

**THE PELICAN  
ISLAND, AND  
OTHER POEMS**

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The Pelican Island, and other poems by James Montgomery

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**JAMES MONTGOMERY**

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"The thoughts that wander through eternity,"  
*Paradise Lost*, book ii.

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1828.

## PREFACE.

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THE subject of "The Pelican Island" was suggested by a passage in Captain Flinders's Voyage to Terra Australis. Describing one of those numerous gulfs which indent the coast of New Holland, and are thickly spotted with small islands, he says:— "Upon two of these we found many young Pelicans unable to fly. Flocks of the old birds were sitting upon the beaches of the lagoon, and it appeared that the islands were their breeding places; not only so, but, from the number of skeletons and bones there scattered, it should seem that for ages these had been selected for the closing scene of their existence. Certainly, none more likely to be free from disturbance of every kind could

have been chosen, than these islets of a hidden lagoon of an uninhabited island [called by Captain F. Kangaroo Island], situate upon an unknown coast, near the antipodes of Europe; nor can any thing be more consonant to their feelings, if Pelicans have any, than quietly to resign their breath, surrounded by their progeny, and in the same spot where they first drew it." — Captain Flinders was particularly struck with the appearance of one of these islands, on the surface of which were scattered the relics of a great number of trees, prostrated by some tremendous storm, or, as he conjectured, self-ignited by the friction of dead branches in a strong wind. This fact (adopting the former hypothesis) suggested the catastrophe described at the close of the third Canto of the Poem.

Having determined not to encumber his volume with notes, which might plausibly have been done to a great extent, — and believing, that those readers, who shall be sufficiently interested in the poem to desire further knowledge



of the subjects progressively reviewed in it, may readily satisfy themselves from popular books of voyages, and natural history, — the Author will merely offer, in this place, an illustration of the nature of coral reefs, extracted from Captain Basil Hall's Voyage to the Island of Loo Choo, in the Chinese Sea.

“ The examination of a coral reef during the different stages of one tide, is particularly interesting. When the tide has left it for some time it becomes dry, and appears to be a compact rock, exceedingly hard and ragged; but as the tide rises, and the waves begin to wash over it, the coral worms protrude themselves from holes which before were invisible. These animals are of a great variety of shapes and sizes, and in such prodigious numbers, that, in a short time, the whole surface of the rock appears to be alive and in motion. The most common worm is in the form of a star, with arms from four to six inches long, which are moved about with a rapid motion in all directions, probably to catch food. Others are so

sluggish, that they may be mistaken for pieces of the rock, and are generally of a dark colour, and from four to five inches long, and two or three round. When the coral is broken about high-water mark, it is a solid hard stone; but if any part of it be detached at a spot which the tide reaches every day, it is found to be full of worms of different lengths and colours, some being as fine as a thread and several feet long, of a bright yellow, and sometimes of a blue colour; others resemble snails, and some are not unlike lobsters in shape, but soft, and not above two inches long.

“ The growth of coral appears to cease when the worm is no longer exposed to the washing of the sea. Thus a reef rises in the form of a cauliflower, till its top has gained the level of the highest tides, above which the worm has no power to advance, and the reef of course no longer extends itself upwards. The other parts in succession reach the surface, and there stop, forming in time a level field with steep sides all round. The reef, however, continually increases,

and being prevented from growing higher, extends itself laterally in all directions. But the growth being as rapid at the upper edge as it is lower down, the steepness of the face of the reef is still preserved. These are the circumstances which render coral reefs so dangerous in navigation; for, in the first place, they are seldom seen above the water; and, in the next, their sides are so steep, that a ship's bow may strike against the rock before any change of soundings has given warning of the danger."

With these brief quotations to explain the two principal circumstances on which the poem is founded, the Author abandons his "Pelican Island" to the judgment of the public, having no hope to conciliate favour by apology or vindication, where he has painfully felt that both would be necessary, if the success or failure of his work did not wholly depend on the manner in which it has been executed. He only requests the reader to bear in mind, that the narrative is supposed to be delivered by the imaginary being who witnesses the series of