

Title: Dancing on Ice

Sub-title: *A Stirring Tale of Adventure,
Risk and Reckless Folly*

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Published: 2008

Publisher: Old Street Publishing Ltd London

Website: www.oldstreetpublishing.co.uk

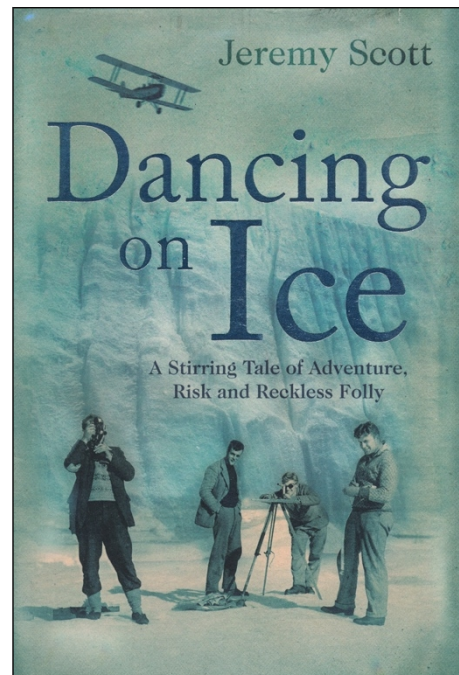
Contents: 246 pp, three b&w photo plate sections

Cover: hardcover, dustjacket

Size: 240 x 160 mm

ISBN: 978-1-90587-50-1

Review: Alan Bye



I began by tagging several pages then gave up, the book is full of quotable bits. Here is Jeremy on 'Risk'

'Risk in various forms is available today, but 75 years ago that particular compound was more readily available. There still were unknown places in the world, places no-one had yet gone to: there were blanks on the map. It was no desire for fame that drew them to those untrodden regions but something visceral and instinctive to their nature. They had tasted it already; both had known the high of venturing in to that vast, white, empty landscape of cruel beauty and truth. To face the adversities they encountered there required comradeship, resolution and courage. Their existence was harsh but simple and their purpose clear. They were fully alive there; it was a place of elemental purity in a messy and uncertain world.'

This was about Gino Watkins and J M Scott, already companions in mapping parts of Labrador, now the prime movers in the British Arctic Air Route Expedition. (BAARE). Aircraft of that time needed refuelling every 500-600 miles. The demand was for fast travel from Europe to North America. While they planned this expedition, the Hindenburg flew quite low over them on its way to America. That put a dampener on their enthusiasm. Then the R 101 exploded in flame in France which ended the airship industry to leave the way open for fixed wing aircraft.

The descriptions of London and night life, high society circa 1930 are fascinating. I was two then so didn't know the pleasures of dancing the Charleston or the Black Bottom, my time circa 1945 was the quick step, waltz, ballroom dancing in general. I asked myself, having read *Gino Watkin* and *The Land God Gave to Cain* by J M Scott, *Watkins Last Expedition* by F Spencer Chapman, where is the kayaking?

The description of Gino's insouciant manner, his family lacking finance yet there he was at the great coming out balls in the season in London, dancing with débutantes. He and Scott were busy planning the expedition and acquiring suitable companions to do the various tasks. There were two Gipsy Moth biplanes fitted with floats or skis which required an engineer and two pilots. Gino had a flying licence. They did some flying but the huge gales on the east coast of Greenland in winter wrecked them at their base.

'Gino always enjoyed teasing the rigger buggers and the ultra-respectable. It amused him to play the affected poser and he liked to shock, but his manner concealed ruthless, fully-focussed will. "If a man wants anything, absolutely anything badly enough, he can get it, absolutely anything" he told Scott.'

The quality of public-school life is described in detail because it shaped the inner man. After such privations neither the high Arctic or prison could much dismay them. *'Gino fitted in with the regimen not at all. He showed little academic promise and detested organised games, seeing no point in them. The only activity he excelled in was the lonely sport of cross country running. He also became a crack shot with both rifle and revolver, representing Lancing at Bisley where he scored higher than any other competitor.'*

(I endured much the same at school, loathed team games, ran cross country and was offered the opportunity of being a sniper in the army. I turned it down, longevity for snipers is notoriously absent.)

The expedition, its fourteen members and all its equipment with one biplane lashed to the deck of the 'Quest', an icebreaker, set off down the Thames to steam to the Faroe Islands where Scott was waiting with teams of savage sledge dogs. They called at Iceland for coal then arrived at Angmassalik on the east coast of Greenland where they went on foot on the ice with their wind-up gramophone. They danced.

'Explorers, ship's crew, and Eskimo girls all dance; a frenzied double beat jiggling set by the women in their red sealskin boots. Wearing bright blouses, beads and ornamented seal-fur trousers they have dressed up in party gear and are as agitated as jumping beans with the thrill of it all.'

The details of their hut and domestic arrangements are very interesting. Summer ends rapidly north of the Arctic Circle and they had to put two of their number on the ice cap 130 miles from base to keep weather watch. Courtauld volunteered to do it solo. They trekked there up the precipitous edge of the ice cap.

I cannot even suggest the brutality of the conditions, the winds regularly over 100 mph, half rations, rapidly shortening days, setting up a tent at each stop, struggling in wet clothing in to wet sleeping bags, too weary and too cold to do anything but remove their boots which froze solid. Their will to live was sorely tested yet their first duty was attend to the dogs. When rations for the dogs were almost finished they shot a dog and fed it to the others. Later they ate dog themselves.

Courtauld was left in calm conditions in his tent with an entry tunnel under the snow so that warmth in the tent would not spill out. There was a can of beans, contents and both ends removed, which served as a ventilator at the peak of the tent. It was down that opening months later that Gino shouted down to Courtauld who that day had resigned himself to death, *"Are you alright?"* to hear a weak response, a voice which had not been used for months reply: *"Yes. Thank God you've come, I'm perfectly fit."* The muscles of his legs had wasted through lack of use and food. He had been trapped by drifting snow and ice for weeks, the access tunnel blocked solid, unable to leave his tent every three hours to read weather instruments.

There was international alarm because Courtauld could not communicate with base. His supplies were calculated to last until 15 March. It was the end of April before he was dug out of his temporary tomb. Four rescue expeditions were dispatched to find him, all failed bar Gino and his team.

Their return as separate teams by different routes to find a ship to Denmark was arduous. They returned to great acclaim, international stardom. Their advice was, youth is brief, now is the time to secure finance for the next expedition. Even though it was the time of the great depression, finance was found. A year later four of them returned to Angmassalik. As before Gino economised on food supplies because they could use their kayaks and hunting skills to secure seal along the way.

Gino was hunting alone in Lake Fjord, the others were in another branch of the fiord. Gino vanished. They found his kayak floating inverted, his sealskin trousers on an ice floe, his hunting gear but no Gino. He journeyed 25 years from birth to beyond, his transition was swift.

(The author is the son of Freddie Spencer Chapman)