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Elizabeth Leane

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Abstract

Antarctic exploration in the 'Heroic Era' (the early twentieth century) is often represented as the last gasp of British imperialism – an attempt to occupy empty, uninhabited and more-or-less useless territory at a time when the rest of the empire was beginning to crumble.¹ Of British Heroic-Era exploits, three stories in particular preoccupy the present popular imagination²: Robert F. Scott's ill-fated journey to the Pole with his four companions, as famously related in his posthumously published journal; a slightly earlier journey to Cape Crozier by three of Scott's expedition members in search of Emperor penguins' eggs, as told by Apsley Cherry-Garrard in a chapter of his 1922 travel memoir *The Worst Journey in the World*; and the story of Ernest Shackleton's Imperial Trans- Antarctic Expedition, in which his ship, *The Endurance*, was imprisoned and later crushed by ice, leaving the men to survive on ice-floes and a subantarctic island.

ELIZABETH LEANE

Eggs, Emperors and Empire: Apsley Cherry-Garrard's 'Worst Journey' as Imperial Quest Romance

Antarctic exploration in the 'Heroic Era' (the early twentieth century) is often represented as the last gasp of British imperialism — an attempt to occupy empty, uninhabited and more-or-less useless territory at a time when the rest of the empire was beginning to crumble.¹ Of British Heroic-Era exploits, three stories in particular preoccupy the present popular imagination²: Robert F. Scott's ill-fated journey to the Pole with his four companions, as famously related in his posthumously published journal; a slightly earlier journey to Cape Crozier by three of Scott's expedition members in search of Emperor penguins' eggs, as told by Apsley Cherry-Garrard in a chapter of his 1922 travel memoir *The Worst Journey in the World*; and the story of Ernest Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, in which his ship, *The Endurance*, was imprisoned and later crushed by ice, leaving the men to survive on ice-floes and a subantarctic island.

Each of these stories has its own reception history throughout the twentieth century. Scott's reached its peak of prominence at the time of its first appearance in 1913, in the wake of the explorers' deaths, and has provoked controversies, revisions and backlashes ever since. Shackleton's, which emerged in the midst of World War I, was no rival to Scott's until recent decades, when the tale of the *Endurance* experienced a renaissance of popularity, with the Anglo-Irish explorer held up in 'how to' management guides as a brilliant leader. Only Cherry-Garrard's story of 'the weirdest bird's-nesting expedition that has ever been' (240), which forms the structural centre of *The Worst Journey in the World*,³ has kept a strong, steady reputation. *The Worst Journey* has appeared in numerous editions throughout the century, and is frequently acknowledged as a classic both of Antarctic exploration and the wider genre of travel writing.⁴ Yet, while Scott's polar journey has been an increasingly popular subject within literary and cultural studies of recent times, with a number of analyses intent on interrogating his legend in the light of new political viewpoints, particularly those influenced by gender and postcolonial theories (see for example, Moss 2006; Bloom 1993; Wylie 2002a, 2002b; Spufford 1996; Pegg 1993), and Shackleton has also begun attracting attention in this context (for example, Farley 2005), *The Worst Journey in the World* has been largely ignored by literary critics. This essay offers the beginnings of a cultural analysis of this text, focussing on the closely intertwined

narratives — imperial, scientific, and literary — that coalesce around three penguins' eggs in Cherry-Garrard's account of the world's worst journey.

The sledging expedition that has become known as the 'Winter Journey' or simply the 'Worst Journey' took place during the first winter of Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition, and consisted of a round-trip of over two hundred kilometres from the base hut at Cape Evans on Ross Island to the Emperor penguin colony at Cape Crozier. The expedition team consisted of the young, short-sighted Cherry-Garrard, who had been appointed assistant zoologist; Edward Wilson, the expedition doctor, chief scientist and artist; and the indomitable Henry 'Birdie' Bowers, a naval lieutenant.



Figure 1. Bowers, Wilson and Cherry-Garrard beside their sledge, prior to their departure for Cape Crozier. Photographer: Herbert Ponting. Copyright: Scott Polar Research Institute.

The explicit aim of the five-week journey was scientific — to collect embryos from Emperor penguins' eggs — but it also had a practical side-benefit in the lead-up to Scott's assault on the Pole, which commenced shortly afterwards. The three men existed on separate diets to discover empirically which combination of fat, carbohydrate and protein was best suited to polar exploration. The journey was, then, at least from Scott's perspective, itself a form of scientific experiment. Two of the men — Wilson and Bowers — went on to be members of the polar party, and thus to die on the return journey. Cherry-Garrard survived the expedition to chronicle both journeys — the attempt on the Pole and the attempt to retrieve the eggs — in his famous book.

A useful way of approaching the narrative of the Cape Crozier expedition is to compare it to the far longer polar journey. An ostensible point of difference between the two endeavours is the purpose of each. Scott's polar journey was one of territorial exploration undertaken — publicly, at least — for the glory of nation and empire. While it is true that the expedition as a whole had serious scientific aims — even on the way back from the Pole the desperate, dying men dragged around sixteen kilograms of geological specimens with them — Scott had stated in his first public announcements that his primary aim was reaching the Pole (Crane 397). His disappointment at being forestalled by Roald Amundsen's Norwegian team makes it clear that national and personal priority was a highly important factor. The Winter Journey, by contrast, was explicitly scientific in aim. No new territory would be covered: Wilson had collected eggs from Cape Crozier before, but only an embryo in the right stage of development — that is, one retrieved in the darkness of winter — was suitable for his purposes. Following nineteenth-century biologist Ernst Haeckel's influential theory that ontology recapitulated phylogeny, and believing the Emperor penguin to be the most primitive bird on Earth, Wilson thought that its embryo could reveal the evolutionary link between reptiles and birds. And for Wilson, personally, intense scientific curiosity was very likely sufficient motivation for the undertaking. But, as numerous critics have observed, science and empire are not so easily disentangled. Imperial control is closely linked with the scientific objectification of the colonised, whether this be a people or a landscape and its fauna. The collection and display of exoticised objects, including those relating to natural history, is a way of deploying and displaying power, and was a strategy that Britain made ample use of at its imperial height:

The acquisition of objects from areas of the world in which Britain had colonial or proto-colonial political and military interests, and the ordering and displaying of them by a museum which was a part of the British state, formed ... a three-dimensional imperial archive. The procession of objects from peripheries to centre symbolically enacted the idea of London as the heart of empire. (Barringer 11)

Cherry-Garrard's story ultimately tells of such a procession (although one with an ambiguous ending befitting its historical position at a point when the British Empire was past its apogee and about to suffer an irrecoverable blow). Thus, while the polar journey (retrospectively at least) seems to foreground imperialism, and the Winter Journey science, in both endeavours these two contexts are inextricably linked.⁵

A more striking difference between the two journeys lies in the physical nature of the goal that each expedition hoped to achieve. Both had an obvious geographical aim: to reach the Pole and return, in Scott's case, and to retrieve the eggs from Cape Crozier in Cherry-Garrard's. But the Pole, as many have pointed out, was in some senses a non-goal. It was marked by nothing (or so Scott's men hoped), and was only identifiable by careful measurements and calculations; it

was the lack of such that made Robert Peary's claimed conquest of the North Pole in 1909 a subject of dispute. The South Pole is, as science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson observes, 'a kind of no-place, a blank on the map. No reason to be here except for the abstract fact of the spin axis of the planet, which was a pretty strange reason once one thought about it. Ridiculous in fact' (231). Scott's men faced terrible disappointment at being beaten to this nothingness, and ended up dying as a result of their efforts. Cherry-Garrard and his companions at least had a material object — several, in fact — as the goal of their journey. They ended up gathering five penguin eggs and although two broke on the return trip, they were able to bring the others back to base, and later to London, as a concrete sign of their success. This points to another difference in the two stories: their outcomes. Scott and his companions perished horribly, whereas the *Winter Journey* — despite being identified as 'The Worst Journey in the World' by Cherry-Garrard, Scott and hosts of later readers — ended happily, with the safe return of the three men, complete with eggs.

These points of comparison and contrast mean that the events of the two journeys fit neatly into the narrative patterns of two pre-existing literary genres: the tragedy and the imperial quest romance. At the outset, admittedly, both journeys presented as polar variations on the second of these genres. Robert Fraser, in his outline of the imperial quest narrative, points to its early origin in transcultural myths of 'male protagonists who ... set out with a team of picked companions' to recover a prized object, such as 'a golden fleece, or the skin of some fabulous animal' (5), and the influence of 'certain key features of traditional legends' including 'an onerous journey across uncharted regions, the reaching of the goal, the conquest, a withdrawal' (6). Drawing on the work of Andrew Lang, he identifies the important elements of the genre in its late Victorian manifestation — 'the band of companions devoted to one another; the common code of chivalry; the quest for a fabled source of wisdom; forbearance; virility; fighting' (7) — and adds his own criteria: the team of adventurers are 'usually amateurs', although 'the nature of their enquiries has to do with the harnessing of technical and exclusive disciplines' (16). Furthermore, the wisdom they seek is linked to the 'sources of humanity itself' (76). With certain elements interpreted metaphorically — there are few specific external foes to be fought on these Antarctic voyages, except the environment itself — both journeys display clear resonances with this genre.

The imperial quest romance was highly popular in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, and no doubt informed and reinforced both the public's and the men's own conception of their actual endeavours (Cherry-Garrard's favourite authors were Kipling and Conrad [Seaver lxix]). As Graham Dawson observes, while the adventure quest is a form of fiction, it can nonetheless 'be seen to furnish imaginative resources and a mode of subjective composure that may be drawn upon in a living engagement with real circumstances of risk and challenge'. But real circumstances mean that there is 'no guarantee of closure...

Where in practice such an “adventure” ends in disaster and defeat, it will not be narratable as an adventure quest but will give way to the narrative pattern of irony or tragedy’ (56). This is exactly what happened in the case of the polar journey. As Carl Murray has observed, ‘a quest narrative transform[ed] ineluctably into tragedy’ (180) when the well-known events of the journey transpired: the various problems with weather, surfaces and supplies that plagued the expedition, the men’s realisation that they were not the first to the Pole, the terrible trials of the return journey and the eventual death of all of the team members. Murray notes that later chroniclers of the story, including Cherry-Garrard, constantly reinforced its reading as a tragedy both explicitly and implicitly through references to ‘fate’ and ‘hubris’, but shows that the basic events in themselves conformed remarkably closely to the established elements of the Greek tragedy (195–208). And many elements which the polar journey initially appeared to share with the imperial quest romance have been eaten away by the controversies and revisions which have dogged the polar journey in the hundred years since it was undertaken: various commentators have, for example, challenged the assumption that Scott’s companions were devoted to each other, suggested their apparent displays of forbearance (such as Lawrence Oates’s famous sacrificial suicide) were coerced, and questioned the overall worth of their undertaking.

The Winter Journey, by contrast, is striking in the way its events adhered to conventions of the imperial quest romance throughout the entire undertaking. The journey was certainly romantic in purpose — a perilous search over extremely hostile territory for the eggs of an exotic, remote creature — a piece of ‘some fabulous animal’. Although the team were largely composed of amateurs (neither Bowers nor Cherry-Garrard had any formal scientific qualifications, and neither had experience of polar sledging expeditions prior to joining Scott), the knowledge they sought — the evolutionary link between reptiles and birds — related both to a specialised disciplinary debate and to the broader question of origins. The trek was undertaken under the most testing possible circumstances — in the dead of winter, in complete darkness, with temperatures reaching down to around -60°C . The three questors suffered many trials, such as the loss of their tent during a particularly windy spell, and were also at times rewarded with miraculously good luck, including the re-discovery of the tent. The journey had none of the realistic messiness and retrospective controversy of Scott’s polar journey, with its rivalry for places in the polar party and later accusations of incompetency; according to Cherry-Garrard, he and his two companions were unflinchingly civil and cheerful throughout their trials (251, 279, 302), and later commentators have revealed no evidence to the contrary. Lastly, as I have said, the journey was successful, as opposed to Scott’s narrative of noble failure.

This success was, admittedly, later qualified by a different kind of failure: the failure of the eggs to yield any information of scientific interest. But before addressing this aspect of the ‘Winter Journey’, I would like to deal with a prior

question: just what was it about the Emperor penguin that made the retrieval of its eggs in the dead of winter vital enough to risk three human lives in the first place? In literary terms, what exactly is the sought-after knowledge that motivates this imperial quest romance? Cherry-Garrard gives an initial explanation in his lead-up to the story:

it is because the Emperor is probably the most primitive bird in existence that the working out of his embryology is so important. The embryo shows remains of the development of an animal in former ages and former states: it recapitulates former lives. The embryo of an Emperor may prove the missing link between birds and the reptiles from which birds have sprung. (240)

But this begs the question of why the Emperor was considered ‘the most primitive bird in existence’. Recent events have conspired to make the modern researcher sceptical about the tendency to project diverse qualities onto this particular animal: in the wake of the film, *March of the Penguins*, conservative Christian groups in the USA claimed the Emperor as the model of proper parenting and proof of Intelligent Design. The blockbuster animation, *Happy Feet*, seemingly reacting against its predecessor, held it up as a paradoxical symbol of the power of individualism within conformity, and a poster-child for environmental protection.⁶ What assumptions did a culture steeped in imperial quest romances project onto this unsuspecting bird?

A couple of critics have had a stab at this in passing. Patrick Morrow, in a coda to his *Post-Colonial Essays on South Pacific Literature*, observes that ‘the explorers guessed very wrong on the Emperor Penguin eggs as being “truly primitive”, (a common mistake for a Colonizer when faced with “the other”, be this human or beast)’ (151). Tom Griffiths, in *Slicing the Silence*, also suggests that the assumption may have been grounded in culture as much as science: ‘The primitive lurked in the wastes of Antarctica for Edwardian explorers.... Like indigenous peoples encountered by voyagers around the world, the Emperors were seen to be a doomed “race”, noble savages of a kind, destined to die out because they were a relic of past ages’ (222, 235). This comment rests on a logic familiar to postcolonialists, a process identified variously as ‘allochronism’ (Johannes Fabian’s term) or ‘anachronistic space’ (Anne McClintock’s) in which an analogy is drawn between spatial and temporal difference: ‘colonized people ... do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographical space of the modern empire.... Atavistic, irrational ... the living embodiment of the archaic “primitive”’ (McClintock 30). The process can apply to animals as well as people. The thylacine is a case in point: Robert Paddle, in *The Last Tasmanian Tiger*, notes the way in which this animal was classed by early twentieth-century commentators as a one of the world’s most primitive creatures, cut off from the evolutionary progress of the rest of the world (205). And in Antarctica, a continent lacking human inhabitants, animals structurally take the place that indigenous peoples occupy in other imperial contexts. Just as

the latter tend to be naturalised by colonial invaders, to be categorised not under culture but together with the natural environment as something to objectify and conquer, the former may be projected further down the supposed evolutionary ‘ladder’ than is strictly warranted.

But why, of all Antarctic creatures, and of all birds, should the Emperor be the particular bearer of the ‘most primitive’ label? Certainly there was early confusion about whether penguins were birds or fish, but this was true of all species of penguin. The Emperor’s name suggests if anything regality, and the cliché of the penguin as a tuxedoed man — the epitome of upper-class civility — was familiar and often used by Heroic-Era explorers, who sometimes quite literally confused distant groups of Emperors (the tallest of the penguin family) with their fellow expeditioners. Cherry-Garrard himself terms Emperors the ‘most aristocratic inhabitants of the Antarctic’ (xxix). There are other Antarctic animals whose outward appearance from a human perspective better suits them for the ‘most primitive’ award, as anyone who has seen — or heard or smelled — an elephant seal up close will testify.

The history of human encounter with Emperors sheds little light on this point. Penguins were first seen by Europeans around the turn of the sixteenth century (Sparks and Soper 152), but Emperors, an almost exclusively Antarctic species, were not spotted until about three hundred years later. The latter part of their scientific name, *Aptenodytes forsteri*, stems from a German naturalist, Johann Reinold Forster, who travelled on James Cook’s Antarctic journey of the early 1770s together with his son Georg (Simpson 34–35). The Forsters described and drew what was later thought to be an Emperor, although it was more likely a King (Müller-Schwarze 119–21; Sparks and Soper 179). The first Emperor specimen was caught in 1820 by the Russian explorer Thaddeus von Bellingshausen (Masson 14), and several were brought home (some pickled in barrows) by James Ross during the British expedition of 1839–43 (Ross 159). George Robert Gray, a zoologist on Ross’s voyage, identified the new species in 1844 using the retrieved specimens, mistakenly identifying them (probably mistakenly) with Forster’s drawings — hence the scientific name. While subantarctic penguins became more familiar to the British in the later nineteenth century, with the first birds (Kings) arriving at the Zoological Gardens in Regent’s Park, London, in 1865 (Martin 78, 86; Palmer), knowledge of the birds continued to be very limited over the next decades (Rivolier 89). Their common name seems to have been well-established established by the 1880s (Weinecke 2010, 271), but no one knew anything about where or when their eggs were laid, or how their chicks developed. An important artefact was in fact available: an Emperor’s egg, found sitting on an ice floe, was retrieved by a French expedition in 1838, and sold as part of a larger collection to an Englishman in 1845 (Walter 5; Wilson 28).⁷ There was no way of confirming its provenance, however, and it sat in a collection in Norwich for the next fifty years. In 1905, it was finally identified by Wilson, who by this time had been to

the Antarctic on Scott's first expedition, sledged to the first identified Emperor penguin rookery at Cape Crozier and brought back a number of Imperial eggs of his own. But Wilson had visited the rookery only in the comparatively tolerable conditions of the Antarctic spring; the eggs he found were deserted and he was not able to obtain embryos early enough in development to tell him anything startling in evolutionary terms. When the chance came to go south again, he was eager to clear up the mystery: 'The possibility that we have in the Emperor penguin the nearest approach to a primitive form not only of a penguin, but of a bird', he wrote in 1907, 'makes the future working out of its embryology a matter of the greatest possible importance' (31).

Wilson's remark about the Emperor's primitive nature comes at the end of a thirty-page report on the bird that gives no explanation for this assumption. It is surprisingly difficult to trace the source of his scientific reasoning on the matter. In an 1836 essay, influential palaeontologist Richard Owen had observed in penguins 'an interesting affinity to the *Reptilia*' (270; online); this, along with corroborating evidence from two other authors, is remarked on in the zoology report from the 1873–76 Antarctic *Challenger* expedition, which in turn considers penguins to be of 'considerable antiquity' (Watson 231) and notes that 'the opisthocœlous character of the dorsal vertebræ' is 'more truly reptilian than avian' (Watson 233). In 1887 M.A. Menzbier proposed that penguins had 'gradually evolved from reptiles independently of other birds' (Sparks & Soper 137). R.W. Shufeldt, writing in 1901, is convinced of the 'low morphological rank' of penguins, which he terms an 'extremely old' suborder, but he does not single out the Emperor in this context (390). In fact, it is difficult here or in any other of the contemporary ornithological literature to find any reference to the primitiveness of the Emperor in particular — unsurprisingly, given that so little evidence of the species was available prior to Scott's *Discovery* expedition. William Plane Pycraft's report on evidence brought home by this expedition (published in the same volume as Wilson's report cited above) points to some aspects of penguin anatomy that indicate primitiveness (25), but also states that 'penguins are [in a certain respect] less primitive than has been supposed' (2), and debunks the myth that penguin feathers are scale-like (and hence support a connection between birds and reptiles), which he considers a product of 'slovenly observation' (3–4).⁸ A newspaper report on a lecture Wilson delivered to the Royal Institution in early 1905 also makes no mention of the bird-reptile link. According to Scott, Wilson was more forthcoming in a presentation delivered at the expedition's base hut before the journey, mentioning feather arrangement, wing muscles, feet structure and fossil evidence (194). Having investigated the literature, Douglas Russell (2009), a curator of birds at the Natural History Museum in Tring where Cherry-Garrard's eggs now reside, notes that Wilson's views about the antiquity of the family *Spheniscidae* (penguins) echoed Haeckel's, and that his selection of the Emperor in particular as the most primitive was based on head plumage colour characters.

This complex background, however, is in no way evident to the reader of Cherry-Garrard's narrative or any of its numerous retellings. The basic explanation that Cherry-Garrard provides for the Emperors' primitiveness is that they live in the far south. He notes it is still an 'open question' whether or not penguins are 'more primitive than other non-flying birds' such as the ostrich and the rhea, some of which are 'hanging on to the promontories of the southern continents, where there is less rivalry than in the highly populated land areas of the north'. If penguins are indeed primitive, he continues, 'it is rational to infer that the most primitive penguin is farthest south', indicating the Emperor and the Adélie (579) — the two penguin species that breed only on the Antarctic continent (Shirihai 44). Of these, it makes sense, he suggests, to look towards the less numerous and successful — the Emperor — for primitiveness (579). Given the arduousness of the enterprise it is designed to justify, this reasoning seems weak: ostriches are hardly 'hanging onto southern promontories'; and, even in Cherry-Garrard's day, it was well-recognised that successful adaptation did not necessarily imply increasing sophistication or complexity, an observation that fuelled contemporary anxiety about 'degeneration'. Why then should Cherry-Garrard assume that a successful species must automatically be less primitive than a less successful one?⁹ Whatever Wilson's rationale for believing in the Emperor's primitiveness, Cherry-Garrard can only give a confused, unconvincing version of the issue he asserted 'might be of the utmost importance to science' (274). He was himself trained in classics rather than science, and one has to assume that he risked his life, and experienced what he characterises as the most trying journey in the world's history, simply on faith — or that, indeed, he very much needed there to be some special prize at the end of the quest he undertook, not a blank space on the map.

Cherry-Garrard's emphasis on southerly locations suggests that, whatever scientific reasons existed at the time for the incorrect assumption of the Emperor's primitiveness, they were reinforced not only by the logic of anachronistic space, but also by the sense that the far southern regions and their inhabitants are especially vulnerable to the state of being 'frozen in time'. This is due to a combination of factors: the temporal anomalies that occur at high southern (and northern) latitudes, the sense that the southern regions of the Earth are temporally 'behind' the northern,¹⁰ and the association of ice with preservation in time.¹¹ This logic certainly manifests itself in the numerous 'lost race' romances set in the southernmost continent. Fictional Antarctica, particularly in the early twentieth century, is occupied by Neanderthals, Cro-Magnon Men and dinosaurs (Leane 2009). Its far southern position, distant from populated northern centres, its isolation within rough southern oceans, and its icy, preserving climate all made it perfect for these fantasies in which extinct species were preserved alive. The Emperor penguin (along with the Adélie) lives and breeds further south than any other bird.¹² The Antarctic was in this sense the ideal place to set an imperial quest romance, a genre in which, Fraser (along with Patrick Brantlinger [1988])

notes, the atavistic nature of the discovered object is key. The apparent scientific motivation for the Winter Journey cannot then be easily separated from the imperial culture which enabled it.

This reading is strengthened rather than weakened by the coda to the ‘Winter Journey’ in which Cherry-Garrard relates the bathetic conclusion to his sublime endeavour. ‘And now’, he writes at the end of his long chapter, ‘the reader will ask what became of the three penguins’ eggs for which three human lives had been risked three hundred times a day, and three human frames strained to the utmost extremity of human endurance’ (304). The action flashes forward to the Natural History Museum in South Kensington in 1913, with Cherry-Garrard dramatising his encounter with museum staff, reporting the conversation accurately ‘in spirit’ if not verbatim. He initially encounters the ‘First Custodian’:

‘Who are you? What do you want? This ain’t an egg-shop. What call have you to come meddling with our eggs? Do you want me to put the police on to you? Is it the crocodile’s egg you’re after? I don’t know nothing about no eggs. You’d best speak to Mr Brown: it’s him that varnishes the eggs’. (305)

This lower-class diatribe is then replaced by a cool and officious response from the Chief Custodian, who dismisses Cherry-Garrard perfunctorily, ignoring his request for a receipt.

Although Cherry-Garrard eventually receives his receipt, on a later visit to the museum with Scott’s sister he is initially told that no eggs are in the museum’s possession. This is corrected, and he eventually learns that they are being examined by a Professor at Edinburgh University, with whose underwhelming report the chapter concludes. Cherry-Garrard also chose to conclude the wider narrative of *The Worst Journey* with reference to the eggs:

Exploration is the physical expression of the Intellectual Passion.

And I tell you, if you have the desire for knowledge and the power to give it physical expression, go out and explore. . . . Some will tell you that you are mad, and nearly all will say, ‘What is the use? 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 good deal. If you march your Winter Journeys you will have your reward, so long as all you want is a penguin’s egg. (597–98)

No scientific results from the study of the Emperor embryos appeared until 1934, when C.W. Parsons reported that they were of no great significance — certainly not the missing link that Cherry-Garrard’s narrative anticipates.

As an imperial scientific expedition, the Winter Journey was rendered a failure by the museum’s refusal to appreciate or acknowledge — let alone exhibit — the eggs. The culmination of the imperial urge to control through collection was typically display. As McClintock writes, ‘the middle class Victorian fixation with origins, with genesis narratives, with archaeology, skulls, skeletons and fossils — the imperial bric-a-brac of the archaic — was replete with the fetishistic

compulsion to collect and display'. The museum became 'the modern fetish-house of the archaic' (40). With the Natural History Museum's failure to live up to its end of the imperial bargain, Cherry-Garrard's story ends in defeat as much as Scott's — a defeat not from the elements, nor even the march of scientific progress, but from a 'nation of shopkeepers' which no longer recognised the kinds of heroic acts that both Scott and Cherry-Garrard undertook. The passage provides a fitting end to *The Worst Journey in the World* as a whole, as the memoir is frequently read as a lament for a society and a way of life that its author believed had irrevocably disappeared in the wake of the First World War.

However, as an imperial quest romance rather than a report on a scientific expedition, the *Winter Journey* remains a success. The difference here is that the most important thing that the quester brings home from his adventure is not a material object — although this may support his case — but the story itself. Imperial quests are, like Cherry-Garrard's, frequently framed by a mundane narrative of the departure and/or return of the adventurer/s from the centre of civilization (usually London): an outer narrative that contextualises and lends credibility to the inner adventure narrative, and often explains how the latter came to be written and published. This inner narrative can itself take the form of an artefact, such as a manuscript published on the insistence of a friend or relative, or recovered after the adventurer's death.¹³ The testimony of the adventurer then itself becomes the quest's most important result.

Although Cherry-Garrard's ironically identifies the 'reward' of his imperial quest narrative as an essentially useless object ('a penguin's egg'), like fictional narrators he implicitly acknowledges the worth of his quixotic endeavour by the space and energy he spends relating it. Those who first received the story of the *Winter Journey* immediately recognised the value of this narrative *qua* narrative. Only weeks after the expeditioners returned, Scott commented that, while Wilson was 'disappointed at seeing so little of the penguins ... to me and to everyone who has remained here the result of this effort is the appeal it makes to our imagination as one of the most gallant stories in Polar History. ... It makes a tale for our generation which I hope may not be lost in the telling' (259).¹⁴ The story, for Scott, was more important than its outcome; and Cherry-Garrard chose Scott's comment for an epigraph to the *Winter Journey* chapter. More recent commentators agree with Scott: Frances Richard writes that 'though the trekkers keep up the premise of a scientific rationale for their journey, it quickly becomes a kind of existential fiction, a Godot or a MacGuffin to give shape to their travail and keep them going on when they can't go on' (online). Although this is easily said from the vantage-point of the early twenty-first century, when biological knowledge has progressed, it is nonetheless applicable to the internal logic of Cherry-Garrard's original story: the *Worst Journey* was scientifically under-motivated, and in this sense its much-quoted anti-climatic ending — the journey back to the centre of civilisation, the Museum — seems retrospectively fitting. Yet as an imperial quest



Figure 2. The eggs retrieved by Cherry-Garrard, Wilson and Bowers, now held in the Natural History Museum at Tring. (Ref. 22824) Collection: Natural History Museum Picture Library.

narrative, it is not anti-climatic at all, because the tale itself has garnered the appreciation ostensibly due to the eggs.

The eggs which Cherry-Garrard, Wilson and Bowers retrieved from Cape Crozier are still held by the Natural History Museum. Its website notes that '[t]he embryos for which so much had been risked contributed little of scientific importance', but '[t]he three eggs and the remains of the embryos nevertheless have immense historic importance as the goal of the incredible journey and the struggle for survival in the appalling conditions of the Antarctic winter' (online). Where the three eggs once justified the Worst Journey, the Worst Journey now justifies the continued preservation of the eggs. Scott presciently realised that the worth of the journey lay in its narrative: the eggs are important not as specimens, but for their structural function in a now-famous tale. While science and imperialism are inescapable and intertwined discourses lying behind Cherry-Garrard's Worst Journey, its primary value is, in the end, literary.

NOTES

- ¹ The situation was, unsurprisingly, much more complex than this generalisation suggests: Britain along with other established imperial Western powers such as France and Belgium certainly mounted expeditions, but the desire to explore the far south stretched to nations with very different histories and contexts. Japan launched an expedition under Nobu Shirase; Norway, then a newly independent nation with no colonies of its own, attained the goal of first to the South Pole; and the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) saw itself both as representing the British Empire and establishing a special relationship between the newly federated Australia and its southern neighbour. See Innes for an analysis of the Shirase expedition that critiques the tendency to overstate national context in the analysis of ‘Heroic-Era’ exploration; and Leane (2005) for a discussion of the AAE’s ambivalent national position.
- ² Although different nations have developed their own favoured Heroic Era epics (Mawson’s solo trek to the AAE base hut in 1913 is Australia’s most famous), accounts of these British exploits in particular are popular amongst polar enthusiasts beyond Britain itself. For example, the only two primary texts that US bestselling science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson points his readers towards in the acknowledgements to his novel *Antarctica* are Frank Worsley’s *Shackleton’s Boat Journey* (an account of the latter part of the *Endurance* expedition) and ‘above all else’ *The Worst Journey in the World* (562).
- ³ The journey to Cape Crozier occupies the longest chapter — 76 of 598 pages in the Picador Travel Classics edition — of *The Worst Journey*, which is itself an account of Scott’s expedition published more than ten years after the events it describes. The Cape Crozier expedition, rather than the assault on the Pole, is the ‘Worst Journey’ referred to in the book’s title (304).
- ⁴ *The Worst Journey* is the founding volume of the Picador Travel Classics series, which in itself can be read as part of an attempt to establish a ‘travel writing canon’ (Hollard & Huggan 238, 205). The *Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* singles out *The Worst Journey in the World* as the example of polar exploration writing which is often seen as ‘consolidating the qualities’ of the genre (Hulme & Youngs 7). *National Geographic Adventure* magazine selected it as the greatest adventure book of all time in a list published in 2001 (‘Top 10’ F02).
- ⁵ Jones (2003) includes detailed analysis of the complex ways in which discourses of imperialist and scientific endeavour were woven around Scott’s expedition.
- ⁶ See Leane and Pfennigwerth (forthcoming 2011) for a discussion of the representation of the Emperor in these films.
- ⁷ Kept in Drayton Hall, Norwich, before being donated to Norwich Castle Museum (Walter 5) and eventually acquired by the Scott Polar Research Institute, this object is now known as the ‘Drayton egg’.
- ⁸ It is, of course, difficult for a non-specialist such as myself to assess and interpret ornithological literature of the kind cited here. However, T.W. Glenister, summarising Pycraft’s report in 1954, states that Pycraft concluded that ‘the skull of *Pygoscelis* [this genus includes the Adélie, Gentoo and Chinstrap penguins] was more primitive than that of *Aptenodytes* [the Emperor and King penguins]’ (1). Glenister states that early data on the embryology and development of all species of penguin is scarce, and cites Pycraft report as the first to detail Emperor penguin embryology (1, 3).
- ⁹ The problem may have hinged partly on the word ‘primitive’. In biology (now and in Wilson’s time), ‘primitive’ life-forms are those that relate to or represent ‘an early

evolutionary stage' (*OED*); in more general discourse, the word also has (and had) connotations of 'simple, basic, rudimentary; unsophisticated, crude' (*OED*) which the scientific usage does not necessarily imply (Wienecke 2011). Wilson would have been cognizant of this distinction; Cherry-Garrard and his readers may not have.

- ¹⁰ Tarak Barkawi writes that 'One of the most pervasive ways of seeing the world is in terms of a distinction between an "advanced", modern world — the global "North" — and a "backward", underdeveloped world, the global "South"... The distinction is ... temporal, in that the South is considered historically "behind" the North' (101–102). Roxanne Doty likewise identifies 'abstract binary oppositions' that 'frame our thinking' about the North-South relationship, including 'developed/underdeveloped', 'core/periphery', and 'modern/traditional' (2).
- ¹¹ See Leane (2009) for further discussion of 'Antarctic temporality'.
- ¹² As the Adélie breeds in the summer, however, knowledge of its embryology was far more readily obtained, and thus did not present the allure of the unknown that the Emperor signified.
- ¹³ H. Rider Haggard's seminal imperial quest romance, *She* (1887), provides a good example. The frame narrative is written not by one of the adventurers but by the book's editor, whom the reader is encouraged to identify with Haggard. A letter addressed to him explains that the adventurers, having departed on another long and potentially dangerous journey, did not want to deny their account to the world. The manuscript is the most significant of several corroborating objects (ancient documents and artefacts) supporting the tale.
- ¹⁴ These words bear some similarity to one of Scott's most famous phrases, written nine months later in his dying 'Message to the Public': 'Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell ...' (422).

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