

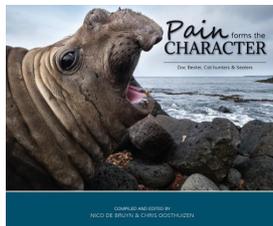


A tribute to storytelling, camaraderie and the Prince Edward Islands

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Pain forms the character:
Doc Bester, cat hunters & sealers

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The Prince Edward Islands were claimed by South Africa in 1947/1948, and officially annexed in 1948 through the *Prince Edward Islands Act, 1948* (largely under pressure to have a presence in the Southern Ocean after World War II). The first Biological–Geological Expedition to Marion and Prince Edward Islands arrived at Transvaal Cove on 4 January 1965. Although it was initially intended as a once-off visit to gather scientific information, this first expedition actually became the cornerstone of a strong (scientific) house built by ongoing scientific expeditions to the islands. Through the efforts of a large number of researchers – both national and international, young and old, world-leader and student – an impressive body of scientific literature has emerged with the Prince Edward Islands as its focal point. Detailed and in-depth knowledge has been gathered of the biotic and abiotic environment on and around the islands; knowledge which has contributed to our understanding of change in the global context. However, our South African National Antarctic Programme is more than just strong terrestrial and oceanographic research; there is an equally important human component to it. There are human characters and stories behind the research, and this is what makes the South African National Antarctic Programme special.

Understanding and knowing our history helps us to understand ourselves. Storytelling is an important component of passing on information from one generation to the next. Although our world is moving towards digital and binary codes, it is essential that we do not lose our ability to tell stories, and to appreciate the joy that these bring. As the editors point out in their note, a 'handful of characters – by a complex mix of individuality, context, societal influence, opportunity, determination, enduring involvement and hard work – have had a proportionately large impact on several research programmes and indeed life at Marion Island as a whole'. One such person is Marthán Bester, and this book pays tribute to the enormous contributions that Marthán has made to the Cat Eradication Programme, and the establishment of the Marine Mammal Programme on Marion Island. But this book is more than just a tribute to Marthán; it is a compilation of stories about people and events on Marion Island over many years – some humorous, some philosophical, but all revealing intimate feelings and the strong camaraderie that one typically experiences whilst visiting one of the most beautiful places on earth: the Prince Edward Islands. It includes memories from other Marion giants such as Valdon Smith, John Cooper, Rudi van Aarde, Peter Ryan, Bruce Dyer, and Steven Chown, as well as numerous others who have worked on the Islands. It tells stories about the Islands themselves, about spending time in the field and on various ships, about falling and getting up (literally and figuratively), about friendship, but all of these are underlined by a strong sense of purpose – to be the best that you can possibly be at the task in hand.

Marion Island has, over the years, seen its fair share of 'weird and wondrous'. From sealers to sheep, from a proposed landing strip (thankfully never realised) to an actual misguided light aircraft landing. There were also several very unfortunate events, including the loss of human lives, shipwrecks, the partial destruction of the base by a fire, and a few medical emergency evacuations. Arguably, one of the most unfortunate events was the introduction of the first cats in 1948, which paved the way for an eventual exponential increase in very skilled feline hunters across Marion Island. The negative impacts that these cats had on several bird species could potentially be matched only by the current mouse infestation. Rudi van Aarde played an important part in initially highlighting the negative impacts that cats had, and these initial efforts resulted in the conclusion of the Cat Eradication Programme under Marthán's watchful eye and skilled hands. Marthán also set up the long-term Marine Mammal Programme, which has been gathering information for a large number of years (perhaps in the running for the most valuable long-term monitoring programme in South Africa).

Reading this book raises a complex set of emotions for me, as I am sure it will for any person fortunate enough to have ever visited these sentinels in the Southern Ocean. The absolute awe when one first sees the Islands, frustration brought on by sheer exhaustion in the field, happiness from spending time with friends and colleagues, motivation and inspiration brought on by research ideas and collaborations, anticipation of seeing loved ones back home, but above all, absolute gratitude for the opportunity to have experienced these Islands. The collection of stories collated here touches on all of these. These stories serve the purpose to highlight and acknowledge the contributions of one such a giant (Marthán Bester), but they also serve to inspire others to experience for themselves what Marion Island is about. *Pain forms the Character* is a tribute to stories and storytelling, to camaraderie, and above all, to the Prince Edward Islands – our sentinels in the Southern Ocean.

