Settlement of the Swan

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The Birth of Perth

BY RUTH MARCHANT JAMES

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EUROPEAN INTEREST in the west coast of Australia – or New Holland as it was then known – far preceded the British colony. Dutch navigators had visited and mapped a large part of Western Australia’s extensive coastline over 200 years before the foundation of the Swan River Colony. In fact, it was a Dutch navigator, Willem de Vlamingh, who named the Swan River (Swaanerivier) in 1697 during a voyage from Holland to look for survivors of a ship thought to have been wrecked on the west coast of Australia. Many other place names scattered along the coastline, including Cape Leeuwin, Rottnest (Rottenest) Island and Dirk Hartog Island, serve as reminders of Dutch visits.

Unlike the Dutch, the French sustained more than a general interest in the early exploration of Australia and, as a result of their various early scientific expeditions, the western coastline is dotted with names of French origin. Indeed, records reveal that Louis St Allouarn, in command of the Gros Ventre, actually claimed possession of New Holland in the name of King Louis XV when he landed on Dirk Hartog Island in March 1772. However, St Allouarn died before completing his journey, and his claim was taken no further.

In September 1791, the British explorer, George Vancouver, in command of the Discovery, accompanied by Commander Broughton aboard the Chatham, reached the magnificent Albany harbour, which he named King George the Third Sound. A second annexation occurred when Vancouver took possession of the land “north-westward of Cape Chatham, so far as we might explore its coasts”.

The possibility of French expansion caused lingering concern among British Government officials and, to forestall further French interest in Australia, the New South Wales Governor, Ralph Darling, acted on orders from the Secretary of State, the Earl of Bathurst, to establish a military outpost in the south-west corner of New Holland.

Major Edmund Lockyer was given command of the brig Amity with instructions from Governor Darling to proceed with a detachment of soldiers from the 39th Regiment, twenty-one convicts and a small group of settlers to establish a settlement at King George Sound. Arriving at Frederickstown (Albany) on Christmas Day 1826, possessory lien was established and on 21 January 1827 Lockyer annexed the south-west corner of New Holland as part of New South Wales.

Meanwhile, the naval officer who was to become the founder of Western Australia, Captain James Stirling, had been on half-pay in England for almost eight years and was delighted to be given command of the 28-gun warship HMS Success with orders to relocate the floundering Melville Island settlement in Australia’s far north. Leaving England on 9 June 1826, Stirling arrived in Sydney on 28 November and there he discussed with Governor Darling the possibility of founding a British colony in the vicinity of the Swan River.

Stirling was aware that French ships were still visiting Australia – indeed, a few days after his arrival in Sydney the French corvette, L’Astrolabe sailed into Port Jackson under the command of Captain Dumont D’Urville, and Stirling noted with concern that charts aboard L’Astrolabe included a detailed map of the Swan River region from Baudin’s 1803 expedition. This only heightened concerns that when the Coquille had returned to France in 1825 under the command of Captain Duperry, the surveyor for its exploratory expedition to the western coast, Jules Blosseville, may have recommended the establishment of a French penal colony in the south-west of New Holland.

Governor Darling decided the time had come for action and Captain Stirling was given permission to explore and
report on the Swan River's suitability as a settlement.

Setting out from Sydney on 17 January 1827, the Success sailed via Van Dieman’s Land, sighting Rottnest Island on 5 March. Unable to find anchorage close to the mainland, they took shelter overnight on the north-east side of the island.

The next day, after an unsuccessful attempt to bring the Success closer to the entrance of the Swan River, the anchor was finally dropped about a mile south-west of the river’s mouth and Stirling sent the ship’s master to seek a channel and hopefully a safer place to land. In the meantime, he sent out in the gig (the ship’s boat reserved for the captain) together with the New South Wales government botanist, Charles Frazer, to explore the river for some five or six miles, examining the layout and naming several landmarks.

Two days later, on March 8, Stirling took a party of eighteen men in two boats to make a lengthier and more detailed exploration of the Swan River. Accompanying him were Frazer, the ship’s surgeon Frederick Clause, artist Frederick Garling, Lieutenant Peter Belches, midshipman Heathcote, the ship’s clerk Augustus Gilbert, seven seamen and four marines.

Crossing the limestone river bar, which proved to be an impediment to river traffic for decades after, the gig and cutter passed the two headlands at the mouth of the Swan River (Arthur Head and Rous Head), and sailed past Point Walter, named for Stirling’s brother, before entering Melville Water and an expanse of river later known as Perth Water. Viewing the river from the rise overlooking the future city of Perth, Stirling named the hill Mt Eliza after the wife of Governor Darling.

Undeterred by a series of mudflats and an encounter with several armed natives, the exploratory party established its camp at the junction of Ellen Brook, named in honour of Stirling’s wife, and the Swan River. This picturesque stretch of the river greatly impressed Stirling, as is evidenced by his report:

The richness of the Soil, the bright foliage of the Shrubs, the majesty of the surrounding Trees, the abrupt and red coloured banks of the River occasionally seen, and the view of the blue summits of the Mountains, from which we are not far distant, made the scenery around this Spot as beautiful [sic] as anything of the kind I had ever witnessed.

The party divided into three groups and set out to explore surrounding land to the north, the west and the east. The glowing report of the journey, later presented by Captain Stirling and Charles Frazer, made the case for the foundation of a new colony at the Swan River more appealing.

On his return to England in 1828, Stirling negotiated leave of absence from the Navy on half pay, and lost no time in trying to persuade the Colonial Office to support the proposed settlement. A doubtful British Government only acquiesced after it became clear that the intended settlement would be established as a private enterprise. In accepting the appointment as Lieutenant-Governor of the new colony James Stirling undertook to...
follow the orders issued to him by Sir George Murray, Secretary for the Colonies:

The Government does not intend to incur any expense in conveying settlers, or in supplying them with necessaries after their arrival. Persons proceeding at their own risk before the end of 1829, parties of no less than five females and six males, as settlers, will receive land grants in proportion to the capital they may invest at the rate of 40 acres (16 hectares) for every three pounds invested.

Stirling then set about attracting private investors in the new colony, publicising the venture in newspapers and through his own connections. Swan River became something of a sensation, its virtues and opportunities for British farmers exaggerated and embellished by its promoters, journalists and shipping agents to suggest a paradise on earth.

Thomas Peel, a cousin of the Home Secretary of State, Sir Robert Peel, who had been planning to emigrate to New South Wales, responded enthusiastically. Together with three partners, he set up the Peel Association to invest in the colony, developing grandiose plans to acquire land, purchase ships and finance the transfer and settlement of up to 10,000 people over four years. These he hoped would be employed on grazing operations and the large-scale cultivation of tobacco, cotton, sugar and flax.

The plans hit early problems when the government refused their request for 4 million acres, instead agreeing to one million acres for which title would be granted only when the land was improved and also refusing them priority in selecting the land. As a compromise, the government finally agreed to the Association choosing some land before departure, but only after Stirling had made his selection. Stirling chose the land of Garden Island and 100,000 acres on Geographe Bay, more than
100 km south of the Swan River. Peel chose 250,000 acres of land immediately to the south of the Swan estuary and the Canning River. Dissatisfied with the land offers being made, the syndicate withdrew from the project, leaving Peel in charge.

Meanwhile, the government developed the land-grant system for other independent settlers and arranged for the naval vessel, HMS Sulphur, to convey troops under the command of Captain F C Irwin to the new colony. The 443 tonne Parmelia was chartered, under Captain Stirling’s command, to transport civil officers, their families and stores.

Foundation of the Swan River Colony began with the arrival at Cockburn Sound of the 26-gun frigate HMS Challenger on 25 April 1829, under the command of Captain Charles Howe Fremantle, with orders to take formal possession of the western coast of New Holland. The young naval officer had been relieved to see no French flag visible on the mainland and for seven days those on board the vessel spent time exploring Garden Island, fishing, hunting for seals and digging wells to replenish the ship’s water supply.

Fremantle’s men manhandled the cutter and gig over the treacherous rocky bar blocking the entrance of the river and, on 2 May 1829, the Union Jack was hoisted on the south head of the river in a brief ceremony to claim the whole of the western coast of New Holland in the name of King George IV.

Continuing up the Swan River as far as the Canning River, Fremantle had his first encounter with a group of curious, but friendly, Aborigines and, on the party’s return to the mouth of the river, the final night was spent at Rous Head.

The following morning they crossed to the southern headland, and Fremantle noted in his diary: “landed in a little bay just round Arthur’s Head, which looked clean & grassy and appeared a good place for making our first encampment”. From this site the future city of Fremantle grew.

Under the watchful eye of Lieutenant Henry, a party of twenty-four men from the Challenger erected shelters, planted vines brought from Cape Town and dug fort-like trenches to ward off any unexpected attack. Meanwhile, those who remained on board spent their days refitting the rigging, replenishing...
the ship’s supplies and preparing the Challenger for its imminent departure after the appearance of the Parmelia with the first colonists.

The Parmelia’s long journey from Plymouth was completed on 31 May 1829 when the vessel rounded Rottnest Island. Foundation Day, the first day of June, which marked the initial sighting of the Parmelia by officers from the Challenger, dawned bleak and blustery.

Realising that the barque was about to make an imprudent run for Cockburn Sound, Fremantle immediately dispatched a cutter to warn Stirling against such a decision. An over-confident Captain Stirling, anxious to settle his passengers on shore, chose to ignore the advice and “in five minutes the ship was floundering towards the shore”. A major effort was made to force the Parmelia over the bank, but to no avail, and as the winds strengthened there was every chance that the vessel would break up.

To lighten the load and ensure the safety of those on board, the officials’ wives, a number of settlers and children were transferred to the Challenger while a further 28 women and children were accommodated on the tiny wind-swept Ille Bertollet (Carnac Island) and placed under the protection of John Morgan, Colonial Storekeeper. Unaware of the Parmelia’s fate, the group huddled under canvas in wintry conditions and, according to Morgan, “subsisted almost entirely upon salt beef and biscuit … one knife and one drinking mug for the whole party”.

For eighteen hours crews from both vessels battled to save the Parmelia before she was able to weigh anchor alongside the Challenger in Cockburn Sound.

Rough conditions made the task of relocating the settlers to the mainland too risky and Stirling decided to establish the first settlement on Isle Buache (Garden Island). The marooned party on nearby Carnac Island was transferred and Captain Fremantle did all in his power to assist the Lieutenant-Governor to settle the Parmelia passengers on their island base.

The Challenger’s crew were sent ashore to clear a section of ground and to erect tents and primitive huts from a mixture of brushwood and imported materials. Finally on 8 June 1829, HMS Sulphur arrived in Cockburn Sound with a detachment of soldiers from the 63rd Regiment.

Taking advantage of the additional manpower, a road from the well was cut through to the top of a hill and a store was erected. Personal possessions, stores and livestock were gradually off-loaded from the Parmelia and once the temporary settlement, referred to as Sulphur Town, was defined, everyone set about securing their places of residence, tending the cows, goats, rabbits, hens and ducks brought out with them and planting vegetable gardens to supplement future food supplies.

On 9 June 1829, Stirling anglicised the name of the island, renaming it Garden Island – his decision, no doubt, influenced by botanist James Drummond who was convinced that the soil was suitable for planting.

Forced to reorganise Stirling’s original plans for settlement, the Colonial Secretary, Peter Brown, intimated that when the weather abated Irwin would relieve Fremantle’s marines stationed on the mainland and take command of the post earlier prepared by the Challenger’s crew at the mouth of the Swan River.

On 18 June 1829, the official proclamation of the Swan River Colony was read to the officials and colonists on Garden Island, the same document having been read by Captain Irwin at the mainland camp the day before.

By 27 July, Stirling had posted a government notice outside his makeshift vice-regal residence on Garden Island stating that the first stone of a new town, to be named Perth, would be laid on 12 August and that after that date all applications for land would be received.

Meanwhile more settlers arrived aboard the Calista and St Leonard on 5 and 6 of August, and the original group of Swan River settlers were transferred to the mainland camp. By September all passengers from the Parmelia, with the exception of John Morgan, the colonial storekeeper, had left the island.

Conditions were far from ideal for these and the hundreds more new arrivals over the next few months who found themselves deposited with their possessions and stock on the shore and left to make what shelter they could against the elements.

Several locations were suggested for the colony’s seat of government, but these were rejected in favour of an area between Point Frazer and Point Lewis some twelve miles from the intended port at Fremantle. James Stirling was convinced that not only did the chosen site display great natural beauty, but it also offered fresh water, as well as lime and clay for building purposes. Captain Fremantle’s diary entries recorded on 5 and 10 August 1829 briefly described the lead-up to the foundation of Perth:

The Lieutenant Governor having made up his mind to establish a Town up the Swan River to be called Perth, & to lay the first Stone of it on the King’s birthday the 12th of August 1829; I offered to render him any assistance with boats & to convey him up. We proceeded a large party on
Examined the Country about the Islands on the 10th & went about five miles up the Swan above them, when we came to good flats of Country, and very rich grass; good grazing grounds lands. Saw several swan & wild duck.

Although not overly impressed by the quality of the soil, Charles Fremantle thought the site chosen for the Swan River Colony’s principal town was ideally situated, with the sea on one side and within reasonable reach of the upper part of the country by river. His diary entry described Perth’s Foundation on 12 August 1829:

On the 12th our Party increased, & there being no stone contiguous for our purpose, to celebrate the commencement of the new Town, Mrs. Dance cut down a tree; fired Volleys, made Speeches & gave several cheers; named the Town Perth according to the wishes of Sir George Murray.

Present were the Lieutenant Governor James Stirling, and Captains Charles Fremantle of HMS Challenger, William Dance of HMS Sulphur, Harbormaster Mark Currie, Surveyor-General J Septimus Roe, Colonial Surgeon William Milligan, Colonial Secretary Peter Brown (Broun), members of the 63rd Regiment and their Commandant Frederick C Irwin.

Perth took its name from the birthplace in Scotland of Sir George Murray, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, who in the opinion of the colonial surgeon, Dr Collie, was “the ostensible father of the infant colony”. The name attracted some criticism and one settler, William Leake, revealed his disapproval in a letter to Under Secretary Twiss in England:

Sir,
Can you not give Captain Stirling a hint on his imprudence in calling the capital of the Swan River by the insignificant name of Perth? Is it because Sir George Murray was born in this insignificant place, known only to reading men or Geographers as an obscure place in Scotland? I have heard a vast number already declare against Swan River because they now consider it a place where the Scottish interest will only prevail. There is Perth Town, Melville Water, Cockburn and Dalrymple Sound, in fact nothing but Scottish names. Why was not the principal Town called Swan River, London Town, Wellington or a name that the three countries in unison may look up to?

The original town of Perth was surrounded by a chain of fresh water lakes and to the north there was a series of swamps. At that time, the Swan River ran adjacent to the present Bazaar Terrace and just south of the existing Supreme Court Gardens. According to one observer, "the bank as far back as Hay Street was beautiful in colours of green, yellow, white and pink with small streams running into the river". The designated township was then little more than a military encampment in a precinct bounded by the future St Georges Terrace, Barrack, Howick (Hay) and Irwin Streets. The cantonment accommodated members of the 63rd Regiment with the officers’ tents erected on the present site of the Burt Memorial Hall and the noncommissioned officers on the site of the Treasury Building. Cleared land in the centre of the square contained a military hospital and parade ground and on the corner, later occupied by the Deanery, stood a temporary gaol.

By April 1830, 36 ships had arrived in the colony carrying independent settlers and those sponsored by the Peel Syndicate, swelling the population to 1500, excluding soldiers. As people waited in the Fremantle camp for their land allocations, it soon became evident that there was not nearly enough fertile land to go round the settlers already there, and more shiploads were due to arrive. By the middle of 1830, nearly all of the land in the Swan and Canning basins had been allocated and, even there, much of it except a narrow band adjoining the rivers and occasional pockets was unsuitable for agriculture.

The failure of Thomas Peel’s migration scheme was a further blow. Arriving on the Gilmore with 179 emigrants on 15 December 1829, six weeks after the government’s deadline, Peel was forced to forfeit his land selection and accept an allocation further south. With two more ships arriving, there were soon 400 emigrants deposited on an isolated grant of land 72 km south of Fremantle. Dysentery, childbirth, scurvy and heat exhaustion took their toll.
toll and within 12 months of arrival at least 30 people had died and were buried in the nearby sandhills.

The original land-grant system, which granted applicants land in proportion to the value of stock, implements and servants they brought with them, was abolished in January 1832 and, not surprisingly, once the free land grants were discontinued fewer investors arrived with capital.

The Lieutenant-Governor recognised the rising despair within the struggling colony and, faced with a growing shortage of food supplies, a paucity of funds and labour, and the near cessation of immigration, returned to England in August 1832 to seek further financial support. Having been promoted to Governor of Western Australia, Stirling was also at this time awarded a knighthood. His appeal for assistance, however, had only limited success and he returned to the Swan River two years later to find deteriorating relations between Aborigines and settlers.

Under instructions from the Colonial Office, Stirling introduced a stringent new administration, cutting back on costs, limiting flour rations, and implementing new guidelines for the selling or exchanging of land. He then set out with a party of officers and police on an exploratory expedition for grazing land between the Murray River and Mount William, 70 km to the south-east of the Swan River. It was here that the tragic conflict with the Murray River people, the Battle of Pinjarra, occurred, resulting in the deaths of many Aboriginals and one European (Captain Ellis).

Sir James Stirling continued to administer the colony until 1838, struggling to manage its fragile economy within the constraints of land regulations set out by the Colonial Office in Britain. Gradually, the colony, including the tiny settlements at Guildford, Fremantle, Bunbury, Augusta and Albany, began to show signs of some security, if not prosperity, and Stirling finally departed the Swan River Colony in 1838, accompanied by his wife and their six children. John Hutt, a bachelor, succeeded him as Britain’s vice-regal representative.

With a population of 2,132 in September 1838, and a workforce of just 788, half of whom were employed in agriculture, there was an acute labour shortage for construction and public works. By the late 1840s the idea of introducing convicts, although controversial, was accepted by many as the only practical solution to the future development of the colony. As a result, on 1 June 1850, exactly twenty-one years after its foundation, Western Australia lost its status as a free colony. Over a period of 19 years 9,668 male convicts were transported to Western Australia and the improvements carried out during the convict era provided for the first time sure signs of a more secure future and a permanent sense of place.

With the construction of much-needed roads, bridges and public buildings and the temporary easing of the colony’s economic woes, the western colony took a huge step forward. Although still in its infancy, Perth, by then established as an Anglican bishopric, was well qualified to assume the title of city when it was proclaimed by Queen Victoria on 23 September 1856.

The Author

Ruth Marchant James is a writer and historian with a special interest in the history of Western Australia. She is the author of several books including Heritage of Pines – A History of Cottesloe (1977); The Meath Story (1982); Untamed By Time (1987); Cork to Capricorn – a History of the Presentation Sisters of WA 1891 – 1991 (1995); and Fields of Gold (1999).