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CHAPTER XIII

FIRST FAILURES IN THE TROPICS

In May 1846 Letters Patent erected into a separate colony, to be called “North Australia,” such of the territories comprised within the colony of “New South Wales” as lay to the northward of the 26th degree of south latitude (i.e. from a point a few miles north of Gympie to Cape York); the western boundary, though not fixed, was presumed to be the 140th meridian of east longitude (i.e. the meridian cutting the Gulf of Carpentaria at its lowest point and running south to 26° S., on a line about twenty-five miles east of what are now Burketown, Mt. Isa and Birdsville. (The 141st meridian and 26th parallel made the north-east corner of the Colony of South Australia and that was probably intended to be the junction point.)

“North Australia” was to be a distinct colony like “South Australia” and “Western Australia,” but unlike them was to be governed through a superintendent, guided by the Governor of New South Wales who, moreover, had the right at any time to visit the new colony and to assume the administration temporarily, in person, if he found it necessary to do so.

Halifax Bay, being the most central site for a port (i.e. somewhere in the Townsville to Ingham coastal strip), was thought the most likely point for a capital; the land laws were to be suspended for the time being; the expenses of the first three years were to be defrayed by the Home Government out of funds appropriated for convict services; while a sum of up to £100,000 was to be allowed for such public works or buildings as might be approved by the Governor.

George Barney, Lt.-Colonel in the Corps of Royal Engineers, was appointed Lieutenant-Governor with the style and title of Superintendent, and Mr. W. W. Billyard was gazetted Chairman of Sessions of “North Australia,” with power to act both as Civil and Criminal Judge.

At the moment, Governor Sir George Gipps of New South Wales was being succeeded by Governor Sir Charles Fitzroy, who discussed the whole question of transportation with Gladstone before departing for Sydney per H.M.S. “Carysfort.” He arrived on 2 August 1846, unaware that on 3 July, while he was still at sea, Gladstone had fallen from power and had been succeeded at the Colonial Office by Lord Grey, and that the whole project was still-born.

In Brisbane and Sydney, meanwhile, the papers had been hotly engaged upon the matter. In Brisbane, while strongly supporting the scheme so far as it might serve to provide a labour supply—so sorely needed in Moreton Bay and the Darling Downs—doubts were thrown on its success unless the scheme were modified considerably:

“The principle of the scheme is humane, but the details have not been well considered, for we do not believe that the persons to be benefited by it (unless they have previously followed agricultural pursuits) will ever be readily disposed to handle either the spade or the plough. . . . It is quite a mistake to imagine that the same results will not follow from the organization of large numbers of vicious persons, as have followed before.”

In Sydney, the “Sydney Morning Herald” and the “Atlas” were violently opposed to anything resembling a revival of transportation and bitterly attacked the scheme; and also Lt.-Col. Barney and the Colonial Office. The Moreton Bay “Courier,” in angry reply, concluded a four-column tirade by condemning:

“the canting mawkish sentimentality that appears to influence sundry of our contemporaries in their notices of Northern Australia. They inveigh against the bad faith of the British Government, and denounce the new colony as a great artery through which the diseased humours of a feculent society are to be conveyed amongst us. But in what has the bad faith been displayed? We, the colonists of N.S.W., rush into the labour market of Van Diemen’s Land, eager competitors for the services of its expirees, endeavouring to outbid each other in tempting offers of good wages and abundant rations . . . and yet . . . coolly turn round and blame Ministers for . . . aiming to found a labour depot from which these men may readily be transferred to us without trouble or expense of agency! . . . Cheap and abundant labour is an essential adjunct of our prosperity, and the instinct of self-preservation must urge, as it has already urged, us to avail ourselves of it wherever it can be obtained.”

The feud was to become increasingly bitter as time went on, and included many subjects.

The Sydney newspapers expressed mainly the view of the artisans, small shopkeepers and the political hacks who were their mouthpieces; the Brisbane papers, those of the squatters and the merchants dependent on them; to the former, labour was of less significance than it was to the latter, to whom, in fact, it was the essential to solvency and success.

Meanwhile Col. Barney and Mr. W. Billyard with their wives, families, and parties, had arrived in Sydney; and Barney had left in the “Cornubia.” 94 tons, to scan his new domain.

Bustard Bay and Rodd’s Bay were visited and rejected; Port Curtis reached and chosen. It was a good, secure and extensive harbour, a fair site for a settlement; it was readily drained, had good positions for wharfs; good anchorage in five fathoms within half-a-mile of
the shore, with a creek permitting vessels of large size to be hove down for inspection or repair; an unlimited quantity of excellent timber, brick-earth, and shells for lime or mortar; land fit for agriculture; and limited facilities for fresh water, that could be readily improved.

The Deputy Surveyor-General for New South Wales, Capt. Perry, and the Assistant Surveyor, J. C. Burnett, set out meanwhile from Brisbane under instructions to make this a two-pronged venture by surveying a route overland to the first accessible and suitable bay—obviously Port Curtis—no further mention was made of Halifax Bay (the future site of Townsville). Perry and Burnett, with four men, after reaching Cressbrook readily, met difficulties increasingly when they set out to follow the headwaters of the Brisbane River. Four days later they crossed the D'Aguilar Range along a line marked by Messrs. Ferriter and Uhr (87) to a station called (sic) "Wicalloo" (Wivenhoe). Great downpours of rain baffled them and, guided by friendly natives, they reached a newly selected station (Bookembah)—where they found two settlers, weatherbound—and reached Brisbane after an absence of fourteen days.

In a new attempt the following year (1847) Burnett found a river but was doubtful of its identity, whether it was Oxley's "Boyne," as he at first supposed, or whether it entered the sea "at Port Curtis, Bustard Bay or Hervey's Bay." He was able to follow it to Hervey's Bay, and his pertinacity was rewarded by Governor Fitzroy who named it the Burnett, while the smaller stream which entered the sea at Wide Bay was named the Mary, for Lady Fitzroy (88) (7 September 1847). (Maryborough now stands on this river.)

Barney was soon back in Sydney, and the "Lord Auckland" (barque, 350 tons), the "Thomas Lowry" (ship, 407 tons), the small steamer "Kangaroo" and the "Sea Nymph" were assembled to convey the first party for the conquest and the colonisation of the tropics of Queensland by white men.

The "Lord Auckland" preceded the other members of the convoy; these were to follow as soon as they were adequately provisioned and prepared. She left Sydney on 3 January 1847.

It is worth recalling the names of these first adventurers. They were: Col. and Mrs. Barney, Mr. G. H. Barney (son) and two Misses Barney; Mr. and Mrs. Billyard and child; Mr. W. K. McNish (Crown Solicitor and Registrar), his wife and three children; Mr. J. S. Dowling and Mrs. McDonald), lady help to Mrs. Barney; and a number of mechanics and citizens whose names are not recorded. Captain Day and the Assistant Surveyor, J. C. Burnett, set out meanwhile from Sydney on 8 January 1847.

The "Thomas Lowry" was detailed for duty in the new Colony. The "Thomas Lowry" when, finally, it arrived on 14 March 1847, brought Mr. and Mrs. McConnel and family; Mr. Bates and family; Col. Gray (Police Magistrate) and son; Mrs. Lowndes; Dr. Silver; and Lieut. G. J. de Winton and the rest of the detachment of the 99th. Meanwhile two small boats, the "Harriett" (cutter) and the "Secret" (schooner), had come in on 3 March with timber and stores, and with P. W. Walsh, George Clark and wife, J. Smith and Joseph Thompson (who had sold up in Ipswich to try his fortune in the new settlement).

The "Lord Auckland" touched a shoal on arrival on 25 January, and most of her party had landed on Facing Island on 26th (the 59th anniversary of "Foundation Day"). They established themselves in utter discomfort in a temporary camp under Gatcombe Head, in the worst of the tropical summer (T. 110° F. for days together), with mosquitoes, sandflies and sickness added to the austerities of the place.

The officers were sworn in (Captain Day as Police Magistrate pending the arrival of Col. Gray on the "Thomas Lowry"); a Legislative Council appointed; and a "Government Gazette" was issued in manuscript. Everyone, however, anxiously awaited the rest of the convoy for, meanwhile, stores ran low until only biscuit, salt junk and fish were scantily available; the blacks attacked well-sinkers; sharks made bathing and fishing hazardous, and the forlorn settlers felt like castaways. Indeed they were: their course was already run!

On 14 March 1847 the "Thomas Lowry" landed its troops in force under Lieut. de Winton on the south side of the present site of Gladstone to protect the well-sinkers who were in "constant fear and peril"; for what it was worth, this was the first active assertion of British rule in what is now Central Queensland!

Seven weeks before the "Lord Auckland" had even left Sydney for Port Curtis, Lord Grey had sent Governor Fitzroy a despatch, directing him to abandon the whole "impolitic" scheme for colonising "North Australia." On 15 April, the "Kangaroo" arrived and delivered these orders to Col. Barney. Twelve days later the exodus began, the "Thomas Lowry" taking many of the officials, their wives and families, and thirty-one rank and file of the 99th with "seven women and sixteen children" back, to arrive in Sydney on 9 May 1847, precisely a year after Letters Patent had been issued in May 1846 setting up the colony.

Col. Barney remained, temporarily, while the "Lord Auckland" was made seaworthy again; a wooden store was erected near the

(87) Ferriter and Uhr had marked out a line that reached North Brisbane; it was about to be traversed by bullock dray. Stuart Russell had penetrated part of this area in 1842. The oldest tombstone in what is now Maryborough commemorates a child named Uhr (1844). J. C. Burnett died at Kangaroo Point, Brisbane, on 18 July 1854 from "the effects of hardships and exposure" (which generally meant delayed consequences of avitaminosis), as so many explorers did.

(88) Lady Fitzroy, while driving in her carriage, was killed in a road accident on 7 December 1847.
south shore head; the blacks were won over; and an exploratory
party penetrated fifteen miles into the bush (and stayed away a
night—finding the country highly fertile).

In his report to Governor Fitzroy on his return, Barney mentions
that there were already numerous parties of selectors, squatters,
and adventurers following the tracks of explorers and surveyors or
preceding them into the unknown, and that some of these had
already approached successfully to within a short distance of Port
Curtis and must soon re-open it by private enterprise. He was right.
Within seven years he, himself, was dealing with Port Curtis land,
not as “Superintendent” and “Lieutenant-Governor of North Aus-
tralia,” but as Chief Commissioner of Crown Lands for New South
Wales, a post to which he was appointed at the end of 1848. (89)

The colonisation of the tropics and near tropics of Australia by
white men had had an inauspicious beginning. In the century that
followed it was to triumph over all the difficulties of “climate,”
distance, prejudice and the economic drag upon its progress of the
south-east corner of the continent. While Barney was returning to
Sydney, crestfallen but still optimistic about the possibilities of the
North, Leichhardt and Mitchell, and later, Mitchell’s assistant
Kennedy, as we have seen, had already explored or were planning to
explore further parts of the great unknown interior of Queensland;
and they, too, were dreaming of linking the new cities of the
“Southland” of mystery with the “Spice Islands,” India, China and
Japan, that lay to the north.

The colony of North Australia had been a fiasco; Leichhardt had
already set out on his last journey; Kennedy was preparing for
what was to be his. Misfortunes rarely come singly.

It has been well said that it is the tragedies included in the story
of exploration that have most often seized popular imagination,
rather than its triumphs. “Lost Leichhardt,” Burke and Wills, and
Kennedy are remembered; while Mitchell, Gregory, and Lands-
borough are all but forgotten.

Emotion and public repercussions have, only too often, influenced
public policy, and so it was to be in this case.

Kennedy’s Overland Trip to Cape York

The story of Edmund Besley Court Kennedy, Assistant Surveyor
to the New South Wales Government at twenty-two years of age;
twenty-eight when he accompanied Mitchell in 1846; twenty-nine
when he discovered the Lower Barcoo in 1847, and heroically dead
at thirty, is an epic—but his fate helped to delay development in
the far north of Queensland for many years.

(89) On 5 October 1855 he succeeded Sir Thomas Mitchell as Surveyor-General
of New South Wales.
they reached the mouth of the Pascoe River, 140 miles south of Cape York, with only nine horses and those almost too weak to travel. Their provisions were 46 lb. of flour, 1 lb. of tea, and 75 lb. of dried horseflesh. They left two-thirds of it here with Carron and seven men who were too weak to travel further, unless help came. Kennedy, with four men and Jacky-Jacky, pushed on desperately, but, at Shelburne Bay, it was necessary to leave three—one, badly wounded when his gun exploded; two others with a recurrence of ague. None of these three was ever seen again.

Kennedy, with Jacky-Jacky, made a final dash for Port Albany—with four skeleton-like horses out of the original twenty-eight, too weak almost to carry their pitifully small belongings; for three days, in fact, the black carried Kennedy, only his burning eyes alive in his shrunken, bearded face. At bitter last, from a sand-ridge near the mouth of Escape River, Port Albany came in sight, but it lay, mockingly, separated from them, under a cloudless blue sky, by miles of mangrove swamp and stinking mud. The food was finished.

They crept along the southern fringe of the swamp; the blacks now were trotting, silent-footed, just outside musket range: close enough for the hot dog-fox reek of their sweat to taint the breeze; at dusk, near a patch of scrub marked by three great ant hills, they struck their blow. Kennedy pitched forward pierced through the back—two other spears struck him as he lay. Jacky-Jacky dodged a fraction of an instant too late and a spear glanced off his forehead. A wild fusillade from Jacky-Jacky’s musket set the murderers hurrying through the undergrowth, out of sight and out of range—to await the dawn. It was 10 December 1848.

Near a river now called the Jacky-Jacky, running into Newcastle Bay, the faithful black hid Kennedy’s body, his journals and, nearby, his notebooks. The notebooks were recovered six months later. Without food or sleep, exhausted, he crept on north, and on 23 December reached the schooner “Ariel” at Port Albany.

Meanwhile, the party under Carron, left at Pascoe River in Weymouth Bay, soon exhausted their food; they died one by one. Blacks emerged from the scrub, with the quick short step of the warrior tensed to kill; threw their spears viciously; darted back into the shadows.

On 1 December the long-awaited “Bramble” hove in sight, sailing southward. Carron recorded:

“I went up the hill, just in time to see the ship passing the Bay. I cannot describe the feeling of despair and desolation... as we gazed on the vessel as she fast faded from our view... on the very brink of starvation and death...”

They were 1,400 miles from the nearest Australian settlement south.

On 30 December, when only Carron and Goddard remained alive,
through the haze of their wandering senses they saw deliverance come—natives, suddenly fawning and friendly, came running up with signs of peace—and a torn and dirty piece of paper—a note from Captain Dobson of the “Ariel”—and, behind them, Dobson himself, Dr. Vallack, a sailor named Barrett, and—emaciated but beaming—Jacky-Jacky.

Some five months later, on 11 May 1849, Jacky-Jacky, aboard the “Freak” (Captain Simpson) returned to Escape River, and pointed out the spots where he had buried Kennedy, and had hidden his journals, and also his notebooks. The body was not found; the trousers in which it had been wrapped for burial were seen in a native canoe, and Captain Simpson recorded:

“A river which runs into the centre of Newcastle Bay” (now the Jacky Jacky River) “was next examined, and the place found where Jacky had concealed the small papers in a hollow log, but a rat or some animal had pulled them out where they had been exposed to the weather, and were quite saturated with water. They consisted of a roll of charts on which his track was laid; these, with care, may possibly be deciphered....” (See Text Figure 9(a).)

It was to be a century before anyone troubled to do it! (Southerners got the sun in their eyes looking north from Sydney then, as they do looking north from Canberra nowadays!)

On the suggestion of Glenville Pike (put forward to the proper authorities by the Historical Society of Queensland*) it has been agreed that the bush track from Laura to Portland Roads which will some day be the first main highway in all the Cape York Peninsula, will be named the “Kennedy Road.”

Doggedly Northward Nevertheless

Official interest in North Australia had faded and was hard to revive, but squatters with their flocks and herds continued to move steadily on towards Gladstone’s abortive colony from the very year of its fiasco (1846-7). In 1847-8 Archer, Hawkins, Lawless, Humphreys, Herbert, the Halys, Clapperton, Ferriter, Uhr, Reid, and others, as mentioned, had occupied the middle and Upper Burnett to link up, soon, with the new-springing settlements of Maryborough and Bundaberg.

By 1853 Landsborough’s station on the Kolan (24½° S.) had been left far behind, the nomadic horsemen pressing ever north; and a ring of settlers was also established round the resurrected town of Gladstone which, in 1854, received as Government Resident, Maurice O’Connell, who had been Commissioner for Crown Lands at Gayndah. An official map that year showed the Fitzroy River for the first time—at whose existence Cook had hinted in 1770—and pioneer squatters were sprinkled at the sea-end of the tropic of Capricorn. Ignoring incidental disaster and official caution and ineptitude, bold and adventurous men continued to advance into the tropics.

Other groups, like those foraging parties of horsemen—their very remote ancestors who several thousands years earlier had descended from mid-Asia into the rich lands of the Middle East—rode in, in little clusters to the Mooni (1846) and Cogoon areas (1848) and founded the Maranoa squatting district. A flying column reached the Fitzroy Downs in 1848, was repulsed, retired, and returned in 1850 to stay. For the moment, however, the Warrego and the Barcoo were beyond the limit of economic settlement. (See Chapter XX.)

Only a small amount of material has been published on the pioneers of the Wide Bay District compared with that concerning the Burnett District, but the former was settled almost as quickly, and at about the same time. The MacTaggarts, Tooths, Corfields and Eatons of the Wide Bay district should stand beside the pioneers of the Burnett in any survey of pastoral expansion.

The stations mentioned here are given in the order in which they appear in the Register of Leases, kept in the Survey Department of Queensland. The following particulars occur:

* Since February 1959 the Royal Historical Society of Queensland.

(91) It must be remembered that some of the lessees could have been in occupation up to four years before tenders were called. The areas were 15,000 or 16,000 acres. With the passing of "The Crown Lands Alienation Act of 1856" parts of the country were resumed out of three or more consolidated runs.

(92) "Reminiscences in Queensland" by W. H. Corfield.

Junction Station—Tendered for, October 1851. Lessee: Gideon Andrew Scott; transferred to C. Scott 1854; A. H. Brown 1854; Anderson & Leslie 1857; to J. and F. Atherton 1869. 

Kilkivan—Balaro—Tendered for, February 1849. Lessees: Abram Brierly and J. D. Maclaggart, with Maclaggart sole lessee in 1857. Wycalber—Tendered for, September 1851. Lessee: H. C. Corfield; transferred to John Eaton 1855. (This run was later consolidated with Teebar.) 


**The Dawson Valley**

Charles, James and Norman Leith-Hay, three of the five sons of Colonel Sir Alexander Leith-Hay of Rannes and Leith Hall, Aberdeen, Scotland, were early on the Darling Downs, and early, indeed, in the Wide Bay area, and first in the Dawson River district. 

South Toolburra, which the Leslies sold to a Mr. Gordon, passed from him to Messrs. Fairholme and Leith-Hay. The date is not certain, but the New South Wales Government Gazette of 1 February 1848 lists, amongst those who have obtained licences to depasture stock “beyond the limits of location” for the year ending 30 June 1848, “Yoolburra (Toolburra)—Hay and Fairholme.”

About 1852, the Leith-Hay brothers sold South Toolburra and left the Darling Downs with 28,000 sheep, bullock carts, and all the other equipment necessary for a long trek with stock. 

The family first acquired Ger Ger (Running Creek) and Marodian (Calejon) in the Wide Bay district, but this country proved unsuitable for sheep. (See above.)

Their next venture led to the settlement of the Dawson River district, for in March 1853 they passed through Archer brothers' holding at Coonambula, near Eidsvold, in the Burnett district; crossed the Divide into the Dawson Valley, and settled in what they named Rannes, 130 miles distant from Eidsvold, and just below the junction of the two rivers, the Don and the Dee, named after their home area in Aberdeen, Scotland. (James and Norman undertook the pioneering work; Charles had returned to England in 1854.)

The Archer brothers passed through Rannes on 30 April 1853 on the trip which led to their settlement at Gracemere, near Rockhampton, still further north.

The first shearing from Rannes took place in 1854. The wool went to Maryborough, via Gayndah, a distance of 220 miles. Later in 1856, a shipment of wool was made from Port Curtis.

In 1859 James Leith-Hay sold Rannes and Banana to Towns and Stewart (who sold it to Thomas Andrew and John Brown Watt in 1864). After the sale of Rannes, James Leith-Hay became Gold Commissioner at Rockhampton, and was afterwards appointed to the position of Police Magistrate at Bowen.

(Tragedy had struck the family in 1857. Norman Leith-Hay was on the schooner “Seabelle” which left Port Curtis on 7 March 1857. More than twelve months later it was ascertained that she had been wrecked on Keppel Island, and it is presumed the crew and passengers were murdered by aboriginals.)

The squatters, their wives, their sons and daughters, and their helpers pressed forward tirelessly, inspired by a vision of endless acres, cobbled to a grey mosaic by the woolly backs of sheep.

If the remote officials of distant Sydney looked to the Pacific Ocean, and the new struggle for spheres of influence there, and their own local interests—their new University, their railway proposals and so on—and could spare no thought for the man on the land so much the worse for them!

What did it matter that, to the many checks imposed by nature in the outback, there were added, indeed, the economic handicaps of lack of labour, uncertain land tenure, lack of credit, and of vast distances unshortened by any form of swift transport?

If the Mother Colony offered no answer to these, was the solution Separation? They thought it was.