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One of Mawson's 'Forgotten Men': Robert Bage and his Antarctic Diary

WE ARE CURRENTLY PASSING through the centenary years of the first Antarctic expedition lead by Douglas Mawson. Offered the chance to travel with Robert Scott's party, Mawson preferred to plan his own route and organised an expedition that lasted from 1911 to 1914 and contributed much to the scientific and geographic accomplishments of the so-called 'heroic age' of Antarctic exploration. Mawson's party included men of great scientific and geographic expertise, many of whom, including Mawson himself, honoured the great traveller's tradition of recording their adventures in a journal or diary, often for publication on their return.

One of these was Robert Bage (1888-1915) and his diary from the Mawson expedition has recently been acquired by the State Library of Victoria (SLV).¹ The acquisition of Bage's diary is something of a *coup* for SLV considering that the bulk of Mawson materials are held at the Mawson Institute, Adelaide, and the Mitchell Library in New South Wales. It came into the public domain by the kind donation of its last-known holder, Dorothy Wardle, in whose keeping it was first noted by Ross McMullin, the Melbourne historian and recent biographer of Bage and other Australians killed in World War One.²

McMullin describes how Bage returned to regular soldiering after his Antarctic exploits, just five months before the start of the Great War. He was one of the 'original' ANZACs, landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 but was killed twelve days later. The survival of his Antarctic diary is a great memorial to this Australian 'soldier, adventurer and hero'.³

On the occasion of this acquisition we are presented with the opportunity to reassess the Mawson expedition and to ponder its fate as the least well-known of the three great expeditions to Antarctica prior to World War One, and to examine the role of Robert Bage, a representative expeditioner who travelled with Mawson and embodied the best achievements of the expedition as a whole. A future article* will focus on detailed extracts from Bage's diary.

II

The Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911-1914 (AAE), led by Mawson, was part of the great wave of Continental exploration of the Antarctic region in the early years of the twentieth century. Prior to this period, Antarctica had been explored almost entirely by sea. By the close of the nineteenth century, most of the sub-Antarctic islands and parts of the Peninsula had been discovered, despite the ice cover making reliable sightings of land very difficult. However, it was not clearly established prior to the 'heroic

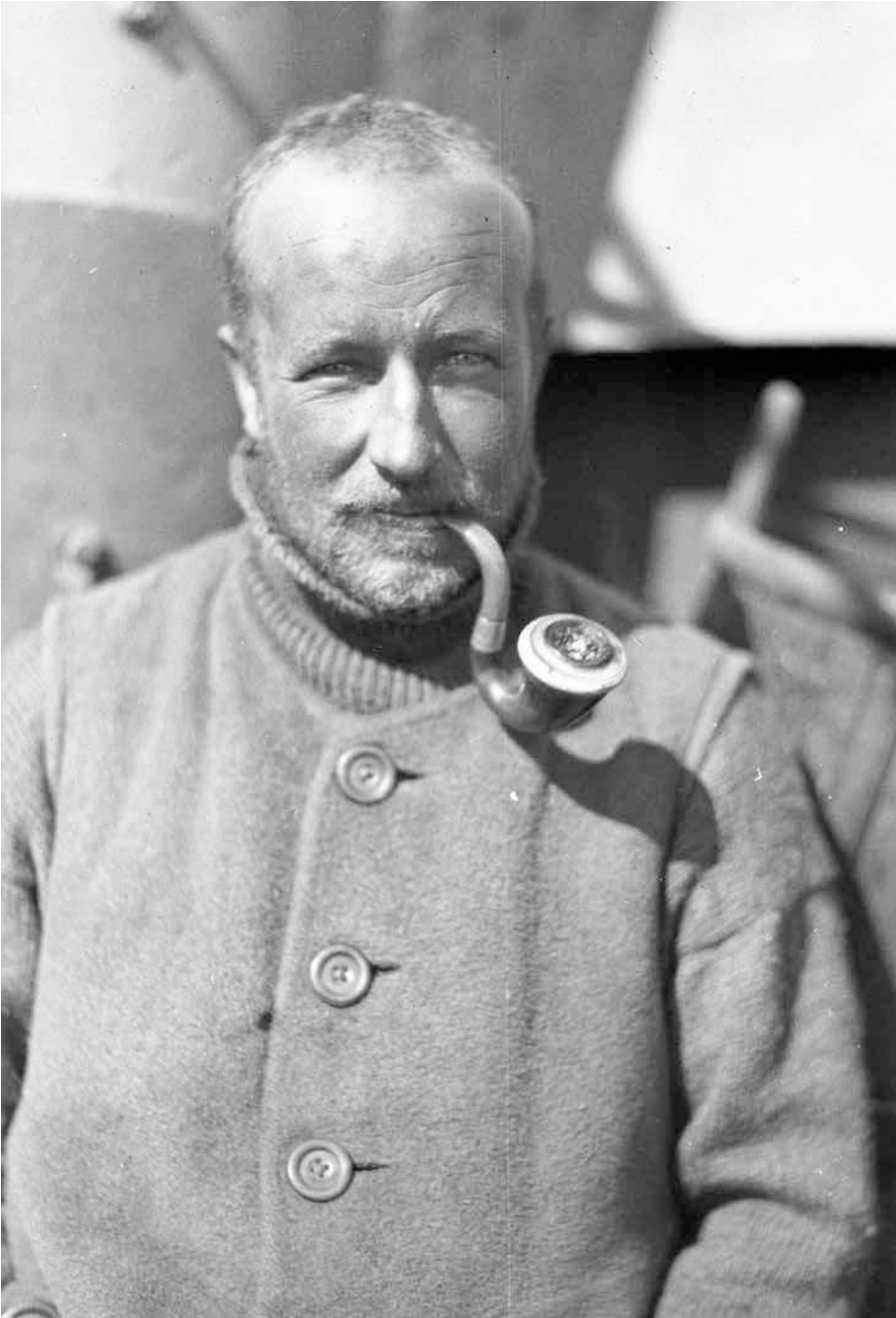
age' that the Antarctic was a single continent, and, if it were, where its precise continental boundaries lay. The great push at this time was to get men onto the land mass and collect scientific data regarding the geographical extent of the terrain, the physical and climatic conditions on land, and to test the magnetic characteristics which applied to this part of the globe.

Within this general programme, Mawson's expedition has complicated historical associations with the other two great expeditions of the time, those being Scott's expedition of 1910-1913 and Shackleton's expedition of 1914-1916, all three of which must be seen within the general British-led interest in exploration of Antarctica at this time. Mawson was an English-born but Australian educated geologist who had previously been a member of Shackleton's first expedition to Antarctica in the years 1907-1908.⁴ From this association arose the invitation for Mawson to join Scott's second expedition, the ill-fated expedition of 1910-1913 which ultimately led to the death of Scott and his companions during their return journey from the South Pole. Mawson chose to pass up this offer, opting to strike out with his own expedition to explore the Antarctic coast directly south of Australia rather than return to the Ross Sea, as Scott intended.

Although Scott in the *Discovery* was the first to carry out extensive exploration on the Antarctic continent during 1901-1904, in his later expedition of 1910-1913 he became caught up in the race to the South Pole, after the Norwegian, Amundsen, made it known he was attempting to get there first. Amundsen reached the geographic South Pole on 14 December 1911. Scott and his party of Wilson, Evans, Bowers and Oates reached it on 17 January 1912, finding Amundsen's marker flag. They perished on the return journey, probably on or about 29 March 1912, their remains being located by a search party some eight months later. In spite of (or perhaps because of) his failure, the previously lionized Scott then became to the British public an unassailable symbol of glorious but doomed heroism.⁵

From the point of view of English and Australian Antarctic exploration, the other fateful and ultimately doomed journey at this time was Ernest Shackleton's plan to walk from a base in the Weddell Sea across 2900 kilometres of the continent, meeting another party that would walk towards them from the other side of the landmass. Like Scott, Shackleton was beset by problems, especially the dangerous sailing conditions in the Weddell Sea. Eventually, after the loss of their ship, the *Endurance*, Shackleton left one party of men on Elephant Island while he and five others took a longboat, the *James Caird*, towards South Georgia, where he would organize a rescue party to return to Elephant Island. Shackleton's 1450-kilometre journey in the *James Caird* and his climb over the mountains of South Georgia to the settlement of Stromness (on the far side of the island from where they had landed) became the stuff of heroic legend. Like Scott, he was feted by the British public, even though his original intentions had been thwarted; but unlike Scott he was able to mitigate his failure with the rescue of his entire party.⁶

Compared to those of Scott and Shackleton, Mawson's expedition was much more successful, both scientifically and in terms of achieving its stated goals. According to



Robert Bage with his customary pipe. Photo taken by Frank Hurley on board the *Aurora* returning home from the Australasian Antarctic Expedition, 1911-1914. Reproduced courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales (Home and Away no. 36090)

Mawson, he was inspired to explore the great span of Antarctic coast lying nearest to Australia, that part of the continent which he often called 'the Australian Quadrant'.⁷ Mawson proposed this goal separately to both Scott and Shackleton during a visit to London in 1910, but both ultimately found themselves unable to follow up on Mawson's proposal, leaving him to put his plans before the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science. Its committee members were enthusiastic. Fundraising in both Australia and Britain followed, with the public endorsement from Shackleton in London and the support of the Royal Geographical Society.

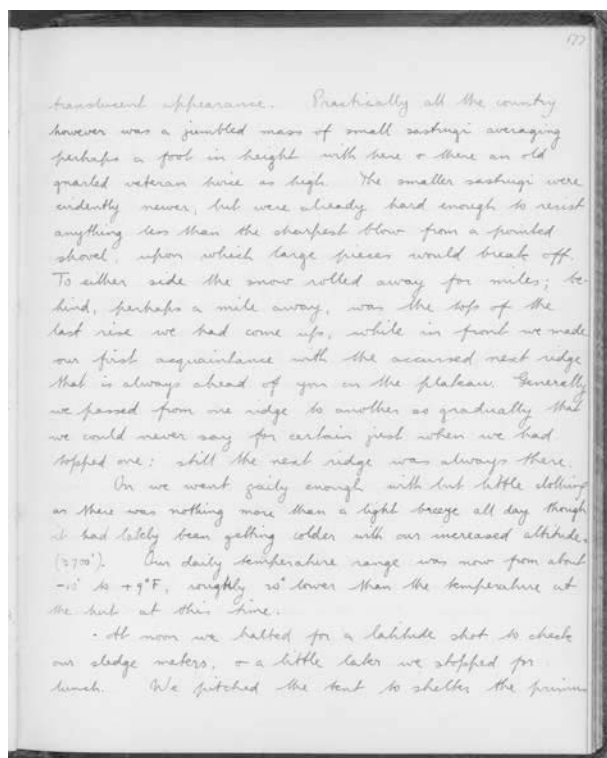
According to the final plans, the *Aurora* (the chosen expedition ship under Captain Davis), was to sail first to Macquarie Island, where one party of five men was to be stationed for meteorological and other work. The *Aurora* would then continue on to the Antarctic continent where a main base of operations would be established. From the main base, six sledging trips were to be sent out in various directions further inland or along the coast. Meanwhile, the *Aurora* was to proceed westwards with the further object of landing another party which would establish a Western Base. From there, the ship would sail to Hobart and return the following year to relieve the various parties. All of the landed parties were to pursue scientific programmes and oceanographic data would also be taken on board ship.

As Mawson himself admitted, 'the scope of our intentions was regarded by some as over-ambitious' but nobody in his party regarded them as impossible, and they were adhered to and were very largely completed with great success.⁸ This success was both scientific and organisational and was admired and commented upon both in Britain and Australia, one commentator going so far as to call Mawson's expedition 'the greatest and most consummate expedition that ever sailed for Antarctica', claiming that, in scope and execution, it held an 'exalted' position amongst all previous expeditions, including those of Scott and Shackleton.⁹

And yet, a number of things did go wrong, most notably the unfortunate deaths of Ninnis and Mertz, who accompanied Mawson on the Eastern Sledging Party. Ninnis disappeared into a massive crevasse; Mertz died of vitamin A poisoning after eating the livers of sledge dogs. After having to wait out a week-long blizzard at Cape Denison, Mawson got back to base camp alone and unaided and far behind schedule after a month-long solo trek, and notwithstanding some extraordinary personal suffering and some really desperate moments (such as when he removed his socks to discover that the whole of the skin on the soles of his feet had lifted). He was met by a small party of men who had chosen to remain and search for him, but the main party on board the *Aurora* had left and Mawson was forced to overwinter for another year, despite his weakened state. Referring to this largely unheralded feat of survival by Mawson compared with the glorious death of Scott, one Australian wag cheekily opined: 'Scott lay back and thought of England; Mawson stood up and walked home'.¹⁰ Yet no great notice was taken of this feat at the time.

Polar exploration in this period often required supreme efforts of will and

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Cover and single-page from copy of Bage's Antarctic Diary recently acquired by the State Library of Victoria

seemingly superhuman feats of survival, which in turn fed into notions of Empire and Anglo-Saxon superiority. Herein lies, perhaps, the reason why the tragic death of Scott and the difficulties of Shackleton caused them to be lionized and feted by an adoring public. This was not called the 'heroic age' of exploration for nothing, and it seems as if both the British and the Australian public were at least as interested in 'mythologizing' the feats of their heroes as they were in appreciating their scientific achievements.

There is no doubt that when Mawson returned to Australia in February 1914 he was accorded a hero's welcome, but he never achieved a similar level of fame in Britain and it would be fair to say that, to this day, his name is not as well known in Britain or the United States as those of Scott and Shackleton. A variety of reasons have been suggested for this state of affairs, including the outbreak of World War One that same year, which turned the mind of the Anglo-Saxon public to other things.¹¹ Also, it has been suggested that Scott and Shackleton were British at the height of Empire, and that the drama of Scott's death combined with his excellence as a writer made his name memorable. In the case of Shackleton, his name rode on the back of his well-known personal charisma. Jasper Rees, in his review of a recent book on Mawson claims that Mawson's low profile in Britain is partly due to his Australian nationality and partly to 'his dislike of flag-planting for its own sake'.¹²

This curious lack of 'heroic' acclaim for Mawson has led a number of recent authors to comment that Mawson's successful completion of his scientific goals in such an ambitious programme has, paradoxically, been the reason why he (to a certain extent) and his fellow expeditioners (to a greater extent) have become the 'forgotten men' of Antarctic exploration when compared to Shackleton and Scott. Heather Rossiter, for example, who edited the Antarctic diary of expeditioner Charles Harrison, comments:

As is sadly common with such expeditions, thirty men of the AAE have been overlooked, lost to Antarctic history. Only the name of their leader Mawson survives in the public memory, yet it was the unremembered men who did the work, went out into the blizzard to read the anemometer, marched inland to record magnetic deviation, who hauled in fish traps and dug through ice to gather rocks that might tell of the land's long history.¹³

In a sense, Mawson and his men were, generally speaking, successful enough that there was no great story to tell. They 'merely' got the job done and returned in good health, bringing with them a wealth of new scientific data. In fact, those who write historical accounts laced with great encomiums of praise (such as those written about Shackleton and Scott) have rarely attributed Mawson and his men with any great feats of heroism, have told no story of survival against impossible odds, nor given any account of great personal suffering – all things which are easier to 'mythologise', it would seem, when plans go seriously awry.¹⁴

At least Mawson, being an Australian, escaped the fate of the Norwegian, Amundsen, who, having beaten Scott to the South Pole by using dogs to pull his sledge (as against Scott who pulled his own sledge), was often coolly received by the British

public. At a Royal Geographical Society banquet to honour Amundsen, the President of the Society, Lord Curzon, in his closing remarks, stated that, 'I almost wish that in our tribute of admiration we could include those wonderful, good-natured, fascinating dogs . . . without whom Captain Amundsen would never have got to the Pole.' As Amundsen remembers it, Curzon then concluded with, 'I therefore propose three cheers for the dogs'. Amundsen always considered this a thinly veiled insult.¹⁵

Mawson himself was never insulted for his achievements, but then neither was he greatly admired for his heroism. If Mawson himself has not received the same level of admiration in print as Scott and Shackleton, an even stronger case might be made for the neglect of his fellow expeditioners, the 'forgotten men' who carried forward the great scientific work, and whom Mawson was always most generous to, frequently lauding their individual and collective efforts whenever he wrote of them.

III

One of the 'forgotten men' who remained behind to look for Mawson was Robert Bage. Edward Frederick Robert (Bob) Bage was born in St Kilda, Victoria, in 1888 and was educated at Melbourne's Church of England Grammar School and Trinity College at Melbourne University, completing a degree in civil engineering. He joined the Corps of Military Engineers in Queensland in 1909 and transferred to the Royal Australian Engineers two years later. He took leave from the army to accompany Mawson, where he served as astronomer, magnetician and recorder of tidal data. After returning from Antarctica, Bage was attached to the Engineers Staff College, Melbourne, and was mobilised at the outbreak of World War One. He took part in the ANZAC landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915. Highly rated as an engineering sapper and officer, he was killed in action in early May whilst pegging out an advanced infantry post in full daylight view of the Turks, despite pointing out to his commanding officer that such dangerous activities were normally done at night.¹⁶

Bage led the expedition's southern sledging party on their 1000-kilometre overland journey towards the South Magnetic Pole, returning in the midst of difficult blizzard conditions and short rations. Also, as mentioned above, he volunteered to winter over in Antarctica when Mawson did not return in time for the departure of the *Aurora*, being quite willing to spend extra time at base camp to assist with the search for the then missing Mawson. Bage was reputedly cheerful of disposition, always ready to lend a hand, always capable of quiet determination and was always resolute in his desire to get the job done.¹⁷ If handwriting is any guide, he was also a plain, solid, uncomplicated man. At the end of Mawson's *Home of the Blizzard*, his written report of the expedition, there is a page of signatures belonging to each of the expeditioners. In contrast to the flourishes and curlicues of others, Bage's signature stands out for its simple legibility and lack of ostentation.¹⁸

What sort of man did Mawson want on his expedition and how did Bage measure up? Mawson took staff selection very seriously, claiming that 'in no department can a

leader spend time more profitably than in the selection of the men who are to accomplish the work'.¹⁹ Quoting Fiala, the Arctic explorer, Mawson makes it plain that, while scientific expertise and practical skills are necessary, they are not enough; in addition, 'moral' quality is necessary, meaning the ability to curb one's desires and work hard against difficult odds. Only then should mental and physical powers be assessed.

When the time comes to assess physical powers, however, 'the great desideratum is tempered youth'.²⁰ At age fifty, a man may be as strong and resilient as a twenty-year-old, but, on average, after about thirty years of age, the body's ability to respond to strains is much diminished, and by forty, a man reaches his acme. After that, degeneration of the body sets in and the limits to endurance become much reduced. But against this must also be considered mental powers, since a man must show 'mental ability, acquaintance with the work and sound moral quality'.²¹ Finally, it is only when the individual is able to 'sacrifice all personal predispositions to the welfare of the whole' that good working conditions will prevail.

Given these requirements, it is not hard to see why Bage was chosen for the expedition, and how he was representative of the calibre of man that Mawson required. By reference to Mawson's staff notes, the average age of the expeditioners may be calculated, and is found to be 26 years. (Mawson himself was 30, the oldest was Close at 40 years and the youngest was Correll at 19 years.) All were single men, except Close. Fifteen of the staff may be classified as being science-trained, a practicing scientist or someone normally engaged in scientific pursuits. Thirteen were engineers or technical experts (such as wireless operators or mechanics). Six were serving or former soldiers or merchant sailors. Although most of them were at the start of their careers, a solid proportion had already accumulated experience in professional, scientific or trade fields, such as universities or museums, or other public bodies, or normal civilian occupations. Three had had previous experience of polar travel.

Amongst this company, Bage, at age 23, was just slightly younger than average, but was the same age or younger than ten out of the 36 expeditioners. He had already completed an engineering degree and had worked for both the Queensland Railways and the Royal Australian Army Engineers by the time he went with Mawson. This had given him a self-confidence and leadership qualities that were often commented upon in such a relatively young man. The circumstances of his early death at Gallipoli show that he was used to rough work and difficult conditions, and that he lacked nothing in courage. Despite his having no previous polar experience, he was, in fact, just the sort of person that an expedition leader would be very glad to have, as his actual performance in Antarctica amply demonstrated. He was, indeed, a perfect example of Mawson's exacting requirement for a combination of youth, practical skills and 'moral qualities' which is signified in the reference to 'tempered youth'.

One of Bage's main roles on the expedition, along with Eric Webb and Alec Kennedy, was to record data of the terrestrial magnetic fields around Antarctica. It takes a reading of Mawson's 'Editorial Preface' of the final scientific report on terrestrial



'Bage & his tide gauge'. Photograph by Frank Hurley taken during the Australasian Antarctic Expedition, 1911-1914. Reproduced courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales (Home and Away no. 36680)

magnetism to realise just how unfavourable the conditions were during the collection of this data, requiring the full capabilities of the 'tempered youth' who undertook it. Indeed, in the words of the meteorologist, J. M. Stagg, who compiled and wrote the final report on magnetic disturbances at Cape Denison, this data was 'arduously collected'.²²

Webb was mainly responsible for taking daily readings at the main base situated at Cape Dennison, while Kennedy looked after the western base located (as Mawson termed it) 'on a floating and constantly moving glacial sheet'. Kennedy also suffered from 'very limited facilities and even more limited assistance'. Webb, at the main base, had to fight the daily winds of Commonwealth Bay, where the average speed during the two years of data collection was 50 miles an hour. In the worst weather, it was not uncommon for Kennedy and Bage to crawl the short distance on hands and knees, across the windy ice drifts, from the main hut to the magnetograph hut where readings were taken, feeling their way by touch from one familiar rock to the next in the face of impossible visibility.

In his 'Preface', Mawson singles out Bage for this 'very creditable performance' and accords him special mention for carrying on Webb's base station work during the second year. In addition, Bage is mentioned for his field observations during the sledging journeys, despite the time and weather constraints around which he had to work:

Had more time been available for the southern sledging party (Bage, Webb, and Hurley), enhanced results would have accrued for, after a splendidly executed journey, they had to turn on their tracks when very close to that magnetically interesting locality, the Magnetic Pole.²³

Clearly, Bage was a competent and energetic expeditioner, typical of the tough breed that survived and worked alongside Mawson.

Aside from his main duties, Bage was a useful workmate, assisting with various jobs establishing and maintaining the main base, such as assisting Mawson to site and place flagstaff markers, locating and leading back any lost dogs, assisting with the building and repair of huts, and transporting supplies to and from the *Aurora*. He became storeman during the second winter at the main base. When it was his turn to cook, he was renowned for his steamed puddings.²⁴ Bage proved to be a man with a practical turn of mind. At one stage he launched a home-made kite which was designed to raise a wireless aerial.²⁵ He was a willing helper with many of the scientific experiments, such as tide gauge readings and magnetograph readings, and showed himself to be a conscientious record keeper when called upon to assist others, as he was on the journey home. In that instance he took supervision from Captain Davis on the *Aurora* to record ocean temperature readings and the collection of water samples.²⁶

IV

Following a well established tradition of voyagers and explorers throughout the centuries, many of the Mawson expeditioners kept careful and detailed diaries. Mawson himself and John King Davis, his second-in-command, were both diarists, as were Charles Laseron the biologist, Frank Stillwell, the party's geologist, the biologist John Hunter and the meteorologist Charles Turnbull Harrison, whose journal has only recently appeared in print.²⁷ Other expeditioners wrote letters home, which, when assembled, provide another form of diary record. Belgrave Ninnis was one such, as was Perceval Gray, who served as second officer on the *Aurora*. Mawson himself, aside from his 'official' Antarctic diaries, also wrote letters home to his fiancée, Paquita Delprat.²⁸

The copy of the Bage 'diary' acquired by SLV is of this latter type, comprising a series of letters and several shorter narratives (totalling some 178 tightly written pages) rather than a continuous journal-style document. The original manuscript of Bage's diary was entrusted to Herbert Dyce Murphy, who returned to Hobart with most of the expeditionary party on 15 March 1913, while Bage wintered over with Mawson at Main Base for a second year. Murphy returned to England in late 1912.²⁹ The transcription of Bage's writings was most likely made from the original diary and letters sometime before 1920 and survived through the family of Bage's fiancée, who resided in England at the time of his death and who returned to Australia some decades later.³⁰ The whereabouts of Bage's original letters and manuscripts is currently unknown.

Like the writings of Ninnis and others, Bage's diary-writing during his time in Antarctica was not continuous. His account of the journey out of Hobart to Macquarie

Island takes the form of letters home to his family and covers the period from the Hobart departure of the *Toroa*, the ancillary sailing vessel of the expedition, on 12 December 1911 up to its arrival at Macquarie Island on the following day. These letters cover Bage's experiences on board ship and his first impressions of Macquarie Island.

A second, much longer letter covers the sea voyage down to Antarctica on the *Aurora*, with entries starting on 29 December 1911 and finishing on 16 January 1912. This section of the diary covers his time on Macquarie Island, the sea journey down to Antarctica and, most significantly, a detailed account of how Mawson's men came to choose a site for their base. Also mentioned is the surprise and concern when the wind sprung up a day or two later, revealing the one great disadvantage of their chosen site. Subsequent anemometer readings showed that this was (and still is) the windiest spot on earth.

Bage's diary proper – that part sent home with Dyce Murphy – forms the main part of the contents. Its entries run from 19 January 1912 through to 7 November 1912, and cover Bage's time during his first year in Antarctica, including a narrative of his day-to-day activities and frequent mention of the ever-present wind and challenging weather.

A final part of the diary, that part covering the activities of the southern sledging party which Bage led in 1911, was first published as part of Mawson's Expedition Reports.³¹ The copy which SLV has acquired is, unfortunately, incomplete, the transcription having been left hanging mid-sentence after the first few days' narrative. The remainder of the text has been preserved in the printed Mawson report.³²

Bage had proved himself to be a practical and very energetic member of the expedition, and his Antarctic writings reflect this. It was by no means a literary journal that he wrote and it was not continuous – but was never intended to be. Alongside the other diaries and letters written by members of the Mawson party, it provides a fascinating glimpse into an age now past, but a truly 'heroic age', when modern scientific exploration first opened up the Antarctic continent to the world. And it was a world where heroism was shown to arise, in a peculiarly down-to-earth and Australian fashion perhaps, from the successful completion of an ambitious and arduous programme of tasks as much as from glorified feats of endurance or death.

* **Editor's note:** To appear in the *La Trobe Journal*, issue no. 92, December, 2013.