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BRO. HAROLD OSWALD FLETCHER

SCIENTIST and EXPLORER

Harold Fletcher was born on 26 February, 1903 and, at the age of 15, he answered an advertisement for a general assistant at the Australian Museum, College Street, Sydney. He remained at the Museum for the next 50 years, specializing in paleontology of which he was appointed curator and eventually the Museum's Deputy Director from 1953 to his retirement in 1967.

From 1937 until 1967, he was the honorary paleontologist for the NSW Department of mines, later the geological Society of NSW.

He attended the University of Sydney and the NSW University of Technology when he studied geology and obtained the degree of Master of Science.

In 1929 when he was 26, Harold saw a news item about an expedition Mawson was to make to the Antarctic. "I used to like getting out of the museum and taking part in field work," Harold said. "So whenever I heard of a chance to join an expedition I used to try to be in it." He was seconded as assistant zoologist to the British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition (BANZARE) of 1929-31.

Harold's first expedition sailed from Cape Town in October 1929 in the barque *Discovery* – the ship that took Scott to the Antarctic in 1901. The main object of Harold's voyages was to survey the coast of Antarctica from longitude 160 degrees East to 45 degrees East. That stretch of land beyond the coast, with the exception of Adelie Land, is now Australian Antarctic Territory. The expeditions also pursued scientific investigations in the sub-Antarctic Kerguelen, Heard and Macquarie Islands. Harold had respect and admiration for Mawson, who in turn wrote of Harold: "... his jovial disposition and fine physique proved an asset at all times.

Despite the success of the expeditions, Harold sympathized with Mawson's occasional frustration at the unwillingness of his captains to take calculated risks to get *Discovery* closer to unknown land.

BANZARE was reassuringly different from the fiasco of the first expedition Harold joined as museum representative in 1922. This was a hydrographic survey of South Australia's Lake Eyre, to find out which parts of its 9690 sq. km held permanent water and where the huge volume of floodwater vanished so quickly.

The expedition was led by a retired hydrographer, who decided to launch a 5 m dinghy in the south-eastern corner of Lake Eyre North.

“The plan was that all four members of the expedition, together with all our gear and enough food for at least seven days, would set sail in this craft,” he recalled. “It didn’t seem to trouble our leader that the dinghy would be greatly overloaded or that we could be left stuck in saline mud, with little chance of rescue.” As it happened, it didn’t matter. There was no sign of water at the launching site and the expedition was abandoned.

These days, we know that the rapid disappearance of water from Lake Eyre after flooding is caused by the high rate of evaporation, which is about 2.5 m a year.

Before and after Antarctica, Harold’s life has been sprinkled with expeditions in search of fossils and zoological specimens – to outback Queensland, the Gulf country, the Northern Territory and the Kimberley. In the early ‘30s he traveled from station to station over the worst non-roads, in a T-model Ford ute bequeathed to the museum by the leader of an American expedition – “a handsome gift”, in Harold’s view. They spent a lot of time digging it out of sand and bogs. “But it was the first vehicle the museum ever had. I did most of the driving – I enjoyed it,” Harold says.

He crossed the Simpson Desert in 1939 in an expedition led by Dr Cecil Madigan of the University of Adelaide. Madigan had named the Simpson (after Adelaide businessman A. A. Simpson, who supported his research) following early flights he had made over it. Before Harold’s expedition, no white man had been to the centre of the 143,000 sq. km Simpson and none had crossed it. It was a rare season, the expedition encountering heavy rain. Its eight members, including two camel-men and an Aborigine, were carried by a string of 19 camels. They went north from Charlotte Waters, then east across the desert’s centre before turning south-east to Birdsville.

The main crossing took 25 days, covered 482 km and involved climbing 703 sand ridges, many of them 27 m or more in height. Most of the Birdsville Track to Marree, where the expedition disbanded, was flooded.

In his book on the expedition, *Crossing the Dead Heart* (Georgian House, 1946), Madigan’s impression of Harold was rather similar to Mawson’s – that of a strong, resourceful man not easily put off balance by any sort of adversity. Madigan appointed him second-in-command.

Harold Fletcher is a holder of the King’s Polar Medal and a member of the Australian Chapter of the Explorers Club of New York.

Married to Mollie, they have a son and a daughter.

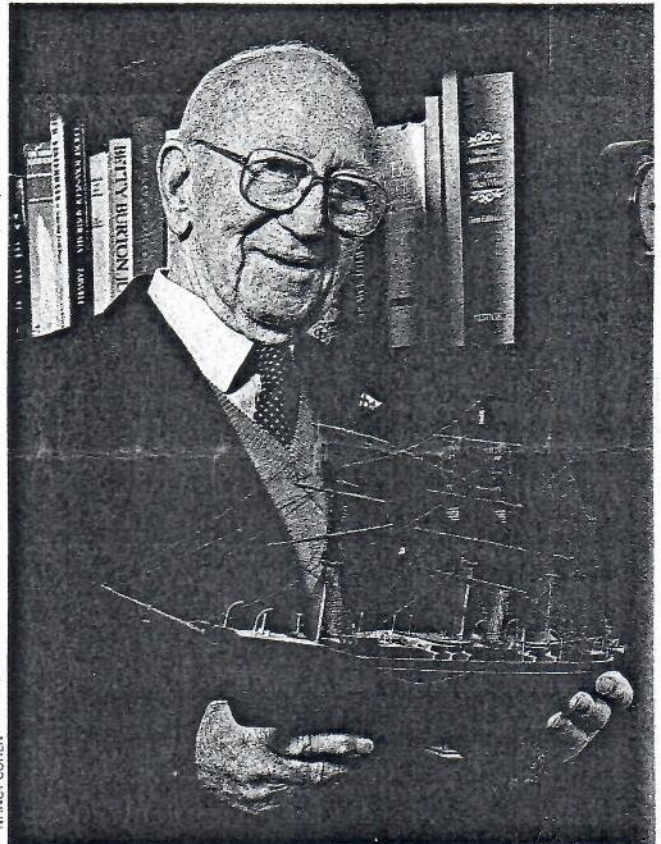
A keen lawn bowler, Bro. Harold Fletcher was made a Mason on 5 October 1951 in Lodge Prometheus No. 527 at Chatswood. He was passed Fellowcraft on 7 January 1952 and raised a Master Mason on 1 February 1952.

He died on 3 August 1996 aged 93.

REFERENCES: Who’s Who in Australia 1988.
Australian Geographic No. 17. Jan – March 1990.



Harold Fletcher on the voyage south as assistant zoologist. Mawson said of him, "His jovial disposition and fine physique proved an asset at all times."



In his Sydney home, Harold Fletcher, 86, relives sub-zero adventures as he holds a model of the famous barque Discovery. Although he spent more of his time exploring inland Australia, Antarctica fascinated him.