



Explorer Mawson's Huskies Immortalised in Antarctic Place Names.

OPINION

The Australian hero whose feats deserve more recognition

Josh Frydenberg, The Daily Telegraph

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Ask an Australian kid to name a national hero and a sporting star, actor or musician is more than likely to roll off their tongue.

But there is one man whose name should be near the top of any such list and whose feats warrant far more recognition by the young.



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 Antarctic explorer Sir Douglas Mawson. Picture by Vladas Meskenas

So to honour this legacy and to help spread the word about Mawson's heroics, the Turnbull government is funding the Mawson's Hut Foundation's mobile classroom.

It will include displays and exhibits about the five huts Mawson and his team built during the Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911-14, and travel to different schools around the country.

Added to the National Heritage List in 2005, four of the five original huts still survive to this day and tell an amazing story of heroism, adventure, survival and scientific discovery.

In the huts, empty tins, clothes, a stove, bunks and books lie undisturbed more than 100 years on.

Born in England in 1882, Mawson came to Australia aged two.

Educated at Sydney's Fort Street Public School and the University of Sydney, he went on to lecture in mineralogy in Adelaide. It was there he met in 1907 another famed explorer, Ernest Shackleton, with whom he joined the British Antarctic Expedition and got his first taste of the perilous yet exciting nature of a polar expedition.



📷 Explorer Sir Douglas Mawson using a surveying device in the Prince Charles Mountains while leading an exploration to the Antarctic continent. Picture: Supplied

This expedition would be one of 15 that would take place to the icy continent in the years 1897-1917 — a period simply and rightly known as the Heroic Era.

It was a time when dozens of brave souls took on the harshest environment imaginable in a bold journey of discovery that tragically for some ended in death.

Mawson's expedition left Hobart docks on December 2, 1911 on board the Aurora with 31 men, the vast majority of whom were Australians with a small number of New Zealanders and British and one Swiss.

Tonnes of supplies, from medical and communications equipment to tobacco and cocoa, were loaded, along with sledges and a trusted team of working sledge dogs from Greenland.

After battling storms they stopped midway at Macquarie Island to erect a wireless relay station. This would subsequently enable them to send morse code messages from their Cape Denison base in Antarctica back to Australia.

While the conditions on Macquarie Island were far from serene, it was in Antarctica that the limits of human endurance were really tested. Facing temperatures of -40C and worse, Mawson built his huts at Cape Denison, which he named "home of the blizzard", for it is the windiest place at sea level on earth.



 Josh Frydenberg says Mawson deserves far more recognition. Picture: Kym Smith

Mawson would later write in his book of the same name about what he encountered: “A hurricane of wind roaring for weeks together, pausing for breath only at odd hours. Anyone who had been out in it would gladly exchange for hell and chance his luck.”

If anyone could speak with authority about the harsh conditions, then it was Mawson.

For it was in 1912 that he and two colleagues — Belgrave Ninnis, a lieutenant in the Royal Fusiliers, and Xavier Mertz, a Swiss ski champion — headed out with 16 dogs and sledges to map the coastline east of Cape Denison.

Tragedy struck when Ninnis fell down a crevasse to his death.

Days later Mertz, weary and overwhelmed, succumbed to sickness and died in his sleeping bag.

Mawson was left alone, with no human or animal companions.

His remaining dogs were used as food simply to stay alive.

Suffering frostbite and starvation, with boils on his face and his hair falling out, Mawson staggered on alone for 32 days before reaching the hut.



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📷 Raising the flag at Cape Denison after completion of hut. Picture: Supplied

It would take him months to recover before the Aurora returned him to Australia in 1914.

The legend was born.

Mawson’s feat of survival and his success in mapping thousands of kilometres of previously unknown coastline and country became an important part of our young nation’s story.

Mawson’s heroics remain as inspiring today as they did then and every Australian school student should be given an opportunity to learn about his achievements.

And who knows, the Mawson Foundation’s new mobile classroom may very well just find and inspire Australia’s next great explorer and scientist.

Josh Frydenberg is Australia’s Minister for the Environment and Energy. He recently returned from Antarctica, where he accompanied 12 Australian school students and their teachers.



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