

# The Natural Explorer

Also by Tristan Gooley  
The Natural Navigator





# THE NATURAL EXPLORER

TRISTAN GOOLEY

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SCEPTRE

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For the Gooleys.  
Present, past and future.



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## The Lost Explorer: An Introduction

And that, in brief, is all there is to tell about the South Pole. One gets there, and that is about all there is for the telling. It is the effort to get there that counts. We put the Pole behind us and raced for home.

Richard Byrd

**T**he explorer has taken a wrong turn.

In the National Gallery of Ireland there hangs a painting of a tall, dark-skinned and well-built man. He is dressed in flowing robes and a turban, clothes he is unlikely to have chosen. The portrait was painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds and in 2001 it sold for a record £10.3 million.

The man in the picture had travelled from the other side of the world and appeared at the heart of London society in the autumn of 1774. The handsome visitor wore a Manchester velvet suit lined with white satin and lace ruffles; an elegant sword hung by his side. News of his arrival caused a sensation and spread across the city; he was quickly introduced to the elite of the day. The stranger met King George III three days after setting foot on English soil.

Omai was the first Polynesian to visit London and had arrived aboard HMS *Adventure*, one of Captain Cook's two ships from his second great exploratory voyage. He had been adopted by the expedition for both good and bad reasons, but he was not coerced. Omai cannot be held accountable for what happened next.

The Noble Savage, as he was labelled at the time, was eagerly chaperoned by Sir Joseph Banks. Banks had sailed with Cook on his first voyage, as a self-sponsored gentleman botanist, and met Omai in his homeland of Tahiti during this journey. Banks had been quick to capitalise on the success of Cook's previous circumnavigation. In the months after Cook and his crew returned from that voyage it was Banks who positioned himself as the righteous feeder of public curiosity. (He walked away from the second expedition before it departed, in a sulk after being told that the extra cabins he had insisted on having built on top of an otherwise excellent vessel had made Cook's ship unseaworthy and dangerous.)

Banks, Omai and Cook, three men from three very different worlds, gave us some of the golden moments in the history of exploration and in turn the opportunity for us to build a picture of what it means to be an explorer.

Banks, for all his self-aggrandising, was a formidable naturalist. Discovery was his business – he brought back 30,000 plant specimens from his travels, including 1,400 never seen before, which increased the number of the world's known plants by a quarter. He also vividly embodied both gallivanting hero, fighting to push back the frontiers of human knowledge, and fame-crazed egotist. He was able to draw from impressive reserves in each department when the occasion demanded and coming across Omai for the second time, it was the latter resource that he reached for.

Banks was ahead of his time in having an eye for what the public wanted and the chutzpah and means to deliver it. He took Omai under his wing and began a campaign to grab the attention of the British public, or to be more accurate, the public that mattered to him: high society.

It was Banks' interest that pushed Omai to the centre of attention. The noble man, who had left the comforts of home to travel half way around the world in arduous conditions, had metamorphosed into someone who enjoyed the attention, perhaps a little too much. Omai had become a celebrity. His visit was not without

controversy, he was criticised for joining a rakish circle, for playing cards and kissing a lady's handkerchief.

The scientist, the discoverer, the navigator, the conquistador, the hero, the celebrity . . . The explorer wears many masks. But behind them all lies a simple philosophy. The explorer must do two things: make discoveries and communicate these to others.

Omai gratefully accepted a lift with Cook's third great voyage and returned to his life in the Pacific. Unfortunately we know little about his time after settling back there. He doubtless regaled the islanders with rich tales of the people and customs in London and the discoveries he had made on the other side of the world. In this way he was as much an explorer as Cook or Banks and he did us a great service by illustrating that it was possible to discover a place that regarded itself as the political and cultural centre of the known world. He died two and a half years after his return, possibly from a disease contracted in England.

It has been more than two centuries since this trio came together and helped to increase knowledge and fire imaginations. The masks available to the explorer have not changed much, but as time passed, two proved more popular than the others: hero and celebrity. This was a gradual process but there are moments when we are able to get a front-row seat to observe it.

By the first half of the nineteenth century existential angst had crept into the thoughts of the more conscientious explorers. The Prussian explorer of Australia, Ludwig Leichhardt, wonders, in a breathlessly-long sentence, which mask people will see him wearing.

Others considered the undertaking exceedingly dangerous, and even . . . madness on my part; and the consequence of a blind enthusiasm, nourished either by a deep devotion to science, or by an unreasonable craving for fame: whilst others did not feel themselves justified in assisting a man who they considered was setting out with an intention of committing suicide.

Almost a century after Leichhardt's journey the change was gathering pace, but it took a boy from County Kildare, Ireland, to act out the tipping point. On Sunday, 7 March 1912 a cable arrived from Hobart, Tasmania. In it the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen informed his brother and, in turn, the world, that he had reached the South Pole.

In an article published four days later in the *New York Times*, Sir Ernest Shackleton analysed Amundsen's victorious cable. In the Anglo-Irishman's choice of words it is easy to sense his mildly begrudging respect for his rival's achievement: in the short piece he describes Amundsen as fortunate on four separate occasions. However, if there is the slightest hint of bitterness it is almost certainly brought on by a weightier problem than one man's achievement, however envy-inducing.

The South Pole had stood as one of the greatest goals in the imagination of explorers and the public for centuries and was the only one left after the North Pole had apparently succumbed in 1909. (The American explorer, Robert Peary, claimed to have reached the geographic North Pole on 6 April 1909. He was given credit for it at the time and for many years afterwards, although the balance of opinion has now shifted against him. The debate as to whether he reached it or not rumbles on.) Both Poles had now been trampled and therefore sullied as goals of the highest kind for polar explorers. To a man as finely tuned to the marketability of large expeditions as Shackleton, this news was as cold a wind as he would have felt in Antarctica.

Shackleton was acutely aware that the business of exploration required a delicate balance and clever packaging. Now that the race to the South Pole was over, he would need to offset its neatness of goal with the scale of his new venture, and the danger it promised. This was a raising of the polar exploration stakes that he had forecast exactly one year to the day before. Writing in the *Daily Mail* on 11 March 1911 Shackleton attempted to explain, and perhaps plead, that the game that he had given his life to, must go on. 'The discovery of the South Pole will not be the end

of Antarctic exploration. The next work [would be] a transcontinental journey from sea to sea, crossing the Pole.'

Therein lay the rub. If it was not before, it had most definitely now become a game. Previously it had been easy to argue that the human race needed to know what lay at the Poles. Now it transpired that there was nothing to differentiate the geographic Poles from the ice that lay all around them, but we only know that because explorers, like Amundsen, reached them and reported back.

It might sound risible now, but nobody could actually prove that these places were not marked by pots of gold or being patrolled by icy dragons. While any doubts lingered, however small, discovery of more of the same was every bit as valid in geographical terms as the discovery of a smoking and thundering waterfall on the Zambezi river.

The problem with Shackleton's new trans-Antarctic proposal was that the aims of exploration had shifted. The crux of his new expedition was not that it would make discoveries, but that it would be physically, technically and mentally at the limits of human potential. It promised to deliver a great narrative, but it did not offer to teach us much that was new about the world we live in. The geographer and explorer, Sir Clements Markham, wrote that he was 'astounded at the absurdity of Shackleton's plan' and added that it was, 'designed solely for self-advertisement.' Markham was certainly no fan of Shackleton's, but he was not alone in holding reservations. Even *The Times*' upbeat assessment was that Shackleton's aim was to restore Britain's prestige by putting it back at the top of polar exploration – prestige, not discovery. The Royal Geographical Society limited its support to an aloof £1,000 and then showed some regret for even that level.

By both design and then accident, the story that emerged from Shackleton's now famous *Endurance* epic, or the 'Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition' to give it its formal title, was extraordinary. The boat, *Endurance* herself, became trapped and then crushed in the southern ice, after which the expedition unravelled

completely. As Shackleton fought to protect his team, he led his men over ice, onto the elements-torn Elephant Island, across the Southern ocean in a small boat and then over the dangerous land of South Georgia to the refuge of a whaling station.

With each stage there followed another chapter in a tale of hardship, leadership, courage, sacrifice, navigation, bad and good luck that has possibly never been exceeded in the history of exploration. This story has been told often, the point here is that its power has played a significant part in re-shaping the image of the explorer in the minds of the public and consequently in the minds of explorers themselves.

It is no coincidence that before the expedition set off, Winston Churchill referred to Shackleton as, 'this adventurer' and not 'this explorer'. The crossing of Antarctica was not conceived as a voyage of discovery, even before it went horribly wrong, and by the time each person had miraculously survived the ordeal, discovery had been dramatically expunged from the popular picture of the explorer altogether. Who would be so greedy as to cry out for greater insight into our world, when such a feast of the human spirit prevailing over nature's cold wrath was being served up for all to enjoy?

The Trans-Antarctic expedition was conceived as a 'pitch', something Shackleton knew would stand a good chance of lighting the interest of the public, media and sponsors, although not necessarily in that order. This triad of interest had now completed its move from the background of expedition ambitions to the foreground. Science had been trumped, it lacked the public appeal of adventure, and it took its seat at the back.

Shackleton was by no means the only one responsible for the switch of emphasis from discovery about the world we travel through to the travails, danger and, not least, glory of the individual explorers themselves. However, he personified this shift well and played his part with vigour.

The trend continued throughout the twentieth century and now, sadly, in the second decade of the twenty-first it feels as

though we might have reached a point where it is difficult to find a good home for the word 'explorer'. The word 'exploration' now feels equally moribund, and is most commonly used when companies look for oil, gold or other precious minerals.

The physical goals have been steadily mastered and it becomes increasingly obvious that the rewards to humanity of driving harder in this area are diminishing. There is talk of learning more about what we are capable of, mentally and physically, but this is not a convincing argument. There might not have been an expedition since Shackleton's *Endurance* voyage one hundred years ago that has taught us much more about what our species can achieve in extremis.

What explorers moulded in the old style so often mean, but do not say, when they use this argument is that we will learn what they *as individuals* are capable of. The results are often undeniably impressive journeys, but might they be of greater service to the individual than the species?

Before this philosophy dominated, there was a golden age of exploration. More than one in fact, and they were not golden because places on the map had not been walked upon by white men, but golden because these were times when to explore meant to discover and share. We have fallen into the trap of believing that territory needs to be virgin for exploration to be possible or, failing this, an explorer must risk their life and dance with the extremes of physical endurance. Neither of these notions is true.

We must collectively share responsibility for allowing the concept of exploration to be monopolised by those who have been consumed by these ideas. It is time to wrest it back, time to forge a new explorer by reaching back to the many who had the spirit in years gone by and out to the few who have held on to it.

For a new age of exploration to be worthwhile, the aim must be to return to celebrating the acts of discovering and sharing, on however modest a scale. We can take our inspiration from the most curious of those that have gone before and go further, as we are not limited by the boundaries of knowledge or

communication of their era. An ardent spirit of inquisitiveness married with the opportunity to connect more deeply and share more widely with the world around us than ever before: this is where the joys lie.

The person who brings greater understanding of the role a wild flower plays in the universe and the impact it might have on our thoughts and emotions, serves us better than the person who finds some novel way to punish themselves by exercising in remote places. In the future there will be two types of explorer, but only one will be happy to settle for quiet enlightenment, shared.

The great German explorer of South America, Alexander von Humboldt, who relished the interconnections that the natural world offered two centuries ago, holds a light for the new explorer. Humboldt was an inspiration at a time when a spirit of inquiry was treasured – Charles Darwin took his *Personal Narrative* with him on his travels and knew passages by heart. We should not be surprised to learn that Humboldt can hint at paths ahead for us.

It is the task of the explorer (and it is this which distinguishes them from the traveller) to make discoveries and to share them with the world. The latter part of the role offers exciting new possibilities for the next generation of explorers. When Humboldt wrote about his travels he did so in a way that conveyed his sense of wonder. He clearly viewed the opportunity to share his discoveries with as much zeal and ambition as the journey itself. His writing is entrancing and drew all who read it into the moments he had experienced. It is no coincidence that he was admired by French literary giants including Balzac, Hugo, Chateaubriand and Flaubert. He was friends with many luminaries of the German Romantic movement too, including Schiller and Goethe, who told his biographer, ‘What a man he is! I have known him so long and yet he amazes me all over again.’

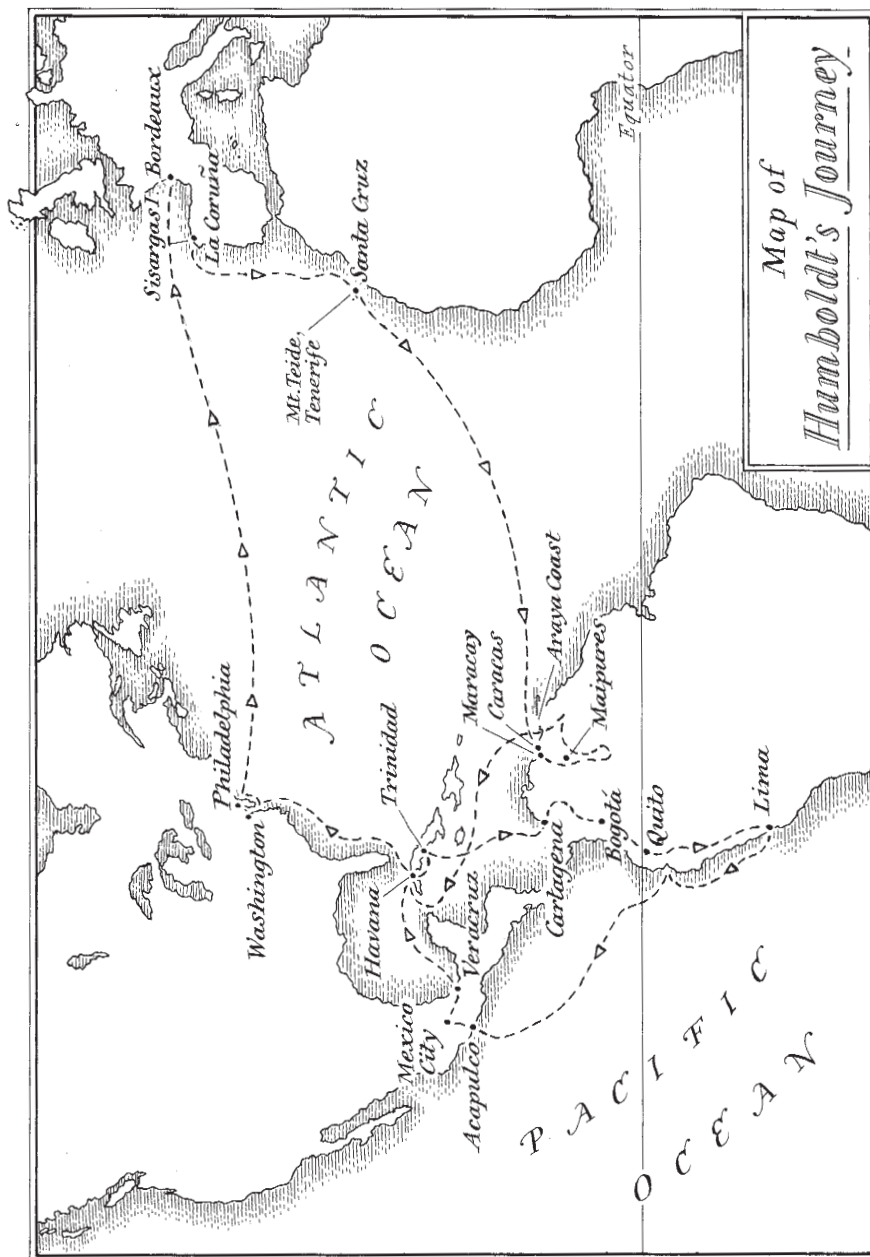
The opportunity to share the joys of discoveries with others through creativity has always been with us, it is part of being human, but we are especially fortunate that we live in a time when the potential to both create and share is growing exponentially.

Human beings have always marvelled at novelty, but we also find much to love in things that emerge from the dialectic course of our past. Deciding to see exploration as a challenge to make discoveries in lands that have been mapped many times and then share this experience in creative ways, marries tradition and novelty.

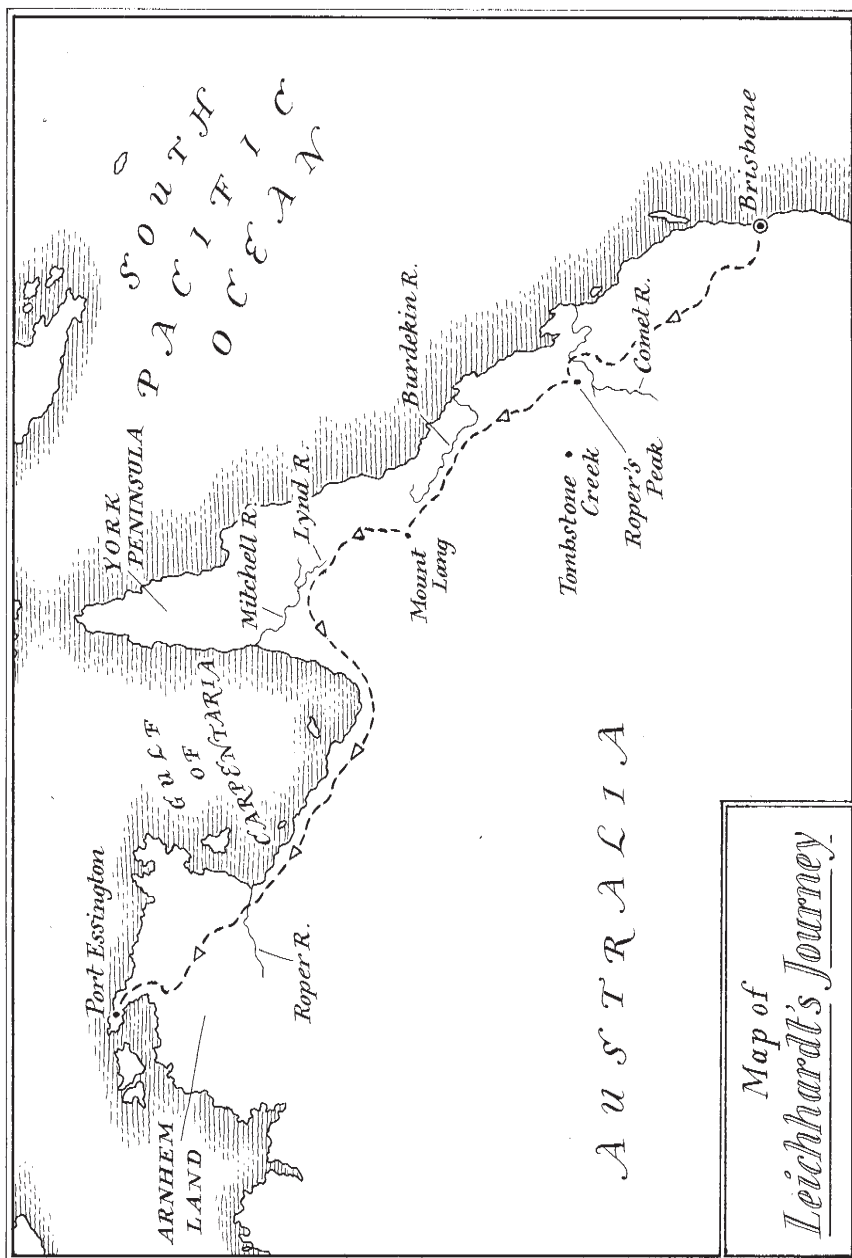
The experience of witnessing a deer move across white slopes as the intricate lattice of a snowflake cracks the light of a low sun into a perfect spectrum, can bring exaltation of a few seconds to an aware observer. The experience can also be wrought into a painting, a poem, book, song or sculpture and the whole journey of a few seconds or many years, shared with the world via the exploding potential of a digital age. Somewhere along this path the observer becomes an explorer. The opportunity is there for a new golden era.

It took a lot of courage for men to haul sleds across icy crevasses or to risk dropping down dead for want of a drop of water. It takes a different courage to attempt to make discoveries in a world that is so self-consciously drowning in knowledge and then to share this through creative expression. This is the gauntlet that the Natural Explorer runs.

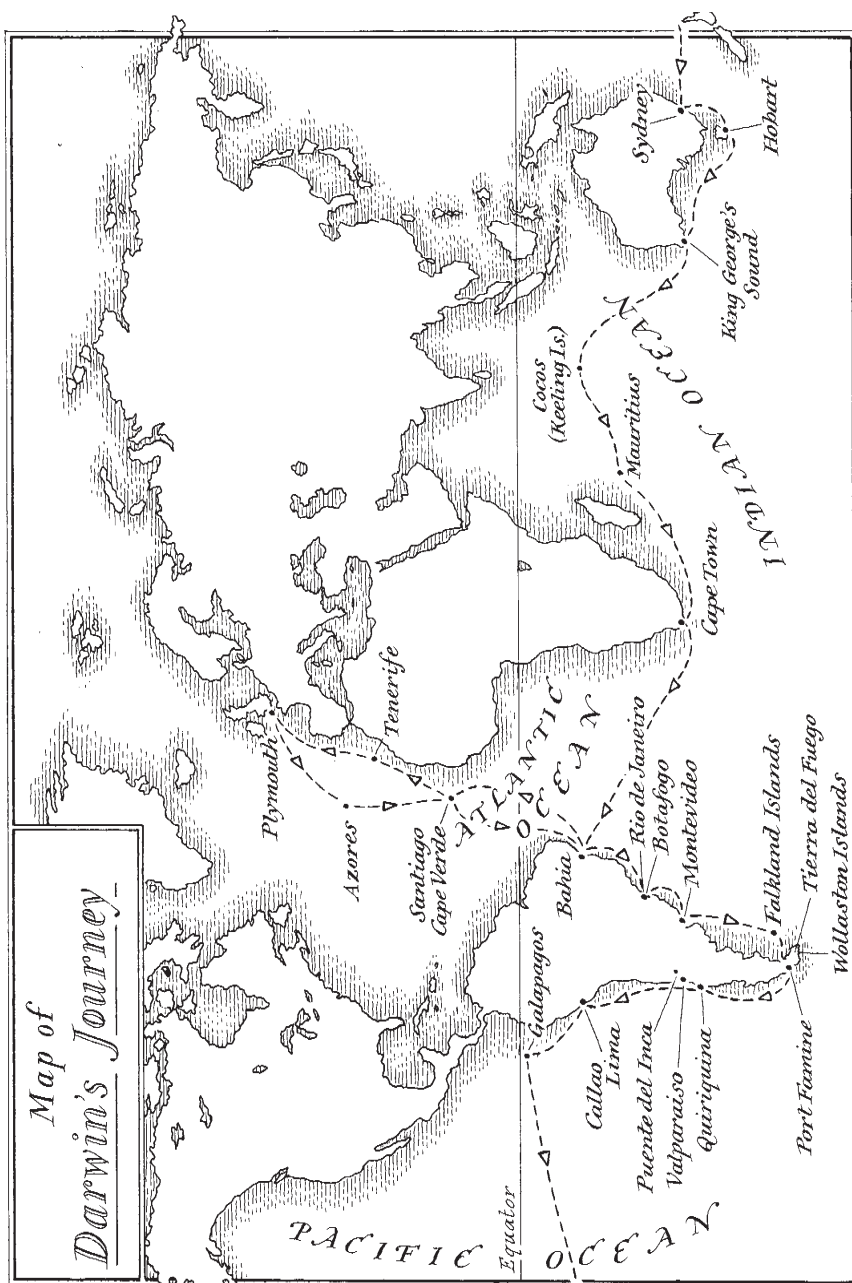




Alexander von Humboldt's American Expedition 1799–1804



Ludwig Leichhardt's Australian Expedition 1844-1845



Charles Darwin's Beagle Expedition 1831–1836