

Early Antarctic Explorers



The Group discussed three early twentieth century Antarctic explorers, namely, Amundsen, Scott and Shackleton. The seven expeditions they undertook between them started to open up the Continent, but the group were interested in their characters and their different approaches to managing expeditions.

Amundsen went on two, but only commanded one of them, and he was arguably the most successful, being the first to reach the Pole. His was also the most uneventful trip. After establishing a series of supply depots from their base ("Framheim", Bay of Whales, Ross Ice Shelf), their first attempt on the Pole had to abort because of bad weather. The second attempt saw Amundsen's party of five leave their base on October 19th, 1911, reach the Pole on December 14th, and return safely to Framheim on January 25th, 1912. The expedition made its way in their ship, *Fram*, to Hobart, Tasmania, from where Amundsen announced his success on March 7th.

Scott also made two expeditions, and he commanded both. On the first expedition (known as the

Discovery Expedition of 1901-04, named after their ship) he, along with, among others, Ernest Shackleton, set a new southern record of latitude 82°S and discovered the Antarctic Plateau, on which the South Pole is located. They very nearly didn't make it back to their Base Camp through a combination of bad weather and illness (they all had snow-blindness, frostbite and scurvy and Shackleton was so ill he couldn't work). Scott's second expedition of 1910-13, called the Terra Nova Expedition (again named for their ship), saw Scott lead a party of five which reached the South Pole on 17 January 1912, less than five weeks after Amundsen's expedition. A planned meeting with supporting dog teams from the base camp failed, despite Scott's written instructions, and at a distance of 162 miles from their base camp at Hut Point and approximately 12.5 miles from the next depot, Scott and his companions died.



Scott & Amundsen's Expeditions 1911-1912

Shackleton made three expeditions to Antarctica (he died of a heart attack on South Georgia at the start of a fourth), being the leader on the second and third. The Nimrod Expedition (again called after the ship) left New Zealand on August 1, 1908, eventually setting up a base camp at Cape Royds, north of Scott's base at Hut Point. The "Great Southern Journey", as Frank Wild (one of its

members) called it, began on October 29, 1908. On 9 January, Shackleton and three companions reached a new Farthest South latitude of 88° 23'S, only 112 miles from the Pole. Shackleton reasoned that it was too high risk to attempt those final miles. Indeed, their return journey to McMurdo Sound was a race against starvation, on half-rations for much of the way.



Shackleton's Endurance Expedition 1914-1917

His third Expedition (called Endurance, again, after the ship) commenced just after the start of WW1. It was an attempt to cross the Antarctic Continent via the Pole, in which it was completely unsuccessful. Endurance became trapped in sea-ice and eventually sank, forcing the crew to camp on the ice, and after some months to sail in small boats 350 miles to Elephant Island, just north of the South Shetland Islands. From there, Shackleton and five others sailed one of the small boats 800 miles across the Southern Ocean to South Georgia. After 16 days at sea, they were finally able to land on the uninhabited south shore, Shackleton decided not to risk the stormy seas but to cross the island on foot, to reach the Whaling stations on the north shore. For their journey, the survivors were only equipped with boots they had pushed screws into to act as climbing boots, a carpenter's adze, and 50ft of rope. Leaving three of the crew at the landing point, Shackleton

travelled 32 miles with two companions over extremely dangerous mountainous terrain for 36 hours to reach the whaling station at Stromness on 20 May, 1916 (The island was not to be crossed again until 1955). After recovering the three from the south of the island, he organised the rescue of the rest of Endurance's crew from Elephant Island. They finally arrived in Valparaiso in early September. Not a single member of the Endurance's crew lost his life.

The Group's discussions did lead to some conclusions. Shackleton seems to have been the best leader/man-manager of the three. He never quite got to the Pole, about 110 miles short, but he survived three expeditions to one of the planet's most inhospitable regions. He was clearly very popular, both as a member of the Discovery Expedition, and whilst leading, particularly through all the troubles of the Endurance Expedition.

His interviewing and selection methods were regarded as eccentric; believing that character and temperament were as important as technical ability, and his questions were certainly unconventional. Physicist Reginald James was asked if he could sing! Others were accepted on sight because Shackleton liked the look of them, or after the briefest of interrogations. He loosened some of the traditional hierarchies to promote camaraderie, such as distributing the ship's chores equally among officers, scientists and able seamen. He made a point of socialising with his crew members every evening after dinner, leading sing-alongs, jokes and games.

Amundsen was probably the most accomplished and experienced of the three. His 1910 Polar expedition may have been only his second visit to the continent, but he had a lot of experience of Polar conditions. First Mate on the Belgian Antarctic Expedition of 1897-9, he learned from the expedition's American doctor that consuming fresh meat, particularly offal, helped prevent scurvy. His successful first-ever traverse of the Northwest Passage (1903-06) saw him spend two winters with the local Inuits at King William Island. They taught him the use of dogs, both to haul sledges and also as pack animals; and the benefits of wearing animal skins, that were lighter in weight, warmer, and waterproof, rather than the normal European heavy woollen clothing. He used dogs to haul his sledges, starting with 52, arriving at the Pole with 16, and 11 by the time they returned to base. The others had been shot and eaten along the way, by both men and dogs!

Scott was a product of his time and choice of career. As a Royal Navy Officer he was very conscious of the dividing line between officers and other ranks, even extending that to the very civilian situation of the Discovery Expedition. This may have accounted, in part, for the strained relationship that appears to have existed between him and Shackleton. Both his expeditions were, first and foremost, about scientific discovery, reaching the Pole was not the prime objective, unlike Amundsen, who saw that as the prime reason for the enterprise. The Terra Nova Expedition also differed from Amundsen in its size and complexity. There were dogs, ponies, and even motor vehicles used to pull sledges, although the final Polar party hauled their sledge themselves, from 87.5 degrees south, all the way to the Pole and back across the Plateau, down the Glacier and across the Ross Sea Ice-shelf to their final resting place, just 12.5 miles short of One Ton supply depot. The final drive to the Pole commenced with a number of parties, all travelling at different speeds, but converging at intervals on the supply depots, before the final party of five made the Polar assault. There were also rendez-vous arranged for Scott's return journey. Critically, one of those was missed, and that almost certainly condemned the party. Perhaps its very size and complexity contributed to the failure of the Polar attempt, although appalling weather also contributed. Scott was beset by very high winds and temperatures as low as -40C, which slowed his progress. Scott was undoubtedly a competent organiser, but a little more flexibility in the arrangements might have helped.

I'm not sure we came to solid conclusions concerning these three, but while researching Scott, I came across the following:

In his 1956 address to the British Science Association, one of Shackleton's contemporaries, Sir Raymond Priestley, said "Scott for scientific method, Amundsen for speed and efficiency but when disaster strikes and all hope is gone, get down on your knees and pray for Shackleton", paraphrasing what Apsley Cherry-Garrard had written in a preface to his 1922 memoir "The Worst Journey in the World".