A century ago, Douglas Mawson laid the foundations for the acquisition of ‘our Great Frozen Neighbour’ when the Australasian Antarctic Expedition raised the Union Jack and the Australian flag at Commonwealth Bay and took possession of an Antarctic sector ‘for the Empire and for Australia more particularly’. The young Mawson had achieved a national quest commenced during the movement to Federation. With Australia in control of part of New Guinea, the Commonwealth, he said, would then stretch from ‘pole to equator’.

Together with Mawson, the mainly young engineers of ‘Australasia’ who journeyed to the ‘glorious playground for venturesome youth’ in 1912 were participating in a significant act of nation building. The legacy of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition ultimately led to Australia becoming involved in its first major and most complex question of foreign policy unconnected to war.

After the Second World War a tri-national dispute involving Britain, Argentina and Chile regarding British sovereignty over the Falkland Islands Dependencies threatened to weaken all Antarctic sovereignty claims and to upset the international political balance in the fragile cold war period. Seeking to defuse the situation, the United States suggested the internationalisation of Antarctica. Australia eventually agreed after winning support from the proposed contracting parties, which included the Soviet Union, for the non-militarisation of the Antarctic.

Australia’s acquisition of its Antarctic territory and the negotiations for the 1959 Antarctic Treaty are stories of entanglements of international politics, diplomacy and law, of an influential scientific lobby and emerging nationalism that involved Australia in intricate diplomacy with its powerful protectors both before and after the Second World War. This untold history is only now coming to light as the result of revelations contained in government records that have lain overlooked in the National Archives of Australia.

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