



Scott's career in the Royal Navy was lacklustre and appeared to be going nowhere, until he caught the eye of Sir Clements Markham. Markham, who was known to frequent tropical locations in the company of young midshipmen on loan from the Royal Navy, had discovered Scott at a sailing regatta in St. Kitts. He immediately took great interest in Scott and was rumoured to be instrumental in his unusually rapid rise through his navy ranks, culminating in his command of *Discovery*.

At the Royal Geographical Society, Scott's lack of experience in a masted ship became an issue, and RGS director Mostyn Field was deeply suspicious of Markham's enthusiastic support of Scott. He pointed out Scott's lack of naval experience afloat.

To be fair to Scott, he hadn't sunk a vessel, but his service record was decidedly strange. He had been in the service of the Royal Navy for years, but there were periods where Scott's name would mysteriously disappear off the list of active officers. Scott did make a voyage up the Pacific Coast on HMS *Amphion* in 1889 and was a big hit in the social scene in Victoria, British Columbia. Only twenty-one years old, dark-haired and handsome, he was the most sought-after of the ship's officers. However, the only record of *Amphion's* stay in Victoria was of its ignominious departure:

The close proximity of Haro Point was not observed, owing to the fog, and the first intimation of danger was the loud, crashing sound as the warship's side was pierced by the saw-like rocks, followed by the rushing noise of the water pouring into her forward compartments. (*Victoria Daily Colonist*, November 7, 1889)

Scott was just a lieutenant aboard *Amphion*, but it was not the sort of action that gets one's portrait hanging in the National Gallery, nor did it entitle one to command a brand-new and, by now, rather expensive vessel.

Clements Markham prevailed however and Scott was appointed master of HMS *Discovery*.

Provisioning the ship was left to Scott, who intended to rely on canned meat and vegetables. The subject of scurvy was always an issue for any trip of that length and prior polar expeditions had been able to avoid it by using seal meat, but Scott had a soft spot for animals and didn't want to rely solely on the local wildlife for food. Under pressure, he grudgingly allowed that seal meat would be made available a few times a week, but only for those who wanted it. As a guard against scurvy, Scott took on board 100 gallons of lime juice, although lemon juice had already been proven to be far more effective as an antiscorbutic than lime juice. When scurvy inevitably hit the party, Scott and Wilson came up with their own remedy, which involved whitewashing *Discovery's* holds, airing out the hammocks and regular outdoor exercise. (This was thirty years after James Cook had exposed the mysteries of scurvy.)

Symptoms of scurvy:

Although one is more likely to suffer from the Norwalk virus on ships nowadays, next time you're on a cruise, keep an eye out for the following:

Tiredness, weakness, irritability, aches and pains,* poor healing, bleeding in fingertips or old scars, bruising easily, bleeding gums, swollen purple spongy gums and a sudden fondness for Céline Dion CDs.

* Not to be confused with a bad hangover.

Upon launching, it was clear that *Discovery* had serious shortcomings. Besides a sickening roll, she was undermasted and her engines had the same horsepower as a sewing machine. C.R. Ford, seaman on *Discovery*,

recalled the first time he saw *Discovery*: “I got to Dundee and couldn’t find the ship, then I saw a barrel at the edge of the wharf. I went along and saw this ship below the wharf. I was quite horrified.”¹

Regardless, Scott accepted *Discovery* from the shipyard and sailed her down to London for provisioning. While Scott was standing on deck with a group of other men, a heavy block fell from aloft, missing him by inches and putting a large dent in the deck. Scott reportedly went white with rage, startling the crew, as it was the first they had seen of Scott’s temper. It wouldn’t be the last. He once dressed down a man who had the temerity to complain about burned hot cross buns at Easter and punished the offender by having his grog cut off for two days. When the sailor protested, Scott ordered the man to be removed from his sight before he struck him.

He [Scott] was a strict disciplinarian, anything not up to the naval standard he was used to would cause his quick temper to flare up. He would fly at us, but we never minded much as it would be over in a minute. On one occasion, he went for me, which I thought was most unfair but a few hours later, he met me on deck and with a sweet smile offered me plum pudding.

—C.R. Ford, seaman, HMS *Discovery*²

Prior to sailing, *Discovery* was visited by a steady procession of cranks and wackos. The Flat Earth Society turned up armed with charts showing the Antarctic ice barrier was actually a safety ring around the Earth, and if the men sailed through it they would disappear into outer space. Another group turned up on deck and cursed the voyage. It took everything Scott had to prevent the sailors from tossing that group into the Thames. They finally shooed the last of the zealots off the ship and, on August 6, *Discovery* sailed south.

Almost immediately things began to go wrong, starting with their food:

We found out before we left, our food supply was bad. We had to sail with what we’d got, it was too late to change it. It didn’t strike anyone that we didn’t need to take what we’d got; we could have got fresh food in New Zealand.

—C.H. Hare seaman, HMS *Discovery*³

The ship leaked badly, wormholes were discovered, planks turned out to be unseasoned and defective bolts were letting in water. Blame was immediately put on shoddy workmanship at the Dundee yard. The yard countered that plans for the ship were constantly being altered during construction and that they were only trying to stay within an impossible budget. *Discovery* did reach New Zealand without sinking and the crew were able to effect repairs while in Lyttelton. The remainder of the voyage to the ice was uneventful, except for Seaman Charles Bonner, who fell from a mast and died from his injuries. They made their way through the pack ice in a record five days, reaching Ross Island in January 1902, where they erected a hut on Hut Point.

The *Discovery* hut was actually a prefabricated Australian sheep drover's hut and had no insulation and a roof more suited to the dry Australian outback than the Antarctic. Ignoring the lessons of de Gomery's expedition some years earlier, Scott anchored *Discovery* in McMurdo Sound, where he planned to use the ship, instead of the hut, for accommodation. *Discovery* ended up firmly trapped in thick fast ice for two years.

Scott, Ernest Shackleton and Scott's close friend Edward Wilson headed for the South Pole on November 2, 1902, planning a route over the Great Ice Barrier and up the Beardmore Glacier to the Polar Plateau at 9,000 feet elevation. Wilson probably should never have gone on the journey. The medical department of the Royal Navy had twice rejected him for the expedition, as he was still recovering from a long illness related to tuberculosis. It was Markham who stepped in and over-ruled the medical doctors.

Weather conditions on the Barrier were ideal and they made good time, but things began to unravel fifty days into the march. The dogs were getting sick from tainted dog food, and Scott and the party were incompetent at handling the dog teams: the three men ending up dragging the sledges themselves. They kept going until December 30, 1902, when at 82°17' S they gave up and turned back. Shackleton had started exhibiting symptoms of scurvy, which was not surprising, for they had



Shackleton, Scott and Wilson prior to the start of their Southern Journey, November 2, 1902.

long since exhausted their meagre supply of seal meat and were reduced to living on canned pemmican and dog biscuits. On January 14, 1903, on their return journey, Scott described Shackleton's condition:

Shackleton has very angry-looking gums—swollen and dark; he is also suffering greatly from shortness of breath; his throat seems to be congested and he gets fits of coughing, when he is obliged to spit and once or twice a day he has spat blood. I myself have distinctly red gums. And a very slight swelling in the ankles. Wilson's gums are affecting one spot, where there is a large plum-coloured lump; otherwise he seems free from symptoms.⁴

Shackleton's condition deteriorated alarmingly, to the point where Scott and Wilson had a discussion outside Shackleton's tent about his chances for survival.

Scott: "Do you think he'll last?"

Wilson: "I don't think so."



Discovery locked in the ice in McMurdo Sound. Observation Hill in the background.

A strong voice bellowed from within the tent: “I’m not going to die. I tell you this, I shall be alive when both of you fellows are dead!”⁵

Rather prophetic of Shackleton ...

They made it back to the coast alive, on February 3, 1903, to find *Discovery* still locked in the ice, but the relief ship *Morning* had arrived in their absence. Scott sent eight men, including Shackleton, home on *Morning*, while he and the remaining men would stay on the ice-bound *Discovery* for another season.

Scott and Wilson spent the following summer exploring and doing extensive mapping of the surrounding area, with Scott, Petty Officer Edgar “Taff” Evans and William Lashly spending some weeks poking about on the Great Ice Barrier. They returned to find the ship was still locked in ice and winter approaching fast. This time it was serious. They didn’t have enough supplies to last another winter, and in fact what few supplies they did have were turning rancid, with Dr. Wilson having to personally examine each food tin when it was opened. They tried using saws to cut a channel in the ice, but after two weeks of sawing, all they had been able to do was cut 450 feet of channel—with another 20 miles of ice to go.

Back at the Royal Geographical Society in London, the directors were getting nervous. *Discovery* was overdue in New Zealand and the RGS feared the worst. Reluctantly, and after much snivelling and grovelling

from Markham, the British Admiralty sent two relief ships. *Morning* and the sealing vessel *Terra Nova* were dispatched with orders to pick up the stranded crew (if they were still alive) and abandon *Discovery*.

Royal Navy ships towed *Terra Nova* and *Morning* across the Mediterranean Sea and through the Suez Canal to the Indian Ocean, in order to save burning coal.

On January 5, 1904, Scott was shocked to look out of his cabin on *Discovery* and see the two relief ships hove-to in McMurdo Sound, and even more shocked by the orders he was given from the Admiralty: upon arrival of the relief vessels, *Discovery* was to be abandoned and the crew and officers transferred to the relief vessels.

Scott was livid. He was convinced he had an enemy in the Admiralty who wanted to scuttle his career, and he was determined *Discovery* should not be abandoned. The relief ships stood patiently by as the *Discovery*'s crew frantically dynamited a passage for their ship through the ice, much to the annoyance of any sea life that happened to be living directly underneath. Eventually, after freeing their vessel on February 14, they prevailed and headed for home, but not before *Discovery* struck a reef, where the ship stayed for eight hours until the tide floated her off. *Discovery* arrived back in England in September 1904, where Markham immediately put her on the auction block. Factoring in the Admiralty's bill for the rescue attempt, the final cost of the expedition had ballooned to a colossal £200,000—roughly £4 million today. *Discovery* leaving the RGS with an embarrassing deficit of £190,000. Regardless of the pickle the RGS found itself in, Scott was anxious to return to the Antarctic and this time reach the South Pole.

But Ernest Shackleton, who had arrived back in London a year earlier on *Morning*, had a head start on fundraising for his own expedition to the South Pole.

Scott had barely got his oilskins back from the cleaners when Shackleton announced he'd raised £30,000, got the backing of the Royal Geographical Society and purchased *Nimrod*, a clapped-out whaler, to transport him back to the Ross Sea. To Scott's fury, Shackleton was heading back to Antarctica before him.



Ernest Shackleton

Shackleton was born to Yorkshire parents in County Kildare, Ireland, on February 15, 1874. He went to sea at the age of sixteen and was a competent ship's master by the time he joined the 1901 Discovery Expedition about eight years later. Relations between Scott and Shackleton soured after their return from the aborted trip to the South Pole.

Ernest H. Shackleton, Explorer. Resumé:

- Discovery, 1901: Got to within 297 miles of South Pole, returned with scurvy. Ship almost crushed in ice.
- Nimrod, 1907: Got within 97 miles of South Pole. Ran out of supplies. Got scurvy.
- Endurance, 1914: Ship crushed by ice. Sailed 800 miles to South Georgia in an open boat. Ross Sea party stranded without supplies for two years. Two men died.

Without social connections or money, Scott had no choice but to sit on the sidelines as the Royal Geographical Society paraded Shackleton as the man to claim the Pole for England. Scott was mollified by the title of “backup explorer” should anything go wrong with Shackleton’s expedition. Scott was convinced Shackleton would fail, and to make things difficult for him, he extracted from Shackleton a written promise he would stay away from Ross Island, specifically the hut they’d erected on Scott’s previous 1901 Discovery Expedition, as he already had plans to use the hut as a base for his own upcoming expedition.

The strange case of the Dublin Crown jewels: On July 6, 1907, Ernest Shackleton's brother Francis was implicated in the heist of the Dublin Crown Jewels* but avoided prison time by threatening to expose a homosexual ring operating out of Dublin Castle—the site of the safe containing the jewels. Sir Arthur Vickers, the keeper of the keys to the safe, was charged with “failing to exercise due vigilance or proper care of the regalia.” Despite his protests, he lost his job and was murdered by the Irish Republican Army in 1921. Francis Shackleton eventually went to prison for defrauding a widow of her savings.

*Actually a set of diamond-encrusted beer mugs.

Although Shackleton's expedition was not billed as “scientific,” Shackleton did take along a token collection of scientists, including my great-uncle Raymond Priestley, who later recalled that upon applying for the position of geologist on the expedition, Shackleton interviewed him personally, posing only two questions:

1. “Can you identify gold?”
2. “Can you play a musical instrument?”⁶

Priestley presumably answered both questions correctly, as he was hired. Years later, my other great-uncle, Griffith Taylor, the Australian geologist on, put it bluntly: “Shackleton had not the slightest interest in science.”⁷

On July 30, 1907, promising to send Scott a postcard from the South Pole (no doubt postage-due), Shackleton sailed for New Zealand on *Nimrod*, along with twenty-nine expedition members, a collection of sledge dogs, a motorcar and old *Discovery* shipmates Frank Wild and Ernest Joyce. To conserve their coal reserves, *Nimrod* was towed by *Koonya* from New Zealand as far as the pack ice, then made the rest of the trip under her own steam. Like *Discovery* a few years earlier, *Nimrod* sailed into McMurdo Sound, but due to heavy sea ice was forced to anchor miles away from the site of their camp on Cape Royds. The delay in unloading meant the



Raymond Priestley in the Western Mountains, 1907.

Austral summer was fading and by the time they got their hut erected, average temperatures had plunged to minus 20°F.

The group waited out the winter until the return of the sun, when Shackleton, Jameson Adams, Eric Marshall and Frank Wild, would head for the Pole, while a second party, made up of Edgeworth David, Dr. Alistair Mackay and Douglas Mawson, would set out on a 1,200-mile journey to reach the estimated location of the Magnetic South Pole.

The position of the Magnetic South Pole varies from year to year due to the drift in Earth's magnetic field. Edgeworth David and Douglas Mawson put the location of the Magnetic Pole in the middle of Wilkes Land at 72° 25' S 155° 16' E in 1909. Geographers later found that to be incorrect. The likely location of the Magnetic South Pole in 1909 was actually at 71° 36' S 152° 0' E. (But that was just being pedantic.)

At time of writing, the Magnetic South Pole was in the Southern Ocean.

The Magnetic Pole Party immediately ran into difficulties; their motorcar overheated constantly, requiring frequent stops for long periods in order to allow the vehicle to cool down, which slowed their progress. They eventually abandoned the motorcar and continued on foot, dragging their sledges, running out of food, suffering from severe frostbite and snow blindness. Finally, on January 15, 1908, they raised the Union flag at what they calculated was the Magnetic South Pole.

Their return journey was tight, as they had set a prearranged time and place to meet *Nimrod*, making it to the ship with only hours to spare.

The Geographic Polar Party was having an even worse time. The ponies were sick and weak and being shot at regular intervals, Adams' leg was injured from being kicked by a pony (score one for the ponies) and Shackleton had badly miscalculated the amount of rations they'd need. By November 26, 1908, they passed the point where Shackleton, Scott and Wilson had turned back six years earlier. They celebrated this milestone by shooting another pony. This not only meant fresh pony meat; they could also eat the deceased pony's fodder.

By Christmas Day, Shackleton's party had struggled up the Beardmore Glacier and was on the Polar Plateau, being brutalised by constant blizzards and plunging temperatures.

On January 9, at 88° 23' S, they were only 97 miles from the South Pole, but their rations were so depleted that if they carried on any farther, they would not make it back alive. They planted a flag, took some photos and headed home, leaving behind a trail of dog and pony carcasses, along with a few hundred cigarette butts (Shackleton had a fondness for cigarettes). The return journey was made a little easier due to their rigging a sail on the sledge. By the time they reached the coast, they had walked 1,700 miles for nothing. The South Pole was still up for grabs.

Frank Wild, a member of Shackleton's expedition, became close friends with both Raymond Priestley and Silas Wright, spending much time at the Priestley family home in Tewkesbury.