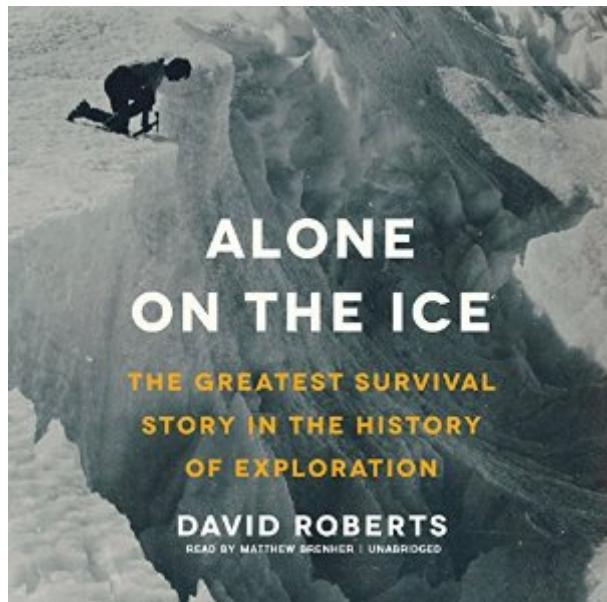


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Alone On The Ice: The Greatest Survival Story In The History Of Exploration



Synopsis

His two companions were dead, his food and supplies had vanished in a crevasse, and Douglas Mawson was still 100 miles from camp. On January 17, 1913, alone and near starvation, Mawson, leader of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition, was hauling a sledge to get back to base camp. The dogs were gone. Now Mawson himself plunged through a snow bridge, dangling over an abyss by the sledge harness. A line of poetry gave him the will to haul himself back to the surface. Mawson was sometimes reduced to crawling, and one night he discovered that the soles of his feet had completely detached from the flesh beneath. On February 8, when he staggered back to base, his features unrecognizably skeletal, the first teammate to reach him blurted out, "Which one are you?" This thrilling and almost unbelievable account establishes Mawson in his rightful place as one of the greatest polar explorers and expedition leaders.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

After whipping through a couple great polar exploration books, I got a copy of *Alone on the Ice*. (Btw, I highly recommend both of these: *Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage*, which is the well known account of Shackleton's ill-fated, but miraculous survival in Antarctic and Arctic Adventure: *My Life in the Frozen North*, which though hugely popular in its day, is something of a lost classic that is a great read filled with lots of well told dramatic adventure while [unlike *Endurance*] giving insight into native Eskimo culture, which is fascinating.) In "Alone on the Ice," David Roberts tells the true story of what Sir Edmund Hillary called "the greatest survival story in the

history of exploration." Hillary was referring to the 1912 expedition of Australian explorer Douglas Mawson and his fellow members of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE). Mawson and cohorts set out to explore Antarctica with the intention of gathering specimens and to make scientific observations of the continent. What has left Mawson's considerable accomplishments and amazing survival story obscured by the layers of newsprint and time is--unlike Roald Amundsen and Robert Scott--he wasn't a pole bagger. Mawson, never grabbed headlines by "summiting" the south pole. Mawson and the AAE's expedition went virtually unnoticed by the public.

There's something about the cold which strikes us on a visceral level. Not only does cold have the power to drain our energy and blister our flesh, it can also make even the simplest tasks incredibly difficult. Nevertheless, during the first decades of the twentieth century, several cadres of heroic men surmounted their natural aversion to the cold and made valiant attempts to explore the most foreboding continent on earth: Antarctica. One of these attempts was the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) of 1913, which is the subject of David Roberts' new book "Alone On The Ice." The AAE was led by a young scholar and university professor named Douglas Mawson. Roberts does a brilliant job of chronicling Mawson's life story and describing Mawson's affinity for adventure. As Roberts portrays him, Mawson was an all-around Renaissance Man, whose adroitness at surviving in the Antarctic was equaled by his brilliance as a scientist. In addition to providing a detailed narrative of Mawson's life, Roberts also succeeds in humanizing the men with whom Mawson traveled on his expeditions. All and all, the biographic sections of "Alone On The Ice" are outstanding. While the backstories of Mawson and his fellow adventurers are intriguing, "Alone On The Ice" is a tedious read in many ways. The biggest problem with the book is its pacing. Instead of telling the story of the AAE as a crisp, streamlined narrative (as Alfred Lansing did in his similarly themed work "Endurance"), Roberts allows the minutiae of his research to slow the story down. For example, throughout the book, Roberts uses an excessive number of quotes from the diaries of Mawson and his fellow adventurers to bolster his points. A few well-placed diary quotes would've enhanced the story of the AAE.

I'm a sucker for good books about true adventure and polar exploration, Antarctica in particular, and my decision to buy *Alone On The Ice* was an impulse. I'd never heard of David Roberts before, and only had a limited knowledge of Sir Douglas Mawson and the AAE, but I took a chance because the subject matter appealed to me. As a bit of a warning, I have to admit I was initially a little baffled when the story was picked up in *media res*. Having finished the book, it does seem like a good idea

to entice the reader with immediate action before providing the context (albeit a little jarring). Luckily, it's pretty smooth sailing from there...for the flow of the narrative that is, certainly not for the players! The story of the AAE is a big and complex one indeed, but I feel that Roberts told the tale with something as close to elegance as possible. For the sake of the narrative Roberts is forced to omit some of the details of the expedition, but the focus here (especially in the second half of the book) is on Mawson and his incredible solo journey for survival. Without giving anything away, it really is one of the most heroic and exciting stories of survival I've ever read, and Roberts brings it to life with vivid, but never florid, writing. One of the most interesting points of the book for me was the depiction of the psychological effects of polar exploration and isolation, right down to its most devastating. I appreciate that Roberts did his best to refrain from making personal inferences about what was going on in the minds of the men on the expedition.

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