

Account by Fell on drowning of Jeffcott

James Walter Fell
(transcribed and annotated by Chris Durrant)

Introduction

The State Library of South Australia holds a reproduction of Fell's manuscript, D 5471 (L). The original is said to be held in the University Archives of the University of Sydney.

A note appended to the copy adds the information that James Walter Fell was said to have been born in Montrose in 1800 and to have gone to Tasmania before his employment at Encounter Bay.

The transcription retains Fell's idiosyncratic spelling and capitalization, though the distinction between upper and lower case in some letters, 'c' in particular, is apparently unintended and it is sometimes impossible to distinguish between an 'e' and an undotted 'i'. Contractions have been expanded in square brackets.

The manuscript is not dated, but the language and revisions suggest that it was well-rehearsed narrative made some time after the event.

The document

In the month of Oct[obe]r 1837, being in charge of the Company's Whale fishing Station at Encounter Bay¹; I was visited by Sir John Jeffcot², the Chief Judge of the New Colony of South Australia & Mr John Hindmarsh, eldest son of Capt Hindmash R.N., the first Governor of that Colony. They came round from Adelaide in a small Cutter belonging to Government for the purpose of proceeding to Van Diemens land in the Barque "South Australian", which I daily expected ~~in~~ to convey what oil we had procured that Season, for Hobart Town. Sir John's errand was to get married to a Lady in that Colony & young Mr Hindmarsh was to accompany him in quality of Bridegrooms man. But alas they were never doomed to reach their destination. Three days after their arrival the expected Vessel ~~arrived~~ came in bringing with her 9 hands & assistant Cooper to overhaul the Casks previous to shipping, they having got very leaky by laying so long on the open platform exposed to the sun. On the evening of the party coming ashore I observed the Cooper whose name was Callen¹ strolling about in a peculiar absent manner & on enquiring the reason at some one, they informed me, that for a long period he had been habitually intoxicated, & that since coming on Board, he had got no grog & they therefor presumed he was suffering from the horrors. On hearing this I called him inside & gave him a good stiff horn of grog which seemed greatly to revive him. Seeing the beneficial effects I poured him out another, with a strong recommendation to proceed immediately to bed, but just as he raised the glass to his lips, he exclaimed at the same time dropping the liquor, "Ha! Did you see that rat run into ~~to~~ the Bung hole of the Cask & a Cat after it". He alluded to some empty Casks that lay before the door, which certainly might have admitted a Rat, but could not in any

¹According to David McLaren, junior, Fell had been appointed by the steward, Abraham Clegg, and McLaren, in Clegg's absence, had retained him as store keeper in November 1837.

²John William Jeffcott.

¹John Calnan.

way have let a cat follow, besides such an animal to my certain knowledge was not then within 100 Miles. Instantly I perceived that the poor man's brain was affected & that the accursed scourge of the inebriate had laid its phantom grasp on him. Giving him another draft I got him of to bed. This might be about 8 o'clock P.M. About 9½ one of his Companions came roaring with terror—"O! Master do come, for Callen has gone mad & threatens to shoot us all." I ran to the hut & found the poor man attempting to scramble over a low partition wall, musket in hand for what purpose, I presume he knew not. Seizing him by the leg I dragged him back, but he persisting in his design, I was obliged to lash him down in his bunk, much after the fashion children are made fast in their Cradles. Being utterly unacquainted with the nature of the Complaint, & having no Laudanum or other ~~nafeot~~ soporific drug in the medicine Chest, I compounded a large basonful of thin gruel, & left him with instructions to his two Companions² to call me if he appeared to get worse. Towards morning one of them came in great consternation, to say, that, the patient had literally bitten the rope [illegible insertion] that held him down asunder. (I was a 2½ inch one) and was endeavouring again to get over the wall. On reaching the hut, I shall not soon forget the scene that presented itself. There lay the miserable man, who having failed in his attempt, had fallen back on his pallet, where he lay, his eyeballs glazed, & half out of the sockets gazing at some horrific phantom, no doubt conjured up by his diseased imagination—his lips were apart his tongue lolling out of his mouth & both were convulsed by that terrible tremor, which universally accompanies & gives name to the disease. Every limb too, was affected & he muttered broken curses, alternating with snatches of prayer ~~aeoomp~~ or demonic peals of laughter. Unable to assist him I could but prey. However at day break I made a signal to the Ship, hoping that some of her officers would prove more experienced than I ~~myself~~ as all of them were much older. They came on shore at once, but also could give as little help to the wretched sufferer as myself. Indeed from what I have since learned, I verily believe the steps the Master of the Vessel¹ took only served to hasten on the fatal crisis. In short he proved himself a silly conceited fool, but I was overruled partly from his seniority, partly from his demure knowing look & partly from his reiterated assurance that his remedies could not by any possibility fail. Accordingly (after stating that he knew Callen to be a free mason) he proceeded to whisper some nonsense in his ear, of which he knew or cared as much as a dog & then in spite of every remonstrance bled him. The blood oozed out of the vein turgid & black to the extent of 3 or 4 ozs, then stopped. From this moment he sank, lost a deal of external sensation, & from the increased tremors in the jaws & face nearly bit of his swollen tongue. The spectacle was truly awfully pitiful & certainly might warn all who saw it to avoid the grog can. But it did not. All that day next night & next day he continued gradually to weaken, but still the mutterings, trembling & convulsive workings of the hands & fingers continued. Towards 10 P.M. of the third night his extremities grew clammy & cold. The pressure of the finger on the flesh remained as if made in dough, his eyeball turned upwards, his breathing became more laboured & every symptom foretold speedy dissolution. Still the mutterings continued as if the unconscious being was holding converse with the inhabitants of an unseen world, & thus he ~~continued~~ kept, until the last pang, when starting to an upright position he flung his arms wildly in the air, exclaimed, "Good God can this be death," fell back & expired.

Next day we held a sort of ~~eroneers~~ enquest on the corpse, at which Sir John acted as Coroner, ~~and~~ who after the verdict of died from the effect of grog did not fail to deliver an impressive homily to all of us on the baneful effects of the liquor when indulged in to excess. He business was now to get some one to lift the body from its couch upon a board overspread by the deceaseds Coverlet², as it stunk so. After every persuasion had failed I at length prevailed on his two companions for the bribe of a bottle of rum, which they swigged off previous to commencing operations, to remove it but the moment the body was bent by their efforts to raise it, so insufferable a smell arose from the confined gases issuing forth, that the party who held the head quitted his hold & the Corse fell to the Ground carrying the individual who held the feet along with it. This however only seemed to man him for his task for starting up & cursing his Companions pusillanimous stomach, he haled his load upon the board. Waiting till the stench had partially evaporated, we sewed the corpse in its winding sheet, lashed it to the plank & bore it to a hole previously dug, covered it up, & left it to its final repose until resurrection day. This story needs no Comment & certainly reads a more profitable lecture than the tongue of the most eloquent preacher.

²Identified by David McLaren, junior, as William Powell and John Cranfield.

¹John Boyd Thorburn McFarlane.

²This might also be read as 'Coverbed'.

A week subsequent poor Callen had ceased to be a theme of conversation, when our usual routine was broken thro[ugh] by the arrival of two men from Port Fairy, situated some 300 miles to the eastward. They reported that they had made the journey ~~on-foot~~ overland accompanied by a horse which they said they were compelled to leave on the other side of the River Murray, across which they themselves had been rafted by the natives. This we doubted & look[ed] on the parties with some suspicion as bushrangers, which I believe afterwards turned out to be nearly right. The name of the one was “old Jack Foley—that of the other I forgot³. Both however became afterwards pretty notorious in the Colony, old Jack in particular. Sir John took down extensive notes of their account of the Journey, a Considerable quantity of which I have no doubt was fable; but this so strengthened him in a preconceived notion that he determined without loss of time to attempt an entrance to the Murray river from the Sea an achievement that had hitherto baffled our utmost efforts.

Accordingly having made arrangements with the neighbouring fishing party commanded by a Mr. Blenkinsop¹ we started in the Course of two days. The party consisted of the Crew of a Whale boat with Sir John as passenger & about 15 more who kept along the beach to be ready to assist those in the Boat if need might be. After reaching the mouth of the river & being baulked in several attempts to enter we were compelled to run the boat Close in shore & so track her a distance of 6 or seven miles inside the broken water, so extensive is the bar that impedes the entrance to this large stream. It is here necessary to explain the peculiar phenomenon, which Continually occurs here however calm the external ocean may be. Immediately in the entrance the water will Continue calm & unruffled for 15 or 20 Minutes together, when it will at once take motion [last two words inserted] spring up into long mountainous rollers, which topping, curl & break with a force & impetuosity which those only who have witnessed them can well comprehend or believe. In fact their roar is heard on a silent night 20 miles on each side of the mouth. This can only be accounted for by the long heave of the Southern Pacific which here meets with the first barrier in its progress from the Pole & from the nature of the bottom which at once falls from 14 to 90 & 100 fathoms about 3 Miles from the Shore. The consequence is Such a body of water being so suddenly impeded in that undulatory swell, which is known always to exist in the ocean however calm the weather, forces its way upwards and so occasions the extraordinary tumult described, and which makes the entrance into this otherwise so noble & useful river so impracticable & dangerous. Indeed I believe the feat of coming clear out has since been successfully achieved, but still the quiet is so temporary & the risk so great, that the river can be nothing more than a useful inland thoroughfare. However We got into it & after proceeding as far up as Lake Alexandrina, we there spent twelve days in surveying the various beauties of the water & the capabilities of the land as a residence for civilised man.

During all this period the weather had been constantly mild & calm, so on the 13th morning after a regular consultation it was agreed to make the attempt of gaining the main ocean by the channel of the river. But as the danger was known & apparent to every one it was resolved that none but volunteers should be requested to form part of the Boats Crew. These were soon obtained from the Common hands, but Blenkinsop a headstrong man taunted two of his headsmen with their pusillanimity, when they reluctantly agreed to go in place of two of the Volunteers, who no doubt gladly gave up their seats, as whatever might be the result, it was a service by which they at least could gain but little honor or profit & no glory. The names of the two officers were George Wright & Harry Brooks, who with myself George Mills⁰ & little Punch (for I knew him by that cognomen only) formed the rowers while Blenkinsop took the Steer-oar & Sir John rested himself close aft in the stern sheets. The attempt really seemed to me madness, but cursed pride urged me onward as I did not like to let Blenkinsop go before me. The shore party took a direct route from the lake homeward while we pulled downwards towards the Sea. On reaching it all seemed smooth as a millpond. Not a breath of air ruffled the surface and we gave way with desperation knowing the situation we were placed in. The boat flew over the surface for the space of a quarter of an hour gaily & gallantly and we had left the land two miles astern. Joy began to lighten up our hitherto fixed & sombre countenances at the idea of having successfully accomplished so arduous so to say meritorious undertaking. But alas our joy was transient—transient as the sun beam that played on the bosom of the waters around us. Suddenly one of those mighty rollers I have described started up a head of us. “Give way my boys” said Blenkinsop

³Edward Stone made a statement to Jeffcott as well as Jack or John Foley.

¹John William Dundas Blenkinsop.

⁰This could read ‘Miles’, but Charles Mann recorded it as Mills at the time.

and over the top of the watery mountain we shot beautifully & down with racehorse speed into the liquid valley. ~~But~~ On came another mightier than the last, but it too we passed harmlessly ~~over~~. A third mightier still appeared, bristling & curling as it approached. The only exclamation was uttered by Sir John. "The Lord have mercy on Our Souls, for we shall all be drowned". It was his last. Involuntarily I looked over my shoulder, the boiling, foaming mass roared above me obscuring but not obliterating the Sun. It was but a moment, but in that moment how many distinct reminiscences crowded thro[ugh] my brain. Crash it descended—the boat opened like a muscle, a gurgling hissing noise in the ears succeeded & for a few moments all recollection was swallowed up in my vain struggles to save myself. When memory returned I found myself hurried onward in an element to[o] thin to swim in but much to[o] dense for respiration. At length my head shot for an instant above the waters so as to permit me to inhale the blessed air. In that instant, I observed Sir John's hat & one of the men situated as I was. Another billow Came rolling on,—presence of mind was left me to dive under it so that it passed over me comparatively harmless. A minute more & I struck the hard sand with such force as to deprive me of Consciousness & I certainly would have been re-engulphed by the retiring wave, but for the timely aid of some natives who rushed into the sea & dragged me almost lifeless on shore. They had watched our progress, seen our disaster, & generously risked there own lives to save ours, thus shewing an example of magnanimous humanity to the proud disdainful, civilized white man. They stretched me on the warm sand & here I lay for some time in a dreamy, but truly painful state. I still heard the rush of the waters & still felt the difficulty of breathing but it gradually became easier & I awoke once more to consciousness & light. My breast was quite blue, through the force of the stroke that precipitated me on the sand but otherwise I could not say I felt very much, if I except a sense of fulness in the Chest, which doubtless arose from the water forced into my stomach. I tried but could not vomit.

I now looked round for the companions of my mishap, but alas two alone were left viz. G Miln⁰ & little Punch. Sir John Blenkinsop, G. Wright & Brooks having disappeared. None of the bodies but Blenkinsops was ever found. It came on shore some 5 or 6 hours afterwards, was buried by the natives but exhumed next day & ~~bring~~ by orders of his Wife, brought home & buried in his own garden, where a wooden monument, with a suitable inscription executed by a Tar named "Toby" marks the spot. Miln & Punch were still in a worse plight than myself, so consigning them to the care of the Natives I started homewards with the woful intelligence & reached there at one next morning much fatigued indeed. A party at once started & met my two Comrades some 6 or 8 Miles from the fishery, whom having refreshed with a swig of grog they brought safely home at sunrise.

⁰Mills?