The Race to the South Pole

The Man Who Took the Prize

A century ago Scott lost and Amundsen won—partly because he knew when to turn back.

By Caroline Alexander
Photograph courtesy National Library of Norway, Picture Collection

"September 12—Tuesday. Not much visibility. Nasty breeze from S. -52°C. The dogs clearly affected by the cold. The men, stiff in their frozen clothes, more or less satisfied after a night in the frost…prospect of milder weather doubtful."

The writer of this terse diary entry was Roald Amundsen, a Norwegian explorer who had won renown five years earlier for being the first to sail the Arctic's fabled Northwest Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Now he was at the opposite end of the world, in the Antarctic, aiming for the most prestigious prize the world of exploration still offered: the South Pole. Planned with characteristic meticulousness, this bold venture was also the result of happenstance. Two years earlier Amundsen had been immersed in plans to extend his exploration of the Arctic Ocean and to drift over the North Pole, when he received news (later contested) that Robert Peary had already claimed the Pole. At that instant, Amundsen recalled later, "I decided on my change of front—to turn to the right-about, and face to the South." As Amundsen reckoned, if he won the South Pole, fame as well as financing of future exploration would be secure. Ostensibly preparing for the north, he secretly planned for the south.

Winning the South Pole, however, was not to be taken for granted. Also heading south was the well-advertised British Antarctic Expedition, under the command of Captain Robert Falcon Scott. Amundsen was keenly conscious of his rival, as his September 12 diary entry shows. Tormented by the prospect that Scott might beat him, Amundsen had jumped the gun, starting before the arrival of polar springtime and manageable weather. The result was the death of valuable dogs and frostbite on the feet of his men that would require a month to heal. Racing back to his base, Framheim (named after his ship, the famous polar-going *Fram,* meaning "forward"), Amundsen abandoned two companions, who struggled into camp a day after his

return. "I don't call it an expedition. It's panic," Hjalmar Johansen, the most experienced polar explorer of the team, told Amundsen. Bitterly resented, Johansen's damning words cost him a place on the eventual Pole-seeking party.

These glaring errors are worth dwelling on not to find fault with Amundsen but to dispel a myth that has long claimed him: His attainment of the Pole was just a passionless application of expertise and cold ambition, and Amundsen himself, therefore, was a colorless professional. This characterization contrasts starkly with the perception of Scott, who, with his gallant British party, showed grit and courage, fighting for every mile, and who died tragically on the ice.

The false start of September 1911 is a reminder that there is no such thing as an inevitable outcome in the risky enterprise of polar exploration. Methodical and careful, Amundsen was also a man of towering ambition, prey to the same dangerous dreams and impulses that drive all explorers to risk their lives in wild places. Amundsen's greatness is not that he lacked such driving forces but that he mastered them—as his diary entries go on to show. Four days after his premature start Amundsen assessed his party's situation dispassionately and made the decision to "hurry back to wait for the spring. To risk men and animals by continuing stubbornly once we have set off, is something I couldn't consider. If we are to win the game, the pieces must be moved properly; a false move and everything could be lost." The ability to regain and maintain perspective in the pursuit of something as heady as a personal dream is a rare asset. Like other great explorers, Amundsen knew when to turn back.

A dazzling résumé lay behind Roald Engelbregt Gravning Amundsen's South Pole venture. Born in 1872 into a well-to-do ship-owning, seafaring family, he sailed at the age of 25 as second officer on the *Belgica,* as part of a scientific expedition to the Antarctic. When the *Belgica* became stuck in pack ice, her crew achieved the unintended distinction of being the first humans to overwinter in the Antarctic. Demoralized and suffering ill health, the company was held together by the ship's surgeon, Frederick Cook (later infamous for unsubstantiated "firsts" at the North Pole and the summit of Mount McKinley), and by Amundsen, whose diary shows him to be wholly engaged in his surroundings. "As for the tent, with regard to shape and size it is comfortable but it is too susceptible to the wind," he observed in February 1898. Over the years he would make many resourceful improvements to polar equipment.

Since reading about it as a boy, Amundsen had been fascinated by Englishman John Franklin's disastrous search for the Northwest Passage. Although Amundsen continued his sea career, he also began planning for an Arctic venture. In 1903 he headed north in the ship *Gjøa* with a remarkably small crew of only six men (Franklin had taken 129) to seek the Northwest Passage and, possibly calculated to bestow scientific respectability, the current position of the north magnetic pole. Over three winters Amundsen lived and worked in the Arctic, eventually navigating a passage that threaded through the islands, shoals, and ice of Canada's Arctic archipelago to the Beaufort and then the Bering Sea—a historic first. "The North-West Passage was done," Amundsen wrote in his diary on August 26, 1905. "My boyhood dream—at that moment it was accomplished. A strange feeling welled up in my throat; I was somewhat overstrained and worn—it was a weakness in me—but I felt tears in my eyes."

The *Gjøa* expedition gave Amundsen more than his first geographic prize. Through it he became closely acquainted with the Netsilik Eskimos and their superb adaptation to the rigors of the Arctic world. Amundsen was not the first European explorer to learn from indigenous people.

The great polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen and others had learned how to dress and travel and eat from Norway's northern Sami people. Now Amundsen supplemented that wisdom with survival tools he had studied and experienced firsthand: loose reindeer skin clothing that provided warmth and ventilation, fur boots, dogsleds, snowshoes, ice caves, igloos.

"We are used to saying, Well, the Norwegians grow up on skis," polar historian Harald Jølle says, "but we forget the other skills." When Roald Amundsen set up his base camp in Antarctica's Bay of Whales in January 1911, he was 38 years old and a seasoned polar veteran. He was in wholly unknown territory, but he was also in a familiar landscape of snow and ice.

Amundsen and his men used the months preceding the polar journey to lay down depots of supplies and to subject every article of food, clothing, and equipment to ruthless scrutiny and refinement. Every detail was considered with focused seriousness grounded in Amundsen's profound respect for the environment he now confronted.

The more than 800-mile journey began at last on October 20, with Amundsen and his four companions on skis behind four loaded sledges, each weighing 880 pounds and pulled by 13 dogs. Ahead, across unknown terrain, lay an arduous slog over (and occasionally into) crevasses, around the abysses and ice of the Queen Maud range, and onto the Polar Plateau, through perilously unpredictable weather. Yet without any major mishap, the Norwegians reached their goal on schedule. "And so at last we reached our destination," Amundsen wrote in his diary on December 14, 1911, "and planted our flag on the geographical South Pole, King Haakon VII's plateau. Thank God!"

Before leaving Polheim, as the men had dubbed their polar camp, Amundsen left a letter for Norway's King Haakon VII on special notepaper he had brought, "and a few words to Scott, who I presume will be the first to come here after us." The letter ensured a report of his success in the event of some disaster and was an elegant way of telling Scott, I won. Scott's honorable safeguarding of this letter would be the proof of Amundsen's success.

On the return leg the men abandoned surplus stores (some of which would be gratefully collected by Scott's party). As throughout the journey, dogs were shot and, along with dogs that had died, consumed as food by both surviving dogs and the men. Early on January 26, 1912, the polar victors arrived back in Framheim. "Good morning, my dear Lindstrøm," Amundsen greeted his startled cook. "Have you any coffee for us?"

The contrast between what Apsley Cherry-Garrard, the legendary chronicler of the British expedition, called Amundsen's "business-like" operation and Scott's "first-rate tragedy" is painful to draw, but it highlights issues that still concern adventurers and explorers today. Amundsen used dogs; Scott ponies and motor sledges. Amundsen traveled by ski, a skill at which he and his men were brilliantly adept; Scott never learned to ski proficiently, so he and his men trudged, pulling their own sledges. Amundsen depoted three times the supplies Scott did; Scott starved and suffered scurvy. Some of Scott's fatal errors can be defended in terms of the precedents of his own times—after all, his compatriot and rival, Ernest Shackleton, had used ponies and almost reached the Pole. And some of Amundsen's tactics are troubling, such as his calculated slaughter of dogs that had been affectionately named and treated as companions.

At root, though, the contrast between Amundsen and Scott is not about details of management but broad outlooks—those of the professional and of the amateur. "In Norway there is *very* little tolerance for failure in expeditions," one historian says. "You go and you come back whole." The British, in contrast, emphasized the struggle, believing that character, not skill, would win out and that death was heroic—a view that would be judged irresponsible today. "I am inspired by how Amundsen prepared his expeditions," Børge Ousland, a Norwegian explorer who made the first solo crossing of the Antarctic, says. "He always tried to learn from others. He identified the problem, then looked to solve the problem."

Amundsen enjoyed celebrity until the end of his life, but unlike his compatriot and mentor—the multifaceted, charismatic Nansen—he never achieved the financial security he had hoped his books and lectures would bring. In July 1918 he returned to the Arctic to undertake the scientific work he had promised Nansen: following the ice drift in his ship *Maud.* In the 1920s, searching for new prizes, Amundsen turned to aviation, making several unsuccessful attempts to fly over the North Pole. In 1926 he commanded the airship *Norge,* flown by Italian pilot Umberto Nobile, for the first successful crossing of the Arctic by air.

Daring as these later adventures were, Amundsen participated more as passenger than leader, surrendering control to others. Financially strapped, he had become embittered, lashing out at old allies. Yet in May 1928, when Nobile's airship went missing over the Arctic, Amundsen hastened to join the multinational rescue effort, pushing friends to finance a rescue plane. He was poised to get married, and his determination to be involved suggests that, as an essentially solitary man, he was running from this commitment. It's clear that he also missed the limelight his heroic feats had earlier won him. Like the confused start of his South Pole success, Amundsen's last quest belies the workmanlike image imposed upon him, revealing instead a very human man.

In Tromsø, above the Arctic Circle, he boarded his plane, a Latham 47 fitted with floats, which had come from France. By then the pilots had been flying for three days and were operating on very little sleep. With difficulty the lumbering, heavily laden plane struggled to become airborne. The air was still, which often presaged banks of summer fog and dangerous visibility to the north. Under modern scrutiny, the accumulation of errors is foreboding.

The plane left Tromsø on June 18, and at 4 p.m. it was seen for the last time passing over Sommarøy, where the mountainous land abuts the sea. It was summer, and the land was green, but Amundsen was heading north, toward the ice.

1. What is Roald Amundsen's Ordinary World?
2. Describe his Call to Adventure.
3. Is there evidence to show that Amundsen was reluctant? That he might Refuse the Call? Explain your answer.
4. Did Amundsen have a Mentor? Explain your answer.
5. What is the Threshold Amundsen has to pass through in order to continue on his journey? What makes you think this?
6. Are you surprised that a work of non-fiction can closely follow the fictional structure of the Hero's Journey? Why or why not?