

**Nicoletta Brazzelli**

**Postcolonial Antarctica and the Memory of the Empire of Ice**

**Abstract I:** In 2012 the anniversary of Robert Falcon Scott's arrival at the South Pole and of his death in the ice on his return journey has prompted new research on Scott and the Antarctic continent. The renaissance of Antarctic interests shows that Antarctica continues to be a source of fascination for the Western world as a place for the expression of individual bravery and endurance. However, the role of Antarctica as an imperial space in the British cultural imagination is now superseded by its status of postcolonial territory 'owned' both by the former imperial nations and by postcolonial countries such as India or New Zealand. The 1959 Antarctic Treaty recognized to Great Britain an influential role in the international agreements that established international cooperation promoting scientific activity. At the same time, many other countries are directly involved in the project of making the 'white continent' a natural reserve entirely devoted to science.

**Abstract II:** L'anniversario dell'arrivo al Polo Sud da parte di Robert Falcon Scott nel 2012, seguito dalla sua tragica morte fra i ghiacci sulla via del ritorno, ha ridato slancio allo studio di Scott e del continente antartico. La rinascita dell'interesse per l'Antartide dimostra che il continente continua a esercitare un grande fascino sul mondo occidentale, come luogo in cui si esprimono coraggio e resistenza fisica. Il ruolo dell'Antartide in quanto spazio dell'immaginario britannico, tuttavia, appare oggi superato dal suo stato di territorio postcoloniale 'posseduto' sia dalle ex-potenze coloniali che dalle nazioni postcoloniali, come India o Nuova Zelanda. Il trattato antartico del

1959 ha riconosciuto alla Gran Bretagna un ruolo di primo piano all'interno degli accordi internazionali che hanno consolidato la cooperazione per la ricerca scientifica. Allo stesso tempo, molti altri paesi sono coinvolti nel progetto di fare del 'continente bianco' una riserva naturale interamente dedicata alla scienza.

Antarctica is not properly a postcolonial country: it has no native population, no specific language or culture; its history seems to coincide with the history of European explorations. According to the general perception, Antarctica is a frozen continent dotted with scientific bases, where scientists from different nations cooperate in the name of scientific research. Alternatively, it is a snowy waste, threatening the world as it melts (Walton 2013). Certainly, Antarctica plays a crucial role in our planet's contemporary scientific and environmental challenges; it also played a crucial role in the first decades of the twentieth century as the last 'terra incognita' on earth.

One hundred years ago, in 1912, the race between Britain and Norway for the South Pole aimed at redeeming the ideology of the imperial conquest and was driven by a combination of geopolitical, imaginative and scientific ambitions. At the same time, according to Chris Turney, 1912 heralded the dawn of a new age in our understanding of the natural world (Turney 2012). Men like Scott, Shackleton and others embodied the values of the British Empire, but were also scientific observers of a new, extreme and still unknown environment. The *Terra Nova* Expedition led by Scott enjoyed the strong support of the Royal Geographical Society, an institution in which scientific concerns and imperial attitudes overlapped. Scott and his party reached the South Pole on 17 January 1912, but discovered that the rival expedition led by Amundsen had reached the Pole one month earlier. On their return journey, the five Englishmen faced unexpected difficulties and overwhelming physical burdens. Assailed by an unusually harsh weather, after the death of two of them, the three survivors were

forced in their tent only 11 miles from a supply depot. Their frozen bodies were found nine months later, together with their letters and journals (1).

Scott's adventures fascinated the public because the Antarctic continent appeared an imaginative space for heroic endeavour, unencumbered by the troubling legacy of imperial exploitation which determined the efforts of the explorers in Africa and elsewhere. In a 'clean' white space, Europeans could pursue an 'unashamed heroism'. Moreover, with the absence of a native population, Antarctica appeared to offer unprecedented opportunities for the colonial tradition of place naming. For the explorers, naming a new place stressed the fact that their expeditions had been successful and useful as a patriotic act of conquest (2). Francis Spufford (1997) suggests the passage from 'imperial eyes' to 'imperial ice': imperial ice represents a metaphor that encodes the desire for apparently harmless conquest, both at national and individual level. The imperial Polar expeditions redefined British identity during the Edwardian era and the Antarctic ice constituted a final monument to the imperial ethos (Dutton 2009: 377-379).

On the whole, Britain's interest in Antarctica was a direct consequence of the nation's imperial ambitions. Captain Cook's eighteenth-century voyages (and his first glimpses on Antarctica) expressed not only scientific curiosity, but also the global aspirations of a maritime nation. Scott himself sailed south from Britain along an imperial corridor, passing through South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, before departing for Antarctica. His crew carried the beliefs and practices of an imperial nation to the extreme South. The conquest of the South Pole was of greater symbolic than strategic or commercial value and was meant to mark the expansion of the British Empire to the southern limits of the earth.

The appeal of the Antarctic has been intensified over the last years by a growing interest in the scientific achievements of the so-called Heroic Age of Polar exploration (Brazzelli 2012). The scientific aims of the *Terra Nova*,

symbolised by the 35 pounds of geological specimens the Polar party carried until their death, witnessed the selflessness and idealism of the enterprise. Likewise, the Emperor Penguins' eggs carried back to England by Apsley Cherry-Garrard would have helped solve the mystery of the 'missing link' between birds and reptiles. In addition, photographs, together with maps and charts, played their part in establishing the ultimate proof of the British conquest of the Pole. While stones, penguins' eggs and meteorological data were gathered in order to establish the history of Antarctica and of the earth itself, the tragedy of Scott and his party strengthened a peculiarly British vision of tragic heroic figures, battling against a cruel destiny (3).

While the global impact of the race to the South Pole is undeniable, the renewed interest in the story of *Scott of the Antarctic* is worth considering. The *Message to the Public* Scott wrote at the end of his journals (Scott 2003: 476-477) remains the cornerstone of Scott's heroic reputation. Criticisms of Scott began to grow only at the end of the 1950s. At that time, Britain embarked on a process of self-examination and developed a narrative of external weakness and internal decay. The debacle of Suez, the process of decolonization, the general anxiety about the crumbling economic achievements generated an extensive literature devoted to national decline. Scott and his heroic culture began to be questioned. At the end of the 1970s, Roland Huntford's critical review of Scott as an incompetent bungler achieved a wide popularity and remains highly influential (Huntford 1979). However, several writers and scholars did continue to defend Scott's reputation in the 1980s and 1990s; among them, Ranulph Fiennes (2004) (4).

The contemporary designation of the Antarctic as the 'continent for science' is a representation (5), a very powerful one, indeed, which resonates with the icescape itself, a giant white laboratory with its connotations of objectivity and impartiality (Glasberg 2008: 640-641). The tales of endurance, self-sacrifice and technological innovation that marked the 1912 expedition laid

the foundation for modern scientific exploration. Antarctica's image shifted from a purely symbolic prize to a region connected to global processes of environmental and cultural change. Nowadays, at a time when competition for resources is placing the Antarctic Treaty System under increasing pressure, the history of the expeditions of the Heroic Age exposes the interdependence of science and empire.

The survey of the Antarctic environment played a central role in shaping the history of the continent. Even after the end of the Heroic Age of Scott and Shackleton, the mapping of Antarctica by the British was never an unproblematic affair. In 1943-1944 Operation Tabarin, the code name for a secret naval operation designed to raise British imperial profile in the South Atlantic, was implemented. This was clearly connected with the preservation of Britain's South Atlantic influence (Dodds 2002: 13-33). In 1948, the film *Scott of the Antarctic*, directed by Charles Frend, played a relevant role in mythologising the Empire on the verge of its disappearance and once again celebrated ideals of service, duty and sacrifice connected with the frozen South: at the time of its release, Britain was engaged in an expensive and dangerous game of territorial occupation, mapping and diplomatic work (Dodds 2012a). The zenith of British Antarctic endeavour was the successful outcome of the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition under the leadership of Fuchs and Hillary in 1958. The crossing of Antarctica was meant to be the high point of British and Commonwealth Polar achievement as men and their machines triumphed against the most hostile natural landscape on earth.

By the end of the 1950s hundreds of thousands of pounds had been spent on land-based surveying, air photography, logistical support and base maintenance in order to preserve British claims to Antarctica. The political status of the uninhabited Antarctic continent and surrounding seas emerged as a relevant feature of international politics at the end of the 1950s. The Washington conference (15 October-1 December 1959) was undoubtedly a remarkable

diplomatic watershed. It did create a legal and political framework for future international cooperation in the region. Claimant states had to accept the suspension of territorial claims; arguably the Treaty was a geopolitical and legal victory for the British delegation, as territorial claims were preserved for the duration of the Treaty. In any case, it implied a relevant act of international collaboration in an era dominated by postcolonial change and anti-colonial rebellions in Africa, Asia and elsewhere.

The Antarctic Treaty was signed in 1959 after drawn-out negotiations. The two superpowers, USA and USSR, agreed not to let the Cold War conflict propagate in Antarctica. The International Geophysical Year (1957-58) pointed out how political interest could be sublimated into science; manifestation of national presence as well as rivalry was constructively translated into competition and cooperation in research. However, the decolonization process had hardly begun. The Antarctic club of twelve nations (Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States) was based on the exclusion of many emerging countries. Therefore, to enhance a wider legitimacy and credibility, in the 1980s India, Brazil and China were accepted as Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties. Other Third World nations gradually followed. India especially stressed the fact that an active interest in Antarctica had grown in areas of the world without a lengthy record of exploratory and scientific achievements. Today a basic conflict persists between the rhetoric of scientific internationalism and the actual dominance of national interests. Postcolonial engagement has pinpointed this anachronism, suggesting that the political and organizational framework of Antarctic research should be reconsidered.

The Antarctic Treaty addressed the major elements of the 'Antarctic problem', especially differing attitudes to territorial claims and the potential conflict over the overlapping claims of Chile, Argentina and the United Kingdom in the Antarctic Peninsula. It formally demilitarized the Antarctic continent (and

the surrounding ocean) and established a nuclear-free zone (Haward 2011). These provisions were supplemented by the development of an innovative regime of inspection. The Antarctic Treaty is a security instrument and, with its focus on science, provides one of the earliest examples of what is now termed environmental security. The signing of the Antarctic Treaty recognized that it is in the interest of all mankind that Antarctica shall continue for ever to be used exclusively for peaceful purposes. Moreover, international scientific cooperation requires that all the parties involved share their information with one another.

Article IV froze sovereignty positions and thus facilitated the emergence of science as the determining factor in shaping access to terrain and scientific data (S.V. Scott 2011). In a sense, the Treaty protected the status quo ante. Unlike in other parts of the world, however, it showed that it was still possible for man to be a 'good colonizer'. After its entry into force, all the claimant states continued to believe that their territorial claims were intact and fundamentally unchanged. The Antarctic Treaty parties, like the British imperialists of the past, argued that their claims to scientific and environmental authority were being used in the interests of all humankind. As a whole, the Antarctic Treaty System is a multi-faceted process of international cooperation from which participants undoubtedly accrue multiple benefits. On the other hand, the Antarctic Treaty offers a good example of hegemonic power. It could be viewed as a simple rehearsal of old colonial claims, but also as an act of imperialism on the part of the USA. The USA had made no territorial claims in Antarctica but would be allowed to go anywhere on the continent and to use the continent for all but non-peaceful activities.

However, the 1982 invasion of the Falklands by the Argentine army reasserted Britain's determination to maintain an advantage in that remote area of the world, regardless of the prevailing international pressure to solve a basically colonial situation. The link between patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia and British identity was clearly revealed during the 1982 military campaign.

Other recent developments in Antarctic geopolitics demonstrate the limits of the Antarctic Treaty System. On 17 October 2007 Britain reinforced its three major territorial claims in Antarctica, by using the Law of the Seas, to claim strategic seabeds and thus potentially valuable areas of oil reserves. This was in clear defiance of the Antarctic Treaty System, according to which no claims can be acted upon under its regime. While the British claim had little to do with science, it clearly shows that a new approach to the government of Antarctica is necessary.

Science is a *raison d'être* in Antarctica, involving material condition, governance structure and epistemology. Since the International Geophysical Year and the Antarctic Treaty, science has taken up the burden of human active presence and has shaped its own vision of the future of Antarctica. The implications of science have become the hegemonic modes of engagement in a vast territory in which the traditional forces of nation and capital markets have been put in abeyance. Although the 1959 Treaty required the phasing out of purely military occupation and goals in Antarctica, demilitarization has not resulted in the disappearance of the military in the region. Rather, the after-effects of militarization can be traced in the Antarctic built environment, human cultures and languages. Science too is inscribed into military traces and national narratives. According to Peder Roberts, Antarctic science has always been a "geopolitical performance" (Roberts 2012: 157). Thus, the conception of the Antarctic as a conflict-free space is clearly challenged, because the establishment of national bases was always an act of competition, a marker of national and ideological strength.

Klaus Dodds writes that "ushering a new era of continental exploration and international rivalry, the Antarctic is now as much a symbol of global anxiety, as it is a site of ongoing scientific collaboration and knowledge exchange – snow, ice, and the cold are new geopolitical and scientific front lines" (2012b: 1). On the one hand, Antarctica remains one of the last vestiges of



colonial expression and masculine endeavor retaining notions of territorial sovereignty expressed through environmental and scientific activities. New postcolonial perspectives are opened up by the reinterpretation of the Antarctic past developed in countries such as Argentina, Chile, New Zealand and Australia – that is nations that did not take part in the Antarctic history of exploration, but boast a geographical closeness to the southern continent.

On the other hand, Dodds stresses the fact that Antarctica has not figured prominently in the literature dealing with postcolonialism. And yet, despite the fact that there were no indigenous Antarctic peoples who resisted foreign domination, Dodds advocates connecting Antarctic politics to a postcolonial perspective (Dodds 2012b: 60-67). The term postcolonial critically highlights how systems of colonial domination whether in the form of production of knowledge or the prevailing geopolitics of international order, persist in the contemporary era. Dodds regards Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Chile, Argentina and the USA as engaged in imperial Antarctic policies. According to Dodds, Article IV established a pattern freezing the colonial map for the duration of the Treaty, at the same time allowing the development of new modes of scientific cooperation among different national communities.

In a questionable way, the 1959 Antarctic Treaty provided UK with a prominent role in the international agreements, while enabling territorial strife to be replaced by international cooperation through which an increasing number of countries are directly involved in the project of making the 'white continent' a natural reserve devoted to peaceful scientific developments. Antarctica has shifted from a blank backdrop for Empire or even a symbol of purification to becoming a part of an environmentally endangered planet. Thus, the language Antarctica speaks nowadays has changed from imperial rhetoric to an environmental creed and seems to warn mankind on the consequences of a universal, global 'ruin'. In this sense, according to Elena Glasberg, the Southern continent is the site and source of a new kind of "environmental melancholy"

(Glasberg 2011). Its significance as 'symbol of our time' goes hand in hand with its condition of material place in need of protection by the concerned efforts of the rest of the world. The master narrative of the past is now accompanied by a scientific discourse including an ecological consciousness and the global interconnectedness of nations and cultures. Antarctica, once the most remote place on earth, is now the site for the development of new representational practices and new modes of exploratory knowledge.

On the whole, there is a sense today that scientists carry the baton of the great explorers of the past. Indeed, Antarctica appears to offer direct access to the past, its ice acting as a kind of archive of past ages, while it also envisages present and future perils (Leane 2012: 155). The contemporary process of creating Antarctica through writing is strongly connected to memorialization, the artificial environments of the continent, even the bodies of the people moving across or temporarily living on ice (Glasberg 2012: 2-3). The modern Antarctic novel is fully aware of such environmental 'ideology', at least since Ursula Le Guin's science fiction work *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) (6). Despite popular perceptions of the Antarctic as a frozen male-only continent, women have followed the footsteps of the heroes of the past. The recent occasions created by women working and living in Antarctica also imply a gendering of the scientific research. On the other hand, any current 'realistic' Antarctic narrative tends to be a travel narrative, portraying journeys of personal growth and renewal. Thus, in *Terra Incognita. Travels in Antarctica* (1996) Sara Wheeler focuses on the people of Antarctica, past and present – the way they live now, the way they lived and died in the past, and how they react to the physical and psychological challenges of the most extreme weather conditions of the world.

The passage of time is the structuring pattern of Beryl Bainbridge's novel *The Birthday Boys* (1991), which deconstructs the myth of the Polar explorers from a postcolonial and feminist perspective, testing and debunking Edwardian

male values. The 'Birthday Boys' of the title are Scott and the four members of his final team, each of whom narrates a section of the story. As the narrative progresses the reader discovers that these figures are not great explorers, but frail and anxious men, terribly suffering from nostalgia, tenderly recalling their mothers and wives (7). If Bainbridge retells and revisits historical events, other narrative texts imagine the future, such as Marie Darieussecq's *White* (2003), where the ghosts of the explorers interact with the fictional characters and continue to narrate their own story (8).

The sense of Antarctica as a place apart also means that it can be considered apart on a temporal scale, while its communities can sustain views of new or different gender roles and societies. In this sense, science fiction provides a peculiar point of view, on the one hand, pointing to an ideal Southern land, on the other, to post-apocalyptic situations. In Kim Stanley Robinson's *Antarctica* (1997), the representation of the continent, although de-exoticised through the writer's emphasis on tourism and scientific investigation, is deeply influenced by the age of explorations. Ecological sustainability is a major theme in *Antarctica*, where a significant part of the action is catalyzed by the threat of invasion and depredation of the near-pristine environment by corporate interests.

In conclusion, Antarctica remains a fascinating and contradictory place, the imperial site of the British cultural imagination as well as the contemporary postcolonial territory governed both by the former imperial nations and by postcolonial countries such as India or New Zealand. If we acknowledge the relevance of a postcolonial approach, prevailing representations of Antarctica rewrite the colonial age of explorations steeped into myth and memory as peculiarly contemporary narrations based on post-imperial values and scientific challenges, mostly related to changing world climate and environmental issues.

**NOTES**

1. Among the vast bibliography on the Antarctic expeditions at the beginning of the twentieth century, a great number of works deal with Scott. See, for example, Preston 1997, Jones 2003, Crane 2005 and Blackhall 2012. On the persistence of Scott and Shackleton's fame, see Barczewski 2007.
2. It is worth mentioning that, in the colonial context, alien space, according to Paul Carter (1987), exists when it is culturally assimilated. The discovery of the new land – Australia in Carter's study, but the same principle functions for Antarctica as well – is the initial moment of cultural formation and generation of the continent.
3. Larson (2011: 294) argues that the British Antarctic expeditions of the pre-war period become modern and forward-looking enterprises. The expeditions conducted significant research that, in fields ranging from climate change and palaeontology to marine biology and glaciology, helped shape the twentieth century view of Antarctica and its place in the global system of nature. Although the focus on heroic manhauling turned Scott into a Victorian stereotype, the British expeditions of the Edwardian age prefigure the current era in Antarctic science.
4. On Scott's changing reputation see Jones 2011 and Jones 2012.
5. Sherrill 2001 emphasizes the process of textual and discursive formation of the North, implying the creation of visual and verbal myths. The extreme South and the extreme North, notwithstanding their geographical and morphological differences, share similar systems of representation.
6. Ursula Le Guin is also the author of "Sur", a short story originally published on the *New Yorker* in 1982, a fictional report, long hidden in an attic, of an all-woman expedition to the South Pole which took place in 1909-10, before Amundsen and Scott. Le Guin's feminist utopia creates an alternative history of Antarctica, though inevitably retracing the history it critiques.
7. On Bainbridge's work see Brazzelli (2009: 41-53).

8. Also in Elizabeth Arthur's *Antarctic Navigation* (1994), Scott remains an icon. All these fictional examples, and many more, are presented and discussed in Leane 2012.

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