

**PCAS 20 (2017/2018)**

**Critical Literature Review  
(ANTA602)**

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***Antarctica – the Woman and the Quest for a Polar Career***

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Word count: 2920 (excluding abstract and references)

**Abstract:**

The perceptions of female identity and the characteristics to what is deemed feminine can vary from culture to culture. The naming of vehicles and machinery with feminine sounding names is evident across western cultures from America, Europe and Australia. The base stations on Antarctica are no exception and pictured evidence by Anne Noble suggest the “gendered nature of our relationship to the place” (Wells 2011). In the exhibition ‘The End of the Earth’ Wells (2011) brings to our attention the photographs that Noble took in Antarctica in 2008, of inanimate objects such as trucks and other vehicles that were branded with feminine sounding names like “Kimberley, Reba, Trixie and Patsy”. Is this observation a reflection of the relationship that people have with Antarctica – the woman? Are women working in Antarctic programs given the acknowledgement and recognition that is deserved of their Polar Careers and if so, are women rewarded in the same light and traditions as men? Although not a heavily gendered discussion, the following review seeks out the extent to which women are rewarded for their success in Antarctica after years of exclusion from the continent.

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## Introduction

This review intends to make a broad assessment of the legacy of women in Antarctica and the methods by which merit is awarded in acknowledgement of their continued presence and success. Primarily, the history of women in Antarctica is mapped out to give context and to highlight the pathways that women forged in times when they did not qualify for Antarctic expeditions for reasons based on their gender. It is not the intention of this critical review to highlight the gender gap of men and women in Antarctica as discussed in other works. The issue of gender is raised only to acknowledge the role that gender discrimination played in the progression of women in Antarctic polar careers. As pointed out in the Polar Journal by Seag (2017), even with previous works by academia, *“...considerable gaps persist in our understanding of how female bodies were absented from Antarctica despite relative progress for women in their home countries, as well as the factors that contributed to an increase in women’s presence over time. A broad temporal view of gendered change is crucial to a holistic understanding.”*

Secondly, it is intended to throw a spotlight on the point in time when women working in the Antarctic begin to get awarded for their achievements in the same light and traditions as men. The presence of women in Antarctica both visually and culturally is addressed, as are the methods by which the achievements and success of women in the Antarctic and polar regions are rewarded. Acknowledgment is given to the efforts made by the historians and researchers of today who have made an extra effort to fill in the gaps left in the historical records of women in Antarctica. The discussion gives a supportive nod towards further Antarctic outreach initiatives using the many different mediums of technology currently possible to engage the public.

Finally, the review attempts conclude with the progress that the Antarctic community has made in support of women pursuing Antarctic careers, however hindered or slow the progress is perceived.

## Antarctica – man’s conquest of the woman

Antarctica was devoid of women actively taking part in ambitious conquering expeditions and they are mostly excluded from the narratives of historic Antarctic expeditions. However, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Antarctica, the continent itself was deemed in many narratives ‘the woman’ who needed conquering and in the 1900’s Antarctica is referred in personal accounts and expedition diaries as a more “aloof, virginal woman to be won through chivalrous deeds” (Leane 2009). The expressions of Antarctica as a woman to “conquer” or to “win” are not unlike the reflections of Dodds (2009) where after the war of 1945 men saw Antarctica as a “testing ground for manly character”. These narratives and records of Antarctic expeditions may be the origins of the ideals of Antarctica as a ‘boys club’.

## Forbidden to enter

Polar archives hold records of correspondence between “three sporty girls” and Ernest Shackleton, where in the letters the women are applying for places on the Endurance Expedition (Pegrine 1914). The same archives also have a record of the letter where Shackleton replied “...there are no vacancies for the opposite sex on the expedition”. Even though the women in the letter may very well have qualified for the expedition, a thought in that regard is not even considered simply for reasons of

gender. It seems that such refusals were not a once off occurrence as academics and historians have taken note of the many obstacles put before women who earnestly continued to apply for polar expedition work in the Antarctic.

In a book discussing the music, sounds and cultural connections of Antarctica (Hince, Summerson et al. 2015) the author explains that in the 1920's women could not actively participate in Antarctic expeditions save for women such as the wife of a ship's captain who could embark on expeditions in the role of 'companion' or as a 'domestic worker'. Further gender inequalities toward women are detailed in accounts of Mawson's British, Australian and New Zealand expedition of 1929 where 25 girls applied and were refused and again in 1937 where the greater number of 1300 women applied to join the British Antarctic expedition and yet again none of the 1300 women were accepted.

The selection process for opportunities to remote Antarctic positions offered by the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) was of a 'men only' design. Applications from women were refused acknowledgement out-right. As described by Seag (2017), the International Geophysical Year of 1957-1958 made way for the establishment of BAS in 1958 and for NASA in 1961. The closed-door policies for women seeking positions of remote locations continued until the anti-discrimination legislation laws of the 1970's. It was in this era that both BAS and NASA came under pressure to undertake a more equal opportunity stance that led to greater institutional change. Where NASA embraced the change and the race of "firsts" to send women into otherwise male dominated positions, BAS continued to completely block women from almost three-quarters of their field positions. During an interview with Janet Thomson (Jones 2012), who was a scientist with BAS in the 1960's and 1970's, Thomson recalled how one female colleague received a reply to an expedition application that read "Women wouldn't like it in Antarctica as there are no shops and no hairdresser". Thomson, over a span of 18 years, persisted in showing her interest in joining Antarctic expeditions and throughout that time Thomson was continuously told that "we do not have the facilities for women".

In a memoir written by a doctor of an experience spending one year on a British Antarctic survey base the writer finds it necessary, for the sake of context, to remark on previous studies made on the qualities of a good Antarctic winterer. And again, the subject of gender and the barriers placed in front of women is part of the discussion (Francis 2012). The author based the discussion around a study on the levels of anxiety of men and women aboard two expeditionary ships (Mocellin 1995). The study found that women can cope better with the Antarctic environment than men and at the same time, women were not as likely selected for expeditions even though they were just as qualified.

### Women make the selection

Indeed, as addressed in an article by the telegraph newspaper (Jones 2012), BAS continued the ban of women on Antarctic expeditions until Janet Thomson, a scientist working for BAS in the 1960's and 1970's. Thomson was eventually allowed on a research ship in 1983 becoming the first female BAS

scientist to work inside the Antarctic circle. Soon after in 1986 women from BAS were permitted to work on a small station, Signy, for the summer season only. Eventually in 1993 the first women spent the winter season at the station and in 1993 the first woman over-wintered at the British research base, Rothera. It was 2013 before the first woman, Jane Francis was elected Director of BAS. Now in 2017, Dr. Jess Walkup is the Base Leader at Rothera and has spent three winters on the continent (Halton 2017). In Walkup's experience, it seems that women are still less likely to over-winter and that the reason for this is linked to the fact that there are less women coming from and applying to the roles needed to support the base, such as mechanics, plumbers and engineers needed to run the base in harsh conditions. The percentage of women on the base is as a result still low, normally ranging from 10% to 25% (Halton 2017). With this analogy it seems that the counts of women in Antarctica is in direct reflection of the global underrepresentation of women in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) (Catalyst 2016). Is this an opportunity for Antarctic communities to lead the way for the rest of the world? Is it possible to evoke a greater sense of community support for women to advance in their polar careers in Antarctica, therein attracting greater numbers of women into the space?

Given a brief overview of how gender perceptions hindered women in their quest for Antarctic expedition work in the past, the question arises, has the Antarctic community since made enough progress in this regard? Is gender still a hindering issue for women that want to avail of an opportunity to work in any capacity across the Antarctic Community?

### **Antarctica – a conquest for the woman**

Many women not only take part in but lead Antarctic expeditions and there are more women who have achieved great success through Antarctic research work (Blackadder 2013). The progress and success of women in Antarctica has increased since the 1960's but to what extent are women in Antarctica acknowledged for their achievements? In what form is the presence of women in the Antarctic celebrated and are the female role models brought to the fore in support of the future generations of scientific researchers, technicians and engineers working in Antarctica? The following sections highlight the various methods by which recognition is given to women in Antarctica.

#### **Place names, a quest for comfort and culture**

Previously, place naming in honour of certain women was nothing unusual among historic expeditioners. Besides honouring female sovereigns or expedition patrons, were their actions an attempt to give some consideration towards the 'excluded gender' during their exploits? Or was it simply that naming new places after women was just an effort to bring a certain amount of familiarity and comfort to the men exploring new land? Regardless, the naming and renaming of places in Antarctica seemed as frequent and as haphazard as the expeditionary naming parties. A similar view is discussed by Balch (1912) who states, "...confusion about names sometimes arises owing to different explorers having given different names to the same place".

Even though women were barred from Antarctic expeditions and prevented from carrying out their work in Antarctica until the 1960's and 1970's, they were "nevertheless invoked in terms of place

naming and territorial conquest and later even encouraged to have babies in Antarctica” (Dodds 2009). Only up until recently, in the 1940’s, are Antarctic places given names in acknowledgment of pioneering women actually working in Antarctic programs (Devine 2015).

Carol Devine, a humanitarian, social scientist and a member of the Society of Women Geographers, has so far recorded over 200 places named after women in Antarctica (Devine 2017). Documented by the work of Devine (2015), the Queen Maud Mountains were named after the Norwegian monarch by Roald Amundsen who was the first explorer to reach the South Pole in 1912. In 1909, Marguerite Bay was named after the wife of explorer Jean Baptiste Charcot, leader of the French Antarctic Expedition. In 1948 ‘land’ was also named after the first woman to work in Antarctica in the 1950’s, an American Edit Ronne, who was the official expedition recorder of the party in 1947 – 1948. The ‘land’ was renamed in 1968 as the ‘Ronne Ice Shelf’ (Devine 2017).

### **Machinery & Laboratories, a quest for visual representation**

The perceptions of female identity and the characteristics to what is deemed feminine can vary from culture to culture. An unusual but entertaining topic, depending on the readers point of view, is the naming of machinery using feminine sounding names in Antarctica. The base stations on Antarctica are no exception and pictured evidence by Anne Noble suggest the “gendered nature of our relationship to the place” (Wells 2011). In the exhibition ‘The End of the Earth’ Wells (2011) brings to our attention the photographs that Noble took in 2008 of inanimate objects, such as trucks and other vehicles, that were branded with feminine sounding names such as “Kimberley, Reba, Trixie and Patsy”. Whether the human relationship with the vehicles is still the case in 2017 and if the naming of the vehicles is in honour of family members, friends and work colleagues or just resulting out of the human need for companionship, is open to discussion. Similarities between perceptions of female identity and cars are explained in parallel discourse through works by ceramist Margaret Dodds. In Dodds exhibition, sculptures of Holden cars are on display and some dressed in feminine attire to express, in particular to Australia, the cultural association of cars with female identities (Charlton 2017).

In more recent times, Antarctica New Zealand honoured all women who have worked on Scott Base by dedicating three laboratories at the newly refurbished Hilary Field Centre to three pioneering Antarctic women; Pamela Young, the first kiwi woman to work in Antarctica in 1986, Thelma Rogers, the first female technician to spend a winter on Scott Base and Margaret Bradshaw, a Polar Medallist and the first woman to lead a field party deep into the interior of Antarctica (Barraclough 2017).

### **Online Biographies, a quest for female role models**

Even though women have since gained entry and have achieved success in Antarctica and the greater Antarctic community, the struggle for female representation in Antarctic programs seems to remain (Blackadder 2013). In response to this, in 2016, the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) held an online event, consisting of a wikibomb in acknowledgement of the fact that 55% of the members of the Association of Polar Early Career Scientists (APECS) are female (SCAR 2016). The event encouraged the creation, editing and updating of records dedicated to the women leading and involved in Antarctic research. Over 100 Wikipedia biographies of women were launched as a result,

*“...it is time to promote and celebrate the achievements of female Antarctic scientists within the SCAR community in order to increase the visibility of these leading and influential role models for our younger female researchers and to stimulate girls around the world to pursue science careers.”(SCAR 2016)*

A growing Wikipedia list of Antarctic Women now exists online and includes the many roles of explorers, researchers, educators, administrators and adventurous in support of the endeavour to include women in Antarctic history.

### Honorary Medals, a quest for awards in leading scientific research

In the global scheme of things women are underrepresented in leadership roles in the STEM workforce (Catalyst 2016). However, this cannot take away from the fact that women are achieving success and obtaining leadership roles in Antarctic research. Specifically, both the Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research and the British Antarctic Institute (BAS) are directed by a woman (SCAR 2016).

Eventually, women began to receive the same honorary medals and awards as men for their research achievements in the polar regions (Riffenburgh 2007); Elanor Honeywell was the first woman awarded the Fuchs Medal from BAS in 1975, Virginia Fiennes was the first woman to receive a Polar Medal in 1986 and Denise Allen was the first woman to receive the Australian Antarctic Medal in 1989. Since the female firsts of honorary medals and awards, women continue to receive the acknowledgements even though they are not received as frequently by women as men. An Australian Scientist, Sally Poncet, received the Fuchs medal in 2010 for her wildlife and vegetation mapping for conservation management in the Antarctic, (SGNL 2010). Margaret Bradshaw, a British born New Zealander, was the second woman to receive the Polar medal in 1993 and was the first woman to lead an Antarctic deep interior party in 1979 on an expedition to the Ohio Range (Mills 2003). Most recently Myrtle Simpson, Nicknamed ‘the mother of skiing’, was awarded the Polar Medal in 2017 in recognition of her arctic achievements (BBC 2017). Barbara Wienecke who holds prestige as an exceptional sea-bird ecologist, was a recipient of the Australian Polar Medal in 2013(.gov.au 2013).

Overall, women are acknowledged by the Antarctic community for their achievements, however tardy it may seem. Regarding the records of women in Antarctica and their achievements, in more recent years there is a renewed feeling of momentum. Antarctic historians and researchers have driven the cause and have strived to update databases and create new content, filling gaps in history where the women of Antarctica have played a leading role.

### Conclusion – a continued quest for the future

The generation of a database mapping the places named after women in Antarctica is already underway (Devine 2015). Creation of additional visual aids recording the presence of women in Antarctica would help to reach a larger and more diverse target audience, bridging that gap in communication between scientific research and the public. Ultimately, such activities would support and help to highlight the endeavours of women in Antarctica to date.

Given the success that renewed research initiatives have had on filling the gaps in historical records of women in Antarctic and the combination of modern technology used to share the knowledge of Antarctic researchers and historians, further discussion regarding Antarctic outreach and the use of current technology is a worthy cause.

It seems that the 20<sup>th</sup> century culture of Antarctica has left a mark on the future generations of the community, slowing down the progress of women in their polar careers. The review does not purposefully highlight this observation, but it could be an opportunity to examine the traditional mechanisms for awarding Antarctic achievements, particularly the mechanisms governing the award of the Queens Polar Medal, the Fuchs Medal and the Australian Polar Medal. Is gender discrimination still an issue or a relic of past behaviours?

The renaming of laboratories on Scott Base has rushed a flurry of excitement and commendation through the Antarctic communities both on and off the continent. Such simple, uncomplicated gestures of acknowledge might have the greatest impact and all Antarctic organisations could do well to follow suit.

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