Antarctica is often assumed to be a continent fundamentally lacking in diversity, with a limited and isolated history. In their book, *Antarctica: A History in 100 Objects*, Jean de Pomereu and Daniella McCahey make the case for a far more wide-reaching conceptualization of Antarctica, encompassing a diversity of both people and material culture.

De Pomereu and McCahey had originally been selected to curate an exhibition at the Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut, United States. Set to display a broader sweep of Antarctic history than is usually on offer, this exhibition would trace the history of the continent from conceptualizations of Antarctica before it was discovered to the modern day. Ultimately, the exhibition was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but by reorganizing the information into a book, the authors have been able to produce something of a “super-exhibition.” That is, they are no longer constrained by the limitations of physical space, object size, or label text, which necessarily curtail the scope of museum exhibitions. As a result, the range of the project and the accessibility of the information to interested parties have been significantly increased. Nevertheless, the book retains what is most powerful about museum exhibitions: the objects. It is the inherent mutability of objects, and their ability to spark multiple stories and perspectives, that makes them a powerful tool in the discussion of the history of Antarctica.

Work to highlight the diversity in Antarctic history has become increasingly popular across a variety of academic disciplines in recent years, with scholars of history, archaeology, and other social sciences looking to foreground the range of people involved in the continent’s recent and more distant past.[1] While this is in line with wider shifts toward inclusive histories in academia today, this process was traditionally considered to be difficult—or even impossible—in the context of Antarctica, thanks to the relative lack of opportunities to engage with the Antarctic continent for those who were not white European men. *Antarctica* questions the prevalence of the traditional narratives of European exploration and re-
interprets materials that belonged to these “typical” Antarctic explorers to outline how these objects can relate to broader world events, themes, and contexts. Nevertheless, by the authors’ own admission, “it is a fact that the majority of stories in these pages are dominated by Europeans and Americans—mostly white and mostly men” (p. 204).

With these limits in mind, it was a refreshing decision to begin this history of the Antarctic away from Captain Cook. The first two objects in the book firmly place the work in a broad geographical context: the Kunyu Wanguo Quantu world map, which incorporates European and Chinese geographical knowledge from the early seventeenth century, and a “hei matau” fourteenth-century Māori fish hook. Both are skillfully employed to bring people from around the globe into the discussion from the outset, serving to balance the inevitable sweep of rather more Eurocentric “Heroic Age” objects that follow. The best entries use the objects as “jumping-off” points to tie early engagements with the Antarctic to the more recent past. For example, object 39, “whale oil soap,” connects a potted history of Antarctic whaling to a discussion of Argentina and Chile’s territorial claims in the 1940s and shows how Britain’s management of Antarctic whale stocks was played as a geopolitical tool to the nation’s advantage as a result.

In committing to consider one hundred objects in one book, de Pomereu and McCahey choose breadth over depth of discussion, perhaps for lack of space in the strict two pages allocated per object. It is surely a compliment to the book that the reader is often left wanting to know more about a particular subject: what have been the findings of object 83, an “optical module” (a scientific instrument used for detecting neutrinos), since this project began in 1996, for example? And while a very light-touch thread can at times be identified from one object to the next, it is unlikely that readers will read each entry in order as the format of the book invites a more sporadic reading style. Additionally, the presence of one hundred objects makes clear that there are many other Antarctic objects that have not been included in the book. The act of curation by its very nature involves value judgments, difficult decisions, and personal preferences, and it would have been interesting to make this framing process a little more explicit in the introduction or conclusion. Exactly how were the objects selected? What was left out and why? The authors state that the book aims to be “holistic rather than comprehensive,” but in explaining these decisions, another layer of nuance could have been laid upon the work (p. 2).

The authors clearly bring their different positionalities to the project. It is easy to see de Pomereu’s background in visual and material culture in the stylish design and imagery throughout the work, which brings the objects and their various geographic, historic, or social contexts to life. Similarly, McCahey’s background as a social historian is evident in the book’s factual precision and its insistence on populating the frozen continent with such a wide variety of people. Their interests converge in the history of science, which forms a comprehensive thread throughout the work. The evident synergy of de Pomereu’s and McCahey’s academic backgrounds in the appendix of “100 Antarctic Books” is an especially welcome addition.

From before its discovery, Antarctica has attracted many kinds of specialists—from early seafarers, whalers, and hero-explorers to contemporary scientists, historians, and tourists. Consequently, this book would appeal to a wide range of readers. Its real strength is in its ability to broaden not only the diversity of people included in Antarctic history but also the interests of its readers, by providing the expected stories and then challenging them with new and different objects, contexts, and narratives. It makes specialist subjects accessible, but also pushes readers to think more deeply and more broadly about this continent. In their conclusion, de Pomereu and
McCahey write, “One of our specific aims has been to break some of the clichés that often constrain Antarctic history,” and there is no doubt that they have succeeded (p. 204).

Note


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