

We couldn't quite believe it when the two ships came in and anchored in the bay – for four years we have clung to life in this godforsaken spot. For four years we had cursed the Captain who had abandoned us here, we cursed our shipmates who had sailed off without us, we cursed the barren beaches, the rough hillsides, the rain, the mud, and our bad fortune.

It had seemed like a grand adventure, one that would give me money for passage back home, what a fool I had been. 'Join a sealing vessel and make your fortune,' they had said, 'you can pass, you'll make a great cabin boy, here I'll give you my jacket.' Drunk on life I let them cut off my hair. It had seemed such a lark, duping the men, being accepted as one of them.

So I sailed from New Zealand south, but the seals were gone – we found piles of bones, we found the abandoned cook pots, we were too late, sealers before us had taken all. So further south we sailed. The Captain was sure that at Campbell Island we would find our quarry. The first beach we reached was empty as before. The Captain ordered us to split into groups and go searching. My three companions and I found a few animals lying like slugs in a small cove, and rushed back to tell the others, but they were gone, nowhere to be seen. We walked from cove to cove, scrambled up the hill to scan, but nothing, no sign, empty beaches and empty ocean. We had two muskets between us, three knives, a flint, the clothes we stood up in, one blanket and one big secret.

At first I tried to keep it from them, fearful of what would happen, but they already had suspicions, and living as we did, relying on each other, soon stripped away all barriers. We explored the island from east to west, from north to south and in our searching we found a small herd of cattle and a cache of supplies, left long ago by other sealers. Oh, the joy of a cook pot and a bag of grain! We constructed a stone and sod hut next to a stream by the shoreline, collected eggs and seabirds and slaughtered any seals we found – carefully skinning them - still hoping that we could salvage something from our hardship. After four years we had gathered a mere 170 – we had heard that in the 1820s one man might get that number in a few days! The years went by, slowly.

Finally it happened - not one, but two ships, the *Eliza Scott* and the *Sabrina* dropped anchor – we

raced to greet the men as they came ashore. Sent by the English whaling firm Enderby Brothers, they had come to find new grounds and explore for new lands. They had only called into Campbell Island to pick up fresh water – they were on their way south. They didn't expect to pick up four poor souls, and one a woman. Space on the ships was tight, and so we were split; I joined Captain Freeman on the *Sabrina*. It was strange to not be together anymore, back aboard a vessel, three square meals, but heading further south, not north towards home.

The air chilled, astonishing lumps of ice came floating by and penguins porpoised through the waves. And then we saw it – land! Icy, white, beautiful, never seen before. The two ships travelling in tandem came as close as they dared and I watched from the deck as Captain Freeman ordered the whale boat to be lowered, and he and some sailors rowed to the *Eliza Scott*, and picked up Captain Bellany. Later in the mess, I heard how they'd managed to step foot on a rocky beach, pick up some stones and claim the island for the King. We spent the next few days sailing around these new islands, the cartographer mapping and sketching, all admiring the ice cliffs and high peaks. I hoped we would then head north, but no, we went further south, until an ice barrier blocked our way. I have never seen anything so beautiful, I'm not sure any woman has ever seen anything like it, a flat carpet of white, a cliff of pale blue, peaks of ice, as the sun set everything glowing. Antarctica!

And then the wind picked up, and up. We turned and ran for the north, the ship bucking and buckling, the men scrambling to clear scuppers, furl the flapping sails and bailing, endless bailing as the hold began to fill. We have now lost sight of the *Eliza Scott*. The Captain has lit the blue lights: I know what that means, we are done for.

On the night of 24 March 1839, in a severe gale, *Sabrina* sank with all hands. *Eliza Scott* returned safely to Britain.

Anonymous: The first woman to see Antarctica

Hannah Lawson

