

The South Pole in 'Tasmanian Views'

HARALD ØSTGAARD LUND
EXPLAINS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF
HIS RECENT DISCOVERY

IN NORWAY, THE IMAGE OF POLAR EXPLORER Roald Amundsen (1872–1928) and his men, Helmer Hanssen, Sverre Hassel and Oscar Wisting, standing in front of a tent at the South Pole, is not merely a picture of 'someone, somewhere' in 1911. It is the ultimate image, the emblem of the proud, independent nation of Norway (separated from Sweden in 1905) and stamped, engraved, printed and reprinted in books, magazines and films, on posters, postcards and packaging. The Norwegian polar heroes had won the last great race of discovery, proving the self-perceived myth that the Norwegians were bolder, smarter and, above all, better skiers than the British. For the Norwegians, victory over England became manifest in a ski race and embodied in a picture of the victory ceremony, the flag hoisted and heads bared. However, today Norway holds no photographic prints of the image. In fact, the only original print known to exist is held by the National Library of Australia.

During recent years, the South Pole picture has mostly been reproduced with the byline: 'Photo: Scanpix'. Scanpix is a stock photography agency that for generations has been distributing images taken by anonymous photographers. In-depth analysis of Scanpix versions of the South Pole image reveal that they originate from an autotype (or half-tone print) reproduced in an edition of Amundsen's book, *The South Pole: An Account of the Norwegian Antarctic Expedition in the Fram, 1910–1912*. From the late 1800s, autotype was a revolutionary method of producing print plates, enabling pictures with smooth transitions between light and dark to be printed with text.

The National Library of Norway and other Norwegian institutions hold several copies of the South Pole image. However, these versions are not original prints and can also be traced through several generations back to an autotype, possibly printed in an international newspaper even before Amundsen's book was



published. With a magnifying glass, it is easy to see the rasters (the fine black and white dots that make up the image) and recognise the pattern which repeats itself in the Scanpix versions. The Scanpix versions are merely more abstract, with sharper contrasts, blurred details and almost geometrical figures on a white background being the result of generations of reproductions. For photographic archivists in Norway, the missing original photograph has proved problematic: it is the most requested image and those who ask for it are usually after a photograph, rather than a reproduction

Edward William Searle (1887–1955)
'Tasmanian Views', Edward Searle's Album of Photographs of Australia, Antarctica and the Pacific, 1911–1915 album of b&w and sepia-toned photographs; 31.0 x 25.5 cm Pictures Collection



the sled journey, as Amundsen told me they would all be returned to me, and those are the ones that are of value to me.

Wilse provided photographic equipment and instructions in preparation for the South Pole expedition. He also completed important supplementary work, including producing the slides for Amundsen's series of lectures, which premiered in Norway on 9 September 1912. These slides were heavy, fragile glass diapositives that were viewed on a white screen using a *Laterna Magica* (a magic lantern), an old kind of projector. *Laterna magica* performances were often grand-scale events during the time before film and, together with press and book rights, slide lectures were the polar explorers' most important source of income. The process of transferring an image from a negative to glass also often included masking parts of the original image, changing the contrast, retouching and hand colouring.

In 1986, Wilse's slides were discovered as part of a virtually untouched collection of 248 glass diapositives stored in the attic of one of Amundsen's heirs. Before this time, the slides had been considered missing or destroyed. Newspaper reports and comments from the time, together with physical traces on the glass diapositives themselves, indicate that Amundsen preferred to use the most retouched and coloured glass diapositives for his lectures. Of the four existing copies of the South Pole picture in this collection, the most worn diapositive—almost completely crushed—is also the most coloured and with the straightest flag. But the image that stands out among the others is composed of photographic grains. On the frame is the label: 'Prepared by J.W. BEATTIE HOBART, Tasmania'.

Hobart was the expeditioners' first contact with civilisation after the South Pole journey. It was from here that the news of the Amundsen expedition's success was telegraphed and where the photographs were developed, in the studio of Tasmanian photographer John Watt Beattie (1859–1930). In his book, *The Story of the Camera in Australia* (1977), Jack Cato gives a vivid description of the event that occurred in Beattie's darkroom in March 1912:

Imagine the drama and the tension as those two men [Amundsen and Beattie] stood there in the dark, their faces dimly lit by the deep ruby lamp above the sink ... John's

of a reproduction of an autotype from a book or newspaper.

In his book *The Amundsen Photographs* (c.1987), Roland Huntford claims that Amundsen's camera and most of his photographs were ruined during the expedition. According to Huntford, the skier Olav Bjäländ (1873–1961) was the only other expedition member who took a camera to the South Pole and without whom:

there would have been no pictures at the Pole. Thus it was that the photographic record of the last great journey of terrestrial discovery depended on snapshots, taken in the spirit of a holidaymaker who wanted to bring home a few mementoes.

In Norway, Bjäländ is usually credited as have taken the South Pole picture. However, both in Bjäländ's diary and in his biography published in 1945, a lot is written about photography but only in connection with him being photographed. He is not referred to as a photographer. The closest reference is in a letter dated 22 December 1913, in which Bjäländ thanks the Norwegian photographer, Anders Beer Wilse (1865–1949), for some photographic plates. He writes:

When looking through them, I observe that the most outstanding plates are not included. I would therefore ask you to send me all the pictures from



ABOVE

Attributed to Olav Bjäländ (1873–1961) *'Farvel til 'polheim'* Reproduced from *The South Pole*, vol. 2, by Roald Amundsen (Kristiania (modern Oslo): Jacob Dybwad Publishing House, 1912) autotype; 16.0 x 10.0 cm

BELOW

Unknown photographer Captain Roald Amundsen, *Discoverer of the South Pole, on Board the Fram at Hobart, March 1912* b&w photograph 19.3 x 15.2 cm Pictures Collection nla.pic-an23815102

head was over the great trough that was filled with dishes and bottles as he hurried the plates with the images he could faintly see, from dish to dish ... and all these thin glass plates to be handled and treasured as though they were more precious than diamonds—as they certainly were ... As he bent over his dishes, John was the first man in the world to see a picture of the South Pole ... the tent, the flag ...

In Amundsen's diary, the only mention of the event is: 'The photos have now been developed at Mr. Beattie's. Many of them are excellent'. Amundsen seems to have been satisfied but also slightly uninterested. Indeed, the absence of photographic copies in Norway confirms Amundsen's general disinterest in the medium. The explorer probably saw no reason to preserve negatives or paper positives, as the images would be reproduced as glass diapositives and halftone prints. In 1933, Beattie's studio was destroyed by fire and, according to Cato, 'not one negative was saved'.

Hundreds if not thousands of copies, original positives and vintage prints may have been distributed from Beattie's studio. But the story of Amundsen and his men has never been retold in Australia to the extent it has in Norway and the photographs were probably not appreciated or preserved as they might have been in Norway. It is impossible to determine how many original positives still exist but thanks to digitisation and, not least, through the cataloguing at the National Library of Australia, we know of one.

In the Library's Pictures Collection is an album titled 'Tasmanian Views', which contains a mixture of a photographs and clippings. The album was compiled by the Australian photographer Edward William Searle (1887–1955) while he was working for Beattie in Hobart between 1911 and 1915. It contains mostly classical views of Tasmanian towns, rivers, mountains and some remarkable caves. Scattered here and there are images of the Searle family's travels. Included are also several pictures taken during expeditions to South Pacific Islands, such as Easter Island, among them ethnographic pictures of cannibals. Alongside portraits of the pillars of society and of prisoners are pictures from Douglas Mawson's Antarctica expedition (1911–1914). In addition, prison registers, business cards and newspaper clippings have been included.

Of particular note is *The Successful Explorers at the South Pole, 14 December 1911*, a photograph of the four polar explorers in front of a tent at the South Pole. The image has been mounted with three other pictures from the South Pole, underneath which appears the inscription: 'Original photos taken at South Pole by capt [sic] Amundsen Dec. 14th 1911—Films developed and printed by E.W. Searle Mar. 12th 1912 for Capt Amundsen'. The print is the only known version in existence to have been developed directly from the film inserted in the camera in the first moment of shooting at the South Pole. Until recently, the image was held by the Searle family.

The Tasmanian print links us with something that is both more and less than the 'iconic' images disseminated in Norway. For example, in the Tasmanian version, the flag is less prominent than in most Norwegian reproductions, suggesting that somewhere along the line the original image was altered, possibly for dramatic effect. The fact that the photograph has been placed in an album of Tasmanian images makes for a refreshing change from the nationalistic context in which the image usually appears in Norway, thereby allowing for alternative interpretations of the picture.

In becoming emblematic, the image of Amundsen and his men has taken on a meaning in Norway that subsumes the relevance of its photographic origins. But no matter how altered a reproduction is, whether it has been cropped, retouched or painted, the importance of its visual imagery will always be linked to its photographic origins. It is for this reason, that the Library's original print is such a remarkable discovery.



FROM TOP
Attributed to Olav Bjåland (1873–1961), original print developed by John Watt Beattie (1859–1930), glass diapositive prepared by T.W. Cameron, Melbourne
The Successful Explorers at the South Pole, 14 December 1911
1912
coloured glass diapositive
Private Collection

Attributed to Olav Bjåland (1873–1961), glass diapositive prepared by Anders Beer Wilse (1865–1949)
The Successful Explorers at the South Pole, 14 December 1911
coloured glass diapositive
8.2 x 8.2 cm
Private Collection

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