

This year marks the centenary of Roald Amundsen's trek to the South Pole and the 150th Anniversary of the birth of Fridtjof Nansen. I was privileged to be one of only twenty people invited to see the original slides taken on their journeys on a helioscopic projector at the Royal Geographical Society in April, the first time since they were shown by the explorers themselves nearly 100 years ago. As I watched these slides in awe and saw some of the original artefacts they took with him, such as the skis they used to make a catamaran and the sextant sight Amundsen left at the pole for the luckless Scott to prove he had been there, I began to wonder about what exactly has changed in polar photography and indeed what has stayed the same today?

Sadly the slides and artifacts are not available for public viewing but there are plenty of ways to follow in their footsteps today. You can take part in adventure cruising and actually walk where these men walked or sip a gin and tonic from the observation lounge as the icebergs and snow capped mountains slip slowly by. Like the old explorers you will have to cross the Drake Passage, the unpredictable stretch of water from Tierra del Fuego to the White Continent and like them you can marvel at the albatrosses and fulmars as they soar around the ship with majestic ease.



Both Amundsen and Nansen were Norwegian and indeed the evening had been organised by Norwegian polar cruising specialists Hurtigruten. The company's polar cruise ship holding around 200 people on an average trip is named the Fram, the same as the original ship that was used by both men between 1893 and 1912 (Nansen had originally planned to get her stuck in the ice and drift across the North Pole).

Marine photography is at the best of times one of the most difficult forms of career path that a person can take. Couple that with the climate and hazards of the Polar Regions and instantly the difficulties but at the same time the rewards double.

In this modern age photographers such as myself are in many way insulated from the Arctic and Antarctic environment with latest technological clothing and cameras. It wasn't always that way of course and the main reason for writing this article was my respect for the early polar photographers and indeed a lust to research these pioneers and their trials and tribulations.

Perhaps the doyen of these photographers was Herbert Ponting who accompanied Scott on his ill fated expedition to the South Pole in 1911. He was like all the early polar

photographers dedicated to his work. So dedicated in fact that on many an occasion he nearly died in pursuit of the perfect photograph he was after as we shall see. I cannot criticise him too much as I have myself at times forgotten how unforgiving the sea can be if you forget the rules for merely an instant.

As a member of the shore party in early 1911, Ponting helped set up Scott's Antarctic winter camp at Cape Evans, Ross Island. As with the other early photographers Ponting took with him large wooden cameras using bellows to focus and glass plates to record the image. Although the expedition came more than 20 years after the invention of photographic film, Ponting preferred high-quality images taken on glass plates. The first films became very brittle in such cold temperatures and were prone to snapping.

So not only were the photographers weighed down by this apparatus but they also used adjustable wooden tripods on which to stabilise the camera whilst balanced on ice flow or in a small boat. Unlike the modern lightweight, plastic cameras modern photographers use with small digital memory cards inside them the early cameras had brass or iron metal screws and hinges to hold the sides and back together. This in itself could be hazardous as Ponting once wrote.

"Often, when my fingers touched metal they became frost-bitten. Such a frostbite feels exactly like a burn. Once, thoughtlessly, I held a camera screw for a moment in my lips, and took the skin off when I removed it. On another occasion, my tongue came into contact with the metal part of one of my cameras, whilst moistening my lips as I was focusing. It froze fast instantaneously; and to release myself I had to jerk it away, leaving the skin of the end of my tongue sticking to my camera, and my mouth bled so profusely that I had to gag it with a handkerchief."

In addition, Ponting and his contemporaries had to be cautious when dealing with spray from the sea, in the cold temperatures any such thin layer of water instantly froze and it was not possible to use the camera until the front of the lens had been thawed out. Nowadays too if photographers want to photograph a ship moving through an ice field they can employ fast inflatable rubber boats called zodiacs. Zipping across the water we can circumnavigate a ship in thirty seconds and take about as many photographs in the same time.

The early photographers were not so lucky and had to row some distance ahead of the ship and only got one chance. Frank Hurley took part in six trips to the Antarctic, including the expedition led by Shackleton on the Endurance. Hurley often forgot to balance his own safety with his desire to get the perfect image. In his book about the expedition Hurley recorded a near miss:

"In my keenness to secure records of these efforts and of the ship charging the ice, I had a narrow escape from being crushed to death. Putting my camera in a waterproof case, I stood on a floe immediately in the vessel's path."

Hurley's dedication is shown that when the team were forced to abandon the Endurance he stripped to the waist and waded into the icy water inside the hull to retrieve his treasured images from the slowly sinking ship. Together, Shackleton and Hurley chose 120 glass plates to keep and take with them. Shackleton smashed the remaining 400 glass negatives not only because they were so heavy for the journey home but he also feared that Hurley would endanger himself by returning for them later.

If you want to experience the real modern day successor to the pioneers then you need to visit Martin Hartley's website. He is one of only a handful of professional photographers to have ever crossed the Arctic Ocean on foot and with dogs, documenting the state of the disintegrating Arctic Ocean sea ice on three major environmental expeditions: On 14 March, Martin and two companions were dropped onto the sea ice at approx 85°32'00"N, 77°45'00"W to begin their gruelling trek on foot to the North Geographic Pole. The team arrived at 90°N on 12 May, having covered a distance of 777km, battling against southerly drift for much of the journey.

"The problem with working at 35 ° below zero" he says "is the materials in modern day cameras contract. The auto focus stops working and the shutter can lift up and stay there. I get around this by wrapping the camera in a plastic bag and putting it under my coat to warm up."

The early photographers also had to be very careful with how their negatives were stored. As stated earlier they preferred glass plates to film. However, they still had to be careful with glass plates as it was necessary to take them into their expedition's designated darkroom, often a room in the hut, to develop the image. This however involved a risk that the plate might well crack going from the subzero conditions outside to the warmer air of the hut. In some cases the chances of this happening would be alleviated by the plates being brought in over a number of days gradually raising the temperature.

Compare that to my own method of ensuring my images are not lost by downloading them onto my laptop in the ships' bar some twenty minutes after I'm back on board. As with the early photographers I have to think about condensation problems. It was not uncommon for them to leave their cameras outside the hut to prevent the formation of condensation in the warm interior. I get around this by having mine in sealable plastic bags, which also act as waterproofing agents to prevent the sophisticated electronics of modern cameras being destroyed. A little salt water on a button of a digital camera can render it useless.

Expeditions to the Arctic had one great difference to the Antarctic as they had to suffer all the hardships of the southern latitudes but also the perils of the world's largest amphibious carnivore which regarded them as fair game for food. Because the Arctic consists solely of ice and water Polar Bears could and can literally appear out of nowhere. William Batten and William Grant photographed the 1876 Arctic expedition to search for the North West passage and Grant went on to record others in the Barents Sea and Spitsbergen areas. One of the albums shows a dead polar bear that they had shot and still today my own experiences can mirror this.



In Spitsbergen a Polar Bear safety lecture was given before we landed on any of the islands about what we needed to do in case we encountered a bear and I have to say I was impressed that in any ways the bears' lives were put before ours, with the rifle being used only as last resort. I had imagined one behind every rock as this was going on until our expedition leader told us they had been taken by surprise on their last visit as one had come out of the water. They eventually made it go away with flares and a series of loud bangs.

Perhaps more than in any other spheres of photography polar marine photographers are at the mercy of the weather. Storms can whip up at a moment's notice. This can be galling when just like the early explorers you are counting on taking certain images to sell when you get back home. In the early days illustrated lectures were likely to increase the public interest and therefore allow for further exploration. Shackleton financed his expeditions by giving lecture tours with the photographs as did Amundsen and Nansen.

Whilst in the Weddell Sea in 2011 we were due to land on the islands on the east side of the Antarctic Peninsula and I had particularly planned to photograph some of the fossils on these islands. However the wind got up very quickly and started pushing the ice towards us so the captain had to make an immediate decision to leave the area otherwise we would have been trapped between the ice and the land. Although somewhat exciting this was also very annoying as it meant that particular part of my work would not come to fruition.

The wind can be your worst enemy in these latitudes as we have just discovered especially when it is what the early explorers called a "Lazy Wind" that is one that goes straight through you rather than trying to go around. These winds can have tiny ice droplets in them that search out the wrinkles in your face and the tiniest gaps in your hi tech, state of the art insulated clothing. The early explorers had woollen clothes with seal or reindeer skin coats and sleeping bags. Amundsen himself is quoted as saying "In woollen things you have to jump and down like a madman to get warm." Of course once they get wet, woollens also take ages to dry properly.

The basic premise of marine polar expedition photography has stayed the same over the 160 years of its existence, essentially a dedication to photography throughout the expedition. The first responsibility of the photographer is to compile a comprehensive record of the journey from its preparation to finish. As professionals, marine photographers in the Polar Regions are expected to capture breathtaking and striking photographs of every part of the trip. Simple snapshots will not do. Finally today they are expected to respect the

environment by that I mean not only the land itself but the local people, their culture and the wildlife.

Where things have changed dramatically is in the attitude to wildlife particularly with regard to the responsibility photographers now must have towards it. Nowadays the welfare of the animal is put before any photograph you may need. I have photographed Orcas from a small boat but had stayed some distance away so as not to stress the animals. (Incidentally Ponting was once photographing these magnificent animals when he suddenly realised the pod of some eight animals was trying to knock him off the ice floe, a favourite tactic when hunting seals, he was standing on with his camera and tripod into the waters of McMurdo Sound.

There are many early photographs of penguins and seals being shot and butchered. Indeed the Great Auk, the nearest thing the Arctic ever had to a penguin became extinct because of the early explorers need for food which was soon followed by sailors stocking up with meat prior to sailing across the Atlantic.

To be fair the only way the early polar marine photographers could actually record many of the native species was to use dead examples as their large plate cameras were not designed for close ups or fast moving marine mammals in the water. Nowadays if I want to photograph a seal on an ice flow or a humpback whales flukes I have the distinct advantage of using telephoto lenses that can also bring Little Auks nesting high up on a cliff into the full frame rather than as a tiny part of it.

As a general rule we stay back from penguins a minimum of 20 feet and even more, if we're photographing them nesting. The problem is that they are very inquisitive and will often walk up to you and start pecking your backpack and gear. As the animals get bigger however so do the distances, for seals I have a minimum of 50 feet. This is OK for Bearded Seals in the Arctic but Fur Seals in the Antarctic are quite capable of covering this distance in about four seconds!!



Do not please think when you read this article I am some latter day Ponting or Hurley. As I said earlier in fact I work from the 5 Star luxury purpose built Norwegian Ice strengthened Polar cruise ship *The Fram*, the same name as Amundsen's ship (It's Norwegian for "Forward") operated by Hurtigruten the specialist polar cruise line.

Martin Hartley however is the true successor to the pioneers and this is exemplified that in intense cold he use a Leica MP a mechanical camera made entirely of brass and a hand held Weston light metre exactly as Ponting and Hurley did and like them if he places it on his noose when he take it away from his face the skin goes with it.

If this article has whetted your appetite to know more then you can even g If you want to go one better and meet Martin and the early photographers then take a look in his book *Face to Face: Polar Portraits* A lavish account of pioneering polar photography and modern portraiture.

It was the first book to examine the history and role of polar exploration photography and features the very first polar photographs, the first portraits of explorers and some of the earliest photographs of the Inuit. Bringing together rare unpublished treasures from the historic collections of the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI), with Martin's modern colour portraits of individuals living and working in the polar regions today.

Useful Information

www.martinhartleypolar.com

www.hurtigruten.co.uk

Face To Face

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