BERT WESTON WRITES

In the June issue of the Illawarra Hist. Soc’s “Bulletin” and in the answers to the Local History Quiz the name of the man who pioneered with T.S. Mort the export of frozen meat was given as Nicholle.

During the First World War, I attended Wollongong High School with his two sons, Stanley and Frank, and can assure you that the name was spelt “Nicolle” and pronounced n’KOL.

ILLAWARRA’S FIRST WHITE SETTLERS

1796

Who were the first Europeans to visit and settle in Illawarra?

In answer to this question many members would naturally suggest that the unintentional landing of George Bass, Matthew Flinders, and the boy Martin, just south of Towradgi Point on the morning of 26 March 1796, was “the first authenticated, landing of white men in Illawarra” (W.G. McDonald, The First Footers, 1975, p.5.), their vessel the Tom Thumb having been swept ashore by an outsize wave whilst Bass was endeavouring to secure fresh water nearby.

Likewise, if we reject Frank McCaffrey’s unsubstantiated claim that “Major George Johnston’s cattle were sent to Illawarra during the drought of 1803-4” (F. McCaffrey, The History of Illawarra and Its Pioneers, 1926, p.13), most would regard the establishment of a cattle station at Wollongong by Doctor Charles Throsby and Joseph Wild early in 1815 as the first white settlement in the area.

Yet the first such settlement had occurred many years before Doctor Throsby took an interest in Illawarra, and even before Bass and Flinders made their famous voyage in the Tom Thumb in 1796. It appears that runaway convicts had arrived in the area prior to that date and were growing corn and potatoes at the time of Bass and Flinders’ visit. For this information we have no less an authority than Matthew Flinders himself.

It seems that on the morning of Sunday, 27 March 1796, the crew of the Tom Thumb awoke to the sunshine of a new dawn after having spent the night at sea in their tiny vessel, sheltered on the northern side of Red Point (Hill 60, Port Kembla).

When they were beckoned to shore by two visiting Aborigines from Broken Bay and Botany Bay (one named Dilba), speaking to them in the Port Jackson language (Bass possessing a knowledge of that dialect), they “rowed towards them, and received a small quantity of water and two fish” (quoted from Matthew Flinders’ Journal, in W.G. McDonald, Earliest Illawarra, 1979, p.10). When more natives gathered on shore, Bass and Flinders decided to “put off without landing under pretence of returning northward, but with the intention to land in a shallow cove of the pitch of Saddle Point [Red Point]” (ibid., p.10). Their haste to get away was motivated by their belief that the local Aborigines were hostile, and, as Flinders states: “the natives to the south-ward of Botany Bay were generally believed to be cannibals” (ibid., p.9).

After arriving at the small cove at Red Point, the party cooked their provisions, dried their clothes, and put their supplies in order. However “it was not long before the two natives [Dilba and friend] came upon the point to look after us, espying us thus busied close under them, came down” (ibid., p.11). As these two
natives were so persistent, and appeared harmless, Bass and Flinders decided to use them as guides to locate the nearest shelter. The natives suggested "that at a small distance to the south-ward, was a fresh-water river" (ibid., p.11), and offered to conduct them there. Due to the party's strained circumstances - their supplies were low and still wet from the capsizing at Towradgi Beach - Bass and Flinders somewhat warily accepted the offer and the 3 white men and 2 natives cast off from the cove towards the river to the south. In the words of Flinders:

"The sea breeze freshened up from the northward, and we steered before it, according to the direction of our pilots; who amused us by the way with stories of some white men and two women being amongst them; who had Indian corn and potatoes growing. The women, they said, they would bring to us, as well as plenty black ones, and that we should get quantities of fish and ducks in the river." (ibid., p.11)

The river to which Flinders refers, and later named "Canoe River", was actually the entrance to Lake Illawarra. The subsequent fate of the Tom Thumb, and the crew's encounter with Aborigines on the shores of Lake Illawarra, is well known, however of the "white men and two women" mentioned living amongst the Illawarra natives at the time we have no other record, this being the earliest account of white settlers in the district.

The comment by the two native pilots that they would bring the two white women to Bass and Flinders suggests that the Europeans were living close by, however the trepidation of the explorers towards the local natives ruled out any lengthy stay to await their arrival, and an inland exploration at that point was out of the question. The incident was not referred to again by Bass or Flinders, though perhaps the authorities in Sydney were informed when the party returned to Port Jackson.

The "white men and two women" were most likely runaway convicts who would not have welcomed the encounter with authorities such as Flinders, a member of the Royal Navy, and Bass, wearing the red coat of a soldier. Whether Governor Hunter subsequently despatched troops to the area in search of the runaways is unknown. Perhaps he would have preferred to keep the matter quiet, for if the convict community at Sydney realized that members of their fraternity were successfully carrying on farming in the Five Islands district, more would consider escaping. It was very much in the interests of the Governor and the small Colony to promote the idea that the native tribes in areas to the north, south, and west of the then small settlement around Port Jackson, were hostile and perhaps cannibals. The Colony could not afford to lose even one able-bodied convict in its efforts to survive.

The identity and subsequent fate of the "white men and two women" living amongst the Illawarra Aborigines in 1796 - Illawarra's first white settlers - is unknown. Perhaps they were apprehended by soldiers and returned to Sydney; murdered by local natives; or moved further to the south or inland to escape detection. That soldiers had already been in Illawarra prior to Bass and Flinders, perhaps searching for these same runaway convicts, is suggested by another of Flinders' comments in his Journal. Following the encounter with the natives at Lake Illawarra, and the Tom Thumb crew's supposed escape from death by its shores, he records:
"we slept by turns till ten o'clock [off the entrance to Lake Illawarra], and the moon being then risen, - the weather calm, - and water smooth, we pulled out towards Saddle Point; not a little pleased to have escaped so well. Perhaps we were considerably indebted, for the fear they [the natives] entertained of us, to an old red waistcoat which Mr. Bass wore, and from which they took us to be soldiers, whom the natives are particularly afraid of; and though we did not much admire our new name "Soja" [soldier], yet thought it best not to undeceive them" (ibid., p. 13)

It is a sad thought that as early as 1796 the Illawarra Aborigines had come to fear whitemen, especially soldiers. Flinders noted "the extreme fear they seemed to be under of our harmless [wet] fire-arms" (ibid., p. 13), and today we can only guess at what had provoked this fear. We should also consider that if white people were amongst the local Aborigines at such an early point, then the decimating effects of European diseases such as smallpox etc., would already have started to take effect, and not have been introduced after 1815, when white settlement in Illawarra became widespread, as is generally considered.

The Botany Bay native Dilba, who was so friendly in piloting Bass and Flinders to Lake Illawarra and supplying them with water and fish, was later accused of killing 2 members of the crew of the Sydney Cove wreck who passed through Illawarra in April-May 1797. He was eventually pursued by a party led by George Bass, but escaped being shot.

Matthew Flinders’ manuscript journal of the cruise of the Tom Thumb to Illawarra in 1796 contains a lot more information of historical significance than merely the amusing account of the shaving of aboriginal beards by the shores of Lake Illawarra for which it is popularly remembered. Its depiction of the local Aborigines as hostile is so unlike later accounts which almost invariably point out how friendly the Illawarra blacks were in comparison to those from other regions of New South Wales.

Michael Organ

ILLAWARRA’S FIRST WHITE SETTLERS

1796

WAS THOMAS HENRY HUXLEY IN THE ILLAWARRA?

According to Bill Bayley in his Blue Haven (p. 22) "the eminent scientist professor [Huxley - the popularizer of Darwin’s Origin of Species] visited the place [Woodstock Mill near Jamberoo] and married Heathorne’s daughter Henrietta in 1847."

This would appear to be untrue. After years of research I’ve been unable to uncover the slightest piece of evidence to substantiate Mr. Bayley’s argument.

Huxley married Henrietta Heathorne after whirling her around the dance-floor at one of Sydney’s more elite social occasions. Bayley’s suggestion that Huxley was in the Illawarra probably stems from a number of things - wishful thinking, sexism and a fondness for the ‘great man’ school of historiography.

Henrietta Heathorne, however, was a most interesting woman in her own right and has left us with a vivid record of a journey to the Illawarra in 1843-1844. In 1912 she published her reminiscences of the Illawarra in the English Cornhill Magazine. As far as I am aware, they have never been republished in full since