Chapter 1: The European Discovery of Wilsons Promontory

The European history of Wilsons Promontory began on the morning of 2nd January, 1798.

On that date George Bass and his six companions, on their famous whaleboat expedition from Port Jackson to Western Port, sighted the ‘high, hummocky land’ which was considered to be that described by Tobias Furneaux who, in the Adventure, had become separated from Cook during the great Second Voyage in 1773. Surely it could be nothing other than the eastward aspect of Furneaux Land!

On the return journey from Western Port easterly gales forced them to shelter in a small, quiet bay which Bass named Sealer’s Cove. His use of the appellation ‘Sealers’ rather than ‘Seal’ suggests that, perhaps, Bass was not the first mariner to have entered the Cove. Was it so named because he recognised it as a place suited to the needs of a future sealing industry or because he had seen some evidence that sealers already knew the place?

Van Diemen’s Land sealers and Yankee whalers were, even at that time, busy in the waters of the Southern Ocean and had bases in Van Diemen’s Land. The east coast of this promontory was almost certainly known to some seafarers—sealers among them—but their interests would have been centred on matters other than marine and land surveying and such official activities. In his account of the voyage Bass gives no indication of the surprise the party must have experienced at the sight of smoke signals from one of the islands off the south-west coast of the Promontory—an island now presumed to be one of the Glennis, near Oberon Bay. Investigation revealed seven of what had been a larger party of convicts who, in a stolen whaleboat, had escaped from Port Jackson. For reasons now unknown, the seven men had been marooned, were taken aboard by Bass while the remaining five were ferried across to the mainland and put ashore somewhere on the west coast—possibly at some point along the shore of Waratah Bay—furnished with a few essentials for survival and left to find their own way to civilisation. It seems that, on the homeward journey, Bass’s party saw the five in the vicinity of Corner Inlet and this might be taken to indicate that the group was heading in the right direction. Sydney Cove was the only settlement then in existence on the continent. They were not seen again by Europeans.

The exposure of human bones in the sandhills of Yanakie some years ago caused speculation about their origin and it was suggested that they may have been the remains of one or more of this unhappy band of castaway convicts. Since Bass is understood to have seen them on the eastern side of Corner Inlet it is highly unlikely that they would have back-tracked across the isthmus. Doubtless they were the bones of Aborigines.

The passing of more than a century and a half, during which time sealing has been more or less controlled, has seen the very gradual re-establishment of seal colonies in places where they once thrived, although the present populations are but a small fraction of the number slaughtered in the heyday of the industry. The pots and other appurtenances which once decorated Sealers Cove and Refuge Cove have long since vanished either by decay or by submergence beneath sand and water.

From Sealers Cove Bass continued on to Corner Inlet where he was again obliged to shelter for several days. The enforced interruption to their progress gave the party an opportunity for some further exploration in that sector of the Promontory. It was while cruising in Corner Inlet the voyagers once more saw the five convicts.

After leaving the Inlet the party put into Wingan Inlet to search, without success, for the anchor lost there during the outward journey. They then made their way to Port Jackson which was reached on 25th February, twelve weeks after the commencement of the heroic voyage.

Subsequent consideration must have convinced Bass that the land he had rounded was not Furneaux Land. The matter was resolved later in the year when he and Flinders circumnavigated Van Diemen’s Land and charted the Furneaux group of islands. Governor Hunter adopted the joint recommendation of Flinders and Bass that the ‘high, hummocky land’ be known as Wilson’s Promontory—in honour of Thomas Wilson. Wilson is generally referred to as ‘a London merchant and friend
of Flinders’, but, in the absence of any amplification, this seems an inadequate reason for him being thus commemorated. Another and less well-known legend has it that he was the tutor of Bass during the latter’s student days after he had served his apprenticeship to an apothecary, Dr Francis of Boston. It may well have been that he was indeed a friend of Flinders, too.

There is still another story about the origin of the name—one which is perfectly reasonable. In the Sydney Morning Herald of 28-10-1922 the following letter to the editor appeared:

Mrs Mary Graham was a daughter of William Wilson, who died during the 1840s. On 12-10-1922 (in a letter to the editor) James H Watson denied that Lieut. Wm. Wilson had anything to do with it [the naming of the Promontory] at all or, I suppose, was even present.

In the vicinity of The Bluff, Captain Flinders, William Wilson and another, put off from H.M.S. Reliance in the captain’s dinghy and, no beach being seen, Wm. Wilson jumped on to a rock (losing a shoe)—all sailors wore shoes. Captain Flinders wrote in his pocket book “We shall now name this land Wilsons Promontory”, and tore the leaf out of the book and handed it to Wm. Wilson who put it in his pocket while on the rock.

The Thos. Wilson mentioned by your correspondent, Mr.Watson, was a near relative and close friend of the Flinders family and he was the father of Lieut. Wm. Wilson who stood on the rock. My father, who was the eldest son of Lieut. Wilson, and my mother were born very early in the last century at Kissing Point and King street, Sydney respectively. Wm. Wilson brought some pine trees from Norfolk Island which were planted on land near ‘Tin Can’ Corner of Phillip and Brady Streets and a few transplanted to the Botanic Gardens.

Jas.A.Wilson
Vaucluse.

The following quotation from J. H. Heaton’s Australian Dictionary of Dates and Men of the Times (Sydney, 1879) tends to enhance the likelihood of J. A. Wilson’s story being true:

Mr William Wilson was an officer on board H.M.S. Reliance, Captain Flinders, of which Mr Bass was surgeon. After passing through Bass’s Strait, so called after the doctor, they sighted the headland and left the ship in the cockboat in charge of Mr Wilson. As they got to the small beach on the north side he jumped ashore first, the point where he landed being thenceforth
called Wilson's “Promontory”. Mr Wilson was the first who planted the Norfolk Island pine in New South Wales ... His son was the first man who left New South Wales to import draught horses from England (1798).

This present writer has sought but failed to find any official document issued by Governor Hunter wherein he expresses specific approval of the Flinders-Bass recommendation that the landmark be named ‘Wilson’s Promontory’ in honour of Thomas Wilson or, indeed, any other Wilson. Now, nearly two centuries later, does it really matter?

Coast Surveys

Bass had not concerned himself with a detailed examination of the coastline of the Promontory and its environs and place names ascribable to him are few. The subsequent voyage in the 25-ton Norfolk confirmed the use of names such as Sealers Cove and Corner Inlet (and, of course, Western Port). It also brought official recognition of Wilsons Promontory and Bass Strait (at the time occasionally referred to as ‘Mr Bass’s Strait’).

The filling in of the detail was begun by Lieut. James Grant R.N., Commander of H.M.S. Lady Nelson. During the years 1799 and 1800 Grant charted a considerable stretch of the southern coastline and named a number of the navigational landmarks on the Promontory. In 1841 Thomas Townsend, Assistant Government surveyor charted Corner Inlet and the adjacent seas and islands. During the years 1842 and 1843 Commander J.L. Stokes, on the survey ship H.M.S. Beagle, worked from Refuge Cove and Waterloo Bay to Shallow Inlet.

Six years later G.D. Smythe contracted to survey from Corner Inlet to Cape Wellington. In the 1860s Cox and Wilkinson carried out further soundings in the same area and in 1869 and 1870 Navigating Lieut. H.J. Stanley, R.N., officer in charge of the admiralty and Colonial Marine Survey, undertook an important and detailed survey of coastal features at Port Albert, Corner Inlet and the Promontory.

Although the Promontory shoreline was well defined by these several surveys, the hinterland remained almost unknown territory during the first three or four decades following the voyages of Bass and Flinders—unknown, at least, to the inhabitants of the Port Phillip District. Curiously enough it was more familiar to the merchants and mariners of Hobart Town and Port Jackson, to people who had occasion to travel to and from those two settlements. Its eastern seaboard offered several safe anchorages and quiet bays where passing ships might call to restock with fuel or water and where their passengers might even disembark for a spell of recreation. So long as the sealing industry and its successor, the whaling industry, lasted these coves and bays would have been lively enough places with plenty of visitors from across the Strait or from Port Jackson. In fact, for them, it appeared to be much easier to visit the Promontory than it was to visit Melbourne.

One of the callers, the botanist Baxter, is known to have collected plant specimens there during the period from 1823 to 1825. His specimens are still in their folders in the Kew Herbarium, England. His is
the first known plant collection ever made on the Promontory—one which anticipated that of Ferdinand Mueller by more than a quarter of a century! Doubtless other serious-minded people would have been among the visitors of those early days but, at a time when an excursion away from the convict settlements was an adventure, such accounts as those visitors may have written have been lost or their value overshadowed by those of exploration and adventure of far greater significance to the inhabitants of the fast-growing Australian Colonies.

Callers of another sort also arrived on those shores from time to time—escaped convicts from Botany Bay and even from Van Diemens Land. The small party found by Bass has already been mentioned but adventurousness or despair led many others around Cape Howe or across the Strait in the hope of reaching freedom. Chance or good navigation would have brought some, at least, to the inhabited places near Alberton or Port Albert (founded in the early 1840s) and on the Promontory. One such was a woman convict, now remembered by the name ‘Biddy’. She settled herself near Mount Singapore on the peninsula of that name and she remained there long enough for her abode to become known as ‘Biddy’s Camp’—a name that it still bears. Perhaps Biddy selected the spot because it was remote from the more organised communities where there were troopers and magistrates, because it had a permanent supply of fresh water and it was not so isolated as to be inaccessible to those who roamed over Singapore Peninsula or who had reason to voyage in the adjacent waters of Corner Basin and the Inlet. It is evident that the place was lively enough to provide for her needs.

A search of available records has failed to indicate precisely when Biddy was in occupation of her camp, nor for how long, but, by inference, it can be believed that it was during the period when Buchanan and Bell operated the timber mill at Sealers Cove and while that same company grazed its stock on Singapore Peninsula—roughly, about 1850. It seems that her presence in the area was known to the stockmen because, as legend has it, she was given employment on the ‘station’ and, through the intervention of the owner or occupant of the ‘run’, she was forgiven her sins and enrolled into free society—such as it was and what there was of it.

The Wreck of the Clonmel

From the time of its discovery by Flinders and Bass more than 40 years elapsed before the people of the Port Phillip settlement began to display much interest in the hinterland of the Promontory.

Curiously enough, this interest stemmed from a sea-faring incident—from the misfortune of the owners, passengers and skipper of the 52-ton paddle steamer Clonmel. The first of a line of passenger steamers to ply between Port Phillip and Port Jackson, it arrived in the Colony in December 1840 and, on its second voyage, ran onto a sandbank during its passage along the route from Cape Howe to Wilsons Promontory.

About 35 km east of Corner Inlet the ship stuck fast and, for many years, it remained a landmark for enterprising salvagers and explorers. The sad story, told in language that would be hard to match, appeared in the Port Phillip Herald of 8 January, 1841:

“The Jo Paens which resounded a month ago on the arrival of the first steamer, the Clonmel, at this port, have scarcely ceased to vibrate in our ears, when the melancholy duty is imposed upon us of chanting her funeral dirge. The noble steamship Clonmel—this annihilator of space—this condenser of time…this Argo which would have brought many a Jason to our modern Colchis in search of the golden fleece is, we lament to have to say, a wreck, being now fixed on a reef off Corner Inlet … To convey to a stranger in words the sensation created in our community by the melancholy tidings of her loss would be a difficult task. Indeed, it seemed as if some grievous calamity had befallen us; … had it not been for the oral testimony of Mr D. C. Simson, who came up from the wreck in an open whaleboat, the report would have been at once attributed to one of those thousand-and-one vagaries which rumour, with her hundred-tongued mouth, is so apt to trumpet forth, when we have been some time without arrivals or news.”

The reporter then went on to record the ‘plain, unvarnished narrative’ by Mr Simson. It purported to convey to the Herald’s readers “a picture of courage
and self-devotion of which our national history teems with innumerable instance; nevertheless, characteristic as they are of the British sailor, each occasion of their recurrence reflects additional lustre on his country and his profession.”

Mr Simson’s narrative, recorded in about 2000 words, is an historical document if only for the reason that it gives a first-hand account of an event which led to the settlement by Europeans of a whole new province of New South Wales — the province that was to become the Gippsland of today.

It is quoted hereunder, with few omissions:

“On Wednesday afternoon, on 30th December (1840) I embarked on board the steam-ship Clonmel, Lieut. Tollervey, commander, bound from Sydney to Port Phillip. The passengers and crew consisted of seventy-five individuals. At 4 p.m. rounded the south head of Port Jackson, wind from the southward, blowing fresh. Next morning, 31st, found us off Jarvis’s Bay; wind still average with a strong head sea, the vessel progressing at an average of seven knots an hour. At daylight, 1st January, Cape Howe bore WSW of us; in the course of the morning sighted Ram Head, and took a fresh departure, steering for Wilson’s Promontory. The wind was now fair with smooth sea and out course SW half-W’ the wind and weather continuing favourable during day and night. A little after 3 a.m. 2nd January, all the passengers were startled by the ship striking heavily. On reaching the deck I discovered breakers ahead; the captain who had been on deck during the whole of the middle watch giving orders to back a-stern and doing all in his power to rescue the ship from her perilous situation. Finding that the engines were of no avail in backing her off the bank on which we found she had now struck, orders were given to lighten her by throwing overboard cargo, etc., but without the desired effect, the vessel still surging higher upon the reef. The anchors were then let go when, after a few more bumps, she swung head to wind, taking the ground with her stern, bedding herself, with the fall of the tide, upon the sand, rolling hard and striking occasionally. Daylight had now made its appearance and we found ourselves on shore on a sandspit at the entrance of Corner Inlet, about half a mile from the beach between which and the vessel a heavy surf was rolling. It is necessary here to remark that the course steered and the distance run would not have warranted any person in believing us so near the shore as we actually found ourselves. The sea [had been] smooth, the wind fair and the vessel going at the rate of at least 10 knots an hour and it was impossible for any navigator to have calculated upon an inset carrying a vessel under the circumstances above alluded to, 30 or 40 miles to leeward of her course in eighteen hours.

Captain Tollervey’s conduct had hitherto been that of a careful and watchful commander; he was on deck during the whole of the middle watch, which he himself kept, anxiously on the lookout and was on the paddle box at the time the vessel struck but the night proving misty, nothing could be seen beyond the length of the vessel. Capt. T, on finding all attempts to get the vessel off by running kedges and warps out, throwing overboard cargo etc., unavailing, and a strong sea rising with the flood tide, turned his attention to the safety of the passengers and crew. After several trips by the whale-boats and assisted by the quarter-boats afterwards, every soul was landed safely by 2 pm., the captain being the last to leave the vessel. A sufficiency of sails, awnings and lumber was brought on shore to rig up tents for all hands and everybody set to work to form an encampment. In a short time the ladies and females were comfortably housed, having beds placed for them in a weather proof tent. The male passengers were equally accommodated by means of spare sails and awnings brought from the ship and we found ourselves at sun-down as well provided for as we, under the circumstances, could desire. A sufficiency of provisions consisting of live-stock, hams, bread, flour, biscuit, rice, tea, sugar, wines and beer had been landed during the forenoon to keep the whole party for about ten days; water was found in abundance by digging but was rather brackish to the taste. Captain T. now brought order into the chaotic mass by establishing watches, previously haranguing the passengers and crew, explaining to them the stronger necessity which existed under their unfortunate circumstances for discipline and punctual obedience of orders than would have been necessary on board his noble vessel had she been afloat. Sentinels posted in all directions round the encampment, were relieved every two hours.

When order was thus established Captain T. and myself laid down in the tent and talked the events of the day over. He agreed...that it would be desirable that a boat be sent to Melbourne for relief and, having obtained his consent to head the party, I had no trouble in finding a crew of five volunteers to join me in the undertaking. One of my fellow passengers, Mr Edwards, volunteered to join us and the next morning, amidst the cheers of our fellow sufferers, we were launched by them from the beach in a whale-boat. We proceeded in the first instance to the vessel to lay in a store of provisions, not wishing to deprive those onshore
of any portion of their scanty stock. Owing to the very heavy surf which was rolling on the beach, we were nearly two hours before we reached our ill-starred ship, being every moment in danger of swamping. The scene which now opened on ascending the deck was harassing in the extreme; a few hours before, this stately vessel had been clearing the waters, buoyant, like its living inmates, with life and hope, now an immovable wreck; … As our time was short we supplied ourselves with such provisions as came within our reach and, after hoisting the Union Jack to the mainmast, upside down, we shoved off and committed ourselves to the care of a merciful Providence. At 8 am the 3rd inst. we took our departure, outside the bank, steering for Sealer’s Cove. Our boat was manned by five seamen and, beside ours, we had a small lug-sail made our of the owning. ... Our provisions consisted of biscuit, a ham, a breaker of water, three bottles of wine, 12 of beer and one of brandy. Of the latter article I would not take more, dreading its effects upon the crew. The small quantity I took, however, I found very beneficial, administered to them in minute portions. Shortly after leaving the Clonmel the wind came from the westward; we were obliged to down sail and pull, and after six hours vain struggling against the wind to reach the mainland, we were under the necessity of running for one of the seal islands where we found a snug little cove which we entered and, by refreshing the crew with a three hours rest and hearty meal we once more pulled for the mainland and reached Sealer’s Cove about midnight, where we landed, cooked our supper and passed the remainder of the night in the boat which we anchored in deep water. At half past 3 am. on the 4th inst. I started three men on shore to get the breaker filled with water; they had scarcely filled them and brought them down to the beach, when I observed the natives coming down upon us. I hurried them on board and got under weigh, the wind blowing hard from the eastward at the time. After a severe pull of four hours we were at last able to weather the southern point of the Cove, to host sail and run for Wilson’s Promontory which we rounded at 10 am. …… At 8 pm. we brought up in a small bay at the eastern entrance of Western Port …… After a refreshing night’s repose on the sandy beach we started next morning at the break of day, happy in finding ourselves so near the end of our voyage. Having a strong and steady breeze from the eastward we sailed along very fast before it, although we were in imminent danger of being swamped, the sea having risen very considerably and breaking over us repeatedly. At 2 pm. we were abreast of the Port Phillip Heads but, to our extreme mortification, when within a mile of being within a secure harbour we found the strong ebb tide created such a ripple and so much broken water, that I did not consider it prudent to run over it. We were therefore obliged to keep the boat’s head to windward from that time until the flood tide would make; we were in this tantalising situation for four hours when, to our inexpressible relief and joy, we saw a cutter making for the heads and, bearing down upon her, found her to be the Sisters, Captain Mulhall, to whose hospitable reception I cannot do sufficient justice. He took our boat in tow and ourselves on board and landed us at William’s Town at 11 pm., having been thus 63 hours from the time we left the ship to the time we landed at the beach.”

As a postscript to the above narrative the Port Phillip Herald reporter noted that, among the passengers, were Mr and Mrs Walker (Mrs Walker being a daughter of Mr Blaxland, M.L.C., Clonmel provided her with a second experience of shipwreck), Mr Goodwin, who owned half of the cargo, Mr Robinson who had charge of £3,000 worth of Union Bank currency notes (which were not recovered by any of the official salvagers!) and Mr and Mrs Cashmore, newly wed, who had shipped a large quantity of goods “for the new establishment to be opened at the corner of Collins and Elizabeth streets.” The reporter was sorry to have to add that the fire-men and some others “acted in a most disgraceful manner.”

Only a short time before the wreck of the Clonmel word had reached Melbourne of the wreck of the Isabella at King Island and the then recently appointed Port Phillip Harbour Master, Captain Charles Lewis, went to the scene of the wreck in the Harbour Authority’s cutter Sisters which was commanded by Captain Mulhall. It was on the return journey from this venture that the cutter picked up the crew of Clonmel’s whaleboat at the Port Phillip Heads. Lewis organised a rescue operation expeditiously and, next day, set sail in the Sisters for Corner Inlet. Another and slower boat, Will Watch, followed. Between them the rest of the crew and passengers were brought to Melbourne. Of the ship’s complement of 75 only Captain Tollervey suffered any injury as a consequence of the disaster. He was lamed for life by a leg injury.

While Lewis was examining the wreck and estimating the possibility of salvage, Mulhall manoeuvred his cutter through the maze of sandbanks and channels to an anchorage close to the Snake Island encampment and, with the assistance of Will Watch, took aboard the seventy. The return voyage was delayed a little because some of the stranded party had decided to fill in time
by exploring the environs of the island in *Clonmel’s* longboat. (Lewis had had the forethought to include in the rescue party a platoon of the 28th Regiment (at that time stationed in Melbourne) to guard the wreck and salvageable cargo. The small band of explorers rowed along a channel that led them into the estuary of a stream which later became known as the Albert River, and it seems they followed it upstream to an area which was to become Port Albert. Meanwhile Lewis, in his search for safe passageways for the salvage ships which were expected to operate as soon as they became available, plumbed the waters in the other direction—easterly, towards Corner Basin. He located the channel that follows the northern shore of the island and heads to the site of the present Welshpool.

Thus it was that he actually entered Corner Basin which, on his return to Melbourne on 15th January, he described as ‘a noble lake with a navigable passage’ and expanse of water that might prove to become a magnificent harbour. The channel he followed is now called the Lewis Channel. It may be of interest to record that one of the channel lights was built by one Lasseter, the same surname as the adventurous character who, more than a century later, ended his days searching for a gold reef he had previously stumbled on somewhere in Central Australia.

The wreck of the *Clonmel* and its aftermath was dealt with at length in the columns of the *Port Phillip Herald*, the *Port Phillip Gazeteer* and the *Port Phillip Patriot* and, in due course, in the Sydney and Van Diemen’s Land newspapers. The main Port Phillip references are to be read in the papers issued between the dates 8th January and 16th April, 1841. However they should be read with a certain degree of circumspection because of the difficulty encountered by the reporters of obtaining unbiased or even authoritative accounts for publication. It seems that the obligatory official enquiry was a secretive affair but the public was left with the impression that Captain Tollervey was not blameworthy and with the suspicion that the fault lay with the ship’s first mate. The *Clonmel* owners appear to have been adequately covered by insurance, the several owners of its cargo appear to have lost heavily and the less wealthy passengers were obliged to suffer their losses without much in the way of compensation. As for the cargo, some of it was salvaged as quickly as possible. Efforts at salvaging the ship itself had to be abandoned after a few trials and the owners settled for selling the wreck for £110. At intervals during the next two years salvage operations continued until most of the removable equipment had been recovered. Parts of the engine were saved but the boilers proved irrecoverable and they, with what was left of the hull, are said to be still visible when wind and wave scours the site on Clonmel Island—the sandbank where the ship finally settled after being washed ashore about nine kilometres beyond the point of its first impact. The *Port Phillip Gazette* of 2nd August, 1843 draws the veil over the rest of the story of the *Clonmel* when it, not quite accurately, stated the “the *Portenia* had brought to Sydney the whole of the wreck of this fine steamer.”

The present writer has been unable to locate a picture of the *Clonmel*, but in the Port Albert Historical Museum may be seen at least two relics of the vessel—a brass boiler plate and one of its cannons.