

The Sealers' Shanty

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'Only Mrs Cowan's Little Boy Said Good-bye'

New Zealand sealer, Henry Charles Mellish, spent nearly two decades living and working on Macquarie Island. On at least one sealing expedition, his wife accompanied him and acted as cook for the sealing party. Early in 1891, the Mellishes made the luckiest decision of their lives when they decided to await the arrival of their employer, Joseph Hatch, on the *Gratitude* instead of accepting a passage to New Zealand aboard the *Kakanui*.

Abandoned on Macquarie Island

By 1890, New Zealand sealer, Henry Charles Mellish, had spent sixteen years sealing on Macquarie Island, with only short breaks of six to nine weeks off the island. In that year, his wife was also engaged as cook to the sealing party by businessman, Joseph Hatch. Her cooking skills were tested to the limit after August 1890, when the party had eaten their food stores and filled all available barrels with elephant seal oil.



Mrs Mellish, cook to one of Joseph Hatch's sealing parties.
Photo De Maus.

The sealers could no longer work after the barrels were filled. All they could do was forage for food and try to stay alive. Their clothing wore out, their boots were leaking and there was no relief ship in sight. Life had become harsh and boring.



Mr Mellish, Photo Karl Gerstenkorn

Unknown to Mellish and their gang, friends and relatives of the sealers had been lobbying the New Zealand government to send a relief ship to the island. The government agreed, and sent the *S.Y. Kakanui* to collect the sealing gang. The *Kakanui* arrived at the sealers' camp at Lusitania Bay in January 1891.

All but the Mellishes were 'mad to get away'. Mellish read the gang a letter Hatch had sent them. This letter attempted to persuade the sealers to remain until the *Gratitude* arrived. The sealers, however, considered that Hatch had shown no regard for their welfare, and was not to be trusted. They quickly boarded the *Kakanui*.

They were in such a hurry to leave the island that 'only Mrs Cowan's little boy', said 'good bye' to Mrs Mellish.

Henry Mellish advised the *Kakanui*'s master, Captain Best, to leave as quickly as possible since the sea was becoming rough. The *Kakanui* sailed off into heavy winds. In the middle of the night the wind changed direction and a gale sprang up that was worse than Henry Mellish had ever experienced in all his years on the island. For the next 16 hours, the wind blew down a fairly new storehouse, lifted stones bigger than marbles and shifted full oil casks. After the storm settled, the Mellishes walked back to the north end of the island. There they noticed that the *Kakanui* had called in there to allow the gang to collect their property.



Digester works at the Isthmus/Razorback Hill, n.d., photographer unknown, Australian Antarctic Division..

On 29 January 1891 the NZ government steamer *Hinemoa* arrived at Macquarie Island and Mellish said to his wife:

'That is the Hinemoa. The Kakanui has never arrived. She is lost in that gale. She has gone otherwise they would never have sent the government boat down there.'



The *Kakanui*. Illustration by D.I.M. Ross.

A thorough search of all the islands south of New Zealand failed to find any trace of the *Kakanui*.



Because there were nine men (or rather, seven men and two boys) and one woman in Mellish's gang, and because these sealers were stranded for a long time on Macquarie Island, we think that the '*Kakanui*' events may have become the confused with other unsubstantiated accounts of both the *Eagle* and *Lord Nelson* shipwrecks.

References

- De La Mare, A.J. 1990, *Joseph Hatch and the Loss of the Kakanui*, Invercargill Licensing Trust Charitable Trust, Invercargill.
Cumpston, J.S., 1968, Macquarie Island, Australian Antarctic Division, pp152-175.

Further Reading

The story of the *Kakanui* shipwreck is told in:
Lost without a trace - *Kakanui*
and the *Eagle* and *Lord Nelson* yarns in:
Lord Nelson Shipwreck - Fact or Fiction?
The Legend of the Eagle
Tom Hutchinson's Tragic Tales