

To: Editor
The Georgian
St. George's College
Brentford

TRUCCO - for the archive. This is a very good
account

NG.
Headmaster
2.11.93

St. George's and Antarctica

As at 1991 Fixed to the outside of the wooden building housing our

Please → Geography Room is a metal plaque bearing the inscription:

correct
This is the
Geog Room
is no longer
there

This Building was Formally Opened by
Hubert Wilson Esq. C.B.E.

H.B.M. Consul General

At a solemn Service of Commemoration
On Sunday March 17th 1929

Being the Seventeenth Anniversary of the
Glorious Death of
Capt Lawrence E.G.Oates

In the Antarctic

Who was Captain Oates and what had he got to do with
St. George's?

We need to go back to 1910 when the race to be the
first man to reach the South Pole began in earnest with the
Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen challenging the English
Expedition led by Captain Scott. Scott had chosen the
Captain Oates now commemorated on our plaque to be in charge
of the ponies he intended to use to drag his sledges for the
first part of his march to the pole. Oates was a cavalry
officer who had been commended for bravery in the Boer War in
South Africa. One account tells us :

'The reconnaissance patrol he was leading
into Boer-held territory was ambushed in
a dry river-bed. On being called upon to
surrender, Oates' reply was characteristically
curt: 'We came here to fight, not to surrender'.
During the action several of his men were
wounded, and as each man's ammunition ran
out ordered him to fall back, himself re-
maining to keep up a steady fire until finally
the Boer's withdrew, leaving Oates alone and
wounded. At the end of the day a search-party
brought him in with a compound fracture of the
thigh. His patrol had arrived back safely,
intact and without the loss of a single man.
For this action Oates was awarded the Queen's
Medal with clasps'.

No Surrender draft'.

In the event, the race to the pole was won by Amundsen who reached it on December 15th, 1911. He sailed back to Australia in his ship 'Fram' to give the news to the world, touring Australia and New Zealand giving lectures about his adventures. He then sailed to Buenos Aires where, according to 'The Georgian' of the time:

'On Monday, July 10th (1912), 30 boys attended the lecture given by Captain Amundsen in the Odeon. After hearing a most interesting description of the discovery of the S.pole and seeing numerous pictures illustrating the difficulties that faced the heroic explorers which was an object lesson on 'nil desperandum' our party adjourned next door to the Royal Hotel for their evening meal and reached the college about 9.20p.m.'

While in Argentina, Amundsen was feted by the Norwegian community here and in particular by Don Pedro Christopherson who had financed the supplies for the 'Fram'. Amundsen stayed in one of Don Pedro's estancias to write his book about the expedition before returning to Norway in triumph. You can still see the 'Fram' on show in Oslo.

Meanwhile, as yet unbeknown to Amundsen or the world at large, disaster had befallen Scott's polar party comprising Scott, Oates, Wilson, Bowers and Evans. They had reached the South pole 33 days after Amundsen but the return march became a nightmare. They had to haul the sledge themselves unlike Amundsen who had wisely used husky dogs. They faced a return march to base of about 1,300 km. After 600km Evans collapsed and died from concussion received in a fall. They were all suffering from frost-bitten feet as they experienced very low temperatures (-43°C one night). Oates'

feet became particularly badly frost-bitten and his old thigh wound was painful. He could not help the others to pull the sledge and he knew he was delaying them, endangering their safe return. Before setting out on each day's march it took two hours to put his foot-gear on his swollen frozen feet which were by now becoming gangrenous. Having struggled 1,000km from the pole in two months but with another 300km to go, Scott wrote in his diary:

'Friday, March 16th or 17th.

Lost track of dates but think the last correct. Tragedy all along the line. At lunch the day before yesterday, poor Oates said he couldn't go on, he proposed we should leave him in his sleeping bag. That we could not do, and we induced him to come on, on the afternoon march. Inspite of its awful nature for him he struggled on and we made a few miles. At night he was worse and we knew the end had come. Should this be found I want these facts recorded. Oates' last thoughts were of his mother, but immediately before he took pride in thinking that his regiment would be pleased with the bold way in which he met his death. We can testify to his bravery. He has born intense suffering for weeks without complaint and to the very last was able and willing to discuss outside subjects. He did not - would not - give up hope till the very end. He was a brave soul. This was the end. He slept through the night before last, hoping not to wake, but he woke in the morning - yesterday. It was blowing a blizzard. He said 'I am just going outside and may be some time'. He went out into the blizzard and we have not seen him since..... We knew that poor Oates was walking to his death, but though we tried to dissuade him, we knew it was the act of a brave man and an English gentleman. We all hope to meet the end with a similar spirit, and assuredly the end is not far.'

Tragically, Oates' sacrifice was to be in vain.

Scott, Wilson and Bowers could only stagger on a further

20km before camping in a blizzard.. Their food and fuel was exhausted and they all froze to death in their tent. Their bodies were not found until seven months later when a search party from base discovered their tent nearly buried in snow. A search was made for Oates' body but it too had long since been buried by the snow. They built a cairn near where Oates had walked out to his death and placed a cross on it. Lashed to the cross was the following record:

'Hereabouts died a very gallant gentleman, Captain L.E.G. Oates of the Inniskilling Dragoons. In March 1912, returning from the pole, he walked willingly to his death in a blizzard to try to save his comrades, beset by hardship. This note is left by the Relief Expedition. 1912.'

The news of the tragedy did not reach the outside world until February 10th, 1913 when the expedition ship reached New Zealand. The names of Scott, Oates and his companions became synonymous with heroic but tragic endeavour and the selfless death of Oates struck a particularly poignant chord.

Now, at this point, we begin to see the connection between Oates and St. George's. One of the teachers here in 1913 was Mr. Arthur Cuff and he must have been deeply impressed with the story of Captain Oates. He had been teaching geography, sports and drama here since 1903 but, now, in 1913, he left St. George's to become headmaster of the British Day School in Montevideo and later served in the first world war. He therefore missed the lunch in honour of another polar explorer, Sir Ernest Shackleton, that Canon Stevenson attended in Buenos Aires in 1914. Shackleton had in fact marched to within 150km of the S.pole in 1909 but was now about to embark from

Buenos Aires in his ship 'Endurance' to go to Antarctica and cross the whole continent. It proved to be a disaster for the 'Endurance' was crushed and sunk in the Antarctic ice. His expedition had been marooned on Elephant Island and only after he had made an epic 1,200km journey in one of the ship's lifeboats to South Georgia had he been able to organise a rescue ship for his marooned comrades.

In 1917, Shackleton was again in Buenos Aires and was guest of honour at our Speech Day, presenting pupils with prizes and the school with a signed picture of the 'Endurance'.

To return to Mr.Cuff, he had left Montevideo and became joint partner of the Buenos Aires High School for boys in Belgrano. Then, in 1928, he applied for the headship of the new Preparatory School at St.George's. He was unsuccessful in this, the post being given to Rev.

Eric Rattray who had followed Mr.Cuff's footsteps as headmaster of the British School in Montevideo. So Mr.Cuff decided to start his own preparatory school and, rather than call it after one of the saints as seemed customary, elected to honour it with the name of his hero, Captain Oates. So Oates College opened at Hurlingham early in 1928 and numbers grew rapidly. In the 'Buenos Aires Herald' of March 16th, 1929 appeared the announcement that, on Sunday, March 17th, 1929 at Oates College:

'a special service will be held in commemoration of the late Captain L.E.G.Oates whose sublime act of self-sacrifice occurred on that day 17 years ago. A hearty welcome is extended to parents and all interested in the school to be present. Opportunity will be taken of the occasion to open formally the new classrooms built during the vacation for which purpose H.M. Consul-General H.W.Wilson Esq has promised to be present.'

Fixed to the wall of this new, timber classroom building was the plaque which finally came to St. George's college. To see how this came about we need to follow the fortunes of Mr. Cuff and Oates College. His college was a day- and boarding-school for the sons of British and North American parents and was organised into houses named after well-known Antarctic explorers. In the main hall hung a print of the famous painting by J.C. Dollman of Oates staggering out into the blizzard to die entitled 'A Very Gallant Gentleman' (the original of which hangs in the Cavalry Club, London). Captain Oates had been devoted to his mother, Mrs. Caroline Oates, and she must have approved Mr. Cuff's calling his college after her son. She regularly donated books about explorers to the Oates College Library.

Oates College remained open until 1937 when, much to the chagrin of the parents, Mr. Cuff closed the school to become headmaster of this college, St. George's, in succession to Rev. Herriz-Smith. He brought with him about 50 Oates College boys, some of their teachers (for example Mr. Roman Charo who now lives in retirement close to the college), the library books, the Oates painting and the timber classroom block carrying the plaque commemorating Captain Oates on its wall. It is this very same classroom block which now houses our geography room at St. George's. One of the dormitories here became 'Oates Dorm' and if you look in our library for books about exploration you will find at least six which came from the Oates College library and all bearing an inscription from Mrs. Oates.

Mr. Cuff did not enjoy good health and resigned the headship of St. George's in 1940. Rev. Jackson took over as headmaster and in his farewell speech to Mr. Cuff assured him that St. George's:

'intended to make some permanent memorial of Captain Oates so that we ourselves may develop something of that hero's devotion to duty and self-effacement.'

It is now difficult to discern the result of that intention. We simply have the classroom block with its Oates plaque, the books donated by Mrs. Oates and a nameplate on one of the dormitories in School House inscribed 'Oates Dorm'. The picture of Oates' seems not to have survived, possibly having been destroyed in the fire of 1959.

Mr. Cuff returned to England to become Chief Overseas Commissioner for Toc H and was resident manager of South America (River Plate) House, London, run for the benefit of Latin American volunteers serving with the armed forces during the second world war. Many Old Georgians who served in that war have fond memories of Mr. Cuff and the welcome he extended to them whenever they were in London. On retirement he returned to Argentina to live for a time in Los Cocos, Cordoba, but moved back to the U.K. in 1961 where he passed away at his home in Anglesey in 1969.

A museum and memorial library devoted to Captain Oates was established in 1955 in Selborne, England, by his cousin. The museum is housed in a building called 'The Wakes', once the home of Rev. Gilbert White who published a well-known classic book 'The Natural History of Selborne' in 1789. Visitors to Selborne often make a point of searching out Gilbert White's grave in the grounds of Selborne parish church but Old Georgians may well wander a little further and come across another grave, one inscribed 'Eric Ainsworth Rattray, 1891-1947'. It is a strange coincidence that the Rev. Eric Rattray who had been challenged for the headship of St. George's Preparatory School in 1928 by Mr. Cuff, the founder of Oates College, should now lie at rest a short

distance from the national museum to Oates himself. Mr. Rattray had led St. George's Preparatory School most successfully from its foundation in 1929 until his retirement in 1946. He had then returned to England and been appointed the Vicar of Selborne, a parish in the gift of Magdalen College, Oxford, where he had gained his degree. Tragically, within a few months, he had a serious accident, skidding on his motorbike and as a result of the severe concussion he suffered he died soon afterwards.

Finally, there is another important school with a memorial to Captain Oates. A bronze portrait medallion of Oates was executed by Captain Scott's wife and erected near the library of Eton College, England, where Oates had been a pupil. We of St. George's can be proud that there are two schools in the world with memorials to Captain Oates - the premier school in England and the premier school in South America.

Michael LARKIN

May 1993.