

from an overseas trip. As it is, the book is satirical and hilarious and somehow touching all at once. It is divided into chapters, listed helpfully in a table of contents (chapters including, for example, 'Chapter IX: the indescribability of alpine beauty' and 'Chapter X: European Toilet Arrangements'). The drawings depict vignettes like 'a German manual worker tending vines in a Rhine vineyard. He is looking worried because after tea he has to take his turn at driving at high speed on the autobahn'.

In the front of the book is a letter to my mother, in which First Drest Himself entrusts the distribution of his book to her infant child. In other words, to me. It instructs that we may allow access to selected relatives 'provided their hands are clean and they tie up the black cord [that binds the pages together] when they are finished. Unrelated folk and people with unreliable habits, while not by any means ruled out, should be carefully vetted; the basic material is extremely valuable and the Art work alone is probably worth a fortune on the open market.'

His formal tone was so often the source of his silliness, and so it is that, despite the fact that these instructions are obviously a joke, I take them very seriously indeed. And before I untie that carefully typed musty-smelling tome, I always wash my hands.

**The ice was all between
Bonny Cassidy**

... whoever has resolution and perseverance to clear up this point by proceeding farther than I have done, I shall not envy him the honour of discovery, but I will be bold to say that the world will not be benefited by it.

So wrote Captain James Cook in 1773, having crossed the Antarctic Circle thrice without sighting his quarry: the great southern continent. Whether ignorantly or belligerently, Cook remained in serious doubt about its very existence.

I know the feeling. In the summer of 2011 I sailed out of Hobart on a Russian-crewed, New Zealand-staffed, ice-strengthened ship. Depending on one's cultural identification, she was known as the *Professor Khromov* or *Spirit of Enderby*. She swung bravely towards the mouth of the Derwent River—the shirred waters of the grey river rushing towards its fate, the sea, as Patrick White described it in *A Fringe of Leaves*. Her course was to sail to the edge of East Antarctica, where, at Commonwealth Bay, the recently restored Mawson's huts were awaiting a celebration of their founder's 1911 expedition. A few tourist expeditions including our own were permitted to land during that season and poke about.

The Mawson's Huts Foundation raises funds and coordinates work on the huts in which Douglas Mawson's men (in various combinations) lived for two years. The organisation is patronised by Governor-General Quentin Bryce, and works in partnership with the Australian Antarctic Division. The hard work that's been done over the last thirty years to restore the huts is conservation, not preservation. Like most of the conserved built environment, the huts are a skilful collage of replacement, replica and renovation. The work is done to satisfy our collective desire for an illusion of immediacy and continuity.

As we began rolling into the Southern Ocean, the ship's staff screened a documentary on the latest chapter of the huts' restoration. I enjoyed the first fifteen minutes, before being forced to scramble from the lecture room, clawing open a sickbag. For the next forty-eight hours, I was locked in an ungodly rhythm of compulsive vomiting and insomnia, unable to move or sleep for the anxiety of nausea. No reading, and certainly no writing. I'd purchased my ticket with the help of a literary travel grant, and had an unfinished poetry manuscript sliding down the side of my crib. At one point, in a bile-green haze, I recalled a conversation on Constitution Dock back in Hobart. There were ice obstructions, someone had remarked.

Bergs in the Bay. I couldn't keep the thoughts of icebergs at bay, and drifted off into the bumps and bashes.

Eventually I surfaced and began to meet my forty-odd fellow passengers, some of whom were also warily shuffling down the corridor, white bags tucked up their sleeves. My cabin mate, a nurse from Frankston, was anxious about our progress. 'All I want to do is set foot in that hut, I don't care about anything else,' she laughed anxiously. I was out of the loop, but it didn't take long for word to circulate: two huge bergs, which had broken off the tongue of the Mertz Glacier two years before, were gradually passing east along Commonwealth Bay, gathering a jam of thawing sea ice behind them, and blocking sea access to the bay and the French base of Dumont D'Urville.

But our hopes remained buoyant for weeks. The staff offered free cocktails before dinner. Some of us played cards as waves knocked against the upper deck. Someone went sprawling across the library carpet and picked themselves up with a chuckle. Our captain spontaneously rerouted the ship to the lush Auckland and Campbell islands south of New Zealand, where we spent idyllic days gradually stepping into the Antarctic latitudes.

At mealtimes, the words *bucket list* ricocheted off the low dining-room ceilings as passengers recounted their

expedition credentials. The last time I had heard that phrase was on a long walk in the West MacDonnell Ranges near Alice Springs and I offered this measly scrap of expedition experience to the conversation—choosing not to mention that my purpose on that trip, as on this one, had been literary. This time, though, I learnt a new verb: to *do*, synonymous with travel, experience, survive. Some grey nomads at our table had ‘done’ the Canning Stock Route; next, they were going to ‘do’ the Arctic. It all sounded so simple.

We churned west through the Furious Fifties, to Australia’s sublime Macquarie Island. While we all happily got our wellies on to have a look at the subantarctic wildlife and terrain, there was no question as to our main objective: Antarctica proper was still the prize. Most of us doubted that we could afford the expense and time to repeat this trip. Our focus was on the horizon, and not even the stunning, fog-bound spine of Macquarie Island could keep us distracted for long. We sat looking, and waited.

Together it was easier to deny the possibility that the purpose of our trip could be thwarted. The real reason for our detour across the Tasman, of course, was to buy some time for the ice jam to clear. However, with Commonwealth Bay as our only legal landing point on the Antarctic continent, things were beginning to look glum.

Back in the bilious lecture cabin we were told that the two bergs at the head of the ice jam, B09D and B09B, had lodged against a group of islets. More mobile ice was building behind them, and increasingly all along the bay. Without an icebreaker we could not penetrate the ice along the continental shelf. We absorbed the news with sighs and some tears. Our self-pity, however, was nudged aside as we began to grasp how serious the situation had become in the bigger picture of East Antarctic ice dynamics. They can change as frequently and dramatically overnight as over a decade or a century. Mawson’s huts and Dumont D’Urville Station stood a good chance of becoming inaccessible by sea for years.

We carried on through a grim night and day, floating pathetically along the edge of the loose sea ice. We were on the precipice of something; we could see the crowd of mobile ice stretching ahead of us to the Antarctic coast. It seemed as though the Antarctic Circle had become material, as we followed the distended curve of the polar cap.

A collective melancholy settled silently upon the passengers, and the staff tiptoed around. I was no longer the only one zoning in on a computer screen. One passenger set about completing his goal to sight (and photograph) 700 bird species. He rose early and stayed up through the long

evening to stand on the deck in his waders with a giant telephoto lens. In between these patrols, he roamed the cabins knocking on doors to check his lists and species with others. When the Russian sailors locked us in during bad weather, he sat in the bar, a double shot in front of him as he stared out at the plunging seas or down at the rocking floor. Taxonomy is another way of imagining immediacy and continuity, after all. It puts the world within reach.

Another night and day washed through us and the mood began to shift. We were relieved of anticipation. In unearthly sunshine and a calm ocean we drifted through the spectrum of sea ice: frazil, bergy bits, hummocks, and at last the majestic icebergs. Here was the other side of the Antarctic Circle, across which Cook had woven back and forth, becoming increasingly disenchanted. Everybody was beguiled by the hypnotic spectacle of the ice universe. By day we whizzed around the lacy edges of the ice in Zodiacs, chasing penguins, wading into floes and watching walls crumble from a distance. One sunny evening I noticed that even one of the Russian sailors—never seen away from the bridge—had come down to the lower deck to photograph a particularly stunning berg. I was writing at full steam, drawing not on photos, sketches or walks as usual, but on

some composite idea of Antarctica I now had no hope of seeing. I gulped down the irony as the ship's pin-board began to fill with original poems penned by anonymous passengers, and on Christmas Eve the staff arranged a poetry reading with prizes.

In the cabin next door a guy wore a T-shirt advertising a shop in California: 'We have everything sometimes.' I'd think of this phrase at odd moments during the journey, and now it often comes to mind when I'm dealing with chance. I'm bemused by our great caper to a destination that is always only maybe accessible. One part of me enjoys Antarctica's rejection of our anticipation. Another part of me is concerned by what the Mertz tongue breakage reflects about the instability of glacial ice, and how the new Mawson's huts management plan will deal with the human traffic of tourism. Stop the boats?

Meanwhile Mawson's huts brave the freeze of another winter, never thinking of us.

Before humans saw it, Antarctica was imagined: Ancient Greeks hypothesised its existence as the antithesis to the Arctic. Some of us have invented the unseen continent with language. For our little group, tossed around the idea of Antarctica, the place remains much as it did when we set off: projected through a glass brightly.