The Enduring Books of Shackleton’s Endurance: A Polar Reading Community at Sea

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Abstract
Ernest Shackleton’s legendary Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition (1914-1917), best known today as a testament to the leadership qualities of its indomitable “boss,” deserves to be similarly recognized for elucidating the importance of vulnerability of book culture in exploration. The Endurance’s substantial library was mostly discarded before the ship sank in the Antarctic’s Weddell Sea on November 21, 1915. Available reading material was further reduced as the 28-man crew moved from ice floe to ice floe and later boarded three small boats sailing through horrendous conditions to Elephant Island. While Shackleton and five others soon sailed to South Georgia seeking rescue for all 28 men, twenty two of them spent four months wondering whether relief would come but surviving partly thanks to their much reduced library of fewer than ten volumes. With evidence drawn from a wide range of sources, the article explores reading as a coping mechanism to help this reading community deal with mind-crippling boredom and the distractions of anxiety.

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Published
2017-08-24

Issue
Vol 7 No 1 (2017)

Section
History