

## NATURE WRITING PRIZE 2017 SHORTLISTED ESSAY

### 'Heard Island is a Place' by Erica Nathan

*There is one place in the oceans of our world that can connect to all others by sound.*

This calculation was once made by oceanographers wishing to measure climate change. They reasoned that a cluster of loudspeakers suspended one kilometre into the ocean waters abutting Heard Island could transmit a low frequency long wave signal capable of generating sound to travel all the oceans, touching all the continents. The acoustic means to determine changing temperature on this earthly scale is tested, and thwarted, in the early 1990s, when Heard Island delivers on its wild weather reputation. One speaker is severed from its cable; a second smashes, lost irretrievably.

Success would have seen a diesel generator stationed on Heard Island. Rather, we are left with the exquisite idea that a pinpoint place with enough connective energy to wrap around the earth, lives decibel-free, on the edge of our occupied land mass. Heard Island is not, however, so named because receivers the world over can hear its signal. As delicious as it would have been, a pun was never intended.

Heard is an island pulled to the heavens by a volcano huffing and steaming and on occasions disgorging, galvanising glaciers that grind towards the sea. Scientists know it, also mountaineers, ham radio enthusiasts, and in centuries past, whalers in pursuit of elephant seal blubber. It is an island that people frequent in time bites, most often by the season, and not habitually. From these brief encounters an island identity is forged.

For the last fifty odd years Heard Island has been Australian territory. Attaching nationality to an essentially uninhabitable, geographical outlier entails a dedicated strategic mindset, and perhaps because of this, the polar south is marginal to our identity. For many, Heard Island would qualify as an offshore camp for asylum seekers, a distant station on the outskirts of our collective cultural map. Being distant though, it is a frontier, and although not the bush, or the outback, the island does draw us into that tradition of seeing the encounter with inhospitable landscapes as formative for us as a nation.

Antarctica is a landscape I have pushed aside as too alien, too difficult to know. When landscape is assembled by a mere handful of observers, each characterised as intrepid, it is a struggle to set forth. Stage set pieces of emotional fortitude and physical endurance become icebergs impeding our own travels southward. I believe, however, Heard Island can be a half

measure for comprehending the Antarctic continent, a miniature snow globe I can shake and contemplate. Officialdom, I later learn, sensed likewise. Heard Island emerges as a testing ground for the Mawson Station of 1954, with huskies, meteorological equipment, and remote team dynamics all performance rated for ongoing settlement of the more southern, truly antarctic land mass.

I browse archival inventories in the hope that the past will yield a tangible offering for my quest, a foothold of sorts. I find *Birds Frozen in three cement drums for Perth Museum from Heard Island*, an irresistible Nordic noir listing with tabloid overtones. It marks my beginning and prompts an exercise in geography. I insert a drawing pin, topped with a blue flag, into my braincase. I cut a length of wool representing 900 miles and extend it from the island to the western sector of the Antarctic continent. I then cut a much longer length representing 2,400 miles that I extend from the flag to Fremantle. A third length signifying 1,840 miles is stretched between Fremantle and Hobart, Tasmania. I have my bearings.

*Nineteen birds, of twelve species, including a few juvenile, make it to Perth in a state of undetermined frozenness.*

A second archival entry adds a splash of fate. On Xmas Day 1949 a young meteorologist launches a bottle, with a message, to the sea beyond Atlas Cove, the most navigable entrance to Heard Island. Five years and eight months later it is found beached on the west coast of Tasmania, on the day and year of my birth.

*The label is battered, but it is identified, prosaically, as Bottle H192 or H198. The message is its journey.*

Both bottle and birds arrive as historical flotsam on the incoming tide. The novelty of summer begins to wane, and I decide to venture south.

*To somewhere I have never been.*

There is much written about Heard Island, more than ten books or parts thereof, and enough reports and articles to paper mâché a life-sized sled. Expeditioners to Heard Island, in particular those who reside there for a season, are compelled to share the experience. As well as words there is a photographic and film record. Rocks, chiefly of the volcanic family, pressed and pickled specimens, and assorted artefacts, are housed in universities and museums. My favourite item is a single clog, salvaged from an unknown location on Heard. It belongs to a right foot, is made of strong leather that resembles dried kelp, is soled in timber still bearing its grain. Arriving without a story, it is boxed as lost property from the sealing years, ready for pick up from Antarctic Division HQ, Tasmania.

I am coming to know Heard through the words and sketches of a group of observers spanning three centuries. I am wrestling with others' ideas of the island and my own determination to give birth to a quite different imagining of the place. I want it to be more than a beach platform where elephant seals are flensed for second grade oil, more than a scientific icebox shelving investigations without end, more than a showcase of rookeries for bird enthusiasts. Much more. I want to know a bigger Heard, and I appreciate that to get there I must process the established reality of this island, sift, sort, rearrange. Just as chefs deconstruct a traditional dessert before building anew, I must reference the old stories before assembling my own.

My first task is to womanise the island, just a little. Three figures from the past will assist. I begin when Heard Island first appears on maritime charts. There is a tussle around who discovers the island and, most importantly, takes naming rights. It is Fidelia Heard's husband of four months, John, who wins. As captain of an American merchant ship en route to Melbourne he follows a new directive to marine test the Furious Fifties and inadvertently, comes within view of an island unmapped, before continuing on his way. It is John that the island name references after he publishes his find back in Boston. And Fidelia? She travels with John, comes on deck to distinguish the island through her eyeglass – confused with iceberg and watery reflection - and sketches its form for her journal. *She* captures the island, for a moment, and the sketch is part of John's submission. She records her hope that *they* are the discoverers. It is November 1853.

The second woman is Mrs. Robinson. Following Fidelia's eyeglass moment multi-national parties converge on Heard with knives sharpened, trypots and blubber press in place, set to fill barrels with oil from the elephant seals abundant on the island. And so, it is that five years after Fidelia, Mrs. Robinson sets sail from Hobart into the ocean waters of Heard Island for a period of many months. Her first name is not disclosed in the whaling memoirs of her husband, who captains the voyage. I like to think of Mrs. Robinson as a hearty and heroic soul, marrying domesticity with oceanic escapades of substantial risk. Apparently, she experiences no sickness whatsoever in the many months of rough seas. Her husband reveals, almost as an afterthought, that she has charge of their two young children, plus one other, perhaps unexpected, when the voyage commences. Mrs. Robinson gives birth to a son on the eleventh of March. The captain reports *mother and son quite as well as expected*. Southward Ho!

My third woman is Andrée de la Rue. With her geologist husband Aubert, she spends eight days on the island in 1929. Unsurprisingly they collect rock samples. When a weather window opens, they try to climb the highest peak of the volcanic massif that is the bulk of Heard Island. Big Ben's highest point, Mawson Peak, is just over 9,000 feet high; little Mount Wellington in

temperate Hobart almost reaches its waist.

*Three women, their voices barely heard, bring the island into their life story, allowing me safe passage.*

There are two expedition memoirs, written a few years apart, which take me onto the island when it assumes its role as a Men's Shed. First there is Arthur Scholes' *Fourteen Men*. Arthur relies on diaries of his comrades to supplement his own account. Second is Peter Lancaster Brown's *Twelve Came Back*. They mark Heard Island's traineeship for the permanent Antarctic bases, known as the early ANARE (Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition/s) years. Between 1947 and 1953 parties of between nine and thirteen men conduct one-year relays on the island, passing the baton each summer. Arthur is the Husky pup relishing a fresh blizzard, enthusiastic for the science; Peter is hopeful candidate for the leading sled dog, a man apart.

Arthur and Peter represent their year on Heard as a chronological unfolding of events. In this world, they pit themselves against all the island blows at them. They focus on physical and mental endurance, adventure and challenge. *Fourteen Men*. *Twelve Came Back*. There is resonance here with the public ideals of military stoicism, and yet, as with all the expeditioners, recent war experience barely surfaces. For the duration of their mission to the South, it is the climate of Heard that is protagonist in the many mishaps, the moments of exhilaration, improvisation and achievement, and in the loss of two men. They are acted upon at Heard, and they fight back.

The men set off on field trips to count, ring, survey, capture, brand and extract. During a blizzard, they tie themselves together with rope. They share the burden of being out front, to determine direction, to test the snow bridges. Umbilically there is a longer rope twisted from history, joining parties of sealers with these early ANARE men and, for some, the cord remains uncut. It is in the appellation *Heard Islanders* that finds its way into memoirs and academic papers alike. Arthur and Peter are Heard Islanders.

They have to earn this title. Perhaps with the exception of the pantry, provisioning is rudimentary, often inadequate. On returning from field trips, tents and sleeping bags are modified, crampons adjusted, maps redrawn. You step out of the huts' protective warmth with them. And they do step out, especially Peter.

Although they struggle to invoke a landscape intimacy, they write vividly of their excursions and the inevitable interaction with wildlife. The backdrop for these scenes is one of harsh grandeur, a white arena in foreign terrain. They readily record the antics of seals and penguins.

These creatures are centre stage, accommodating curious onlookers, tolerating - readers are assured - the ongoing prodding and probing, branding and killing, to satisfy biologists, huskies and photographers. I am drawn into the world of elephant seals with their inflatable trunk noses, warily observing from the edge of the page. On cue, they clamber to stage a mass haul-out, three-ton *beachmasters* - monster males - claiming breeding territory, then patrolling their harems.

Arthur and Peter weave campfire humour into these scenes, as do other chroniclers. Peter relates an experience where the petrels have the better of him. He approaches a rookery to ring the young birds, work begun the year previous:

*A few weeks ago, I had thought the adult birds were good shots when they regurgitated their partly-digested food at me, but they were rank amateurs at the game compared with the nestlings...at a distance of ten feet, peeping over its nest wall, it fired and scored a direct hit on my chin – treating me to a salvo of green bile.*

A different author transforms the branding of *porkies*, the elephant seal pups, into a Western sitcom, assigning gun-slinging saloon names to the work party participants who ride the back and sear the skin of these creatures.

Another group report on a perilous mission to count seals beyond the safety of Atlas Cove. The men endure a dinghy that malfunctions, weather conditions described as *Heard Island Horrors*, a shredded tent, shrinking visibility, and a navigational blunder. Bravado and excitement brace against reticence to openly reflect on their island place. They discover *that an excellent rum zabaglione can be made with gentoo eggs... that penguin flesh is much more tender and tasty when pressure cooked with onions* and, more soberly, *that Spit Bay is the haunt of the silver-grey petrel which was hitherto unknown on the island.*

It is not that Arthur and Peter are immune to the beauty of Heard. They both step out of the hut to experience its strangeness. But they are grudging, depositing emotion in emergency caches under the snow. Arthur's summation, appearing early in his memoir but probably penned towards its end, is:

*On the whole, the island was a depressing place. There was little beauty in the gaunt grey rocks, the barren flat and grim precipitous coastline. In the days to come the island's air of sullen harshness was to become all too familiar. But, despite all that, there was something of almost indefinable loveliness about it.*

There is room for a little reverence. Arthur, mindful to preserve his modernity, postulates that prehistoric men, had they lived on Heard, would have bowed their heads in worship to the mountain. *It made you feel like that*, he concludes.

John Bechervaise was officer in charge of the 1953 expedition to Heard. In a literary sense his descriptive powers surpass both Peter and Arthur. They would not have written *there is something patrician about the great bulbous nose of a sea elephant*. His day journals do encompass landscape description, observation and wonderment. Like them, he finds a *freedom of spirit* on Heard, away from the *arrogant and stagnant backwater of a city*. Here adults can return to the playground, high stake escapades being the grand equaliser. In vocabulary and action, he is schoolmaster and scout leader in equal measure. John's words paint pictures of the landscape, *strange, unfriendly and yet vividly beautiful*. It is a picture you look at through a viewfinder. It is encased, frozen solid, as a theatre space for boys and men.

The early ANARE men, John, Arthur and Peter included, are memorialised in the Antarctic Hall of Fame, and with them, an enduring portrait of Heard Island. The odd socks, long johns, jumpers and cans of food salvaged as artefacts at Antarctic HQ, relay a signal for Heard that transmits on a narrow band. Unlike our climate scientists with their loudspeakers, the very highest value these men afford Heard is of disconnection with the world they know.

I remain appreciative of the expeditioner genre, as practised then and now, for it does enable a knowing of sorts. At the same time, I am frustrated with the partial soundtrack and irritated by my dependency. Leaving behind the idea of Heard as frontier, I return to the library shelf and find the unexpected, an entire volume of Antarctic words. *Ice flower*, not the window variety, is the entry that resets my connection with Heard. Ice flower. Hitching these two words allow familiarity to reach out and touch the unfamiliar. I learn about crystalised floral diversity, expansive carpets claiming entire slopes as you might see everlasting daisies colonise arid sands after rain. Intricate patterns bloom across the sea ice in a succession of gardens that astonish under bright light. With the aid of snow glasses, I bend to the flowers, as I would for a newborn.

On leaving the ice garden, Ken Dalziel's *Penguin Road* takes me by the hand. Writing for children, he devises food as a vital link between worlds. When approaching Heard *it looked like the top of a giant ice-cream cone sitting high up in the sky on top of the clouds*. There is snow that resembles sago, *hard dry little pellets*, different to the snow of mainland Australia. For huskies, eating snow is drinking water.

Ken expeditions in 1953, with John Bechervaise. *Penguin Road* is composed from letters he writes for his own children. The foreword by Phil Law, a long-time director of Antarctic

operations, adds ANARE flavor that is largely absent from the text. Simply narrated, and infused with awe, Ken answers many questions his children might ask. And I realize my knowledge of the sub-Antarctic is childlike, needing explanation.

He tells them, and me, why a small ship is most suitable for the voyage; how icebergs come into being, why their crevices are blue, and why water pours from holes in the walls and into the sea; why huts have fourteen sides; why there are no trees; why ships are so careful near icebergs; why the crevasses of glaciers are so very deep; why pressure ice forms at the end of a glacier; why huskies are useful as pack dogs; why rings are attached to the black-browed albatross; why a glacier forms where it does, connecting mountain and sea; why the elephant seal is so called; why southern weather observations are important; why sheathbills are without webbed feet; and, why thunderstorms are rare on Heard.

It is fun, Ken writes, to slide down the ice in snow pants.

*Sometimes at night we saw a waving curtain of light in the sky.*

Like us, the birds have history...*the feet of countless generations of penguins had made this amazing highway over a period of many years...*the penguin road.

Finally, he returns us to a garden. Wind is the signature quality of Heard, so...*when a pleasant southerly sweeps through our gardens at home, we shall remember that it is perhaps just the last movement of a wind that a few days before had swept the icy flanks of Big Ben.*

Frank Norton's illustrations are a perfect fit. The cover displays penguins enlarged in the foreground, on the rise of their road, dwarfing men in the background who stoop to make contact, down at the seaward end. A map colonises Heard, claiming it for Australia, a sweeping line of ship, whale and iceberg joins koala with a smoking Big Ben. And yet, Norton's landscape of white, flecked with blue, outlined in black, is a penguins' place.

I close Penguin Road, and open an edited collection of papers on the subject of Heard. Published some ten years ago, there are twenty-two contributors; five are women, although only one is a lead author. Without calculating, perhaps ninety five per cent of words ever written about Heard relate to disciplinary studies of volcanic geomorphology, glaciology, climate, botany, invertebrates, marine everything, seabirds, archeology, macro-algae, mammals, soils. These studies entail intermittent counting, collecting, extracting, mapping, trapping, coring, recording, sampling, swabbing. Heard is the wounded soldier inside the makeshift Red Cross tent, a body partitioned for specialist attention.

I want to walk on Heard and find there is a trail of maps to assist. One of the most helpful is an aerial representation of Heard as a kugelhopf cake. To look down on Heard is to see gently

twisted protrusions of dough that emanate from a heaving central depression. Like the kugelhopf, its base is a tubular ring shape, not perfectly circular. The only other likeness is a ribbed beanie with two earflaps tapering east west. But it is the towering cake that best replicates the pitched bulk of Heard's major volcano, with its rivers of ice spiraling downwards, many with snouts in the sea. About thirty glaciers, identified as ANARE personnel, radiate from Big Ben.

The kugelhopf map is helpful because it explains the density of annotations that fringe the base of the island. Only a few souls have ventured up rather than around. To walk the island is to negotiate a glacier, tackle a headland, risk a beach cliff, and contemplate sharply faceted moraine. The map that gives me a hiking track is from 1951. Considered to represent the first route around the island, this hand drawn sketch shows the ebb and flow of naming, with the sealers' geography beginning to give way to history-making ANARE features. The red-dashed walking route is rarely straight. Waves of track move in and out from the coast, every indent evoking a barrier. Even in perfect conditions, polar fitness assumed, stash points provisioned, this is no afternoon stroll.

The circumnavigation mud map emerges from a field trip to Long Beach. For the three men who set off from Atlas Cove this beach lies across the 'other side' of the island. With shameful ease, comfortable and warm at my desk, I parachute myself into a panorama of six sketches. I know it is, at best, an overnight trek to the warmth of a hut. I know the freezing bulk of the island stands behind me. In the first instance, I take in the whole by viewing the beach from a steep bluff. The beach faces south, flanked by two major glaciers, *Gotley* and *Fifty-one*. Two lesser nameless ones enclose the beachscape.

For the first time, I see how the landscape parts fit together. The eastern headland overshadows a glacier that is progressively crevassed as it enters the sea. A glacier stream runs a shallow valley. Between bluff and the narrow rocky beach is a large lagoon, swampy with poa tussocks and bright green cushions of azorella. Seals lounge about, adding to the apron of miniature hillocks between land and sea. Glacier and moraine edge the valley, scree and rock tumble from cliffs, ice melt feeds the lagoon.

If I stand tall on the bluff I can make out the remains of a sealer's hut amongst the cushions, its proximity to the water a sign of decades gone by. Heavy surf makes music with the pebbled shore. A cove of sorts provides a boat landing.

I move along the bluff to take full view of the western reach of the beach where a sandy flat is dwarfed by scree and rock. There is movement, a zoological *anime*, with rookeries of gentoo, macaroni and giant petrel occupying different elevations, all partitioned without fences. Further



west are sheer cliffs of black rock, reaching 150 feet, strewn with more azurella and more petrels, otherwise known as nellies, ready to cluster for a feed of blubber.

I look south and there are no ships on the horizon. The annotation on Sketch Five tells me this. In the duplicate set of these sketches, a fine steamship, *Wishful Thinking*, is added to the scene. So too is *Foo*, a comic head peering over the rim of the ocean, hanging by a helpful nose and two hands, to exclaim *Wot! No Corio...*

Time to step out of the frame and fold the rabbit fur earflaps of my ushanka. I transition with the sound of modern ice melt, warping the boundaries of the sketch map, transmitting a barely audible signal through the oceanic sound channel.

Seeing the remnants of the sealers' hut again freeze-frames the island, capturing a static scene inside the snow globe that is Heard, of men, for men. My solo excursion, assisted admittedly, gives me strength to hear the voice of the sealers unmediated by their ANARE inheritors.

*Fidelia is before me, so too Mrs. Robinson. And Andre de la Rue. Together we shake the globe with vigour.*

It is not long after the wake-wash from the marine home of John and Fidelia brushes against the coast of Heard, that the commercial world hears the call. Sealers consider the island a late discovery for their industry as oil harvesting from elephant seals peaked decades before. Although they kill seals across a thirty-year period, the slaughter is intense between 1857-9. *Elephanting* is what the sealers called this business, and they called themselves whalers. Fifty odd vessels come and go, operations vary somewhat, but all leave Heard weighed down by barrels of elephant seal oil.

There is academic modeling that translates oil barrels into gallons, gallons into seals. In 1857 alone, over 25,000 barrels of oil are hauled onto schooners. For me it is enough to know that once there were many, many thousands of seals, then there were few, then they recovered somewhat, and now, numbers are in decline once more. The sealers' claim on the island lingers, far beyond the barrel count.

In the centenary year of Heard's cartographic birth, the crew members from the Norwegian *Tottan* facilitate the changeover of ANARE expeditioners. Phil Hall is superintending for the Australian outfit. He invites the crew to take a bonus of seal flesh, and they accept. *Huge white carpets three inches thick* are harvested from seals they kill on the beach. Peter, author of *Twelve Came Back*, records this

moment, and the moment that follows: two ANARE doctors *stepped forward, rapidly cut through the cartilage of the chest bones and plunged their largest hypodermic needles into the still quivering hearts* of the slain seals. These fresh blood samples return with the Norwegian crew, bound for the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories in Melbourne.

Peter discovers half-buried human remains on one of his island rambles. He extracts the skull from beach sediments, separated from its skeletal parts, and then repositions it on the black volcanic sand as though buried below the neck in beach play. There is a bullet hole at the base of the skull. All is ready for the photographic shoot and later, there are jokes, and a name is agreed. Sealers conducted a savage business and the savagery rebounds.

There is another decapitated head of a sealer that survives for viewing. This other one is carved into Heard Island basalt. Retrieved as relic from the elephanting era, he sits behind glass in a gallery of Antarctica at Hobart's Museum. He stares, mouth tightened inside his beard, mute, knowing an island we do not. He may have ornamented one of the sealers' graves dispersed across the island, a tribute to a dear friend and a life few could live.

The killing of seals *en masse* is history that needs containment, analysis, reflection. It is on a different scale to the seam of brutality that can show itself in fieldwork. Both narrative strands seem entwined, however, and feed my knowing of Heard.

Quite recently, in November 2016, a veteran of Antarctica, including Heard Island, died in a nursing home on the east coast of Tasmania. Apparently, he was a *quiet, introspective* man. Before training in meteorology, which enables his many missions south, he endures serious action during the war. I like to think that Heard Island instilled inner calm in this man. For all the words written about rough landings, climatic brutality, avian squawking, it is the years of voice-less quiet in this place, muffled by ice floes, that, with advanced tuning, can be heard the world around.

Of all the sub-Antarctic islands Heard is considered the most untouched by introduced flora and fauna. There are no rabbits, and no rats. Its rough seas protect. As does heritage legislation and special management provisions of this century, sometimes in the face of commercial fisheries. On the most recent voyage to Heard, scientists sample its surrounding waters, assessing Big Ben's undersea volcanic cousins for their iron rich contribution to biological productivity. The investigative party, which includes a choreographer and visual artist, does not disembark. They export images in pencil drawings, dance moves, and graphic software to those not present, broadcasting Heard as a place we can all know.

Secondary voices for Heard will, I hope, de-masculate its core essence, liberate from science, invite respectful and awed interaction with an island place that rebuffs our ongoing presence, our periodic visitations.

I believe that Heard Island speaks through artist Bea Maddock, who, like the Antarctic veteran, died this year. In 1987 she voyaged to Antarctica, along with Jen Senbergs, both part of an arts-humanities program. In making footfall on Heard, she drops, suffering a serious leg injury. Jen sketches her being winched back on to the ship. Unable to walk the island, she draws from relative confinement. Her work from Heard seeds a body of linear landscapes that bring ideas of southern wilderness, our first beginnings and colonisation into a fulcrum of place. These paintings hang in galleries for the world to see.

A birth often follows a death. For me Heard Island is now a real place, with a history. It has entered my psycho-geography as a font of stillness, an ice flower of novel beauty, impervious, but bending to the howl of wind and the crack of ice. I am content to hold my reading glass up to this landscape. I am ambivalent about stepping ashore. Like Fidelia, I see it passing as I journey, joyful at its frigid isolation, excited, and fearful of its changing form, knowing its value in connecting the oceans of the world.

The human history of Heard engenders a territoriality that prevails over its otherness as a distant crucible of life we cannot quite grasp. Of the many photographs snapped by expeditioners, there is one particular image I cherish. It is, fittingly, in black and white, a match for the island's dark cliffs heavy with glacier ice. Softly toned, we see a pair of black-browed albatross, heads angled into their own space. They sit with majesty, astride their nest of moss, sculpted into a shallow bowl atop a precipitous cliff, overhanging the ocean breakers far below.

Heard Island, I hear you.