

The Sealers' Shanty

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Sinking a Small Fortune: Joseph Hatch and the Oiling Industry

Joseph Hatch quite literally sank a small fortune in the Macquarie Island oiling industry. He was the last of the Macquarie Island sealing bosses - and the only employer to invest in the long-term development of industry on Macquarie Island. Hatch was not afraid to flout regulations and made many enemies in his long career. He was a brilliant public speaker, and whenever he sensed that public opinion was against him, he would organise public meetings, which gave him the opportunity to sway the public to his point of view.

*An old man with the look
of the sea in his eyes*



Joseph Hatch, from J.S. Cumpston, *Macquarie Island*.

After meeting Joseph Hatch in Hobart early in the twentieth century, journalist, Michael Sharland found it hard to imagine that this 'little old man' could once have been the centre of an international row over cruelty to penguins on Macquarie Island:

'You met him at his door, a bespectacled white-haired man, slightly stooped, but still with the look of the sea in his eyes.'

Hatch was an astute businessman who seized any opportunity to make money. He had a background in the pharmaceutical business, which aroused his interest in processing animals for pharmaceutical products.

Hatch was born in London but moved to Melbourne, Australia, as a young man. He then moved to Invercargill, New Zealand, where he started many enterprises, including a bone mill, a rabbit-skin exporting business, a soap and glycerin manufacturing business. Once he bought a stranded whale for 30 pounds and processed its products. **The biggest venture of Hatch's life, however, was the Macquarie Island elephant seal and penguin oil business.**



Digesters at Lusitania Bay installed by Joseph Hatch. Photo Parks and Wildlife Service, Tasmania

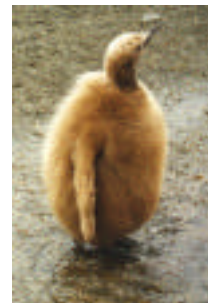
Hatch was a gifted speaker and was never one to let rules and regulations stand in the way of a promising business venture. Whenever he found himself in conflict with the authorities, he would organise public meetings to put his point of view. These public meetings were nearly always packed out.

In 1873, the New Zealand Government introduced closed periods to sealing in an effort to save seals from extinction. In 1886, Hatch's vessel, *Awarua* became the centre of public attention after Captain Drew reluctantly rescued survivors of the *Derry Castle*

shipwreck in the Auckland Islands. When seal skins were found on board, both Drew and Hatch had a lot of explaining to do. Hatch was a member of the New Zealand parliament at that time and was hoping to be re-elected. He called a public meeting to explain himself but for the first time in his career as a public speaker, Hatch failed to win over his audience. **He lost the next election.**

Hatch was quick to take advantage of the lack of restrictions imposed by the Tasmanian Government, which administered Macquarie Island. He started sending sealing gangs to Macquarie Island intermittently from around 1886.

At first Hatch's sealers boiled down elephant seal blubber in try-pots, but Hatch was keen to use more efficient equipment. In 1889 he placed an advertisement in the *Southland Times* seeking an engineer or blacksmith to erect boiling-down works on the island. Later that year he shipped a digest boiler, together with coal and wood to the island aboard the *Jessie Niccol*. Hatch had also been experimenting with the rendering of penguin oil and decided that the new plant would be suitable for this activity.



Young king penguins were boiled down for their oil on Macquarie Island. Photo Tavis Potts.

Hatch established a digester works at Lusitania Bay in November 1899 and from then on, his ships regularly took supplies of coal, timber and firewood to the island. In early 1892, Hatch transferred his headquarters to the Nuggets. Digester plants were also set up at the Isthmus, Hurd Point and Hasselborough Bay.



A digester plant operating at the Nuggets, 1895.
Photo W. Bickerton, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

After returning from the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) in 1914, Sir Douglas Mawson, campaigned to have Macquarie Island set aside as a nature. Media attention quickly focussed on the issue of cruelty to penguins.

Hatch fiercely denied newspaper reports in England and in Australia that his sealers herded penguins into digesters to be boiled alive. According to Hatch:

'The idea that 800 of these 12 to 14 lb weight birds could readily be walked up a greasy plank is ridiculous in the extreme.'

At a meeting in the Invercargill Theatre Royal on 23 March 1891, Hatch claimed that the issue of protecting the penguins was 'ridiculous nonsense' since so few birds were killed compared to the vast numbers in the penguin colonies. According to Hatch, his employees struck the penguins on the head and killed them before loading them into the digester. This is consistent with scientist, Leslie Blake's description of the Macquarie Island oiling process in 1912:

About 2,000 birds are driven into a small wire-netted yard and the gates are closed; a couple of men then enter with sticks and picking out the 'one year olds' (which I might state are the only 'fat' ones at this time of the year) they give them a knock on the head. When all the fats have been picked out, the gates are opened and the remainder are driven out none the worse for their adventure. The birds are then packed in huge boilers called 'digestors' and steam is turned on to the pressure of 30lb every square inch for 12 hours. The oil is then run into settling tanks and subsequently barreled, while the refuse passes into chutes and into the sea.' (18 Jan 1912).

Hatch leased Macquarie Island from the Tasmanian Government in 1902, and moved to Hobart in 1912. He bought a neglected property at 28-32 Montpelier Road where many local residents workers at Salamanca Place complained that his seal oil refinery was 'unduly aromatic.' The Tasmanian Government did not renew Hatch's lease on Macquarie Inland when it expired on 2 February 1920. This was probably because the negative publicity his business was attracting reflected poorly on the Government.

Joseph Hatch was involved with sealing on Macquarie Island for over thirty years. Like many other sealers before him, the fortune he had hoped to make from Macquarie Island's wildlife never eventuated.

Three of his sealing vessels were wrecked on the island.

Joseph Hatch died in Hobart in 1928, at the age of 91.



References

- Cumpston, J.S., 1968, *Macquarie Island*, Australian Antarctic Division.
- De la Mare, W., 1990, *Joseph Hatch and the Loss of the Kakanui*, Invercargill Licensing Trust Charitable Trust.
- Blake, L., (1912) in Mawson, D., *Australian Antarctic Expedition 1911-14, Scientific reports*, series A, Vol. 1., part 1 Narrative, 1942, p281.
- Sharland, M., 1976, *Once Upon a Time*, Davies Brothers Ltd, Hobart, p3.

Further Reading

You can read other stories about Hatch in:

[Lost at Sea' - Kakanui](#)

['All Hands Safe - Tremendous Battle with the Seas' Gratitude](#)

['I Can't face Hatch' - Jessie Niccol](#)

[Third Hatch Shipwreck - Clyde](#)