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Crozier's penguin: An object history of maritime and museum science

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Abstract

In November 1843 John Cassidy, curator in the Belfast Museum received, perhaps rather dolefully, a collection of bird skins. The Museum was barely managing to cope with the constant flow of donations from the 'four quarters of the globe'. But the gift of bird skins could not be ignored. Sent by Captain Francis Crozier, recently returned from the British Antarctic Expedition, the bequest contained 150 species of Southern Ocean birds, including the remains of two immature 'great penguins'. Taking the one surviving specimen as a focal point, this paper compares and contrasts the ways in which *Aptenodytes forsteri*, or the emperor penguin, was differently scripted on board ship and in the museum. The lively interpretations and close encounters with emperor penguins on the ice and on board the two naval bomb vessels are set alongside the more constrained meanings and fleeting attention given to them in a metropolitan and a provincial museum.

I first encountered the object that lies behind this paper tucked away in a corner of the newly re-furbished Ulster Museum. The immature emperor penguin, first prepared for display in 1844, now stands as a testimony to the importance of taxonomy. It was, as the display panel notes, one of several specimens collected during the British Antarctic Expedition and donated to the Belfast Museum by the second in command, Captain Francis Crozier, late in 1843. Crozier's specimen was among a larger collection of emperor penguins gathered during the three austral summers that the HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* explored the largely un-charted edge of Antarctica. Some of the well-preserved specimens made it possible for George Robert Gray, assistant keeper of birds at the British Museum, to distinguish for the first time between the King and the Emperor Penguin, giving the latter the scientific name *Aptenodytes forsteri*.[1] Gray's brief published account was based on one or more adult specimens. The juvenile that found its way to the Belfast Museum was of less relevance to the task of distinguishing between two species of penguin which, up to that point, had been conflated. Its importance lies elsewhere.

The Ulster Museum specimen bears traces of the ostensibly global enterprise of circumpolar exploration and the more provincial, if not parochial, practices of a regional museum. Here it is approached as an entry point into two rather different, but overlapping, spaces of scientific inquiry — the re-fitted naval vessel and the museum.

Penguins, naval culture and expeditionary science

In 30 September 1839, two naval 'bomb' vessels, adapted for polar exploration, set sail from Margate bound for the Antarctic. The official purpose of the voyage was scientific, primarily geomagnetic. The discovery of the south magnetic pole was a major aim, along with setting up several observatories on various oceanic and sub-Antarctic islands. Natural historical objectives were also important. Joseph Hooker, assistant surgeon on HMS *Erebus* was charged with describing and collecting botanical specimens encountered on the voyage. Robert McCormick, surgeon on the *Erebus* was responsible for geology and zoology. James Clark Ross, the commander of the expedition, was also deemed a competent scientific observer. His second in command, Captain Francis Crozier, was recognized as an expert in geo-magnetic survey. All were involved to a greater or lesser extent in amassing specimens of natural history.

The emperor or 'great penguin,' as those on board knew it, was among the most discussed species that the voyagers encountered. Indeed, it became a kind of totem object, reflecting and mediating the voyage's complex relations with the Antarctic. As has been noted by others, penguins assumed the role of indigenes in the unpopulated territory encountered by expeditions to the Antarctic in the early nineteenth century.[2] The penguin populations were frequently presented as martial in appearance and behaviour and they became, in the unpublished and published narratives of the voyages, a sign of the apparent ease with which the ice-locked land of the Antarctic could be added to a nation's territorial possessions.

The emperor penguin in particular was presented as a mock threat to the expedition's aims. On one occasion Robert McCormick set after a 'great penguin' on the ice, 'shooting him through the centre of the body with a ball from my old double-barrel [but] he displayed as much strength and energy as if he had only been struck by a few grains of small shot'.[3] When they were captured and frog marched on board, the difficulty of then killing them was also noted on a number of occasions. It became a kind of sport for the sailors

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[1] George Robert Gray, *Aptenodytes, Annals and Magazine of Natural History* 13 (1844), 315.

[2] For example, Martin, S. *Penguin*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2009.

[3] McCormick, R. *Voyages of Discovery in the Arctic and Antarctic Seas, and round the World* 2 vols. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1884), vol. 1, p. 250.

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who chased them around the decks with bludgeons to secure supper (penguins were an important source of food supplementing supplies. They apparently made a reasonable soup). Bludgeoning penguins did not always work and, after some experimentation, it was decided that the best method for killing individuals marked for scientific investigation was administering hydrocyanic acid. According to McCormick, one dram of diluted acid killed a great penguin in less than two minutes.[4]

The parodic militancy of emperor penguins was given dramatic form in a play put on by the Royal Victoria Theatre in Hobart, Van Diemen's Land, when the two ships overwintered there in 1841. In the nautical melodrama, bellicose emperor penguins standing five foot tall attacked the crew of the *Terror* and *Erebus*. The final scene had the figure of Britannia predicting the end of the British empire, and the rise of 'Tasmania' as the new Britain of the southern hemisphere. The penguins were staged as the foot soldiers of a new empire that would undermine the confident imperial trajectory of the Antarctic expedition. The use of farce made an otherwise subversive political point appear ludicrous. The members of the crew who watched the play with enjoyment could not be accused of conspiring with sedition. Yet, as Elizabeth Leane has argued, under the guise of comedy and farce, the play did contain undercurrents of seditious settler politics.[5] The drama could be read as a critique of the current governor, the arctic explorer and friend of Ross, Sir John Franklin who was then under considerable political pressure and left the colony a little over a year later.[6] It was notable that Captains Ross and Crozier did not attend the performance.

Whatever the underlying politics of staging menacing emperor penguins, for at least senior members of the expedition, they remained a comforting presence in the face of the threat of an unruly crew while at sea. The latter were kept in check through the conventions of naval discipline, which included corporal punishment. On a number of occasions, 48 lashes were meted out for theft. The threat was enough to cause one crew member to jump overboard into a heavy sea.[7] Penguins, however difficult to kill, were easier to discipline and any member of the crew could join in the sport of beating them with a bludgeon.

On board the two vessels, then, the emperor penguin played various roles — object of sport, nourishment, entertainment and a symbol that helped mediate relations between officers and crew and between the voyage and its publics. But perhaps more than anything else, the emperor penguin became an indicator of the scientific success of the expedition. During the voyage there was some awareness that the 'great penguin' had not yet been scientifically described. Rectifying that was certainly high on the agenda of at least some of the officers on board. Robert McCormick, sometimes misrepresented as gun happy, decried the killing of penguins for anything other than essential food or for the cause of science.[8] McCormick followed the conventions of early-nineteenth-century natural theology in describing the emperor penguins as a striking example of beauty in the natural world, a sign of the work of a benevolent creator. As such, they deserved both protection and close scientific scrutiny.

Scientific interest in the emperor penguin could, however, clash with other naval priorities. At about 9 pm on 27th January 1842, Robert McCormick, surgeon on board HMS *Erebus,* spotted two large penguins, 'apparently a new species,' on a piece of ice. As he later described it, he was

> very naturally desirous of securing them for the government collection, and asked for a boat to go and capture them; but, unluckily for me, Captain Ross being on board the *Terror* at the time, our automaton first lieutenant, whose prestige, if he has any at all, is more for holy-stoning decks in his morning watch than in the paths of science, did not deem them worth the trouble of lowering a boat for. Fortunately for the *Terror's* credit, his brother-officer in that ship, Lieutenant McMurdo, thought differently, and had a boat manned, and a chase on the ice. Both the birds were secured, when they turned out to be the young of the great penguin, still in their grey, immature plumage, and as such a highly interesting addition to the ornithological collection. One weighed thirty-seven and the other thirty-five pounds.[9]

It was an episode like this that was captured by Joseph Hooker and included in the published account of the voyage [Figure 1]. Sergeant William Cunningham, who had later secured the two immature penguins in a similar fashion, noted in his own journal that he had, 'Caught two young King Penguins on the ice … they are beautiful birds'.[10] Cunningham, however, was unaware that these were not king but 'great' penguins. At the time of capture, the two Royal Navy vessels where just south of the Antarctic circle, bearing towards what was later named the Ross Sea. This was too far south for king penguins, the young of which, in any case, have brown not grey down.

The laborious task of collecting and preserving specimens of the emperor penguin took up a considerable amount of time. McCormick recorded that it took him four or five hours to skin an adult emperor penguin. What he does not note, but what Joseph Hooker privately observed in a letter to his father, is that he was 'clumsy' in taxidermy and produced some 'ludicrous disasters' when attempting to prepare a skin.[11] Others on board were judged more

[4] McCormick, *Voyages*, vol. 1, p. 328.

[5] Leane, E. 'Tasmania from below: Antarctic travellers accounts of a southern gateway', *Studies in Travel Writing*, 20 (2016): 34–48.

[6] See, for example, *Hobart Town Colonial Times*, 4 May 1841, p. 2.

[7] Campbell, R. 'The Voyage of HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror* to the Southern and Antarctic Regions. Captain James Clark Ross, R.N. 1839–1843. The Journal of Sergeant William K. Cunningham, R.M. of HMS *Terror*, part 2' *Journal of the Hakluyt Society* (2009), p. 96, online at http://www.hakluyt.com/PDF/Campbell_Part2_Journal.pdf [accessed 21 August 2017]. For more on the tensions evident on board, see: Maddison, B. *Class and Colonialism in Antarctic Expedition, 1750–1920* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2014).

[8] McCormick, *Voyages*, vol. 1, p. 170.

[9] McCormick, *Voyages*, p. 265.

[10] Campbell, 'Journal of William Cunningham, part 2,' p. 103.

[11] Hooker J D to Hooker W J, 25 November 1842, Correspondence from Antarctic Expedition, Joseph Dalton Hooker Correspondence Project, http://jdhooker.kew.org/p/jdh/asset/1868 [accessed 1 September 2017].