

The Shipwreck Watch

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Captain Angel's Daughter? The Headless Figurehead

In March 1973, ANARE expeditioners, Peter Hill and Robert Thompson, discovered an exquisitely carved, headless figurehead of a woman at Sellick Bay on Macquarie Island's west coast. Could this be 'Captain Angel's daughter' the figurehead of the *Torrens* which hit an iceberg near the Crozet islands in 1899?

An extraordinary find



Sellick Bay, Macquarie Island. Photo Geof Copson

On 19 March 1973, Australian National Antarctic Research expeditioner, Peter Hill, walked into Sellick Bay on the south-west coast of Macquarie Island. He and fellow expeditioner, Bob Thompson had been counting fur seals, checking bands on wanderer albatrosses and looking in on black-browed albatrosses at Caroline Cove. Peter was a fast walker, and while waiting for Bob, to catch up with him, he explored the rocky foreshore.

*P*eter Hill became interested in a huge clump of driftwood in a muddy hole. He was trying to drag it out when Bob Thompson arrived. **With supreme effort, they dragged the wood onto the rock - and realised that they had discovered an exquisitely carved, headless, but otherwise full-sized female figurehead.**



The headless figurehead.. Photo Bob Thompson.

Close to where the men found the figurehead, part of a topmast of a ship had also washed ashore.

*P*eter Hill and Bob Thompson wanted to carry the figurehead back to the ANARE station at the north-east of the island but the figurehead weighed over 308 pounds. It would be impossible for the two of them to carry her any distance. They propped her up on the rocks and photographed her, then raced back to the station and developed the photographs. A few days later Peter and Bob were back at Sellick Bay with a medical stretcher and six volunteers stretcher-carriers.

The figurehead's journey back to the station took two years.

He journey involved many more stretcher-carrying expeditions in which she was carried over coastal rocks and scree, tussock grass and the 'featherbed' marsh on the Macquarie Island plateau.

In the winter of 1973, the figurehead was abandoned at Skua Lake. She was visited by ANARE parties in 1974 but she was not moved again until the winter of 1975.



Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Officer, Irenej Skira with the figurehead at Skua Lake, 1974.

This time, she was roped to the underside of a helicopter. Shortly after take-off the load started spinning and the rope snapped. She dropped into the 'featherbed' below, and disappeared from sight. A search party set out from the ANARE station to try to find the missing 'lady'.

They were lucky enough to spot an arm and a frayed rope protruding from a small pool near Aurora Caves.

Days later, eight men spent two and a half hours retrieving her from the pool. This proved to be difficult because the banks of the pool kept collapsing as they tried to pull her out. Eventually she was again strapped firmly onto a medical

stretcher. Several more processions of stretcher-bearers had to be organised before the figurehead was sledged over the side of the plateau and dropped on the foreshore near the station. From there she was triumphantly taken to the station on the back of a tractor.



The figurehead was shipped to Melbourne in 1975. She was stored in an ANARE warehouse and forgotten and her condition deteriorated rapidly. She was eventually sent to the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, where they are trying to prevent her from deteriorating any further.



The figurehead's origin remained a mystery for 26 years, until Glyn Roberts discovered a reference to the *Torrens*, which hit an iceberg after rounding the Cape of Good Hope late last century and lost her jib-boom, bowsprit and figurehead.

He ordered plans of the ship, which showed a figurehead similar in design to that found on Macquarie Island.

Glyn Roberts thinks the figurehead may have belonged to the *Torrens*, the last of the 'Wool Clippers', and carried passengers to Australia. She was built at Sunderland in 1875. The *Torrens* figurehead was carved by sculptor Joseph Melvin and modelled on Flores Angel, daughter of Captain H.R.

Angel. Flores' brother, Falkland, was master of the *Torrens* when she hit the iceberg in 1899.

Sketch of *Torrens*, based on plans by H. Underhill



Glyn Roberts, presents his reasons for this conclusion:

*Could the lost Figurehead of the Sailing Ship *Torrens* have reach Macquarie Island?*

This conundrum has been causing me sleepless nights! So I have decided to put together all the information I have on two incidents separated by some 74 years so you can judge whether they are connected.

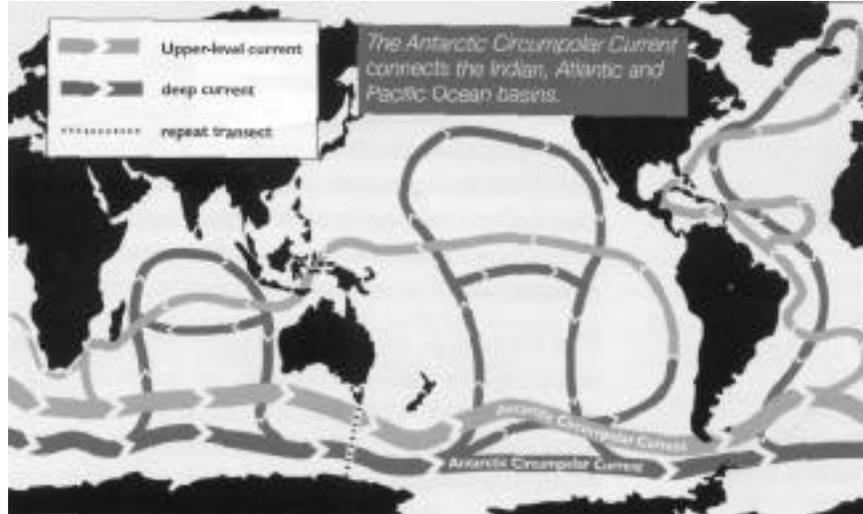
At 8pm on 11th January 1899 some 40 kilometres south west of the Crozet Islands at 46° 35' S. 50° E. the sailing ship *Torrens*, on a journey from London to Adelaide, sailed into an iceberg and lost its foretopmast, jibboom, bowsprit and figurehead and badly damaged its foremast and bow. The *Torrens* struggled into Port Adelaide on 5th February 1899 as reported in the South Australian Register dated 8th February 1899.

On 19th March 1973, two 'intrepid' ANARE men, Peter Hill and Bob Thompson, were walking the shore of Sellick Bay on the west coast of Macquarie Island, 54° 38' S. 158° 50' E., when they discovered a large piece of driftwood buried in mud behind some rocks. When it was cleaned up a little, to their surprise it turned out to be a headless female figurehead from an unknown sailing ship.

Are these two events connected?

- Plans of the sailing ship *Torrens*, built in 1875 by James Laing of Sunderland, UK, show a figurehead which is similar in design to that found on Macquarie Island. It was painted in white and gold and is said to have been modelled on the daughter, Flores, of the ship owner, Henry Robert Angel.

- CSIRO Oceanography information indicates that the Antarctic Circumpolar Current flows across the Indian Ocean past Macquarie Island into the Pacific Ocean and through Drakes Passage at the southern end of South America and back into the Atlantic Ocean. The total flow of water is some 130,000,000 cubic metres per second! (a sixth of a sydharb per second). (see diagram.)



- The circumference of the earth's small circle at 51° S latitude, which is midway between where the collision happened and Macquarie Island, I have estimated at some 24,000 kilometres. The figurehead would have to travel some 7350 kilometres eastwards to reach Macquarie Island.

- G. Deacon in his book "The Antarctic Circumpolar Ocean", suggests that, based on the reports of early navigators, such as James Ross, the surface flow of the Antarctic Circumpolar Current flows eastwards at a rate varying from 18 to 36 kilometres per day (kpd) in the Indian Ocean but flows south eastwards at 22 kpd south of New Zealand.

- The South Australian Horace Lamb Oceanographic Institute put several thousand plastic drift cards into the ocean south of the Cape of Good Hope and recoveries of these cards on Australia, Macquarie Island and New Zealand shores indicated a drift of 9 to 15 kpd.

- An enormous natural experiment occurred when a submarine eruption took place 52 kilometres north-west of Zavodovski Island in the South Sandwich Group at 55° 30' S. 28° W. on 5 March 1962. Pumice from the eruption was reported by ships in the area to have covered 5000 square kilometres with some large pieces floating on the surface. Pumice was reported from Tasmania, Macquarie Island and Stewart Island (NZ) in late 1963 and early 1964 (see G Copson photograph). Karen Townrow reported finding pumice on the beach at Caroline Cove in 1986/7. The pumice had therefore floated 188° of longitude (some 13,150 kilometres) in about 19 months. The rate of travel has been calculated for the larger floating pieces, which would be blown along by the wind, as 23 kpd, while the sub-surface pieces travelled at 9 to 14 kpd.



Pumice and cut timber, washed ashore on the west coast of Macquarie Island. Photo Geof Copson.

So the figurehead could have floated the 7350 kilometres to Macquarie Island in 18 to 28 months. It could, however, have also gone all the way around the world one or more times and then landed on the west coast of the island. One complete circumflotation of the earth in the Antarctic Circumpolar Current would take approximately eight to ten years. The figurehead had 74 years to arrive on Macquarie Island so it could have floated around the earth up to seven times looking for a spot to land!

I think it found that spot on Macquarie Island!

Glyn Roberts,

22/9/99

***R*eferences**

- Michener, E, 1979, '*The Figurehead of Macquarie Island*', The DogWatch, No 36, pp47-48.
- Thompson, R, 1973, 'Intrep-edition', Macquarie Island Journal, unpublished manuscript, copy supplied by R. Thompson.

***F*urther *R*eadng**

The Legend of the Eagle

***M*ystery**

What is the story of the mysterious carving of a woman found on Macquarie Island in 1973?

Who were Flores Angels descendants? Do they know any family history about the Torrens figurehead?