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Haunting the Wide, White Page – Ghosts in Antarctica

Abstract: Antarctica is not only the coldest and most desolate place on earth, it is also the most haunted one. According to statistics, for every 9.62 inhabitants (albeit temporary) in the Far South, there roams one ghost to haunt them. The ice sheets of Antarctica serve as an enormous freezer, not only safeguarding thousands of years of history in its numerous layers, but also preserving deserted huts and stations as well as the bodies of unfortunate explorers. By investigating abandoned places, heroic-era horror stories and real-life accounts, it becomes apparent that Antarctica is a repository for human's deepest fears and its hidden, forbidden desires. Ghost stories therefore entered the continent as one way of dealing with the spatial and perceptual isolation man is inevitably confronted with on the ice. With the help of allegedly haunted places such as Whaler's Bay and Scott's Hut, literary examples like "Bride of the Antarctic" and *The White Darkness*, as well as real-life accounts by Morton Moyes and Sir Ernest Shackleton, this paper traces the short – but nonetheless "lively" – history of ghosts at the bottom of the world.

Antarctica is the coldest, the windiest, the driest and the highest continent on earth. It is a continent of scale and superlatives, but not a place one might immediately associate with ghosts and their stories. At a closer glance, however, the stereotypical pictures – icebergs, penguins, ice floes – might just as well be replaced by other images – failed expeditions, frostbite, snowbound tents – to evoke the uncanny and uncertain atmosphere typical of a ghost story. It is therefore no wonder that the spirits of the dead entered the continent in the form of ghost towns, ghost hunters and spirits haunting or even helping unfortunate explorers both on the written page and in real-life expeditions. This paper aims to trace the relatively short history (Antarctica was discovered 200 years ago, a mere 100 years ago man sat first foot on it) of ghosts on the seventh continent.

Advertised as the "most haunted place on the planet" (Hotchkiss, par. 1) by cruise lines, Antarctica's ghosts can indeed withstand mathematical calculations: Although the continent has a permanent human population of zero, there are approximately 3,000 scientists, researchers and personnel from around the globe staying in facilities through the Antarctic summer and a smaller number even throughout the Antarctic winter (The World Factbook). Zhang Xin estimated that 312 people have died on the continent ever since its discovery (17). This means, if death equals the existence of a ghost, Antarctica could indeed come up with one

ghost per every 9.62 inhabitants. Intended for a target audience, namely cruise ship passengers, these tongue-in-cheek statistics nonetheless gives evidence of how humans perceive this place.

In European and Western imagination Antarctica has always been a strange and beautiful place, a land that is actually frozen water. The continent is located just off the edge of our maps, but “a space at whose heart there is one six months day and one six months night cannot quite seem like part of humanity’s planet” (Moss 1). Antarctica is, in contrast to its counterpart on the other pole, the only continent without an indigenous population and their corresponding creation myths. It is therefore a place without its own language, its own culture, legends or history; a blank canvas, so to say, that can be filled with our ideas, dreams and (ghost) stories. With terms like ice, exploration and sublime wilderness humans draw upon long-held associations and might think of places of enchantment and magic. McCorristine therefore noted that the poles “were strange places where strange things could happen [...] unearthly dreamscapes, [...] places of uncanny solitude” (86–7). The vast and perpetual ice sheets of Antarctica literally safeguard thousands of years of history in their layers; never melting, never forgetting. Antarctica thus serves as a repository both for our deepest fears, but also as a projection to live out their hidden, forbidden desires. Strange things indeed seemed to have happened on this unearthly dreamscape and every once in a while the blank canvas is filled with a ghost story.

Antarctic Ghost Towns and Human Angstlust

Abandoned towns, buckling buildings and crumbling walls evoke a feeling of both fear and curiosity in humans. Denoted ‘Angstlust’ in psychology¹, man is both drawn and repulsed by places that are no longer populated by the people who once built them. Antarctica consists of a multitude of these abandoned places. Faced with the choice of either discarding a location and all its appertaining equipment, or trying to minimise the human influence on such a pristine environment as much as possible, explorers and scientists face the horns of a dilemma. Hans-Ulrich Peter, an ecologist of Friedrich Schiller University Jena, even went as far as to attach a veritable rubbish problem to the frozen continent (ii). Despite the efforts to introduce standard guidelines for waste disposal in the region, extreme weather condition as well as infrastructure problems hinder a strict enforcement time and again. As long as these guidelines are not strictly adhered to, however,

1 For a detailed discussion of the phenomenon see, for instance, Apter and Warwitz.

ghost towns and abandoned places inspire visitors, research personnel and authors alike. The clear remnants of human's earlier and current ventures make Antarctica, on the other hand, also the first continent where man's first dwellings still survive. Their preservation should be, according to Pearson, considered of global importance (45). 34 historic sites, containing over 8,000 inventories artefacts, now pose the question of how to solve conservation problems on the continent (*ibid.* 45–6).

The two most famous and disturbingly well-preserved abandoned places are Whaler's Bay on Deception Island and the camp built by Sir Robert Falcon Scott and his party on the north shore of Cape Evans in 1911. After their ship drifted away, the hut was inadvertently occupied by the Ross Sea Party under leadership of Sir Ernest Shackleton from 1915 to 1917 (Antarctic Heritage Trust). Nowadays Scott's Hut epitomises the Heroic Age of (failed) Antarctic exploration.² Due to the dry climate and the freezing temperatures, the hut remains in a remarkable state of preservation. Visitors and photographers can be sure to take pictures of rusty bean cans and scientific equipment covered with dust. A cross near the cabin moreover commemorates the three men who died there in 1916 (Legler 12). Scott's Hut is thus a place where events are frozen in time; a place where past, present and future mingle. Spatial isolation and even the absence of familiar patterns such as day and night, normally an important way of maintaining a sense of control, add to the factors of why humans perceive the camp as strange, uncanny and haunted.

Moving further north along the Antarctic shoreline, Whaler's Bay on Deception Island poses another ghostly place. The deserted town is noteworthy not so much because of the tragic fate of its inhabitants, as was the case with Scott's Hut, but because of the sheer feeling of isolation and loneliness it exhales. Whereas the name Deception Island alone evokes trickery, intrigue and concealment, the visitor is confronted with barren volcanic slopes and a desolate coastline upon approaching the horseshoe-shaped Antarctic outcrop (Fabricius, par. 1). First populated in 1906 by a Norwegian-Chilean whaling company as a base for factory ships, Whaler's Bay was abandoned in 1931 after a decline in market for whale oil (Avi Abrams and Constantine von Hoffman). The Great Depression forced the approximately 150 people working in the bay during the austral summer to leave the place and seek literally greener pastures elsewhere. Even the old cemetery perished, having been destroyed in a 1969 volcanic eruption, and a newly erected memorial cemetery is all that remains nowadays (Fabricius, par. 10). Visitors are

2 The Heroic Age refers to the time when Antarctica was mainly explored by foot, ski and dog sledge and roughly covers the years from mid-1890s to the early 1920. For more information see, for example, Leane 186.

both fascinated and appalled by the horrific scene of whale skeletons, rusted out buildings and big boiling vats sunken into the ground. Whalers's Bay elucidates like no other place mankind's impact on nature and the feeling of emptiness and misplacement humans leave behind once they are gone.

The rest of Deception Island, paradoxically, can be considered a hotspot in Antarctic scales; a factor that might actually add to the reason why Whaler's Bay is regularly listed on the 'Top 10 Haunted Places' all over the world (News.com.au). The island hosts both an Argentinean and a Spanish science base and can be reached easily by cruise ships. Shooing its guests over the barren rocks, visitors perceive the feeling of (paid) accessibility and extreme isolation at the same time. It is therefore no wonder that Whaler's Bay was eagerly taken up as the perfect location for paranormal activity. "Ghosts of Antarctica," an 2011-aired episode of the American TV-series *Destination Truth*, immersed itself with the ghost settlement and hosted a 60-minutes feature replete with images of shaky hand cameras, infrared visions, random lights and strange noises.

Heroic-Era Horror Stories

Antarctica is probably the most extensive and far-flung wilderness on our planet. It provides, as Leane puts it, "a site remote from civilisation, on the edge of established social conventions" (59). The continent is on average three times higher than any other, one-and-a-half-times the size of Europe, where it never rains and rarely ever snows; in short, a sublime landscape that might bring our rational mind up against its limits (Wheeler 7; Leane 59). It comes as no surprise that the earliest stories featuring the Antarctic are full of whirlpools and abysses, fearful and dark spaces typical of gothic horror stories (Leane 59). The best-known example of early Antarctic literature, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, most explicitly uses gothic images such as a demon ship, a figure of death-in-life and zombie sailors to confer a sense of horror on the reader. The mariner eventually leaves Antarctica, but can never escape "the South Pole of the mind" (Wilson 174).

Authors such as Coleridge, E. A. Poe and Jules Verne, writing in a time when Antarctica was still an untrodden and uncharted land, capitalised on the sense of metaphysical horror on the ice, "thereby laying the foundation of a sub-genre of Antarctic science-fiction, most notably carried forward by H.P. Lovecraft's 'Mountains of Madness' (1931)" (McCorristine 86). Even when the continent was finally accessed and slowly discovered, the Heroic Age suffered from a fair share of horrors. Beginning with the obvious physical dangers of a sledging trip, early explorers also suffered heavily from the psychological trials in claustrophobic

base camps (Leane 68–9). “One had the impressions of fighting, always fighting, a terrible unseen force” (31) recalls the Antarctic explorer Charles Laseron vividly. This terrible unseen force, a feeling shared by a number of explorers, is eventually given literal and visual presence in literature and film (Leane 69).

In John Martin Leahy’s short story “In Amundsen’s Tent” (1927), it is a ‘thing’ escaping from Amundsen’s tent to attack a team of explorers on their return from the South Pole. While the narrator exclaims that “The thing itself [...] can’t be any worse than this mystery and nightmare of imagination” (qtd. in Manhire 125) his fellow companions suggest the entity in the tent might be “a demon, a ghost materialised. I can’t say incarnated” (ibid. 128). The thing continues to follow and haunt the explorers, eventually driving the last surviving member of the team on the brink of madness. While the thing’s first and foremost purpose seems to be to spread horror, the nameless entity also embodies the disappointment and dangers of Scott’s failed race to the South Pole in 1912.

Another ‘thing’ appears in John Carpenters famous movie “The Thing” (1982), based on John W. Campbell, Jr.’s science fiction novella *Who Goes There?* (1938), and haunts both scientists and cinema audience. A 2011-sequel with the same title suggests that even after nearly 85 years, the notion of an unseen and untitled force in a hostile environment is a spine-tingling one.

A completely different entity, namely the ghost of an explorer’s wife, haunts the men in Amelia Reynold Long’s short story “Bride of the Antarctic”. Published under the pseudonym Mordred Weir in 1939, “Bride of the Antarctic” recounts the story of three scientists overwintering in an Antarctic hut. As in any prototypical ghost story the hut was cursed by the death of a number of members of an ill-fated expedition the season before, amongst them the wife of the commander. The setting, however, is a completely new one. Interestingly, the short story was published four years after the first real-life woman, Caroline Mikkelsen, had set foot on the continent (Dodds 41).

Soon the story unfolds and the three overwintering men encounter strange incidents. A skull is seen while burning an old box and the approaching Antarctic winter ultimately seems to be the harbinger of doom:

By the end of the first month, the blackness was complete even at midday. Strange stars hung from an ebon sky, so large that their apparent nearness was frightening. [...]

In the vivid, unearthly glare, we could see the white crags of the Admiralty Range, at whose feet we crouched; and in the distance, rising above them, the steep black sides of Mt. Erebus, a lazy cloud of grey ash drifting about its crater, like the smoke from a funeral pyre. The sight was like a harbinger of evil; and we crept back into the house and fastened the trap above us.

It was shortly after this that the noises began. (Weir 73)

While the men try to dismiss the scratching and wailing noises in the beginning – “What you heard was the timbers creaking under the weight of snow on the roof” (Weir 74) – they become more persistent and a ghost eventually appears:

Something was in the room with us. It had come up through the open trap, and was taking form out of the mist. We saw it take shape. Afterwards, Farrell and I tried to tell each other that what we had seen had been a trick of the light and the damp air let up from the cellar; but we both knew that the thing had assumed the almost nude form of a woman draped in a long white bridal veil. (Weir 75)

The bride’s frozen corpse emerges to confront the men, forcing her killer, the third member of the party, to leave the hut for the deadly space of Antarctica. The notions of insides – the safety of the hut – and outsides – the vast space of the continent – become acutely prominent in the short story. Ultimately, it is the thin border between them that provide the source of terror (Leane 59). The ghost is moreover a female one, an entity that seems to belong ‘out there’ not ‘in here’, in the back-then masculine space of a heroic-era hut (ibid. 65).

Sensory Deprivation and Helping Hands

All places are more than their mere physical components, and especially so in Antarctica. The continent exists most vividly in the mind, it is “a metaphorical landscape” (Wheeler 3). In “Bride of the Antarctic” it is not only the freezing isolation, the vast landscape and endless darkness the characters have to cope with, but their psychological trials are additionally aggravated by the presence of a spirit. Even under normal conditions most people would agree that Antarctica wields a profound effect on personality and characters. Few men are the same after a stay on the frozen continent and the effect of the hostile environment was most certainly not only experienced by fictional characters but also by real-life explorers and researchers.

Morton Moyes, for instance, had to spend ten weeks alone in an isolated hut in Queen Mary’s Land in 1912 (Griffith 189). Moyes was a scientist of Douglas Mawson’s Australasian Antarctic expedition and despite attempts to keep up routine meteorological observations and remain calm, his imagination started to play tricks on him after a while (Leane 53). In “Season in Solitary”, Morton recounts his experience and vividly describes his emotional deterioration until he feared his comrades might find him “raving mad or dead in this pit of ice” (Moyes 23) one day. Elizabeth Leane summarised Morton’s encounter with the vast ice sheets of Antarctica with the following words:

The silence that surrounded him quickly came to seem ‘oppressive and unnerving’, the creaking of the glacier ‘ominous’ and his own laughter ‘uncanny’. He began to think of the glacier as ‘something alive’ [...]; the space outside his hut was a ‘creeping waste’; his solitude was like ‘an unseen presence.’ (53–4)

In his account Moyes impressively portrays the changeable and moving capacities of the ice, but also points at a phenomenon that has been the focal point of psychological experiment and research ever since the 1960’s: sensory deprivation. The term describes the reduction or even removal of stimuli from one or more of the senses and suggests that perceptual isolation might eventually lead to (irreversible) psychological damage (Suedfeld 4). “Deprivation can lead to behavioral decrements, particularly in perception” (ibid.), noted Suedfeld and thereby encapsulates the trials long-term visitors of Antarctica almost always inevitable have to suffer. There is hardly any Antarctic diary that does not reflect on the mirages and illusions encountered on the ice: the strange way the sound travelled, the shifting shapes of the ice or how small things in the distance all of a sudden seemed enormous frequently dazzle these travellers. The three-dimensional capacities of the ice are, together with atmospheric phenomena that could call the reliability of perception, even that of the most seasoned commanders, into question, therefore the starting point for a number of putative ghostly encounters. Ghostliness is furthermore closely linked (or precisely not linked) to the body and “the weird things that could happen to it at the Poles” (McCorristine 88).

Spirits roaming the Antarctic ice, however, do not always haunt the explorers and play tricks on them, they can also guide them. The most famous incident of such a helping ghost is given by Sir Ernest Shackleton himself. In *South*, he describes the intense feeling of an extra member in his party while crossing the snow-capped mountains of South Georgia: “I know that during that long and racking march of thirty-six hours over the unnamed mountains and glaciers of South Georgia it seemed to me often that we were four, not three” (120). Eight years later T.S. Eliot transmitted Shackleton’s feeling in poetic form and thereby helped the march across South Georgia gain literary immortality. In “The Waste Land” it reads: “Who is the third who walks always beside you? / When I count, there are only you and I together / But when I look ahead up the white road / There is always another one walking beside you” (Eliot 359–62). Although Shackleton’s extra member has become a third, instead of a fourth in the poem, Eliot allegedly just remembered the gist and not the exact details of the story³, the invisible

3 Eliot himself stated in the notes included in his work how he was inspired by Shackleton’s encounter. Jarold Ramsey furthermore examines how part five of “The Waste Land” was inspired by *South*.

person is clearly a positive and helping one. Interestingly, this fourth – or third – man was not only experienced by Shackleton but also by other Antarctic explorers and extreme athletes in general. In fact, there were so many of them that the term ‘The Third Man Factor’, after Eliot’s line, was coined and scientific and psychological explanations for the phenomena were henceforth sought. The findings so far range from a coping mechanism of the brain and the aforementioned sensory deprivation to questions as to how we actually perceive the presence and place of our body and this of other persons in traumatic situations.⁴

In Geraldine McCaughrean’s young-adult fiction *The White Darkness* (2005), the Third Man comes in the form of Titus Oates, the epitome of British gallantry in the early days of Antarctic exploration.⁵ In the novel the protagonist creates Titus as her imaginary friend and helper, drawing on her knowledge of the real Antarctic explorer. While the imaginary Titus is affectionate, honest and endlessly supportive, the Antarctic terrain is a perilous and indifferent place, frequently haunted by mirages. The final agonising trek of the protagonist ultimately mirrors her difficulty and pain at detecting the lies she has been told.

By using Titus Oates as the protagonist’s alter ego, McCaughrean harks back to the heroic-era, “for the days when polar exploration was, and celebrated being male, white and frequently dead” (Moss 23). Sym, the protagonist, is obsessed with Antarctica and the romantic figure of Captain Oates: “I have been in love with Titus Oates for quite a while now – which is ridiculous, since he’s been dead for ninety years. But look at it this way. In ninety years I’ll be dead, too, and the age difference won’t matter” (McCaughrean 1).

The actual bodies of the five members of Scott’s party are still encased in the Antarctic ice. The remains of Evans and Oates, the first casualties, were never found; Scott, Bowers and Wilson died later in their tent. The bodies are very likely to remain in the ice for several hundred more years, although “inexorably making their way towards the coast, and presumably will one day leave the continent inside calved icebergs” (Leane 169). A completely different kind of ghost is created with the myth of a slumbering hero, slowly completing his journey north. Getting in line with narrative traditions like King Arthur and other heroes just waiting to return, the fate of Scott and his companions thus both reassure and soothe the readers of tales such as *The White Darkness*.

4 Both John Geiger and Peter Suedfeld did extensive research on the ‘Third Man Factor’ and published their ideas and findings in a number of articles.

5 The real Lawrence ‘Titus’ Oates became engraved in the British cultural memory by allegedly uttering the words “I’m just going outside and may be some time” before he left into the blizzard (Leane 87).

On a continent where volcanoes are called Erebus and Terror, and the so-called Ghost Mountains lie buried beneath its middle, ghosts have most certainly plenty of room to wander the ice. Antarctica is a metaphorical landscape and exists most vividly in the mind. The continent, however, offers more than just a conveniently large space on the map and more than just a generically hostile setting: it signifies instead an instability of the margins of the world that humans are both drawn to and repelled from. It is a place that elucidates how people and their imagination act and react in extreme environments. Antarctica is thus indeed a repository for human's deepest fears and its hidden, forbidden desires.

Ghosts usually appear during the night, at dark and the temperature usually drops upon their arrival. Temperature can hardly drop any further in Antarctica, but what is striking in the discussed literature and media – with the exception of “Bride of the Antarctic” – is that Antarctic ghosts tend to appear in the Antarctic summer. 24 hours of complete daylight, the complete absence of darkness, a ‘White Darkness’ in McCoughrean’s words, is unsettling.

In summary, the Antarctic landscape has not only inspired authors but also deeply shaped the people actually venturing there. A sublime landscape indeed that draws our mind against its limits, whether in abandoned places such as Whaler’s Bay or Scott’s Hut, in horror stories featuring frozen brides or in unseen spirits guiding us. No place, to put it in a nutshell, can be hostile, remote or cold enough for a proper ghost to heat up our imagination.

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