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“Scott of the Antarctic”: The Conservation of a Story

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Tasmania

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“Scott of the Antarctic”: The Conservation of a Story

Abstract

This thesis examines the present status and enduring significance of the story “Scott of the Antarctic.” It critically reviews the story’s century-long history of interpretation and, via literary analysis, considers its meaning for a contemporary audience. It argues that while Captain Robert Scott’s historic hut is being conserved as an icon of the heroic era of Antarctic exploration, the story which gives that hut its meaning is in a less satisfactory condition and is also in need of conservation.

In keeping with the twofold nature of its subject—a story which is based on fact—the thesis acknowledges both historiographical and literary critical perspectives. In addition, it draws on a wide range of data: manuscript letters and journals, newspaper and magazine commentary, historical monographs, biographies, literary works and film.

The thesis reviews recent scholarly commentary on Scott’s story and identifies a variety of shortcomings. These include the polarized nature of the discussion, heavy uncritical use of a single influential debunking biography and a concomitant neglect of earlier sources. A detailed analytical survey of the story’s interpretation, from its genesis to the present, highlights principal themes and the influence of intellectual fashions. Veneration of the central character has always been accompanied by criticism. But judgements of Scott’s last expedition necessarily lack full knowledge of the circumstances, and many exhibit partisanship, faulty reasoning and the bias of hindsight. Two aspects of the story that have remained surprisingly unexamined are critiqued: the saintly reputation of Lawrence Oates, and the methods and accounts of the other contender for the South Pole, Roald Amundsen. Despite some recent favourable appraisals of Scott, evidence is presented that the character assassination that began in the late 1970s persists today.

The final part of the thesis directs attention away from judicial and historical debates, and seeks the story’s deeper resonances through literary analysis. Although the quality of Scott’s writing and the tragic nature of his story are often mentioned, they have previously received scant critical attention. Aspects of the explorer’s literary skill are examined, and comparisons explored between his story and Greek tragedy as described in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The discussion locates a large part of the transhistorical meaning of “Scott of the Antarctic” in its tragic qualities, and concludes by considering how the story’s potential has been exploited in imaginative renderings.



Edward Wilson, "Paraselena"

“Scott of the Antarctic”: The Conservation of a Story

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:

...

And such too is the grandeur of the dooms

We have imagined for the mighty dead;

All lovely tales that we have heard or read

— *Endymion*, Keats

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents in gratitude for a lifetime of inspiration and support.

Grammatical prologue

“HAD WE LIVED,” wrote Captain Robert Falcon Scott—still alive of course but feeling life ebbing away like the last few drops of oil in the can of the improvised lamp by which he wrote—“Had we lived I should have had a tale to tell...” Scott means an account of the *Terra Nova* expedition he intended to write when he was back at home: going over his diaries, crafting his book and discussing it with his publisher-friend Reginald Smith and others, as he had with *The Voyage of the Discovery* after his first expedition. “Had we lived ...”: this ‘third conditional’ rules the grammar of the sentence. Third conditionals are used to imagine how the consequences of situations in the past could have been different if the situations (conditions) which produced them had been different: ‘if it hadn’t rained ...’; ‘if only she had got there earlier...’ But since the past cannot be changed, these different conditions and consequences must always remain imaginary. Scott’s third conditional is somewhat peculiar from a grammatical point of view, because he is speculating about an impossible *future*. The past to which he refers, although now to him as irrevocable as any other, has not yet actually occurred. It soon did, however. Death came. And the next pencilled sentence of his famous “Message to [the] Public” begins: “These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale...”

Once the ‘condition’ of death was fulfilled, the possibility was permanently lost for Scott to tell his own story as he wanted to. As he had realized, his only part in shaping the way their story would be told was the sledging diary to which he was adding the final entries. It was found, as he had hoped, with their bodies in the tent on the Great Ice Barrier by a search party on 12 November 1912. Probably it would have seemed ironic to him that it was the very fact of their deaths that would turn his “rough notes” into something far more stirring—at least for a time, and not only for the Englishmen he had imagined as his audience—than the “tale of the hardihood, endurance, courage of my companions” that he had hoped to write. On the other hand, he would no longer have any opportunity to supply information or explain or defend himself against criticism. In future his story would be told by others. The fact of his death and that of his companions would fuel all those later tellings. And very often Scott’s single, impossible, but future-looking third conditional, “Had we lived ...”, would be inverted into equally impossible backward-looking ones, all with the same theme: “Had such-and-such been different ... they would have lived.”