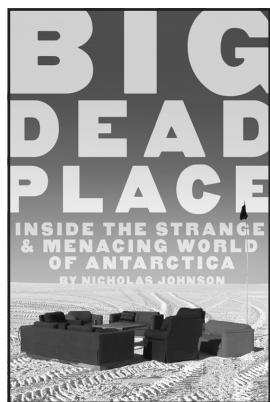


Big Dead Place: Inside the Strange & Menacing World of Antarctica



by Nicholas Johnson
Feral House, 2005, 260pp, \$16.95

Nicholas Johnson's *Big Dead Place* portrays McMurdo Station as the ultimate company town: Not only can't the workers escape, but the company mistreats them, fires them and ships them out on very short notice—often for the flimsiest of reasons. As one human resources supervisor (identified only as “HR Guy”) warns a worker: “You have no rights down here.”

In this case, the “company” is Raytheon Polar Services Co., the private contractor that provides logistical support to the U.S. Antarctic Program, known simply as “the Program.”

Readers hoping to find tales of modern-day heroism among stoic Antarctic workers or stories of exciting scientific discovery on The Ice will be disappointed by *Big Dead Place*, but the book offers something much more rare: an inside view of the Program from grunt's-eye level.

Johnson spent five summers and two winters in the Program as a DA (dining attendant) and Waste EO (equipment operator), both low-level jobs. The Antarctica he writes about is the American Antarctic bureaucracy that currently reigns both at McMurdo and the South Pole (Palmer is different, he suggests, since it's smaller and personnel arrive and depart by ship). Johnson portrays The Ice as it might be seen in a bawdy version of “Dilbert,” the cartoon created by Scott Adams about a beleaguered office drone who suffers countless indignities in an anonymous cubicle that could be any American “worksites” anywhere.

Big Dead Place is a rich, witty and important book—and a searing indictment of the mindless, cover-your-ass bureaucracy of Corporate Antarctica.

Thanks to the corporatization of American Antarctica, many workers no longer feel part of the larger mission—particularly at sprawling McMurdo, with a summertime population exceeding 1,100. Some workers spend an entire year in Antarctica emptying waste containers and recycling bins, or washing dishes, or shuffling papers in a fluorescent box. These people are so remote from the science they support that a chance for them to get out in the field is a rare treat, often obtained only through “connections.”

With their six-day, 54-hour workweeks, American Antarctic workers are also victims of the federal government's expediently flexible interpretation of the territorial status of its bases in Antarctica. Although the

United States has never made a formal territorial claim over any part of Antarctica—and even if it had, the Antarctic Treaty sets aside all territorial claims—the I.R.S. nevertheless taxes Americans working in Antarctica as if they were at home. Meanwhile, U.S. rules on overtime pay and worker safety in such legislation as the Fair Labor Standards Act and in regulations such as those issued by the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) do not cover workers in Antarctica, and in 1993, the U.S. Supreme Court determined (in *Sandra Jean Smith v. United States*, No. 91-1538) that Antarctica is a “foreign country.”

Adding to these burdens are those imposed by constant skirmishing between management and workers, which Johnson sees as “the natural result of a teetering bureaucracy stuffed into a small town of people improvising in an unusual environment”:

The by-the-book mandates of management are eroded daily by the slippery traditions of a shifting mass of seasonal contract workers whose innovation—useful for jerry-rigging an engine or concocting some out-of-stock tool—does not dry up at the end of the work day, when residents sneak work tools to build lofts in their rooms, barter goods between departments (without all the messy paperwork), and find nice warm places to grow marijuana.

The persistent battling becomes so oppressive that the “strange and menacing” aspect of Antarctica in Johnson's subtitle refers not to the continent's punishing weather, but to the work atmosphere at McMurdo, poisoned by a bureaucracy under which workers suffer “daily unpleasantness.”

I have never heard one person say that the most difficult thing about Antarctica is working outside, or being cold. I have never heard one person imply that Antarctica's tough physical environment would be the main reason not to return. I have never heard of one returnee who finally quit because it's the world's highest, driest, coldest, or whatever. People leave because of the bullshit.

Despite the skirmishing, there's never any question of where the true power lies: “Wherever management saw a problem,” Johnson writes, “the plane [out] could solve it.” Another useful management tool is the end-of-season bonus paid for good behavior, but double-dealing bosses can also cut it, or snatch it away completely, for petty “violations” of murky company regulations—or, apparently, simply out of sheer personal vengeance.

Still, in Johnson's view of Corporate Antarctica as a treacherous, Machiavellian mob of competing professional bureaucrats, the lot of the managers themselves is hardly a happy one, either. The average manager, he tells us, is “far less concerned with the business of managing essential tasks than in staving off the onslaught of accusations and sideswipes that might hinder her progress to the next level.”

Johnson has a wonderful eye—and ear—for detail and for odd but revealing scraps of information. And his writing can be vivid: A metal machine brought into a warm building at the South Pole, he writes, “sucks up heat so fast that it emanates cold as a fire emanates heat.” He also chronicles McMurdo's social scene, complete with alcohol-fueled antics and furtive couplings in out-of-the-way places, including, allegedly, atop the altar in the Chapel of the Snows.

The book's 58 unconventional photos deserve

their own special mention, as they're unlike those in any other Antarctica book. My favorite is a grainy black-and-white photo of physician Leonid I. Rogozov removing his own appendix at Russia's Novolazarevskaya station in 1961. Another shows a tourist enjoying a drink aboard Air New Zealand Flight 901 just before it crashed into Mt. Erebus in 1979, and there are shots of the recovery team documenting and bagging remains of one of the 257 people killed in that disaster. Other photos show McMurdo's scrap wood pile, a close-up of standard-issue “bunny” boots and unwanted treasures collecting in the “skua piles” inside McMurdo dorm entryways.

When Johnson detects pretense, he's swift to puncture it—and his radar is right on. A schoolteacher on an NSF-sponsored visit to Antarctica, for example, insists that he doesn't want to visit the South Pole for *himself*, oh no: “five thousand kids back in Wisconsin need me to go.” Johnson also neatly skewers the self-interest of guest-journalists and their portrayals of Antarctica as a pristine wilderness where everyone is a scientist engaged in important research: “If such professionalism is maintained,” he writes, “the journalist may be invited back, or even hired to help with NSF Public Relations,” as was one former *Washington Post* reporter.

Nothing is spared Johnson's sharp eye, including the government's oft-repeated claim that the primary reason for American involvement in Antarctica is scientific research—not effective occupation of territory as a basis for any claims of sovereignty that the U.S. may one day care to make. But for every grant-funded American scientist on the ice, Johnson points out, there are five wage-earners, most of them involved in building or maintaining infrastructure. As the 11-member United States Antarctic Program External Panel appointed in 1997 wrote, “The U.S.'s scientific and environmental research in Antarctica give substance and relevance to the national presence.” In other words, Johnson says, “ironworkers don't support science; science supports ironworkers.”

Books such as *Big Dead Place* that give us an unvarnished peek inside the Program are unusual in contemporary Antarctic literature, which now includes a fair number of scientists' memoirs. To complete the picture of modern-day Antarctica, maybe it's time for a supervisor or manager to write a no-holds-barred account of the new Corporate Antarctica. It could be interesting and instructive to hear what it's like trying to manage all of these innovative, improvising individuals. Then again, that could make a dull tale.

The National Science Foundation might also wish to take into consideration the disconnect obviously felt by many workers stuck in the Antarctic bureaucracy and try to build on its current efforts to involve personnel in the scientific mission of the Program. Despite these and any new efforts it makes, however, NSF will always have a hard time counteracting the sheer size of the Program, which necessitates a large number of people playing very ancillary support roles to the primary mission. Besides this, of course, there are naturally a large number of workers who simply have no interest in the mission other than their own paycheck.

A final note: some readers may know Johnson's work from his web site, BigDeadPlace.com, which he wrote under the pseudonym F. Scott Robert. It's a fascinating “no-bullshit” look at working for the Program, and well worth reading along with this title. Though some of the web site's material has been included in the book, most of the book is new. □

An Interview with Nicholas Johnson

Big Dead Place author Nicholas Johnson, preparing for a new job in Iraq, answered questions emailed by Antarctic Editor Jeff Rubin.



JR: *I'd heard through the grapevine that you were deploying to Antarctica again in late 2005. That's obviously wrong. Why Iraq?*

NJ: All employment but that in unusual circumstances now looks to me miserable and unappealing. I'll be a Warehouseman in a camp north of Baghdad. I don't know what that means, but somehow I don't suspect I'll be surprised by the workaday activities of inventory and moving stuff around.

JR: *Where do you live now?*

NJ: Vancouver, BC. I grew up and lived in the Seattle area most of my life.

JR: *Will you go back to the Ice with the Program?*

NJ: Sure, I hope so. I love the Ice.

JR: *What years were you at which station, and what your job was each time?*

NJ: 1998–99 Summer at McMurdo—Dining Attendant (DA); 1999–2000 Summer at McMurdo—Waste Technician (Waste); 2000–01 Summer-Winter at McMurdo—Waste Equipment Operator; 2001–02 took a year off and wrote the book; 2002–03 Summer at McMurdo—Fleet-Ops Equipment Operator; 2003–04 Summer-Winter at South Pole—Cargo Handler.

JR: *What could USAP or Raytheon do to make the work situation better?*

NJ: Medical facilities, as well as the entire department of Environmental, Health, and Safety, should be legally divorced from the control of the Prime Support Contractor (presently Raytheon). That the same company responsible for safety statistics and insurance costs also controls employee access to medical care presents a fantastic conflict of interest and causes many problems each season.

NSF should recognize that Raytheon's five-tier "performance-based" bonus system should be changed back to an all-or-nothing bonus system. While those few who receive the larger bonuses will usually disagree, the system favors those in small departments or those working in Science Support positions, and is often used by more unscrupulous supervisors or foremen, especially at small South Pole, to dole out last-minute political punishment to those they simply dislike. In any case, the system is inefficient, makes more work for supervisors, and causes interminable bickering and morale problems. [Myself, I've received one Level 5 and two Level 4s, and have thus benefited from the present system.]

A bonus idea for the health of The Program, not necessarily relating to work life: Artists, writers, and journalists chosen to go to Antarctica should be screened and selected by private organizations, perhaps by a lottery system, at the bill of NSF. Public money funds The Program, so the public should receive information about The Program that is not funneled through NSF.

Above are some of those topics easy to note. Many other issues would be too disparate and de-

tailed, but might fall under topics like "NSF Should Be Ultimately Responsible for the Contractor's Activities" or "Architects Should Consult with Winter-Overs" or "HR Should Be Fired and Replaced By Robots."

JR: *Washing dishes or emptying trash cans for a full year in Antarctica, with very few opportunities to get out in the field, must create poor morale. Would it help if all workers had more chances to get out, not just on jollies, but doing real work?*

NJ: By any standard, it's painful, impractical, and expensive that every grunt should be flown hither and yonder for "morale" purposes. I believe your suggestion would be popular, but you're asking the wrong guy. Though I've certainly enjoyed the insane beauty that Antarctica offers in every direction and, like anyone, I would appreciate more time in the field, to me it's the routine sameness of place that becomes tiresome, not whether that place is "industrial" or "natural." People out in the field for six weeks are usually excited to visit McMurdo. Too long in Christchurch, and I can't wait to get to McMurdo.

To my mind the stations are a main Antarctic attraction, not something to merely be suffered until one gets a chance to go see a penguin or a nunatak. For example, given only one "morale" flight, I'd choose Vostok over the Dry Valleys. But that's just me. In any case, those who return season after season know more people, thus more field opportunities arise. That's just how it works. Some women have found additional opportunities to experience Antarctica's pristine breath-taking majesty by having sex with beakers [scientists] or helo pilots.

JR: *I was fascinated by the photo of the Russian doctor doing his own appendectomy. Where did you get it?*

NJ: I flew to Christchurch to write my book on the gamble that the three significant Antarctic libraries there would bring me small treasures unimaginable. I found the photo in a Soviet Antarctic journal in the Canterbury Museum Library. That's also where I found the fascinating journals of Thomas C. Poulter from Byrd's '33-'35 expedition that have not previously been mined to their full potential.

JR: *Despite all the bullshit, you spent five summers and two winters in the Program. What did you like about Antarctica? What kept bringing you back?*

NJ: Snow on diamond-plating [flooring common to almost every industrial building at McMurdo or Pole]. Broken satellite dishes beside new pizza ovens on the cargo line. Radio chatter where you know the person behind every voice. Having twelve pairs of the same socks, and everyone else has the same socks as you. Beautiful women in oily Carharts running heavy equipment. The parallel courtesy and ruthlessness that develops between those wintering together, where extravagant pretensions are quickly broken.

In McMurdo, the almost constant sound of the wind making weird noises and rattling the windows; at Pole, watching the slight but steady wind form vast drifts in no time. At a lunch table, conversations that involve a recent romance between a DV and a DA, an account of speaking with crazed Russians on their way out after two years at Vostok, how to use explosives to



Nicholas Johnson, author of *Big Dead Place*

shift an iceberg, or the latest email from Safety saying beware of tripping on rocks in the road. As my friend Jason Anthony once said, "I feel like I would have to boil a year of my interactions with people [in Maine] to get a week of McMurdo conversation."

Working outside all day, and being really cold, makes it easy to appreciate the momentous hurdles of warming a room. Appreciating a warm room brought my appreciation of the icebreaker that made the way for the fuel tanker to juice the power plant and the UTs who maintain the furnaces. Living on the ice made me appreciate simple pleasures in general. Another thing I love about working in Antarctica is that no one carries keys.

JR: *Did you get any nastygrams from NSF or Raytheon about the book?*

NJ: No. I've even received an unofficial note of support from an NSF manager.

JR: *Did you ever see The Polar Times while you were working in Antarctica?*

NJ: At Pole it usually sat on the window ledges while ironworkers rifled through *People* magazine looking for celebrity [breasts]. If you really want to hone an Antarctic journal for Pole, have a bunch of rugged stories from Pole circa '62, then on the next page have [pornography]. *The Polar Times* certainly has its devotees though, and if it stopped showing up people would be upset. □

CORRECTION

The article "APS Member Donates Shackleton Flag" (July 2005 *Polar Times*) incorrectly identified the number of companions who accompanied Ernest Shackleton on his attempt to reach the South Pole during his *Nimrod* expedition. Shackleton had three (not two) companions: Lieut. Jameson Boyd Adams, *Nimrod*'s second-in-command; Eric Marshall, the chief engineer; and Frank Wild of *Discovery* and, eventually, *Endurance*, fame.—The Editors.