

Pirates at Recherche Bay

or

The Loss of the Brig. "Cyprus"

By

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Monday next the tenth of August is the one hundredth anniversary of the day on which public demonstrations of all kinds were held to celebrate the official end of Transportation to Tasmania; and no doubt many of us have heard stories and accounts of the efforts made by our forbears to clear this Island of the evils of the System and to rid it of its Penal Settlements.

The brig *Cyprus* was closely associated with the work of Transportation; indirectly the cause of Macquarie Harbour Penal Settlement being closed; and the story of her capture, one means perhaps by which public thought in England was slowly aroused to the realization of the wrongs done men and women sentenced to the punishment of Transportation.

The most exciting incident in this little vessel's career took place in the year 1829 as she was on her way from Hobart Town to Macquarie Harbour, with convicts and supplies for the penal settlement there; but before giving the details, some reference should first be made to Recherche Bay, to the discovery of Macquarie Harbour, the formation of its penal settlement and to the conditions under which convicts suffered about the time the *Cyprus* sailed out of Hobart Town on what was to be her last voyage from this port.

Recherche Bay on the southern coast of Tasmania was discovered by accident in the year 1792. It is recorded that Admiral Bruny D'Entrecasteaux with two ships under his command, left France in September, 1791; reached the Cape of Good Hope early in 1792 and from thence set his course for Van Diemen's Land.

Soon after reaching Australian waters the two vessels ran into a severe storm. A wave unexpectedly broke against the Commander's ship. The violence of the movement caused D'Entrecasteaux to fall against the corner of a barrel organ being brought out as a possible gift to some savage chief. At first it was thought he had fractured a rib and we are told that the pain he suffered was so great that whenever he sneezed it threw him into a fainting fit. He was not permitted to leave his cabin and was therefore dependent on others for taking observations.

After passing the Mewstone Rock on 21st April, the lieutenant responsible for such reports gave the bearing of Eddystone Rock as South West instead of so many degrees South *East* of their position. Their course was altered and instead of sailing well into Storm Bay they reached the area at the southern entrance to Storm Bay Passage. Towards evening

two boats were lowered to search for suitable anchorage. Next morning both ships began a long tow to the selected harbour which was not reached until 25th April.

The Frenchmen highly delighted with the surroundings, called the inlet where they lay "Port D'Entrecasteaux" and decided to make it headquarters for local exploring expeditions. The Bay itself was carefully surveyed, marked in on their charts and named "Baie de la Recherche" (after the vessel which D'Entrecasteaux commanded). "D'Entrecasteaux Channel" was discovered, named and surveyed by an expedition from Recherche Bay and in the process a small island off the south west of Bruny Island visited and named by the crew Partridge Island.

After Tasmania was settled Recherche Bay became a kind of half-way-house for vessels sailing up the West Coast and was a popular anchorage for boats engaged in whaling.

Macquarie Harbour on the west coast of Tasmania was discovered by James Kelly.

In the Library of the Royal Society is an account, in Kelly's own handwriting, of a voyage he made in a whale boat with the idea of examining in detail the then largely unknown coast of Van Diemen's Land. They set out from Hobart Town on 12th December, 1815, spent a night at Recherche Bay and four days later entered Port Davey. Here they caught wild fowl, black swans, teal, eels and fish which they took with them for food on the next stage of their journey.

From 22nd to 26th December they were weather bound in a snug Cove near High Rocky Point.

On 28th December, Kelly wrote, "Weather calm, pulled along shore to northward—at noon rounded a projecting point which opened into an inlet—we found a strong current running out which make us believe there must be a large river in the south east direction."

At that time the whole face of the coast was on fire, he tells us, and the smoke so thick that they could not see one hundred yards ahead of the boat. They rowed against the current into the passage between a small island and what appeared to be the mainland. Later the same afternoon the smoke cleared a little Kelly and his party found themselves on a large sheet of water, near a small island on which they landed to spend the night. So, under the cover of a pall of smoke and haze, James Kelly and his brave little crew, discovered and entered the only worthwhile harbour on the west coast of Van Diemen's Land.

Next morning, 29th December, something of the extent of the enclosed water could be seen and in honour of the Governor of New South Wales—Lachlan Macquarie—they called it Macquarie Harbour, the name it retains to the present day. For three days they sailed and rowed about this almost landlocked sea naming various features after well-known people.

Early on 1st January, 1816, Kelly and his men set out from Macquarie Harbour well pleased with their discoveries and ready to continue their voyage—eventually to go, in some forty-nine days—almost completely around our Island.

Approximately three years later Lieutenant Governor Sorell, finding it difficult to house and control the large number of convicts then being sent to Van Diemen's Land, conceived the idea of sending the worst and most hardened prisoners to some remote spot on the coast, and so sent for James Kelly. Kelly, by this time had made a number of trips to Macquarie Harbour for Huon Pine and other timbers and having circumnavigated the whole Island, could speak with personal knowledge. Macquarie Harbour was the "remote spot" he suggested.

After confirmatory surveys, two brigs, the "Duke of York" and "Prince Leopold" were fitted out to take the unhappy convicts to the new and isolated prison on the West Coast. The "Duke of York" with the commandant of the projected settlement—Lieutenant Cuthbertson—reached Macquarie Harbour on 2nd January, 1822.

The thickly timbered Sarah's Island (named by Kelly after the wife of Thomas William Birch) was chosen as the site for headquarters. The women convicts—for there were women sent round with the early parties—were placed on Grummet Island—three quarters of a mile away from Sarah's Island.

Most of the men were sent almost immediately, under strict supervision, to cut timber on the mainland. Many attempts to escape were made and the hardships these men underwent in their efforts to gain freedom can hardly be credited.

On 22nd December, 1823, the first Commandant—Lieutenant Cuthbertson—lost his life as he was returning from an attempt, in a severe storm, to save the first little vessel built at the settlement from shipwreck.

Lieutenant Wright was then appointed and under his direction a farm was commenced on the mainland. It was from this farm that a party of prisoners managed to evade their guard and escape in a small boat. Later, under the leadership of Matthew Brady, they and others became the terror of all settlers living in isolated districts of Tasmania.

Before these convicts made their get-a-way, they captured Doctor Garrett, the settlement's medical officer and determined to give him a taste of the punishment they themselves had at times received. In spite of the doctor's expostulations, he was ordered to strip for the application of the cat-o'-nine tails. He had just managed slowly and deliberately to remove his coat when young Brady put in an appearance and would not allow him to be touched. In this way Brady showed his appreciation for kindly treatment given him by the doctor when he was in hospital. It is not hard to imagine the doctor's delight at being released so unexpectedly.

Besides endeavouring to escape some poor wretches committed murder well knowing that they would be sent to Hobart Town for trial and sentence. It was soon realized that these convicts had no other object in mind, than that of obtaining a change of surroundings.

After Lieutenant Wright, Lieutenant Butler was appointed to administer the affairs of the Penal Settlement and it is recorded that under his supervision almost a daily improvement could be seen in every branch of Government service there. His firm, severe and yet just and humane treatment had its effect. Building after building was erected, excellent quays were made to border the front of Sarah's Island and fences of successive tiers of palings some thirty feet high, were raised to protect the rear of the settlement from the blasting effects of the north west winds, raft after raft of Huon pine came from the Gordon River and boats, cutters, schooners and brigs left the dockyard.

Along the waterfront were erected the stores, the workshops, shoemakers' quarters and behind them stood the penitentiary. Further back were erected the offices, superintendent's quarters, the master of ship-builders' premises, the bakehouse tannery and gaol. To the right of these stood the residences of the engineer, the surgeon, the commandant and the chaplain. Here and there sawpits were dug in convenient places. The remaining unoccupied areas of the island were developed into gardens which eventually produced, it is said, as fine vegetables as could be grown anywhere. These were not for the convicts however, except perhaps when they were in hospital, or on other rare occasions.

They, the prisoners, after a breakfast of "skilly", a thin porridge made of flour or oatmeal, water and salt, were sent off to allotted jobs, to the mainland to cut timber and to other arduous tasks. They received no other food until the end of the day when on their return they were given a good meal of salt meat and vegetables (mostly potatoes) allowed to dry as far as possible their usually sodden clothes and then sent to their comfortless resting places for the night. The whole set up of this penal station was to make men FEEL their punishment.

Colonel George Arthur, who followed Colonel Sorell as Lieutenant Governor, saw the value of the Penal Settlement at Macquarie Harbour and continued to make transportation to it something to be greatly feared, in consequence there were numerous attempts made by prisoners to escape from the vessels taking them to that desolate and dreaded spot.

Until 1825 the brig "Duke of York" was usually used in this service but an examination then disclosed that she was completely unseaworthy. Shipping suitable for the West Coast and for sailing over the bar into Macquarie Harbour was very limited. Colonel Arthur made immediate application to Sir Thomas Brisbane, Governor in Chief at Sydney for a new vessel. One, almost completed, lay near Sydney and this Sir Thomas promised would be appropriated to service in Van Diemen's Land; but in March 1826 Colonel Arthur received notification that the new vessel could not be spared and he would have to make other arrangements.

Following a survey of local vessels, Captain John Briggs, on 6th June, 1826, offered a brig called the "Cyprus" for the USE of His Majesty's Government; but as Governor Arthur wished to *purchase* a vessel, he was asked to state the price at which he would sell. Then because he included a grant of land in his terms, Briggs was asked to quote again. This time he said Seventeen hundred pounds in British sterling money.

With due Government caution a Committee was appointed to inspect and report on the vessel. Two months later the "Cyprus" became Government property.

This sturdy little vessel then for three years sailed back and forth to Macquarie Harbour, mostly from Hobart Town but sometimes from Port Dalrymple or Launceston. To Macquarie Harbour she took supplies and usually a complement of convicts. From Macquarie Harbour she brought Huon pine and other timbers, furniture and articles manufactured by convicts for the Government. Once she took the Rev. Wm. Schofield, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary and first chaplain at Macquarie Harbour, to a four year term of duty at this West Coast station. She proved to be a very seaworthy and reliable little vessel and was of considerable value to the Government.

Suddenly, in August, 1829, this hardy little vessel received all the publicity any owners could have wished for. The news flew round Hobart Town that she had been piratically seized by convicts being transported to Macquarie Harbour. There was much speculation as to how such a thing could happen and many theories were advanced before the details became available.

The sequence of events ran something like this:—On 6th August the "Cyprus" left Hobart Town on one of her usual trips with supplies for Macquarie Harbour. All told she had some 62 souls on board. Included were thirty-one convicts, a pretty bad lot all in double irons, under a guard from the 63rd Regiment in charge of Lieutenant Carew. Lieutenant Carew had with him his wife and two children and with them went all their worldly possessions, because of his transfer.

About a fortnight later the ship "Orelia" left Hobart Town making her way to sea via D'Entrecasteaux Channel. As she neared Partridge Island off the south western end of Bruny Island, Mr. Lovett, pilot of Hobart Town, who was taking her down, saw through the gathering gloom of evening an unusual light flickering from the island. Investigation appeared to be necessary, the ship was brought to and he was rowed ashore. Here to his surprise he found two men, both convict sailors who claimed they had just come from Recherche Bay in a kind of coracle to obtain assistance for a stranded party of forty odd persons from the brig "Cyprus". They explained that the position of those people was desperate and unless something could be done quickly the marooned people would die of starvation.

To add strength to their story the men produced Two Scraps of Paper, one of which was addressed "P. Munro Esq.," headed "Recherche Bay, August 23rd, 12 p.m." and its message read, "These will inform you that the brig 'Cyprus' has been captured by prisoners who sent us

together with family, soldiers and sailors etc., in all 40 persons, on shore. We have been here (Research Bay) nine days and are without provisions, your immediate assistance will be the cause of saving us from starvation. The men who bear this have behaved themselves in an exemplary manner and of course will be treated accordingly." A post-script read "Four of the guards severely wounded".

On the second scrap of paper, much smaller than the first and addressed to John Burnett, Colonial Secretary, was written "We fail for want of paper, you therefore will apprise His Excellency in the Lieutenant's name of our misfortune". On the other side was written, "You will not destroy the boat as it was made with three pocket knives. Eighteen prisoners gone in the brig, five making Hobart thro' the bush".

Quite recently I discovered these two interesting pieces of paper roughly folded and pinned to the written evidence of the event and still held among Government records preserved in the State Archives. Their discovery was the reason for my preparing this paper.

Pilot Lovett must have been amazed at what he read and at what he saw of the crazy craft in which these two brave men had risked their lives in order to obtain assistance.

Immediate instructions were given his boat's crew to make for Birch's Bay with the information for Mr. Munroe. Munroe was superintendent at the convict sawmilling station there, and in his turn under the date 26th August, 1829, he wrote to the Lieutenant Governor, "I loose no time in forwarding a person to town with the intelligence that I proceed immediately in a whale boat with provisions for the distressed persons in Research Bay, I also despatched the 'Opossum' sloop, which happened to be here, which together with the boat will be able to bring the whole party up."

Munroe's letter was sent, again in the pilot's boat, to Hobart Town arriving there in the early hours of the following morning. The matter was considered to be so urgent that the message was delivered to the Lieutenant Governor, according to the "Colonial Times" "long before His Excellency's usual time of rising". Colonel Arthur sent at once for Lieutenant Hill, the Port Officer, and gave him orders to despatch the "Opossum" to the rescue without a moment's delay. This action had, of course, been anticipated by Mr. Munroe as his note indicates.

Hobart Town's waterfront must have been all agog, but there was nothing to do but await events.

It appears that after leaving Hobart Town on 6th August, the "Cyprus" sailed for Recherche Bay. On her arrival there the wind was from the wrong quarter for proceeding up the West Coast, so her Captain while waiting for an expected change, decided to try and recover two anchors lost in a gale, on a previous trip. Then the wind dropped altogether and they lay in a dead calm.

Because fresh fish were always a welcome addition to the usual ship board fare, Lieutenant Carew, the doctor and a couple of men, one of them a convict sailor by the name of John Popjoy, took the brig's smaller boat and rowed to a spot some 250 yards away.

At the time this party left the brig, everything was quiet on board. Five convicts were on deck, "taking the air", a privilege often given prisoners because of the cramped quarters they occupied, and three soldiers kept guard. All others aboard the vessel were below having their evening meal.

Suddenly there was a scuffle aboard the "Cyprus". The convicts on deck had attacked the sentries, knocking them down and seizing their arms. At the same time a hencoop was flung across the soldiers' hatchway, thus barring help from those below. Other prisoners scrambled from their quarters and were soon releasing one another from their irons. The Captain, hearing the struggle from the cabin rushed on deck, to be promptly knocked senseless. A shot was fired by one of the soldiers below, but all it did was to fill their quarters with powder fumes and to attract the attention of the fishing party, and they, sensing immediately that something was wrong aboard the brig, began to row hurriedly back to the vessel.

By this time it was practically dark and Lieutenant Carew and his fishing party coming alongside were ordered to stand off. The lieutenant commenced to point out the folly of the convicts' action and even offered to say nothing about the affair if they would return the vessel but his efforts had no effect.

Those aboard the "Cyprus" were then taken and landed at five different places. Very little food was allowed them and they were given nothing for shelter. Of the twenty remaining on board, two were sailors held under compulsion, because it was hoped they would join the pirates and later help work the brig.

A convict sailor, William Swallow, but also known by many other names was elected the Cyprus's new Master, another man named Ferguson was made lieutenant and immediately rigged himself out in Lieutenant Carew's best uniform, sword and all, while a third named Jones became the Mate. Others discovered the rum aboard and were soon the worse for it.

Soon after five o'clock on the morning following the piratical seizure, Moran and Knight, the two sailors held captive, escaped, jumped overboard and swam ashore. Shortly afterwards in a light breeze, away sailed the brig. Two hours later she was out of sight.

When daylight came the marooned parties came together at Green Pt. There was very little food for so many, they were in a sad plight . . . and it began to rain.

Despite Mrs. Carew's entreaties, the pirates had refused to land clothing or other luggage, even for the women and children. The only shelter they had was canvas hammocks spread over boughs of trees. Rough shelters were attempted for the men but they were soon wet through.

John Popjoy, the convict seaman who went with the fishing party was a practical sort of person and appears to have been a most interesting character and apparently a very brave man. Another outstanding personality among the marooned party was the wife of the sergeant. In the

"Colonial Times" we read "that a remarkable instance of the presence of mind in a female occurred, the sergeant's wife, during the confusion, rolled up the despatches intended for Macquarie Harbour and actually succeeded in bringing them off in her apron."

But to return to John Popjoy. It seems he began to talk matters over with Morgan and they decided to seek permission to try and reach Hobart Town through the bush. They set out and got as far as the Huon River, where they stripped, tied their clothes to their heads and were about to enter the water, intending to swim across when they were attacked by natives. Their exit was extremely hurried and in their anxiety they lost their clothes and in a naked state had to return to the camp at Recherche Bay, two days' journey.

Nothing daunted, Morgan then suggested building a catamaran or coracle in which to paddle along the coast for assistance. The only tools among the party were three pocket knives. With these wattle tree branches were cut and shaped into a boat frame about twelve feet long. Canvas shelters were then stretched over this frame and smeared with a mixture of boiled soap and resin to make them waterproof. Paddles were then fashioned by the help of what remained of the pocket knives.

At noon on 23rd August the crazy little craft was launched, and in her these two brave men, Popjoy and Morgan, set out for assistance. Cheers were given by the castaways, but few of them ever expected to see these two gallant sailors again. And they knew too that they themselves could not live long unless rescue came soon.

Within forty-eight hours help was on the way. First the whale boat from Birch's Bay, with food and other supplies and then the "Opossum" to take them back to civilization. The five men who had set off with the intention of heading the Huon River, found it impossible and in a state of utter exhaustion managed to get within twelve miles of the mouth of the river. Here they were picked up by a search party sent out in a boat from Birch's Bay and were later conveyed to Hobart Town.

Lieutenant Carew was held for Court-martial and charged with neglecting the proper precautions, though warned of the extreme peril which demanded his vigilance; that he proceeded on a fishing excursion; that during his absence the vessel was surprised and seized; that he exhibited professional incapacity and had been guilty of a breach of the articles of war. His trial lasted five days and much conflicting evidence was taken. In the end he was exonerated.

When reporting an account of the trial the "Colonial Times" wrote "Mr. Gellibrand aided Lieutenant Carew by the exercise of his powerful talents and, as we are told, with noble generosity disdained to diminish the family's small store of wealth by taking his customary fee, remarking 'that people who had been stripped of everything, even of clothes as a covering for their children, were not those of whom he ever sought or chose to make a harvest'." Public sympathy was with Lieutenant Carew and even before the trial, generally he had been absolved of all blame.

John Popjoy, who at the age of eleven years had been transported for horse stealing, was granted an immediate pardon by Governor Arthur as a reward for his outstanding bravery and exemplary behaviour in assisting to rescue the marooned people. Even though confirmation of his pardon could not arrive for some time he was permitted to take the next ship sailing for England, where again he was to render service to those in authority.

The other convicts aboard the "Cyprus" who had not joined the pirates were granted some remission of their sentences, except one and he was promised consideration if during an intervening period no adverse report was received of his behaviour.

In his History of Tasmania the Rev. John West tells that the capture of the "Cyprus" and of the escape of the convicts in her so stirred popular imagination in England that a play was written about it and performed in one of the theatres in London. A song also was written by another sympathiser, and this it is said was for long afterwards sung at many campfires in the interior. Neither play nor song told the story to its end however.

Actually the pirates on the "Cyprus" sailed for the Friendly Islands by way of New Zealand where purporting to be the brig "Darling Brothers" out of Boston they spoke a small vessel called the "Elizabeth & Mary" whose skipper reported the incident on his return to Hobart Town.

From the Friendly Islands, where seven convicts deserted, the "Cyprus" sailed for Japan, then towards China. As they came near the Chinese coast it was decided to scuttle the vessel, take to the boats and endeavour to rehabilitate themselves as the cast-away crew of the "Edward". How they came to possess a boat from the "Edward", her sextant and logbook is not clear but they made themselves conversant with her movements as far as the logbook entries would allow.

Two of their number they forced to land on the coast of China but this move in the end was the undoing of the others. The main party then scuttled the "Cyprus" took to the boats and in one of them, that with the "Edward's" name on it, arrived at Canton. Here they survived a close examination, though their demeanor and the style of their narrative gave rise to strong suspicions. There was nothing however which justified their detention. Swallow and three others were given passages back to England at the expense of the Company to which the "Edward" belonged. The others joined a Danish brig about to leave for Mexico.

Not long afterwards the two men compulsorily put ashore arrived at Canton but under the custody of Chinese officers who delivered them to the authorities as British subjects.

At first these two told the same story as their predecessors, but because news of the capture of the "Cyprus" had by then reached China from New South Wales, they were doubted, confined separately and questioned. On 24th June, 1830, one of these men, John Dennie (or Denner) voluntarily made a confession, from which I have taken details. The information he gave was hurriedly sent on to London. It reached England just before Swallow and his companions did. A warrant was issued for their arrest. After some delay they were discovered and taken into custody. Their trial commenced soon afterwards.

John Popjoy, who had come under notice again for committing some trifling offence, was called to give evidence. He told of the pirate's crimes, gave their names, described the secret marks on their persons, all possibly with the idea of saving his own skin; for an opinion had grown then that he deliberately had persuaded Lieutenant Carew to go on the fishing expedition in Recherche Bay chiefly with the intention of giving the pirates a full opportunity to capture the "Cyprus". How or what he was to gain from such an infamous action is of course now difficult to imagine.

Some pirates were sentenced to death, others were transported again to Van Diemen's Land. Among the latter was Swallow, who escaped execution, it is said, because he was ill at the time or it was pleaded that he had not actually engaged in the capture of the "Cyprus". He was taken to Macquarie Harbour, was long confined to hospital, both there and at Port Arthur. His sufferings were extreme and according to the Rev. John Allen Manton, First Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Chaplain at Port Arthur, "he expressed a strong desire for salvation and pleaded hard for mercy". He finished his earthly course on 12th May, 1834.

For long the loss of the "Cyprus" was used as an argument to induce the Government to close Macquarie Harbour Penal Station which in the end was closed in 1834. Then in 1835 a strong effort led by the Sheriff at Hobart Town, was made to bring about the cessation of Transportation altogether; but eighteen years elapsed before popular feeling was strong enough to obtain the desired result and it was not until 10th August, 1853, that the Great Day could be celebrated.