





*This is the first in a series by a Melbourne writer and academic who is obsessed with Tasmania's giant freshwater crayfish, *Astacopsis gouldi*. This wonderful creature appears regularly in the written and oral history of the state, and there are many tales to tell about it. This is just one of them.*

## Lobster à la library

*writer and photographer* **Terry Mulhern**

Few people realise there are giant Tasmanian freshwater lobsters hiding in the State Library of New South Wales. They aren't live lobsters or even preserved specimens. They can be found in the diary of colonial surveyor John Helder Wedge (1793-1872).

Tu: 26 [February 1828] ... we crossed the Alarm River a little above its junction with the Tret ... We caught a quantity of Trout and Blackfish ... and two very large freshwater Lobsters."

Although *Iuteralipina* – the giant freshwater crayfish – has been eaten by Tasmanian Aborigines for thousands of years, this is the earliest account of a white man catching and eating them.

Wedge's Tret, later renamed Detention River, empties into Bass Strait mid-way between Stanley and Wynyard in north-west Tasmania. Its confluence with the Alarm River is



above left Mountain trout

above lutaralipina or giant freshwater crayfish

left River blackfish

about 10km inland. Wedge and his survey party were camped here because one of his men was ill and needed rest. They were also running short of provisions, so while they rested, they fished.

The “trout” were *Galaxias truttaceus*, which locals still refer to as “mountain trout”, and the blackfish were *Gadopsis marmoratus*, slippery monsters with sweet-tasting, white flesh. When you add a couple of lobsters (which I’ve been told are delicious), this was quite a feast and would have made a welcome change from salted meat and damper.

But who was John Helder Wedge and why was he in north-west Tasmania in February 1828?

Wedge was raised in Shudy Camps in rural Cambridgeshire, England. Times were tough fol-

lowing the end of the Napoleonic Wars. So, in 1824, Wedge and his older brother emigrated to Van Diemen’s Land. They set up a water-powered sawmill at Oyster Cove, south of Hobart, and both also established farms on the South Esk River in the Northern Midlands. John Helder Wedge, who had trained under his father Charles, was also employed by the government as an assistant surveyor.

Wedge became frustrated by his lack of advancement in the Survey Department, so in 1835 he threw his lot in with his friend John Batman and became one of the “founding fathers” of Melbourne. Wedge travelled back to England in 1838 and then, after his father’s death in 1843, returned to Tasmania. Wedge is buried in the Perth Cemetery, not far from his estate, Leighlands.



*Tret [Detention] River*

Back in 1828, Wedge's main task had been measuring out the land granted to newly arrived settlers by Lieutenant-Governor Arthur. But on one occasion Wedge was in the north-west as Arthur's "spy". A few years earlier, the British Government had granted a quarter of a million acres in this remote and unexplored region to a group of London financiers called the Van Diemen's Land Company. The VDL Co had ambitious plans to grow fine merino wool here.

It was a huge gamble, as no-one in London (or Van Diemen's Land for that matter) knew if there was much grassland in the north-west. It turns out that there wasn't, and as a result the company's local manager, Edward Curr, argued repeatedly with Arthur over the location of the company's grant. Curr had his eye on land closer to Launceston, but Arthur stood firm. Allowing the company to tie up a huge swathe of prime pastoral

land adjacent to the "settled districts" was not on Arthur's agenda. He was developing a thriving private property market in the colony – a market in which the Arthur family had significant pecuniary interests. So, Arthur sent Wedge to assess the lands then occupied by the Company and to report on whether Curr's belly-aching had any basis.

Unsurprisingly, Wedge recommended that the company remain confined in the distant north-west. Wedge did agree with Curr that there was only limited ready-made pasture, but he infuriated the VDL Co manager by saying there was plenty of good soil for agriculture; it just needed to be cleared.

Anyone who has ever visited the north-west's dense eucalypt and myrtle forests will know why this enraged Curr. Clearing the land using axe and saw was backbreaking and labour-intensive. On the scale the VDL Co required, it would be mind-bogglingly expensive.

To Wedge's credit, he was right about the soil – north-west Tasmania's rich red volcanic loams have made it one of Australia's great dairy and vegetable-growing regions. But Curr had another reason to resent Wedge's "uninvited" presence.

In the months before Wedge's arrival at Circular Head there had been escalating conflict at nearby Cape Grim between VDL Co shepherds and the indigenous peerapper, whose country they had occupied. Initially, relations were cordial but, when the shepherds "enticed" peerapper women into their hut, violence erupted. At least one peerapper man was killed and a shepherd was speared in the thigh. As payback, the peerapper drove off the cliffs into the sea 118 of the company's precious ewes.

Curr retaliated by sending a boatload of armed men to Cape Grim. Under the cover of darkness, they ambushed the peerapper at their camp, killing as many as 12. The vengeful climax – which occurred a week after Wedge arrived at Circular Head – is now known as the Cape Grim massacre. Thirty peerapper men, women and children were murdered by Curr's shepherds at a place they then named "Suicide" Bay. When the powder smoke cleared, this time it was human bodies that were thrown off the high cliffs into the sea.

Somehow, Curr managed to keep the killings a secret from Wedge and Arthur.

For seven weeks, an oblivious Wedge criss-crossed the war zone surveying the countryside, perplexed as to why he hadn't encountered a single aborigine. Early on, he had seen campfire smoke in the distance and sent his men to investigate, "But when the men had got there [there] was no one to be seen". He put it down to the "Natives being remarkably quick sighted" and "very expert in eluding the search of White men".

On the morning of May 1, at Green Point Beach near Marawah, events finally caught up with Wedge.

As he prepared to break camp, Wedge saw "a Native standing perfectly motionless with a bunch of spears on his back at a short distance

from me". He was soon joined by another "16 men armed with spears". The group scattered into the dunes when shots were fired, but one man headed across the beach and plunged into the sea. Wedge assumed this was a decoy and sent a few men after him, while he and the rest of his party pursued the others. But the main group of aborigines escaped, so Wedge's forces reassembled by the water's edge and waited for the swimmer. For more than half an hour Wedge watched "no less to my astonishment than to my admiration" while "He remained swimming amidst the very heavy surf". Eventually, cold and exhausted the "apparently lifeless" man washed ashore. The "man" was a nine-year old boy. Wedge "rubbed his loins and brought him to".

Wedge was a pious Christian and, by all accounts, sympathetic to the campaign to abolish slavery. Incongruously, instead of allowing the tearful and frightened little boy to run off to re-join his family, Wedge decided to embark on an "experiment".

"I had long wished to have a boy of this description under my own care — for I always dissented from the prevailing opinion that, however kindly treated ... they would be treacherous and take the first opportunity to return to their tribes".

The boy's name was Wheete Coolera, but Wedge called him "May Day", in honour of the day he "saved" him. Wheete was the first of four Aboriginal children – three boys and a girl – whom Wedge kept at Leighlands over the years. When visitors came to dinner, "May Day", dressed in young man's finery, was displayed as a curiosity.

Wedge kept Wheete as his constant companion and even took the boy on his survey expeditions, where Wheete sourced bush foods for himself and his "Master".

I wonder if this reminded Wheete of happier times spent running and laughing at the side of his mother and aunties? Harvesting edible fruits and fungi. Cooking oysters and abalone on driftwood bonfires. Perhaps Wheete and his mother squatted quietly by a slow-moving forest stream, tied a bone

to a length of twine, tossed it into the water and waited for the pull of a lobster.

Was Wedge's "experiment" a success? There is no evidence that Wheete attempted a "treacherous" escape. But Wheete was alone, so very young and Wedge took him such a long way from his own country. Perhaps when he was older, he might have tried to run away, like the other boys did. We'll never know. Wheete died in the winter of 1830 from "a violent inflammation of the chest". He would have been 11 years old.

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As I closed Wedge's diary, I wished that the lobster had revealed to me less of Wedge and more of Wheete. Then I noticed Wedge's sketches on the front page. In the centre, a young boy holds what could be a telescope. He has dark skin, curly black hair, sensuous lips and arrestingly long eyelashes. Wheete Coolera? 📷

*Terry Mulhern is a Melbourne-based writer. He has lived in Victoria for more than 20 years but, like a swift parrot, he migrates every summer across Bass Strait to north-west Tasmania. More of his writing can be found at [www.terrymulhern.com](http://www.terrymulhern.com).*



Frontispiece from Helder Wedge's 1828 diary, showing a young boy (Wheete Coolera?) near the centre of the page  
courtesy of State Library of New South Wales