

***GEORGE BASS***



***THE DISCOVERY  
OF BASS STRAIT***

**George Bass**

# **The Discovery of Bass Strait**

**Enriched edition.**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Lance Thomas*

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# Introduction

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Pressing south along an ill-defined shore in small, vulnerable boats, a naval surgeon learns to trust the sea's signs over inherited charts, pursuing the unsettling possibility that a continent might be broken by water and that certainty must be earned with soundings, headwinds, and the measured courage to keep going when the map runs out, as tides, swell, and the angle of distant headlands become a grammar of inference and every wet, wind-bitten mile converts suspicion into knowledge, turning a scattered sequence of bays and islands into the decisive idea of a strait and the sobering responsibility of naming what is found.

The Discovery of Bass Strait by George Bass is an exploration narrative set along the southeastern rim of Australia during the late 1790s, when British naval surveys probed the outline of the continent from Port Jackson to the latitude of Van Diemen's Land. Drawn from Bass's reports and journals of coastal voyages, it records the observations that established the existence of the passage now called Bass Strait. The work belongs to the pragmatic maritime writing of its era, favoring logbook precision, coastal description, and cautious deduction over embellishment, and it presents the incremental, practical labor by which empty spaces on charts became measured water.

Beginning from the settled anchorage at Port Jackson and ranging southward in stages, the narrative traces a

methodical reconnaissance: short runs along an unfamiliar coast, repeated landfalls, and the patient reading of tides, swell, and shoreline orientation for signs of a dividing passage. The voice is steady and observant, marked by bearings, soundings, and weather rather than drama, yet the cumulative effect is tense and absorbing, as hazard and inference build together. Readers encounter an economical style that speaks in the language of seamanship, allowing the excitement of discovery to emerge from precise detail rather than overt rhetoric or retrospect.

Without theatrics, Bass's account demonstrates a disciplined process: testing a suspicion with a series of coastal forays, verifying each inference against the next headland, and resisting premature conclusions until observations align. It hints at the collaborative fabric of early Australian hydrography, in which officers compared notes, shared boats and crews, and worked under the colonial administration of New South Wales; in the same period Bass cooperated closely with Matthew Flinders. Yet the emphasis stays on the southward track itself, where a map begins to cohere from scattered facts, and a continent's outline is reconsidered in the shifting light of the sea.

Among the work's central themes are the testing of ideas against resistant reality and the conversion of seaborne experience into authoritative chart. Observation competes with rumor; patience refutes wishful thinking; and the hazards of wind, lee shores, and scant provisions refine judgment. Naming, too, becomes thematic, reminding readers that maps are not neutral records but instruments

of power and memory. The sea functions at once as antagonist and instructor, demanding humility while rewarding careful attention. In this narrative, navigation is a form of empirical reasoning performed under pressure, where each sounding is evidence and each decision a wager on incomplete knowledge.

For contemporary readers, the book models how knowledge emerges from partial, fallible data—an approach that resonates with modern science, polar exploration, and fieldwork of many kinds. At the same time, it prompts critical attention to the colonial lens through which land and sea were recorded and renamed. The coasts and islands described here are also Country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with long-standing maritime knowledge, and recognizing this reframes claims of discovery as declarations of European notice. Read alongside that awareness, Bass's account becomes both a compelling sea story and a document that invites ethical, historical conversation.

Approached as both adventure and document, *The Discovery of Bass Strait* rewards attention to its small details: the set of a current, the profile of a headland at dusk, the quiet reckoning after a difficult landfall. Its pacing mirrors the coast it describes, alternating cramped labor with sudden expanses, and its tone maintains discipline without extinguishing wonder. As a bridge between observation and idea, the narrative endures because it teaches how to think with evidence under uncertainty, how to read environments carefully, and how to question the

authority of maps even as we rely on them to make the world navigable.