Opening Bass Strait: The Intruders From the West

Brendon W. Jarrett

The people on the first vessels to go through Bass Strait from the west would not have regarded themselves intruders. Apart from obeying orders issued by their seniors, it's highly likely they believed they had the opportunity of earning a living and advancing their careers while taking part in an adventure that would add its small part to the sum of human knowledge. But in fact they *were* intruders and so were those who preceded them in the strait and those who followed. It is something white Australians tend to forget and sometimes it's at the expense of Indigenous Australians. This is not the place and now is not the time to follow that matter further, but it is something that I believe should be kept in mind.

So, who were these intruders through Bass Strait? And, in particular, who were the first two or three to take vessels through it from the west?

We have all heard of Grant in the *Lady Nelson*, but would it surprise you to learn that, strictly speaking, Grant was not '*sent from England*' to be the first to traverse the strait from west to east? And would it also surprise you to know that the first domestic animals to travel through the strait on a sailing ship were a dog and a baboon?

There is no doubt, of course, that James Grant did take the *Lady Nelson* to Port Jackson through Bass Strait. He experienced some heavy weather off the SE coast of NSW before he was able to beat up the harbour to the Sydney Town cove on 16 December, 1800. But Grant had not come direct from England and neither was it the intention when he left Portsmouth that he should go through Bass Strait. Indeed he knew nothing of such a strait when he departed the Thames. It was only while he was in Simonstown in Valse Baai, a day's sail south of Cape Town, preparing for his summer crossing to New Holland, that he learned of it.

How come? Well, historically speaking, we must go astern a little.

Various distinguished seamen in a number of different vessels while travelling to Port Jackson by way of the VDL east coast had surmised there was open water between VDL and the NSW coast—although there then was no distinction made between the two land masses. In 1788 Governor Hunter was one of those people. Others before him, like William Bayly—the astronomer on Furneaux's ship *Adventure*, which in 1773 was Cook's consort ship on his second circumnavigation—had disagreed. But things were coming to a head. It seems likely that there was considerable doubt about a strait until Gavin (also known as Guy) Hamilton, luckily found the Banks Strait entrance and happily stranded his rapidly sinking ship, the *Sydney Cove*, between two islands off the south-west coast of Cape Barren Island on 9 February, 1797. Before being rescued from Presevation Island he had plenty of time to observe sea conditions and the weather, and on his eventual arrival in Sydney he told Governor Hunter that he believed the sea to the west of the island was open.

Incidentally, of the eighteen men Hamilton sent off to Port Jackson for help, only three survived the wreck of the ship's boat and the brutal treck along the NSW coast that followed. One of the three was the supercargo William Clarke. Clarke was puzzled by the inconsistent attitudes of the Aborigines they had contact with along the way; some being interested, helpful and kindly, others antagonistic without apparent reason. Though tough and tenacious, Clarke was unbridgeably apart in his understanding, and he was not at all impressed by the appearance of the Aborigines he came across during his grim excursion. After describing the First Australian's long and straight hair, which was used to wipe their hands, he continued:

> *Frequent application of rancid grease from blubber or shark oil to their heads and bodies renders their approach exceedingly offensive. Their ornaments consist of chiefly fish-bones or kangaroo-*

teeth, fastened with gum or glue to the hair of the temples and on the forehead. A piece of reed or bone is also wove through the septum or cartilage of the nose, which is pierced for the admission of this ornament ... Upon the whole, they present the most hideous and disgusting figures that savage life can possibly afford.

And that was only the men; the women he described as '*scarcely human*'. To use Australian agricultural phraseology, the Aborigines doubtless thought Clarke 'a bit of a dag' too, starving as he was amongst plenty. But they saved him nonetheless. As for the bone passed through the nasal septum, thirty years earlier James Cook's boat people in the *Endeavour*, when referring to this piece of adornment, used what I think is a delightful description: they called it the Aborigines' '*spritsail yard*'.

Hamilton's experience was followed by Bass's expedition and his discovery—in the European sense, that is—of Wilson's Promontory and the harbour of Westernport. He was back in Sydney Cove by 27 February, 1798, fed up with mutton birds and fish as tucker, but convinced that the tides and sea conditions he met with indicated an open strait.

While Bass had been gallivanting around the southern mainland in an open whaleboat for nearly three months, Flinders was making a couple of trips on Charles Bishop's sealer *Nautilus* to the wreck of the *Sydney Cove.* He made a valuable running survey from a small ship's boat while in the Furneaux Group. When Bass and Flinders got their heads together in Sydney Town and compared notes, eight days after Bass's return from his jaunt to the south, they were both convinced, and so was Hunter, that the existence of a strait was a virtual certainty.

On 1 March, 1798, Hunter wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Duke of Portland, informing him that Bass had

> *... found an open ocean westward* [of Wilson's Promontory] *and, by the mountainous sea which rolled from that quarter, and no land discoverable in that direction, we have much reason to conclude that there is an open strait through, between the latitude of 39° and 40° 12' S., a circumstance which, from many observations made upon tides and currents, I had long conjectured*

Hunter received no response to his long missive—nothing unusual about that; by this time he was becoming used to being ignored by his grace the duke—but he also informed Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society, of Bass's work and forwarded a small chart to him, showing the discoveries Bass had made. Bass and Flinders had also been impressing the Governor with their useful if hazardous voyages up and down the coast in the *Tom Thumbs One* and *Two*, but Hunter's problem in Sydney was a lack of a vessel suitable to put through Bass's putative strait, and there the matter rested until at last, in September of 1798, Hunter was able to make the sloop *Norfolk* available to them. He issued orders to Flinders to sail '*beyond the Furneaux Islands and, should a strait be found, to pass through it and return by the south of V.D.L.*' So on 7 October, in company with George Bass and twelve men off the *Reliance*, Flinders at the age of twenty-four years sailed with his first command, the rather shaky *Norfolk*.

Just as a quick aside here, while Charles Bishop in the *Nautilus* accompanied them as far as the Furneaux Islands before sealing on this and a second trip, Flinders logged on 30 October, 1798, that his people on the *Norfolk* had employed themselves '*in getting a few sealskins dried to make us good warm caps.*' But while he had been surveying on the islands earlier, in the boat off the *Nautilus*, he had found that skins from the Little 'Fairy' Penguins, *Eudyptula minor,* made useful waterproof caps for his crewmen. The appearance of the whole crew wearing Fairy Penguin caps must have been quite a sight. Had they seen it, what would the Indigenes have thought of that? Better a mutton bird perhaps?

After its circumnavigation of VDL the *Norfolk* returned to Port Jackson on 17 January, 1799. We can be pretty sure Hunter was pleased to see his two young protégés and he granted Flinders an additional 300 acres at Bankstown—at the very reasonable rental of five shillings per annum, payable after five years.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, a desperate war was still raging between Britain and France. The long dark years extended from 1793 until 1815, when on 18 June the French army under Napoleon was virtually annihilated by Arthur Wellesley with the vital support of the Prussians under Marshall Blücher at the Battle of Waterloo in Belgium, then part of the Netherlands. The war for many and certainly for the Admiralty was:

One stern tyrannic thought which made
All other thoughts its slave.

In these dire circumstances neither the British government or the Admiralty had the time or inclination to give much thought to what seemed a minor matter: the possibility of a strait in the convict colony of NSW. In May of 1799 a dispatch on the subject from Hunter to the home authorities was given to Bass to deliver. But Bishop, with whom he was travelling, unexpectedly sold the *Nautilus* in Macao, and consequently by the time Bass arrived in London with the despatches from Hunter in August of 1800 some fifteen months had elapsed.

During this period Phillip Gidley King, formerly the Commandant on Norfolk Island was on sick leave in England. As an experienced naval officer, he had been able to give valuable advice to the Admiralty, the Navy Board and Sir Joseph Banks—sometimes referred to as 'the Patron of Australia': in particular, to give advice about the most suitable type of vessel for use in the colony and to personally reinforce the thrust of Governor Hunter's dispatches on that subject.

Now lying in the Thames after being launched there on 3 November, 1798, was a very small experimental gun-cutter designed by Captain John Schank, which was waiting completion at John Dodman and Co.'s yard at Deptford. While he was on furlough recuperating, King had noticed this vessel and described the unusual flat-bottomed type to Banks, suggesting its suitability for exploration along the Australian coast. Banks, being the President of the Royal Society and a friend of the king, was not like Little Jack Horner: Banks could pull plums from *anyone's* pie, and he put pressure on the Naval Board to supply a vessel for NSW.

There was a factor in Bank's knowledge that would greatly influence the Navy Board's decision. While the war raged on and Hunter's dispatch of 17 August, 1797, carrying information about the discovery of Bass Strait and the circumnavigation of V.D.L. was making its slow way from Port Jackson to London, and while the Naval Board had been procrastinating over a decision on a new ship for service in N.S.W., the Royal Society under Banks' presidency was advised by the Institute of France that it was sending two ships, the *Géographe* and the *Naturaliste*, to the South Seas on a scientific mission to explore the mysterious uncharted coasts of New Holland. The Institute requested that arrangements be made with the Admiralty for the provision of safe-conduct passes for its two ships. This was a request that was not unique and for which precedents had been established between both countries, as too with America, during periods of war.

For the Admiralty and a suspicious Government this approach put a different slant on things. If the French once again were to be visiting uncharted sections of the New Holland coast, it seemed to them that the presence of an armed survey vessel in N.S.W. waters certainly was warranted if it forestalled any French moves against British interests there. Perhaps, given present circumstances, passports could be delayed, although it would be difficult to refuse them outright for a French 'scientific' voyage, but delay *would* allow time to fit out and man a British ship.

Banks now used his considerable influence and the Navy Board, though still reluctant, transferred a vessel to the Colonial Department. '*Hup! Hey presto! and Abracadabra!*'—and from under the Admiralty's hat, or so it seemed, there was, at last, a new vessel for the colony of NSW. It was the *Lady Nelson*, one of the smallest of a series of vessels of a relatively new type. With the outbreak of the war with France various sizes and iterations of these vessels had been trialled by the Admiralty following its invention—along the lines of a '*Chinese contraption*' he said—by Captain (later Vice-Admiral of the Blue) John Schank during the American War of Independence, more than twenty years earlier. Schank, probably while serving as Master's Mate / Midshipman, had first suggested the system to Hugh, Earl Percy, later the 2nd Duke of Northumberland, as far back as 1774. Percy had concurred with Schank's thinking and a boat with centreboards was built for the duke at Boston, New England, where he was campaigning during the American War imbroglio.

The dimensions of this new vessel, seen lying in the Thames by King, were not the same as those of one of the Admiralty's first vessels of the type, the *Trial*: despite some assertions to the contrary, at 120 tons that earlier vessel was much larger. The new vessel measured only 52 ft. 6 in. (16 m) in length on the gun deck with beam of 17 ft. 6 in. (5·34 m), and with the sliding keels drawn up drew '*barely more*' than 4 ft. (1·22 m) aft. Its nominal burden was 55 tons which suggests the depth of hold under the single deck was no more than 6 ft. (1·83 m), little enough to crack one's head on the deck beams, but for those times almost a surfeit of room. It was provided with two brass carriage guns at Deptford and on reaching Portsmouth was supplied with four 3 to 4 pounders. When leaving Portsmouth fully stored and loaded for Port Jackson, with keels up the vessel was drawing about 5 ft. 3 in. (1·6 m) aft and 4 ft. 3 in. (1·3 m) forward, and by my reckoning the displacement had increased from about 60 to over 80 tons. It had only 2 ft. 9 in. (840 mm) freeboard abreast the gangway, which was little enough for the Southern Ocean, even with the almost shoulder-high bulwarks above the deck. Instead of being rigged as a cutter with its cumbrous boom and gaff it was thought, correctly, that a brig with its two masts and smaller individual sails would be more practical.

To cut a long and interesting story short, Lieutenant James Grant at the age of twenty-seven was given the command. Banks was heavily involved in preparations for the voyage to Australia, the ship was very well provisioned and equipped, and crew members were paid £4 to £6 a month, which was well above normal Naval rates. To confuse enemy ships it might meet the brig was painted in the colours and style of a Spanish vessel. This created problems for some of the vessels in the West Indies convoy *Lady Nelson* and HMS *Porpoise* were sailing in. And for the *Lady Nelson* too. On one occasion in the North Atlantic the frigate HMS *Hussar*, the convoy guardian, tried to sink Grant before recognising his colours; the next day an armed merchantman, '*Much to his credit'*, Grant wrote, *'Hove to and fired a shot, almost plump on board us.*' And only a few hours later a merchantman, having no guns, tried to run him down. Grant abandoned the convoy and went his own way. He'd had quite enough of that nonsense.

Mutual suspicion and some alarm were aroused between the *Lady Nelson* and a Spanish vessel that closed with Grant a few days from the Cape and Table Bay. Michael Hogan, the owner of the privateer *Chance* of the Cape Colony, had taken the Spaniard as a prize off the mouth of the River Rio in South America and placed his navigator, John Black, in command of it with a crew of six for a passage to the Cape of Good Hope. But now Black was unsure of his position, his vessel had been damaged in a storm that carried his ship's boat overboard, he was short-handed, and he was also short of supplies. In dire need of charts, canvas and cordage too, he bore down on the seemingly 'Spanish' *Lady Nelson* whose people observed, of course, the approach of a larger seemingly 'Spanish' brig. In mid-ocean the two vessels, like dogs newly meeting, sniffed the wind and one another. With suspicions eventually allayed, they hove to while a boat was sent from the *Lady Nelson* to visit the stranger. Prize master Black came on board the *Lady Nelson* to explain his predicament and while there was asked why he had approached what purported to be a Spanish enemy vessel. Black explained that, despite the paint, he knew they were not Spanish but English by the cut of *Lady*

Nelson's sails. Some seamen, at least, were not easily fooled—and Black, already famous, was an intelligent tiger—but he refused to believe the drop keels in *Lady Nelson* until they were shown to him.

Grant's orders were to sail from the Cape in the summer months and he spent the waiting time at Simonstown preparing for the crossing. He now was content to have twelve seamen on board. And, having in mind the previous poor workmanship at Deptford that led to the breakage of two of his three keels, he now took the precaution of engaging a new carpenter for the ship.

And then orders from the Duke of Portland arrived with a change of plan. No longer was he to round VDL's South Cape. He was to go through a new strait. At first the scientific aspect of the voyage had been given no importance, but as the possibility had now arisen of work to be done along an unknown section of coastline, Grant found a somewhat eccentric personality who might fill the bill as having, '*Medical knowledge with a turn for Natural History*'. Dr Brandt joined the ship with his pet baboon and a dog that he said protected him from '*wolves and hyenas*'. The dog alone was quite enough, but the baboon also was embarked for the voyage, and in retrospect Grant probably rued this decision. Brandt was an engaging character who claimed to have seen a unicorn while travelling from Delagoa Bay in Mozambique to the Cape Colony after being shipwrecked. Apart from his entertaining '*embellishments*' of facts, Brandt suffered from chronic seasickness and was about as much use during the passage to Port Jackson as his baboon. It had been his food taster in the African wilds: if Jackoo would not eat it, neither would the good doctor.

The *Lady Nelson* put to sea on 17 October, 1800, and was followed a month later by Black in the *Harbinger*, another ship owned by the Cape merchant Michael Hogan who was a particularly sharp operator engaged in a number of shady activities such as slaving besides privateering. Later in life he was the American consul in Chile. Falling in with hard weather almost immediately in the Southern Ocean, Grant found his brig again performed well, and he was as enthusiastic about her capabilities there as he had been in the Atlantic. In a fresh wind he '*had so much sea I hove the vessel to and found her perfectly easy and dry.*' Grant sometimes made use of what we would call a sea anchor and he referred to as a '*drag sail*', a device, he said, that was '*well known to the Dutch who use them in their large ships which they send to Batavia.*' Fifty years later the Royal National Lifeboat Institute in Britain was equipping its lifeboats with a refinement of the same principle, and sea anchors—properly called drogues—although they are rarely called for today, are still being sold by some yacht chandlers.

Grant's orders from the Duke of Portland and the Admiralty required him to make a passage with the little *Lady Nelson* well to the north of the usual route to V. D. L. and run his easting down while somewhere about the parallel of 38°S. latitude rather than the more commonly used summer route some 300 sea miles or so further to the south. That route was around the 43° parallel, and generally it was only if the passage was being made in the winter months that a course along a parallel another 2° to 3° further north, somewhere between 40° and 41°S. latitude, would be followed. On making the new coast on 3 December, 1800, Grant named Mount Schank after his friend Captain John Schank, the inventor and proponent of the sliding keels on his unusual vessel; Mount Gambier was named after one of the Lords of the Admiralty; Cape Northumberland after the duke of that name who also was a friend of Schank's and had long held an interest in naval architecture, including sliding keels; and Cape Banks after Sir Joseph Banks, part mentor for this voyage as for so many others to his favoured New South Wales. While sailing along the coast in very light airs Grant named Cape Bridgewater after the duke; Cape Nelson after his ship; the Lawrence Rocks near Cape Grant, Lady Julia Percy Island (Deen Maar to the Aborigines) and Cape Otway after a relative, a friend and a mentor respectively. But he did not land in Bridgewater Bay—although he put a boat over the side and pulled in to the shore—and he missed the anchorage at the head of what he called Portland Bay. From Cape Otway to Wilson's Promontory was fairly straight forward (no pun intended) and after naming the Glennies, Rodondo, Curtis, Moncur and Devil's Islands as they were passed, he

completed the first west to east transit of '*Mr Bass's Streight'*, proving it to be a trafficable route for shipping to Port Jackson, which he entered on 16 December, 1800.

John Black in the *Harbinger* left Cape Town, heading nearly south for the 39°S parallel in order to reach stronger winds as soon as possible and knowing that this was the route that Grant had intended to take. Black raised Amsterdam Island on 4 December, 1800, when 27 days out from Cape Town. He bore up closely to the shore of the lonely island in the southern Indian Ocean and looked for a signal or any sign of the *Lady Nelson* before resuming his run to the east, but Grant was already off Cape Bridgewater. Black saw land on 31 December and by 11:00 hours it was recognised as a cape: it was in fact Cape Otway. The *Harbinger* was brought to anchor, a little to the east of the cape, near Blanket Bay, and here Black made some careful observations, determining the magnetic variation by azimuth to be 4° 45' E. and the position of the cape to be in 39° 3' S. latitude, 143° 14' E. longitude. Here Black's latitude was about as accurate as Grant's had been at Cape Banks, which is to say it was within ten to twelve miles of being correct. But his longitude was a great deal more accurate than Grant's, being only 17 miles west of the correct meridian at this cape, whereas Grant's at Cape Banks was 63 miles too far to the east.

Black reasoned that if Grant had already been this way and connected his running survey with that of Bass's at Westernport—as was probable—the *Harbinger* for its part should be seeking instead the *southern* limits of this western entrance to the strait. Alternatively, if Grant had found the southern limit of the entrance already, then he, Black, had established the *northern* limit, which was the cape he was now anchored under and for which he had fixed a position. And so he set sail to the SSE, casting about for land in the strait. On the first day of January, 1801, some 45 miles from Cape Otway, he found it: the *Harbinger* raised islands to the SSE that virtually named themselves as the New Year Islands. There was land behind them too, and it appeared extensive. It was too far to the north to be the north-west corner of V.D.L., as Black knew from Bass's and Flinders' experience on the *Norfolk*—news that had been relayed to him at the Cape of Good Hope. Consequently, the land in view had to be a large island. He noted the considerable number of seals and sea-lions on the coast, and with a practical eye on his future prospects in Sydney he named it King's Island after the governor.

From the New Year Islands Black sailed north to clear King's Island, naming Cape Palmer (today known as Cape Farewell) as he went. Having passed to the west of the flat-topped reef that was breaking heavily some 3½ miles NW of the cape, he named it Harbinger Reef after his ship. He now had fixed a position for the northern extremity of the island, and having looked for and found no obstructions between it and Cape Otway on his trawl for land between the two a few days previously, his next decision concerned the most appropriate course to take through the strait. He knew of the extensive islands off the NE corner of V.D.L.—the Furneaux Group—and that Bass and Flinders had traversed the entire southern coastline of the strait. He was also aware of the sighting of land off the NW corner of V.D.L.—it was possibly the south coast of his King's Island, but it could be another one—and of course he knew too of Bass's discovery of Wilson's Promontory on the northern shore of the strait and knew its position too, which likewise he had been advised of before leaving Cape Town. Furthermore, he knew that if all was well Grant had probably worked the *Lady Nelson* along the northern coastline of the strait as his orders had instructed him to make his landfall well to the north. (And as we know, Grant had followed those orders closely.) It therefore appeared to Black that his best bet was to search for any further obstructions in the middle of the strait that may be additional to those he had already found. To this end he shaped diagonally across the strait from King's Island to the reported position of Wilson's Promontory, but of course found nothing between the two. He made Port Jackson on 12 January, 1801, just 27 days behind Grant.

The Cape merchants were off and running. A few weeks after Black arrived, the brig *Margaret*, 121 tons, Captain John Byers, arrived at Port Jackson on 7 February, 1801. Buyers had made his landfall at the New Year Islands before buzzing around inside the strait, finding nothing and exiting through

Banks Strait like a bee from a bottle. He was 80 miles into the Tasman Sea before shaping a course to the north and Sydney.

And that will have to do for now. Except for the Bass Strait baboon! It might not have had a long life. The following four verses appeared in the *Sydney Gazette* on Sunday, 29 July, 1804. There is no certainty that the subject they referred to was Dr. Brandt's simian friend on Garden Island where the doctor lived and grew vegetables—although a monkey then was a fairly rare sight in Sydney. But whether the dog-faced Jackoo was also known as 'Pug' is immaterial really, as the sentiments expressed are remarkably appropriate to the doctor's prized pet.

EPITAPH

(On a Monkey that ufually occupied the fummit of a high poft in the yard of a Gentleman in Sydney.)

Beneath this behold'd fpot, in death repos'd,
Lies the grim corfe of one estrang'd to care;
Who chatt'ring oft', no fecret once difclos'd,
Who liv'd a captive ... yet diftained a tear.

A Mind poffeffing a peculiar mould,
Alike to him was flattery and fcorn;
And tho' unclad, protected from the cold,
For bounteous Nature's robe had ne'er been fhorn.

Devoid of talent, yet by fate preferr'd,
He lived EXALTED, died without difgrace ...
Uncenfor'd too! ... nor has Report been heard
T' announce the next Succeffor to his place.

Should the gay Coxcomb hither chance to ftray,
Let fympathy provoke one kindred fhrug;
And let him chatter through the wily way,
In doleful emphafis … Alas poor PUG!

⁕

[This paper, which is a much abridged version of an addendum to the author's forthcoming work *Thomas Keen: A Chequered History of a Rough Journey Through Life,* is largely based on James Grant's account of his voyage entitled *The Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery ...,* published in London in 1803 and in an Australian facsimile edition in 1973. Information on early seafaring along the south-eastern coastline of Australia, for instance on the preregrinations of George Bass and Mathew Flinders, has been extracted from source material held by the Mitchell Library in Sydney and the LaTrobe Library in Melbourne. Most of this is more readily available from various books held by the libraries or through their online access portals. For those with the time and interest there is a rich literature to consult.]