

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Saturday Night at SPRI

93 Grantchester Meadows
Cambridge, England
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Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Among the activities of the Scott Polar Research Institute, and in keeping with its role as a meeting place for polar-minded people, is the annual series of Saturday evening lectures held during the fall and winter terms. The topics are as varied as the speakers themselves, ranging over wide geographical and subject areas. The offering last season consisted of eleven lectures, a somewhat greater number than usual, six of which were on Arctic subjects and five on the Antarctic. These covered several separate expeditions, SAS trans-Arctic air routes, Nautilus's crossing of the Arctic Ocean, physiology, ice formation in the Soviet-Arctic, and social medicine in Swedish Lapland. The speakers were three Britons, three Americans, and one each German, Russian, Norwegian, Frenchman, and Swede, giving an international outlook that is perhaps as significant an aspect as any.

Three lectures have been given so far this year, all good, but two of them I shall mention only briefly.

The first of the 1959-60 season was given by Danish shipowner Knud Lauritzen, who with his brother Ivar owns J. Lauritzen Lines, a powerful name in polar shipping. They have a fleet of some fifty ships, fourteen of which, beginning with Kista Dan in 1952, have been designed and built specifically for ice operations. This polar fleet, of which Knud Lauritzen is the father, is unique in the commercial shipping world. Kista Dan and Magga Dan are perhaps the best-known of these vessels for their Antarctic voyages under charter to the British and Australians and through Kista Dan's role in "Hell Below Zero." These two ships, of 1300 and 1850 tons respectively, rely largely upon expeditionary work, as does 2130-ton Thala Dan. The others, ranging from 2700 tons to 5050 tons, are primarily employed in trading in Finnish and Greenland waters. In a new area, there will be during the first three months of 1960 ten sailings to Quebec, which is normally closed during that period.

Lauritzen gave a good outline of the work which his ships do, and general details of their construction and operation, but he refrained from being drawn out much on the topic which was of especial interest to many, the economics of these operations. This was understandable, as he has a monopoly in this field, but still regretted.

The last of these three lectures was given by Dr. Harry Wexler, chief of the U. S. Weather Bureau's research section, on "Antarctic Temperatures." About this I shall only say that he did an excellent job in presenting clearly and in understandable form a mass of data, the presentation of which can so easily be deadly dull. This is doing neither the man nor his lecture justice, but for me to try to recap it, particularly without his diagrams, would be to do it an active injustice. So with apologies to Dr. Wexler I'll pass on to Sir Raymond Priestley's memorable talk on "Antarctic Exploration Yesterday and Today."

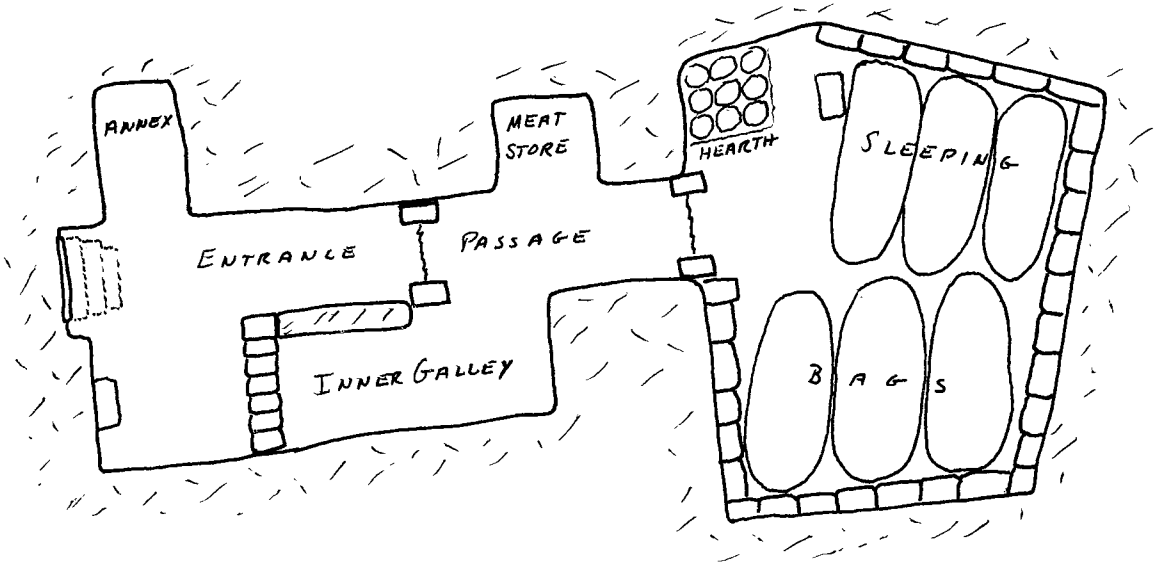
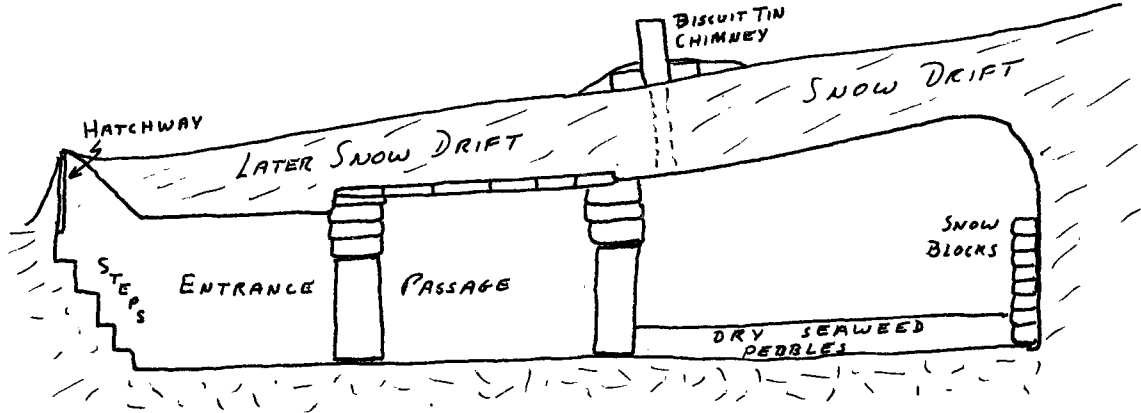
Sir Raymond (sketched in John Hanessian's #4) first sailed south as geologist with Shackleton's 1907-09 expedition on the Nimrod, and then with Scott's renowned Last Expedition, 1910-13, on the Terra Nova. The six-man Northern Party, of which Priestley was a member (and of which he is now the sole survivor) spent an epic winter (1912) in an almost-inexpressible ice cave on Inexpressible Island, at about 75° south. After a primarily academic career for 35 years following WWI, he returned to the polar fold as Acting Director of the Falkland Islands Dependencies Scientific Bureau from 1955-58, and in 1957 journeyed to West Antarctica with Prince Philip. In the Antarctic summer of 1958-59 he travelled south once again, this time to the McMurdo Sound area as British observer with our Operation Deep Freeze IV. Besides visiting familiar sites in the McMurdo region, he sailed also to Little America, Hallett, and Wilkes Stations. His lively interest, objectivity, and perspicacity were remarked upon by those who travelled with him, and are clearly seen in his diary report of the trip and in his lecture.

Sir Raymond discussed both the old and new of Antarctic exploration, giving a vivid picture of conditions half a century ago and significant observations on the modern technique. His presentation was both serious and humorous, punctuating telling descriptions of trying circumstances with wonderfully human anecdotes.

He recalled the second ascent of Mount Erebus, Ross Island's 13,300 foot active volcano, in December 1912 by a party which he led. Here I wish it were possible to turn on the tape recording I have of this lecture, for the written word can hardly convey the full warmth and zest.

Coming down the mountain was easier than going up. Indeed, we planned to descend the first 3000 feet over snow slopes on the seats of our trousers, braking ourselves with ice axes as we went. It didn't quite work out like that. After 500 feet we passed over a ridge of very sharp, well-camouflaged rocks, and we did the remaining 2500 feet without the seats of our trousers, not a very pleasant experience with the temperature at -38° F.

The story of the wintering of the Northern Party on Inexpressible Island defies ready summarizing. The Terra Nova had been unable to pick them up as planned; they had only summer clothing and a small amount of sledging food. Here they lived for seven months in an ice cave, barely existing on a meagre stock of seals and penguins. In his book Antarctic Adventure, Priestley wrote "...we have justified our existence, even if only by proving that a party cut off from its base, with practically no resources beyond what are grudgingly provided by the country, can exist, if not in comfort, at any rate in comparative safety. The winter of 1912 has undoubtedly left its mark on all of us, and none of us would care to repeat the experience..."



The ice cave on Inexpressible Island

Headroom: $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet

While his remarks showed with quiet clarity the nature of some of their remarkable ordeals, he made it plain that even this hell had its humor. The duty cook, in murky darkness, would begin meal preparation by attacking some solidly-frozen seal with a geological hammer and chisel. Bits flew everywhere. The aluminum cooker would then be passed around "like a collection plate in church" as everyone groped in the dark for anything that felt like meat.

Lots of things besides meat got into that stew. One time Campbell said to me, "Raymond, you've stolen my spill." I said, "What do I want with your spill? I don't smoke." The spill consisted of a foot length of tarred rope, with a large piece of carbon on the end of it. I had got it - it was in my second mug of stew. That evening the meal tasted strongly of creosote, and we didn't much like it.

The recounting of experiences with Shackleton and Scott was notably lacking in any boastfulness. These were cited to show varied glimpses of Antarctic exploration half a century ago, and from this Priestley carried forward to his impressions of work in the present day.

Few have moved with the times as Sir Raymond has. Many men whose initial Antarctic work dates back any considerable number of years tend to hark back to those years with a feeling largely unsympathetic toward present exploration and its methods, comparing these unfavorably with the past - or not really bothering to compare at all, simply making it clear that to them the old days are the only ones which matter.

Certainly Sir Raymond has a firm nostalgic link with that past of which he was so much a part, but he is not obsessed by it, for he also possesses an unusually keen appreciation and understanding of the modern work, and the ability to realistically evaluate each. He has not remained rooted in the past but has kept full pace with the evolution of exploration, giving his observations on the old and the new a rare validity.

I had wondered what his reaction would be to our Naval Air Facility on Ross Island, which has wrought a pronounced physical change in the landscape at Hut Point, base of Scott's first expedition and visited by Priestley on both Shackleton's and Scott's later ventures.

He remarked that bulldozers seemed to be "everywhere," and cited some of their accomplishments, such as the Little America to Byrd Station tractor trains. Commenting on the McMurdo scene,

Our old headquarters at Hut Point was unrecognizable, the landscape had been so pushed about. At Marble Point, where a permanent airfield is being surveyed, the camp is aptly labelled "FUBAR" - which being interpreted means "Fouled up beyond all recognition." The Americans had a sense of humor. And as I looked around my old haunt at Hut Point, I thought

rather sadly that a similar description would have fitted there very well. But it remains true that omelets can't be made without breaking eggs.

"But it remains true that omelets can't be made without breaking eggs." It is this last sentence, a sincere and unaffected comment, which provides the significant key. Without it, his words would have been merely the grumblings of an old man disconsolate because things had changed from his day. With it, we have somethings vastly different: a candid regret at seeing the mechanized alteration of a well-remembered scene, but this relegated to the background by acceptance and appreciation of the reasons for these changes. This is typical Priestley.

One would naturally expect him to comment on Roald Amundsen, who bested Scott to the South Pole by a month. He did, but without rancor. "Amundsen's conquest of the South Pole was, in a sense, the greatest geographical impertinence that history records," but though Amundsen had raised his expedition as a North Pole venture, changing his plans (very very quietly) after Peary's capture of that prize, Priestley bears him no ill for besting Scott to the South Pole. The Norwegians understood dogs and knew how to use them; the British at that time did not. Amundsen also took basic risks in establishing his base on the Ross Ice Shelf and in finding his own pathway (the Axel Heiberg Glacier) to the polar plateau.

If Amundsen had gone up the Beardmore Glacier, we couldn't have said enough against him. He took that chance, of going south straightaway...all the more power to him. But we've nothing whatever against Amundsen.

Not every Englishman is as charitable in this as Sir Raymond! Even he, however, has an important fault to find:

I've only one thing against Amundsen, and that's as a scientist. He complains how he had to spend so much time in his bag, because of the dogs' routine, that he got bored with life. Yet on the whole of that journey the only geological specimen he picked up was a bit of granite from the moraines near Mt. Betty. Our people were dying on their feet, and they brought back forty pounds of priceless specimens. He couldn't have had anybody on that party with scientific instincts, or even a proper sense of the publicity value of science.

Priestley's tone, even more than his words, conveyed the depth of his feeling about this. He contrasted Amundsen and Shackleton:

Shackleton was no scientist, but he knew the value of science... He converted an ordinary adventure into a first-rank scientific show. But he didn't do it from love of science, he did it because he realized the value of the show to him.

In his Presidential Address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, in 1956, Priestley summed up his feelings in saying

I believe a colleague hit the nail when he wrote:
'As a scientific leader give me Scott; for swift and efficient travel, Amundsen; but when things are hopeless and there seems no way out, get down on your knees and pray for Shackleton.' *

Further commenting on modern polar work, Sir Raymond smilingly poked a gentle gibe at one aspect:

The application of air travel to polar exploration is today a commonplace. Senators and sisters of mercy race each other to the Pole.

In a more serious vein,

In fifty years of Antarctic exploration much has changed. Most of the discomfort has gone, and with it much of the glamor.

Priestley here defines his terms carefully, for he adds that the dangers and tensions have not lessened, they have only changed. It is clear that he feels the emphasis has shifted from physical difficulties, though aplenty of these remain, to what might be called human difficulties. Among the tensions, he has cited particularly certain features of ham radio and press coverage, which, in keeping an expedition in close and constant contact with the outside world, exert pressures not always for the good. The advance of technology is not without its drawbacks.

Nonetheless, the technological advances of half a century of Antarctic exploration impress and greatly interest Sir Raymond, as is well evidenced by the attention paid in his diary of this most recent trip to the details of the varied forms of transport which he observed in action. He has termed mechanization the great American contribution to polar exploration.

* Apsley Cherry-Garrard, another member of Scott's Last Expedition, wrote in the Preface to his book The Worst Journey in the World, "For a joint scientific and geographical piece of organization, give me Scott; for a Winter Journey, Wilson; for a dash to the Pole and nothing else, Amundsen; and if I am in the devil of a hole and want to get out of it, give me Shackleton every time."

His diary also shows an active mind thinking through the problems and possibilities of various methods of and approaches to future Antarctic exploration in its many facets. It is perhaps this forward outlook that is primarily responsible for his 73 years appearing to be a dozen or more less.

Lastly, a bit from the conclusion of Sir Raymond's lecture:

Perhaps the most satisfactory feature of the situation today is the international cooperation that is taking place regularly and practically without exception in this outpost of a distracted world where elsewhere suspicion and distrust prevail. This holds, as a rule, even for the British, Argentine and Chilean parties in disputed Graham Land... In February, in Wilkes Land, I saw \$1,000,000 worth of gear handed over from one country to another: a well-established base for 17 men. At a short, moving ceremony, a new set of scientists took over, and work continued without pause.

I have quoted Sir Raymond at some length, his own words being greatly preferable to any paraphrase or summary. Perhaps the random selection presented here will help give a fuller view of this many-sided grand old man of Antarctica.

Very sincerely,

John Tuck, Jr.
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