

Roald Amundsen – Pole to Pole Norwegian Explorer Extraordinaire

Tommy D. Dickey
Ocean Physics Laboratory
Department of Geography and
Interdepartmental Program in Marine Sciences
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA 93106

Abstract

Roald Amundsen was born into a family of Norwegian ship owners and captains in 1872. Early on, Amundsen knew that his quest was one of exploration and adventure. He was inspired and occasionally mentored by the most revered polar explorer of the time, Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen. Amundsen was a student of polar exploration rather than more conventional academics and was also influenced by Sir John Franklin who discovered the North West passage. Interestingly, Amundsen's life story and expeditionary accomplishments parallel in many ways those of Nansen.

In 1897, Amundsen joined the Belgian Antarctic Expedition led by Adrien de Gerlache, who used the ship *Belgica* to accomplish the first over-wintering in Antarctica. de Gerlache allowed *Belgica* to be locked in sea ice at 70° 30' S, in similar fashion to Nansen who had done the same in Arctic waters with the legendary ship *Fram*. Amundsen learned much about all aspects of polar exploration during this expedition, which also included the American doctor Frederick Cook who purported to be the first person to climb Mount McKinley (aka Denali) and to reach the North Pole. Despite his infamy, Cook likely saved the *Belgica* expedition and was later befriended by Amundsen even while Cook was serving a prison sentence at Fort Leavenworth.

Amundsen's initial major accomplishment was leading the first expedition to successfully cross the Canadian North West Passage in the small, shallow draft ship *Gjoa* during the period of 1903-1905. This expedition was used to great advantage by Amundsen as he learned from natives about survival in the extreme polar climate as well as the use of sled dogs. Amundsen was never driven by scientific inquiry, preferring exploration and discovery for their own sakes. Nonetheless, he was the first person to report that the position of the North Magnetic Pole is not stationary. Amundsen was acclaimed for the Passage adventure (documented in his book, *North West Passage*, 1908), which came at a time of great importance for Norway as it had just gained independence from Sweden. Amundsen's polar accomplishment served to inspire the new nation headed by King Haakon VII at a time when polar exploration was viewed with great awe and was

a major source of national pride.

Amundsen intended to be the first to lead an expedition to the North Pole, but reports had surfaced that both Frederick Cook (1908) and Robert Peary (1909) had already accomplished this feat. Interestingly, most experts now believe that the North Pole had not been actually reached at that point in time, but more on this later. In a stroke of genius, or some would say madness, Amundsen turned the *Fram* (without Nansen's permission or knowledge) toward the South Pole on June 3, 1910. The final region on planet Earth to be explored was indeed Antarctica. Amundsen wrote the following curt note to British Captain Robert Falcon Scott: "Beg to inform you *Fram* proceeding Antarctica – Amundsen." And thus began perhaps the greatest race in human history – the race to be the first to plant a nation's flag at the South Pole – also known as 'the last place on Earth.' With diametrically opposed experiences, strategies, and personalities, Scott and Amundsen led teams to the South Pole. Amundsen beat Scott by 35 days, arriving at the Pole on December 14, 1911. Ironically, Scott rather than Amundsen was recognized as the more heroic, although tragic, figure until the publication of Roland Huntford's masterful book *Scott and Amundsen* (also entitled *The Last Place on Earth*) in 1979, which debunked many of the myths of the polar race and the personalities and leadership qualities of Amundsen and Scott.

Later, Amundsen's exploits included more polar exploration, sailing through the North East Passage with a new ship, *Maud*. Amundsen then attempted North Pole crossings using airplanes (with American Lincoln Ellsworth) and zeppelins. Leading the *Norge* zeppelin airship crew, he successfully passed directly over the North Pole, making him and exploration teammate Oscar Wisting the first persons to reach both geographic poles. The designer and captain of *Norge*, Italian Umberto Nobile, and Amundsen became fierce enemies following this accomplishment because of disputed credit and jealousies. Nonetheless, Amundsen ultimately gave his life in June 1928 in an airplane crash during search and rescue operations to find Nobile and his crew after their airship went down during Nobile's flight, which was intended to land at the North Pole. Amundsen was arguably the greatest of polar explorers, yet to many, Nansen, Scott, and Ernest Shackleton remain better known figures of the remarkable Age of Exploration, which ended with Amundsen's epic journey to the South Pole.