

My father was August Courtauld, a polar explorer, and although he died when I was very young, his exploits have significantly influenced my work as an artist. This essay is about him and how his life has inspired my paintings.

August was part of the British Arctic Air-Route Expedition in 1930, which set out to research the possibility of air travel to America over the Arctic. And to find out whether this could be done meant mapping Greenland's coast and recording its severe weather. The expedition was the idea of explorer, Gino Watkins, an elegant young man who was both acetic and hedonistic and who loved rock climbing, seal hunting, dancing and jazz. Apparently Gino's training for the trip included sleeping naked by an open window and taking explorer's rations of margarine to eat at dinner parties. But such frivolities went hand in hand with a great talent for leadership and a cheerful disdain for discomfort, such as waking up in a flooded tent, his body half under water. He also saved my father's life.

Gino recruited 14 others, mostly in their early 20s, to join him on his expedition and in July 1930 the team sailed to Greenland on *The Quest*, the boat in which the great Ernest Shackleton had died. The voyage had a tricky start when they anchored off Erith for a farewell lunch on the yacht of their sponsor, August's cousin, Stephen Courtauld. Stephen had a pet lemur called Mahjong, a savage little thing with sharp teeth and it bit the wrist of Percy Lemon, the wireless operator, causing blood to flow all over the new planks of the deck and giving Lemon pain for three months. But back on *the Quest*, off they went, under a flag showing a polar bear with wings, although they had another medical emergency when the ship's doctor got terrible toothache

and they had to go ashore in Northumberland for the tooth to be extracted with a hammer and chisel. Next stop was a Faroe Island where they picked up dog master Jamie Scott and 50 fierce huskies, one of which had killed many sheep. They also took on board a ton of dog (and human) food: whale meat and blubber which burst disgustingly from barrels as the boat rolled in rough seas off Iceland. They finally got to Greenland and built a base camp on the east coast and then an ice station 140 miles inland on the ice cap. They reached this site with great difficulty, with the huskies in boots, via many hidden crevasses ('grim traps for the unwary' as Captain Scott called them) and, more dauntingly, up a steep, polished glacier they named Buggery Bank.

The ice station was a domed tent, of double thickness, ten feet by 6, with a ventilator pipe at the top and entered by a tunnel through the floor. There was a wall of ice around it with a space within the wall for the weather instruments. It was designed for two to live in at a time but it was here that my father volunteered to remain alone during the winter. The reason was this. A sledging party, including August, had set off from the base camp to bring back the two who had been at the station that autumn and install the next pair with new supplies of food and fuel. But they had the most violent weather, challenging autumn had changed to murderous winter. It took them six days to haul sledges up Buggery Bank, they had winds of over 100 mph, tents were blown away in blizzards, dogs were buried in snow with tails frozen to the ice and some of the huskies gave birth and had to eat their own puppies. A canine version of 'Titus Andronicus'. These horrible conditions drastically slowed down the relief party so that they were forced to consume much of the food

meant for the ice station as they struggled to reach it. And in addition the dogs broke into a bag of pemmican and ate several days' rations. There would not be enough food for two men during winter and it looked as if their weather project would have to be abandoned altogether.

August however said that he could stay there alone. He was used to solitude, in fact he liked it, and as he had painfully frostbitten toes he had no wish to make the journey back to base. The others argued against such recklessness but he was inflexible. He would stay and keep the observations going.

And so he did. He was cut off from all communication as the radio had been dumped on the journey to lighten the load. He had no contact with any living thing once he had killed all the lice in his reindeer-skin sleeping bag. And as his companions left on December 5th he wrote: 'I could just see them as a speck in the distance. Now I am quite alone. Not a dog or even a mosquito to look at'. And later, in the same vein, he continued 'All around it was utterly flat; in every direction snow stretched to the horizon like the sea. There was no life on the ice cap. I never saw a bird, or even a fly.' He always seems to have been very aware of insects, or their absence.

He passed the time writing his diary, reading classic novels (*Vanity Fair*, *Guy Mannering*, *Jane Eyre* etc), dreaming of food and smoking. He liked his tobacco but had to smoke tea leaves when it ran out. And, of course, most importantly, he recorded the weather and went out every three hours to read the meteorological instruments. The Arctic winter, however, brought increasingly terrible blizzards, the ice

station and its tent gradually became buried under snow so that for six weeks he was completely snowed in. Luckily a few inches of the ventilator pipe remained above the surface but inside was claustrophobic in the extreme; the tent bulged dangerously under the weight of snow, icicles hung from its roof, ice formed in August's sleeping bag, he had hardly any food or fuel and was lying in the dark to save what little paraffin was left. Outside the temperature dropped to 53 below zero. He whistled and sang songs from *The Beggars Opera* and Gilbert and Sullivan to keep his spirits up.

And amazingly he had firm faith in his deliverance. His diary records 'the curious feeling of security that came as time passed....as each month passed without relief, I felt more and more certain of its arrival. By the time I was snowed in I had no doubts on the matter.... I will not attempt any explanation of this, but leave it as a fact that while powerless to help myself, some outer Force was in action on my side, and I was not fated to leave my bones on the Greenland Ice Cap.'

And he was right of course, release came on on 5th May, a day which August with uncanny premonition had sensed would be significant. He appears to have been something of a clairvoyant. The rescue had been attempted several times before, but the men couldn't find the smothered ice station. Finally a sledging party of Watkins and 2 others saw the tattered Union Jack and some instruments poking above the snow. Gino had brought a prayer book in case August was dead but they got there just in time, when he was down to his last bits of pemmican and the stove, as he wrote, 'gave its last gasp'. Then, he continues, 'there was a noise

like a football match overhead. They had come. A hole of brilliant daylight appeared in the roof. There was Gino's face.'

August was awarded the polar medal by George v, contradicting the king when he referred to his rescue. 'I was not rescued as I was never lost', said August. He also said 'no sir' 3 times when the king asked if he had been cold or hungry or lonely. August went on other Greenland expeditions, including a brutal open boat journey of 600 nautical miles with Watkins and Lemon. He also climbed Greenland's highest mountain and had a mountain and glacier named after him. He married Mollie to whom he was engaged before he went to the Arctic and had 6 children. He was a fearless yachtsman, always happy when the winds were strengthening to gale force, and was able to navigate by the stars with complete accuracy. He was an officer in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in the war and commanded motor torpedo boats. However he got MS in his forties. He died aged 54 and was buried at sea from an Essex lifeboat. 'Full fathom five thy father lies, of his bones are coral made', this song chanted by Ariel in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, has meant much to me for this reason.

I was eight when he died and since he was ill for several years before that, my memories of him are extremely sketchy. Despite this his adventures have shadowed my life and influenced my paintings of people in wilderness. These figures include polar explorers depicted in the sharp light and bright sherbet colours which August describes in his diary. He writes, 'Aurora wonderful tonight, like purple smoke wreaths twisting and writhing all over the sky'. Or he

notices the sun 'casting its rose-pink light along the snow and making shadows and bright places'. This last observation found its way into the first of my series of paintings called 'August'.

The faceless, silhouette in these paintings has something to do with the fact that I didn't know my father. He seemed to me a mystery, even something of a threat. And the hunched, Yeti-like form suggests the wild-man who was ill at ease with social convention. As a Cambridge undergraduate he was walking in awkward silence with his dance partner after a May ball. She said to him 'this is too awful, can't you think of anything to say.' He could not. He said that he found girls 'a nuisance' at this stage and he wasn't happy on the dance floor either. He was useless as a city stockbroker, a job which he loathed, and he didn't want to join the family business. He really belonged in the extreme outdoors, with walrus, bear, crocodile; in deserts, oceans, rivers, mountains and ice where, he writes, 'how grand and awful are the things that are here, the things that grip the heart with fear, the forces that spin the universe through space.' He was attuned to a sense of 'the sublime', that feeling of awe and terror in the face of something overwhelming. And you don't get that at cocktail parties.

So I've painted August as something not quite human, in keeping with much of my work in which people morph into something other, an ape, ghost, robot, cyborg or, in the case of August, an Abominable Snowman. And this feeling for metamorphosis reminds me of the only story I know about my father and me. When I was a child I wasn't so much *interested* in metamorphosis as terrified by it. I had a horror of changes in appearance and would scream at

people with wet hair or in sunglasses or hats. When a woman came to afternoon tea in a hat, August, announcing my phobia with characteristic impulsiveness, pulled it off and off came her wig as well, leaving her bald. That must have been an even more frightening transformation to cry about and it reminds me of a story about August as a little boy when he tried to turn his sister into a bald monk by covering her head with plasticine. Girls, after all, were 'a nuisance'.

So my father, this ice hermit, was very unusual: anti-authoritarian, individualistic, excessively modest and extraordinarily courageous. And, thinking of the classical definition of a hero as someone who goes too far or beyond the norm, he seems to fit the category of the heroic.