

Photo: Ramsey and Muspratt

THE SCOTT POLAR RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Just forty years have passed since Captain Robert Falcon Scott and his four companions died while returning from the South Pole. The journey and end of these men is a story which has probably stirred Britons more than any other peacetime event in centuries. They rallied nobly to Scott's last appeal to "see that those who are dependent on us are properly provided for", and the Captain Scott Memorial Mansion House Fund soon reached a total of £76,500 for disposal by its trustees.

When the Mansion House Fund had fulfilled its dual task of providing for dependents and of publishing the scientific reports, there still remained a sum of £13,000 set aside as a "Polar Research Fund". It was at this time, in the early 'twenties, that Frank Debenham, later Professor of Geography in the University of Cambridge, put forward proposals which sprang from discussions towards the end of 1912 with two other members of the Antarctic Expedition: Raymond Priestley, until recently Vice-Chancellor of Birmingham University, and Charles Wright, who later became Chief of the Royal Naval Scientific Service. Debenham showed convincingly that often the hard-won experience of polar expeditions in the past had been lost when their members dispersed, and that the techniques of life and travel in cold regions had been inadequately

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recorded. Each expedition had had to learn these techniques anew, rarely profiting from the experience of others, and in this way valuable time and even lives had been lost. To ensure that future expeditions might fully profit from the lessons of their predecessors, and that techniques might develop upon the sure basis of recorded experience, Debenham proposed the foundation of a centre or institute for polar research. It was at once recognized that a foundation of this nature, which would preserve continuity in research rather than give spasmodic help to expeditions, would admirably conform to the aspirations, both national and scientific, which Scott and other members of the expedition held so firmly.

In November 1920 the Council of the Senate of Cambridge University gave formal approval to the proposal to establish a polar research institute in Cambridge, and the institute found its first home in an attic room in the Sedgwick Museum of Geology. Finally, in 1925, the Trustees of the Captain Scott Memorial Research Trust transferred the Trust to the Chancellor, Masters, and Scholars of the University of Cambridge for the erection, endowment, and maintenance of an institute which might serve both as a memorial to the Polar Party and as a centre for the study of the polar regions. So the Scott Polar Research Institute was established. A Committee of Management was appointed by the Senate of the University, and Professor Debenham became the first Director, a post which he held with great distinction until 1946.

In the 'twenties and even more in the 'thirties there was intense interest in arctic exploration among undergraduates of Oxford and Cambridge, stimulated first by the leadership of George Binney at Oxford and James Wordie at Cambridge, then by Priestley's lectures in Cambridge and Debenham's enthusiasm as director of the youthful Institute. Much voluntary help was available. Books, maps, equipment, and records were amassed, and in 1927 the Institute moved from the Sedgwick Museum to Lensfield House, where a museum and library were formed. Public appreciation of the Institute rapidly developed and the need for a permanent building became obvious. The Pilgrim Trust therefore generously enlarged that portion of the original endowment which could properly be set aside for building, and in 1934, before a distinguished company of scientists and explorers from many different countries, Mr. Baldwin, Prime Minister and Chancellor of Cambridge University, opened the new building.

In its memorial and symbolic aspect the design by Sir Herbert Baker was much influenced by the late Dr. Hugh Robert Mill. Built of pale primrose brick with stone facings, the building is surmounted by a roof balustrade bearing the inscription *Qaesivit arcana Poli videt Dei* ("He sought the secrets of the Pole, he now sees those of God"). A bust of Captain Scott, modelled by his widow, Lady Kennet, is set over the main entrance. This entrance leads into a vestibule, on both sides of which the ceiling rises to a shallow dome. These domes each contain a coloured diagrammatic map by Macdonald Gill, one depicting the arctic and the other the antarctic regions, encircled by names of leading explorers of all nations who mapped those parts of the polar regions opposite their names. The marble floor below is set with stars in

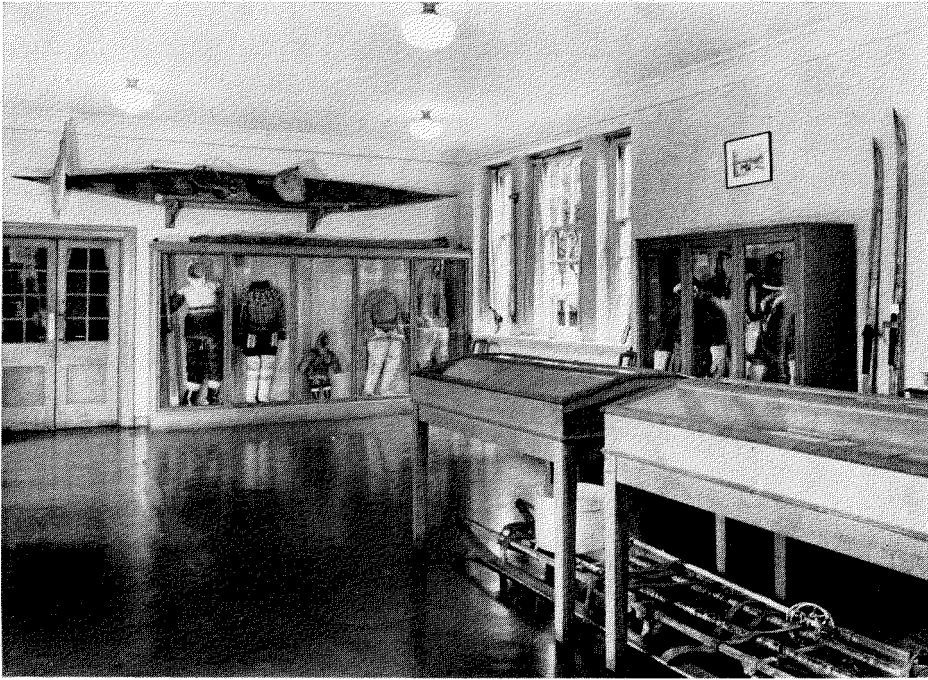


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The museum, showing the Eskimo and Lapp exhibits. The sledge and cooker are relics of Captain Scott's last expedition.

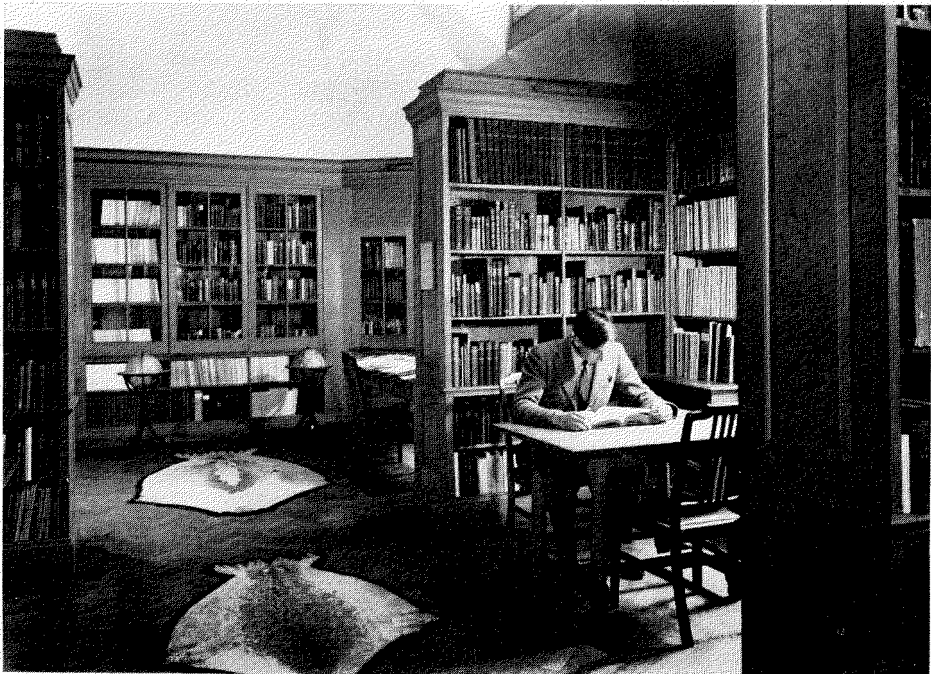


Photo: Ramsey and Muspratt

The library.

the form of the polar constellations, the Great Bear and the Southern Cross. The hall contains relics of Scott's last expedition including some of his final letters, Wilson's prayer book, Oates's sleeping-bag, and other articles brought back from the tent in which the Polar Party died. The vestibule leads into the museum hall, the contents of which are arranged to teach, by means of evolutionary series, the development of particular items of equipment, and to draw attention to current activities in the polar regions. There is also a section illustrating Eskimo and Lapp clothing and equipment, and examples of native art and culture. In addition to the museum there is a picture gallery, on the top floor of the building, where Dr. Wilson's water-colour sketches and drawings, of which there are more than 700 in the Institute's collection, are exhibited.

The collection of books, periodicals, scientific reports, photographs, and maps rapidly expanded and the Second World War demonstrated the value of the Scott Polar Research Institute as the repository of geographical, historical, and technical material not readily available elsewhere. The Institute provides facilities for research workers to prepare their reports, and a small staff gives help to enquirers. Although the Institute undertakes no formal teaching activities within the University, lectures are given during term by persons engaged in polar work of many different kinds. The *Polar Record* has been issued twice a year since 1931 to report on current activities and to record developments in technique and research in the arctic and antarctic regions.

The Institute's post-war growth in size and responsibility has been impressive, at first under the directorship from 1946-9 of the Reverend Launcelot Fleming, formerly chaplain and geologist of the British Graham Land Expedition of 1934-7. When Fleming became Bishop of Portsmouth he was succeeded by the present director, Dr. Colin Bertram, formerly zoologist of the British Graham Land Expedition.

The Institute is supported financially by the original endowment remaining from the Lord Mayor's Fund, by the subscriptions of the Association known as the "Friends of the Polar Institute", by the contribution of the Dominion Governments and their Agencies, but mainly by the British Treasury, whose interest since the Second World War has demonstrated the country's realization of its polar commitments and its need for specialist knowledge.

Thus the tragedy of forty years ago is commemorated by a growing Institute and an ever-increasing fund of knowledge on the polar regions.