

Learning about New Zealand in Antarctica

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Antarctica provides an interesting context to connect with aspects of the essential learning about New Zealand, as identified in the social studies national curriculum. (Ministry of Education, 1999, p23) New Zealand has a long history of contact and political interest in Antarctica. In this remote setting, New Zealand plays an important custodial role and participates on the international stage as one of the signatories to the Antarctica treaty system. Every year a number of New Zealanders go to Antarctica as part of science teams, in administrative and support roles at Antarctic bases, as participants in education, media and artists programmes, as eco-tourists, and in search of adventure. Scott Base is a small, and by no means typical, extension of New Zealand. However, here you will find representations of New Zealand's national identity and heritage on the Ice.

This paper draws on literature, interviews conducted with people at Scott Base in October 2002, and the author's personal experience in Antarctica

Essential Learning About New Zealand

The following is a discussion of aspects of essential learning about New Zealand that can be addressed within the context of Antarctic studies. A number of social studies issues and concepts can be investigated– heritage, identity, perspectives, resource management, rights and responsibilities, amongst others. The discussion draws on issues and examples that are pertinent at the secondary level of schooling, but with adjustment some of these may be relevant for younger students.

People in New Zealand's history

- Edmund Hillary
- Frank Worsley
- Ernest Shackleton
- Robert Scott

Figures from the heroic era of exploration in Antarctica and more recent times form part of New Zealand's romantic past. The British explorers Robert Scott and Ernest Shackleton both used Lyttleton as the stepping off point for expeditions to Antarctica in the early twentieth century. The memories and records of these explorers' deeds are maintained in the artefacts housed in New Zealand museums, especially those in Christchurch and Lyttleton, and national photographic collections. These explorers from the heroic age form part of the heritage of New Zealand. The New Zealand Antarctic Heritage Trust maintains their expedition huts on Ross Island. These are Scott's Discovery hut at Hut Point and Terra Nova hut at Cape Evans, and Shackleton's hut at Cape Royds. The expeditions of these men took place under the British flag, but their deeds are also irrevocably linked to New Zealand's history.

Frank Worsley was captain and navigator on Shackleton's famous 1916 sea crossing from Elephant Island to South Georgia, in a lifeboat called the *James Caird*. He was born in Akaroa and spent part of his younger years in Christchurch, but left New Zealand for a life of seamanship and adventure abroad. He epitomises practical ability, rugged individualism and gritty self-reliance.

I would like to say a word about Worsley's feat of navigation in the *James Caird*. It was he who got them to South Georgia, not Shackleton. He was using dead reckoning, a method of establishing one's position using the direction and distance travelled rather than astronomical observation. This system involves taking the sun's position, but on the boat journey the sun made a brief appearance once or twice a week. Dead reckoning, writes Worsley, became "a merry jest of guesswork". In addition, the map he had of South Georgia was incomplete and inaccurate. His achievement is almost without equal in the long history of seamanship. (Sara Wheeler, in the Introduction to *Shackleton's Boat Journey*, pp22-23)

Edmund Hillary drove the first tractor to the South Pole, beating Vivian Fuchs whose 1957-58 British Trans Antarctic Expedition Hillary was supporting. Depending on your perspective, this could be seen as an example of New Zealand 'can do' attitude, opportunism and heroic achievement. Conversely it could be viewed as an inappropriate act of individualism and upstaging of others. He and Worsley share attributes of kiwi ingenuity, practical skills and physical toughness.

These men have established places in the annals of polar exploration. Women don't feature in these memories, but then exploration was a man's game in the early twentieth century. This gendered heroic ideal is in itself an interesting social phenomenon that students could explore.

[photo 1] Statue of Captain Robert Falcon Scott, Christchurch, sculpted by his wife, Kathleen Scott.

Inscription on the base from Scott's diary: I do not regret this journey which shows that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another and meet death with as great fortitude as ever in the past.

Major events in New Zealand's history

- Mount Erebus air accident, 1979

Acts of heroism and tragedy associated with exploration brought Antarctica into the consciousness of New Zealanders in the early twentieth century. However, it was a different type of tragedy that raised people's awareness of New Zealand's involvement with the Ice in the later twentieth century and had an effect on the national psyche. The Mt. Erebus air disaster, on November 28th 1979, affected many New Zealanders. All 257 people, tourists and crew, on Air New Zealand flight 901 died when their aircraft crashed on Mt Erebus in Antarctica. At the time few New Zealanders were untouched by the tragedy, and because of this it constitutes a major event in New Zealand's history. However, it is also a major event for other reasons. Justice Mahon's accusations of an Air New Zealand cover-up of the cause, which he described as "an orchestrated litany of lies", led to a national furore. People came to question the integrity of a New Zealand corporate icon and flag carrier and the workings of the New Zealand justice system, as well as the verdicts handed down by the air accident inquiry, led by Chippendale, and the later Royal Commission inquiry led by Justice Mahon. Like other influential events, such as the Gallipoli campaign and the Springbok tour protests, it led New Zealanders to question their institutions. It

inspired self-criticism and self-awareness, and marks a step in the path of national identity formation and maturation.

[photo 2] Mt Erebus, with a polar tent in the foreground.

New Zealand's participation in significant international events and institutions and its possible roles in world affairs in the future

- Britain hands over responsibility for the administration of the Ross Dependency to New Zealand, 1923
- Establishment of Scott Base 1955/56 (opened January 1957)
- New Zealand is one of the twelve original signatory nations to the Antarctic Treaty, 1959
- The Antarctica (Environmental Protection) Act is enacted, 1995

Political events have established New Zealand as a player on the Antarctic stage. They have led to New Zealand having a physical presence on the ice, at Scott Base. With this political involvement come international rights and responsibilities. New Zealand has rights to administer an Antarctic programme and have a presence in the continent. These are accompanied by responsibilities to cooperate with other nations in the management of the continent, through the auspices of an international treaty system, and to monitor and control the activities of visitors to Antarctic territory, both on land and sea.

The New Zealand government takes these rights and responsibilities seriously. The Antarctica (Environmental Protection) Act gives force to the 1991 international Protocol on Environment Protection to the Antarctic Treaty, and regulates the economic and scientific activity in which New Zealanders can engage in Antarctica. New Zealand participates in the international meetings at which decisions are made about how Antarctica will be managed.

No one owns Antarctic territory. Whilst New Zealand might see itself as having special rights and responsibilities in relation to the Ross Dependency, New Zealand does not have the authority to dictate to other nations. Instead all nations are bound to follow the protocols for use, management and protection of the Antarctic environment and resources that are established under the various treaties of the Antarctic treaty system. There are other national science programmes and bases within the Ross Dependency. The United States of America maintains two bases – Amundsen-Scott base at the South Pole and McMurdo Station. McMurdo is just over the hill from New Zealand's Scott Base on Ross Island. The Italians have a base on the eastern coast of the Ross Sea, the Terra Nova Bay station. This means that in the daily running of Scott Base and the affairs of science, New Zealand coordinates and cooperates with other nations. For example, the United States and New Zealand both take flights down to Antarctica, carrying personnel and supplies for both Antarctic programmes, although the far greater scale of the United States programmes means that they take many more flights and maintain a much larger physical presence on the Ice.

[photo 3] Sheep carcasses, Discovery Hut, Hut Point, which are thought to have been donated to an expedition by the New Zealand government.

[photo 4] Scott Base

The development over time of New Zealand's identity and ways in which this identity is expressed

- values
- stories
- icons, images and artefacts

Identity is expressed in a variety of ways, including the articulation of commonly held values, the presentation of icons and images, and the telling stories. Many New Zealanders like to think that they are conservationists and promote a clean green image of New Zealand and New Zealand's activities in Antarctica. This may not have

always been the case, and ideas that New Zealand has always been more responsible than other nations in caring for the Antarctica environment may be more myth than reality – a happy chance relating to scale rather than superior management practices. However, conservation values underpin much of what is now done in Antarctica, and how people judge the actions of the New Zealand Antarctic programme. For example:

I was hoping that stories about the environmental impact had been exaggerated, but they weren't. One of my jobs is to commission the new sewage treatment plant. It hadn't really hit home what we do to the environment until I got here and saw what sort of place it is. I was surprised that people could still dump raw sewage into an environment such as this. Why the hell didn't a new sewage plant happen ten, twenty years ago? (Scott Base engineer)

The scale of New Zealand's physical involvement in Antarctica has been smaller than other players, meaning that New Zealand makes less of a physical imprint on the Ice. This and a distinctly Kiwi mentality or way of doing things is something that New Zealanders observe and comment on when they compare Scott Base with McMurdo Station, as epitomised in the following excerpt.

I was surprised at the contrast between McMurdo and Scott Base. We walked up Observation Hill today and there's this huge town on one side, really ugly, and on the other side is Scott Base, which is quite pretty and they've gone to some effort to make it blend in with the environment. Everything's a nice green. We're sort of quietly going about a bit of research at Scott Base, not making much of an impact – partly because of our size but also because of the mindset of doing little things, and doing things cheaply rather than thinking big and throwing heaps of money at problems. We seem to be making a smaller footprint and having much less impact here than our neighbours. There's a lot of respect for the place from all the people that I've met. Everyone wants to keep the place clean and rubbish is well taken care of here at Scott Base. (Diver at Scott Base)

It is debatable whether green actually blends with the Antarctic environment, it being a colour not seen in Antarctic landscapes, but the diver's pride in New Zealand's environmental conscience is clear. Interestingly, it is through comparisons with other people and cultures that New Zealanders come to identify those things that they

consider to be important about their own culture and values. This helps create a sense of identity, what it means to be a New Zealander.

Stories of Kiwi ingenuity abound at Scott Base. These reflect and perpetuate a 'number eight wire' tradition – the idea that New Zealanders are able to make do and make the most of what they have. For example, there's the story re-told by a New Zealand Antarctic about the tracked vehicle that broke down far from base and the mechanic who fixed the engine with a piece of hacksaw blade, saving those involved from being caught in a blizzard. Then there are the stories of the recycling of items thrown away at McMurdo, including the acquisition of an A-frame hut that now acts as the instructor headquarters for people on Antarctic field training and as a short holiday retreat for people working at Scott base – the kiwi bach out on the Ice!

New Zealanders in Antarctica are proud of their kiwi identity and the association of New Zealanders with Antarctica.

I'm quite interested in history and the thing about this place is that it's got this amazing history, but it's only a hundred years old. It's such a poignant history for New Zealanders especially. Hillary going and putting everybody's noses out of joint [by getting to the Pole before Fuchs], and Scott. A lot of people came through New Zealand on their way down here and I'm sort of getting this feeling that you're actually part of history and it's great. It's weird. There's just a whole lot that makes it special down here. (Scott Base engineer)

When I started doing my PhD five or six years ago the last thing I thought that I was going to learn was how to change generator pull cords and rebuild diesel heaters. So, you sort of learn all sorts of interesting things [in Antarctica] and I really like that environment where something happens and you have to respond to it. I think it goes back to some of the pioneering attitude in New Zealand and what we like to think New Zealanders are like. We like to think that you can be somewhere with no help from anyone and you can still actually work out how to sort things out, how to fix things, how to create things out of nothing.

(Scientist at Scott Base)

There are also various signs and symbols that reflect values and ideas relating to identity. There is a sign on the road between Scott Base and McMurdo Station that

announces travellers' arrival at Scott Base, the capital of the Ross Dependency. It is an interesting cultural artefact. The sign is an unofficial and humorous gesture. However, there are serious ideas underpinning its erection and placement. This sign makes several statements. One of these is to claim a place for New Zealanders on the ice, announcing their presence at Scott Base. Another is to claim some sort of New Zealand authority over and responsibility for the Ross Dependency. At another level, and because of its position on the road between Scott Base and McMurdo, the sign makes a subtle political statement, hinting at some sort of perceived rivalry between New Zealander's and their American neighbours. The latter of these interpretations suggests a smaller sibling-larger sibling relationship between New Zealand and the United States. This may be similar to New Zealand-Australian rivalry in politics and sport. In fact, every year there is a rugby game between people at Scott Base and McMurdo Station, held on a 'field' on the sea ice. Thus New Zealanders have transported distinctly New Zealand customs to Antarctica, reflecting a distinctly New Zealand identity – as do the Americans express their identity at McMurdo.

[photo 5] Sign on the road between Scott Base and McMurdo Station

[photo 6] Automobile Association signpost outside Scott Base

Thus, there is a part of Antarctica that is infused with New Zealand customs and values. However, Antarctica also forms part of the New Zealand's identity and infuses the national psyche. For example, when the weather is cold and nasty, people say the wind is coming straight off the Ice. If you live in New Zealand, particularly people in Christchurch, artefacts representing Antarctica's human past and heritage are part of the cultural environment. Scott's statue stands in the centre of the city. The International Antarctic Centre is a popular tourist attraction. Every year there is a church service and blessing at the Christchurch Cathedral for those going down to Antarctica. There is a special Antarctic chalice, which spends the summer at the ecumenical Chapel of the Snows at McMurdo Station, and the winter in Christchurch Cathedral.

Antarctic icons have also become New Zealand's icons. Edmund Hillary, initially made famous for climbing Mount Everest, but also for his Antarctic exploits, is a highly respected and famous New Zealander. His iconic image is preserved on the New Zealand five-dollar note.

[photo 7] Sir Edmund Hillary portrayed on the New Zealand five-dollar note

Thus Antarctica is a part of New Zealand and New Zealanders' identity, albeit more so for some than for others.

Summary

People learn about New Zealand and what it means to be a New Zealander in a variety of contexts. Focusing on New Zealand's connection with Antarctica provides a context or vehicle for the investigation of essential learning about New Zealand. This is not to say that all New Zealanders know much about Antarctica, or feel any particular connection with Antarctica. However, the twentieth century history and heritage of New Zealand and Antarctica are linked. Antarctica plays a role in the development of a collective New Zealand identity, perhaps to a greater degree or in a more obvious way than for many other nations with Antarctic connections.

For too long Antarctic stories have been presented as essentially British stories. I believe New Zealanders' role in how we understand the Ice has been, and continues to be, profound. It is in New Zealand that we find the 'little stories', as carefully preserved as the pony snowshoes in the museum... There is no other place where the history [of Antarctica] is so deep and pronounced. Lyttleton is the Cape Canaveral of Antarctic Exploration.
(Lesley Roberts, writer, reported in University of Canterbury Chronicle)

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