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978-1-108-07178-9 - The South Pole: An Account of the Norwegian Antarctic Expedition in the Fram, 1910–1912: Volume 1

Roald Amundsen Translated by A. G. Chater

Excerpt

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THE SOUTH POLE

CHAPTER I*

THE HISTORY OF THE SOUTH POLE

“Life is a ball
In the hands of chance.”

BRISBANE,
QUEENSLAND,
April 13, 1912.

HERE I am, sitting in the shade of palms, surrounded by the most wonderful vegetation, enjoying the most magnificent fruits, and writing—the history of the South Pole. What an infinite distance seems to separate that region from these surroundings! And yet it is only four months since my gallant comrades and I reached the coveted spot.

I write the history of the South Pole! If anyone had hinted a word of anything of the sort four or five years ago, I should have looked upon him as incurably mad. And yet the madman would have been right.

* This retrospective chapter has here been greatly condensed, as the ground is already covered, for English readers, by Dr. H. R. Mill's "The Siege of the South Pole," Sir Ernest Shackleton's "The Heart of the Antarctic," and other works.—Tr.

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2 THE HISTORY OF THE SOUTH POLE

One circumstance has followed on the heels of another, and everything has turned out so entirely different from what I had imagined.

On December 14, 1911, five men stood at the southern end of our earth's axis, planted the Norwegian flag there, and named the region after the man for whom they would all gladly have offered their lives—King Haakon VII. Thus the veil was torn aside for all time, and one of the greatest of our earth's secrets had ceased to exist.

Since I was one of the five who, on that December afternoon, took part in this unveiling, it has fallen to my lot to write—the history of the South Pole.

Antarctic exploration is very ancient. Even before our conception of the earth's form had taken definite shape, voyages to the South began. It is true that not many of the explorers of those distant times reached what we now understand by the Antarctic regions, but still the intention and the possibility were there, and justify the name of Antarctic exploration. The motive force of these undertakings was—as has so often been the case—the hope of gain. Rulers greedy of power saw in their mind's eye an increase of their possessions. Men thirsting for gold dreamed of an unsuspected wealth of the alluring metal. Enthusiastic missionaries rejoiced at the thought of a multitude of lost sheep. The scientifically trained world waited modestly in the background. But they have all had their share: politics, trade, religion, and science.

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THE EARLIEST EXPLORERS 3

The history of Antarctic discovery may be divided at the outset into two categories. In the first of these I would include the numerous voyagers who, without any definite idea of the form or conditions of the southern hemisphere, set their course toward the South, to make what landfall they could. These need only be mentioned briefly before passing to the second group, that of Antarctic travellers in the proper sense of the term, who, with a knowledge of the form of the earth, set out across the ocean, aiming to strike the Antarctic monster—in the heart, if fortune favoured them.

We must always remember with gratitude and admiration the first sailors who steered their vessels through storms and mists, and increased our knowledge of the lands of ice in the South. People of the present day, who are so well supplied with information about the most distant parts of the earth, and have all our modern means of communication at their command, find it difficult to understand the intrepid courage that is implied by the voyages of these men.

They shaped their course toward the dark unknown, constantly exposed to being engulfed and destroyed by the vague, mysterious dangers that lay in wait for them somewhere in that dim vastness.

The beginnings were small, but by degrees much was won. One stretch of country after another was discovered and subjected to the power of man. Knowledge of the appearance of our globe became ever greater and

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took more definite shape. Our gratitude to these first discoverers should be profound.

And yet even to-day we hear people ask in surprise : What is the use of these voyages of exploration ? What good do they do us ? Little brains, I always answer to myself, have only room for thoughts of bread and butter.

The first name on the roll of discovery is that of Prince Henry of Portugal, surnamed the Navigator, who is ever to be remembered as the earliest promoter of geographical research. To his efforts was due the first crossing of the Equator, about 1470.

With Bartholomew Diaz another great step in advance was made. Sailing from Lisbon in 1487, he reached Algoa Bay, and without doubt passed the fortieth parallel on his southward voyage.

Vasco da Gama's voyage of 1497 is too well known to need description. After him came men like Cabral and Vespucci, who increased our knowledge, and de Gonneville, who added to the romance of exploration.

We then meet with the greatest of the older explorers, Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese by birth, though sailing in the service of Spain. Setting out in 1519, he discovered the connection between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in the strait that bears his name. No one before him had penetrated so far South—to about lat. 52° S. One of his ships, the *Victoria*,

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DRAKE AND GERRITSZ

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accomplished the first circumnavigation of the world, and thus established in the popular mind the fact that the earth was really round. From that time the idea of the Antarctic regions assumed definite shape. There must be something in the South: whether land or water the future was to determine.

In 1578 we come to the renowned English seaman, Sir Francis Drake. Though he was accounted a buccaneer, we owe him honour for the geographical discoveries he made. He rounded Cape Horn and proved that Tierra del Fuego was a great group of islands and not part of an Antarctic continent, as many had thought.

The Dutchman, Dirk Gerritsz, who took part in a plundering expedition to India in 1599 by way of the Straits of Magellan, is said to have been blown out of his course after passing the straits, and to have found himself in lat. 64° S. under high land covered with snow. This has been assumed to be the South Shetland Islands, but the account of the voyage is open to doubt.

In the seventeenth century we have the discoveries of Tasman, and towards its close English adventurers reported having reached high latitudes in the South Atlantic.

The English Astronomer Royal, Halley, undertook a scientific voyage to the South in 1699 for the purpose of making magnetic observations, and met with ice in 52° S., from which latitude he returned to the north.

The Frenchman, Bouvet (1738), was the first to follow

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the southern ice-pack for any considerable distance, and to bring reports of the immense, flat-topped Antarctic icebergs.

In 1756 the Spanish trading-ship *Leon* came home and reported high, snow-covered land in lat. 55° S. to the east of Cape Horn. The probability is that this was what we now know by the name of South Georgia. The Frenchman, Marion-Dufresne, discovered, in 1772, the Marion and Crozet Islands. In the same year Joseph de Kerguelen-Trémarec—another Frenchman—reached Kerguelen Land.

This concludes the series of expeditions that I have thought it proper to class in the first group. “Antarctica,” the sixth continent itself, still lay unseen and untrodden. But human courage and intelligence were now actively stirred to lift the veil and reveal the many secrets that were concealed within the Antarctic Circle.

Captain James Cook—one of the boldest and most capable seamen the world has known—opens the series of Antarctic expeditions properly so called. The British Admiralty sent him out with orders to discover the great southern continent, or prove that it did not exist. The expedition, consisting of two ships, the *Resolution* and the *Adventure*, left Plymouth on July 13, 1772. After a short stay at Madeira it reached Cape Town on October 30. Here Cook received news of the discovery of Kerguelen and of the Marion and Crozet Islands. In the course of his voyage to the south Cook passed

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CAPTAIN COOK

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300 miles to the south of the land reported by Bouvet, and thereby established the fact that the land in question—if it existed—was not continuous with the great southern continent.

On January 17, 1773, the Antarctic Circle was crossed for the first time—a memorable day in the annals of Antarctic exploration. Shortly afterwards a solid pack was encountered, and Cook was forced to return to the north. A course was laid for the newly discovered islands—Kerguelen, Marion, and the Crozets—and it was proved that they had nothing to do with the great southern land. In the course of his further voyages in Antarctic waters Cook completed the most southerly circumnavigation of the globe, and showed that there was no connection between any of the lands or islands that had been discovered and the great mysterious “Antarctica.” His highest latitude (January 30, 1774) was $71^{\circ} 10' S$.

Cook's voyages had important commercial results, as his reports of the enormous number of seals round South Georgia brought many sealers, both English and American, to those waters, and these sealers, in turn, increased the field of geographical discovery.

In 1819 the discovery of the South Shetlands by the Englishman, Captain William Smith, is to be recorded. And this discovery led to that of the Palmer Archipelago to the south of them.

The next scientific expedition to the Antarctic regions

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was that despatched by the Emperor Alexander I. of Russia, under the command of Captain Thaddeus von Bellingshausen. It was composed of two ships, and sailed from Cronstadt on July 15, 1819. To this expedition belongs the honour of having discovered the first land to the south of the Antarctic Circle—Peter I. Island and Alexander I. Land.

The next star in the Antarctic firmament is the British seaman, James Weddell. He made two voyages in a sealer of 160 tons, the *Jane* of Leith, in 1819 and 1822, being accompanied on the second occasion by the cutter *Beaufoy*. In February, 1823, Weddell had the satisfaction of beating Cook's record by reaching a latitude of $74^{\circ} 15' S$. in the sea now known as Weddell Sea, which in that year was clear of ice.

The English firm of shipowners, Enderby Brothers, plays a not unimportant part in Antarctic exploration. The Enderbys had carried on sealing in southern waters since 1785. They were greatly interested, not only in the commercial, but also in the scientific results of these voyages, and chose their captains accordingly. In 1830 the firm sent out John Biscoe on a sealing voyage in the Antarctic Ocean with the brig *Tula* and the cutter *Lively*. The result of this voyage was the sighting of Enderby Land in lat. $66^{\circ} 25' S$., long. $49^{\circ} 18' E$. In the following year Adelaide, Biscoe, and Pitt Islands, on the west coast of Graham Land were charted, and Graham Land itself was seen for the first time.

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DUMONT D'URVILLE

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Kemp, another of Enderby's skippers, reported land in lat. 66° S., and about long. 60° E.

In 1839 yet another skipper of the same firm, John Balleny, in the schooner *Eliza Scott*, discovered the Balleny Islands.

We then come to the celebrated French sailor, Admiral Jules Sébastien Dumont d'Urville. He left Toulon in September, 1837, with a scientifically equipped expedition, in the ships *Astrolabe* and *Zélée*. The intention was to follow in Weddell's track, and endeavour to carry the French flag still nearer to the Pole. Early in 1838 Louis Philippe Land and Joinville Island were discovered and named. Two years later we again find d'Urville's vessels in Antarctic waters, with the object of investigating the magnetic conditions in the vicinity of the South Magnetic Pole. Land was discovered in lat. $66^{\circ} 30'$ S. and long. $138^{\circ} 21'$ E. With the exception of a few bare islets, the whole of this land was completely covered with snow. It was given the name of Adélie Land, and a part of the ice-barrier lying to the west of it was called Côte Clarie, on the supposition that it must envelop a line of coast.

The American naval officer, Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, sailed in August, 1838, with a fleet of six vessels. The expedition was sent out by Congress, and carried twelve scientific observers. In February, 1839, the whole of this imposing Antarctic fleet was collected in Orange Harbour in the south of Tierra del Fuego,

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where the work was divided among the various vessels. As to the results of this expedition it is difficult to express an opinion. Certain it is that Wilkes Land has subsequently been sailed over in many places by several expeditions. Of what may have been the cause of this inaccurate cartography it is impossible to form any opinion. It appears, however, from the account of the whole voyage, that the undertaking was seriously conducted.

Then the bright star appears—the man whose name will ever be remembered as one of the most intrepid polar explorers and one of the most capable seamen the world has produced—Admiral Sir James Clark Ross.

The results of his expedition are well known. Ross himself commanded the *Erebus* and Commander Francis Crozier the *Terror*. The former vessel, of 370 tons, had been originally built for throwing bombs; her construction was therefore extraordinarily solid. The *Terror*, 340 tons, had been previously employed in Arctic waters, and on this account had been already strengthened. In provisioning the ships every possible precaution was taken against scurvy, with the dangers of which Ross was familiar from his experience in Arctic waters.

The vessels sailed from England in September, 1839, calling at many of the Atlantic Islands, and arrived in Christmas Harbour, Kerguelen Land, in the following