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# Beyond the Heroic Stereotype: Sidney Jeffryes and the Mythologising of Australian Antarctic History

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## **Abstract**

In 2010 the Australian Antarctic Names and Medals Committee announced that it had named a glacier near Commonwealth Bay in East Antarctica in honour of Sidney Jeffryes. Jeffryes was a member of Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE), 1911-14, and the decision to attach his name to an Antarctic feature, coming just before the centenary of the AAE's departure, reflected a gradual historical revisionism around the expedition occurring at this time. Seeking to 'honour ... historically significant figures ... whose contributions [to the AAE] have not yet been recognised', the Committee also attached the names of two other previously ignored members of the expedition to glaciers (AG, 'Australian Antarctic Glaciers Named'). In 2017 this approach was extended to include the non-human, when 26 islands, rocks and reefs around the site of the AAE headquarters were named in honour of the 'beloved dogs, which played a critical role in Australia's heroic era of exploration' (AG, 'Mawson's Huskies'). After nearly a century of focus on the 'Great Man' of Australian Antarctic history- Mawson-the criteria for significance were beginning to broaden.

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# Beyond the Heroic Stereotype: Sidney Jeffryes and the Mythologising of Australian Antarctic History

Elizabeth Leane, Ben Maddison and Kimberley Norris

**I**N 2010 THE AUSTRALIAN ANTARCTIC NAMES AND MEDALS COMMITTEE ANNOUNCED THAT it had named a glacier near Commonwealth Bay in East Antarctica in honour of Sidney Jeffryes. Jeffryes was a member of Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE), 1911-14, and the decision to attach his name to an Antarctic feature, coming just before the centenary of the AAE's departure, reflected a gradual historical revisionism around the expedition occurring at this time. Seeking to 'honour ... historically significant figures ... whose contributions [to the AAE] have not yet been recognised', the Committee also attached the names of two other previously ignored members of the expedition to glaciers (AG, 'Australian Antarctic Glaciers Named'). In 2017 this approach was extended to include the non-human, when 26 islands, rocks and reefs around the site of the AAE headquarters were named in honour of the 'beloved dogs, which played a critical role in Australia's heroic era of exploration' (AG, 'Mawson's Huskies'). After nearly a century of focus on the 'Great Man' of Australian Antarctic history—Mawson—the criteria for significance were beginning to broaden.

In the case of Jeffryes, however, the strain of moving beyond the stereotype was evident. Despite his achievements—he enabled radio communication to and from Antarctica, a world first—he has always been the most difficult of the AAE men to include within the Australian Antarctic honour roll. He was a ring-in, incorporated into the expedition halfway through, and only then by dint of circumstance; and

he was a radio operator, taking no part in the scientific or sledging programs that have typically been seen as the core historically significant Antarctic activities. Worst of all, he distinguished himself on the expedition by developing a severe mental illness, evident not only in the privacy of the base hut, but also very publicly on his return to Australia. Immediately committed to an asylum, he spent the remainder of his life in the system, ending up in a maximum-security facility for the criminally insane. With his mental illness publicly framed at the time as a form of 'weakness', Jeffryes became the antithesis of the heroic masculinity epitomised by his erstwhile leader.

Thus, despite the obvious goodwill in the glacier's naming, it was still hard work, even a century later, finding the justifications that would allow Jeffryes this toponymic recognition. This is reflected in the entry on Jeffryes Glacier in the *Australian Antarctic Gazetteer*, which states that, 'In addition to being a competent wireless officer, Jeffryes was also a good cook'. This underwhelming summary of his contribution to Australian Antarctic history is buttressed by Mawson's ambiguous and condescending description of him as 'assiduous', 'enthusiastic' and 'perhaps ... over-conscientious'. The entry concludes that Jeffryes 'suffered a nervous breakdown from which he never fully recovered'—the polite, understated language seeming to betray a nervousness to admit the full horror of the AAE man's end (AG, 'Name Details: Jeffryes Glacier'). The language of the *Gazetteer* entry as a whole is muted and slightly embarrassed; rhetorically, it was far more straightforward to incorporate the 'beloved dogs' into a widening pantheon of Antarctic heroes than to include Jeffryes (AG, 'Mawson's Huskies').



Figure 1. Sidney Jeffryes, with radio mast in the background. Source: John King Davis papers, State Library of Victoria

The memorialisation of expeditions has become an increasingly contested issue in public life both in Australia and internationally (See Ireland; Darian-Smith and Edmonds). While Antarctica might seem peripheral to these debates, which usually focus on colonial legacies and indigenous dispossession, the seven claims upon the continent (of which Australia's is the largest) mean that it too must be understood through the lens of (post)colonialism (Dodds and Collis). In this regard, the stories through which Australians' early experiences of Antarctica are remembered are important components of the nation's ongoing relationship with

the continent to its south. In this context, we argue, Jeffryes' story has a call on our attention: in addition to its own compelling narrative, it enables us to challenge the mythologised heroic stereotype that has dominated Australian Antarctic history.

### **The Heroic Stereotype in Australian Antarctic History**

Historians and geographers have noted that Australian Antarctic popular history has been written and consumed through a frame of heroic masculinity centred on Mawson, whose physical presence in Antarctica (now invested in the historic huts that bear his name) has become the symbolic anchor-point of Australia's territorial claim. Mawson's name, notes Tom Griffiths, is 'almost as iconic and sacred as the words "Bradman" and "ANZAC"' (Griffiths, 'The AAT'). For cultural geographer Christy Collis, he is 'a nationally-metonymic vehicle, a physical ligature symbolically binding the claimed land to the nation' (Collis 52). This lionisation of a single heroic explorer reflects a wider international trend: Ben Maddison argues that 'one of the curious and probably unique features of Antarctic history as it evolved during the twentieth century was its isolation from the main currents of historical thinking', including those that 'attacked the "Whig" or "Great Man" view of history' (Maddison 6). Thus, the complex history of early twentieth-century Antarctic exploration is reduced to the pantheon of Scott, Shackleton and Amundsen. While Mawson looms large in Australian Antarctic culture, internationally he is less well known, barely on the cusp of this A-list. The title of Peter FitzSimon's popular history *Mawson and the Ice Men of the Heroic Age: Scott, Shackleton and Amundsen* (2012) is one rhetorical attempt to ensure he is included.

This 'Great Man' view of Antarctic history has not gone unchallenged. Internationally, critics have addressed the situation in two primary ways. The first approach has been to re-evaluate the reputation of a particular hero, often to the detriment of another. Scott's reputation has been the subject of considerable revisionism, beginning in the late 1950s and given momentum by Roland Huntford's polemical biography *Scott and Amundsen* (1979) (Jones, 'From "Noble Example"'). Historians such as Stephanie Barczewski and Max Jones have traced the waxing and waning of Scott's and Shackleton's heroic status over the last century or so, in the context of changing social and cultural values (Barczewski; Jones, *Last Great Quest*; Jones, 'From "Noble Example"'). The second approach has been to focus attention on previously neglected figures in Antarctic exploration, widening the category of the 'Antarctic hero', through individual or collective biographies and accounts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of the latter, see Maddison.

A similar pattern is evident in the Australian context, although notably later than the British re-evaluation of Scott. As a career scientist whose expedition was framed in terms of scientific discovery, Mawson is more readily slotted into the post-Antarctic Treaty emphasis on science as the defining feature of proper human interaction with Antarctica.<sup>2</sup> The centenary period of the AAE nonetheless saw a belated questioning of Mawson's monopoly on the memorialisation of Australian Antarctic exploration. A number of writers, historians and AAE descendants responded to the centenary by publishing diaries, biographies or expanded accounts of AAE activities, sometimes explicitly to counter Mawson-centrism (See, for example, Riffenburgh 2; Rossiter xi). Around the same time, David Day published the first wholesale debunking of Mawson. Noting previous historians' reluctance to 'dispute his status as Australia's Antarctic hero', Day provides a tendentious account of Mawson's leadership of the AAE, which points to his 'relative inexperience, overweening ambition, and poor decision-making' (Day 2).<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly, Day gives Jeffryes only cursory treatment, although, as we will outline, Mawson's post-expedition treatment of his radioman could have provided ample fodder for a debunking. Indeed, the centenary-inspired revisionism as a whole has paid little attention to Jeffryes' dramatic story. His role in the expedition was not, of course, completely ignored: Beau Riffenburgh in his AAE expedition account delved into the archival evidence around Jeffryes' experiences in unprecedented detail and examined Mawson's responses to his mental illness with a newly critical eye (Riffenburgh 357-68, 388-90). Tom Griffiths wrote several pieces about the AAE that dealt perceptively with the radio operator's experiences, asking at one point whether Jeffryes, as an outsider, was not a 'privileged witness to the hauntings of a winter hut' (Griffiths, *Slicing the Silence* 174).<sup>4</sup> In *Mawson's Remarkable Men*, written by Mawson's Huts Foundation chairman David Jensen, Jeffryes—like all of the other AAE members—received a short sympathetic biography (Jensen 76-9). However, Jeffryes' story is always marginal to the main action of these narratives, and has never itself been the focus of sustained attention. In Antarctic accounts outside an Australian context, where Jeffryes is mentioned it is inevitably alongside other episodes of psychological problems in early expeditions, with the emphasis on the stresses of life in extreme environments (Guly 208; Palinkas and Suedfeld 153). History has overwritten Jeffryes' professional identity by casting him as a victim of 'polar madness' unassimilable into narratives of heroic or scientific glory.

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<sup>2</sup> Critics have noted that imperial heroes are recuperated for the present by framing them primarily as scientist-explorers. See Glasberg xx; Roberts 149.

<sup>3</sup> For a critical analysis of Day's book, see Griffiths, 'Debunking Mawson.'

<sup>4</sup> See also Griffiths, 'In Antarctica' and 'A Polar Drama'.

In this paper, we change the AAE narrative by putting Jeffryes at its centre, focusing particularly on his identity and achievements as a radio operator, and their function within the micropolitics of power relations in the expedition hut. We then turn to the aftermath of the expedition, in which Jeffryes' very public mental illness threatened its heroic image. Drawing on contemporary understandings of how mental illness related to class, gender and colonial discourses of early twentieth-century Australia, we argue that Jeffryes' behaviour radically challenged all of the qualities attached to the stereotype of the heroic polar explorer. His rhetorical quarantining was thus as inevitable as his physical incarceration. We end by pointing to some ways in which Australian public culture is beginning to recognise Jeffryes.

### **The Journey to Commonwealth Bay**

The obscurity of Jeffryes' post-expedition life means that the detailed records available for many of the AAE men are largely absent in his case. We know that he was born in mid-1884 in Toowoomba, Queensland, and that he followed in the footsteps of his father Henry, described as 'telegraph officer' on Sidney's birth certificate. By 1901 he was an apprentice clerk on the Queensland railways (Queensland Family History Society), and ten years later he was working on ships for the Australian Wireless Company. He took considerable pride in his work: twice in later 1911 the media reported his claims to records for long-distance telegraphy ('Shipping News'; 'Record by the Kyarra'). Around the time these reports appeared, Jeffryes applied to the AAE, calling on Mawson in Adelaide in early October 1911.

Mawson considered telegraphy an important innovation of his expedition and envisaged making regular reports of weather and expedition activities from the Antarctic continent to Australia. The logic of Mawson's vision relied on the idea that Eastern Antarctica would become part of the newly formed Australian nation, with the wireless being the primary mechanism that sutured the continents together. In a major address delivered in January 1911 and reported in the *Argus* newspaper, Mawson 'pointed out ... that lying within wireless telegraphic distance of our borders, the Antarctic continent had a special call upon the Australian people' ('Mawson Expedition'). Mawson's embrace of the wireless may have been influenced by newspaper magnate Hugh Denison, director of the Australian Wireless Company, who donated 1000 pounds to the expedition that same month—Cape Denison was later named after him (Mawson, *Home* 311).<sup>5</sup> In any case, it was a sentiment echoed enthusiastically by the press ('Our Antarctic Expedition'). By the time the expedition departed Hobart in December 1911,

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<sup>5</sup> We are grateful to Mark Pharaoh at the South Australian Museum for pointing out this connection to us.

Mawson was proclaiming that 'The great feature of the expedition is our wireless equipment' ('Off to the South').

Of his three planned continental bases (two of which eventuated), only the Main Base at Cape Denison, Commonwealth Bay, would have a wireless transmitter, which would send messages to another base on the subantarctic Macquarie Island, to be relayed to Hobart.<sup>6</sup> At least two radio operators would thus be required. By the time Jeffryes applied, Mawson had already appointed the continental wireless operator, Walter Hannam, and enlisted his help to appoint his counterpart on Macquarie Island. A series of letters from Mawson to Hannam and Jeffryes suggests that, while the leader considered Jeffryes 'a very decent sort of man', 'a very good man' (Letters), he bowed to Hannam's expert judgement, and employed another candidate. Mawson wrote Jeffryes an apologetic rejection, noting that, 'If we require another man, I shall get in touch with you as quickly as possible' (Letter). The expedition duly departed, while Jeffryes continued to work on ships in much warmer climates. However, a year later, when the AAE vessel *SY Aurora* was due to return to Antarctica to take the expeditioners home, Jeffryes was on board. He either volunteered or had been asked to join the ship as its wireless operator: a telegram sent to the expedition secretary from its scientific adviser states, 'Under circumstances advise take Jeffreys' (David).

By mid-January 1913, the *Aurora*, with Jeffryes as its radio operator, had arrived at the expedition Main Base at Commonwealth Bay, where its company learned that a three-man sledging expedition led by Mawson had failed to return. John King Davis, the ship's captain, was faced with choosing between the urgent task of picking up the men at the second continental base about 2400 kilometres to the west—which meant that any remaining Main Base men could not be taken home until the next summer—or waiting for Mawson's party's uncertain return. Davis chose the former and began organising a small team of five of the original expeditioners to stay behind for a second year: meteorologist Cecil Madigan; base physician Archie McLean; engineers Bob Bage and Frank Bickerton; and cartographer Alfred Hodgeman. Hannam had no desire to stay on, but the expedition needed a radio operator; Jeffryes was the obvious replacement. Having expected the ship to pick up the whole party and return to Australia, Jeffryes was now confronted with the prospect of spending a year in an isolated hut with a small group of men he had never met.

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<sup>6</sup> Mawson planned that the Western Base, equipped with a receiver, would also be in contact, but as a vital part of the equipment was found to be missing, this did not eventuate (Mawson, *Home* 64).

### Wireless Politics

In addition to the personal trials that would inevitably arise over the course of a year in Antarctica with a group of strangers, Jeffryes faced considerable professional challenges. Hannam had had little success with the wireless during 1912: although Macquarie Island received a few of his transmissions, he had heard nothing, and then one of the wireless masts had blown down in October (Mawson, *Home* 224-5).<sup>7</sup> Davis put re-erecting the damaged wireless system first in his 'general plan of action' for the second year (Davis 54, entry for 22 January 1913), and Jeffryes evidently set to work as soon as possible. On 8 February, Mawson struggled into the base alone, his two companions, Belgrave Ninnis and Xavier Mertz, having died during the sledging journey. By now Jeffryes had the wireless in working order and was able to send a message to the *Aurora* communicating the news and instructing the ship, just then heading out to sea, to 'Return and pick up all hands' (Gray 61, 8 February 1913). However, weather conditions prevented a landing and, with the season closing in, Davis made the decision to prioritise the relief of the Western Base, thereby condemning the seven men at the Main Base to another year on the ice.

The situation facing the party that remained as the *Aurora* steamed away was difficult, to say the least. Mawson had pushed himself to extremes to survive the journey back to base and was now physically and mentally debilitated. The five volunteers remaining from 1912 were shocked and saddened by the unexpected deaths of their two close companions. Jeffryes was the only newcomer to a group that had been living together for over a year and, never having met Mertz or Ninnis, was further isolated by his inability to share in his companions' intense grief. The six men who remained from 1912 were by no means a single harmonious entity, but they had built a common universe of shared experiences in which Jeffryes had no part. To that extent he was from the outset an interloper.

Professionally, Jeffryes was propelled by circumstances into a position of significant responsibility in terms of the overall objectives of the expedition. Faced with an extra year in Antarctica in such unanticipated circumstances, Mawson devised a makeshift program which sought to complete some of the unfinished tasks. Mawson had told Hannam in 1912 that the 'wireless was the biggest failure on the expedition', and a second year meant this potentially could be rectified (Hannam, 'Item 02' 273, entry for 10 September 1912). The success or failure of the unplanned second year thus rested largely on the newcomer's shoulders. Under these conditions, perhaps the surprising thing is not that Jeffryes experienced symptoms of a severe mental illness just after midwinter, but that he was able to function, socially and professionally, for so long.

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<sup>7</sup> Hannam and his companions had no idea at the time whether their messages were getting through.

Mawson's faith in Jeffryes seemed to be justified in the first few months of 1913. Reception was clearest at night, and as the hours of darkness increased wireless operations became much more viable. During March, April and May Jeffryes established two-way connection for the first time in Antarctic history, making intermittent but frequent contact with Macquarie Island, and even communicating with Hobart. His initial successes were greeted with acclaim and the radio became the hub around which life at Commonwealth Bay revolved: McLean wrote in his diary, 'Of course the real event of the day consists in the wireless intelligence and so by 10.30 p.m. we are all agog' (McLean, entry for 18 March 1913). Coded weather reports had priority, and it was, Mawson noted, 'surprising how often Jeffryes managed to transmit this important intelligence' (*Home* 144). In addition, news of the world, personal news and expedition news flowed in and out via the radio.

At the time of the AAE, wireless technology was less than twenty years old, and radio operators were newly arrived on the amateur and professional scene. Although most radio operators bought equipment off the shelf from Marconi or Telefunken, they were often self-taught. Competing to maximise the distance and clarity with which their own rig was able to communicate, operators frequently made their own modifications and additions to the purchased equipment, and many had an artisan's pride in their craft and skills. Jeffryes' early success with the wireless at Commonwealth Bay, in contrast with the slow progress made in the previous year, was attributed to precisely the individual craft operations that characterised 'wireless experimenters' more widely. Madigan commented that, 'Jeffryes has a very sensitive crystal ... [whereas] Hannam's crystal does not give anything' (Madigan 354, entry for 18 February 1913). Arguably, it was Jeffryes' individual equipment and the personal tweaks he made when 'gadgetting' with the radio that accounted for his success at Commonwealth Bay. Jeffryes' professional identity as an artisan of telegraphy and as expedition wireless officer was to play a key role in the dramatic events that would later unfold.

As much as it allowed contact with the outside world, the radio also generated its own tensions within the expedition. Acting as the conduit for personal messages, Jeffryes was in a crucial position. As Madigan wrote to his fiancée, messages were 'oases in [a] desert' (Madigan 384, entry for 17 May 1913). There was continual anxiety about whether messages had been sent successfully and incoming messages were received correctly. By the end of May 1913, Mawson—eager from the outset to give expedition news priority—was trying to establish greater control over use of the radio, requiring members to 'pay in full for all their messages', to inform him of their content, and to give him the final say on the order in which they were sent (Madigan 387, entry for 29 May 1913). Madigan rankled at what he saw as a double standard, believing the leader prioritised his own

messages over those of his men: 'in this show it is Mawson first and the rest nowhere ... [he sends] messages which make him appear a hero' (Madigan 364, entry for 9 March 1913).

If other members of the expedition were unhappy with the way Mawson used the wireless, Mawson was changing his own perspective on its operator. Towards the end of May, and after weeks in which wireless operations had been frustrated by a combination of the aurora australis, St Elmo's Fire and static electricity, Mawson started to increase the pressure on Jeffryes. The necessity of operating the wireless at night, when reception was clearest, created problems. In the evening Mawson would find Jeffryes tired or asleep, or going to bed early (i.e., before midnight) (Madigan 192, entry for 6 June 1913). In addition to establishing wireless communications to and from the continent, Mawson wanted to investigate scientific aspects of wireless telegraphy. He was disappointed that neither Jeffryes nor Bickerton, his assistant with the wireless, showed any interest in the subject (Madigan 191 and 192, entries for 26 May and 6 June 1913). During this period a subtle but indicative shift occurred in Mawson's diaries, as he began to replace Jeffryes' name with 'the wireless', as in 'Wireless hears Sydney [the city]' or 'Wireless puts through a message' (See *Mawson's Antarctic Diaries* 189 and 190, entries for 27 April and 2 May 1913). This rhetorical erasure of Jeffryes himself from the wireless activities was a foreshadowing of things to come.

### **Communication Breakdown**

In early June, the main radio mast blew down again, ending contact with the outside world. Although it is hard to judge from the diary evidence, if any one episode precipitated the psychotic disorder for which Jeffryes is now best known, it was this. While the first obvious example of unusual behaviour on Jeffryes' part happened in early July, when he initiated an argument with and eventually struck Madigan, the physician McLean claimed to have noticed 'suspicious symptoms' since mid-June (McLean, entry for 11 July 1913). Multiple diary entries, as well as Jeffryes' own letters, indicate that during and beyond the winter months of 1913 he displayed delusions of persecution, paranoia, mood fluctuations, hallucinations, decline in hygiene, and other symptoms consistent with what we would now likely classify as schizophrenia (with a pre-existing vulnerability that was triggered by stress). McLean termed his condition 'delusional insanity' (McLean, entry for 11 July 1913). Although the wireless was eventually repaired, Jeffryes' symptoms continued, varying in severity and at times making the situation extremely trying and worrying for his fellow residents. Over the next few months his paranoia increased, with accusations that the expedition members were trying to murder him. His levels of social engagement also markedly declined as he became more reclusive. In all of this, Mawson and the other members of the party struggled to coexist with Jeffryes and to ameliorate his condition.

In mid-late July, Jeffryes wrote a series of letters to Mawson and friends at home in which he referred to the other expedition members' professional jealousy, and his certainty that he would be 'murdered' as a result of his 'endeavours to make a success of the wireless' (Letter to Mrs Fox).<sup>8</sup> On 29 July, he tendered his resignation, prompting Mawson to read a statement after dinner to all of the men in order to 'clear the atmosphere a little'.<sup>9</sup> While this speech begins considerately, acknowledging the 'steady and constant' manner of Jeffryes' labours and his 'giant efforts', it quickly takes on a mocking tone. Mawson points out that Jeffryes' resignation will require 'inevitable sacrifice' as 'accommodation houses are few and far between in the Antarctic', although an 'ice cave' could be made available for the radioman 'on comparatively moderate terms'. The idea of resignation, he goes on, is a 'vapour of the mind' as there is 'no such thing ... on an enterprise of this kind'—'You might as well assume that the luckless passengers on a sinking liner could resign and be wafted back by fairy wings to terra firma'. Returning to a serious note, Mawson affirms that he, as leader, has 'supreme command for good or bad' during the expedition, and asks Jeffryes to recognise that he has experienced a period of illness and to continue as a 'full member' of the expedition, before threatening the use of 'irons' in the case of 'knavery'. Mawson's biographer Philip Ayres, who reproduces the speech in full, notes the way the speech rhetorically 'isolates the infection' (Ayres 92). Oscillating between sympathy, sarcasm and threat, it seems designed to distance Jeffryes from the rest of the members while maintaining him in his position as radio operator.

Yet in some respects Mawson's speech seems to have backfired. Jeffryes was capable, even within his mental dysfunction, of drawing on his identity as a radio artisan, and using his professional skills to engage in quiet resistance to what he believed was happening to him. In August he started taking the crystal out of the radio and keeping it with him whenever he was not operating the machine (*Mawson's Antarctic Diaries* 201, entry for 10 August 1913). In early September, Mawson recorded that Jeffryes sat at the wireless sending out a message repeatedly but so quickly that its content (in Morse) could not be discerned (204-5, entry for 3 September 2013); he later admitted to his leader that the message was to alert the Macquarie Island operator that five of the AAE men were unwell, and he (Jeffryes) and Mawson would need to leave the hut. Mawson immediately had Bickerton transmit: 'Censure all messages Jeffryes insane' (Mawson, 'Adelie Land Base'). Neither message reached the Macquarie Island men;<sup>10</sup> indeed, the

<sup>8</sup> See also his letters to Mawson, 19 July 1913 and 27 July 1913.

<sup>9</sup> Mawson, Four-page note. These four pages are presumably the 'lead pencil sheets' that Mawson states in his diary he has 'preserved' (*Mawson's Antarctic Diaries* 199, entry for 23-28 July 2013).

<sup>10</sup> The operators at each base were required to keep detailed log books of what they sent and received. Mawson considered Jeffryes insufficiently painstaking in this regard (*Mawson's Antarctic Diaries* 202, entry for 18 August 1913).

only personal message they received from Jeffryes during his illness was one asking urgently after his mother and sending love to his family (Mawson, 'Macquarie Island Base'). To Mawson's chagrin, Jeffryes gave his message priority over those of others, thus adopting Mawson's own form of control (*Mawson's Antarctic Diaries* 205, entry for 8 September 1913). Jeffryes' attempts to circumvent his leader's authority suggest that he saw his professional skills as a primary means of self-defence.

By mid-September, Mawson had handed responsibility for radio communications to Bickerton. In early October, Jeffryes was officially dismissed from the expedition (*Mawson's Antarctic Diaries* 212, entry for 4 October 1913)<sup>11</sup>—a very strange situation, because it contradicted the position Mawson had adopted in mid-July when Jeffryes had tried to resign, and in any case—as Mawson had then facetiously observed—he could not leave the space he shared with his erstwhile co-workers. For them, Jeffryes seems to have become an impediment to be dealt with. Madigan commented in his diary that the number of men allowed to participate in the last iconically heroic activity of the expedition—the final sledging journey—was restricted by the need to leave three behind to watch over Jeffryes (Madigan 440, entry for 18 October 1913). In the eyes of the other expedition members, Jeffryes proved anathema to the heroic tradition—something only exacerbated by the events that unfolded on his return to Australia.

### **From Antarctica to Ararat: The Aftermath of the AAE**

Jeffryes' story began to be rewritten during his journey back to Australia, when the Main Base men joined with their Macquarie Island counterparts. The Macquarie Island wireless operator Charles Sandell, previously aware from a message from the Main Base only that Jeffryes was 'indisposed' and unable to work the wireless (Mawson, 'Macquarie Island Base'), was now filled in on the whole picture: 'It seems that why Bickerton undertook running the Wireless', he wrote in his diary,

was because Jefferys [sic] being of rather weak intellect before leaving Australia, he completely broke down here & went out of his mind at intervals. ... Jefferys knew little about the Wireless tecnechally [sic] & it was only sheer luck he got into communication at all. (Sandell)

As the *Aurora* drew nearer to Adelaide, in South Australia, 'the wireless man' was, according to first officer Percy Gray, 'beginning to go dotty again'—refusing to venture out of his cabin even for food, and at one point barricading himself inside

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<sup>11</sup> See also what appear to be Mawson's notes for Jeffryes' dismissal document, 4 October 1913, South Australian Museum, Australian Polar Collection, 177AAE.

(Gray, entry for 19 February 1914). Jeffryes later claimed he had attempted suicide via an overdose of opium during the voyage (Letter to Maisie Eckford). There is no other evidence of this, but it seems clear that he was not in a healthy state of mind as the journey drew near its end, and he reportedly took no part in the celebrations in Adelaide ('Victim of the Frozen South').

Shortly after arriving in Adelaide in late February 1914, Jeffryes sent a letter home to his older sister Norma that set off alarm bells (Norma Jeffryes, Letter to Douglas Mawson, 21 March 1914). She sent Mawson an urgent telegram in early March, expressing her worry and asking that Mawson have someone accompany her brother home, or alternatively await her arrival (Telegram to Douglas Mawson, 4 March 1914). But by the time this was received, Jeffryes had boarded a train, presumably heading for Toowoomba. The next that was heard of him were media reports—wired around the country—that he had been found wandering in the bush near Stawell in regional Victoria, not having eaten for six days, despite the money in his pocket, and claiming that Mawson had hypnotised him. Both the press reports and Jeffryes' later testimony suggest that this was another suicide attempt (Sidney Jeffryes, Letter to Maisie Eckford). He was quickly committed to the nearby Ararat Hospital for the Insane.

The situation was a public relations nightmare for Mawson, who had so recently been welcomed home by cheering crowds as the nation's premier Antarctic explorer-hero. The incident not only had the potential to bring his leadership into question, but also associated the expedition with a highly stigmatised condition. As Lisa Bloom among others has shown, the polar regions provided the 'ideal mythic site' for the display of manliness (Bloom 6), which in dominant Edwardian discourses meant physical strength, energy, courage and self-control. Mental illness in men, by contrast, was associated with degeneracy, laziness and weakness (Coleborne 114). It was also classed: medical historian Catharine Coleborne notes that working-class men in Australia were 'especially vulnerable to institutional committal' (121).

In Britain, these associations were manifest in the treatment Edgar Evans, the only working-class member of Scott's polar party, whose fate was made public in early 1913. Evans had been the first of the polar party to die: according to Scott's diary, after a fall into a crevasse Evans became 'dull and incapable', and had eventually 'nearly broken down in brain'.<sup>12</sup> As historian Max Jones describes it, 'Evans's collapse engaged with a range of Edwardian concerns about the relationship between physical strength, mental capacity, and social status' (Jones, *Last Great*

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<sup>12</sup> See journal entries for 4 and 16 February 1912, in Scott, 390, 396. 'Dull' was the adjective used in the edited version instead of Scott's original 'stupid', 470. Retrospective analyses suggest a series of reasons for Evans' confusion and death: he may, for example, have been suffering from altitude sickness, which causes a similar disorientation (Solomon 231).

*Quest* 111). The British press quickly framed the episode as the product of a poorly educated working-class man's reduced resistance to the stressors of polar exploration.

If insanity was connected in specific ways with working-class masculinity, it also had a particular relationship with colonial masculinity. In her detailed analysis of asylum populations in colonial Victoria, Coleborne argues that insanity in white male settlers troubled ideas of racial superiority (13). These concerns were in turn connected to anxieties that hot colonial climates were physically and mentally enervating to the white subject (118). The flipside of these supposedly debilitating colonial environments were polar climates, which were seen as energising and rejuvenating. Focusing on the AAE, historian Brigid Hains notes the 'redemptive power of the frontier' in addressing the 'nervous exhaustion' thought to be produced by modern living: 'In the exclusively masculine world of polar exploration the testing of "character" was particularly acute, and was linked to national and racial aspirations for reinvigoration' (Hains 15-6). The pure, bracing climate of Antarctica led Mawson to include, in lists of future economic possibilities for the continent, the establishment of sanatoria (See the example given in Hains 17; and Mawson, 'Commercial' 216). From his own men, he expected ceaseless energy and purposeful occupation. If they were in any doubt about the model to which they were expected to conform, they could have learned it from Mawson's favourite writer, Robert Service, whose poems of the Yukon were read aloud in the hut: harsh environments, these poems suggested, would tolerate only 'the strong and sane', and destroy the 'foolish and feeble', the 'weaklings' (Service 5-10). These poems were, according to McLean, 'virile, full of strong manly life like Mawson himself' (McLean, entry for 18 February 1912). Anyone considered lazy or lacking in energy became the focus of Mawson's disapproval (Leane). That one of his expeditioners should, in this most invigorating of environments, suffer a full-scale mental collapse that rendered him incapable of useful work put all of these beliefs about the character of the polar explorer into question.

Given this context, it is hardly surprising that, in the wake of the press reports on Jeffryes' discovery in the bush, Mawson went on the defensive. His strategy publicly and privately was to distance himself from Jeffryes' selection and to imply a pre-existing mental condition, figured as a form of 'weakness'—both of which worked to exonerate the expedition and its leader. A statement was quickly issued claiming that, after arriving in Adelie Land, Jeffryes '[v]ery soon ... began to show symptoms of mental derangement'. Mawson noted publicly that Jeffryes 'was not chosen' when he first applied to the AAE; and that, in Commonwealth Bay, 'it seemed to us from the first that [he] was not as strong as he might have been'. The weather conditions were 'trying', and as time passed his 'general health began to fail, and his mental condition showed weakness'. When the ship arrived back in

Australia, Mawson explained, Jeffryes 'became quite normal' and so he (Mawson) decided not to inform his family of the problems ('Lonely Antarctic'). These comments were included in reports of the incident in numerous papers across the country.

The Jeffryes family did not appreciate the insinuations. In a statement published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and elsewhere, Jeffryes' mother Helena (Ellen) pointed to evidence refuting the implication that her son had a pre-existing mental illness, and complained about his post-expedition treatment ('Mawson Wireless Operator'). His sister Norma did the same in stronger terms in private correspondence with Mawson. She emphasised her brother's previous good mental health, suggesting that Mawson's 'tone of ill-feeling' towards Jeffryes was due to 'personal antagonism because his break-down in health caused you trouble and hampered the work of the expedition'. She also accused Mawson of prioritising 'self glorification and the blind praises of the world' over her brother (Letter to Douglas Mawson, 21 March 1914). She had a point: while avoiding outright lies, Mawson did choose his words very carefully in his media statement to create an impression that favoured his own and the expedition's reputation at the expense of Jeffryes'.

Meanwhile, Jeffryes had disappeared into the asylum network. Initially his case seemed hopeful: he did clerical work, although he would sometimes 'assume an attitude as if receiving wireless messages' (Philpott, Letter to W. E. Jones). With medical staff thinking that a change of scenery might help (Philpott, Letter to Dorothea Denny), he was shunted between Ararat, Royal Park and Sunbury asylums before ending up back in Ararat in late 1915. At some point following this he was placed in Ararat asylum's notorious high-security J-Ward for the criminally insane, housed in a former gaol in a different part of the town. This may have been due to his violence towards a staff member while at Sunbury, or perhaps a subsequent incident (Shaw). He was in J-Ward when he died from a cerebral haemorrhage in mid-October 1942 (Victoria, State Coroner's Office). Within the system, Jeffryes' professional identity seems to have quickly vanished. The Sunbury admissions records have his name and age wrong and give his occupation as 'labourer'. Under 'Supposed Cause of Insanity', Jeffryes has only a question mark (Register). Not much more than a year after he returned to Australia, all signs of his profession and contribution to wireless and Antarctic history had disappeared.

While Jeffryes was being shuffled from one asylum to another, his erstwhile companions became involved in the war effort, with some of them killed in action—most prominently Bob Bage, who died at Gallipoli. Polar explorers—especially Scott and Laurence Oates—were held up as icons of heroic sacrifice during the First World War (Jones, *Last Great Quest* 255). Shackleton—who spent most of the war years in Antarctica—famously drew a parallel between the 'white

warfare of the south' and the 'red fields' of Europe (Dedication). The heroic mythology of Antarctic exploration thus dovetailed with the version of Australian masculinity built around war and the emerging ANZAC story. From this perspective, Jeffryes' illness posed a challenge to the figure of the polar explorer similar to the one that, on a much larger scale, 'shellshock' posed to the soldier-hero.

Mawson and McLean both combined their war work—in munitions and the medical corps respectively—with writing and editing the official AAE narrative, *The Home of the Blizzard*. Appearing mid-war in 1915, the two-volume account mentions but downplays the upheaval that Jeffryes' condition caused, with Mawson connecting his "nervous breakdown" to the strain of operating the wireless under 'unprecedented conditions' (*Home* 150). McLean, in a medical report included as an appendix, suggests that 'the monotony of a troglodytic winter life made itself felt'. In a footnote to the report, Mawson repeats his view that Jeffryes 'became normal' on the expedition's return, before suffering 'a temporary relapse' (*Home* 310)—although there was at this time as little evidence to suggest that the condition was temporary as there was for Jeffryes' 'normal' state on the journey home.

Despite these attempts at distancing Jeffryes from the expedition, Mawson never publicly called his professional competency into question. And when he submitted his list of recommendations for the Polar Medal to the British Admiralty, Jeffryes was included where the Macquarie Island operator Arthur Sawyer, who departed abruptly after less than a year, was not (Mawson, Six-page note). However, as the expedition became solidified as a cornerstone of Australian Antarctic history and Jeffryes languished in Ararat asylum, his role quickly receded in people's memories. Hannam became known as the pioneer of Antarctic wireless communication, with Jeffryes a footnote to his predecessor's success, notable only in the annals of 'polar madness' (See, for example, Smyth; *Amateur Radio Victoria*).

## **Conclusion**

Heroic masculinity is not a game in which men like Jeffryes can compete, or even participate. Despite his success with the wireless, the radio operator could not be incorporated into discourses of exploratory or scientific achievement, and the only way to rehabilitate the situation was to reframe his 'weakness' as Mawson's strength. The construction of a version of events in which Mawson initially rejected Jeffryes' application to the expedition is a case in point. With Mawson's press statement transformed into received history, Jeffryes became proof of his

leader's good judgement of character, an idea repeated for over a hundred years.<sup>13</sup> Jeffryes was deliberately distanced from the AAE and then, through the asylum system, effectively 'disappeared' from both Australian society and Antarctic history.

This vanishment is only now beginning to be rectified. In 2018, the Mawson's Huts Foundation commissioned a large bronze plaque to mark Jeffryes' gravesite at Ararat General Cemetery, which was put in place in a ceremony on his birthday, 16 October. Prior to that, the site was completely unadorned, a grassy patch with no gravestone or slab and only a numbered marker peg to connect it to the man whose bodily remains are buried below. This contrasted markedly with Mawson's gravesite in Brighton, Adelaide: in addition to the tombstone, Mawson's grave has been recognised by the nearby placement of a bench and a large granite rock from inland Australia, both with plaques reinforcing Mawson's identity as a renowned explorer or geologist.<sup>14</sup> Without erasing or downplaying Jeffryes' mental illness, the Mawson's Huts Foundation's plaque reconnects him with his AAE legacy and his achievements as a radio operator.<sup>15</sup>

However, perhaps the most fitting trace of Jeffryes' contribution to Australian Antarctic history can be found in the subpolar landscape. The south-east coast of Macquarie Island is the location of the 400-metre-high Mount Jeffryes. Officially approved in 1955, the name can be traced back to 1914 (Mawson, *Macquarie Island* 16. See also 181, 14). Although an Antarctic glacier is a glamorous feature to have one's name bestowed upon, for a man whose contribution to the AAE was made not through epic sledging voyages across the ice but in establishing two-way contact with Macquarie Island, Mount Jeffryes is a more appropriate memorial—especially since it has become the site of a solar-powered radio repeater enabling field parties to stay in touch with their base.

A plaque and the name of a remote mountain, however, do relatively little if the story to which they are attached is unremembered and untold in the Australian public sphere. The question of whether and how we remember Jeffryes now goes to the heart of Australia's contemporary relationship with the continent on which it has a 42 per cent claim. If our early Antarctic history tells only stories of heroic

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<sup>13</sup> See for example Flannery 93; Cormick 237. Although Riffenburgh refuted the 'rejection' claim convincingly, it continues to be reiterated as evidence of Mawson's special insight into character, even in official contexts (Riffenburgh 359-60; AG, 'The Finger Tappers').

<sup>14</sup> These memorials were placed by Mawson's descendants and a local history society, but state and national recognition is evident in the many other places and artefacts that bear Mawson's name: a bust in the centre of Adelaide and the 'Mawson Lakes' development in the same city; the suburb of Mawson in Canberra; Mawson Place, the Mawson Pavilion and Mt Mawson in Tasmania (the former two on the Hobart waterfront); and of course Mawson Station in Antarctica.

<sup>15</sup> We are grateful to Terry Schulz, former psychiatric nurse at Aradale Mental Hospital (as the asylum became known), for sharing with us his images of Jeffryes' gravesite prior to the plaque-laying ceremony.

adventure and forgets those of tension, overwork, social difference, stress and illness, then our relationship with this place will continue to be one determined by the figure of the manly imperial hero. Although Jeffryes' story is, from one perspective, obscure, the stakes in its retelling are high: if emotional attachment to the Australian Antarctic Territory is inseparable from the figure of Mawson as heroic scientist, then a shift in the way, and the people through whom, we remember early Australian exploration of Antarctica could have significant consequences.

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