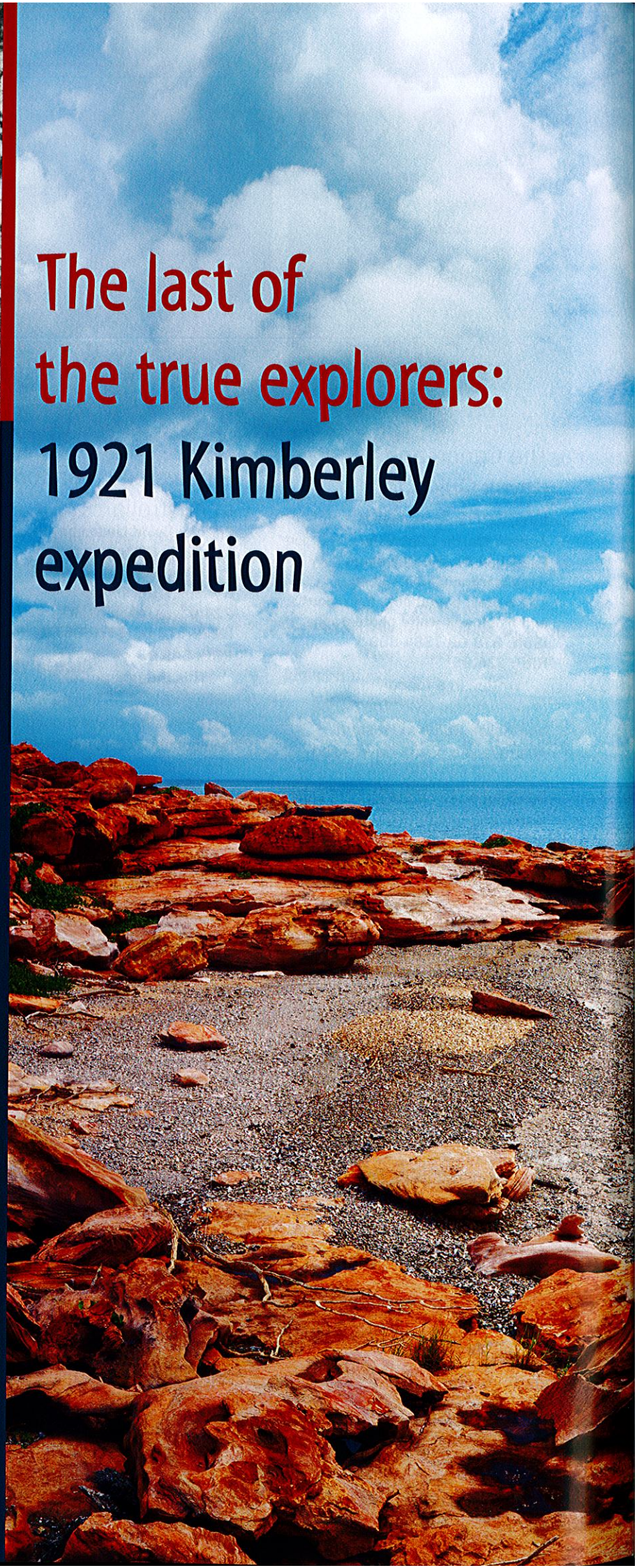
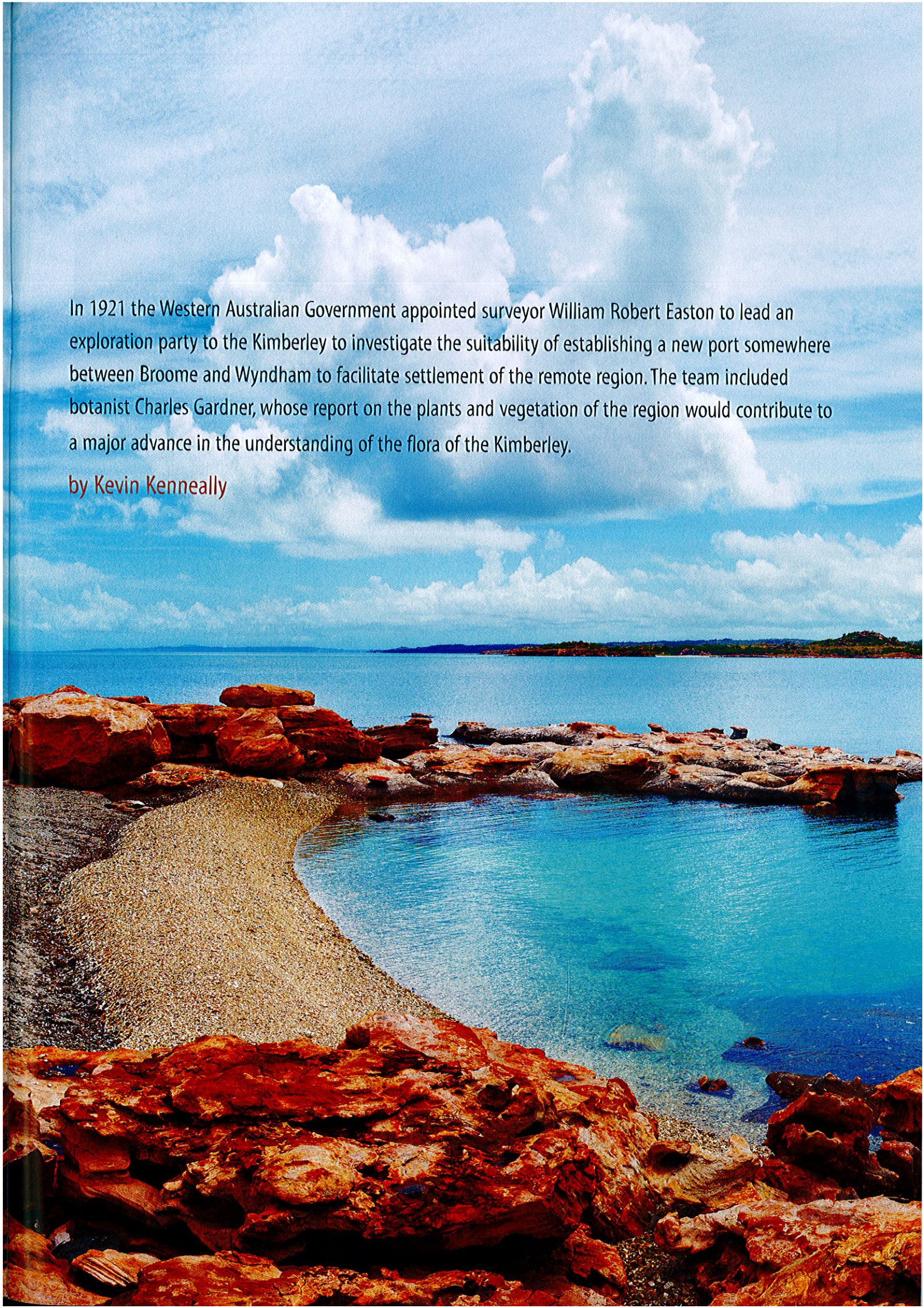


**The last of
the true explorers:
1921 Kimberley
expedition**



A scenic coastal landscape featuring a pebbly beach in the foreground, surrounded by large, reddish-brown rocks. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, transitioning to a deeper blue further out. The sky is a clear, bright blue, dotted with fluffy white clouds. In the distance, a low, hilly coastline is visible across the water.

In 1921 the Western Australian Government appointed surveyor William Robert Easton to lead an exploration party to the Kimberley to investigate the suitability of establishing a new port somewhere between Broome and Wyndham to facilitate settlement of the remote region. The team included botanist Charles Gardner, whose report on the plants and vegetation of the region would contribute to a major advance in the understanding of the flora of the Kimberley.

by Kevin Kenneally

In the 1920s the Western Australian Government under Premier Sir James Mitchell was intent on opening up the Kimberley for settlement. The state was looking to attract “men and money” and Sir James visited London to promote the region. A brochure produced at the time described the region as: “This land of big mountain ranges, extensive tablelands, heavy and reliable rainfall, noble rivers and fertile soils ...”. It also pointed out that: “Its emptiness and its close proximity to teeming millions of coloured populations elevates to a position of first-class importance the question of whether in the years to come it shall be to the Empire an occasion of anxiety and danger, or a source of boundless wealth and unlimited opportunity”.

The government undertook to investigate the coastline to see if there was a suitable locality to establish a new port somewhere between Broome and Wyndham. The Premier and the minister for the north-west instructed the surveyor general to form a land party to examine the coast and report



on a possible site for a harbour adjacent to country suitable for settlement and tropical agriculture. A sum of £2,250 was allocated to cover the expedition's expenses.

The survey party

Sir James recommended licensed surveyor William Robert Easton be appointed as leader. Easton had travelled to the Kimberley as an inspector of pastoral leases and pastoral lease appraiser in 1919. He had also

served as a Lieutenant with the Australian Engineers in France during World War I and had taken up land in the Kimberley with his brother Fred, under the Soldier Settlement Scheme. The Premier also recommended that constable Samuel Rea from Fitzroy Crossing Police Station be seconded to join the party as second-in-command along with a Mr Oswald Siddins: “A man with considerable experience in the Gulf country of Queensland and a likely selector for pastoral purposes”. Additional personnel included Mr N Wright and two Aboriginal trackers ‘Jungabyne’ and ‘Mick’. Such Aboriginal assistants often played important roles in the success of early expeditions, but few details were kept of their service. A former surveyor general, Mr HS King, suggested a botanist be included in the party to gather knowledge of the flora and vegetation of the little-known region.



Previous page

Main Swift Bay, Kimberley. Easton was asked to investigate the area as a potential port site.

Photo – David Bettini

Inset William Easton, surveyor and leader of the 1921 expedition.

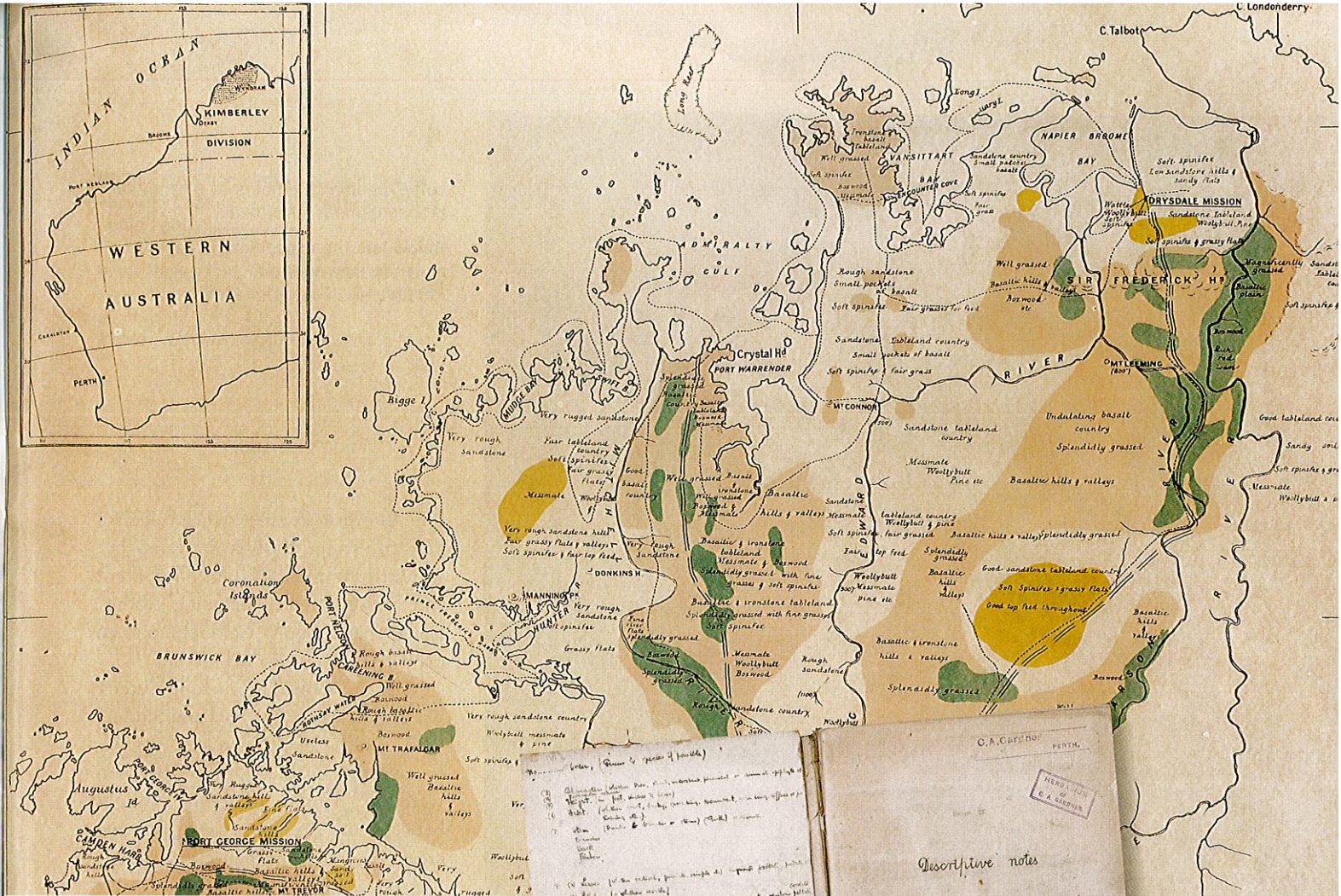
Photo – Bill Easton

Top Mitchell Plateau fan palm (*Livistona eastonii*) named by Gardner in honour of the expedition's leader.

Photo – Kevin Kenneally

Left Expedition members were forced to live off the land, and kangaroos were the main source of their meat supply.

Photo – Bill Easton



Above A map prepared by Easton showing the expedition route and the types of land surfaces and vegetation encountered on their journey.
 Photo - Kevin Kenneally

Inset Gardner's journal in which he recorded descriptive notes and sketches of plants seen and collected on the expedition.
 Photo - DEC Library, Kensington

As a result, Charles A Gardner from the Forests Department was made available to report on the commercial timbers and fodder plants of this unexplored portion of the Kimberley (see 'Charles Austin Gardner' on page 22).

The survey party's instructions

On 23 March 1921, Alfred Canning, the district surveyor, issued Easton with his instruction detailing what outcomes were expected from the survey party.

He pointed out: "... that you will no doubt find the work arduous and possibly dangerous owing to the number and possible hostility of the Natives, and I would impress upon you the necessity of exercising every care in your relations with them—but at the same time, it would be well to obtain any information in regard to their

customs &c.". He also stated: "Since you are taking a botanist, you will obtain through him all information possible in regard to the Flora of the country explored—and gather any specimens that you consider of value—but at the same time, it must be borne in mind that this work is subordinate to the main work, and must not be allowed to interfere with it in any way".

The Kimberley Survey

The party left Fremantle on 24 March 1921 for Derby by the SS *Minderoo*, before heading to Kimberley Downs Station to prepare for their journey. They left the station on 10 April 1921 and headed for a pass over the King Leopold Ranges. Late rains meant much of the country was boggy

and the rivers swollen, forcing detours and delays. The party crossed the Lennard River and passed through the Napier Range. Again boggy conditions forced the party to make a wide detour to keep on the basalt country following the Isdell River. After crossing the Isdell River they passed through splendidly grassed undulating basalt country, before striking the precipitous cliffs of the Synott Range. Descending from the Synott Range, they travelled over grassy country before coming out on the edge of a magnificent gorge on the edge of the Charnley River. Crossing the river required transporting the packs on rafts and swimming the horses across. The river bank's slime-covered rocks meant this was no easy task, with the horses struggling to get a foothold.



Left Expedition members at a camp site preparing meat for a meal.

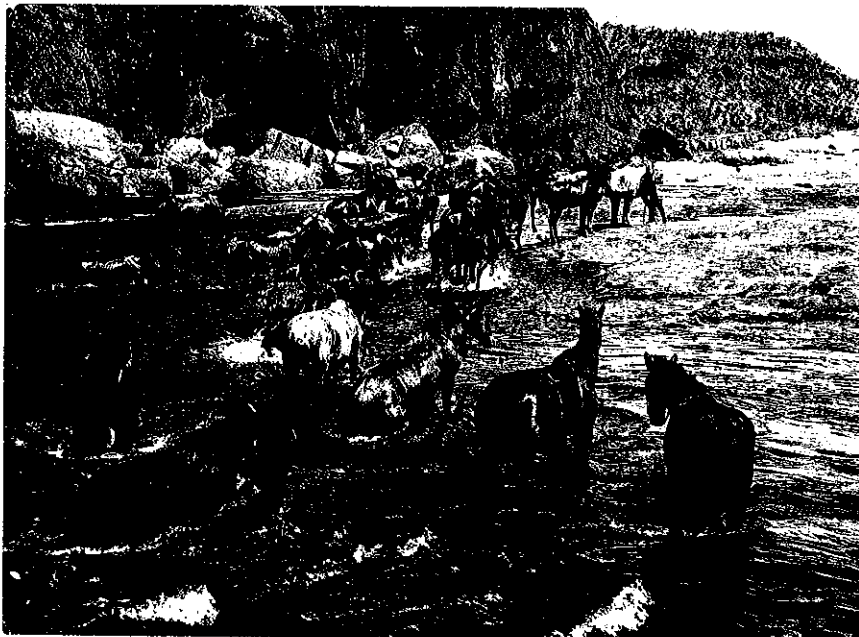
Below left The expedition horses and mules fording a stream.

Photos - Bill Easton

On 28 April disaster struck when a grass fire swept through the camp site. It destroyed much of their equipment and personal items including clothes, blankets and boots. Gardner's pressed plant collections also fell victim.

The fire, fanned by a strong easterly wind, gave Constable Rea and Siddins little warning of its approach. Anxious to save the hobbled horses, the men were in danger of being caught between the fire and a steep running creek. Even though their camping area had been cleared of grass Constable Rea reported the fire was so intense that the packs and saddles, well dressed with oil, quickly caught alight. Most of the government gear was saved by Siddins, who received two bullet wounds from exploding cartridges. The Aboriginal assistants reported fresh tracks from where the fire had started and believed local Aboriginal people, many of whom lived in the area, had thrown a fire-stick into the grass.

The fire left them no choice but to make as quickly as possible for Port George Presbyterian Mission by travelling north-westerly from the Calder River, along the base of the Harding Range, and across Panter Downs to the Sale River. They experienced great difficulty travelling down the Glenelg River, and in places the country became impassable. After crossing the Macdonald Ranges they travelled up a basalt valley before arriving at the mission where the party rested up. Easton discovered the mission was almost entirely out of stores; only three bags of flour were left. The skipper of the mission boat had died suddenly a few weeks before, and one of the missionaries had taken the boat to Broome but not returned.



Right Expedition camp site at mealtime showing Charles Gardner (sitting) writing in his field journal.

Photo – Bill Easton

Inset Pages from Gardner's journal showing his field notes and sketches of plants.

Photo – DEC Library, Kensington

Easton had no alternative but to wait at the mission until the boat returned as his men had no boots and only the clothes they were wearing. Their diet while they waited consisted of sweet potatoes, black tea and a little damper. The mission boat arrived on 25 May carrying stores for the expedition plus some private supplies from Easton's brother Fred at Avon Valley Station at the head of Walcott Inlet. Because of injury to the horses caused by the rough travelling, Easton decided to leave three of them behind and reduce the size of his party, reluctantly sending Wright and one of the Aboriginal trackers home.

A gruelling enterprise

On 28 May, the party left the mission heading north. Travelling became very trying and often required a party member to go ahead to search for a track. In doing so along the Prince Regent River the expedition members often had to remove their boots and travel barefoot, in order to obtain a foothold on the face of the cliffs.

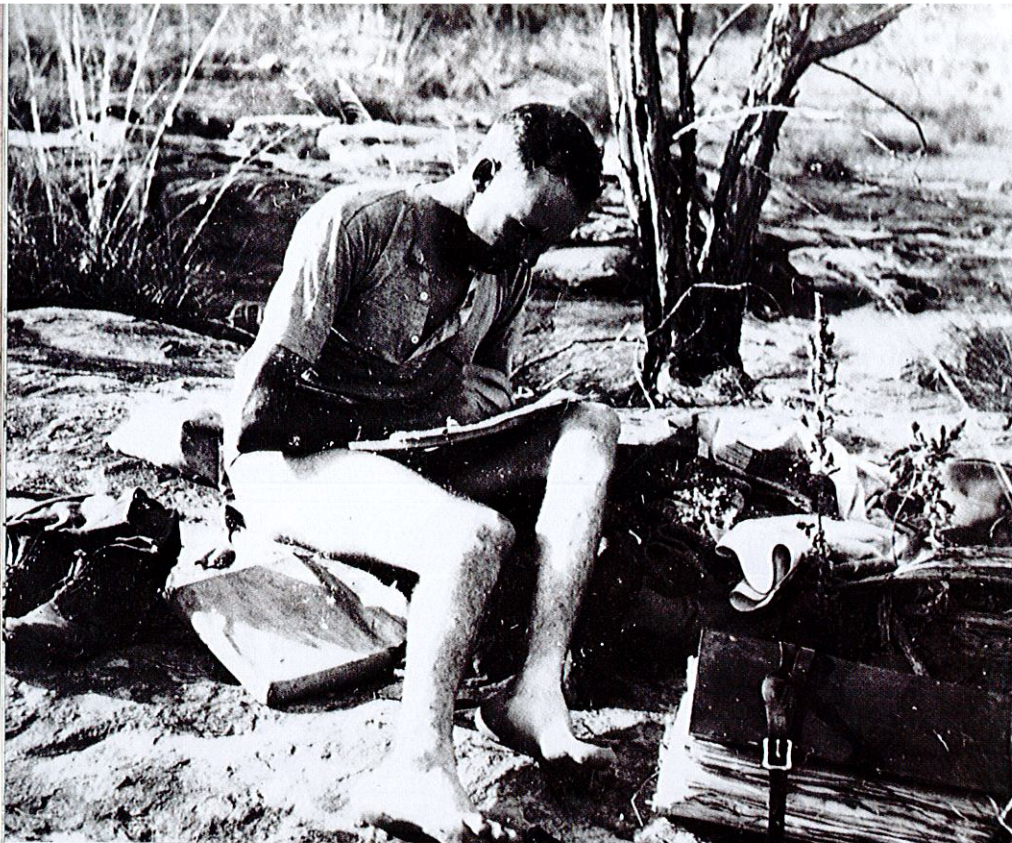
On 10 July the party arrived about 11 kilometres south-east of Swift Bay, where all further progress was barred by a line of impassable cliffs. Arrangements had previously been made for a boat from the Port George Mission to meet the party at Swift Bay on 25 July to replenish supplies. After several days of fruitless search for a track, it was decided that two members of the party should walk to Swift Bay and arrange to have the stores taken around to Crystal Head, in Admiralty Gulf, to which point the rest of the party should proceed and wait. Easton and Siddins set out the following morning, the journey taking two and a half days and covering 65



kilometres, to eventually reach the boat. Siddins was without food for three days and Easton killed and ate a snake on the second day. The boat sailed around Cape Voltaire arriving at Crystal Head on 21 July.

Owing to the rugged nature of the coastal country, it was absolutely impossible to travel horses along it. As plans for the use of the naval survey ship *HMAS Geranium* had fallen through, Easton decided to hire the mission boat for about 20 days, at a cost of £60, and walk around the coast, receiving supplies from the lugger every three days. Easton divided his party in two. He left Constable Rea, Gardner and the tracker (there are no

records of which tracker this was) to examine the coastline of Admiralty Gulf and Vansittart Bay, while Siddins and Easton examined the coastline to the south. This would enable the survey to finish the work several weeks earlier, and give the horses a much-needed rest. At the completion of their tasks Easton's party arrived at Drysdale River Mission on 22 August and the following day Constable Rea and his party rode in. They were extremely hungry as their rations had run out four days out from the mission and they had survived on a kangaroo they had shot. They brought in about 20 horses looking refreshed from their spell.



Left Charles Gardner cataloguing his plant specimens. Note the plant presses in the bottom right hand corner.
Photo – Bill Easton

Below Cover pages of a pamphlet on the north-west of Western Australia published in 1922 promoting the Kimberley, and the Gardner and Easton expedition reports.
Photos – Kevin Kenneally

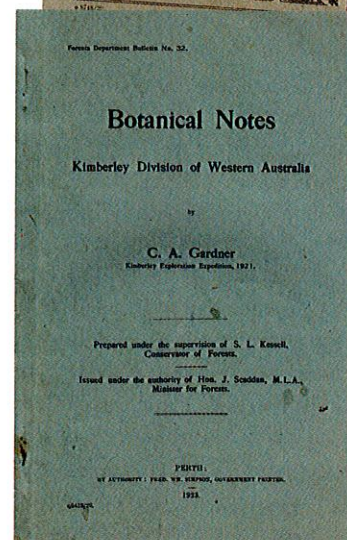
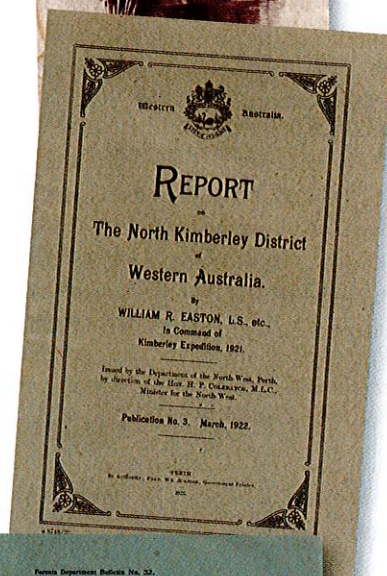
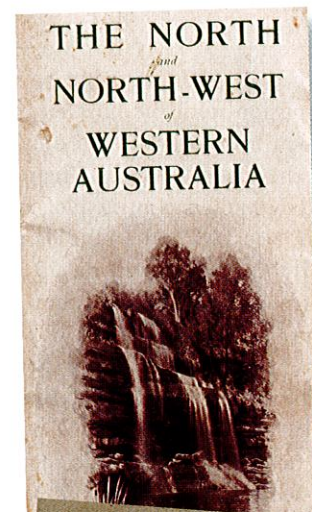
Charles Austin Gardner

Charles Gardner was born in Lancashire, England in 1896. In 1909, when he was 13, his family migrated to Western Australia where his father took up farming. His formal schooling was limited and while working as a bank clerk he met several influential amateur botanists including the artist Emily Pelloe, who instructed him in botanical science. Although he was self-taught, his enthusiasm for botany attracted the attention of Desmond Herbert, the economic botanist at the Department of Agriculture in WA. Herbert recommended him to Charles Lane Poole, the conservator of forests, who in 1920 appointed Gardner as the Forests Department's official plant collector, leading to his role in the 1921 Kimberley expedition.

After arriving at Port George Presbyterian Mission, Gardner wrote to Lane Poole on 11 May reporting that "no forests of any magnitude have been discovered". He said that the river paperbark *Melaleuca leucadendra* was the largest tree he had seen, some exceeding 80 feet. He also reported on the fire that burnt out their camp site near Calder River on 28 April in which his entire botanical collection was destroyed (numbering 75 complete and 20 fragmentary specimens). He explained he had rescued his notes and sketches and hoped to re-collect most of the destroyed specimens on the return trip.

On returning to Perth Gardner prepared a substantial report, published in 1923 as Forests Department Bulletin No. 32, titled *Botanical Notes, Kimberley Division of Western Australia*. The report provided information on the biogeography of the Kimberley as well as knowledge about timber trees and fodder plants. It also included the description of 20 new species of plant accompanied by photographs and sketches. Included among the new species were the fan palm (*Livistona eastonii*) named in honour of the survey's leader, and a cycad (*Cycas lane-poolei*) named in honour of the conservator of forests.

The eight-month expedition to the Kimberley was a momentous experience for Gardner and helped establish his botanical career and subsequent appointment as the state's government botanist. Within months of the report's release, a position was found for Gardner in the Department of Agriculture. In 1924 he was appointed assistant botanist under Walter M Carne. When Carne resigned Gardner was appointed government botanist in 1929, a position he held for 31 years. His influence over Western Australian botany continued up until his death in 1970.





Above The cycad (*Cycas lane-poolei*) was named by Gardner in honour of Charles Lane Poole, the conservator of forests in Western Australia when Gardner was appointed to the expedition.
Photo – Kevin Kenneally

Above right Charles Gardner standing next to a kurrajong tree (*Brachychiton diversifolius*) blazed E[aston]21 with Easton's theodolite on the left. Blazing trees precisely identified the route the expedition took and the points where Easton made his observations.
Photo – Bill Easton



Easier times

Easton's party enjoyed the hospitality of the Spanish Benedictine monks that ran the mission and spent time there resting up in one of the mission's shelters, while shoeing the horses and examining the surrounding country. Easton was very impressed with the friendly relationship the mission enjoyed with the local Aboriginal people. On the afternoon of 25 August some 90 Aboriginal people gathered for photographs to be taken by the expedition party. After supper, they held a dance. At the end of the function, as a token of appreciation, tobacco was handed out to the men and sweets to the women.

On 29 August the party farewelled the mission and travelled south over rough sandstone and splendidly grassed basalt country before striking the Carson River, about 13 kilometres from the King Edward River. They continued on, passing by the Couchman Range, Drysdale River, Prince Regent River, Karl Lagoon on the Calder

River and the Artesian Range before arriving at the northern approach to Hann Pass, over the Leopold Ranges. Following the Barker River, the party struck their outward tracks at the junction of Wombarella Creek and reached Derby on 15 October 1921.

Easton's report

In his comprehensive report Easton pointed out: "although possessing many fine harbours, the North Kimberley District is very inaccessible, owing to its peculiar physical and geographical formations ... The location of a site for a port is governed, to a large extent, by the approaches from the country to be served, and for this reason the number of suitable localities is somewhat limited, as there are very few points along the coast which are reasonably accessible from the back country by wheeled transport". The two areas he considered suitable were Camden Harbour south of the Prince Regent River and Napier Broome Bay to the north.

The report also canvassed the economic potential of the area but Easton cautioned: "I do not recommend these industries be embarked on immediately, but merely as a guide to the latent possibilities of this territory". Descriptions of the geology, flora and fauna were also included but Easton pointed out that Charles Gardner was preparing a full report on the botany and vegetation of the area covered.

One section of Easton's report covered his contact and observations of the "natives" they encountered during their journey. He stated: "the ingenuity displayed by the Aboriginal in hunting

and obtaining his food proves that he is not lacking in mentality and initiative, some of the methods are little short of wonderful ... They are primitive, but far from being a degraded race, although the two terms are sometimes confused. It is primitive to travel by horses in these days of flying, but not degrading".

Easton was to go on and have a successful career in the Northern Territory. In 1924 he was appointed to the Land Board in the Northern Territory, a member of the North Australia Commission in 1926 and surveyor general in 1927. He later took up farming in Western Australia, first at Namban (near Watheroo) and later at Millendon. He died in Perth on 25 October 1987, aged 94.



Kevin Kenneally is a former research scientist with the Western Australian Herbarium and an adjunct professor with the Centre for Regional Development at The University of Western Australia. He has conducted research on the flora, vegetation and natural history of the Kimberley for nearly 40 years.

The author would like to thank William (Bill) Easton for access to his father Bill Easton snr's papers and photographs, and the staff of the State Records Office of Western Australia, and the WA Museum for advice and access to records relating to the Easton expedition.

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Publishing credits

Executive editor Madeleine Clews.
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Scientific/technical advice Kevin Thiele, Lachie McCaw, Keith Morris, Michael Rule.
Design and production Gooitzen van der Meer, Lynne Whittle, Peter Nicholas, Natalie Curtis.
Illustration Gooitzen van der Meer.
Cartography Promaco Geodraft.
Marketing Cathy Birch.
 Phone (08) 9334 0296 or fax (08) 9334 0432.
Subscription enquiries
 Phone (08) 9219 8000.
Prepress and printing GEON, Western Australia.

© Government of Western Australia
 March 2013

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ISSN 0815-4465

Please do not send unsolicited material, but feel free to contact the editors.

Published by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), 17 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.

Visit DEC online at www.dec.wa.gov.au to search the LANDSCOPE catalogue.



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