



# *Who Owns the* ANTARCTIC CONTINENT?

By MORRISON COLLADAY



WHO OWNS the Antarctic Continent — Britain? France? Norway? Sweden? Belgium? Russia? Argentina? Chile? All of these nations claim it, or large parts of it, and most of them are prepared to fight the others for it rather than give up their claims.

Yet the real owner, if exploration counts for anything, is not letting out a peep.

And which country is that? Our own.

The actual discoverer of the Antarctic Continent was Nathaniel B. Palmer, the young captain of a whaling vessel from Stonington, Connecticut. He got his first glimpse of the land on November 18, 1820, and in the following January he explored the 450 miles of that part of the coast which lies directly south of Cape Horn.

In the next twenty years the Antarctic had various casual visitors from many nations, but the first

systematic exploration of the continent after Palmer's was made in 1839-40 by the United States Antarctic Expedition commanded by Charles Wilkes.

Though ostensibly a scientific project, the expedition was really sent out to help the whaling industry which at that time — before the discovery of petroleum — was as important in American economic life as the great oil companies are today. The best whaling territory was in the South Atlantic, South Pacific, and Antarctic Oceans. The whaling companies had for a number of years an active Washington lobby which tried to persuade Congress to send an expedition to the Antarctic to obtain navigational information that would be invaluable to them.

The Congressmen of the eighteenthirties were not enthusiastic about appropriating money for a scientific purpose. However, after the real object of the expedition was whispered

around, the lobby was able to bring enough pressure to bear to get the funds.

Congress afterward got cold feet and cut down the amount so that when the expedition sailed away in six old ships it was not well equipped as to stores. On the other hand, the scientific instruments provided were excellent and its personnel included nine of the greatest scientists of that day.

The position of commander was a political plum and many wondered why it was given to a young officer who apparently had little or no influence. Wilkes, a native of New York, was a nephew of the famous English radical, John Wilkes. He had entered the Navy as a midshipman and spent five years in the Mediterranean and the Pacific. In 1826 he was promoted to lieutenant and assigned to the Depot of Charts and Instruments in Washington.

The expedition sailed from Norfolk, Virginia, on August 8, 1838. Stops were made at Madeira, the Cape Verde Islands and Rio de Janeiro before rounding the Horn; then at Callao, Samoa and a number of other Pacific islands on the way to Australia. In December, 1839, the serious work of the expedition began when it sailed from Sydney for the Antarctic.

**W**ILKES was the first explorer to realize that a great continent surrounded the South Pole. He explored and mapped 1,500 miles

of the coast and took possession of the territory in the name of the United States.

His account of the voyage was published in six volumes in 1845, and the London Geographical Society awarded him its gold medal. (Many of his maps are still used.) There was every indication that he could rest on his laurels as a scientist and explorer. There was also every reason to believe that the United States would retain physical possession of at least that part of the Antarctic Continent with which Wilkes' name was connected. His position and influence probably would have guaranteed this as a matter of prestige.

The coming of the Civil War changed all that for the explorer and the country. Wilkes suddenly became a great popular war hero, and his work in the Antarctic was soon forgotten.

Still in the Navy, he was appointed to the command of the *U.S. San Jacinto*. While searching in West Indian waters for the Confederates' *Sumter* he encountered the British mail packet *Trent* in the Bahama Channel. The *Trent* was carrying two newly appointed Confederate commissioners to England and France.

Over the protests of the English captain, Wilkes removed the pair, James M. Mason and John Slidell, and their secretaries and carried them to New York as prisoners of war. From there they were sent to

Boston and confined in Fort Warren.

When it was learned what Wilkes had done, a wave of patriotic enthusiasm swept the North. He became a popular idol.

In the meantime the news of the capture of Mason and Slidell had reached England. The outraged British government prepared for an immediate declaration of war against the United States. It is generally believed only intervention by Albert, the Prince Consort, gave this country an opportunity to apologize for Wilkes' act and to release Mason and Slidell.

WHEN Wilkes lost interest in the Antarctic with the coming of the war, apparently the government did, too. Since his day our attitude, in contrast with those of the nations mentioned earlier, has been almost entirely negative. When an American expedition of 4,000 men under Admiral Byrd was sent to the Antarctic a few years ago, the admiral said, "This nation doesn't recognize any claims down there and hasn't made any claims."

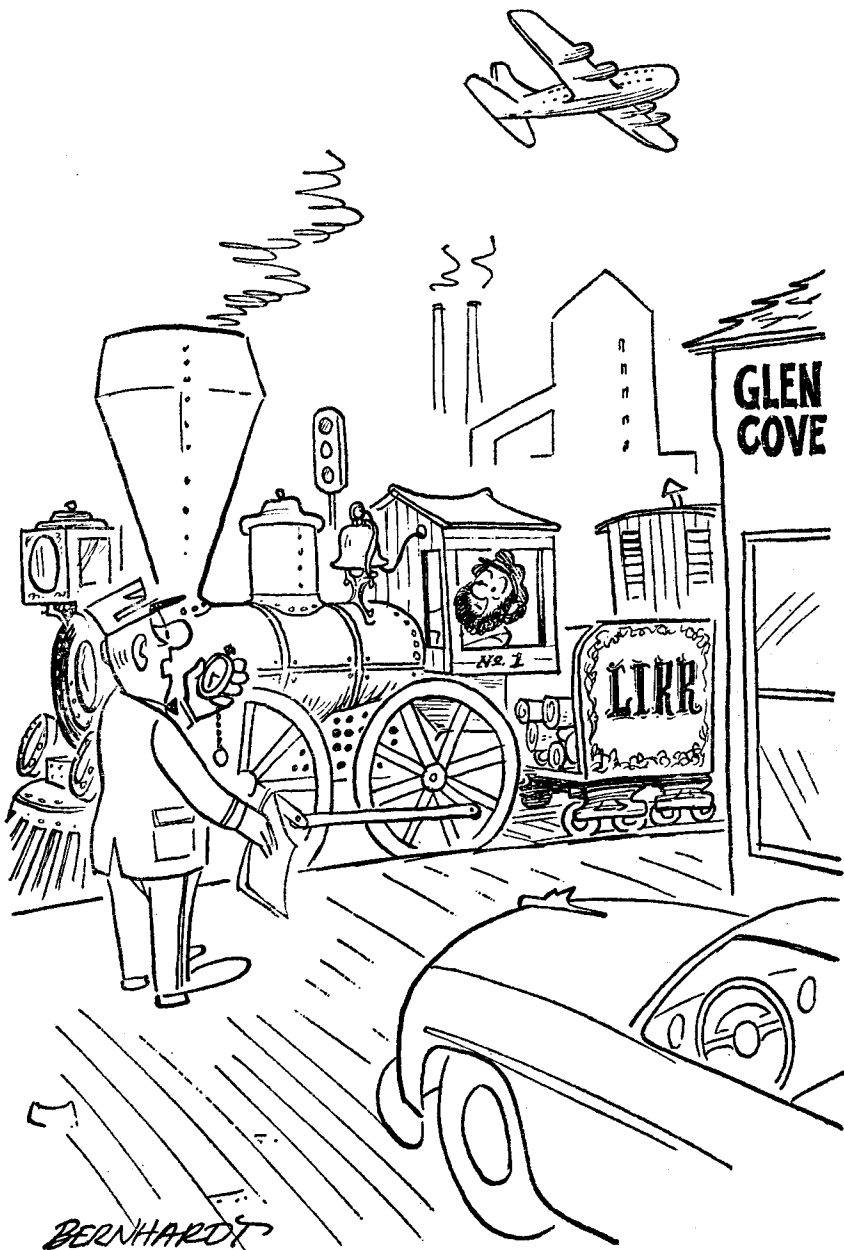
However, some American explorers have been more enterprising on their own responsibility. Lincoln Ellsworth explored a portion of the coast in 1939 and claimed 77,000 square miles for the United States. A recent expedition under Finne Ronne reported, "As a result of our work, an estimated total of 100,000 miles of new territory was explored for the first time and mapped in

the name of the United States."

The various nations with claims to the Antarctic Continent would be happier if the position of the United States were better defined.

Perhaps the United States intends at some time in the future to assert its claim to at least that part of the Antarctic Continent that American explorers have claimed in the name of their country. The future value of the land can hardly be overestimated. True, it is at the present time covered with an ice cap, but at least four times in the past it has had a subtropical climate. Today the ice cap is rapidly receding — it is 900 feet lower than it was a century ago. There is every indication of almost unimaginable mineral wealth in the Antarctic, including the greatest coal field in the world.

Not long ago Lieutenant Commander Lincoln Ellsworth, who probably knows as much about Antarctica as any man living, addressed the American Polar Society. "I am going back to the fogbound coast of James W. Ellsworth Land in Antarctica," he said. "I plan to build a permanent weather station there and include a group of young scientists to be replaced each year . . . I maintain that if the Antarctic Continent approximates the size of North America, why should it not contain all the resources of this great continent? What man needs he always has a way of getting . . . Antarctica today is a young man's land of opportunity."



"You're late!"

BY M. D. BELLAMY

# THE *Town* THAT BOUGHT A *Railroad*

THE eighteen-mile Alexander Railroad had been a faithful servant to the people of Taylorsville, North Carolina, for many years. Then one day in 1946, regretfully, perhaps, but with little warning, the Southern Railway System discontinued operation of the spur. That fateful day the townsfolk found themselves completely cut off, with no method of public transportation for themselves, and no

way of shipping their produce to market. And to make matters worse, two industries planning to locate plants in Taylorsville gave up the idea because of the lack of rail service.

Then the entire populace of the town, a little more than a thousand strong, undertook a single-purpose program. If no railroad system would agree to give them service, they would provide their own. They would buy a railroad!

The first step was to solicit subscriptions for stock to set up a company to buy the road. A group of ten enthusiastic townspeople carried out the job. They canvassed the eighteen-mile line. Mill owners and other businessmen listened and sympathized. More important, they shelled out hard cash — between \$75,000 and \$100,000.

With funds on hand, the new company negotiated with the Southern for the discontinued spur which boasted three stations along its right-of-way: Stony Point, Hiddenite and Taylorsville. The Southern agreed to turn over the line, complete with stations, immediately upon payment of \$50,000.