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**Robb Robinson: William Colbeck (Vignette).**

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### **William Colbeck (1871-1930)**

People from Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire played a significant role in the 'Heroic Age' of Antarctic Exploration (1897-1922). Clements Markham, the President of the Royal Geographical Society, who envisaged and oversaw the British National Antarctic Expedition (1901-1904), came from Stillingfleet, East Yorkshire. Much of the money required to fund the expedition was provided by Llewellyn Longstaff, owner of Hull's Blundell's Paints. And a key player in the celebrated Antarctic expeditions was Captain William Colbeck of Hull.

Colbeck was born in 1871 and educated at Hull Grammar School before signing as an apprentice, aged sixteen, on a sailing ship bound for India. As a talented mariner he rose through the ranks and under the tutelage of Zebedee Scaping, headmaster of Hull Trinity House School, Colbeck gained his Master's Ticket in 1894. But his career shifted suddenly in 1898 when he was invited to serve as Magnetic Officer (taking scientific measurements) on the 'Southern Cross Expedition' led by the Norwegian explorer, Carsten Borchgrevink. Colbeck accepted the offer and became one of the pioneers of living and 'overwintering' on Antarctica. Colbeck and a Finnish colleague, Ole Larsen, set a new exploration record by travelling further south than anyone before them. He also mapped the Ross Ice Shelf and was convinced he had found the best route to the South Pole. Roald Amundsen followed this route successfully in 1911 and subsequently sent Colbeck a letter of thanks.

Colbeck returned to Hull and took a command with the Wilson shipping Line, but in 1902 he was commissioned by Markham to captain *Morning*, a steam yacht to be despatched south to relieve Captain Robert Falcon Scott's ice-bound *Discovery* expedition (1901-04). Many of Colbeck's crew were from Hull when *Morning* left London in July 1902 and steamed south via Lyttelton in New Zealand. On 6 December, they headed towards the Antarctic ice where, on Christmas Day 1902, Colbeck located the *Discovery* stranded in McMurdo Sound. She was locked solidly in the ice, so Colbeck's crew transferred provisions from *Morning*, working day and night to haul vital supplies across the five miles of ice that separated the two ships. After six weeks, *Morning* returned to Lyttelton, dodging out of the ice as conditions deteriorated.

Colbeck moored in New Zealand for the austral winter and then returned briefly to London to plan a second relief voyage. In 1903, *Morning* was joined by a second ship, *Terra Nova*, with Colbeck in overall command. The British Admiralty ordered that *Discovery* was to be abandoned if she could not be released. When *Morning* and *Terra Nova* got within twenty miles of Scott's ship on 5 January 1904 they used explosives to blast a path through the ice and, on 16 February, *Discovery* was finally freed.

After refitting in New Zealand, *Morning* returned to England. Thousands of people greeted Colbeck and the other Hull crew members when they arrived at Hull's Paragon Station in autumn 1904 after their two epic Antarctic voyages. Several Hull-based crew members, including Alfred Cheetham, returned south with later expeditions, but Colbeck went back to the Wilson Line. Cape Colbeck and Colbeck Bay in Antarctica are named after him and he was also awarded the Polar Medal, but he has been under-acknowledged in the literature about Antarctic exploration. This is gradually being redressed: in 2016, a plaque marking the achievements of Colbeck, Cheetham and the rest of the crew was unveiled in Hull's Paragon Station.

**Robb Robinson**