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Abstract

This article examines the cultural artefacts of memory that have been produced as a result of New Zealand's ongoing participation in the exploration of Antarctica. In this research I define two classes of Antarctic memory-making. The first is composed of geographically located artefacts directly associated with New Zealand's physical participation in South Pole exploration. The second class posits representational interpretations of Antarctica as sites of cultural "meaningfulness" to New Zealand's identity. Both categories are defined chronologically by the Antarctic Treaty (1959), which sought to protect objects of "historical interest" from damage or destruction while prohibiting the addition of other permanent artefacts. I suggest that one unforeseen outcome of the Antarctic Treaty was the creation of two states of memory: one of authentic history dating from before 1959, and another of documentary history (requiring representational interpretation), which has occurred since that time. The best examples of the former are the rudimentary huts which remain from the so-called "heroic period" of Antarctic exploration. An excellent example of the latter is found in the Artists to Antarctica programme in which selected New Zealand artists—writers, visual artists and musicians—have the opportunity to visit and record their views of the region's unique qualities. In two parts I give some critical consideration to each memory state using specific examples, and discuss the implications they present. Finally, the article introduces what I consider an "illegitimate" monumentality in the example of Air New Zealand Flight TE-901 (which tragically collided with Mount Erebus in 1979), and which lies uneasily between historical and documentary classifications of memory.

Keywords: Antarctica, explorer huts, monumentality, architectural nationalism

Françoise Choay has written that the "monument" reveals itself as an object whose function is to "make us remember".[1] From this Latin origin, a monument is not simply a reminder, a pointer to some past event. It operates first as a warning taken from the past and into the future.[2] This is first self-evident in the example of nationalism. The New Zealand landscape is littered with war memorials that, in reminding us of the loss of life suffered in violence, also show us what is at stake in future conflicts. In other examples of monumentality, warning presents itself through postscript. The classical ruins of Europe stand as a testament to the passage of empires, as do empty houses in New Zealand's small towns during economic downturn. Our most everyday monument is the cemetery headstone, but what warning are we to take from this prosaic and universal standard: that death finds us all? A visitor to the historic Karori cemetery in Wellington may well ask even more of the past's lessons when facing the grave of Harry McNish, which features a bronze cat reclining on its surface. McNish was the ship's carpenter on Sir Ernest Shackleton's doomed Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition (1914-1917). He was also the custodian of a cat named "Mrs Chippy", which he had smuggled on board. After the loss of their ship, ironically named *Endurance*, McNish was instrumental in ensuring the seaworthiness of the small boats that eventually lead to Shackelton making the islands of South Georgia in an extraordinary sea voyage of 800 miles. However, long before then, Shackelton had ordered Mrs Chippy be destroyed because, in his view, the animal had no chance of survival. McNish never forgave Shackelton for having the cat killed. Shackelton, in turn, denied McNish a Polar Medal, despite the carpenter being integral to the party's survival.

McNish died destitute in 1930, and his grave remained unmarked for almost 30 years until the New Zealand Antarctic Society erected a headstone in 1959. In 2004, the New Zealand Antarctic Society added a life-sized bronze sculpture of Mrs Chippy to the grave. Visiting today, one might imagine it to be the grave of a man with a special relationship with this particular cat and one would not be wrong. However, this only hints at the scale of history hidden in this diminutive scene. In the face of the monumental mythology of Shackleton's escape from Antarctica, McNish's grave is a fitting tribute to the pain of personal sacrifice that lives long after the heat of heroics has gone.

McNish's grave is a part of the material culture of Antarctica and, like many other examples, it is also a notable part of New Zealand's cultural and historic fabric. In this article I discuss other examples of this country's ongoing participation in the geographic, scientific, and cultural exploration of the region. I begin by establishing two classes of Antarctic memory-making. The first is composed of geographically located artefacts directly associated with New Zealand's actual participation in Antarctic exploration. The second consists of representational interpretations of Antarctica that present it as a site of cultural meaningfulness to the New Zealand identity. These two categories are defined chronologically by the Antarctic Treaty, which sought to protect objects of "historical interest" from damage or destruction, while prohibiting the addition of other permanent artefacts.

Unfortunately, one unforeseen outcome of the Antarctic Treaty was the creation of two states of memory: one of "authentic" history dating from before 1959, and another of documentary, which requires representational interpretation and has occurred since that time. The best examples of the former are the rudimentary huts, which remain from the so-called "heroic period" of Antarctic exploration. An excellent example of the latter is found in the Artists to Antarctica programme in which selected New Zealand artists—writers, visual artists and musicians—have the opportunity to visit and record their views of the region's unique qualities.

I will first give some critical consideration to each memory state using specific examples, and then discuss the implications they present. Finally, the article will briefly examine an example of what I consider to be an "illegitimate" monumentality in the example of Air New Zealand Flight TE-901, which tragically collided with Mount Erebus in 1979, killing all 257 on board. The recent date of the event, and the sensitive nature of the site, means that it falls into a state not authenticated by the Antarctic Treaty and not available to documentary. It is an alien intrusion in a landscape that has been, and still is, defined by concepts of natural wilderness. Nonetheless, this flight plays its own significant role in the construction of New Zealand's national narrative, and the place of the New Zealander in the Antarctic.

Despite our obvious southern association, the relationship with Antarctica should not be taken for granted. That it is significantly greater in size than New Zealand's domestic landmass makes a case for ownership more surprising, and is due in large part to this country's geographic proximity as the closest outpost of the British Empire to this section of the continent when the first round of division occurred in 1923. The signing of the Antarctic Treaty Agreement in 1959 ratified New Zealand's ballot in what remains, at least passively, contested territory.[3] This Agreement also bestowed upon this country responsibility for the heritage artefacts left behind by the "heroic period" explorations of 1901-1920, prominent amongst which are the explorer huts of the expeditions led by Robert Falcon Scott and Shackleton.

Part 1 – The explorer huts

Cool! Wow! Beautiful! Awesome![4]

These short words, punctuated with four exclamation marks, were liberated by poet, Bill Manhire, from the visitors' book at Shackleton's Cape Evans hut for his own collection, *Visiting Mr Shackleton (for Chris Cochran)*. It is not clear whether we should take such abridged feedback as a failure of words, or a failure of vocabulary. Perhaps we should marvel that an isolated shack, built a century ago as temporary accommodation in an inhospitable and largely unapproachable region, has a visitors' book at all.

Ironically, it is probably the neglect of these huts that has assured their longevity. In 1956, United States explorer, Richard Byrd, found Scott's Discovery

Figure 1. The hut at Cape Adare in the Antarctic, built by the "Southern Cross" party in 1896. 1901-1904. Photographer unidentified. Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand. Ref. F-51719-1/2.

Hut appearing as if it had only recently been abandoned: "The timbers looked as if freshly sawn."[5] Abandoned cabin biscuits were sampled and found to be edible, if rather tasteless. Wax matches lit cleanly, and nails from a broken barrel had not rusted. While the hut could not be entered because of ice intrusion, the disarray of human detritus surrounding the huts was commented upon, and a variety of artefacts were removed as souvenirs.[6]

From this re-discovery every contact with the huts reinforced their historic value as monuments to a period in Antarctic exploration marked by tragedy and heroics. However, on this continent the absence of occupation elevates all artefacts to monumental status as proof of human resilience. Yet, this same logic means that nothing ever leaves behind its utilitarianism enough to become fully monumental. After his 1907-1909 expedition, Shackleton left supplies in the Cape Royds hut, writing later that: "The vicissitudes of life in the Antarctic are such that such a supply might prove of the greatest value to some future expedition."[7] Attempts at restoration in the 1960s took this theme quite literally and sought to return the huts to the moment when the explorers left, locking the door, but leaving the key for others.[8]

In the summer of 1964-1965 structural strengthening of the hut at Hut Point was completed with the restoration team having arranged "… the stores and equipment in the most effective way possible" to recreate a domestic sphere from the past.[9] These first attempts at historical conservation owed a great deal to the historic shadow cast by the early explorers. Quartermain records the team returning discarded "relics" to what they felt were their correct places in the huts in order "… to make the hut look as far as possible as it had done when occupied by the pioneers".[10]

What had been left behind as survival shelters by one generation were uncovered as historic monuments by another. The awe that saturated this invention is apparent in comments written by Frank Ponder, the New Zealand

Government architect who oversaw the design of Scott Base. He recalled in his memoirs: "These places were a shrine to their memory … I was overcome by the importance of maintaining these buildings as a monument to the explorers, pioneering spirit, bravery and endeavour."[11]

Ponder's romantic nationalistic view of Antarctic exploration sets the scene for New Zealand's subsequent approach to restoration and conservation. The explorations of Scott and Shackleton may not have been New Zealand initiatives, but through associations of empire and locality New Zealanders are implicated in the history of Antarctica, and have inherited a responsibility toward the material evidence of exploration.

While there is no question that these rudimentary shelters are important historic sites, the issue of restoration and preservation of the huts reveals a conflict between conventional building heritage conservation and the protection of crude dwellings built in the most barren environment on the planet. These huts were not conceived of as enduring monuments. While they are deteriorating as a result of climate and activity, the reality is that they were never built for anything other than as a respite against the elements for a very brief moment in Antarctic history. Despite originally being considered a temporary contingency, the huts have actually lasted exceedingly well in the extremes of the southern continent.

All the historic sites in the Antarctic region are governed by the provisions of the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, the same year the New Zealand Antarctic Society recognised Harry McNish. This Agreement requires governments to "adopt all adequate measures to protect such tombs, buildings or objects of historical interest from damage or destruction".[12] However, nationalistic competition over Antarctica and its resources has elevated almost all evidence of human occupation in this environment to the status of artefact. The nature of monuments at isolated locations is itself a suspect exercise given that the Treaty's Annex of Historic Monuments includes a heavy tractor left by the USSR at Vostok Station, the abandoned installations of the Argentine Station, General San Martin, and a "concrete monolith" erected by the Chilean government as a point of reference for hydrographical work.[13]

Monuments are evidence of nationalistic ownership even as they stand as stark symbols of the failures of Western progress to dominate in this region. This language of monumentality is at odds with the monumental traditions of Europe. The great Gothic revivalist, Augustine Pugin, saw the Western monument as defined by a strict contrast with the evidence of industrial and cultural progress, and he designed accordingly.[14] However, the monuments of Antarctica, and especially the explorer huts, are afforded monumental status on the basis that they stand distinct from their surroundings. In representing the extent of civilised occupation in a continent otherwise inhospitable to human life, they also signal a failure of Western progress to productively occupy this site. It is for this reason that pieces of utilitarian machinery (which is the typological role played by the huts) can gain monumental significance. They embody the failure of conquest, and although they depart dramatically from normalised architectural heritage they

nonetheless represent, in imperial terms, a proprietary investment.

Ownership is the reason why preservation of the Antarctic huts is such an important issue. Unlike conventional heritage culture, what is at stake here is not ownership of the architectural artefact but the power of this artefact to claim possession of its environment, particularly those environments with a claim. As Geoffrey Bennington has argued, a concept of nation cannot exist outside of those narrative structures that construct it.[15] This is the difference between a hut and a tractor. Architecture, however rudimentary, will always display these stories of human occupation more poignantly than a tractor, if only because it can throw the weight of human history behind its gesture.

The paradox is that this acknowledgement of the failure of Western conquest allows the prosaic and banal to take on monumental qualities. Placed against the background of industrialised Europe, any symbolic significance attached to a primitive or mechanical form would be immediately overwhelmed by a more tangible artefact of human occupation, in particular the cathedral. Here, significance is built upon failure, and not success, but it does serve Choay's requirement that heritage enterprises maintain *valorization*. However, as she explains, this word refers not only to intellectual and spiritual values but also those economic values that valorization offers.[16]

Scott and Shackleton saw these diminutive dwellings in fond, but otherwise pragmatic, terms. They were a means to an end. Today that end has shifted from geographic exploration for political purposes to scientific exploration, which leads inevitably to economic purposes. The immediate example of this practice is the rise in Antarctic tourism in which the huts play a key symbolic role as pilgrimage destinations in a broader wilderness experience. This elevates the historic prominence of the huts, but visitors are also a destructive factor working against long-term historical preservation. Moisture from the breath of visitors is contributing to the deterioration of the hut interiors. Every utterance of "Cool!", "Wow!", and "Awesome" is nothing less than a biological attack on the material integrity of these memory containers.

Figure 2. Captain Robert Falcon Scott at a table writing in his den in Antarctica, 7 October 1911. Photographer: Herbert George Ponting. Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand. Scott Album. PAColl-5011 Ref. F-11384-1/2.

Part 2 – Photographic records

It stinks of blubber. It's cold and it's dark and it's godforsaken.[17]

Thoughts of biological warfare were probably not on the mind of photographer, Jane Ussher, during the time spent photographing in the Antarctic huts. Columnist, Steve Braunias, describes meeting Ussher at Scott Base, feral and delirious, raving about "the huts, the huts".[18] The images she recorded are the central element of a book, *Still Life*, which provides the most detailed photographic documentary of these huts. Herbert Ponting first pointed his camera lens at his colleagues in 1910. Ussher visited at the invitation of the Antarctic Heritage Trust, with the express purpose of recording the expedition huts of Scott and Shackleton. Ussher's images can be imagined as a kind of architectural portraiture.

Comparing Ussher to Ponting serves to contrast the differences between them. Ponting's photographs are images from history; Ussher's are, as she indicates in the title of her book, images that make things history. Or, as Braunias describes her work, Ussher has "… lit beauty. She's framed melancholy. She's exposed still death". To give Braunias's comment a context, one needs to know that his view of Antarctica is refreshingly unflattering. Of his experience he says, "Everything about Antarctica was a monument to death".[19] The huts, too, are in his view just another monument to death. This view comes closest to what it might have actually been like to have visited this place 100 years ago. Against Ponting's hero worship, Braunias sees old-fashioned hardship. Harry McNish wrote frequently in his journal of the misery of having piles. Not a heroic notation, but it is one consistent with the grimy wretchedness recorded by Ponting.

Ponting's iconic portrait of Shackleton working at his desk in the Cape Evans hut (c.1911) may be viewed as a scene of civility. Until, that is, one understands

that the books, photographs, the smoking pipes, are all that pass for human activity in this place. There is nothing of civilisation outside the image. There is nothing at all outside the image Ponting gives us. Ussher's images are different. They are, to understate it even, beautiful photographs, but this is not necessarily a compliment. Beauty, writes architectural theorist, Mark Cousins, is used as a way of turning from ugliness. Ussher draws out of the decomposing penguins and corroded cans of food beautiful images of ugly things.

In discussing exploration of the Antarctic during the nineteenth century, Francis Spufford has suggested that the concept of the sublime, espoused by writers such as Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century, provided Victorian travellers with a ready-made paradigm for understanding their experiences. In buildings, Burke saw greatness of dimension as the defining characteristic of the sublime, but in the Antarctic buildings contract in a spectacular way against the vastness of wilderness. The effect is to create two sublimes: a timeless continental sublime outside the hut, and an historic domestic sublime inside the hut. This is why the painstaking detail in Ussher's photographs is so important. The infinity of detail in these interiors becomes a sublime world contained within another greater sublimity. However, in their exacting attention to light and resolution they also whisper that something is wrong.

In 1985, Chris Burden, an American conceptual artist, built a gallery installation called *SAMSON*, in which a 100-ton jack, connected by gearbox to a turnstile, exerted pressure on the gallery walls. Every time a visitor passed through the turnstile a small increase in extension was transmitted to the jack, thus increasing the outward pressure on the walls. Each individual movement of the jack was imperceptible, but the combined impact contained the potential for catastrophe. Burden's dealer described this slow inevitability as being like that of a glacier.[20] Ussher's photographs remind me of *SAMSON*. I see in them a similar inevitability, although I am not sure that this was Ussher's intention. The glacial analogy given to *SAMSON* represents that the destructive weight of imperceptible entropy has a literalness and poignancy in Antarctica that seeks to own it as a turn of phrase.

I imagine the photographer leaning over her tripod, checking aperture and adjusting focus, all the time oblivious to her own breathing which is inching an entropic jack forward one foggy exhalation after the next, and all in the interests of preservation.

Part 3 – Flight TE-901

An orchestrated litany of lies.[21]

Just before 8.30 am (NZDT) on 28 November, 1979, Air New Zealand Flight TE-901 lifted off from Mangere airport in Auckland on an 11-hour sightseeing round-trip that was to return to Auckland. At 12.49 pm (NZST) it collided with Mount Erebus, an active volcano in Antarctica. The specific cause of Flight TE-901's loss was a

typing error 14 months prior that led to a low-level flight plan being superimposed over the 3,794-metre peak of Erebus.[22] Flying in whiteout conditions, the pilots would never have seen the mountain approaching. An unchecked typo and, over a year later, 257 people died in New Zealand's worst civilian disaster.

The promotional ephemera Air New Zealand produced for its Antarctic "day trips" emphasised the opportunity to "look down on the lonely land of Scott, Shackleton and Byrd, and their explorer-scientist successors".[23] We should not forget, however, that this was a commercial tourism venture driven by economic demands in an environment with a history for being unforgiving to ambition.

Understandably, this tragedy has a prominent place in the national memory of New Zealanders, but it differs from other tragic shadows cast across our collective psyche in two significant ways. First, unlike the Tangiwai rail accident (1953) or the Napier earthquake (1931), Flight TE-901 was a national incident that did not take place inside our national borders. Secondly, and again in contrast to comparable events (including the *Wahine* sinking, of 1968), Erebus was not a natural disaster. It may have occurred in as natural an environment as one might imagine, but it was a tragedy of human error. These paradoxes extend to the present day. The crash site has become a sacred place of memory, but it is one at odds with the Antarctic Treaty which classifies aircraft wreckage as an unwelcome intrusion. At the same time, the Erebus disaster is within living memory, so the associations are still too raw to lend themselves to artistic interpretation.

The wreckage of Flight TE-901 remains in-situ on Mount Erebus, with parts of it becoming visible during warm periods when the snow recedes. This is not a monument in any traditional sense. We are not at liberty to walk through the physical remnants of this event like the marble ruins of a civilisation, witnessing for ourselves the evidence of failed aspirations. Unlike Gallipoli, Erebus will not become a place of pilgrimage, nor a right of nationalistic passage. It is removed from any immediacy of place.

Of the 257 onboard the flight, 200 were New Zealanders.[24] This bleak statistic means that more New Zealanders have died in Antarctica than any other nationality. This, one could argue, gives New Zealand a peculiar stake in the region. Where other nationalities might see a potential holding, this country already has a historic relationship of hardship and sacrifice found in the lives of men like Harry McNish. Just as we are, in some small way, defined by Antarctica, so it is by us in a mutual recognition. Sir Edmund Hillary was to have been on the flight before other commitments forced his withdrawal. The heroic figure of Hillary is an interesting foil. There was no opportunity for heroics onboard Flight TE-901. One moment it was a routine flight, the next it was gone. The heroes of the flight were found in the aftermath of the tragedy (arriving as police, military, and civilian personnel tasked with collecting and identifying the remains of the crew and passengers), and in the personage of Justice Peter Mahon, whose one-man Royal Commission of Inquiry cleared the flight crew from error.

Conclusion

As a geographically and historically significant locality the crash site of Flight TE-901 holds a special meaning to New Zealanders, but what does it mean to consider it a national monument? Unlike the explorer huts it arrived too late, and too pointlessly, to operate as a symbol of empire building. At the same time, the ordinances of the Antarctic Treaty classify it as alien in what that document defends as a pristine wilderness. The wreckage of the flight is an illegitimate presence that refuses to be removed, either literally or figuratively, and it persists as a particular type of container for holding national memory. Phenomenologist, Gaston Bachelard, wrote that a casket contains things that are unforgettable to us: "The past, the present and a future are concentrated inside. In this way the casket becomes the memory of time immemorial."[25] The image of the casket runs through these Antarctic monuments, from the remote isolation of a hut, to the oppressive detail in a photographic study, and the spatial configuration of an aeroplane fuselage. Each, in its own way, is a funerary monument as life gives way to the spectacle of *nature morte.* After all, isn't it the case that memory needs to be frozen in time and place?

Endnotes

[1]Francoise Choay, "Alberti: The Invention of Monumentality and Memory," *The Harvard Architectural Review* 4 Spring (1984): 99.
[2]Choay, "Alberti," 99.
[3]A complete account of how New Zealand came to be a claimant state in the division of Antarctica can be found in Malcolm Templeton, *A Wise Adventure: New Zealand & Antarctica 1920-1960* (Wellington, Victoria University Press, 2000).
[4]Manhire, Bill ed., *The Wide White Page* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004): 298.
[5]Byrd quoted in L.B. Quartermain, *Two Huts in the Antarctic* (Wellington: Antarctic Division New Zealand Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, 1963): 64.
[6]According to Quartermain the 1947 party found a copper tube containing a piece of ruled paper bearing the names Mackintosh, Hayward, and Spencer-Smith, and some inaccurately remembered lines of poetry by Browning. They also removed a sledge, which is now lodged in the Navy Academy Museum at Annapolis. Similarly the 1947-1948 group removed artefacts including a typed letter whose present location is not known. It should be considered likely that other artefacts were removed by the navy personnel and not declared. Quartermain, "Two Huts," 64.
[7]Ernest Shackleton, *The Heart of the Antarctic: Being the Story of the British Antarctic Expedition, 1907-1909* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1999).
[8]"The hut was locked up and the key hung up outside where it would be easily found, and we readjusted the lashing of the hut so that it might be able to withstand the

attacks of the blizzards during the years to come. … If any party has to make use of our hut in the future, it will find there everything that it requires." Shackleton, "The Heart of the Antarctic," 443-44.

[9]L.B. Quartermain, *New Zealand and the Antarctic* (Wellington: A.R. Shearer, Government Printer, 1971): 228.

[10]Quartermain, "New Zealand," 228.

[11]Frank W Ponder, *A Man from the Ministry* (Christchurch: Wenlock House, 1996): 127.

[12]"Antarctic Treaty Recommendations 2.6.2, I-IX Historic Sites (January 2005)," accessed November 5, 2010, www.anta.canterbury.ac.nz/resources/handbook/vol2/2-6.html

[13]Antarctic Treaty, *Handbook of Measures in Furtherance of the Principles and Objectives of the Antarctic Treaty* (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs, 1983).

[14]A.W.N. Pugin, *Contrasts: Or, a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Similar Buildings of the Present Day* (New York: Leicester University Press, 1836; 1969 ed.).

[15]"We undoubtedly find narration at the centre of nation: stories of national origins, myths of founding fathers, genealogies of heroes. At the origin of the nation, we find a story of the nation's origin," quoted in Geoffrey Bennington, "Postal Politics and the Institution of the Nation," in ed. H.K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990): 121.

[16]Choay, "Alberti," 143.

[17]Steve Braunias, "Hut Valley," *Sunday Star*Times Magazine* (14 November 2010) 46.

[18]Braunias, "Hut Valley," 46.

[19]Braunias, "Hut Valley," 46.

[20]Zwirner & Wirth, *Chris Burden: Early Work* (14 September – 23 October 2004), accessed December 4, 2010, www.zwirnerandwirth.com/exhibition/2004/090burden/press.html

[21]Peter Mahon, *Report of the Royal Commission to Inquire into the Crash on Mount Erebus, Antarctica of a DC10 Aircraft Operated by Air New Zealand Ltd, 1981* (Wellington: Government Printer, 1981): para 377.

[22]New Zealand History online, "Timeline to Disaster – Erebus Disaster," accessed November 16, 2011, http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/culture/erebus-disaster/crash-of-flight-901

[23]Christchurch City Libraries, "New Zealand Disasters: Aircraft Accident: DC 10 ZK-NZP Flight 901," accessed November 25, 2010 http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/kids/nzdisasters/erebus.asp

[24]The other nationalities were composed of 24 Japanese, 22 Americans, six British, two Canadians, one Australian, one French, and one Swiss. The Erebus Story "Roll of Remembrance," accessed November 15, 2011, http://www.erebus.co.nz/MemorialandAwards/RollofRemembrance.aspx

[25]Gaston Bachelard, "Chest and Casket," *Daidalos* 53 (1994): 57.

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