

Antarctic History: The Queer Herbarium *[Extract]*

Branwell Roberts interviews five polar writers and researchers on imagining a queer Antarctic past, present and future.

We do not associate plant life with Antarctica. Likewise, queer genders and sexualities may seem anathema to the archetype of the rugged Antarctic explorer. Yet these are fictions, both contradicted in the life and work of Elke Mackenzie (1911-1990), lichenologist and transgender woman. Mackenzie was a botanist on the British Antarctic expedition Operation Tabarin from 1943 to 1946; she transitioned in the 1970s.

In poetry we construct meaning in the spaces between the word, the phrase, the line. Queerness in the historical record may manifest as a tension between what is and is not said. Antarctica itself might be likened to a blank page, paradoxically laden with meaning.

Here Mackenzie's life provides a stimulus for questions asked to researchers, educators and creatives engaging with the queerness of Antarctica's past.

Lichens are hybrid organisms; combinations of a fungus with an algae or bacteria. This article is a testament to that hybridity, piecing answers from disparate respondents together under emblematic moments from Mackenzie's life, forming a conversation between past and present.

Like botanical specimens in an herbarium, fragments of one moment's response are preserved on paper. Yet our minds like our bodies are unstable and may – by themselves or through hybrid contact with others – be transformed.

Verrucaria serpuloides

A lichen discovered by Mackenzie on the Antarctic peninsula; the only lichen species to remain permanently submerged in a marine environment.

Q: How can queerness enrich our understanding of Antarctica and its history?

Drozdzowski: Antarctic Studies is long overdue for a queer viewpoint as well as something that's more informed by feminist studies.

Mikulski: The first thing that really comes to mind for me is looking at different perspectives, because everybody brings something else to the table. I think looking at Antarctica through a queer lens will allow further space for underrepresented voices to speak as well.

Wilkes: Antarctica has always functioned in the collective imagination as 'the end of the earth' – a place at the ultimate margins of discovery. As queer people, sometimes it takes a bit of searching to find out where you fit in, and sometimes it's in those margins.

Molina Flores: I do not wish to present Antarctica as a queer utopia, or suggest that it inherently influenced explorers to adopt more progressive attitudes. Rather than falling for the romanticism of the 'queer misfit' archetype and all it obscures, I find it more compelling to sit in the paradox: Due to its peripherality, Antarctica

attracted queer travellers, who were nevertheless committed to serving the empire whole-heartedly. This disturbs the conservative heroic mythos, while resisting a tidily celebratory view of queer history.

Puranen: While broadly I think queer readings have a lot to offer Antarctic studies, honestly, I don't really think of my queerness as having much of an impact on my Antarctic research. Perhaps it does, subconsciously.

The Empty Chest

Mackenzie took up carpentry in her later years and attempted to reconstruct the seaman's chests used on whaling ships.

Q: What are the challenges of uncovering queer stories in Antarctica?

Mikulski: It's the pushback from right-wing and conservative groups. To me personally, that feels more of a challenge than looking at lost records or trying to read between the lines or finding things that weren't spoken in a clear way. I feel like being queer you get a certain sense of how people might interact with the world.

Drozdowski: Antarctic history has a very large and surface-level knowledgeable amateur fanbase: there are a lot of old white guys who think they know everything. They'll say "Oh, those were men, those were *real men*." And it's like cool, so those real men were cooking and cleaning and darning socks and talking about their feelings with each other. "No they weren't! No they weren't!" But they were. Of course they were.

Puranen: The experience of living and working in Antarctica has historically been gatekept – and this legacy is sadly alive today – as a boys' club. Isolation, safety considerations, and walls of silence all make it hard to unearth queer stories, and not everyone in a position of power is open to hearing them. Then there's also the fact of changing language, understandings, and societal tolerances of queerness – statistically, there are probably other early explorers who went to Antarctica while not visibly queer, like Mackenzie.

Molina Flores: To write queer Antarctic history, one must be comfortable navigating a high degree of ambiguity. I think of this work as *contextualization* rather than 'uncovering'. It demands historical literacy in expressions of queerness: reading against the grain, noticing absences, recognizing period-specific euphemisms and practices. It also calls for strong imaginative capacity. Academic research privileges empirical evidence for good reason, but there will always be a speculative element to historical writing – the less you fight back against this, the better positioned you will be to ask novel, interesting questions. All historians make imaginative choices when interpreting silences.

Wilkes: The challenges are those of historical oppression and suppression of queer people and their stories. The record is left blank or deliberately vague, and that's where fiction comes in.

[contd. p 64]

The Fossilised Branch

A branch fell from a tree when Antarctica was a rainforest. Twelve or thirteen million years later it was found by Elke Mackenzie as a fossil.

Q: What might the future look like for queer Antarctica?

Mikulski: The three words that come to mind are happiness, joy, and inclusion. I think with shifting perspectives and queerness being accepted more broadly, I think it's going to be a more open field, both in terms of historical and scientific research, and anything in between.

Wilkes: Jokingly, I'd like to see a new, properly Trans Antarctic Expedition to make up for how cisgendered the Imperial Trans-Antarctic (1914-1917) one was!

Puranen: Hopefully, more discoveries of queer stories heretofore lost in the archives, more queer people happily and safely living and working on the ice, more openness, and more Pride celebrations at the South Pole!

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Drozdzowski: God I hope it looks better than it does right now. That's a grim answer. I'm hopeful. I'm hopeful because Antarctica is running out of time and we need everyone we can get. We can't afford to bully and exclude the people who could make a difference in saving Antarctica and saving the planet.

Molina Flores: I remain at heart a pessimist with utopian tendencies. I still believe that the work of recovering queer pasts is not exclusively an antiquarian task, but a practical one, instrumental to building queer presents and futures for ourselves. You're infinitesimally small, but you're part of a long chain of queer history, whether you like it or not, and you have the agency to wriggle against the tide. Many of these historical lives were very small, even deliberately obscured – yet they hold a world of possibility.

Vini Drozdowski (she/they) is a PhD candidate at the University of Tasmania in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. Her current research focuses on domesticity, homemaking, and masculinity in 'Heroic Age' Antarctica (1893-1922). While studying at previous institutions in Scotland and in her home country of Canada, Vini has received numerous awards for both her academic and creative writing.

Phil Mikulski is an archival researcher, creative practitioner, and geographer with a MSc degree in Environmental Science from King's College London. His scientific research focuses on polar science and climate change. He is passionate about the history of polar exploration (the Ross Antarctic Expedition of 1839-1843 in particular), nature conservation, as well as maritime and LGBTQ+ history.

Eva Molina Flores is a writer of historical fiction and non-fiction. They are pursuing a PhD in the history of science at Princeton University, specializing in Victorian polar exploration, culture, and the life sciences. They are a current Editorial Fellow at the American Philosophical Society Press.

Emma Johanna Puranen is a postdoctoral research associate in Astrobiology Ethics at The Open University in the UK. Her current research focuses on Antarctica as an environmental ethics analogue for outer space. She is a former Ship's Crew member at the RRS Discovery museum in Dundee, and she had the opportunity to travel to Antarctica in January 2026 on a True Young Explorer scholarship with Heritage Expeditions.

Ally Wilke's debut novel, ***All the White Spaces***, told the story of a trans man 'escaping' to Antarctica in the years after the First World War - only to discover his own ghosts followed him. Ally is a Bram Stoker Award finalist, and her next novel, ***Man Eater***, a feminist eco-gothic about bodily autonomy and plant intelligence, will be published in February 2027. Ally lives in Greenwich, London, with an anatomical human skeleton, and far too many books about weird things.