

St. Gallen Symposium 2006

The Longest Journey
What Europe can learn from
Ernest Shackleton

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36th St. Gallen Symposium

University of St. Gallen, Switzerland

May 18–20, 2006



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The Longest Journey

What Europe can relearn from Ernest Shackleton

Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success.

Part One – A Quick Glance At Ernest Shackleton

“You’re always wanting me to give up things, what is it I ought to give up?”

Ernest Shackleton’s alleged last words, uttered to his good friend Macklin in the whaling station of Grytviken, South Georgia, concluded a life full of adventure and unfulfilled ambition. Born during the disastrous potato crop failure in Ireland in 1874, Shackleton grew up with his family on a farm before moving to Dublin and later to London. Rather than following his father’s wishes to pursue a career in the medical field, he joined the Western Shipping Company in 1890. His first journeys included the rounding of Cape Horn and further trips to America and the Far East. At the age of 24, he was certified as Master.

But Shackleton was always drawn to the *mysterious south* and in september 1900, he approached the principal benefactor of the National Antarctic Expedition, Llewellyn Longstaff, about joining the expedition. Longstaff, impressed with Shackleton’s personality, could not refuse and so, in 1901, Shackleton found himself part of Robert Falcon Scott’s infamous Discovery Expedition. Midway through the expedition, though, he had to be invalided home due to a serious illness – a defeat which would define his further ambitions and only strengthen his resolve. After convalescing, he worked as a journalist, a public speaker and even a politician for the next couple of years; years in which the geographical South Pole remained a place not walked upon by man.

Eventually, in 1907, he was able to organize all necessary resources for his next ambitious project: Spearheading the first successful expedition to the geographical South Pole. After a long and for the most part uneventful passage to the Antarctica on the Nimrod (after which the expedition was named), Shackleton acknowledged that it was impossible to reach land and

ordered the Nimrod to steer to McMurdo Sound where the frozen sea would finally stop them. Shackleton and his team members had to prepare for the six-month night which was to follow. The members of the expedition quickly established a daily routine of cooking, sleeping and eating in their furnished hut as well as emptying dishes during blizzards. Temperatures were now consistently below -20°F, but the team was able to realize the first major accomplishment of the expedition with the successful ascent of Mt. Erebus. In general, people tended to their specialties: Preparing food, doing geographical or meteorological work, tending to medical needs and exercising the Manchurian ponies. By midwinter, activities had lost their initial pace and by the beginning of spring, tensions had risen dramatically.

But the plans, carefully worked out during the winter, were about to be put into place. Three men set out to reach the Southern Magnetic Pole, pulling their own sledges and supplies. After a dangerous journey of several months and 1260 miles, they reached the Magnetic Pole, took a picture, gave three cheers to King Edward VII and worked their way back to the Nimrod, but not without taking possession of the Magnetic Pole for the British Empire.

Shackleton, however, led his party southwards. Their journey would lead them over deadly crevasses across a flat white plain and when they were finally arriving at the polar plateau two months later at an altitude of 10,000 feet, strong blizzards reduced their progress to a couple of miles a day. Sun-burnt, frost-bitten and experiencing deep hunger (by that time the party was nourishing on pony maize), Shackleton considered the lives of those who were with him, and a mere 97 miles from the South Pole, he marked their farthest south.

They could still have reached the Pole, but knowing that they would not have survived, Shackleton decided to exhaust the remaining resources on their way back to the Nimrod, leaving none of his party behind. The honour of reaching the South Pole fell to Amundsen several years later and from the British perspective to Robert Falcon Scott, but unlike Amundsen and Shackleton, Scott never returned.

Upon safe return, there remained one great journey of scientific importance for which Shackleton would set out in 1914: The crossing of the Antarctic Continent from sea to sea, a distance of roughly 1800 miles. The Endurance Expedition was to become the most incredible adventure of this era. After an uneventful passage to South Georgia, Shackleton decided to ask the whaling captains there for their advice. Shackleton set out for the Weddell Sea, but he had to obey the forces he sought to command, and on January 18, 1915, the Endurance was trapped in the ice and consequently drifting northwards.

Henceforth, the danger of being crushed by the ice at night or being attacked by killer whales when they would spot people on the ice was ever present for the following 281 days. After having drifted for roughly 1200 miles, the Endurance eventually sank at the 69th parallel of latitude. Drifting on changing floes, the party developed a daily routine of launching the boats when the floe split beneath them, retreating to a new floe, hauling up the boats and pitching the tents again. On April 9, 1916, they launched the boats once again but were finally able to cast off for open water and a week later, they reached Elephant Island, touching land for the first time in 16 months.

Shackleton was determined to save his party, but he knew that Elephant Island was an inappropriate place to wait for rescue. He had made up his mind: He and 5 other men would go on an anticipated month's voyage to South Georgia, travelling 800 miles in a small, open boat through the most storm-swept water of the world; the rest of the party would wait for Shackleton to return. Gigantic waves, sea spray freezing on the boat, frost-bite, thirst – the boat and the men lived through it, and only 14 days after their departure, they reached South Georgia.

Three further days were spent waiting for the best possible conditions to make landfall, and after another perilous journey over South Georgia's mountains, the rescue of Shackleton's remaining party members could begin.

Reviewing *South*, Apsley Cherry-Garrard wrote of Shackleton: *Do not let it be said that Shackleton has failed. No man fails who sets an example of high courage, of unbroken resolution, of unshrinking endurance...I believe Shackleton never lost a man: he must have had some doubts as to whether he would save one then. But he did, he saved them every one. Nothing is harder to a leader than to wait. The unknown is always terrible, and it is so much easier to go right ahead and get it over one way or the other than to sit and think about it.*

Part Two – To Whom It May Concern

Europe compared the power of innovation in the United States and in the Far East, the unity in diversity of India and the admirable growth in China with its own qualities in the respective areas – and Europe found itself wanting. What are the most significant implications of Shackleton's life for an entrepreneurial Europe?

The underlying (admittedly cheap) question is: Should the people of Europe aspire to reach the Pole or should they be more keen on bringing back home every single man - and woman, of course - assuming that a synthesis of both (which was achieved by Roald Amundsen) is not feasible any longer. The solution to this problem depends on a number of factors or points of view starting with the most basic of questions: What is Europe's South Pole? The ultimate goal, the motivation behind all ambitious projects, the very first impetus behind all good intentions. This, we cannot know, unfortunate as it is.

Freedom Security Diversity Unity Wealth Justice Peace Stability Growth

Trying to establish a preference ordering of these sometimes mutually exclusive terms is at least very demanding and most certainly yields an intransitive outcome.

Realizing one of these terms is respectable; realizing a few of them is desirable; realizing all of them is Utopian.

Unless one wants to live in a Utopian society – a society which raided neighbouring countries for slaves – one will have to learn to set the appropriate priorities. Choose for yourself. The most significant truth to emerge from these statements, however, is that today (and sadly: for the foreseeable future), the success of Europe and its further development is solely measured by the wealth of its nations and people when compared to that of others.

This wealth and the corresponding employment opportunities are created by competition among companies in free markets – a competition which rewards firms that offer better products and penalises those which make less prudent decisions about what they offer. First things first: A strong national competition makes companies internationally more competitive and successful. The European Union – and the Commission in particular – goes a long way in guaranteeing a competitive situation within the EU. This makes their attitude towards international competition just the more enigmatic, especially regarding tariffs and state aid for anachronistic industries.

Wouldn't it be an analogous argument that a strong international competition makes European companies even more successful? Apparently not, as the EU still tends to regulations and protectionism. Where's the courage? Where's the trust? The world is in perpetual motion, and as it changes, you adapt or not. There is a change in reality, and whether you embrace it or not depends mostly on your ability to change your perception. Regulations are arguably not known for their perceptiveness. So, is it better to have fewer regulations? Those which

guarantee competition and improve its effectiveness are as essential as are those which elaborate on our values as a society – but let's start to reconsider the remaining ones.

Furthermore, the customer is no longer willing to accept a price-based competition at all cost. The extent to which the customer values the respect with which we treat our *human resources* and the environment directly translates into a corresponding ethical behaviour and corporate culture on the part of the companies.

Until recently, this aspect of successful competition has been largely ignored and can become a decisive factor for future successes. It is understood that cost benchmarking is the most elementary approach to *imitate* other companies' successes.

However, new ideas, dynamism and innovation are the three single most influencing factors of sustainable growth as outlined in the 6th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development of the European Union. Can Europe afford this luxury? Yes it can, and it should. Establishing a cost-based competition with countries in which it is cheaper to pay a worker who scrapes a hole into a wall with his finger than it is to buy a drilling machine – the mere thought is outrageous.

Consequently, four industries seem particularly promising for the future: Bio-and nanotechnology, alternative energy sources, telecommunication, services. A united Europe is a unique place not comparable to any others in the world and therefore requires a unique approach rather than a mere transfer of another nation's conventional wisdom into a European model. Nevertheless, the mere ability to compete and a corresponding environment are certainly helpful but not mandatory components of a successful development.

Shackleton proved the hypothesis that personal initiative, heart and endurance are of much greater significance to a successful endeavour in spite of any unfavourable conditions. This hypothesis, however, is not merely confined to the intellectual elite, government officials or maybe corporate leaders, and rightly so. It is a rather simple guideline with which success is the probable outcome of all kind of possible actions:

Setting ambitious goals. Being realistic and not afraid to reconsider. Setting priorities. Being reflective, yet decisive. Suffering grave setbacks, but not being discouraged. Being astute and resourceful. A beacon of endurance in times of uncertainty. A leader in your macro – or microenvironment. Making a difference.

If a couple of men and women in Europe were once again living up to these premises, it would make for a comforting start.

Surely the prospect of facing a behemoth of bureaucracy is not equally enthralling as travelling 800 miles in an open boat through the Antarctic Sea, but you have to start somewhere. Apparently, Europe has not developed into a Roald Amundsen, but the author certainly hopes it is not going to develop into a Robert Falcon Scott any further, because like Shackleton, the author prefers the *live donkey* to the *dead lion*.

Hence, let us now prepare to embark upon our own journey to claim the first discovery of the new century: Europe.

Men and women wanted for hazardous journey. Need courage and endurance in a freezing political climate. Little chance of success, certainty of blame and no recognition whatsoever.

Anyone joining up?

Anyone?

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Quotes and ideas used by Francis Bacon, Ernest Shackleton (including Shackleton's alleged advertisement for the Nimrod expedition on the first page), Apsley Cherry-Garrard, Adam Smith, Thomas More (Utopia), Luc de Brabandere, the European Commission and myself.