

The Shipwreck Watch

A Journal of Macquarie Island Shipwreck Stories

Volume 8

1891

‘The Jonah on Board’ - *Kakanui*

The *Kakanui* steamed out of Lusitania Bay, Macquarie Island in January 1891 after rescuing eight sealers who had been stranded on the island for the best part of a year. The *Kakanui* sailed into a storm and was never seen again.

A storm brews

Early in 1890, sealing businessman, Joseph Hatch, sent the *Arawua* to drop off a party of sealers on Macquarie Island. There were two boys and six men in the sealing party, in addition to the headsman, Henry Charles Mellish, and his wife, who had been engaged as a cook. Hatch did not tell the sealers when he would collect them, although they expected that their stay would be about six months.



Sealing businessman, Joseph Hatch.
Photo from J.S. Cumpston, *Macquarie Island*.

The gang worked steadily until August 1890, when they exhausted their fuel supplies and filled all their available barrels with seal elephant oil. At about the same time, they ran out of sugar, tea, coffee and tobacco, and their boots and clothing gave out. They foraged for wild food to add to their dwindling supplies of rice and split peas. Since there was no work to be done, they were 'mad to get away' from the island. Survival soon became a full time occupation for the sealers, and their life became harsh and boring.



Stripping blubber from an elephant seal. Photo C. Sandell, Australian Antarctic Diivision.

Hatch delayed sending a vessel to collect the gang because he was involved in selling the *Arawua*, which was too small for the sealing trade, and buying a new vessel. When he did buy a replacement, his new ketch, *Gratitude*, was damaged in a stormy passage from Invercargill to Sydney and had to be repaired.

Hatch delayed picking up the sealers even longer.

Nearly a year had passed since the gang had been dropped on the island and their relatives were worried about their safety. Jacob Ekhoﬀ, a former master of the *Arawua* bore a grudge against Hatch,

and started lobbying the New Zealand Government to send a relief ship. The Government chartered the small steam yacht, the *Kakanui* to bring the sealers home. A government official was also sent to observe whether Hatch had provided enough food for the sealers.

Hatch was in disgrace with the New Zealand Government and public because, while a member of the New Zealand Parliament a few years earlier, he had flouted the country's sealing regulations.

The New Zealand Government was not inclined to support Hatch's sealing ventures in any way. The *Kakanui's* master, Captain William Best, was therefore ordered not to bring any elephant seal oil back from the island. Hatch did not see what the fuss was about - as far as he was concerned, there was no problem with sealers living off the land. He disliked the adverse publicity and, as an exercise in public relations, lent a new whaleboat to assist the crew's landing. He offered Best his navigation charts.

The *Kakanui*. Illustration by De Maus.



Hatch insisted that Captain Best take a letter to his sealing gang. In the letter he asked Mellish to persuade the sealers to stay on for another fortnight until the *Gratitude* arrived. This would protect Hatch's investment in the elephant seal oil and ensure that all the party would be paid for their share of the oil they had collected. Hatch wrote that he regretted that the Government would not let him send them any supplies on the *Kakanui* and outlined plans to develop the oiling trade on the island.

The *Kakanui* was considered a good sea boat but she had never been far from the New Zealand coast. Many people, including Joseph Hatch, questioned her suitability for the voyage to Macquarie Island. Hatch wanted to travel to Macquarie Island aboard the *Kakanui* so he could talk to the sealers, but intended to remain on the island once he arrived. **He was convinced that the *Kakanui* would founder on the trip back to New Zealand. His last words to Ekhoﬀ as the *Kakanui* sailed from Invercargill were prophetic:**

'Ekhoﬀ, I'll never have the pleasure of seeing you again after you leave this wharf. You might prove to be the Jonah on board.'

The *Kakanui* steamed to into Lusitania Bay, Macquarie Island on 3 January 1891. Four crewmen and the government agent went ashore in Hatch's whaleboat. The government agent offered the sealers a free passage back to New

Zealand. This offer met with immediate enthusiasm from all but the Melishes. Henry Mellish read them the letter from Hatch, urging them to wait for the *Gratitude*. The sealers, however, considered that they had been shanghaied by Hatch, and declared that they would rather trust the Government. They promptly picked up their swags and climbed into the whaleboat. Mellish and wife decided to await the arrival of the *Gratitude*.

When the Kakanui left Lusitania Bay. A violent storm was brewing.

The vessel was never seen again. A thorough search of islands south of New Zealand failed to find any trace of the steam yacht.



King Penguins on Macquarie Island. Photo Geof Copson.

Hatch set up a '*Kakanui* Relief Fund', starting with a public meeting at Theatre Royal in Invercargill. He charged one shilling admission, with the proceeds going to the victims' families. The public

meeting gave him an opportunity try to win back public support for his penguin and sealing operations on Macquarie Island, but by then, New Zealand audiences were becoming wary of Hatch.



References

- De La Mare, A.J. 1990, *Joseph Hatch and the Loss of the Kakanui*, Invercargill Licensing Trust Charitable Trust, pp 3-50.
- Cumpston, J. S. 1969, *Macquarie Island*, Australian Antarctic Division, Melbourne, pp 152-175.

Further **R**eadings

The story of the Mellishes is told in:

'Only Mrs Cowan's Little Boy Said Goodbye' - The Mellishes

Mystery

Where the *Kakanui* foundered after leaving Macquarie Island is one of the island's mysteries.