

Chapter 2 Under Weigh

2.4 Diary of Geo. Bass: Delays; escaped convicts again; making money.

15th February 1798

The easterly winds are dying, and the breeze is shifting to the SW.

Past comments of various Captains and crews, all suggest that this East Coast of N.S.W. is a very unpleasant place for sailing ships, due to its very varied directions of winds and usually very boisterous, dangerous seas. I can support those statements.

To date we have had to remain on shore six times-for a duration of 10 days; 12 days; two days; three days; seven days; three days; and the last here near Rams Head for three days. It was opportune here at this bight, because we endeavoured to recover our anchor that we had to abandon when in the early days of our journey to the SW. We thought that the sand thrown in during that gale, which buried it, might have worked itself out. We looked in vain.

I have been constantly advising my crew not to go about uncovered in the sun. I told them of my experience with Matt on the *Tom Thumb*, where I swam ashore several times near Illa Warra to dry our muskets and powder and return them to the boat. I suffered terribly for several days with sunburn. Not having any oils or medicines, the agonies were prolonged.

The escaped Irish convicts further complicated matters. We originally put them ashore from the island, on the coast to the west side of the promontory, with certain instructions and advice. Upon our arrival on the return journey,

we found they had not progressed northwards at all. I suspect lack of leadership was the cause. I talked with them and encouraged them to follow the coast northwards to Port Jackson. We were obliged to keep in our boat one very old man, and a sick one. This was with the permission of the crew, because it would further reduce our rations.

Due to forceful and dangerous weather it took us several days to round the promontory and reach the eastern side. After quickly exploring a safe cove on the eastern side, and an island that was home to many seals, where we killed several for our rations, we spied the same five convicts. During our time of fighting the elements, they had not been able to negotiate the large expanse of mudflats at low tide, so we spent some time in ferrying them to a better place to continue their 500-mile journey to Port Jackson. Our farewells were very teary for all of us.

Events such as this I have not entered in my log. My log may be viewed by any number of superior officers, and some information is for the Governor alone. They might use it against him.

The Governor is under enormous pressure in balancing what the N.S.W. Corps officers have been able to exploit in terms of money, goods for trade, and general influence over the Colonial Secretary in England, and therefore King George.

In fact since Colonel Grose administered the Colony before Gov. Hunter arrived, many of the Officers have become rich in land holdings, have convicts to carry out free labour, and own many cattle, goats and pigs. They sell the stock and other goods purchased of trading vessels, some of which are American whalers, at great profit-to the Sydney Cove Government stores, free settlers, emancipated convicts and convicts. We pay through the nose.

Although my loyalty is to the Governor, I am partially involved in doing the same. When the *Reliance* was sent to Cape Town, to purchase food of any description and other goods, that were desperately needed in Sydney Cove and Norfolk Island, I purchased 17 merino sheep from the Dutch Governor's wife. My prospective brother-in-law, Captain Henry Waterhouse, also bought sheep that he later sold to Captain Macarthur, who is currently breeding them with his flock of English sheep.

The Governor requested that I count all the whales and seals that I might encounter on the voyage because American whaleboats have been visiting Sydney Cove after whaling in Spanish waters off the West Coast of South America, and the Dusky Bay area in New Zealand. They appear to have had some commercial success, and might start whaling off the coast of N.S.W. and Van Diemen's land-something our government does not want.

During the visit by the Italian Naval Captain Alessandro Malaspina with his two Spanish ships to Sydney Cove in 1793, they even talked about the quantity of whales in the Pacific. The Spanish ships were on a scientific and spying voyage for the Spanish Government. I wish I had been present, my knowledge of the Spanish language is very good. I could have been of important help. Anyway it was some time before my arrival in Port Jackson.

Sometimes the Americans go on to Canton in China, to continue trading. In fact some of the ships hired by the English Government after they have finished their hire in bringing out convicts and stores also try to engage in whaling on their way to Batavia or Manilla. A Mr. Enderby, in England is seeking to overturn the British East India Company's monopoly in being the only ones to fish the waters between the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn. Captain Campbell a merchant ship's Captain is endeavouring to do the same.

To reduce costs in running the Colonies at Sydney Cove and Norfolk Island, and to reduce their dependency on the English Government to sustain

them the Gov. hopes that whaling, sealing and mining coal might allow the population of nearly 10,000 to free themselves of the mercenary interests of the Officer Corps. All the grog imported is owned by them, and is sold or traded at exorbitant prices. Many times it replaces the use of money.

My naval pay, like all sea-going naval officers, is not particularly high and not likely to increase much over the years. I have observed, and discussed many potential commercial activities with associates. As a consequence when I get back to Port Jackson, at an appropriate time I will resign my post and go into some business.

Hopefully when I do get back I may have some news from Colonel Bill Paterson, in regards to his putting my name forward to become a member of the Linnean Society in England. He feels that my scientific writings on the anatomy of the wombat are very good.

He is also confident that my observations and writings on the feeding habits of swans and the behaviour of the white capped albatross merits their approval. I would be very honoured if accepted.

Over the years to overcome tedium whilst not on duty, I have purchased quite a few good books that cover a wide variety of subjects. One of my favourites is William Dampier's '*A New Voyage around the World.*' That Pirate, hydrographer, and business man managed to write about and describe people, events, and draw flora and fauna in a way that has always excited my imagination, and I want to emulate him. He also circumnavigated the world three times.

The wind is now blowing very briskly from the SW, nearly time to launch the boat.

Governor Hunter has promised to grant Henry, Matt and myself some acres of land at the new settlement of Banks Town. I wonder if we can be as successful as some of the Corps officers?

Paper and pen are very hard to find and keep. As a consequence, I have to repeat my observations quietly in my mind several times so that I may be able to recall the circumstances to write down. My log is necessarily short, and I take great care in protecting it from the elements, as I do with my navigation instruments and rudimentary charts.



Part of 2nd Lieut. Matthew Flinders' map of Bass Strait and Van Diemen's Land with Geo. Bass in 1798-99, incorporating all extant maps into one. This shows Bass's dangerously mistaken heading too far to the west, in making for the wreck site of the Sydney Cove. SLV.



Juan Ravenet (attr.), Borador del resivimiento de los oficiales en Baia Botanica (Sydney dignitaries holding a reception for the Spanish expedition). There is some suggestion the reception may have been outside John Macarthur's house. SLNSW; MAM, Madrid (Bauza Collection no. 2354).