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## A Different History for the Poles

We had better begin with the question asked by every reader of the standard accounts of the great expeditions, the urgent question that floats irresistibly to the surface of one's mind as the contrast grows stronger and stronger between the safe, sensible surroundings in which one is reading, and the scenes that are being described. It works like a charm, always. One is sitting down somewhere in the warm – perhaps it is sunny, perhaps it is a dark evening of a temperate winter and the radiators are on – and whatever one's attitude, whatever the scepticism one applies to the boyish, adventurous text in one's hands, into one's mind come potent pictures of a place that is definitively elsewhere, so far away in fact that one would call it unimaginable if one were not at that moment imagining it at full force. Perhaps the place is a howling trough between two huge waves of the Antarctic Ocean, where a twelve-foot open boat encrusted with ice and containing five men, one of whom has gone mad and won't move, looks as if it is about to founder. Perhaps the place is the foot of a cliff in the dark, so cold and still that the breath of the travellers crystallises and falls to the snow in showers, so cold that their clothes will freeze at impossible angles if they do not keep their limbs moving. Perhaps the place is the South Pole itself, an abomination of desolation, a perfect nullity of a landscape, where a party of people are standing in a formal group, one pulling a string attached to a camera shutter. One is there in imagination as one reads, but with the possibility of instant withdrawal; one feels for the human figures at the centre of the scene, but one is not exactly in sympathy with them, though it is through their eyes that one is seeing. Their presence is as astonishing as their astonishing surroundings, something to be wondered at. And one asks, of course, everyone asks, *why?* Why did they do these insane things?