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CHAPTER VII

OXLEY IN QUEENSLAND

Oxley was despatched in the old “Mermaid” in quest of a suitable site for doubly convicted felons—somewhere remote—and, leaving Sydney and running north, he anchored in Port Curtis on 5 November 1823. He occupied sixteen days in making a minute examination of the areas from the north head of Bustard Bay to Mount Lawson. (South from Gatcombe Head, he discovered a rapid mountain stream which was named the Boyne.) Disappointed in the prospects there, however, he sailed back south to Moreton Bay without any very sanguine hopes. Rounding Point Skirmish on Bribie Island, he sailed into the mouth of “Pumicestone River” and cast anchor there on 29 November 1823, not far from where the jetty stands at Bribie township at the present time (1958). The history of the settlement of Queensland really begins from that day. Actually, he was not the first explorer of the locality. Apart from Flinders, various others had visited the spot. Captain John Bingle, for example, had been sent in January 1822 with the colonial cutter “Sally” to seek for that river that might enter Moreton Bay, but his investigation had been unsuccessful. (30)

An astonishing circumstance, however, had already led to the discovery of the long-sought Brisbane River by three castaways, two (Thomas Pamphlett; John Finnegan) on ticket-of-leave, and Richard Parsons. These three men, together with a fourth (John Thompson: who died of thirst subsequently), were blown away from Sydney in a small boat during a gale on 21 March 1823. For eleven days in all, they were at the mercy of the wind and the sea, and they only picked up the outline of the coast again on 9 April, nineteen days after being blown away. Confused by the set of the current, they imagined that they were many miles south of Sydney and set out northwards, paddling desperately on, day after day, until they were finally driven ashore in a storm on the eastern beaches of Moreton Island, where their boat was smashed to pieces in the surf. Apparently they followed the coast of the island towards Cape Moreton, cut across behind it to the north shore and turned back with the shore line, southerly. After a check at the south end of the island they crossed to Amity Point and then, with the help of friendly natives (and in a boat they built in three weeks), got to

(30) His contacts with the natives at Toorbul Point are interesting and are mentioned later—Chapter XVI.
JOHN OXLEY

THE DISCOVERER OF THE BRISBANE RIVER AND HIS CHART.
ALLAN CUNNINGHAM
the "Foster Father" of Queensland.

PLATE XIV.

Explorations in south-east Australia (including Cunningham's) up to 1828. (Oxley, and Lockyer, and Logan's trips up Brisbane River, Logan River, etc., not shown.)
Peel Island, and ultimately to the mainland near Ormiston. At Lytton Hill, the first of white men, they saw the broad and deep Brisbane River at the beginning of June 1823. Weary and footsore they pushed on upstream along the ridges as far as what is now Goodna, hoping to find the means to cross the river, but without success. Giving up the attempt, they returned along its actual banks, and near the mouth of a creek (later, for that reason, called “Canoe River” by Oxley, and now Oxley Creek, Brisbane) they found a canoe, by which they finally crossed, and made their way downstream to what is now Luggage Point. They reached it about 1 July 1823; through the Nudgee and Sandgate areas they pressed on to a native camp near Woody Point, and stayed in that area for awhile. Goaded by their isolation, they pressed on north again over the long expanse of Deception Bay; crossed the Caboolture River; and ultimately reached Toorbul and a blacks’ camp. All the way they found friendly and excited aboriginals, who assisted them as well as they knew how.

When Oxley cast anchor near Toorbul, across from the south end of Bribie Island, some four months later, the Toorbul blacks, together with Pamphlett, came running to meet him. This dramatic incident can best be set out in his own words:

"Saturday, 29th November 1823: We rounded Point Skirmish about 5 o’clock, and observed a number of natives running along the beach towards the vessel, the foremost one appeared very much lighter in colour than the rest. We took him for a half-caste, but were to the last degree astonished, when he came abreast the vessel (which had just anchored) to hear him hail us in good English. We immediately went on shore, and were received by the poor man with a breathlessness that almost deprived him of utterance. He said his name was Thos. Pamphlett, that he left Sydney on the 21st March, in company with three men, Richd. Parsons, Jno. Finnegan, and another whose name he does not remember, being a stranger to him. He said that, intending to go to the Five Islands for cedar, they were caught by a gale of wind shortly after quitting the Heads, and were blown out of sight of land; that some days after, when the gale abated, they made the land again, and thought they had been blown to the south, near Jervis Bay; they kept to the north twenty-one days, without water, having only four gallons when they sailed. The man, whose name he does not know, died for want of it; had plenty of provisions, but had neither fire nor the means of procuring any; ran the boat on shore on the outside of a large island (31) where she was dashed to pieces; walked round the island, fell in with natives, who were universally kind to them and assisted them; that they wandered for many weeks round the shore of Moreton Bay in entire ignorance of where they were; went up a river, which they found to be fresh at some distance from its mouth, descended in a canoe, and found their way to Point Skirmish, receiving occasional assistance from the natives; that three or four months ago, still believing themselves to be south of Sydney, they set forward to the north; that himself and Finnegan, being footsore, soon returned to Point Skirmish; that Parsons went on. He does

(31) Proved to be Moreton Island, probably near Blue Lagoon.
Parsons was rescued the following year (1824).
13th September 1824: “I had directed a party to explore the main opposite to the vessel during my absence.” (He was examining islands in the bay to see if any one was worthy of settlement.) “The report was every way favourable and confirmed the opinion I had previously formed. With the concurrence and approbation of Lieutenant Millar, commanding the intended settlement, I fixed upon a site for the settlement close to Redcliff Point, possessing permanent good water close at hand, good soil in its immediate vicinity fit for most agricultural purposes, well adapted for grazing, with a sufficiency of useful timber for present purposes.”

The following day (14 September 1824) Oxley and Cunningham (with Finnegan in as guide) left the brig in two boats and made their way upstream, reaching Termination Hill at 2 p.m. on 13th. Proceeding on, they reached a point next day from which Oxley saw (with astonishment and some dismay) a magnificent range of mountains, again as guide) left the brig

On 21st, however, his hopes rose again and he wrote:

“On 16 September 1824 Oxley and Cunningham (with Finnegan again as guide) left the brig in two boats and made their way upstream, reaching Termination Hill at 2 p.m. on 13th. Proceeding on, they reached a point next day from which Oxley saw (with astonishment and some dismay) a magnificent range of mountains, where he had anticipated none. He wrote:

“The result of the day’s observations effectually destroyed the perhaps too ardent and flattering hopes I had indulged, that this large river would prove the outlet for the waters of the great western interior; in proportion to the strength of my expectations, was my feeling of disappointment, and I again experienced the fallacy of trusting to appearances.”” He noted also the liability of the river to floods—“a flood would be too weak an expression to convey those western waters to the sea.” He was, of course, quite wrong: he had learned nothing from his “experience of the fallacy of trusting to appearances”—but everyone who has travelled in previously unexplored or little known country will feel a momentary glow of sympathy and appreciation of his reluctance to abandon a cherished preconception.

On their return journey the party had a brush with the natives and wounded one of them and, next morning (28 September 1824), they proceeded downstream, “landing about three-quarters of a mile from our sleeping place to look for water, which we found in abundance and of excellent quality, being at this season a chain of pools watering a fine valley—the soil good, with timber and a few pines, by no means an ineligible station for a first settlement up the river.”

This is, in fact, the site of Brisbane, that “first settlement up the river,” and Oxley’s landing place is marked by a monument on the north side of the river between the Victoria and the Grey Street (William Jolly) Bridges, in the city that grew up here to be the capital of Queensland.

On reaching the “Amity” again, off the Redcliffe settlement, at ten the same night, Oxley was told that the anchorage was bad.

“No vessel should anchor for any considerable time in less than five fathoms off the Point as the holding ground within the three fm. bank is bad, being hard sand . . . the extreme openness and want of shelter cause a very heavy sea to rise in a short time. . . . The winds causing the greatest seas are from north round by the east to S.S.E. the land lying at such a distance between those points as to afford little or no shelter. . . . The settlement is getting on but slowly.”

Lt. Millar, his wife and family, his storekeeper, storekeeper’s assistant, his detachment of fourteen men of the 40th and his twenty convicts were most unhappy: they complained that Redcliffe was unhealthy, unsatisfactory and unsafe; a soldier and two convicts had already been speared—no details of the attack are given—by the blacks; and they easily persuaded Oxley that it was desirable to abandon the original site and re-establish the settlement up the Brisbane River.

Oxley’s activities at Moreton Bay “created a sensation” in Sydney where Sir Thomas Brisbane was greatly excited by his account of the planting of his tiny colony, its early difficulties, and the reed
for its relocation. Oxley had reached Sydney on 21 October 1824 and on 9 November, less than three weeks later, he left again in the “Amity.” The Governor (Sir Thomas Brisbane—our first vice-regal visitor), Chief Justice Forbes, Francis Stephen, John Macarthur (the stormy petrel), and several others went with him, according to the Sydney “Gazette” of 9 December 1824, and Finnegan was again the guide. The party proceeded twenty-eight miles up the river looking with lively interest at this newly discovered area. The Chief Justice hankered to name the new settlement “Edenglassie” after a place having many associations for him; Oxley had proposed to call it “Brisbane,” and the Governor doubtless had no difficulty in accepting this obvious suggestion, but it was not official till 1834. He approved the site and the infant settlement, but ordered that the buildings already erected at Redcliffe should remain there, for the benefit of the natives perhaps, or to assist shipwrecked sailors or castaways like the men who had discovered the river. In any case they stood for years, abandoned, until they mouldered away, leaving nothing but the name “Humpy bong” (mutilated native words for “dead dwellings”) to recall Lt. Millar’s first footing in Moreton Bay.\(^{(33)}\)

Few men of achievement escape criticism. Oxley was no exception. It was said of him that: “Turk like—he could bear no brother near the throne,” and indeed, he was hasty in judgment, jealous of the achievements of others and, like most men, resented criticism and contradiction in opinion or by the hard hand of fact. He had said, for example:

“We had demonstrated, beyond a doubt, that no river could fall into the seas between Cape Otway (Victoria) and Spencer’s Gulf (South Australia)—at least none deriving its waters from the eastern coast”

but, in fact, the immense drainage area of the Murray River does empty into the ocean at Encounter Bay in South Australia. He had also insisted that: “the country south of 34° and west of the meridian 147° 30’ east was uninhabitable and useless for the purposes of civilised man.” This, of course, includes the whole of the Murrumbidgee areas, the Murray Valley itself, all Victoria west of a line from Tallangatta to (say) Bairnsdale; and almost all the closely settled portion of South Australia, and is manifestly absurd.

The residents of those two States are jokingly debited by the rest of Australia with an opinion that is the contrary of this: namely, that the habitability and civilisation of any spot in Australia diminish by the square of its distance north from Melbourne and/or Adelaide!

He was jealous of the success of the unofficial expedition of Hume and Hovell, which completely falsified his prediction. He was antagonised by Lockyer’s suggestion that the credit of the discovery of the Brisbane River should have been given to Finnegan or Parsons or Pamphlett and he conveyed his ill-will on this point to Cunningham, who, though one of the most generous-minded of men, was consequently less than fair to Lockyer.

Nevertheless, Oxley deserves recognition for his magnificent achievements in New South Wales in 1817-18 no less than his essential part in the foundation of Queensland. He did not live long to enjoy his success—worn out by fatigue, exertion and the grossly ill-balanced diets then used by exploring parties, he died shortly after his return to Sydney, at the early age of forty-seven. Cunningham was to be the real founder of the colony.

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\(^{(33)}\) In 1838 they were used by the first German missionaries for a time, but these, too, left owing to the dangerous hostility of the aboriginals.