

WHAT IS TRUTH?

SCOTT OF THE ANTARCTIC

(Rank-Ealing)

SCOTT OF THE ANTARCTIC has been so meticulously documented, and staged with such remarkable fidelity to that part of the written and pictorial record of the Expedition with which I am familiar, that I was left wondering rather sadly if it was not too true to be good—or at least, to be as good as it might have been.

And yet in most respects this is a remarkable film. Much of the background is genuine. A three-man camera team spent two months right in the Antarctic, and most of the balance of the film was shot on location in Norway and the Swiss Alps. The colour-processing (except for a couple of rather chocolate-boxy pieces) is easily first-class. The direction of individual scenes is always workmanlike, often sensitive and at times even inspired, as in one long, slow shot in which we saw the small black silhouettes of the polar party drop slowly below a distant fold in the great ice-cap. Vaughan Williams's music is wild and sad and moving, and where sound would be superfluous there is none. And whoever was responsible for the detail of set and scene has contrived a minor miracle of re-creation. Yet the film is somehow less than the sum of all these talents.

A clue to the failure lies (in part at least) in the astonishing amount of authentic detail crammed into the picture. The credits speak of the generous co-operation of survivors and relatives of members of the Expedition, and apparently the Scott Polar Institute and numerous firms also lent original equipment or replicas of equipment made for the Expedition. In the inevitable pre-occupation with detail the studio (and more particularly the director, Charles Frend) seems to have forgotten that in a film, where the span of years must be confined within 80 or 90 minutes of screening-time, material accuracy may breed spiritual error. More, one of the peculiarities of film is its power to fix detail in the mind and memory, and where the detail tells a story which conflicts with the main theme the effect is that of sand in a bearing.

In the early part of *Scott of the Antarctic*, Scott is seen testing one of the motor-tractors which he intends to take with him. Nansen is looking on, rather sardonically, and when the test is over he points out that if and when the motor breaks down it will be simply a heap of useless metal in the snow — "You can't eat it." But, Scott explains, he is also taking ponies and dogs. "If I were going," replies Nansen, "I would take dogs, and dogs—and dogs."

We are not allowed to forget that scene, or its implications. On the Barrier the tractors break down after covering in the aggregate about 140 miles. Mainly through the heroic exertions of Oates, the ponies get to within a mile or two of their objective, the Beardmore Glacier, before they have to be slaughtered. And at the Pole itself the detail singled out by the camera for emphasis

BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "Scott of the Antarctic."

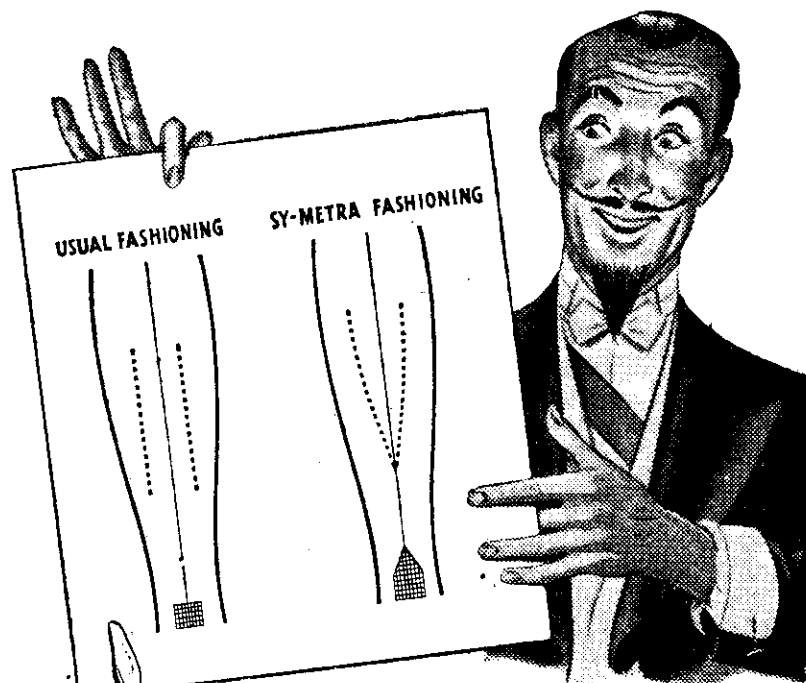
is the surface of the snow around Amundsen's tent—pocked with the pad-marks of the Norwegians' huskies.

I can't vouch for the first incident—Nansen's advice—but all the others were written into the record by Scott himself, and there is no doubt about their truth. The prominence which has been given to them in the film, however, must leave one with the impression (strengthened not only by other details of photography and dialogue but by the absence of equal emphasis elsewhere) that Scott lacked judgment and that he lost his own life and sacrificed his companions in an adventure in which the odds lay too heavily against him. And that accords neither with the facts, nor with the director's intentions. Scott was an experienced polar explorer. Risks had to be taken, but his dispositions provided for all probable contingencies and even made reasonable allowance for other hazards. What defeated him was the unforeseeable—first the failure of the strong man, Evans, then the appalling cold and gales encountered on the Barrier, where the blizzards were fiercer and the temperatures lower than they had been at 11,000 feet on the polar plateau. The shocking accumulation of misfortunes is not glossed over, nor does the film fail to depict the fortitude and the unity of the small party in face of them. Yet the cumulative effect of the picture, from the Pole back to the last camp, is to suggest that had they only beaten Amundsen they would have won through—that failure caused a critical loss of heart, dulled the edge of resolution and finally struck them down one by one. Even if that were the historical truth, I would still prefer the truth which has become a legend in our time, for it is the kind of truth that makes (and keeps) men free.

But if *Scott of the Antarctic* falls short of its objective because the director is not always master of his medium, it is still a splendid effort pictorially, is soundly acted, lapses nowhere from good taste, adds no false heroics to the heroism which has become historic.



JOHN MILLS as Captain Scott



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