Story by Jesse Blackadder

Heroines of the ice

Examine the historical foundations of Antarctic exploration and you'll discover a pack of unsung adventurers etched into its framework – brave women who broke through the ice ceiling to venture south.

MAP: SIR DOUGLAS MAWSON / SOUTH POLAR REGIONS 1911 / NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA, NLA.MAP-RM4064; JAMES BRAUND

During the summer of 1975–76, the Australian Antarctic Division finally sent three women, including Elizabeth Chipman, pictured here in 1976 (and opposite at her home in Seaford, VIC, in 2012), to visit Casey Station in Antarctica.

JUTTA HÖSEL

YOU NEVER FORGET the first time you see Antarctica. As the ship slides through the inky water, ice clangs a metallic symphony against the hull. If it's early in the season, the prow of your vessel rams into metre-thick sea ice, triggering cracks that run ahead like forked lightning. Blue icebergs are frozen fast in the pack ice and lines of penguins appear like tiny black dots, heading for open water. Ahead, low rocky hills rise out of the ice, streaked with black dolerite, as if a giant hand scored the landscape with charcoal.

This is Ingrid Christensen Coast in East Antarctica. It is on the other side of the continent from the Antarctic Peninsula – where most tourists visit – and it is the location of Davis Station, one of three Australian Antarctic Division research stations. The ship is *Aurora Australis* (see page 12) – known affectionately as the Orange Roughie – and it's carrying this season's scientists, tradespeople, chefs, doctor and field experts. I'm here as a writer-in-residence, finding stories of the first women to reach Antarctica. They arrived on this part of the continent in the 1930s and only left tantalising clues about their travels.

Antarctica breeds grand obsessions, and an Antarctic book sparked mine. As I looked through Antarctic pioneer Elizabeth Chipman's 1986 book *Women on the Ice*, I found a photograph of two women on a ship bound for Antarctica. One of them, Ingrid Christensen, gazed at me across continents and decades. The Norwegian Ingrid travelled to Antarctica four times in the 1930s on her husband's whaling fleet. During her first three voyages she didn't manage to land. Between her third and fourth voyages another Norwegian, Caroline Mikkelsen, became the first woman to set foot on Antarctica.

Ingrid's story intrigued me. What had made a 38-year-old mother of six leave her children behind and cross the world to reach Antarctica? How did she feel about missing out on the first continental landing? These questions led me to board *Aurora Australis* in Hobart for a six-week round-trip to Antarctica.

FOR THE 2011–12 Antarctic summer, the Davis Station leader is female. The ship's voyage leader and deputy leader are both women. So is the doctor and one of the chefs. In fact, 20 of the 87 expeditioners aboard *Aurora Australis* are female. It wasn't always like this.

The fate of the first woman to see Antarctica was grim. She was shipwrecked on Campbell Island, 700km south of New Zealand, in 1835 and rescued four years later (with her three surviving male companions) by two sealing ships. Both ships sailed further south towards what appeared to be the Antarctic mainland. The woman's name wasn't written in the log of *Eliza Scott*, which carried two of the survivors. *Sabrina*, carrying the other two, was lost in wild seas on the way home to England.

Elizabeth, who unearthed this story, said, "Perhaps it's appropriate that she is anonymous, without name, nationality, race or social status. She could have been any one of us."

Elizabeth was one of the first women to land at Casey Station, in East Antarctica, in 1976. She joined the then Antarctic Division of the Department of External Affairs as a typist in 1954, and started a lifelong love affair with the south. "It was completely male-dominated, as you'd expect from that era," she says. "Working there opened up all sorts of ideas for me, but I didn't think I'd ever go to Antarctica myself."

Elizabeth managed to find her way onto two voyages to subantarctic Macquarie Island, where Australia has a base, but the Antarctic mainland remained out of reach.

"Finally, in International Women's Year, 1975, a question was asked in the House of Representatives about how many Australian women had gone to Antarctica," Elizabeth says. "The answer was one – Nel Law, wife of the Antarctic Division head Phillip Law, who landed at Mawson in 1961. By that time, change was in the air. We expected more equality."

Elizabeth was one of three women from the Division who were chosen to sail south in early 1976. She spent five days at Casey Station. "I'd seen all the movies and the slideshows and heard all the tales, but nothing prepared me for the beauty and excitement of Antarctica," she says.

When she left the Division in 1977, Elizabeth worried that the stories of Antarctica's earliest female arrivals would be lost. The 19 folio boxes of her papers in the National Library of Australia are crammed with copies of letters she sent all over the world, chasing evidence of the little-known journeys made by women to the subantarctic and Antarctica. In *Women on the Ice*, Elizabeth compiled a list of every woman known to have travelled south of 60° before 1984; a precious chronicle of female history.

THE GRAND TALES of Scott, Mawson, Shackleton and Amundsen dominated Antarctic history for many years and still fascinate people today. In contrast, stories about the adventures of the Norwegian women in ▸

Jesse Blackadder is a freelance writer and author; this is her first feature story for AG. Her novel about the first women to reach Antarctica, *Chasing the Light*, was published by HarperCollins Australia in February 2013.

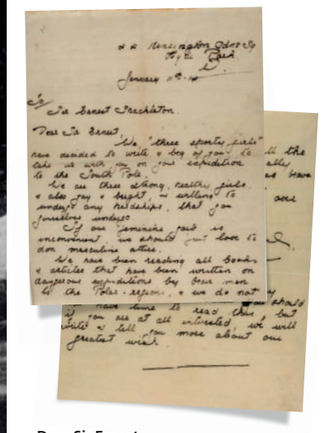
Norwegian traveller Lillemor Rachlew (opposite) cradles the captain's dog, Bello, on board *Thorshavn* (pictured above) in 1936–37. During her two voyages south with Ingrid Christensen (pictured below, at left, with Mathilde Wegger on board *Thorshavn)* Lillemor hunted seals, kept a diary and took photos that were published in France.

COURTESY SANDEFJORD WHALING MUSEUM

TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY SANDEFJORD WHALING MUSEUM; LETTERS: LICENSED WITH PERMISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE, SCOTT POLAR RESEARCH INSTITUTE

"Three sporty girls"

WOMEN BEGAN applying to join Antarctic expeditions as early as 1904, but even those who were qualified – such as leading palaeobotanist Dr Marie Stopes – were rejected by Shackleton, Scott and Mawson. Below is one such letter to Shackleton, asking that he consider letting these young women join his expedition. Shackleton's brief response can be found beneath.



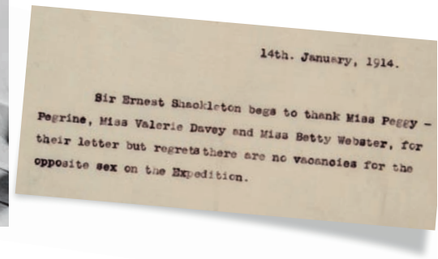
Dear Sir Ernest,
We "three sporty girls" have decided to write and beg of you to take us with you on your expedition to the South Pole.

We are three strong, healthy girls and also gay and bright, and willing to undergo any hardships that you yourselves undergo.

If our feminine garb is inconvenient, we should just love to don masculine attire. We have been reading all books and articles that have been written on dangerous expeditions by brave men to the Polar-regions, and we do not see why men should have all the glory, and women none, especially when there are women just as brave and capable as there are men.

Trusting you will think over our suggestion,
We are Peggy Pegrine, Valerie Davey and Betty Webster

P.S. We have not given any further particulars, in case you should not have time to read this, but if you are at all interested, we will write and tell you more about our greatest wish.



14th. January, 1914.

Sir Ernest Shackleton begs to thank Miss Peggy Pegrine, Miss Valerie Davey and Miss Betty Webster, for their letter but regrets there are no vacancies for the opposite sex on the Expedition.

As a woman working and exploring in Antarctica, you are expected to pull your own weight. Diana Patterson (right) 'manhauls' a sledge on a trip around the Framnes Mountains, Antarctica, in November 1989.

A fringe benefit of working in Antarctica is the chance to explore. The Mawson 1989 autumn traverse team – Arthur Wilkinson (above, from left), Diana Patterson, Doug Cameron and Kim Frost – spent one month away from the station travelling to the Prince Charles Mountains by tractor-train. "Think like a man" was the advice given to Diana Patterson (right) when she became the first woman of any nation to lead an Antarctic base in 1989. She still travels to Antarctica several times a year.

TOP: COURTESY DIANA PATTERSON; JULIAN KINGMA

the 1930s – such as Ingrid Christensen and her companion Mathilde Wegger – are little told.

One of the reasons for this is that women such as Ingrid didn't have working roles during their expeditions. Women applied to join many of the early voyages, including those run by Scott, Shackleton and Mawson, but even those who had qualifications were excluded (see page 87).

Wealth is what set the Norwegian women apart. Lars Christensen, the 'Whaling King', controlled one of the world's largest deep-sea whaling fleets. When Ingrid and her friends journeyed to Antarctica on the refuelling vessel for the factory ships, they travelled in comfort.

While the trips were sometimes dangerous and the crews did chart new territories, these women weren't considered explorers. They were, however, pioneers. At the time, in Britain, some 1300 women applied to join a single Antarctic expedition and they were all knocked back. The Norwegian women therefore blazed the trail south when, on 5 February 1931, Ingrid and Mathilde became the first women – whose names we still know – to see Antarctica.

Yet female scientists didn't begin working on the continent until 1969. Women were a minority in Antarctic research programs until well into the 1980s and the British debated whether to include women in winter expeditions even into the early 1990s. Australian Diana Patterson became the first female station leader on the continent when she was appointed head of the Australian Mawson Station in 1989.

"A colleague advised me to think like a man in my role," Diana says. "I didn't know what he meant, and that was the first time I realised they perceived me differently. In my upbringing I wasn't treated differently from my brothers. I had to do some soul searching and find my own style. I saw that while the previous male leader could be more authoritarian, I had to back off. If I was as firm as him, I was seen as a bitch."

Diana's first year as a station leader coincided with the start of another major cultural change in Australia's Antarctic life. Not only were women working on – and leading – stations, but the entire communication system was evolving, with far-reaching effects.

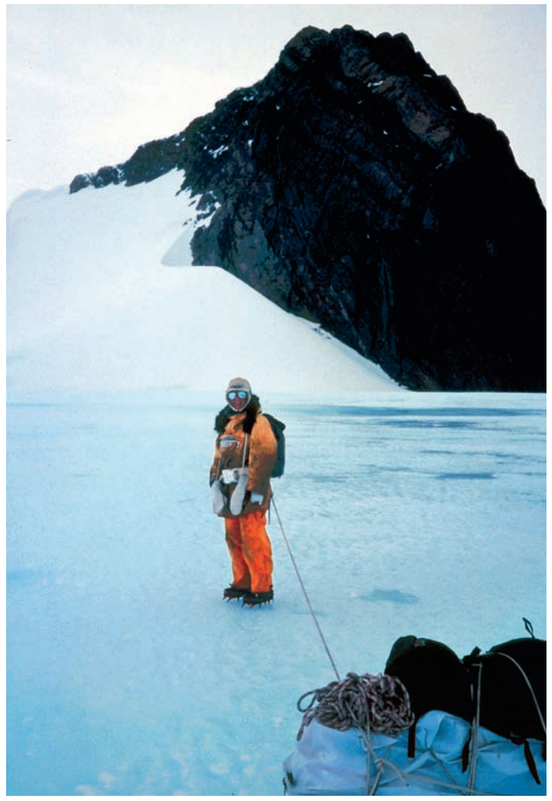
"I was there for the last of the old days when telexes were the most common way to communicate and all work-related messages went through the station leader," Diana says. "When the last ship left in March, you were alone for the winter with very little contact back to Australia. It made for a close-knit community."

When Diana returned to Antarctica in 1995 for her second stint as a leader – this time at Davis Station – new satellite communication systems had been installed. But that wasn't all that had changed.

"Attitudes towards women had shifted very quickly," she says. "In 1995 there were still some old, entrenched views, but generally being a woman wasn't an issue. In the end, you were judged by how well you did your job."

COURTESY DIANA PATTERSON

IT'S A SUNNY SPRING DAY in Antarctica, –4° with hardly any wind, unusual for the planet's windiest continent. For the past hour we've roared across the duck-egg-blue sea ice in a sturdy, red, all-terrain vehicle and I'm now standing in a small valley surrounded by thousands of Adélie penguins. Their courting calls fill the air with throaty chatter. Right in their midst – and therefore strictly out of my reach – is a flagpole marking the 1935 landing place of Caroline Mikkelsen.



Women were a minority in Antarctic research programs until well into the 1980s.

I discovered something about this flagpole before coming to Antarctica. In 1988 retired polar researcher Ian Norman, who then worked at the Department of Zoology at the University of Melbourne, and his colleagues combed through the records of the Mikkelsen landing and discovered that, contrary to reports at the time, the flagpole is on an island. Caroline Mikkelsen, it appears, never reached the Antarctic mainland.

Ian's findings meant that the long-forgotten landing that Ingrid Christensen finally made on her fourth voyage – with her daughter Sofie and two other women, Lillemor Rachlew and Solveig Widerøe – took on a new significance. It turns out that those four women were the first to set foot on the Antarctic continent, on 30 January 1937, at the base of the extraordinary mountain now known as Scullin Monolith, near Australia's Mawson Station. According to newly translated material from the diary of her husband, Ingrid was the first woman to step ashore.

ROBIN THOMSON

When social scientist Robin Burns, who led one of Australia's first government-funded social studies in Antarctica, was receiving chemotherapy for breast cancer in 1994, she imagined she was on board an icebreaker pitching through the rough seas of the Southern Ocean. Ahead lay the pack ice and still water surrounding the continent. "I used that image to navigate the nausea, promising myself I'd reach my goal of calm seas near Antarctica," she says.

Robin spent the 1995–96 summer conducting research in Antarctica. "Because I'd imagined it so vividly during chemotherapy, as we approached Antarctica I almost felt I'd been there before," she says. "When you see that first huge iceberg on the horizon from the ship, it's another world. The immensity of it is hard to imagine. You approach the station and see this extraordinary little brightly coloured settlement in a vast whiteness."

After completing her season in Antarctica, Robin went on to research the experiences of 130 Australian women who lived and worked there between 1959 and 1999.

"The earlier women had sometimes struggled just to do their job in Antarctica," Robin says. "Some were sexually harassed and stalked. Others suffered sexist harassment, which could be wearing.

"By the time I visited in 1995–96, the male heroic culture was less visible. While some men really didn't like having women down there, women had become more accepted."

Organisational culture changed dramatically during the 40-year period covered by Robin's research. As a government department, the Australian Antarctic Division adopted anti-discrimination and anti-sexual harassment frameworks. The old days of the 'boys' club' were slowly coming to a close.

According to Jenny Feast, a weather observer with the Bureau of Meteorology, the day she first saw a penguin come back after winter was one that stayed in her mind. "The sun doesn't come up at Davis for six weeks and every day you gaze at the horizon, hoping to see little specks of penguins sliding on their bellies towards the islands. When I finally spotted one, I'd never been so happy to see an animal in my life."

Jenny was part of a group of 21 men and three women who stayed at Davis Station during the harsh winter months in 2011. She gave little thought to her gender before taking on the challenge. "Certain types of women are attracted to going to Antarctica and they tend to be independent, strong and resilient," she says. "It's a tough place – you learn all about yourself. You have to cope on your own. It's just as tough for the men.

"It's not feasible to be a prissy female down there anyway, not when your hairdresser is a diesel mechanic. It's easier to be one of the boys. Being laid back and tomboyish helps you get by."

Expeditioners are connected to the world in ways that would have been hard to imagine a few decades ago. *Continued page 94* ▶

Delayed by chemotherapy, social scientist Robin Burns (opposite) fought off nausea by fantasising of reaching Antarctica, and in 1995 she made it. Robin (pictured below in 2012) researched experiences of women in Antarctica between 1959 and 1999.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JAMES BRAUND, COURTESY SANDEFJORD WHALING MUSEUM; SUSAN BARR

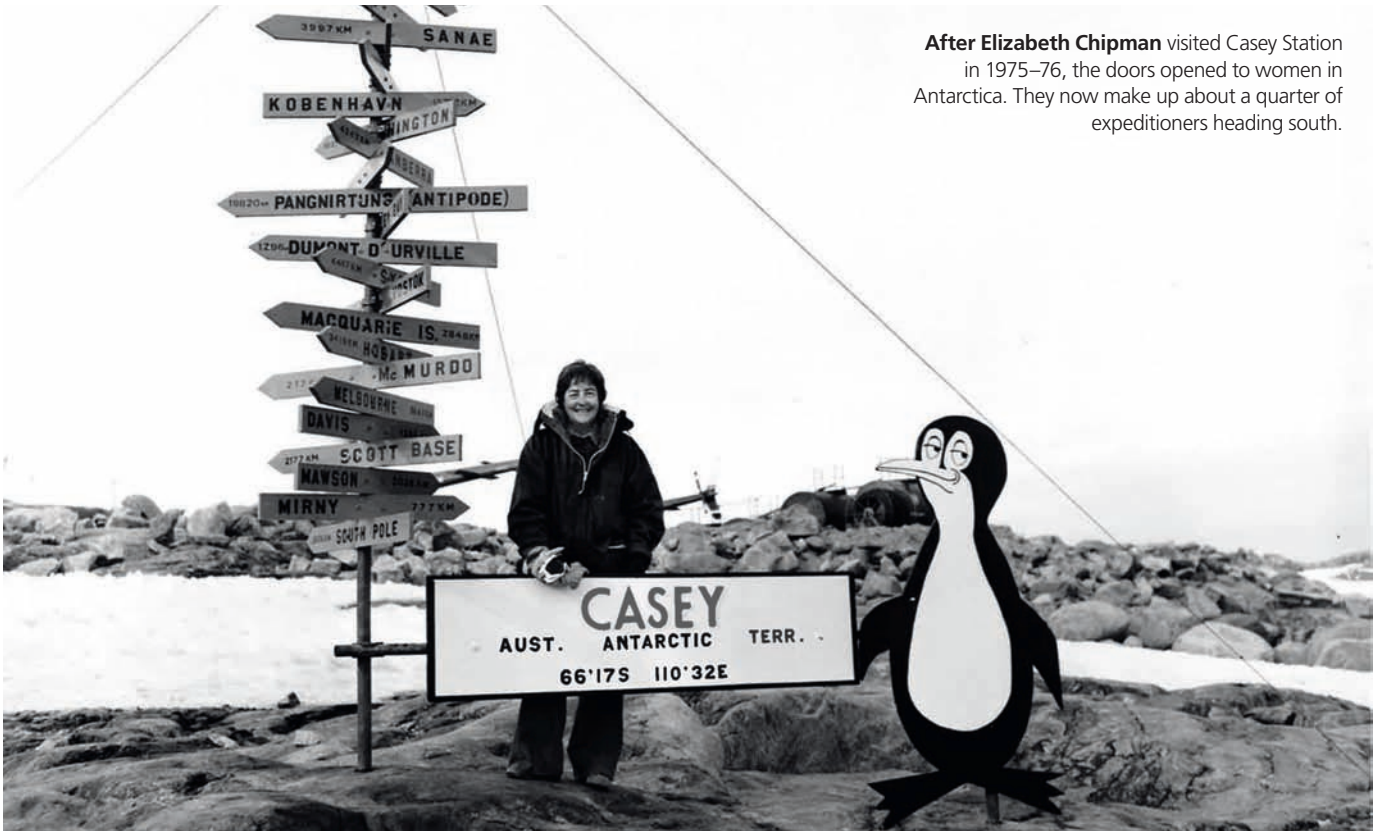
Caroline Mikkelsen (above), thought to be the first woman to reach the Antarctic mainland, raises the Norwegian flag in 1935. Her landing is now believed to have been on a nearby island. Caroline (left, at left) hadn't spoken about her Antarctic landing for 60 years before Diana Patterson (left, at right) tracked her down in 1996, just a few months after rediscovering her landing site near Davis Station.

From directly under the ozone hole, weather observer and photographer Jenny Feast (top) releases Davis Station's weekly ozone balloon, providing important data to the World Meteorological Organisation about the concentration of ozone in the atmosphere. Spectacular views of the aurora australis (bottom), or southern lights, are Antarctica's gift to visitors here in winter. The building in the foreground is the 'pineapple' and has served many purposes.

TOP: SHANE MITCHELL; JENNY FEAST

JENNY FEAST; ROSS SWANBOROUGH

Brown's Glacier (top), near Davis Station, meets the frozen ocean. This breathtaking glacier is up to 150m high in places. Weather observer Jenny Feast (above) – who took the glacier image – was one of three women and 21 men who spent the winter of 2011 at Davis Station. Pictured here at home in Scarborough, WA, she brought back unforgettable photographs and enduring friendships as mementos of her 16 months in Antarctica.



After Elizabeth Chipman visited Casey Station in 1975–76, the doors opened to women in Antarctica. They now make up about a quarter of expeditioners heading south.

"If there's a fire or an accident or a blizzard, you can still die. [Antarctica] is the most remote and anti-human place."

Wireless internet is available in all bedrooms, as is a relatively low-cost satellite phone system.

"It was important for me to have a support network away from the ice," Jenny says. "I would talk to my mum on the phone every week or so, and to my brothers. Facebook is great too, as a way of staying connected with the world."

For Jenny, the downside of being so connected was the loss of a tight-knit sense of community among the Antarctic team. "Our year didn't often do those traditional Antarctic-culture things like hang out at the bar each night or dress up for formal dinners," Jenny says. "It was easy for people to retire to their rooms.

"I was a bit disappointed, but what we did, in the absence of a big social life on the station, was spend lots of time having adventures in the field and it was great to explore Antarctica."

ANTARCTICA HAS A WAY of getting its claws into you. Thirty-five years after her first visit, Elizabeth Chipman returned last year. This time to the Antarctic Peninsula, where she celebrated her 77th birthday. "The peninsula has such scenic beauty," she says. "But I still want to see South Georgia and the Ross Sea. I've been formed by the place. Every day I get up and look at news from Antarctica. I don't feel retired."

Having seen in a new cultural era for Antarctica, Diana Patterson, 62, also shows no signs of retiring. She led the Mawson's Hut Conservation Team expedition in 2002 and now makes several Antarctic trips each year as a guide with Orion Expeditions. "Each voyage is like my first," she says. "It's exciting and emotional... I'm still overawed by Antarctica."

Robin remains an honorary mother to a young woman she worked with during her season in Antarctica and has mentored others. She says that although facilities at the Antarctic stations have improved, what hasn't disappeared is the danger. "Antarctica is still precarious. If there's a fire or an accident or a blizzard, you can still die. It is the most remote and anti-human place."

Jenny brought back strong, enduring friendships as her legacy. "The place makes it special. It's so different to the real world, and friendships have extra connection," she says.

No one knows what Ingrid Christensen or her friends thought of Antarctica. Only Lillemor Rachlew kept a diary, and the original has disappeared. The surviving fragments from it – quoted in Lars Christensen's book about his Antarctic travels – are the only remaining words from the women who went to Antarctica before World War II.

"We crept and slipped along, closer and closer in... It was all very exciting! But we had to give up when we were within 5 nautical miles of land," wrote Lillemor, as she described their attempt to get close to land. "Great blocks of ice as big as church towers lay higgledy-piggledy, 5 miles deep, jammed tightly together, with only a few lanes intersecting them. It was impossible to get through. Not even a dog could scramble over those steep blocks."

What I brought back with me was a longing to go south again. I want to search for Ingrid's landing site at Scullin Monolith. Waiting there, under a cairn of stones, lies the depot those women laid down years ago, still waiting to be found. AG

GLENN FOOTE