

# THE TREK

The Race to the South Pole between 1911 and 1915 has been the subject of many books, films and leadership illustrations. Scott, Shackleton and Amundsen were the three big players of the moment, all wanting the same thing but all going about it in rather different ways.

In his 1956 address to the British Science Association, one of Shackleton's contemporaries, Sir Raymond Priestley, said that you would want "Scott for scientific method, Amundsen for speed and efficiency but when disaster strikes and all hope is gone, get down on your knees and pray for Shackleton". But is this right? Is it fair?

It is interesting how history now talks about these men. If you only read the headlines you may get the impression that Shackleton, at the very least, was living his dream. Yet the truth behind any human is never quite what it seems. Shackleton's life was, according to some commentators, generally restless and unfulfilled. He was in debt and was trying to find quick ways to gain financial security, which never came.

He launched businesses that failed and he died of a heart attack, heavily in debt. On his death, the press, as the press often do, lauded him but then largely forgot him. It was Scott's heroic reputation which continued for years. Until, that is, things changed again in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, long after the men had died; Shackleton was 'rediscovered' and became a role model for leadership in crisis and extreme circumstances. He was, of course, blissfully unaware of the change in the way history had decided to view him or the interest in him. Hindsight seems to have made him a hero; he was ranked number 11 in the 100 Greatest Britains.

Commentators have talked about Shackleton's ability to inspire, his genuine empathy, compassion and deep consideration for his team. He was a 'people first' leader, inspired loyalty and belief in his people and yet he didn't see the goal he so desperately wanted to achieve. Perhaps his focus on people sometimes impacted his ability to make the best call for the mission in hand.

Amundsen also comes out well in the eyes of history— he, after all, beat Scott and survived. He was a driven man, a strategic leader and creative in his solutions to achieve his goal. He was, according to researchers, very focused on him and his achievements and that could sometimes degenerate into rogue leadership, not always being honest about plans and doing anything to win, even if that meant destroying the hopes of others. A recent Guardian article goes so far as to say that Scott was the victim of cruel luck and deception on the expedition... and the perpetrator was Amundsen.

Then we come to Scott. He was seen as a hero at the time, dying for the cause with all of his men in his failed mission. Then history's narrative changed, and a number of researchers and commentators started offering a different perspective. Some called his leadership 'incompetent' and 'ineffective'; others said it was too authoritative, based on command, control and hierarchy. One commentator argued that his task-focused style ended up demoralising his crew rather than energising them toward a common purpose. He was accused of not being agile enough for the hostile environment he found himself in. His obsession with the goal, some said, cost him and his men their lives.

It's easy to judge today, from the comfort of our warm houses. It's easy to give a simple narrative, to make people heroes or villains, right or wrong, competent or incompetent. We can try and piece together what someone was thinking, why they acted the way they did, but ultimately none of us know what it is like to walk in someone else's shoes – after all, they are not ours.

What is interesting is to see how Scott and his men, in the worst moments of their lives, handled the situation. In those final moments, we now know what happened.

Edgar Evans, the team's strongest man, died during the night on the 17<sup>th</sup> February and was found by Scott in the morning. Oates was next. His leg was so badly damaged he slashed his reindeer-skin sleeping bag so he could stick his leg out into the cold so the ice would freeze and kill the pain. He asked Scott to leave him to die, but Scott refused. By the 16<sup>th</sup> March, he could not go on. In an act of self-sacrifice, he left the tent, walked into the blizzard and faced his death.

Three men were left. Bowers, Wilson and Scott. By the 22<sup>nd</sup> March, they knew it was over. They were running out of food, three days away from the next stop, and a blizzard was stopping them move on. They never left the tent again. They took pencil to paper and started writing messages they hoped would be found. It is thanks to Edward Atkinson, the man left in charge of Base Camp, that these notes were found. He knew Scott was dead but he wanted to find him and it is his determination which means we know what happened in those final days.

The men had enough morphine to kill themselves, but they decided to die naturally, and they wrote letters.

Wilson wrote to his wife, Oriana, saying, "We have struggled to the end and have nothing to regret."

Bowers wrote to try and comfort his mother, "For me, the end was peaceful as it is only sleep in the cold."

Scott, almost certainly the last to die, wrote copious letters to the financial backers of the trek, his colleagues and the families of his dead colleagues. In one he said, "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."

Scott's final letter is dated 29<sup>th</sup> March and he said, "It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write more. R Scott." Then he added one last urgent message:

"For God's sake look after our people."

Scott was worried about what would happen to those families of his colleagues who were left destitute. Thankfully, this was taken care of. There was an appeal for funds by the Lord Mayor of London and it was so successful that it provided pensions for all of the expedition party's widows and orphans and there was enough left over to set up the Scott Polar Research Institute.

Scott failed in his mission. He and his colleagues lost their lives. Yet today, in Cambridge, the Scott Polar Research Institute has stood for 100 years, doing ground-breaking work in the polar regions. That is a legacy.

## APPLICATION

The explorer Ranulph Fiennes says: "Scott wrote wonderful English under awful circumstances."

Our leadership, like Amundsen, Scott and Shackleton's, will also be judged by all who want to have an opinion. Some will think we were too much this and too little that. Others will simplify the complex decisions we wrestled with, into sound bites which make us sound reckless or inconsiderate. The people there at the time of our leadership will have a different perspective to those who come long after we have left. Our leadership, and the impact we had, will be told by the people who experienced the impact. People talk to people, we all share our opinions and perspectives and what I think you meant, may not be what you meant at all.

For hundreds of years, people have talked about Scott. What he was and what he wasn't, his successes and his failures. Did he make mistakes? Of course. Did he go too far in some things and not far enough in others? Yes, to that too. Under pressure did he have the right priorities? Perhaps not, but then hindsight isn't available at the time. What we do know is that when he faced the end, when he was in a tent and dying as a result of all the decisions he had made up until now, he made the right call. He stood with his men. He looked after their families. He faced the end bravely and, even then, had a steely eyed determination to ensure others were provided for.

As another commentator, Crane, says, "His letters, diary and last message extend our sense of what it is to be human. No one else could have written them; no one else, at the point of defeat and dissolution, could have so vividly articulated a sense of human possibilities that transcend both."

Scott was a flawed human. We all are. In those end moments, he appears to me to be all the things that others said he was not.

## QUESTIONS

Most leaders are just trying to do the best they can with what they have got. After the event it is always easier to judge and to say we would have done it differently. Hindsight is not available until after the event, so how can we make the best decisions in the moment, whatever the circumstances?

- 1) When you are making decisions, what are the guiding principles that sit behind your decisions? Write these down because when we are under pressure, it is easy to forget!
- 2) Sometimes when we are trying to do the right thing, we search to see what other people's decision was in their context. Although this can be helpful, other people do not have the same circumstances we have, they are not the same people we are with the same character or skills we have. How good are you at weighing up all the options and coming to a decision that you can stand by, no matter how history may decide to write it in the future?
- 3) When you shake a fizzy drink bottle and open the lid, whatever is in the bottle comes out. That is rather like character. When we are shaken, when we are under pressure, who we really are comes out. For Scott, when he faced certain death, what came out was who he was – there was compassion, empathy, consideration, leadership. When you are in the most challenging moments, what comes out of you? What do people see?

We are all on our own trek, leading the best we can. We cannot control what other people think of us or our decisions now, or in the future with the benefit of hindsight. We can control what we think of ourselves and the behaviour we choose for ourselves. Let's make the best decisions we can, with the facts that we have, operating under principles that we believe in. It is all any of us can do.



**© The PiXL Club Ltd. 2025. All Rights Reserved.**

This resource is strictly for the use of The PiXL Club (“PiXL”) subscribing schools and their students for as long as they remain PiXL subscribers. It may NOT be copied, sold, or transferred to or by a third party or used by the school after the school subscription ceases. Until such time it may be freely used within the PiXL subscribing school by their teachers and authorised staff and any other use or sale thereof is strictly prohibited.

All opinions and contributions are those of the authors. The contents of this resource are not connected with, or endorsed by, any other company, organisation or institution.

This resource may contain third party copyright material not owned by PiXL and as such is protected by law. Any such copyright material used by PiXL is either provided under licence or pending a licence.

PiXL endeavour to trace and contact third party copyright owners. If there are any inadvertent omissions or errors in the acknowledgements or usage, this is unintended and PiXL will remedy these on written notification.