

Chapter 4 Extending Our Understanding.

4.1 Lt John Murray: Further exploration of Bass's strait and Western Port.

Here I am, on 14th February 1802, sailing WNW, just leaving to starboard the very familiar western entrance of Western Port.

I am about to explore and survey what may be the most significant harbour in all the large coast of New South Wales. I intend it to reflect my admiration and respect for Governor King. Being the Commander of the *Lady Nelson*, I intend to call it Port King to show my respect for Governor King, and also his support and generosity.

Only seven years ago I was an able seaman, then promoted to assistant master's mate on the *Polyphemus*. I was later transferred to the *Porpoise* when that ship was ordered from England to deliver stores and other items, including copper coins, to the colony of Sydney Town at Port Jackson.

Upon arrival at Port Jackson I was transferred to the *Lady Nelson*, as second in command under Lieutenant James Grant. He had sailed the newly designed ship from England to Port Jackson, and became the first person to sail directly through Bass's strait.

Commander Grant was a superb seaman, but was not very interested in carrying out surveying duties, and had only sailed the *Lady Nelson* on the understanding that he was to deliver the ship to Matthew Flinders at Port Jackson, who was to conduct a survey of all Terra Australis. Grant was then

to take command of a warship to fight the French and Dutch. When Grant arrived at Port Jackson, he found that Matthew Flinders had left Port Jackson for England to get a ship, and that the warship at Port Jackson was just a rotting hulk. After carrying out several surveying voyages for Governor King, including our visit to Western Port with Francis Barrallier and George Caley-the botanist who was friendly with Mr Banks-he resigned and left for England to continue his naval career.

Governor King's last orders to Lieutenant Grant were to sail up the Hawkesbury river and take on board grain that the farmers along the river flats had been growing. He gave specific instructions for protecting the brig from escaped convicts. This meant always having armed guards on deck, never leaving the ship and rolling out boarding nets to prevent people climbing on board.

On our return Governor King allowed Lieutenant Grant to resign. He promoted me to commander of the *Lady Nelson*, and sent me to Norfolk Island to deliver letters to the Lieutenant Governor, Major Foveaux. We also carried a Captain and Ensign of the Corps, and Surgeon's mate for duty on the island. I carried out my orders successfully.

As commander of the *Lady Nelson*, with John Bowen as first officer, I received the following orders from Governor King:-

You will proceed without loss of time to Bass's strait, and observe the following directions for prosecuting discoveries in those straits on the south west of this country:

When you are between Ram Head and Western Port you will proceed to Kent's Group and ascertain the size of those islands, particularly the easternmost.

From Kent's group you will run on a straight course to Wilson's Promontory, noticing the course and distance, soundings and quality of the bottom.

From Wilsons's Promontory you will trace the coast between Cape Schanck and Cape Albany Otway. From thence you will run to Harbinger Rock lying off the north west point of King's Island. You will make a circuit of that island or islands in addition to His Majesty the King's instructions respecting new discoveries. You will carefully examine all within six miles round the island to ascertain whether a vessel may anchor. You will ascertain the time of bearing between the south westernmost point and Albatross Islands, the northernmost point of Hunter's Islands and the Pyramid.

Having completed your survey thus far you will ascertain to what distance soundings may be got to the westward of the sloop Norfolk and the Lady Nelson's passages, taking care to traverse to the latitude of 42 degrees on the south side and within sight of land on the north side or coast of Van Diemen's Land until between 38 and 42 degrees. As you stand in on the Van Diemen's side you will examine the coast between Cape Albany Otway and Cape Solicitor which Lieutenant Grant named Portland Bay, the bottom of which he did not see. Should you have time I would wish you to run due south from Cape Solicitor as far as 40 degrees and work back again to Cape Bridgewater. You will employ another month in tracing the coast from Cape Banks. In returning to this port you will deliver all such journals and charts as may have been completed during your voyage.

What magnificent instructions! Very clear and detailed, leaving no doubt in my mind what was expected of me. Governor King is a very experienced naval officer and surveyor. As a young man he fought in the war against the rebellious American colonies. He served under Captain Arthur Phillip in later sea time, then joined the First Fleet to found the Colony. Just weeks after

arrival in Port Jackson, Governor Phillip sent him with 23 people, including 15 convicts, to form a new settlement at Norfolk Island. What a task!

The Governor helped combine and redraw Mr Bass's chart, with some of Matthew Flinders' and Bass's with Lieutenant Grant's. He believed strongly that the area to the west of Western Port required more surveys and latitude and longitude bearings as did other areas in Bass's strait. He even gave me his personal chronometer to ensure longitude was accurate.



A composite map drawn by Gov. King from information provided by Grant, Black and others. SLV.

The remaining part of Governor King's orders were:-

Should you fall in with H.M.S. Investigator you will communicate these instructions to the commander Matthew Flinders and put yourself under his command. If you fall in with the Géographe and the Naturaliste, French vessels on discovery and scientific research, you will produce your passport from His Grace the Duke of Portland to the commander of that expedition- who we believe is Commander Baudin.

That part is very worrisome. I would be very happy to surrender my command and orders to Matt Flinders. A superb sailor and navigator, but what about the French!

We are still at war. If they get aggressive and wish to take us captive we don't have any cannon with which to fight. We may not have time to exchange passports before any fighting starts!

During our voyage several thoughts spring to mind.

After leaving Rams Head, on one island in the Kent's group we saw smoke and found some sealers, two men, one woman and child. They work for Mr Underwood and Mr. Henry Kable of Sydney Town, killing seals. What a lonely and isolated existence! With the help of one of the men we put a party ashore with our dogs and hunted kangaroos for food, we also collected about 100 mutton birds and lots of eggs.

Sailing towards Wilson's Promontory I demoted the boatswain Barnes for contempt and disobedience. Also a convict, R. Wood, who was my clerk, informed me he had seen Mark Clark a soldier, and Robert Warren who only two days ago had been raised to boatswain in place of Barnes, were pumping off spirits from a cask in the hold. At the same time John Johnson, cabin servant, informed me that he had seen a number of people at different times, half drunk when on watch. I called all hands on deck, read out the Articles of War and put the offenders in irons.

The next day I released Barnes and restored him to the rank of boatswain. I punished Robert Warren with four dozen lashes, and punished Mark Clark with one dozen lashes. Later in the voyage I discovered that Robert Warren had laid an infamous plan to get the First Mate Mr Bowen broke, and otherwise disgraced, by saying he was a notorious thief and embezzler of the King's stores to all the people. I thoroughly investigated and found it a

diabolical falsehood. I put Warren in double irons and will deliver him to the courts in Sydney.

The only other punishment I have had to carry out was to give George Yates two dozen lashes for falling asleep when on watch whilst guarding the deeply loaded launch ashore. A rising tide could have seen the launch overturn or drift away. I had pardoned him three times before for similar offences.

On Sunday 6th December at five pm we gained the entrance to Western Port, using the sails and sweeps, passing the familiar Grant's Point and Seal Rocks. Our time at Westernport was a delight in revisiting old anchorages and reinspecting the area.

Churchill Island is the place where Lieutenant Grant had cleared an area and planted the crops of wheat, corn, onions and potatoes. The wheat was six feet tall; we cut it to feed the pair of swans we were taking back to Port Jackson as well as ourselves. The corn we ate, but the onions were rotting and some animals had grubbed out the potatoes.

From Elizabeth Island we rowed up the Bass river, and observed how torrential rains had changed its outline a little. I sent out a party to land on Tortoise Head, take some bearings, and explore the terrain with a view to erecting a guard post if needed to command the Port. In my view not as satisfactory as the crest of the small range of hills on the western side. Access to them was from the small hidden creek at the top of the small bight. If a fort at Tortoise Head became encircled, the people could not retreat, whilst the small hill fort on the western hills could present several options.

Food was not a problem. We hunted kangaroos, shot birds, fished with the seine net, and used line and hooks for snapper in the deep hole at Sandy Point.

On Phillip Island we discovered several springs of fresh water. One was so big and plentiful that it could water a ship in about four hours, and immediately fill up again. I constructed a small pathway, and erected a signpost indicating the spring's position for future voyagers.

I have observed Indians, and their way of living with great interest. They appear to differ from the Indians around Port Jackson. In looks, clothing such as it is, food collection methods and even different methods of making canoes.

I have also collected fauna and flora for Governor King, and also Colonel Paterson, who still sends items and writes to the Royal Society in London as well as Mr Joseph Banks.

In passing Seal Rocks, there appear to be about 2000 seals, so maybe Mr Campbell's or Mr Kable's sealing ships, or American sealers have not yet had opportunity to come here.



John Murray's charting of Bass Strait. SLV.