

WHY DO THE BRITISH STILL REMEMBER SCOTT OF THE ANTARCTIC?

ABSTRACT – The announcement of the death of the British polar explorer Captain Robert Scott on his return from the South Pole, which he had reached on 17 January 1912, caused a sensation in Britain and around the world. Although he lost the race to the South Pole to a Norwegian party led by Roald Amundsen, the recent centenary of Scott's last expedition aroused widespread interest not only in Britain but around the world. This paper examines why the British public continues to consume Scott's story, with particular reference to the period since 1945. Part one examines how Scott's story has been adapted to the cultural context of post-imperial Britain, in part by emphasising the scientific aims of his last expedition. Part two moves on to emphasise how this new emphasis was supported by the Royal Geographical Society and the Scott Polar Research Institute, and drew on the extensive material culture and striking visual record left by the *Terra Nova* expedition.

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The recent centenary of Robert Scott and Roald Amundsen's expeditions to the South Pole aroused interest not only in Britain and Norway but around the world. London's Natural History Museum hosted a new exhibition on *Scott's Last Expedition*, which is also touring Australia and New Zealand. The museum's American namesake staged a major show in New York on *The Race to the South Pole* in 2010, which subsequently travelled to the Genoa home of the Italian National Antarctic Museum.

The *Last Great Quest*, as the *Illustrated London News* described the endeavour, was certainly a global media event in 1912. Pioneering proprietors from James Gordon Bennett Jr. to Alfred Harmsworth appreciated the value of sensational stories of exploration, sponsoring expeditions to make the news. Both Scott and Amundsen carefully planned their media sponsorship strategies, entering into a range of contracts with different outlets. Scott's decision to sell his story to the Central News Agency – a now defunct Edwardian rival to Reuters and the Press

Association – ensured widespread distribution, while the international network of scientific societies further spread his story around the world.

Scott's death had an emotional impact beyond Britain. Countess Evelyn Martinengo-Cesaresco wrote to «The Times» in March 1913 to emphasise «the extraordinary impression made in Italy by Captain Scott's death. In a long experience she remembers no event out of Italy and very few within its borders which awakened a sympathy so intense and an admiration so profound». The Countess quoted passages from the «Giornale d'Italia» and the «Corriere della Sera», noting Goffredo Bellonci's article *The Captain of the Ideal* which concluded that «Scott fought against Infinity for the honour of his land; no man has ever affirmed the ideal continuity of human life as he affirmed it. A nation that has such men is worthy of the seven seas over which it rules»¹.

The President of the Girl's College of Sant'Agostino, Piacenza, wrote to Scott's mother Hannah two weeks after the announcement of her son's death, in «the supposition that it may please you to receive such a spontaneous manifestation from children on whose imagination the daring exploits and tragic end of Captain Scott have made a profound impression, and whose first thoughts have been for his grieving mother»². The archives of the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) contain a ten peso note, a donation from Mexican schoolboys which was never exchanged.

While the global impact of the race to the South Pole is undeniable, the longevity of interest in the story of Scott of the Antarctic requires further explanation. Many tales which once captivated the public are later forgotten. Major-General Henry Havelock was the toast of the British empire in 1857, arguably the most celebrated of the British generals credited for putting down the Indian Mutiny. Havelock led the successful relief of the city of Lucknow, only to die shortly after his triumph from dysentery. Such was the fame of the devout Christian soldier, the British parliament approved the erection of his statue in Trafalgar Square, the heart of the empire, where it still stands today.

In 2000, however, Mayor Ken Livingstone complained that most Londoners had no idea who Havelock was. «I think that the people on the plinths in the main square in our capital city should be identifiable to the generality of the population. I have not a clue who two of the generals there are or what they did», Livingstone declared. «I imagine that not one person in 10,000 going through Trafalgar Square knows any details about the lives of those two generals. It might be that it is time to look at

¹) «The Times», 6 March 1913.

²) Letter to Hannah Scott, 26 February 1913, MS 1464/23 BJ, Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge.

moving them and having figures on those plinths that ordinary Londoners would know»³. The 150th anniversary of the Indian Mutiny, one of the most celebrated episodes of the nineteenth century, passed with little comment in Britain in 2007.

The following article will explore why some historical figures and events are remembered while others are forgotten, with particular reference to Scott of the Antarctic. In part, of course, Scott is remembered today because his last expedition is such a great story: the drama of the race with the Norwegians; the heart-breaking arrival at the South Pole a month too late; the agonising suspense of the return march; the tragic end only 11 miles from a supply depot which would have saved the British party. Yet a great story alone offers no guarantee of remembrance. Ernest Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition and his incredible boat journey to South Georgia was surprisingly neglected in Britain until the end of the 1990s, its rediscovery driven in part by interest from American scholars of management and leadership.

Excitement and human interest alone, then, do not guarantee remembrance. The following article examines why the British public continues to consume Scott's story, with particular reference to the period since 1945. Part one explains how Scott's story has been adapted to the cultural context of post-imperial Britain, in part by emphasising the scientific aims of his last expedition. Part two moves on to show how this new emphasis was supported by the Royal Geographical Society and the Scott Polar Research Institute, and drew on the extensive material culture and striking visual record left by the *Terra Nova* expedition.

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The *Message to the Public* Scott wrote at the back of his journal remains one of the ultimate expressions of bravery in the face of death, the cornerstone of Scott's heroic reputation (Jones 2006, pp. xxxi-xxxii). The centenary celebrations would have been far less extensive if a search party had not found the journals in November 1912. Elsewhere I have argued that the study of heroes offers a useful methodology for historical research not by attempting to assess an individual's greatness, but by «locating heroic reputations in historical context, and analysing heroes as sites within which we can find evidence of the cultural beliefs, social practices, political structures and economic systems of the past» (Jones 2007, pp. 439-440). From this perspective, the continued interest in Scott's story exposes key changes in British culture since 1945.

³) «The Guardian», 20 October 2000. Livingstone was referring to the statues of Havelock and of Sir Charles James Napier, one of the British heroes of the Napoleonic Wars.

Interest in tales of exploration has increased over the last fifty years, inspired by a yearning for adventure and danger. Anxieties about the enervating affects of modern life have a long history, of course. Before sailing on the *Terra Nova*, Scott's closest confidant Edward Wilson complained that he was «getting more and more soft and dependent upon comforts, and this I hate. I want to endure hardness and instead of this I enjoy hotel dinners and prefer hot water to cold»⁴. Youth movements such as Ernest Thompson Seton's League of Woodcraft Indians in the USA and Robert Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts in England were established in the decade before the *Terra Nova*'s departure, in part to invigorate urban children through contact with nature.

Such expressions are usually heavily gendered. Sara Wheeler has discussed the masculine culture of Antarctic research stations, where male fantasies could be enacted on a continent where no woman set foot before 1935 (Wheeler 1996). While some men objected to their intrusion, women too, though, have sought escape from the mundane repetitiveness of modern life in the developed world through exploration. «I had travelled in search of silence and a retreat from the city», wrote Joanna Kavenna, to explain her journeys around the Arctic (Kavenna 2005, p. 304). Buoyant book sales, magazine features, TV and radio documentaries testify to an ongoing fascination with pioneers such as Scott, Shackleton and George Leigh Mallory, who died on Mount Everest in 1924. Jay Winter has emphasised affluence as a key «precondition» of this «memory boom». «[R]ising real incomes and increased expenditure on education since the second world war» have increased the demand «for cultural commodities» (Winter 2006, p. 37).

More critical accounts of Scott's character and achievements emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, culminating in Roland Huntford's classic debunking biography *Scott and Amundsen* (Huntford 1979). In assessing Huntford's contribution to Scott's remembrance it is important to distinguish between «reputation» and «public interest», however⁵. Huntford's savage critique fractured Scott's reputation, but the controversy surrounding the book re-invigorated public interest in Scott, rather than ushering him into obscurity.

The fascination with explorers is partly explained as their adventures appear less contentious than those of soldiers in a multi-racial, post-imperial society. Scott's exploits on the uninhabited continent of Antarctica are free from the troubling associations with racism and colonial exploitation which bedevil so many other British heroes of the

⁴) Quoted in Jones 2003, p. 246.

⁵) For a full elaboration of this distinction in the context of Huntford's biography see Jones 2011, pp. 197-199.

last three hundred years, such as Robert Clive and Horatio Kitchener. Tales from the history of empire remained a standard feature of school textbooks until the Second World War. The rapid increase in immigration from the commonwealth in the 1950s transformed British society, creating substantial communities of ethnic minorities in cities around the country. At the same time, international opinion increasingly turned against empire after 1945, while a powerful civil rights movement garnered international attention in the 1960s.

In this context, the celebration of imperial heroes such as Havelock and Gordon of Khartoum – men whose fame was built in part on their subordination of colonised peoples in India and Africa – became increasingly problematic. Some writers reworked old imperial heroes to fit this new mood. The successful films *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Khartoum* (1966) presented T.E. Lawrence and General Gordon respectively as benevolent humanitarians, battling against a racist and uncaring British establishment on behalf of Arabs and Africans (Richards 2001). Yet, the prominence of empire in British popular culture steadily diminished after the 1960s, alongside the end of formal empire.

Londoners' ignorance of Henry Havelock in 2000 is indicative of a broader amnesia about the history of empire among the British public. Surveys usually reveal this ignorance co-existing with a diffuse nostalgia for a period of national greatness⁶. The bi-centenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007 generated a wave of celebrations for William Wilberforce's role, rather than a more honest account of Britain's central contribution to the development of the international slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Hall 2007).

This detachment of Scott from an imperial context is misleading. Britain's interest in Antarctica was a direct consequence of the nation's imperial ambitions. Captain James Cook's famous eighteenth-century voyages expressed not only scientific curiosity, but also the global aspirations of a maritime nation. Scott himself sailed south from Britain along an imperial corridor, passing through South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, before departing for Antarctica. His crews carried the beliefs and practices of an imperial nation to the southern continent, dressing up in blackface on the *Discovery* expedition.

Although the conquest of the South Pole was of greater symbolic than strategic or commercial value before the First World War, Klaus Dodds has drawn attention to «the extraordinary twentieth-century expansion of the British Empire in the far south» (Dodds 2002, p. 3). Dodds has shown how the British government explicitly promoted Ealing Studios' 1948 film *Scott of the Antarctic*, in part to project British

⁶) *The British Empire: Imperial Amnesia*, «The Economist», 26 March 1998.

power in the South Atlantic. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government's consideration of a withdrawal from the South Atlantic in 1980-81 should be interpreted as part of a broader re-calibration of Britain's place in the world at the end of empire. The Falklands War in 1982 dramatically curtailed a planned withdrawal. The emotional and commercial legacies of the conflict have extended British investment in the South Atlantic for the foreseeable future.

The geopolitics of Antarctica are usually obscured in accounts of the *Terra Nova* expedition, however. Scott's story continues to appeal in part as a reaction against the routines of modern life, a timeless romantic tragedy existing apart from the brutal realities of imperial conquest. This appeal has been intensified over the last twenty years by a growing interest in the scientific achievements of the so-called "heroic age" of polar exploration. Scott himself was moulded by the ethos of Royal Geographical Society (RGS), in which heroic adventure had to be combined with scientific research (Jones 2005). In this respect, Fridtjof Nansen's *Fram* expedition (1893-96) provided more of a template for Scott's Antarctic voyages than is often realised. Like Scott, Nansen hoped to combine an assault on the Pole with a programme of scientific research. Just as Scott failed in his declared ambition to lead the first party to reach the South Pole, so Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen failed to reach the North Pole. In spite of these failures both expeditions reaped a rich scientific harvest, with the *Fram*'s successful drift offering spectacular proof of Nansen's theory of a floating Arctic ice cap.

The *Terra Nova* expedition's scientific aims, symbolised by the 35lbs of geological specimens which the polar party carried until they died, underwrote the selflessness and idealism of the endeavour. The explorers died not in pursuit of individual glory, but in the cause of human progress. The Chief Rabbi, at the annual meeting of the Peace Society in 1913, hailed Scott as a hero for pacifists, prepared to sacrifice his life for science. Numerous reports praised Scott, Bowers, Evans, Oates and Wilson as «martyrs of science» in 1913 (Jones 2003, chapter 5). The hope that the eggs of the Emperor Penguin carried back to England by Apsley Cherry-Garrard would help solve the mystery of a «missing link» between birds and humans proved misplaced, however. Although usually mentioned in passing, few accounts of the expedition went into any detail about the expedition's scientific programme. Laurence du Garde Peach's widely read children's book, *Captain Scott* (London 1963), for example, did not even name principal scientists such as Frank Debenham, Raymond Priestley and George Simpson (Jones 2011, p. 192).

Climate change focused attention on Antarctica in the final quarter of the twentieth century, as the polar regions have emerged as a primary site for the study of changes in the global environment. At the same time, the market for popular science grew rapidly, driven in part by the

increasing number of science graduates in the developed world, and exemplified by the runaway success of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (London 1988). Specialists had long appreciated the pioneering research carried out by Scott's men, but accounts of their achievements have found a growing audience in the last two decades. Award-winning polar scientist Susan Solomon's *The Coldest March* (New Haven - London 2001), for example, combined an account of Scott's last expedition, with a detailed analysis of the weather conditions faced by the polar party. Solomon paid tribute to the pioneering meteorological research of George Simpson and others, which laid the foundations for her own work (Solomon 2001).

Discussion of the *Terra Nova* expedition's scientific legacy has been a notable feature of the centenary celebrations. Edward Larson published a new book on the scientific dimensions of the «heroic age» of polar exploration (Larson 2011). The Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, emphasised this scientific legacy in his sermon at the centenary Scott memorial service in St. Paul's Cathedral on 29 March 2012:

Scott's expedition laid the foundations of modern polar studies and has stimulated scientific progress up to our own day. Observations, data and samples collected by the scientists accompanying Scott helped to test the evidence for evolution. They made a contribution to the development of the theory of continental drift. And the work continues.⁷

The centrality of polar science to the study of global warming gave a pressing relevance to the expedition's research agenda. «Antarctica as we all know is in particular a crucial place for climate science», the Bishop went on to explain, «where it is possible to extract ice cores which illuminate the history of the earth's climate over 800,000 years».

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The flexibility of Scott's story provides only part of the explanation for the ongoing British fascination with the *Terra Nova* expedition. The investment of key institutions – in particular the RGS and SPRI – coupled with the extensive visual and material legacy bequeathed by the British explorers, have been equally significant.

Scott was propelled into the public eye after his appointment as commander of the National Antarctic Expedition on board the ship *Discovery* (1901-1904), funded primarily by a gift of £45,000 from the British government, equivalent to over £15,000,000 today in terms of

⁷) Bishop of London Sermon (St. Paul's Cathedral, 29 March 2012), <http://communications.london.anglican.org/ministrymatters/2012/03/scott-centenary-st-pauls-cathedral/> (accessed 7 July 2012).

average earnings⁸. While the *Discovery* expedition was a national enterprise organised by the Royal Society and the RGS, Scott's last expedition on board the *Terra Nova* (1910-1913) was ostensibly an independent venture, funded by a wide range of local sponsors. Without a government grant of £20,000, however, the *Terra Nova* would not have set sail. In the immediate aftermath of the announcement of Scott's death in February 1913, national and local dignitaries led the public commemoration of the disaster, from the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, William Inge, through the President of the Royal Geographical Society, Lord George Curzon, to Cardiff businessman Daniel Radcliffe.

The 1948 film *Scott of the Antarctic* represents the last significant moment when central government played a leading role in promoting Scott's story. A range of institutions have helped sustain Scott's memory since then, including the British Museum, which displayed Scott's journals until their transfer to the John Ritblat Gallery in the new St. Pancras home of the British Library in 1998, the Antarctic Heritage Trust established in 1987, and the National Maritime Museum, which organised a highly successful exhibition on the race to the South Pole in 2000. The Scott Polar Research Institute and the Royal Geographical Society in particular have played a vital role maintaining Scott's public profile.

Since its foundation in 1830, the RGS has always relied on the subscriptions of fellows to fund its activities. The Society accumulated a range of expensive scientific and educational responsibilities in the second half of the nineteenth century, but both the promotion of exploration and the provision of a stage on which explorers could present their stories to the public remained essential to attract new members. The RGS has thrived over the last twenty years in part through the skilful exploitation of its heritage. The Society played a prominent role in the Scott centenary celebrations, staging a special exhibition *With Scott to the Pole* at Lowther Lodge, and selling memorabilia⁹. The RGS currently offers four collections of photographic prints for sale to the public: *Mount Everest*, *Vintage Gallery*, *Special Collections Gallery* and the *Antarctica Gallery*, which includes a number of photographs from Scott's last expedition¹⁰.

In part such activities are simply shrewd marketing: book sales and attendance at events about Scott and the «heroic age» remain high, and the Society sensibly wants to capitalise on its history to help fund its many activities. Yet to reduce the RGS's continued investment in Scott to

⁸) Calculated at <http://www.measuringworth.com/> on 15 July 2012.

⁹) The Royal Geographical Society's online *Picture Library* (<http://images.rgs.org/index.aspx>) allows fellows to order copies from the Society's extensive image collection with ease.

¹⁰) <http://images.rgs.org/printstobuy.aspx>.

a marketing ploy obscures how the *Terra Nova* expedition encapsulates the Society's vision of exploration as a combination of heroic adventure and scientific research. Nearly 120 years after a dispute over the admission of women threatened to spilt the Society in the 1890s, the fellowship continues to argue about the Society's role, and the proper balance between exploration and education (Jones 2005). Scott himself continues to divide opinion, partly as a consequence of Huntford's intervention and partly from the tendency of some enthusiasts to position themselves in the Scott or Shackleton «camp». But for many fellows the *Terra Nova* expedition offers the ideal which the Society should promote.

While the RGS shaped Scott's life, his death led directly to the foundation of the Scott Polar Research Institute. Expedition geologist Frank Debenham campaigned to use the balance of the national Scott Memorial Fund – which, after an uncertain start, eventually raised around £75,000 – to pay for the establishment of a scientific institute in Cambridge after the First World War. The money had been raised to pay off the expedition's debts, publish the scientific results, provide for the bereaved and fund appropriate memorials. What better memorial than a scientific institute, Debenham argued. Initially founded in 1920, SPRI moved to a permanent home on Lensfield Road in Cambridge in 1934, where it remains today.

Just as with the Royal Geographical Society, the combination of scientific research and heroic adventure proved problematic. Scott's widow Kathleen, a renowned sculptress, donated a war memorial to the new Institute, the figure of a naked man, his arms spread-eagled as if crucified and head thrown back facing the sky. Debenham and others were uncomfortable about associating the Institute with such a striking image of sacrifice, but could not be seen to offend Scott's widow. They discussed placing the statue in a separate memorial garden hidden away from the main building. The naked figure was eventually placed directly in front of the institute, but the growth of a new hedge on Lensfield Road diluted the impact of Kathleen's graphic sculpture¹¹.

The Institute's officers have worked hard to ensure that SPRI is not viewed solely as a vehicle for Captain Scott's remembrance, opening the *Shackleton Memorial Library* in 1998, for example. SPRI, though, naturally played a leading role in the recent centenary of the race to the South Pole, organising exhibitions about both Amundsen and Scott, staging a *Pole Day* event on 17 January 2012 attended by Prince Albert II of Monaco and the Duke of Edinburgh, and selling souvenirs. The Institute has long provided a forum for the relatives not only of Scott, but also

¹¹) Jones 2003, pp. 278-280. Kathleen's model was Arnold Lawrence, brother of T.E. Lawrence.

of other polar explorers. SPRI's work with the descendants of the *Terra Nova* expedition led directly to the organisation of the centenary Scott memorial service in St. Paul's.

The exhibitions and souvenirs which both the RGS and SPRI produced for the centenary point to two final factors which have helped sustain the remembrance of Captain Scott into the twenty-first century: the astonishing visual record, and the extensive inheritance of material culture left by the combined shore and ship parties of over 65 men on the *Terra Nova* expedition. The London Natural History Museum's *Scott's last expedition* exhibition was built around a substantial set of artefacts brought from New Zealand which had never been seen in England before. Museums in towns and cities around the UK, from Plymouth to York, Cardiff to Dundee, have also drawn on local collections to stage special Scott exhibitions during the centenary¹².

Whatever your opinion of Scott's merits as an explorer, no one could deny that he deserves credit for his appointment of Herbert Ponting as the *Terra Nova* expedition's self-styled «camera artist». Ponting exposed around 25,000 feet of film and 2,000 photographic negatives in the Antarctic. Rarely, if ever, has an expedition been documented so thoroughly and so beautifully¹³. Publishers and film-makers today can be confident of the availability of rich visual resources for any new Scott project, with striking images of the central characters, wild life and Antarctic environment. Media coverage of Scott's last expedition is greatly facilitated by the Scott Polar Research Institute and the RGS, which provide conduits for journalists, writers and film makers to access expertise and resources, and Ponting's work in particular.

Ponting did not, though, take the most famous photograph of Scott's last expedition. The explorers themselves exposed ten plates at the South Pole. Lieutenant Henry Bowers of the Royal Indian Marine pulled the cord which took the most iconic image of the British explorers at the South Pole. This photograph remains the most frequently reproduced: five grim faces marked by hardships endured and the certain knowledge of hardships to come, the forlorn union jack a reminder of their defeat.

The survival of this photograph offers a final explanation for the enduring appeal of Scott's story. In 2000 «Hello Magazine» published two special editions celebrating *The 20th Century in Pictures, An Heirloom to Treasure*. Scott, Bowers, Petty Officer Edgar Evans, Captain Lawrence Oates and Doctor Edward Wilson stared out from the front cover of the first edition, in pride of place above the title.

¹²) The *Scott 100* website offers a record of events and exhibitions during the centenary: <http://www.scott100.org/>.

¹³) See, among many, Riffenburgh - Cruwys 1998.

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One hundred years after his death on the Ross Ice Shelf, interest in Scott of the Antarctic in Britain is as high as at any time since the publication of Huntford's *Scott and Amundsen* in 1979. Scott's *Message to the Public* and the haunting images of the explorers at the South Pole have been supplemented by an abundance of images, artefacts and manuscripts, which have fuelled a stream of articles and books, documentaries and exhibitions. Huntford's criticisms still circulate and assessments of Scott's merits as an explorer differ widely¹⁴. Yet Scott's story has proved adaptable, surviving the end of empire and the demise of the age of duty and deference in which it was born. The emergence of Antarctica as a key site for the study of climate change has amplified the scientific aims of the *Terra Nova* expedition. The unprecedented attendance of King George V at the memorial service in February 1913 secured Scott's sacrifice for nation and empire. A century later the Bishop of London drew attention to the international character of the congregation at St. Paul's to locate «disinterested scientific curiosity» as the principal motivation of Scott's last expedition.

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¹⁴) Note, for example, Huntford 2010.

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