

## Could It Have Been Different? Boatswain Feather with Scott in the Antarctic

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In July 1895 the International Geographical Congress met in London, and it was decided that Antarctica would be the primary focus of new exploration. Up until this time, no one had explored the hinterland of the frozen continent, and even the vast majority of its coastline was still unknown. The meeting touched off a flurry of activity, and soon thereafter, national expeditions from Britain, Germany and Sweden, as well as private ventures, started organizing. The Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration had begun.

When 31-year-old Thomas Alfred Forster Feather was appointed Boatswain of *Discovery* in May 1901, the Norfolk native and First Class Petty Officer had no idea that his performance during the upcoming expedition would net him an appointment as a warrant officer in the Royal Navy. Feather was a post office boy in Stalham before joining the Navy in 1885 as a Boy 2nd Class. By May 1888, he was an Able Seaman, and between 1893 and 1895, Feather rocketed from Leading Seaman to First Class Petty Officer. His ability to handle men evidently showed itself, accounting the quick succession of promotions.

Though appointed to the position of Boatswain of *Discovery*, such an appointment was usually held by a first class petty officer, if a warranted boatswain was not present to fill the billet. One is inclined to conjecture that Feather's "people skills" aided his appointment. This attribute, along with Feather's professionalism, were later warmly laid out by Scott:

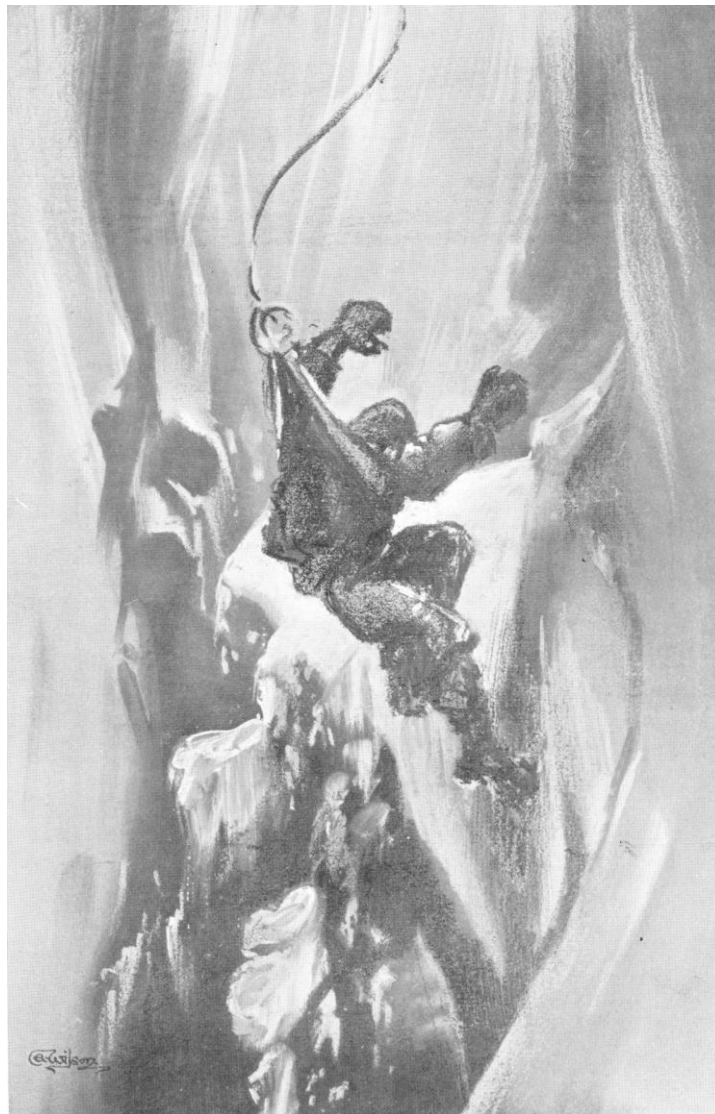
*Our boatswain, Thomas Feather, was a thorough seaman, and took that intense pride in his charge which was so well known in the old sailing days. A sailor will understand well the merits of a boatswain who can make the proud boast that the Discovery circumnavigated the world without losing a rope or sail. Our boatswain, like the rest of us, under new conditions had to turn his talents into fresh channels; in the Far South all that pertained to sledge equipment was placed in his charge, and with him rested the responsibility that everything was in readiness when we started out on our sledge journeys. And here, as before, he proved his excellence, for I do not remember a single complaint or breakdown that could have been obviated by more careful preparation. (Scott (1905), Vol. 1, p. 73)*

After *Discovery* arrived in Antarctica, "Taff" Feather (a nickname derived from his initials) and many of the sailors fostered misconceptions about their strange new home. Believing that Ross Island (on which they were camped) was very small and could be walked around in a few hours by keeping on the ice floe and following the coast. In fact, it measures 60 miles in length. A bit of foolhardiness in mid-May 1902, nearly cost Feather and Second Engineer James Dellbridge dearly. After dinner, they went out for a walk at two in the afternoon, and after six hours had not returned, so three search parties were making ready when the pair turned up onboard. They had gotten lost in the snow drift and were in pitch darkness. Nearby, a sledge party had already suffered a fatality two months previous, when Able Seaman George Vince drowned after slipping down a steep ice slope during a blizzard. His body was never recovered.

Despite his wanderlust, the Tom Feather displayed his mettle during a preliminary southern sledging reconnaissance that September. The party consisted of Scott, Third Lieutenant Shackleton and Feather. The trio's two dog teams were not always kind to the party, as Second-in-Command Lieut. Albert Armitage wrote:

*On one occasion, as they were crossing a crevasse which was 3 1/2 feet broad, and when Mr. Feather was harnessed to the traces, in front of the dogs that were dragging the sledges, the dogs stopped short in front of the crack, and dragged the boatswain back into it, and he was suspended by his harness just below the surface of the ice. Shortly after he had been dragged up and had resumed pulling, the toggle connecting him to the traces carried away, so he had a near shave. When asked if he was hurt, he only replied: 'Damn the dogs!' On another occasion one of their sledges, on which were stowed most of the provisions, went down one of these treacherous places, and Mr. Feather was lowered down to unpack it before it could be recovered. (Armitage (1984), p. 141)*

The sledging expedition had been a closer brush with Death than Feather realized at the time, as Scott related, "This evening the boatswain has shown me his harness; one strand was cut clean through where it fell across the ice-edge. Altogether he had a pretty close call". (Scott (1905), Vol. 1, p. 529) Feather was often Captain Scott's first choice to be a member of his personal sledge.



"Down a Crevasse," by E.A. Wilson (Scott (1905), Vol. 2, p. 282)

During the 1903 sledging season, Feather saw no less activity on the ice. After the trail was blazed up to the icecap (on what was subsequently named Ferrar Glacier), Antarctica's interior was revealed. The main journey from *Discovery* began on October 12, and the advance party (including the Boatswain) commenced its march across the vast plain of snow by mid-November. As the men headed west, the unforgiving conditions began to take their toll – the strain was telling on the party. Feather suffered agonizing back pains, but did not utter a word of complaint as he pulled at the traces just behind Scott. The Commander knew his sledge mate was suffering terribly, but when he cast an eye at Feather, the Boatswain straightened up and pretended nothing was wrong. With pride, Scott wrote, “What is one to do with such people?” (Scott (1905), Vol. 2, p. 257)



Three four-man sledge parties at Hut Point, Ross Island; Feather is standing second from left. (courtesy Feather family)

On a virtually unknown continent, Scott had the luxury of bestowing intangible honors on faithful companions like Feather. It was during this journey that Mount Feather was christened (just past the Ferrar Glacier, in Victoria Land).

The time had come to divide the party. Feather and two other men were sent back to *Discovery* with a sledge on November 22, while Scott and two men struggled westward until 1 December, when they too headed for the ship – their adventure was drawing to a close. By mid-February, due almost solely to efforts by the men from the relief ships *Morning* and *Terra Nova*, *Discovery* was able to break out of her ice prison and leave Antarctica in her wake.

When Scott submitted a lengthy dispatch to the Admiralty, praising all expedition members in the highest terms, he selected six individuals who were specifically Mentioned in Dispatches (MID): Dailey, Dellbridge, Evans, Lashly, Wild and Feather. (Huxley (1978), p. 140)

The MID was sometimes the basis for a medal or promotion in rank, and the Navy came through for Feather. He was promoted Acting Boatswain on Sept. 10, 1904, and confirmed in that rank almost exactly two years later. And though the newly established Polar Medal was being issued to expedition members, not everyone received it from the hand of King Edward VII, as did Boatswain Feather that December. Fate had smiled on him during his first Antarctic expedition, but things would be quite different for Feather – and Scott – the second time around.



Boatswain T.A.F. Feather, RN (courtesy Feather family)

By September 1909, Scott declared he was going to the frozen continent again, with the primary objective being the South Pole. He enlisted several old *Discovery* shipmates, and Feather was officially part of the new venture in April 1910. However, by November the following notation appeared on his service record: “Sent home as unsuitable for Antarctic Expedition” (ADM 196/35/6937). What could this have meant? After seven months' involvement with the new expedition, the man who was previously described by Scott as “a thorough seaman,” and afterward by several officers as “decidedly temperate,” “capable and zealous” (ADM 196/35/6937), was now “unsuitable”?

According to family legend, through Feather's daughter Letty Feather and grandson Dr. John A. Feather, Boatswain Feather and second-in-command Lieutenant E.R.G.R. Evans (later Lord Mountevans of the *Broke*) did not get on well. Evans was said not to be too keen on a man who came up through the ranks, and that Feather “had “the ear” of Scott.” In addition, supposedly Feather believed Evans was a self-opinionated officer, who would not be advised or told anything, and would not listen to what Feather was telling him about the supply chain and arrangements.

There is also another Feather family story that the Boatswain had fallen aboard ship on the way out to New Zealand and injured his knee, and this injury allowed him to bow out of the expedition without losing face.

However, Scott's original journals offer something more concrete regarding Feather's departure from the expedition:

Oct. 29, 1910 – “Heard Feather has been insubordinate to [Lieutenant] Rennick – very much annoyed – Feather suspended from duty...”

Oct. 31, 1910 – “Saw Feather again – I'm afraid he must go.”

(SPRI, B.M. Add.MSS. 51024-51038)

The late polar historian A.G.E. Jones asked former *Terra Nova* stoker Bill Burton about Feather during a 1982 interview: "He said Scott rejected [Feather] as he was too "navy-fied". That is strange for a naval officer and a stickler for things that didn't matter. It did not interfere with his career." (Jones to Stein, personal communication, March 16, 1994).

Naval history enthusiast David Slade (who spoke with Letty Feather in the 1980s) wrote afterward:

*Bosuns were never popular men, especially with the Stokers, so just how much one reads into Burton's comments is open to conjecture. My father was a bosun in the RN, so I know! Stokers under the orders of seamen were known to be less than charitable in their opinions. Mercantile crew even less so!!* (Slade to Stein, personal communication, Sept. 20, 1994)

The story may have ended then and there, except for the tragic death of the South Pole Party in March 1912. Feather's family recalls that he partly blamed himself for the tragedy, and felt things may have turned out differently if he had been available to advise and assist with sledging arrangements. There was no evident bitterness toward his old commander after Feather was sent home, and if any existed, it was likely wiped away by Scott's death and the circumstances that led up to it. (Conversation between Letty Feather and David Slade; Slade to Stein, personal communication, Sept. 20, 1994)

Feather was replaced with Boatswain Cheetham, RNR, an Antarctic veteran who served on the *Morning* (with Second Officer Evans) and Shackleton's *Nimrod* Expedition. Evans wrote of Cheetham:

*The seamen were excellent, and Captain Scott seemed delighted with the crowd. He and Wilson were very loyal to the old Discovery men we had with us and Scott was impressed with my man, Cheetham, the Merchant Service boatswain, and could not quite make out how 'Alf,' as the sailors called him, got so much out of the hands – this little squeaky-voiced man – I think we hit on Utopian conditions for working the ship. There were no wasters, and our seamen were the pick of the British Navy and Mercantile Marine. Most of the Naval men were intelligent petty officers and were as fully alive as the merchantmen to 'Alf's' windjammer knowledge. Cheetham was quite a character, and besides being immensely popular and loyal he was a tough, humorous little soul who had made more Antarctic voyages than any man onboard.* (Evans (1921), pp. 31-32)

Alfred Buchanan Cheetham's incredible Antarctic record speaks plainly through his medallic entitlement: bronze Polar Medal/no clasp/engraved "1902-04" on edge (Boatswain/*Morning*) and silver Polar Medal/Antarctic 1907-09 (Third Officer & Boatswain/*Nimrod*), Antarctic 1910-13 (Boatswain/*Terra Nova*) & Antarctic 1914-16 (Third Officer/*Endurance*). Cheetham went on to serve in the Mercantile Marine after his return from Antarctica, and was Second Officer of the SS *Prunelle* when she was torpedoed and sunk on Aug. 22, 1918, two miles southeast of Blyth. The captain and 11 men lost their lives; among the dead was Cheetham.

Ironically, Feather probably learned of Scott's fate before most of the outside world, since between February 1912 and November 1914 he was based out of Sydney, serving aboard the surveying vessel *Sealark*. He remained in the vicinity, joining the sloop *Torch* in November 1914, based in New Zealand.

Was it mere coincidence that his naval duties put the Boatswain "in the neighborhood" of Antarctica when Scott died? A lingering question surrounding "Taff" Feather and Robert Falcon Scott's fatal Antarctic expedition.

Just prior to the end of the First World War, Boatswain Feather became Chief Boatswain, retiring with the honorary rank of Lieutenant in 1922. He passed from the scene on July 1, 1943.

## Medals and Related Artifacts of Lieutenant T.A.F. Feather, RN

Letty Feather wrote to a collector who had her father's medals in 1989, and related the story as to how they came to leave the family:

*My Father left them to my brother, or I suppose to his wife. He was killed in a cycle accident when the will was 'proved'. She asked if I wanted the medals back. I said I thought my brother would have wanted my nephew to have them and it was left like that. That's when I made a mistake and it wasn't till she died that I learned my nephew didn't want them - can you believe it? - and they had been sold, hence, they appeared on the market. (Feather to Kroulik, personal communication, March 6, 1989)*

Letty inherited her father's officially named Royal Geographical Society Special Award (a silver striking of The Scott Medal in gold). The medal was in her possession in 1989, and when she died in March 1993, it presumably passed to a family member.

A member of the Feather family purchased the following medals and artifacts at a December 2006 Morton & Eden auction:

### Medals

1914-15 Star (BOSN. T.A.F. FEATHER, R.N.)

British War Medal (CH. BOSN. T.A.F. FEATHER. R.N.)

Victory Medal (CH. BOSN. T.A.F. FEATHER. R.N.)

Polar Medal (silver)/Antarctic 1902-04 (PETT. OFF. 1<sup>ST</sup> CLASS. T. FEATHER. "DISCOVERY")

Naval Long Service & Good Conduct (EdwVII – T.A.F. FEATHER, P.O. 1 Cl., H.M.S. EXCELLENT)

### Artifacts

- a) original silver-plated bosun's pipe and 49-inch brass chain
- b) silver cigarette case, ornately engraved leaf decoration and initials "T.A.F.F." (Birmingham, 1899)
- c) enameled brass souvenir vesta case, stamped "Official memento of the visit of the Channel Fleet to Blackpool, 9th, 10th & 11th August 1907"
- d) a plain silver napkin ring, with engraved initials "T.F." (London, 1929)

Notably, two gilt *Discovery* buttons (Firmin & Sons) were also originally part of the collection.



The Feather Collection. (photograph by Dorothy H. Stein)

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Heather Lane  
George D. Lewis  
James Morton  
Rear Admiral J.A.L. Myres, CB  
Baden Norris  
David J. Scheeres  
David Slade  
the late David E. Yelverton, FRGS

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