

## THE GREAT WHITE SILENCE

HERBERT G. PONTING, GREAT BRITAIN, 1924

Screening: Saturday 21 April, 3:30pm



Images courtesy of bfi Stills, Posters and Designs

The race to the South Pole in 1910 is one of those great national stories – we all know how Captain Robert Falcon Scott and his companions met their tragic end after being beaten to the Pole by the Norwegian Roald Amundsen. The subject has spawned a vast literature and acquired considerable baggage, so it comes as some relief to be able to return to the primary sources: the words of the men themselves, the real objects – and best of all the actual film footage taken on the expedition.

The centenary of the British Antarctic (*Terra Nova*) Expedition 1910-13 has triggered a range of activities centred on just such authentic stuff – the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, which celebrates and builds on the expedition's scientific legacy, has just opened its new museum to display original artefacts from the expedition. These include an actual letter by Scott that was retrieved from the tent by the rescue party after his death and the very sleeping bag used by Captain Oates. There is an embarrassment of online riches including all of the expedition's photographs' and Scott's Diaries. In Antarctica itself the expedition's hut is being preserved exactly as it was left a hundred years ago. Central to this centenary reappraisal is the BFI National Archive's res-

toration of *The Great White Silence* (1924), another original artefact; Herbert Ponting's film record of the expedition.

Scott's decision to include a cameraman in his expedition team was a remarkable one for its time, and it's thanks to his vision – and to Herbert Ponting's superb eye – that we have this astonishing visual account of his tragic quest.

The film captures the journey to Antarctica aboard the *Terra Nova*, life in camp, the indigenous wildlife – seals, killer whales and (of course) penguins – the landscapes and ice formations. Most remarkably, though, it records the men themselves happily preparing for the journey to the Pole, demonstrating how they will cook and eat and sleep in their tent on their three-month walk through the frozen wastes. Scott, Wilson, Bowers and Evans sit around showing off their reindeer-hide sleeping bags, smiling and chatting over pemmican hoosh (a stew made of dried meat and melted snow). These are the very men who would die on the journey, in the very tent that would become their tomb.

Ponting left the expedition, taking his precious films with him, just after the men started their long trek to the Pole. It was a remarkable achievement for the veteran photographer, considering the newness of cinematography and the sub-zero conditions in which he was working. The news of the death of Scott and his party two years later, and the huge outpouring of national grief that followed, elevated Ponting's work from reportage into the documentation of a legend. It's no exaggeration to call it a national treasure.

The film was sent to the BFI National Film Archive for preservation in the 1940s, after having been edited into different forms over

### CAST

Robert Falcon Scott -  
*Himself*

Herbert G. Ponting -  
*Himself*

With a Newly  
Commissioned  
Score by Simon  
Fisher-Turner

CREATIVE  
ENGLAND

Picture  
house  
ARTS  
CAMBRIDGE

DE MONTFORT  
UNIVERSITY  
LEICESTER

the years: first into newsreel, then, after Scott's death, into an illustrated lecture. Ponting himself re-edited the footage in 1924 as a narrative, introducing intertitles as well as incorporating his own stills, maps, portraits, paintings and animated models.

The primary aim of the archive's team was to restore the beautiful tints and tones of the original footage, while using the latest technology to render the most detailed, highest-resolution picture possible. The results are exceptional. Lending a vitality to the polar landscape, the original tints were not intended to reproduce natural colours, but rather to suggest lighting effects – time of day, bright sunlight on snow, the purple and pink of the midnight sun, even the texture of a seal's skin. Details in the image – barely visible before – are now clear and sharp. The individual members of the expedition are recognisable, and you can even catch something of their character which for polar enthusiasts will prove a revelation.

Notes compiled from Bryony Dixon's *Sight & Sound* article of November 2010, and also Bryony's liner notes for the DVD/Blu-ray restored release of the film.



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