

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 62

“To Strive, To Seek, To Find, and Not To Yield”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Exploration of Antarctica had been neglected for most of the 19th century. It was a distant and harsh land, all but inaccessible. No one could see any commercial or economic potential there.

This began to change by the turn of the twentieth century, as modern technology made exploration of Antarctica more feasible. And the man who had done the most to open up Antarctica to exploration was Royal Navy Commander Robert Falcon Scott.

Scott returned from his *Discovery* expedition a hero. He published a successful book and received a promotion. But the greatest prize of all had eluded him. His attempt to plant the Union Flag at the South Pole had failed.

And so, *Captain* Scott resolved to return to Antarctica and finish the job by traveling to the South Pole. But he was not the only one harboring that ambition.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 62. To Strive, To Seek, To Find, and Not To Yield.

Last week, we looked at the discovery and early exploration of Antarctica, and finished with Scott's *Discovery* Expedition. On his return to Britain, Scott at once became a hero, and the most famous of Antarctic explorers. This in spite of the fact that the voyage of *Discovery* has been Scott's first and only experience of polar exploration. Keep in mind that he was just an ordinary Royal Navy officer before that.

And you will recall from last week that not everyone in Britain was honoring Scott's achievements. Ernest Shackleton had taken personal umbrage following the 1906 publication of Scott's book, *The Voyage of the Discovery*, because he felt Scott was publicly blaming him for the expedition's failure to reach the South Pole. And so, Shackleton got the idea of returning to Antarctica on his own expedition and conquering the South Pole himself. Only, the Royal Geographic Society turned him down, because Scott, the great man himself, was also talking about returning to Antarctica. But this news only fired up Shackleton more. He became

determined to return ahead of Scott, become the first to reach both the Magnetic and Geographic South Poles, and erase forever the blot on his copybook.

Shackleton managed to secure funding in a few months, with help from the governments of Australia and New Zealand, both of which awarded him cash grants. He purchased a 40-year old seal-hunting ship that he renamed *Nimrod*, and his expedition set off for Antarctica in 1907.

Meanwhile, when Scott learned of Shackleton's plans, he sent Shackleton a politely worded letter that basically claimed McMurdo Sound and Victoria Land for his own expedition, and argued that Shackleton was morally obligated to find his own base for exploring the continent. Shackleton reluctantly agreed, and promised to use King Edward VII land instead, on the east side of the ice barrier.

But when *Nimrod* arrived, Shackleton was unable to find a suitable location on King Edward VII Land, and, with the fate of the expedition at stake, decided to go for McMurdo Sound anyway. The expedition set up a hut on Ross Island, and *Nimrod* left for New Zealand.

Before the Antarctic winter set in, Shackleton ordered an assault on Mt. Erebus. He did not go himself, but six of the expedition did, reaching the peak of the 12,450-foot high mountain.

When spring arrived, Shackleton sent a party to the South Magnetic Pole, in Victoria Land. This group traveled a short distance in the automobile that Shackleton had brought—another Antarctic first—but the car proved useless in the snow, and they ended up pulling their sledges themselves. But the group was successful. They planted a Union Flag and claimed the Magnetic Pole and Victoria Land for the British Empire.

Shackleton himself led the other group of four in all, on a quest for the South Pole. He took ponies on this trip, but, unsurprisingly, the ponies proved unable to survive the weather and died, one by one. The going was slow, and the thin air made it harder still. Shackleton remained determined, cutting back on the rations to assure they could still make it. In the end, it was taking so long they risked missing the rendezvous with *Nimrod* to take them home, and Shackleton had to settle for 88° 23' S, about one hundred miles short of the Pole. Even at that, the others had given them up for dead and they almost missed the rendezvous with *Nimrod*, but all's well that ends well. Shackleton and his expedition returned to Britain in triumph, although Shackleton remained disappointed in his inability to reach the South Pole. He published his own book, *The Heart of Antarctica*, and was hailed by one and all. Except by Scott and his supporters, who saw Shackleton's use of Ross Island as his base as dishonest and a betrayal, and spread nasty rumors that Shackleton's claims shouldn't be believed.

And that brings us to Roald Amundsen. You will recall that Amundsen was part of that Belgian Antarctic expedition as a young man, where he distinguished himself as strong and tough and brave, as well as getting a chance to hang out with Frederick Cook and gain the benefits of Cook's experience in the Arctic, working with Robert Peary. You will also recall from episode

59 that Amundsen became the first to sail the Northwest Passage and returned to his native Norway a hero in 1906.

Afterward, Amundsen began raising money for an expedition to the North Pole, but it was slow going. He was also by this time a seasoned and highly knowledgeable polar explorer, who had learned from the Inuit, as had Peary, of the superiority of animal furs over wool for keeping warm in extreme conditions, and his would be the first expedition in Antarctica to wear fur. Amundsen, being Norwegian, could ski, and he believed strongly in the value of dogs to pull the sledges. He was entirely baffled as to why the English explorers Scott and Shackleton disagreed with him on all these points.

And you may also recall from episode 59 that Frederick Cook announced to the world on September 2, 1909, that he had reached the North Pole. On September 6, Robert Peary announced that *he* had reached the North Pole. On September 9, Amundsen made his first public announcement of his own expedition to the North Pole, but, boy, hadn't those other two guys taken the wind out of *his* sails. And four days later, on September 13, Captain Scott announced in Britain that he was mounting another Antarctic expedition, this one determined to reach the *South Pole*.

And so, at some point afterward, Amundsen began to think that if Cook and Peary had taken all of the drama out of going to the North Pole, well, maybe he should go to the South Pole. And he didn't want to tell anyone this. The private donors who were funding his expedition, and the men who were heading out with him, all believed they had committed to the *North Pole*. And Scott would likely have reacted very badly to his decision, he judged, as would the British government, and, who knows, even the Norwegian government, which valued close relations with Britain, and they might even try to stop him from going.

Okay, so this is going to get awkward. Amundsen might have been willing to go down in history as a jerk, but not as a liar, so he just kept his new plan quiet. Scott tried a few times to contact Amundsen to discuss mutual scientific observations they might make, since they were planning to be at opposite poles at the same time. Amundsen refused to reply to any of Scott's attempts to communicate.

Scott's expedition left for Antarctica on June 3, 1910. Amundsen's left on June 16, still officially headed for the North Pole. It wasn't until the ship reached the Portuguese island of Madiera, in the Atlantic, that Amundsen called a meeting to explain to a very confused expedition that, yes, the plan is still to go to the North Pole, but they were taking a little detour first. To the, um, South Pole. Oh, to have been a fly on the wall at *that* meeting.

Now that the decision was official, Amundsen no longer felt comfortable keeping it secret from Scott. So he sent a telegram from Madiera to Melbourne, Australia, addressed to Scott, politely informing him that his own expedition was now also headed to the South Pole.

Scott's expedition planned to base at McMurdo Sound, which Scott was still thinking of as "his" territory, and would follow the route Shackleton had already explored through the mountains and onto the Polar Plateau. When Scott reached Melbourne, he received Amundsen's telegram, which had been waiting for him. And you can imagine how he felt, but he took the view that the wisest course of action was to move ahead with the original plan, and not to try to change anything or rush anything simply because of this new development. Scott's expedition proceeded to McMurdo Sound, arriving there on January 4, 1911.

Amundsen chose as his starting point the Bay of Whales, a notch in the Ice Barrier that allowed a ship to get about 60 miles, or 100 kilometers, farther south than McMurdo Sound. He arrived there on January 14, ten days after Scott's arrival at McMurdo Sound. Shackleton had discovered and named the Bay of Whales on the *Nimrod* expedition, and by the way, that's "Whales" as in the animal, not the country. An excited Amundsen had picked up on the fact that this Bay of Whales lay 60 miles closer to the South Pole and therefore would give his expedition a bit of a head start. Recall that Shackleton had gotten within 100 miles of the Pole; in Amundsen's view, had he started here, at the Bay of Whales, he might have made it all the way.

Amundsen set to work at once in what was left of the Antarctic autumn, setting up forward supply depots at 80° S, 81°S and 82°S, stopping for the winter only when the cold became too bitter to continue.

Scott's ship, the *Terra Nova*, went off to explore the Ice Barrier after dropping off Scott and his team. One of the discoveries *Terra Nova* made on this voyage was Amundsen's base at the Bay of Whales. They returned to McMurdo Sound and informed Scott of his competition.

Amundsen began his journey to the South Pole as early as he could manage in the Antarctic spring, leaving his base camp on October 20, 1911. Scott began his own trek to the South Pole eleven days later, on November first. This was because Scott's ponies needed to wait for warmer temperatures, while Amundsen's dogs could manage in the earlier, colder weather.

Amundsen's expedition used 52 sledge dogs to pull supply sledges, while the five humans went along on skis. The five of them were all Norwegian, and all experienced skiers. They left supply dumps for the return trip at every degree of latitude, and were careful to mark them well. They progressed at a rate of about fifteen miles a day. Amundsen would not let them move any faster, even though the others wanted to, for fear that humans and dogs alike would tire themselves out too quickly.

Amundsen had planned his expedition meticulously, and it paid off for him. They had had to find their own way through the mountains, but they managed this, passing through to the Polar Plateau, and they reached the South Pole without incident on December 14, 1911. They spent three days there, exploring the region, taking sextant readings, and planting flags all around, because they knew that their navigational readings were not exact, and didn't want anyone quibbling later over whether or not they had been precisely at the South Pole.

In fact, it is now believed that they set up their tent about two kilometers away from the actual South Pole, but they came within meters of it during their surveying, so, good enough.

Amundsen named the area around the Pole King Haakon VII Land. When they began the journey home, they left a tent behind, and in the tent, Amundsen left a letter addressed to the King of Norway, with a request to Captain Scott that he deliver it. This was in case Amundsen didn't make it back home.

But he did. All five of them made it back to the base camp at the Bay of Whales on January 25, 1912. Amundsen entered their hut at four in the morning and woke up the sleeping expedition members to ask them if there was any coffee. It is a testament to Amundsen's planning and organization and their skill in managing polar conditions that when the five of them returned after 99 days traveling across Antarctica, all five of them actually weighed more than when they had started. Obviously, supplies were never a problem.

Amundsen's expedition left Antarctica on January 30, arriving in Hobart, Tasmania on March 8, 1912, where they announced to the world that they had reached the South Pole. There was at this time no news of Scott's expedition, although it was too early to worry. No doubt Scott himself would return soon.

Amundsen had run a smooth, professional, no-drama operation. He himself would later write:

“I may say that this is the greatest factor—the way in which the expedition is equipped—the way in which every difficulty is foreseen, and precautions taken for meeting or avoiding it. Victory awaits him who has everything in order—luck, people call it. Defeat is certain for him who has neglected to take the necessary precautions in time; this is called bad luck.”

[music: *String Quartet*]

Scott, by contrast, had devised a more complicated plan that involved the use of dogs, ponies, and special motorized sledges that had been designed especially for this expedition, as well as plenty of hauling sledges by hand. As it turned out, just about everything about Scott's expedition went wrong. The sledges, sort of primitive snowmobiles, did not work well and had to be abandoned. The ponies did not cope well with the polar weather. Ponies sweat, you see, when they're working hard, which makes it easy for them to get hypothermia in polar conditions. This is in contrast to dogs, which do not sweat.

Scott had dogs, but never meant to take them all the way to the Pole. He was morally opposed to killing dogs, and so would only use them in circumstances when the dogs would be expected to survive and return home along with the humans. He had no qualms about killing ponies for food,

however, it should be noted. And Scott's expedition had skis, but only the one Norwegian on the expedition really knew how to use them. The previous autumn, Scott's expedition had pre-placed some supply caches to be used on the return trip, just as Amundsen and his crew had done.

But the ponies were not coping with Antarctic conditions. In particular, they were not able to place the expedition's largest supply depot, which they called the One Ton Depot, all the way at 80° S, as had been their plan. Some members of the expedition wanted to kill the ponies for food and press on to 80° S, but Scott refused, choosing instead to locate One Ton Depot at 78° 28' S, about 35 miles short of the originally planned location. One of the men warned Scott that he would come to regret that decision. And these words would prove prophetic.

Scott's expedition also sent a second party on a mission of geological research and exploration into Victoria Land, where the South Magnetic Pole lay. This group came to be called the Northern Expedition, while Scott's party headed for the Geographical South Pole was called, of course, the Southern Expedition. We'll come back to the Northern Expedition later; let's focus right now on the Southern Expedition.

As I said, Scott and his party left their base camp on November 1. By December 9, the last of the ponies had had to be shot, much sooner than Scott had planned. On December 11, they reached the foot of the ascent to the Polar Plateau. The last of the dogs were sent back north. From here on, the sledges would be pulled by the expedition members themselves. A team of twelve hauled the sledges up the glacier and onto the Plateau. When that was done, four were sent back with instructions to send a team of men and dogs south to meet the returning expedition on March 1, about ten weeks from now, while Scott and the remaining seven forged ahead toward the Pole.

On January 3, it was time to send four more expedition members back, and leave the final assault on the Pole to the final four members. At this point, Scott and his party believed they were ahead of Amundsen. Surprisingly, Scott decided to send only three of his expedition back, and ordered all four of the others to come along with him, a total of five people, even though they only had supplies for four. It was a curious decision. It may have been that Scott wanted to be sure of having an experienced navigator along. But it required a hastily recalculation of the division of supplies, and it meant five men sleeping in a tent designed for four.

But things went more smoothly once they were up on the Plateau. They passed Shackleton's record on January 9, and knew they would be at the Pole in a week or so.

On January 16, Scott's party discovered one of Amundsen's black marker flags, and ski tracks and paw prints in the snow, and they knew that the Norwegians had already been here. Scott wrote in his diary, "The Norwegians have forestalled us and are first at the pole. It is a terrible disappointment, and I am very sorry for my loyal companions." The following day, January 17, 1912, Scott and his party reached the Pole. They found Amundsen's tent, and Scott found the letter addressed to the King of Norway. They also noted the traces of Amundsen's thorough survey of the area, and realized that even the small hope that they might at least hit the Pole more

accurately than the Norwegians was now gone. Scott wrote, “The pole. Yes, but under very different circumstances from those expected...none of us having slept much after the shock of our discovery...Great God! this is an awful place and terrible enough for us to have laboured to it without reward of priority.”

There was nothing left for Scott and his four companions to do but take a few photographs and head for home. Scott was still holding out hope that they might reach a telegraph in Australia before Amundsen did, and at least be the first to break the news.

But all was not well. The party’s health was beginning to deteriorate. Frostbite in the hands and feet was their constant companion, and one of the men had cut his hand, and the cut was developing a nasty infection. Another man’s feet had been so injured by frostbite that it was getting hard for him to walk.

They were also running short of food, fuel, and time, and morale was low. When they reached the mountains, the point where the descent to sea level begins, they had a day of exceptionally good weather, and Scott decreed a half-day of rest. They used the time to collect 35 pounds of fossil-bearing rocks, which were of scientific interest, yes, but, you know, it was also 35 pounds more weight to be hauled by tired, frostbitten, demoralized men.

When they reached the bottom of the descent, and the beginning of the Ice Barrier, the man with the cut hand, Edgar Evans, could go no farther. On February 17, he collapsed into the snow and soon died.

The remaining four reached the point where the dog teams were supposed to meet up with them on February 27, a couple of days early. But no dog sledge teams were ever sent, apparently because the expedition members at McMurdo Sound were also in poor condition after their own explorations, and there were questions about whether the supply dumps along the way could support so many humans and dogs.

Meanwhile, Scott and the three other survivors on his team continued to trudge north, hoping for relief teams to appear. It gradually dawned on them that no relief was coming, and their progress was slow, only about five miles per day, mostly because of Lawrence Oates, the man with the frostbitten feet, but also because of shortages of food and of the fuel which they were using to melt ice for drinking water. So it is possible dehydration contributed to their difficulties. The weather on the Ross Ice Shelf in the autumn of 1912 was also unusually cold. Winter was setting in early, further hampering their efforts.

Oates was aware that his condition was endangering the others, and he asked to be left behind. The others refused. On March 16, Oates left their tent, saying, according to Scott, “I am just going outside and may be some time.” In fact, Oates simply walked off into the cold until he died, sacrificing himself to save the others.

They made better time for a few days, but then it was Scott with a frostbitten foot. On March 19th, they set up camp at a point just eleven miles from One Ton Depot, which Scott had set up last autumn. Sadly, had the depot been set up at 80° S, as was the original plan, Scott and the two other remaining members of the party would have already reached it. But a huge blizzard struck that night. Scott says the other two men made repeated efforts to reach the supply depot, but were driven back by the weather. Scott's final diary entry is dated March 29. It is assumed that he and his party died that day or the next. It is generally assumed that Scott died last, but there is no way to know for certain.

[music: *String Quartet*]

On the day that Scott and the last of his men died, Roald Amundsen was still in Tasmania. The story of his conquest of the South Pole was headline news everywhere. Congratulatory telegrams poured in from around the world. The news was especially celebrated in Norway, which, you'll remember, has only been fully independent for six years. The Norwegian King Haakon VII created a special South Pole Medal for the occasion, and awarded it to every member of the expedition.

But Amundsen's accomplishment was tainted by the unsavory way he had kept his plan a secret and only sprung it on Scott and the world after Scott's expedition was already under way. And nowhere was the disapproval of Amundsen's actions more pointed than in Great Britain. Publicly, though, the British press and prominent public figures conceded that Amundsen had proved himself skillful and brave, and had scored a proud accomplishment. The fact that his expedition had scouted their own way to the Pole, rather than using the path British expeditions had already begun to map out was also cited as a mark in his favor. Privately, though, British elites were resentful and thought Amundsen's actions unsportsmanlike and underhanded.

Amundsen gave lectures in Australia and New Zealand, then returned to Norway to oversee publication of his account of the expedition. His account was cheerful and upbeat, as his expedition had suffered no tragedies or major setbacks. Next, Amundsen visited Britain, speaking before the Royal Geographic Society, and got into a row with its President, Lord Curzon, after he heard Curzon offer a toast to the *dogs* on Amundsen's expedition, but not to Amundsen himself. Amundsen felt slighted and protested, and was told that he had simply heard wrong. Then the Society demanded that Amundsen apologize for insulting *them*. After that unpleasantness, Amundsen went on to a lengthy lecture tour in the United States, where he received a friendlier welcome.

Meanwhile, back on Ross Island, two expedition members with sledges and dogs had set out south for the One Ton Depot on February 26th, with additional supplies, intending to meet up with Scott and his party on their return. They arrived at the supply dump on March 4th, and it was apparent that no one had been there. They dropped off some extra food and supplies at the dump, but did not go farther south, because there was not enough food available for the dogs, meaning

they would have had to resort to the trick of killing some of the dogs to feed to the others, something they had been specifically ordered not to do. So they turned about and headed back north. Scott was at this point alive and less than 70 miles away, but no one knew that.

A third attempt to head south in search of Scott began on March 26th, but soon had to turn back because of the harsh weather. By this time, it seemed likely to the remaining members of the expedition that Scott and his party had died.

Remember that Northern Party I mentioned before? The ones poking around Victoria Land? The expedition's ship, *Terra Nova*, had returned to resupply the expedition, which had been planning to spend a second winter in Antarctica. *Terra Nova* was also supposed to pick up the Northern Party and return them to the base camp, but because of the unusually early onset of winter weather, there was too much sea ice for the ship to reach them. So that group had to winter over where they were, with no hut or other structure, and inadequate rations. They survived the winter, although it required that they dig themselves an ice cave to live in, and hunt and eat seal and penguin, as well as burn seal blubber for fuel, in order to keep going.

The main body of the expedition on Ross Island hunkered down for the winter of 1912. When spring came at last, they pondered the dilemma of whether their first effort should be to search for the Northern Expedition, or to track down Scott and his party and determine their unhappy fate. They chose the latter. A party set out on October 29, using mules, which had been brought by *Terra Nova* when she'd resupplied the expedition, and they headed south. On November 12, they found the tent containing the three bodies. They collected the records of the expedition, Scott's diary and various letters he had written, and other personal effects. Then a cairn of ice and snow was built over the tent, turning it into their tomb.

One of Scott's letters was addressed to the British public, and concludes with these words:

“We took risks, we knew we took them; things have come out against us, and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of Providence, determined still to do our best to the last ... Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale, but surely, surely, a great rich country like ours will see that those who are dependent on us are properly provided for.”

The rest of the *Terra Nova* Expedition left Antarctica in January 1913. Before leaving, they put up a large wooden cross atop a nearby hill as a memorial to their lost members. It is inscribed

with their five names and a quote from Lord Tennyson: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

It would be February 1913 before the expedition would reach New Zealand, and the news of Scott’s fate became public.

Why did Scott’s expedition fail? Bad luck and bad weather were factors, to be sure. Given how close they managed to come to the One Ton Depot, though, you have to ask a lot of questions, because it seems that only a little bit more push would have gotten them through. Taking five men on the last leg of the trip instead of four, for example, seems a questionable decision, given the outcome. It also seems Scott did not properly calculate rations for his party. Modern analysis suggests that they were carrying only about half the amount of food they should have had, given the heavy work of pulling the sledges, and the high elevation where they were doing it.

And then there was the fuel. Scott was perpetually short of fuel, because the lids on his fuel cans leaked. Amundsen had used fuel cans that were sealed completely shut, like the canned goods you buy at the store. These did not leak.

Amundsen’s willingness to use sledge dogs, and to sacrifice them, rather than have humans pull the sledges, and his expedition’s greater skill at using skis were surely also factors.

But in addition to exhaustion and dehydration and starvation and bad weather and bad luck, the lack of dogs and the unfamiliarity with skis, you also have to account for morale. It must have been a crushing blow, to find that Amundsen had beaten them. What effect their mental state had, in addition to all the other obstacles I just listed, is something we can only speculate about. But it must have had some effect.

Some of the survivors of Scott’s expedition would spend the rest of their lives denying that anything could have been done better, or that there had been any missed opportunity to save the lost Southern Party. Others would be haunted by doubts.

Another person haunted by doubts was Roald Amundsen, who heard the news about Scott while he was on his speaking tour in the United States. Amundsen understood better than most what the morale effect of being second to the Pole must have been, and wondered, too, whether Scott might have lived, had he and his team left some of their surplus rations behind.

To most of the world, Amundsen’s conquest of the South Pole was a heroic tale of the triumph of the human spirit, while the later news of Scott’s death was a tragic footnote. But in the United Kingdom, many saw things quite differently. The British public tended to view Scott as the true hero of the story, the one who had perished honestly and nobly doing what was right, as opposed to Amundsen, who won the race by resorting to underhanded tactics that just weren’t cricket, like keeping secrets and killing the dogs. Amundsen was a “professional,” which, in the language of the British upper class of the time, was a put-down. Scott was a pure amateur, who sought the

Pole with the highest of motives, while Amundsen was a common sort of person, in it for the money. Actually, looking at it from a 21st-century perspective, calling Amundsen a professional and Scott an amateur may be conceding more than the upper classes of the time meant to.

Scott's reputation in Britain was also helped along by the fact that his poignant diaries and letters had been recovered and published, and for the next 60 years, in Britain at least, Scott would be seen as the real hero of the story, and Amundsen the footnote.

At the time of Scott's death, the United Kingdom was at its peak, the richest country on Earth. By 1976, Britain was in the humiliating position of having to apply to the International Monetary Fund for a loan. This is probably the low point of British fortunes in the twentieth century. Given the national mood of that later era, it is not surprising that books began to appear questioning the myth of Scott the hero. In this revisionist view, Scott was a gentleman dilettante, a dabbler who embarked on a risky undertaking with an ill-deserved confidence that, so long as a chap went to the right sort of school, attended the Church of England, knew how to use a fish fork, and kept a stiff upper lip, he was prepared for every challenge. In short, Scott was an exemplar of everything that was wrong with Britain in its Imperial period. He had taken on a task he was not equipped for, and led his comrades to their deaths.

In the 21st century, we are now seeing the debunking of the myth being debunked in turn. Weather data from the Ross Ice Shelf now tells us that the winter of 1912 produced some of the coldest and harshest weather ever seen in that region. That was the reason Scott gave in his own diary for the failure of his expedition, and it looks as if he had a point.

As for Amundsen, the Great War would interrupt his plans for the North Pole, but by 1919, he was at it again. He made a couple of attempts to reach the North Pole by ship, the idea being that the ship could be frozen into the ice in the Arctic Sea and then drift to the North Pole. This didn't work out, and he decided to go for the North Pole by airship instead. As we saw in episode 59, Amundsen did fly over the North Pole, and if we assume that Frederick Cook, Robert Peary, and Robert Byrd were all either dishonest or just plain wrong about their own claims, which seems likely, then Amundsen's party were the first to reach the North Pole, although Amundsen didn't know that at the time. In any case, Amundsen is certainly the first person to visit both poles, along with Oscar Wisting, a fellow Norwegian who accompanied Amundsen on both occasions.

Amundsen disappeared in 1928 while flying on a rescue mission intended to aid survivors of the crash of the dirigible *Italia*, which had been exploring the Arctic. The bodies of Amundsen and the other members of the crew of that flight were never found.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and if you enjoy *The History of the Twentieth Century*, why not leave us a rating or a review, at the iTunes store or at [stitcher.com](https://www.stitcher.com), or better yet, both! That will help other listeners find the podcast, listeners who hopefully will enjoy it as much as you do. And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we go back to the United States for the Presidential election of 1912, one

of the most remarkable elections in American history, because it featured that rarest of occurrences, a genuine three-way race for the White House. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Ernest Shackleton, having been beaten to the South Pole by both Amundsen and Scott, proposed an expedition that would attempt to cross Antarctica by land, including a stop at the South Pole, which Shackleton viewed as the one big accomplishment left undone in Antarctica. By December 1913, funding was in place and he announced his plan. The Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition was to be dropped off along the coast of the Weddell Sea, the opposite side of Antarctica, and cross the continent to McMurdo Sound, with an assist from a second team that would land there and create supply depots.

The expedition left Britain on August 8, 1914, just days after the outbreak of the Great War. They reached Antarctica in January 1915, but their ship was frozen into sea ice before they could reach land. They spent the winter of 1915 aboard their ship, frozen in the ice, waiting for spring.

There had been other cases of ships that froze into the ice, only to be released and sail away in the spring. Unfortunately, Shackleton's expedition wouldn't have that kind of luck. By October, the ice was slowly crushing their ship. The expedition was forced to debark onto the sea ice and unload their equipment, dogs, lifeboats, and supplies, as their ship was slowly destroyed.

Crossing the continent was now out of the question. It was now a matter of surviving and returning home. They hauled their supplies and lifeboats across the sea ice, hoping to get as close as they could to land before they had to deal with open sea, and then make the final crossing by lifeboat.

They managed to reach Elephant Island on April 15, 1916. Elephant Island is one of the South Shetland Islands. It has the advantage of being land, as the ice floe they had been camping on was breaking up, but it was an uninhabited island, never visited by ships.

The only way to contact civilization, they reasoned, was to reach South Georgia Island and its whaling stations, but that was 800 miles away. Shackleton and five others outfitted one of the lifeboats for the journey, leaving the others encamped on Elephant Island.

Sixteen days of stormy, frigid seas later, the lifeboat, somehow, reached South Georgia Island. The south coast, that is. But all the whaling stations were on the north coast, so that required crossing the unexplored interior of South Georgia. It took several days to hike through the mountains, but they reached the whaling station at Stromness on May 20. The last members of the expedition would be rescued from Elephant Island on August 30, 1916.

Reportedly, when Shackleton reached the whaling station, his first question was, Who won the war? And he was astonished to be told it was still going on.

[music: Closing Theme]

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