



R Y M I L L  
C O O N A W A R R A

## THE LIFE OF JOHN RYMILL

John Riddoch Rymill, Mary and Robert's younger son, was born at Penola Station in 1905 and grew up self-reliantly in the Australian bush, before attending Melbourne Grammar School. At the age of 18 he travelled to England, the world centre of polar exploration where, despite dyslexia, he studied accounting, anthropology, nutrition and surveying, and also learnt to ski and fly. In 1929, with his powerful 193cm (6'4") physique capable of carrying an 82kg (180lb) pack effortlessly, he joined a Cambridge University expedition mounted to study the interaction of the American Indians and Eskimos (Inuit) in northern Canada.

Rymill next won a position as pilot and surveyor on the 1930-31 British Arctic Air Route Expedition, investigating the terrain and meteorology of Greenland beneath the proposed Great Circle air route between Britain and North America. The expedition culminated in his epic 700km crossing of the featureless, 3,000m high Greenland Ice Cap with sledge and huskies. In 1932 Rymill assumed command of a similar expedition after the leader was killed in a hunting-kayak. Living amongst the Eskimos and gaining their respect, he took every opportunity to learn their techniques of polar travel and survival.

Rymill's foremost achievement was, at the age of 29, to raise the necessary funds and lead the independent 1934-37 British Graham Land Expedition to the Antarctic. This hostile and uninhabited region, far to the south of Cape Horn, was the last major geographical feature on the earth's surface still to defy human discovery. Thought to be an archipelago, comprising a massive 3,000m mountain range rising precipitously from the ocean, its hundreds of miles of surrounding pack-ice had rendered it inaccessible, crushing the ships and impeding the progress of all previous explorers.



Rymill's sixteen-man team mounted a three-year assault with its small, 150 ton sailing ship, the *Penola*, combining the ancient Eskimo technique of husky-powered sledges with the modern technology of radios and an aircraft. Rymill boldly, and correctly, assumed that the katabatic summer gales from the high mountains would blow the pack-ice offshore sufficiently to expose a narrow coastal channel through which, after aerial reconnaissance, the *Penola* could penetrate. Island bases were then established from which, the following winter, sledging parties could skilfully travel over the thin, newly frozen sea-ice.

The expedition successfully surveyed over 1,000km of previously unexplored coastline, establishing that Graham Land was not an archipelago but, in fact, the Antarctic Peninsula. Rymill crossed its glaciated, igneous mountains to the east coast. Another party discovered and sledged 400km south into King George VI Sound, finding that it separated the Peninsula from Alexander Island, the sedimentary geology of which substantiated the new theory of continental drift. Upon the safe return of this remarkable expedition from its three years' isolation, the citation of one of its many awards recognised it as being 'an harmonious team of very modest gentlemen'.

In 1938 John Rymill married Eleanor Francis who, having completed her Californian fieldwork at Berkeley, had just graduated as the first female PhD in Geography from Cambridge University. Arriving at Penola Station in 1939, Eleanor was soon managing the property while John served in the Navy during World War II. They embarked upon extensive programs of perennial pasture development, and of breeding Corriedale sheep and Angus cattle. John Rymill was also keenly interested in equestrian sports, being instrumental in founding the Equestrian Federation of Australia and the Pony Club Association of SA. He died as the result of a car accident in 1968.