

Conversations with the Sun and Little Men on Mini-Triceratops Dinosaurs

by Moki Kokoris

Felicity Aston is the first woman in the world to cross Antarctica... alone.

Only two other people had accomplished the same feat before her, both of them Norwegian men. It was on January 22, 2012, that Felicity's arrival in Hercules Inlet brought the 34-year old British explorer's 59-day, 1,744 kilometer journey to a close... a journey during which she experienced what she calls "a whole new league of aloneness."

A candy originally named "Opal Fruits," now known as "Starburst," was the reward with which Felicity's parents bribed her up Helvellyn Mountain in England's Lake District at the age of nine. With that achievement (if even tempered by misty rain) began her impressive career as an adventurer, climate scientist, physicist, polar explorer, expedition leader, public speaker and freelance writer.

After receiving a Masters Degree in Applied Meteorology from the University of Reading in the UK, Felicity accepted the position of Senior Meteorologist with the British Antarctic Survey and spent three summers and two winters consecutively at Rothera Research Station on Adelaide Island off the Antarctic Peninsula. As her biography lists: "She has also raced in the Canadian Arctic, led a team of women across the inland ice of Greenland, led a record-setting international expedition to the South Pole, searched for meteorite craters in Quebec, skied along a frozen river in Siberia, traversed the winter ice of Lake Baikal, and completed the infamous Marathon Des Sables across the Moroccan



Photo: © Felicity Aston

Felicity and the Sun enjoy their camaraderie in Horseshoe Valley.

Sahara." As of the printing of this publication, along with two teammates, Gisli Jonsson and Manu Palomeque, Felicity has embarked on a new endeavor called the "Pole of Cold: Winter Expedition"—three-month, 3,000-kilometer journey that will chase winter across northern Europe and into Siberia toward Oymyakon (population 475) in the Sakha Republic of Russia, also known as the Pole of Cold—the coldest inhabited place in the world. The expedition can be followed on its dedicated website, <http://poleofcold.com/>

While many of Felicity Aston's experiences are described in her books (*Call of the White: Taking the World to the South Pole* [Summersdale, 2011] and *Alone in Antarctica* [Summersdale, 2013]) and in many articles in which she has been featured, *The Polar Times* recently engaged her in a Skype interview during which some less common questions were posed for her to answer. We are pleased to share portions of the interview here.



TPT: As a young elementary grade school student, when asked what you wanted to be when you grew up, what did you say?

FA: I went to a Roman Catholic school and we were taught that nuns were good people who helped others. On that basis I decided I was going to be a nun when

I grew up. I soon realized there was more to it and that I probably wasn't suited. The only other profession I remember ever catching my imagination was seeing wing-walkers at an air show—ladies propped up on the upper wing of biplanes doing aerobatics. I decided that was a pretty awesome way to make a living.

TPT: Since we must presume that some readers are first learning about you and your endeavours here, could you share with us when the first



Felicity Aston brandishing the national flag of the United Kingdom upon her arrival at the Geographic South Pole.

FA: Wow—this question has me stumped. I have thought about it long and hard. I'm proud of each and every one of my expeditions because they have all taken so much effort and determination and belief to pull together. I'm also proud of the two books I've written—I still get a swell of pride every time I see my name on a spine in a bookshop. But perhaps what I'm most proud of is the fact that I've managed to make a living out of doing what I love. It hasn't been easy—and it's still not a given—but I'm very proud of myself for not giving up, for fighting to carve out a life for myself that is unique to me.

TPT: Did you bring a good luck charm (lucky socks) with you on your trek across Antarctica? Were there any superstitions that developed during your journey? What was your most precious item that you had with you (not counting your sat-phone connection)?

FA: Weight is so critical that I am very strict with myself in cutting out all non-essential items, including books, journals, lucky mascots and treat ... but ... I did wear a stone from New Zealand around my neck that has come with me on all my expeditions, a small locket my sister gave me as I left, and a tiny St. Christopher from my aunt.

I certainly developed plenty of superstitions during my journey. Every time I skied away from any place I had camped, I made a point of pausing to thank aloud the ground and the space for looking after me so well. Perhaps most significantly of all, I developed a very real relationship with the Sun. It started off by simply saying "good morning" to



The "Pole of Cold: Winter Expedition" team: (L to R) Gisli Jonsson, Felicity Aston and Manu Palomeque, training in Iceland with a Land Rover Defender.

the Sun as I got out of my tent at the start of each day—but this quickly developed into talking to the Sun as I skied along. The worrying part was when the Sun began to talk back, in my head. It turned out that the Sun was a rather difficult character. I began to believe that it was necessary to flatter and compliment the Sun, otherwise I risked the Sun refusing to turn up the following day!

It is difficult to decide on a single most precious item—I adored my stove, the noise it makes when you light it, that reassuring roar that tells you that you will be warm in a matter of moments—I adored my down gilet that I wore nearly all the time and the down booties that were so deliciously warm as they slid onto my weary feet at the end of each day—but above all, perhaps my most precious items were baby wipes and moisturizer. I had a daily ration of a single baby-wipe that I'd use to wipe my face free of all the grease and sweat of the day and to have a very perfunctory wash. It was psychological more than anything else—it made me feel human again!



during whiteouts. On one of those vacuous days, out from the disorienting blankness, a small bald-headed man emerged from his hiding place, evidently disturbed by the cavalier passerby. No sooner was he gone

Looking at the view from her tent on the Antarctic Plateau. (Photo: © Felicity Aston)

that another little figure appeared, this one riding a tiny Triceratops dinosaur. More belligerent than the first, the second man shook his fist in annoyance at Felicity as he galloped off into the blizzard on his bonsai Late Cretaceous "steed." Paradoxically, these scenarios seemed perfectly normal, even rational in the context of Antarctica's isolation. Situation normal—likely a reflection of the desire for companionship compounded by the profound level of exhaustion.

Long after her return home, Felicity would feel a sense of guilt for not conversing with the Sun on a daily basis, and she admits that on occasion she still gives the Sun a quick covert wave to assure it she hasn't forgotten its steadfast loyalty and protective friendship.

As Felicity and her Pole of Cold expedition team continue on their journey across Arctic Scandinavia and Siberia through the months-long darkness of the polar night, we can only wonder whether there will be equivalent conversations with the Moon and Orion or the dancing swashes of the Northern Lights. And if there are, what languages will they speak? ☀