



Thoughts from Linda:

Endurance:  
Shackleton's Incredible Voyage

Alfred Lansing  
1959

*Endurance* is certainly an appropriate title for this book. The word itself means “the ability to withstand hardship or adversity, especially a prolonged one.”

Often billed as a book that illustrates a certain courageous type of leadership in the face of insurmountable obstacles, this book is that, but it is so much more.

It is a page-turner of a read and a remarkable book today for many reasons. It is a history book, an adventure story, certainly a leadership treatise, and a great reveal about the challenging Antarctic climate. As we are experiencing the effects of climate change today in 2023, this book’s description of the challenges of survival, including phenomena like the movement of floes (the floating ice islands, as differentiated from icebergs), is an adventure story and a valuable educational read.

This book, written by Alfred Lansing, draws from the detailed notes from the diaries of the 28 men involved in this extraordinary

adventure and personal interviews with their relatives. It offers a 'play by play' story of an expedition gone wrong in the most challenging area of the planet at a time when there were no communication tools available to reach for help. In fact, until Shackleton and a small crew showed up May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1916, at Husvik, a whaler's community on South Georgia Island, two years after their departure, it was generally accepted that these men had perished on their journey.

Lansing tells the story of the 1914-1916 expedition to Antarctica, where the explorer Ernest Shackleton intended to cross the last uncharted continent, Antarctica, on foot.

As a context, this was not new territory to him as it was his third expedition to the Antarctic. He had first gone in 1901 as a member of the National Antarctic Expedition led by Robert F. Scott, the famed British explorer who managed to get 745 miles from the Pole, the deepest penetration at that time. Again, in 1907, he led the first expedition to declare the Pole as its goal, and with three companions, came within 97 miles of the Pole, only to turn back as they ran out of food.

Shackleton's reputation for bravery in the face of all odds was widespread. Lansing notes, "he was recognized as a Hero of the Empire and was lionized wherever he went, knighted by his king, and decorated by every major country in the world." He was a well-known and entertaining speaker and wrote a book about his experiences.

But he had never forgotten his quest. As he said in a letter to his wife, Emily, in 1911, "I feel that another expedition unless it crosses the continent is not much."

In the meantime, an American explorer, Robert E. Peary, reached the North Pole in 1909, and Scott, on his second expedition in late 1911 and 1912, was raced to the South Pole by a Norwegian, Roald Amundsen, and beaten by only a month. Tragically, the entire Scott expedition perished on their return trip. At the time, this entire series of episodes was received in the British press and among their leaders as a diminishing national series of events. It was a humiliating experience for them to be second best to Norway.

Thus, when Shackleton began his initiative and started to seek funding, his efforts were greeted with enthusiasm, and he was able to arrange all the backing required for his expedition.

The book tells of the building of the amazing Endurance ship, of his recruiting style, and provides daily logs of their adventures. It gives a profile of the 27 men who joined him on this journey, all of whom, amazingly enough, survived. Thanks to the notes and the photographer who joined the team, the entire experience is well-documented, which is in itself a fantastic thing considering the amount of water they often fought, both on board ship and, later, on land. Tidal waves, rain, freezing floes, and all manner of natural disasters struck this group over the roughly two years of the expedition.

I found the description of the day-by-day experiences and struggles compelling, and I almost felt like I was along for the journey. There are so many stories inside this overall experience it is exhausting to even think about the endurance required to continue with the effort.

Just reading about the time from departure when Sir Winston Churchill of the Admiralty encouraged them to “Embark” (WWI began for Britain that same day!) through their first six weeks through a thousand miles of pack ice was thrilling enough. But that was followed by the excruciating story of how the *Endurance* became locked in ice. It drifted, totally dependent on the wind and waves, at the mercy of Mother Nature for ten months until it was finally crushed. The men had moved to the three lifeboats and set up a camp on a floe, knowing the boat would sink.

Even then, the ordeal had barely begun. Lansing tells of the daily struggles for survival and the crew’s journey over 850 miles of the South Atlantic’s heaviest seas to the closest outpost of civilization. It is an astonishing story of survival and, as *Time* magazine put it, “defined heroism.”

The author, Alfred Lansing (although his obituary shows his name as Albert), did a fantastic job researching the story, including interviewing ten of the expedition’s surviving members. He was granted access to the journals and personal diaries of eight others. It is hard to believe he was not on this trip because he tells the story with such detail and astute attention to the timing of events that it seems like he wrote it in his own diary.

Lansing was a native of Chicago, Illinois, and served in the U.S. Navy in WWII from 1940 to 1946, receiving a Purple Heart. He graduated from Northwestern University with a degree in journalism and edited a series of newspapers, ultimately joining UPI in 1949. He later became a freelance writer, contributing articles to *Colliers*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Time*. He was admitted to the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge, England, in 1957, and the book became an instant best-seller. He later settled in Bethel, CT, where he served as the editor of the *Bethel Home News*.

The stories of Ernest Shackleton have been told in numerous books; there are over sixty books available today on Amazon. The *Endurance* itself made news in March of 2022 when it was discovered lying on the ocean floor, almost 10,000 feet below the ocean surface, in good preservation. It was found 107 years after sinking by the search team called 'Endurance 22.' That wreck is designated a protected historic site and a monument under the Antarctic Treaty System.

His legend lives on as one of the most impressive leaders of the modern era. As Lansing writes: "Shackleton's unwillingness to succumb to the demands of everyday life and his insatiable excitement with unrealistic ventures left him open to the accusation of being immature and irresponsible. And very possibly, he was—by conventional standards. But the great leaders of historical record—the Napoleons, the Nelsons, The

Alexanders—have rarely fitted any conventional mold, and it is perhaps an injustice to evaluate them in ordinary terms.

There can be little doubt that Shackleton, in his way, was an extraordinary leader of men. Shackleton's tremendous capacity for boldness and daring found almost nothing worthy of its pulling power; he was a Percheron draft horse harnessed to a child's wagon cart. But in the Antarctic—here was a burden which challenged every atom of his strength. Thus, while Shackleton was undeniably out of place, even inept, in a great many everyday situations, he had a talent—a genius, even—that he shared with only a handful of men throughout history—genuine leadership."

He pays him this final tribute: "For scientific leadership give me Scott; for swift and efficient travel, Amundsen; but when you are in a hopeless situation, when there seems no way out, get down on your knees and pray for Shackleton."

It does not take any endurance to read this book, and it is a delight to do so. I highly recommend it.