

# The melancholy wreck of the *Dunbar*

Terror and pathos – an episode in Australian shipping and social history unrivalled in tragic sweep and Gothic representation. **Kieran Hosty**, curator of ship technology and maritime archaeology, writes about the wreck and its unprecedented impact on Victorian Sydney, 150 years ago this August.

*Warning not heard or seen – no help  
at hand*

*The wide dark bosom of the angry deep  
With irresistible and cruel force  
Received them all. One only cast alive  
Fainting and breathless on the fatal rocks  
To weeping friends and strangers  
afterwards*

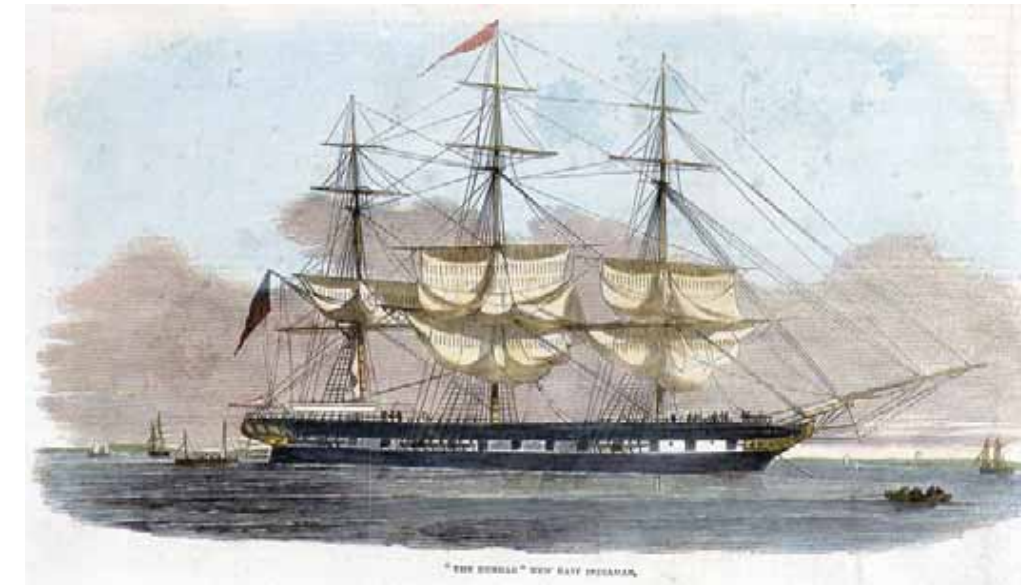
*Thus told his melancholy tale*

From *A narrative of the melancholy wreck of the Dunbar*, James Fryer, Sydney 1857

THE 1850s WERE years of great social and economic growth in Australia, spurred on by the Australian gold rushes and corresponding increase in population, agriculture, industry and commerce. As the demand for goods and services grew, so did the demand for passenger and cargo ships. This persuaded Scottish shipowner and merchant Duncan Dunbar to order a series of hardwood clipper ships from the English shipbuilder James Laing and Sons of Sunderland, England, to cater for the new Australian trade. Credited with introducing the American-style clipper ship to the Australian run, Duncan Dunbar named the various clippers after his family including *Phoebe Dunbar*, *Dunbar Castle*, *Duncan Dunbar* and the *Dunbar*.

## The impact brought down the topmasts, mounting seas stove in the lifeboats and the *Dunbar* heaved broadside to the swells

Built in 1852, the 1,321 register ton, copper-sheathed, three-masted sailing ship *Dunbar* cost over £30,000. Constructed of British oak and East Indian teak and held together by iron knees, iron riders and iron and copper fastenings, the 201.9-foot (61.53 m) vessel, with a breadth of 35 feet (10.66 m) and depth of 22.7 feet (6.91 m), was designed to carry passengers and cargo quickly between England and Australia. However, the *Dunbar* was first requisitioned by the Royal Navy for use as a troop carrier during the Crimean War, so it was not until 1856 that it made



its first visit to Port Jackson – where the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported ‘The *Dunbar* is a splendid vessel.’

On 31 May 1857 the ship departed Plymouth for its second voyage to Australia, carrying 63 passengers, 59 crew and a substantial cargo, including dyes for the colony’s first postage stamps, machinery, furniture, trade tokens (coins privately issued by traders and manufacturers as change and to promote

their business), cutlery, manufactured and fine goods, food and alcohol. Many of the first-class passengers were prominent Sydneysiders, local ‘currency’ that had made it in the colonies and who, after a visit ‘home’ to England, were returning to Australia.

*Dunbar*’s master Captain Green was a veteran of eight visits to Sydney, as first mate aboard the *Agincourt* and *Waterloo*, then as commander of *Waterloo*, and again commanding *Vimeira* and *Dunbar*. After a relatively fast voyage of 81 days *Dunbar* arrived off Port Jackson on the night of

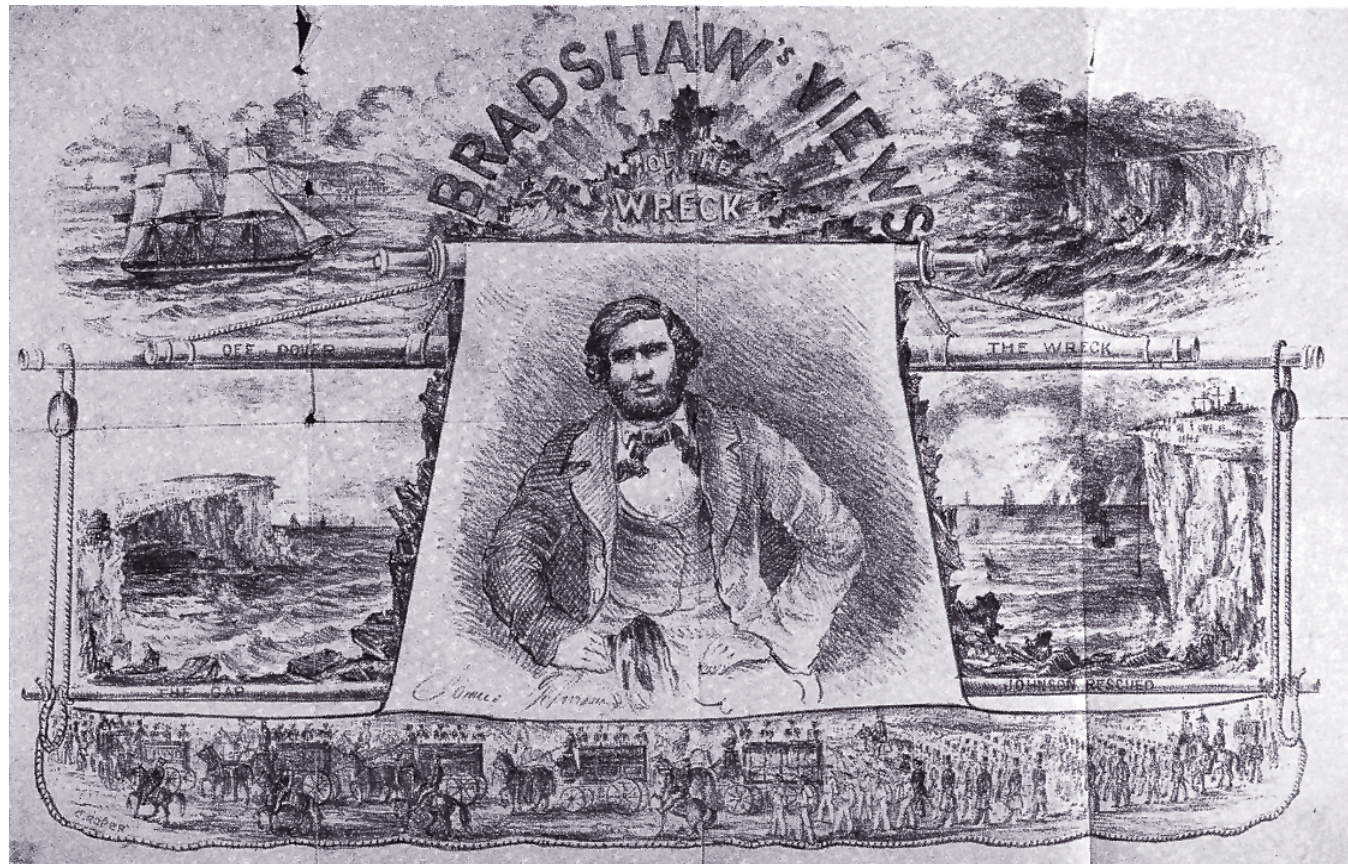
*OPPOSITE: Poignantly personal items such as jewellery and gold denture plates are among the material retrieved from the rocky sea-bed where Dunbar disintegrated. Photographer J Carter ANMM*

*ABOVE: Hand-coloured engraving of Duncan Dunbar’s clipper for the Australian run. ANMM collection*

Thursday 20 August 1857, with a rising gale and bad visibility. The Macquarie Light on the cliff top a mile south of South Head was seen between squalls, although the night was dark and the land was invisible. Shortly before midnight Captain Green estimated the ship’s position off the entrance to the Heads and changed course to enter, keeping the Macquarie Light on the port bow.

Captain Green then ordered a blue light to be burnt to summon the Sydney Harbour pilot. According to the only survivor – a sailor on watch at the time who became the sole source of information about events on board – the urgent cry of ‘Breakers ahead!’ was heard from the second mate on the forepeak. Captain Green gave the order ‘Port your helm!’ to swing the ship to starboard while the watch braced the sails.

It was already too late. Captain Green’s orders instead drove the vessel broadside



onto the 50-metre-high cliffs just south of the signal station at South Head, midway between the Macquarie Lighthouse and The Gap. The impact brought down the topmasts, mounting seas stove in the lifeboats and the *Dunbar* heaved broadside to the swells. Lying on its side, the ship began to break up almost immediately. The mizzen and main masts crashed over the side but the foremast remained standing. One crewman, James Johnson, found himself in the poop clinging to the mizzen chains. Unable to cross the deck, which was being swept by each successive wave,

## He realised that a large vessel had been wrecked when he sailed through masses of bodies, large quantities of timber, bedding and bales

he went below and made his way forward before climbing out of a cabin skylight and onto the chain plates of the surviving foremast. When the foremast finally gave way Johnson was hurled onto the cliffs where he managed to gain a finger hold. Scrambling higher, he became the sole survivor amid a sea of bodies. All 63 passengers and the remaining 58 crew perished in the disaster.

When dawn came, Johnson found himself on a rocky ledge some 10 feet above the wreck, surrounded by

wreckage and dead bodies. From here he climbed up out of the reach of the waves and remained on the cliff face until being rescued on 22 August by either the Icelander *Antonia Wollier* or the diver Joseph Palmer, depending upon sources. (After recovering from the wreck Johnson became a lighthouse keeper near Newcastle, where by a remarkable coincidence he helped to rescue the sole survivor from the 1866 wreck of the *PS Cawarra*.)

One of the first on the scene was the small coastal steamer *Grafton*, whose master Charles Wiseman had prudently decided

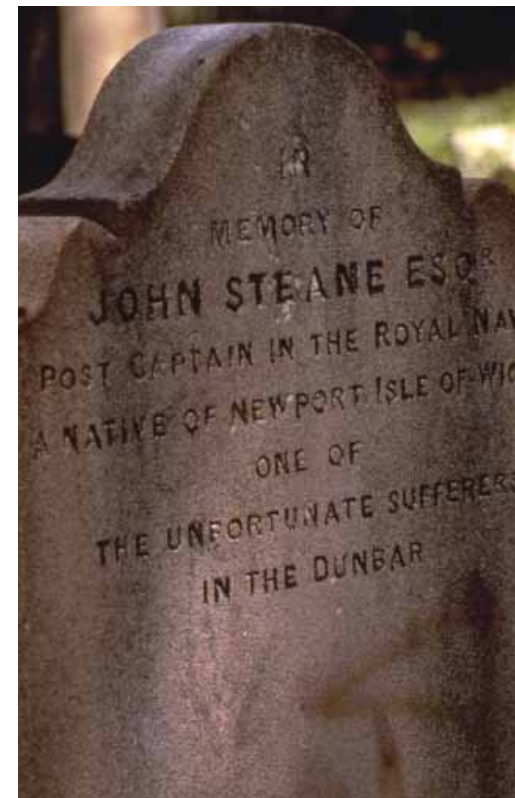
to stand off the coast during the heavy weather of the previous night. Now as he approached the Heads of Sydney Harbour he realised that a large vessel had been wrecked when he sailed through masses of bodies, large quantities of timber, bedding and bales floating between the Heads. By now more reports were filtering in to Sydney town from Watsons Bay and Manly about mangled bodies being washed ashore.

Dawn had unveiled the enormity of the event to the community of Sydney.

Mailbags and other items washed ashore indicated that the vessel was the *Dunbar*. Thousands were drawn to the scene of the wreck over the ensuing days to watch the rescue of Johnson, the recovery of the bodies and the salvage of some of the cargo. For days afterwards the newspapers, journals and local guides were filled with graphic descriptions of the wreck – and of the public's interest in the horrible 'spectacle'.

'The rumours as to the fact of a dreadful shipwreck having just occurred soon assumed distinct shape and certainty. At length it generally became known in Sydney that numerous dead and mutilated bodies of men, women and children were to be seen floating in the heavy surf at the Gap thrown by immense waves at a great height; and dashed pitilessly against the rugged cliffs, the returning water sweeping them from the agonised sight of the horrified spectators ...' (*A narrative of the melancholy wreck of the Dunbar*, James Fryer, Sydney 1857).

To some this spectacle would have been one of morbid curiosity, something to record in a diary or in a letter home to relatives in Europe, but to many, many others, once the wreck had been identified as the *Dunbar*, it would have been the need to identify or possibly recover the body of a father or mother, sister or brother or friend, that drew



them to the scene of the disaster. As the narrative of James Fryer (cited in the previous paragraph) put it:

'The scene is described by parties present to have exercised a sort of hideous fascination, that seemed to bind them to the spot ... each determination to leave the fatal locality became overpowered by a desire for further knowledge, many dreading lest they should have to recognise the familiar face of a friend or relative.'

For the *Dunbar* was not just another ship carrying unknown immigrants starting a new life in Australia. On board were many local residents returning to the colonies after a visit

## Thousands were drawn to the scene to watch the rescue of Johnson, the recovery of the bodies and the salvage of some of the cargo

to the old country, including eight members of the Waller family; Mr and Mrs Peek; Mrs Egan, the wife of the Sydney MP Daniel Egan; and Mr and Mrs Cahuac, son and daughter-in-law of the former Sheriff of Sydney. Also on board were family members migrating from Europe to join family members in Australia such as the two Miss Hunts, the only sisters of Robert Hunt the First Clerk of the Sydney Branch of The Royal Mint, who was a well-known colonial scientist and photographer.

Seventeen bodies, including some mutilated by sharks, were recovered on the north shore of Sydney Harbour from the Mosman Spit around to Taylors Bay. Some were identified immediately by names on their clothing or by personal appearance but other were so badly mutilated they could not be recognised. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported: 'Mr P Cohen, of Manly Beach Hotel, saw two bodies floating and tried to recover them, but in consequence of the number of sharks, and the ferocity with which they fought for their prey, he was unable to do so.' (22 August 1857).

At Middle Harbour the majority of the wreckage of the *Dunbar* appeared to have

drifted ashore, along with several bodies. 'The shore is literally white with candles, and the rocks covered or so deep with articles of every kind – boots, panama hats and bonnets are here in abundance. Drums of figs, hams, pork, raisins, drapery, boots and pieces of timber are piled in heaps along with the keel of the *Dunbar*,' said the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 23 August 1857.

Never before, and probably never since, had a shipwreck off the coast of New South

*OPPOSITE: One of many pamphlets published in Sydney shortly after the shipwreck. ANMM collection*

*ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Gravestone of a Dunbar victim, Newtown cemetery; ballast pigs at the Dunbar wreck site; Hornby Light built at South Head the year after the disaster, marking a safer entry. Photographs NSW Heritage Office, K Hosty/ANMM*

Wales had such a traumatic and long-term effect on the people of the Colony.

## The aftermath

The victims of *Dunbar* were buried at Camperdown Cemetery in O'Connell Town (now Newtown). The bodies of some unidentified victims were placed in a mass grave funded by the colonial government. Some 20,000 people lined George Street for the funeral procession that consisted of the band of the artillery companies playing Handel's 'Dead March from Saul', a company of artillery, seven hearses, four mourning coaches and a long procession of carriages surrounded by a guard of honour provided by the Mounted Police Force. The last hearse contained the body of Captain Steane, a Royal Navy officer who had sailed out on the *Dunbar* to take up his post on the Australia Station. The coffin was wrapped in the Union Jack and accompanied by a company of sailors and officers from *HMS Herald* and *HMS Iris*.

Sydney's banks and offices closed for



*The Dunbar memorial at The Gap, Watsons Bay. It's 500 metres north of the wreck site where the anchor was raised in 1907, 50 years after the catastrophe. The plaque was unveiled in 1930. Photographer J Mellefont/ANMM*

the funeral. One of the most detailed and accurate accounts of the wreck published was extensively promoted:

'BANCROFT'S EDITION – *The Authentic Narrative of the loss of the Dunbar ...* Printed for transmission by post, containing sixteen pages of closely printed matter and illustrations, the whole weighing only half-an-ounce. Price sixpence. This is the most complete narrative yet published. The public is informed that this edition is comprised into the form of a narrative; that it contains all information up to the present time, and is not a mere copy of newspaper reports; and has also a correct list of names of Passengers and Crew, as far as ascertained.' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 7 September 1857).

The *Narrative* was sold out in a few days prompting at least six other editions – no doubt helped by the illustrations of the wreck and its graphic description of the dead: 'Corpses of men, women, and children, some of them fearfully mutilated, were dashed against the beating crags, and as rapidly borne back again by the relentless surge, while here and there heads or limbs which had been torn off by repeated concussions against the rocks, were thrown up as if in jeering mockery by the very element that had caused their destructions.'

Another popular publication was *A Narrative of the Melancholy wreck of the Dunbar* by James Fryer, introduced above, which like Bancroft's *Narrative* provided vivid and graphic descriptions of the wreck and its aftermath: '... now the trunk of a female, from the waist upwards – then the legs of a male, the body of an infant, the right arm, shoulder, and head of a female, the bleached arm and extended hand, with the wash of the receding waters almost as 'twere in life, beckoning for help! ... one figure, a female, tightly clasping an infant to the breast, both locked in the firm embrace of death, was for a moment seen ...'

But Fryer himself comments on the quality of reporting of the great tragedy: 'Nothing is perhaps a more faithful reflex of the anxiety and consternation of the public mind than the vague, hurried, and contradictory manner in which our journals have

given the details of this melancholy shipwreck ...'

Many of the narratives were sent back to relatives and friends in England, no doubt reinforcing the impression that sea travel and immigration were hazardous and serious undertakings. Yet the demand for these accounts was huge, and the advertisements for them stressed how readily they could be sent – the following one placed by Fryer himself:

'For England – the postage by the overland mail to England for printed books is eight pence per half pound. For one postage eight copies of Fryer's *Illustrated Narrative of the Wreck of the Dunbar* can be forwarded. A work possessing the greatest possible interest to home readers on receiving news of this awful catastrophe. James Fryer, 323 George Street.' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 7 September 1857)

Besides the pamphlets and brochures other items began to appear as part of the memorabilia industry associated with the tragedy. Salvors had acquired bits of the vessel and were manufacturing all manner of items including a set of chairs marked 'Made from the wreck of the *Dunbar*' by Andrew Lenehan of Sydney. 'Church, House and Garden Furniture manufactured to any design from the wreck of the *Dunbar* in teak and oak' were advertised in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 June 1859.

More official and in most cases longer-lasting memorials were also built including the one marking the mass

## Coins and belt buckles, pipes and pocket watches and even gold dentures settled in crevices on the rocky seashore

grave in Camperdown Cemetery along with the final resting places of Captain Steine and the Waller family. A memorial tablet in St James Church, Macquarie Street, commemorates Captain James Green. The 'Dunbar Windows' commemorating the deaths of Mrs Green and her two children were originally located in the first St Mary's Cathedral but are now at the St Benedict's Monastery in Arcadia. A contemporary rock engraving was cut five days after the tragedy by C P (identity unknown) above the site of the *Dunbar*, possibly by one of the thousands of spectators who lined the cliffs in August 1857.

A *Dunbar* memorial on the cliff top near The Gap was also established by the local

government as a permanent memorial of the horrendous loss. This memorial was refurbished in 1907 at the 50th anniversary of the wreck, when an anchor was raised and installed, and again in 1930 and 1992 – indicating a long-lasting memory of the events of 1857.

Two initiatives should also be considered memorials to the tragedy. One was the erection in 1858 of the red-and-white striped Hornby Lighthouse and the accompanying lighthouse-keepers' houses on South Head, immediately adjacent the entrance to Port Jackson and Sydney Harbour, which no doubt prevented other vessels from being cast ashore against the cliffs of South Head. And the wreck site itself became a memorial in October 1991 when it was protected under the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976* due to its historical, archaeological and symbolic significance.

## The wreck today

Due to the exposed nature of the site near South Head, its shallow depth and the constant southerly swells that crash into the cliffs for most of the year, the *Dunbar* has been greatly reduced by the elements since August 1857 when the magnificent vessel, the pride of Duncan Dunbar's fleet, slewed into the cliffs. Nineteenth-century salvors, of course, tried to recover anything of value that they could reach. The archaeological remains have also been severely reduced due to the actions of salvage and recreational divers at the site since its rediscovery in the early 1950s, when scuba diving equipment became

more readily available and affordable both to professional and recreational divers.

Without heritage legislation in force and with a lack of understanding of conservation science and heritage protection, the *Dunbar* and other wrecks in Australian waters were severely damaged by divers using many means, including explosives, to obtain materials from the wreck. In good weather and fairly shallow water, scuba divers were able to pick over the *Dunbar* site for trinkets – the many small imperishable items such as coins and belt buckles, pipes and pocket watches and even gold dentures that spilled from smashed trunks and cabins and settled in crevices on the rocky seashore.

This was often accompanied by a misguided belief that they were preserving relics from the ravages of the sea, when in fact being brought up from the sea bed accelerated the deterioration of items that did not receive the appropriate conservation treatments. The divers' efforts also destabilised what was already a fragile site – the protective concretions that covered parts of the wreck were removed and the site was exposed further to the actions of the waves, sand and rock.

Today, the main elements of the *Dunbar* wreck site consist of one Admiralty and one Porters iron anchor, concreted anchor chain, pig iron ballast blocks scattered through the sandstone rock gullies, and many fragmentary remains of copper sheathing, cargo items, ships fittings and fastenings.

In 1991 the *Dunbar* and its associated relics were declared a historic shipwreck under the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act*. This meant that the site was to be protected from any future unauthorised interference and subsequent damage. Two years later, in 1993, the Commonwealth Department of the Arts and Administrative Services declared an amnesty from prosecution to encourage people who had material from protected shipwrecks to come forward and declare that material.

As a result of this amnesty, John Gillies, an active sports diver in the 1950s and 60s, declared a collection of over 5,000 objects from the *Dunbar* wreck to the New South Wales Department of Planning. In August 1994 the department granted Mr Gillies a permit to dispose of his collection at auction under the condition that the collection be registered, photographed, remain in Australia and the new owner inform the department within 30 days of purchase.

Shortly afterwards, the Australian National Maritime Museum negotiated an out-of-auction settlement with Mr Gillies to prevent this important collection from falling into private hands and possible being broken up. Parts of this collection went on display in the *Age of Sail* exhibition at the museum. Over a period of years thousands of *Dunbar* artefacts have undergone conservation, registration and curatorial research, and can now provide the focus for activities at the museum that will commemorate the 150th anniversary of the wrecking of the *Dunbar*. ■

the service, church bells tolled, every ship in the harbour flew their ensigns at half mast and minute guns were fired as the seven hearses and over 100 carriages went past. Additional church services were also held throughout Sydney including the Congregational Church, Pitt Street; Wesleyan Chapel, York Street; Presbyterian Church, Palmer Street; The Free Church, Macquarie Street; The Centenary Chapel, York Street; and in The Sydney Synagogue.

While the victims were being buried conjecture was rife regarding the wrecking. The great loss of life led immediately to letters to the editor

of judgement in the vessel being so close to the shore at night in such bad weather, [we] do not attach any blame to Captain Green or his officers for the loss of the *Dunbar* ...' (reported by James Fryer, 1857, cited above).

The calamitous shipwreck not only generated much speculation about the causes but also a minor industry in memorialising the event. The wreck event formed the focus for several contemporary artists, including S F Gregory, Samuel Thomas Gill and Robert Hunt who captured the terrifying scene through notable lithographs, paintings and photographs.

## Never before, and probably never since, had a shipwreck had such a traumatic and long-term effect on the people of the Colony

of *The Empire* (28–29/08/1857) and *Sydney Morning Herald* (27–30/08/1857) demanding the upgrading of the lighthouses at the Heads. The issues of lighthouses and pilotage were also raised during question time in Parliament, and were the matter of recommendations by the jury at the *Dunbar* inquest.

'The verdict of the jury meets with pretty general concurrence. We may observe that the attention of the authorities is now directed to the subject of improving the arrangements for lighting the entrance to the harbour ...' (reported in Brennan, I: 'The *Dunbar* – A Melancholy Wreck', unpublished paper 1993.) The jury also stated that although 'there may have been an error

Numerous poems, narratives and accounts were written, some published just days after the event.

These publications, which sold in their thousands, included *The Illustrated Narrative of the wreck of the Dunbar* and *Narrative of the wreck* (W G Mason, published by James Fryer 29/08/1857); *The wreck of the Dunbar* (J R Clarke, 1857); *The Dunbar letter paper* (J R Clarke, 08/09/1857); *Narrative of the wreck of the ill fated ship Dunbar* (George Bradshaw, 25/08/1857) and the *Sermon occasioned by the wreck of the ship Dunbar* (Rev. Salmon, J W Waugh, 30/08/1857).

All provided sketches of the scene of the wreck, the survivor's account, passenger and crew lists and accounts of