

## THE FIRST SIGHTING OF ANTARCTICA-BRANSFIELD OR BELLINGSHAUSEN ?

by

Michael Smith

The long controversial debate about who was the first to set eyes on the Antarctic mainland will be reignited shortly with the rapid approach of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first sighting. But will the planned commemorations solve the mystery?

While there is no serious dispute that the first confirmed sighting of the Antarctic mainland took place in the early weeks of 1820, the unanswered question is whether the honour should be given to Irish-born ship's Master, Edward Bransfield or the Russian naval captain, Fabian von Bellingshausen. Surprisingly, neither Bransfield or Bellingshausen are widely known historic figures today, but their momentous journeys of discovery in 1820 opened the era of Antarctic exploration which would later feature such well-known characters as Roald Amundsen, Robert Scott and Sir Ernest Shackleton.

The story began in unspectacular fashion in February 1819 when the small merchant vessel, *Williams* was taking an assorted cargo of tobacco and medicines around Cape Horn from Buenos Aires to Valparaiso, Chile. Captain William Smith, the skipper and part owner of the brig, sailed deeper than usual into the Drake Passage in search of more favourable winds and unexpectedly saw land not marked on his charts. His discovery was part of a chain of 11 islands and small islets which make up the South Shetland Islands, lying around 500 miles south of Cape Horn. Smith, an experienced 28 year old mariner from Blyth, Northumberland, had stumbled across a bleak headland at the north-eastern tip of today's Livingstone Island.

Smith dutifully reported his discovery to naval authorities in Valparaiso where Captain William Shirreff of HMS *Andromache* was the most senior officer. However, Shirreff was unsure about the discovery which he probably thought was merely formations of ice.

Smith soon departed on his return voyage around Cape Horn to Montevideo. On this occasion, to his dismay, he could find no sight of the same land. He was luckier on his third trip of the season. In October 1819, *Williams* once more ran into the uncharted land and on October 16, Smith went ashore on King George III Island before hurriedly reporting the news to Captain Shirreff in Valparaiso.

Rumours had already begun circulating among American whalers in South American ports that *Williams* had located potentially lucrative new hunting grounds and Shirreff was obliged to respond more quickly. Exercising his authority, Shirreff

chartered *Williams* and appointed Royal Navy Master, Edward Bransfield to investigate Smith's findings.



Figure 1. The Antarctic Peninsula, first seen by Edward Bransfield in January 1820. Mount Bransfield is top left with cloud on top. (Jim Wilson).

Bransfield, 34 years old and Master of HMS *Andromache* was an experienced and capable navigator and the perfect choice for the role. He was born in 1785 in the small village of Ballinacurra near Middleton, Cork, where he picked up his first knowledge of the sea while working on his father's fishing vessel along the south coast of Ireland.

By 1803 Britain's war with Napoleon had intensified and the brutal press-gangs were sent in search of able-bodied men for the Navy's warships. Bransfield, just 18 years old, was "pressed" in mid-1803 and summarily thrown into the bitter conflict against the French fleet, which alone would eventually cost the lives of over 90,000 British sailors.

He survived the war and advanced through the ranks to become a ship's Master, whose primary responsibility was navigation. Bransfield was evidently a highly capable mariner and decorated for his role in the successful Bombardment of Algiers in 1816. Two years later he sailed on *Andromache* to help safeguard British interests in newly independent Chile and ran into Captain Smith of *Williams*.

Bransfield's orders in 1819 were to verify Smith's findings, chart new discoveries and observe any wildlife or inhabitants which might be encountered. In keeping with protocol, Bransfield was ordered to take possession of any new lands for the King

and told to "conceal every discovery that you may have made during your voyage." Sheeriff told the Admiralty that Bransfield was "well qualified for the undertaking..."

*Williams*, a two-masted brig of 216 tons (Fig 2), left Valparaiso on December 20, 1819 with a crew of about 30 men, including Smith and his crew, under the command of Bransfield. Sailing alone into largely unknown seas, the vessel was provisioned for 12 months and included four live bullocks and other livestock.

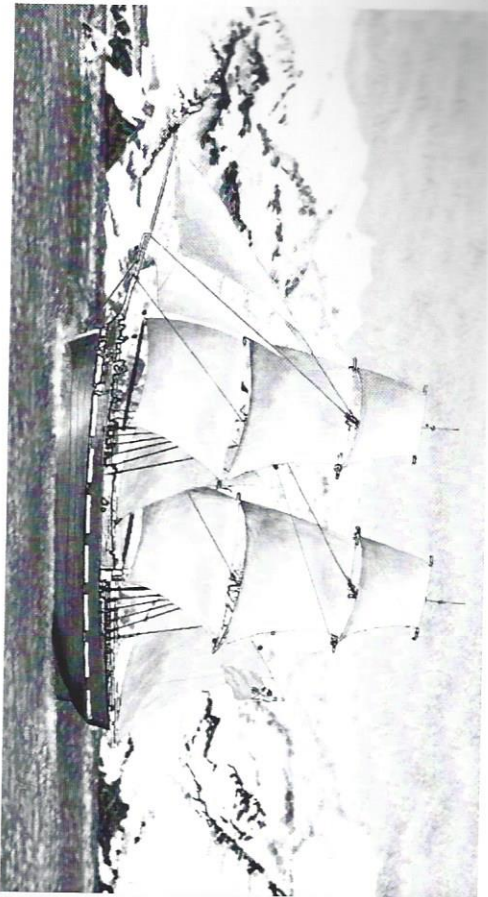


Figure 2. Williams, the small brig commanded by Ship's Master Edward Bransfield, making the first sighting of the Antarctic coastline. (Drawing by Jim Wilson).

The 2,000-mile journey south ran into immediate difficulties with poor weather and took nine days to travel the first six miles. Fog, a common feature of the Drake Passage, hampered visibility and it was three weeks before the South Shetlands came into clear view. Bransfield took a party ashore on King George Island on January 22, 1820, to raise the flag on the Empire's most southerly outpost. The first rock specimens ever taken from the area were collected the following day. Bransfield ran along the coastline of the islands before heading south into uncharted waters. The 60-miles of water, which separate the South Shetlands from the Antarctic Peninsula, is today called the Bransfield Strait and among the main thoroughfares carrying tourist ships to the continent.

*Williams* crossed 63° S and on January 30, 1820 all hands were surprised at the sight which greeted them as the misty haze began to clear. Midshipman Charles Poynter recorded the moment in his journal: "At 3 our notice was arrested by three very large icebergs and 20 minutes after we were unexpectedly astonished by the discovery of land..."

Poynter reported being "half encompassed with islands." The land, he explained, appeared as "immense mountains, rude crags and barren ridges covered with snow."

The expedition had discovered the north western area of the Antarctic Peninsula which he named Trinity Land after the Trinity House maritime body in London. Poynter speculated whether the party had found "the long contested existence (sic) of a Southern Continent."

Bransfield had to overcome appalling weather before establishing a "furthest south" of 64° 56' S in the Weddell Sea. Before turning north, the ship passed the rocky coast of Elephant Island where less than 100 years later Shackleton's men from *Endurance* would be marooned.

*Williams* sailed back to Valparaiso in mid-April 1820 after a pioneering voyage lasting four months. Not a man was lost.

A similar episode of discovery was unfolding at the same time on the other side of the continent under the command of the Russian navigator, von Bellingshausen.



Figure 3. Captain Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen, the Russian naval officer at the centre of the 200-year controversy over who first sighted Antarctica. (Unknown).

Captain Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen (Faddei Faddeyevich Bellingshausen in Russian) was a highly experienced mariner and cartographer in his early 40s who had joined the Imperial Russian Navy at 10 years of age and had been at sea for over 30 years. Bellingshausen came from an aristocratic Baltic German family on the island of Saaremaa in the Gulf of Riga, then part of the Russian Empire and today forming

part of Eastonia. He sailed on the first Russian circumnavigation of the globe in 1803-06 and was highly regarded.

That Alexander was nourishing his own imperial ambitions at the time and in 1819 saw unexplored regions toward the South Pole as possible new territories for the expansion(?)-minded Russia. Bellingshausen was given responsibility for exploring the potential new lands.

He left Kronstadt in June 1819 with a total of 190 men, taking the 985-ton frigate, *Vostok* and *Mirny*, a 530-ton sloop. After stopping at Portsmouth and London, the Russian vessels became the first ships to cross the Antarctic Circle since Captain James Cook almost half a century earlier.

By January 1820, *Vostok* and *Mirny* were an estimated 20 miles from the Antarctic coastline which is now called Dronning Maud Land. On January 27 the ships observed "continuous ice" and "ice mountains" in a southerly direction.

Crucially, Bellingshausen did not mention seeing land in his official reports and did not distinguish between ice and solid ground. Nor did he ever claim to have been the first to set eyes on the Antarctic mainland.

Contemporary newspaper accounts in 1821, after the expedition had returned from the south, quoted Bellingshausen as saying: "...there is no southern continent or should there be one, it must be inaccessible from being covered with perpetual snows, ice, etc."

Strangely, Bellingshausen's two-year voyage failed to generate much interest at home and he returned to traditional naval duties. His distinguished service to the Imperial Russian Navy would eventually stretch for over 50 years.

It was much the same fate as Bransfield, whose voyage did little to stir interest in London during the early 1820s. He offered to return south in the following season to make further investigations of the area, but the offer was declined. The navy's primary focus in the 1820s was northern waters of the Arctic, particularly the elusive the North West Passage. Half a century before, Cook had dismissed Antarctic seas as too forbidding to warrant further exploration and perhaps the Admiralty saw Bransfield's discovery as an unnecessary diversion. Soon after, Bransfield left the Royal Navy.

Both Bransfield and Bellingshausen also suffered a similar setback when crucial documents relating to their entire voyages were mysteriously lost. It is a remarkable coincidence which has added to the mystery still surrounding the issue of who saw the continent first.

The log book of *Williams* disappeared in the 1820s and has never been found, leaving Bransfield's claim heavily reliant on the surviving charts and some contemporary magazine articles. Fortunately, the journal kept by Midshipman Poynter, which contains the most valuable first-hand account of the expedition, was unexpectedly found in New Zealand during the 1990s and has provided the most detailed insight into the voyage of *Williams*.

Bellingshausen's account of the 1819-21 expedition did not appear until a decade later in 1831 and it was well over a century before a detailed English version of the journey appeared in 1945. It was only recently that author Rip Bulkeley conducted the most thorough English language investigation. According to Bulkeley, the original manuscript of Bellingshausen's book, his expedition journals and the naval records of the expedition have all disappeared.

However, Bulkeley's exhaustive examination of the Russian expedition has reached one important conclusion. In Bulkeley's considered opinion, "...Bellingshausen was not the first commander to see the Antarctic mainland..."

If true, the honour of being first to see and chart the Antarctic mainland falls to the enigmatic and largely unknown Irishman, Edward Bransfield. Yet he has never received formal recognition for his feat and very little is known about his life after the voyage of *Williams* in 1820.

Bransfield went back to sea as a merchant mariner and drifted into obscurity. No personal account of his great voyage was ever written and to add to the puzzle, no photograph or painting of Bransfield has ever been found. To this day the face of the man who made the first confirmed sighting and charted his discovery of the Antarctic mainland remains a total mystery.

The enigmatic Edward Bransfield died a forgotten man in Brighton on October 31 (Fig 4), 1852 at the age of 67. He outlived Bellingshausen, who died on January 25, 1852, by nine months.

Plans to erect the first ever memorial to Edward Bransfield on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his first sighting of the Antarctic mainland are well advanced. Remembering Edward Bransfield, a voluntary group seeking to increase awareness of Bransfield, is raising funds to place the monument in his birthplace of Ballinacurra, Cork on January 30, 2020.

#### Further reading

Rip Bulkeley, *Bellingshausen & The Russian Antarctic Expedition 1819-21*, Palgrave Macmillan

R.J. Campbell (Editor) *The Discovery of the South Shetland Islands 1819-1820: The Journal of Midshipman C.W. Poynter*, The Hakluyt Society  
 David Day, *Antarctica: A Biography*, Oxford University Press  
 Frank Debenham, *The Voyage of Captain Bellingshausen To The Antarctic Seas, 1819-1821*, Hakluyt Society  
 A.G. E. Jones, *Polar Portraits: Collected Papers*, Caedmon of Whitby  
 Michael Smith, *Great Endeavour – Ireland's Antarctic Explorers*

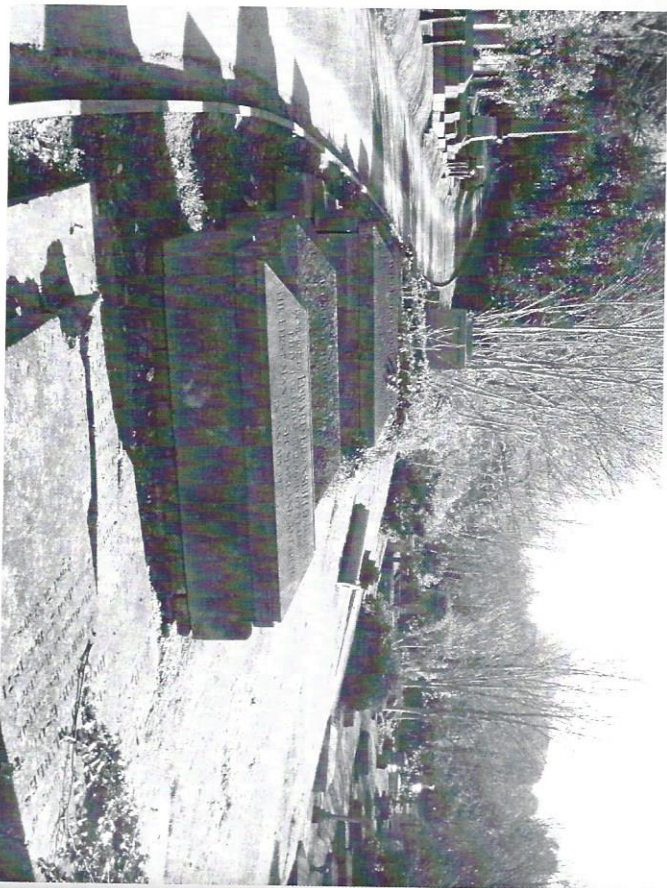


Figure 4. No image or painting of Edward Bransfield has ever been found. Our only connection to the Irish explorer is his last resting place in the Extra-Mural Cemetery in Brighton, UK. (Michael Smith).

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## CIRCLING THE WHALE BONE ARCH

by

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### Introduction

Within one hundred yards of the Whale Bone Arch, the following could or can be found: my grandfather's business on Ross Road (the structure now long gone); my Uncle's shop (the building still in use on the corner of John and Dean Streets); my parents' home where I grew up; my church, Christ Church Cathedral on Ross Road, where I went to Sunday School; my school on John Street, where I attended classes between 1952 and 1958; our main grocery store, the West Store on Ross Road and the parish hall behind the Cathedral where I took part in the activities of the Life Boys and the Boys Brigade. Within that orbit is the seashore where, as a boy, I often played and where the FIC Boatyard had been in operation for many years (Luxton, 2008). It was originally owned by J M Dean & Sons and then by the FIC and it was where my elder brother often worked as a shipwright.

Ross Road, sometimes referred to as the Front Road, runs east to west, parallel to the seashore. At right angles to Ross Road and separating Arch Green (1) from the West Store is Dean Street. Dean Street runs north to south and climbs the north-facing slope on which Stanley is built. At the 'Top of the Hill' is Davis Street and the area behind that is the Murray Heights where new roads and new houses have sprung up to accommodate the town's expanding population. It is where Stanley common peat bog once began and from where the two great 'peat slips' descended onto the town. The second street back from the beach is John Street where, at number 38, I spent the first twenty two years of my life.

### The Whale Bone Arch

The Arch and the green on which it is built is the hub around which a group of prominent buildings and businesses are present. Some, because of age or damage have been demolished and new ones built. Others, like the Nissen huts of the Second World War, were of a temporary nature. The Whale Bone Arch was erected on Cathedral Green (Arch Green) in 1933:  
*The Penguin Monday, 16<sup>th</sup> October 1933.*

*The finishing touches are now being made to the imposing arch of four Blue Whale jaw bones erected by the Public Works Department in the form of an arch on Cathedral Green commemorating the gift of the land to the Colony by the Falkland Islands Company on the occasion of the Centenary.*