

## Contents

List of Illustrations	xiii
Preface	xxiii
Acknowledgements	xxix
<b>1. The Antarctic Ice Sheet Puzzle</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. Prelude	1
1.2. Some History	2
<b>2. Sounding through the Ice</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1. Seismic Measurements of Ice Thickness	8
2.2. Gravity Measurements	12
2.3. Early Tests	13
2.4. The International Geophysical Year and Its Aftermath	15
<b>3. The Advent of Radio-Echo Sounding</b>	<b>21</b>
3.1. Experiments and Happenstance	21
3.2. Developments in Cambridge and Antarctic Tests	26
3.3. Trials in Greenland	29
3.4. Field Activities Elsewhere	35
3.5. Radio-Echo Sounding Goes Airborne	36
<b>4. Flight into the Unknown: Long-Range Antarctic Campaigns Commence</b>	<b>43</b>
4.1. International Cooperation	44
4.2. Plans for Antarctic Season 1967	46
4.3. Antarctic Operations	51
4.4. Review of the Season	62
<b>5. The Second Antarctic Season 1969–70: A Task for Hercules</b>	<b>63</b>
5.1. Cambridge Preparations	65

5.2.	The Team Assembles	66
5.3.	Washington, DC	68
5.4.	New Zealand Activities	70
5.5.	Antarctic Sounding Commences	76
5.6.	Personal Experiences	82
5.7.	Western Marie Byrd Land and the Ross Ice Shelf	87
5.8.	Halley Bay—Visit to the Brits!	90
5.9.	Inland Flank of the Transantarctic Mountains	98
5.10.	To the Interior of East Antarctica and Vostok, the Coldest Place on Earth	99
5.11.	The Filchner Ice Shelf	106
5.12.	Meanwhile in the Antarctic Peninsula	107
5.13.	The 1969–70 Season in Perspective	109
<b>6.</b>	<b>Review and New Plans</b>	<b>111</b>
6.1.	International Antarctic Glaciological Project	111
6.2.	Aircraft	114
6.3.	Navigation	115
6.4.	Radio-Echo System—Collaboration with the Technical University of Denmark	117
6.5.	Deconvolution and Migration	119
6.6.	RES Recording	122
6.7.	The Team	122
6.8.	New Plans and Preparations	124
<b>7.</b>	<b>The Continental Survey Begins: A Land Emerges</b>	<b>125</b>
7.1.	To Washington and New Zealand	125
7.2.	Antarctica—Delays and Frustration	127
7.3.	The Science Begins—Eventually!	133
7.4.	A Land Emerges	137
7.5.	Mapping of East Antarctica	138
7.6.	The Ice Sheet Surface	139
7.7.	The Sub-Ice Morphology	144
7.8.	Lakes beneath the Ice	146
7.9.	Quo Vadis?	152
<b>8.</b>	<b>New Impetus</b>	<b>153</b>
8.1.	A Tripartite Agreement	154

8.2.	Cambridge Activities	155
8.3.	Devon Island—An Arctic Foray	156
8.4.	The ‘Keystone’ of Gondwana	162
8.5.	A New Aircraft and New Instrumentation	166
8.6.	A Planning Dilemma	173
8.7.	Remote Sensing in Glaciology	174
8.8.	Preparations for the New Season	175
	8.8.1. Dome C and East Antarctica	176
	8.8.2. Marie Byrd Land	178
	8.8.3. Ross Ice Shelf	179
	8.8.4. Other Projects	182
<b>9.</b>	<b>1974–75: Radio-Echo Sounding Comes of Age</b>	<b>185</b>
	9.1. Initial Deployment	186
	9.2. Operations Commence	190
	9.3. Siple Coast—Domes and Ice Streams	194
	9.4. ‘Lake’ Vostok	196
	9.5. Inland of Dry Valleys	203
	9.6. Disaster at Dome C!	204
	9.7. The Season Concludes	207
<b>10.</b>	<b>Data, Research, and Politics</b>	<b>210</b>
	10.1. Ice Streams of Marie Byrd Land	210
	10.2. The Ross Ice Shelf Revisited	212
	10.3. Some Geological Investigations	215
	10.4. Politics Intervene	216
	10.5. Research Accelerates	218
	10.6. Automated Data Reduction	221
	10.7. Royal Society Discusses Antarctic Science	222
<b>11.</b>	<b>Changing Planes</b>	<b>224</b>
	11.1. The NSF Sets Out Its Plans	224
	11.2. IAGP, September 1976	227
	11.3. Antarctica 1977–78—A Change of Planes	229
	11.4. Christchurch, New Zealand—The Programme Hangs in the Balance	231
	11.5. Antarctica at Last!	236
	11.6. An ‘Operational Day’	239

11.7. 1977–78 Operations	248
11.8. Dry Valleys	251
11.9. Retrospective	253
<b>12. The Final Season, 1978–79</b>	<b>256</b>
12.1. Magnetic Moves	256
12.2. Dynamics of Large Ice Masses	259
12.3. The Final Season Advances	262
12.4. Taylor Glacier Project	279
<b>13. The Axe Falls</b>	<b>286</b>
13.1. A Telegram Arrives	286
13.1.1. Data, Access, and Political Myopia	288
13.2. NSF Magnetism Meeting	292
13.3. New Initiatives, New Opportunities	292
13.3.1. Satellite Studies of Polar Ice	293
13.3.2. Svalbard	293
13.3.3. Short-Pulse Radar	297
13.4. North American Engagements	300
<b>14. The Antarctic Folio</b>	<b>304</b>
14.1. Developing the Portfolio	306
14.2. Funding	309
14.3. Folio Gains Momentum	312
14.4. Scales and Map Projections	313
14.5. Coastline and Other Details	315
14.6. Place Names	318
14.7. Enter the Cartographers	321
14.8. The Maps Unfold	322
14.8.1. Ice Sheet Surface	322
14.8.2. Flowlines	326
14.8.3. Compiling Statistics, Writing Papers	328
14.8.4. Third International Symposium on Antarctic Glaciology	328
14.8.5. Bedrock Surface	330
14.8.6. Ice Thickness	331
14.8.7. Isostatic Bedrock	331
14.8.8. Magnetism Sheets	334
14.8.9. Internal Layering	336

<b>15.</b>	<b>The Last Push</b>	<b>342</b>
	15.1. The Folio Completed	342
	15.2. The Folio Reviewed	348
<b>16.</b>	<b>The Aftermath</b>	<b>350</b>
	16.1. Svalbard	353
	16.2. Satellite Altimeter Group	361
<b>17.</b>	<b>Reflections</b>	<b>364</b>
	17.1. Some New Brooms	365
	17.2. The Surface Configuration of the Ice Sheet	367
	17.3. The Subglacial Bedrock Landscape	370
	17.4. Water beneath the Ice	375
	17.5. Epilogue	378
	Appendix 1: Display and Recording of RES Data	379
	Appendix 2: SPRI Research Students in the Radio-Echo Sounding Programme	383
	Abbreviations	385
	Glossary	389
	Index	397

# 1

## The Antarctic Ice Sheet Puzzle

### 1.1 Prelude

Today Planet Earth is in trouble. Several decades of scientific observations and studies have revealed the progressive and rapid deterioration in the health of our world's natural environment. Increasingly, alarms are being sounded regarding the dependence of humanity on the use of fossil fuels. The emissions from their combustion have dramatically increased the quantity of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The result is a world that continues to lurch towards disastrous warming, and despite warning calls to governments, there has been insufficient application of mitigation measures or preparedness to adapt to a new order. The fate of millions of individuals—their lives, livelihoods, and heritage—hangs on a thread as sea levels rise inexorably, storms and extreme weather events become more prevalent, and heat waves and wildfires increasingly threaten cities and the countryside.

The great ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica, the latter the size of Europe, play a key role in the climate story and occupy a central stage in the long-term well-being of our world. On the one hand they reveal, through physical and chemical analysis of their layers of accumulated snow and ice, a remarkable and detailed record of changes in climate extending back 800,000 years. On the other hand, the destiny of the ice locked away in the ice sheets is crucial to future sea levels. The reduction in size of the ice sheets is already contributing to a steady rise in sea level—20 mm in the last two decades.<sup>2</sup> This shrinking is not purely a matter of melting around the periphery in response to atmospheric and ocean warming. These external forcings

<sup>2</sup> IPCC: Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Masson-Delmotte, V; et al. (eds.), Cambridge: CUP.

are having complex effects on the flow and stability of immense ice drainage basins that have the potential to discharge substantial additional volumes of fresh water into the ocean. Furthermore, these current changes are committing our world to sea-level rise for many centuries to come.

To understand the response of the ice sheets to climate, sophisticated models have been developed and are continuously being refined. All require data on the glaciological characteristics of the ice sheets. Of fundamental importance are the shape, thickness, bed topography, basal conditions such as melting or freezing, the net gain or loss of mass in the form of snow and ice, and other internal indicators of past flow or changes of state. The technique of radio-echo sounding (RES) and the many surveys that were undertaken principally in Antarctica in the late 1960s and '70s that form the substance of this book yielded the first comprehensive database for many of these parameters. They are affording, in several instances, the baseline from which we can assess the changes in ice volume and behaviour that will continue to challenge the environmental conditions of our planet. Before embarking on the story of these explorations, however, it is salutary to look back to the early questions about Antarctica and the search for methods to probe its icy carapace.

## 1.2 Some History

As soon as humans spied and later set foot on the remote Antarctic continent in the second decade of the nineteenth century and became aware of its ice cover they quickly desired to know more of its extent, shape, thickness, and behaviour. Exploratory ventures of the early part of that century—for example, the expeditions of James Clark Ross, Charles Wilkes, and Dumont D'Urville—brought back tantalising reports to Europe and North America of this enormous frozen region (Figure 1.1<sup>3</sup>). Their findings and records fed the fecund minds of natural scientists and learned societies and gained prominence in contemporary texts about the natural world.

James Croll, Robert Ball, James Geikie, and others—seized by these accounts—speculated on their significance and interpreted their wider implications. Sir Robert Ball, Lowndean Professor of Astronomy and Geometry at the University of Cambridge, ventured his thoughts on the matter

<sup>3</sup> Captain Sir James Clark Ross (1847) *A Voyage of Discovery and Research in the Southern and Antarctic Regions, during the Years 1839–43*, in two vols, London: John Murray.

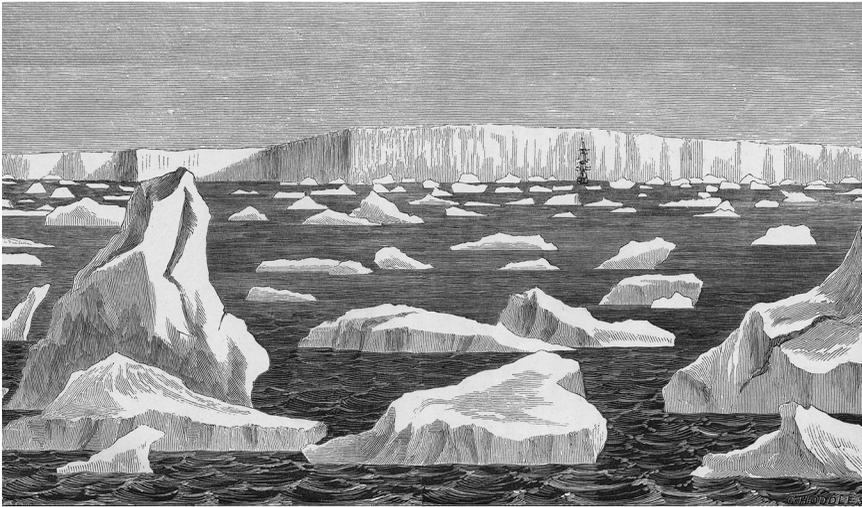


Figure 1.1. The Great Ice Barrier (now known as the Ross Ice Shelf). (From a drawing by Sir James Clark Ross; see footnote 3).

in a little book, *The Cause of an Ice Age*, published in 1892: ‘It seems, however that in its [Antarctica’s] vicinity lies an extensive tract which is crushed under an ice-sheet far transcending, both in area and thickness, the pall which lies over Greenland. From the dimensions of the Antarctic icebergs, it becomes possible to estimate the thickness of the layer of ice, from the fringe of which those icebergs have broken away. It is now generally believed that the layer of ice which submerges the Antarctic continent must have a thickness amounting to some miles.’<sup>4</sup> A few years earlier, James Croll had made calculations on the possible depth of the ice sheet. He based his estimate on rudimentary notions of the flow of an ice mass which gave a depth in the centre of the continent of 39 km!<sup>5</sup> Croll did consider this value excessive and revised his numbers downwards, also referring to the known thickness of icebergs, and gave as his best guess a thickness of 4 mi (6 km). Both Ball and Croll were remarkably close to what we know today as the thickest ice, which is just a shade under 5 km deep.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ball, R (1892) *The Cause of an Ice Age*, 2nd ed., London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 180pp.

<sup>5</sup> Croll, J (1875) *Climate and Time in Their Geological Relation*, London: Stanford, 577pp.

<sup>6</sup> Robin, G de Q, quotes an 1879 article by Croll that gives the thickness as 3 mi (4.8 km). ‘The thickest ice measured by the SPRI RES programme was 4776 m in the subglacial Astrolabe Basin of Wilkes Land (footnote 1). A new maximum from the same area was reported in 2013 of 4897 m by the

It was not until the advent of the twentieth century that the prospect materialised of being able to gain some more exact measure of these large ice masses. Notions of drilling through the ice were entertained but soon abandoned after the deepest holes extended only a few tens of metres. Eric von Drygalski during his ‘Gauss’ expedition (1901–1903) attempted to bore a hole and reached about 30 m; the technology was incapable of penetrating to any great depth.<sup>7</sup> However, by the 1920s, geophysicists had devised methods of sounding through rock strata using sound waves generated by near-surface explosions. Such seismic sounding was initially applied to the exploration for oil—by identifying suitable rock structures for later drilling—and it was not long before the technique’s potential was appreciated for the depth sounding of glaciers. Initial early exploration in the European Alps confirmed that the albeit rudimentary technique held promise for the great ice sheets. The first to grasp both the significance and the opportunity was the legendary German meteorologist Alfred Wegener. Although noted for his exposition on continental drift, Wegener became fascinated in his later career by the polar regions and organised expeditions to explore the geophysical conditions in Greenland. Pioneering the seismic method with an early apparatus (Figure 1.2), Wegener’s team was able to undertake the first dependable measurements of Greenland ice during his 1929–31 expedition, when the team achieved a reliable determination of 2000 m.<sup>8</sup>

Such experimental forays in Greenland were not pursued further until after World War II, when the French Expéditions Polaires Françaises commenced activities under the charismatic leadership of Paul Emile Victor.<sup>9</sup> Using more modern electronic equipment, Alain Joset and Jean-Jacques Holtzscherer made more than 400 spot soundings in the central regions of the ice cap and revealed depths of over 3000 m. These measurements demonstrated that within the interior of this large island the bedrock was below sea level.<sup>10</sup> Such expeditions provided clear expectations that similar

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Bedmap consortium (see Fretwell et al. (2013) (footnote 368). The average ice thickness of the whole continent by the SPRI analysis was 2160 m, and by the Bedmap consortium, 2126 m.

<sup>7</sup> Fogg, G E (1992) *A History of Antarctic Science*, Cambridge: CUP, 483pp.

<sup>8</sup> Sorge, E (1933) The scientific results of the Wegener expeditions to Greenland, *Geographical Journal* 81 (4): 333–44; Brockamp, B; Sorge, E; and Wölken, K (1933) Bd. II: *Seismik, Wissenschaftliche Ergebnisse der Deutschen Grönland-Expedition Alfred Wegener 1929 und 1930–31*, Leipzig: F A Brockhaus.

<sup>9</sup> I had the privilege of a most convivial meeting and lunch with Victor many years later when he was a tax exile from mainland France, living on a motu in the lagoon of Bora Bora in French Polynesia.

<sup>10</sup> Joset, M A; and Holtzscherer, J-J (1954) Détermination des épaisseurs de l’inlandsis de Groenland, *Annales de Géophysique* 10:351–81.

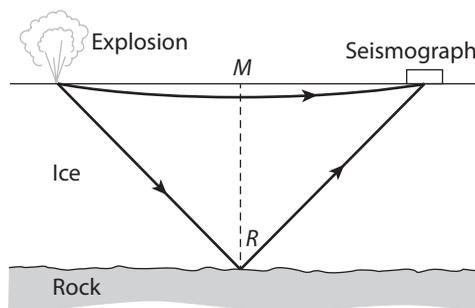


Figure 1.2. The seismic technique as used on the Wegener Expedition ( $R$  is the point of reflection at the bed, and  $M$  is the point vertically above it on the surface). (From Sorge (1933); see footnote 8).

thicknesses were to be encountered in Antarctica. But transferring the technology south was a much greater logistical and costly enterprise, so much so that Richard Foster Flint, writing in the first edition of his seminal textbook, *Glacial and Pleistocene Geology*, published in 1957, stated: ‘The thickness of the ice sheet is virtually unknown except along a single seismic traverse, 600 km long, near the margin, where the maximum thickness is 2,400 m.’ (p. 42). We shall return to these early seismic forays and the more extensive programmes of sounding conducted during and after the International Geophysical Year (IGY) (1957–58) in the next chapter, but we need to investigate further the ‘single seismic traverse line’ that Flint reported.

The Norwegian-British-Swedish Expedition (NBSE), which operated between 1949 and 1952, was a post-World War II collaborative operation that set the standards and logistic template for much of what was later undertaken in the IGY; it was also the first and one of the most successful examples of international scientific cooperation in Antarctica. The expedition was the brainchild of Hans W:son Ahlmann, professor of physical geography at the University of Stockholm, and one of an early and influential group of scientists with a keen interest in the study of the polar regions and glaciology. The expedition developed many of the techniques which would be adopted by all major scientific expeditions thereafter. Dr Albert ‘Bert’ Cray (chief scientist of the United States Antarctic Research Program in the 1960s) set the expedition in context some years later: ‘The era of extensive exploration can be said to have had its beginning in the Norwegian-British-Swedish

Expedition.<sup>11</sup> The story of the expedition was told in the official account by the leader, John Gaeiver, not long after its return<sup>12</sup> and latterly by Charles Swithinbank<sup>13</sup> in a very readable account from the perspective of one of the young scientists in the party. Several scientific reports were produced which are still of considerable value today.

A major objective of the expedition was to conduct seismic sounding of the ice thickness. This work was to be undertaken by tracked vehicles during an oversnow traverse across the floating ice shelf by the coast and thence onto the grounded ice sheet of the high polar plateau as far inland as the fuel supplies and terrain would allow. The person in charge of this programme was Gordon Robin, an Australian physicist who had previously worked as a meteorologist with the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (FIDS—the precursor to the British Antarctic Survey) on Signy Island in the South Orkney Islands.<sup>14</sup> Robin's painstaking and tireless efforts to achieve consistent and dependable seismic results were probably the crowning glory of the NBSE, and his pioneering techniques and experience were the model for later sounding campaigns. Robin's interest in probing the ice sheet and investigating its physical properties and behaviour did not diminish upon his return to Britain in 1953.

In 1955 Robin took the directorship of the SPRI at Cambridge University and continued to pursue his glaciological interests (Figure 1.3). With the appointment of Dr Stanley Evans to the Institute in 1959 Robin found another scientist with complementary experience in remote sounding (Figure 1.4). Evans had spent time at the British base of Halley Bay during the IGY, studying the ionosphere. It was his expertise in radio frequency research combined with Robin's glaciological background that spawned the development of a new and highly productive technique that revolutionised the study of glaciers and ice sheets—radio-echo sounding (RES). The RES method and its application engaged the author of this book as a young graduate student in the late 1960s and consequently dominated a significant part of his career. To tell the story fully of how this new technology evolved and became the standard for penetrating ice sheets and glaciers we

<sup>11</sup> Crary, A P (1962) The Antarctic, *Scientific American*, 207 (3): 60–73.

<sup>12</sup> Gaeiver, J (1954) *The White Desert*, London: Chatto and Windus, 304pp.

<sup>13</sup> Swithinbank, CWM (1999) *Foothold on Antarctica*, London: Longman, 260pp.

<sup>14</sup> Drewry, D J (2003) Children of the 'Golden Age': Gordon de Quetteville Robin, *Polar Record* 39 (208):61–78.



Figure 1.3. Dr Gordon de Quetteville Robin during his time as director of the SPRI at the University of Cambridge between 1955 and 1983. (Courtesy SPRI).



Figure 1.4. Dr Stanley Evans, in New Zealand, 1969.

must first travel back to the early days of seismic sounding and the work by many countries, but notably that of the United States and the then Soviet Union. Their efforts provided us with the first glimpse of the true dimension of the vast ice sheet of Antarctica and what lies beneath its icy shell, and that stimulated the development of alternative techniques.

## Index

Page numbers in *italics* refer to figures and illustrations.

- Abbot, R-Adml J L, 54
- absorption, 27, 31–32, 147, 170, 246, 313, 337
- accommodation: Antarctica, 77, 127–28, 188–218, 267; Devon Island, 157; New Zealand, 73, 231, 263; Switzerland, 297–98
- acidity levels, 329, 338, 339
- Adelaide Station, 41, 107, 108
- AGAP. *See* Antarctica's Gamburtsev Province Project
- Agassiz Ice Cap, 299, 302, 351
- Ahr, Gary, 234, 248
- air navigation charts, 141, 186, 358–359
- Airborne Research Data System (ARDS), 169, 230, 234, 236, 237, 241, 243, 263, 271
- Aircraft
- C-121 and C-121(J) (*see* Super Constellation C-121)
  - C-130 (*see* Hercules C-130)
  - C-141 (*see* StarLifter)
  - IL-14, 36
  - Pilatus Porter, 41
  - single-engine Otter, 37, 38, 41, 42
  - Twin Otter, 107, 157, 161, 311, 355, 356, 358
- Altsch Gletscher, Switzerland, 123, 297, 298, 351
- American Geographical Society, 146, 305, 313, 374n369
- Amundsen, Roald, 14, 84–85, 86
- ANARE. *See* Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions
- Anderson, Dwayne, 225–27, 232, 287
- Andrews Air Force Base, 69, 126
- Angino, Ernest, 151n168
- AntArchitecture Action Group, 339
- Antarctic Glaciological and Geophysical Folio (Folio), 304
- binder, 308, 321, 344, 346, 346, 347
  - cartographers (*see* Fryer)
  - concept, 290, 308–9
  - database, 307–8, 313, 316, 323, 328
  - printing, delays to, 344–46
  - sheets, list of, 312
- Antarctic Peninsula, 131, 220, 328; RES flights by BAS, 41–43, 42, 45, 48–50, 107–9, 108, 365
- Antarctic Treaty, 15–16, 44, 54, 64, 101, 111, 226, 258
- Antarctica's Gamburtsev Province Project (AGAP), 106, 196n207. *See also* Gamburtsev Mountains
- Antenna(s), 21, 37, 253, 291, 297
- design, 38, 51, 65, 75, 75, 118–19, 119, 154, 157, 158, 160, 170–73, 172, 242, 297, 299, 354–55
  - down-bore-hole, 159–61, 160
  - helicopter-mounted, 294–95
  - polar diagram, 75–76, 129
  - ringing, 76n110, 81, 129
  - trials, 51–52, 75, 118, 125, 133
- APL. *See* Applied Physics Laboratory
- Applied Physics Laboratory (APL), 169, 229, 236, 271, 291
- ApRES. *See* Autonomous phase-sensitive Radio Echo Sounder
- Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute, Leningrad (AARI), 24, 35, 146, 153
- ARDS. *See* Airborne Research Data System
- A-scope records, 35, 180, 380–81, 380
- Austfonna, 353–61, 357
- Austin, William, 71
- Austin Institute for Geophysics, 366
- Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions (ANARE), 154, 217
- Autenboer, Tony van, 123
- Autonomous phase-sensitive Radio Echo Sounder (ApRES), 365
- Avionics, 72, 169, 241, 253

- Bailey, Jeremy, 30; crevasse accident, 36  
balance velocity, 210–11, 214  
Ball, Bob, 133  
Ball, Sir Robert, 2–3  
Bamber, Jonathan, 297, 361, 367  
Banzare Coast, 238  
Barbers Point, Oahu, 187  
Bartholomew, John, 145; Bartholomew, John and Sons, 146, 308–9, 349  
basal echo-/layer-free zone, 227, 339  
basal heat flux, 262  
basal shear stress, 195, 318; in ice streams, 210–11  
Beacon Supergroup, 82, 86, 98, 162, 164, 165  
beam flipper, 67  
BedMachine, 372  
Bedmap (1 and 2), 3n6, 371–72, 373, 374  
bedrock surface, 19, 113, 254, 312, 330–31, 332  
Behrendt, John, 10, *II*, 106, 331; attends Magnetics Meeting, 292; CRAMRA, advice to US government, 258; Dufek Massif, magnetic sounding in, 255, 257–59, 263, 267, 269, 269, 300, 305, 306, 312  
Beitzel, John, 35  
Bell, Robin, 366  
Bentley, Charles R., 29, 154, 228, 292, 301, 323, 374; Dome C sounding request, 177, 264–65, 273, 289; RIGGS activities, 180, 322, 342; seismic soundings, 8–10, 9, 12, 13–14, 16, 17  
Bentley sub-glacial trench, 19, 34–35, 225, 318, 366  
Bird, Ian, 154, 217  
Bird, Robert, 310  
Blankenship, Don, 278n258, 366  
Bogorodsky, I., 24–25, 44  
Boomerang, 194  
Borns, Hal, 289  
BP. *See* British Petroleum  
Brady, Howard, 253  
Branch of Special Maps, US Geological Survey, 69  
Bråsvellbreen, 358, 359  
Bresnahan, David, 125, 235, 237, 252, 267  
Brimelow, Andrew, 230, 234, 253  
British Cartographic Society, 146; Folio, award of, 349  
British Petroleum, 97; Folio sponsorship, 310–12  
Broken Arrow, 194  
Brown, Colin, 231, 249  
Brownworth, Frederick, 91n120  
BSSN. *See* Byrd Station Stain Network  
Budd, Willam, 113, 141, 144, 229, 304  
Bull, Colin, 328–29  
Bushveld Complex, 259  
Byrd Glacier, 266, 280; RES soundings of, 56, 265, 278, 289; velocity of, 56n87, 265 (*see also* glaciers)  
Byrd Station Strain Network (BSSN), 211, 289  
Byrd Sub-Glacial Basin, 47, 245, 277, 318  
C-130. *See* Hercules  
C-141. *See* StarLifter  
Calkin, Parker, 203, 215, 217  
Cameron, Richard, 224–25, 263, 291–92, 300  
Canadian Hydrographic Service, 301  
Cantrell, Major R., 74  
Center for Remote Sensing of Ice Sheets (CRE SIS), 366, 370n365  
Chamberlin, T. C., 261  
check lists, 67, 235, 239, 262  
Christchurch, New Zealand, 46, 68, 72, 109, 136, 186–87, 231–32, 236, 263, 274, 287; NZARP HQ, 70 (*see also* Harewood airport)  
Clayton, Alan: at Devon Island, 156, 161; at Halley Station, 97; map compilation, 139–41  
climate change, 1–2, 176, 192, 214, 265, 326, 351, 365, 369–70  
Clough, John, 35, 154, 186, 225, 226–27, 229  
clutter echoes, 195, 195, 211, 278, 357  
Coates Land, 92  
Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory (CRREL), 29–31, 33, 60, 123, 219, 265  
cold-weather clothing, 188  
collapse of West Antarctic Ice Sheet, 178, 272, 285  
compensation flight, 236, 253–54, 273–74, 275  
Concordia, 204  
Convention on Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resources (CRAMRA), 258  
Cook, Hammond & Kell, 345–46  
Cooper, Paul, 299, 329, 367n356; on Folio work, 307–8, 313, 317–18, 326, 333, 342; Svalbard seasons, participates in, 352, 354–56, 355, 356, 360  
cores, ice, 4, 112–13, 176, 214, 227, 279, 297, 329, 339–40; basal layers, interpretation of, 339; Byrd, 40, 60; Camp Century, 176; Dome C, 176–77, 274, 289, 371; Dye 3, 218–19; J9, 90, 198, 260; Taylor Dome, 306; Vostok, 113, 200–201, 254  
Corr, Hugh, 365  
Cowan, Andrew, 293

- Craddock, Cam, 228, 301, 301n276
- CRAMRA. *See* Convention on Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resources
- Crary, Albert, 5, 45, 69, 112, 228; appointed OAP Chief scientist, 29; conducts IGY seismic sounding, 44, 45; support SPRI RES, 45
- Crary Ice Rise, 167, 213, 214, 215, 301. *See also* Ross Ice Shelf
- crash at Dome C, 205–7, 206
- CRReSIS. *See* Center for Remote Sensing of Ice Sheets
- crevasses, *II*, 36, 83, 84–86, 89, 194–95, 195, 214, 260, 266
- Croll, James, 2–3
- Croom, David, 361
- CRREL. *See* Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory
- CryoSat (1/2), 368
- DAAC. *See* Distributed Active Archive Center, NASA
- Dale, Bob, 68, 125
- Danmarks Tekniske Højskole. *See* Technical University of Denmark
- Dansgaard, Willi, 218, 219
- data recording, 167, 230; magnetic tape, 168–69; punched papers tape, 122, 133, 168–69
- data reduction, 138, 171, 307, 318; automatic digitisation, 221–22; digitising, 138, 210
- data sharing: criticisms of SPRI, 155, 288–89; cooperation with US scientists, 155, 289; NSF meeting/agreement June 1976, 224
- Davis, Leslie, 123
- Declair, Hugo, 123–25, 128–30, 130, 217, 300
- deconvolution. *See* migration
- Deep Looking Radio Echo Sounder (DELORES), 365
- DELORES. *See* Deep Looking Radio Echo Sounder
- Denton, George, 183–84, 203, 256, 261, 279
- depth hoar, 9
- Devon Island, Canada: basal reflectance studies of, 157–58; RES experiments at, 156–61; SPRI airborne survey, 161; sub-ice hypersaline lakes under, 161, 202
- DEW-line. *See* Distant Early Warning (DEW-line) stations
- digitising RES records. *See* data reduction
- Discovery, Mount, 243
- Distant Early Warning (DEW-line) stations, 219
- distinguished visitors to McMurdo, 189
- Distributed Active Archive Center (DAAC), NASA, 369
- Division of Polar Programs, 68n105, 218, 224, 224n233, 229, 232, 236, 255, 286, 291–92, 300. *See also* Office of Polar Programs
- Doake, Christopher, 365; Devon Island, 156, 159, 160, 220–21, 220n228; Fleming Glacier movement, 221
- Dome Argus (A): height of, 102–3
- Domes: Argus, 320, 340; Boreas, 320; “C” Circe, 143–45 149, 176–77, 183, 204, 227, 229–30, 234, 254, 264–65, 274, 320, 324, 337, 338, 340, 340, 366; Fuji (*see* Valkyrjdomen); Hercules, 320; Little Dome C, 325n299; Talos, 320, 325; Titan, 320, 325; Valkyrjdomen (Fuji), 320, 340
- Doppler Navigation unit, 47, 73, 115
- Dowdeswell, Julian, 39, 297, 350, 353, 355n334, 366; Devon Island, 161; Franz Josef Land, 361; Svalbard seasons, participation in; 355, 360–61, 360
- down-borehole logging of radio wave velocity, 159–60, 160
- DPP. *See* Division of Polar Programs
- Dreschhoff, Gisela, 269, 271, 292
- Drewry, David, 9, 186, 257
- aircraft data recording system, consultation, 167–69
- Antarctic season 1969–70, participates in, 67–68, 81, 96–99, 103
- Antarctic season 1971–72, participates in, 124–25, 130, 131
- Antarctic season 1974–75, participates in, 192, 208
- Antarctic season 1977–78, participates in, 231
- Antarctic season 1978–79, participates in, 245, 264, 275
- British Petroleum, discussions, 311–12
- Dry Valleys project, 251, 279–84, 281, 284
- East Greenland, 67, 174
- European Space Agency, ERS-1 altimeter team, 363
- flying experiences, 76–77, 82–86, 135–36, 205, 245, 339
- Folio (*see* Antarctic Glaciological and Geophysical Folio)

- Drewry, David (*continued*)  
Fryer, liaison, 343  
Halley (Bay) visit, 90  
joins SPRI, 67  
Jungfrauoch, experiments, 297–99, 298  
Madison, visits, 301  
magnetics meeting, attends, 292  
NSF meetings, attends, 224–26, 300  
Phillips Petroleum, Bartlesville, visits, 301, 310–11  
Satellite Altimeter Group, 252, 261, 323  
South Africa, visit, 163–66, 166n188  
Spitsbergen 1980 season, participates in, 293–97  
SPRI RES strategic plan, 167, 218  
Stockholm, visit, 354  
Svalbard 1983 season, participates in, 293, 353  
Vostok, experiences, 100–102, 101  
Williams Field survey, 129–30, 130  
women in Antarctica, 77n111
- Dreyer, Natalia, 316
- Drinkwater, Mark, 363, 367–68
- driving stresses, 312–13, 329–30
- drone, 364
- Dronning Maud Land, 14, 35, 36, 123, 154, 323, 340, 371
- Dry Valleys Drilling Project (DVDP), 113
- Drygalski, Eric von, 4
- Drygalski Ice Tongue, 143
- Dufek Massif, 255, 259; data reduction and results of, 300, 305, 306, 310, 335; sounding operations of, 267, 269, 270, 275–76; sounding, plans for, 257–59, 258, 265
- D'Urville, Dumont, 2
- DVDP. *See* Dry Valleys Drilling Project
- DYE-3 experiments, 218–19
- Earth Explorer missions, 368
- East Antarctic Ice Sheet, origins: role of Transantarctic and Gamburtsev Mountains, 98–99, 183
- Echo Strength Measurement (ESM), 181–82, 181, 301, 317
- ECOPS. *See* European Committee on Ocean and Polar Science
- Eiken, Trond, 355
- EISMINT. *See* European Ice Sheet Modelling Initiative
- Eldgja eruption, Iceland, 340
- Ellesmere Island, 37; RES sounding on, 37, 38–40
- Elliot, Lt. pilot, 101, 102
- Ellsworth Land, 334
- Ellsworth Mountains, 107, 230, 250, 251, 254, 275, 276, 331; sub-glacial lake, identified, 255, 377
- Ellsworth Station (IGY), 106, 257
- Environment Canada, 301
- EPICA. *See* European Project for Ice Coring in Antarctica
- Erebus Ice Tongue, 278, 289, 302–3
- Erebus, Mount, 87, 280
- errors: in ice depths, 10, 13, 40; in ice surface elevations, 134, 140–41; in INS, 117, 129, 138–39; in navigation, 66, 87, 98, 175, 324
- ERS-1, 362, 362, 363, 368. *See also* European Space Agency
- ESA. *See* European Space Agency
- ESF. *See* European Science Foundation
- ESM. *See* echo strength measurement
- European Committee on Ocean and Polar Science (ECOPS), 371
- European Ice Sheet Modelling Initiative (EISMINT), 371
- European Project for Ice Coring in Antarctica (EPICA), 340, 371
- European Science Foundation (ESF), 371
- European Space Agency (ESA), 344, 363
- Evans, Stanley, 6, 7, 63–64, 122, 147; Antarctic season 1967–68, deployment mishap, 51n84; Antarctic season 1967–68, planning of, 46–49, 51, 52, 75; Antarctic season 1969–70, operations, 85, 103; Antarctic season 1969–70, preparations for, 65, 67–68, 79; Antarctic season 1971–72, participates in, 124–26, 128, 132; Ellesmere Island, experiments in, 37–40; Engineering Dept, departure for, 155–56; Greenland, experiments in, 29–32; Halley Bay, visits, 91, 95–97; ionosphere studies of, 26; joins SPRI, 21; other institutes, supports, 154; RES systems, design of 21, 27–28, 34; views on Soviet RES, 25
- Ewen-Smith, Beverley, 34, 46–51, 66, 115, 122; Antarctic season 1967–68, participates in, 51–53, 52, 52–55, 59, 61, 66n104; automated digitisation, 222; demobilisation, 61–62; RES in Antarctic Peninsula, 107
- Expéditions Antarctiques Belges, 123, 164, 164

- Ferraccioli, Fausto, 106n135, 365  
Ferrar magmatism (dolerites), 130  
Fifield, Richard, 343  
finite element analysis, 192n206, 360–61  
Finkel, Abe, 231  
Finsterwalderbreen, 361  
firn, 298  
Fisher, David, 302  
fixes (position), 48, 62, 87, 98, 115–16, 138, 140, 324. *See also* navigation  
Fletcher, Joseph, 125  
Flight Planning Directory, 238  
flight recorders, 49, 49, 62, 66, 115–16, 122. *See also* SFIM (flight recorder)  
Fogg, G E, 104  
Folio *See* Antarctic Glaciological and Geophysical Folio  
Ford, Art, 258  
forecasts, meteorological, 239–40, 240. *See also* weather  
Forrestal Range, 259, 335  
Fowler, Alfred, 225  
Fryer, David, 145, 345; East Antarctic map production, 145–46; Folio, meetings held, 308–9, 313, 321; GEOprojects, sells to, 343–44  
Fuchs, Sir Vivian, 34, 64, 222  
Fuzesy, Anne, 40, 172  
  
Gamburtsev Mountains, 57, 102, 105–6, 138, 143–44, 254; East Antarctic Ice Sheet, origins in, 183; first discovered, 17, 201; possible geological origin, 196n207  
GEBCO. *See* General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans  
General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans (GEBCO), 301–2, 305, 322  
George Philip & Sons Ltd, 345  
Gerasimou, Helen, 68nn106  
glaciers: Astrolabe, 192; Axel Heiberg, 83–84, 86; Byrd, 56n87, 77, 83, 143, 265, 266, 269, 278, 289; Evans Ice Stream, 319; Foundation Ice Stream, 254n240; Lambert, 103, 154, 326; Liv, 56, 83, 248; Mawson, 183, 203; Mertz, 192n206; Mulock, 57, 183; Nimrod, 56, 56, 83, 129; Ninnis, 60, 192; Ramsay, 84; Reedy, 84, 89; Reeves, 135–36, 135; Rennick, 267, 289; Scott, 56, 83–84, 85, 248; Shackleton, 85, 86, 98, 205; Skelton, 13, 35, 57, 83, 183, 203; Taylor, 83, 183, 204, 252, 273, 279–85, 280–82; Wright, 203, 252, 281  
glacio-chemistry, 156  
Global Positioning System (GPS), 87, 115, 221, 323n296, 364  
Gogineni, Prasad, 366  
Gondwana, role of Antarctica, 98, 137, 162–66, 163, 196n207, 311  
Gorman, Michael, 34n56, 174, 252, 297, 353; Antarctic season 1971–72, participates in, 124–27; Devon Island seasons, participates in, 156–57, 159, 161, 220; Ferrar Glacier, movement study, 130; Franz Josef Land project, participates in, 361; joins SPRI, 122; Severnaya Zemlya project, participates in, 361; Svalbard seasons, participates in, 354–56, 355–56  
Gow, Tony, 265  
GPS. *See* Global Positioning System  
GRACE. *See* Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment  
gravity measurements, 98, 196n207, 318, 333, 365, 377; ice thickness, 8, 12–13, 13, 19–20, 29, 50, 57, 100, 105, 123, 144, 175, 180  
Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE), 368  
grid for Antarctic RES, 116, 125, 133, 138–39, 144, 167, 173, 175, 177, 179–80, 192, 194, 204, 229–30, 238, 254, 275, 286  
Grosswald, Mikhail, 217  
ground effect, flying in, 246  
Gudmandsen, Preben, 63, 118, 118, 154, 169, 185–86, 218, 262, 292, 337; attends NSF Meeting, 224–26  
Guinness Book of Records, 328  
  
Halley (Halley Bay), 26, 90, 93n121; aircraft refuelling at, 93; Halley 2 and 3, 94, 94; IGY station, visits to, 95–97, 96; ozone hole, discovery of, 94; RES, early tests, 28, 28, 36; RES flights out of, 90–91, 92, 94, 97, 110  
Halley Bay. *See* Halley  
Hamilton, LtCmdr Richard, 73–74, 104  
Harewood Airport, 61, 70, 234; test flights at, 51–52, 52, 53, 236, 264, 267; USA(R)P HQ at, 70–72, 71, 72, 126, 231  
Hargreaves, Neil, 173, 185, 208, 220, 305

- Harrison, Chris, 122, 137, 155; Antarctic season 1969–70, participates in, 66–68, 73–74, 77, 81, 95–97; Antarctic season 1971–72, participates in, 124; designs RES beam switching, 45–46; develops migration program, 120, 121
- Hattersley-Smith, Geoffrey, 157; Canada airborne RES, participates in 37, 40, 63; UK Antarctic Place Names Committee, specialist with, 319–20
- Hawkins, Robert, 146; Antarctic Folio, cartographic work on, 321–22, 329, 343–45
- Heap, John, 319
- height errors: least-squares method, 140–41, 324; random walk method, 141, 141, 324
- Heinz, Cmdr. Harvey, 74, 84
- Heirtzler, Jim, 292
- Hercules C-130, 63, 244, 320
- #129, 206
  - #131, 206, 218, 224–26, 229, 236, 241, 253, 264, 268, 270; magnetometer, 172, 257; mechanical problems, 27
  - #319, 205–6
  - #320, 65, 72, 75, 117, 119, 125, 128, 186–88, 190, 194, 253
- antenna configurations, 72, 118, 119, 172
- crashes, 132, 205–7, 206
- emergencies, 193
- F and R models, range of, 115, 125, 167, 251
- fuel payload, 55, 114, 187, 191, 223, 244, 264, 270
- galley and in-flight food, 244
- JATO take-off, 132, 205–7, 205
- navigational equipment (*see* navigation)
- RCAF support, 157
- RES, suitability for, 65, 110
- whiteout landing, 246–47
- Hereward, Christopher, 230, 234, 249, 256, 263, 267, 274, 275, 297, 307
- Herr Jr, LtCmdr Arthur, 185–91, 190, 207, 208, 247; orders C-130 wash-down, 188
- Holdsworth, Gerry, 302
- Holt, Capt F C, 190
- Holyer, Ian, 210, 308
- Honeywell chart recorder, 243n237, 243, 247, 274, 287, 382
- Hornsund, 295, 296
- Hughes, Terence, 179, 186, 265, 266, 271, 278, 280n260, 289, 292
- Huppert, Herbert, 302
- ice: average thickness, 328; thickest, 3, 328
- Ice core drilling. *See* cores, ice
- ice shelf, 316; Amery, 326; Brunt, RES, experiments on, 26, 28, 28, 36, 81, 91, 92; Brunt, RES flight on, 97; George VI, 41; Larsen, 41, 108; McMurdo, 77, 265, 278; Ronne-Filchner, 17, 19, 81, 92, 257, 315, 319, 331; Ronne-Filchner, RES flights on, 106–7, 110; Ross (*see* Ross Ice Shelf); Ward Hunt, 37, 40
- ice streams, 315; around East Antarctica, 374–75; basal water, 195, 211, 330; Marie Byrd Land, 61, 88–89, 88–90, 173, 178–79, 194–95, 195, 210–12, 211–12, 214, 215, 327; names of, 89, 319; shear margins of, 194–95, 212, 214; stability of, 272–73; Thwaites Glacier (*see* Thwaites Glacier)
- IceBridge, 370
- ICECAP. *See* Investigating the Cryosphere Evolution of the Central Antarctic Plate
- ICESat1/2, 368, 370
- IFR. *See* inflight rations
- IGY, 5–6, 8, 11, 15–16, 23, 35, 43–44, 57, 95–96, 96, 99, 103, 105–6, 134, 201, 354
- inertial navigation systems, 47, 122, 168, 240; accuracy of, 117n147, 138, 253; initialisation of, 129, 130, 241; principles of, 116, 262
- inflight rations, 240–44. *See also* IFR and Hercules, galley
- INS. *See* inertial navigation systems
- Institute Ice Stream, 254
- internal reflecting horizons, 32–33, 58–59, 58, 137–38, 151, 254, 256, 304, 336–337, 339; age of, 182, 339–40; frequency relations of, 338; horizontal extent of, 339, 340; ice flow related to, 339, 340; impulse sounder, studies of, 297–99, 298; origins of, 33, 60, 220, 329; pulse-length, relations to, 380. *See also* basal echo-/layer-free zone
- International Antarctic Glaciological Project (IAGP), 112–13, 114, 116, 144, 176–77, 233; council meetings of, 112–13, 176, 186, 222, 264; national members of, 112–13, 117, 264, 316; objectives of, 113, 265; origins of, 112; SPRI, role in, 117, 124, 132, 139, 175, 177, 217, 227, 229
- International Glaciological Society, 366; ‘Dynamics of Large Ice Masses’, 259; ‘Glacier Beds: The Ice-Rock Interface’, 262; ‘Remote sensing in glaciology’, 174–75, 186; ‘Thermal Regime of Glaciers and Ice Sheets’, 222

- Investigating the Cryosphere Evolution of the Central Antarctic Plate (ICECAP), 371
- Irons, Larry, 230, 249, 267, 274, 275
- Isochrones, 182, 339
- isostatic rebound, 105, 145, 312; Folio sheet of, 313, 331–33, 334; methodology, 333
- Jacobs, Stanley, 302
- Jaeger, Cmdr Jim, 235
- Jankowski, Edward, 254, 262, 301, 305, 308, 328, 333, 342, 351; Antarctic season 1977–78, participates in, 234–36, 238, 239, 253; Antarctic season 1978–79, participates in, 263–65, 267, 269, 274, 275; Folio magnetic maps, works on, 312, 334–36, 342; ice drilling, assists in, 252, 252; joins SPRI, 230; works at USGS, 259
- Jelbartisen-Trolltunga-Fimbulisen, 123
- Jensen, Dick, 140–41
- Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), 367
- Jezeq, Kenneth, 154, 366
- Jiracek, George, 35
- Jones, Lois, 77n111
- Jones, T O, 44, 64, 68n105
- Jordan, Susan, 307–8, 307, 313–15, 314n289, 318, 322, 324, 328, 330, 342, 345, 353
- JPL (Jet Propulsion Laboratory), 367
- Jungfraufirn, 298, 298
- Jungfraujoch Research Station, 297–98, 297n273
- Kaman Aerospace, 167–69, 230
- Kapitza, Andrei, 16–18, 18, 57, 105, 201, 202n212; Gamburtsev Mountains, confirmed, 201; Piotr, father of, 201; SAE, service with, 201–2; Vostok, seismic records at, 202–3, 202n212, 202n214
- Karoo Supergroup, South Africa, 162, 164, 165
- King, Lester, 166n188
- Klever, Jim, 234, 248
- Koerner, Fritz, 302
- Kosar, Bill, 225–26
- Kotlyakov, Vladimir, 203; member IAGP Council, 113; visits Cambridge, 316, 317
- Kunlun Station, 102
- Kvitøya, 356, 358–59
- Laboratoire de glaciologie et géophysique de l'environnement (LGGE), 113, 176, 219, 283, 348
- Laclavère, Georges, 104
- lakes, sub-ice, 58, 146–52, 151, 178, 230, 353, 375–78, 377; 1971–72 discoveries, 148–49, 150, 174; hyper-saline (Devon Island), 161; Sovetskaya, initial discovery, 148–49; Vostok, 196–203, 197, 376 (see also Vostok, Lake)
- Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, 260, 292, 302, 311, 366
- Langway Jr, Chester, 219
- Lanyon, Margaret, 71, 72, 186–87, 231
- Larminie, Geoffrey, 311–12
- layers. See internal reflecting horizons
- LeBreque, John, 292
- LeMasurier, Wesley, 229
- Levanon, Nadav, 323–24
- Liestøl, Olav, 295, 295, 353, 355
- Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, 65, 74, 118, 173
- logistics: in Canada, 37, 157; provision of in Antarctica, 5, 131, 153–54, 218, 225, 286
- long-range cruise, 251
- Lorius, Claude, 176–77, 177, 230, 348; crash at Dome C, 204–7; glacio-chemistry, 283; member IAGP Council, 113, 143
- Macheret, Yura, 361, 366
- Mackie, David, 174, 185, 187, 208, 230
- Madrid Protocol, 258n242
- MAGIC (Mapping and Geographic Information Centre), 308, 353
- magnetic basement, Folio sheet, 312, 335, 336
- magnetic modelling, 301
- magnetic susceptibility, measurements of, 301, 303
- magnetics meeting, NSF, 292
- magnetometer, aircraft installation of, 172, 224n232, 226, 229–31, 236, 253–54, 255, 257, 268
- map scales, 291, 313–14
- mapping, use of satellite imagery, 48, 107, 199, 315, 351
- Mapping and Geographic Information Centre (MAGIC), 308, 353
- Marie Byrd Land, 47, 59, 60–61, 76, 81, 87–90, 88, 173, 178–79, 194–95, 204, 210–12, 211, 214, 228–29, 259, 272, 336–37
- Martin, John, 312
- Mayewski, Paul, 267
- McCuddin, Rear-Admiral L M, 125, 132
- McIntyre, Neil, 299, 318, 329, 352, 363; Svalbard campaign, participates in, 355

- McMurdo, 45–46, 53, 58, 69, 77, 77–78, 113, 127–28, 167, 188, 190, 191, 232–33, 235–36, 238, 240, 255, 265, 286; air facility, 46, 65, 193, 247 (see also Williams Field Air Facility); clubs, 53–54; Thiel Earth Sciences Lab, 128, 190
- MCoRDS (Multi-Channel Coherent Radar Depth Sounder), 370n365
- Meldrum, David, 222; Antarctic season 1974–75, participates in, 185, 190, 192, 208; Antarctic season 1977–78, participates in, 230–33, 235–37, 249, 253; Antarctic season 1978–79, participates in, 262–64, 267, 269, 275, 279; assists in Taylor Glacier project, 279, 282, 284; joins SPRI, 155–56; undertakes electronics developments, 181, 230, 241, 256; visits China Lake, 230, 263
- Mercer, John, 178, 271
- Meteorites, 327, 383–84
- Meteorological Center, 239, 240
- meteorology. *See* weather
- Miakov, Sergei, 217
- Michaelis, Anthony, 81
- migration, 119–21, 121, 174
- Millar, David, 256, 308, 329; Antarctic season 1978–79, participates in, 263, 267, 269, 274; layers, studies of, 305, 312, 338, 340, 351
- Mirnyy Station, 25, 35–36, 57, 100, 100, 112–13, 144, 153–54, 200
- Monahan, David, 301
- Moore, R K, 366
- Morrison, Lt Cmdr J 'Jake' K, 44, 52; loses radio contact, 58–59
- Mouginot, Jérémie, 369
- Moulton, Ken, 125, 225, 232–35
- MSSL (Mullard Space Science Laboratory), 363
- Mullard Space Science Laboratory (MSSL), 363
- Multi-Channel Coherent Radar Depth Sounder (MCoRDS), 370n365
- Murton, Ed, 355n335, 355
- NASA. *See* National Aeronautics and Space Administration
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 116, 167–68, 323, 370
- National Science Foundation (NSF), 44–46, 64, 68–69, 68n105, 125, 255, 271, 300; convenes magnetism meeting (*see* magnetism meeting); crisis talks, 132, 232; name changes, 224n233; new remote sensing aircraft, plans for, 166–69; planning meeting 1976, 224–27; RES data, supply to, 263, 288, 301; RES programme, terminates, 286–88; SPRI support, pressure to reduce, 217–18, 230; support of IAGP, 117; Tripartite agreement (*see* Tripartite agreement)
- National Snow and Ice Data Center (NSIDC), 369
- Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), 66–67, 123, 139, 172–73, 218, 256, 306–9, 311n287, 342, 353–54, 362–63; funding, provision of, 46n78, 307n283–84, 354n331, 362n342
- Naval Weapons Center (NWC), China Lake, 226, 230
- navigation, 37, 74, 87, 122, 141, 247n238, 262, 317; accuracy/closure errors, 13, 66, 129, 138–39, 253; aerial photography, use of, 87, 98, 116 (*see also* trimetrogon); aircraft instruments (*see* avionics); dead-reckoning, 47, 116; inertial navigation systems (*see* inertial navigation systems); problems with instruments, 47, 73, 115; recording of, 168, 256
- Navy Air Development Center, Warminster, Pennsylvania, 118, 185, 187
- NBSE. *See* Norwegian-British-Swedish Expedition
- Neal, Christopher, 208, 254, 256, 257, 300, 305, 307, 342; Agassiz ice cap, 299; aircraft ditching briefing, describes, 187nn204; Antarctic season 1974–75, participates in, 185–88; Antarctic season 1978–79, participates in, 263, 267, 274, 275; echo strength Measurements (ESM), devises, 180–81, 181 (*see also* ESM); joins SPRI, 173; on-board fire, describes, 193; Ross Ice Shelf, studies of, 254, 259–60, 329–30; short pulse radar, designs, 297–99; Spitsbergen programme 1980, participates in, 294–97; white-out landing, describes, 247
- Nedry, LtCmdr Robert, 189–90, 208
- NERC. *See* Natural Environment Research Council
- Nicholls, Keith, 365
- Nordautlandet, 296, 352–53, 357–58, 359, 361. *See also* Svalbard
- Nordhill, Cmdr Claude, 128, 232
- Norsk Polarinstitutt (NP), 293–95, 342, 353, 361
- Norwegian-British-Swedish Expedition (NBSE), 5–6, 9, 14, 354
- Novotny, Eva, 363

- NP. *See* Norsk Polarinstitut
- NSF. *See* National Science Foundation
- NSIDC (National Snow and Ice Data Center), 369
- nuclear waste, disposal in Antarctica, 151–52
- NWC (Naval Weapons Center, China Lake), 226, 230
- Nye, John, 159
- Oeschger, Hans, 219, 219
- Office of Antarctic Programs. *See* Office of Polar Programs
- Office of Polar Programs (OPP), 71, 71n108. *See also* Division of Polar Programs
- OPEC (Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries), 309
- OPP. *See* Office of Polar Programs
- Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), 309
- Orheim, Olav, 103; Spitsbergen programme 1980, participates in, 293–95, 295; Svalbard (Nordaustlandet) project, participates in, 353, 355, 355
- Osborne, Larry, 76, 79
- Ostrov Viktoriya. *See under* Svalbard
- Oswald, Gordon, 137, 155–56, 174, 180; Antarctic season 1971–72, participates in, 124–25, 134; Devon Island RES, participates in, 156–57, 161; discovers sub-ice lakes, 148–49; joins SPRI, 123; RES missions, recalls events, 134
- Pallisgaard, Mogens, 185, 190, 208, 230–31, 234, 234, 249
- Paren, Julian, 37, 122–23, 299, 337; joins SPRI, 67
- Pensacola Mountains, 257, 267, 331
- Perkins, David, 256, 263, 267, 275, 279, 281
- Petrie, David L, Antarctic season 1969–70, participates in, 67–68, 77, 80, 95–97; joins SPRI, 65; RES in Antarctic Peninsula, participates in, 41, 42, 107; RES sounding Brunt Ice Shelf, 28
- Philberth brothers, 151–52
- Philips Petroleum, 310; Bartlesville, OK, visits to, 301, 310; Folio, sponsorship of, 303, 311; interest in Antarctic geoscience, 310
- photographic film for RES, 55, 58, 72, 120, 122, 236, 288, 382; Bimat film, 72, 122
- Photographic Lab, McMurdo, 55, 72
- Pilon, Jerry, 225
- Pine Island Glacier, 272, 272, 365n346
- place names, Antarctica, 318–20, 344
- Point Magu, 187
- Polar Continental Shelf Project (Canada) (PCSP), 157, 301–2
- polarisation, 37, 174, 220, 226
- Pole of Relative Inaccessibility, 35, 58, 81, 100, 102–3, 104, 201; IGY base selection, 104; Lenin bust, 103n131, 104; QMLT visit, 35, 103
- Popov, Sergey, 375
- Poulter, Thomas C, 13–14, 23
- Powell, John, 361
- pulse length, 220n228, 294, 297, 337, 338, 354n333, 380, 381
- Queen Maud Land Traverses, 19, 35
- Queen Maud Mountains, 82, 98, 103; geophysical soundings, 98; inferred geology, 144
- radio echo sounders, SPRI  
IDIOT, 299, 299  
SPRI MkI, 28  
SPRI MkII, 29, 34–35, 39, 41, 54, 63, 66, 123, 154, 217  
SPRI MkIV, 34, 66–67, 73, 73, 79, 107, 117–18, 124, 137, 157, 185, 294, 353, 361  
SPRI short-pulse, 297
- radar fading patterns, 159–60, 160, 220n228
- Radioglaciology, 24, 109, 352n362, 363n344
- Radio-glaciology workshop, Columbus, 1981, 329
- Radok, Uwe, 141
- RAL. *See* Rutherford Appleton Laboratory
- Randall, Terry, 30, 34, 123; markets SPRI MkII sounder, 34
- Rapley, Chris, 363
- Ravich, Michael, 228–29
- Reference Elevation Model of Antarctica (REMA), 367
- Regional Geophysics, Branch of USGS. *See under* United States Geological Survey
- REMA (Reference Elevation Model of Antarctica), 367
- re-mastering SPRI films, 350–51, 352
- RES and seismic depths compared, 24, 57, 275
- RES data recording, 279–382; chart, 28–29; digital, 254, 256, 364; ESM, 181; Honeywell recorder, 243, 243; photographic film, use of, 30, 73, 120, 122, 158, 171, 236, 294
- RES system sensitivity, 57, 58n91, 60, 76, 104, 129, 154, 227, 294

- resectioning, 48. *See also* trimetrogon  
photography
- Resolute Bay, Canada, 157, 161
- RIGGS. *See* Ross Ice Shelf Geophysical and  
Glaciological Survey
- Rignot, Eric, 370
- Riley, Norris, 94, 97
- RISP. *See* Ross Ice Shelf Project
- Robin, Gordon de Q., 5, 13, 63, 137, 145–47, 156,  
173–75, 222, 259, 262, 301, 305, 329–30, 337,  
348
- airborne RES, seeks support for, 36, 43–46
  - Antarctic season 1967–68, participates in,  
49, 51–62, 52–53, 55, 58, 61
  - Antarctic season 1969–70, participates in,  
67, 74, 77, 81, 89–90, 102, 106
  - Antarctic season 1971–72, intervention in,  
132
  - Antarctic season 1974–75, participates in,  
185, 208
  - Antarctic season 1977–78, intervention in,  
232
  - Canada tests 1966, 37
  - Darwin College Cambridge, Vice-Master, 124
  - Devon Island RES, participates in, 156–61,  
160
  - director SPRI, 6, 7
  - Evans, recruits, 26
  - Greenland tests 1964, 29–30, 32–33
  - IAGP, UK representative, 113–14, 178, 186
  - NSF, liaison with, 64, 154, 217–18, 255, 286–87
  - Queen Maud Land, seismic work in, 6, 9,  
10, 14, 15
  - Ross Ice Shelf, studies of, 179, 212–14
  - satellite altimetry, 367
  - SCAR, roles in (Secretary and President),  
113, 124
  - sub-ice lakes, studies of, 147–49, 197, 198,  
201–2, 222, 353
- Rockefeller Plateau, 113, 179, 210
- Roosevelt Island, 14, 61, 215
- Rose, Keith, 117n147, 173, 210–12, 211, 257, 259,  
262, 272–73, 282; Antarctic season 1974–75,  
participates in, 185, 195, 208; Greenland, 174
- ROSETTA-Ice project, 260
- Roslin Glacier, East Greenland, 123, 174, 248, 259
- Ross Ice Shelf, 3, 14, 16, 19, 87, 91, 120, 139, 178,  
179–82, 194, 198, 211–15, 213, 215, 229, 319. *See also*
- Ross Ice Shelf Geophysical and Glaciological  
Survey; Ross Ice Shelf Project
  - basal melting and freezing, 180–81, 254,  
260, 260, 260n247, 330, 330
  - basal zone, 173, 214–15, 215
  - bottom crevasses, 214, 260
  - brine percolation, 260
  - Crary Ice Rise, 213–15, 301
  - dynamics, 50, 90, 113, 137, 226
  - early RES tests, 23, 35
  - Folio, proposed sheet, 312, 331, 342
  - grounding zone, 60–61, 81, 88–89, 90
  - previous extent, 284–85, 327
  - RES soundings on, 23, 35, 47, 55–56, 60–61,  
81, 84, 87, 88–89, 91, 110, 120, 129, 139, 143,  
179–82, 203, 211, 212, 213, 213–14, 218, 239,  
244–45, 251, 254, 259
  - sub-ice water circulation, 179, 213, 260n247
- Ross Ice Shelf Geophysical and Glaciological  
Survey (RIGGS), 90, 180, 225, 322, 342
- Ross Ice Shelf Project (RISP), 90, 179–80, 211,  
214, 218, 229, 239, 254, 260
- Ross, James Clark, 2, 3
- Röthlisberger, Hans, 10, 24, 29
- Royal Geographical Society, London, 23, 64
- Royal Society, London, 28, 78, 114, 165, 222–23,  
297; discussion meeting 1976, 222
- Rutherford Appleton Laboratory (RAL), 201,  
261, 293, 363
- Sabrina Coast, 238
- SAG. *See* Satellite Altimeter Group
- SALE (Subglacial Antarctic Lake Environments),  
376
- SAR (Synthetic Aperture Radar), 369, 369
- Satellite Altimeter Group (SAG), 344, 352, 361,  
362n342, 363
- satellite altimetry, 140, 260n247, 293, 323, 351,  
362, 367
- Scambos, Ted, 273
- SCAR. *See* Scientific Committee on Antarctic  
Research
- Scarlett, Mrs, 73
- scattering, radar signal of, 27, 89, 278, 337, 359
- Schaefer, Trevor, 154
- Schroeder, Dustin, 222, 350–51, 351–52
- Schytt, Valter, 14, 354
- Science Plan (SPRI) 1975, 167, 318

- Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR), 16, 111, 113, 124, 139, 186, 201, 228, 371, 375; Antarctic Digital Database, 367
- SCR-718 radio altimeter, 23, 36, 123
- Seasat, 323, 362
- Seelig, Walter, 68, 126, 231, 233, 263
- seismic sounding of ice thickness, 4–6, 5, 8–12, 13–20, 25, 29, 44, 47, 57, 100, 106
- Severnaya Zemlya, 361
- SFIM, flight recorder, 49, 49, 62, 66, 115–16, 122
- Shackleton Range, 35, 91, 97
- Shackman cameras, 79, 158, 382
- Siebert, Martin, 353, 366, 377; Cambridge Conference (1994), 201; Lake Vostok, 202, 202n214
- Simões, Jefferson, 361
- Siple Coast, 88, 90, 178, 194–95, 195, 214
- Siple Station, 128, 131, 168, 232–33, 235, 255, 300
- Skou, Nils, 185, 242, 263
- Smith, Beverley. *See* Ewen-Smith, Beverley
- Smith, Phil, 64, 69, 125
- Smith, Roderick, 360
- sno-cat, 10–11
- snow accumulation, 33, 102, 148, 177, 180, 182, 226, 285, 317–18, 326–27, 339, 340, 359
- Søndergaard, Finn, 263, 267, 268–69, 274, 275
- South Africa: geology, 162, 163, 165, 259; geostudies 1974, 163–66
- South African National Antarctic Expedition (SANAE) Station, 124, 154
- South Pole Station, 35, 98, 103, 131, 225, 300, 381; foodstore, 133–43; refuelling, 65, 87, 91, 102–4, 107
- Sovetskaya Station, 56, 57, 102–3; sub-ice lake, 57–58, 58, 146–49, 377
- Soviet Antarctic Atlas (Atlas Antarktiki), 19n38, 305
- Soviet seismic measurements, 16–18, 57, 105, 201–2
- Soviet/Russian radar sounding, 24–25, 35, 44, 153–54, 221, 354
- specific range, 251
- Spence, Mary, 331–32, 345
- Spitsbergen. *See under* Svalbard
- Springate, Lt, 74
- Srite, Cmdr David, 233–35
- Stanford University, 13n26, 222, 350, 352
- StarLifter (C-141), 69, 70, 126
- Stauning Alps, Greenland, 67, 174, 361
- Steed, Hugh, 228, 254, 257, 308; Antarctic season 1977–78, participates in, 230, 234, 238, 253; Antarctic season 1978–79, participates in, 268; visits NWC, China Lake, 230
- Steenson, B O, 21–22
- Steer's Head, 194
- Stern, W, 21
- Stillwater Complex, 259
- Studd, Garry, 355
- Studinger, Michael, 98, 366
- Stump, Ed, 86
- Subglacial Antarctic Lake Environments (SALE), 376
- sub-ice morphology, 14, 17–18, 17–19, 47, 57, 98, 105, 202, 216, 245, 254, 277, 322, 331, 370, 373–74
- Sugden, David, 256
- Super Constellation (C-121), 45–46, 51, 53, 75; in Greenland, 40; at Lakenheath, 46; limitations, of, 65
- surging: ice streams, Antarctica, 178, 212; Svalbard, glaciers, 293, 354n331, 358–59
- Svalbard, 353–61, 256; Finsterwalderbreen, 361; Kvitøya, 356, 358–59; mini-ranger, Motorola, 356; Ostrov Viktoriya, 359; Spitsbergen RES 1980, 294–97, 296. *See also* Nordaustlandet
- Swithinbank, Charles, 63, 66, 292, 311; Antarctic Peninsula RES flights, 41, 42, 43, 45; Antarctic season 1967–68, participates in, 49–51, 52, 55, 58, 61; BAS, glaciology, head of, 41, 365; Dufek Massif, joins flight, 267, 269; measuring outlet glaciers, 50–51, 56, 248; NBSE, participates in, 6; work on Byrd Glacier 1978–79, 265, 266
- Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR), 369, 369
- Talbot, Lina, 210
- Technical University of Denmark (TUD), 63, 292; Antarctic season 1974–75, participates in, 185, 187, 208; Antarctic season 1977–78, participates in, 229–31; Antarctic season 1978–79, participates in, 262–63; antennae design, 118, 119, 129, 172; Electromagnetics Institute, 117; Greenland season 1975, 220; liaison meetings with SPRI, 218, 224, 256; radar systems, 118–19, 169–70, 171, 173, 234, 253; SPRI, collaboration established, 118, 123. *See also* Tripartite agreement

- termination of RES by NSF, 286  
Terre Adelie, 14, 176, 230, 328  
Texas Technological University, Lubbock, 76, 81, 217  
Texas, University, Austin, 366  
thickest ice. *See under* ice  
Thiel Mountains, 19, 84, 267, 276–77  
Thomas, Robert (Bob), 81, 90, 186, 271–73  
Thompson, Robert, 71  
Thwaites Glacier, 272, 272, 374; International Thwaites Glacier Collaboration, 273n256; SPRI RES sounding, 271, 273  
Todd, Ed, 232, 255, 287, 291, 292, 300  
trimetrogon photography, 48, 66, 115–16; camera installation 48, 49, 66, 241; position from (*see* resectioning)  
Tripartite RES agreement 1973 (SPRI, TUD, NSF), 118, 153–55, 217, 224–27, 255  
Tropical Wind, Energy Conversion and Reference Level Experiment (TWERLE), 323–24  
TUD. *See* Technical University of Denmark  
turbulence, 119, 135–36  
TWERLE (Tropical Wind, Energy Conversion and Reference Level Experiment), 323–24  
  
United States Antarctic Program (USAP), 51, 69–70, 71; operational plans, 131, 232; representative (McMurdo), 53–54, 127–28, 189, 235; representative (New Zealand), 70–71, 71, 126, 186, 231. *See also* National Science Foundation  
United States Army Electronics Laboratory (USAEL), 29, 35, 44; airborne tests, Greenland, 40  
United States Geological Survey (USGS), 91, 115, 126, 129; Branch of Regional Geophysics, 255, 257, 259, 292, 303, 305; Branch of Special Maps, 49, 68–69, 292, 331  
USAEL. *See* United States Army Electronics Laboratory  
USAP. *See* United States Antarctic Program  
USARP. *See* United States Antarctic Program  
USGS. *See* United States Geological Survey  
USNS *Private John R Towle*, 208  
  
Vaughan, David, 371  
velocity, radio waves in ice, 23–24, 27, 37, 123, 156, 174–75  
  
Vermin Villa, 127, 188  
Vestfonna, 354, 358, 359  
Victor, Paul Emile, 4, 14  
Vinson Massif, 107, 250  
Von Gunten, Phil, 231  
Vostok, 99–100, 101, 104; ice core drilling, 113, 200, 254; visit 1969–70, 99–102; world's lowest temperatures, 57  
Vostok, Lake, 196, 200; discovery, 197, 198, 201–3; glaciological regime, 113, 254, 376–77; ice thickness, 57; international programmes, 353, 366; RES records, 121, 340, 352, 366, 375–76  
VXE-6, 44, 46, 65, 70, 116n146, 128, 187, 189–90, 191, 207, 225, 233, 235, 237, 267, 271, 292  
  
Wade, Alton: Byrd 2nd and 3rd expeditions, member of, 76; Madison conference 1977, attends, 228–29; SPRI RES 1969–70, joins, 76  
Waite Jr, Amory (Bud), 22–23, 22; Antarctic, tests, 23–24, 36; experiments with buried aeriels, 22; NW Greenland, RES trials 1963 & 1964, 29  
Walford, Michael, 28, 28  
Walker, John, 232  
Watts, Len, 192n206; 360–61  
weather, 133, 359; white-out (*see under* Hercules)  
weather satellites, use of, 239  
Webb, Major Eric, 321  
Weertman, Hans, 216  
Wegener, Alfred, 4–5  
Werner deconvolution, 335n313  
West Antarctic Ice Sheet Project (WISP), 179  
West Antarctic Rift system, 162, 164, 275–78, 277, 334–35  
Wheat, Lt Bill, 237, 249, 263  
Whillans, Ian, 182, 186, 229, 273, 289, 340; RES termination, comments, 289–90  
Whittington, Joyce, 138, 172, 210  
Wilbanks, John, 76  
Wilkes, Charles, 2  
Wilkes Land, 112, 176, 192, 228, 325  
Wilkes sub-glacial basin, 144, 162, 173, 222, 311, 318  
Williams Field Air Facility, 77, 79, 133, 194, 237, 238, 240–41; geodetic survey, 130, 130; mess, 248; tinsmith, 193

- Williams, “Taff”, 355, 355  
Williamson, Frank, 300  
Wilson Piedmont, 280, 281, 289  
Wingham, Duncan, 370  
Wisconsin Range, 267  
WISP (West Antarctic Ice Sheet Project),  
179  
women scientists in Antarctica, 77n111, 271  
Wright, Nick, 310  
Wright Valley, 283; ice samples, 252, 280n260;  
mini-expedition 1971, 130, 131  
Zeller, Ed, 271, 280n260  
Z-scope records, 380–81  
Zotikov, Igor, 148–49, 198–99, 202n214  
Zwally, Jay, 168–69, 230, 323