

# IS POLAR EXPLORATION WORTH WHILE?

BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

THE death of Captain Scott and his associates has excited world-wide sympathy. The manner in which he and they met death, as shown in the record he left behind him, is beyond praise. As always in such a case, there is a tendency to try to find some one who is to blame, and there is a still further tendency to question whether the expenditure of gallant and useful life was repaid by what it was hoped might be accomplished. Both tendencies are natural, but neither is useful.

As for the first, the tendency to find fault, it is well for the men who plan and lead such an expedition to be critical in their dealings with those who at any point fail to meet the very serious responsibilities that rest upon them. But no good purpose whatever is served by ignorant public discussion of the alleged shortcomings. In any expedition such as this there are bound to be unforeseen difficulties of every kind, and it is often absolutely impossible for the outside public to say whether a failure is due to some lack of forethought on the part of those engaged in the expedition, or to causes absolutely beyond human control. There is not and cannot be certainty in an affair of this kind—probably there cannot be certainty in any affair, but above all in what by its very nature is so hazardous. The slack or rash man is much more likely to fail than the man of forethought, but the hand of the Lord may be heavy upon the wise no less than upon the foolish.

There remains the question as to whether

the great risks and hazards are warranted by the end sought to be achieved. I emphatically think they are warranted. This, however, is hardly a matter which can be settled by argument in such shape that it shall satisfy every one. People who greatly dread hazard or greatly disapprove of it, and who are not interested in knowledge as such, will naturally disapprove of taking even a small risk for widening at any point the domain of knowledge save where immediate and tangible remuneration is to follow. Naturally, such people, who are often very good people but who possess limited imaginative power, will never be appealed to by the men who prize life as a great adventure, the men who in one age first crossed the Atlantic, first sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, and first passed the Straits of Magellan and circumnavigated the globe; the men who, in another age, first penetrated to the North and South Poles, who first crossed Africa, or who found their way for the first time to the forbidden city of the Dalai Lama. The difference is largely based upon difference of temperament, and argument can never reconcile wide temperamental distinctions. Personally, I hold that it is a fine thing for our civilization to produce the Pearys and Amundsens, the Scotts, Stefanssons, and Shackletons, the men of daring nature and lofty spirit whose purpose is:

“To follow knowledge like a sinking star  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.”

“To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars.”

Courage, hardihood, shifty self-reliance and unshifting fixity of purpose—surely these are great traits to be shown by the individual; traits of which the nation producing the individual should be proud.

This is not to say that all exploration in the future should be like polar exploration in the past. It was highly desirable from the standpoint of geographical knowledge that we should know what the Poles are like. A decade ago we did not know. Now we do. We know that the North Pole is a sea covered, perhaps all the time, by ice. We know that the South Pole, on the contrary, is a great mountain eleven thousand feet high, a high point on the huge plateau of the great Antarctic island-continent.

The contrast in life between the Arctic and Antarctic regions is very striking. The Antarctic continent is a vast snow-covered mass of land, absolutely lifeless except for the life of whale and seal, penguin and gull, on the fringes. This is a most interesting life for the naturalists. The leopard seal is as fierce as the great spotted cat of the tropics from which it takes its name; and there are other seals, fat, good-humored, helpless, who, unless cruelly undecieved, treat men merely as friendly strangers, objects of mild curiosity only. The penguins never touch dry land and never know warmth. They pass their whole lives upon the ice and in the icy water. The emperor penguin, standing erect on its two flippers, is almost as tall as a short man. But this life, though interesting, is limited. There are no mammals, and no man has ever dwelt there nor visited it save as explorers visit it. There has never been any permanent human habitation even on the fringe of the Antarctic.

All this is reversed in the Arctic region. There is an abundant life stretching very far towards the Pole, and probably there are some representatives of this life which occasionally stray to the Pole. Both in the water, and on the ice when it is solid over the water, and on the land, in the brief Arctic summer when the sun never sets, the Arctic regions teem with life as do few other portions of the globe. Save where killed out by men, whales, seals, walruses, and innumerable fish literally swarm in the waters; myriads not only of water birds but of land birds fairly darken the air in their flights; and there are many strange mammals, some of which abound with a plenty which one would associate rather with the tropics. The

strangest of these mammals, the musk-ox, has a history which for a quarter of a million years has been associated with the history of man. Somewhere in the remote past—it is impossible to tell within a hundred thousand years, but perhaps a quarter million years ago—the musk-ox, with many other strange beasts, dwelt in what is now France and Germany, and was there preyed upon by men whose carvings on bone and ivory show that they were in much the same cultural stage which the Eskimos have reached to-day. As the climate grew warmer, and as their human foes developed better weapons, the musk-oxen retired northward, and then, abandoning the Old World entirely, found their last refuge in the frozen lands of North America. They have not been in Europe since long before early Neolithic men first made their smooth stone implements and their pottery in what is now England and France, and built their huts on driven piles in the lakes of Switzerland and North Italy. These musk-oxen, which once lived in what is now Ohio and Kansas, just as they once lived in England and France, have followed the retreating glacial ice belt toward the Pole; and there, in the immense desolation of the North, they still dwell side by side with men, the Eskimos, whose culture is at the same stage of development as that of those inconceivably remote ancestors of ours who hunted the musk-ox when it was still a beast of the chase in mid-England.

From all this it will readily be seen that there is much more of interest to be found around the North Pole than around the South Pole. There are very interesting problems of geography, geology, and zoölogy yet to be worked out at the North Pole. The problems are fewer in the Antarctic. Yet they exist there also. There is no particular point in visiting either Pole again, no particular reason for another "dash" toward either Pole; but there is ample room for extensive, unquestionably toilsome, and even dangerous scientific work. Only the boldest, hardest, and best-equipped men can undertake such work. These men must do it at hazard of their lives. Fortunately there remain plenty of men of the same fine type as gallant Captain Scott, whose name is now added to the long honor roll of those men who "do and dare and die at need" in working to increase the bounds of knowledge and wisdom, and to extend our acquaintance with the world upon which we dwell.