

Sealer dealers, colonial history, and architecture

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This study rethinks colonial building and architecture in the Tasman world through a case study of the sealing industry. It argues that it is necessary to contemplate Sydney, Hobart, and Launceston from the water, as port cities; to restore connections between seal hunting, capitalism, and empire-building; and to situate sealers within the “webs of empire” that encased the globe by the nineteenth century.¹ In New Zealand, sealers and whalers were the British empire’s “advance guard”.² Given convictism, can the same be said for colonial Australia? Through an adaptation of staple theory to encompass luxuries and consumer items sought by colonial enterprise, the paper confirms that seal hunting marked the beginnings of Australian capitalism directed at developing external markets.³ The newness of its contribution resides in the argument about how sealing entrepreneurs – sealer dealers – shaped the colonial built environment. The study focuses on a set of Sydney’s ex-convicts, plus mariners and merchants who were not former convicts, who made fortunes from seal hunting, fortunes that provided the capital to build ships and shipyards, wharves, estates, and townhouses. It finds that these sealer dealers built and in turn depended on the “grey

¹ Tony Ballantyne, “Sealers, Whalers and the Entanglements of Empire,” in Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand’s Colonial Past* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2012), chap. 6. On ports, see Kenneth Morgan, “Building British Atlantic Port Cities: Bristol and Liverpool in the Eighteenth Century,” in Daniel Maudlin and Bernard L. Herman, eds, *Building the British Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 212-28.

² Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire*, 136.

³ Richard Pomfret, “The Staple Theory as an Approach to Canadian and Australian Economic Development,” *Australian Economic History Review* 21, no. 2 (1981): 133-46. William J. Lines, *Taming the Great South Land: A History of the Conquest of Nature in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 33, identifies the sealing industry with the beginnings of Australian capitalism but does not distinguish between domestic capitalism and enterprises in search of global markets.

architecture” of ports, such as wharf facilities and warehouses, for their success.⁴

Seal hunting initiated the Tasman world, which I define as a zone formed by traffic across the Tasman Sea, and that in the nineteenth century formed part of the oceanic networks that spanned an increasingly British world south of Asia.⁵ Launched from Port Jackson, these enterprises sought fruits of the sea to trade with London and the empire in India, and for the China market, until the prodigious slaughter ended the trade.⁶ A sealing gang constructed the first European buildings in New Zealand, in Dusky Sound in 1792.⁷ Bass Strait, however, was the site of the first sealing rush in the Tasman world from 1798 to 1803, a rush triggered by the imperial project of exploration and mapping.⁸ Having devastated the Bass Strait rookeries, the sealers raced across the Tasman to the wild seas of Foveaux Strait; to the Sub-Antarctic islands; and south to the Antarctic islands in the 1820s.

In considering the “grey architecture” of the shipyard and colonial port town, this study focuses on the sealer dealers’ home bases, since shipbuilders and shipping merchants involved in sealing built wharves, harbour and dock facilities at Port Jackson and Hobart Town on the Derwent. Sealing also financed the building of satellite river towns and shipyards: at Windsor on the Hawkesbury River and Port Dalrymple on the River Tamar, which became a supply depot. Land grants to former convicts in New South Wales influenced the positioning of small fleets on the Hawkesbury, and fuelled conflict with the

⁴ For a definition of “grey architecture”, see G. A. Bremner, J. Lagae and M. Volait, “Intersecting Interests: Developments in Networks and Flows of Information and Expertise in Architectural History,” *Fabrications* 26, no. 2 (2016): 236.

⁵ Philippa Mein Smith, “The Tasman World,” in Giselle Byrnes, ed., *The New Oxford History of New Zealand* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 13; James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders From Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Auckland: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1996), 131-32; Philippa Mein Smith, Peter Hempenstall and Shaun Goldfinch, *Remaking the Tasman World* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2008).

⁶ Richard Pomfret, “The Staple Theory as an Approach to Canadian and Australian Economic Development,” *Australian Economic History Review* 21, no. 2 (1981): 133-146.

⁷ Robert McNab, *Murihiku and the Southern Islands* (Invercargill: William Smith, 1907), 40; Robert McNab, ed., *Historical Records of New Zealand* Vol. 1 (Wellington: Government Printer, 1908), 177.

⁸ J. S. Cumpston, *First Visitors to Bass Strait* (Canberra: Roebuck Society, 1973), 14.

river's Aboriginal owners.

A series of case studies frame the project's findings. One case study relates to the biggest shipbuilder in the colony, James Underwood, who had a free passage to New South Wales on the First Fleet, and accumulated his capital from the sealing industry. His partner Henry Kable – also a First Fleeter – was a ship's chandler and an emancipist trader. Together Kable and Underwood sent ships with sealing gangs to Bass Strait, and were the first of the Sydney entrepreneurs to send schooners to hunt for seals in New Zealand waters.⁹ Kable and Underwood also entered into a sealing partnership with Simeon Lord, another ex-convict, who marketed the skins.¹⁰ Lord, Underwood and Kable built a shipyard on the Hawkesbury, and all three had "handsome houses" in Sydney.¹¹ Lord erected his house by the Tank Stream Bridge, a building which provided accommodation for ships' officers and served as a "rendezvous for captains and supercargoes".¹² Underwood built a yard at the mouth of Sydney's Tank Stream and a substantial, flat-roofed Georgian house behind it.¹³ Similarly, John Grono operated his shipping business from the Hawkesbury River, and sent sealing ships to Fiordland and Foveaux Strait, where he assembled shore bases and huts for sealing gangs. Back on the Hawkesbury, he built a home for his family downstream from Windsor.¹⁴ Even Mary Reibey, the ex-convict woman entrepreneur whose face graces the Australian \$20 note, as well as her husband and sons, grew rich from sealing.

By mapping such case studies of seal hunting as an early colonial enterprise, this

⁹ Hainsworth, *Builders and Adventurers*, 85; Cumpston, 12-13; McNab, *Murihiku*, 80.

¹⁰ Cumpston, 29; Hainsworth, *Builders and Adventurers*, 85; D. R. Hainsworth, "Kable, Henry (1763-1846)," Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kable-henry-2285/text2941>, first published 1967, accessed 13 June 2007.

¹¹ Hainsworth, *Builders and Adventurers*, 18.

¹² D. R. Hainsworth, "Lord, Simeon (1771-1840)," Australian Dictionary of Biography, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lord-simeon-2371/text3115>, accessed 13 June 2017.

¹³ Hainsworth, *Builders and Adventurers*, 78.

¹⁴ A. Charles Begg and Neil C. Begg, *The World of John Boulton: Including an Account of Sealing in Australia and New Zealand* (Christchurch: Whitcoulls, 1979), 124-25, 128-29.

project traces trans-colonial networks and relationships that literally built on the profits, and makes new connections between the histories of colonial architecture and industries in the Tasman world. One avenue to develop concerns the accumulation of wealth and the cultivation of propriety through domestic architecture built by trade throughout the British empire and the “Anglo world”. Another is to enlarge the theoretical framework through analysis of relationships between the dynamics of settler capitalism, the colonial built environment, and eco-colonialism in the form of plundering indigenous animal species: all relationships between land and sea.

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