

## University of Tasmania Open Access Repository

### Cover sheet

**Title**

Scott of the Antarctic: The Conservation of a Story

**Author**

Murray, C

**Bibliographic citation**

Murray, C (2006). Scott of the Antarctic: The Conservation of a Story. University Of Tasmania. Thesis.  
<https://doi.org/10.25959/23210885.v1>

Is published in:

**Copyright information**

This version of work is made accessible in the repository with the permission of the copyright holder/s under the following,

**Licence.**

If you believe that this work infringes copyright, please email details to: [oa.repository@utas.edu.au](mailto:oa.repository@utas.edu.au)

Downloaded from [University of Tasmania Open Access Repository](#)

Please do not remove this coversheet as it contains citation and copyright information.

**University of Tasmania Open Access Repository**

Library and Cultural Collections

University of Tasmania

Private Bag 3

Hobart, TAS 7005 Australia

E [oa.repository@utas.edu.au](mailto:oa.repository@utas.edu.au)

CRICOS Provider Code 00586B | ABN 30 764 374 782

[utas.edu.au](http://utas.edu.au)

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

Carl Murray

B.A. (Hons.) West. Aust.

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

University of Tasmania

October 2006

## **Declaration**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University of Tasmania or any other institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief it contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text; nor does this thesis contain any material which infringes copyright.

## **Authority of Access**

The thesis may be available for loan. Copying of any part of the thesis within two years of submission is allowable only with the written permission of the author. Limited copying after that date is permissible in accordance with the *Copyright Act, 1968*.

## “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.



Paraselena. Jan. 15. 11. 9:30 pm.  
Cape Evans. McMurdo Sound.

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

# Contents

List of figures	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Grammatical prologue	ix
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>PART I. Preliminary</b>	
Chapter 1: “Scott” in academia	10
Chapter 2: <i>Terra Nova</i> in context	38
<b>PART II. Historical “Scott”</b>	
Chapter 3: Genesis and exegesis	54
Chapter 4: Recollected voices	97
Chapter 5: Critical blizzards	140
<b>PART III. Literary “Scott”</b>	
Chapter 6: Writing a tragedy	180
<b>Conclusion: The conservation of a story</b>	223
Works cited	228

## List of figures

<i>Frontispiece</i>	“Paraselena,” watercolour by Edward Wilson <i>Diary of the ‘Terra Nova’</i> 23	
<i>Fig. 1</i>	Maps, Scott’s route to the South Pole Cherry-Garrard, <i>Worst Journey</i> (1965 ed.) 542	37
<i>Fig. 2</i>	Amundsen’s telegram to Scott. National Maritime Museum 60	47
<i>Fig. 3</i>	Cartoon, “When Heroes Meet with Disaster” <i>Daily Mirror</i> 18 Feb. 1913. (Jones, <i>Quest</i> 144)	96
<i>Fig. 4</i>	Facsimile of Scott’s diary, 16/17 March 1912 <i>Diaries</i>	191
<i>Fig. 5</i>	Facsimile of Scott’s diary, “Message to the Public” <i>Diaries</i>	192

## Acknowledgements

A scholarship from the University of Tasmania and the goodwill of many people have made this project possible. I would like in particular to thank the following: Professor Andrew McMinn and Dr Kelvin Michael of the Institute of Antarctic and Southern Ocean Studies for their support and for additional scholarship and travel funding; Professor Bruce Mapstone and the Australian Government's Antarctic Climate and Ecosystems Cooperative Research Centre for funding conference attendance and a study trip to Cambridge; and Professor Julian Dowdeswell and his staff for the welcome and assistance I received at Scott Polar Research Institute.

My indebtedness to scholars and librarians known and unknown is, of course, incalculable, but I would especially like to thank for their generous help the staff of the University of Tasmania's Morris Miller Library, the library of the Australian Antarctic Division and the library and archives of Scott Polar Research Institute. I am also grateful to Lord Kennet for kindly allowing me access to family archival material held at the Institute and at the library of the University of Cambridge.

Finally, I could not have been more fortunate in my 'polar party,' my supervisors, Dr Julia Jabour, Associate Professor Marcus Haward and Dr Elle Leane. Each, in different ways, has been essential to this journey and it is a pleasure to record my warmest thanks to them.

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.”