

Chapter 2 Under Weigh

2.2 Diary of Geo. Bass: Some reflections; whaleboat repair.

17th January 1798

I intend to leave Western Port tomorrow Thursday 18th January 1798, at about 5am. I am reluctant to do so, but this is the seventh week out from Port Jackson, and we have been here 12 days. Our reduced rations, even with additions of seal meat, birds and fish, make our return essential. We are hungry much of the time.

Our exploratory voyage has been plagued by bad, unpredictable stormy summer weather, making us stay ashore at various places for long periods of time, in what appears to be a bad drought period. I feel a gale might get up even tomorrow, but we have to make the attempt.

Whilst ashore, I have vigorously explored, examined and collected samples of botanic species, native animals and birds that I have not seen before. After showing them to Gov. Hunter, who is a keen botanist and who regularly writes to Sir Joseph Banks, I intend sending them to Sir Joseph and my fellow botanist Major William Patterson of the Marine Corps, who is also currently in England. Bill had been posted to Norfolk Island for a time as Lieutenant Governor. He was also Administrator of the colony at Sydney Cove until Governor Hunter arrived.

Bill planted an English peach variety in the Colony that has been very successful in producing fruit, so he knows quite a bit about botany. We also shared the experience, though at different times, of attempting the arduous

task of finding a way over the mountain range to the west of Sydney Cove. I even had some special climbing irons made for my boots on my individual exploration.

My report to the Governor will have to be of the highest order, and I must be able to answer his intense and wide-ranging questions.

I am confident I will be able to, having spent five years of sea time on various ships sailing all over the Atlantic Ocean. I am no stranger to decision making and responsibility. I have also had other occasions where I have had to present reports to him. Both voyages of the *Tom Thumbs*, being ordered to take a whaleboat and look for *Sydney Cove* shipwreck survivors, and my excursion into the impassable mountain range.

On a more personal level, I accompanied Governor Hunter, Henry Hacking, the Colony's principal hunter, David Collins the Judge Advocate, and my superior officer from the *Reliance* Captain Henry Waterhouse on a two-day expedition from Parramatta to an area known as Cow Pastures. It was believed that runaway cattle from the first days of the Colony were growing in numbers in that area.

The Governor decided to see for himself. I think he was trying to free himself from the worries of his job for a few days and relive his early vigorous years of exploration.

We all had a satisfying time talking about our respective careers and activities over the campfire during the nights. The Governor knew that I was on the *Reliance* when it was sent to Norfolk Island to retrieve the guns from the H.M.S. *Sirius*. He was the commanding officer of the *Sirius* when it was shipwrecked there. At that time he had to return to England where he had to undergo a Court-Martial. He was exonerated of any blame to do with the ship

being wrecked. He understood how sometimes circumstances were not entirely fair to the individual regardless of how hard the individual tried.

Our whaleboat was in a desperate state when we finally passed through the narrow neck of water into what appeared to be a large open expanse of harbour, so we quickly ran it up a beach above the high-water mark. I asked my coxswain John Thistle, who was from the *Reliance*, to minutely examine the condition of the entire boat. Whilst that was happening, I divided the crew into water and food procurers, camp workers, and men who would accompany me on my explorations carrying my instruments and any food and water we would need.

John found that the aft quarter planking was suffering badly from nail sick. He and two others would use a hammer and dolly to rivet some extra copper nails to the planking once the planks were levered tightly against each other. Because of the constant pounding in the seas, jarring on the beaches and the strain on the hull from each rowing position, all nails would have to be carefully examined and re driven where required.

The repairs had to be done very quickly. We needed the boat to search for good water, hunt birds and fish, and to examine the harbour in detail, rowing up channels and creeks. The harbour shores would need to be drawn, and depth soundings taken at low tide. If the harbour followed the usual tidal pattern, I calculated the first of the useful low tides would be starting at 9 a.m. tomorrow.