

The Piper and the Penguin

I recently had the privilege of meeting lots of penguins. They had charming personalities, especially the King Penguins of Macquarie Island (photos), which turned out to be excellent SCD pupils and in no time at all were pointing their toes, getting the hang of basic formations and covering neatly.



Reel of Three



Pas de Bas-coupé



Reel of Four

When I returned from the trip I thought it would be timely to learn something about the background to Roy Goldring's reel "The Piper and the Penguin", one of seven dances in his excellent "Scotia Suite of SCDs", published jointly by the RSCDS and the RS Geographical Society to mark the centenary of the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition (1902-1904). The Australian National Library provided much information, including a biography of William Spiers Bruce, scientist-explorer, Scottish-nationalist and expedition-leader, a collection of photographs from the expedition, the ship's log, and two books by expedition members.

The title of the dance comes from an incident in a hazardous week in the second voyage of the expedition. On 7th March 1904 the ship "Scotia" was caught in pack ice at the furthest south point reached in the Weddell Sea, "*stuck solid like a fly in treacle*" in the words of Bruce's log. This was perilously close to the onset of winter, at 74° S, 22° W. Nineteen days earlier Scott's "Discovery" had made a narrow escape from the ice in McMurdo Sound, on the other side of the continent. Eleven years later Shackleton's "Endurance" would be fatally ice-bound close to where "Scotia" was trapped. Fortunately she broke free on 13th March and was able to head for home. Meanwhile, on the 10th, Bruce recorded in the ship's log "*after dinner I spent a considerable time [on the ice floe], as it was sunny, photographing the piper, the ship and an Emperor Penguin, and a football scene...*"

H Pirie, expedition geologist, bacteriologist and medical officer, described the occasion: "*A number of Emperor Penguins, which were very numerous, were captured: in the event of wintering they would have served as food, but as it turned out it was only their skins that had to do duty. To test the effect of music on them, Piper Kerr played to one on his pipes, - we had no Orpheus to warble sweetly on a lute, - but neither rousing marches, lively reels, nor melancholy laments seemed to have any effect on these lethargic, phlegmatic birds; there was no excitement, no sign of appreciation or disapproval, only sleepy indifference*" *

One of the photographs of the Piper and the Penguin is reproduced in the "Scotia Suite" of SCDs. Like several others taken that day, it shows a bemused Emperor penguin tethered by a dark cord to a snow-filled pan at the feet of Gilbert Kerr, the laboratory assistant and piper, who had dressed in full regalia for the photo-shoot. He has both feet firmly planted on the cord, as if to make sure that the penguin could not escape by dragging its anchor.

This famous picture has been reproduced (at least) three times, in three different ways. Certain details, like the way the bagpipe tassel is swinging and the bird's beak is gaping, are a perfect match in all three, so they must be from the same negative. The version in the book of dances is reproduced back to front, but in all other respects it is the same as the copy in Pirie's account, published soon after the expedition returned (quoted above). Another early book was written by the expedition botanist, who may have become sensitive to public opinion concerning respect for wildlife, for his

version was doctored by painting out the cord and its anchor (see right photo below). The clearest picture of the Piper and the Penguin, linked together for posterity by the cord, and a century later by Roy Goldring's dance, is in Peter Speak's biography of Spiers Bruce (see left photo below).



Left: Emperor Penguin tethered to a snow-filled pan at Piper Kerr's feet (from biography of Spiers Bruce)

Right: This view of the Piper and the Penguin comes from "Naturalist at the Poles", by expedition botanist R. N. Rudmose-Brown. It is in the original orientation and the cord and its anchor have been painted out. The version in the "Scotia Suite" is the same, but is reversed and not only shows the cord but also that Kerr had moved to stand on it, as if the pan had proved to be an inadequate anchor.

Pirie neglected to concede that the penguin was given limited opportunity to express disapproval. Tied by the leg, it could hardly exit (with its flippers over its ears?). Neither did he allow that it might have been nervously contemplating the twin prospects of serving as food and its skin "doing duty" – reasonable grounds for indifference to the piping. It may even have been remaining aloof as a form of dignified protest, knowing that earlier in the expedition a cage-full of Emperors had been kidnapped to participate in Bruce's efforts to make the first phonograph recordings in the Antarctic. They were not very cooperative on that occasion either, perhaps because, as shown in another photograph, several corpses of their brethren had been parked – a bit insensitively – right beside their cage, *en route* to the ship's larder. Emperor penguins were an important part of the diet of most early expeditions. Again quoting Pirie: "*Some of them when weighed turned the scale at close on eighty pounds, and it was just all that one man could do to lead one up to the ship: with their beaks they bit fairly hard, and with their long flipper-like wing could hit out decidedly hard*" *

For bagpipe aficionados, the back-to-front reproduction of the photograph in the "Scotia Suite" gives the erroneous impression that Piper Kerr had his pipes over his right shoulder. He had a prominent role on the expedition, and it is recorded that each evening he played traditional Scottish airs around the deck.

For penguin aficionados, the Emperor of the photographs has been transformed into an Adélie penguin in the logo shown on each page of dances in the book. This species is much smaller than an Emperor, with a white ring around its eye and a distinctive silhouette – faithfully drawn in the logo, where the reversed Piper and the different Penguin (now looking attentive, even appreciative) stand in front of the ice-bound "Scotia".

* From Chapter 12 (by Pirie) in: *The voyage of the "Scotia": being the record of a voyage of exploration in Antarctic seas*, by R.C. Mossman, J.H. Harvey Pirie and R.N. Rudmose-Brown. ANU Press, Canberra 1978 (originally published in Edinburgh in 1906)

