

Antarctica—Background

Title 187

While I was editing *Discovery*, and ever since the International Geophysical Year of 1957-1959, I published a regular column about the IGY every month, in which the Antarctic featured regularly [see Title 63]. I became deeply interested and started to collect the classical books of the heroic period of Antarctic exploration, the works of Scott, Amundsen, Charcot, Cherry-Garrard, Franklin, Hurley, Nansen, Peary, Ross, Shackleton and Weddel. [See Title 51] It had become a large and valuable collection of which I was proud, but I had to sell it at Christie's in April 1988. It was hard to part with it.

After I joined the staff of the *Daily Telegraph* in 1963 as their Science Correspondent, I was able to consider the possibility of travelling to the Antarctic myself, and I planned and schemed to obtain an invitation, without which a visit would have been impossible. Sir Vivian Fuchs, Director of the British Antarctic Survey in Cambridge, was kind enough to invite me to visit Halley Bay, the main British Station and to report from there. But travelling was lengthy, by plane to Valparaiso, and then by sea for two weeks to get to Halley Bay and two weeks to get back. I discussed the invitation with my Editor but he turned it down, saying: "We couldn't afford to have you on a sea cruise for a month without filing any copy". I had to agree with his reasonable reply.

I then went to see Dr Gordon de Q. Robin, director of the Scott Polar Research Institute, also in Cambridge, and he told me of his joint work with Dr S. Evans of his Institute, to measure the Antarctic ice thickness by radar from an aircraft which was to be tried out by the US Navy. "Why don't you come with us and report on this unique Anglo-American project for a British Newspaper?" It was a brilliant idea and I went to work on it immediately. On my next visit to Washington, I saw the National Science Foundation which supports most American basic research, including Antarctic science. I asked them for permission to report on the radar research in the Antarctic.

They approved of my visit, but added a proviso that I also obtained clearance from the US Navy which at that time, 1989, provided all the essential infrastructure, transport, sustenance, heating and housing, as well as the essential polar clothing. Through the Naval Attaché at the British Embassy in Washington, I obtained an introduction to the American Admiral in charge of the Antarctic Sector. He also approved, but added the further proviso that I had to obtain a medical certificate of my perfect mental and physical health. Considering the not unlikely emergencies in the Antarctic, I appreciated the essential need for an assurance of normal behaviour when the survival of an isolated group depended on it. I do not know what my doctor thought when I asked for a mental certificate, but he gave it and the Editor also gave his final seal of approval. Financing my visit was nowhere discussed.