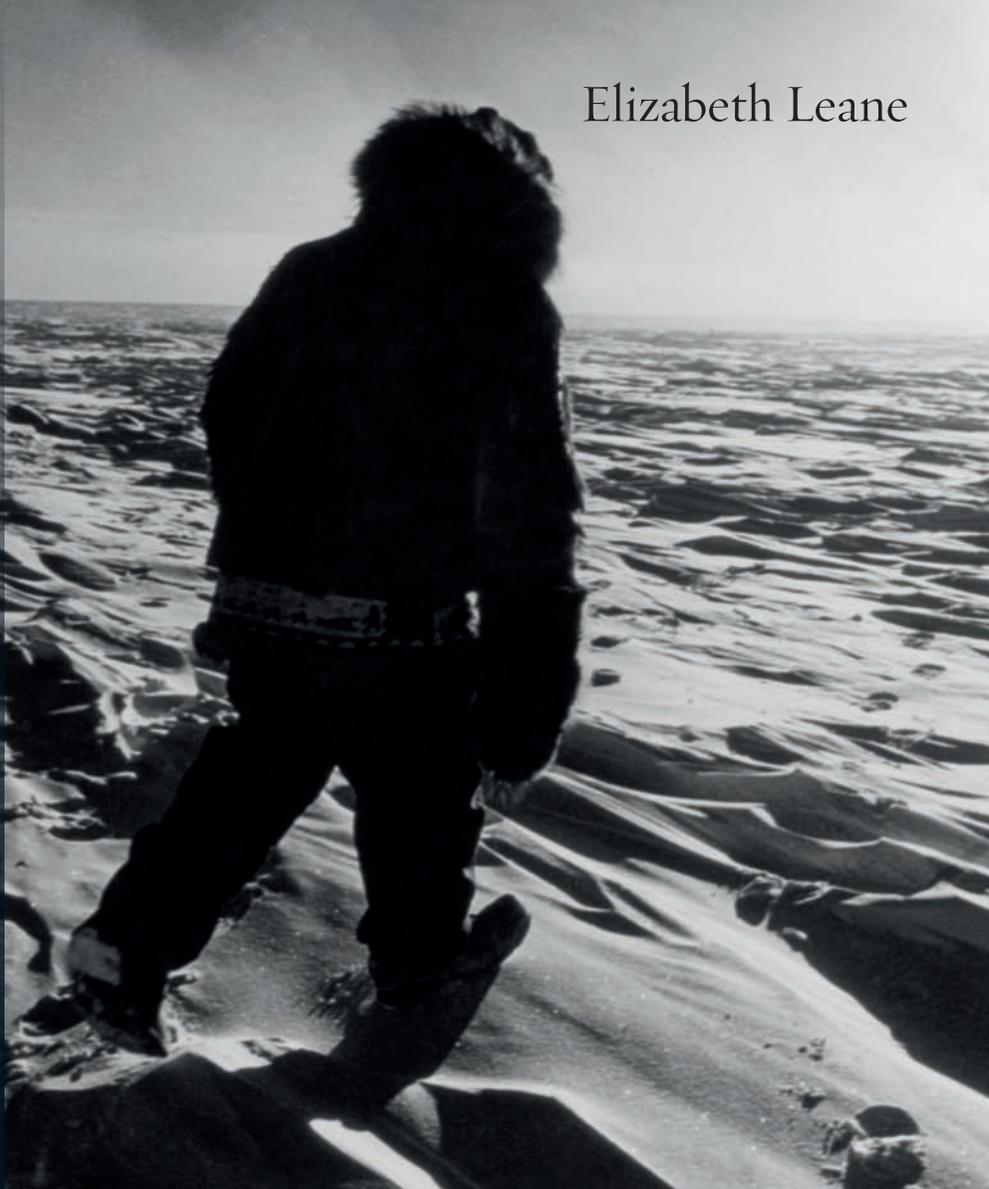


South Pole

Nature and Culture

Elizabeth Leane

EARTH SERIES



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Preface

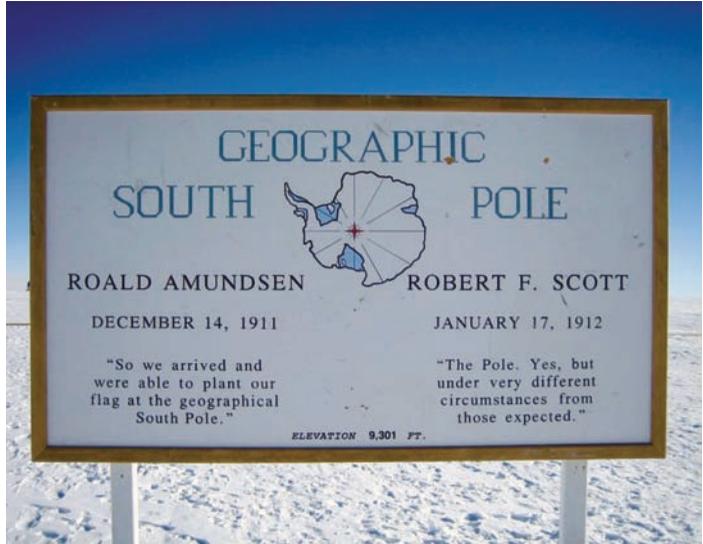
It is hard to think of a stranger place than the South Pole – if you can call it a place at all. Humans have theorized its existence for millennia, but our history of actual encounter with the South Pole is remarkably short – a little over a century. Many people equate it with a whole continent – Antarctica – but the Pole itself is technically just a point. There is no doubt about its cartographic position: 90 degrees south. But try to locate the Pole on a standard map and you may find yourself tracing out a line along its bottom; it does not slot easily into our conventional ways of looking at the world.

In the popular imagination, the South Pole is the most remote point on the globe. However, as one of two points where Earth's rotational axis meets its surface, it is also about as central a place as you can find: the whole planet revolves around it. The topography of the Pole is both remarkable and tedious: it 'sits' atop several miles of ice, on a largely featureless plateau. There is not, on the face of it, a lot to recommend the place: it is dark for half the year; its freezing climate is entirely hostile to all organic life above the level of the microbe; its economic value is minimal; and it is a long way from anywhere. In the early decades of the twentieth century, however, this point on Earth was more sought after than any other. Six nations' territorial claims now meet there, although it remains, like all of Antarctica, unowned.

My aim here is to tell the story of humanity's relationship with the Pole – one that begins in speculation and imagination, moves through exploration and tragedy, becomes rooted in

This map shows the wedge-shaped territorial claims to the Antarctic converging on the South Pole (only the Norwegian claim has an unspecified southern limit).

Sign marking the Geographic South Pole.



permanent station points to one of many important differences between the North and South poles. Unlike its northern counterpart, the South Pole is solid. Although it is ice rather than land, it can be built and lived upon, meaning that its history of human interaction has been quite different from that of the Arctic pole.

I also want to complicate the story of the South Pole as it is popularly told. I have been talking here about *the* South Pole, but there are, as I will explain, many ‘South Poles’, not all of them stationary. While my focus is primarily the Geographic South Pole, from time to time I turn to various ‘other’ poles. And despite Antarctica being dubbed the ‘continent for science’, I want to emphasize that the Pole is not just a natural place, a goal for explorers and an important site for scientists. It is also a very political and contested place, as well as a cultural place, one that is continually re-imagined and represented. The South Pole is a real point on the Earth that can be visited – tourists pay a large price to do so – but it is also a highly charged symbol.

At first glance, the Pole might seem an impossible subject for the writer, let alone the artist or photographer. How much is there to say about a remote point on an ice plateau that

cannot even be located without complicated observations and calculations? As it turns out, a great deal – much more than can be squeezed into a book of this size. Images and ideas have accreted around the Pole during thousands of years of geographical speculation, and the previous century, with its sledging journeys and overflights, international political negotiations, scientific investigations, infrastructure construction, environmental crises and tourist visits, has added many new meanings and mythologies. This book attempts to weave together these diverse facets of the South Pole.

3 Polar Imaginations

‘On this 21st day of March 1868, I, Captain Nemo, have reached the South Pole and the 90th degree, and I take possession of this part of the globe, now comprising one-sixth of all the discovered continents.’

‘In whose name, captain?’

‘In my own, monsieur!’¹

It is both ironic and fitting that the first official claiming of the South Pole in literature should be made in the name of ‘Nemo’ – Latin for ‘no one’. The mysterious and misanthropic submarine captain of Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (1869–70), who normally avoids stepping on land, makes an exception of the small islet he discovers at the Geographic Pole, on the basis that it has not yet been sullied by a human foot. A political subversive, he refuses to claim this land for a nation, empire or sovereign, instead planting his own black flag with a golden ‘N’ as the sun sinks below the horizon at the autumnal equinox.

While Nemo may be the first fictional character to *claim* the South Pole, he was not the first to *reach* it. It is difficult to know to whom this particular credit should go. In Dante’s *Inferno*, the first part of his fourteenth-century poem *The Divine Comedy*, the Greek literary hero Ulysses (now in the underworld) relates his final, fatal, voyage southwest towards ‘the stars / of the other pole’.² He recalls having spied a mountain higher than any he had previously seen, before his ship, encountering a whirlwind, went down. Dante’s whirlwind is a variation on the mythological South Polar vortex that besets many literary voyagers. The protagonist of an anonymous early eighteenth-century French novel, *Relation d’un voyage du Pole Arctique, au Pole Antarctique*, finds his vessel sucked down a tremendous whirlpool at the North Pole, rushed along ‘terrifying torrents’ in ‘subterranean passages’, whence it emerges in a calm, foggy sea at the other end of the Earth. In