

## Oppegård kirke, Oppegård, Norway: fixing the location where Roald Amundsen revealed his ‘minor diversion’

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Received November 2012; first published online 11 March 2013

doi:10.1017/S0032247413000181

**ABSTRACT.** After learning in the first week of September 1909 that the North Pole had been claimed, the career and prospects of the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen hung in the balance. Scheduled to lead an exploration of the north polar basin, Amundsen suddenly found himself without adequate funding or a clear objective. His self-described ‘coup’ to turn southwards and reach the South Pole was perhaps the most dramatic and best-kept secret in the history of polar exploration. Amundsen shared his decision only with a very select few, including his brother and manager, Leon Amundsen, a scene dramatised in the 1985 television mini-series *The last place on earth*. The location used in the film is identified at the unusual grave markers of the Ingier family outside Oppegård kirke in Oppegård, Norway, about five km from the site of Amundsen’s home on Bunnefjorden, a branch of Oslofjord.

### Introduction

On Wednesday, 1 September 1909, as Roald Amundsen was in the middle of intensive plans for a seven-year exploration of the north polar basin in the wake of Fridtjof Nansen’s transpolar drift in *Fram*, the morning newspapers arrived with startling news. Dr. Frederick Cook, Amundsen’s comrade from the 1897–1899 *Belgica* expedition to Antarctica, had claimed to be the first human at the North Pole, in April 1908. This news followed upon a summer that included the return from within 180 km of the South Pole of Ernest Shackleton.

More momentous news arrived six days later, on Monday, 6 September. Robert Peary cabled from Battle Harbour, Labrador, that he had reached the North Pole in April, 1909, and Peary’s allies in New York geographical circles immediately initiated a campaign to discredit Cook’s claim. The rapid succession of claims and counter-claims was a catastrophe for Amundsen. His expedition, only partially funded, was now less than four months from departure on a voyage few saw any further use for. Worse, Cook was already making noises about trying for the South Pole.

At some point in the critical hours that followed, between Monday morning, 6 September, when he received the news of Cook, and the evening of Friday, 10 September, after he placed an order for 50 Greenland dogs with the Danish inspector for North Greenland, Jens Dagaard-Jensen, and effectively committed himself to Antarctica, Roald Amundsen turned from his long-planned exploration of the north polar basin to a rapid and risky expedition to be the first human to stand at the South Pole.

In his memoirs, Amundsen describes his choice as ‘a coup,’ one that, like any coup, had to be absolutely secret until successful. Tor Bomann-Larsen writes that the coup required a ‘stomach full of ice and a cool head’ (Bomann-Larsen 1995: 123), since Amundsen would be deceiving not only other poten-



Fig. 1. Sverre Anker Ousdal as Roald Amundsen lets his brother Leon in on the secret that he will try to reach the South Pole (frame from the Central Independent Television PLC production *The last place on earth* (1985).

tial explorers but his nominal patron, Fridtjof Nansen himself. Roland Huntford notes that Amundsen kept the secret so close that he did not let Dagaard-Jensen know where he intended to take the 50 dogs. Further, the letter containing the order for them was written on a piece of Frederick Cook’s notepaper and dated 9 September 1909, suggesting that it was perhaps his meeting with his old comrade Cook that ultimately turned Amundsen’s direction firmly south (Huntford 1979: 209).

The first person who was let in on this stupendous decision was Leon Amundsen, the explorer’s brother, secretary and manager. In *The South Pole*, Amundsen writes that Leon, ‘upon whose absolute silence I could blindly rely, was the only person I let into the secret of my change of plan’ (Amundsen 1912: 45). Just when and where Amundsen revealed this decision to Leon is unknown, but it had to come between the news of Monday morning and the time he returned from his Copenhagen meetings with Cook and Dagaard-Jensen.

### The scene as imagined in text and film

The moment and its location became the pivot around which *The last place on earth*, a 1985 film production of Central Independent Television PLC (now ITV Central), turned. *The last place on earth* was a multi-part television adaptation of British dramatist Trevor Griffiths’ screenplay entitled *Judgement over the dead* (1986), itself based on Huntford’s *Scott and Amundsen* (1979). The critical scene comes just after Amundsen’s return from Copenhagen on the afternoon of Friday, 10 September. Amundsen, played by Sverre Anker Ousdal, brings Leon, played by Per Theodor Haugen, to a clandestine meeting in a graveyard. There, ‘enlisted amid grassy gravestones’ (Griffiths 1986: 62), they meet Fritz Zapffe, a Tromsø chemist, also correspondent for the Christiania newspaper *Morgenbladet* and a key ally of Amundsen. In Griffiths’ screenplay, Amundsen presents Zapffe, played by Frank Roberts, with a long explanation of a new ‘extended’ programme of research in the north polar basin that will require more money and delay his departure on board *Fram* by six months, until mid-summer 1910.

Once Zapffe leaves, Leon presses his brother on the ‘madness’ of the programme. With the North Pole claimed not once but twice by the Americans, the funding for the north polar basin project has crumbled. It is only here, walking to one of several large marble pillars that are apparently grave markers,



Fig. 2. Ousdal and Per Theodor Haugen as his brother Leon after Amundsen reveals his secret (frame from the Central Independent Television PLC production *The last place on earth* (1985).

that Ousdal traces a finger in the gold intaglio of a name and reveals to Leon that, in order to get the required financing, he needs 'a coup.' When Leon expresses bewilderment, Amundsen explodes at him.

Think! Think, man, for Chrissake. Think about the press barons, the industrialists. To get finance you need a coup. So, we'll give them one. Our voyage takes us south by the Horn. We take dogs with us instead of collecting them in Alaska. On the way we make a minor diversion and take the South Pole (*Last place on earth*, Episode 1: Poles Apart, 1985).

The scene as written by Griffiths is slightly different: AMUNDSEN (FIERCER, RATIONAL, BITTER) Then think, for God's sake, think, man. The press barons and the industrialists and the politicians want a coup before they'll fund the serious work, so we'll give them one. It so happens the voyage takes us south by the Horn. We take dogs with us, instead of collecting them in Alaska. On the way, we make a minor diversion and take the South Pole. (PAUSE. MILD SUDDENLY) Wouldn't that be a coup of sorts? (Griffiths 1986: 64–65).

In the film, this scene is constructed in a graveyard against the backdrop of a white church and a gathering of what appear to be pink and white dogwoods in full bloom. The centerpiece of the scene is a collection of six marble pillars that appear to be grave markers. Leon, the careful businessman, is stunned by his brother's news and has to sit down on the base of one of the marble grave columns to gather his thoughts. He has immediately recognised both the danger and the genius inherent in such a rash move, and worries that it could land them both in jail for misusing government funds appropriated for the exploration of the north polar basin.

The screenplay makes it clear that a graveyard was required for this scene. This requirement was metaphorical, of course, but it also makes clear that a particular graveyard and grave marker was to be used. In the screenplay, Amundsen brings his brother to the cemetery containing the grave marker of Adam Tollefsen. Tollefsen, a Norwegian member of the *Belgica* expedition, had suffered a breakdown while in Antarctica. The screenplay has Amundsen leading his brother 'through a wilderness of paupers' graves' to the

plain grave marker of Tollefsen, 'barely seen through the weed growth' Here Amundsen tells a story involving his escorting Tollefsen home to Norway and Tollefsen's subsequent suicide by self-immolation, which Amundsen describes as one of many 'forms of madness' (Griffiths 1986: 63–64), by which comparison his own 'madness' at attempting the South Pole seems rational.

As filmed for television, the entire Tollefsen backstory was removed. The author of the screenplay could not recall why this scene had been removed, as the first episodes of the film had seen rapid turnover in directors. He thought it possible that the horrific death of Tollefsen had been a dramatic invention (T. Griffiths, personal communication, 17 September 2012). This would indeed seem to be true. Although the records about Tollefsen are not completely clear, the following seems to be likely until final proof can be found either way.

It is known that Amundsen accompanied Tollefsen back to Norway by taking a fast mailboat from South America, arriving in May 1899 (Bomann-Larsen 1995: 52). Back at home Tollefsen 'eventually recovered' (*Fram* Museum 2009: 15), although one of the other Norwegian sailors, Engelbret Knutsen, actually did die shortly after return. Attempts to trace Tollefsen in the Norwegian digitised census and church records reveal only one Adam Tollefsen, born in 1866, as our man on *Belgica* was, who in 1910 was married and had a son born at the end of February 1900. For a man returning from a long and arduous expedition far from any form of family life, it would not seem surprising that a child would be born to him exactly nine months later. The archival records and more research may eventually give us the ultimate proof of Tollefsen's short or long life after *Belgica*, but for this paper it is sufficient to state that the story of his gruesome suicide as told in the screenplay would seem to be an invention without basis in fact. This is perhaps why this part of the plot was dropped.

Even without the story of Tollefsen, the graveyard remains a prominent metaphor in the screen dialogue. And instead of a pauper's grave, Amundsen makes his confession at an extraordinarily elaborate set of family grave markers. The characters refer several times to these unique surroundings. Before being dismissed from the meeting, the journalist Zapffe asks Amundsen: 'Can I say we met in a graveyard?' 'Say what you like, as long as it helps our cause,' Amundsen replies. Later, when Leon protests that the explorer's decision could land them both in jail, Amundsen looks around them and responds, 'There are worse places. Here is one. The South Pole is probably another. We'll see.'

It is at this moment the film both reveals and shifts from the 'last place' of Amundsen's nightmares, to be an explorer without a great discovery, buried in obscurity in a forgotten graveyard, to the last place of his earthly dreams, the South Pole, the only place left where a polar explorer could find glory and, effectively, the immortality that accompanied it. The author of the screenplay was well aware of the power of the graveyard as the backdrop for the revelation of Amundsen's secret, not only as a direct link with Tollefsen and the theme of madness, but also 'mainly to stress the dangers to life and limb that the polar trip would pose' (T. Griffiths, personal communication, 17 September 2012).

In Fritz Zapffe's own account 'Roald Amundsen. My cooperation with him through 25 years' (Zapffe 1925: 22–23) he places his meeting with Amundsen not in September 1909, but in the spring of 1910, and 'at Svartskog', which undoubtedly indicated at Amundsen's house. Zapffe recounts how they

discussed the planned North Pole expedition and the difficult financial situation, and then how Amundsen let him into the secret of the diversion to the South Pole. Amundsen explained that he trusted his friend to keep the secret.

As noted, Tollefsen's story, as well as the location of his grave, if any, remains uncertain. Likewise, the actual location of the graveyard scene was somewhat difficult to identify because the large marble markers seem extravagant for a Norwegian cemetery. Given this, it even seemed possible that the film's producers could have placed the large pole-like markers in the graveyard to heighten the dramatic effect of Amundsen's secret. Both of these notions proved to be incorrect. The church is Oppegård kirke in Oppegård, about five km inland from the fjord-side site of Amundsen's preserved home, Uranienborg. The convenience of shooting this scene at Oppegård kirke seems evident, since it would have required moving cast and crew only a short distance from where large segments of the series were already being filmed.

The dramatist was emphatic on the necessity of having actual Norwegians read this scene in a Norwegian graveyard. One of the strengths of this production was that it 'dared to cast Norwegians as Norwegians, so what one simply couldn't do in the text, which was the Norwegianness of Norwegians, was supplied by the actors. . . The most powerful single enhancement that occurred collectively was involved in that. The boldness of casting Norwegians to speak English but in a Norwegian way' (Griffiths 1986: xxxvii).

The large marble pillars in the graveyard that play a central role in the scene are also actual grave markers, and commemorate a prominent local family, the Ingiers. The particular grave, the last in the line, at which Ousdal as Amundsen is tracing his finger is that of Frithjof Ingier (1849–1906). A visit to the graveyard in the autumn of 2012 revealed that the dogwoods have been removed since the filming of the television series in 1984.

The drama of the scene is intensified by the framing provided by the foliage on the trees and the marble columns although, if this site in fact was used by Amundsen to meet with Zapffe and then reveal his secret to Leon, the state of the vegetation would have been slightly different, the September date of the meeting precluding the lush green trees. It is difficult to ascertain whether all the marble columns would have been in place at that time, but there is no reason to suppose that they would not. Taken from the left (that is nearest to the church) the death dates on the columns are 1828, 1850, 1864, 1884, 1897 and Frithjof in 1906. So even if the columns were conceived and erected in bulk, they could all still have been in place in the Oppegård kirke graveyard in 1909. It may, in fact, be supposed that they were erected in two phases, since the two nearest the church have a different design at the top than the four with later death dates.

The Ingier family were owners since the end of the 18th century of what, by Norwegian standards, were large land areas east of Oslo, with farms, forests and sawmills amongst their properties. Frithjof's grandfather, Lars Ingier (1760–1828), lies under the first marble column nearest to the church. Both Frithjof and his father Hans Helle Juel Ingier (1810–1884) (4th from the left) were prominent local politicians in their time. In 1900 Frithjof deserted the family business and properties, and his wife, and left the country. However, in one way or other his



Fig. 3. Oppegård kirke in Oppegård, about five km inland from the fjord-side site of Roald Amundsen's preserved home, Uranienborg, photographed in October 2012 (S. Barr).

memory, and presumably his earthly remains, returned to the bosom of the family, in Oppegård churchyard, around 1906.

### Conclusions

The overall sequence of events, that began with Frederick Cook's announcement and ran through Peary's counterclaim and Amundsen's re-direction, concluded on Monday, 13 September 1909, with the public announcement that Robert Falcon Scott was poised to launch his own expedition in search of the South Pole. Unbeknown to Scott, another explorer had shared a similar plan the preceding weekend with his brother, a plan that would upset all of Scott's hopes and trigger a race that in many respects was over before it began.

75 years later, three excellent actors reading from a sophisticated screenplay recreated the key moment in this sequence, using a tiny graveyard a few km from Oslofjord as the critical backdrop. By eliminating the Tollefsen backstory and its pauper's grave, the film production set these actors against the immodest grave markers alongside a modest church in Oppegård commune in Norway, and gave us a vision of how the original dramatic scene might have played itself out.

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