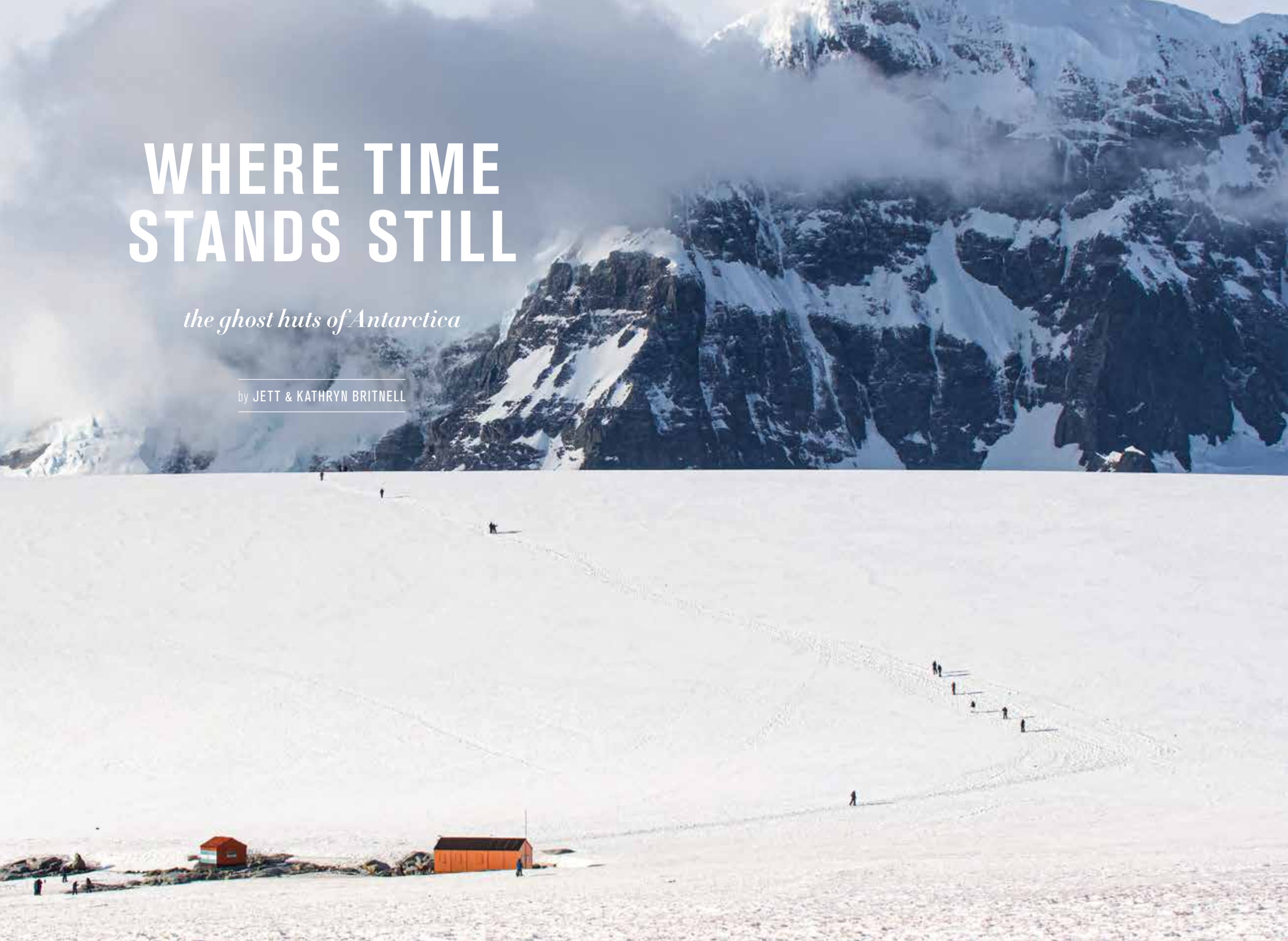

WHERE TIME STANDS STILL

the ghost huts of Antarctica

by JETT & KATHRYN BRITNELL

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Antarctica is the continent where time itself seems to hesitate, and the weight of history lies buried beneath drifting snow and ancient ice. At this inhospitable edge of the world, where storms can erase the landscape in moments and the cold presses deeper than anywhere else on Earth, a scattering of humble wooden huts stand sentinel—weathered but stubbornly intact, haunting testaments to the grit of early scientific exploration and the will to survive at this most remote frontier.

Preserved by the relentless cold, these "ghost huts" have defied decay, holding within them the rhythm of lives abruptly interrupted when expeditions moved on or were forced to abandon their objectives. Unlike ruins elsewhere that crumble with age, the ghost huts of Antarctica appear suspended in time, neither wholly deserted nor truly inhabited. Yet each tells a story of endurance.

Damoy Hut, built in 1975 above Dorian Bay, served as a transit stop for researchers en route to Rothera Station. Its bunks and notebooks remain in place as though waiting for their occupants to return. Wordie House, established in 1947, became a cornerstone of Britain's postwar presence. There, typewriters, weather logs, and even a chessboard remain, silent witnesses to men who recorded data through the long winter nights. On Detaille Island, the evacuation in 1959 was so sudden that socks were left pegged to lines to dry and teacups abandoned on tables.

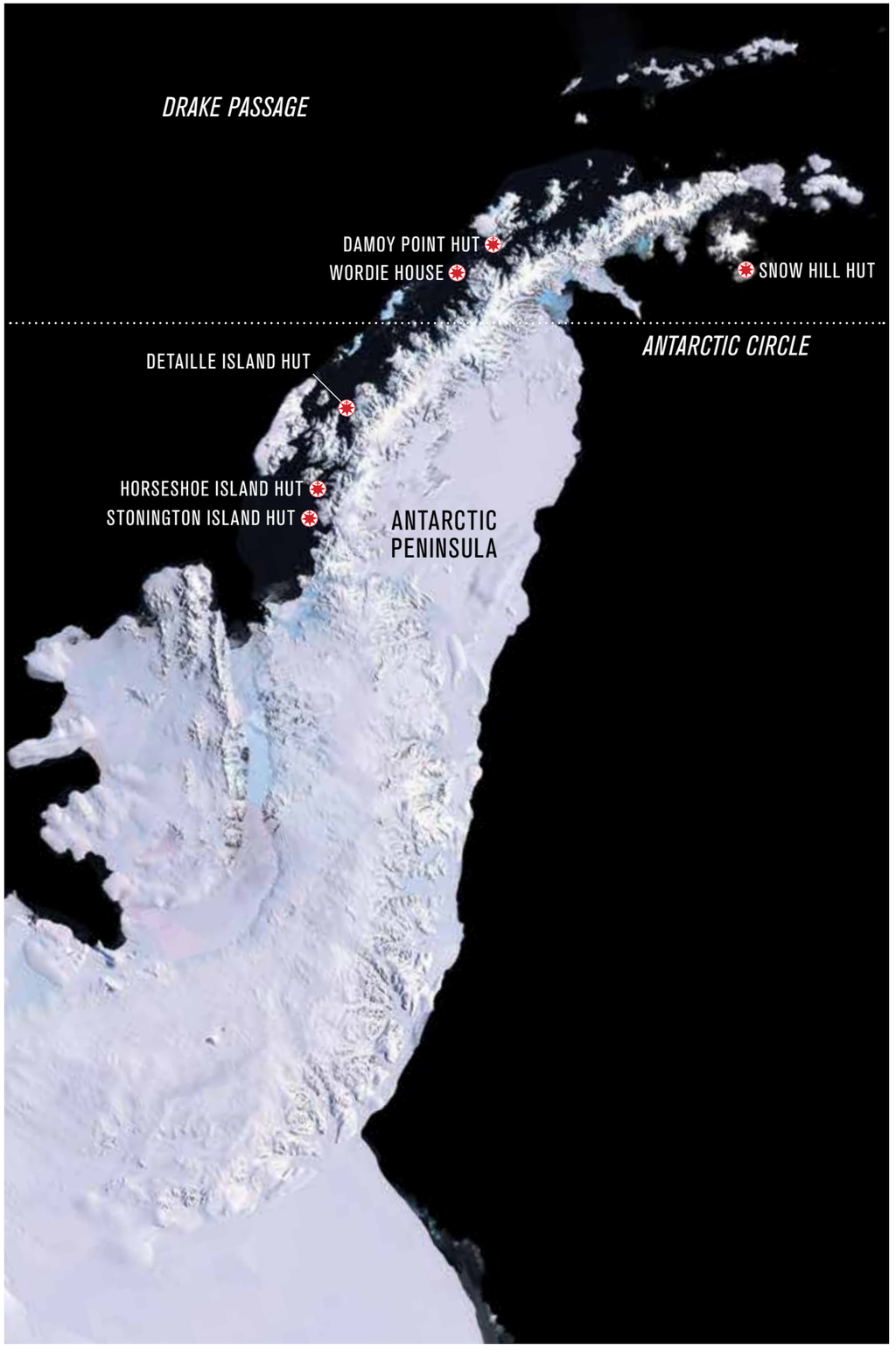
Built in 1955, Horseshoe Island Hut was abandoned just 10 years later, skis and tools left behind in the rushed departure of its researchers. At Stonington Island, where British and American scientists once worked side by side, laboratories still bear traces of shared discovery. Snow Hill Island offers an earlier glimpse into Antarctic history, where a Swedish expedition endured two unrelenting winters at the dawn of the 20th century. Their simple shelter remains a monument to extraordinary perseverance.

Visitors who step inside these ghost huts often speak of an eerie, unsettling feeling of being watched. The sensation echoes the famous account of Sir Ernest Shackleton during his desperate 1916 crossing of South Georgia, when he felt an unseen companion walking beside him, a reassuring phenomenon that later became known as the "third man factor."

Over the years, dozens of these ghost huts were shuttered because of changing scientific priorities, limited funding, or the extreme challenges of survival. Some—such as those associated with Shackleton—have been preserved as cultural heritage sites, while others persist despite the relentless advance of ice and snow.

Today, more than 40 modern scientific research stations operate across the continent, equipped with laboratories, satellite links, and renewable power. Scientists drill into ancient ice, study fragile ecosystems, and gaze into the cosmos through skies untouched by light. Amid their relatively advanced research stations, the ghost huts remain as museums and memorials, their silence carrying the story of courage and determination at one end of the Earth.

OPENING SPREAD: DAMOY HUT IS PERCHED UPON A ROCKY KNOLL ON WIENCKE ISLAND ABOVE THE ICEBERG-DOTTED WATERS OF DORIAN BAY ON THE PALMER ARCHIPELAGO. FACING PAGE: A MAP OF THE ANTARCTIC PENINSULA WAS BUILT FROM IMAGES FROM THE LANDSAT 7 SATELLITE. IMAGE COURTESY NASA.



DAMOY POINT HUT

A STANDOUT DETAIL IS THE HUT'S VIVID ORANGE EXTERIOR, METICULOUSLY RETURNED TO ITS ORIGINAL HUE DURING A 2023 RESTORATION. INSIDE IS A BUNKROOM OUTFITTED WITH FIVE TIERS OF TRIPLE-STACKED WOODEN BUNKS, A COMPACT KITCHEN WITH A SIMPLE STOVE, AND A MODEST MESS AREA.

WORDIE HOUSE

NAMED AFTER SCOTTISH POLAR EXPLORER JAMES WORDIE, WHO WAS THE CHIEF SCIENTIST AND GEOLOGIST ON SHACKLETON'S *ENDURANCE* EXPEDITION OF 1914-17, WORDIE HOUSE WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1935. THE ORIGINAL STRUCTURE, WHICH WAS LOST IN WHAT MAY HAVE BEEN A TSUNAMI IN 1946, WAS REBUILT USING AN ARRAY OF REPURPOSED MATERIALS.

DETAILLE ISLAND HUT

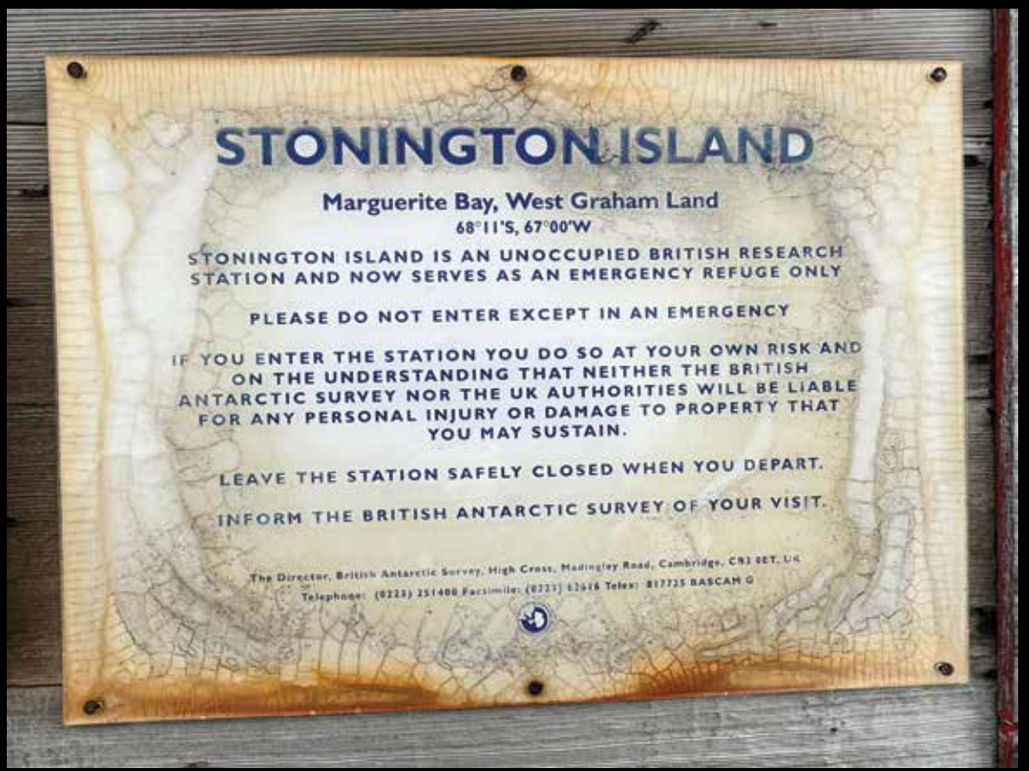
LOCATED IN THE LALLEMAND FJORD, OFF THE LOUBET COAST, DETAILLE ISLAND HUT WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1956. HOWEVER, THE SITE WAS ABANDONED IN 1959, WHEN UNRELENTING SEA ICE PROMPTED ITS RESEARCHERS TO MAKE AN EMERGENCY ESCAPE ACROSS THE ICE SHEET.

HORSEHOE ISLAND HUT

ESTABLISHED IN 1955, THIS PREFABRICATED STRUCTURE WAS SHIPPED TO THE SITE AND ASSEMBLED BY A DEDICATED TEAM OF GEOLOGISTS AND OTHER SCIENTISTS.

STONINGTON ISLAND HUT

STONINGTON ISLAND WAS THE SITE OF OPERATIONS FOR BOTH THE AMERICANS AND BRITISH, WHERE THEY CARRIED OUT SIGNIFICANT SURVEY WORK ON THE ANTARCTIC PENINSULA.



SNOW HILL HUT

IN 1902, A SWEDISH ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION, LED BY OTTO NORDENSKJÖLD, PLANNED TO OVERWINTER IN THE HUT AHEAD OF CARRYING OUT EXPLORATIONS IN THE SPRING. WHEN THEIR SHIP, THE *ANTARCTIC*, SANK AFTER BEING CRUSHED BY PACK ICE, THEY ENDED UP STAYING THERE UNTIL THEIR RESCUE BY THE ARGENTINE NAVY TWO YEARS LATER.