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## Schoolboy Tourist 1889

### Peter MacFie

Letters of Percy Shearn, aged 15.

The notoriety of Port Arthur has attracted (official) visitors even before its closure in 1877. By 1889 - less than 13 years later - Port Arthur's tourist industry was thriving, as can be seen by the following two letters of Percy Shearn.

Percy Charles Shearn was born on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1873 at St. Leonards where his parents Charles Henry Shearn and Mary Ann (formerly Richards) ran a small but obviously busy store (it took Charles over two months to find the time to register Percy's birth in Launceston). Charles' father had arrived per the schooner *Mary Ann* from Sydney as a cabin passenger in February 1844.

By 1889 the Shearns had moved their home to Patterson Street, Launceston. Charles had set up a business as an accountant and commission agent in George Street. Meanwhile Percy was holidaying in Hobart whilst anxiously awaiting his school examination results.

He visited the old settlement accompanied by "Aunty Smith" and an unspecified number of children, presumably his cousins. Accommodation was available privately, or in the *Carnarvon Hotel*, as the *Commandant's House* was then known, where James H. Cowan was the publican. (He is buried at Port Arthur cemetery.)

Despite being known officially as Carnarvon, the reputation of Port Arthur attracted tourists. The visitors travelled on the *Flora*, a steam ship of 838 tons, one of the number of ships big and small which ran regular summer trips to Port Arthur.

Percy's brief description of sea-sick passengers is very convincing. Guided by elderly ex-prisoners, Percy visited the ruins much as visitors do today. The Model Prison and the Asylum were still intact, yet to be burnt out for the 1895 bushfires. As souvenirs, Percy "cut bits of wood off different places in the buildings", and kept a "bit of lead" and an ivy leaf from the Church.

Following closure of Port Arthur, the pauper ex-convicts were removed to the old Cascades Womens' Prison. Some preferred to return to the familiar surroundings of Port Arthur however, where they entertained, and – if Percy Shearn's reaction is typical – frightened the younger generation by their association with the unfamiliar and infamous past of the site. Percy's drawings - which surrounded his letters - indicate the graphic impacts the descriptions and the surroundings had.

As guiding is a tradition at Port Arthur now established longer than the prison era, these letters can give an insight into their early days, as well as the surprising lack of a schoolboy's knowledge of Port Arthur and to the wide-eyed sensitivity of an impressionable, devoted (and naïve) son.

Copies of these letters were passed to the Port Arthur Conservation Project from the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston. We gratefully acknowledge their permission to reprint these letters.

## Transcript of letters

### Letter 1

Top of letter, sketch of chained convicts with armed labelled 'The Good Old Times, Port Arthur'.

Port Arthur is a beautiful place you can hardly realize that it has been the scene of so much suffering and cruelty. Some of the stone steps are worn very much and to think you stand in the cells, stand in the dining room, walk in the exercise grounds and go about where once walked chained convicts.

Sketch in body of letter, titled 'Oh, how nice', with a sketch of a cat-o-nine-tails and a rifle with bayonet and caption "Quite a nice thing to get a whipping with and the gun to keep you in order."

New Town  
15/1/1889

My dear Mama and Dada.

I was very glad to get your welcome letters this morning and to know that you are quite well and getting on all right. I went to Port Arthur yesterday. (I was not able to write last night but you will get this letter just as soon as if I had after all I went through you will see I was hardly able to write letters.) Left home about 8am walked into Hobart down to the wharf (about 3 miles) on the way going to the post office to send a letter to you, then went and got my ticket.

The boat left about 9a.m. It was the *T.S.N.6 Flora*.

We got to Port Arthur about a ¼ to one p.m. (I had dinner before going on shore). It was rather rough people sick in all directions and sprawling about everywhere some laying flat on the deck with their head towards the side others are rolled up in a kind of ball it was awful she was pitching and tossing dreadfully both going and coming.

I was in the Bow (where you feel all the tossing and pitching and rolling.) Well we got there all safe and sound and on shore I went I saw an old fellow showing some gentlemen about and without asking their permission I attached myself to them (I wanted to see all there was to see and hear all about it) so I went with these gentlemen (they did not say anything so I concluded they did not mind and went about with them hearing the explanations given by

the old man and hearing about everything. It is useless for me to attempt to tell you about everything I saw therein writing I will have to tell you when I see you about the Prison, Church, Magazine, Hospital and Model Prison. The Model Prison was the prison where the worst prisoners were confined it was very silent there was no noise allowed the prisoners never saw each other; even when the officers walked about they wore slippers over their boots to muffle the sound. There were a couple of cells where the prisoners were put if they misbehaved themselves broke rules etc. The walls are 6ft thick and you have 4 doors to pass through to get to it all at different angles it is pitch dark inside they were put here from 3 to 30 days according to the offence. I have cut bits of wood off different places in the buildings. A bit of lead and an ivy leaf from the church which is roofless and windowless, pulpitless and pewless also doorless being at the same time floorless, so you see there isn't much of it left, only the skeleton which is rather shaky, I believe by the looks of it, but a most picturesque ruin nevertheless with a lot of ivy on it, it is very pretty. I took a hasty sketch of the magazine, and the model prison. (They charge 6<sup>d</sup> to let you in there, it belongs to a private person I wish it belonged to me.) Looking at it over the top of the hospital wall they are sketches just on a rough outline. I will try and do 2 pictures properly from them at home, I think I can, I know you like anything like that, (I have not quite finished the mill yet I am doing it so carefully it does look so nice.) I wish I could paint in oils if I could I would go and stop at Port Arthur (There is an Hotel and some private houses there) and paint all the places they would be so nice as curious and be very valuable in times to come when the places are all pulled down, and there is nothing left of these relics of the old days (gone never to return.) Port Arthur is a most beautiful place and very healthy I believe. Will you please excuse me not describing the place fully as it is almost impossible to do so by letter I will tell you all about them fully when I see you. We got back about 7 p.m. and I walked home, after a little refreshment. I saw a genuine ghost last night I will tell you all about it another time. I hope you are satisfied with my school report. Well Dear parents Goodbye and with lots of love and kisses, I ever remain your affect, son, Percy O. Shearn

## Letter 2

Sketch of Percy with the old blind man at the top of the page labelled 'Aunty Smith's blind man and me'

One of the old blind men who insisted on having one of my hands and also feeling me. You can imagine I enjoyed it and whether I washed my hands or not. I let him do it because he was blind and put up with any unpleasant feelings. I am trying to be more amiable.

Second sketch is titled 'Explained in letter' and is of a man tied to the triangle and being flogged.

New Town  
15-1-1889

Dear Mama and Dada,

I hope you are both quite well. Looking over my reports today I think on the whole I got on better than before and hope you think the same and hope you are pleased and satisfied with me. I have just come in I have been outside talking to a couple of the blind men one is a respectable one who plays on a musical instrument I think I mentioned him before as having played "Home Sweet Home" to me when I asked him to. The other one is one that used to go out to Aunty Smith's. She called him "my old blind man". She recognised him when she was down here by his large feet. He is such a queer person to talk to he carries a large stick and always has such a peculiar smile on his face and then he will get so close to you and he speaks rather loudly. I have put a representation of him and me at the commencement of the letter. The other picture is meant for a flogging (I hope you like the subject it is such a pleasant one). The man at the triangles (They are those 3 sticks) is supposed to be stripped to the waist and the marks on his back are intended for the marks made with the cat-o-nine-tails (it is supposed to be that thing which the other man holds in his hand). There is also a soldier to keep him in order with the prison gate in the background with guardhouse beside it. The picture is entirely original (all I put in are). It took me nearly all the morning to write a letter to you (8 pages). I did not get up early I was so tired after yesterday. Aunty does not get up early. In the afternoon I went for a walk with Aunty up by the creek it was very nice, I do hope you are enjoying yourself Dear Mama and that Dear Dada is getting on all right. Well dear parents I must close. And commending you to my Heavenly Father's Keeping, I remain, Your ever affect. Son, Percy O. Shearn

The Children are not well, so Aunty cannot write, will Dear Mama excuse her. (You understand, Dear Mama.) She sends her love.

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