

DOUGLAS
MAWSON

Explore the story of a young Australian Antarctic adventurer and scientist

Australia and Antarctica

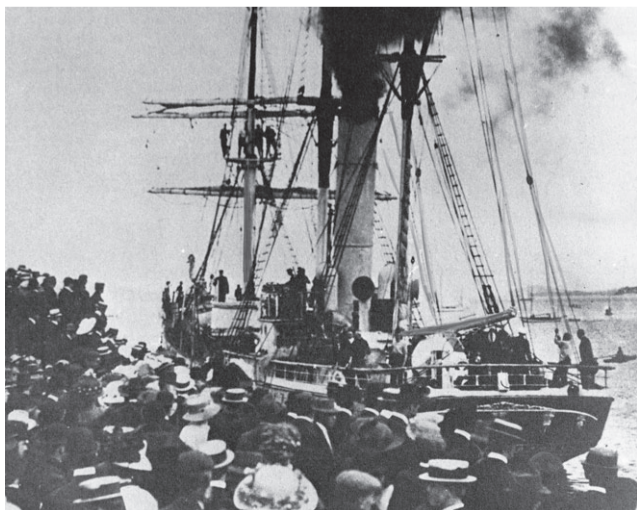
Australia and Antarctica were the last continents to be charted by European explorers. For a long time they were thought to be a single land mass.

Even 100 years ago no-one was quite sure what existed at the southern extremity of the earth. The first sightings of the mysterious seventh continent were recorded in 1820 and people were soon wondering who or what lived there and what we could learn from it.

Tasmanian connection

No known human had set foot in Antarctica until as late as 1895. Several expeditions set out in the early 1900s to study Antarctica and in December 1911 Douglas Mawson led the first Australasian expedition to the frozen south. His group of scientists and adventurers sailed from Hobart bound for Macquarie Island and on to the mysterious Antarctic region. This was Mawson's second voyage to Antarctica.

Mawson landed a communications team on Macquarie



The Aurora setting off from Queens Wharf, Hobart.



Mawson's Hut. Picture by David Killick

Island and in the months ahead they would relay the first radio signals from Antarctica to the world, via Hobart.

Scientists planned many studies with an emphasis on biology, geology, meteorology and magnetic charting for navigational purposes. During this Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) the scientists produced information that made a major contribution to our understanding of Antarctica.

Things to explore:

- Who were the first people to sight land in the Antarctic? www.mawsonshuts.aq/preparation/index.html
- Why did Mawson establish his base at Cape Denison? www.mawsons-huts.org.au/cms/history-of-mawsons-huts/
- Scientists on this expedition found a huge skeleton from an animal they called a sea-elephant. Draw the skeleton. <http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/item/itemDetailPaged.aspx?itemID=53418>



Building Mawson's Hut in 1912. Frank Hurley photo.

Mawson in Antarctica

On January 8, 1912, Mawson's ship reached a wide bay that Mawson named Commonwealth Bay. The expedition party landed at Cape Denison.

Mawson set up two exploration bases, one on Shackleton Ice Shelf and the main base under his leadership at Cape Denison. At each base he and his men undertook a series of carefully planned scientific investigations, including intensive land exploration along the coast and into the interior. He later described Commonwealth Bay as "the Home of the Blizzard" because of its extremely powerful winds.

Mawson set off on a "far eastern" expedition with Belgrave Ninnis and Xavier Mertz. After covering 500km in five weeks disaster struck: Ninnis, with one of the two sleds and most of the party's supplies, was lost down a huge crevasse.

Mertz died on the return trip, but Mawson survived after a solo journey during which he hauled himself on a rope out of a deep crevasse. He had to struggle with continuous hunger, frostbite and other ailments as well as long periods of inactivity because of blizzards. It is one of the great polar stories of survival.

On Mawson's return to Australia in 1914 he was treated as a hero by delighted crowds. His great achievement as an Antarctic leader and scientist were later recognised with a knighthood.

Mawson returned to the Antarctic in 1929 and 1931 as leader of the first and second British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expeditions (BANZARE), focussing on oceanography, marine biology and Antarctic coastal exploration.

Things to explore:

- What did Mawson see when he returned to base after the disastrous sledging expedition? www.mawsonshuts.aq/cape-denison/mawsons-fatal-journey/last-gasp.html
- What was thought to be the cause of Mertz's death? [www.antarctica.gov.au/about-antarctica/history/people-of-](http://www.antarctica.gov.au/about-antarctica/history/people-of-antarctic-history/douglas-mawson)

[antarctic-history/douglas-mawson](http://www.antarctica.gov.au/about-antarctica/history/people-of-antarctic-history/douglas-mawson)

- Make a timeline of important events from the AAE expedition: <http://centenary.antarctica.gov.au/events/historical-timeline-of-aae>

Mawson's legacy

The scientific investigations conducted on Mawson's expeditions contributed to the world's understanding of Antarctica, and the global processes of which Antarctica is a part.

The work of Mawson led directly to the establishment of the Australian Antarctic Territory. In addition to Mawson, Australia's reputation in Antarctica was founded on the work of dedicated scientists and explorers such as John King Davis, Hubert Wilkins, John Rymill and Phillip Garth Law.

Phillip Law promoted and consolidated Australia's interests in Antarctica and was appointed Director of the Australian Antarctic Division in January 1949. His work secured Australia's substantial and ongoing commitment to Antarctica and our scientists continue this important research today.

Things to explore:

- See some photos from the 1911–14 Australasian Antarctic Expedition expedition: www.antarctica.gov.au/about-antarctica/history
- What did Mawson's base at Cape Denison look like? Take a virtual tour: www.mawsonshuts.aq/blizzard-interactive/index.html

What's the weather like?

You don't have to travel to Antarctica to see what it is like – you can look at the webcams set up at Casey, Mawson and Davis Stations and Macquarie Island. The pictures are captured using a video camera and fed into computers at the stations. The computers process the images and send them via a permanent satellite link to the Australian Antarctic Division's headquarters in Kingston.

Things to explore:

- What's the weather like at Mawson station in Antarctica today? www.antarctica.gov.au/webcams/mawson
- Find Cape Denison on a map: http://data.aad.gov.au/aadc/mapcat/display_map.cfm?map_id=156
- How large is Antarctica? www.antarctica.gov.au/about-antarctica/fact-files

An important anniversary

The centenary of Sir Douglas Mawson's 1911-14 expedition provides an opportunity to commemorate 100 years of Australian involvement in Antarctica. More can be learned about this anniversary at www.antarcticcentennial.tas.gov.au/

Things to explore:

- Write a story based on photographer Frank Hurley's image of a man wearing an "ice mask": <http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/item/itemDetailPaged.aspx?itemID=86416>
- Write a poem about the huskies photographed by Mawson's colleague Mertz: <http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/item/itemDetailPaged.aspx?itemID=60379>



Mawson Station Webcam image

Sources:

www.mawsons-huts.org.au
www.antarctica.gov.au
<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia>
<http://centenary.antarctica.gov.au>

