

# The Sealers' Shanty

*A Journal of Sealers' Stories*

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## Boy Bird, 'Elephant Hunter'

Boy Bird and his father sailed from New Zealand to Macquarie Island aboard the *Friendship* in 1877. They spent the summer hunting elephant seals as members of Captain Donald Sinclair's sealing gang. The work turned out to be much harder than they expected. By then, elephant seals were becoming scarce on Macquarie Island.

*'Boy': a New Zealand sealer*



Impression of Boy Bird. Belinda Kurczok.

We don't know 'Boy' Bird's first name or his age, but we do know that he worked with Captain Donald Sinclair's gang of sealers on Macquarie Island during the summer of 1877-78. Boy and his father, Andrew, sailed on the schooner, *Friendship*, from Port Chalmers, New Zealand. Less than an hour after anchoring at the Macquarie Island isthmus, the ship's owner, Captain John Thomson, had rowed out to the *Friendship*. Thomson was overjoyed to see the *Friendship*, since he and the crew of the *Benleugh* had been shipwrecked and marooned on the island since August that year.

Sinclair's crew took over the huts that the *Benleugh* castaways had lived in, and the castaways sailed home to New Zealand aboard the *Friendship*.



Sealers' huts on Macquarie Island, drawing from J.S.I. Thomson

Boy and the other sealers set to work repairing the sealers' huts before settling down to enjoy their Christmas celebrations. On Christmas day they stopped for a rest and feasted on corned beef, Macquarie Island cabbage, potatoes, elephant seal tongues, curried parakeets, penguin tongues, hearts and livers. For dessert they had plum and blackberry jam pudding. They even indulged in some wine with their meal, and considered themselves very well off indeed.

Boy and the sealers then set to work hunting down elephant seals and boiling them down in trypots. Trypots are huge cauldrons that were used for boiling down the blubber of seals and whales. By 1877, elephant seals were becoming scarce around the sealers' camp at the north-east of Macquarie Island and the sealers had to travel far afield to kill them.

One of Boy's jobs was to help tend the trypot, but shortly after Christmas, he was allowed to accompany Sinclair on one of his 'elephant hunting' expeditions. Sinclair wrote in his diary that the day had been long and hard and 'the poor boy was crying from hunger'. Eventually the party arrived back at North-West Beach, boiled the billy, ate some bread and meat, skinned an elephant seal, loaded the blubber in their dinghy and left just before dark. They did not arrive back at the huts until 9.30 that evening.



Recreation of Boy Bird stirring a trypot by Jordan Harries. Photo Glyn Roberts,

Boy saw in the 1878 New Year on the west coast of Macquarie Island. He huddled in a tent made from a dinghy's sail with a small party of cold, wet and hungry sealers. Unfortunately, the sealers were unable to make a fire as Boy had used the whole box of matches to boil the billy at dinnertime.

Sinclair tried not to let this worry him, and celebrated the new year by singing songs and telling yarns ... which would have been quite enjoyable if they had not all been soaking wet!



Macquarie Island cabbage, a valuable source of vitamin C for Macquarie Island sealers. Photo Geof Copson.

Sinclair's main problem was carrying the elephant seal blubber back to the huts. Using carts was difficult due to the rough terrain. Sinclair soon regretted that he hadn't brought more men with him to help him carry the blubber. He tried moving the blubber in boats, but these often proved difficult to use and dangerous in the heavy surf around the island. At times his gang used hauling lines to drag the blubber off the beach near the tryworks.

After killing elephant seals, Sinclair and his gang buried the blubber until they could come back and collect it. The problem was that by the time they got back to the blubber, it had often decomposed or been attacked by skuas.

On one occasion, Boy accompanied Captain Sinclair and another man on an excursion to Eagle Beach. They crossed the marshy plateau, which Sinclair described as a 'horrible road to go'. They found a great number of seals in a remote inlet and Sinclair wrote excitedly in his diary:

*"I think I can safely say I have struck Oil(?) at last".*

Unfortunately the inlet was difficult to get to by boat and it was impossible to carry blubber home from by land, so Sinclair's hopes of making a fortune from the oil were dashed. On this particular trip, Sinclair reported seeing the figurehead of a large eagle.

Boy and the rest of Sinclair's party left the Island on the *Jessie Niccol*, having killed 218 elephant seals which filled sixteen casks of oil in two months of work.

*They must have been very disappointed with their haul!*

### **R**eferences

- Cumpston, J. S. 1968, *Macquarie Island*, Australian Antarctic Division, Melbourne, pp98-117.
- Norman, F.I., 1989, "A horrible road to travel" - the diary of Captain Donald Sinclair at Macquarie Island, December 1877-January 1878, Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings, March, Volume 36, No 1, pp33-49.

### **F**urther **R**eadings

An account of the *Benleugh* wreck is given in:

Horizontal Icicles Clung to the Wreck' - *Benleugh*, 1877

and the story of the eagle figurehead is told in:

The Legend of the Eagle