

European explorers of the Macquarie Harbour region

The Dutch explorer Abel Janszoon Tasman was the first European to sight the west coast of Tasmania, just north of the entrance to Macquarie Harbour. It was to be another 173 years until this wild and mountainous region was further explored. The initial exploration by sea of Macquarie Harbour was motivated by the desire to seek new resources for the fledgling colony. The search for suitable land for agriculture provided the impetus for the first attempts to cross the mountainous regions of the west, but it was to be a long time before an overland link was established between the settled east and the west.

James Kelly

The first European to 'discover' Macquarie Harbour was Captain James Kelly. A first generation Australian, Kelly was born in Parramatta in 1791, a mere three years after the First Fleet had arrived in New South Wales. It is believed that he was conceived aboard the transport, *Queen*, as it carried its cargo of convicts to the new colony — among them his mother, Katherine Devereaux. Kelly gained his experience as a seaman

during his voyages into the southern oceans in search of the fur seals that provided oil and fur for the new colony. On one such journey Kelly found himself stranded on Macquarie Island for 18 weeks after his ship ran aground.

The voyage that was to lead to Kelly's discovery of Macquarie Harbour was commissioned by Thomas William Birch, a merchant whose primary motive for financing the trip was to locate a source of Huon pine timber. According to Kelly's journal, Birch accompanied him in the schooner *Henrietta Packet* to Port Davey, a discovery that they named in honour of the then Governor of Van Diemen's Land.

Kelly then continued to sail up the west coast in the ship's whaleboat, *Elizabeth*, accompanied by four oarsmen. Their boat was only one third the length of today's Gordon River Cruise boats. They arrived at the narrow entrance of Macquarie Harbour on 28 December 1815, and named the new discovery in honour of the Governor of New South Wales, Lachlan Macquarie.

There is some confusion as to whether Birch was with Kelly at Macquarie Harbour.

Birch's account claims that he was, while Kelly's journal, written some time after the event, makes no mention of Birch accompanying him.

On the 30 December Kelly continued further up the harbour, where he came upon the mouth of a large river, which he named the Gordon, after 'Mr Gordon of Pittwater, who had kindly lent the boat for this particular trip of discovery'. Kelly noted the Huon pines that grew along the rivers' banks, an observation that was to be influential in the decision to establish the Sarah Island penal settlement seven years later.

Early exploration

Exploration was perhaps the last thing on the minds of the officers and convicts as they struggled to establish a penal settlement on Sarah Island in 1822. The forays that did take place were largely to find areas suitable for growing the crops needed to fend off the constant threat of starvation, or to locate natural resources, such as Huon pine, for use in

the Sarah Island shipyards. Early reconnaissance of the Gordon River was undertaken by Commandant Butler, who pushed up the river as far as the first impassable rapids, some 31 kilometres from the mouth. For one member of the party, Thomas Lempriere, there were 'few if any rivers in the Colony which afford such grand and imposing scenery.'

The rugged terrain of the west coast afforded a formidable challenge to early land explorers. Among the first Europeans to venture far inland was the explorer James Hobbs. In February 1824, he climbed the D'Aguilar Range at the southern end of the Harbour. From the summit he lamented, 'nothing appeared but one mountain towering over another'. Hobbs was not impressed with the farming potential of the Macquarie Harbour region.

Goodwin and Connolly

Two unwitting explorers of the wild river country to the east of Macquarie Harbour were the convicts James Goodwin and Thomas Connolly. In March 1828, the two prisoners absconded from a pining party on the lower Gordon River, and travelled up the lower Franklin, upper Denison and upper Gordon rivers. In the three weeks that it took the pair to successfully traverse to the settled east, they had become the first Europeans to encounter many of the

major features of the rugged wilderness that so effectively isolated the Macquarie Harbour penal settlement. Goodwin's own account of their route suggests that they crossed the Prince of Wales Range and entered the Vale of Rasselas near the southern shoulder of the Denison Range and on to Wylds Craig — wilderness areas that today attract only the hardiest of bushwalkers. Goodwin was pardoned in 1829 and later became an indispensable member of a party involved in the exploration of the interior.

Opening the west

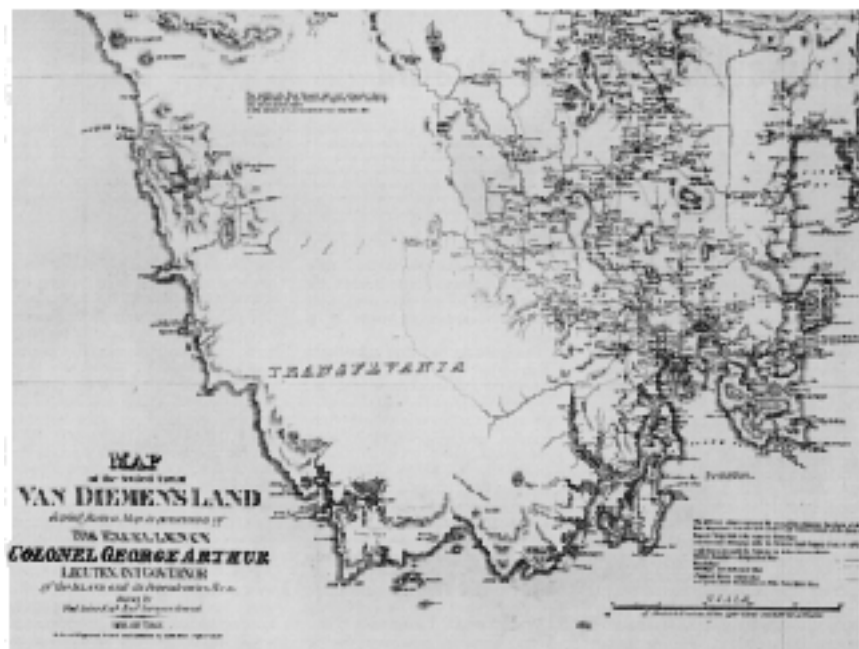
The road which had been envisaged between the settled east and the west had its origins in the track cut by James Calder from Lake St Clair to the lower Gordon to facilitate the journey of Sir John and Lady Franklin in 1842. Although the purpose of the track was not primarily

for exploration of the area, Calder did become the first European to sight many of the major features of the upper Franklin region, such as Deception Range and the Jane River. The track, which had taken Calder 32 weeks to cut, was to later become the first of the mineral access routes into western Tasmania. It was the mineral boom that was to lead to the establishment of a network of roads and railways in the Macquarie Harbour region and the establishment of towns that were to briefly flourish around the shores of the harbour.

Further reading

Binks, C. J. (1989). *Explorers of Western Tasmania*. Mary Fisher, Launceston.

Pink, K. (1984). *Through Hells Gates*. Published by the Advocate Newspaper, Burnie.



Maps of the time showed the unexplored interior of the south-west as 'Transylvania'. (Courtesy of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery)