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Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Lantz, B. (2020). The "terra firma" anecdote: On the attempt to deceive Roald Amundsen during the meeting between the Fram and Terra Nova expeditions in 1911. *Polar Record*, 2020.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0032247420000303>

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Research Note

Cite this article: Lantz B. The “*terra firma*” anecdote: On the attempt to deceive Roald Amundsen during the meeting between the *Fram* and *Terra Nova* expeditions in 1911. *Polar Record* 56(e29): 1–2. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247420000303>

Received: 3 July 2020
Revised: 4 August 2020
Accepted: 11 August 2020

Keywords:

“*Terra firma*”; Roald Amundsen; Victor Campbell; Bay of Whales; Motor sledges

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The “*terra firma*” anecdote: On the attempt to deceive Roald Amundsen during the meeting between the *Fram* and *Terra Nova* expeditions in 1911

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Abstract

This paper discusses an unsourced anecdote in Roland Huntford’s dual biography of Scott and Amundsen and their race for the South Pole; the first edition of the book was published in 1979. During a meeting between the *Fram* and *Terra Nova* in the Bay of Whales on 4 February 1911, Lieutenant Victor Campbell allegedly told Roald Amundsen—in order to deceive him—that one of the British motor sledges was “already on *terra firma*”. In a recent article in *Polar Record*, Huntford received criticism for (seemingly) having imagined the episode. However, a description of this incident, though with a slight variation compared to Huntford’s version, can be found in Trygve Gran’s book, *Kampen om Sydpolen* [The Battle for the South Pole], published in 1961. Hence, one must conclude that Campbell really did try to mislead Amundsen regarding the motor sledges. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the attempted deception had an impact on Amundsen’s plan for his south polar journey.

The anecdote

On 4 February 1911, Captain Robert Falcon Scott’s *Terra Nova* and Roald Amundsen’s *Fram* had an unexpected encounter in the Bay of Whales. The two crews socialised diplomatically during the day, and we know from the diary kept by Thorvald Nilsen, the captain of the *Fram*, that the Norwegians learned from the British—led by Lieutenant Victor Campbell—that one of their motor sledges had been lost down through thin sea ice at a depth of 200 fathoms (Kløver, 2011). However, according to Huntford (1979: 345, 2002: 330), Campbell felt bitterly dejected because his “Eastern Party” had been unable to land on King Edward VII Land. Consequently, he decided to deceive Amundsen, who asked how the motor sledges were working; Campbell responded with, “One of them is already on *terra firma*”. Huntford claimed that Campbell’s intention was to mislead Amundsen by giving him the idea that one motor sledge had already crossed the Barrier and possibly reached the Beardmore Glacier, even though he was actually referring to the one resting on the seabed in McMurdo Sound (thus, technically, he was not lying). Huntford has suggested that Campbell’s deception was successful and that Amundsen’s anxiety about the motor sledges was the reason for his premature start southwards in September 1911.

Huntford’s description of the encounter in the Bay of Whales has been repeated by several other authors of historical narratives (see May, 2016, for a brief review). Hence, it has become widespread and established as almost factual. However, even though Campbell actually did try to deceive Amundsen regarding the motor sledges, the details and consequences of the attempted deception differ from Huntford’s narrative.

Most members of both expeditions kept diaries, and quite a few of them subsequently wrote books about their ventures in the far South, but the “*terra firma*” tale presented by Huntford (1979) does not seem to be told anywhere. May (2016) has referred to the anecdote as an unrealistic myth—first, because simple arithmetic would suffice to show that it would be practically impossible for Scott to have placed a motor sledge at the foot of the Beardmore Glacier at that time. Furthermore, it would not have made any sense to do so even if it had been possible. Second, the first edition of Huntford’s dual biography of Scott and Amundsen and their race for the South Pole was published in 1979, but there is no pre-1979 reference to the *terra firma* anecdote. In addition, why Amundsen would believe that the expression (i.e. *terra firma*) referred to the foot of the Beardmore Glacier is unclear; Cape Evans on Ross Island where two *Terra Nova* motor sledges actually landed clearly fits the description.

The Norwegian member of the *Terra Nova* expedition, Trygve Gran, reflected later in life on the expedition in his book, *Kampen om Sydpolen* (Gran, 1961). Unfortunately, an English translation of the book was never published. In his book, Gran spent several pages covering the meeting between the *Fram* and *Terra Nova* in the Bay of Whales on 4 February 1911 and included a

conversation between Campbell and Amundsen at lunch on board the *Terra Nova* (the translation was performed by the present writer, who reads Norwegian fluently).

Towards the end of the lunch, Amundsen came up with a question that gave the quick-thinking Victor Campbell a nice and disguised way to vent some of his emotions. After Scott, he was the one who felt the most disturbed by the Norwegian occupation of the Bay of Whales.

“How are the motor sledges doing?” asked Amundsen.

“Well, I can inform you, Captain Amundsen”, answered Campbell—and in correct Norwegian, too, because he had spent several years in Norway, for example, as a farmer—, “our motor sledges are outstanding, and if I am not very mistaken, they are now well on their way over the barrier towards the Beardmore Glacier”.

The Norwegian group fell silent. The pill that Campbell had just served was hard to swallow.

[Mot slutten av lunsjen kom Amundsen med et spørsmål som ga den snarstenkte Victor Campbell anledning til på en fin og fordekt måte å gi et fnugg av sine følelser luft. Han var jo, nest etter Scott, den som følte seg mest berørt av den norske okkupasjon av Hvalbukten.

“Hvordan går det med motorsledene?” spurte Amundsen.

“Ja, det kan jeg betro Dem, kaptein Amundsen”, svarte Campbell, og det på korrekt norsk, for han hadde tilbragt flere år i Norge, blant annet som gårdbruker. “Våre motorsleder er helt enestående, og hvis jeg ikke tar meget feil, er de nå på god vei innover Barrieren mot Beardmore-breen”

Det ble stilt i den norske kretsen. Den pillen som Campbell nettopp serverte, var ikke lett og svelgje.] Gran (1961: 97)

When the encounter in the Bay of Whales took place, Gran was in the field as a member of the party that laid down the One Ton Depot, so one must assume that Campbell told him the story about the attempted deception when they were reunited at Cape Evans in late November 1912, or perhaps later. Gran’s diary notes (Hattersley-Smith, 1984) indicate that he and Campbell generally got along very well—perhaps partly because of Campbell’s proficiency in Norwegian and prior sojourn in Norway. The fact that Gran knew in such detail what Campbell and Amundsen had been talking about, despite the conversation being in Norwegian, and that he knew that Campbell was the second member of the British party after Scott most disturbed by the Norwegian presence in the Bay of Whales, suggests that Campbell was Gran’s source. It should be noted that Campbell did not mention the conversation between him and Amundsen or anything else about the lunch on board the *Terra Nova* in his short diary note for the day of the encounter in the Bay of Whales (King, 1988).

The quoted extract from Gran’s book is quite interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it shows that Campbell did, in fact, attempt to give Amundsen the impression that the British motor sledges were much more successful than they truly were, implying that they could be a threat to Amundsen’s goal to be the first to arrive at the South Pole.

Secondly, there is a pre-1979 reference to the fact that Campbell tried to deceive Amundsen. This is particularly noteworthy, given that *Kampen om Sydpolen* is included in the bibliography of Huntford’s book. However, Gran’s version of the episode is not accurately characterised by Huntford.

Thirdly, Huntford (1979) claimed that Campbell tried to deceive Amundsen out of bitterness because his plan to land on King Edward VII Land had failed. However, according to Gran (1961), Campbell’s bitterness originated from the fact that the Norwegian party was present in the Bay of Whales.

Fourthly, at present, there is no support for the assertion that Campbell ever referred to “*terra firma*” during the conversation in which he attempted to deceive Amundsen regarding the efficiency of the motor sledges. That part of the story seems to be a myth.

Finally, despite Gran’s assumption that Campbell’s statement regarding the motor sledges was a hard pill to swallow for the Norwegians, it is unlikely that it had any impact on Amundsen’s plans for his southern journey. After having experienced the barrier surface first-hand during the first depot journey later in February 1911, Amundsen was highly sceptical regarding the characterisation of British motor sledges as efficient for transport there (Kløver, 2010). The fundamental reason for Amundsen’s false start in early September 1911, when the cold was too severe for travelling, was that he felt pressured by the knowledge that he would become bankrupt economically as well as socially unless he could reach the pole before Scott (May, 2016). Additionally, he simply hoped for better temperatures as he journeyed (Kløver, 2010). The presence of the British motor sledges was never mentioned, neither implicitly nor explicitly, by Amundsen as the motivation for any detail of his logistical plan.

Acknowledgements. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest. None.

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