WHERE THE EARTH MEETS THE SKY: A STORY OF PENGUINS, PEOPLE, AND PLACE IN ANTARCTICA

Blight, L. (2026). Bond Street Books, Toronto, ON, Canada. 301 pp. Paperback: ISBN 978-0385702119, US$38.00.

Blight's memoir of her time spent in Antarctica, *Where the Earth Meets the Sky*, recounts a season monitoring Adélie Penguins (*Pygoscelis adeliae*) at Cape Royds on Ross Island. Blight's interweaving of polar science, vivid descriptions of the all-consuming beauty of Antarctica, and deeply personal stories made reading this book a visceral experience. As someone who has spent time on Ross Island, *Where the Earth Meets the Sky* brought back the sights, noise, smell, and emotions of being surrounded by hundreds of thousands of penguins. Through her wry sense of humor, Blight aptly captures the highs and lows of months spent in remote solitude.

The penguin colonies on Ross Island have been censused since the early 1980s in efforts to understand environmental change in Antarctica (Lyver et al., 2014). The responsibility of monitoring is a collaborative effort between the US and New Zealand, given territorial claims and nearby McMurdo and Scott bases. Because of this strong research partnership, Adélie penguin natural history has been well-described on Ross Island through an impressive long-term monitoring program. Blight paints a picture of penguin ecology through storytelling—from the description of penguins' attempts to attract mates through ecstatic displays over pebbled nest bowls, to the striking colors of penguin guano reflecting different parts of their diet.

Blight's descriptions of the animals and everyday life on Ross Island brought me right back to Antarctica, to the point where I dreamt of being at Cape Bird each night after putting down *Where the Earth Meets the Sky*. The story of penguin 1091, that despite having been gashed open by a leopard seal, dragged itself back to its nest, reminded me of my own similar encounter with a half-eaten Adélie penguin. As a mother of two, I often recount the image of a practically bisected penguin coming out of the ocean, walking past me in a trail of blood, and ascending a steep gravel hill to its nest—a true testament to motherhood. Learning that 1091 survived the season (although its eggs did not) filled me with relief. Adélie penguins are resilient and fierce, eking out existence in a harsh environment—bashing intruders (scientists) with a muscular flipper until their legs and arms are covered in bruises, ensuring their safety and survival in brutal indifference. Blight's descriptions of the extremes of interpersonal relationships were also spot on—from fast friendships to loathing the way your cabin-mate chews their food.

A story of monitoring penguins in Antarctica is necessarily a story of climate change. Because they rely heavily on sea ice conditions, penguins are 'canaries in a coal mine'—the success of laying eggs and raising chicks closely tied to climatic conditions (Ainley, 2002). Blight describes how some penguins nest in lower areas of the colony and because of increasingly warm temperatures, these areas have become more water-logged. I remember looking at shivering mucky chicks in pooling water with a heavy heart. Blight also tells the story of the grounding of iceberg B-15A in the early 2000s, the largest iceberg ever recorded by satellite imagery. The iceberg was a dramatic 'natural experiment'—completely altering the ocean currents and summer sea ice. The results for penguins were catastrophic: increased sea ice extent meant that penguins had to walk as many as 70 km to feed at sea, drastically reducing breeding success. Despite having read scientific articles about this iceberg, Blight's description of flying over it in a helicopter and the iceberg filling her field of view as far as the eye could see made its magnitude resonate.

Despite being a harbinger of the future, Blight also eloquently describes Antarctica as a beacon of hope and possibility, a place of connection and healing. Throughout the book Blight describes Antarctica as a sacred place, where the indifference of nature makes you feel at once insignificant and one with the world. Blight's description of Antarctica's beauty, so profound that you feel it physically, gave me pause. I, too, remember this feeling (for Blight, it made her lift her arms in reverence, for me, it frequently moved me to tears), but given the crowding of modern life, it's easy to become less attuned to the beauty of nature. As Blight reflects: "perhaps the whole world is [beautiful] like this, but it is only here in Antarctica that we can appreciate that it is so, each moment of life a tiny meditation."

Blight's scattered tales of early male Antarctic explorers emphasize that humans are resilient (there's a particularly gruesome story of two expeditioners who are so wet and malnourished their skin peels off). Yet, *Where the Earth Meets the Sky* offers more; humans are capable of profound connection with a species other than their own in a place not meant for them to inhabit. Blight's book is part of the rewriting of the Antarctic literary canon. From one of male conquest to one of women seeking connection: disconnecting from a world so packed with noise and technology and reconnecting with nature and themselves.

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Lyver, P. O. B., Barron, M., Barton, K. J., Ainley, D. G., Pollard, A., Gordon, S., McNeill, S., Ballard, G., & Wilson, P. R. (2014). Trends in the breeding population of Adélie penguins in the Ross Sea, 1981–2012: A coincidence of climate and resource extraction effects. *PLOS One*, 9(3), Article e91188. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0091188

NEW(ISH) AND NOTEWORTHY

Spring 2026

The Great Auk: Its Extraordinary Life, Hideous Death and Mysterious Afterlife

Birkhead, T. (2025). Bloomsbury Publishing. London, United Kingdom. 288 pp. Hardback, ISBN: 978-1-399-41574-3, £20.00

The Last of Its Kind: The Search for the Great Auk and the Discovery of Extinction

Pálsson, G. (2024). Princeton University Press. Princeton, United States. 328 pp. Hardback, ISBN: 978-0-691-23098-6, US$27.95

More than 180 years after it was officially declared extinct, the Great Auk is enjoying a cultural renaissance, with two books published about it within a year of each other, which in literature qualifies as lightning-quick succession. Even with the auk more or less fixed in amber by now, both authors find distinctive ways to approach it. In *The Great Auk*, British journalist and author Tim Birkhead gives his characteristic blend of history, travel, and personal insight as he ranges across the bird's former haunts around the North Atlantic, weaving in accounts of colonist-explorers, collectors, and the ultimate killing of the final birds by strangulation at the hands, ironically, of putative preservationists. Throughout, Birkhead meditates on the nature of loss, longing, and the ways humans feel compelled both to record and imagine absent species.

Gísli Pálsson takes a somewhat more scholarly tack to the auk. His *The Last of Its Kind* is a compelling mixture of history and science that reconstructs not just the auk's disappearance, but also the tortured aftermath. Using a failed 1858 expedition by British naturalists as his scaffold, Pálsson, an anthropologist from Iceland, uses archival notebooks and eyewitness accounts to illustrate a critical shift in scientific thought: the realization that humans could, in fact, drive species to extinction—an idea that is, of course, only too familiar these days. The book is richly detailed and atmospheric, and even if it is at times perhaps a little too richly detailed, it succeeds as both an engaging case study and a broader reflection on humanity's far-reaching environmental impacts, making it a thoughtful and often haunting contribution to the literature on extinction.

No Island Too Far: The History of Seabirds and Their Remote Islands

Brooke, M. (2023). Pelagic Publishing. London, United Kingdom. 384 pp. Hardback, ISBN: 978-1-784-27592-1, £30.00

No Island Too Far by Michael Brooke is an engaging memoir of his travels all over the world in search of seabirds. Drawing on decades of seabird research, Brooke recounts visits to remote islands across the globe, combining vivid descriptions of the wildlife he finds there with views into island ecology and conservation. Each chapter is a self-contained journey, rich with anecdote, humor, and the occasional hardship common to remote fieldwork. Ultimately, Brooke offers a fascinating window into rarely seen places and the dedicated, slightly mad mindset necessary to study the seabirds for whom those places are home.

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