

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby
1997

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Issue 3 of 22

Arrival of Europeans

To explore the root of environmental issues in the Peel-Harvey, Keith Bradby goes back to the beginning of the Swan River Colony and the mind-set of officials and settlers who knew nothing about the land or its people. Excerpts from Chapter 2, 'Claimed and Tamed: The process of European settlement', pp. 19-23.

Thomas Peel was one English land speculator with unrealistic expectations. In 1828, before settlement began, he wrote: 'It is well known that the soil of the Swan River, from its moist state, is better adapted to the cultivation of tobacco and cotton than any other part of Australia. Both of these articles are intended to be cultivated on a large scale; as also sugar and flax ...'

Interest in Western Australia was generated by Captain James Stirling's voyage to the west coast in 1827. Based on his 10-day exploration of the Swan River, Stirling submitted a glowing report on the prospects for a new colony there, and vigorously lobbied for its settlement.

But the British Government saw little need for a settlement on the Swan, and was wary of the expense involved. Stirling overcame these concerns by suggesting that a privately funded agricultural settlement be established. The British Colonial Office soon received a number of offers from private parties. One

was from Stirling himself, who proposed to lead the new settlement, without pay, in exchange for an extensive land grant. This was accepted. Formal moves were made in London during December 1828 to annex the so far 'unclaimed' million square miles of virtually unknown territory that made up the western third of Australia, and Stirling was appointed its Governor.

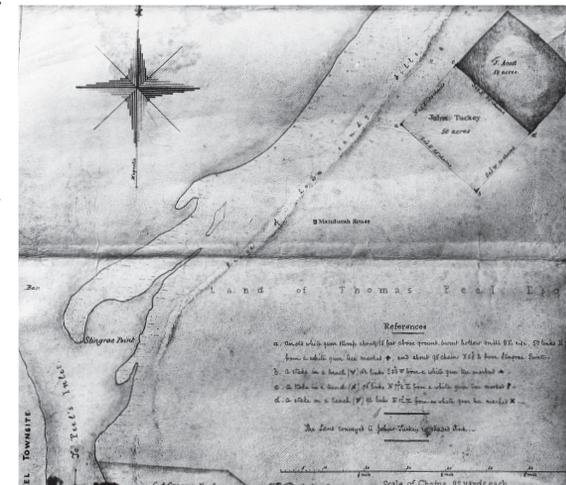
Once this decision was made, a forward party, under the command of Captain Fremantle, was dispatched without delay. On 2 May 1829, Fremantle formally raised the Union Jack on the banks of the Swan River. Governor Stirling and the first party of settlers arrived exactly one month later. Most of the immigrants were either general servants or agricultural labourers, indentured to larger (intending) landholders whose prime purpose was to acquire and farm land.

Land was offered on a 'come and get it' basis. Settlers were able to claim one acre for every 1s 6d invested. These were very attractive terms indeed, particularly when compared with the prevailing prices for land in England. And the land was, apparently, of similar quality. In his report to the British Government, Stirling claimed that country surrounding the Swan River was: *Situated in a Climate that admits of (European) Labour ... possessing great*

varieties of excellent soil, well watered by springs, creeks and refreshing showers ... it appears to hold out every attraction that a country in a state of nature can possess.'

'Conditions were quite desperate in the first year, with new settlers suffering many hardships. The realities of the Australian landscape were starting to make themselves felt, and possibly foremost among these was the soil. It was described by one settler as *'... truly appalling ... nothing but sand, scrub, shrubs and stunted trees, from the verge of the river to the top of the hills ... I may say with certainty, that the soil is such, on which no human being can possibly exist.'*

'Exploring parties in search of better quality land were soon heading inland and along the coast' and 'within months the desperate settlers on the Swan were selecting blocks along the Murray.'



First map of the 'Land of Thomas Peel Esq.' (Mandurah) in 1842 from Ronald Richards 'Murray and Mandurah' courtesy Owen Tuckey.

Chronology

Jun 1829: Governor Stirling and the first party of settlers arrive from England to establish the Swan River Colony.

Jul 1829: A brief trip led by Captain Currie found the Serpentine River.

Nov 1829: Lieutenant Preston's exploration party became the first recorded Europeans to sail on the Peel-Harvey estuary. During the trip, Preston noted 'a considerable fertile plain' lay beyond the Harvey River.

2011: "We may all still have 'unrealistic expectations' of the capacity of the land and our waterways to withstand demands for urban, rural and recreation pressure." Jan Star, AM, Chair PHCC.