

Scott, Oates and Heroism

We were very honoured to be visited last Wednesday by Sir Ranulph Fiennes, the great polar explorer and adventurer. Many of you will have been here in this hall to hear his words. He showed us his modesty and his courage in his words – and I was left reflecting about courage and about the kind of men who go to such extreme and challenging places. Sir Ranulph spoke about Captain Scott, that other great polar explorer, who died 101 years ago in an attempt to lead the first team to the South Pole. I would like to use this assembly to think about heroism, using an example from Scott's expedition to the South Pole. Scott, and one of his team, Captain Oates, give us an insight into the place of heroism in our history and our culture.

Scott set out with his team to be the first to reach the South Pole. He was up against a Norwegian team headed by Roald Amundsen. Scott reached the Pole early in 1912, to find that Roald Amundsen had got there before him. The blow was hard: harder still the impossibility of the return journey before the darkness and intensity of the southern winter set in.

On the return journey, the team struggled against great hardships and out in the vast snow and ice, one by one, they died. Scott is thought to have died on March 29 1912, we think that he was the last to go.

Some historians see Scott as a bungler, a man who lacked strategic sense, someone who led his men through negligence to their deaths. It is tempting to think of him as obstinate, foolish, deluded, reckless. Others, like Sir Ranulph Fiennes, see in him a spark of genius. He risked failure, but it is only by the desire to take risks that the human race ever achieves anything.

Scott's most famous words were left to be found with his body and those of his companions months after he perished at the South Pole: he knew he was about to die and he left his "Message to the Public" – he wrote: "We took risks, we knew that 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."

This is old-style heroism, where a great man, perhaps flawed and arrogant, measures his greatness against a great task. Scott was arrogant but even in his arrogance there is another kind of heroism. However, there was another, very different kind of hero on the doomed expedition: Captain Laurence Oates. Oates disagreed with Scott many times on the expedition.

'Their natures jarred on one another,' a fellow expedition member recalled. Oates wrote in his diary "Myself, I dislike Scott intensely and would chuck the whole thing if it were not that we are a British expedition.... Scott is not straight, it is himself first, the rest nowhere...". Oates was a great man in his own right. After many expeditions

to different parts of the world and a distinguished army career, he found himself on Scott's doomed Antarctic expedition. And on the long return, knowing that they had been beaten to the South Pole, Oates, like his comrades, was broken down by the cold, hunger, exhaustion and snow-blindness.

He could hardly walk because of a problem with an old wound, and his feet were agony through frostbite. Oates' could not move quickly enough and his three remaining companions would not leave him.

To avoid certain death, they had to march 9 miles a day. With Oates, they could not keep to this pace. On 15 March, Oates told his companions that he could not go on and proposed that they leave him in his sleeping-bag, which they refused to do. He managed a few more miles that day but his condition worsened that night. He awoke on the morning of 16th March and knew what he must do to save his friends. He said, "I am just going outside and may be some time." Without going to the pain and effort of putting his boots on, he walked out of the tent into a blizzard and -40°C temperatures, to certain death.

Scott wrote in his diary, "We knew that poor Oates was walking to his death, but though we tried to dissuade him, we knew it was the act of a brave man and an English gentleman". Oates sacrificed himself to give his friends a chance to live. This was not flashy heroism, but quiet bravery of the highest order.

Although Amundsen had the honour of getting to the Pole first, his heroism does not seem to have made an impact. Today, Scott and Oates are the real heroes, for all that they failed and died.

Whether or not Scott actually was a hero: a man to be admired and looked up to, is for each individual who learns his story to judge. Some of the things he has been criticised for are important parts of our national character: they were useful before Scott exhibited them, and invaluable in the two world wars. In Scott's case the question is made more acute because those flawed characteristics arguably led to the deaths of the other men on his expedition, and therefore whether Scott should take responsibility for that.

But everyone who travelled with him was a volunteer: they all took risks, and all knew that they took them. Each man exercised his own will, his own spirit of adventure, and was prepared to take the consequences upon himself. And amongst those people was Captain Oates, who demonstrated a very different and perhaps more attractive heroism than Captain Scott.

Oates was not in it for himself – he sacrificed himself for his friends. Oates was not out for glory – he went quietly to his death with fuss or ostentation. Oates was not irrational or driven – he had weighed up the odds, knew the stakes and came to a tough decision which he saw through. Above all, Oates knew that his own selfish needs are not as important as the needs of the group – that when it came to it, he would have to put what he wanted aside and do the right thing. To do it so

diffidently, so quietly is what adds to his heroism and greatness. To look around him and say "I'm just going outside now, I may be some time" and have everyone who heard know exactly what he meant makes him live in the collective memory. Was his sacrifice in vain? No one was saved. I think it was not in vain...

Oates was never found. The bodies of Scott and his companions were discovered by a search party on 12 November 1912 and their records retrieved. Their final camp became their tomb; a high cairn of snow was erected over it, topped by a roughly fashioned cross. Oates received no such honours. His body is still out there in the Antarctic, in the vast cold empty spaces that his heroism has illuminated and made his own.