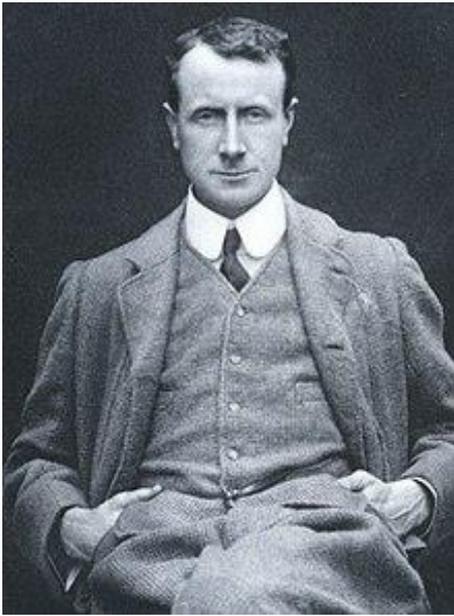


Edward Wilson



Edward Adrian Wilson was born in Cheltenham on the 23rd July 1872, the son of a local physician. He attended Cheltenham College, studied Natural Sciences and Medicine at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, finally qualifying in medicine at St. George's Hospital, London.

“He felt so close to nature he could hear a bird's heartbeat”

In childhood he developed a passion for nature and encouraged by his doctor father, he explored the fields around his family's farm learning the skills of careful observation and drawing the wildlife and fauna he found. He was particularly interested in drawing from life, a talent developed in his school which had a reputation for preparing boys for careers in the military or in medicine.

At medical school, he contracted TB which was treated then in sanatoria on the continent providing fresh air and rest. The enforced idleness and strict regimes of the clinics in Norway and Switzerland were irksome, but Wilson used this time to develop his artistic talents. Here he observed and practised painting the subtly different colours of snow.

His combination of talents, expertise and interests made him an ideal choice for Captain Scott's first expedition to the Antarctic. In 1901 he sailed out on The Discovery as the junior surgeon, zoologist and expedition artist. On the final trip he was its Chief Scientific Officer and artist.



Edward Wilson had no formal art training beyond school. However, when convalescing from TB in Norway and Switzerland, he read Ruskin whose advocacy of “close observation” and “truth to nature” made him the ideal drawing master for a man who had spent so many hours ‘drawing from life.’ Another source of inspiration and protege of Ruskin, was Turner, whose watercolours Ted studied for hours in the National Gallery when he returned to London.

The hardships of outdoor work, the precise observations of colour and light and Ted’s delightful sense of humour are illustrated in this extract from a letter to his father from Norway:

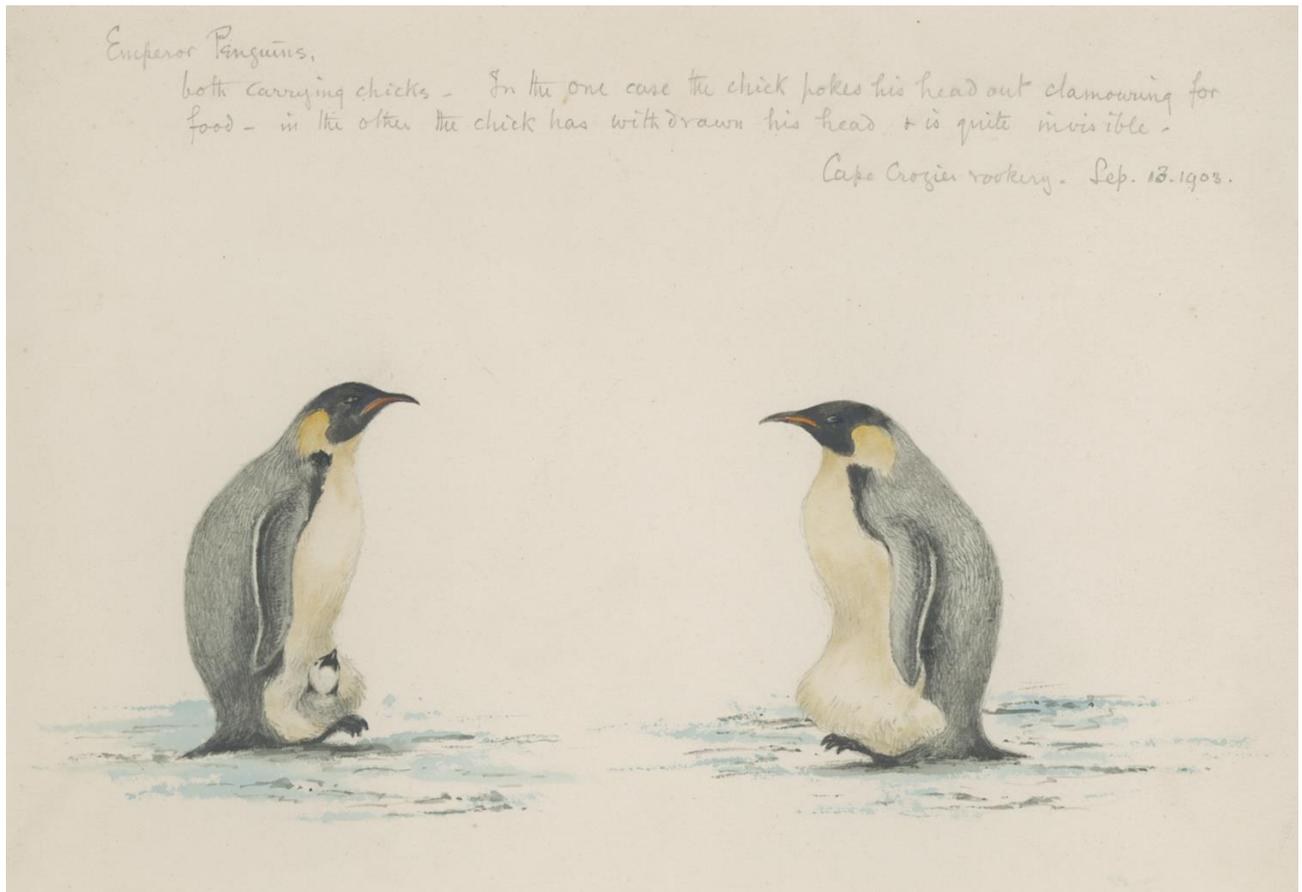
..”Then the snow patches become rose and blue in the shadow and the sky tones up from a yellow into a very light green and blue, then in a few minutes when you wonder what is coming next it all goes out and you are left with sober greys and greens and mosquitoes. It takes a lot of yellow paint, a cast-iron resolution and a power of tobacco to sit and sketch.”

The extraordinary light shows and atmospheric phenomena such as parhelions, paraselenes and lunar halos of the Antarctic continent are recorded vividly and beautifully in his paintings. The scientific accuracy of his depictions also made them of exceptional educational value.

“Sketching in the Antarctic is not all joy”..

is Ted’s wonderful understatement of the difficulties and dangers of drawing in sub-zero temperatures when even a few minutes exposure to the air can invite frost-bite :“fingers are all thumbs” and “you can only sketch when your eyes stop running” he added in a letter home. The cold even affected the graphite in pencils making the “softest B as hard and gritty as an H.” He worked fast outdoors, then back indoors at the base, worked up his sketches. Painting with damp paper and experimenting with Turner’s technique of using body colour where white is painted on as a primary background or added to the pigment, to create an opaque finish which contrasts with the more transparent effect of watercolour.

The journeys to and from Antarctica provided endless opportunities for observation of birds and sea creatures. Whilst on board, Wilson designed a portable covered wooden desk for drawing out on deck, strung over the shoulders by a strap with slits to insert the hands. That way the wind did not rip the paper and the hands were warmer.



'the weirdest bird-nesting expedition ever'

Scientific enquiry was an essential part of the Antarctic expeditions. Seeking to establish the breeding habits of Emperor penguins, Wilson led a sledging party for five weeks in 1903 to Cape Crozier, to find a colony in the breeding season. Memorably described by Apsley Cherry Gerard, **'The Worst Journey in the World'** took place in the winter when temperatures range from -20 to -50 and below; there are 24 hours of darkness; constant blizzards and high winds. Antarctica is known as the windiest place on earth.

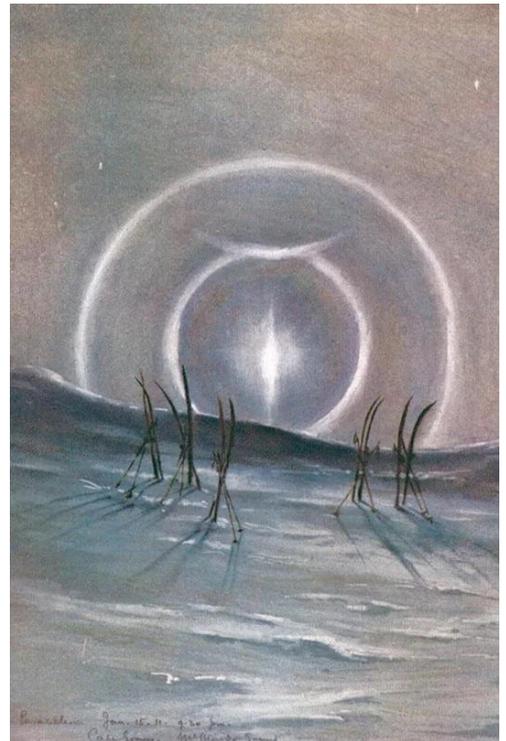
The sledging party found the penguin colony on the sea ice: observing the male's role as egg-keeper and understanding the necessity for the penguins to 'huddle' together for warmth. Wilson though an ardent conservationist, was determined to advance science. The three-man team collected five eggs for embryologists to examine on their return.

Wilson's illustration shows his talent for reproducing the natural world accurately and memorably. The chick on the left emerges to gaze upward at its parent, while the drawing of the penguin to the right shows how the egg is kept tucked under a fold of skin and balanced on father's feet.

The sketch shown below using chalk on black paper of three men in a tent powerfully illustrates the conditions of the Cape Crozier trip. There is animation and purpose as the men prepare to bed down for the night. The lamplight reflecting onto the white lines gives a sense of comfort here. In fact, towards the end of the trip, the tent was plucked up and destroyed in a blizzard.



Albatross



A paraselene: a bright spot on the halo of the moon



There were other forms of polar art: this cartoon from the **South Polar Times** reflects the affectionate respect shown to Ted by a fellow artist.



References

The Scott Polar Institute in Cambridge has a permanent collection of artefacts from the early expeditions; houses artwork by Edward Wilson and Herbert Ponting's wonderful photographs
The Cheltenham Museum in Gloucestershire has sketches from his childhood and many paintings. It also pays tribute to Edward Wilson's father and his excellent work for the good of the community.

Edward Wilson's diaries: The Discovery Expedition; The Terra Nova Expedition
Scott's Diaries

The Worst Journey in the World by Apsley Cherry Gerard

Various works by George Seaver on Wilson: **Edward Wilson Nature Lover, The Faith of Edward Wilson**

Exhibition of **Arctic Culture and Climate** British Museum until 21st Feb 2021