

A Chronicle of the World : 1840 – 1893

It was primarily the war of attrition between Paraguay and Manchuria which kept the islanders in their isolation. The ambitious Lopez dynasty led an independent Paraguay to the shores of the Pacific and established one of the greatest naval powers of the nineteenth century. Manchuria, having concluded treaties with Russia, meanwhile turned its attention to the Pacific trade. And so began in 1844 one of the most bitter and devastating wars of the century. The effects on world trade were far-reaching, for few ships dared to venture into that part of the high seas which lie between the Cape of Good Hope on the one hand and the Cape Horn on the other. It was this disruption which determined the fate of those who had been abandoned on the desolate Island of Kerguelen in the South Indian Ocean.

From the inheritance of my father I came into possession of an old family Bible. Not our family Bible, for it seems that my family never rose to one. But a Bible which my father had received under heavily mysterious circumstances from a lady of Fort William. Which lady had inherited it from her mother, who, in her turn, had been presented with it by the famous explorer William Bruce in 1901, after a particularly cold winter he had spent in the meteorological station at the top of Ben Nevis. A note inside the front cover reads: "This Bible was given in gratitude to William S. Bruce at Gough Island in the year 1893 by Mr James Finlay, late of the Island of Kerguelen."

The Bible is remarkable not for its age and decrepitude, dishevelled though it is, large sections barely hanging together by threads and glue. So tattered and worn indeed that much of the New Testament threatens to slip into the Apocrypha. The book is remarkable not for the printed words that lie within, for they conform strictly to the Authorised Version of King James; but rather for the handwritten notes which appear in the margins of some of the pages. In places, the marginalia are torn and so rubbed thin and erased as to be completely illegible. In other places, the ink used was of such poor quality – made probably from mosses and perhaps the bodily juices of fish or sea-birds – that it has faded entirely. But enough remains to reveal a history of injustices which should now be brought forth to the public attention.

Without further ado I will set forth these notes that you may judge for yourself. We turn first to the marginalia to the Book of Exodus, Chapter One, reading from Verse One.

"My name is James Lunn, minister to the parish of North Jura. What I set down here is a true history, which began in the year of Our Lord eighteen hundred and forty," begins the commentary, in the neat and bold writing of a man of learning. "Should the Lord preserve this Holy Book, then my history will serve to record the many wrongs we have suffered at the hands of the Godless.

"After several years of hunger in the village of Kenuachdrachd, I made an arrangement with Captain George Harris, whom I met in Glasgow, for his ship to call at Lagg and to take my people to Van Diemen's Land. Many of that community and from other places in Jura had already gone, to America mostly, to seek out new lands and a living for their children. We had heard that Van Diemen's Land was a place of plenty, of high forests and of green meadows. Harris told me that Van Diemen's Land was a place

where all my flock could live as Godly men, without the oppressive practices of landlords and factors.

“Many of my parish agreed that this is what we should do.

“There were about four dozen of us in all who boarded the big ship at Lagg on the second day of April in eighteen hundred and forty, and who sailed down the Sound leaving the bald hills behind us for the last time. I remember that many a mother wept and many a grown man as well, as the last sight of Jura disappeared in the clouds.

“It was on the first day of this awful journey that I found Captain Harris to be a fearful and a godless man. He roared at the children if he saw them on deck and he was brutal to the sailors. Many a time I remonstrated with him and we shouted at each other, over the treatment of both passengers and crew, Captain Harris red in the face and with bunched fists, myself white as a winding-cloth and arms waving. On one occasion Harris used his fist to end such an argument, and I had to retire below decks for three days to nurse my swollen face.

“I cannot tell exactly what route we travelled, for I am a poor sailor and navigator upon the sea; but it was southwards all the way, through storms and flat calm, and heat and rain, for days and nights together. The ship rolled and turned even in the slightest swell, and many of us lay sick under decks, where we were tossed together. During one storm, which lasted for three days, the floor was slimy with their sickness. Our oldest parishioner, William Finlay, died in that storm, wild on his bed until the very last, when he suddenly sat up shrieking, then passed over. He was slipped over the side on the following day, his body to the waves, his soul to God. Two babies also died on that forsaken day.

“After several weeks, we turned towards the east. I learned from some of the crew that the dark coastline which we could dimly see to the north was Africa. One morning, not long after this, I chanced upon Captain Harris. He had been drinking heavily and boasted to me that he would be a rich man after this journey was over, for he was to set up in trade in the China Seas, where, as he said, spices and slaves, rum and women were to be easily had. Such a confession shocked my sensibilities and I remonstrated with him, calling him down for his ungodliness. Harris was in no way moved by these words and laughed openly in my face. ‘Ungodly, Mr Lunn? I tell you, you are dealing with the most sinful man you will ever meet,’ he bawled, ‘For I have stolen this ship and no man will ever catch me for it!’

“It seemed that Harris had obtained the ship by some trick, pretending to hire it for a short trip, but changing its name and appearance on the high seas, shortly before picking up his passengers from Jura. The whole act had been planned for many months. I had been deceived and implicated in all of this, for Harris had waited for our contract to be signed before he stole the ship

“Of course, I was horrified at this revelation, and mortified that the God-fearing men and women of Jura should be setting out for a new life on a ship which was captained by a shameless criminal, and I chastised Harris openly for it. But my words were like hailstones in summer - soon melted and leaving no trace upon the sinner Harris.

“Over the next few days, I endeavoured to make the sinner see the error of his ways. But the man was so obdurate that my words found no way into his soul.

“The winds and the seas in that part of the world were wild. A gale blew night and day and again into night and day, huge waves towered over us from the rear and lashed us, and those of us who could still move had to care for friends and parents and children who were moaning in their cots. I led prayers for our salvation, almost incessantly.

“It was therefore with great relief that one grey morning we saw land to the south of us, and found that Harris was directing his ship towards that land. Some way off, on the

horizon, we could just make out the sails of two ships disappearing to the east. Which ships these were we did not know.

“It was by my calculation the twentieth day of July, and I called on my flock to rejoice that we had finally come through all our troubles, with the hand of the Lord laid upon us, and had reached Van Diemen’s Land in health and safety. Although it was July, it was not a summer’s day. I observed Captain Harris who seemed to me to have a mocking smile on his face.

“All those who could bestir themselves came up on deck to see our new land. In all truth, it looked desolate and bare, unwelcoming. There was a huge mountain covered in snow which lifted itself up into the clouds and out of our sight. The coastline was rocky and waves crashed upon it. The cloud came down low from the mountains and obscured much of the land. After several hours, our ship tacked into a rocky inlet, where there was shelter. But there was not a tree, not a blade of grass to be seen. Wild birds swooped and dived, screaming like demons. An anchor was cast and we rode on the restless sea for a time.

“I was beset by doubts and took Harris to one side and began to argue with him. ‘This cannot be Van Diemen’s Land, sir!’ I exclaimed, pointing at the most barren cliffs and headlands I had ever laid eyes on. ‘This land is no better suited for human habitation than Garbh Reisa.’ Harris simply smiled cruelly: ‘Have you ever seen Van Diemen’s Land, Mr Lunn?’ Of course, he knew that I had never travelled so far and could only stay silent.

“It was not possible to land in that bay, which the sailors named Port Christmas, for a westerly gale was howling across the land from the sea beyond, preventing the ship from approaching the far beach. At around midday, therefore, Harris turned his ship south and eastwards again, and we sailed swiftly among rocks and reefs, with the land to the south vanishing between the mist and the spray. We sailed for about six hours, fearing at every moment to be cast upon the rocks and to perish. At one time we sailed down a fast channel between a monstrous headland and a rocky island. At the head of the land to our right was a mountain which appeared briefly through the clouds. We passed through other rocks on which the sea broke terrifyingly. But the sailors were skilful. When night fell we found ourselves in a sound where the water seemed calmer.

“The ship lay at anchor all night, and in the morning we were told to get on the boats with all that we possessed. I protested again that this could not be Van Diemen’s Land, but Harris said nothing to me. He was occupied in moving the people from the ship to one of his two small boats, and in seeing them safely to land. Since the wind was rising again, it was a dangerous business. Each time that I tried to speak to Harris, or to his first mate, I was brutally shouldered aside, and could get no answer. I was in the last boat to leave. As the sailors pushed away from the side of the ship, Harris leaned over the rail above us. ‘You are right, Mr Lunn!’ he shouted to me, ‘This is not Van Diemen’s Land! But I am sure you will make it into God’s own land with your men of Jura!’ With that, we pitched into the surf now mounting rapidly and headed for the shore. The sailors avoided our eyes, and none would reply to my desperate questions, until one, moved perhaps by pity, answered my pleas for some knowledge of where we were being landed. ‘This is the Island of Kerguelen, sir, the Island of Desolation some call it. You are still some weeks away from Van Diemen’s Land. May God help you all!’

“And with that blessing we were cast upon the shore of our new home.”

Many pages were required to write down this small piece of history and you should understand that we have by now reached Exodus, Chapter Thirteen. It was scarcely appropriate that the Pharaoh should let the enslaved people go, just at the moment when

the enslaved people were abandoned upon the Island of Kerguelen. Nevertheless it was so. Take the time to consult your atlases and globes and see where Tasmania. and where Kerguelen and where the nearest port of civilisation.

Mr Lunn continues:

“We were left on a land without trees, without beasts, without shelter, by a man who had stolen his ship and now proposed to make a fortune in the warm seas of China.”

“But the eye of the Lord was upon us and His Vengeance came in a most strange circumstance.

“No sooner had we been put ashore amongst those wailing families and friends, than the small boat pushed out into the waves again and made for the ship. But the wind, which had been strong enough until then, rose of a sudden to a gale and worse; it twisted and turned and began to strike up the sea before us into monstrous waves. The ship was tossing at its anchor like a piece of wood. The small boat was snatched up, driven sideways into some rocks and was smashed into a hundred pieces before our eyes. What became of the sailors we could not see, for the rain and the foam lashed into our faces and we had to seek shelter. And then the great thing happened!

“The Very Great Vengeance of the Lord Almighty came down upon the Devil in flesh, George Harris. For the wind blew stronger yet and waves like hills rose up and crashed upon the ship and tore it from its anchor and sent it hurling across the sound towards the rocks! Oh! as we stood on the shore we knew that the Good Lord was with us, and I led my people in psalms to thank Him for these acts. And as we sang, Harris and those of his crew who could, leaped from their ship like the souls of the damned into the Pit, and they plunged into the foaming torrent and disappeared from our sight.

“Oh! the ways of the Lord are mysterious but glorious to behold!

“No sooner had the Lord God emptied that ship of its heartless and sinful crew, than He bade the storms be silent and the waves be still, and a fresh breeze to come in the stead of the great wind. And as Harris and his men pulled themselves out of the water on the shore of a small island out there in the sound, their ship, now purged of sin and grief, set its own sails and sailed peacefully out to the open sea and at a steady speed towards the east.

“The God-fearing souls of Jura were left on the main part of the land, and the sinner Harris and some of his crew on their island, the two tribes separated by a sea in which the currents flowed fast. And never a boat for either of us. As the storm died away and the ship which had been our home disappeared fast behind a headland, I led a prayer of thanksgiving and then we left the shore in search of a place to build shelters.”

Here is a curious thing: the Reverend Lunn continued his account of those terrible events only at Joshua, Chapter Twenty-Two. This lacuna was not of the physical sort, the ravages of time having eaten away at memories: there was simply no writing of any sort in the margins of the remainder of Exodus, nor yet in Leviticus nor in Numbers.

“We found very little shelter but, at some distance from where we had been landed, and protected behind a small hill, a place which we thought might suit to build some huts. And in the first few days that we were there, we built with our bare hands, digging rocks from the very hillside, collecting turfs and seaweed to fill the gaps as best we could. But how many times did we build up only to have a wind knock it down. In those first few days and nights, with a gale blowing without end, and the rain coming down upon us as upon Noah, we lost several small children and two old men who died in the night, with only my poor words of ministration to comfort them.”

And again there is a great gap, for Mr Lunn had chosen to continue his story in the Book of Job.

“When we had built enough shelters from the rocks and stones and had filled the cracks with moss, and had buried those who had died of exhaustion and starvation and fever, we began to arrange our lives. There was no wood which we could use for fires, but peat and seaweed aplenty. It became possible to cut and dry peat, using our bare hands for the most part, since we had few tools with us.

“For food, we set out at the break of each day, men and women and children, to hunt down seals or birds or anything that had wings or scales or fur. After a whole day, it was possible to return home with nothing to show for the hunt. But we learned where the auks were and where the fulmar and petrel. Seals were not easily found and less easily killed. We all joined in, from the youngest child to the oldest woman, for only thus could we find enough to feed us and keep us from day to day. I accompanied these parties if there was no sick person to tend to. Always one or two of the old people were left behind at our shelters to tend the fires and cut more peats.

“It seemed that we had arrived in the worst days of winter. I tried to explain that the Southern Hemi-Sphere had opposed seasons to the Northern but I do not think many really understood. It was July when we left the ship, and in Jura the skies would have been calm and the days warm. Down here, the clouds raced without end, the days were short and the nights full of wind and sleet and snow.

“After fifty days, the nights grew shorter and we saw the sun in brief moments. A more optimistic man than I might have named it Spring. And then a thing happened which would have saved us all had it gone well. A ship appeared in the sound and a small boat was put out. We all watched from the shore, as the boat was rowed out to the island on which Harris and his remaining crew had been wrecked. We knew these men to be still alive, for we saw every day small figures moving about. We watched as the boat landed and then pulled away again, with several more men aboard. When the boat had visited the ship again, there was a delay of an hour or more, which we did not understand. I waved my arms furiously to attract some attention and our best men shouted and the women wailed. To no avail, it seemed.

“At last, the boat put out again, with two or three men standing in it, armed with long guns. It came close to the shore but did not land. I called out to them to come ashore and to save us all from a certain death. There was a man in the boat, with long fair hair, who spoke few words of English. It seemed they were hunters after the whale, from Norway.

“‘I will not land,’ shouted the man in the boat.

“‘For the love of God, man,’ I cried, ‘Can you not take away at least our poor children?’

“‘No, sir,’ said the other, ‘For if you have the plague, I will not land.’

“‘The plague?’ I shouted, ‘We do not have the plague. Please come ashore and see for yourself.’

“‘I am sorry, sir. Mr Harris has told us your story,’ answered the sailor, ‘And I cannot put my ship at risk. We will ask another ship to come later in the year.’

“And with that, the boat put about and the ship left into the east, with the devil Harris and his men on board, never to be seen again.”

“Already we had lost about ten of the forty souls who had landed - babies for the most part and old men. We buried them as we could in shallow graves and marked the

graves with stones. And still we carried on. I, who had been a fit man full of hope when we had left Jura, felt that I had aged beyond my years, my hair now almost white and with a long white beard. I tried to speak to my people with the words of comfort and of judgement from the Bible in which I now write and which was our only book of wisdom. But even I, in those months, sometimes wondered aloud to my friends whether the Good Lord had deserted us in our hour of need. I read much in the Book of Job.

“During our summer, we found that a cabbage which grew in profusion did much to keep us alive, for it seemed to keep our eyesight sound and our skin healthy. The cabbage and the oily flesh of the birds, and their eggs - such was our food in that year and in all the years to come. But it did not close our doors to death nor to sickness nor to despair.

“In the second Spring on that island, I asked several of the younger men to go on a journey into the island, to see what they might find in the hills behind us. We had until then walked for many miles along the shoreline, both east and west, in search of food, and had found other places where we might live. No one place was any better than others. Water was to be found everywhere, as were the birds, the cabbage and the seals. Some glens were more sheltered than others, but none exceeded the benefits of our first place of landing..

“It was a morning of fog on which five young men set off. What a journey that must have been! They were away from their families for twenty days and nights, and they saw many lochs and many bays and rocky shores to the south, and places where fishing might be good. They saw long long hills abandoned by God. They saw bogs stretching to the horizon, over which they stumbled for hours, as in a slough. They saw distant mountains rising with snow on them from behind hills which they knew they would not climb. They saw a coastline which was far far longer than all of the shores and hills of Jura put together many times. But they saw not one other living soul, not one creature of the land and not one man.”

We have to turn to the three Books of Nahum, Habbakuk and Zephaniah for the next legible entries. In the Books of Isaiah and Jeremiah many of the pages have notes which are now illegible. The writing in the later Books was not that of Mr Lunn: it was far less confident, larger, the words encroaching upon the printed text, with an abundance of ink-blotches and extraordinarily poor spelling and grammar (which I have here corrected, for it would be a shame to spoil my own good prose with these ill-educated words). I suppose this had been the work of another of the poor exiles.

“The whalers came back in the third year after our arrival. A ship put down its anchor and a boat came out to our shore. This was the Year of the Doctor, for there was a learned doctor on the ship. Having no English, he made himself understood to Mr Lunn by signing and drawing on a slate. He seemed surprised that we had not all died of the plague which Harris had said had afflicted us. He was able to treat some of our worst sicknesses. Mr Lunn asked if the ship could take some of our people off the island. The surgeon told him that this was not possible. The ship was on a hunting trip that would last two years, and could take no passengers, nor yet even a letter.

“But the Norwegian was most interested in our cabbage. He took as many as we could give him. He gave in return some bits of wood, nails and tools and two bags of grain which could be spared. He also promised to return on a future voyage and trade with us again.

“I believe that the sailing away of this ship broke Mr Lunn’s heart, for he took to his bed and died soon afterwards. Thomas Finlay took the Bible to himself and read to us from the Book every night and twice on the Sabbath.

“Another two years passed and in the Year of Grey Snow another whaling ship called. It was a Norwegian. The captain seemed to have knowledge of us. He came ashore and was warmly greeted. He brought wood and grain with him, which was most useful to us. He traded for cabbage and for salted eggs.

“Captain Sorensen told us of the war raging between Paraguay and Manchuria whose ships were now greatly feared. They were pirates upon the high seas and no man was safe from them. The captain told us that we had best to remain quietly where no one should think to discover us. When he told us these things, we were glad that we were apart from the sinful world. We were untouched by war and pirates, safe in the hands of the Good Lord. Captain Sorensen promised to return again in the following year, if he were spared. He would take us off if the wars had finished or trade with us again if the wars continued.

“In the Year of the Stranded Whales, another ship came. It was from Boston in America and the captain brought bad tidings. The war between Paraguay and Manchuria still prevented him from taking us off the island. He brought worse news also. On the first day of eighteen hundred and forty-seven a great storm of huge fiery bodies fell from the stars upon the sea between Scotland and America. The waters between Zetland and Iceland were boiled away. Dry land was revealed upon which a man could walk for many leagues. A huge wave was set up which crashed upon Scotland and split the whole land apart between Fort William and Inverness. The north of the land was sundered from the south of the land and a vast gulf lay now between them. The waves which had caused this devastation carried on to the lands of Europe and swept away Amsterdam and Berlin and Paris and Rome. Little was left of the great lands there, nor yet of the many sinners of Paris of whom the captain had heard tell.

“The captain told us that the world was an evil place and that we should stay here for the moment. If God spared him he would return in two years to take us off. In the meantime our friends thanked us for our cabbage and our salted sea-birds. They left us some sacks of grain and many spars of wood with which we repaired our houses. Many among us wished that the seas between our island and Van Diemen’s Land would dry up like the story of the Red Sea. We would walk from here to a better place.”

In the Book of Zechariah, yet another hand is evident:

“In the year which followed the Year of Hunger, we were visited by a ship. It was from Russia. The captain spoke little English. But we managed to trade news for cabbage and eggs. We discovered that this ship was fleeing from great devastation. The rebels of Finland had in that year invaded the lands of Russia and Prussia and Denmark. They killed the kings and emperors of these lands. They subjected their peoples to grievous taxes and outrages. The captain said that the Finlanders would cause a war in all of Europe. He advised us to stay in peace and isolation. He promised never to tell his enemies of our island. He departed on his long journey in search of the whale.”

The last legible entry recorded in this Bible lies at the end of the Book of Malachi, where the Lord remonstrates against those who have used harsh words against Him. The hand of the chronicler is very poor and the fragment is short:

“There are two of us. John Finlay is the brother of my mother. I am James Finlay. Many years have passed since we came to this land. I was born here five and forty years past. We are told that all the world is consumed by fire and water and the Angels of God have visited wrath upon all men. We alone live on. Few ships come to visit us now for the whale is also gone.”

And with that final entry terminates the history of the people of Jura exiled upon Kerguelen and held captive there by world events beyond their control.