

# Pardo and Shackleton

## Parallel Lives, Shared Values

Fiona Clouder, Her Majesty's Ambassador to Chile

**Luis Pardo and Ernest Shackleton – two great figures in the shared history of two countries - UK and Chile. Two lives that became intertwined in one of the greatest rescues in history. Two men who have inspired others. Two figures who lived their lives with shared values. Values from which we can learn today.**

So who were Luis Pardo and Ernest Shackleton? Their great achievements were in an era of exploration. Shackleton is widely known as an inspirational leader. He never achieved his personal dream of being the first to reach the South Pole, but his reputation as a leader of men is based on a still greater success: the survival and safe return of all his team members, whilst overcoming almost unimaginable odds.

Perce Blackborow – a stowaway on the Endurance expedition – described Shackleton:

**“Possessed of a very generous nature, with which he combined extraordinary powers of endurance and hardihood. He was optimistic even when things looked blackest, this inspired those who served under him.”**

But the return of Shackleton's men could not have been achieved without the bravery of the Chilean Naval captain Luis Pardo and his inspirational leadership of the crew of the *Yelcho*. Pardo was born in Santiago in 1882, and joined the Armada de Chile in 1900. His commitment and bravery has inspired subsequent generations.

This article tries to highlight some of the key points, context and principles, that explain why Pardo's role in relation to Shackleton's expedition was so important. The Imperial Trans-Antarctic

Expedition 1914–17, led by Ernest Shackleton, set out to cross Antarctica via the South Pole. The plan was for the Weddell Sea party to sail on *Endurance* to Vahsel Bay, where they would establish a base camp from which the crossing party would commence its journey. At the same time a party would sail on *Aurora* to McMurdo Sound in the Ross Sea on the opposite side of the continent to lay supply depots for the crossing party.

However, in 1915 Shackleton and his men were confronted with one of the worst disasters in Antarctic history: *Endurance* was crushed in the pack ice and sank, the outside world was unaware of their predicament or location, food was scarce, and chance of survival was remote. The men were marooned on the sea ice for several months before sailing to Elephant Island, where there was little chance of discovery. The only realistic chance of survival was to sail one of the lifeboats 800 miles across the Southern Ocean to South Georgia in order to seek rescue.

At the time the important naval Battle of Coronel took place off the coast of Chile, on 1 Nov 1914, the *Endurance*, was en route to South Georgia. A year later, many men, known as the 'West Coast Boys' departed Chile, including from Punta Arenas, to fight for Britain in World War I. Patriotism, valour and fighting for what you believed in, were strong values.

The story is well known of how Shackleton and a small group of his men on the lifeboat, *James Caird*, against all the odds, reached South Georgia to initiate the rescue of the rest of his men marooned on Elephant Island. But the detail of the subsequent



Piloto Pardo and crew members on the deck of the *Yelcho*.  
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rescue is perhaps less well known. There were several rescue attempts to save the men on Elephant Island. First Shackleton arranged for the Southern

Sky, an English whaling ship, to sail south. But when she encountered sea ice, she was forced to turn back. Negotiations then led to the Uruguayan trawler, Insituto de Pesca No. 1 sailing

south, but stopped by sea ice, just 20 miles from Elephant Island. Then in July, the Chilean Navy tug, the Yelcho, towed the Emma, a schooner, south, but after numerous attempts to get the schooner through the pack ice, Shackleton was forced back.

The Yelcho was built in 1906 in Scotland. She was 120ft long and 23ft wide (the

width, coincidentally, was the length of the James Caird), and had a top speed of 10 knots. She was a small naval patrol and maintenance vessel, never intended for use in Antarctic waters.

As Alfonso Filippi, the author of 'Lecciones de un Rescate', says:

**"The vessel had no heating, no electrical lighting, no radio, no false bottom, and low bulwarks. To send her to Antarctica was daring beyond belief.**

**The only positive attribute suggesting a successful outcome to the mission was the quality, skill and courage of her crew."**



Bust of Captain Luis Pardo Villalón, Point Wild, Elephant Island, South Shetland Islands. © Andrew Shiva

# Parallel Lives, Shared Values, continued...

The Chilean Navy gave permission for the *Yelcho* to be used, but with the instruction: “*Yelcho* must not be risked in ice.”

In the famous letter, from Luis Pardo, to his father, before setting out in the *Yelcho* to rescue Shackleton’s men, Pardo demonstrates the qualities he showed, that have inspired others. He was willing to risk his life to save others.

**“The task is great, but nothing frightens me. I am a Chilean. Two considerations make me face these dangers: to save the explorers and to give glory to Chile.**

**“I will be happy if I can achieve in what others have not. If I fail and die, you must take care of my Laura and my children, who will be left without any support, except yours.**

**If I succeed, I will have done my humanitarian duty as a mariner and as a Chilean. When you read this letter, your son will be dead or will have arrived at Punta Arenas with the castaways. I will not return alone.”**

The *Yelcho* arrived and rescued the Elephant Island party on 30 August 1916. The family of James Wordie have kindly allowed to be cited, the journals of James Wordie, the Chief Scientist of the *Endurance*. His journals are being published for the first time through the Scott Polar Research Institute.

Wednesday 30th August.

*“On board a Chilean relief ship, and make NW to Cape Virgins at 11 knots. I have not yet learned the name of the ship, for all is confused and excited; and on all sides we hear of nothing but the terrible war news.*

*„...The ship was sighted just on 1pm; before 2pm all were on board and the course was set northwards. Then we learnt that this is the fourth effort to relieve us...”*

The successful return of Pardo, with Shackleton and his men, was greeted with great pride and joy in Punta Arenas, and is well documented by INACH and at many historic sites around the city.

From Wordie’s diary:

Wednesday 6th Sept

*“Punta Arenas is likely to be our stopping place for nearly ten days ... Sunday’s doings seem to have excited Chileans as well as English... Reached our destination about midday, being met by Governor etc. Then through great crowds to hotel. Monday saw the beginning of a feverish round of festivities.”*

On his arrival in Punta Arenas Shackleton sent a telegraph to Admiral Munoz Hurtado:

*“It is impossible to express my deep feelings of gratitude, for all that you have done for us, and I wish to place this on the record. Shackleton.”* Similarly, there was much joy when the *Yelcho* arrived in Valparaiso. Wordie’s diary records:

Wednesday 27th Sep

*“Made Valparaiso about 10am... All sorts of craft packed with sightseers came out to meet us...Went ashore in the Admiral’s barge en route to the Naval Club, but here some 20 policemen were trying to keep back a crowd, which the newspapers say amounted to 30,000 (there has been nothing like it since 1879, and the victory over Peru....”*

The welcoming party lunch was hosted by the great grandfather of our current Honorary Consul, in Valparaiso, Iain Hardy.

Luis Pardo declined a reward of £25,000 (a fortune at the time) from the British Government declaring he had ‘simply done his duty’. From 1930 – 1934 he was the Chilean Consul to Liverpool, and at the time the greatest sea-port in Europe and one of the premier ports of the world.

Shackleton published his book *South* in 1919, to further raise funds for his expeditions. The thanks to the Government of Chile, and Luis Pardo, are in the most prominent place – at the end of the preface:

*“Finally, it was the Chilean Government that was directly responsible for the rescue of my comrades. This southern Republic was unwearied in their efforts to make a successful rescue, and the gratitude of our whole party is due to them.”*

*“I especially mention the sympathetic attitude of Admiral Munoz Hurtado, Head of the Chilean Navy, and Captain Luis Pardo, who commanded the *Yelcho*, on our last and successful venture.”*

All of us need heroes, whether a Shackleton or a Pardo, to inspire, to encourage us to try, and to open our eyes as to what can be possible. There are views that sufficient thanks were not given to Pardo. But we must take note of the era, a different code of conduct, the time of war, and that thanks were certainly given.

And in this centenary year, we are ensuring that Pardo’s name, values and contributions are recognised. The event during the *Mes del Mar* causes all of us to reflect on Shackleton, Pardo, the values they led their lives and others by, and the inspiration and legacy that they have given to all of us. The story of Shackleton and the *Endurance* expedition could so nearly have ended in tragedy, had it not been for the bravery and heroism of Luis Pardo.

The story of Pardo and Shackleton demonstrates the qualities of international co-operation, which are embedded in the Antarctic Treaty of today.