

# Mapping Antarctic and Arctic Women: An exploration of polar women's experiences and contributions through place names

## Commentary

**Cite this article:** Devine C. Mapping Antarctic and Arctic Women: An exploration of polar women's experiences and contributions through place names. *Polar Record* 58(e35): 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003224742100070X>

Received: 15 July 2019  
Revised: 9 August 2021  
Accepted: 26 October 2021

### Keywords:

Mapping; Polar; Women; Arctic; Antarctic

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### Abstract

In this commentary, I investigate the Poles differently, and in situ, rather than only as stereotypically barren uninhabited expansive places on a globe or maps. The human stories are behind the relatively white space on which few place names are marked. But the more visible ones are made and told through a male-dominated, colonial narrator and mapmaker, until more recently. Cartography, like history, has overwhelmingly documented men's worlds, stories, dominations and accomplishments, creating a virtual whiteout of women's and notably Indigenous women's stories also in polar regions. In this commentary, I report on a journey into (re)mapmaking I did of women's stories told through female place names and toponymies of women especially in the Antarctic, through a crowd-sourced project, Mapping Antarctic Women. I explore not only mapping female place names and women's stories in the Arctic, exploring gendered, colonial and western culture mapping but also newer digital Indigenous place name mapping and also mapping of human-exacerbated changes in the ice that makes the Antarctic map.

I never imagined knowing all of the rounded and pointy lines that make the shape of the Antarctic continent. I never imagined knowing these jagged lines through remaking Antarctica's map using female place names. But now that I have traced the contours, and even changing contours, of Antarctica's coasts, ice shelves and ridges along the Transantarctic mountains, I understand why I am on this cartographic journey.

Antarctica is a place that started in the imagination after all. Long before this southern continent was discovered or touched, the astronomer and geographer Ptolemy imagined that it existed as a counterpoint to the Arctic. He wanted to make sense, even a balance, of the spherical world. I suppose I was seeking the same.

Antarctica is our world; we are connected to and dependent on its ocean systems, ice and cold climate and are concerned about its rapid shifting and melting. Ptolemy envisioned Antarctica without seeing it. Captain James Cook, who first crossed the Antarctic Circle in 1773, felt the continent's chill yet said discovering the icy "Country" would not be worthwhile because it was "doomed by Nature never once to feel the warmth of the Sun's rays, but to lie for ever buried under everlasting snow and ice . . . the world will not be benefited by it" (Cook, 1773). Fabian von Bellingshausen, a Baltic naval officer in the Imperial Russian Navy in 1820, is recorded as the first human to sight it. But like Cook, he also thought it was not worth venturing closer.

Yet human curiosity and drive to know the unknown meant scientists, navigators, whalers and sealers, for centuries only men from numerous countries, continued to pursue knowing Antarctica. Some months after Bellingshausen saw Antarctica, Anglo-American sealer John Davis landed on the continent.

Antarctica is a time capsule within a time capsule under four km of thick ice. When I started to closely read the Antarctic map 20 years ago, it was the unexpected start to my understanding of the challenges and struggles of women against living also in the polar patriarchy. With two other women, I led a team of international volunteers on a joint Russian-Canadian environmental clean-up project in 1995–1996 at a Russian scientific station on King George Island on the Antarctic Peninsula. It was an effort to support and raise awareness on the implementation of the 1991 Environmental Protocol of the Antarctic Treaty (Trusler & Devine, 2015).

This new mapping began in my mind one day when I promised myself to find out the story behind a place name. I was in Sergey's office, the Russian base manager, where he was telling me that there had been few women in the Antarctic. I noted behind him a map and a name on that map, Marguerite Bay.

But who is Marguerite then, I asked myself. My decision to discover Marguerite of Marguerite Bay gave birth to a project to collect and share the stories of women's visibility in and contributions to Antarctic exploration, knowledge and science.

Upon returning home from the clean-up project, I began to (re)make the map of Antarctica with female place names. In telling the unknown or little-known stories of Antarctic women,

whether they were evoked in a place name or they physically worked there, I would learn and share snippets of history, geography, anthropology, ethnography, politics and stories of the barriers women faced and tackled, their explorations, discoveries and more. I wanted to highlight the women-centric place names and toponymy of the Antarctic map. This exploration is not only about women appearing on maps or mapmaking themselves but also the meaning and use of maps themselves.

While reading original Antarctic explorer journals in the Scott Polar Research Institute's Thomas H Manning Polar Archive, I also kept looking for women's stories and place names for my burgeoning Mapping Antarctic Women project. Only after scanning decades of the polar genre's writing by men did I hear a woman's voice. Not only were early Antarctic-enthusiast women denied joining expeditions, but there are also no first-person texts or interviews, if they existed, of the first women to see and visit the continent in the late 19th or early 20th century.

I touched the original "Three sporty girls" letter written by Peggy Peregrine in her loopy handwriting to Sir Ernest Shackleton beseeching that she, Valerie Davey and Betty Webster be able to join his Imperial Antarctic Expedition in 1914. Reading Peggy's letter, I felt the women's calling (Pegrine, 1914).

In a return letter, Shackleton sent his regrets in a single line, "there are no vacancies for the opposite sex on the expedition". That was the same message for the women in Argentina, the USA and other countries who wanted to join Antarctic expeditions.

That sexist ice wall was eventually thawed decades later, forced-calved thanks to the women who wanted equal opportunity to go to the Antarctic, and thanks to their allies. The first recorded woman to sight Antarctica was privileged but adventurous all the same – Norway's Ingrid Christensen who ventured there with her whaling magnate husband in 1931. Her namesake is the Ingrid Christensen Coast east of the Amery Ice Shelf in the western half of Princess Elizabeth Land (named in 1931 by Australian explorer Sir Douglas Mawson for Britain's Princess Elizabeth, King George V's granddaughter).

Searching for Marguerite, I found that Antarctica is a continent with an extraordinarily high number of female place names. Some of the first ones tell the story of women's absence. They were given by men for the women left behind: daughters – Ann Island on the Fallières Coast, the west coast of the Antarctic named for the fourth daughter of Frank Debenham, Australian geographer and first director of the Scott Polar Research Institute; patrons – Queen Maud Mountains of the Transantarctic mountains named for the Norwegian queen Maud of Wales (1869–1938); loves – even reportedly a hut (or Mountain, Mount Hope) named for Sir Ernest Shackleton's lover. Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, who in December 1911 was the first human to have reached the South Pole with his team, named Mount Betty, a ridge overlooking the Ross Ice Shelf, after his beloved childhood nanny.

Eventually, the map also represented the actual appearance of pioneering working women to the windiest, driest, highest, coldest and most remote place on earth (Whyte, 2018).

Jackie (Edith) Ronne was the first woman and American woman to work on an Antarctic expedition (the private Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition (RARE) 1947–1948). Jackie's husband, who led the RARE expedition, named the newly discovered territory, the world's last unknown coastline in the Weddell Sea, Edith Ronne Land in 1947. But years later when it was determined the ice shelf was larger than charted, it was renamed the Ronne Ice

Shelf by the US Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names to refer to the larger ice shelf. It is unclear why "Edith" was dropped.

In 2010, the Ronne Ice Shelf changed again, this time with a human hand in devastating glacial melt and climate change. It received attention when NASA's satellites captured part of it shattering into pieces and a chunk of sea ice, comparable to the size of Wales, breaking off (Rapid Sea Ice Breakup along the Ronne-Filchner Ice Shelf, 2010).

After Jackie Ronne, in 1956, Russian marine biologist Maria Klenova did Antarctic ship-based research. She was the first female scientist, and Russian woman, to work in Antarctica. Klenova studied marine life and helped map the first Soviet Antarctic Atlas. Klenova Peak is her namesake in the Ellsworth Mountains in West Antarctica.

Toponymic features are also formally and informally named after women, from ice shelves, bays, nunataks, mountains and islands. Otome Point in East Antarctica is so named because it looked like a woman's nose to the men on the Japanese Antarctic Research Expedition in 1957–1962.

Mapping Antarctic Women is also a look at the southernmost continent with the women who were "on" it too – Jones Terrace is named for geochemist Lois Jones who led the first all-women Antarctic scientific expedition in 1969 (Lois, 2018) and Mount Askin is named for Rosemary Askin, New Zealand geologist who at age 21 in 1970 helped discover Antarctica's richest-known site of fossilised fish (Rosemary, 2019).

Fast forward a half a century and you find place names after contemporary Antarctic scientists such as Tilav Cirque that honours Turkish astrophysicist Serap Tilav. Not only was I happy to learn from a Turkish academic about her but also to learn that cirques are bowl-shaped hollows that glaciers occupy. British Marine biologist Kirsty Brown is the namesake Kirsty Island, a rock outcrop and marine research location near Rothera Research station on the Antarctic Peninsula, East of Léonie Island. Kirsty sadly was killed by a leopard seal while on a diving mission there.

I have mapped hundreds of such female place names by scouring Antarctic maps themselves and official Gazetteer online databases such as the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) Composite Gazetteer of Antarctica, "the authoritative international gazetteer containing all the Antarctic toponyms published in national gazetteers, plus basic information about those names and the relevant geographic features" (SCAR, 2020).

By 2015, 24 countries had named 37,325 geographical names for 19,303 features. National Antarctic Place-names Committees liaise with each other – there is collaboration and some peaceful disagreement on names and name changes. Mobil Oil Bay was originally Bahia Eva Peron.

I asked others in the polar research world to help me crowd-source place names at the SCAR conferences in Colorado (2014) and Malaysia (2016). The list grows; I keep discovering gems of names and their stories today.

Marguerite Bay, it turns out, is the namesake of early 20th century French explorer Jean-Baptiste Charcot's second wife, Marguerite Cléry. His first wife left him on the grounds of abandonment.

As maps do, they beautifully and at times wistfully tell us the story of us, just as ancient ice cores and Antarctic stories carry our beautiful and tragic history. "This was a place, after all, where a predominantly male homosocial history of inhabitation had to be imported along with the material objects necessary for survival", says pre-eminent geographer Klaus Dodds (Dodds, 2009).

Through this mapping project, I better understood the history, geography and culture of Antarctica – also the social and gender politics, and the politics of exclusion. Maps and place names reveal Antarctica – from the positive international collaborations and scientific achievements including protecting this continent for peace and science, tackling the ozone hole discovered there, but also the brutal greed that led to the near depletion of whales and seals and the exclusion of women for no good reason.

Antarctica's mapping has been about more than simply knowing what we now designate as Antarctica on maps. For each discovery or notation of Antarctic geography also caused a change in the way the globe itself was known and mapped, a seeing of Antarctica's gendered formations and seeing "outside of historical determinism" (Glasberg, 2012).

Ultimately, this place at the bottom of the world is our beacon of possibility and a harbinger of what we harmed and what we endeavour to protect for all of humanity and planetary health.

### Women of the Arctic

Recently, I have a new interest in Arctic mapping. Like Ptolemy, I need a kind of balance and understanding of this opposite Pole and the women who live there and visited. What women and gendered stories are unmapped in the Arctic? Many I am sure.

Many stories have been newly collected and shared through the work of Plan A, a brainchild of Tahnee Prior and Malgorzata Smieszek. In their recent "Women of the Arctic: Bridging Policy, Research and Lived Experience" non-academic event co-organised with the U Arctic in September 2018 in Helsinki, they interviewed and celebrated women across the Arctic representing diverse ages, professions and life experiences, creating profiles (Plan A, 2018).

What I love about these new Women of the Arctic profiles is how they reach outside of the traditional borders of "what makes a notable person". Plan A's event gathered city mayors, entrepreneurs, civil society leaders, women in polar science, women involved with solutions to gender-based violence in northern communities or northern industries, at the intersection of Indigeneity and feminism in the circumpolar North, involved in LGBTQ2s+ rights in the Arctic and women artists or activists in the North. Other initiatives such as "Women in Polar Sci" and "Women in the Arctic and the Antarctic" (Burke, 2018) also feature the contributions of women living or working in polar regions. Already the mapping and storytelling of women and gender in the Arctic are richer, wider and deeper.

I further developed this Arctic mapping concept with Malgorzata and Tahnee of Plan A and briefly presented it at The IASC Social Sciences and Humanities Working Group and International Arctic Social Science Association Workshop on Gender in Polar Research, 30 March, 2020 during Arctic Science Summit Week (ASSW) 2020. We aim to share a prototype Mapping Women of the Arctic map at the 2023 ASSW for participant feedback and input.

There is a need for redressing the gender gap and the dearth of women's stories in traditional and non-traditional sources. Mapping women in the Arctic can offer new perspectives and insights and also significantly push the boundaries to also help answer the question Plan A posed: "whose stories matter in the polar regions and why?" and Parker Ziegler, on feminist GIS cartography who asked "What is a map? What makes a good map?

Who has the right to make maps? What should maps do for us? And who decides?" (Ziegler, 2017).

### Place names North

While of course I would discover female place names in the Arctic, I recognise a major difference is that humans have known and lived in this northern Pole region much longer. Indigenous peoples have inhabited this region for thousands of years. Antarctica had no original human population. Especially in the Arctic, it is important to consider pre- and post-colonial forms of mapping.

It is not hard to find female place names from colonial times in the Arctic, in English.

On traditional western maps, you find Queen Victoria at both Poles, a nod to the colonial history of both extremes of the Earth. In the Arctic, she is Victoria Island, Kitlineq, named in 1839 by fur traders and explorers, Peter Warren Dease and Thomas Simpson, who followed its southeast coast. It is the eighth largest island in the world and Canada's second largest island.

In Antarctica, Victoria Island is found on the western side of Antarctica fronting the Ross Sea and the Ross Ice Shelf, discovered by British Captain James Clark Ross in January 1841.

I suspect that in western mapping and cartography, more attention is paid to place names for western women explorers than to the feats of Indigenous women thriving and surviving in the harsh climate and surviving colonialism. As with early Antarctic women, in the Arctic I was certain I had found the parallel story of no recording or under-recording of women's achievement and contributions, and especially that of Indigenous women.

### Indigenous mapping

"We found [our way] better without maps! [laughter] We didn't need any. What will you do with a map when you have the ponds, and the sunlight? And the rivers . . . The brooks flow from west to east. And the trees thrive towards the sun." -a Sami woman, Sirges community (Cogos et al., 2017)

I read how the Sami, Indigenous people of northern Europe inhabiting Sápmi, transmit knowledge of cultural landscape expressing both mental and cognitive maps in place names. Researchers noted, "the Sami traditionally did not use maps to orientate themselves, nor did they ever produce their own maps. Even today, maps are rarely used by the Sami when they travel across their lands, as is the case for other arctic and subarctic people". Sami place names, like other Indigenous culture's place names, have also been politicised for "toponymic colonialism" with European states establishing their ownership of the lands through place name "deformation, translation or eradication on maps" (Cogos et al., 2017).

There are notable efforts now to capture Indigenous place names in the circumpolar north, especially by the communities themselves.

In Alaska, ELOKA, the Exchange for Local Observations and Knowledge of the Arctic, has a Yup'ik Environmental Knowledge Project working with Elders from Bering Sea coastal communities to document Yup'ik place names. On a fascinating Google map, you can hover over one of hundreds of dots and hear the name pronounced, and some also include a place or geographical details. One dot is Kanaryarmiut, the site of an elderly Yup'ik woman's grave. She died there berry picking in 1945 (Yup'ik Environmental Knowledge Project, 2012).



