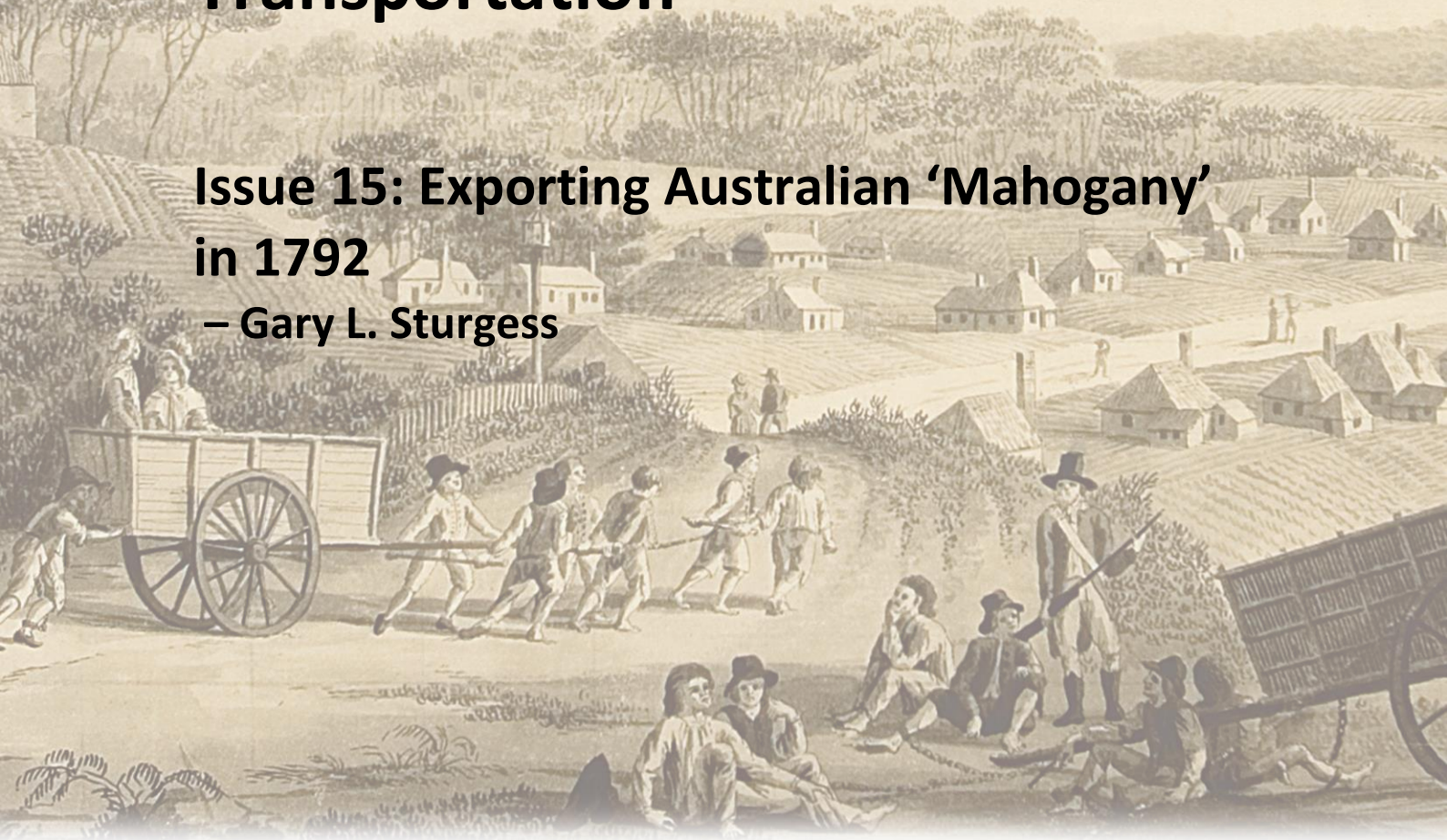


‘A Fine Passage’: Insights into Early Australian Convict Transportation

Issue 15: Exporting Australian ‘Mahogany’ in 1792

– Gary L. Sturgess



Summary

Having transported convicts to New South Wales as part of Australia’s Third Fleet, the Admiral Barrington sailed for Bombay (Mumbai) to take on board a cargo of cotton. We now know that when she arrived in the Makassar Strait – between Borneo and Celebes (Sulawesi) – in March 1792, she was carrying 200 tons of mahogany.

This newsletter explores the likely origin of the cargo, using recently-discovered documents in Pembrokeshire and at The Hague, among other sources. It concludes that almost certainly, the wood was taken on board at Port Jackson, making this one of the earliest exports from the then four year old British colony.

A periodic newsletter publishing new research into early Australian convict transportation.

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Two Hundred Tons of Mahogany

The *Admiral Barrington*, largest of the ten ships which made up Australia's Third Fleet, arrived off the west coast of India in December 1792, having taken almost a year to make her way from New South Wales. She was meant to take on a cargo of cotton at Bombay, but on the 18th of that month, she was captured by the Malvani, a sea-going people from the Konkan region along the coast between Goa and Bombay, whom the British regarded as pirates. While the crew would all be released, the ship was wrecked and had to be abandoned.

In May of the following year, the *Barrington's* Bombay agent submitted a claim to the government for compensation from Shivaji, the Raja of Kohlapur and notional ruler of the Malvani, who had recently signed a treaty with the British guaranteeing safe passage of their ships through these waters. The claim – for 179,364 rupees (around £4m in today's values) – included the cost of the ship, the cargo of cotton (which would now be sold at a substantial loss), personal belongings of the officers and crew, and a 'cargoe of timber 200 tons, consisting of mahogany, large slabs of gross timber, and knees', valued at 5,000 rupees.¹

The timber was clearly intended for sale in India, and the captain was carrying it in breach of his licence from the East India Company, which permitted him to take on a cargo of cotton at Bombay, on the strict condition that he did not otherwise engage in trade within the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Documents recently uncovered in the archives of the Dutch East India Company at The Hague reveal that the mahogany was already on board when the *Barrington* sailed into the Macassar Strait in late March or early April 1792.

Statements taken from former crew members in early June claimed that 'Malays' on the west coast of the island of Celebes (now Sulawesi) had told them that 'the ship with the "white lion" had been attacked by the pirates of Zolo, who murdered everybody and then set the ship alight; further relating that the ship was loaded with red wood'. There is no question that they were referring to the *Barrington*: her figurehead was a lion.²

This account was largely wrong – the *Barrington* had not been burned by ‘the pirates of Zolo’ – she made her way into Batavia, and from there sailed out into the Indian Ocean, to Trincomalee in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and then up the west coast of India – but it is clear from this story that her cargo of mahogany, a red wood, was already on board by the time she arrived at the entrance to the Macassar Strait.

The journal of the *Admiral Barrington* has not survived, and in trying to identify the source of this cargo, we must work backwards in time, ruling out those places where it could not possibly have been acquired. As Sherlock Holmes explained, when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

Melanesia

The *Admiral Barrington* and the *Queen*, another Third Fleet ship, had sailed from Norfolk Island on the 29th of January 1792. Their precise route is unknown, but according to the statement by the former crew members, around three weeks after leaving the island, they encountered a storm which broke the *Barrington*’s fore mast. The main mast was already in a bad way, and the captain decided they had no alternative but to take the ship into Batavia for repairs. The *Queen* accompanied her to ensure that she arrived.

On leaving Norfolk Island, they would have sailed north through the Solomon Islands, and based on the journal of the *Alexander*, a First Fleet ship which sailed through the Macassar Strait in 1788, there was nowhere in the islands of Melanesia where they could have safely landed and harvested 200 tons of hardwood. And once the mast had been broken, they would not have risked any diversion or delay.

The Macassar Strait

For this same reason, it is unlikely that the *Barrington* would have touched at one of the primitive landing places along the Macassar Strait and taken on board a cargo of hardwood. Some of her former crew members had refused to cooperate with the ship’s master, and were sent ashore in an armed boat ‘on the Mandhar shore’, almost certainly Cape Mandar, half way down the west coast of Celebes. It is highly improbable that the timber was purchased there.

Norfolk Island

The convict settlement on Norfolk Island had been shipping timber to the main settlement at Port Jackson since July 1788, three months after the first European settlers arrived on the island, but this was the legendary Norfolk Pine, a soft wood. There were hardwoods, including one that was said to bear 'a great resemblance to mahog^{any} with long narrow leaves, cuts very hard & is of a very fine close grain'. This tree exuded a red gum when cut, but they were reported to be no more than five inches through.³

In any case, there is also no evidence in the Lieutenant Governor's journal or letterbook that timber was sent on board the *Barrington* or the *Queen* in the eight days they were anchored off shore. The island had no safe harbour, and loading and unloading ships was fraught with danger. The *Sirius* had been wrecked there in March 1790, and a number of men and women had drowned making their way to and from visiting ships. The *Queen* was occupied unloading her passengers and cargo until the day before they sailed, and the *Barrington* was struck by a strong gale which sprung her fore mast.

Port Jackson

This leaves Port Jackson as the only possible source of the cargo. A wood that would come to be known as 'mahogany' or 'red mahogany' (*Eucalyptus resinifera*) had been identified at Broken Bay to the north of Port Jackson as early as June 1788: it was described by the surgeon John White as a red gum which produced an astringent resin which had medical uses. There was another eucalypt growing closer to the settlement which also produced a red gum, and it seems that it was this second tree which the settlers had found was useless for building. One of the officers said of this tree: 'when it is Sawed it is found good for no one purpose but the fire'. And Governor Phillip wrote:

*'The wood is heavy and fine grained, but being much intersected by the channels containing the gum, splits and warps in such a manner as soon to become entirely useless; especially when worked up, as necessity at first occasioned it to be, without having been properly seasoned.'*⁴

The earliest known reference to the Australian hardwood known as mahogany is a journal entry by David Collins, the Governor's official secretary, in March 1795. Edward McClellan, the master of the *Experiment*, had sent a crew to the Hawkesbury, where they had collected 60 large logs of a tree they called cedar, and purchased 'some of the mahogany of this country'. (This wood has subsequently been identified as *Eucalyptus resinifera*.)⁵

It would seem that timber-getters were harvesting the red mahogany by the summer of 1794. They were almost certainly former convicts, but we do not know who they were, where they were obtaining the wood, or how long they had been engaged in this business. The question is whether some of these trees might have been felled and sawn into slabs three years earlier, and sold to the master of the *Barrington*.⁶

Eucalyptus resinifera did not grow in the immediate vicinity of Sydney Cove or Parramatta. A third settlement to the west of Parramatta known as Toongabbie was opened in October 1791, around the same time that the *Barrington* arrived in Sydney Cove, and while she was there, hundreds of convict labourers were sent out to clear the vegetation so that maize could be planted. There were large hardwoods at Toongabbie, but with the intense focus on cultivation, these would have been dragged to one side and burned. In principle, some of these logs might have been taken down river to the *Admiral Barrington*, but Toongabbie was some four or five miles west of the Parramatta wharf, the road was rudimentary, and there were no beasts of burden in the colony to haul them.

In reminiscences of these early months at Toongabbie, one of the convicts later recalled: 'Many a time have I been yoked like a bullock with twenty or thirty others to drag along timber'. Another who had just arrived on the *Barrington* said: '... we were yoked to draw timber, twenty-five in gang. The sticks were six feet long; six men abreast. We held the stick behind us, and dragged with our hands.'⁷ The colony was on short rations at this time and the settlement was being ravaged by disease, so it is not plausible that 200 tons of mahogany could have made its way from Toongabbie to the Parramatta wharf.

John Mitchenson, who had recently taken command of the *Barrington*, had reason to seek out hardwood that could be shipped to India for sale. Prior to the departure of the fleet from England, Anthony Calvert, the managing partner of

the firm which owned six of the Third Fleet ships (including the *Barrington* and the *Queen*), had asked the Home Office for permission to carry away local timber from NSW.⁸ No reply has been found, but given that this would have been a breach of the East India Company's monopoly, it is highly unlikely that permission was granted. However, it is likely that Calvert mentioned the wood in his personal instructions to the masters of his ships: we know that his instructions did refer to the sale of an illicit cargo of metal which Calvert's ships were carrying out to India from England.

Eucalyptus resinifera grew in the bushland which lay to the south-west of the settlement at Sydney Cove – the area today described as Sydney's inner west – but these districts had not yet been opened to settlement, and there was no easy way for the lumber to be moved down to the harbour. However, the turpentine-ironbark forest where the red mahogany grew, came down to the harbour at a number of places on the north shore, and Mitchenson might have sent boats to fell some of the trees close to the water's edge and cut them into rough slabs that could be shipped on board.⁹

Alternatively, some enterprising ex-convicts might have already been logging these hardwoods, for use in the gentlemen's houses then being built at Sydney Cove and Parramatta. By November-December 1791, there were a number of experienced sawyers in the colony who had served their time and would have been looking for ways of commercialising their skills. And in December of that year, the *Gorgon* carried home a plank 'of extraordinary hardness' which in colour resembled mahogany.¹⁰

There is no mention of this in any of the surviving records. Exporting this timber was a breach of the Company's licence, so it is understandable that Mitchenson might not have wanted to highlight it, but given that this was one of the colony's earliest exports, it is surprising that none of the officers and gentlemen said anything about it. At the very same time, they were excitedly writing home about the potential for a whale fishery off the coast.

So while we cannot be certain that this was the source of the mahogany on the *Admiral Barrington*, there is simply nowhere else in the course of her voyage where she might have obtained it.

Australia's Earliest Exports?

The earliest commercial exports from the new colony were seeds of native Australian plants sent back with First Fleet ships. Governor Phillip wrote to Sir Joseph Banks in September 1788 that the man he had employed for three months to collect seeds had 'sold them to the people belonging to the Transport', clearly for commercial sale in England.¹¹ Following the return of Cook's first expedition, and the reports of the botanist Joseph Banks, London's seedsmen had shown a great deal of interest in the flora of New South Wales. The most notable of these was James Lee, who was close to Banks and the botanists at Kew.

Lee published a pamphlet, 'Rules for Collecting and Preserving Seed from Botany Bay', which has been dated to 1787 (although it might have been published a year or two later). However, the first edition of *The Voyage of Governor Phillip*, published in London in 1789, shortly after the return of the First Fleet ships, included a notice that plants from Botany Bay were for sale at 'the nursery gardens of that eminent and learned botanist, Mr Lee, of Hammersmith'.¹²

The first exports of any scale came with the Third Fleet. The *Britannia* took the first whale off the NSW coast on the 26th of October 1791, but she did not sail for the west coast of South America until late January. The *Barrington* sailed from Port Jackson on the 5th of January, several weeks ahead of the *Britannia*. But the *Mary Ann*, a Third Fleet whaler also owned by Camden, Calvert & King, collected 30 barrels of oil from five whales in late November, returning to port on the 3rd of December and sailing for South America on the 28th, a week ahead of the *Barrington*.

There is a question as to whether whales caught off the coast should be counted as an Australian export, since the flesh was boiled down at sea. Port Jackson was nothing more than a base for the refreshment of ship and crew. The mahogany, on the other hand, was taken from the shores of Port Jackson and cut into slabs by local sawyers. It is debatable, then, whether oil or mahogany was first, but in either case, Australian hardwood was one of colonial Australia's earliest exports.

Research

I discovered the claim for the *Barrington* and her cargo in John Tasker's personal papers some years ago at the Pembrokeshire Record Office after a wide search for Calvert's agents. The statements given by her crew members were recently found in the vast collection of the Dutch East India Company held at the Netherlands National Archives at The Hague, now available online, but for the present, still difficult to search.

The image on the cover page is by the Italian artist Fernando Brambila, and shows carts drawn by men (and, it seems, boys) at Parramatta in March-April 1793 – Fernando Brambila, 'Vista de la Colonia de Paramata en la Nuova Gales Meridional', La Cátedra interinstitucional de Historia Naval (Armada Española-Universidad de Murcia).

My thanks to Michael Flynn for (once again) pushing back at my hypotheses and forcing me to drill deeper into the sources. This is a second edition of this newsletter, published immediately after the first, responding to questions and comments from readers.

¹ John Tasker to Major General Robert Abercromby, 10 May 1793, Tasker Archives, Pembrokeshire Record Office, D/TE/1.

² 'Account given by Willem Jansz. . . and Thomas Kratten. . .', 6 June 1792, Archives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), 1692-1795, Netherlands National Archives, HaNA 1.04.02 3959/0351.

³ Henry Waterhouse to his father, William Waterhouse. 20 February 1789, Letters Written by Henry Waterhouse to his father, 1788-1801; and other papers, 1782-1803, State Library of NSW (hereafter SLNSW) Safe 1/187

⁴ John White, *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales* [1790], (ed. Alex H. Chisholm), Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1962, pp. 145-146, 158, 175-177; James Campbell to Lord Ducie, 12 July 1788, State Library of NSW, ML MSS 5366; Anon., *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay*, 1st ed., London: John Stockdale, 1789, pp. 59-60.

On the 'two very different sorts of trees' that produced the red gum, see Denis Considen to Anthony Hamilton, 18 November 1788, Banks Archive, SLNSW, Series 23.26. See also Jocelyn M. Powell, 'Early Impressions of the Vegetation of the Sydney Region: Exportation and Plant Use by the First Fleet Officers', in P.S. Short (ed.), *History of Systematic Botany in Australasia, Proceedings of a Symposium Held at the University of Melbourne, 25-27 May 1988*, South Yarra: Australian Systematic Botany Society, pp. 87-96 at p. 94.

⁵ David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales* [1798], Sydney: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1973, Vol. 1, p. 345.

⁶ Several readers have asked whether this wood might not have been too hard for the axes and saws available in the settlement in 1791-92. There is no question that the red mahogany was being logged by December 1794, when the technology was unchanged. A settler at Toongabbie in late 1792 wrote that the hardwood there 'often bids defiance to the best English saws and axes', but whether or not they processed the timber, they still had to fell these trees in order to cultivate the land – Letter from a Gentleman at Toongabbie, 30 November 1792, *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 4 July 1793, p. 4.

⁷ Statements of Joseph Smith and Henry Hale, extracted from the MSS., 'Voluntary Statements of the People of New South Wales, collected by Mrs. Chisholm', published in Samuel Sidney, *The Three Colonies of Australia*, London: Ingram, Cooke & Co., 1853, pp. 41-43.

⁸ Anthony Calvert to Evan Nepean, 18 February 1791, UK National Archives, CO201/6/248.

⁹ D. Benson and J. Howell, *Taken for Granted: The Bushland of Sydney and its Suburbs*, Sydney: Kangaroo Press, 1990.

¹⁰ *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 2 August 1792, p.2. It is unknown whether this plank came from Norfolk Island or Port Jackson.

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¹¹ Arthur Phillip to Sir Joseph Banks, 26 September 1788, Neil Chambers (ed.), *The Indian and Pacific Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks*, London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009, Vol. 2, pp. 338-339

¹² Anon, *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay*, 1st ed., London: John Stockdale, 1789, pp. 294-295.