



# THE POLAR

## *Gentleman*

Jean-Baptiste Charcot





**“While wintering, the English were jestering goodnaturedly about the leaders of the Belgian, Norwegian, Swedish, German, and Scottish expeditions... when they came to the French expedition Scott popped his head out of his cabin and shouted: “Let Charcot alone, he is a gentleman!” Since then, it appears that I have been known to British polar explorers by the nickname of “Polar Gentleman.” Coming from a man like Scott, it is the highest compliment I have ever received, and I am very proud of it.”**

*- Charcot in a letter to Paul Chack, naval historian (as quoted by biographer and mentee Marthe Oulie)*

The above quote is from a chapter titled “Achievement” in which Oulie goes on to explain how Charcot was fêted throughout 1910 upon the return of his second Antarctic expedition. He received British honors and British celebrations, favorable coverage in the British press, and, according to his diary, nearly 500 letters of congratulations from around the world. While rattling off the names of various other explorers who wrote to or about Charcot’s success, Oulie claims that “Sir Ernest Shackleton considered Charcot’s expedition one of the hardest possible” and details Sir Lewis Beaumont’s assessment of the risky sailing conditions Charcot endured as proof.

On the next page, Oulie is more direct.

**“The English were grateful to him, too, for not having tried to fight them on their own ground, for having kept off of Scott and Shackleton’s territory and avoided competition... Charcot, in the eyes of the English, had behaved like a gentleman.”**

As Oulie herself noted, Charcot's navigational prowess and scientific achievement were not exactly what drew admiration from British explorers: he had respected the rules they set for what they considered to be their race on their turf. In 1907, it seemed that everyone was planning some sort of polar expedition — and nobody wanted to share. The planning stages of the *Nimrod* and *Pourquoi Pas?* expeditions were, for example, also the planning stages of an expedition to be led by Henryk Arctowski, one which never got off the ground. This excerpt from one of Shackleton's letters while planning *Nimrod* provides some context:

“As regards your doubt as to the foreigners ever going to our particular quarters, when I mentioned to Kelty the probability, he thought it quite a mistaken idea of mine until he had a conversation with Charcot of the French expedition, after my plans appeared, who is very angry with Arctowski, because Arctowski now says he is going between Graham Land and King Edward the Seventh's Land, though at Brussels last year he arranged with Charcot that Graham Land to King Edward the Seventh's Land was to be the French sphere, and that he (Arctowski) would go down to the “Discovery's” winter quarters... Of course, since my announcement publicly, Arctowski could not go to our quarters.”

As Shackleton obviously knew, a great deal depended on who could get their ideas to the press first. The behind-the-scenes tussle for control of the British Antarctic project and the split between Scott and Shackleton has been well-documented elsewhere, as has the British assumption that the race to the South Pole was a solely British project at this point. But here's Clements Markham making it explicit in a 1907 letter to Shackleton:

“I certainly should have been much annoyed if that fellow Arctowski had gone poaching down in our preserves; but I believe he has not got any funds. Foreigners never get much beyond the Antarctic Circle.”

He goes on to mention Scott and Barne, another *Discovery* officer, and between them, adds: “Charcot is going down the Pacific side of Graham Land where he will not do much.” Though he is being quite dismissive, Markham has made an interesting choice here to include Charcot in his roundup of British plans relevant to Shackleton. He appears to be in a separate category from “foreigners” like Arctowski, perhaps because his plans to “not do much” were seen as something out of the way of British sporting accomplishments.

Markham was not the only one to afford Charcot a sort of semi-British status in the polar annals: on the right, a polar fan's homemade costume included Charcot alongside such names as Scott, Oates, Ponting, Hurley, and Macklin.

It is possible that Charcot, who had taken home two silver medals in the 1900 Paris Olympics, was less interested in races by the time the one for the South Pole was seen as fully underway. There was also the matter of the scientific method: Charcot was not just a doctor, but the son of one of the most famous doctors in France. In his own books, Charcot emphasizes the importance of double-checking others' work: he used the *Belgica* as an example, going one by one through the officers' reports to compare each man's description of an island they may or may not have witnessed, one Charcot was able to map more definitively thanks to the conditions of the ice. He was wary of wasting resources and men on preliminary expeditions, preferring to build up the body of scientific knowledge available in hopes of maximally safe expeditions. This attitude endeared him to other explorers and the public alike.

### *further reading*

[Charcot of the Antarctic](#) by Marthe Oulie

[The Shackleton Letters: Behind the Scenes of the Nimrod Expedition](#)

[The Voyage of the Pourquoi Pas? In the Antarctic](#) by Jean-Baptiste Charcot

