

Chapter 1 Westernport

1.2 Diary of Surgeon George Bass: Discovering the Westernmost port of NSW

5th January 1798.

Most of the night my crew of six, all volunteers from my ship HMS Resolution, had lain dozing across their oars. Because we had dropped the sail, we had to dip our oars regularly to keep our 28-foot whaleboat in a safe position offshore.

I kept us about two miles from the entrance because the surf over the breakers or sand bars made it too dangerous to row through the two headlands at night. An outgoing tide, and a southerly wind blowing into the entrance making a very boisterous lot of whitecaps. Extremely dangerous for us if our boat was made to surf by the following wind into waves hitting our bow.

We thought it was the entrance to an estuary, and although we could see the heads from about twenty miles away, it took us long time in the afternoon to make the entrance. It was dusk before we arrived. I had got my people to row me into a small beach where I jumped ashore, climbed the rise and observed the estuary entrance and a large body of water beyond. I decided to go into the estuary on a rising tide that, I calculated from all my observations in the last 24 hours, would be about 3 a.m.



George Bass and crew. I.H. & LDMM.

We are hungry and our bellies are rumbling. Our food is low, no fresh food at all! I decided we should all eat a ship's biscuit, probably full of weevil worms, and drink a beaker of brackish water. My people won't complain about the water so long as they can taste the dash of rum in it! Even the rum is getting low. I must carefully measure it out.

One sailor complained that the ship's biscuit hurt his teeth too much. At 24 years of age I was proud to be ship's surgeon on HMS *Reliance* and I thought I could cure most ills, and cut out or cut off most diseased parts.

Not this one though. I inspected his mouth and suggested I would have to cut out two teeth. He seemed to trust me, then I said I had left my medical instruments back in Sydney Cove, but I could use the whaleboat mallet and one of his mate's cutlasses to dig his teeth out. He instantly told me he would prefer to just suck on the biscuit to soften it. The rest of the people laughed and laughed. We are a very close bunch of fellows, from my ship. We get on well.

We left Port Jackson at 6 p. m. Sunday 3rd December 1797, with the encouragement and assistance of Governor Hunter, who knew that my duties

as ship's surgeon were very few whilst my ship the *Resolution* was being repaired, and I was very bored.

How did I get to this situation of being in charge of a whaleboat and crew of six people on this exploration of the coast to where no man had been before?

It started on my voyage out from England to Port Jackson. I left England on February 15th 1795, and arrived at Port Jackson in the Colony of New South Wales on September 7th 1795.

Captain John Hunter had been appointed Governor of the Colony of New South Wales. The founding Governor, now Admiral Arthur Philip, has retired a little while ago, and in his absence the chief military officer of the New South Wales Corps had filled in. Now all that changed because Captain Hunter was appointed Governor by the Colonial Secretary Lord Evan Nepean, to take all the powers of the appointment and run the Colony as an extension of English Government!

On the voyage out from England with an enormous amount of spare time, Captain Hunter, who was the senior officer on board, but not actively engaged in sailing the ship, spent a lot of time reminiscing to Matthew Flinders and myself, in regards to his naval career and sailing experiences. Particularly about the Colony of New South Wales, and Norfolk Island. The Indian, Bennelong, was also being returned to Sydney. What an enigma he is.

Captain Hunter fired our imagination with the possibilities of unlimited exploration, being first, hardships, failure, but always gaining knowledge. Matthew in particular after his experiences in fighting the French in the naval battle called 'The Glorious June', and nearly dying, wanted to explore the unexplored in Terra Australis and chart it for maps.

I realised that life without a challenge was merely an existence. I will take all opportunities to explore the new land. I clearly recall Captain Hunter telling us about the early days of the settlement in Sydney. The colony nearly starved to death. So Governor Arthur Philip sent Captain Hunter to Cape Town to get fresh supplies of food. He decided to take a very dangerous and unpredictable route.

Instead of battling winds in sailing down to the tip of Van Diemen's Land and then westward to Cape Town at the bottom of Africa, Captain Hunter sailed east to Cape Horn and continued sailing east around the world to Cape Town. When his ship was loaded he continued sailing eastwards to the bottom of Van Diemen's Land, then northward to get to Sydney Cove. So he actually sailed all the way around the world in one direction, using the winds that blow in a predominantly easterly direction.

Drake, Dampier and Cook had also sailed in those latitudes of 35 degrees South to 55 degrees South. Those latitudes regularly experienced freezing violent seas and winds.



A different view of the world: Captain Hunter sailed clockwise from Port Jackson. AGGV.

His ship HMS *Supply* was a very unstable sailer, and when Captain Hunter was at the southernmost tip of Van Diemen's land on the way back to Sydney, a terrible storm blew up. The ship nearly tipped right over several times and all aboard fully expected to drown.

From Captain Hunter's observations sailing north up the east coast of Van Diemen's Land, he believed and hoped that a strait of water might exist between Point Hicks NSW and Van Diemen's Land, that would save two or three weeks extra sailing time to Port Jackson, and might be a much safer route and reduce the possibility of shipwreck.

There was a shortage of men to carry out any kind of work, let alone set off on expeditions taking other men and food supplies away from the colony. However the Governor saw that I was free and had previous sailing experience to Cape Town and also exploring the coastline to the south of Port Jackson. He only had one boat available and that was the whaleboat. He and I discussed the boat and decided that for coastal exploration it was ideal so long as we did not venture too far from shore.

The Governor wrote up my orders, and allowed us to depart for the unknown.