



THE FACES OF SECOND PLACE. ROBERT FALCON SCOTT AND THE TERRA NOVA POLAR PARTY AT THE SOUTH POLE IN ANTARCTICA IN JANUARY 1912. THE PHOTO WAS TAKEN BY HENRY 'BIRDIE' BOWERS, WHO USED A PIECE OF STRING TO OPERATE THE CAMERA SHUTTER. PHOTO: ALAMY

The Cabin

The unlikely journeys of an Antarctic hut.

THE FAWN-COLOURED, THREE-BY-FOUR HUT PERCHED ATOP GODLEY HEAD IS NEAT AND UNASSUMING. IT SITS QUIETLY, OVERLOOKING THE PACIFIC AND THE KAIKOURA RANGES, BUT IF WALLS COULD TALK, THESE ONES MIGHT JUST CHEW YOUR EARS OFF. THIS CABIN HAS BEEN TO ANTARCTICA AND BACK, WEATHERING RELOCATIONS, HEARTBREAK AND MORE THAN ONE EARTHQUAKE.

The structure was one of four prefabricated tongue-and-groove cabins built in Norwich for Robert Falcon Scott's 1910 - 1913 Terra Nova expedition. It would be his second journey to Antarctica. The first, in 1901, saw him take the ship *Discovery* the furthest south to date. This time, he hoped to be the first human to stand at the South Pole, and, as a British naval officer, hoist the Union Jack. The journey, however, became a race when Norwegian Roald Amundsen decided at the last minute to change his own course from the North Pole to the South; Amundsen had just been beaten to the North Pole by the American expedition that included Matthew Henson, Robert Peary, and the Inuit explorers Ooqueah, Ootah, Egingwah and Seeglo.

Until a world war took precedence, the Western media of the early twentieth century was dominated by a race to be first: the first to reach Antarctica, the first to stand at the North and the South Poles, the first to traverse great icy landmasses. The men who took part - whether in the name of patriotism, science, fame or obsessive flag planting - were the rockstars of their time.

Blanketed in darkness for a winter that stretches from April to October, and ruled by massive, destructive icebergs, Antarctica is about as inhospitable as they come. Scott's base for exploring it? Christchurch. The garden city is one of just five international Antarctic gateways - that is, with direct access to the South Pole. Back in the heyday of Antarctic exploration, this was the place to be. The city is peppered

with relics (including streets bearing the names of Kinsey, Wilson, Scott and Shackleton, among other explorers), but few are so charming, and sad, as the humble hut known as Scott's Cabin.

The cabin was meant to be a meteorological research hut, which explains its rooftop observation platform. Dr George Clarke Simpson had been granted leave from his post at the Imperial Meteorological Office in Simla, India, to serve as expedition's meteorologist. Stationed at Cape Evans, he sent balloons up (just like NASA does today) to monitor weather conditions for the Pole attempt. But before Simpson had the chance to set up and work from the hut, a cholera outbreak at the Met Office in Simla saw him recalled back home.

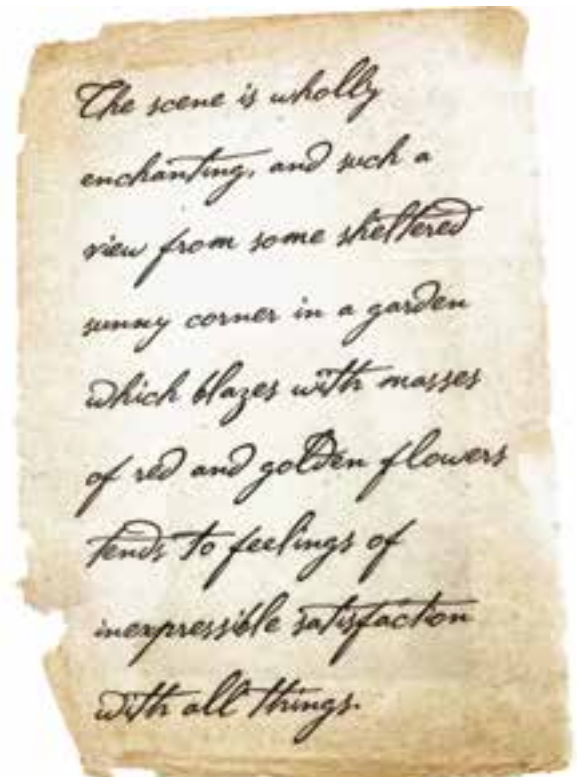
With no meteorologist to use it, the cabin was dispatched, still in its wrapping, back to Lyttleton. From here, it was hoisted up to Clifton Terrace, which overlooks what is now the seaside village of Sumner, and installed in the garden of fellow explorer Joseph Kinsey's summer house. It soon became a watering hole and crash pad for Antarctic explorers and their posses. This was fitting. Before his departure on the Terra Nova, Scott had written fondly in his diary about Kinsey's garden: "The scene is wholly enchanting, and such a view from some sheltered sunny corner in a garden which blazes with masses of red and golden flowers, tends to feelings of inexpressible satisfaction with all things."

On November 28, 1910, the eve of the Terra Nova's departure, *The Christchurch Press* reported on the confident and modest spirit of the crew, writing, "that spirit comes from Captain Scott, who is one of the most modest and retiring of men, but who possesses the rare

quality of getting the best possible work from his subordinates."

Scott's expedition did not go well. The Norwegians, whose team included highly-skilled skiers and a team of dogs from Greenland, beat the Brits to the pole by a month. Meanwhile, Scott's party was plagued by storms, injuries, illness and hunger - and, modest or not, by an Imperial worldview that eschewed using animals for the final push, favouring instead the more stoic technique of man-hauling and suffering with a stiff-upper-lip. They died on their way back, perishing just 11 miles from their final food depot.

Scott kept writing until his frozen fingers could no more. His last, upper-lipped, diary entry is dated March 19, 1912: "We are weak, writing is difficult, but for my own sake I do not regret this journey, which has shown that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another, and meet death with as great a



FEELINGS OF INEXPRESSIBLE SATISFACTION.
PHOTO: GEORGIA MERTON



SCOTT'S CABIN. PHOTO: GEORGIA MERTON

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fortitude as ever in the past.” The news took a year to reach the outside world.

The cabin and its surrounds, perched over the arid hills and windswept coastline near Christchurch, became a bittersweet place. Scott and his wife Kathleen had spent their last days and nights together at the Kinseys’. She was on a ship back to New Zealand with their little boy to greet Scott when she heard the news.

Meanwhile, Oriana Wilson, the wife of Scott’s right-hand-man, Edward ‘Bill’ Wilson, lived in the cabin for a year while waiting for the reunion that would never come, and thus it came to be nicknamed “Bill’s Cabin”. Others called it “Scott’s

Cabin” or, simply, “The Cabin”. It then went on to house the dog handler from the Terra Nova expedition, Demetri Gerof, and Scott’s “best sledge dog”, Osman the Siberian husky. When Gerof eventually left, Osman went to a zoo.

Many winters later, in the seventies, Scott’s Cabin and the property it stood on were bought by Valerie and David Crichton. Enamoured with the history, teak floors and Baltic pine cladding, the Sumner couple kept it in good nick, and used it as a study - until the quakes hit. In September 2010, the little hut became part of a new history, providing shelter for the Crichtons as the first Christchurch earthquake rocked their house. The hut survived the February 2011

quake, too, but the cliff-top property did not. Shortly thereafter, the Crichtons vested the hut with the Department of Conservation.

So began the cabin’s next journey, this time, with any luck, to where it will live out the rest of its life on terra firma. On February 27, 2013, almost exactly a hundred years after the Terra Nova arrived back in Lyttelton bearing its tragic news, The Cabin was hoisted and trucked south of the city to the lofty hills of Godley Head. There, it stands today, windows facing hopefully out to sea.

GEORGIA MERTON