

Reviews

MAWSON: A LIFE. Philip Ayres. 1999. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press (The Miegunyah Press). 321p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-522-84811-7. \$Aus39.95.

Douglas Mawson has long awaited his biographer, but, with this book available, one can only observe that the wait has been worth it. As an Antarctic explorer, Mawson has always been regarded as being in the first rank, and readers of *Polar Record* will be familiar with his famous expeditions in 1911–14 and 1929–31, as well as with his participation in the journey towards the South Magnetic Pole on Shackleton's British Antarctic Expedition of 1907–09.

It is easy for any biographer to concentrate on those aspects of the life of his subject that are well known and that are calculated to appeal to the interest of the book-buying public. Moreover, these are the aspects that are likely to have the most accessible sources; in the case of polar explorers, the book written after each expedition, the personal papers of the expedition members lovingly cherished in a polar archive, the natural history reports, and so on. The lesser-known aspects of the life of such a subject might, frankly, be boring to the keen polar enthusiast, who can be expected to purchase the book hoping to read tales of derring-do by the hero in inhospitable latitudes. Moreover, these lesser-known aspects are very hard work. The sources are likely to be diffuse and difficult to track down, and the cast of characters much larger than the relatively circumscribed number involved in an expedition, both as participants and sponsors. The question of balance is therefore paramount. The biographer's duty is to present a comprehensive portrait of his subject, devoting as much attention to the relatively mundane as to the heroic, while at the same time not submerging the latter in the former and alienating those who take up the book precisely because of the respect, enthusiasm, and interest they bear for the subject.

Philip Ayres has succeeded magnificently in this respect, and has written a biography that is scholarly and sober but at the same time very entertaining. He has presented a picture of Mawson the man, not just Mawson the explorer, and has done so in a manner such that, at the subject's death, on the penultimate page of the book, one feels that one is parting from an old acquaintance with whose idiosyncrasies one is very familiar. For this reviewer, at any rate, it is the single polar biography that he was least happy to have finished reading.

The blurb makes it clear that, apart from his expeditions, remarkably little was actually known about Mawson, and this, together with the fact that as he was almost obsessive at keeping copies of his correspondence, meant that the author had to undertake a vast amount of research *ab initio*, including interviews with those who had known Mawson personally. For example, this research revealed a matter of

particular interest to this reviewer: that Mawson was half Manx. As his mother came from Douglas, Isle of Man, it seems well within the bounds of possibility, although this is not claimed by the author, that he received his Christian name from her home town, which she was never to see again after the family emigrated to Australia in 1884.

The author's coverage of the expeditions for which Mawson is famous is comprehensive and written in a plain, informative, and straightforward manner that will be appreciated by those who take up the book because of Mawson's status as a famous Australian rather than as a famous explorer. An obvious highlight is the account of Mawson's famous journey on foot and alone, after the deaths of his two companions, Belgrave Ninnis and Xavier Mertz, back to his base at Cape Denison during the Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911–14. The author addresses the question of Mawson's responsibility for the death of Ninnis — who fell into a crevasse some 300 miles from their base — because he did not insist on him wearing ski or snowshoes. He also raises the matter relating to whether Mawson committed cannibalism on Mertz's body. A particularly interesting chapter of direct polar relevance describes Mawson's relations with Richard E. Byrd, Lincoln Ellsworth, and Hubert Wilkins. With the two former he was on friendly terms, while with the latter 'there was a hint of rivalry.' Throughout the book the sometimes difficult relations between Mawson and John King Davis are explored in some detail.

The author's writing concerning the purely polar parts of the book has a certain mild diffidence to it, almost as if he feels a reluctance to judge on issues that are totally apart from his personal experience, as, indeed, they are beyond that of most of his readers. He becomes more decisive in those sections that deal with Mawson's personal life, his involvement in government matters, and, especially, the sections that provide details of his activities as an academic member of staff of a university. His accounts of the chicanery surrounding the questions of laboratory accommodation and of elections to various chairs read so true to life that one suspects that the author has had a good deal of first-hand experience of the same sort of thing himself.

The illustrations are the finest that this reviewer can recall having seen in a polar biography. There are no fewer than 64 of them, some in colour. An innovation is the printing of a few illustrations in stereoscopic pairs. The most interesting illustration is the sketch map Mawson used to express his original plan for the Australasian Antarctic Expedition. As the author points out, this shows the boldness of the original conception. There are five maps, two of which are original and were prepared under Mawson's supervision. There are comprehensive notes

and a full bibliography. In the review copy, a significant part of the bibliography was missing and the pagination at the end of the book incorrect. One hopes that the whole of the print run was not so afflicted. The book is very well presented, attractively bound, and has an astonishingly reasonable price. The publication was supported by the Miegunyah Fund. The book is warmly recommended, and the author and publishers deserve our thanks. (Ian R. Stone, Laggan Juys, Larivane Close, Andreas, Isle of Man IM7 4HD.)

KEYGUIDE TO INFORMATION SOURCES ON THE POLAR AND COLD REGIONS. William Mills and Peter Speak. 1998. London and Washington: Mansell Publishing. xiv + 330 p, hard cover. ISBN 0-7201-2176-0. £70.00.

The authors offer this work as a quick reference guide to current knowledge of the polar and cold regions, a commendable if somewhat daunting undertaking. The work is intended for a broad range of those concerned with such research, but might prove most useful to students who may be new to the field.

The *Keyguide* is presented in three parts. The first is a survey of the polar and cold regions and of their relevant information sources. It provides a broad historical background and commentary for the uninitiated. The exercise begins with maps and definitions of the polar regions; the reader learns, for example, that whilst defining the Antarctic geographically is relatively simple, such is not the case for the Arctic; it depends on which of various parameters or delimiters one uses, such as ice cover, permafrost, isotherms, etc. (The correct definition of permafrost, the authors remind us, is not 'permanently frozen ground.')

A brief historical account of polar research follows, starting with rudimentary data collection on early sailing explorations, and tracing this up to our present highly organized system of research organizations. The good record of international cooperation in Antarctica is contrasted with the more sticky problems in the Arctic, which has eight 'Arctic Rim' countries with which to contend. What broke the ice here (so to speak) was Mikhail Gorbachev's proposal in 1987 that the Arctic be declared a zone of peace and protection. This provided the framework for a growing number of international organizations and agreements on the Arctic. The authors make only brief mention here of research in the non-polar cold regions, but point to relevant organizations such as the International Glaciological Society and the International Permafrost Association.

Next is a listing of all national organizations engaged in polar research, with brief histories and locations of their research stations. The authors are diplomatic in giving all countries equal billing here, but in reality there is a continuum of importance, ranging from a few countries that are heavy-hitters in polar research down to some that have only pro forma efforts in place, intended to do little more than show the flag. The discussion concludes with a brief mention of the role in polar affairs of non-governmental

organizations, notably Greenpeace and the Worldwide Fund for Nature.

The focus of the next chapter is educational sources pertaining to polar research. It is directed to those who may seek career opportunities, or simply employment, in polar regions. The authors suggest a wide range of pertinent academic disciplines that one might pursue. They also provide a useful listing of institutions offering such courses; curricula are described for leading institutions throughout the world.

Next is an overview of the basic types of information sources and their formats. Main topics include bibliographic databases, serial publications, conference proceedings, theses and dissertations, and translations. No surprises here, although this reviewer was struck by the lukewarm evaluation of the thesis as a resource. The authors give it rather low marks, as 'tending to be both physically and intellectually inaccessible,' which detracts from the presumed originality of the thesis topic. On the matter of conference proceedings, this reader must emphasize that these are rich but elusive sources. The problem of obtaining conference proceedings in a timely manner, or indeed at all, is a vexing one for bibliographers, as can be attested from my work with the *Cold regions bibliography*. One can only hope that the retrieval situation improves with time.

This chapter concludes with references to internet resources. The authors note that at the time of publication (1998) the potentials of the internet were just beginning to be realized. It follows that internet search skills will become increasingly required if one is to do up-to-date research.

The fifth chapter ('Who? What? Where?') tells how to get information on individuals, living or dead; on data and statistics; and on maps. The sixth and final chapter in this part lists libraries, archives, and museums available to the researcher.

Readers not concerned with the above can cut to the chase by going directly to the second part of the book, which is a compendium of published sources under the simple heading of 'Bibliography.' The authors emphasize that the contents are guidelines, not a comprehensive listing. All types of print and electronic formats are covered. Entries are organized in a hierarchical format with Dewey Decimal notation, and are numbered consecutively throughout. There are two main categories here. The first, 'Regional and general sources,' has some 200 entries ranging from the most general (a guide to reference books) to a current listing of internet sources. In between, the authors cover a range of topics such as bibliographic databases, periodicals, and special collections.

The second main category in Part II is 'Subject sources,' which lists sources on disciplines in the sciences, arts, and humanities. The subsets are 'Earth sciences,' 'Life and environmental sciences,' 'Human and social sciences,' 'Arts and humanities,' 'Engineering and related subjects,' and 'Travel and expeditions.' For a random example to