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The Whys and Wherefores of Research – Anne-Marie Callus

In *The Worst Journey in the World*, published in 1922, the British explorer and zoologist Apsley Cherry-Garrard chronicles Robert Falcon Scott's Antarctic expedition which set sail in 1910, with the main aim being to be the first to reach the South Pole. A secondary aim was to collect as much scientific data as possible, for which Cherry-Garrard, Henry Bowers and Edward Wilson trekked – with great difficulty – sixty miles across the coast of Antarctica to collect five emperor penguin eggs. Since female emperor penguins lay their eggs in autumn for their male companions to incubate them in time for spring, the three men had to visit the penguins' rookery to obtain eggs and their embryos in the very long, extremely cold and very dark Antarctic winter. Talk about doing difficult fieldwork! This experience is recounted in the famed 'The Winter Journey' chapter in Cherry-Garrard's book.

What connection is there between this journey and the conducting of our own research? Much, I think. We may ourselves start with grand aims about what we set out to achieve with our studies. Perhaps a link between a social issue and possible responses to it; discovering more about what it means to be human; learning more about the natural world; seeking further technological advancement; and so many other possible examples. If every research project were to fulfill all the aims and hopes pinned on it, we would be closer to resolving various social and global issues by now and be presciently knowledgeable about how to avoid problems in the future. Alas, the reality is very different.

In Cherry-Garrard's case, the hardships and horrors of the three-week journey enabled him and his companions to reach their immediate objective – that of obtaining emperor penguin eggs. All three managed to return to the base safely, although Bowers and Wilson would later perish with Scott on their return from the South Pole, where they would arrive second after the Norwegian Roald Amundsen's party. The reason for obtaining the eggs in the first place was for biologists to try and find an evolutionary link between reptiles' scales and birds' feathers. Cherry-Garrard ends his chapter on the Winter Journey by writing that

[i]f the conclusions arrived at with the help of the Emperor Penguin embryos about the origin of feathers are justified, the worst journey in the world in the interest of science was not made in vain. (p. 310)

If we are to take him at his word, Cherry-Garrard's journey *was* made in vain. The website of the Natural History Museum records that no evolutionary link could be established on the basis of the embryos in those eggs.

Does that make such research not worth bothering about at all? Well, I think it is worth bothering about, and I am quite sure that most – possibly all – of you agree. Most graduands will have carried out

research in 'partial fulfillment of the requirements of' various degree courses, as the wording goes. As for us academics, we are actually expected to dedicate time to research. It is worth reflecting on why we do this, why we ask our Masters students to spend at least one third of their study time engaging in their own research; this in addition to that undertaken by undergraduate, doctoral and postdoctoral students.

Whatever our subject may be, research enables us to find out more about it in a systematic fashion and to gain new insights. Starting with what has been done before enables us to build on past knowledge and add to it, or take it into a different direction. Writing up our research and publishing it enables us to share our insights with others and allow *them* to build on it or counter it. Like Cherry-Garrard, we cannot know how our research will unfold, what the results will be or whether it might seem to have been done in vain. As in his case, sometimes it can seem that we are going to the ends of our limits, for uncertain outcomes. Impact factors, citation analyses, altmetrics and other kinds of analytics can only tell us so much about the effect that any study and its results might have now and in the future.

We also need to consider what is in it for the research subjects, be they human beings, emperor penguins or anything else under the sun and beyond it. Emancipatory disability research, to take an example from my own area, has much to say about ensuring that disabled people are not expediently used by researchers for their careers, with no contribution to the improvement of disabled people's circumstances, even if in a small way or indirectly. That principle can be extrapolated to all research. We should at least have the *intention* of making the world a better place for its inhabitants.

We should never stop exploring, telling others about our research – however insignificant or inconclusive it might seem – and learning from the discoveries of others. This is how Apsley Cherry-Garrard ends his book:

if you have desire for knowledge and the power to give it physical expression, go out and explore. ... Some will tell you that you are mad, and nearly all will say, 'What is the use?' For we are a nation of shopkeepers, and no shopkeeper will look at research which does not promise him a financial return within a year. ... If you march your Winter's Journeys you will have your reward, so long as all you want is a penguin's egg. (pp. 597–598).

The manner of Cherry-Garrard's writing is of his particular place and time, but the gist of what he says applies anywhere, at any time. This trait brings me to my final point. A good reason to use our faculties to do research, read that of others and reflect on it all is to better discern which knowledge is timeless and universal and which insights are valuable insofar as they shed light on a particular place and time. That could be our grand aim. But, if the only tangible outcome is our equivalent of a penguin's egg, it would suffice to know that the rigorous journey will have been worthwhile even if, by the logic of the world, it might seem too small a result or not much of one at all.

Quotations taken from Apsley Cherry-Garrard, *The Worst Journey in the World* (London: Picador, 1994 [1922]).