

CARSTEN EGEBERG BORCHGREVINK (1864-1934) - Polar Explorer



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A painting six foot high is prominently presented in the auditorium of the Norwegian Polar Institute in Tromsø. The head of communication reminds us that if he is “the forgotten polar hero” in Norway, our relative receives great attention at the museum in Hobart, Tasmania and by the Antarctic Heritage Trust on New Zealand.

Our Polar hero – Carsten Egeberg Borchgrevink

The first wintering in Antarctica

"Four countries have a reason for remembering Norwegian Carsten Borchgrevink and his wintering expedition to Antarctica which started a 100 years ago today" wrote polar historian Susan Barr, advisor to Riksantikvaren (the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage) in a feature article in Aftenposten on 18th December 1998. The article continues: "The first wintering on the continent created a basis for other expeditions, among them Amundsen and his South Pole expedition. Borchgrevink noted important meteorological observations, was a pioneer in the use of dogs in Antarctica and brought back a number of photographs".

"Carsten Egeberg Borchgrevink was born in Christiania (name of Oslo prior to 1924; editors note) in 1864 of Norwegian father and English mother. Educated as a forester, he emigrated to Australia in 1888, where he for 12 years kept strong links. Because of the relatively close proximity to Antarctica, there was at the time great interest in exploring this southernmost continent. In 1894 the ship *Antarctic* of Tönsberg called at the Melbourne harbour, on a combined whaling- and exploration expedition to the Ross Sea. H. J. Bull was the head of expedition, Leonard Kristensen was the captain. Borchgrevink was quick to make contact, and convinced mr. Bull to let him participate. The expedition was an economic failure in respect of whaling. It gained, however, historic importance because a party of eight men managed to get ashore at Cape Adare on 24th of January 1895. Borchgrevink brought home the first samples of lichen and species of stone from the continent. The episode was later to achieve fame, as both Kristensen, Borchgrevink and a young sailor, all claimed to have been the first to have set foot ashore. The dispute between Kristensen and Borchgrevink in particular, became both public and acrimonious.¹



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The Antarctica expedition of 1898-1900. Carsten Borchgrevink, in one of the ship cabins, studies different rock samples. Small bottles may also be seen on his desk.

Borchgrevink gathered both lichen and species of stone ashore. These were of considerable scientific importance, since vegetation was not considered viable in Antarctica. Both Bull and Borchgrevink returned home with plans for a wintering expedition to Cape Adare.



Photo: Copyright © The Norwegian Polar Institute archives

The Antarctica expedition of 1898-1900. Carsten Borchgrevink with the dogs onboard the Southern Cross.

Borchgrevink reported to the 6th International Geographical Congress in London, diminishing mr. Bulls position and presenting his own role as more significant than it had been. His report was however a success, and the congress decided to give the exploration of Antarctica top priority. In spite of his many articles and lectures in various meetings, financial support for a new expedition was not achieved; neither from England nor Australia.

Where others would give up, he eagerly continued his planning, and in 1896 he was rewarded by the support of publisher Sir George Newnes. This was not appreciated by Sir Clements Markham, the President of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), who preferred a united support to a national Antarctica expedition lead by Robert F. Scott. This expedition got underway in 1901, named *The British National Antarctic Expedition*. Borchgrevink named his expedition *The British Antarctic Expedition*, presumably after the largest sponsor claimed the vessel to sail under British flag.

¹ It is said that Borchgrevink and a sailer jumped ashore to hold the boat for the Captain... (editors note)

The Colin Archer vessel *Pollux* was purchased for the expedition and renamed *Southern Cross*. The crew of 19 were Norwegian, except the cook from Sweden. In addition a 10-man wintering team including Borchgrevink joined the expedition; Louis C. Bernacchi, Tasmania (magnetic and meteorological observations); William Colbeck, England, (magnetic observations and cartography); Hugh Blackwell Evans, England (assisting zoologist); Nicolai Hanson, Norway (zoologist); Herlof Klövstad, Norway (physician); Anton Fougner, Norway (scientific assistant); Kolbein Ellefsen, Norway, (assistant); as well as two Norwegian lapps, Ole Must and Per Savio (dogsled drivers). 90 dogs and equipment for three years was brought along.



Photo: Copyright © The Norwegian Polar Institute archives

The Antarctica expedition of 1898-1900. Carsten Borchgrevink in a kayak. On the ice floe, the Elkhound Burman. Picture taken in January 1900.

At the time, the Belgian Antarctic expedition had not yet returned from its forced wintering onboard the ship *Belgica* – where Roald Amundsen also participated. The wintering conditions on the Antarctic continent were completely unknown. *Southern Cross* left London 22nd August 1898 and from Hobart 18th December and it reached Cape Adare on 17th February 1899. Two prefab houses from Strømmen Trevarefabrikk (Norway - editors note) were mounted, and the team was left behind on March 2nd.

During wintering, the expedition experienced only one (and probably unavoidable) death.²

The observations of the expedition; especially the meteorological ones, formed a basis for others to follow: They were pioneers in the use of dogs in Antarctica, and they came back with photos.



Photo: Copyright © The Norwegian Polar Institute archives

The Antarctica expedition of 1898-1900. Carsten Borchgrevink in full polar gear. Photo taken in studio.

The *Southern Cross* collected the wintering team on 28th January 1900 for the return journey. They sailed South to the Ross Ice Shelf, and observed its considerable retraction since Ross' pioneering expedition 58 years earlier. They discovered a suitable bay in the

² Nikolai Hanson; most likely intestinal volvulus (editors note)

ice-barrier allowing them to ascend onto the ice shelf itself; which they named the *Bay of Whales*. They beat the furthest-south by ship record set by Ross, and carried out a ski-and sled walk of some 10 miles inward on the barrier. They set a furthest-south on land (ice) record, and they were the first to report on the conditions of the barrier; to the advantage of those who followed (Shackleton, Scott and Amundsen).

Borchgrevink's discovery of the *Bay of Whales* was keenly noted by Amundsen, who benefitted from this on his expedition towards the South Pole. The positioning of the wintering camp at *Bay of Whales* gave Amundsen a good lead on Scott – who had his camp on Ross Island in McMurdo Sound, and assisted Amundsen's team to be the first to reach the South Pole on December 14th 1911.



Copyright © the artist - S. Francis Smitheman

Oil-painting: The British marine painter S. Francis Smitheman was in the process of depicting all the older expeditions to Antarctica, from Ross up to Scott and Amundsen, a series of some 20 oil paintings. Commissioned by Norway, he created a painting of Carsten Borchgrevink's arrival at Cape Adare. The artist wanted to honour Carsten Borchgrevink, because more recent British polar research admits that Borchgrevink did not receive the distinction that he deserved. One of the paintings is hanging in my (the editor's) living room, with the following text: The "Southern Cross" expedition 1898-1900 under the leadership of Carsten Borchgrevink landing the leader and nine members at Cape Adare for the world's first wintering on the continent of Antarctica. – S.Francis Smitheman, ATD.BA Hons FRSA 1988

When he returned to England, Borchgrevink did not receive the recognition that he deserved; to a certain extent due to his somewhat inflated and egocentric attitude, as well as his frayed relationship with the other participants on his expedition.

He was, however, honoured by the Scottish Royal Geographical Society, and in Norway, among others, he was awarded the Knighthood of St. Olav (the highest order conferred by the king – editors note).

Borchgrevink married Constance Prior Standen in England on 7th September 1896, and the couple had their firstborn boy Ridley on 1st February 1898, half a year prior to the *Southern Cross* departure for Antarctica. Later they had another son and two daughters. Ridley became a recognised painter and illustrator of animals.

The family moved to Kristiania (Oslo) in 1902, where Borchgrevink remained for the rest of his life. He felt resentment by the lack of demands for his expertise on Antarctica. (- - -)

On his 60th anniversary the Société de Géographie de Genève conferred him an honorary membership. Yet he was mainly a disappointed person, often in a poor financial situation. (- - -) In 1930 he was finally awarded the Patrons Medal from the RGS for his undoubted achievements in Antarctica. In 1929 Stortinget (the Norwegian Parliament – editors note) awarded him an annual grant of NOK 3000 for his pioneering work. He died in Oslo on April 21st 1934. His name is today linked to several geographical locations and topo-

graphical phenomena in Antarctica.

New light was shed on the expedition in 1998, when Bernacchi's grandchild published his diaries from this period (Crawford, Janet; 1998, *The First Antarctic Winter*, South Latitude Research Ltd, Christchurch, New Zealand). The book gives a fascinating picture of the human relations and difficulties among the members of the team, in addition to showing how much they achieved as the very first to experience the extremely difficult conditions.

The wintering camp on Cape Adare is still intact, and is designated as an important cultural heritage site. Located in what today is New Zealand's claimed territory, it is the New Zealand's Antarctic Heritage Trust who is trying to maintain both the huts and the items of the Borchgrevink expedition. Cape Adare is remotely located, and the maintenance is extremely difficult and expensive. The remote location does not prevent tourist groups to visit; weather permitting. "

(From the feature article by Susan Barr in the newspaper Aftenposten of December 18, 1998 with minor editorial cuts and additions by the undersigned, Christopher Borchgrevink, 2003)



The Carsten Borchgrevink camp at Cape Adare, where the first wintering in Antarctica took place, 1899-1900. Photo: Antarctic Heritage Trust

Sources:

Carsten Borchgrevink's own story: *First on the Antarctic Continent* (1901)

Norwegian edition: *Nærmest Sydpolen (Closest to the South Pole)* (1905)

The Fame of Norway (1920-25)

Store Norske Leksikon (*Great Norwegian Encyclopaedia*)

National Geographic Magazine November 1984 carried photo of Flash-frozen *Pagothenia borchgrevinki*; a small fish frozen on exposure to air of minus 13 degrees Fahrenheit. Below the ice the fish was protected from the water of 29 degrees F by glycopeptides in their blood.

THE NORSEMAN, March 1992 carried on pages 9-12 an article by Per Gramsborg headed *The first man to have set foot on the Antarctic continent*.

The Strand Magazine 1897 had on pages 344-352 an article written by Carsten E. Borchgrevink – *Antarctic Exploration* – with six drawings and four photographs made from his participation onboard the whaler *Antarctic* and summarising explorations in the Antarctic up to that time.



"*Pagothenia borchgrevinki*"

At the occasion of his birthday on 1st December 1914, Aftenposten presented a two column article:

Carsten Borchgrevink 50 years today:

"Carsten Borchgrevink was the first scientist that stepped ashore on Antarctica as the leader of the great British expedition on the *Southern Cross* He followed the world famous explorer Sir James Clark Ross, who arrived in Antarctica in 1842 and reported that the ice-barrier in the Ross sea was an impenetrable hindrance against human penetration further South; that was the result of his famous voyage. Thus the world remained passive for more than half a century; until 1898 the words of Ross remained unchallenged. Then Carsten Borchgrevink was the man who taught the

world that the barrier was not invincible. He carried out the first wintering in the Antarctic. He went ashore on the barrier itself, made the first dogsled trek on the ice and was the man who up to that time had been closest to the South Pole. On the same expedition he observed and confirmed the location of the magnetic South Pole. These are his great achievements for science. And it is not to be forgotten: Carsten Borchgrevink opened the land surrounding the South Pole, and thereby he became an important signpost for all later expeditions. "

The journal *History* 2004, no 1/ 2004 in Bergen, writes the following:

" A source claims that Borchgrevink, as a young man, must have been the most eager skier, for in the Norwegian Tourist Association's archives, he is noted as the first climber to mount Galdhøpiggen; the highest mountain of Norway, in wintertime. This happened on Christmas day 1887, together with Thomas Heftye and Knut Vole. "

Kristiansand, September 2004

Christopher Hawkins Borchgrevink

(The article is presented in "Slekten Borchgrevink Anno 2004" (the Borchgrevink Family Book anno 2004), and translated by the author.)