

CAMDEN HARBOUR: SOME DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

At the meeting of 1 April 1998, Dr Ian Crawford, formerly of the WA Museum, spoke about differences between the current written historical account of the ill-fated Camden Harbour settlement and the Aboriginal oral narratives, which were also examined in the light of archaeological evidence. His aim was to integrate the evidence to form a more complete historical narrative.

The written history, set out in Christopher Richard's book *There were three ships: The story of the Camden Harbour expedition 1864-65* (UWA Press, 1990), tells of very favourable pre-settlement reports; first by Lt George Grey, of fine grasslands, followed by an enthusiastic report by Dr Martin, after visiting the area in 1863- 4, about well grassed and watered country, large timber and large areas suitable for sheep, rice and similar grain, and the growth of spices, sugar, tea and coffee.

The first group of settlers, Victorians, arrived in mid December 1864, "conned" into investing by promoter named William Harvey. By the time the second group arrived in February 1865, principally the WA Government representatives Robert Sholl and his son Trevarton, the settlers had already decided to leave. Several settlers were dead from heat stroke. The lush grass had withered and lacked nutrition, the land was extremely rocky and water was scarce. Stock had died as a result, and from blow fly strike. Sholl saw the failure not only due to the nature of the country, but also due to a lack of a rounded social structure amongst the settlers, or as he put it "All were masters - there were no servants".

Generally, little was said in the written accounts about the role of the Aborigines. In 1914, however, the *Australian Pilot* did attribute the failure of the Camden Harbour settlement mainly to the hostility of the 'natives'.

The Aboriginal accounts tell a somewhat different story. In 1965 Sam told Ian of an attempt to steal a dinghy at night from a white settlement on New Island (at the mouth of Brecknock Harbour in which Camden Harbour is situated). The response was to search out and massacre the Aborigines on the island. Andy Malum's father, though shot in the eye, escaped and swam to the mainland where he went around telling what had happened and that the white fellows were bad and had to be driven out. There was a settlement there at the time and the Aborigines harassed the white people by setting fire to the grass feed and spearing anyone wandering away from the settlement. In the end the white people had had enough and they left. "We won a victory," said Sam. There were other Aboriginal accounts of a massacre, including one that referred to white people becoming wrecked on Champagne Island and subsequently going to New Island and becoming wrecked again, but they did not appear to be linked to Aboriginal actions at Camden Harbour. The Camden Harbour literature makes no reference to such an event, so what was the truth?

Here the archaeological evidence sheds some light. The remains of a vessel substantially larger than a lugger were scattered around the shore line on New Island and, in 1989, Ian, Graeme Henderson and Geoff Kimpton found substantial evidence of a settlement. Graeme said remains of the vessel had to be those of the Australian Fishing Company's *Enchantress* which sailed from Britain in 1874. She fished the waters around the Kimberley coast for pearl shell and, after hitting a reef off Champagne Island, made Brecknock Harbour before becoming a complete wreck. A 'rather sanguine battle with the natives' is said to have taken place and the account in Graeme and Kandy-Jane Henderson's *Unfinished Voyages: Western Australian Shipwrecks 1851- 1880* (UWA Press, 1988) refers to people being killed and wounded on both sides. Thus the New Island massacre was later than the troubles at Camden Harbour. Ian thought the hardening of white people's attitudes towards the Aborigines was due to the troubles at Camden Harbour and stories about killings elsewhere in the colony.

It is well documented that Aborigines, on first meeting white people, commonly mistook them for spirit beings - Wandjinas associated with rain and lightning, Malan of the impenetrable hide, Kaiara associated with cyclones, Djadan the lightning man and many more. The early Aboriginal reaction to the Camden Harbour settlers points to this view. The steps they took, like lighting fires and throwing stones, were consistent with trying to drive spirits away. These actions were in contrast to their reactions to Indonesians. They knew how to deal with these human intruders; they speared them.

Trevarton Sholl recorded an account of a local Aborigine meeting a party of whites and being amused by another Aborigine, Billy, who was with the party. The local shook hands with him, felt him all over, had him open his mouth to examine his teeth. The local was laughing heartily during the whole examination. The actions mystified Sholl but Ian thought that this was one occasion where it became apparent that the whites were not spirit beings, for the Wandjinas—which the whites probably most closely resembled—had no mouth.

Aboriginal actions became more hostile as they became aware that the settlers were human after all. Up until June 1865 no real damage had been inflicted by either side, but after that the situation deteriorated rapidly with the Aborigines determined to drive the settlers away, lots of fires were lit and menacing confrontations taking place. Elsewhere in WA confrontations took place with people being killed. Sholl expressed increasing frustration, writing 'if some of the natives are not shot and an example made there will be mischief done, they throw spears at people, steal boats, and if they could get the chance would be only too delighted to murder.'

The last confrontation occurred in September when a party including Trevarton Sholl visited Hanover Bay. The Aborigines attacked and two men were wounded one of whom died later. In their efforts to reach the settlement quickly they wrecked their boat resulting in the drowning of another man. A month later Sholl refers to the purchase of 'enough gunpowder etc to blow all the niggers in Camden harbour to glory' if he could get another chance at them. Fortunately he didn't and the settlers left soon after.

Gilbert Marsh