

II First and Second Voyages of Exploration_____

First Journey (South of Continent, then to North-West - Home via Timor)¹

And so, 21 December, 1817, arrived, and the start of their first adventure in the 'Mermaid'; but it was a false start, and bad weather forced a return to port that same day. However, they sailed on 22 December. It was a voyage which was to last until late July of the following year, and was to take them around the south of the continent, through Bass Strait, and up the western coast to the far north-west corner of Australia. Then, after a visit to Timor to replenish provisions and water, they returned to the Australian coast, which was sighted just south of Montebello Island. From there, it was a journey back to Port Jackson by re-tracing their forward route, reaching Sydney on 29 July, 1818. Although it may have been the accepted thing for sailors in those days, living conditions would have been crowded on the 'Mermaid', and a comment in a letter dated October, 25, 1817 from John Roe (Frederick Bedwell's shipmate), probably to his father in England, confirmed this; he said that they would all sleep in "standing bed places", and that our bones would be very sore for the first few months"; he also said that it would take some weeks before they would be so far accustomed to it to get any sleep, and that "I expected to be very sick indeed on board of her for a short time, but I must grin and bear it." He explained that the ship was "so small as to prevent the possibility of our being able to sleep in cots or hammocks." Such voyages would include many occasions involving great risk, and times of particular interest and satisfaction. In order to give some idea of what occurred, the story of those journeys (as recorded in King's Journal) will be provided in some detail, including descriptions of any happenings of special interest, especially those relating to Frederick Bedwell.

As they needed to survey the coastline between North West Cape and the north of Australia, it entailed a long voyage from Sydney before commencing their work, and they could have chosen to proceed from Sydney either to the north or to the south.

For their first voyage, the Bass Strait route was chosen so that they could later obtain the maximum advantage of the monsoon winds.

They proceeded around the coast, anchoring as necessary, and reached King George the Third Sound on 20 January, 1818; later, in Oyster Harbour, although unable to catch fish by line, due (it was claimed) to the presence of sharks, Boongaree obtained some by seine (a large fish net) and spear. On 10 February, the land south of North West Cape was sighted, and after losing an anchor some miles east of the Cape, they sailed all night to avoid a repetition. The vessel was unable to be anchored until sunset on the 12th, when a strong wind caused a fluke of another anchor to break; now, except for the small stream anchor, there was only one anchor left. They sailed deeper into the opening near the Cape, and on 15th, anchored for what was to be three days in a bay to be named Bay of Rest. During this time, Frederick Bedwell explored the eastern shore of the bay on one day, and on the next day, he examined the bottom of the bay, while John Roe walked over the sand ridges behind the beach. The crew were affected by the heat (105 degrees in the shade on land), and the flies. A number of the men bathed in the sea, causing two or three days "indisposition" for some, and, surprisingly, this was seldom afterwards permitted. They gave the name of Exmouth Gulf to the opening, after Viscount Exmouth.

On 24 February, they anchored to the east of Rocky Head, where Lt. King and John Roe climbed to obtain an extensive view. They saw natives paddling on logs of wood between islands, and Frederick Bedwell, with difficulty, brought one man on board, protesting. Forty of their tribe, mostly women and children, watched on shore, seemingly overcome with grief; and would it be any wonder? To those people, it could be likened to our feelings if one of us was taken prisoner onto a space-ship. The 'captive' quietened down when he saw Boongaree, and after rejecting biscuit, but enjoying sugar, he was put back on a log near the beach, with an axe and other items which he fancied. He was accepted cautiously on shore and interrogated; then his body was closely examined by his fellows, and all sat around for about thirty minutes to hear his tale. At that, they all rose, called out to the ship, and walked off leaving the presents behind. Later that afternoon, Frederick Bedwell and John Roe rowed near shore with further presents. During the night, the natives called out, and then left the island. In the daylight, their living area was inspected, and it was surprising to find that their water craft was merely an arrangement of two short logs, joined to increase its length, and paddled by hand - "the extreme case of the poverty of savage boat-building all round the world," as observed by Mr. King.

On 4 March, 1818, according to P. P. King, "we anchored in a bay which at John Roe's request was named Nickol's Bay." In a publication concerning J. S. Roe (by F. R. Mercer) it said that, on that first voyage, "Roe was given the honour of naming one bay, choosing to make it a point of remembrance of a man named Nichol who had been lost overboard."² There is no mention of that circumstance in King's Journal. However, on 27 and 28 September 1819, in the following year and in respect of the following journey, King stated in his Journal that William Nicholls, a seaman from Norfolk Island, who had been suffering from a "dropsical complaint" for nearly three

months, died from suffocation "having very imprudently laid down his head to leeward while we were under sail." He was interred next morning (28th) on shore, and the north-west point of Adolphus Island (in the north-west of the continent) was named after him in memorial, by Mr. King.

The request by John Roe for the naming of Nickol's Bay (which occurred during the first journey) probably relates to a statement in another letter to his father, a lengthy document dated 8 June, 1818, which was written whilst off Coepang, Timor. In this letter, John Roe said that Mr. King had kindly offered him the privilege of naming one bay, which he accordingly did by naming it after Mr. Nickols. He continued by saying that had it been large enough and of sufficient importance to have borne the name of his patron, Sir Richard Keats, he should have given that in preference; but being no more than six or seven miles wide, and deep, it would be offering no compliment to his rank in the Navy.

Who then was the Mr. Nickols for whom John Roe named a bay? Possibly John Roe's later letter of 5 August, 1818, gives the answer. That letter was written after the 'Mermaid' had returned to Sydney. In it, he expressed surprise and astonishment at the statement by Mr. Nickols (no doubt reported by his father in an earlier letter), regarding the £20 which "he (Mr. Nickols) was kind enough to lend me," and he disagreed with the indication by Mr. Nickols that the loan was "honoured by desire of my father."

There is no doubt that Nicholl's Point (on Adolphus Island) was named by Phillip Parker King in memory of the unfortunate seaman who had been buried there. But John Roe, during a later voyage, had named Nickol's Bay in honour of a family friend in England. Nickol's Bay is now known as Nickol Bay, and the present-day town of Karratha is at its southern most edge.

This Nickol's Bay affair is in itself a trifle, although it does provide an example of the difficulty of achieving accuracy in historical writing, even in regard to such a simple matter as that.

And now, we can continue the voyage where we left the 'Mermaid' in Nickol's Bay on 4 March, 1818. As the monsoon was weakening, they set out for the northern coastline, and in late March, they landed in a bay on Goulburn Island for water and wood, and found traces of Malay visits on the beach, as had Flinders. Some natives were causing trouble, and Frederick Bedwell was sent to capture their canoe as a reprisal for their theft of tools and flags. They retreated into the wood, and Frederick took their canoe on board his boat - it was of Malay origin, about 17 feet long. That night, the natives retaliated by cutting the moorings of the whaleboats, and recaptured their canoe - however, they were detected, and it was recovered. There was further minor friction on the next day, during which Frederick Bedwell was required to moor the whaleboat about 15 to 20 yards offshore, with ready "musquets", to guard the water party. However, having obtained the water, it was decided to go elsewhere for wood as fuel.

In the following weeks, a Malay fleet was sighted in Macquarie Strait. 'Mermaid' sailed past them, declining to stop as they seemed to indicate, because there were 15 proas, each of 25 to 40 ton, with at least 300 men in total. They were seen again on the next two days, their fleet then having increased to 21 proas, but they passed by without threat. Phillip King commented that although each of his men went ashore armed, it was fortunate that they were not often obliged to use their weapons, for most of the twelve firearms which they possessed were useless, notwithstanding their being the best procurable at Port Jackson when the vessel was equipped.

At this stage of the journey, although there was no mention in the Journal of any request by Frederick Bedwell, there is reference to three geographic features which were probably named by Frederick. They are firstly, Mountnorris Bay (Lord Mountnorris had nominated Frederick for the Navy), then there is Cape Cockburn, probably named in honour of Frederick's commanding officer for much of the Napoleonic Wars, and lastly, Valentia Island, no doubt for Viscount Valentia (Lord Mountnorris). As a matter of interest, 'Valentia' is spelt, apparently in error, on current official maps, as 'Valencia'.

Among other activities, as the voyage progressed, both Raffles Bay and Port Essington were named, there was another sighting of the Malays, and further trouble occurred with natives. On 25 April, King named two flat-topped hills, seen from Port Essington, as Mounts Bedwell and Roe, (because he said that they were conspicuous objects) and on that same day, two men from another fleet of proas came on board and stayed for three hours, showing great interest. King promised to give them some gunpowder on the next morning, but sailed away early to avoid them.

The flat-topped hills named after Bedwell and Roe are near the southern coast of the Coburg Peninsula, close to Aiton Bay, and are only about 150 metres in height - Two Hills Bay is on the coast between them.

During early May, they named the Alligator Rivers, and were careful to avoid the crocodiles, which they called alligators.

When ashore on Melville Island one day, King and his party were surprised by natives, and ran off leaving behind the insect net of Mr. Cunningham, and the theodolite. Mr. King had fired his fowling-piece just before at an iguana, and so they had no defence. Guarded by Frederick Bedwell with an armed party in the whaleboat, they endeavoured to negotiate for the return of the theodolite, but apart from exchanging some chisels and files for water and sago, there was no success. The natives left a woman alone in the water, apparently expecting the party to take the woman in exchange for the theodolite; Mr. King remarked in his Journal, in a rare show of humour, that she obviously had not been selected for her youth or beauty. They did not recover the stand.

Bathurst Island was named, as were some other features, and by the end of May, 1818, it was time to leave the coast; provisions and water were low, and there was need to

resort to Timor without delay. In the afternoon of 4 June, they anchored off the Dutch settlement of Coepang, 1/3 mile from Fort Concordia.

Difficulty was experienced in obtaining provisions or water from the Dutch Resident, but he provided two young buffaloes and some vegetables and lent money on a private bill. Chinese merchants formed the greater proportion of the population, and Chinese shops supplied vegetables and rice, but it was discovered later that they could have been obtained at half the price.

Although Coepang was described as a poor place, it was picturesque, and with a lively appearance, having stone houses roofed either with red tiles or thatch, and with shade from thick groves of trees including bread-fruit and hibiscus. It is a mountainous island, which was said to be rich in gold and silver, and superstition is said to have required one human sacrifice for every bottle of gold dust collected; this practice was apparently rigidly enforced by the chiefs in the mountains.

Timor had been visited in 1699 by William Dampier, and it had changed little since his account. It had also been visited before King by Lieut. (later Admiral) Bligh, in addition to Captain Flinders and Commodore Baudin.

A rajah, who was the principal of a fleet of Malay proas in the roads, gave King a detailed account of their regular visits to New Holland, and of the manner in which they cured trepang, together with information regarding other products of interest to them, and of their usual sea routes when they visited Australia.

According to one of John Roe's letters, written in Port Jackson on 21 January 1820, news had been received of a report of the supposed sinking of the 'Mermaid' some time previously, when it was said to have been lost with all hands. Mr. King sent a letter to the Admiralty to contradict this. The understanding was that the rumour had been spread by a man who had previously commanded the ship, and who had been seeking revenge for having lost employment.

The party sailed from Timor on 14 June, and sighted Australia to the south of Montebello Island. The crew were badly affected by dysentery, and a jolly boat was lost in a severe gale; meanwhile, the weather was very cold. On 24 July, they entered Bass Strait, and unfortunately, it was here that George Speed died, explained by Mr. King as being due to "excessive indulgence in vegetables and fruits from Timor." After a difficult return journey from Timor, due to the weather, they entered the Heads at 8 p.m. on 29 July 1818, and anchored in Sydney Cove, being seven months away, and having successfully completed their first voyage. Except for one man who needed some time in hospital, all of the returning crew were in good health.

Some Signs of Friction

However, despite the obvious success of the voyage, comments in one of John Roe's letters to his father (dated 8 June, 1818, and written while moored at Coepang) indicated that there was some form of resentment, probably due to the slight, yet definite, seniority of Frederick Bedwell, but apparently centred on duties which it was considered were being avoided by Frederick. There seems little doubt that John Roe was unhappy, driven as he seemed to be by an extreme desire to succeed, and striving to achieve some form of perfection. That would of course make him a very hard and conscientious worker, and with his valuable skills, success must follow, even though it might not always bring contentment.

As examples of those feelings, John Roe wrote, in his letter of 8 June, that "... I was enabled to render more assistance to Lt. King than my companion, Mr. Bedwell, and in fact the whole of the duty which should have been equally divided between two, fell upon the shoulders of one only. I was sometimes more than he could well sustain.....So far, with the approbation of my superior officer, I should have been perfectly contented, but a sort of jealousy was awakened in the breast of a second person, who unjustly supposed me instead of himself, to be the cause of his not securing so much attention as an equality of services would have entitled him to, and which he thinks is due to his acquaintance with a certain noble personage in England; it is therefore sometimes squally with thunder and lightning, the clouds being attracted by the high land, yet they produce serene weather afterwards, and everything goes on with its accustomed smoothness till the clouds again begin to gather."

That thought was repeated, this time briefly, in a letter of 7 December, which was written later in Sydney. He said "I have in fact not a moment to look around me, placed (as I before hinted) in a situation to do the greater part of another's duty in addition to my own, but without complaining."

It is possible that he was talking about the work of sketching the landforms for the official report following the completion of the journey; Frederick did seem to be less skilled in that direction, but it could also be that Frederick Bedwell was better utilised in matters concerned with the operation of the vessel - and also in dealings with the natives and the crew. In such a small group of officers, surely Phillip King would be aware of any problem involving shirking of duty, and would have corrected it quickly; apart from that, those comments were written during and after the first of the voyages, yet King retained Bedwell as his second-in-command for in excess of three further years.

The Second Voyage (Van Dieman's Land)³

For the period up to December, 1818, they were busy with charts of the journey just completed, and re-equipping the vessel, and as they were not planning to depart on their next coastal survey until the time for the westerly monsoon (well into 1819), King advised the Governor that they intended to survey the entrance of Macquarie Harbour, lately discovered on the west of Van Diemen's Land. They sailed from Sydney Cove on 24 December, 1818, and cleared the heads on Christmas Day - King apparently enjoyed Christmas at sea! They took Mr. Justice Field of the Supreme Court as a passenger, having offered him a return passage to Hobart Town, where he was to hold court. After crossing the entrance to Bass Strait in a heavy gale, they anchored off Hobart Town on 2 January, remaining there until the 10th. Two days later, they named the west head of Macquarie Harbour as Cape Sorell, in honour of the Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land, and anchored after dark off the bar. Next morning, 'Mermaid' was lightened, and warped over the bar to avoid delay, striking twice lightly, and then anchoring between the bar and the harbour entrance. Soundings had been taken throughout. During the next three days, they entered and moved up the harbour, meeting the vessel 'Sophia' on its way back to Hobart Town. King named the channel after 'Sophia's' Captain Kelly, who had discovered Macquarie Harbour. Over the next week, they further examined the harbour and found huon pine interspersed with many other species, which were examined and listed carefully by Mr. Cunningham. During their stay at Macquarie Harbour, there was some peaceful contact with parties of natives.

They left the harbour on 26 January, 1819, with some grounding as they crossed the bar, and they entered the Derwent and anchored at Hobart Town early on the 30th. After another week (apparently R. & R.), they sailed from Hobart Town, with their passenger, the Judge, on 7 February, arriving in Sydney Cove at 9 p.m. on the 14th.

In a recent 'Sydney Morning Herald', there is an article relating to a book printed in that same year, 1819, written by Barron Field, the Judge. 'First Fruits of Australian Poetry', which had been privately distributed, may be the earliest creative work of New South Wales; it was suggested that, unfortunately, the quality of its content was lacking.⁴

The unusual continuation of heavy rains until mid-March prevented the progress of preparations for their second coastal voyage; during that time, there were three floods on the Hawkesbury and Nepean Rivers which had considerably damaged the ripening crops.

Life in Sydney

This delay allowed time for the adventurers to take advantage of a little more of the society life in Sydney, although, from one letter, John Roe seemed to be tiring of it. On 19 April, 1819, he wrote that he was quite tired of a place "torn by dissention," and he was happy with the thought of speedily getting out of the reach of it for at least a few months to come. He said that they dined frequently at the mess of the 48th Regiment, and also at Government House.

In his letter, it was pointed out that robberies and murders were getting very frequent, and that seldom a market day passed, without three or four being executed for those crimes. He stated that either Frederick Bedwell or he was on board 'Mermaid' each night to guard the vessel, and that the two of them agreed tolerably well, "considering the variety and wish of one to top the officer, and the determined resolution of the other not to submit to imposition!!"

John Roe's next letter was written on 25 April, 1819, from No. 1 Cambridge Street, and he said that they were at last in their Government house, and although much exposed to the risk of house-breaking, they were prepared and keep a good look-out, and would handle anyone pretty roughly. Besides the three of them (probably Cunningham, Bedwell and Roe, with Mr. King spending his time with his wife at Parramatta), there were three servants living in the house, and a man in the kitchen, whose wife they had engaged as cook. It was quite an establishment, although not wind or water proof; and, there was a garden which grew, among other things, strawberries, figs, and grapes.

He said that the natives frequented the town daily in great numbers, bringing fish and other things, in exchange mainly for bread, tobacco and spirits, "the latter of which they are uncommonly partial to, and are soon quite intoxicated with a very small quantity." The women walked around with the greatest unconcern and simplicity with no clothes on whatever, "and without even so much as to cover the spot where Eve placed the fig leaf;" on the other hand, the men would wear clothes, but in a most ridiculous way.

Describing one of their normal days on shore, he said that they would breakfast at 8 o'clock, after which they would wind and manoeuvre three out of the eight timekeepers belonging to others, which had been placed in their care. By 9 o'clock, they commenced observations of the sun in order to find the rates of the watches. After about half-an-hour, he would amuse himself either by calculating and working the observations, or by drawing. At noon, there were more observations, and the other chronometers would be wound up and compared; that would take two hours, when it would be time for the afternoon observations of the sun to correspond with those in the forenoon. After that, they would walk until 4 o'clock, then dine, before

resuming their walk until 7 o'clock, "when tea and scandal broth is drank." He said that the remainder of the evening would be spent in working the observations taken during the day, following which, there may be time to write or read until midnight.