

● Review of the week

Brought in from the cold

Gripping accounts are testament to the bravery and determination of an often overshadowed Antarctic explorer.

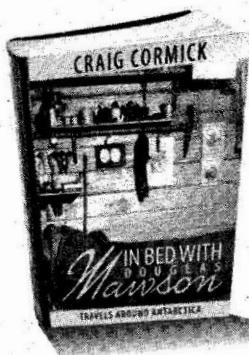
Review by Ross Fitzgerald

When explorer Douglas Mawson left Hobart on December 2, 1911, he was feeling optimistic, although he was actually setting out on an expedition that would bring extreme privation in the world's most extreme environment. Later in his book, *The Home of the Blizzard*, Mawson evocatively wrote: "As we proceeded down the river... Hobart looked its best, with the glancing sails of pleasure craft skimming near the foreshores, and backed by the stately, sombre mass of Mount Wellington."

Things only got worse from then on. Yet, despite the difficulties, his Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911-14 was extremely successful in scientific terms and well worth remembering in this, its centenary year.

Craig Cormick's cheekily titled book *In Bed With Douglas Mawson* was almost entirely written during his seven-week voyage on board the RSV Aurora Australis from January 31 to March 20, 2008. This enabled the award-winning journalist to visit Australia's three Antarctic Division bases on the frozen continent and thus to follow in the great explorer and geologist's footsteps. These three Australian bases are Casey, Davis and Mawson.

As he navigated the wild Southern Ocean and explored the icy coastline of Antarctica, Cormick was deeply aware of travelling "with Mawson's ghost at his side". Even though he was the equal of his contemporaries, Sir Ernest Shackleton and Robert Falcon Scott, until recently Mawson's achievements have been overshadowed by their fame. Yet, as Cormick demonstrates in this well-researched and lucidly



Biography

IN BED WITH DOUGLAS MAWSON

Craig Cormick
New Holland, 320pp,
\$29.95

DOUGLAS MAWSON

Lincoln Hall
New Holland, 224pp,
\$49.95

written book, in terms of discovery, Mawson's expedition achieved considerably more than both Shackleton and Scott combined.

Cormick reminds us that, in 1773 and 1774, Captain James Cook and his crew aboard the *Resolution* were the first humans to cross the Antarctic Circle. Yet, even so, they failed to sight the Antarctic continent. Cook wrote at the time: "I can be bold enough to say that no man will ever venture further than I have done and that the lands which may lie to the South will never be explored."

How wrong Cook was, as this book convincingly demonstrates.

Cormick's thrilling, yet often humorous, account of his travels around Antarctica will be of considerable interest to those intrigued by the spirit of adventure, comradeship and discovery. There are two negatives, though. Unfortunately, *In Bed with Douglas Mawson* contains no index and, more importantly, not a single photograph.

This is certainly not the case with Lincoln Hall's revealing book *Douglas Mawson*, which boasts 170 beautifully produced photographs, many of them previously unpublished. Of particular note are some Antarctic images of the great photographer and filmmaker Frank Hurley, who accompanied Mawson's expedition, plus some superb photos showing the explorer as a dedicated family man, friend and leader, as well as an extraordinary adventurer.

Some of the most striking photos, taken at Cape Denison, feature Adelie penguins, which, then with no land predators to fear, were "more confused than frightened" by the curious human beings they encountered. One of the most revealing snaps is that of an emaciated Mawson, who lost a third of his body weight in Antarctica.

All the various images in Hall's fascinating pictorial biography, coupled with excerpts from diaries and other correspondence written at the time, give the reader a unique and fascinating insight into the personality of the multifaceted Mawson, who, as a scientist and an explorer, demonstrated enormous bravery and determination.

To illustrate the reality of Mawson's diverse interests, the final photo in the book is that of a finely attired and fit-looking Mawson, in the late 1940s, joking with former



prime minister W.H. ("Billy") Hughes, whom he had tried to persuade to introduce the metric system into Australia. This was two decades before metric was adopted. As far back as 1919, Mawson had written to Hughes, then serving as prime minister, extolling the virtues of the metric system, "including the financial benefits of being able to supply manufactured tools and machinery to the South American market", which had previously been serviced by the defeated Germany.

One of Australia's best-known mountaineers, Hall draws on his own experiences climbing Mount Everest and other peaks to convincingly explain what made it

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possible for Mawson to achieve what he did in Antarctica "in climatic conditions which to the uninitiated seem suicidal".

It seems fitting to close this review with some words of Mawson himself. These are quoted by Craig Cormick towards the beginning of his well-edited and evocative book.

Featured in Hurley's film of Maw-

son's 1911-14 voyage, which was also called *The Home of the Blizzard*, the great explorer wrote on approaching Antarctica: "I never saw or dreamt of anything so gloriously beautiful as some of the stuff we have come through this morning. After lunch the country changed entirely. In place of the confused jumble and crush we have had, we got on to neve slopes (i.e. the upper part of a glacier, above the limit of perpetual snow); huge billows, half a mile to a mile from crest to crest, meshed with crevasses."

Just as the words of Mawson, who died from a cerebral haemorrhage in 1958, are unforgettable and eminently readable, so, too, are these two fine books.