

“Death or Liberty!” Alexander Pearce’s ill-fated trek across Tasmania

Not everything we know about Australia’s terrain was written by intrepid explorers or gleaned from the reports of surveyors, adventurers or remote settlers. The interior of Tasmania holds some of the wildest and most inhospitable terrain on our continent, yet it hasn’t always been expeditions and missions that have ‘conquered’ it.

Alexander Pearce (or in some records, Pierce) was an Irish convict, aged around 30, who received seven years’ transportation to New Holland for stealing shoes. The popular myth that most transported convicts were poor unfortunates or street urchins, forced by extreme poverty to either steal or starve, is usually an erroneous one; transportation was a sentence normally reserved for habitual offenders or those seeking profit rather than survival. This seems to have been Pearce’s case, as he admitted to stealing *six* pairs of shoes and not just one.

Pearce’s records suggest that he was not a happy convict, nor an obedient one. In his first 18 months in Hobart Town, between February 1821 and August 1822, he received no less than 175 lashes in four allotments – a high amount for any convict – for offences including attempted escape and stealing ducks, turkeys and a wheelbarrow. A third effort at bolting yielded several weeks’ liberty before Pearce was recaptured and sentenced to Macquarie Harbor in the colony’s isolated west, by a magistrate probably quite pleased to see the back of him.

It is hard to think of a more fitting place for a recidivist and recalcitrant convict like Pearce; the Harbor was considered, probably quite fairly, as being the worst convict settlement in the British Empire. For both inmates and guards, Macquarie Harbour was a place of punitive posting, a torturous, remote outpost where nobody wanted to be. In the 1820s areas of European settlement in Tasmania were minimal and focused around Hobart and the Derwent and Huon river valleys, the Tamar River in the north and the coastline, charted from sea. Macquarie Harbor lay in the distant west, an isolated speck on an otherwise empty map. It was a geographic prison, hemmed in by wild seas to the west and the most wild, impenetrable mountains and forests on all other sides. Today cherished for its natural beauty, the convicts and their guards of the 1820s cursed Macquarie Harbor for its isolation, bleak weather and oppressive surrounds.

Sarah Island was the settlement’s dormitory site, home for about 170 convicts and 18 soldiers. Nestled deep in the southern corner of the harbor, about a mile in circumference and several hundred yards from shore, the island was chosen by the first commander, Lieutenant Cuthbertson, as the site for the entire settlement. Cuthbertson obviously had security in mind – most of the convicts could not swim – however with no fresh water, poor soil and, once cleared, no timber, all supplies had to be shipped to the island.

The guard-to-convict ratio on Sarah Island was low, about one to ten, so Cuthbertson’s regime – aimed to prevent an uprising – was based around tiring work, rigid discipline and brutal punishment if convicts erred. The men rose at sunrise six days of the week, most wading to boats in the bleak half-light, setting out towards the shore under the command of either a guard or an overseer (usually a convict trustee). Once ashore the gangs would set to work on the region’s ancient Huon pines that formed the economic rationale for the Macquarie Harbor settlement (the penal advantages were only incidentally useful). Capable of surviving for as long as two millennia each, the Huon pine’s soft timber was buoyant, oily, resistant to pests and did not warp after long periods of immersion in water, consequently it made ideal timber for shipbuilding.

The convicts would cut, strip and haul the gigantic pine logs to shore and tow them back to Sarah Island, all by hand – it was draining work. They were given bread as their daily work ration, although to prevent hoarding of food, and thus escape attempts, it was usually laced with ergot to send it rotten after a couple of days. The men would return to Sarah Island at dusk, down their evening meal, usually of salted beef or pork, and retire to sleep in crude hammocks, often in clothes that were still soaked.

Little wonder then that the men of Macquarie Harbor dreamed of escape; Hell itself could scarcely provide a more miserable existence. But how could it be done? To flee while ashore was almost inconceivable: the harbor was ringed by mountain ranges, rock escarpments, dense scrub, tightly condensed rainforests, fast-flowing rivers and creeks. Like most in the colonies, the convicts would have also imagined the interior to be populated by savage natives, even though in reality there were probably no more than a few thousand Aboriginals in all of Tasmania. Fleeing via boat was perhaps a more attractive option: if you could steal one, you would need to sneak past Sarah Island, move north-west up the harbor and negotiate the tumultuous tidal flows at the harbor's entrance, Hell's Gates, avoiding being spotted by the four soldiers posted at the pilot's station.

*We left Macquarie Harbour, it was in the pouring rain
None of us quite sure if we would see England again
And some fool muttered 'death or liberty!'
There was six of us together, a jolly hungry crew
And as the days went by, you know, our hunger quickly grew
And some fool muttered 'death or liberty!'*

Despite these difficulties it was the sea-bound option chosen by Pearce and his co-escapees – Greenhill, Travers, Dalton, Bodenham, Kennerly, Mather and Brown – when they decided to liberate themselves on September 20, 1822. Their aim was steal the pilot's boat and provisions, chart it out of Hell's Gate then tack north and east through Bass Strait, before setting sail for any foreign port not having extradition pacts with England (like most convicts they had little idea of geography or scale). After setting out at dawn they managed to overpower their convict overseer then steal a few provisions, before a comedic mix of accident and error caused them to sabotage their own boat and set off into the bush.

The escaped gang was confident, determined and relatively fit, however the area they planned on traversing is notoriously difficult, so rugged that it hosts few bushwalkers today. They climbed the 1100-metre high Mount Sorrell on their first afternoon at liberty, spending a cold night somewhere beneath the summit, unwilling to light a fire for fear of being seen from Sarah Island. The gang was in grave fear of being pursued by soldiers, however none were sent after them. Cuthbertson had, some months prior, had six convicts flee into the bush in a similar manner and sent a party of two soldiers and three trusted convicts in pursuit of them; neither the escaped convicts nor the pursuit team was seen or heard from again. It would be better, Cuthbertson thought, to let the bush take its toll: the eight would return soon enough, begging for food and shelter.

*So that night we made fires out of twigs and out of bark
And our stomachs they were rumbling all through the night so dark
We were only trying to keep ourselves alive
But when the sun came up next morning? Well the six had turned to five!*

The party continued west for several days, moving through the Engineer Range and toward the Franklin River, some of the most inhospitable country on the continent. Their small stash of flour was soon exhausted and it was Greenhill – the party’s leader, if only because he carried the axe – who expressed the inexpressible, broaching cannibalism as a means for survival. “Tastes like pork” he is alleged to have said. The first victim was Dalton, who was bludgeoned to death just before dawn on their eighth day of escape. Greenhill, Pearce and Travers bled and butchered the body, cooking the heart and liver on the fire before leading the grisly feast. Brown and Kennerly – to whom Dalton had been something of a friend – probably considered themselves next in line for slaughter so that day slipped back from the group and fled back to Sarah Island. Their return took three weeks and both died, exhausted and malnourished, within days of their return, without having breathed a word of what had transpired in the bush.

*All five of us were nervous and I'll tell you that's a fact
But you should have seen the bastard who was carrying the axe
He was a sick man he had murder in his heart
And then we reached the Franklin River, it took two days to cross
We were wet and almost starving and for food were at a loss
We were hungry men with murder on our minds.*

The group made their way to the Franklin River, a deep and wide fast-running stream with steep banks and overhanging vegetation. Two of the remaining six were non-swimmers so the party took great care, constructing a structure to facilitate their safe crossing. Several days after traversing the Franklin they crossed the Deception Ranges and moved onto the western fringes of the boggy Loddon Plains, before their hunger again got the better of them...

*So that night we made a fire out of twigs and out of bark
And our stomachs they were rumbling all through the night so dark,
They were making noises the dead could not ignore
And when the sun came up next morning, well the five had turned to four!*

The victim this time was the unfortunate Bodenham, one of the more reluctant participants at the last feast and again probably killed by the zealous Greenhill. Again the rest of the group devoured the heart and liver on the first night, divvying up the rest of the flesh in equal portions for the journey ahead. A decade later a government surveyor, moving across the Loddon Plains, came across human bones and some convict relics: probably the remains of the unfortunate Bodenham.

*Well the four of us kept marching to a place called Western Tiers
A country full of tasty game but for us it held no cheer
We had no guns, we were traveling without hope.
But the axe it loomed so ominous and God's hand was at play
A sick man is a type of game which can not run away
So stay easy, my poor man, your time's at hand.*

Next to be eaten was Mather, who had been continually ill throughout their journey, suffering from constipation and nausea. Mather, who was physically the strongest of the group, survived one spontaneous attack from Greenhill, seizing the axe from him and hurling it to Pearce. He did not,

however, survive a second which came from all three working on concert. Another murder was committed, another body dissected and devoured – and the group continued on.

*Well the three of us kept moving but one was fading fast
He had been bitten by a snake and you could see he would not last
Stay easy, my good man, your time's at hand
And when he could last no longer his days were fading fast
We were far too weak to carry him, subsistence it comes first
Stay easy, my good man, your time is at hand*

Four days after the death of Mather, a bite from a snake – probably one of Tasmania's prolific black-headed tiger snakes – spelled doom for the unfortunate Travers. His foot swollen and black from gangrene, in intense pain and almost completely unable to walk Travers, convinced he was dying, begged Greenhill and Pearce to abandon him and go on (he might also have guessed his eventual fate). They hauled the unfortunate Travers across Wentworth Hills before one of the pair dispatched him with the axe; this time the murderer was probably Pearce, who might have felt himself lucky at this point, given that Greenhill and Travis were the closest conspirators in the previous killings. The two surviving convicts stayed put for two days, resting and feasting on Travers' body; presumably they didn't eat the gangrenous foot.

*Now he had been looking at me funny, sort of eyeing me for days,
And you would not need to be too bright to know that bastard's ways:
He was a sick man, he had murder in his heart.
But even bastards have to rest, and even bastards have to sleep,
And when he was in the land of Nod straight over to him I creep,
And the axe that he had wielded now was mine!*

It would not require incisive logic to figure what happened next. Greenhill and Pearce continued on uneasily, knowing that each was eyeing the other as a prospective meal. They walked several dozen metres apart, camping either well away from each other or, when together, staying awake or feigning sleep. Throughout this tentative waltz across central Tasmania Greenhill always retained the axe, which made Pearce certain that he must dispatch his companion or suffer the same fate. Eventually Pearce won out, catching Greenhill asleep, stealing the axe and bludgeoning his skull. The triumphant Pearce tore strips of flesh from Greenhill's arms and thighs, stashed it for the journey and continued on in search of Table Mountain, a landmark he knew from his days in the south-east. A week or so later, he stumbled on a sheep, and shortly after ran into Maguire, an old convict associate from Hobart. Alexander Pearce had completed a remarkable 49-day trek across the most hostile wilderness in Australia; and he had shared in five cannibalistic feasts along the way.

*Well now history is a pack of lies, as any fool can tell
And when I got down to Hobart Town I told my story well,
But do you think they would believe one word I said?
For they thought that I was covering for my mates still at large,
Said they'd be roaming in the bush so wild and free
And back to old Macquarie Harbour they sent me*

The settled areas outside Hobart were rife with ex-convicts turned bushrangers, and unlike the legends attached to Victorian and New South Wales bushrangers, there was nothing romantic about

them: they were cruel and violent thugs who plagued free settlers and government officials. Pearce took up with two of these types and remained at large for a further two months, before a military patrol captured them in January 1823 and took them back to Hobart Town in chains. For some reason Pearce decided to recant the story of his voyage to freedom in full, cannibal gore and all; and for some reason the colonial authorities rejected it as the fanciful lies of a convict covering for his friends. The decision was made to send Pearce back to Macquarie Harbor.

*But I remember the fires made out of twigs and made of bark
and my stomach it was grumbling all through the night so dark
And this young fool, he just said to me 'it's liberty or death!'
And he looked a rather tasty one, I just could not help it...*

The macabre adventures of Alexander Pearce did not end there. Now something of a celebrity amongst his fellow inmates, Pearce still dreamed of escape, except next time he would travel not west but north, sticking to the coast where food was more procurable. He found a ready partner in a young Thomas Cox; the pair bolted on November 16, 1823 but lasted only three days before Pearce murdered Cox and stripped his body of its best parts for eating. Soldiers found Pearce next to a smoking fire, his pockets stuffed with human flesh, the mangled remains of the hapless Cox not far away in the bushes.

Cuthbertson shipped Pearce back to Hobart where the courts now took him far more seriously: he was tried and hanged. His skull was cleaned, preserved and shipped off to prominent physician in the United States; it may still be seen in the University of Pennsylvania. Episodes of the Pearce saga were retold in tawdry London magazines throughout the rest of the 1820s, suitably cleaned and idealized for English ladies wanting a scare.

The Macquarie Harbor settlement, which despite its supplies of timber proved expensive to operate, lasted only until 1833; as a place of secondary punishment it was eclipsed by Port Arthur. Visitors to the harbor and the nearby town of Strahan can visit Sarah Island today, where ruins of the penitentiary, bakery and slipway still stand. In all, about 70,000 convicts were transported to Van Diemen's Land up to 1852 when all transportation ceased.

Learning activities

Students at CSFII Level Six (years 9-10) enjoy using the Pearce story as a basis for studying convict life, labour, settlements and punishment. Webquests and research on Macquarie Harbor and Sarah Island are easy to organize and implement. The song *A tale they won't believe* is an excellent stimuli and/or means of organizing research or presentations; e.g. dramatic reconstructions, posters or creative writing. Co-curricular tasks with Geography are possible, such as mapping tasks and investigation into the terrain, flora or fauna of the region.

Sources

1. The song *A tale they won't believe* can be found on the Weddings Parties Anything albums "Trophy Night" and "They were better Live". The full lyrics can be found on the Web at <http://www.lyricsondemand.com/w/weddingspartiesanythinglyrics/>

2. Paul Collins' excellent account of Pearce's terrible journey is called "Hell's Gates" and is probably the best full text on the subject. It was published by Hardie Grant Books, South Yarra in 2002.
3. Robert Hughes' renowned Australian history, "The Fatal Shore", covers Pearce's escape in some detail in the chapter 'Bolders and Bushrangers'.
4. The ABC series "Bush Tucker Man: Stories of Survival" features an episode on Pearce and the difficult terrain he managed to cross. DVDs are available from ABC shops.

Picture captions

Alexanderpearce.jpg	A death-bed sketch of Pearce after his hanging
Sarahisland.jpg	A sketch of Sarah Island at its peak in the 1820s
Penitentiary.jpg	The ruins of the three-story convict penitentiary on Sarah Island
Rafting.jpg	Sarah Island convicts are showing moving Huon pine logs by raft

Internet sites

<http://scs.une.edu.au/Bushrangers/pearce.htm>
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0PEH/is_62/ai_n6150926
<http://www.vision.net.au/~jennings/macquarie/mac2.html>
<http://thegreatoutdoors.com.au/display.php?location=TAS&ID=6181>
http://www.clickforaustralia.com/tasmania_convict_history.htm