Recovering Scotland's Antarctic Research and Literary Contributions

By Ellen Frye

In the history and literature of Antarctica, Scotland and its people hold an anchored presence. One of the earlier crews to venture south, on 2 November 1902, was an all-Scottish expedition, intent on researching Antarctica in as much totality as possible, including climate, astronomy, meterology, botany, biology, geology, and geography. William Speirs Bruce was a polar scientist and oceanographer who organised and led the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition to the South Orkney Islands and the Weddell Sea, to Antarctica itself. Having been refused funding from Clement Markham, President of the Royal Geographical Society, who supported the Englishman Robert Falcon Scott's expedition instead, Bruce appealed for public donations to equip his voyage and expedition, and his success means that we have substantial Scottish pieces in early Antarctic literature, including the photographic book, *Life in the Antarctic*; the volume, *The Voyage of the "Scotia": Being the Record of a Voyage of Exploration in the Antarctic Seas*, by Mossman, Pirie, and Rudmose-Brown (three of the expeditioners); the ship's logs; and the meticulous diaries of one of the sailors, John MacMurchie. The present essay begins by focusing on *The Voyage of the "Scotia"*, as the authors' disparate opinions and impressions of Antarctica offer a foundational account of the Scottish presence on that continent. This account is then compared with a much later memoir by another Scotsman, Gavin Francis's 2013 book, *Empire Antarctica: Ice, Silence and Emperor Penguins*. As a physician at a research station for fourteen months, Francis's perspectives on Antarctica are also marked by his distinctive Scottish voice and identity.

In 1902, at the time Bruce selected a nearly all-Scottish crew for his Scottish National Antarctic Expedition, the North Pole had already been conquered and the Englishmen, Scott and Shackleton, had made a voyage to the southern polar region in the previous year. Bruce chose as part of his team his fellow Scots, Robert Mossman, Dr James Harvie Pirie, and Robert Rudmose-Brown, who

together both wrote and edited the volume, *The Voyage of the "Scotia": Being the Record of a Voyage of Exploration in the Antarctic Seas*. The fourteen chapters of the book contain contributions that alternate amongst the three men and incorporate some of the other expedition members' quotes and writings, too. Mossman was a meteorologist; Pirie was a geologist and bacteriologist, who also served as the medical officer; and Rudmose-Brown was the expedition's botanist. In addition, the zoologist David Wilton and the *Scotia*'s captain, Thomas Robertson, and most of the other twenty-five officers and sailors were also Scottish, most of them accustomed to icy waters from working on Arctic whaling ships.

What perhaps stands out the most in *The Voyage of the "Scotia"* is the authors' penchant for nature and their innate sense of curiosity. The book opens with a joint preface by Rudmose-Brown, Mossman, and Pirie, who state:

> *But if there is one note the authors would more gladly dwell on than another, it is the truly Scottish nature of this expedition. Germany, Sweden, and England, and later France, each had its own expedition, several of them largely aided by Government support. It remained for Scotland to show that as a nation her old spirit was still alive, and that she could stand beside the other nations and worthily take her place in this campaign of peace. It is was in this spirit that the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition was planned, organised, and carried through by its indefatigable leader, Mr. William S. Bruce. (xi)*

As the volume proceeds, it becomes clear that the three main authors each has his own individual style and preferences. Dr Pirie's first chapter brings us from Scotland to the Falkland Islands, or Malvinas, and is characterised by his typical dry humour:

> *Sharks were occasionally caught when the ship was stopped for any purpose. No skill is required, merely a strong hook baited with a juicy morsel of pork, with a strong rope to haul up the victim. But keep at arm's-length once he is on deck. Shark cutlets are tender enough, but just a trifle strong flavoured: if you don't know what is being served up, it is all right. (40)*

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The Treaty remains in force until 2048. If the members of this Scottish expedition resisted the aspirations of European imperialism, in 1903, a team nevertheless disembarked and built a metereological observing-station on Laurie Island, one of the South Orkneys, and naming it Omond House, after Mr R. T. Omond of Edinburgh, who had been responsible for the establishment of a meteorological station on Ben Nevis. By the time the ship returned to the South Orkneys, in 1904, Omond House had been sold to the government of Argentina, and the new Argentine staff relieved six members of the expedition who had wintered over. The establishment of Omond House remains an important Scottish accomplishment, as it is still the longest running scientific base in Antarctica. Other traces of the expedition remain, perhaps most charmingly, in an iconic photograph, 'The Penguin and the Piper', taken when the Scotia became trapped temporarily in the ice-pack. The expedition bagpiper Gilbert Kerr proceeded to play different styles of music to a penguin, in order to see its reactions.

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A major theme in Francis’s book, unlike those of his predecessors, is his beloved emperor penguins. After a winter’s separation, Francis returns in spring to visit the emperor penguin colony:

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References & Further Information

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