

The Development of the Guano Trade from Hobart Town in the Fifties and Sixties

By

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Within recent years there has been a marked return of interest in the remote islands of the Pacific, since these islands have now acquired a strategic value on account of the Empire and Pan-American Flying Routes. In the following pages an attempt has been made to link up their history with the development of the guano industry from Hobart Town by the ships employed by the late Hon. W. L. Crowther, F.R.C.S., C.M.Z.S. in his whaling and timber interests.

ISLANDS ADJACENT TO TASMANIA

Lawrence Rocks—

Mt. Chappel Island—

Breaksea Island—

The Lawrence Islands, near Portland, Bass Strait, were the first exploited. Here in 1854 the little ships *Union*, *Flying Squirrel*, and *Scotia* were employed taking guano, which was sold at Hobart Town at £8 per ton.

A report ('Hobart Town Advertiser', 6th April, 1854) states that there was a great quantity of guano, which was filled into bags and so loaded into open boats, from a platform about 18 feet above a rocky ledge. Upon this latter the stern of the boat was grounded, the remainder being afloat in deep water and often exposed to a heavy swell. Such a method of loading must have been dangerous and wearing to both men and boats.

A lease of Mt. Chappel Island, in order to take guano, was applied for by W. L. Crowther from the Government of Tasmania. He was not alone in the field, however, as a Mr. Askunas of Melbourne, having purchased information as to the presence of guano there,

approached the Government with the same request, offering a rental of £500 a year for four years. The Minister concerned, believing the guano to be of immense value, decided to suspend the Waste Lands Act, under which the application for the lease had been made, and refused Crowther's offer. In no way discouraged, the latter landed his working parties on the Island and commenced to bag up the guano for shipment.

Askunas acted promptly and chartered a vessel, the *Boomerang*, at Melbourne to proceed to the Island. On landing, her crew were set upon and driven back to their ship which returned to Queenscliff. Heavily reinforced, the *Boomerang* returned to Mt. Chappel. One man dressed as a constable read a document with an imposing seal (it was stated after in evidence that it came from a pickle bottle), which claimed to give the newcomer legal possession. As a result of this stratagem or of superior force, Crowther's party withdrew to their boats, when the *Boomerang's* crew completed the filling of the bags, and, with the guano already procured, loaded their ship and left for Melbourne.

In an action *Crowther v. Askunas* held at Hobart ('Mercury', September 18th, 1861), the plaintiff was not successful. His contention that to be in possession was equivalent to a title, not being sustained.

In a long letter to the same paper (August 1st, 1861) Crowther pointed out that the deposits were of a very limited extent. He warned farmers and the public that, except for 300 tons of pure guano at the site of a cormorant rookery, all of which had been removed by the *Boomerang*, no deposits existed elsewhere on the Bass Strait Islands. He gave an analysis of an extensive deposit immediately below the surface on Mt. Chappel, which was principally carbonate of lime, and valuable phosphates being present only in traces.

An account of this controversy with the Government as to the Bass Strait islands is given in considerable detail in Tasmanian Parliament Paper No. 38 (1861). The matter, however, settled itself when it was realised that, except for an odd deposit at a site of a rookery, guano in commercial quantities did not exist. It is of interest to note that among the leases applied for by Mr. Askunas was that of Cat Island, on which the preservation of the gannet rookery is a matter of Government interest at the present time.

Crowther made one more effort, this time from Breaksea Island near Port Davey. From this site a cargo was obtained by his whalers, and his ship the *Juno* was loaded and despatched to Ipswich, England. When analyzed on arrival, it was found that the cargo was only a light sandy soil almost without fertilizing properties. His heavy loss convinced him that guano had to be found in dry tropical or sub-tropical climate, and he sent his whalers to make a systematic search for suitable islands in such latitudes.

ISLANDS IN THE CORAL SEA

Wreck Reef and Islets	22. 10. 30. S. Lat.	155. 28. 40. E. Long.
Bell Cay, Swaines Reef	21. 42. S. Lat.	151. 20. E. Long.
Raine Island	11. 35. 50. S. Lat.	144. 2. 20. E. Long.
Bramble Cay	9. 7. 50. S. Lat.	143. 52. 10. E. Long.
Brampton Shoal and Islets	{ 18. 49. } S. { 158. 2. 6. } E.	{ 19. 35. } Lat. { 185. 4. 3. } Long.
Pilgrim Island	24° S. Lat.	104° W. Long.
Lady Elliot's Island	6. 6. S. Lat.	152. 40. W. Long.

The Coral Sea may be regarded as that area lying between the coast of Queensland and Noumea on the one hand and New Guinea and Norfolk Island on the other. The visits of Crowther's own whalers to this region must have made him familiar with the existence of islands and reefs supporting the rookeries of innumerable sea birds.

Personal contact with the officers of H.M.S. *Fly* and *Bramble* when refitting at Hobart Town after surveying these seas strengthened his intention to lease and work certain reefs and islands. To this end, with another (? E. I. Chapman) he formed the Anglo-Australian Guano Company early in 1861. On March 4th of that year a schooner, the *Harp*, was chartered and cleared in ballast for Guam. To clear for Guam was a common custom at this time when an owner did not wish to disclose the destination of his vessel. News, however, was received on July 5th that the *Harp* had been wrecked on Bird Island, fortunately without loss of life.

Bird Island which is part of Wreck Reef is low, about one mile in circumference, and surrounded, except in one part, by a coral reef. The anchorage is very unsafe and cannot be used by shipping during the hurricane season. Here Flinders' ship, the *Porpoise*, was lost in 1802.

Several Tasmanian vessels were lost in this vicinity in succeeding years, and a list of them is given in Appendix A. At this period gold had been discovered in Gabriel's Gully near Otago, New Zealand, and, to convey diggers and supplies to that port my grandfather had called in two of his whalers, the *Isabella* and *Flying Squirrel*, and opened up a regular shipping service between Hobart Town and Dunedin.

On June 6th, 1862, the little schooner *Flying Squirrel* (79 tons) left Dunedin for the 'Polynesian Group,' where she took in 100 tons of guano, returning with it to Hobart Town, whence she sailed on September 16th for Dunedin with timber from Crowther's mills at Oyster Cove.

By January 10th, 1863, the secret and details of the new venture were widely known, as a despatch from the Secretary of State, dated October 27th, 1862, confirmed the action of H.M. Government in granting to the Company an exclusive occupation for a term of years of certain guano islands in the South Pacific area. The islands and their locations are given above. The lease was to be for seven years in each case, and authority was given to erect buildings, &c., on the islands. Instructions as to maintenance of the personnel and their discipline also were laid down. This agreement also provided that a statement should be made each half year of vessels lifting guano and the total tonnage taken. Royalties were to be paid at the rate of 2s. per ton of guano for the first two years, and at the rate of 4s. per ton for the remaining five years. Such a concession aroused great interest at Hobart Town, and the 'Mercury' four days later commented in a very laudatory manner on the enterprise of their fellow citizen.

Dr. Crowther's largest whaler, the *Offley*, was called in and fitted to take guano whilst whaling on the out and home passages. A schooner, the *Northern Lights*, was purchased to engage in the trade.

An interesting legal position arose on March 13th, 1863, when the *Offley* was refused a clearance by the Customs Department. It was contended that, although as a whaler she had exemption from light and port dues, this exemption did not cover the carrying of guano. The sum claimed, £15 13s. 4., was paid under protest the next day, but recovered with costs as a result of legal action taken some weeks later.

Some dislocation of Crowther's fleet was caused by the outbreak of the Maori War. The *Isabella*, having been chartered to convey troops to New Zealand, was refitted for that purpose. On August 16th, 1863, she sailed from Hobart Town with seven officers and 110 other ranks of the 12th and 40th Regiments. Another whaler, the *Sapphire*, was called in from the whaling grounds and laid on for Bird Island, whence she arrived on December 14th with 320 tons of guano.

So far all seemed well with the industry. Guano was coming in freely by Crowther's ships, and by at least one chartered vessel, the *Daniel Watson*, and there was a ready market established in Tasmania as well as at Melbourne, Adelaide, and as far as New Zealand. The time seemed ripe to extend the venture.

On April 16th, 1864, Mackay's launched for Crowther a schooner called by (his wife's) name, *Marie Louise*. The new vessel of 50 tons, rigged as a fore-and-aft schooner, was designed to explore the Pacific Ocean for new guano deposits.

At this time the *Offley*, *Juno*, *Sapphire*, and *Pryde* (brig.) were on the Bird Island trade with the *Sapphire* and *Isabella* maintaining the Dunedin service and calling at Bird Island on the homeward run.

The 'Mercury' of October 10th, 1864, reported the arrival of the *Sapphire* from Bird Island via Lady Elliot Island. This island (6° 6' S. and 152° 40' W.) is a dependency of the Queensland Government, and was leased to Crowther for a period of ten years from the 10th November, 1863, at a rental of £300 per annum for the first three years. It was also provided that 200 tons of guano per year were to be available for sale at Queensland ports. Other conditions of the lease were very similar to those laid down by His Majesty's Government for the other islands. Shore parties were permanently established on Bird and Lady Elliot Islands, their services being for twelve months, with a relief at the end of that time. They worked on a wage, getting out the guano and bringing it in by trucks to sheds. Here it was bagged ready for transport to the vessels lying at anchor off shore. It was carried between the shore and the ships by whale boats, and these boats were sheathed with metal in order to minimize wear by friction on the coral and also to avoid destruction by the teredo.

This year the *Sapphire* made the voyage out and home in less than six weeks, shipping 360 tons from open boats. The *Isabella*, *Britons Queen*, and *Offley* brought a series of cargoes—the last-named calling at Auckland. Production generally had been steadily increasing. There are no figures for 1860, -1, -2; 1863 - 462 tons; 1864 - 854 tons, and an estimate of 1600 tons for 1865.

An important development now took place. On August 1st, 1865, a prospectus was issued in order to reorganize the Company. The Anglo-Australian Guano Company Ltd. was formed with a capital of £60,000 in 3000 shares each of £20. Henry Hopkins, Esq., was appointed Chairman of Directors. Dr. Crowther accepted £10,000 as purchase-money in fully paid-up shares, and made over to the Company his rights to the guano on the islands leased from His Majesty's Government and the Government of Queensland, as well as ships, various stores, guano in the sheds, with tramways and buildings on the islands.

Captain J. W. Robinson was appointed Manager at Lady Elliot Island, and on September 30th, 1865, landed with his family and twelve labourers, and brought 30,000 feet of sawn timber from the Oyster Cove Mill with which to erect permanent works. Captain Robinson's journal, in the writer's possession, gives details as to the daily routine of collecting and loading guano.

The island itself was a coral island, about 3½ miles long by 2½ miles across, situated about 60 miles from Rockhampton, and was occupied by countless sea birds.

Conditions for ships were greatly improved in 1867, when the *Macquarie* laid down permanent moorings in the hope of attracting overseas as well as inter-colonial trade. Captain Robinson also caused a permanent light to be erected on a mast 85 feet above sea level.

During the Summer (hurricane) months no ships loaded, and the men were employed filling the huts with guano.

ISLANDS IN THE S. PACIFIC AREA

Teinhourn	10. 20. S. Lat.	150. W. Long.
Roggewein	11. S. Lat.	156. W. Long.
Bauman	12. S. Lat.	154. W. Long.
Christmas Is.	1. 57. N. Lat.	157. 27. W. Long.
Ducies Is.	24. 40. S. Lat.	124. 48. W. Long.
Cato's Is.	23. 15. S. Lat.	115. 34. W. Long.

In the months preceding the formation of the new Company His Majesty's Government granted to Crowther the lease of the above islands as well as Pilgrim Island and Bramble Cay. He fitted out the *Marie Louise* under Captain Pie to report upon their capabilities and look for new islets. Entering out for Bird Island on January 18th, 1866, she was not reported until her arrival at Brisbane on July 10th. In the interval she had visited the Navigators (Samoa), Ducies Island, Christmas Island, and according to family tradition had sailed nearly to the coast of South America. During this cruise the mate, Mr. Bradley, fell from aloft, and was paralyzed for the remainder of his life.

The barque, *Elgin*, in 1873 found a corked bottle on Ducies Island embedded in a heap of stones. In it was a message which read: 'Exploring vessel *Marie Louise* of Hobart Town off Ducies Island, April 5th, 1866—Crew all well—Bound from here to Christmas Island.' Upon her return she was sold, and was eventually wrecked at the Fiji's in 1871.

In 1866 Crowther had been involved in a controversy with the Tasmanian Government. Approval of leases from the Home Government had not been transmitted to him for six months after their arrival, and in this way he had suffered considerable loss.

By this time the administration of all guano leases from the Antarctic to 10° S. of the Equator and between latitudes 170 W. and 75 E. had been placed under the administration of the Governor of New South Wales. These islands, however, did not carry guano in sufficient quantity, and were not worked by him. In consequence His Majesty's Government in February, 1869, revoked the licences for Teinhourn, Roggewein, Bauman, and Pilgrim Islands upon the grounds that they could not be located, though shown on Admiralty Charts, and also that the stipulated quantity of guano had not been removed from them. The lessee was also required to pay arrears of rent at £100 per annum per island for Ducies, Cato, Christmas, and Raines Islands in addition to such other sums as might be due.

The association of Launceston with the Anglo-Australian Guano Co. Ltd., and the latter year of its work, cannot be dealt with here. Nor can the work of Captain Crosby and the discovery of guano (phosphate rock) at Ocean Island.

With the opening up of the Trans-Pacific Air Routes considerable controversy has arisen between the British Government and that of the United States as to the sovereignty of Christmas Island and other islands. It is of historic interest in this regard that as far back as 1865 such islands were in the possession of Great Britain, and one at least was actually leased to a British subject for the taking of guano.

APPENDIX A

Wrecks and Boat Voyages Associated with Guano Islands

<i>Harp</i> (Schooner)	Lost Bird Is., 1861.
<i>Golden City</i> (Ship)	Lost Bird Is., July 13th, 1866.
<i>Briton's Queen</i> (Schooner) ..	Lost Mast Head Is.
<i>Cosmopolite</i> (Brig.)	Lost Mast Head Is., Nov., 1866.
<i>Wolverine</i> (Brig.)	Lost Bird Is., with all hands, June, 1878.
<i>Annie</i> (Schooner)	Lost Bird Is., Aug. 2nd, 1882.
<i>Lone Star</i> (Brigantine) ..	Lost Wreck Reef, Sept. 10th, 1871.
<i>Isabella</i> (Barque)	Lost Cape Barren Is., with guano.

Notable Voyages

<i>Lone Star</i>	Capt. Clark, with three men in a small boat, over 300 miles to the Queensland Coast.
<i>Annie</i>	An almost similar voyage by the ship's boat.
<i>Prairie</i>	Voyage with two men (sole survivors of the crew), west about from Torres Straits to Hobart.
<i>Alice Maud</i> (Cutter, 16 tons) ..	An exploring voyage, September 27th, 1875, to Torres Straits.
<i>Marie Louise</i>	Exploring voyage, as stated, to S. Pacific Ocean, 1865.

APPENDIX B

Sources of Information

Captain A. B. Robinson, 1865-67	Personally given. Copies of correspondence between his father, Capt. J. W. Robinson, and the A.A. Guano Co., and Harbour-Master of Rockhampton.
Log Books	<i>Bird Is.</i> , Oct. 10th, 1873-May 20th, 1874, Captain Strachan.
Log Books	<i>Lady Elliot Is.</i> , 11th Nov., 1864-Sept. 12th, 1865. Capt. J. W. Robinson.
Log Books	<i>Lady Elliot Is.</i> , . . . 1872-May 3rd, 1872.
Log Books	Barque <i>Offley</i> , Jan. 21st, 1864; Dec. 28th, 1864. Capt. J. W. Robinson.

- A.A. Guano Company Prospectus, 1865.
- A.A. Guano Company Annual Report, 1869.
- A.A. Guano Company Chart of Bird Is. and MS. letters, W. L. Crowther and Henry Hopkins. List of shareholders and balance-sheets.
- Guano Parliamentary Paper: 1861. No. 38, Tas. Govt.
- Despatches: H.M. Govern-
ment Lease of Certain Islands: Tas. No. 39. July 5th, 1863.
Dismission of Leases: Tas. No. 18. Feb. 17th, 1869.
- Lease of Lady Elliot Is. Copy of Indenture: Q. Govt.
Further Correspondence, Aug. 6th, 1866; Oct. 20th, 1866.
- Newspapers of the period, especially files of the 'Mercury.'
- There is a considerable file at the Mitchell Library dealing with the A.A. Guano Co. Ltd., which the writer has not been able to examine fully.
- Most of the above are in the possession of the writer.