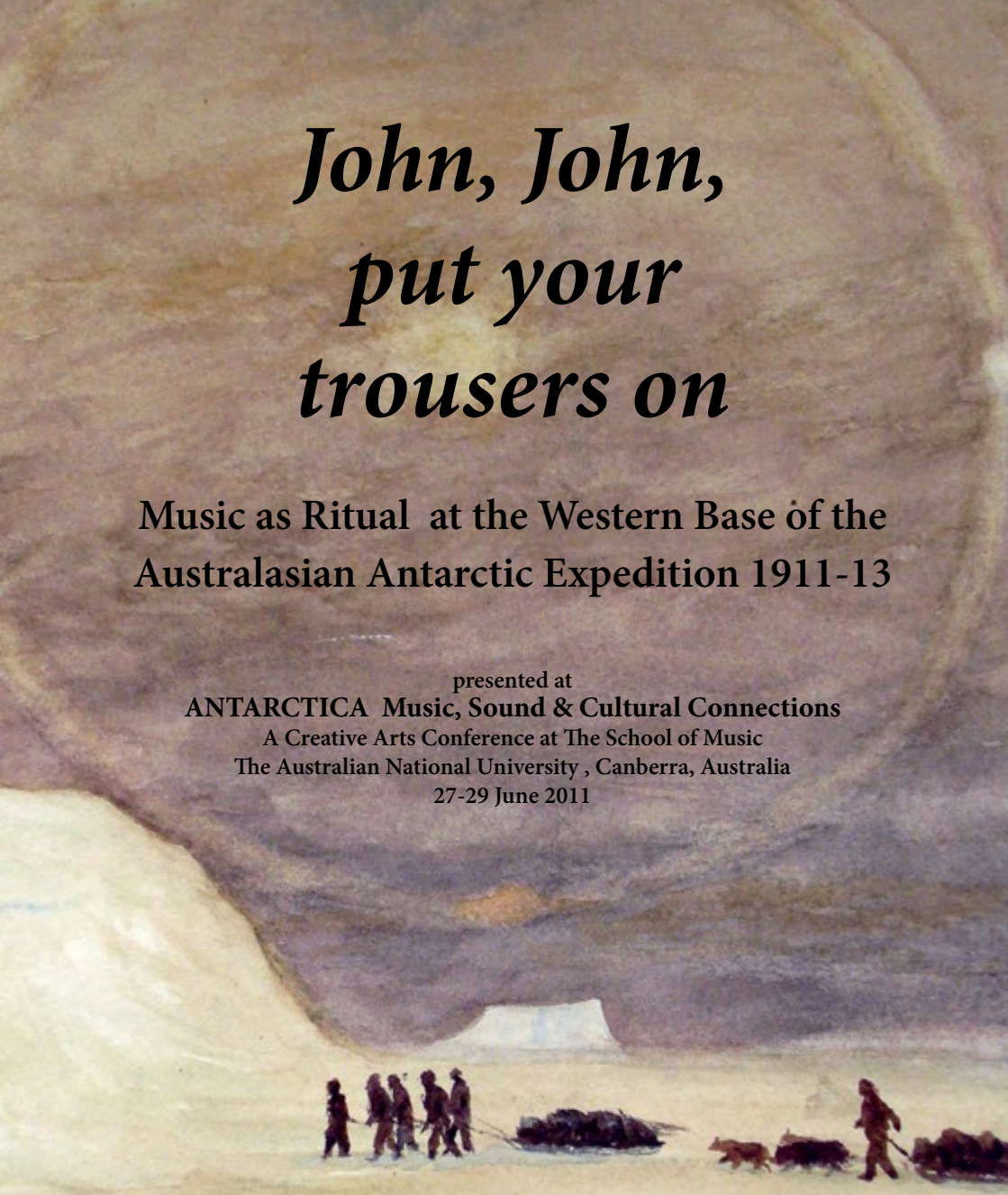
John, John, put your trousers on

Music as Ritual at the Western Base of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition 1911-13

presented at
ANTARCTICA Music, Sound & Cultural Connections
A Creative Arts Conference at The School of Music
The Australian National University , Canberra, Australia
27-29 June 2011



HEATHER ROSSITER AND ADELAIDE TITTERTON

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Published in 2013 by Heather Rossiter
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Production by Fullcream Media
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ABSTRACT

Although music was an integral part of the religious observance conducted almost every Sunday at the Western Base of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition, the AAE, it is not religious music, but music in the primary role of secular ritual that is the subject of this paper.

Several definitions of ritual are considered and behavioural patterns at the base tested against them. Using these parameters, three rituals are identified. One began their day, a second marked the end of the week, and another of less regular occurrence initiated assaults on the Antarctic's secrets. Using diary extracts and other sources, the origins of each ritual are traced, its expression and affective dimensions analysed, and the psychological benefits deduced. The contribution of the rituals to the social harmony that was so much a feature of the base is evaluated.

In a polar world where sound was always extreme: either unnervingly lacking or bruisingly, deafeningly excessive, 'sounds in melodic or harmonic combination'[1], that is, music, were the mode of expression in all three rituals, though each incorporated musical forms specific to itself. Organised, moderated, melodic sound, music, was both relief and release. Ritual music gave immaterial expression to anxieties and fears, and exorcised them. More, it gave the men psychological sustenance, fortified their courage and created mutually supportive bonds.

Whether sung or played on the gramophone, solo or chorus, jocular or devout, music informed the rituals that developed at the base; music was their ritual.

1 'music'; *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*

JOHN, JOHN, PUT YOUR TROUSERS ON
MUSIC AS RITUAL AT THE WESTERN BASE OF THE AUSTRALASIAN ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION 1911-13

Psalms were chanted and hymns sung as an integral part of the religious service conducted almost every Sunday at the Western Base of the AAE 1911-1913, but the music was secondary to the spiritual content of the ceremony; music was a contributor to the ritual, not the ritual itself. In the secular rituals discussed here music was the entire performance, that is, it had primary status.

Charles Turnbull Harrisson After the Winter, Second Base 21.9.12, watercolour, collection Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

To clarify what we mean by ritual the OED is of limited help, defining ritual as 'pertaining or relating to, connected with rites'. So we proceed to 'rite' and find: 'a formal procedure or act in a religious or other solemn observance; a custom or practice of a formal kind'.[2] So it is behaviour and it is formal, but we still aren't very much advanced.

If we turn to Myerhoff we progress. 'Ritual is an act or actions intentionally conducted by a group of people employing one or more symbols in a repetitive, formal, precise, highly stylized fashion … rituals persuade the body first; behaviours precede emotions in the participants … Rituals can be distinguished from custom and mere habit by their utilization of symbols. They have significance far beyond the information transmitted. They may accomplish tasks, accompany routine & instrumental processes, but they always go beyond them endowing some larger meaning to activities they are associated with'.[3] Moore puts it more succinctly. 'Rituals entice action and generate strong emotions'.[4]

To relate these definitions to activities in the Western Base hut on the Shackleton Glacier, we will bundle together 'rituals persuade the body first', 'they may accomplish tasks', and 'rituals entice action', in considering the first strains of music in the daily life of the men. They were woken not by a cup of tea bedside, or a shake, nor by an order, but by a gramophone record. The choice was the nightwatchman's. On 7 May 1912 Harrisson 'woke them with "Gems from Maritana" followed by "The Lost Chord" cornet solo'.[5] But the most frequent 'alarm clock' was a comic song recorded by Will Danby for

2 'ritual'; Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

3 B. G. Myerhoff, Fusion, 'Fictions and Continuity in Secular Ritual', in Secular Ritual, eds S. F. Moore and B. G. Myerhoff, Van Gorcum, Assen, 1977, pp199-200

4 P. J. Hefner, R. L. Moore, and R. W. Burhoe, *Symposium on Ritual in Human Adaptation*, Zygon, Chicago, 1983, 18: 209–219

5 Harrisson, CT, ML MSS 386, 7 May 1912

the General Phonograph Company, England, in 1906 (and which you can download free from The Cylinder Archive), as '*John, go and put your trousers on*'. It was first played on the Glacier on 11 March 1912, when Harrisson records, 'It has now become the fashion to rouse the sleepers with a tune upon the gramophone. The Dr, while he was cooking, hit upon the most apropos if not the choicest, in "John, John, put your trousers on"."
As can be imagined, the music 'persuaded the body' and 'accomplished the task' of getting the men out of the (relatively) warm bunks into the chill air of the hut, and 'enticed' them to dress and assemble for breakfast.

Although directed toward action, this ritual morning music had a deeper psychological intent. As Moore says, 'Rituals entice action and generate strong emotions'. Action, getting them out of bed, was achieved without putting anyone out of humour. Stated positively, the ritual's real achievement was in manipulating emotions so as to maintain harmony and avoid friction at a time of day when people are generally sensitive.

We skip now to a Saturday night ritual that always began with the singing of "*Sweethearts and wives*". On board the *Aurora* on the Expedition's first Saturday out of Hobart, 9 December 1911, Harrisson records, 'evening a bottle of whisky served out & we drank "Sweethearts and wives" … Wild drank "Other men's – as I've neither." Hannam drank "Sweethearts & wives – may they never meet!" Then a concert.'[6] This was an occasion, not yet a ritual. Formalisation into ritual did not begin until 9 March 1912.

The Western Base party landed on the Shackleton Glacier on 15 February 1912, and lived in tents while building their hut. Saturday 2 March was their first night under a roof but there were no ceremonies. The men were too

6 Harrisson, CT, op. cit., 9 December 1911

Charles Harrisson MSS CY 4578 State Library NSW

tired, dirty and still occupied with finishing the hut interior. On the following Saturday Harrisson writes, 'As it was Saturday night we drank "Sweethearts & Wives" for the first time on the Barrier. Wild drank "Here's to all sweethearts & wives, tho' I've neither, & God bless them." I, "& to one good wife in particular."[7] 'The toast was followed by the men singing the old sea chanty *Sweethearts and Wives*, which was a prelude to a vocal concert.

This was the genesis of their Saturday night ritual: the singing of *Sweethearts and Wives* followed by a concert. Frank Wild's beautiful baritone usually led it, Moyes, also an accomplished singer, often sang 'seconds', Watson kept the rhythm, Kennedy sometimes accompanied on his flute or was persuaded to give a solo, and all participated heartily. At the men's request a regular item

7 Ibid., 9 March 1912

was a solo by Wild. Of his repertoire *Kabul River* was the most appreciated, often mentioned in the diaries, always with praise.

Kabul River, words by Rudyard Kipling, set to music by Peter Bellamy, relates a disastrous night crossing of the Kabul River, Afghanistan, by British troops on 31 March 1879. The first two verses only are included here. While reading them, imagine Wild's expressive baritone conveying the anger and despair embodied in the repetition, listen to the meter driving forward.

Kabul town's by Kabul river -
Blow the bugle, draw the sword -
There I lef' my mate for ever,
Wet an' drippin' by the ford.
Ford, ford, ford o' Kabul river,
Ford o' Kabul river in the dark!
There's the river up and brimmin', an' there's 'arf a squadron swimmin'
'Cross the ford o' Kabul river in the dark.

Kabul town's a blasted place -
Blow the bugle, draw the sword -
'Strewth I sha'n't forget 'is face
Wet an' drippin' by the ford!
Ford, ford, ford o' Kabul river,
Ford o' Kabul river in the dark!
Keep the crossing-stakes beside you, an' they will surely guide you
'Cross the ford o' Kabul river in the dark.

Kabul town is sun and dust -
Blow the bugle, draw the sword …

It is a song about mateship, as well as disaster. For us in 2011 with Australian troops in Afghanistan the song has a certain resonance, perhaps less bitter than the import of a century ago. Sung by Wild, a master of expression, it evoked a very emotional response and as the Saturday night ritual developed, Kabul River deepened the bond between the men and their leader.

The ritual was quickly established. March 9, as stated above, was the first performance; by March 16 they were out on the ice cap on what they expected to be a short depot-laying run south – they had yet to learn the caprice of the Antarctic blizzard. Even so, the ritual was enacted: 'Laying in our bags yarning, & Moyes & Wild singing. That evening sang verses of "Sweethearts & Wives" – tho we had nothing to toast them in.'[8] And on Saturday 30 March, trapped by the weather, 'the boys have had enough of blizzards! Am writing in my sleeping bag ... Moyes has gone to bed for once without a song, but Wild in the next tent, upon me reminding him of the day, sang a couple of verses of "Sweethearts & Wives". "The girls, God bless them, First our sweethearts, then our wives" rang out over the dead, God-forsaken, ice-bound land, while the yellow gleam of a moon, low down in the NE, shone thro the tent walls …'[9] Oh yes, the ritual was becoming indispensable.

Though Wild dominated the ritual when present, he was not requisite for its performance. On 5 October, during the depot-laying journey to the west in which Wild did not participate, Moyes and Harrisson sharing a tent, Harrisson wrote, 'Moyes sang verse of "Sweethearts & wives". I joined in

8 Harrisson, op. cit., 16 March 1912
9 Ibid., 30 March 1912

Charles Turnbull Harrisson Antarctic sledging 1912, watercolour, collection Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

chorus, then Hoadley in other tent took it up …' Again, on 12 October, still stuck on the ice cap, 'One of the hardest blizzards that we have faced … Did not attempt cooking. Got a few sticks of chocolate & retired to bag with notebook, burberry blouse, &c., & got bag over on side ready to turn face down if the tent goes … Am rather dreading the coming night … We sang verse & chorus of "Sweethearts & wives", scarcely audible amidst the storm.' Scarcely audible maybe, but intensely comforting.

And that is why the singing is considered ritual. Moore 1983 asserts 'ritual is more than a conscious cognitive affair, more than a behavioural affair. Affective dimensions are involved which are frequently too elusive to capture'.[10] Giving heart to men caught in truly life-threatening situations is only one of its 'affective dimensions'.

Being a collective affair, ritual has an integrating function and, with its capacity to resolve conflicts, it can restore equilibrium within a community. The Saturday night ritual of singing together strengthened the group's cohesion, negating the petty annoyances and irritations that must inevitably have arisen while living together in such confined circumstances as the small hut or the tiny tent, both subject to extreme weather conditions. The ritual of music induced an affective state that erased any discord or lingering resentment which might have split their tight little society.

That affective dimension is referred to as *communitas*. Communitas is a Latin noun inducted into anthropological psychology by Victor Turner in 1974[11]. In that context it encapsulates spontaneously generated feelings of comradeship and egalitarianism, a sense of sharing, a spirit of community

10 Hefner, Moore, and Burhoe, op. cit.

11 V. Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors : Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1974, p. 231

within, but apart from, the larger encompassing society. It is the antithesis of Marx's concept of alienation. In *communitas*, society overrides individuality.

While *communitas* is a transitory state of intense intimacy and equality, paradoxically the experience enables people to return without rancour to a social structure that holds people apart, so that Wild, having been temporarily within the men's arc of inclusiveness, and they within his, could be fully accepted again in his role as leader and therefore separate from them. *Communitas* had licensed his superior rank. Because he was one of them, endorsing his superiority elevated them all. He was addressed by the men as 'Sir' or 'Mr Wild', they even thought of him by those nominals as the diaries attest – yet we cannot help wondering whether, during the Saturday night music ritual, they might actually have called him 'Frank'. Too late now to ask.

Individually, the induced state of *communitas*, of sharing, of being part of this elite brotherhood, reinforced their courage, their determination to explore the forbidding land, to endure all the hazards of that white place and to achieve the tasks set them.

But let us not forget that the symbol at the heart of this ritual was woman – the sweethearts and wives of the song, for that symbol had great significance in their all-male society where bundling into a three-man sleeping bag was not unusual, even on one short sledging journey four of them doing so, Harrisson complaining, 'One of the most uncomfortable nights I have passed in a sleeping bag. Warm enough, but oh so cramped ... bag not intended for 4 men. Could not lay at full length & when I could suffer it no longer & had to turn, Andy, next to me, would turn too. Both had to lay the same way!
The other two did not complain – so must have got a better share of bag than

Charles Turnbull Harrisson Montage
13 x 10cm created in Antarctica 1912,
collection Geoffrey Harrisson

we did.'[12]

Remembering that Andy Watson, the heaviest of them, weighed well over 12 stone one can believe such propinquity gave new meaning to contiguity! Interpersonal relationships were delicate matters in such a cloistered society, and not to be complicated by sexual tensions between young healthy men. Besides, the year was 1912; Oscar Wilde was only twelve years dead. Woman, though absent, had an indispensable function.

From psychiatry comes another definition of ritual: 'repetitive complex movements … used to relieve anxiety'.[13] This definition introduces another significant aspect of the Antarctic music ritual on Saturday nights.

For Harrisson, the only married man, the music released a flood of emotion of which anxiety was a major component. No doubt the same was true for Watson, the only formally engaged man, but we know less about his emotional response, not only because his literary ability is less than Harrisson's, but because he rarely mentions his fiancée. In Harrisson's diary we find on Saturday night after Saturday night expressions of love and desire for

12 Harrisson, op. cit.,16 August 1912
13 'ritual, n.', J.C. Segen, *Concise Dictionary of Modern Medicine*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 2006

Carrie, his very dear wife, and of fear for his children's wellbeing. The singing of *Sweethearts and Wives* released the anxiety, the fear; it flows out onto the page and for the moment is assuaged.

So ingrained had the ritual become and so important was it to their psychological well being that even alone Moyes observed it, writing on 30 November: "Had Sweethearts and Wives by myself tonight."[14] Moyes had been left to mind the base when two sledging parties went out into the field. Harrisson had gone with the Eastern Party, his intention being to help only as far as a depot laid in September, then to return to the hut. The plan was wrecked by the discovery that a blizzard had blown away a carefully-stashed sledge; Harrisson's sledge then became indispensable to the main party and he had no choice but to go on with them.

With Harrisson overdue on the projected lone 100-mile return journey, we can imagine Moyes sitting in the hut, fearful for Harrisson's welfare, singing *Sweethearts and Wives* almost as a way of conjuring up his friend. In the lonely weeks ahead he repeated the ritual, his strong voice ringing out into the solitude, perhaps even reaching the moulting emperor penguins that 'Moyes used to go down and talk to'.[15] We can believe that the ritual alleviated his anxiety to some extent; what it did to the penguins is not recorded.

Finally, a third music ritual: departure. From primitive to sophisticated, societies have established leave-taking rituals – daubing the body with ash, breaking of bread and a glass of wine, communal prayer, a handshake and a murmured 'Bon voyage'. At the Western Base the ritual was music, not sung by the expeditioners though sometimes their voices rose with it, but a

14 Moyes, M, ML MSS 388/1 30 November 1912
15 Harrisson, op. cit., 6 January 1913

recording of *God be with you till we meet again*. Describing their departure on the third sledging journey, Harrisson notes, 'Slipped "God be with you till we meet again" on the gramophone – it has heralded our departure on every occasion – Hobart & each sledging trip.'[16]

The negro spiritual: lyrics by Jeremiah E. Rankin, published in 1882, was set by several musicians and became so popular that its eight verses were incorporated into Hymns Ancient & Modern, Second Supplement in 1916, though without the refrain. While the lyrics are reassuring, the refrain is designed to excite.

Whose music and whose recording they played in Antarctica is not known; it certainly wasn't Ella Fitzgerald whose beautiful rendition makes one too emotional to get out the door.

1. God be with you till we meet again,
By His counsels guide, uphold you,
With His sheep securely fold you,
God be with you till we meet again.

Refrain:
Till we meet, till we meet,
Till we meet at Jesus' feet;
Till we meet, till we meet,
God be with you till we meet again.

2. God be with you till we meet again,

16 Ibid., 1 May 1912

'Neath His wings securely hide you,
Daily manna still provide you,
God be with you till we meet again.

3. God be with you till we meet again,
When life's perils thick confound you,
Put His arms unfailing round you,
God be with you till we meet again …

By August 22, when the fifth sledging journey began, the awfulness of winter sledging in the Antarctic had brought its own reality to the usually ebullient men. 'Called at 5.30 a.m … away a little before 7 a.m. Much of the romance seems to have gone out of the sledging. Not talking now of how many crevasses they would fall into & not much of new discoveries, but much of how to keep warm, how to get all they would wish to take into the 11 lbs allowed, and, above all, how to get enough tobacco in. No "God be with you till we meet again" on the zonophone. Morning thick, dull'.[17]

It was apparently a lone exception. Perhaps they can be forgiven. They were only six days back from the fourth sledging journey, which, although short, had been no picnic. Yet maybe weariness is not the reason. The interval between the sixth sledging journey, which lasted one calendar month, and Harrisson's next and last sledging journey was only four days. However, the mood on that departure was much more elevated and on October 30 Harrisson once again records the ritual. 'Good breakfast of seal's liver, bacon & gravy … Jones took photos … Eastern Party – Wild, Watson, Kennedy. Supporting Party – Harrisson & the 3 dogs! Beautiful bright morning neces-

17 Harrisson, op. cit., 22 August 1912

sitating goggles … "God be with you till we meet again" on the gramophone … hands shaken, good wishes all round & we left amid "Three cheers for the Eastern Party!" then "Three more for the lone sledger!" – which we returned.'[18]

The purpose of this ritual needs little analysis. Prayer, entreaty, plea for protection on what they all knew were dangerous assignments but rarely acknowledged even to themselves. Ritual can assuage subliminal anxiety, as psychologists acknowledge and as we have seen in regard to Harrisson's fears for his young children.

And what of the return from these expeditions? The men came in exhausted, starved, sore-footed, chafed, arriving at any hour, even midnight, and only once, in a show of bravado really addressed to the lonely Moyes, they 'struck up a rousing marching chorus'.[19] The homecomings were too varied to establish a ritual, the men too depleted.

18 Ibid., 30 October 1912
19 Ibid., 6 January 1913

16

CONCLUSION

Only three rituals developed at the Western Base: one began their day, a second marked the end of the week, and another, less regular, initiated assaults on the Antarctic's secrets. In a polar world where sound was always extreme, either unnervingly lacking: 'The silence roars in one's ears. It is centuries of heaped-up solitude'[20], as Borchgrevinck unforgettably defined it, or bruisingly, deafeningly excessive: 'Sunday went out as it came in, blowing furiously … One great continuous roar that seemed to shake the very Ice Cap!'[21], it is not surprising that 'sounds in melodic or harmonic combination'[22], that is, music, should be the mode in which their rituals were expressed. Organised, moderated, melodic sound, music, was both relief and release. Music, ritual music, manipulated their matutinal emotions; gave immaterial expression to anxieties and fears, and exorcised them; it ameliorated tensions within a confined community and engendered harmony among eight men of very different ages and personalities; it bonded them into a brotherhood while allowing hierarchy.

Yet it was more. From rituals incorporating specific musical forms the men of the Western Base derived psychological sustenance that enabled them to survive an extreme environment and to meet challenges in the field that tested them physically and mentally. From the jocular *John, John, put your trousers on* to the emotive *God be with you till we meet again*, whether sung or played on the gramophone, solo or chorus, music was their ritual, their ritual was music.

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20 Borchgrevink, C E. 1901. *First on the Antarctic Continent*, London: George Newnes Ltd, 135
21 Harrisson, op. cit., 21 October 1912
22 'music'; *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*

ABOUT HEATHER ROSSITER

Research scientist in the US and UK, teacher and vine-grower in Australia, Heather Rossiter's articles, book reviews and travel pieces have appeared in Australian and international publications. She was research consultant to the documentary, 'Mawson: Life and Death in Antarctica', screened on ABC and BBC TV in 2007 and her book, Lady Spy, Gentleman Explorer: The Life of Herbert Dyce Murphy was shortlisted for the ISAA Book Award 2002.

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