

Commentaries

Commentary on Chris Turney's *Why didn't they ask Evans?*

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I am writing in response to Professor Chris Turney's recent research article *Why didn't they ask Evans?*, published in *Polar Record* on 28 September 2017. The article took as its focus Scott's second-in-command, Lieutenant E.R.G.R 'Teddy' Evans, and alleged that Evans failed to deliver Captain Scott's 'updated orders' to base in February 1912. This is an error that needs to be corrected.

In my research paper *Could Captain Scott have been saved? Revisiting Scott's last expedition* (May, 2013), first published 20 January 2012 in *Polar Record*, I explained that Scott should be cleared of the false modern allegation of having given 'last-minute verbal orders in January 1912' for his dog-teams to come south to meet him. Citing the transcriptions in Evans's 1921 memoir *South with Scott* (Evans, 1921, pp. 160–163), I showed that Scott left written orders for the dog-teams, that these were dated October 1911, and that the writer Roland Huntford had mischaracterised them as last-minute 'verbal orders' in his 1979 book. In his article, Turney implies that Evans's transcription is untrustworthy, that Scott's 'updated' orders were dated January 1912, and that Evans supposedly failed to deliver these 'updates' to base. Unfortunately, Turney has erroneously based this hypothesis of 'updated orders in January 1912' on the combination of a weak source (Tryggve Gran's 1961 Norwegian-language memoir *Kampen om Sydpolen* (Gran, 1961), a source given to him by Huntford) and a misdated source (Wilson's expedition sketchbook; Wilson, 1911).

The weak source, Gran's 1961 memoir, shows signs of fictionalisation (e.g. long speeches attributed to historical personages, which cannot be found in the primary evidence). Gran was not personally present at the later key events: he was not part of the polar journey of November 1911–March 1912, nor was he at Hut Point when Evans was brought in with scurvy in February 1912. I believe we should be sceptical of a dramatic commercial narrative written 49 years after the fact by someone who was not physically present at the key events he describes.

The misdated source, Dr Edward A. Wilson's sketchbook, is in the Scott Polar Research Institute archives (callmark: SPRI MS 797/1;BJ). Turney dates Wilson's sketchbook from 1912 (his reference for it is 'Wilson 1912b') (Turney, 2017, p. 511) and uses Scott's orders as transcribed in its first 16 pages to support his narrative that Scott supposedly issued 'updated orders' for the dog-teams in January 1912, which Evans supposedly failed to deliver to an ignorant base in February 1912. However, Turney has misdated Wilson's sketchbook. Although it carries no official date, we can see that it is from 1911, not 1912, from three specific aspects:

- i) Wilson's transcriptions of Scott's orders use the future tense (beginning with the expectation that the motor sledges 'will' be leaving from Cape Evans on 22 October 1911), indicating that they were written before the expedition's official start on 1 November 1911.
- ii) On the first page, the team member 'Clissold' is written in as a proposed member of the Motor Party; this was subsequently crossed out, with the word 'Hooper' substituted. This is a reference to how, after Thomas Clissold injured his back on 8 October 1911, Scott had to replace him with Frederick Hooper nine days later. These orders were evidently amended during October 1911 in response to ongoing developments.
- iii) Wilson's transcriptions of Scott's orders are neatly written *in ink*. From 1 November 1911 until his death in March 1912 Wilson was out in the Antarctic interior, where all documents were written *in pencil*, as ink would freeze. These transcriptions were written by Wilson at base before 1 November 1911.

When we view Wilson's sketchbook correctly as dating from 1911, we can see that it actually corroborates Evans's transcriptions of Scott's written orders dated October 1911. Place the 'Instructions for Dog Teams' in Wilson's sketchbook alongside Scott's written 'Instructions for Dog Teams' as transcribed in Evans's 1921 memoir *South with Scott*, and in the key points (including the Polar Party's being met by dogs around 82°30' S on 1 March 1912) both sources independently verify the existence of written orders from Scott, dated October 1911, for the dog-driver Cecil Meares to read and evaluate. The separate testimonies of Wilson and Evans together confirm that Scott wrote out orders in October 1911 for the dogs to meet his Polar Party in March 1912, and I can see no reason to believe Scott ever cancelled or updated these orders later in his expedition: no such evidence of cancellation or updating was brought back from returning parties for the acting head of base George C. Simpson to record in his handwritten journals of 1911–1912 (Simpson, 1911; callmark: SPRI MS 704/4;BJ), and Scott records no such cancellation or updating in his own journals. One would expect Scott, as a naval officer, to record important changes to his orders in writing, rather than doing so 'verbally'. It appears that Scott always expected his original written orders of October 1911 to be fulfilled by his men between February and March 1912.

Why does this matter?

It matters because Evans should be cleared of the erroneous charge of ‘failing to deliver Scott’s updated orders’, as the men at base during February 1912 already understood Scott’s unaltered wish to be met by dog-teams.

Establishing Scott’s original orders of October 1911 also provides some necessary context. In 1912, Evans had not fulfilled his dietary requirements (May, 2013, pp. 73–75), so he probably feared early on for his own health during his return (and the later discrepancies in dating Evans’s scurvy can be explained by Evans keeping his early fears and symptoms from his naval subordinates until his condition proved undeniable). Crucially, in 1912 Evans was also expecting dog-teams to fulfil Scott’s 1911 orders. In taking more than his fair share from one depot, Mount Hooper, for his own survival, Evans was banking both on Scott being intercepted by dog-teams out on the Barrier, and on Scott’s party progressing as swiftly as possible on the food Evans had left behind for them. However, those dog-teams did not go far enough south to meet the Polar Party due to errors at base (May, 2013, pp. 81–86), and the Polar Party’s progress was hampered by the debilitation of two people: Petty Officer Edgar Evans (during 4–17 February 1912) and Captain Oates (during 2–16 March 1912, after which Oates sacrificed himself). Because the Polar Party slowed their pace to accommodate their debilitated comrades instead of abandoning them, they were unable to convert their food to sufficient mileage to save themselves. Lieutenant Evans could not have known this at the time.

Evans’s misjudgements and general unpopularity have been an open secret in polar studies for years (e.g. the biography *Cherry*; Wheeler, 2001). However, a catalogue of Evans’s errors and personality flaws is not a solid foundation on which to build an implicit theory of harmful intent. Although Turney’s language in his article is not explicit, the suggested accusations within the ensuing media coverage have been rather serious (using language such as ‘cold-hearted betrayal’ and ‘deliberate sabotage’ (Fernandez, 2017)) and so I believe it is best to address such a hypothesis directly.

When we examine Evans’s actions during 1912, I think it fair to state that Evans did not aim to cause Scott serious harm. There was only one depot, Mount Hooper, where the Polar Party recorded a shortage of food; someone with harmful intent would have left nothing. Furthermore, had Evans had harmful intent towards Scott and his men back in 1912, then he would not have left Antarctica early but would have insisted instead on recovering from scurvy at base. Staying in Antarctica during 1912–1913 would have enabled Evans, as base leader, to control the search for the bodies of the Polar Party, to be the first to read their final testaments, and to excise any incriminating evidence. Instead, Evans sailed back to New Zealand in

March 1912 and did not return to Antarctica until January 1913, leaving others to find the bodies and documents. That Evans felt free to turn his back on Antarctica in 1912 indicates his lack of awareness of any future problems. Only after hearing of the disaster in January 1913 did Evans take steps to conceal his previous misjudgements. Someone who had deliberately committed a serious crime would have taken such steps during 1912 as well.

Turney’s article also appears to suggest that Evans could have been capable of withholding vital ‘updates’ from base (he questions the validity of Evans’s sickness with the phrase ‘sick or not’; Turney, 2017, p. 508). However, the fact of Evans being seriously ill is indisputable: in his expedition memoir *The Worst Journey in the World* (1922), Cherry-Garrard records that the naval surgeon Atkinson confided to him privately that when he first saw Evans he appeared so ill with scurvy that Atkinson ‘thought he must die’ (Cherry-Garrard, 1994, p. 429). Turney’s scenario suggesting Evans was capable of withholding ‘updated orders’ from the men at base in February 1912 is not tenable: firstly, Evans was genuinely ill when he was brought to Hut Point, and secondly, he did not bring back ‘updates’, as Scott had not changed his October 1911 wishes for the dogs to come out to ‘meet’ the Polar Party in March 1912.

I would be grateful if Turney’s inadvertent misdating of Wilson’s sketchbook could be corrected in *Polar Record* at the earliest opportunity, so that the polar community is aware that two separate sources, Wilson in 1911 and Evans in 1921, together confirm that Scott in October 1911 wished for the dog-teams to come out to meet his Polar Party, and that Scott informed Meares the dog-driver, and others at base, of his wishes at the time.

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