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REVIEW ESSAY
Changing Trends in Remembering Amundsen and Scott


The past couple of years have seen publication of several books dealing with the epic drama of men struggling with Nature and each other to be the first to reach the geographic South Pole. Roald Amundsen and four companions, citizens of a newly independent Norway were the first to make it, reaping the prize before the rival party of Robert Falcon Scott did. Amundsen had officially set out to repeat Fridtjof Nansen’s experiment of locking his ship the Fram in the Arctic sea ice to follow its drift and undertake original oceanographic research, but he had the audacity to change his mind and head for the South Pole, thereby challenging Scott whose expedition had the backing of the British Empire.

The outcome is well known. Amundsen’s superior planning, know-how regarding survival under polar conditions and efficient use of Inuit style clothing and dogsleds won the day over Scott’s naval tradition of man hauling, poorer clothing and insufficient preparations. Amundsen made it back to civilization to announce his own achievement; Scott and his four companions froze to death near a depot they were unable to reach on their return to base-camp. Both men had their names inscribed in the history of their respective nations, symbolizing respectively the ingenuity and prowess of a newly independent nation on the rise and the onset perhaps of the decline of the world’s biggest imperial power at that time.

Both Norway and the UK have made their national heroes the focal points of many events commemorating the “conquest” of the South Pole. From 2010 onward into 2012 there have been exhibitions and seminars of various kinds commemorating the Amundsen and Scott expeditions. A team of skiers from Norway has re-enacted Amundsen’s trek to the pole. They left the Bay of Whales on
the Ross Ice Shelf on 1 October 2011 and two of them made it all the way to the pole by 14 December; two others had to be flown in the last 80 kilometres. A British group paying tribute to Scott and his men traced the original rescue party’s tracks from Hut Point to Scott’s final camp where they met up with several other persons flown in for a memorial ceremony.

Nowadays well trained sportsmen and adventurers pulling lightweight sleds made of new composite materials, packing dry-frozen foods, very light tents and sometimes using sails and the latest ski equipment have made it to the Pole, intermittently in contact by satellite telephone with people back home and writing daily reports with pictures inserted in blogs. In case of mishaps support for airborne rescue may be called upon. The situation is quite different from what it was one hundred years ago. This struck me when I was in Tromsø on 14 December 2011.

The national celebration of Amundsen’s South Pole achievement took place that day in Tromsø, Northern Norway, where the Norwegian Polar Institute is now located. Festivities included the unveiling next to the Polar activity centre (Polaria) of a statue depicting Helmer Hansen in front of a dogsled; Hansen, an ice skipper, was a native of Northern Norway and the lead sledge-driver on the trek to the Pole.

A polar parade went through the streets of Tromsø to Stortorget, the city’s main square where there was an outdoor stage with a large screen accommodating musical performances and activities for children. Through a satellite hook-up one could see images of the Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg and hear his voice in direct transmission from the South Pole as he was speaking with members of the Norwegian team who had reached that site on skis. Haakon, Crown Prince of Norway was on stage in Tromsø and interacted from there directly via satellite transmission with Stoltenberg and the other Norwegians at the South Pole asking the latter various questions about their trip.

Being in Tromsø the previous day for a one day long seminar on Amundsen’s exploits and various facets in his life, I stayed on for the big celebration. Witnessing the media event at Stortorget I came to think of the vast change in conditions of polar exploration and research wrought by a century of successive technological developments, most recently satellite communications, Internet and multimedia. Messages that one hundred years ago took months to reach people back home now come with only a few seconds delay, and in situ pictures on top of that.

When Amundsen and his four men reached the South Pole, news of his achievement only reached world capitals three months later, in early March 1912, after he had sent a telegram away immediately when his ship Fram docked in Hobart, Tasmania, on its return from Antarctica.

Scott and his men approached the Pole on 17 January, 1912, thus well after Amundsen; on the 18th they surveyed the area and came across the tent that Amundsen had erected, complete with a note to Scott and a request to convey a letter to Norway’s King Haakon. Word that Scott’s party had also reached the pole but perished on their return to base-camp did not reach the world until February 1913, three months after a search party discovered his tent covered by snow and containing three frozen bodies, one of them Scott’s, in sleeping bags, together with diaries, geological specimens and photographs.
Ross MacPhee’s book *Race to the End* was written to accompany a special Antarctic exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Founded in 1869 the museum is today one of the largest institutions of its kind with a broad scientific, educational and cultural mission carried out by more than 200 scientists who conduct research and manage a vast array of collections of specimens and artefacts. The author is Curator in the Division of Vertebrate zoology and was also the curator of the exhibit. He has been in Antarctica many times and is intimately acquainted with the history of many facets of its exploration and science. Through close institutional cooperation with the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) in Cambridge, UK, and both the Fram Museum and the Norwegian National Library in Oslo he was able to assemble many objects and unique images of documents and artefacts as well as photographs associated with the race to the Pole. These are used to illustrate the historical background, context and unfolding of significant events between June 1910 when Amundsen left Oslo on the *Fram* until the fateful discovery of Scott’s tent on November 1912 and the impact of this news when it reached world capitals in February the following year.

In chapter one Kathleen Bruce Scott’s farewell to her husband in New Zealand on 19 November 1910 as he leaves with the *Terra Nova* for Antarctica starts the story, complemented with a brief historical review of Antarctic exploration prior to the advent of the so-called heroic age to which Amundsen’s and Scott’s epic battle in a quest to reach the pole belongs. The twelve chapters that follow take us back and forth between the two men’s camps and activities during different intervals of time, telling of important turns of events, decisions, difficulties encountered on the way to the pole, and concerns that occupied the minds of the two protagonists.

Each chapter is richly illustrated with images of artefacts, documents, original photographs and material from contemporary media. In the course of this we learn about the foodstuffs, equipment, and preparatory activities that went on at the different base-camps. The scientific components of Scott’s expedition are amply covered with brief summaries of essential geological and biological findings. In addition the bearing that differences in approach, influences of national cultures and traditions and the previous polar experience had on the two parallel expeditions are highlighted.

Chapter 12 entitled “It is finished” deals with the two contrasting endings after the pole had been reached, Amundsen’s quick return to base-camp and departure for Hobart, and Scott’s continual setbacks, loss of two men and final reflections recorded in his diary entries and words meant for posterity written while pinned down for nine days and nights with two remaining companions in his tent in a storm while food and fuel grew less each day.

The two final chapters deal briefly with the aftermath and legacies of the two explorers. The first one ends with Amundsen’s disappearance in June 1928 in the Norwegian Sea on a rescue flight out of Tromsø in an endeavour to search for survivors of the crash of the Italian dirigible commanded by his former arch-enemy Umberto Nobile. An Amundsen Foundation was set up to commemorate the Norwegian hero and ended up finally financing publication of some of the scientific results from the man’s earlier expedition through the Northwest Passage. The second one recounts the legacy of Scott’s *Terra Nova*
expedition and the way it came to symbolize the advancement of science as opposed to Amundsen’s quest for laurel gathering. A Scott Memorial Fund raised more than sufficient funds in a trust that was used in 1920, in part, to build the Scott Polar Institute in Cambridge, England.

In an appendix MacPhee’s book contains a set of unique panorama fold-outs and a map first issued in a magazine in 1913 to illustrate different stretches in Scott’s assault on the Pole and the return leg in which three men finally struggled to their final resting place. Overall the American Museum of Natural History’s book is intellectually stimulating and aesthetically pleasing.

Edward Larson’s An Empire of Ice complements MacPhee’s Race to the Pole very well. It both broadens the scope regarding the historical background and setting in which the “race” took place and foregrounds the issue of science. Therewith the linking of Amundsen with laurel gathering and Scott with research is accentuated even more.

The first chapter sets the scene. It takes us to the Royal Geographical Society in London towards the end of 1912, when Amundsen recently back from his Fram expedition gave a talk on his triumphant South Pole achievement. How Robert Scott had fared was still not known. The British eagerly awaited his return when, it was intimated, the whole country would have a real celebration, one that emphasized the advance of science. The chapter clarifies how the British establishment regarded Amundsen as a lucky interloper who had plucked the prize that was rightfully Britain’s. The chapter outlines the broader geopolitical context of “the race” and nicely captures the British mood and what was held to be at stake.

The second chapter charts important episodes in the history of the quest to map the earth’s magnetic field, or what was called the “Magnetic Crusade.” Here the story goes back to the English seventeenth century astronomer Edmund Halley, traces the upsurge of German terrestrial magnetic research in the early 1800s and the backing James Clark Ross received to find the South Magnetic Pole (Ross had already reached the North Magnetic Pole in 1831). Ross’s Antarctic expedition exceeded all expectations. It plotted magnetic lines but did not find the magnetic pole.

On the other hand a whole new world was opened up for exploration and research beyond the great ice barrier and Mt Erebus, Victoria Land was claimed and British priority was established to an important route to the South Pole. The British Challenger expedition in the 1870s followed up on Ross’s magnetic work and found that the magnetic lines in the Antarctic region had changed dramatically over three decades. Tracking down the South Magnetic Pole became an important argument for launching new expeditions. Larson shows how Scott’s Discovery expedition and Shackleton’s Nimrod expedition fit into this history with roots going back to Halley and rivalry with Germany on the magnetic front. He details the vicissitudes and achievements of the two expeditions in this regard, culminating in Shackleton’s Northern Sledge Party coming close to the Magnetic Pole which for scientists was no less interesting than Shackleton’s “Furthest South” (i.e., coming close to the Geographic Pole). Of course it was not insignificant that the Union Jack was also ceremonially planted near the Magnetic South Pole.

The third chapter concentrates on map-making and topography. It distils the contributions of the Discovery and Nimrod expeditions in this particular
branch of geographic research, again linking it to a long tradition in British imperial history that includes the names of Livingstone and others who sought the sources of the Nile and Franklin, as well as Nares plus others who explored the Arctic north. Chapter four does something similar for oceanography and marine biological work in McMurdo Sound and the charting of meteorological features along the Ross Ice Shelf (as it is called today) and the region around Mt Erebus.

In chapter four the author shifts gear in order to delineate the ideology that inscribed polar exploration into the heroic imagery of Britain’s survival in a Darwinian world of struggle and rival powers where slackers were associated with decline. Polar exploration counted as a means to train and discipline naval officers and men during peacetime. It was believed to stimulate courage, daring, boldness and chivalry. The survival of the British Empire, it was held, hinged on these qualities. The champion of eugenics, Francis Galton, Larson argues, saw here the antidote to lethargy that he feared would otherwise lead to the demise of the British race. He had seen signs of it in the Boer War. Larson further notes how these ideas were promoted among geographers and explorers and that Clements Robert Markham carried some of them into his promotion of Antarctic exploration. Additionally the chapter traces how this ideology was present in Scott and Shackleton’s determination out on the ice. Scott, groomed and backed by Markham, represented the ideals of British manhood in the Edwardian age—“grit” and self-sacrifice in the service of science and honouring the nation. Media commentators portrayed overcoming adversity to do good science as a sign of moral and national fitness.

According to Scott, Shackleton failed to measure up to these standards during the Discovery expedition and was duly sent home after only one year. Shackleton’s humiliation knew no bounds and became the source of his determination to demonstrate otherwise, taking revenge on Scott by outdoing him in the field. This was an important driving force in Shackleton’s own Nimrod expedition. Larson shows how willpower in this case translated into important geological work and meteorology. Shackleton’s success in turn upset Scott who now declared he would have a second go and plant the Union Jack at the South Pole. Science and politics intertwined. Reliance on man hauling was a common denominator wholly in line with British naval tradition and the enactment of a culture that hyped racial fitness and moral character. The use of dogs to replace manpower, it seems, would have essentially diluted this doctrine.

In chapter six the author explains how and why biological field work during Scott’s and Shackleton’s expeditions grew out of a strong emphasis on natural history in nineteenth century British science. Collecting specimens of seals and seabirds and the study of marine microorganisms were an important dimension for the Discovery while Shackleton’s Nimrod expedition focused more on fresh water micro-organisms. The differences, we learn, had to do with the interests of individual investigators. Edward Wilson who participated in both of Scott’s expeditions had a pronounced interest in procuring Emperor penguins and their eggs. He thought the Emperor was the oldest surviving species of penguins after a much larger and older species of penguins only known through their fossil remains had disappeared. On the basis of fieldwork he also pieced together a new account of how Emperors breed. This motivated incredible efforts to find and observe baby penguins but also to see what penguins were doing before that stage,
thus calling for a midwinter trek to a rookery in night time darkness to look for eggs in order to complete investigation of the Emperor’s life cycle. Scott’s second expedition afforded the opportunity, and Wilson grasped it. The epic ordeal of the Winter Journey that brought back three eggs is recorded in his biological assistant Apsley Cherry-Garrard’s famous book, *Worst Journey in the World* (1922). The contribution to biology was important. The chapter devotes considerable space to this episode and explains Wilson’s work in relation to the scientific debates at the time on possible mechanisms of evolution. Wilson’s interest was connected to evolutionary biology and his hope of shedding light on the evolutionary process. The significance of the man’s achievement lay there, even if his own theory of avian evolution later proved wrong.

Chapter seven reviews the geological surveys undertaken during the three British expeditions. The author recounts how conflict between the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Society prior to Scott’s first expedition substantially weakened its geological component when Markham’s insistence on the supremacy of a naval command structure won out placing science in a subordinate position, precipitating the resignation of the expedition’s science director. Despite this the expedition made a relatively good start on which Shackleton’s expedition with a strong focus on geology was able to build further. In Scott’s second expedition there was a strong contingent of geologists.

Overall the triad of British expeditions covered a lot of territory, investigating several mountainous regions as well as the famed Dry Valley. Using fossil finds and evidence of stratification the scientists pieced together a picture of the Antarctica’s past, intimating that it was a continental landmass that was once connected to other southern continents. One of the geologists compared Victoria Land to Queensland, with a fault line running along the east coast separating an uplifted high plateau from what is now a sunken sea basin. All along the chapter lets us follow the various geological parties at different times and in different locations in the field.

Chapter eight deals with glaciology. Here again the resignation of the science director from Scott’s first expedition reduced the potential for professional studies in this discipline. It was compensated by many qualitative observations made by Scott and others, suggesting that the polar ice sheet was shrinking. This view was corroborated by further exploration during Shackleton’s expedition, but now geologists also studied the movement of the Ross Ice Shelf and two ice tongues extending from Victoria Land into the Ross Sea. During Scott’s second expedition the movement of glaciers further inland were studied and different kinds of ice were classified. The reconstruction of what was discovered is interwoven with Larson’s depiction of the different adversities encountered in various locations and the misfortunes that in the end overtook Scott’s South Pole Party. The author convincingly shows how, taken altogether, a considerable amount of new knowledge regarding various properties of snow and ice and the movement of glaciers was accumulated during the British triad of expeditions.

The final chapter is short, an epilogue simply entitled ‘Heroes’ Requiem.’ Here the author reflects on the changing meanings projected into the story of the death of Scott and his men. Immediately after the event the value of science was accentuated. Later on as the First World War loomed up it was the moral message of sacrifice to one’s nation that stood out. The Second World War rein-
forced the heroic interpretation. In more recent times as entrepreneurial deeds are hyped, the images of Amundsen and Shackleton as strong leaders eclipsed that of Scott, who now became the hapless bungler, a view reinforced with the publication of Roland Huntford’s popular book of 1979, *Scott and Amundsen*.

Larson’s book was written in reaction to the tendency following Huntford to reduce Scott to an incompetent naval man steeped in Victorian tradition. His own mission is to shift the focus back to the research dimension in the triad of British Antarctic expeditions he expertly unravels in the broader context of both science history and geopolitics. In this he succeeds. His reassessment is timely, coming a few years after the completion of the fourth international polar year that momentarily gained considerable media attention. It also tallies well with the increased significance accorded Antarctic science in an age when attention to global climate change has become an important political issue.

Larson’s claim that Antarctic expeditions at the time under consideration in his book were largely a British project is however questionable. It gives a picture of British science as a self-contained system largely isolated from the work of several other explorers and researchers involved in the same range of disciplines and preoccupied with similar research agendas.

One need only think of the expeditions led by Drygalski, Nordenskjöld, Charcot and Filchner during the same period. They also produced equally good science and reflected on similar problems, like the geological history of the Antarctic past and its glaciology, as well as taxonomic issues in biology. Ever since the first international polar year the ideal of scientific internationalism and interaction among researchers of different nationalities existed in parallel with manifestations of great power chauvinism.

The schematic generalization of changing public images of polar heroes with time in resonance with changing conjunctures of ideologies and politics is interesting, but it is also possible to find counter-currents in different constituencies of national populations. As Peder Roberts has shown in a recent paper on how, when Scott and Amundsen for various different reasons have been invoked as exemplars of national polar achievement both past and present by wedging them to particular sets of values, there are several other aspects that also play in. He points to later rivalries between countries and exemplifies with the one over sovereignty claims in Antarctica when a dividing line was drawn between Australian-British and Norwegian spheres of interest (Roberts 2011).

Cornelia Lüdecke’s book, *Amundsen*, also starts with the historic race. This time we are taken along to follow the Norwegian on his very final lap to the South Pole. The introductory chapter is entitled “The Day at the South Pole.” It provides an extract from the explorer’s own travel report and thus presents the situation entirely from his perspective, what he sees, experiences, feels and thinks. His rival Robert Scott is there only in Amundsen’s mind as a mirage of eventual uncertainty that is not cleared away until the Norwegian team are well within sight of their goal and know they are first. This opening is very effective, since it immediately introduces us to the complexities of Amundsen’s character.

Ten chapters that follow cover successive periods in the explorer’s life and achievements while two final chapters focus on his death and continuation thereafter as a legendary figure of the past.

Chapter two covers Amundsen’s origins, his youth and early education, and
then in chronological order come the expeditions he was involved in, punctuated here and there with a chapter that takes up significant interludes between them.

The Belgica expedition (1897–1899), in which he participated as Third Officer and resented the Belgian commander Gerlache’s authority, is referred to as a period of early learning, which in the next chapter is supplemented by an account of his further training, obtaining his captain’s papers and mastering instruments to measure earth magnetism.

The general plot is one of following the young Amundsen’s learning curve and then the life of the mature professional explorer whose single-minded will-power and focus on prestige transformed him into a controversial figure, a hero revered in some circles and despised in others. The plot is straightforward, each expedition is detailed and its most significant events are pieced together with exceptional care and clarity. Attention to scientific aspects and the complexities of obtaining empirical data under extreme conditions combines with accounts of dramatic episodes that serve to enliven the storylines.

The Gjøa expedition through the Northwest Passage is portrayed as still belonging to Amundsen’s apprenticeship period. It qualified him as a polar explorer to be reckoned with, but we also see how during the course of it his interest in the scientific aspects of the magnetic Pole were eclipsed by a fascination with the survival techniques of the northern Canadian Inuit and learning from them. In the long run the ethnological results of the Gjøa expedition also turned out to be much more important than the magnetic ones. The race to the South Pole is depicted as Amundsen’s masterpiece: we are given a very good overview of the various stages in this expedition, its background, and significance for the explorer’s later life. Thereafter follows an interlude of financial difficulties and interactions with Norwegian but also German scientific communities, as the promise to carry out a replay of Fridtjof Nansen’s Arctic drift experiment is now finally acted upon.

The chapter on the crossing of the Northwest Passage and the first leg of the Maud expedition (1918–1921) is entitled “The Injured,” referring to the injuries Amundsen received in an attack by a polar bear and a nasty fall, which placed him in a kind of subdued background position while Harald Ulrik Sverdrup successfully upheld the banner of science. Again we are provided with a good overview of important facets of the expedition.

In the next chapter we follow the Maud expedition’s subsequent phases (1922–1925) when Sverdrup, despite all odds, reaped further scientific successes, while Amundsen himself became more interested in a quicker way to reach the North Pole. The experimentation with airplanes is superbly reconstructed by Lüdecke and she neatly places these efforts in their contemporary both scientific and technological contexts. Thereupon, of course, comes a chapter on the first dramatic flight that almost reached the pole. Here again we are alerted to the role of various stakeholder interests involved (and various levels of rivalries) at the time. Amundsen’s initiative in facilitating the design and German manufacture of a useful solar compass is discussed, a highlight that is often ignored in earlier accounts of the man’s achievements, since they have one-sidedly fixed on his reputation as an adventurer. We learn how a later version of this compass was still used by the two Dornier-Wal planes Boreas and Passat engaged in photogrammetric survey flights over Antarctica during the German Schwabenland expedition 1938/1939.
Here Cornelia Lüdecke’s earlier research on and intimate knowledge of the history of the role of polar flights in the context of exploration and research is an important asset. She is able to provide insights into the pioneering role Amundsen played in this regard, therewith counteracting the less serious and dismissive approach one can find in some of the literature that nowadays seeks to play up the science dimension in Scott’s expeditions by playing it off against a lack of the same in Amundsen’s exploits.

The stories, respectively, of the Dornier-Wal flying boats in an almost successful attempt to reach the pole, and thereafter the successful flight over it with the dirigible *Norge* are both told in rich detail. The author clarifies the intricacies of logistics, competing actor networks, money and power plays, as well as complicated personal relationships, but without losing sight of the overall historical significance of the pioneering experiments. Thus we are able to better appreciate dimensions that otherwise get lost when the focus of a narrative is on record-breaking while obscuring the pioneering nature of technological experimentation.

The final two chapters are short. They follow Amundsen during his few final years, his bitterness and lonely self-isolation and his disappearance and its aftermath.

The disappearance 18 June 1928 is shrouded in mystery. Most likely the crash occurred somewhere in the Norwegian Sea below or above Bear Island.

Thereafter, on 24 October, Nansen held a powerful memorial speech that was broadcast by radio into many homes throughout Norway. About two months later at 12 o’clock the country came to a halt—two minutes of silence during a day of national mourning and remembrance, on 14 December 1928, an important date in the history of the Norwegian nation. Amundsen the polar hero was immortalized as an icon. His departure at the same time marked the end of an era.

Cornelia Lüdecke is to be commended for her successful attempt to come to grips with her elusive subject. Throughout the narrative flows easily, rich in detail, also when it comes to reflecting telling elements in the man’s complex personality, his enigmatic relationship with women, and the circumstances that led to his final psychological and physical tragedy, only to rise from the ashes as a legendary figure whose end also symbolized the definite end of the heroic age of research and exploration to which he belonged.

This biography, published in pocket book form, is a handy reference work for anyone who wants to quickly find out what the man was doing at different points in his life. The bibliography is also useful, although the Scandinavian reader will miss some of the newer literature Norwegian scholars have produced in their native language in recent years.

The book should definitely appeal also to a wider audience interested in gaining a more balanced view of Amundsen than the one in the Anglophone literature that mainly constructs him as the figure who beat Scott to a mathematical point at the extreme “bottom” of our globe.

Amundsen and Scott have been remembered many times and in different ways during the past century. On each occasion new facts and perspectives have come to light, and equally interesting—in retrospect—is how the constructions of memory are historically contingent, they change with the times.
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