

Forgotten Adventurer – A Life of Apsley Cherry-Garrard
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“To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.” Thus the inscription engraved on the cross in memoriam to Captain R. F. Scott, Lieutenant Henry Bowers and Edward Wilson reads, twelve and a half miles south of One Ton Depot on the way to the South Pole, situated atop of a cairn covered in snow. Beneath lie three Antarctic explorers, adventurers and respected individuals, men whom Apsley Cherry-Garrard was honoured to call friends.

What were the circumstances of Cherry-Garrard’s background prior to his involvement in Antarctic expeditions?

Born 2 January 1886 at 15 Lansdowne Road, Bedford, England, Cherry-Garrard was the first offspring of his parents, the fifty-three year old Colonel Apsley Cherry and the twenty-eight year old Evelyn Cherry (nee Sharpin). Colonel Cherry, a man who had fought with merit in India and China for the British Defence Forces, inherited the estates of his brother and aunt, when they died shortly after each other. The only condition to owning the estates, which included land, money, houses and heirlooms, was that the Colonel had to take on the Garrard name and arms. Thus the name Cherry-Garrard entered into existence.

Throughout his childhood, Cherry-Garrard enjoyed his own company and at the age of seven was sent away to Grange Prep School in Folkestone, Kent. Cherry-Garrard was next sent to the elite educational institution of Winchester College. Following this, Cherry-Garrard attended Christ Church (an Oxford College) to read Classics and Modern History. This degree saw him develop an insightful yet intellectual writing style, that eventually produced an epic tale of both personal and historical value.

In what way did Cherry-Garrard enter his expedition (1910-1913)?

A true conservative, Cherry-Garrard found himself torn between the split of the old and the new England which was quickly appearing before him. While staying at his cousin Reginald Smith’s estate in Scotland through the autumn of 1908, Cherry-Garrard met Edward Wilson, a natural scientist who had previously been on Scott’s 1901-1904 *Discovery* expedition. A committed Christian, Wilson immediately took the impressionable Cherry-Garrard under his wing, and Cherry-Garrard respected Wilson’s intellect, his selflessness, and his desire to complete the tasks he had started. In the *Discovery* expedition Wilson had been amazed by the Emperor penguins, but due to uncontrollable conditions, he never received the chance to properly study them. He vowed to return to Antarctica and complete his research.

The first beginnings of plans had been produced between Scott and Wilson and the latter had informed Cherry-Garrard of these. Cherry-Garrard posted an application to Scott to be considered as a crew member on his upcoming expedition. Wilson was unequivocal in his support, but Scott was looking for scientists. Reggie gave his young cousin valuable advice. Apparently another man, Oates, had paid one thousand pounds to the expedition, and suggested Cherry-Garrard try the same. He

did so, submitting a donation to the expedition. But Scott rejected him anyway. Not at all bitter, Cherry-Garrard insisted that the donation should stand, and Scott, admiring this noble trait, revised his decision (with no doubt a little encouragement from Wilson) and on Wednesday 27 April 1910, Apsley Cherry-Garrard became the youngest member of the British National Antarctic Expedition, in the role of assistant zoologist to Wilson.

The steamer *Terra Nova* left on 1 June 1910 and set sail for Antarctica. The sense of comradeship evident on the *Terra Nova* extended into the Antarctic and for once Cherry-Garrard (immediately renamed Cherry) felt that he belonged. He built solid, loyal and unquestionable friendships, with Wilson and Bowers, renamed Birdie. These two men were to haunt him for the rest of his life.

What was his stay in Antarctica for and what did he achieve in Antarctica?

After reaching the Antarctic Circle, Scott had anticipated a landing at Cape Crozier, but a lack of a suitable place to dock saw them alight near McMurdo Sound, in a place christened Cape Evans.

The crew began frantically working in order to set up quarters for the twenty-five men who were to remain behind for the winter. However Scott, by this time aware of the Norwegian Amundsen's close proximity, was desperate to set up depots on the way to the South Pole, before winter set in. Cherry participated in this endeavour, gaining the reputation of an excellent sledder.

But the primary purpose for Cherry was assistant zoologist and Wilson wanted to visit the flightless Emperor penguins. Wilson and Cherry believed them to be the most primitive bird on earth, and thus it was thought their embryology could explain the link between birds and reptiles. But as the three men Wilson, Bowers and Cherry prepared to leave, Scott wrote in his journal, "this winter travel is a new and bold venture, but the right men have gone to attempt it."

Travelling on sledges, the men found the conditions harsh. The horrors of the nineteen days it took to reach Cape Crozier were indescribable, with Cherry often thinking how easy death would be. A major problem, according to Cherry was lack of sleep that often saw them stumbling into each other as they fell asleep while marching. Arriving at Cape Crozier on 15 July, the three men battled -77 degree temperatures, beginning the process of building an igloo and after collecting five eggs from the Emperor penguin rookery, the men returned to this igloo.

But sleeping that night, the men were soon to realise the meaning of the word endurance. The canvas roof of the igloo blew off in the night, as did their tent, set up as a lee-way into the igloo. They lay in the dark, singing or praying and thumping each other, for a reflex reaction was the only way they knew each other was still alive. After surviving weeks in dark, cold conditions that previous men had only been able to withstand for a few days, it seemed cruel to die in such a way.

But the blizzard eventually settled, and the men set out on a search for the tent, discovering it not far from the igloo. Miracle that it was, Cherry recorded, "our lives had been taken away and given back to us. We were so thankful we said nothing."

The return march, quickly decided upon, began. Cherry applies a great deal of credit to Wilson for all of their survival, for his undivided attention to Cherry and Bowers, checking for signs of the dangerous frostbite. He did all that he could to alleviate the sufferings of his men.

Arriving at Cape Evans on 1 August, thirty-five days after setting out, the winter journey had not achieved its scientific ends, despite all of the atrocities. But in terms of achievement outside of science, the winter journey can be seen as a moral and symbolic journey, captivating both the contemporary public of the time and many generations after with its heroic theme. As Cherry later wrote, “If you march your Winter Journeys you will have your reward, so long as all you want is a penguin’s egg”, recognising that although the feat was heroic, it was futile in all other purposes.

Returned from the “worst journey in the world”, Scott realised his mistake in allowing three of his best sledgers to perform such a dangerous, futile, scientific exploit. Wilson, Bowers and Cherry barely had time to recover before they began preparing for the journey to the South Pole, which was to take place once the snow was suitably hard for the ponies. The first polar party set out on 24 October, but after marching 575 miles, Scott told Cherry he was to be returning to Cape Evans as a member of the second-to-last party to return, due to his extremely poor eyesight and his exhaustion.

Back at Cape Evans, Atkinson decided he would remain as a doctor and send Cherry as leader of a dog team to accompany Dimitri to One Ton Depot, to hurry Scott and his men home. Cherry, who had never navigated or driven dogs before, had to sledge 150 miles on the featureless Barrier, with winter closing in, to reach the Depot. Before he left, Atkinson warned Cherry that under no circumstances were in any of the dogs to be harmed. When they arrived at One Ton Depot the weather was terrible, with swirling snow disallowing any chance of continuing further south, on top of which they were quickly running out of dog food, plus Dimitri was not coping well with the cold, and his whole right side was virtually paralysed. After remaining at One Ton Depot for six days, Cherry made the decision to return home, to save the dogs and Dimitri.

But here lies the crux of the problem. The conflicting orders given by Scott had both parties confused about Cherry’s purpose. Both Atkinson and Cherry believed that Cherry was supposed to encourage the men home, so as to quickly spread the news that they had reached the pole. But Scott and his men were now relying on the dog team to bring them precious food and fuel to save them. But Cherry was not to know that sixty miles south his best friends were perishing of hunger and lack of fuel and he undoubtedly made the correct decision.

Returning once again to Cape Evans, as the weeks rolled past Cherry was forced to admit that his friends had probably died. On a search journey, a crew member discovered a tent twelve miles south of One Ton Depot. Inside were the frozen bodies of Scott, Wilson and Bowers. Collecting Wilson’s and Bower’s diaries, Cherry found the uplifting notes he had laid out at the depots on his return to Cape Evans for Wilson and Bowers inside Wilson’s trouser pocket. Cherry’s treasured book, *Ulysses*, was also retrieved, which he gave to Wilson’s widow, Orianna. The crew collapsed the tent, covering the bodies, and built a cairn over it, with a cross made out of skis marking the spot where the adventurers lay. Returning home to England to face his depressed future, Cherry realised that it was a fitting end to the men he had come to know and love, especially Wilson, whom he aspired to emulate, and wrote, “Wilson sets a standard of faith and work... We have missed him ever since he died. But you must find him: his voice, it is a quiet voice, is for those who listen... and he will live in many hearts. “

What is the significance of his achievements and why was he important to the development of knowledge in the Antarctic continent?

Back home, Cherry was either praised or denounced for his role in Antarctica. Some said he could have prevented the tragedy, while most sensible people realised this was not possible. But Cherry, always anxious, could never accept his decision, and alternately blamed himself, Scott or Evans for his friends' demise. Out of all the living explorers the Antarctic had the most profound impact on Cherry, as he was obsessed with the topic for the rest of his life.

But perhaps the most redeeming feature of Cherry was the book that he wrote, titled "*The Worst Journey in the World*". At first supposed to be an official record of the expedition, Cherry instead wrote a piece of prose that was at once intensely personal and a memoir of his and his comrades' adventures. A captivating read, *The Worst Journey* provided Cherry an outlet for his grief, and gave him a tangible goal on which to focus. Through his sensitive nature, Cherry had an amazing ability to portray weaknesses of character in a human light, without detracting one piece of the man's personality and, as a critic wrote, he understood what drove men to take risks. Particularly in Scott, Cherry found a target. But his aim was not to ruin Scott's reputation, rather to allow the public to see that even Scott had his faults, and that the 'ideal hero' that England so badly craved did not exist.

But most literary critics adored his work, and he received many reviews such as: "It would be more seemly to salute such a book with the ancient greeting of the Roman, standing with outstretched, uplifted arm in silent admiration of the great men and great deeds recorded."¹

In 2001, *The Worst Journey*, was voted best book ever in the category of history/travel in America. Decades and generations after it was written, *The Worst Journey* still provides a sincere account of the events, a truthful analysis of the people and a tale which unfolds in both an informative and emotional manner.

What was his place within the 'Heroic period' of Antarctic history?

As regards Cherry's place in the 'Heroic period' of Antarctic history, Cherry remains one of the few explorers yet to be discovered to any real extent. Yet, as an experienced old explorer once said, just because he is not famous does not make his story any less worthy of the telling. In his own way, Cherry was typical of an old-time English hero: sensitive, quiet, gentlemanly and loyal to a fault. These qualities, whilst being a direct antonym to the conditions of Antarctica, saw Cherry become a favourite among the men, his selfless attitude and willingness to complete even the most menial of jobs, assured him a place in their hearts. Unlike Scott, Shackleton or Amundsen or Oates and Crean, Cherry was never viewed by his contemporaries as exceptionally important, and even in today's modern times, there is a tendency to brush him off as a rich, privileged snob who bought his way into the expedition. This could not be further from the truth, as Cherry took part in all of the major journeys of the expedition. Cherry did cement his place in the Heroic period through his courage under pressure, his steadfastness and his ability to understand why his comrades made the decisions they did.

Explorer, gentleman, scientist and environmentalist, Cherry did enjoy all of the luxuries afforded him by his estate. Yet he would have given it all away, readily, eagerly, in order to retain his best friends for life, Wilson and Bowers. Instead, he faced the difficult task of returning to a life without them in it, a cold, hollow thought

¹ Bookman critic

for this highly-strung man. Yet through his determination, it is clear to see that Apsley Cherry-Garrard was an Antarctic hero, and he considered himself blessed to have been a member of the British National Antarctic Expedition 1910-1913. Cherry concluded his tale with the following words, a fitting reminder of what was lost and magnificently gained during his journey through Antarctica:

“For we are a nation of shopkeepers, and no shopkeeper will look at research which does not promise him a financial return within a year. And so you will sledge nearly alone, but those with whom you sledge will not be shopkeepers: that is worth a great deal.”²

² Sara Wheeler, *Cherry: A Biography of Apsley Cherry-Garrard* (Published: Jonathan Cape, Great Britain, 2001), p.218.