

# Southern extremes

*Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica*

By Tom Griffiths

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Reviewed by Emily Potter

Tom Griffiths' vivid, poetic and engaging history of Antarctica nearly lost me early on. Anyone who has read even a little of the popular literature that concerns this continent would be familiar with the tropes of voyaging, exploration and endurance that so strongly characterise Antarctic narratives. And here is this book, I thought, going over the same ground. In *Slicing the Silence*, the voyage is there, and so are the explorers, with their flags and frozen feet, haunting Griffiths as he travels aboard the *Polar Bird* to dispatch a new lot of 'winterers' at Casey Station. This is how *Slicing the Silence* begins and ends. But in between there is so much more. Griffiths comes to the endeavours of empire, and its exploring heroes, only to hurtle his readers elastically through space and across millennia, from the deep time of Gondwana to the new contours etched in the ice by climate change: all writing into being the story of the 'Great South Land'.

There is a reason, he suggests, why the 'heroic age', as it is known, and the impulse for personal pilgrimage there are just so prominent in the literature of Antarctica. Even Jenny Diski, who begins her book *Skating to Antarctica* with a refusal to get out of bed, let alone leave London, eventually sails down South (although she never sets foot on the ice). For Griffiths, people 'come' to Antarctica in two ways—through the stories they encounter, and the journeys they physically undertake—and it is this insight that reorients the familiar aspects of *Slicing the Silence* in an original and fascinating direction. Intractable material reality and the power of narrative are the two forces that drive Griffiths' account, and much of the book's poetry lies in the realising of their profound interrelation.

Rather than idealising the heroism of iconic explorers—such as Scott, Shackleton, Mawson and Byrd—Griffiths' history is more concerned with exploring the relationship between human and non-human worlds. This relationship was deeply natural, as well as culturally played out. Griffiths shows us how the industrialising world was impacting upon Antarctica even before humans first set foot on the continent. Reciprocally, and well before this, the separation of Antarctica and Australia is thought to have had 'a decisive effect on the evolution of early humans' (81), as a restricted flow of tropical water to the Indian Ocean saw Africa—the 'cradle of civilisation'—start to dry up.

In Griffiths' hands, the history of Antarctica is complex and multi-faceted. It exists in the minutia of daily life, the pursuits of science, and the structure of ice. It is also in the books carefully chosen and brought South by wintering teams; the pile of whale bones on Grytviken beach, the refuse of a once-massive industry; and the roaring forties winds that puffed the sails of empire. In keeping with this understanding of history, the book does not unfold in chronological fashion—only Griffiths' journey to Antarctica is linear in nature.

Griffiths' journal entries punctuate this weave of historical narratives. For me, these short, reflective notations are less interesting than the rest of the text. They do provide some sense of what it is to travel to Antarctica on a modern expedition, as part of an Antarctic community, and they give Griffiths an outlet for the hyperbolic descriptions of overwhelming immensity that inevitably seem to attach to the continent. But I have to admit that Griffiths' journal entries didn't convince me that, as he puts it, 'you need to be there' (18), in order to appreciate the singularity of the Antarctic environment. Or perhaps it's that language will always be insufficient to adequately communicate the experience of *being* in place. Griffiths' claim is more persuasive when it is considered in light of the quality of the broader narrative which showcases his great capacity not just for beautiful and affective prose, but also his ability to articulate the profoundly dynamic nature of place—something that an encounter with the Antarctic environment, scattered with the remains of various human pasts now frozen into a kind of eternal present, must sharply bring into relief.

It is an opportunity to think *with* the place that Griffiths' journey enables, as the reader is taken amidst the dusty log books of previous expeditions and navigated through the Antarctic's various and peculiar landscapes—'time assumes different rhythms [here]. There is the deeper pulse of the ice ages, the seamless months of eternal light or night, the fourth dimension of a blizzard' (251). Griffiths is confronted by the reality of an environment that has been the object of much fascination and pursuit but is also a place where no human belongs. Even Griffiths' fellow winterers—who will continue to stay for another six months on the continent, undertaking tasks of scientific investigation and maintaining a community on the ice—will only ever be temporary presences in Antarctica. All humans come here as outsiders and Griffiths shows how this place continues to be an unhomey home, even for its more persistent travellers.

Griffiths' exercise in history writing is a self-reflexive response to an environment that challenges both communal conditions and social memory. 'Down south, each year begins anew with the break-up of the winter ice. Can history and culture resist the devastating rhythm?' he wonders (259). He issues a warning against 'societies without history or memory, frozen not just by temperature and energy gradients but also by a challenging information gradient, by a severe disconnection between the past and the present' (271). The importance of history,

Griffiths argues, is to sustain and make sense of the world—something that the explorers themselves understood.

Integral to Griffiths' account of Antarctica is the inherent instability of its historical archive. This theoretical approach is due not only to Griffiths' view of the importance of narration to human existence but, more specifically, to his account of the efforts of those who visited Antarctica in the age of exploration (and even more recently in the years of geo-political wrangling over Antarctic territories). For Griffiths, these explorers must *write* themselves into history. The story of Scott, at once poignant and pathetic, is sensitively handled in Griffiths' account. The famous explorer began to construct his memory as soon as he set off for Antarctica, culminating in the final staunch letter he wrote to his public back up North, as he lay dying in his freezing tent. This demonstrates how history is made in Antarctica: having 'lost the race to the pole, [Scott] had to find an alternative glorious ending' (22). The landscape of ice and snow may have confounded Scott's ambitions, but it enabled him to re-imagine his own ending and provided a frozen time capsule in which his written words could, after his death, re-enter life.

Whatever history in Antarctica is, *Slicing the Silence* tells us, it is not just the sum of the parts that we know. That is, it is more than the explorers and their words, the machinations of international politics, meteorological statistics and the deep time of the ice. Rather, it is in the relationship between all these things that something 'alive and unpronounceable' (21), something like Truth, can be discerned. One of the best parts of the book, for me, is the chapter devoted to the Emperor penguin and how it beguiled scientists in the early twentieth century. Griffiths offers a multiplicity of stories on this fascinating creature, as he follows the Emperor into the twenty-first century. This story culminates in the release of the film *March of the Emperor* in which, he argues, the bird stands in for the virtues of monogamy in a battle between the American religious right and their opponents.

Before humans and Emperor penguins first met each other, before the first egg was taken and analysed, it was believed that this was an unevolved bird, exceptional in its biological primitivism (222). Perhaps this explains the need felt by the Scottish Antarctic Expedition to regale a penguin with bagpipe music in 1903—an effort to civilise this fetishised creature. In 1911 a party, headed up by Cherry-Garrard, set out to bring back the first Emperor eggs: an extraordinarily difficult quest as these penguins nest in the dark of winter. In a brief but wonderful section, Griffiths writes about the approach of Cherry-Garrard and his team from the point of view of the penguins. He imagines himself into their world, and recognises the meeting as one in which, to be sure, different powers were at play, but where the men and the penguins faced each other in a moment of mutual strangeness and political opportunity.

Here is another story that Griffiths relates: 'An Adélie penguin once courted Dr Edward Wilson by dropping a pebble at his feet. It was probably a misguided expression of love. But perhaps we can see it as a shrewd act of diplomacy' (242). Apparent in this face to face encounter between the Emperors and the men who were after their eggs in the dark of an Antarctic winter, and in the gift of the pebble placed at Dr Wilson's feet, is a relationship based not on the hard lines of exploitation or resistance, but on the negotiation of things—human and non-human. Humans are not at the centre of this story, and this is a possibility, as Griffiths knows, for both history writing and for a global environmental future in which the health of Antarctica is crucial. *Slicing the Silence* provides much-needed inspiration for how we might take up this possibility and run with it.

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