

BY A POLAR HISTORIAN

As it Was

On 2 November 1902 the Antarctic research ship, *Scotia*, sailed quietly down the lower Clyde from its berth in the yards of the Ailsa Shipbuilding Co., on its way to Antarctica. There was no fanfare nor publicity, for this was the Scottish sabbath, and moreover its leader and progenitor, William Speirs Bruce, unlike his rivals Nansen, Scott, and Shackleton, was not one to court publicity. He had organised the first all Scottish polar oceanographical expedition and named it the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition (SNAE). Its centenary is being celebrated in Edinburgh in 2002.

William Bruce had prepared himself exceptionally well for this journey; well experienced in polar biology, zoology, geology, meteorology, oceanography, as well as practised in terrestrial and marine surveying. There was probably no one in Britain at that time so well qualified as polar scientist to carry out a major expedition to the Antarctic. He had offered his services to Sir Clements Markham for the first of Scott's Antarctic expeditions, the *Discovery*, but by the time Markham had offered him a place as assistant scientific officer Bruce had organised his own ship and made his own plans. He was determined also to mount an expedition that was exclusively Scottish.

Bruce had been born in London on 1 August 1867, the second son in a family of eight children. His father was a successful medical practitioner in Kensington, a fashionable part of the city, but William Bruce by his paternal lineage was Scottish. In 1884 William Bruce attended a summer school at Granton on the banks of the Forth near to Edinburgh. This course changed his life. The leader was Patrick Geddes (later Sir Patrick), already well known as an environmental ecologist who preached an holistic doctrine of natural history. Bruce abandoned his projected studies in London and enrolled as a medical student in the University of Edinburgh. Here he came into daily contact with some of the best natural philosophers of those times, in the teaching of geology, zoology, anatomy, and chemistry. At the weekends he was recruited to assist such eminent scientists as Sir John Murray and Sir John Young Buchanan, both of the famous Challenger expedition (1872-76), in the preparations of their voluminous reports. Here Bruce learned the rudiments of oceanography.

In 1892 the Dundee shipping owner Robert Finnes was organising a whaling expedition to seek for the Southern Right Whale in the Weddell Sea off the Antarctic Peninsula and Bruce was enrolled as assistant surgeon and naturalist. Although no right whales were spotted the four vessels filled their holds with seal oil and blubber and Bruce returned fired with an ambition to pursue polar studies. This was his polar baptism. He wrote to Hugh Robert Mill to say he was prepared to go anywhere in polar waters. In the meantime he was appointed by Sir Alexander Buchan, the pioneer meteorologist, to a temporary post as superintendent of the observatory on the summit of Ben Nevis. Here he learned his practical meteorology.

Bruce completed his polar initiation into scientific methodology, both terrestrial and oceanographic in the Arctic. In 1896 Mill arranged for him to join as naturalist the Jackson-Harmsworth Expedition in its third season in the Arctic, based in Franz Josef Land. There Bruce met the Norwegians, Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen who were resting following their astonishing journey after leaving *Fram*, and he worked with Albert Armitage and Reginald Koettlitz both destined to accompany Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition. In 1898 Bruce was back in the Arctic, this time as naturalist on Andrew Coats yacht, *Blencathra*, off Novaya Zemlya and in the Barents Sea. Here he occupied 249 scientific stations, completed 34 hauls with dredge and trawl, made 60 collections of plankton, 80 depth soundings and 30 salinity measurements.

On returning to Tromsø in northern Norway he found the *Prince of Monaco* with his oceanographic research vessel, the finest of the day, *Princesse Alice*, and to Bruce's delight and astonishment he was invited to join it for a cruise to Spitsbergen. He was now in the company of such eminent marine scientists as Jules Richard, Karl Brandt, and John Young Buchanan. He followed this with a winter as guest of the *Prince* sailing the Mediterranean on *Princesse Alice*.

He was now ready for the Antarctic again and raised funds in Scotland to purchase and re-equip his own research vessel, and named it *Scotia*; it was modelled on *Princesse Alice*. The scientific staff were his friends and virtually all Scottish: Robert Neal Rudmose Brown, botanist and zoologist, John Harvey-Pirie, medical doctor and geologist, Robert Cockburn Mossman, meteorologist, and David Wilton, zoologist. There were two junior assistants, Alistair Ross, taxidermist, and Willie Cuthbertson, artist. Unlike the staff of *Discovery* none of the staff or crew were from the Royal Navy: all were expected to share the general duties on board and there was no formal etiquette.

Two summer seasons were spent in biological and oceanographical work in the Weddell Sea and South Atlantic. New coastline was discovered on the Antarctic continent and named Coats Land at 74 degrees south. In the intervening winter the ship was frozen into Scotia Bay in Laurie Island, South Orkneys, where an observatory, Omond House was built, which remains as the oldest scientific observatory in Antarctica. Collecting, sounding (with the new Lucas Machine), and trawling never stopped. Bruce disproved the 1843 depth of James Clark Ross of '4,000 fathoms-no bottom', and brought back a superb collection of

specimens and data. Much of this material formed the basis of his Oceanographical Institute (1909-1919), in Edinburgh. The latest of the three research vessels named Scotia was launched by the late Queen Mother in 2002 at Aberdeen and now works mainly in northern waters

Bruce died in 1921 and according to his wishes his cremated remains were scattered off South Georgia in April 1923.

Further Reading

- The Log of the Scotia by William Speirs Bruce, ed. Peter Speak, Edinburgh University Press, (1992)
- Bruce: Scottish Nationalist and Polar Explorer by Peter Speak, Royal Scottish Museum Press, Edinburgh, (forthcoming 2002)

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