

# ‘A kind of suicide’? Errors and misconceptions in Roland Huntford’s account of the last days of Scott’s polar party

Karen May and George Lewis

c/o Scott Polar Research Institute, Lensfield Rd., Cambridge CB2 1ER  
(karenmay31@gmail.com)

Received June 2012; first published online 23 January 2013

**ABSTRACT.** In writing and interviews Roland Huntford has stated that at the end of his life Captain Robert Falcon Scott ‘probably’ had no reason to wish to survive, and that he ‘persuaded’ Dr Edward A. Wilson and Lieutenant Henry Bowers to remain in the tent with him when they could have gone forward. This commentary demonstrates that Huntford’s interpretation of events shows a serious misunderstanding of the primary sources and historical context; that Wilson and Bowers could not have survived had they gone forward, a fact which Huntford himself understands; and that Scott had extremely strong motivation to wish to return home.

## Introduction

In his book *Scott and Amundsen*, sometimes given the alternative title *The last place on Earth* (1979, 1983, 1999), and in media interviews in *The Guardian* on 27 December 2008 and 28 March 2012 and *New Scientist* on 4 October 2011 (Crace 2008; George 2011; Moss 2012), the writer Roland Huntford has suggested that, during Scott’s final days, Scott behaved in a morally abhorrent manner towards his companions in the polar party. Huntford’s first charge is that Scott placed pressure on Captain Lawrence Oates to kill himself (‘Poor Oates, indeed. He sat there in the tent, Scott staring at him, with the unspoken expectation of the supreme sacrifice’ (Huntford 1979: 535, 2002: 549)). Huntford subsequently admitted on television that here he had relied on ‘intuition’ (Fiennes 2004: 418), but he lodges a more serious charge: that Scott knew he would return to shame and ridicule at having come second at the south pole, and had decided that ‘self-destruction’ (Huntford 1979: 565, 2002: 549) was an acceptable alternative to public disgrace. Huntford wrote the following:

Scott himself probably held Wilson and Bowers back (. . .) Scott would have to answer for the men he had lost. [Ernest] Shackleton would have the last laugh. That was something Scott could not face. It would be better to seek immolation in the tent. That way he could snatch a kind of victory out of defeat. Wilson and Bowers were persuaded to lie down with him and wait for the end (Huntford 1979: 541–542, 2002: 524–525).

A casual reader might mistakenly infer from this that Wilson and Bowers still possessed sufficient strength to return to base, and that Scott had actively held them back from saving themselves. To the best of our knowledge, Huntford has not yet acted to correct any such misconception. In a 2011 interview he states

Scott’s letters and diary . . . read like a long suicide note. I don’t think he could face failure, so it was a kind of suicide, lying down in the tent . . . Scott’s writing implies he was interested in his reputation, not the lives of his followers. He probably persuaded

[Wilson and Bowers] to wait on the grounds their records would be found if kept in the tent but not if they fell on the trail (George 2011).

This commentary aims to assess Huntford’s statement that Scott committed ‘a kind of suicide, lying down in the tent’. Huntford’s 1979 book has had some revisions since its first publication (Rosove 2001: 204–205), but this argument against Scott has remained unchanged, so page citations will be from both the 1979 hardback and 2002 paperback (1999 revision) editions.

From a close examination of the primary evidence, it will show that Scott cannot be deemed to have ‘held Wilson and Bowers back’ as there was no realistic chance of their survival (a fact Huntford himself evidently understands) and that, far from believing suicide the only option, in March 1912 Scott had every reason to stay alive and made every conceivable effort to return home.

## The polar party’s final days

We must first examine the circumstances of Scott’s last march. Huntford comments that Scott’s writings ‘read like a long suicide note’ (George 2011). His interpretation may have been prompted by the most famous misquotation in Scott’s published journals, the closing words for 17 January 1912, the day the party reached the south pole: ‘Now for the run home and a desperate struggle. I wonder if we can do it’ (Scott 1913: 375). This sounds like early fatalism: in fact, Scott’s journal was posthumously edited. Scott’s actual words were ‘Now for the run home and a desperate struggle *to get the news through first*. I wonder if we can do it’ (Jones 2008: 470). Scott is being anything but fatalistic: he is setting the goal of the swiftest possible return to base.

Next we must consider the incident of the medicine case. On 11 March 1912 Scott writes that a severely debilitated Oates ‘is very near the end. . . What we or he will do, God only knows’ (Scott 1913: 406). Scott states that Oates ‘practically asked for advice’ and that ‘[n]othing could be said but to urge him to march as long as he could’ (Scott 1913: 406). Scott takes one action, however, which places the means of suicide in each man’s hands:

I practically ordered Wilson to hand over the means of ending our troubles to us, so that anyone of us may know how to do so. Wilson had no choice between doing so and our ransacking the medicine case. We have 30 opium tabloids apiece (Scott 1913: 406–407).

Here Scott appears to be giving Oates the means of an easy exit without the humiliation of having to ask for it. Knowing that Wilson, a Christian, would not willingly deliver the means of suicide into anyone's hands, Scott forced him to concede. By this coercion, and by making a record of it, Scott took responsibility and spared Wilson's conscience and reputation. Ultimately, there is no evidence that Oates took the opium tabloids, and the evidence argues against Scott having done so.

Scott, however, becomes increasingly aware of his critical situation. In his letter to Sir Edgar Speyer, dated 16 March, 13 days before his final entry, he writes 'I fear we must go and that it leaves the Expedition in a bad muddle. But we have been to the Pole and we shall die like gentlemen' (Scott 1913: 412). Huntford thereby suggests that Scott 'had been preparing his farewells for some time. . . [he] had already given up' (Huntford 1979: 542, 2002: 525). In fact, Scott wrote to Speyer on the same day Oates left the tent. Given the context, Scott's seeming fatalism in this letter, and in his corresponding journal entry of 17 March ('assuredly the end is not far. . . [T]hough we constantly talk of fetching through I don't think anyone of us believes it in his heart. . . [Effects] will be found with us or on our sledge' (Scott 1913: 408–409)), was most probably a reaction to Oates' recent death. To read such statements solely as evidence of mental capitulation is not entirely accurate, as such an approach disregards Scott's documented further struggles to survive.

On 19 March Scott made his last march to within 11 statute miles (17.7 km) of One Ton depot. On 18 March he had written '[m]y right foot is gone, nearly all the toes' (Scott 1913: 409): though he, Wilson and Bowers had marched northwards for another day despite this injury, for some reason they could go no further. The men still had one hope left, the possible arrival of the dog teams for whom Scott had left written instructions in October 1911 to meet the polar party (Evans 1949: 186–188). However, the projected date of meeting had been 1 March; by this point it must have been clear to Scott that something had gone wrong either at base or during the dog teams' journey south. If the dogs did not arrive, death was inevitable. The letters and 'Message to [the] Public' might be Scott's last chance to communicate with family, friends, sponsors and the British nation. Scott's frank acknowledgement of impending death does not mean that he wanted to die.

However, Huntford unfortunately appears to believe that if Scott, Wilson and Bowers died it was because they deliberately chose not to live. Of Scott's companions he states:

By the mores of the time, if Wilson and Bowers had survived but not Scott, they would have been

accused of deserting their captain and been socially dead (George 2011)

Huntford's suggestion seems to be that the fear of being 'socially dead' drove Wilson and Bowers to choose a *more literal* kind of death. In reality, Wilson and Bowers were both extremely modest men with few social aspirations, and would have placed their families' wishes for their survival ahead of social standing. It was certainly not unthinkable that polar explorers might return without their companions: the Australian explorer Douglas Mawson is a famous example, returning to base in 1913 as sole survivor of a three-man team. Whilst suffering from near-fatal scurvy on his return from the south in February 1912 E.R.G.R. ('Teddy') Evans wrote a note of explanation should his lower-deck companions Thomas Crean and William Lashly return to base without him (Ellis 1969: 145–146). In the event of his death, Evans clearly did not wish them to face charges of deserting their leader. Likewise, had Scott known he would die whereas Wilson and Bowers might return alive, it is inconsistent with Scott's character that he would not have officially cleared them in writing of any suggestion of desertion. Had Scott unexpectedly died first, Wilson and Bowers could have exonerated themselves by returning with his journals. Even if malicious rumours had subsequently swirled around the issue of their survival, such as Mawson endured in later years (Riffenburgh 2009: 131–132), Wilson and Bowers cared greatly for their families and little for society's opinion. They would doubtless have preferred to survive.

So why did Wilson and Bowers remain in the tent when Scott alluded in his diary to a plan for them to make a 22-mile round trip north to bring back food and fuel from One-Ton Depot? Huntford appears disinclined to believe that the weather was abysmal, or that Wilson and Bowers were too exhausted to make such a gruelling trip, stating instead that Scott 'probably' persuaded them to stay with him:

He probably persuaded the two to wait on the grounds their records would be found if kept in the tent but not if they fell on the trail. Wilson's letter to Mrs Oates [mother of the team's Captain Oates] hints tragically at such pressure, and that, left to himself, Wilson would have kept going. (George 2011)

Let us examine Wilson's last letter to Mrs Oates in its entirety:

Dear Mrs Oates, this is a sad ending to our undertaking. Your son died a very noble death, God knows. I have never seen or heard of such courage as he showed from first to last with his feet both badly frost bitten – never a word or a sign of complaint or of the pain. He was a great example. Dear Mrs Oates, he asked me at the end to see you and to give you this diary of his – You, he told me, are the only woman he has ever loved. Now I am in the same case and I can no longer hope to see either you or my beloved wife or my Mother and Father – the end is close upon us, but these diaries will be found and this note will reach

you some day. Please be so good as to send pages 54 and 55 of this book to my beloved wife addressed Mrs Ted Wilson, Westal, Cheltenham.

Please do this for me dear Mrs Oates – My wife has a real faith in God and so your son tells me have you – and so have I – and if ever a man died like a noble soul and in a Christlike spirit your son did – Our whole journey's record is clean and though disastrous – has no shadow over it. He died like a man and a soldier without a word of regret or complaint except that he hadn't written to you at the last, but the cold has been intense and I fear we have all of us left writing alone until it is almost too late to attempt anything but the most scrappy notes.

God comfort you in your loss

Yours sincerely

EA Wilson (Wilson 1912a: 56–59).

Huntford states that this letter 'hints tragically' that Scott persuaded Wilson to wait and that, 'left to himself, Wilson would have kept going'. We can find no such 'hints': in fact, this letter is evidence for the more obvious explanation that Wilson was too weak to continue. He was now 'in the same case' as Oates: thoroughly debilitated.

Huntford's suggestion is that 'something' prevented Wilson and Bowers from leaving the tent to fetch supplies, and that this 'something' was not poor weather or physical debilitation but Scott himself:

Something stopped them; it is not clear what (. . .) Scott himself probably held Wilson and Bowers back (. . .) Wilson and Bowers were persuaded to lie down with [Scott] and wait for the end, where the instinct of other men in like predicament was to keep going and fall in their tracks (. . .) They wrote their last letters, believing they would be found someday. That indeed was the argument that Scott probably used to persuade Wilson and Bowers to lie down and wait in the tent (Huntford 1979: 541–542, 2002: 524–525).

As biographer David Crane states, 'of all the charges levelled at [Scott] this is the most grotesque' (Crane 2006: 578).

Would Wilson and Bowers have possessed sufficient strength to haul a loaded sledge over 100 miles from their last position back to Hut Point to save themselves, and did Scott deliberately prevent them from doing so? Certain readers believe so, and appear to have taken this belief from Huntford's work. Journalist John Crace states in *The Guardian*:

Huntford's suggestion [is] that Scott had come to understand that his failings would be revealed were they to get home and had contrived to persuade the remaining members of the polar party that, by remaining in their tent where their bodies might later be found, they could achieve in death the fame that had eluded them in life (Crace 2008)

Journalist Stephen Moss concurs, also in *The Guardian*: 'Huntford believes Wilson and Bowers would have made it back without Scott; Scott had, in effect, willed his

own death to ensure a kind of secular sainthood' (Moss 2012).

However, it should be stressed that there is nothing in the primary evidence to indicate that Wilson and Bowers had sufficient strength to make it back to base: in his double-biography Huntford makes no such claim. In fact, Huntford explicitly acknowledges that all three men had little hope:

Even if they reached the depot, they were probably finished, with 130 miles still to safety and the season closing in (Huntford 1979: 541, 2002: 524)

All Huntford has ever stated is that Wilson and Bowers could have chosen to 'keep going', that by doing so they could 'fall in their tracks' (Huntford 1979: 542, 2002: 525) or 'on the trail' (George 2011), and that 'Scott himself probably held [them] back' (Huntford 1979: 541, 2002: 524). Sadly, it appears that others have erroneously taken from Huntford's statements the mistaken inference that journeying onwards could have resulted in Wilson's and Bowers' *survival*. No such conclusion should be drawn from Huntford's words. We do not at present understand why Huntford should believe that Scott himself 'probably held [them] back' (Huntford 1979: 541, 2002: 524) (the one piece of evidence he directly cites in support of his case, Wilson's letter to Mrs Oates, makes no mention of this issue), but whether Scott 'held them back' or not is ultimately irrelevant. By this point Wilson and Bowers were too debilitated to have any realistic chance of survival, and from his comment that they were 'probably finished' Huntford evidently understands this. It is our hope that in the future Huntford will reword his text for greater clarity, and attempt to rectify false impressions taken from his writing or media interviews that he holds any belief that Scott deliberately prevented Wilson and Bowers from saving their own lives.

Furthermore, the argument Huntford suggests Scott used to 'persuade' Wilson and Bowers to stay in the tent has some unfortunate flaws in its logic. Huntford suggests Scott's argument was that, if they remained, their 'last letters' could be found with their bodies: 'If they had fallen in their tracks, they and their records would have been lost. In the tent, they would have a chance of being found, and their tale saved from oblivion' (Huntford 1979: 542, 2002: 525). In Trevor Griffiths' 1985 television adaptation, Scott suggests to Wilson, 'If our effects are lost, *all's* lost, wouldn't you say? Letters to our loved ones, journals, samples. In the tent, they may still be found, survive to tell the tale. . .' (Griffiths 1986: 280).

Unfortunately, this theory is not internally consistent. In Scott's entry of 21 March ('To-day forlorn hope, Wilson and Bowers going to depot for fuel' (Scott 1913: 410)) the intention was clearly for Wilson and Bowers to go to One Ton depot to fetch supplies for Scott, who would stay in the tent. So why should Scott at this point use the preservation of effects as an argument to dissuade his companions from trying for the depot? As polar researcher Sarah Airriess observes (personal

communication, 28 March 2012), had Wilson and Bowers departed and 'fallen in their tracks', the tent, with Scott and effects inside, would still have remained upright and visible for possible discovery by a later search party. Thus Huntford's and Griffiths' theory that Scott dissuaded his companions from a potentially life-saving trip to One Ton Depot for the sake of preserving letters and effects is untenable. Faced with such an argument, Wilson and Bowers, intelligent men both, would not have been convinced: they surely would have replied that they could nonetheless try for the depot, as it would not require *all three of them* to remain inside the tent with the effects.

A reverse hypothesis has been suggested by Susan Solomon, that Wilson and Bowers 'were well enough to negotiate' the return journey (Solomon 2001: 321) but chose not to save themselves and instead stayed with Scott: 'their deaths may have been a matter of choice rather than chance' (Solomon 2001: 327). Though well-intentioned we believe this goes too far, especially in interpreting Bowers' comment 'I am Captain Scott's man and shall stick by him right through' (Solomon 2001: 327) as possible evidence of self-sacrificial intent: in the strict context of his letter home (Seaver 1938: 227), Bowers is simply stating that he will abide by Scott's decision for him on the Southern Journey. Judging from the remark in Wilson's letter to his parents 'we three are nearly done up' (Wilson 1912b: 48–49), we think it highly unlikely that Wilson and Bowers would have had sufficient strength to walk to safety.

The crucial question is whether Wilson's and Bowers' proposed trip to the depot on 21 March was in fact potentially life-saving, or even feasible. From the last letters it would appear that it was neither. Wilson writes to Reginald Smith that 'we shall make a forlorn-hope effort', but 'it means 22 miles, and we are none of us fit to face it' (Seaver 1933: 293). Scott notes as early as 11 March that '6 miles [per day] is about the limit of our endurance now' (Scott 1913: 407) but for this mission to succeed Wilson and Bowers would have had to man haul a sledge around 22 statute miles (35.4 km) in a single session. A strong following wind, with the sail hoisted, might have assisted them: however, the sail also doubled as the tent's floorcloth (Scott 1913: 375; Evans 1949: 263), so Scott would have been left in a tent with no groundsheet. In any case, at the depot Wilson and Bowers would have had to dig out supplies, load the sledge and drag their burden back, possibly against a *facing* wind. In the event of a blizzard they had no tent and hence no shelter.

As Fiennes observes, from their letters it is clear that Bowers and Wilson knew that this journey was likely to prove fatal (Fiennes 2004: 369). Bowers wrote to his family that he was 'still strong & hope to reach this [depot] with Dr Wilson & get the food & fuel necessary for our lives' (Bowers 1912: 66–67), but a close examination of his language reveals his acknowledgement of his probable death:

God alone knows what will be the outcome of the 23 miles march we have to make but my trust is still in Him. . . [I] am only glad that I am permitted to struggle on to the end. When man's extremity is reached God's help may put things right & though the end will be painless enough for myself I should so like to come through for your dear sake. It is splendid to pass however with such companions as I have. . . [Y]ou will know that I struggled till the end (Bowers 1912: 66–69).

Bowers' hope for 'God's help' and his repeated emphasis on 'struggling to the end' suggests his awareness that he would not survive. This last letter reads as a note to be left behind with Scott in case he did not return from the depot mission. Bowers closes with 'you will know that for me the end was peaceful as it is only sleep in the cold' (Bowers 1912: 68–71). This accords with Wilson's letter to his wife Oriana: 'Birdie [Bowers] and I are going to try to reach the Depot 11 miles north of us and return to this tent. . . I shall simply fall and go to sleep in the snow' (Seaver 1933: 293). Both Wilson and Bowers were aware that death would be the most likely outcome of an attempt to reach One Ton depot.

Huntford appears to believe that these men decided to 'lie down and wait in the tent' (Huntford 1979: 542, 2002: 525). Such phrasing could be taken to imply that forward momentum signified the will to survive, whereas remaining in the tent was giving up. Solomon employs a similar dichotomy to interpret Wilson and Bowers' remaining in the tent as a conscious self-sacrifice, but we believe the implied binary opposition of 'survival versus death' is erroneous in both Solomon and Huntford. At this point, seriously weakened and with no hope of the dogs' arrival, these men knew that they did not have a choice which would result in survival.

Thus it cannot be taken as strange or suspicious that Wilson and Bowers changed their minds about venturing outside. Both were Christians, and may have considered that such a futile 'forlorn-hope effort' would be tantamount to suicide, for them a mortal sin. In his youth Wilson had written on the subject: '[I]t is no sin to long to die, the sin is in the failure to submit our wills to God to keep us here as long as He wishes' (Seaver 1933: 72). Huntford has unfortunately misinterpreted this quote as evidence of 'a death wish that was a Victorian perversion of the Franciscan ideal' (Huntford 1979: 161, 2002: 155). This misreads Wilson's faith as nihilistic. In fact, Wilson's words merely show that he was aware of his quietist impulses and knew to guard against them. Had Wilson truly 'nursed morbid death-wishes', as Huntford suggests (Huntford 1979: 542, 2002: 525), then on 21 March he might well have decided on a futile run to One Ton depot. However, he did not, and his artwork and writings (Seaver 1933; Wilson and Elder 2000) provide ample testimony to his love for life.

More importantly still, had Wilson and Bowers departed and 'fallen in their tracks' they could arguably have brought a quicker end to their physical suffering but

would have been leaving Scott to face a prolonged and lonely demise. Given Wilson's strong Christian faith and affection for Scott, it makes sense that Wilson would have rejected the temptation of an easy exit and stayed with his friend instead. Indeed in his youth Wilson had written, reacting to the Christian mystic Thomas à Kempis: 'This is the most fascinating ideal I think I have ever imagined to become entirely careless of your own soul and body in looking after the welfare of others' (Wilson and Elder 2000: 29). Thus it is most probable that he, and Bowers, remained in the tent with Scott to provide companionship for each other to the end. To die as these men did is terrible enough: for each to have died alone would have been worse.

On 22–23 March 1912 Scott writes that 'Wilson and Bowers unable to start [for the depot]' and at this point evidently considers bringing about his own death: '[M]ust be near the end. Have decided it shall be natural – we shall march for the depot with or without our effects and die in our tracks' (Scott 1913: 410). Given his severely frostbitten foot, Scott knew he could not walk to safety. In his letter to J.M. Barrie he writes: 'We did intend to finish ourselves when things proved like this, but we have decided to die naturally in the track' (Scott 1913: 412). To his wife Kathleen he writes 'We have decided not to kill ourselves but to fight it to the last for that depot but in that fighting there is a painless end so dont worry' (Scott 1912a: 22–23). In these last two letters Scott draws a distinction between deliberate suicide (presumably by means of the opium tablets) and the journey out to the depot, which too would result in a quick death but with no imputation of cowardice.

This intention to 'die in our tracks' is the closest Scott ever came to 'suicide'. However, it is clear that Scott finally *refused* this option, as his body was found *inside* the tent. Wilson and Bowers had earlier chosen not to leave; far from Scott dissuading his companions from leaving, as Huntford suggests (Huntford 1979: 541–542, 2002: 524–525), it is more credible that Wilson and Bowers now dissuaded Scott from going outside to 'die naturally in the track'. We shall never know the conversation in the tent during the men's last week: however, judging from what is known of their personalities and from their final letters (in particular Wilson's affirmations that the expedition's 'record is clean' (Lane and others 2012: 48–49, 53, 58–59)), Wilson and Bowers would have prevented Scott from self-destruction to no purpose.

One final anomaly must be addressed. Scott wrote in his final entry of 29 March, 'Every day we have been ready to start for our depot 11 miles away, but outside the door of the tent it remains a scene of whirling drift' (Scott 1913: 410). This gives the impression that Scott had the strength to go on; however, in context this is not credible. On March 18 he had written that his frostbitten right foot would require amputation (Scott 1913: 409); by this point he could not have been 'full of good health and vigour', as he writes in one farewell letter (Scott 1913: 415). The 'whirling drift' Scott describes has long been inferred to

be a blizzard, but meteorologist Susan Solomon, using Surgeon E.L. Atkinson's records taken at Corner Camp in late March, writes that 'Atkinson's weather log thus proves that there was no blizzard on or after March 27' (Solomon 2001: 319). Given his insistence on his 'good health', it is likely that Scott recast his final circumstances into the scenario that all three could conceivably have gone forward had it not been for poor weather. This would have been less distressing for relatives to read than a frank admission that they no longer had the strength to continue.

Regarding the party's debilitation, it should be noted that there is no contemporary account from the search party of November 1912 of visible signs of scurvy on the polar party's bodies. Huntford states that by March 'Scott was almost certainly in the early stages of scurvy' (Huntford 1979: 534, 2002: 517); however, Scott would have recognized the signs, as during his return from the farthest south during January–February 1903 on the *Discovery* expedition he diligently records scorbutic symptoms in himself and Wilson: 'I myself have distinctly red gums, and a very slight swelling in the ankles. Wilson's gums are affected'; 'our scurvy symptoms for the last few days have remained about the same'; 'our scurvy has been advancing again with rapid strides' (Scott 2009: 443, 451, 457). By contrast, no observations of scorbutic symptoms exist in his or Wilson's sledging diaries during 1911–1912. On 18 March 1912 Scott faithfully recorded the circumstances in which he contracted frostbite, even attacking himself for it ('like an ass I mixed a small spoonful of curry powder with my melted pemmican – it gave me violent indigestion' (Scott 1913: 409)). Many would consider such an incident too humiliating to record for posterity, but here Scott is characteristically frank and self-analytical: there is therefore no reason to believe that he would have concealed scurvy symptoms at this point, had they existed. The lucidity of Scott's last entries and farewell letters also testifies to a mind unclouded by the listlessness and sensory distortion characteristic of scurvy.

Teddy Evans, the only recorded scurvy sufferer on the *Terra Nova* expedition, had avoided eating the fresh meat recommended by Wilson, and this omission in his diet quite possibly triggered his condition (May 2012: 2–6): Scott, Wilson and Bowers certainly would not have neglected their diet as Evans had. Huntford states 'There are stray hints that [Atkinson] might have been concealing evidence of scurvy, which could not be revealed because it would have reflected on the whole conduct of the expedition' (Huntford 1979: 563, 2002: 547). Huntford appears to believe that during this period scurvy was seen as an unspeakable scandal which necessitated a cover-up; however, in 1905 both Scott (Scott 2009) and Wilson (Wilson 1905) published accounts of scurvy on the *Discovery* expedition, and the fact of Teddy Evans' scurvy was calmly and dispassionately reported in the international media in 1912 (for example *Washington Post* 3 April 1912: 1), as was Arnold

Spencer-Smith's 1916 death from scurvy in Shackleton's Ross Sea party (for example *Washington Post* 6 February 1917: 1). Judging from this, occurrences of scurvy on polar expeditions seem neither scandalous nor covered up. More importantly, there is no contemporary evidence that Scott, Wilson or Bowers had scurvy at the end of their lives. If Atkinson ever dropped such 'stray hints' in later life, he, like others at base, probably found comfort in the notion that the polar party died of something other than the failure to send the dog teams far enough for a rescue (May 2012). Scott's journals show the chief causes of the polar party's debilitation: forcibly slowed progress (due to injured companions) and extreme cold. Subsequent modern scientific analyses have pointed to malnutrition as a further significant factor, but Huntford's argument that the polar party were suffering specifically from *scurvy* remains speculation.

Did Wilson, Scott and Bowers avail themselves of the opium tabloids at the end? It is unlikely that Wilson and Bowers would have done so on religious grounds. As for Scott, Huntford's assertion that Scott's death was 'a kind of suicide, lying down in the tent' (George 2011) is factually erroneous. Eyewitness accounts from search party members indicate that in fact Scott was found *sitting up*, and even that his eyes were 'wide open' (May 2012: 13). Frederick Hooper thought Scott had been 'in great pain' at the time of his death, and Trygve Gran concurred: 'His face was twisted. No doubt he has had a hard time; he had not passed away peacefully' (Gran 1972). It would appear that Scott struggled against death to the last, which argues against his having taken opium tabloids for a self-willed and painless exit. Scott wrote that '[t]hese rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale' (Scott 1913: 417): the journals and last letters, and the eyewitness accounts of Scott's body, all counter any 'suicide' theory.

We must now examine Huntford's hypothesis for why Scott preferred suicide to survival. Huntford's argument appears to be that Scott 'had nothing to look forward to' (Huntford 1979: 541, 2002: 524). Allegedly Scott was returning to disgrace and accusations of failure, plus the loss of part of his lower right leg, and thus decided on suicide. As we shall see, this reveals a regrettable lack of understanding both of Scott's character and the priorities of the Edwardian era.

### If Scott had lived...

Had Scott lived, what possible charges might have been levelled against him? Huntford states: 'Scott would have to answer for the men he had lost' (Huntford 1979: 542, 2002: 524). However, Scott had not been held responsible for the deaths of Charles Bonner and George Vince during his *Discovery* Expedition of 1901–1904. Similarly, Roald Amundsen was not required to answer for the deaths of Gustav Wiik during his *Gjøa* Expedition of 1903–1906, or Peter Tessem, Paul Knutsen and Søren Syvertsen during his *Maud* expedition of 1918–

1925; Carsten Borchgrevink for Nicolai Hanson in 1899; William Bruce for Allan Ramsay in 1903; Mawson, for Belgrave Ninnis and Xavier Mertz in 1912–1913; nor Shackleton for Arnold Spencer-Smith, Aeneas Mackintosh and Victor Hayward of the Ross Sea party in 1916–1917. The earliest example of a higher authority calling a polar leader 'to answer' for expedition deaths is Benito Mussolini's blatantly unjust 1929 inquiry into Umberto Nobile's culpability for the *Italia* disaster. In the words of author Wilbur Cross, before Mussolini 'never in the history of global exploration had men been formally accused of a crime simply because they had failed to return victorious in the battle against those forces of nature that had sent many of the strongest, bravest men in the world to their deaths' (Cross 2002: 294).

Huntford's subsequent argument that Shackleton, Scott's alleged rival, 'would have the last laugh' (Huntford 1979: 542, 2002: 524) is also untenable. Scott had reached the south pole whereas Shackleton had been unable to do so. Shackleton would therefore have had no cause to feel superior; there is also no evidence that he harboured a shred of pleasure over the demise of Scott's party, that is, a 'last laugh', and such *schadenfreude* would have been inconsistent with Shackleton's character as we know it.

Would Scott have returned to British hostility and ridicule? In 1912–1913 the perception of honour was as important as accomplishment. The phrase 'playing the game', with its connotations of good sportsmanship, essentially encapsulates Edwardian ethics: by such standards, Amundsen's victory was flawed. He had reached the south pole first, but had done so by deceiving his sponsor Fridtjof Nansen (Bomann-Larsen 2011: 84–85), his competitor Scott (Bomann-Larsen 2011: 86), his own crew until their arrival at Madeira (Bomann-Larsen 2011: 82–83), his King, his government and his countrymen (Bomann-Larsen 2011: 84–85). The British registered their disapproval of such tactics: when announcing Amundsen's victory, *The Times* remarked that

From the English point of view he may not have 'played the game': we cannot forget the secrecy under which for months he shrouded his intention to steal a march on the man who had for years been making his preparations to attain the coveted goal (*The Times* (London) 9 March 1912: 5)

Echoing this, Leonard Darwin, a former Royal Geographical Society President, wrote privately to Scott's wife Kathleen in 1912 that Amundsen 'has not played the game' (Jones 2008: xxix).

By contrast, Scott had reached the pole in accordance with his country's wishes: had he returned home, Scott's second-place ranking would probably have been acclaimed by the British as the 'true' victory, the *moral* victory. For a hint of the glories that would have awaited a living Scott, one need only look at the honour bestowed upon Teddy Evans in 1913. Evans was only the nominal head of the expedition, the title having defaulted to him

after Scott's death. Evans had not seen the south pole; in fact he had not even seen the expedition's second winter, having been invalided home early in 1912 with scurvy. Yet as the nearest thing to Scott himself he was made a C.B., a Companion of the Order of the Bath (*London Gazette* 16 May 1913: 1). In 1909 Shackleton had turned back roughly 97 nautical miles from the pole, and had come home to British honour and acclaim rather than accusations of failure: he was immediately made a C.V.O., a Companion of the Victorian Order (*London Gazette* 16 July 1909: 5) and this was followed by a knighthood (*London Gazette* 24 December 1909: 1). Had Scott, already a C.V.O., returned, his would have been a higher honour than Shackleton's standard knighthood: Scott would have been made a K.C.B., Knight Commander of the Bath. Scott's widow Kathleen was given the title of 'Lady Scott' and 'granted rank, style, and precedence of the widow of a K.C.B.' Her entry in *Debrett's Baronetage* states that Scott 'would have been nominated a K.C.B. had he survived' (*Debrett's* 1929: 118).

Moreover, Scott was concerned that if he died on the Great Ice Barrier, the family for whom he had worked so hard could have been left with little to live on. Scott's concern had always been the welfare of his dependants: in 1910 these were his wife Kathleen, son Peter, mother Hannah, unmarried sister Grace and widowed sister Rose with her young daughter Erica. From the time of his father's insolvency in December 1893 (Gwynn 1939: 24) to his father's death in 1897, Scott had been a breadwinner for his family. After the death of his younger brother Archie in 1898, Scott was the sole 'man of the family' and though he initially shared the bill for his family's financial support with his brother-in-law William Ellison-Macartney (Gwynn 1939: 33), by 1904 Scott had assumed entire responsibility for the annual £200 bill (Pound 1966: 115). As his mother told him, in a 1908 letter regarding his forthcoming marriage at the age of 39, 'You have carried the burden of the family since 1894, it is time now for you to think of yourself and your future' (Gwynn 1939: 106–107).

Whilst working at the Admiralty in 1909 Scott had a special salary of £950 for one year (Crane 2006: appendix 28–29) that converts to £54,207 in 2005 terms (The National Archives). However, at the end of his life Scott knew that on his death his widow and son would receive his meagre captain's naval pension. Scott had administrative experience in personnel matters, most recently as Naval Assistant to the Second Sea Lord, Vice-Admiral Sir Francis Bridgeman (Gwynn 1939: 161): he was well aware of British naval parsimoniousness. An ordinary captain's widow's pension was £90 per annum; Kathleen might qualify for a 'special pension in lieu of ordinary pension', which, after three years' service at the rank of captain, would have been £150 for an accidental death (*Navy List* 1907: 893). His young son Peter would have qualified for a 'compassionate allowance to legitimate children' amounting to £18–25. Thus Kathleen could

have expected an income of £175 per annum at the very most, and £175 in 1910 was equivalent to £9,985 in 2005 terms (The National Archives).

The situation was somewhat better for Scott's mother and sisters; they could expect some assistance from Ellison-Macartney. However, Kathleen, as executor of Scott's will (*The Times* (London) 17 May 1913: 8), knew that in the event of his death Scott's savings would be held in trust to provide an income for his mother. Scott writes in his last letters to his mother, 'Willy [Ellison-Macartney] will look after you, but you will have the small amount of money I was able to save' and 'I die feeling that your material comfort will be looked after to the end' (Gwynn 1939: 230, 231).

Scott's estate was posthumously valued at £3,231 12s 3d (*The Times* (London) 17 May 1913: 8), £184,395.81 in 2005 terms (The National Archives). *The Times* reports that

Captain Scott left all his securities deposited. . . upon trust for his mother, Mrs Hannah Scott, for life, with remainder to his wife, and he left all other his property [*sic*] to his wife absolutely (*The Times* (London) 17 May 1913: 8)

Scott's mother would have had some security; meanwhile Scott's widow and son would not have been penniless, but in the light of his naval administrative experience Scott feared that, after his death, their only reliable income would have been an annual naval pension with the purchasing power of less than ten thousand pounds in today's currency.

Hence Scott appealed repeatedly for his friends and country to help support his dependents. To his agent, J.J. Kinsey, Scott wrote, 'My thoughts are for my wife and boy. Will you do what you can for them if the country won't' (Scott 1913: 414). To Vice-Admiral Sir George Egerton: 'Please see my widow is looked after as far as Admiralty is concerned' (Scott 1913: 414). To Speyer: '[W]ill you please do your best to have our people looked after those dependent on us I have my wife & child to think of. . . [Wilson] leaves a widow entirely destitute. Surely something ought to be done for her and for the humbler widow of Edgar Evans' (Scott 1912b: 38–41). To Bridgeman, in a passage deleted from the reproduction of the letter in the 1913 edition of Scott's journals: 'I want you to do your best to secure a competence for my widow and boy. I leave them very ill provided for but feel that the country ought not to neglect them' (Ross 1998: 187–188). To Barrie: 'I leave my poor girl [Kathleen] and your godson [Peter], Wilson leaves a widow, and Edgar Evans also a widow in humble circumstances. Do what you can to get their claims recognised' (Scott 1913: 412). Thus Scott's last writings certainly do not 'read like a long suicide note', as Huntford has stated (George 2011). In reality, they read like a succession of charity appeals. As a postscript to his last diary entry on 29 March, Scott wrote, 'For God's sake look after our people' (Scott 1913: 410). This is the voice of a man who thought of others to the last.

With regard to his future employment, Scott would easily, had he wished, have continued to rise in the Royal Navy. He had the high regard and personal friendship of two influential figures, Bridgeman and Egerton, to whom he wrote farewell letters (Scott 1913: 413–414). Scott was due for promotion regardless. The promotion time from Captain to Rear-Admiral was 9 to 10 years (*Navy List* 1915: 85–89). Scott's date of appointment for Captain had been 10 September 1904, so his nomination for promotion to Rear-Admiral would probably have come by September 1914.

Huntford states of Scott's promotion prospects, 'His place on the captains' list would determine when - or whether - he would get his flag; and what kind: would he end as Rear Admiral, retired; or rise to full Admiral and - who knew - perhaps even First Sea Lord?' (Huntford 1979: 186, 2002: 179). Huntford unfortunately appears to be in some confusion regarding the career path of a Royal Naval captain in 1910. In fact, Scott's progression to Rear-Admiral was merely a matter of meeting his sea requirements and serving his time. Of the 33 men promoted to Captain in 1904 (*Navy List* 1907: 94) 30 subsequently rose to the rank of Rear-Admiral, with most advancing to the rank of Admiral on the retired list: the only three exceptions (Scott being one) had died by the end of 1914. Therefore, had he lived, Scott's promotion would have been virtually automatic: by 1914 he would have been Rear-Admiral, with a guaranteed pension of £600 per annum even if placed on the retired list (*Navy List* 1907: 795). The purchasing power of £600 in 1910 is £34,236 in 2005 terms (The National Archives).

With this secure income, the royalties from his published *Discovery* and *Terra Nova* expedition narratives, and the possibility of a company directorship or other such lucrative career, Scott's life would no longer have been dictated by financial concerns. Had Scott stayed in the Royal Navy, in spite of his disability, the starting salary for a Rear-Admiral on active duty would have been £1095 per annum (*Navy List* 1907: 773), or £62,481 in 2005 terms (The National Archives). Huntford has stated that 'I don't think [Scott] could face failure' (George 2011) and has written that upon returning Scott would have 'had to face the terrible words *MENE MENE TEKEL UPHARSIN*. . . Thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting' (Huntford 1979: 541, 2002: 524). In reality, upon his return Scott would have had to face overwhelming national acclaim, high honours, a place in British history and the financial security for which he had longed.

When Scott's tent was found, his 'Message to the Public' ('I appeal to our countrymen to see that those who depend on us are properly cared for' (Scott 1913: 417)) was answered handsomely by the British nation (Jones 2004: 104–109). However, though he evidently hoped that others would take over his role in supporting his wife and son, Scott could not have been *certain* of such generosity. Any cynical hypothesis that Scott deliberately chose to die on the Great Ice Barrier fails to take into

account one crucial factor: Scott could not even have been certain that the tent would ever be found. His last letters were written in hope, not in calculated anticipation.

Scott's journal entry regarding his frostbitten foot ('Amputation is the least I can hope for now, but will the trouble spread? That is the serious question' (Scott 1913: 409)) indicates that his main concern was not the amputation itself but whether the frostbite would *worsen*, and hence prevent him from going on. From his stoic attitude, it appears unlikely that the prospect of a future lived with a disability could have deterred Scott from returning to Britain. Had Scott survived to return home, his family's financial crises would no longer have been an issue: with the distinction of his being perceived by his nation as the more *honourable* conqueror of the south pole, his future would have been assured. Getting home was key to 'looking after his people', and Scott, in our assessment, did his utmost to return.

In conclusion, we would submit that the primary evidence strongly refutes any argument that Scott committed 'a kind of suicide', or prevented his companions from saving themselves.

#### Acknowledgements

Our thanks must go to Dr Michael Rosove for his invaluable work on this commentary; to the three anonymous referees for *Polar Record* whose generous, detailed and insightful comments assisted greatly with revision; to the Scott Polar Research Institute Library and Archive for their kind assistance with documentation; to the Scott estate for permission to quote from Robert Falcon Scott and Hannah Scott; to the Wilson estate for permission to quote from Edward A. Wilson; to *The Times* for permission to cite two copyrighted articles; to the naval website 'The Dreadnought Project' ([www.dreadnoughtproject.org](http://www.dreadnoughtproject.org)); the *London Gazette* website ([www.london-gazette.co.uk](http://www.london-gazette.co.uk)); the Newspaper Archive ([www.newspaperarchive.com](http://www.newspaperarchive.com)); to Chris Barker, Professor Jonathan Lamb, Philippa Lewis, Jacqueline Broucker, Sarah Airriess, Maureen Lewis and Dr Peter May.

#### References

- Bomann-Larsen, T. 2011. *Roald Amundsen*. Phoenix Mill: Sutton.
- Bowers, H.R. 1912. Letter to Mrs E. Bowers, March 1912. In: Lane, H., N. Boneham and R.D. Smith. 2012. *The last letters: the British Antarctic expedition 1910–13*. Cambridge: Scott Polar Research Institute: 65–71.
- Crace, J. 2008. Out in the cold. *The Guardian*, 27 December 2008 (Review section): 10. URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/dec/27/interview-roland-huntford> (accessed 30 November 2012).
- Crane, D. 2006. *Scott of the Antarctic*. Harper Perennial: London.
- Cross, W. 2002. *Disaster at the pole*. Connecticut: Lyons Press.
- Debrett's Illustrated Peerage, Baronetage, Knightage and Companionage*. 1929. London: Dean and Son.
- Ellis, A. (editor). 1969. *Under Scott's command: Lashly's Antarctic diaries*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Evans, E.R.G.R. 1949. *South with Scott*. London: Collins.
- Fiennes, R. 2004. *Captain Scott*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.



- George, A. 2011. Scott's biographer: British polar hero was incompetent. *New Scientist* (4 October 2011) 2832: 30–32. URL: <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21128320.200-scotts-biographer-british-polar-hero-was-incompetent.html> (accessed 30 November 2012).
- Gran, T. 1972. BBC television interview with Tryggve Gran, 1972.
- Griffiths, T. 1986. *Judgement over the dead: the screenplay of 'The last place on earth'*. Norfolk: Thetford Press.
- Gwynn, S. 1939. *Captain Scott*. London: Penguin.
- Huntford, R. 1979. *Scott and Amundsen*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Huntford, R. 2002. *Scott and Amundsen*. London: Abacus.
- Jones, M. 2004. *The last great quest*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, M. (editor). 2008. *Journals: Scott's last expedition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lane, H., N. Boneham and R.D. Smith. 2012. *The last letters: the British Antarctic expedition 1910–13*. Cambridge: Scott Polar Research Institute.
- May, K. 2012. Could Captain Scott have been saved? Revisiting Scott's last expedition. *Polar Record* doi:10.1017/S0032247411000751
- Moss, S. 2012. Captain Scott centenary: storm rages around polar explorer's reputation. *The Guardian*, 28 March 2012: 10 URL:<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/mar/28/captain-scott-antarctic-centenary-profile> (accessed 30 November 2012).
- Navy List*. 1907. *Navy list for October 1907*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Navy List*. 1915. *Navy list for January 1915*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Pound, R. 1966. *Scott of the Antarctic*. New York: Coward-McCann Inc.
- Riffenburgh, B. 2009. *Racing with death: Douglas Mawson – Antarctic explorer*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Rosove, M. 2001. *Antarctica, 1772–1922: freestanding publications through 1999*. California: Adélie Books.
- Ross, S. 1998. *Admiral Sir Francis Bridgeman: the life and times of an officer and a gentleman*. Cambridge: Baily's.
- Scott, R.F. 2009. *The voyage of the 'Discovery'*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions.
- Scott, R.F. 1912a. Letter to Mrs K. Scott, March 1912. In: Lane, H., N. Boneham and R.D. Smith. 2012. *The last letters: the British Antarctic expedition 1910–13*. Cambridge: Scott Polar Research Institute: 14–25.
- Scott, R.F. 1912b. Letter to Sir E. Speyer, 16 March 1912. Cited in: Lane, H., N. Boneham and R.D. Smith. 2012. *The last letters: the British Antarctic expedition 1910–13*. Cambridge: Scott Polar Research Institute: 36–43.
- Scott, R.F. 1913. *Scott's last expedition*. Vol. I. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co.
- Seaver, G. 1933. *Edward Wilson of the Antarctic*. London: John Murray.
- Seaver, G. 1938. *Birdie Bowers of the Antarctic*. London: John Murray.
- Solomon, S. 2001. *The coldest march*. London: Yale University Press.
- The National Archives. Online currency converter. URL: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency> (accessed 2 June 2012).
- Wilson, D.M., and D.B. Elder. 2000. *Cheltenham in Antarctica: the life of Edward Wilson*. Cheltenham: Reardon Publishing.
- Wilson, E.A. 1905. The medical aspect of the *Discovery's* voyage to the Antarctic. *British Medical Journal* 2(2323): 77–80.
- Wilson, E.A. 1912a. Letter to Mrs C. Oates, March 1912. In: Lane, H., N. Boneham and R.D. Smith. 2012. *The last letters: the British Antarctic expedition 1910–13*. Cambridge: Scott Polar Research Institute: 56–59.
- Wilson, E.A. 1912b. Letter to Dr E.T. Wilson, March 1912. In: Lane, H., N. Boneham and R.D. Smith. 2012. *The last letters: the British Antarctic expedition 1910–13*. Cambridge: Scott Polar Research Institute: 48–51.