The EXPLORATION *of the* ANTARCTIC PENINSULA

1819 to 1937

By Hugh Allan

CHAPTER 1

Dawn Breaks on the South Shetlands

Smith and Bransfield[2,17]

In February of 1819, Englishman Captain William Smith, part-owner of the brig *Williams,* sailed from Montevideo with a cargo for Valparaiso. After the vessel entered Drake Passage, heading westwards in the usual bleak and blustery conditions, the weather deteriorated. Smith turned southwards, partly because of the wind, and partly because he hoped to find favourable weather in that direction. The men aboard the *Williams* had grave concerns for their safety. On the 19th February 1819, worry changed to amazement when they sighted land through the wind-blown haze. Captain Smith's temptation to examine the shores more closely had to be shelved – he had a cargo to deliver, and he knew that his insurance would not cover him during any digression from transporting cargo to exploration. Furthermore, the weather at that point turned favourable, as if protecting the southern lands from intruders.

The *Williams* turned and raced with the breeze, covering several hundred kilometres of cold and wind-streaked sea that pounded the vessel until she cleared Drake Passage and was well into the Pacific Ocean.

After seeing his ship safely tied up in Valparaiso, Smith reported his discovery of land to William Henry Shirreff, senior British naval officer in that port, and captain of HMS *Andromache*. Shirreff scoffed at the claim that a merchant vessel had discovered new land. He insisted instead that Smith had probably seen icebergs. But one person did not scoff: John Miers, a British businessman who knew Smith well, eagerly

absorbed the details of the voyage and the sightings as related by his friend and business colleague. He probably also obtained information from one Joseph Herring, mate on the *Williams*. Herring, incidentally, parted company with Smith in Valparaiso and, for reasons that he chose not to advertise, travelled across the continent to Buenos Aires.

Miers and Smith were more business-minded than Shirreff. They knew the sealers working in South Georgia had been making good profits, so the pair were excited not only by the discovery of new land, but also by the potential of finding new sealing grounds. All of which provided a good incentive for Captain Smith to carry out further explorations in the area of his discovery. In May of 1819, having obtained a cargo for Montevideo, he sailed from Valparaiso.

Once in the Drake Passage, he set course for the land he had seen. Weather intervened, for winter had arrived in the south. Apart from tumultuous seas, he had floating ice to contend with. Even so, he managed to reach the latitude (62°) of the land he had seen, albeit a long way to the west of it. Before long, he reached ice that proved to be an impenetrable barrier, forcing him to turn northwards without seeing his objective.

After reaching Montevideo in June 1819, Smith occupied himself with finding another cargo, determined to revisit his discovery at the earliest opportunity. While he went about his business, some Americans who had interests in the sealing industry approached him, seeking information about the new land. That others had already heard about his finding troubled him, for his intention was that British sealers should be the first to benefit from the land he had discovered, assuming sealing opportunities existed there. He remained tight-lipped about his previous two voyages, but the same could not be said for his former mate, Joseph Herring.

In June 1819, an American sealer, James P. Sheffield of Stonington,

Connecticut,[18] set sail in the *Hersilia* on a voyage to the southern seas in general, and the Falkland Islands in particular. One Nathaniel Palmer, the second mate, was put ashore at the Falkland Islands to procure supplies, while the captain took his ship on a minor voyage in search of the fictitious Aurora Islands. During his spell ashore, Palmer obtained information about new islands that had been discovered. Also in port at that time was the brig *Espirito Santo* out of Buenos Aires, and curiously, the mate on the *Espirito Santo* was an apparently talkative Joseph Herring. So, when the *Hersilia* returned, Palmer, as a result of his detective work, was able to direct his captain towards Smith's discovery, where they anticipated finding profitable hunting grounds. It seems that, in spite of Smith's silence on the matter, the new islands were hot news in Montevideo and Buenos Aires, and before very long, even in England.

In October 1819, Captain William Smith sailed from Montevideo, once again with a cargo for Valparaiso. On reaching Drake Passage, he continued southwards, determined to confirm his discovery of February that year. He made his second sighting on the afternoon of 15th October, when he saw land about fifteen kilometres away, in hazy conditions. There were great numbers of whales and seals around the ship. Closer inspection of the land revealed innumerable penguins on the shores, but he found also that the waters close to the coast were littered with rocks, reefs, islets, icebergs and lumps of ice. As evening approached, he took his ship further out to sea for safety. The next morning, he ventured landwards again and sailed north-east along the coast, making notes of geographical features and taking depth soundings.

At 8 a.m. on the morning of the 16th October, in clear conditions, Smith came to a cape where the land curved to the south. This being the easternmost point of his present voyage, he called the cape North Foreland, after North Foreland in Kent, which is the easternmost

point of England. He went ashore and planted the Union Jack, taking possession of the land in the name of King George III. He named his discovery New South Britain. It was later changed to New South Shetland, because its latitude was the same as the Shetland Islands' latitude north. From North Foreland, Smith retraced his track in a south-westerly direction along the coast, recording more details and noting with interest the abundance of Antarctic fur seals on the beaches. Smith recorded these particulars with the intention of encouraging Captain Shirreff in Valparaiso to initiate an official British exploratory voyage to the region.

During his sojourn along this rugged coast, Smith enjoyed reasonably calm conditions, but periodic fogs hampered his work, obscuring his view of the land and forcing him to haul off to seaward. As a result of these manoeuvres, he assumed (incorrectly, as it turned out) that he had been cruising along a continuous piece of land. In due course, he saw only sea to the south, and he decided to end his exploration. Not long afterwards, he saw another headland far to the south, which he named Smith's Cape (now Smith Island). He recorded its position and set course for Valparaiso, where he arrived on 24th November 1819.

By early December 1819, Captain Shirreff had been convinced that Smith's discovery was genuine. He announced that the British Navy intended to charter Smith's ship, the *Williams,* for a survey of New South Shetland. At that time, the vessel had already been loaded with a cargo of machinery belonging to the aforementioned John Miers. He was well aware of the importance to Britain of such a survey, so he readily agreed to off-load his equipment to free the ship. Miers was apparently the person who suggested the name South Shetland. He also wrote an account of Smith's voyages, and he drew a chart based on information gained from conversations with Smith and the mate, Herring.

Shirreff appointed Edward Bransfield, a master in the British Royal Navy, leader of the survey. Smith was retained as pilot, and on the 30th December 1819, the *Williams* headed south from Valparaiso to carry out the first official survey of Antarctic lands.

After crossing Drake Passage, those on board the *Williams* sighted land at 8 p.m. on the 15th January 1820. Approaching the grey and rugged coast in the fading light, they hove-to some distance from the shore. The next morning, Smith ventured to within two kilometres of the coast, staying well clear of the rock-strewn waters. A few sailors rowed him ashore in a whaleboat for a closer examination of the shoreline. His search for a safe anchorage in the bay was not entirely successful, because, as he reported on his return to his ship, the exposed nature of the bay suggested it would only be useful in an emergency.

In fact, an emergency arose earlier than expected. The sailors had hoisted the whaleboat on board and the ship had got under way when the weather thickened. Fog enveloped them, and shortly afterwards, a line of breakers appeared not far from the bows of the ship. The helmsman turned the vessel and almost ran her onto a reef. There was no option but to drop anchor where they were. Fog forced the *Williams* to remain in her perilous situation for four hours.

When it lifted at 5.30 p.m., Bransfield moved the ship away from the reef. Around midnight, a squally wind came up, buffeting the vessel. She would certainly have been wrecked had she remained in her earlier position. Daylight revealed a heavy swell that sent waves crashing violently across the reef in a welter of foam. All on board would have been relieved to be watching from a distance rather than at close quarters. Around the ship, multitudes of terns and petrels wheeled and dived, while in the waters, Smith observed with interest an abundance of seals and whales. That inhospitable place did indeed look promising.

On the 17th January, Bransfield commenced his survey by obtaining the latitude and longitude of Start Point (Fig. 3), a headland at the

western end of the bay Smith had inspected the previous year. To the north-east, the bay ended at what he called Cape Shirreff. He named the bay Barclay's (now Barclay Bay). An island lying about three kilometres south of Start Point became known as Rugged Island.

The survey expedition then proceeded eastwards from Cape Shirreff, towards a bleak and inhospitable island whose black cliffs had vertical clefts highlighted by snow within them. Bransfield's feelings for that dreary place resulted in it being called Desolation Island. To the south, Bransfield noted high mountains on what he referred to as the 'mainland'. The jagged peaks looked as dramatic as they were uninviting.

By 10 p.m. on the 17th January, although it was still light, a fog began to envelop the ship, and she was taken into safer waters, where she lay at anchor for the night. The next morning brought with it a partial clearing of the fog. Bransfield continue his survey towards the east, where he sighted a distinctive island, square with a flat top. Due to a return of poor visibility, and the hazardous nature of the waters, Bransfield did not approach it. He named it Falcon's Island (now Table Island). Had the weather been kinder to him, he would have observed a strait between two larger islands to the south. With the fog increasing, the *Williams* was taken a safe distance from the land, where she lay at anchor.

The following morning brought no improvement, but the men were kept busy, observing and enjoying the company of numerous whales and vast numbers of penguins in the waters around the ship. By midday on the 20th, the appearance of the sun enabled Bransfield to fix his position (61° 54' S, 59° 10' W).

The next day, visibility improved slightly, and a few small islands, craggy and partially covered with snow, came and went in the changing atmospheric conditions. Then Smith saw North Foreland, which he had discovered and named on his visit to the area the previous year. Smith and Bransfield were now about 170 kilometres from Start Point. Passing around the cape at 9 a.m., the fog descended upon them once

again, hiding the coast for the next six hours. When it cleared in the afternoon, the land could be seen shrinking to the south-west. On the port side, about 25 kilometres away, a peaked island emerged from the fog. It was named Bridgeman Island (Fig. 3).

The *Williams* rounded a cape, which received the name Melville. Beyond it, the curve of a wide bay spread out towards a conical island in the distance. The men found it to be occupied by thousands of penguins – it became Penguin Island. As they passed it, a second bay came into view, which appeared to offer suitable shelter and anchorage. Bransfield went ashore in a boat and took possession of the land in the name of King George III, naming it New South Britain. (His chart later showed it as South Shetland.) Bransfield planted the Union Jack, and at the same time, the men on the ship hoisted the Ensign and Pennant and fired a gun. Grog was handed out to each man, and the ceremony concluded as everyone drank to the health of the King. Bransfield named the bay George's Bay (now King George Bay).

Later in the afternoon, midshipman Poynter and a few sailors were sent in search of water. They landed on Penguin Island, where multitudes of penguins, having chicks to protect, tried desperately to prevent the human invasion. The men retaliated with clubs, and many birds were killed before a path was made through the rookery. This unnecessary carnage was even more tragic in view of the fact that the water on the island was found to be undrinkable anyway, having been polluted by the penguins. Subsequently, an excellent supply of running water was found on the 'mainland' adjacent to Penguin Island.

On the 23rd January, the sailors began the task of replenishing the ship's water supply. Bransfield and Smith carried out a survey of the bay in a whaleboat, taking soundings and fixing the latitude and longitude of prominent features. A headland to the south-west received the name Martin's Head. Several elephant seals were killed for their blubber, evidently to offset the cost of the voyage. One seal gamely fought back and badly lacerated a sailor's hand.

The seal's fight was in vain, though, for his blubber too ended up on the ship.

Captain Sheffield in the *Hersilia,* meanwhile, having followed Palmer's directions (which he had obtained while in the Falklands), had reached the South Shetland Islands. On the 23rd January, the *Hersilia* arrived at what Sheffield called Hersilia Cove, on the north-east coast of Rugged Island. They took only sixteen days to load *Hersilia* with sealskins, and she departed immediately for her home port of Stonington, Connecticut. The rape of the South Shetland Islands had begun.

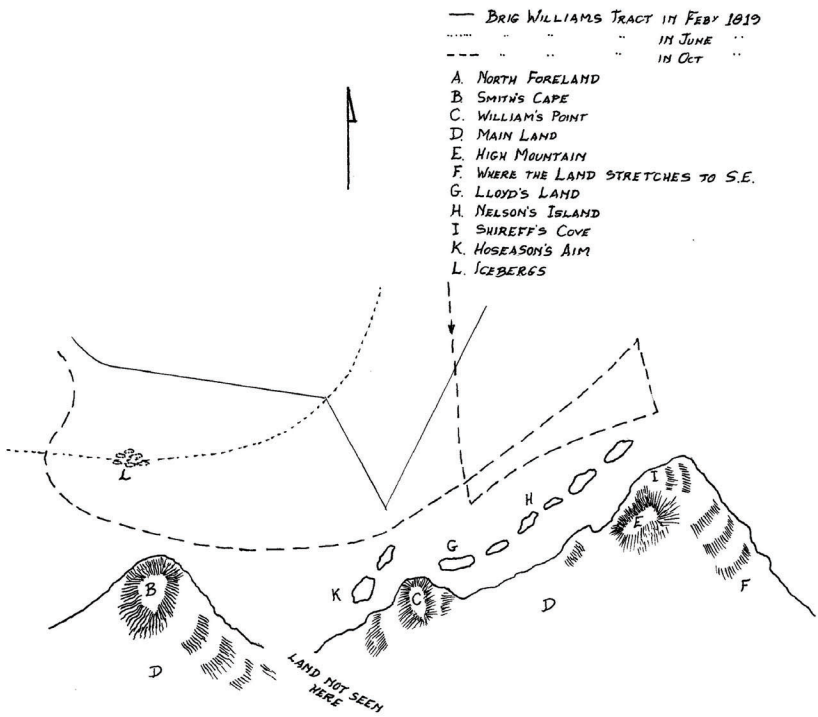

Figure 2
Chart of New South Shetland (After Miers)

On the 24th January, Bransfield's survey in the rowing boat had to be temporarily halted when a breeze came up, bringing large quantities of loose ice into King George Bay. Rowing a boat in such conditions proved impossible for the sailors. A subsequent change in wind direction took the ice out of the bay, and Bransfield completed his survey of the area the following day. Heavy snow started to fall in the evening, and for the whole of the 26th January, snow and fog confined the vessel to the bay.

At 10 a.m. on the 27th January 1820, the *Williams* drifted sluggishly out of King George Bay. In almost calm conditions, the ship took six hours to reach the open sea. To the north-east, beyond Penguin Island, Cape Melville (Fig. 3) came into view. Martin's Head appeared

to the north, on the starboard side. Hazy conditions persisted, and indeed grew worse, as Bransfield sailed in a south-westerly direction, following the coast. As was the case with the northern coastline, Bransfield saw and charted it as a single landmass.

The 29th dawned foggy and remained that way until noon. When it cleared, it gave mankind his first view of a magnificent range of high, snow-covered mountains. The peaks wore white mantles that hung on the precipitous slopes, torn here and there by near-vertical, dark ravines, into which the sun's rays could not penetrate. The coastline consisted of long ice cliffs, being the termination of inland glaciers. Black buttresses protruded here and there, accentuating the harsh beauty of the land.

CHAPTER 2

A New Continent

Smith and Bransfield[2,17]

Bransfield and his men had only a few hours in which to enjoy the scenery and to chart the spectacular landscape before the fog descended upon them. A rapidly falling barometer portended further deterioration in the weather, so Bransfield and Smith prepared the *Williams* for stormy conditions. By 8 p.m., a strong gale had arrived, and it drove the ship southwards, away from the mountainous coast, which they never again saw.

The following morning, on the 30th January 1820, the survey expedition found itself in an uncomfortable situation: to the south-south-east lay a fearsome-looking coast, while in a westerly direction lurked three large icebergs. A haze came down and hid everything from view until 4 p.m. The sight that then greeted the explorers caused them considerable concern. They had drifted into a semicircle of land with the appearance of islands, beyond which could be seen a mountain range. They sounded in 80 fathoms, and barely had this work been completed when the haze deteriorated into a thick fog, causing even more worry in their hostile surroundings.

Bransfield gave the name Trinity Land (Fig. 3 – now Graham Land) to the area where high mountains predominated. This was the first recorded sighting of the Antarctic continent, though Bransfield did not claim to have discovered a continent. When visibility improved, course was set to the east-north-east to get clear of the dangerous

waters. By noon the next day, the sea ahead of the vessel presented a mass of floating ice. After a course-change, they sighted an island, which Bransfield named Hope Island (its present name). Far to the south, a high mountain could be seen, but it remained unnamed for the time being. It is situated on that part of the Antarctic Peninsula now known as Trinity Peninsula.

Bransfield made his next discovery three days later and 150 kilometres to the north-north-west of Hope Island. Their course had been dictated by gales, sometimes accompanied by snow. The 2nd February saw the *Williams* west of Cape Melville once again. Dangerous waves were crashing onto three large rocks that loomed ever closer, and the ship, being almost under bare poles due to the gale, found itself yet again in an uncomfortable situation. After the crew put on more sail, they managed to get her clear of that treacherous place. The weather gradually improved, and a westerly course was set. At 8 a.m. on the 3rd February, Bransfield discovered a group of high islands, snow-capped and rugged, with dark and rocky shorelines. He did not spend time surveying them in detail, but they did receive the name O'Brien's Islands, which is now the name of the smallest island in the group (Fig. 3).

At 5.30 p.m., about 30 kilometres to the north-north-west, a group of low islands came into view, dominated to their south by a mountainous and glacier-encrusted land. The waters around them showed evidence of reefs just below the surface, and rocks jutted sharply from the sea. A proliferation of fauna prompted Bransfield to name them Seal Islands.

The morning of 4th February found the *Williams* on an east-south-easterly course, parallel to a dark and high island not far from the Seal Islands. Captain Smith maintained a respectable distance from it on account of the fog, which obscured the coast intermittently. After a few hours, it terminated in a cape where cliffs soared 250 m sheer out of the sea. Bransfield did not name the island, which became famous nearly a century later as Elephant Island. He named the cape later

in his voyage (see below). The *Williams* then passed by a smaller island with a high peak (340 m), and beyond it lay a peninsula, part of another large tract of land. Rounding its northern extremity, the vessel followed the coast to the south-east and reached a headland at 6 p.m. Here, the land trended to the west, and Bransfield had a boat lowered so that he could go ashore. He planted the Union Jack and took possession of the land in the name of King George the Third. While he was engaged in these formalities, those on the ship noticed numerous streams cascading down the mountainsides. This raised the men's hopes that the ship's water-tanks could be replenished, but the terrain and intervening ice cliffs prevented any such operation.

Bransfield assumed that these lands were part of Trinity Land, and he therefore refrained from naming the two large islands, but he did bestow a name, Cape Bowles, on the place of his landing. For the next few days, the *Williams* followed an easterly course, Bransfield being eager to discover whether the Trinity Peninsula to the south-west was contiguous with the South Sandwich Islands to the north-east. However, no land was found in that direction, and by the 9th February, after a course change, the ship had returned to the Seal Islands. Clear weather prevailed, and from a distance of about 30 kilometres, those on lookout could see the islands, as well as the breath-taking unnamed island beyond.

On the 13th, the *Williams* was at anchor off the Seal Islands. Smith and some sailors went ashore at a place where seals abounded. Evidently, Captain Shirreff (in Valparaiso) had instructed Smith to procure some specimens, but the scientific meaning of the word seemed to have been lost in the men's enthusiasm for killing – nearly three hundred of the creatures were slaughtered. Further waste was incurred because the carcasses were left on the shore until after dinner, and most were washed away by a rising tide. The sum total of their efforts was eighty skins and a piece of rock that was thought to contain coal.

The *Williams* then followed the northern coast of the land for a second time. The 14th February brought them to the imposing 250-metre-high

black headland they had seen before. On this occasion, the cape was named Valentine's Head (now Cape Valentine). The small island a few kilometres to the east became Cornwallis Island. By the 15th February, Bransfield had satisfied himself that Cape Valentine was on an island, but still he did not give it a name.

He then set course to the north-east and sailed until the *Williams* was well clear of the islands before heading south in a final search for land. At latitude 64° 56' S, nearly 500 kilometres from Cape Valentine, heavy pack ice barred the way. Turning to the north once more, they saw Cape Bowles again on the 28th February. Bransfield now confirmed that the cape was on an island, which he named Clarence's Island (now Clarence Island). The east coast was examined as they sailed past, and its northern extremity, which Bransfield named Lloyd's Promontory, was found to be typical of these islands – inhospitable and inaccessible. The voyage continued in a northerly direction, and on the 4th March, the Seal Islands and their unnamed neighbour could be seen in the distance. Bransfield's intention at this point was to return to Cape Shirreff to plant the Union Jack and officially end the survey.

Nature intervened, and he never did get to plant that flag. Falcon's Island (Fig. 3), now Table Island, came into view on the 9th March. The coast here presented a miserable sight, with innumerable rocks upon which the breakers crashed relentlessly. To Bransfield's annoyance, the wind became unfavourable, and a strong current also hindered the vessel's westward progress. The wind intensified over the following few hours, forcing the vessel to the east again. By the 14th, the *Williams* had passed Seal Islands and had reached latitude 59° 30' S in longitude 54° W. The adverse winds had driven them nearly 550 kilometres from Table Island.

The breeze eventually eased, and course was once again set for Cape Shirreff. On this occasion, the *Williams* approached the land from the north, and Bransfield sighted a small island not far from Desolation Island, which he named Smith's Island, in the mistaken

belief that Smith had discovered it the previous year. It was later found to be a group of islands, and was given the name Zed, on account of its configuration. During the course of the survey, twenty-one features had been named.

Bransfield's desire to reach Cape Shirreff was once again thwarted. This time, a strong easterly current along the coast was to blame, and so, given the lateness of the season, he abandoned any attempt to return to Cape Shirreff.

After sunset on the 19th March 1820, the *Williams* headed north-west into Drake Passage. More than three weeks later, on the 16th April, Smith and Bransfield arrived in Valparaiso.

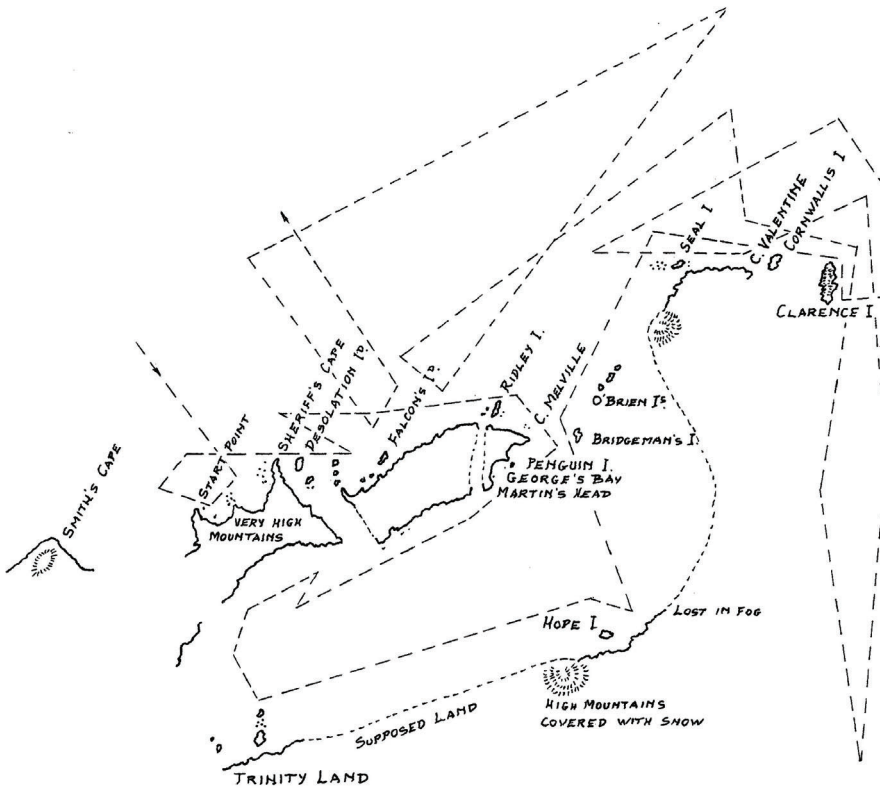

Figure 3
Bransfield's Chart and the Track of the *Williams*