



## TRANSCRIPT

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### Arts, Literature and Music

**A Good Read – Antarctic Affair, by Emma McEwin**

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*A first group of staff from the Salisbury Library Service, preparing for their contributions to A Good Read. Sandhya Burton is standing right.*

Author Emma McEwin is the great granddaughter of Sir Douglas Mawson, celebrated Antarctic Explorer and familiar face on Australian currency. Her book traces the story of Douglas' emerging interest in Antarctica and his consequent expeditions to the continent, as well as the key role that Paquita Delprat, his future wife, played in his survival.

Douglas Mawson's expeditions and survival stories are well known and documented and his contribution to the scientific community has also left a legacy. Emma's book goes beyond just repeating what has already been written. She writes as a descendant and an insider to a family who for many generations will continue to be shaped by Douglas' experiences and ultimately his safe return home.

Personally, reading *An Antarctic Affair* was a step outside my usual choice of literature but as is often the case with such choices, it resulted in unexpected reading pleasure. Emma McEwin quite successfully uses her personal insight and warmth to resurrect the intrigue around an era of life, work and exploration that we now perhaps all take for granted.

As a child in primary school, I was always captivated by the journeys, adventures and achievements of the explorers to the point that I wanted to be one. The realisation that all continents had already been discovered was somewhat upsetting to me at such a tender young age, but Emma's writing reconnected me with my childhood fancies and appealed to the young adventurer in me.

While marketed somewhat as a love story, *An Antarctic Affair* is perhaps more a tale of resilience, endurance and history with a strong theme about the power of love. Expecting a love story I was at first confused about the absence of romance but was captured none the less by the tales of adventure. But with due course, the small amount of contact Douglas had with Paquita became represented quite realistically in quantity as the book continued.

Douglas and Paquita sent very few letters to each other while Douglas was in Antarctica and some of these letters were not exchanged until he had returned to Adelaide. Wireless communications later in his expedition were less private so any exchanges between them lacked the freedom of expression that their written correspondence contained. If Emma had focussed more on the love

story it would have unbalanced the reader's perspective of how their relationship persisted and survived years of separation as well as diminishing the readers understanding of how the small amount of contact they had impacted on a series of significant experiences and misfortunes.

Famously, Douglas Mawson reached Antarctica after departing from Adelaide in 1911 with a crew of scientists. Douglas, while originally accompanied by Belgrave Ninnis and Xavier Mertz on a sledging journey away from the rest of the team, was the only survivor after Ninnis perished down a crevasse and Mertz succumbed more slowly to harsh conditions, near starvation and poor diet.

With much necessary equipment lost down the crevasse with Ninnis and the snow dogs gradually slaughtered and eaten for their own survival, Douglas eventually faced weeks of walking alone through perilous conditions back to base. When he finally reached base camp he had missed the ship that could have taken him home to Paquta by a matter of hours and was forced to remain in Antarctica for another year.

As a love story, what could be missing? Young lovers separated by Douglas' desire to explore and conquer thrilling new territory only to return overdue to his fiancé having nearly not returned at all; short and rare exchanges of letters written in an era where passion was packaged politely and with great restraint should one be perceived as unladylike or common; and the uncertainty of whether their love would survive the changes that occurred in both people throughout a 3 year separation.

Emma McEwin explores many other themes throughout her book. Intertwined with tales of endurance and survival, she touches on faith, loyalty, and human instinct, and always comments only as a third party. She analyses situations seemingly without bias and reveals Douglas as a strong and remarkable man, but a man nonetheless with weaknesses and flaws who was on occasion surrounded by controversy.

I was surprised by the extent to which I enjoyed this biography but found it to appeal on so many levels. While Douglas' life is one which differs incredibly from anyone I know personally, as a reader one can still relate to his fundamental human desire to love, be loved, succeed, and pursue that which would bring the most happiness to his life. It is because of these appeal characteristics that a reader need not have an existing interest necessarily in Douglas Mawson to enjoy the book – just a sense of adventure and an open mind.

Emma McEwin's book *An Antarctic Affair* is a new release published this year in March by East Street Publications.