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Under the ice: the creative dialectic of poetry and the visual image

Abstract:

All texts are in expressive and dynamic relation with other texts. Sometimes that relationship is explicit – the text which 'quotes' or directly riffs upon another. Sometimes the relationship is more indirect as, for instance, in the backdrop influence of genre conventions on the writing of a new science fiction novel. When a work of art – in this instance, a poem – is explicitly responding to another work of art – say, a painting or a photograph – there is a very tangible acknowledgement of the vital role of intertextuality in an evolving and shifting production of meaning. This paper considers the ways in which several poems – one by Jane Kenyon and three by Lucas – operate in creative dialogue with 'trigger' texts which range across the visual, linguistic, historical and narrative. It thereby offers a critique of the notion of 'inspiration' often implicit within the category of ekphrastic poetry and replaces it with the notion of a dynamic creative dialectic between different textual forms. In this sense, by using a practice-based method of research, the paper also interrogates the role which other texts invariably play – implicitly or explicitly – in the production of the creative work.

Biographical note:

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All texts are in expressive and dynamic relation with other texts. Sometimes that relationship is explicit – the text which 'quotes' or directly riffs upon another. Sometimes the relationship is more indirect as, for instance, in the backdrop influence of genre conventions on the writing of a new science fiction novel. When a work of art – in this instance, a poem – is explicitly responding to another work of art – say, a painting or a photograph – there is a very tangible acknowledgement of the vital role of inter-textuality in an evolving and shifting production of meaning. In this paper, I will consider the ways in which several poems – one by Jane Kenyon and three of my own - operate in creative dialogue with 'trigger' texts which range across the visual, linguistic, historical and narrative, thereby critiquing the notion of 'inspiration' often implicit within the category of ekphrastic poetry and replacing it with a dynamic creative dialectic between different textual forms. In this sense, by using a practice-based method of research, I am also interrogating the role which other texts invariably play – either implicitly or explicitly – in the production of the creative work.

As Derrida described in his seminal description of our secular, late capitalist experience, we can only form understandings of the world and our relationship to it through proliferating sequences of referentiality (Derrida 1967). That is, there is neither a single or simple epistemological arrival point nor a font of ontological significance. Rather, as sentient and linguistically-constructed subjects, we are endlessly responding to – interpreting, reframing, indeed reblogging – material that is already in circulation. Having then abandoned the notion of an ur-text of primary signification, 'meaning' – if we reimagine the concept – is a comparison of *différance*, an infinite exchange of equivalent incipience and deferral. However, while there may be no fixed *a priori* point of meaning, the reader is certainly not passive. Each time we pick up and engage with a facet of the world – be it abstract idea, experience, narrative or the distillations of art – we are necessarily refracting it through our own particular lens, actively weaving together a multivalent textuality in order to 'make sense of,' to knit the world into our own stories and *vice versa*. In this sense, we are always engaged in processes of attempted translation as well as interpretation, recasting textual facets within the crucible of our own circumstances and point of view. Every text we produce, every deliberate work of art we 'create,' is already in a state of dialogue, either explicitly or implicitly, with the texts which surround it. As Julia Kristeva describes it in *Desire in Language*, 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotation; any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (Kristeva 1980: 66).

This notion of the reader or viewer's personal refraction of a text is also mirrored by the image of the ghosting of texts. Any textual formulation carries with it the possibilities of the spectral trace – a ghostly or palimpsestic flickering of previous texts, previous images which pressure and inform the surface of a current or dominant text. Depending on how explicit a text is in its acknowledgement or re-using of a previous text, such ghostings will be more or less foregrounded. When for instance, director Mike Leigh made his extraordinary film about the life of the painter, *Mr Turner* (2015), he is very explicit about the ways in which his filmic representation is both informed and haunted by the visual texts which Turner himself produced. The opening scene for example, where Turner (Timothy Spall) is silhouetted against the

sun while watching the quiet Dutch scene before him – the dip of the women's bonnets as they pass him, talking together – suggests something of the isolation and impenetrability of the character, his role as an intense watcher of the world and his bold and innovative use of light, as well as subtly suggesting the focus of light as a primary element of a painterly *mise-en-scène* carried forward from the early Dutch masters. The presence of these previous visual texts reanimate in the text of the film scene and narrative, deepening and literally colouring its production of meaning.

In American poet Jane Kenyon's 'Dutch Interiors,' the idea of a triggering visual text is used to literally suggest the ways in which one text – here paintings in an exhibition – might challenge the viewer/poet to see the world differently, to be startled out of tired ways of understanding. Walking around an exhibition of Dutch art from the 'cold reaches of northern Europe,' the speaker is at first dulled by the familiarity and repetitions of the images viewed in which 'Christ has been done to death…a thousand thousand times.' It is a version of a seminal story which has nevertheless grown dull by cliché, its insights clouded by images so thoroughly co-op ted by tradition and convention. Kenyon's poem describes being unmoved by the exhibition until she finds an image which both captures her attention and recasts the occluded significance of a Christ "done to death":

> Suddenly bread
>
> and cheese appear on a plate
>
> beside a gleaming pewter beaker of beer.
>
>
> Now tell me that the Holy Ghost
>
> does not reside in the play of light
>
> on cutlery!

The freshness of style or content with which this particular strikes her, enables its 'ghosting' texts to reanimate, to become apparent in a way which, by extension, engages the reader. Presumably like the visual image she is looking at, the visuality of her own answering poetic image is similarly suffused with light – "appear," "gleaming pewter," "the play of light/on cutlery" – light and reflecting light which draws the image out of the cold shadows and into a sphere of transformed and transformative perception. And while bread, cheese and beer approximate the meal of the eucharist, they are also different: "suddenly" we see this plate of food anew. The poem, like the image in the exhibition, offers a new vision of an old idea, an image to arrest the viewer wearied by repetition. The space or aporia which Kenyon's image finds is prised open again by the ambiguities of the proffered food – food which appears to be there but isn't, which speaks of conviviality and life but is also connected to darkness and death. The image of this simple, peasant meal is the occasion for the "play of light," connected not only to perception, but to the possibility of life in death, what she describes as "the Holy Ghost" – or the sanctification of an absence that is somehow (doctrinally, spiritually) imbued with

presence. In responding to the visual image – which is itself responding to other images within genres and painterly and religious convention – Kenyon strives both to refer to the revelatory moment suggested by the painting and to recreate it within the specificity of her own poetic art. The laying of images and references within the poetic text suggests that while some ghosts can be inhibiting and dulling, some can be liberating – especially when the craft of the poem is able to generate a new way of representing them.

In my own praxis, I have found the explicit influence of previous art works – as a particular form of self-conscious textuality – to be a rich trigger source. Here, I will use three examples to argue that the ekphrastic poem is not so much in a linear or secondary relationship to that prior work, but is in fact engaged in a bi – if not multi – directional relationship between textual sites. One of the poems is written in imaginative response to the well-known paintings of Claude Monet; the other two are initiated by and in 'dialogue with' a series of photographs taken by the Australian Frank Hurley in the Antarctic – as well as to some extent the historical narratives which inform that period of polar exploration. In their different ways, each of these poems suggests the complex bi-directionality of influence – where the 'meaning' of a text is produced both via the interaction of text and reader, and by the interplay of various levels of textual presence: the current text and the archaeology of texts which it brings with it. The text which in some way quotes or makes visible its intertexts, explicitly linking itself to other sites of meaning construction, not only embodies something we have come to think of as postmodern play but contributes to a powerful current of ideas, where texts respond to another texts, either implicitly or explicitly, while simultaneously morphing into others. In this sense, ghosts, as traces of the past, are a productive and inevitable aspect of all aspects of our lives; the art work which makes them visible makes them a little easier to recognize and accept.

From this perspective, the poem which is in active dialogue with another (let's say, visual) text, need not be exclusively corralled within the category of the ekphrastic, but rather can be seen as just doing more overtly what all art does – making new texts by responding to the proliferating fabric of other texts. Thus, for instance, in the following short poem, 'Lastly: *Les Roses,*' taken from a longer sequence, 'Monet: A Series,'[1] I have used the famous visual imagery of Claude Monet's painting as both the point of departure for the imagery within the poetry and as a way of acknowledging the two texts, painting and poem, as parallel modes of evoking an 'as new' seeing of the world – a seminal evocation which ultimately works towards bringing the reader/viewer into a state of change or of heightened perception. It is this state of perception, of paying attention to the thing before us which is enabled by the focus of the framed text, which brings us into greater understanding of the shifting construct of the self and into an ethical, reciprocal relationship with the external world.

'Lastly: *Les Roses*' responds to a number of potential intertexts: the intense visuality of Monet's painterly image (Monet, who in turn, was presumably responding to factors such as: his own garden, his failing eyesight and his life-long project of recording the physical world in all its changing aesthetics), his own proliferating

series of images of his garden and his roses in particular, as well as an historical and retrospective sense that this was the final work of an artist who had spent his life paying close attention to colour and season and movement within the natural world. The poem is certainly reminiscent of the painting, using its own tools of imagery, line length and typographical spacing to evoke both a parallel sense of the visual image and to catapult the reader into a comparable sphere of alertness and new perceptions. It is not attempting to *be* or to duplicate the painting; rather it seeks to emulate its ability to evoke, suggest, juxtapose images and ideas in a sensual canvas in order to bring a reader to a similar place of enlivement and attention:

Lastly: Les Roses, from 'Monet: Series'

When swirling bright pink blooms –

        clustering on leggy stems and

          collared with rough green –

lean,

    blowsy and heavy-headed

across a swathe of summer blue,

its cooling vapours –

vision sways in

 eddies

in the dizzying, dappled shade of the garden,

     its little puffs of rise

and fall and

quiver:

this perpetual and

     renewing

season,

this perfumed possibility of

seeing

for the very first time.

Echoing Monet's painting, the poem attempts to draw the reader/viewer's attention to a point of specificity – the laden branch, the colours of sky and bloom and leaves, extrapolating to imagine the scents and temperatures of the summer garden. A universe of potential visuality is distilled, 'contracted' to the singularity of an image.

The sparsity of words on the page, the opening out of lines and the evocative power of verbal imagery – which has the capacity to suggest without literally showing – keeps the poem associative rather than merely descriptive or imitative. I have used the title 'Lastly,' to suggest something of the biography of the painter, the final installment in a life's work of reworking the details of the immediate, hoping to draw out there the luminous flickering of perception. There is also a sense of the 'last' comment, the final contribution in a conversational exchange – both between the painter and his world, and also between myself as poet and the evocations of the painting. The poem is itself nested within a longer 'Series' ('Giverny,' 'Water Lilies' and 'Morning on the Seine'), which echoes Monet's repetitions of certain visual themes – series of the garden, the river, the water lilies, the haystacks etc. I have used the concept of the 'Series' to explore this idea that art is about an ongoing process of *looking*, and, as in the Kenyon poem, of re-presenting the world in a new way that has the potential to startle. That activity of looking can be highlighted when the object being looked at – the garden, the water lily, the painterly canvas – is used as the repeated object. It is never the same water-lily because the act of looking is always different. I think this is what Monet meant by his series and this is what I have played with in my own visually-oriented poetic series. In this sense, the poem implies that the image – visual or linguistic - is never exhausted, but can be revisited with an almost endless number of variables: time, place, season, mood, artist etc. Each work of art is a point of perception, a frame which draws the eye in to witness, interpret and reflect.

The work of art – as a text of intentionality – places a compositional frame around the broader processes of interpretation and referentiality, concentrating the evidence of the visual. A version of the snapshot/chat, visual art focuses our attention not only on the specificities of the external word but crucially upon our own processes of looking and the creative and evolving task of 'making sense.' As the American painter Douglas Fryer notes about his own praxis, "[Painting] is all about the arranging of marks on a surface, and the creation of an abstracted version of reality, with the suggestion of things that are unseen, but felt."[2] Within the work of art, something/somewhere external is usually evoked and certainly cross-referenced – for example, Fryer's eliciting of a specific place, such as the Sevier River in Utah (Fryer 2015) – not necessarily in an attempt to mimetically reproduce that physical space as a kind of *trompe d'oeil*, but in order to register a *response* to that space which incorporates both the particularity of the looker and the particular insights which this looker might be able to convey about the evoked specificity. The literal marks on the page – in Fryer's and Monet's cases, brushstrokes in paint, in the case of poetry, the black lines of letters on white pages – are to be registered for their own sakes (aesthetically, semantically) but also for what they *suggest* about what remains unrepresentable: feeling, possibility, versions of the underside or the not-yet visible.

As Fryer's comments suggest, while drawing attention to a tactile surface, art (visual and linguistic) can sometimes perform the function of looking beneath the immediate skin of what is available to physical sight. When positioned mindfully (utilising the techniques of craft and the perspectives of art) for the attention of the viewer, physical place can be evocative, suggestive of layers of interpretation – emotional, geological, historical, personal. In this way, whatever the genre or medium, art has the potential

to operate in a poetic manner – by which I mean to use the self-consciousness of craft to peel open the apparent hegemony of surfaces to reveal the caverns, hidden spaces and viscera which deepen our understanding of the point where we are all standing: the liminal nexus between self and world, looker and looked at, text and interpretation. In her poem 'A Bourne' – a word suggestive of a stream, a boundary or a goal – Australian poet Lucy Dougan describes the way in which the poetic can operate as a kind of gateway, a liminal site facilitating movement between inside and outside, surface and below:

> I went to ground, pinned myself, palms down,
> to this bourne, this fold in the earth,
> held all our voices and footsteps in its spin (Dougan 2015, p. 52).

My following poems, 'Dark Pole' and 'Vacant Places' take us to the Antarctic – a different geographical place, a different 'fold in the earth' – and are similarly responding to multiple texts: to the body of photographs taken by Australian Frank Hurley (1885-1962), his diaries of the experience, the narratives which surround the so-called Heroic Age of Polar Exploration as well as a general interest in and knowledge about an unvisited landscape which continues to captivate the cultural imagination (cf Griffiths 2007, Turney 2012). The image and idea of the Antarctic also presents us with a physical landscape on the very edge of human endurance let alone representation, and certainly one in which the human figure struggles to insert himself. These poems thus consider the notion of what is in some ways an 'inhospitable' prior text, one which evokes limited and complicated response from any subsequent representations.

 A prolific and famous photographer, Frank Hurley is best known for the photos he took in the Antarctic – in particular, as a participant on Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition (1911-1913) and the ill-fated Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914-1916 headed by Ernest Shackleton (Groom 2010, Ennis 2002 and 2010, Bowdon 1999). Hurley's images operate on a number of levels: they are documentary of an environment which was not well understood at that time, as well as being records of particular human endeavor. In this latter sense, the photographs are also ideological, as they were part of a larger imperial project to position the white man as the colonizing force within the strange landscape of the Antarctic, thereby placing the human as the rightful inheritor and conqueror of this place – a perhaps impossible mission to claim the alterity of the Antarctic for the Anthropocene. However, my poems suggest that, depending on framing, positioning and poetic suggestion, there can be more to these images than the dominant surface representation or narratives implies, reinforcing that there are always blind spots within any text, as well as the possibilities of unfolding and revelation – the yielding of the 'Bourne.' Under the ice, literally and figuratively, there is always the possibility of something different, of water and creatures moving freely in dark, unseen places, full of menace and/or possibility.

Dark Pole

This dreaming place,

        cold under-side,

creaking in opacity,

plank and floe –

how will I know you

again

in the meek light of temperate day?

Your cloaked peaks,

groaning citadels of ice,

they loom like stars or

sudden ships in blackness,

bearing down –

remembering the tug

of ocean pits where

thoughts

flickerand

     glide –

metallic ghosts

to ride invisible tides,

imagining an easy surface.

'Dark Pole' plays with a double notion of the 'negative': in the geographical sense of the antithesis to knowns such as the constellations of the northern hemisphere (Ant-arctic = 'below/opposed to the bear'), and also as the heavy glass negative plates which Hurley literally used in the laborious production of his art in such intensely trying physical circumstances. The poem also suggests that this notion of antithesis might also be aligned with other oppositions – dreaming, night, ocean currents in the black water under the ice, the extremity of cold. However, as Hélène Cixous (Cixous 1981: 90-98) argues in her feminist use of deconstruction, the feudal hierarchy of binary oppositions is fundamentally disrupted by the recognition of their mutual dependence – the impossibility of knowing surface without depth, the convex without the concave. The slippery proliferation of apparent oppositions in 'Dark Pole' then, doesn't simply reverse a binary, but rather problematizes it. And although the 'pole' might be literally described as a place – and indeed a mathematically measured place

in the vastness of white which confirms particular scientific and ideological notions about the world and its cultures of power – it is also a metaphorical and elusive concept. The pole is not just something men might race toward, perhaps dying in the attempt, but it evokes the more metaphysical notion of elsewhereness, a not-visible 'negative' which informs and haunts everything which is available to sight. There is also an undifferentiated 'tug' in the depths of 'ocean pits,' where even 'thoughts' themselves might take on the spectral shapes of deep-sea creatures:

> flicker and
>
> glide –
>
> metallic ghosts
>
> to ride invisible tides,
>
> imagining an easy surface.

Thus, while the function of the poetic may sometimes be to focus the attention on the skin of the present and to highlight its aesthetic nature, it can also serve to disrupt the apparent ease of the surface – to call into contemplation an alternative to an unequivocal and fixed binary connection between self and other. The ghost, emblematic of the liminal, hints at the undersides, the uncanny traces of things forgotten or never dreamed about.

The final poem examines the representation by Hurley of the Antarctic as a place of 'vacancy,' its non-habitation by humans rendering it, in the imagination of the times, as a kind of *Terra Nullius*, a virginal and primitive *tabula rasa* awaiting human inscription to accord it meaning. My poem both recognises this essentially imperialist view and attempt to offer points of ironic critique – in particular, the confronting frustrations of being neither able to read or write upon this white 'vacancy.' By focusing on the human longing to fill – or to write upon – the apparent incipience of 'vacant places,' the poem explores the relationship between the human subject and the undeniable alterity of the physical world. To what extent is it possible to watch or to 'listen' to the inalienable foreignness of the 'other' without wanting to draw it into the language of the same?

Vacant Places

> 'I felt regretful to have been compelled to turn back, as the lure of the ridges was strong, and the vacant places seemed to beckon irresistibly.'
>
> – Frank Hurley, Photographer; Antarctic diary, December 21, 1912.

Illegible landscape,

white page

empty of inscription

 we crawl across your indifferent face –

interlopers,

pirates;

impervious to metaphor your

vacant places

call

and repel me,

siren songs of jolting ridges,

flattening blasts of frozen wind,

blue abyss of the crevasse

that speechless,

creaking vault:

what does my human eye

have to do with this vast place,

this counterpoint

      below the northern bear

these flickering southern lights

illuminating strangeness?

our anchoring pole,

empty of mirrors

untrackable continent –

      you resist our compositions.

In 1912, while on Mawson's Australasian Expedition, Hurley, Eric Webb and Robert Bage set out to locate and map the South Magnetic Pole. As Hurley notes in his diary on 21st December, the trio were forced by weather conditions to turn back before they reached the pole, leaving Hurley looking back in a state of longing – a state of mind which I have used as the epigraph to the poem: 'Behind us lay still the interminable ridges and personally, I must say I felt regretful to have been compelled to turn back,

as the lure of the ridges was strong, and the vacant places seemed to beckon irresistibly (Hurley 2012).' My poem was initiated by this concept of the 'vacant places' which Hurley is compelled to leave still unexplored. Whereas Hurley's implicit understanding is to see them as a kind of emptiness not yet marked by human presence and signification – an emptiness which he is thus driven to fill with human endeavor – the poem recasts it as the resistant white of the unwritten and perhaps unwriteable page. Not only is the whiteness of the Antarctic 'empty' of the 'inscription' of familiarity and human culture, but it also presents itself as 'illegible,' a fundamentally foreign text unavailable to human interpretation. Hurley perhaps looks to 'conquer' landscape with the ideological values of empire, literally framing its vacancy with imperialist discourses, and thereby reasserting the human as the divinely appointed lord of the earth and its creatures. However, as 'explorer,' he is forced back, disallowed – not just by weather and circumstance, but by the very alterity, the uninhabitable 'vacancy' of the Antarctic, and its imperviousness to the appropriating 'metaphors' of human language and understanding.

As writer Helen Garner noted on a latter-day trip to Antarctica, 'It's hopeless trying to control the flood of metaphor' (Garner 2001: 20) which is provoked by its visual spectacle – and yet it is equally hopeless trying to contain the challenge embodied by the Antarctic within the semantic framework of sameness, within metaphor's fundamental work of interpreting one thing in the light of another. However many photographic views or frames might be put around this landscape, attempting to shape it into something recognizable and thus 'tamed,' the vast whiteness of the Antarctic remains resistant, elusive to such a lassoing of aesthetic containment. So remote and physically challenging, the Antarctic functions not as a special case but rather as a graphic exemplar of the world external to the human subject, making explicit the complex engagements of self and other, familiar and foreign. As a fluid and suggestive mode, the poem offers us a way into a recognition of human limitation in the face of the other or the external world. To return to the dialectic of interpretation and referentiality: not everything witnessed or experienced is able to be translated into a language of recognisability, and even the 'compositions' of art can sometimes only momentarily or spectrally frame that which eludes definition and understanding. And metaphor is perhaps just another way of understanding the ghosting of texts and the endlessness of referentiality: we *can* only know the thing before us by means of its relationship to other things, similar and different. All else remains beyond knowing – under the ice. My poems thus function to identify dominant ideas within the 'narrative' or surface affect of Hurley's photos and diaries, as well as pointing to the blind spots. They also use Hurley's images and ideas to unravel, to launch different ways of seeing the world, of responding to the primacy of the image and all that it contains and doesn't contain.

By its reliance upon affect and mood, the visual, like the poetic, is itself a textual mode which privileges suggestion and associative patterns of meaning-making or derivation. As Fryer described, the 'arranging of [intentional] marks on a surface' – either linguistic or painterly – can have the capacity to evoke not only things which are 'unseen,' but also 'felt.' By linking itself explicitly to the visual mode, poetic ekphrasis works to intensify the possibilities of affective evocation as well as

foregrounding the fundamentally intertextual proliferations of any textual practice. To even begin to imagine what might be under the ice, or suggested in the dislocating inverse of the shadowy, we need first to represent the ice itself, and to do so in a manner which enables the deconstructive processes of peeling back, of identifying not a hidden or true 'fixed meaning,' but rather the possibilities of depth, of reflecting surfaces and a domino-slide of interconnected sites of textual meaning and imaginative interpretations.

Endnotes

[1] Rose Lucas, *Unexpected Clearing* (forthcoming March 2016), University of West Australia Publishing.

[2] Douglas Fyer, http://douglasfryer.blogspot.com.au/, viewed August 5, 2015.

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Appendix of Images
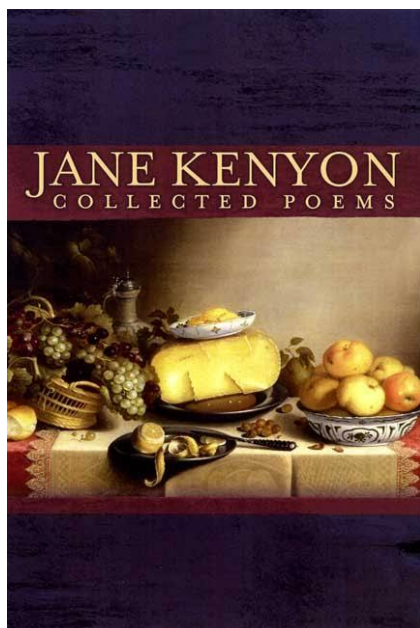

Turner (Timothy Spall) in *Mr Turner* (Mike Leigh, 2015)

Claude Monet, 'Les Roses,' 1926, oil on canvas, Paris, Musée Marmottan

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Douglas Fryer, 'Sevier River' http://douglasfryer.blogspot.com.au/, viewed August 5, 2015

Frank   Hurley   1915,   an   iceberg   bears   down   on   the   *Endurance*
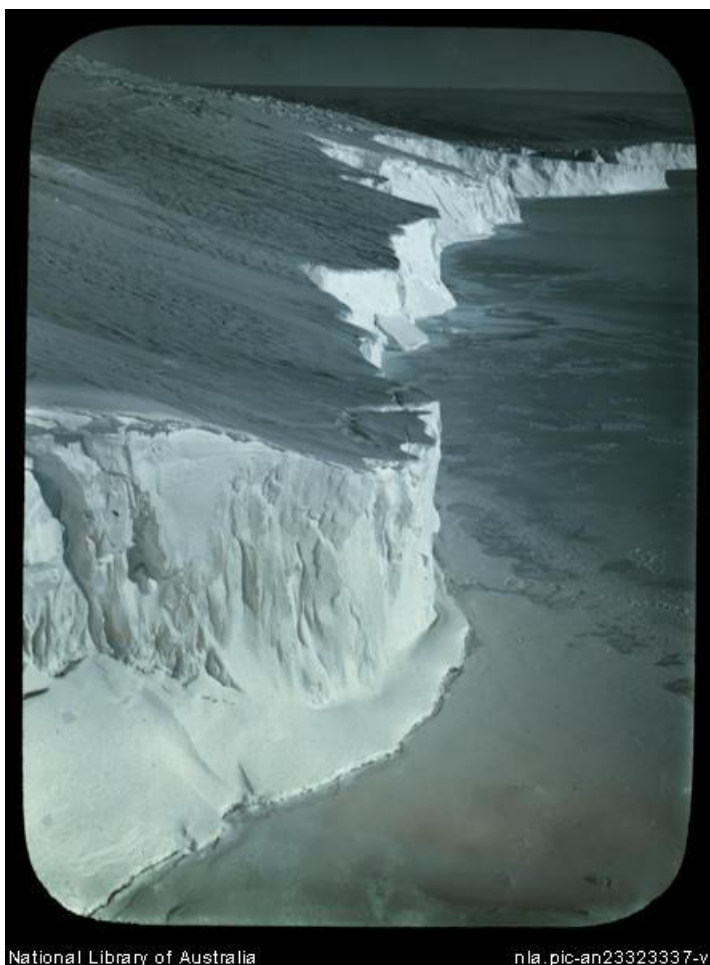http://nla.gov.au/pictures/frank-hurley-antarctic-photographs

Viewed November 20, 2015

Frank Hurley with camera on ice in front of the bow of the trapped *Endurance* in the Weddell Sea, 1915

http://nla.gov.au/pictures/frank-hurley-antarctic-photographs

Viewed November 20, 2015

Frank Hurley, Weddell Sea, 1915

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