ANTARCTIC VIGNETTES I: MAWSON’S SAILMAKER – JAMES FORBES

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(with one plate)


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?

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 hear 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.
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 whalerman he deserves to be more widely recognised.

I thank Mark Pharaoh and the South Australian Museum for permission to reproduce Frank Hurley's photograph of Mawson's sailmaker.

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REFERENCES

24AAE: Captain's pay book part of the Mawson Collection held at the South Australian Museum.

BT 100/270: Board of Trade file held at the National Archives Kew, London.

BT 100/305: Board of Trade file held at the National Archives Kew, London.


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