

A voyage around Mawson

NON-FICTION

IN BED WITH DOUGLAS MAWSON: Travels Around Antarctica. By Craig Cormick. New Holland. 320pp. \$29.95.

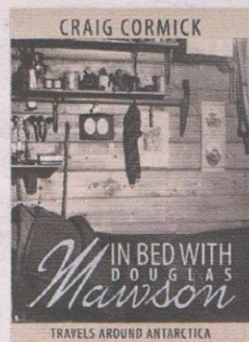
Reviewer: **ALESSANDRO ANTONELLO**

Craig Cormick voyaged to Antarctica in early 2008 aboard the Australian icebreaker RSV Aurora Australis. It was a seven-week resupply voyage for the Australian Antarctic Division, covering the great expanse of the Southern Ocean, and visiting Australia's three scientific stations, Casey, Davis and Mawson. Cormick, a Canberra author and science journalist, travelled as an arts fellow, and the result is this charming and thought-provoking book.

Cormick takes the reader not only to Antarctica, but on a voyage through bureaucracy, love and separation, subversive history, through past, present and future, and an overwhelming encounter with nature. He admits that he dreamed of Antarctica a thousand times before he "trod upon its frozen shore", and with an easy, conversational tone, he shares with the reader experiences which surpassed his dreams.

The first question a reader might have is what of the "in bed" part of the title? This is the most experimental part of Cormick's writing: his account of his fantastical, voyage-long encounter with the phantom of Douglas Mawson, the dominant figure of Australia's Antarctic history, foremost among Antarctic scientists and explorers, and one of the fathers of the Australian Antarctic Territory. Cormick first speaks with Mawson under the influence of a seasickness tablet, and Mawson returns to interrogate him throughout the book. Mawson continually challenges Cormick to justify his ideas, and the reader benefits from Cormick's self-reflection. It is an interesting conceit, to attempt to think with the mind of the long-dead and larger-than-life figure of Mawson, and Cormick generally achieves good humour and insight. It turns out that Mawson was quite good in bed.

Bureaucracy is one of the major themes. Cormick opens with a story of Australian expeditioners complaining of bureaucracy in a discussion on conservation and the Antarctic environment. In this opening scene, he demurs at making a judgement, but bureaucracy quickly becomes the distant and interfering enemy of all good-hearted and energetic explorers. On one occasion, he notes, approvingly, a common theme in the writing of modern explorers and adventurers which regards the "heroic age" of Antarctica as having been replaced by a "heroic age of bureaucracy that excessively limits the individual". Throughout the book,



bureaucracy menacingly rears its head, though, in the end, there is no triumph over it by the scientists and expeditioners.

Another major theme is love and separation. At the start of the voyage, Cormick tries to sneak his wife aboard the Aurora Australis while it is docked in Hobart, yet falls at the first hurdle when a security guard – a menacing bureaucrat with clipboard – denies her entry. It is a telling beginning to his reflection on his separation from his own wife, and the separation of other Antarctic explorers and scientists from their loved ones, particularly the great love story of Douglas Mawson and his future wife, Paquita.

In the course of his voyage, Cormick makes several wonderful trips on to the continent, with extended visits outside Davis and Mawson stations. Like so many before him, he writes of the awe and spectacle of the violent, primal and beautiful Antarctic environment.

This book is in many ways a provocation. It makes us question the purpose of incessant human activity in the Antarctic, not just in a value-for-taxpayers sense, but also in a broad human sense – why are we there, and where are we going? Cormick can see quirky and downright subversive futures: on one occasion he offers the idea of scientific stations, fundamentally disenchanted with their bureaucratic overlords, pushing for independence and existing as breakaway independent republics, making their money from tourism or mineral exploitation. Cormick doesn't seem to be encouraging such a world, but his speculation is more than many others have offered, and really gives pause for thought.

Few writers communicate these wider sentiments to the public, and readers interested in the Antarctic, travel, or the politics of science and conservation will be interested to read this book. In this centenary year for Australian Antarctic exploration and science, I expect this will be one of the better offerings. Cormick can at times be a little too blunt, rushing through his experience



The Antarctic flagship Aurora Australis, on which author Craig Cormick, above left, travelled.

and through Antarctic history without stopping a little longer to explore meanings and implications – but who am I to question another man's Antarctic dreams? His encounter with Mawson enlivens the book, and makes one think again about this giant figure of Antarctic history.

Cormick's journey to Antarctica highlights the pointy end, the particular and (relatively) everyday experiences that give the huge ideas of science, heroism, environment and humanity their meanings. Many have journeyed to Antarctica, and there are many ways to make one's journey there: Cormick makes his journey with phantoms and metaphors, with heroes and villains, with past, present and future. The reader, I think, has a good voyage leader in Cormick.

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