SHACKLETON'S AVERSIOH to tempting fate was well known. This attitude had earned for him the nickname "Old Cautious" or "Cautious Jack." But nobody ever called him that to his face. He was addressed simply as "Boss" — by officers, scientists, and seamen alike. It was really more a title than a nickname. It had a pleasant ring of familiarity about it, but at the same time "Boss" had the connotation of absolute authority. It was therefore particularly apt, and exactly fitted Shackleton's outlook and behavior. He wanted to appear familiar with the men. He even worked at it, insisting on having the exact same treatment, food, and clothing. He went out of his way to demonstrate his willingness to do the menial chores, such as taking his turn as "Peggy" to get the mealtime pot of hoosh from the galley to his tent. And he occasionally became furious when he discovered that the cook had given him preferential treatment because he was the "Boss."

But it was inescapable. He was the Boss. There was always a barrier, an aloofness, which kept him apart. It was not a calculated thing; he was simply emotionally incapable of forgetting — even for an instant — his position and the responsibility it entailed. The others might rest, or find escape by the device of living for the moment. But for Shackleton there was little rest and no escape. The responsibility was entirely his, and a man could not be in his presence without feeling this.1
EN**DURANCE: THEMES AND QUESTIONS**

**What is moral leadership?**

All of us who serve as leaders, or who aspire to leadership roles, try to determine what good and effective leadership consists in. But is good leadership, even excellent leadership, the same as moral leadership?

There is no better place to begin to answer this question than with the story of Ernest Shackleton. On December 14, 1914, the *Endurance*, a 144-foot-long three-masted barkentine, a ship built for the ice and heavy seas of the South Pole, left South Georgia, the southernmost outpost of civilization, a desolate island and whaling station. Its destination was the continent of Antarctica, the goal of its leader and crew, the “last great polar expedition” — crossing Antarctica on foot. On August 30, 1916, Shackleton, the expedition’s British leader, collected the 27-member crew for their return trip to South Georgia.

In between was a 21-month ordeal that began with the sinking of the *Endurance* in the Weddell Sea off the coast of Antarctica, followed by 497 days on ice floes and in small boats, then a numbing 4-month wait for stranded crew members on Elephant Island to see if Shackleton’s (and 5 other crew members’) 17-day dash in an open 22-foot boat over 850 miles of some of the worst seas on the planet had been successful in reaching South Georgia to acquire a ship large and sturdy enough to save them. Not a single member of the crew had been lost.

*Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage* can serve as a laboratory for us, a place to begin to learn about leadership. The historical account was written from diaries and interviews with members of the expedition. In this intimate portrait of leadership we observe a leader and those led in close quarters and over long stretches of time.

Even if we hope we never face a challenge like Shackleton’s, we wonder how we might fare as the leader of a group in such extreme straits. We’ll be interested in how Ernest Shackleton maintains the morale, stamina, and hope of the crew of volunteers, seamen and civilians alike, people who need to believe in their leader but who are experienced enough not to be easily fooled by false promises or unrealistic assessments of the challenges they face.

**Survival: a challenge of right versus wrong**

Through Shackleton, we can begin to develop our own views on the burden of leadership: what moral decision-making looks like under conditions of responsibility for others. And let there be no mistake about it: There were plenty of decisions to be made in the days and months that passed between the sinking of the *Endurance* and the crew’s final rescue. When to leave and when to stay; what to preserve and what to leave behind; how to pass the time when no progress could be made — Shackleton faced an unending stream of decisions, providing us with a vivid picture of the lived reality of leadership and the concerns, worries, and responsibilities that come with it.
But since our goal is to understand how moral leadership differs from leadership of any other kind we'll want to dig deeper, and ask: What responsibilities do leaders face when their own lives are at stake, and when the lives of those who are in their keeping are at risk? What is permitted? What is required? What is prohibited? Shackleton’s decisions can be examined in light of these questions, questions that plumb the challenge of survival, questions of right versus wrong that Shackleton faced, not once, but thousands of times over the course of the 21 months. Should he try to save the whole crew, even those who were too sick to help and who might slow them down, perhaps fatally, when they needed to respond to changing conditions of sea and weather? How about the shirkers – those who refused to cooperate and do their fair share of work? Should he keep the crew together, or allow the stronger and more capable and able-bodied men to try to find a means of rescue for the rest? These were some of the viable options that Shackleton faced.

**The role of context in moral decision-making**

We’ll also be able to examine the role of context in moral decision-making. From the moment the *Endurance* is trapped in the pack ice of the Weddell Sea, it is evident that Shackleton’s decisions, even if tactically flawless and morally sound, will still be tested in a situation over which he has little, if any, control. The heavy seas and winds and implacable currents of the Weddell Sea will play a large role in the outcome of the expedition, forcing us to consider this special requirement of leadership – the need to act in an uncontrollable world.

**What does morality consist in?**

The satisfying outcome of Shackleton’s story – all of the crew saved – will also allow us to begin to explore what we mean when we use the term “moral.” We will have the opportunity to examine Shackleton’s actions and his motives – the story of how he came to the expedition, and what personal goals he had for it. This allows us to begin to consider the factors that we believe should be taken into account in moral judgment. Does Shackleton demonstrate moral leadership because he saves the crew? Is that all that is required? Are there other tests that we should use to assess him, other criteria that he must meet before we call him a moral leader? Our work in answering these questions will lay the groundwork for subsequent inquiry into moral challenge, moral reasoning, and moral leadership, and what they mean to each of us.

**ASSIGNMENT**

**READING:** *Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage*, by Alfred Lansing.

1. Was Shackleton a moral leader? How do you know?
ENDURANCE: BACKGROUND

We are routinely treated to media coverage of events around the globe, making us familiar with tsunamis and drought and with the challenges of individuals and nations thousands of miles away. We debate topics such as climate change, global warming, and other environmental threats that can only come from a perspective that is truly worldwide, one that stretches, in fact, beyond our planet. So it may be hard to imagine what it was like to live at a time when parts of the world were virtually unknown, and when nations and individuals competed for the honor, and related political and commercial influence, that came with exploration. The following background materials will help bring you back to the time of Ernest Shackleton. They sketch the broad context of geographical exploration among European nations, and then the more particular story of British exploration, and the history of the explorers of Antarctica, including Ernest Shackleton.

European competition and geographical exploration

Historians commonly refer to the last decades of the nineteenth century as the beginning of the "New Imperialism," when vast tracts of land worldwide—from Africa to India, to Southeast Asia, to China—were brought under European control. Geographical and scientific exploration was inherently bound with the momentum of European imperialism. For instance, just as Britain was gaining control over parts of Africa, British explorers were simultaneously seeking the sources of great African rivers such as the Niger and the Nile. These intrepid explorers were often seen as heroes and sources of pride to their country; their exploits were widely circulated in writing, and captured the popular imagination. Through exploration—"discovery"—territories (even those previously inhabited) could be "claimed."

Britain’s Royal Navy, arguably the strongest in the world until World War II (1939–1945) and the linchpin of its Empire (the world’s most extensive), played a direct role not only in geographic exploration, but in scientific exploration as well. Charles Darwin, the naturalist and originator of the theory of evolution, for instance, sailed aboard a Royal Navy ship, the famed HMS Beagle. Similarly, Britain’s Royal Geographic Society, which was instrumental in spearheading, formalizing, and disseminating geographical and scientific exploration in the nineteenth century—including Polar exploration—viewed itself as an agent of both science and Empire. Its original prospectus of 1830 claimed that the advantages of exploration were not just “of the first importance to mankind in general,” but “paramount to the welfare of a maritime nation like Great Britain with its numerous and extensive foreign possessions.”

As industrialization spread across Europe, newly unified nation-states such as Italy and Germany, along with older, more established powers such as France, sought to compete with Britain (and with each other) for power, trade, and prestige. Nearing the turn of the century, this competition became especially fierce between Britain and Germany, and was manifested most spectacularly in a naval arms race.
Control of the water had attained paramount importance, and this control was not purely about armaments; it was also about charting, mapping, and exploring the seas.

**Great Britain and Polar exploration**

The exploration of the Arctic seas and the Antarctic continent, although having little to do with any distinctly military posturing, was seen as a source of prestige, and, as such, explorers into the region were treated as national heroes. Antarctic exploration was pursued partially because of the challenge of conquering the last frontier that existed — in the words of Ernest Shackleton, “You can’t think what it’s like to walk on places where no man had been before.” It was also, in a sense, seen as an international sport. Britain’s greatest adversaries in reaching the South Pole, for example, were not Germany, Italy, or France, but rather Norway (see timeline chart on p. 34), a country that hardly participated in the European power struggle and indeed remained neutral in World War I (1914–1918), and America, which was to be Britain’s eventual ally in that conflict. These were not rivalries in any bitter sense, and indeed British explorers such as Captain Robert Scott often consulted more experienced Norwegian polar explorers for advice.

For Britain, the pride associated with exploration at the turn of the century was especially alluring. Captain Scott’s expedition to Antarctica aboard the *Discovery* in 1901, on which Shackleton served, departed Britain “with the unanimous backing of their countrymen,” an important development at a time when Britain’s role in the next century was deemed uncertain. Queen Victoria had died earlier in the year, and meanwhile the British Army was suffering continuing setbacks in the Boer War in South Africa against the ethnically Dutch Boer militias. As one newspaper trumpeted, “Even in the throes of an exhausting struggle, we can yet spare the energy and the men to add to the triumphs we have already won in the peaceful but heroic field of exploration.” When Shackleton returned from his command of the *Nimrod* Antarctic expedition in 1909, he came back a hero, with one newspaper commenting that “It is pleasant to think that in spite of the moanings we hear from time to time on the decay of British manliness, our people are still as swift as ever to idolize the Man of Action.”

**Antarctic exploration until Endurance**

**Eighteenth and nineteenth centuries**

One of the most celebrated explorers of all time, Captain James Cook, sailed on several landmark journeys through the southern hemisphere in the last half of the eighteenth century. His reports of large seal populations on the islands surrounding Antarctica triggered an onslaught of British and American sealers into the area; the Industrial Revolution in England had suddenly made seal and whale oil indispensable (mineral oil was unknown at the time), and meanwhile seal skins were coming into fashion for women’s coats. During the first decades of the
ERNEST SHACKLETON: BIOGRAPHY

Ernest Shackleton was born outside Dublin in 1874 to an Anglo-Irish family, and moved with his family to London as a child. In 1890 he joined Britain’s merchant navy (not an organized fleet, but a term that included all privately and publicly owned merchant ships flying the British flag), and by 1898 he had achieved qualifications to be the master (captain) of a merchant ship. After being introduced to Sir Clement Markham, he was offered a position on Captain Scott’s 1901 expedition on the Discovery. Shackleton returned to England in 1903 in ill health, having suffered on the journey from scurvy.

Shackleton immediately began seeking a means of returning to Antarctica, and resigned from the merchant navy in order to raise funds. He failed in the short term to do so, and attempted a series of jobs ranging from journalism to politics. Eventually, he came to work for a Scottish industrialist, William Beardmore, who agreed to support Shackleton’s 1907–1909 voyage on the Nimrod. The expedition came within 97 miles of the South Pole before being forced to turn back, partially because Shackleton continued Scott’s folly of using ponies instead of dogs (despite the advice of more experienced Norwegian explorers). None-the-less, the expedition achieved success in locating the South Magnetic Pole and returned to Britain to wide acclaim. He published a book on the Antarctic, and embarked on a series of lecture tours, including to Norway, where his successes also met an enthusiastic response.

When his celebrity waned with the “Race to the Pole” between Scott and Amundsen, Shackleton embarked on various business ventures, which came to little. Shackleton’s announcement of another journey in 1913, to cross a large swath of unmapped Antarctica, was originally greeted with skepticism, especially since the pole had already been reached. None-the-less, he bought a Norwegian ship, which he renamed the Endurance, and assembled a crew. When war was declared in Europe in 1914, Shackleton offered his ship and his men to the Royal Navy, but was given permission to proceed to the Antarctic.

Following the Endurance adventure, Shackleton was commissioned into the Army as a major, and gave a lecture tour after the war. However, he soon became ill and began drinking heavily. In 1921 he took the opportunity to go south once again on the Quest. In 1922 he died of a heart attack on that voyage, while on the Island of South Georgia, where he was buried.

nineteenth century, this booming trade was responsible for much of the continuing exploration in the Antarctic region.9
Throughout the century, scientific exploration also continued apace, originally centered around a search for the South Magnetic Pole10 led by the British Royal Navy and by Captain James Ross in particular. Learned societies proliferated
### Table 4.1 Antarctic expeditions at the turn of the twentieth century

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expedition and vessel</th>
<th>Leader and financing</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901–1904 The British National Antarctic Expedition, aboard the <em>Discovery</em></td>
<td>Captain Robert Falcon Scott, with the backing of Sir Clements Markham and the British government</td>
<td>Limited use of skis, limited knowledge of how to handle dogs. Lack of nutrition caused scurvy. Ernest Shackleton, a member of the expedition, was severely weakened.</td>
<td>Biological experiments conducted and important geographical discoveries made. Distance from pole reached: 463 miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907–1909 The British Antarctic Expedition, aboard the <em>Nimrod</em></td>
<td>Sir Ernest Shackleton, privately financed</td>
<td>Used ponies instead of dogs, which proved to be a mistake on the icy terrain. Illness plagued the expedition, and Shackleton was forced to leave members behind before returning for their rescue.</td>
<td>Numerous geographical and biological discoveries made. South Magnetic Pole discovered. Distance from pole reached: 97 miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910–1912 Norwegian expedition on the <em>Fram</em></td>
<td>Roald Amundsen (of Norway), privately financed</td>
<td>Adept use of skis and dogs allowing for efficient travel, use of seal meat to forestall scurvy, well planned, and fortunate with weather</td>
<td>First to reach South Pole. Returned safely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910–1912 Expedition aboard the <em>Terra Nova</em></td>
<td>Captain Scott, privately financed</td>
<td>Continued use of ponies, little use of skis, unlucky with weather</td>
<td>Scott and polar expedition party reached pole soon after Amundsen, but perished on the return journey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: Scurvy was a common ailment suffered by sailors, and could at times prove fatal. Only in 1912 was it discovered that scurvy is caused by a deficiency in vitamin C.
throughout the century, and helped support and spur this research. The International Geographic Society passed a resolution in 1895 declaring that “the exploration of the Antarctic Regions is the greatest piece of geographical exploration still to be undertaken.”

Financing voyages

While the Royal Navy had funded voyages of science and exploration in the past, the naval arms race with Germany prevented it from directly funding an expedition to the Antarctic at the turn of the century. Rather, Sir Clement Markham, president of the Royal Geographical Society and determined to beat the Norwegians and the Americans to the South Pole, raised money for the first major Antarctic voyage; he was eventually given a grant by the British government. Markham chose the captain, Robert Scott, an officer in the Royal Navy, for the 1901 voyage on the Discovery. Scott’s crew included Shackleton.

Subsequent voyages were privately financed. Shackleton, for his first Antarctic voyage as a commander in 1907 on the Nimrod, actively engaged in fundraising, and expected great financial returns in publishing contracts and lecture tours. He even negotiated a £10,000 deal with a publishing company for advance rights to his account if he succeeded in reaching the Pole. Scott, not as enthusiastically, also had to raise funds for his doomed expedition aboard the Terra Nova in 1910, in which he raced the Norwegian Roald Amundsen to the South Pole (Table 4.1).

BACKGROUND BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FURTHER READING

Theorizes about the connections between exploration and empire, and provides concrete examples. See specifically Chapter 2 on the Royal Geographic Society.

Details the history of Antarctic exploration, including in-depth discussions of the major expeditions at the turn of the twentieth century.

Provides an in-depth account of Scott’s, Shackleton’s, and Amundsen’s voyages, and also gives detailed biographical information on each of these explorers.

Provides the history of the Royal Navy throughout the nineteenth century, including voyages of exploration and the naval arms race with Germany.

A compilation of Shackleton’s writings on both the Nimrod and Endurance expeditions.
ALFRED LANSING: BIOGRAPHY

Alfred Lansing was born in Chicago in 1921. During World War II (1939–45), when he was nineteen, he began a six-year tour of duty with the US Navy. While in the Navy, he was promoted to the rank of ensign and received a Purple Heart, a medal awarded by the President to members of the armed forces who are wounded (or killed) in battle. After leaving the Navy in 1946, he attended college, graduating from Northwestern University in Chicago in 1950.  

Lansing became a professional writer, journalist, and editor, explaining that “I have a great many opinions about writing, but I’m afraid that all of them are unprintable; furthermore, it’s been my experience that most writers don’t talk about their craft – they just do it.” He began his career as a bureau manager for the United Press, a global news agency. He later served as a staff writer for Collier’s, an illustrated news and literary magazine that employed highly regarded writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Winston Churchill; he also worked as the Outdoor Editor for Collier’s, having a specific personal interest in Japanese gardening. His professional career also included working as an associate editor for Reader’s Digest, a popular and best-selling general-interest magazine, as well as becoming an editor for Time Books.  

Lansing is best-known for his freelance work, especially for his thoroughly researched work *Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage*, first published in 1959. The book has since been regarded as a classic; the 2002 paperback edition was its twenty-seventh printing. A few years after its first publication, Lansing also published an abridged edition under the title *Shackleton’s Valiant Voyage*.  

“Throughout the book,” a laudatory book review exclaimed, “the extremely thorough research undertaken by the author is evident. Lansing conducted extensive interviews with the survivors of the expedition, as well as gaining access to many of the diaries kept by the men during their ordeal.” As part of his research, he became a member of the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, England, in 1957.  

For his work on *Endurance*, Lansing was awarded a Secondary Education Board Book Award, as well as a Christopher Little Award. The latter prize, which he received in 1960, is given to books dealing with important subjects concerning the public good that are based on “sound and spiritual principles” and that are presented with solid literary craftsmanship with the goal of reaching a wide audience.  

AUTHOR BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES


Ibid., p. 16.

Ibid., p. 18.

Quoted in Ibid., p. 18.

Ibid., pp. 50–51.


The magnetic poles, whose locations shift over time, are the center of the Earth’s magnetic activity and differ from the actual geographic poles through which the Earth’s axis runs.


Mortimer, op. cit., p. 12.

Ibid., p. 34.


Ibid.


Lansing, op. cit.


*Contemporary Authors Online*, op. cit.
