

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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'Obligate Pinnipedophagi' were we (that is, necessarily seal-eaters). That is a stimulating phrase and very true, and suitable to introduce some of the facts and curiosities of our Antarctic exploration 60 years ago. It was a dozen years after return from Graham Land that I worked in Oman with the Ichthyophagi, as Herodotus called the fish-eaters, and as such they still then remained. The intention in this book is to give interest and pleasure in the reading, and perspective, too.

So much has changed in Antarctica in the decades that have gone, that a reminder from an octogenarian participant should have its interest today. So my chief objective is to stress change. Obligate Pinnipedophagi were we, eaters of seals for man and dog food: we had little else. Amundsen (1912) was totally dog-dependent but used a great deal of imported dog food. We were dog-dependent, with far more dogs. And we were the only British Antarctic expedition between the wars. We, 16 of us, and our working dogs, more than 80 in total, ate seals: we had no alternative, except for our sledging rations. We were seal-eaters for financial reasons — lack of money. We were poor indeed in the midst of the world economic slump. Seal-meat, baking-powder bread, porridge, and margarine were our staple diet.

All now is so different. Today no longer under sail, Antarctica no longer empty on arrival, no longer wintering a tiny vessel, no longer poverty of resources: then totally dependent upon seals for man and dog food, indeed now no longer any dogs, and seal-killing is supposedly forbidden. Today no longer the absence of personal payment, nor the virtual absence of alcoholic refreshment. So I describe the curiosities of us, the educated exploratory poor, 60 years ago at sea and in the harsh Antarctic environment.

Change advances ever onwards. Research ships now are vast, aeroplanes fly direct to Antarctica from New Zealand and the tip of South America. Living accommodation and laboratories are extensive and remarkably equipped, even now for decades at the South Pole itself. Over-snow vehicles can be well-equipped homes and laboratories in themselves. National research stations are numerous, and international cooperation happily is great. The 30-year International Antarctic Treaty of 1961 still extends, and effort in conservation for Antarctica as a world heritage continent is widespread. The politically dubious status of Antarctica lies seemingly dormant, and, happily, economically workable oil and minerals are not yet proven. The human wintering population exceeds 1000, the summer population of scientists and technicians numbers several thousands. As well, now near 10,000

ship-borne tourists annually are visitors. One hopes their ships are adequately insured!

However, 60 years ago we did have a tiny Fox Moth aircraft and a small motor launch. We did have personal competence, confidence, and zeal for discovery. Radio communication then was minimal, and certainly we had little disturbing awareness of the tergiversations and the horrors of the world beyond. Aloneness and total self-sustenance were the real and natural order, and none expected more.

And we did, I aver, produce more new knowledge, in proportion to money spent, than any other Antarctic venture before or since. Quite wrongly the BGLE 1934–1937 is an expedition forgotten by the public but highly regarded by those who truly know. Yet John Rymill, our leader, and RY *Penola* named after his Australian home, should be widely remembered for vigour and success on the ice, and Bob Ryder (later VC) for great skill in seamanship with so unhandy and small a ship.

As to our essential or obligate total dependence upon seals for man and dog food, I stress here that being biologist to the expedition, it came to pass that I did most of the seal-killing. I soon became adept, and my research prospered for I was able personally to measure and collect those specimens — skulls, gonads, parasites — dear to the heart of an eager young zoologist. It was primitive research, I must admit, but so unlikely ever to be repeated in magnitude.

Frequent, swift, and substantial changes of plan were forced upon us throughout the expedition. These arose first from the background inadequacy of *Penola's* engines, and then the inevitable paucity of foreknowledge of sea-ice conditions month by month. Astonishing variations in conditions of wind and temperature were compelling too. Most of all, our new topographical knowledge, some gained from the air, forced upon us changes of plan to assure maximum mapping of what we were currently discovering. It must be remembered throughout that the high mountainous nature of Graham Land compelled our explorations to be ship-borne in the narrow coastal channels in summer and autumn, and by sledge on the perilous inshore sea ice in winter and spring. Amid these circumstances, we were fortunate indeed to return without loss. Our mid-winter escape, over breaking sea ice to Terra Firma Island, was an almost miraculous good fortune under most able leadership. But whatever the tumult and the danger, from climatic and ocean turbulence, we ever had the realisation that these were the forces of nature. We were content in our loneliness; we never had to contend with the fear of malignant men, so soon to arise in war worldwide.



Fig. 1. *Penola* with all sails set: a demonstration in perfect calm.

To repeat the original story by John Rymill in 'the expedition book,' *Southern lights* (1938), is obviously inappropriate. Instead I will here rely upon an interesting and full, though short, descriptive article written soon after return by three of us scientists, Launcelot Fleming, Brian Roberts, and myself. It represented our best succinct endeavour. It is the only such statement to complement the specialized papers in the *Geographical Journal* and elsewhere. So here reprinted, is our 'Three Antarctic years,' as published in the *Canadian Geographical Journal* (Vol 22; 1941). These present reflections upon our past have been written over a number of years, not consecutively.

Here is truth, no exaggeration, no performance of self-imposed courageous feats, but a description of long-term

effort to increase real knowledge, geographical and otherwise — and that with success. In our day, Antarctica still was empty, although I do not forget the initial work of Admiral Byrd with his huge USA exertions on the other side of the continent during the latter part of our time in the south.

I write here in happy memory of good companions, of events and circumstances, hopefully to give interest and a true perspective. And I touch upon some themes not commonly available in official accounts.

For convenience of understanding, I have inserted in Appendix III summaries of the lives and careers of the participants on the expedition. And here follows a brief summary of the expedition's work and circumstances.

Sixty years ago Graham Land was the overall name for the then-known northern stretch of the modern Antarctic Peninsula.

Summary

BGLE's primary aim was the basic mapping of the southern part of the so-called Falkland Islands sector of Antarctica, southward of South America.

Because of shortage of funds, in the period of world economic slump, the expedition was limited to 16 men in the small three-masted wooden topsail schooner *Penola*. This was the last of the old-style expeditions under sail. All members of the party worked as seamen in the long passage south to Cape Horn and onwards south again. This was the transition, from the heroic period as it has been called, to modern times. Or was it the tail end of the heroic period?

The expedition worked three summers and two winters continuously in Antarctica. It was the most dog-oriented expedition ever, with almost a hundred working dogs, so exceeding in number Amundsen's successful teams that reached the South Pole. It is now, recently, illegal to keep dogs in Antarctica.

There was the first successful use in Antarctica of a light aircraft flying alternatively off skis or floats. By travel, largely on the sea ice, the peninsularity of the formerly believed Antarctic Archipelago was demonstrated. Of prime importance was the discovery of King George VI Sound.

The expedition worked on very restricted financial resources, so that the total cost, including the ship, was less than half a million pounds in modern money. The basic diet of both men and dogs was local seal-meat, so cheaply 'living off the country' as 'Obligate Pinnipedophagi.'

Penola wintered the first year frozen in. For the second winter she sailed north to South Georgia for refit, while the shore-party of nine men made long sledge journeys to the

south and to the Weddell Sea.

It is believed that more new knowledge (in survey, geology, biology, etc) was gained per pound spent than in any other Antarctic expedition before or since.

There was little acclaim on return because of no excitement of public interest by death or disaster and no connection with the South Pole, and then the close approach of World War II. All received the Polar Medal. There was real poverty of resources throughout and minimal radio communication with the world, and none on the local scale. Colour photography was not yet available.

The meagre government contribution to the expedition was provided as encouragement at a time when it was politically expedient to demonstrate British interest in the long-claimed Falkland Islands sector of Antarctica. The Royal Geographical Society was generous from its modest resources. The £1000 granted in 1934, after allowance for inflation, was, it is believed, the largest grant ever given to a single expedition.

The Deception Island whaling station, the farthest south, was already closed, but whaling remained in full force at South Georgia, and open-ocean pelagic whaling was beginning.

Our evolution in sledging techniques was the basis of the following war-time Operation Tabarin, the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey, the Fuchs trans-Antarctic success, and the on-running British Antarctic Survey.

The British Graham Land Expedition 1934–1937, however little and wrongly appreciated, was John Rymill's triumph in the exploration of an unknown area, and the increase of knowledge. It had no element of great drama, but yes, it was full of adventure and danger. Here I attempt to provide true perspective.

Also at last we can welcome a full biography of John Rymill — *Arctic and Antarctic: the will and the way of John Riddoch Rymill* — from the pen of the veteran and notable Australian explorer, John Béchervaise.