
THE MENTALIST

interview by NICK SMITH, images courtesy FELICITY ASTON



WHILE OTHERS FIND THE ISOLATION OF ANTARCTICA TO BE ONE OF ITS MAIN ATTRACTIONS, FOR BRITISH EXPLORER FELICITY ASTON, BEING ON HER OWN IN THE WHITE CONTINENT WAS ITS STERNEST CHALLENGE.

IT'S NOW A YEAR SINCE BRITISH POLAR EXPLORER FELICITY ASTON BECAME THE FIRST WOMAN TO CROSS ANTARCTICA ALONE, A YEAR THAT SHE HAS SPENT REFLECTING ON WHAT IT ALL MEANS. ALTHOUGH ONE OF THE MOST PHYSICALLY

DEMANDING JOURNEYS IMAGINABLE, IN CONDITIONS THAT THREATENED HER SUCCESS AT EVERY TURN, WHAT REALLY BOTHERED HER WAS THE SHEER LONELINESS OF A VAST, ENDLESS CONTINENT WHERE NOTHING SEEMED TO COMPENSATE FOR THE LACK OF FELLOW HUMANS. NO STRANGER TO ANTARCTICA—FELICITY SPENT MORE THAN TWO YEARS THERE AS A SENIOR METEOROLOGIST AT ROTHERA RESEARCH STATION—SHE CHEERFULLY ADMITS THAT WHILE OTHERS WEAR THEIR FROST BITTEN FINGERS AS BADGES OF HONOR, SHE HAS HAD TO DIG DEEP TO MAKE SENSE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF SUCH PROLONGED ISOLATION. THE RESULT IS HER NEW BOOK *ALONE IN ANTARCTICA*. EXPLORERS JOURNAL CONTRIBUTING EDITOR NICK SMITH CAUGHT UP WITH FELICITY IN LONDON'S ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY, WHERE THEIR CONVERSATION WAS NOT SO MUCH ABOUT PHYSICAL ENDURANCE, BUT MORE THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS AND MOTIVATIONAL DRIVERS THAT HINDERED AND HELPED HER ON ONE OF THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY ANTARCTIC CROSSINGS OF THE MODERN ERA.



NICK SMITH (NS): We're sitting here one year after your historic solo crossing of Antarctica. Has the passing of time allowed you to make sense of the achievement?

FELICITY ASTON (FA): It's more a reckoning really, because the whole thing is very emotional. That really took me by surprise. I had no idea what it would be like to be alone for that amount of time. Today, I start my lectures by asking people in the audience when was the last time they were truly alone. Not on their own, but the last time they were truly alone. It's amazing how many people, when they think about it, have never really been beyond the view of another person. Everyone wants to know what it was like to be alone: how did you maintain the self-discipline required on such a journey? How did you get through? Now, these aren't questions that you can easily pin down in nice bite-size chunks.

NS: It was a huge achievement. You were the first woman to cross Antarctica alone. You were the first person to make the traverse using only muscle-power. Clearly the walk, for all the records you set, was a massive personal challenge.

FA: I've had to spend time trying to work out what it was that kept me going. You may have seen in a video on my website that shows me bursting into tears at the end of the journey. Writing the book helped me to understand what I had done. But my attitude seemed to change in the process of writing.

NS: You've called it, fittingly enough *Alone in Antarctica*, and of course as anyone who's ever done so will know, writing a book is a very lonely experience too.

FA: That's true. Oddly enough, my first book, *Call of the White*, which was about the 2009 Commonwealth Antarctic Expedition, was all about how to get on with people from different cultures and backgrounds in extreme circumstances. But my new one is all about how you get on with yourself. In some ways the lecture tour helped me to write it, because people

would ask questions at the end of my talks and I'd think "gosh, I've never thought of it in that way before." Writing and talking helped be to crystallize my thoughts. The thing that really struck me is that you're not just alone in the physical sense. It's a mental thing too, and a lot of us can experience that without having to go to Antarctica.

NS: Do you think the experience you had has a wider symbolic value to other people who have also been alone?

FA: A musician came up to me and said that everything I described made sense to her. She explained how when she is waiting in the wings of a darkened stage, the moment before going on to do her solo, no one could come to her aid. I also had a lady come up to me who had been suffering from depression for the past three years. I'd been talking about the difficulty of getting out of the tent every day and this was something she understood.

NS: One of the things that really seems to bother polar explorers is that they run out of things to think about. There's a lack of incoming data that really challenges their mental fortitude. Is this something you ever get used to?

FA: I think that being alone can make you less mentally tough. One of my mental mind tricks I play on myself is to imagine I have a team skiing behind me. And that's because I am a lot more mentally tough when I'm a leader. This was one of the biggest challenges of the expedition: maintaining self-discipline and motivation when there was no one to observe me. There was no one to criticize if I took a short cut. But when you lead a team you must, to a certain extent, lead by example. You can't refuel your stove bottle inside the tent when you've just told everyone that this is something that you absolutely mustn't do. But when you are on your own there's a strong temptation to just give in and do the easy things that you know you shouldn't do.

NS: Tell me more about the psychological tricks.

FA: It's all to do with the strength of the emotion that you are trying to re-create. I hesitate to admit it, but my strongest motivation comes not from thinking about my loved ones or those that supported me, but it was in thinking about people who had been negative about me, people who had hurt me in the past. There was a boss I once had who thought I was a waste of space. Now that really annoyed me at the time. But I found that by really digging out those old wounds I could get somewhere. I did not want that person to be right about me. And that means you've got to get out of this tent. I had a teammate years ago who said some really unkind things about me that I thought were totally unjust. Now I remember that, and I use that to crank up the emotion.

NS: When you get home, how do you cope with the normal life of friends, family, the city? Doesn't the everyday version of reality seem just a bit trivial and pointless?

FA: No. I know a lot of explorers and I have a cord of affinity with many of them. Especially women. But, I often see them trying to fill the hole that is inevitably there when you get back by planning the next trip. And I think this is a horrible cycle, and you lose something by giving in to it. It's almost as if many of them cannot be content with being back at home. And that is a huge sacrifice to make. When I'm out in the wild I'm not really thinking of other adventures. I think of when my mum and me went on holiday, or a night out with the old college crowd. And that to me seems to be an indication that these things are really important and I really don't want to be disconnected from my home life. I've worked really hard to try to make these two parts of my life—home and expeditions—to create a balance, rather than a conflict. So when I am on an expedition I try to remember how lucky I am to be there, and when I'm at home, perhaps a bit bored with having to go to the supermarket along with half of the world, I try to remember that this was one of the things that I dreamed about. There are times when I'm on an expedition when I think that to be curled

up at home watching TV with a glass of wine would be the highest achievement of mankind.

NS: It so often seems to be a feature of conversation with women explorers, and yet you've not brought up gender once. Is gender an issue for you?

FA: I went to a single-sex grammar school where everyone was a woman. And so you never really thought about gender. It was always about what you wanted to do. This might have put me at a disadvantage in my adult life, and there have been times when as a woman I've been in the minority. And there have been times when it's taken me a while to understand that this is an issue for other people. So you have a situation where you feel that something isn't working, and your default assumption is that this is because you aren't good enough. And then, way down the line, something will click, and you realize that you're being treated differently because you're a girl. The fact that my upbringing was of the type where this kind of thinking never enters your head means that it can be a bit of a surprise sometimes.

NS: And yet, your crossing of Antarctica makes you a role model and an ambassador for women. How do you feel about that?

FA: There is a default assumption that women aren't strong enough or experienced enough to do the sort of things I do. But there are plenty that have proven themselves. I was very conscious of the influence this trip had the potential to create. I was supported on this trip in the sense that I had resupplies, but it is my hope that there are women out there who can follow and do the whole thing unsupported and do it really quickly. I could have improved on my time. I did the whole thing in 59 days when I thought it would take 70. But there's room for improvement, and I hope that there are other women who will go for that, but not just women's records. I hope they'll go for firsts in their own right. And we're on the brink of that now. And that's really great. (For more on Felicity Aston, visit: www.felicityaston.co.uk.)