

ANTARCTIC VIGNETTES I: MAWSON'S SAILMAKER – JAMES FORBES

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(with one plate)

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A photograph by Frank Hurley of the sailmaker on the Australasian Antarctic Expedition 1911–14 is identified as the Dundee whalerman James Forbes.

Key Words: James Forbes, sailmaker, Antarctica, Mawson, *Aurora*.

INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSION

Whereas the wintering personnel and ships' officers of the heroic age of Antarctic exploration are generally well-known, many of the ships' crews are not. Indeed in some instances a complete crew list has never been published. This paper is the first in a series headed "Antarctic Vignettes" seeking to rectify this and record the achievements of some of these little-known men.

Photograph H99, part of the Mawson Collection at the South Australian Museum, is a Frank Hurley portrait of a middle-aged man of indeterminate age with a weather-beaten face, prominent nose and large ears, shown peering off to the left, leaning with his right forearm resting against a wooden box, revealing a gnarled hand with powerful fingers (pl. 1). The picture is entitled "Sails" indicating that he was a sailmaker during the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) 1911–14; but who was this man?

A complete crew list for all of the voyages of the AAE has never been published, the usual practice being to name only the ships' officers and wintering scientists/expeditioners. Sir Douglas Mawson (Mawson 1930) and Captain John King Davis (Crossley 1997) indicated that the crew of the barquentine-rigged Dundee whaler the SY *Aurora* numbered around 24. However, the total number of men who served on the *Aurora*'s three Antarctic and two sub-Antarctic voyages (1911–14) is closer to 55, with only four of the officers (Captain John King Davis, Second Mate Percy Grey, Third Mate Clarence P. de la Motte and the Chief Engineer F. J. Gillies) and one of the seamen (Oswald McNeice) serving throughout. So it is possible that as many as five men might have served in the capacity of sailmaker during the AAE.

The Captain's pay book (24 AAE), however, only lists one sailmaker – James Forbes. He sailed out from England and served on the first two Antarctic voyages and the two intervening sub-Antarctic ones. Apparently a sailmaker was not deemed necessary for the third and final Antarctic voyage and a donkeyman (A. Beverley) was engaged instead.

James Forbes served on *Aurora* from 26 July 1911 until 18 March 1913 on wages of seven pounds per month and at the end of the expedition was highly commended by Davis. Here the story might have ended but a man of that name (Jimmy Forbes) is mentioned in Hardy (1967) when discussing the 1925–27 voyage to the Southern Ocean in Captain Scott's old research ship the RRS *Discovery* (Hardy 1967, Savours 1992). Could it be the same man?



PLATE 1

Mawson's sailmaker – James Forbes
(photograph: Frank Hurley).

Jimmy Forbes is mentioned on pages 58 and 117 (Hardy 1967). The entry on page 117 recalls his participation in the crossing the line ceremony, which does not help this study, but that on page 58 is of particular relevance.

No one, who has not experienced it, can appreciate the full attraction of seeing — and hearing — square-rig sails set. Gradually, one after another, they are unfurled and the yards raised; they are raised to the chorus of some old sea-shanty — "Blow the Man Down," "Whiskey Johnnie" or "Roll the Cotton Home" — as all hands heave on the long rope stretching away aft. We all give a hand at it, or, in the case of the lighter fore-top-gallant sail, we run aft with the rope. A number of our crew have been specially selected for their experience in square-rig; and old "Sails" himself (Sailmaker Jimmy Forbes) in his younger days, had made a number of voyages in the old Dundee whalers. To anyone who has only heard sea-shanties sung in drawing-rooms, or from the concert platform, it is indeed impressive to bear them used functionally: to lighten the labour of heaving and to keep all hands pulling together.

The final evidence is Dr E. H. Marshall's photograph reproduced opposite page 32 (Hardy 1967). Taken at Christmas 1926 it shows the personnel of the *Discovery*, the *William Scoresby* and the Marine Biological Station at South Georgia, on board the *Discovery* at Grytviken, South Georgia.

Jimmy Forbes is standing two rows behind and a little to the right of Alister Hardy. This man's face has the same facial features as illustrated in Frank Hurley's photograph (pl. 1). (Note that while he is not named in the photo caption in Hardy's book, which only identifies the officers, the same photo appears in Coleman-Cooke (1963) where many more men including Forbes are identified).

According to the RRS *Discovery's* terms of engagement (BT100/305) Jimmy Forbes, who was aged 54, 5 feet 4 inches tall with blue eyes, dark hair and a fresh complexion, joined the *Discovery* on 1 July 1925 as sailmaker on wages of 10 shillings per day and was discharged at the end of the voyage on 3 October 1927. He was then living at 153 Overgate, Dundee. By 1925, square-rigged ships like the *Discovery* were becoming uncommon and a number of old sailors had to be brought out of retirement to man them. Jimmy Forbes was one such man who had last been at sea five years earlier in 1919 on the *Hanover*.

From the above report, it is clear that Jimmy Forbes spent most of his life with the Dundee Whaling Fleet. Could he have gone south to the Antarctic before his 1911–13 AAE engagement, perhaps with the Scottish pioneering expedition of 1892–93, when four ships out of Dundee visited the Antarctic Peninsula in search of whales?

The terms of agreement (BT100/270) for the *Polar Star* (Captain James Davidson) lists a 21-year-old Dundee man by the name of James Forbes as signing the agreement on 5 September 1892. It is clear that the signatures on both the *Polar Star's* and *Discovery's* ships' papers are made in the same spidery hand.

James Forbes joined the *Polar Star* on wages of three pounds five shillings per month plus a cut of the profits — five shillings for fast boat and striking money, two shillings and nine pence for every Imperial Tun of oil (whale or seal) harvested, less 2½% for waste; 30 shillings a ton for bone money and five shillings for every 1000 seal skins with cut and damaged skins at half rates. The voyage was not a particularly successful one from a whale/seal-catching point of view and Jimmy Forbes signed-off back in Dundee on 16 June 1893.

James (Jimmy) Forbes was one of the little known men of the early days of Antarctic exploration. He was born in Dundee in about 1871 and served in the specialist role of sailmaker on three Antarctic expeditions spanning 35 years. He first went south as a 21-year-old on the *Polar Star* with the Dundee whaling expedition of 1892–93. He next served on the *Aurora* with Sir Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition (1911–14) and finally he took part in the *Discovery* Investigations (1925–27). While nothing further is known about this Dundee whaler he deserves to be more widely recognised.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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James Lawrence Sailmakers, based in Brightlingsea, Essex, UK, specialise in making sails for classic and...
See more of James Lawrence Sailmakers on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of James Lawrence Sailmakers on Facebook. Log In. Forgot account? Sailmaker James Forbes, from Dundee, had 21 years of sailing experience: eight Arctic and four Antarctic voyages, including this 1912-13 voyage. Forbes was a crewman on the Polar Star's 1892 Antarctic voyage in search of whales. Lincoln had spent the previous winter voyage in the subantarctic, but lacked Forbes' experience, however, claims to be as good if not better than Forbes at many tasks. The crew's respect for the expeditioners was evident in their response to the news of Mawson's lone survival on his sledging journey; Mertz and Ninnis had died. Taylor writes: "This sad news cast a gloom over the ship, in fact over the whole expedition. It was deadly [quiet], everyone walked around the ship on tiptoe and spoke in whispers." Mawson's Australasian Antarctic expedition successfully established bases at Commonwealth Bay and the Shackleton Ice Shelf. The expedition explored extensively along the coast near the bases and claimed this land as British territory. The planning, financing and crewing of this expedition can be read in detail at the Australian Antarctic Division's Home of the Blizzard website which has been established to honour the centenary of the Australasian Antarctic expedition (AAE). Experience at sea ranged from none to over two decades. Sailmaker James Forbes, from Dundee, had 21 years of sailing experience: eight Arctic and four Antarctic voyages, including this 1912-13 voyage. Forbes was a crewman on the Polar Star's 1892 Antarctic voyage in search of whales. Antarctica is the coldest, windiest, driest continent on the planet, and researchers are still discovering many of its secrets. Find out some of the most interesting facts about the southernmost continent! There's lots of ice. (Image credit: Robin E. Bell/ Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory.) The Antarctic Ice Sheet is the largest single mass of ice on Earth. Antarctica is an icy land. (Image credit: NASA).