

Just on a hundred years ago, on 31 March 1909, a small crowd of people gathered in the pre-dawn gloom of Darling Harbour, waiting for a steamer to arrive. Professor T.W.Edgeworth David was returning to Sydney after an absence of 15 months, during which time he had served as leader of the scientific team on Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic expedition, undertaken a climb of the volcanic Mt Erebus and successfully completed a hazardous journey to the vicinity of the South Magnetic Pole. He was returning to Australia a popular hero.

Many in the waiting crowd were students, young men and women from David's geology department at the University of Sydney. It was a cold morning and people were muffled in scarves and overcoats. They stood around in subdued conversation or passed the time watching the loading of coal on the many ships berthed there under the glare of huge electric lights. At 5am the first rays of sun appeared and soon afterwards a vessel glided into view through the fog. The *Sydney Mail* described the arrival: '*A tall figure on the steamer's deck was looking eagerly at the crowd on the wharf. There was no mistaking that old, familiar form.*' An undergraduate yelled, '*"I see you've got your old brown hat on..."*' And, greeted with smiles and hand-wringing, Professor David was home from Antarctica.'

* * * * *

In 1907 Edgeworth David had learnt that Ernest Shackleton, a veteran of Robert Scott's polar expedition of 1901/2, was raising funds for a new expedition to the Antarctic. The professor offered his support, using his influence in Sydney to raise funds for the expedition. He also wrote to Shackleton, asking to accompany the expedition on the first stage of their journey to base camp. With extra funds provided by the Commonwealth Government, Shackleton was eventually able to include a number of Australians on his team, including David, and the young Douglas Mawson. The understanding was that Mawson would stay for the whole expedition, wintering over at their base camp and then taking part in the summer journeys in 1908. Professor David would help get base camp established and then return in the expedition ship, *Nimrod*, to New Zealand in time for the new university year in 1908.

David's wife, Cara, was no stranger to these long absences of her husband. During the early years of their marriage in the 1880s, when David had been a young and hard-working surveyor with the NSW Department of Mines, Cara had in fact spent many months with him in geological survey camps in the Hunter Valley. Their first baby, Margaret, slept in a candle box in their tent; one day Cara found a poisonous snake curled up under the washing basket in the camp. With the birth of two more children, the couple purchased a house in Sydney but David's work – surveying for coal in the Hunter region and the Blue Mountains - kept him constantly on the move and he was able to spend very little of the children's baby years in their company. In 1890, Cara confessed in a letter to a close friend her worries about her husband: 'Sometimes I feel as if I shall go out of my senses with grief when I look forward to his probable breakdown. He works too hard as usual ...'

David eventually decided that the welfare of his family required him to seek a more settled form of employment, and in 1891 he was appointed as Professor of Geology and Physical Geography at the University of Sydney. Life for the family became more stable, but David kept up his usual frantic pace of work: there were lectures to prepare, students to supervise, numerous scholarly papers to write, service on scientific boards, travel to international conferences and regular geological camps and field studies. His decision to accompany Shackleton on the first stage of his Antarctic mission must have seemed quite in keeping with his career thus far.

If Cara had reservations about her 49-year-old husband joining Shackleton on his voyage in December 1907, she kept her thoughts to herself at the time. Of course the farewell in Sydney was an emotional one, but her expectation was that, by the grace of God, she would have her husband back with the family in three months' time. But in fact David was preparing for a much fuller involvement with Shackleton's team than he had first intended or revealed to his wife. In letters to Cara, written after leaving Sydney, he dropped hints that must have worried her, delegating to her all financial affairs such as taxes, insurance and university fees for the children, with the ominous advice, 'I am telling you of these extra expenses ahead in case, by any chance, of my accidental detention in Antarctica.' On 6 January 1908, while the *Nimrod* was being towed by the New Zealand ship *Koonya* towards the pack ice, David penned a decisive letter to Cara, when he revealed that Shackleton had persuaded him to stay on in winter quarters and take part in the polar expeditions the following summer.

This letter, along with others that were delivered to Cara at Woodford after the *Koonya* returned to New Zealand, was to trigger an emotional crisis for her. It is clear from all the written evidence that she loved David deeply; but perhaps she saw now that his heroic virtues came at a cost, to his family's peace of mind and to his own welfare. She had long ago realized that she must let her husband go his own way, and that she would rarely be able to follow him over that 'illimitable ocean' where he journeyed as a scientist. But now she faced the likelihood of losing him forever. For the next year there would be no news of the party. The silence and their isolation would be absolute. There must have been times when Cara felt both bitter and resentful during the long months of David's absence, feeling that his love and commitment to her had been sacrificed for a larger, grander cause, one in which women and families could play no part.

Cara was an experienced and efficient housekeeper and manager of family finances but she must have been exasperated by David's insouciance in this regard. What would happen if the university saw David's extended absence as a breach of contract? After the failure of an investment in Queensland, the family had very few savings. There were rates to be paid, insurance premiums, income tax, university fees for two of their children and annual subscriptions to the numerous scientific bodies to which David belonged, as well as their commitments to a number of charities. For much of David's 15-month absence, Cara stayed up at their Blue Mountains cottage, immersing herself in the day-to-day demands of the garden, the orchard and the bush dwelling. An energetic and highly intelligent woman, Cara had been involved for some years with a number of pioneering groups committed to advancing the cause of women's welfare, rights and education. These groups still commanded her loyalty but as 1908 wore on she had less and less emotional energy to give to them and resigned from any work that required leadership on her part. Her involvement with the Women's Club in Sydney, a place that must have given her a lot of enjoyment, was put on hold and she resigned from the committee.

Cara wrote to a friend after David's safe return, about the 'awful loneliness and horror of those [fifteen] months... That long silence during the Antarctic trip very nearly killed me.' Her private anguish was expressed in insomnia and a range of physical ailments.

David came back to Australia to be feted by the general public and the academic world alike, and his unauthorized absence from the university was forgotten in the general excitement that greeted his return. His name and the expedition had been kept firmly in the public eye through 13 articles appearing in the *Daily Telegraph* between 21 March and 4 April 1908, describing the voyage south of the *Nimrod* and the landing and setting up of the expedition. David had written the articles and sent them to Cara on the returning *Nimrod*, with instructions to edit them as required and ensure their copyrighted publication.

What Cara endured over those months, however, was kept very much within her family. She was to face another long separation from David in 1916, when he embarked for the Western Front as an officer with the newly formed Tunnelling Corps. By that stage Cara David had learnt how to live with solitude. She found that 'hard work was the best palliative for loneliness' and threw herself into a number of projects that were important to her. These included running her Blue Mountains home as a convalescent home for returned soldiers, and directing the Women's National Movement, a strong feminist group who used their new voting powers to influence government policy and bring about the early closing of hotels.