

Rediscovering the location of Victoria's first colonial garden



Australian Information Service
*An Island Sanctuary, Churchill
Island, Victoria, 19 February
1976*

b&w photograph
15.5 x 20.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn4364259

E. Rebecca Sanders, a Norman McCann Summer Scholar, describes how she located an 1801 garden on Churchill Island and the garden's role as a first step in the colonisation of Victoria

The tiny but historically important Churchill Island is a 57-hectare parcel of paradise situated in Western Port bay, Victoria. The bay was explored by Dr George Bass in 1798, and then surveyed more thoroughly by Lieutenant James Grant in 1801 and Acting-Lieutenant John Murray in 1802. Despite its early place in the annals of European exploration of Australia, the first European settlement (in what became the colony of Victoria in 1851) did not occur until 1826, when Captain F.A. Wetherall helped to oversee an unsuccessful attempt at present day Corinella on the south-east side of Western Port.

The island, according to Lieutenant James Grant's *The Narrative of a Voyage of*

Discovery, Performed in His Majesty's Vessel the Lady Nelson, of Sixty Tons Burthen, with Sliding Keels; in the Years 1800, 1801 and 1802, to New South Wales, was the site of Victoria's first European garden. Grant and his crew planted the garden—a plot of cultivated land in which they sowed a variety of plants including wheat, corn and potatoes—alongside a blockhouse and temporary hut in 1801, some 34 years prior to the settlement of Melbourne. (At the turn of the nineteenth century the existence of Port Phillip Bay was unknown to European explorers, and it would not be until the following year that Acting-Lieutenant John Murray would find the bay that would become Victoria's busiest port.) Thus it was at Churchill Island, which was then thought to be the westernmost port on Australia's south-east coast, that the garden was sited, a suitable location due to its rich red soil.

In many ways this garden signalled a broader desire by Grant and his men to change the landscape into a colonial space no longer belonging solely to the indigenous Bunerong population. In his published account, Grant records that his benefactor, John Churchill, had encouraged him to plant wheat, corn and other plants 'for the future benefit of our fellow-men, be they country-men, Europeans or savages', illustrating the way in which the British viewed exploration as a natural precursor to a more permanent presence.

In 1976, 175 years after Grant and his crew planted the historically important garden, the Victorian Government, at the urging of both the local shire and the Victorian Conservation Trust, bought Churchill Island. Today it is a heritage tourism attraction managed by Phillip Island Nature Parks, which has restored the 1860s and 1870s homestead and cottages to their former glory. However, the site of Grant's garden is not visible today; indeed, its location has long been a mystery.

Visitors to heritage tourism attractions want to experience history. While a monument to Grant's garden, and the blockhouse he also ordered to be erected,

stands on the island's southern shore, this hardly satisfies visitors' desires to see the site of the garden. Various managers, and the local population, have focused on other historical aspects of the island, including its heritage listed buildings in order to provide visitors with a tangible form of heritage.

When I began my PhD, both the management of Phillip Island Nature Parks and the Friends of Churchill Island Society suggested that finding the location of Grant's fabled garden might form an important part of my research. The task was daunting. Other researchers had already completed histories of the area, but none had stumbled upon the site of the garden. It was certainly not recorded in Grant's narrative of his journeys in the *Lady Nelson*. It was therefore a real coup for both the local community and the management of Churchill Island to find an original map detailing the location of the garden in the National Library of Australia's Maps Collection. It would now be possible to show visitors the exact site of Victoria's first colonial garden.

The map, entitled *Chart of Western Port and Coast to Wilson's Promontory Forming Part of the North Side of Bass's Strait by Ensign Francis Barrallier*, was drawn up on the orders of Governor King in 1803. Barrallier had accompanied Grant on his exploration of Western Port in 1801 as the surveyor for the expedition. On the map a clear rectangular outline decorates the southern shore of Churchill Island. The total

area cleared for the garden, blockhouse and temporary hut was recorded in Grant's account as being 'some 20 rods'. The outline on Barrallier's map matches the description provided by Grant.

The Library acquired the map through Sotheby's in 1980. It had originally belonged to the Hydrographic Department at Taunton, England. In terms of finding the location of Grant's garden, the importance of this map cannot be overstated. Although the outline of the island on Barrallier's map does not exactly match more recent maps of the island, it does provide the general location of the historic site. It is hoped that archaeologists will be able to use the map to find physical signs of the existence of the garden and blockhouse.

In accessing an original copy of this map, I discovered information previously unavailable to earlier researchers. Although Valda Cole, author of *Western Port Chronology 1798-1839* (1984), used a copy of this map in a chapter devoted to another island in Western Port, French Island, she was never able to appraise an original version. The copy that was provided to her in 1984 by the Hydrographic Department at Taunton was too poor to show the island clearly. While it is possible that Cole might have made out the faint outline, she did not refer to it in her work despite devoting part of an earlier chapter to Grant's exploration of Churchill Island. Not knowing where to look, readers of her book, including staff of Phillip Island Nature Parks, members of

below left:
John T. Collins (1907-2001)
Island Cairn to James Grant 1984
gelatin silver photograph
8.8 x 12.5 cm
State Library of Victoria, image no.
jc013391
Courtesy State Library of Victoria

below right:
Scenery on Churchill Island
Courtesy Phillip Island Nature Park





the Friends of Churchill Island Society, local residents and of course myself, failed to spot the barely visible shape of the garden on Cole's copy of the map. Had I not viewed the original, the general location of Victoria's first European colonial garden might have remained obscure.

Together with Barrallier's map, the writings of John Murray, Acting-Lieutenant and commanding officer of the *Lady Nelson*, about his time in Western Port in 1802, and the log of HMS *Fly* kept by Captain Wetherall fill in some of the details of the history of Churchill Island.

Like all ship captains in the British Navy, Murray was required to keep a log of the journey. What differentiates his log from many others is the wealth of detail he provides about the landscape and his assessment of the expedition's likely outcomes. A rare transcript of Murray's *The Log of the Lady Nelson on a Voyage of Discovery to Bass Strait* is housed in the National Library's Manuscripts Collection.

Murray's daily entries record his reflections on the landscape he was visiting and his view that Churchill Island, and the larger Phillip Island, would soon become a site of European entrepreneurial activity but not settlement. Murray writes:

In short, although this Cove and Island can supply a ship in abundance with what is generally considered the greatest of her wants, yet I fancy it would poorly pay a settler.

For Murray, settlement was clearly a desirable practice, but only where the landscape could support such an activity with ease. He did not feel this was the case with either Churchill or Phillip islands, and advocated for a sojourning presence instead.

Murray's logbook reveals that Grant's garden was a site of relatively little importance to most of Western Port's early visitors. While Murray searches out the garden very early in his survey, it is clear from the way it is later ignored that this was an exercise in curiosity. The garden was less useful to the crew of the *Lady Nelson* than the locations of safe harbours, natural resources such as seals and coal seams, and food and water sources which would help ensure the success of the expedition and those conducted by future visitors to the bay.

The rights to the region's spoils that could supply the British were strongly proclaimed in 1826, when Captain Wetherall of HMS *Fly* oversaw the performance of a ceremony of possession on Western Port's shores. This event is recorded in Wetherall's *Log of the Fly 1826*, available as part of the Library's collection of the Australian Joint Copying Project microform reels. In performing this

ceremony, the British believed that they had laid a formal claim to the land and therefore owned the rights to the region's natural resources, rights enforced by the British Naval presence that controlled Australia's waters.

When Barrallier's map is contextualised alongside Murray's and Wetherall's logs, it becomes clear that Grant's act of sowing wheat, corn, potatoes and other plants was an important event in the colonisation of Australia. It was the first in a series of statements and acts by the British that proclaimed their intention to both utilise and control the region's natural resources for the benefit of the British people. It was the first of many acts of colonisation of the region, a process that began in earnest in 1801 on Churchill Island, 34 years before Melbourne was chosen by John Batman as 'the site for a village'.

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opposite top:
Great Britain Hydrographic
Department
*Chart of Western Port and Coast to
Wilson's Promontory Forming Part
of the North Side of Bass's Strait*
1803
map; 28.5 x 44.8 cm
Maps Collection
nla.map-rm1862

opposite middle:
detail of *Chart of Western Port ...*
showing Western Port

opposite bottom:
detail of *Chart of Western Port ...*
showing the outline of Grant's
garden on Churchill Island

this page:
Captain Wetherall
*Chart of Western Port in Bass's
Straits 1827*
print; 39.7 x 42.3 cm
Maps Collection
nla.map-rm681a

