

Feature Review

## SUBANTARCTICA

The Auckland Islands and Joan Druett's *Island of the lost*

BERNADETTE HINCE

Australian National Dictionary Centre, Canberra <bh@home.netspeed.com.au>

### Abstract

The subantarctic is a little-known region with fluid boundaries. Its islands, once obscure and undesirable places, have conservation protection today for their distinctive plants and animals, spectacular landscapes and scientific value. In reviewing *Island of the lost* (2007), Joan Druett's popular account of two 1864 shipwrecks on Auckland Island, this article explores the notion of a continuing culture of the subantarctic in the absence of permanent settlement.

### Keywords

Shipwrecks, subantarctic islands, Auckland Island, Robinsonade

Like a sea lion's whiskers, the subantarctic islands positively bristle - with stories. Most of them have not yet been told. Novelist and maritime historian Joan Druett has 18 books under her belt. In *Island of the lost* (2007) she tells the story of two 1864 wrecks on Auckland Island, using accounts published after their rescue by two survivors, Thomas Musgrave (1866) and François Raynal (1875).

Auckland Island, "a godforsaken island at the edge of the world", as the book's cover tells us, is the largest of New Zealand's subantarctic islands. But where exactly is the 'subantarctic'? And what is it? The 'antarctic' part of its admittedly confusing name suggests icebergs, extreme subzero cold, and the heroic age of Scott, Amundsen, Shackleton and Mawson. In fact, Auckland Island is only 280 miles (400 km) south of New Zealand's Stewart Island. Like other subantarctic islands, it has an almost unchanging temperature (which hovers around zero) and penetratingly wet weather - very different from Antarctica, with its dry cold and extreme sub-zero temperatures.

Because they are unfamiliar to most people, the Earth's two cold polar regions - Antarctic and the Arctic - are sometimes confused. The *subantarctic* is different again, but it is so little known that it is hardly surprising to find its tiny maritime islands lumped in with the vast ice-covered continent of Antarctica. Modern governmental and scientific thinking encourages this confusion. The global Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research manages not only the frozen continent but also sometimes extends this interest to the subantarctic islands, a practice followed by most national Antarctic research programs

too (Keage and Quilty, 1988: 3, Gaston and Spicer, 2004: 1). And the cover photograph of the book *Geopolitics in Antarctica* (Dodds, 1997), for example, shows not Antarctica but the subantarctic Marion Island. Yet the subantarctic islands are a distinctly separate place from Antarctica.

They lie in the high latitudes of the Southern Ocean, halfway between the polar continent of Antarctica and the other southern continents of Africa, Australia and South America. The islands are in the 'roaring forties' and 'furious fifties', latitudes whose winds blow across the Southern Ocean with no significant land to slow them down. Dwarfed by the surrounding seas, these specks of islands sit in the teeth of these winds - in fact, with their craggy cliffs they *are* the teeth of the wind. One, at least, is called just that - Dent Island off New Zealand's Campbell Island is a tooth of land named Île de la Dent by the French in 1874. Others such as South Georgia's Shag Rocks appear on the horizon 'like broken teeth' (Brock, 2007 np; see also Hince, 2005).

While most of us hardly know the word subantarctic, its meaning is warmly debated among specialists. Definitions vary individually, and by field of study. To a hydrologist the subantarctic can be 'any regions washed by 'subantarctic water''; to a biogeographer, some temperature and climatic regimes are subantarctic, others are cool temperate (Dawson, 1965: 44; see also Walter, 2004). Though distinctly different from other places, the subantarctic can be hard to pin down. Even its edges move. It is often defined as the region between the two fluid oceanographic and biological boundaries — the Antarctic convergence or 'polar front', an irregular broad stretch of ocean where cold antarctic and warmer subantarctic waters meet, and the subtropical convergence or 'subantarctic front' (see Hince, 2000: 345).

There are about 20 subantarctic islands or groups of islands (Figure 1), depending on how they are counted - the Tristan da Cunha group, Gough, Marion and Prince Edward Islands, Îles Crozet, Îles Kerguelen, Île Amsterdam, Île Saint-Paul, Heard and McDonald Islands, Macquarie Island, the Auckland Islands, Campbell Island, The Snares, the Antipodes Islands, the Bounty Islands, the South Shetland Islands, the South Sandwich Islands, the South Orkney Islands, the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and Bouvetøya (Johnstone, 1985: 101–2; Morrone, 1998: 947; Aubert de la Rue, 1931: 169; Aubert et al 1999, 243; Bergstrom, 2004: 16, Ferron, 2004: 155, Greve et al, 2005: 157). The islands are territorial possessions or claims not only of the southern hemisphere (South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina) but of countries as far away as the UK, France and Norway.

Among them, only the South Atlantic British territories of Tristan da Cunha, the Falkland Islands and South Georgia are permanently inhabited. Some other islands have bases where transient residents arrive, work and live for a summer, a year or up to two years, and leave again. As well as being damp and cold, subantarctic islands are isolated by distance or difficulty of access - usually both. Most were sites of sealing, places of transient or failed settlement, and places of interest to naturalists and scientists. During the 20th Century the subantarctic islands gradually became valued for their unique and rarely encountered plant and animal life. They strike many as beautiful, though those who are marooned there seldom have an unalloyed appreciation of them. In an age when noise pollution has reached "an apex of vulgarity" (Brown, 2005: 19), island sounds are often just those of the sea, wind and animals.

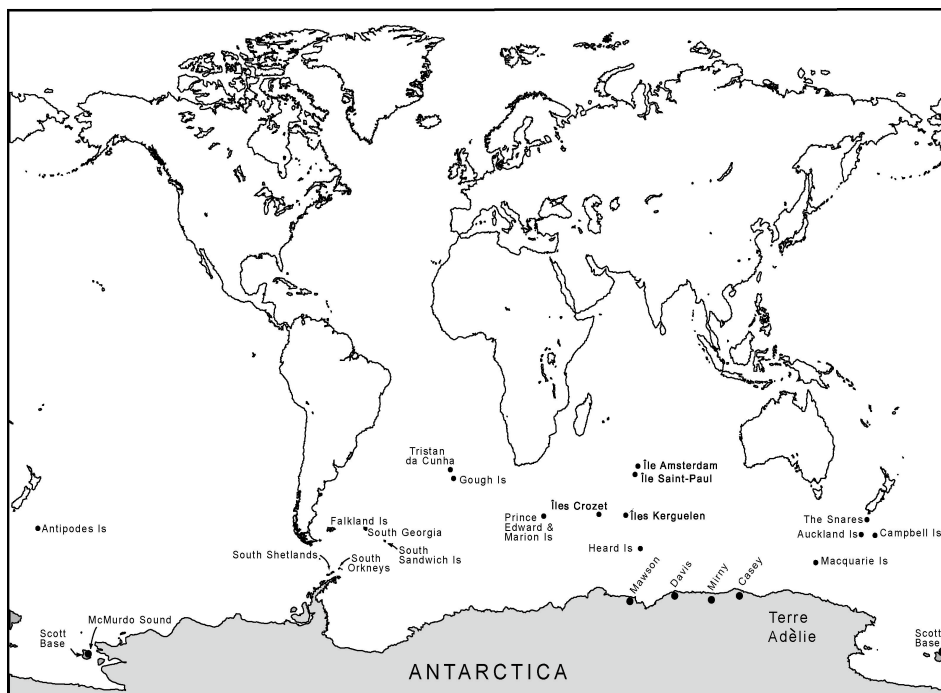


Figure 1 – The subantarctic islands (drawn by Richard Barwick and reproduced from Hince, 2005)

If no one lives on most of these subantarctic islands in any sustained way, where do we look to find out what has happened there? People on inhabited islands create and pass on their own “powerful historic island memory and imagination” (Bartmann, 2000: 41, 45). But (with the exception of the British possessions) almost no one has been born on subantarctic islands and no coherent society exists on them to maintain tradition or to record history. Even with the establishment of modern research stations, no thriving culture exists where accumulated memories might be stored and shared. As a result, the few who visit such islands have no easy way of inheriting any of the stories that – in the rest of the world – give us our sense of place and history. But even without enduring human inhabitation or folklore, the subantarctic islands do have a history. It’s just not the normal history of islands.

Dutch writer and journalist Alfred van Cleef tried for years to visit the French Île Amsterdam in the southern Indian Ocean. *The lost island: alone among the fruitful and multiplying* (2004) was the idiosyncratic result of his quest – and idiosyncrasy seems a perfectly rational response to the subantarctic. When he finally reached it, van Cleef had no sense of belonging. He was “a temporary resident... in unfamiliar territory”:

*Because the history of the island was rewritten with every new expedition (he wrote), I was just as much a part of it as any other inhabitant of the earth who had ever set foot there. Yet at the same time my presence*

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*seemed to be inherently meaningless. In a few years no one would be left on the island who knew me or even knew that I existed. (2004 4–5)*

In his poetic and contemplative book, *The arch of Kerguelen*, Jean-Paul Kauffmann reflected similarly on the history of the subantarctic Îles Kerguelen:

*In the course of my research, I realized that the facts surrounding the discovery of the Kerguelens and its exploration between 1790 and 1914 explain absolutely nothing. There is no continuity. Whalers and scientific mission have nearly always followed one another in ignorance of what went before... One mission leaves, another takes its place. Each one knows nothing about the one before. The Kerguelians have no memory. (2000: 6, 36)*

This is both true and not true. On Îles Kerguelen, for example, Kauffmann's claim may be true of most of the small number of French men and women - perhaps 90 - who live there for the course of a year ("les hivernants"), including those doing national service. But there are a handful of general 20th Century books (mostly in French) on Îles Kerguelen. And in their survey of its flora in 1996–2000, scientist Yves Frenot and his colleagues (Frenot et al 2001: 35) paid "special attention... to sites with past or current human activities" - the modern base at Port-aux-Français, the sheep farm and sealers camp at Port-Couvreux, the old whaling station at Port Jeanne-d'Arc, and places in the Golfe du Morbihan such as Île Longue with its introduced animals and Lac d'Armor with its history of farming introduced fish. All this is history.

Of course, one's view of an island as a place neutral to one's presence can come from the lack of an enduring human culture, rather than just an island's subantarctic location. English writer Adam Nicolson, for example, felt the same on his own islands, the uninhabited Shiantis in Scotland's Outer Hebrides. "I never quite feel the comfort of arrival that I expect", he wrote in *Sea room*:

*It is enigmatic. This is the longed-for place, but it is so indifferent to my presence, so careless of my existence, that I might as well not have been here. (2002: 44)*

All three of these writers have a palpable desire to affect the islands they are writing about, even if only by exploring and narrating their history. As far as subantarctic islands go, we have done much more than simply write about them. We have taken pains to introduce animals and plants to most of the small islands of the world. Somewhat surprisingly, this includes those of the subantarctic. We have then often spent big sums of money eradicating the same species on the islands. So it seems fitting that Joan Druett's first book was about plant and animal introductions into New Zealand, a country that provides possibly the world's best example of how not to treat an island whose native plants and animals you value.

In 1996 I went by ship to the New Zealand subantarctic island groups of The Snares, Campbell and Auckland Islands (Figures 1 and 2). They were unexpectedly beautiful places. On the Auckland Islands I saw the 1850 grave of Isabel Younger, age three months, who was born and died within the most remote settlement ever established in the name of the British Empire. Large and territorial Hooker's sea lion bulls snapped towards me as I walked along a track that skirted their breeding beach. Ageing signposts

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pointed towards long-gone depots once maintained for victims of inevitable shipwrecks. If I had known then how the subantarctic would snare me, my field notes might have been exhaustive - as it happened, I took almost no notes (something that I still find hard to believe twelve years later). I was surprised by the presence of graves on such remote and unpopulated islands. The flowering plants or ‘megaherbs’ were waist-high and spectacular. Sooty albatrosses wheeled overhead at the edge of steep rocky cliffs, the curiously pale-eyed hoiho (yellow-eyed penguin) walked between beach and bush. Even as a traveller on an expedition tourist ship, it was easy to find quietness and solitude. This was a world I knew almost nothing of, but it had its own distinctive plants and animals, and a human history that could explain the graves, the old signposts, the recently abandoned meteorological station.

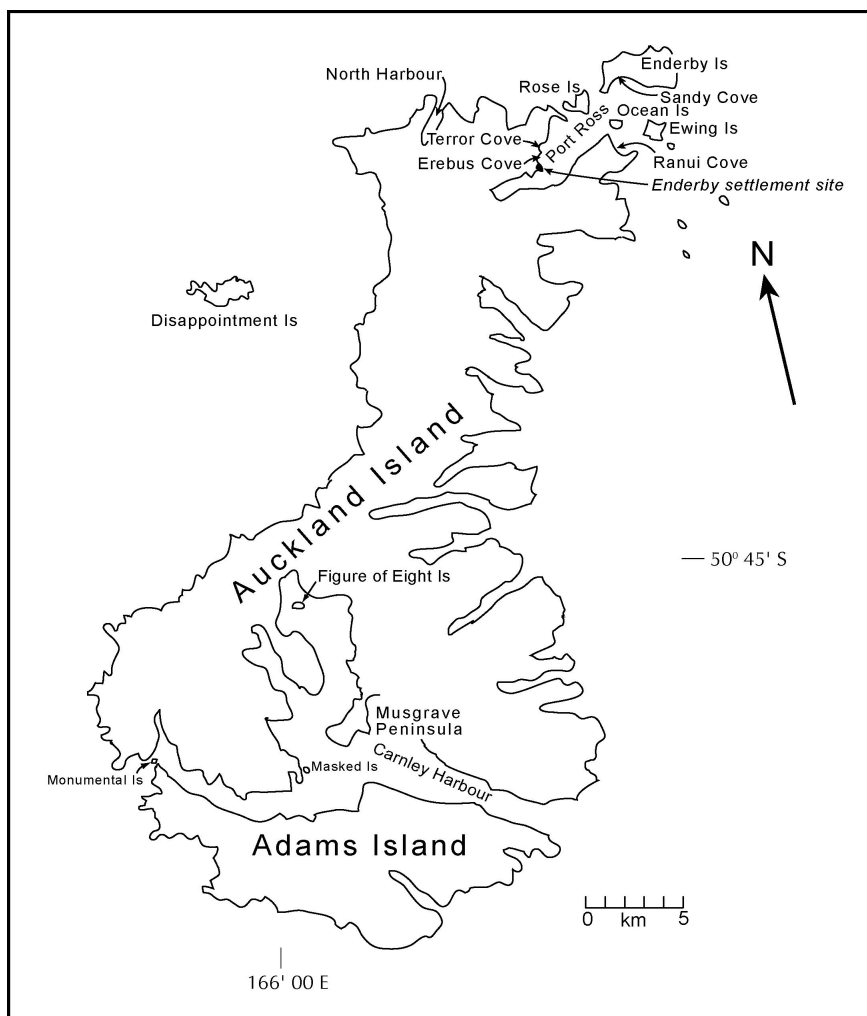


Figure 2 - Auckland Island. (Drawn by Richard Barwick, and reproduced from Hince, 2005).

## Auckland Island's Robinson Crusoes

In 1719 in England, nearly three centuries ago, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was published. There have since been many other 'Robinsonades' — stories of island castaways on voyages cut short by a shipwreck, or islands as places for social experiments that were unimaginable in mainland settings. Druett's *Island of the lost* is a good example. But though Defoe's was a novel, with the real Alexander Selkirk as probable inspiration, Druett's account is true. Or almost. I had turned only the first two pages of *Island of the lost* before questions began to rise in my mind. What is fiction, and what fact? *Island of the lost* is written as a fictionalised account of true stories. Yet who shall say what is real and what is not? Even the words 'true story' invite questions. When Druett describes a Sydney wharf on a cold day in October 1863, how much does it matter what the waves really did, what sort of beard a man had, whether a ship's crew were amiable or taciturn, if it was windy or not... I began to be distracted from the story and to wonder whether Joan Druett had checked the waves, the beard, the crew and the weather (given the research she has done, it's quite likely she did all of this). How much does the accuracy of this level of detail matter? To most readers, surely what counts is Druett's ability to create a plausible world and draw them into it and — in this case — to make that world a dauntingly inhospitable subantarctic island.

Artefacts found on the Auckland Islands suggest that, like other outer islands in the New Zealand region, Polynesian seafarers visited them in prehistoric times.<sup>2</sup> Later, the islands were on the path of ships sailing between Australia and Cape Horn. On one such voyage eastwards, Captain Abraham Bristow of the whaling and sealing vessel *Ocean* (owned by Samuel Enderby and Sons of London) recorded the European discovery of the islands on 18 August 1806. The islands were the site of fur sealing until the mid-1820s and were also used as a base by occasional whalers. Three major exploring expeditions visited the islands during 1840. A small number of Maori and Moriori briefly settled on the islands later in the same decade, in an occupation not documented until the arrival of British settlers in 1849.

Of the shipwrecks known on Auckland Island from 1864 to 1906, 78 of the 202 people involved survived. All five men on Thomas Musgrave's small ship the *Grafton* survived. There were 25 on the larger *Invercauld*, whose story we also learn. Of those, 19 survived the wrecking but only three lived long enough to be rescued.

## The wreck of the *Grafton*

In late 1863 the *Grafton* set out from Sydney to search for a silver deposit believed to be on Campbell Island. The men found no silver. Coming northwest from Campbell Island on their homeward journey, they decided to call at Auckland Island. Here, their ship was caught in a dubious harbour during a rising storm and blown onto rocks. The five men aboard managed to retrieve the ship's dinghy from the wreckage, a life-saving move that gave them a way to get around the local coast and, ultimately, a vessel in which they could sail for rescue. The *Grafton* itself (Fig 3) held together through the winter storms, to such an extent that in August the men decided to try heaving it onto its other side to assess the possibility of repair - unfortunately, it proved too badly damaged. Two records of the *Grafton*'s wrecking have survived, one by the captain Thomas Musgrave (1866), master mariner, and one by a resourceful Frenchman François Raynal (1875). Druett uses

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both books and many other sources to tell the story with a brilliant sense of immediacy and life.

In their first months on the main Auckland Island, the men made a substantial cabin, 'Epigwaitt', with a large stone chimney and a wooden floor, thatching it with some 5000 one-pound bundles of thatch. Though there were disagreements, the group had a strong cohesion. They made makeshift furniture, salvaged a chronometer, barometer, thermometer, bellows, a looking glass, pots and pans, and panes of glass windows from the ship, and conducted evening classes in Portuguese, French, Norwegian and mathematics. For a while they even made pets of fledgling native parrots found on the island. A young cat befriended the men and became a pet and a good mouser. Once they saw two dogs, and pig footprints, but they did not see any pigs and never again saw the dogs. (The pigs were probably descendants of those released 60 years earlier by Captain Bristow who returned to the island in 1807, the year after his discovery of the group.)



Figure 3 - Wreckage of the *Grafton* near Epigwaitt, Auckland Islands (1888).  
Photographer William Dougall. Source: Te Papa website 2004. Reproduced by courtesy  
of Te Papa Museum of New Zealand.

For the men of the *Grafton*, finding food was a problem. The few potatoes salvaged from the ship did not thrive when planted. The men killed what seals they could, gathered

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shellfish, and tried the local plant *Stilbocarpa polaris* (Macquarie Island cabbage) whose large sweet root they found palatable when grated and fried. Apparently they did not try the cabbage's edible leaves, so much appreciated by Bellingshausen on Macquarie Island that he wished his men had preserved more of the leaves for later use (Mawson, 1943: 34). Though it saved the Auckland Islanders from starvation, it was a diet that palled. Druett (2007, 139) quotes Musgrave who wrote in July 1864:

*I may here describe our precise mode of dragging out our miserable existence at this time. Breakfast - seal stewed down to soup, fried roots, boiled seal or roast ditto, with water. Dinner - ditto, ditto. Supper - ditto ditto. This repeated twenty-one times per week. Mussels or fish have become quite a rarity, and we have been unable to get any for some time.*

For anyone wrecked on a subantarctic island, scurvy and starvation were real possibilities and food the greatest preoccupation. Its procuring and preparation feature consistently in accounts of life on subantarctic islands. (Even in the mid-20th Century, better-provisioned expeditioners were keen to try subantarctic wildlife.<sup>3</sup>)

On Auckland Island, the colossally enterprising Raynal made soap with homemade lye and seal oil. After making his own tanning solution and soaking sea lion skins for months, he produced leather shoes for the men. He made a grindstone and fashioned a set of blacksmith's tools - bellows, furnace and anvil - to start building a new boat to sail to the nearest inhabited part of New Zealand. He had a makeshift forge and used timber from the wreck of the *Grafton*, making ironwork slowly as he went. Eventually Raynal realised that the time needed for such a job made it a hopelessly optimistic venture, and the men began overhauling their old dinghy instead.

On 10 May 1864, when the *Grafton's* survivors had been on the island for four months, another ship, the *Invercauld*, was wrecked there. The main Auckland Island with its rough terrain is about 27 by 15 miles (43 by 24 km), which makes it is easy to understand why neither party discovered the other. The *Invercauld's* wreck, "in such terrible parallel" (Druett, 2006: 279)] to the *Grafton's* fate, was testimony if any more was needed of the hazards of approaching the islands under sail. This time there was no ship's carcass to sustain the victims. The *Invercauld* was smashed into atoms within twenty minutes of striking the island's much wilder western coast. Captain George Dalgarno and others including Robert Holding, a gamekeeper's son, travelled across country and discovered a derelict building on the island's northeastern tip. (Holding's great-granddaughter Madelene Allen (1997) later edited his reminiscences, incorporating them into the absorbing narrative of her own travels to the island.) The building found by the men of the *Invercauld* was part of the twelve-year-old remains of Charles Enderby's British whaling settlement, a settlement that had lasted less than three years.

There was little esprit in the *Invercauld* group, and its men slowly starved. They ate occasional 'widgeon' (cormorants), seals and sea lions. One man cannibalised a recently dead body. By late October, 16 of the 19 *Invercauld* men had died. The three survivors made a small boat and sailed it to a nearby island, Rose Island (their 'Rabbit Island'), where they built a sod hut with a thatched roof and sealskin beds. "When finished, we found it very comfortable, I can assure you" wrote one of the three, the mate Andrew Smith. "The bottoms of our beds were of seal's skins stretched upon a stretcher, and then we covered them with some withered grass, and for blankets we used seal-skins." Dalgarno's account was less sanguine. "Gradually we collected a sufficient number of



seal skins to construct with them a little hut, like the cabins of the Eskimos, but it protected us very imperfectly against the continual rains and the severity of that frightful climate” (both accounts are given in Druett, 2007: 188–9) Ironically for the men of the *Invercauld*, rabbits released by expeditions such as James Clark Ross's in 1840 to succour shipwreck victims had eaten all the island's vegetation and made it essentially less habitable (Aerodrome Services Branch, 1946: 13). A year and ten days after the *Invercauld's* wreck, the three men on Rose Island were rescued by a ship bound for South America, which didn't bother to search the island for other castaways.

In the middle of 1865, eighteen and a half months after their shipwreck on Auckland Island, the *Grafton's* survivors launched their laboriously converted ship's dinghy (now christened *Rescue*) to try and reach New Zealand. The dinghy could take only three men. With great good luck, and with little food and water, they reached Stewart Island south of the South Island of New Zealand. A local trader there, Captain Tom Cross, took them in his cutter the *Flying Scud* to Invercargill. While the New Zealand government prevaricated about rescuing the *Grafton's* other two men, Captain Cross sailed the *Scud* south himself. He was delayed by bad weather and a bad compass and got lost, but finally arrived at the Auckland Islands 22 days after leaving Invercargill. Musgrave, who returned to the island a few months later searching for castaways with Captain Norman in the *Victoria*, wrote that, “having suffered myself, I would gladly have gone to the pole to have succoured others under similar circumstances” (Druett, 2006: 243).

Some small aspects of Druett's gripping story worry me, but they are mostly the carpings of a satisfied reader. It is occasionally hard to remember whether it is the *Grafton* or the *Invercauld* under discussion. And the lapse into modern scientific shorthand with the obscure acronym 'sam' (sub-adult male) for young seals jarred. These are quibbles. A more serious issue is Druett's view of sealing, though to be fair this is a minor part of the story. It is easier to look back and see clear motives and patterns, than to detect them in what Milan Kundera's aphorism describes as 'the fog of the present'. Like many others who write on sealing, Druett describes the 19th Century sealers as greedy and desperate men remorselessly pursuing fur seals for their furs and elephant seals for their oil, emptying the newly-discovered subantarctic islands of seals as quickly as possible. Sealing was – undisputedly - very short-term, and on subantarctic islands it sometimes lasted only three or four years, such was the haste of the harvest. But greed or desperation cannot necessarily be imputed as the *motives* of those involved by looking at the *effects* of sealing, any more than my own motives can be similarly assumed by looking at the effects, if (for example) I dine on gemfish or travel by ship to a subantarctic island. If greed is measured in terms of resources used, any 21st Century middle-class book reviewer is likely to be deemed greedier than a mid-19th Century sealer.

The subantarctic islands have traced a trajectory during the past century from unwanted and unknown places through a certain amount of ecological blundering to a new status as places that are worth conserving for their distinctive plants and animals, spectacular landscapes and scientific value. *Island of the lost* is a rollicking yarn and a carefully researched story that implicitly tells this story too. I can't think of a simpler or more enjoyable way to discover the subantarctic than reading this book.

Endnotes:

1. Aubert de la Rue (1930), Arnaud and Beurois (1996) and Delépine (1998).
2. See Anderson (2006).
3. On Heard Island in 1952, 'at lunch one day roast penguin breast appeared on the menu. Although quite dark and somewhat evil-looking, it had a delicious flavour, something quite distinct from beef steak which it closely resembled in texture' (Brown, 1957: 51).

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