

DR REGINALD KOETTLITZ 'RK'

Polar Explorer, Geologist, Botanist

1860-1916

by Aubrey A Jones

The article concerning the YHA building, Charlton House, Dover in the Society's August 2002 newsletter was read with great interest and affection by me and my wife Ann Koettlitz.

Ann, the youngest daughter of Dr Maurice Koettlitz, lived in Charlton House until the death of her father in 1960.

As described in the society newsletter the house is indelibly connected with Dr Reginald Koettlitz the polar explorer from the heroic period of polar exploration, which bridged the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century.

We are fortunate due to the care and diligence of Miss Ulrica Koettlitz, late of Dover and Lydden, to possess many of Reginald Koettlitz's papers, photographs and other material relating to his industrious life of exploration and scientific achievement.

As a result we are researching his life and many achievements in an effort to establish his rightful place among the foremost scientific explorers of the period.

Although RK is rightly remembered for his role with the National Antarctic



Expedition in 'The Discovery' led by Captain R. F. Scott, this was the last of four major exploratory and amazing journeys.

The Antarctic connection is described in detail on the memorial of his final resting-place in Cradock, South Africa. His

The Discovery in dry dock, Lyttleton, New Zealand



cabin on the *Discovery* can be viewed on the ship, which is the centrepiece of the Dundee Heritage Centre, Discovery Point. The *Discovery* was constructed in that city.

However, it should be acknowledged that two of his previous expeditions were of equal standing and of greater personal achievement and scientific significance.

Firstly, there was the Jackson/Harmsworth expedition to Franz Joseph Land led by Frederick G. Jackson, which lasted for three years. This was the longest

period and closest location to the North Pole that man had ever survived. The intention was to find a route to the North Pole; it was thought at the time, 1894-1897, that Franz Joseph Land might be a land bridge to the pole.

RK was the expedition surgeon, geologist and botanist and other explorers of note who survived in the hut at Elmwood, Cape Flora were Captain Albert Armitage who also travelled south in the *Discovery* and William Spiers Bruce the Scottish polar explorer.

There were two major personal achievements by RK during the three years in the Arctic. The land party stayed clear of the dreaded explorer disease, scurvy, for the whole period. This was a major breakthrough for the time and before the advent of knowledge concerning vitamin deficiency.

It was achieved by the insistence of Koettlitz ensuring the party continually ate fresh meat. In this case,

polar bear, walrus and wild birds. In fact, together with the specimen in Dover Museum the slaughter of polar bears by the expedition affected the balance of polar bear existence in the region for many years. This lesson relating to the prevention of scurvy was a crucial one that was ignored in subsequent Antarctic exploration with fatal results.

His other major contribution was in the world of geology where RK's examination and study of the rocks and land formation in the area of the Cape

Flora base led to ground breaking discoveries. His estimates as to the age of rocks differed from other eminent English geologists but were later confirmed by the Norwegian geologist Mathoist supported by the famous Norwegian explorer Dr Fridjof Nansen.

Nansen and his companion Johansen were saved from death by being discovered by RK and other members of the expedition whilst returning from an attempt on the North Pole. This led to a lasting friendship between the two men.

RK later presented papers to the Royal Geographical Society with Frederick Jackson concerning the expedition. His achievements in Franz Joseph Land are commemorated by the naming of 'REGINALD KOETTLITZ ISLAND' in the archipelago.

In 1898 Koettlitz joined the Herbert Weld-Blundell expedition to Northeast Africa, again as surgeon and scientific adviser in addition to his responsibilities as expedition resource manager. This involved the purchasing of camels and mules to facilitate the journey.

The expedition set out from Berbera in British Somaliland. Whilst making a slight deviation from the route RK discovered a new species of cuttlefish which now bears his name, 'SEPIA KOETTLITZI'.

The expedition travelled west and crossed into Abyssinia at a remote crossing point named Jig-Jigga before heading for Harar where the countryside became mountainous and most difficult when compared with the previous plains.

An interesting description is contained in the diaries and reports prepared by RK during this journey. He describes areas in Abyssinia as a veritable 'Garden of Eden' where there are lemon groves, olives, limes, irrigation programmes where cotton and coffee are grown with vast herds of cattle and other wild beasts.

This contrasts greatly with modern Ethiopia and the Sudan. Advancement into the 21st century has not assisted all peoples of Africa.

From Harar the expedition headed towards Addis Abeba passing many caravans carrying ivory making their way to the coast. On reaching Addis Abeba they were met by the British representative, Captain Harrington who resided in the British residence, which consisted of two large tents in an enclosed turf, walled compound.

The other British resident was a man named, McKelvy who had resided there for 37 years having been captured by the Magdela tribe, been released but continued to live as an Abyssinian national. Until the arrival of Captain Harrington he had forgotten the English language.

Whilst in the region Koettlitz became the first British national to visit the famous sacred mountain, Mount Zuqula the centre of Abyssinian Christian religion which had survived many centuries of persecution. At the centre of the mountain is a sacred lake surrounded by dense woodland and inhabited by hermit like holy men who questioned the intentions of the Koettlitz visit.

He proved his credentials and good intentions by producing a sovereign showing the image of St George who was the patron saint of the Abyssinian Christians. From that moment he was regarded as a Christian of a very high order and held in great esteem.

On returning to the capital the expedition re-formed and made their way overland to the Sudanese border at Famaka and thence up the Blue Nile by gunboat and local dhow to Khartoum and Cairo.

Full details of the expedition, its achievements and discoveries including

animals and birds previously unknown to science were given in two papers presented to the Royal Geographical Society by Herbert Weld-Blundell and Dr Koettlitz in 1899.

As indicated in the society newsletter RK then travelled by the steamer 'Sobralcuse' across the Atlantic to the Amazon where he made extensive collections of plankton and other marine life.

Finally, he was appointed as senior surgeon, botanist and bacteriologist to the National Antarctic Expedition in the *Discovery* from 1901-1904.

Much has been written on this expedition and the subsequent fatal Scott

led expedition in which he and his companions perished. Little has been written on the role and accomplishments of Dr Reginald Koettlitz who is better known in South Africa than in the United Kingdom.

He should be regarded as one of Dover's famous sons but many events have conspired against this. I will touch briefly on a number of his personal achievements while in the Antarctic.

He led, or was a member of the early sledging journeys from the expedition base at Hut Point, McMurdo Sound. Along with Albert Armitage and Louis Bernacchi who had Antarctic experience they were the only members of the party with polar



Officers and members of the scientific staff on board *Discovery*, 1901. Reginald Koettlitz is 5th from left, next to Scott



experience. Koettlitz was probably at the time the foremost expert in the prevention and treatment of scurvy in Polar Regions.

The other members of the expedition were enthusiastic amateurs and in time this experience was overlooked, ultimately with fatal consequences.

The lasting memorial from his sledge

journeys is the vast 'KOETTLITZ GLACIER', which remains to this day a glacier of magnificence and is much studied by geologists from around the globe.

He performed the first surgical operation on the Antarctic continent, removing a large cyst from the cheek of Lieutenant Roys. This operation was carried out on the wardroom table of the *Discovery* and produced much entertainment when Koettlitz produced an impressive array of surgical knives, scissors, gauze etc and ghoulishly explained the use of each.

He grew the first living plant using the soil of the continent and provided mustard and cress for the Ship's Company in a memorable teatime banquet. There is a species of freshwater algae discovered by RK bearing the name 'PLETROCOCBUS KOETTLITZI' which he discovered near the winter quarters at Hut Point.

Finally, he led the support party with Albert Armitage en-route to his discovery of the route up the Ferrar Glacier culminating in Armitage and his party being the first to reach the polar plateau.

The *Discovery* returned to Britain via



Emperor Penguins, Antarctica, 1902

Marie Louise Koettlitz at their farm in South Africa, 1910



In fact, he and his wife died within two hours of each other in Cradock and are buried in the cemetery of Cradock church where his fine memorial is located and is a major tourist attraction in the region.

This project is but two years in to a five-year term. This autumn will bring a visit to visit South Africa to carry out further research on this remarkable citizen of Dover who will eventually receive the recognition he richly deserves.

If any of your readers feel they can contribute to the Dr Reginald Koettlitz debate and research please contact us via the officers of the Dover Society.

New Zealand and the Falkland Islands but Dr Koettlitz was unhappy with his exclusion from the final scientific reports and he decided with his wife Marie Louise to emigrate to South Africa.

They settled in the area of Somerset East in the Western Cape and he spent the years as a contented local doctor and JP. His reason for choosing South Africa were linked with the Discovery expedition when they had received a kind welcome from the residents of that country. He considered New Zealand but felt it too far and remote.

He was a well-respected doctor and citizen of Darlington, Somerset East and Cradock and as the society newsletter stated he died of dysentery and his wife of heart disease. They resided initially on a small farm at Grobbelaar's Kraal where Koettlitz told neighbours that he wanted a long rest in the sun away from his polar endeavours.



Cradock Cemetery, South Africa