**Filming and Formatting the Explorer Hero: Captain Scott and Ealing Studios’ *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948)**

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**Introduction**

Such a film as ‘Scott’ is welcome at a time when other races speak disparagingly of our ‘crumbling empire’ and our ‘lack of spirit’. It should make those who have listened too closely to such talk believe afresh that ours is the finest breed of men on this earth (*Sunday Dispatch* 5 December 1948).

‘I felt that it was indeed a great honour to have been given the chance of portraying on the screen Captain Scott, a great Englishman who holds a unique position in the nation’s history’ (John Mills cited in James 1948: 11).

As the first director of the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) at the University of Cambridge (1920-1946) and professor of geography, Frank Debenham, recalled that the idea of making a film about the late Robert Falcon Scott and his Antarctic Terra Nova Expedition (1910-1913) provoked a rather muted reaction. In a ‘personal opinion’ published in the Institute’s journal, *Polar Record*, he noted that ‘Early in 1945 a rumour was spreading round that a film was to be made of Scott’s Last Expedition, and the reaction of among the “survivors” – as the press choose to call us – was interesting. It was, almost universally, one of dismay and even antagonism. The arguments against were varied. The story was already sufficiently told; it was out of date; to film it would be an invasion of privacy, and so on and so forth’ (Debenham 1949: 311). It was, in his judgement, going to be a challenging film to plan, to make and to predict the reactions of those who watched it.

Debenham was a ‘survivor’, he was one of the geologists selected to accompany the Terra Nova expedition and explored and surveyed the mountains of Victoria Land. An injured leg prevented him from being selected to join Scott in his pursuit of the South Pole. On his return to the UK, Debenham served in World War I seeing action in France and Greece. After suffering a severe injury, he left the army and returned to Cambridge. As a fellow and lecturer in cartography, he alongside another Cambridge geologist and explorer, Raymond Priestly, were instrumental in co-founding the SPRI. The Institute’s genesis lies in public donations given in the wake of Scott tragedy. It was intended to be an enduring legacy of the Terra Nova expedition’s scientific credentials and in so doing act as a very material reminder that stories about a ‘dash to the pole’ with Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen should not diminish its achievements.

The former director’s reflections on ‘dismay’ and ‘antagonism’ capture well the rather jaundiced views about the legacy of Robert Scott and his final expedition. Representing Scott’s life and death was, by the early 1920s, already contentious subject matter. Even before the commission and production of *Scott of the Antarctic* (Frend 1948), the public engagement with the Scott expedition was varied even after the posthumous publication of Scott’s expedition diaries. While many contemporaries readily accepted the idea that Scott was a heroic explorer and example for the nation, this was not shared by all. D H Lawrence’s novel *Women in Love* (1920) serves as a reminder that Scott’s achievements and even death were deeply ambiguous matters. Though allegory, Lawrence’s novel questions the manner in which Scott’s death was commemorated and the public outpourings of grief. Thereafter, we consider in more detail the decision by Ealing Studios to produce and the resulting time consuming task involving delicate negotiations with surviving family members and the Scott Polar Research Institute. Reminiscent of the sort of work that British director Paul Greengrass did with the families of those who died on flight United 93 on September 11, 2001, Ealing Studios’ director Charles Frend was determined to make an ‘authentic’ biopic and historical film. Scott’s status as a tragic yet heroic explorer figure placed some creative ‘constraints’ on Frend and the filming team.

As the chapter considers later, however, the timing of the film was also opportune. While there was no location filming in Antarctica, the film utilizes film footage from the Antarctic Peninsula in a deliberate attempt to promote British Antarctic interests at a time of rising geopolitical tension. This is important because *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948) needs to be understood within a broader cultural, geopolitical and economic context. By the late 1940s, the Antarctic was a far more complex political space than in the midst of the so-called ‘Heroic Era of exploration’ (c. 1890-1914). For one thing, seven states including Britain had pressed formal territorial claims to the continent. The British claim, the Falkland Islands Dependencies, substantially overlapped with rival claims by Argentina and Chile. The United States was making its strategic and scientific presence felt across the continent. In resource terms, Britain was deeply involved with the whaling trade, working closely with Norwegian companies and individuals on South Georgia and in and around the Antarctic Peninsula. Finally, popular and literary expressions of polar commemoration helped to underwrite not only the establishment of the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge but also memorials and commemorative plaques built around the British Isles.

Debenham’s aforementioned misgivings about the film project appear to be apposite. *Scott of the Antarctic* does offer a more ambivalent reading of Robert Scott and the Terra Nova expedition. Some of that critical work is done through the narrative arc and staged encounters, but there is also another element to the film which is sound. The musical score by the English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams reminds us that sound can and does shape the mood and tempo of film, offering insights into places, times, emotional states and relationships. Ealing Studios considered Vaughan Williams to be inherently appropriate given public reputation as a composer and contributor to the BBC including the Proms. Finally, as noted, the prevailing geopolitical context of Antarctica in the late 1940s also acts as a counterpoint to a film that ostensibly looks backwards to a Heroic Era of exploration that was largely surpassed by a new era of permanent occupation and large-scale and multi-national exploration. The film’s release coincided with new plans led by the United States for the future control of Antarctica.

**Biopics: Ealing Studios and Scott as Explorer-Hero**

Film historians and other scholars have, academically speaking, neglected the sub-genre of biopic (or biographical films) as opposed to the western, gangster, thriller, drama and horror genres (Langford 2005: 14). Geroge Custen on *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* and more recently, Dennis Bingham’s *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* are the most substantive interrogation of the sub-genre (Custen 1992, Bingham 2010). The biopic as opposed to the documentary genre uses actors to dramatize the lives of usually notable individuals. Established in the era of silent cinema, the biopic was highly popular in the 1920s and 1930s, and depending on the focus of the film they criss-cross genre types ranging from drama and epic to action-thriller and crime. Biopics also vary in whether they tackle the entire life and work of an individual or concentrate on a particular notable theme or event. In Bingham’s examination of the sub-genre, he identifies distinct qualities associated with the white male biopic, which differ substantially from films about the lives of women and people of colour. In the white male biopic, Bingham argues that the wife or female partner is always secondary to the husband but nonetheless shown as integral to eventual success. While white male biopics might touch upon weakness and mistakes, they tend to present this as virtuous self-awareness and celebrate the capacity of the individual to endure and demonstrate resolve. By way of contrast, Bingham observers that female biopics often enable highly visible and successful women to be acknowledged and recognised in a prevailing American culture, which struggles to acknowledge such women in the first place (Bingham 2010: 9-10).

What makes Bingham’s work valuable is that he is not concerned with whether a biopic is historically accurate or representative. Rather the focal point is more on generic convention and the creative role of directors and their artistic and casting interventions. So in any discussion of a biopic, it would be more fecund to think about the wider context of production, casting and reception of the biopic, which in turn might reveal evidence about authenticity and truthfulness. At that point, we might reasonably ask what might be at stake if such a biopic attracts public controversy even opprobrium. Or, alternatively, some biopics have been celebrated and most praised such as Academy and BAFTA award-winning *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013), which was based on a nineteenth-century memoir of an American slave called Solomon Northup.

Ealing Studios’ *Scott of the Antarctic* would have, at first glance, been an unlikely candidate for potential iconoclasm. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, under the leadership of Michael Balcon, the Studios enjoyed a public reputation for producing well-received comedies such as *Hue and Cry* (1947), *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), *Passport to Pimlico* (1949), *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951) and *The Man in the White Suit* (1951). But Ealing was also associated with films that were closer to the Scott project in the sense of addressing heroism, endurance and resilience. Two prime examples bisecting the *Scott of the Antarctic* release were World War II era dramas: *San Demetrio, London* (1943) and *The Cruel Sea* (1953). Making a historic biopic which “narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world” was somewhat of a departure from the post-war studio norm of film comedy (Bingham 2010: 10). But it fitted nonetheless with Ealing Studios wartime and post-war record of producing films that celebrated ‘Britishness’, even if in the case of Scott what was being recognized was the heroic failure of an expedition to return safely from the South Pole after reaching it in January 1912. What was going to be challenging, however, was how to confront the awkward fact that the expedition’s team died only 11 miles short of One Ton depot on their return, and were earlier second place when it came to the so-called ‘race to the pole’. While there was plenty of tales of hardship, steeliness and endurance, it was also a challenging story to portray because it was so well known. There was no element of narrative suspense leading perhaps other critics to conclude that the film was ‘boring and [a] ridiculous undertaking’ (Bazin 1967: 157).

The historic biopic can and does become more complicated when the person or persons being depicted are either still alive and/or if there are surviving family relatives and friends to consider. The decision to make a film about Scott and his last expedition was taken in 1945, and thus just over 30 years after the explorer’s death. Scott’s widow, Kathleen, and immediate family including his son Peter were very much alive. The relatives of the other four members of the final party were also present. Consulting with the relatives and academic authorities at the Scott Polar Research Institute was integral to the filming production process. The decision to cast the respected English actor John Mills was also a considered one because of his public popularity in wartime films such as *We Dive at Dawn* (1943) and *Waterloo Road* (1945). His physical resemblance to the late Robert Falcon Scott was also said to have influenced casting. Balcon recalled some years later that ‘My first choice to play the part of Scott was John Mills … John worked hard … his sincerity comes through in everything he does’ (Balcon 1969: 175). After a series of auditions, popular actors Derek Bond and Kenneth Moore were offered the role of Captain Oates and Teddy Evans respectively.

Ealing Studios’ famous producer Sir Michael Balcon sought formal permission from surviving family relatives and production team spent a great deal of time researching the expedition. Their support was publicly acknowledged in the closing film titles of the film, ‘This film could not have been made without the generous co-operation of the survivors and the relatives of late members of Scott’s Last Expedition.’ Balcon was determined that the film should address the Scott expedition as sensitively as possible, recognizing that the topic had been listed by the Ministry of Information in 1939 as suitable for propaganda-making about British heroes (Richards 1993). Public awareness of Scott grew substantially with the publication of some of the photographs and silent film taken by Herbert Ponting and the publication of *Scott’s* *Last Expedition* (extracts from his journals) in a cheaper paperback edition in 1923 (Jones 2004). Although edited and amended by the creator of Peter Pan, J M Barrie, in the form of a final ‘death scene’, Scott’s last messages and letters were widely understood as indicative of heroism and self-sacrifice which chimed with a Britain betwixt two world wars. The Scott film contributed to a re-enchantment with the original expedition, and book sales of the journals reportedly surged in 1948-9. The publishers, John Murray, released a special school edition in 1949.

The filmmakers worked closely with SPRI and at one stage it was hoped that the film project would offer the research institute a welcome funding boost. The partnership with Ealing Studios was not quite as profitable as anticipated. Colin Bertram, the new director of SPRI, was in regular contact with representatives of the Studios, and initially the sum of 100 guineas was paid in 1948 for ‘professional services’. Later, approaches were made by the Foreign Office to try and secure further payments from the Studios for SPRI. Ealing Studios confirmed that no further payments would be possible in 1950 because of a combination of higher than expected entertainment taxes and disappointing audience figures (Dodds 2002). Balcon later wrote about his frustration with such an outcome given earlier hopes for recognition and success, ‘Although I knew there would be enormous difficulties in making a worthy film of this great story – to say nothing of the hazards and cost – the decision to go ahead was taken at long last’ (Balcon 1969:171). While disappointing, the British government departments responsible for polar matters (in the main the Colonial and Foreign Offices) alongside specialist agencies such as FIDS and academic centres led by SPRI recognised that profile raising needed attention. FIDS employees, for example, were encouraged to speak at the Royal Geographical Society and contribute when invited to BBC radio broadcasting.

As part of Ealing Studios’ commitment to authenticity, a former Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey field scientist and surveyor, David James, was hired to advise on polar conditions and expeditionary techniques. James was also a former member of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve and involved with the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940. Ealing hoped that James would play his part in supporting their reputation for making films that celebrated team spirit, pluckiness and public service. Scott’s diaries and journals were an important primary source and other explorers and geographers were interviewed about Scott’s personality and leadership style. Surviving family members of the expedition team were consulted in the pursuit of authenticity and legitimacy (Balcon 1948: 153- 155).

It was a Royal Command film, scored by leading English composer Ralph Vaughan- Williams. Balcon wanted to produce an audio-visual spectacle, ‘We soon realised that colour would give enormous additional value to the picture, with a great range of exciting and colourful backgrounds’ (Balcon 1948: 154). A huge sum of money was spent on the film itself, with an outlay of over £370,000 and high hopes that the movie would succeed in the UK and the United States (Chapman 2005: 150). In reality, the film was never quite as successful as Ealing had hoped or even expected. As Balcon noted ruefully, ‘The American public has no interest in failure, even if it is heroic failure, and certainly they do not easily accept other people’s legends’ (Balcon 1969: 174). What might have hurt even further was that the production of the film was so rooted in attention to historic detail and geographical verisimilitude. Balcon appointed two scriptwriters, Walter Meade and Ivor Montagu, to work on the screenplay using expedition diaries to provide historic authenticity and interviews with survivors to gain insights into the likely interpersonal dynamics of the party. The film’s sombre and respectful evaluation of the expedition spoke strongly to an austerity and ration-hit post-war Britain rather than a United States with its own ‘heroic stories’ to tell past and present (Chapman 2005).

It was some years later that Scott and his party were to be lampooned by a post-war generation of comics, actors and writers led by Peter Cook and Monty Python. With the exception of D H Lawrence’s *Women in Love* (1920), which features allegorical criticism of Scott’s death through the demise of Gerard in the European Alps, there is little evidence prior to 1948 of Scott’s reputation being traduced (Jones 2014). The English novelist, Peter Vansittart recalled in his book, *In the Fifties*, a game he used to play with his contemporaries. He would read out extracts from Scott’s diaries including, ‘We are showing that Englishmen can still die with a bold spirit, fighting it out to the end…’ (Vansittart 1995 cited Wheeler 2010: 57). He recorded friends laughing at the performance but also amended his rendition later implying that the words had been issued at the Warsaw Ghetto of 1944. In that case of deliberate mistaken identity, he recalled his friends has applauded and nodded their approval.

For his liberal-left acquaintances at least, the Scott story no longer exercised any grip on their collective imagination. Scott’s poetic musings about the expedition and its painful demise appear capable of either mockery or experimentation in a way that suggests that they might no longer be indicative of a stoical Englishness.

**Screening Scott**

The screenplay for *Scott of the Antarctic* does not address the broad sweep of the life and death of Robert Scott. After a prologue, which addresses the build-up to the 1910-12 Terra Nova expedition, Scott’s credentials as naval officer and polar explorer are addressed. The audience is not offered any insights into Scott’s childhood in Devon and early life. Rather attention is given to how Scott gathered around him a group of men including Captain Oates, Taff Evans, Bill Wilson and Teddy Evans. What we learn is that the men were eager to fuse scientific enquiry with adventure and historic priority (i.e. being first to the South Pole) and that the expedition required powerful sponsors including the Royal Navy and the Royal Geographical Society, and a programme of events designed to raise sponsorship. Devastatingly, for the British party, they learn later that the celebrated Norwegian explorer, Roald Amundsen is also intent on reaching the South Pole. Whether Scott and his party care for it or not, the rival expeditions are in effect in a ‘race to the pole’.

The remainder of the film concentrates on the arrival of the party in Antarctica and the final planning and execution of the expedition’s route along the Beardmore Glacier and then over the immense polar plateau. The film depicts the arduousness of the trek, the perils and pitfalls of man-hauling and Scott’s reluctance to use dogs, the arrival of the final party and their painful demise on their return from the South Pole. One challenge for the director and his team was to focus on a realist and melodramatic modality for the biopic. Audiences needed to be left with a powerful sense of the elemental qualities of Antarctica, which in 1948 was still as remote as the moon for British and international publics. While there was some controversy regarding the accuracy of Scott’s contemporaneous temperature readings, there was little doubt that the party had been buffeted by extreme cold and wind. Climate scientist Susan Solomon wrote in *The Coldest March* that Scott was right to note that the coldness had been freakish. It was so cold, with temperatures below minus 40 degrees centigrade that the party’s clothing froze to them, their sleeping bags provided no warmth and relief from the cold, and man-hauling became insufferable because it was so cold that the metal runners were no longer lubricating the underlying ice. The sluggish sledges were death-traps.

What helped to convey the elemental nature of Scott’s struggle with the coldness was the filming locations and the use of Technicolor. Filming was based in Norway and Switzerland, with filmed footage of Antarctica, and this commitment to authenticity helped to convey well the immense and forbidding landscapes encountered by the final party. Osmond Borradaile was responsible for the Antarctic imagery; Geoffrey Unsworth collected film from Norway and Switzerland; and Jack Cardiff was responsible for fusing on-site footage with the studio reconstruction of the final death scene. The filming of the tent interior is arguably one of the least successful moments of the film, as Cardiff struggled to secure a sense of melodramatic authenticity. By way of contrast, one of the most noteworthy qualities of *Scott* was the use of the extreme long shots of the Antarctic landscapes and seascapes, which were used effectively in order to convey to audiences what Scott and his party had to tackle: a 1600 mile return trek from Cape Evans to the South Pole perched on the polar plateau at some 9000 feet above sea level. Norwegian and Swiss footage of glaciers and mountains helped to frame the ‘Antarctic’ as isolated and isolating, austere yet beautiful, daunting but also beguiling. Overall, trade press reviewers such as *Monthly Film Bulletin* endorsed the artistic labour, ‘Magnificent exterior photography, capturing the grandeur and beauty of the Antarctic and, in contrast, portraying its treachery and ferocity, will rank as some of the finest ever seen’ (1949: 4).

As Bingham would note, however, *Scott of the Antarctic* is unashamedly a biopic about white men. If there is another ‘co-star’ then it is the empty Antarctic landscapes and seascapes. By way of contrast, women play minor if largely supportive roles. Diana Churchill’s portrayal of Kathleen Scott is the epitome of Bingham’s observation that wives are shown as unquestionably supportive of their husbands. There is only moment in the film where that bond of loyalty is questioned by the wife of Bill Wilson. Oriana Wilson, played by Anne Firth, is resentful that her husband agreed to accompany Scott again to the Antarctic. Sensing correctly, as it turns out, he may not return alive. But her resentment is fleeting and ultimately not sufficiently disruptive to the participation of Wilson.

There are only four female characters in the entire film and within the first thirty minutes, women disappear from the script and film itself altogether. This is a film explicitly about a small group of British men and their aspirations to be explore and study Antarctica. The dynamics between the men and the homo-sociality of expedition, especially in the confines of the tent, is recurring. As Perry noted, ‘As in so many Ealing films… the women are subordinated to the totally passive role – they wait patiently at home in Britain knowing they were never see their husbands again’ (Perry 1981: 109). Even when Scott is seen lecturing across England before the expedition’s departure to Antarctica, the audience is composed overwhelmingly of men. Women don’t appear to be interested in the expedition and are certainly given no agency to question the wisdom or desirability of the venture itself.

What is less easy to discern though is what motivates Robert Scott’s decision-making as the director steers clear of potential controversy over Scott’s leadership and experimentation with mechanised vehicles and Siberian ponies. John Mills recalled some forty years later that the film was not going to probe the ‘darker’ elements of Scott’s personality, ‘He was a fascinatingly complex character – a born leader, with tremendous physical stamina and courage. He had a quick temper, which he often found difficult to control. This I was never allowed to show, because of the possibility of upsetting relations still living’ (1980: 295). Disputes with expedition members are not dwelled upon and we are never told why Scott agreed to take a party of five when pre-expedition planning had assumed there would only be four. There is no resolution to what audience members asked Scott in Yorkshire while fund raising – why would you want to go to the South Pole? It is a curious if brief scene because it introduces the spectre of doubt but then does not return with any resolution. Did Scott, for example, think that the scientific and even literary legacy of the expedition would be sufficient to resolve such matters?

The film in short concentrates its creative energies on exploring what it might have felt like to have been on that final expedition, and the immense challenges facing the men who were battling against unrelenting elemental forces. John Mills’ voice-over, using extracts from Scott’s diaries and journals were intended to add historical authenticity. What has often been under-estimated, however, is the role of the musical score by Ralph Vaughan Williams in creating a more ambivalent atmosphere to the film. Vaughan Williams was approached in 1947 and in her memoir of her husband his wife, Ursula, reveals that he was initially reluctant to accept the commission (Vaughan Williams 1964). While she notes that he was drawn to the ‘strange world of ice and storm’ this was tempered by a view that ‘he despised the heroism that risked lives unnecessarily’ (1964: 279). Putting personal reservations to one side, she recalled that nonetheless, ‘He was excited by the demands which the setting of the film made on his invention to find musical equivalents of ice, of wind bellowing over the great, uninhabited desolation, of stubborn and impassable ridges of black and ice-covered rock, and to suggest man’s endeavour to overcome the rigours of this bleak land and to match the mortal spirit against the elements’ (Vaughan Williams 1964: 135).

During World War I, Ralph Vaughan Williams served in the Royal Army Medical Corp and had direct experience of the suffering of the war dead and injured. His ambivalence towards Scott’s demise meant that he was not an obvious choice but it is reasonable to suspect that Ealing Studios did not appreciate his judgement about the Terra Nova expedition. Ursula Vaughan Williams was writing nearly twenty years after her late husband’s composition of the musical score. What Vaughan Williams did produce, however, was widely acknowledged by film critics to add insights to the sombre even menacing nature of Antarctica. The musical score with its eerie and haunting qualities was not one that Ealing Studios was expecting because it was thought to foretell the death of Scott and his party. Vaughan Williams, working with Scott’s journals, which spoke of the howling winds and unrelenting cold, was attempting to convey to audiences the terror-like qualities of the Antarctic landscape.

Although not an exercise in explicit debunking, later critics have contended that Vaughan Williams’s musical score conveyed a nihilistic view of Antarctica. The musical scholar Daniel Grimley contends that, ‘far from being an apotheosis of the Romantic sublime, Vaughan Williams once again invokes the image of Antarctic nature as unnatural or mechanistic, a domain which operates according to systems and controls beyond the mastery or interpretative understanding of individual human agency. In this sense, Vaughan Williams’s work reveals a deeper truth about the Antarctic landscape than that offered in familiar accounts of Scott’s voyage, including the Ealing Studios film’ (Grimley 2008: 140). Vaughan Williams’s musical score, which formed the inspiration for *Sinfonia Antarctica* (1953), presents a coded warning about the limits of human capacity to master the earth. With the onset of the cold war and the nuclear age, it is possible that the musical score (despite denials from Vaughan Williams at the time) speaks to concerns beyond an Edwardian era polar expedition.

**Film Critics and *Scott of the Antarctic***

Although selected as a Royal Command Film, *Scott of the Antarctic* did not receive the British Film Award of 1949. *The Fallen Idol* (1948), a murder mystery drama starring Ralph Richardson, was the top pick. Despite the impressive production budget, *Scott* only recouped around £215,000 and was in financial terms, an investment that failed to break even (cited in Chapman 2005: 155). It was all rather galling given that post-war British cinema was more generally enjoying something of a boom in terms of participatory audiences around the UK’s 4000 odd cinemas (Harper and Porter 1999: 67). Ealing Studios’ failure to turn a profit was notable and for all the commitment to authenticity and veracity, the film critics were rather divided on the film and its merits.

What becomes apparent from reading the trade press reviews is that most professional critics praised the film for its technical qualities. There was general praise for the use of Technicolor and the value overall of the on-location filming in Norway and Switzerland. Disappointingly, the actual footage from Antarctica did not attract quite the same praise, in particular the usage of polar footage at the start of the film was judged to be have been poorly edited. Where there is less praise, more generally, it lies in the areas of film sequencing, plot and narrative, Scott’s character and leadership style and the lack of melodrama.

The film’s plot and structure was subject to particular criticism by the film critic writing for *Sunday Dispatch*. In their review published on 5 December 1948, it is observed that ‘*Scott of the Antarctic* is a technically competent film…but something is missing from the film that prevents it from being termed “great”… the mistake of concentrating on Scott’s epic march to the South Pole and too little on the men who made it…In no way can the actors concerned be held responsible for this failure to make the men they portray seem absolutely real…[Notwithstanding that reservation] every man, women and child in the British Empire must go and see it.’ What is not clear by the end of that review is why the film is sufficiently compelling. The point about delving further into the character of the party and individual personalities was something that John Mills later acknowledged as a failure of the film itself. However, at the time there was no intention to make anything but a film that conveyed a spirit and unity of purpose.

Other critics were even more robust in their criticism of the film. Writing in the *Daily Express*, Leonard Mosley remarked that, ‘I felt that the Director missed the full impact of overwhelming disappointment when Scott and his men found that they had been beaten to the Pole…a good film…It is only that it seems a much more splendid story in my mind than it looked to me on screen.’ In the *Daily Telegraph*, disappointment was made manifest noting, ‘where imagination has filled in the gaps in the written document the effect is less happy… humour introduced at intervals to relieve polar monotony remained, for the most part, snowbound. The sight of Amundsen’s flag at the Pole did not stir the emotion as it should… the story which should have had in dramatic form the power of Greek tragedy to move pity and terror, has become on the screen just another adventure story, more monotonous than most.’ These reviews would have been bitterly disappointing to Ealing Studios because of their investment in producing a film that was faithful to the pioneering spirit of the expedition and a desire to represent the Scott story as uplifting to a country recovering from war (Chapman 2005: 147). It was supposed to ‘epic’ in the sense of being sweeping, spectacular and supportive of Scott as a truly heroic character.

What film critics were exposing, more generally, was a failure of this epic biopic to more audiences. Rather than provoking feelings of admiration and awe, they charged Ealing Studios with producing a film that failed to capitalise on the Scott myth. After thirty years of public commemoration and exposure through the publication of Scott’s journals, public recognition of the Scott story was high. Yet that also created a dilemma given that there was no obvious opportunity for suspense as it was well known that Amundsen had beaten Scott to the South Pole on 14 December 1911. Where there were opportunities to produce an ‘edgier’ film, the critics concluded that Ealing Studios declined to take these opportunities in the film itself. Two opportunities were identified. The first involves a seemingly trivial incident involving Edgar Evans and an accident which left him with a cut finger. Failing to heal properly, the finger became gangrene and Evans was later further incapacitated by a head injury as the party travelled through the Beardmore Glacier. The film appears to endorse Evans’s stoicism and refusal to complain about the true state of his injuries rather than consider that Evans’s reluctance to admit how badly he was injured could compromise the safety of his companions.

The second example which caught the eye of the critics was where the film failed to reflect more critically on Scott’s style of leadership. Earlier in the film, Oates is shown to be inept when it came to packing supplies on the sledges, and they later fell off because they were not sufficiently secure. The expedition party loses valuable time repacking the supplies. Evans is clearly cross with Oates and tells Scott that ‘I can’t trust myself to speak, Sir’. Scott replies ‘well, don’t then, Taff’. But what the film does not explore in any detail is whether Scott should have been more decisive and failed in the mind of some reviewers, such as *Sight and Sound*, to capitalise on the opportunity to ask more searching questions about what motivated Scott and how did his leadership contribute or not to the failure of the expedition to return to base camp safely. Did, for example, tensions within the party contribute in any way to that failure to endure?

Malcolm Balcon and Charles Frend were not, however, going to produce and direct a film which explored these questions in any detail. Balcon believed in an ‘Arnoldian best-self’, implying that it was far better to focus on how individuals can put the needs of others ahead of themselves regarding of their personal wealth and class interest. As Matthew Arnold wrote in *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869, ‘As he explained, “in each class there are born a certain number of natures with a curiosity about their best self, with a bent for seeing things as they are, for disentangling themselves from machinery, for simply concerning themselves with reason and the will of God, and doing their best to make these prevail; —for the pursuit, in a word, of perfection”’ (original 1869, 1960: 144).

While laudable in principle, the film also failed to capture the imagination of American audiences. Richard Roud, in the magazine *Sight and Sound*, observed that there was little empathy for Scott’s gentlemanly and stoic character (Roud 1956-7). And why would American audiences want to watch a film about British failure and death? Fortunately, the Scott film never received the opprobrium directed at the biopic about the great New York Yankees baseball star, George ‘Babe’ Ruth in *The Babe Ruth Story* (1948). In sharp contrast, the Ealing Studios film *The Cruel Sea* (1953) did receive a positive reaction in the United States, and what helped was its focus on World War II where the US and UK had been successful wartime allies. The film made a star of Jack Hawkins and was the most commercially successful film of 1953, including earning over £215,000 in the United States. Notably, Malcolm Balcon remarked later that, ‘I think perhaps *The Cruel Sea* because when we saw that for the first time, we realised that we really had brought it off. It seemed to just gel and be absolutely right. Sometimes you don't get that feeling, but with that one we all did’ (cited in BBC 2017).

**Conclusion**

Francis Spufford in his accounting of ice and the English imagination concluded quite reasonably that *Scott of the Antarctic* was intended to be ‘a post-war fable of class integration’ (Spufford 1996: 4, Paget 1990). It was a film on its release in late 1948 that many British school children were taken to see as part of organised visits to the cinema. An indifferent performance at the British box office coupled with disappointing audience figures in the United States meant that the film was damp squib for Ealing Studios. The care taken with the production of *Scott of the Antarctic* meant that Robert Scott as explorer-hero was not going to debunked until years later by revisionist historian Roland Huntford and his book *Scott and Amundsen* published in 1979 (Huntford 1979). What made the revisionist impulse even more unlikely in 1948 was that any viewing British public including school children had been exposed to the Scott diaries, public commemoration and the publication of other volumes including *The Worst Journey in the World* by another expedition member, Apsley Cherry-Garrard (Cherry-Gerard 1922). All off the above contributed and indeed reinforced a view of Scott as a largely heroic figure and Cherry-Gerard helped to convey to audiences the emotive final resting place of Scott’s party:

Their story I am not going to try to put down. They got to this point on 21 March and on the 29th all was over. Nor will I try and put down what there was in that tent. Scott lay in the centre, Bill (Wilson) on his left, with his head towards the door, and Birdie (Bowers) on his right, lying with his feet towards the door. Bill especially had died very quietly with his hands folded over his chest. Birdie also quietly. Oates’s death was a very fine one. We go on tomorrow to try and find his body. He was glad that his regiment would be proud of him. They reached the Pole a month after Amundsen (Cherry-Gerard 1922, 2010 page 496).

Access to the Antarctic was made possible by British government support for the film, via the Colonial Office. With the logistical assistance of the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (FIDS), an organization created in the aftermath of a secret wartime operation called Tabarin, Ealing Studios’ production was considered timely. At that point in time, Britain faced rival territorial claimants (Argentina and Chile) and increasing interest from the United States in shaping the future territorial and resource governance of the polar region (Dodds 2002). The FIDS, funded by the whaling industry and managed by the British Colonial Office, enjoyed an explicit mandate – collect geographical information, produce maps and ensure that British sovereignty was as secure as possible through ‘effective occupation’. FIDS’s work was far removed from the ‘gentlemanly’ model of polar exploration of the Edwardian era. There was nothing necessarily heroic in planting plaques and signposts warning others to keep out of ‘Crown Lands’. The Colonial Office had hoped that an opportunistic partnership with Ealing Studios might helpfully raise public attention on Britain’s polar portfolio.

*Scott of the Antarctic* nonetheless contributed to the rejuvenation of an Edwardian era expedition and what it represented in terms of endurance, stoicism and ultimately heroic sacrifice (Durgnat 2011). We also should not under-estimate what the Scott expedition also achieved in terms of scientific advancement – while the 1948 film focussed on the fate of the South Pole party the Terra Nova expedition was also dedicated to zoological research, geology, magnetism, meteorology, and the undertaking large-scale mapping and surveying. The professional photographer Herbert Ponting captured the scientific work of the expedition members. Within seven years of the release of *Scott of the Antarctic*, a new generation of school children were watching the film in the UK and New Zealand as part of funding raising efforts dedicated to supporting the Trans-Antarctic Expedition (TAE). The TAE came to fruition in March 1958 when a British-New Zealand team led by Vivian Fuchs and Ed Hillary successfully crossed the polar continent. While Fuchs and Hillary were crossing the Antarctic, *Scott of the Antarctic* lead actor John Mills was starring in a World War II movie called *Dunkirk* (1958). Even if the TAE did not capture the artistic imagination and commercial planning of Ealing Studios, it did prove that a British-led polar expedition did not have to end in disaster.

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