



Figure 1. 'Listening to nice things about himself'.

Source: *The Bulletin*, 19 March 1914.

We can categorise silence and sound in the following ways:

- Mawson's musings on Antarctic sounds, etc (outside);
- Morse code wireless-related matters (inside); and, in passing,
- other technological noises inside the hut: a range of sounds aside from wireless.

Within this broad spectrum ranging from Mawson's musings to Morse code, the following subjects stand out:

Mawson's musings (outside)
poetry (improvised)
relating to sledging
relating to blizzards

Morse code (inside the Main Base hut)
wireless-related sounds
end of 'Heroic Era'?
first wireless message

It would be interesting also to briefly consider what other sounds perhaps echoed around the huts of these expeditions that competed with Antarctic silence. Other technological noises heard inside the hut (but not discussed further in this paper) included acetylene lighting in operation, music playing (gramophone, improvised band), air-tractor engine running, lathe operating, welding ('thermiting'), and the tide gauge clock — warmed at night inside!² So aside from noises emanating from animal life and the elements, silence is not all pervading.

The following text written by Mawson is from the copy of *The home of the blizzard*³ presented to his old *Nimrod* companion, Tannatt William Edgeworth David. This adaptation — reproduced in the frontispiece of *The silence calling*⁴ by Tim Bowden (who took his book title from this poem) — ends with 'Apologies to Service D.M.'. The corresponding sections of Mawson's adaptation and the original Service version shown here side by side illustrate the changes Mawson made (from words shown in italics in Service's version).

Mawson's version

To that lone land where bravely you
endured
And if perchance you hear the
silence calling,
The frozen music of star-yearning
heights,
Or, dreaming, see the seines of silver
trawling
Across the ship's abyss on vasty
nights,
You may recall that sweep of savage
splendor,
That land that measures each man at
his worth,
And feel in memory, half fierce, half
tender,

Service's original version

To that lone land *that haply you*
forsook
And if perchance you hear the
silence calling
The frozen music of star-yearning
heights,
Or, dreaming, see the seines of silver
trawling
Across the *sky's* abyss on vasty
nights,
You may recall that sweep of savage
splendor,
That land that measures each man at
his worth,
And feel in memory, half fierce, half
tender,

2 'The most chronic sufferer throughout the vicissitudes of temperature was the clock belonging to Bage's tide-gauge. Every sleeper in the hut who was sensitive to ticking knew and reviled that clock. So often was it subjected to warm, curative treatment in various resting-places that it was hunted from pillar to post. A radical operation by Correll — the insertion of an extra spring — became necessary at last.' Douglas Mawson (1915) *The home of the blizzard*. William Heinemann, London, vol. 2, pp. 171–2.

3 Douglas Mawson (1915) *The home of the blizzard*. William Heinemann, London.

4 Tim Bowden (1999) *The silence calling*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

The brotherhood of men that know the South. The brotherhood of men that know the *North*.

The original poem, *L'Envoi*,⁵ from *Ballads of a Cheechako* (1909)⁶ — was written by Robert Service, the 'Canadian Kipling'. Mawson probably made these changes only to make the text more relevant to David's (and his own) experiences. But the lines 'If perchance you hear the silence calling, The frozen music of star-yearning heights,' to me raise the question: did these evocative words draw Mawson to this poem? Did they speak powerfully to him, even if in a near silent way? All that can be said conclusively was that Service was noted as being a great favourite of many of the men — including Mawson — on these earlier expeditions.

While this question will otherwise have to be left unanswered, there are a few examples of Mawson's thoughts which implicitly refer to (in this case, the absence of) distracting sounds, while outside sledging in Antarctica: 'At times during the long hours of steady tramping across the trackless snow-fields, one's thoughts flow on a clear and limpid stream, the mind is unruffled and composed'. This diary entry dates from the end of *Nimrod Expedition*.⁷

Another example relating to exterior sounds is also from his diaries: 'Snow could be seen pouring over the "Barrier"... [and was] the main cause of the seething roar, but it was mingled with an undertone of deeper tone from the upland plateau — like the wind in a million tree-tops'.⁸

This last example is from Mawson's *Aurora* expedition, a longer expedition to this treeless continent, which brings us to the subject of the sounds inside Main Base, specifically those involved with wireless telegraphy.

The wireless masts dominated Cape Denison, even in states of incompleteness. They served roles beyond that of wireless telegraphy. Flags flown from the masts were a signal to the ships off the coast, their stays were guides in blizzards, and the varying degrees of completion were a message to the men as to the happenings around the base. Mawson's expedition pioneered the use of wireless telegraphy down south, but not without many setbacks.

Officially, wireless operations began relatively late in 1912: 'Sept 30, aerial was at such a height as to give hope that long-distance messages might be despatched ... The [Buzzacott] engine started and gradually got up speed in the dynamo.

5 One or more detached verses at the end of a literary composition, serving to convey the moral, or to address the poem to a particular person (orig. employed in old French poetry); a conclusion or result.

6 A cheechako is 'a person newly arrived in the mining districts of Alaska or northwestern Canada', Oxford Dictionaries, 'cheechako', http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/cheechako, accessed 9 June 2014.

7 Fred Jacka and Eleanor Jacka (1988) *Mawson's Antarctic diaries*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p. xxxv.

8 Mawson (1915) *The home of the blizzard*, vol. 1, p. 113.

The sharp note of the spark rose in accompanying crescendo and, when it had reached its highest pitch, Hannam struck off a message.⁹ Was it heard by anyone? No response came that year.

A fortnight later, on 13 October 1912, one mast blew down. No further wireless contact was achieved until early 1913, when it was 'possible for Jeffryes to "hear" Wellington, Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart, and once he managed to communicate directly with the last-named. Then there were numerous ships passing along the southern shores of Australia or in the vicinity of New Zealand whose "calls" were audible ... occasionally the "chatter in the ether" was so confusing that Sawyer, at Macquarie Island, would signal that he was "jammed".'¹⁰

This reference to the 'chatter' over the wireless suggests that their silence was already lost, even if only at times. But Mawson revealed a more obvious sense in which the notion of Antarctic silence does not fit with the reality of life at Main Base in 1913, in a related passage concerning the practical difficulties of carrying out wireless receiver work. During this work:

So many adventitious sounds had to be neglected; the noise of the wind as it swept by the Hut; then there was the occasional crackling of 'St. Elmo's fire';¹¹ the dogs in the veranda shelter were not always remarkable for their quietness; while within the Hut it was impossible to avoid slight sounds which were often sufficient to interrupt the sequence of a message; ... when the aurora [Australis] was visible, signals would often die away ... Jeffryes would sometimes spend the whole evening trying to transmit a single message ... [It was] found easier to transmit and receive wireless messages between certain hours.¹²

The significance of wireless telegraphy: The end of an era

Some significant early expeditions to Antarctica were those of Scott (1910–13, *Terra Nova*), Mawson (1911–14, *Aurora*), Shackleton (1914–16, *Endurance/Aurora*), Rymill (1934–37, *Penola*) and Ellsworth/Wilkins (1935–37, *Wyatt Earp*).

9 Mawson (1915) *The home of the blizzard*, vol. 1, p. 153.

10 Mawson (1915) *The home of the blizzard*, vol. 2, p. 137.

11 Electrical weather phenomenon in which luminous plasma is created by a coronal discharge originating from a grounded object in an atmospheric electric field. St Elmo's fire is named after St Erasmus of Formiae (St Elmo, Italian for St Erasmus), patron saint of sailors.

12 Mawson (1915) *The home of the blizzard*, vol. 2, pp. 136–7.

In their classifications of eras or periods of Antarctic expeditions, Law (1957) and Fisher and Fisher (1958) put the end of the heroic era at 1916 and 1922 respectively (see Table 1). In other words, these authors included Mawson's 1911–14 expedition in the heroic era rather than their later mechanised or development era, though it is worthy of comment that Law and the Fishers don't agree with each other on when this next era should start, indicating just how subjective the precise establishment of such eras can be.

Table 1. Traditional and proposed new classification of Antarctic eras.

| <i>Law (1957)</i> | <i>Fisher and Fisher (1958)</i> | <i>This chapter</i> |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Heroic era 1900 to 1916 | Heroic era 1890s to 1922 | Heroic era 1900 to 1913 |
| Development era 1918 to 1939 | Mechanised era 1923 onwards | Mechanised/technological era 1914 onwards |
| Mechanised era 1944 to 1958 | | |

I suggest that a new Australian (post-Phillip Law) interpretation, based on the significance of the wireless communications, adds to our understanding of Antarctic history. This new division for the heroic era ends in 1913, after Scott's last expedition, when wireless was now a reality, and the traditional silence or lack of communication with the outside world that so characterised any ventures over the Antarctic winter was broken.

The end of this era, and beginning of the Mechanisation (Technological) Era then follows — or in other words, the end of silence ...

Given the importance of wireless, it is interesting to know what was the first wireless telegraphy message from Antarctica to the outside world. While the official record provides one answer to this, one of the expeditioners, Charles Laseron, in his account of the venture provides the following unofficial answer relating to a period early on when the men were experimenting with the new technology, having set it all up:

... ..

‘We are sorry for poor Laseron.’

So it would appear that

Few mutilated messages reached Australia, but of this we knew nothing at the time [September 1912], as no answers came through.

Probably Hannam or Bickerton, practising Morse, did not realise that their effort was actually going over the air ... Some would-be effort of humour on my part ... The secretary of the expedition, fortunately

decided to wait for further particulars before informing my family. When the *Aurora* finally picked us up [early in 1913] he was on board, and almost his first words were, "How is Laseron?"¹³

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------|--------|---------|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|--------|
| A .- | B -... | C -. -. | D -.. | E . | F ..-. | G --. | H | I .. | J .-.- | K -.- | L .-. | M - |
| N -. | O --- | P .-. | Q ---. | R .-. | S ... | T - | U ..- | V ...- | W ... | X -.-. | Y -.- | Z --.. |

Figure 2. A morse key.

Source: Author's own research.

Conclusion

Like many Antarctic veterans, Mawson became sensitive to this unique, largely unknown environment, and this included how sound was at times experienced there. Focusing here particularly on the first two expeditions he was a member of, it is clear he was articulate enough to attempt to identify and compare some of these impressions, revealing for a time something of a Mawson-like poet.

While it can be useful to distinguish between sounds inside Winter Quarters and those outside, this paper has primarily explored something of the range of audio experiences to be encountered inside — when the incessant noise of blizzards did not fully intrude into this cocoon. It can be argued that an examination of these sounds reveals the surprising presence of machines and other technologically advanced equipment. Mechanisation at Main Base in 1912–13 centred on the attempts to establish — and then maintain — wireless telegraphy with the outside world. When contact was first made, despite being almost accidental, the impenetrable silence of Antarctica was broken forever.

Given the irreversible consequences of this momentous break with the past (which had been characterised by year-long isolation with no word from civilisation), a case can be made for a revision of the traditional division of Antarctic historical eras, with the ending of the heroic era being pushed back to 1912 when 'Laseron's' message got through. Coincidentally, this was the same year that Robert Scott's South Pole Party all died, even if it would take until 1913 for this to be known by the outside world, the lengthy delay being in part due to the absence of wireless on his expedition.

¹³ Charles F Laseron (1947) *South with Mawson*. Australasian Publishing Company, Sydney, p. 81.

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