



'Lone Iceberg - Cape Hallett', Oil (30" x 48") 1993, The Blount Corporate Collection, Montgomery, Alabama by Alan Campbell [www.alancampbellstudios.com](http://www.alancampbellstudios.com)

## The region of ice and snow

Adrian Cooper reflects on changing perceptions of our southernmost continent

It is 200 years since Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen and Mikhail Lazarev claimed to be the first people to set eyes on the Antarctic continent. The date was 27 January 1820. The Royal Navy's Edward Bransfield arrived a few days later, while Nathaniel Palmer became the first American to view Antarctica, in November that same year.

In more recent times, I have become fascinated by the way travel to Antarctica has changed perspectives about the continent itself as well as the broader geographical imaginations of individuals and groups who make that extraordinary journey. Through my association with the Royal Geographical Society and the BBC World Service, I have met and interviewed over 50 such adventurers during the last twelve months.

From those interviews, it became clear that Antarctica began to change perspectives for those people even during the earliest stages of their preparation. As plans developed, new friendships were made. New books were suggested and studied. And astonishing surprises were encountered even before the voyages had begun and the first iceberg or penguin was gleefully observed.

The first surprise for most of these travellers was that Antarctica has inspired more literature and art than they had previously imagined. Edgar Allan Poe's novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) seems to appear on most Antarctic travellers' reading list, with its unsettling descriptions of the whaling ship *Grampus* and its treacherous voyages through extreme southern seas. In many ways it is a form of early science fiction, which Jules Verne developed in his *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) and later in his two-volume novel *An Antarctic Mystery* (1897).

Poetry inspired by Antarctica also obliges readers to rethink their assumptions that the continent is simply empty and unrewarding. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1834 edition) often ranks among the most frequently quoted within the Antarctic's ability to shatter naive assumptions about its landscapes.

*And now there came both mist and snow,  
And it grew wondrous cold:  
And ice, mast-high, came floating by,  
As green as emerald.*