

The Wreck of the Rover

by Michael Mates

Joseph White was eleven years old when he witnessed the wreck of the Rover at Broulee on the night of 13 October 1842..

This could well have been his story.....



Several potatoes rolled off the top of the pile. Must be rats, thought Joseph White. Well, one more noise to keep me awake: add it to the south wind and the waves. Several shingles rattled on the roof. Five bells. Two-thirty in the morning according to Constable McAlister's ship clock. The Blacks around the fire were still humming, a soft buzzing sound, in a sand shallow just outside the house. You'd think they'd be tired after all that rowing.

It's a world turned upside down, here on a New South Wales beach. Cold weather from the south, spring in October, and Mother and Father both dead. McAlister, his guardian, had given him a place to stay and helped out as best he could with his education, but it wasn't home. Joseph helped out too, loading potatoes and slabs of cheese off the punts into the shed, then on to the long boats and into the schooners anchored in the bay, ready for shipment to Sydney. He felt the hard ripple of his work muscles along his shoulders and upper arms. The way I'm growing, I'll be able to row when I'm eleven. I'm almost strong enough.

The wind picked up a notch, and the waves slammed down a little harder.



Joseph wondered about that fool of a captain of the Rover. It was bad enough in Broulee Bay, in the lee of the island, where three schooners tossed at anchor. But Captain Florence was out in the bay, away from shelter. The fool. He hove in last night just before sunset, his sails shredded ribbons hanging

from the masts, the crew and convicts worn and frightened looking. But not Captain Florence. A large, red-faced healthy bull of a man, master of the Rover and of all that he surveyed. God's law on the fore deck, and not a man to suffer fools wisely; nor one to suffer wise men either. Captain Stevenson, a Jervis Bay whaler sheltering from the storm, had enlisted the help of Hopping Joe and his mates, who rowed a whaleboat out to the schooner, in failing light and some danger, to warn Florence that he was exposed.

"Damn you, Sir! I will not be told where to anchor. I am the master of this vessel, Sir, and I'll thank you to keep your advice to yourself," roared Florence, keeping perfect balance on the pitching deck and jutting his chin into the argument.

"As you wish, Captain," yelled Stevenson from the tossing boat. The rowers leaned their backs into the oars to return to shore. Joseph heard Stevenson tell the story to McAlister and whispered to himself one of his father's many quotations from Shakespeare: "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" And then, in singular form for a singularly foolish ship's captain: "You block, you stone, you worse than senseless thing."

What with anger at Captain Florence and worry for the convicts and crew, Joseph had been tossing and turning all night, through the ship's clock ringing and wind howling and surf crashing and Aborigines' humming and Abraham Maleber's roaring return to his punt to sleep off his latest losing battle with grog. Another noise, thought Jim - Maleber snoring on top of his bags of potatoes.

Six bells chimed. Three in the morning.

Any more wind, thought Joseph, and I won't hear anything else. As if in answer, the wind rose, adding a thin shriek to the roar.

But wait a minute - that's not the shriek of the wind - that's a man! Is he saying

something or just screaming? Joseph bolted out of his cot and flew to the window. There he was, a small dark shadow against the white sand, staggering up the beach from the north, and yelling, yelling, yelling. White duck seaman's trousers, a bare midriff and long wet hair took form. But what was he saying?

Joseph and the man met at the door. "Help! Oh, help! Mother of God, she's sinking, she's sinking, she's sinking!"

"The Rover?" yelled Joseph. The man sagged against the doorpost, dripping and shivering.

"Yes, yes, yes. You come. Quickly. All the men, all the prisoners, the Captain. They all gonna die! They all on the Rover. They no jump. I jump. Been in a wreck before. You come, you come, aye aye, you come."

"You wait here, lie down, rest," answered Joseph, seizing the man by the shoulders and thrusting him into a cot in McAlister's front room. Other men in the house were stirring, some alert. "What the Devil is going on?" one irritated voice growled.

Joseph looked square at the man. "Now, you tell me. Where is the Rover?"

"Ship down there." He pointed north. "A mile down. Maybe less." The man gratefully relaxed into the cot and caught his breath with jerking sobs.

Joseph looked north. Could he see the ship? A two-masted schooner, thirty tons, he recalled. Is that it? Can't see.

"Wake up! Wake up! The Rover's gone aground! Wake up! Wake up!" Joseph pounded on McAlister's bedroom door.

"Where, Joseph?"

"North. A mile. There's a man - he's off the boat. He's foreign. He jumped off. Ran all the way down. Says she's sinking."

McAlister woke up the rest of the men in his house while Joseph dashed next door to rouse the others. Men tumbled out of beds and cots, pulling on boots and staggering out into the storm. Mrs McAuley gathered blankets and hustled out with the convict Mrs Lee.



Broulee from Mossy Point — The vicinity of the last hours of the *Rover*

Maleher's useless, drunk, thought Joseph: won't bother with him — couldn't get him up anyway. Another block, a stone...

Joseph ran over to the humming men. "Hopping Joe! Warrigal Tom! Joey Broulee! Batemans Bay Harry! Broulee Billy! Jerry Broulee! Come help! Ship's in trouble!"

The six rose as one in a liquid motion and headed along the beach with the ragtag gaggle of settlers dodging the clumps of seaweed thrown up on the wide curve of the beach. McAlister and Hopping Joe, both strong runners, headed the party, followed by the small but nimble-footed Joseph. Stopping after a mile, they peered out towards the ocean and saw only polished-silver waves, intricate and flamboyant foam, the sea upending itself against the shore and slapping down on the sand.

"Look, look, you see," shouted Hopping Joe, pointing out to sea.

The three squinted out into the slashing rain and darkness. Something was moving, about a hundred feet out, silhouetted in the surf. Yes, it was the *Rover*, heaving up and slewing about, pitching and wallowing in the crashing waves. It looked like a hulk already — spars and rigging were overboard but attached to the hull like a net. Were those screams coming from the ship?

The others panted in. One of the men had improvised a torch and others were gathering driftwood for a fire; Mrs McAuley and Mrs Lee stumbled through the wet sand with blankets. The fire grew slowly and cast a flickering light into the rescue party and the roaring surf, which was edging the *Rover* closer to shore.

As soon as the first pale streaks of light appeared through the sheeting rain, Hopping Joe took several long strides into the water and plunged into the surf. Joseph started after him.

"Wait! Joseph. You're too small. You can't help that way and I can't swim."

Joseph knew McAlister was right. I can swim like a seal but how could I drag a man ashore? he thought. Still, it hurt.

He watched Hopping Joe crest a wave and then disappear into a trough.

Warrigal Tom and his friends followed Hopping Joe into the waves.

"Baal me jarrard," each one shouted. "I'm not afraid."

McAlister looked at the men — poor swimmers all. "We'll need to make a chain. Left hand in belt of the man in front of you. I'll go first."

Like a snake, the linked settlers shouldered their way into the sea.

Joseph could hear the men on the ship now, shouting and wailing and screaming. Hopping Joe was bellowing "Jump. You jump. I take you safe."

Joseph knew that the crew would be washed out to sea by a receding wave if they jumped from the ship and weren't helped to shore. In the first beginnings of morning light, he could see the men on board, panicked and exhausted. Hopping Joe dragged one man back to the beach, unceremoniously dumped him by the fire and went back for more. McAlister's chain was snaking out towards the *Rover*. Joseph could see McAlister wave with his fist to a man on board and shout: "Jump, jump, jump, you fool! You're dead without us!" The man hurled himself into the sea and McAlister grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and passed him back along the line. The Aborigines were swimming about, seeking whom they could save and passing the rescued to McAlister's wavering snake of men or hauling them ashore by themselves.

One wretch didn't move when he reached shore. It was Captain Florence, pale and silent.

Six, maybe seven ashore. Hard to count, thought Joseph, with all the noise and cold. He looked out at the *Rover*. The ship slewed around swiftly, drawing back from McAlister and nearly slicing Hopping Joe and his mates down. One man left, or was it two, on board. How can they reach the poor devil now? The *Rover* spun again, smashing out like a malevolent, living thing against the swimmers and retreating further away from shore and into the flexing waves.

That's it, thought Joseph. No help for them now! And then, without thinking or fear, he snatched a coil of rope, slung it over his shoulder and dived into the waves like a sleek water rat coiling his way through the battering surf and forward, forward, up down and sliding through the waves, tossing one end of the rope to McAlister and shooting forward towards the *Rover* as he uncoiled the rest.

Riding a wave, Joseph saw one sailor, drunk with fatigue and fear, clinging to the stump of a mast.

"Jump! Jump! I've got a rope! Jump, for the love of God, jump!"

The man gawped at Joseph, who was completely at home in the water and riding the waves like a seal. The astonishment was like a slap in the sailor's face and he jerked away from his false refuge and hurled himself off the pitching *Rover* towards Joseph.

Joseph treaded water in the broiling sea, slipped a noose over the man's neck and opposite armpit and shouted out "Mr McAlister! He's hooked! I've got him! Pull! Pull! Pull!"

McAlister yanked, gave a curl of rope to the man behind him, who passed on the curl to the next man, and the sailor was heaved ashore and dragged to the fire, where he vomited seawater and lay shivering, clawing into the solid sand as if to assure himself that he was on land.

Joseph rode in on a wave as everyone on shore applauded and shouted, "Well done, Joseph! Well done!"

"Joseph White, my boy," said McAlister, "That was a brave thing to do!"

"Baal me jarrard," he replied, standing in the surf and shivering proudly.

