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The past and present of King George Island (South Shetland Islands, Antarctica)

The South Shetland Islands first existed on maps in 1819 after their discovery by the Englishman, William Smith (Hattersly-Smith 1951) and annexation on behalf of King George II.

In 1819–1821 in the area of the South Shetland Islands, American, British and Spanish sealers hunted for seals (Stackpole 1995). Admiralty Bay and the South Shetland Islands were probably named by George Powell, a British sealer sailing on the *Dove* in 1821–1827.

In 1821, the Russian expedition led by T.T. Bellingshausen, sailing through Bransfield Strait from west to east gave King George Island the name Waterloo Island, not knowing that English had been earlier in that area. King George Island is called *Waterloo Island* to this day by the Russians (Dubrovin and Preobrazenskaja 1987).

At the end of the 19th century after fur seals were completely exterminated in the South Shetland Islands, sealers were replaced by whalers. Whalers needed large, deep bays to capture whales and Admiralty Bay was one of the best.

One century earlier the development of whaling industry in Antarctica was foreseen by George Forster, citizen of Gdańsk, who participated in the second expedition of James Cook to South Georgia and observed there many flocks of baleen whales (Aagaard 1929). In 1905 Ch. Christensen, a Norwegian shipowner sent the first modern fleet of three whaling ships *Admiralen*, *Hanken* and *Ønun* which arrived in Admiralty Bay on 27 January 1906. Ships and whaling bases needed both deep bays and drinking water and Admiralty Bay was most suitable for this purpose.

During his second Antarctic expedition in the years 1908–1910 Jean Charcot (Charcot 1978) encountered the ships of two Norwegian and one Chilean whaling campaigns which had their bases in Admiralty Bay and on Deception Island.

As observed by Charcot, the catchments were so plentiful that only 40% of the killed whales flesh was used.

At first there was a coastal whaling industry. In the years 1906, 1907, 1908 and 1909 there were caught in South Shetland Islands area 183, 791, 930 and 1743 whales, respectively (International Whaling Statistics 1931). Whale bones strewn on the shores of Admiralty Bay date from this period. In 1997 in Admiralty Bay there were still present the fragments of 152 whale skulls, including 95 at Kellar Peninsula and Hennequin Pt., while at the west shore of Italian Valley up to Patelnia Peninsula 57 fragments were found (P. Kittel, *pers. inform.*). Commonly are found the fragments of skeletons, wood, barrels and harpoons.

There were not any prominent historical persons on King George Island at that time, although it has been mentioned that a few sealers from the ill-fated ship, *Discovery*, wintered over on King George Island (Hattersly-Smith 1951). In 1992, on Demay Point, Polish expedition has found a piece of human leg bone which documents that someone had been buried on King George Island.

After World War II, in December 1947, the British militia, commanded by John Huckle, built a small wooden hut on Kellar Peninsula from wood transported from Deception Island. Point Thomas was a better location from the point of view of at least one Englishman, after reconaissance in the area of Point Thomas, but the leader of the British group, A. Reece, decided to build the hut on Kellar Peninsula anyway. Kellar Peninsula was thought to be the best place to achieve the goal of the expedition which was to map the South Shetland Islands and Kellar Peninsula provided good access to all of the islands. This is the argument for why the British built a base on the Kellar Peninsula, Base "G". Five people wintered over in 1948 lead by geologist, E. Platt, who died later in the same year during field work (Fuchs 1982).

In February–March 1947, in Admiralty Bay, Argentinian ship and officers made their presence. The island has been named 22 de Mayo while Admiralty Bay was called Baya Lasserde. The Argentinians built their own hut to emphasize their sovereignty, about 80 meters away from the British one. This hut was occupied from time to time. The English were present on Kellar Peninsula without break from 1948 up to 1961. Admiralty Bay station, Base "G" mostly carried out meteorological observations, but they also made geologic and topographical measurements and observations. Base "G" finished its activities in 1961.

On January 28, 1968, the Soviet icebreaker, *Ob*, entered Admiralty Bay. The expedition was led by A. F. Trioshnikov who was looking for a suitable location for a Russian station. The shores of Admiralty Bay were not to his liking and he finally selected a location west of Admiralty Bay, Maxwell Bay, and there *Bellingshausen* Station was opened on February 22, 1968 (Trioshnikov 1985).

One year later, after a volcanic eruption completely destroyed the Chilean station (*Presidente Aguire Cerda*) on Deception Island by covering it with ash, the

Chileans relocated to King George Island, 300 meters away from *Bellingshausen* Station. The Chilean station *Eduardo Frei*, was opened on March 7, 1969.

Chile claimed the territory between 52 and 90 degrees of western longitude, based on a Chilean decree from September 7, 1939. In the same area, Argentina and Britain claimed territory. The Antarctic Treaty, which was ratified in 1961, froze all territorial claims to Antarctica, but the existing claims have not been disputed.

The first Poles to land on King George Island were biologists who participated in the 19th Soviet Antarctic Expedition (SAE) as a IIIrd Polish Antarctic Biological Expedition organized by Nencki Institute of Experimental Biology, Polish Academy of Sciences. On November 17, four men landed on the shores of King George Island and spent the night there due to strong gales. These men were: Krzysztof Jażdżewski, Andrzej Lipkowski, Stanisław Rakusa-Suszczewski and Hubert Szaniawski.

Three years later in the season 1975/76 there was a beginning of a new period of Antarctic investigations. There was a consensus of interest to exploit Antarctic krill (*Euphausia superba*) whose numbers were estimated to be in the millions of tons. Poland sent the Ist Polish Antarctic Marine Expedition to western Antarctica on two ships, the research vessel, r/v *Profesor Siedlecki*, and the fishing trawler, m/t *Tazar*. The main goal of the expedition was to evaluate the possibility of harvesting and processing krill (*Euphausia superba*) in the Antarctic. The Federal Republic of Germany organized a similar expedition with two ships (a research vessel and a fishing boat).

In February 1976, two Polish ships anchored near the shore of Maxwell Bay in front of *Bellingshausen* and *Eduardo Frei* stations (Rakusa-Suszczewski 1979). On the day of their arrival, a memorial plaque was placed on the nearby rock with an inscription recounting the first Polish expedition. The text was written in Polish, English and Russian. Beneath the memorial plaque, a metal tube was placed which contains the names of all the members of the expedition. This memorial plaque was accepted by the Antarctic treaty as a historical monument, as was the grave of Włodzimierz Puchalski, who died on the shores of Admiralty Bay in 1979.

While the Polish expedition worked in Bransfield Strait on the r/v *Profesor Siedlecki* and the m/t *Tazar*, the Italian alpinists' expedition built a small hut on the shore of Ezcurra Inlet in Admiralty Bay. This small hut was named *Giacomo Bove* Base, but in March of the same year, the hut was destroyed. The area where the Italians had built their hut is now called Italian Valley on Polish maps of Admiralty Bay.

In December 1976, new Polish expedition left from Gdynia on two ships, the m/s *Zabrze* and the m/t *Dalmor*. The goal of the expedition was to establish a Polish base. On January 28, 1977 construction of the base began in Admiralty Bay and on February 26, 1977, *Arctowski* Station was officially opened.

In the 1983/84 season, on Kellar Peninsula, eight kilometers away from the Polish station, on the opposite side of Admiralty Bay, near the old British station "G", Brazil established their own station *Comandante Ferraz*.

In January 1988, a marine expedition from Ecuador established a small refuge on Hennequin Point.

In the 1988 field season, Peru started to build *Machu Picchu* Station on Crepin Point. The station operates from time to time during summer field seasons.

Americans have a small summer field hut in Special Site of Scientific Interest 8 (SSSI No 8) which is called *Peter J. Lenie*; *Copacabana* is its nickname given by the Poles.

In the area of Maxwell Bay situated west of Admiralty Bay there presently work the stations of China (*Great Wall*), Chile (*Frey*), Russia (*Bellingshausen*), Uruguay (*Artigas*), South Korea (*King Sejong*), Argentine (*Jubany*), and of the Federal Republic of Germany (*Dalman*). To the east of Admiralty Bay there will soon be built a seasonal Czech station in the vicinity of the SSSI No 34.

The relatively high number of bases on King George Island and in Admiralty Bay could be detrimental to the Antarctic environment and for this reason, Poland and Brazil wrote a proposal in 1991 to declare the area of Admiralty Bay an Antarctic Specially Managed Area (ASMA) in the Antarctic Treaty. The proposal was completely accepted by the Antarctic Treaty Organization in 1996 after a few revisions. The area of Admiralty Bay will be regulated by the ASMA plan which will be coordinated by Brazil until the year 2000 upon agreement with Poland.

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