At two points in the “heroic” period of polar exploration, one at its peak in the middle of the nineteenth century and the other marking its close on the eve of the First World War, two scenes present stark contrasts between survival and tragedy. The first scene, probably in the spring of 1846 (Beattie and Geiger 1987, 38), has been only sketchily reconstructed from eyewitness accounts. British sailors from an expedition attempting the Northwest Passage to the Pacific, wearing poorly insulated clothing (tight canvas jackets and leather boots), drag twenty-foot boats over the ice of Victoria Strait, in the vicinity of the North Magnetic Pole, toward what they think of as civilization. They are dying—starving, freezing, and, as we now know, disoriented from lead poisoning due to carelessly soldered canned provisions from London (Beattie and Geiger 1987, 156—60) and in an advanced stage of scurvy (Beattie and Geiger 1987, 56). Lieutenant Francis Crozier, leading these forty survivors after the death of the expedition’s leader, Sir John Franklin, begs food—both by sign language and using what he thinks is the Eskimo word for seal—from four Eskimo families. The Eskimos, by contrast, are better fed because they know how to hunt the sparse game of the region and have food traditions that preserve maximum nutrition, even scarce vitamin C. The next morning, the Eskimos seemingly reverse their hospitable treatment and depart, leaving the sailors to their fate. It is probable that “the thin resources of that part of the Arctic would not support the four families and a party of forty men, and the Eskimos knew it” from tradition and experience (Lopez 1986, 380).

Sixty-six years later, at the other end of the world, another scene of starvation and failure is played. Attempting to return from the South Pole, Captain Robert F. Scott and his two remaining companions, Lieutenant Henry Bowers and Dr. Edward Wilson, also starving and freezing and
probably, like Franklin’s men, suffering from scurvy, are awaiting their deaths in a blizzard-engulfed tent eleven miles south of a depot that would have saved them. Their sledge, which they have been “man-hauling” on foot, carries thirty extra pounds of geological specimens, among them a plant fossil which is later to play an important part in “building the ... originally derided ... theory of continental drift” (Young 1980, 16). In this scene, the players who know how to deal with the harsh environment are not present except in the minds of the dying men: Roald Amundsen and his “Norskies,” as the British disparagingly called their rivals, have raised the Norwegian flag at the South Pole about a month before. The Norwegians’ dog and ski tracks might have been covered by drifting snow by the time the British party arrived at the pole (there is no known record of the British mentioning them), but those tracks were the marks of a travel technology, rejected by the British party, that carried the Norwegians to the South Pole and back safely, expeditiously, and in good health.

What do these two scenes have to tell us about the interplay of cultures in the planet’s two coldest environments? What do they tell us about what nation means in an environment whose inhabitants, like many unvisited cultures of the recent past, call themselves just “the people”? And, more important for the present purpose, what do the popular scientific narratives that chronicle those two expeditions, and others like them, have to tell us about how the British, Norwegian, and American cultures withstood and interacted with an indifferent nature and an uncomprehending indigenous culture?

This essay attempts to answer those questions by examining the interaction of national pride with the exploration of the natural world and its inhabitants, as it is seen in the popular science writing of the period; that is, in the accounts of the expeditions as edited for the public. I survey both the generation of information and its inhibition. On the one hand, knowledge was generated from contact with skilled practitioners, improvisation, empiricism, and reading; but, on the other hand, various types of cultural resistance—linguistic, institutional, commercial, geographical, ecological, and imperialistic—hindered its application. The popular scientific accounts show these contrary processes sometimes predominating in different expeditions, sometimes mixed together in the same one.

What exactly was the role of popular scientific narratives in describing, rejecting or accepting, and passing on polar travel and survival technologies to the succession of explorers? We could start by looking at what these scientific narratives include: both information about what anthropologists call the “material culture”—the techniques of daily life, the life-support system—so starkly absent in the cases of the Franklin expedition on King William Island in 1846 and the Scott party on the Ross Ice Shelf in 1912, and clarification of the role of nature and nation in spreading and inhibiting these technologies.

Clothing, shelter, and diet are all crucial where life is as fragile as a candle flame in a storm. The absence of vegetation means that vitamin C, if it is to be obtained from the environment, must be secured from raw meat, and the cold dictates a diet very heavy in fat. The need to hunt animals that have a blubber layer means alternating periods of waiting (typically, kneeling on the ice by a breathing hole) with bursts of very heavy work like hauling or butchering. Hunting this way necessitates clothing that is very warm but loose enough to allow sweat to evaporate during periods of activity, because wet skin loses heat very quickly. Amundsen’s North West Passage is one account that passes on the discovery of this technique (1908, 1:45).

The need to travel long distances in search of game requires (literally) cold calculation; somehow or other through prehistory a technology was refined in which the dog provided motive power, aid in hunting, direction finding in blizzards, and, in an emergency or on exceptionally long trips, food for other dogs or for drivers. The need to travel light (because excess weight might mean the difference between reaching home or dying on the return trip if food ran out) meant that igloos or snow houses built on the spot and efficiently heated by animal-fat lamps were preferable to heavy skin tents. John Rae learned this in the 1830s by emulating the Eskimos (Berton 1988, 158–59); Amundsen recounts how he learned the technique (1908, 1:25–27); and Robert Peary built up a relationship with an Eskimo village to supply him with dogsleds and igloos (1986, 43). Travel on foot could be improved on, though Arctic peoples did not know this: skis, developed prehistorically in Scandinavia, were brought to the Arctic for Fridtjof Nansen’s first Greenland crossing in 1888, and combined with dogsleds and taken to the South Pole by Amundsen. The popular scientific narratives often illustrate how nature (the climate, terrain, and fauna) dictates the culture of a region. To the Eskimos of the nineteenth century (following Lopez 1986, 418), I use this term rather than the geographically restricted Inuit, hunting was either the purpose of travel or the usual means of fueling people and dogs on a journey. The climate and terrain precluded major investment of energy in purely scientific activities.
The Europeans, on the other hand, were required by their scientific culture to demonstrate or seek mastery over nature—both national pride and commercial fortunes depended on it. Even now it is hard for us to see the poles as anything but arbitrary points on the map, suitable for a demonstration of prowess like the finish line of a race or a goal in a team sport. Such motives must have been quite without meaning to nomadic hunters like the Eskimos; such objectives must have looked like simple recklessness. The only point of the trip for the Eskimos who accompanied Peary and Matthew Henson on the series of six northern trips culminating in the 1909 North Pole attempt, for instance, must have been the firearms and sled materials Peary paid them with (Peary 1896, 333).

In the popular scientific narratives, these survival implements, techniques, and traditions—Eskimo in the Arctic and a hybrid of Eskimo and Scandinavian in the Antarctic—take center stage again and again as the subjects of a dialogue between cultures. In many cases the dialogue takes the following pattern: the indigenous material and spiritual culture appear as the subjects of ethnographic writing by the travelers, and the writers and editors of a popular scientific narrative reveal (sometimes unconsciously) their cultural assumptions and prejudices in response to them.

Popular science books were the medium for reporting this cultural interface—at least the “civilized” side of it. Apart from newspaper journalism (incidentally a field ripe for research), the public was informed about the expeditions by means of two- or three-volume books. Orders, logs, and notebooks written in the field were edited for popular palatability and appeared with increasing frequency following the three Parry expeditions (between 1819 and 1825). Only the output of expedition leaders, as opposed to their companions, appeared before World War II, however, and then only in heavily edited form. In the case of Scott’s Last Expedition and Amundsen’s South Pole, papers by scientific members appeared as appendices, usually in a second volume, representing an attempt to justify the scientific value of the expeditions, and to avoid accusations of mere nationalism. These papers report auxiliary expeditions, geology, flora and fauna, and the like. Rather than the short popular accounts in magazines we might expect today, these accounts, relatively undemanding in literary style and technical content, served the same public function as Discovery, Scientific American, or Science News do today, and corresponded to some extent to scientific reports in today’s learned journals.

The style of the main narratives is personal, anecdotal, and motivational. Scott’s narratives in particular, and Amundsen’s to almost the same extent (pace Huntford’s attempt to contrast Scott’s “romantic excogitation” with Amundsen’s “sailorlike simplicity” [1979, 191, 192]), were crafted to give an impression of stoutheartedness under adversity (with the addition of ingenuity in the case of Amundsen’s account). The narratives and their slightly more scientific appendices fall within Greg Myers’s category of the “narrative of nature” rather than the “narrative of science” (1990, 144–64)—that is, they recount phenomena chronologically and from the investigator’s point of view rather than according to the topical structure of the subject.

I believe that a particular expression of a national sense of superiority, namely the British navy’s prejudice, must be blamed for the initial resistance to learning the technology needed for polar travel and survival. The British navy went into exploration for the wrong reasons in the first place. After Napoleon, “the Navy had to find something for its ships, its men, and, most important, its officers to do now that Europe was at peace” (Berton 1988, 18). The navy brought an entrenched arrogance to its new task, even discounting the opinions of experienced navigators, as if only navy men could know the truth. The most experienced sailor of his time was the whaling captain William Scoresby, whose Polar Ice (1817) has since been called “the foundation stone of Arctic science” (Berton 1988, 25). But—he wasn’t navy.

Berton also sums up neatly the attitude of the Royal Navy to the Eskimos at the time of the first Parry expedition of 1818: “nobody on this so-called scientific expedition thought to investigate how a band of people who couldn’t count past ten had managed to adapt to their formidable homeland” (1988, 30). This in spite of the fact that the Eskimos were expert mapmakers and showed Lieutenant William Parry the existence of a passage now called Fury and Hecla Strait (Berton 1988, 51). The Ross and Parry party of 1818 greeted the Eskimos of Etah, a remote settlement in northern Greenland, in gold braid and cocked hats, as if they were attempting to make a good impression at the court of Versailles, could well serve as a snapshot characterizing the period of exploration leading up to the disastrous Franklin expedition of 1845–47.

Hence, infrequent contact and cultural barriers prevented the British from taking advantage of Eskimo techniques. Berton sums up the prevailing attitude of nineteenth-century Britons to “native” cultures very well:

The nineteenth-century English upper classes ... considered themselves superior to most other peoples, whether they were Americans,
Hottentots, or Eskimos. But another part of it, surely, was fear: the fear of going native. Could any proper Englishman trample about in ragged seal fur, eating raw blubber and living in hovels built of snow? Those who had done such things in some of the world’s distant corners had been despised as misfits who had thrown away the standards of civilization to become wild animals. Besides, it was considered rather like cheating to do things the easy way. The real triumph consisted of pressing forward against all odds without ever stooping to adopt the native style. (1988, 8)

Occasionally, as with George Francis Lyon, an officer in Parry’s 1821–22 Arctic expedition, there were exceptions. Lyon lived with the Eskimos and learned their ways and foods (including nerooka, a delicacy consisting of the contents of the entrails and stomachs of deer—not for the squeamish but certainly high in vitamin C). He did this, as his contemporaries read in his published journal, “on the principle that no man who wishes to conciliate or enquire into the manners of savages should refuse to fare as they do” (quoted in Berton 1988, 50).

The resistance to Eskimo culture evident in the major popular scientific narratives reflects the way Europe since Napoleon and the United States since the Civil War had come to regard themselves as the civilized part of the world, destined to push back the unenlightened darkness of the rest of the globe. France, Britain, Portugal, Belgium (the most notoriously corrupt African colonial power, as seen in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*), and the new Germany were claiming Africa; even Denmark had laid claim to Greenland. Against this imperialistic background Norway achieved independence from Sweden on June 7, 1905, and a new nonimperialistic kind of national pride was embodied by Fridtjof Nansen, Norway’s first ambassador to London. In 1895 he had come 170 miles nearer to the North Pole than anyone else, and later he served as a model of Saint Olaf for a famous artist’s illustrated edition of the Sagas, entering “thousands of Norwegian homes in the likeness of a medieval Norse hero and the patron saint of Norway” (Huntford 1979, 54). His sense of the heroic can be seen in his introduction to Amundsen’s *North West Passage*, where he writes of “a ring of steeled, purposeful human will—through icy frosts, snowstorms, and death” (1908, xxiv–xxxv).

Nansen’s *First Crossing of Greenland* (1890) is remarkable not only for its nationalism but also for its empiricism. Nansen recounts how he improved on the rather inconclusive British naval sledging experiments with thin metal-shod runners (*Cyriax* 1964, 129–30). “We Norwegians,” Nansen says in an interesting conflation of nation and nature, “look upon this expedient [broad runners on sledges] as simply natural, as we are accustomed to our old-fashioned ‘skijælker,’ which is a low hand-sledge on broad runners, resembling our ordinary ski” (1890, 1:33). Nansen followed the Swedish explorer Nils Nordenskjöld in the use of skis in the Arctic, having been impressed by the “extraordinarily long distance [covered by Baron Nordenskjöld] in an astonishingly short time” on skis. Nansen also reasoned out a simultaneous solution to both the motive power and food supply problems in an empirical, even calculating, way. He first proposed using either reindeer or dogs for motive power and food, and then narrowed the selection down to dogs on the grounds that they are easier to feed (they eat the same food as humans, while reindeer have to have reindeer moss brought along); and though their flesh takes some getting used to, “the Eskimo reckon it a delicacy, and... anyone who could not... bring himself to eat it would not be a fit person to accompany such an expedition at all” (1890, 1:30). In sum, the nationalism in Nansen’s scientific narrative is not so strong that new ideas cannot be entertained.

But Nansen is only one of the notables of the so-called heroic period. The accounts of Scott (1905, 1913), Peary (1910), and Amundsen (1908, 1912) reveal three different kinds of interplay of nature and nation. Scott’s shows the failure of blinkered nationalism in the Antarctic; Peary’s shows how his “American plan” followed Amundsen’s and Cook’s Arctic examples of learning from the Eskimos, but betrays an inability to accept nonwhites as anything but primitive; and Amundsen’s combines nationalism with receptivity to information from others.

Scott’s Antarctic expedition of 1901–4 is recounted in *The Voyage of the “Discovery”* (1905). This popular two-volume scientific memoir, whose great success was a factor in the funding of his 1911–12 expedition, was designed for the general reader. Poetic epigraphs for each chapter (in spite of a claim to tell the tale “as simply as possible” [1905, 1:viii]) appeal to the parlor. A rather ignoble appeal to jingoism appears in the historical preamble, in which Scott makes Eurocentric fun of the South American Queros who “solemnly” annexed a mistaken Antarctic (1905, 1:5). In general the account betrays a reluctance to experiment with unfamiliar technology. Even though “Norwegian snowshoes or ski” (1905, 1:125) were brought along, for example, they were used mainly for exercise, as the caption to a group photograph suggests (1905, 1:300). Scott thus failed to benefit from
the available accounts of Nansen, Amundsen, and Peary, who had progressively built up a tradition of skis and dog sleds as the most energy-efficient polar travel method. While Scott's eventual preference for man-hauling was based on empiricism, unfortunately his perfunctory “test” was conducted in ignorance of skiing technique. He found that “a party on foot invariably beat a party on ski even if the former were sinking ankle-deep at each step; while to add to this, when the surface was hard, ski could not be used.” Following the need to do things the hard way characteristic of all British naval expeditions, Scott thought skis good only for “a party out of condition.” It is quite true that it is difficult to get skis to glide at very low temperatures (a condition modern Nordic skiers still find it tricky to wax for), but still it must be said that Scott allowed the inadequacy of his ski expertise to dictate a travel method inordinately hard on his party, though he tried to make a virtue of necessity with grand phrasemaking: there is, he says, “nothing to equal the honest and customary use of one’s own legs” (1905, 1:454).

As Scott's Discovery expedition was ending, Amundsen, so he tells us in The North West Passage (1908), was attempting to learn from the indigenous people of King William Island the kind of techniques Scott was making light of. This meant, for example, learning the difficult language of the Netsilik (Seal Eskimos) among whom he wintered on the Northwest Passage expedition of 1903–7 (1908, 1:291). His willingness to learn an unfamiliar tongue suggests that he viewed his own culture as less than monolithic, as is further shown in his account of the preliminaries to the first contact with his native mentors. His narrative (as edited for publication) demonstrates a surprising degree of cultural self-parody:

Down on the ice I drew up my troops and inspected them, and even the most critical general could not have found fault with their appearance and bearing. I myself threw out my chest as well as I could, drew myself up, made a regulation right-about turn, and gave the command “Forward—march!” I advanced, casting a sidelong glance up to the deck where the Lieutenant and the cook stood side by side. It seemed to me that their expression . . . was not exactly one of admiration, not even of seriousness. (1908, 1:116)

Amundsen does not lose the opportunity to reveal one further irony of all this military deployment. The Eskimos’ response to the Norwegians’ nervous, rehearsed “Teima” is an even warmer one—“Manik-tu-mi!—the Eskimo’s friendliest greeting” (1908, 1:116).

Amundsen also describes how he learned to avoid man-hauling, after he had had to do it on one trip “because snow too cold and too few dogs. By offering all our strength, we managed to advance 3½ miles,” he notes in his log (quoted in Huntford 1987, 27b). From that moment Amundsen feared man-hauling and learned to depend on dogs. In spite of his response to native culture, however, when concepts of property later became a problem, Amundsen felt obliged to blow up an empty igloo at a distance in a terrorist display of explosive European technology to make the Eskimos think that he had magic powers to punish them (1908, 1:260).

Peary, too, recognized that travel in high latitudes depends on using the techniques of those who live there. In The North Pole Peary writes, “It seems unnecessary to enlarge on the fact that the men whose heritage is life and work in that very region must present the best obtainable material for the personnel of a serious Arctic party” (1908, 6). In pursuit of his “American plan,” Peary painstakingly built up strong ties with Etah, on Smith Sound in northwest Greenland, the Eskimo village closest to the North Pole. Even so, his tone often reveals condescension and even arrogance: “From the very beginning of my polar work I believed that these most northerly human beings in the world could afford me invaluable assistance in my plans for exploration. Later I had a fatalistic feeling that the Almighty had put the little tribe in this particular place for the express purpose of assisting [me] to win the pole” (1917, 179).

Peary’s “American plan” brought him to the same conclusion about “motors” as Amundsen: ponies weigh ten times as much as dogs, he observes in his Secrets of Polar Travel, so “every motor that one [pony-drawn] expedition loses means a loss of ten per cent of its tractive force, while every motor that the other [dog-drawn] loses means only one per cent loss” (1908, 198). Dogs were also a better bet than machinery:

Devices which work satisfactorily in temperate regions are more than likely to fail down when called upon to perform under the handicap of polar conditions. Sooner or later—and usually sooner—any machine will fail down in polar work, and when it does so it is simply a mass of old junk which neither men nor dogs can eat, and which cannot even be burned to cook a pot of tea. (1917, 197)

Peary seems to have been a goal-oriented and persistent man. Anyone who gets within thirty miles of the North Pole at the age of fifty-six, to less from frostbite, deserves that much at least. Hence it is reasonable to assume that his acceptance of Eskimo culture was factitious rather than
sentimental, and that he carried the expected arrogance of the civilized toward the supposed primitive. His attitude to his African-American assistant, Matthew Henson (who just may have been the first human to reach the North Pole), is poignantly instructive: “While faithful to me, and when with me more effective in covering distance with a sledge than any of the others [Henson was a better sledge driver even than the Eskimos], he had not, as a racial inheritance, the daring and initiative of [the other, white members of the expedition] Bartlett, or Marvin, or MacMillan, or Borup” (1986, 273). And even though Marvin turned back just before the penultimate stage, Peary writes that “with the exception of Bartlett and myself, [Marvin] alone of all white men had entered that exclusive region which stretches beyond 86 [degrees,] 34 [minutes] north latitude” (1986, 254; emphasis added).

Henson was listed in the expedition’s roster as an “assistant,” eighth in the list of twenty-two crew, after the three young white “assistants” but before the mate and the rest of the ship’s crew. An exceptionally capable and ingenious man, he was certainly invaluable, for example, in “training the new men in the art of dog driving, igloo building, and survival” on arrival at Cape Sheridan (Ferris 1989, 56). Still, Peary seems not to have considered Henson a full member of the party. The illustrations to The North Pole (1986, between 16–17) show all the crew except Henson in a series of nine portraits. Later pictures include a striking madonna-and-child picture (the baby is probably Henson’s son, Ahnahaq; see 80 Years Later 1987, 25), but Henson himself appears only once, in the center of the Eskimo group posing as standard-bearers at their goal. The fact of the matter was probably that Peary regarded Henson and the Eskimos as on a par.

The same paternalism can be seen when Peary writes about intervening in the lives and livelihoods of the Etah Eskimos to suit his own ends. Cultural mingling, for him, seems to have been trading his goods and his planning for native expertise and endurance.

Since 1891 I had been living and working with these people, gaining their absolute confidence, making them my debtors for things given them, earning their gratitude by saving, time after time, the lives of their wives and children by supplying them with food when they were on the verge of starvation. For eighteen years I had been training them in my methods; or, to put it another way, teaching them how to modify and concentrate their wonderful ice technic and endurance, so as to make them useful for my purposes. (1986, 43–44)
the second, while professing admiration for Eskimo culture, he couldn't
avoid condescending to an "inferior race" (1986, 333). His reaction in _The
North Pole_ to Eskimo death practices reflects the European repugnance
to Eskimo ways. It was probably more or less used to their odor and
table manners and understood (or had modified) their traditional concept
of communal vicinity property, but he balked somewhat at their ideas of
death. Their apparent callousness was incompatible with the sentimental
Christianity of the time. As Peary puts it, "even a mother who has been
inconsolable at the death of her baby soon laughs again and thinks of other
things" (1986, 67).

When Ross Marvin, a young and promising civil engineer, was drowned
at the Big Lead (a strip of open water of changing size and position above
forty miles from land), the two Eskimos who were with him stayed behind
to break camp and found his floating body later. Peary writes that

_of course they knew what had happened to Marvin; but with childish
superstition peculiar to their race they camped there for a while on the
possibility that he might come back. But . . . when he did not come
back, . . . they were in dread of his spirit. So they threw from the
sledge every thing they could find belonging to him, that the spirit, if
it came back that way, might find these personal belongings and not
pursue the men. (1986, 319)_

It seems Peary did not know, or was ignoring, the custom of burying be-
longings with the dead, disordered in this case by the danger of thin ice
and the sense of being on a pointless journey in terrain devoid of game.

Peary did show admiration for Eskimo ingenuity, but in a rather round-
about way: "My own experience has been that the average aborigine is just
as content with his own way as we are with ours, just as convinced of his
own superior knowledge, and that he adjusts himself with his knowledge
in regard to things in the same way that we do" (1917, 44). In _The North
Pole_, when promoting the use of his own equipment for his own purposes,
he is even more remarkably patronizing about the Eskimos' ingenuity.

They exhibit, . . . in marked degree, all the Oriental capacity for imitation.
Out of walrus ivory, in some respects their substitute for steel—and a
_surprisingly_ good substitute it is—they will construct _amazingly_ good models or copies of various objects, while it does not take them
long to master the use of such tools of civilization as may be put into
their hands. It will easily be seen how valuable and useful a quality
this has proved for the purposes of the arctic explorer. If he could

not rely on the Eskimo to do the _white man’s work with the white
man’s tools_, the labors of the arctic traveler would be tremendously
increased. (1986, 61–62; emphasis added)

Both Roald Amundsen and Captain Robert Scott were preparing
major expeditions when Peary’s account appeared in 1910, and their
scientific narratives show the different ways they dealt with Peary’s in-
formation. _Scott’s Last Expedition_ (1913), as edited by Leonard Huxley,
shows a blindness to all precedents and influences not compatible with
naval practice; while Amundsen’s _South Pole_ (1976) reveals an acceptance
of indigenous travel methods, which are then pressed into the service of a
nationalism whose chief characteristics are flexibility and independence
rather than domination. Amundsen, using Eskimo-derived dogsleds and
Scandinavian skis, reached the pole with a small group and returned safely
in 99 days. Scott’s polar party, on the other hand, traveling in the same sea-
son and from the same quarter of the compass but with an assortment of
motor sledges that wouldn’t start reliably, horses that could neither browse
nor walk, skis and dogs that the party only minimally trained themselves
to use, and relying mostly on “man-hauling,” all in slightly better weather,
derived their 103-day trip one hundred miles from base, freezing and starving
to death while waiting out a blizzard with insufficient fuel and food.

Amundsen, like Nansen, was certain of the advantage of his Norwegian
birth, writing of “us, who were born and bred with ski on our feet,” but
he did not allow his nationalist tradition to dictate his choice of equip-
ment. Not satisfied with the equipment bought on dry land, he tells us in
_The South Pole_ that “we spent the winter in altering our whole equipment,
which our depot journeys had shown to be too heavy and clumsy for the
smooth barrier surface” (1976, i:vi–ix). In common with most other expedi-
tions of the period, Amundsen relied on tents, although he was led
by serendipity and improvisatory genius to rediscover what Eskimos had
always known: when you want to build in the snow, build _with_ the snow.
After a big snowdrift had piled up because they had insufficient shovels,
“one of us [probably Jørgen Stubberud, the carpenter] had the bright idea
of taking Nature in hand, and working with her instead of against her”
and dug out “a whole under ground village” (1976, i:269–70).

_Scott’s Last Expedition_ repeats the mix of inspiration and populariza-
tion of Scott’s earlier book, _The Voyage of the “Discovery.”_ Edited to
conform to the imperial myth, what Roland Huntford calls “an affair of
heroism for heroism’s sake” (1979, 559), its two volumes were conceived as
a memorial in the spirit of Tennyson’s “In Memoriam,” the Albert Memo-
rial, or indeed the quotation from Tennyson’s “Ulysses” used on the Scott cairn near what is now McMurdo Base: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” Publication had to await the discovery of the bodies and records in the polar spring (i.e., November 1912); the book includes Scott’s famous last “Message to Public,” in which he attributes to “bad weather” what was really inadequate laying down of supplies. “This journey,” he writes, “has shown that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another and meet death with as great a fortitude as ever in the past” (1:417).

Scott’s Last Expedition attempts to conceal, and in doing so reveals, what was worst in the British navy’s approach to exploration. Since the navy’s purpose was to identify daring and successful middle-level officers, not to reach any particular goal, perseverance in the face of disaster was admired regardless of the outcome. To make matters worse, Scott himself was not a good leader. He left things until the last minute, took criticism very badly, and did not follow the ample documentary advice available to him. His greatest skill was convincing and graceful writing in a grand rhetorical style, unfortunately no substitute for prudence, and indeed detrimental to it.

We can detect in Scott’s narrative the bemused puzzlement of someone encountering unfamiliar techniques that challenge the conventional wisdom of the naval college. He writes wistfully of the survival technology he knew of but did not use: Amundsen, says Scott, survived the low temperatures of the Arctic night because “he was with Esquimaux who built him an igloo shelter nightly” (1913, 1:250). Scott does not mention, or had not realized, that Amundsen had shown through his narrative that igloo building is a skill that can be learned. Scott had no trouble convincing himself, however, that new British technology would enable him to “win” the pole, while the “old” technology of Norwegian skiers and Inuit dogsled drivers was difficult (which was certainly true), and therefore unlikely to succeed (far from true, as the tragic outcome was to prove). Scott accidentally got a practical second introduction to skiing during motor sledge tests in Norway prior to the 1911 attempt. Perhaps because Trygve Gran, going for a spare part for a broken motor sledge, made it look so easy, Scott took him on as once as the expedition’s unofficial ski instructor. But Scott’s navy mentality was not ready for a new, tricky, and physically demanding skill, certain not from a foreigner, no matter how many ski championships he had won. Gran’s instruction came to be regarded only as a pastime.

Similarly, the experiences of the “sideshow” western expedition to Cape Crozier, which preceded the pole attempt, prompted Scott to muse: “One continues to wonder as to the possibilities of fur clothing as made by the Esquimaux, with a sneaking feeling that it may outclass our more civilized garb—but it would have been quite impossible to obtain such articles” (1913, 1:254). In terms of adaptation to conditions, it was the tight naval canvas and clamp-collecting wool that were uncivilized. And, of course, Peary and Amundsen had been obtaining “such articles” since the turn of the century.

The Royal Navy had enjoyed technological superiority—had “ruled the waves”—since Lord Nelson, and change of any sort was seen as a threat to that continued superiority. The consequent tendency to institutional rigidity apparent in Scott’s account naturally included the chief weakness of an imperialist power—racism. Scott was able to look on Eskimos as civilized enough to learn from, but not civilized enough to be called civilized. Discussing Leopold M’Clintock’s contribution to Arctic travel, for example, he allows that “Esquimaux . . . methods were closely observed and more or less imitated,” but continues: “to the English explorers of the nineteenth century belongs the honour of being the first to discover that, again to quote Sir Leopold [M’Clintock]: ‘the ice which arrests the progress of the ship forms the highway for the sledge’; they were the first civilized beings to use that highway” (1913, 1:145), as though M’Clintock had discovered sledding instead of merely writing a description of it.

The evidence of Scott’s Last Expedition suggests quite clearly that Scott’s case was exceptional: few explorers compounded cultural rigidity with command indecision to the same extent. A picture of Scott shows him surrounded by books on the Terra Nova (1: facing 218). Did he read them? We don’t know. He may have read the available accounts—his book-lined cabin cannot have been completely for show—but it is certain that a lack of management skills added to institutional, national, and personal prejudices prevented many necessary arrangements from being made. Sixty-four years after Franklin, one could almost say the same of the 1912 Scott party as the Franklin expedition: although Scott’s men hunted a little and canning techniques had become safer than those of Franklin’s time, there is still suspicion that their highly processed, “civilized” diet may have been severely vitamin-C deficient, making plausible Huntford’s explanation of Petty Officer Evans’s collapse (1979, 522–23) and the slow progress of the party on the return from the pole (Scott 1913, 53–53). The other shortcomings of Franklin’s earlier Royal Navy expedition—wrong clothing and wrong travel technology—had not really changed at all. Scott’s Last Expedition attempts to present Scott and his party as heroic martyrs to the
cruel Antarctic, but in fact it shows that they died victims of the cultural rigidity of their own institutions.

Judging from the examples of Franklin and Scott, both characteristic of nineteenth-century British navy polar exploration, it seems that for at least a hundred years after Parry's first contact with the Eskimos, and in spite of an accessible and continuous Scandinavian ski tradition, vital survival and travel information reached those who needed it with remarkably low efficiency. Scott's Last Expedition shows how cultural prejudice (a master race mentality based on military and technological superiority, both applicable only to the climates of their origin) prevented adoption of the necessary technology by virtually ignoring scientific narratives that didn't fit the paradigm. In addition to prejudice, the necessity of contact must account for the slowness with which travel and survival information became available. Obviously, practical teaching was available only in the Arctic, and then only in the unlikely context of respect and rapport between Europeans and Eskimos—something else dependent on an appropriately attenuated concept of nation. Meanwhile, Nature, in her polar guise of sparse resources and temperatures capable of freezing exposed flesh in two or three minutes, laughed at the refitted bomb ships, like the Hecla, and at such newspaper publishers as Charles F. Hall, that England and America sent to pluck out the heart of her mystery.

Studying the interactions of the natural world with the societies attempting to follow their cultural patterns within it, as seen in the popular scientific narratives of the "heroic age" of polar exploration, is part of the enterprise mapped out by Donna Haraway in her study of the history of primatology: "to envision a different and less hostile order of relationships among people, animals, technologies, and land, . . . to set new terms for the traffic between . . . nature and culture" (1989, 15). Amundsen's North West Passage and South Pole narratives, in particular, illustrate a "traffic" out of which such an order emerged; dog-sled exhibitions have survived even the advent of the airplane to become an "extreme" sport, like the 1988–89 Transantarctic expedition, as well as an occasion for international collaboration, like the 1989 Bering Bridge expedition.

Amundsen's popular scientific narratives exhibit a culture deliberately defining and inadvertently revealing itself at the same time. While they display at least two of the characteristics of imperialistic jingoism (a sentimental Volksblut nostalgia akin to Wagner's and Hitler's cult of the Nordic, and a masochistic cult of effort to the point of pain), they seem devoid of racism and crass mercantilism. His narratives recount, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, the interplay between three cultures: a newly nationalistic type demanding that its patriots make their mark on the world; then, stimulated by the first, a prehistoric indigenous type (common in new nations), in Norway's case having reference to a heritage of hardy navigators and explorers; and, finally, the terrain-constrained Eskimo type with a panoply of survival technologies. It was a blend of the best of all three that was so starkly vindicated in the Norwegian success of 1911–12.

REFERENCES