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 melancholy wreck of the *Dunbar* was 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 Sydney-siders, 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 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 forecastle. 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.
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. 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 horror of the melancholy wreck of the Dunbar.

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 – 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.

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. The aftermath of the Dunbar shipwreck and the public’s interest in the ‘horrible spectacle’. 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.’

At Middle Harbour the majority of the wreckers 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 Wales had such a traumatic and long-term effect on the people of the Colony. The aftermath of the Dunbar shipwreck and the public’s interest in the ‘horrible spectacle’.

One of the first on the scene was the small coastal steamer Grafton, whose master Charles Wiseman had prudently decided to head south before dawn, and thereby miss 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 Cowarra.) 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.

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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 coffins 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 The Age (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 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 men’, as 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 J Green, Samuel Theis Gill and Robert Hunt who captured the terrifying scene through notable lithographs, paintings and photographs. 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, published by G Mason, published by James Fryer 29/08/1857; 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. Salom, 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 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 the 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 ascertainment.’ (Sydney Morning Herald 7 September 1857). The Narrative was sold out in a few days, prompting at least six other editions – notably the Illustrated 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 huge oblongs or limbs which had been torn off by repeated concussions against the rocks, were thrown up as if in jarring 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 Bancroft’s Narrative provided vivid and graphic descriptions of the wreck and its aftermath: ‘...now the trunk of death, 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 ‘were in life, beckoning for help’ ...one figure, a female, a man, and 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 more profoundly felt by 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 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 bins of the wreck and were selling various manner of items including a set of chairs marked ‘Made from the wreck of the Dunbar’. By the sale of ‘Church, House and Garden Furniture manufactured to any design from the wreck of the Dunbar in teak and oak’ were advertised by Sydney Morning Herald, 27 June 1859. More official and in most cases longer-lasting memorials were also built including the one marking the mass grave in Camperdown Cemetery along with their ensigns at half mast and minute guns were fired in remembrance of the event. The wreck and other wrecks to come forward and declare an amnesty from prosecution to encourage people who had material from protected sites 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 site for preservation as relics of 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 precious 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 symbolic signifying its importance. 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:

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