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**Title**      *My White Infinity: Constructions of post-heroic Antarctica in a selection of first-hand narratives by women.*

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**Abstract:**

The 'Heroic Era' of Antarctic exploration is usually situated in the first quarter of the 20th century, or from around 1895 until the First World War. During this period the economic focus of exploration shifted to one of "geographic and scientific discovery", typically by "national land based exploring expeditions" (Ferguson 1995: 5).

For women, however, it could be argued that their 'Heroic Era' did not begin until the end of the 1940s, and continued into the 1970s. This is the era of female 'firsts': the first women to work in Antarctica, to visit the South Pole, to traverse the continent on foot, and to travel as tourists. Unlike the first 'Heroic Era', this one is characterised less by the physical challenges posed by the natural environment than by the man-made barriers of masculine and institutional resistance to women's presence.

Beginning with Jennie Darlington's 1957 account of her year on the Antarctic Peninsula with the Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition, and ending with the 2015 *The Antarctic Book of Cooking and Cleaning*, this review discusses the ways in which the selected narratives both unmake and remake the legacy of the Heroic Era as they represent Antarctica's changing human landscape, and the authors' presence within it.

## **Introduction**

Throughout the initial period of its exploration Antarctica was coded as an exclusively masculine environment – the ultimate ‘frontier society’. The idea of Antarctica as a masculine preserve permeated expedition environments and shaped the narratives written by explorers. Typically, Heroic Era narratives emphasise primacy, striving, national imperatives and male homosocial bonds, and the struggle to overcome difficulties and limits, whether imposed by the extreme environment or the explorers’ own bodies and the available technology.

Since they began to visit Antarctica in the 1940s (often against fierce opposition), woman travellers have contributed first-hand accounts of their experiences to the growing body of Antarctic literature.<sup>1</sup>

This review examines five personal narratives written in English by women who visited Antarctica in the roles of wives, scientists, expeditioners, and cooks. It focusses on the ways in which they appropriate, negotiate, contest, or reframe the tropes of Heroic Era narratives and, in doing so, construct post-Heroic ways of being and acting in Antarctica.

### **The post-Heroic explorer: Jennie Darlington’s “*My Antarctic Honeymoon: a year at the bottom of the world*”.**

Jennie Darlington and Edith (‘Jackie’) Ronne went to Antarctica in 1947-48 as part of the Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition (RARE). Originally, the women were only supposed to accompany their husbands as far as Valparaiso. When the Ronnes decided that Jackie would stay with the expedition, a mutiny broke out and some of the men threatened to leave. Eventually a compromise was reached by which the men agreed to remain if both women were included (Darlington 1957).

The paradoxical situation of being a woman in Antarctica is implied by the title of Darlington’s book with its incongruous pairing of ‘honeymoon’, the epitome of civilised values and heterosexual normality, with ‘Antarctica’, suggesting a bleak and exclusively masculine wilderness.<sup>2</sup> But if Darlington’s year in Antarctica derails a conventional romance narrative by taking it somewhere unforeseen, her location of a honeymoon in Antarctica also signals a departure from heroic era narratives.

At one point Darlington writes “Taking everything into consideration, I do not think women belong in the Antarctic” (1957: 205). Hansson (2009: 16) attributes Darlington’s willingness to accede the continent to men to the anti-feminist politics of the post-war period. Darlington’s statement should, however, be read against her claim that “if I had the chance I would do it all over again” (1957: 179). It is further qualified by her suggestion that no-one

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<sup>1</sup> For accounts of the institutional barriers that prevented women going to Antarctica, see for example, Chipman 1986, Braxton 1969, and Burns 2001. Braxton’s description of Antarctic’s ‘white infinity’ provides the title of this review.

<sup>2</sup> For convenience I refer to Darlington as the author of *My Antarctic Honeymoon*. The book, however, is ghostwritten (by Jane McIlvaine), complicating the notion of an authentic or singular voice.

has a claim to Antarctica, that “we were all interlopers searching in the silence for answers we did not have the humility or wisdom to assimilate”(1957: 92).

Darlington’s scepticism towards heroic ideals is suggested by her portrayal of the RARE expedition as fractious and fractured, poorly organised, and prone to avoidable errors. The expedition’s self-styled ‘heroes of science’ are depicted as mostly concerned with manufacturing illicit alcohol or perusing books containing “pictures of women”(1957: 155). Just as significantly, by locating Harry Darlington’s motives for going to Antarctica in his reluctance to return to a civilian and domestic life for which he is poorly equipped by his wartime experiences, Darlington identifies heroism with escapism.

Darlington’s critique of heroic ideals includes Antarctica role as arena for “nationalist energies” (Pyne 1986: 87). When the RARE expedition arrives at Stonington Island, a British expedition is already in residence. The ensuing dispute over territory is symbolised by the struggle for exclusive possession of the American-built privy left behind by the Byrd expedition. By portraying “the only plumbing on the Antarctic continent” (1957: 88) as Stonington Island’s most desirable possession, Darlington mocks the value of making territorial claims in a post-war world, and in a place as inhospitable to human presence as Antarctica.

But where Darlington’s account most departs from previous Antarctic narratives is in her awarding of central place to the female rather than male body. This focus is apparent from Darlington’s first step onto the ice, where she lands awkwardly and is assaulted by “waves of self-doubt and insecurity” (1957: 27). Her response is “to try harder than I had ever tried before in my life” (1957: 118). Struggling under the unaccustomed weight of her duffel bag, she represses any appearance of weakness: “I was in a man’s world, where I was expected to carry my own duffel bag and follow in my husband’s footsteps”(1957: 27).

The human body – variously striving, suffering, surviving or succumbing – is also at the centre of Heroic Era narrative, a consequence of the extremity of the Antarctic environment, which makes human survival problematic.<sup>3</sup> By placing her differently gendered body at the centre of her narrative, Darlington identifies the chief challenges she faces not only as an unforgiving natural environment or her inferior physical strength, but as a harsh and inflexible masculine judgement.

As a result, Darlington’s attempts to manage her body extend beyond attempts to conceal physical weakness to repressing any expressions of femininity: “My job was to be as inconspicuous within the group as possible. . . all feminine instincts should be sublimated”. The rationale for this attempt to make her sex a source of indifference is the double standard she notes: “as women, we bore the major responsibility for the men’s conduct towards us” (1957: 177).

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Scott’s account of his return from the South Pole (Scott 1964), Mawson’s of his 1912 sledging journey inland from Commonwealth Bay (Mawson 2000), or Cherry-Garrard’s of the 1911 Winter Journey to Cape Crozier (Cherry-Garrard 1994).

The inherently disruptive effects of a woman's presence in Antarctica is suggested by Darlington's description of her first encounter with one of the British expedition, just returned from a sledging journey on the plateau. Mistaking her for a mirage, he attempts to dispell the illusion by handing her a snow shovel. When Darlington steps forward and takes it, he flees in terror (1957: 131). Darlington's narrating of the incident exploits its humour, but the extreme nature of the man's response also implies that the physical presence of a woman in Antarctica can cause a man to temporarily lose his reason.

Darlington's internalisation of the view of her body as uncontrollable and disruptive is evident in the episode in which she tells her husband she is pregnant: "I'm having a baby. I've upset the programme. I'm sorry" (1957: 229). In the event, Harry's response is not anger but "wonder" (1957: 230). As the Darlingtons leave the base to return to the United States, Harry opens the door for her with the words "After you" (1957: 256). The narrative ends with Jennie's achievement of priority, as her husband – presumably cured of his heroic impulses – prepares to follow her back into civilised domesticity.

### **Heroism at the South Pole: "Ice Bound" and "Four to the Pole"**

In 1999 Jerri Nielsen went to the US Scott-Amundsen Station at the South Pole as the station's physician. Her 2001 memoir *Ice Bound: One woman's incredible battle for survival at the South Pole* recounts her experiences in the isolated environment after discovering she has breast cancer.<sup>4</sup> Anne Bancroft and Nancy Loewen and Ann Bancroft's *Four to the Pole*, published in the same year, recounts the attempt by the four members of the Antarctic Women's Expedition (AWE) to push their bodies beyond accustomed limits to fulfill their goal of being the first women to travel to the South Pole on ski and pulling sledges – a re-enactment of the tradition of 'manhauling' made famous by the British expeditions of Shackleton and Scott.

Nielsen travels to the Pole to escape the aftermath of a traumatic marriage and her unsatisfying job as an ER surgeon in a corporatised medical environment. After initial difficulties coping with the environment of the station and her workload, she finds it "the most perfect home I have ever known" (2001: xx).

Nielsen discovers her breast lump shortly after the station closes for winter. Assisted by colleagues, an airdrop of medical supplies, and a videoconference link with specialists in the USA, she self-administers chemotherapy until she can be evacuated from the station.

What Nielsen seeks and discovers at the Pole is a frontier community, a "small colony holding on to the traditions of a faraway homeland" (2001: 168) similar, perhaps, to that envisaged by Richard Byrd when he named his 1929 expedition base 'Little America'. Likening herself to "a frontier medicine woman, setting up my practice on a vast ice prairie" (2001: 55), Nielsen accepts improvisation and making-do as a feature of "life on the frontier . . . we expected shortages and problems" (2001: 83). In return, frontier living

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<sup>4</sup> Like *My Antarctic Honeymoon*, *Ice Bound* is ghostwritten (by Maryanne Vollars, perhaps best known for ghosting an autobiography of Hillary Clinton).

simplifies life and reinvigorates members of the 'tribe' with a sense of value, trust, and purpose.

Despite the highly technologically mediated character of life at the South Pole and the scientific research that is the rationale for the base, Nielsen portrays the human environment in terms that are primitive and nativist. Life at the Pole revives "innate talents for survival and communication that are dormant in technical society", and which she attributes to the "tribal past" (2001: 166). Their isolation enables 'Polies' to develop their distinctive customs, rituals and even dialect (169). The results are healing and transformative: "surrounded by friends, in a community that needed me, in a place that I loved, [I was] discovering more every day about what truly mattered in life"(2001: 138).

As Nielsen is forced to fight for her survival, the narrative revives Heroic Era tropes. Nielsen's predicament foregrounds the life-threatening rather than utopic implications of Antarctica's isolation, while the side-effects of her chemotherapy recall the physical and psychological struggles of Heroic Era explorers.<sup>5</sup> They include a sense of emotional isolation (2001: 275), fatalism, fatigue ('like. . . walking through neck-deep Jell-O' (2001: 302)), painful physical symptoms, and chemically-induced mood swings that diminish her ability to distinguish the real from the imaginary.

Waiting for winter to end so she can be extracted from the station, Nielson relates her predicament to that of Shackleton during the *Endurance* expedition, "clinging to hope and waiting for rescue" (2001: 335). Comparison with the great Heroic Era survivor brings consolation: "Shackleton's courage, dispensed so long ago, reached across the years and piloted me through another night" (2001: 336).

In contrast to *Ice Bound*, *Four to the Pole* narrates a deliberate rather than accidental recreation of Heroic Era experience. Of the narratives discussed, it puts the highest value on the heroic attributes of primacy, physical striving and endurance, and is the most conscientious in its attempt to recreate the experience of early land-based exploring parties.

Exact duplication is not feasible, and while the women limit their transport on the ice to skis and sleds, they benefit from contemporary knowledge with regard to nutrition, physiology, and equipment. They also know that rescue is possible. Just as significantly, the AWE's primary goal of "focu(sing) attention on the achievements of women"(2001: 8) substitutes gender for the nationalist-inspired imperatives of geographic and scientific discovery that gave a transcendental purpose to the "terrible journeys" of the Heroic Era (Blackadder 2015: 169).

Where Heroic Era expeditions sought to expand the public's imaginative grasp on the continent through lectures, books, moving pictures, cigarette cards and other advertising,<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, accounts such as Frederick Cook's of the 1897-99 Belgian Antarctic Expedition (the first to winter in the Antarctic ice), which provide harrowing descriptions of the crew's physical and psychological disintegration in the Antarctic winter, partly due to the effects of malnutrition. (Cook 1900).

<sup>6</sup> The inclusion of photographers such as Ponting and Hurley in expeditions was partly motivated by the valuable contribution their visual records made to fundraising, publicising expeditions, and communicating achievements (usually by way of post-expedition lecture tours). For the role of advertising see, for example,

the AWE makes use of email and recorded telephone calls so that schoolchildren in North America can follow the groups's progress. "Each day the women pulled their sleds a little closer to the South Pole, kids. . . were learning more about the earth's mysterious seventh continent" (2001:38). In a further updating of Heroic Era values, this includes "aware[ness] of the environmental issues facing Antarctica", and the vague but inclusive aim of "encourag[ing] people of all ages to take on new challenges"(2001: 8).

While the all-woman team may appear as a female mirroring of the male homosocial groups of Heroic Era expeditions, *Four to the Pole* proposes gender as the source of a critical difference. The women record themselves crying and this is noted as a positive, "a way to relieve loneliness and stress"(2001: 32). Similarly, the collaborative and mutually supportive ideals of the expedition are emphasised: "when one woman was weak, another was strong – and so the group forged ahead, hour by hour, striving to find a balance between the needs of all the members" (2001: 30). This collaborative ideal receives formal expression in the narrative, which is structured as a selection of extracts from each woman's diary, linked by Loewen's commentary.

*Four to the Pole* suggests the limiting effect of perceptions of gender on the expedition's ability to achieve its goals. Loewen and Bancroft speculate that the reason businesses are reluctant to sponsor the AWE is fear that the women may fail, need to be rescued, or die, creating "a negative image of the sponsoring company"(2001: 9). Bancroft is forced to abandon her plan to extend the trek into a full traverse because of her fear of getting into more debt if she needs rescue. Watching the well-funded expedition of Ranulph Fiennes and Mike Stroud depart from the South Pole to complete the traverse, Bancroft is left with "feelings of disappointment and longing" (2001:71). This, too, may be in keeping with Heroic Era values: as Francis Spufford (1996) notes, failure is as much a feature of Heroic Era narratives as achievement.

### ***Antarctic Housekeeping***

In her study of Antarctic fiction, Elizabeth Leane argues that increased access to Antarctica since the 1970s has resulted in a shift of narrative emphasis away from the "drama and danger of physical endeavour" to "everyday experience" (2012: 134). 'Antarctic realism' involves narratives that emphasise inside knowledge, details of daily routine, and the "minutiae of specifically Antarctic challenges surrounding transportation, food, clothes and toileting" (2012: 135). While Leane's comments are made in the context of fiction, they also apply to the non-fiction accounts of Antarctic housekeeping discussed here: Alexa Thomson's 2003 memoir *Antarctica on a Plate*, and Wendy Trusler and Carol Devine's 2015 *The Antarctic Book of Cooking and Cleaning: A Polar Journey*.

Thomson and Trusler both travelled to Antarctica as cooks, Thomson for a private company based in Dronning Maud Land that operated an air service, and Trusler for an environmental clean-up operation on the Antarctic Peninsula (Wendy Devine, co-author of *The Antarctic Book of Cooking and Cleaning*, was the originator of the venture).

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Ponting's photograph of Hooper, a member of the Terra Nova expedition, seated on a crate and eating from a can of Heinz baked beans (Herbert and Lewis-Jones 2011: 77).

Thomson locates her earliest awareness of Antarctic in a childhood visit to the British Museum's reading room. Leaning over the case where Scott's diary was exhibited she recalls reading "the faint words scratched onto it: *For God's sake look after our people*" (2003: 5).

Thomson's role as an Antarctic cook will involve 'looking after' the culinary needs of clients and colleagues. But while she recounts her struggles with faulty stoves or going to the toilet during a blizzard, the 'heroic' is generally used for contrast. "I wonder what Scott and his doomed party would have made of our embarrassing riches", she muses. "All this food seems strangely obscene from an historical perspective" (2003: 197).

Thomson, who at the beginning of the narrative lives in Sydney and has a corporate job, conforms to Leane's description of "the citified Antarctic female sojourner" (Leanne 2012: 147). Like the typical chick-lit heroine, she is white, heterosexual, unmarried, and more at home in an urban environment than on the ice. But *Antarctica on a Plate* reproduces another narrative trope identified by Leane: the depiction of Antarctica as transformative. Leane (2012) ascribes this to the generally short-term nature of Antarctic residence, which lends itself to narratives that emphasise moments of transformation or self-realisation. As Thompson writes, "Over these past months I sensed a different me emerge. . . I'd begun to appreciate and relish this person. I don't want to lose her" (Thomson 2003: 376). When her contract finishes Thomson, who has begun a relationship with a co-worker, does not return to her old life, but moves to San Francisco to become a writer.

Cooking and transformation also feature in *The Antarctic Book of Cooking and Cleaning* (TABCC), but by linking 'housekeeping' to a larger ecological narrative, Trusler and Devine's book connects this most traditional of female occupations to contemporary global issues.

The potential for the critical eye of the housekeeper to lend itself to ecological concerns is evident from the earliest accounts by women of their visits to Antarctica. Pamela Young, the first New Zealand woman to work in Antarctica, described her critical response to the first sight of the hut that would become her kitchen: "it was all very neat, but of course needed a few feminine touches – such as a complete rearrangement of the shelves and a thorough spring clean" (1971: 52). But Young also drew attention to the least noble legacy of the post-IGY expansion of human presence in Antarctica. "The bases are surrounded by vast middens, more reminiscent of the Middle Ages than of the twentieth century", and she described "the contrast between the virgin ice and snow . . . and the squalor of the rubbish piles" as "traumatic" (1971: 159). Like Young or the fictional female expeditioners in Ursula Le Guin's counterfactual narrative *Sur*, Darlington also recorded her appalled response to the rubbish surrounding the base at Stonington Island: "Piles of debris were everywhere, tangible intrusions, sinful, man-made violations of that virgin wilderness" (Darlington 1957: 118).

This connection between housekeeping and environmentalism is the focus of TABCC. The book commemorates a 1998 environmental clean-up project on the Antarctic Peninsula. Comprising diary extracts, recipes, lists, letters, and contemporary and historic photographs, it is a tribute to "small gestures", written in the belief that "wisdom is to be gleaned from sound housekeeping practices" (2015: 265).

The project involved taking tourists to Antarctica by ship where they spent four to five days picking up rubbish at Bellingshausen station. A condition imposed by the station was that the project supply its own cook. That cook was Wendy Trusler, and the largest portion of TABCC is taken up with extracts from the diary she kept during the project. Like Thomson, Trusler recounts the challenges of cooking “in a makeshift kitchen. . . at the bottom of the world” (2015:7), while Devine comments that “Antarctica transformed me. I became braver and certain I wanted to work on global justice” (2015: 197).

But as Devine’s comment implies, the project’s ecological focus enlarges the theme of ‘taking care’ to encompass global politics and environmental stewardship. The authors note that the Antarctic Peninsula and surrounding oceans are warming faster than anywhere else in the world. They have no illusions about Antarctica being ‘pristine’, and they comment that “the military-industrial complex lurks around every corner” (2015: 15).

Yet if the goal of erasing the ‘footprint’ of Antarctica’s human occupation suggests a critical attitude to Antarctica’s human past, Trusler and Devine are not immune to the appeal of the continent’s human history. The authors themselves point out that the book is modelled on Heroic Era collections of documents, with their inclusion of provision lists, menu plans, journals and letters (2015: 7). In a further assertion of continuity, Trusler and Devine juxtapose photographs and diary entries from early expeditions with their own. Rather than rejecting Antarctica’s human history, TABCC reframes it to emphasise its non-heroic features: cooking and eating; moments of work and enjoyment that suggest accommodation to an unusual environment rather than its conquest.

### ***Conclusion***

In her 1971 memoir Pamela Young explicitly relates the policy shift that enabled her to go Antarctica to the perception that the Heroic Era was in the past. “There was a general feeling. . . that since the exploration period was over it would be appropriate to normalise things in Antarctica” (1971: 15).

Spanning a period of approximately fifty years, the five narratives discussed reflect this process of increasing ‘normalisation’ as a result of Antarctica’s increased integration into global networks of work and travel.

Life in Antarctica, however, is never entirely ‘normal’. Perhaps this is one reason why Antarctic’s heroic past remains a reference point for most of these authors, whether as contrast or inspiration, an object of critique or of reframing. Antarctica, after all, is noted for being an environment where the past – whether in the form of the records of past climates or human traces – remains, preserved from normal processes of decay.

The most significant shift suggested by these narratives may be the way in which Antarctica itself is both conceptualised and valued. Heroic Era narratives tended to portray Antarctica as sublime antagonist, indifferent to human presence. It would probably have been difficult for their authors to imagine the scale of the impact that humans could have on the

continent, or that the Antarctic environment would ever be viewed as possessing a fragility that would inspire feelings of protectiveness.

For Darlington, Antarctica is still inhospitable and treacherous, an arena in which mostly male actors pit themselves against a threatening terrain. At the other end of the historical period represented by these texts, TABCC suggests that the post-Heroic is increasingly characterised by environmental imperatives.

Bellinghousen station hosted the environmental clean-up project because it was under pressure to comply with the 1998 Environmental Protocol on Antarctica. By situating the clean-up within the geopolitical context of the Protocol, TABCC suggests that the latter may, as did the IGY and Antarctic Treaty, signal a new epoch in terms of both how humans act in Antarctica and the values they attach to it.

Both the Protocol and TABCC assume that Antarctica, while it may still inspire feelings of the sublime, is also vulnerable to environmental threats from climate change, ocean acidification and exploitation of its marine resources. As Elena Glasberg has observed, “Antarctica is not only cold, but melting” (2012: xii). Leaving aside the issue of the potential heroics of pitting “small gestures” against the “military-industrial complex” and fossil fuel industries, Antarctica’s role in the global climate system makes it more difficult to view the continent as isolated exception. Or as Trusler and Devine note via their revisioning of an Antarctic proverb, “What happens in Antarctica doesn’t stay in Antarctica and vice versa” (2015: 11).

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