

RCEWA – Sir Ernest Shackleton’s Medal Miniatures

Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the medal miniatures meet Waverley criterion one.

Further Information

The ‘Applicant’s statement’ and the ‘Note of Case History’ are available on the Arts Council Website:

www.artscouncil.org.uk/reviewing-committee-case-hearings

Please note that images and appendices referenced are not reproduced.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Brief Description of item(s)

A set of twelve medal miniatures mounted on a single brooch pin, half sized replicas of all but one of the all medals awarded to Sir Ernest Shackleton and was the final set of miniatures obtained by him.

Materials: gold, silver, plate and enamel and ribbon.

Dimensions: ca.147mm x 57mm x 5mm

Manufacturer: Not stated

Date: ca.1919

Condition:

The miniatures are in worn condition. The colours have survived well but there is some surface dirt on the ribands, which a conservator would be able to remove if wished. The reverse of both the Commander of the Royal Victorian Order and the Officer of the Order of the British Empire medals are showing wear, the plated surfaces having almost entirely rubbed away. The clasp is intact and the set still suited to its original purpose – to be worn and admired.

2. Context

Provenance:

This miniature set belonged to Sir Ernest Shackleton and is likely to have been purchased by him upon the award of his British War medal and Allied Victory medal both awarded in 1919 for his service during the Great War.

This medal set was kept by Shackleton and passed through the family into the hands of the present owner, a direct descendant of Shackleton.

3. Waverley criteria

These items meet Waverley Criterion One.

It is so closely connected with our history (including local history) and national life that its departure would be a misfortune.

These items are associated with the single most decorated British polar explorer, Sir Ernest Shackleton. A man who led some of the most significant British Antarctic expeditions in history, the legacy of which resonate still today. Shackleton's reputation as an explorer, leader and national figure remains strong and public interest, if anything, has grown in the hundred years since his death. The latter point evinced by the continued popularity of museums galleries (Polar Worlds at the National Maritime Museum, The Polar Museum in Cambridge); exhibitions (The Enduring Eye exhibition at the Royal Geographical Society and national tour); television programmes and films (notably the Channel 4 drama *Endurance* starring Sir Kenneth Branagh and a finalist in the BBC Icons: Greatest Person of the 20th Century). His achievements were recognised domestically and internationally both during his lifetime and in the century since and this medal set, of honours awarded by the United Kingdom, Chile, Denmark, Norway, France, Russia and Italy, tangibly demonstrates the distinction of this international figure.

There are no known full-sized medals belonging to Shackleton in any UK museum. This set, which contains all but one of the medals awarded to him, provides a material record of all of his achievements and honours and is the last remaining opportunity for that to be reflected in a British public institution.

DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of item(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.

This set of medal miniatures comprises twelve half-sized replicas of twelve of the thirteen medals awarded to Sir Ernest Shackleton. They are mounted, with ribands overlapping on a large brooch pin and clasp in accordance with Ministry of Defence regulations on brooch width.

The medals are arranged in order:

Commander of the Royal Victorian Order, 1909
Officer of the Order of the British Empire (Military), 1909
British War Medal, 1914-18
Allied Victory Medal, with emblem for Mentions in Dispatches, 1914-18
Polar Medal, EV11R with three clasps 'ANTARCTIC 1902-04', 'ANTARCTIC 1907-09' and 'ANTARCTIC 1914-16'
Polar Star of Sweden, 1909
Dannebrog of Denmark, 1909
St Olaf of Norway, 1909
Legion of Honour (France), 1909
St Anne of Russia, 1910
Crown of Italy, 1910
Order of Merit (Chile) 1916

The medal missing from the set is the Royal Crown of Prussia, awarded in 1911, possibly omitted for political reasons, as the Great War had just ended when this was made.

Such sets were purchased by the recipient to be worn on Mess Dress uniforms and civilian evening dress usually for evening functions.

As previously stated these have clearly been worn and the ribands bear the surface soiling and on the reverse there is wear on the metal plate of two of the medals, but generally they are in reasonably good condition. Conservation cleaning would certainly be beneficial.

2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item(s).

Sir Ernest Shackleton needs little introduction. Known as one of the greatest explorers in history, his accomplishments, and indeed failures, but more importantly his response to adversity place him as one of the greatest of Britons. He achieved a farthest South in 1909, having had to make the agonising decision to turn back a mere 97 miles short of the Pole, an

achievement which made his name and earned him the knighthood and CVO upon his return. The leadership and courage he demonstrated during the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition is legendary and referenced still today by teachers of leadership across the world. The loss of his ship *Endurance* to the ice and his heroic rescue of all his men after two years marooned in Antarctica is a story told and retold.

The significance of and interest in Sir Ernest Shackleton is not to be underestimated. His international reputation and appeal remains high and the legacy of his achievement continues to inspire and his story provides content for new publications, exhibitions and media productions every year.

The Medals

His contribution during his lifetime was recognised both at home in the UK and abroad and he received thirteen official decorations. He was also awarded around forty civilian and academic awards from thirteen countries as well as the UK.

In the UK he was awarded a Polar Medal, with three clasps for each of the three expeditions from which he returned in 1904, 1909 and 1916; the CVO was presented to him after he returned from his attempt on the South Pole in 1909.

Upon his return from Antarctica after the *Endurance* expedition, Shackleton was keen to join the war effort and volunteered for the army and was appointed a Temporary Major. For this he received a British War medal and Allied Victory medal for his service during the First World War. Towards the end of the war he was posted to Russia during which his contributions to the Great War and subsequently, the Russian Civil War he was appointed an OBE. This and the two war medals represent the period of his career that is very poorly reflected in the public domain. Much is made of his Antarctic exploits, but his conduct and achievements when he served in the Army are little known. The war medals, including a Mentioned in Despatches by General Ironside, throw light and potential research areas on his non-polar career, contrasting the frustration of polar ambitions with wider military necessities which did not give him the same honours.

The international nature of the response to his Antarctic endeavours is effectively illustrated in this collection of medals. They coherently demonstrate the importance of his lecture tour of Europe after his return from Antarctica in 1909, and how governments and monarchs were keen to recognise his achievements. For example:

- Polar Star of Sweden was awarded to Shackleton by the King of Sweden on a visit to the Swedish Geographical Society in October 1909.
- Dannebrog of Denmark awarded by King of Denmark on visit to Danish Geographical Society, 12 October 1909
- St Olaf of Norway, 1909 was awarded when he visited Christiania (Oslo) in October 1909

These reflect Shackleton's status after the *Nimrod* expedition in 1909, where he was lauded as a heroic explorer. The awards also illustrate the international nature of, and interest in, polar exploration. From an interpretation perspective, this takes Shackleton, and indeed British polar exploration more broadly, into the international domain and away from a British-centric view.

Representation in Public Collections

There is almost no chance now that there will be occasion to bring together all of his British and overseas decorations in one place. His original medals are distributed between private collections and the Canterbury Museum in Christchurch, New Zealand, so this set of miniatures is the sole opportunity to behold the range and extent of his recognition. (See Appendix One for detail of previous sales).

More broadly, there are few medals in the public domain for most of Shackleton's expeditions. The Scott Polar Research Institute's collection focuses more on the *Endurance* expedition with Frank Worsley's, Herberht (sic) Hudson and E. Joyce's medals held there. The Royal Geographical Society holds Eric Marshall's medals from the *Nimrod* expedition, but medals (and indeed other material culture) from other members of that expedition are few and far between. So this set forms a precious and vital facet to this history which is poorly represented in British public collections.

Associated figures:

Sir Ernest Shackleton, 1874-1922, was born in County Kildare, Ireland and was raised in London and schooled at Dulwich College before joining the merchant navy aged sixteen. An enthusiastic and highly accomplished sailor he joined Captain Robert Falcon Scott on his first attempt on the South Pole. This expedition ended poorly for Shackleton as he was sent home on health grounds. This perhaps was the moment which stiffened his resolve as a Polar explorer.

Before his next Antarctic venture he turned his hand to journalism, administration and even an attempt at politics, but in 1907, after considerable planning he led his own attempt on the South Pole. Abominable conditions and dwindling supplies forced him to take the decision to turn the polar party of four men back, within 100 miles of the Pole. This was to create his reputation as a leader and earned him several honours upon his return. This attempt paved the way for Scott's tragically doomed attempt on the Pole in 1912 and Roald Amundsen's ultimate achievement to be the first to reach the South Pole.

Shackleton set his new sights on a transantarctic crossing and in 1914 he, with the blessing of Sir Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, led a hugely ambitious expedition to cross the continent. The Imperial Trans Antarctic or *Endurance* Expedition is perhaps the greatest story of exploration, peril, leadership and survival ever told. A few sentences here will not do the story justice, save to say that Shackleton's leadership and courage in unthinkable and seemingly irretrievable circumstances, to bring home all

the men of the Weddell Sea Party unscathed, is the stuff of legend and firmly cemented his reputation as a leader and celebrated explorer.

He returned from Antarctica in 1917 to then join the war effort, acting as a diplomat in South America and a military expedition to Murmansk. In 1918 he served in the army with the North Russia Expeditionary Force in the Russian Civil War.

Still with unfinished Antarctic business, in 1921 Shackleton embarked on his final expedition to Antarctica on the Shackleton-Rowett expedition aboard *Quest*. An expedition which ended in tragedy when in January 1922 he succumbed to a heart attack in South Georgia aged just 47.

Shackleton's legacy has been felt across the world. Not only are his stories revisited over and over in popular media, but academic interest in the man and scrutiny of his actions, his decisions and even his health (a recent paper discusses his potential affliction with *beri beri*) remains high, and that looks to continue long into the future.

Significance:

Whilst at one level this is an object imitating the actual medals awarded to Shackleton, the absence of those medals in UK public collections renders these this miniature set all the more significant. To not have the medals from the most decorated polar explorer we have known, available in UK institutions is a major anomaly and without them his story is incomplete. This set provides the sole remaining opportunity to remedy this absence and enable current and future generations to appreciate anew the contribution Shackleton made across the world.

This item is, without doubt, of national importance. As a unique artefact which explicitly communicates the accomplishments and recognition of this extraordinary man; as a personal item seemingly well-worn; and as a symbol of his legacy. This set should take its place in a public collection so that it might be used to inspire visitors with Shackleton's story for generations to come.

Summary of related items in public/private ownership in the UK

- There are no known Shackleton medals in UK museums.
- The Polar Medal with 3 clasps remains with the family.
- The original war medals are held by a private owner.
- Two previous sets of miniatures sold to unidentified owners – there is no publicly available record of ownership.
- SPRI have a Polar medal riband with clasp for 1914-16, but not the actual medal awarded to Shackleton
- Shackleton's RGS Antarctic silver medal, 1909, held by the National Maritime Museum and in Polar Worlds.