

Why are penguins so called? (2)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE southern coast of Newfoundland, excluding the peninsulas at the eastern end which make huge leaps into the sea, is two hundred miles long and remarkably straight.

Far to the south-west, across the Cabot Strait which (except when closed by ice) offers an open door into the Gulf of St Lawrence, lies Cape Breton, which got its name from Breton sailors. But there are many much closer islands, mostly too small to appear on the average map. The largest are St Pierre and Miquelon, the only part of France's vast North American territories never to have been taken from them by the British or the Spanish.

Halfway along this desolate coast, about twenty miles off Cape la Hune and thirty-five west-north-west of the Grande Miquelon, lies Penguin Island. It may be tiny and today it enjoys a quiet summer coat of green, but for European mariners beating west out of the Atlantic for the Cabot Strait, Quebec and Montreal, it was once a major landmark and fast food outlet.

The first person to place the island's name on record seems to have been a Portuguese explorer called João Alvares Fagundes, who sailed this way in or before 1520, and called it *Isla de Pitigoen*. What this means would be anybody's guess, were it not for the fact that he was followed by a succession of Englishmen who called it Penguin Island. "Penguin" is clear enough to anyone with a knowledge of Welsh, Cornish or Breton, all widely-spoken languages amongst the Atlantic seamen of those days. It means "white head" or "white top": *pen gwyn*.

In summer, from May to August, Penguin was one of the world's few breeding sites for the great auk, a stupid, fat, flightless, black-headed bird that stood upright on land – a full two-and-a-half-foot high – but swam like a fish at sea. The island's "white top", visible from far out at sea, was guano, and the bird, which was unfamiliar to the vast majority of the seamen (unless they came from St Kilda), seems to have taken its name from the island.

Don't take my word for it. Look what the earliest travellers say, and notice that they all speak of the island of "Penguin" in the singular. Take Richard Hakluyt's report of Richard Hore's voyage of 1536. "From the time of their setting out from Gravesend, they were very long at sea, to witte, above two moneths, and never touched any land untill they came to part of the West Indies about Cape Briton, shaping their course Northeastwardes, untill they came to the Island of Penguin, which is very full of rockes and stones, whereon they went and found it full of great foules white and gray, as big as geese, and they saw infinite numbers of their egges.

"They drave a great number of the foules into their boates upon their sayles, and tooke up many of their egges, the foules they flead [flayed] and their skinnes were very like hony combes full of holes being flead off: they dressed and eate them and found them to be very good and nourishing meat."

In other words, as Samuel Eliot Morison pointed out in his book "The European Discovery of America" (1971), the birds were so plentiful and helpless that you could lay your ship alongside the rocks at high water, drop a gangplank or stretch a sail ashore, and drive as many waddling auks on board as you wanted. "The fishermen used them for bait, and the Beothuk Indians made a cake out of their fat with wild strawberries."

Morison also points out that Hore's voyage was the first ever tourist cruise in American history, "much as if Thomas Cook or American Express set up an air trip to the moon in 1971 – as they probably will do within a few years". Hore, a London leather merchant, was a rascal. They should make a film about him starring Michael Caine. He had a hundred wealthy tourists in two ships. One ship was lost. For the other, Penguin was the first landfall, and they killed "bears both black and white" as well as "the foules".

Going on to Newfoundland, the passengers dug up "raw herbes and rootes in the fields and deserts", then resorted to cannibalism. Hore preached a sermon denouncing this and was rewarded with the arrival of a French ship. They captured it and raided the larder, but not before a few more tourists had died of starvation. The survivors got home, but Hore's voyage put an end to the American tourist business for at least two centuries. "Why, in Heaven's name," says Morison, "could not the Englishmen have supported life from sea-fowl and fish?"

Next, Anthony Parkhurst wrote a description of Newfoundland in 1578, transferring the name of the island to the bird. "There are Sea Guls, Murres [guillemots], Duckes, wild Geese, and many other kind of birdes store, too long to write, especially at one Island named Penguin, where wee may drive them on a planke into our ship as many as shall lade her. These birdes are also called Penguins, and cannot flie, there is more meate in one of these then in a goose: the Frenchmen that fish neere the grand baie, doe bring small store of flesh with them, but victuall themselves alwayes with these birdes."

In Edward Hay's account of Sir Humphrey Gilbert's voyage of 1583, Penguin is simply the island and the bird is nameless. "We had sight of an Iland named Penguin, of a foule there breeding in abundance, almost incredible, which cannot flie, their wings not able to carry their body, being very large (not much lesse than a goose) and exceeding fat: which the French men use to take without difficulty upon that Iland, and to barrell them up with salt. But for lingering of time we had made us there the like provision."

Stephen Parmenius, a Hungarian who sailed with an English fleet in the same year, thought when writing to Hakluyt that the bird had given its name to the island: "To us alone the first land appeared, the first of August, about the latitude of 50 degrees . . . It is an Island which your men call Penguin, because of the multitude of birdes of the same name. Yet wee neither sawe any birds, nor drew neere to the land, the winds serving for our course directed to another place . . . called by the name of Saint Johns."

Evidence to the contrary is provided in 1594 by Silvester Wyet (Wyatt), who had been scouring the waters around Anticosti Island in the Gulf of St Lawrence for whales. His account is geographically precise. "We returned backe to the Southwarde, and were within one league of the Island of Penguin, which lyeth South from the Easternmost part of Naticotec [Anticosti] some twelve leagues. From the Isle of Penguin wee shaped our course for Cape de Rey [Cape Ray, S.W. Newfoundland] and had sight of the Island of Cape Briton: then

returned wee by the Isles of Saint Pedro [St Pierre], and so came into the Bay of Placentia [S.E. Newfoundland].”

Wyet’s “Isle of Penguin” is today’s Bird Rock, in the middle of the Gulf of St Lawrence. Naturalists have proven that it was never frequented by the great auk. So “Penguin”, it seems, was a generic name among these mariners for a guano-topped islet. This is proved by the existence of groups of Penguin Islands in Gros Water Bay, Labrador, and off Cape Freels, N.E. Newfoundland, none of which seem to have been home to the great auk.

But why, you may ask, should an Englishman call Bird Rock a “penguin” rather than a “white-top”? Half the answer is that, once given, the name had stuck, and that was that. The other half is that in this period the English government was desperate to find Welsh names in North America, so Wyet was “on message”. Let me explain.

By the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) the Pope had divided the New World between Spain and Portugal. In 1534 Henry VIII rejected the authority of the Pope and established the Church of England. He was a Tudor, a Welshman, and in 1536 Wales was officially incorporated into England (Ireland and Scotland proved harder nuts to crack). His daughter Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558 and entrenched Protestantism as England’s state religion.

By 1583 Elizabeth’s government was going into overdrive to establish England’s right to North America. There were persistent legends in Europe of something out there having been discovered before Columbus. Erik the Red? No point in handing rights to the king of Denmark. St Brendan? An Irish cleric who recognised the Pope. Madoc ap Owain Gwynedd? Perfect.

The legend that America was discovered by this Welsh prince in 1170 became vastly overblown after 1583. Indian tribes were claimed to be found speaking Welsh, and in 1953 the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a plaque at Fort Morgan, Mobile Bay, Alabama, declaring this to be the very spot where Madoc had landed. It became such a national embarrassment that Welsh scholars have mostly taken pains to dismiss it as Elizabethan propaganda. But according to Gwyn Williams, in his fascinating book “Madoc, the Making of a Myth” (1979), this is going too far. He doesn’t claim that it’s true, but he’s able to show that it’s genuine folklore with a pedigree stretching back beyond 1583.

In 1583 Gilbert formally annexed “the Newfoundland lands” to the English crown, and this was justified in a report by Sir George Peckham, the third chapter of which “doeth shew the lawfull title which the Queenes most excellent Majestie hath unto those Countries”. This chapter begins: “And it is very evident that the planting there shal in time right amply enlarge her Majesties Territories and Dominions, or (I might rather say) restore to her Highnesse ancient right and interest in those Countries, into the which a noble and worthy personage, lineally descended from the blood royall, borne in Wales, named Madock ap Owen Gwyneth, departing from the coast of England, about the yeere of our Lord God 1170, arrived and there planted himselfe and his Colonies, and afterward returned himselfe into England, leaving certaine of his people there, as appeareth in an ancient Welsh Chronicle, where he then gave to certaine Ilands, beastes, and foules sundry Welsh names, as the Iland of Pengwin, which yet to this day beareth the same.

“There is likewise a foule in the saide countreys called by the same name at this day, and is as much to say in English, as Whitehead, and in trueth the said foules have white heads. There is also in those countreis a fruit called Gwynethes which is likewise a Welsh word. Moreover, there are divers other Welsh wordes at this day in use, as David Ingram aforesaid reporteth in his relations. All which most strongly argueth, the sayd prince with his people to have inhabited there.”

Peckham goes on to quote a speech by Montezuma, no less, in which the Aztec emperor states that “our forefathers came from a farre countrey, and their King and Captaine, who brought them hither, returned againe to his naturall Countrey”. Madoc, obviously.

Gwyn Williams comments on this. Peckham’s “ancient Welsh Chronicle”, he says, has never been identified. David Ingram was a sailor who claimed to have walked 2,000 miles from the Gulf of Mexico to Maine in the 1560s. He reported a fruit called *guiathos* (which Peckham turned into *gwynethes*) and a greeting *Gwando!* It’s like Welsh *Gwranddo!* “Listen!” Ingram also spoke of our favourite bird, though he couldn’t have seen it, even in Maine. “They are exceeding fatte and very delicate meate, they have white heads, and therefore the Countrey Men call them Penguins (which seemeth to be a Welsh name). And they have also in use divers others Welsh words, a matter worthy the noting.”

Ingram was so suspiciously “on message” that Hakluyt, a conscientious scholar, dropped him from the second edition of his “Principall Navigations”. Two things come out of it all. Firstly, it’s part of an emerging scholarly consensus that the Celtic and Native American languages were first cousins and that through them, especially in Central America, the language of the Garden of Eden could be traced. Cue the Scots colony in Darien and Lachlan Maclean’s book “Adhamh agus Eubh” (1837) which sought to prove that Gaelic was the original language of mankind. Secondly, *penguin* could be the Beothuk name for the birds (Fagundes’s *pitigoen*), picked up by some English sea-captain and roundly declared to be the Welsh word for their breeding site.

On we go lads, to the South Pole by Christmas.

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