

The Shipwreck Watch

A Journal of Macquarie Island Shipwreck Stories

Volume 7

1877

The Legend of the *Eagle*

Soon after the wreck of the *BenCleugh* in 1877, Captain J.S.I. Thomson spent five days walking around the island with two crewmen, 'Cockney' and Barker. In a bay on the northwest coast, they came across a ship's figurehead in the shape of a large eagle.

This report may have inspired the legend of the *Eagle*.

A walk around the island

Soon after the wreck of the *BenCleugh* at Middle Beach on Macquarie Island in August 1877, two crewmen wandered away from camp and became lost. Captain John Thomson, part-owner of the *BenCleugh* and two crewmen, Cockney and Barker spent five days walking around Macquarie Island looking for these men.

They came across the figurehead of a large eagle at what is now known as Eagle Cove.



An eagle figurehead carved by Martin Jeffery

Thomson also reported finding a quantity of logs, which he supposed to be Australian red cedar and some sperm candles.

Four months later, Captain Donald Sinclair visited Eagle Cove and noted:

'there is a cave in a large rock, on a low plain, which has once been inhabited, most likely by the unfortunate shipwrecked people that belonged to the vessel that was wrecked about there, as there is lots of wreckage about the beach, and an eagle that has been a figurehead.'



In 1911, sealer, Tom Hutchinson, told a story about the wreck of the *Eagle* shipwreck to members of Dr Douglas Mawson's Australian Antarctic Expedition. By that time, details of the *Eagle* shipwreck had become more elaborate:

"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..."

"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."



A sealer's grave on Macquarie Island.
Photo J.K. Ling. Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service,.

A similar account of the *Eagle* shipwreck was narrated by George Ainsworth in Sir Douglas Mawson's *Home of the Blizzard*. The most vivid account of this shipwreck, however, appeared in the *Adelaide Mail* in 1947:

'In the (eighteen) sixties a brig was wrecked off the promontory later named Wireless Hill, by the Douglas Mawson expedition of 1913.

Nine men and one woman got ashore through the mountainous combers, and lived for 26 months in a wet, shallow cave before they were rescued - gibbering skeletons, draped in blistered skin, their hair matted and their teeth loose with scurvy.

Their food had been mainly gulls and penguins' eggs, grass roots, shell fish, and an occasional wormy cod trapped by the receding tide in rock pools.

They had saved a few lucifer matches and managed to keep a fire going with the blubber of bull sea

elephants, killed in mating fights on the beaches.

The woman died the day the rescuing sealer hove in sight.

Her grave, marked by a cairn of stones, is near the site of the Mawson expedition huts on the hill.

The dried tussock with which the castaways covered the floor of their cave and the soot of their fire was still there in 1938.'

After extensive research, we have been unable to find any first hand account of an *Eagle* shipwreck, or a vessel of another name that may have carried an eagle figurehead, that was wrecked on Macquarie Island. We believe that the legend of the *Eagle*, may have grown from the tellings and re-tellings of campfire yarns. We also think it has become confused with another dubious Macquarie Island shipwreck: the '*Lord Nelson*'.

We did, however, find a record of a schooner, *Eagle*, which left Launceston in Tasmania for New Zealand early in 1850, then set out from Auckland for San Francisco in the United States of America. This *Eagle* was carrying a cargo of scantlings, shingles, palings, candles, flour and bran when she struck a reef at the mouth of New Zealand's Firth of Thames and was totally wrecked.

From this information, it would be easy to conclude that the wreckage of this schooner washed down to Macquarie Island. However, the

circumpolar current washes easterly. For the figurehead and other wreckage of the *Eagle* to have come from New Zealand, it must have washed around the world and ended up on Macquarie Island.

Perhaps the figurehead belonged to another vessel, wrecked somewhere to the west of Macquarie Island, and was swept by currents towards Macquarie Island.



Photo of another ship's figurehead, found on Macquarie Island in 1973.
Photo Bob Thompson.

References

- Ainsworth, G. 'Life on Macquarie Island', in D. Mawson, *Home of the Blizzard*, 1996 edition, p 344.
- Bateson, C. 1972, *Australian Shipwrecks Vol. 1, 1622-1850*, Reed, Sydney, p236.
- Broxam, G. and Nash, M., 1999, *Tasmanian Shipwrecks, Vol 1. 1797 - 1899*, Navarine Publishing, Canberra, p179.
- Cumpston, J. S 1968, *Macquarie Island*, Antarctic Division, Department of External Affairs, Australia, p106.
- Hurley, F, 1925, *Argonauts of the South*, Knickerbocker Press, London, pp29-30.
- Thomson, J.S.I., 1912, *Voyages and Wanderings in Far Off Lands and Seas*, London, p166.

Further Reading

The *Lord Nelson* Story is told in:

Fact or Fiction? - Lord Nelson Wreck,

You can read the story of another ship's figurehead which floated ashore on Macquarie Island in:

Captain Angel's Daughter? The Headless Figurehead

Mystery

We challenge you to discover the origin of the eagle figurehead found on Macquarie Island in 1877.