



by  
James Dixon  
Commander of the Skelton

Compilers Note -

An original copy from the first publication of Captain Dixon's book in 1822 is held in the Latrobe Library, Melbourne. A facsimile limited edition (200 copies) was produced in 1984 by Melanie Publications, Tasmania, from an original copy belonging to Mr P B Walker.

The pages reproduced here, for the interest of Wilson Family members, are confined to the story of the outbound sea voyage. Captain Dixon's book also makes extensive observations on the state of life and conditions in the colonies, and includes as an appendix, a copy of Governor MacQuarie's Report regarding Van Diemen's Land, Tables of the Population, List of Articles Suitable for Exportation, &c; then going on to describe the homeward bound voyage.

Melanie's reproduction also has a Foreword giving interesting background on Captain Dixon's origins, and his life and home in Van Diemen's Land. Members will be interested to know that he came from the village of Skelton in Yorkshire; later living in nearby Whitby, the same coastal village of Yorkshire whence came Captain James Cook.

## PREFACE

The following little work lays no claim to any literary merit. It was written entirely for the purpose of giving to the public, and those emigrating, regarding the Colonies of Van Diemen's Land and New South Wales; -- Countries which are rising every day in interest and importance, and which, at present, present an important field for emigration.

Many of the observations contained in the volume are general,-- a great many are matters of opinion. Those facts and cases which are stated, are either what I saw, or have from such authority as could not be doubted. Of one thing I have generally been cautious; viz. not to overrate the advantages of emigration.

If a man can live at home, let him do so, -- if he must emigrate, Australia is at present the best quarter he can choose.

The engraving accompanying the volume is an accurate likeness (and not a caricature, as one at first sight would be apt to imagine) of one of the natives of New South Wales, with his wooden shield. Many of these characters are to be seen at Sidney. This engraving was copied from a portrait of one of them painted by an artist there.

J.D.

Edinburgh,  
16th January 1822.

### NARRATIVE, &c - A VOYAGE TO NEW SOUTH WALES & VAN DIEMEN'S LAND

The gloomy prospects which the commencement of the year 1820 held out for men who had to depend on mercantile pursuits alone, made it necessary for many to endeavour to provide for themselves and families, without becoming burdens on their friends, and induced a number of persons to emigrate with this view to the settlements in Van Diemen's Land, and New South Wales.

The difficulty of procuring employment for ships at that time, naturally suggested to the owners of vessels, the idea of fitting them out as transports, for the conveyance of such persons as were desirous to emigrate to new settlements.

The owners of the Ship Skelton advertised to take passengers and goods at the port of Leith, for the Cape of Good Hope, Hobart Town, Van Diemen's Land; and Port Jackson, New South Wales. The terms were made as moderate as possible, the charges being 70 guineas for a cabin passage, 40 guineas the steerage, and one third less to the Cape of Good Hope; the ship finding the usual provisions, besides a supply of live stock.

The ship sailed from Leith Roads on the 19th of June, having on board 57 passengers, and 17 in crew, for Portsmouth, where more persons were

expected to join her. There were 21 embarked there, and she proceeded on her voyage. Nothing particular occurred, until the 16th of July, when Mrs McLeod, a passenger, was delivered off Cape Ortugal, of a fine boy. Her recovery was speedy and complete; so much so, that she said jocularly, a ship

was as good for ladies in that way, as the shore, where there was so much attention paid to them. The Salvage Rocks were seen on the 23rd of July, also Palma, the next day Feroe, and one of the Canaries; when, catching the trade winds, the ship proceeded at a rapid rate.

Unfortunately the measles broke out, which soon became general among the children, and even some adults were attacked. The distemper proved of a very mild kind, so that although 36 children were sick of the disease at different periods, and five grown persons, yet no death occurred. Here it may be necessary to observe, that in this malady, attention to air, diet, and medical experience, is of the utmost consequence to children; and in this instance, considerable advantage was derived from the skill of a Medical Gentleman of experience, who was on board as a passenger.

The disease began in the family of Mr Headlam, and had been communicated to that family by traveling in the same coach from London, with a child who had just recovered.

On the 31st of July, was near the Cape de Verd Islands; so near, that we had laid by part of the previous night, expecting to see St Jago. We however found ourselves by observation past it at noon; when the wind being fair, and the ship to the leeward of the island, it was not advisable to attempt beating up towards it. We accordingly proceeded.

We now lost the N.E. trade winds much earlier than we expected, and were nine or ten days employed in beating up towards the line. The passengers, notwithstanding the warmth of the weather, did not feel much inconvenience. We fortunately had only one very short calm for about twelve hours. In the evening the gentlemen and ladies generally danced, which was a very useful exercise on board a small ship, to keep away ennui, and at the same time promote a good appetite, the want of which I had no reason to complain of.

Although the owners had gone to the expense of procuring water when at Leith from Burntisland, yet it turned out very bad. The only good water on board was that taken in at Portsmouth. It was not necessary to go to allowance as no person took more than he found absolutely necessary. At the same time, though the water was bad, we did not find it injurious to the health. Almost all water undergoes a state of fermentation during the voyage through the warm latitudes, but it improved as we got into a colder climate.

On the 21st of August we crossed the line, with the usual ceremony of a visit from Neptune;-- the passengers, Ladies as well as gentlemen, with the exception of a gentleman a little unwell, answering the usual questions put to them by the god of the sea, and were enrolled in the list of his children. The day was fine, and spent in conviviality.

As we entered the southern hemisphere, we did not find the southeast trade winds so steady as might have been expected. In latitude 14 degrees south, we got a S.S.W. wind, which continued for some days, and instead of standing on

the starboard tack, as is general, we stood towards St Helena, and would actually have got into that longitude in four days, when the south east trade wind came on again, and we stood to the south-west. Some difference of opinion prevailed on board, whether it was not better to have stood on towards the Brazil coast than tack. The result of our passage to the Cape, is however the best proof as to which was preferable, as we arrived before ships who left England previous to ourselves.

We began to get variable winds on the 9th September, and getting outside the tropic, we got fair winds to the Cape of Good Hope.

The Table mountain was seen on the 27th September, early in the morning; it was, however, seen so far off, that we did not get in with the land till the afternoon. We came to an anchor four or five miles outside Table Bay that night about 10 o'clock.

At daylight next morning we weighed, and towed into Table Bay, it being calm. We were visited by the harbour master in his boat; who, after enquiring alongside the usual questions of where are you from ? &c. put into my hands a paper, requesting me to state whether we had had any sickness on board, more particularly to name whether the small pox, measles, or chicken pox had been on board.

We unfortunately had no answer to make but the true one. He then ordered us to hoist the quarantine flag, and the health officers would visit us. The measles at this time had entirely disappeared for above three weeks, yet there was no remedy but patience, as the disappointment, was severe to us all, more especially as the fathers of families had congratulated themselves on the thoughts of getting their wives and children on shore for a few days to get their linen washed, and such little refreshments as would be conducive to their health for the further prosecution of the voyage.

The health officer came alongside shortly after, and told us he was sorry that on no account could he release the ship from quarantine; but he would permit the captain, doctor, and a few of the heads of families to land, to procure refreshments for themselves; but the families and children, more especially the foul linens, were on no account to go on shore, but to be washed on board. This had one good effect, -- it materially lessened the expenditure of the passengers, as they were prevented from landing.

A few young men that were embarking for the Cape were landed; one of them a joiner, got employment on very liberal terms, about 6s. Sterling per day; another, a young man brought up to farming business, was also appointed an overseer to a gentleman of fortune, who had brought a number of Malays to the colony, and purchased a tract of land, and was about settling there.

This young man got 80 pounds sterling a year, bed and board. The other two were what unfortunately too many are brought up to, viz. quill driving; which, in the different classes to which it applies, is becoming quite a drug at home. In fact, emigrants should know some useful employment, besides the common rules of arithmetic; otherwise they will be generally disappointed.

Almost every mechanic is sure of finding employ, and liberal pay; whereas the poor lad, brought up in a merchant's counting house, finds few who are in want of his abilities.

The Health Officer, and Colonial Secretary were very polite; but though frequently solicited, would not venture to release us, as the Dutch at the Cape, having a number of slaves, on which, perhaps, no inconsiderable part of their incomes depended, were dreadfully alarmed at the idea of a ship where measles had prevailed coming near them. Some few years previous, the measles had been introduced, and carried a great many of their slaves off, as well as a number of free inhabitants and children.

An elderly gentleman, a passenger on board, who had been for twenty years in a weakly state, here became unwell. I name this to show, that although the Cape of Good Hope is useful for scurvy, or disorders of a slight nature, the air is by no means so to persons who have got a fixed complaint. In fact, people die there very fast. At the time we were there, vegetables were dear. The only cheap article was the Cape wine and Mutton, which latter is no doubt extremely nourishing to men long on salted provisions, yet bears no comparison to the same kind of food in England. The sheep are quite hairy, more like goats than sheep. The merinos have been introduced at some expense by the Government, for the raising of fine wool; but it does not appear to answer the purpose of the land holders, as, from the immense tracts of land they possess, they might have flocks innumerable; and it may be conjectured, that the Cape, from the nature of the feed, is not favourable to the raising of fine wool sheep.

This colony and its produce, are generally so well known, that it would be unnecessary to state what may already be found in many books. The Dutch there live on a gross diet, take too little exercise, and therefore are short lived. The gravestones are a very good criterion to judge by. It is rare to see fifty years of age inserted on them. The establishments in the wine trade are very considerable, and will no doubt increase, as the wine is certainly improving in flavour, -- perhaps now and then from importing a few pipes of real Madeira, to mix with their wines, or to improve their character.

There are several boarding houses at the Cape, where the usual charge is from 5 to 7 rix dollars per day for board and lodging. A very good table is kept, and as much Cape wine allowed as is proper for a person to take. If Madeira, Port, and Sherry are drank, it is charged separate. The rix dollars were worth 1s 9d when the Skelton was there, the exchange being much against the colonial currency.

Trade was exceedingly dull, but was expected to improve, as an order in Council had permitted the Cape to be a free port; and foreign ships might carry their commodities to that colony, provided their government would admit colonial produce into their countries on reciprocal terms of charges and duties. The Isle of France was also admitted a free port under similar regulations.

Many settlers have been given grants of land near Algoa bay. I much question whether the colonizing this part will be attended with advantage to the colonists, or to the mother country, except that England will get clear of a

superabundant population, which is desirable in the present state of things at home.

It may be remarked, that all new settlers must become like the Patriarchs of old, they must possess great flocks and herds; yet where there are no markets, it prevents that industry which otherwise in colonies would become of great value. Africa, or that part rather in which our settlements are situated, has no large river, and few good harbours. The value of produce must long remain a mere nothing to the grower; and it is doubtful whether ever, from the nature of soil and climate, these countries will be fully peopled. The report of Captain Moresby, commander of the Menai, published in the Cape Town Gazette, of 15th July 1820, is, I am afraid, but an indifferent account of the spots chosen to be the shipping and landing place of a great or a thriving colony.

In that report, the observation which is made as to the preference given to Algoa Bay over Torbay in England, Palermo Bay in Sicily, and Table bay, is but a very poor account of the best anchorage or harbour to be met with on the coast, supposing it to be in prospect that these settlements will become of great consequence to the mother country.

We remained in Table Bay about 15 days; and after having exchanged a few goods in the barter trade, viz. hops for wines, manufactures for Holland gin, and received the necessary supplies of fresh provisions, among which the broad tailed sheep made no inconsiderable figure, we sailed on the 14th October, and got out of Table Bay that evening. Next day we got round Cape Point, it being rough blowing weather; the wind fair. We experienced strong winds, with a rough swell for three or four days. It is always necessary to prepare a ship for heavy seas, generally prevalent off this headland, owing to strong currents setting from the westward.

Our passage, on the whole, was uncommonly fine, to St Paul's Island, which we made on the 2nd of November at noon.

We came close to the island; and having three hours before dark, the boats were lowered down, and a party with the mate went on shore. He made the following report to me:-- On approaching the shore, found the ground rocky and uneven at the bottom, with a great deal of sea-weed floating on the surface of the water. Our landing place was on a ridge of loose stones, forming the outside of a large bay, or bason, about ten yards to the westward of the entrance of it.

When at the shore, were hailed by a man, naming himself Mathew Brien, a native of the Isle of France, who, with four other black men, are kept there for the purpose of killing seals. About a pistol shot from where we landed, we descried their habitation, which was a very different one; the passage to it was over loose stones, with a very strong sort of grass growing between them. The hut was on the side of a very soft rock, built with clay and turf, and covered with a kind of grass. He had two bed places; the bedding of which was composed of seal skins and sail cloth. In one corner of the hut was a hen and chickens newly hatched. Their fuel consisted of the grass with which the island is covered. Near the water's edge is a hot mineral spring, of a considerable size, in which they sometimes dress their victuals. It is rather brackish, and of a greenish hue, when boiled and cooled. It is the only water

they make use of on the island. The Frenchman had a boat and canoe, with several casks, coppers for boiling oil, &c. After leaving the hut, we went up to the top of a hill.

The passage up was through very long and strong grass, almost as strong as rushes, made use of by coopers. It grows in tufts. The ground was very soft, being a sort of mould from volcanic matter. In the mouth of the bason stands a very singular pyramidal rock. The bason was about one mile across. In this bason was a prodigious depth of water; and supposing there to be a passage in, would contain in safety a considerable number of vessels. Mathew Brien had a small garden. English vegetables were growing there. He also had a quantity of barley growing.

The night approaching, we returned on board, after receiving from Mr Mathew Brien a few fish, like the snapper; which, however, when dressed were of an oily nature. Mr Brien was placed there to kill seals, and boil their oil, by merchants from the Isle of France, who send a vessel at stated periods to receive his fish, oil, &c. and carry him the necessary supplies. From some reservedness in his manner, I am inclined to think he suspected us of some intention to plunder. He seemed shy in shewing what seal skins and oil he had in his possession. The quantity seen of these articles was very trifling.

The mineral spring alluded to would dress fish close to the edge of the bason; so that you may literally catch fish in one hand, and boil it on the hook without moving.

The soundings of the entrance are regular to the distance of 1 1/4 miles. You may anchor in from 5 to 20 fathoms. If the anchor once starts, it is not likely to hold again, the ground having a regular descent. The soundings are exactly like gunpowder. A quantity of fish may be caught, but they are of an oily and strong flavour. At six in the evening, the boat having returned, we bore up on our voyage, to go round the south end of Van Diemen's Land.

Here it may be necessary to state, that, after leaving St Paul's, we discovered great quantities of seaweed, which continued for several days, in fact, all the way to the south-west point of Van Diemen's Land. This, with other symptoms, such as light fogs and birds, leaves little doubt, that land or islands lay to the southward of this part of the ocean.

Several islands having been discovered within the last ten years, near to New Zealand and Van Diemen's Land, makes this the more probable. This part of the ocean has been hereto little navigated. The few navigators who have penetrated to the southward, have been generally only on particular parts, so as to leave immensely vast tracts of ocean yet unexplored. I think, were a ship ordered to cross backwards and forwards, as far as she could penetrate south, then back to 40 degrees south in a zig zag direction, say every 5 degrees longitude, that something would be added to the discoveries of this age.

The large island lately discovered off Cape Horn, named New South Shetland, is a proof of the truth of this opinion. It is true, that if there are islands, they may be of no use; yet if they prove places where oil or seal skins can be procured, they would be of great value.

Having little wind on the 18th and 19th November, we were as far to the southward as 46 degrees 10 minutes; there we still observed fogs, sea weed, and birds; sure indications, in my opinion, of land being to the southward. It is generally believed, that in these seas the current runs to the eastward. We had no opportunity of trying it, yet from the ship being always as far ahead, and sometimes farther than the dead reckoning, it may be presumed it is so; and if so, no seaweed can float from Australia. Therefore, all that is seen must either float from St Paul or Amsterdam; and, from the quantity we noticed between these islands and S.W. Van Diemen's Land, I am strongly inclined to think, that some large island or islands exist in these quarters. On the 25th November, at four in the afternoon, we made S.W. Cape Van Diemen's Land.

The sight of this island, (being the intended residence of a great number of settlers we had on board), made them strain every faculty before dark, to form some opinion respecting the land of their adoption. We lay to part of the night; at daylight passed inside the Mew stone, and stood for Admiral d'Entrecasteaux Channel; which in long nights is perhaps the best, as there is anchorage all the way through. The tides are uncertain, and I think can never be very strong; as we wrought against them, the wind changing shortly after getting into it. Here we lost one of our passengers, the person before mentioned as being unwell at the Cape. He died just as we entered the Channel. He had two sons on board; one of them a married man with a family of five children.

He had been gradually declining since we left the Cape; and for some days previous to his death, had often expressed a wish to reach the land. His wishes, in fact, were partly realized; as he was interred the second day after his death in Hobart Town Church Yard. His name was Road Knight.

We came to anchor on Sunday the 26th November, about 11 in the evening, in d'Entrecasteaux channel, and the next day got under weigh. About 3 in the afternoon we saw Hobart Town; and the pilot came on board very shortly afterwards. We saw some vessels at anchor, and found that two convict ships, a brig from India with India goods, and two colonial vessels were there. The naval officer came on board about a mile from Hobart Town, and took the manifest and list of passengers; and though we had a corpse on board, allowed us to land immediately. The arrival of a vessel with so many settlers was an object of some importance in the colony. There also arrived the same day, about two hours after the Skelton, the Caroline, Captain Taylor, having 30 or 40 passengers, which naturally increased the interest of our arrival. Some of the passengers went on shore that evening to get lodgings, and found that the terms demanded were exceedingly high; from one, to one and a half guineas per week, for small unfurnished houses, and these not plentiful.

Lieut. Governor Sorrel sent an intimation, that he would wish the settlers to call at Government House; many of them not being aware that they should immediately have waited on the Governor. But both their own interest, and the etiquette of the colony requires them to do so as soon as possible, to state their views, and prepare a schedule of the property they possess. Their grants of land being made out in proportion to their capital, their statement can be required on oath. Several instances having occurred of persons having described themselves worth much more than they really were, and also setting



a ridiculous value on goods or movables, to swell the amount of their schedule.

I believe the oath is seldom administered, as the Governor acts on the most liberal terms with respect to their grants. One half of what the settler gets is seldom made use of, nor is it likely to be in this generation. Land is now, however, saleable, particularly if a large proprietor is anxious to get as much as possible in one focus. The present system of agriculture being anything but the improvement of land, in fact they pitch on a good piece; plough it till it is exhausted, and then pitch on another piece.

The settler, at such an immense distance from home, begins now to feel the difficulties of his situation, especially when every kind of useful thing is enhanced three times its real value, by the avarice of the merchants; who, however, it must be admitted, certainly run great risk in selling their goods; but if they get half they charge they are well paid.

I shall now attempt to describe the river Derwent, from Hobart Town upwards. This river, in a nautical point of view, is of the greatest value, as there is plenty of water for any vessel, six or seven miles above Hobart Town, and I think there are at least 14 feet at high tides, up to New Norfolk, the first settlement of any consequence situated on the banks of the river. New Norfolk is about 22 miles by water, and much the same by land. The site of a new Town is marked out on the left side of the river, on an eminence called Richmond Hill.

The town is to be named Elizabeth Town. The situation is well chosen; and when it is considered, that it will be the shipping place for all the settlements at New Norfolk, it will most likely in a few years become a town of some note; at present there are not more than 23 or 24 houses. Government intends to erect a school, and other buildings, as they may be required.

It is not until you come up to New Norfolk, that you discover the value of Van Diemen's Land in an agricultural point of view, You there observe corn, barley, &c. thriving well, under the management in general, of only very indifferent farmers, who with confined means contrive to get a few acres of wheat sown. The agriculturalists are completely kept down by the merchants, and political causes. Government is the principal purchaser; and it only takes off a limited quantity, for the purposes of feeding the convicts that are employed at public works. That demand has lately increased, owing to the immense number of persons sent out, more particularly to Van Diemen's Land, which colony has proved itself the granary of New South Wales. ....

## Postscript Summary

Captain Dixon's book goes on to describe life and conditions in Van Diemen's Land & New South Wales, with a brief description of the journey from Hobart Town to Port Jackson. He departs Port Jackson on June 15th 1821 destined for Hull in England, loaded with 181 bales of wool, 40 tons of timber, 1680 kangaroo hides, some wattle bark, 2800 ox horns, and 12 passengers.

This part of the Skelton's voyage is in some ways more eventful than the outbound journey. Navigating via Lord Howe Island and New Zealand to Cape Horn, he reaches that region at latitude 58/longitude 100, suddenly 'falling in' at that point with an iceberg 45 feet high and 250 yards in diameter.

Nearing Diego Ramires on August 3rd Skelton passes the Horn 'very swiftly' but uneventfully at noon that day, thereafter passing Terra del Fuego with its towering snowcapped mountains, Staten Island, inside the Falklands and up the coast of South America. Sighting many large whales en route, Skelton arrives at Rio de Janeiro on the 23rd of August, the first vessel from Port Jackson to dock there for five years.

In port he finds the 'Royal George' with Sir Thomas Brisbane, the newly appointed Governor and his entourage en route to take up his posting in Sydney. Also in port is the male convict transport 'John Barey', whilst the female transport 'Providence' arrives shortly after, reporting insubordination on board. Both transports are headed for Australia.

Dixon describes conditions in Rio, in particular the intense trading activity going on in goods from all parts of North America, Europe and Asia; and in slaves into the Portuguese colonies. He reports revolutionary ferment underway there particularly amongst newly freed slaves who 'chaunt a constitutional song, but who, of course, can know nothing about the meaning of it.'

Departing Rio on September 24th, they sight a number of vessels in the next few days, one of which, possibly a pirate, closely trails the Skelton, then sets chase showing all signs of making ready to attack, finally closing apparently to board. A heated verbal exchange of challenges follows, but the offending vessel is seemingly deterred from hostile action when one of the Skelton's passengers, Lieutenant Waddel of the 48th Regiment appears on deck in full military costume. Finally, with the rejoinder 'we are from Nantuckets, and be damned to you' the would be attacker makes off.

Skelton crosses the line (the equator) on October 17th, and on November 24th without further incident, makes the Isle of Wight where some passengers are dispatched, then arrived in the Humber on the 27th. Here Captain Dixon finds orders to proceed immediately to Leith his original point of departure, where he duly arrives on December 5th, 1821 after some 18 months absence.

The Skelton with Captain Dixon as master made one further voyage via Rio and the Horn to Australia with arrival in Port Jackson in December 1822. She stayed in Australian waters trading between Sydney and Hobart until September 5th 1823 returning to England again via the same route.

Throughout these voyages Captain Dixon is described as Captain Dixon Jnr., and the ship's principals as Dixon & Co. from which we might infer that his father or family owned the ship.

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