

24 – North West Coast – Launceston to Cape Grim

Port Dalrymple

The women, such as Elizabeth Paterson, who arrived at Port Dalrymple in 1804–05 (p26), did so at a place rather ambiguously defined today. If you travel up the east bank of the Tamar from Launceston, you come to George Town just inside the mouth of the river, and Low Head further towards the sea. Travelling up the west bank, you reach what was York Town, a few kilometres beyond today's Beaconsfield. If you draw a line just south of York Town and George Town, joining them across the river, this area comprised Port Dalrymple, though it might also include Launceston, named in its very early days Patersonia.

This itinerary does not include George Town, home of artist Susan Fereday (pp172) and site of the first Female Factory (p62), nor Low Head, where Marion Villa was the holiday home of the Cox family of Clarendon, depicted by artist Eliza Cox (p355). It goes, instead from Launceston up the West Tamar Highway, and along the north west coast, stopping first at York Town.

York Town

Today's York Town (Yorktown) is a cluster of small farm holdings and an active community and, in the midst of that and bushland, is the archaeological site of old York Town. An archaeological project there from 2000–07 made some interesting discoveries; spasmodic archaeological and regular maintenance work continue.

Three primary sites emerged: Riley's cottage, where Sophia Riley (p26) lived with her storekeeper husband and children from 1805 to 1808; a soldiers' camp; and Government House, where Elizabeth Paterson lived with her husband, adopted daughter Elizabeth Mackellar, and convict maid Hannah Williams. Among the settlement of about 200 were Elizabeth Kemp, sister of Alexander Riley and wife of Paterson's second in command, and convicts Anne Keating and husband, and Mary Bowater (pp25–7, 362) and partner, later husband, Thomas Smith.

At the Riley site, buttons and Chinese exported porcelain were found, as well as brick walls. Government House, on the highest ground, requires more work but it would have been a significant structure. Thin glass fragments, clay pipes, buttons and other artefacts signifying an appropriate lifestyle have emerged.

It is possible to visit the site which is a mix of defined public and private areas. The public, signposted Yorktown Historic Site, on Bowen's Road beside the main highway, includes a car park and WC and barbecue facilities. From

there, a 50-metre walking track winds to a block that was at the centre of the 1804 settlement. Some minor ground disturbances and brick fragments delineate some of the early building sites. The evidence is discrete, helped by some interpretative signage. The only building is a rough representation of an early timber hut used as a maintenance store. Across the highway from the site, you can walk along the foreshore of the Tamar River, which has returned to bushland since the time of settlement.

One of the reasons for Paterson's abandonment of York Town was that the land proved unsuitable for cattle; crops were disappointing – though Elizabeth Paterson made a garden - and food supplies ran short. The move started south to what became Launceston, and York Town was finally left in 1811. Clarence Point, where Elizabeth rode to meet ships, is just beyond York Town.

Badger Head

The Highway turns west (C741) at York Town, but also continues north – Badger Head Road (C742) – to the headland on the edge of the Narawntapu National Park. Badger Head was known as Narawntapu by the Norroundboo people who were displaced by copper, asbestos, iron and gold mining in the early nineteenth century. Some say the colonist name derives from wombats, fancifully said to resemble badgers. I prefer the suggestion that it was named after the notorious Charlotte Badger (p28). She was believed to have taken refuge among the Aborigines here. This doesn't really fit in with other Charlotte accounts which have her sailing off straight after taking over the *Venus*. Badger Beach at the foot of the headland is said by the Parks and Wildlife Service to be safe for swimming.

Trying to return to their new home, Poyston, after a sojourn away from Port Sorell in 1846, travel arrangements for Louisa Anne Meredith and her family went awry. Stranded in George Town after Charles had gone ahead, the family, including a child of six, made its way with a horse-cart and two riding horses on an impossible track and along the five miles of Badger Beach. Then it was up the steep side of Badger Head by now sans cart which was replaced by the arms of constables sent by Charles. Louisa writes in *My Home in Tasmania*:

The horses were led up, with many a perilous plunge and desperate effort, scrambling like goats to keep a footing; and I clambered and climbed along, brave in resolution of well accomplishing the task I had voluntarily undertaken, and anticipating a succession of such difficulties, if not greater ones. On gaining a tolerably level space, I inquired of our servant, 'How much more of the road is as steep as the last bit?' And I began to think how much good heroism had been needlessly aroused in me, when he replied, 'Oh! Ma'am, that's all except one ugly gully, a few miles further on.'

The view from the top was good, though!



52. Poyston, by Louisa Anne Meredith, from Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, courtesy of the Glamorgan Spring Bay Historical Society

Port Sorell (Poyston – Louisa Anne Meredith)

On the other side of the Narawntapu National Park, and across the mouth of the Rubicon River, is Port Sorell. Where the Shearwater Country Club (the Boulevarde, Shearwater) is today, stood Poyston, the specially built house the Merediths moved into in 1846, after a respite away from Port Sorell and the unhappy earlier house they had inhabited. Louisa and the children arrived at Poyston after the gruelling journey via Badger Head just described. She wrote of her first impression:

The next morning we breakfasted at Poyston, our new home ... Since I had last visited it, the exterior had been completed, and the trees cleared away towards the sea, opening a most lovely view of the port and its fairy islands, the bold bluff of Badger Head, the grand Asbestos range of mountains, and the open sea; the western end of the picture being closed by some wooded rocky points and intervening sandy beaches.

At Poyston, Louisa created a garden, kept bees and collected their honey, got pregnant again, and taught her children to swim; she watched them grow healthy. Barely two years later, the Merediths returned to the east coast.

Walyer (pp32, 112) eluded capture by Robinson in 1830 by making her way with two of her sisters to Port Sorell, their original home. There, however, she was captured by sealers.

Latrobe (Sherwood Hall – Dolly Dalrymple)

Cut down southwest to Latrobe. If you go via Wesley Vale on the Port Sorell Road, you are in the territory of Christine Milne's campaign, as a local

housewife, against the establishment of a pulp mill there. This catapulted her into state politics and, in 1993, leadership of the Green party (p231). Since 2004, she has represented Tasmania in the Federal Senate.

At Bell's Parade in Latrobe is Sherwood Hall, the home of Dolly Dalrymple (pp30, 195). Born, it is said, in the Port Dalrymple area, hence her name, to Woretermoetyenner (p30) and George Briggs, Dolly was fostered in Launceston by Jacob Mountgarrett, colonial surgeon at Port Dalrymple, and his wife **Bridget Mountgarrett** (née Edwards, m1811; d1829) when Robinson made her mother join the other Aborigines at Wybalenna. Dolly was christened in their house in 1814 by Knopwood, adding Mountgarrett to her name. Bridget Mountgarrett taught her to read and write, undertake household duties and fit into white society. Dolly was said to be a most attractive child. Mountgarrett fell foul of the law, and when he died in 1828 Bridget was left destitute and died the following year. By then Dolly had left their care.

In *Dolly Dalrymple*, Diana Wyllie tries to establish the unvarnished facts of her life. In 1826, aged about 16, and living with convict stock-keeper Thomas Johnson, she had her first child, though he was probably not the father. Robinson wrote in 1830: 'This stockkeeper lives with a half-caste female, a stout well made person by whom he has two children.'

In May 1831, a group of Aborigines attacked the Johnson house where Dolly was alone with her daughters. One of the girls was speared in the thigh but Dolly managed to barricade the door and windows and, armed only with a musket loaded with duck shot, for six hours held off the attackers, who also tried to smoke her out. As a result of her bravery, she was awarded a 20-acre land grant. Johnson received his conditional pardon that October and he and Dolly, known officially as Dalrymple Briggs, were given permission to marry. As Diana Wyllie puts it, 'This was the first step in their successful life together and a momentous move from the lowest ranked in society, an ex-convict and a half-caste, to being landowners in town.'

In 1836, Johnson was convicted of receiving. Dolly, with four children now to support, petitioned Governor Arthur asking that he be assigned to her; the petition was rejected. Wherever Johnson was assigned, they had three more children before he was legally free in 1841, though one of their daughters died in 1837 aged nine. The year of Johnson's release, Dolly wrote to an influential acquaintance asking for help to obtain permission for Woretermoetyenner to come and live with them. The application was approved.

By 1847, the Johnsons had ten children, but that same year Dolly's mother, by then known as Margaret Briggs, died. Her release from Wybalenna and the comfort of spending her last years with her daughter and grandchildren must have been unprecedented.

During these latter years, the Johnsons had been living in the township of Perth where Dolly had taken her land grant. The town of Latrobe was only just finding its feet but in 1848 the family moved there and set up a timber-splitting business, palings being needed for the copper mines of South Australia. They were also acquiring land in the area, including Sherwood

where in 1854 Johnson built a hotel and, in 1855, opened a colliery. Another Johnson hotel was called the Dalrymple Inn. Other ventures followed. Some time in the early 1850s, they built Sherwood Hall. Gradually, ten of their 13 surviving children married and had children, several with the second forename Dalrymple. Dolly was to have 70 grandchildren, which is why she has so many descendants, including Diana Wyllie. Two other descendants are the sisters Rosalie Medcraft and Valda Gee whose *The Sausage Tree* (1995) helps them reclaim their Aboriginal heritage. Dolly died in 1864 aged 54 and was buried beside a laurel tree on the banks of the Mersey not far from Sherwood Hall. Her funeral was a Latrobe occasion.

In 1970, Sherwood Hall was flooded and, by 1987, deterioration and vandalism had almost destroyed it. But it was declared a unique house and in 1991 a committee was set up to restore and re-site it to Bell's Parade where it was opened to the public in 1995 (best to check opening times). On the Mersey, approximately where Dolly and Johnson were buried, there is a memorial cairn.

Devonport (Home Hill – 77 Middle Road – Enid Lyons)

Middle Road leads off the Bass Highway in West Devonport. The property started as a hill covered in apple trees, an orchard that was never a success but kept the Lyons family in fruit. When politician Joe Lyons married Enid Burnell (pp226–9) in 1915, he gave it to her as a wedding present, and as the site of their dream home. They chose the design of the house from a newspaper competition and it was built by 1916; they moved in two months before their first child was born.

The house was expanded over the years to accommodate twelve children and remained their home no matter how often politics took them away; indeed, it was the refuge to which they retreated whenever possible. It was a special bolt hole for Enid when Joe died in 1939 and during her political life in Canberra; it was her home until her death in 1981.

Home Hill is now owned by the City of Devonport and the contents of the house by the National Trust (best to check opening times).

Historian Faye Gardam in 'Dame Enid Lyons – a Lady with Style' (1996) tells how she ran a small interior decorating shop in Devonport of which Enid Lyons in her older age became a customer. She details how Enid beautified Home Hill, and ends: 'Some of Dame Enid's original room layouts have been altered to cater for tourists and house a caretaker. But it still remains in essence her creation. A visitor there once told me she felt that Dame Enid had just stepped out for a moment or two.'

In Carmel Bird's short story 'The Woodpecker Toy Fact', the narrator spreads a fantasy haze over Devonport:

This is the fact that the Cabbage White Butterfly arrived in Tasmania on the feast of St Teresa 1940, which was the day that I was born. We both arrived in Devonport, and have been constant observers of each other from

the beginning. It is possible that the Cabbage White knows more about me than I know about it. I have a photograph of myself with a cloud of Cabbage Whites. I am three and I am standing among the cabbages in my maternal grandmother's garden, wearing the blue dress with white edges that my grandmother knitted me for Christmas.

Tiagarra Cultural Centre and Museum (Bluff Road, Mersey Bluff)

At the opposite end of West Devonport from Home Hill, at the mouth of the Mersey River, is the Mersey Bluff, a sacred Aboriginal site. In 1929, a teacher came across the petroglyphs, or rock carvings, that the centre, designed to resemble a traditional dwelling of the North West people, was established in 1976 to protect. Ten of the 200 or so petroglyphs can be seen on the walking track that surrounds the building. Inside the Tiagarra – meaning keep or keeping place – are artefacts and displays depicting the traditional way of life.

Emu Bay (Burnie)

Continuing along the Bass Highway, you pass Emu Bay where Walyer (pp32, 112, 384) gathered together fighters following her 1828 escape from the sealers who had abducted her in her youth. In the Civic Centre Plaza outside Burnie Town Hall, there has been a three-panelled art work commemorating her by Deloraine Aboriginal artist Carole Horton – but I have been unable to determine its current status. An installation, 'Warriors and Whalers' (1991) by Jennie Gorrings, inspired by Walyer, is in a private collection. Julie Dowling's portrait is said to be in the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Stanley

Two of the imagined Tasmanian places in Carmel Bird's uncannily real fiction are Copperfield and Woodpecker Point. When I asked her, for the purposes of my factual book, where in reality she imagined them, she replied:

I do not have exact geographical locations for [them] – they are in the general area of Stanley – Woodpecker Point being coastal and Copperfield being inland. Several people have said to me that they realised when I wrote of Copperfield that I was actually describing a place called Balfour – I have never been to Balfour, and had not actually heard of it before.

Part of the action of *The Bluebird Café* takes place in Copperfield; a train journey takes the narrator westward: 'I was looking out of the window most of the time, and the scenery, especially when we were going along the coast after we left Burnie, was beautiful. The sand is white. I pretended I was on a train in the south of France.'

A scene-setting 'tourist' introduction to the short story 'Woodpecker Point' by a member of the fictional family in *The Bluebird Café* (and later novels), starts straight-faced: 'Named for the legendary Tasmanian Woodpecker, which nests only on the north west coast, the town of Woodpecker Point is the site of the first settlement in this part of the island, and is classified as an historic town.'

Although Carmel's *Red Shoes* (p375) is set mostly in Victoria, the story moves to Tasmania, to the same general area as Woodpecker Point, when a girl is kidnapped and taken there to be killed. The novel is loosely related to the true story of Anne Hamilton-Byrne, leader of a sinister cult just outside Melbourne which collected, detained, and brainwashed children.

In Carmel's 2010 novel *Child of the Twilight*, many of the women characters come from Woodpecker Point, though the action takes place in Melbourne and Europe around two Christian icons, a Baby Jesus statue in Rome and images of a Black Madonna in such towns as Boulogne and Montserrat. I don't think I am giving the end away to say that it takes place in Woodpecker Point and, there, Carmel weaves into the story one of the threads of her pre-occupations and writing – the Aboriginal women of Tasmania's past. In the church in Woodpecker Point the narrator finds,

... in a tiny cave-like side chapel there is something unexpected, even amazing. The wall is decorated with a dim and dusty fresco, a primitive picture of a delicate Black Virgin standing among local native landscape and a feathering of ferns, moss and tiny pale yellow orchids. The figure is a portrait of an unknown indigenous girl, a member of the tribe of people who were living in this area when Europeans arrived. It is one of the loveliest and most endearing Black Madonnas I have seen.

Whenever I finish one of Carmel's novels, searching for real Tasmania to put in my book, I chide her for confusing fiction and fact so convincingly that I cannot disentangle them. She justifies herself towards the end of *Child of the Twilight*: '... fiction is the perfect place to put the facts'.

For all Carmel Bird's fantasy around the imaginary Stanley, the real place, on an 8-kilometre-long peninsula extending into the Bass Strait, has its own interest and a history as the first settlement in this part of the island.

The Van Diemen's Land Company (VDL Co.) was granted its charter in 1825 in order to produce fine wool, and the following year its surveyors travelled to the Stanley area to find suitable sheep pasturing. Its chief agent was Edward Curr who had first arrived in Tasmania as a merchant in 1820 with his wife of a year, 22-year-old **Elizabeth Curr** (née Micklethwait, 1798–1866). Their first child was born in Hobart ten months later, their second in 1822, and a third on board ship on the way back to England in 1823. They left again for Tasmania for Curr to take up his VDL Co. appointment in 1825 just after the birth of their fourth child. The family moved north in 1827, following the birth of their fifth child, though Elizabeth seems to have returned to Hobart for the sixth child, born just over a year later.

Augusta Mary Curr (b1830) was the first colonist child to be born at Stanley, and six more little Currs followed (and one at nearby Sheffield). Settlers had begun to arrive in the area in 1826, but it was not until 1842 that a design for the town was introduced. Elizabeth Curr's life, let alone her pregnancies and deliveries, must, therefore, have been somewhat rough and ready. There wasn't a coach service to Burnie until 1880, and then the journey took six to seven hours.

Until 1835, although the family was living on the Highfield property, it was not the house that is open to the public there today the completion of which dates from that year, but a 'small cottage'. Rosalie Hare, though, writes that 'It was equal to a genteel English farmhouse.' It was there that Rosalie, who gives evidence of the killing of Aborigines in Chapter 8 (pp106–7), stayed with Elizabeth for a few weeks from January 1828 while their husbands sailed to Port Dalrymple in the ship of which Robert Hare was captain.

Apart from the Currs' house, Highfield, Stanley's main attraction is Circular Head, sometimes called the Nut, which is just what it sounds like, a curious round, high-cliffed lump – a volcanic plug. Rosalie Hare wrote of it:

The Head justly called Circular presented a rather desolate sight. Here were plenty of trees, but they were of Stringey-Bark so called from their bark continually falling off and hanging in strings ...

The height of Circular Head appears about four hundred feet. I ascended it in company of the Surgeon without much difficulty. We found sheep grazing on its summit and kangaroo leaping about in all directions ... The descent from the Bluff we found very unpleasant and rather dangerous.

There is a chair lift today! The Nut can be seen from Highfield which is about a mile from the township; the whole area is also known as Circular Head. The property has been Highfield Historic Site since restoration began in 1987.

Rosalie's Tasmania journal is short; she was only on dry land there between 20 January and 6 March, but it is revealing, particularly about Aboriginal women and attitudes to the people on whose land the VDL Co. had intruded. She writes of life at Highfield and about **Mary**, a woman who visited the family speaking a little English and kissing Elizabeth, Rosalie and the children, to Rosalie's consternation. She continues:

The next day three other native women, or young girls about fifteen, paid us a visit. These poor creatures had joined the crew of a sealing boat while they were looking for seals along the coast and were brought by them to Circular Head.

How was my very soul shocked when two of these girls took off their kangaroo-skin coats and showed the inhuman cuts these European monsters had given them when they had not been able to find them food. Mrs Curr's feelings were instantly aroused for the youngest of these poor girls, and she thought it might be possible to teach her to take care of the children.

But on consideration it appeared dangerous – as they have been frequently tried as servants, but universally proved traitorous.

One incident in Elizabeth Curr's life stands out in particularly sharp relief, for there is a monument in the garden at Highfield that reads:

Juliana Teresa Curr was buried here in 1835, aged 2 years, [10] months, 14 days. She rests in peace.'

On 24 June, Juliana was playing in a cart harnessed to a mild old dog when it suddenly rushed to join a dogfight outside the yard of the new house. As it did so, Juliana hit her head on the solid planks of the fence and was killed almost instantly. In 1838, a part of the garden was described as a 'winding bowery walk' to Juliana's tomb in an alcove surrounded by honeysuckle and sweet briar.

The Curreys left Stanley, Thomas under a bit of a cloud, in 1841, the year Elizabeth gave birth to their 14th child, and settled in Melbourne where their last child was born. When Thomas died in 1850, he left her and eleven surviving children well provided for. In the 1850s, the Hares also settled in Melbourne. There Rosalie, who had taught when they lived for a spell in Cape Town, was first a head teacher then, in 1864, opened her own school. I think we can assume that she and Elizabeth caught up with each other.

Carmel Bird's Woodpecker Point is not quite Stanley, or Circular Head, for in her 2004 novel *Cape Grimm*, a character visits a quite distinct Highfield: 'There were rose bushes in the gardens at Highfield. When she was a child Rosa Mean believed the roses had been planted in her honour.'

To the south of Stanley is a nest of little settlements, one of which is brought alive in the early twentieth century in *Ruby of Trowutta: Recollections of a Country Postmistress* (p372). The postmistress then, and earlier, had a rather wider brief than today's; it included midwifery, whatever the distance or the weather, or the initial lack of training.

Cape Grim

Here on this furthest north western point of Tasmania the air is the purest in the world, monitored by an air pollution station operated by the Australian Bureau of Meteorology. And yet Carmel Bird writes in *Cape Grimm*:

A stench of mournful abject violence hangs in the air, howls in the waves, moans in the wind, rustles in the heath and stirs among the adamantine rocks. Call them ghosts. Call them the sorrow that inhabits the atmosphere, but they are not shapeless, they have the form of tormented human beings, restlessly returning to the place where their lives were lost or taken from them. Even on a sun-filled summer afternoon the land, the sea and the air in this place are haunted. Some ghosts are white, most are black. The figures and voices of sorrowful men who died in the attempt to protect their own

lives, and the lives of their women and children. The mournful cries of the violated, mutilated women who saw their babies dashed against the rocks, saw their family groups scattered and dispossessed.

The novel links the massacre of Aborigines which took place here at Victory Hill in 1828 (p106) and an imaginary white cult massacre over 150 years later. The ghost of the murdered Aboriginal girl Mannaginna appears to the cult character Virginia when she sees in her mind what happened in the past.

Does writing of these events help Carmel Bird come to terms with Tasmania's past which has haunted her since childhood? How far is her character, Virginia, an alter ego when she recounts: 'The images fade, the moans, the cries, the whispers die away. I am a dreamer, but Mannaginna herself is not a dream. I sense in myself a great, great longing to merge with this dark bridge spirit who sits beside me in the cave.' Then she adds: 'I don't believe that Mannaginna will ever find peace, will forever and forever haunt the ocean and the cliffside. She will never find peace; I will never find peace.'

The ghost of Mannaginna is part of Carmel's gallery of Aboriginal ghosts, including that of Mathinna which she places in the Cataract Gorge in Launceston in *The Bluebird Café* (p379). She gave me a couple of insights into her creativity when we were emailing each other about Mathinna, the little girl whom Jane Franklin took into Government House and left behind when she returned to England (p179). Carmel wrote of the painting of the child:

I am so pleased Thomas Bock did that picture of Mathinna – I know it is a tragic picture – but because it exists her spirit has travelled down the years, and seems to be really setting fire to creative imaginations. I first saw it in fact in a blurry black and white photograph in a book that belonged to my great-grandfather.

And a few weeks later she added:

[Today's Aborigines] probably think that as people go on and on about Mathinna they are only compounding the original crime committed by the Franklins. Personally, Mathinna's story always brings tears to my eyes – and I have a strange wish that I could reach her and comfort her and tell her how sorry I am.

Cape Grim, with its indelible memory of massacre, Carmel's treatment of it (symbolic of wider wrongs), and its pure, pure air, I hope end this book in as fitting a way as it was begun by the Louise Girardin magnetometer deep in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel at the other end of the island.

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