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Blizzard - Race to the Pole

Jasper Rees

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BLIZZARD

RACE TO THE POLE

JASPER REES

BBC
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To my mother and father

Foreword

There have been many books and films about Captain Robert Falcon Scott. In recent decades not all of them have been complimentary. He has been portrayed as a bungler, an incompetent, and a man with no natural ability as a leader - unfairly, in my view.

As posterity has slung mud at his memory, so the reputation of Roald Amundsen, the Norwegian who beat Scott to the South Pole, has risen. To my mind, Amundsen was a coldly efficient polar explorer - intelligent, focussed, flexible. He also made bad mistakes. The scope of his journey was much narrower. He went south with the sole determination to reach the pole before his rival. Scott did not know that he was meant to be racing, but set out with a very careful, clever plan to reach the pole and bring back a great deal of scientific information. In the event he produced far more information about Antarctica in various research fields than all the other international expeditions in the first half of the twentieth century put together. That's an achievement in itself.

In my biography of Scott I attempted to wrestle him free from the clutches of revisionism. As a polar traveller myself, it seemed a good idea to measure his experiences of travel in extreme cold against my own. But I could make comparisons only up to a point. The equipment that Scott used was certainly the best available at that time for man-haul. It is still pretty good for heavy man-haul today. Dr Mike Stroud and I found that using ventile Lancashire cotton, which was available to Scott, was preferable to

using Gore-Tex, which was not 100 per cent breathable. You will sweat doing heavy man-haul if you have a Gore-tex outer even in extreme cold. In other areas, huge strides have been made. We man-hauled far heavier sleds, but they were better designed. The technology that has changed most of all is navigation. I have spent over 35 years in the north and south poles on and off as a navigator. The effort of navigating outside the tent, of trying to get the altitude of the sun or some other heavenly body, involves very cold work. The time when you're meant to be resting and getting warm inside the tent is cut down hugely. With GPS (Global Positioning Systems), none of that is now necessary. Sat phones are also a great deal easier than High Frequency radio communications.

However, since 1911-12, few people have travelled in the polar regions with anything like the full array of handicaps endured by Scott and, to a lesser extent, by Amundsen. Now eight men have gone a step further and, as accurately as possible, have re-enacted Scott's man-haul journey, while a party of five men have undertaken to copy the journey with dogs made by Amundsen. *Blizzard*, the BBC's reconstruction of the race to the South Pole, is a fascinating attempt to make polar history live again, and to test the theories tossed about in so many books against the cold hard reality of practice.

It brings a fresh perspective to the question often asked of the explorers of the Heroic Age. For all our interest in them, do those men have any relevance today? Scott and his like are easy meat to the determinedly cynical because anybody who has striven for non-materialistic goals can always be laughed at so easily. But on a very basic level, Scott was hugely instrumental in making millions of individual servicemen and women appreciate the value of bravery and steadfastness through two World Wars. More mundanely, both he and Amundsen encouraged people to enjoy the outdoor life. Those things may seem to have lost

their value now. The popularity of *Blizzard*, suggests that perhaps, after all, they have not.

Sir Ranulph Fiennes

The Modern Race

Blizzard is not a carbon copy of the race that inspired it. With the participation of an eight-strong British team and a five-strong Norwegian team, the intention of the BBC television series, and of this book, is to illustrate what it was like to travel in Antarctica between October 1911 and March 1912. Perhaps it will also settle a few arguments that have echoed down the century.

All of the equipment, food, clothing and style of transport were as near identical as possible to those which were taken by Captain Robert Falcon Scott, Roald Amundsen and their men to the South Pole.

Of the inevitable discrepancies between the two expeditions of 1911-12 and their television re-enactment, the obvious one is in the calendar. As it's in the southern hemisphere, Antarctica's brief sledging season is spliced by Christmas Day. The race was re-run in the northern hemisphere, and took place between April and July 2005.

The Greenland ice cap is itself a largely accurate substitute for Antarctica, being cold, white and apparently endless. But it is not an exact likeness. There are no vast stretches of sea ice such as Scott and Amundsen had to traverse for the first 400 miles of their journey. Nor is there a mountain range quite so imposing as the Transantarctics, which separated the explorers of old from the Polar Plateau.

The other deviation was in the use of animals. It would cost millions to film in Antarctica, but even more than the prohibitive cost, the reason for not reconstructing the

original journey over the original terrain was the ban on non-indigenous animals in Antarctica. And yet it was also impractical to follow Scott's lead and take ponies to Greenland, so the modern British team was given more dogs than Scott had, with the proviso that they shed them at roughly the same points in the journey as Scott lost his ponies and dogs.

Scott is thought to have died on the 150th day of his journey. Amundsen needed 99 days to travel over 700 nautical miles from his base at Framheim to the South Pole and back. Scott had 60 more miles to cover, but in order to make the reconstruction more symmetrical, both modern teams are required to travel the same distance as Amundsen did towards a putative 'pole' on the ice cap.

The modern teams had huge advantages over their predecessors. They travelled in the knowledge that, barring accident, they would not lose their life, or be allowed to succumb to frostbite. But there was one disadvantage: Scott and Amundsen were not being filmed for a television documentary series. Both Bruce Parry and Rune Gjeldnes, the modern team leaders, complained in their diaries about losing time thanks to the demands of the film crew, though they both conceded that without the film crew they wouldn't be there. Those sections of their diaries that deal with these frustrations - the timing of the flights in and out, the dealings with the skeletal crew and safety guide - are often illuminating about the process of making a television programme, but that is not what this book is about. The important thing to make clear is that while the expeditions had to be organised in tandem with the series's producers, at no point did the modern explorers receive any material assistance from the safety guides and the camera crew travelling with them. The best they could hope for was the accurate time when their 1920s chronometers proved too unreliable for the purpose of navigation.

Other than that, they were on their own.

The Scott/Amundsen Race Timeline

1902

31 December

Scott, Shackleton and Wilson on the *Discovery* expedition reach 82 degrees 11 minutes, the furthest point south ever reached.

1907

Amundsen announces his plan to explore the polar sea in the north, and begins raising money.

1909

9 January

Shackleton's *Nimrod* expedition sets a new record for furthest south, at 88 degrees, 23 minutes: 97 miles from the pole.

26 March

News of Shackleton's achievement reaches England.

1 September

American explorer Frederick Cook claims to have reached the North Pole.

3 September

American explorer Robert Peary claims to have reached the North Pole.

13 September

Scott announces a new expedition bound for Antarctica.

1910

March

Scott tries to meet Amundsen in Kristiania (present-day Oslo).

7 June

Amundsen sets sail from Kristiania on the *Fram*.

15 June

Scott leaves Cardiff on the *Terra Nova*.

9 September

In Madeira Amundsen announces to his crew his intention to go south instead of north.

12 October

Scott learns of Amundsen's plan when the *Terra Nova* docks in Melbourne.

29 October

Terra Nova sails south from Port Chambers, New Zealand.

1911

5 January

British party begins disembarking at Cape Evans.

15 January

Norwegian party begins disembarking at the Bay of Whales.

3 February

Terra Nova encounters *Fram* in the Bay of Whales.

23 March

Norwegians return from third depot-laying journey, having reached 82 degrees south.

21 April

Scott returns to Cape Evans from depot-laying journey, having reached 79 degrees, 28 minutes.

8-16 September

Amundsen's party of seven sets out for the South Pole, but is beaten back by the cold.

20 October

Amundsen's reduced party of five sets out again.

2 November

Scott's polar party leaves Cape Evans.

17-21 November

Amundsen's party finds, names and climbs the Axel Heiberg Glacier to reach the Polar Plateau.

4-8 December

Scott's polar party held up by storm at base of Beardmore Glacier.

10 December

Amundsen passes Shackleton's furthest south record, 92 miles from the pole.

11 December

Cecil Meares and the dogs leave Scott's polar party and turn for home.

15 December

Amundsen's party reaches the South Pole.

21 December

The first four of Scott's man-hauling party of 12 turn for home near top of Beardmore, 180 miles from the pole.

1912

2 January

Scott's party reaches the Polar Plateau.

4 January

Three more of Scott's man-hauling party turn for home, 90 miles from the pole leaving Henry 'Birdie' Bowers, 'Taff' Evans, Captain Laurence Oates, Dr Edward Wilson and Scott.

17 January

Bowers sees Amundsen's black flag near the pole.

26 January

Amundsen's party arrives back at Framheim (base camp).

30 January

Fram sails north with Norwegian party safely on board.

17 February

Evans dies at the foot of the Beardmore Glacier.

3 March

Apsley Cherry-Garrard arrives with dog teams at One Ton Depot to relieve Scott's polar party.

7 March

Fram docks in Hobart; Amundsen telegraphs home news of his triumph.

10 March

Cherry-Garrard leaves One Ton Depot.

17 March

Oates dies.

21 March

Scott, Wilson and Bowers make their last camp.

29 March

Presumed date of Scott's death.

Oct 29

Search party leaves Cape Evans.

12 November

Scott's tent discovered with three bodies inside.

1913

17 January

Terra Nova returns to Cape Evans to collect the southern party.

10 February

Terra Nova docks in Oamaru, New Zealand. News of Scott's death is telegraphed back to London.

INTRODUCTION

Flag

THIS CROSS AND CAIRN ARE ERECTED OVER THE BODIES OF CAPT. SCOTT, C.V.O., R.N.; DR E.A. WILSON, M.M., M.A. CANTAB.; LT. H.R. BOWERS, ROYAL INDIAN MARINES. A SLIGHT TOKEN TO PERPETUATE THEIR GALLANT AND SUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT TO REACH THE POLE. THIS THEY DID ON THE 17TH JANUARY 1912 AFTER THE NORWEGIAN EXPEDITION HAD ALREADY DONE SO. INCLEMENT WEATHER AND LACK OF FUEL WAS THE CAUSE OF THEIR DEATH.

ALSO TO COMMEMORATE THEIR TWO GALLANT COMRADES, CAPT L.E.G. OATES OF THE INNISKILLING DRAGOONS, WHO WALKED TO HIS DEATH IN A BLIZZARD TO SAVE HIS COMRADES, ABOUT 18 MILES SOUTH OF THIS POSITION; ALSO OF SEAMAN EDGAR EVANS, WHO DIED AT THE FOOT OF THE BEARDMORE GLACIER.

THE LORD GAVE AND THE LORD TAKETH AWAY. BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD.

Relief Expedition (signed by all members of the party)

A BLACK FLAG. There was a black flag planted squarely across their path. It fluttered in the hazy distance.

Of the five of them hauling breathlessly across that infinity of ice, it was the short, beaky navigator they named 'Birdie' who spotted it first. He was the only one not on skis, the only one who had to mind his every step as the treadmill edged them forward on their quest. But he looked up and there it was. At these frozen latitudes mirages can occur. As they neared, there was no wishing it away as a trick of the southern light. The object swimming into focus was made by man. 'The flag was of black bunting,' noted

the doctor in his diary, 'tied with string to a fore-and-after which had evidently been taken off a finished-up sledge.'

Its colour mocked them. The great virtue of black in a prairie of whiteness is that it draws the eye. That was evidently the intention of those who left it. White, the only colour under their frost-nipped feet these past months, speaks of birth, newness, innocence, of virgin territory. And what of its opposite, its omega? It cannot have escaped the attention of the five men who found the flag flapping in the stiff breeze of the plateau that black is the shade of the end of things. If nothing else, it meant the end of hope.

It was with hope undimmed that they had left home 18 months earlier, officers and ratings, scientists and enthusiasts. They had taken leave of their wives and mothers, and they had pointed the ship's prow towards the other hemisphere. At every stop on the way down they set foot on soil of the Empire. They left the last outpost of civilization laden with dogs and horses brought from the north. And the ship, slung treacherously low in the water with the weight of livestock, equipment and supplies, somehow contrived not to drown them all as she breasted the angry ocean on her way down to a largely uncharted continent.

Their aim, once they had sliced through the belt of sea ice and made landfall, was to find their way to the very heart of this uninhabited landmass. They wanted to be the first men there. They would plant the flag in honour of king and country, and they would turn triumphantly for home, feeding off the depots of food they had so meticulously placed in their path on the way south.

And this they did, but only up to a point. That point was marked by a black flag in the middle of nowhere at the bottom of the world. Around it were tracks, and the frozen droppings of dogs. They had trudged through 76 days and 750 nautical miles to reach here, and at the moment of epiphany, the moment where epic struggle should have

been converted into triumph, a flag silently, succinctly advised them that their effort had been in vain. There was no note attached, but words were scarcely needed to convey the shattering message.

The man they called the 'Owner' had feared the worst. The previous night he had written in his diary, 'It ought to be a certain thing now, and the only appalling possibility the sight of the Norwegian flag forestalling ours'.

But it was the black flag that dashed the cup from their lips. Their rival planted it there on the meridian he supposed the British party would be travelling along, to give them an early warning that they had been preceded. Three days later they did indeed find the pennant of a small, newly independent nation fluttering atop a pyramid-shaped tent. Inside it was a pile of discarded equipment, plus two letters, one of them addressed to the man who found it, kindly requesting him to ensure that the other letter be delivered safely into the hands of the King of Norway. A scientist on his expedition would later remark that, in that instant, the Owner was 'degraded from explorer to postman'.

In the event, the Owner would not need or, indeed, be able to deliver the letter. Elsewhere on this inhuman continent his five rivals were hastening home on skis, their supplies pulled by fit, well-fed dogs. They had reached their goal more than a month earlier. In another week they would arrive safely back at their base. Within ten weeks, the Owner and his four followers, debilitated by hunger and frostbite, weakened by the back-breaking task of hauling all they needed to sleep in and eat, defeated by distance, would be dead.

When their bodies were discovered six months later, the inquest began. It has never really ended.

* * * * *

The first man to stand in judgement over the mortal remains of Robert Falcon Scott - the Owner - was a naval surgeon called Edward Atkinson. When Scott failed to return to the base camp at Cape Evans by April 1912, when the Antarctic winter set in, he and his four companions were known to have perished. Atkinson took the helm of the *Terra Nova* expedition as the men, now under his command, hunkered down forlornly for the long night of the polar winter. They set out again on 29 October. On 12 November, just over a year since Scott's party headed off from Cape Evans for the pole, the search party found a tent out on the Great Ice Barrier. They were more than 150 miles from real safety, but only 11 miles short of the nearest depot. Inside were the frozen bodies of Scott, Dr Edward 'Uncle Bill' Wilson and Henry 'Birdie' Bowers. Scott's diary, kept up until he lost the strength to continue, would reveal all.

The tent was lowered over the dead, and they were interred under the weight of a huge snow cairn topped by a pair of skis in the shape of a cross. Then Atkinson retired to read about their journey to the pole, the discovery that Roald Amundsen's team of five men had beaten them by a whole month, about the turn for home and the long trudge off the Polar Plateau, down the treacherous 120 miles of the Beardmore Glacier, at the base of which they lost Petty Officer Edgar 'Taff' Evans. He read how they continued on to the Great Barrier, where Captain Laurence 'Titus' Oates made his famous exit. The three survivors struggled on until a storm descended, impeding their search for One Ton Camp, where food and fuel promised relief. As the storm raged on, cold and malnutrition forestalled any prospect of further progress. There might have been a faint hope of rescue, but Scott had given orders that prevented anyone proceeding beyond the depot.

Through ten days, perhaps more, the men lay in their reindeer-fur sleeping bags and awaited the inevitable.

Wilson and Bowers were both ardent Christians and must have found comfort in their profound belief that they were passing to a better place. But Scott was more interested in arranging his own afterlife, and used the guttering candle of his remaining strength to write, to see his own story through to the very end.

‘Every day we have been ready to start for our depot eleven miles away, but outside the door of our tent it remains a scene of whirling drift. I do not think we can hope for any better things now. We shall stick it out to the end, but we are getting weaker, of course, and the end cannot be far. It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write more. R. Scott.’

The words have a powerful impact, even at a distance of nearly a century. Imagine how Scott’s bathetic valediction must have worked its spell on Atkinson, with the dead entombed in ice only yards away from where he read. His medical report on the cause of death concluded rousingly, ‘I don’t think men ever died a nobler death’.

Every Englishman present shared the feeling, but in the search party Atkinson drew around him to hear the sorry tale, there was also a Norwegian called Tryggve Gran. Gran was a young man Scott had taken on as ski instructor for his novice sledgers. When they dismantled the sledge that Scott and his men had hauled through nearly 1000 miles, they found 30 pounds’ worth of geological specimens. Gran hazarded a sceptical note in the privacy of his diary: ‘I think they might have saved themselves the weight.’

On the sledge they also found Amundsen’s letter to King Haakon of Norway. Although they didn’t yet know it, delivery was no longer necessary. Amundsen and his party had long since escaped the Antarctic continent and headed for Hobart. The world was informed of his pioneering journey to the pole when Scott, Wilson, Bowers and Oates were still struggling out on the Barrier.

* * * * *

Outside his native Norway, posterity knows little of Amundsen, still less of his companions Olav Bjaaland, Sverre Hassel, Helmer Hanssen and Oscar Wisting. While five Britons walked straight on to a plinth in the national imagination, the five Norwegians who reached their goal turned round and hastened back to a century of obscurity. Amundsen's dogs had hauled him to the pole first, but the efficiency of his enterprise made his achievement somehow unmemorable. The dryness of his journal did not help: his practical account of skiing and sledging to 90 degrees south contrived to keep the spirit unfired. There was nothing Amundsen could do to prevent a juggernaut of Scott hagiographers from squashing his story into the margins of the popular myth. Scott's martyrdom was not only moving and extremely well written, it was also useful. When Britain went to war, it was Scott's inspiring example of noble self-sacrifice that was industrially deployed to send all those young men over the top in Flanders and into a hailstorm of German machine-gun fire. After the war, Captain Scott's reputation was cemented by art. It took Apsley Cherry-Garrard, the man who had waited for Scott's polar party at One Ton Camp, nearly a decade to write *The Worst Journey in the World* (1922), but it still goes unchallenged as the most remarkable book about British exploration ever written. After the next war came *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948), a film starring John Mills, memorable chiefly for the bleakly beautiful score by Ralph Vaughan Williams which went on to become the *Sinfonia Antarctica*. So Captain Scott remained on his plinth, a symbol of English stoicism who laid down his life at the start of a century in which his country laid down her empire.

It took many many years for Scott to be knocked off his perch, but when the attack on his reputation came, it was implacable. Roland Huntford's book *Scott and Amundsen*

was published in 1979, the same year that Chapman Pincher exposed Anthony Blunt, the Keeper of the Queen's pictures, as the 'Fourth Man' in *The Climate of Treason*. There is an argument to be had about which book did more to dent the British establishment's sense of itself. Huntford's dual biography did its best to expose the imperial hero as a bungling amateur with severe and unattractive flaws in his personality, most damaging of which was his final desire to put his own glorification in death above the survival of his comrades. And in denigrating Scott, he raised Amundsen on to a pedestal as a bold man of action who could do almost no wrong.

Where Scott is concerned, the Huntford version became the orthodoxy, appropriate for a nation in decline and newly steeped in the ways of self-doubt. The explorer's name became a byword for incompetence, an emblem of British arrogance. Where Amundsen had sensibly relied on huskies to drag him to the pole, and enlisted a team of expert skiers and dog-handlers uniquely qualified for the task, Scott had ambled up to the start line with a muddled transport plan involving motorized sledges, ponies, dogs and man-hauling. His men did not know how to ski, and though he had taken the precaution of bringing a skiing instructor from Norway, he soon took against Gran and did little to ensure his explorers were drilled in this arcane art. The litany of criticisms is extensive: Scott was moody, distant, too dependent on ossified naval structures, while at the same time prone to last-minute improvisation. He issued confusing orders, was over-reliant on man-hauling, fostered the contempt of the more independent-minded members in his party, allowed his men to succumb to scurvy ... and so it goes on. Aside from biographies of dictators, never has a writer found less to venerate in his subject than Huntford did in Scott.

There is a great deal of evidence put forward by Huntford to underpin his argument. Scott appears to have

suffered from depression, and certainly missed a trick in his wariness of dog-sledging. The thing that holds the book back from conclusiveness is less its righteous indignation than the frequency with which evidence for crucial claims is withheld. An obvious example comes when the book alights on the most iconic moment in the entire saga. After Oates crawled out of the tent to his death, Scott wrote in his diary that Oates 'took pride in thinking that his regiment would be pleased with the bold way in which he met his death'. Huntford is sceptical. 'Scott ascribes heroic thoughts,' he writes, 'leaving the unanswered question of how he knew.' Unfortunately, this is often the problem with Huntford too. He writes that Oates, contemplating death, 'has to face the hideous realisation that he had been betrayed by incompetent leadership'. Although Oates gave vent to intemperate thoughts earlier in the journey, there is no actual evidence that he was thinking this as he died. But Huntford's most damning accusation was in the vein of pure character assassination. With Oates close to death on the long march home, his feet frostbitten, 'he sat there in the tent, Scott staring at him, with the unspoken expectation of the supreme sacrifice'. George Bernard Shaw, who befriended Cherry-Garrard as he wrote his great tome and disliked Scott, was the first one to make this suggestion. But Huntford does not quote Shaw. He does not quote anyone.

The book that rescued Amundsen from oblivion needed to be written. The book that asked questions of Scott's unblemished reputation also needed to be written. But the book that performed both these tasks so radically was inevitably going to excite some form of riposte, some form of counterbalance. It came 24 years later, when Ranulph Fiennes, the polar explorer, set out to debunk the debunker in his bestselling biography, *Captain Scott* (2003). Using his experience of polar travel, Fiennes sought to correct what he saw as the calumnies visited upon Scott by an author

who, he pointed out, had never set foot on the southern continent.

'No previous Scott biographer,' Fiennes advised, 'has man-hauled a heavy sledgeloading through the great crevasse fields of the Beardmore Glacier, explored icefields never seen by a man or walked a thousand miles on poisoned feet. To write about hell,' he concluded, 'it helps if you have been there.'

He dedicated his book 'to the families of the defamed dead'.

Based on his own experiences of Antarctica, Fiennes's book re-evaluates issues of leadership, navigation, health, transport and sundry other areas of decision-making thrown up initially by Huntford, and subsequently pounced on by others who have laboured in his slipstream. The result is a book that is not quite as finely written as Huntford's, but much more alive to the deadly reality of polar travel. Where the books are each other's equal is in their fixity of purpose. Nothing will persuade either author out of his entrenched position.

But it is not as if Scott and Amundsen have had merely each other to contend with, as they did in 1911. In the period between the books published by Huntford and Fiennes, the polar rivals have lost ground to a third explorer. One of Amundsen's posthumous problems has always been that in the brief period of Antarctic exploration known as the Heroic Age, Scott already had a nemesis in the form of Ernest Shackleton. And once Scott's value in the stock market of polar heroism plummeted, it was this rivalry that embedded itself more deeply in the popular imagination.

Scott first went south in 1902 on the *Discovery*, and set a new record for the most southerly latitude reached by man when he man-hauled to 82 degrees and 17 minutes. His companions on that trip were Wilson and Shackleton. The evidence for it is patchy, but somewhere out on the ice

Scott and Shackleton seem to have had a falling out. Shackleton succumbed to scurvy on the long march back to base, and Scott invalided him home. Depending on who you read, the two men either did or didn't become confirmed enemies.

When Shackleton returned to Antarctica in 1907 it was at the head of his own expedition on the *Nimrod*. In a display of astonishing strength and courage, he and his party of three men made it across the Barrier to the foot of the Transantarctic Mountains, where they discovered and named the Beardmore Glacier, a vast 120-mile pathway up to the Polar Plateau. Navigating their way through the maze of crevasses strewn in their path, they managed to trudge to within a degree and a half of the pole - a tantalizing 97 miles - before turning back. They could certainly have reached 90 degrees south, but just as certainly they would have perished on the way home. 'I thought you'd prefer a live donkey,' Shackleton wrote to his wife, 'to a dead lion.'

Shackleton was knighted by Edward VII on his return from the south, and it was in his footsteps over the Barrier and up the glacier, neurotically attempting to keep up with his daily distances, that Scott travelled in 1911. But as far as posterity is concerned, Shackleton is now remembered not for that heroic march, but for an expedition that took place after Scott's death. The Imperial Transantarctic Expedition set out from England on the *Endurance* in August 1914, with the declaration of war ringing in the ears of all aboard, to make the first crossing of the Antarctic continent. As stories go, it is far greater than the sum of its parts, and those parts are great indeed. It is a story of survival and comradely fortitude in the face of extreme danger and lasting hardship, and perhaps the ultimate example of triumph snatched from the jaws of catastrophe. The expedition failed in its stated task, and yet despite the loss of his ship in the ice, Shackleton managed

to shepherd all his men back to safety through a two-and-a-half-year odyssey.

Returning home to news of unparalleled slaughter in Flanders, Shackleton and his exploits seemed somehow redundant, even a little vulgar. Although four years dead, Scott was now the useful man of the hour, and so he remained. When Huntford's biography of Shackleton was published in 1985, an American reviewer wondered who would read a life of a man no one had ever heard of. But society changes, and in doing so it develops a need for different heroes. Shackleton's story gripped a generation somehow turned off by the old Edwardian virtues of sacrifice and hierarchy. Dramas were made, documentaries filmed, a travelling exhibition mounted, even a motivational business guide written, which posited Shackleton as the ideal model for commanders of the boardroom. Suddenly there was a debate about which Edwardian explorer you'd rather follow up a blind alley: the one who died (but could write his way to immortality), or the one who survived (but used ghost-writers)?

In the bitter controversy over Scott, accusations of lying have made their way into print. Lawyers have been mentioned in dispatches. In the end, the bitterness is testimony to the life that courses through the veins of this great story. The craggy explorer of the Heroic Age will go no more a-sledging in an uncharted wilderness of snow, but there is yet a sense in which he is still strapped into his harness and hauling across the sastrugi of the plateau. A century on from the decade in which men went south in search of knowledge and glory, victory and vindication, they have moved into the encrusted realm of legend; the stories of endeavour, comradeship and, in the case of the British party, death have acquired the status of Nordic myth, of a cryogenically frozen soap opera, its frost-nipped heroes the characters in a never-resolving narrative.

But for all the books, for all the scholarship, no one really knows what it was like for these men who did, after all, once live and breathe. Even Fiennes is separated from final insight of how it must have been for the men who went before him by the invention of the woollen fleece, the modern boot, the greater understanding of diet. And of course these days there are satellite telephones and GPS (Global Positioning Systems).

Questions about Scott's tactics remain unanswered. Was he fatally handicapped by the lack of an instinctive feel for travel in cold climes, despite his experiences on the continent ten years earlier? How genuinely efficient is dog travel when the teams of huskies are required to haul their own food over hundreds of miles? Did Amundsen's experience of living among the Inuits, as he successfully attempted to become the first man to navigate his way through the Northwest Passage, give him an incalculable advantage when it came to surviving in the extreme cold? Or was the advantage simply that he was a Norwegian? Hindsight has prompted successive generations to ask a different, but key question: what, ultimately, is the point of man-hauling?

There is only one way to answer some, if not all, of these questions and to find out what those men might really have gone through between October 1911 and March 1912. And that, with the closest possible attention to historical accuracy, is to run the whole race again.

CHAPTER ONE

Selection

I DON'T HOLD THAT ANYONE BUT AN ENGLISHMAN SHOULD GET TO THE
SOUTH POLE.

Captain Scott

IN MARCH 1910 Captain Robert Falcon Scott, who had announced his plan to conquer the South Pole six months previously, went to Kristiania, as Oslo was then known. Among the calls he paid on the various Norwegians who might be helpful to his quest, he contacted the distinguished 37-year-old explorer Roald Amundsen, who was himself planning to lead the first expedition all the way to the North Pole. Amundsen's monumental plan was to sail as far north as possible, allow his ship to be trapped in the ice and spend the next four or five years drifting across the Arctic ice cap. Scott was all for suggesting that they launch a joint scientific venture in which their findings would be pooled for the greater furtherance of knowledge. But Amundsen would not meet Scott. For the duration of the Englishman's stay, he made himself scarce. Thus the two leaders of this great story never clapped eyes on each other.

For his costly expedition Amundsen had raised many of the necessary funds from the government and private business. A young nation was behind him, and expectant after his triumph in navigating the Northwest Passage. But there was a problem. The previous September, just before Scott announced his expedition, two Americans emerged from the frozen north each claiming to have reached the

North Pole. To this day the argument thunders on over whether Frederick Cook or Robert Peary verifiably got there first. To Amundsen it didn't matter. It was no longer going to be him, so he turned the ship of his ambition through 180 degrees. He would try for the South Pole instead. But he couldn't tell anyone, least of all the south-bound Englishman who had come to extend an offer of cooperation.

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High above the North Atlantic, a small aeroplane crosses the stretch of water between Iceland and Greenland. Though small, the plane is not full. On one side of the aisle sit eight Englishmen. On the other are four Norwegians and an American. They talk among their own group: no conversation breaches the aisle.

Nearly a century later, they are acting out their own version of Anglo-Norwegian frostiness. The east coast of Greenland, spectacularly fringed with aquamarine bergs, nears through the window, but no one appears ready to play the unmanly tourist and whip out a camera. Before the spring is out they will have seen more than enough of Greenland.

The 13 men tip out of the plane and into the waiting lounge, where a shop sells classic polar pipes: the Scott, the Amundsen, the Shackleton and - a good one, this, for Antarctic anoraks - the Crean. It's not clear how many of the British party have heard of Tom Crean. He was a modest Irish sailor who happened to be the only man present on both great iconic quests of the Heroic Age: Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition, and Shackleton's on the *Endurance*. Crean had a remarkable capacity for work and cheerfulness in the face of extreme hardship. It can be legitimately argued that if Scott had taken him to the pole instead of Taff Evans, the polar party might have survived.

The modern British team could certainly use someone of his dependability as they embark on a re-creation of that journey.

Do they make them like Crean any more? One of the issues the reconstruction that they are about to embark on is designed to look at concerns toughness. Both physically and mentally, the polar explorers of 100 years ago endured things that the mollycoddled modern male may find intolerable. A childhood spent in the warm embrace of central heating does not encourage a tolerance of extreme cold. The men attempting to suffer anew the conditions borne uncomplainingly by Scott and Amundsen and the stoics they travelled with are used to a much-improved diet, to proper medicine and, of course, to efficient kit. Are they really fit to lace Crean's boots? To fill his pipe? Ninety-nine days in Greenland will tell.

A helicopter on the runway sputters into life, and the parties are ferried in groups across the 17 miles of the sound to Tassilaq, the largest settlement on Greenland's eastern seaboard. The tiny Hotel Nansen, named after Norway's pioneering explorer Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930), whose great deeds were all accomplished at these northerly latitudes, will be their home for the next fortnight. In these confined quarters, in this town of 3000 mainly Inuit inhabitants hemmed in by mountain and fjord, with only one dining room between them, the British team and the Norwegian team will exchange scarcely a word.

They have come here to rerun the journeys made by their iconic compatriots. The plan is to do it as accurately as possible, to put themselves through an experience as close as can be arranged to that undergone by their predecessors. Accuracy, of course, is more easily achieved in some areas than others. It is a huge logistical operation to track down manufacturers who can produce supplies identical to those mentioned in the diaries, letters and memoirs of the original participants, and, indeed, depicted

in the photographs. But as near as makes no difference, the British and Norwegian teams will keep warm in clothes of the same design, sleep in the same sort of sleeping bags and tents, pull the same sledges and clip themselves into the same skis. They will navigate with the same equipment. They will have to stomach the same food. In some cases, the sources remain unchanged. The Norwegians' hickory-and-ash skis come from Amundsen's own supplier, while the British team's oatmeal biscuits come, as they did in 1911, from Huntley & Palmer, and are made to the original recipe.

But there will be undeniable differences between now and then. The journey will not be over identical terrain. In 1911 Scott installed himself, as he had in 1902 on the *Discovery*, at the eastern end of what was then known as the Great Ice Barrier, a vast sheet of ice covering a bay at the edge of the Antarctic continent, which is roughly the size of France. Conscious that he was the interloper, Amundsen sensibly headed for the western end of the Barrier, 400 miles away. He intuited, from the evidence of previous expeditions, that a place known as the Bay of Whales would be a better landing place anyway, and so it would prove.

It wasn't called the Barrier for nothing. In terms of miles, half of both journeys were taken up in crossing it before they made land. Thereafter their path to the pole was blocked by another rampart - a huge range of peaks known as the Transantarctic Mountains running diagonally along the edge of the Barrier. Both expeditions had to make their way up glaciers that sluiced down through the gaps. Having negotiated the crevasses strewn in their path, they emerged on to the high Polar Plateau, 10,000 feet above sea level, and headed south.

Dogs are integral to the story of the conquest of the South Pole. Both Amundsen and, to a lesser extent, Scott used huskies. However, since 1994 it has been impossible