



SPQ Module 16 – The Gift of Traditional Knowledge



“In my mind no journey ever made with dogs can approach the height of that fine conception which is realized when a party of men go forth to face hardships, dangers, and difficulties with their own unaided efforts. Surely in this case the conquest is more nobly and splendidly won.”

Robert Falcon Scott

“The English have loudly and openly told the world that ski and dogs are unusable in these regions and that fur clothes are rubbish. We will see – we will see.”

Roald Amundsen

We are all a product of the environment into which we are born and the experiences we accrue, and bear the mark of our people and culture in all endeavors. The above quotes from Scott and Amundsen bear testimony to their cultural heritage and their characters. Scott was a sensitive man who reflected the early 20th century British sense of superiority, idealism and notion of noble purpose. Amundsen by all accounts was a very practical and even taciturn man, not swayed by romantic sentiment.

Compared to the Scott Antarctic expedition of 1910-13, Roald Amundsen’s journey to the South Pole was a low budget affair. Over sixty men manned Scott’s ship the Terra Nova; Amundsen sailed with 25. The British wintered over with a team of 25 men at Cape Evans compared to the Norwegian team of 9 that remained at their base camp on the Bay of Wales. With inferior resources at his disposal why was Roald Amundsen so much more successful than Robert Scott?

This question has long been a matter of debate. Doubtless many factors influenced the outcome of the respective expeditions, some, such as weather were clearly

beyond the control of the leadership. Yet the characters, culture and experience of both men had a profound influence on the outcome of the respective expeditions.



Figure 1: Dog team pulling sledge on Amundsen expedition (Source: "The South Pole" - Roald

Roald Amundsen was a professional explorer who honed his expeditionary skills on years of polar experience, before turning his attention to the South Pole. He was born and raised in Norway, a Nordic country with a long tradition of cross-country skiing and winter living. More importantly Amundsen proved himself open to learning and adopting the traditional knowledge of others. During his trip through the Northwest Passage in Arctic Canada in 1903-06 he spent two years living with, and observing the arctic survival skills of the Netsilik Inuit, while his ship the Gjoa, was trapped in ice. During their stay Amundsen and his crew of six men fully interacted with the Netsilik, adopting Inuit clothing, participating in dog sledding and seal hunting excursions, and sharing their food. These experiences proved to be exceedingly important to Amundsen. While the British were often dismissive of traditional knowledge, Amundsen's willingness to learn from the Inuit and adopt their techniques for his own purposes was central to his success in Antarctica.

The ability to travel great distances in search of food, which principally meant following the migratory routes of animals, was central to the survival of the Inuit. Without dog teams food would have been harder to obtain, and the very survival of Inuit culture would have been at stake. Archeological evidence suggests the relationship between the Inuit and working dogs goes back 1000 years. Early dog sleds were built with whalebone runners, which were later replaced with iron runners with the arrival of trade with Europeans. The use of working dogs is common to all Inuit people other than those in Southern Greenland, although the breeds of dog differed.

Robert Scott made the assertion that using dogs for polar exploration was less noble than man hauling. He did in fact bring dog teams on his expedition, but used them only in a support role. It is questionable whether the Inuit would have survived if they had had to haul their families about on heavy sleds while they chased sources of food. Nobility becomes less of an issue when one's very survival is at stake.



Figure 2: Roald Amundsen in furs in Antarctica (Source: The South Pole by Roald)

Unlike the British team, Roald Amundsen supplied his men with fur clothing on the journey to the South Pole (Scott's men had fur mittens and boots). Amundsen had learned from the Inuit the value of fur, and importance of wearing layers and loose clothing to allow for ease of movement and the evaporation of sweat. Excessive sweating can be very dangerous in a cold environment. Tight clothing has a tendency to absorb sweat, and the collection of moisture in the fabric serve to conduct heat from the body.



Figure 3: Man-hauling on the Scott expedition (Source: Scanned from the book Les Grands Explorateurs).

The British wore deerskin jackets with woolen vests and pants and an outer canvas shell. Although the layering proved a just approach, the clothing did not dissipate sweat very well. During the long arduous days spent hauling their sledges their clothing became wet, and they had limited capacity to dry it out. Damp clothing loses much of its insulating property, and in their diaries the British frequently complained of being wet and cold. Amundsen and his men likely did not sweat as much as the British because their dogs were doing much of the work. Indeed, to Roald Amundsen the most important members of his expedition team were his dogs. Without them he felt the Pole would not have been achieved.

Thus it is evident that the traditional knowledge of the Inuit was instrumental in enabling man's first successful expedition to the South Pole. The lessons of the Inuit continue to influence modern day explorers with their use of loose breathable clothing.

Dog teams are no longer permitted in Antarctica, having been banned in 1990 to protect the wildlife. Current day expeditions that do not employ motorized vehicles must return to man hauling as a means of transportation. Fortunately for teams like Ray, Richard and Kevin that reach the South Pole, they are not obligated to turn around and haul their sledges back to their base camp like Robert Scott, for they can now catch a plane flight home.



Figure 3: Dog on Scott's expedition listening to gramophone (Source: Scanned from the book Les Grands Explorateurs).