

A Sealing Voyage to Bass Straits by the Schooner 'Brothers' in 1813

By

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It is a remarkable fact that, in spite of the many voyages from Sydney Cove, Hobart Town, and Port Dalrymple to procure seal-skins and sea-elephant oil, the only sources of information as to the incidents of these expeditions have been short reports in colonial newspapers and in official communications from Sydney to the Home Government. The logs kept by the masters of these small craft have almost completely disappeared. MacNab, in his outstanding work on the early whaling and sealing days of New Zealand, being unable to consult such sources in the libraries of Australia and New Zealand, made the long journey to New England for this purpose. Some years ago, by a fortunate chance, an old log, bound in kangaroo skin and kept in the well-known hand-writing of Captain James Kelly, came into my possession. In it were the proceedings of two voyages: first, that of the 'Brothers,' which is described hereafter, and secondly that of the 'Mary and Sally' to Macquarie Island to take sea-elephant oil and sealskins. The dates of these voyages were respectively the beginning and latter end of 1813. Although there is little in them that is sensational, yet the daily routine of the ship is of great interest, and considerable light is thrown on the primitive methods of sealing and unstinted killing on the islands where the seals congregated. It was the custom at this period for a ship to procure salt from Kangaroo Island for the preservation of the skins. Their wood and water were obtained from the nearest source to the seal rookery, whether island or mainland, and beyond these their needs were few. At the period of this voyage the sea-elephants of King's Island had been practically exterminated, and no reference to them is made in the ship's log. The fur seals had, however, recovered somewhat from the wholesale slaughter of their herds in days immediately following the discovery of the Bass Straits sealing grounds.

Captain Kelly, it will be seen, touched at several islands in the Straits for a period of more than four months, before he was able to return to Sydney Cove with some 7000 skins.

His ship, the schooner 'Brothers,' had been launched just over four years before, at Cockle Bay, Sydney, to sail on her first sailing voyage five months later, on 5th January, 1809. In the next three years she made at least three voyages to Port Dalrymple and King's Island. The opening pages of the ship's log is unfortunately missing, and the journal commences on 3rd January, 1813, on the coast of New South Wales. The fur seal, which was the object of this voyage, was about 6 feet in length, the female being a foot less. The adults had a coarse fur of grey to yellow-brown colour, the ventral surface being darker, and under this was a rich chestnut underfur which persisted through life.

The identity of this seal is uncertain. Scott and Lord claim that the common seal of the Bass Strait Islands is *Arctocephalus tasmanicus* Scott and Lord. Bones of *A. cinereus* (Péron) have been identified by Professor Wood Jones from the kitchen middens of the Tasmanian aborigines, and this species may have occurred on the islands in Kelly's time. A third species, *A. doriferus* Wood Jones, may also occur on the islands of the Bass Strait.

The colonial schooner 'Brothers' left Sydney Cove in the first week of January, 1813, to take seals in the Straits. Captain James Kelly had with him a crew of at least ten men, in addition to his ship-keeping party; as is shown by a later entry in his log, when he landed a shore party of that number at one of the sealing rocks.

After a stay of a day at Twofold Bay, the ship proceeded to the southward, but owing to a strong head wind at noon on the 5th came to in the entrance of Barmouth Creek, anchoring with the small bower in 9½ fathoms. On the next day the bay was cleared, and with the anchor stowed the boat was got on board and the voyage was continued. Five days later a stop was made under the Capashine Island (Flinders Island) in 20 fathoms. Two hours later, the anchor having commenced to drag, all sail was made, and with the loss of her buoy rope the ship stood to sea. The same afternoon a boat's crew was landed at the Stacks, and later returned with 12 skins. Rounding the north point of Van Diemen's Land, and standing to the south-west and west, Captain Kelly cruised for four days, evidently in the hope of discovering uncharted rocks or islets where seals might be found. Being unsuccessful, however, and the weather being bad, he bore up to King's Island, and the vessel stood in towards the land. In a hard squall the fore-gaff carried away, but at 8 p.m. she came to in Elephant Bay in 8 fathoms with the small bower. The same day a boat was sent ashore for a spar with which to make a new fore-gaff, and next morning six casks of water, with two boat-loads of wood, were taken on board.

Weighing at 6 p.m. the 'Brothers' came to under Counsellor Island¹ at 8 p.m. with the best bower in $3\frac{1}{2}$ fathoms; the ship's boat, however, only obtained three skins, the local sealers having probably cleaned up the rookery.

After repairing the rigging, the voyage was resumed on 23rd January; and, standing to the north-east, Phillips Island was in sight next day. The following day, running into Western Port, the 'Brothers' came to under the island in 5 fathoms, and the ship's boat, with the shore party, was sent to the seal island. Returning next day with 304 skins, the party of ten made daily visits, taking successively 314, 104, and 17 skins.

On 31st January a move was made to the south-west, and at 5 p.m. Point Schank was 5 leagues distant. Next day Albatross Island was passed, and the same day the ship came to under Hunter's Island with the small bower in 7 fathoms, Three Hummock Island lying east by north 5 miles. After moving to another anchorage on the next day, two boats were sent to the Seal Rocks to kill seal. The boat having returned with 17 skins and evidently a good report of the prospects at the rookery, the vessel was got under sail, and anchored further up the south part of the bay, mooring with a small bower to the south'ard and the best bower to the north'ard. The small boat was taken on shore to be repaired. Three days later, having collected wood, and the repairs being completed, two boats were sent to the Seal Rock, and returned in 48 hours with 375 skins. The large boat had, however, been stoved in the operations. On Tuesday, 9th February, the crew were employed salting the skins and repairing the large boat whilst the schooner was unmoored and got under weigh, to be brought to an anchorage further to the northward, and so more conveniently to the Seal Rock. Standing to the northward, at 6 p.m. the next day she came to in a sandy bay in 6 fathoms, and was moored fore and aft. Two boats left at 8 a.m. for the Seal Rock to kill seal, taking with them 12 bags of salt. In three days a cargo of 612 skins was brought back, and the log notes the crew during the next day as stowing them in the hold and doing other necessary jobs. The large boat was soon again in trouble, and on Wednesday, 17th February, having returned with the small one and a cargo of 460 skins, part of the crew were employed in repairing her whilst others salted the skins. On the 20th hard gales were experienced, and the fore topmasts and yards had to be housed. Opportunity was taken to send the water-casks on shore to be filled. As the weather allowed, the boats were employed between the ship and the Seal Rock, on some days the surf not permitting them to land there. A succession of gales brought about a serious state of

¹ No island of this name is shown on the charts of the early navigators to Bass Strait, nor is it on Admiralty charts. The rocks off the north end of Sea Elephant Bay are, however, still known lately by this name. Close study of the log of the 'Brothers' also places it in this locality.

affairs, and the log of the 26th reads as follows: 'The day commences with hard gales at east and rain. 11 p.m. the vessel labouring very much, parted the small bower.' On the Seal Rock, where the boats were hauled up, 'The surf broke so high that it totally wrecked the large boat to pieces, and the small boat was barely being repairable to bring the people off the Rock.' The gales having taken up, three days later, at 4 p.m., the remains of the small boat returned with all the people. They had been obliged to put a square stem on her with sealskins. On the Rock 220 skins had been left, all salted. The small anchor was weighed with the boat's aid, and the cable was found to be gone in three places. This was spliced the next day, when the best bower was hove up and replaced by the small one; during this operation, however, a buoy rope was lost. Seven days are entered in the log as being spent principally on shore repairing the boat; wood and water were also got on board. Having got up the yards and topmasts preparatory to moving off, at 7 a.m. of 7th March, Kelly sailed with a light breeze, sending at 10 a.m. the boat to the Seal Rock with a load of salt. More salt was sent the next day, with firewood, the boat returning at sunset, when the ship stood to the westward. At daylight the south point of King's Island was bearing W. by N. distant 7 or 8 leagues. At 10 a.m. the boat was sent to the Black Rock, off Seal Point (south end of King's Island), to kill seal, and returned in two hours with 51 skins.

Remaining at sea during the night, at daylight the 'Brothers' stood in towards Seal Point, and moored in Chapman Bay in 12 fathoms. The boat visited Seal Point and procured 20 skins. The seals being so few in number, a move was made to the northward after taking in water, hoisting in the boat, and stowing the anchor. Tuesday, 16th March, commenced with moderate breezes at S.S.W. At 2 p.m. the schooner came to under Counsellor Island in 4 fathoms. The boat was sent to the river to look for the small boat belonging to Mr. Blaxcell, but returned at 7 p.m., not having been able to find it. The log reads: 'We supposing Robert Knight to have her at New Year's Islands by finding his directions all round the island.' Weighing at 8 a.m. with a light breeze, at 3 p.m. the 'Brothers' came to off Coomes Bay in 13 fathoms, with the small bower. Seeing a smoke off Wig Point, the boat was sent on shore, and there found the small boat with Robert Knight, he having repaired her.

With this valuable addition to his equipment, Kelly at 1 p.m. weighed and sailed for New Year's Island, where he moored at 5 p.m. In the few remaining hours of daylight the boat obtained 120 skins from the islands. In spite of strong gales next day another 220 skins were obtained from the small island. The gales continuing, with smart showers of rain and hail, the following afternoon the crew remained on board salting skins, and the whaleboat was got on deck. The 21st and 22nd were also spent on board, shifting ballast out of

the run to trim the vessel, taking down the yards and topmasts, and stowing skins. Another trip of the boat to the small island resulted in its return with 72 skins, and the next day, the 24th, at 2 p.m., the vessel unmoored, and at 8 p.m. came to off the north end of Counsellor Island in 8 fathoms. From here, at 10 a.m., another move was made to Elephant Bay, anchoring there at noon. Heavy gales were experienced during the following two days, but firewood was got off from the shore and a change made in the crew, whereby one, Bundle, was discharged at his own request, and Charles Peterson and Christian, residents on King's Island, were taken on board. At noon the vessel was again at sea, with her course S.S.E., towards her former anchorage under Hunter's Island. Landing a boat-load of salt on the passage, at 9 p.m. she came to off the west end of Three Hummock Island. After 11 hours sail was made to anchor at noon in the harbour (by which is meant, probably, the sheltered inlet from which they had worked Seal Rock in the earlier part of this voyage. The 30th March saw yet another shift, this time to the westward, where at 4 p.m., in a sandy bay, a stop was made, and the boat sent to Seal Rock with salt and provisions. For seven days the boat plied between the rock and the vessel, bringing back 700 skins. The 7th April is noteworthy owing to the cable of the best bower parting, when the small bower was let go, and so the ship brought up. The boat on the same day brought back 240 skins. Considerable anchor drill was the routine for next day, when, having bent the small bower to the cable of the lost anchor, the vessel was warped further out of the bay with the kedge. The ship's large grindstone was lashed to the kedge, and both secured to the cable of the lost best bower. The latter anchor they were not able to secure owing to the buoy not watering. With these precautions the ship safely rode out next day, during which hard gales blew from the east. When the weather permitted the lost anchor was swept for, but without success. On the second day the boat was sent to the Rock, and returned with 292 skins. On Saturday, the 17th, giving up the search for the anchor, a large stone was brought off from the shore, and slung to the small anchor to moor the vessel.

For the next three weeks the crew were employed partly taking seals and partly on the ship salting and stowing down. On various days cargoes of 200, 250, 230, 350, 370 skins were taken on board. When, on 8th May, the boat came alongside with 810 skins and four bags of salt it was a sign that the end of sealing at the Rock was in sight, although another load the next day of 255 skins and 5 bags of salt was brought to the ship. After wooding and watering and getting up the yards and fore topmast, on the 13th the 'Brothers' stood out of the bay; but, the wind coming in from the westward, anchored in the same place for the night. A last call at the Rock after weighing enable the people sealing there to come on board with yet another 352 skins. Calling on the 16th to the north end of

Counsellor Island, the small boat was left at the river on King's Island' at 8 p.m. with the best bower in $3\frac{1}{2}$ fathoms; the ship's boat, 18th May the sea log was resumed as the vessel set her course for Sydney Cove, where she arrived and moored on 31st May, 1813. The last entry in the log in Kelly's writing reads: 'N.B.—This ends the voyage of the schooner "Brothers," being 7090 seal skins.'

The files of the *Sydney Gazette* give interesting information as to the subsequent career of the schooner. After another voyage to Hobart Town, returning on 30th October, 1813, and one to Port Dalrymple, terminating in April, 1814, she cleared for New Zealand in June of the following year. In company with the 'Trial' a serious encounter took place with the Maoris at Trial Harbour (named after the vessel), near the River Thames.

These little ships had been trading for flax along the New Zealand coast, and returned to Trial Harbour to pick up flax the natives had promised to have ready for them. At noon on Sunday, 20th August, both vessels, in spite of having rigged boarding nets to prevent such an occurrence, were taken by the Maoris. The crews took refuge between decks, and from there and through the cabin skylight kept up a harassing fire with their muskets. Not accustomed to this type of warfare, and losing heavily, the Maoris quitted the decks. One of their number, however, who had had experienced with ships, cut the cables, and both the 'Brothers' and the 'Trial' went ashore. The crew of the latter, almost desperate, with a volley of seven muskets regained their own ship, and by using their swivels as well as the muskets drove off the natives from the 'Brothers.' Later the vessels were refloated and resumed their voyages. In this affray both ships lost several of their crew. A detailed account of the affair is given in the *Sydney Gazette* of 8th November, 1815.

Next year the 'Brothers' was lost on the Kent's Group, probably returning from Port Dalrymple with a cargo of wheat. Mr. Howell, the master, and ten men existed for ten weeks on the wheat that was washed on shore. Only one man of the crew was lost.

Captain Kelly had by this date permanently associated himself with Van Diemen's Land, his famous circumnavigation of the island having terminated early in 1816. Some details of his early seafaring as a sealer and whaler may be read in his evidence given before Mr. Commissioner Bigge.

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