

INTO THE UNKNOWN

Some young men are born to challenge boundaries; to climb the highest mountain, sail distant oceans, explore unknown lands, cross the icy polar wastes, trek arid deserts and discover limestone caves deep beneath the known surface land. Matthew Flinders was such a man, explorer, navigator and expert cartographer. He honed his skills on board under guidance of the irascible Captain Bligh in the vastness of the Pacific, its scattered islands and uncharted coast-lines.

Flinders set his goal to explore the coast of recently settled New South Wales to fill in the gaps, detail and possibly over-looked features from Captain Cook's discoveries. Was it a large island, an archipelago of islands, part of the fabled continent, the Great South Land, or part of New Holland so named by Dutch navigators? Was there an inland sea? Flinders embarked on a long voyage of discovery to answer these questions.

The sails thrummed, drum tight in the brisk wind as the *Investigator* ploughed her way across a choppy sea, wind-blown spume whipped white from the dark crests. A rocky shore line to the port side offered no harbour nor safe refuge. From a mountain range, blue in the distance, came the unmistakable tang of eucalyptus mixed with the salt air, and intermittently with the stench of rotting sea weed surging against the cliffs.

A wisp of smoke rose from a headland before dissipating above. With his eye-glass Captain Flinders could faintly make out the forms of people. Probably black, naked with spears, and yellow dingo dogs.

The ship was joined by a school of dolphins, silver-grey, cheerful and streamlined, cavorting, diving or racing ahead on the pressure wave under the bowsprit. Then diving deep only to reappear along-side, rolling, a fluke in the air, to grin at the sailors by the rail. Was that a wink? Back to bold, the irrepressible dolphins led the way.

The *Investigator* rode the waves, slowing as she rose to the crest, and lurching into the troughs in a long and slow metronomic rhythm. The helmsman held her steady, making minor

adjustments to prevent the friction of the hull against the power of the wind in the sails slowing her in the troughs.

The Captain stood in the stern, his hand on the rope attached to a small hand-hewn log trailing behind like an obedient dog or a hooked fish. Five knots on the line were visible above water, sometimes more, sometimes less, but concluding five was a fair average. As he strode forward he saw the man at the helm sweep the black and white cat off the log book to the deck. “Git below, ya furry-fiend!” He growled.

“Eh Mate! That’s a bit harsh”, the Captain responded “Trim is as much part of the crew as anybody else!”

“Yair mebbe so, but he was asleep on the job. He shoulda be ‘tween decks catchin’ rats and mouses”.

Trim’s arching back and bristling erect tail made his opinion obvious as he stalked away.

“Any sailor of the salt should know a ship cat’s work is at night when the rats and mice come out to plunder stores”.

Everybody aboard knew Matthew Flinders loved Trim the Cat, one of the world’s most travelled felines into the unknown.

Captain Matthew Flinders wrote in the ship’s log:

1700 hrs. Wind SSE sea moderate. Rocky coast to W continues. Speed 5 knots

Waves chattered along the hull, occasionally splashing aboard, ship timbers creaked to a steady rhythm, masts and yard arms groaned under load, sails and rigging sang in tension with the wind. Everything just as it should be. Captain and crew relaxed; a sound and well run ship.

“Ahoy below!” A shout from the crow’s nest atop the main mast. “Breakers, rocks dead ahead! Four cable lengths!”

“Hard down to starb’d! Make seaway!” The Captain commanded the helmsman.

As the ship veered to starboard the wind was lost from her sails, they luffed, slapping and banging like a giant, ungainly pelican attempting flight from a rough and stormy sea. The sailors

knew their the ropes and captain. They scrambled into the rigging, and the deck crew to haul on the capstans and deck cleats even before their captain and mate shouted orders. As momentum was lost, with no forward pressure on the rudder, she no longer answered to the helm. The ship drifted helplessly, at the mercy of the wind and sea towards looming death.

With every hand on deck or in the rigging, they worked frantically until the sails once again filled and the ship responded to control. The men in the rigging were close enough to look straight down into the ugly maw of the suck and draw of foaming waves clawing at black rocks as the ship took up the wind and heeled her way past with no room to spare. There would have been no hope of rescue if they had fallen victim to that savage and brutal hazard.

Memories of Flinder's best friend, George Bass, weighed heavily on all their minds. Lost in the immensity of the Pacific Ocean, sunk, wrecked or eaten by cannibals, nobody knew. Neither he nor his crew were ever seen or heard from again. Such had so nearly been their own fate.

"It will soon be dark," Matthew Flinders told his men. "We need to make sea room where we'll be safe for the night." To the man at the helm he called, "Hold that course, 30 degrees nor-nor-east until we are safe from the coast and any further risk of rocks, coral reefs and shoals."

"Matt, Matt, come now it will be dark soon and the tide is coming in. Your mother will have dinner ready". The boy picked up his model ship and waded ashore, clambering onto the rocky tidal shelf.

He walked beside his aunt as they made their way up the hill, carefully cradling the toy ship in his arms to avoid crushing the rigging and square rigged sails.

"I heard a lot of talking and shouting down there," his aunt said "What was going on?"

"I was Captain Matthew Flinders. He was a famous navigator and explorer, he named Australia. We learned about him at school. He is my hero!"

"And you share his name, too, Matthew!"

"Yep!"

