

The Sealers' Shanty

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'Graveyard Reefs and Tombstone Rocks' - Tom Hutchinson the sealer

Three faces glowed in a weird green, firelight. Outside the rough, iron hut at the Nuggets, a storm had brewed to a boil, 'shrill with the voices of ghosts'. Photographer, Frank Hurley, and biologist, Charles Harrison strained to hear sealer, Tom Hutchinson, tell tragic tales of Macquarie Island's shipwrecks.

A storm brews at the Nuggets

Late in 1911, sealer, Tom Hutchinson told tragic tales of Macquarie Island's shipwrecks to Frank Hurley and Charles. Harrison, members of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE). The photographer, Hurley, and the biologist, Harrison, were on their way to the Caroline Cove and Hutchinson was their guide. Hurley had deliberately left a lens there, because he wanted an excuse to return there and spend more time photographing this beautiful place.



Tom Hutchinson telling tales of shipwrecks at the Nuggets
by Belinda Kurczok

The men spent the first night in a rough iron sealers' hut at Nuggets Beach.



The grave of Captain Holmes., from J.S. Cumpston, Macquarie Island.

Inside the grimy hut were memorial tablets, carved by sealers from ships' wreckage in honour of drowned shipmates. The hut was gloomy and oily, but a fire soon made the atmosphere cosy and cheerful. Hutchinson sang a sea shanty as he fried up a meal of penguin steaks and eggs he had taken from a large barrel of pickle in a corner.

The men ate their dinner by candlelight, and the flickering of light threw strange shadows around the hut, lighting up smoke-grimed walls. The men drew closer to the fire and piled on more of the driftwood, which burned with an eerie green flame.

Tom Hutchinson then declared that it was a sad day for the island when Captain Hasselburgh anchored his brig near the isthmus:

'Seals! When he landed here the whole place was alive with them!

'The noise he made about it when he got back to Sydney set a whole fleet of sealers racing out, each bent on getting rich quicker than the other fellow. They slaughtered every flipper that showed itself, not even sparing new-born 'pups'. It was a wicked business. One vessel, by the way, the same name as yours, the *Aurora*, carried back 35,000 pelts in one season.

In five years they clean wiped out every seal. Then laws were made to stop them from killing any more!



Hurley asked Harrison if any ships had been wrecked on Macquarie Island:

'Wrecked!' cried the sealer. 'Why the reefs are ships' graveyards and the rocks tombstones!'

Harrison fed more wreckage to the fire and observed that the night was wild. Hutchinson replied:

'Oh! It's the usual thing here. It's a hell of a place for weather...Why, even that wood you're stoking up the fire with, came from the Jessie Nichol. She was cast up on the rocks scarce a mile along the beach, on such a stormy black night as this.

Three were drowned, and mighty lucky were the others to get away. The kelp - that long snaky seaweed - grows very thick along the rocks near where the Jessie was wrecked. God help the man who gets tangled up in it.

'The Gratitude or what's left of her, which lies outside on the beach, belonged to the Company who runs this penguin oil business. They've lost three ships. The Clyde was the last one to come to grief - only a couple of months ago. She was to have taken us back home, that's why we are all marooned here now. That reminds me, I must tell you about the Eagle, it's the saddest story of the lot; went to pieces during a gale on the West Coast. Nine men and a woman saved themselves after a hell of a struggle. They lost everything and the ten of them all lived together in a cave for two years. What a hell of a life for a woman! Bad enough for men to live on sea-elephants and penguins all the time, but for a woman ...

'The cave is littered with bones and, inside you can see all round the mouldy grass that they slept on for beds. There's a cross too, to the woman, poor soul. She died the very day relief came.'

.... 'Sealing is not all the big adventure it's cracked up to be - 'darned rotten grub, cranky little cockleshells of boats, seas swarming with icebergs and reefs and cold Davy Jones always waiting to tuck you up in his locker below. Some of the old sailors used to say this was the port of the 'Flying Dutchman,' and that he lures ships to destruction on these reefs. Anyhow, there's enough wrecks to make one mighty superstitious about it. The

Lord Nelson, Beucleugh, Caroline, Countess Cimento, and I guess a whole lot of others never heard of, are all scattered about the reefs. It's an evil place.'



Macquarie Island's gravestone reefs and tombstone rocks.
Photo Geof Copson.

The three men eventually retired to bunks in the hut, but Hutchinson's haunting stories had made Hurley restless and he could not sleep. After the fire had died out and voices were quiet, rats swarmed over their blankets. The only way the three men could sleep was to rekindle the fire and for each of them to keep a three hour watch. **Hutchinson explained that rats had come ashore on shipwrecks and infested the whole island.**

Reference

Hurley, F, 1925, *Argonauts of the South*, Knickerbocker Press, New York & London, pp14-38.

Further **R**eadings

You can read about the rats of Macquarie Island in:

Scobie Pye - Rat Scientist

and stories of shipwrecks mentioned by Hutchinson in:

'An Unknown Waif of the Sea'

All Hopes on a Longboat - Caroline

Fact or Fiction? Lord Nelson Wreck

Lord Aids Ailing Countess

The Skeleton in the Hut

'Horizontal Icicles cling to the Wreck' - BenCleugh

'All hands safe - 'Tremendous battle with seas' - Gratitude

'I Cant Face Hatch' - Jessie Niccol

The Legend of the Eagle