

EDITOR'S EXPLORATION

Happy Christmastime!

I mean it with the fullness that it can bring; but I am also very sensitive that for many any happiness, joy and sense of blessing is negated or tempered by grief and difficult circumstances. This December is the centenary of one of the most dramatic and epic events in Australia's story.



I write this piece, 100 years on from that day, (Dec. 14 1912), when Lt. Belgrave Ninnis, Dr. Xavier Mertz and Douglas Mawson were sledding across Antarctica, 300 miles from base (Mawson's Hut). It was part of Australia's great foray into Polar exploration and the geophysical sciences. It was ambitious, not for glory, but for knowledge and experience of this great unknown place on our planet, and Australia & New Zealand were ideally placed to study and protect this awesome and dreadful continent.

This day, Ninnis was at the rear of the group sledding across the untravelled Polar plateau, (140° - 160° longitude), and in a few seconds of yelling, howling dogs, the tangle of sled, man and harness, Ninnis fell to eternity, into a vast crevasse. The anguish of the tragedy was compounded with the realisation that it was the food sled that happened to be Ninnis's death carriage. So began the desperate retreat by Mawson and Mertz. They must now survive by eating their dogs, and errantly believe that the easiest portion to consume and most nutritious was the liver.

It was in fact uniquely poisonous in these animals, and the two companions were soon succumbing to its dreadful debilitating effects. On Christmas Day 2012, they prepared food and Mawson applied a dob of butter to the dog stew "to add a festive touch", with 2 broken pieces of biscuit found in a pocket. They wished each other "Merry Christmas", then pressed on a few more miles. Mertz died on Jan 7th .

Mawson went on alone, for a further 33 days, sick and physically incapacitated by the toxic symptoms. He fell into crevasses, and had to determinedly haul himself out. This was so frequent that he modified the sled to act as an anchor, and his harness he made into the form of a ladder. It prompted him to diarize this quote. "Dying is dead easy. It's the keeping on living that's hard". After 33 torturous trekking days, the unrecognisable man was met near the Base by 3 Expeditioners who had stayed behind in the hope of finding their fellows. They could see the ship *Aurora* steaming in the distance abandoning them to winter at the Base, as it left for Australia.

The expedition was both tragic and heroic. The despair in witnessing their abandonment draws parallels to Bourke, Wills & King. It created a living legend, an iconic human figure in our



National story, and Mawson survived to teach Geology, and Explore again another day. Now, when I say "Happy Christmastime", I appreciate that it may be enjoyed simply in "dobs of butter", shared in a fellowship of the most extreme circumstances, or, it may be a joyous and boisterous celebration of good will.

The festival of Christmas evokes a spectrum of experiences and attitudes; but whatever your views, I hope you may rise to the occasion to find and share happiness, to give and receive blessings with others.

History is recorded for the future to read. Perhaps in a similar way rearview mirrors are in front of us.

It all helps to navigate the way ahead.

May Ninnis's "fall to eternity" remind us of our soul, the eternal nature of God, witnessed in Jesus, the Christ, and in the hope he inspires.