

## SCAR Open Science Conference 2014

### Report of Panel Session “Connecting the past-present-future: studies and methods in history for Antarctic research and science”

Convener: Dr. Ursula Rack, Gateway Antarctica, New Zealand.

Co-Convener: Dr. Andrew Atkin, Gateway Antarctica, New Zealand.

Keynote/Introductory Case Study: Dr. Susan Barr, *Fram* Museum, Norway.

On 26 August, after the completion of the day’s Open Science presentation schedule, a panel session and discussion forum was conducted for humanities researchers, science communicators, social scientists, archivists, curators, knowledge management professionals and artists who are interested in interdisciplinary research. Most of the 30 attendees were members of the SCAR History Expert Group and the SCAR Social Sciences Action Group.

The forum topic was concerned with improving access and retrieval of archival sources for the benefit of social science researchers and scientists who need to mine historic data from diaries, letters, reports and oral or visual communications. It aligned with the SCAR OSC Social Sciences and Humanities sessions 44 (The Presence of the Past) and 45 (Methods and Innovations in Polar Social Sciences and Humanities).

Dr. Susan Barr’s keynote concerned the publication of the diaries of Roald Amundsen and other members of his South Pole party. This case study was consistent with the theme described thus: “Transcription, translation and interpretation of these various sources by humanities researchers working in conjunction with scientists can provide valuable knowledge for both historians, and scientists.” Of the seventeen expeditioners, there are fifteen diaries available for publication, most being held in publicly accessible repositories such as the National Library in Oslo.

Susan Barr recounted the experience of engaging a team of volunteers to transcribe and translate the diaries, and some particular challenges including misinterpretations, obscure dialects, access rights, handwriting deciphering and elements of self-censuring. The diaries in general were not intended for publication and were prepared for publication verbatim, uncorrected and without commentary, thus providing accessible and valuable resources for researchers. Comparison of various descriptions of an event can lead to a better understanding or more balanced view, especially where certain diarists considered the event inconsequential or had a faulty memory when writing diaries in hindsight. Susan did stress that researchers should, wherever possible consult original documents.

An open discussion led by Dr. Ursula Rack followed the keynote presentation. The following prompts were circulated to the participants prior to the workshop:

- Is there value in establishing a single register of polar diaries including details such as location, online address, format, accessibility, ownership and a short synopsis?
- Is there value in establishing a register of historians who have transcribed diaries, correspondence or reports and who are willing to share their work? There is considerable duplication of effort transcribing materials of this sort.
- What are the expectations of different research groups of how the diaries should be prepared for their specific questions?
- What could be a useful platform to communicate the diaries?

Initial discussion centered on consideration of the types of data that can be mined from the diaries and other personal sources? Various examples were cited that showed the broad interests of group members. Examples included landscape descriptions, weather records and descriptions, expeditioner's personal feelings, cartographic data, wildlife observations, fish captures, sea ice information and sea level history.

The discussion then moved to consider the particular challenges and problems encountered when researching with diaries? Access can be limited by physical location of the source (a significant challenge for researchers in Australia and New Zealand). Researchers find digitized (scanned) copies of diaries available online can save the need for international travel and time spent in archives, but scanning older documents is a risk to the fabric.

Many sources are still held in family or private collections and although the holders may be willing to grant access, ignorance of their availability can undermine effective research. Intellectual property issues are sometimes encountered, for example where descendants are unwilling to allow researchers the right to re-publish documents as they fear reputational damage to the memory of the diarist or invasion of privacy. This element also raises the issue of whether particular diaries were intended for publication and were self-censored or sanitized in the first instance.

On a more practical note, there are constant challenges related to interpretation of handwriting or particular terminology used in diaries and journals. The workshop members agreed that there is probably significant duplication of transcription effort, and any system that can facilitate sharing and exchange of electronic versions of diaries, correspondence and reports would be mutually beneficial to researchers in this field. Although sharing in this manner already occurs through informal collegial networks the workshop members agreed that there would be utility in development of a more formal mechanism.

Discussion turned to finding feasible solutions and ways in which members of the History Expert Group and the Social Sciences Action Group could enact next steps? Various solutions were discussed and there was some debate regarding whether such a project should proceed as an institutionally hosted, funded project or as an unfunded and simpler solution that could be initiated by interested parties using freely available resources. In the discussion was also considered the intellectual property issues and we will keep this in mind in the further process.

One possible solution would be a database that could be accessed via a dedicated web portal. Each diary or item would have a set of meta-data attached that could indicate to prospective readers if the content is appropriate to their research direction. Information at the portal might include lists of known diaries, names of transcribers, digital copies or contact details for the owner of digital versions, notes on the quality or selective nature of the digital notes. This would save time by reducing unnecessary investigation of irrelevant resources. Such a solution would require significant funding, an institutional home, a specialist gatekeeper and continuing employee to develop and curate the collection. It could be a repository for electronic copies of original documents, a guide to location and access for documents held elsewhere or some combination of both.

More basic solutions not requiring institutional support include establishment of an email listserv for sharing by interested parties or the development of a Wiki. Both of these solutions could be activated quickly, most probably by interested parties from amongst the workshop attendees, and at nominal cost compared to a database and web portal concept.

An email listserv could be an effective means of sharing information about obscure sources becoming available in the public domain but there seemed to be general agreement that the most effective and comprehensive solution was the development of a Wiki. Only a nominal amount of gatekeeping would be required after initial set up, it could be established without any funding then self-maintained by researchers with log-in access (to prevent advertising and spam). Some further work is required to determine layout and desired fields of information, but there appeared to be willingness to contribute time and effort to establishing such a sharing mechanism as a first step.

This workshop was a successful gathering for assessment of the level of concern and demand for improved services related to polar diary digitization, transcription and translation. It provided a platform for the airing of specific challenges and the vibrant discussion generated ideas for future directions.