

Alone on the Ice (1912-14 Antarctic expedition)

by David Roberts (2013)

Great Antarctic explorers of the time were Amundsen, Scott & Shackleton. Douglas Mawson [DM] [1882-1958] was a geology teacher that wanted to go with Shackleton in 1907. They explored an active volcano [Erebus] & tried to find magnetic south. Men had to wear goggles to prevent snow blindness. Horses & cars proved useless. They man-hauled a sled then went back for another sled. The team that almost got to the South Pole barely got back to camp just in time to catch the ship [Nimrod] & return home.

DM wanted to make a scientific Antarctica trip, but Shackleton still owed DM money from the 1907 trip & Scott wanted the pole [not science]. So, he created his own trip, the Australasian Antarctic Expedition [AAE]. He was going to take a plane, but it crashed before they left so, they converted it to a tractor [still useless]. He took dogs & sheep. Captain Davis led Aurora out from Hobart, Australia on 12.2.11.

They setup a radio tower on Macquarie Island [to relay messages back home] & left George Ainsworth in charge. Frank Hurley was the team photographer. 1.8.12 they landed at Cape Denison [later to find out it is one of the windiest places on Earth]. Frank Wild [previously went with both Scott & Shackleton] was in charge of the western base [1500 miles from main base]. A prefabricated hut was erected at both consuming 100 lbs of coal a day each. Books, music & drama kept them entertained through the dark winter.

Even the penguins & seals leave for the winter. Tobacco & chocolate were precious rations. DM worked his men hard, but not more than himself. Some got "Polar Depression", but others were lazy. They survived the winter & in Oct they setup cache 5 miles from base in a cave & others further out. Nov 7 teams of 3 set out with the help of 4 support teams of 3 to explore. Several teams went out to map the coastline. They found a meteorite.

By a twist of fate one man had to endure the psychological toll of being alone in the western hut for 10 weeks.

All main base teams had instructions to be back by 1.15.13 [1.30.13 for the western base]. One team was 3 days late due to storms & DM was still out. DM left a note for captain Davis to wait until 2.1.13 then leave to save the western base. A search party was sent out but found no signs & left a food cache 25-miles out. Then a storm kept them from loading up the ship until 2.8.13.

11.10.12 DM, Mertz & Ninnis set out with 1723 lbs over 3 sleds & 17 dogs. They deliberately overloaded the 3rd sled with food [man & dog] that would soon diminish. 300 miles from camp on 12.14.12, Ninnis & his sled disappeared into a crevasse & not seen again. It was too deep for the ropes they had. Their teammate & all the food were gone.

On ½ rations the other two men started the return home with no food for the dogs [which were killed & eaten along the way]. They created a make shift tent. Covering 24 miles the 1st day & progressive less each day [some none due to a blizzard]. Mertz died on 1.8.13. DM had to set out on his own.

He fell 14' into a crevasse & had to pull himself out hand-over-hand up the rope that saved him [twice]. He thought of his fiancé & fought on. He reduced the load again & again [hating to lose photo plates]. He kept writing in his diary [just as Scott did to tell his story of his death]. 1.29.13 he saw a dark spot in the snow & found that food cache [left only 6 hrs prior]. The food allowed him to cover 13 miles that day. 2.1.13 he came to Aladdin's Cave [with pineapple & oranges from the ship] but was forced to stay put due to a blizzard.

2.8.13 the storm stopped & he went the 5 miles to base camp to find no ship [left 6 hrs earlier]. The captain left supplies & 6 men to winter over again. The radioed the ship to return, but winds kept them from boarding. The ship had to get the men at the other base before ice froze [& they were without food]. They were picked up 2.23.13. Only one man knew how to use the radio & he was mental [later diagnosed with schizophrenia]. 6.8.13 the top section of the radio mast blew away & took months to repair due to bad weather.

They started a monthly newspaper. 10.4.13 DM finally fired Jeffryes when Bickerton got the radio to work. By Nov DM went out with a team to find the lost instruments, but they were buried in snow. 11.29.13 the radio crew midway was picked up & 12.23.13 the Aurora picked up the 7 men in Antarctic. They explored the coast for 6 weeks & returned to Australia 2.26.14.

DM was married soon after returning home, then went to visit the families of the lost. DM went on a lecture tour to help pay off debts from the expedition. Hurley & Wild went on the 1914-17 Endurance expedition. 6.29.14 DM was knighted & soon WWI broke out. The public lost interest in explorations. 1929-30 DM led 2 more expeditions to the Antarctic. 1958 Edmund Hillary was the 1st party to reach the south pole [on tractors] since 1912. 2007 Tim Jarvis tried to recreate DM's 300-mile trek [but with many safeguards].

Note: Roald Amundsen was the first to reach the South Pole on 12.14.11.

Quotes:

"Just have one more try – it's dead easy to die, it's keeping -on-ling that's hard." (Robert Service);

Books: The Home of the Blizzard (DM); The Heart of the Antarctic (Shackleton); Endurance (Langsing); Through the First Antarctic Night (Fred Cook); South with Mawson (Charles Laseron); Mawson's Will: The Greatest Survival Story Ever Written (Lenard Bickel); South with Mawson (Charles Laseron); Mawson of the Antarctic (Paquita Mawson);

Definitions: [obviously he likes big words]

16- prosaic = simple

17- adamantine = unbreakable

19- sledge = sled

21- sastrugi = ridges

21- impetuosity = impulsiveness

23- laconically = concise
23- cynosure = guide
24- seracs = ice pinnacle
24- crevasse = split
26- snow bridge = light cover over crevasse
31- neuralgia = pain from shingles
47- preposterous = absurd
47- pathological = compulsive
49- ensconced = hidden
50- modicum = little
50- finnesko = reindeer skin boot
51- felicitous = suitable
52- hoosh = porridge of pemmican, biscuit & melted snow
52- pemmican = dried meat, flour & fat
54- fumaroles = hole in volcano that release steam
59- inclinometer = similar to a compass
60- voyeuristic = nosy
65- erstwhile = previous
65- dereliction = neglect
67- pegmatites = granite
67- eskers = narrow ridge
69- reticent = quiet
69- farinaceous = rich in starch
74- demurred = objected
78- ablution = bath house
78- raiment = clothing
80- theodolite = surveyor's instrument
82- magnanimous = noble
88- nonplussed = perplexed
90- verandah = porch
92- capricious = impulsive
92- voluminous = big
92- taxonomic = scientific classification
92- minutiae = detail
96- cum = with
100- chicanery = trickery
101- precipitating = triggering
105- rookery = breeding grounds
105- raucous = loud
109- tabular = flat
109- denizens = residents
110- ice blink = reflection of more ice beyond the horizon
110- water = reflection of water beyond the horizon
114- reconnoiterers = one who does reconnaissance
115- boatswain = petty officer in charge of the hull [ship body]
115- hijinks = mischiefs
118- purported = alleged
119- fulminated = raged

119- derisive = mocking
119- epithet = nickname
122- indolent = lazy
128- egalitarian = democratic
128- ethos = code
128- blancmange = sweet dessert
128- plebeian = working class
130- sobriquets = nicknames
136- loth = reluctant
136- vicissitudes = changes
137- espied = saw
137- persiflage = frivolous bantering
143- raconteur = storyteller
143- deprecates = condemn
143- diffident = shy
145- incredulity = disbelief
147- biliousness = nausea
150- foibles = faults
151- ambivalent = unsure
152- peevish = irritable
156- conundrum = difficult problem
159- addled = confused
160- tyrannical = oppressive
161- fidelity = loyalty
165- sanguine = cheerful
167- envisaged = predicted
167- fiendish = brutal
169- slovenly = sloppy
169- unalloyed = pure
169- autonomously = alone
175- scintillated = sparkled
175- paucity = rarity
175- suet = hard fat [tallow]
176- miasma = mist
176- diminution = decrease
180- gneiss = type of rock
185- chronometer = timepiece
186- vie = compete
190- floe = floating ice
191- petrel = seabird
191- fulmars = seabird
209- glimpsing = glance at
209- innocuous = harmless
210- pell-mell = recklessly
210- pragmatism = logically
211- conjunctivitis = inflamed eye mucous membrane
213- onerous = difficult
217- macabre = gruesome

218- loath = unwilling
219- husbanded = managed
220- torpor = inactivity
221- wan = pale
226- nigh = near
227- abraded = chafed
227- lanolin = ointment
228- fusillade = shots fired in rapid succession
231- assiduously = diligently
249- invaliding = not valid
250- litany = prayers
258- imputation = accusation
258- contraindication = strict warning
262- gaol = jail
263- attribution = acknowledgement
264- lugubrious = sad
264- doggerel = verse
265- arcane = secret
265- gleanings = gathering bit by bit
268- anomie = unrest
268- slovenliness = sloppy
270- bellicose = aggressive
270- ameliorated = bettered
271- calumnious = false charges
276- haranguing = lecturing
282- ether = air
282- obstreperous = disruptive
290- tenterhooks = suspense
291- sic = intentionally so written
294- panegyrics = elaborate praise
294- canonic = undisputed
295- bohemian = unconventional
295- prescient = psychic
299- anachronistic = outdated
300- corpus = mass
301- consummate = perfect
301- finis = end
302- academe = place of instruction
304- approbation = approval
305- anecdotes = stories
306- beguiling = charming
306- burberry = fabric used for coats
307- priori paradigms = presupposed thinking
310- dilettante = amateur
312- encomium = enthusiastic praise