Filtering ‘ways of seeing’ through their lenses: representations of Antarctic exploration by lesser known Heroic Era photographers.

Patricia Margaret Millar

B.A. (1972),
B.Ed. (Hons) (1999),
Ph.D. (Ed.) (2005),
B.Ant.Stud. (Hons) (2009)

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Patricia Margaret Millar
Date

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Patricia Margaret Millar
Date
Abstract

Photographers made a major contribution to the recording of the Heroic Era of Antarctic exploration. By far the best known photographers were the professionals, Herbert Ponting and Frank Hurley, hired to photograph British and Australasian expeditions. But a great number of photographs were also taken on Belgian, German, Swedish, French, Norwegian and Japanese expeditions. These were taken by amateurs, sometimes designated official photographers, often scientists recording their research. Apart from a few Pole-reaching images from the Norwegian expedition, these lesser known expedition photographers and their work seldom feature in the scholarly literature on the Heroic Era, but they, too, have their importance. They played a vital role in the growing understanding and advancement of Antarctic science; they provided visual evidence of their nation’s determination to penetrate the polar unknown; and they played a formative role in public perceptions of Antarctic geopolitics.

The objective of this study is to collate background information and literature on lesser known Heroic Era photographers and to offer a discursive examination of photographs, assessing their representations of exploration in Antarctica. Photographers’ ‘ways of seeing’ were influenced by their backgrounds and often by the history of their nations’ involvement in Arctic exploration. Their representations were shaped within contexts of prevailing polar exploration discourses—the race for the South Pole, nationalism, heroic adventure, and scientific investigation. The images they brought back were determined by the nature of their expeditions, whether inherently scientific, nationalist, or adventure-seeking; by the various sponsoring imperatives; and by how their photographic documentation was intended to be used.

This study is important because it offers a comparative consideration of photographers of less well known expeditions from a range of nations and cultures, offering new layers of understanding of the forces that drove the exploration of Antarctica. It is based on principles of historiography and on discourse analysis, an appropriate method for examining the multi-layered cultural messages within the images.
# Contents

**ABSTRACT** .................................................................................................................. III

**CONTENTS** ................................................................................................................... IV

**ILLUSTRATIONS** .......................................................................................................... V

**TABLES** ........................................................................................................................ VIII

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ............................................................................................... ix

**PART A: INTRODUCTION** ........................................................................................... 1

- **CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS IN PHOTOGRAPHY** ........................................... 2
  - The Heroic Era .............................................................................................................. 4
  - Importance of visual representation of the Heroic Era .................................................. 7
- **IMPORTANCE OF THE PRESENT STUDY** ................................................................. 8
- **METHODOLOGY** .......................................................................................................... 8
  - Objective ....................................................................................................................... 10
  - Research questions ...................................................................................................... 11
  - Organisation of the thesis ............................................................................................. 11
  - Scope and limitations ................................................................................................. 11

**PART B: VISUAL DOCUMENTATION OF EXPLORATION** ............................................ 13

- **PHOTOGRAPHY** ........................................................................................................ 13
  - ‘Ways of seeing’ ........................................................................................................... 14
  - Discourses of polar exploration .................................................................................. 15
  - Forms of pre-conceptions of the Antarctic .................................................................. 16
  - Cameras and equipment .............................................................................................. 19
  - Amateur photographers ............................................................................................... 23
  - Polar photographers .................................................................................................... 23

- **Colour** ......................................................................................................................... 24
- **Lantern slides and multimedia shows** ........................................................................ 25
- **Postcards** ..................................................................................................................... 26
- **Styles of polar photography** ..................................................................................... 30
- **Promotional aspects** .................................................................................................. 30
- **Photography, art and science** .................................................................................... 31
- **Summary** ..................................................................................................................... 32

**PART C: EXPEDITION PHOTOGRAPHY** ..................................................................... 34

- **BELGIAN ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION (BELGICA)** ..................................................... 35
  - Frederick A. Cook ......................................................................................................... 36
  - Henryk Arctowski .......................................................................................................... 41
  - The ‘ships in the ice’ motif ............................................................................................ 41
  - ‘A new world of ice’ ....................................................................................................... 41
  - Glittering whiteness and brilliant colour ........................................................................ 45
  - ‘This realm of eternal ice’ ............................................................................................... 47
  - Extreme isolation ......................................................................................................... 49
  - Identity: constructing the explorer-hero ....................................................................... 51
  - Documenting science .................................................................................................. 54
  - Nationalism, the race for the Pole, and possession ....................................................... 56
  - Summary ....................................................................................................................... 57
  - ‘Ways of seeing’ ........................................................................................................... 57
  - Representations of exploration in Antarctica ............................................................... 57

- **GERMAN DEEP SEA EXPEDITION (VALDIVIA)** ....................................................... 59
  - Friedrich Winter ............................................................................................................ 62
  - The iceberg motif .......................................................................................................... 64
  - Documenting science through photography and art ..................................................... 67
Amundsen’s slides ......................................................................................................................... 163
Polar heroes ................................................................................................................................. 165
The representation of Amundsen ................................................................................................. 165
Other heroes ................................................................................................................................. 168
The heroic hunter-explorer ........................................................................................................... 170
Comparison with other expeditions’ photographers ................................................................. 171
Summary .......................................................................................................................................... 172
‘Ways of seeing’ ............................................................................................................................ 173
Representations of exploration in Antarctica ................................................................................ 173
JAPANESE ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION (KAINAN MARU) ............................................................. 174
Miisio Seizô and Taizumi Yasunao .............................................................................................. 175
Shirase as hero .............................................................................................................................. 179
Flag raising ..................................................................................................................................... 185
Wildlife .......................................................................................................................................... 187
Comparison with other expeditions’ photographers ................................................................. 190
Summary .......................................................................................................................................... 192
‘Ways of seeing’ ............................................................................................................................ 192
Representations of exploration in Antarctica ................................................................................ 192
SECOND GERMAN SOUTH POLAR EXPEDITION (DEUTSCHLAND) ........................................... 193
Representations of the leader ......................................................................................................... 194
The narrative and its photographs .............................................................................................. 197
Wilhelm von Goeldel .................................................................................................................... 198
Documenting scientific activity ..................................................................................................... 201
Conrad Heyneck ........................................................................................................................... 203
Documenting scientific activity ..................................................................................................... 205
Ernst Müller .................................................................................................................................... 206
Comparison with other expeditions’ photographers ................................................................. 207
A perception of failure .................................................................................................................. 208
No heroes for Germany ................................................................................................................ 209
Summary .......................................................................................................................................... 209
‘Ways of seeing’ ............................................................................................................................ 210
Representations of exploration in Antarctica ................................................................................ 210
PART D: CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................. 211
Findings .......................................................................................................................................... 211
The photographers, their backgrounds, their ‘ways of seeing’ .................................................. 211
The kinds of images they captured, and their audiences .............................................................. 213
Photographic equipment .............................................................................................................. 214
Representations of exploration in Antarctica ............................................................................. 215
Concluding remarks ...................................................................................................................... 219
REFERENCES ................................................................................................................................. 221
APPENDIX ....................................................................................................................................... 262