

Sydney Cullis – a Contributor towards the preserving of the Antarctic Legacy of South Africa(ALSA) and Supporter of the ALSA project

Although born in Pretoria, I was at school and university in Cape Town. My surgical training started with internship at Groote Schuur Hospital and I was then fortunate to spend time in Zimbabwe, London, Edinburgh, Durban and, by then married to Catherine who I met in the pub after a hockey match in Durban, we returned to Cape Town. Here, under the tutorship of Prof Jannie Louw, I obtained the Fellowship of the College of Surgeons of South Africa in 1973 and the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh the following year.

When our first child, James, was three days old I left for Hereford in the UK where we had a very enjoyable year “practising on the Poms” - because, although GSH afforded excellent experience in trauma and exotic cancers, the NHS in the UK provided exposure to the “bread and butter” of general surgery in private practice. When we returned to Cape Town I joined a partnership of three other general surgeons, initially in Wynberg and later in Claremont and was also a part-time consultant in the Department of Surgery at UCT/GSH.

In 2007 , as per our partnership agreement, I retired from the practice but continued to assist my partners in theatre – and also celebrated my semi-retirement by undertaking a cruise from Ushuaia in Argentina to the Falklands, South Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula as far as Petermann Island, just north of the Antarctic Circle. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic I have now retired fully as it is recommended that surgeons over 60 should stay out of theatre.



Sydney and Catherine at “furthest south”



At Shackleton's grave, South Georgia

In 1993 when our son, James, was in Matric he had to produce a talk for one of the school societies and, as the Fiennes/Stroud "In the footsteps of Scott" expedition to cross Antarctica unsupported was in the news, he decided to choose it as his subject. To provide him with some guidance I started reading about the history of Antarctic exploration - and the more I read, the more fascinating I found it - and the more South African connections I came across. I was probably more receptive than I might otherwise have been as the first film I ever went to see (aged 6) was "Scott of the Antarctic" in 1948 and I have never forgotten the haunting soundtrack music of the Vaughan Williams's 7th Symphony as they struggled up the Beardmore Glacier.

The following year we visited James who was doing a gap year as a stooge at Bilton Grange School near Rugby in the UK. With my newfound interest in Antarctic history I contacted the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge about the possibility of looking for further South African connections in their archives. Bob Headland, then the Director, replied with an invitation to visit them and, when I did, was extremely helpful in pointing me in the right direction - and on subsequent visits he had even accommodated me in his house in Mawson Road. He recommended that I read an article he had written on the very subject - "A history of South African Involvement in Antarctica and at the Prince Edward Islands" (S. Afr. J. Antarct. Res., Vol 21 No 2, 1991 p 77) which to this day is still the definitive article on the subject. His co-author was John Cooper - and it was only when I returned home that I discovered that he was the same John Cooper that I'd been running with three times a week for several years - and was instrumental in the start of ALSA. I was totally unaware of his interest in, and wide knowledge of, Antarctic history and, needless to say, over the years since then we have continued to run together and John has passed on a wealth of information to me.



John Cooper and Sydney at the Simon's Town Historical Museum for a luncheon to commemorate the Centenary of Scott's Midwinter Dinner - 5th June 2011

Note the replica of Cherry-Garrard's Christmas Tree

Initially my interest was in trawling through the published accounts of the Heroic Era expeditions for South African connections-and discovered that, not only did many of the expeditions use Cape Town or Simon's Town as a revictualling port, but many of the members of those expeditions had spent time in South Africa either before or after their visits to Antarctica – Maclear (*Challenger*), Scott, Shackleton, Wild, Joyce, Ferrar (*Discovery*), Pirie (*Scotia*), Davis (*Nimrod*), Oates, Mears (*Terra Nova*), Gray (*Aurora*) and James (*Endurance*) are some of them.

As I delved deeper into the subject, I realised that it was part of our history that was not well known here in South Africa. The only visible evidence of this that I was aware of was the Scott Memorial near to the fountain at the bottom of Adderley Street and a small display on Marion Island at the Iziko Museum.



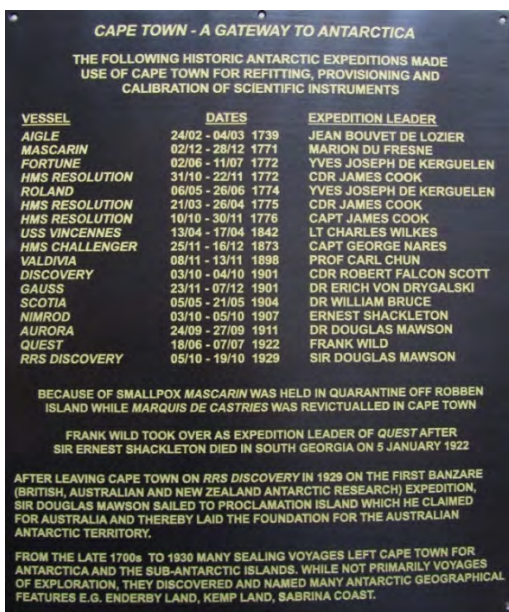
I therefore tried to find ways of highlighting the concept that Cape Town and Simon’s Town were “Gateways to Antarctica” - by creating presentations to historical societies, U3A’s, UCT Summer School, and Ship Societies both in Cape Town and Durban. I also facilitated the erection of plaques listing the Antarctic expeditions that passed through Simon’s Town in Jubilee Square and the British Hotel there. Another plaque containing the list of the 17 historic Antarctic expeditions that had made use of Cape Town was made with a view to it being erected somewhere in the V & A Waterfront - but unfortunately it is still gathering dust somewhere there.



Plaque at Jubilee Square. Simon’s Town



Plaque outside British Hotel, Simon’s town



Cape Town plaque



Painting of *Aurora* by Jeremy Day

Another source of information has been the study of newspaper reports of their visits - thanks to the South African library. One such report on the departure of *Aurora* from Cape Town in 1911 mentioned how one of the huskies had fallen overboard and had been rescued by a passing dinghy. This enabled the episode to be recorded in a painting of her departure by Jeremy Day which was commissioned to celebrate the centenary of *Aurora's* visit to Cape Town.

In 2015 John Cooper had alerted me to the risk that the series of Peter Bilas paintings of Antarctic ships on *SA Agulhas I* might get lost or damaged when being transferred to the new *SA Agulhas II*. We therefore arranged for them to be restored (sponsored by GAC Shipping) and exhibited in the Iziko Maritime Museum at the V&A waterfront.



Poster for the Bilas Antarctic Ship painting Exhibition

Having a niche interest such as this has provided the opportunity when travelling away from Cape Town to search out items of Antarctic interest -

The bell in the church at Gestingthorpe near Cambridge which Mrs Oates restored and engraved in memory of her son Lawrence's involvement in the Anglo Boer War.



Sign outside Church in Gestingthorpe

The grave of Frank Oates (Lawrence's uncle) in the bush on the border between Botswana and Zimbabwe

The crumb-scoop from *Discovery* on the farm near Middelburg of Mike Ferrar, great nephew of Hartley Ferrar, the geologist on *Discovery*.



Franks Oates's grave



Discovery toasting fork and crumb-scoop

The grave of Hartley Ferrar's mother in the Stellawood cemetery on the Berea in Durban.

The farm "Quest Estates" in Mkuse in northern KZN where Frank Wild lived after the Quest expedition, the Mkuse railway bridge he helped to build and the Golela Hotel on the border with Swaziland where he worked as a Barman.



Frank Wild (centre) working on
Mkuse Railway bridge



Mkuse railway bridge still standing

The crematorium in Braamfontein in Johannesburg where his ashes were discovered in 2015 by the South African born journalist, Angie Butler.



Braamfontein Crematorium



Frank Wild's ashes

Marion Dufresne's panelling in the Mayor's parlour in St Malo, France



Panelling from Dufresne's house in St Malo taken to USA in 1930's but returned after WWII

The discovery in the Johannesburg Art Gallery of a painting by Charles Shannon of Kathleen Scott, the explorer's widow and another one of her in storage of the National Art Gallery in Cape Town. Also, a painting in the Fehr Collection in the Castle in Cape Town by William Hodges, the artist on James Cook's second round the world voyage during which, a few weeks after leaving Cape Town, he became the first person in recorded history to cross the Antarctic Circle.



Lady in Winged Hat by Shannon



Cape Town by William Hodges (1772)

The Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1955-8 was the first to cross the continent from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea - which Shackleton had failed to do in his Endurance expedition of 1914-17. The meteorologist on that expedition was Hannes la Grange, who thereby became the first South African to reach the South Pole and in 1959 he was appointed leader of the first South African expedition to Antarctica (SANAE 1).



Hannes la Grange

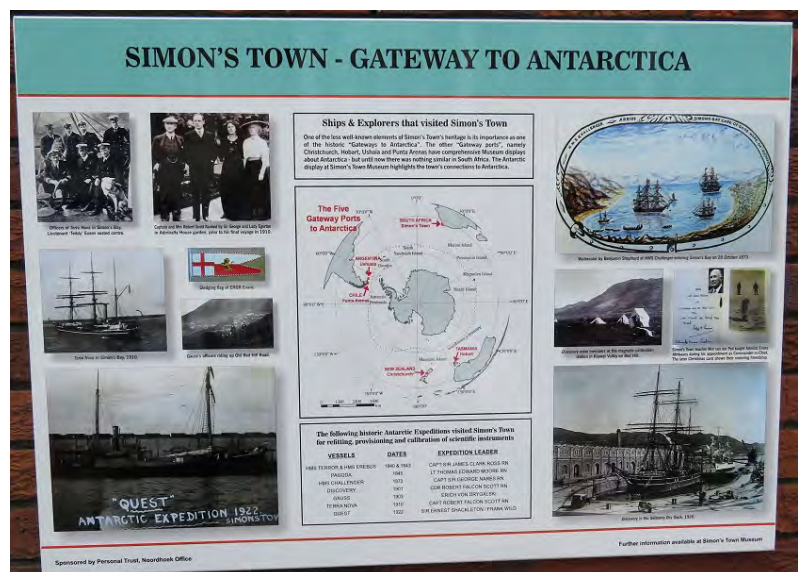


His Snocat with the old South African flag

The surplus after the expedition established a fund and each year, as a result of Hannes's participation, South Africans are able each year to apply for a grant for Antarctic research. In 2010 I applied for, and received, a grant which enabled an Antarctic display to be established at the Simon's Town Historical Museum. Last year a poster entitled "Simon's Town-a Gateway to Antarctica" was added to the Wall of Memory in the centre of the town.



Simon's Town Historical Museum



Poster on Wall of Memory, Main Road, Simon's Town

In 2015 I learned from Jaco Boshoff, marine archaeologist at the Iziko Museum, that he had discovered a sledge in the basement of the museum. It had been left in Cape Town after Shackleton's Quest expedition in 1922 and has now become the centre point of a comprehensive Antarctic display at the museum which opened last year.



A Gateway to Antarctica Exhibition, Iziko Museum, Cape Town

My most recent subject of interest has been the connection between the historic Antarctic explorers and the 2nd Anglo Boer War (ABW) now known as the South African War. As the ABW (1899-02) occurred during the Heroic Era of Antarctic exploration (1895-1922) it is not surprising that at least 13 men took part in both events - but during my research I discovered that for five of the prominent explorers, Shackleton, Wild, Davis, Joyce and Oates, their careers as polar explorers were directly or indirectly due to the ABW. This was the subject of a presentation at the 120-year Commemoration of ABW Conference in Bloemfontein last year.

I have enjoyed the opportunity whenever Antarctic historians have visited Cape Town to show them our "Antarctic sites" - most memorably when showing Bob Headland around Simon's town we discovered that *Discovery's* badge had been added to those on the wall of the Selbourne drydock. *Discovery* had undergone an extensive refit in 1926 in the dock prior to her departure on a research voyage to South Georgia which paved the way to the international ban on whaling enacted in 1936



Discovery badge



Discovery in Selborne Dry Dock, Simon's Town in 1926

The significant anniversaries of the historic Antarctic expeditions have been useful to raise awareness of them in South Africa. A good example was the centenary of the death of Lawrence Oates in March 2012. A plaque was erected on the house in Aberdeen in the Karoo where he had recovered after being shot in the leg during the ABW.



Unveiling of plaque at 16 Brand Street, Aberdeen by Lawrence Oates (right) grandson of explorer who lives in Pretoria and the Greens, current owners .

In December 2021 it will be 250 years since Marion Dufresne spent a month in Cape Town prior to his re-discovering the island which now bears his name and, as a result of its annexation 1947-8, it is an integral part of South Africa. We hope it will be suitably commemorated.

I have been very fortunate to have been afforded the opportunity to develop a new interest/hobby which has resulted in my meeting so many very helpful individuals. I hope that it may have generated a more widespread interest in this relatively unknown facet of South African history.