

Encounter Bay and Lake Alexandrina

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Introduction

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Text

To His Excellency the Governor.

Adelaide, January 1, 1838.

We have the honor to inform your Excellency that, in pursuance of our intention to ascertain if there were any other outlet from Lake Alexandrina than the one discovered by Captain Sturt (for which object your Excellency was pleased to grant us leave of absence), we arrived at Captain Blenkinsop's fishery, opposite Granite Island in Encounter Bay, on the afternoon of December 1. We succeeded in bringing a bullock cart, although drawn but by two bullocks, the whole way; but the hills were so rugged and precipitous and the ravines so deep at the southern extremity of the Mount Lofty range that we were sometimes obliged to unload the cart, and all of us by a further rope fastened to the pole to assist the bullocks in dragging up the empty cart, which we only effected by a few yards at a time, and then afterwards carry up our provisions &c., ourselves. This explanation of the bullock cart we deem necessary to shew your Excellency the difficulty of passing the range. Previously to our departure from Adelaide, Captain Blenkinsop had promised us the loan of a whale boat, which we intended to transport over-land in the cart, for which purpose *alone* the cart was taken. We cannot omit to mention how much the colony, and particularly ourselves, are indebted to Captain Blenkinsop for the great assistance he afforded us in furnishing a boat and six men for the purpose of our expedition, and for the zeal manifested and the willingness he evinced to forward our views; and also by his own exertions to increase our means of obtaining the fullest information respecting all that came under our notice. He was not at the fishery on our arrival there, so that we did not leave it until the morning of December 4. A frame had been constructed on the cart on which the boat was to be laid, which was first to try the entrance, and if unable to effect a passage was to return to the nearest place where she could land, and then be carried on the cart over to the channel between the lake and the sea. Accordingly the boat started some hours before us; and we, being ten in number, including two natives, set off with the cart to the nearest part of the channel between the lake and the sea. The distance was from eight to ten miles over a gently undulating country, lightly wooded and covered in many places with very fine grass. At noon we halted by the side of a well about seven feet deep, formed by the natives at the foot of a very low hill about a mile distant from the sea, 200 yards from the channel, and about six miles from its mouth, which bore about S.E. We then, leaving the cart, set out on horseback and foot towards the channel, and on arrival ascertained, by a flag

erected inside the bar on the western point, that the boat had entered. The channel appears to be about 400 yards wide, and the current was running out from five to six knots per hour—the water being so fresh that within the influence of the swell from the sea we found it palatable. The length of this narrow part of the entrance is about a quarter of a mile in a northerly direction, when there are two channels, one stretching away to the eastward and appearing to run a considerable distance at the back of the sandhills; but the chief body of water came from the N.W. channel, on the banks of which we had left the bullock cart. It runs for about five miles parallel to the coast, from which it was separated by an unbroken range of sandhills, about 400 yards wide, which we backed in many places by a ridge of stone. The soundings from the mouth of the channel up to where they left the cart (six miles) were from three to four fathoms, and the body of water varied in width from half a mile to a mile. We left this place early the next morning, the boat sounding all the way and finding from three to four fathoms, and the bullock cart tracing the channel along its banks. From our last halting place its course gradually curved round to the N., N.N.W., and N.E., when, after proceeding about four miles, the progress of the cart along the banks of the main channel was stooped by a creek of very variable width, and about four fathoms deep, which runs for about four miles W.N.W. This last reach was only fifty feet wide but as deep as before, and with banks so steep, and so little raised above the water that we stepped from the boat while afloat into a rich grassy meadow presenting no indication of being subject to overflow. The creek, which received the name of “Currency Creek” from the name of perhaps the first boat which ever entered it, terminated abruptly at the foot of a hill, where it received a mountain stream. On arriving at this fertile, well watered, and sheltered spot, which in a straight line we should not think more than twelve miles from the fishery, we determined to leave the cart and horses here in charge of a party and the rest of us to proceed in the boat to the lake.

December 6.—Started at six there being twelve of us, including a native, besides the dogs. We had not proceeded more than five minutes down the creek when the boat was stove by running against a sunken tree and filled so rapidly that had she been one hundred yards from the shore she could not have reached it. However we hauled her up, stopped up the holes with pieces of flannel besmeared with the grease of two tallow candles, and, having covered the whole with a piece of Kangaroo skin nailed with brass studs which formed the initials on a box in the boat, in forty minutes she was again proceeding on her voyage. We had in the boat two men who told us that they and another had recently arrived at Captain Blenkinsop’s fishery by walking along the coast from a fishery at Port Farey, having carried their provision, which was flour, on a horse, and that their journey occupied about six weeks. They met very few natives and did not fall in with any stream running into the sea which was deeper than their knees until they arrived at the passage by which the boat entered. Not being able to cross it, from its width, depth, and the strength of the current, they turned up to trace its banks until they should find an eligible place to pass it. They endeavoured to cross the channel which was seen to the eastward on entering from the sea, but found it also too deep and too wide; not knowing at the time that on reaching the other side they would have been on an island. They then continued to trace the shores of the lake for two days and a half, when they crossed a narrow part of it on raft made of pine trees tied together with the tether rope of the horse, which they were obliged to abandon. They pushed the raft across with a pole about fifteen feet long and, the raft being entirely submerged with their weight, they were the whole day in gaining the opposite shore. For at least a mile on each side of the lake the water was not six feet deep, but in the middle they could not reach the bottom.

On entering the channel from the creek, the mouth of which is about ten miles from the bar, we continued to row for about three hours, our course being E.N.E., E., and E.S.E., and the water from two to three miles wide. On arriving abreast of a beautiful little bay on the northern shore the channel was suddenly reduced in width to about 400 yards, and we became sensible of a strong current setting against us. Our course now lay to the S.E., and having rowed about four miles, we landed on a small, low, stony island, when we found we had entered the lake, which seemed to be about twenty miles across in every direction and of a very irregular figure. The northern shore was extremely picturesque, its appearance presenting a succession of bays and rocky precipitous points about thirty or forty feet high; but the southern shore appeared low and covered with reeds, and the sandhills which intervened between the lake and the sea were visible over it. The men having rowed about seven hours, we halted an hour and dined here. We were now assured by the two men, of which mention has been made,

that the land to the westward was an island; and we were confirmed in that opinion by observing between it and the sandhills an opening, which we conceived led to the eastern channel on entering from the sea, and by which we supposed that Captain Sturt passed, as it was the nearest direction to the sea, and all view of the channel by which we entered the lake was shut out by the island on which we dined. We therefore beg your Excellency's permission to name the island, which appeared to be about fifteen miles long and six wide "Hindmarsh Island.". At half past three P.M. we again embarked and rowed for some time along the north shore to the eastward, when the wind becoming fair we made sail and proceeded rapidly. About five we opened a strait about six miles wide formed by two points which project suddenly into the middle of the lake from its opposite shores. Having arrived a little before sunset abreast of the one on the northern shore, we hauled in under the lee of it to pass the night. On ascending the point, which was about forty feet high, we discovered in the upper part of the lake a wide bay running back very far to the N.W. Land was visible to the N.N.E., but from that to the E.N.E. the lake was our horizon. The opposite point of the strait bore E. $\frac{1}{2}$ S., and we named it "Point McLeay"; the point on which we stood "Point Sturt"; and the peninsula of which it formed a part "Sturt's Peninsula." About half a mile from this spot and about a quarter of a mile from the water side we discovered a salt pan about four acres in extent, the figure of which was so regular and oval, and its floor so level and smooth, as to appear the work of art. As we had had a good deal of rain lately, the salt had probably become incorporated with the clay as we found but little of it. It came on to rain during the night and continued so in the morning which induced us to wait a little in hopes of fine weather. About a quarter of a mile from the point we found the raft used by the men some weeks before to cross the lake, exactly as they described it; it was just of sufficient buoyancy to support three of us, and the pole which they used to push it across about fifteen feet long we erected on Point Sturt, having carved on it "December 6, 1837." In the afternoon it blew hard from the S.W., accompanied by heavy rain which rendered it impossible to go on the lake. The gale continued all night and all next day, the wind in the afternoon drawing round to the S.E. and rain ceasing. It rained again throughout the night.

December 8.—The wind had moderated but it was still showery. On examining our provisions we found we had only sufficient left for the day, and we were at least thirty miles from our dépôt and the wind against us. The boat had been so crowded with people that little room remained for provisions, and these were soon exhausted; we therefore were obliged to return without proceeding any further up. We started at six and rowed towards Point MacLeay; for the first mile we had less than six feet of water; it then gradually deepened to fifteen feet in the middle when it as gradually shoaled again; the water was here so pure that we filled our kegs. Having arrived within two miles of the opposite shore we altered our course to the N.W. homeward. About noon we landed on Hindmarsh Island just after entering the narrow part of the channel. While here, six natives appeared on the opposite cliff waving and shouting to us, and as two of them had articles of English clothing on no doubt they visited the fishery. After waiting about an hour we started again and arrived at the head of Currency Creek about 6 P.M., the men having rowed eleven hours during the day. Our biscuit and salt meat were all expended and we found none left here, but there were no less than three kangaroos weighing about 300lb hanging up in the trees. Captain Blenkinsop having ridden over to the fishery to procure a supply of provisions, the next day our party was increased by the arrival of Sir John Jeffcott and your Excellency's son who, having been wrecked in the *South Australian*, in the same gale which we experienced on the eighth, had joined us in the hope of being in time to see the lake. The next day we returned to our old halting place six miles from the bar.

December 12.—Captain Blenkinsop having returned to us from the fishery started in the whale boat, accompanied by Sir John Jeffcott to recross the bar. Having arrived at the narrowest part of the channel they proceeded two miles up the eastern channel where, on Hindmarsh Island, they found a pole erected, apparently a studding sail boom; this they took down, and having put a flag on it erected it again. Soon after they found some hundreds weight of whale-bone, which was put forward in the boat. The water at the entrance runs obliquely from the western to the opposite point, escaping to the S.E. They had nearly passed all the breakers when the boat filled, and Sir John Jeffcott, Captain Blenkinsop, and two of the boat's crew were drowned. It afterwards appeared that the boat's crew had concealed from Captain Blenkinsop the danger and difficulty they met on entering, a knowledge which might have prevented this melancholy catastrophe. The survivors were assisted by the natives who waded into the water and dragged them nearly exhausted on shore. On arriving among the breakers

the necessity of providing for their safety caused the sounding to be neglected so that nothing is known of the depth of water there.

It is probable that during the rains and while the lake pours its overflowing water with such impetuosity into the sea that the flood tide causes no perceptible difference in the velocity of the current; that a channel of considerable depth may exist between the lake and the sea, although not so deep as in the entrance, as the water on escaping from the confinement expands over a very flat beach. But in the fall of the year after the drought of summer, when the lake falls to the level of the sea, as Captain Sturt at that time of year found its water brackish so many miles up, the cause which operated to keep the channel open having subsided, the sea would then act without any opposing power and block up the entrance, as found by Captain Sturt. Even when the channel is open the constant surf which rolls in over a very flat beach for several miles on each side of the entrance, breaking at least a quarter of a mile from the beach, and continuing to break all the way appeared to us to render the entrance generally impassable for open boats; and the strength of the current, narrowness of the channel, and the eddies make it impassable for any thing else except, perhaps, steam boats not drawing much water. It therefore appears to us that there is no practicable communication between the Murray and the sea by this entrance; and it remains to be shewn what are the easiest means of establishing an intercourse between the sea and the great and important high road to the most fertile district of Australia. About ten miles from a deep and wide channel communicating with the Murray, over a gently undulating country, is an anchorage at Granite Island, in Encounter Bay. The land in the immediate neighbourhood is extremely rich, and the site most picturesque and well calculated for a town. Fresh water is found by digging twelve feet, only ninety yards from high water mark. The soil by the water side is a sandy loam, but so deep and moist that it produces the finest vegetables. This spot is bounded on the east and west by two rivers, about from fifty to one hundred feet wide, which in winter bring down a considerable body of fresh water, but in summer they are brackish, and their mouths become blocked up by the sea. They abound in ducks and fish, and are navigable for boats two or three miles up. Owing to the unfortunate loss of Captain Blenkinsop and the boat, we had not an opportunity of surveying the anchorage, but he told us that good sized merchant ships might lie close to the island sheltered from all winds, except those between E. and S.E., and that men of war might anchor in five or six fathoms, open only from east to south. The island is about half a mile long and 300 yards wide, and about half a mile distant from the shore. From a point about midway between the two rivers, a reef, with only three feet on it at high water, extends to the western end of the island; on which reef a causeway might easily be constructed as it would be protected from the south-west winds by the land to westward, and the material (granite) is on the spot, the removal of which would serve to level part of the island and form quays of the solid rock.

We consider this site the most eligible that we have yet seen in the colony for the first town, as it combines at least six out of the seven points recommended by the Commissioners for the site of the first town in their published instructions to the Surveyor General, viz.:—

1. A commodious harbour, safe and accessible at all seasons of the year.
2. An *abundant* supply of water.
3. A considerable tract of fertile land *immediately* adjoining.
4. Facilities for internal communication.
5. Facilities for external communication.
6. The neighbourhood of extensive sheep walks.

By laying down strong moorings the anchorage may be made to hold three times as many ships as at present, and the greatest facilities exist for a long line of quays and warehouses. We are therefore of opinion that although the seat of government be elsewhere the commercial advantages of this spot will render it the centre of population and wealth, as the exports of the interior must necessarily flow towards this the only outlet from the Murray and the energy of man will in a great degree supply the few desired objects which nature has withheld.

We have the honor to be, Sir,
Your Excellency's most obedient and
very humble Servants,
T. BEWES STRANGWAYS.
Y. B. HUTCHINSON.