ANTARCTICA: LIFE ON THE ICE
INTRODUCTION
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In the austral summer of 2005, I made a day trip by helicopter to Robert Falcon Scott's hut at Cape Evans on Ross Island. This was Scott's base in 1910, his expedition that ended with his death and the death of four of his team mates. The story of this expedition is one of the saddest in Antarctic history and is my favorite so to visit the hut was a sort of pilgrimage. The hut was busy with a crew of New Zealand men digging out ice from the south side of the hut. I knew how the ice piled up there as I had read about it in Scott's journals and in Apsley Cherry-Garrard's marvelous account of Scott's final expedition, The Worst Journey in the World. The men handed me a pickax and for a while I chipped away with them with the great sense that this small gesture connected me to the past, even to heroism. Soon enough, though, this heroic traveler was tired, so I gave up my digging and wandered into the hut.

Once my eyes adjusted to the dim light I stood, overwhelmed by what had been left there: cans of collard greens and bottles of medical supplies above Dr. Wilson's bed; reindeer sleeping bags and finneskos (the Norwegian-style boots). When I looked closely I could see that the leather soles were peeling away. The daily lives of these explorers I so admired became clear to me as I looked at Cherry-Garrard's bunkbed, and noted where Ponting processed his photos. When I saw toothbrushes propped in glasses at the head of some of the men's beds I wanted to weep. For me, their lives were contained in those toothbrushes.

It's the daily details that allow me to imagine a place and the bigger the place, the more I need those small details. Lucky for me, Scott's narratives are filled with passages like this from his 1901 expedition: "The first task of the day is to fetch the ice for the daily consumption of water for cooking, drinking and washing. In the latter respect we begin to realize that many circumstances are against habits of excessive cleanliness, but although we use water very sparingly, an astonishing amount of washing is done with it, and at present the fashion is for all to have a bath once a week."

A bath a week in melted ice water--for almost two years. With this sort of detail I am delighted and at the same time the "heroic age" of Antarctic exploration is brought down to the basics. What they ate, how they slept and other facts of daily life make up much of the 1,200 pages of Scott's narrative of his 1901 expedition. In fact, there is little that I would label heroic. Mostly, we manhaul and suffer slowly and eat a lot of hoosh and biscuits. The overall expedition is unquestionably heroic as these British navy men and crew sailed south through iceberg-laden waters, spent a winter with their ship encased in ice, and, through a dark Antarctic night, explored, learned to ski, made endless scientific experiments, staged plays and survived to tell their story. There was only one fatality, Able Seaman George T. Vince who slipped from a cliff and fell into the water. A cross in memory of Vince stands on Ross Island a short walk from McMurdo station. Another cross rests at the top of Observation Hill marking the deaths of Scott, Bowers, Wilson, Evans and Oates. It reads: To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield. When I arrived at the top of Observation Hill, breathless in the thin clear air, I looked at the Ross Sea, made sure no one else was nearby, and kissed the cross.

As a young girl, my father filled my head with stories of the South Pole (at one point I imagined Scott was a distant cousin and was angry with him for killing both dogs and ponies). Since then, I've read a range of narratives and have taught classes at Bard College on the Antarctic. It is the stories of Robert Falcon Scott, Earnest Shackleton, and especially Apsley Cherry-Garrard that first lured my imagination and then me to the white continent. I am not alone; most people who venture south have these narratives as their framework, imagining that they too will experience blizzards and extreme temperatures, see penguins and stand in awe of Mount Erebus. But as much as I read I could not entirely imagine myself in Antarctica.

I wanted to know what sort of tent I would sleep in at a remote camp, and would I feel lonely waking in that tent—or would I even be able to sleep with that endless sun? I wanted to experience an Antarctic wind on my face and understand what deep cold did to my bones. In other words, to understand a place, I need to break it down into the simplest of human needs: sleep, warmth, food. But also: how do you keep communication with loved ones? How often does mail arrive? Are there showers? How do people travel around? Where do people pee? And what about love?

Through the narratives of early explorers I could gather the answers to some of my questions. But my two final questions remained unanswered. It wasn't until I visited Cape Evans that I saw that Scott and his men had outhouses, three for officers and one for enlisted men. But love, that remained the great mystery. Cherry-Garrard once, in about six hundred pages, thinks of "girls, or a girl…" That's a meager fantasy in two and a half years living in an all-male world. I can forgive his omission only because these were, after all, British gentleman.

But the early accounts only gave me a sense of life in Antarctica long before permanent bases, heated and with running water, and long before helicopters and LC130 cargo planes. I wanted to know what it was like for modern travelers on the continent. Some modern narratives gave me an idea of life on the ice, but I wanted more; I needed to track down the stories I wanted to read, which means I had to go to Antarctica.

No one ends up in Antarctica by accident. Flying there on your own dime is expensive and the other most commonly used route--getting a grant or a job on the ice--is difficult. You have to be qualified for specialized jobs such as fixing snowmobiles in below zero temperatures or loading helicopters or pushing snow in a D8 Caterpillar bulldozer and be physically and often mentally qualified for life on the ice. So people are specialized in their work, though often they learned the skill only to be able to head south. In their real lives they are park rangers or dentists, someone who wanted a break from their lives and wanted an unusual adventure. So all of these workers are healthy, and despite complaints about work (a six day, sixty hour a week schedule), a buoyant optimism reigns.

I am one of the lucky writers who have received a grant from the National Science Foundation's Artist and Writer's program. With their support, I spent six weeks in Antarctica during the Austral Summer of 2004-2005. They remain some of the happiest weeks of my life.

Since my goal while in Antarctica was to experience daily life on the ice and to find people in different fields of work who could describe that life for me I was open to just about any experience that came my way. I worked with Solar Joe installing solar panels at a camp at New Harbor at the mouth of Taylor Valley, and there learned how to

make Antarctic concrete: take sandy soil, hand carry a bucket of water from the Ross Sea, add to the sand, and within twenty four hours it will be a frozen block. I helped David Ainley, a penguinologist, count Adélie penguins and then inject pit tags in nesting penguins. I got to cup that football shaped creature under my arm, as its flipper faintly beat me. From these experiences I concocted dramatic tales of 45 mile an hour winds and the charm of penguins, but still, what fascinated me most was how people lived their lives, how our very human needs of food, work, play, sleep and love fit in such a big place.

These essays, I hope, will offer travelers a sense of those human needs—plus some. And yet at the same time I know that what all of these writers and travelers are trying to describe is the indescribable. You just can not know what it is like to crave Ritz crackers slathered with butter until you've lived in a camp for several months in temperatures hovering near zero.

Still, these essays reveal with great intimacy and detail moments of life in Antarctica, from the late 70s to the present. I can promise that the writers here are not proper British gentleman—the ways of love on the ice are revealed in several of these essays. We have the voices of GAs (General Assistants) and scientists, of writers and those who have never written for publication. Through these vivid experiences, we are taken onto the ice, and are offered the richness of daily life: there are essays here about food and loneliness, about riding snowmobiles and finding love. The essays that follow are set in the three U.S. bases--McMurdo, South Pole, and Palmer—and in camps in the Dry Valleys or on Ross Island and at remote camps on the polar plateau. There is one essay describing the thrill of flying in with the only independent company on the continent. The range of experiences here can not cover life on the ice, but they do offer insight and humor from a big and beautiful place.

If you want to know how to pee in Antarctica, you will have to go there.