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Pole Dance

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Extract

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Chapter One

THE LURE OF THE SOUTH

Hope was fading fast. A blizzard had been raging for eight days, imprisoning the three men in their tent. The temperature was in the minus forties and the Antarctic winter was rapidly closing in. Food and fuel had run out days ago and they were starving, desperately weak and frozen to the core. Less than eleven miles to the north lay a depot with enough supplies to restore their strength for the final push but the storm showed no sign of relenting and they were too exhausted to leave their sleeping bags. The end was near. With badly frostbitten fingers, Captain Scott picked up his pencil and scrawled: 'Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale.'

I must have been seven years old when my mother gave me the Ladybird storybook about the adventures of Captain Scott. Like most boys of that age, I was far happier kicking a football around than toiling through a boring old book but this one was different from all the others I had been made to read and it gripped me from start to finish. What had compelled these brave men to drag themselves through unimaginable dangers and suffering to reach this barren spot on the Earth's surface? It was a story of extraordinary heroism against a fearsome opponent. I immediately read the book again. A Norwegian called Roald Amundsen might have beaten Scott and his men to the prize of the South Pole, but their glorious failure stirred something deep inside me. Although I didn't really understand why, at that moment I knew that one day I too had to go to the South Pole.

My career as an 'explorer' had not got off to an auspicious start. I was an energetic child and enjoyed climbing up things. We were living in a flat in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil when I tried to make an ascent of the north face of my parents' bookcase. On reaching the summit, my weight caused the seven-foot-high structure to tilt outwards from the wall and come crashing to the floor. Mum rushed into the sitting room to find her four-year-old son trapped under the bookcase, crying his eyes out. Luckily I was none the worse for wear, but I vowed to steer clear of items of furniture in the future.

My interest in Scott was rekindled at Harrow School when the polar explorer Robert Swan gave a slide show to the boys about his recent trip to the Antarctic. Along with Roger Mear and Gareth Wood, and without outside support, he had retraced Scott's route from his hut on the Ross Sea to the South Pole, a mammoth journey of nearly nine hundred miles. Like me, Captain Scott had been a childhood hero of Swan's, so I could relate to his passionate obsession. His was a captivating story, brought to life by his enthusiasm and dramatic photographs. But Swan had almost died on the expedition. If this bulldog of a man with shoulders like a rugby prop forward had found things so tough, surely there was little hope for someone like me lasting more than a few hours in Antarctica.

When I was sixteen I joined the 'Marmots', the school mountaineering club. We were immensely fortunate in having an organisation that ran introductory climbing trips to the British mountains. There were many reasons why I decided to give it a go. Although I would eventually grow to six foot two, at that age I was still knee-high to a grasshopper and constantly getting squashed on the rugby field by bruisers twice my size. I desperately wanted to prove something to myself, my parents and my peers and to reach a summit high in the clouds seemed the most eye-catching way of achieving this. Ever since I was a young boy I have loved snow, and mountaineering appeared to be the perfect way of mucking about in the stuff. The rugged hills of Snowdonia, the Lake District and the Scottish Highlands were the perfect playground to get to grips with ropes, crampons and ice axes under the watchful eye of the master-in-charge, Mr Greenstock. Mr Greenstock had over forty years' climbing experience under his belt and his infectious enthusiasm for the mountains rubbed off on all the boys lucky enough to join his well-run trips.

Despite their own scant interest in mountaineering, my parents were always supportive of my ambitions and when I left school they encouraged me to join a trekking expedition to the Indian Himalayas. The four-week trek took us through barren valleys, past ancient monasteries and over high mountain passes, always tantalisingly below the snowline. The hundred-mile journey through the Zanskar Range was fascinating, but I found it frustrating not to be up among the glistening white summits. After saving a bit of money working in the ski and surf department at Harrods, I sought to rectify this by travelling and mountaineering around New Zealand. Despite almost being turned to ash whilst trying to climb the 9,200-foot volcano Mount Ruapehu mid-eruption, my time in this stunning country gave me invaluable experience.

My gap year had fuelled my appetite for the mountains, and shortly after starting at Bristol University I embarked on trying to organise my

first proper climbing expedition. Two years later and we had raised enough cash through commercial sponsorship and other fundraising events (including a sponsored head shave) to pay for six weeks in the Andes. During which time we climbed a total of six peaks in Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru up to 21,500 feet in altitude. I was delighted with what our inexperienced team had accomplished.

On a personal level, I drew a great sense of fulfilment from having made the expedition happen. There were times when it had looked as though the trip wouldn't even get off the ground, but when we all congregated at Heathrow Airport for the flight to Quito it felt as though we had already achieved something great just to be standing there together. The expedition also taught me a great deal about myself – how strong my body was and how it responded when pushed to the limits, how I coped with the altitude and how I reacted during times of extreme pressure. My climbing skills improved markedly and I forged strong friendships with like-minded people who craved the freedom that the great outdoors provided. The flame of adventure had been kindled within all five of us and we vowed to return to the mountains.

The long university holidays were filled with smaller-scale climbing trips to the Alps, Morocco, Tanzania and Patagonia which enabled me to build on my experience and extend my mountain skills. Much of my geography and geology degree course was based on geomorphological processes in the polar regions, focusing primarily on the Antarctic ice cap. I was enthralled with everything I learned, but I never imagined that I would ever get to visit the great white south myself. In my mind, Antarctica was reserved for scientists and a handful of superhuman explorers. This belief was reinforced when I read *Mind Over Matter*, the epic story of Sir Ranulph Fiennes's crossing of the Antarctic continent. For ninety-six days and nights, his body underwent an appalling ordeal, during a journey described as 'Hell on Earth'.

Post-university life as a young twenty-something seemed to be settling into a routine. I became a trainee accountant with Arthur Andersen and moved into a flat in London. Motivating myself for the excitements of accountancy was a hopeless task: my mind would wander when I should have been hard at work. I have always been the inquisitive type but I find there is only so much that I can learn second hand. It is through raw experiences amongst the breathtaking scenery and open skies of the great outdoors that I learn so much about myself and the world I live in. Within weeks of returning from a trip to the wilderness, I find myself planning the next adventure. It is this constant dreaming that gives me my energy, and I dread the day when the ideas start to run out. The daydreaming may have had something to do with my failing a set of key

accountancy exams in late 1999, when I decided to leave the City and become a ski guide in the Swiss Alps.

To climb a virgin mountain and tread where no man had been before was one of my lifelong ambitions. At a time when I should have been revising for my financial reporting exam, I found myself trawling through old expedition reports in the libraries of the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club in London. It struck me that there were very few places left in the world where new mountains were still waiting to be explored. Most of the remaining unclimbed summits are located in the remote regions of Antarctica, Greenland, Alaska and the forested mountains of the Congo and Indonesia. The Himalayan kingdoms of Bhutan and Tibet contain some of the highest virgin peaks in the world but because of stringent bureaucracy, mountaineers are dissuaded from visiting them.

I then stumbled across a report by a Russian mountaineer about the new exploration possibilities in the former Soviet republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Due to their location on the sensitive Soviet-Chinese border, barring the odd yak-herder they had been off-limits to all non-military personnel for decades. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in the early nineties, the 'Stans' have gradually been opening their doors to mountaineers. A prominent spur of the Himalayas called the Pamirs extends deep into these two small landlocked countries and reaches altitudes of over 24,000 feet. The Pamirs lie alongside the ancient Silk Route trading highway. When Marco Polo visited the region in the thirteenth century he called it 'the roof of the world'. Further investigation revealed a cluster of over forty peaks far higher than anything in the Alps in an area called the Eastern Zaalay range in the southeast corner of Kyrgyzstan. So little was known about the place that only Pik Kurumdy, the highest summit in the range, had been given a name. At 22,000 feet, Kurumdy was one of the highest unclimbed mountains on Earth. I had to go there.

The British Silk Mountains Expedition of 2000 took the best part of eighteen months to organise. I was amazingly fortunate that so many Bristol friends shared my passion for adventure. George Wells was one of my closest friends at university, and having proved his worth during our Andean expedition three years earlier he was naturally my first pick when selecting the team for Kyrgyzstan. I also recruited Patrick Woodhead, who had lived with George in the house next door to me. We were joined by one of my Arthur Andersen colleagues (and another Bristol alumnus) Nick Stopford, two experienced Russian climbers called Anatoly Moshnikov and Vladimir Vysochkiy, and our jovial Australian base camp manager, Scott Jamison.

Sponsorship was secured only days before our departure, courtesy of the internet company NOW.com. We set off for Kyrgyzstan at the end of June 2000 with the aim of exploring and mapping as much as we could of the Eastern Zaalay Mountain Range. NOW.com wanted this to be the world's first truly 'live' expedition and sent out a producer and technician to beam back live images and video to the company's website and satellite television stations in Hong Kong and Singapore.

From an idyllic base camp on the banks of a rampant glacial river, which we named the Anduin after the mythical river in *The Lord of the Rings*, we made a total of nine first ascents over a period of six weeks. One of the great treats of the expedition was choosing names for these unnamed rivers and mountains, which might one day appear on a map of this part of the world if the Kyrgyz cartographers get round to it. Mountains were named after my mother Quenelda (following a successful ascent on her birthday), our patron Ranulph Fiennes and even George's lifelong cleaning lady Ethel, who had sadly passed away a few months earlier.

The expedition had been an unqualified success, and we all came home with a real sense of privilege that we had been the first people to visit these secret mountains. The only disappointment was narrowly missing out on climbing Pik Kurumdy, after dangerous snow conditions forced a retreat less than two thousand feet from the summit. Our time in Kyrgyzstan had been an enormously happy one and fuelled my own desire to organise something on a much grander scale. Having been climbing mountains for the best part of seven years, I wanted to take a break from the mountains and set myself a new challenge altogether. It was then that the South Pole began to fill my daydreams again.

Not long after our return to England, I got talking to Faye Sommerville, an old friend of George's. For the last five years, she had been working for an American organisation called Adventure Network International (ANI), the only private company providing air transport to Antarctica. It caters for climbers, penguin spotters and other 'extreme tourists'. Ever since Robert Swan's 'In the Footsteps of Scott' trip to the South Pole in 1985, ANI has supported every non-governmental expedition to the Antarctic interior. Faye told me that ANI had just begun running commercial trips to the South Pole and that the next one would start in November 2001. For a fee of £30,000, I could join a professionally guided sixty-day journey from a start point at Hercules Inlet on the Antarctic coast to the bottom of the world. With the chores of logistics and team building already organised, all I would have to do to guarantee my place on the 2001 expedition was to raise thirty grand. Faye went on to explain that if the expedition was successful, at twenty-six I would become the

youngest Briton to reach the South Pole, and this angle might score points when trying to raise the necessary sponsorship. I knew that if I didn't grasp this opportunity while I had the chance, the South Pole would gnaw away in my mind forever.

After a winter in Switzerland working as a ski guide for the chalet holiday business Ski Verbier, I became part of their London management team. My boss, David Pearson, was aware of my South Pole ambitions and said that provided that my work didn't suffer, I could use the office's facilities to look for financial help to join ANI's commercial expedition. It was an incredibly generous offer, and for the best part of twelve months I made the time, often after work or at weekends, to pester all the companies who had sponsored my previous trips to the mountains as well as hundreds more. Several organisations expressed an interest, but all promises of support vanished after 11 September 2001. I briefly contemplated borrowing the £30,000 before my parents drummed some common sense into me. The expedition went ahead without me. The Canadian polar veteran Paul Landry guided Timo Polari from Finland and Chris Weyers, from Australia, to the South Pole in sixty days.

Seeing my dreams evaporate after so much hard work only made me more determined to have another go the following year, but not on a commercial trip and not with a group of people I had never met before. Without really thinking about what I might be letting myself in for, I made the decision to put my own South Pole expedition together and fill it with fellow adventurers, people I had climbed with in the past. 2002 marked the centenary of Captain Scott's first attempt to reach the South Pole, and I began trying to find a way in which I could incorporate this important anniversary in my own plans. The 1901–4 British National Antarctic Expedition, or the *Discovery* Expedition as it is more commonly known today, was a landmark in the history of Antarctic exploration, but its extraordinary achievements have been completely overshadowed by the tragic events of Scott's fateful return to Antarctica nine years later.

In 1902 Scott and his companions Ernest Shackleton and Edward Wilson were forced to turn back less than five hundred miles from the South Pole. But it was outstanding scientific work that was the expedition's crowning glory, and its findings filled more volumes than the entire Encyclopaedia Britannica. My idea was for our expedition to celebrate the *Discovery* Expedition's achievements by following Scott's route south of McMurdo Sound to the point of his party's 1902 farthest south on the Ross Ice Shelf. From here the plan was to join the *Terra Nova* Expedition's 1911–12 route up the notorious Beardmore Glacier, through the Transantarctic Mountains and on to the Pole. Unlike Scott, who had

to retrace his steps all the way back to McMurdo Sound, we would have a ski plane to pick us up from the Pole. Only Robert Swan's team had completed this route since Scott's day and we could expect the 820-mile journey to take anything from fifty-five to seventy-five days.

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Even though the first recorded sighting of the Antarctic mainland occurred less than two hundred years ago, man has speculated about its existence for thousands of years. In about 530 BC the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras reasoned that the Earth must be spherical with a vast southern continent to balance the landmasses of the north. The name Antarctica, from the ancient Greek Antarktos, translates as 'opposite Arktos'. Arktos is the constellation of the Bear that dominates the northern night sky. The Egyptian Ptolemy believed that people of great wealth inhabited what he called Terra Australis Incognita, the Unknown Southern Land, but that an impenetrable hot belt of fire and monsters separated the northern and southern hemispheres.

The fearsome Polynesian chief Ui-Te-Rangiora headed south from Raratonga in his canoe in about AD 650 'until the ocean was filled with white powder and great white rocks rose high into the sky.' The notion of a southern continent lost favour in the Middle Ages, when dissident thinkers risked being burned at the stake for suggesting that the Earth was anything but flat. It was not until the momentous journeys of Columbus and Magellan that Pythagoras's theory was confirmed.

The first known map of Antarctica dates from 1508, when the Renaissance genius Leonardo da Vinci drew the outline of an imaginary continent called 'Antarctus' south of Africa. In 1578, sixty years after Magellan's circumnavigation, Sir Francis Drake became the first man to sail round Cape Horn. In his boat *The Golden Hind* he reached a new 'farthest south' of 57°S. When the Dutchman Abel Tasman sailed around Australia in 1642–3, he proved once and for all that if there was a great southern continent it could not be connected to an already known landmass.

During the early planning stages of our expedition, Pat Woodhead and I visited the Expedition Advisory Centre at the Royal Geographical Society in London, where a magnificent seventeenth-century map of the world adorns an entire wall. Gazing up at this fabulous work of art, I found it extraordinary that even though Antarctica had never been sighted at the time the map was drawn, the cartographers of the day had imaginatively pencilled in a vast southern continent, complete with rivers and forests.

It was the Yorkshireman Captain James Cook who threw the concept of a verdant southern paradise out of the window for good. During the

second of his long voyages around the world, he became the first man to penetrate the Antarctic Circle, and in 1773 the first to circumnavigate the continent. Cook spent many months searching for land, and after pack ice forced him to retreat to South Georgia Island he wrote: 'The place is doomed by nature never to feel the warmth of the sun's rays, but to lie forever buried by everlasting snow and ice, whose horrible and savage aspect I have not the words to describe.' He had reached 71°10'S, a record that was to stand for half a century. Had it not been for the bad weather, he would surely have sighted land, tantalisingly shrouded in mist less than fifty miles from his ship. Although he never saw it, Cook believed that a southern land must be the source of the icebergs spread over the ocean but that it was unlikely to be habitable. He concluded: 'Should anyone possess the resolution and fortitude … to push yet further south than I have done … I make bold to say that the world will derive no benefit from it.'

Explorers were so discouraged that they steered clear of the far southern seas until in 1820, as often happens when waiting an eternity for something to arrive, Antarctica was spotted twice in the space of just three days – first by a Russian ship and then by an English vessel. Whether it was Fabian von Bellingshausen or Edward Bransfield who saw it first remains a source of dispute between Russia and Great Britain to this day, but their discoveries opened the way for hundreds of pioneering voyages to the Antarctic. These expeditions were led not by explorers but by ambitious men seeking to make a quick buck from Antarctica's primary resource – seals.

The sealers were roughnecks, lured to the South by the huge bounty that seal pelts could fetch back home. Sealing parties from Britain, France and the United States had slaughtered literally millions of animals for their fur. Having never seen humans before, the seals showed no fear and would inquisitively waddle up to the men, only to be clubbed to death or shot. During one particular voyage in the early 1820s, no fewer than 100,000 skins were taken back to England aboard *Pegasus*. But by the time the ship had docked in London, the skins had rotted into a stinking mass that had to be shovelled out of the hold and sold on as manure.

By 1822 the seal populations of the Falkland Islands and South Georgia had already been hunted almost to extinction, forcing the sealers to search for new breeding grounds further south. Often the discovery of new lands would be kept secret so the sealing companies could have the seal stock entirely to themselves. The sealers' journeys became ever more daring, and in 1823 the Scot James Weddell sailed south through the sea that now bears his name as far as 74°15'S, over two hundred miles further south

than any man had been before. Within ten years, Antarctica's seal population had been obliterated and the industry collapsed. Amazingly, many seal colonies have since recovered. From a population of around ten animals 180 years ago, the fur seal population of South Georgia has multiplied to over a million, in one of the animal kingdom's great recovery acts.

The departure of the sealers from the south came at a time when scientific interest in the polar regions was on the increase. Following the discovery of the Earth's magnetic field by the Germans in the 1830s, ambitious expeditions were launched to find out more about it. Scientists were only just beginning to realise the importance of the Earth's magnetic field to maritime navigation. Spurred on by the British naval officer James Clark Ross's arrival at the North Magnetic Pole in 1831, several government-funded expeditions headed to Antarctica in the hope of locating the South Magnetic Pole.

The next to cast their eye south were the French, under the command of the wonderfully named Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville. Dumont d'Urville had already made a name for himself seventeen years earlier after convincing his government to buy the beautiful statue of the Venus de Milo for the nation, which had recently been unearthed in the Aegean. After penetrating deep into the Weddell Sea and spending a year carrying out anthropological research in the South Pacific, they finally landed in East Antarctica in 1840, hacking off a few pieces of granite from a cliff as proof of their discovery. Dumont d'Urville named the land Terre Adélie after his wife and returned home to great acclaim.

At about the same time Lieutenant Charles Wilkes led an American expedition into the south. His discoveries led him to believe that the lands unfolding before him could be part of a much bigger continent – Terra Australis Incognita. But this could not be proven. Despite charting more than one thousand miles of virgin coastline, Wilkes was court-martialled on his return home for poor surveying techniques and for the rough treatment of his crew.

But neither the French nor the Americans found what they had been searching for. Hoping to reproduce his sensational successes in the north and discover the South Magnetic Pole, the dashing James Clark Ross set sail for Antarctica aboard HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror*. In January 1841, he penetrated the pack ice as far south as 78°9'S, becoming the first to see the 200-foot-high gleaming wall of the Ross Ice Shelf. He described this extraordinary ice barrier, which stretched for hundreds of miles in each direction, as 'a mighty and wonderful object far beyond anything we could have thought or conceived'. It prevented Ross from pushing any further south and he concluded: 'We might with equal chance of success try to sail through the white cliffs of Dover.'

Other discoveries during Ross's four-year voyage included new mountain ranges, the 12,000-foot volcano Mount Erebus on Ross Island and the coastline of Victoria Land. Ross was adored by his crew and in 1842 he threw a lavish New Year's Eve party for all on board. After mooring alongside an iceberg, a refreshment bar complete with seating was carved into the ice and the festivities lasted all day.

Around the coast of Victoria Land, Ross's compass started behaving wildly. His investigations led him to speculate that the South Magnetic Pole was located somewhere on the high plateau of Victoria Land and way out of reach. Ross's legacy was his surveying work of McMurdo Sound off Ross Island and then eastwards along the Ice Barrier, which would one day pave the way for the subsequent British and Norwegian attempts on the South Pole.

Ross was given a hero's welcome on his return to England. On his wedding day later that year, his new father-in-law made him promise to hang up his expedition boots for good. He kept his word and the career of one of Antarctica's great pioneers came to an end. Ross had proved conclusively that there was no hospitable land in Antarctica and it was not visited again for over fifty years.

Interest in the southern continent was rekindled in 1895 when the leading geographers of the day gathered at the Royal Geographical Society in London and passed a resolution stating: 'The exploration of the Antarctic Regions is the greatest piece of geographical exploration still to be undertaken.' Governments were urged to send teams south and a new wave of scientific exploration in the south had begun.

The Belgians were the first to respond, and in early 1898 *Belgica* under the command of Adrien de Gerlache weighed anchor at Punta Arenas in Chile and headed south. A young Norwegian called Roald Amundsen volunteered his services to join the expedition as first mate and without pay. Hoping to discover new lands, *Belgica* headed down the length of the Antarctic Peninsula and into the Bellingshausen Sea, loaded with three years of supplies. With the austral winter fast approaching and a growing danger of the ship becoming frozen in, de Gerlache asked his crew how they would feel about spending the winter stuck in the pack ice. The men went berserk and accused their skipper of plotting their icy imprisonment long before they had set sail from South America.

By early March, the ice had sealed their fate, and more by accident than anything else, *Belgica* became the first ship to overwinter in Antarctica. Penguins were slaughtered to provide fresh meat, enabling the ship's doctor to prove the effectiveness of fresh food at keeping the dangers of scurvy at bay. The ship's physicist ignored the advice, saying that he would rather die than eat penguin meat, which on 5 June was precisely

what he did. Narrowly avoiding becoming trapped for a second miserable winter, *Belgica* returned safely to Chile the following March. The expedition provided Amundsen with valuable experience and fuelled his desire to one day claim Antarctica's ultimate prize and be the first man to reach the South Pole.

In 1899 the Norwegian Carsten Borchgrevink overwintered near Cape Adare on Victoria Land with nine colleagues and seventy-five dogs. They took the dogs out on sledging forays, produced excellent maps and carried out research on the Earth's magnetic field in one of the windiest corners of the continent. The expedition showed that in the relative comfort of a wooden hut, men could survive the desperately cold and dark Antarctic winter, opening up numerous possibilities for the exploration of the interior. But the enigma of the great southern landmass still remained unanswered.

Since the International Geographical Conference in 1895, the elderly president of the Royal Geographical Society, Sir Clements Markham, had campaigned tirelessly for a major British expedition to push deep into the heart of Antarctica. He was not alone in his belief that because of the ground-breaking voyages of Cook and Ross, the British had priority in Antarctica. One outspoken campaigner went so far as to say: 'I should not like to see foreign names upon that hemisphere where all civilised points are inhabited by our countrymen and belong to this country.' This was the heyday of the British Empire so it is not surprising to find ripe Victorian arrogance assuming that the polar regions were part of the Empire and the best way of exploring them was the British way. After years of fundraising and meticulous planning, Markham's dream was finally realised.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, atlases were covered with blanks south of the Antarctic Circle. Despite hundreds of journeys by nineteenth-century pioneers, there had been just a handful of coastal landings and only a tiny fraction of Antarctica's twenty-thousand-mile coastline had been mapped. Were these early discoveries merely islands, or could the dots be joined to reveal Ptolemy's great southern continent? Following a royal inspection by the new king and expedition patron Edward VII at the Cowes yachting regatta, the SS *Discovery* set sail from the Solent in searing heat on 6 August 1901 on a quest to unravel the mysteries of the far south. The British National Antarctic Expedition was the most ambitious programme of Antarctic exploration ever seen, and one which would ultimately open the route to the South Pole. *Discovery*'s commander was to become the most recognised illustrious name in the history of polar exploration. His name was Robert Falcon Scott.

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ANI's base in Antarctica is located at Patriot Hills near the Ronne Ice Shelf, thousands of miles from Scott's base at McMurdo Sound. Had I found the funds to join Paul Landry's expedition with ANI in 2001, we would have set off from Hercules Inlet, twenty-odd miles from Patriot Hills, on the edge of the Antarctic continent. Following in the footsteps of Captain Scott, as opposed to the standard Hercules Inlet route, would increase our expedition's costs dramatically, as ANI would need to fly halfway round Antarctica just to drop us off at our start point.

Based on a party of four people and a polar guide, ANI quoted me a price of £180,000 to include all logistical support and the placing of two depots at either end of the Beardmore Glacier. Extra equipment and training costs put the budget close to the £200,000 mark. I remained convinced that despite a sevenfold hike in the amount of money to be raised, public interest in Scott's exploits would put us in a strong position to generate significant media coverage and possibly a television documentary. This publicity would all help when it came to looking for sponsorship.

Ranulph Fiennes, who had supported some of my previous trips to the mountains, agreed to be patron of the project, which adopted the grandiose title of the 'Commonwealth South Pole Centenary Expedition'. Having been working with the Prince's Trust for a number of years, I was keen that the expedition should try to raise a significant sum of money for this worthwhile cause, a task made more achievable after the Prince of Wales gave the trip his backing.

Next came the task of selecting a team. Our expedition to the unclimbed mountains of Central Asia had been as close to the perfect trip as possible – we had achieved far more than we had expected, and despite the day-to-day stresses and hardship, every day was filled with laughter. Oh, and nobody died. If we could reproduce the same expedition spirit in Antarctica, then I believed it would give us the very best possible chance of success. George Wells had just started his own property development business in London, and with all the distractions and time away that the expedition would entail, pressing him to join me would be disastrous for his fledgling company. George had been with me on most of my earlier trips and leaving him out of the side this time around was a particularly difficult decision to make.

I hoped that Pat Woodhead and Nick Stopford, the other two Kyrgyzstan veterans, would have fewer work constraints and be able to join the team. We had been through a great deal together and become very close. At the end of 2001, Pat was trying to make it as a freelance television producer, working on documentary subjects as diverse as swimming with great white sharks and the journeys of Alexander the Great. I first

met him at the beginning of my second year at Bristol University. I had just moved into a house with five friends. One day the doorbell rang and I opened the door to find a young student, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist and clutching a chicken. He walked straight past me and made a beeline for Amanda and Lucinda, two of the girls I was living with. 'Good afternoon ladies,' he said confidently, with a cheeky twinkle in his eye, 'I've just moved in next door and was wondering if I could borrow your microwave to defrost this.'

Over the course of the next two years I got to know Pat very well, and found out that there was much more to the guy than simply trying to impress members of the opposite sex. Together we competed in the London Marathon, rock-climbed in the nearby Avon Gorge and became good friends. Pat is one of life's great enthusiasts and his limitless energy has seen him work as a rhino tracker in Namibia and run marathons in Arctic Norway. I fired off an email to see how interested he might be in coming to the South Pole. The reply came back within three minutes. 'What makes you think I want to freeze my kahoonas off, eat grim food, burn eight thousand calories a day, never see darkness, have to put up with you as a tent partner, be in danger of falling in crevasses and be savaged by mutated penguins? Yes alright, I'll do it.'

Nick is without doubt the most experienced mountaineer amongst our motley group of adventurers. Even before going to Kyrgyzstan, he had an impressive list of ascents to his name, including Mont Blanc and Mount McKinley, the highest mountain in North America. In 2001 he joined a British expedition to the North East Ridge of Mount Everest, reaching an altitude of over 25,000 feet before bad weather forced the team's retreat from the mountain. Nick's personality fluctuates between that of a serious accountant and that of a giggly teenager. His passion for the outdoors and ability to get on with anybody made him an excellent guy to have on the expedition. The only problem was that he had recently gone to work for Ernst & Young in Geneva. Whilst he was desperate to join the team, it would have been pushing his luck to ask for all that time off before he had settled in to his new job. Nick's girlfriend at the time was living in London, which did at least give him the perfect excuse to fly over for weekends to train and work on the expedition.

My work took me to Verbier for a few days in March 2002, during which time I managed to fit in a day's skiing with some friends who were over on holiday. One of their party was a South African called Andrew Gerber, whom I had never met before. Although you would never have guessed it from his Home Counties accent, he was brought up in Cape Town before moving to England at seventeen. He seemed

particularly interested in my South Pole plans and confessed to having wanted to go on a major expedition for years. Later that morning Toby, one of the guys we were skiing with, came up to me and whispered in my ear: 'If you're still looking for teammates, you should seriously consider asking Gerber. He may have never done any of this expedition stuff before, but he is strong, loyal, has plenty of common sense and is a beast on the rowing machine. Trust me, he would be awesome.' By the end of the day I had seen enough of this Andrew Gerber character to ask him to join the team.

It may seem strange to pick someone for such a major venture as an expedition to the South Pole without knowing much about him, but on all my expeditions, I have tried to select people who get along with others and who can stay focused when the chips are down. To me, these character traits are far more important than sheer technical ability. Even though I have been incredibly fortunate never to come to blows with a team member, it is well known that expeditions can be stressful affairs where fellow participants have spectacular fallings out. I wasn't sure exactly what it was, but Andrew had something about him, and I just sensed that he would fit into the team perfectly. With all his sailing, skiing and rowing experience, I was convinced that he wouldn't take long to pick up the technical side of things.

The hardest part of any expedition is finding somebody to pay for you to go. It is usually a two-stage process. First you need to be able to guarantee publicity. Only with the strong prospect of the company's name appearing on television screens or newspaper pages will a marketing director part with any of the precious marketing budget. With Nick in Geneva and Andrew not joining us till the spring, Pat and I set about working on ideas for a television documentary.

Sir Kenneth Branagh had just appeared as Ernest Shackleton in Channel Four's superb two-part television drama about Shackleton's fateful *Endurance* Expedition. Having heard Branagh give a passionate lecture at the Royal Geographical Society about the making of the drama and his dream of one day visiting Antarctica, we approached him about the possibility of flying in to join us for the final hundred miles of the expedition. For two weeks he deliberated before having to decline because of work commitments. He generously wrote: 'I shall therefore leave it to the real heroes and simply say a huge thank you for the immensely flattering idea that you should even consider me as a team member.' Had he come on board, we felt sure that everything else would have fallen into place.

For months Pat used his contacts in the television industry to set up meetings with documentary makers and production companies. The two

of us would then try to sell them the idea of a bunch of young polar novices following Scott's route on the centenary of his first attempt to reach the South Pole. Whilst there was plenty of interest in the idea, the practicalities and costs of filming in Antarctica became the major stumbling blocks every time. We needed to pursue other options.

All the major newspapers and television news channels were approached to explore the chances of our story making the headlines. Every time the answer was the same: 'It sounds an interesting story and there's a chance we might run a report about your story when you reach the Pole, but due to the unpredictable way that news works, it could be that major news breaking on the day would shut your story out. Keep in touch, but for now we can't guarantee anything.'

One of the news outlets I contacted was ITN. I spoke to the journalist Terry Lloyd, who over the years had reported on many of Ranulph Fiennes's polar exploits. After all the setbacks of my other dealings with journalists, his enthusiasm blew me away. 'Tom, I think this is a terrific idea. I would love to report your story for "The News at Ten". I'll see what sort of commitment I can drum up from the guys here, but count it as a YES. Now go and get your sponsorship, young man!' Over the course of the next few months, Terry and I spoke regularly on the telephone to set everything in stone. It wasn't the hour-long documentary that we had been hoping for, but it was a start.

The four of us wrote hundreds of sponsorship letters and emails to the marketing departments of every major company with a budget large enough not to take fright at the £200,000 we needed. From telecommunications firms to banks to yoghurt manufacturers, we courted them all and followed every letter with a phone call. Optimistically, we also approached organisations with a polar connection such as Smirnoff Ice, Guinness Extra Cold and Fox's Glacier Mints, convinced that we were the answer to all their marketing dreams. Before the person on the other end of the line had a chance to say no, we would offer to come and meet them in person. Mostly we got no further than the switchboard, but on the few occasions when an offer for a meeting was successful, we felt we were far more likely to be taken seriously if we could talk to someone face to face.

More schmoozing in large office buildings all over the country routinely ended in disappointment. It was a shameless task, and however many meetings I had already had that day I would still try to sound passionate and excited. David at Ski Verbier was wonderfully supportive, and if things in the office weren't too busy he would give me the time off work to meet potential backers. Everyone in the team was doing their bit in our never-ending quest for sponsorship. Occasionally,

a company would sound impressed by a presentation and voice an interest in making some form of financial contribution. But when it came to that final commitment, things would always fall through.

One exception was Snickers, with whom Pat and I had several meetings. It was particularly ironic that it should have been Pat who made the initial sponsorship approach. Towards the end of our Kyrgyzstan expedition, food supplies ran out three days before we were due to be picked up from our base camp. Things got so desperate that we resorted to living off wild mushrooms and Strepsil throat lozenges. We had saved one Snickers bar to be split between the team, which we hoped would provide us with enough energy to reach our last summit of Pik Fiennes. Our empty stomachs rumbled from the very first step. I have never been so hungry or felt so weak. For six long hours we staggered up the mountain's snowy flanks, fighting off temptation for as long as possible. A few hundred feet below the summit and we could hold off no longer. Salivating uncontrollably, we turned to Pat, the custodian of the Snickers bar, and asked him to start chopping it up. Looking decidedly sheepish, he bowed his head and confessed: 'Sorry guys, I've already eaten it.' We all have a giggle about it now, but at the time we wanted to throw him off the mountain. By approaching Snickers for a large cheque (and several complimentary boxes of chocolate bars) he was now seeking absolute forgiveness.

In early July 2002 Anne Kershaw, the president of ANI, was over in London and we arranged to meet her. Anne took over the running of ANI after her husband Giles (the founder of ANI) died in a gyrocopter accident in Antarctica in 1990. This petite, blonde, glamorously dressed and very attractive Scotswoman was nothing like the image of the efficient businesswoman that I had built up in my mind following our correspondence over the past eighteen months. She looked as if she had just left university. For most of our hour-long meeting she was extremely chatty and friendly, almost flirty, as we discussed the logistics of the expedition. Then the conversation turned to money and her steely professionalism kicked in. I tried to find ways of bringing the expedition costs down, but hers is a cut-throat business and she had learned to stand her ground. Before bidding us farewell, she said: 'You've got two months to get the funds together, or I'm afraid the trip is off.'

The route via the treacherous 120-mile-long Beardmore Glacier is the most difficult of all the approaches to the South Pole. Of the eight people who have reached the Pole this way, only Robert Swan's small team returned alive. The glacier is littered with giant crevasses from which Scott had many narrow escapes. Choosing the safest line was of vital importance and I approached Professor Charles Swithinbank of the Scott

Polar Research Institute in Cambridge for some much-needed advice. Having spent many years surveying Antarctica from the air, he knew the intricacies of the constantly changing Beardmore Glacier better than any man alive, and he passed on some particularly useful aerial photographs and up-to-date glacier surface information.

I had read much about recent expeditions in Antarctica that used kites to improve travel speeds, and thought it would be worth us trying to do the same. The theory is that when the wind is blowing in the right direction, these mini-parachutes can be raised into the air and used to propel a man on skis, dragging a sled across the snow. As with the new extreme sport of kite surfing, with good handling the kites can help one travel great distances given favourable conditions.

Roger Mear had been part of Robert Swan's three-man In the Footsteps of Scott Expedition to the South Pole in 1985. Roger had used kites in some of his more recent expeditions to great effect, once covering over one hundred miles across Greenland in just six hours. When I asked him if an outfit of polar amateurs such as ours would be able to cope with the technicalities of the new sport of kiting, he could not have been more positive. But Roger also highlighted the importance of training with the kites, stressing in an email to me: 'If you are intending to go to Antarctica this coming season then you have to get going with the kites NOW! It's a big learning curve, even if you are all good downhill skiers.'

I also contacted the Belgian explorer Alain Hubert, who in 1997–8 made the longest unsupported crossing of Antarctica with his partner Dixie Dansercoer. After reaching the Pole from the East Antarctic coast, they descended the Beardmore Glacier before deploying their kites to help them cross the Ross Ice Shelf to McMurdo Sound. He told me that the winds they experienced on the Ross Ice Shelf typically blew from the west. As we would be travelling in the opposite direction to Alain and Dixie, if we were to take kites with us we would be able to use these crosswinds to our advantage. Alain also recommended we use a special type of kite called a NASA-wing that had been developed by NASA as a way of landing spacecraft.

Whilst living in Cape Town, Andrew had spent much of his free time on the beach flying kites very similar to the ones we hoped to use in Antarctica. Pat had also tried them out in the past and the four of us spent several Saturday afternoons on Clapham Common getting used to the art of flying these king-duvet-sized pieces of paper-thin material. Roger suggested arranging some kite-buggying instruction on the large tidal flats of Camber Sands, not far from my parents' house in East Sussex. Over the course of a hot July weekend, Pat, Nick, Andrew and I slowly got to grips with the kites to power the buggies along the beach.

Translating our newfound skills into 'kite-skiing' on snow would be a different task altogether, but our south coast trials had brought home what might be achieved in Antarctica if the winds blew in our favour.

It was all very well honing our skills in the warmth of the British summer, but we needed to acquire some cold-weather experience before we headed south. Following a search on the internet, I managed to track down a German alpine guide by the name of Gottlieb Braun-Elwert. Gottlieb ran specialist polar training courses in the Southern Alps of New Zealand and had trained a Singaporean team that had successfully reached the South Pole in 1999. I arranged an intensive three-week programme for the four of us at the end of August – the middle of the New Zealand winter. At that time of year Greenland was the only other part of the world where we could have trained for a polar expedition. However, the huge costs involved in getting there made this impossible.

A fortnight before we were due to leave for New Zealand, Snickers withdrew their support because of 'internal problems'. This hammer blow was particularly heartbreaking as we had received provisional guarantees that they wanted to make a financial commitment of £100,000 to the expedition. The one company who continued to show an interest was the car insurance specialists Hastings Direct, who I had heard were eager to support Sussex-based sporting projects. They had just signed a deal to sponsor the prestigious WTA tennis championships at Eastbourne, and I thought with my own links with the county it was worth approaching them.

Over the course of the summer, I had had several meetings with their colourful American chairman, David Gundlach. Having done a lot of climbing in the Rockies in his younger days, he shared our passion for the great outdoors and said that he would like to become involved in the expedition. David told me that his business commitments made it impossible for him to find the time to climb again but that our expedition was his way of continuing his adventures. He very generously agreed to provide the £8,000 we needed to go to New Zealand 'to keep this terrific enterprise alive.'

Our three-week trip to New Zealand proved to be a great success. After a few days ski mountaineering around the Harris Mountains above the sleepy town of Wanaka, we based ourselves in a small corrugated iron shack called the Centennial Hut, high in the Southern Alps. The only way in was by helicopter. Located amongst large ice fields, with biting winds and regular snowstorms roaring off the rocky peaks above, the place resembled a sort of mini Antarctica and was the perfect place for us to train. We spent a lot of time ski mountaineering, learning to build igloos (a vital skill in case our tents blew away in Antarctica),

practising crevasse rescue techniques and building up our fitness levels in temperatures down to −20°C. In the perishing hut every evening, Gottlieb continued the instruction with some invaluable lessons about polar clothing, equipment, nutrition and survival.

Our time on the ice fields also gave us the perfect opportunity to try out the kites on the snow. It was a strange but exhilarating sensation to be pulled across the flat surface by a thin piece of material fluttering thirty yards above our heads. We experimented with the NASA-wings in New Zealand but found they had a narrower wind-range than the more conventional 'wind foil' kites, which allowed us to ski at an angle of ninety degrees to the wind.

It was also clear that if the kites were ever deployed, drama was never going to be far away. Nick and Andrew, both hurtling along in opposite directions at breakneck speed, managed to have a head-on collision, skis and bodies flying through the air in a cloud of powder snow. Thankfully, other than dented pride, neither of them suffered injury and they were soon back on their feet in fits of laughter. Moments later, Pat managed to wrap £600-worth of kite round the one rocky pinnacle protruding through the ice field. We spent the rest of the afternoon fixing ropes to the rock so that he could abseil down the cliff face and recover the kite.

Although we hadn't been given the chance to travel for days on end across a polar ice cap, we returned to England pleased with everything we had learned and almost ready to take on the harsh Antarctic environment. Our sessions with the kites confirmed their huge potential, and we made the unanimous decision to take them to Antarctica. The training gave Andrew a hands-on introduction to expedition life, and he proved himself to be more than up to the job. Most important of all, everyone got on extremely well in New Zealand and the three weeks had been an invaluable team-building exercise.

With just seven weeks to go before the planned expedition departure date, there was still a huge amount to do. Shortly after we returned home from New Zealand, Geoff Somers agreed to join us as our polar guide and came down to London to meet us. Having somebody in the team with polar experience was going to be vital to the success of the expedition and Geoff was one of the very best in the business. His quiet, unassuming character belies an incredibly tough interior that has seen him achieve far more than any other British polar explorer in recent times. Geoff has not become a household name in this country in the way that other British explorers have, simply because he does not like the attention. After many years working for the British Antarctic Survey, he began leading trips to the Poles. The highlight of his expeditions took place in 1989–90 when, along with five colleagues and several dog teams,

he made the longest traverse of Antarctica. In an extraordinary feat of endurance, they finally reached their destination after an unbroken 220-day journey of nearly four thousand miles.

It wasn't just his vast experience that made Geoff my first choice as our expedition guide, it was the fact that four years earlier he had travelled hundreds of miles with kites in Antarctica. We liked Geoff enormously and spent a useful weekend with him talking logistics and flying the kites in Hyde Park. He also suggested a fitness regime to build up our strength and stamina. Geoff's ideas were so unconventional that at first we weren't sure if he was being serious.

Following Geoff's recommendation, Pat managed to track down some old minibus tyres, which we then tied together and attached to a waist harness. Geoff told us that dragging them through uneven terrain was the best way of building up the muscles we would be using to pull our sleds in Antarctica. Over the course of the next few weeks, we met up in the evenings for tyre-dragging sessions around the sandy horse rides of Rotten Row in Hyde Park. With a ski pole in each hand, we walked along at a brisk pace, doing hour-long laps of the park. Choking clouds of dust rose from the tyres as they reluctantly slid through the sand. It was mind-numbing, sweaty work, and we must have looked a truly bizarre sight, but we soon learnt to ignore the comments from American tourists and people walking their dogs.

When we met Geoff, one of the first things he told us was: 'You lads need to bulk up a bit. You're way too scrawny for polar travel.' He recommended putting on weight fast, by whatever means possible. For somebody with a sweet tooth like me, I thought all my Christmases had come at once. Rather than pour the usual semi-skimmed milk on my cereal in the mornings, I used double cream, before tucking into a second helping. Throughout the day, I would gorge on cakes, biscuits and jam-filled donuts, go to McDonald's for lunch and eat large steaks and ice cream for dinner. But it wasn't working and my excesses saw me put on only three pounds of weight over a month of feasting. I had read how Ranulph Fiennes had lost nearly four stone during his Antarctic crossing. If the same happened to me, I would blow away in the wind.

I cannot begin to imagine how complex it would have been for Scott and Markham to put the *Discovery* Expedition together. To start with, the British National Antarctic Expedition needed to raise the best part of £6,000,000 (in today's money) to get off the ground. After dedicating six years of his life to the job, Markham eventually secured the funds from the government, the Royal Geographical Society and a multitude of businesses and individuals. Scott's officers were largely made up of men who had served under him in the Royal Navy. One notable exception

was his young ambitious third lieutenant Ernest Shackleton, who had served in the Merchant Navy since he was sixteen. The scientific staff had an important role to play on the expedition, none more so than the expedition's zoologist and assistant surgeon Edward Wilson. There was little time for any training, although nine months before *Discovery* set sail, Scott and Markham travelled to Oslo for a series of invaluable meetings with the legendary Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen.

Whilst all the preparations for our expedition were coming together, Anne Kershaw was still on my back for the money. Not long after our return from New Zealand, I was asked into the television studios of BBC London to give an interview for the evening news about our recent South Pole training trip. When I was told that the programme was going out live, I went sheet white and shook with fear. Plastered in countless Hastings Direct logos, and with the newsroom filled with tents, kites and skis, I stumbled my way through the interview. The weatherman Peter Cockroft gave a special Antarctic weather forecast and the ordeal of being in front of the cameras turned out to be far less terrifying than I had first feared.

The following day I spoke to David Gundlach, who was tickled pink with the exposure that the interview had given his company but he added that he had yet to make up his mind over sponsoring the expedition. He said he was also talking to 'other parties' about possible joint sponsorship deals but would let us know shortly. All our other leads had now dried up – David was our last hope.

With one month to go before departure, I began to write a journal of each day's events and my thoughts at the time. That is where this book goes on from here. Some of the historical, factual and geographical information about Antarctica was written up in my journal, but much of it was incomplete or inaccurate at the time of writing and had to be more thoroughly researched back in England. Otherwise, I have tried to keep the journal as close to its original form as possible. In certain cases, it needed to be adapted to make events more easily understood but I have tried to keep these changes to a minimum. My journal was sometimes written at times of great difficulty and stress, and I believe it reflects these conditions well.