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CHAPTER IX

AS FAR AS THE FORTIES

The West-flowing Rivers; The Wool Crisis; Foreign Competitors and Political Stirrings

Cunningham had confirmed Lockyer's belief that the Brisbane River originated on the eastern side of the range, and that it was no outlet for the westward-flowing rivers of New South Wales. Where, then, did they go? It was obvious that many were collected into the Macquarie, but where did the Macquarie go? Did it empty into an inland sea, as Oxley supposed; or flow south or north across the continent? He had insisted there was no great river drawing its waters from the eastern coast that emptied into the seas between Cape Otway (Victoria) and Spencer's Gulf (South Australia). If there were no inland sea, could it be that the west-flowing rivers reached the Gulf of Carpentaria, the Northern Territory, or North-West Australia where there were great inlets, insufficiently explored? Sturt was to solve this problem almost immediately and prove Oxley wrong. At the same time, he set that new series of explorations in motion that, within twenty years, had replaced the myth of the inland sea, by the equally exaggerated concept of the "dead heart of Australia"; and had, in compensation, added to the map those vast territories in Queensland and the north-west, that link Brisbane with the tropical coasts of the Arafura Sea.

The Significance of Sturt's Discoveries in the South

In 1828-29, the years of Cunningham's greatest discoveries in Queensland, Sturt, accompanied by Hume, traced the Macquarie River and, where Oxley had found a vast swamp, found that the drought of 1826-27-28 had left dry, cracked earth, scored by channels. At the further end there was a great river—the Darling—but it was salt! Was this because it joined the inland sea? Sturt followed it to a point near Dunlop's range where it ran south-west, and, returning, explored its links with the Bogan, the Macquarie, and the Castlereagh (which was also dry). They were branches of the Darling and, in all probability, the smaller rivers of the western slopes of the Dividing Ranges were twigs on those branches. (Mitchell, two years later (1831), was to confirm this.)

Sturt decided to begin further south and to follow one of Hume's
discoveries, abandoning the further pursuit of Oxley's drought-smitten chains of pools.

His party left Sydney late in 1829 and marched slowly along the Murrumbidgee. Below Hay, they took to the boats they had brought with them and, almost at once, found the mouth of the Lachlan. A week's passage onward brought them to a point where (14 January 1830) they were "suddenly shot out into a fine river more than a hundred yards wide that flowed through well-grassed country under the shade of noble trees" (A. W. Jose).

This was the main stream fed by all Hume's rivers; and Sturt, who named it the Murray, decided to follow it to the sea. Day after day they were swept along with the current; each night they made camp in spite of danger from blacks, of whom they saw many—some hostile; then, on the ninth day, below a long sand spit, a great river joined in from the north. Sturt was certain it was the Darling which he had discovered (as a shrunken river of salt water!) 300 miles north-east. It was.

From the junction of the Murrumbidgee with the Murray, he followed the main stream 1,750 miles to the sea in Encounter Bay, South Australia. The network of its enormous river spread, drained 414,250 square miles of territory—an area approximately double that of France; its discovery inspired the establishment of South Australia. Within fifteen years the whole southerly bend of the Murray was taken up by South Australian settlers, and within eighteen the land was settled as far back as the borders of New South Wales.

The importance of the discovery was immense: the personal cost was great. The privations Sturt's party endured in pulling back over a thousand miles upstream were bitter in the extreme: Sturt himself, with bloated oedematous limbs, also went blind (as starving Australian prisoners did, in some instances, in Japanese prisoner of war camps). He did not recover for years; actually, he never fully regained his health and his death was due to his inability, from this and later experiences, to resist infection.

Sturt and Mitchell

In the north of New South Wales close to what is now the Queensland border, Sir Thomas Mitchell (1831-2 and 1835) had explored the Namoi and Cunningham's Gwydir, and the MacIntyre; he had also confirmed their links with the Darling. As Surveyor-General of New South Wales since 1828, he did not conceal his anger and jealousy at Sturt's having been chosen to command the expedition that solved the problem of the inland waters and the west-flowing rivers. He sought the opportunity to test Sturt's suggestion that the broad freshwater river that he had found joining the Murray was, indeed, the shrunken saltwater stream he had called the Darling a year before. In 1835 Mitchell followed it down, but soon found that Sturt's surmise was undoubtedly correct. He was unwilling to do nothing more than confirm the triumph of his rival, and in his search for a fitting line of further exploration, he was fortunate in the extreme. He went down the Lachlan, already (1836) swarming with cattle, to the Darling; thence back and up to the Loddon (which he discovered); but from there, passing across to the Grampian Mountains, he discovered the plains of Western Victoria in all their glory: as far as the Glenelg River, in the far south-west, where Victoria and South Australia now meet.

On his return from the Glenelg River area, he made contact unexpectedly with the Henty brothers, who had established themselves at Portland (Victoria) in 1834 as whalers and sealers; thence, easterly, he reached Port Phillip and thence completed his return journey by way of the northern slopes of the Australian Alps and the Murray.

Mitchell's discoveries did, in fact, stimulate a flow of emigration from New South Wales to this "promised land"; a similar flow from Tasmania to the southern coast had already preceded it; a fresh drought elsewhere intensified the migration.

"Immigrants from north and south raced in, met, eddied, and scattered like spray over the whole land, in a year or two. In 1841" (the area that was to be) "Victoria possessed 11,700 men, 50,000 cattle and 782,000 sheep; and ten years later" (1851—the date of its separation from New South Wales) "men had increased fivefold and sheep sevenfold."

North-west to Desert; North to the Downs

So much for the southerly flood that was spreading everywhere from the earlier occupied areas of the centre; the tide was flowing towards the north with equal strength and with a new optimism.

Already, the huge estates granted to the Australian Agricultural Company had set up active development in the area between the Hunter River and Port Macquarie. By the early forties, every river mouth north from Port Macquarie as far as Moreton Bay was haunted by cedar cutters—the many "Cedar Creeks" (along which to-day one seeks in vain even a single cedar) are a melancholy commentary on a rape of the forests that was as insensate and extravagant as the virtual extermination of the whales and seals had been in Bass Straits. Inland from coastal bases, or southern holdings, the squatters pressed their bullock teams and drays along blazed lines, improving tracks, and finally, well-defined roads, until they too were as far north as the Darling Downs of Cunningham. This great extension of settlement promoted such an increase in the
production of wool that Governor Gipps, himself, reported on 23 September 1840:

“The limit seems to have been attained beyond which the feeding of sheep will cease to be a profitable employment, the wool not bearing the expense of transport.”

The desert, too, interposed its veto to the explorers seeking rich new areas for settlement and for exploitation.

Eyre pressed northward from Adelaide to disillusion and defeat at Mt. Hopeless—hemmed in by vast salt lakes (still shown on old maps as a great horseshoe-shaped inland sea), he abandoned further hope of extension there.

Sturt went in north-west from the Darling (1844) to the Barrier Range and the Grey Range, desperately attempting to find another land of promise by an inland sea. His companion Poole died of scurvy at Mt. Poole. There was no hope westerly.

Warned by these drastic examples, Mitchell decided that there was no new area available for the ever-advancing waves of “squatters,” unless one could be found in the far north, and then only if it should prove to be very fertile; or easily accessible either by sea or—extravagant as he feared such a possibility might be—by the new-fangled railways people were talking about! Mitchell, Leichhardt and Kennedy on land; Stokes and others at sea were, indeed, to write the next chapter for the north in striking discoveries. Elsewhere, for the time, the process of extension was stayed by economic limits.

Dispersion in the Tropics and Nearby Seas

Dispersion was proceeding according to Rogers’ four factors (page 64) simultaneously, and with interesting results.

So far as his first factor was concerned, “the segregation of re-convicted convicts,” there was (1820) a depot at Port Macquarie, New South Wales; while depots were also set up at Macquarie Harbour in Tasmania (1822), at Brisbane (1824), and at Norfolk Island (1826) in turn. They remained in operation until the pressure of free settlement (and of public opinion) caused the withdrawal of Macquarie Harbour to Tasman Peninsula (Port Arthur), the closure of Port Macquarie as a convict settlement between 1830 and 1840, and the evacuation of Moreton Bay Penal Settlement in 1839.

The second factor, the “fear of the French,” revived—almost hysterically—from time to time. Just as the progress of the Napoleonic wars had led in 1800-1805 to the occupation of Hobart, Port Phillip and Launceston, so the suspicion of French intentions led now to the re-occupation of Westernport (1826-8, again abortive), Albany in Western Australia (1825-30), and, on the far northern shores, Melville Island (1824-9) and Raffles Bay (1827-9). All of these were convict settlements and all were ultimately abandoned except Albany which, in 1830 (cleansed of its convicts), was linked with the new settlement set up at Swan River in 1829, and engendered from that union: Western Australia.

The third factor, the “theories of colonisation,” which Rogers had in mind, was exemplified in South Australia and in Western Australia. Their significance for Queensland, at this stage, is, merely, their influence on the fourth factor—the “forging of links of Empire.”

It will be recalled that Rogers had said that dispersion was invariably preceded by little maritime discoveries, but involved mighty political issues.

The first interest in the northern coastline of tropical Queensland had been deflected hundreds of miles west following the accidental landfalls of the Dutch on the west coast of Australia when bound for Java; and the greater preoccupation of the British with India. The barren coasts of North-West Australia had killed interest in the primitive areas further east, and the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Northern Territory had come to be regarded as an unprofitable pocket, off-course to all voyagers. The meticulous map-making of Philip Parker King (1819-1821) had added certain little maritime discoveries that now acquired a new significance and involved the great political issue of Franco-British rivalry in South Asia and, later, Oceania.

Great Britain had emerged from long years of war as the greatest power in the world and the mistress of a huge, but almost accidental, colonial empire. India was largely hers; Ceylon and Cape Colony wholly so; the Straits Settlements and Singapore (1819) were strategic points on an ever better-defined girdle round the new strategic world. But there were no links between Australia and India, nor the markets and strong points of South and East Asia. The journey to these lands was dangerous in the extreme for vessels from the settled eastern coast of Australia, because of the hazards of the Great Barrier Reef. It seemed reasonable to suppose that a harbour and entrepôt on the north coast of the continent would be of the utmost importance. Melville and Bathurst Islands and P. P. King’s “Pt. Essington,” the nearest points to the “East,” seemed ideal sites—but they were outside the territorial limits of “New South Wales,” which extended only to 135° E. longitude.

In 1824, therefore, Melville and Bathurst Islands were formally annexed to the British Crown by Capt. Gordon Bremer of H.M.S. “Tamar.” When Governor Darling was appointed in 1825 his com-
mission included the continent as far west as 129° E.—and Darling suggested it should be enlarged to include all Australia. (46)

Pt. Essington was occupied in 1838 "as a house of call, a port of succour, a future Singapore," and Captain Stokes described it as: "a magnificent harbour, well worthy of having on its shores the capital of Northern Australia; destined from its proximity to India and our other fast-increasing Eastern possessions to become not only a great commercial resort but a valuable naval post in time of war."

He was a century before his time—it was to be the age of aviation and nuclear energy that would make the North the front door of Australia.

"How vain, alas! is prophecy," cried Rogers. "Traders kept aloof; the very ships refused either to call or be wrecked there; it was 700 miles from Torres Straits; it did not pay; and Governor Gipps, when asked why it was retained, replied that 'If abandoned, it might attract foreign powers' but that Cape York would serve our purposes far better. So a movement was made towards Cape York in 1848, and Port Essington was only retained till 1850."

Vainer than prophecy is the myopia of indifference—the absence of foresight in those so-called "practical" men who are the day-to-day materialists that ultimately govern all policy. Cape York, too, languished and died. (The bombing of defenceless Darwin in 1942 was necessary to awaken the conscience of Canberra; and only the discovery of one of the world's largest deposits of accessible bauxite in Cape York peninsula, and of rich radio-active materials in western Queensland and the Northern Territory have brought more than lip-service to the assistance of "Intra-tropical Australia.") Perfunctory attention and actual indifference are unchanging elements of remote control that are equally stultifying in all ages and all countries.

Sydney scents Opulence in Oceania

The economic crisis of 1841-43, though it stimulated the search for new sources of quick wealth, tightened the hand of the government on any avoidable expenditure. The East India Company in India was, moreover, entering upon a period of bland bureaucracy that among other things was to provoke the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58 and lead to the end of its charter. The first of the Opium Wars of 1838-42 was imminent in China. The question of "links of Empire" in the immediate north therefore was in abeyance, and for the time speculative eyes looked elsewhere, and in particular to Oceania.

(46) In 1829 Captain Fremantle of the "Challenger" took formal possession of the Swan River area in Western Australia and, moreover, formally claimed "all that part of New Holland which is not included within the territory of New South Wales." Small settlements had been made at wide intervals on the north, the west and the south coasts of Australia, so that occupation consolidated the claim to possession, but, in fact, the real circumstance that rivetted the chain of ownership upon Australia, was that Great Britain was supreme upon the sea.
Frenchman, whose silent partner was the French Government (as later appeared), bought land on Banks' Peninsula and proposed to colonise it.

The hand of the British Government was forced: Governor Gipps was ordered to act, and that peremptory officer immediately annexed New Zealand to "New South Wales" (1840), annulled all presumed land titles, and prevented any future trafficking by vesting in the Crown a pre-emptive right in all native land. By the Treaty of Waitangi (6 February 1840) 512 native chiefs confirmed his acts.

Four days after Banks' Peninsula was formally occupied a French frigate arrived, followed next day by a first batch of fifty-seven baffled French colonists. New Zealand—for the time being a dependency of Australia—was saved by the skin of its teeth! But the battle for the South Pacific had begun in earnest.

The French and the English, the two dominant trading and colonising powers in the South Seas, were soon to be joined in competition by the German Empire (into which Prussia was to blossom after the Franco-Prussian war) and, later still, by the United States.

These considerations profoundly affected Sydney and the better informed part of the people of "New South Wales," who had reached a stage of civic and political consciousness far in advance of the constitutional status of the colony. It was obvious that there must be a great advance towards responsible government, which was rudimentary if, indeed, it could be said to exist. Besides "New South Wales" (which still included unborn Victoria and Queensland), Tasmania (1825), Western Australia (1829) and South Australia (1836) made up a group of separate colonies, separated by their policies and their mutual jealousies, but inevitably related by similar problems, dangers and potentialities. For the moment New Zealand was included, and its story had shown the need for unity. Such unity, however, was violently opposed by many in each colony. What use, indeed, was it to speak of unity, whether of policy or status, when the population itself had none? It was split between the "bond" and the "free," the townsmen and the pastoralists; the government officials and the unrepresented public. Even trial by jury had only been conceded grudgingly in 1830.

Inching North by Sea

While these and other issues convulsed Sydney and the towns of the south, the northern pastoralists pressed ever forward in search of new land, and the survey ships gradually provided more complete pictures of the coasts. To the positive work of their navigators, a long series of wrecks on the Barrier Reef contributed negative under-tones equally informative and more dramatic.

Matthew Flinders in 1799 and in 1801-3 had verified and occasionally corrected the work of Cook, and meticulously charted the Gulf of Carpentaria. Jeffreys in 1815, sailing with troops from Sydney to Ceylon in the armed brig "Kangaroo," had examined and named in passing, Port Molle, Snapper Island, Port Ninian, Cape Melville, Princess Charlotte Bay, with the Flinders Group of five islands forming the western head of Bathurst Bay and Lloyd Bay.

Phillip Parker King in several voyages from 1819 to 1821 assiduously surveyed the coasts of Queensland, though the greatest part of his work was done, as indicated previously, on the shores of the Northern Territory and North-West Australia.

Cunningham accompanied King on these visits and botanised with excellent results. King gleaned a shred of new discovery (47) here and there in Queensland, reached the Endeavour River, and anchored as he reported "in all probability in the same spot where Cook had landed his stores." There, in honour of the great navigator, he named Mt. Cook. (He also, in passing Point Cooper, named the summit of the backing hills "by Mr. Cunningham's desire, after John Bellenden-Ker, Esq."

He reported that the natives at Endeavour River proved very troublesome, and the fourteen days spent there were not very profitable to Cunningham's scientific curiosity owing to "the smallness of our company not allowing me two or three armed men as a guard in distant walks." Here, however, he too made the observation:

"It appears rather singular that of a dozen natives with whom we communicated a day or two previous to the commencement of open hostilities, and who were very communicative, they had no idea of the word 'kangaroo' although they knew the animal we spoke of, as well as by our signs as by its frequency on the rocky hills around us. The animal bearing the generally established name of 'kangaroo' throughout Europe they call mauya or menuah." (48)

Standing off round the outer island of the Flinders Group on 13 July 1819 King suddenly came upon the wreck of the "Frederick" which was lost there on the reef in September 1818. Attracted by a river-like opening in Newcastle Bay he closed in to examine it, when the ship suddenly struck and was only saved with difficulty; this added "Escape River" to the chart. Doubling Cape York, he bore up, the following day, for the Wessel Islands at the north-east tip

(47) For example: He examined Rodd's Bay (just south of Flinders' Port Curtis) the Percy Group; Reunius Bay; a small bight on the north side of Cape Conway; Whitsunday Passage; Cleveland Bay; Palm Island; Gould Island in Rockingham Bay; the Family Islands; the Fitzroy Islands, off Cape Grafton, etc., etc.

(48) (See footnote page 27.)
of Arnhem Land—where he completed from the east the survey he had made from the west in his first trip as far as that area.

The third voyage of the “Mermaid” began from Sydney on 12 July 1820, and was notable because she took the ground at Port Bowen and was, with difficulty, warped off. She reached Endeavour River a week later, subsequently exploring carefully Lizard Island. The “Frederick” was still lying upon its reef near Cape Flinders, and King again doubled Cape York, this time examining the “Post Office” at Booby Island, Torres Straits.

The jealousies of the land explorers—or some of them—are in marked contrast with the generous admiration the navy men showed for each other.

The discoveries of Flinders and of P. P. King had left a number of areas insufficiently explored. Both shared the belief that the interior of the continent. Obviously, if this should prove to be so, waters of vast rivers like Sturt’s Murray, giving access to the far great bays and sounds they had found might easily receive the charm, will unite in thinking that the career of such a man should not be without a lasting monument.”

The discoveries of Flinders and of P. P. King had left a number of areas insufficiently explored. Both shared the belief that the great bays and sounds they had found might easily receive the waters of vast rivers like Sturt’s Murray, giving access to the far interior of the continent. Obviously, if this should prove to be so, it would provide opportunities for establishing settlements close to India and the new spheres of influence that were being developed in South and South-East Asia. The exploitation of the vast supplies of raw materials available in those areas was to be the optimistic basis of enterprise for a generation or more, both for governments and for those merchants not seduced by the possible promise of Oceania.

In July 1837 the authorities despatched H.M.S. “Beagle,” sloop of war, under Captain J. C. Wickham, R.N., to make a close study, among other places, of the Gulf of Carpentaria and the neighbouring areas of North Queensland. He was accompanied by Lieutenant J. Lort Stokes as first Lieutenant and assistant surveyor, and Stokes’ narrative of the voyage is most interesting. Coote quoted it extensively in his “History of Queensland,” Vol. I, and it is worth quoting.

On 3 July 1841, at Sweer’s Island, Stokes recorded:

“The ‘Investigator’s’ old well was discovered half-a-mile eastward of the point on the S.E. extreme of the island, to which I gave the name of Point Inscription from a very interesting discovery we made of the name of Flinders’ ship cut in a tree near the well and still perfectly legible, although nearly forty years old... On the opposite side of the trunk the ‘Beagle’s’ name and the date of our visit was cut... I forthwith resolved that the first river we discovered in the Gulf should be named the Flinders as a tribute to his memory it was best becoming in this humble follower to bestow, and that which would most successfully serve the purpose of recording his services on this side of the continent.”

Stokes’ party dug another well, discovering excellent supplies of good water at twenty-five feet, and reported, very truly:

“This was a very important discovery, as Investigator Road is the only anchorage for vessels of all sizes at the head of the Gulf in either monsoon, and possesses an equal supply of wood, fish and birds... and lastly, I should observe, that in the case of our being fortunate enough to find rivers or fertile country on the southern shores of the Gulf, we at once saw we might look forward to the time when Investigator Road (the road fully deserves the name of a good port, being four miles in length by one in breadth, with a depth of from four to six fathoms and sheltered at all points, except from south to S.S.E., in which direction the shoalness of the shore prevents any sea from getting up)—should be the port from which all the produce of the neighbouring parts of the continent must be shipped.”

(Not the significance of the words italicised in these two quotations by me.—Ed.)

On 28 July 1841 they discovered the mouth of a noble river and called it the Flinders; four days later they entered another and named that, the Albert.

Stokes gave a glowing and poetic description of both rivers and

[51] Later Police Magistrate (1842) and Government Resident (1853) at Brisbane following the closing down of the Penal Settlement (1839) and the opening of “Moreton Bay” to free settlement (1842). While in command of H.M.S. “Beagle” his other important activities included the further exploration of Torres Straits; the discovery of the Adelaide River; the discovery and charting of Port Darwin and Byne Harbour; and the discovery of the Victoria River. Ill-health caused him to relinquish his command, in favour of Lt. (afterwards Capt.) Stokes. In 1846 Wickham surveyed Moreton Bay and with Capt. Owen Stanley, supervised the laying of the buoys for the north entrance for the Port of Brisbane. Disappointed at being overpassed, by the appointment of Sir George Bowen as 1st Governor of Queensland (10 December 1859) he left Brisbane for England early in 1860. He died at Biarritz, France, suddenly in 1864. His name is perpetuated in various Streets, a park, etc.

[52] Portion of this tree is now in the Queensland Museum.

was delighted to discover that the waters of one branch of the Albert, a few miles from the mouth, were fresh!

"Of the importance of our discovery there could now no longer be any doubt, and the exhilarating effect it produced on all was quite magical, every arm stretching out as if the fatigue they had experienced had suddenly passed away. . . . Onwards we hurried, the influences of the tide being rarely felt and the river preserving its S.W. ¼S. direction, with a width of 200 yards and a depth of two fathoms and a half. At the end of three miles no change was perceptible and we began to congratulate ourselves on at last having found a stream that would carry boats far towards the point it was always my ambition to reach—the centre of the continent. . . ."

Alas, fallen trees, shallows and various other hindrances soon indicated that their road to the centre was no second Murray River, although they had voyaged fifty miles inland in high hope. They landed and decided to explore this part of North Queensland before returning—their provisions were exhausted.

"Following up a short woody valley, and reaching the summit of the level . . . a vast boundless plain lay before us, here and there dotted with woodland isles. . . . The river could be traced to the southward by a waving line of green trees; the latter were larger at this spot than in any other part, and consisted of tall palms and three kinds of gums. No trace of the western branch could be discovered. . . . The line of verdure still pointed out the southerly course of the river across the endless plains and it became natural to speculate on its source of origin; whether it was the drainage of a swamp, or the outlet of some lagoon fed by the cordillera to the eastward. . . . All was lonely and still, and yet even in these deserted plains, equally wanting in the redundance of animal as in the luxuriance of vegetable life, I could discover the rudiments of future prosperity and ample justification of the name which I had bestowed upon them" (the "Plains of Promise").

Stokes at this point was in lat. 17° 58½' S., long. 129° 25' E., at a place well suited for exploration southward. (Some three years later Leichhardt, coming overland from the South, was to link this discovery with the settled areas of Moreton Bay and the Darling Downs. See page 123.) In all, Stokes examined closely about 200 miles of the southern shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and charted twenty-six inlets, five of which, at least, were most hopeful sites for future development.

He was not to know that a generation or more would elapse before anyone seriously attempted to exploit the discoveries made in the Gulf and Northmost Queensland by Flinders, King, himself and others and that, as "links of Empire," they were fated never to function.