

Obituary

Edith Anna Maslin (Jackie) Ronne (Fig. 1) died on 14 June 2009.

‘I started off for a year’s stay on the Antarctic continent with one small suitcase which contained mainly a good suit, a good dress, nylon stockings and high heel shoes – clothes about as suitable as Eskimo furs would be on a South Sea island, but I had the excuse that I didn’t know I was going. . .’ (Jackie Ronne).

The story that followed was one which forever changed the nature of Antarctic exploration and made legend the life of Jackie Ronne.

Edith Anna Maslin was born on 13 October 1919 to Charles Jackson Maslin and his wife Elizabeth. She was raised in the suburban decorum of a conservative Baltimore family but always felt that her destiny would be ‘a little bit different’, spinning around the lamp post outside of the house, wondering what it could be.

She acquired her nickname of ‘Jackie’ during a girl scout summer camp, the girls replacing the end of their father’s names with ‘ie’ to form the diminutive. Edith used her father’s middle name and ‘Jackie’ she became. The nickname finally stuck during her University years and as Jackie she was known for ever afterwards, to those who knew and loved her.

She graduated in 1940 with a degree in history from George Washington University in Washington DC, ending up working in the State Department. Jackie met Finn Ronne (1899–1980) on a blind date in 1942. A friend set up Jackie with Finn, knowing that they were both interested in skiing. Finn was Norwegian by birth and was raised on skis; Jackie could almost manage a small slope in the local park. Nevertheless, they hit it off. She was taken with his Norwegian charm and tales of Antarctic exploration. Finn was already a noted polar explorer, as was his father, Martin Ronne (1861–1932). Finn was besotted by Jackie’s beauty, charm and mischievous streak. They were married in March 1944.

After the war, Finn announced plans for his own Ronne Antarctic research expedition. This drew him into conflict with Admiral Byrd and with the British Government, both of which failed to stop him exploring an Antarctic region which they thought of as their own. The resultant backstabbing of the Ronnes affects their reputation to this day.

Jackie looked after the daily press releases and administration. She expected to remain in Washington to do this, going only as far as Beaumont, Texas, to wave farewell. The expedition sailed on 25 January 1947 and much to her surprise, she sailed with the ship. Finn had persuaded Jackie to sail as far as Panama. Jackie in turn



Fig. 1. Jackie Ronne.

suggested that Jennie, the newly married wife of chief pilot, Harry Darlington, come for an extended honeymoon and the two women would fly back together. At Panama, their voyage was extended to Valparaiso; and once there, Finn insisted that Jackie should come to the Antarctic.

Few women had visited the Antarctic, and those that had done so had been on board whaling and sealing vessels. A woman as a polar explorer was a novel idea and met with resistance from some expedition members. Jackie, too, had her doubts. She didn’t want to make headlines and detract from the scientific purposes of the expedition. In the end, the doubters were persuaded by both women going.

So it was that Jackie Ronne became the first American woman to set foot on the Antarctic continent and the first woman with an official role on an Antarctic expedition. In addition to her administrative and press duties, she assisted the scientific work. Jennie Darlington, went as a companion. Both became the first women to overwinter in the Antarctic.

The Ronne Antarctic research expedition (1947–1948) used the old East Base (HSM Number 55, 68°11’S, 67°00’W), built at Stonington Island by Finn when second

in command of the United States Services Expedition (1939–1941). It executed significant scientific work, leading to numerous publications. Considerable exploratory work was also undertaken; despite diplomatic difficulties much of it was co-ordinated with the British Falkland Islands Dependencies personnel stationed a few yards away in Base E. They explored the unknown western and southern Weddell Sea coasts with planes and dogs, acquiring 14000 trimetrogon photographs and putting some 500000 sq. miles and putting 250000 sq miles of unknown Antarctica onto the maps. The southernmost discoveries were named Edith Ronne Land. It says much of her that with Jackie's encouragement, it was re-named as the Ronne Ice Shelf twenty years later.

Conveniently for certain political interests, the expedition's accomplishments became overshadowed by its bitter infighting, which lasts to this day. What happened so upset Jackie that she would not speak of it often and did not read her diary again until 1995. 'I didn't want to be reminded of the pain,' she said, preferring to focus on the achievements.

The Antarctic made Jackie's life, 'I married it,' she used to joke; effacing her considerable pioneering role. Much feted upon her return, she travelled and lectured

across the world for the rest of her life. She was also widely honoured, notably with a special Congressional Medal for Antarctic Exploration. She continued to support Finn in his Antarctic activities and helped to write his many books. Their daughter, Karen, was born in 1951. Jackie became a fellow of The Explorers Club and was dedicated to the Society of Woman Geographers, serving as its president from 1978–1981.

Despite vowing never to go back, Jackie Ronne returned many times to the Antarctic. She pioneered tourist ship visits to the Antarctic in 1959 and became the seventh woman to reach the South Pole, on a Navy flight in 1971. Finn died in 1980. Jackie went on to become a frequent and popular guest lecturer on cruise ships. In 1995 she returned to Stonington Island aboard *Explorer*. Preparing for that trip allowed her to revisit her diary and to write her book *Antarctica's First Lady* published in 2005.

Jackie was a lady of considerable charm, loyalty and affection, with a wonderful sense of humour. She liked nothing better than a game of bridge; or a long chat over a scotch and soda, with a bowl of potato chips, preferably a penguin bowl, for penguins appeared in every aspect of her home in Bethesda, Maryland.

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