

2: Background and literature

Ponting, the product of a middle-class Victorian upbringing typical in many ways, would develop in his mid-thirties into an internationally known photographer. His background, travels and photographic experiences all had influences on the work he would do in Antarctica, shaping his approach and style.

Ponting, camera artist

Born in 1870 in Salisbury, England, Ponting was the eldest son of a prosperous banker. He attended grammar schools and Wellington House College, Leyland, but no further record of those years survives. His early adulthood was marked by inability to succeed: he tried and abandoned a banking career, then moved to California in 1893 or 1894, where he was involved in ranching and mining, both of which were unsuccessful. He married the socially well-connected Mary Biddle Elliott there in 1895. Two children were born, Mildred and Arthur.

During these years Ponting developed his first interest in photography, but it was not until around 1900 that he took it up seriously. He had almost immediate success, winning several photographic competitions, and was hired by a stereopticon company to produce views for their machines, a process that uses two images to create a three-dimensional effect. Writing in 1910 about these early days, Ponting said: ‘The beautiful stereoscopic process had a hold on me [that] ... got stronger and stronger’ (quoted by Arnold 2004:205). He quickly extended his activities. He had finally found a successful occupation that was also a passion.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, he travelled widely in Europe, America, Siberia, the Far East, South-East Asia and India. He took photographs for many prominent magazines and was well paid for it. He kept physically fit: Arnold (1971) includes a photograph of Ponting roped to a companion, climbing in the Alps. He was photojournalist in the Spanish-American and Russo-Japanese wars. Another journalist described him as ‘the foremost war photographer in the Far East ... the only one who had the gumption to travel through these regions ...

photographing ... in spite of frequent arrests and danger of prolonged military imprisonment' (quoted by Arnold 2004:208). Ponting's disregard of discomfort and danger in search of good photographs would be a characteristic throughout his career.

He became a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1905, published a number of small books of photographs, well received (Arnold 1971), and began to exhibit internationally. His work was regularly published in many popular periodicals such as *Harper's*, *The Illustrated London News*, and continental publications, mostly with agency rather than personal credits, which makes it difficult now to identify his photographs. The photography consisted largely of images which recorded news or important cultural events, but there was also frequent pictorial photography. In 1908 he took mountain photographs in Switzerland and France. He published *In Lotus Land Japan* in 1910, confirming his international reputation as a photographer and travel writer.

Arnold (1971) reproduces a wide-ranging selection of over thirty of these early photographs. There are Japanese, Chinese and Ceylonese people in exotic dress or involved in ritual or craft. There are several photographs of Mt Fuji, and one of the Eiger in the Alps. Ponting wrote that all this work was 'in the interests of geography' (Ponting 2001:3), but the work reveals his eye for the saleable: he sought out and photographed the picturesque and the exotic.



2. Ponting: Mt Fuji 1907.

This photograph is the opening image of Ponting's 'Japanese Studies' collotyped by K. Ogawa F.R.P.S. in Tokyo in 1906. It is accompanied by a quote from a Wordsworth poem: 'A distant mountain's head, Strewn with snow smooth as the sky can shed, Shines like another sun' (RGS 2005).

Ponting's close relationships suffered, however. He had separated from his American wife and two young children by 1906, apparently having told his wife that an artist should not be tied down by family responsibilities (Arnold 2004). Little correspondence has survived which might throw light on the marriage. Arnold (1971:35) quotes from an unacknowledged source in which Ponting told his father at the time of the separation that 'he was a desperate man and was "ready for the river"'. Apart from one attempt to meet with the children in 1910, prevented by his departure for Antarctica, and one known expression of regret later in life, Ponting never showed interest in them again. He did include them in his will, but specifically excluded his wife.

Although he seems to have shied away from close relationships, he could get on well enough with people. His last photographic assistant, C.H. Dickason, said of him in 1964:

As a chief he was wonderful to work with and almost anybody could approach him. He was a perfect gentleman and his breeding was

evident always ... [I was] thrilled and proud of the opportunity to work for a man whose work in the field of pictorial photography was without a shadow of a doubt second to none. (Quoted by Arnold, in Riffenburgh, Cruwys & Arnold 2004:211)

In the decade after he took up photography in earnest, Ponting became a person of international notability (Arnold 1971), and he came to identify closely with his successful occupation. At a crucial moment in *The Great White South*, Ponting says he thought: 'Without my cameras I was helpless. At all costs ... my precious kit should be saved ... We would survive or sink together' (2001:70), and there is the sense here that he refers to something wider and deeper than his brief in Antarctica.

Ponting has attracted the attention of two fellow artists, a contemporary painter and a much later poet. The painter was Ernest Linzell, who portrayed Ponting under attack by killer whales in Antarctica.



3. Ernest Linzell, *Attacked by Killer Whales*, c. 1920.

Ponting included a copy of the painting in *The Great White South*, where he described the terrifying incident. A number of killer whales broke through the ice in an organised attack. An undated photograph in Riffenburgh, Cruwys and Arnold (2004:215) shows Ponting re-enacting his movements when under attack.

The pose is very similar to that in the painting, and it may be that this was one of Linzell's sources.

The poet who has depicted Ponting is New Zealander Chris Orsman. His long poem *South* (1996) tells the story of the *Terra Nova* expedition, focusing on the polar party and its camera artist. In 'A Magic Lantern Show' Orsman presents us with a Ponting 'with a fussy manner, pedantic, precise, his diction ornate' (59), a description which concurs with that given by writers such as Arnold, who says Ponting had 'a stiff and slightly fussy demeanour' (Riffenburgh, Cruwys & Arnold 2004:213).

Ealing Studios' 1948 feature film *Scott of the Antarctic* gives only a few minutes to the Ponting character, showing him with his kinematograph camera, then reciting his humorous 'sleeping bag inside-outside' poem (discussed below), to back-slapping acclaim from the expeditioners. This last is a misrepresentation: the poem was in fact read aloud by Scott, with only one listener correctly guessing its authorship. *Scott of the Antarctic* does, however, pay homage to Ponting's work with scene reconstructions of some of his more famous stills.

Photography of the time

By 1900 the basis of photography's twentieth century accessibility and popularity had been established, with many camera clubs and magazines for amateurs, and motion pictures being shown regularly in European and American cities. There were also large numbers of professionals trying to earn a living from photography. After years of sometimes intense argument, photography was generally accepted as an established form of art (Newhall 1972; Scharf 1974).

There is no evidence that Ponting ever took much interest in the debate, apart from describing himself as 'camera artist', a term in common usage throughout the nineteenth century (Krauss 1982). However, others attributed artistic qualities and associations to his work. At the publication of some of his Japanese photographs in 1905, praise was given to his 'fine artistic instinct' (Arnold 1971:33). In 1925 he was identified with both pictorialism and 'straight'

photography (Arnold 1971). The approaches named were sometimes in contradiction: the first emphasised aesthetics rather than the documentation of reality; the second, realism and objectivity without darkroom manipulation. Ponting was a pragmatist with a keen sense of what would appeal to his audience. He did not confine himself to any particular approach.

Landscape and portraits were his specialty. Landscapes had been photographic subjects since the earliest days of the medium, and photographic portraiture had risen rapidly in popularity. There was also a demand for documentary photographs. The first collections of Ponting photographs exhibited and published were in these genres.

Ponting did not theorise about his work as art, but in *The Great White South* he wrote much about technique. The industry in Ponting's time was one of constant technical innovation, in which he was passionately interested. His equipment, however, would have been standard: a large-format camera which took glass plates requiring long exposures. Photographers could use albumen prints, in which paper was coated with an egg-white film before being sensitised by a silver nitrate solution; or platinotype prints, using platinum; or carbon prints, Ponting's speciality.

Representations of Antarctica

Ponting's photography would become an important part of the body of work which comprises representations of Antarctica. In certain ways, his work would have been influenced by this larger context, although his understanding of Antarctica and representations of it would have been limited, shaped by his English middle class upbringing and schooling, and his later reading.

How Ponting may have imagined Antarctica, and how Antarctica may have shaped his imagination in turn, is highly relevant to this study. His expectations of Antarctic landscape and nature would have been strongly influenced by social and aesthetic norms, and by prevailing literary and artistic conventions (Wylie 2003). Though photography is commonly associated with objectivity and

accepted as a copy of reality, it is actually a cultural practice with its own codes and conventions. Landscape is also mediated by culture (Mitchell 2002), and its representation may involve overlaying pre-existing sets of ideas about places on other places (Noble & Sullivan 2007). Similarly, portraiture may be closely connected with cultural beliefs about the nature of personal identity (Gage 1997).

We know something about what Ponting knew of Antarctica before he went there. In *The Great White South* he says he had read *The Voyage of the Discovery*, Scott's book about his first Antarctic expedition. Scott gives a history of Antarctic exploration and goes on to give a very detailed account of the 1901-04 expedition, including much geographic and scientific information. The book includes some photographs by Reginald Skelton, Chief Engineer and Official Photographer, which must have been of particular interest for Ponting, as well as artwork by Edward Wilson. There are also descriptive passages about Antarctica's ability to enthrall:

Beyond our immediate surroundings is fairyland. The eye travels on and on over the gleaming plain till it meets the misty white horizon, and above and beyond, the soft silvery outlines of the mountains. Did one not know them of old, it would sometimes be difficult to think them real, so deep a spell of enchantment seems to rest on the scene. (Scott 1905:272)

Ponting says in *The Great White South* that he had also read Shackleton's *Heart of the Antarctic* before his own journey there. This is a detailed account of the 1907-09 *Nimrod* expedition. It too gives an introductory history of polar exploration, and has many photographs. The photographers are not named, but Shackleton may have taken some himself. Most are unexceptional as photographs, but there are some showing very beautiful icy scenes. There are also stunning on-site illustrations by the expedition artist, George Marston.

Shackleton introduces the theme of adventure in the second sentence of *Heart of the Antarctic*, and Scott also uses the word extensively in his book. Readers of the time were showing a strong preference for adventure and for writers in the genre such as Stevenson, Kipling and Rider Haggard, whose heroes combined adventurous spirit with virtues of gallantry, honour and 'manly duty' (Karamanski 1984:461). On his way south Ponting read F.T. Bullen's *Cruise of*

the Cachalot, an account of the *Terra Nova*'s earlier whaling history, and called it 'one of the most stirring books of adventure ever written' (Ponting 2001:21). He loved the idea of adventure, and would construct his own book and his film in terms of it.

Both Scott and Shackleton quoted poetry in their books. Both refer to Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and Shackleton quotes 'Alone, alone; all, all alone' (Shackleton 1909, 1:289). Ponting, along with most grammar schoolboys of his times, probably knew the poem. Many Antarctic explorers were poetry lovers and *The Ancient Mariner*, one of the great symbols of human loneliness, was a perennial favourite (Simpson-Housley 1992; Bell 2001). Coleridge drew on explorers' depictions of Southern and Arctic Ocean ice, and brought them to life in resonating lines:

And now there came both mist and snow,
And it grew wondrous cold:
And ice, mast-high, came floating by,
As green as emerald.

The poem is heavy with supernatural mystery. Scott had also felt something of the supernatural in Antarctica, using the word 'ghostly' several times in *The voyage of the Discovery*, as in 'the frowning range of mountains that has looked down on us in such ghostly, weird fashion throughout the winter months' (Scott 1905:292). The supernatural was a feature also in much of the fiction about Antarctica that had been written by Ponting's time. Nineteenth-century writers had represented the South Pole as 'a gateway to previously unimagined spaces' (Leane 2004:153). There is no evidence that Ponting ever read any of this fiction, but he does seem to have been a prolific reader and may have been aware of it.

Another poet, Robert Service, was also popular among explorers. Service was an Englishman of Ponting's generation whose verse described the frozen north of Canada. It is not known when Ponting first encountered this work, but he quotes Service four times in *The Great White South*. He uses Service's descriptions of polar isolation: 'the Great Alone' and 'the stark and sullen solitudes that sentinel

the Pole'. He also prefaces his chapter on the fate of the polar party with excerpts from a Service poem:

And I will not be won by weaklings, subtle, suave and mild,
But by men with the hearts of Vikings, and the simple faith of a
child;
Send me the best of your breeding, lend me your chosen ones;
Them will I take to my bosom, them will I call my sons.

Antarctica has often been represented as 'a catalyst for, antagonist in, and sometimes a metaphor for, human endeavour and drama' (Leane 2007:269). It lends itself readily to metaphorical representations, with environmental and climatic extremes constructed as challenges to character and mental capacity. Spufford (1997) argues that British explorers viewed Antarctica through the lens of the sublime, a mixture of awe and fear arising from recognition of humanity's vulnerable relationship to nature. Pyne (2004:67) suggests that Antarctica's ice was a mirror reflecting back at the explorers their own character and that of the civilisation from which they came: 'Explorers and the civilisation that sent them did not so much discover The Ice as The Ice allowed them to discover themselves'. Wylie (2003) believes the explorers' experience of the landscape would have related to metaphysical questions on the nature of being, with the fashioning of selves and landscapes being a mutually dynamic process. Ponting would have gone south with an imagination of Antarctica and its exploration amorphously formed from many sources, and mediated by his culture and his own world view.

The power of the photograph to enthrall lecture audiences and enhance expedition fund-raising had quickly made it part of polar exploration. Early photographs in the Antarctic had been taken during the *Challenger* Expedition of 1872-1876 and the *Belgica* Expedition of 1897. Shackleton's *Nimrod* expedition took some cinematograph films as well as photographs. However, the main work of illustration was still undertaken by artists. Ponting's Antarctic work would be seminal, paving the way for other fine photographers.

Ponting's brief and role in the expedition

Early expedition photography was viewed as essentially functional, its purpose being to show the terrain, geology, geography, botany and wildlife, and the work and life of expeditioners. On the British Antarctic Expedition, Ponting's function involved all these, and there was a promotional aspect with a view to raising funds for potential new expeditions. Scott also felt strongly that posterity was an important part of the audience for the record (Barwell 2007), and being a man with an appreciation for the arts, he sought a photographer of distinction. Unlike artists and photographers in other Antarctic expeditions of the period, Ponting's role would be exclusively devoted to this work.

Ponting told the press that the expedition would be the best equipped, photographically, of any that had left England (*British Journal of Photography* 1910). He had been given 'virtually *carte blanche*' by Scott (Arnold 1971:49). The equipment he selected was comprehensive for both pictorial and scientific purposes. He took a number of cameras for still work, including some Newman & Guardia 'Sibyl' ¼ plate models with f/4.5 Tessar lenses, light and strong and specially intended for use by sledging parties. His most frequently used camera was one he designed himself, a 7 in. x 5 in. reflex, but he also had a Sanger-Shepherd selected for photomicrographic work, and a lens for telephotography, together with roll-films, Eastman 'Seed' Plates and Paget Plates, Burroughs Wellcome Tabloid 'Rytol' Developer, Lumière colour-plates, colour filters and a projection lantern. He also took two movie-cameras: a Newman-Sinclair, adapted from the company's No. 3 model, and a J.A. Prestwich camera (Arnold 1971). He said later that Eastman film 'never failed to yield the finest possible results' (Ponting 2001:171). He had a Newman-Sinclair cinematograph film developing machine.

Ponting was described in the roll of members of the British Antarctic Expedition as 'camera artist'. Although the term was somewhat generic at the time, Scott also referred frequently to Ponting as 'artist' and to his work as 'art': he was a 'true artist ...sustained by artistic enthusiasm' (Ponting 2001:xvii), 'an artist in love with his work' (Scott 2006:168).

As an artist, he had to make a living. His pay on the expedition was £5 per week, compared with £4 per week paid to the scientific staff. He intended to earn much more money, post-expedition, by lecturing and exhibiting his work in the media landscape of the time, an ‘ever-changing mix of established media and emerging cutting edge technologies’ (Dixon 2006:61), in which Ponting was very much at home, having both technical skills and a grasp of how to maximise publicity and profit.

His post-expedition disputes about copyright and publication, and his comment in *The Great White South* that he found the Antarctic a very disappointing region for photography, convey to some the impression that his interest in Antarctica ‘was almost wholly commercial’ (Wylie 2002:256). Ponting’s disappointment with Antarctica, however, was only in regard to the difficulties it presented; elsewhere in *The Great White South* he writes of its great beauty for the photographer, and Scott made the observation that Ponting ‘declares this is the most beautiful spot he has ever seen and spends all day and most of the night in what he calls “gathering it in” with camera and cinematograph’ (Scott 2006:96). Nevertheless, he was a self-made, working man, and his artistry was necessarily linked to commercial purpose.

Ownership disputes of his photographic coverage apparently arose from the vagueness of contracts. It had been agreed that 40% of the proceeds from the exploitation of the cinematography should go to the expedition, 40% to the Gaumont company (which had exclusive rights to the film), and 20% to Ponting. Ponting bought all the rights to it in 1914. On the other hand, there had been no fully comprehensive agreement between Ponting and Scott on post-expedition use of the still photographs. He seems to have taken a personal agreement between himself and Scott to be sufficient. After his return to England, and not knowing then that the polar party had perished, Ponting wrote to Scott: ‘I think that I made a very great mistake on going on this enterprise without a full and complete Agreement ... and I certainly think you should have let me know in full ... of your arrangements for dealing with my work ...’ (quoted by Arnold 1971:86). He later wrote to Frank Debenham, one of the expedition’s geologists:

‘It makes me feel sick when I think of the way Scott muddled up publicity matters ...’ (quoted without date in Arnold 1971:87). There was also friction with other members of the expedition over their use of his photographs in their lectures. They took his objections lightly.

A degree of emotional estrangement from others was inevitable, given Ponting’s character and temperament. Arnold speculates that he may have been incapable of sustaining close relationships. ‘[He] never became an explorer or a team-man. He remained primarily a single-minded and superb photographer ... He remained a ‘loner’ to the end ...’ (1971:57).

In his work the camera artist was essentially on his own. It was complex and difficult in the freezing cold. The equipment was bulky and moving it around was laborious. Touching freezing metal camera parts could cause frostbite; the cameras required careful attention to prevent condensation accumulating when they were brought into the hut; glass plates had to be stored outside, in an equipment depot, and brought inside over a period of two days, to prevent flaws developing on them. Ponting’s darkroom set him apart physically from the other expeditioners, and he spent long hours in it. As he said in *The Great White South*,

Fifty feet of [cine-] film lasts for less than a minute on the screen; but to develop, fix, and wash that quantity of negative took about an hour and a half ... It took over a hundred hours during the winter to develop and wash the negatives ... In addition, there were many hundreds of glass negatives to be developed. (Ponting 2001:152-3)

Riffenburgh and Cruwys (2004:30) say Ponting won the respect of the other expeditioners early, ‘engaging in all manner of contortionist efforts to obtain the best possible photographs and footage’ during their voyage south. But in Antarctica he was too busy photographing to help set up base, and when he himself needed help with heavy unloading, none was forthcoming. There was some envy: Debenham wrote, ‘Ponting ... has the photo lab all to himself with a stove’ (quoted in Back 1992:33); and another scientist complained, ‘Our noble friend Ponting has the softest time’ (Hanley 1978:68). Later, in the ‘spirit of larkiness’ (Moss 2006:100) which characterised much of the activity at the base, the expeditioners invented a new verb to describe their participation in Ponting’s

photography: to pont, meaning to hold a pose, sometimes in uncomfortable positions, in the freezing cold. Even then they were not all tolerant of his demands: physicist Charles Wright wrote, ‘The photographer Ponting is an abominable nuisance’ (Bull & Wright 1993:56).

They were, however, appreciative of the lantern lecture entertainments he treated them to. Ponting recognised the role of these lectures in enhancing his status among the men, and made a composite photograph which he included in *The Great White South*.



4. Ponting lecturing on Japan using lantern slides.

Cecil Meares, whom Ponting had known and worked with before the Antarctic expedition, wrote a mock poem which Arnold (2004) believes reflected the affection of the expeditioners.

I'll sing a little song, about one among our throng,
Whose skill in making pictures is not wanting.
He takes pictures while you wait, 'prices strictly moderate';
I refer, of course, to our Professor Ponting.
Then pont, Ponko, pont and long may Ponko pont;
With his finger on the trigger of his 'gadget'.
For whenever he's around, we're sure to hear the sound
Of his high-speed cinematographic ratchet.

The poem was printed in the expedition's *South Polar Times*, edited by Apsley Cherry-Garrard, but Ponting made no mention of it in *The Great White South*. Perhaps he did not appreciate the gentle mockery. He did mention his nickname and the men's use of the verb 'to pont', saying on one occasion: 'I was once again the butt for no end of twitting about the peril of "ponting" for Ponko' (182). He also included his own poem, 'The Sleeping Bag', the first part of which is presented here as an indication of his sense of humour:

On the outside grows the furside, on the inside grows the skinside;
So the furside is the outside, and the skinside is the inside.
As the skinside is the inside, and the furside is the outside;
One Side likes the skinside inside, and the furside on the outside.
Others like the skinside outside, and the furside on the inside;
As the skinside is the hard side, and the furside is the soft side.
If you turn the skinside outside, thinking you will side with that
Side,
Then the soft side furside's inside, which some argue is the wrong
side

It is wordplay, and a situational humour best appreciated by those constantly getting into sleeping bags—a bonding humour. He wanted to show that he was one of them. This representation he strenuously maintained in the years after the expedition. Promoting his public lectures, he sometimes used a mascot toy penguin, which he reminiscently named 'Ponko' (National Maritime Museum, n.d.)¹.

¹ The toy is now held in the United Kingdom's National Maritime Museum. In 2002 Meredith Hooper made the toy a character in her children's book, *Ponko and the South Pole*, Frances Lincoln, London (UC 2001-04).



5. Ponting and stuffed penguin, 1913.

Expeditioners who wrote books about their experience appreciated Ponting's work and his contribution to their recreation, but did not really see him as one of them. Lieut. Evans mentions him only a few times in his book written around 1920. He does, however, illustrate it with '31 photographs by Herbert Ponting, F.R.G.S.' (title page) including one of Ponting himself, with penguins. Evans writes that 'the greatest treat of all' during the midwinter festivities was the exhibition of 'wonderful slides' in which Ponting, who 'had been everywhere with his camera', recorded the expedition's daily life (113, 114). Cherry-Garrard mentions him several times, most warmly in regard to the lantern lectures: 'No officer nor seaman ... could have had too many ... [The lectures] gave us glimpses into many lands illustrated by his own inimitable slides' (2003:218).

Scott's journals refer a number of times to Ponting. On first landing on the continent, Ponting was 'enraptured' and using 'expressions which in anyone else and alluding to any other subject might be deemed extravagant' (2006:71). Later, Scott wrote that Ponting spent most of his time in his darkroom, and: 'I would not imply that he is out of sympathy with the work of others, which is far from

being the case, but that his energies centre devotedly on the minutiae of his business' (187). When the winter interfered with photography, Scott noted that Ponting's 'nervous temperament is of the quality to take this wintering experience badly' (251). Scott felt he got to know Ponting better when being taught the rudiments of photography, so that photographs could be taken at the Pole: 'My incursion into photography has brought me in close touch with him and I realise what a very good fellow he is; no pains are too great for him to take to help and instruct others, whilst his enthusiasm for his own work is unlimited' (293).

It is interesting to note that Ponting wrote to Kathleen Scott in 1917 that 'not even dear old Uncle Bill knew your husband's inmost heart better than I did' (quoted by Lynch 1989:302), and to Debenham in February 1926 that Scott

had many intimate talks ... with me in my darkroom with closed doors. Some of those talks were of so intimate a nature that they will remain locked forever in my breast. But I know what his ideas were for the future and I have tried to carry them out. (Quoted by Lynch 1989:302)

There is no corroborating evidence of this claimed level of intimacy between Ponting and Scott.

Wilson's journals also refer a number of times to Ponting, briefly, mostly in connection with photographs, filming and Ponting's entertaining lantern lectures. Ponting had taken his newly published *In Lotus Land* to Antarctica, and Wilson read it and talked with him about Japan. From Wilson, we learn that 'Ponting plays banjo and sings well' (Wilson 1972:84). So while Ponting may have found the over-wintering experience difficult, his lantern lectures and musical talent certainly helped the others.

Ponting says in *The Great White South* that, before the departure of the polar party, Wilson gave him a parcel containing his sketches, asking Ponting to 'take charge of it, and to deliver it to his wife' (185). Although Ponting says he was 'much pleased at this expression of friendship', in the end he 'preferred ... not to take the responsibility of being the bearer of the valuable parcel, and managed to

hand it to Lieut. Pennell, to be placed in the *Terra Nova*'s safe, and thence forwarded home by registered parcels post'. The incident is in keeping with Ponting's ambivalence with regard to friendship: part of him wanted it, but the other part preferred to remain at some distance.

Ponting's place in the history of photography and film

Ponting's place in the history of photography and film is a specialised one, closely associated with his Antarctic work. His photographs are seldom seen in general histories of photography, and his film is mentioned only briefly in histories of non-fiction film. Though he himself seemed to believe he was at the pinnacle of his career before being approached by Scott, his earlier photographs are now exhibited and published mainly on account of his Antarctic success.

Early exhibitions of Ponting's Antarctic photographs in London, Glasgow, Cambridge, Portsmouth and Paris were critically and commercially successful (Arnold 1971; Lynch 1990), with as many orders for landscapes as for portraits of the explorers. His lectures from January 1914, highlighting animal and bird life, were also immensely popular. Artist-members of the Royal Academy, the president of the Royal Watercolour Society, British and international art periodicals and the popular press praised Ponting's composition and lighting (Lynch 1989). He seems to have had an instinctive feel for these. His Antarctic landscapes were seen to have particular resonances with painters' representations of the heroic and the sublime (Fox 2005).

Ponting's cine-film

Ponting had always been particularly excited about making a cine-film. Interviewed for *The Weekly Press* in 1910, he had said: 'It will practically bring the Antarctic itself before the public's eyes. The cinematograph is undoubtedly one of the greatest educators of the century' (quoted in Arnold 1971:49). Time has proven his assessment to be correct.

Movie camera manufacturing specialist and pioneer motion picture engineer Arthur S. Newman said Ponting set himself to learn as much as possible about the medium, 'took [it] up with enthusiasm, and from that time his still camera took a second place in his ideas ...' (quoted in Arnold 1971:50). In a private communication around 1930, urging that his film be acquired by some public body, Ponting had written:

The Kinematograph, properly applied, is the greatest educational contrivance ever conceived by the mind of man. I have taken to it because I believe that by its means the art of photography finds its highest mission. (quoted in Lynch 1989:295)

Ponting's film was made into a number of different versions, all receiving high contemporary praise (Arnold 1971; Barwell 2007). The first was a silent short, titled *With Captain Scott, R.N., to the South Pole*, released in 1911, comprising scenes of the voyage south and the establishment of base camp. It 'raised polar cinematography to new heights' (Jones 2003:83), and was commercially successful. Further releases of shorts occurred in September and October 1912, part one featuring the Antarctic landscape, natural history, and scientific work, and part two presenting preparatory scenes for the polar journey. Although Amundsen's success was by now detracting somewhat from interest in the Scott party's progress, the new release was also a commercial and critical success. After the news of the death of the polar party a third version, *The Undying Story of Captain Scott*, was released in 1913. The French critic Colette called this one of the most influential films to appear in Paris in the period (Amad 2005). These earlier films no longer exist in original formats.



6. Herbert Ponting and the cinematograph.

Ponting had secured the rights to his film in 1914. After the Great War, when the public's interest in his lectures fell away, he devoted his time to working on the film. In 1924 it was re-released, again a silent version, as *Great White Silence*. In 1933 he added narration and music and renamed it *90° South: With Scott to the Antarctic*. At the time, *The Cinema* hailed the 'fine photography [and] sheer narrative drama of Ponting's commentary' (probably 1933, quoted in Arnold 1971:94).

One reason for the critical success was that Ponting was 'a natural storyteller' (Lynch 1990:218), and by this time he was well practised in relating images and narrative and skilled in all technical aspects of his work. Arthur Newman said at the time that 'he was both an artist and a technician—a rare combination' (quoted in Lynch 1989:304).

Nevertheless, the last version of the film was a financial failure. Ponting blamed poor publicity and marketing, but it also may have suffered from competition from Frank Hurley and others in the changing times between the two world wars. Ponting may have become out of touch with what audiences were wanting. The film contains the same strong patriotic theme which had won an earlier version praise from the Senior Chaplain to the Forces in World War One, but by 1933 the world had known the Great Depression, and audiences may have been more cynical. British cinema in the period was dominated by American films. The most popular feature films of the time were from the action-horror (*King Kong*) and song and dance genres (Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers). As well as escapist cinema, audiences had become accustomed to more sophisticated film technology. The combination of adventure and education with which Ponting had tried to infuse his twenty-year-old footage in *90° South* no longer had wide appeal.

To Ponting, his continuing work on the film was his contribution towards perpetuating public memory of the expedition. After watching the 1924 version, ‘eyes full of tears’, he said: ‘I feel that if I had never done anything ... but produced this film, so that the world could know how great that adventure was, life would have been well worth while’ (Swaffer 1924, quoted by Murray 2006:147).

Other Antarctic artists and photographers of the period

Ponting’s contemporaries, in a pictorial and Antarctic sense, included his co-expeditioner Edward Wilson, George Marston (artist on Shackleton’s *Nimrod* and *Endurance* voyages), Charles Harrisson (Mawson’s 1911–14 Australasian Antarctic Expedition), Roald Amundsen (first to reach the South Pole), and Frank Hurley (official photographer on three Mawson expeditions and Shackleton’s *Endurance* expedition).

Edward Wilson had been with Scott on the *Discovery* expedition. His sketches and watercolours, like much of Ponting’s work, are ‘imbued with an awe of nature, a sense of the sublime’ (Andrews 2007:98). His illustrations of Antarctic

birds set a very high standard (Roberts 1959). Wilson and Ponting admired each other's work. Ponting wrote that 'many of [Wilson's] drawings were artistic gems' (2001:118). Wilson wrote:

I think Ponting's work is perfectly admirable and the enthusiasm and care he has put into it down here is beyond all praise. I have never seen more beautiful pictures than some he has taken here of ice and Mount Erebus and seals and so on. (quoted by Lynch 1989:304)

A small number of Wilson's paintings are on permanent display at the Scott Polar Research Institute museum. Others are reproduced in biographies: George Seaver's three books; D.M. Wilson's *Cheltenham in Antarctica: the life of Edward Wilson*, and Isabel Williams' *With Scott in the Antarctic – Edward Wilson, explorer, naturalist, artist*.

George Marston's watercolour of a luminous iceberg, 'The Dreadnought', was in Shackleton's *Heart of the Antarctic*, which Ponting read. In other watercolours the moon and aurora illuminate dark winter landscapes with mystical effect. Marston did lithographs and etchings for Shackleton's book *Aurora Australis* in 1908, the first book published in Antarctica. Some of Marston's work is held today in the Scott Polar Research Institute. D.M. Wilson's 2009 book, *Nimrod Illustrated*, includes reproductions of some of the work.

Charles Harrisson's landscape paintings and drawings, like Wilson's, are topographical studies. Reproductions of some of these were included in the original version of Mawson's book about his 1911-1914 expedition. Andrews (2007:117) writes: 'The Antarctic landscape has a definite horizontality and essential simplicity, which Harrisson ... captured with minimal marks and a reductive sense of space.' The State Library of New South Wales holds a sketchbook and drawings by Harrisson.

Roald Amundsen did not use a professional photographer or artist on any of his expeditions, although he had one of Norway's famous professional photographers, Anders Beer Wilse, teach his men some elementary photography. Amundsen's own camera was damaged, and most of his films were ruined, apart from some 'snapshots, taken in the spirit of a holidaymaker who wanted to bring

home a few mementoes' (Huntford 1987:44). This may be one reason why Amundsen's success failed to capture the public imagination as Scott's and Shackleton's expeditions did (Fox 2005). Andrews (2007:102), however, says of the photographs that 'there is something totally compelling in their simplicity and the sense of immediacy with which they were recorded'.

The Amundsen images are not comparable with Ponting's or Hurley's, but in Huntford's 1987 collection they provide interesting historical insights. They are reproduced in the many books about Amundsen, including his own book, *The South Pole: An account of the Norwegian Antarctic Expedition in the Fram, 1910-1912*. The Fram Museum in Oslo exhibits the photographs.

The literature draws few direct comparisons between Ponting and the work of those contemporaries, but Arnold makes a comparison with Hurley: 'Ponting generally had a surer touch with composition and there is a suggestion in the extreme contrast of many of Hurley's pictures that Ponting was also more careful in processing film and plates ...' (Riffenburgh, Cruwys & Arnold 2004:22). Arnold points out that Ponting had significant advantages over Hurley: he was more experienced, and in Antarctica he was able to do photographic work to the exclusion of everything else.

Frank Hurley produced many very fine still photographs and a movie film. His photographs, like Ponting's, evoke the awe of the sublime, and his images of Shackleton's *Endurance* in its death throes in the ice have great power. Hurley's work might be said to take certain characteristics of Ponting's to an ultimate level. He had set Ponting up as a role model. His diary entries for 24 July 1918 and 11 December 1916 say: 'I cannot speak too highly in praise of [Ponting's] work, & I set him up as an ideal' and, regarding Ponting's lecturing, 'His manner & delivery are excellent, his patter splendid' (quoted by Dixon 2006:66). But if Ponting's photographs are sometimes seen as artful, many of Hurley's are 'manufactured; he manipulated his composite photographs to achieve the look he required ... He embellished and dramatised' (Kelly 2007:27). Like Ponting, Hurley's identity and vocation became merged, but Hurley's representation of his persona was more prominent: he was 'not only the ring master but also the

leading attraction in his own travelling, international, multi-, mass-media circus' (Dixon 2006:62), his own celebrity an inextricable part of the show.

Hurley's photographs remain highly popular and exhibitions occur in all parts of the world. They are reproduced in many books, such as his own book, *South with Endurance*, H. Ennis's *Man with a camera: Frank Hurley overseas*, and J. Thomas's *Show man: the photography of Frank Hurley*.

As Andrews (2007) points out, it was photography, not traditional art forms, which came to exert the most influence on Heroic Era images, with the works of Ponting and Hurley revealing the greatest artistic advances. Photography in Antarctica was new, experimental, challenging to the camera artists, and an enthusiastic public was waiting to see their work.

More recent assessment of Ponting's work

Ponting's work in Antarctica has continued to attract attention and praise. His vivid depictions of the work and recreation of the expeditioners were admired by Jennie Boddington, Curator of Photography at the National Gallery of Victoria, who wrote that Ponting's 'mastery is best illustrated in the portraits and group shots which are among the finest of their kind in the history of photography' (1979:20). Ponting's landscapes also continue to win praise:

In a time when spectacular colour pictures of towering icebergs and blue-green glaciers plunging into frothing seas are commonplace, Ponting's eloquent black-and-white images of the Great White Continent still have the power to instill a sense of awe in a modern audience. (Riffenburgh & Cruwys 1998:7)

The photographs are still sought out today. The Scott Polar Research Institute and the Royal Geographic Society have large selections for purchase. The Scott Polar Research Institute also hires out a Ponting Touring Exhibition of thirty framed and mounted prints taken directly from the original negatives.

Ponting was a perfectionist. 'One does not see a bad Ponting picture. If they did not reach his high standard he smashed his plates as he developed them' (Fuchs

1978:5). He made careful notes about the photographs, but probably did not always give them titles, and consequently some photographs are at times given different titles. The images have been cropped differently in various publications, altering the composition from an aesthetic point of view. In these cases, a full appreciation of Ponting's sense of composition may not be possible.

There is no doubt that Ponting sought to produce images that would be attractive to his public, and some have found this a flaw in the work. Wylie (2002:256) sees Ponting's aim as being 'to manufacture the most picturesque and thus most valuable studies. A conscious artifice of foreground and background and figures thus permeates his landscapes'. Ponting often involved people in his landscapes, partly in order to visually situate the expedition he was recording—as specified in his brief—but also for reasons of a sense of scale, and possibly too because there was a convention that paintings of the 'landscape sublime' might contain figures reacting to the scene before them (Finley 1979).

Ponting remains today 'a pioneer of modern polar photography ... the first to bring an artistic eye to the science of recording polar expeditions and life' (RGS 2005). His photographs are considered to be 'among the most evocative images ever taken of the continent' (SPRI 2007). Critical commentary of his film has also continued to be highly favourable. The official historian of British cinema called it 'one of the really great achievements, if not the greatest, of British cinematography during this unhappy period' (Low 1948, vol. 2:155). Its importance as a fine early example of travel documentary is secure.

In the last years of his life, in failing health and finances, Ponting on one occasion wrote peevishly: 'the Antarctic ... was the great error of my life. I should have kept on at the valuable interesting travel work I was doing, and left polar exploration to others' (quoted in Lynch 1989:294-295). But the Antarctic was the highest point of his career, and the reason for his continuing reputation today.

Scientific value

The work Ponting produced also had significant scientific value, in keeping with his brief. His landscapes gave topographical detail, with icescapes depicting many and varied ice forms. He also added considerably to the limited store of knowledge about Antarctic life science.

Arnold (1971:79) claims: '[Ponting was] a trail-blazer in his movie-photography of the animals and birds of the south'. The high value of the photographs and film, in decades when scientists had less possibility of access to Antarctica themselves, is demonstrated by papers such as one in 1945, referring to Ponting's photographs 'beautifully illustrat[ing]' the full trumpet of Adélies, and correcting a previous erroneous interpretation of their behaviour (Richdale 1945:37).

Lynch (1990:224) sums up the importance of this work:

He shot photographs and film of places and events that were new and rare. He made, in the Antarctic in 1911, a time-lapse sequence of a penguin egg hatching. He photographed the behaviour of seals and other mammals and birds, behaviour that had previously been a matter of speculation, producing many valuable scientific records.

Ponting had invested much time and skill in capturing images for science, and he would have been gratified by the praise.

The Great White South

The Great White South, first published in 1921, falls midway between the photographs of 1910-12 and the last version of the cine-film in 1933. The book was an immediate and lasting success. *The British Journal of Photography* called it 'the most eloquent tribute to [Ponting's] artistic and technical skill as a photographer under outdoor conditions such as no other man has been called upon to endure' (quoted by Arnold, in Riffenburgh, Cruwys & Arnold 2004:210). Huntford (2001:xi) calls it 'part textbook about the highly specialised subject of photographing the polar world ... advice [which] holds good today ... [It is] photo-reportage at its best'. Second and third editions followed in 1922 and

1923. It was then reprinted eight times by 1935, the year of Ponting's death. Other less frequent reprints and editions have followed. All contain the many photographs of the original edition, but unfortunately not presented in the most appreciable format, as they are there primarily to supplement the text.

Ponting prefaced the book with a solemn evocation of those who had died:

that epic Polar drama which must ever stand out in the annals of exploration for the heroism of those who took the leading parts and perished . . . bequeathing to their race a priceless heritage in the story of their perfect comradeship, self-sacrifice, and devotion to purpose, ideals, and duty. (xiii)

He says that Scott had wanted young people to know about such adventures, as this would stimulate 'a fine and manly spirit in the rising generation' (xiii), and this wish had inspired the writing of the book. A sub-set of its goals concern Scott's early explanation to Ponting of the main objective of the expedition: scientific research. The book contains much information about geology, meteorology and zoology. There are many descriptions of the scientists at work. It is a well-researched book.

Ponting the writer never loses sight of his goals. The headings at the top of the page cue the reader to the topic and tone, and these regularly emphasise the adventurous nature of the expedition: 'An adventure with killer whales', 'A skiing feat', 'An heroic adventure'. It is an entertaining read. The writing style is fluent, and the first-person narrative engages the reader.

Throughout the book, Ponting depicts himself as intrepidly and diligently seeking his photographs, dedicated beyond concern for his own life. Unlike the film, the book also relates some near disasters—his own encounter with killer whales, the Southern Party caught in a blizzard, ponies crashing through the sea-ice, dogs falling down a crevasse, the harrowing Cape Crozier journey of Wilson, Bowers and Cherry-Garrard, and Clissold falling from an iceberg. The reader is kept aware of the enormous challenges of the environment. Ponting also comments again and again on its beauty.

Above all, the book depicts the personalities of the expedition. The representation of Scott and the others is vividly managed in description and in conversation. Ponting's construction of the expedition is a harmonious one. Explicit authorial comments show that he was a devoted admirer of Scott.

The staunchest tie of all that bound the Expedition was the incentive for each to do his utmost, born of esteem, respect and fellow-feeling for the quiet and unassuming yet masterful man on whose broad shoulders rested the grave responsibilities of leadership. (Ponting 2001:168)

In his introduction to the 2001 edition of *The Great White South*, Huntford says that Ponting attempted to conceal critical weaknesses in Scott. It is hard to reconcile this claim with descriptions of Scott in the book. Nowhere does Ponting imply that Scott is infallible: failure is possible, adversity and misfortunes occur, but the Leader has qualities that counterbalance these.

One honoured him the more for his admirable attitude over such blows of Fate. There was no repining or lamentation in adversity. Scott simply cast aside misfortunes that could not be helped, and seldom if ever referred to them again. He looked always forward, with hope and confidence in his destiny. (163)

Ponting, of course, completed *The Great White South* years after the death of Scott. The impact of the tragedy changed the course of his life. But Huntford's inference, which attempts to support his own criticisms of Scott (Huntford 1993), is without textual basis in Ponting's book, and its inclusion as a preface to the 2001 edition appears to be a marketing ploy which Ponting himself probably would not have liked.

After Antarctica

On his return from Antarctica, Ponting was at the peak of his career. An exhibition of two hundred of his photographs was held at the Fine Art Society of London in 1913. He presented many illustrated lectures; in 1914, he performed more than a hundred times to an estimated total audience of 120,000 (Lewis-Jones 2008). But he was first embittered by disputes over rights to the exploitation of his photography, then shattered by the news of the death of Scott

and the others. He has been called ‘a forgotten casualty of the Antarctic disaster’ (Jones 2003:181). The later years of his life turned into an anti-climax.

He did a little portrait work, mostly unremarkable, and became involved in the development of unsuccessful inventions. The reasons for his renunciation of serious photography are unclear. For years he received continuing assignment offers, but chose instead to devote much of his time to reworking the film. He wrote in 1931, ‘I felt that my duty was to try to keep the Scott story alive in every way I could’ (quoted by Lynch 1989:294). Antarctica became an obsession dominating his life.

He died on 6 February 1935.

Ponting’s legacy

Ponting is commemorated in Antarctica by Ponting Cliff in northern Victoria Land 71° 12’S, 168° 21’E, named by the expedition’s Northern Party. He does not mention this in *The Great White South*, which suggests that he was unmoved by the compliment. But he knew the value of the work he had done, lobbying for his film to be purchased by a public body in the interests of posterity. After his death, to clear his debts, all the negatives produced during his career were sold to Paul Popper, a photographic and literary agent, whose business (Popperfoto) changed hands several times over the years, but with the negatives always remaining there. In 2004 the collection was offered to the Scott Polar Research Institute, which bought it with the aid of a grant of £533,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The photographs, film and book are the enduring legacy of a complex and enigmatic man.