AN ADMIRABLE PLACE

by L. Talbot

"Mr Augustus Gregory proceeds almost immediately on an exploratory expedition to examine the district marked in the map as Lanark, and situate between Sussex and Albany districts.

The coast line of this district was traversed by Mr Preston when he was boat wrecked during the early days of the colony, and he laid down several rivers which discharge themselves into the sea at this locality, and among them the Donnelly, to which most of the southern cattle spearers resort after a foray. It will be of some interest to know to which of the inland rivers these outlets are connected, and it is of colonial importance to know whether this terra incognita offers facilities for the depasturing of stock or the cultivation of grain."

So began a new item in a Perth newspaper of 1852, and of course the 'terra incognita' it refers to is that same area that many foresters now refer to as "The Wild Country". The area shown on early maps as Lanark covers most of this same country. It lay between Cape Beaufort and Chatham Island, with its east and west boundaries formed by parallel lines running north from those two points; and its northern boundary formed by an east-west line passing through about the present site of Palgarup.

The news item continued:

"Considering the length of time to colony has been settled it seems extraordinary that a tract of country so near the settled districts should have been so long unknown and we are glad to find that the Governor has determined that the blank spaces shall no longer exist."

It was extraordinary indeed that this district had remained so long, not only unsettled but largely unexplored, considering it lay so close to Albany, Augusta and the Vasse, three of the longest settled districts in the colony. Perhaps the settlers of those districts found this land too wild, even for them. Certainly the explorers who had attempted to examine it earlier - Bannister, Clarke and Gregory, once before, - had found it so.

This second expedition of Gregory's was to do little to alter the situation. On his return the newspapers disappointedly reported that the land he had traversed offered little inducement for settlement, nor had he found any harbours along the coast. However, he was able to report that he had discovered some magnificent "bluegum (karri) forest - one fallen tree measuring 140 feet to the first limb and about five feet in diameter." He had seen very few natives and those he did see were "perfectly quiet."

The reference to the quiet natives, no doubt stemmed from reports, current about that time, that natives had been spearing cattle in the Vasse district and then retreating to the Donnelly River where they were safe from pursuit. Gregory was accompanied on this expedition by a Constable Scott, who went along specifically to investigate the Donnelly spearers. He claimed to have tracked them as far as that river "where they eluded further search."

Scott warned the few natives they did encounter to have nothing to do with the "beef-eaters."

Another explorer of the Region, William Nairn Clarke, had had some interesting plans for settling the Nornalup district, as early as 1841; but he was unable to gain any support from the authorities and nothing came of his plans. He wrote several letters to the Colonial Secretary in which he proposed that a station be formed at Nornalup as a preparatory step to its later colonization and to prevent the Americans from unlawfully taking away any of the valuable timber from the nearby forests, "which" he wrote "will be a source of future wealth to the colony".

He claimed that a ship anchored off the bar, in the shelter of Saddle Island could remain for months while a cargo of spars for masts, yards, etc., was got from the magnificent forests on the shores of the rivers and estuary; and, at the same time, the ship could be engaged in bay whaling between Point Nuyts and Point Ramie.

In one of his letters he wrote "I offer my humble services to the government on receiving adequate remuneration and payment for outlay to form an establishment on the Estuary of Nornalup where there is an admirable site for a town and commence a fishery on a large scale, and if His Excellency will allow it I should like to have ten years lease of Saddle Island for the purpose of procuring salt and breeding pigs - "

"As I conceive that these views of mine are calculated for the benefit of the Colony at large and will lead the way to sources of wealth yet untried I hope that His Excellency will regard them in a favourable light".

The Governor was not sympathetic and Clarke got neither the remuneration he requested, payment of outlay for his two exploratory expeditions, nor a lease on Saddle Island."

There was a shortage of Government funds in those days too it seems.

In another letter Clarke referred to two sealers, who had for some months been living on Sandy Island, near Cape Chatham. Their names were Genible and White. They had talked in Albany of a large river debouching into the ocean not far beyond Sandy Island, its waters being fresh almost to its mouth. They claimed to have gone up this river for about twelve miles, hunting kangaroo; but they were not, as Clarke wrote, "Curious about objects more important to others." They described it as "a river quiet and gently flowing but the bar is dangerous at times."

Clarke made use of sealers to obtain information whenever he could do so, but being a very proud and haughty person, he went to some pains on more than one occasion to assure the Governor that he did not associate with such uncouth fellows. As he put it: " - As useful information is only to be obtained by hearing the remarks of such people, certainly not the most polished of the human race, I felt no hesitation in extracting all I could. They added that there was fresh water on Sandy Island and abundance of mutton birds and that from Cape Chatham to Point Entreasteaux all the mainland is a sheet of inlets. Allowing for the exaggeration natural to all such people, still enough is left to excite a good deal of curiosity and tempt future enterprises."

There is a footnote to this letter in which Clarke again assures the "Government" that he would have nothing to do with people 'whose principles are very abhorrent in every particular' and that when he hired a boat he also hired a "steerer named Solomon Aspinall late pilot to King George's Sound who understands boat navigation to east and west of King George's Sound".

Two other events of interest which occurred in this district were, in 1866, the escape of four convicts from Warren Bridge Road Gang, and in 1892, the discovery of a 50 year old skeleton and a quantity of money and other articles, near the Donnelly River.

The four convicts who absconded one November evening, hoped to walk to South Australia; but they found the going in the karri forests and coastal swamps so exhausting that after about six weeks they gave themselves up at Albany. One of them wrote an account of their experiences which was published in the 'Inquirer" soon after their surrender.

They took with them a quantity of flour and damper which they had earlier concealed in the bush about half a mile down the river. When this gave out they lived on a few wallabies, kangaroo rats, that they succeeded in snaring, supplemented at times by roasted roots, fish and a goanna.

They had to force their way through extremely dense thickets and at times through wide swamps " - in which there was eighteen inches of water and six inches of mud".

Some idea of the hard going can be gleaned from this quotation:

"Travelled through about two miles of bluegum country but found the underwood and dead timber so thick that it took us four hours to accomplish the distance, we then reached what I should call tea tree scrub, through which we travelled about seven miles in about as many hours, the scrub being about five feet in height. This was a fearful days work and we could never have done it had there not been plenty of fresh water with which we refreshed ourselves, we afterwards came to a very dense thicket with upright scrub about the thickness of a walking stick and growing so closely that we had to take it in turns to break down the sticks; and after working for twelve hours we had the satisfaction of being quite sure that no mounted police in the world could follow us up, on the other hand, we had only made two miles and our provisions were nearly all gone".

At times, of course, travelling was much easier and they welcomed the black-boy flats and stretches of open red gum forest and rolling sand hills, but thickets were encountered frequently.

Although they set over thirty snares each night, they usually succeeded in catching only one or two kangaroo rats and other wallabies. Their best haul yielded "Two kangaroo rats and an iguana caught during the night and were very much enjoyed, the latter reptile I fancied the most delicious morsel I had tasted for a very long time".

Other accounts of food gathering included this: "After travelling five miles through a thinly grassed country, arrived at a beautiful spring of

cool fresh water, with lots of roots growing about, such as we had seen the natives eat when en route from Busselton to the Warren; we therefore camped at once, digging, roasting and eating roots until night; we also put by a supply for the road".

From then on these roots were to be a major source of food for them. Soon after leaving the spring they came to " - a fearful thicket, but there was no alternative and we went at it like fowls through a cornfield and succeeded in doing a mile in four hours".

Ten days after escaping they came to an inlet, which they had earlier seen from a high road some miles inland. Possibly this was Broke Inlet. Here they caught some fish, some of which weighed about two pounds and which the writer described as "fine fresh water trout".

They spent some time here smoking some of the fish to take with them, using " - a sort of green bush, which we afterwards believed to be the poison plant". The writer continued: " We ate some of the smoked fish with the roots we had saved. Soon after the meal I heard Hooley call for assistance, I was going towards him but fell in the attempt, experiencing a most dreadful thumping sensation in the head, which was followed by severe vomiting and bleeding at the nose, Smith and Ellis were also taken ill with the same symptoms, and before night we were all laying at deaths door, with the greatest difficulty we managed to crawl around the fire, but no one was equal to the exertion of putting on a piece of wood".

Two days later they were able to resume their journey but Hooley unwisely ate some more of the smoked fish and was again violently ill. He was sick for the remainder of their journey and a great burden to his companions, so that by the time they reached Torbay they had all had enough and decided to go into Albany and surrender. Except the author of their story, - whose name, unfortunately, is nowhere mentioned, - he did not want to give himself up at Albany but decided instead to return to the Warren and surrender there. So against the advice of his friends he set out along the coast and succeeded in getting almost back there, but by then he was so weak and exhausted he could go no further and lay down in the sand hills, not caring whether he lived or died. He was found by a Mr Mottram who took him to his home and, eventually, on horse back back to the Warren Bridge.

The discovery in 1892 by Mr George Giblett of Balgarrup, of a skeleton that had been buried in drift sand near the Donnelly River for more than fifty years, uncovered a mystery that has never been satisfactorily resolved. With the skeleton was a quantity of money and various other articles including an iron kettle, broad axehead, tin mug, tin tray, pocket knife, hand auger, a flint, pinfire cartridge, small bottle, three lead sinkers, pincers, butcher's steel, two knives, portion of a sextant, trouser buttons, a brass naval button, thirteen pieces of blue and white willow pattern pottery, portions of clothing and other odds and ends, as well as thirteen sovereigns, ten Spanish dollars and three English silver coins. The dates on the sovereigns ranged from 1817 to 1832.

Local folklore at Pemberton has it that the skeleton was found in the Yeagerup sand dunes close to Lake Yeagerup, which is also known locally as 'Dead Man's Lake" and although it has now been long forgotten elsewhere, there was in the past, much conjecture about the identity of the dead man.

Considering that it took four months or more to sail from England to Australia, the 1832 sovereign makes it unlikely - though not impossible - that he was one of the party of nine men who disappeared between Albany and Augusta in 1832.

In about the 1930's Mr Alfred Bussell wrote a paper on the Southwest Aborigines and in it referred to a story they had told him, of a white man who lived among them about four generations before. Bussell spoke the native language and claimed to understand their ways. He suggested that the skeleton found by Giblett was, very likely, that of this mysterious white man, who Bussell believed must have been a ship-wrecked sailor. He wrote "This story is a record of facts, told from father to son for about four generations or more - the men and women in this story really did exist, so that the story must be pretty well true, I believe from the name they gave the place where they found this white man - Jerrymungup, that his name was, or he called himself to the blacks, Jerry Monk, or perhaps Jerry Monger - hence the name Jerrymungup. The reason I think it might be so, is because I know their mode of constructing name places so well".

Bussell's suggestions about the identify of the skeleton are of course just conjecture and in any case be believed the man was living with the blacks before the white settlers came, in which case the 1832 coin rules him out also.

A more likely solution was one put forward by Mr H.C. Prinsep. He had been informed by a Dr Green, who, it seems, had lived at Augusta at one time, that in the early days of the colony a Fremantle trader named Cass used to visit Augusta in his cutter, with a stock of drapery, hardware, etc., to sell to the settlers. In 1835, against the advice of Dr Green, Cass set sail from Augusta in very stormy weather and neither he, his man nor the cutter were ever seen again. Prinsep believed that the articles and money found with the skeleton pointed to it being the remains of the trader, and he pointed out, that had the cutter been unable to round the Leeuwin in the stormy weather, the prevailing winds would have driven it towards the Donnelly River.

So, Jerry Monger, Cass, an unknown sealer, or shipwrecked sailor, the mystery still remains, along with those of the nine men of 1832 and the six open graves discovered by Clarke near Nornalup in 1841.

Even today, after 150 years of settlement this strip of Coast Country remains a wilderness area, difficult of access, wild, windswept, challenging and fascinating and there are many of who hope it will always be so.