



THE ROYAL COLLECTION TRUST

The Heart of the Great Alone: Scott, Shackleton and Antarctic Photography

Herbert Ponting and the *Terra Nova* expedition

We shall have a cinematograph and photographic record which will be absolutely new in expeditionary work
Scott, 1913, vol.1, p.148

When Herbert George Ponting (1870-1935) joined the British Antarctic Expedition aboard *Terra Nova* in 1910, it was the first time an official photographer was included in a polar expedition. The images he produced were not only a conscientious record of the expedition but also outstanding artistic studies of wildlife and landscape.

Ponting was introduced to expedition leader Captain Robert Falcon Scott by the English adventurer Cecil Meares, who was in charge of the dog teams on *Terra Nova*. A well-known and successful travel photographer, Ponting had been covering the Russo-Japanese War when he met Meares on board a steamer bound for Shanghai in 1905. He was interested in polar exploration and four years later was signed up by Scott to join his latest venture. He took two film cameras and several still cameras to the Antarctic. His most frequently used camera was one he had specially adapted to take 7 x 5in (178 x 127mm) glass-plate negatives.

Ponting began photographing his surroundings as soon as the ship left New Zealand. The Antarctic summer months were spent taking as many photographs as possible. Ponting spent the winter months developing his negatives and giving lectures to the men, showing slides of his work from Japan and examples of his current Antarctic work. He also taught photography to other members of the team. As it was impractical for a professional photographer to be part of the final Polar party, Ponting stayed behind, but his tuition ensured that the push to the Pole would be documented and would provide valuable evidence of the achievements of Scott's team.

Ponting's images are today inextricably linked with the memory of the men who died on that journey and have done much to sustain the story of Scott. Ponting produced many portraits of the men at work and more formal character studies, such as that of Scott writing his journal in the hut. He also made a large number of wildlife studies, from close-ups of comical Adélie penguins, such as *The 'Glad Eye'*, to Weddell seals basking in the sun.

It is the landscapes that capture and convey Ponting's own emotional response to his surroundings. Some views, such as *Midnight in the Antarctic summer*, have a conventional, picturesque composition, without any hint of the danger that exists in the region. Colour is an important element of Ponting's work. Of the ice grotto that was the location of one of his most famous images, Ponting wrote:

From outside, the interior appeared quite white and colourless, but once inside, it was a lovely symphony of blue and green. I made many photographs in this remarkable place – than which I secured none more beautiful the entire time I was in the South.

Ponting's experience of publishing his work in magazines and newspapers gave him an eye for strong graphic images. In *The ramparts of Mount Erebus*, Ponting captures the immensity of the landscape and contrasts the enormous ice cliff with the tiny human figure and sledge at the lower left corner.

Ponting wrote of the difficulties of working in such cold temperatures. He learnt that cameras had to be left outside otherwise they would become covered in condensation when brought into the warmth. The negative plates, which were stored outdoors with chemical stocks, had to be brought inside gradually to prevent them from cracking in sudden temperature changes. The biggest problem was frostbite, as it was almost impossible to manage the equipment without having to use bare fingers at some point. Ponting wrote:

My tongue came into contact with a metal part of one of my cameras, whilst moistening my lips as I was focussing. It froze fast instantaneously; and to release myself I had to jerk it away, leaving the skin of the end of my tongue sticking to my camera.

On his return to London in 1912, Ponting began to prepare his photographs and film footage for public display. Like the rest of the world, he was unaware of the deaths of Scott and his Polar party until February 1913. Devastated by the tragedy, he felt obliged to lecture and display his work as widely as possible to keep the memory of the five men alive. After the successful publication of his book, *The Great White South*, in 1921, he devoted much of the rest of his life to ensuring that the photographs and the film were seen. Film extracts were shown to British troops during the First World War to encourage selfless devotion to the Nation. The photographs were also widely circulated around the world as postcards.

Scott and Ponting had not established a proper agreement over the use of the photographs, the copyright of which belonged to the expedition for two years. Scott's death saw Ponting lose control of his work, as others began making deals to sell the rights of his photographs. Profoundly affected by his Antarctic experience, he subsequently undertook very little new work.