

# The Sealers' Shanty

*A Journal of Sealers' Stories*

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Volume 5

1877

## Chief Harpooner, Henry Whalley

Henry Whalley was born on Kangaroo Island in 1818 or 1819, the son of the unofficial 'governor' of Kangaroo Island. His mother was a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman who had been abducted to Kangaroo Island by sealers or whalers. Whalley died on Macquarie Island in 1877 after the wreck of the *Bencleugh*. He was buried by his shipmates on Macquarie Island in the ribs of 'an unknown waif of the sea'.



Impression of Henry Whalley by Belinda Kurczok

*A man of the old world  
and the new*

*T*rucanini, who died in 1876, is generally considered to have been the last of the tribal Tasmanian Aboriginal people. However, nineteenth century whalers and sealers captured a number of Tasmanian Aboriginal women and took them to live on Kangaroo Island. Some of these women survived Trucanini, and one of them may have been Whalley's mother.

We know very little about Whalley's mother except that she was closely related to William Lanne, a famous Tasmanian Aboriginal whaler. Whalley and Lanne were shipmates on the *Runnymede*. Whalley was a pallbearer at Lanne's funeral in 1869.



William Lanne, painting by H.J. Woodhouse, c.a. 1854.  
Tasmaniana Library, State Library of Tasmania.

Whalley's father is sometimes referred to as 'Robert' and sometimes 'Henry' 'Whallen', 'Wharley', 'Wallon' and 'Wally'. He sailed with Captain James Kelly to New Zealand on board the brig *Sophia* in 1817. Whalley's father went ashore with a party of sailors to a Maori village. The Maoris attacked and killed two crewmen. Wallen, made his way back to the *Sophia* where he and the rest of the crew battled with the Maoris. According to James Kelly's account, the crew of the *Sophia* shot the village chief the next day, sawed up forty-two canoes and set fire to the village before leaving.

Whalley's father settled on Kangaroo Island, with a community of ex-whalers

and sealers and their Aboriginal partners. He was one of the first unofficial settlers and the unofficial 'Governor' of Kangaroo Island. He had a fertile farm at Three Wells River and young Henry spent his boyhood amidst a flourishing vegetable garden, four acres of wheat, and stocks of pigs and fowls. Whalley's house was a neatly fenced 'A' frame of logs and bark. The family sold or traded their farm produce with crews of passing ships.

### *The South Australia Company takes over*



The farm where Henry Whalley grew up on Kangaroo Island, from J.S. Cumpston, *Kangaroo Island*.

When Henry Whalley was a boy, the South Australia Company took over the farm at Cygnet River. Although the Kangaroo Island residents considered Whalley's father to be the 'Governor' of Kangaroo Island, the government company refused to treat him with any respect. Wallen tried to start another farm on another part of the island but the Company made this very difficult for him.

Whalley's father obviously cared for his son, but saw that he had no

future on Kangaroo Island. After the South Australia Company took over, he sent his son to Hobart to get an education and a trade there.

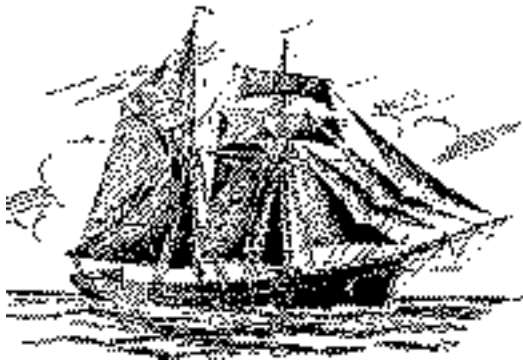
In 1856, Tasmanian Government records listed Henry Whalley as a ship owner in Hobart, but the record does not mention the name of his vessel.

John Thomson, owner of the *Benacleugh*, held Whalley in very high regard. He wrote that he had a kindly and cheerful disposition and was 'a great favourite with all on board'. Thomson thought that Whalley had 'great courage and self reliance'. Once Thomson admired 'some specially natty sailor work' that Whalley had been doing and Whalley replied:

*'a good man can do anything he makes up his mind to do, no matter what.'*

Thomson wrote that 'the recollection of this has since rallied me when in hard places more than once'.

Whalley dislocated his leg at the hip during a fierce storm at Macquarie Island, while aboard the *Benacleugh* in 1877. The next day his friends helped him ashore with the aid of a rope.



Sketch of topsail schooner by H. Underhill. Permission to reproduce by Brown, Son & Ferguson Publishers, Glasgow.

By the time Whalley came ashore he had lost all feeling in his legs. His friends helped him on a cold, miserable trip northward to some weather worn sealing huts. The next night, Whalley's young off-sider, George Baker, from Tasmania, offered him a cup of coffee. Whalley drank it and said: 'That is good; now I will have a long sleep'. He never woke from his sleep.



The huts where Whalley died, sketch J.S. Thomson.

When Whalley's shipmates tried to bury him, they struck the 'ribs' of an old fashioned sailing vessel, five feet deep in the shingle. His epitaph, inscribed in a wreckage from the *Benacleugh* was:

***'There, calmly let him sleep,  
not all the winds that blow,  
can shake his watch,  
and he shall keep  
a quiet watch below'***

Whalley was fifty eight years old when he died. He is probably still buried on Macquarie Island, in the ribs of what Thomson called 'An Unknown Waif of the Sea'.



This story has been prepared with kind assistance from Kangaroo Island researchers, Joan Huxtable, Rebe Taylor, Jean Nunn and Bev Willson, and in consultation with Greg Lehman and Julie Gough, Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, Hobart.

### References

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- Thomson, J.S.I. 1912, *Voyages and Wanderings in Far Off Lands and Seas*, London, 1912, pp139-153.
- Tasmanian Mail*, 9 March 1878, p11, col. 4, death notice

### Further Reading

A detailed account of the *Bencleugh* wreck is given in:  
[Horizontal Icicles Clung to the Wreck' - Bencleugh](#)

### Mysteries

What did Henry Whalley do after leaving Kangaroo Island and moving to Tasmania?

What was the name of his ship?

What was the name of the shipwreck Whalley's shipmates found on Macquarie Island?