

Going to Extremes

With his latest book, Terra Antarctica, William Fox '71 uses the world's coldest continent to explore human cognition in vast, remote desert environments.

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William Fox '71 considers his writings unique because he interviews people functioning in very different environments. "I enjoy talking to both artists and scientists and putting their work next to each other and asking, 'What can we learn as these two bodies of knowledge rub up against each other and exchange a little bit of information?'"

William Fox was 3 when he produced his first book: a folded paper with a crayoned map and letters forming *The End* ("the only two words I knew at that age") scribbled across one page.

"Apparently," the author and poet recalls over coffee in his Burbank living room, "I had it in mind when I was very young that books were something I wanted to make."

His latest, *Terra Antarctica*, released last fall by Trinity University Press, charts his three-month stay in the world's emptiest, coldest, and driest continent—a place where weather reports "come in three flavors," Conditions Three, Two, and One (the latter enforcing a facility lockdown), all

considered severe by the meteorologists at McMurdo, the Antarctic's largest American station. It is the sort of cold that freezes ink pens and tape recorders and shatters film, where unprotected skin will succumb to frostbite in mere seconds when wind collides with plunging temperatures. Yes, there are telephones, and Internet access, and a daily mail call. And thanks to a U.S. Navy-instituted food service originally fashioned for submariners, the eating can be remarkably good (steak and lobster, wine, and goat cheese empanadas were some of the highlights). But the menu is not without premeditation; while it helps replace the 5,000–6,000 calories visitors burn up in the field, it also is believed that feeding people well in a difficult environment keeps them happy.

"That goes back to Roman Times," Fox muses, smiling: "an army marches on its stomach."

History would be hard-pressed to produce a more difficult environment than Antarctica, where Fox spent the Austral summer of 2001–02 as a guest of the National Science Foundation's Antarctic Visiting Artists and Writers Program. It hasn't rained in some parts of the Antarctic for two million years, and while *March of the Penguins*

has heightened fascination with its magnificent, brutal topography, life here is mostly microbial, packed into snow and icy waters.

Fox researched the continent for two years before donning government-issue gear to personally examine his subject. His accounts perpetuate a line of inquiry threading several of his books, chiefly, how the human mind transforms space into place, or land into landscape. It takes a transdisciplinary approach, a scientist/psychologist/environmentalist/writer, to understand and explain human cognition in extreme environments. "This is a book," he says, "about that larger topic, how we use cultural means to augment our neurobiology in order to overcome the perceptual difficulties we experience when exploring large spaces."

This intellectual pursuit began in the 1970s when, standing atop the serrated peaks of Nevada's Mount Limbo, Fox gazed across the desert and plotted the locations of small rivers below without actually seeing the waters. He describes evaluating his scale in an empty environment that had been turned from space into place through the adjoined histories of exploration, art, cartography, and science, making out the carved, geographical actions of a couple million years in the valley's ancient shorelines

and terraces. “I realized that while I stood there, I essentially was watching my mind process what was happening, and that’s when I became intrigued,” Fox says.

The author used poetry to further explore this cognition in his 2002 collection, *Reading Sand*.

“I realized that everywhere I went in the world, whether climbing in Nepal or Greece or the Arctic, I wasn’t trying to capture a summit or a record book,” says Fox. “I wanted to be high enough to see how the world looked and how it worked, and have that experience of my mind seeing itself work.”

Loosing that same curiosity on the Antarctic, Fox concludes that one problem in coping with vast, empty expanses is to develop a sense of place while our ability to sense the space itself is compromised. This potential conundrum is illustrated by Fox’s examples of visual and cognitive dissonance. He outlines, for instance, vision as a guiding force in not only assessing space, but surviving it. Whiteouts in the Antarctic, caused by blinding snow and perfectly dispersed light, are one example, leaving a visual field absent of contours. Land becomes sky, sky becomes land, horizon is diminished. The body fumbles at the loss of its geographical compass.

This absence of visual cues, he writes, is not unlike the sufferings of World War II long-range bomber pilots who forgot how to focus after hours of peering through a window with no discernible contours.

Fox’s reflections on McMurdo, the Ross Sea Region, the Transantarctic Mountains, and the South Pole, laced with anecdotes as well as scholarly research and historical narrative, have been commended by *Booklist* as “a uniquely fashioned chronicle of Antarctica that brings into sharper focus the crucial symbiosis between art and science” and by *Publishers Weekly* as “the perfect read after seeing *The March of*



Canada Glacier and Lake Hoare, Taylor Valley

the Penguins.”

It was not the author’s first wandering into extreme territory. After graduating from CMC, he flew to New Zealand for six months, where inspiration aroused a book of poetry, *Trial Separation*, and an introduction to climbing. The latter would entwine with his writing from that juncture on, opening doors for more desert exposure, including scouting the Arctic for NASA and leading treks through the Himalayas.

Depression and claustrophobia are not uncommon side effects for strangers to broad, unsettled land. But since his boyhood in Nevada, where Fox moved with his mother at the age of 10, the author has found them as peaceful as compelling. “They are places that I am comfortable with, and where I design my work to fit.”

With multiple research layers shaping his books, Fox is frequently confused for a scientist. “What I have is a toolbox degree from CMC,” he says, “and you can pretty much go anywhere and find out anything if you’re persistent. I have the good fortune to be able to read, go to places, talk to people and learn from them, and write down what they tell me. And basically that is what my work consists of.”

While Fox isn’t a credentialed scientist, his father, who worked in a laboratory built next to the family’s home, was. Mom followed art and read poetry aloud, so young William enjoyed the best of both fields. When older, he lectured and ran the telescope at the local planetarium in Reno and dreamed

of becoming an astronomer. While his math skills proved inferior for this field, his writing evolved in a way that impressed the literature faculty at CMC. Fox recalls Ladell Payne and Langdon Elsbree suggesting he consider an independent study course under the care of Bert Meyers, a revered Los Angeles poet serving on the faculty at Pitzer College. Their union proved so effective that by the time Fox received his diploma in 1971, the ink was drying on his first published book of poetry, *Iron Wind*.

“The literature department at CMC enabled me to pursue my writing,” he says.

In his upcoming book, *Driving to Mars* (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2006), Fox recalls his stay on the Arctic’s Devon Island as a team member of NASA’s Houghton-Mars Project, developing exploration protocols for the human journey to the Red Planet. Devon is the world’s largest uninhabited island, a desolate ice bed flowered with glaciers and a sizeable crater—not to mention polar bears. Next year he will revisit the warmer climate of Australia for another project on extreme deserts.

“It’s fun to write about these kinds of environments,” Fox says. “Anyone who spends enough time outdoors, whether a cattle rancher or an alfalfa farmer or a geologist, they’re all environmentalists of one kind or another. We may have different ideas about the environment, but we’re all intimately wed to the world around us.”