



ON THE ICE: Stellenbosch University PhD history student Lize-Marié van der Watt arrives at Antarctica. In the background is the Kamov KA-32 helicopter that ferried her ashore. PICTURE: VLADISLAV KLIPACHENKO

# Historian brings Antarctica story in from the cold

## South African role is documented

JOHN YELD

Environment & Science Writer

STELLENBOSCH University post-grad history student Lize-Marié van der Watt has, well, made history herself by becoming probably the first South African academic from her discipline to set foot on the frozen continent of Antarctica.

The cheerful 26-year-old, who celebrated her birthday "down south" last month during a two-and-a-half month visit to South Africa's Sanae base, was gathering material for her PhD thesis that involves documenting the experiences of South Africans who have lived and worked in Antarctica, or on the sub-Antarctic islands of Gough, Marion and Prince Edward at some point during the past 90-odd years.

There have been a number of popular articles about South Africans who have visited these remote areas, Van der Watt explains – people such as scientists or those employed in the annual teams which built, manned and managed the country's various Antarctic or sub-Antarctic bases such as engineers, electricians, diesel mechanics, doctors and radio operators.

Also, many scientific papers have been published, and South African scientists have built a highly respected research output. But, until now, there has been almost no rigorous academic investigation of the humanities' and social sciences' aspects of the country's historical involvement in these polar and sub-polar regions, she says.

That is changing, with an increased interest driven particularly through funding from the government for the Antarctic Legacy Project. This is run by the DST-NRF Centre for Invasion Biology at Stellenbosch University, and involves collecting and archiving stories, memories, photographs and other documents.

"The role South Africans have played in scientific, biological, meteorological and other research in the Sub-Antarctic Ocean has never been fully recognised until now," the groundbreaking project explains on its website.

Van der Watt collaborates closely with Dora Scott, who manages the data collection of the Legacy project.

Although she is only just finishing her data collection, and is yet to draw any empirical conclusions from it, she suggests South Africans have traditionally looked inland and towards Africa when it comes to exploration.

Despite South Africa having maintained a near-continual presence in Antarctica since 1960, when meteorologist Hannes de Lange led the first South African National Antarctic Expedition which over-wintered at the Norway Station in 1960, and at the Prince Edward island group (Prince Edward and Marion) which was occupied during the top-secret Operation Snoektown in 1947/48, there is a lack of public awareness of this history.

This is perhaps surprising,



WEIGHTY TASK: An emperor penguin being weighed by members of the first South African Antarctic expedition to over-winter in 1960/61. PICTURE: A LE R VAN DER MERWE

because during the great "heroic era" in the early years of the 20th century several polar expeditions – including those of Robert Falcon Scott – travelled via the Cape, Van der Watt notes.

As early as 1919, a South African Antarctic expedition was proposed by a Stellenbosch University zoology professor (although he was an Australian national), and South Africans crewed on ships heading south, particularly in the whaling fleets, but also on those of the explorers.

"This Antarctic history isn't part of our school curriculum, and it's not something that our politicians have latched on to as a source of pride for South Africa," says Van der Watt.

But with Cape Town now actively promoting itself as one of the important "gateways" to Antarctica, and several local academic institutions also teaching various polar aspects, it's a good time for her to be working on the subject.

Van der Watt was drawn to study history by Professor Sandra Swart's riveting account of horses in South Africa, and wrote her Master's dissertation on the effect of locusts and drought on Free State farmers.

Although she knew "absolutely nothing" about Antarctica, she jumped at the new research opportunity, she says.

"I'd started to become a social-environmental historian, looking at the relationship between people and their environments, and this opportunity literally fell into my lap through the NRF (National Research

Foundation) grant to the Legacy project. I immediately said yes, even though the only thing I knew about Antarctica was that there are no polar bears or Eskimos there."

Although politics and foreign policy constitute a significant part of South Africa's history in Antarctica, Van der Watt's thesis concentrates specifically on the history of the scientific and social environment.

She has already conducted more than 40 oral history interviews, including with the family of Le Grange, who died in 1997. She has also been shown some of the pioneering South Africans' letters and hopes to see more of their diaries.

Then, in December, she headed south aboard the SA Agulhas for some first-hand research during the annual summer takeover expedition, and was also able to interview some South African polar veterans like "Bez" Bezuidenhout and Koos Cronjé, who specialise in Antarctic bulldozing.

Because she had spoken to so many people beforehand and had read so much about Antarctica, she had a fair idea of what she would find there, she says.

"But nothing can prepare you for the absolute uniqueness of that environment – there's just nothing you can compare it to. And I didn't know that snow and ice come in so many different colours. All the blues of the icebergs... You've seen the pictures, but it's just not the same."

On the web: <http://academic.sun.ac.za/cib/antarcticlegacy/>  
john.yeld@inl.co.za