

Letter to J.C. Mathews

William Wyatt

Introduction

This letter to Joseph Clements Mathews was published in *The South Australian Record* of 8 August 1838. Mathews married William Wyatt's sister Mary in 1831.

Preface

TO THE EDITOR OF THE 'SOUTH AUSTRALIAN RECORD.'

Sir,—Your invaluable paper having increased so much in circulation in this neighbourhood since its first introduction, and being desirous of patronising so useful a publication, it gives me great pleasure in sending the following extracts of an 'Expedition into the Interior of South Australia,' by my much-esteemed friend and brother-in-law, Mr Wyatt, who holds the responsible situation of "Protector of Aborigines" in the colony. As all your readers must be convinced that your sole object in publishing the 'RECORD' is with a view, in the first place, of benefiting the operative community of our country, and, secondly, those of our friends who have left the shores of England for South Australia, your motives are worthy of the highest commendation, and your valuable paper should be as extensively diffused as the limits of our country may reach.

With this view, Sir, I send you this narrative of my friend's Expedition, in addition to the letter sent a few days ago, which probably will be read with interest by the friends of South Australia.

Yours truly,
J. C. MATHEWS

Hooe House, near Plymouth,
2nd of August, 1838

Text

And now for a little news concerning myself. The Governor appointed me, on 3rd of August [1837], 'Protector of the Aborigines;' this, with my appointment of 'Honorary Colonial Naturalist,' is just the thing to please me, and I assure you that my black children (for they call me 'Ichenle' Father) interest me beyond description; they are extremely teachable, and you would feel highly amused to see Julia teaching some of the women to sew up rents in their garments, which in many instances are shirts which they receive from the colonists. I have already acquired a considerable number of word in their language, and can make myself understood by them without much difficulty. On the 5th of September I started from Adelaide for Encounter Bay, in company with Mr Mann, the Attorney-General, and Mr Powys, with my interpreter, Cooper, who has been some years in Kangaroo island, and a man to

take care of the horses. On our way we picked up a family of natives belonging to a well-known and excellent man, commonly called Oakaperinga Jack, and they went the remainder of the journey with us. The object of our journey was to inquire into the particulars of a murder committed by a native on the person of a white man, a whaler. It is my duty to examine into all circumstances which may affect the well-being of the Aborigines, so that they may have the same justice done to them as the colonists, and for this purpose the Attorney-General and myself were directed to proceed to the *South Australian*, then lying in Rosetta Harbour, Encounter Bay, to see the prisoner, witnesses, &c., he to prosecute, I to defend the poor native. It gives me much pleasure to be enabled to tell you that the murdered man's improper conduct to the two wives of the native, on their way from Encounter Bay to Adelaide, appears to have been the sole cause of the murder; the prisoner has lately been brought round to Kangaroo Island, and will soon, with the witnesses, be conducted here for trial. I have only to regret that I have neither time nor space to insert my journal of this expedition, as I know it would much interest, inform, and amuse you; but I must content myself with giving you a sketch of it. We have three horses, one of each was intended for Mr Mann and myself, but we found our baggage was too much for the third, and consequently divided it between two, and I rode the other most of the journey. Sundry delays prevented our leaving Adelaide until nearly two, and we assumed a ludicrous appearance on commencing our march. I bore on my back a knapsack and canteen, lent me by Mr Jacob, a survey officer, and a large package of bedding in a wallabee (small kangaroo) rug was fastened to the saddle. On passing the first stream the saddle girths of our sumpter-horse broke with the effort of getting up the bank, and all our provisions and whatever bedding was not on my horse were precipitated into the stream, so that we were detained some time, and only reached a small river, on whose banks we bivouaced for the night, about eight or ten miles from home, and near one of the company's sheep stations, at which we saw about 1,000 sheep. The tent under which Mr Mann and I slept was nothing more than a double-sized blanket thrown over a pole between two bushes; the rest of the party bushed it in true colonial style.

Sept. 6—Left Weta-wertunga after breakfasting, fell in with Jack and his family above-mentioned, passed Oakaperinga or Field's River, a very beautiful stream, and put up for the night on the farther side of a large swamp, in the district called by the natives Olorilla Rottiakinga. In the course of the day had a magnificent view of the gulf, sea-coast, hills, and plains.

7th—Crossed a noble forest of gum trees, &c., traversed the extensive large hills, one of which was so steep and long, nearly half a mile, that we had to stop twice in the descent, and bivouaced at Missunga in a bush-hut, made on a former occasion by Cooper, under a fallen tree. Here we were visited by forty natives, one-third women, and the rest fine athletic men, richly bedaubed with red ochre and whale blubber from the crown to the waist. They gave us a grand corrobory, and I gave each of them a handful of biscuit.

8th.—Traversed several very rich meadows and nearly ten miles of boggy swamp, almost the only bad land we fell in with during the journey. At the top of a series of hills at the head of Encounter Bay, we had a magnificent view of it with the surrounding country, and a lovely vale, eight miles long by from one to four broad, with a very serpentine stream running through it and terminating in the bay; altogether one of the finest views I have ever beheld of the kind. We were received at Captain Blenkinsop's fishery in the most hospitable manner, and sat down to a capital dinner, tea, and supper, in one.

9th.—All the morning a strong gale. In the afternoon crossed a small river, called Moo-oola, and went to the Company's fishery, about four miles from Captain B.'s; were taken on board the *South Australian*, lying in Rosetta Harbour, and made the necessary examinations.

10th.—Wandered about the neighbourhood of Encounter Bay, examining the numerous remains of skeletons of the whales killed during the season, lying on the beach with huge masses of flesh, &c., looking like large rocks, in various stages of decomposition.

11th.—Saw the process of 'cutting in' a whale. A cut is made all round the body, through the blubber, varying from ten to twenty inches thick, and then another six feet below it. By means of another cut along the back and a hole made through the blubber, a rope is inserted forming a loop, and this

is fixed to the tackle from the main-yard, so that while the mass is separated from the body it is at the same time hoisted on board, and the huge carcass rolls round in the water, so as to make one complete revolution until the band is entirely disunited; this is called a blanket piece, the blubber from the other parts is then taken off in a similar way; the whale lies on its back, and the tongue and an immense layer of blubber outside are cut off from the under-jaws, the blubber being taken on board, and the tongue towed to the 'try-works,' on shore, where the man, called the 'tonguer,' takes charge of it to extract its oil; this enormous organ is bigger than the carcass of a bullock, and when it is removed from the mouth there is an excellent view of the layers of whalebone emerging from the gums and palate.

12th.—This morning Captain B. and Mr Powys, and myself, with our attendants and some natives, set out for the inlet to Lake Alexandrina by land, while Mr Mann went with two whale-boats to attempt entering the inlet from the sea; this they could not affect; for the great extent of beach is washed by immense rollers, reaching from two to three miles from the shore, varying in number from six to twelve, and so regular that they can be easily counted with their lofty ridges of foam. Our journey was about fifteen miles to the inlet, and in the way we fell in with a party of the Murray natives, 60 [?] adults, besides children, and several parties of from 12 to 20. We coasted for about seven miles, after reaching the inlet, by crossing the sand-hills to the beach, and at length came to the embouchure of the inlet, which we skirted, and then followed its margin seven miles towards the lake. Just above the entrance we saw six or eight natives who had swum across the channel, towing their wives or children, or rather pushing them before, on a raft of timber and reeds; they seemed much astonished at our horses. On our return, by the clouded light of the full moon, for the most part keeping the beach, we passed two fires on the high-coast land, and suddenly heard a tremendous yell, which for some time completely drowned the mighty roar of the breakers. This came from an assemblage of natives we had fallen in with during the day, with those who had accompanied us from Encounter Bay part the distance, amounting to upwards of 100 adults. Some of these were highly rouged with red ochre and bedaubed with whale-blubber, while others had white stripes over and under the eyes and down the ridge of the nose, meeting in a spot at the lip.

13th.—Went on board the American whaler, *Statesman*, Captain Coffin, to see some patients, and while there had the good fortune to see a cow-whale and her calf, which we first saw close to the stern, attacked and killed by a boat from the ship and another from the shore. It was truly a magnificent sight to observe the huge monster, after being struck with the harpoon, darting head foremost under water and elevating her tail with its mighty flukes, which seemed to threaten the boats with destruction as they waved in the air and slowly disappeared beneath the waves. While this was in operation it blew a complete gale, and rained part of the time in torrents, the wind blowing the blood first in one then in two lofty columns, from the whale's blow-holes, into the faces and all over the persons of the boats' crews. At length, after making a considerable way out to sea, she was seen in her 'flurry,' or dying agonies, and soon lay a lifeless mass upon the ocean. The calf was then killed, for while it lives the mother will not forsake it, but if it be killed first she soon makes to sea and is lost.

14th and 15th.—Detained by bad weather.

16th and 17th.—On our journey home.

18th.—Arrived about four p.m., having walked full twenty miles, besides riding during the day, and not at all fatigued. I cannot by any means do justice here to this trip; it was one continued scene of pleasing excitement throughout; and I bore bushing so well that, although I went away with a very bad sore throat (the only illness I have had here) that left me entirely in two days, and I returned in perfect health.