4: Conclusion

This thesis has addressed a deficiency of analysis of Ponting’s images by examining the relevant literature and a representative selection of photographs and his cine-film. His work documented the British Antarctic Expedition for history, and was an intrinsic part of the contemporary promotion of Antarctic science, increasing knowledge of the Antarctic environment and topography, and making a direct contribution to the life sciences. The artistic qualities of the work, praised extensively by critics both contemporary and modern, are strikingly evident in the landscapes and portraits discussed here. Technical aspects, composition, lighting and tone have been used skillfully to construct images which have stirred strong responses in viewers from Ponting’s time to the present. His place in the history of camera art is a specialised one, most closely associated with Antarctica, but the best of his images endure as works of art in their own right.

Ponting has been shown to have been an enigmatic individual, who in his thirties recreated himself as a world photographer, with great success and renown. He was selected by Scott to record and document all aspects of the British Antarctic Expedition, and this he carried out with single-minded dedication. Although he has not left any writings on the subject, his interpretation of the role of photography is implicit in his work: he thought it was the paramount means of recording, documenting, and making viewers understand about distant worlds. On the role of cinematography he was explicit, correctly assessing it as an entertainment and educational medium of enormous potential. Further understandings of Ponting’s concept of the role of photography and film could be obtained through research in the Scott Polar Research Institute’s Herbert Ponting Collection, the H. J. P. Arnold Collection and others—which was not possible during the writing of this thesis. Other useful insights into his work, and Heroic Age photography generally, could be achieved through a comparative analytical study of his work and that of Frank Hurley.
Ponting’s personal role on the expedition was subsumed by the professional brief Scott set out for him. The expeditioners had mixed feelings about his role, but they complied with his demands. His images added a vital dimension to historical understandings of the expedition and also played a crucial part in keeping alive the memory of Scott and his men. The representation of Scott on two levels—a person with family and friends, work and recreation, and a Leader of courage and determination—made immediate and lasting visual connection with the public.

The contemporary appeal of the images lay not only in their depiction of a remote and mythical place being explored and investigated, but in the discourses of cultural pride which flow through much of the work. There is a visual language which contemporary audiences would have associated with their inherited ways of being, behaving, and valuing (Gee 1992)—the explorer tradition, heroic endeavour and imperial pride; the honour of work; links to home and family; affection and caring for animals—idealised, as is the nature of discourses. Ponting had a keen sense of his audience, which was in the first instance a British one, but there are many elements of the discursive appeal to which non-British viewers would also have responded, as indeed do modern viewers. Narratives of human endeavour continue to captivate audiences, and the expedition’s story is one of perennial interest. For those who work in Antarctica in modern times, Ponting’s images are an important part of their history, traditions and culture.

The sense of place that emerges from the work is mediated by the expedition. Ponting’s focus is on the beauty of Antarctica, the nobility of the venture, the fineness of the men. Interwoven themes, however, allude to darker aspects. His landscapes have resonances of the awe and power associated with the concept of the sublime. Photographs of exhausted and injured men are reminders of the transience of life.

A connecting theme throughout the work is Ponting’s expression of his own personal and professional role. In the decade before Antarctica, the world photographer persona had become essential to his self-image, at the expense of
personal relationships. In the closed environment of Antarctica, that construction of identity was reinforced, his skills were developed to their highest point, and personal and professional identities merged further. In the years after Antarctica, he remained fixated on the expedition, dedicated to keeping alive the public’s memory of it and its tragedy. On a personal level, in his obsession he was also validating his own part on the expedition, his camera artist persona, his life.
References


Ponting, H.G. 1991, *90° South: With Scott to the Antarctic*, National Film Archive (U.K.), British Film Institute, and Milestone, New Jersey.


