



President's Column

W. Bede Mitchell

Windy, cold, desolate, frequent sleet, ice, and snowstorms—South Georgia is a miserable place in winter. Of course, I don't mean the Georgia I call home, where Georgia Southern University nestles

snugly in Statesboro, an hour's drive from Savannah and the Atlantic Ocean, and where, as I write this in December, the temperature has reached 76 degrees. The South Georgia that boasts the hellish winter is South Georgia Island, a remote British territory lying near the Antarctic Circle, at latitude 54° south. What little I know about it comes from its role in the story of Sir Ernest Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition of 1914–16. As recounted in several books, including Roland Huntford's *Shackleton*, this incredible adventure came to a successful conclusion due to Shackleton's extraordinary leadership.¹ Whenever I am asked what books about leadership I might recommend, I skip over the usual catalog of biographies, autobiographies, and profiles of football coaches and captains of industry. The best books on leadership that I know, from the standpoint of providing both worthy models and gripping entertainment, recount the early twentieth-century Antarctic exploits of Shackleton, Roald Amundsen, and Robert Falcon Scott.

Shackleton and his team of twenty-seven men planned to be the first expedition to cross the Antarctic, but before they could even set up their base camp on the continent, their ship was trapped in pack ice. They hoped to ride out the winter and continue their journey when the ship could break free during the warmer spring and summer seasons. Instead, the ice crushed and sank their ship, *Endurance*. Shackleton and his men removed supplies, personal possessions, and three twenty-foot lifeboats. They pitched five flimsy tents on what had become an ice floe heading away from the Antarctic, slowly dissipating.

After four months on the ice floe, the surrounding pack ice had finally broken up enough that the men could take to their boats and steer a 100-mile course to Elephant Island, one of the most remote and godforsaken lumps of rock in the entire Atlantic Ocean. Far from any ship-

ping lanes and whaling waters, Elephant Island was not a location anyone would think to investigate in the event a rescue party was sent for the *Endurance* expedition. But it was the first land the men had been on in 497 days, and its glacier-covered terrain was home to enough seals and birds that Shackleton knew there would be food to maintain the main party while he and a select five-man crew set out in one of the lifeboats for their only hope of survival—South Georgia Island, more than 800 miles away.

The story of their 17-day voyage in some of the worst sailing conditions imaginable is both inspiring and appalling. Yet in their tiny vessel they survived a tidal wave and a hurricane that sank a 500-ton steamer, killing all hands on board. Despite endless fog and similar impediments to visibility, and despite having only a sextant and compass for navigation, they successfully found a tiny island that amounted to a speck in a haystack. Unfortunately, they could only safely land on the uninhabited part of the island, so Shackleton and two men had to walk across the interior of South Georgia Island to reach the whaling station on the other side. This meant traveling about 20 miles as the crow flies, but the hike meant scaling several mountain ranges more than 6,000 feet high, or finding safe passages between them. No one had ever explored the interior of South Georgia Island, so in addition to having no mountaineering gear, they had no reliable map. Yet somehow these three exhausted, frostbitten, starving men found a route to the whaling station in 36 hours, and the rescue missions for the other expedition members began immediately. When it was all over, not a single one of the 28 men lost their lives during the expedition.

I have read the story of Shackleton's expedition several times, and one of the many things I find remarkable is the way in which he was able to maintain morale and discipline through this surrealistically nightmarish ordeal. As Apsley Cherry-Garrard, a member of Robert Scott's fateful and fatal South Pole expedition, wrote after learning about the *Endurance* team's achievement, "I know why it is that every man who has served under Shackleton swears by him."² In spite of the horrifying challenges they had faced, when Shackleton mounted another expedition in 1921 about half of his *Endurance* team flocked to rejoin him.

Unfortunately, Cherry-Garrard's experience with Scott's leadership contrasted painfully with the reports of

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Shackleton's men. Another Huntford book, *The Last Place on Earth* (originally published as *Scott and Amundsen*), recounts in great detail the preparations made by the teams who hoped to be the first to reach the South Pole, and by the time the reader reaches the narrative of the actual assaults on the pole, the eventual outcome appears as inevitable as a Greek tragedy.³ As Shackleton was a master leader in emergency conditions, Amundsen was the consummate planner, ensuring as much as humanly possible that emergency conditions would not overwhelm him and his men, even in the Antarctic. On the other hand, while Robert Scott had more courage and strength in his little finger than I have in my whole body, it is beyond distressing to read about the planning and execution failures attributable to his leadership that led to the deaths of Scott and his four comrades during their desperate and disorganized return from the South Pole.

Careful preparation and planning, the importance of maintaining strong interpersonal relationships within

a team during emergencies—these and a hundred other leadership lessons are found in these stirring adventures. I am keen to know whether LAMA members can recommend similar books in which leadership is modeled as part of an entertaining story, whether true or fiction. If you have such a recommendation, go to <http://blogs.ala.org/LAandM.php> and share it with the rest of us!

References

1. Huntford, Roland, *Shackleton* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1986).
2. Cherry-Garrard, Apsley, "The Boss," *The Nation* (December 13, 1919), 397-98.
3. Huntford, Roland, *The Last Place on Earth* (New York: Atheneum, 1985).

outcomes or products of effective leadership, but what that really means, in a library context, is often misunderstood. John Bednarz's philosophical discourse on the subject humanizes the amorphous concept of innovation by showing how it arises from complex interpersonal interactions. Pixey Mosely and Wendi Kaspar take a nurturing view of leadership, focusing on the process by which managers recruit, hire, and retain library employees, and how they must adapt in order to attract new blood. Michael Aloï and Joyce Gotsch look at how a team-based management program has worked at Dowling College, where every member of the team is an equal, and leadership comes from the group conscience.

Leadership is indeed a nebulous attribute. My own opinion is that there are as many styles of leadership as there are leaders, and that some are instinctive, while others are strategic. Mastering some particular skill set or knowledge base does not certify you as a leader. Likewise, even if you are the center of attention and larger than life in your personal comportment, you may still fail miserably as a leader. The key, to me, is to find the leadership style that works for you, then to develop it.

That, by the way, is a big part of what LAMA is all about. Recently, there has been discussion at executive board meetings about the appropriateness of incorporating the word "leadership" into LAMA's official name. Certainly, the title Library Administration and Management Association has served the division well for many years.

Still, leadership is a quality that transcends just administration and management, and I for one would like to see LAMA become LLAMA, the Library Leadership And Management Association. I even like the acronym better, since it complements the (un)official LAMA doodle, which originally appeared in the summer 2007 issue of *LA&M*.²

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This doodle, by the way, illustrates a *llama*. The stuffed animal that we give away at conference is also a llama. For the record, a *lama* is a Tibetan monk. Call me picky, but that has always bothered me.

References

1. Niels Bohr in W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter, *Oxford Dictionary of Scientific Quotations* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2005): 72.
2. With apologies to Bob Daugherty for the unauthorized use of the doodle, which has appeared in his signature line.