



Scots who made their mark on.....

The Known Extremes : 4 Alistair Forbes-Mackay



First Scot at South Pole

Thirty-one year old Dr Alistair Forbes-Mackay (1878-1914) from Carksey in Argyllshire did what Sir James Clark Ross was unable to do in reaching the Magnetic South Pole, 78 years after Ross had located the its Northern twin.



Mackay was part of a team led by the famous Australian Arctic explorer Douglas Mawson (whose image appears on many Australian and A.A.T. stamps e.g. A.A.T. 1961 *left*) and Welshman, Prof. Edgeworth David, his mentor.

The son of a soldier, Col A. Forbes-Mackay of the 92nd Gordon Highlanders, Mackay attended university in Edinburgh then worked in the zoology department of the University of St Andrew's in Dundee. But his life of adventure began in South Africa where he served in the Police force run by Robert Baden-Powell and he went on to become a Royal Navy surgeon. With such experiences under his belt he gained a place on the 1908-1909 expedition to Antarctica led by Anglo-Irishman Ernest Shackleton, arriving at Cape Royd on the *Nimrod*.



B.A.T. 1984 showing Shackleton and A.A.T. 1979 showing his *Nimrod*

Mackay's particular responsibilities on this were as assistant surgeon and being in charge of the Manchurian ponies taken with the party to haul equipment across the icy and rocky terrain in sub-zero temperatures.

In March 1908, the first major achievement of this expedition was the maiden ascent of 13,360 foot high Mount Erebus, named after one of James Clark Ross's bomb ketch vessels. This hazardous and blizzard-affected attempt was led by 50 year-old David, accompanied by Mawson and Mackay.

This group was then the team selected to head for the Magnetic South Pole, 7000 feet above sea level which they reached on 16th January 1909. Self-evidently this was a tremendous feat of endurance and strength, with the crowning moment captured on film by a remotely operated camera, taking a photo which was doctored for the 1959 A.A.T. stamp but reproduced faithfully on the 2009 stamps. The journey of some 700 km had taken ten weeks, during which the leadership of Prof David was challenged by Mackay who threatened to declare the senior partner medically insane unless he allowed Mawson's judgement to prevail.

The 1260 miles that the three covered stood as a record as the longest unsupported journey by man-drawn sled for seven decades. Each man would pull his sled to a given point ahead and then return to pick the supply load and then trudge forward with that on his back until he got to the sleds and then repeat the whole process endlessly.



(From left) Mackay, David and Mawson raise the flag at the Magnetic South Pole 16 Jan 1909. A.A.T. 1959 (above left) and 1961 (left) use an edited version of the photo—note direction of Union flag. SG 135 within the A.A.T. 2001 long set for the Centenary of Australian Antarctic Exploration and two of the 2009 set within the souvenir sheet below use the original version.



Four years later Mackay's luck ran out when he died of exposure in the Arctic as part of the *Kartuk* expedition led by Icelandic-Canadian Vilhjalmur Stefansson to explore the territory west of Parry Archipelago (now termed the Queen Elizabeth Islands) in Canada. In a party of three Mackay (including fellow Scots James Murray and Sandy Anderson) perished as they tried to cross the ice pack in a small rickety boat to get to Wrangel Island.



(Part of Anderson's jawbone was returned to Scotland in 2000, having turned up on an internet auction !!)



(Above) A.A.T. 1999, and (below) A.A.T. 1984 showing equipment used by the party to locate the magnetic South Pole and GB 2003





Scots who made their mark on..... *The Known Extremes : 5 Alexander Selkirk*



And now for something completely different....

In this extended series which began with an article on David Livingstone in Spring 2008 we have noted the achievements of explorers like Mungo Park, Alexander Mackenzie, John Macdougall Stuart and Sir John Ross who led small parties into *terra incognita* as well as leaders of great political parties or movements like John A MacDonald, Sir George H Reid and Catherine Spence. But on this page we look at one man who faced challenge and adversity literally all by himself and in doing so inspired the creation of one of the early greats of modern English literature.

Born in 1676 as Alexander Selcraig in Largo, Fife, this young man left his home area for a life at sea before he was 20 after a lengthy history of anti-social behaviour and family discord. It was not clear where he first went, but he may just have been involved in the ill-fated Darien scheme financed by Scots in Central America.

The story of what happened then comes from information Selkirk gave to two separate interviewers, Captain Woodes Rogers (who rescued him from the island he was marooned on) and the distinguished English essayist Richard Steele when he had returned to England for some time.



*William Dampier
Australia 1985*

After a brief return home in 1701 Selkirk, as he now styled himself, had joined the service of the buccaneer William Dampier as a navigator, operating in the seas off South America. Dampier's "fleet" - the *St George* and *Cinque Ports*, crowded with seamen left Kinsale in Ireland in September 1703, hoping to capture and plunder many vessels.

Their passage to the southern tip of South America was a very unhappy one with poor food, rampant scurvy and threats of mutiny. When the two ships were separated early in 1704 Dampier in *St George* turned up just in the nick of time to stop the crew taking over *Cinque Ports*, but respite was temporary and Selkirk believed that the boat was in such a poor state that it would not survive at sea much longer. In September of that year the boat had been provisioned and had had some repairs effected in Cumberland Bay at the island of Mas a Tierra within the Juan Fernandez archipelago, off the coast of Chile. Its young Captain Thomas Stradling ordered the men to embark but Selkirk challenged him about the boat's seaworthiness and Stradling called his bluff, offering to leave him there with some basic provisions, tools and utensils, which he did when no other seamen offered to support Selkirk, unwisely as it turned out as the boat later sank killing most of them.

From top down Monaco 1994, Grenada 1972, Romania 1960, Chile 1965

The Juan Fernández Islands are a sparsely inhabited island group reliant on tourism and fishing in the South Pacific Ocean, situated about 667 km off the coast of Chile, and comprise several volcanic islands, one now renamed after his fictional alter ego.



Chile 1974, one of a quartet devoted to the flora and fauna of the archipelago which helped to sustain Selkirk



Selkirk no doubt hoped it would be a matter of days before he was picked up and it was—some 1,580 or so of them !! At first he said he

was naturally despondent—he was attacked frequently by elephant seals and rats—but there were tales of others who had survived on the island for many months before him and he was very resourceful, eating a lot of fish, lobster, seal and goat-



Chile 1974, one of a quartet devoted to the flora and fauna of the archipelago which helped to sustain Selkirk

meat all of which was plentiful. Selkirk had the means to start fires but was wary of his presence being spotted by the Spanish, who were notorious for their cruel treatment of prisoners. From his lookout he was able to see them two hours before any potential beaching and take the necessary precautions to cover his tracks.

The experience on the island proved to be a formative one for him as he had time in abundance to reflect on his character and life to date and in time, he claimed, he began to appreciate his solitude and read his Bible frequently.



He was eventually rescued on the second day of February 1709, by Woodes Rogers in the *Duke* whose navigator William Dampier was able to identify Selkirk despite his weather-worn appearance and almost unintelligible attempts to speak. Selkirk served on the *Duke* for the following two years to his great profit and when he returned to England he was both wealthy and something of a celebrity.

The novelist Daniel Defoe took the bones of Selkirk's tale, romanticised and embellished them into the most successful novel *Robinson Crusoe* in which the hero is shipwrecked and spends 28 years of his life on an island off the coast of South America.

Alexander Selkirk went on to marry two women, some sources say one bigamously and died at sea as first mate of *HMS Weymouth*, possibly from yellow fever on December 13, 1721.