

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JT-4

The Scott Polar Research Institute

93 Grantchester Meadows
Cambridge
England
15 March 1959

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

After Professor Frank Debenham retired as Director of the Scott Polar Research Institute in 1946, Hugh Robert Mill wrote, in an Appreciation appearing in The Polar Record,

Two momentous documents formed the germ of the Polar Institute which tries to preserve all such writings concerning polar exploration and research. These are Scott's last letter, ending with the appeal that launched the great Mansion House Memorial Fund, and Debenham's plan for a Polar Institute written at Cape Royds.

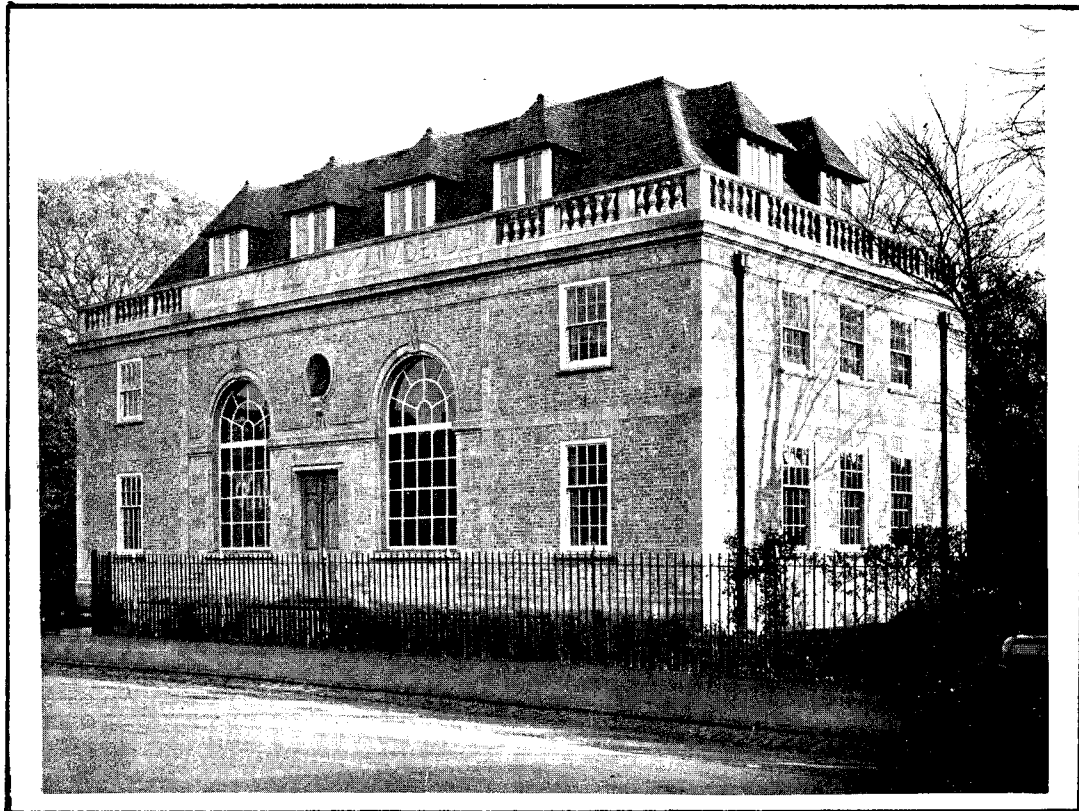
Debenham, writing a historical summary of the Institute in 1945, mentioning the latter document cited by Mill:

It is rarely possible to state exactly when a new idea is born... Yet the germ of a polar institute certainly emerged during November of 1912 on the slopes of Mount Erebus when Raymond E. Priestley and I were making a geological survey...round Shackleton's old hut at Cape Royds. ...the first written proposal for an Institute was the product of a blizzard, spent in Shackleton's hut early in December 1912.

Both Debenham and Priestley were keenly aware of the problems they had had in locating the records of previous expeditions, and were concerned about the future of their own expedition's records. They were also determined to do something about this lack of continuity.

Robert Falcon Scott wrote his Message to the Public in March, 1912, shortly before his death. He explained the reasons for the failure of his party to return safely from the Pole, and concluded,

Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale, but surely, surely, a great rich country like ours will see that those who are dependent on us are properly provided for.



Quaesivit Arcana Poli Videt Dei

Inscription along the roof balustrade of the
Scott Polar Research Institute

"In seeking to unveil the Pole
He found the hidden face of God"

* * * * *

England was shocked by the news of the fate of Scott's Polar Party, but not into lethargy. The Lord Mayor of London opened the Mansion House Memorial Fund, which received immediate and generous response, totalling about £76,000. Half of this was allocated to the widows and relatives of the five who had been lost; £17,000 were set aside for the working up and publication of the scientific results of the expedition; £12,000 went to a Memorial Fund, which paid for the statue at Plymouth and other items; and the remainder, about £10,000, formed a Polar Research Fund, in which Debenham saw the practical wherewithal for a polar institute.

In furthering this idea Debenham had active support from other members of the expedition itself, and also that of prominent figures such as Lady Scott, H.R. Mill, and Sir Ernest Shackleton; but it is to Debenham directly that the greatest credit must go. His patient persistence brought the plan to a healthy birth after a gestation period measured in years, not months. His proposal was acceptable to the Trustees of the Memorial Fund and to Cambridge University, and a start was made in 1920, with a room in the Sedgwick Museum of Geology. The functions of the

Institute, as laid down at that time, were to be:

1. A comprehensive collection of all polar literature into a library
2. A museum of polar equipment
3. A collection of duplicates of type specimens of new genera and species both biological and zoological
4. A set of rooms available for research work

The Memorial Fund was wound up in 1925, with £13,000 being given to Cambridge University for the Scott Polar Research Institute, as it had been officially designated, with the stipulation that at least half of this sum should go towards a building. In 1931 the Pilgrim Trust, spurred by Sir Edward and Lady Hilton Young (Lady Scott), gave £4000 to the building fund, and two years later the University allocated a site. In November 1934 the present building was formally opened.

From 1925 until 1957, the Institute was administered by a Committee of Management whose functions were "...the general management of the Scott Polar Research Institute," the appointment of a Director, and the submission of an annual report to the University on the work of the Institute. In the earlier years, the only income was about £500 annual interest on the Endowment and Maintenance Funds. The Director (Prof. Debenham, who was also Professor of Geography) was unpaid, his assistant received a small salary, and volunteer workers played a large and important role. Until the beginning of World War II the Institute fulfilled fairly closely the functions outlined for it in 1920, with the exception of the collection of duplicate sets of type specimens of new genera and species.

1931 saw the emergence of The Polar Record, first published twice a year, and now three times a year. Much of the Foreword to the first issue is still highly pertinent, e.g.

The Scott Polar Research Institute...has as one of its main aims the collection and utilization of information on polar matters. Neither of these tasks is as simple as might be expected, for at the present time there is so much exploration and exploitation in the polar regions, the news of which appears in so many forms and languages...

Those responsible for its publication hope that here will be found an outline of the most recent polar endeavour such as is not otherwise available to anyone who is not in a position to consult foreign literature, press articles, correspondence, blue books and the like which regularly come under the notice of the Editor and his assistant.

The Editor, at that time, was Prof. Debenham; now, the editorship is a separate full-time job, with other staff personnel aiding in the abstracting and compilation of foreign language material. The extensive list of Recent Polar Literature appearing at the end of each issue is not the least of the Polar Record's achievements.

During World War II the main part of the building was taken over by the Naval Intelligence Department. The library, information files, and in general the experience of the personnel proved a great value to many government departments. Following the war, the Institute expanded rapidly, which necessitated additional funds. These were obtained by a direct grant-in-aid from H.M. Treasury, the first of which, in 1946-47, was £1800. This was gradually increased to £5666 (about \$16,000) in 1955-56. In addition, direct annual grants, totalling about £1000, were received from the four Commonwealth governments with polar interests (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa) and from the Falkland Islands Dependencies Administration.

Important changes were recently dictated by the need for a further substantial increase in the grant-in-aid and the need for revision of the original constitution. The Treasury grant had been on an annual basis, with no iron-clad assurance of its continuation, and the work being done by the Institute as it had actually evolved was considerably beyond the scope of the original constitution.

When the Treasury was asked to increase the grant-in-aid, they suggested exploration of possibilities that the Institute should come under the financial aegis of an organization, such as the University or the Royal Society, which already administered large blocks of government funds, as the Institute was one of only three small, individual organizations receiving a direct grant.

Arrangements were completed early in 1957 whereby the Institute became more closely allied with the University, as a sub-department of the Department of Geography. The direct grant-in-aid ceased, with an equivalent sum instead being added to the block grant which the University receives from the Treasury through the University Grants Committee. None of these funds are specifically earmarked for the Institute, however. To quote the "Report of the General Board on the constitution of the Scott Polar Research Institute as a Sub-department within the Department of Geography" (November 1956):

The University Grants Committee made it clear that they would neither wish nor be prepared to provide an ear-marked grant for the Institute and that, if the University agreed to their proposal to assume financial responsibility for it, then it would be for the University to decide from year to year, and from quinquennium to quinquennium, the extent to which the work of the Institute should be developed or limited.

A pregnant paragraph.

This Report bears additional quoting, and at some length, I feel, as it clearly points out the general attitude of the University.

If the interests of the University were to be the sole criterion, the General Board think that the library and museum of an Institute such as was originally envisaged could satisfactorily function with a much smaller staff than that of the present Institute and that the government departments at present sponsoring the greater scale of activity might then be expected to establish a national institute to take over that side of the Institute's present activities. The Board have, however, been convinced by the Committee of Management that the unique reputation of the Institute and the service which it can and does supply to the Commonwealth are such that it would be unreasonable, at this stage of the Institute's development, to try to confine its activities to the mould set by the Report of 1920 and thereby to force either abandonment within the Commonwealth of the information service which the Institute now provides or the inevitable inconvenience and dislocation which would be involved by attempting to build up such facilities elsewhere. After further discussion between representatives of the General Board and the Committee of Management, the General Board have therefore agreed, subject to assurance from the University Grants Committee that the necessary additional funds will be provided in the form of an addition to the present block grant, to propose to the University the establishment of four University teaching offices in the Scott Polar Research Institute and, in conformity with the principles described in the Board's two recent Reports on University development, the closer integration of the Institute into the main stream of University teaching and research by its constitution as a Sub-department within the Department of Geography.

The Committee of Management had recommended a broad expansion program for the Institute for the period 1957-62, including increasing the graduate staff from its effective level of seven up to fourteen, and the construction of a new wing the size of the present building to provide badly-needed additional space. In light of concern over too-rapid and too-great expansion of the University as a whole, however, - which the University was determined to check wherever possible - only four University graduate posts were authorized (see above), with the proviso that three other staff positions could be maintained with funds received from other sources, e.g. the Commonwealth grants and contracts. One might say that the University was mighty cagey - not reducing the staff or facilities in any way, but equally ruling out any expansion for the present time at least.

Prior to the recent changes, the Directorship of SPRI was a half-time job. Professor Debenham held it in conjunction with the post of Professor of Geography until 1946. He was succeeded by Rev. W.L.S. Fleming, who had been chief scientist, geologist, and chaplain on the British Graham Land Expedition of 1934-37, and who left in 1949 to become Bishop of Portsmouth. Another member of the same expedition, Dr. Colin Bertram,

held the post of Director from 1949 to 1956, when he resigned to accept a visiting professorship in New Zealand. Bertram was well aware that the post should become a full-time one, and felt that this should be part and parcel of the then-impending changes. During the transition period, the present Professor of Geography, J.A. Steers, was Acting Director.

The present Director, Dr. Gordon Robin, came to the Institute from the Physics Department of Canberra University. A physicist, he had served as seismologist on the Norwegian-British-Swedish Antarctic Expedition 1949-52. He had not applied for the Directorship, but was selected by the Committee, who apparently were determined to get a "bona fide scientist" instead of a "rover boy" - derogatory concept of a person of broader background but lesser specialization. Some definitely feel that the Director should, in fact, be a person of broad background and interest - a view I tend to share myself. However, let it be said that this is in no way directed at any individual. In my own case, I have found Gordon Robin ready to take the initiative in assessing the whys and wherefores of work not directly in his own line.

One of the most obvious and greatest challenges will be to forward and further the work of the Institute and to achieve expansion despite University pressure to the contrary. Not that the present work is not highly noteworthy, however - an amazing amount is achieved on a budget of about £14,850 (the estimate for fiscal 1958-59, equalling roughly \$41,500).

Describing the functions of the Institute isn't completely simple and straightforward, but the key may be found in the second and third words of the name Scott Polar Research Institute. For clarification of the word Polar, we may go back to Debenham's article of 1945:

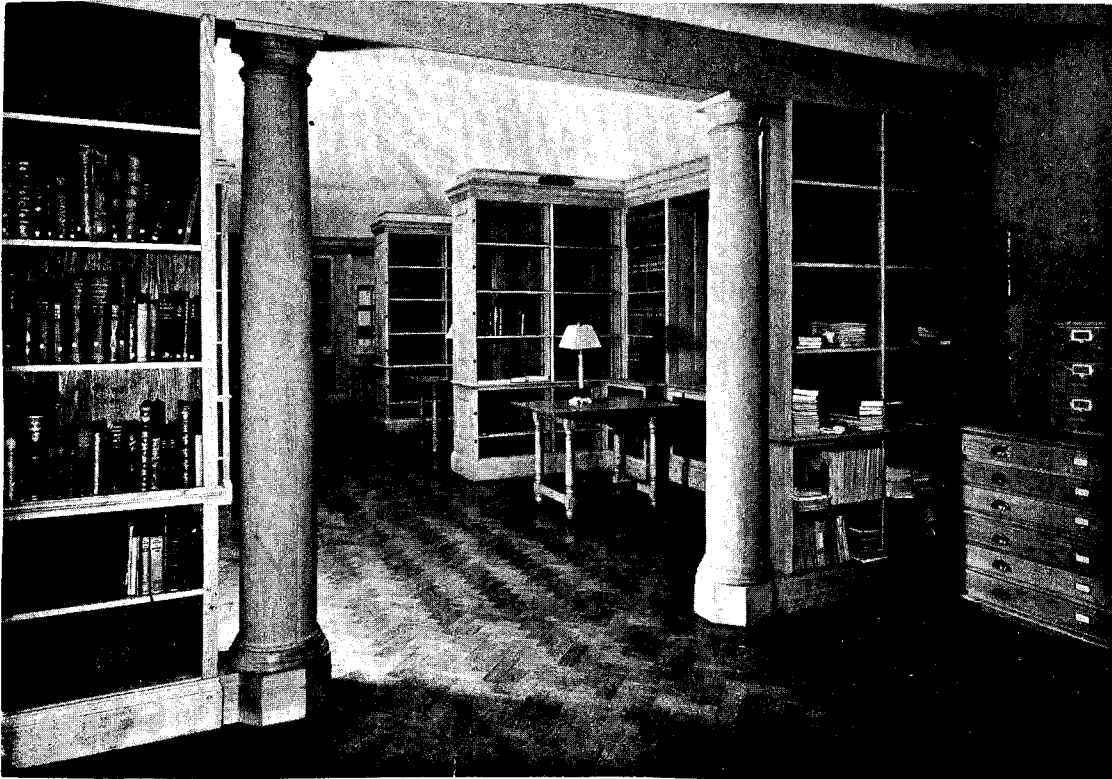
Since the origin of the Institute was specifically based on an Antarctic expedition, and since there had been for many years very little British effort in the Arctic, there was a danger that the Institute's outlook might settle itself rather definitely towards the south and be out of balance.

This tendency, if it ever existed, was soon put right by the intense interest which was focused on the Arctic immediately after the last war...

This balance of outlook has been well maintained.

The University's enumeration of the duties of the Director reads "...to advance knowledge in his subject, to promote and direct research in it, and to supervise the work of the Institute under the general direction of the Head of the Department of Geography." In the context of now being a sub-department under Geography, Institute personnel give certain lectures on polar matters as a part of the geographical tripos. Since 1946, there have been regular series of Saturday evening lectures given by leaders in a wide variety of current fields of research in the

polar regions. In some years there have also been series of several lectures on more specialized subjects, such as a series of seven this past term on "Technical Problems of Life and Work in Polar Regions."



The library, pre-1945. There are now no empty shelves.

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The real core of the Institute is its library, including books and manuscripts, periodicals, an array of information files, and a map collection of some 10,000 sheets. The archival section is considerable and important, including such items, for example, as the watercolors of Dr. E.A. Wilson (of Scott's expeditions and member of the ill-fated Polar Party), the Franklin diaries, the papers of Bruce, Parry, Back, and others, ships' log books, and so forth. There is also a growing microfilm collection. About 400 periodicals are taken regularly, most of which are acquired by direct exchange for the Polar Record and hence without the passage of cash.

Regular production of a bibliography of publications and article within the Institute's field of interest has been a feature of the past twenty years. These items are catalogued and classified by the Universal Decimal Classification, and by author. Duplicate cards are sent to various external organizations, each of which receive roughly two thousand such cards each year. The more important items appear as the Recent Polar Literature section of each issue of the Polar Record.

Taken as a whole, the library, the map and manuscript collections,

and the information files comprise the most important accessible accumulation of polar material in the world. The only comparable collections are the Library of Congress, the Stefansson Collection at Dartmouth College, and the Arctic and Antarctic Institute in Leningrad.

The museum, which is small but attractive, houses many relics of Scott's expeditions, with some from other early explorers and additional more recent material - including a weasel used by the Norwegian-British Swedish Antarctic Expedition 1949-52. It also provides wall space for a selection of Wilson's famed watercolors, but only a regrettably small portion can be displayed at any one time.

One of the lesser-known items is the equipment pattern collection, comprising specimens of clothing and equipment, illustrating their evolution during the past hundred years. This collection has had to be packed up and stored elsewhere owing to lack of space in the Institute.

Another way to understand the actual functions of the Institute is to view briefly the work of the various personnel, that of the Director having already been mentioned. He is also Secretary of the Special Committee for Antarctic Research of the International Council of Scientific Unions. The other staff members are:

Dr. Brian Roberts - who divides his work between the Institute and the Foreign Office Research Department, providing liaison with the latter and other government departments; special responsibility for Antarctic affairs, polar place-names and terminology (he is Secretary of the Antarctic Place-names Committee); advisory activities over a wide field, including all polar matters with a political aspect. He also has the added burden of being my Supervisor - for which I, at least, am grateful.

Dr. Terence Armstrong - Assistant Director of Research - covers all Russian language material; recent research has been done on the Northern Sea Route and an ice probability analysis of the Soviet Arctic.

Amorey Gethin - covers all Scandinavian language material, with special responsibility for information on Greenland, Svalbard, and northern Scandinavia.

Dr. Stanley Evans - Assistant Director of Research - currently working up auroral data from the Royal Society IGY station at Halley Bay.

Dr. Charles Swithinbank - currently pursuing a contract between the Institute and the Defence Research Board of Canada for an ice probability analysis of the Canadian Arctic.

Max Forbes - Editor of The Polar Record - full time work on the publication of The Polar Record, plus responsibility for the Museum and the photograph collection.

Harry King - Librarian and Information Officer - responsible for the library and information files; exchange arrangements for The Polar Record;

provision of information drawn from documents available in the Institute; covers Spanish language material.

Ann Savours - Assistant Librarian - also responsible for the map and manuscript collections.

In addition, there are three clerical personnel, and at present three non-staff research workers. The latter group includes John Hanessian and myself, and John Heap, who is employed by the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey, working on an ice probability study of the Dependencies.

Mention should also be made of the British Glaciological Society, which is housed in the Institute (a secretary with a relatively small office). The BGS serves in addition as World Data Center C for Glaciology for the IGY.



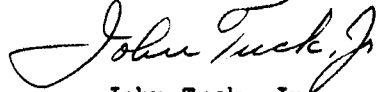
The former Wilson picture gallery. The pictures had to give way to bookshelves, map presses, filing cabinets, and research space.

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I hope that the foregoing will provide a suitable picture of the Scott Polar Research Institute, its facilities, and its functions. It does not mention, however, the human aspect of the Institute as a place to which polar people are drawn, sometimes by direct request to lecture here, more often on their own initiative whenever they happen to be within striking distance. The importance and value of such personal contacts should be obvious without explanation.

There are points, to be sure, about SPRI and its staff that one could criticize, but to do so would only be to pick at a few loose threads in a basically excellent and well-knit whole. One may hope, and so far it is only a hope, that the United States may someday have a polar center of an excellence, value, and reputation comparable to the Scott Polar Research Institute.

Very sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John Tuck, Jr." The signature is fluid and elegant, with a prominent loop at the end of the last name.

John Tuck, Jr.

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