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Building Wireless Hill

On 2 December 1911, the heavily laden Steam Yacht, *Aurora* left Hobart for Macquarie Island and Antarctica under the command of Captain John King Davis. On board were members of Dr Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition, including George Ainsworth, who was to lead the Macquarie Island station for the next two years. The *Toroa* left Hobart a week later, carrying supplies and staff for the new Macquarie Island station.

Hobart farewells an Antarctic expedition

At Queen's wharf, Hobart on 4 December 1911, sailors perched high in the rigging of the Steam Yacht, *Aurora*, singing sea shanties. In doing this, they entertained a large crowd that had gathered to farewell Dr Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition (A.A.E.). Crew and expeditioners were packing on board a vast bulk of coal, scientific equipment, 6,000 gallons of benzene for fuel, boxes of food, hut timbers, wireless masts, sledging dogs and poultry. There was no room for the dogs below decks. They had to be placed on the ship's bridge, along with meteorological screens that were also used as hen coops.



Dr Douglas Mawson, photo from from *Home of the Blizzard*.

The heavily laden *Aurora* steamed out of Hobart to the cheers and streamers of enthusiastic well-wishers. A fleet of small boats followed the vessel out of the mouth of the Derwent River.



The *Aurora* leaves Hobart in 1911, with Dr Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition on board.

The Aurora headed into a storm.

Before long, forty foot waves surged above her decks. At times it seemed that all fuel and equipment that had not been lashed down would be washed away. Sledge dogs shivered and whined as the spray showered over them. Eventually the storm eventually settled.

On 11 December, Macquarie Island lay, a welcome sight ahead. Mawson and a few members of the expedition rowed ashore to explore Caroline Cove. They took magnetic observations there and established a store of provisions. Mawson and his advisors decided against establishing a station at Caroline Cove and decided to sail north to the Isthmus.



The *Aurora* steamed north to Buckles Bay, where Mawson and his Macquarie Island station leader, George Ainsworth, decided they would build the station hut and wireless station. The Expedition had chartered the steamer, *Toroa*, to take additional supplies of coal to Macquarie Island. This vessel left Hobart a week after the *Aurora* with the A.A.E.'s Macquarie Island crew on board.

The expedition camped in a small wooden sealers' hut below Wireless Hill, in sight of the wrecks of the *Clyde* and the *Gratitude*. Mawson chose the site because he wanted Macquarie Island to relay messages from the station he was about to set up in Adelie Land, Antarctica - an aerial on Wireless Hill, which was three hundred and fifty feet high, would meet with little interference from land masses.



Wireless operating hut, Macquarie Island 1912, photo C. Sandell, Mitchell Library, State Library N.S.W.

The expedition's immediate problem was to haul wireless masts and equipment to the top of the steep hill. Luckily the weather remained clear while the wireless station was being built. Sealers had once used a flying fox to haul blubber to the top of the hill, but by then

the equipment was in a poor state. Mawson's party repaired the flying fox and used it to drag heavy spars for wireless masts and other gear to the top of the hill. As they worked, they sang sea shanties.

In the evening, the expedition members sang and yarned. Every day, two men stayed behind to cook and clean the hut. Those men who were not on domestic duties climbed Wireless Hill and spent the day digging holes for the wireless masts, anchoring stays and hauling gear to the top of the hill. Men at the bottom of the hill had to fend off ferocious attacks from skuas.



The AAE's Macquarie Island Party, 1911-1913, from J.S. Cumpston, *Macquarie Island*. From left: Hamilton, Blake, Ainsworth, Sandell and Sawyer.

A couple of minor accidents occurred while building the wireless station, but by the wireless hut was completed in a week, although the wireless was not, at that stage working. The Antarctic party returned to the *Aurora* in a whaleboat. The last whaleboat trip carried several sheep that had been put ashore to feed and some sledge dogs that had been sent ashore for exercise. As the expeditioners rowed through the choppy seas, they had a difficult time battling the wind and currents while trying to keep the sheep from the dogs.

Five expeditioners remained on Macquarie Island for the next two years

These were meteorologist and station leader, George Ainsworth, geologist and cartographer, Leslie Blake, biologist, Harold Hamilton, and wireless operators, C.A. Sandell and A.J. Sawyer.

References

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- Laseron, C.F., *South with Mawson, Reminiscences of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition, 1911-1914*, pp27-37.

Further **R**eadings

You can read three more stories of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition in:

Frank Hurley's 'Juvenile Trick'

The Wireless Crew

Hamilton, Blake and Mac,

and about the wrecks of the *Gratitude*, *Jessie Niccol* and *Clyde* and in:

'All hands safe: Tremendous Battle with the Seas!' - *Gratitude*

'I Can't Face Hatch' - *Jessie Niccol*

Third Hatch Shipwreck at Nuggets - *Clyde*