Looking beneath the tip of the iceberg: researching the history of the Antarctic working class, *c.* 1750-1920

Between 1750 and the end of the 'Heroic Age' in the 1920s, around 15000 people went to Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic islands. Despite this, Antarctic historians have collectively, and without exception, deemed that experiences of around 100 of these people were historically significant. Compounding the emphasis, about half or more of this latter group are minor actors, only present because of the support role they play. As a result, historians have placed several handfuls of people at the centre of 'the Antarctic drama'. The vast majority of the people who went to Antarctica remain apparently unknown to history, uncommented on by historians, and thoroughly neglected in Antarctic historiography.

One of the strongest reasons for this neglect is the dominance amongst Antarctic historians of the view succinctly put by Fritjof Nansen in his Introduction to Amundsen's *The South Pole* (1912) - 'It is the *man* that matters, here as everywhere'. While the outlook of most Antarctic historians has inclined them to agree with Nansen and focus on the actions of a select Pantheon of heroic leaders, their predelictions have been supported by the difficulty of finding information about the actual role of the working class in Antarctic history. The voices of the maritime masses is particularly muted, especially during the explorations up to c. 1850. While from at least the mid-18th century there was a tradition of British, and to a lesser extent European and American, working class self-writing, those who took part in voyages of Antarctic exploration were very often bound by strict conditions designed to prevent all but officially-sanctioned information from seeing the light of day. While some working class sailors kept records in the form of diaries and journals, very few of these have survived into the modern era. The majority of information about early Antarctic history directly reflects the heroic individualistic outlooks of the great explorers themselves.

Given the nature of the dominant information, researchers who want to understand the role and significance of the working class in Antarctic history need to draw on the

rich variety of techniques that historians in other fields have developed to investigate the history of other relatively voiceless groups. From the 1960s, historians have adopted techniques from adjacent disciplines, especially anthropology, cultural studies, gender studies and history-from-below, and brought to light the histories of a whole range of 'subaltern' people, especially women, slaves, workers, indigenous, homosexuals. For historians of the Antarctic working class, one way of doing this is by adopting the idea of 'reading against the grain' of the official accounts. Once one approaches the classic texts of Antarctic exploration as documents that reflect the class point-of-view of the writers and the societies from which they came, one can begin to read them for evidence of what they remain silent about, what they pass over without comment and what they choose to include and to emphasise. Invariably, it is the role of officers and leaders that are highlighted in these accounts, while the working class are consigned to a passive role in which they can play no important part in Antarctic exploration. Few writers were as honest in putting forth their views as Barlatier Demas, 2nd Lieutenant on D'Urville's *Astrolabe*, who described French seamen as 'living machines, destined to pull on oars all their lives.', but such views lay just beneath the surface of many of the derogatory descriptions with which the Antarctic canon is studded.

While the official accounts of explorers are essential for building knowledge of the role of the working class, they can be augmented with the quite different perspectives found in working class accounts of Antarctic exploration. John Marra's *Journal of the Resolution's Voyage* was published in 1775 – cheekily pre-empting Cook's official account. As gunners' mate on Cook's *Resolution*, Marra ranked pretty lowly in the naval pecking order, and his text gives us a rare view of late 18th century Antarctic exploration from the forecastle. The value of its distinctively working class perspective can be seen by comparing Cook's and Marra's description of the provision of drinking water. In common with many other official accounts of Antarctic exploration, Cook mentions the necessity of re-provisioning the ships with fresh water from Antarctic glacial ice, and provides some information about how this was done and the steps taken to warm the frozen sailors involved in this task. Marra's class conscious description, on the other hand, communicates the experience from below, explaining that the pieces of floating ice were so large and heavy, 'that it became absolutely necessary for them to plunge their arms into the water in order to

get their hands under them to obtain a purchase'. The result of this was that 'their arms in a very short space of time put on the appearance of icicles, and became so numbed as for the present to be totally incapable of use.' The seamen performed this hard labour until enough ice had been collected and melted to replenish the ships' stores of drinking water – the best part of 3 weeks, in this instance. Not for nothing did Marra introduce his description of 'ice-watering' with the comment that although the provision of this utterly necessary water supply appeared to be without cost – a 'gratification', as he put it - in reality it was far from free. Rather, it had been 'dearly purchased by the pain of those whose lot it was to procure it, … a grievous service '.

Marra's account goes further than telling us that agonising working class labour underpinned the continuation of Cook's and other Antarctic explorations. Where the official accounts imply that the seamen were motivated to the 'grievous service' of ice-watering by the carrot of an extra tot of spirits delivered benevolently, Marra argued that the stick - in the form of the threat of the lash - was a more important motivating factor. It was this he alluded to when he noted that the seamen 'would relieve each other [from ice-watering], when commanded … , with as much alacrity, as if it had been only to take their turn at the nightly watch.', because 'such is the advantage of discipline' [8] As much as it goes against the grain of the established history, it seems that at least at times, working class labour on Antarctic explorations was coerced rather than given willingly.

The other great direct working class source for Antarctic exploration is the autobiography of Thomas Smith. Smith worked as a sailor, sealer and whaler in the early 19th century, participating in the fur and elephant seal slaughter on South Georgia and the South Shetlands between 1815 and 1825. His autobiography – the shortened title is *A Narrative of the Life, Travels and Sufferings of Thomas W. Smith* - chronicles the quite unbelievable suffering and systematic exploitation that was endured by the workers (amounting to several thousands in these years) employed by Antarctic sealing masters. Apart from adding to our picture of this important segment of the Antarctic working class, Smith's account raises questions about the term 'explorer' itself. Smith describes in detail how in the course of their work, sealers necessarily became explorers themselves, as they investigated and accumulated knowledge, which was embodied in early maps, about hitherto unexplored parts of the

South Georgia coast. Intriguingly, Smith mentions several episodes in which sealers made quite considerable journeys into the mountains of South Georgia, and in one case attempted to cross from the south to the north coast. Although the crossing was unsuccessful, and ended in tragedy, it suggests how tenuous and circumstantial are the claims of heroic and historical status given to individuals such as Shackleton and his 1916 crossing of South Georgia.

While research into the history of the working class in Antarctica is in its infancy, it offers us an opportunity to develop more critical perspectives on the human history of the continent. It leads us to interrogate some of the received interpretations, and to ask exciting new questions about how Antarctic exploration happened. As interest in the subject increases, hitherto unknown sources will come to light, and these in turn will allow additional questions to be posed, and new explanations for Antarctic history to be developed.

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