

## Watercolours in the Antarctic

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Among my collection of Antarctic books I found frequent mention of Dr E.A. Wilson, a member of Captain Scott's second, fateful expedition to reach the South Pole, 1910-1913. Wilson died with Scott, Oates and Evans on their return journey. Dr Wilson, the medical chief of Scott's expedition was not only a painstaking biological observer, but also a superb watercolour artist, whose sketches are now permanently preserved at the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge. They have been universally admired for their scientific accuracy and their delicate colouring.

They inspired me to try and follow his example, although I knew I would never reach his perfection. His technique was similar to mine, rapid outline of the sketches, by Wilson in pencil, followed by colouring on return to the expedition's heated hut. I never had any difficulties with my Rotring pen, even at the lowest Antarctic temperature I encountered of  $-40^{\circ}$  (C or F). I could also retire for colouring to my warm 'Press Hut' at McMurdo.

Knowing in September 1969 that there might be a chance to visit the Antarctic, I bought a new box of watercolours and practised during holidays after more than 20 years lapse. I brought back from my Antarctic visit 25 watercolours, showing the US Air Force bases on which we landed, the aircraft on the ice, their inside during radar flights, the McMurdo base and its atomic power station, the South Pole, the volcanic Mt Erebus, Byrd Station and Shackleton's hut at Cape Royds on McMurdo Sound, as well as a number of other subjects.

Of Shackleton's Hut, built in 1908, I made a black-and-white sketch. In 1969 the Hut was still in perfect condition, lovingly maintained by New Zealand history-enthusiasts during their spare time from their nearby Scott Base. When Sir Ernest Shackleton's son, Lord Shackleton, was elected President of the Royal Geographical Society in June 1971, I thought my little sketch might find a place in the *Daily Telegraph*, whose Science Correspondent I then was. It was accepted and published on 4 June 1971, 15 column-centimeters long. I was offered the sum of £ 5 for it — the only time I have ever been paid for my artistic endeavours. This I considered an insult, either nothing as a member of staff, or a proper fee as an artist, working under most unusual circumstances.

'Watercolours for Science' became of sufficient interest to me to research its history, and I traced it back to Dürer (1471-1528) using it for some animal studies. Botanical illustrations in herbals also date back centuries. However, it was the many watercolours "Faithfully executed upon the spot from Nature" by Sydney Parkinson, watercolour artist on Captain Cook's *Endeavour* during the 18th century, which gave them the first real scientific approbation. In my opinion, he was the true originator of scientific watercolours. My article on this subject was published in *Leonardo* Vol. 14, No. 4, (1982).