The life and death of Edward Wilson

Edward Wilson was born in Cheltenham on 23 July 1872, the son of a local physician. He was educated at Cheltenham College, and at Cambridge University, where he graduated in Natural Sciences in 1894. He continued his medical studies at St Georges Hospital in London and qualified as a doctor in 1901.

Wilson’s medical and scientific skills were matched by his artistic talent. It was this combination that led to his appointment, in 1901, as second medical officer, vertebrate zoologist and artist on Captain Scott’s National Antarctic Expedition, which set sail aboard Discovery in August 1901.

During the expedition, Wilson undertook important scientific work and began to create the superb series of Antarctic drawings and watercolours that are his main artistic achievement.

Following his return to England in 1904, Wilson undertook various scientific projects and prepared illustrations for books on British mammals and birds. In 1909, he accepted Captain Scott’s invitation to act as Chief of Scientific Staff on a second Antarctic Expedition, which set sail aboard Terra Nova in June 1910.

A principal aim of the expedition was to reach the South Pole, which no one had ever done before. Wilson was one of five men chosen to make the journey. They set out from the Antarctic coast in November 1911, and arrived at the Pole on 17 January 1912, only to discover that the Norwegian explorer, Roald Amundsen, had reached it a month before.

Their journey back was dogged by terrible weather, food and fuel shortages, and sickness. By mid-March, two of the party had died, and the remaining three, including Wilson, were marooned in their tent by a nine-day blizzard. There they died, during the last days of March 1912, their bodies being discovered eight months later, on 12 November 1912.
Edward Wilson and Cheltenham

Members of Edward Wilson’s family had lived in Cheltenham since the 1850s, and continued to do so for more than a century. His birthplace, 6 (now 91) Montpellier Terrace, has an inscription on its exterior, recording his birth there, although the house in which his family lived from 1874 until the 1930s, Westal in Montpellier Parade, has been demolished; its site is now occupied by part of the Eagle Tower car park. Still to be seen though is the house known as The Crippetts, on the slopes of Leckhampton Hill, where Wilson’s mother Mary farmed from 1885 onwards, and where the young Edward Wilson developed his love of nature.

Following Wilson’s death, a public subscription for a permanent memorial to him was launched, and on 9 July 1914, a bronze statue, designed by Captain Scott’s widow, Kathleen, was unveiled in the Promenade. Its Portland stone base bears this inscription –


Dr Wilson is also commemorated at Cheltenham College. In 1924, his portrait, dressed in Antarctic clothing, was included in a new stained glass window representing the Christian virtue of Fortitude in the College chapel, and in 1936, part of the old Junior School was converted into a new Biology Department as a memorial to him; there, in 1937, a bronze plaque with a profile of Wilson based on a bas-relief by Lady Scott was erected. It bears the inscription –

Edward Adrian Wilson M.B. Biologist and Explorer From boyhood a lover of nature He died with Scott on the return from the South Pole March 1912. "Strong in Will To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield”

- the quote, being the last line of Tennyson’s Ulysses, being the words inscribed on the wooden cross erected to the memory of Wilson and his four companions on Observation Hill in Antarctica, looking across to the Great Ice Barrier where the five men had perished.
From 1926 onwards, a number of individuals, including Wilson’s widow, Oriana, donated paintings, photographs, documents, objects and scientific specimens relating to Wilson and the two Antarctic Expeditions to Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum, while others were acquired by purchase. A significant addition to the Collection, from the Wilson family in 1995, was a large archive relating not only to Dr Wilson, but also to other members of his family. Archive additions are still made by the family, most recently to mark the 2012 centenary. Amongst the most historically significant items in the Museum’s collection are a compass and a watch found on Wilson’s body in 1912 and the prayer book used by Dr Edward Atkinson at the funeral service of Scott, Wilson and Bowers in November 1912.


**Antarctica 2012**

The Centenary of the *Terra Nova* Expedition and the deaths of Scott and his companions were marked by a series of national and provincial commemorations, including events in Cardiff, Cheltenham and Plymouth, culminating in a Memorial Service in London’s St Paul’s Cathedral on 29 March 2012. A special service was held in Cheltenham College Chapel to remember Wilson, and the statue in the Promenade rededicated. Three new information boards were also unveiled – at the statue, the College and site of Westal, the Wilson family home, in Montpellier Parade.
To find out more about the Wilson collection and archives held by the museum contact: The Collections Manager, Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum, Clarence Street, Cheltenham GL50 3JT
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