

Obituary

Sir James Wordie

Sir James Mann Wordie, C.B.E., an Honorary Member of the Arctic Institute of North America, died in Cambridge on January 16, 1962 at the age of 72. In his quiet way he exerted a very great influence on polar work in Britain for some 40 years, and it is unlikely that anyone again will be able to fill the sort of position he held. He bridged the gap between two eras in the history of exploration, and by virtue of his work at Cambridge, his wide and scholarly knowledge, and his great practical experience he was able to perform a unique function in advising and guiding the work of others.

He was born in Glasgow in 1889, the younger son of John Wordie, a well-known haulage contractor. After attending Glasgow Academy and Glasgow University, he entered St. John's College, Cambridge, in 1910 and read geology, taking the Tripos 2 years later as an Advanced Student. His first visit to a polar land came in 1913, when he went to the Yukon and Yakutat Bay on an excursion that followed the International Geological Conference at Toronto. Back in Cambridge, he was engaged in graduate work in the Sedgwick Museum, where also the lately returned members of Scott's last expedition were working on their material. As a result of this association he joined Ernest Shackleton's British Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition as geologist and chief of scientific staff, and thus participated in the now almost legendary adventure of the *Endurance* (1914-17). After the ship had been crushed by the ice of the Weddell Sea, and months had been spent in improvised camps on the pack-ice, the expedition reached Elephant Island, where Wordie remained with the main party while Shackleton made his extraordinary open-boat journey to South Georgia for help. The way things had turned out, there was no scope for geological work, but Wordie was able to use the time to advantage by making sea-ice studies, and his "Natural history of the pack ice as observed in the Weddell Sea" (1921) was one of the foundations of such studies in the south.

When the expedition returned, the war was still being fought and Wordie joined the Royal Field Artillery. In 1919 he returned to Cambridge and at once took up polar work again, this time in the Arctic. In the summer of that year and of 1920 he was geologist and second-in-command (to W. S. Bruce) of expeditions to Spitsbergen. Then in 1921 he started his own series of arctic expeditions, which were to extend over nearly two decades.

The 1921 expedition was to Jan Mayen, where biological, glaciological, and geological studies were accompanied by an ascent of Beerenberg, the extinct volcano that dominates the island. In 1923 Wordie led a Cambridge expedition that attempted to reach the Franz Josef Fjord area of East Greenland, but the ice was unfavourable and the party never got ashore — indeed, it narrowly escaped disaster. In 1926, however, this area was successfully reached with another party and the summer was spent on survey and archaeology. Wordie returned to the same area again in 1929 and his geologists continued where the 1926 party had left off. A highlight of the activities of this summer was the ascent of Petermann Bjerg by Wordie and four others after a 9-day approach march.

After four visits to the Greenland Sea he now turned his attention to the shores of Baffin Bay. In 1934, taking a party that included ornithologists as well as geologists and archaeologists, he made for Melville Bay, intending to call at Kap York and then cross to Ellesmere Island. Ice was unfavourable, however,

and after some work ashore at Upernavik and farther north, the expedition crossed Baffin Bay south of the "Middle Ice" and spent the remaining month surveying and charting Eglinton Fiord and Clyde Inlet. Wordie was still determined to get to Ellesmere Island, and in 1937 he succeeded. Bache Peninsula was reached and then the ship cruised down the east coast of Ellesmere Island and Baffin Island. Survey and geological work were carried out, and archaeological sites investigated at Carey Øer, and Turnstone Beach on Ellesmere Island. Probably the most original scientific work done was the pioneer cosmic ray study by Dymond and Carmichael, who used balloons to carry into the upper air instruments for recording intensity and concentration.

All these expeditions were carried in chartered Norwegian sealers. In those days it was still possible for the financing to be entirely private, each member paying his share. They were not large-scale undertakings—the numbers in the parties seldom reached double figures—but their importance was out of all proportion to their size. During the 1920's especially, it was these expeditions that, as much as anything else, kept alive in British universities the interest in polar exploration. Wordie chose his men with skill, and stimulated all of them with his particular combination of quiet enthusiasm and tenacity. Many, like Vivian Fuchs and Pat Baird, later made their own important contributions to polar exploration, whereas others now hold senior scientific appointments in Britain and the Commonwealth.

He made no more arctic journeys, but in 1946-7 he returned to the Antarctic to advise on the programme of the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey, of whose Scientific Committee he was Chairman. On this voyage he visited the South Orkneys, the South Shetlands (where he passed Elephant Island once again), and the Graham Land Peninsula.

All this while his base had been at St. John's College. He was elected Fellow in 1921, and was successively Tutor, Senior Tutor, and President before becoming Master of the College in 1952, a post he held until his retirement in 1959. He was thus ideally placed to infect many generations of undergraduates with his own keen desire to unravel the processes of nature in remote parts of the world, and it was this, it must be repeated, that he did well above all else.

His influence extended far beyond Cambridge, for his advice was sought in many quarters. He was a founder-member of the Committee of Management of the Scott Polar Research Institute, and its Chairman from 1937 to 1955. He was a member from 1923 to 1949 of the Discovery Committee of the Colonial Office, a body that played a most important part in undertaking oceanographical research in the Southern Ocean from its ships *Discovery I* and *Discovery II*. He was President of the Royal Geographical Society, 1951-4, and Chairman of the British Mountaineering Council, 1953-6. The Royal Society made him Chairman of its International Geophysical Year Committee in 1955. He was awarded medals by the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the Royal Geographical Society, and the Royal Scottish Geographical Society; he was knighted "for services to polar exploration" in 1957.

Wordie was indeed a most unusual person. His study, with its great library of polar books, was normally in indescribable disorder. In it one would see a slight figure, whose manner was as far from dominating as one can imagine, and whose soft Glaswegian tone of voice was equally quiet and level whether he was telling a joke or administering a rebuke. Yet these were most deceptive indications. He could lay his hands at once on the paper he was looking for; and he had very strong ideas to which he held tenaciously. Of those in Britain today who have played any active part in polar work, there are few who have not at some time benefitted, and benefitted greatly, by Wordie's stimulation, kindness, and help.

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