

# The Pioneer



*Aborigines using fire to hunt kangaroos*  
(Joseph Lycett, c1820) [National Library of Australia]



AUSTRALASIAN

*Pioneers' Club*

# Contents

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**THE PIONEER** **3**

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**LORD BEAUCHAMP ...  
AND THE CLUB'S BRUSH WITH FAME** **7**

---

**THE WRECK OF THE *CATHERINE ADAMSON*** **17**

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# The Pioneer

Last July *The Pioneer* recalled diplomat and author George Ivan Smith’s averment that Australia’s unforgiving terrain “fought with flood and fire to force [the pioneers] back.”<sup>1</sup> In the months which followed that issue a black summer served up solid reminders of both, albeit in reverse order, with only the rains of mid January finally extinguishing the rampant fires which razed the land and ruled the nightly news. In the aftermath, recrimination about responsibility ... global warming versus ground fuel loads ... has revived debate about how the indigenous inhabitants coped before our pioneer forebears arrived.

In August 2013 *The Pioneer* reprinted *How the Aborigines Managed Fire*, a March 2013 Discovery Luncheon address given to the Union, University & Schools Club by Bill Gammage, then an adjunct professor at the Australian National University and author of *The Biggest Estate on Earth*.<sup>2</sup> Professor Gammage declared that whereas “non-aborigines see [fire as] a threat, capable of destroying people and property with ungovernable fury”<sup>3</sup> (a word picture, surely, of the awful scenes which saturated television screens through December 2019 and early January 2020), “aborigines know [fire as] an ally.” Thus, with “fire-or-no-fire” they managed their environment through controlled burns, reducing fuel and protecting habitat by burning in patches to maintain a grass under-storey and lure grazing animals. When Europeans displaced them as managers of the landscape the frequency and intensity of fires increased, so that “landscape fire almost completely changed its character after 1788; fire, from being tame, became wild.”<sup>4</sup>

This is not a unique or tendentious theory. Gammage was recently joined by Professor Stephen Pyne, author of *Burning Bush, A Fire History of Australia*,<sup>5</sup> David Bowman, Professor of Fire Geography and Fire Science at the University of Tasmania, and ANU Emeritus Professor of History, Tom Griffiths, co-author of *Living with Fire*,<sup>6</sup> in an ABC Radio discussion of how Australia has been shaped by fire management ... or lack of it.<sup>7</sup> In Griffiths's words:

“This is a continent uniquely dominated by fire ... we are the fire continent of the globe ... it is the place where the greatest firestorms in the world take place ... When [Captain] Cook sailed along the east coast he noticed the number of human fires, he called it a continent of smoke ... other European navigators observed that fire is at the heart of aboriginal civilization, they farmed, celebrated, hunted, cooked, fought with fire ... and so over millennia ... they changed the vegetation of the continent.”

Gammage exemplifies how the aborigines would “mosaic the land”: to create grass next to forest, to provide both feed and habitat for different animals, they used “cool fires,” burning at night or early mornings when dew helped cool down the fire so that flames were low and the wind often gentle, allowing aboriginal people to direct the burn. They did not ignite the tree canopy” ... (think here, in contrast, of the ‘crown fires’ which cremated so much wild life in December-January) ... “they did not bake the seeds and nutrients in the soil or destroy root systems, they charred only the bottom bark, not the logs lying on the ground or habitat trees.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast, although some settlers recognized a need to burn, they burned in summer and during the day, when plants sweat out flammable oils, producing a fire which was too hot and promoted the growth of scrub. As early as 1810 James Macarthur was to note the development of a scrubby landscape which had become thick with young trees but no grass. Bowman concurred that “Australia’s flammable vegetation diversified,” so while cool fires helped reduce the density of plants like bracken fern or casuarinas which produce extreme fuel loads, the hot fires of western-style hazard reduction burns encourage their re-growth. “Cultural burning,” concludes Gammage, “is *proactive*, while hazard reduction burning is *reactive*.”

To aborigines fire was “as much a friend in the bush as in the fireplace,”<sup>9</sup> Gammage explains, but the British settlers, says Griffith,

“had no experience of free range fires, they were used to fire as something to keep warm and cook with, they did not see it ranging across the landscape, they did not know the power of the element they had unleashed.”

On Black Thursday, 6 February 1851, with five million hectares, one quarter of the colony of Victoria, alight, ash was being carried 65 kilometres on scorching winds from Mount Macedon to and beyond Melbourne to fall on ships at sea, while “human fugitives fled to water, wherever it could be found, and stood in it, breathing with difficulty the suffocating atmosphere.”<sup>10</sup> By the time of the Victorian Black Friday fires in January 1939, Europeans (in the finding of Royal Commissioner Judge Leonard Stretton) still had not lived long enough [in Australia] to accumulate wisdom about the natural rhythms of the Australian bush.<sup>11</sup> Seventy years later, 2009’s Black Saturday fires in Victoria were, to Griffiths, almost a re-run of 1939:

“When I was coming to terms with Black Saturday I kept thinking of Black Friday; even though I recognized Black Saturday as a climate change enhanced fire I was more disturbed by the familiarity of the fire ... it was 1939 all over again.”

Gammage agrees:

“After Victoria’s February 2009 fires, I saw on TV how joyous people were at the bush regenerating green. I was dismayed. Another fire cycle was beginning, to end in another killer fire 20-40 years on.”<sup>12</sup>

In the event he had to wait only ten years. On 31 December 2019, 169 years after their 1851 Black Thursday, Victorians in the town of Mallacoota were again fleeing to a beach under blood-red skies, camping on wharves and boarding boats to escape bushfires racing towards the coast.

Watkin Tench, a captain lieutenant in the NSW Marine Corps and author of *Sydney’s First Four Years*,<sup>13</sup> noted that every small aboriginal group had a fire stick. Governor Phillip reported to Lord Sydney, the Colonial Secretary, that “[the aborigines] are seldom seen without fire, or a piece of wood on fire, which they carry with them from place to place.” Explorer Ludwig Leichhardt recognized fire as part of the aborigines’ “systematic management” of country,<sup>14</sup> with local expertise crucial because of local plant variety from spinifex to rainforest. Griffiths agrees that answers “must be local, ecological and historical” and cites mid 20th

century controlled burning of the jarrah forests of Western Australia to support this theme. But he acknowledges that “with rapidly rising average global temperatures and climate change upon us, the windows for controlled burning are narrowing and the times in which we can do it are becoming fewer and fewer.”

“Making fire an ally works,” says Gammage, but “non-Aborigines today battle to control fuel, maintain diversity and balance species.”<sup>15</sup> Pyne sums up:

“The firestick is a point of great continuity in Australian history and I hope Australians can find a way to bring the firesticks in their various reincarnations together ... to exercise stewardship over a very fire prone land. You’re not going to do it with air tankers ... you have to do it with fire.”

*John Lanser*

- 1 Introduction to the reprint of Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life*, Collins, 1953.
- 2 Allen & Unwin, 2011.
- 3 Gammage, *How the Aborigines Managed Fire* in *The Pioneer*, August 2013, page 10 at page 11.
- 4 *Loc cit*
- 5 University of Washington Press; revised edition, July 1998.
- 6 CSIRO Publishing, 2013.
- 7 *Fire in the Australian Landscape*, Rear Vision, Radio National, 2 February 2020. Quotations otherwise unreferenced are from this programme.
- 8 *Cool burns: Key to Aboriginal fire management* - Creative Spirits, retrieved from <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/land/aboriginal-fire-management>. A visual exposition of cool fires was demonstrated in *Fighting Fire with Fire*, Australian Story, ABCTV, 13 April 2020.
- 9 Gammage, *op cit*, page 9.
- 10 Quoted from *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*.
- 11 Report of Royal Commission into January 1939 Bush Fires, Public Record Office of Victoria, VPRS 1163.
- 12 Gammage, *op cit*, page 14.
- 13 Library of Australian History reprint, 1979.
- 14 Russell-Smith & ors (eds): *Culture, Ecology and Economy of Fire Management in North Australian Savannas*, CSIRO Publishing, 2009 at page 27.
- 15 Gammage, *op cit*, page 15.

# Lord Beauchamp ... and the Club's brush with fame

The Club's most distinguished Honorary Member *by far* has been the immensely wealthy, aesthete **William Lygon**, 7th Earl of Beauchamp, KG, KCMG, CB, KSt.J, PC, sometime Chancellor of the University of London and 20th Governor of NSW 1899-1900. He carried the Sword of State at **King George V's** Coronation.

His visits-in-exile to Sydney 1930-1938 and the accompanying sex scandals form the key background story to Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel of a doomed aristocratic family – *Brideshead Revisited*. Apart from **Aloysius** the teddy bear (who played himself), **Laurence Olivier** took the Lord Beauchamp/Lord Marchmain role in the 1980s award winning television series of the same title.

Lord Beauchamp lived a successful double-life until his visit to Sydney in 1930 brought to official attention a matter of shared beds and King George V's response: *I thought men like that shot themselves*. It is a tale of many pleasant hours at Bondi Surf Life Saving Club; curious activities at *Carthona*, Darling Point; a 1936 Sydney society divorce with several gentlemen's names suppressed by the Court; and the wife later suing Lord Beauchamp for damages of approximately \$2.5M for the alienation of her former husband's affections. Throughout this, he was an Honorary Member of the **Australasian Pioneers' Club**.



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The *Brideshead Revisited* characters drawn from the real life figures  
The Hon. Hugh Lygon - Beauchamp's alcoholic, homosexual second son (left);  
Lord Beauchamp (centre);  
Evelyn Waugh (right)

But let us start at the beginning.

Lord Beauchamp inherited his title and an extraordinary fortune in 1891 at the tender age of 19. At the age of 26, with only a modest civic and Parliamentary career behind him and still a bachelor, he was (in the words of Hilaire Belloc) sent out to govern NSW. Accompanied by 100 crates of art and an unmarried sister, he arrived in Sydney in May 1899. His selection to be Governor, unmarried at 26, is usually described as ‘*a surprise*’. Closer observation of his weekend disappearances to Brighton and his charity work among the youth of the East End might suggest that the far off posting to Australia was to remove him from temptations and help him settle down as it were.

Bored with the conventional Vice-Regal rounds, Beauchamp sought out the ranks of local artists and writers to the confused delight of Sydney Bohemia. **George Augustine Taylor** in 1918 wrote a fond memoir of the rackets after hours *Dawn and Dusk* supper club and described the Governor as slipping away incognito to its nocturnal gatherings. He described Beauchamp as a “*gorgeously-dressed individual, full of fun giving preference to brains over cash*”.



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William Lygon, 17th Earl of Beauchamp

Leading *Bulletin* writer and founder of the *Dawn and Dusk* club, **Victor Daley**, wrote a fun piece in June 1900 in the *Australian Star* of his delight at being invited to attend a levee at Government House. Under the headline Rosy-Cheeked Footmen, he wrote “*Lord Beauchamp deserves great credit for his taste in footmen...I was piloted to my seat by a pretty, peach-cheeked gentleman, in a court suit of black velvet, adorned with buttons of cut steel, and with a cunning little Court sword hanging at his side...I may see here that the most striking feature of the vice-regal ménage is the youthfulness of all its members...*” All up, Daley loved the special musical presentations, the sumptuous supper and concluded, as an ordinary journalist unused to such things, that it had been a great evening.

Tiring of his sojourn in the colonies and using the public excuse of Government House needing to be renovated to make way for an incoming new Governor-General, Beauchamp left his post early in October 1900 [between 1901-1917 NSW Governors had to live at Cranbrook, Bellevue Hill].

Back in London, Beauchamp married the sister of the bovine **Duke of Westminster**, the richest man in Britain, and sired seven children, 1903-1916.

In quick order on his return, Beauchamp was made a Privy Counsellor (1906), Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports (1913) and a Knight of the Garter (1914). He served in the War Cabinet (1914-1915) and was a close personal friend of Asquith



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Lord Beauchamp (centre), in a family group photograph at his estate Madresfield Court in the 1920s



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Lord Beauchamp at his civic height

and Baldwin. After the War, he became Leader of the diminished Liberal Party in the House of Lords (1924-31). Beauchamp was appointed Chancellor of London University in 1929.

None of this distracted Beauchamp from his extra-curricular life. His grand country estate had many rooms and many stable hands. Walmer Castle at Dover also provided discreet opportunities for weekends away with London thespians and local fishing lads. His double life was an open secret in higher society, but was officially overlooked. Apart from his social links with the Royal Family and the unedifying prospect of a public scandal, Beauchamp was also still entitled to the ancient right of trial by the House of Lords.

But always, festering in the background, his brother-in-law was collecting evidence of his double life and pushing to have him charged. The violently homophobic Duke of Westminster would refer to Beauchamp as '*my Bugger-in-Law*'.

By mid-1930, aware that the Duke was closing in and conveniently claiming ill-health, Beauchamp resigned his public positions (except for Lord Wardenship of the Cinque Ports) and embarked on a grand world tour abroad. He travelled with



Lord Beauchamp receiving his Hon. LLD at the Great Hall, University of Sydney

a young aspiring Liberal politician **Robert Bernays** as Private Secretary and an attractive valet from the staff at his country estate. To the startled surprise of the newly-appointed (May 1930) NSW Governor, the wandering Earl included Sydney and Canberra in his world tour. **Sir Philip Game** was a conventional senior Service Officer and no doubt discreet cables were sent to London enquiring as to how much red carpet was to be rolled out and any special interests the Earl might have. Replies most probably gave Sir Philip something of a diplomatic heads-up.

Arriving in August 1930, Beauchamp took Sydney Society by storm. He was the first Governor ever to return on a private visit. He had more prestigious titles than any colonial could imagine and the memories of 1899-1900 burnished bright. The ever-innocent **University of Sydney** quickly honoured him with an Honorary LL.D. The **Australasian Pioneers' Club** elected him an Honorary Member.

Unfortunately for everyone, Beauchamp's Sydney hosts spotted that he was sharing his bed with the valet and/or Bernays. It was indicated that on his forthcoming visit to the Bush Capital he should leave his travelling companions behind, expect to stay at the Hotel Canberra and expect to be accompanied by 71-year old Major-General James Mackay. London was necessarily alerted to the Sydney bedroom

arrangement by officials (if only for self-protection) or by Westminster's private detectives in hot pursuit.

After seeing the Melbourne Cup, Beauchamp departed Australia for Vancouver in November 1930. In a farewell press interview, he cheered everyone up by observing that he had not had a dull moment during his two months in Sydney and that he had found "*the greatest delight in shooting the breakers and entering into all the beach sports at Bondi.*" He sent an autographed photo to the Bondi Life Savers' Club members as a "*memento of the pleasant hours he had spent among them.*"

Back in London, Westminster pounced. The official embarrassments in Sydney gave him the final ammunition he needed.

The Duke presented a dossier to his unimaginative sister, who promptly had a breakdown, fled the Madresfield estate and sued for divorce. Westminster next went to King George V, who allegedly replied that '*he thought men like that shot themselves*'.

Days later, three Knights of the Garter arrived at Madresfield and advised Beauchamp in effect that the King wanted him to consider his options (preferably by midnight). He caught the night train to the Continent and began his travels anew with the German spas, the Riviera, Tahiti and Sydney on his programme. Exile avoided both Royal and political embarrassment of a criminal trial at the House of Lords. [Readers may recall that Peers could still claim the right of trial by their Peers – until 1935, – when motor rally enthusiast Lord Clifford disputed a charge of dangerous driving.]

News of these developments was closely held, not unlike the later treatment of King Edward VIII's affair with Wallis Simpson. It was quite useful to Beauchamp that his loyal daughter **Sibell** was the newspaper tycoon Lord Beaverbrook's lover.

In far off Australia people still largely accepted the cover story of further travel being required for reasons of health. In February 1932, the *Sydney Morning Herald* indicated that this return visit to Australia was part of a health tour for his troubled heart condition. Also writing of the happy news of Beauchamp's anticipated return, the *Sun* observed that, on his previous visit, the Bondi Beach Surf Club had almost been described as his headquarters while in Sydney and that members were



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Lord Beauchamp and his pals at Bondi Beach

“looking forward to more fun on the beach with their pal the Earl.” He always ensured that there was a keg of beer sent to them at Christmas.

Beauchamp’s other athletic enthusiasm while in Sydney was the manly pursuit of boxing. He was a regular at the Stadium, Rushcutters Bay and there became an acquaintance of colourful Sydney sporting and theatrical entrepreneur, **Hugh McIntosh**, and **Percy Dawson**, who owned the fashionable *Ambassadors* night spot in the basement of the Strand (re-birthed in the 1950s as *Chequers*). It was probably to assist McIntosh, who was in one of his periodic financial difficulties, that Beauchamp journeyed to Springwood to open a rough 9-hole golf course next to McIntosh’s *Bon Accord* holiday resort in February 1933 (now the Springwood Golf Club).

Beauchamp was accompanied on his 1933 Blue Mountains expedition by his second son, the Hon. **Hugh Lygon**, whose recent bankruptcy in England and whose struggles with alcoholism and his own homosexuality recommended a period of time-out in Australia (under the supervision of his father).



The Hon. Hugh Lygon



Carthona, Darling Point

Hugh Lygon was the role model for **Sebastian Flyte** in Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited*. In the novel, Sebastian fled to Morocco which doubled in the novel for the Eastern Suburbs fleshpots of Sydney. 1933 Springwood, however, is unlikely to have been the inspiration for Tangiers no matter what might be said of it today.

During the 1932-33 summer visit, Beauchamp's Private Secretary was the young **George Bellingham Roberts**, whom he had met earlier on the French Riviera. Beauchamp took a lease upon the waterfront property *Carthona*, Darling Point – suitably grand and suitably private.

For reasons best known to the parties concerned, in 1933 Beauchamp encouraged his private secretary Roberts to marry an unworldly, but aspirant Sydney socialite, **Belle Finlayson**. They initially lived at *Carthona*, in the absence of Beauchamp, who had continued after the wedding on his travels.

The marriage was a disaster, ending in a lurid divorce in 1936, with the bride claiming that the physical side of the marriage had lasted only one night; that there had been unnatural goings on at parties in the boatshed at *Carthona*; casual nudity between Robert and his male friends; and readings from

D.H. Lawrence's then pornographic *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Windeyer KC and Shand KC appeared respectively for the parties in the proceedings before a special jury of four. Further details can be found online at TROVE in that newspaper of record, *Truth*, 22 November 1936.

Roberts left Sydney quietly in January 1937 for the Riviera.

With *Carthona* no longer available and the Roberts having gone their separate ways, Beauchamp next leased **Frank Packer's** house at 78 Victoria Road, Bellevue Hill. With some doors probably closing on him after the 1936 Roberts divorce, he purchased a large mansion at nearby 8 March Street atop Bellevue Hill and set about having it redecorated to give himself a permanent Sydney bolt hole on his annual circumnavigation of the holiday spots of the wealthy.

He returned hurriedly to England in late 1936 to attend to the funeral of his second son, Hugh (see Sebastian in *Brideshead Revisited*) in a car accident. A Tiger Moth plane was revved up at the airport in case the brother-in-law Duke of Westminster tried to have arrested him at the graveside. His daughter Sibell, through Lord Beaverbrook, had ensured that, in all the circumstances, no official action would be taken. The death of King George V earlier the same year had also complicated the legal standing of the earlier warrants.

The final denouement in this sad story was taken by Belle Finlayson. In July 1937 she had a Supreme Court writ issued against Beauchamp for £25,000 (for the alienation of her husband's affections). It may have been the action of a woman scorned, but it may also have been a device by others in the hope that it would encourage Beauchamp not to return to Australia. In September 1938 *Smith's*



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George Bellingham Roberts and his bride, Belle Finlayson at Carthona on their wedding day



*The Beauchamp Hotel, Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, Sydney*

*Weekly* reported that Beauchamp's 'friends were surprised' by his decision to return to Australia in the summer. As if to remind readers, the next story made reference to Finlayson's writ and, obliquely, to his being a frequent visitor to the Bondi Life Saving Club rooms.

Beauchamp was on his way back to Australia in December 1938 when he died of cancer in his suite at the Waldorf Astoria, New York, in the presence of a daughter, **Dorothy**, and his heir, **Lord Elmley**. Beauchamp's private secretary at this time was **David Smythe**, who was left the March Street mansion. It was subsequently sold to **Jack Massie**.

Sadly, we may never know the identities of Messrs A, B and C, whose names were suppressed in the 1936 divorce case and the Club's official History draws a veil across any visits Beauchamp might have made to its 169 Phillip Street clubhouse during 1930-1937. If only those walls could talk.....

But, next time you are in Oxford Street and passing the Beauchamp Hotel (renamed in 1900 in his honour as Governor), near Taylor Square, think kindly of our most distinguished Honorary Member. He was a devoted father and genial company. He just made some colourful choices in Love.

***Robert Whitelaw***

# The Wreck of the *Catherine Adamson*

The *Dunbar* is a household name in the Club. Not so the *Catherine Adamson*, notwithstanding both ships foundered in the vicinity of Sydney Heads just nine weeks apart, the sinkings separately took the lives of two brothers, and victims of both disasters share a common tomb in the Camperdown cemetery ... yet the *Adamson* catalysed more controversy at the time than did the *Dunbar*.

## The ship

The *Catherine Adamson* was a three masted, single decked Aberdeen clipper, carvel built in 1855 by Alexander Duthie & Co of Aberdeen for Henry Adamson of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. At 886 tons she was smaller than the *Dunbar* (a Blackwall frigate of 1320 tons), but clipper ships had a larger total sail area and were built for speed. Their boom years began in 1843, following growing demand for more rapid delivery of tea from China, and continued with the discovery of gold in California and Australia. In 1857 the *Adamson* won the title “Queen ship” after setting a new record for a return voyage to the UK, having departed Sydney on 26 March and arrived in London 68 days later.

On Friday 23 October 1857 she was on her third voyage to Sydney with 34 crew, eight passengers and a general cargo of silk, cotton, muslin, parasols, hats, jewellery and perfumes plus 45,000 litres of rum, 22,500 litres of brandy, 7,000 litres of spirits, 20,000 litres of wine and 150 barrels of ale ... earning the title “the booze barge.” Her captain was George Stuart, and he was 87 days out from Falmouth (Cornwall) when he met squalls off Botany Bay. At 9pm he anchored outside Sydney Heads and signalled for a pilot.

## The pilot

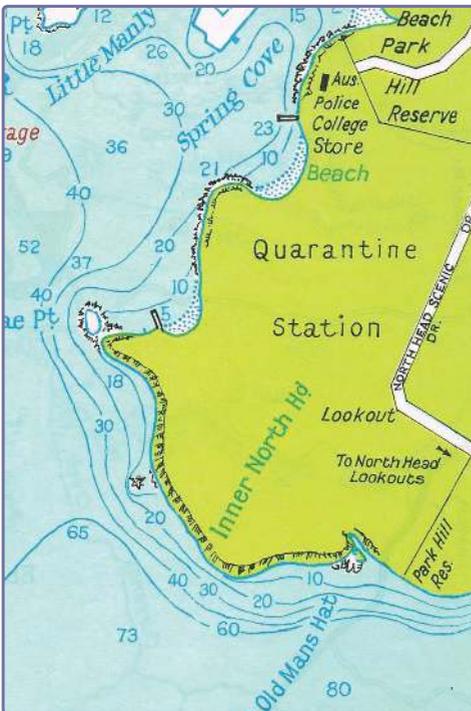
John Charles Hawkes was aged 48. He arrived in the colony in 1838 as chief officer of the *Lady Fitzherbert* and afterwards commanded several English and colonial vessels before spending almost five years as a pilot at Sydney Heads. He boarded the *Adamson* at about 9.30pm. The sea was relatively calm and there was a moon.

## That night

Captain Stuart, cognizant of the *Dunbar* disaster nine weeks earlier, was troubled by a strong westerly wind blowing waves on to North Head and wanted to put further out to sea. Hawkes argued that rather than waiting for a really nasty gale to arrive and perhaps keep the *Adamson* out for more than a week, incurring enormous expense, the better move was to sail for the port immediately. He believed a flood tide due at 11.50pm would counter the adverse wind, enabling him to tack around inner north head into Spring Cove where he could either await fair wind to proceed to Sydney or, if bad weather persisted, obtain help from a tug. His will prevailed and the ship headed for the entrance. For the second time in fewer than ten weeks a decision which would end tragically.

The schooner *Vanquish* later reported that it and the *Adamson* entered the Heads together with the true wind west but veering in squalls from south west to north west. The two vessels made several tacks and about 10.30pm the *Vanquish*, then on starboard tack, crossed the bows of the *Adamson*. Shortly afterwards a heavy

squall from the south seemingly brought the *Adamson* onto a lee shore. With the steersman unable to keep the sails full the ship made an unsuccessful attempt to tack and increasing wind blew away the fore sail. Hawkes headed towards Spring Cove for shelter, but the *Adamson* was soon within 15 metres of the breakers at North Head. The pilot and desperate captain now ordered both anchors released, lights were burned and rockets were fired.



Inner North Head, showing (top) Spring Cove, where pilot Hawkes was headed, and (bottom) Old Man's Hat, where the *Adamson* foundered.

The paddle steamer *Williams*, entering the harbour from the Hunter River, pulled alongside and offered help, its master, Captain Henry Creer,<sup>1</sup> shouting through a megaphone for the pilot to send him a rope. Hawkes, instead, wanted to send for the tug *Washington*, which was then anchored at Watson's Bay, to pull them out, but Creer retorted "we're 20 horsepower stronger than any tug." Finally, a gig<sup>2</sup> was dispatched with a leadline from the *Adamson* but it broke ... and when one finally reached the paddle steamer on a second attempt the gig smashed into the paddle wheels of the *Williams* and was lost.



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Henry Creer,  
master of the  
*Williams* paddle  
steamer

Captain Creer called out "slip [let go] your cables" but again the response aboard the *Catherine Adamson* was hesitation, a delay which allowed the wind to blow the *Williams* broadside and in the confusion the tow line was lost. By now the *Adamson* had drifted perilously close to the first line of breakers and the *Williams*, having tried to get closer but failing in the breaking sea, set off for Watson's Bay pilot station.

At 3am the sea changed and heavy rollers swung the *Adamson* around so that its stern battered against the rocks. A small lifeboat was filled with some crew and passengers but when it was only halfway down the side of the hull the *Adamson* struck the cliff, Captain Stuart leaping overboard into the stern of the lifeboat.

By the time the lifeboat passengers got to a nearby steamer the *Adamson's* mizzen mast was already down and the other masts were falling. The lifeboat was then abandoned, leaving those still on board the *Adamson* to perish either under the falling masts or in the boiling sea. When the *Williams* arrived back from Watson's Bay the *Adamson* was beam end on to the rocks with only the forecandle<sup>3</sup> and bowsprit to be seen rising out of the surf. One hour later, when a tug finally arrived, the vessel was thoroughly wrecked and had sunk.

## The next day

By 8am the wreck had broken up, some fractured spars and a few packages alone remaining to mark the site. Four bodies, apparently seamen, plus the body of the pilot, were recovered, the rest probably taken by sharks.

**TOTAL WRECK  
OF THE  
“CATHERINE ADAMSON,”  
AT THE  
NORTH HEAD.**

**TWENTY-ONE LIVES LOST.**

*(From Sydney Morning Herald, Oct. 26.)*

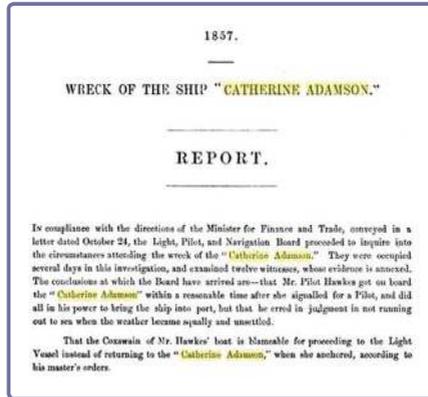
EARLY on Saturday morning, Sydney was thrown into a state of considerable excitement and alarm. The loss of the ill-fated *Dunbar*, with so many familiar friends and acquaintances gone in her fatal wreck, but nine weeks since, is still fresh to memory and most melancholy to contemplate.

Meanwhile, news that a valuable wreck was lying in shallow water had spread quickly and looters descended, either in small boats or along the shore to which much of the cargo had drifted on the floodtide. Because what they recovered was Crown property as untaxed bounty they hid everything in nearby bushes to avoid detection by the police, who arrived about noon with the Port Master and a large number of merchants to assist in saving every particle that came within reach. Divers were hampered by small steamers which circled around loaded with passengers who watched with morbid fascination, just as hundreds had flocked to South Head nine weeks earlier to witness the recovery operation of bodies and body parts from the *Dunbar* wreck site.

### **The inquest.**

On Monday 26 October an inquest before the City Coroner and a jury of 13 opened at the *King's Arms Hotel* in lower George Street (where the *Dunbar* inquest had sat just nine weeks earlier). The deceased, 21 in all, were,

- three passengers: Hugh Leathes (brother of the Secretary of the London and Liverpool Fire and Life Insurance Company), the Reverend Jacob Jones, (a Congregational Minister who had accepted an invitation in connexion with the New South Wales Home Missionary Society), Alexander Ramsay (brother of Robert Ramsay of Darling Downs) and two unnamed servants;



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Light, Pilot & Navigation Board report, November 1857

- fifteen crew, including the second officer: those known were John Browne (the ship's carpenter), Antonio Smith, Tilney Rising (seaman) and William Sappy (seaman, whose brother Charles Sappy had died in the *Dunbar* wreck);
- pilot John Hawkes, who left a widow and four children.

Hawkes was buried next day at St Stephen's Churchyard, Camperdown.<sup>4</sup> Five unclaimed bodies from the crew were buried the following day, in the common grave which already held the unidentified *Dunbar* dead<sup>5</sup> but in stark contrast to the solemnity which attended the *Dunbar* interments, drawing censure from A MASTER MARINER<sup>6</sup> in a letter to *The Sydney Morning Herald*:

*“Having today attended the funeral of our lamented friend Captain Hawkes, in coming out of the Cemetery gate, to my astonishment, I saw three hearses, containing the bodies of the drowned seamen from the Catherine Adamson, without a single soul, either of their ship mates or friends, following. The very few gentlemen attending Captain Hawkes’ funeral turned to see the poor fellows to their grave, when it appeared the clergyman had not received notice of the funeral, and had retired. There was a half-dug grave, into which their bodies would have been thrown like so many dogs, had not some of those present protested against such indecency. Ultimately, the sexton agreed that the corpses should not be interred until tomorrow ... the remains lying meanwhile in an open vault.”<sup>7</sup>*

A FRIEND OF HUMANITY was similarly incensed:

*“I beg to draw your attention to the difference between the funeral obsequies of such bodies as were discovered from the wreck of the Dunbar, and those of the Catharine Adamson. When the funeral of the sufferers in the Dunbar took place nearly every shop in the centre of the city was closed, and most of what is called the Sydney nobility followed the bodies to their last resting place. Was that because most of them were very wealthy people? When the funeral of those recovered from the wreck of the Catherine Adamson took place, not one person followed in its train. Why was this distinction made?”*<sup>8</sup>

## The wreck

The following day, Tuesday 27 October, salvage rights were sold at auction for £194 (about AUD 35,000 today).<sup>9</sup>

## The blame game

With the ship’s remains and its cargo, mortal and mercantile, out of the way, the inquest continued on Tuesday 28 and Wednesday 29 October, then adjourned to Tuesday 3 November to weigh much contradictory evidence.

The *Adamson*’s chief officer, James Douthie, stated that Hawkes “stood across” [ie, sailed around at some distance offshore] several times waiting to get to an anchorage, but the gale and heavy sea compelled him to anchor in a dangerous position close to shore, so that a squall was able to throw the *Adamson* on to rocks and she became total wreck in one hour. He believed the ship had been “ridiculously handled” by the pilot.

Captain Stuart differed: he claimed the anchorage would have been safe if the weather had remained moderate, and had the gig and lifeboat (with him aboard the latter) got to the steamer to suggest it come closer to the wreck, but both were swamped.

One seaman of 21 years’ experience thought the pilot worked the ship in a proper manner, while another claimed the blocks<sup>10</sup> were defective before leaving England, causing the ship to work badly in consequence.

## The finding

The evidence of the seafaring witnesses having mainly exculpated the captain, the finding by the jury, eight members to five, was of “an error in judgment displayed by the late Mr Pilot Hawkes in attempting to bring the ship *Catherine Adamson* into harbour during the unfavourable state of the weather at the time.” The jurors added that “some further efforts should have been made with the lifeboat to save ... more lives of the late passengers and crew.”<sup>11</sup>

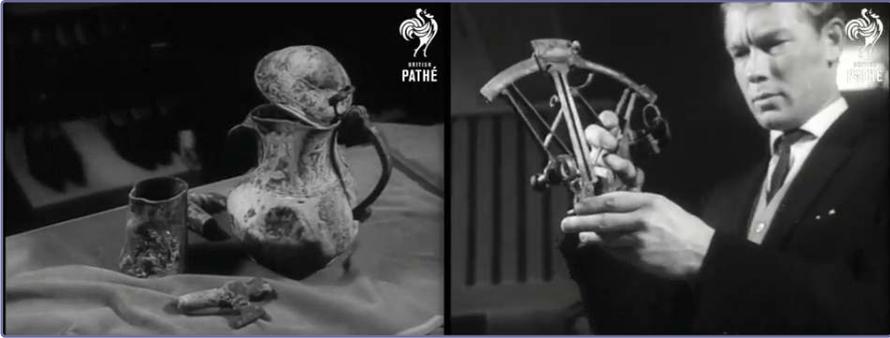
## The reaction 1: Hawkes

Predictably, a split finding on the basis of conflicting evidence served only to stimulate rather than settle the debate. *The Sydney Morning Herald* offered “readers who wish to form an independent opinion” a summing up, noting that “witnesses formed contradictory opinions about the pilot,” one describing him as “excited & confused” while another saw “no hesitation or incompetence.” It revisited the critical question of whether he should have persevered without a favourable wind, recognized his belief he could achieve his aim by tacking and accepted that “the ship disappointed him” (a reference to the poor state of the blocks). Nonetheless, it noted that the weather changed after 11pm (which the *Vanquish* captain had confirmed), justifying doubt that Hawkes should have continued to a point where turning back was impossible, given the ever-present risk of squalls. Thus, the paper concluded, “the pilot cannot be entirely acquitted of blame.”<sup>12</sup>

Accepting the paper’s invitation to form an independent opinion, A COLONIAL COMMANDER contributed his contra view three days later. He found the chief officer of the *Adamson* the more guilty. Asking whose fault it was that the blocks were in poor condition, he contended that Hawkes, knowing he would be criticised for the commercial cost of staying at sea, was entitled to make a judgment believing the blocks would be functional. He sympathised that the young pilot was in a similar position to Captain Green of the *Dunbar*: criticised for his attempt to enter port at night but not surviving to defend the accusations made against him.<sup>13</sup>

## The reaction 2: Stuart

There was similar debate about whether the law of self-preservation should be “kept in subordination to the higher obligation of professional or natural duty.”<sup>14</sup>



Relics recovered from wreck site, 1965

Captain Stuart had defended his joining the lifeboat as being an attempt to get to the steamer to have it come closer to the *Adamson*, saying he “could do more for that purpose than anyone else.”<sup>15</sup> Six days earlier, the Light, Pilot and Navigation Board Report had equivocated that “had Captain Stuart and the Chief Officer remained longer on board it is probable that the men might, under their direction, have got out the pinnace<sup>16</sup> and in her reached the steamer; but it is equally probable ... in the event of failure the lives of Captain Stuart and Mr Duthie [sic] would have been sacrificed in vain.”<sup>17</sup> The *Herald* would have none of this. Protesting against “the relaxation of the obligation of a captain and his officers on the mere ground of the comparative value of life” it averred that

*“[I]n case of shipwreck a captain owes duties to his passengers which they do not owe to each other” and that “Captain Stuart, as commander of the Catherine Adamson, was under these obligations [so that] if he neglect, forget, and abandon them ... he may save his own life, but not his honour.”*<sup>18</sup>

SAGITTARIUS was equally adamant:

*“The Board ... admit that [had the captain remained on board he might have succeeded in launching the pinnace] ... but then they say he might possibly have failed, and ... his own life and that of the mate would have been thrown away in vain [so] they do not blame him for not attempting it. The only inference from this is that a captain is not to be required to exert himself to save the lives of his passengers, if by so doing he puts his own life*

*in peril ... This is directly contrary to all established notions of the moral duties of commanders [and] there is not a nautical Board in England that would endorse such a doctrine.”<sup>19</sup>*

## The legacy

The cumulative impact of the *Catherine Adamson* loss so soon after the *Dunbar* disaster was public perception that the harbour entrance was unsafe. The Macquarie Light had been built in 1818 to guide ships *to* the Harbour rather than *into* it and communication between South Head and Sydney Cove signal stations was by an optical semaphore system, obviously quite useless at night. 1858 saw upgrades to both. In January an electric telegraph was installed between Sydney and South Head and in 1858 the Hornby lighthouse on the inner South Head, named after Admiral Sir Phipps Hornby, was opened by the governor, Sir William Denison. The *Herald* had bitterly commented, when in September 1857 the Light, Pilot and Navigation Board recommended its construction,



Old Man's Hat, site of the wreck inner North Head and (inset) the cliff top formation giving it the name



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Diver at the wreck site as it is now

*“there is no need to send to England for a lantern; a first class catoptric<sup>20</sup> light, which cost £2,700, has been lying in the Colonial Store since 1853. It is a pity it was not erected long ago instead of rusting in packing cases. Many lives and much property might have been saved.”*

## The litigation

In 1858 a claim was brought on behalf of Captain Stuart, seeking compensation for some of the plundered cargo, but that long legal saga is another story, for another time.

## The wreck today

What little remains of the *Catherine Adamson* lies in 11 metres of water off Old Man’s Hat, North Head, protected under the NSW Heritage Act (1977). In 1965 some relics retrieved from the wreck site were put on display in a Sydney department store.

***John Lanser***

- 1 Henry Creer and his brothers Joseph (1826-1909) and Edward (d.1900) were all associated with the coastal trade between Sydney and the Clarence River. Joseph would become senior pilot in Sydney [<https://loosemoreblog.wordpress.com/captain-henry-creer/>]. Henry Creer died on 20 September 1893, and is buried in Camperdown cemetery (BN17672).
- 2 A gig is a small rowing boat.
- 3 The upper deck of a sailing ship forward of the foremast.
- 4 6234 BN06252 John Charles Hawkes
- 5 The Burial Register of St. Stephens Church, Newtown contains entries for seven unidentified persons. The burial register numbers are 6255 and 6266. It seems that there were no burial forms completed for these burials.
- 6 The use of *soi disant* pen names was a device then common among newspaper letter writers.
- 7 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 October 1857, page 3. Two more bodies were similarly interred on 2 November 1857.
- 8 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 October 1857, page 3.
- 9 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 October 1857, page 8.
- 10 Blocks are pulleys, single or multiple.
- 11 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 November 1857, page 5.
- 12 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 November, 1857, page 8.
- 13 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 November, 1857, page 4.
- 14 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 November, 1857, loc cit.
- 15 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 November, 1857,
- 16 A pinnace is a small boat, usually with sails and oars, used as a tender in the age of sail.
- 17 Light, Pilot and Navigation Board Report, 6 November 1857.
- 18 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 November, 1857, loc cit.
- 19 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 November, 1857, page 4.
- 20 Catoptric light systems used parabolic reflectors to direct light out to sea in a concentrated horizontal beam. They became obsolete with the development of the Fresnel lens for lighthouses in the late 19th century.



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## **EDITOR**

John Lanser

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