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Commentary

Cite this article: Lewis Williams E (2019) Creating poetry from the BAS archives: Commentary on, and extracts from, a new poetic sequence, "Met Obs". *Polar Record* **55**: 341–346. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247419000512

Received: 28 May 2019
Revised: 27 August 2019
Accepted: 5 September 2019
First published online: 21 November 2019

Keywords:
values; poetry; meteorology; base diaries; sublime

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This research was supported by the Consortium of the Humanities and the Arts South-East England.

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Creating poetry from the BAS archives: Commentary on, and extracts from, a new poetic sequence, "Met Obs"

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Abstract

The Antarctic Treaty of 1959, which dedicates the continent to peace and international scientific cooperation in the face of rising east–west tensions, is informed in part by a shared scientific imaginary created by the UK and other nations which maintained scientific bases in Antarctica at the time. In this article, the poet offers works extracted from her longer sequence "Met Obs," based on meteorological reports and journals from the UK station at Port Lockroy written in advance of the 1957–1958 International Geophysical Year (IGY). The poems engage with the work and circumstances which helped foster such an imaginary, as well as with the nexus of Antarctic "values" endorsed by the Treaty, and the later Madrid Protocol. The commentary further contextualises these literary responses in terms of the attitudes of the men working there as well as the "wilderness and aesthetic values" recognised by the later Protocol on Environmental Protection. The world of the poems may belong to 1950s Antarctica, but their observations reach beyond that experience, making a case for the continued relevance of Treaty values, and for the importance of artistic, as well as scientific, responses to the environment in a world under threat from accelerating climate change and competition for resources.

Looking back on his time on the continent (1959–1965), my father – who began his Antarctic career as a scientific assistant at Port Lockroy and ended it as scientific leader at Scott Base – suggested that there was no room in Antarctica for politics or national gain. His optimistic perspective echoes the preamble to the Antarctic Treaty which expresses the belief that international co-operation in science, such as that evidenced during the 1957–1958 International Geophysical Year (IGY), would benefit all humanity. My father's view suggests that what might be a cause of tension between governments was less important on the ground, despite intense personal, social and political pressures on men living and working on a homosocial research station, in extreme conditions, often confined in close quarters. However, his optimism seems justified not only by the terms of the Treaty but also by the years of peaceful co-operation which followed it: the growing number of Treaty signatories and regular multinational collaborations, the Madrid Protocol and conventions such as the one addressing the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources. The writers of a psychological report from Halley in 1959 believed that in the Antarctic winter "[a] new sense of values [was] born" (Lush & Norman, 1959, p. 5). The darkness of winter, with its introversion and increased need for vigilance and sensitivity in social interaction for the benefit of individuals and the group, is a time of rebirth. The values referred to by Lush and Norman are in some ways codified in the pragmatism of a treaty which recognises occasionally competing rights and claims of the Treaty signatories, while not endorsing them, and which insists on co-operation for the benefit of the whole.

"Met Obs" is extracted from a longer work which forms part of the creative element of my PhD. The poems are based on meteorological reports and journals from the UK station at Port Lockroy written in advance of the 1957–1958 IGY. They focus on the small-scale society of the base itself, where individuals are tested to their limits by close proximity and the onset of winter. The sequence follows the seasons, moving from light into darkness and back again, the relationship between the weather and the men's mood demonstrated in "Codes (2)" where apparently trivial annoyances become the equivalent of a full-scale storm. The poems engage with the work and circumstances which helped foster a shared scientific imaginary, as well as the nexus of Antarctic "values" endorsed by the Treaty and the later Madrid Protocol.

It has been suggested (Codling, 2001) that wilderness and aesthetic values, recognised by the Protocol on Environmental Protection, should be separated for the purposes of mapping the landscape and providing a consistent framework for decision-making. However, it seems that the Antarctic experience as it is expressed in the base diaries is absolutely about combination – the practical business of the scientists' life alongside the extraordinary beauty and harshness of the landscape – and while there is a benefit to clarification, and Codling accepts that ultimately subjectivity cannot be avoided, the wording of the original treaty and the Madrid

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Protocol recognise the holistic nature of the experience. The opening poem in "Met Obs" takes a statement of material fact and places it on the background of a contemporaneous meteorological report from Lockroy, setting up the question of how far scientific data in a historical context can be employed in poetry. This question is further explored in "OP(i)" which challenges the view expressed in Edgar Allan Poe's sonnet "To Science" [1829] that the "peering eyes" of science have stripped divinity from the natural world (Poe, 1829). The entry for 3rd July in the Lockroy base diary reads, "Saw a very good illustration of 'Mother of Pearl' clouds during the morning . . . The delicacy of structure and the beauty of the colouring beggars description . . . Several of us bemoaned the fact that we hadn't a colour film . . . " (Lockroy, 1954) The frustrated desire to record the clouds on film suggests that several men wanted a means not just to record a meteorological phenomenon, but also to convey its beauty and its effect on them. Along with the drawings which accompany the Lockroy meteorological reports, this is evidence that scientists on base were just as alive to the aesthetic qualities, as to the scientific value, of what they were observing in the landscape.

Making daily life possible is one of the most powerful aspects of the diaries, and a kind of commonsense "making do," perhaps not unexpected from men who had often seen military service, is inflected by the grandeur of the environment. "In Antarctica," remarks Francis Spufford, "even the butter is primeval" (Spufford, 2011). "Met Obs" questions whether the transformative experience associated with the sublime can be expressed in the language of work. The spiritual as well as the factual aspect of the experience is conveyed in "The Stevenson Screen" where both man and machine measure and record, number is poetic and instruments sound out "the music of weather." The final poem, "OP(vii)" sets the observation and illustration of the parhelia circle in the context of Wordsworth's poem "The Tables Turned," and asks with Wordsworth that we bring to our encounters with the natural world "a heart/That watches and receives" (Wordsworth, 1986, p. 131).

For me, there is profound hope in the terms of an Antarctic Treaty System which looks towards an approach to values which transcends international, academic and semantic divisions. We need to take seriously the range of ways in which those values are communicated; there is an impressive body of literature and art, as well as other disciplines, which explores various intersections of the personal, political, historic and scientific in the particular context of Antarctica and its global significance. The presentation of these poems suggests that the values they embody, despite deriving from the particular conditions of scientists living and working in the Antarctic in the mid years of the 20th century, remain as relevant now as it was to a time of heightening fears of potential nuclear war.

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Archival Documents

The images of optical phenomena and italicised quotations are kindly reproduced with the permission of the British Antarctic Survey:

Falkland Islands Dependency Survey Base A Port Lockroy
Meteorological Report June – November 1952
BAS Archive Ref AD6/2A/1952/X
Falkland Islands Dependency Survey Base A Port Lockroy
Meteorological Report January – November 1953
BAS Archive Ref AD6/2A/1953/X

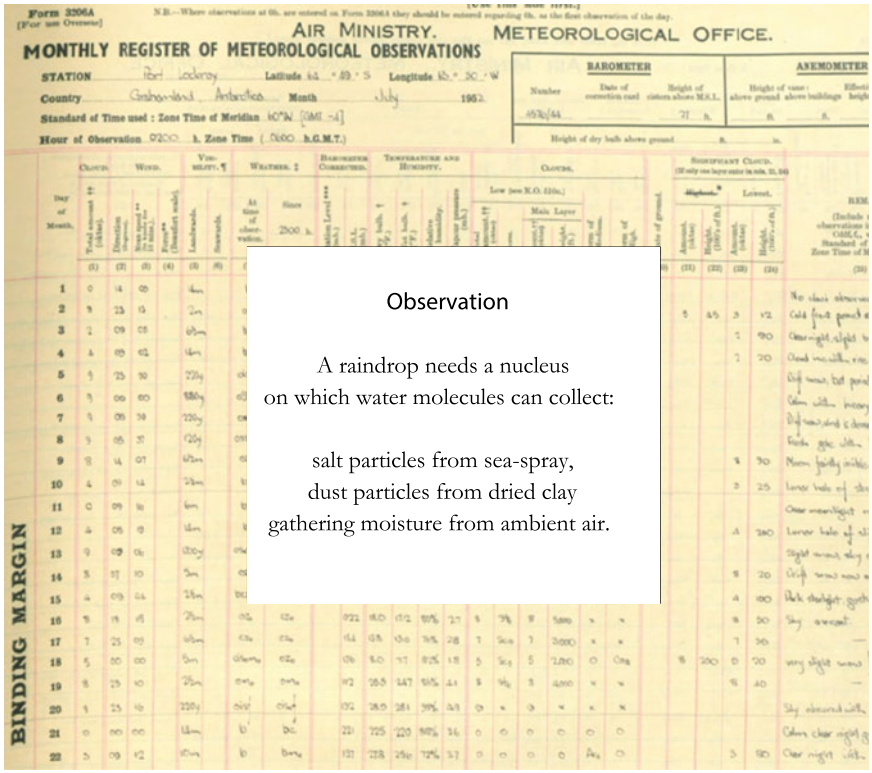
Base Diary Port Lockroy 1952; British Antarctic Survey Archive Reference AD6/2A/1952/B

Base Diary Port Lockroy 1954; British Antarctic Survey Archive Reference AD6/2A/1954/B

The photographs were taken by A G Lewis who worked at Port Lockroy from 1959 to 1960, and in Antarctica between 1959 and 1965. He was awarded a Polar Medal in 1970.

MET OBS

The following poems are excerpted from a longer sequence which is part of the creative component of my PhD, and not yet published. It sets the responses to the base diaries from Port Lockroy (1952–1954) in the context of a contemporary reader responding to their own landscape, emotional as well as geographic; this first person reader, cut from this shorter sequence, is situated at the bottom right of the page, the aim being to acknowledge that the poetic responses to the archival material are curated and are part of a communication taking place across time as well as space. Quotations from the base journals appear in italics. Poems with dates refer to particular incidents or observations found in the base and field reports; the "OP" poems to optical phenomena, and the "Codes" poems to the numerical scale employed to facilitate transmission of meteorological data by Morse code. The images are integral to the sequence, rather than illustrations: the photographs and drawings are part of a documentary record which acknowledge the viewpoint of the observer.



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OP(i)

Water dispersing sunlight
showers different wavelengths

red to violet; look

an arc made from travelling light
and falling water.

Do not call me vulture
or accuse me of preying
on a poet's heart
as I anatomise
this coloured stillness.

15th December 1952

Geoffrey, Robby and myself went ashore . . .
to inspect the base hut, and to declare the base reopened. Simultaneous thrill of arrival and sting of cold; what matter a door broken by *persons unknown*, the hollowness of empty rooms, and a scattering of boxes islanded by meltwater and rain? Time to sweep floors, light fires, make our presence felt.

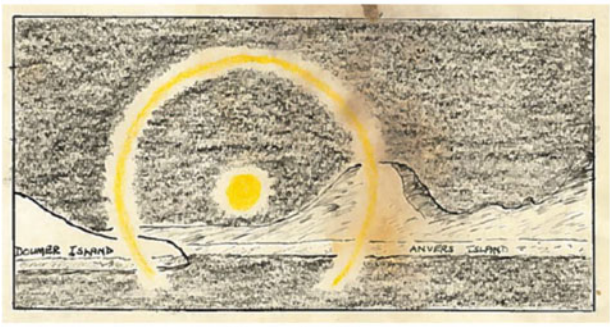
9th January 1952

New Esse cooker constructed in the kitchen
and Geoff made his first batch of bread with great success.

Listened out for Met news but nothing heard again so think they must be suspended – no news until the arrival of the Biscoe.

After some experimenting, David perfected his chocolate sponge.

27th April 1953



Lunar Rainbow

OP(ii)

No one is awake except the night breathing rime into the air -
listen - we have drawn a circle rising from the sea
around the moon.

The Stevenson Screen



(i)
Like a beehive with louvred sides
painted white to reflect the sun,

this box on a stand is a house of instruments,
a squat rectangle lent intelligence by its function.

Its stillness has a listening stance;
the bees which fly here are invisible

and silent, leave no waxy hexagons
but paper traces and honeyed number.

(ii)
King of a small rock
it looks without eyes
at the mountains whose distance
is measured from here:

Ice Cliffs of Doumer
Jabet Peak
Mount William
their known heights simplifying
the estimation of altitude
when recording
an observation of clouds.

Notes concerning instruments *The thermograph was placed for a trial period on the shelf of the Stevenson screen and later suspended from two cup-hooks from the roof*

(iii)
Tend me.

In a blizzard,
snow accumulates around my coils.

When the wind blows
my instruments are skittish.

Hold me still –

but do not expect me
to read every day the same.

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(iv)
At each determined hour
of the day or night,
this office: the met obs.



Screen door opened
Polewards
and a man bows
before the instruments
notes – in pencil – temperature,
humidity, atmospheric pressure;
records wind speed
and direction.

Then he stands,
and with the evidence of his eyes,
takes readings of the clouds
and listens
to the music of weather.

30th April 1952

– *one breakage, two omissions* –

Everything comes in a box.
If something's missing, you wait for a ship
(even then there's no guarantee.)

Take the equipment for the met station -
there was no maximum thermometer,
no drum for the thermograph
- so no way of recording maximum temperature.

Of course you can improvise.

We had an Ovaltine tin –
its circumference was just right
the exact measurement of a thermogram
and we made a key for winding the clock
with a split-pin.

Codes (2)

State of Sea

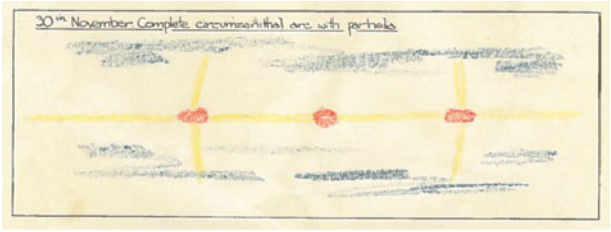
5 = Rough
I counted 94 fag ends per square foot
on the floor by the electronic equipment. Apart from
the fact
6 = Very Rough
it should be forbidden because of the fire risk,
it's a disgusting habit.
One person here hasn't washed his socks
for 16 months.
To go day after day without washing and then make bread.
9 = Phenomenal

13th May 1952

The seagull with the broken leg
failed to appear for scraps today,
but there were nine sheathbills by
the door, looking hungry, and all
puffed up white and tame with cold.
One followed Fred all the way to the
point, and half flew half hopped all
the way back. *Unable to say whether
this change had any significance, the
wind being 15 knots SW all the time.*

The shags were on the rock again.
*David fixed up some fishing lines
and we went out to try our luck.*
Came back empty handed –

30th November 1952



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OP(vii)

Do not call me thief or say I string
the tendons of dissected Gods
in the workings of my instruments

when I note
. . . the parhelia circle . . .
first observed at 1400 GMT,
between Jabet Peak and Wall Mountain.

Bring with you an observant heart
and mark this wonder –
three suns in a circle of reddish light
being of a strong intensity . . .
blazing above a frozen sea.

28th Dec 1952

Robby and Ralph busy concreting in the genny room until lunchtime. Genny is sick and needs a bed,
a good solid one with shingle and sand. She
needs to be cradled in a room reinforced
with beams. Listen to her cough and rattle,
the sputter of her valves. She will be moody,
recalcitrant, but surprisingly fitted for
reanimation. Hers are the habits you can try
to fix. Lean against her heat, listen for her
breath; diagnose with fingertips, her inlet
pipes and pumps, and seek amongst the
broken things for bits to make her new.

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