

WORK IN THE FALKLAND ISLANDS AND DEPENDENCIES BY THE ARTIST WILLIAM CUTHBERTSON DURING THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION, 1902–1904

by

Phil Stone

The ‘heroic era’ Antarctic expeditions led by the likes of Robert Scott and Ernest Shackleton at the beginning of the 20th century commonly included a competent artist in the team. Black and white photography was well advanced by then, epitomised by the Antarctic work of Herbert Ponting with Scott and Frank Hurley with Shackleton, but colour photography was still in its infancy and not readily available. It was the artists’ job to fill that gap in the expedition’s records, painting in colour both Antarctic landscapes and the fine detail of zoological specimens before they suffered post-mortem fading or discolouration. Of course, the artists’ sketch books were also filled with more informal pencil or pen-and-ink drawings of their surroundings. Famous from that period are the artworks by Edward Wilson (1872–1912), who accompanied both Scott’s *Discovery* and *Terra Nova* expeditions (and died with Scott on the fatal retreat from the South Pole) and George Marston (1882–1940), who took part in Shackleton’s *Nimrod* and *Endurance* expeditions. The Scottish National Antarctic (*Scotia*) Expedition (SNAE), led by William Speirs Bruce (1867–1921) was no exception and included an artist amongst its scientific staff, William Alexander Cuthbertson (1882–1968).

Cuthbertson’s recruitment to the expedition

William Cuthbertson was the youngest member of the SNAE team, born in Edinburgh on 18 July 1882, the eldest of three children. He was schooled initially at Daniel Stewart’s College, Edinburgh and then, from 1894 to 1898, at the city’s Royal High School. Leaving school aged 15 he became an art student at Edinburgh’s Trustees Academy and in 1902 moved to Paris to study at the *Académie Julian*, whence he was invited back to Edinburgh to join the SNAE as expedition artist (Figure 1). The history of the Cuthbertson family has been documented elsewhere (Fanshawe 2022) but it is not certain what circumstances led to William’s appointment. He does not seem to have made a personal application, suggesting that he was invited to join the expedition after his name emerged from discussion between Bruce and his advisers.



Figure 1. A studio portrait of William Cuthbertson probably taken in about 1898 around the time that he commenced his studies at Edinburgh's Trustees Academy. He would be about sixteen years old. Photograph reproduced with permission from an original held with the W. S. Bruce Papers (Gen. 1654), University of Edinburgh Library Heritage Collections.

William's father (William George Cuthbertson) had established a stationery company and become a successful Edinburgh businessman. In the list of SNAE benefactors supplied to the *Scottish Geographical Magazine* by the expedition secretary (Ferrier 1903), "Mr W. Cuthbertson, stationer, Edinburgh", is acknowledged as the supplier of official stationery, making it likely that the business was an early corporate supporter. This may have been influential in securing William the position. Moreover, his mother, Katherine, was another talented artist – she had exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy – and in Edinburgh the Cuthbertson family lived close to Bruce's university friend, the author and artist W. G. Burn Murdoch (1862–1939) who had sailed with him on the *Balaena* Antarctic whaling voyage in 1892–93 (Burn Murdoch & Bruce 1894). The two households may well have met socially and in Edinburgh artistic circles. A recommendation from Burn Murdoch would have carried great weight with Bruce.

In addition, some pre-existing link between Bruce and the Cuthbertson family seems likely from the language used by Bruce in his written accounts of the expedition when referring to William. So, in *The Log of the Scotia* (Bruce 1992) he is always called Willie, whereas all the other expedition members are invariably referred to by their surnames, in keeping with the formal convention of the time. The diminutive would seem out of place in the SNAE context without a previous social connection, and the irascible Bruce was not renowned for casual familiarity. Other expedition members sometimes followed Bruce's example and used Willie rather than Cuthbertson in their

own accounts, whilst retaining formal surnames for all their other colleagues (Brown *et al.* 1906). It seems unlikely that William's position as the youngest member of the expedition was the sole excuse; several of the crew were only a few months older, as was Alastair Ross who had been a classmate of William's at Edinburgh's Royal High School and had abandoned medical studies to join the expedition as taxidermist.

Irrespective of the circumstances that led to his involvement in the expedition, during its progress Cuthbertson completed a substantial body of work. Much of that is now held in Edinburgh by National Museums Scotland (NMS). The paintings and drawings were indexed by Bruce after the expedition, and his manuscript list of 200 numbered items is also held by NMS. The artworks are numbered in random order, and not all are clearly identified by date and/or location. They include scenes from *Scotia* at sea, sketches of shipboard life, Antarctic landscapes and seascapes, and numerous detailed drawings illustrating the animal life encountered and collected.

Cuthbertson's work during the expedition

The SNAE, aboard *Scotia*, set sail from the Firth of Clyde on 2 November 1902. Additional coal and supplies were taken aboard at the Cape Verde Islands. An unsuccessful attempt was made to land on the mid-Atlantic St Paul's Rocks, and *Scotia* dropped anchor in Stanley Harbour, Falkland Islands, on 6 January 1903 (Figure 2).

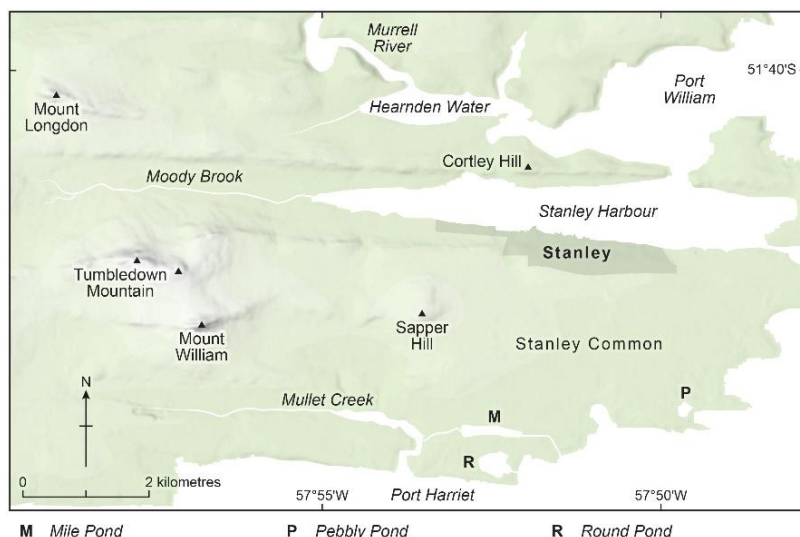


Figure 2. A location map of the Stanley area showing the locations visited by Cuthbertson. British Geological Survey © UKRI (geographical detail taken from Falkland Islands 1: 50 k sheet 15, Crown Copyright 1979; hill shade sourced from Esri, NASA, NGA, USGS).

Three weeks were spent in Stanley and several of Cuthbertson's artworks can be securely identified as having been produced then. One of these is a landscape (Figure 3), untitled and undated, which was only tentatively attributed to the Falkland Islands by Bruce in his numbered, manuscript list of Cuthbertson's paintings.



Figure 3. An untitled and undated painting (oil/gouache on canvas) by Cuthbertson, probably showing Tumbledown as seen from the Moody Brook valley, with Sapper Hill in the distance on the left: 30.5 cm x 22 cm. Reproduced with permission from National Museums Scotland W. S. Bruce Archive: Box 4, File 44. © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson. Below the painting is a recent photograph of the view from Moody Brook by Brian Summers, used here with his permission.

The probability of the painting (number 100 in Bruce's list) having a Falkland Islands origin was thought very likely by Fanshawe (2022, p. 61), and it is reminiscent of the north side of Tumbledown Mountain as seen from a position close to the cliffs. But with artistic dramatization, Cuthbertson seems to have transposed the relatively rugged perspective of the close-up view of the crags onto a panorama of the Tumbledown ridge extending east to Sapper Hill, a vista apparently as seen looking south-east from the Moody Brook valley to the south of Mt Longdon (Figure 2).¹ In Figure 3 Cuthbertson's painting is reproduced alongside a recent photograph of the view from Moody Brook. Perhaps he made several sketches of Tumbledown from different vantage points and then worked-up a composite interpretation when back at the ship; albeit no preliminary sketches have survived and that would not have been his usual way of working (Fanshawe 2022). For comparison, the characteristics of the rocky Tumbledown summit ridge and the broken cliffs along its northern flank are illustrated in Figure 4, with the view thence extending eastward over Stanley Harbour.



Figure 4. The eastern crags of Tumbledown Mountain (the central summit in Cuthbertson's painting, Figure 3) overlooking, farther to the east, Stanley, Stanley Harbour and Port William (cf. Figure 2). Photograph by Phil Stone. BGS image P605071 © UKRI.

Apart from Cuthbertson's undated excursion to Moody Brook, to the west of Stanley, he made at least two other forays into the Stanley hinterland, as recorded in the notebook of James Hunter Harvey Pirie (1878–1965), the expedition's doctor and geologist, also held by NMS (Bruce Archive, Box 8, File 97). On 7 January 1903, Pirie

and Cuthbertson landed on the north side of Stanley Harbour, climbed Cortley Hill and thence walked down to Hearnden Water and the Murrell River (Figure 2). They were intrigued by the stone runs (which Pirie referred to as ‘stone rivers’), the large periglacial blockfields that form a characteristic feature across parts of the Falklands landscape (Clark & Wilson 2008; Stone 2017). Like previous visitors, they could not understand how the spreads of large boulders came together into near-horizontal surface layers. Of the gradient, Pirie recorded:

“...it is scarcely appreciable; as a result of two separate approximations (we had nothing to measure it) W Cuthbertson thought it to be about 1/30 while I put it about 1/40 ... I cannot comprehend how the stones can have rolled down into their present position from the slopes as they are now.”

Nine days later, on 16 January, Cuthbertson again set out from Stanley with Pirie, but this time also accompanied by Robert Neal Rudmose-Brown (1879–1957), the expedition’s botanist and invertebrate zoologist, and a local resident referred to by Pirie as “the man Mellin”.² They walked south across Stanley Common and explored Mullet Creek and the north shore of Port Harriet with Pirie’s geological notes including descriptions of folded strata and barrier beaches isolating lagoons (note the ponds marked on Figure 2). Neither this excursion, nor that on 7 January to the Hearnden Water stone run, seems to have stimulated an artistic response from Cuthbertson.

In his role as expedition artist, Cuthbertson was also required to record the colour and detail of freshly collected marine invertebrates. Some were recovered from Stanley Harbour, probably by Brown, and three of Cuthbertson’s four or more representations (some undated and untitled pictures may possibly have a Falklands origin) are reproduced in Figure 5. Bruce has provisionally identified the animals in his index list of paintings as, verbatim, Halobates (a ‘sea skater’, Figure 5A), a Holothurian (‘sea cucumber’, Figure 5B), and sea anemones (Figure 5C). The dates on the pictures show that Cuthbertson was involved in this work on 7, 13, 16 and 18 January, probably aboard *Scotia*. It seems unlikely that his training in Edinburgh and Paris had included this kind of subject matter.

The three weeks spent in Stanley during January 1903 were Cuthbertson’s only experience of the Falkland Islands. Although *Scotia* called twice more, these visits were during the 1903–1904 austral summer when Cuthbertson, with five colleagues, had been left on Laurie Island, South Orkneys, to continue with the expedition’s scientific programme (Figure 6).

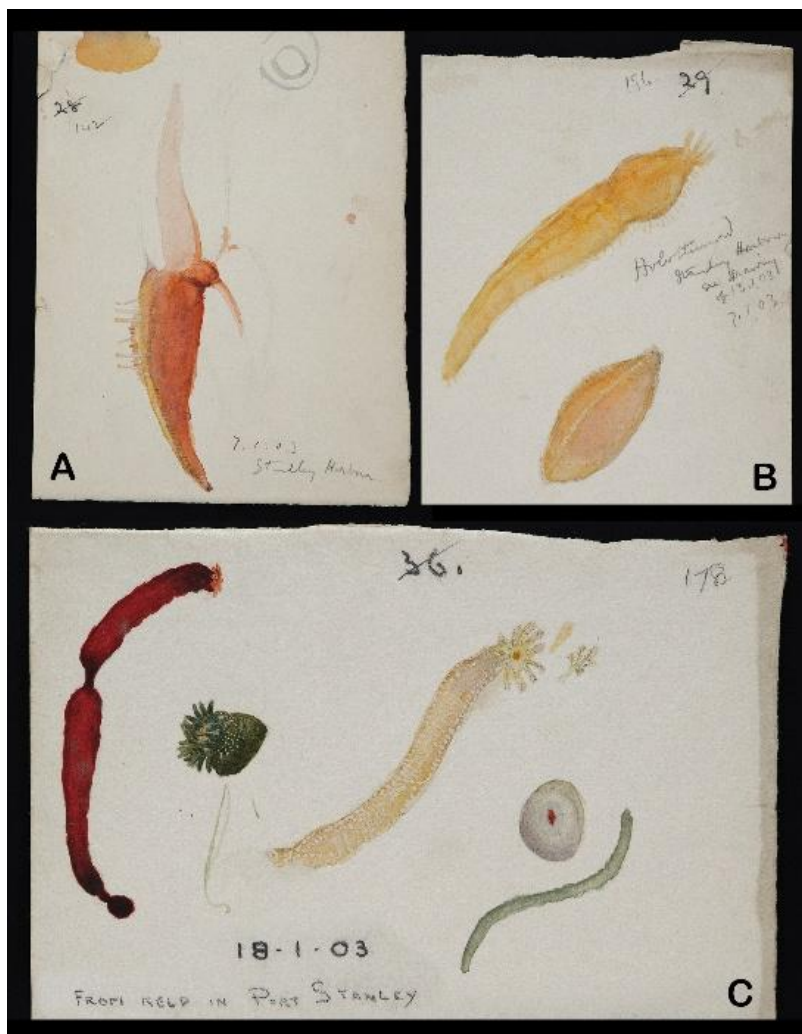


Figure 5. Paintings by Cuthbertson of marine invertebrates collected in Stanley Harbour. Reproduced with permission from National Museums Scotland W. S. Bruce Archive. © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson. A – *Halobates* (Sea Skater), 12 cm x 15 cm (Box 6, File 76, item 142); B – *Holothurian* (Sea Cucumber), 9 cm x 11.5 cm (Box 6, File 78, item 196); C – Sea anemones, 12 cm x 8 cm (Box 6, File 77, item 178). The dates and notes added to A and B are in Bruce's handwriting. The annotation of C was probably by Cuthbertson.



Figure 6. William Cuthbertson and fellow members of the team that remained on Laurie Island during the 1903–04 austral summer whilst Scotia was taken north to the Falkland Islands and Buenos Aires for stores and repairs. Image dated February 1904. From left to right: Alastair Ross (taxidermist), William A. Cuthbertson (artist), J. H. Harvey Pirie (geologist and surgeon), William Martin (seaman and assistant meteorologist), Robert C. Mossman (meteorologist and party leader), Bill Smith (cook). Reproduced with permission from the Glasgow Digital Library, based at the University of Strathclyde.³

Most of Cuthbertson's SNAE artwork dates from his time on Laurie Island, from 26 March 1903 to 22 February 1904. Marine invertebrates, fish, seals and birds are all represented in the collection, together with a few sketches of men at work around the ship and the base established onshore. A selection of these illustrations was included by Fanshawe (2022) in his Cuthbertson biography. Penguins provided particularly appealing subjects but one series of charming sketches (Figure 7), clearly drawn from life, is dated 22 and 26 February 1903, before arrival at Laurie Island and whilst *Scotia* was exploring far to the south in the Weddell Sea. In his narrative of the voyage Bruce (1992) recorded that on 22 February, whilst surrounded by sea ice at about 70°S 17° W, “we took an Emperor penguin alive and several were seen on the ice”. Then, on February 26: “The captive Emperor is quite tame, and was getting resigned to his fate until today, when he found that over the bulwarks are water and ice: now he has a disquieting ambition to get there”. This unfortunate bird was undoubtedly

Cuthbertson's subject, although the light-hearted attempt to represent its raucous call with a musical notation (Figure 7, middle right), was perhaps a little optimistic. But there was a happy ending – for the penguin. On 27 February, Bruce noted that “The captive Emperor disappeared overboard last night”.

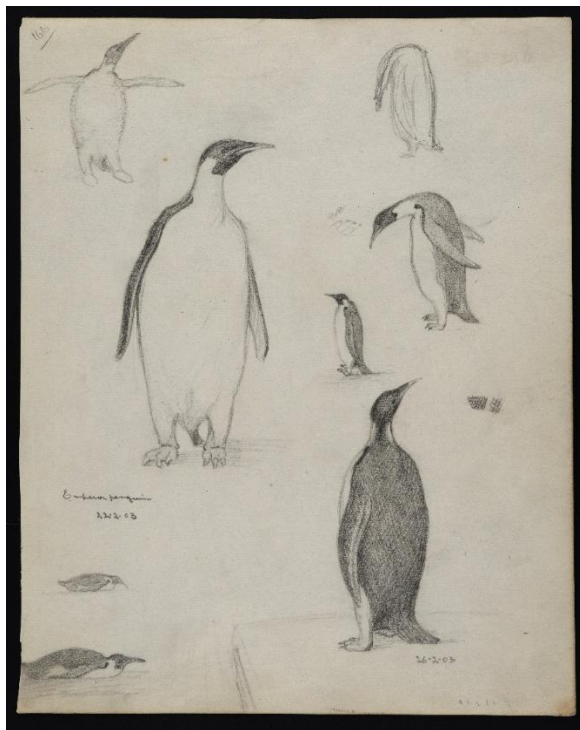


Figure 7. A series of sketches by Cuthbertson of an Emperor penguin, captured alive in the Weddell Sea and taken aboard *Scotia* in February 1903: 20 cm x 25 cm. Reproduced with permission from National Museums Scotland W. S. Bruce Archive: Box 6, File 77, item 166. © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.

Not all penguins were that lucky, and most of Cuthbertson's zoological subjects were dead, with many more penguins and seals being killed to supplement the expedition's supplies of food and fuel. He may not have been comfortable with that situation. Whilst he and his five comrades spent their summer on Laurie Island, *Scotia* sailed to the Falkland Islands, and thence to Buenos Aires for repairs and to take on additional coal. A package of letters from the expedition members was sent to Edinburgh for onward distribution by the SNAE secretary, James Ferrier, who additionally arranged for “News from the Explorers” to be published in *The Scotsman* newspaper on 6 January 1904. Within “Letters from the Artist” the comment “I have discovered that an Antarctic zoologist doesn't know what pity means” suggests distaste for the slaughter

of wildlife, and that might have caused friction with his colleagues, but then Cuthbertson concluded “the ship’s company have got on together as happily as brothers”.

Cuthbertson’s other important role on Laurie Island was to contribute to the topographical survey (Bruce 1905), complementing the surveyor’s measurements with landscape panoramas, annotated with code numbers for the principal peaks and landmarks (Figure 8).

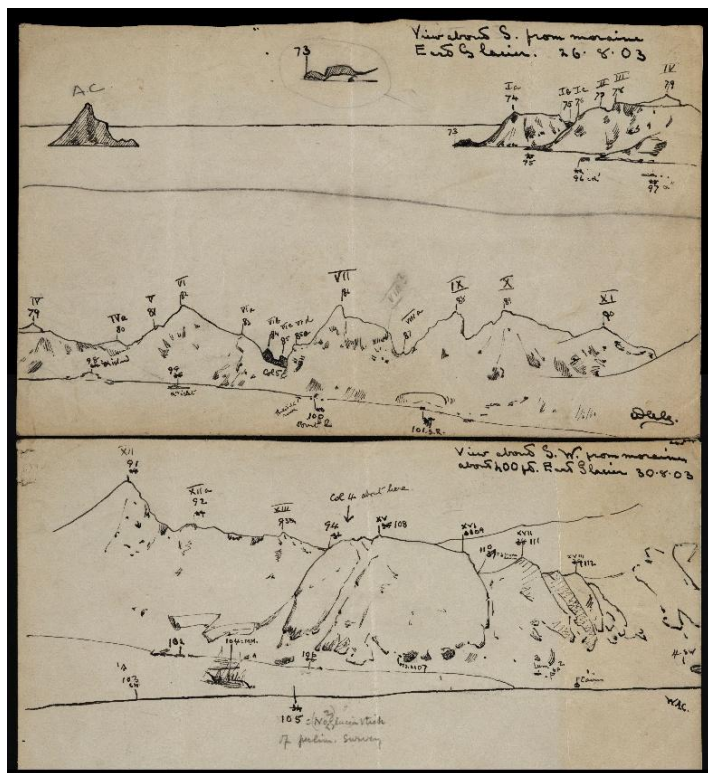


Figure 8. Topographical sketches by Cuthbertson produced in support of the survey of Laurie Island. The three profiles form a continuous transect from top left to bottom right. A.C. stands for ‘Ailsa Craig’: 20 cm x 21 cm. Reproduced with permission from National Museums Scotland W. S. Bruce Archive: Box 9, file 107, items 378 & 379. © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.

The mountainous, glaciated interior of the island was impassable, and the survey team had perforce to travel over the rough coastal sea ice, hauling a sledge loaded with their equipment and provisions. This was arduous work, as Pirie described:

“To reach our destination we had only about three miles to go, but it took full six hours to get over that ice – six of the hardest pulling I ever want to have to do. How the tea went down after it! ‘If this is Science,’ said Willie [Cuthbertson], ‘she’s a hard mistress; give me Art.’” Pirie in Brown *et al.* (1906, p. 160).

Cuthbertson’s life after the expedition

Scotia sailed back into the Firth of Clyde on 21 July 1904 to a triumphal welcome. Cuthbertson would have enjoyed celebrity status for a short time and together with his colleagues of the SNAE scientific team he was awarded a commemorative medal by the Royal Scottish Geographical Society (Fanshawe 2022, p. 127). Bruce subsequently commissioned twenty-four unique SNAE silver medals which he personally awarded to his senior scientific team, the officers of *Scotia* and those of her crew who had served for the duration of the voyage, and the three members of the expedition’s Edinburgh-based support staff. The latter group included the secretarial assistant, Nan Anderson, who may thus have become the first woman to receive an Antarctic medal of any description. Inexplicably, William Cuthbertson and Alastair Ross did not receive Bruce’s medal. There is no ready explanation for this omission (Mair & Stone 2024) and Bruce compounded the puzzle by subsequently including Cuthbertson and Ross on his unsuccessful nomination list for the prestigious Polar Medal (document held with the W. S. Bruce Papers (Gen. 1656), University of Edinburgh Library Heritage Collections). That the Polar Medal was never awarded to any member of the SNAE continues to provoke controversy (Dudeney & Sheail 2014).

Cuthbertson’s activities after his return from the SNAE have been thoroughly documented and illustrated by Fanshawe (2022). Initially he resumed his artistic training in Edinburgh and in 1910 travelled to Spain on a scholarship won from the Royal Scottish Academy. Two or three years were spent in Spain. He served with the Royal Navy (RNVR) in both World Wars and settled with his wife in Maldon, Essex, enjoying a measure of success as a portrait and landscape artist and as a literary illustrator. He clearly took pride in his Antarctic exploits, reminiscing that he was probably the youngest man to take part in any of the ‘heroic era’ expeditions, and in 1929 he became one of the founding members of the Antarctic Club. He was the only SNAE participant at the Club’s inaugural dinner at the Café Royal in London on 17 January that year (Fanshawe 2022, p. 129).

William Cuthbertson died on 3 January 1968 at Maldon, aboard his houseboat. This was the converted motor patrol launch – ML 349 – that he had commanded during the First World War and subsequently during 1919 on North Sea mine clearance duties, and which he had purchased in 1920.

Acknowledgements

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provided helpful comments on an early draft of this article. I must also thank Brian Summers for geographical discussion and the photograph of Tumbledown Mountain used in Figure 3, and Helen McShane (Jane Cameron National Archives, Stanley) for information on Charles Mellin.

Notes

1 So far, Tumbledown has proved a consensus view for the subject of the painting, but any other suggestions would be welcome. They would need to be within walking distance of Stanley.

2 A Mr Charles Mellin was resident in Stanley in March 1902, as confirmed by an entry in *Falkland Islands Magazine* (Vol. 14. No 4: Report of the Magistrate's Court), and in June 1902 he took on a two-year lease for 15 'Pensioners Cottages', now Pioneer Row (Lease agreement held in the Jane Cameron National Archives, Stanley). Other details of his position and circumstances have not been established.

3 The 'Glasgow' image appears to have been scanned backwards (probably from a glass plate original) and has been reversed in Figure 6 into agreement with the background topography as illustrated in recent photographs. In this orientation it matches a range of similar images held elsewhere, including at the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge, for which see Speak (2003).

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