

THE MAN WHO HUNTED WHALES

A tale of Kangaroo Island and a doomed ship

DOROTHY M. HEINRICH

~Awoonga~

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Dorothy M. Heinrich

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Author's Note

In the year 1836 nine adults and four children were landed from a whaling ship on an island wilderness off the coast of southern Australia. They were the first European settlers of a new British colony – or so they believed. The place was Kangaroo Island, and these pioneers would discover soon enough that it was already the home of men who had left their whaling and sealing vessels to live in its wilderness. Living on the island were also the Aboriginal women whom these men had abducted from the nearby mainland and Van Diemen's Land.

The ship which had brought the new arrivals to the island departed after a stay of only eight weeks, and sailed to the whaling grounds of the Pacific. Eleven months later, the vessel struck a reef, and sank. Of those who scrambled into the boats, not all returned to safety.

A journal, written by the vessel's master, survived the sinking and its aftermath, and is in the archives of the Mitchell Library, Sydney. In it, Robert Clark Morgan, master of the *Duke of York*, has recorded the last voyage of his ship.

With the urge to learn more of the voyage and the ship's eventual fate, I began reading from a microfilm copy of the journal. It spans the two year period from the time of the *Duke of York's* departure from London in February 1836 until Robert Morgan's return to

England in February 1838. The journal is weather-damaged. This causes focussing problems through the entire microfilm copy, but particularly in the earlier entries. The unconventional grammar, spelling, and style of writing also present difficulties – Robert Morgan had been a man of limited education. His vernacular was that of a nineteenth century mariner, and his spelling, no doubt, reflected the manner of his pronunciation.

The most comprehensive and more readily readable journal entries are the daily reports of wind, waves and weather, and the crew's sailing orders. However, in other entries Robert Morgan writes of shipboard incidents, and of rebellious elements among the crew. He records in somewhat disjointed style the dangers and frustrations of the whale hunt, his loneliness, and the disastrous mishap which befell his vessel in the waters of the Pacific. Through all of this runs his unshakeable trust in the Almighty.

In the following pages I have attempted to assemble the fragmented accounts as they appear in the journal into a fluid, coherent narrative which retells Robert Morgan's story, thereby making it more accessible to general readership. Where appropriate, the captain's words – his feelings about people and incidents – have been quoted, in order to give him a voice in his own story. Robert Morgan's observations may be at variance with some others already on the historical record: nevertheless, they remain his perspective of the events described.

In writing this story, I have consulted accounts left by William Beare, formerly one of the child passengers who had voyaged on the *Duke of York* to Kangaroo Island, and of second mate Robert Russell, survivor of the sinking of the vessel. Other sources used are as indicated in the text and end-notes.

It should be noted that changes to several place names have occurred since Robert Morgan's journal was written. The island of Van Diemen's Land, discovered in 1642 by Dutch seafarer Abel Tasman, was renamed Tasmania in 1856 to honour that famous navigator. New Holland, the anglicised version of the name given by Tasman to the great land mass whose north coast he partially charted in 1644, later became Australia, the name advocated by English explorer and navigator Matthew Flinders. Although the name Australia was in wide usage by 1836, Robert Morgan used both terms, New Holland and

Australia, when writing in his journal. The names of several Pacific islands have also changed since the early nineteenth century, and these are indicated, where appropriate, in the text.

Conversion Table of Units of Measurement

1 pound = 0.4536 kilograms

1 hundredweight = 112 pounds or 50.80 kilograms

1 ton = 1.02 tonnes

1 gallon = 4.546 litres

1 barrel = 35 gallons or 159 litres

1 inch = 2.54 centimetres

1 foot = 30.48 centimetres

1 yard = 0.914 metres

1 mile = 1.61 kilometres

1 fathom = 6 feet or 1.83 metres (nautical measurement of depth)

1 league = 3 miles or 5 kilometres

1 knot (1 nautical mile per hour) = 1.15 miles per hour
or 1.85 kilometres per hour

1 acre = 0.405 hectares

Please Note: Quotations from the journal of Robert Morgan have been written in italics. Italics have also been used for the names of vessels mentioned in the narrative.

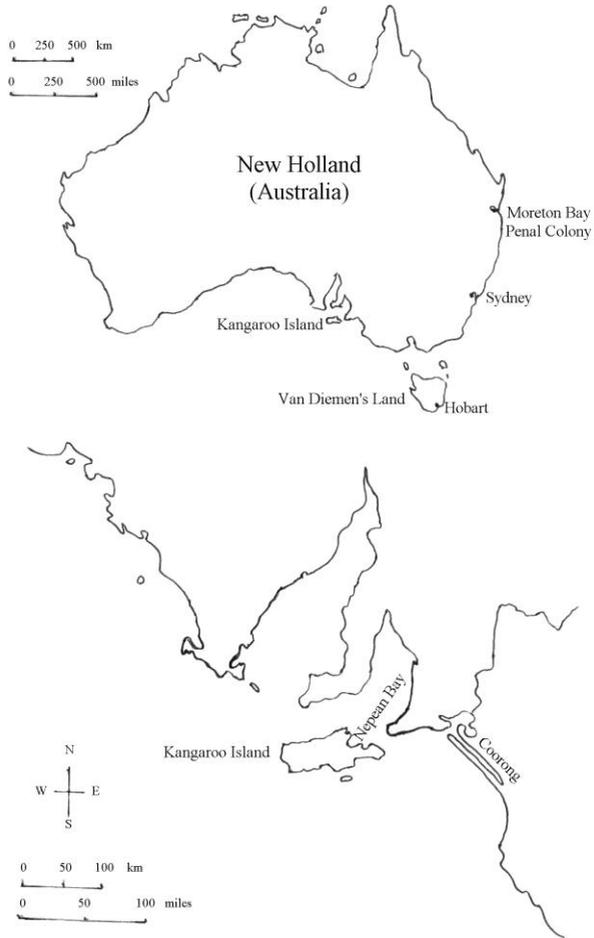


Figure 1. Kangaroo Island and adjacent South Australian mainland

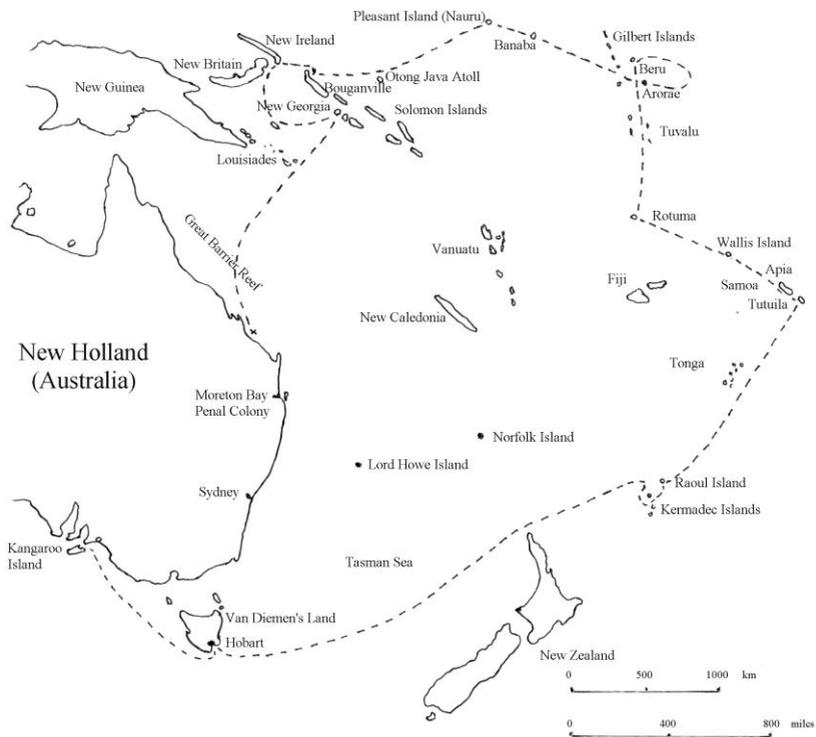


Figure 2. Into the Pacific: last voyage of the *Duke of York*

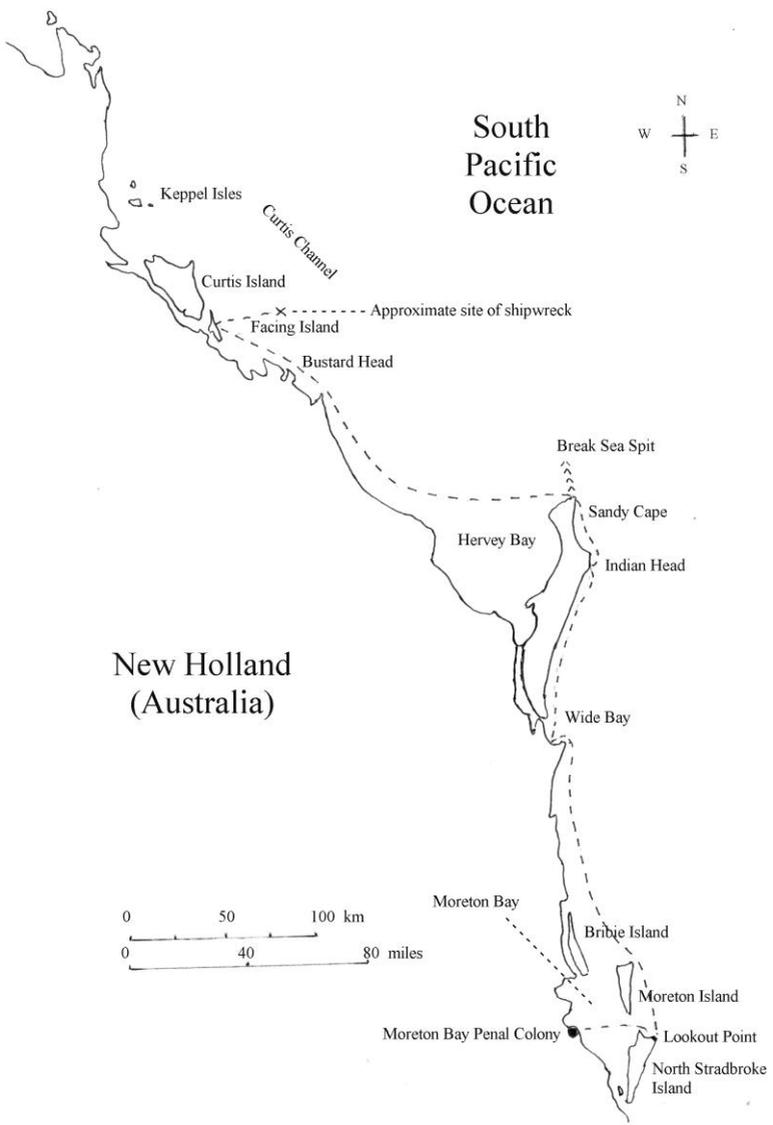


Figure 3. Route travelled by the *Duke of York* survivors

Background

From late February until December in the leap year 1836, a succession of fifteen ships departed from England carrying hopeful settlers of a new colony. The destination of the earlier of these vessels was an island lying in the waters south of the Australian mainland. Thirty-four years before, in March 1802, Matthew Flinders had chartered its northern and eastern coastline during his circumnavigation of the great southern continent. The sailors of Flinders' *Investigator*, hungry from the privations of four months at sea, eagerly hunted down the kangaroo-like creatures which roamed its scrubland in prodigious numbers and slaughtered them by the score. In one afternoon's work alone, half a hundredweight of animal heads, forequarters and tails went into the stew pot for dinner, and for days afterwards the whole ship's company dined on as much soup and steak as satisfied their appetites. Thereafter on English sea charts, this place, which had so nourished Flinders' sailors, bore the name Kangaroo Island.¹ It is likely, however, that these gentle kangaroo-like animals were in reality wallabies.

Only a few days after the English sailors departed from the island, the *Investigator* came upon the French vessel *Le Géographe*, commanded by Nicolas Baudin, who was conducting both a cartographic survey and scientific exploration of the Australian coast. The two captains, Flinders and Baudin, met at sea near the place which

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came to be known as Encounter Bay. They exchanged information, then sailed their separate ways, Flinders in the south-easterly direction from which Baudin had come, and Baudin to the south-west. Flinders' landing and partial mapping of the island only a matter of days before their meeting robbed Baudin of any claim to be the first to place it on European maps, but it was Nicolas Baudin who first circumnavigated and completed the charting of the island in January 1803. Baudin gave it the name Île Borda.²

To the Ngarrindjeri people of the mainland, however, the island was simply known as Karta, or 'place of the dead'. It had been a long time since Indigenous people had lived upon its shores in any number. But it was a place also known to intrepid whalers and sealers who periodically visited its bays and inlets in pursuit of the beautiful animals inhabiting these southern waters. Some of these visiting sailors turned their backs on a life at sea and remained on the island to eke a living from its soil. But the island was also from time to time the haven of fugitives who had escaped the penal settlement of Van Diemen's Land and chanced upon its shores in the vessels by which they had fled their imprisonment.

The passengers in the ships bound for Kangaroo Island in 1836 were travellers of a different kind: they were the prospective settlers of a new colony, who sensed economic and social opportunities not afforded in their homeland. Pressures of an expanding population in Britain, industrial change, and a consequential rise in urban and rural poverty had impelled many to seek a new life elsewhere.

Convict settlements had already been established on the east coast of Australia, beginning in 1788 at Sydney Cove, and later, on the island called Van Diemen's Land in 1803. To these places England had relocated some of its burgeoning prison population. The new colony, however, was to be a society based on the principle of paid labour, not penal servitude.

The idea of colonisation of England's distant lands by a systematic settlement of free people was originally conceived by Edward Gibbon Wakefield.³ One of Wakefield's earlier schemes, however, had led him into trouble. His abduction and elopement with a schoolgirl heiress as a means of improving his financial status did not go as planned. For his efforts he found himself arraigned before the

Background

Lancaster Assizes in 1827, and sentenced to three years' imprisonment in Newgate Prison.

However, his time as a guest of His Majesty George IV was not spent in idleness. For such an audacious exploit Wakefield had narrowly escaped hanging or transportation, giving him cause to reflect upon the practice of dispatching England's criminal classes across the seas to colonise far-flung reaches of Empire. In 1829 he penned 'A Letter from Sydney', in which he expounded a system of colonisation based upon the settlement of labouring families and funded by the sale of land at a fixed price to investors and wealthier prospective emigrants. Such settlement would be concentrated and contained, and admit no transported convicts.

After Wakefield's release from prison, his views on systematic settlement gradually gathered support among some influential people, Robert Gouger among them.

In 1830 the National Colonization Society was formed. Throughout the following three years, however, the British Colonial Office and the proponents of a new colony wrangled protractedly over the conditions for systematic settlement.⁴ In December 1833 the South Australian Association was formed, and intense lobbying resulted in the South Australia Act being passed in the British Imperial Parliament on 15 August 1834. In the same year the Parliament assented to the formation of the South Australian Colonization Commission, which was responsible for raising the funds for establishment of a British province in southern Australia. Parliamentary support for this colonial experiment was conditional upon the sale of £35,000 of preliminary land orders and the provision of an emergency fund of £20,000.

The British Colonial Office appointed a Board of Colonization Commissioners which met for the first time in May 1835 under the chairmanship of Robert Torrens, a man with advanced liberal ideas who pressed for the establishment of early local government, a free press, and religious freedom. The Colonization Commissioners were charged with the duty of appointing officials, such as a surveyor-general for land surveys and town planning, as well as the selection of suitable male and female emigrants, and the management of land sales.

However, the offer of land priced at one pound per acre in as yet unsurveyed wilderness on the other side of the earth was not taken up with eagerness by sufficient subscribers among the British public.

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The scheme was rescued from failure when, in 1835, ship-owner George Fife Angas and other wealthy merchants formed the South Australian Company. This joint stock company bought the remaining land orders at a capital outlay of £200,000, acquiring 13,700 acres at the reduced rate of 12 shillings per acre and pastoral leasehold rights over a further 220,000 acres. The company was to provide infrastructure such as roads and building works, and establish a livestock industry.

Angas, a Baptist with the declared ideal of ‘a place of refuge for Pious Dissenters of Great Britain’,⁵ also proposed the ventures of whaling and fishing as industries which would underpin the future settlement’s economy. Encounter Bay and the off-shore island charted by Matthew Flinders more than thirty years before were to be the bases for these operations. Angas induced employers of labour to emigrate, and actively recruited among the congregations of the Dissenting Churches for people who shared his views to be part of the South Australian Company’s venture.

By the end of 1835, the departure of the first emigrant settlers was imminent, and on 19 February 1836, the Crown issued the Letters Patent which established South Australia as a political entity.

A Company-owned schooner, *John Pirie*, was the first vessel to sail for Kangaroo Island on 22 February 1836 with prospective settlers.⁶ Among the next to leave were two other South Australian Company ships which had been purchased and fitted out for the purpose of whaling, the barques *Duke of York* and *Lady Mary Pelham*, which departed from London and Liverpool on 26 February and 30 March respectively. Two vessels which the Colonization Commissioners had appointed to carry the surveyors of the new colony, the barque *Cygnets*, and the brig *Rapid*, which was commanded by the Surveyor-General Colonel William Light, left separately on 20 March and 1 May. A ship chartered by the South Australian Company, *Emma*, departed London on 21 April, and two vessels which were under private charter, the *Africaine* and *Tam O’Shanter*, set sail on 28 June and 20 July respectively. These eight vessels and their passengers arrived at Kangaroo Island progressively from late July to early December 1836, but not, however, in the order in which they had left their home ports. On 28 December 1836, a ninth ship, *H.M.S. Buffalo*, which had been chartered from the Royal Navy by the Colonization Commissioners and

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had departed from Portsmouth on 13 July, brought the first governor to the new colony, an event which has long over-shadowed the arrival of those earlier vessels. More than four hundred people had already landed on the shores of Kangaroo Island or moved from the island to Holdfast Bay on the South Australian mainland before the much anticipated arrival of Governor John Hindmarsh, the person invested with the authority to establish government.

A further six vessels departed from England in the period from September to December 1836 and arrived in the colony of South Australia in early 1837: the ships *Coromandel*, *William Hutt*, *John Renwick*, *Isabella*, *Sarah and Elizabeth*, and *South Australian*. Of those emigrants who left England in 1836, a total of 813 people received free passages from the Land Fund, and 73 were unassisted settlers. With further arrivals in 1837, the total population of the colony of South Australia reached approximately 3,000 people by the end of that year.⁷

The following story concerns the voyage of the *Duke of York*, one of the earliest of that fleet of vessels to sail for Kangaroo Island. There was little time between the purchase of this ship and her departure from England, a matter of two to three months, so conversion to a whaling vessel fit for the dual purpose of transporting emigrant passengers and the business of pursuing whales had been a hasty one. The persons on board consisted of a small group of aspiring free settlers and almost twice their number in a crew more concerned with the spoils of whaling.

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PART I

Beginnings

Captain Robert Clark Morgan was thirty-seven years old when he left England as master of the whaling vessel *Duke of York*. On board his ship were thirty-nine persons, although of this number no-one can be certain. Many of the ship's records have long since been lost – destroyed, most likely, by water and mildew in a damp Customs House cellar.⁸ Apart from the captain himself, the crew numbered twenty-five – a twenty-sixth man simply failed to join the ship.⁹ The whaling vessel was also carrying passengers. It is here that uncertainty intrudes. The names of thirteen people, nine adults and four children, who embarked in London a few days prior to the ship's departure, have survived in the records. Whether there were others on board when the *Duke of York* set sail on that dismal, rainy Friday, 26 February 1836, is uncertain.

Little is known about the young Robert Clark Morgan. He was born on 13 March (the date noted in his diary) in the year 1798.¹⁰ His birthplace had been somewhere in the slums of Shadwell, Whitechapel, or thereabouts, and his childhood spent close to the tanneries and roperies, the smithies and taverns, which clustered about the parish chapel of St Paul's.¹¹ It was here, also, that Robert Morgan had lost both parents while still very young. In a dark moment he later lamented in his journal that he had no early memories, either of father or mother, sisters or brothers.¹²

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I lost them young and knew little of them

He had been taught to read and write, but education for the boy from the docklands of the Thames' north bank had not extended far. At the age of eleven, he entered the world of naval life. This was at a time when England was at war with France. Childhood ended abruptly.

I was cast on the world young at the age of eleven years to walk the journey of life ... not knowing my right hand from my left

Then, still a boy, he began service on a whaling vessel like the one of which he was now master.¹³ For boys were commonly sent to sea in British ships, and the *Duke of York* had her own two boy apprentices among the crew. From the age of eleven onwards, the sea had been Robert Morgan's whole existence, except perhaps for fleeting periods ashore. When he was aged twenty-four, he had wed Mary Dorrington of Whitechapel. Their marriage had taken place on Monday 30 December, 1822.¹⁴ A seaman's life was one of long absences punctuated by brief returns, and the thirteen year union had so far produced two children. But firstborn Charlotte had died, leaving one loved son Robert. When he was about to sail from England in February 1836, Robert Morgan's wife was heavily pregnant with another child.

Concerns for his family, however, were submerged in the troubles brewing around him. Even before the *Duke of York* had drawn away from her berth, an irritable crew had begun mouthing words of complaint.

The stores which his emigrant passengers were taking with them to begin new lives in a new land – building materials for their houses and plants for growing their food – filled the vessel's hold and took up space upon the deck. But timber and house bricks, vine cuttings and vegetable seeds, and the apple, pear, plum, almond and mulberry trees, date palms and carobs, did not sit well with men who had signed on to go chasing whales.¹⁵ The *lumber* on deck and down in the hold was a contentious issue for a tetchy crew.¹⁶ They were whaling men, and they did not like the passengers' stores getting in their way. Nor did they much like the passengers – a sentiment soon reciprocated. They

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were undertaking a long voyage, and conflicts in purpose were already unleashing deep resentments. For five months all must endure the others' company in the confines of an 81 foot 3 inch whaling vessel.

So in drizzling rain on that day in late February 1836 the barque was loosed from her moorings and towed by steam vessel from St Katharine Dock. The old Tower Bridge and the peak-roofed warehouses, crammed with all manner of merchandise, receded from view as the *Duke of York* proceeded quietly down the Thames to where the river spilled into the open water of the North Sea.

Robert Morgan that night noted the ship's departure for Kangaroo Island in his journal. On its pages he began his record of events concerning his vessel, the crew and passengers. When he wrote those first words, he did not know just how long he was going to be away from England.