

# With Scott to the Pole (Part One)

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## ● Introduction

In 1910 Captain Robert Falcon Scott set out for the Antarctic. He did not return from this expedition. Having reached the South Pole, he died on the return journey. His body was found, alongside his colleagues Bowers and Wilson, in a tent just 17.5 km (11 miles) from the safety of a supply depot.

Scott's expedition contains stories at both epic and human scale. From the beauty of Antarctica's icescapes, to the men relaxing on the *Terra Nova's* deck; from struggling against the bitter cold to surveying the landscape, to an impromptu haircut.

Yet most memorable of all is the journey to the Pole, and the eventual realisation that the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen had beaten them. Much has been written about Scott's role as a leader. This exhibition does not aim to judge Scott's actions. Rather, through Herbert Ponting's photographs of the expedition, it reveals the intimate moments of one of the most renowned episodes of polar exploration.

*"It is the duty of an explorer to bring back something more than a bare account of his movements. He must take every advantage of his unique opportunity (and) add to the edifice of knowledge those stones which can only be quarried in the regions he visits."* Captain Scott

Pen Hadow, who has travelled unsupported to both the North and South Poles notes, *"the value of any explorer's endeavour has always been inextricably linked to how successfully their experiences and discoveries are communicated to the public back home. Ponting's deliciously atmospheric, and internationally significant photographs of Scott's final expedition have lost none of their power in transporting us back in time to the scenes, the moods and the moments experienced on one of the most famous and valuable British expeditions of all time."*

### **The Expedition crew**

The expedition crew drew people from all walks of life; a Naval Captain, 'other' ranks, scientists and two volunteers. The volunteers were a recent graduate Apsley Cherry-Gerrard and Captain Lawrence Oates, each of whom paid a £1,000 subscription to join the Expedition.

Although a British expedition, it drew its members from further afield, including the Australian geologists Griffiths Taylor and Frank Debenham, the Canadian physicist Charles Wright, the Norwegian ski instructor Tryggvi Gran, and Anton Omelchenko, the ponies' groom, who was a Russian jockey from Vladivostok.

Some had been members of Scott's previous *Discovery* expedition, and also part of Shackleton's *Nimrod* crew, whilst for others this was their first time in Antarctica. Here members of the crew relax in the sun on the deck of the *Terra Nova*.



A warm day in the pack (crew asleep on deck), by Herbert Ponting, 1910

### **Robert Falcon Scott**

Scott was born on 6 June 1868 in Devonport, Devon. He was the youngest of eight children and followed family tradition by joining the Navy as a cadet.



Captain Scott, by Herbert Ponting, 1911

His introduction to the Antarctic came when he was picked by Sir Clements Markham, then President of the RGS, to lead the earlier *Discovery* Expedition in 1901. On his return he was promoted to Captain. His Antarctic expeditions combined geographical discovery and scientific research.





Getting the ill-fated caterpillar or motor sledge off the ship, by Herbert Ponting, 1911

In general, the Expedition did not gain the best results from their dogs. In part, this was due to some lack of understanding among the British explorers about the animals, their diet, and how to drive them. In contrast, Amundsen had spent time with the Inuit people of the Arctic, learning how they successfully used dog teams. The Norwegian's expertise with dog teams made an important contribution to the success of their expedition.



Husky Kesoi, by Herbert Ponting, 1910-1912



Captain Oates and Pony Snippets, by Herbert Ponting, 1911

### Supplies

The supply depots were the lifelines that supported the push to the South Pole. They held vital supplies of food, fuel, and other equipment. A continuing concern was striking the right balance between the weight of food supplies, the calories they produced, and their portability – alongside the suitability of the clothes the men wore and equipment they used. A man's daily sledging rations weighed 980 grams (2lbs 3oz), and included pemmican (preserved meat - which was boiled up to form a stew called *hooch*), sugar, fortified biscuits, butter, cocoa and tea. It provided 4,430 calories a day.



Laving a supply depot H&Ps Biscuits. by Herbert Ponting. 1911

Concerns about the suitability of supplies and equipment continue to be an important part in the planning of modern Antarctic expeditions. Sir Ranulph Fiennes led the *Transglobe Expedition* in 1979-82 and in the 1990s, with Mike Stroud – an expert nutritionist, the first unsupported Antarctic crossing. He notes, “when I arrived in Antarctica in 1979 we unloaded over 3,000 cardboard boxes, each of which could be lifted by one man. Scott’s team used wooden crates, many of which remain in his huts to this day. Scott’s clothing was the best available at the time and which was most suitable for man-hauling heavy sledges. For my own Antarctic travels I found the best gear was often very similar to that which had been selected by Scott. When Mike and I completed our unsupported crossing of Antarctica we tried hard to achieve more ‘calories per weight carried’ than Scott’s team had – but despite the intervening eighty years we only managed a slight improvement on his rations.”

### Encountering Antarctica

Sastrugi, shown on the next page on the Barne Glacier, create a very rough surface and make travel across this landscape very difficult. The route to the Pole took Scott’s men across the Ross Ice Shelf. This massive ice sheet is between 180-900m (600 – 3,000 feet) thick and about 360 km (600 miles) long. In all, it is about the size of France and forms 60m (200 feet) high cliffs at the water’s edge. The Ross Ice Shelf was discovered by James Ross in 1841 and was also known as the Great Ice Barrier. Before he set off on his fateful journey southwards, Dr Edward Wilson wrote *The Barrier Silence*, which was printed in the Expedition’s newspaper the *South Polar Times*.

#### The Barrier Silence

The silence was deep with a breath like sleep  
 As our sledge runners slid on the snow,  
 And the fate-full fall of our fur-clad feet  
 Struck mute like a silent blow,  
 On a questioning ‘hush’, as the settling crust  
 Shrank shivering over the floe;  
 And the sledge in its track sent a whisper back  
 Which was lost in a white fog-bow.  
 And this was the thought that the Silence wrought  
 As it scorched and froze us through,  
 Though secrets hidden are all forbidden  
 Till God means man to know,  
 We might be the men God meant should know  
 The heart of the Barrier snow,  
 In the heat of the sun, and the glow  
 And the glare from the glistening floe,  
 As it scorched and froze us through and through  
 With the bite of the drifting snow.



Sastrugi on Barne Glacier, by Herbert Ponting, 1911

The ship's crew regularly surveyed the ice shelf and their measurements were incorporated into British Admiralty surveys of the southern oceans. These records have become increasingly useful for modern researchers who want to understand the changing nature of Antarctica's ice shelf and how this may be linked with global warming.

For example, Dr Nanka Karstkarel, a Dutch geographer has recently assembled more than 500 Antarctic maps in order to plot the history of the ice shelf's movements over the last 200 years. Many came from the Society's Collection and she notes, *"Some of the very earliest maps are ice charts from the British Admiralty. The RGS has a very old collection and it is a very good series. There are maps of the Southern Ocean which vary in detail, but they are enough to get a good impression of the dynamics of the sea ice and how it has changed. These records have been vital for my research – the old maps are not just 'heritage', they are really useful for today's researchers."*

## ● Capturing the expedition

### **Expedition Photographer**

Before joining the Expedition Herbert Ponting was an established photographer. He built his own darkroom in the expedition hut at Cape Evans where he developed his photographs.



Herbert Ponting and the cinematograph, 1910-1912

