

# Letter to Robert Gouger

Charles Mann

6 March 1838

## Introduction

This letter was written by Charles Mann, the former Advocate General, when he visited Van Dieman's Land on legal business in 1838. He was on the way to Hobart in the *John Pirie* when she was stranded at Encounter Bay by the gale of 21 December 1837. He continued to Hobart on the *John Pirie* on 8 January 1838, returning to Adelaide in April.

Robert Gouger was in Hobart at the time on his way to London to complain about his dismissal as Colonial Secretary by Governor Hindmarsh. He included the letter in his *South Australia in 1837; in a series of letters: With a postscript as to 1838*, published by Harvey and Darton, Gracechurch Street, London, 1838.

## Text

Hobart Town, 6th March, 1838.

My dear Gouger,

I have twice traversed the country which intervenes between Adelaide and Encounter Bay. My first visit was occasioned by the inquiries which Driscoll's death rendered necessary; and for about ten days I was, as advocate-general, the guest of the late Captain Blenkinsopp. This took place in August last, and consequently during the winter solstice. In the latter end of December (our summer season) the company's schooner, the *John Pirie*, on board of which I was then a passenger, anchored in the bay. The dreadful storm which drove the *Pirie* on shore, and wrecked the *Solway*, is of a date too recent to require any detail or comment; I mention it only to show that my visits have taken place at seasons which enable me to speak with confidence of the prevailing winds to which the bay is subject. The bay itself is bounded, westerly, by a lofty bluff or promontory of land, stretching out to seaward nearly at right-angle with the coast, and forming a substantial protection for vessels anchored in a cove to its N.W., and termed Rosetta Cove. About two ships, if moored fore and aft, may, during the winter season, lie here in great safety. The prevailing winds at this period of the year, are from the westward of south to the N.W. In the summer season, violent gales from the S.S.E. to the eastward must be expected and even Rosetta Cove is not then altogether protected. At the distance of a mile and a quarter from the Bluff, and bearing from it about northeasterly, is a rocky island of small dimension. From this island a dangerous reef runs towards the shore, and it is connected in the same manner with the Seal Rock, a small island distant about two miles and a half from it, and bearing about E. by S. At the termination of the Bluff shoreward the South Australian Company have, on a gentle acclivity of land, the buildings of their whaling establishment. From this place the ground slopes gradually down to the sea, and a small and sandy plain, bounded inland by an intricate and hilly country, at a distance varying from a mile to a quarter of a mile, forms the sea-coast easterly

from the Bluff, up to a small bar river which runs into the sea, near Mootaparinga. About four miles easterly from the Bluff, is the whaling establishment of the late Captain Blenkinsopp, and about equidistant between these locations, lies a large island, called Granite Island. This island is distant from the shore about a quarter of a mile; it is not exactly at right-angles with the coast, but lies in a slight degree diagonally, so as to form a fair protection against winds, varying from the N.W. to the S.S.W. The extreme length of the island is, I should think, considerably less than half a mile. From the seaward extremity, looking inland there is deep water, and this continues to some shears erected by the late Captain Blenkinsopp, half-way between the extreme points of the island. From the shears the water shoals rapidly, and in the deep-water I do not imagine that more than four ships could at any time lie safely; as it is requisite to keep close in to the island. The Seal rock is distant from Granite Island about half a mile, and a reef of rocks extends from the one to the other. This reef forms a valuable breakwater, when the wind is blowing from the N.W. and from thence, for about six points southerly. In fact, it is in this reef which makes Granite Island a tolerable roadstead during the winter months. Even during that period, however, gales often blow from the shore with such violence as to render the place untenable. During a gale of this nature, which occurred in July last, the Francis Freeling was driven from her anchorage in the direction of the Seal Rock. Providentially the wind suddenly subsided at the very moment when all hope was lost, and the crew were about to abandon her. The Captain of this ship soon after left the bay, on the express ground of the want of safety of the roadstead. The only ships which have continued at this anchorage for any length of time are the Hind brig, Captain Blenkinsopp, and the American ship, the Statesman, Captain Coffin. These vessels were in the bay from the latter end of February to the middle of September; and consequently, during the most favourable portion of the year—the winter season. Captain Blenkinsopp, in the statement of his experience of Granite Island, always spoke of it as forming a fair roadstead for about four ships, during the whaling or winter season; but at the same time, he dwelt with strong emphasis on the necessity of an extra supply of good ground-tackle. Captain Coffin's opinion was less favourable, and he frequently complained loudly of the anchorage; and I am convinced that nothing but the excellence of the spot for whaling would have induced him to have continued there an hour. Whilst lying at this anchorage the Statesman broke the flukes of her anchor three times. During my stay at Captain Blenkinsopp's, in August, the wind generally blew off shore, or from the N.W. or S.W. The latter winds were from seaward; and when they prevail the surf is tremendous, and the noise of it literally deafening. On many occasions during my stay, the surf was so heavy, as, in my opinion, to have rendered the landing of goods impossible, and the beaching of a boat dangerous.

I have hitherto spoken of Granite Island during the winter season. In the summer, I should deem it a most dangerous spot; violent gales from the S.E. to the eastward are then of frequent occurrence. As an instance, on the 10th of December ult. the South Australian, a noble vessel, belonging to the South Australian Company was driven on shore by a gale of terrific violence from the S.E. and utterly wrecked. On the 21st of the same month, the Pirie, and the Solway, were wrecked by a violent gale from the S.S.E. The scene which I then witnessed can never be lightly erased from my memory. You know I am somewhat venturous on the water, and no ordinary sea would excite my attention; on this occasion, however, I was literally awed. From the Bluff to the nearest island, from thence to the shore, and again to the Seal Rock and Granite Island, there was one mass of whitened foam. The heavy roll of the sea was so tremendous that it was frequently impossible, from the decks of the Pirie, although lying near the Solway, to see the lower masts of that vessel. Again and again, the sea made a clean breach of the deck of the Pirie. It is a marvel to me, that this beautiful little vessel did not founder; and still more that she held on so long. I shall never forget the moment when she parted; I had landed at twelve o'clock with Captain and Mrs. Duff. From this time I watched the Pirie with intense anxiety. A little before three the gale had augmented till it was nearly a hurricane; her danger was so apparent, that I had induced Mr. Harper, the chief mate of the South Australian, and some whalers to come with me, in order that we might man and put off a whaleboat from Rosetta Cove. Mr. Harper, several of the whalers, and myself, were running from the company's station towards the cove, with the purpose of putting off, when a tremendous wave literally gulphed the Pirie. For a moment, I lost sight of her hull, and as she rose, I saw that the cables had parted—all seemed lost, as she drifted bodily on to the near island, over which the surf was then breaking with terrific violence. Captain Martin had, however, been long prepared for this event. and to his coolness and seamanlike intrepidity the safety of the vessel and crew are to be attributed. Just as I expected to see the Pirie crushed to atoms, her jib was hoisted, she wore, and forged over the reef within a few yards of the

island. Such is the scene I witnessed, and I have given it at some length, because I think it will put beyond a doubt the fallacy which would make of Rosetta Cove or of Granite Island safe harbours, or even a secure roadstead during the prevalence of winds like these. Captains Martin and McFarlane are both decidedly of opinion that the anchorage to the eastward of Granite Island is open to all winds from the S.S.E. to the east; I concur with them in that opinion. I am sure that no one who witnessed the awful scene which I have just described would at such a moment have been mad enough to have deemed that anchorage a place of safety.

You have frequently questioned me as to the entrance of the Murray, and my opinion of its capabilities. Your enquiries I will now endeavour to satisfy. During my stay at Captain Blenkinsopp's in August, I frequently expressed my earnest desire to explore the seaward entrance to the Murray. At my urgent request Blenkinsopp gave me the use of a whaleboat, and accompanied by Mr. Wyatt I started a land expedition for the purpose of exploring landward the embouchure of Lake Alexandrina. A slight sketch of the coast to the eastward of the Mootaparinga river will, I think, be useful. From the river easterly, the land rises abruptly and for about four miles the shore presents a bold and rocky aspect, but at this distance it again sinks to a sandy level, winding round southerly. From this point there is a low sandy sea-coast, completely open to the southern ocean. The whale-boat sailed from the station of Captain Blenkinsopp till we neared this shore, and we then pulled for about three miles towards the Murray. The wind was about N.N.W., and it was far from blowing freshly, yet I could trace an immense surf running upwards of from six to eight feet in height along the whole coast as far as the eye could reach. At from four to five miles distant the entrance to the Murray is rendered strikingly obvious by an immense wall of foam, which appears literally to stretch directly athwart the entrance. I cannot think, from contrasting it with the shore-surf, that it could have been less than from ten to twelve feet in height, and this was the opinion of the men with me in the boat. This entrance is, I should say, more than a quarter of a mile in breadth. At a distance of four miles the men became alarmed, and remonstrated, but I induced them to continue their course. When upwards of two miles from the river an immense roller turned the boat on her beam-ends. On looking along the interval from this spot to the Murray, I could see repeated lines of rollers rising and breaking, and I became convinced that it would be impossible to effect the desired object, and that any further perseverance would uselessly risk the lives of the men. I therefore reluctantly gave the signal of retreat. The land-party were more successful, and Captain Blenkinsopp ascertained that on the south eastern or right hand side of the entrance there was a channel of very deep water; this was rendered almost certain by the difference in the number and the force of the rollers on the respective sides. On the left eleven were counted, on the right three only were perceptible. Hence Captain Blenkinsopp was of opinion that if the whale-boat had passed the mouth of the river for about a mile and three quarters she might, by pulling close in shore, have effected a passage into the river. This scheme he subsequently put in practice, how unsuccessfully the melancholy death of Sir John Jeffcott, of himself and two of his boat's crew, may prove. A narrative of this lamentable affair, as gathered from two of the surviving seamen and from some extracts of Captain Blenkinsopp's diary, will comprise the substance of our present knowledge of the entrance to the lake. On Monday the 2nd December last, Captain Blenkinsopp dispatched a whale-boat to the Murray; the men were directed to pass the south-east or right hand side of the embouchure for the space of a mile, and then to pull up towards the entrance of the Murray, keeping close in shore: following these orders the boatmen landed on the south-eastern beach, considerably below the mouth of the river. There was scarcely any wind, and the weather was very favourable; notwithstanding this, however, the surf was running on the beach upwards of six feet in height as far as the eye could distinguish the line of shore. Here it became apparent to the men that it was impossible to pull against the current, they therefore determined to track the boat on. This they effected, some of the men keeping out to seaward in order to prevent the surf from beaching the boat, whilst the rest tracked her. After great labour and considerable danger they passed into the river, and when in smooth water they stood over to the western side, where they were joined by the land-party. The entrance once passed, the embouchure to the lake is reported to present a calm and beautiful sheet of water, varying in depth from four to three and a half and three fathoms. On the south-eastern side it is said to carry this depth of water nearly up to the lake. The current, however, is fearfully rapid, and the boatmen who survived are of one opinion in respect to the impossibility of any vessel making a passage against the united force of the current and the immense sweep of rollers which rise and break for the distance of a mile and a half to two miles before the entrance to the river is attained. From the Monday, the day on which the expedition started, to the following Sunday,

the party were engaged in exploring the embouchure, and they reached and encamped upon the bank which forms the entrance of Lake Alexandrina. On Sunday morning Sir John W. Jeffcott, the judge of the supreme court, joined the party, and unhappily agreed to accompany Captain Blenkinsopp on his return in the whale-boat. On Monday morning, the 12th December ultimo, Captain Blenkinsopp and Sir John W. Jeffcott put off in the boat, and after inspecting the state of the rollers determined to venture through them. The boat had passed several rollers, and, according to the statement of Mills one of the survivors, had run out nearly three quarters of a mile from the entrance, when a roller of fearful magnitude turned the boat on her beam-ends, and nearly filled her. She rose, however, and the judge becoming alarmed, exclaimed, "The Lord have mercy on our souls, we shall be all drowned!" He had scarcely spoken before a short sea turned the head of the boat round, and a roller immediately following, she foundered. Captain Blenkinsopp clung to the boat, but was soon washed off. Sir John Jeffcott seized one end of an oar to which Mill was also clinging. In about three minutes Sir John relinquished his grasp, sunk, rose for a few moments, grasped at a box floating near him, missed it, and finally disappeared. Two of the men were drowned, and the others reached the shore, and, when utterly exhausted, were saved by the friendly aid of the natives. I have now given you the result of my visit to Encounter Bay, and of the knowledge which I have acquired with regard to the embouchure and Lake Alexandrina. With reference to the latter I may add, that the problem of the existence of another entrance is at once and for ever set at rest. The width of the embouchure, the rapidity of the current on the south-eastern side of the stream, and the depth of water which it carries from the lake when viewed in connexion with the necessary allowance to be made for an evaporating surface so large as Lake Alexandrina, all tend to strengthen such a conviction. As to Granite Island or Rosetta Cove, useful as they are and will be to a limited extent during the whaling season, it is my opinion that to say they are, or ever could be, made good and secure harbours is a kind of mental hallucination little short of Midsummer madness.

With many earnest wishes that you may have a speedy voyage, believe me to be,

My dear Gouger,  
Your very faithfully,  
Charles Mann