

Elephant Island and Beyond: The Diaries of Thomas Orde Lees

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ELEPHANT ISLAND AND BEYOND: THE DIARIES OF THOMAS ORDE LEES. By John Thomson. Bath, Somerset, U.K.: Bluntisham Books, The Erskine Press, The Bath Press, 2003. 339 pp. £24.95. ISBN 1852970766.

Thomas Orde Lees was certainly the most controversial, unpopular, and most likely-to-be-eaten member of Shackleton's ill-fated *Endurance* expedition (1914–1916). John Thomson has produced an interesting compilation of Orde Lees' diaries covering this period. Previous accounts of the expedition have used the material, but here the Antarctic buff can read the first-person account of this colorful, interesting, and accomplished man. In addition to the diaries, the author has provided a readable account of Orde Lees' early life from his "illegitimate" birth in Ireland in 1877 and subsequent activities in China (prior to the *Endurance* expedition), U.K. during World War I, and Japan, until his death in New Zealand in 1958. The great bulk of the account is material from the diaries of the period 16 January 1915, as the *Endurance* entered the ice of the Weddell Sea, until the rescue from Elephant Island by Shackleton on 30 August 1916.

I assume the reader is familiar with the almost annoyingly repetitive telling and retelling of the *Endurance* saga in books, film, and television in the past five or so years. Orde Lees, at Shackleton's request, kept the diaries for use in publicizing the expedition. He apparently did occasional rewriting, but appears to be quite truthful throughout. Although self-serving, as all diaries are, he gives numerous examples where his prickly personality caused friction with other members of the expedition. After *Endurance* became beset in the ice pack, Orde Lees spent most of his duties for the next year and a half managing the food, cooking for a time, and worrying about sufficient food for survival of the party. As early as 29 January 1915 he wrote, "we had relied on penguins and seals to eke out our larder and there are none." At Shackleton's order, Orde Lees and others hunted seals and penguins from the time *Endurance* was beset in January 1915 until the boat trip to Elephant Island in April 1916, as the ice floes on which they were camped disintegrated.

After Shackleton, Worsley, and the four others sailed for South Georgia in the tiny *James Caird*, Orde Lees writes continually of his difficulties persuading Frank Wild, the leader on Elephant Island, of the need to lay in a stock of seals and penguins. To be fair to Wild, however, by the time of the rescue, the small remaining stock of meat from these animals was quite spoiled by the relatively warm temperatures. Orde Lees mentions on several occasions the weakness of the men, due (according to him) to lack of carbohydrates and relying almost entirely on meat. One item that livened their spirits on Elephant Island was an occasional "tot of methylated spirits," which was planned for use in the stoves of the party crossing Antarctica. This must have been methanol, which has killed at least two men I am

aware of in Antarctica in the U.S. program in the 1960s and 2000s. Orde Lees was aware that “it cannot be good for one, but it seems to put new heart into us.”

One of the fascinating things to me, which (perhaps deliberately) is not commented on by the author, was the gradual deterioration of the living conditions from early winter of 1915 on *Endurance*, to drinking methanol and eating a little rotten penguin in August 1916. This book has a diary entry for almost every day during this period, so the tedium and length of time the party spent in really horrible conditions becomes only gradually apparent to the reader. Perhaps that is the greatest contribution of the book to the sizable library of accounts of the *Endurance* expedition. By the end of May 1916 they were reduced to rereading five volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, confined to the letters A, E, M, P, and S. “We know all about the manufacture of paper and the arts of printing, mining, engraving etc.” The tobacco addicts on Elephant Island had a particularly hard time as the supplies dwindled to nothing. “The absence of tobacco makes the men very irritable, impertinent, and unreasonable,” particularly when some of the “officers” still had a limited amount to smoke in toilet-paper cigarettes. Wild “thinks that . . . [the men] . . . have been very improvident.”

On 23 August 1916, Orde Lees refers to hearing mocking remarks such as, “We shall have to eat the one who dies first.” Years later, Orde Lees’ daughter recalled her father telling her and her mother about a ballot over who would be “first for the ‘cook pot.’ [Orde Lees’] name was drawn and he believed he would have been killed if Shackleton had not returned to Elephant Island.” Thomson lends credence to this suspicion from an account of a plan to lure Orde Lees to the waterfront and shoot him “accidentally” when “the designated member of the group raised his arm, pointed to the sea, but shouted ‘There’s a SHIP!’”

Upon returning to England, Orde Lees entered the Royal Air Force and as a 40-year-old was assigned to observation balloons, where he became fascinated with parachutes. He became an enthusiastic proponent of parachutes and made many jumps to demonstrate their usefulness for pilots. The device was considered “unmanly” despite

800 deaths among trainee pilots in 1917. Eventually nine out of ten pilots “keenly desired them,” although it was not until 6000 British air dead that, in 1925, parachutes were provided to the R.A.F.

After WW I, Orde Lees went to Japan on a “secret” mission to assist in the development of the Japanese Air Force, despite U.S. hostility to the idea. The author surmises that he carried out intelligence activities in Japan for the British. For some unknown reason, which the author suggests is possibly related to this mission, he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel in the Royal Marine (in which he had served many years earlier), so he could have an improved retirement.

Orde Lees, after an earlier failed marriage, married a young Japanese student, Hisako Hoyano. At the start of WW II the Orde Lees family, which by this time included a daughter, fled penniless to New Zealand, where he remained the rest of his life. He worked as a porter and office boy at a school. Although his past accomplishments were known, “his abilities and talents were left to waste” because of prejudice by New Zealanders of that era “of anyone who stood out from the common crowd.” He always loved speed, never walked when he could run, and rode his bicycle through motor vehicle tunnels to save time—to the dismay of the local Wellington police.

Orde Lees later became very interested in the International Geophysical Year (IGY) Expedition to Antarctica. He was thrilled to join the committee of the RNZ Antarctic Society at the age of 79.

Thomson has written a useful book about a little-understood man. The author does a nice job of bracketing the material from the dairies with other biographical material. The book is enhanced by inclusion of drawings and sketches by Orde Lees and others as well as poorly reproduced photographs. For any armchair explorer or serious student of the “heroic era” of Antarctica, there is a wealth of detailed information in Orde Lees’ well written dairies.

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