

SCAR History of Antarctic Research Expert Group

Report of the 7th SCAR History Workshop “Antarctic history: probing the unknown”

Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, Stellenbosch, South Africa, 26-29 July 2011

The SCAR History Action Group held its annual workshop in Stellenbosch from July 26 to 29, 2011. The workshop was hosted by the Centre for Invasion Biology at Stellenbosch University with the generous support of the South African National Research Foundation, the German Research Foundation, and SCAR. At this occasion – the first Group meeting on the African continent – twenty-three participants from five continents shared their research. In keeping with the workshop’s theme of ‘probing the unknown,’ presentations showcased new methodological perspectives, especially in archeology and anthropology, in addition to unearthing fresh information on the history of polar research.

The workshop was timed to coincide with the launch of two major projects that promise to greatly assist polar history for years to come. The Antarctic Legacy Project, based at Stellenbosch University, has collected and digitized photographs, personal diaries, and oral history interviews related to South African Antarctic research. The University of Cape Town has digitized and indexed over seventy thousand primary documents related to the Antarctic from South African government archives, material that will be of great relevance to scholars around the world. Both projects have been sponsored by the South African National Research Foundation.

Two plenary lectures were given. Peder Roberts presented work conducted with Lize-Marie van der Watt, arguing that Bouvet Island was a means of exploring wider issues in polar history and politics. This remote and nearly inaccessible island was nevertheless at the centre of wider debates concerning British imperial power, South African meteorological ambitions, and Norwegian Antarctic plans during the Cold War. Maria Ximena Senatore challenged the master narratives of Antarctic history by showing that archeological evidence can illuminate the nineteenth-century sealing or whaling for which documentary records are extremely scarce, showing that these activities were connected to global commercial networks.

Workshop presentations embraced both local and international perspectives. Archeological research on the lives of sealers and whalers, and anthropological research on the lives of scientists, provided particularly stimulating. Papers brought to light new information on South African Antarctic monuments, archeological research on Marion Island, the careers of early Antarctic scientists, and aviation in the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic. One particularly important contribution challenged white-dominated narratives of South African Antarctic history while locating recent counter-narratives in the contemporary political context. Studies focused on new sources for polar history embraced both the opportunities of working with newly-collected materials from the Legacy Project, the value of textbooks as primary historical sources, and the opportunities of disseminating historical material to the public through internet portals. Other papers demonstrated how research on the Crozet Islands sealing trade could profitably draw upon a broad range of material, from statistical records to legal documents, and how more traditional (but hitherto unavailable) documentary records

could shed new light on even well-studied episodes, in addition to the challenges of constructing narratives from modern expeditions where source material has been lost. The programme also included a filmed play about the relationship between Chile and the United States in the Antarctic, which prompted further thoughts about the potential of theater as a forum for presenting historical research.

This was the last meeting of the Action Group before its reincorporation as a SCAR Expert Group, a reflection of the Group's continued growth under the leadership of Cornelia Lüdecke. The mix of senior and early-career scholars, in addition to veterans of Antarctic research and key figures from the South African Antarctic programme, led to a series of highly energetic conversations that confirmed the continuing importance of the human element to SCAR's activities.