

### Why are penguins so called? (3)

#### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“There is no tracing the connection of ancient nations but by language, and therefore I’m always sorry when language is lost, because languages are the pedigree of nations. If you find the same language in distant countries, you may be sure that the inhabitants of each have been the same people; that is to say, if you find the languages a good deal the same; for finding a word here and there will not do; as Butler, in his *Hudibras*, by way of ridicule, finds the word *penguin* in the Straits of Magellan, signifying a bird with a white head; and that word has the signification in Wales of a whiteheaded wench: *pen*, head, *guin*, white; therefore the people near the Straits of Magellan are Welsh.”

Thus, in a conversation at Dunvegan in September 1773, did Dr Johnson sweep aside the myth of the Welsh Indians. The belief that somewhere there was a tribe descended from Madoc ap Owain Gwynedd, who went to America in 1170, still had a firm hold in Johnson’s day, because many Indians still lay far beyond the white man’s reach, and you can’t prove a negative.

In his book “Madoc: The Making of a Myth”, Gwyn Williams shows that the widespread belief in the myth in Wales was the motivation for John Evans’s exploration of the upper Missouri in 1793–97. Evans’s aim was to get past the Sioux to the Mandans, who lived around what is now Twin Buttes in North Dakota, and who were understood to be white, to live in stone houses, to sail in coracles and to speak Welsh.

Evans found that some of these things were true or half true, but not the last one. In the nineteenth century the Mandan nation was destroyed by smallpox, but in 1976 Williams and a BBC Wales TV crew tracked down some remnants in Twin Buttes Reservation, and found that international myths have a way of imposing themselves on local ones. When asked about the “Lone Man”, a reformed alcoholic called Ronald Little Owl bent his Asiatic-looking face into the television lights and said, “The Lone Man was the founder of our people. He was a white man who brought our people in his big canoe across a great water and landed them on the Gulf of Mexico.”

Last time I showed that the Newfoundland mariners of the sixteenth century had a name for the kind of guano-covered islet where great auks waddled ashore in summer to breed – a “penguin”, almost certainly from Welsh, Cornish or Breton *pen gwyn* “white top”. And I showed that this name was transferred to the great auk itself. It was already a rare bird in those days, and now it’s extinct, though you’ll see stuffed ones in museums. I’ve been surprised to discover that the standard work on it, an imposing tome called “The Great Auk, or Garefowl: Its History, Archaeology and Remains” (1885) is by Symington Grieve, the very man who wrote a well-known book about Colonsay and Oronsay.

To understand how “penguin” was transferred to the bird we know today, I decided to consult Hakluyt’s “Voyages”. Richard Hakluyt (?1552–1616), a contemporary of Shakespeare’s, devoted his life to collecting accurate accounts of English explorations. (He was from Herefordshire on the Welsh border, and although his name looks Dutch, I believe it’s Welsh.)

Hakluyt’s earliest mention of penguins in the southern hemisphere comes in an account by Francis Petty of Thomas Candlish’s circumnavigation of the globe in 1586–88. At the end of 1586, in the southern summer, Candlish’s fleet is coasting south by Patagonia. “The 17th day of December in the afternoone, we entred into an harborough, where our Admirall went in first: wherefore our Generall named the said harborough Port Desire: in which harborough is an Iland or two, where there is wonderful great store of Seales, and another Iland of birds which are grey guls . . . Also the fowles that were there, were very good meate, and great store of them: they have burrowes in the ground like conies, for they cannot flie. They have nothing but downe upon their pinions: they also fish and feede in the sea for their living, and breede on shore.”

This is now Puerto Deseado in Argentina, and Petty is describing what we would now call penguins. They seem to be burrowing into sand to lay their eggs, though hardly to the same depth as “conies” (rabbits). Hakluyt notes in the margin: “Foules breeding in burrowes like conies. We call these foules Penguins.”

By 7 January 1587 they’ve entered the Straits of Magellan, and Petty says: “From the narrowest of the Streights unto Pengwin Iland is 10 leagues, and lyeth West Southwest somewhat to the Southward, where wee anchored the 8th day, and killed and salted great store of Pengwins for victuals. The ninth day wee departed from Pengwin Ilande, and ranne South Southwest to King Philips citie which the Spaniards had built.”

So here we have an island which is a breeding-ground for the species that we know as penguins to this day. The name of the island and the name of the birds is already established, but it seems to be the bird which has given its name to the island, and not the other way round. Mariners who reached these latitudes are likely to have seen great auks in Newfoundland waters, and to have transferred the name without a second thought, for both species were fat, flightless, black-headed, two or three feet high and stood erect.

In August 1589 a fleet of three tall ships under John Chidley left Bristol for Chile. William Magoths, who was aboard the *Delight*, reported to Hakluyt that they soon lost touch with the other two ships, which were never seen again. The *Delight* touched land at Port Desire and took on water and seal-meat. “From hence,” says Magoths, “we sailed toward the Streight of Magelan, and entred the same about the first of January. And comming to Penguin yland within the Streight we tooke and salted certaine hogsheds of Penguins, which must be eaten with speed: for wee found them to be of no long continuance.”

They were then struck by one disaster after another: weather, attacks by Indians, disease, cold. They turned back, and Magoths was one of just four men from the entire fleet who returned to England.

In 1591 Candlish led a fleet on a voyage to Chile, and by August 1592 the crew of the *Desire* were in a similar situation to that experienced by Magoths, except that they were in the depths of the southern winter, some of them had threatened mutiny, and they were still looking for the other ships of the fleet, especially “General” Candlish’s. John Jane reported how they struggled back north from the Straits to Port Desire.

“Three leagues from this harborough there is an Isle with foure small Isles about it, where there are great abundance of seales, and at the time of the yeere the penguins come thither in great plentie to breede . . .

“The sixt of August wee set saile, and went to Penguin-isle, and the next day wee salted twentie hogsheds of seales, which was as much as our salt could possibly doe . . . The seventh of August towarde night wee departed from Penguin-isle, shaping our course for The Streights, where wee had full confidence to meete with our Generall. The ninth wee had a sore storme, so that wee were constrained to hull, for our sailes were not to indure any force. The 14 wee were driven in among certaine Isles never before discovered by any knownen relation, lying fiftie leagues or better from the shoare East and Northerly from The Streights.”

They had found the Falklands! Searching obsessively for Candlish’s ship, they struck out for the Straits again, passed through them, spent nine days in the Pacific, then were beaten back into the Straits.

Penguins now became their principal food. Just as our Highland place-names are designed to show how each little piece of land could be exploited, so any island where penguins came ashore to breed was named “Penguin Island” to show mariners where they could eat. At Penguin Island in the Straits they loaded such “great store of Penguins” into their small boat that it sank in a squall. The captain and lieutenant threw out all the birds, refloated the boat, got back to the ship, and set sail immediately. “Thus in a mighty fret of weather the seven and twentieth day of October wee were free of the Streights, and the thirtieth of October we came to Penguin-isle being three leagues from Port Desire, the place which wee purposed to seeke for our reliefe.

“When wee were come to this Isle wee sent our boate on shore, which returned laden with birdes and egges; and our men sayd that the Penguins were so thicke upon the Isle, that shippes might be laden with them; for they could not goe without treading upon the birds, whereat we greatly rejoiced.”

While some of the men laboured on the island, the others went to the mainland to lay in wood and water, and “canibals” killed nine of them. “At their returne they sent the boate to the Isle of Penguins, whereby wee understood that the Penguins dryed to our hearts content, and that the multitude of them was infinite. This Penguin hath the shape of a bird, but hath no wings, only two stumps in the place of wings, by which he swimmeth under water with as great swiftnes as any fish. They live upon smelts, whereof there is great abundance upon this coast: in eating they be neither fish nor flesh: they lay great eggs, and the bird is of a reasonable bignes, very neere wise so big as a ducke.”

They restored themselves to health, feasting on penguins, young seals, young gulls and “an herbe called Scurvygrasse, which wee fried with eggs, using traine oyle in stead of butter”. They also made salt by pouring sea-water into holes in rocks. Finally, on 22 December, in good heart, they set off for Brazil with 14,000 dried penguins in the hold.

They must have been unaware of Magoths’s advice that penguin “must be eaten with speed”. Their diet on this voyage north to the equator was (per man) two-and-a-half ounces of meal two days a week and three spoonfuls of oil three days a week, and (per four men) a pint of peasemeal porridge two days a week, and six quarts of water and five penguins per day.

They began to have terrible dreams. These seemed to come true when thirteen of them were massacred on shore by a force of Portuguese-led Indians. But they were the lucky ones. “After we came neere unto the sun, our dried Penguins began to corrupt, and there bred in them a most lothsome & ugly worme of an inch long. This worme did so mightily increase, and devoure our victuals, that there was in reason no hope how we should avoide famine, but be devoured of these wicked creatures: there was nothing that they did not devour, only yron excepted: our clothes, boots, shooes, hats, shirts, stockings: and for the ship they did so eat the timbers, as that we greatly feared they would undoe us, by gnawing through the ships side . . .

“Our men began to fall sick of such a monstrous disease, as I thinke the like was never heard of: for in their ankles it began to swell; from thence in two daies it would be in their breasts, so that they could not draw their breath, and then fell into their cods; and their cods and yarges did swell most grievously, and most dreadfully to behold, so that they could neither stand, lie, nor goe.”

On 11 June 1593 they ran ashore at Bearhaven in Ireland. Of Candlish’s fleet, only sixteen men had survived.

Don’t eat too much turkey this Christmas. Watch a film instead. We watched “March of the Penguins” the other evening. It’s out on video, and it’s fascinating. Up close, the most striking thing about a penguin is its black head, with its long black beak and its little black slitty eyes. It was crystal clear that “white top” describes its habitat, not its head.

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