

Chasing the Light

Art and Awe in Antarctica

Text, Paintings, and Photographs by Alan and Colin Campbell

We stepped off the tail ramp of the C-17 onto the vast plain of frozen sea as if in a dream, mesmerized and drawn forward by the sight before us. For my 24-year-old son, Colin, on his first trip to the ice, it was more than a revelation; he was stunned. To come here is to enter a world like none other on the planet, a place that becomes more elusive with every attempt to convey its wonder, mystery, and magic to outsiders. If culture shock comes from that first encounter with a foreign country, stepping into this ethereal ice world is sensory shock on a grand scale.

We were taking in our second sunrise of this day, a flash of salmon gold and citron splashed across a crystalline cobalt sky like pigments in a Turner watercolor, the hues of intense heat in the midst of biting cold. The temperature was locked in at -30°F with a wind chill of -80° , and the hairs of my moustache were already coated in ice. After the many months of making preparations, procuring supplies, and securing sponsors, we were finally in Antarctica. This was the real “Deep South,” in stark contrast to our native Georgia back in the United States.





(Alan's Journal)

After lunch (four meals per day at six-hour intervals are the real clock at McMurdo) we are back at the Science Support Center for our most unusual training course of all, learning how to operate the odd mix of vehicles used in Antarctica. We move from the familiar to strange to stranger, going from a fat-tired Ford pickup to a track-equipped version of the same before arriving at the true mechanical wonder of the ice called the Pisten Bully, a caterpillar-treaded German cousin of the venerable Sno-Cat. With a very low center of gravity from a huge diesel engine nestled between a pair of nine-foot treads, it can pivot in place on the most angled of slopes. Only the makers of World War II Panzers could have dreamed up such a creation, and it is ideally suited for this world of ice and snow. Putting the Bully through its paces, we roared off in a plume of dust and diesel exhaust, ripping along at more than five miles per hour (top speed is a teeth-rattling 16).



Artists and Writers

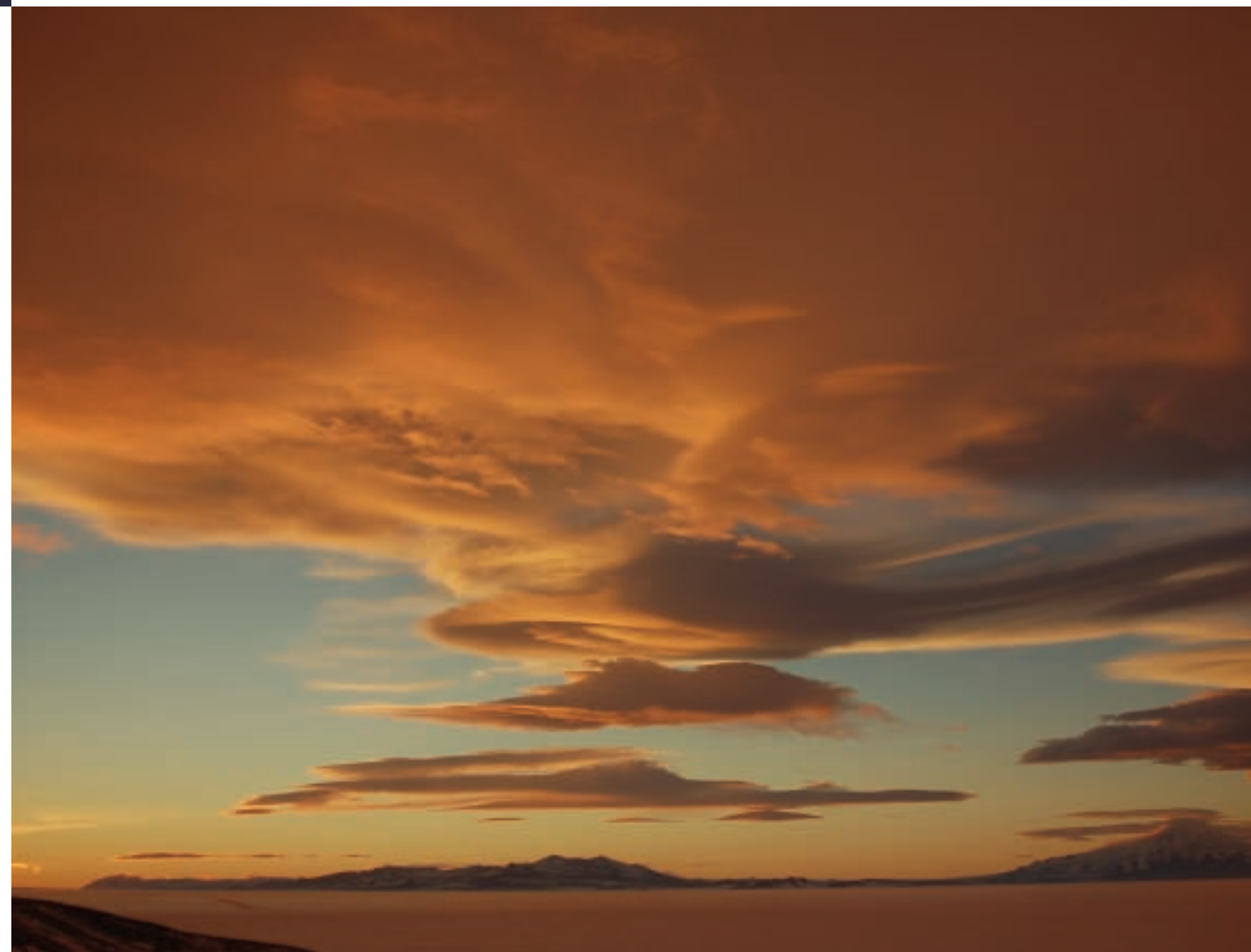
I first became involved with the NSF Artists and Writers Program in 1987, after seeing photographs of glowing scarlet-crimson icebergs floating in indigo blue-black oceans. I was swept up in a passionate desire to journey to the bottom of the world in pursuit of the most abstract and light-filled landscape imaginable. Little did I know at the time that I was catching the initial swell of an environmental movement that has since become worldwide with some of its most urgent issues (global warming and ozone depletion) being defined by the discoveries of science in Antarctica, and subsequently enhanced and amplified through the language of the arts in words, poems, sculpture, paintings, photographs, and music. The success of artists and writers on the ice in heightening public awareness of these issues, as well as in conveying the majesty and mystery of the ice, has been best described by NSF as “going beyond the terms of science.” With the creation of the Artists and Writers Program, NSF has written the latest chapter in a history of artists partnering with scientists and explorers reaching back hundreds of years, from the expeditions of Ernest Shackleton and Robert Falcon Scott in the Antarctic to Charles Darwin in the Galapagos and the circumnavigating voyages of James Cook and Charles Wilkes.

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Our arrival marked my fourth trip to the ice since 1987 under the Antarctic Artists and Writers Program (AWP) of the National Science Foundation/United States Antarctic Program (NSF/USAP). As the first two-generation team of NSF artists ever to work in Antarctica, Colin and I were on a visual journey of exploration to the historic expedition huts of Shackleton and Scott, as well as to other locations on Ross Island and in the Royal Society Range of the Trans-Antarctic Mountains to be recorded in oil paintings and watercolors as well as in journal writings and sketches for subsequent exhibitions back in New Zealand and the United States.

Barely six hours had elapsed since the C-17 had thundered off the Tarmac into the darkness as early dawn glowed faint crimson to the east of Christchurch, New Zealand. We had been picked up at our hotel at 4 a.m., having slept only two hours after repacking our gear and stuffing in bags of key limes, carrots, and snow peas from a late-night grocery run. These “freshies” would be our goodwill currency for introductions to the “winter overs,” those personnel who had just spent five months in the dark at McMurdo Station, the primary United States research base in Antarctica that would be our home for the next ten weeks.

With this fourth trip came the fulfillment of a long-held desire to come to the ice at Winfly (Winter Fly In), in a time of luminous magic, as the long Antarctic winter night begins its slow transition back to the austral summer with an average increase of 20 minutes of sunlight daily. Winfly officially begins with a late winter series of U.S. Air Force C-17 flights, three or four at most, arriving over a week in mid-August. Landing on ten-foot thick ice over sea depths exceeding 1,000 feet, the big planes bring in essential cargo, early science teams, and key support personnel to guide McMurdo's transition



(Colin's journal)

Last night I saw my first Aurora Australis to truly speak of the snaked, serpentine ribbons of light weaving across the sky in utter silence. They were eerie and beautiful, coming and going, stretching the whole of the sky. We took pictures, but they aren't accurate. They actually capture more color than the eye can, but they cannot capture the strangeness, the vaporous quality, the feeling that something great and alive is stirring just beyond the surface of the sky. Great greens and yellows dancing, moving so fast you could watch the pulses lick the sky. I felt almost embarrassed, like I was witness to something intimate or secret.



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portable and heated (most of the time) studio on treads. We ranged as far and wide as possible, but again

from the slow pace of winter darkness to the headlong rush of the sunlight-driven summer research season. The first phase of our project would target the ever-changing light and color of late August through September, working in a 20-mile radius of McMurdo Station. After the last C-17 headed north on August 26, there would be no more sounds of aircraft until the summer season commencement in early October, at which time we would venture to far more remote locations for our work.

McMurdo

Over the next several weeks, we took every opportunity to be in the field, on several occasions running into 24- to 36-hour days in pursuit of subjects. Colin's term "chasing the light" became our mantra and guiding star at any hour of the gradually lengthening days. Much to our surprise, the fleet of Pisten Bullies gave us something we had never envisioned: a truly

and again we found ourselves turning our attention to Mt. Erebus, the 13,000-foot active volcano that dominates Ross Island like a Mt. Fuji, often cloaked in 50-mile-long shadows from the mountains across McMurdo Sound. Sitting side-by-side in the Pisten Bully, we painted Mt. Erebus numerous times in oils amid the blowing winds and snow.

(Colin's journal)

Painting a place is much of how I come to understand it, much the same as painting a portrait helps me really see a person's face. I haven't yet truly learned how to convey, or even really see, the colors of this place.

It's a fairly arrogant concept to be here to paint. To assume we can somehow portray this place is just absurd, at least through paint. The same way this world is fleeting when attempted to be captured by words, the lasso of the brush is just as ineffectual.



The Aurora Australis

With this flexibility for being in the field at all possible times and places for our work, we soon discovered the fantasy world of the Aurora Australis—Latin for "Goddess of the Southern Dawn"—with late-night forays to remote locations on Ross Island. In scientific terms, auroras are formed by streams of charged particles carried by solar winds into Earth's magnetic field. To us they would become much more.

(Alan's journal)

We both slept in today, after a late, late night under the celestial

downpour of the Aurora Australis at Castle Rock. It was ethereal and surreal, like entering another world filled with creatures of pure light moving across the sky, undulating and pulsing like dragons or mythic creatures of the benthic deep—flashes of light that suddenly emerged from the pitch dark and then were gone. They were everywhere, even directly overhead—as if the night sky had been painted in broad sweeps by a brush dipped in lime-green phosphorescent paint—great calligraphic strokes streaking across the sky. In the distance, Mt. Erebus was backlit so brightly that the whole volcano was shown in silhouette, including the trailing plume.



Counterclockwise from upper left: Our Kyrgyz hosts were nomads living at 11,000 feet. A local military official accompanied us as part of our permission to enter the restricted area. The mountain border of



several volumes of Tennyson and Browning, and I recalled the photos of Scott's last birthday dinner here in the winter of 1911 with the great man himself seated at the head beneath banners of the Empire. Bunk beds that had been used by Birdie Bowers, Titus Oates, Apsley Cherry-Garrard, and others flanked the table as well as the science laboratory on the farther right, and in the very back center stood an unusual structure of personal interest to Colin and me: the dark-room of photographer Herbert Ponting. We moved slowly about, sketching and shooting photos, until at last we were at the inner sanctum, Scott's personal quarters. Just beyond were those of Edward Wilson, the

Cape Evans and Scott

On September 22, we made our first trip to Cape Evans, to arguably the most historic structure in Antarctica, the 1910 hut of Robert Falcon Scott's British Antarctic Expedition. Dwarfed by the looming Mt. Erebus, the hut is a true time capsule. Entering its dark and brooding interior, we stepped immediately back into another world, void of all the comforts and conveniences of the modern era of exploration in Antarctica such as Gore-Tex, VHF radios and GPS, helicopters, aircraft, snowmobiles, saunas, four hot meals a day, and yes, even ice cream. This place was entirely different and full of reminders of what true explorers and risk takers Scott and his men were. Cases of Colman's mustard, Huntley & Palmers biscuits, Heinz ketchup, and other supplies were stacked everywhere, while overhead hung two Nansen sleds in the rafters.

On the great center table stood a single lamp alongside

expedition's chief scientist, chaplain, doctor, and artist, in addition to being Scott's best friend who perished with him, Bowers, Oates, and Edward Evans on the return leg after the lost race to the South Pole. In the cold stillness their presence was tangible and real, as if the vapors of our breath were their ghosts returned to inhabit this place for eternity.

We made several return trips to the hut at Cape Evans, named for Edward Evans, and, later in early October, a one-day trip by helicopter to Shackleton's 1907 hut at Cape Royds. Much smaller in size, Shackleton's hut seemed to reflect in its simplicity the contrast of leadership styles as well as the outcomes of his and Scott's respective expeditions. I recalled spending three days camping and painting watercolors here in 1987, but on this trip our time was all too brief, and the conditions too cold for anything other than drawing and taking photographs.

(Alan's journal)

As I photographed Colin sitting cross-legged on the ice sketching several penguins that had walked up to him, I could only feel great paternal pride in this talented young man who at age four was drawing six-foot dinosaurs on the wooden floor of my studio. I returned to my own drawing, and, as three emperors approached, lay my sketchbook on the ice and reached back for my camera. Turning, I got proof positive that the art critics are everywhere: all three emperors were bending over in unison looking into my open sketchbook at drawings of penguins.





The Emperor Rookery

One of our last field trips was by helicopter out to an emperor penguin rookery on the sea ice at Beaufort Island. It was arranged at the last minute with the key support of Dave Bresnahan, the top NSF representative at McMurdo and a long-time supporter of the Artists and Writers Program. The hour flight took us past spectacular views of Mt. Erebus and Ross Island, and as

our copter approached Beaufort, the rookery came into view like a handful of black dirt scattered on a white tablecloth below. In a long arcing descent, we landed on the other side of a nearby iceberg locked in the frozen ocean and approached on foot. It was only a matter of minutes before we began encountering adult emperors in ones and twos departing or returning to the rookery. Drawing nearer we also began to see the first of a number of dead chicks, frozen and half buried in the snow-covered ice. There was even an abandoned egg, which looked so natural in its whiteness on the ice. Even though we were permitted to be here, we were also restricted from entering the rookery and so spent the next several hours drawing and shooting photos from a distance of several hundred feet. With all of the random splatters of guano, it was as if we were standing on a gigantic Jackson Pollock canvas.

Farewell to Erebus

One of the last friends we made at McMurdo was Col. Ron Smith of the U.S. Air Force. In addition to being the ranking officer on the ice, he was also a poet of some talent. Perhaps it

Counterclockwise from upper left: Our Kyrgyz hosts were nomads living a feet. A local military official accompanied us as part of our permission to enter the restricted area. Thentain

was this kinship of the arts, but whatever the reason, when I had inquired about the prospects for our being allowed on the flight deck for photos on our return trip, we were at first rebuffed with comments about post-9/11 regulations. But then with a cryptic smile he added, “But you know, I am the commanding officer here.”

We were told later by friends left behind that a good part of McMurdo noticed a rather odd departure that day and wondered what was going on. As the big plane lifted off in a usual northern departure, it suddenly leveled off and banked left in a full reversal of course for a low-level fly-by of McMurdo followed by a loop around Observation Hill with the memorial cross for Scott’s 1912 doomed polar party and then a fly-by of Scott Base. It then proceeded to ascend to Mt. Erebus, where it banked hard for several circuits of the smoking crater before leveling off and setting course for Christchurch. Looking out my window down toward McMurdo Sound, I could see the tiny huts of Shackleton and Scott and marveled one last time at their dreams and what they were willing to sacrifice for them.

Reflecting on our roles as storytellers, my thoughts also turned back to moments of solitude and reflection on the ice, and to one in particular night at Lake Hoare in the Taylor Valley late in our trip. I was working alone in the studio tent barely 100 feet from the alabaster side of the Canada Glacier and was

(Alan’s journal)

Redeployment Day. Our final day at McMurdo, a surreal day filled with strange feelings, a sense of being uprooted and adrift. At one point it seemed as if I was fading, becoming transparent, disappearing while I was still here. I did not sleep the last night. It had been a full day of final packing of all of our personal gear and clothing for “bag drag,” that ritual of schlepping all of our cameras, field gear, art supplies, and ECW (extreme cold weather) clothing up to the passenger and baggage terminal.



struck by the incredible gift we had received, to be here to experience the ineffable mystery of Antarctica, with the elusive goal of somehow distilling meaning from it all in paint on paper. In the midst of such pristine aloneness, I suddenly felt comforted by the presence of an immense and timeless wisdom, benign and all knowing, flowing like a river through all of creation, calling each of us to live in community, not just through caring for each other but also in our stewardship of the planet. It brought back the words of the great Australian Antarctic explorer Sir Douglas Mawson:

“We came to probe the mystery, to reduce this land to the terms of science.

But there is always the indefinable which holds aloof and rivets our souls.”

COLIN CAMPBELL works as a freelance artist in the Baltimore/Washington, D.C. area. He graduated from the Maryland Institute College of

Art, where he studied painting, ceramics, and animation with a minor in Ancient Art History. Colin was awarded several prestigious scholarships, including the Trustee Award for artistic excellence and the Maryland Institute College of Art Academic Scholarship.

ALAN CAMPBELL is an environmental/expedition artist from Athens, Georgia, who has built a most unusual career working alongside large scientific research programs around the globe. Alan has journeyed four times to Antarctica as a National Science Foundation visiting artist with the U.S. Antarctic Program, spending over eight months on “the ice.” His work represents a partnership between art and science in the tradition of the great exploring expeditions of the past, while helping to promote awareness of important environmental and conservation issues of today. He lectures widely on the role of art in exploration and discovery, with appearances at the Smithsonian, National Geographic, various museums in the United States and abroad, and the Explorers Club in New York, where he was elected a national fellow in 2004. He recently completed his first book, Ossabaw: Evocations of an Island, a collaboration with photographer Jack Leigh and writer James Kilgo, published by the UGA Press.

