In 1922 the polar exploration vessel *Raven* sailed from Hobart in the early hours of the morning, south into the icy embrace of the Antarctic Ocean. Neither she nor the thirty-one men aboard her were ever seen again.

In 2005, during a visit to an Australian Antarctic station, a writer discovers a long-lost journal — the only surviving artefact and evidence of the fate of the *Raven* expedition. It is a discovery that will consume his life and eat into his soul.

*Into White Silence* is the story of a collision between the past and the present, the folly of ambition, and the ghosts of the ice.

‘Eaton generates a compelling suspense from the human drama that led to the disaster . . . he captures with vividness and precision the beauty and terror of the Antarctic landscape’ *The Age*

‘A superbly told tale of a ship’s mysterious voyage that will leave its mark on your imagination and a chill in your spine’ Peter FitzSimons, bestselling author of *Batavia*
Award-winning Australian writer Anthony Eaton has long been fascinated with both the history and the reality of Antarctica. So when in 2005 he was offered the chance to spend six weeks travelling to and from Casey Station in Wilkes Land, Antarctica, he leapt at the opportunity. During that voyage he became both enchanted and cowed by the power and beauty of Antarctica, and the impact it has on the minds and hearts of those who are lucky enough to experience it. Into White Silence is the result of that voyage.

Anthony is the author of eleven novels for various readerships. He has twice won the Western Australian Premier’s Award, holds a PhD in creative writing, and teaches at the University of Canberra in the ACT, where he lives with his wife and son.
INTO WHITE SILENCE

ANTHONY EATON

RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

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To the men and women of the 59th ANARE.
Thanks for a fantastic experience.
Men go out into the void spaces of the world for various reasons. Some are actuated simply by a love of adventure, some have the keen thirst for scientific knowledge, and others again are drawn away from the trodden paths by the ‘lure of little voices’, the mysterious fascination with the unknown . . .

Sir Ernest Shackleton
Members of the 1922 Raven Expedition

EXPEDITION PERSONNEL

Expedition Leader
Edward Rourke

First Officer
Capt. (retd) George Smythe-Davis

Second Officer
Lieut. (retd) William Downes

Expedition Meteorologist
Alexander Holdsworthy

Expedition Cartographer
Douglas King

Expedition Zoologist
Dr Gregory Shannon-Stacey

Expedition Geologist
Michael Burke

Expedition Photographer
Randolph Lawson

Expedition Surgeon
Dr George Dalby

Carpenter
Lawrence Moreton

Carpenter
William Moreton

Ski Instructor
Per Petersen

Dog Handler
Ivan Gregorivich Petrokoff

Dog Handler
Piotre Dimitri Petrokoff

SHIP’S STAFF

Captain
Capt. James McLaren

Ship’s Bosun
Richard Ryan

Ship’s Engineer
Charles Weymouth

Cook
Samuel Piper

Ship’s Steward
Stanley O’Hanlon
CREW MEMBERS

James Armitage
Arthur Beale
Daniel Carston
Peter Grace
Henry Griffith
Thomas Irvine
Jimmy James
David Lacey
Jack McDonald
Joseph Smith
Ernest Tockson
Thomas Walsh
Isaac [surname unknown]
The Polar Exploration Vessel Raven

COMPARTMENTS
1 Upper Fo’castle
2 Lower Fo’castle
3 Main Deckhouse
4 ’Tween Deck
5 Main Companionway
6 Wardroom
7 Lower Hold
8 Propeller Tunnel
9 Engine Room
10 Boiler
11 Coal Bunker
12 Water Tank
13 Water Tank
14 Kennels
15 Galley
16 Cook’s Cabin
17 Steward / Bosun
18 Chartroom
19 Biologist / Zoologist
20 Cartographer / Geologist
21 Engineer / Photographer
22 2nd Mate / Meteorologist
23 Surgeon
24 First Officer
25 Captain’s Cabin
26 Expedition Leader’s Cabin
27 Stores
28 Darkroom / Brig
29 Chain Locker

FIXTURES
30 Forward Hatch
31 Funnel
32 Main Hatch
33 Helm
34 Steering Gear
35 Wardroom Skylights
36 Engine
Built Norway 1920

PORT VIEW

MAIN DECK

DECKHOUSE / 'TWEEEN DECK / WARDROOM

LOWER HOLD
Edward Patrick O’Rourke – Lineage

Prudence Chastity O’Reilly

Unknown Father

Mary Kathleen O’Rourke
(1768–1815)

Patrick Michael O’Rourke
(1769–1793)

Nellie Elizabeth O’Reilly
(1790–1856)

Timothy Patrick O’Rourke
(1790–1880)

Myra O’Rourke [née Blake]
(?–1809)

Patrick James O’Rourke
(1815–1878)

Arthur Edward O’Rourke
(1830–1894)

Thomas Patrick Rourke
(1844–1901)

Fanny Rourke [née Albright]
(1852–1908)

Edward Rourke
(1878–1922)
William Downes – Lineage and Descendants

Stephen Downes (1880–1940)  
Mary Downes (1883–1948)

Elsie Downes [née Stapledon] (1899–1993)  
William Downes (1897–1922)  
Archie Downes (1899–1973)  
Violet McHenry [née Downes] (1901–1967)

Sam Harcourt (1925–2007)  
Rose Harcourt [née Downes] (1927–)  
Andrew Harcourt (1949–)  

Emily Harcourt (1981–)
For almost two years now, the small leather-bound journal of Lieutenant William Downes has been sitting on a corner of my writing desk, defying me. I must confess that I’ve lost track of the number of times I’ve sat here in the twenty months since the diary came into my possession, leafing through its pages and then staring out my study window at the distant Brindabella Mountains, sometimes for hours, trying to come to terms with the horrors contained within it.

Words are strange things. As a writer, it is something of a perpetual puzzle to me, how a few scrawled glyphs on a piece of paper can contain so much power over the human imagination. That such visceral experiences as love and hate and fear and pride and despair can be so easily bound to the page is a mystery which
only deepens the further I explore it. The journal of William Downes is a perfect example of this phenomenon.

To look at, the journal is unremarkable: slightly smaller and thicker than a modern B-format paperback, housed within an unadorned red leather cover, tattered and watermarked from its years of frozen internment. Inside these unassuming wrappings there is page after page of the Lieutenant’s elegant copperplate handwriting, documenting, with a journalistic eye for detail and an air of almost detached nonchalance, the events that occurred aboard the Polar Exploration Vessel *Raven* during the expedition of 1921–1922.

The handwriting is itself worthy of note: right up to the final entry, wherein he outlines the last enigmatic re-appearance of the Ice Man on the evening of 30th June 1922, Downes’ hand remains steady, graceful and somehow resolute, despite all that was occurring around him. At no point is there the telltale tremor of terror, the shake of a hand nervously fighting both the intense cold and the trepidation of almost certain death. Even his final words; "... and so I too shall step out, into white silence" are formed with the same confidence as his first.

But all this is beside the point. My purpose in writing this foreword is not to lecture you on the vagaries and power of the written word, however fascinating I find the subject, but rather to allow me the opportunity to outline, explain and apologise for the liberty I took in removing the journal of William Downes from the station library at Casey Antarctic Base during my sojourn there in the summer of 2005–06.

Stealing from libraries is not something I make a habit of – especially from one as remote and important as that at Casey. An
account of the mystery of the Raven and the fate of those aboard it, however, was something too enticing to leave behind. I should also confess that my original motive in appropriating the journal was not pure. My intention was to use it to form a work around the basis of Downes’ experience that I could claim as my own fiction. It seemed too good an opportunity to pass up; the secrecy that had surrounded the preparations and departure of Edward Rourke and his company, combined with the disaster that followed, meant that the story of the Raven had been lost. What better opportunity could there be for a writer who happened to find himself in possession of the only remaining document detailing the fate of the ship and all those souls aboard it?

Upon my return to Australia, though, an odd thing happened; the more I considered the contents of the journal and the more I wrestled with the ethics of what I had done by removing it, unauthorised, from its custodians at Casey Station, the harder it became to appropriate the story to my own ends. Each time I began to write ‘My Antarctic book’ – as I came to refer to it – I’d find myself a mere thousand or so words into the first chapter and unable to continue, haunted by the feeling I was doing Downes and those who perished with him a disservice that flew in the face of the Almighty.

At about this time the nightmares began; night after night I’d wake, always in the small hours and always filled with this sense of unspeakable dread. Dawn would find my pillow soaked with sweat and my sheets a choking tangle about me. My poor wife had, on occasions, to move to another room just to get a decent evening’s rest. On waking, I could never recall the exact cause of my dread but only a sense of unshakable, all-pervading cold; a chill from the
very marrow of my bones which set my teeth on edge and tightened the breath in my lungs.

And so it has continued, for the twenty months since I stepped off the gangplank of the *Aurora Australis* and back into the real world in late 2005. Over time the nightmares have become fewer, but no less lacking in intensity. And always, every morning when I enter my study and switch on my computer, Downes’ journal is there to greet me. Accusing. Defying.

Which is how you come to hold this book in your hands. For whatever reason – call it luck, or fate, or karma – the gods have chosen to entangle my voice, and indeed my life, with that of the late Lieutenant William Downes and his ill-fated crewmates. Finally, after much self-doubt and internal debate, I have come to realise that the only way I can free myself of this entanglement is to allow this story – his story – to be told.

Ideally, I should like to have been able to present the journal to you in its complete form – unabridged and without comment. It quickly became clear to me, however, that not only would large sections of Downes’ writing make for exceptionally dull reading – bills of lading, detailed plans for the distribution of supplies to inland depots and that sort of thing – but also that there were holes in his narrative which needed to be filled. Perhaps, I told myself, this was the real reason I spent that summer two years ago so far from home, on the ice-sculpted shores of Newcombe Bay, so that when the time came to tell this story I’d have the voice, the experience and the wherewithal to be able to do justice to this extraordinary piece of history and to capture the terrible, tragic beauty of Downes and his fate.

Wherever possible, I have allowed the Lieutenant to speak for himself – his words capture the immensity and futility of his
situation far better than mine ever could. From time to time, though, I’ve found it necessary to draw upon my own experiences and research to frame the scenes for you, to fill in the gaps and silences behind Downes’ writings. For this, I beg your indulgence.

Anthony Eaton
Canberra
May, 2008
October, 1921
Hobart, Tasmania

The SS *Loongana* steamed slowly up the Derwent River towards its berth at the Salamanca Wharf, and Lieutenant (retired) William Downes, a young man distinguished by his service in France during the Great War, leaned on the portside rail, watching the city of Hobart slip slowly past in the hazy, late-afternoon light. In the distance the monolithic bulk of Mount Wellington, its summit shrouded in cloud, cast a long shadow across the city, rendering the waters of the river to inky blackness.

And me? In my turn, I watch Lieutenant Downes, as I have so many times these last two years. I watch him in my mind’s eye, my
perceptions of him filtered through the veil of time and across the vault of many years now past.

In my research, among the documents and effects that I managed to uncover, I came across a photograph of Downes taken somewhere in Europe, sometime during the war. Faded and grainy, it shows a group of seven men all clad in military garb, sitting in comradely repose upon a low stone wall which appears to be the shattered remains of an old farmhouse. Most clutch cigarettes and two sport rakish moustaches of the sort only young men of that era could consider fashionable.

They wear their filthy uniforms with a kind of weary pride. Their slouch hats are, almost to a man, tilted to jaunty angles and their carbine rifles slung carelessly on their shoulders or, in a couple of cases, propped against the stonework beside them. All are smiling, grinning for the camera as if to convey to the viewer the impression that they find this whole debacle something of a joke. But the smiles don’t touch their eyes. In those there is a kind of terrible distance – similar to what you see in the faces of men who’ve looked into the void of death and then somehow returned.

On the back, in handwriting I’ve come to know well, a brief inscription reads: ‘Me and the lads after B/crt. Terrible affair. L. and B. no longer.’ I know from other photographs that William Downes is the first man on the left but there is no clue to the identities or fates of the other six. It is easy to hope that all made it safely home again and returned from that meat-grinder of a war to farms and families and sweethearts, but of course, given the monstrous capacity of the First World War to devour young men, such a possibility is unlikely.

Downes, though, did return, and attained for himself a modest covering of glory along the way. According to official Army records, on 11th April 1917, during the hellish mauling of the first battle
of Bullecourt, Downes was among the handful of infantry in the Australian 4th Brigade who managed, despite the abject failure of the much-vaunted British tanks, to find a path across the wire-laden no-man’s-land and secure a section of the German trench system that made up the famous Hindenburg Line.

As the battle continued to go sour, and as 2300 members of the 4th Brigade fell to the German machine guns, it became clear to Downes and his compatriots occupying the enemy lines that their position was rapidly becoming untenable and so they fell back towards their own forces, fighting a desperate rearguard action the whole way. In the course of this their captain, one George Smythe-Davis, was injured, taking a bullet in the upper part of his left thigh.

Despite Smythe-Davis ordering his men on without him, Downes put himself at considerable risk by insisting on carrying his Captain to the relative safety of a nearby bomb crater and then holding that position for almost two hours until another Australian squad was able to assist in extracting them from the battlefield. For his efforts, Downes was mentioned in dispatches and later decorated.

I find it hard to look at that photograph nowadays, knowing what I do about Downes’ eventual fate, and trying to reconcile in my mind the enormous injustice of the whole affair. To have returned unscathed from such a hideous experience as Bullecourt, to have demonstrated that sort of strength of character and leadership, only to perish in the icy darkness of an Antarctic winter because of the petty ambitions of another man is a travesty of justice I find difficult to come to terms with.

But I digress. As far as this book is concerned, our relationship with Downes begins not in the muddy battlefields of France but a world away and several years later, aboard the stately steamship
Loongana as she eases her patient way up the Derwent in the calm twilight of a Tasmanian October afternoon. Downes, now at the age of twenty-four, leans upon the teak railing, absorbing the passing vista of Hobart with a cigarette clutched loosely between the fingers of his right hand and a pensive expression on his face. Beside him, a battered brown suitcase contains his other suit, several shirts, his good shoes and his shaving gear. Tucked beneath his left arm is a copy of yesterday’s Melbourne Age and in the pocket of his jacket is a new journal, covered in red leather and inscribed inside with the words:

TO WILL. FOR SAFE TRAVELS, WITH LOVE, ELSIE.
WEATHERLY, 1921.

Inside this as-yet-unblemished token is a single sheet of paper, folded once, and it is this which has brought the Lieutenant down here to Hobart from his parents’ farm outside Ballarat. Though the letter is typed, the signature at the bottom is crabbed and spidery, suggesting a hand more concerned with efficiency than aesthetics.

Perhaps, as the Loongana steams past Kingston and Sandy Bay, Downes reaches into his pocket, retrieves the letter and re-reads it for the hundredth time, turning over in his head the enigmatic invitation. Perhaps he wonders again at the odd circumstances that have brought him once more from the peaceful security of Weatherly and tempted him into the unknown. Perhaps, in removing the letter from his new journal, he notes the inscription from his sweetheart and wonders if the price of this undertaking is too high.

Or perhaps he does none of these things, but simply continues his quiet observation of the banks of the river as they slip past.

One thing he would certainly have seen, though I imagine its significance escaped him at the time, was a particular vessel, moored
among the many smaller ships and boats in Sandy Bay. The two-
masted, brigantine-rigged shape of the Polar Exploration Vessel 
*Raven* would have dwarfed most of the smaller boats lying at anchor 
around it, but its tar-black hull probably blended somewhat into 
obscurity against the darkening waters of the river, overshadowed 
at that time of day by the surrounding hills. As best I can discover, 
by the time Downes arrived in Hobart to consider fully Edward 
Rourke’s extraordinary offer, the *Raven* had been afloat and on her 
mooring for almost six months. Having completed her sea trials 
the previous autumn under the command of Captain McLaren, she 
had been laid up at anchor for the duration of the winter with only 
a skeleton crew of watchmen aboard.

As the *Loongana* made her stately way towards Battery Point 
and Sullivan’s Cove beyond, her wake would have taken a few 
minutes to reach the *Raven* and, as heavy as the polar vessel was, 
it is unlikely that the passing of the larger ship would have made 
much impact, except perhaps to set the masts swaying slightly. If 
Downes did indeed notice the dark ship, who can know what his 
thoughts might have been? Certainly he could not have imagined 
that he was looking at his tomb.
2nd October, 1921
Hobart, Tasmania

Having arrived in Hobart this evening aboard the SS *Loongana*, I have established lodgings for myself in a respectable boarding house, run by a Mrs Pilkington, a widow who happily accepts ex-servicemen of good character, who are of clean appearance. Though I had not written ahead to reserve a bed, she was, after some discussion, happy to accept my military credentials and my record in France, which she held in good regard.

The passage from Melbourne across Bass Strait is one which, I will admit, I approached with some trepidation, remembering well the awful weather which greeted us our first three nights at sea when we shipped out for Egypt. This time, however, Neptune was much kinder and the *Loongana*, which is clearly a well seasoned vessel and used to this particular ocean, handled the swells with aplomb. I can only hope this bodes well for whatever journeying this strange expedition will involve.

From the dormer window of my small room I have a view out across the wide expanse of the Derwent River. The city of Hobart stretches along its banks, and from what I have seen in my brief walk up from the docks, it is a pleasant enough place, though many of the buildings are of heavy grey stonework, a legacy of
its convict heritage, I imagine, which lends the town a distinctly sombre air. As we steamed upriver towards our berth, the distant peak of Mount Wellington dominated the landscape, hunching black against the sunset with its summit shrouded in cloud. I hope for some clear weather in the next few days so I can take in a full and unencumbered view of the mountain, which certainly seems impressive, especially in comparison to the farmlands I am used to.

I am looking forward to presenting myself at the expedition offices tomorrow morning, to finally meet the enigmatic Mr Rourke and investigate his curious proposal more fully. Considering his letter, which I have carried with me against the possibility that I might have been somehow deceived, I confess that I find myself somewhat at a loss as to precisely why I have decided to come here.

Mother is of the opinion that the war has left me ill-equipped to deal with the more pedestrian aspects of life and perhaps she has a point. Certainly, from the few scant facts that Mr Rourke was willing to commit to the page, this ‘great undertaking’ of his promises some form of adventure at the very least. In the couple of years since my return from Europe, life has acquired a certain monotony which I am glad to break. In France, in the midst of that maelstrom at Bullecourt, I remember wishing fervently for nothing more than one last evening sitting with my parents on the verandah at Weatherly, watching the sun set over the house paddock. Now though, having fortuitously managed to return from Europe with both my limbs and reputation intact – the latter indeed somewhat improved as a result of my actions – the gentle pace of home has lost a deal of its lustre.

Whatever my reasons, whether they be the craving for further adventure, or simply an inability on my part to settle down, it is
fruitless to dwell upon them now, for here I am, safely in Hobart and, while I am not yet completely decided on my position as regards Mr Rourke’s odd invitation, I am determined to investigate it further.

It strikes me that this journal, which Elsie was good enough to give me as a parting gift, may stand as my sole record of the events of this adventure and so for the sake of completeness I will relate here the circumstances which have brought me to Hobart, seemingly, as my mother describes it, ‘on a whim’.

When Captain Smythe-Davis offered my name to Mr Rourke as a ‘young man of suitable discretion and admirable fortitude’, I am certain he thought himself to be doing me a favour. Indeed, when the Captain wrote to me, explaining that an associate of his was seeking a particular type of man for an undertaking which he was not at liberty to set to paper, I was flattered. Certainly I can think of a number of other lads in our company who would have served to meet Mr Rourke’s requirements just as well as myself; good blokes, all of them.

For reasons best known to himself, the Captain recommended me and it was with a great deal of anticipation and more than a little curiosity that I soon after received Mr Rourke’s invitation to join him and his company here in Hobart to, in his words, ‘prepare for, and then embark upon, what will doubtless become known as one of the greatest undertakings of adventure and exploration of recent times.’

This in itself piqued my curiosity – as the Captain no doubt attested, I have always had something of a hankering to step outside the normalcy of my everyday life and challenge myself against the wider world; indeed, it was this peculiar aspect of my nature which encouraged me to sign up so readily in the AIF and which, I believe, served me well on the battlefield.
Mr Rourke’s letter continued thus:

At present, and without some form of informed commitment from yourself, I am unable to divulge to you more than the barest details of this undertaking, but suffice to say that I am seeking a young man, physically able and with good strength of character, who will be able to endure the privations and hardships of an extended sea voyage in often difficult circumstances while maintaining a sense of leadership at all times. This man shall work closely with Captain Smythe-Davis and be in charge of much of the logistical planning and the day-to-day running of the expedition, and in a position to step into my shoes should something unforeseen occur.

Lieutenant, make no mistake, should we succeed in this we shall achieve a great deal of recognition and regard for both ourselves and, indeed, our nation. I have committed a large proportion of my personal wealth to ensuring that our success is assured. If you see fit to accept my offer, and things proceed to my satisfaction and expectations, I am certain that many future opportunities will present themselves to you as a direct result of your involvement.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you at our expedition offices in Hobart, Tasmania, to discuss this great undertaking. Should you wish to further investigate my offer, please inform me by return post and I shall gladly book you passage from Melbourne at the earliest possible convenience.

Sincerely yours,
Edward Rourke
Reading back over it, there is something about the letter that I find vaguely unsettling, but difficult to express. It is always hard to gain any true sense of a man from a letter but, despite its general nature, Mr Rourke’s correspondence leads me to imagine him as being particularly focused – for want of a better term – and this is a trait I have often observed in other men, both for better and worse. It was my experience in France, that those men most afflicted by this type of peculiar intensity either survived unscathed like myself, or were the first to fall under German bullets.

Whatever the specifics of Mr Rourke’s character, I am certain that I will gain some understanding of him once I have at hand more information about this expedition. Given that he has chosen Hobart as his base of operations, I can only assume he intends to voyage south to the polar ice cap, but for what reasons I cannot even hazard a guess.

It is getting late and I need to find a place to dine, as Mrs. Pilkington informs me she is unable to provide an extra meal for this evening, so I shall end this entry here.