

## Antarctica: a Biography

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Peter Clarkson

The title of this book, *Antarctica: a Biography*, might cause some initial confusion but this is rectified by the publisher's puff on the front inside flap of the dust jacket where it is described as 'the first major international history of this forbidding continent'. However, the title does serve the author's purpose in prompting the reader to consider not only the discovery and geography of the Antarctic (the continent and the peri-Antarctic islands), but also the explorers who made the discoveries and the political machinations of their governments over these uninhabited territories.

Following the author's preface, the book is divided chronologically into 21 chapters (ranging from the 1770s to 2012). The periods of each chapter vary in length according to the extent of activities within each particular period. Each chapter is subtitled with a short quotation relevant to its content, and although the popular expression 'The Heroic Era' is not used it is covered in chapters six to eight. There is a short epilogue followed by 63 pages of endnotes by chapter, seven pages of a select bibliography and an index of 21 pages.

In the preface, the author explains how he came to write the book as a result of writing a previous book where the Antarctic kept impinging on the research. He also acknowledges individuals and organizations that provided help and encouragement.

Chapter one covers the 1770s, the author's chosen starting period, dealing principally with the voyages of Captain James Cook. It is always arguable where to begin a history but, in this case, Cook's first voyage

(1768–71), to observe the transit of Venus from the Pacific Ocean, seems appropriate. Other voyages that had sailed in search of the fabled southern continent are mentioned but Cook's secret instructions, after completing the science, were to search for the 'mythical Great South Land' and claim it for Britain. The vivid imaginations of 18th-century cartographers and others had described a land of agriculture and minerals with a population of some 50 million. Cook did not sight Antarctica in either his first or second voyage (1772–5) but he did circumnavigate the continent twice and crossed the Antarctic Circle (66° 33'S) for the first time. He also charted the island of South Georgia and discovered the South Sandwich Islands, claiming the former for Britain. However, he did speculate that there must be a landmass farther south from which the huge icebergs he encountered would have originated.

The next chapter covers the period 1780-1820, beginning with Cook's third voyage on which he was tragically killed by natives on Hawaii in 1779. The slaughter of fur seals on South Georgia, prompted by Cook's accounts of his previous voyages, is mentioned only in respect of the Russian Bellingshausen's arrival at that island. The Tsar had despatched two ships, *Vostok* and *Mirny*, under Bellingshausen's command to check Cook's discoveries, search for the southern continent and to counter British territorial aspirations in the region. On 19 February 1819 William Smith from Britain sighted the South Shetland Islands. Bellingshausen crossed the Antarctic Circle on 27 January 1820 and sighted the coast of Antarctica the following day. Meanwhile Smith had returned with Edward Bransfield RN to chart his discovery before turning south and sighting the coast of the Antarctic Peninsula on 30 January 1820. Despite attempts at secrecy, news of Smith's discovery, not just of the islands but the thousands of fur seals there, had leaked and American and other British sealers descended on the islands. After a maintenance stay in Australia, Bellingshausen returned to the Ross Sea and sailed eastward around the continent to sight and name first Peter I øy and then Alexander Island. Unlike the British, who landed and made territorial claims, Bellingshausen simply named his discoveries.

Chapter three deals with the uncontrolled predation of the fur seals on the South Shetland Islands, which effectively annihilated the population and led sealers to begin to search for new sealing grounds. Undoubtedly new coasts were found but secrecy for commercial reasons and the loss of so many ships' logs mean that outstanding records are few. Nevertheless some major discoveries were made, notably James Weddell reaching 74°S in the Weddell Sea. Britain and France were preparing expeditions to explore and carry out research in the region while the young United States was eventually persuaded to send an expedition to explore and chart the seas frequented by its sealers. The scene was set for the next major period of discovery.

The Frenchman Dumont d'Urville, the American Charles Wilkes and the Briton James Clark Ross dominate the next chapter, detailing the years 1839–43. Both d'Urville and Wilkes sailed along stretches of the Antarctic coast south of Australia between about 150°E and 105°E but d'Urville landed on some islands at 140°E to claim the land for France that he named 'Terre Adélie' after his wife. Wilkes' course lay farther north and although he sighted the appearance of land he was unable to disembark. However, he did suppose that the ice cliffs were the northern edge of a continent that he termed Antarctica. Ross wanted to reach the South Magnetic Pole (he had already reached the North Magnetic Pole), but his observations indicated it was on land that he could not reach. Nevertheless he discovered Victoria Land and reached Ross Island, setting a new farthest south record. Ross also explored around the northern tip of the Antarctic Peninsula and discovered James Ross Island.

Chapter five covers the period up to 1895. While d'Urville was fêted and honoured on his return to France, Ross received less acclamation in Britain, and in the United States Wilkes was court marshalled for lying about seeing land and doing so before d'Urville! Their reports stimulated some unsuccessful whaling ventures to the Southern Ocean but there was little other activity apart from the *Challenger* expedition in 1872. During this period Britain was more concerned with the search for the North-west Passage.

Chapters six to eight, as mentioned above, cover 'The Heroic Era'. The author shows how the ambitions and prejudices of Sir Clements Markham, President of the Royal Geographical Society, influenced the course of Antarctic exploration, not always for the best. The expeditions of De Gerlache (Belgium), Borchgrevink

(UK), Scott (UK), Drygalski (Germany), Nordenskjöld (Sweden), Charcot (France) and Bruce (UK) are briefly described. Science was the underlying driver but inevitably national prestige was an important carrot for fundraising. The importance of sovereignty and territorial claims was beginning to emerge.

Whaling was now a well-established industry with shore stations in South Georgia and the South Shetland Islands. The development of the explosive harpoon, the use of faster catchers and better processing led to a profitable industry. The lease of land by the Falkland Islands government to the whalers at Grytviken, South Georgia, accelerated sovereignty questions. The British government issued 'Letters Patent' in 1908 to substantiate British claims in the Antarctic against Argentine and Chilean claims. Charcot returned to the Antarctic Peninsula with a scientific expedition in 1908. Shackleton reached within 100 geographical miles (180 km) of the South Pole in 1908 while Cook and Peary claimed to have reached the North Pole in 1908 and 1909 respectively. Amundsen redirected his Arctic expedition south to reach the South Pole on 14 December 1911, followed by Scott on 17 January 1912.

Chapter eight deals at length with Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic expedition, perhaps inevitably as the author is Australian. However, he does uncover the different versions of Mawson's epic journey, each adapted to suit his immediate needs and audience. Filchner's *Deutschland* and Shackleton's *Endurance* expeditions to the Weddell Sea and Nobu Shirase's *Kainan-maru* expedition from Japan to the Ross Sea are briefly referred to, with the Antarctic politics of the time being blended in with the stories.

Chapter nine turns to the post-war period, dominated by territorial questions and the determination of Leo Amery, a British government minister, to claim the entire continent for Britain, except for the irritating French claim to Terre Adélie. Whaling, predominantly Norwegian, continued and the British government, by licensing the whalers, was adding support its territorial claims. A grandiose British expedition to the Antarctic Peninsula planned by John Lachlan Cope was eventually reduced to two men spending a winter in an abandoned water-boat converted into a hut at Waterboat Point in Paradise Harbour.

Richard Byrd (USA), Hubert Wilkins (Britain/Australia) and Lincoln Ellsworth (USA) were all making pioneering aircraft flights in the Arctic and it was inevitable that this technique of exploration would soon be transferred to the Antarctic. The complications this would cause for Antarctic sovereignty are discussed in chapter ten, particularly those between Britain and Norway as the latter claimed Peter I øy and Bouvetøya and considered claiming the unclaimed sector (20°W – 50°E) between the British and Australian claims.

Chapter 11 turns to Byrd's first Antarctic expedition, to the Ross Ice Shelf, which used aircraft to photograph vast previously unseen swathes of the continent, and on which he made the first flight to the vicinity of the South Pole. He was keen to claim territory and put ground parties into the newly discovered mountains to bolster any claim by actual knowledge of the area. He also ensured that photographs included the coastline to link the coast to the interior. He named the unclaimed region Marie Byrd Land to forestall any claims that might be made by Wilkins overflying the same region from the Antarctic Peninsula. Byrd also made extensive use of radio to inform his media sponsors, and hence the rest of the world, of his discoveries. At the same time, Mawson was in competition with the Norwegians to chart and claim the coast south of Australia and the Indian Ocean.

The next chapter covers Mawson's return to Antarctica for a second season on *Discovery* to consolidate the Australian (British Empire) claims although Norway had already agreed not to claim any territory within the Australian area of interest. Both the Norwegian and Australian claims had an economic basis: Norwegian whalers wanted to avoid paying licence fees and royalties to hunt in British-claimed areas while Australia would have liked those revenues and also hoped for a mineral bonanza on the continent.

Territorial concerns continue to predominate in chapters 13 and 14. In November 1935 Lincoln Ellsworth flew from the northern end of the Antarctic Peninsula, across Marie Byrd Land to a point 25 km from Byrd's old Little America station, claiming the area 80°W–120°W for the United States. Byrd returned to Little America a few days after Ellsworth's departure. His expedition made further flights and ground surveys and Byrd himself spent a winter alone 160 km south of the station. The appointment of a US postmaster to issue

US stamps on mail franked at Little America alarmed the British and New Zealand governments who thought this might be used to establish sovereignty in the Ross Dependency. Meanwhile the British Graham Land Expedition (1934–7) showed that the Antarctic Peninsula was part of the Antarctic mainland and not an archipelago.

The business of claiming territory was exercising politicians, particularly in the United States and Australia, as the whaling fleets of Norway, Japan and Germany continued to harvest the Southern Ocean. Ellsworth and Wilkins were, in effect, being used as pawns by their governments to explore and claim territory but not to reveal their intentions to each other. Then it would be for government lawyers to use their reports to the best advantage. Promises were made and broken, and the book reveals this to have been a very cloak-and-dagger tale!

Chapters 15 and 16 deal with the Antarctic during the Second World War. Growing national posturing, particularly by Germany, over territorial claims in Antarctica, prompting President Roosevelt to propose a United States Antarctic Service expedition to claim large parts, if not all, of the continent. Byrd cancelled his planned private expedition to be leader of the governmental expedition. Its preparation, funding, aims and execution are presented as a fascinating tale of inter-departmental rivalries, secrecy and misleading of the national press. In the event, the expedition, with no formal scientific programme, achieved very little and certainly not the planned geographical exploration on which to base a major land grab. Events in Europe quickly gained priority for the American government.

The results of the US Antarctic Service expedition to East Base and West Base were published too little and too late to substantiate the proposed American claims. Meanwhile Argentina took advantage of Britain's pre-occupation with the Second World War to make claims in the South Shetland Islands and the Antarctic Peninsula. Britain was slow to respond but, in 1944, established small bases at Deception Island and Port Lockroy, each with a post office and a scientific programme, under the guise of monitoring enemy activity. The British 'expedition' was code-named 'Operation Tabarin'. All traces of the Argentine claims were removed or obliterated.

Once the war was over, as chapter 17 shows, Operation Tabarin became the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (FIDS) that continued to man its Antarctic bases and to establish more. FIDS was now a civilian operation although many of the personnel were ex-military. Argentina and Chile began taking steps to counter the British claims, and those of each other, over the Antarctic Peninsula region. The United States meanwhile launched 'Operation Highjump' to bolster US claims by overflying huge swathes of the continent and to provide cold-weather experience to counter the perceived threat of hostilities with the Soviet Union in the Arctic. Again, despite taking thousands of air photographs, the cartographers were unable to make meaningful maps because there was no ground control. Australia and New Zealand were also concerned that their claims would be jeopardized by the US activities. Australians were unable to land on the continent, although the government arranged to annex Heard and Macquarie islands, and still no New Zealander had visited the Ross Dependency.

In chapter 18 the author discusses the Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition (1947–8), which re-occupied Byrd's East Base on Stonington Island alongside FIDS Base E and, in joint ventures with the British, did extensive mapping by combining air photography and the all-important ground control. Australian, New Zealand and further US expeditions failed to materialize. The Soviet Union, not wishing to be left behind, began looking at Bellingshausen's expedition and considered claiming territory seen by him, largely within the Falkland Islands Dependencies. However, suggestions for international governance of the Antarctic were being made although there was fierce opposition in many quarters. Whaling was resumed but was theoretically controlled by the International Whaling Commission. Then, for several nations, the Korean War diverted attention from the Antarctic.

The following chapter turns to the early years of the Cold War. Tension was rising in the overlapping claims on the Antarctic Peninsula. In February 1952, RRS *John Biscoe* arrived at Hope Bay to rebuild Base D that had been burned to the ground and was met by a hail of bullets from the Argentine base Esperanza. The

British retreated but the Governor of the Falkland Islands returned with a detachment of Royal Marines aboard HMS *Burghhead Bay* to secure a landing. An apology was received from Juan Perón, President of Argentina, but the tension remained. Meanwhile, Britain was preparing maps with British names and was in communication with Norway, Australia, France and New Zealand, and with the Americans to reach agreement over names proposed by the Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition. The British government also supported Vivian Fuchs's proposed Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition (1955–8) as a means of consolidating the territorial claims of Britain and New Zealand. The International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957–8 was looming and would provide a scientific *raison d'être* for Antarctic exploration.

Chapter 20 begins with the death of Admiral Byrd on 11 March 1957, which closed a chapter in the United States' exploration of Antarctica. He went south for the last time in the 1955–6 season as the United States prepared for the IGY. Twelve nations took part in the IGY. Science was undoubtedly the foundation for the IGY but the claimant states were worried that occupation of foreign bases within their territories would undermine their claims. This was a particular concern for Australia (Soviet bases) and New Zealand (American bases). The Americans wanted access to the entire continent, as did the Soviets, and made efforts to advise the Soviets that, wherever they went, the United States had already been there. The international Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) was established in 1958 and proposed to coordinate mapping in Antarctica that Australia saw as potentially threatening its claim. The American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, was keen to keep the Soviets out of Antarctica.

Early in 1958, the US wanted to invite the 12 IGY nations to a conference on the Antarctic to develop a diplomatic solution. Innumerable meetings took place between all of these nations, many of them in secret between sympathetic nations, others also in secret to bring dissenters on board. The conference eventually began in Washington on 15 October 1959 but it took six weeks of debate until the text of the Antarctic Treaty was agreed on 1 December 1959.

The final chapter brings the story up to date. The entry into force of the Antarctic Treaty on 23 June 1961 placed the territorial claims of the adherent states in abeyance, with no activities being able to enhance or detract from those claims. Nevertheless, many Treaty Parties were concerned to ensure that their activities, especially mapping, naming features, operating post offices and issuing Antarctic stamps, would consolidate their claims should they ever be challenged. The more bizarre of these activities were the efforts by Argentina and Chile to ensure babies were born in their respective Antarctic territories. Environmentalists began to exert pressure on national governments and their Treaty delegations to protect the Antarctic from commercial exploitation, and this led to the abandonment of the Convention for the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resource Activities, and the development of the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources and the Protocol on Environmental Protection.

In his epilogue, the author briefly recalls pertinent topics and points out that new nations, environmental and scientific groups, tourism and resource companies with all their different interests and activities, mean that Antarctica's ownership will be difficult to resolve.

The principal theme of the book is the ownership of the Antarctic. It dwells on national politics and international diplomacy concerning territorial claims and the establishment of sovereignty. It provides a fascinating insight to the reasons why explorers went to Antarctica and the ways in which governments chose to interpret and use their explorations. As one might expect, governments were frequently somewhat economical with the truth while also quite prepared to embellish the truth to meet their requirements. The same can also be said of some of the explorers! Many of the famous, as well as the less well-known expeditions, are given little coverage and this is largely in relation to the territorial and sovereignty arguments. This is a deliberately chosen approach, and it works well, although readers seeking tales of expeditionary heroism should look elsewhere.

Perhaps the most interesting aspects of the book are where it deals with the internal activities of national governments as they sought to make the most capital from the material to hand. In this respect, the accounts of the United States, British and Australian governments' efforts to make and bolster their territorial claims

are the most extensive. The author has delved deep into archives to tease out the interdepartmental rivalries and portray the leading characters who were instrumental in developing Antarctic policy. Foremost among the latter must be the American Richard Byrd who was forever seeking personal glory and power. It would be interesting to learn more of the internal wrangling that must have taken place within Argentina, Chile and the Soviet Union.

Personally, I should have found a chronology very useful, listing the major events described in the book, particularly the various expeditions. This would have provided a ready reference as to who may have seen what and when in the later chapters, where the priorities of different claims are discussed.

By any yardstick the Antarctic Treaty has been very successful. Perhaps more than anything else it has kept the peace in Antarctica for more than 50 years. It has protected the Antarctic environment through the Environmental Protocol, and the Commission on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources has done much to conserve stocks of fish and krill. Any exploration and exploitation of mineral and hydrocarbon resources have been effectively postponed for at least another 35 years. The Treaty is not perfect but there is a general determination among the Treaty Parties to make it work. It has also provided blueprints for aspects of the Law of the Sea and the Outer Space Treaty. It would have been good to have read more of these successes in the book.

The 16 pages of plates show 31 black-and-white photographs. These pictures range from explorers' portraits to contemporary newspaper articles. Together they illustrate examples of most of the topics discussed in the text. Inevitably the historic photographs are monochromes but some modern colour photographs would have been good, particularly those showing the landscape of the Antarctic to give the reader a better idea of its always-spectacular appearance. Contrary to what many people may think (and this has been used as a book title), the Antarctic is not simply a 'white desert'. However, I suspect that the publishers had a strong opinion on this.

Many books about the Antarctic suffer from a paucity or a complete absence of maps. The endpapers of this book show two historical maps. The front endpaper is 'A New Map of the World', dated 1703, and marking the positions of the South Pole and the Antarctic Circle but absolutely nothing else. This was, of course, the state of knowledge at the time and made no concessions to the customary technique of allowing the cartographer's imagination to fill the blank spaces. The rear endpaper is a German map of the Antarctic region, c1910, which shows the state of knowledge at that time. This is obviously of historical interest and demonstrates graphically how little was known just 100 years ago. What is missing is a modern map of the Antarctic as it really is. Any reader unfamiliar with Antarctic geography will need a good reference map to hand, preferably on a large scale, to locate many, if not all, of the place-names mentioned in the text. This may not be the fault of the author as experience has shown that many publishers either do not recognize the importance of maps or consider that their inclusion is unnecessarily expensive. Either way, it is a serious lacuna for the book.

To write the history of an entire continent in a single volume is a bold undertaking, (reviewing the book has also been a considerable challenge!) even for Antarctica, with no indigenous population and unseen until less than 200 years ago. David Day has done remarkably well. The text is well-written, informative and very readable. At £25.00 the book is very good value and provides an excellent and concise introduction to the history of the Antarctic

NB. On page 123, in a quote describing Bruce's departure from the Antarctic, there is an unfortunate error in recording a 'bargee' rather than a burgee hanging from the mizzenmast. It conjures an image of an unfortunate junior seaman receiving the ultimate punishment! The quote, which is absolutely correct, is from Peter Speak's, *The Log of the Scotia Expedition, 1902-04*. I suspect that the error arose in transcribing the hand written logbook where a 'u' was possibly mistaken for an 'a'.

The author is happy to accept this review.

**Other reviews:**

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