

In the Wake of Captain Stirling Take 2

In March 2017 my old mate Michael Lefroy and I decided to re-enact the small boat voyage that Captain James Stirling RN made up the Swan River in March 1827. It was this voyage that led to the establishment of the Swan River Colony that eventually grew into the State of Western Australia.

We failed. We simply took the wrong boat, our Caledonia Yawl *Crazybird*. We figured that as Stirling used a boat that was predominantly a sailing boat we should do the same. However, well short of our destination, All Saints Church built to mark the highest point Stirling and his crew reached, we were forced to turn back by overhanging trees and snags. Not to be deterred we decided this March to give it another go, but first let's visit the back story of the original voyage.

On January 26th 1788 Captain Arthur Phillip RN led the first fleet of 11 naval vessels and transports into Botany Bay. He had instructions from the Crown to claim New Holland, as it was known by Europeans, for King George III. The fact that indigenous people had been there for over 60,000 years was evidently not a matter for consideration as the British had decided that New Holland was Terra Nullius, that is uninhabited.

He was ordered to claim the land up to the Treaty of Tordesillas line established in 1494 by Pope Alexander VI that divided the globe into two hemispheres, one for the Spanish and one for the Portuguese. The line that was established 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands or roughly 45 degrees West, when extrapolated to the other side of the globe became 135 East near what is today the Western Australian border. Botany Bay was on the east side of the line and hence in the Spanish half. This did not worry the British as Spain's power had long since waned but they did not want to upset the Dutch as they were at that time forming a treaty with France and Holland to counter the threat of Russia. As The Dutch had done the majority of the exploration of the western side and named it New Holland it was considered that they might get a bit upset if England then went and claimed it. So New South Wales was established east of the line and for the next 40 odd years the land west of the Treaty line was not colonised by any European power.

During those years the French made a number of scientific voyages to explore and chart New Holland with increasing interest in possibly establishing a penal colony in Western Australia. In 1826 Dumont d'Urville sailed the *Astrolabe* into one of the world's great natural harbours, King George Sound, on the south coast of Western Australia, the site of today's city of Albany.

d'Urville got on very well with the local indigenous people and decided to report back that this would be a perfect place for a French colony. He stayed a month and sailed on to Sydney. Unbeknown to him on the way to Sydney he passed a Major Lockyer on the ship *Amity* coming in the opposite direction. He had been

sent by Ralph Darling, the recently appointed governor of New South Wales, to establish a military post in King George Sound.

When d'Urville arrived in Sydney he heard of the dispatch of Lockyer and realized that they were too late as the British were already on the move. The irony of this is that Lockyer had not been sent to claim Western Australia, a land mass roughly the size of Western Europe, but merely to establish a military presence there.

While In Sydney d'Urville dined with Captain James Stirling, who was there with a small fleet of Royal Navy vessels, and told him of his voyage. He also showed him copies of the charts of the Swan River area made by the well-resourced French Baudin expedition of 1801 to 1803. Stirling saw a huge opportunity. The British were not at war with the French or anybody else and hence the likelihood for advancement in the Royal Navy was greatly diminished. A future on the beach on half past beckoned when he got back to England.

He met with Darling and told him of the French interest in the West. Darling agreed to supply him with a ship, *HMS Success*, and off he sailed for the Swan River.

He was not the first there. In 1697 Dutchman Willem de Vlamingh had landed and sailed in ship's boats up the river that he named the Black Swan River. In 1803 one of Baudin's midshipmen Francois Heirisson also explored the Swan River but neither of them got further than the delta of the river that is today near the Causeway bridge. The Aboriginal name for the area is Matagarup meaning "leg deep" which explains their dilemma.

Stirling arrived off the Swan River in March of 1827, a particularly nice time of the year. He launched a 30-foot ship's boat and with 17 men and provisions for a number of days they set off. When they got to the delta, like Vlamingh and Heirisson, they found the river hard to navigate but showing true British grit they spent two days dragging their boat through the shallows until they found deeper water further up stream. They carried on for two more days until they could get no further.



Stirling and his party sailing up the Swan River. This painting makes his boat look much larger than it would have to have been to make the voyage.

Stirling ventured inland and was very impressed by the soil and the vegetation. He obviously did not go far west from that point or he would have found the bleak soils of the Gnangarra sands that might have tempered his enthusiasm.

When Stirling returned to England he wrote a glowing report of the Swan River area and convinced the Crown to allow him to claim the rest of the continent. It would not cost them a penny as long as he was given the right to make land grants and hence attract investors. The entrepreneurial spirit of Western Australia was established and arguably still lives today.

So back to our attempt to re-enact this voyage. This time we would not take a sailing boat that we could row, but a rowboat we could sail. The obvious answer was a St Ayles skiff. These lovely boats designed by Iain Oughtred are usually only rowed, but the two at Royal Freshwater Bay Yacht Club have also been fitted with a simple sprit rig on an un-stayed mast.

The St Ayles skiffs are normally crewed by 5 people – four rowing sweep oars and a coxswain. For this voyage, considering all our camping gear and supplies, we decided to go with three crew and were joined by Gerry McGann.

So at 0840 on 16th March 2020 three over 70 year old blokes set off from the beach at RFBYC. There was virtually no wind and so for the first hour we rowed until a nice little Sou'wester sprang up. We stepped the mast and hoisted the sail

and were soon sliding along at two to three knots on a virtually empty river, or to be correct, estuary because we had yet to get to the delta at the Causeway.



Checking the rig before departure. Did we take too much gear? Yep

At midday we sailed under the Narrows Bridge and rowed into Elizabeth Quay, a new small boat harbour built right in front of the Perth CBD.



Elizabeth Quay

After coffee at one of the restaurants we got under way and rowed to the Causeway, the furthest point reached by the Dutch and the French. Unlike them we did not have to contend with shallows as the river has been dredged to form an island in the middle of the river, Heirisson Island, that now has two navigable channels either side. We re-stepped the mast and with the aid of the freshening but still moderate sea breeze we were soon bowling along heading east.



The simple sprit rig was a delight

BY 1430 Maylands Yacht Club slipped past our lee and we saw an opportunity to cut off some rowing by taking a small channel west of Garratt Road Bridge. Great idea except the little bridge at the far end was so low we could barely squeeze underneath it.



A bit of downwards pressure and we were through

At 1630 we passed the confluence of the Swan and the Helena River, one of the Swan River's major tributaries although today it is a shadow, or a dribble, of its former self owing to a dam up stream.

By 1700 we were rowing under the Guildford road and rail bridge and had mirrored the earliest commercial traffic in the colony that was by large sailing barges between the river ports of Fremantle, Perth and Guildford.



The sun was getting low so we looked for somewhere to camp and saw a very nice field opposite Woodbridge, a heritage house built on a land grant that Stirling had given himself. After negotiating with a goat farmer we set up camp. In retrospect we should have stopped earlier or pushed on further because we found ourselves right under the flight-path of Perth airport. As we sat in our simple camp eating freeze dried food we looked up at the A380's et al flying low overhead bringing hundreds of people to start 14 days quarantine. It was only a few nights before Western Australia's borders were to be closed because of the Covid -19 virus. Stirling also did not have a very good first night, as he was so concerned with the noises of the bush that he stayed anchored out in the middle of the river all night.



Setting up camp the first night.



Stirling preparing to camp for the night - a painting by Frederick Garling in 1827

The next morning we were up early and decided to leave our camp and supplies set up so we could push on up the river “light ship”. We also left the sailing rig at the camp as we knew that it would be all rowing from then on as the large trees that crowded the bank would make sailing almost impossible. We also took some paddles in case the river became too narrow for our sweep oars.

After a pit stop at Mussel Pool where we had a chat with some interested local river historians, including one I went to school with, we rowed on. We settled into a routine of swapping out the cox every half hour so one would row for an hour and cox for half an hour. We did not push it but just tapped the boat along and the miles ticked by aided by an incoming tide from the estuary.

All went well and by 0915 we crossed under the large bridge carrying the Reid Highway over the river. The hum of the traffic filtered down through the trees and we could picture people driving along in their steel boxes listening to their radios totally unaware that just below them a major adventure was taking place.

Shortly thereafter the adventure took a dramatic turn as we ran aground for the first time on a submerged log. With the tide pushing us more firmly on there was nothing for it but for Gerry to strip down, show the sqawking galahs his manly physique and drag us off with suitable encouragement from the remainder of the crew.

We pushed on and passed Ivy Cottage, the turning point for the failed 2017 *Crazybird* attempt. It was all new territory from here on. The river narrowed and we became very cautious. The oars were put away and we resorted to paddles to navigate the increasing number of snags and shallows.



Paddling Indian canoe style

AT 1045 we passed under Maardi Bridge, the last one before our destination. By 1100 we passed the confluence of Leonards Creek and the Swan River. Excitement grew for the *Ripple* crew. We were getting close but would we be frustrated by the increasing snags and shallows? The tension was tangible.

Finally at 1230 we navigated around a small bend in the river and saw Ellen Brook, named by Stirling after his wife. The Perth suburb not far away is named Ellenbrook after it.



The confluence of Ellen Brook and the Swan River

We paddled on a few hundred metres looking for the fabled Surveyor's tree that was marked in 1829 by the colony's first Surveyor General, John Septimus Roe. It was not to be as finally the river was no longer navigable and *Ripple* and her valiant crew, just like Stirling and his crew, could go no further.

We returned to the riverbank just below this point where we thought we would find the church above the steep bank and went ashore. The scrub and grass was very thick and the thought of tiger snakes was uppermost but we were not to be deterred. We wished we had brought our non-existent machetes but finally we climbed a small broken down path to find at the top of the steep bank the tiny All Saints Church.



The sign says in part “ On this spot CAPTAIN STIRLING camped in 1827 and here the vision of a state arose in his heart and mind”

We entered and contributed to the churches coffers and left a short record of our epic voyage in the visitors’ book. I expect that in years to come this page will feature strongly in their archives.

After an hour of quiet reflection on what we had achieved we descended to *Ripple* that was being closely guarded by the tiger snakes where she was nestled on the grassy bank – or so we imagined and headed off back down the river. We had many miles ahead of us, thirty to be exact.



Ripple being guarded by the tiger snakes

Ahead the clouds looked ominously grey and threatening. It had hardly rained so far this year, so surely not now. The wind picked up from the South West, right on the bow for us – and then it started raining. Not just a nice little sprinkle but close to torrential. All the usual banter stopped and our collective minds were told to take a break while our ancient bodies just plugged away, slowly ticking off the miles. We did not bear to think about the state of our camp. Would the tent still be up or reduced to a rag in a mushy pool? Best not to contemplate – just row.



Minds in neutral as we struggled down stream

At 1630 we arrived at Mandoon Winery. This was on land that John Septimus Roe had been granted, so we thought we should pay our respects. We tied *Ripple* up to the nice little pontoon that, on brighter days and times, would most likely have had a wine tour ferry alongside. Would they let us in considering our drowned-rat status? Not to worry as Mike knew the management and after buying suitable quantities of their magnificent reds, we were soon drinking coffee in front of a fire the staff especially lit for us. We listened to the drips falling into the puddles growing below our chairs. Gerry bought a rug.



Gerry and his new rug

By 1730 we were off again. It was still raining but we had to get to our camp before dark. Fortified by Mandoon's hospitality and spurred on by what we might find at our base camp we rowed on with increased vigor.

AT 1800 we were mighty relieved to see our little tent come into view in the failing light. We went ashore and were delighted that not only was it still up but was dry inside and the rain had stopped. The 1800 A380 heading for Qatar roared overhead as a welcome. Ahh home sweet home.

The only down side was there was a rather hostile note from the landowner advising that we were trespassing and we should leave. The goat farmer had obviously misrepresented the reception we would receive. We agreed to comply with the order - in the morning.



Gerry and welcome note – not

With dry clothes and a freeze dried curry washed down with a fine Mandon Shiraz, complete with the story of Stirling on the label, we settled down to a pleasant night accompanied by a few notes on Mike's ukulele with the 737's providing the baseline.

Next morning dawned clear and bright but unfortunately the Sou'wester was still blowing. Still, nothing for it but to hit the oars and get going. At 0830 we were back at the confluence of the Swan and the Helena and stopped in a park to brew some coffee before heading off again. Our next stop was Claisebrook, that was the main sewer of Perth back in the early days but is now a very pretty little harbour surrounded by apartments and restaurants. We availed ourselves of the latter and fortified ourselves with a delicious lunch and a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. Little did we know that it would be the last restaurant meal we would enjoy for many weeks/months/years – who knows?



Approaching Matagarup Bridge on the way home

An hour or so later we passed under the Causeway and rowed straight into the teeth of the Sou'wester. We crawled around the south shore trying to stay as much as we could in the lee of the South Perth foreshore but with little success. At 1530 we pulled into the lee of The Narrows Bridge embankment - we had been rowing for most of the past eight hours.

A party was sent to climb the embankment and check on the conditions in Melville Water. They returned with long faces. It was blowing 18 knots out there and did not look like easing up any time soon.

There was nothing for it but to camp here, at least until the early hours. We thought about checking with the authorities, so contacted the City of South Perth rangers. Surely they would be so impressed with our feat that we would be given dispensation to camp. Maybe they would send down the Mayor to congratulate us. It was not to be. We were told we could sit on the side of the river with our sleeping bags around our shoulders but not to go asleep or that would be seen as camping.

This did not sound like much fun so another plan was hatched. We would lighten ship and try and make Royal Perth Yacht Club another two miles up wind of us. An Uber was called and the driver was slightly surprised as we filled his car with all our food, wine and camping gear but no passengers, only an address of where to take it all.

We set off. As we passed under the Narrows the full force of the Sou'wester hit us and at times we doubted we were making any headway. A safety boat was sent from RFBYC to offer us a tow but we thanked them and declined.

At dusk we started to feel the lee of Royal Perth Yacht Club and shortly after pulled into the little beach just below one of *Australia II's* masts.

It would normally be Twilight Sailing and the Club would be heaving, but on entering the bar we found one bar staff, dimmed lights and two club members. We doubled the number of people at the Club and it dawned on us that the world had changed while we had been on the river.

We were picked up by our families and headed home to our beds, but next morning were back on *Ripple* ready to complete the voyage.

It was a grey but windless morning as we set off and rowed out onto Melville Water. A light Sou'easter sprung up so we hoisted sail and sailed across a completely empty estuary. It seemed the world had stopped, which we realized it pretty much had. The Sou'easter strengthened and went around to the North so we gybed around Point Walter, named by Stirling after his brother, and shortly after ran up on the beach at RFBYC.



Arriving back at RFBYC

We had reenacted a little voyage that was made 192 years ago but one that had huge implications. As a result of this voyage the whole of the continent became

one nation and not half British and half French. The State of Western Australia that is arguably the powerhouse of the Australian economy, thanks mainly to its huge mineral wealth, was born on this ancient land and we learnt that if you want to go adventuring there is no better boat than a St Ayles Skiff equipped with a sprit rig.

John Longley