

Mobile Icons

Libby Robin

Brigid Hains

The Ice and the Inland:

Mawson, Flynn and the Myth of the Frontier

MUP, \$49.95hb, 219pp, 0 522 85036 7

Roger McDonald and Richard Woldendorp

Australia's Flying Doctors

FACP, \$34.95hb, 120pp, 1 86368 385 2

AUSTRALIA'S FRONTIER LEGEND is alive and well, as is John Flynn's contribution to it in these two new books. In *Australia's Flying Doctors*, Richard Woldendorp's glorious photographs celebrate a medical service that reaches about eighty per cent of the vast Australian landmass. They are complemented by Roger McDonald's economical personal vignettes of outback spirit.

The outback frontier is at its most archetypal in a crisis. The Flying Doctor medical team meets distance, isolation and fear of death in unlikely landscapes from Cape York to Tasmania and back to the Bungle Bungles. It is not just doctors who are 'heroes', but nurses and pilots, even one aircraft maintenance engineer seconded at short notice to pull apart a meat mincer in which a shearer's cook caught her hand. The Flying Doctor is generally, but not always, appreciated. McDonald reminds us that some fiercely independent bushmen do not welcome help in time of trouble.

The Flying Doctor service was the vision of Presbyterian pastor John Flynn. It began operating in 1928, after more than a decade of campaigning. Stories of bushmen dying for lack of treatment in remote places filled the *Inlander*, the journal of the Australian Inland Mission, published irregularly from

1913 until 1929. Aeroplanes were central to the enterprise, and not just for transport. The moral authority of Flynn's campaign built on an aerial perspective that reached beyond state political boundaries and saw the whole continent as a single nation.

As Brigid Hains argues in *The Ice and the Inland*, Flynn sought to unite (white) Australians in support of their vulnerable and empty frontier country, to offer 'a mantle of safety' to brave outback pioneers and to the Aboriginal people displaced by them. Both Hains and McDonald are struck by Flynn's clear-eyed ability in 1915 to leap onto the bandwagon of wartime rhetoric and direct it to the home front:

We who so cheerfully sent a cheque for £100,000 to Belgium to help a people pushed out of their own inheritance by foreigners — surely we must just as cheerfully do something for those whom we clean-handed people have dispossessed in the interests of superior culture.

Woldendorp and McDonald remind us that the Flying Doctor service 'depends wholly upon the generosity of governments, the corporate sector and the general public for survival', and use photographs and narrative to promote its mission. Hains tackles the frontier's complex psychology and the myths and legends behind the mission. As a 'force for elevating the nation's moral character', the outback and its icy counterpart, Antarctica, are, in her reading, contested, not always heroic, spaces.

Hains juxtaposes Flynn with Douglas Mawson, iconic figures of a newly federated nation. Her prelude takes an historic moment in 1911 that brings together not only the men, but also their new nation, in the unlikely South Australian outback town of Beltana. Mawson was about to go south on the famously successful Australasian Antarctic Mission. Flynn was heading north, to the Northern Territory and beyond, conceptualising a vast 'Inland' that in fact reached much of the coastline of the north and the west. Hains's book is not so much about the men's legendary achievements, but about a nation's 'epic endeavour to write a frontier mythology'.

Whilst Woldendorp and McDonald draw their images and text from Australia's extensive 'outside country', Hains's focus is on inner landscapes. She examines the psychohistory of the challenge of ecological systems 'hostile to European settlement patterns', and explores the land and elements as they remake a nation and its citizens.

Mawson and his men's work in Antarctica also involved a voyage into self and society. They escaped the everyday and the mundane of civilisation, but did they actually claim the imagined icy space for the Empire? Could they somehow renew civilisation through exposure to wilderness? Hains re-creates the psychological ambiguity of their mission. British imperial hunting traditions were in the minds of Wild and Moyes, posing bare-chested above their 'trophy'. But it was a Weddell seal, one of nature's least ferocious creatures. Frank Hurley's famous photograph of this moment portrays not heroism but a subversive humour — wicked colonial irony rather than imperial majesty.

The early twentieth century was a time of 'progressive' thinking, not just in Australia, but also in the USA and Britain. The so-called 'gospel of efficiency' endorsed an uncritical faith in experts. Efficiency, scientific expertise and new technologies were the means of moral redemption. Hains explores 'progressivism on ice' in the scientific expeditions of the Mawson team, who had to turn their rigid training to the unexpected. She compares them with the 'fine womanly nurses' of Flynn's Australian Inland Mission doing progressive things in the desert. These resourceful women achieved 'cleanliness, fresh food and scientific child-rearing' in difficult conditions. Most importantly for Flynn's vision, they stayed on in the Inland, married frontiersmen and built a morally sound community.

Tensions between wilderness and 'home' recur at many levels throughout *The Ice and the Inland*. The sublime landscape was beyond humanity, yet the ice explorers sought a language that could embrace it and 'draw it closer to their life-world'. The men of the south celebrated freedom from a domestic world controlled by women, yet worried about their absence. Flynn, too, worried about this. If Mawson's men were trying to rescue an impossible land for Empire, Flynn was trying to redeem an Inland largely without white women for society and the nation. He needed to convince his supporters that the outback was the 'essential heart of the nation'. The key to connecting wilderness and its opposite, 'home', was technology. The wireless was lauded by both Mawson and Flynn. But the wireless also threatened the isolated independence essential to the frontiersman and his myths, and this paradox bred its own anxieties, as Hains explores.

The positive psychological shift from Dead Heart to Red Centre was orchestrated by Flynn and his contemporary H.H. Finlayson, and continues in Woldendorp's recent images. In the early years, frontier style focused on the need

to escape the coastal fringe with its 'evil cities', to develop a national and personal moral strength through the outback. The 'empty' outback also needed people, preferably permanent residents, building a new nation of white Australians. As the century wore on, the rhetoric of the Inland became increasingly like that of the Ice, with redemption through visitation, or itinerant life-changing experiences. Hains, in her Epilogue, makes the powerful point that both Flynn and Mawson mooted tourism as a redemptive force for their respective wastelands, and for the people of the distant populous cities.

The great strength of *The Ice and the Inland* is its power to reveal the psychological underbelly of past and present rhetoric about the moral character of the Australian nation. Hains evokes the tension between racism, paternalism, masculine individualism and nationalism in hostile and arid landscapes. She asks why a modern, urbanised society decided that frontier landscapes were at the heart of its national identity. *The Ice and the Inland* is a finely nuanced exploration of the place of this heroic past in Australia's ecologically anxious present.

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