

### **Lyttelton, New Zealand, to Cape Evans, Antarctica**

I sailed to Antarctica with a group of people who wanted to save the world. The world, in this case, meant Antarctica's ice-shrouded 5.4-million-square miles, a crystalline fortress separated from the known or temperate world by a ring of howling, fierce ocean. There is nothing more alone in this world than Antarctica. Once the center of a great southern supercontinent, it became a fragment, drifting south to the pole, where the seas and winds conspired to seal it in a horrible cold. Ice took over, offering a jumble of milk-stained cliffs and green glassware. When the sun shines the whole place lights up better than the Emerald City, and it is the most beautiful place on Earth.

I was young then and did not realize there remained places not only called the unknown, but actual unknown regions of Earth—unseen, untouched, unmapped, places no one had yet named or even set eyes on. In Antarctica, a requirement of entry is leaving your eyes behind after you have a new pair

installed. Then you get the chance to see the world again as though for the first time, and even your own home and mother make you stop and revel in wonder. *My God*, you find yourself saying, *I love the smell of rain on hot concrete*. Transformation is a great idea as long as you don't think about it too much.

Our ship was a donated oceangoing tug, designed to pull large freighters to and from port; Dutch-built with enormous Smit-Man engines, most of her career had been spent working coastal Maryland for the pilots' association. (Coincidentally about forty miles from where I grew up outside of Washington DC.) We had ample engine power but lacked a hull wholly reinforced for ice. What this gained in narrative color, it lost in mind-numbing terror. (Later, when it was too late and we were already at sea deep in the Antarctic, one old salt noted she was a very dangerous ship for ice, neither designed nor modified to deal with hits from rock-hard ice. Later still, when Antarcticans learned I traveled on this old ship, my choice to do so came to be considered—falsely I might add—"brave.") Fitted with brass and polished, dark wood, about thirty years old, Greenpeace sailed her south to scrutinize polar research stations and create outrage about Antarctic mining schemes being hashed out at closed-door international meetings.

I recall cruising through the long tunnel separating Lyttelton—a colonial port town established in the mid-nineteenth century, later home and workplace for dozens of polar explorers and their crews—from the larger metropolitan area of Christchurch, New Zealand, on a hot, bright January morning, and seeing our ship tied up at the quayside, flanked by Nedlloyd freighters and coastal supply ships, and in contrast to them our ship appeared pitifully small, like a black-and-ocher bath toy festooned with a rainbow, a hopeful little tub. The cab driver wanted to know why I was going to

the quayside. I told him we were heading to Antarctica to save the world, something I had come to enjoy telling people, to which he looked aghast in the rearview mirror, then asked me if I believed in God. Do you know, he began, that a ship sank down there only two years ago? I knew the ship he was talking about, and it scared me in a profound way; yet a growing urgency to be in Antarctica overshadowed fear. As I paid the driver, he looked at me and said, “Really, God bless you.”

Many Antarctic stories begin with a bright moment of realization or even a dream—illustrating the narrator’s ineluctable destiny as a polar explorer. My story begins with this scene: a Greenpeace press kit sliding off my desk one morning in Melbourne, Australia. Antarctica smiled at me from the cascade of photos; an ice-shrouded steaming volcano, gleaming blue ice, tiny red-eyed penguins, a slick black whale fin. *Under threat!* The press release screamed. The images lodged in my brain but something else happened as well, I cannot say what it was exactly, but I knew I would go south. This certainty offered a feeling akin to that of arriving home on a cool, autumn afternoon, as the sun angles lower in the sky, and a warm yellow lamp shines hopefully in the front window. It is a feeling that has never left me, and comes to me each time I read or write the word *Antarctica*.

I began reading stories about Antarctica that night as I rode home across the Yarra River on one of Melbourne’s famed wooden trams. Small girls wearing straw boaters and navy coats filled the tram. I had recently moved across the world from Sarasota, Florida, and found work at Melbourne’s afternoon daily newspaper, settling down with my longtime beau. This man, it turned out, wooed many, from the features editor at a competing newspaper to a former beauty queen from Texas. I spent most evenings sitting on the kitchen counter, tapping my fingers on the green, glitter-flecked Formi-

ca and eating popcorn; by day I wrote about food and chefs and sampled whitebait omelets, Champagne, Mongolian barbecue, and sobbed in the toilet stall. Antarctica offered me a way out.

So I called Greenpeace's London office and talked to a man named Martin who told me I must interview with the crew, at present in New Zealand preparing for Antarctica. "By the way," he added, "there is a New Zealand story here, too. We're finally putting what's left of the *Rainbow Warrior* down as a diving reef. Big memorial offshore to the ship, her mission, and the man the French government killed." A week later, I got on a plane for the three-hour flight to Auckland and arrived at midnight, from where I joined the Greenpeace yacht *Vega* and sailed north, at midmorning entering stunningly beautiful Matauri Bay, on New Zealand's eastern coast. Helicopters swooped overhead. Small cabin cruisers and bright-colored yachts formed a white-and-silver flotilla of mourning. What was left of the *Rainbow Warrior* slowly sank to the bottom as a diving reef, while her crew stood in an inflatable boat watching surging air bubbles roil the surface. Two years earlier, French navy divers set charges on the *Rainbow Warrior's* hull and blasted the ship in Auckland harbor, killing one of her crew; while Pacific island nations, Greenpeace, and others had engaged in a long, often violent fight over French nuclear testing in the South Pacific, the French response stunned the world.

After the ceremony, we set up camp on a dark beach illuminated by a pyre-like bonfire and a dense pack of stars overhead. Whiskey bottles passed around, someone played a drum; it shimmered, a tribal, strange, hippies-on-the-high-seas aesthetic and exactly what I anticipated. And that was how I wrote the story when I returned home to pack my bags for Antarctica, having secured a spot on the thirty-two-member crew.

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Lyttelton, a deep-water port built within a slowly eroding, 11-million-year-old volcano on New Zealand's east coast, tells a story of Antarctic embarkation—the wonder, thrill, mystery—of the last, great terrestrial explorations, a role dictated by its close geographic proximity, a town where the great explorers lived and worked and worshiped God before they set sail.

Eight women sailed on our ship, two cooks, one of the mates, an able-bodied seaman, a zoologist, a geologist, the doctor, and me; I quickly fell in with third mate Bernadette, of County Wexford, Ireland, and Maggie of New York's Hudson Valley, who was a seaman and boat driver—Maggie dropped out of college and sailed off with Greenpeace because of the whale issue, she explained, elaborating that the Japanese and others needed to stop killing and eating them. Bernadette was a professional ship's mate and had worked for Shell moving tankers across the North Pacific. This low-paying Greenpeace stint was an effort, she explained, to get back her karmic balance.

During the day, people worked with little rest; huge mesh bags of carrots coming on board, yellow paint scraped and replaced by white paint, stores counted, arranged, balanced; everything had to balance in the hold. I read books about polar exploration and tried to stay out of the way. At night, the sailors played pool at the British Hotel, a grotty, wharf-side pub, and I followed along; one night some sailors from another ship got into a fistfight and one was stabbed with a screwdriver, a sight even the seasoned sailors noted as gruesome. The injured man was helped up steep concrete steps to a medic, then they mopped up the floor with sudsy water, circles of white, gray, red, pink. Then the crack of pool balls filled the air, impassive faces returned, a local beer called Tui was poured all around.

Greenpeace exuded rock-band cool, complete with group-



*Baden Norris, Antarctic curator, historian, and explorer, sitting on a bench taken from the Terra Nova in the Lyttelton Museum Polar Gallery.*

ies—women and men eager to meet the heroes off to fight for Antarctica—and they waited among the inflated, black-and-white plastic penguins, vivid photos of whales breaching, dangling crystals refracting so many tiny rainbows, waiting for someone to talk to them; they usually mistakenly assumed I had an active role in this scheme to save the world, too, and gave me a certain look of admiration. So I fled the docks for the musty calm of the Lyttelton Historical Society's museum, upstairs to the eccentric Polar Gallery.

While I stood there in the quiet, dim light one afternoon, gazing at a badly preserved emperor penguin, a calm, resonant voice began, "This penguin was brought back by a local sailor named James Paton; penguin décor was part of Lyttelton in the early twentieth century. Many had such stuffed

Antarctic souvenirs in their entryways,” I turned and saw a man with bright blue eyes and silver hair; he wore a pressed shirt and his face was sculptural in its wrinkles. I introduced myself as a writer going south with Greenpeace and extended my hand.

He said, “I’m Baden Norris, Antarctic curator here and at the Canterbury Museum. I was just off to make some tea. Do you want a cup?”

While Baden made tea, I recounted our Antarctic agenda, covering four months, weather and ice permitting. Baden knew of us, polar ships in Lyttelton being well publicized. People still came from all over the South Island to get a look at them.

“Our first stop will be Cape Evans,” I began, but Baden interrupted me: “Well, it’s good we met then,” he said. “I have spent some time at Cape Evans, beginning in the early 1960s. You will come to see how your own story begins to mirror the story of Lyttelton itself.”

What, I wondered, did that mean?

“You’ll see,” he said. “Want some biscuits?”

And so he began untangling Lyttelton’s Antarctic ties for me, ties evident even in the facts of his own Lyttelton roots—born in a wharfside hospital and reared surrounded by sailors’ tales of sea, ships, and polar exploration—his grandparents once owned a farm further around the harbor, land later sold and made into a large quay for today’s oceangoing freighters.

“When the First World War ended, Lyttelton became home to more Antarctic explorers than any other place on Earth. They worked together on the docks, men from all the great expeditions of the Heroic Age,” Baden recounted, men whose stories animated the town’s pubs and drawing rooms.

He paused a moment and said, “And I had the privilege of meeting many of them—including a man from Shackleton’s

famous boat journey—my father once took me to visit Harry McNeish.” McNeish famously sailed as ship’s carpenter with Ernest Shackleton on the *Endurance* expedition of 1914–1917. You don’t have to read too far into *Endurance*’s story to find McNeish, the Antarctic’s most famous mutineer. (McNeish argued that once the *Endurance* sank, the crew was not obligated to accept Shackleton’s leadership, because their contracts were to follow orders at sea, not when living on the ice.)

While McNeish famously stood in opposition to Shackleton at times, the carpenter’s fame is also linked to his companion, a male cat named Mrs. Chippy. Mrs. Chippy had to be shot when they abandoned ship, to spare her the fate of dogs ripping her to pieces on the ice. (Shackleton never forgot how McNeish refused his leadership and denied the carpenter the prestigious Polar Medal bestowed by the king on crewmates when they returned to London.) McNeish later emigrated to New Zealand, where he became an immediate wharveside celebrity; New Zealanders have always lauded Antarctic explorers beyond the recognition offered by the rest of the world. Baden’s father had been a sailor, and when he heard the McNeish was dying, they traveled by ferry to pay their respects to him in Wellington. Baden was barely school age. Wharf workers in Wellington rallied to care for McNeish, Baden said. “I recall his small, dark room . . . McNeish gestured to us . . . come to his bedside,” Baden said. “I was terrified. My father held my hand. He wanted us to honor McNeish, a hardworking ship’s carpenter who had survived Antarctica’s most dramatic shipwreck. McNeish wanted to tell us something. He could barely raise his head from the pillow, and leaned his face close to mine. In a hoarse whisper he said, ‘Shackleton killed my cat.’”

Baden and I often met after that in the Lyttelton Museum, where I would read old newspapers from the days of Shack-

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leton and Scott while he tinkered and explained what it was like to grow up in Lyttelton, a town we came to call the “Cape Canaveral of Antarctic exploration”—I liked the analogy with *The Right Stuff*, a bunch of brave nobodies shot out into the stratosphere, pushing the edge of the envelope, some to become legendary, some to slip into the dim world of the forgotten. All still brave. All still had done it.

Baden went to sea at fifteen, and Mortimer “Jack” McCarthy, an Irishman from Kinsale, then a Lyttelton resident, was among his crewmates. McCarthy had sailed with Robert Falcon Scott’s *Terra Nova* expedition of 1910, part of the crew that challenged ferocious seas to get Scott safely on his way to the South Pole.

Baden showed me a fine photograph of McCarthy, a tall man with a handlebar moustache and a pipe, standing at a ship’s wheel, wind blowing the sea to great crests not an arm length from where he stood. McCarthy had been a kind man with the empathy to help young sailors’ stave off homesickness—through lively stories of his great Antarctic adventures. As a boy, Baden had played with McCarthy’s sons in the streets of Lyttelton. One was named Tim. Many years later, Baden discovered that McCarthy’s brother, Tim, had sailed to the Antarctic with Shackleton and Worsley aboard *Endurance*. A strong and good-natured man, Tim was among the six who made Worsley’s brilliant small boat journey from Elephant Island to South Georgia. The Tim we meet in books about the *Endurance* is a tough North Sea fisherman, imbued with grace and wit and a single-minded determination to not only survive, but to do so with good cheer. Like most of the *Endurance*’s crew, Tim returned from three seasons trapped in Antarctica and enlisted immediately in World War I. He would die within months of his return, shot dead at a gunnery post while at sea with the British Navy. This fact was almost too much for me to bear.

Jack McCarthy had been the first man to sight the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen's ship, the *Fram*, in the Bay of Whales. While Amundsen had announced his intent to explore and locate the South Pole, the fact of another ship in remote Antarctic waters jarred *Terra Nova's* crew. The British had a proprietary sense of Antarctica. Some of the *Terra Nova's* seamen wanted to fight it out with the Norwegians then and there, McCarthy later told the boys. But the officers would have none of that, so they returned to Cape Evans to leave word for Scott: The race to the South Pole was on.

Once the *Greenpeace* sailed, with Baden and about a hundred others waving good-bye from the quayside, we quickly hit gale-force-eight seas. The ship's bucking and jerking terrified me. I tried to fill my mind with Antarctic stories, as a stay against fear. I read how in 1839 the Englishman James Clark Ross arrived in the South Pacific, determined to answer questions of what, exactly, the Antarctic was: Ice? Land? Gold?

In his possession was a hundred-page instruction book from the Royal Geographic Society, a detailed account of every object of inquiry that learned body could devise.

In 1841 Ross navigated his two ships, *Erebus* and *Terror*, southward, threading them through pack ice. The men described the belching flame and smoke of the world's southernmost active volcano, which they named *Erebus* after their ship. Ross compared the great ice shelf to the White Cliffs of Dover.

Ross's expeditions also began the long and fabled Antarctic tradition of wild parties and inventive entertainments. Alan Gurney, in *The Race to the White Continent*, writes, "The player of female roles in Arctic theatricals had metamorphosed into one of the Royal Navy's most handsome and one of its most scientific officers. Beginning in 1818, the 37-year-old Ross had spent eight winters and fifteen summers explor-

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ing the Arctic.” When *Terror* and *Erebus* spent New Year’s Eve in the Ross Sea, the men carved a pub from thick sea ice and celebrated, sculpting a dance floor and ice chairs for Ross and his officers. A flag flew above all these hijinks, the same flag that flew over the North Magnetic Pole. It announced, “Pilgrim of the Ocean,” and on the other side, “The Pioneers of Science.”

Ross, an enthusiastic naturalist, had included among his crew twenty-one-year-old Joseph Hooker, a naturalist, as the sole nonmilitary man on board. (Hooker’s methods for prying lichens out of icy sub-Antarctic island rocks made a keen impression on me: Hooker records sitting on lichens, using his rear end to thaw the area sufficiently, allowing for the lichens’ collection as specimens.) Ross’s Antarctic discoveries are considered among the most remarkable of the nineteenth century. His reports of the Antarctic, and his discovery of a wall of ice, 160 feet high and 500 miles long, stunned and amazed readers just as revelations about the Moon or Mars would thrill later generations. (The ice shelf, the sea he navigated, and a prominent island were named Ross in his honor.)

When Ross’s fellow officer and Antarctic shipmate John Franklin later headed to the Arctic in search of the Northwest Passage with *Erebus* and *Terror* and failed to return, Ross bravely set out to find his friend. Ross and others did not succeed; evidence, facts of their last weeks, later offered a story of how Franklin and his men, after losing their ships to the ice, set out on foot and perished. Death lurked, ever-at-hand, along with polar explorers.

(Some years later, in 1905, a beak-nosed Norwegian named Roald Amundsen climbed aboard an old fishing boat and became first to bash through the Northwest Passage. Two years of this three-year endeavor were spent on an Arctic island where he and his small crew traded with the Inuit, absorbed

key polar survival skills from the locals, including the advantages of native cold-weather clothing. Amundsen would deploy this training when he set out for the South Pole.)

While the ship pitched and rolled southward, fifty degrees south, sixty degrees south, heading to the high seventies of southern latitude, my body adjusted to life at sea. One day, I taped an illustrated timeline of early twentieth-century Antarctic expeditions to the wall by my bunk. I like timelines not because of what they illustrate but for all the things they leave out, as though events exist outside of this world, untethered to a particular landscape, unmarred by human suffering or desire, as though events are unrelated, as though there is no knock-on effect or ripple effect or consequence. The notion of time as a line never resonated for me. Time for me appeared as a disk, an old 78 record album, slightly tilted, like the Milky Way.

In 1897 the Royal Geographical Society announced its intention to locate and claim the South Pole for Great Britain. Between 1901 and 1921, in twelve expeditions, men from Scotland, Japan, France, Australia, Norway, Germany, and Great Britain walked the ice in this pursuit. These stories form the spine of early twentieth-century Antarctic histories, peppered with bold innovations—polar explorers adapted new technologies under perilous conditions, which makes for interesting stories. For example, transport: Motorized vehicles were brought to Antarctica by Shackleton on the *Nimrod* expedition, even though they had yet to be fully integrated into more temperate societies. These were not men who believed in elaborate “practice runs” before the actual event. Many came to Antarctica having never skied before. Some see this as foolhardy. Others, such as myself, feel the wonder of their confidence.

The timeline centered on the “race” for the South Pole, which began in earnest in November 1901, when Scott, a

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midlevel English naval officer, sailed south with a purpose-built ship called *Discovery*.

Picture this: Between 1901 and 1912, four pole quests dominate the stories, two by Scott (accompanied on the first by his soon-to-be archrival Ernest Shackleton), one by Shackleton (where he came within ninety-seven nautical miles of the pole), and then—surprise!—Amundsen arrived, snatching the world's last great geographical “unknown” with formidable efficiency.

What struck was the high drama of it all—following the characters on an icy stage to their sometimes-tragic ends. Scott, an ambitious, doomed naval officer, whose big mistake may have been his refusal to use dogs to pull their South Polar-bound sledges. Instead, five men manhauled, yoking themselves to sledges weighing hundreds of pounds. They slowly perished on the return journey—one fell and hit his head, one wandered off because his frostbitten feet did not allow him to keep up, three were found in the tent the next spring, a mere eleven miles from a fuel and food supply depot that might have saved their lives.

In a short time, I came to know their stories as though I had heard them all my life.

Shackleton, an Anglo-Irishman by birth, is portrayed as offering inexhaustible good humor and devotion to his men. Shackleton never directly lost a man in his explorations. He died in 1922 when his heart gave out aboard a ship called the *Quest*, attempting one more Antarctic voyage.

Amundsen's Norwegian egalitarianism showed in how he offered his men equal part in the expedition—down to all holding the bamboo flagpole while ramming it into the ice, marking the South Pole for the first time. Amundsen vanished in 1928 while on an air reconnaissance mission looking for the Italian explorer Umberto Nobile, whose airship had crashed in the Arctic.

Both Scott and Shackleton had departed for the South Pole from Ross Island, where they built wooden huts. The huts remain largely intact a hundred years after their abandonment.

The timeline showed photos of the men, windburned, by these structures. I studied the photos, wooden, prefabricated buildings originally designed for Australian Outback settlers. The images defined raw fragility: the sharp contrast of silvered wood against all that ice. Why hadn't the ice flattened them, I wondered, or why hadn't they rotted?

But rot is an organic process, where bacteria or fungi slowly break things down. The Antarctic presented cold, dry air inhospitable to rot.

After a week, after our ship crossed the Antarctic Circle, we pushed into the Ross Sea. Empty yet full, white yet blue, ice-shrouded rock spreading out as far as the eye could see: I wrote about people living in capsule-like bases, what they ate and read and how they planned booze rations using accountants' spreadsheets and grew pot in their hydroponic greenhouses for sustenance through the sensory-depriving winter darkness.

The landscape overwhelmed. I spent my first Antarctic week walking between the Greenpeace base and the historic Scott hut, side by side at Cape Evans. Scott's hut—a word used to signify temporary or makeshift shelter and not one offering the right resonance for a place where men survived all that cold and ice—was an insulated wooden dwelling, a prefabricated place with a frontier aesthetic. The Greenpeace base followed a mobile-classroom aesthetic, painted a sickly shade of yellowish green, a color announcing that the paint was donated not selected. I don't know what I expected, but it all seemed so flimsy and crude, it approached the feeling of a stage set.

The electric-orange Greenpeace helicopter roared back and