

JOHN BATMAN LETTERS

Tell of His Pioneer Life in Tasmania

PRESENTED TO VICTORIAN PEOPLE

On Saturday last, 100 years from the actual foundation of Melbourne, Mr. W. Russell Grimwade presented to the people of Victoria letters written by John Batman before he came to Victoria from Tasmania.

It was a national gesture on the part of a man who has been outstanding as a public benefactor.

The letters throw light on the work and outlook of the man Batman, whose courage, enterprise, and foresight led to the establishment of Melbourne.

These letters had a great intrinsic value as well as a national and historic value.

Mr. Grimwade presented them personally to the Public Library at an informal ceremony in the office of the chief librarian. He was accompanied by Mrs. Grimwade, and, in the absence of the president of the Library trust (Rev. Dr. Sugden), who is ill, the vice-president (Mr. A. Bright) accepted the letters and handed them over to the acting chief librarian (Mr. T. F. Cooke) for safe custody.

The first of the letters, and incidentally the latest to come into Mr. Grimwade's possession, was given to him about 15 years ago by a leading Melbourne solicitor. It is purely a formal letter, written at Kingston, Ben Lomond, on August 6, 1835, to Mr. Walter Davidson, in connection with a sheep deal, but it shows the shrewdness of Batman, who said he thought it fair to deduct one-third of the purchase price of some ewes he was going to buy that did not have lambs "at their sides," or, as the modern grazier says, "lambs at foot."

Then come five more letters, written by Batman during the period June 6, 1830, to March 11, 1831.

Clash With Major

All are in an excellent state of preservation, and they give interesting glimpses of some of the exploratory and pioneering work that Batman did in the colonisation of Tasmania before he founded Melbourne.

On June 6, 1830, Batman wrote to James Simpson, police magistrate at Hobart Town, complaining of trouble that he had had with a Major Abbott in obtaining the necessary facilities from the military for establishing and maintaining friendly contact with the aborigines. Major Abbott, it appears, had control of some native women, and had refused to allow several to be attached to Batman's party as guides and contacts.

That was bad enough, but Batman complained that the major "had even

complained that the major "had even refused to read the instructions given to Batman by the police magistrate," which authorised his obtaining the services of the women. To this letter Governor Arthur initialled a minute four days later, stating that it would now be necessary to request Major Abbott to deliver over the necessary women to Mr. Batman.

Search for Tribe

More than a month later—on July 31—Batman again wrote from Kingston to Mr. Simpson. He had obtained the black women he needed, and, with his party, had set out in an easterly direction.

The letter goes on:—

"On 2nd inst. the women left the huts with three black men and one white, all unarmed, to endeavour to fall in with their tribe, the women acting as guides. From the 2nd-17th they remained hunting and scouring the country between Ben Lomond and the sea coast and round to the North Esk without seeing any trace whatever of the natives. The women appeared to be as much surprised at not finding the tribe as we did on their return. . . . The 18th, 19th, 20th, 21st, and 22nd the snow was 3ft. and 1ft. thick on the ground.

"The women would, therefore, not move from the huts. On the 23rd they left again with the same four men, unarmed, and proceeded towards George's River and St. Patrick's Head. I gave the men orders to allow them to go in whatever direction they wished, and up to this I have heard nothing of them. . . .

"The women perfectly understand the wish of the whites to be on friendly terms with them, and I think do all in their power to fall in with their tribes. The only reason I can give for their not falling in with the tribe before this is that the blacks must have left entirely their old hunting-grounds and gone to others."

"Next Moon"

On August 21 Batman wrote again to Dr. Simpson stating that on August 5 the black women had returned without finding the tribe, but on

without finding the tribe, but on August 9 he had let them go and again loaded with all kinds of provisions because they had promised to return "with or without their tribe next moon."

The letter concluded with a recommendation from Batman that pardon or remission of sentence be granted to eight convicts who were in his party for the services they had rendered during the 12 months' exploratory trip through Tasmania. Of these, six were "lifers" and two others had 14 years to serve.

Batman adds the naive remark concerning one prisoner: "Wishes to have his ticket of leave. Thinks he's not able to endure the fatigue longer. Nine years since sentenced—life."

He was one of the five to whose names the annotation appears, "Yes, G.A." signifying that the request was granted.

Land for Blacks

This letter also contains a minute by the Governor granting 100 acres of land each to two Sydney aborigines, "Pigeon" and "John Crook," and a Tasmanian native, "Black Bill," for their good conduct while serving under Mr. Batman.

The next letter, dated January 17, 1831, is a short one to Mr. John Burnett, Colonial Secretary, Hobartown, in which "your obedient, humble servant, John Batman, draws attention to an account he sent on the 9th of the previous month for provisions and clothing supplied by him to 14 aborigines that had left his house.

"The amount was approved of by his Excellency the Governor," he went on. "I therefore beg to request that I may have an order to receive the amount in Launceston which to me will be a convenience."

To Visit Natives

The last letter of all, written on March 11, 1831, is to Mr. Burnett, and in it Batman outlines his plans for a trip to Swan Island to make further contact with natives.

"I conceive it will be necessary that a boat should accompany me from Launceston with provisions and articles in the way of presents for any natives I may meet with before my arrival at Swan Island," he wrote.

"I beg to state for his Excellency's information that there are now in this neighbourhood two tribes; one is the tribe that speared a few days back a man of Mr. Cox's and two or three days after left for dead one

of Mr. Mapsey's splitters and speared a second—they at the same time took away the black woman who was married some months back to 'Black Bill,' an aborigine of this island (presumably the 'Black Bill' mentioned as having received a grant of land in a previous letter).

"She has not since been heard of—this woman was brought up from infancy among white people, and is not acquainted with one word of their language—

Encounters With Settlers

"The second tribe I speak of," he continued, "I think they have no wish to commit murder."

He speaks of encounters with settlers had had with members of this tribe, who were armed with spears. One party said "... the natives could have murdered the whole of them if they wished," and the other party, he wrote, "also states they could have murdered them if they wished—they cut open some bags of wheat and then made off."

"This tribe, if falling in with, I think might readily be induced to become friendly, but it cannot be accomplished without the assistance of one or two of their own people who understand a little English and can speak to them in their own language," said Batman.

And there is a note of caution in the concluding paragraph, in which Batman writes, "I trust that a detachment of military may be stationed here from St. Paul's, as formerly, for the protection of my family and others in this neighbourhood."