Hidden History - Narratives of the Southern Ocean Sealers

Anthony J. Brown, Visiting Fellow, Dept. of History, Flinders University

Abstract

Decades before the official settlement of Albany (1826/27), Perth (1829), Melbourne (1835), and Adelaide (1836), scattered bands of sealers, deserters, ex-convicts and other 'desperate characters' had found refuge on the islands and sheltered coves of the south coast - from the Bass Strait Islands to Kangaroo Island, Nuyts and Recherche Archipelagoes and King George Sound. 'They are a complete set of pirates going from island to island along the southern coast in open whale boats, having their chief resort or den at Kangaroo Island ... among themselves they rob each other, the weak being obliged to give way to the stronger' (Major Lockyer, Commandant at Albany, 1826-27).

The sealers' life was harsh and dangerous - some were drowned, some massacred by south sea islanders or murdered by their mates, others again died from disease, starvation or exposure. Their treatment of native women was often abominable. Yet they established Australia's earliest export industry. Their ships were first to explore vast tracts of the Southern and Pacific Oceans, filling in many gaps on the maps left by Cook and his successors. A sealer discovered Macquarie Island in 1810.

When the Russian explorer Bellingshausen sailed to the Antarctic in 1819-1821, expecting to make new discoveries, he found a large sealing fleet already there.

Sealing has none of the glamour, even romance, surrounding the whaling industry (at least in retrospect) - yet, arguably, it was of greater importance in colonial history, involved more participants, and has even stranger stories to tell. The paper examines some of the surviving sealers' narratives - Australian, American, and British - and includes cameo accounts of individual sealers - among them Edmund Fanning, Isaac Pendleton, and Amasa Delano (American), Joseph Murrell (Port Jackson), James Kelly (Hobart), and John Boultbee (UK). Though long written out of the historical record, the sealers are entitled to their place in the Australian story.