

## Where Polar Bears Meet Penguins: An Introduction to Scott Polar Research Institute

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### ABSTRACT

The Scott Polar Research Institute was founded in 1926 as a memorial to Captain Robert Falcon Scott who perished on his way back from the South Pole in 1912. Its purpose was to serve as a repository of polar data and a meeting place for explorers, and to provide a forum for exchange of information on exploration and equipment. The building, built in 1934 and enlarged in 1968, includes the museum, archives, library, laboratory space, cold rooms for ice research, and office space. Personnel include research and support staff, visiting scholars and students. Research interests encompass science and social science in both the Arctic and the Antarctic.

January 1912. After a grueling trek of more than 900 nautical miles from their base camp to the South Pole, man-hauling their sledges of supplies and equipment, the five-man crew of the British Antarctic Expedition's South Pole party arrive to discover that Amundsen's Norwegian expedition has beaten them to their goal by a month. Exhausted and discouraged, they head back to their base camp and ship. Two months later, after covering almost 800 miles, they make their final camp, pinned down by a blizzard only eleven miles from a life-saving depot of food and supplies they had cached the previous season. Two of the men have died of injuries and exposure; the leader and his last two companions acknowledge their fate.

Captain Robert Falcon Scott writes a few letters to the families of his crew and then makes a final entry in his diary:

29 March. Since the 21st we have had a continuous gale. We had fuel to make two cups of tea apiece and bare food for two days. Every day we have been ready to start for our depot 11 miles away, but outside the tent it remains a scene of whirling drift. I do not think we can hope for any better things now. We shall stick it out to the end, but we are getting weaker, and the end cannot be far.

It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write more.  
R. Scott

Last entry.  
For God's sake look after our people.

Nine months later in November of 1912, a search party from the base discovers the last camp, the bodies of Scott and his men, the diaries that tell the whole, dreadful story and Scott's last appeal, his "Message to the Public."

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This was the Heroic Age of Polar Exploration, and what came to be known as Scott's Last Expedition provided the heroes of the day. The public's imagination and heart were in thrall and the response to Scott's appeal to "look after our people" was extraordinary. The monies raised exceeded the needs of the heroes'

appeal to "look after our people" was extraordinary. The monies raised exceeded the needs of the heroes' families, and the surplus was put aside for publication of results from the expedition, a memorial fund which paid for a statue, and a sum of £10,000 designated "Polar Research Fund."

While writing up the scientific results back in Cambridge, two young members of the expedition, Frank Debenham and Raymond Priestley, realized that they had, for want of access to previous expedition notes, repeated earlier research which had never been published. This brought to mind a dream that they had nurtured during the enforced leisure of an Antarctic blizzard: a polar centre or institute which would serve as a repository of polar data, a meeting place for explorers, and a forum for exchange of information on polar exploration and equipment. Their "co-conspirator" in the scheme was James Wordie, who had himself survived incredible hardship in Antarctica on Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition. The Great War intervened for five years, but in 1919, with the approval of Scott's widow, Lady Scott, Debenham approached the trustees of the memorial fund with their idea for a polar institute which would "preserve continuity in research rather than give spasmodic help to expeditions." He "showed convincingly that often the hard-won experience of polar expeditions in the past had been lost when their members dispersed, and that the techniques of life and travel in cold regions had been inadequately recorded. Each expedition had had to learn these techniques anew, rarely profiting from the experience of others, and in this way valuable time and even lives had been lost" (Bertram, 1952).

Debenham, Priestley and Wordie were encouraged by the trustees and supported by the international polar community. The Sedgwick Museum of Geology of the University of Cambridge rented them some attic space and they began to amass equipment and records, with those of the Scott expedition serving as the nucleus of the collection, which soon included Arctic material as well as Antarctic. The attic became a natural meeting place for people interested in polar exploration and science and the scene of many "debates on methods of travel, types of equipment or even matters of past history" (Debenham, 1945). Volunteers handled most of the work of correspondence, cataloguing and caring for the equipment.

At last the trustees granted the money accumulated in the Polar Research Fund, and in 1926 the Scott Polar Research Institute was officially established under the supervision of the University and with the Royal Geographical Society represented in its management. Frank Debenham, one of the two who had first dreamed of the institute, was made director.

After a couple of years in the attic (known as the Attic Period) and further temporary accommodation in Lensfield House, loaned by the University, the Institute was able to move into its own new building in 1934, which was intended to be both functional for the needs of the Institute and a memorial to Robert F. Scott. The inscription over the main entrance, "Quaesivit arcana Poli videt Dei," has been translated as "He sought the secrets of the Pole: he found the hidden face of God." Captain Scott's widow, a well-known sculptor, presented a bust of her husband, which graces the front of the building, and a bronze statue of a youth she entitled "Aspiration," as a memorial to the men who perished on their journey to the South Pole. The entry hall featured two shallow domes painted to depict the Arctic and the Antarctic in some topographic detail and encircled by the names of early explorers and pictures of their ships. The capitals of the adjacent columns were carved to represent penguins for the southern dome and polar bears for the northern. This vestibule led into the museum and an exhibit of polar equipment and memorabilia; upstairs was devoted to the library, its catalog and space for research. The top floor was a long gallery designed for the display of some of the artwork from polar expeditions, especially a collection of paintings by Edward A. Wilson, who perished with Scott.

By the time of the move in 1934, the museum and library collections had assumed their full character and would soon be regarded as premier in the arena of polar knowledge. The museum collection included original manuscript diaries and field notebooks, maps and charts, photographic negatives and prints, lantern slides and 16 mm films, as well as bulkier objects such as sledges, tents, clothing, food samples and personal gear, all donated by various Arctic and Antarctic expeditions. The library featured some 800 books, as well as manuscripts and press cuttings from British and overseas papers. In the years that followed, the Institute was successful in its aims: "to encourage polar research by supplying information and advice to intending explorers, affording opportunities for study and assisting in the organization of expeditions, and for this purpose to concentrate in one place all existing knowledge of the polar regions and subject it to expert criticism

and cataloguing; above all, to maintain communication with all polar explorers, investigators, and students without any restriction or qualification" (Mill, 1928).

From 1931 Scott Polar Research Institute produced *Polar Record*, a biannual publication designed as an official account of current polar exploration and scientific survey and including technical, summary and review articles, together with an extensive bibliographical section based on the library's analytical cataloguing. The Institute also provided a free reference service by correspondence and for visitors to the Institute, responding to enquiries from government, scientists, business, expedition leaders, biographers and students, among others. Scott Polar was recognized as an invaluable source of information and expertise during World War II, when all three branches of the military had to cope with Arctic and sub-Arctic conditions. The building was commandeered by the Admiralty and the staff put to work on the topic of polar warfare, helping to plan operations in northern Norway and Spitsbergen and writing information booklets about northern areas. This usefulness to the government was subsequently rewarded with increased responsibility in polar matters and a Treasury grant to support a larger staff, including the first professional librarian.

After the war the Scott Polar Research Institute grew in its collections and its influence. Although there was no formal teaching program, it hosted lectures by polar explorers and scientists. In 1946 a support group, the Friends of the Polar Institute, was founded to "bring those interested in polar exploration into personal association with the . . . Institute and its work" (Scott Polar Research Institute, 1948, p. 12) and to develop a source of voluntary contributions to the Institute's finances. Scott Polar Research Institute became part of the sub-department of the Department of Geography of the University of Cambridge in 1957, an event which affected staffing and finances and ultimately led to increased teaching by the Scott Polar staff. At first this was confined to lectures at the undergraduate level in various University departments, but in 1975 Scott Polar inaugurated its own post-graduate course leading to a diploma; this course was upgraded to a master's degree, or M.Phil., in polar studies in 1980. That same year the Institute became a full department in the University.

A generous grant from the Ford Foundation enabled the Institute to add a new "wing" in 1968 which effectively quadrupled its floor space. The new building included offices, laboratory space, two cold rooms, a map room, special archives storage, and a lecture room. The expansion meant a threefold increase in the space allotment of the museum and the library, which by this time held around 9000 books, 15,000 reprints, pamphlets and unpublished reports, and about 750 journal titles.

Today Scott Polar Research Institute, usually called by its acronym, SPRI, continues its traditional roles of resource, research and meeting place for polar scientists, historians, explorers and enthusiasts throughout the world. The research interests of the full- and part-time staff at Scott Polar include sea ice studies, remote sensing, glaciology, history of Arctic and Antarctic exploration, Siberian socioeconomics, Soviet Arctic shipping, Arctic and Antarctic geopolitics, ecology of the Southern and Arctic oceans, and the history and art of scrimshaw. The research staff are supported by a full complement of technical and clerical assistants. The Institute's sea ice research is particularly topical as an aspect of world climate and an index of global warming. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher recently paid a private visit to SPRI to learn more about this research and how it can be incorporated into her new "green" policies.

Since the inauguration of *Polar Record* in 1931, Scott Polar has expanded its coverage of polar literature. By 1955 the *Record* came out three times a year and its bibliographical section, *Recent Polar Literature* (RPL), was made available first as a separate reprint and later as a supplement to the *Record*. More recently, *Polar Record* has moved to quarterly publication, and RPL has expanded to *Recent Polar and Glaciological Literature* (RPGGL) by incorporating the bibliographical section of the *Journal of Glaciology*. *Polar Record* and RPGGL are produced by Polar Publications, SPRI's in-house desk-top publishing operation, and are the main currency of the library's exchange programme. The Institute also has two other series: *Special Publications* and *Occasional Papers*.

Each year SPRI plays host to visiting scholars who come to work in the library and archives for periods from a week to a year; from their research at Scott Polar they have published numerous books, biographies and edited diaries. These visitors, who are given offices or desks in the library, become full members of the SPRI community, singing for their supper by giving guest lectures and seminars. In 1989 their research

interests included sea mammal hunting among Siberian Eskimo, oil exploitation in the Soviet north, history of trade of narwhal horn, the future of the Antarctic Treaty System, prehistoric settlements in Newfoundland and northern Norway, and the history of Arctic whaling.

A select group of "sandwich" and post-graduate students top off this lively community. The sandwich students are visitors from other universities or polytechnics who spend a year of their honours course studies working with a research group at SPRI. A small number of Ph.D. and M.Sc. candidates are wedged into the nooks and crannies of the building; their research interests encompass topics as diverse as geographical information systems, the psychology of polar explorers, remote sensing of sea ice, and Inuit hunters of Greenland. About a half dozen students who can claim some previous polar or sub-polar experience or education are enrolled each year in the M.Phil. program; they are assigned desks in the library. During the first two terms a series of experts present daily seminars on five major topics: environment, circumpolar peoples, history of exploration, resources and problems of development, and administration of polar areas. The students write a number of essay-length position papers and during the third term complete a master's thesis.

SPRI houses the World Data Centre 'C' for Glaciology, the headquarters of the International Glaciological Society, and the Secretariat of the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research, better known as SCAR, and familiar to marine librarians for its many publications on the Southern Ocean, especially its BIOMASS series. Two other organizations in Cambridge maintain close ties with Scott Polar: the International Whaling Commission and the British Antarctic Survey; the latter has long been closely associated with SPRI and today is headed by a former director of SPRI. Scott Polar hosts the monthly meetings of the Cambridge Explorers and Travellers Club.

Public lectures are given on Saturday evenings during university term, and the museum is open every afternoon except Sunday. Visitors examine images and artifacts brought back from the edges of the globe: Frank Hurley's magnificent photographs of the wreck of the *Endurance* and the perseverance of Shackleton's crew, models of the *Fram* and the *Gjoa*, stuffed penguins, an Inuit kayak, dog and motor sledges, medals for bravery and stamps of commemoration, portraits of explorers and navigators, soapstone carvings from the Arctic and scrimshaw from the seven seas. Outside stand a sealers' trypot from South Georgia and an Inukshuk, or caribou guide, from Baffin Island. There is room to display only a fraction of the collection; many smaller objects are housed in the museum store; most of the manuscripts, logs, the picture collection and photographic materials are kept upstairs in the purpose built archives room.

The archives reside in fireproof, environmentally controlled comfort, well above Cambridge flood level. The room is furnished with solander cases to hold the paintings and specially fitted cabinets to hold slides, rare maps and charts, and an extensive collection of 10-cm glass diapositives. The material is organized by the same modified Universal Decimal Classification system used for the library; it is in great demand by historians, biographers, television and film producers, and journalists. Except for certain restricted material, the archives are accessible by appointment with the Archivist/Curator. The foundation piece of the collection is, of course, material from Scott's British Antarctic Expedition, 1910-1913: diaries, log books, charts, artifacts and 700 paintings by the talented Edward A. Wilson, Scott's scientific chief and the expedition's zoologist. Many of these were donated by the Trustees of the Captain Scott Memorial Polar Research Trust, along with papers from Scott's National Antarctic Expedition of 1901-1904. Subsequently, the collection has added material from most of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century British polar expeditions (Savours, 1959), including many manuscript maps and charts.

The published map and chart collection is housed on the topmost floor of the new portion of the building. It features comprehensive sets of government-issued charts and maps for both polar regions, terrestrial and marine. These are secured primarily through exchange agreements and are generally organized using the same geographic classification found in the library and archives collections.

Valuable as the human resources of Scott Polar are, the library is recognized as the mainspring of the Institute. A depth and breadth of coverage of polar topics are combined with a detailed catalogue to create what we claim is the best polar collection in the world. From the 800 volumes moved into the new building in 1934, the collection has grown to 23,000 books, 36,000 pamphlets and over 900 current serial titles. Perhaps

the library's tee-shirt motto, "Where Polar Bears Meet Penguins," best sums up the bi-polar breadth of the collection which brings together the natural history of both the North and South Poles. The collection excels in additional subjects, including navigational and expedition reports from the 18th century to present, history and biography of exploration, history of whaling and sealing, glaciology, sea ice mechanics and remote sensing of ice, oceanography and ecology of Arctic and Antarctic waters, and ethnology of circumpolar peoples. Due to early and continued efforts and an elaborate exchange mechanism, the collection of literature on Siberia and the Soviet north is certainly the best in Western Europe, rivaled only by the Elmer E. Rasmuson Library in Alaska. Because it is a reference collection, the material in the library is non-circulating and may not be taken from the building. However, all SPRI personnel, including visiting scholars, have 24-hour access to the library. Material may go out on interlibrary loan at the discretion of the Librarian.

The collection's excellence in coverage can be attributed to the Institute's early goal to "concentrate in one place all existing knowledge of the polar regions and subject it to expert criticism and cataloguing" (Mill, 1928). Fulfilment of this aim engendered an unusually structured library staff comprising four bibliographers headed by a Librarian/Information Officer and supported by a technical and clerical staff of three. The bibliographers are each subject specialists with linguistic skills and bear responsibility for collection development, acquisition, cataloguing and reference work in their respective subjects. Three of these positions, which are half-time, cover the Arctic material: Scandinavian, Russian and North American. Antarctic bibliography is covered by the Librarian as part of his job. Glaciology, including snow and ice world-wide, is covered by the manager of the World Data Center 'C' for Glaciology, the office of which is housed in the library. In addition to the manager's assistance in the SPRI library, WDC-C publishes *Glaciological Citations*, an annotated bibliography which is distributed monthly to a regular mailing list. Selected literature searches on specific topics are also available to paying customers.

Since 1945 the collection has been catalogued at the analytic level using Universal Decimal Classification. In 1950 the polar expert Brian B. Roberts devised a modified version of UDC with additional detail for polar and subpolar regions. This guide, *Universal Decimal Classification for Use in Polar Libraries*, is now in its third edition; the version used at SPRI is an unpublished revision. The analytics created by the bibliographers for books, pamphlets, conference papers and journal articles went into a card catalogue which grew to over 70,000 entries and also were published in *Recent Polar Literature* and later *Recent Polar and Glaciological Literature*. In 1976 the entire catalogue was published in book form by G.K. Hall of Boston, Massachusetts; a supplement was produced in 1981.

Although Roberts was a strong force in the development of the library, credit for its steady growth and intrinsic excellence must go to H.G.R. King, librarian from 1955 to 1983 and the Institute's first to hold a university appointment to the position. Bringing to his work a keen sense of scholarship and a lively interest in all things polar, Harry King directed the library through almost thirty years of change and fluctuation without compromising the quality and completeness of the collection or the catalogue. He forged relationships with other major Arctic libraries, initiating many valuable exchanges, and was an early participant in the Northern Libraries Colloquy. He also found time to edit a number of books based on the SPRI archives.

Upon his retirement King was succeeded by Valerie Galpin. Her brief was to automate the catalogue. This she did, using custom designed software developed in Cambridge. In 1985 the card catalogue was closed, and the bibliographers began data entry into SPRI LIB, which now, at 30,000 entries and growing by 8,000 a year, is the world's largest bi-polar online bibliographic database. Presently, it is mounted on Cambridge University's mainframe computer, which limits access to the database to university members; however, included in Scott Polar's development plan is an in-house computer which would contain SPRI LIB and make it more readily available to other libraries. Galpin was a vigorous participant in the Northern (now Polar) Libraries Colloquy and instigated a programme of shared cataloguing among polar libraries known as InterCat. Several pilot projects involving exchange of analytics for designated serial titles were underway when she left SPRI in 1988.

William Mills is the new librarian of Scott Polar Research Institute, having joined SPRI in the spring of 1989. He brings to the job a background in computer assisted information service and a scholarly interest in polar subjects, particularly geography. To speed the retrospective conversion of the card catalogue into SPRI LIB, he has purchased an ICR or intelligent character recognition scanner which will read the cards into compatible

software prior to manual editing, with the intention of saving considerable keyboard entry. He hopes also to use this ICR scanner to create SPRINEW, a current-awareness service featuring tables of contents and abstracts of material as it comes into the library and before it is catalogued; SPRINEW data would later be modified by the bibliographers for entry into SPRILIB. As a service to the international polar community, Mills would like to establish an electronic bulletin board of polar information, and work has begun on a polar periodicals database which will create a union list of polar periodicals held in United Kingdom libraries. Also under way is a comprehensive directory of current UK research in the Arctic and sub-Arctic; this will be available in both printed and online form. In conjunction with the Rasmuson library at the University of Alaska – Fairbanks, he is investigating the possibility of establishing a polar thesaurus. Last, but by no means least, January 1990 will see the launch of a new and improved version of RPGL to be called *Polar and Glaciological Abstracts* and to be published by Cambridge University Press.

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Twice each day the gleaming brass bell from Captain Scott's ship, the *Terra Nova*, is sounded. It summons staff, students and visitors alike to the old museum: five bells for morning coffee and eight bells for afternoon tea. For me, this ritual gathering epitomizes the spirit of Scott Polar Research Institute and the realization of its founders' goals. We all stand together in the museum; we chat and gossip and discuss our work. We exchange ideas and experiences, sharing a common interest and surrounded by the evidence of man's fascination with the ends of the earth.

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