

SAMMY COX.

FIRST WHITE MAN IN TASMANIA.

FACT OR MYTH?

By

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(C)



Sammy Cox who lived well over a hundred years.

Was Samuel Emanuel Cox the first white settler in Tasmania? Is his strange and early eventful life true? States a report: *“On June 5, 1891 there died at the Launceston invalid Asylum at the age of 117 Samuel Cox, believed to have been the first white person to live in Tasmania.”* (Examiner newspaper) Another article published states, *“A Tasmanian William Buckley?”* (reference to William Buckley who lived with aborigines in Victoria- *The Argus* – Melbourne 17 Oct 1931) another, *“English Boy was adopted by Blacks”* (Examiner August 12, 1961). Sammy has been credited in having the above mentioned distinctions. Indeed he is honoured especially on the north west coast and has a bistro at the local inn in Carrick named after him.



Left: Sammy Cox Bistro. Right: Carrick Hotel.

The hotel is very old going back to 1833. It has been accepted that Sammy's claims have been true for many years. Numerous articles have been published in various newspapers and magazines reiterating the belief. But was he? If it is true, the historical implications are enormous. Even such publications as the *Australian Dictionary of Biography Vol 1* (1966) carries an article on him, not reputing the claims. Well firstly let's look at the accepted story....

Sammy lived, it is said, to the ripe old age of 117 years dying in 1891, thus being born in 15th November 1773 He as born Samuel Emanuel Jervis (Jarvis is also sometimes stated), the son of Squire Jervis (Cox being an adopted name) who died when Sammy was only ten years of age. He claimed to have been born at Shenstone Park, near Lichfield England, November 15 and was educated at Oscott College, a Catholic educational institution.

Upon the death of his father, his uncle, who turns out to be envious of his brother's lands offers to take the young Samuel, his nephew, to sea with him aboard the vessel "*Regent Fox*". Now the story gets really interesting. In 1789 after Sammy had been sailing with his uncle for six years across the Pacific Ocean, the vessel was apparently in the River Tamar and was in need to take on fresh water. Some reports say at the Heads while another states near George Town. Various interpretations come into play, but the Boatswain (or crew members) told young Sammy, at this time 16-17 years of age that the captain, his uncle, was planning to murder him (or maroon him on a remote island), so that he could claim Sammy's inheritance. His uncle was later Sir John Jervis, afterwards Earl St. Vincent and who became an Admiral. Sammy also claimed that during the voyage the vessel was attacked by pirates (other reports a "warship") in the South Pacific and that that Sammy was holding his uncle's hand when during the encounter had his arm shot off by a canon ball and Sammy was left holding the arm, which seems to me quite impossible.

Mortified of his impending murder, the young man decided to escape from the *Regent Fox* and after anchoring near the Tamar Heads he with crew members went ashore for water. He then took the opportunity to take to the bush and hide from the crew and waited until they gave up searching for him. Off they sailed leaving him alone in this strange land. If a

true tale, he must have been terrified. However, the lucky stars shone upon our hero. He came in contact with some aborigines, but panicking, he ran to the River Tamar and plunged in, in an attempt to escape their perceived deadly clutches. The original inhabitants of this island were good swimmers, as observed by the early explorers and settlers, so they swam after him and brought him back ashore. Afterwards he was to live with them for 26 years.

In 1803 history shows us that the first British settlement took place at Risdon Cove in September and then at Sullivan's Cove 1804 and in the Tamar 1804 and 1805. Thus arrived more whites to this island, Tasmania. Meanwhile Sammy still lived with the aborigines particularly around the area of Quamby under the leadership of whom Sammy called "Black Jack". While hunting one day in the year 1812 near Hadspen he met up with some white people, the first he ever seen since deserting his ship, the *Regent Fox* in 1789. He then left the native people and took up again with the whites, in particular a family of settlers on the north west coast and attached himself to Elias of the Cox family. Other reports state he met with a Mr Simmons, not Cox.

Thereon, his life was rather normal, if not dull. He was a gardener in the Longford, Bishopsbourne and Carrick district and for 50 years lived on the Whitshaw property, *Armidale*, Carrick in a cottage he called, "Little Moat" where Thomas Reiby lived while building *Entally*. Sammy was described by an early settler, Mrs. Blazely of Carrick, as a "*short kindly old fellow who spoke in a jerky voice*". Sammy also boasted around the neighbourhood that he was in line for an Earldom in England. As he aged he was persuaded to place himself into the Launceston Old Peoples Depot. He died in 1891 at the grand old age of 117, other sources say 115 years old with official records stating 110 years old. Whatever, he lived to a great age. That is the claim and the generally accepted story of Sammy Cox.

His name and tale have become part of folklore. When did this become so? It seems really late in his life. When over a hundred years old he appeared in the Launceston magistrate's court on a charge of being intoxicated and was fined five shillings. Prior to this he had related his story to any one willing to listen. One was Thomas Wilkes Monds who owned and operated the Carrick Flour Mill near Sammy's home and who had befriended him and promoted the tale. It is understood that Monds travelled to England in 1880 to substantiate Sammy's story, but without success.

Sammy's arrest seems to highlight his claims once again and many appeared to accept his story. In the year 1900 a letter was received from a Mr. E. Jervis of Frankston (Victoria) to the Superintendent of the Launceston Benevolent Asylum where Sammy lived out his last days seeking information respecting an old man named "Sammy Cox". The writer claimed that Sammy was his grand uncle and requested a photo of him. It is interesting that while at the asylum Sammy's claims to be a member of a well connected family was not believed.

There exist other versions of how Sammy came here. One appeared in *The Tasmanian News* of 1884 (9th Oct) that Sammy was born in Absent Mountain in North Wales and had landed in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) in 1781 and not 1789 and was an apprentice on board the ship. (If born in 1773 he would have only been 8 years of age). After accompanying crew members who went ashore in the Tamar to obtain water he was accidentally left behind and fortunately for the child, was found by aborigines. He arrived here not on the *Regent Fox* but the vessel *Regent Gose*. However, research finds no such vessel was in our vicinity at that time. Some reports state that the vessel was not the *Regent Fox*, but the *Empire Fox* or the *Flying Fox*.

Is Sammy's story true? If it is, as stated, it is hugely important historically.

There are, however, numerous problems with the tale. The first problem encountered is that the school he said had attended did not begin until 1794. There is no evidence of any vessel called the *Regent Fox* (or the others) being in the area in 1789 let alone the *Regent Gose*. There was a vessel called the *Mercury* captained by John Henry Cox who did visit Van Diemen's Land in 1789 sailing inside Shouten Island, Maria Island and discovered Oyster Bay.

The other is his age. If he was 117 it would have been possible for him to be aboard the vessel but if he was 110, it would have him being born in 1781 thus he was only be eight years old in 1789 even at that time too young to be aboard the vessel and his father, it is said, died when he was ten years of age.

Question: why would the captain, Sammy's uncle let his murderous plans be known to the Boatswain who in turn passed on the terrible news to young Sammy? Surely if he was planning murder he would keep it to himself. The more important thought is that Admiral Jervis had no reason to kill his nephew being a very successful man in his own right. His career path is easily traced, being such a prominent person and he was no where near Tasmania the year in question. Indeed in 1789 he was a politician and not sailing in the South Pacific. Paintings exist of the Admiral which shows he also had both arms. The Admiral had two brothers, but neither of them fit the bill.

The other major problem I have is that, unlike William Buckley who lived with the Victorian aborigines for many years, Sammy could not recount much at all about the Tasmanian aboriginal living habits, their culture or language. Surely living with them for up to 26 year he should have known a lot more. Indeed to be fair, newspapers stated in his obituary about his life with the aborigines that, "*great extent doubted.*" (Examiner). If he lived with the aborigines, did he marry as did Buckley?

What is known is that a convict arrived in Tasmania aboard the *Lady Nelson*, 29th July 1812 with the name Samuel Cox. Another Samuel Cox, Protestant, arrived as a steerage passenger aboard the *Phoenix* docking in Hobart Town 26th January 1825. This Samuel Cox

came from St Leonard's England. On 6th March 1828, researcher Andrew K.S. Piper reports that this Samuel Cox was found guilty of an assault on a boy, which appears to be of a sexual nature. He was confined for two months. Then in 2 October 1835 he was again sentenced for an assault on a boy with "*intent to commit an unnatural offence*". He was sentenced to two years imprisonment, which included working in a chain gang at Bridgewater. It is possible this was our Samuel Cox, who would do his best to hide his background.

It is interesting that the Tasmanian Colonial Government, having heard of Samuel's claims to the Jervis family in England sought financial reimbursement from the family for his up keep at the Launceston Invalid Asylum. After investigations the Tasmanian Government dropped any further endeavour to do so. I would suggest they found out that Sammy's claims had no foundation.

Thomas Wilkes Monds once stated that the vessel *Regent Fox* was named after Prime Minister of England, Charles Fox, who became Regent when King George III became unfit to rule. The major problem is that Charles Fox was never Regent.

Is it possible that Sammy was inspired by the publication of Buckley's story in Tasmania, the fame of the Earl of St Vincent and the adventures of Horatio Nelson who too had his arm shot off? Was he inspired by the visitation of Captain Cox in the *Mercury* to the River Tamar in 1789? Or Stevenson's novel "Kidnapped".

The story of Samuel Cox being the first man to live in Tasmania has become accepted folklore. In my opinion, it is based in myth.