

SCOTT OF THE ANTARCTIC (1948): GEOPOLITICS, FILM AND BRITAIN'S POLAR EMPIRE

ABSTRACT – This paper uses the release of Ealing Studios' *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948) to initiate a reflection on how the then UK government was preparing to anticipate and prepare for growing geopolitical and scientific challenges to its polar sovereignty. Two counter-claimants (Argentina and Chile) and one close ally (United States) refused to accept that the Falkland Islands Dependencies were part of the British Empire. While most investment and overall strategy was directed towards mapping and surveying, the Colonial Office did offer support to a filmic project focussing on the heroics of Edwardian polar explorers. The rationale for and the reaction to the film are interwoven with a broader geopolitical assessment, which suggests that celebrating manly character and stoic leadership was not going to be sufficient in a world where British imperial authority was being challenged and indeed corroded south of 60 degrees South.

doi: 10.7358/acme-2012-003-dodd

Introduction

The Ealing Studios' film *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948) was selected in November 1948 to showcase British cinema at the Royal Command Film Performance. At the appropriately named Empire Cinema in London, Princess Elizabeth and her husband the Duke of Edinburgh attended the film's opening. «The Sunday Dispatch» concluded that «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»¹. However, as Martin Francis has noted, this cinematic homage to pre-World War I heroism, and the accompanying domestic stoicism on the part of female partners left at home, coincided with an apparent “crisis” of family breakdown and divorce (Francis

¹) *The finest breed of men*, «The Sunday Dispatch», 5 November 1948, p. 1.

2007). Even if newspaper film critics were largely moved by a stirring reconstruction of Edwardian endeavour, post-war Britain was struggling to come to terms of rationing, shortages and marital harmony as returning servicemen unsettled wartime gender relations. For the literary historian Francis Spufford the film stands as a «post-war fable of class integration» rather than of “gender integration” let alone “racial integration” given that the polar party in question was composed of white men.

While Martin Francis juxtaposed post-war anxiety over family life (with particular reference to male nostalgia for war service and homo-social companionship) with the release of *Scott of the Antarctic*, my concern is with another kind of imperial juxtaposition. While mindful of the South Asian independence and post-colonial change in Israel and Ireland, Britain’s polar empire was also undergoing fundamental change. While Francis is aware to the contemporary geopolitics of the Antarctic and South Atlantic, he under-estimates quite how integrated this apparently remote part of the world was with the wider imperial enterprise. The Falkland Islands Dependencies (FID) were *pace* Francis incorporated into the British Empire. First claimed in 1908, and then again in 1917, the FID were being mapped, surveyed and even thinly populated by a ring of British research stations and field huts in the mid to late 1940s onwards. At the same time, however, these vast territories were contested by rival claims to ownership by Argentina and Chile. Britain’s wartime ally, the United States, also had its own agenda and accompanying ambitions for the Antarctic Peninsula and the wider polar continent. The making of *Scott of the Antarctic* reveals how a film re-telling the Scott story of 1912-3 was at the same time caught up in the contemporary geopolitics of the Antarctic.

Britain’s temperate and tropical empire might well, in the late 1940s at least, looked a bit more vulnerable to change than it had done before the onset of the Second World War. In the extreme south, by way of contrast, Colonial Office officials charged with managing the FID were gearing up to protect territorial and resource interests. The post-war organization, the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (FIDS) was at the forefront of this mission (previously a wartime secret operation called *Tabarin*). So the making and release of *Scott of the Antarctic* needs to be sensitive to this prevailing context of territorial protection and, at times, ongoing mapping/surveying wars with rival South American claimants. By the 1940s, three countries were in effect claiming the same territory in the Antarctic as their own.

This short essay picks up on two aspects namely the geopolitical circumstances prevailing circa 1948 and the actual production of the film involving as it did men and equipment supplied by the FIDS. In the final section I return to the reception of the film and how Edwardian polar mythology co-existed uneasily with the realities of post-war polar geopolitics.

1. *Mapping Wars*

In 1948-9, the FIDS, was embarking on its fourth summer season (October-March) of Antarctic mapping and surveying. The post-war Labour government of Clement Attlee had agreed to commit itself to an extensive programme of cartographic and meteorological research in the South Atlantic and Antarctic region. The challenges facing the FIDS were formidable as a score of men, operating in the short summer season, were expected to map and survey some of the most inhospitable terrain in the world. While the absence of an indigenous human population removed one obvious source of complexity, the FIDS faced competing surveying and mapping parties determined where possible to achieve greater map coverage and evidence of their achievements by establishing rival field stations equipped with some of the paraphernalia of modern states namely the flag pole and place name plaque. Cartography was unquestionably politics by another means. And the production and circulation of sheet maps and charts was further evidence of imperial endeavour.

The idea that there could be “gentlemanly exploration” of a sort imagined if not always practiced in the Victorian/Edwardian era seemed out of place in the late 1940s. FIDS with its two offices in Stanley in the Falkland Islands and London was expected to co-ordinate the movement of men and ships around the Antarctic with the explicit purpose of collecting, processing and advertising geographical knowledge of the FID. So when Ealing Studios approached the Colonial Office to help with the film of *Scott of the Antarctic*, it must have seen an unlikely collaboration. What benefit might accrue from asking the FIDS to collaborate with Ealing Studios given the pressures the mapping organization was already under to ensure that its maps and charts were as good if not better than anything produced by Argentine and Chilean map makers?

The relationship between the Colonial Office and Ealing Studios was further complicated by the involvement of the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) at Cambridge. The then director of SPRI, Colin Bertram, was involved in a series of negotiations with the Studios over fees for professional services offered to the film makers in terms of access to documentary evidence and personal recollections associated with the Scott expedition. It was not a profitable exchange as the Studios offered only a modest fee and the promise of more never materialised given the film's comparatively modest audience figures, especially beyond the UK. Nonetheless, the Colonial Office with some reservation did agree that if Ealing Studios wanted assistance in filming in the Antarctic (albeit the wrong side of the polar continent) then it would ask the FIDS to offer some assistance in terms of logistics and advice on potential location filming. The rationale being that it was, on balance, better to offer some support to a film addressing the endeavours of a national hero than to be

seen to be churlish. But it was nonetheless akin to a marriage of convenience, location shots of the Antarctic Peninsula in the name of representing a fable of Edwardian endeavour was not going to help in managing the competing claims over the Antarctic region. However, officials concluded that some publicity was better than no publicity at all.

Another reason, which might have tipped the balance in favour of collaborating with Ealing Studios, was the growing evidence of Argentina's determination to ensure that the Antarctic and South Atlantic was part of the geographical imagination of its citizens. Under the leadership of Juan Domingo Peron, Argentine public education was increasingly committed to producing a new series of geography textbooks celebrating the fact the Argentine Republic now encompassed the Argentine Antarctic sector. School children were expected to memorise the size of the country and accurately draw Argentina including its South Atlantic and Antarctic territories. In 1948, the Peron government instructed the Military Geographical Institute (IGM) to ensure that henceforth all Argentine national maps depicted the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula as national territories. This educational investment was hugely important in ensuring that a new generation of children were instructed and inculcated not only with a sense of territorial entitlement but also a sense of hostility towards imperial Britain.

The other intriguing aspect of the contested geopolitics of the Antarctic was the role of the United States. While Chile was also a rival claimant, Argentina was more troubling for the British because of additional antagonism over the Falklands and South Georgia. But the United States was a rather different proposition. As was clear by the late 1940s in a wide variety of geopolitical settings, the US's presence was substantial and in the context of the Antarctic interest was growing. A privately organised expedition led by the American naval officer Finn Ronne in 1947-48, for example, carried out extensive aerial photography of the polar continent and land-based surveying. The Ronne expedition was stationed on the same island as a FIDS surveying party and this created local tensions between the two groupings rather than some kind of "special relationship" on the ice. The Ronne expedition was partly supported by a large grant from the Truman administration and US naval personnel were much in evidence. The net result was to illustrate that Britain and its small retinue of surveyors faced stiff competition from US and South American rivals, armed in some cases with logistical capacities (especially in terms of airplanes and aerial surveying) that far exceeded anything that could be mustered from the UK.

It was only a matter of time when Britain would be eclipsed in terms of map production so perhaps the decision to support Ealing Studios was recognition that the resultant film, even if it was depicting past times, would bring some welcome publicity for Britain's enduring rela-

tionship with the Antarctic. As Brian Roberts, the Foreign Office's top polar expert, confided to another FIDS base leader E W Bingham, «In the long run this has been largely been a matter of lobbying in the right quarters and keeping up interest and “educating” civil servants in Antarctic matters»². He made this observation via letter in December 1946 some two years before the release of *Scott of the Antarctic*. A prescient observation given the priorities closer to home but also one which recognised that the mobilization of interest and education was also being done on an ever more national scale in rival countries, especially Argentina and to a less extent Chile.

So my reading of this film is not through a UK domestic optic (as Martin Francis' skilfully offers and others before him such as Jeffrey Richards) but one based on thinking about how the film, in subtle ways, might have registered geopolitically in a post-war context where the British polar empire was under challenge. Within three years, Britain has gone to reactivating its polar presence via a secret naval operation to funding a programme designed to consolidate its imperial presence in the Antarctic Peninsula and surrounding islands. At the same time, Argentina, Chile and the United States were more active in the same region and showing little inclination to respect British territorial/resource interests. By 1948, the year of the film's release, the United States had even put forward a radical new plan to create a so-called condominium in which all the seven claimant states and the US as a semi-claimant would work together to manage the Antarctic in their collective interests. The idea was shattered by the announcement that the Soviet Union was not going to accept any attempt to create a political framework that excluded them from proceedings. The net result was to ensure that the geopolitics of the Antarctic was going to be far more complicated than had been envisaged before the onset of World War Two.

2. *Popular geopolitics and the making of «Scott of the Antarctic»*

Film remains a powerful medium for the representation and mobilization of cultural and geopolitical scenes, scenarios and identities. One area of interest to scholars in popular/feminist geopolitics is the contribution that film genre makes to the ways in which the trio of space, place and landscape are represented within film. The desert, whether in hot or cold places such as the Sahara and the polar continent respectively, has

²) Cited in Dodds 2002, p. 4.

been regarded as one such landscape in which war films, Westerns and historical dramas can situate and propel particular narrative arcs. The desert, as a forbidding and indeed testing environment, becomes a place in which a whole series of vectors such as gender, class and ethnicity can be explored and woven into narrative structures.

When talking of a term such as popular geopolitics, a generation of scholars have drawn attention to how places and landscapes are not simply passive backdrops to media forms such as films or novels. They play a critical role in situating and constituting narrative development and thus contribute to the ways in which audiences understand the films. In the British context, the idea of the polar landscape as a testing ground of British character and fortitude has been a very powerful one, and one that from the nineteenth century onwards was fortified by explorers, geographers, scientists as well as journalists talking, writing and drawing the Antarctic as a place that inspired awe, fear, terror and dread (Pringle 1991).

So making sense of *Scott of the Antarctic* in part demands that we recognise the longer tradition of representing the Polar Regions while acknowledging that post-war films have been regarded as powerful signifiers of British national identity and post-colonial trajectories. *Scott of the Antarctic* is just one of a number of films (e.g. *Holiday Camp*, *East Money*) released in the late 1940s that have entertained such analyses. In a post-war culture where governments were urging citizens to maintain a common “community spirit” in the face of rationing and shortages, films that celebrated or commemorated heroism, stoicism and/or communal co-existence were particularly noteworthy. Later, in the 1950s, a generation of war films (e.g. *Dam Busters*) reminded audiences of the heroic struggles of British men and women recently endured against a common foe.

The involvement of Ealing Studios in the making of *Scott of the Antarctic* made sense given their specific reputation for producing films that celebrated British identity. *Passport to Pimlico* and *Kind Hearts and Coronets* were just two examples of Ealing films that were judged to be indicative of this very British celebration of the absurd and quirky. The Scott film endorses a different kind of British identity one based more on pluckiness, gentlemanly conduct and sacrifice. But in their different ways, the Ealing films drew upon past experiences of war and endurance to entertain and inform audiences about British character and fortitude.

Ealing’s famous producer Sir Michael Balcon was deeply conscious of the sensitivities facing anyone seeking to make a film about Scott’s ill-fated party. As Max Jones reminds us, the reputation of Scott in the 1940s was still extremely strong, and it was only in the 1960s that there was a more concerted attempt to question that sense of heroic sacrifice (Jones 2011). For most people, especially school children in the post-war period, the Scott story was still taught as if it was an epic tragedy of Greek proportions. The Scott diaries accompanied by the films made

by Herbert Ponting provided a vivid reminder of the extraordinary endurance of those polar explorers in the midst of an utterly unforgiving landscape. Nature itself, rather than war, tested the character of Scott and his party. Sir Michael and his associates, mindful that there were survivors from the Scott expedition, and family members of the dead men still alive, were careful to ensure that the film was considered to be as “factual” as possible³.

David James, a FIDS surveyor and ex-prisoner of war, was appointed advisor to the film and played a key role in guiding Ealing Studios through the potential minefield of memory and representation. Acting on advice of the SPRI, Balcon with the support of James approached the survivors of the Terra Nova expedition to take advice and to outline their preferred approach to the making of the film. Frank Debenham, a veteran of the expedition, was consulted over the personality and temperament of Scott to ensure that the “right” kind of actor was chosen to convey his leadership qualities. After a series of auditions, John Mills was selected for the role as Captain Robert Falcon Scott and other casting decisions followed. The film’s script, worked on by Walter Meade and Ivor Montagu, concentrated on the physical hardship of polar exploration, the suffering of Scott and his party, and their bravery in the face of appalling weather conditions, especially in the final days of the party’s return trip from the South Pole. The script was in no way meant to “debunk” the Scott legend but rather intended to reinforce the personal and collective qualities of the men involved and to contrast, where possible, Scott’s commitment to science and exploration rather than simply achieving an exploratory first (clearly important given that his Norwegian rival Amundsen achieved that).

The director of the film, Charles Frend, was an innovative figure in British post-war cinema. Eager to produce a semi-documentary film, Frend was intensely interested in portraying the expedition in a highly realistic and supportive manner. Frend also, however, faced a dilemma. While being realistic was one thing, it was quite another to persuade audiences that the film was going to be exciting and worth watching given that everyone knew that Scott’s party failed to return from the South Pole alive. His brief was ambitious; to secure on-location filming, to dramatise a well-known saga and to ensure that the final version was mindful of the sensitivities of the survivors and the family of the dead men.

With that in mind, filming was carried out in the Antarctic Peninsula in January 1947. David James along with camera operators Osmond

³) As an aside their care in gathering as much as material as possible while making *Scott of the Antarctic* has interesting parallels with Paul Greengrass’s well publicized attempt to make *United 93* (2006) as “factual” and “authentic” as possible in the absence of any survivors following the 9/11 attacks.

Borrodaile and Bob Moss accompanied FIDS staff to Hope Bay. Since 1943, Britain had established a scientific station as part of their deliberate wartime strategy to protect polar territories from counter-claimants whether they were South American or North American in terms of origin. Whereas Scott and his party traversed the Ross Sea region of the polar continent, Ealing's filming was occurring on the opposite side closest to South America for reasons of cost and access. The Ross Sea region was claimed by New Zealand and that part of the Antarctic involved a longer and more costly journey. The Colonial Office gave permission for filming on the proviso that the film shots could be used in other publicity related contexts, especially when used to highlight the role of FIDS staff in the contemporary Antarctic. After a period of filming, the landscape shots were later to be used in the opening scenes of the film. FIDS colleagues were persuaded to dress up in Edwardian era polar outfits and push sledges across the ice, for the purpose of recreating Scott's training preparations before the final assault on the South Pole.

Following three demanding months in the Antarctic, the film crew returned to the UK and subsequently travelled to Norway and Switzerland to complete filming. In both countries, alpine environments were used as analogues for the polar continent and in particular the Beardmore Glacier and south polar plateau. The final scenes involving the succumbing to death of Scott's party was actually filmed in Ealing Studios, and there was concern at the time that the studio shots were a poor substitute for the more authentic landscape shots. Fake snow called "fluff" and plaster casts designed to reproduce the ice surfaces of the Antarctic did not satisfy all of those involved in the production process. The final scenes were particularly hard to film given the well-known denouement and yet dialogue had to be invented in order to help convey to viewers those last moments of the expedition. For Freund, fundamentally, the film was intended to show Britain as a nation of explorers and adventurers, without dwelling unduly in why Scott's party might have failed to return safely. Such restraint was perhaps understandable given the desire of Ealing Studios to avoid giving offence to surviving relatives and mindful of national sensitivities (which were assumed to be unwilling or ill-prepared for the story of Scott and his party to be de-bunked in any fashion). Scott, if anything, was supposed to be a signifier of British national identity and heroism rather than indicative of British amateurism and/or emblematic of other countries and their personnel out-performing British men in the polar field. Scott's death rather than being an expression of weakness was considered to be demonstrative of the virtues of British military leadership and stoicism in the face of extraordinary adversity. Apparent disaster/failure transformed into a morality tale of courage and fortitude.

3. *Responding to Scott of the Antarctic*

As the Royal Command film of the year (1948), there was some considerable commercial pressure to ensure that *Scott of the Antarctic* was a success at the box office. British cinema, more generally, was facing challenges from Hollywood while at the same time cinema admissions were at their peak in the immediate post-war period. Ealing Studios was hopeful that the film would be popular with audiences and well received by the critics. The critics for their part generally praised the film its technical competence and overall presentation. Where opinion was divided was over the plot and narrative development as well as the representation of the final segment of Scott's return journey from the South Pole. Perhaps, surprisingly given the cost and effort involved, the opening scenes shot in the Antarctic Peninsula were not judged by the critics at least to have added much to the film's narrative and dramatization.

Complaints over the film's narrative and plot littered the earliest reviews of the film. One example is provided by the newspaper, «The Sunday Dispatch», which noted, «*Scott of the Antarctic* is a technically competent film, but something is missing from the film that prevents it being termed "great". The mistake of concentrating too much on Scott's epic march to the South Pole and to little on the men who made it [...]. In no way can the actors be held responsible for this failure to make the men they portray seem absolutely real [...]. [But given the reservations expressed] [...] every man, woman and child in the British Empire must go and see it» (Dodds 2001, p. 8). The notion that the film represented required viewing for all British and imperial/commonwealth citizens was not so boldly represented in all the reviews. However, it did capture a sense that the human qualities expressed through the character of the men led by Scott were noteworthy and highly relevant notwithstanding the passing of three decades.

Other critics, such as the «Daily Telegraph», were again complementary with regard to the technical qualities of the film but ambivalent on the knotty subject of how to represent Scott and his party's endurance and ultimate sacrifice. As their commentator noted, «Where imagination has filled in the gaps in the written documents 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 emotions as it should ... the story which should have had in a dramatic form the power of a Greek tragedy to move pity and terror, has become on screen just another adventure story, more monotonous than most». One area of concern was the dramatization of Scott's motives and the failure to acknowledge that he faced a Norwegian competitor who appeared to be less prone to failure in equipment and most controversially choice of personnel. This criticism seems a lit-

tle unfair as Scott is shown to be lecturing to audiences around the UK about why the discovery of the South Pole was important in an exploratory and scientific sense. Some of the most controversial elements of the Scott film did concern the competence of Scott's leadership on the one hand and on the other, the errors by others such as Evans and Oates at various stages of the trek to the South Pole.

Ealing Studios, however, and in particular Michael Balcon was more concerned with providing a positive image of Scott and his men rather than concentrate on conflict, tension and possible inadequacy. Other areas of the expedition and exploratory culture more generally were touched upon lightly. One strong illustration is the role of gender relations and the relationship between the men and their wives. This was not something addressed by the critics but it was a feature of Ealing films more generally that women were generally represented in passive roles transfixed in the private space of the home. Women, such as Scott's wife, were depicted as patient, uncomplaining and loyal especially noteworthy when one considers that these men were going to be away from home for considerable periods of time with no means of contact. Scott's party were to be tested by nature itself as opposed to being pressurised by domestic considerations; while the ice might crack, the women left behind were stoical and understanding.

In the United States, the film did not make much impression on audiences. For some American commentators, Scott's demeanour was too stiff and gentlemanly in the face of growing adversity. For others, the film represented 'out-dated cultural values', which did not translate well into a post-war era increasingly characterised by American consumer-led optimism albeit conditioned by growing anxieties of a Cold War involving the Soviet Union and separated by a northerly polar frontier. With that disappointment in mind, Ealing Studios never made another film like Scott and instead concentrated on a series of comedies and satires about wartime and contemporary British life (e.g. *Passport to Pimlico* 1948) rather than looking backwards and filming the adventures of Victorian and Edwardian imperial heroes.

Conclusion

This short essay has reflected on some of the context surrounding the making and reception of Scott of the Antarctic. Francis Spufford in his magisterial book, *I May be Some Time*, writes about Scott in the light of a British enchantment with the Polar Regions more generally. What he teases out from this film is some of the prevailing values and

assumptions about Edwardian polar exploration alongside a broader debate concerning British national identity. In the 1940s and 1950s, films were considered to be important carriers of national values and Ealing Studios' reputation very strongly rested on its ability to represent British people and institutions in a generous spirit. The Scott film was intended to be a fable of manly character, stoical leadership and in general indicative of British national pride. It is not surprising so many children (born during World War II or just before) recall going to the cinema to see Scott of the Antarctic.

And yet, as I have discussed earlier, the film's release coincided with two broader contextual factors. First, in the case of the Antarctic itself, Britain was facing serious challenges to its sovereignty by Argentina and Chile. Territorial claims to the Antarctic (made in 1908 and 1917) were being actively disputed by an Argentine government determined to ensure that a new generation of school children were educated and indeed inculcated with a sense of how fundamental the Argentine Antarctic Territory was to the Argentine Republic. The United States, moreover, was also not inclined to respect the British claim to polar territory and made it clear that it would refuse to acknowledge anyone's claim to exclusive sovereignty in the Antarctic. So a film about Scott, while possibly inspirational to some children, was portraying a world of gentlemanly polar exploration that had disappeared. Private expeditions, sponsored by exploratory societies, were being surpassed by large-scale expeditions led by national navies involving semi-permanent base construction and multiple air-links across the entire polar continent.

The other aspect worth bearing in the mind is that the film was released in the year that the ship *Empire Windrush* docked in London carrying several hundred Jamaican and other West Indian Commonwealth subjects. Britain was changing. The Empire was returning home. So in that sense, the film Scott represented something else – a kind of memorial to something that was ending. A tradition, in other words, of white men exploring vast continents in the name of Kings (and Queen Victoria) and the British Empire. While white men continued to explore the Antarctic in the 1940s and 1950s, and as it happens fight in a series of colonial wars, there were fewer opportunities for such life stories. Or so we thought. And then the Falkland Islands and South Georgia were occupied by Argentine forces in April 1982.

KLAUS DODDS

Royal Holloway, University of London
K.Dodds@rhul.ac.uk

REFERENCES

- Dodds 2002 K. Dodds, *Sceneing Antarctica: Britain, the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey, and Scott of the Antarctic*, «Polar Record» 38 (2002), pp. 1-10.
- Francis 2007 M. Francis, *A Flight from commitment? Domesticity, Adventure and the Masculine Imaginary in Britain after the Second World War*, «Gender and History» 19 (2007), pp. 163-185.
- Jones 2011 M. Jones, *From “Noble Example” to “Potty Pioneer”:* *rethinking Scott of the Antarctic, c. 1945-2011*, «Polar Journal» 1, 2 (2011), pp. 191-206.
- Pringle 1991 T. Pringle, *Cold comfort: The Polar Landscape in English and American Popular Culture 1845-1990*, «Landscape Research» 16 (1991), pp. 43-48.
- Spufford 1996 F. Spufford, *I May be Some Time. Ice and the English Imagination*, London, Faber and Faber, 1996.