ANTARCTIC VIGNETTES I: MAWSON’S SAILMAKER – JAMES FORBES

by Herbert J. G. Dartnall

(INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSION)

Whereas the wintering personnel and ships’ officers of the heroic age of Antarctic exploration are generally well-known, many of the ships’ crews are not. Indeed in some instances a complete crew list has never been published. This paper is the first in a series headed “Antarctic Vignettes” seeking to rectify this and record the achievements of some of these little-known men.

Photograph H99, part of the Mawson Collection at the South Australian Museum, is a Frank Hurley portrait of a middle-aged man of indeterminate age with a weather-beaten face, prominent nose and large ears, shown peering off to the left, leaning with his right forearm resting against a wooden box, revealing a gnarled hand with powerful fingers (pl. 1). The picture is entitled “Sails” indicating that he was a sailmaker during the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) 1911-14; but who was this man?

A complete crew list for all of the voyages of the ME has never been published, the usual practice being to name only the ships’ officers and wintering scientists/expeditioners. Sir Douglas Mawson (Mawson 1930) and Captain John King Davis (Crossley 1997) indicated that the crew of the barquentine-rigged Dundee whaler the SY Aurora numbered around 24. However, the total number of men who served on the Aurora’s three Antarctic and two sub-Antarctic voyages (1911-14) is closer to 55, with only four of the officers (Captain John King Davis, Second Mate Percy Grey, Third Mate Clarence P. de la Motte and the Chief Engineer F. J. Gillies) and one of the seamen (Oswald McNeice) serving throughout. So it is possible that as many as five men might have served in the capacity of sailmaker during the AAE.

The Captain’s pay book (24 AAE), however, only lists one sailmaker – James Forbes. He sailed out from England and served on the first two Antarctic voyages and the two intervening sub-Antarctic ones. Apparently a sailmaker was not deemed necessary for the third and final Antarctic voyage and a donkeyman (A. Beverley) was engaged instead.

James Forbes served on Aurora from 26 July 1911 until 18 March 1913 on wages of seven pounds per month and at the end of the expedition was highly commended by Davis. Here the story might have ended but a man of that name (Jimmy Forbes) is mentioned in Hardy (1967) discussing the 1925-27 voyage to the Southern Ocean in Captain Scott’s old research ship the RRS Discovery (Hardy 1967, Savours 1992). Could it be the same man?

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James (Jimmy) Forbes was one of the little known men of the early days of Antarctic exploration. He was born in Dundee in about 1871 and served in the specialist role of sailmaker on three Antarctic expeditions spanning 35 years. He first went south as a 21-year-old on the Polar Star with the Dundee whaling expedition of 1892–93. He next served on the Aurora with Sir Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition (1911–14) and finally he took part in the Discovery Investigations (1929–31). Nothing further is known about this Dundee whalerman he deserves to be more widely recognised.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Mark Pharaoh and the South Australian Museum for permission to reproduce Frank Hurley's photograph of Mawson's sailmaker.

REFERENCES

24AAE: Captain's pay book part of the Mawson Collection held at the South Australian Museum.

BT 100/270: Board of Trade file held at the National Archives Kew, London.

BT 100/305: Board of Trade file held at the National Archives Kew, London.


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Andrew Mawson's stories. I am the founder of Advanced Workplace Associates, an organization that helps business leaders use scientific research to enhance human & organizational performance. Since childhood, I've had an instinct for science and numbers, which I pursued with a bachelor's degree in applied statistics and computer science. Following an early career in the IT industry, I set up a firm from Manchester, England. Since childhood, I've had an instinct for science and numbers, which I pursued with a bachelor's degree in applied statistics and computer science. Mawson lost two men - Belgrave Ninnis and Xavier Mertz - on an expedition to map part of the coastline, but survived an epic return journey alone to the main base. Frank Wild, like Mawson originally from Yorkshire, led the western base party. Geologist Andrew Watson was a student at the University of Sydney. Photograph: James Francis (Frank) Hurley/State Library of New South Wales. Sir Douglas Mawson OBE FRS FAA (5 May 1882 – 14 October 1958) was an Australian geologist, Antarctic explorer, and academic. Along with Roald Amundsen, Robert Falcon Scott, and Sir Ernest Shackleton, he was a key expedition leader during the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration. Mawson was born in England and came to Australia as an infant. He completed degrees in mining engineering and geology at the University of Sydney. In 1905 he was made a lecturer in petrology and mineralogy at the University of Douglas Mawson and the Aurora, Australasian Antarctic Expedition. Mawson was offered a prestigious role on Robert Scott's expedition that sailed for Antarctica in 1910, he turned it down in favour of his own plan for an Australian Antarctic Expedition. He successfully raised funding for an ambitious scientific programme staffed almost entirely by men from Australian and New Zealand Universities. Davis, Captain James Whaling authority. Forbes, James Sailmaker. van Waterschoot van der Gracht, J.M.N.T. - Marine artist. Eitel, Conrad C. - Secretary.