

THE LEEDS MERCURY ARTICLE AND SPECULATIONS ON A DUTCH SETTLEMENT IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

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Introduction to the *Leeds Mercury* Article

In 1993, while preparing episodes about Australian explorers for his television documentary series, *The Bush Tucker Man*, Les Hiddins received a copy of an old newspaper article from marine archaeologist Dr. Peter Gesner. Titled “*Discovery of a White Colony on the Northern Shore of New Holland*” it was first published in 1834 in the *Leeds Mercury*, a reputable English newspaper. The article states that, on April 10th, 1832, an expedition led by a Lieutenant Nixon landed at Raffles Bay on the north coast of New Holland (northern Australia). It should be noted here that Raffles Bay would have provided convenient anchorage and fresh water but not the support of an existing military outpost, since the short-lived Fort Wellington settlement established there in 1827 had been abandoned in 1829 (Wilson, 1835, pp. 113-118). It was from Raffles Bay in April 1832, the *Leeds Mercury* article continues, that the expedition party explored southward into the interior, there discovering an isolated white colony descended from Dutch shipwreck survivors.

The following full transcription of the *Leeds Mercury* article is headed “*Original Essay*”, a title that may puzzle present-day readers. A regular column in the *Leeds Mercury*, it presented essays that could be either fiction or non-fiction, but were deemed “original” because of being published there for the first time:

ORIGINAL ESSAY

DISCOVERY OF A WHITE COLONY ON THE NORTHERN SHORE OF NEW HOLLAND.

A correspondent living near Halifax has favoured us with the following interesting communication:

TO THE EDITOR OF THE LEEDS MERCURY.

GENTLEMEN, - A friend of mine, lately arrived from Singapore, via India overland, having been one of a party who landed at Raffles Bay, on the north coast of New Holland, on the 10th of April, 1832, and made a two months' excursion into the interior, has permitted me to copy the following extract out of his private journal, which I think contains some particulars of a highly interesting nature, and not generally known.

The exploring party was promoted by a scientific Society at Singapore, aided and patronized by the Local Government, and its object was both commercial and geographical; but it was got up with the greatest secrecy, and remained secret to all except the parties concerned. (For what good purpose it is impossible to conceive:-)

Extract from an unpublished manuscript Journal of an exploring party in Northern Australia, by Lieutenant Nixon.

May 15th, 1832. - On reaching the summit of the hill, no words can express the astonishment, delight, and wonder I felt at the magical change of scenery, after having travelled for so many days over nothing but barren hills and rocks, and sands and parching plains, without seeing a single tribe of aborigines excepting those on the sea coast, and having to dig for water every day.

Looking to the southwards I saw below me, at the distance of about three or four miles, a low and level country, laid out as it were in plantations, with straight rows of trees, through which a broad sheet of smooth water extended in nearly a direct line from east to west, as far as the eye could reach to the westward, but apparently sweeping to the southward at its eastern extremity like a river; and near its banks, at one particular spot on the south side, there appeared to be a group of habitations, embosomed in a grove of tall trees like palms. The water I guessed to be about half a mile wide, and although the stream was clearly open for two thirds of the distance from the southern bank, the remainder of it was studded by thousands of little islands stretching along its northern shores: and what fixed me to the spot with indescribable sensations of rapture and admiration was the number of small boats or canoes with one or two persons in each, gliding along the narrow channels between the little islands in every direction, some of which appeared to be fishing or drawing nets. None of them had a sail, but one that was floating down the body of the stream without wind, which seemed to denote that a current ran from east to west. It seemed as if enchantment had brought me into a civilized country, and I could scarcely resolve to leave the spot I stood upon, had it not been for the overpowering rays of a mid day sun, affecting my bowels, as it frequently had done, during all the journey.

On reaching the bottom of the hill in my return to our party at the tents, I was just turning round a low rock, when I came

suddenly upon a human being whose face was so fair and dress so white, that I was for a moment staggered with terror, and thought that I was looking upon an apparition. I had naturally expected to meet an Indian as black or as brown as the rest of the natives, and not a white man in these unexplored regions. Still quaking with doubts about the integrity of my eyes I proceeded on, and saw the apparition advancing upon me with the most perfect indifference: in another minute he was quite near, and I now perceived that he had not yet seen me, for he was walking slowly and pensively with his eyes fixed on the ground, and he appeared to be a young man of a handsome and interesting countenance. We were got within four paces of each other when he heaved a deep and tremulous sigh, raised his eyes, and in an instant uttered a loud exclamation and fell insensible on the ground. My fears had now given place to sympathy, and I hastened to assist the unknown, who, I felt convinced, had been struck with the idea of seeing a supernatural being. It was a considerable time before he recovered and was assured of my mortality; and from a few expressions in old Dutch, which he uttered, I was luckily enabled to hold some conversation with him; for I had been at school in Holland in my youth and had not quite forgotten the language. Badly as he spoke Dutch, yet I gathered from him a few particulars of a most extraordinary nature; namely, that he belonged to a small community, all as white as himself, he said about three hundred; that they lived in houses enclosed all together within a great wall to defend them from black men; that their fathers came there about one hundred and seventy years ago, as they said, from a distant land across the great sea; and that their ship broke, and eighty men and ten of their sisters (female passengers?) with many things were saved on shore. I prevailed on him to accompany me to my party, who I knew would be glad to be introduced to his friends before we set out on our return to our ship at Port Raffles, from which place we were now distant nearly five hundred miles, and our time was limited to a fixed period so as to enable the ship to carry us back to Singapore before the change of the monsoon. The young man's dress consisted of a round jacket and large breeches, both made of skins, divested of the hair and bleached as white as linen; and on his head he wore a tall white skin cap with a brim covered over with white down or the small feathers of the white cocatoo. The latitude of this mountain was eighteen degrees thirty minutes fourteen seconds south; and the longitude one hundred and thirty-two degrees twenty-five minutes thirty seconds east. It was

christened Mount Singapore, after the name and in honour of the settlement to which the expedition belonged.

A subsequent part of the journal states further:

that on our party visiting the white village, the joy of the simple inhabitants was quite extravagant. The descendant of an officer is looked up to as chief, and with him (whose name is Van Baerle,) the party remained eight days. Their traditional history is, that their fathers were compelled by famine, after the loss of their great vessel, to travel towards the rising sun, carrying with them as much of the stores as they could, during which many died; and by the wise advice of their ten sisters they crossed a ridge of land, and meeting with a rivulet on the other side, followed its course and were led to the spot they now inhabit, where they have continued ever since. They have no animals of the domestic kind, either cows, sheep, pigs or anything else: Their plantations consist only of maize and yams, and these with fresh and dried fish constitute their principal food, which is changed occasionally for Kangaroo and other game; but it appears that they frequently experience a scarcity and shortness of provisions, most probably owing to ignorance and mismanagement; and had little or nothing to offer us now except skins. They are nominal Christians; their marriages are performed without any ceremony; and all the elders sit in council to manage their affairs; all the young, from ten up to a certain age are considered a standing militia, and are armed with long pikes; they have no books or paper, nor any schools; they retain a certain observance of the Sabbath by refraining from their daily labours, and perform a short superstitious ceremony on that day all together; and they may be considered almost a new race of beings." (A correspondent, 1834, p. 7).

Reactions to the *Leeds Mercury* article

The *Leeds Mercury* article was soon reprinted and circulated in English, Scottish, Irish, American and Australian newspapers (the latter copying British newspapers brought by sailing ship). In a sample of 35 such articles published between 1834 and 1847, about half simply repeat or summarise the original, while others include added comments. Among the latter, on February 3, 1834, the *Morning Post* (London) expressed "surprise that either amongst the settlers, or their descendants, there should have been neither books nor paper" a comment copied in other English, Irish and American newspapers (*Morning Post*, 1834, p.4). Australian newspapers were more negative. On July 25, 1834, the *Hobart Town Courier* printed, "We can scarcely give it credit as we think

it strange that, if true, the news of the discovery should not have reached us in this part of the world by a less circuitous route than that of India, Singapore and England" (Hobart Town Courier, 1834, p. 4). On July 26, 1834, the Sydney Monitor dismissed the story as "A noval Hoax probably invented by the witty Editor of the Launceston Independent of the 5th July 1834. We cannot believe the following account to be Authentic, as the new race of beings had to travel only 500 miles to find the sea; and yet in 170 years they had not found it, though the first ship-wreck were hardy Dutch mariners." (Sydney Monitor, 1834, p.4). As late as March 27, 1847, the Hobart Town Courier reproduced a fragment of the original article sent in by a reader and stated: "We suspect it, however, to be a mere figment of the imagination --- one of these 'wonders' which occasionally garnish the "Tales of Travelers. For the simplicity of the narrative and the precision of its detail impart an aspect of truth and beguile us into belief; the absence of all subsequent notices for so long a period, during which exploration has tried every field of research, and the present ignorance of any such settlement, force us back to doubt and distrust" (Hobart Town Courier, 1847, p.3).

In 1851, though, a Dutch reader, who had happened upon a Dutch translation of the *Leeds Mercury* article, not only acknowledged it as true but also added to the story of the expedition. The Dutch article, translated as "*Ontdekking eener volkplanting op de noordlijke kust van Nieuw-Holland*", had appeared in 1837 (*NederlandschMagazijn*) and came to the attention in 1851 of Hermann Van Blommestein (1791-1864), an elderly sugar producer living in Pekalongan on Java (*Nederlandsch Magazijn*, 1837). He wrote a letter to the *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch Indië*, recalling a related event during the 1830s, when he, a retired sea captain, had been harbour master of the Java port of Semarang. He wrote as follows (here translated from Dutch into English and with two evident memory lapses regarding dates indicated and corrected):

"In 1836 [i.e. 1832], an English merchant ship arrived in Samarang where I was the Harbour Master. The ship captain, whose name I have forgotten, told me that he had just come from the north coast of New Holland and that some of the passengers on board his ship, who had travelled into the interior, had met about 300 Hollanders living in a totally primitive manner. I reported to Governor-General De Eerens [i.e. Van den Bosch, who was Governor-General in 1832] what the captain had related to me, but have never heard anything more about the matter. I did read a story of this kind later in an English newspaper. Probably that story is the basis for the account in the *Nederlandsch Magazijn* of 1837, which relates that some English travellers in the Raffles Bay area, on the north coast of New Holland, had encountered about 300 Hollanders

in the interior; they were dressed in hides and their chief was descended from an officer named Van Baerle. They related to the travellers that their ancestors had been shipwrecked about 170 years ago; 10 women had also survived the shipwreck. They lived in a very backward civilisation. Sundays were still honoured when they refrained from work.” (Van Blommestein, 1851).

Van Blommestein’s service record, consulted during a visit to the Dutch National Archives in the Hague, states that in 1851, the same year van Blommestein’s letter was published, his government pension payment was increased, and he received an award for an unspecified action taken decades earlier. The archivist commented that it was unusual to make an award so long after the event.

In recent decades Western Australian historical researchers have also considered the *Leeds Mercury* article. *The Dutch Down Under 1606-2006*, an impressive multi-authored volume edited by Nonja Peters, begins with a chapter by Bruce Donaldson, “*The Dutch Contribution to the Discovery of Australia.*” Donaldson has inserted a Postscript mentioning the *Leeds Mercury* and Dutch articles discussed above (both apparently brought to his attention shortly before the book’s publication). Donaldson concludes that the exploration tale is interesting and regrets that it is unverifiable (Peters, 2006, pp. 24-25).

In his 2012 book, *The Lost White Tribes of Australia: 1656 Part One*, Henry Van Zanden suggests that James Stirling, Governor of Western Australia, concocted the fictional expedition account for publication in the *Leeds Mercury* shortly before departing England in February 1834 to return to Western Australia. Van Zanden surmises that Stirling might have intended to falsely alarm the Colonial Office about a supposed Dutch presence in Australia and thus stimulate government support for his fledgling colony. Van Zanden thinks Stirling could have based his tale on a known Western Australian shipwreck, such as the 1656 wreck of the *Vergulde Draeck*, whose descendants he argued might have survived until the 1830s in the Karakin Lakes area north of Perth. Van Zanden claims discovery in that vicinity of the remains of stone structures, likely built (he surmises) by survivors of an unidentified Dutch shipwreck (Van Zanden, 2012, pp. 41-49; Weber, 2013, pp. 1-4).

Another Western Australian historian, the late Thomas Vanderveldt, published a book about the Dutch in Australia, *Blood that Unites Us*, in 2014. In it he firmly rejects the idea that shipwreck survivors might have chosen to walk into Australia’s interior instead of remaining near the coast (Vanderveldt, 2014, p. 9). He favours the coast of Western Australia as the location of a lost Dutch colony but found no artefacts at

the likely Karakin Lakes site. Vanderveldt recommends DNA as the best means of identifying Dutch shipwreck descendants (Weber, 2013, p. 6)

Evidence For and Against the Existence and Location of the Supposed Dutch Colony

The *Leeds Mercury* article contains details of the purported expedition and colony. The name “Lieutenant Nixon” implies that the expedition leader was military and British, although a thorough search of service records has not revealed any East India Company (EIC) Army or British Army officer named Nixon, who might have led such an expedition in 1832. Nevertheless, the account reads as a typical military reconnaissance report, succinctly describing terrain, weather, vegetation, water and food sources, and inhabitants encountered.

During his own aerial and ground reconnaissance south from Raffles Bay, Hiddins suggested the Palmer River, a Finke River tributary south of the MacDonnell Ranges, as a possible location for a supposed lost Dutch colony. The landscape features described in the *Leeds Mercury* article could be argued to resemble the Palmer River area, as depicted on the first detailed map of the MacDonnell Ranges, compiled by Charles Chewings, who explored there during 1879-1885 seeking grazing and water for livestock (Chewings, 1886) (Fig. 1). Land selection for the first pastoral stations in the MacDonnell Ranges was then underway, and German Lutheran missionaries from Adelaide had recently founded the Hermannsburg Mission station nearby. Although three earlier explorers (Stuart, Gosse and Giles) had separately traversed the area in the 1860s and 1870s, their less detailed maps show landscape features only as conventional symbols and then only along their exploration routes (Stuart, 1864; Gosse, 1873; Giles, 1889).

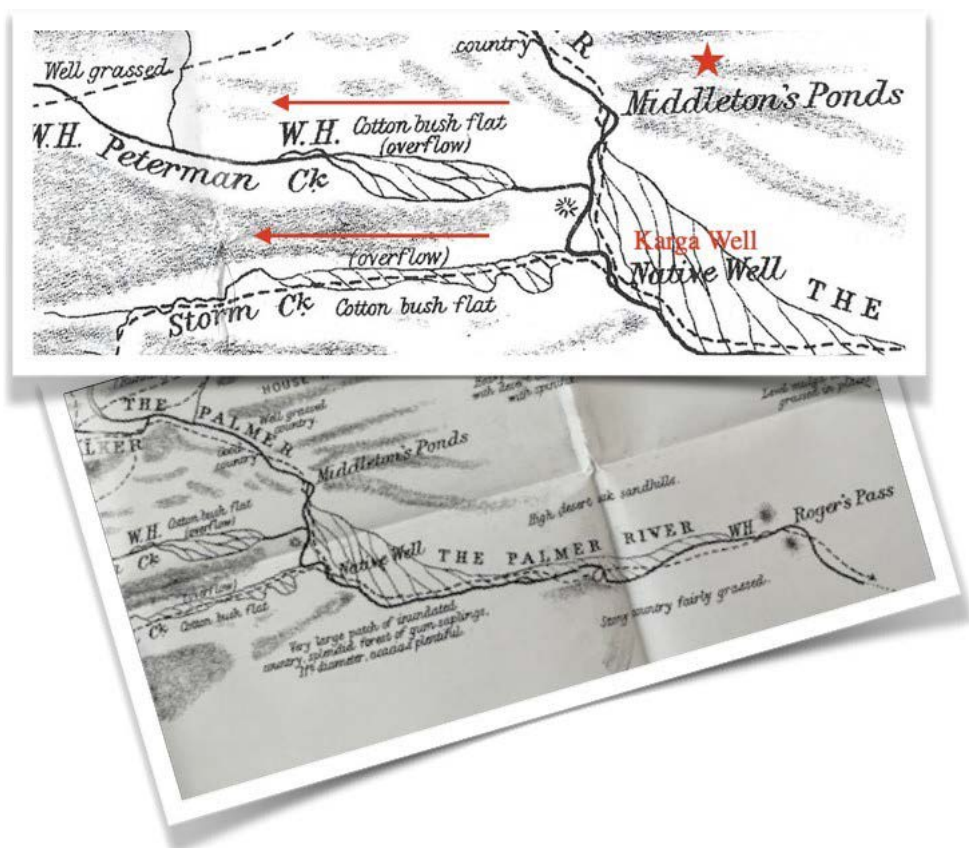


Figure 1. Detail from Map of the MacDonnell Ranges by Charles Chewings, 1886. The southeastern quarter of the original map appears here below a version modified for this article by adding red map symbols and labels. (Chewings, 1886.)

The Chewings map differs from the *Leeds Mercury* description in showing the Palmer River and Middleton Ponds shrunk due to low rainfall. Lieutenant Nixon supposedly observed in 1832 “...small boats... floating down the body of the stream without wind, which seemed to denote a current ran from east to west”. Chewings noted the following of the Palmer River, “In time of heavy flood the water cannot be carried away in the main channel, and spreads over an area from three to four miles wide and six or seven in length when, again, it finds its way into the main channel, only to run out on the other side as soon, and so it keeps on to Roger’s Pass (Chewings, 1886, p.10).

The story in the *Leeds Mercury* may also provide a link to archival records of a particular shipwreck. The 1834 newspaper account states that the Dutch colonists’ leader was Van Baerle (a Dutch surname) and that their ship had been wrecked 170 years earlier. Dr. Femme Gaastra, a Dutch maritime historian, searched the VOC (Dutch East

India Company) records and identified a ship, the *Concordia*, that left Batavia for Holland in February 1708. Its passengers included a VOC employee named Constantijn Van Baerle and also ten women (Gaastra, 1997, pp. 118-119). After leaving the Sunda Strait during stormy weather, accompanying ships lost sight of the *Concordia* near Mauritius and concluded that it had sunk.

Although the *Concordia* disappeared 124 (not 170) years before 1832, the dates seem reasonably close. The *Leeds Mercury* account says that the colonists still spoke an old form of Dutch. The young colonist first encountered would have described his ancestors' shipwreck to Lieutenant Nixon using the Dutch word *schipbreuk*; hence the statement in the *Leeds Mercury* account that their "ship broke". The description of the young colonist's clothing is reminiscent of men's styles in early 1700s Holland, albeit fashioned from skins.

The likelihood that a shipwrecked party would have been compelled by famine, after the loss of their great vessel, to head inland from the west coast "towards the rising sun" has been questioned by Thomas Vanderveldt and others. However, the seven sailors who sailed a small boat back to Batavia seeking help after the wreck of the *Vergulde Draeck* in 1656 reported to the VOC Governor General of the Indies, as quoted in translation by Rupert Gerritsen in his chapter in *The Dutch Down Under*, that the 68 people who remained "*were about to go inland ... where we very much hope they will have found provisions and drinking water*" (Peters, 2006, p. 41).

After the Hermannsburg Mission was established north of Middleton Ponds in 1879, the German Lutheran missionaries were in contact with the neighboring Kukatja/Luritja tribe (Domeier, 1993, p. 14). According to an early Hermannsburg missionary, Rev. J. Kempe, "*many of the women had Jewish [i.e. biblical] names, such as Judith, Paula, Mirjam, before they ever saw a white man*" (Krichauff, 1887, p. 33).

Other relevant stories persisted into the 20th century. In the 1950s Tiger Talkajyerie, a traditional Luritja elder guiding visiting journalist, Arthur Groom, recounted the following tale: "*My people tell me pussy-cat come that way,*" he said nodding to the west. "*Long time ago before white people come, big boat come that way and pussy-cat jump off, run about, find another pussy-cat, and now big mob pussy-cat everywhere, run about desert country alla time; eat little birds - lizard- eat close up everything*" (Groom, 1959, pp. 144-145). This Luritja tribal legend may point to an early shipwreck on the Western Australian coast (Gaynor, 2000, pp. 150-151).

Another relevant story was told to Hiddins by Ross Milne about New Crown and Tieyon Stations, located near the Finke River south of Alice

Springs. During the 1960s and 1970s Milne worked there during cattle mustering, along with an Aboriginal stockman. The stockman related to Milne a tale heard as a youngster from a tribal elder, who recalled that long ago a “White Tribe” had been living not far northwest of Tieyon Station near the Finke River. The members of the tribe, who had blue eyes and blond hair, had disappeared long ago. (Hiddins, Personal Communication, 2024).

Maslen’s Survey and Raffles Bay

According to European continental theory, a large inland lake or river was supposed to exist somewhere north of the Swan River settlement in Western Australia (Moore, 1837). An expedition south from Raffles Bay on the north coast, in search of a supposed great river, had been proposed in a book written by Thomas J. Maslen. A former EIC Madras Indian Army lieutenant, Maslen had been forced by ill health to retire on half-pay to chilly North Yorkshire in England. Unable to emigrate to Australia as he wished, Maslen channeled his enthusiasm into a book, *Friend of Australia*, laying out his plan for the systematic surveying and mapping of that continent (Maslen, 1830; Cook, 2008). He proposed an initial survey line, running north to south from Raffles Bay, a location midway between Australia’s east and west coasts. Maslen envisioned military survey parties establishing a north-south chain of camps at regular intervals, from which subsidiary parties would explore east and west, adding more north-south lines on either side, and eventually covering the entire continent with a systematic map survey grid. Maslen also wrote of his belief that a great river, as envisioned on his accompanying map illustration, would be discovered in the Australian interior (Maslen, 1830, p. 380 and fold-out map). A copy of Maslen’s book may have reached James Stirling, soon to be appointed Governor of Western Australia, during 1831 and inspired him. In early February 1832, after the document formally commissioning Stirling as Governor had arrived from England, Stirling wrote a letter of thanks to Robert Hay in the Colonial Office. In it Stirling declared that he wanted to promote exploration “... in the determination of the important fact whether a great river exists in the country to the Northward” (Statham Drew, 2003, p. 204). That sentence echoes Maslen’s pet theory.

Raffles Bay and Middleton Ponds do align on nearly the same east longitude (Raffles Bay 132 degrees 24 minutes and Middleton Ponds 132 degrees 34 minutes). In addition, the explorer Augustus Gregory made the discovery in 1855 of the remains of a large camp on Elsey Creek, located between Raffles Bay and Middleton Ponds and at approximately the same east longitude, 132 degrees 59 minutes. Gregory described the Elsey Creek site:

“...several trees cut with iron axes were noticed near the camp. There was also the remains of a hut and the ashes of a large fire, indicating that there had been a party encamped there for several weeks; several trees from six to eight inches diameter had been cut down with iron axes in fair condition, and the hut built by cutting notches in standing trees and resting a large pole therein for a ridge; this has been burnt apparently by the subsequent bush fires, and only some pieces of the thickest timber remained unconsumed. Search was made for marked trees, but none found, nor were there any fragments of iron, leather, or other material of the equipment of an exploring party, or any bones of animals other than those common in Australia. Had an exploring party been destroyed here, there would most likely have been some indications, and it may therefore be inferred that the party had proceeded on its journey. It could not have been a camp of Leichhardt's in 1845, as it is 100 miles south-west of his route to Port Essington.” (Gregory, 1858).

The observations of Gregory, later appointed the Surveyor General of Queensland, merit consideration. However, he was likely unaware of the 1834 *Leeds Mercury* article, so did not make that connection.

If an English expedition originated from Singapore to Raffles Bay, as the *Leeds Mercury* article states, it was not the only secret mission sent out from Singapore in 1832. The EIC was expecting its economic power to be diminished in 1834 by the loss of its valuable Chinese trading monopoly. As a counter measure, Hugh Hamilton Lindsay, the son of an EIC director, was secretly sent north by ship in 1832 to spy on Chinese ports, and his findings were soon made public (*Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, 1833, pp. 94-107, 158-173; Bickers, 2012).

If also sent from Singapore under the auspices of the EIC, the supposed secret expedition from Raffles Bay into Western Australian territory would have required the permission and possibly the collusion of Governor James Stirling. From the 63rd Army Regiment Stirling might have contributed the services of young Lieutenant Robert Dale, a capable explorer and surveyor with two years of experience in Western Australia. A useful EIC connection could have been Captain Walter Pace, a new Swan River settler and also a retired EIC ship captain and a Stirling family friend (Henty, 1934, p. 6). With a small crew on his Dutch-built schooner, the *Monkey*, Pace had begun trading voyages between Swan River and Java ports. Newspaper shipping reports show the *Monkey* visiting East Indies ports during March 1832 (*Javasche Courant*, 1832), a schedule would have meshed with expedition members' arrival at Raffles Bay on April 10, 1832, as reported in the *Leeds Mercury*.

According to the *Leeds Mercury* account, the Dutch colony was 500 miles (804 kilometres) south of Raffles Bay and had been reached in a month, plus another month for the return journey, but that distance and timing may have been deliberately falsified. The actual distance from Raffles Bay to Middleton Ponds is about 1200 miles (1,931 kilometres). Starting from Raffles Bay and travelling about 17 miles (27.4 kilometres) per day, the explorers would have reached Middleton Ponds in about 2.5 months. Taking roughly the same time to return, they would have arrived back at Raffles Bay by early September 1832.

A Possible Scenario

In 1832, Governor Stirling had informed his Executive Council that dire economic and resource problems required his return to England to ask the Colonial Office for more support for the Swan River colony (Statham-Drew, 2003). The Council agreed, approving Captain Irwin as interim Lieutenant Governor (Statham-Drew, 2003). That plan suited Stirling, but Irwin acquiesced reluctantly, having already received permission for leave to England, where he hoped to marry (Statham-Drew, 2003). Stirling impatiently waited for Captain Dance of the *Sulphur*, the naval vessel assigned to Western Australia, to bring needed supplies from Van Diemens Land to Swan River and then take the Stirlings to England. The *Sulphur* finally left Swan River on 12th August 1832 and reached Portsmouth, England on 12th December 1832, having stopped briefly at the Cape (Statham-Drew, 2003).

Although we have no proof, Captain Irwin, who diligently wrote monthly dispatches to Stirling in England, could have sent him a report by late 1832 of a Raffles Bay expedition, if one had indeed taken place. Under this scenario, when Irwin's report reached England, Stirling would have shared the news of the Dutch colony's discovery with his superiors in the Colonial Office, perhaps anticipating official gratitude for discovering the potential political threat of a prior Dutch foothold in Australia. About that time, a change in government forced the long-serving head of the Colonial Office, Viscount Goderich, to leave that post. As an unusually generous parting gesture, Goderich arranged for Stirling to receive a knighthood, awarded on April 3rd, 1833 (Statham-Drew, 2003). One wonders whether the award might have been related to news of the supposed Raffles Bay expedition.

Back in Western Australia, economic woes and food shortages persisted, but the Colonial Office in London focused on cutting the Western Australian budget. Acting Lieutenant Governor Irwin had appointed Dale as his aide-de-camp and raised his salary, but the Colonial Office reacted by rescinding Dale's appointment and reducing his pay (Statham-Drew, 2003). Both Irwin and Dale became increasingly anxious to return to England and plead their cases. That opportunity arose in September

1833 with the arrival of Captain Richard Daniel, commander of the two 21st Army Regiment companies newly assigned to Western Australia. Daniel outranked Irwin for the Lieutenant Governorship, so Irwin could leave promptly (Statham-Drew, 2003). Dale, who accompanied Irwin, stated on September 27th, the night before they departed, that “*motives of prudence and ulterior prospects had an imperative call on him*” (Dale, *Perth Gazette*, 1833). Irwin and Dale must have returned to England via India overland, a route faster than sailing around the Cape for it instead involved sailing up the Red Sea to Suez, crossing to the Mediterranean by camel and continuing by ship to England (Blackburn, 1838).

By early January 1834 Irwin and Dale must have arrived together at an English port and then gone separate ways. Captain Irwin, possibly the “old friend” mentioned in the *Leeds Mercury* account, may have visited Thomas J. Maslen, who lived in Ripponden, near Leeds, in mid-January 1834. As already mentioned, Maslen’s book would likely have inspired the plan to explore south from Raffles Bay. Continuing with this scenario, after reading an expedition report shown him by Irwin, we could imagine Maslen copying it (with some alterations to preserve secrecy) for submission to the editor of the *Leeds Mercury*, who published it on January 25th, 1834. Although Maslen signed as “*an anonymous correspondent living near Halifax*”, his whinging “*for what good purpose*” complaint about secrecy matches the tone of other letters that Maslen wrote to editors and prominent persons and, it might be argued, betrays his identity. Additional clues are faint pencil notations of the latitude and longitude reached by the expedition, written in Maslen’s distinctive hand on the verso of his copy of his own map of Australia. That copy has survived with Maslen’s interleaved, author’s copy of *The Friend of Australia*, both now in the Mitchell Library in Sydney (Cook, 2008). When visiting that library, I identified the volume’s author and original owner as Maslen (it had been mis-identified by its previous book-collector owner). Hiddins, who examined the copy of Maslen’s map there on a separate occasion, recognised the significance of Maslen’s penciled latitude and longitude numbers near the Middleton Ponds location. That discovery was a gratifying coincidence of long-distance scholarly collaboration!

While the above comments about Captain Irwin’s meeting with Maslen are speculative, it is certain that Irwin visited with Stirling in Portsmouth aboard the *James Pattison* on February 8th, 1834, the day before it departed for Australia. Before leaving, Stirling wrote to the Colonial Office, notifying them that Irwin would visit there on February 10th. Although there is no written record of the meeting, Irwin was received favorably, as was a letter he wrote expressing general praise of Lieutenant Robert Dale (Letter, Irwin to Lefevre, 18 Feb 1834. CO 18/14).

Thereafter the *Leeds Mercury* story would lie dormant until Hiddins received a copy of the article and began to research it. Hiddins visited the British National Archives in the late 1990s, provided with a list of the record groups most likely to include relevant documents. However, his research in Colonial Office and other archives was stymied by unexpected gaps. The relevant documents, most of them formerly recorded as present in the archives but not now to be found there, were as follows:

- A) Written mention of Stirling's unexpected arrival in England in December 1832 (no mention found).
- B) CO 18/10, p. 88, "Schedule of Documents with Letters & Accounts Accompanying Govr Stirling's Despatch 23 July 1832 No 17." (this volume was present).
 - B.1) Entry in CO 18/10. 2B no 1: "Reports of Exploring parties from commencement of the Colony to July 1832" (at p. 90 there is a small inserted page headed "2B" above the word "missing").
 - B.2) Entry in Vol. CO 18/10 stating that a copy of item "2B" was sent to the Royal Geographical Society by Robert William Hay, Under Secretary of Colonial Office, on 4 October 1832 (copy missing from the Royal Geographical Society archives).
- C) Colonial Office volume containing Stirling's report to the Colonial Office on Swan River exploration to July 1, 1832 (still classified, with restricted access, in 1999).
- D) Lord Fitzroy Somerset's original copy of the same letter (missing from his personal archives of Colonial Office letters deposited at the Gwent Records Office).
- E) The private journal for 1832 of Lord Howick (Colonial Office Under Secretary) (missing from collection of his personal journals and papers deposited in University of Durham Library).
- F) Prime Minister Grey's personal letters and official communications deposited in the Palace Green Library at Durham (nothing concerning Australian colonies in this collection).
- G.1) CO 18/14 Letter from Captain Irwin praising Robert Dale addressed to J.S. Lefevre Under Secretary of State. [also marked]; Copy to the Horse Guards [i.e. Lord Fitzroy Somerset]. This letter, the only relevant piece of correspondence located by this search, reads as follows:

Colonnade Hotel [London]. Feb 28, 1834.

Since my arrival in town from Western Australia having (while in attendance at the Colonial Office, given such information respecting that Colony and explanation of the initiatives I adopted while charged with administration of its government) as have been required by the Secretary of State, I feel myself called upon, before leaving town, to submit for his favorable notice, the important services to the colony by Lieut. Dale 63rd Regt. This officer, while attached to the Survey Department, discovered the country eastward of Darling's Range (considered the finest in the settlement) & subsequently conducted across the range the first settlers of the new district, with their carts & establishments.

Other expeditions of discovery in the Swan River and King George's Sound districts were likewise conducted by this officer, who has separately received from Governor Sir James Stirling an expression of approbation, and a notification that he had brought under the notice of His Majesty's Government the services he had rendered to the Colony.

Trusting that the account your having taken of Lieut. Dale's services will recommend him to your notice, and that you will be pleased to lay them before Mr. Secretary Stanley, I have the honor, to be, Sir your most obedient honorable servant. F.C.Irwin Captain 63rd Regt.

- G.2) CO 397/3 Lefevre received Irwin's letter on March 1st, 1834 and, as requested, sent a copy to Lord Fitzroy Somerset on March 5th, 1834 with the following cover note:

With reference to your Lordships letter of the 2nd December 1831 in reply to one of Mr Hay of the 25th November 1831, I am directed by Mr Secretary Stanley to transmit to you a copy of a letter from Captain Irwin, in which that officer bears testimony to the ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ services which Lieut. Dale of the 63rd Regiment rendered to the Government of Western Australia, & to request that you will submit this further application in behalf of Mr. Dale to the favourable consideration of the General Commanding in Chief.

I am sir --- John Lefvire. 5 March 1834.

As indicated above, a line and a half of text has been completely erased, the resulting blank space filled in with squiggles, perhaps correcting a copyist's error.

Conclusion

During several decades researching this topic, much has been learned but the existence of an 1832 expedition and its discovery of a Dutch settlement in central Australia remain unproven. After so much elapsed time, it may not be possible to discover more about the missing documents listed above, but they remain part of this intriguing mystery for the researcher to ponder.

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Major Les Hiddins, Australian Army, Ret, AM, who initiated this research in 1993 for his “Bush Tucker Man” TV series, has shared information from field observations in Australia, historical research in Australian and English libraries and archives, and from subject experts.

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Dr Andrew Cook, formerly Curator of Maps in the India Office Records, British Library, provided archival assistance researching the India Office Records in the British Library and the Colonial Office Records, National Archives, Kew.

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