

Preaching to the Converted

Reflections on Lecturing in Antarctica

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Without any doubt Antarctica is a landscape of extremes. Some of the most hostile environments on the globe are to be found on the 7th continent and despite all the technology available today every trip to Antarctica still includes certain risks. History of Antarctic exploration includes, on the one hand, some of the most grueling stories of death and survival for the sake of scientific achievements, and navigating Antarctic seas with some of the stormiest waters on the globe. On the other hand the history of Antarctica also includes the successful story of an international treaty related to securing the common use of a part of the globe for the benefit of all mankind, stories of direct international cooperation despite major conflicts like the Cold War, and the history of one of the largest international fisheries ever, pelagic whaling off Antarctica.

Thus the history of Antarctica and the waters surrounding the frozen continent are without a doubt a rich topic for the (few) historians interested in the subject. As a result, a good deal of analytical and/or descriptive research has been published in recent decades. But whenever the question of historical research is asked, there are two other questions that need to be raised: *Cui bono* and how to communicate results with the public?

While it should not be necessary to talk about the first question, as the answer might be obvious from examining historical research about other regions of the globe, the answer to the second question seems to be more difficult to ascertain as it relates to historical research regarding other parts of the globe.

When it comes to communication with the public for most historians, the first choice is still the book or the published article. This is also true for most historians dealing with Antarctica and the mere fact that Robert Scott's record of his journey to the South Pole¹ is still a bestseller tells volumes about the relevance of traditional publications in the context of Antarctic history. But it also needs to be mentioned that most books about Antarctic history have never reached broad audiences and remained widely limited to the small groups of professionals dealing with the subject. While the same might be true for other fields of historical research it seems to be of particular relevance for the subject under consideration in this article.

The next relevant means of communication for historical research to a broad audience seems to be museums. While it is true that there are a number of museums dealing with Antarctic history all around the globe, and an even larger number of temporary exhibitions that have dealt with the subject, for example the exhibition '*Arktis – Antarktis*' in 1997 at the national German exhibition hall in Bonn², it is also true that some of the most relevant and interesting museums in this context are located in Antarctica itself or on the Sub-Antarctic islands. The South Georgia Museum in Grytviken operated by the South Georgia Heritage Trust, or the museum at Port

Lockroy operated by the Antarctic Heritage Trust on Wiencke Island in the Palmer Archipelago, are just two of the best-known examples.



Figure 1 The South Georgia Museum, part of the South Georgia Heritage Trust. Photo by author.

The third means of communication of historical research on Antarctic history and related maritime history to a 'broad' audience are the lectures given on board every cruise-ship operating in the Southern Ocean. Of course other means of communication include the Internet and documentaries on TV, and even if they might reach the broadest audiences, they are often more part of the entertainment industry than proper dissemination of historical research.

Having been involved in publications on Arctic/Antarctic history, museum work related to the field as well as having lectured on board ships in

Antarctic waters, I would like to discuss some of the unique characteristics of communicating historical research about Antarctica. Finally, we should think at least a little about what this might mean for the distribution of research results of other sub-fields of maritime history.

When invited for the first time to lecture on board a vessel sailing to Antarctica you will be pleased by the invitation and, if time and personal circumstances permit, you will most probably agree to the invitation. If you are interested in using the trip to Antarctica for research, chances might be limited at best as most historical documents about Antarctica are in archives far away from Antarctica and there will be hardly any time for research; consequently the advice given by environmental historian Adrian Howkins that 'not going' to Antarctica might also be an option for consideration.³

However, as this article is about communicating historical research while in Antarctica or the Southern Ocean, the option of 'not going' is of no relevance for the following.

Selecting the topics for the individual lectures is not only crucial but very different from the standard approach most scholarly historians choose when thinking about potential topics for research. Somewhat contrary to traditional research, market demand needs to be considered and thus any list of lecture topics will include at least some of the standard themes such as the various Shackleton expeditions, the Race to the South Pole, and other well-known topics on which only little analytical research has been done during previous years. Of course there will also be chances to add more analytical papers to the list of topics and these are without any doubt the more interesting subjects in the context of this paper.

Even with the steady increase of Antarctic tourism since the first trips of the 1969-built MV LINDBLAD EXPLORER, the first purpose-built cruise ship for Antarctic waters⁴, and more than 26,000 passengers visiting Antarctica during the 2011/2012 season alone according to data provided by the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO)⁵, Antarctic tourism is still a very small niche market in the global tourism industry. The main reason for this is easy to explain: even the cheapest cruise to Antarctica will cost nearly \$10,000 US per person inclusive of flights to the port of departure and some discretionary costs.

Consequently, the audience of any historic lecture given on board will be very different than audiences maritime historians are normally used to, regardless whether giving a paper at a scholarly meeting or preparing an exhibition at a museum. There will be people for which money is an easily available commodity and there will be people that fulfill for themselves the dream of their life. While both groups are very different in comparison to each other, both groups do not represent the average population.



Figure 2 The natural beauty of the Antarctic environs draws thousands of tourists each year. Photo by author.

But what does this mean for communicating Antarctic and/or maritime history to these two groups? What does it mean for finding the balance between edutainment and dissemination of analytical historical research results? What does it mean for the impact any historian wants to make by presenting his or her research? All answers to these questions may be somewhat speculative and, in addition, personally influenced.

Even if it is assumed that the whole audience

has a high degree of interest in the subject - why else would they be here? –the main point of interest will normally be the landscape and nature itself. History will be part of the interest, but limited to the well-known stories about exploration and the extremes encountered by Antarctic explorers. While these topics will need to be covered, there is the larger question of how to include those topics in which the historian is interested and which might have certain relevance for the future of the 7th continent. Luckily it can be assumed that the average education level of the audience is higher than that of the average museum visitor in a maritime museum. Thus, abstract topics like the development of the Antarctic Treaty System might be easier to include than in a traditional museum. But when it comes to a topic like whaling

history of the Southern Ocean, it needs to be considered that a good deal of the audience will be somewhat sympathetic to the anti-whaling movement and, consequently, a clear line needs to be drawn between historic whaling and today's discussion about whaling even if they are interconnected. While it is mandatory to draw this line, this interconnectedness is at the same time a unique opportunity for presenting analytical historical research about the topic. When the audience of a paper about Antarctic whaling has encountered a pod of whales swimming around their zodiacs only a couple of hours before the presentation, there is a unique chance to communicate that the animals are not some kind of 21st century 'Bambi' but that they can be the 'Monstrum Horrendum' of whalers in the past. Maritime environmental history seems to be a particularly relevant and easy subject to convey when the audience has just encountered this environment and thus has some kind of first-hand experience no normal museum visitor in other latitudes will ever have.

But in the end there is one question that needs to be asked when thinking about lecturing in an environment like a cruise-ship operating in Antarctic waters: Is it just edutainment that will provide some historians an opportunity to visit the areas they have studied and thus make it akin to a vacation for them or is there truly academic

justification for such a lecture trip?



Figure 3 The M.S. BREMEN draws a crowd of shoreside onlookers. Photo by author.

There are as many answers to this question as there are historians. Here is one historian's view. Whenever thinking about historical research and history as a profession it needs to be understood that historical studies are not about the past, but a specific method of utilizing the past for understanding the society of today and,

maybe, even for shaping the world of tomorrow. A historian that is not interested in today and tomorrow but just in knowing what has happened in the past can be viewed as an antiquarian or a collector who is collecting knowledge about the past for the sake of his or her own interest but without societal meaning. Subsequently, a historian does not only need to analyze the past, but also to communicate the result of his research to the audience or, more broadly, society. Finally, the communication of historical research results to society will (hopefully) influence the decision making of today and thus the future of society.

Generations of qualified historians have debated this basic concept of historical research in the past and while there might still be more disagreement than agreement, most theoretical approaches will at least agree on the fact that historical knowledge without accompanying communication is not really useful. But does this mean that

lecturing in Antarctica itself is only justified by the fact that it is a form of communication of historical research results? While this might be true, such a view undermines the true value of this research-related activity. This article is titled “preaching to the converted” and while this might normally be considered an easy task without any challenges, just the opposite seems to be true in this particular context. The audience of a lecture on board a cruise-ship in Antarctica will definitely have more knowledge about Antarctic history than the average population and, in many cases, at least as much knowledge about the field as professional historians lecturing outside their particular area of expertise. Therefore, they might be considered as ‘converted’. But few of them will have understood Antarctic history as an analytical subject instead of an antiquarian one. If it becomes possible to communicate during a lecture series that history is not only the collection of facts, but also that these facts might provide meaning for today via proper analysis, the whole cruise might be considered as a success from the point of view of the historian. As it seems to be true that people value what they have seen with their own eyes more than what they learned about in an abstract way, the combination of this intrinsic value with the analytical concepts and results communicated during the lecture about Antarctic history will truly convert the passengers on board the ship to ambassadors of Antarctica. But does Antarctica really need 20,000 new ambassadors annually; especially as there is no native or permanent population on the frozen continent? Maybe precisely because there is no native or permanent population, such a number of ambassadors might make sense.

While the local population anywhere else on the globe might be able to voice concerns whenever economic or other interests provide a threat to the region, this is not the case for Antarctica. Thus far, the Antarctic Treaty System⁶ has guaranteed that Antarctica has not become easy prey for multinational companies. Hopefully this will continue into the future, but it needs to be recognized that recent advancements in technology make future economic use of Antarctica more probable than ever before.⁷ Because of this there is at least some risk that the treaty might be challenged in the near future. If this somewhat dark scenario might become a reality, the ambassadors of Antarctica will be needed, if only as a surrogate for a local population as a



Figure 4 A shore party gets a closer look at the local inhabitants. Photo by author.

counterbalance to other stakeholders in the related societal discussion. Of course science and scientists will also need to step into the discussion, but it would be naïve to assume that they would be able to provide the required counterweight without at least some public support.

It might be argued that the same results can be achieved through other

means, including the media and exhibitions in museums in the higher latitudes. While such avenues are definitely worthwhile, the knowledge achieved in such context would be abstract and thus lack the personal dimension. People tend to be really concerned only about the things they know firsthand.

It might be argued, therefore, that lecturing about Antarctic history in Antarctica itself might be much more than just an exclusive hobby of some specialized historians. It could be stated that it goes directly to the core of any historical research: preparing society for an educated discussion of the questions of today and tomorrow by analyzing the past.

An increasing global demand for raw materials, continued Global Warming and sophisticated technology that is decreasing the costs for potential resource-extraction in Antarctica have already resulted in mounting political tensions. Recent rhetoric about the Falkland Islands between the UK and Argentina or the conflicts between Japan and environmental protection groups like the Sea Shepherds are just two examples. Because of these facts, Antarctica will inevitably gain increased attention in the future and thus historians will need to give more of their attention to Antarctic history. While giving more attention to the continent's history will result in additional worthwhile research projects and historical research about the region, without proper communication it will remain meaningless. But informing the passengers aboard Antarctic cruise ships is extremely important as they are the only people going to the



Figure 5 Potential Antarctic ambassadors visiting the local population.
Photo by author.

frozen continent other than a small number of professionals and scientists.

That the proverbial ivory tower is not a place where historians should long to be is a widely accepted fact. For the historian interested in Antarctic history, leaving the ivory tower might not mean getting in touch with his or her local community, but boarding the ship whenever there might be an opportunity.

Finally it should be noted that going to Antarctica is definitely a useful experience, but it is also difficult work as it is part of the job of the lecturer to shepherd the passengers while being ashore, to answer the same question a hundred times, to enforce the regulations for encounters with and protection of Antarctic wildlife as well as historic monuments... in other words, it's just the same as communicating history and historical research in your very own community.

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Notes

¹ Robert Falcon Scott, *The Last Expedition* (London: Vintage Classic, 2012).

² Stephan Andreae and Deutschland Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundersrepublik, *Arktis - Antarktis* (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundersrepublik Deutschland, 1997).

³ Adrian Howkins, "'Have You Been There?'" Some Thoughts on (Not) Visiting Antarctica," *Environmental History* 15, no. 3 (2010).

⁴ E. J. Stewart and D. Draper, "The Sinking of the Ms Explorer: Implications for Cruise Tourism in Arctic Canada," *Arctic* 61, no. 2 (2008): 224.

⁵ International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators IAATO, "2011-2012: Summary of Seaborne, Airborne, and Land-Based Antarctic Tourism"

http://iaato.org/documents/10157/91866/tourism_summary_byexpedition.pdf (accessed 18.7.2013 2013).

⁶ *The Antarctic Treaty System*, (Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Pub. Service, 1983).

⁷ S. L. Chown and others, "Challenges to the Future Conservation of the Antarctic," *Science* 337, no. 6091 (2012).