

WILD MEN OF THE WILD COUNTRY

by

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Articles in past issues of Forest Notes refer to "The Wild Country" of the south coast (R.J. Underwood Vol. 8 No. 1 and B.J. White Vol 8 No. 2). Now it is proposed that some of this region is to become a National Park. Therefore those people interested in the south coast may appreciate some notes on the "Wild Men" who frequented this Wild Country in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Even before the first British settlement in W.A. was established at King Georges Sound in 1826, sealers had been active along the coast and by the 1830's Yankee whalers were visiting the area in increasing numbers. The only forces of law and order on the south coast were at the tiny infant settlements at Albany and Augusta. The sealers, some of whom it seems were escaped convicts from Van Diemens Land, had little to fear from these and so they worked with impunity the bays, inlets, offshore reefs and islands along this all but unexplored coast.

The whalers too, many of them tough ruffians sailing under a foreign flag, showed little regard for Britain's sovereignty over the territory and spent much time laying up and sheltering in these same bays and inlets. There are accounts of them buying dogs in Albany for hunting kangaroos along the coast and at least one account of them hunting wild cattle near Two People Bay.

There is evidence too, that men were sometimes abandoned ashore from the whaling ships. While J.S. Roe and party were exploring along the south coast, they discovered the skeleton of one such sailor. He had been one of three men put ashore, on this inhospitable coast, allegedly at their own request. One of the three reached Albany and took up employment there. The other two

perished in the bush.

There are stories of callous murders amongst the sealers, who at one time had their headquarters on the islands of the Recherche Archipelago, and tales of raids by them on the natives' camps on the mainland for the purpose of carrying off native women.

When Major Edmund Lockyer sailed into King Georges Sound to found the settlement, there he found that sealers had recently abducted four native women from Oyster Harbour, shot a native man and marooned four others on Michaelmas Island.

When a few months later eight sealers came to the settlement in two boats, Lockyer had them arrested and charged them with murder and piracy and informed them that they would be sent to Sydney to answer these charges.

The men admitted taking the women from Oyster Harbour and marooning the four on Michaelmas Island but claimed the dead man had been shot in self defence after one of the sealers had been knocked unconscious by a stick or stone thrown by the natives during an affray with them. They told Lockyer they had been on the coast for eighteen months having been left with only three months supplies and an assurance that a ship would return to pick them up within eight months; but they had been left to live on whatever they could get and had even eaten a dog. They had with them when arrested, a native woman and a boy from the mainland opposite Kangaroo Island and two native women from Van Diemens Land.

They must surely have been very skilful seamen and they were familiar with the coast as far north as Rottneest Island. They told Lockyer that between Middle Island and Rottneest Island, there were safe boat anchorages every 50 to 70 miles. They had been more than twenty miles up a river about 25 miles south of the Swan and described how about six miles from the entrance it opened out into a broad stretch of water as large as Princess Royal Harbour.

After hearing tales from sealers of a large river flowing into Nornalup Inlet, William Nairne Clark with a party of white men set out in a whale-boat to explore the area in 1841. According to him the sealers called this river the "Deep River", but it was known officially as the Frankland River. The river now known as the "Deep" he refers to as the "West River".

In his letters and reports of this expedition, Clark makes several references to the sealers and in particular to one named Williams; his chief informant.

Clark, who seems to have been a haughty and superior person, in a report to the Governor went to some pain to assure that gentleman that he did not make a practice of associating with such people as sealers, whom he said were "not the most refined of people" and he seemed rather peeved to think that Williams Bay may have been named after this uncouth sealer, and he rather hoped that perhaps it had been named after His Late Majesty King William IV.

Clark had the pleasure of again making the acquaintance of his friend Williams while on this expedition, for an entry in his journal written at Chatham Island states:

"7-3-41. Williams called at the island today in his boat "Fanny" on his way to Leschenault. He reported having found fine land and a large river at Parry's Inlet. He did not land from the boat perhaps for reasons best known to himself."

Clark also refers to sealer named Isaacs who for some months lived with a black woman on Saddle Island, and he also wrote of "Sealers Cove" just inside the bay of Nornalup Inlet.

The presence of American whalers off the coast caused Clark some concern but he also saw this as a great opportunity for trade for he reported to the governor:

"Perhaps the British government is not exactly aware that upwards of 150 sail of American vessels averaging about 300 tons each are generally off this coast in the whaling season and are obliged to put into the harbours of Western Australia for refreshments consisting of potatoes, cabbages, turnips, fruits, etc. What splendid field is thus opened for the cultivation of the soil. I am sorry to say no British South Sea Whaler has as yet appeared and that the Americans are carrying away the riches of the deep for their own country".

He saw a need for a naval presence on the west coast in those days too, and showed concern for the then lack of such:

"The "Tuscalooya" American Whaler was ordered out of Two People Bay by the "Herald" Sloop or War some years ago but at this moment she is riding in Princess Royal Harbour preparing to go to the sperm whaling grounds and afterwards in the winter months to one or another of our bays where there is no Government Station. Another American whaler along side of her, called (I understand) the "John Elizabeth" is to adopt the same course and to be piloted into a British Bay by a British subject for the avowed purpose of whaling."

In 1832 a party of white men set out from Albany to walk to Augusta. They were not heard of again and from references to this party in early writings it seems there was for many years, considerable conjecture as to their fate.

When Alfred Hillman, a surveyor was exploring along the coast between King George Sound and Nornalup Inlet in 1833, he had with him as a guide a King George Sound native named "Mopie". An entry in his journal dated 8/7/1833 states in part:

"Came across the ashes of fire around which, Mopie informed us three white-men slept and I have every reason to believe them to be part of the party who left this settlement in September, 1832. At one mile from this spot we arrived at the Frankland River".

Clark with his party explored this same area between the Frankland River and the coast in 1841 and he wrote of an incident which occurred, by his reckoning, about five miles SE by E of the Nornalup Estuary:

"On my way back to the tent one of the men at a little distance uttered an exclamation of surprise and on going to the spot I found that he had stumbled on an open grave between five and six feet long by one and a half feet broad, evidently dug by a spade from the marks on its sides. On looking around we found five more graves within a short distance of one another, all on top of a sandy hill. They were about four feet deep and the soil had been shovelled away on each side. My first idea was that some goods and chattels in long boxes had been what is vulgarly called planted there, by some person or persons unknown, and afterwards dug away at a convenient opportunity without filling in these holes but on descending into one and scooping away the sand with both hands, I came to a human skelton whether aboriginal or European I could not say as after much trouble I was unable to find the skull which might have given me some glimmer of light on the subject. The bones (evidently of a tall man) lay with the shoulders to the east and the feet to the west. They were carefully replaced and reconsigned to their last resting place on this earth.

I have to remark that several white men left King George Sound some years ago for

Port Augusta and were never seen afterwards, and I heard although I cannot vouch for the authenticity of the story that murder had been committed by the sealers and the blacks indiscriminately. I might here enter into detail of facts which have been related to me but I drop the subject".

Villainous ruffians the sealers may have been, but they were also hardy and daring seamen engaging in a lonely and dangerous occupation, but probably not a particularly lucrative one, for it seems they were exploited by the traders who purchased the skins from them.

Clark, writing in the Perth Gazette described how the sealers rowed up against the wind often in a heavy swell, to where the seals lay on the rocks and reefs. The headsman standing ready in the bow of the boat would leap on the rocks armed with either a club or a gun. The moment he jumped the boat was instantly propelled backwards to prevent it being smashed to pieces. If the seals were asleep they were stunned with a club, if they tried to make for the water they were shot with rifles or double barrelled guns.

The boat meanwhile would be kept moving about by the oarsman out of reach of the surf, until the work was completed. When all was ready it would be rowed in again as quickly as possible, the man or men ashore and the skins they had taken would be picked up. It was dangerous work requiring skilful and daring seamanship to say the least.

According to Clark the hair seal was found along the west coast and the fur seal was found only along the south coast. He wrote:

"whilst the skin of the hairy seal is only worth between four and five shillings that of the fur seal fetched nearly fifteen shillings at King Georges Sound, and has been sold in London for £2/2/- each, thus affording a large profit to the buyer, more

especially as the original price is generally paid in stores, on which there is a large profit accruing to those who are skilled in the craft of merchandize".

Much of the information for this article has been obtained from the writings of William Nairne Clark. He was a "Wild man" himself though in a different way to the sealers and whalers. He was an arrogant, quarrelsome lawyer, originally from Scotland. At Fremantle in what is said to have been the only duel fought in Western Australia, he killed his adversary. He was charged with the murder but was acquitted. He was very unpopular in Perth and later moved to King Georges Sound where he set himself up as the self appointed champion of the region. He explored in the Kojonup area as well as along the south coast and wrote glowing reports of both regions. He claimed to have traced the Deep (Frankland) river up for fifty miles and described the timber in the area as "the most magnificent that I ever saw in the world". He does not seem to have achieved much recognition of his friends, but I am sure that the present day champions of "The Wild Country" will appreciate this description of it by him:

"In conclusion, I have no hesitation in stating that in point of timber, rich soil and grazing land well watered, the whole of the Territory from Parry's Inlet to Point D'Entrecasteaux is not surpassed by any other portion of the Colony, and let these who doubt the fact, go see, and judge for themselves."