

And I may be some time...

Craig Cormick¹

Titus Oates is alone on the ice tonight. The blizzard of the previous few days has blown itself out, and he can finally gather his thoughts again. The stars are shining down on him from the deep blackness above, sparkling on the ice. He likes the night sky when he can see it. So different from the perpetual whiteness that otherwise surrounds him and blinds him. When he holds his hands in front of his face he can't see them.

He trudges back to the tent, wondering what the others will say to him when he crawls back into the small canvas cave. He walks back to where it should be, but can't find it. That confuses him and he looks about carefully. It has to be here somewhere, he thinks, and he paces back and forward searching for any sign of it. Perhaps just the dark shape of the pyramid top jutting out of the snow.

Then he remembers, as the thoughts reassemble a little more. They are dead. The tent was collapsed on top of them by the search party. And that was years and years ago. He remembers now how he followed the slow progress of the tent as it was buried under snow and ice as the glacier slowly carried it northwards. He had even tried to estimate when it would finally reach Cape Royds on Ross Island. That would be a reason for celebration, he thinks. The Polar party finally returned.

And he wonders if Scott's hut is still there? He imagines so. People like to preserve things like that. There might be a whole row of them there now, all the huts of subsequent explorers, like terrace houses. But he also wonders if somebody hasn't packed it off back to London and reassembled it in Hyde Park or somewhere. If so, his mother and sister would have gone to visit it and walked carefully around the interior, looking perhaps at the labels on each bed and at each place at the long dining table.

One of the expeditioners might even be employed as a guide and will tell them everything he can remember about the Polar party.

He's not sure what they'll make of Scott though. Will he be considered a valiant hero or a failure?

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He'd like to ask somebody that. He'd like to know what happened to the Norwegians too. Did they make it back to safety? It would be an irony if they'd fallen down a crevasse or lost their bearings and failed to make it home as well. He's looked for them on the ice at times, but hasn't found any trace of them.

Sometimes, when the wind blows strongly, he can make out the voices of others calling, but can never quite tell who they are. Wailing sounds very similar in any language, he imagines.

He would like to be able to walk back to find Evans' grave though, but there are never enough calm days to allow it. The incessant winds sweep down and scatter his thoughts across the ice, and it takes so much longer to reassemble them again each time.

He imagines that sooner or later he won't be able to reassemble them at all. And that will undoubtedly be the time a party of explorers walks past, retreading Scott's path. One might pause and feel a sudden chill up his spine as Oates tries to reach out to him. But the man would just shrug and go on. What would feel unnatural about a chill in a man's bones on this continent?

They'll walk on and he'll be blown further away like tiny dancing snow particles borne before the winds and scattered forever.

And then he remembers his diary. Of course there was his diary. That was with the dead men in the tent and the expedition party that found them took all the papers away, so his words won't be lost. His written words will survive him. His mother will have received them and kept them under lock and key, guarded safely in her home to make sure no harm came to them. And researchers would be granted access to transcribe them and put them into a book. That thought gives him great satisfaction.

Then another memory comes to him. The site they had pitched their tent when he had crawled out into the blizzard had been the exact site he had recommended to Scott that they build a depot. But he had decreed it would be 30 miles further north. Bloody fool, he thinks. And he remembers the fight he'd had with him over it. Like when Scott had disagreed with his recommendation to work the horses down to exhaustion and then eat them.

It wasn't that he didn't love horses, being a cavalry man, but he knew they were knocked-up old beasts that should never have been purchased and could not be relied upon to do the job needed of them.

Scott had never known war like he had, he thinks, which was why he was unable to make the harsh decisions required. He'd not only fought in the Boer War as Lieutenant Lawrence Oates of the 6th Inniskilling Dragoons, but had been recommended for the Victoria Cross.

He wondered if the powers-that-be had now awarded him a medal for polar bravery and self-sacrifice? Or did they think him a fool as well? That worries him, that the historians will have gone through all their diaries and papers and read just how much animosity there was between them. He can now remember writing: 'I dislike Scott intensely and would chuck the whole thing if it were not that we are a British expedition.' And also that Scott was 'not straight, it is himself first, the rest nowhere...'.

Had he crawled out of that bloody tent just to get away from the others? He looks down at his hands, but still can't see them despite the air being so still. He recalls that he had severe frostbite in both his hands and feet. His war wound in his leg had been plaguing him too. It opened anew and filled with gangrene, making him limp worse than ever. Those last days were hell. Now he can recall the feeling of it. The pain in his extremities. The sickness in his stomach. The anger at knowing he was going to die through the foolishness of others. Or perhaps it was his own foolishness as well.

He'd been so determined to join the expedition and make a name for himself. There was something he had to prove, but he can't quite recall what it was. Something he was ashamed of.

Then he remembers the encounter he'd had with young Henrietta McKendrick in Scotland, as a young man. That had hardly been very heroic of him. She'd not even been quite 12 years old at the time.

He remembers his mother, and the way she had dominated his life. How he'd longed to escape her. And he remembers the men he had killed in the Boer War. He remembers so much, all flooding back at once now. And above all he remembers the loathing he had for his putrefying body, black and pus-ridden, an abomination in this beautiful harsh wilderness.

How could he have not crawled out of the tent into the blizzard?

There is something else he has to remember. But now he feels the wind picking up again. He tries to turn away from it, to maintain his thoughts. What was it he had said to Scott as he had left the tent? It was something vital to remember. Something that keeps him here. But the wind is clawing at him now and his thoughts and memories are plucked from him with its shrill song, and are sent whirling across the empty continent once more.

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