

TEACHERS NOTES



# MAWSON

LIFE AND DEATH IN ANTARCTICA

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## Synopsis

The Douglas Mawson Antarctic Expedition of 1912 is one of the most amazing feats of physical and mental endurance of all time.

After an horrific journey across hundreds of kilometres of frozen wasteland, during which his two companions perished, the world was amazed to hear that Douglas Mawson had survived. Some questioned how it was possible, and the media of the day reported that he'd considered eating the body of his dead comrade, Xavier Mertz.

Mawson was later knighted and became a hero, but the question of how he lived when others died has tantalised scientists, historians and explorers ever since.

Now, Australian adventurer Tim Jarvis retraces Mawson's gruelling experience to find an answer. Having been almost killed during his own solo trek to the South Pole in 1999, he confronts the deadly ice again—as Mawson did, with similar meagre rations and primitive clothing and equipment.

It's a bold and unprecedented historical experiment that will provide clues to what happened to Mawson physically—and mentally—as a man at times literally hanging on the precipice of life and death.

Combining the drama of Jarvis's contemporary adventure with chilling dramatic reconstructions, expert commentary and stunning footage from the original expedition photographed by Frank Hurley, this is an extraordinary story of human survival.

## Curriculum links

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Media Studies, SOSE/HSIE, History, Geography, Outdoor Education, Science and Environmental Studies.

The Office of Film and Literature Classification has classified the film PG with the consumer advice: survival themes.

## Key terms

- The following terms are used during the program. Carry out research, if necessary, then in your own words write a definition of each term. Also write a sentence that includes each term, showing how it may be applied within a 'real-world' situation.
  - sastrugi
  - whiteout
  - geology
  - pemmican
  - plasmin biscuit

- crampons
- *Aurora Australis*
- magnetic South Pole
- crevasse
- snow bridge
- dehydration
- polar hand (slang for a medical condition)
- toxic
- frostbite
- providence
- stoical
- hypothermia
- Aladdin's Cave

## Key people

- Carry out further research if required, then write a one-paragraph biographical description about each of the following key people featured in the program:
  - Dr Douglas Mawson
  - Dr Xavier Mertz
  - Lieutenant Belgrave Ninnis
  - Captain John King Davis
- Tim Jarvis (as Douglas Mawson) has academic qualifications in environmental science and environmental law, and has undertaken expeditions to remote wilderness locations in many parts of the globe. After viewing the program, explain in writing Tim's motives for conducting his Antarctic expedition. Also write a short commentary about some of the other expeditions in which he has participated.
- Russian-born John Stoukalo (as Xavier Mertz) is an aeronautical engineer, and was formerly in the USSR Navy. He is now an Australian citizen. Write a short commentary about John's role and purpose in the program. For example, why was he selected to accompany Tim in his Antarctic trek? Why did he leave the expedition before it was completed?
- From the program, write a short commentary about Dr David Tingay's role in Antarctica during the Jarvis expedition. As well as being a medical physician, what qualifications and experience did he have for participating in Antarctic conditions?

## Brief history of Australia in the Antarctic

Australia's involvement in Antarctic exploration and scientific research extends back to the late 19th century.

- Carry out appropriate research, then construct a selective timeline of Australia's involvement in Antarctic exploration and research from the late 19th century to the present. Include brief explanatory notes and illustrations where applicable.

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- Designed either for poster or web page display, draw a map (or a collection of interrelated maps) of Antarctica showing how it is separated into international sectors of control and governance. Label each one. In the Australian sector, mark and label the positions of the main bases and settlements, the important geographic features, the routes taken by past expedition teams such as those by Mawson, and any other features of importance. To place Antarctica into general geographical context, you may wish to include the southern part of Australia (including Tasmania) on the map.

### The 'colonisation' of Antarctica

As Antarctica is considered to have one of the most uninhabitable climates on the planet for humans, why have world governments taken so much interest in it since the late 19th century? Why does Australia have a permanent base established there, at huge and ongoing financial cost to the nation? What scientific, environmental, military, strategic, resource-rich values and benefits does it hold for us? Does Antarctica have commercial and business potential as a tourist destination?

- In pairs or small groups, research the purposes and the short and long-term value of Australia's participation in Antarctica over the past century, noting the various research programs and explorations that have been carried out, the reasons for them, whether they have proven successful, and whether there has been a change of emphasis over the decades in the type of research, experimentation and exploration carried out. (For example, has environmental research into global warming become a priority? Is any research into the ecological effects of Japanese whaling in the region being carried out?) Prepare and write a report on these issues, ensuring you add conclusions about Antarctica's on-going and future importance to Australia and the rest of the world in general.
- Carry out research, then prepare an illustrated double-page magazine spread, aimed at young teenagers, about Antarctica as a tourist destination—past, present and future (both fly-over sight-seeing by air, and by ship). Look at questions such as whether this has become a popular growth industry, the range of tours being offered, the expense, the dangers, whether there are strict controls and enforcements in place regarding environmental regulations, whether mass tourism is of any hindrance to scientific

research or whether the two can co-exist, whether tourists need to acclimatise to conditions or undergo any form of educational training before embarking. You may also wish to construct a suitable travel agency advertisement, or a public interest notice about the responsibilities of tourists, sponsored by the government, for inclusion into the pages. (For an example of the types of commercial Antarctic tours available, see website reference to Tourism.)

### The journey and the experiment

As we see in the program, Mawson endured extreme physical conditions and deprivations during his disastrous trek across the Antarctic ice between November 1912 and February 1913, particularly after the death of Ninnis then later of Mertz. These were also retraced and replicated as closely as possible almost a century later by Tim Jarvis. Questions, in part raised by Tim himself, though, arise. For example, can Tim's experiment truly be considered an accurate replication? And can he prove without a doubt that Mawson survived entirely by 'Providence' and through his own endeavours, thus putting to rest forever the suspicions, raised by others, that out there, alone on the ice, Mawson was impelled to commit an act of cannibalism?

- Carry out extra background research if necessary, then discuss in class and take notes on the reasons behind the Mawson expedition of 1911-1913, and particularly to the ill-fated trek between November 1912 and February 1913. For example, in what ways was the expedition of importance to the British Empire and specifically to Australia? Was there competition at the time between England and other countries to claim Antarctic territory, and if so, why? (It may be instructive to foreground these events against the long build-up to World War One in 1914, and the battle of the early 20th century superpowers for European and world prestige and supremacy.)
- You are a journalist. Draft a newspaper report of 300-400 words announcing Tim Jarvis's plans to recreate the Mawson 'death trek'. Ensure the report contains Jarvis's reasons behind the attempt, and what he is setting out to demonstrate. You may include your own fabricated interview material with 'experts' in the field, commenting on the chances of success or failure. The report should have a headline, and be formatted into columns. Include photos or other illustrative material, such as maps, where applicable.

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- From all of the information presented during the program, and drawing on further research if necessary, in pairs, draw up a chart of the significant similarities and differences between the Mawson and Jarvis journeys. Include information on where Jarvis's food, clothing, shelter, transport, tools and equipment were identical to that used by Mawson, or where compromises were necessary. Comment also on weather/climatic conditions and any other significant variables and differences. Do you think the routes taken by Mawson and Jarvis were identical? Provide evidence to support your opinion.
- Building on the previous activity, discuss in class then write your own analytic account of the likelihood that Tim Jarvis (and his companion representing Xavier Mertz, John Stoukalo) can completely and accurately recapture and recreate the Mawson experience. For example, might the presence of a doctor and a film crew, even if they kept their distance for much of the time, affect the experiment before, during and after it? Is it at all possible for someone today, in the early 21st century, to totally capture and experience the psychological attitude, the mindset, the knowledge, the daily way of life, the expectations, the conditions, the customs, of someone from a century ago, even if they derive from the same or similar culture (in this case Anglo-Australian)? Further, from this experience, is it possible to draw accurate assumptions and conclusions about the events of the distant past?
- At one point during Tim's trek, while sitting out a blizzard, he says, "The biggest fear is just failing, and I feel the weight of that hugely every day I sit here." In what ways does this comment mark the essential difference between Mawson and Tim, and the predicaments each are in, respectively? Discuss in class the personal and private ramifications for someone such as Tim of aborting such an experiment. Plan and write a short fiction story about the fear of failure. As many, or perhaps all of us, have experienced this feeling in our own lives at some stage, you may wish to dramatise a situation you have encountered yourself.
- At the end of the program, Tim Jarvis says, "I didn't want to think that he (Mawson)...needed to have cannibalised anybody to have made it. I like to think that he just drew on his great resolves of inner strength...and did it with what he had, just as the story went."

After viewing the program and considering all the evidence presented, express your reasoned viewpoint, in 200-300 words, as to whether or not you think Tim has adequately demonstrated that Mawson survived through "his great resolves of inner strength", or whether the suggestions of cannibalism still remain to be disproved.

- Imagine that somehow Douglas Mawson were able to communicate across the decades with Tim Jarvis about the attempt to recreate his journey. What do you think he would say? In pairs, plan and draft a script of dialogue, a private conversation between the two men. Consider carefully what they might say to each other, what questions they would ask, what answers they might give. Try to get inside the minds and hearts of the two adventurers. Rehearse a reading of your script, and revise the dialogue as appropriate.

### Survival and endurance

It may be considered that Douglas Mawson was lucky to survive his trek across the Antarctic ice, even taking into account his apparent inner fortitude and will to survive. By modern risk assessment standards it may even be argued that such a trek, at the least without back-up assistance and communications, was ill-prepared, and today would not be contemplated let alone attempted.

- Discuss in class and write notes on the range of items and facilities that both Mawson and Tim had at their disposal which contributed to making their experiences worse than perhaps they could, or should have been. Consider, for example, food nutrients and transport.
- Continuing from the previous activity, and carrying out further research if necessary, write a commentary on the role of the huskies in Antarctic exploration, whether they were a success or not, when and why they ceased to be used in Antarctica, and the problems Tim had with them during his attempt to emulate Mawson's journey.
- Write a short story told from a husky's point of view, set during either Mawson's or Tim Jarvis's trek.

We know from viewing the program that Tim Jarvis and John Stoukalo had medical back-up, and were accompanied, albeit at a distance, by a film crew, and perhaps by others, probably with access to contemporary facilities. They weren't, therefore, alone and in the same situation as Mawson, Ninnis and Mertz.

- Imagine that you are in Tim's position: you are planning your expedition, and it will be carried out

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in early 20th century style, as far as is possible. However, it must be carried out in such a way that everyone's safety and health is paramount, as much as is possible. Working in pairs, construct a written proposal for your expedition, to be submitted to the Australian Antarctic Division for appraisal and permission to continue.

You will need to address in detail the interrelated issues of:

- risk assessment
- harm minimisation
- back-up support
- communications
- contingencies in case of accident, illness, breakdown of equipment etc
- gaining acceptable insurance policies
- Discuss in class whether all the factors you have examined in the previous activity detract from 'the spirit of adventure', or enhance it.
- What are the main differences between Antarctic exploration in Mawson's era, and in the early 21st century? Construct an illustrated poster display, with text descriptions and explanations where applicable, of the kind of contemporary clothing, food supplies and nutrients, medical supplies, tools, equipment, communications facilities, transport and shelter, and even meteorological weather predicting technology used in the Antarctic today. The class may best carry out this activity by separating into groups, with each group concentrating on one aspect and comparing them to those from the past to demonstrate essential advancements and improvements.

Fictionalise a situation you may have been in that involved an aspect of survival or endurance. It does not necessarily have to be a sports or outdoors endurance experience. You may present this activity as a short story, a personal diary entry (or collection of entries), as an illustrated comic strip or as a set of poetry or song verses, or in some other kind of narrative form of your choice.

### Emotional and spiritual sustenance

Across the decades there are some remarkable similarities between the Douglas Mawson and Tim Jarvis expeditions, not the least being the emotional and spiritual support, hope, motivation, comfort and encouragement given the two men through both their attachments to loved ones at home, and through the diaries, letters, poetry and philosophical writings they carried with them onto the ice.

- Mawson, in his diary, drew sustenance from the 'stoic' writings of the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius. What does 'stoic' mean, and how might it apply to the situations Mawson and Tim Jarvis experienced? Carry out some research, then write a short biography of Marcus Aurelius, including a brief summary of his writings, and of the world view expressed in those writings.
- Marcus Aurelius is quoted twice during the program:
  - "If you are pained by external things, it is not they that disturb you, but your own judgement of them. And it is in your power to wipe out that judgement now."
  - "The more a man deprives himself, or submits to be deprived, the more he grows, and the more he grows in goodness."
- In class, discuss and write notes on what you think these quotations mean, and why Mawson may have considered them noteworthy. What would he have gained, or felt, from them? What is your own reaction to the thoughts expressed in these quotations? Do you, for example, consider the attitudes expressed as out of date, irrelevant to us today, or timeless and of worth to us?
- Discuss in class the possibilities for plot, characters, themes, styles, approaches and settings, then select one of the previous quotations of Marcus Aurelius, and draw from it in any way suitable, to plan and write a short fiction story. The story may be written in a style and genre of your own choosing.
- In class, read Louis MacNeice's 1935 poem, *Mayfly*, partly quoted by Tim during the program. Discuss the poem in class, particularly looking at the convergence of the two themes of time and love, and the overall purpose of the image of the Mayfly insect. Why do you think Tim's friend, Elizabeth, chose *Mayfly* for him to read during his expedition, and what did Tim feel and think was relevant or worthwhile to him from reading this poem in adversity?
- Read the 17th century poem by Andrew Marvell, *To His Coy Mistress*. What does this poem have to say about love, immediacy and the passage of time? Compare it to the themes and images developed in *Mayfly*.
- Spend some time drafting and revising a poem of your own that you feel would be appreciated by a loved one or a friend in adversity.

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Include this poem in a small journal of thoughts and impressions, and suitable extracts from other sources, compiled for your loved one or friend.

### Media studies

Carry out the following activities.

- The program intertwines two stories: Douglas Mawson's and Tim Jarvis's. Discuss and write notes on how the film is constructed in order to tell both stories simultaneously, and to draw connections between them. Examine the film's inter-cutting editing techniques to and fro between the two stories, and provide examples of where this is evident, discussing its purpose and effectiveness. How is this technique used to create, perhaps, a form of visual and psychological bond between the two men, separated by many decades? What would be the effect and outcome, so far as the viewer is concerned, if a less complex, alternative method of presentation were used, such as following Mawson's story with Tim's?
- Discuss in writing the use and effectiveness during the program of archival black and white newsreel film and photographs taken by Mawson expedition member, Frank Hurley. Are the actuality colour scenes involving Tim and John on location filmed in the same way or not? Offer an explanation for your answer.
- Carry out research about Frank Hurley's role, significance and fame as an early 20th century Antarctic photographer, then prepare an illustrated double-page spread for a popular magazine, featuring biographical information and details about his photographic work. Ensure you examine the way in which he composed not only images of rugged nature, but how he presented the human figure within that landscape, and used the elements of light and dark to construct a heightened awareness of both. Would you consider his work to be 'documentary' or 'art'?
- Comment in writing, pointing to particular examples from the program, about the purpose and effectiveness of scenes using actors to portray Mawson and Mertz. Why are these 'dramatic reconstructions' presented in black and white?
- Discuss in class and write notes on the purpose and effectiveness of other elements of the program, such as the style of voice-over narration, the way in which background or 'mood' music is used to enhance particular scenes, and the insertion at various points of face-to-camera interviews. (Note, for example,

that the narrator occasionally speaks in the future tense, especially in the first few minutes of the film. Why is this?)

- The following are some comments from the film's director, Malcolm McDonald (from the program's press kit):  
"We had three skidoos and sleds carrying all the film and other equipment. Logistically it was very difficult camping, de-camping, cooking etc, as well as trying to make a film...(There were) lots of lens-fogging situations..."  
During filming in New Zealand the huskies "were very uncooperative. They weren't used to the fan-type harness system...and they got tired very quickly..."
- Imagine you are the director of *Mawson – Life and Death in Antarctica*. Write a set of personal diary entries about your experiences in attempting to set up, manage and film the enterprise. What kinds of problems will you encounter, and how will you deal with them? Are you fearful the entire project might collapse? Are you concerned about accidents and unforeseen events?
- Write your own review of the program in 400-500 words, designed for a popular weekly TV magazine. (An alternative may be to prepare, rehearse, present and record a three-minute, on-camera review designed for the audience of a popular youth-oriented news and current affairs TV program.)

### References and Further Resources

#### Books

- Frances M. Ashcroft, *Life at the Extremes*, HarperCollins, London, 2000
- Philip Ayres, *Mawson: A Life*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 1999
- Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Penguin, London, 2005
- Lennard Bickel, *This Accursed Land*, Pan Macmillan, revised edition, Sydney, 2002
- Nancy Robinson Flannery (ed), *The Everlasting Silence: The Love Letters of Paquita Delprat and Douglas Mawson 1911-1914*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2000
- Lawrence Gonzalez, *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why: True Stories of Miraculous Endurance and Sudden Death*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2003
- Tom Griffiths, *Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2007
- Lincoln Hall, *Douglas Mawson: The Life of an Explorer*, New Holland, Frenchs Forest, 2000

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Fred Jacka and Eleanor Jacka (eds), *Mawson's Antarctic Diaries*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1988

Alan Jacobs, *The Spiritual Wisdom of Marcus Aurelius: The Divine Conservation*, O Books, Winchester, UK, 2004

Tim Jarvis, *Mawson: Life and Death in Antarctica*, Melbourne University Publishing, Carlton, 2008

Tim Jarvis, *The Unforgiving Minute*, Bantam, Sydney, 2004

Louis MacNeice, *The Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1966

Emma McEwin, *An Antarctic Affair*, East Street Publications, Adelaide, 2007

Alasdair McGregor, *Frank Hurley: A Photographer's Life*, Penguin Australia, Camberwell, 2004

Douglas Mawson, *The Home of the Blizzard: The Story of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition, 1911-1914*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 1996 (this edition first published in 1930)

Paquita Mawson, *Mawson of the Antarctic: The Life of Sir Douglas Mawson*, FRS OBE, Longmans, London, 1964

Herbert Ponting and Frank Hurley, *1910-1916 Antarctic Photographs: Scott, Mawson and Shackleton Expeditions*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1979

Nigel Smith (ed.), *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, Pearson Longman, London, 2003

### Film/TV

Ian Cuming (director), *Breaking the Ice*, Roadshow Entertainment, 2005

Chris Hilton (director), *The Last Husky*, Aurora Films, 1993

Frank Hurley (director), *Home of the Blizzard*, National Film and Sound Archive, 1913

Simon Nasht (director), *Frank Hurley: The Man Who Made History*, Roadshow, 2005

Mike Piper (director), *Home of the Blizzard*, Beyond Distribution, 1998

### Websites

Antarctica:

[www.aad.gov.au](http://www.aad.gov.au)

[www.classroom.antarctica.gov.au](http://www.classroom.antarctica.gov.au)

The SY Aurora:

[www.orf.i.net.au/SYAurora.html](http://www.orf.i.net.au/SYAurora.html)

Captain John King Davis:

[www.aad.gov.au/MediaLibrary/asset/MediaItems/ml\\_391113946064815\\_Davis50th\\_Word.pdf](http://www.aad.gov.au/MediaLibrary/asset/MediaItems/ml_391113946064815_Davis50th_Word.pdf)

CSIRO (do a site search for 'Antarctica'):

[www.csiro.au](http://www.csiro.au)

CSIRO – Antarctica web links:

[www.csiro.au/resources/ps2ii.html](http://www.csiro.au/resources/ps2ii.html)

CSIRO – The Helix study guide on Antarctica:

[www.csiro.au/resources/TheHelixTG114.html](http://www.csiro.au/resources/TheHelixTG114.html)

Frank Hurley:

[www.awm.gov.au/people/222.asp](http://www.awm.gov.au/people/222.asp)

International Polar Year, 2007-2009:

[www.ipy.org](http://www.ipy.org)

Tim Jarvis:

[www.spiritofadventure.com.au](http://www.spiritofadventure.com.au)

Douglas Mawson:

[www.douglasmawson.com.au](http://www.douglasmawson.com.au)

[www.mawson.sa.gov.au](http://www.mawson.sa.gov.au)

[www.coolantarctica.com/Antarctica%20fact%20file/History/Douglas%20Mawson.htm](http://www.coolantarctica.com/Antarctica%20fact%20file/History/Douglas%20Mawson.htm)

[www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/mawson](http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/mawson)

Tourism:

[www.peregrineadventures.com/Antarctica/Specialist-Voyages.html?bhcp=1](http://www.peregrineadventures.com/Antarctica/Specialist-Voyages.html?bhcp=1)

Wilderness Survival:

[www.survivaltopics.com](http://www.survivaltopics.com)

### Mawson – Life and Death in Antarctica

Produced with the assistance of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Channel 4.

A Film Australia Making History Production in association with Orana Films.

Writer/Director: **Malcolm McDonald**

Producer: **Richard Dennison**

Executive Producer: **Alex West**

Duration: **85 minutes**

Year: **2008**

Study guide written by Roger Stitson. With thanks to the South Australian Museum and Mark Pharaoh.

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