

Jane L Lennon, *Across Bass Strait: Inter-colonial trade in meat and livestock*
(Melbourne: Anchor Books, 2022)

Launch speech, Port Albert, Saturday 30 April 2022

Tom Griffiths

I know it's hard to believe, but Jane has been working on this history for fifty years. Of course, she has done so many other things across the last half century: securing lasting achievements in government, national parks and historic places, working as a heritage consultant in Victoria and Queensland, offering leadership nationally through the Australian Heritage Commission and Council and internationally through ICOMOS, and she has written so many reports, books and articles along the way. But all those experiences have in some way fed into and enriched this, her original project, a project she has constantly returned to, perhaps been haunted by and always been passionate about.

It all began in the late 1960s when Jane was researching the coastal geomorphology of Corner Inlet and she became intrigued by the rotting old timber stumps she found along the shoreline. What clues did they offer to the human history, she wondered? Was there a submerged or forgotten cultural landscape to be rediscovered? In a few years, Jane had embarked upon a Master of Arts thesis at the University of Melbourne and its subject became 'Squatters, Merchants and Mariners: An Historical Geography of Gipps' Land, 1841-1851'. Her thesis, completed in 1975, was soon recognised as the outstanding scholarly work on the early history of the region. It was much sought after – the unpublished thesis occasionally disappeared from the university library. Over the years, Jane kept returning to the research, finding new archives, hearing about tin trunks of papers behind the shire office, finding forgotten letters and sketches in interstate libraries, listening to locals, defending regional heritage and constantly combing the landscape for more clues. Historical research is labour-intensive and time-consuming and there are no short cuts. Jane worried away at the work, enhanced the original thesis and now has made it into a book, one informed by those years of study and reflection. Her deep knowledge of Victoria and love of stormy southern shores shines through the work. And today she has brought this handsome publication back down to the Port, to launch it here where it all began! So this is a very special occasion. Jane, you have written yourself into the history of this place.

This place where we gather is indeed the epicentre of the book. It's about Port Albert, this forgotten port on the edge of Bass Strait; it's about those rotting old timber stumps Jane found while wading in Corner Inlet; it's about the vigorous sea trade. But it's also about early Gipps' Land as a whole, a region long

inhabited by the Gunaikurnai and infiltrated in the nineteenth century by the sea routes, mountain cattle tracks and land hunger of the invading Europeans. It's about the isolation of this region – defined as it is by the amphitheatre of the alps, the restless ocean, the shifting sands, the great forests, the muddy morasses. It's also about Gipps' Land as part of an archipelago of island settlements connected by the sea. It's about Bass Strait and Van Diemens Land and New Zealand; it's about emigration, the convict system and global trade. The scale of the history is illuminating and exhilarating. Jane's book has 'span', as the great Commonwealth and Australian historian, Sir Keith Hancock, would have put it. 'Span' was one of the qualities he looked for in fine history: the ability to zoom in and out, to see your particular people and places in the great span of geography and history.

The early Australian colonies were oriented to the ocean. The great continent behind them was Aboriginal, the vast inland remained a mystery, and the Europeans were sea peoples who had conquered the winds. The Australian writer David Malouf has remarked that one of the imaginative gifts of Europeans to the land of Australia was their vision of the continent as an island: it was, he said, 'not just a way of seeing it, and seeing it whole, but of seeing how it fitted into the rest of the world'. This was an imported, imperial vision, a view from the outside. And once a landing was made, people looked seawards, longingly to distant shores. Australia was an island defined by navigators, its European beachheads were connected by seaways, and they backed onto a dark and forbidding unknown. We are reminded how watery were the worlds of the first generations of white settlers, how exposed and vulnerable they were to the marine elements, how ocean emigration was so often the formative experience of their lives, how markets and settlements were shaped by the contours of sea and wind. Jane's book recaptures that world for us, a world of drownings, shipwrecks, shipmasters, schooners, smugglers, hawsers, harbours, quays, channels, buoys, beacons, wharfage, warping, lighters, cutters, coasters, punts, masts, spars, sails, winds, tides, pilots, captains, crews, customs, cargoes, gin, rum and lime juice.

This book is also about convict society and its economic and social footprint. Port Phillip and Victoria prided itself on being free of the convict taint of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. I grew up in Melbourne as a great-great-grandson of the gold generation, descendant of free immigrants who made a new democratic society under the Southern Cross. But recent scholarship has reminded us how important convicts and ex-convicts were in the making of Victoria. I'm thinking of James Boyce's brilliant history of *Van Diemen's Land* and his subsequent history of the founding of Melbourne from across Bass Strait, called *1835*. And last year Janet McCalman published her wonderful book, *Vandemonians: The Repressed History of Colonial Victorians*. The

Vandemonians were the generation of ex-convicts who crossed Bass Strait to lose themselves in Port Phillip and Victoria, seeking to escape their 'demonised' past.

It turns out that I'm descended from one of those too. One of my great-great grandfathers was transported to Van Diemen's Land for stealing a goose from the proverbial common in Somerset in 1832, served his time, crossed to Port Phillip in 1839 and became a farmer near St Arnaud. There he reinvented himself. He clipped the seven years of his sentence off his age, married a younger woman and his God-fearing descendants never knew anything about his convict background. In fact they grew up trumpeting the purity of their origins. A typical Victorian story, it now seems.

Jane was onto these forgotten dimensions of our history early. The first two chapters of this book are about the convict society and penal administration of Van Diemen's Land. We learn especially of life on the Tasman Peninsula, the gnawing hunger of the convicts on the road gangs and the need for a reliable supply of fresh meat. So began the livestock trade from Gipps' Land across Bass Strait, so began the settlement of Port Albert and the making of a port which by the late 1840s had more ships coming and going than Melbourne. The book tells this story in satisfying detail: the squatters who supplied the stock, the merchants who managed the trade, the mariners who braved Bass Strait, the convict workers sustained by a supply of fresh meat. Together they built a complex, fragile economy that connected colonies and spanned the seas.

There are many great characters in this story, such as Edward Crooke or John Foster or John Johnson or Robert Turnbull. My favourite is Captain Godfrey Vaughan Bentley, a master mariner who took up the Port Albert trade in 1843 and made 160 voyages across Bass Strait in ten years. He leased a pastoral run, Sandy Creek, north of Stratford and was friendly with his neighbour, the influential Edward Crooke. Bentley's friendly, gossipy letters to Crooke survive and cast a warm light on the period. He even counsels his friend in matters of love. And he made witty comments on high society, or on the pretensions of his fellow squatters. John Johnson was a mariner and pastoralist who became a politician and Bentley observed him buttering up 'the nobs' in Melbourne by throwing a great dinner 'so that they should not forget him, as it appears to be his ambition to get his legs under their mahogany.' Captain Bentley offered philosophy too, musing that 'the richer men get in this world, the more they slave themselves to get more money, and never have time to enjoy it.' Unfortunately, he never had time to enjoy it for he died suddenly of cholera at the age of 42 in Hobart Town in 1860. The flags of all vessels in the harbour were flown at half-mast to honour the passing of this respected and well-liked man.

There is a wonderfully strong sense of place in this book, of the power of the elements and the environment. Jane's original work was in historical geography, so she likes to know where she is, the lie of the land, where the rivers flow, the prevailing winds, the species of trees, the feel of the soil. She acknowledges the teaching of Eric Bird and Tom Perry and has been influenced by famous geographers overseas such as Jan Broek, William L Thomas, Carl Sauer, W G Hoskins and David Lowenthal. Jane is fascinated by landscape changes, by the sequence of occupation written in the land, by the importance of history to conservation. She worked with the pioneering National Trust Landscape Committee in the 1970s. She cherishes the landscape as a palimpsest, as a vast canvas of layered inscriptions.

Jane also has a historian's love of documents, as this book shows. She delights in the letter-books and bluebooks and account books, the variety of handwriting with which historians have to wrestle, the meticulous notations of trade and shipping. She searched out the marvellous sketches by Robert Russell reproduced in this book, and the superb painting on the cover by William Strutt from the Parliament of Victoria, depicting the shipping of cattle at Sandridge in 1850. This sense of place and love of the tangible past are what has made Jane such a great champion of heritage all her life.

I had the good fortune to work for Jane in the late 1980s in the Historic Places Section of the then Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands, and it was she who introduced me to environmental history, the scholarly field that I've since mostly worked in, which is a natural elaboration of historical geography. Jane was a wonderful boss: enabling, curious, passionate, and practical, a natural team leader, fun to be with, dedicated to public service, excited by ideas, and determined to see natural and human history as bound together.

Jane dedicates this book in part 'to all those friends and colleagues who thought I would never finish my story.' But Jane, what about those of us who never doubted you would?

Congratulations Jane! And congratulations also to Liz Rushen and Perry McIntyre of Anchor Books for producing such a fine-looking publication, with clarity and colour and with notes you can actually read and pictures where you want to find them. And finally, congratulations to Port Albert, for constantly luring Jane back, for no longer being the most notorious and disgraceful settlement in the colony, and for kick-starting the economy of our beloved Gipps' Land. It is my pleasure to launch this book, to break a metaphorical bottle of champagne across its bow. May it sail boldly and have good fortune on its voyages and find many ports and passengers!