

## PCAS 13 (2010/2011)

### Literature review



## Introduction

Antarctica is commonly known as the continent of extremes: the coldest, windiest, highest and driest place on Earth. Its environment is the hardest place on our planet to support life. These superlatives only describe characteristics of its natural environment. However, there is more to the peculiarities of this land: it is the only continent without native inhabitants or a permanent population; and the only place without a cultural background. Because of it, it is the only continent to record the first woman to ever set foot on it.

For centuries men imagined the existence of the *Terra Incognita*. Later, they discovered the continent, explored its coasts, travelled inland and conquered it. The Southern Continent was a place for men only. Nevertheless, women accompanied men in these adventures; whether it was as a companion onboard whaling vessels or in the men's hearts and minds. In the mid 1950s, Antarctica was declared as a continent for peace and science purposes only. Governments and scientists turned their attention to this 'living laboratory' for research. But it was not until the late 1960s that the first women were accepted as part of Antarctic Research Programmes.

## A practical companion

The end of the eighteenth century saw men travelling to the Sub Antarctic Islands and the Southern Ocean in sealing and whaling vessels. In some cases, they took with them their wives, but little is known of the women's experiences. There are only a few names of these women recorded in the ship's logs (p 12, Chipman 1986) and very little reference of their presence.

Other women found themselves southbound as courtesans for the ship's captain, as was the case of French woman Louise Seguin (or Louison) who was onboard Le Roland on the 1773-74 voyage to the Kerguelen Islands.

In 1766-77, Jeanne Baré (or Baret) became the first woman with a professional role in the Sub-Antarctic, as she was the botanist valet on Bouganville's Falkland Islands expedition (p 167, Chipman 1986).

It was one of these female companions who, in 1935, became the first woman recorded to set foot on the Antarctic continent. Her name was Caroline Mikkelsen, the wife of a whaling captain, who landed briefly in the coast of Princess Elizabeth Land, near today's Australian Davis Station.

## A heroes' wife

The Heroic Era of Antarctic Exploration (from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) saw brave men defeating the odds to conquer the last unknown frontier. The South Pole was the main prize and later, traversing the Antarctic continent became the focus of these expeditions. The names of the explorers are familiar to most people today; their stories of endurance and sacrifice are well known by Antarctic aficionados. There is abundant literature available written in the Western World regarding these expeditions and their main characters, but little detail is paid to their wives and families.

The wives of the explorers endured years of loneliness and anxiety (p 236, Reader's Digest 1985/88), looking after the home and children with little money. Some women contributed to their husbands' expeditions participating in fundraisers (e.g. Kathleen Scott) or as biographers (e.g. Paquita Delprat Mawson). Some women, such as Emily Shackleton, were an important inspiration for the safe return of their husbands. In 1907, Ernest Shackleton made the difficult decision to stop his expedition just 97 nautical miles from the South Pole. He explained his decision to Emily in a letter saying "...I thought you would rather have a live donkey than a dead lion..." (p 237, Reader's Digest 1985/88).

Overall, women were often in the explorers minds. During the winter months, the men will entertain themselves with songs, poems and plays. In 1898 the *Belgica* under the command of De Gerlache, got trapped in pack ice and became the first party to winter in Antarctica. To battle boredom and depression, the men organized a Concourse for beautiful women. It was a beauty contest that lacked of actual female contestants, but the men provided to the judges 464 pictures, charms and fascinations from their possessions to select the most beautiful women of their ship (p 252, Cook 1909).

### **Era of Antarctic Science and women's first participation**

Before 1957's International Geophysical Year and the consequent development of Antarctic National Programmes, women had proved they could live in Antarctica. In 1947, the private expedition led by Finn Ronne took two women among 23 members to live in Antarctica: Edith Ronne and Jenny Darlington became the first women to winter in the Antarctic (p 1093, Encyclopedia of the Antarctic 2007).

Despite that women had been working successfully as scientists all around the world, Antarctica in the 1950s still remained a men's world. This was mostly due to the opposition of some Antarctic programme leaders to have women working on the Continent. Sir Vivian Fuchs, head of the British Antarctic Survey, thought women could not handle the hard work and would require new facilities. In Courier Mail (1963, quoted in Encyclopedia of the Antarctic, p 1093) he said '...their presence would change the whole psychological atmosphere of the bases...', He was not alone in his thinking, American Admiral Duffek thought women would "wreck the illusion of being frontiersmen going into a new land and the illusion of being a hero" (p 1093, Encyclopedia of the Antarctic 2007). Even the literature written at this time reflected the opposition to having women in Antarctica. In the novel *Monday at McMurdo*, written in 1957, the New Zealand author David Burke writes "...it was unwise to have a woman come even for a few hours to an Antarctic base where a hundred of men have said goodbye to wives and girlfriends for a year" (p. 46, Burke 1957).

However, women were determined to fulfil their dreams of working in the Antarctic and conducting their own research, instead of depending on male assistants to collect data for them. Back at home, these women were respected professionals by their male colleagues, but Antarctica was still off limits to them.

At the beginning (1955-1956) women scientists were ship-based and could not land in the continent. In the summer of 1969-1970, the US Navy ban on transporting women was lifted, allowing the first women scientists to work in the Antarctic continent. There was still opposition to have female staff: women were highly selected, there were doubts of their physical and psychological strength and their potentially disruptive social nature (p 1093, Encyclopedia of the Antarctic 2007). Another concern of the national programme managers was the facilities, which proved no barrier for women, largely because they adapted quickly to the conditions. "a lock for the toilet door sufficed", replied one woman (p 1093, Encyclopedia of the Antarctic 2007).

### **40 years of women in Antarctica: challenges and changes**

In the last 40 years, women have participated in many Antarctic roles. From Base personnel, support personnel, talk-show celebrities, scientists, station leaders, managers of Antarctic national programmes, adventurers and recipients of Polar Medals or similar awards.

The path for women to be considered an equal partner to work in the Antarctic has been a slow process, and in some cases is still developing. Countries like New Zealand opened the Antarctic National Programme to women in the early 1970s, not only for New Zealand scientists but also inviting scientists of other nationalities. Such is the case of Dr. Li Huamei, who worked in Antarctica as a geologist in partnership with the New Zealand Antarctic Division in 1984, becoming the first Chinese woman to work in the Antarctic (p 144, Chipman 1986).

The working conditions for women in most Antarctic National Programmes have changed, allowing equal opportunity for employment. However, the women to men ratio is still very low "the best gender equity ratio has been around 1:7 in favour of male expeditioners (p 6, Wisenet 2003). The Australian Antarctic Division is aware of this unbalanced situation 'working hard to rid the program of its traditional 'blokey' culture...slowly, there is an increasing number of tradeswomen going south...' (p 4, Wisenet 2003).

The Feminist Movement of the 1970s helped women to gain access to work in Antarctica, but there were responsibilities to come with this benefit. For many years, women were judged by their behaviour and their work. Women had to balance the men's expectations of "being one of the boys", being perceived as unsexed or "unfeminine", or the sexual innuendo and pressure carried out from interacting socially with their male's workmates (p. 216, Rothblum 1998).

Looking at Australian Robin Burns research, the women interviewed complained that the expedition culture has not yet changed. For example, women did not get appointed to a permanent scientific positions nor were there positions available in the (Australian) Antarctic Programme headquarters (p 167, Burns 2000). Comparing this situation with New Zealand's Antarctic Programme Headquarters, there are twenty five permanent staff listed in their organizational chart, of which seven are women, none of these occupying the role of manager (<http://www.antarcticanz.govt.nz/about-antarctica-nz/contact-us>).

Other factors affecting the participation of women in Antarctic National programmes are:

- work conditions includes long periods in Antarctica, affecting personal relationships (i.e. leaving children behind), emotionally too difficult (p 168, Burns 2000)
- Female scientists have the perception that to be a successful researcher full dedication is needed, to the exclusion of other interests or personal life.
- Improvement in the extreme cold weather clothing and footwear to fit women sizes "boots...were so wide that I developed platform-like calluses" (p 8, Wisenet 2003)
- Stories heard but not reported of sexual harassment, indecent behaviour and even indecent assault to women expeditioners (p 7, Wisenet 2003)
- Pressure from society from leaving "their normal roles" of wives, mothers and being the emotional support for their families (p 215, Rothblum 1998)

## Conclusion

The role of women in Antarctic National programmes has evolved from companions to contributors. Initially, women served as inspiration from afar. The last 40 years has seen a slow inclusion of females in all aspects of national programmes. However, men still greatly outnumber women in the Antarctic workplace, even though many developed nations have mandated equal employment opportunities by law.

The main constraints on women's involvement in national programmes have been the perception that they are interfering with the 'heroic culture', or taking men's jobs. In addition, women have strong ties to their families and the long separation required by many national programme positions interferes with their family priorities.

## Bibliography

Burke, D. 1967 *Monday at McMurdo*. A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington

Burns, R 2000. *Women in Antarctic Science. Forging new practices and meanings*. In *Women's studies Quarterly*. Volume XXVIII. Numbers 1 & 2. The City University of New York.

Chipman, E 1986, *Women on the Ice*, Melbourne University Press, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition.

Cook, F 1909. *Through the First Antarctic Night 1898-1899*. Polar Publishing Company. Centennial Edition

Reader's Digest, 1985-1988. *Antarctica, the extraordinary history of man's conquest of the frozen continent*. Reader's Digest New Zealand, revised and updated edition.

Riffenburgh, B 2007, *Encyclopedia of the Antarctic*, Volume 2. Taylor and Francis Group, New York.

Rothblum, E, Weinstock, J, Morris, J, 1998. *Women in the Antarctic*. The Haworth Press, New York.

Wisenet Journal, 2003. *Women in Antarctica/ AGM*. Volume 64. Canberra.

## Websites

<http://www.antarcticanz.govt.nz/about-antarctica-nz/contact-us>

<http://www.antarcticanz.govt.nz/images/downloads/whoarewe/2010-2011scottbaseorgchartoctober.pdf>

[http://www.antarctica.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/20883/General-Information-061210.pdf](http://www.antarctica.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/20883/General-Information-061210.pdf)

[http://www.antarctica.ac.uk/about\\_bas/our\\_organisation/bas\\_pspe\\_organisation\\_chart.pdf](http://www.antarctica.ac.uk/about_bas/our_organisation/bas_pspe_organisation_chart.pdf)