



A 'Naturalist In' series

WHERE THERE'S ICE AND SNOW AND THE WHALE-FISHES BLOW



by Chris K. Starr



Review of:
Eleanor Mathews 2003. *Ambassador to the Penguins*. Boston: David R. Godine 353 pp.
[47th in a series on "naturalist-in" books; see www.ckstarr.net/reviews_of_naturalist.htm]

Robert Cushman Murphy (1887-1973) was Curator of Birds at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Among his many field trips was the 1951 expedition that rediscovered the Bermuda petrel (*Pterodroma cahow*), which had been considered extinct since the 1620s. His magnum opus (Murphy 1936) is on South-American sea birds.

Murphy was an avid naturalist from a very early age, with a special passion for sea birds. He went beyond just learning the names of species and how to identify them, taking a keen interest in their habits. In other words, already in childhood he was far from being an ordinary "bird watcher" (i.e. one who eagerly lists birds but would not think to watch them).

In May 1912, an American whaling vessel began a voyage that would last almost a year. Provision was made for Murphy to join the voyage and storage space for his gear and specimens on board in exchange for partial funding from the American Museum and the Brooklyn Museum of Natural Science. The *Daisy* spent the southern summer

around South Georgia, reaching sub-Antarctic latitudes in November 1912 and departing four months later. It was Murphy's first time in the South Atlantic. He later wrote a book that is mostly about whaling (Murphy 1967), and his 1947 book is an edited version of his letters home to his newlywed wife during the *Daisy* expedition. The main part of *Ambassador to the Penguins* is a re-worked version of his Logbook by his granddaughter, supplemented from his copious notes and some of his many photographs. Murphy is treated in the third person in the book.

The background chapters amount to a biography of Murphy up to the time of the voyage, including an account of his courtship. The *Daisy* made several interesting stops along the way, including at the prison island of Fernando de Noronha. Of the 45 chapters, chapters 27-41 are devoted to the sub-Antarctic period and so form the core of the book.

Captain Benjamin D. Cleveland was no ordinary ship's master. On the one hand, he was much interested in natural history and contributing to the advancement of science. On the other hand, he was moody, vulgar and on occasion terribly unreasonable.

Murphy's account extends to the social aspects of shipboard life, including such things as quarrels among the crew (drawn from many different places

and backgrounds, as on the Pequod) and with the captain.

Murphy's account of the whaling enterprise was not very different from that given by Melville (1831). By 1912, old-style seafaring on sailing ships was almost at an end. While methods of sailing had hardly changed in a century, the number of ships was much reduced. Furthermore, the American whaling industry was nearing its end, as petroleum and electric lights were sharply devaluing whale oil and other products of the whale. Furthermore, British and Scandinavian whalers were already operating on a much larger, more mechanized scale. Murphy was consciously recording a disappearing way of life.

The voyage comprised spells of long monotony, punctuated by episodes of great urgency and exhausting labour. There is a close description of the difficult and very dangerous job of killing a huge whale. "It took immeasurable courage for six men [in a small boat] to approach a fifty-foot whale on its own territory." Murphy was fascinated by the immensely gory process of bringing a dead whale on board and stripping it systematically before tossing the great skeleton back into the sea. He found himself increasingly offended by the wholesale butchery.

The expedition sensitized him to the vulnerable state of the marine biota and its habitats, and he became a lifelong environmental campaigner.

South Georgia today has no regular human population and is occupied only by scientific personnel. However, a century ago there was a settlement of some hundreds, supported by the whaling industry that had existed there since 1790. There were several whaling stations, processing a huge number of whales. Even in its declining years, the business was still profitable.

The British government, which administers South Georgia, had at the time of the voyage recently introduced regulations to limit the hunting of whales and elephant seals (also valued for their oil) and to enforce the thorough use of the catch. Even so, it was immensely wasteful, and Murphy noted that, although it was illegal to hunt female elephant seals, most of those collected by the Daisy were females.

About half-way between the Equator and the

South Pole, the seas got really rough. In addition, there were hail and heavy winds. The sky was gray much of the time, and they had to keep a sharp lookout for icebergs.

The South Georgia archipelago at about 54°S and 37°W is both remote and inhospitable. The nearest other land is the South Sandwich Islands, a cluster of smaller islands about 520 km to the southeast. At 3528 km², South Georgia is only about three-quarter the size of Trinidad, yet it rises much more steeply from the sea, and its highest point is three times that of Trinidad's highest. Its coastline is deeply indented with fiords (Headland 1992).

Much as I enjoyed this book, South Georgia is not a place I have ever wanted to visit. The island and its surroundings are often stormy and miserably cold, even in the summer. For example, at the height of summer in January 1913 Murphy recorded 13 days of rain and/or snow and 15 days of gale-force winds. Much of the land surface is permanently covered in snow and ice, and even the exposed areas are largely barren. There are no trees or even shrubs. Aside from grasses and a few other small flowering plants, its flora consists of mosses, ferns and lichens.

Despite this, the time in South Georgia was a golden age for the biologist Murphy. He established a daily routine of rowing from ship to shore, where he had a tent as a makeshift onshore workshop. Once on the island he walked about extensively including on skis and snowshoes. There were moments when he could see more birds than he would have thought existed on earth. He had a permit to collect any birds except the introduced



upland goose. Collecting must have been easy, as he found the nesting birds mostly quite approachable.

The sea birds included some that bred nowhere else, and nine species of penguins are at least occasionally present. Of these, the king penguin and gentoo penguin had substantial colonies. These held his interest more than any other group of animals, and he spent happy days watching their courtship, squabbling and brood care. Although they are highly dependent on the sea, it is also a place of great danger to them, and they typically nest well inland, often more than a kilometre from the shore, to which they must of course walk to go foraging. He even found a gentoo penguin graveyard, an inland pool with hundreds or perhaps thousands of dead penguins sunk in it.

Murphy also took the opportunity to explore some of the smaller associated islands. There are no native land mammals on any of them, but marine mammals abound. These include various seals and the baleen whales that the Daisy was there to hunt. Algae thrive in the summer, leading to great masses of alga-feeding krill, which in turn feed the migrating whales. Up to November, elephant seals remain many hundreds of kilometres out to sea, foraging for squid and fish during long, deep dives.

In all, he collected about 500 birds of 55 species, as well as a great many mammal skeletons, insects, arachnids, plants and other specimens. He was the first to show a connection between the patterns of sea-bird life and seasonal conditions among the various sub-Antarctic islands.

By the end of the Daisy's stay in South Georgia, Murphy was most definitely tired of the place and eager to get back to his newlywed bride and the comforts and certainties of home. Even so, he left the island with a feeling of regret, or at least sentimentality.

References:

- Headland, R. 1992. *The Island of South Georgia*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 312 pp.
- Melville, H. 1831. *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*. New York: Harper 635 pp.
- Murphy, R.C. 1936. *Oceanic Birds of South America*. Vol. 1-2. New York: American Museum of Natural History 640 pp.
- Murphy, R.C. 1947. *Logbook for Grace*. New York: Macmillan 290 pp.
- Murphy, R.C. 1967. *A Dead Whale or a Stove*

Boat. Boston: Houghton Mifflin 176 pp.

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Addendum:

TOWARD A REAL NATURALIST LIBRARY

For many years the Club has been looking for ways to have a permanent, conveniently located headquarters. This would serve as a place for the Management Committee to meet, with the Club's records and other documents right there, so that no one would have to haul from somewhere else.

With volunteer staffing a couple of days a week, it would also be somewhere that new and visiting naturalists could come to discuss topics of shared interest and acquire Club publications.

As a major additional advantage, it would finally allow us to have a real library and reading room. This could be quite a substantial blessing, as the Club's "library" has long been stored in boxes, inaccessible and therefore quite useless.

I have no idea what is in those boxes, but let us assume for now that it is not much. With establishment of a proper headquarters with bookshelves and the books all in order according to the Library of Congress system, that "not much" would soon change. I guarantee it.

Some of you have been reading my series of reviews of naturalist-in books in these pages, (at least I certainly hope you have). I have personal copies of many of the books that I review, as well as some that I choose not to. They are sitting at home on my shelves, doing nothing. After all, I have already read them. I would be very happy to turn many or most of them over to a real naturalist library if one existed. And I am fairly sure there are other members in a similar situation.

So, it is my recommendation that the Management Committee make it a top priority to ensure that a suitable, long-term headquarters is a top priority is in place before the next AGM (9 January 2020). What should we call the library when it is inaugurated about a year from now? Possibly the Victor C. Quesnel Reading Room. Just a suggestion. 