

Extract from: **In Northern Seas:  
Being Mr. Alfred Searcy's Experiences on the North Coast of Australia**

**EARLY MILITARY SETTLEMENTS**

**AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT (P33)**

Mention of the early military settlements on the north shore of Australia set me hunting up historical records dealing with their establishment. Several years ago, in some able articles by the late Aeneas J. Gunn on "Pioneering in Northern Australia" the writer said:- "In 1820 Capt. King, in the ill-found 80-ton cutter Mermaid with no little heroism, boldly explored the coast, ventured where it seems almost a miracle he should have reached, and a still greater marvel that he should ever have escaped to recount his adventures. On his recommendation successive attempts at colonization under impractical military rule were made in 1824 at Fort Dundas and Raffles Bay, Melville Island, and subsequently some years later at Port Essington in Arnheim's Land. All in a few years languished, and were abandoned, owing to want of the requisite experience in their government, thereby casting a damning stigma on the Northern Territory, which is only now wearing off." Melville Island was discovered. in 1818 by Capt. Philip P. King, who in 1818 -1822 surveyed the north coast of Australia, and afterwards published "A Narrative of a Survey of the Intertropical and Western Coasts of Australia, performed between 1818 and 1822." Curiously enough the expedition missed Port Darwin, which was discovered by Capt. Stokes, of the Beagle, in 1839, and named after his friend the able naturalist, Charles Darwin.

—Fort Dundas.—

It was not until some two years after the completion of Capt. King's survey that H.M.S. Tamar was dispatched by the Admiralty for the purpose of choosing a suitable site on the northern coast of Australia for the establishment of a convict settlement, The Tamar arrived at Port Jackson on, July 24, 1824, and in less than a month sailed thence on her mission, having on board a detachment of the 3rd Regiment, a party of the Royal Marines, and 45 convicts. A landing was made at Port Essington; but, after a vain search for permanent fresh water, the idea of settling at this place was abandoned. Lieut. Roe, of the Tamar in a letter to his former commander, Capt. King, gives the following particulars concerning the founding of the settlement at Port Cockburn:—"Light winds retarded our arrival, and it was not before the 20th that we brought up close to Luxmore Head, in St. Asaph Bay. Possession was taken with the same forms as at Port Essington, and we commenced a strict search for water in every direction, but with no success. At the expiration of five or six days a small river and plenty of water were discovered on Melville Island, abreast of Harris Island, and an eligible situation for the intended new settlement being discovered near it, the ships were removed thither on October 2, 1824, and parties landed to commence operations with axe and saw. The "projection of land fixed upon for the site of a town was named after the commandant (Capt. Barlow); the cove was named King's Cove, after yourself, as the original discoverer of the strait; and that part of Apsley Strait, between Luxmore Head and Harris Island received the name of Port Cockburn in honour of Vice-Admiral Sir George Cockburn, G.C.B. All disposable hands being employed in clearing the point we were speedily enabled to commence the erection of a fort, 75 yards in length by 50 wide, to be built of the trunks of the felled trees, and to be surrounded by a ditch 10 ft. wide and deep.

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On the memorable October 21 our quarter-deck guns were landed and mounted, the colours were hoisted for the first time and the work was named Fort Dundas under a royal salute from itself. Quarters were constructed within the walls of the fort for the accommodation of the officers, and about 30 huts of various kinds were erected and thatched with rushes for the soldiers and convicts. A deep well was sunk near the fort; a good substantial wharf ran out into the water, and as soon as a commissariat storehouse was finished, all the provisions were landed from the Countess of Harcourt and secured there. The soil in the neighbourhood of the settlement being exceedingly good, gardens were cleared and laid out, and soon produced all kinds of vegetables. In our stock we were rather unfortunate for of six sheep that were landed for the purpose of breeding five died —supposed from the effect produced by eating some pernicious herb in the woods. Pigs, ducks, and fowls seemed however, in a fair way of doing well, and had increased considerably since they were landed; but great inconvenience was experienced for want of some horses or draught oxen, which would not only have materially expedited the work in hand, but spared the men much fatigue and exposure. But the works proceeded with such spirit and alacrity that we were enabled to sail for Bombay on November 13 without exposing the new settlement either to the jealousy of the Malaya or the mischievous attack of the natives. Not one native made his appearance before the early part of November, when, as if by signal, a party of about 18 on each shore communicated with us on the same day and were very friendly, although exceedingly suspicious and timid. They would not venture within the line of the outer hut, and always came armed but laid aside their spears and clubs whenever friendly signs were made.

These Indians made repeated signs for hatchets, and although they had stolen two or three, it was considered desirable to gain their goodwill by giving them more. They were of course much pleased, but the next day axes, knives, and sickles were taken by force from men employed outside the settlement upon which they were made to understand that until these articles were restored no more would be given. This course being persevered in by us, they seized these implements on every occasion that presented itself, so that it was found necessary to protect our working parties in the woods by a guard; the result of which was that the natives threw their spears (p45) whenever resistance was offered and the guard was obliged to fire upon the aggressors.

Open acts of hostility having now been committed, and the natives increasing daily in numbers, to upwards of 100 round the settlement, a good lookout was kept upon them, but not sufficiently to prevent about 60 of them surprising five of the marines in a swamp, cutting rushes, and throwing their spears among them. Their salute was immediately returned, and they disappeared without any damage having been done on either side. At the same minute, however, reports of musketry were heard at our watering place and garden, and proved to be in repelling an attack that about 40 natives had made upon one jolly boat watering, and two men cutting grass. One of the natives was shot dead at 10 yards distance, while in the act of throwing his spear, and our people thought that several others were wounded, as they disappeared making most strange noises, and have not been near us since. One of the spears thrown on the last occasion had 16 barbs to it, but, in general, they were merely scraped to a sharp point, without even one barb, and were not thrown with anything like precision or good aim.”

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—A Prophecy.—

When the Tamar left Lieut. Roe considered the settlement to be in a very forward state, and ventured on a prophecy:—“Such is the state of the settlement of Fort Dundas, which at some future time must become a place of considerable consequence in the Eastern world. The soil and climate of Melville and Bathurst islands are capable of growing all the valuable production of the East, principally spices, and many other equally important articles of trade; it is conveniently placed for the protection of ships passing to our Indian possessions from Port Jackson, and admirably situated for the purposes of mercantile speculation”

—Failure and Abandonment of Settlement.—

Fort Dundas was, however, doomed to failure. Towards the end of 1827 Mjr. Campbell, who was appointed commandant of Melville Island in August 1826, represented to the Governor of New South Wales the disadvantages under which the settlement laboured, among them the fact that at that time the island was out of the direct line of trade—no traders of any nation whatever had come near it. Port Darwin had not then been discovered. The main object of the Government in establishing the settlement—opening up commercial intercourse with the Indian archipelago—had, he pointed out been completely frustrated. Mr. Campbell's relations with the island ceased during 1827, and we have to turn to another author—Mr. G. Windsor Earl, M.R.A.S. linguist of the North Australian Expedition and Commissioner of Crown Lands for Port Essington—for a few lines to complete the story of this unhappy garrison. In his work “Enterprise in tropical Australia.” published in 1846, he relates that Capt. Stirling, H.M.S. Success, was dispatched from Sydney in 1827 to found another settlement at Raffles Bay, on the mainland, 13 miles east of Port Essington. He took three transports, conveying a detachment of troops, some convicts, stores, and implements. The garrison at Melville Island remained during two years subsequent to the occupation of Raffles Bay. The establishment was then (1829) broken up, and the stores removed to the latter settlement, which was also, according to Mjr. Campbell. deserted in the same year, though Mr. Earle concludes:—“The settlement at Raffles Bay proved as prosperous as that at Melville Island proved the reverse.” But all the authorities agree that Fort Dundas, Melville Island, was in 1829 abandoned without regret by its garrison to the treacherous natives.

**FORT DUNDAS AND PORT ESSINGTON.  
VISITED BY MR. ALFRED SEARCY.  
No. XXI.**

“In company with the late Mr. Gunn” said Mr. Searcy “I visited Fort Dundas some years ago in one of the pearling luggers. We found it an interesting and lonely spot. The old settlement was formed on Melville Island, in Apsley Straits, which run between the island and Bathurst Island. The tide rages through these straits at a terrible rate. We had reason to remember this for it was night when we left the straits, but before we were clear we got mixed up in a lot of coral reefs. The tide was so strong that our craft was simply rolled, dragged, and bumped over the lot. If she had not been a well-built pearling lugger the bottom would soon have been ripped out of her. “We eventually anchored, with the other Pearling Boats off Garden Point. Early next morning parties were sent ashore for wood, one man in each boat at least being armed, the coloured crews of the luggers having a most wholesome dread of the Melville Island natives. Four of us started in dingys for the Barlow Point to have a look for Fort Dundas.

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P46

—After Seventy Years.—

“Landing on some very slippery rocks we made our way through the mangroves up a sharp rise, and then saw what we at first took for a watercourse. Upon following it round, however, it dawned upon us that it was a real moat, with earthworks and bastions above it. This was Fort Dundas, constructed some 70 years before. It seemed impossible to imagine that on those walls soldiers kept their weary watch— soldiers in their tightly buttoned red coats and stiff leather stocks—for it was in the days of Brown Bess, stocks, martinets, and stiff shakos.

Following a walled roadway out of the pit, we walked inland through parklike country, some of the trees being very fine. About half a mile away we came upon the ruin of what had evidently been a very substantial building. We put it down as a church, as there were several places near it, marked out with stones, which looked like graves. After breakfast we landed on the north side of Garden Point to look for the garden. The landing was on a lovely sandy beach, with fairly open country at the back of it. Close by there was a little rivulet of water running into the sea from under dense undergrowth, which rendered it deliciously cool and refreshing. We passed inland, but could find no traces of the garden beyond a heap of stones, which we thought the most likely spot. At the immediate point is a pretty dense jungle, with some grand timber in and around it. Wandering up the beach later in the evening I found two heaps of bricks, evidently the work of the old settlers. The outside ones were black and weather-beaten, but inside they were as bright as the day when they were made. The bricks were of poor quality through the clay being unsuitable.

—Port Essington.—

“I always looked forward to my visits to Port Essington with great delight, for besides the good shooting and hunting there were the old associations of the place to think about. In 1838 two men-of-war put into Port Essington with people to form a settlement, one of the boats having previously called at Port Adelaide for marines. In 1849 a man-of-war called and removed the settlers. Mr. T. Gill, I.S.O., the Under Treasurer, has kindly supplied me with the following interesting particulars: —H.M.S. Alligator, Capt. Sir J. Gordon Bremer, C.B. K.C.H., arrived Holdfast Bay July 10, 1838, and took marines left by H.M.S. Buffalo to Northern Australia (Port Essington), and also Governor Hindmarsh to Sydney.—SA. Register July 14, 1838. H.M.S. Alligator and H.M.S. Britomart took marines to Port Essington and established a settlement there in November, 1838. Settlement abandoned in December, 1849. H.M.S. Meander removed the garrison to Sydney and destroyed the buildings.—The N.T. of S.A., Adelaide, 1803. The ruins of the old military settlement were always a source of great attraction to me, and I was never tired of wandering about the place. The ruins looked more as if they were dismantled by man than by Father time, and I only recently learned that such was the case. The magazine and brick kiln were still in a perfect state of preservation. Many of the posts of the old fences were standing, and portions of the landing stage remained. The old settlers made splendid bricks. A short distance inland was the old burial ground, nearly covered by dense tropical growth. There were several headstones, and one large monument. I think the latter was in memory of a sergeant of marines,

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—“Flash Poll.”—

“At Port Essington I always had a great friend to meet me in ‘Flash Poll’—an ancient black dame, who was a young woman when the soldiers were stationed there, and a fine woman she must have been, judging from her appearance even when I saw her. Many a good yarn I had with her about the old days, and some funny stories she told. The old woman remembered the officers well, particularly the chaplain. Poll could still repeat like parrot a prayer and sing a psalm; but I am bound to say that singing was not her strong forte. She had a great command of a certain sort of language which she did not hesitate to use when her liver, for instance, was out of order. As sure as she said the prayer and sang the Psalm, she wound up with ‘Give it tobacco, give it nobbler,’ both of which she got at times. Whatever I said goodbye, Poll always rattled off a list of things she wanted. They would have fitted out a decent bush shanty. Once a year I did send, her turkey red, tobacco, pipes, and a bottle of medicine. Flash Poll thought a lot of me, in fact, she promised me her skull, but I am afraid that interesting relic will never come my way. Her pet way of showing her grief at my departure was to ask for a knife to cut her head. Poll was a great hand at making hats out of leaves of a palm tree. The amount of work in one was enormous and generally occupied about six months. I have to this day one of the hats that Poll made.

—Robinson's Camp.—

“The little house in which Robinson lived was built under some tamarind, trees of great age. Many a bag of ripe fruit I took away. There was a shower bath, of which the camp generally was very proud. Picture to yourself an old beer barrel in the rafters of a small hut, a brass beer tap, and attached to the top a 2-lb boullie tin with several holes. After turning the tap on you sat down, for otherwise one might get tired, and waited. It became a fine art to dodge the drops so that they should not all land on one part of the body. It was a great comfort, however and filling the barrel amused the niggers.

—Letter from “Buffalo Bill.”—

“A few days ago I received the following letter from my old friend and comrade, Mr. E. O. Robinson:—’Melbourne, November 24, 1904.—My Dear Searcy—I am sending you some particulars of early days at Port Essington. My first trip to the settlement was in 1874, when, we went to look for Borrodale and Permain. A party under J. Lewis (now the Hon. J. Lewis, M.L.C.) went overland at the same time, and we met them at Port Essington and later brought their horses to Darwin in our schooner Northern Light. Shortly after I formed a small company in Darwin for bêche-de-mer fishing, and made my camp at Port' Essington. It did not pay, and was abandoned after some six months. The next settlers were the Coburg Cattle Company. About 1876 Fred J Dewar and. three others took up 200 square miles between Raffles Bay and Mount Norris Bay. They shot 1,000 buffalo, and tanned them at the old settlement there. Four years ago their tan pits were still in good order. The schooner Kingston called at Raffles Bay, and took the leather to Sydney. One of the party accompanied the shipment, and that was the last heard of him or the buffalo leather. That broke up what has turned out a great industry, as over 50,000 buffalo have been shot since those days. I exported 23,000 hides in seven years.

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In 1896 Joe Cooper, Barney Flynn, Tom Madden. Jim Sedgerwood, Billy (a kanaka) and Tinga (a Malay), shot 4,644 on Melville Island, since when there has been no work done In 'this place. About 1877 Wingfield and I took up Croker Island for a trepang fishing station. We grew some good tobacco there, but just as we had made a good homestead, had a nice piece of ground cultivated, and were getting along well, Wingfield was killed by the natives while I was in Port Darwin.

It was a knock for me on my return to find nothing but the cat welcome me, the dwelling ransacked and the poor old chap buried in the sand about six yards from the house, Part of his face was exposed and the fowls were pecking at it. I had only two black boys with me, and the venture was given up. I then took charge of the Coburg Cattle Company's station, and stayed there four and a half years. I then removed to Bowen Straits. If you could get some of my old customs reports there should be some interesting reading. Popham Bay was only a trepang station. It is interesting, as some day there will be a lighthouse on the hill on the western side there being good anchorage in the bay during the south-east monsoon, and in the bight below Cape Don during the north-west monsoon.

I have just been reading your alligator yarns in The South Australian Register, and good reading they are. Did you ever hear of the one that chased Stevens and myself? We were in a dingy at Castlereagh Bay, at the mouth of Glyde's Inlet. We were looking for the best channel at low water. The water was very muddy and discoloured. A monster suddenly appeared astern of the dingy. The niggers yelled, and down he went. The course of the dingy was promptly altered. Up came the 'gater just where the dingy should have been if it had been kept on its original course, and then he appeared just astern of us. The monster chased us for fully half an hour. I had only a revolver, and the niggers were so scared they would not keep the boat steady, so I did not get a shot. I have not done so much writing for ears. Every good wish to you all.

—Yours faithfully, E. O. Robinson.' Robinson's mate Wingfield was murdered by Wandy Wandy who was subsequently executed for the leading part he played in the Cape Brogden massacre,"

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