

AURORA: DOUGLAS MAWSON AND THE AUSTRALASIAN ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION 1911–14.

Beau Riffenburgh. 2011. Norwich: The Erskine Press. 525 p, hardcover, illustrated. ISBN: 978-1-85297-108-3. £37.50.

In the preface to this book, the author sets out his stall concerning its subject, the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) of 1911–1914, under its leader Douglas Mawson. He points out that this was intended to be a thoroughly scientific expedition, at a scale never previously contemplated, and that in its execution 'it was responsible for the exploration of vastly more territory than any other Antarctic expedition'. He points out firmly that outside Australia there is much ignorance concerning this 'magnificent' expedition and points out that his book represents the 'first examination of the full expedition' since the publication of Mawson's own book *The home of the blizzard* in 1915 (page 1) modestly refraining to note that it was surely impossible that Mawson's own work (Mawson 1915) could be regarded as a disinterested and dispassionate review of events since, among other reasons, most of the participants in the expedition were very much alive when he wrote.

In order to conduct a trivial test of the hypothesis concerning the public knowledge, or lack of it, of Mawson and his expedition, this reviewer attended an adult education session on 20th century art at the Isle of Man College in Douglas, by coincidence just down the road from the place of residence of Mawson's mother, who was a Moore, a very common surname on the island, before her marriage. He asked the class, none of whom had great polar interests, if they had heard of Robert Falcon Scott. All raised their hands. Ernest Shackleton? 17 out of 20 but one admitted that he knew the name only from the RAF aircraft named after the great explorer in the 1950s. Roald Amundsen? 8 out of 20. Douglas Mawson? Not one hand but a lady smiled and said 'With a first name like that he might have been one of ours.' This is true in a manner of speaking.

It should be stated immediately that this book is as magnificent in its own way as Mawson's expedition was in its. From our knowledge of the previous works by this author one might reasonably expect the usual intense attention to detail and balance of presentation for which he is so conspicuous among polar writers, and be impressed by the sheer amount of hard work entailed in producing this text. It is sufficient to write that one is not at all disappointed. But this reviewer definitely detected a slight, almost intangible, lightening of tone in the writing in this book in comparison with his *Nimrod*, for example (Riffenburgh 2004). This seems to have had the effect of making the whole work more capable of being absorbed in a very few readings, surely a good thing with such a complex tale. It is too much to say that it is as difficult to put down as a Sherlock Holmes short story, for example, but almost, and in view of the intimidating bulk of the book, and the detail of the topic, that is no mean claim. A further point in this context is that the author, in collaboration with his wife Dr Elizabeth Cruwys, who writes successful historical crime novels under the name Susanna Gregory, has taken up detective fiction writing too,

under their joint pseudonym of Simon Beaufort. One of these books has direct relevance to the Antarctic and rejoices in the title *The 'Nimrod' murders*. It is a very good read and is highly recommended both for the story and for the numerous insights with which the text is replete (Beaufort 2011).

It should be remembered that the AAE comprised three land stations, the Main Base at Cape Denison, under Mawson himself, the Western Base on the Shackleton Ice Shelf, under Frank Wild, and the station on Macquarie Island under George Ainsworth, and that the lynchpin of the whole venture was the vessel *Aurora*, commanded by John King Davis, of which it may be said that no expedition was better served by its, in this case, very modest, ship. The significance of the vessel to the whole is reflected in the centrality of its name in the title of the book.

An obvious problem to an author taking on the challenge of describing the expedition is how best to explain events in each of the separate elements of the expedition while retaining the integrity of the whole. The author's strategy in this respect is, after the background to the expedition is described, to have chapters or groups of chapters on events at each of the bases, most notably of course, those of the different journeys undertaken from each, and the scientific work related thereto, while not, at the same time, forgetting events on the ship. He does not, quite rightly in the opinion of this reviewer, resist the obvious temptation to build suspense by dividing up the element of the expedition for which it is most remembered, namely the great journey of Mawson, B.E.S. Ninnis, and Xavier Mertz punctuated by the death of Ninnis, by falling into a crevasse, that of Mertz probably from vitamin A toxicity caused by eating 'infected' dog meat, and of Mawson's own horrific sole journey back to the Main Base where he arrived just having missed the departure of *Aurora* and having to face another winter in the Antarctic. But the author does not need to overstress the awfulness of these events. The story simply speaks for itself, and there is no need to make it more sensational than it is.

One further aspect of the main part of the book that must surely present temptations to an author is to reduce the amount of text devoted to the less 'important' part of the story and in this case one suggests that this would be the events at the Macquarie Island base. However this has been resolutely resisted and a full account is presented of the 23 months for which the party was on the island, stressing the importance of the radio installation there as a means of maintaining communication with further south. The account demonstrates that of the three bases this was perhaps the least successfully led. At all events there were serious disagreements among the five people established on the island, but this does not seem to have affected the quality of the scientific work achieved. This reviewer was particularly impressed by the results of the surveyor, Leslie Blake, whose map of the northernmost part of the island, reproduced on page 218, is an extraordinary achievement for what was more or less a single handed effort.

A further and obvious problem especially in a book with such a large *dramatis personae* is how to introduce the individuals who participated in it. A simple list at the start with comments on individuals would have become tedious.

Instead, the author introduces each as he becomes prominent in the story and this successfully brings in 'personal interest' at intervals. However, at the valedictory there is a brief note on the subsequent career of each. Some of these are short, the subject becoming a casualty in World War I, while some are longer. A few of the members of the expedition survived into their 90s.

The author's summing up of the expedition as a whole and of its significance is masterly. But in a short review one cannot do better than follow the author and quote the well known comment of J. Gordon Hayes that the expedition was 'judged by the magnitude both of its scale and of its achievements, was the greatest and most consummate. . . .that ever sailed for Antarctica' (Hayes 1928: 210). There is a full, and extremely detailed, critical apparatus.

The book is very well presented and the price, for what one gets, is remarkably modest. It is handsomely and solidly bound and is illustrated throughout by contemporary photographs, many from the camera of Frank Hurley, and diagrams. There are several maps of which the two largest are enclosed either in a separate container or attached to the inside rear cover. These are maps taken from the original reports of the expedition and have been reproduced at a rather small scale. The reader needs to make constant reference to these maps since they set out the routes taken by the various sledging parties which are marked by dates recording progress. This can easily be made much simpler by scanning each into a computer and magnifying it. This enables the reader to have a clear large scale image in front of him without having the inconvenience of constantly turning the page to see those maps that are, as is usual in books,

fixed in place. The dust jacket is most attractive. Several of the photographs in the book could have served the purpose but the one selected, of a group of men, and simply entitled 'Watching *Aurora* depart' sums up the sheer loneliness of Antarctica in a way that no words ever could.

To sum up. What more can be said about the AAE that is not said in this book? One supposes that it is not impossible that further diaries may be discovered, new medical results might cast light on precisely what it was that caused the death of Mertz, or perhaps new insights might arise into the problems faced by the expedition in maintaining radio contact between Cape Denison, Macquarie Island and the mainland, but these would simply be details. The great account of the AAE has been written and we should express our thanks to the author for completing such a mammoth task in such an efficient manner. At the same time we must acknowledge the enterprise of the publisher for having sufficient faith in the exercise to carry it through.

All with interests in Antarctic history, should, nay, *must*, read this book if they are to retain credibility in the subject. (Ian R. Stone, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Rd., Cambridge CB2 1ER.)

References

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- Riffenburgh, B. 2004. *'Nimrod': Ernest Shackleton and the extraordinary story of the 1907–09 British Antarctic Expedition*. London: Bloomsbury.