The Race to the South Pole

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, one of the most exciting fronts of exploration was that of Antarctica, the massive, ice-bound continent surrounding the South Pole. Team after team of adventurers, eager to be remembered by posterity, raced to be the first to reach the pole.

But reaching that fabled pole was not so easy. Since Antarctica had not yet been explored, expeditions did not have the benefit of terrain maps. Neither did they have discoveries from their antecedents to help them on the grueling journey. Many ships became locked in ice and were in danger of being crushed. Crews were forced to abandon the ships and trek across the barren land. This was made difficult because they could only bring with them the gear and supplies they could haul by dogsled. Crew members and sled teams could disappear into hidden ice crevasses in the blink of an eye.

Moreover, explorers faced dismal weather conditions, including temperatures below zero, severe wind chill, and blinding blizzards. Many explorers died of hypothermia due to the extreme weather. Others suffered or perished from malnutrition and other maladies, such as pneumonia, frostbite, windburn, and dehydration. Sometimes, entire crews perished on the journey, their stories to be told posthumously in journals recovered by search parties or later explorers.

The first team to reach the South Pole was led by Roald Amundsen in 1911. Robert Scott’s team arrived one month later only to find that they’d been beaten, then to perish on the trek back out. History still remembers these parties and many others, though, for the courage they showed in the face of such hardship.