



Mr. George Bass, the surgeon on His Majesty's Ship *Reliance*, informed Governor Hunter that nothing could gratify him more effectually than allowing him the use of a good boat and permitting him to man her with volunteers from the King's ships to examine the coast to the South of Port Jackson as far as he could with safety and convenience during the summer of 1797–98. Bass was furnished with a whaleboat, fitted, victualled and manned as he wished. He sailed down the coast examining the country he passed. After passing Point Hicks he steered towards the islands lying north of Van Diemens Land. He hoped to supplement his provisions with rice from the wreck of the *Sydney* Cove on Preservation Island. It was the 3rd January 1797 when "water was observed to gush in through the boats side pretty plentifully near the water-line abaft." "As there appeared some risqué of a plank starting" it was decided to return to the coast and follow it. Running along the shore on the 5th January they saw a break in the land and with the flood tide they crossed a spit and "entered a very extensive harbour" through its eastern passage. From the weather, the circumstances of the harbour itself and the repairs to the boat they stayed there until the 17th January. Bass "named the place, from its relative situation to every other known harbour on the coast, Western Port." Of that harbour he wrote "Swans may be seen here, hundreds in a

flight, and ducks, a small but excellent kind, in thousands. There is an abundance of most kinds of wild fowl."

Bass's discovery led to Lieutenant Grant in command of the *Lady Nelson* being directed to explore Bass Strait in 1801. On the 21st March 1801 he entered Western Port and came to anchor abreast of a sandy point, which Grant named Lady Nelson Point, the name by which it is still known, as a memorial to the vessel, as she was the first decked one that ever entered that Port. This visit by the *Lady Nelson* which ended on the 23rd April 1801 is most remembered for the first planting on Victorian soil, Grant having planted crops on Churchill Island. Grant observed "that Western Port is capable of containing several hundred sail of ships with perfect security from storms and will admit of being fortified". He also makes reference to "red bills" (pied oystercatchers) as being excellent eating.

Later in 1801 the *Lady Nelson* returned to Western Port under the command of Lieutenant Murray who had been on board on the previous visit. The purpose was to follow the coast west of Western Port. She gained entrance passing between Grant Point and Seal Rocks on the 7th December 1801 and came to anchor in Elizabeth Cove. Next day she moved to an anchor off Lady Nelson Point and



Murray took the gig to Churchill Island and wrote in the log of the Lady Nelson “the Wheat and Corn that Lieut. Grant had sown in April last was in full viger 6 feet high and almost ripe, the onions were also grown into Seed, the Potatoes have disappeared. I fancy that the different Animals that inhabit the Island have eat them or otherwise destroyed them”. Another important outcome of Murray’s visit was that following the coast to the west of Western Port he discovered Port Phillip.

The log of the Lady Nelson records that Murray and his crew virtually lived on swan and wildfowl which they shot. The abundance of swan in Western Port observed by both Grant and Murray is compelling evidence of healthy seagrass meadows where they were to be found.

As the Lady Nelson passed Seal Rocks to enter Western Port it seemed to him the rocks were as full of seals as when he was last there, a circumstance that almost made him conclude sealers had not been there. However when an officer and men went to Seal Rocks, on returning they reported that seals were as plentiful as ever and several thousands but during another visit on the following day the 1st officer “found the remains of fires and a number of Bamboo Pegs also a club”. Murray noted in the log “the Harrington must have been here”. The Shipping returns of Ships cleared outwards from Port Jackson disclose the Harrington, built and registered in Calcutta was cleared in both September and December 1801 bound for sealing. One can only speculate as to when sealers first reached Phillip Island.

Another interesting find made by Murray in February 1802 whilst raising an anchor when moored in Elizabeth Cove was “a Quantity of Oysters, Mussels and other Shell Fish at low water”. He wrote in the log “today gave the Shore a strict Search at low Water and plainly perceived that a company of 6

or 8 men would not run any risk or hazard of being starved here for several months from the vast quantity of Shell Fish to be found at low Water”. The presence of oysters in Western Port was confirmed in the 1850’s by an oystering industry being set up under the auspices of the Western Port Oyster Company centred around the site which is now the township of Rhyll with other boats coming from Hastings, Corinella and San Remo. The oysters were the mud oyster or deep water oyster which were harvested by a form of dredging. It is believed that at times there were up to 40 boats engaged in the industry some of which were local farmers oystering to supplement their income. Young Captain John Loch took a cargo of oysters from Rhyll to Geelong for transportation to the goldfields. However with over harvesting and natural predators oysters have been rarely found in Western Port since the 1960’s.

In 1802 Nicolas Baudin led a French scientific expedition consisting of two corvettes, the lead ship Le Geographe and the Le Naturaliste. The ships had sailed across the south coast of Tasmania and up the East Coast to Storm Bay when they became separated. Le Naturaliste under Captain Hamelin proceeded West in Bass Strait to the western entrance to Western Port off which it moored on the 9th April 1802 and Hamelin sent two long boats, captained by Milius to chart Western Port. With him, amongst others, were Faure, a cartographer and Leschenault, a botanist. Previous explorers’ charts had shown the land to the north of Phillip Island as a peninsula. Midshipman Bredent in the smaller boat accompanying Milius circumnavigated that land and on the French chart it is shown as Ile des Francais. Phillip Island is shown as Ile des Anglais. Leschenault’s journal reported “During this expedition I only found thirty plants I had not seen before. First a shrub of the Rhizophya family which grows on the muddy beaches by the sea”. That family is the family of the tropical mangrove.



Of particular interest is Milius's account of his encounter at what would appear to be the headland at Corinella. "This part of new Holland is but sparsely inhabited. I discovered a column of smoke in the great basin on the Cape of Fires;. I approached, and heard the cries of aboriginals, who signalled to me to come to them, and by their gestures I understood that they indicated a place where I could conveniently disembark. I approached the coast, and descended upon the beach, accompanied by the botanist Leschenault. I directed the boats to be careful to allow themselves to run aground, and urged all on board not to be afraid because of the numbers of these peaceable natives. M Leschenault and I sat down together at the foot of a cliff, 50 to 60 feet in height, upon which the aborigines were gathered together, and we made signs to them to come to us, giving them significations of friendship. They responded to our invitation only by signs of the greatest mistrust. Not one of them dared descend though they had called to us. They talked amongst themselves for a long time, without our being able to understand what they desired. Believing, nevertheless that they invited us to leave our clothes and to climb the cliff to go and meet them. I took off my jacket, and my shirt, this seemed to satisfy them so I started to climb the cliff and as it was steep they indicated plants by which I could pull myself up. In vain I made demonstrations to induce them to reach out a hand to me. They showed the same mistrust. When I was nearly at the top, I pretended not to be able to climb further, and extended my arms toward them, as though to supplicate them to save me; but none of these unhappy folk advanced to help me.

When I reached the plateau at the top, they all chattered at once, moving away from me. I perceived that my pantaloons and my shoes troubled them, and they wished to see me naked like themselves. I then made signs of leaving them.

I took out my watch, which they regarded with cries of astonishment. I pointed to the sun, and traced upon the soil its daily movement, which they appeared to understand. I gave them my pantaloons and my shoes, which they took, carefully covering up the shoes. Then they made signs to me to follow them to warm myself and take food. I manifested much repugnance at walking with bare feet, and fell to the ground to make them understand that my shoes were absolutely useful to me. One of them then plucked a tuft of dried bush and laid his hand flat upon it, doubtless to indicate to me that the path was easy and that I had nothing to suffer. They looked at me closely and appeared very satisfied to see that my form resembled theirs. They made some movements to induce me to imitate them, and when I had executed these they manifested their joy by laughing. Having demanded to see my mouth, showing me theirs – which I found well furnished with teeth – I complied, whereat there was renewed laughter. I saw that they were great children, whom it was necessary to amuse, and I succeeded perfectly in so doing when I sang to them a little piece, at the same time making grimaces and dancing. I made fresh demonstrations of friendship, but it was impossible to approach nearer than a step or two. The slightest gesture on my part of coming near them made them retreat. Finally, seeing that by so doing I could obtain my shoes, I decided to follow them, But before doing so I asked M Leschenault, who awaited me at the foot of the cliff, and who advised me to descend, to bring me a box containing some trinkets, which I wished to distribute among them. As soon as they saw him they took to flight in bands of three, uttering shrill cries. M Leschenault and myself were at their mercy. Since it was only with difficulty that we had been able to ascend the cliff, we could not beat a retreat. The mistrust of the aboriginals their flight and their cries, could not but make me uneasy. They might have gone for their arms, and I had



nothing to oppose their spears but a dozen pearls. I felt it was better to assume an audacious attitude, and instead of flying I followed them for about half an hour. I came near to a little family who were eating shellfish around a little fire, and who, as soon as they saw me, took to flight like the others. I lost sight of them in the forest into which they fled. I left these unfortunate people, carrying away a poor opinion of their courage, but with the certitude that they had no bad intentions, and that, as I have already said, they are simply big children whom it is necessary to pardon everything.

The figure of these men differed much from that of aboriginals whom we have previously seen. They had a white cross upon the middle of the face, their eyes were surrounded with white circles, and several had white and red crosses all over their bodies. But what astonished me most was to see that the nostrils of two of them were pierced to allow the passing through of a dry straw, which doubtless they regarded as an ornament. They blackened their skin with charcoal. I observed one small man for whom the rest appeared to have no consideration. I have never in my life seen a face more hideous. He was covered with a black skin, which reached, to the middle of his legs, and his face was so dirty that I scarcely dare to affirm that he was a man.

They had with them a big dog, which by his skin and his tail resembled a fox, but his head appeared to me to be large and his muzzle short and big. I had sacrificed an hour and a half to this interview, and I returned to the coast to resume my geographical operations.”

By 1826 the British had asserted a claim to the whole of Australia and despatches in March 1826 to Governor Darling suggested establishing settlements at Western Port and Shark's Bay or King George's Sound. In response Governor Darling decided to send an expedition under Captain Wright of the Buffs to establish a settlement

at Western Port and Captain Wetherall of His Majesty's Ship Fly to give every assistance he could afford. The Fly with the Colonial Brigs Amity and Dragon sailed from Sydney on the 9th November, 1826. On board the Dragon was William Hovell who with Hume had explored the country from Lake George near Goulburn to Port Phillip in the previous year. Hovell's purpose was to explore the country around the new settlement and to that end he had four horses on board. Captain Wright's instructions included a warning that the “French discovery ships which are understood to be preparing for these seas, may possibly have in view the establishment of a settlement on some part of the Coast of this Territory”.

On the 12th November 1826 the corvette Astrolabe commanded by Captain Dumont D'Urville of the French Navy entered Western Port by the western passage. As they went on they sighted a sealer's camp, who on seeing the corvette, put to sea in their boat and came alongside. The ship went on and moored at “Mangrove Creek”, the Rhyll Inlet. As soon as the corvette was tied up the sealers climbed aboard and the skipper presented his credentials for inspection.

Dumont D'Urville had come from King George Sound where he had taken on board, as passengers to Port Jackson, three sealers who had been abandoned by their captain and had been living a miserable existence for 7 months. One of them, Hambilton, knew Western Port and was able to act as a guide. Dumont D'Urville wanted to visit a native village about which Hambilton had spoken. He took them to a point near the eastern entrance to Western Point which Dumont D'Urville named Honeyeater Point. They “found only not so recent traces of native occupation although their huts, numbering between forty and fifty were still there a short distance from the shore, surrounded by the remains of their fires and fragments of the shells



of the crustaceans they had eaten. Some of the huts had frames made of large branches covered with big strips of bark.”

On the 16th November the sealers took Dumont D’Urville some radishes from their garden and informed him a ship was arriving any day to establish a colony on Phillip Island. On the 19th November the Astrolabe left Western Port.

A gentleman in the Asiatic Journal of 1827 reported that as the vessels led by Captain Wetherall of HMS Fly ranged along Phillip Island “Some men (Europeans) dressed in seal skins, and accompanied by a number of dogs, appeared along the shores; and shortly after were observed several conical, rudely constructed huts, half hid amongst the prolific honeysuckle, mimosa, and gaudy acacia pendula, which had sprung up there and flourished, unassisted and unregarded. These people, it afterwards appeared, were a party of sealers; they had come from Port Dalrymple, and mustered seven in number. Some black native women, whom they had managed to carry off from the main land, lived with them. They seemed extremely fond of each other’s society!” The sealers ran along the beach and came up to the ships and told them that the French Discovery ship had left on the previous Sunday.

Hovell observed that one of the sealers and his black wife came up to Corinella on the boat for the purpose, if possible, of seeing if a country woman of the girl’s was in any of the tribes of natives that reside generally about the rivers at the top end of Western Port. He wrote “It appears that she and another (both from Van Diemens Land) had run from the sealers six years back, and joined another of the tribes. The way these men got those girls and women is by purchasing or more properly speaking bartering for them of the different chiefs along the east coast of Van Diemens Land, when the trade first commenced a girl could be got for a piece of a dead seal or porpoise. Now they require Bread,

Flour or Kangaroo Dogs. I have been told by those who have had dealings in these articles of barter, that some of the Girls leave their friends without any sort of regret, this I think cannot be believed for according to the old adage “home is home be it ever so homely” others they say make strong resistance but that the Chiefs authority is absolute”.

The Fly anchored off Rhyll and whilst boats were despatched on survey in different directions to find the best place for the settlement a party commenced clearing a commanding position of Phillip Island opposite to the anchorage. “A hut had already been constructed there, and a well dug by some sealers, who in their excursions up the harbour frequently refreshed in this port —. A great portion of the overhanging wood which crowned the sides of the hill being cleared, and a sort of glacis formed, so as to command the landing place, this battery was named Fort Dumaresque”. On the 2nd December two six pounders were landed to command the anchorage and a party got up a flagstaff. On the 3rd December Captain Wetherall performed Divine Service and at Noon the Union Jack was hoisted and saluted with 21 guns. Hovell, on that day, was exploring near Bass’s River and his diary notes include “about this time 12 o’clock we heard a Royal Salute of 21 guns fired which came from the direction of where His Maj. Ship Fly was lying, and knowing the Battery was nearly finished on Phillip Island I had no doubt it was from there it came”.

On the 24th January 1827 on his return to Port Jackson Wetherall reported to Governor Darling on Western Port stating “I personally examined every part of its extensive shores”. He reports that at the head of the harbour for about a mile and a half from the high tide mark the country is open, sometimes almost clear of trees, with a luxuriant grass covering the surface. The soil is everywhere wet, and the water in some parts following footsteps. The shore



is low, muddy and inaccessible, till after half tide, lined with mangroves for some space,, which spring from a bed of oozy blue clay, left dry by the ebb for an amazing distance.” He writes of four inconsiderable streams found, which make a respectable appearance, when the flood is up their channels, but dwindles away as it recedes. When traced they wind away in deep beds, principally excavated by the tide, but, soon dividing and subdividing, terminate in small rills at no great distance from the beach, and seem to act merely as drains to the swamps behind them.

Hovell reported to Governor Darling on the 27th March 1827 after returning to Port Jackson, but had also kept a diary. On the 13th February he had set out to walk around Western Port after having been taken in the sealers boat with his party of two soldiers and three convicts from the settlement to a little to the East of Red Bluff (Stockyard Point). During the walk when he came to “Wetherall’s rivers or inlets” he attempted to follow them upstream, but at a distance of 1 to 1 1/2 miles from the shore he found tea tree brush which was impassable. He arrived at Cape Schank on the 23rd February where in accordance with a prior arrangement he sent up a smoke signal and the sealers came in their boat and collected his party.

In November 1834 the schooner Elizabeth from Launceston sailed into Western Port seeking a cargo of wattle bark and found it near the old settlement. They stripped the bark from the trees and took it to Port Jackson leaving the shore party behind. The shore party moved their equipment to the area between the Bass River and Griffiths Point (San Remo). The barque Andromeda came to pick up a second cargo of bark and the shore party to take them back to Launceston. It is believed knowledge gained from these ventures led Samuel Anderson charting a vessel in September 1835 to take him to settle on the Bass River. He took with him food,

tools, farming equipment, vegetable and wheat seed, seed potatoes, working bullocks and two or three farm workers who were willing to accompany him. The vessel took them up the Bass River for about one kilometre to a point where the river turns to the left and a small creek, the Ross Creek, flowed in from the right. This area is now known as the Bass Landing. Anderson selected a site further up on the north bank for a house and huts. That was the site where Bass had obtained fresh water and repaired his whaleboat in 1798 and is near where the Bass Highway Bridge now spans the River.

Anderson found that land travel to the new settlement of Melbourne was impossible in winter and very difficult in summer months because of the swamp at the northern end of Western Port. Five years were to pass before any European traversed this route.

During the first year Anderson was dependent on a vessel from Launceston to bring him supplies and to take his first crop of wheat to market. Ships from Launceston continued to collect cargoes of wattle-bark from Western Port. It was not long before Anderson acquired his own whale-boat and his means of travelling to Melbourne was to sail across Western Port to the present site of Hastings and then travel by bullock dray and on foot to Port Phillip and the present site of Frankston, then along the coast to Melbourne, a journey of at least four days, sometimes five.

In 1847 the noted cartographer, Thomas Ham compiled, engraved and published “A Map of Australia Felix from the Colonial Government Surveys, Crown Lands Commissioners and Explorers Maps, Private Surveys etc. – Respectfully Inscribed (with permission) to His Excellency Sir Chas. A. Fitz-Roy Knt. Governor of the Colony of New South Wales. On the Map at the northern end of Western Port lies “The Great Swamp”. Its position is approximately two miles north of Western Port



where Wetherall's four rivers or inlets enter Western Port, its length from West to East is approximately 45 miles and its average width from North to South is 5 miles.

The picture is that of a vast wetland. The maps show a bush track from Melbourne to South Gippsland but it is not continuous as it passes between The Great Swamp and Western Port.

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