

NON-FICTION

Louis Becke

The Beginning Of The Sea Story Of Australia

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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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THE BEGINNING OF THE SEA STORY OF AUSTRALIA

From "The Tapu Of Banderah and Other Stories"

By Louis Becke

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To many people in England the mention of Australia conjures pictures of tented gold-fields and tall, black-bearded, red-shirted bushrangers; of mounted police recruited from "flaxen-haired younger sons of good old English families, well-groomed and typically Anglo-Saxon"; of squatters and sheep runs; of buckjumpers ridden by the most daring riders in the world; and of much more to the same purpose; but never is presented a picture of the sea or sailor folk.

Yet the first half-century of Australian history is all to do with the ocean. The British sailor laid the foundation of the Australian nation, and, in the beginning, more than any other class, the sailorman did the colonising and did it well. This, however, is the story of most British possessions, and generally it is gratefully remembered and the sailor duly credited and kindly thought of for his work. But in these days the dry west wind from the back blocks seems to have blown the taste of brine and the sound of the seethe of the curling "white horse" out of the mind of the native-born Australian; and the sailing day of a mail boat is the only thing that the average colonial knows or cares to know about salt water.

To write on such a subject as this, one has to leave out so much, that it is necessary to begin almost in the middle in order to reach an ending. Sea exploration and coast surveying opened the ways; whaling it may surprise the reader, but it is nevertheless true as once the main support of Australia and New Zealand; and runaway sailors formed a very considerable part of the back country population, such men making handier and better farm labourers, stockmen, and, later on, miners, by reason of their adaptability to strange surroundings, than ticket-of-leave men or the average free emigrant.

The first four successive Governors of Australia in the beginning, be it remembered, the continent was one colony were captains in the Navy. Governing in those rough days was not a mere master-of-the-ceremonies appointment, and Phillip, Hunter, King, and Bligh, if they made mistakes, considering their previous training, the populations they governed and the times in which they lived, amply justify Palmerston's words that if he wanted a thing done well in a distant part of the world; when he wanted a man with a good head, a good heart, lots of pluck, and plenty of common sense he would always send for a captain of the Navy.

Phillip, the first of these Governors, was sent out to found "a penal settlement at Botany Bay, on the coast of New Holland," and did the work in such fashion, in spite of every discouragement from the forces of nature, the Home Government, and his own officers, as to well entitle him to a place among the builders of Greater Britain. What was known of Australia, or rather New Holland the name of Australia was still in futurity in 1788, when Phillip first landed on its shores?

Let us say nothing of Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch voyages; of wrecks and piracies; of maroonings, and massacres by blacks; of the discoveries of Dampier and of Cook, but sum the whole up thus: the east coast of Australia, from its northernmost extremity to its southernmost, was practically unknown to the world, and was absolutely unknown to Englishmen until Cook's first voyage. Cook, in the *Endeavour*, ran along the whole east coast, entering a few bays, naming many points, and particularly describing Botany

Bay where he stayed some little time; then he sailed through Torres Straits, and thence, *via* Batavia, home to England, where he arrived in June, 1771. The English Government took no advantage of his discoveries until 1786, when Botany Bay was fixed upon as the site of a new penal settlement; and this choice was determined, more than anything else, by the advice of Sir Joseph Banks, who, from the time of his voyage with Cook in the *Endeavour* till his death, took the keenest interest in the continent; and colonists are more indebted to the famous naturalist for his friendly services than to any other civilian Englishman of the time.

Phillip's commission ordered him to proceed to Botany Bay, but authorised him to choose another site for the settlement if he considered a better could be found. He arrived with his fleet of transports in 1788, after a voyage of many months' duration, so managed that, though the fleet was the first to make the passage and was made up of more ships and more prisoners than any succeeding fleet, there was less sickness and fewer deaths than on any of the convoys which followed it. Phillip made a careful examination of Botany Bay, and finding it unsuitable for planting, the settlement was removed to Port Jackson. After landing the exiles, the transports returned to Europe *via* China and the East Indies, and their route was along the north-east coast of Australia. The voyages of these returning transports, under the navy agent, Lieutenant Shortland, were fruitful in discoveries and adventures. Meanwhile Phillip and his officers were working hard, building their homes and taking their recreation in exploring the country and the coast for many miles around them. And with such poor means as an indifferent Home Government provided, this work of exploration went on continually under each naval governor, the pressing want of food spurring the pioneers ever on in the search for good land; but that very need, with the lack of vessels, of men who could be trusted, of all that was necessary for exploration, kept them chained in a measure to their base at Sydney Cove.

Phillip, white-faced, cold and reserved, but with a heart full of pity, was responsible for the lives of a thousand people in a desolate country twelve thousand miles from England so desolate that his discontented officers without exception agreed that the new colony was "the most God-forsaken land in the world." The convict settlers were so ill-chosen, and the Government so neglected to supply them with even the barest necessities from Home, that for several years after their landing they were in constant distress from famine; and disease and death from this cause alone was an evil regularly to be encountered by the silent, hard-working Phillip. The only means of relief open to the starving settlement was by importing food from Batavia and the Cape of Good Hope, and to procure such supplies Phillip had but two ships at his disposal: the worn-out old frigate *Sirius* (which was lost at Norfolk Island soon after the founding of the settlement) and a small brig of war, the *Supply* which for many weary months were the only means of communication with civilisation.

The Home Government, when they did despatch a second fleet, instead of sending supplies for the starving people under Phillip's care, sent more prisoners, and very little to eat was sent with them. The authorities seem to have had an idea that a few hundred shovels, some decayed garden seeds, and a thousand or two of Old Bailey men and women criminals, were all the means needed to found a prosperous and self-supporting colony. How Phillip and his successors surmounted these difficulties is another story; but in the sea history of Australia the work of the naval governors occupies no small space in it. Remember, too, that the Torres Straits route and the Great Barrier Reef, now as well charted as the Solent, were only then being slowly discovered by clumsy old sailing craft, whose masters learnt to dread and avoid the dangers of the unknown coast as children grow cautious of fire, by actually touching it.

Hunter, the second Governor of New South Wales, and King, the third Governor, both did remarkable surveying work on the coast while serving under Phillip, and both made still more remarkable voyages to England. Hunter was the senior naval officer under Phillip, and was in command of the *Sirius* when she was lost on Norfolk Island.

This is how the dauntless Hunter got home with the crew of the *Sirius*, after waiting six months on Norfolk Island for the chance of a passage. The *Waaksamheid*, a Dutch snow{*} of 300-tons burden, which had brought supplies to Sydney from Batavia, was engaged to take Hunter and his shipwrecked crew to England. She was *thirteen months* on the voyage, and here are some extracts from Hunter's letter to the Admiralty, written from Portsmouth on the 23rd of April, 1792:

"I sailed from Port Jackson on the 27th of March, 1791, victualled for six months and with sixty tons of water. We were one hundred and twenty-three people on board all told" (remember this vessel was of three

hundred tons burden). "The master was directed to call at Norfolk Island to receive despatches, but contrary winds prevented us carrying out these orders. We steered to the northward and made New Caledonia, passing to the westward of it, as the master (a Dutchman) did not feel himself qualified to navigate a vessel in these unknown seas. He had, upon leaving Port Jackson, requested my assistance, which I gave him. In sailing to the northward we fell in with several islands and shoals, the situations of which we determined, and it is my intention, if the Navy Board will permit me, to lay a short account of this northern passage before the Board, when the discoveries will be particularly mentioned. No ship that I have heard of having sailed between New Britain and New Ireland since that passage was discovered by Captain Carteret in Her Majesty's sloop *Swallow*, I was the more desirous to take that route.... We passed through the Straits of Macassar and arrived at Batavia after a tedious and distressing passage of twenty-six weeks."

** A snow differed somewhat slightly from a brig. It had two masts similar to the fore and mainmasts of a brig or ship, and, close abaft the mainmast, a topsail mast.*

After burying an officer and two seamen at Batavia, Hunter left that place on October 20th, reached the Cape on the 17th of December, and was driven to sea again after the loss of two anchors, till the 30th. So weak and ill were his men from the effects of their stay in the unhealthy climate of Batavia, that he had to remain at the Cape till the 18th of January, when he again put to sea and sailed for England.

Hunter's brief and precise official account of his voyage discloses little of the great distress of that thirteen months' passage; but it shows how the spirit of discovery was in the man; how, in spite of the care of one hundred and twenty-three people in a 300-ton vessel, and half rations, he had time and energy enough to think of surveying. One result of his voyage was his strongly expressed opinion that the proper route home from Australia was *via* Cape Horn now the recognised homeward route for sailing vessels.

The name of King ought never to be forgotten, for the services of father and son in Australian waters were very great. King, the elder, came out with Phillip as second lieutenant of the crazy old *Sirius*. He had previously served under Phillip in the East Indies, and soon after the arrival of the first fleet in "Botany Bay," as New South Wales was then called, he was sent with a detachment of Marines and a number of convicts to colonise Norfolk Island. His task was a hard one, but he accomplished it in the face of almost heartbreaking difficulties.

Phillip, finding that his despatches failed to awaken the Home Government to a sense of the deplorable situation of the colony he had founded at Port Jackson, determined to send home a man who would represent the true state of affairs. He chose King for the service. Every other officer both naval and military was ready to go, and would have eloquently described the miseries of the colonists, and harped on the necessity for an instant abandonment of the settlement they were writing letters to this effect by every chance they could get to forward them but this was not what Phillip wanted. He, and he alone, recognised the future possibilities of New South Wales, writing even at the time of his deepest distress: "This will be the greatest acquisition Great Britain has ever made." All he asked was for reasonable help in the way of food and decent settlers who could work. All he got in answer to his requests was the further shipment of the scum of the gaols and the hulks and some more spades and seeds. King believed in his chief and cordially worked with him and King was the silent Phillip's one friend.

So King went home, his voyage thither being one of the most singular ever made by a naval officer. He left Sydney Cove in April, 1790, and after a tedious passage reached Batavia. Here he engaged a small Dutch vessel to take him to the Cape of Good Hope, sailing for that port in August. Before the ship had been a week at sea, save four men, the whole crew, including the master, were stricken with the hideous "putrid fever" a common disease in "country" ships at that time. King, a quick and masterful man, took command, and with his four well men lived on deck in a tent to escape contagion. The rest of the ship's company, which included a surgeon, lay below delirious, and one after another of them dying seventeen of them died in a fortnight.

King tells how, when handling the bodies to throw them overboard, he and his men covered their mouths with sponges soaked in vinegar to prevent contagion. In this short-handed condition he navigated the vessel to the Mauritius, where, "having heard of the misunderstanding with the French" the gallant officer refused

to take passage in a French frigate; but procuring a new crew worked his way to the Cape, where he arrived in September, reaching England in December, after a passage which altogether occupied eight months a letter from England to Australia and a reply to it now occupies about ten weeks.

In England King was well received, being confirmed in his appointment as Commandant of Norfolk Island, and he succeeded in getting some help for his fellow-colonists. Upon his return to his island command the little colony proved a great worry. The military guard mutinied, and King armed the convict settlers to suppress the mutiny! This act of his gave great offence in some quarters. Phillip had resigned the command at Sydney, and the Lieutenant-Governor of the colony, who was in charge, was the commanding officer of the New South Wales Regiment more celebrated in the records for its mutinies than its services and the degradation of the Norfolk Island detachment by King was never forgiven by the soldiers, but the Home Government quite approved his conduct.

But King made one very serious mistake. He had sent a vessel to New Zealand, and from thence had imported certain Maori chiefs to instruct the settlers on Norfolk Island in flax cultivation.

King had pledged his word to these noble savages to return them to their native country, and in order to do so, and make sure of their getting there, he himself embarked in a vessel, leaving his command for a few days to the charge of his subordinate, while he sailed the thirteen hundred miles to New Zealand and back. For this he was censured, but was notwithstanding afterwards appointed the third Governor of New South Wales, succeeding Hunter.

King's son, who was born at Norfolk Island in 1791, entered the Navy in 1807, and saw any amount of fighting in the French war; then went to Australia in 1817, and surveyed its eastern coast in such a manner that, when he returned to England in 1823 there was little but detail work left for those who followed him. Then he was appointed to the *Adventure*, which, in conjunction with the *Beagle*, surveyed the South American coast. In 1830 he retired and settled in Australia, dying there in 1856. His son in turn entered the service, but early followed his father's example, and turned farmer in Australia. He still lives, and is a member of the Legislative Council or Upper House of the New South Wales Parliament.

Here is a family record! Three generations, all naval officers, and all men who have taken an active share in the founding and growth of Greater Britain; and yet not one man in a thousand in Australia, much less in England, has probably the remotest idea of the services rendered to the Empire by this family.

The fourth and last naval Governor, Bligh, is more often remembered in connection with the *Bounty* mutiny than for his governorship of New South Wales. He was deposed by the military in 1808, for his action in endeavouring to suppress the improper traffic in rum which was being carried on by the officers of the New South Wales Regiment. This second mutiny, of which he was the victim, certainly cannot be blamed against the honesty of his administration; and the assertion, so often repeated, that he hid himself under his bed when the mutinous soldiers who had been well primed with rum by their officers marched to Government House, can best be answered by the statement that Nelson publicly thanked him for his skill and gallantry at Copenhagen, and by the heroism which he showed in the most remarkable boat voyage in history. He may have been the most tyrannical and overbearing naval officer that ever entered the service, but he was not the man to hide himself under a bed.

There were other naval officers of the early Australian days whose services were no less valuable to the infant colony. Think of the men associated with this time, and of the names famous in history, which are in some way linked with Australia. Dampier, Cook, La Perouse, Bligh, Edwards and the *Pandora*, Vancouver, Flinders, Bass all these are familiar to the world, and there are others in plenty; for example, Grant, who in his vessel, the brig *Lady Nelson*, did such work in Australian waters as, if performed nowadays say in Africa, would have been recorded in hundreds of newspaper interviews, many process-work pictures and a 21s. book with cheap editions!

What a story is that of Bass and Flinders! Such noble, disinterested courage! Such splendid service to English colonisation, and such a sad ending to it all.

Bass and Flinders, in their tiny open boat, the *Tom Thumb*, and in the sloop *Norfolk*, dotting the blank map of Australia with the names of their discoveries it is not necessary surely to remind the reader that Bass began, and together the two men completed, the discovery and passage of the straits between Van Dieman's

Land and the main continent. Bass surveyed something like six hundred miles of the Australian coast in a whaleboat with a crew of six men! And one *cannot* summarise Flinders' work in the *Norfolk* and in the *Investigator* before the old ship was condemned and converted into a hulk to rot in Sydney Harbour.

How were these men rewarded for their services, and what has posterity done to keep their names in remembrance? In 1803 Flinders started for England, was wrecked, and making his way to the Mauritius was there, to the everlasting disgrace of Napoleon's Island governor, detained a prisoner for more than six years. Of course the English Government ultimately procured his release, but it took them all that time to do it; and when he did get back they promoted his juniors over his head. When he died in 1814, a broken heart was as much as anything else the cause of his death.

Bass, after leaving Australia, went to England and sailed in an armed merchantman bound to South America. At Valparaiso the Governor of the town refused to allow the vessel to trade. Bass, who was then in command of the ship, threatened to bombard the town, and the refusal was withdrawn; but, watching their opportunity the authorities seized him when he was off his guard, and it was supposed he was sent to the interior. As the years passed by there were one or two reports that he was seen working in the mines, but it seems to have been no one's business to inquire into his fate. It is more than probable that the brave Bass died a slave.

But the whalers, "South Seamen" and East Indiamen, did no less good service than the King's ships in the early days, and yet even the old books do them but scant justice. For the first fifty years of Australian colonisation the merchantmen charted reefs, discovered harbours, and did just those things for the desert waters of the Australasian Pacific as were afterwards done by land explorers, in their camel and pack-horse journey-ings into the waterless interior of the continent And the stories that could be told! The whalers and sealers who were cast away on desert islands, and lived Robinson Crusoe lives for years! The open boat voyages. The massacres by blacks. The cuttings-off by the savage islanders of the South Pacific. The mutinies and sea fights!

Hobart in Tasmania, Twofold Bay in New South Wales, and many New Zealand ports were the great whaling stations, and Sydney the commercial headquarters. Fifty years ago there were something like twenty whalers in the Hobart Fleet alone; now, one or two hulks lying in Whaler's "Rotten Row" is practically all that survives of the trade.

The Americans took a leading part in the industry, and ships with *New Bedford* or *Nantucket* under their sterns traversed the Pacific from one end to the other. Australian whaling was begun (Dampier reported whales as early as 1699) in Governor Phillip's time, by some of the convict transports coming out with whaling equipment in their holds, and after disembarking their human freight, departing for the "Fisheries."

Some of these ships often remained in the Pacific for years, making cruises of twelve or eighteen months' duration, returning to Sydney when full ships to discharge and refresh, their cargoes being sent to England in some returning "favourite fast clipper," while the whalers went back to their greasy and dangerous vocation, until they were lost, or cut off by the savages, or worn out and converted into hulks.

What numbers of them *were* lost! and what wonderful and blood-curdling experiences their crews underwent when they were castaways, or deserted, or were marooned on "the islands"! Here is a story of a vessel lost in Torres Straits in 1836 not a whaler, but an East Indiaman. Some of her crew and passengers managed to land on the mainland of North Australia and were there captured by blacks. Six months later a few survivors were rescued and landed in Sydney; and this is what had happened to the only woman of the party, Mrs. Fraser, wife of the captain: She had seen her child die, her husband speared to death before her face, the chief mate roasted alive, the second mate burned over a slow fire until he was too crippled to walk, and otherwise horribly and indescribably tortured, and she herself was made to climb trees for honey for her captors by having lighted gum branches applied to her body.

In another instance a vessel was wrecked on the North Australian coast in 1846, and nearly twenty years later the sole survivor turned up at a cattle station near Port Denison, in North Queensland. He had been all this time living among the blacks, unable to escape, and civilisation had found its way, in the years that had elapsed, far enough into the back country to reach him. The stockman who first saw the man took him for a black and levelled his rifle at him, when he was stopped from shooting the poor fellow by the words, "Don't fire, I am an Englishman."

Here, told in a few words, is the story of the first landing in Victoria, and the first discovery of coal in New South Wales: On the map of Tasmania, in the north-east corner, is marked the Furneaux Group of islands in Bass's Straits. Dotted about the cluster are such names as Preservation Island, Clarke Island, and Armstrong Channel. These names all commemorate the wreck of the *Sydney Cove*, Captain Hamilton, bound from Calcutta to Sydney, and lost in February, 1797. She sprang a leak on the 13th of December, 1796, and her crew, chiefly Lascars, managed to keep her afloat till the 9th of the following February, when the skipper made Preservation Island, and there beached her. All the people landed safely, and got what stores they could ashore. Then it was decided to despatch the long boat to Port Jackson for help.

Thompson the mate, Clarke the supercargo, three European seamen, and a dozen Lascars manned the boat and left the island on the 29th of February. On the 1st of March the boat was driven ashore and battered to pieces close to Cape Howe (near the present boundary line of Victoria and New South Wales) three hundred miles from Sydney, in a country never before trodden by the feet of white men. All hands were saved, and after a fortnight's rest, feeding on such shellfish as they could obtain, the party set out to walk to Sydney.

Clarke kept a rough diary of this journey, telling of encounters with blacks, of death and madness by starvation and other privations; of how they crossed wide and shark-infested rivers by building rafts of tree branches cut down and fashioned with jack knives; of how the lives of men were purchased from the blacks by strips of clothing; and of how they counted the buttons on their ragged garments, and thus reckoned how many lives could be bought from the savages with what remained.

The terrible march lasted until the 15th of May; then three exhausted men, horrible to look upon, and the only survivors of seventeen who had, sixty days before, begun the journey, were picked up a few miles to the south of Sydney by a fishing boat.

The spot where they were seen walking along the beach was close to Port Hacking, and Clarke, three days before his rescue, had lit a fire and cooked some fish with coal he picked up. This was the first discovery of the great southern coal-fields of New South Wales.

There are other less gruesome stories than these; for example that of the Sydney whaler *Policy*, which, sailing under a Letter of Marque for the Moluccas, was set upon by a Dutch private ship of war the *Swift* at one time a formidable and successful French privateer. Captain Foster of the *Policy*, though his armament was very inferior and many of his crew were prostrated with fever, engaged the Dutchman, fought him for some hours, and brought his ship a prize into Sydney Harbour. Two Spanish vessels were captured in the same way by armed Sydney whalers; so that Australian waters have seen a little fighting.

On board the convict ships of those early days there were often mutinies, desperate and sometimes bloody, and some of these led to remarkable results. In one instance the soldiers not the prisoners rose upon the crew and the ship's officers, turned them adrift in an open boat, and carried off the ship. They were recaptured afterwards by a man-of-war in the Indian Ocean and brought to justice. Convict mutinies often were only suppressed after desperate hand-to-hand fighting; then a day or two later the ringleaders would be hanged from the yardarm, and a dozen or more convicts flogged at the gratings. And these things, be it remembered, were going on only an old man's lifetime ago.

New Zealand is fertile in adventure stories, and the well-known *Boyd* massacre is paralleled by two or three other tragedies equally as dreadful, if less often told. The whaling history of that colony would make a booknot of the kind suitable for young ladies seminaries, 'tis true, but mighty strong in human interest, and presenting the race as well as the sex problem for the study of the reader.

Statistics are terribly dry reading, but by way of contrasting the condition of Australian shipping then and now, it is worth while quoting a few figures.

In 1835, the heyday of the colonial whaling trade, when the smoky glare of the whaleships' try-works lit up the darkness of the Pacific ocean night, there were forty-one vessels, of a total tonnage of 9,257 tons, registered in New South Wales, employed in the fishery. In the same year twenty-two vessels arrived in Sydney from the various grounds, their cargoes of whalebone, sealskins, and sperm and black oil valuing altogether about PS150,000. Now the whaling trade in Southern Seas is represented by two or three small and poorly equipped ships from Hobart, though the whalesperm, right, and humpback are again as plentiful

as they were in the first years of the fishery. One of the present writers, less than four years ago, counted over three hundred humpbacks passing to the northward in two days on the coast of New South Wales, while there were ten times that number of the swift and dangerous "fin-back" whales travelling with them.

But, though the whale fishery is extinct, there is something to be shown instead.

It has been said that twenty-two whalers entered Sydney in 1835, which means that during that year not twice that number of vessels of all descriptions entered the port for the whaling was then *the* trade. But the steamer was beginning to count, and the beginning of the Sydney steam trade is not without a peculiar interest for Londoners at any rate.

The *Sophia Jane* was the first steamer in Australasian waters. She arrived in Sydney from London, *via* the Cape of Good Hope, with cargo and passengers, on the 14th of May. This vessel was built on the Thames by a well-known shipbuilder of the time, William Evans, who was the builder of many other notable early steamers. She was running for a summer or two as a passenger steamer between Gravesend and London; then between different ports in the south of England; and then, under a Lieutenant Biddulph, of the Royal Navy, she was sent to Sydney. The little vessel was 126 feet long by 20 feet beam, drew 6 feet of water, was of 256 tons burden, and had accommodation for fifty-four passengers; her engines were of 50 horse-power, and her speed eight knots an hour. This was the first steamer in the Southern Seas the forerunner of a fleet of mighty leviathans.