

Expressing Antarctica:
A review of Antarctic Inspired Poetry
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Introduction

This review explores the representation of *Antarctica as an extreme environment*, in Antarctic inspired poetry. The volume of work with potential to be included does not permit a comprehensive review instead a cross section of works across a broad time span has been made. The range considers from the late eighteenth century to present day. Poem's have been sampled to include works from people who have only imagined Antarctica but never visited as well as those who write from direct experience of the environment. It also aims to provides a discussion of how individual experiences and preceding works may have contributed to the images of Antarctica portrayed.

The essay is structured as a review of each poem or collection and a final summary. The reviews are divided into three sections defined by time periods, Early Works, Heroic Era and Modern. The first section begins with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Heroic era focuses on poetry written at that time and how it relates to the experiences of those individuals. The Modern section focuses on poetry from 'professional poets' who have visited Antarctica as part of the Artists in Antarctica program. *Erebus*, by Bill Sewell has also been included, this long poem stands apart from the other modern Antarctic poems because the subject is the crash of a scenic over-flight in 1979. Finally a poem from a primary school child is considered as an indication of future images of Antarctica.

Part 1 - Early Works

Rime of the Ancient Mariner¹

"Antarctica's literary potential as the Ancient Mariner realized, lay in its alienness and inaccessibility." (Pyne, p 162)

Coleridge's Antarctic setting creates a world on the boundary of fiction and reality. A distinct set of images are used to portray the extremes of the environment as remote and cold.

¹ Coleridge, S T (edited by Fry, P 1999) *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's - 1817 text.
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Excluding the 'STORM-BLAST' which propels the ship into Antarctic waters there is no wind in this Antarctica, there is mist, snow and fog. There is no mention of sighting land, instead he describes ice which is 'floating by'. Coleridge creates a sense of isolation and distance from the rest of the world by creating a very simple ice-scape. He limits his visual descriptions of the ice cliffs to just two elements, the colour "As green as emerald." and the proportions "And ice, mast-high". The use of the ship as the sole point of comparison rather than a comparison with landmarks at home.

The ice was all between.

The ice was here, the ice was there,

The ice was all around:

These lines show the ice closing in around the ship which creates an unsettling environment.

In Coleridge's Antarctica the environment is dynamic. The experience begins with a positive tone "wondrous cold" where the ice is passive "floating by". The initial impression changes with the introduction of a "dismal sheen" and then developing with awareness of the lack of life, "men nor beasts," coupled with the haunting sounds from the ice, he builds tension: "...cracked and growled, and roared and howled".

Antarctica becomes a hostile place where the ship is trapped. The escape begins with a violent change "The ice did split with a thunder-fit;". The experience in the Antarctic ends with the departure on a "good south wind" and the image that they have been saved.

This portion of the *Ancient Mariner* has an Antarctic setting and has been included in collections of Antarctic works such as *Wide White Page* (Manhire, p43-7) as well as cited in studies of Antarctic literature such by Pyne and Simpson-Housley. The *Encyclopedia of the Antarctic* by Beau Riffenberg, highlights it as the most famous Antarctic poem (Riffenberg, p387). However although the poem was written after Captain Cook's account of his voyage south was published, the source of inspiration is likely to be accounts of Arctic exploration.

Lowe conducts a detailed analysis of the possible sources of Coleridge's inspiration for his Antarctic voyage in *The Road to Xanadu*, (Lowe, p135 - 151). He cites sources including Coleridge's correspondence and library records at the time he was writing the poem. Lowe laboriously prescribes every Antarctic detail of the poem to Arctic sources. With this interpretation the *Ancient Mariner* does not fit so comfortably in a the collection of Antarctic Inspired poetry.

The *Ancient Mariner* may have had another role in Antarctic Inspired poetry. Simpson-Housley's review of Antarctic poetry considers works from "...the second voyage of Captain cook (1772-5) to the death of Captain Scott (1912)." (Simpson-Housley, p99). He describes Shackleton as "...the most prolific Antarctic poet..." (p104) and states "Shackleton made direct reference to the '*Ancient Mariner*' on at least two occasions" (p105). He details the parallels between elements of the *Ancient Mariner* and Shackleton's poems *A Tale of the Sea*, *Fanning Isle*² and *Two Ways*³.

Written in 1895 before Shackleton's Antarctic experiences, *A Tale of the Sea* was influenced by Coleridge. Like Coleridge, Shackleton's uses iceberg imagery and "The greatest similarity between the two poems, however is the image of spectre-barks on hostile seas. Shackleton's seas are tempestuous whereas Coleridge's are becalmed..., but both threaten the mariners." (p105).

"The Antarctic Muse" Thomas Perry

Thomas Perry's song *The Antarctic Muse*⁴ (Manhire, *Wide White Page*, p41) was written during Perry's first hand experience on Cook's voyage south on the Resolution. Perry expresses a mixture of conquering spirit at the discovery of the "South Continent" but the strongest tone is one of relief having turned for home. "We have done our utmost as any men born" (Manhire, *Wide White Page*, p41).

² 'A Tale of the Sea' and 'Fanning Isle' are cited by Simpson-Housley from a collection of Shackleton's poems compiled by Margery Fisher and published in Ralling's book.

³ "The Poem 'Two Ways' was published in the Sunday Express on 5 February 1922.... The poem seems to have been printed on a manuscript in 1907." (Ralling 1983)"

⁴ Originally published in *The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery* vol. II, ed., J.C. Beaglehole (Cambridge, 1961). Manhire titles this verse 'Song' however Simpson-Housley who cites the same reference states the title to be 'The Antarctic Muse' (Simpson-Housley, p100)

Like Coldridge his representation of Antarctica is of the enduring cold and the sea ice. He conveys this using the behaviour of people as a point of reference, the donning of "Mittens and Magdalen Caps". The sense of danger and hostile environment comes from writing of the bravery of the men, and the skill of Captain Cook to "conduct the Ship from all eminent danger" (Manhire, *Wide White Page*, p41).

Part 2 - Heroic Era Expeditions

There were a significant number of poems written during the polar winters by the explorers of the heroic era. For Scott and Shackleton's men the two Antarctic publications the *South Polar Times*⁵ and *Aurora Australis*⁶ were primary outlets for this work.

South Polar Times

'this the 23rd day of April marks the disappearance of the sun for many long months; and as we can expect no light from without, we look for light from within. So in the hope that this idea may even in a small way be realized, the first number of the South Polar Times appears.' - Shackleton (April 1902), Editorial, *South Polar Times*

A single copy of the *South Polar Times* was produced monthly during the winter of Scott's expeditions, copies of this were collected in three volumes. Volumes 1 and 2 are the editions from the *Discovery* expedition and Volume 3 collects the editions produced by the *Terra Nova* expedition during the austral winter before the South Pole journey, (April - Oct 1911).

Most of the poems in the *South Polar Times* were lighthearted, intended to entertain and distract from the harsh environment. All of these poems were inspired by the men's day to day experiences of their lives and work in Antarctica. For example, *Biolovertia* (*South Polar Times* Vol. 1, part 3, p27) is a poem detailing the life forms found in the ocean, it represents the Antarctic waters through the microscope as a vibrant place filled with life, a stark contrast to the world observed with the naked eye. The poem *The Sleeping Bag* by Ponting from the same edition (p42) shows a different aspect of the extreme environment. The subject is a argument on the best way to use a fur lined

⁵ *South Polar Times*, Vol. 1-2, (1907) London: Smith, Elder & Co
South Polar Times, Vol. 3, (1914) London: Smith, Elder & Co

⁶ Ed. Shackleton, E.

sleeping bag - the fur side inside or outside. It is light hearted and portrays the argument as banter between the men, however it shows the constant struggle for warmth and the challenge of living in a small isolated group in an unfamiliar environment.

A recurring subject in *South Polar Times* poems was the twenty-four hour darkness. It is either represented as never ending as in *Through Winter's Night* "nor life nor light e'er chases gloom away," (*Through Winter's Night* - Unknown, *South Polar Times* Vol. 3, p92) or through the anticipation of the return of daylight as in *Dawn* (Fitz Clarence/M Barne, *South Polar Times*, Vol. 1, July 02 p31). In Bowers mid-winter contemplation of the sunrise, he forgets the hostility of the Antarctic environment. His short poem, *Return of the Sun* (*South Polar Times*, Vol. 3, p92), celebrates the end of darkness and presents a more romantic portrait of Antarctica as a magnificent landscape. He shows a sense of awe and adulation for Antarctica.

Greatest of Heaven's lights, grandest of earthly sights,
Cape, island, shore,
Limitless plains of snow, peak, boulder, berg and floe,
Lit with thy radiant glow,
Greet thee once more.

Wilson's poem *The Barrier Silence* sets a very different tone. Reading it today, with the knowledge that it was written by Wilson before he set out on the journey to the pole where he perished, it has an eerie sense of premonition. (*South Polar Times*, Vol. 3, notes p160).

The Barrier Silence

The silence was deep with a breathe like sleep
As our sledge runners slid on the snow,
the fate-full fall of our fur-clad feet
Struck mute like a silent blow
On a questioning "hush" as the settling crust
Shrank shivering over the floe;
And the sledge in its track sent a whisper back
Which was lost in a white fog-bow.

And this was the thought that the Silence wrought
As it scorched and froze us through,
Though secrets hidden are all forbidden
Till God means man to know,
We might be the men God meant to know
The heart of the Barrier snow,
In the heat of the sun, and the glow
And the glare from the glistening floe,
As it scorched and froze us through and through
With the bite of the drifting snow.

The theme of isolation is most prominent here. It is represented by the silence and the image of their tracks being erased by the elements. He also conveys a strong feeling of the unknown in the second stanza. This would have been influenced by his apprehension towards the journey that lay ahead. Most directly, Wilson characterises the environment by the cold. The rhythm of the poem and the narrative of a journey conjure images of a vast landscape. The use of God's will portray a feeling of powerlessness in this environment.

Aurora Australis⁷

'During the sunless months which are now our portion;... we have found in this work an interest and a relaxation, and hope it will prove the same to our friends in the distant Northland.' (*Aurora Australis*, Preface, by E. H. Shackleton)

Shackleton, the editor, writes these works were written for entertainment and to pass the time while on the ice, he acknowledges a wider audience to the north. Shackleton also highlights the differences between this publication and the *South Polar Times*, an indication of the competition between him and Scott. With this context of intended audience, the poems are split between lighthearted entertainment and portrayals of the triumphs of conquering the harsh land.

Midwinter Night is a rare example of a lighthearted poem by Shackleton (Simpson-Housley, p110). It depicts the ordinary nature of the men's' dreams "...barmaids

⁷ Shackleton, E H (1998) *Aurora Australis* Auckland: SeTo Publishing, Originally published 1908.

and bottles,/Whisky and barrels of beer,..” This playful poem has a warm and comforting tone, it is focused on life inside the hut, while sleeping the men are insulated from the harsh reality of the Antarctic winter, Shackleton expresses his responsibility for these men as the Watchman.

The narrative of *Southward Bound* tells of the journey of *Nimrod* to Antarctica. It has a more formal tone and the regular meter and rhyme add to the sense of striving and conquering. Antarctica is portrayed as a woman protected by icebergs “... guarded a virgin bed.” The men portrayed as determined, are able to overcome all the challenges presented. Only in the penultimate stanza do they become passive, dominated by the Antarctic environment.

In a solitary hut on a lonely isle
Beneath a smoke capped height,
Hemmed in by the ice that grips us awhile
We wait in the long dark night.

Even this situation is only temporary, with the additional power of the male sun the party will triumph over Antarctica, “When the sun returns from his tropical home”.

The third poem in *Aurora Australis, Erebus* by Shackleton is another conquering story, this time the ascent of Mt Erebus. The Antarctic environment portrayed is extremely harsh, and impenetrable “Proud, unconquered and unyielding” the scene is set with images of the timeless dominance of the mountain. There is an immense battle where the mountain is joined by other elements of the Antarctic environment, blizzards, cold and darkness, but although men are no physical match for this power Shackleton shows that Antarctica can be defeated by man because of human qualities “heart and brain”.

***The Ice King*, J D Morrison, (Doorly, G S, p117)**

The Ice King was written in 1903 by Morrison. He was chief engineer on the relief ship, the *Morning*. These words were inspired by his experience they left the *Discovery* and Scott's men for their second Antarctic winter. (Doorly, p115-7). Unlike the heroic era poetry written by the men who wintered over down there this poem provides an external perspective on the environment Scott's men endured and it is written by someone with his own first hand experience of Antarctica.

Down in the deadly stillness, cut off from the world, alone;
Held in the grasp of the Ice King, on the steps of his crystal throne;
Waiting returning sunshine, waiting the help we'll bring,
Wearily watching the hours go by, till the *Morning* comes with the spring.

This first verse describes the Antarctic environment, the isolation, being trapped and at the mercy of the 'Ice King'. Antarctica is represented as male here, perhaps because it would have been more fitting for "brave men" to be held hostage by a King. As the ship is leaving at the end of summer, the polar night is a prominent element here. There is no specific mention of the cold or wind, in fact he describes the 'stillness'. The key elements of the environment are the isolation and darkness.

Part 3 - Modern

The modern poetry experiment.

The modern experience of Antarctica for visiting poets is very different to the men of the heroic era. Visiting artists are on the continent for a short period during the summer and are able to visit a variety of locations with relative ease. The purpose of their work has some parallels with the early explorers their role is to communicate to the world their experience and impressions of Antarctica. They do endure a degree of discomfort relative to normal lives. This sentiment is captured by Bill Manhire in *Blood Falls* "Here he is with his cautious life." (Manhire, B. (2001) *Collected Poems*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, p262) and is repeated in *Some Frames* (Manhire, p263).

The collection of poems in *Homelight* (Brown, N. et al. [1998] Wellington: Pemmican Press) is a modern day response to the *South Polar Times* and *Aurora*

Australis. Written and first printed in Antarctica by the first NZ Visiting Arts Fellows in January 1998. The poems depict the day to day occurrences of these modern visitors, *Orsman's Cigar* by Manhire details many of the behaviours now expected of visitors “/Pack out your yellow snow,/The grey water so/”. These show the sentiment that Antarctica is an environment to be protected. He makes reference to the Antarctic Treaty “/A protocol:/For every day./”. From the same collection, the poem *The Polar Explorer's Love Song* by Manhire reflects on the extreme cold of the environment. Antarctica personified as “The goddess Hypothermia”.

Hoosh (Manhire, *Collected Poems*, p253-260), first published in 1995 was written by Manhire long before he visited Antarctica, it is a collage of Antarctic images. The style portrays an outsider's attempt to comprehend the environment. The work inspired by his first hand experience of Antarctica is more precise and direct.

The *Lakes of Mars* (Orsman, C. 2008, Auckland: Auckland University Press) collection of poems reads like a travelogue. It represents Orsman's personal experience of Antarctica, the poems are immediate a direct account of his senses, not reflective. In contrast to the works from the heroic era he conveys the sense that he was a visitor not an inhabitant. *What the Camera Missed*, (Orsman, C. *Lakes of Mars*, p39-40) gives an image of Antarctica as vast, complex and timeless. It implies that Antarctica is too subtle to be fully appreciated ‘too fine for memory’ ‘too fine for our nostrils?’

Before he went to Antarctica, Orsman wrote an epic poem about Scott's journey to the south pole (Orsman, *South: an Antarctic Journey*). The Antarctic environment is portrayed hostile and cold but also very simple a direct physical challenge in terms of cold and the vast difficult terrain to be covered. This contrasts with the complexity of images from Orsman's own experience of the environment.

Erebus: a poem, Bill Sewell

This long poem stands apart from the other modern poems because the prompt/subject is the crash of a scenic over-flight in 1979. There is a strong theme of the isolation and remote location. Expressed from the perspective of those who have lost their friends and family in the crash, they feel cut off from the distant graves rather than someone alone in Antarctica who feels cut off from the rest of the world. A comparable

sense of isolation is expressed much earlier in *The Ice King* by Morrison (Doorly, p117), looking at those trapped in Antarctica from an external perspective.

The poem is divided into Frames, a number of these have strong images of the Antarctic environment.

Frame 4: Breaking the quiet (p18) dwells on remoteness of Antarctica, represented by the silence. The extreme environment is powerful and constant. "Nobody was there/to hear the impact/but the quiet/that came after/would have been immense -"

Frame 17: A final Thing. (p46)

Sewell draws a parallel with the heroic era, erecting a cross to mark the crash site with claiming the pole 'trying to punctuate the past.' Represents man's desire to make some mark a memorial but it will be smothered in snow, it can not be permanent in this environment which does not acknowledge or stop for the human loss.

Wairakei Primary School Children's Poems (Unpublished)

The most prominent images of Antarctica for children today come from films such as Happy Feet and March of the penguins rather than tales of the heroic era. Children now have a strong awareness of sustainability and environmental protection. This poem reflects the change in attitudes towards the Antarctic environment, it is not represented as a dangerous, hostile place to be conquered and dominated by man but rather a fragile environment that requires our protection.

The Over Weight World by Orla Maher

A nuclear reactor
sinks underwater
as Antarctica slowly melts.

Sliced up like a pie,
a fragile eco system
leaves cream on greedy faces

A generation of whales

lost to harpoons
like a feeding frenzy

This white wonderland
of ice shatters
under an overweight world.

Summary

The themes expressed in Antarctic inspired poetry have developed over time as the continent have been explored. The early impressions were of the cold and isolation, these images endured through the heroic era, reflecting the extended duration of expeditions and the constant striving to explore further in to the continent. The ferocity of the Antarctic wind is strangely absent from the poems in this selection, perhaps a review of poems from Mawson's expedition may show a different perspective. The audience for the poems of the heroic era had a strong influence on the images portrayed, the need for entertainment during the long dark winter was the primary goal.

In recent times, with Antarctica relatively more accessible, the image of isolation has faded from poetry. Only in the extreme circumstance, like the Erebus air crash does the isolation become significant. However, new themes, the fragility and purity of the Antarctic environment are emerging. This reflects the changing social consciousness.

All poetry of the Antarctic makes use of the white space on the page. It either focuses on a particular detail allowing the reader's imagination to fill the space around it with cold, ice and wind, or it takes the wide view and provides a scant line drawing of the landscape a few words or prompts to allow the reader again to fill the space between. Across all of the examples considered it is the intense and persistent cold, which consistently represents Antarctica as an extreme environment.

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