From the end of 2011 through 2012 the centenary of Sir Douglas Mawson’s 1911-1914 Australasian Antarctic Expedition to Commonwealth Bay, and 100 years of Australian Antarctic expeditions will be held.

The following is foremost based on George Dovers’ address to the Society on 2nd October 1947 and other material from various sources. George Dovers, FRGS (Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society), a resident of Wollongong, joined Dr (later Sir) Douglas Mawson in 1911 on the first Australian Antarctic Expedition as a navigator and cartographer. The object of the expedition was to secure scientific knowledge of the ‘Australian Quadrant’ the area between longitude $90^0$ and $180^0$ East a distance of 3,200 km.

The expedition, consisting of 37 men, lots of equipment, food for at least 2 years, sleds and dogs, left Hobart on 2nd December 1911 on the *SY Aurora*, a three-masted steam yacht of 386 tons, 50m long, 9.3m beam and 5.7m draught. She was built at Dundee, Scotland, in 1876 where for many years she took part in seal and whale hunting in the Arctic. In 1910 Douglas Mawson bought the vessel specifically for the 1911 expedition and ordered a refit and strengthening of the hull and bow. Captain Davis, the Master of the vessel, was also second-in-command of the party. The first stop was Macquarie Island some 1100 km south-south-east of Tasmania. After some bad weather they arrived at the island where 5 men were put ashore on 11th December to set up a weather station and wireless communication base. After leaving Macquarie Island the *SY Aurora* proceeded along the meridian of $158^0$ East longitude for Commonwealth Bay. On 8th January 1912 the main party of 18 men was landed at Cape Denison, Commonwealth Bay, newly discovered territory which Mawson named King George V Land. Mawson, of course, was in command at the Main Base. The vessel departed on 19th January 1912 to land the Western party. Despite being summer the weather was not very kind and the party was landed
2,400 km westward instead of 1,280 km. The party of 8 men landed on 19th February 1912 at what became known as Queen Mary Land. Mr George Dovers was a member of that party. The Aurora sailed 3 days later for Hobart to refit and with orders to return in a year’s time to pick up the expedition.

What was happening on the Main Base at Cape Denison? After the huts were completed by the end of January 1912 the winds grew to hurricane-force and it became essential to wear spiked boots to venture outside. At the end of February, despite dangerous weather conditions, Mawson wanted to survey the area. He and two men, managed to make just short of 9 km before weather conditions forced them to return. The party was desperate to build two radio masts which took 5 months. On 1st September only one-way contact was made with Macquarie Island until the whole system came crashing down to earth on 13th October. Communication was still very basic at that time - by Morse code only. Two-way communication was not re-established until 13th February 1913. Winds encountered during the expedition’s stay measured from an occasional breeze to an average of 100 kmph with gusts of over 300 kmph. The winter months were filled with long periods of boredom and inactivity. From August sledging sojourns were held. Mawson with two companions headed south in a 65 kmph gale. After only 9 km they dug an ice cave and established a supply base which was named ‘Aladdin’s Cave’. The whole month of October was spent at the Main Base as the weather was atrocious. During November 1912 five parties headed out in various directions on scientific exercises. One party travelled south to the magnetic pole. Its support party travelled only 100 km before returning on 21st November to base leaving three men to reach the magnetic pole. The round trip to the pole was about 1,000 km and the party on 23rd December, due to running short of supplies, just 80km short of their goal, turned around and went back. Temperatures encountered during that trek (Antarctic summer) averaged −30°C. The Eastern party enjoyed beautiful scenery and good weather in the beginning but on their return trip it was delayed by blizzards and deep soft snow. They finally reached a food cache on Mt Murchison after three days on just a mug of penguin broth.
The Western party was not so lucky. After leaving the Main Base they travelled 50 km in 7 days in soft and drifting snow. During their trek they discovered the first meteorite. By Christmas 1912 they were 252 km from Cape Denison and did not experience too much bad weather on their return trip.

Mawson and his party of three men left the Main Base on 12th November 1912 on the Far Eastern trek. They had a torrid time. They crossed two glaciers, the Mertz, badly crevassed and the Ninnes, covered in rolling waves of ice. In early December the party was trapped for three days by a 110 kmph blizzard. On 14th December Dr Xavier Mertz, ahead on skis, signalled that he had spotted a snow-covered crevasse. Mawson made it across easily, but Mertz cried out as Ninnis suddenly disappeared. Mawson turned around and was horrified to see Ninnis the sledge and all the dogs gone. Rushing to the edge of the crevasse the men stared down into a deep, gaping hole where, on a ridge some 50 odd meters below a dog was whining, apparently with a broken back. Beneath that was only an abyss. They called for some hours but no reply came from the deep. Gathering all the rope they had it did not even reach the dog on the ledge. Most of the indispensable supplies, such as a tent, most of the food and six of the fittest dogs were lost. The remaining sledge, having discarding one the day before, carried 10 days rations for the two men and nothing for the remaining six dogs. All this occurred just over 500 km from the Main Base. Mawson an Mertz made it back to the discarded sledge. They picked up a few items and disposed of anything not essential. No food caches were established on the outward trip as they were returning by a different course. The dogs, somehow, were fed. Nevertheless their health was deteriorating and either died or killed to feed the surviving dogs and humans. They managed for 10 days when at Christmas Day the last dog died and the party was still a good 250 km from Main Base. The two men kept going by themselves doing no more than 10 km a day though did 25 km in one day on 30th December. Now Mertz started to feel the effects of eating dog meat and wanted to eat some of the sledging rations. Two days later on 1st January 1913 he developed stomach pains. Slowly he was losing his strength and the men rested for a day. Dr Mertz could no longer walk and was put on the sledge which Mawson had to pull by himself. On 7th January Metz
became delirious and succumbed.

Now Douglas Mawson was all on his own and still a long way to go. He, nevertheless, pushed on only to fall 10 days later in a crevasse dangling on his 4 metre harness. He got himself together and after the second attempt he miraculously managed to crawl out of the hole. Then on 27th January running out of food a blizzard stopped his progress. Luckily, two days later he came upon a snow cairn. It had been built only a few hours ago by three men from Main Base who had been searching for his party. He consumed the food and read a note stating that Aladdin’s Cave was only 40 km away. Mawson arrived at the cave at 7pm on 1st February. The weather became so bad that he was trapped there for 7 days. Fed up with doing nothing and despite the weather he set off once again. He finally arrived back at Main Base only to see the Aurora disappearing on the horizon. The six men left behind by the Aurora in January to search for him repaired the radio masts and finally made contact with the outside world. Being back on the air the Aurora was contacted but due to ice conditions could not return.

With the vessel gone for another year the seven men, still under the leadership of Mawson, had to spend the rest of 1913 in Antarctica. They reconciled themselves to another winter of blizzards and confinement. Having a fresh crew made also a difference. They were well stocked with supplies. The SY Aurora returned on 12th December 1913. After sailing along the Antarctic coast for a month, Captain John Davis changed course to the north arriving at Gulf St Vincent on 26th February 1914. Mawson wrote, “The welcome home, the voices of innumerable strangers - the hand-grips of many friends - it chokes me - it cannot be uttered!”

Whatever happened to the eight-men Western Party? Weather conditions were severe but not as bad as on the Main Base. They settled in their hut called ‘The Grottoes’. The radio mast they erected was also blown down in the first blizzard. Winds were strong and gales of 100 kmph were not unusual. Setting up caches for food and other goods were made as early as August 1912. When winter was over the jobs of exploration and mapping of the coastline was undertaken. Frank Wild, the leader and sledge master, trekked to the east and was cut short after 200 km due to severe crevasses in the Denham Glacier. The western
team, after crossing the Helen Glacier, discovered extensive penguin rookeries. By Christmas the Western Party reached Gaussberg which was discovered some ten years earlier in 1902. The entire party was picked up by the *SY Aurora* on 23rd February 1913.

Most of the crew was made up of young graduates of Australia and New Zealand universities. Dr Douglas Mawson was a member of Ernest Shackleton’s Nimrod Expedition also known as the British Antarctic Expedition of 1907-09 who located the South Magnetic Pole. He was given the leadership due to his infinite resource, splendid physique and astonishing indifference to frost. The other member of the expedition, Frank Wild, was also with both Scott and Shackleton expeditions. Lt B E S Ninnis of the Royal Fusiliers was appointed in London and was put in charge of the dogs and Dr X Mertz, an expert Swiss mountaineer also appointed in London to looked after the dogs.

What did this expedition achieve? It gained a great amount of scientific knowledge of the Antarctic Plateau in the following fields: Terrestrial Magnetism, Biology, Geology and Oceanography. It mapped at least 1,600 km of coastline. Captain Davis, the leader of the ship’s party, located new land between longitude 130° and 140° East, which he named Wilkes Land after an American explorer of the 1830s.

The *SY Aurora* made several more trips to Antarctica. On one trip she was trapped in ice for from May 1915 till February 1916. In 1917 she departed Newcastle with a load of coal for Chile. The ship was posted by Lloyds of London on 2nd January 1918 as missing, presumably a casualty of World War I.

Mr Dovers mentioned in his talk that at the time another expedition was being prepared for Antarctica, and two Illawarra residents were selected, namely Robert Dovers, his son, and J Lambeth.

Now, after this background on the Australasian Antarctic Expedition where do the Illawarra Historical Society and Museum fit in? Firstly, the speech by Mr George Dovers, a local, who was a member of the Western Party. Secondly, the artefacts donated to the Society for the Museum. They are foremost two dog sledge runners, still
with leather straps to attach the runners to the superstructure, used by the Western Party, an icepick engraved with 'Australasian Antarctic Expedition 1911', one of G Dovers diaries at Queen Mary Land covering from 7th November 1912 till 26th January 1913, a group photo of the party pulling a sledge and finally a set of skis used by Robert Dovers during the 1947 and 1953 Antarctic Expeditions.

The above artefacts came to light some years ago and it was decided to donate them to the National Museum of Australia in Canberra in time for the Centenary of Australian Antarctic Expeditions.

References:
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Antarctica and Sir Douglas Mawson - Australia.gov.au
SY Aurora - en.wikipedia.org
Dovers diary Nov 1912 till Jan 1913.