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### **Alone on the Ice: The Greatest Survival Story in the History of Exploration**

By David Roberts

Alone on the Ice: The Greatest Survival Story in the History of Exploration, David Roberts. W. W. Norton & Company, 2013. 368 pages, hardcover/paperback, \$27.95/\$16.95.

Douglas Mawson's 1911–13 Antarctic journey was riddled with horrific crevasse falls, near starvation, polar-madness, and disheartening sled dog meals. No surprise then that *Alone on the Ice* opens like a thriller. But as told by David Roberts, this bio-adventure is both compelling and scholarly.

In the opening "Forgotten By God" chapter, Roberts, the dean of mountaineering literature and an accomplished historian, explains why anyone steeped in more famous explorers' deeds should read this story: "Since the second decade of the twentieth century, Mawson has lurked in the shadow of his contemporaries Scott, Shackleton, and the great Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen. In part this is because he was Australian." More importantly, Roberts explains, Mawson had no ambitions for the pole and was driven to "explore land that had never before been seen by human eyes."

For those readers familiar with the popular (yet, according to Roberts, "vastly oversimplified") 1977 book, *Mawson's Will*, this epic (also told by at least a half dozen other authors) was ready made for Roberts' deft, investigatory style, as well as his experience with crevasses. A mountaineering journal reviewer could be forgiven for emphasizing that Roberts' first books, *The Mountain of My Fear* and *Deborah: A Wilderness Narrative*, influenced a new generation of adventure writers to similarly pull themselves from those deep holes, confess to one's weaknesses while revealing your partners' foibles, and then commit oneself to the narrative as if it were an unclimbed peak. The preceding Gentlemanly Brotherhood of the Rope generation, one can imagine, felt scandalized by this new tell-all literature. Roberts then advanced this form by extracting himself as a character and writing more polished, third-person narratives: elucidating the fakirs in *Great Exploration Hoaxes*, his warts-and-all portrayal of the dipsomaniac writer in *Jean Sayers*, and his bold debunking of the vainglorious icon Maurice Herzog (of Annapurna fame) in *True Summit*.

*Alone On the Ice: The Greatest Survival Story in the History of Exploration* is yet another step up in Roberts' oeuvre. Picking (yet not picking on) an unblemished hero like Douglas Mawson allows the author to bring laser focus on the scientist's unerring principles, his disciplined research, and his modest tendency to understate the epic, even in his 1914 memoir, *Home of the Blizzard*. Australians everywhere (including those rescued from an iced-in cruise ship this austral summer, visiting Antarctica expressly to celebrate the centenary of their hero) should remain grateful that Roberts didn't choose an Aussie version of Frederick Cook, Christina Dodwell, or Galen Rowell—a few of many visited by [JW1] unsparing pen.

While Roberts has always complemented his luminous prose with keen character analysis, when he turns to the heroic narrative—see the award-winning *Escape from Lucania* or *Finding Everett Ruess*—one can't help finishing each book in a surprising glow of inspiration.

Likewise, Mawson's stirring character is revealed through the author's generous portrait, and even more profoundly, from Mawson's diary, which Roberts calls "a telegraphic blueprint of exhaustion and grim pragmatism." Here, to rival anything Scott of the Antarctic wrote while going down in flames, Mawson also thought he was penning his last words: "This is terrible. I don't mind for myself, but it is for Paquita [his fiancé] and for all the others connected with the expedition that I feel so deeply and

sinfully.”

Still, despite the deaths of two partners, there’s little morbidity, and nothing saccharine about the narrative. In classic form, Roberts employs his mathematically precise bullshit detector, ferreting out various personality quirks, including the many soiled-pants-type nuances of an expedition member’s insanity; the ongoing tension with another teammate who can’t get back to college to resume his Rhodes scholarship; the “choleric,” “fulminating” “Gloomy,” (27 years young) “Old Man” Captain Davis; or the widow Kathleen Scott’s libidinousness and speculated attempt to bed Mawson. All of which, should be noted, make it a page-turner of fully fleshed-out character portraits.

Thanks to scores of letters, memoirs, and diaries, Roberts quotes directly from the explorers, often with haunting immediacy. “The true enemy of the expedition was the relentless succession of crevasses,” Roberts wrote. “On November 22, the day after Ninnis’s ‘close shave’ when he had caught himself by the arms as he started to plunge into a crevasse right next to the tent, the third and most heavily laden sledge went through a snow bridge.” Then Roberts gets out of the way to let Mawson’s voice take over once again.

The narrative rarely slips, unless one is counting the 171 pages it takes to return to the riveting tale of Mawson’s hunger march, tiptoeing round crevasses where the reader is shrewdly left dangling from the first chapter. Still, the scientist’s fascinating backstory elevates this book above the purplish Mawson’s Will.

Sharp-eyed readers might also catch a lone note of repetition, beginning on page 17, when Roberts describes his protagonist’s “piercing blue eyes” with the same chestnut that Roberts quotes from Frank Wild’s biographer on page 164. What is it about great explorers, one wonders, that endows them with such piercing eyes?

For a book so rigorously end-noted and researched, the book’s subtitle, *The Greatest Survival Story in the History of Exploration* is puzzling. In the last paragraph of the Epilogue, Roberts explains that the subtitle is a quote from Sir Edmund Hillary, who a “few years later,” after writing a guest foreword for Mawson’s Will, “outdid his own encomium.”

In that original foreword Hillary described Mawson’s saga: “It became what is probably the greatest story of lone survival in Polar exploration.” Since the author of *Mawson’s Will* invented dialogue for his book, it was no stretch for him (or perhaps his publisher) to bastardize Hillary’s words into a flashy subtitle: *The Greatest Polar Survival Story Ever Written*.

But for Roberts’ scholarly book, someone turned off the bullshit detector while vetting *Alone on the Ice*’s subtitle: *The Greatest Survival Story in the History of Exploration*. According to the author’s endnote, this new Hillary (encomium expanding) quote and subtitle comes from the front cover of *Racing with Death: Douglas Mawson—Antarctic Explorer*, published in 2008. Roberts does not mention the preface of that book, where the author Beau Riffenburgh correctly quotes Hillary from the *Mawson’s Will* Foreword, and someone (authors traditionally point to publishers when it comes to title gaffes) again bastardizes the quote for the front cover. After *Racing with Death: Douglas Mawson—Antarctic Explorer* comes the blurb surrounded by quotation marks and cheekily attributed to Hillary: “The Greatest Survival Story in the History of Exploration.”

For all its erudition, *Alone On the Ice* (if only with the unscholarly subtitle selection) has jumped onto the bus with previous books in over-hyping a protagonist eclipsed by the canonization of Scott and Shackleton. And one can only imagine that Mawson—learned scholar, ever humble, let alone haunted by the death of his partners—would have had nothing to do with this sort of misquoted glorification.

In this reviewer’s opinion, the greatest survival story in the history of exploration has many contenders. A short list could include Bligh’s 1789 survival epic sailing a small boat several thousand

miles after the mutiny on the *Bounty*; Franklin eating his boots in the 1820s while seeking the Northwest Passage; Powell surviving unknown rapids while exploring the Colorado River in 1869; Nansen's hungry retreat from a North Pole attempt in 1896; Albanov's 1912 ordeal in the Kara Sea above Siberia; or two years later, on the other side of Siberia in the Chukchi Sea, drifted over from the Alaskan Arctic, the *Karluk* crew shipwrecked on Wrangell Island. Finally, Shackleton's survival story isn't a primary contender simply because the last picture book about him was a bestseller; his story is a contender because no one died. In 1916 Shackleton sailed on a desperate rescue mission 920 miles across the nightmarish Weddell Sea in a poorly equipped life boat and eventually rescued all of the men left behind in Antarctica—an entirely different outcome from the tragic Mawson expedition.

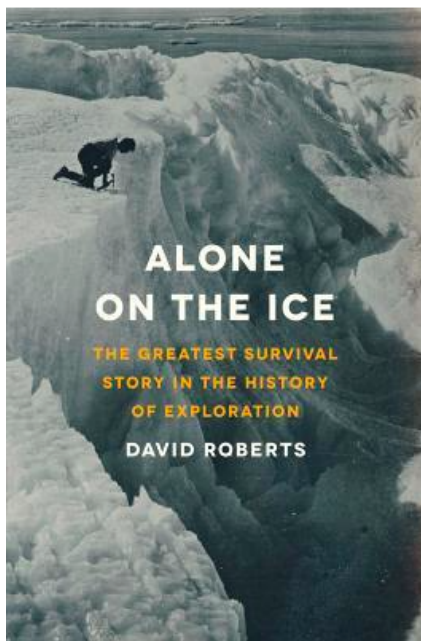
Now, let it be said that a review focused only so critically on a subtitle—as if the bullshit detector torch passed down from Roberts himself has no other place to shine—shows that the book is otherwise beyond reproach. Roberts' narrative truly deserves a place alongside other masterpieces of adventure and exploration. The book is also leavened with Frank Hurley's seldom seen, brilliant photographs from Mawson's expedition—if only to remind us, that as Shackleton's later photographer, Hurley had a knack for selecting prodigious leaders.

Photo-rich, nuanced, and impeccably researched, *Alone on the Ice* showcases David Roberts' wide-ranging legacy, from Alaska mountaineering to the southwest desert to the Himalayas, to the Arctic, and now to Antarctica. The link is unmistakable, for any student of Alaskan mountaineering literature will remember how Roberts and his partner Don Jensen repeatedly and horrifically fell through crevasse "lids" (as Aussies refer to hidden snow bridges) while retreating from the Alaskan peak recounted in his gripping memoir *Deborah: A Wilderness Narrative*. Just as Melville recalled his whale ship days for another classic work, Roberts' crevasse-laden re-creation of the Mawson saga is without peer—among one of the greatest survival stories in the history of exploration.

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## Images



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