Book Review

Antarctic Science, **31** (2019)
doi:10.1017/S0954102019000166

William Speirs Bruce: forgotten polar hero

Isobel P. Williams & John R. Dudeney
Amberley Publishing, Stroud, 2018
ISBN 978-14-456-8081-1, 304 pp. £20

In the public eye, the Heroic Age of polar exploration is dominated by three very different individuals: Scott, Shackleton and Amundsen. In Australia, of course, Mawson rightly gets attention and in the Nordic countries so does Nansen. But one important figure is almost invisible: William Speirs Bruce. Bruce gets barely a mention in Edward Larson's history of Heroic Era science (*An Empire of Ice*, Yale University Press, 2013), though he does figure in Tony Fogg's thorough *A History of Antarctic Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1992) and was the subject of a recent biography by Peter Speak (National Museums of Scotland, 2003, now out of print). This new biography is by polar historian Isobel Williams and polar scientist John Dudeney, a combination of skills that is apposite, for it was through science that Bruce made his greatest contribution to our knowledge of Antarctica.

Bruce was born into relatively comfortable circumstances in London, though he was educated in Scotland, and his identity as a Scot was integral to his personality. And it was his personality that defined much of his life. His single-minded, dogged conviction that the point of going to new places was to learn about them scientifically meant that his contribution to our understanding of polar regions was greater than almost any other major figure of the Heroic Age; the only other who comes close is Nansen. At the same time, his reserved nature and difficulties with communication led him into constant disagreements and frequent fallings out. Indeed, the authors argue that nowadays Bruce would have been regarded as on the autistic spectrum.

The main part of the book presents a fairly conventional narrative history of Bruce's life, giving particular attention to his scientific development. Bruce's training in Edinburgh under the tutelage of the founders of biological oceanography was clearly seminal, as was his sojourn in the meteorological observatory atop Ben Nevis, and his less than happy experience on the whaling voyage aboard *Balaena*. This trip convinced Bruce of the wealth of valuable science there was to be done in Antarctica, but also of the need for any expedition to have a scientific leader if it was to be successful. This was how he approached what was to be his most important contribution to our knowledge of Antarctica: the voyage of the *Scotia* and the establishment of his meteorological observatory on Laurie Island in the South Orkney Islands.

This observatory was established in 1903 when the original plan to establish a winter station deep in the Weddell Sea had to be abandoned because of ice. Observations have continued to this day, and contribute to the longest environmental data series for any site in Antarctica. A notable legacy indeed.

The authors describe Bruce's continuing trials and tribulations in attempting to establish a Scottish Oceanographical Laboratory, his struggles to raise funding for publication of the scientific results from the *Scotia* voyage, and his developing interest in the commercial exploitation of mineral resources in Svalbard. Here his personality continued to affect his success, as he was prone to criticize those whose support he needed most. Furthermore, in marked contrast to many of the major figures from the Heroic Age, he eschewed self-promotion, a feature of his personality that undoubtedly limited his ability to raise funding for new ventures.

The final section of the book is a rather eclectic series of appendices. They include fascinating extracts from the log of the *Scotia*, documentation concerning Bruce's plans for a trans-Antarctic expedition (long before Shackleton's attempt) and a valuable history of the Bruce Memorial Medal. For many people the most interesting part will be a careful re-examination of the extent to which Sir Clements Markham was, or was not, instrumental in Bruce not receiving the Polar Medal. This was something that rankled Bruce until he died, and the authors do a valuable job in explaining the history of this episode, and the real origin of the decision (the King, on advice from the Treasury).

This is a fine book, well written, comprehensive and balanced. It is valuable in its demolition of some long-standing myths, and in painting a rounded picture of one of the most important, but ignored, figures in the history of polar science.

ANDREW CLARKE