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The Last Place on Earth

At the September Athenaeum meeting Dr. Robert Sivley, in his comment, stated that the Society was, in his words, going downhill and perhaps future presenters needed some inspiration from the Muses in the choice of subjects for papers. The Muses were nine goddesses of the arts and sciences in Greek mythology. They were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, an area in which all of us could stand improvement. Each muse ruled over a certain art or science, and I am sure that most of you might think that the muse for this paper might be Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, because after all, my life seems consumed at this point by domestic violence, which is no doubt a tragedy in today's society. The thought of domestic violence as a topic for this paper is partially true, in that my inspiration came indirectly from domestic violence. I had to forgo my open meeting presentation last May because I was in London attending a domestic violence program sponsored by the British Society of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. While there I was visited by Clio, the muse of history, who called on me instead of my calling on her for inspiration for this paper. While Margaret and I were in London we did have the opportunity to see quite a few things that we had both seen some thirty years before, and also things that neither of us had seen before. We spent a morning in the British Museum, having entered through a side entrance and not the main entrance. By entering this way we walked through cavernous rooms the size of huge airplane hangers. These rooms were once the location of the British Library, which had recently been moved to a new location near King's Cross Station in the last several years. Something inspired us to go to the new library, perhaps the fact that Margaret has been a librarian for a number of years, retiring just this last year. The new library was not that easy to find because most Londoners did not know where it was located, and our map had a wrong placement for it. Nonetheless, we found it - an immense building of modern architecture - and "an abomination" according to Prince Charles. I found it quite pleasing to the eye, but what do I know, I am only a commoner and not subject to thousands of years of tradition. We discovered that the

entire library is not accessible to everyone, and that one needs to secure reading rights to enter the library itself. We were disappointed, but saw a sign announcing "The John Riblatt Gallery: Treasures of the British Library." We entered a room about the size of the small meeting room in the convention center, where we usually meet. As soon as I entered I was overwhelmed. The collection contained a permanent exhibition of the greatest treasures from the British Library's unparalleled collection of books, manuscripts, maps, music and other forms of recorded knowledge. The collection spans almost three millennia and comes from most of the continents of the world. The treasures on display include books and documents that have shaped history, such as Magna Carta, the letters patent of the East India Company, King George's declaration of war upon the American colonies, and Horatio Nelson's handwritten plan for the Battle of Trafalger. The diverse religious traditions of the world, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam are represented by rare and beautiful copies of their sacred texts. There you can view the Gutenberg Bible, the Gospels of Ivan Alexander and the Tyndale New Testament. The Diamond Sutra is there, printed in 868, the world's oldest written document, discovered at Dunhuang, China, in 1907. In this same room you will find the world's first printed hymnal, Leonardo da Vinci's notebook, the Mercator Atlas, which is the first modern world map, printed in 1569. William Shakespeare's First Folio and the manuscript of Alice's Adventures Under Ground, handwritten by Lewis Carroll between the years 1862 and 1864 for Alice Liddell, the original Alice, handwritten copies of Kubla Khan, Jane Eyre, and works by Chaucer are there to feast upon. Handwritten works by Mozart, Handel, which includes his copy of "The Messiah," and the Beatles demonstrate the breadth of the music collections.

Needless to say, this room, containing all of these treasures in beautiful, lighted display cases was breathtaking. Margaret and I were constantly saying, "come over here, you won't believe this." But it was not until I glanced to the right of Horatio Nelson's plan for Trafalger that my breath was taken away. There, in a small notebook were written the words: "Thursday. March 29 Since the 21st we have had a continuous gale from W.S.W. and S.W. We had fuel to make two cups of tea apiece and bare food for two days on the 20th. Every day we have been ready to start

for our depot only 11 miles away, but outside the door of the tent it remains a scene of whirling drift. I do not think we can hope for any better things now. We shall stick it out to the end, but we are getting weaker, of course, and the end cannot be far. It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write more. R. Scott Last entry. For God's sake look after our people." Tears came to my eyes - I was looking at the actual journal, in his own hand, of Robert Falcon Scott, whose ill-fated expedition to the south pole has been an interest of mine for some thirteen years when I first saw a dramatization of this expedition on PBS. It was called "The Last Place on Earth," which referred to the fact that Antarctica was the last place on earth that had not been explored by man, and the pole had not been reached by anyone at that time. Three years ago, while visiting my parents in East Hampton, New York, I visited my favorite book store there and saw Scott's Last Expedition, a book of Scott's journal entries, giving a day-to-day diary of this ill fated journey. This inspired me to read The Worst Journey in the World, by Apsley Cherry-Garrard, who accompanied Scott to the Antarctic on the doomed quest to be the first to the South Pole, and who recounts the unforgettable trek across the world's most forbidding and inhospitable terrain. He was also a member of the search party that ultimately discovered Scott's body along with his personal journals.

Robert Falcon Scott was born on June 6, 1868, the parish of Stoke Damerl, Deveonport, England. He was the first son and third child of John Scott, member of the middle classes and a brewer by profession. Scott's father was a morose man who believed that he was a failure in life. Scott inherited his father's small frame and his frail nature; as for his temperament, all of his life he was to suffer from bouts of moodiness and self-doubt.

A the age of thirteen Robert Scott passed the examination for a cadetship in the Royal Navy and joined the training ship *Britannia.* Two years later he became a midshipman. In 1887 he was transferred to the *Rover*, one of the ships of the navy's training squadron exercising in the waters of the West Indies. It was there that he encountered the geologist Clements Markham, who, at the age of twenty, had been a member of the search party sent to look for the missing ships of Sir John Franklin, lost while trying to find a north-west passage to India. It was a meeting that

was to shape Scott's destiny.

Nine years later the two met again, in Vigo, Spain. Popular with his fellow officers, generous hearted, often absent minded and sometimes hot tempered, Scott was now serving as a torpedo officer. Markham, recently knighted, had become president of the prestigious Royal Geographical Society, and what was more important, he was obsessed with the idea of a British expedition to explore the unknown continent of Antarctica.

There was to be a third chance meeting between the two, three years later, when, home on leave in London and walking down Buckingham Palace Road, a road that I had traversed in its entirety, Scott caught sight of Markham on the opposite side. They had tea together, during which Markham told him that an expedition to Antarctica was now in the planning stages. Two days later, backed by Markham, Scott applied to lead it; in due course he was given command, though it was not until July 10, 1901, that he boarded the *Discovery* and set sail down the Thames on the first leg of his first journey to the Antarctic. On deck, acknowledging the cheers of the mob of onlookers, stood two men who would perish with him on his last and fatal journey - Edward Wilson, whom Scott considered a saint, and the hard drinking Edgar Evans, who was to hit his head on a rock while descending the Beardmore Glacier and who died ranting and raving. "I fear Evans is becoming stupid," reads the original entry in Scott's journal, but was changed out of respect for Evans' family into "I fear he is becoming dull." This change tells a great deal about Scott's compassion for the members of the expedition. Also among the ship's company was Ernest Shackleton, a junior officer in the merchant service.

By most accounts, and Markham's in particular, that first expedition was judged a success, though later detractors declared the so called "scientific" discoveries to be minimal, badly written up and lacking in serious intent. No one, however, doubted the hardships endured or the courage needed to meet such extremes of cold and physical exertion.

In the years following his return, Scott was determined to set out once again for Antarctica and, in 1907, again backed by Markham, an appeal was launched for funds to underwrite a second expedition. It was then that Shackleton announced his intention of making his own bid for the Pole. Historians have since claimed that Scott was incensed at Shackleton's

poaching of territory he considered his, and his alone. Certainly in his diaries he expresses dismay when his daily marches compare unfavorably with those of Shackleton's party. In 1909 Shackleton got within 100 miles of the Pole and turned back because three of his companions were unable to continue farther.

That same year, dining with James Barrie, the playwright who wrote "Peter Pan," Scott met his future wife. It probably says a lot about Scott's complex character in that he was able to attract and marry a very talented and vivacious sculptress like Kathleen Bruce. It says even more that she would immediately single him out as her destined husband that very first time that they met. In her own words he was "not very young, not very good looking, but he looked very healthy and alert, and I glowed rather foolishly. I had to leave immediately to catch a train...he strode behind me...he would have swooned with embarrassment at that time could he have foreseen how soon he would be wheeling the perambulator of this tiresomely independent young woman's baby." Kathleen had always wanted a son and had instinctively marked out Scott to be its father. They were married the following year and their son Peter was born ten months later. Peter later became a naturalist, no doubt influenced by his father's expeditions.

For the next two years Scott devoted all of his energies to raising funds for the expedition. It was hard work. Patriotism was appealed to in order to sway potential contributors - England had to be the first to the South Pole! Though the exploration was primarily to be of a scientific and geological nature, it was, he urged, a matter of pride that the Union Jack should be the first flag to fly at the Pole. "If we don't get there soon," Scott warned, "the Americans will." But it was not the Americans who would become his rival, but rather the Norwegians. Roald Amundsen was a seasoned Arctic explorer whose dream of being the first to reach the North Pole was thwarted by Americans Frederick Cook and Robert Peary. He had for years been building a reliable team of experienced polar campaigners. Amundsen was not a military type. Though he commanded undeniable respect from his men, he was not given to military pretensions of the era. He thus created a comraderie between him and his men, which could only be to their benefit in the hazardous exploration of the most

unforgiving frontier then known to man.

Finally, on June 10th, 1910, an old, patched-up whaling ship named the *Terra Nova* left West India Dock, London, on the start of her voyage to Antarctica. Scott paid out *L*100 to have her registered as a yacht, which enabled the ship to dodge the attentions of the Board of Trade officials who would most certainly have pronounced her unseaworthy. By November she was berthed at Lyttelton, New Zealand. While there Scott received a telegram from Amundsen's brother that simply stated "Am heading south. Amundsen." Until then the entire world thought that Amundsen was heading to the Arctic for exploration, even though the North Pole had already been reached. Amundsen had led his countrymen, including his sponsor, to believe that his intentions were to go north. It was not until Amundsen had embarked on his ship for the long journey south and was out of reach of wireless communication that his brother released his true intentions. Thus Scott's long-planned expedition to the Pole in 1911-1912 became a race. Both men were determined to reach the Pole first in the name of their country, though Scott always maintained his expedition was scientific first, glory seeking second, and Scott's expedition was composed largely of scientists, military and civilian, while Amundsen's had no scientific component.

When the *Terra Nova* sailed from New Zealand she sailed away with almost sixty men crowded aboard, among them Captain Titus Oates, seconded from the Fifth Royal Inniskilling Dragoons, and Lieutenant "Birdie" Bowers, temporarily released from the Royal India Marine. Both men had paid a thousand pounds to join the expedition. Scott had said goodby to his wife and son in New Zealand, for they, along with several other family members of the crew, had accompanied the men to New Zealand.

The party spent its first winter in Antarctica at Cape Evans in a hut built on one of the dark spurs of the volcanic Mount Erebus. This hut had been prefabricated according to Scott's instructions before leaving England and was set up with ease because of his elaborate planning. Even before this hut was put together, Scott set off to visit the old hut he had made his home on the earlier expedition in 1902. He was disgusted to find the windows had been left open, turning the interior into a block of ice, and

blamed Shackleton and his expedition party of 1909. When he returned the new hut was ready for occupation. There was a room for Herbert Ponting, the photographer, space for the scientific instruments and stables to house the ponies that Scott believed absolutely essential for the success of the trip. He planned to use them to carry the enormous amounts of equipment and food as far as they could, then to shoot them and use them for food when they were no longer able to continue. Scott had little faith in the ability of sled dog teams to assist in this immense journey. Though he brought dogs on his expedition, he only intended for them to be used, in addition to the Siberian ponies and motorized sledges, to transport supplies to depots on the Great Ice Barrier. Scott did not believe either the dogs or the ponies would be able to endure the ascent of the Beardmore Glacier or travel on the plateau to the Pole. The ponies would be shot and used as a source of food for the men and the dogs, and the dogs would be returned to base, then used to undertake an additional trip southward to replenish the depots on the Barrier for the men returning from the Pole. Scott instructed that a partition be built down the middle of the living quarters to separate the men's space from that of the officers'. Today it is easy to draw the wrong inference, it was not that he considered the men inferior, but rather that he felt both groups would be more comfortable with such an arrangement. As stated earlier, Amundsen felt no such need because of his non-military background.

As Antarctica was the coldest, most inhospitable place on earth in the early 1900's, the continent was accessible only during the Antarctic summer, and even then, the interior was snowbound under sub-zero temperatures and ravaged by frequent blizzards. An expedition hoping to reach the South Pole had to travel by ship to the coast of the Ross Sea in Antarctic summer, build a base, and depot food and fuel supplies by sledge teams as far south as possible and return to base before the Antarctic summer ended. This is exactly what Scott and Amundsen were doing during this period, with Scott and his men also conducting extensive scientific experiments that to this day are valid, concerning the very origins of the polar ice cap. The expedition teams would then have to wait out the six month long Antarctic winter in their base camps before making a start for the Pole as soon as summer began. It would take the entire Antarctic

summer to reach the Pole and return to the base, and even this would require a substantial amount of favorable weather. All supplies of food and fuel would have to be placed in the depots on the outward journey to supply the returning teams, which meant a great deal of agonizing pulling. Also to be pulled were the rock samples taken, depot marker flags, diaries, food for the dogs and ponies, and other endless supplies.

The route to the Pole from the Ross Sea begins with the Great Ice Barrier, essentially an extremely thick ice sheet atop the Ross Sea, 400 miles to cross. Cutting across the route after the Barrier are the Transantarctic Mountains, thousands of feet high. An earlier expedition had discovered a means of traversing the mountains through the Beardmore Glacier, which is intimidating in itself, involving climbing some 120 miles. Atop the Beardmore Glacier is the polar plateau, 350 miles of which must be crossed to reach the Pole. Add that up and you come up with some 800 miles of frozen wasteland to cross one way to reach the South Pole. And this had to be traversed by foot. The conditions on the polar plateau are worsened both by the altitude and by the proximity to the Pole. The identical route had to be taken to return to the Ross Sea base camp, so that these depots mentioned earlier that had to be laid on the outward journey could be accessed for vital food and fuel. The Scott party was confident about the Beardmore Glacier, the only known way of reaching the polar plateau through the mountains, being their knowledge only, thanks to Shackleton.

In addition to the scientific experiments and the stocking of depots that could be reached within several weeks trek from the base camp, the men had relatively little to do. Scott made many entries of the boredom of the men and he did everything in his power to keep them busy. Even when the temperature was 20 - 30 below zero he had the men outside for brief periods of time, even playing soccer.

On midwinter's day, which fell on June 22, the men celebrated Christmas and had what Bowers innocently termed an orgy - they drank champagne, ate roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, anchovy pie, crystallized fruits and plum pudding flaming with brandy. Oates, who usually spent his time in the ice block stables with the ponies he had learned to love and to get to respond to him with extraordinary feats of strength, drank a little too much, danced the Lancers with the Russian stable groom and ran about

shooting at everybody with a toy pop gun. Finally Scott, rather in the manner of a head prefect of an English public school, told him to call it a day. Scott's entry simply stated: "Thus, except for a few bad heads in the morning, ended the High Festival of Midwinter."

At this point the entries in the journal are somewhat despondent. Scott had found inactivity irksome and he was greatly depressed at the poor performance of the motorized sledges, upon which he staked the success of the expedition. One had fallen through the ice during the unloading from the *Terra Nova*, and the other three had proven unreliable in the extreme cold. Added to that he had little faith in either the ponies or the dogs, the ponies being in terrible physical shape from the storm ridden voyage south, and even in spite of Oates' care for the animals of which he had grown so fond. Worse still was the brooding over the fact that Amundsen was also trying to reach the Pole first, a fact that he had shared only with his good friend Wilson and which was a constant worry.

On November 11, 1911, the British expedition started out on its ill fated 800 mile journey. On January 4, 1912, Scott made his final decision and selection of the men who would accompany him on the final stage - Evans, Bowers, Wilson and Oates - and turned back the rest of the supporting party. The description of the labors that these men endured during the final stages of reaching their goal is almost indescribable. The best way may be to say it is something like dragging a several hundred pound sledge up a steadily inclining path that is covered with broken ice the size of boulders for hundreds of miles with the temperature somewhere between 20 to 30 below zero and the wind blowing at about 40 to 50 miles an hour and you are at an altitude of approximately 10,000 feet.

On the 16 of January, some ten miles from their goal, Bowers detected a black speck on the horizon, for at this point the terrain had leveled out and was almost smooth like. Soon after they came upon sledge and ski tracks and the imprints of dogs' paws. Amundsen had beaten them, and was already retracing his steps. It was a cruel blow to the five men who had struggled so hard and sacrificed so much to be first. Scott's journal entry that day reflected his despair:

"Tuesday, January 16 Camp 68 Height 9,760 T. -23.5. The worst has happened, or nearly the worst. We marched well in the morning and

covered 7and one half miles. Noon sight showed us in Lat. 89 42`S. And we started off in high spirits in the afternoon, feeling that tomorrow would see us at our destination. About the second hour of the march Bowers' sharp eyes detected what he thought was a cairn; he was uneasy about it, but argued that it must be a sastrugus (an irregularity formed by the wind on a snowplain. 'Snow wave' is not completely descriptive, as the sastrugus often has a fantastic shape unlike the ordinary conception of a wave). Half and hour later he detected a black speck ahead. Soon we knew that this could not be a natural snow feature. We marched on, found that it was a black flag tied to a sledge bearer; near by the remains of a camp; sledge tracks and ski tracks going and coming and the clear trace of dogs' paws - many dogs. This told us the whole story. The Norwegians have forestalled us and are first at the Pole. It is a terrible disappointment, and I am very sorry for my loyal companions. Many thoughts come and much discussion have we had. Tomorrow we must march on to the Pole and then hasten home with all the speed we can compass. All the day-dreams must go; it will be a wearisome return. Certainly we are descending in altitude - certainly also the Norwegians found an easy way up." Unlike Scott, Amundsen relied solely on dogs - more than 100 of them on his attempt at the Pole, and although he was crossing previously unknown territory, unlike Scott, he had found another means of ascending the polar mountains and used dogs on his entire journey to and from the Pole, thereby easing the physical burdens of his men, unlike Scott's, who had to pull their own supplies.

The next day Scott and his men reached the Pole. His entries reflect his terrible disappointment. "THE POLE. Yes, but under very different circumstances from those expected. We have had a horrible day - add to our disappointment a head wind four to five, with a temperature of -22.... We started at 7:30, none of us having slept much after the shock of our discovery. We followed the Norwegian sledge tracks for some way; as far as we make out there are only two men.....Great God! This is an awful place and terrible enough for us to have laboured to it without the reward of priority.....Now for the run home and a desperate struggle. I wonder if we can do it."

From the start of the return journey, Evans was weakening. He was

the largest of the group in size and was existing on the same meager rations. Unknown to the others he had cut his hand some weeks before on one of the sledge runners and it had become gangrenous and the size of a melon. Evans died on the Beardmore Glacier. In early March, Scott and his three remaining companions' progress on the Great Ice Barrier was slowed by lowering temperatures, blustery weather, continually deficient depot rations, scurvy, and Titus Oates' deteriorating leg, the result of severe frostbite. Oates, at end of his strength, sacrificed himself on March 17 by crawling out of their tent and into a lethal blizzard, hoping that his death will enable the others to complete their return journey. Scott's journal entry:

".....Tragedy all along the line. At lunch, the day before yesterday, poor Titus Oates said he couldn't go on; he proposed we should leave him in his sleeping bag. That we could not do, and we induced him to come on, on the afternoon march. In spite of its awful nature from him he struggled on and we made a few miles. At night he was worse and we knew the end had come. Should this be found I want these facts recorded. Oates' last thoughts were of his mother, but immediately before he took pride in thinking that his regiment would be pleased with the bold way in which he met his death. We can testify to his bravery. He has borne intense suffering for weeks without complaint, and to the very last was able and willing to discuss outside subjects. He did not - would not- give up hope till the very end. He was a brave soul. This was the end. He slept through the night before last, hoping not to wake; but he woke in the morning - yesterday. It was blowing a blizzard. He said, 'I am just going outside and may be some time.' He went out into the blizzard and we have not seen him since.

I take this opportunity of saying that we have stuck to our sick companions to the last. In the case of Edgar Evans, when absolutely out of food and he lay insensible, the safety of the remainder seemed to demand his abandonment, but Providence mercifully removed him at this critical moment. He died a natural death, and we did not leave him till two hours after his death. We knew that poor Oates was walking to his death, but though we tried to dissuade him, we knew it was the act of a brave man and an English gentleman. We all hope to meet the end with a similar spirit,

and assuredly the end is not far."

The end came some twelve days later, the result of disease and the unbelievable bad weather that plagued the expedition during their entire return. Amundsen reached the Pole some month before Scott and did not face the deadly storms that Scott encountered.

By the beginning of April, the remaining expedition members knew that the Pole Party could not have survived. The Antarctic winter then prevented their sending out a search party until November, when on the 12th of that month they discovered the Pole Party's last camp. Wilson and Bowers were found in the attitude of sleep, their sleeping bags closed over their heads as they would naturally close them. Scott died later. He had thrown open the flaps of his sleeping bag and opened his coat. The little wallet containing the three journals was under his shoulders and his arm was resting across Wilson, his best friend.

Some years ago the BBC interviewed Tryggv Gran, then in his eighties. Some sixty years earlier he had been a sublieutenant in the Norwegian navy and an expert on skis, and had been chosen as a member of Scott's expedition. Speaking in a heavily accented and quavering voice, he recounted his memories of that day in 1912 when the Polar search party stumbled upon the tent in which lay the bodies of Scott and his two companions Wilson and Bowers. He said, "We saw a mound of snow...we knew it was Scott's tent. I stayed outside...as a Norwegian it was not my place. The others undid the tent flaps and went inside. Wilson was lying quite peacefully, his feet towards the entrance...Bowers, the other direction. Wilson had died peacefully...Scott was between them, half sitting up, one hand reached out to Wilson. Then I heard a noise...like a pistol shot...I was told this was Scott's arm breaking as they raised it to take away the journals strapped under his arm. Scott had died dreadfully...his face contorted with frostbite. We covered up the tent with snow and made a cairn on top. I shall never forget...we stood and sang Scott's favorite hymn, 'Onward Christian Soldiers.'"

The principal goal of Scott was the advancement of knowledge. There can be few events in history to be compared, for grandeur and pathos, with the last closing scene in that silent wilderness of snow. The great leader, with the bodies of his dearest friends beside him, wrote and wrote until the

pencil dropped from his dying hand. There was no thought of himself, only the desire to give comfort and consolation to others in their sorrow. He wrote letters to the families of each of the members of the party who would not return, to his wife and to some of his closest friends. He wrote a message to the public that gave an explanation for the disaster, which is probably the saddest thing I have ever read. In part it said:

"We arrived within 11 miles of our old One Ton Camp with fuel for one hot meal and food for two days. For four days we have been unable to leave the tent - the gale howling about us. We are weak, writing is difficult, but for my own sake I do not regret this journey, which has shown that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another, and meet death with as great a fortitude as ever in the past. We took risks, we knew we took them; things have come out against us, and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of Providence, determined still to do our best to the last. But if we have been willing to give our lives to this enterprise, which is for the honour of our country, I appeal to our countrymen to see that those who depend on us are properly cared for.

Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale, but surely, surely, a great rich country like ours will see that those who are dependent on us are properly provided for. R. Scott"

Amundsen returned alive to face the scorn or disinterest of nearly everyone, while the story of Scott's tragic demise gained the lurid attention and admiration of aristocrats and working class alike. Amundsen won the race, but Scott emerged the posthumous hero, a legend, prompting Amundsen to comment, "Never underestimate the British habit of dying. The glory of self-sacrifice, the blessing of failure."