



IN MEMORIAM

GASTON DE GERLACHE DE GOMERY

(17 November 1919 – 13 July 2006)



Gaston de Gerlache de Gomery, 1957

Baron Gaston de Gerlache de Gomery was the most prominent “Antarctician” in Belgium. He really personalised for a long time Belgium’s involvement in Antarctic affairs.

He was the second son of Adrien de Gerlache, the famous captain of the *Belgica*, who conducted the pioneer Belgian Antarctic Expedition, which overwintered in the Antarctic in 1898–1899 for the first time in history, discovered new lands and harvested remarkable scientific results.

At the age of 12, his father embarked him, with his mother and sister, to an Arctic tour, which fascinated him. But, except for this experience, his father, who was a modest and taciturn man, did not tell him much about his polar achievements.

By familial tradition, he wanted to take up a military career. The war interrupted his studies, he was made prisoner-of-war, released, joined the resistance, escaped to England, and, at the end of the war, was a pilot of the Royal Air Force. He continued flying in the Belgian Air Force and was later appointed “lieutenant colonel aviateur de réserve”. He left the military career, pursued

his studies, became a lawyer and legal adviser in the textile industry and ended his career as president of an important insurance group. He was also involved in local politics and was mayor of his community for many years.

Belgium's involvement in the International Geophysical Year (1957–1958) as well as the subsequent Belgian Antarctic programmes were due to the initiative, conviction and unrelenting efforts of Gaston de Gerlache. After gaining a first Antarctic field experience as an observer among the French Antarctic expedition in Terre Adélie, he organized and took the leadership of the Belgian Antarctic Expedition 1957–1958, which built the King Baudouin Station in Dronning Maud Land. This was exactly 60 years after the *Belgica* expedition conducted by his father, and Gaston, symbolically, raised the old flag of the *Belgica* at the new Belgian station.

During this well organized expedition (Gerlache used to say that “a well prepared expedition is already half successful”) a new mountain range was discovered and christened *Belgica Mountains*. On a reconnaissance flight to the mountains the ski of the small Auster aircraft was caught by a sastrugi and broken. Without radio contact, the four men started to walk back to the station far from 250 kilometers. This was the beginning of a dramatic story, which fortunately ended favourably ten days later thanks to the help of a rescue plane sent by Soviet Union from the other side of Antarctica.

He wrote *Retour dans l'Antarctique* (Casterman, 1960) relating the 1957–1958 expedition.

In 1959, Gerlache was a delegate to the first meeting relating to the Antarctic Treaty in Washington. Gerlache's 1958 expedition and the Belgian involvement in the IGY allowed Belgium to become one of the twelve original signatories of the Antarctic Treaty.

King Baudouin station was closed in 1961 due to lack of further governmental support and rebuilt in 1964 again due to Gerlache's relentless efforts. The Netherlands participated in these new series of three expeditions and Gerlache had the overall responsibility as chairman of the Belgian-Dutch Antarctic Committee.

He returned several times in the field as leader of a large Belgian summer party in 1964–1965 or as an Antarctic Treaty observer to US and Chilean stations.

He was awarded the U.S. Antarctic Service Medal and the Bellingshausen medal of the Moscow Academy of Sciences.

I was 16 when I met Gaston de Gerlache for the first time on the occasion of a lecture he gave on the Belgian Antarctic Expedition 1957–1958. The lecture was introduced by Professor André Capart, then director of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, who years later became my PhD mentor. I was strongly impressed by Gerlache's great presence and by his way to recall “l'Expédition de la *Belgica* commandée par mon père”! I promised myself after this outstanding event to go to the Antarctic one day!

For eight years Gaston de Gerlache was an esteemed chairman of the National Committee on Antarctic Research of the Royal Academies of Belgium. As secretary of this committee I have had the privilege to work closely with him and to collaborate to the preparation of the international symposium celebrating in 1998 the centennial of the *Belgica* expedition. Not being a scientist himself he was however very much aware of the scientific challenges that the Antarctic represents. He deeply appreciated the success of the symposium and the participants will remember the wonderful garden party he kindly offered at his Mullem domain in east Flanders during the symposium.

Gaston de Gerlache is survived by his wife of many years, Lily, five children and many grandchildren. His children and some of his grandchildren are continuing the family polar tradition.

He will leave a very strong memory among the Antarcticians in Belgium and elsewhere.

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