

JANUARY MEETING

1st Talk

Scott's Forgotten Surgeon Dr Reginald Koettlitz - Polar Explorer

A talk by Aubrey A. (Gus) Jones *reported by Alan Lee*

Dr Koettlitz was born in Ostend, Belgium on 23rd December 1860. His father, Maurice, a minister of the Lutheran Church, moved to Dover with his family and by the late 1860's they were living at 75/76 Folkestone Road, Dover where his mother, Rosetta, ran a boarding school. Along with Reginald were his three brothers Maurice, Robert and Arthur and two sisters Rosetta and Elise.

In 1873 Reginald, with his brother Maurice, entered Dover College where he studied Greek, French and German which would prove a great help during his later expeditions.

In 1878 he entered Guy's Hospital to study medicine, qualifying as a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons. He then moved to Edinburgh and graduated as Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians. Here he first became interested in geography and exploration.



His first post was as a general practitioner at Butterknowle, County Durham where he remained for nine years.

Here he became medical officer and public vaccinator for the Hamsterley district, advisory GP to the Auckland Poor Law Union and surgeon to the Butterknowle, Woodland and New Copley collieries. Appointed Acting Surgeon to the 2nd Volunteer

Battalion the Durham Light Infantry he was later promoted to Senior Lieutenant. He resigned his commission in June 1894, prior to joining the expedition to Franz Josef Land, Antarctica. It was at Butterknowle that he became a member of the Barnard Castle Lodge of the Brotherhood of Freemasons. He later transferred to his local lodge in South Africa.

In the early 1890's he passed his practice over to his brother and cycled back to Dover from Durham. On 9th July 1894



Koettlitz at Butterknowle Surgery
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he signed the papers and became a naturalized British subject.

Two days later he was aboard *S.Y. Windward* as she set sail from St Katherine's Docks. He had secured a position as surgeon with the Jackson - Harmsworth expedition to Franz Josef Land at the North Pole. It was planned for a stay of between two and five years.

They set up base, a single cramped hut, at Cape Flora on Northbrook Island on 17th November 1894. In the first two years it housed eight men and in the third seven. Owing to the cramped conditions, tempers were short and many ridiculous arguments took place. For the first winter one party lived in the hut and the rest on board the *Windward* which had become trapped in the ice.

They supplemented their dried and tinned rations with fresh meat which Koettlitz thought was essential to prevent scurvy. This included 94 polar bears, walrus, pony meat and loons (a species of bird).

The polar bear he brought back from this expedition stood in his brothers' surgery at Charlton House, London Road for many years. Now on display at Dover Museum it is still in an excellent condition and an impressive sight.

Good with his hands he made himself garments, boots and a face and nose mask. He made snowshoes and harnesses for the ponies, harnesses for the dogs and improved the tents.

Much of the uncharted part of Franz Josef Land was mapped and some islands and features named after expedition members. One such was Reginald Koettlitz Island. After three hard years they agreed to return and arrived at Erith in September 1897.

On his return to Dover he produced a substantial paper for the Royal Geographical Society in London detailing the construction, size and shape of the islands visited, illustrated with many detailed drawings and diagrams. He gave a series of lectures, one in the Norman Hall of Dover College, to the pupils and townspeople. This was reported in the *Dover Telegraph* at the time. Between lectures he joined the Blundell Expedition to North East Africa and completed a solo trip up the River Amazon.

By 1899 the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Society were planning a joint venture to the Antarctic. After much disagreement Lieutenant (later Commander) Robert Falcon Scott, an experienced naval officer but with no polar experience, was appointed leader. By now Dr Koettlitz was a well known, but slightly eccentric, expedition surgeon, geologist and botanist. He sat on the planning committee prior to joining the expedition in March 1900.

Never a rich man and to raise funds he was appointed as the ship's doctor aboard the Red Cross Line steamer *Sobralense* on its voyage up the Amazon to Manaos. During his short time away the expedition ship the *Discovery* had completed her sea trials.

On 2nd March 1901 at Chelsea Registry Office he married a 38 year old Calais woman Marie Louise Butez. Ernest Henry Shackleton, later one of the most famous polar explorers, attended the wedding.

The expedition set off on 5th August 1901 from the East India Dock, London. During the voyage Koettlitz's appointment as 'Chief of Scientific Staff' was confirmed although Scott disregarded this. Only

Koettlitz on the *Discovery*

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Armitage and Koettlitz had direct experience of polar survival for any length of time while Bernacchi had a little. Overall this meant that the expedition was very inexperienced.

Some interesting, and unusual, items were listed as 'Medical Comforts'; 27 gallons of brandy and whisky, 60 gallons of port wine, 36 gallons of sherry and 36 gallons of champagne.

After a stop-over in New Zealand the *Discovery* anchored at McMurdo Sound in February 1902, base camp was set up and the stores landed. Koettlitz and Armitage had serious concerns over the lack of any survival training as to their dismay recreational pursuits took preference. This contributed to the death of Seaman Vince.

Scott then led a party to set up a provisions camp, but left his experienced men behind. He took no skis and only a few out of condition dogs, intending mainly to manhandle the sledges. This was the 'British Way' but was against all experienced wisdom. After three days and ten miles of arduous effort he left the stores there and returned to the ship.

Temperatures dropped to -94°F but every Sunday the decks were scrubbed and the men inspected on the open deck.

Koettlitz was not impressed with the 'make do and mend' attitude of the expedition and it was August before any attempt at getting the dogs formed into efficient teams was tried.

That spring on his return to base he found most of the crew had scurvy. They had no fresh meat as Scott refused to

sanction the killing of wildlife. After he reversed this the scurvy soon cleared up. He was advised not to put the small boats on the ice, he ignored this, they became covered in ice and snow and took a lot of extra hard work to cut them free.

During the 'sledging' season 1902-03 Koettlitz discovered a huge glacier, later named '*Koettlitz Glacier*'. Even today it is still a huge size. Scott forced Shackleton to leave and stated "if he does not go back sick he will go in disgrace". Shackleton's challenge to his authority on the voyage out had not been forgotten.

In 1902-03 Dr Koettlitz took the first coloured photographs of the continent. He took 53 colour images but all photographs, plates and his expedition journal went missing and have never been found. Scott instructed that no prints were to be made from any of the plates. After being ice-bound for so long the rescue ships reached the *Discovery* on the 14th February 1904. They sailed for New Zealand and a tremendous reception.

On their return to England selected members of the crew, including Koettlitz,

were awarded the new polar medal. Scott, invited to Balmoral by the King, took Wilson's sketches, Skelton's black and white photographs but ignored Koettlitz's colour ones and most of his work. He had collected and catalogued some 828 items, kept many detailed medical records but received little recognition for his work.

Back in Dover on Wednesday 11th January 1905 at a civic reception in the Town Hall he gave an illustrated lecture entitled, "Furthest South" which lasted two hours. This was the first, and only time, the new three coloured process, perfected by him, was shown to the public.

After declining Shackleton's invitation to join he helped him with preparations for his Antarctic Nimrod Expedition. They turned back only 97 miles from the pole.

When their only child died at birth Dr Koettlitz and his wife moved to South Africa in 1905. He obtained a general practice in the Somerset East District, based at Grobbelaars Kraal, Darlington, which now lies at the bottom of an artificially enlarged Lake Mentz. He was appointed Justice of the Peace.

In 1915 they moved to Somerset East and on the 5th January they were both taken to Queen's Central Hospital, Craddock.

They both died on the 10th January 1916 within two hours of each other, she of heart disease and he of acute dysentery.

When news reached Somerset all the flags in the town were flown at half mast. They were buried in Craddock cemetery and obituaries appeared in the Lancet, national and local newspapers in New York, Australia, Britain and New Zealand.

He is largely forgotten in England apart from in Dover. In 1922 the Rev C W Wallace, Rural Dean of Craddock campaigned for a memorial, now positioned over his grave. There is no memorial to him in this country.

The book Scott's Forgotten Surgeon by Aubrey A. Jones

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Marie Louise Koettlitz

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Koettlitz Memorial

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