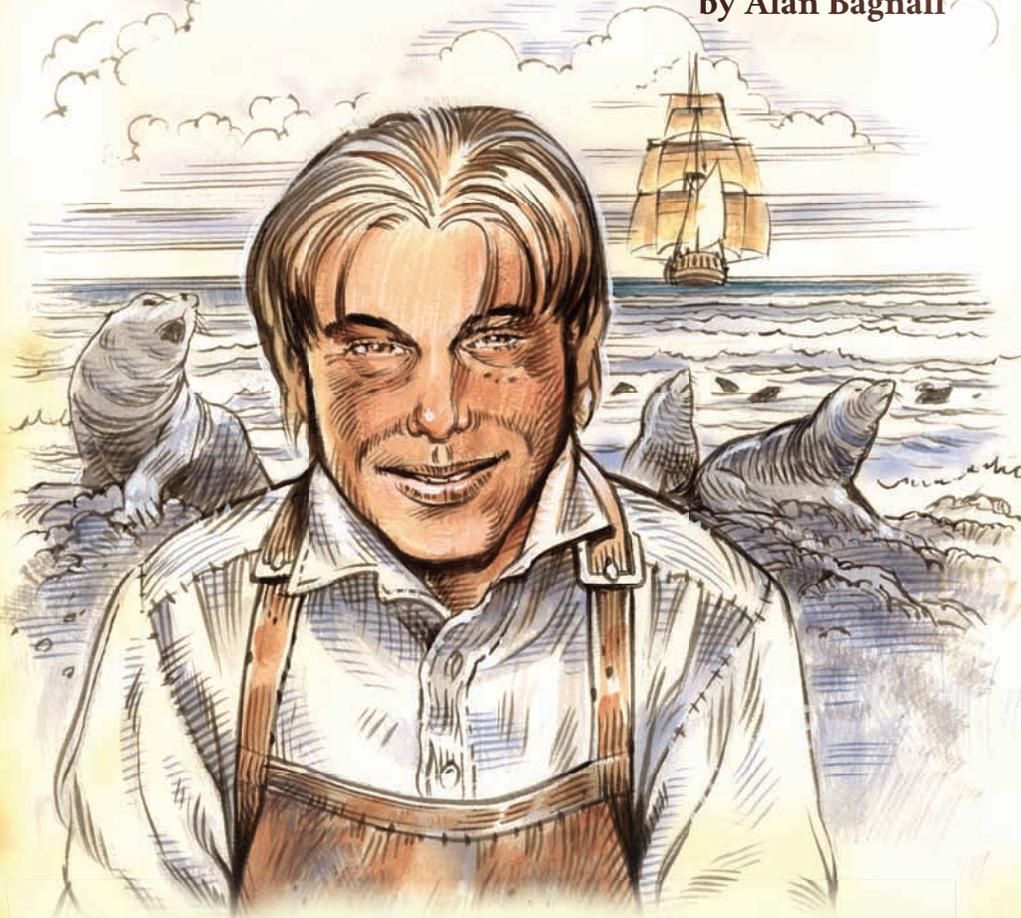


My Name Is Davy Lowston

by Alan Bagnall



*My name is Davy Lowston, I did seal, I did seal.
My name is Davy Lowston, I did seal.
Though my men and I were lost,
Though our very lives 'twould cost,
We did seal, we did seal, we did seal.*

This story is about a true event. In 1810, a group of men were left on some remote islands to catch seals – but the ship that was meant to pick them up never returned. Davy Lowston was one of those men. We don't know a lot about him. The author has based this story on what we do know, but he has imagined many of the details.

My name is Davy Lowston. New Zealand's oldest folk song is about me. My story is true, and I'll tell it as it happened. I didn't keep a diary because I never learnt to read or write, but this is what I remember.

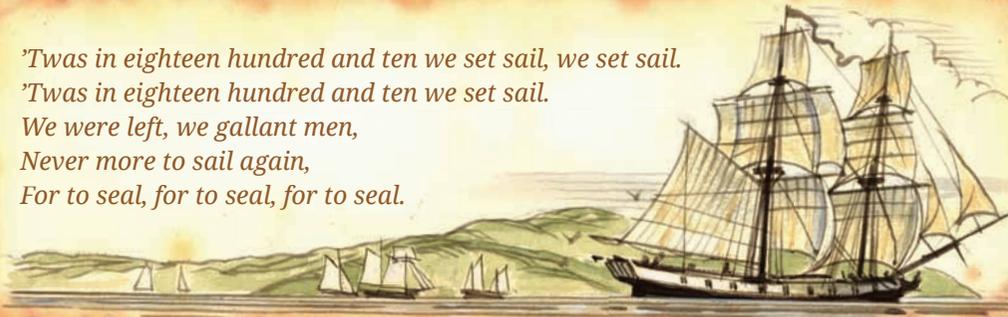
I grew up in the crowded city of London. One evening, while I was walking on the London docks, two men grabbed me. They pulled me onto a whaling ship and locked me in a cabin. There was nothing I could do. They didn't let me out until the ship had left port.

The whaling ship sailed to the South Pacific. It was a hard voyage, but I learnt a lot. By the time we arrived in Port Jackson, Sydney Harbour, I knew all about hunting and killing whales.

Still, I hated the whaling life, so while we were in Sydney, I crept ashore in the middle of the night and hid until the ship left port again. I was free, but I had no money. What could I do?

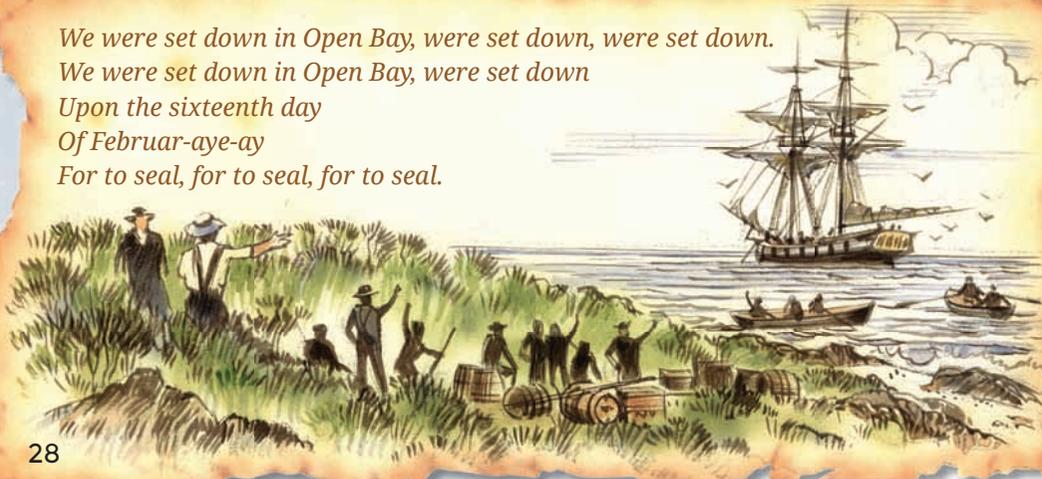
Then I heard that the captain of the **brig** *Active* was looking for sealers. Sealskins and whale oil were worth a lot in those days. Rich people wore sealskin coats to keep warm, and whale oil was used to light street lamps. So, I joined the *Active*, and we set sail for New Zealand.

*'Twas in eighteen hundred and ten we set sail, we set sail.
'Twas in eighteen hundred and ten we set sail.
We were left, we gallant men,
Never more to sail again,
For to seal, for to seal, for to seal.*



Ten of us landed on the rocky shore of the Open Bay Islands off the south-west coast of the South Island. The islands were bare except for a few patches of scrub, and they were surrounded by wild, stormy ocean. They were home for thousands of seals and screeching sea birds.

*We were set down in Open Bay, were set down, were set down.
We were set down in Open Bay, were set down
Upon the sixteenth day
Of Februar-aye-ay
For to seal, for to seal, for to seal.*

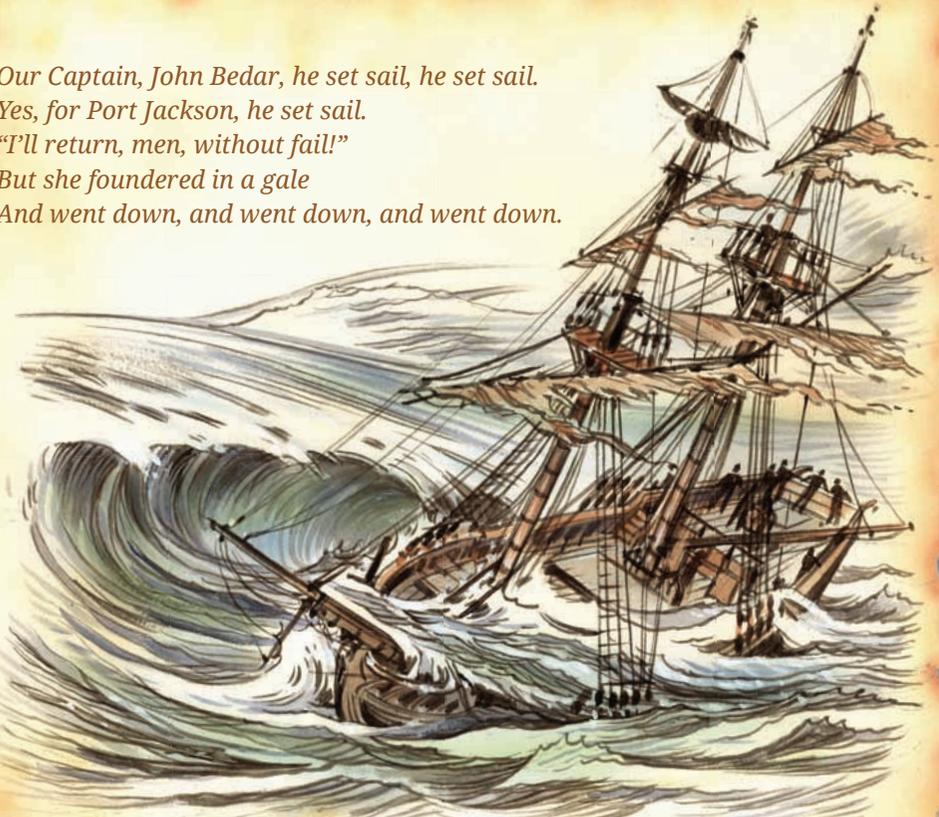


The captain promised he would be back soon with food and other supplies. Then he left for Sydney.

The Open Bay Islands were often swept by rain and sleet. There was little protection from the cold and the wind, so we built huts for shelter. They were tiny, with walls of stone and roofs made from tussock grass.

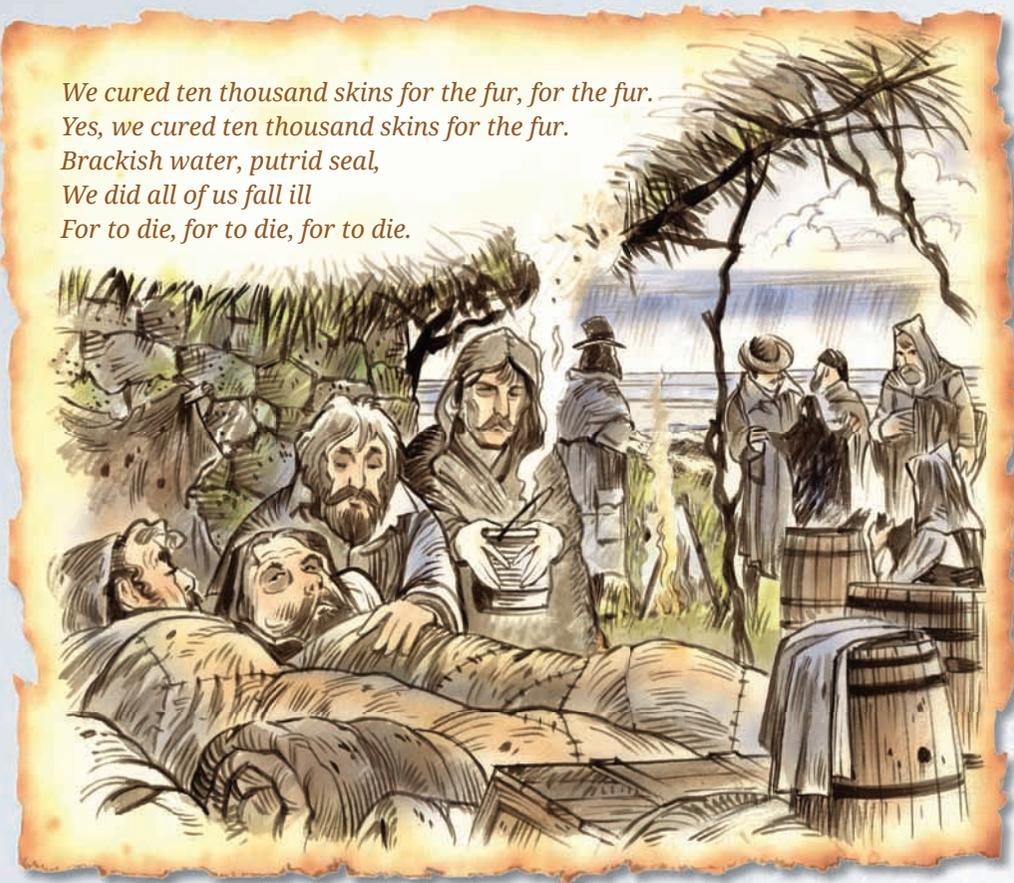
Our team worked hard. We killed and skinned ten thousand seals. Every day we kept a lookout for the *Active*, but in vain. We didn't know that the ship had run into a terrible storm and sunk on the way back to Australia.

*Our Captain, John Bedar, he set sail, he set sail.
Yes, for Port Jackson, he set sail.
"I'll return, men, without fail!"
But she foundered in a gale
And went down, and went down, and went down.*



We were left on those bleak islands for three years and ten months. Mostly we ate seal meat, but as time went by, we killed most of the seals. It became harder and harder to get enough to eat. Sometimes we ate fern roots, but there weren't many of them, and they tasted terrible. Some of us became very sick.

*We cured ten thousand skins for the fur, for the fur.
Yes, we cured ten thousand skins for the fur.
Brackish water, putrid seal,
We did all of us fall ill
For to die, for to die, for to die.*



At last, during our fourth summer, we saw a sail on the horizon. We quickly lit a fire and threw some green branches onto it. We were lucky. The sailors on the **schooner** *Governor Bligh* saw the smoke, and we were rescued. We would not die on those terrible islands after all!

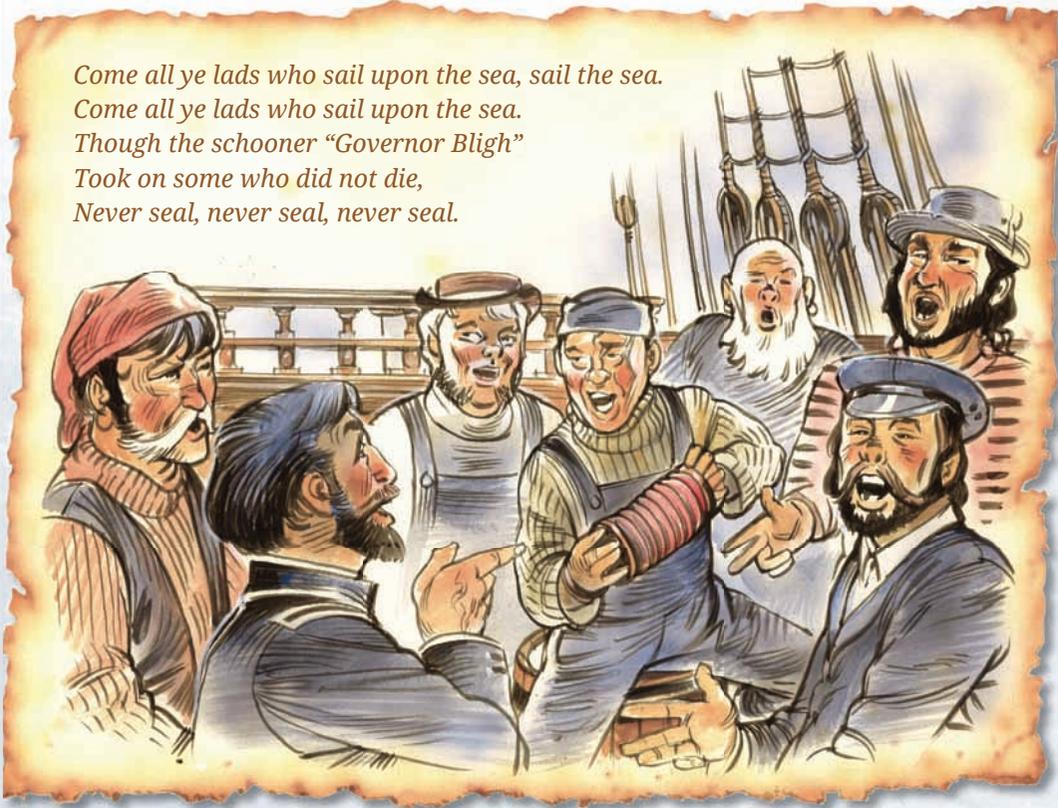
The *Governor Bligh* took us back to Sydney. We had been gone so long that everyone thought we'd died. Suddenly our story was in the newspapers, and we were famous.

But a lot of people in Sydney were like me. They had come from the slums of London, and they couldn't read. They relied on the town crier for their news. The town crier was a man with a loud, booming voice. He walked the streets, ringing a bell and shouting out the latest stories: "Hear ye! Hear ye! Sealing party returns from the dead!"

The town crier made our story into a kind of chant. An American whaling ship was docked at the wharf, and the crew heard the town crier's chant. They liked it so much that they began to sing it to the tune of a popular song. They changed my name from Lowrieston to Lowston to make it fit better. They also said that some of us died. It wasn't true, but it made a better story!

Those American whalers spread the song all around the Pacific. When I heard that it had arrived in New Zealand, I knew our story would be remembered long after we had gone.

*Come all ye lads who sail upon the sea, sail the sea.
Come all ye lads who sail upon the sea.
Though the schooner "Governor Bligh"
Took on some who did not die,
Never seal, never seal, never seal.*



Davy Lowston - the song

The song "Davy Lowston" has been recorded by many singers and musicians. You can listen to it on the audio version of this text at www.schooljournal.tki.org.nz

Perhaps you could learn it. Then "Davy Lowston" will be sung by yet another generation of New Zealanders, two hundred years after it all happened.

GLOSSARY

brig: a sailing ship with two masts

schooner: a sailing ship with the tallest mast at the back

illustrations by Spike Wademan

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by Alan Bagnall

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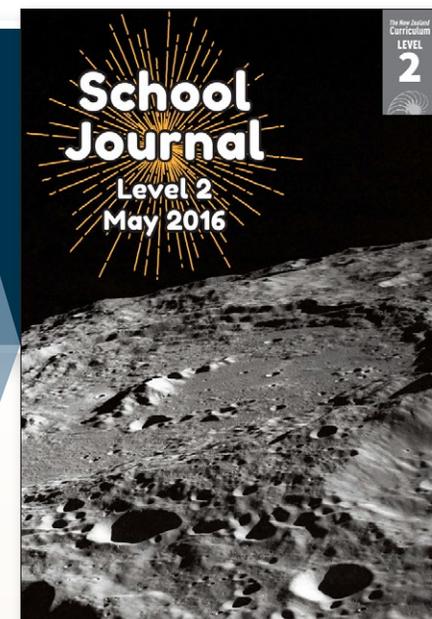
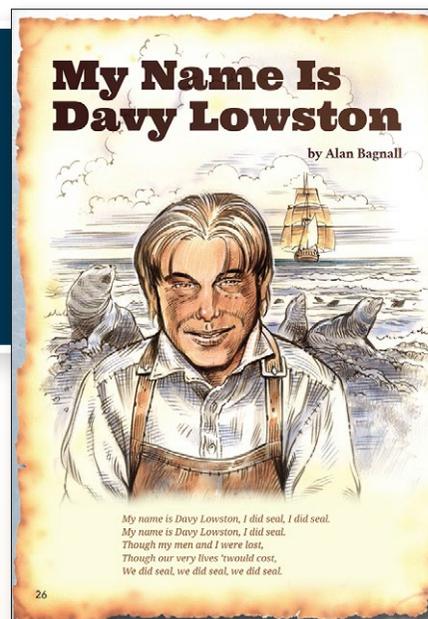
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