

Tom Crean (explorer)



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Tom Crean (20 July 1877 – 27 July 1938) was an Irish seaman and Antarctic explorer from County Kerry. He left the family farm near Annascaul to enlist in the British Royal Navy at the age of 15. In 1901, while serving on HMS *Ringarooma* in New Zealand, he volunteered to join Robert Falcon Scott's 1901–04 British National Antarctic Expedition on *Discovery*, thus beginning a distinguished career as an explorer during the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration.

Crean was a member of three of the four major British expeditions to Antarctica during this period. After the Discovery Expedition he joined Captain Scott's 1911–13 Terra Nova Expedition, which saw the race to reach the South Pole lost to Roald Amundsen, and ended in the deaths of Scott and his polar party. During this expedition Crean's 35-mile (56 km) solo walk across the Ross Ice Shelf to save the life of Edward Evans led to him receiving the Albert Medal. His third Antarctic venture was the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition on *Endurance* led by Ernest Shackleton, in which he served as Second Officer. After *Endurance* became beset in the pack ice and sank, he was a participant in a dramatic series of events including months spent drifting on the ice, a journey in lifeboats to Elephant Island, and an open boat journey of 800 nautical miles (920 statute miles, 1,500 km) from Elephant Island to South Georgia.^[2] Upon reaching South Georgia, Crean was one of the party of three which undertook the first land crossing of the island, without maps or proper mountaineering equipment.

His contributions to these expeditions earned him three Polar Medals, and a reputation as a tough and dependable polar traveller. After the *Endurance* expedition Crean returned to the Navy, and when his naval career ended in 1920 he moved back to County Kerry. In his home town of Annascaul, he and his wife Ellen opened a public house called the "South Pole Inn". He lived there quietly and unobtrusively until his death in 1938.

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Early life and career

Thomas Crean was born 20 July 1877, in the farming area of Gurtuchrane near the town of Annascaul in County Kerry, to Patrick Crean and Catherine Courtney.^[3] He was one of 10 children, and attended the local Bracklun Catholic school, leaving at the age of 12 to lend much-needed help on the family farm.^[4] At the age of 15, Crean enlisted in the Royal Navy. Biographer Michael Smith suggests that after an argument with his father, Crean claimed he would run away to sea, and walked to the Royal Navy station in nearby Minard Inlet.^[5] Lacking his parents' consent, he probably had to lie about his age to get in. Following his enlistment in July 1893, 10 days before his 16th birthday, he is recorded in Royal Navy records as a Boy 2nd Class.^[6]

His initial naval apprenticeship was aboard the training ship HMS *Impregnable* at Devonport. In November 1894 he was transferred to HMS *Devastation*. By his 18th birthday in 1895, Crean was rated Ordinary Seaman while serving on the HMS *Royal Arthur*. Less than a year later he was serving on HMS *Wild Swan* as an Able Seaman, and also served on the Navy's torpedo school ship, HMS *Defiance*. By 1899, Crean had risen to the rank of Petty Officer, 2nd Class while serving on HMS *Vivid*.^[7]

In February 1900, Crean was posted to the torpedo vessel HMS *Ringarooma*, part of the Royal Navy's New Zealand Squadron based at South Island. On 18 December 1901 he was demoted from Petty Officer to Able Seaman for an unknown misdemeanour.^[8] His assignment to the *Ringarooma* was to change the course of his life. In December 1901 the *Ringarooma* was ordered to assist Captain Scott's ship *Discovery* when it was docked at Lyttleton Harbour, New Zealand, one of its last stops before embarking on the British National Antarctic Expedition to Antarctica. An Able Seaman on Scott's crew deserted after striking a Petty Officer and was replaced by Crean.^[9]

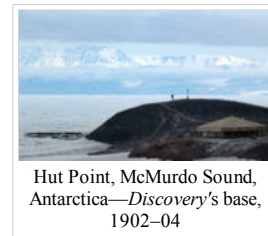
Discovery Expedition, 1901–04



Tom Crean with sled dog puppies, February 1915

Born	20 July 1877 <div>Gurtuchrane, County Kerry, Ireland</div>
Died	27 July 1938 (aged 61) <div>Republic of Ireland</div>
Nationality	Irish
Occupation	Explorer
Spouse(s)	Ellen Herlihy ^[1]
Children	Mary, Kate, Eileen

Crean sailed with Captain Scott and the crew of the *Discovery* out of Port Chalmers, New Zealand on 21 December 1901, bound for the Antarctic. The ship anchored in McMurdo Sound on 8 February 1902, at a spot which was designated as "Hut Point".^[10] Here the men established the winter quarters from which they would launch scientific and exploratory sledging journeys. Crean soon established himself as one of the most consistent man-haulers in the party, with only seven of the 48-member party logging more time in harness than Crean's 149 days.^[11] Crean had a good sense of humour and was well-liked by the men. Captain Scott's second-in-command, Albert Armitage, wrote in his book *Two Years in the Antarctic* that "Crean was an Irishman with a fund of wit and an even temper which nothing disturbed."^[12] It was at this time that he formed close friendships with William Lashly and Edgar Evans: all three would establish themselves as seasoned polar explorers over the next decade.



Hut Point, McMurdo Sound, Antarctica—*Discovery's* base, 1902–04

Crean accompanied Lieutenant Michael Barne on three sledging trips across the Ross Ice Shelf, then known as the "Barrier". These included the 12-man party led by Barne which set out on 30 October 1902 to lay depots in support of the main southern journey, undertaken by Captain Scott, Shackleton and Edward Wilson. On 11 November the Barne party passed the previous furthest south mark,^[13] set by Carsten Borchgrevink in 1900 at 78°50'S, a record which they held briefly until the southern party itself passed it on its way to 82°17'S.^[14]

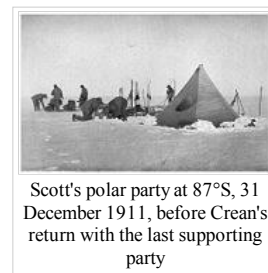
During the winter of 1902 *Discovery* became locked in the ice. Efforts to free her during the Antarctic summer of 1902–03 failed, so Crean and the rest of the men did not leave the Antarctic until the ship was finally freed in February 1904. After returning to civilization, Crean was promoted to Petty Officer 1st Class, on Captain Scott's recommendation.^[15]

After the Discovery Expedition, 1905–10

Crean returned to regular duty at the naval base at Chatham, Kent, serving on HMS *Pembroke* in 1904, later transferring to the torpedo school on HMS *Vernon*. Crean had caught Captain Scott's attention with his attitude and work ethic on the *Discovery* Expedition, and in 1906 Scott requested that Crean join him on HMS *Victorious*.^[16] By 1907 Scott was planning his second expedition to the Antarctic: over the next few years Crean followed Scott successively to HMS *Albemarle*, HMS *Essex* and HMS *Bulwark*.^[16] After the Anglo-Irish explorer Ernest Shackleton passed Scott's furthest south record in 1909, but failed to reach the Pole, Scott continued preparations for his next expedition, officially requesting Crean to join in March 1910. Crean accepted in April, a few months before his 33rd birthday.

Terra Nova Expedition, 1910–13

Captain Scott held Crean in high regard,^{[17][18]} so he was among the first people Scott recruited when planning the Terra Nova Expedition.^{[15][19]} Crean would be relied upon as one of the few men in the party with polar experience. His first major contribution was as part of the 13-man party who laid "One Ton Depot" 130 miles (210 km) from Hut Point,^[20] so named because of the large amount of food and equipment cached there for the returning parties. On the return trip to Cape Evans Crean, with Apsley Cherry-Garrard and Lieutenant Henry "Birdie" Bowers, camped on unstable sea ice. During the night the ice broke up, leaving the men adrift on an ice floe and separated from their sledges. Crean probably saved the men's lives by volunteering to leap from floe to floe until he reached the Barrier edge, and then walking solo back to Safety Camp to get help.^[21]



Scott's polar party at 87°S, 31 December 1911, before Crean's return with the last supporting party

Crean was one of the men who made up the support parties on Scott's attempt at the South Pole. This journey had three stages: 400 miles (640 km) across the Barrier, 120 miles (190 km) up the heavily crevassed Beardmore Glacier to an altitude of 10,000 feet (3,000 m) above sea level, and then another 350 miles (560 km) to the Pole.^[22] Crean and Lashly, along with Lieutenant Edward Evans, formed the last support party, accompanying Scott on the glacier ascent and onto the polar plateau, to 87°32'S, 168 miles (270 km) from the Pole. Here, on 4 January 1912, they turned back, while Scott, Edgar Evans, Wilson, Bowers and Lawrence Oates continued towards the Pole. Crean, Lashly and Evans now faced a 750-mile (1,200 km) return journey back to Hut Point. After two months of effort to reach this point, Crean wept at the prospect of having to turn back so close to the goal.^[23]

Biographer Michael Smith suggests that Crean should have been selected for the polar party in the place of Edgar Evans, who was weakened by his recent hand injury (of which Scott was unaware). Crean, considered one of the toughest men in the expedition, had led a pony across the Barrier, and he had been saved the hard labour of man-hauling until the foot of the Beardmore Glacier.^[24] It has also been suggested by Scott biographer Roland Huntford that the surgeon Edward L Atkinson, who accompanied the southern party to the top of the Beardmore, had recommended either Lashly or Crean for the polar party, rather than Edgar Evans.^[25]



Tom Crean and Edgar Evans exercising ponies, winter 1911

Soon after turning back, the party lost the route back onto the Beardmore Glacier, and faced a three-day detour around a large icefall where the plateau tumbles down onto the glacier.^[26] With food supplies short, the group made a desperate decision to slide, uncontrolled, down the icefall on their sledge. The three men slid 2,000 feet (600 m) in seconds,^[27] dodging crevasses up to 200 feet (61 m) wide, and ending their descent by overturning on an ice ridge.^[28] Evans later wrote: "How we ever escaped entirely uninjured is beyond me to explain".^[27]

The gamble at the icefall paid off, and the men reached the next depot two days later.^[28] However, they had great difficulty navigating down the glacier. Lashly wrote: "I cannot describe the maze we got into and the hairbreadth escapes we have had to pass through."^[29] In his attempts to find the way down, Evans removed his goggles and subsequently suffered agonies of snow blindness that made him into a passenger.^[30] When the party was finally free of the glacier and on the level surface of the

Barrier, Evans began to display the first symptoms of scurvy.^[31] By early February he was in great pain, his joints were swollen and discoloured, and he was passing blood. Through the efforts of Crean and Lashly the group struggled towards One Ton Depot, which they reached on 11 February. At this point Evans collapsed; Crean thought he had died and, according to Evans's account, "his hot tears fell on my face".^[30] With well over 100 miles (160 km) to travel before the safety of Hut Point, Crean and Lashly began hauling Evans on the sledge, "eking out his life with the last few drops of brandy that they still had with them".^[31] On 18 February they arrived at Corner Camp, still 35 miles (56 km) from Hut Point, with food running low. With only 1-2 days food rations left but still 4 or 5 days sledge pulling to do, they had to stop. They decided that Crean should go on alone to fetch help. With only a little chocolate and three biscuits to sustain him, without a tent or survival equipment,^[32] Crean reached Hut Point, after 18 hours of continuous walking, in a state of collapse.^{[31][33]} He arrived only just ahead of a fierce blizzard, which probably would have killed him, and which delayed the rescue party by a day

and a half.^[30] The rescue was successful, however, and Lashly and Evans were both brought to base camp alive. Crean modestly downplayed the significance of his feat of endurance. In a rare written account, he wrote in a letter: "So it fell to my lot to do the 30 miles for help, and only a couple of biscuits and a stick of chocolate to do it. Well, sir, I was very weak when I reached the hut."^[34]

At Cape Evans the winter of 1912 was a sombre one, with the knowledge that the polar party had failed to return, and had undoubtedly perished. Frank Debenham wrote that Crean's light-hearted nature and Irish brogue kept the hut merry, and that "in the winter it was once again Crean who was the mainstay for cheerfulness in the now depleted mess deck part of the hut."^[35]

In November 1912, Crean was one of the 11-man search party which found the remains of the polar party. On 12 November they spotted a cairn of snow, which proved to be a tent against which the drift had piled up. It contained the bodies of Scott, Wilson, and Bowers.^[36] Crean later wrote, referring to Scott, that he had "lost a good friend".^[37]

On 12 February 1913 Crean and the remaining crew of the *Terra Nova* arrived in Lyttleton, New Zealand and shortly after returned to England. At Buckingham Palace the surviving members of the expedition were all awarded the Polar Medal by King George and Prince Louis of Battenberg.^{[38][39]} Crean and Lashly were both awarded the Albert Medal, 2nd Class for saving Evans's life, these were presented by the King at Buckingham Palace on 26 July 1913.^[40] Crean was promoted to the rank of Chief Petty Officer, retroactive to 9 September 1910.^[41]

Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition (Endurance Expedition), 1914–17

Ernest Shackleton knew Crean well from the Discovery Expedition and also knew of his feats on Scott's last expedition. Like Scott, Shackleton deeply trusted Crean:^[42] he was worth, in Shackleton's own word, "trumps".^[43] Crean joined Shackleton's Imperial Transantarctic Expedition on 25 May 1914, as second officer,^[44] with a varied range of duties. In the absence of a Canadian dog-handling expert who was hired but never appeared, Crean took charge of one of the dog-handling teams,^[45] and was later involved in the care and nurture of the pups born to one of his dogs, Sally, early in the expedition.^[46]

On 19 January 1915 the expedition's ship, the *Endurance*, was beset in the Weddell Sea pack ice. In the early efforts to free her, Crean narrowly escaped being crushed by a sudden movement in the ice.^[47] The ship drifted in the ice for months, eventually sinking on 21 November. Shackleton informed the men that they would drag the food, gear, and three lifeboats across the pack ice to Snow Hill or Robertson Island, 200 miles (320 km) away. Due to uneven ice conditions, pressure ridges, and the danger of ice breakup which could separate the men, they soon abandoned this plan: the men pitched camp and decided to wait. They hoped that the clockwise drift of the pack would carry them 400 miles (640 km) to Paulet Island where they knew there was a hut with emergency supplies.^[48] But the pack ice held firm as it carried the men well past Paulet Island, and did not break up until 9 April. The crew then had to sail and row the three ill-equipped lifeboats through the pack ice and then to Elephant Island, a trip which lasted five days. Crean and Hubert Hudson, the navigating officer of the *Endurance*, piloted their lifeboat, although Crean effectively was in charge as Hudson appeared to have suffered a breakdown.^{[49][50]}



Members of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition aboard *Endurance*, 1914. Crean is second from the left in the first standing row. Shackleton (wearing soft hat) is in the centre of the picture.



Tom Crean, in full polar travelling gear

On reaching Elephant Island, Crean was one of the "four fittest men" detailed by Shackleton to find a safe camping-ground.^[51] After settling on a deserted rookery above the high-water mark, some of the men, led by ship's carpenter Harry McNish, modified one of the lifeboats—the *James Caird*—so Shackleton could sail to South Georgia with a crew of five and arrange a rescue. Frank Wild, who would be in command of the Elephant Island party, wanted the dependable Crean to stay on the island,^[49] and Shackleton initially intended to leave him with Wild, but relented after Crean begged to be included in the boat's crew.^[52] The journey to South Georgia took 17 days through gales and snow squalls, in heavy seas which navigator Frank Worsley described as a "mountainous westerly swell".^[53] The journey has been described by polar historian Caroline Alexander as one of the most extraordinary feats of seamanship and navigation in recorded history.^[54] Shackleton, in his later account of the journey, recalled Crean's tuneless singing at the tiller: "He always sang when he was steering, and nobody ever discovered what the song was [...] but somehow it was cheerful".^[55]

They made their South Georgia landfall on the uninhabited southern coast, having decided that the risk of aiming directly for the whaling stations on the north side was too great; if they missed the island to the north they would be swept out into the Atlantic Ocean.^[56] The original plan was to work the *James Caird* around the coast. However, the boat's rudder had broken off after their initial landing, and some of the party were, in Shackleton's view, unfit for further travel. The three fittest men—Shackleton, Crean, and Worsley—were therefore required to trek across the island's glaciated surface, in a hazardous 36-hour journey to the nearest manned whaling station.^[57] This trek was the first crossing of the mountainous island, and was done without tents, sleeping bags, or map—their only mountaineering equipment was a carpenter's adze, a length of alpine rope, and tacks from the lifeboat hammered through their boots to serve as crampons.^[58] They arrived at the whaling station at Stromness, tired and dirty, hair long and matted, faces blackened by months of cooking by blubber stoves—"the world's dirtiest men", according to Worsley.^[59] They sent a boat to pick up the three on the other side of South Georgia, but it took Shackleton, Worsley and Crean three months and four attempts by ship to rescue the other 22 men still on Elephant Island.^[60]

Later life



Statue of Crean, with the South Pole Inn in the background

Upon returning to Britain in November 1916, Crean resumed naval duties. He was specially promoted to the rank of Warrant Officer (as a Boatswain) in recognition of his service on the *Endurance*, on 15 December,^{[61][62]} and was awarded his third Polar Medal. Crean married Ellen Herlihy of Annascaul on 5 September 1917. He saw quiet service in the First World War, at the Chatham barracks and then on HMS *Colleen*.

In early 1920, Shackleton was organising another Antarctic expedition, later to be known as the Shackleton-Rowett Expedition. He invited Crean, along with other officers from the *Endurance*. By this time, Crean was married, his second daughter had arrived, and he had plans to open a business following his naval career. He turned down Shackleton's invitation.^[63]

On his last assignment, with HMS *Hecla*, Crean suffered a bad fall which caused lasting effects to his vision. As a result, he was retired on medical grounds on 24 March 1920.^{[62][64]} He and Ellen opened a small pub in Annascaul called the South Pole Inn.^[65] They had three daughters, Mary, Kate, and Eileen,^[66] although Kate died when she was four years old.^[65]

Throughout his life, Crean remained an extremely modest man. When he returned to Kerry, he put all of his medals away and never again spoke about his experiences in the Antarctic. Indeed, there is no reliable evidence of Crean giving any interviews to the press.^[67] It has been speculated that this may have been because Kerry had long been a centre for Irish nationalism, and it would have been inappropriate for an Irishman to speak of his achievements on British polar expeditions.^[67] Crean became ill with a burst appendix in 1938. He was taken to the nearest hospital in Cork where his appendix was removed, but infection had set in. After a week in the hospital, he died on 27 July 1938, shortly after his sixty-first birthday.

Crean was buried in his family tomb at the cemetery in Ballynacourty.^[68] He is commemorated in at least two place names: Mount Crean 8,630 feet (2,630 m) in Victoria Land, and the Crean Glacier on South Georgia.^[69] A one-man play about Crean's life, devised by Aidan Dooley, has been widely performed since 2001, including a special showing at the South Pole Inn, Annascaul, in October 2001. Present were Crean's daughters, Eileen and Mary, both in their 80s. Apparently he never told them his stories; according to Eileen: "He put his medals and his sword in a box [...] and that was that. He was a very humble man".^[70]

Notes

- ↑ Smith uses the Irish form "Eileen", p. 301
- ↑ One nautical mile or "geographical" mile = 1.15 statute miles, or one minute of latitude. Distances hereafter are given in statute miles.
- ↑ Smith, Michael, *An Unsung Hero: Tom Crean - Antarctic Survivor*. Headline Book Publishing, 2000, p. 16
- ↑ Smith, p. 16
- ↑ Smith, p. 18
- ↑ Smith, p. 19
- ↑ Smith, p. 20–21
- ↑ Smith, p. 29
- ↑ Smith, p. 31
- ↑ Hut Point was the name given to the location, alongside the ship's mooring, of the expedition's main storage hut. The hut was used in later expeditions as a shelter and storage depot.
- ↑ Smith, p. 46–47
- ↑ Smith, p. 46
- ↑ Smith, p. 55
- ↑ Crane, pp. 214–15. Modern re-calculations based on photographs have placed this furthest south at 82°11'S (Crane map, p. 215).
- ↑ ^a ^b Smith, p. 70
- ↑ ^a ^b Crean, Royal Navy service record, referenced in Smith, p. 72
- ↑ Scott, in a letter home October 1911 included in his diary, wrote of his admiration for Crean, saying he was "perfectly happy, ready to do anything and go anywhere, the harder the work the better"
- ↑ Scott recommended that Crean be promoted to Petty Officer 1st Class after the 1901-04 expedition; see Smith, p. 70
- ↑ Scott, in a letter to Crean on 23 March 1910, invited Crean to join the expedition. Reprinted in Smith, p. 76
- ↑ Apsley Cherry-Garrard, *The Worst Journey in the World*, Carrol & Graf Publishers, 1922, p. 107
- ↑ Cherry-Garrard, p. 147
- ↑ Smith, p. 102
- ↑ Scott, Diary, 4 January 1912. Reprinted in Smith, p. 123
- ↑ Smith, p. 161
- ↑ Huntford (*The Last Place on Earth*), p. 455
- ↑ Smith, p. 127
- ↑ ^a ^b Smith, p. 129
- ↑ ^a ^b Lashly's diary, quoted in Cherry-Garrard, p. 402
- ↑ Lashly diary, quoted in Preston, p. 207
- ↑ ^a ^b ^c Preston, p. 206–08
- ↑ ^a ^b ^c Crane, pp. 555–56
- ↑ Cherry-Garrard, p. 420
- ↑ Smith, p. 140
- ↑ Crean, letter to unknown person, 26 February 1912, reprinted in Smith, p. 143
- ↑ Smith, p. 168
- ↑ Crane, pp. 569–70. Oates and Edgar Evans has perished earlier on the return journey.
- ↑ Crean letter to J. Kennedy, January 1913, SPRI, reprinted in Smith, p. 172
- ↑ Smith, p. 180
- ↑ *London Gazette*: no. 28740, p. 5322 (<http://www.london-gazette.co.uk/issues/28740/pages/5322>), 25 July 1913. Retrieved on 7 December 2008.
- ↑ *London Gazette*: no. 28741, pp. 5409–5410 (<http://www.london-gazette.co.uk/issues/28741/pages/5409>), 29 July 1913. Retrieved on 7 December 2008. The Albert Medal was later superseded by the George Cross, and so this rates as one of the highest British awards for gallantry.
- ↑ Smith, p. 183
- ↑ Huntford, Roland, *Shackleton*, Carrol & Graf, 2004, p. 477
- ↑ Alexander, p. 21
- ↑ Smith, p. 190
- ↑ Shackleton, pp. 44–45
- ↑ Alexander, pp. 29–31
- ↑ Shackleton, p. 31
- ↑ Alexander, p. 98
- ↑ ^a ^b Alexander, p. 127
- ↑ Smith, p. 226
- ↑ Shackleton, p. 147
- ↑ Shackleton, p. 158
- ↑ Worsley, p. 142
- ↑ Alexander, p. 153
- ↑ Shackleton, p. 174
- ↑ Alexander, p. 150
- ↑ Alexander, p. 156
- ↑ Worsley, pp. 190–91
- ↑ Worsley, p. 213
- ↑ Worsley, p. 220
- ↑ Admiralty Certificate of Qualification for Warrant Officer, 17 August 1917, referenced in Smith, p. 300
- ↑ ^a ^b "RN Officer's Service Records—Image details—Crean, Thomas (from promotion to Warrant Officer)" (fee usually required to view full pdf of service record). *DocumentsOnline*. The National Archives. http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?Edoc_Id=7888001. Retrieved on 8 December 2008.
- ↑ Smith, p. 308
- ↑ Smith, p. 304
- ↑ ^a ^b Smith, p. 309
- ↑ Smith, p. 306
- ↑ ^a ^b Smith, p. 312
- ↑ Smith, p. 314
- ↑ Smith, p. 318
- ↑ Kennedy. "Irish village hears tales of its forgotten polar hero". <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/oct/16/maevkennedy>.

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External links

- *Tom Crean Society's Website* (<http://www.tomcrean.com/>) Accessed 9 October 2008.
- *Crean and Shackleton Antarctic Commemorative Coins Issued by Ireland* (<http://www.coinnews.net/2008/09/05/antarctic-explorers-coins-issued-in-ireland-shackleton-and-crean-celebrated-with-silver-and-gold-4381/>) Accessed 9 October 2008.

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