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Cecil Meares' 100-year-old pennant survived the Race to the End of the Earth

Victoria, BC – Cecil Henry Meares (1877-1937) was an adventurer – possibly a spy – an explorer and British naval officer. He was selected as the team member “in charge of dogs” for Robert F. Scott’s ill-fated race to the South Pole in 1911-12. Meares retired to Victoria in the 1920s. His 100-year-old sledge pennant was part of a family donation to the Royal BC Museum and BC Archives. It will be on display beginning May 17 as part of the *Race to the End of the Earth* exhibition.



Captain Scott’s last birthday dinner, during the British Antarctic “Terra Nova” Expedition, taken June 6, 1911. Cecil H. Meares is seated, second from left. On the right, Meares’ pennant hangs third to the left of the standing man.
Photo by Herbert G. Ponting.
Courtesy of the Alexander Turnbull Library, NZ.

Cecil Meares was the son of a British Army Officer. Born in Ireland but educated in Scotland and England, he left home at 17 to travel across Europe and Asia, learning languages along the way. He worked in the Siberian fur trade, was in Peking (Beijing) during the Boxer Uprising, served in the British Army during the Boer War and explored the Chinese-Tibetan borderlands. Later, Meares signed on with the British Air Mission and in 1921 a sword was presented to Commander Meares as a gift for helping to train Japanese naval pilots.

Materials from Meares’ estate that also came to the Royal BC Museum and BC Archives include: Meares’ correspondence on the Antarctic

expedition from 1910-1913; letters written to his wife from First World War trenches in 1914; certificates of service with the British mission in Japan, 1921-22; a manuscript entitled “The Land of the Budorchus” and articles about travels in Western China, 1908-09, as well as photographs and medals. These records and artifacts provide a glimpse of a most interesting life, one that may – or may not – have included intelligence and diplomatic work while surveying Manchuria.

But back in 1910 it was Meares’ experience driving dog sleds in Siberia that led Robert Scott to recruit him for the British Antarctic Expedition as the officer “in charge of dogs.” Meares helped prepare for the expedition, then set up a telephone line and ran supplies between camps. In 1912, he received a message from home urging him to return “to attend to family affairs.” He left shortly before Scott’s team perished on the ice.



Meares’ pennant is a custom-designed, handmade flag. Each officer on the expedition flew their unique pennant from their sledges so that they could be seen in a blizzard. They were also hung indoors for special occasions, such as Scott’s birthday party in June 1911 – his last celebration.

Only a few of these sledge pennants have survived. They were often crafted by wives or sweethearts. Symbols of meaning to each man were incorporated in their own design. The St George Cross was for England. The deep blue background symbolized loyalty and truth in heraldic terms. Meares' embroidered mermaid and motto "*Omnia Providentiae committe*" meaning "Trust to all Providence," came from his family's coat of arms.

Meares' pennant and story will be part of the *Race to the End of the Earth*, opening May 17 and running until October 14. The exhibition chronicles the epic adventures of Roald Amundsen and Robert Falcon Scott in their quests to be the first to reach the South Pole in 1911-12. Visit explore.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca to learn more about the museum's exhibition. Running concurrently at the IMAX Victoria theatre is the film Shackleton's Antarctic Adventure, about the later 1914-1916 tale of survival.

About the Royal BC Museum As the provincial museum and archives, the Royal BC Museum preserves and shares the stories of British Columbia – on-site, off-site and online – through its research, collections, exhibitions, publications and educational programs. Its two-hectare cultural precinct in Victoria also includes a number of historically significant buildings and First Nations sites.

For more information about the Royal BC Museum, visit www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca or call 1-888-447-7977.

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