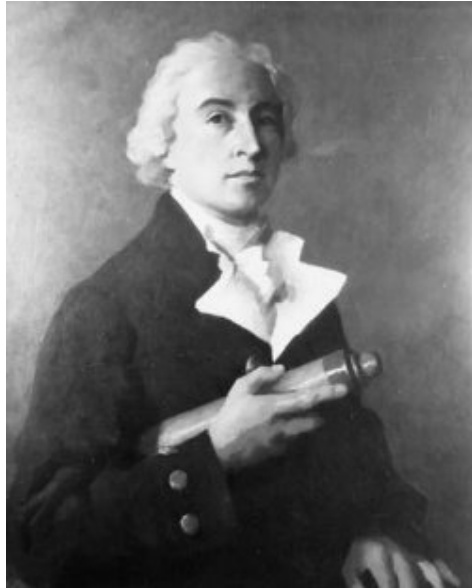


George Bass

(1771 – 1803)



George Bass, surgeon and sailor, was born on 30 January 1771 at Aswarby, near Sleaford, in Lincolnshire, England, the only child of George Bass, a tenant farmer, and his wife Sarah, née Newman. When his father died in 1777 George moved with his mother to Boston. For five years he was apprenticed to the local surgeon-apothecary Patrick Francis, and at 18 he was accepted after examination in London as a member of the Company of Surgeons. Two months later he was again examined and certified as 'a surgeon's mate any rate'. Within a week he was in the navy, at sea in H.M.S. *Flirt*. Late in 1789 he was transferred to the *Gorgon* and, while it was fitting out at Portsmouth, went to London for another examination which won him promotion to 'surgeon second-rate'. He had brief postings in several ships, became proficient in navigation and seamanship and fluent in Spanish. He possessed some ninety books on many subjects, and through print and spoken word he had learnt much of the Pacific explorers. When he heard that the *Reliance* was fitting out for New South Wales, he obtained a transfer to her in April 1794, taking with him as personal servant a boy named William Martin. Henry Waterhouse was in command and Matthew Flinders master's mate when the *Reliance* sailed with Governor Hunter. They arrived at Port Jackson on 7 September 1795.

Bass and Flinders became fast friends. Finding that little of the coast had been explored, Bass, Flinders and young Martin fitted a mast to a small rowing boat of about 8-foot (2.4 m) keel and 5

feet (1.5 m) beam that Bass had brought with him named the *Tom Thumb*, a remarkably small vessel in which to sail along an ocean coast. Seven weeks after arrival they examined the George's River which entered Botany Bay.



Bass, Flinders and Martin in *Tom Thumb*.
Such a small boat to sail along an ocean coast.

Their favourable report induced Hunter to examine the country and establish a settlement at Banks Town, one of the earliest towns established in Australia. A voyage to Norfolk Island in the *Reliance* interrupted their exploration, but in March 1796 they set out again in another *Tom Thumb* to find a river supposed to enter the sea south of Botany Bay. Flinders' log described their perilous adventures: the Aboriginals who guided them to Lake Illawarra, the islands named after Martin who baled for dear life in a storm, and the providential shelter found at Watta Mowla (Wattamolla), whence they discovered and explored Port Hacking. Bass also made land excursions and searched for natural history specimens. On one trip to the Cowpastures he found the cattle brought out in the First Fleet and discovered good land near Prospect Hill. On another he attempted to cross the Blue Mountains, tackling the precipices with scaling irons and ropes, until after fourteen days his party was driven back by thirst, hunger and fatigue.

In September 1796 the *Reliance* and *Supply* were sent by way of Norfolk Island and Cape Horn to South Africa to buy livestock for the government. At Cape Town some officers also bought stock for themselves, Bass buying a cow and nineteen sheep. Like a Noah's ark, the *Reliance* returned to Port Jackson on 26 June 1797. There Bass heard a report that coal had been found on the coast south of Sydney by survivors of the wrecked *Sydney Cove*. He promptly offered to search for it and, with two of the survivors, he left Port Jackson on 5 August 1797 in Governor Hunter's whale-

boat. He was back in eight days with specimens of the coal and a report of its abundance around Coalcliff.

The wreck of the *Sydney Cove* on Preservation Island also revived discussion on the possibility of a strait between New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, a subject dear to Bass's heart. He was granted permission to explore the southern coast and given a well fitted whale-boat, 28 feet 7 inches long (8.7 m), built in Sydney of native banksia timber. In this open boat with six volunteers and six weeks provisions he left Port Jackson on 3 December 1797. In the next eleven weeks, despite boisterous weather, he travelled some 1200 miles (1931 km), found the Shoalhaven River, Twofold Bay, Wilson's Promontory and Western Port and deduced from the great swell and the direction of the tides that a strait separated the mainland from Van Diemen's Land. On 7 October 1798 he set out again to make sure.

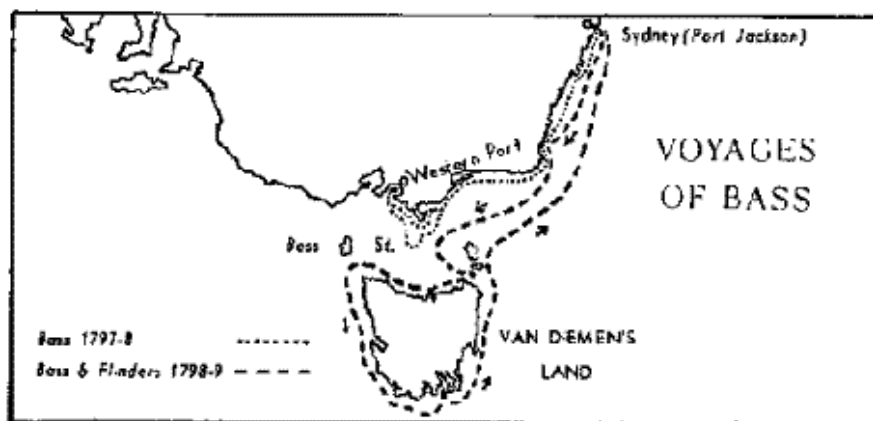
In the *Norfolk*, a 25-ton sloop built at Norfolk Island, he sailed with Flinders and twelve weeks provisions, under orders to pass through the strait and return by the south of Van Diemen's Land. His journal of the voyage, quoted in D. Collins *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, abounds in observations on Aborigines, plants, birds and animals, and on the geographical and geological features of the islands that were visited. On 1 November they found the Tamar estuary and three weeks later rounded North West Cape to breast the westerly swell of the southern Indian Ocean. They also examined the Derwent estuary and on Christmas day Bass climbed Mount Wellington. They returned to Port Jackson on 12 January 1799; in April Bass was elected a member of the Linnean Society, London, and his scientific works on the anatomy of the wombat, the feeding habits of the swan, and the nesting behaviour of the white-capped albatross were published.

By this time Bass was tiring of poor pay, small prospects and comparative inactivity as a surgeon. He was impressed by the fortunes awaiting trading shipowners in the south Pacific, and particularly by Charles Bishop whose venturesome projects had brought him to Port Jackson in the *Nautilus* with a cargo of seal skins and oil which he proposed to sell in China. Rather than wait for the *Reliance* to return to England, and described in the ship's muster book as medically unfit, Bass decided to sail with Bishop in May 1799. In July they found the little-known group of Bass Islands, some of which he charted and named, his work being noted in the charts dedicated to him in 1802 by Alexander Dalrymple. At Macao Bishop sold his cargo and the *Nautilus* at good profit and they sailed for Bombay. On the way Bass charted the port of Rhio on Bintang Island and the Straits of Singapore. This chart, the first of any accuracy, was published in London in 1805. He reached England in the *Woodford* at the end of July 1800. There he was given twelve months leave by the

Medical Board and became free to work with Bishop in organizing a commercial venture. They soon raised £10,000, bought the *Venus* and began loading her with goods expected to sell well in New South Wales. Bass also fell in love with Elizabeth, the eldest sister of his former captain, and on 8 October 1800 they were married at St James's Church, Piccadilly. For the next ten weeks they were constantly together and she went with him in the *Venus* to Portsmouth. They parted sadly when the *Venus* sailed on 9 January 1801.

Unfortunately other speculators were ahead of them. Bishop and Bass arrived at Port Jackson to find the market glutted and their goods unsaleable. Hoping to clear their debts, Bass contracted with Governor King to make a voyage to the south sea islands for pork for the government. The London cargo was left in Sydney and they sailed for New Zealand; after leaving Dusky Bay, they discovered near Cape West some large sounds which they named the Inlets of Venus, and further north an island which they named after Bishop's friend, Lord Bolton. At Matavai Bay, Otaheite, Bishop went ashore to set up a trading post, while Bass took the brig to buy pork and salt from the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands. They returned to Port Jackson with a profitable cargo that brought some £3000, part of it being sold to Captain Baudin for his French expedition.

With creditors still to be satisfied and his crew to be paid, Bass prepared for a whaling and sealing voyage to New Zealand, but Bishop had fallen ill and an opportunity arose to run a cargo to South America, perhaps some of his unsold London goods. Although Bass knew the danger of infringing in trade restricted to Spanish merchants, he was attracted by the handsome profits that might unite him with his wife. He sailed into the Pacific on 5 February 1803 in command of the *Venus*. After that time nothing authentic was heard of him, every rumour being exploded by patient research. His wife waited in vain. She received a pension from the Admiralty from 18 October 1805, and died on 23 June 1824. His mother lived to 92 and died in 1828 at Lincoln.



The name of Bass lives on in the seas that he explored and his meticulous care had lasting effects on the work of Matthew Flinders. He was a man of great courage and resourcefulness, eminently qualified to undertake the remarkable work he carried out, a man "whose ardour for discovery was not to be repressed by any obstacle or deterred by danger".

References.

Bass's journals at ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/themes/travel.html
www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A010062b.htm