

Shades of white

In this extract from his book *The Other Way*, which celebrates our relationship to the natural world, acclaimed designer DAVID TRUBRIDGE describes a trip to Antarctica.

● photographs by DAVID TRUBRIDGE

On another day, we tracked across the sea ice to the historic huts of Robert Falcon Scott and Ernest Shackleton, who both led expeditions in search of the South Pole in the early 20th century. In a month or two, this would all be open water after swells have rolled in from the Southern Ocean and broken up the thin sea ice. We were carried in a Hägglund vehicle with rubber tracks. At first, the route had been marked as safe by radar calibration of the sea ice. But soon we were on our own and frequently came across leads that had opened up in the ice and then frozen over again. Was the lead strong enough to cross? Each time we had to stop, get out and drill holes in the ice to measure its depth. If it was not thick enough, we lifted timbers off the roof of the Hägglund and laid them over the gap. Progress was slow and there was lots of standing around waiting.

I stood there with my cameras looking for something to photograph. There was not much nearby, just the scruffy ice surface, textures and shades of white repeated endlessly. I saw a tiny white feather snagged in filigree ice. Even something as frail and insubstantial as this had absorbed enough warmth from the low sun to melt some of its surrounding ice. Around its perimeter its fine strands seemed to blend in with the different

crystalline pattern of the ice. It was exquisite. In a forest, I would have missed such a detail among a dense plethora of overlaying patterns and textures. Out here in the emptiness, its lone singularity made it an “event”.

Each time we stopped to check a lead, I kept my head down and observed. I was soon rewarded by another exquisite event. A bird must have dropped a tiny sea urchin (kina in Aotearoa) shell on to the ice. It was only the size of my fingernail, yet it, too, had absorbed enough of the sun’s warmth to melt its surrounding ice. This created a round blue recess in the ice, in the middle of which sat the perfectly framed kina shell. I did not have very good cameras in Antarctica and the quality of my photographs, both transparency and digital, is mixed. But these two simple shots remain my most treasured.

Here, something shifted in my relationship to the world around me. These “events” taught me how to see in a new way. They gave me a different way in which to tell the story of place. What is special about being out on the sea ice? I could photograph the panoramic scene, but the mountains and ice cliffs would be distant and reduced to trivia. Zoom in on them and you lose the sense of space. But these exquisite events introduced a new meaning into my way of seeing.

As a teenager, I had holidayed in Norway with a box Brownie camera and





had taken a string of black-and-white photos of distant fjords, mountains and rivers. I assumed the grandeur I was experiencing would be replicated in the photograph. I was the apex of evolution, lording my own sense of self and my own view over the magnificence of nature, reducing landscape to the picturesque. My feet barely touched the ground. When I saw them later, I realised that the photographs were bland and conveyed nothing of what I had felt. And now here I was, surrounded by the awe-inspiring Antarctic scenery, peering at a feather, not even a resplendent primary one fit for a headdress, but a humble curl of down, ensnared by ice. This tiny transient spec drew me in like I had never been drawn before.

Since Antarctica, I have discovered that it is these details that best express what I am feeling in nature. How do you tell the story of a forest? Do you stand outside like an omnipotent observer and see a mass of green? Or do you delve inside it, drawn up close to one leaf, one insect, one flake of bark? How do you tell the story of a mountain better than by looking at a flake of schist? I learnt that I can connect to a single component in a way that I could not with the whole. Such are the photographs in this book. It began for me out on the sea ice of McMurdo Sound.

When we finally stood inside the historic huts, a reverent hush enveloped us. We were lost in a past that seemed so present. The emptiness of Antarctica had sealed up history, keeping it untouched since the day the explorers walked out. And the dryness had preserved it. No recreated museum can instil such a vivid connection to past lives, past hopes, past daily routines. Here were their slippers under the bunk, their books on the shelves and mementos pinned to the wall. We stood in our synthetic, super-efficient clothing, marvelling at the simplicity of theirs, the reindeer-skin sleeping bag, the leather hob-nailed boots. Outside, we had a heated diesel vehicle with a radio and, beyond that, helicopters and giant aircraft. They had nothing until their ship might or might not return. If the sea ice did not melt, they had to face another stormy winter of darkness, with the fainter hope of rescue beyond.

Did their vulnerability turn Antarctica into an adversary to be overcome, a relentless foe to outwit and keep one step ahead

of? Or did it bring them closer to the raw essence of nature? Apsley Cherry-Garrard was a member of Scott's doomed Terra Nova expedition that tried to reach the South Pole. His book *The Worst Journey in the World* implies the former: that nature is something to be confronted and dominated. Does our cosseted safety of today keep us a distance apart? Or does our ease allow us to sink deeper into the land? I don't think we will ever know, but I was grateful for this window on to another view from another time.

Those first tentative voyages of exploration down to the ice started to fill in large gaps in the maps of the time. But they also "opened up new

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scenes for a poetical fancy to range in", as Andrew Kippis noted perceptively in 1788 when he wrote about James Cook's voyages, especially among the icebergs of the Southern Ocean (as recounted by Stephen J Pyne in *The Ice*). In literary circles, Antarctica was first used by writers of morality and gothic tales to represent a spiritual hell, beginning with Samuel Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" – the descriptions of the otherworldly land were based on Cook's accounts. Edgar Allan Poe developed the genre into romantic "horror upon horror". Mary Shelley ended her *Frankenstein* tale in the Arctic wastelands, representing a land beyond morals.

Similarly, the visual arts express the way in which we relate to the world around us. They tell the story of how that relationship has evolved over the centuries. Our culture conditions the way in which we see. Looking at a tree, a scientist will see a remarkable process of photosynthesis and water transfer, a shaman will see a forest spirit and a forester will see timber. And that conditioning will also change over time within the same culture. Romantics of the early 19th century, such as painters Turner and Courbet, saw humans as insignificant alongside the majesty of nature, while later industrialists

and scientists reduced nature to a machine and an asset to be exploited for man's profit.

While visual culture was going through a radical shake-up at the beginning of the 20th century, it was not much use in telling the story of Antarctica. Modernism quickly moved away from the representation of nature and life – such as impressionists like Monet and post-impressionists like Van Gogh – to the cubism of Picasso, and other later forms of modernism. This new art was self-referential and free of any sense of representation, which means it was the romantic era, far more than the small elite circles of modernism, that continued to direct the way most people saw Antarctica well into the 20th century.

The explorers of the "Heroic Age", like Scott and Shackleton, sailed down to Antarctica precisely when modernism was first appearing. But modernism was not looking that way and it was romantic themes that prevailed. Despite being an anachronism, romanticism became the defining visual language of Antarctica, its legacy remaining through the first half of the 20th century. It filled the vacuum of representation left when modernism followed its own separate, non-representational path. The new art changed how people saw art, but not how they saw Antarctica.

It comes down to light. No view of Antarctica can be suggested without the idea of light. Which explains not only why romantic representations fit so well, but also, ultimately, how photography alone filled the visual space left by modernism. Photography is light made physical – light waves turned into printing ink. The early photographers, such as Herbert Ponting on Scott's Terra Nova expedition, saw the great continent through the romantic lens.

Ponting framed tiny humans in his compositions to emphasise scale. He mostly used a telephoto lens, believing that its flattening of distance suitably expressed the distorted and compressed perspective of the place, which is caused by that absence of the normal fading and blueing of light with distance that I had noticed.

I don't think that the romantic legacy in the visual representation of Antarctica has ever gone away. But the way in which we see Antarctica has changed. The story told about Antarctica



started with gothic horror in literature and moved on to nature as the sublime in romantic visual art. But something of that horror lingered on in Scott's near-final words: "Great God! This is an awful place." And some of that "sublime" is still there today, mostly in photographs. What we do not have today is any sense of the heroic as epitomised by the tragic Scott. Antarctica is now relatively safe and easily reached by anybody on a tourist boat. I feel that my own personal realisation on the sea ice of McMurdo Sound fitted well into the journey of the visual arts. I was not comfortable depicting heroic, panoramic landscapes because this implied a disconnect. I wanted to experience immersion and express that intimate connection through a detail that is partly abstracted.

The insistent and raucous throb of the helicopter shatters the deep time silence of Antarctica. We are being taken from New Zealand's Scott Base to the Dry Valleys for a couple of days. The Dry Valleys lie along the edge of the Transantarctic Mountains, which we have been looking at across McMurdo Sound from Scott Base. The 4000m range spans the continent, separating East and West Antarctica. It acts like a dam, holding back the massive East Antarctic Ice Sheet, which is up to 3km thick. Up there, the air is very cold and very dry and it scours down the valleys, sucking out all moisture as it goes. If snow ever falls here, the ice crystals sublime directly to vapour in the dry cold without going through a water phase.

To get there, we have to fly across the Koettlitz Glacier, which flows out of

the mountain range further inland. At first, the ice underneath us is white with streaky patches of dirt. A helicopter-shaped shadow follows us about 90m below. Now, dirty green patches of different, older ice appear, then sprinklings of black dust from nearby volcanic Black Island. The surface becomes more patterned and textured, like the scumbled canvas of an Anselm Kiefer or the dense patterns of a Jackson Pollock painting.

The green ice starts to turn blue and frozen melt pools appear. In the middle, there are pure white snow domes, riven with spidery cracks where they have been uplifted by freeze and thaw. I look up at Mt Discovery in the distance and see the

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flowing lines of specked ice sweeping around its base and towards us. We move over an area covered in dust, like a dirty coal mine, interspersed with frozen green and white pools. Then the dust thins out, leaving only a brilliant pale blue and dazzling white, delineated by meandering black lines. Each pool has at its centre one of the white domes with the beguiling patterns of radiating cracks. By now, tears are trickling down my face.

I have never seen such stunning beauty ever in nature. It is so unassuming and so unexpected. Maybe the Scott Base crew see this all the time and hardly notice it, or maybe they love it as much but wanted to keep it as a surprise for full impact. Either way, it remains the most powerfully affecting scene I have ever seen and my most treasured memory. ■

David Trubridge, ONZM, is one of New Zealand's most successful designers of lighting and furniture. His book *The Other Way* will be launched at the Auckland Writers Festival, August 23-28. Copies available now from davidtrubridge.com/nz and selected retailers.

