

## Escapes from Macquarie Harbour penal settlement

Although many men did attempt to escape from Sarah Island, few were successful. The first attempted escape occurred on 4 March 1822, two months after the settlement was established. The two men were never heard of again. Six days later another escape party of six convicts met the same fate. Such was the price that many paid for attempting to escape from Sarah Island, but for some their bid for freedom resulted in remarkable adventures and often long periods of liberty.

The great majority of escapes occurred in the early years of the settlement, with 156 recorded between 1822 and 1828. Of these, over half died in the attempt. Despite much greater opportunities to do so, far fewer attempted escape in the last five years of the settlement.

### **The quest for the east**

Although the majority of escapees headed north up the coast, a few did undertake the treacherous journey across the wild, unknown mountain ranges of the west coast in an attempt to reach the settled regions of the east. Two convicts who successfully took this route were James Goodwin and Thomas

Connell, who slipped away from a pining party in a canoe they had secretly carved from Huon pine. The two men headed up the Gordon and Franklin rivers until forced to abandon their craft eight kilometres up the Franklin at an impassable waterfall. For four weeks the pair travelled by foot across the wild mountain regions of western Tasmania, entering areas that no white man had seen before. Goodwin was later captured near the settlement of Ouse. Connell, who had earlier parted company with Goodwin, was never seen again. After his capture, Goodwin was granted a pardon and employed in the service of the Surveyor General in recognition of his unique, first-hand knowledge of the western wilderness.

### **The cannibal Pearce**

On the 20 September 1822 an escape attempt by a party of eight prisoners resulted in Alexander Pearce becoming the first to reach the settled districts of the east. Pearce was captured after a brief period of liberty and upon his return to Macquarie Harbour he confessed to the cannibalism of other members of the escape party in order to ward off starvation. As the grisly

tale unfolded, Pearce related how the men had granted one of their next meals the opportunity to say prayers before eating him. Eventually, only Pearce and one other man, Bob Greenhill, remained alive. Greenhill had earlier said, perhaps jokingly, that he was so hungry he could eat a man! When Greenhill was finally overcome by tiredness and fell asleep, Pearce killed him and set out alone, taking with him a portion of Greenhill's thigh and arm.

There was insufficient evidence to try Pearce for murder. On his second escape, only a few weeks after he was returned to Macquarie Harbour, Pearce again killed his companion for food, despite having sufficient bread and salt meat with him at the time of his capture. Pearce was found guilty of murder and executed at Hobart Town on 19 July 1824.

### **Matthew Brady**

One of the best known prisoners to escape from Sarah Island was the flamboyant Matthew Brady. In June 1824 Brady and fourteen companions seized a boat and sailed to the Derwent estuary before taking to the

bush. For nearly two years Brady led one of the most notorious of Tasmania's bushranger gangs. For some settlers he was a folk hero, a chivalrous man who rarely used violence and took every opportunity to protect the reputation of women.

The Government moved to bring Brady and his gang to justice by offering a 25 guinea reward. Brady responded by posting a notice offering 20 gallons of rum for the capture of Lt. Governor Arthur. Brady eventually met his fate after being captured by a group of settlers led by John Batman, who later founded Melbourne. He was hanged before a crowd of well-wishers and weeping women on 4 May 1826.

### **The *Frederick* escape**

Perhaps the most remarkable escape attempt occurred after the official closure of the penal settlement. Twelve convicts, under the supervision of several soldiers and Master Shipwright David Hoy, remained behind to complete the fitting out of the brig, *Frederick*. Despite the fact that specific orders concerning the completion of vessels in the yards had mysteriously been mislaid, the men dutifully carried out their tasks with 'great propriety, executing Mr. Hoys' orders with promptitude and alacrity'.

After the launch of the *Frederick* in January 1834, ten of the convicts seized the ship. They landed their overseers on the beach, leaving with them half of

their supplies. The convicts then sailed the *Frederick* south of New Zealand and onto the distant coast of South America. Six weeks later they abandoned the *Frederick* off the coast of Chile and rowed the ship's whaleboat the remaining 80 km to shore.

Passing themselves off as wrecked sailors, the men were welcomed into the community and several soon assumed positions as shipwrights and respected members of the community. Several married local women, while six of the men made a further escape to America and Jamaica.

Ultimately, the long arm of British law caught up with the four remaining men, bringing them back to face the Hobart gallows in 1837. At their trial, two of the escapees, William Shires and James Porter argued that they were guilty only of stealing a 'floating bundle of wood and other materials'. As the *Frederick* had never been registered, there was some doubt in the Chief Justice's mind as to what legally constituted a ship. Further, the ship had been seized in enclosed waters and not on the high sea — a requisite for charges of Piracy. It was these legal technicalities which saved the men from the gallows. Nonetheless, the men were transported to Norfolk Island for life. The story of the *Frederick* has been dramatised by Richard Davey in his play, *The Ship that Never Was*.

### **The final escape**

For many men the burdens of Sarah Island were intolerable. Particularly during the early phase of the settlement, some deliberately committed murder in order to be sent to the gallows and escape once and for all from the tortured lives they led. One hapless prisoner by the name of Trenham confessed that his motive for stabbing another prisoner was to get out of this world. He reasoned:

'I would be sent to Hobart Town and tried for my life; if found guilty, the parson would attend me, and I would be sure of going to heaven.'

Unfortunately for Trenham, the man he stabbed recovered and Trenham was tried, flogged and forced to continue living in the world he so desperately wished to escape. Yet for others, their desires were realised and after being found guilty of murder they were hung in Hobart Town. For them it was the final escape.

### **Further reading**

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