

Chapter 4: History of Antarctic Exploration

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For many hundreds of years the continent of Antarctica has been a mysterious and sought after land. Ancient Greek philosophers were the first to hypothesize of the existence of Antarctica. They believed that because of the existence of a large land mass in the north, there must be a mass in the south to balance the energy (Quarterman, 1967). Much later it was dubbed 'Terra Incognita', the unknown land, and many feared the South Seas were an impassable zone until the 1400s (Quarterman, 1967). Eventually Europeans became convinced that there was a land mass to the south and in searching for this mystical place they instead discovered Australia, New Zealand, the Falkland Islands, the South Shetland Islands, South Georgia, and Kerguelen Island (May, 1988).

Some hypothesize that the early Polynesians of the South Pacific may have been the first to have known of or seen a white land to the south (Quarterman, 1967). Their legends tell of a great traveler who paddled far to the south and came to a place of bitter cold where the land was covered in a white powder and huge white rocks rose from the sea to the sky. These people became the ancestors of the Maoris who settled on New Zealand long before the arrival of European explorers (Quarterman, 1967).

Many early explorers thought they had found the continent, but really they had only found some of the many outlying islands. The names of these islands attest to their near misses. In 1578 Sir Francis Drake believed he had sighted a land mass at the south pole but it was not until 1773 when Sir James Cook on the *Endeavour* became the first to cross the Antarctic circle that real hope blossomed as to the discovery of a southern continent (Quarterman, 1967). Forty years later, Russian naval

captain Bellinghausen was the next to cross the Antarctic Circle and complete the first circumnavigation of the continent. Bellinghausen also became the first to actually sight the continent (Quarterman, 1967).

Captain James Clarke Ross

In the mid 1800s the British government began to take more scientific interest in the southern oceans and surrounding islands. In 1838, Captain James Clarke Ross was appointed the command of an Antarctic research expedition and given the *HMS Erebus* and the *HMS Terror* for his use (Quarterman, 1967). Ross had considerable experience in Arctic travel and had acquired survey experience reaching the magnetic north pole in 1831(Quarterman, 1967). Though the ultimate goal of the journey was the general exploration of the Antarctic seas, the Royal Society provided Ross with a 100-page book of instructions on everything from geology and physics, to meteorology and zoology (Quarterman, 1967). Many notable officers were assigned to his command; however, there were surprisingly few scientists on board. After spending the austral winter season in New Zealand Ross set out to sail south and arrived at Cape Good hope in 1839 only to learn that French expeditionary Dumont D'Urville had already discovered a stretch of the Antarctic coast he called Terre Adélie, and that American Charles Wilkes had discovered what is now Wilkes Land (May, 1988). Though Ross was considerably irked by the fact that D'Urville had chosen to penetrate the south land at the very spot he was considering, he later discovered several errors in the map D'Urville had created.

On January 11, 1841 Ross saw the land of Antarctica, but could not reach it for a huge mass of ice blocked his path (Quarterman, 1967). Ross wanted desperately to

reach the south magnetic pole, thereby balancing his earlier achievement of reaching the north magnetic pole in his youth. He theorized that the south magnetic pole may be accessible by ship but was incredibly frustrated at the discovery of the complete impenetrableness of an Antarctic bay permanently frozen over. This bay of ice later became known as the Ross Ice Shelf (Quarterman, 1967).

Ross then turned his journey to trace the Antarctic coastline, mapping it as he went. But he was unimpressed with the incredible landmass he was the first to study; it only prevented him from reaching his goal of the pole. Toward the end of his journey he came across Antarctica's only active volcano. He named it Mt. Erebus after his ship and neighbouring extinct volcano Mt. Terror (Quarterman, 1967). Smoke continues to rise from the flooded crater of Antarctica's active volcano.

Henry Bull, an American whaler, is said to be the first person to set foot on the continent in 1895, but there is some controversy over that fact because it is difficult to tell where the pack ice ends and the land begins (May, 1988). In that same year the International Geographical Congress designated Antarctica as a main region of exploration in the world and the race to be the first to reach the South Pole began (May, 1988).

Robert F. Scott

In November of 1902 Robert Scott made his first attempt to reach the South Pole (May, 1988). Along with Edward Wilson and Ernest Shackleton, he reached a latitude of 82° south before being forced to turn back. Shackleton, Eric Marshall, Frank Wild, and Jameson Adams made a second push for the pole in 1908, but bad weather

and the onset of scurvy forced them to turn back 180 kilometres before their destination (May, 1988).

Even though Scott did not participate in Shackleton's 1908 expedition, plans of mounting another attempt to reach the pole soon began to take shape. A dedicated man of science, Scott planned the Terra Nova expedition to make scientific observations and geographical discoveries but ultimately to attain the South Pole (Savours, 1974). He had left only 151 kilometres of uncharted land between him and the pole. He soon landed at Antarctica and setup base camp on the edge of the Ross Ice Shelf near Ross Island and Mt. Erebus. The ship carried with it 3 motor sledges, 19 ponies, 33 dogs, and 24 men (Antarctic Connection, n.d.).

Scott planned to use the tracked vehicles over the ice, but they were not as successful as he had hoped and one actually fell through the ice as it was being unloaded from the ship (Savours, 1974). Still, he felt they had potential and brought them along for the journey. They lasted less than a week.

The ponies were decided upon as the only reliable form of transportation but that they would not manage the whole way (Antarctic Connection, n.d.). The ponies would pull the heaviest of the gear and then the crew could man-haul the last bit to the pole. However, the ponies floundered in the deep snow and could not manage the load and either died of exposure or were shot after a month (Antarctic Connection, n.d.).

Scott was reluctant to use sledge dogs as a means of hauling because of his experiences with them on the *Discovery* expedition (Savours, 1974). Dogs were traditionally the favoured form of transport because they were adapted to withstand the fierce cold and lack of water. Also, as the journey progressed, the weaker dogs could

be killed and fed to the others as a source of fresh meat. However, Scott felt the dogs became companions and he could not employ them in such a ruthless fashion (Savours, 1974). By bringing the ponies and the sledges for part of the way, Scott felt better using his own power and knowing that he would not need to resort to those grim methods. However, when the sledges and ponies proved useless on the frozen terrain, Scott's team eventually decided that using the sledge dogs was the only way they would get to the Pole.

When Scott landed at Antarctica he and his men began the process of depot laying (Antarctic Connection, n.d.). This procedure involved collecting stores and packaging them, then traveling along the intended route caching food along the way. These materials would then be picked up for the journey back from the Pole. Since the party would be doubling back along the same route to return to the coast there was no need for them to carry all the supplies at once. Not only would caching provide them with stores for way home but also the journeys allowed them to get a feel for the land and find their way on unknown terrain. Caches would also be dropped closer to the Pole during the journey inland. However, Scott rushed his men through the depot laying process then waited through the dark winter for the arrival of summer and the beginning of the long trek south (Antarctic Connection, n.d.).

The party that set out to push for the pole included Robert F. Scott, Edward Wilson, Lawrence Oats, Edgar Evans, and Henry Bowes. The addition of Bowes at the last minute may have been an error in judgment as the expedition was originally planned for only four men. Bowes had no skis and the extra man limited the rations of everyone in the party. The extra man limited everyone's rations and proved difficult to

travel with for he had no skis. Some analysts believe that this may have been the crucial error made by Scott that led to his eventual death on the return journey (Savours, 1974).

After pushing through rough terrain, terrible weather, and bad health, Scott's Terra Nova party reached the South Pole on January 17th, 1912 (Antarctic Connection, n.d.). There he discovered to his dismay a Norwegian flag and a tent with a note in it from Roald Amundsen: he had reached the pole only 33 days before Scott (Antarctic Connection, n.d.). Disappointed, malnourished, beaten, and exhausted Scott's party began the long journey home. Unfortunately, a gale trapped the party for eight days and bad health soon took over. In March 1912 all members of the party died just 18 kilometres away from the next food depot (Antarctic Connection, n.d.). Their fate was not discovered until November of the next summer.

Roald Amundsen

Roald Amundsen was a Norwegian explorer of high repute who was actually charged to reach the North Pole (Antarctic Connection, n.d.). He was sailing the *Fram* which, unlike most exploration vessels, was purposely built for polar sailing (Ward, 2005). It was one-third as wide as it was long making it designed to withstand the immense pressures of being stuck in the ice. Instead of being crushed the rounded hull would be pushed upward. Amundsen planned to stick the vessel in the ice and float around with the natural flow until it carried him in the area of the North Pole (Ward, 2005). However, he learned that Peary had been beaten him to the pole and decided to change his plans immediately and head south instead. He did not even tell his crew until they reached Madeira because he was worried that the government would not let him

compete with their allies the British for the title because of their economic connection. (Antarctic Connection, n.d.).

The *Fram* reached Antarctica on January 11, 1911 and began the process of the setting up based camp which he called *Framheim* (Ward, 2005). He chose to start from the Ross Ice Shelf because it was blocked from the wind and the shore was relatively constant and unchanged. He also chose a location on the Shelf about 100 kilometres closer to the pole than Scott's base camp. His team consisted of himself, Olav Olavson Bjaaland, Hilmer Hanssen, Svere H. Hassel, and Oscar Wisting (Ward, 2005). He brought with him 100 Greenland sledge dogs and spent the austral winter caching depots and preparing for the trip (Savours, 1974).

On December 14, 1911 Amundsen and his team were the first humans to set foot on the South Pole (Antarctic Connection, n.d.). They then spent the next 3 days calculating and rechecking their exact location to be sure they had indeed reached the pole. Before they left they skied in a 16 kilometre radius to be absolutely certain and planted the Norwegian flag (Antarctic Connection, n.d.). Every member arrived back at Framheim 39 days later, healthy and happy.

Amundsen is not given the fame he deserves for this accomplishment because of the tragedy of Scott's expedition. Amundsen was plagued by accusations of unsportsmanlike conduct by knowing that Scott was planning a trip and not telling anyone his own change of plans (Ward, 2005). The note he left behind was considered vain and arrogant by some and had the Scott expedition survived, Amundsen may have been spared such animosity. In 1928 Amundsen disappeared while traveling in the Arctic (Ward, 2005).

Ernest Shackleton

After being defeated at his attempt to reach the South Pole Ernest Shackleton resolved himself to be the first person to cross the Antarctic continent on foot. However on January 18, 1915 his ship the *Endurance* became trapped in the ice 136 kilometres from the coast (Antarctic Connection, n.d.). There he and his crew waited patiently for an opening for 281 days before the vessel was crushed under the intense pressure of the ice pack (May, 1988). The crew then piled into the lifeboats on top of the ice and waited for the ice to carry them closer to land (Antarctic Connection, n.d.). Soon Shackleton decided that they should row the boats to the nearest land mass of Elephant Island almost 161 kilometres to the north. They reached the tiny piece of desolate land on April 16th, 1916 and set up camp hoping to be rescued by passing whaling vessels (Antarctic Connection, n.d.).

Shackleton knew their chances of rescue were slim and soon decided that he and five other men should sail one of the 22.5 foot lifeboats 1287 kilometres north to South Georgia (Antarctic Connection, n.d.). They gave most of the rations to the men who would have to wait for rescue on Elephant Island and set sail. With only a compass and sextant to plot the route, Shackleton had no room for error or else he would miss the island entirely and be lost at sea in the south Atlantic. Miraculously he landed on shores of South Georgia tired, wet, and starving only to have to walk 35 kilometres over the top of the island to reach the whaling station on the other side (Antarctic Connection, n.d.). Because of Shackleton's phenomenal leadership skills and ability to motivate and inspire his men, as well as his own personal strength, he was able to accomplish this unbelievable feat. On August 30, 1916 all members of the crew

were safely rescued after 2 years of being stranded in Antarctica (Antarctic Connection, n.d.).

Shackleton's love for Antarctica did not die after the *Endurance* disaster and he still yearned for the southern seas. In 1921 he returned to the south to circumnavigate the continent and find the lost polar islands that had been named by past explorers. Sadly, he died of a heart attack before leaving South Georgia and is buried on the very island that brought his salvation only 5 years before.

Conclusion

There are many men and vessels who have perished chasing the dream of the white continent; a land so mysterious in its bleakness and secrets that it seemed no explorer could resist its temptations. Many were lost and even more were unsuccessful but they can be remembered in the names of the countless bays, islands, and mountains of the glittering continent. Explorers faced unspeakable hardship, starvation, and cold to learn more about the land mass that balanced the Earth and some were successful in conquering the terrain. Others were lost to the snow and ice and saw their hopes and dreams swallowed up by an unforgiving land. No matter what their attraction to the white continent was, they pushed the limits to find Terra Incognita.

References

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