Chapter 11: The Chaotic Years

While the spectacular environs of Recherche Bay conceal secrets of pre-European Tasmanian existence and symbolise their sociable racial interaction with the first European visitors, its significance does not end in 1793. Across the past two centuries the history and archaeology of this remote place comprises a palimpsest of diverse European endeavours. Developing and decaying as they did, such pioneering industrial initiatives and associated social conditions provide thought-provoking testimony and material traces for all Australians. This constitutes a truly cultural landscape of national status to cherish and preserve. It offers a rich resource for cultural tourism that could sustain an industry other than forestry, with mutual benefits to employment and heritage.

Whaling

In 1804, the year that David Collins established the Risdon Cove settlement, an English whaler already was exploiting the whaling prospects of Adventure Bay. Two years later, William Collins established a bay whaling post at Ralphs Bay on the Derwent estuary. Over the following three decades, eastern Tasmania and Bass Strait became a global centre for whaling and sealing.\(^1\) Sadly, the region witnessed the introduction of destructive diseases into the Aboriginal population and the abduction of females, well ahead of the tide of Tasmanian land settlement.

George Augustus Robinson has relevant information about the impact of whalers or sealers on the Aboriginal population. He talked with a girl whose hands and feet had been tied when she was placed in a boat and taken away. She claimed that there were 50 such women then in Bass Strait. More specifically, he reported that there were three Bruny Island women who had been abducted.\(^2\) Diseases invaded men, women and children, to add to the demographic impact of the abductions. In 1829, Robinson reported the deaths of 10 persons, eight from Bruny Island and two from Port Davey. Most illnesses originated with colds. A few days later, the total of dead reached 22. By February 1831, he believed that, throughout south-east Tasmania, including Recherche Bay and Bruny, only several people had survived.\(^3\)

The shore-based whaling industry, which saw bay whalers working at Recherche Bay by the 1820s, was a dangerous, bloody and short-lived industry. It was encouraged by a reduction in the English duty on whale oil in 1828.\(^4\) Crews harvested the southern right (or ‘black’) whales, *Eubalaena australis*, as they migrated up the D’Entrecasteaux Channel from the Antarctic during the winter. Pregnant females sought calm harbour waters in which to calve, so Recherche Bay was a superior haven as its waters were the required minimum of five metres deep. They fell easy prey to hunters, but proved an obviously non-renewable
resource as pregnant females were the prime target. The Bay offered another
natural advantage for whalers, in that the Actaeon Reef outside the harbour
entrance assisted the hunt by blocking an exit for escaping harpooned whales.
George Augustus Robinson was present there in 1833 and described the reef’s
value and the dangers of the trade. He was told that during the 1832 winter
season around 100 whales were slaughtered there.\(^5\) As this was an average of
at least two whales a day, the waters must have been turbulent and bloodied
with thrashing bodies. During 1839 more than 1,000 right whales were harpooned
in Tasmanian waters; 645 whales died in 1837, resulting in a financial return of
\(\£135,210\).\(^6\) The oil and baleen bone were sought eagerly in London for lighting,
cooking and corsets, amongst other uses. This ruthless industry was
self-destructive. By the 1840s the stream of right whales diminished and
deep-ocean whaling of other species was substituted. A shore-based station
persisted at Recherche Bay for another 20 years, but returns were small.

**Imlay shore-based whaling station.**

The Imlay shore-based whaling station at Snake Point. Whale carcasses were winched onto this sloping

In his careful archaeological survey around Recherche Bay, Parry Kostoglou
located 15 separate sites, six on Gagen’s Point, where the evidence revealed
occupation traces — basal remnants of huts or stores, glass and ceramics, chimney
butts and whalebone.\(^7\) Life for the whalers during their winter vigil must have
been rudimentary and cold in their bark huts. Robinson arrived there in March
1833, before the main whaling season, but found ‘the shore is strewed with
putrid carcasses and bones ... There are still remaining on shore numerous huts and iron pots where they boil down, or try, the oil.'

Robinson was on Bruny Island during the 1829 winter. He described a whale hunt involving seven boats, each crewed with six oarsmen and a cox-harpoonist. Such figures imply that 49 men were involved in competitive killing of one whale. By 1836, at least 260 men were employed in the industry.

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**Fisher Point pilot station and pub, 2006.**


With so many ships entering the harbour, in 1836 a pilot’s station was established on the southern headland (Fisher’s Point), given a permanent presence for a few years, until it was abandoned in 1851. Recherche Bay must have been a competitive and potentially unruly place as whaling teams sought the same quarry from co-existing shore stations. The pilot station became a pub, which attracted crews of deep-sea whalers. The boisterous Sawyers Arms quenched deep thirsts.

That boundary disputes existed both on land concerning space to process the whale and on sea as to which team harpooned first, is understandable. For example, at Cockle Creek during the 1830s there were four whaling stations. In 1833, the government intervened. The Colonial Surveyor, J. E. Calder, arrived to delimit boundaries between leases allotted to the rival parties. Even when the industry was in decline, the Crown issued seven leases for bay whaling stations...
at Recherche Bay between 1840 and 1859. Surviving archaeological sites are valuable testimony to the harsh way of life involved in Tasmania’s first major export industry. Recherche Bay played a prominent role in that primitive economy.

The dolerite rocks defining the bay in places provided sloping flat platforms for some shore-based whale fisheries to flense a whale carcase. One is on Gagen’s Point, but the most striking facility is at Snake Point, near Fisher’s Point. It was capable of holding a carcase once it was winched from the sea. Traces of bricks and other relics occur in the wooded area behind this massive rock, evidence for the crude shelters in which men sheltered. This station was established in 1835 by Alexander Imlay.

Symbolising the dangers of this violent profession is the nearby gravestone of Samuel Thomas Pryat. He died aboard the Alladin, off Southwest Cape, aged in his 20s, a possible shipmate of the ill-fated Aboriginal man William Lanney. Lady Jane Franklin’s visit to the bay in 1838 provided testimony to the busy and smelly harbour. On Gagen’s Point she observed Kerr’s whaling station equipped with shear-legs for carving up a carcase.

**Piracy on the Brig Cyprus**

During August 1829, Recherche Bay was the venue for an act of piracy. It had repercussions in several lands, resulting in three men being hanged, but the ringleader escaped with his life. The deed was celebrated in a well-known ballad and, it is claimed, in London’s theatreland. It was the subject of a book by Frank Clune and Inky Stevenson in 1962. A good yarn, it is entirely undocumented, although it appears to quote many sources.  

The two-masted brig Cyprus, 108 tons, measured 24 metres by six, so it was overcrowded with 64 persons aboard. It was transporting 33 hardened convicts in irons from Hobart to the west coast penal establishment at Macquarie Harbour. Also on board were Lieutenant Carew and a dozen 63rd Regiment soldiers transferred to its garrison. Carew’s wife and two children and the wife and child of a soldier added to the crowded conditions. Fortunately for the mutineers, the ship carried three months worth of stores for the penal settlement on Sarah Island.  

The vessel became stormbound for a week in Recherche Bay, time for the convicts to hatch an escape plot. Carew was a new chum and an irresolute character who was lulled into a false sense of trust by the deliberate good behaviour of the convicts. To relieve the boredom and fetid atmosphere of their cramped quarters, Carew charitably allowed five convicts at a time to exercise on deck, minus their chains. He and the doctor went fishing, possibly lured off the ship by convict John Popjoy (or Pobjoy) who requested an urgent hearing out of earshot of his
fellow prisoners. At least he was in their boat, leaving four unchained convicts
taking exercise on deck.

Security was lax, with only two armed guards, the other soldiers were lazing
below deck. They were easily overcome by the convicts and a chicken coop was
placed over the hatchway preventing the soldiers from climbing the ladder.
Shots were fired harmlessly up through the deck, but the troops were silenced
with boiling water down the hatch. Within minutes the ship was captured and
all prisoners unchained. Carew was not allowed aboard and, fearing for his
family, obeyed orders to go ashore. After five trips in the rowing boat, all the
civilians, sailors and convicts who rejected the choice of sailing free, were
dumped ashore. Minimal food and clothing accompanied them. Late that day
Popjoy deserted the mutineers and swam ashore.

Woodcut of Cyprus castaways attributed to W. B. Gould, 1829.

William Buelow Gould probably sketched ‘the making of the coracle’, a woodcut in The Hobart Town
Courier, 12 September 1829. It depicts the Cyprus castaways. Convicts are assisted by Mrs Carew while
Lieut. Carew despairs, head in hands. Archives Office of Tasmania

Except that the two guards had sore heads, nobody was injured and the incident
was carried out without fuss. The vessel sailed away with 18 men, navigated by
a former seaman answering to the name William Swallow and many other aliases.
In a remarkable feat of navigation, with a crew unused to manning a vessel, they
sailed the Pacific with only one casualty, the loss of a man overboard when aloft
at the sails. They touched at New Zealand, by-passed Tahiti because of
unfavourable winds, spent six weeks at Niuatoputapu (Keppel’s Island), where
seven men chose to remain. The remaining 10 crew sailed on across the Pacific.
Swallow claimed that they reached Japan, where they were fired upon. In a recent detailed evaluation David Sissons demonstrated that this was one of Swallow’s ingenious fabrications. They never reached Japan, but did reach the Chinese coast. Voluntarily leaving two men at an island en route and another man subsequently, they headed for Whampoa (the outer part of Canton). They scuttled the *Cyprus* when near China and rowed off in the ship’s boat, now renamed *Edward*, with a false story to match that they were distressed sailors from that ship. It was then February 1830.\(^\text{13}\)

Those 44 people marooned on the beach at Recherche Bay included 15 ‘trusty’ convicts. Popjoy was one of them, having deserted the pirates that night by diving overboard and swimming ashore. Lieutenant Carew was totally unprepared to lead this dispirited group and initiatives came chiefly from the convicts. Brush and bark shelters were erected and two convicts departed to walk to Hobart, one of them the ubiquitous Popjoy. They swam across the Huon River, but claimed that they were threatened by Aborigines and swam back to safety across the river leaving their clothes behind. They returned naked and scratched to the dejected party. Five convicts then volunteered to reach Hobart via an inland route, so avoiding broad river mouths, but they failed to reach Hobart before they were rescued in poor condition. One of these convicts was William Buelow Gould, an artist who was destined to gain local celebrity as an artist and drunkard. Subsequently he prepared an etching for the *Hobart Town Courier*. It depicts Welsh sailor Morgan making the coracle, with Lieutenant Carew sitting on a rock, hands over his face in despair, while his wife assists with the coracle. 170 years later, Gould gained greater fictional celebrity in *Gould’s book of fish* by writer Richard Flanagan.\(^\text{14}\) Popjoy is prominent in Flanagan’s saga, but the *Cyprus* incident escapes mention.

Morgan ingeniously constructed the coracle using a knife, a razor and canvas across pliable wattle sticks. It was waterproofed with beeswax and soap from personal kits. Remarkably, it proved seaworthy and Morgan and Popjoy set forth using rough-hewn paddles. They only needed to cross the D’Entrecasteaux Channel to Partridge Island, fortunately in calm waters, to seek assistance from the *Orelia*. That vessel sent a relief boat to the rescue, while another was sent to Hobart with Morgan and Popjoy.

The news created great excitement and the Hobart press made much of the garbled news. The castaways were rescued, Lieutenant Carew was court-martialled but exonerated, and Popjoy became a public hero. His reward was a full pardon, so he soon sailed for London.\(^\text{15}\)

When George Augustus Robinson sailed into Recherche Bay on 1 February 1830, the brush shelters were still there.\(^\text{16}\) Their location offers an attractive archaeological puzzle. Where were they camping during the 10 days before their rescue? There may exist archaeological traces of their stay. The fact that the
Cyprus sheltered for a week, moored sufficiently close to shore for Popjoy to swim, might favour a location on the north-eastern peninsula beach, scene of the 1792 French visit. But Lady Jane Franklin’s comments in 1838 are relevant. She wrote of the northern sector of the western side of the harbour as the site of the castaways. Then she had second thoughts and added a note: ‘On reconsideration, I believe the landing place in question was the W point of the most western of the coves which I have called Lucas Cove.’ That would be in the Rocky Bay area, possibly in Coalbins Bay or Mottes Beach.

Robinson, who was travelling with Bruny Island people who were witnesses, told of a terrible deed carried out by the pirates before they sailed. Provided that his evidence is accepted and that the crew concerned was on the Cyprus, Robinson accused the crew of abducting the wife of his Aboriginal friend, Mangana. This consigned her to what may be described as a fate worse than death. No other sources refer to this kidnapping, although Robinson evidently made an official report on this event.

Popjoy and the pirates were destined to collide in London, resulting in Popjoy becoming a veritable killjoy. The seven men from the Edward duly presented themselves to British authorities in Canton, where their story of shipwreck was accepted. Four of them including Swallow (now Captain Waldron) signed on as crew on Charles Grant for London. The remaining three sailed for America and fortunate obscurity on the Danish barque Pulen. The Charles Grant arrived in London on 7 September, the convicts having foolishly sold items from the Cyprus to fellow crew members, later to incriminate them.

They were unaware that on 1 September the Kellie Castle arrived from Canton, having outsailed their ship, with news of their true identity. The three convicts who had left the Cyprus near China also turned up in the Canton area and two of them told contradictory versions; George Davis even forgot the agreed name of his captain! Then the Sydney newspapers arrived with the Recherche Bay story and one of the convicts confessed. The Kellie Castle sailed to bring the news to England, with Davis as a prisoner. When the convicts disembarked from the Charles Grant, they were arrested, except for Swallow who disappeared for a time, until captured.

It was at their trial that their nemesis, Popjoy, intervened to provide testimony, rather selectively, against the men. He had arrived legitimately in London as a free man during July 1830. He had worked his passage home on a ship, in which a passenger was Hobart prison’s head gaoler. He had voyaged to London for the trial of another celebrated convict, Ikey Solomon, who Charles Dickens transformed into Fagan. Consequently, fate produced two men willing to identify the prisoners. Swallow ingeniously told long and involved tales of how the convicts had forced him to navigate the ship, while he took no part in the initial piracy. He convinced the jury, which found him, the ringleader, not guilty.
Two men, Davis and Watt were hanged at Execution Dock, over a century since Captain Kidd’s execution there for piracy. Possibly these unfortunates were the last men to be executed in England for piracy. Another convict, James Camm, subsequently arrested in the Pacific, was hanged at Hobart.\(^{19}\)

Swallow had committed a serious offence by returning to England, made worse by thefts committed following his return. So he and the other two convicts were sentenced for life and transported back to Hobart. They arrived at Macquarie Harbour prison two years later than the law had intended.

Robinson almost certainly talked with Swallow there in 1833.\(^ {20}\) Robinson thought him ‘in a dying state’. In fact he died at Port Arthur a year later. A con man with forethought and vivid imagination, he was sole navigator of the *Cyprus* around the greater Pacific. He merited fully the praises sung by Frank the Poet in the following ballad, still popular after more than 150 years.

Come all you sons of Freedom, a chorus join with me,  
I’ll sing a song of heroes, and glorious liberty.  
Some lads condemn’d from England sail’d to Van Dieman’s Shore,  
Their Country, friends and parents, perhaps never to see more.  
When landed in this colony to different Masters went,  
For trifling offences, t’Hobart Town gaol were sent,  
A second sentence being incurr’d we were order’d for to be  
Sent to Macquarie Harbour, that place of tyranny.  
The hardships we’d to undergo, are matters of record,  
But who believes the convict, or who regards his word?  
For starv’d and flogg’d and punish’d, deprived of all redress,  
The Bush our only refuge, with death to end distress.  
Hundreds of us were shot down, for daring to be free,  
Numbers caught and banished, to life-long slavery.

Brave Swallow, Watt and Davis, were in our noble band  
Determin’d at the first slant, to quit Van Dieman’s Land.  
March’d down in chains and guarded, on the *CYPRUS* BRIG convey’d  
The topsails being hoisted, the anchor being weighed.  
The wind it blew Sou’Sou’West and on we went straightaway,  
Till we found ourselves wind-bound, in gloomy Recherche Bay.  
’Twas August eighteen twenty nine, with thirty one on board,  
Lieutenant Carew left the Brig, and soon we passed the word  
The Doctor too was absent, the soldiers off their guard,  
A better opportunity could never have occur’d.  
Confin’d within a dismal hole, we soon contriv’d a plan,  
To capture now the *CYPRUS*, or perish every man.  
But thirteen turn’d faint-hearted and begg’d to go ashore,  
So eighteen boys rush’d daring, and took the Brig and store.
We first address’d the soldiers “for liberty we crave,
Give up your arms this instant, or the sea will be your grave,
By tyranny we’ve been oppress’d, by your Colonial laws,
But we’ll bid adieu to slavery, or die in freedom’s cause.”
We next drove off the Skipper, who came to help his crew,
Then gave three cheers for liberty, ’twas answer’d cheerly too.
We brought the sailors from below, and row’d them to the land
Likewise the wife and children of Carew in command.
Supplies of food and water, we gave the vanquish’d crew,
Returning good for evil, as we’d been taught to do.
We mounted guard with Watch and Ward, then haul’d the boat aboard,
We elected William Swallow, and obey’d our Captain’s word.
The Morn broke bright the Wind was fair, we headed for the sea
With one more cheer for those on shore and glorious liberty.
For Navigating smartly Bill Swallow was the man,
Who laid a course out neatly to take us to Japan.
Then sound your golden trumpets, play on your tuneful notes,
The CYPRUS BRIG is sailing, how proudly now she floats.
May fortune help th’Noble lads, and keep them ever free
From Gags, and Cats, and Chains, and Traps, and Cruel Tyranny.\(^{21}\)

ENDNOTES
1 Information on Tasmanian whaling comes from the carefully researched unpublished report to the
3 Ibid.: 76, 226 n35.
160.
7 Kostoglou’s systematic survey is summarised by Evans, ‘Shore-based whaling in Tasmania’, vol. 2:
9 Ibid.: 71.
12 There are numerous references to the Cyprus affair, many of them garbled. The most detailed version
is by Clune and Stevenson, The pirates of the Brig Cyprus, 1962. It combines detailed conversations
between the pirates, highly fictional, with evident quotations from anonymous but official London
documents. What trust can the reader place in such undocumented ‘faction’? For London theatre
for the ballad.
13 This account is only as reliable as Clune and Stevenson. A detailed examination of the Cyprus in the
Pacific was written by the late David Sissons, forthcoming in the Journal of Pacific History. It corrects
many errors.
’The axe had never sounded’

15 The best contemporary version is in Hobart’s Colonial Times, 28 August, 4 September 1829. See also Lemprière (1839). There is new information in Pretyman, Papers and Proceedings Royal Society of Tasmania 88 (1954).


17 Mackaness, Correspondence of Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin, 1947: 44.

18 Plomley (ed.), Friendly mission, 1966: 75-6. Clune and Stevenson, The pirates of the Brig Cyprus, 1962: 84-5, doubt whether those responsible were on the Cyprus, but appear to quote official documents which identify the action with Cyprus.

19 The above account drew upon Clune and Stevenson who quote what must be trial documents.


21 Quoted in Ingleton, True patriots all, 1952: 129. Ingleton, p. 289, identifies Frank the Poet as Frank Macnamara, who died in 1852.