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Paradise Regained! the BANZARs

Dr Douglas Mawson returned to Macquarie Island with the British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition on 1 December 1930. On his earlier visit to the island in 1911, he had been alarmed by the rate at which seals and penguins were being killed on Macquarie Island and had campaigned for a halt to the island's oiling industry. When Mawson re-visited Macquarie Island in 1930, he was delighted to find that the native wildlife was flourishing again.

Return to the island



Sir Douglas Mawson, from *Home of the Blizzard*.

When Dr Douglas Mawson first visited Macquarie Island in 1911, sealers had been hard at work killing elephant seals and stripping them for their blubber, which they boiled down in steam-driven digesters. The impact of sealing was not a pretty sight, according to New Zealand journalist, E.R. Waite:

'The beaches of Macquarie Island present a somewhat gruesome appearance, being strewn with skeletons of elephants, while in the case of older operations the bones have come adrift and lie in heaps where washed up by the waves.'



Sealers flensing an elephant seal. Photo by C.A. Sandell from J.S. Cumpston, *Macquarie Island*.

Elephant seals were not the only species to suffer at the hands and machines of sealers. In the early 1900s, these men were employed by sealing businessman, Joseph Hatch. According to E.R. Waite:

'the toll of penguin oil is about double that supplied by the elephants, and, contrary to popular belief, it is not the large King Penguin which is killed, but the very much smaller Royal. These birds arrive on the beach in the neighbourhood of the oil station in countless thousands and are herded in pens, killed, and placed in the digester, 900 birds constituting once charge.'

After returning from Antarctica in 1914, Mawson started writing articles about Macquarie Island. He also lobbied politicians and other prominent figures to close down oiling operations set the island aside as a reserve.

Media attention seized upon the issue of cruelty to penguins, and the Tasmanian Government was soon the focus of an international outcry.

Mawson wanted absolute protection for the native animals on Macquarie Island but knew that his

argument would carry more weight if he could demonstrate an economic benefit to protecting the wildlife. He therefore argued that sheep, cattle or reindeer and even arctic foxes could be farmed on the island if the oiling industry was halted. *Mawson, however, believed that Macquarie Island had little commercial value, and would best be preserved as an asset for future generations.*

Mawson's British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Expedition (BANZARE) left Cape Town aboard the *S. Y. Discovery* and visited Possession, Kerguelen and Heard Islands and the Antarctic continent, before leaving Hobart on 22 November 1930. The *Discovery* anchored in Buckles Bay, Macquarie Island on 1 December 1930.

The next day Mawson had an early breakfast and went ashore with his scientific staff. Mawson then rowed back to the ship for the rest of the equipment and the remainder of the party.

The expedition erected tents above the beach and put their gear inside so that it would be out of the weather. The party included:

Dr W. Ingram and H.O. Fletcher, who were to climb the plateau and use nets and guns to obtain samples of life forms from the lakes.

Dr R.A. Falla and A. Howard, who were to study penguins at the Nuggets.

F Hurley, S.A.C. Campbell and G.E. Douglas, who formed the photographic party,

A.L. Kennedy and K.E. Oom, who were to record magnetic and

astromonomical observations on the spit, from the old magnetic station, Sir Douglas Mawson and R.G. Simmers, who were to examine the AAE huts and wireless station and count the numbers of sea elephants.

As Mawson set off with Simmers to find the old AAE hut, he was delighted to observe that the elephant seals were no longer on the edge of extinction. In fact he counted about a thousand elephant seals, including almost four hundred pups. He was probably just as happy to find Hatch's digesters in ruins.

Many boards had blown off the digester huts, and the roofs, sides and iron-work had rusted. The old sealers' huts were dirty and rusty, and Mawson found an elephant seal inside one of them. The old AAE hut was also decrepit. Boards had fallen off and moss and fungus had grown over it. The roofing iron and guttering had rusted, although the water tank was still sound. The floor was strewn with rubbish from boxes and provisions that had been left behind. Mawson decided that in order to re-establish a research station on this site, a new stove and replacement piping, floorboards, roofing iron and guttering would need to be shipped to the site.

On Wireless Hill, Mawson found that one of the aerial masts had snapped off at ground, and another fallen away. He thought that because the aerial had fallen to the south-west, this might have been caused by an earthquake.

Mawson was amazed to find the wireless transmission house intact,

although several boards had blown off and the roof was leaking badly. Climbing Wireless Hill in a high wind, he immediately became more sympathetic to the hardships endured by Ainsworth and the Macquarie Island AAE as he tried to climb Wireless Hill:

'...I thought Ainsworth made too much of the difficulties of the climb to the Wireless Hut and the need of a stout hand line for safety sake, but going up I found that he had in no way exaggerated the case. The westerlies, streaming across the isthmus, simply whip across the sides of the hill, bending the grass flat or tearing it up altogether, and gouging huge holes in the peaty layers with which the hill is seamed.'



Wireless station hut, Wireless Hill, Macquarie Island, c1912, photo C. Sandell, Mitchell Library, State Library of N.S.W.

Mawson also visited Lusitania Bay in the *Discovery* and found that the two huts that had been there in 1911 were no longer standing. The weather frustrated much of the expedition's scientific efforts. Oom, for example, had wanted to obtain star observations to allow him to determine a more accurate longitude of the island, but mist, wind and cloud prevented him from doing this. Only Frank Hurley was not deterred by the weather, and took great delight in taking moving photographs of the island's wildlife.

References

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- Waite, E.R., 'Macquarie Island - The *Tutanekai's* Cruise - an Island Calling - Sea Elephants and Penguins', 1913, n.d., clipping supplied by J. Massey, Southland Museum, Invercargill.

Further Reading

Stories about the Mawson's earlier expedition to the Antarctic, the Australasian Antarctic Expedition can be found in:

Building Wireless Hill - The AAE, 1911

Hurley's 'Juvenile Trick'

The Wireless Crew, 1911-1913