

Despatch (Copy)

To Earl Bathurst

H. M. Ship Samar

10th November 1824

Port Cockburn Melville Island

My Lord

The Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty having been pleased to select me to carry into effect the instructions of H. Majesty's Government relative to the formation of a settlement on the North coast of Australia, I think I may without impropriety do myself the honour, personally, to address Your Lordship to state some of the circumstances which have occurred and which have led to the establishment of a portion of H. Majesty's servants and subjects at this place and to give your Lordship as detailed a view of the nature of the country and its capabilities of answering the ultimate objects of which H. Majesty's Government has reference in forming a settlement in this part of the world as from the limited period of my residence I have been enabled to take.

With the hiring of the ship Countess of Starcount for the conveyance of the necessary stores &c. and with the small number of troops which the Governor of New South Wales was enabled to spare me your Lordship has been already informed by His Excellency's despatch previous to my sailing. I have therefore to relate that on the 24th August the expedition left Port Jackson, and after a critical and dangerous navigation reached Port Essington in Coburn's peninsula on the 20th September. I was directed by my instructions to cause that Port to be examined and if I received sufficient addition to my force

I was to detach a portion to occupy it. Circumstances did not permit this and I therefore considered that I should forward the service entrusted to me by entering the Port myself and devoting a short period to a survey of its shores, a search for fresh water and also performing the necessary ceremony of taking formal possession of the country in the name of the King and hoisting his Majesty's colours upon it. This was accordingly done under a salute and a feu de joie from a guard on shore answered by a Royal salute from H.M. Ship.

The enclosure marked N^o 1 is a copy of the form on which I took possession and another copy written on parchment was buried ~~under~~ ⁱⁿ a sealed bottle (which also contained several of H.M.'s coins) on a point which I named in consequence Point Record.

In laying this paper before Your Lordship I beg leave to explain the reasons which induced me to exceed in a small degree the instructions contained in Your Lordship's letter to the Admiralty explanatory of the intentions of his Majesty's Government of which Your Lordship were pleased to send me a copy for my guidance.

By these instructions I am directed to take special care that formal possession was taken of the coast included between the Western side of Bathurst island and the Eastern side of Coburn peninsula. I was also to make a settlement in Apsey Strait my first object but if I found that from scarcity of water poverty of soil and other circumstances it was not an advantageous position for a colony I was to retrace my steps to the

Eastward as far as the Liverpool river.

This river being situated in the longitude of $134^{\circ}15'E$. and the meridian 135° being the boundary of W^{ts} King's Territory ⁱⁿ New South Wales I judged that it would not be the intention of his majesty's government to leave these few miles of the land unoccupied particularly as Goulburn islands on the East side of Goulburn. Colburgh peninsula possessed the advantages of good soil and water, at the same time considering that there was every probability of my being enabled to form a settlement in Arsey Strait - that in such case circumstances would prevent my returning to the Eastward and that by that means leave a small and desirable portion of the coast unoccupied and free for other nations to settle on - I determined to venture on the measure of taking possession of the whole coast from 135° E. lat. to 129° E. the East of these meridians being to the Westward of Bathurst Islands. I have therefore to express my earnest hope that having in this instance to perform his majesty's Service your Lordship will be pleased to honour me by your approval. for my conduct.

On the 21st September, at daylight I despatched four boats in different directions under intelligent officers to examine the Port and search for water going myself for several miles into the Interior on the Eastern side. I found the country everywhere much parched and burnt up, the soil sandy and thickly strewed with sandstone rocks highly coloured by particles of iron, the hills having in few instances attained any considerable height. No traces of water were found by any of our parties on this days excursion. On the following morning the

boats were again despatched and I went on the Western side of the harbour here the land is higher and the soil decidedly better producing fine timber trees. The country much more open; haes of natives were seen in many places but none of them showed themselves, nor could the smallest portion of water be found by any of the parties on this side the Port, but on Point Record a hole was discovered fenced round with Bamboe containing a small quantity, thick and rather brackish. This was evidently the work of Malays, and there were several other signs of these people having recently been on the place. It is probable that by digging deep wells good water could be found but at present the value of Port Essington is considerably reduced by the apparent scarcity of this most indispensable necessary of life. It is however one of the most noble and beautiful Harbours that can be imagined, perfectly secure, with a moderate depth of water, a capacity of containing 1000 sail of vessels and a place worthy of ^{the notice of} his Majesty's Government, if their views should ever lead them to increase the establishments on this part of the Coast.

On the 23^{rd Sept} the expedition proceeded to sea and on the 26th arrived in Apsley Strait where possession was taken of Melville and Bathurst islands according to the form N^o 2. On the 27^{th Sept} parties were sent on shore to search for water. Several wells were sunk on both islands but the water was constantly found brackish, three days strict search held out no better prospect and I began to be under considerable apprehensions (for our stock was fast diminishing), when I had the good fortune to find a small

stream of excellent water in a cove, about five miles to the southward of the ship, the South Eastern point of which presented a most favourable position for a settlement being moderately elevated and tolerably clear of timber. The ships were immediately moved down and anchored in this cove, which in honour of the first discoverer the Island I named King's Cove; the point on which I fixed for the settlement, Point Barlow, and the whole anchorage Port Cockburn in honour of that distinguished officer Admiral Sir George Cockburn.

The position of the establishment having thus been decided on I began immediately to clear the ground and erect a Fort (which considering the known treachery of the Malays and the numbers in which they come on the coast, as well as the probable hostility of the natives I determined should be as strong as I could from circumstances render it) and to commence a commissariat store house, butts for the ~~more~~ soldiers and Prisoners, and a pier extending nearly to low water mark in order that provisions and heavy stores might be landed without injury.

The labours of everyone in the expedition was given so cheerfully that on 21st October¹⁷⁹⁴ having completed one Bastion and the sea face of the Fort, I had the satisfaction of hoisting his majesty's colours on Fort Dundas (so named in honour of the noble Lord at the head of the Admiralty) under a royal salute from his nine pounders guns and one twelve-pounder Cannonade which were already mounted.

Fort Dundas which is now completed with the exception of a portion of the ditch is built of timber of great hardness and solidity / some of the

trees being 2'10" in diameter and of immense weight /
 in layers of five feet deep and fifteen feet wide the
 height of the work being six feet. On it are mounted
 two, nine pounder cannon to shift on occasion
 and which will answer the Lady Nelson, Colonial
 vessel if it should be necessary to detach her on
 service. The Fort is rectangular, its sides being
 seventy five yards by fifty; the guns are those
 from the quarter deck of the Tamar, and each
 provided with fifty rounds of round shot and
 eight of grape and case. I have also supplied the
 detachment with every other description of ordnance
 stores which I thought might be useful and which
 I was enabled to spare from the ship.

The pier is composed of exceedingly heavy logs of
 timber and stones; it is a solid piece of work
 which will last for years, twenty one yards long
 and six wide. The troops and convicts have
 built themselves good and comfortable cottages
 close to the Fort. Regular barracks, however, in
 the square are to be immediately commenced
 for the former. The House for the Commandant
 and two of the officers of the garrison is inhabited
 and the other house for the remaining officers
 is in a forward state.

It was, my Lord, remarkable that until the 25th
 October no natives were seen although our parties
 had been several miles into the interior in different
 directions for the purpose of examining the country
 and the officers in pursuit of game, which was the
 only means of providing a fresh meal. On the 25th
 having been a considerable distance in my boat I
 was surprised on my return by the appearance of

ten natives near the entrance where the low tide
 had rendered the river fordable to a sand-bank
 situated in the centre. They were armed with spears
 and had waded in a line towards this sand
 bank, and seemed at first disposed to dispute our
 egress; on our near approach they retreated, threw
 down their spears into the mud and held up their
 arms to show us they intended nothing hostile
 accompanying the action with loud and incessant
 talking and vehement gestures. Being most anxious
 to establish an intercourse, I rowed towards them but
 they retreated again to the shore. After some time,
 however, they gained confidence and at length came
 as near as to take a handkerchief and some other
 trifles which were put towards them on an oar.
 I could not succeed in getting them nearer, and
 having given them all the boat afforded I left them
 apparently well satisfied. In the same afternoon
 a party of them came down to our settlement, surprised
 some of the men who were cutting timber, at a
 little distance and took from them the axes, of
 the use of which they seemed to have a correct
 idea. An alarm was soon given, the soldiers
 seized their arms and probably some of the natives
 would have fallen a sacrifice to their temerity if
 they had not retreated. Captain Barlow (the
 commandant) and myself immediately proceeded to
 the shore and after going a short distance into
 the wood we came on eight of the party consisting
 of about eighteen or twenty men with whom we
 soon established an intercourse by making signs of peace
 and giving our guns to those behind us and
 advancing with open arms. The natives immediately

them down their spears and a tolerable degree of confidence
 seemed to be felt. Several of the youngest however kept
 in the rear and collected the spears ready for action.
 They made many signs for hatchets which we
 signified should be given them if they came towards
 the settlement. By these means we succeeded in
 drawing them near the Port but nothing could induce
 them to come beyond the line of our huts or into
 the cleared ground. I found on inquiry that they
 had stolen three axes, but as it was desirable
 to establish a friendly intercourse if possible no notice
 was taken of this theft and three other axes were
 given them, at which they seemed highly pleased
 and returned into the wood making their fires about
 half a mile from us. Two days after they again
 surprised two men and took from them an axe and
 a reaping hook; our sentinels and others being near
 they were made to understand that this system could
 not be allowed and with some reluctance the
 reaping hook was returned but the axe was carried
 off; it became necessary to check this disposition
 to theft and on the usual vociferation and signs
 for axes they were told none would be given them
 and that they were to go away. They complied
 with this instruction and it was evident from their
 brandishing their spears and the waddy (a short stick
 sharp at one end and which they carry in their
 hands) that they were dissatisfied and probably
 intended mischief. We saw no more of them until
 the 30th, on which day our boat at the watering
 place was surprised by a party of eighteen or twenty
 who sprang from the bushes all armed with spears,
 another party at same moment surrounded a cottage

in a garden which the officers had made at a little distance and in which at that time was only one of the young gentlemen and a Corporal of Marines; they immediately endeavoured to make a retreat to the boat, but this the natives seemed inclined to prevent; finding their situation critical and the savages preparing to throw their spears, the Corporal fired over their heads, on which they drew back and afforded him a chance to escape - he again loaded as he ran firing repeatedly and kept them at bay until the young gentlemen reached the boat. On this a shower of spears were thrown and one grazed the back of the midshipman; fearing some mischief might ensue the Corporal judged that it would be more prudent to prove to them that we were superior in arms and that it might save some bloodshed if he selected a leading man for some punishment, he therefore fired directly at him; he fell or threw himself down as several others constantly did at seeing the flash but was most likely struck by the ball for they immediately retreated into the woods. At the same time several came down near the settlement and threw some spears one of which went through a large bag of grass which a man was carrying but it did no injury. Since this period they have not been seen in the neighbourhood of the fort or watching place, and I am inclined to think that at least one of them have succumbed.

These people are generally above the middle height, their limbs straight and well formed possessing wonderful elasticity. They were rather actively than strongly built, the stoutest among them having little muscle; their colour is nearly black

their hair coarse but not woolly; occasionally they tie it into a knot at the back of the head and many of them had daubed their hands heads and bodies with red and yellow pigment. Almost all of them were marked with a sort of tattoo, the skin appeared to be raised in a certain form for the purpose of admitting some substance beneath it and this turned down until it healed leaving small round lumps on the surface. The men were entirely naked but two women whom we saw at a little distance had a small mat of plaited grass or rushes fastened round the body and covering those parts which decency generally conceals. Their arms are the spear which is a straight shaft well hardened by fire about ten feet long, generally with a plain sharp point (but on some occasions they use a barbed spear; one of these was thrown at us and which I have preserved; it is most ingeniously made and has seventeen barbs cut out of the solid wood, very sharp and capable of inflicting a deadly wound) and the waddy, a short stick which they throw with wonderful precision, striking a bird at the top of the tallest tree with as much certainty as we could with a fowling piece.

In their habits these people seem to resemble the natives of New South Wales, although I think they are a degree higher in the graduating scale of the human species; like them they wander from place to place on the coast in search of the means of preserving existence. Like them they seem to devour the most disgusting food, the remains of which we often found; in person they are superior, and the covering of the women which I suppose is general

is no doubt a step towards civilization. Their ideas of a supreme being and a future state are undubitably less confused and barbarous, because on Bathurst island we found the tomb of a native which from its simplicity and the order in which it was preserved would not have disgraced a people much further advanced in intellectual endowment. It was, my Lord, an oblong square, open at one end, the remaining sides being railed round with small trees about eight feet high; many were curiously carved with a stone or slab shell and surmounted by the Waddies of the deceased. The earth was raised above the level as is usual with Europeans, but this part was not more than three feet long; at the head stood part of a canoe and a spear; next it were several of the baskets made of the fan-palm leaf: from their small size and make we thought they had been placed there by the children of the departed.

The sand and bushes were kept clear from around the tomb and nothing could exceed the neatness of the interior of the area. It is perfectly unusual to find this respect for the dead and consequent acknowledgement of a future state and a superior Power in the natives of Australia. I trust your Lordship will pardon my having detained you so long by this relation; but as this country has hitherto been untroubled by European foot, I presumed that a short account of it might be interesting.

The soil of the island, as far as I can form a judgement is most excellent and probably capable of producing many if not all the fruits and valuable shrubs of the Eastern Islands. The plants brought from Sydney flourish luxuriantly, particularly the

Nagat (?), the banana and sugar cane. Pumpkins
 radishes &c. are soon above the ground and the
 maize came up on the fourth day from its being
 sown. In passing pursuing the stream of water
 I have mentioned to your Lordship in the first
 part of my letter, several large ponds were discovered
 in the neighbourhood of which I have no doubt, most
 valuable rice plantations may be made. Amongst
 the trees, some of which are of majestic height and
 well calculated for many purposes of human industry,
 are the Eucalypts, a sort of *Lynum vitæ*; the
 Cabbage palm, and the Sago palm with several others
 with the names of which I am unacquainted. I also
 found cotton in considerable quantities being the Tree
 cotton; it is not I am aware considered so good
 as that which is taken from the small shrub, but
 I have thought it right to mention it and also to
 send a small quantity to England for your Lordship's
 inspection. Considering that in all probability the
 culture of the plant may prove of general advantage
 to the colony. We also found a bastard nutmeg
 and a species of pepper highly fragrant. There are
 no traces of the Trepan. The fish we find are
 chiefly mullet, skate, a small species of bass and
 that which seamen call the old wife; nor is the
 supply of these by any means certain. We have
 been often a whole week without taking a sufficient
 for all our men. At Port Essington of infinite
 variety abound. Indeed we caught at one haul
 of the same whenever we tried it sufficient for every
 one in the expedition. The animals we have
 seen on this island are the Kangaroo, the Water
 dog, bandicoot, opossum, Kangaroo rat and flying

Squill. The birds are pheasants, quail, parrots, paroquets, pappas curlews and a sort of snipe.

A few snakes have been seen of which from the flattened head and the fangs, were evidently venomous the centipede, scorpion and tarantula are also found but on the whole the poisonous reptiles are by no means numerous.

The climate of these islands, as far as I can form a judgment is decidedly as good a one as can be found between the tropics. The thermometer rarely reaching 88° in the hottest part of the day and in the morning at dawn sometimes falling to 76°, indeed nothing can be more delightful than this period of the twenty four hours.

Necessity obliges me and all the ships company to be constantly exposed to the vertical sun but fortunately but few have suffered, and some very severely, the fever which made its attack, quickly yielding to medicine.

By the chart which I have forwarded your Lordship to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, your Lordship will perceive that this is a part of the finest description. The entrance is however rather narrow and must when it may become frequented have buoys laid down to direct vessels approaching.

The capabilities and situation both in a military and commercial point of view will, I confidently answer, the wishes and intentions of his majestys government in establishing a colony in this quarter.

The whole of the stores being landed and the defences of the place being quite equal to any attack that might be expected I considered that it was necessary to proceed in further execution of the orders I have received from the Lords

Commissioners of the Admiralty, and shall therefore
put to sea tomorrow leaving the settlement under
the charge of Captain Manners Baskin of the 3rd
Regiment, fifty five officers, men and forty four
cavalry, three ^{free} mechanics. Colonial brig Lady
Helen 68 tons two men.

Lt J. J. Gordon Bremer

Enclosure No 1

The whole coast of New Holland or Australia
contained between the meridians of 129° + 135° East of
Greenwich with all the bays, rivers, harbours, creeks &c
in and all the islands lying off were taken possession
of in the name and in the right of His Most
Excellent Majesty George IV King of the United Kingdom
of Great Britain + Ireland, and His Majesty's arms
Colours hoisted at Port Essington on the 25th September
1824 by James John Gordon Bremer, Companion of the
most honourable military order of the Bath. Captain of
H.M. Ship the Porpoise and Commanding Officer of
H.M. Majesty's forces employed on the said coast.

H.M. Majesty's Colonial brig Lady Helen and the
British Ship Countess of Harcourt in Company
Port Essington Australia
25 September No 24

J. J. G. Bremer