

# The Sealers' Shanty

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## Alexander Miller, Convict Stowaway

Alexander Miller was a convict who escaped the penal colony of Van Diemen's Land by stowing aboard the sealing ship, *Caroline*. Miller spent two cold, hungry and lonely years battling for survival on Macquarie Island. Eventually he decided he'd prefer the relative 'comfort' of convict life in Tasmania to his 'freedom' on Macquarie Island. He asked the crew of the *Cyprus* to take him back to Hobart Town so he could face his punishment for escaping.

*What is the price of freedom?*



*'Study of a man turning slightly to the right'.*  
By Thomas Bock 1793-1855 Allport Library and Museum of  
Fine Arts, State Library of Tasmania

Alexander Miller was born in County Down, Ireland. He was convicted in 1817 and sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's Land. In 1823, while still a convict, Miller was working in the service of Thomas Tremble, of Pittwater, Van Diemen's Land. He was 28 years old when he escaped from Pittwater to Hobart Town and stowed aboard the *Caroline*, a sealing ship bound for Macquarie Island.

It is not clear how Miller went ashore after the *Caroline* anchored on the coast of Macquarie Island. He probably persuaded the crew to take him ashore in a rowboat, but it is also possible that he swam ashore.

The *Caroline* returned to Sydney with a full cargo of elephant seal oil, leaving Miller on Macquarie Island.



On her next trip to Macquarie Island, the *Caroline* was shipwrecked. Miller shared the island with the castaways for several months and may have been able to salvage some provisions that were washed ashore from the wreck of the *Caroline*.

Life as an outcast, foraging for survival on a remote, subantarctic island eventually became unbearable for Miller. After two years of struggling for survival, he decided that this dreadful 'freedom' was not worth its price. When the sealing brig, *Cyprus* offered to take the shipwrecked crew of the *Caroline*, back to Hobart, he asked to be taken on board.



When Miller returned to Van Diemen's Land, he received 50 lashes and was sent to the Maria Island penal settlement, where he no doubt found the climate more to his liking than on Macquarie Island.

The *Hobart Town Gazette* reported on 15 October 1825 that Miller had led a miserable existence on Macquarie Island, living on penguins and mutton birds:

*"which he acquired with difficulty on the rocky mountains, and for the feathers of which he occasionally obtained some worn-out garments of the sailors who touched at the island."*



Caroline Cove, Macquarie Island. Photo Geof Copson

Miller did not give up his attempts to escape from Van Diemen's Land, but *the next time he tried to stowaway it was on the 'Bombay', which was headed for warmer climates than Macquarie Island.*

Miller was captured before the *Bombay* left the Hobart docks. He was sentenced to three months in a chain gang and fourteen days on the tread wheel. He had many charges of drunkenness recorded against him before he received a conditional pardon in January 1845.



A bitter chill! Caroline Cove in winter. Photo Geof Copson

*Miller's story may have been the inspiration for a story reported in the Adelaide mail in 1947:*

*'.. a lone survivor of a wreck had lived for nearly three years on the island.*

*He was even worse off, because he had no fire - but he fed better because he devised a catapult for killing seals, which he ate raw; and he used their untanned hides for clothing.*

*When discovered this man had almost finished building an amazing coracle of sealskins stitched on to a framework of driftwood. He had made the craft with a worn-out jack-knife and belaying pin as his only tools.*

*He had intended to attempt a passage to the Auckland islands, hundreds of miles away, where a shipwreck depot had been established.'*



## References

Lennox, G., n.d. Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, 'Anecdotal Note - a convict on Macquarie Island', unpublished, quotes:

Archives of Tasmania, CSO 63/1 p.18; Pol. No. 27; CON 13/1 p91; CON 31/29 p.9; CON 32/1 p.313.

*Hobart Town Gazette*, 15 October 1825 p.2 col 2; May 1817, p.2, col 1; 30 Aug 1817 p.2 col.2; Supplement, 25 February 1825 c.4.

White, O, 1947, clipping supplied by J. Massey, Southland Museum,  
Invercargill.

***F*urther *R*eadin*g***

The story of this wreck of the Caroline is told in:

'All Hopes in a Longboat': *Caroline*