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‘In the Interest of All Mankind’: Women and the Environmental Protection of Antarctica

Emma Shortis

This chapter highlights the major contribution of women activists working against mining in Antarctica during the 1980s, and reinstates them in the historical record. Despite a growing recognition of the need to include women and gender in studies of the Antarctic, the history of the continent remains overwhelmingly dominated by accounts of men. This chapter first points out how women do, in fact, have a long history on the continent, as companions, explorers, scientists, and activists, and then describes the feminist histories of women that reinvigorate scholarship on the Antarctic. It points out, however, that this work does not include studies of women environmental activists, who were central to efforts to protect the continent from environmental destruction. A greater understanding of women’s deep engagement with the continent also illuminates Antarctica’s larger role in the international environmental movement. Finally, this chapter analyses how gendered perceptions of the continent

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as 'white' and 'pure' rebound on female presence, and the complicated interplay of such gendered perceptions with legitimate desires to protect the Antarctic environment.

The 1959 Antarctic Treaty mandates that Antarctica 'shall continue forever to be used exclusively for peaceful purposes and shall not become the scene or object of international discord'. This, the treaty makers assert, is 'in the interest of all mankind' (Antarctic Treaty Secretariat 1959). Scholars and activists have generally assumed that 'all mankind' can be safely assumed to mean 'all humankind'. Historically, however, Antarctica has been an almost exclusive preserve of 'mankind' only. Womankind, at least until very recently, has been almost entirely absent both from the continent and our study of it (Dodds 2009). As the preserve of 'mankind', the Antarctic has been understood and constructed in gendered terms, as a 'virgin' continent, and a space in which to test and demonstrate a particularly masculine (and Western) form of heroism. This designation of the Antarctic as a masculine space marginalizes the role of women on the continent, and, in the words of Klaus Dodds, has significant implications for 'how and with what consequences the polar continent has been settled and studied' (2009: 505).

Women, however, have a long history on the continent, initially as companions to their conquering husbands, and later as scientists and activists in their own right. Gender, furthermore, is central to understanding desires to first conquer, and then protect, the Antarctic. Women activists were in fact central to efforts to protect the continent, in what became one of the most significant political developments in Antarctic history: the defeat of a nearly completed international agreement that would have allowed mining to begin on the continent, in favour of a new agreement that banned mining and committed signatories to comprehensive environmental protection. This was an extraordinary achievement for both the environmental movement and the individuals and states involved. Existing histories of this agreement, however, do not address the central role of environmental activists and their campaigns in its defeat. The fact that some of the central players within this movement were women is rarely mentioned. These women activists, however, were one of the major driving forces behind the successful environmental protection of an entire continent. How gendered understandings of this con-

tinent as 'fragile', 'pure', and 'pristine' played into desires to protect it from environmental destruction are also central to understanding the effective public appeal of the campaign. An understanding of the central role of women in Antarctic history and politics, and broader feminist and gender-based approaches, is thus crucial to understanding the past, present, and future of the continent.

Feminist Approaches

Feminist approaches are only just beginning to find a voice amongst studies of the Antarctic. After being among the first Australian women to visit the continent in an official capacity, Elizabeth Chipman published *Women on the Ice* in 1986. Chipman's book was the first in-depth look at the history of women in the Antarctic. While the book was certainly groundbreaking, Chipman cautions that she 'felt no obvious discrimination' when she visited Antarctica (1986: 6). The book thus traces the history of women's involvement in Antarctica, but fails to interrogate the reasons behind the erstwhile exclusion of women, or to consider the popular characterization of Antarctica as a masculine space. It was Lisa Bloom's *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* in 1993 that was the first to consider the deeper ramifications of gender for the history, and study, of the Antarctic. These two pioneering works were followed by others, including Esther Rothblum, Jacqueline Weinstock and Jessica Morris' *Women in the Antarctic* in 1998, and Robin Burns' *Just Tell them I Survived! Women in Antarctica* in 2001. Both Burns and Rothblum had themselves visited the Antarctic, and both books focus on tracing the history of women, and their experiences, on the continent. Several significant contributions have also been published in a 2009 edition of the journal, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*.

While relatively small, this significant body of work on women, gender, and the Antarctic has the potential to make a significant impact on polar studies. Collectively, this work asserts that historically, Antarctica has been seen as a 'virgin continent', ripe for exploration, conquest, and, most importantly, as a stage on which to demonstrate virile, masculine heroism. In the ironic, but accurate, words of Christy Collis: 'Ban women

from half a continent, and pretty quickly that half continent becomes a fantasy world for masculinity' (2009: 514). While Collis is referring specifically to the Australian Antarctic Territory, her words are reflective of the history of the continent as a whole.

Collis is not alone in pointing out the absence of women in Antarctic history. Popular perceptions, and even many gender-based histories of the Antarctic, tend to regard women as almost entirely absent from the continent until at least the 1960s. Rosner asserts that this is mostly true, as women have not been prominent as explorers, conquerors, or researchers of the Antarctic (2009: 491). As Dodds argues, women's role 'was at best marginal' (2009: 507). Even those 'marginal' women, furthermore, have rarely had their roles or work acknowledged, either by the men they were with or by mainstream scholarship.

Travel Companions to the Conquerors

Women, however, do have a significant history in the Antarctic, and tracing this history was Chipman's great original contribution. As she points out, there is evidence of women visiting the sub-Antarctic as early as 1773, and women were present well into the nineteenth century, mostly as wives and companions to captains of whaling and sealing expeditions (1986). It was not until 1935, though, that a Norwegian woman, Caroline Mikkelsen, would actually set foot on the continent itself (Chipman 1986). Like most of the women before her, Mikkelsen had accompanied her husband on a whaling expedition, but she was the first to disembark and place her feet on land (Chipman 1986: 75; see also Lewander 2009: 92). It was not until more than a decade later that two women, Edith Ronne and Jennie Darlington, members of a private expedition, would spend a winter on the continent (Burns 2001: 15). Like the women before them, neither was there in a professional capacity (Chipman 1986: 113).

The Ronne expedition marked a significant milestone in women's presence on the Antarctic continent. However, the fact that women had now proved that they could survive a winter on the continent did not increase women's presence in the Antarctic. After Ronne, as Chipman

observes, national governments increasingly controlled access to the Antarctic, and government-led and funded expeditions were closed to women (1986: 67). As Dodds puts it, 'women were considered unsuitable for such an environment' (2009: 506–507) and would have to fight for their right to visit the continent they were studying.

The first four Australian women to participate in a government expedition went to the sub-Antarctic Macquarie Islands in the summer of 1959–1960 (Burns 2005: 2). Isobel Bennet, one of those women, later reflected that 'We were invaders in a man's realm and were regarded with some suspicion. We had been warned that on our behaviour rested the future of our sex…' (quoted in Chipman 1986: 44). Further, while two male-led and manned expeditions led by the Dutch explorer Roald Amundsen and British explorer Robert Falcon Scott had arrived within weeks of each other at the South Pole in 1911, it was not until the summer of 1969–1970, almost a decade after Bennet's first visit, that women arrived at the South Pole as part of an American expedition for the very first time (Chipman 1986: 95). It was, then, not until the beginning of the 1970s that women scientists were able to participate in continental expeditions (Dodds 2009: 508). Australian women visited Casey Station, on the continent itself, for the first time in the summer of 1975–1976, during International Women's Year (IWY) (Burns 2001: 21). Despite this small increase in women's presence in the Antarctic, the continent was still not entirely open to women. American women were not allowed to spend winter on the continent until 1974, while British women had to wait until the 1990s (Dodds 2009: 508), nine years after the first Australian woman, Louise Holliday, in 1981 (Burns 2005: 3). This milestone, somewhat unsurprisingly, still did not mean that all barriers had been broken down (Burns 2001: 20). Chipman, for example, argues that the two American women who wintered on the continent in 1974—one of whom was Chief Scientist—were chosen because they were old and unattractive, claiming that '[t]he women were not likely to be sexually provocative' (111–113). While Chipman acknowledges that the women were 'the best in their fields', even she subscribes to the view that it was women's sexuality—not their brains—that was paramount (113; see also Burns 2001: 23). It is this focus on sexuality that overwhelmingly dominates histories of Antarctica. Outside the specific feminist and women's

histories outlined above, women's historic role on the continent is always overshadowed by heroic tales of male competition and conquest.

The fact that women do have a history in the Antarctic, however, should by now be clear. Like men, women have been active in the sub-Antarctic and on the continent itself since at least the 1770s. Women have travelled to the continent as companions to invaders and explorers, and later worked there as scientists in their own right. Today, however, women still represent a significant minority on Antarctic research stations, despite the fact that, as Chipman wrote in 1986, '[w]omen have proved they can do the job in Antarctica as elsewhere' (7).

Women Activists and the Campaign for a 'World Park' Antarctica

The little scholarship that is available on women's historic role in the Antarctic does not address the role of women activists; as outlined above, the focus is overwhelmingly on women as companions, private expeditioners, or state-sanctioned scientists. This reflects not only the dearth of gender-based scholarship on Antarctica but also the general lack of research into the role of non-state activists on the continent. While the role of non-state activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in, for example, the international campaign to ban whaling has been studied comprehensively (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 127), their role in the Antarctic campaign of 1989–1991 is barely understood (Shortis 2015; Clark 2013). Environmental NGOs' ability to disseminate and promote the idea that Antarctica should be protected from mining, however, is central to understanding how the parties to the Antarctic Treaty were convinced that six years of negotiation over minerals exploitation should be abandoned in favour of comprehensive environmental protection.

The Convention on the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resource Activities, which would have allowed mining to begin on the Antarctic continent, was adopted by the parties to the Antarctic Treaty in June 1988 (CRAMRA 1988). Environmental organizations such as Greenpeace, the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Wilderness Society, the International

Fund for Animal Welfare, and the Australian Conservation Foundation, united under the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC), had begun campaigning for the environmental protection of Antarctica nearly a decade before the Minerals Convention was signed (Shortis 2015; ASOC 2013). ASOC was the leading non-governmental coalition advocating for Antarctica, representing over 200 member organizations in 35 countries (Antarctica Project 1989). After the Convention was signed, the international campaign against Antarctic mining sought to convince parties to the Treaty not to ratify the agreement.

In Australia, that campaign was spearheaded by Lyn Goldsworthy, the coordinator of the Australian branch of ASOC. Australia, as a claimant to 42% of Antarctic territory, plays a significant role in Antarctic politics, and so in the 1980s Goldsworthy was well placed to influence both Australian Antarctic policy and broader international developments (Haward and Griffiths 2011: 102). In her role in the Australian branch of ASOC, Goldsworthy executed a brilliant campaign aimed at stopping the Australian government from ratifying the Convention, which it had spent more than six years negotiating. Goldsworthy and her colleagues worked closely with government policy makers, at times cleverly exploiting interdepartmental tensions. While continuing this highly sophisticated behind-the-scenes lobbying, ASOC Australia, under Goldsworthy's direction, simultaneously used more traditional techniques like newsletters, petitions, and advertisements, which all helped to generate substantial interest from both the media and the public. The strong public response to the campaign fed directly into the eventual decision by both the Australian and French governments to oppose the advent of mining in Antarctica (Shortis 2015; Clark 2013: 170–171). In 1989, the Australian Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, came to the conclusion that Australia should *not* ratify the Minerals Convention, claiming that 'it was inconceivable that we should put at risk the one remaining pristine continent' (Hawke 1994: 467–468). The Australian government's sudden refusal to ratify the Minerals Convention, given that the Antarctic Treaty System operates under a consensus rule, meant that the Minerals Agreement could not be adopted. Existing histories of the Australian decision against ratification focus overwhelmingly on the role of government, and a more recent

spat between the former Prime Minister and his former Treasurer, Paul Keating, around who decided what first (Haward and Griffiths 2011: 246–247; Bramston 2015). While the significant role of such tensions, and broader concerns about the sovereignty of the Australian Antarctic Territory, have been acknowledged by the existing scholarship, the extent and nature of Goldsworthy's role in Australian decision-making has not. The significant role played by the coordinator of ASOC Australia in this momentous decision, and the subsequent Australian campaign to replace the Minerals Convention with an environmental protection agreement, is rarely acknowledged. Goldsworthy, however, deserves much of the credit both for the original decision and later the Australian government's successful negotiating role in the lead up to the 1991 Madrid Protocol for Antarctica. Goldsworthy's work has however been officially acknowledged when she was made a Member of the Order of Australia for her contributions to conservation.

Women also played a significant role in the international campaign against Antarctic mining, which worked closely with national campaigns like the one led by Goldsworthy. Kelly Rigg was the coordinator of the Greenpeace International Antarctic Campaign from 1986 to 1990. Rigg was one of the driving forces behind the internationalization of the campaign. She coordinated and organized several Greenpeace expeditions to Antarctica, which were crucial for both attracting media and public attention to the issue, and also in elevating Greenpeace into a respected voice in Antarctic politics (Clark 2013: 164–165). Women were on each one of these expeditions, increasing the presence of women activists and scientists on the ice itself. Rigg was also crucial in enlisting the French celebrity filmmaker and adventurer Jacques-Yves Cousteau for the campaign. In 1989, Cousteau started a petition against the Convention in France, and in less than a year had 1.5 million signatures (Committee on Merchant, Marine and Fisheries 1990: 5). An American version, organized jointly by the Cousteau Society and ASOC, also gained 1.5 million signatures in less than a year (AP 1989).

Official players rarely acknowledge the role played by international environmental organizations in generating this significant and influential public response to the prospect of mining in Antarctica. Ex-Prime Minister Hawke, for example, notes the 'growing anxiety around the world on

global environmental issues', but his retelling of the story only acknowledges the work of the Australian and French governments and Cousteau (Hawke 1994: 468). Hawke does not acknowledge (indeed, does not even mention) the work of Goldsworthy, Rigg, Greenpeace, or ASOC in helping to generate and focus this 'growing anxiety' on Antarctica. As Hawke acknowledges, Cousteau most certainly played a central role in the campaign against the Minerals Convention, spearheadeding an intensive lobbying campaign in the United States, which, under President George H W Bush, was in favour of Antarctic mining. He generated substantial media coverage, organized public petitions, which were signed by millions of people, met with congressmen and senators, appeared before Congress and its various Subcommittees on multiple occasions, and even took six children—one from each continent—on a highly publicized awareness-raising expedition to the Antarctic. Cousteau, along with Greenpeace International and Greenpeace USA (where the Antarctic campaign was also headed by a woman), was instrumental in generating the political pressure that would eventually sway the Bush administration into supporting an environmental protection agreement for Antarctica (for more on Cousteau's significant role, see Shortis 2015). During this campaign, Cousteau worked closely with Greenpeace and ASOC. Together, environmental organizations, Cousteau, and the French and Australian governments ensured that the Mining Convention was defeated and replaced by a comprehensive environmental protection agreement. Women activists like Rigg and Goldsworthy played an essential role in devising, directing, and executing this sophisticated and successful campaign, which resulted in the pre-emptive protection of an entire continent.

A 'Virgin' Land

These women activists were undoubtedly working in a space, both real and imagined, dominated by men. As New Zealand activist Cath Wallace observed, women working on the campaign in the 1980s got the clear message that 'especially young women who aren't even scientists' shouldn't have a say in Antarctic politics (interview with author 2014). She felt that 'many of the officials and scientists [she] dealt with were incredibly

patronizing', and that she and her colleagues faced 'extraordinary hostility'. Women like Wallace, Rigg, and Goldsworthy were in the double bind of challenging from the outside a state-sponsored, previously settled agreement in a closed diplomatic environment. They were also, simultaneously, focused on a particular environment both dominated by men, and imagined as an exclusively masculine preserve.

During the campaign for a 'World Park' Antarctica in the 1980s, despite the significant presence of women activists, gendered understandings of the continent persisted. As late as 1990, Jacques Cousteau was referring to the Antarctic as 'this virgin land' (*Tulsa World* 1990). Virginity, of course, is associated with purity—a characterization of Antarctica that was deliberately perpetuated during the 'World Park' Antarctica campaign. Antarctica was, as Cousteau described it, 'the last unspoiled area of our planet' (*Tulsa World* 1989, 1990). To Australian environmentalists, 'Antarctica is the ultimate wilderness, the last and greatest' (Suter 1979: 9). Politicians and the media took up this message as well. For Hawke 'it was inconceivable that we should put at risk the one remaining pristine continent' (Hawke 1994: 467–468). This characterization of the 'last pristine wilderness' is not limited to decades' past. Even today, in serious academic publications, Antarctica is still labelled 'pristine' without much concern or qualification (Haward and Griffiths 2011; Leane 2007: 262). These understandings of Antarctica as 'pure', 'pristine', 'unspoiled', and so on align with broader narratives in nature protection which value purity and tend to feminize nature. In the 1980s, environmentalists like Cousteau, Rigg, Goldsworthy, and Wallace cleverly integrated this representation of Antarctica as fragile and vulnerable into the contemporary emotional language of environmentalism, carving out a role for the ice as an emotional symbol for the environmental movement (Fay 2011: 293). Partly as a result of this campaign, and growing knowledge of the scientific value of a 'pristine' Antarctic, the continent became, in historian Tom Griffiths' words, 'the key to the future of humanity' (2010: 28). That 'key', though, was implicitly feminine. As Victoria Rosner has so clearly outlined, '[i]n common references to the poles as pure, pristine, or untouched, we hear echoes of the old talk about the seventh, virgin continent, so chilly and remote yet so sought after by men' (2009: 493).

Historically, Antarctica has been understood primarily as a site for male competition and conquest. Women have been excluded from the space both physically and emotionally—physically by governments and expeditions restricting their presence or banning them entirely, and emotionally, as too weak to cope with the demands of an isolated and hostile environment. Femininity was, and arguably still is, allowed only as a framework for understanding the fragility and purity of a place that must be protected by men. As Bloom observes in *Gender on Ice*, 'These last spaces on earth, which still remained invisible and therefore inscrutable, excited a consuming passion on the part of white men of various Western countries to "conquer" and make "visible" these sites' (1993: 3). These 'lusts', as Lewander describes them, were certainly not considered appropriate for women, whose weakness and fragility had no place on a continent that needed controlling and conquering (2009: 93). Rosner labels this the 'grand heroic tradition', which 'defines the polar regions as all-male spaces of bonding, conquest and noble suffering' (2009: 490). Women, in this context, cannot possibly be the 'heroes', because, in effect, it is femininity itself that is being conquered (Lewander 2009: 93).

This designation of the Antarctic as an exclusively male preserve has meant that demonstrations of male 'heroism' have imbued popular histories, and perceptions, of the Antarctic (Rosner 2009: 491). Women activists do not fit into this framework. According to Bloom, both the Arctic and the Antarctic thus 'occupy a peculiar position' in the development of British and American nationalism (1993: 3). Certainly, for Britain, and the Australian and New Zealand colonies, the history of Antarctic conquest and exploration is closely tied to imperial narratives. In national imaginations, the Antarctic became a place where men went to test, and demonstrate, their imperial masculinity, and through that, the masculine superiority of the nation/empire itself (Rosner 2009: 490; Dodds 2009: 505; Bloom 1993: 6). It should not be surprising that women could not fit into this context, and at least partly explains the unwillingness to include women in Antarctic expeditions and the hostility faced by women activists. Women, should they be allowed to participate, would shatter the mythic masculine space of the Antarctic. As American Rear Admiral George Dufek said in 1959, 'I felt the men themselves didn't want the women there. It was a pioneering job. I think the presence of women

would wreck the illusion of the frontiersmen—the illusion of being a hero' (quoted in Chipman 1986: 87).

Conclusions

The indefinite ban on mineral resource exploitation in the Antarctic, and the internationally agreed upon environmental protection of the entire continent, represents an almost unparalleled achievement in the history of international environmentalism. In the words of one environmental campaigner, it was 'arguably Greenpeace's biggest victory ever' (Kelly Rigg, interview with author 2014). Surprisingly, however, there is very little existing research into this extraordinary feat. Given the relative lack of success stories in international environmental negotiations, especially more recently, this is a significant oversight. Women activists were central to the success of the 'World Park' Antarctica campaign of the 1980s. In 1991, that campaign culminated in one of the most significant international environmental agreements in existence today, an indefinite ban on Antarctic mining. Women activists, however, were one of the major driving forces behind the unprecedented success of this campaign, and an understanding of the central role of women in Antarctic history and politics, and broader feminist and gender-based approaches, is crucial to understanding the past, present, and future of the continent. At the centre of international political questions of resource management and exploitation, conquest, sovereignty, and the environment, the Antarctic continues and will continue to play a significant role in international relations. As the Antarctic comes under pressure from tourism, climate change, and political tensions, the ramifications of gender-based approaches should not be underestimated. The Antarctic's history as a gendered space will continue to influence its future and goes some way to explaining the resonance of campaigns to preserve and protect its 'fragile' environment. Deeper understandings of women's historic role in Antarctic activism, and the importance of gender to both the continent and environmental activism more broadly, might offer alternative understandings of, and approaches to, the future of an environment under threat.

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