

CAPTAIN FROM CONNECTICUT

Isaac Pendleton's Last Voyage

BY ANTHONY BROWN

The island of Van Dieman, the south-west coast of New Holland, and the southern parts of New Zealand, produce seals of all kinds in quantities at present almost innumerable. Their stations on rocks or in bays have remain'd unmolested since the Creation. The beach is incumber'd with their quantities, and those who visit their haunts have less trouble in killing them than the servants of the victualling office have who kill hogs in a pen with mallets.

Sir Joseph Banks, 1806

BETWEEN 1792 AND 1807, more than eighty American ships visited the fledgling colony of New South Wales. They came from Boston, New York, New Bedford, Nantucket, Providence, Sag Harbor and from Stonington, foremost of the sealing ports. The Yankee captains were traders, whalers and sealers – some of them all three. Sea-otter pelts, sealskins and sandalwood were sought-after items of trade, particularly for the lucrative China market at Canton, the sole Chinese seaport open to westerners.

Reports of the teeming seal fisheries in Bass Strait and to the south of New

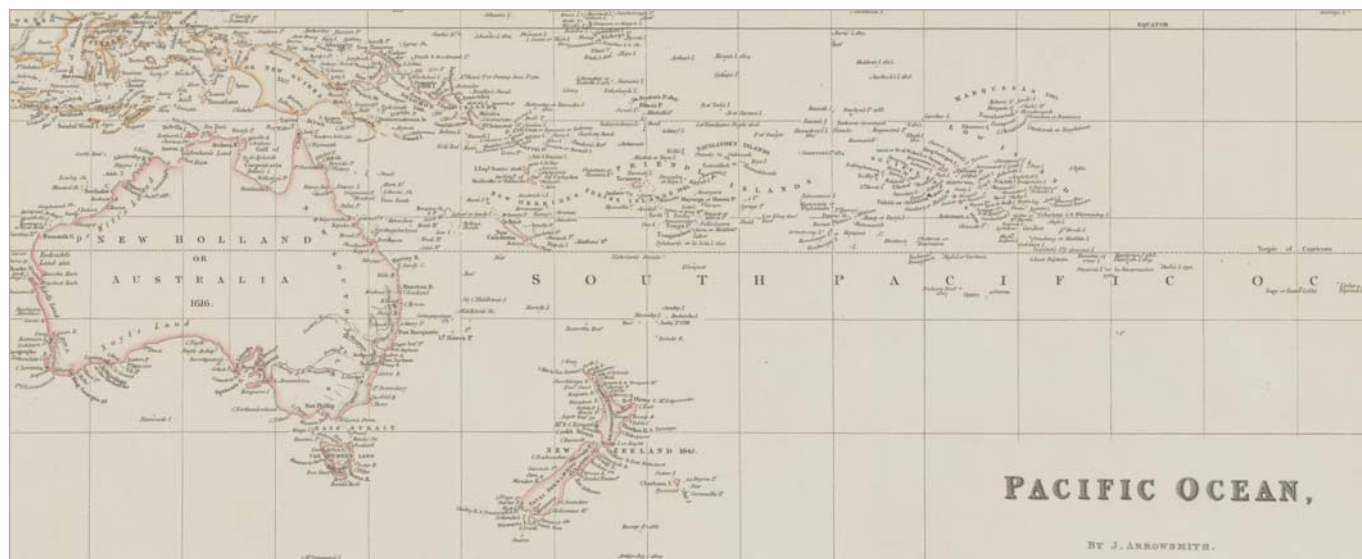
Zealand (together with the knowledge that skins of the fur seal traded at Canton for ten times their value in New York) brought an influx of sealers to Australasian waters in the early 1800s.

One of the earliest was the brig *Union*, 99 tons, owned by Fanning & Co. of New York and captained by Isaac Pendleton. Owner and master were both Stonington men, members of two of the port's maritime dynasties, and related by marriage to a third – their wives were sisters from the Sheffield family.

Though the *Union* was Isaac Pendleton's first command, he came

well recommended as “an upright man and able navigator, and possessed of every desirable capacity, successfully to prosecute this fishery and commercial trade”. His father Amos was a master mariner, and ten of Amos' eleven sons were also seamen (five died at sea). Isaac married Nancy (Ann) Sheffield just six weeks before he sailed from New York in October 1802, bound for the South Seas. He was a month short of his twenty-fifth birthday.

The first officer, Daniel Wright, “an excellent seaman and navigator, of much mechanical ingenuity”, also came from New England, as did most of the crew. Edmund Fanning's



Enlarged section from a map of the Pacific Ocean, published 1834 by John Arrowsmith, 1790–1873. National Library of Australia, nla.mpa.nk2456-72.



Flinching a yearling, a young sea elephant at Tristan De Acunha (i.e. da Cunha), c. 1824, Augustus Earle, 1793–1838, watercolour, Rex Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia, nla.pic-an053421-v.

reputation as owner attracted many volunteers. A successful sealing captain and trader, he was fast realising his ambition “to add new discoveries to the knowledge of man relating to these seas, and the no less flattering hope of realising a fortune”. Seasoned deck-hands and greenhands off the farm opting to join a sealing gang shared the dream, hoping that one lucky voyage might produce enough capital to start their own businesses.

Doubling the Cape of Good Hope at the turn of the year, Pendleton set course for the Crozet Islands in the southern Indian Ocean. Failing to locate them at their supposed latitude and longitude, he made for the south coast of New Holland, where the explorer George Vancouver had reported great numbers of seals at Seal Island, in King George Sound. On making Cape Leeuwin he ran eastward along the coast, entering the Sound about mid-February. Seal Island was identified from Vancouver’s description, but the promised seals were missing – no more than thirty were killed in the following days.

Pendleton was in Two People Bay, east of the Sound, when a longboat was seen approaching. Climbing aboard, the commander introduced himself as an officer from the *Géographe*, flagship of Nicolas Baudin’s voyage of discovery.

Returning to the Sound, Pendleton found the French captain ashore, at his observatory. At lunch on the *Géographe* next day, he sought Baudin’s advice on the south coast sealing grounds for, he said, he had not been lucky, and so far had obtained only a few hundred skins, of the 20,000 he needed before heading for Canton. Furthermore, he lacked any charts of the land to the east, or the dangers along it.

The chance encounter changed Pendleton’s fortunes. During the previous twelve months Baudin had sailed the length of the south coast, visited Port Jackson, charted the south and east coasts of Tasmania, touched at several Bass Strait islands (notably King Island) and spent a month at Kangaroo Island. He shared his knowledge with the American, including the location of seal

rookeries, and gave him a copy of Matthew Flinders’ chart of Bass Strait. In return, it is likely that Baudin took the chance to rid himself of several unwanted passengers (stowaway convicts from Sydney) by transferring them to the *Union*.

Eight stowaways had been found aboard the French ships after their departure from Sydney in November 1802. Baudin had landed them at King Island in late December, but five were smuggled aboard by his crew before he sailed. His Journal notes their presence at Kangaroo Island in January, but says nothing further about them. The next mention came from Captain Chace, master of the colonial sealer *Good Intent*, who reported meeting the *Union* at Waterhouse Island, in Bass Strait:

Captain Pemberton [sic] informed me that he had fallen in with the French Commodore off the western coast of New Holland; that he had afterwards touched at and cleared the New Year’s Islands... Of the four prisoners who effected their escape from the Colony in the *Géographe*, three now remain upon the New Year’s Islands.

Other sources show that the *Union* made landfall at the New Year's Islands (off King Island) on 11 March 1803, and sealed there for six weeks before heading for Waterhouse Island. This makes her the first Yankee sealer known to have hunted in Bass Strait.

Retracing his course, Pendleton wintered in 'Union Harbor' (Flinders' Nepean Bay) at Kangaroo Island. As was common practice, he carried aboard the frame of a small schooner, or shallop, to act as a tender to the brig, transporting men and supplies to the hunting grounds, and also acting independently as a sealer. Named *Independence*, the schooner, of 35 tons, was built at what is now the American River inlet, using locally sawn timber. Completed in three months, she was sent back to Seal Island in the Sound while Pendleton himself made for Sydney, where he arrived with five thousand skins on 6 January 1804.

Six days later the *Union* was at sea again, now under contract to the colonial administration, and bound for Norfolk Island. She carried the island's Lieutenant Governor, Major Joseph Foveaux, and "an extensive supply of goods on Mr. [Simeon] Lord's account" – plus, if the shipping records are correct, the 5000 sealskins, as yet unloaded.

The government contract with a foreign-flagged vessel, captained by an American on his first visit, was unusual enough; the speed of the turnaround suggests the deal was driven by commercial imperatives. Simeon Lord, an emancipist trader often at odds with Governor Philip Gidley King, was intent on amassing a fortune in sealing, whaling and trading ventures in the Pacific.

From the 1790s, the sealing industry was one of the few sources of export revenue for Australia's early colonies, providing oil for cooking and lamps, and skins for hats, shoes and coats to the English and Chinese markets. Sealing began after the survivors of the *Sydney Cove* wreck to the south of Flinders Island in 1797 reported large colonies of fur seals in the area. By 1807, there were around 200 sealers in Bass Strait living tough existences on the remote coasts of Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia, as well as on islands such as the Furneaux and Kent groups in Bass Strait and further west on Kangaroo Island. They are known to have abducted Aboriginal women to

live and work with them, supplying the ships that came from Sydney, Hobart and Launceston to collect their cargoes. Sealing was a lucrative business – a shipload could be sold - for £10,000 in England – and the harvesting of seals was uncontrolled and indiscriminate. By 1810, the numbers of seals in Australian waters were seriously depleted and the industry had effectively collapsed. Sealers either turned to whaling or moved their operations to New Zealand and its southern islands. Of four species of seals originally found in Bass Strait, three, including the elephant seal, were totally eradicated, and only small numbers of Australian fur seals were left.

Perhaps Baudin had briefed Pendleton on the Sydney sealing trade – and traders – as well as on the sealing grounds, and the latter contacted Lord on his arrival. In any event, the venture soon led to a more formal partnership.

Returning from Norfolk Island in early March, Pendleton left his skins in Lord's warehouse and then sailed south to rejoin the *Independence*. The schooner's movements at this time are unknown – she found few seals in the west, and by Fanning's account met up with the *Union* at Kangaroo Island. The two vessels sealed together in Bass Strait and filled their holds before heading for Port Jackson. The brig, with 22 men, entered the port on 29 June, and the schooner, with 16 men sailing under the master, O F Smith, arrived three days later.

With thousands of his skins filling Lord's warehouses, Pendleton agreed to join the ex-convict entrepreneur in sandalwood and sealing ventures in

the Pacific. The skins already in store were sold to Lord on credit, while the *Union* was contracted to him to procure a cargo of sandalwood at Fiji, which Pendleton would then sell at Canton.

With the proceeds, Pendleton was to purchase Chinese merchandise (silks, chinaware, etc) for sale at Sydney on their joint account. The schooner *Independence*, meanwhile, was declared the joint property of Lord, Pendleton and John Boston (another associate of Lord's), and would sail to the sealing grounds south of New Zealand. Governor King branded the scheme "an arrant fraud on the American owners", but could do little to stop it.

The two vessels left Port Jackson on 28 August 1804, ostensibly for China. In fact the *Independence*, with Isaiah Townsend in command and Owen Folger Smith as master of the sealing gangs, headed south for New Zealand, while Pendleton in the *Union* sailed



William Westall, 1781–1850. *Seal Island in King George's (i.e. George) Sound, Western Australia* 1802. National Library of Australia nla.pic-an6053421.



Rafting blubber at Tristan De Acunha (i.e. da Cunha), c. 1824, Augustus Earle, 1793–1838, watercolour, Rex Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia, nla.pic-an2818210.

for Fiji. He called first at Norfolk Island, where he shipped some extra crewmen.

The brig reached Tongataboo (Tongatapu, in the Tonga group) at the end of September. Several canoes came out to greet the visitors, and Pendleton, hoping to engage a native as an interpreter, went ashore with John Boston, the supercargo (manager of the ship's cargo), and six men. About thirty islanders stayed on the ship, and Daniel Wright, the First Officer, had much difficulty persuading them to leave. When finally they did so, he hoisted the ship's colours and fired a gun to alert the shore party.

Observing the ship's boat on the beach 'lying broadside on, in the hands of the natives', Wright kept the crew on watch all night, but no canoes were seen. Two came within hail in the morning, but did not approach the ship. The men wanted to open fire, "construing their gestures to that of the boat's crew being murdered", but Wright refused. Nor would he agree to the men's pleas to sail at once.

Next day more canoes came out, in one of which was a white woman who called out in English. A Malay with her, speaking broken English, invited them ashore to join the captain, but the woman, "by particular signs, when unnoticed by the natives, forbid them

to comply". The third day the canoes came off again, and the Malay repeated his request.

The white woman stood up in the head of one of the canoes, cried out that those on shore were murdered by the natives, and then, leaping into the water, swam towards the ship, the men on board presenting their muskets, and thereby preventing the natives from picking her up, by which means she reached the vessel and was taken aboard.

Learning from her that Captain Pendleton and the boat's crew had been massacred, Wright ordered the men to fire on the islanders; two fell in one of the canoes, and they hastily turned back. He cut the cables and stood out to sea, reaching Port Jackson in 19 days.

On the voyage the rescued woman, Elizabeth Morey, related her adventures. She had arrived at Tongataboo in June 1802 as a passenger on the American ship *Portland*, Captain Mellon, bound for Lima in Peru. A local chief came aboard to seek the captain's help in repelling invaders from another island. With Mellon's support the attackers were repulsed, and the



Simeon Lord, c. 1830 – watercolour on ivory miniature, a transportee who became one of the wealthiest men in the colony. State Library of NSW. MIN 92.



Rivalry between American sealers and local operators in the rich sealing grounds of Bass Strait led to many clashes, and one such incident is depicted in this etching by Geoffrey C Ingleton. The ship, *Charles*, of Boston, lay to refit at a small beach in the Kent Group, and in order to careen the vessel, all the cargo was landed above high-water mark. The ship's 30 crew were at work on the repair when the colonial schooner, *Governor King*, suddenly appeared. This small vessel, manned by only nine men, and the master, Moody, landed with the intention of harassing the Americans and if possible securing some of the stores lying on the beach. The American crew at once settled any such idea. The currency lads were made to run the gauntlet, badly beaten and then bundled into a boat and marooned on an isolated, waterless isle offshore. There they stayed until Moody promised to leave the area – which he did and made haste to Sydney, arriving on Boxing Day 1803 to complain loudly of his rough treatment from those rascally Americans. Etching by Geoffrey C Ingleton (1908–1988), reproduced by courtesy of Mrs Nan Ingleton.

chief returned to offer gifts to the captain. Next day two boats were sent ashore for refreshments, while canoes came out with yams. With the ship's company divided, the islanders fell upon their visitors, killing Captain Mellon and most of the crew; a few survivors regained the ship and sailed off. Morey herself and her black maid were not harmed, and lived with one of the chief's wives. She had been sent out in the canoe "to induce the boats more readily to leave the ship".

Back at Sydney Daniel Wright, now master of the *Union*, found himself bound by Pendleton's contract with Simeon Lord; the trader, having purchased the American's sealskins on credit, was not required to pay until the vessel returned with the proceeds of the sale of Fiji sandalwood at Canton. The ship left Port Jackson on 12 November, officially bound 'for China in ballast' – but in reality for Fiji, to load sandalwood.

Approaching Vanua Levu, second largest of the Fiji islands, the brig was caught in a heavy squall; embayed among the coral reefs,

... by the force of the sea swell and current, [she] was cast on the reef and wrecked. Every person on board either perished by drowning, or was massacred by the natives, who from the commencement of this series of disasters had been watching every movement, and as each unfortunate man gained a foothold on the rocks, thus terminated his existence; their bodies ... serving the purpose of food.

The *Independence* fared no better. Townsend landed O F Smith and his gangs on the subantarctic Antipodes Islands, 870 km south-east of New Zealand, and then returned to Sydney. The schooner again headed south in June 1805, still under Townsend's command, to pick up Smith's men and their catch, but disappeared in the wild waters of the Southern Ocean. Smith and his men, with 60,000 skins, were picked up the following year by

the *Favorite*, another American ship in league with Lord. Two of the sealers, Jonathan Wild and Hans Christian Hoof (perhaps, with Smith, the last survivors of the *Union*), protested their harsh conditions while Lord and other owners amassed riches at their expense:

I can scarcely depict the hardships endured ... on the [Antipodes] Island where I was left – where there was no wood to cook provisions (provided I had any to cook). The only substitute for fuel was the Fat of Seals; and the only sustenance ... was no more than the insides of seals and birds ... The owners have no commiseration for their fellow creatures ... and Galley Slaves have a preferable life.

Simeon Lord (1771–1840) brushed aside the sealers' complaints. A few years later he abandoned the sealing industry for his diverse pastoral, manufacturing and export interests. At his death in 1840 he was one of the wealthiest men in the colony.

Edmund Fanning (1769–1841) died the following year. In his lifetime he sailed on, led or acted as agent for more than seventy sealing and trading voyages and expeditions. His memoirs, *Voyages Around the World* (1833), included a chapter (inaccurate in many details) on the *Union's* voyage. Lord's double-dealing was neither forgotten nor forgiven: "her owners never receiving either for the skins taken from South Antipodes, or for the 14,000 left by Captain Pendleton in Mr Lord's charge, one farthing". He closed with a belated eulogy to the dead captain and crew:

Thus terminated a voyage than which none was ever commenced with more encouraging prospects, and thus went her crew, than whom, more hardy and resolute spirits never strode a vessel's deck.

Owen Folger Smith (whose middle name suggests a link with the Folger family, yet another New England sealing/whaling dynasty) transferred his allegiance to Simeon Lord, becoming one of his most proficient sealing captains. He is credited with



The gravestones of Ann and Isaac Pendleton in the Robinson Burial Ground at Stonington, Conn.

the discovery of Foveaux Strait, separating Stewart Island from the South Island of New Zealand.

Ann Pendleton (1777–1868) survived Isaac by 64 years. She never remarried, dying in 1868. She was buried in the Robinson Burial Ground at Stonington, alongside the memorial stone she erected for her husband years before.

The Author

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The strange tale of Elizabeth Morey

Deposition of Elizabeth Morey respecting the ship *Union*, of America

(A board of inquiry convened at Sydney on 26 October 1804 to examine the events at Tongataboo. *Sydney Gazette*, October 28, 1804)

Elizabeth Morey being sworn, says that she lived with the Chief's wife on the Island of Tongataboo, and that on or about the 30th of September, she understood a ship had arrived at the Island – she then residing at the opposite side thereof; that one of the natives had come over for the purpose of bringing the Malay, who was known by the name of Charley, to go on board her; that three days after the vessel's arrival she was sent for by the Chief, to converse with one of the white boys that had come on shore, from whom she learnt the ship's name, that she was from New York, and that the Captain and several of her people were on shore; that the Chief desired her to go off to the vessel, and endeavour to get some more of her boats on shore; that she went off in a canoe as she was ordered,

accompanied by the Malay, with five other canoes, and did as she was directed, being afraid to do otherwise; but from the conversation she had overheard among the natives previous to her going off, she was satisfied that the greater part of those who had gone on shore were murdered; but being assiduously watched by the Malay (Charley), she could not communicate her information to the officers on board the ship except by signs which she had used, unconscious at the time whether they were regarded by them or not; that she again went on shore, and told the Chief what she had done.

That upon the morning following she was again sent for by the Malay, who informed her that she was again to go off to the ship to repeat her former message, and endeavour to get on shore some of her people: That she went off accordingly, accompanied by four canoes, in one of which was Charley the Malay, and on coming near the ship, she stood up in the head of the canoe in which she was, she called to the people on board, informing them that their

comrades were all murdered by the natives on shore, then jumped overboard and swam for the ship, calling to the people to fire on them in the canoes, which they afterwards did; that she heard the two muskets fired on shore, which she knew was done by order of the Chief, as he had told her he would do so before she left the shore, to induce the boats the more readily to leave the ship, from an idea that Europeans were on shore, firing for a boat.

Sworn before us, this 26th day of October, 1804.

George Johnston
John Harris

Here Elizabeth Morey disappears from the historical record. Chuck Weikert, an American who served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Tonga Islands, offers an intriguing footnote to her story. "There is evidence", he writes, "that she spent just a few months in Sydney before asking to return to Tonga on board the *Union*". The ship sailed on 11 November 1804, but whether Elizabeth was on board, or whether indeed the *Union* called at Tonga before her shipwreck off Vanua Levu, remains unknown.