

# DANGERS AND DIFFICULTIES OF THE TORRES STRAIT AND INNER ROUTE

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## INTRODUCTION

On 24 September 1846, Sir Francis Beaufort, a most distinguished hydrographer strenuously urged the Admiralty Lordships to recommend to the Government in London the Torres Strait route as the best and fastest means of communication with Australia.<sup>1</sup> Mail was taking an average of 119 days outbound and 135 homebound, making a return post of eight months.<sup>2</sup> Officials and merchants were dissatisfied and opportunities were being lost. As Beaufort reported, it was universally acknowledged that faster communication would result in the new Colony doubling her capital, population and produce.

Whilst Beaufort was preparing his report, a committee appointed by the Legislative Council of New South Wales was also considering the best means of communication with England and it too, recommended the route via Torres Strait, which it considered to be the least expensive, the most expeditious, the most convenient and advantageous.<sup>3</sup>

The route round Cape Leeuwin, the S.W. point of Australia, had been the subject of criticism. From April to October strong westerly winds prevailed on the southern coasts of Australia, rendering a passage under sail to the westward impracticable unless in a fast and well found ship.<sup>4</sup>

The Torres Strait route had long been exciting. As early as 1803, when reporting the return of Matthew Flinders from his survey and circumnavigation of Australia, Governor P. G. King

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wrote to Lord Hobart advocating the use of Torres Strait to facilitate trade with India and added, "But a still more interesting object than that presents itself in the advantage this Colony will derive in procuring breeding stock from Timor and the islands to the east of Java, as the voyage from hence via Torres Strait will not exceed six weeks".<sup>5</sup>

There was opposition to the Torres Strait route. In London a new chartered company promulgated a route via the Cape and sought Government patronage for the conveyance of mail and immigrants. Merchants at Port Phillip claimed bias by the New South Wales committee as its decision favouring Torres Strait would result in ships terminating their voyages at Port Jackson. The inevitable happened — Westminster shelved the problem and later appointed a Select Committee to enquire into the matter. This English Select Committee, chaired by Viscount Joycelyn, was appointed by the House of Commons in 1851 to enquire into the existing steam communications with India and China and also into the best mode of establishing steam communications between England, India, China, Australia, New Zealand or any of them.<sup>6</sup>

Before the earlier New South Wales committee, Captain P. P. King, who in the *Mermaid* and *Bathurst* had made the first survey of the waters inside the Barrier Reef and Torres Strait, gave evidence favourable to the Torres Strait route. Before the English Select Committee, Captain Blackwood and Lieutenant Yule gave similar evidence. These three senior Royal Navy marine surveyors were highly experienced and moreover, were the only living marine surveyors in the world who had worked in and made any detailed study of these waters. They were supported by the earlier report of the world-renowned Sir Francis Beaufort — yet all this weight of expert evidence failed to persuade the Select Committee, which came to the conclusion it could not recommend the Torres Strait as a regular route as it abounded with dangers and difficulties. Less than 25 years later, hundreds of passenger and other ships were annually using the Torres Strait and Inner Route.

### MEETING OF THE OCEANS

What, then, were these abundant dangers and difficulties and how were they mastered so quickly? Before making this examination, a broad picture of the Torres Strait and Barrier Reef waters may be appropriate.

The narrow and short Torres Strait is riddled with a complexity of islands and shoals, and in aggravation it is a meeting place

of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In some of the passes the currents rage like rivers in wild flood. About a mile east of Somerset is Fly Point, which guards the south-eastern entrance to the  $3\frac{1}{2}$  cables-wide Albany Pass. Here the two oceans with their differing tides, differing currents and differing levels of sea height, battle it out. The confused and boiling waters at Fly Point can present an awesome sight. Understandably, sailing directions of a century ago prescribed that a sailing vessel should not attempt Albany Pass except under favourable circumstances, as the strong streams would, with baffling winds, render her unmanageable. The experienced Matthew Flinders was to write, "Perhaps no space of  $3\frac{1}{2}$  degrees in length represents more dangers than Torres Strait".

Trinity Bay, so named by Cook because he sailed through on Trinity Sunday (he was slightly wrong as he had not allowed for westing), has its southern extremity at Cape Grafton and its northern at Cape Tribulation. The former, Cook named during the quiescence of his uneventful stay there; the latter he named after the shock of shipwreck "for here began all our troubles". And it is here in the northern portion of Trinity Bay that the troubles of the reef waters start to manifest themselves to the full.

The southern end of the Barrier Reef is east of Gladstone, where it is most distant from the coast. At about Cape Grafton — off Cairns — the outer reef starts to converge on the coast and the inner and outer reefs become thicker and closer. In the vicinity of Cape Tribulation the real outer barrier reefs start to be seen. Here the spectacular outer ribbon reefs start, now favoured by marlin anglers. The farther south from Cape Tribulation the more scattered the reefs become, and the more distant from the coast. The further north from Cape Tribulation the thicker the reefs become, and the more impenetrable is the outer Barrier. In the southern portion there are navigable gaps in the outer Barrier miles wide. In the northern portion many gaps are only a few chains wide. North of Cape Tribulation the waters in most of the passages through the outer Reef are shallow — often less than 100 feet — yet half a mile to the east the waters are extremely deep, often exceeding a mile deep. Inside the outer Barrier from Cape Tribulation north, the waters are shallow — it is hard to find deeper than 20 fathoms — but shoals and reefs abound with faces just as abrupt as those on the eastern faces of the outer. This suddenness of drop on the faces of the outer and inner reefs absolutely confounded early navigators. Nothing like this had ever been experienced before in any part of the oceans of the world, let alone for such a long continuing and broad distance.

Just as there are changes in the reefs in the vicinity of Cape Tribulation, so too are there changes in the weather pattern. Invariably from Cape Tribulation north, the winds are stronger than they are south of that cape. For most of the year, the south-east trade winds prevail. In Cooktown more than 80 per cent of the winds of the year are from the south-east. In the three hot months, December, January and February, the sun swings down to the Tropic of Capricorn and part way back, carrying with it northerly and westerly winds and the great monsoon belt of warm moist air from the Equator.

### **DANGERS FOR TORRES, FRUSTRATION FOR TASMAN**

The earliest record of any of these difficulties was entered by Don Diego de Prado in 1606 in his journal when he travelled with Torres. Torres entered the strait which now bears his name, from the east, and from his first entry until his departure from the western end Prado recorded they were plagued by its shallowness, shoals and numerous islands. They encountered a tempest which was so frightening that they made confession and prepared to die. They met contrary currents so strong that for days it was necessary to have two men struggling at the helm to keep the ship's head against the stream. Off Prince of Wales Island their ship begun to bump on the bottom, and to avoid being smashed to pieces they had to lighten ship for otherwise the ship would have been smashed to pieces.<sup>4</sup>

On 25 September 1608 the Spanish Council of State considered a report from Torres and submissions for a continuation of exploration. The Council formed the opinion that discoveries withdrew men from Spain, that Spain was then short of men, that fresh discoveries would lead to greater injury and open a way for their enemies to go and occupy them, that the Spanish Treasury was so exhausted that there would be more strain in retaining what they had already discovered. The Council resolved to secrete all references to the discoveries, and this secretion succeeded for more than 150 years.

Thus the impecuniosity of Spain in 1608 and the extended commitments of the Spanish Government resulted in a long deferment of further exploration of these waters. Their dangers were to remain unpublicised for more than a century and a half. Although officially secreted, rumours as to the discovery by Torres of a strait between New Guinea and the Southland persisted right up to the time of Cook's first voyage.

In 1644, Tasman set out on his second voyage of discovery with a squadron of three ships — a small *quel Bracq* manned by

only 14 sailors, and two larger pinnaces. His written instructions directed him to ascertain whether the Southland was joined with or separated from New Guinea. He was directed to seek an anchorage for his two pinnaces at Prince of Wales Island and to explore the land whilst sending the small *Bracq* to the east to ascertain whether there was a passage to the South Sea. Should such a passage be found, then he was to sail down the east coast of the Southland to Van Diemen's Land, which he had discovered on his first voyage. Had these instructions been attained, the existence of Torres Strait would have been published to the world. Tasman did anchor off Prince of Wales Island right at the western end of Endeavour Strait, but did not or could not probe Endeavour Strait. His chart survived but his journal did not, and we do not know the reason his instructions were not carried out. Did the *Bracq* encounter head winds, shoal waters or strong currents which exist here in these baffling waters? Any one of these would make probing impossible.

### COOK'S DIFFICULTIES

And then came Cook, more than a century later. Cook's first voyage is so well known that no purpose would be served in retelling all the difficulties he encountered in these waters, but certain aspects need to be mentioned. After landing and seeking water near Cape Grafton, the *Endeavour* sailed into the night across Trinity Bay, in waters where the character of the reef changes. So numerous are the reefs at the northern end of Trinity Bay that it is impossible to sail in a straight line without running onto a reef. By electing to sail at night, the die was irrevocably cast and it was only a matter of time before the *Endeavour* would crash on to a reef as she did at Endeavour Reef, a small detached inner reef.

After repairs had been completed, Cook landed at Lizard Island seeking escape from the reef. He climbed the highest hill "where to my mortification I discovered a reef of rocks laying about two or three leagues without the island, extending in a line NW and SE farther than I could see on which the sea broke very high".<sup>10</sup> The *Endeavour* sailed through a passage Cook saw, now known as Cook's Passage. The narrow Cook's Passage has a depth of 13½ fathoms, but half a mile out to sea the depth exceeds 1000 fathoms.

A day or two later in the fathomless waters just outside the outer Barrier they were confronted with their most terrifying situation, even more terrifying than when they crashed onto Endeavour Reef. The *Endeavour* was becalmed but the south-east

swell kept rolling and sweeping the *Endeavour* closer and closer to the abrupt face of the outer Barrier. Anchoring was impossible. When only 100 yards from the outer reef they could not find bottom with 120 fathoms of line. The pinnacle and the yawl were sent ahead to tow the *Endeavour*. Sweeps were hurriedly rigged through the gun room ports.

Cook wrote: "All dangers we had escaped were little in comparison of being thrown upon this reef where the ship must be dashed to pieces in a moment. A reef such as is here spoke of is scarcely known in Europe, it is a wall of coral rock rising all most perpendicular out of the unfathomable ocean".<sup>11</sup>

The oarsmen in the gun ports, pinnacle and yawl continued their desperate efforts. At the most critical time a small breath of wind sprang up which, with the assistance of the oars, moved the *Endeavour* to safety away from the reefs. Later a suitable passage through the outer Barrier was found, and with the assistance of the oarsmen and further timely breaths of wind the *Endeavour* was carried into the haven of the inner reef waters.

Cook had a man in the chains swinging the fathoming lead for in excess of 1000 miles "A circumstance that I dare say never happened to any ship before and yet it was here absolutely necessary". After the disaster at Endeavour Reef, the prudent Cook sailed only in daytime, and then with boats ahead fathoming and feeling for a safe passage. On his chart of the inner reef waters from Providential Passage to Cape York, Cook printed one word in bold letters LABYRINTH.

From Trinity Bay to Booby Island Cook encountered more difficulties and dangers at sea than in all the rest of his voyage — yet he was unaware of dangers narrowly missed. With hindsight it is now well known that off the tip of Cape York the *Endeavour* passed close to Quetta Rock, and in Endeavour Strait passed if not over then close to the mischievous Rock.

Torres and Cook were the first to record how intricate these waters were, but they had not been exposed to another major danger — the natives. The natives of Cape York and Torres Strait were far more aggressive than were the natives elsewhere in Australia. They came to be regarded as treacherous and deceitful. They were cannibals, and whilst they worshipped no God some had an inexplicable fondness for human skulls — particularly European — around which they danced every morning and night.<sup>12</sup>

In 1793 the first major clash occurred. Bampton in the *Horzumeer* and Alt in the *Chesterfield*, two merchant ships, sailed

together from Norfolk Island through Torres Strait. At Erub or Darnley Island they had friendly dealings with the natives and next day, eight armed men landed. When they had not returned after three days, a search party was launched which resulted in a skirmish at what became known as Treacherous Bay.

An armed party of 44 men landed and on discovering clothing and personal belongings of their missing comrades they destroyed by fire 125 huts, 16 large and valuable canoes measuring from 16 to 18 feet, and plantations of sugar cane.<sup>13</sup>

The memory lingered on for generations, and nearly 100 years later the people of Darnley Island told the Rev. S. McFarlane their version of the events. They claimed the English sailors came to get water from the only place where water was available all year. The islanders did not object to this but did object when the sailors started washing their clothes and bodies in their only permanent water hole. Despite protests from the islanders the sailors persisted and a battle ensued.<sup>14</sup>

There is little doubt the events of 1793 contributed to later massacres of shipwrecked people, one of the most horrifying being the wreck of the *Charles Eaton*.

That wreck in 1834, and the massacre of her passengers and crew, excited widespread emotion. Among the passengers were Captain D'Oyly, his wife and two infant sons. In London, William Bayley, D'Oyly's brother-in-law, pestered the authorities for action. Among the many he approached were Lord Glenelg, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Lord Mayor of London and the Board of Admiralty. The Admiralty assured him "... that while his Lordship deeply sympathizes with your feelings under the distressing circumstances to which you advert, he is not aware that it would be in the power of Parliament to provide any effectual remedy against the calamities to which the crew and passengers of a shipwrecked vessel may be exposed from the uncivilized inhabitants of the country, on the shores of which they may be unfortunately cast. The most effectual security which in his Lordship's opinion can be taken for the safety of our countrymen in these seas is a complete survey of the straits, and of the adjoining coast of New Holland".<sup>15</sup>

Word spread that there were survivors, and urged on by the persistent Bayley over two years after the shipwreck, rescue ships were despatched — the *Tigris* from Bombay and the *Isabella* from Sydney.

Two boys, John Ireland, a cabin boy and William D'Oyly were rescued. The skulls of some of those massacred were recovered

bearing axe marks. They were joined together by European cor-dage in an oval shape 5 feet by 2½ feet arranged around a tortoise shell and ornamented with cowries and other shells.<sup>16</sup>

There was agitation to send a suitable force from India and New South Wales to exterminate those concerned, and there was also agitation to establish a manned harbour of refuge.

### EARLY ATTEMPTS

The first commercial attempt to use the Torres Strait route, in 1804, ended in tragedy. Governor King arranged for James Wilson, the master of the *Mersey*, to go to Ceylon to buy cattle for the struggling colony.<sup>17</sup> The *Mersey* of 350 tons and a crew of 73 left Port Jackson on 23 May 1804. In December 1804 King reported to Lord Hobart that the *Mersey* was lost "on her passage through Torres' Straits and the master and 16 men saved". Frustratingly, no more seems to be known.<sup>18</sup>

For those early mariners who attempted a passage through Torres Strait from west to east, a further difficulty was in store. Apart from about three months in the summer the prevailing winds in Torres Strait are from the south east and east, head on to ships approaching from the west. In 1826 the brig *Anne* with a cargo of Timor ponies left Melville Island and attempted the passage through Torres Strait from the west. She reached the Gulf of Carpentaria, where head winds from the east made further progress impossible and forced her back to Melville Island which she reached some three months after her initial departure. There she took on a supply of fresh water and set off again for Port Jackson — but this time down the west coast of Australia and through Bass Strait.<sup>19</sup>

The armed brig *Kangaroo* was the first ship to succeed in navigating the whole length of the Inner Route and through the Torres Strait. Under the command of the colourful renegade Lt. Charles Jeffries, *Kangaroo* left Port Jackson on 19 April 1815 for Ceylon. His voyage was reported as a "new track in seas abounding with reefs and shoals in every direction, to the imminent danger of the navigator".

When he reached Endeavour River, Jeffries was left to his own judgment in running down an immense track that had been hitherto unexplored. Influenced by Cook's experiences, Jeffries sailed this unexplored coast by day and anchored each night and took the added precaution of an intense mast head lookout. The Hobart *Town Gazette* reported: "On the 1st June at half past 12 the vessel fell in suddenly with a dark red coloured water, which from the position of the sun was not perceived until within 50



yards. The helm was instantly put hard-a-port and the vessel going between five and six knots cleared a shoal, which had given the red colour to the water, within the narrow distance of ten yards. This danger was first observed by the Captain, who was fortunately at the mast head with three seamen employed for the lookout. Upon examination, the changed colour of the water was found to have been occasioned by a bed of mushroom coral rock, about four feet under water".<sup>20</sup> Near Torres Strait the *Kangaroo* grounded on a sand bank with upwards of ten fathoms depth of water within a ship's length.

For more than a century this was regarded as the first recorded passage through the entire length of the Inner Route, but in 1937 the Memorandums by James Martin were unearthed and published. Martin's brief writing, in its limited way, is the first recorded navigation of the Inner and Torres Strait route.

The person behind this voyage was the remarkable young Mary Bryant, the mother of two infant children including a three-month-old baby still at the breast. The touching story of her group of escaped convicts and her two infants is well known. Suffice it to say that Mary Bryant and her companions sailed in an open six-oared boat from Port Jackson to Timor without loss of life — a feat often regarded as more prodigious than Bligh's open boat voyage also to Timor. Just a few miles from the tip of Cape York they had a frightening skirmish with natives which involved an exchange of musket shots with arrows. Mary Bryant and her companions knew they had to cross the 500-mile wide mouth of the Gulf of Carpentaria. For this they sought fresh water and rowed a few miles down from the tip of Cape York searching for water. Two large menacing canoes with matting sails and containing 60 to 80 men headed towards them. All hopes of replenishing their supplies of fresh water were abandoned and they sailed west.<sup>21</sup>

The two voyages through the Torres Strait and Inner Route by Mary Bryant and Jeffries, even though sparsely recorded, reflect some of the major early problems of these waters — the unexpectedness and abruptness of the reefs with their difficulty of detection, and the aggressiveness of the natives.

## SURVEYING

In June 1801 Matthew Flinders received his commission from the Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty to proceed in the *Investigator* "to the coast of New Holland for the purpose of making a complete examination of the said coast . . . to make a careful investigation and accurate survey of Torres Strait".

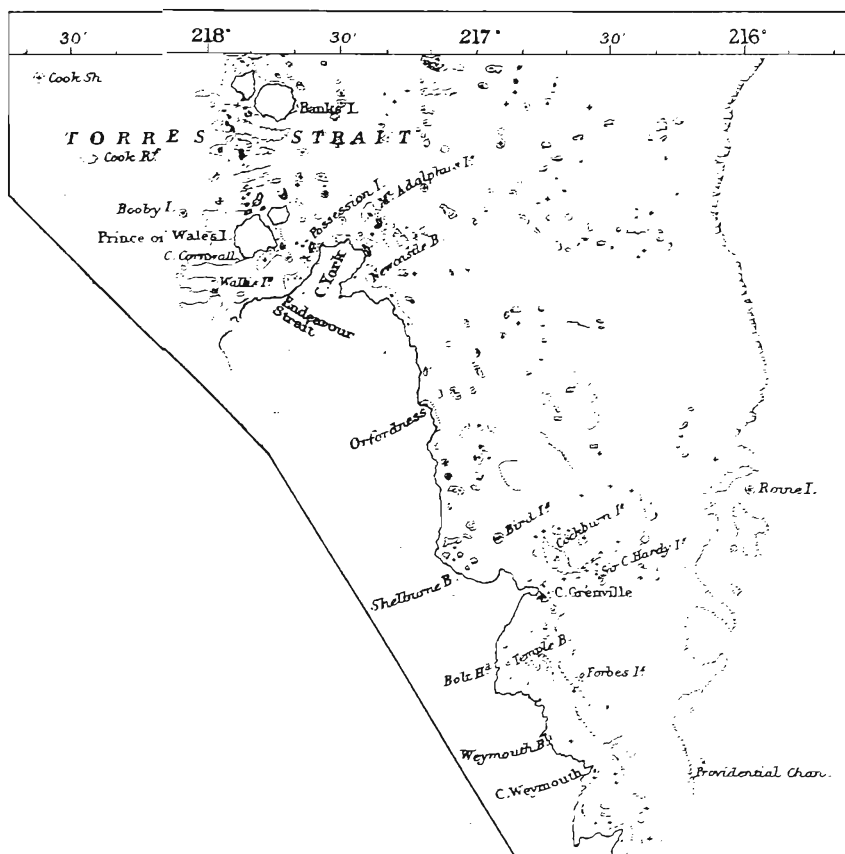
In October 1802 he entered Torres Strait to which he was no stranger as he had been there before with Bligh on his second voyage. Flinders mastered all the difficulties he encountered in the Torres Strait. He proved that a ship could pass from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean in three days. He recorded a confused situation with tides — when it was high water at York Island it was high water at Murray Island five hours later, and one hour earlier than at Prince of Wales Island.<sup>22</sup>

As yet no survey had been attempted of the water inside the Barrier Reef for its complete length. Whilst Cook had navigated most of the inner waters, he had been outside the Reef from Cook's Passage to Providential Passage. Flinders had been well outside the Outer Barrier Reef about Townsville north to Torres Strait. After the termination in 1815 of the long war which followed the French Revolution, the Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty gave attention to completing the examination of the Australian coasts. Captain Philip Parker King received instructions to survey the unexplored parts of the coast.

King's voyage in the *Mermaid* inside the Barrier Reef was certainly eventful. When at the present site of Cooktown there was an attack by aborigines. Two days after leaving Endeavour River the *Mermaid* was nearly wrecked at the Howick Islands, and on the following day whilst off the Flinders Group they discovered the wreck of the *Frederick*. Further north at Cape Sidmouth some shoals were not visible until close by, and twice the *Mermaid* was nearly wrecked.

The entry by King near Sunday Island on 20 July typifies the difficulties of these waters "... soundings were struck in seven fathoms, but in three heaves they decreased to two fathoms hard sand, although our distance from the shore was at least three miles". Four days later whilst off the entrance to a river the *Mermaid* ran onto a shoal and had a narrow escape, which prompted King to bestow the name Escape River. At 4.00 p.m. on the following day, 25 July, whilst riding' uneasily at anchor in Torres Strait the ring of the anchor broke. Later that morning off Wednesday Island they narrowly escaped some rocks, two of which were about 50 yards from their lee bow. The events of that day were far from being over, for that afternoon, when anchored at Good's Island they lost a second anchor leaving them with only one anchor. Little wonder, then, that on that day King ignored natives who were trying to attract attention. He and his crew were fully occupied with the safety of the *Mermaid*.<sup>23</sup>

In 1821 King was back in these waters completing his survey, this time in the *Bathurst*. This was larger than the now decayed



Details of Torres Strait

*Mermaid* and even possessed a long boat large enough to carry out and weigh an anchor or save the crew if any accident should happen.

The merchant ship *Dick* sought the comfort of convoy from King through the Inner Route and Torres Strait. At the Northumberland Islands they met with the brig *San Antonio*, bound for Singapore, having left Port Jackson four days after the *Bathurst*. King offered escort, which was declined. Her impatient master, armed by the confidence of possessing Flinders' charts, claimed he intended to run day and night through the reefs and sailed off ahead of the *Bathurst* and *Dick*. At best, Flinders' charts afforded only partial assistance. From about Townsville to Torres Strait, Flinders was well outside the outer reef and indeed well out of sight of land. For much of the inner waters there is a large void in Flinders' charts. In one stretch not even the coast is shown. At Frankland Island, near Cairns, the *Bathurst* overtook the

*San Antonio* which had been aground but undamaged. Her master made light of this but significantly, instead of preceding the *Bathurst*, she quietly stayed in her wake until all three ships had passed through Torres Strait.<sup>24</sup>

Again near the mouth of Escape River and again in less than 24 hours, King had the misfortune to lose two anchors.<sup>25</sup>

King was convinced that the Inner Route was safe provided proper precautions were taken which involved, amongst other things, anchoring each night. In turn this involved the tedious task of handling and stowing heavy hemp rope. The rhythmical chants of the crew did little to relieve the burden of this onerous task, and it was tempting to throw caution to the wind and sail on through the night rather than seek the sanctuary of a safe night anchorage. King advocated the Inner Route so frequently that, for a period, it became known as King's Route — but there were many adversaries.<sup>26</sup>

### RAINE ISLAND BEACON

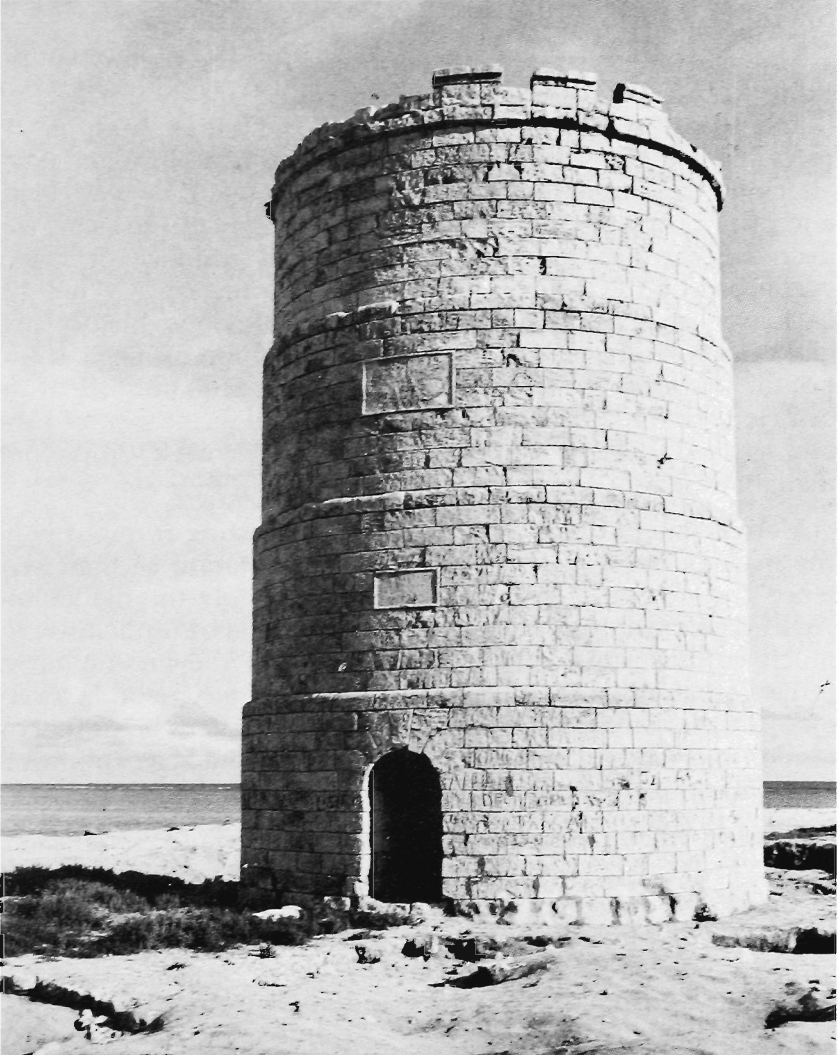
In 1841 the Admiralty Lord Commissioners grasped the nettle of these baffling waters again. They commissioned Captain F. P. Blackwood to take Her Majesty's corvette *Fly* in company with the tender *Bramble* under the command of Lt. Yule, to carry out further surveys. The Reef and Torres Strait waters predominate in his instructions.

Before discussing this survey, it is appropriate to recall the words of Professor Jukes, the chronicler of the *Fly* survey, when standing on the peak of Lizard Island: "We were now going to commence marking out a more secure road through some of those reefs and shoals and hoped in some degree to modify this danger. Such labours of detail, useful through not brilliant, are all that Cook and the illustrious navigators of old have left ..."<sup>27</sup>

Blackwood's achievements were prodigious. In three years under sail, in most difficult waters festering with reefs and shoals, he surveyed an area 1000 miles long and up to 170 miles wide. His outstanding achievement was the erection of the Raine Island beacon at one of the eastern entrances of Torres Strait. Raine Island is a small cay 1000 yard long and 500 yards wide with a maximum height of 20 feet above sea level. Having selected his site, Blackwood returned to Sydney and applied to the Colonial Government for assistance. He was given 20 convicts — mainly masons and quarry men.

From the island lumps of coral were quarried and worked into square blocks. Lime for mortar was manufactured by burning large shells, which in turn required large quantities of firewood

which had to be obtained from islands near the coast; for the necessary fresh water small dams were constructed on Sir Charles Hardy's Islands; wooden beams required in the construction were salvaged from the wreck of the *Martha Ridgway*, shipwrecked 25 miles south of the *Fly* anchorage. Their improvisation succeeded and in less than four months the beacon was completed. It was a three-storey circular stone tower, 40 feet high and 30 feet in diameter at the base where the walls were five feet thick. Its canvas-covered wooden dome peak was 75 feet above sea level. It stood there conspicuously, painted with



**The remains of Raine Island Beacon in 1975.**

Photo: Mr. Peter Ogilvie, Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Services.

alternate red and black vertical stripes, visible eight or nine miles from the deck and 13 measured miles from the mast head.<sup>28</sup> This lone sentinel, perhaps the most remote in the world, was a major achievement.

Lighthouses and beacons point to a safe passage or warn of dangers. Today it is rewarding to examine their order of construction as this points to the early trade routes and the relevant importance of each route. The first to be built in Australia was at South Head, Sydney in 1818. The next two were in Tasmanian waters. These first three were on the doorsteps of our earliest towns. The fourth was at remote Raine Island in 1844.<sup>29</sup>

Melville, an artist with Blackwood, recorded some of the human aspects of life on this lonely cay. In charge of the forge on Raine Island was the *Fly's* armourer, who had been newly recruited in Sydney. He proved to be difficult and insolent. After attacking the corporal of the watch with a maul, he was seized and put in irons on the little colony. When *Fly* put to sea it was decreed that he should receive the full number of lashes prescribed by the Articles of War. Melville records, "When his back was stripped at the gratings, his previous history and character could be read in the heavy scores upon his flesh. It was not the first time the prisoner had made the acquaintance of the cat. He took his punishment without a shudder or sign of pain, and when unleashed he strode off the quarter-deck with a loud malignant laugh".

Melville later continues, "However interesting it might be to the masons (who were promised a commutation of their sentence and a reward for good behaviour) to ply the mallet and chisel upon the soft sandstone of Raine Island, and however much enthusiasm the worthy architects of the beacon tower threw into their work, it was putting the best face upon it, a very dull prospect for those who had already exhausted their observation on every square inch of the little island, and began almost to know every booby or noddy inhabitant by sight".<sup>30</sup>

By May 1845, charts prepared from the *Fly* and *Bramble* surveys had been lithographed, Blackwood had compiled sailing directions from Raine Island to Cape York, and Yule had compiled sailing directions for Endeavour Strait. The Governor directed their publication, and sets of the charts and both sailing directions were on sale in Sydney and Melbourne at five shillings a set.<sup>31</sup>

For many years this lone sentinel beckoned ships from the east and the south into Torres Strait. Time proved the selection of

Raine Island was unfortunate. It safely guided ships through the outer Barrier, but led them into difficult waters. It guided too many to danger and failed to fulfil its original object of guiding ships to a safe landfall. Use of this passage occasioned so many wrecks and misadventures that the route was finally abandoned.<sup>32</sup>

In 1846 the Admiralty Commissioners considered that still more should be done to make these waters more secure and commissioned Owen Stanley in the *Rattlesnake* to make further surveys. The hydrographic instructions for Owen Stanley included the correction and improvement in the existing charts along the inner passage between the coast and the outer Barrier. His instructions from Beaufort continued: "However necessary it was, and is, to contribute as much as possible to the safety of those vessels who chose the outer voyage by the Barrier Reef, it is not the less our duty to facilitate the navigation of the In-shore Passage of all vessels who prefer its tranquility and security to the risk of the former; and your labours for the accomplishment of this object will prove to be of peculiar importance when steam communication between Singapore and Sydney shall be established".<sup>33</sup> *Rattlesnake's* surveys lasted from 1846 to 1850.

The surveys conducted by *Rattlesnake* were efficient and in 1850 the Hydrographic Office published a series of charts based on these surveys. During World War II, Owen Stanley's surveys of the Torres Strait adjacent to the southern coastline of Papua was actively used. They were the only ones in existence for those waters.<sup>34</sup>

### SELECT COMMITTEE OF 1851

Remote Cape York and its adjacent waters, although void of industries and populated only by primitive people, was affected by the Industrial Revolution.

In the middle of the 19th century steam propulsion of the paddle and the screw was displacing propulsion by sail. Continuing improvements were resulting in the screw displacing the paddlewheel. The main advantage of steam propulsion was obvious — a ship could punch directly into the teeth of the wind.

Three major routes between England and Australia were under consideration by the Select Committee: the Panama Route which involved crossing the Isthmus of Panama by a proposed railway then under construction; the Cape Route around the Cape of Good Hope, and the Indian Route. The first half of the Indian Route involved crossing the Channel by sea, crossing France by train, crossing the Mediterranean by sea, crossing the

Isthmus of Suez by land and then to Point de Galle in Ceylon where one of three proposed sea routes was available (a) via Torres Strait (b) direct to the west coast of Australia reaching Sydney via Swan River and Port Phillip, and (c) via Singapore, Batavia and Swan River. Much of the evidence called before the Select Committee centred on the safety and security of the waters of Far North Queensland. The minutes of this committee contains the evidence of an amazing list of witnesses.<sup>35</sup>

Captain Blackwood recommended the outer passage in going to Sydney. He considered the erection of the Raine Island beacon had settled the difficulties with using the outer passage, and pointed out that in 1849 after the erection of the beacon some 36 ships went via the Outer Route and not one was wrecked. He readily agreed that Torres Strait was an anxious passage and not free from danger. In the reverse voyage coming to the south from the west he considered a steamship should take the Inner Route, for she would find smooth water and be enabled to anchor whilst with the outer she would meet a heavy sea. He admitted there were sunken coral patches and coral dangers which could not be discovered by the mast head lookout, nor by the lead. Moreover, the glitter of the sun at certain angles had a dazzling effect which prevented sighting of reef. However he considered that these difficulties had been overcome by the two complete surveys of the Inner Route by Captains King and Stanley.

Lieutenant C. B. Yule who had been surveying waters off the north and east coast of Australia with both Blackwood and Stanley from 1842 to 1849, gave evidence favouring the Torres Strait and Inner Route. He claimed the Inner Route was safe but great precaution was needed. These included directing a course not by astronomical observations but by landmarks entirely; anchoring every night from Cape Grafton to Cape York; anchoring sometimes in thick weather or when the sun was ahead dazzling the eye, though very often this could be avoided by altering course two or three points. Subject to these precautions and keeping a good lookout, he considered the Inner Route safe at any season and that a vessel could pass through the dangerous parts of the Inner Route at a full speed of eight or nine knots during daylight with security. He laid the blame for most shipwrecks in these waters on bad navigation.

Robert Lowe, a New South Wales M.L.C., claimed that the general view of the Colony of New South Wales favoured steam communication via Torres Strait. He conceded there was a question of local selfishness between the different colonies — Sydney



people favoured anything which would bring the steam line to Sydney, whilst the people of Adelaide and Port Philip favoured anything that would bring it to Adelaide and Port Philip.

Sir John Stirling, R.N., opposed the Torres Strait route, which he considered objectionable for many reasons — thick weather, monsoons — strong currents — and the very considerable number of banks and islands which abounded. He stated: "I passed through Torres Strait at the most favourable season of the year, had the very best charts, and with the very best look-out possible; where no bank had been marked before, I found myself landed upon one".

Even more damning evidence was given by Mr. F. G. Moore, commander of a mercantile vessel and who had made many trips to Australia. As his evidence appears to have been persuasive in the minds of the Select Committee, it is proposed to quote some of his evidence —

"Can you, shortly, give the Committee a general statement of the relative advantages of those two passages, the one by the north coast through Torres Straits, the other by Cape Leeuwin?" — "If I were left to my own judgment in making the passage, I should prefer the south coast to going through Torres Straits, in as much as I consider the Torres Straits passage exceedingly dangerous. On both occasions when I have been through we had very experienced officers. It is the practice in Sydney for ships to wait for each other till they make up a fleet, and then the commander who has seen the most service through Torres Straits is chosen as the commodore, and they follow him as nearly as possible, but it frequently happens, nevertheless, that ships get lost. On my first voyage through Torres Straits there were four ships; I think we were in the wake of the four ships, and they all passed a reef quite safely except ourselves. It was about 11 o'clock in the day, everybody was on the look-out, and every vessel cleared the reef but ourselves; we brought up hard and fast upon the reef, which when I lowered a boat down to examine, I found I could put my arm down and break the coral off; it ran to a sort of pyramid, with seven fathoms water round its base; we went in on the parallel of 12, I think, and on each side of the passage through the Great Barrier there was a wreck lying; there were one or two others not broken to pieces, but perfectly deserted".

Mr. Wilson — "Would the danger be considerably modified by the employment of steamboats?" — "No; during the winter monsoons the fogs are said to be very thick; the best charts which have ever been made of Torres Straits are faulty. These

coral reefs spring up so quickly that if a chart were completed tomorrow, in a few years afterwards over the very soundings where that chart showed deep water there might be a coral reef impassable, or even dry above the surface”.

Another Captain — W. C. Doutry — who had commanded a vessel through Torres Strait, opposed that route, which he considered uncertain and unsafe. He was asked,

“Although it has been surveyed by many able surveyors, you do not think it is made sufficiently safe for steam communication?”. He replied, “Certainly not. The charts are of very little service to you; you must steer the vessel all the way by the masthead. I have been with two officers at the masthead of a ship running over the coral reef; we could not see them; the gleam of the sun was in the way . . . They (i.e. the reefs) are always growing up. Ever since I recollect the colony the opinion has been that, with the exception of openings forced by the current, Torres Strait would be blocked up altogether”.

### HARBOURS OF REFUGE

There was a growing awareness of the need to establish a harbour of refuge. Hardly a ship passed through Torres Strait without locating some new danger. London, more than 10,000 miles and months of travel away, could not be activated. Those on the spot started to improvise. In 1835 W. Hobson, then captain of the *Rattlesnake*, conceived the idea of using a cave on Booby Island as a Post Office. This was established years before any Post Office in any part of Queensland or even Victoria.

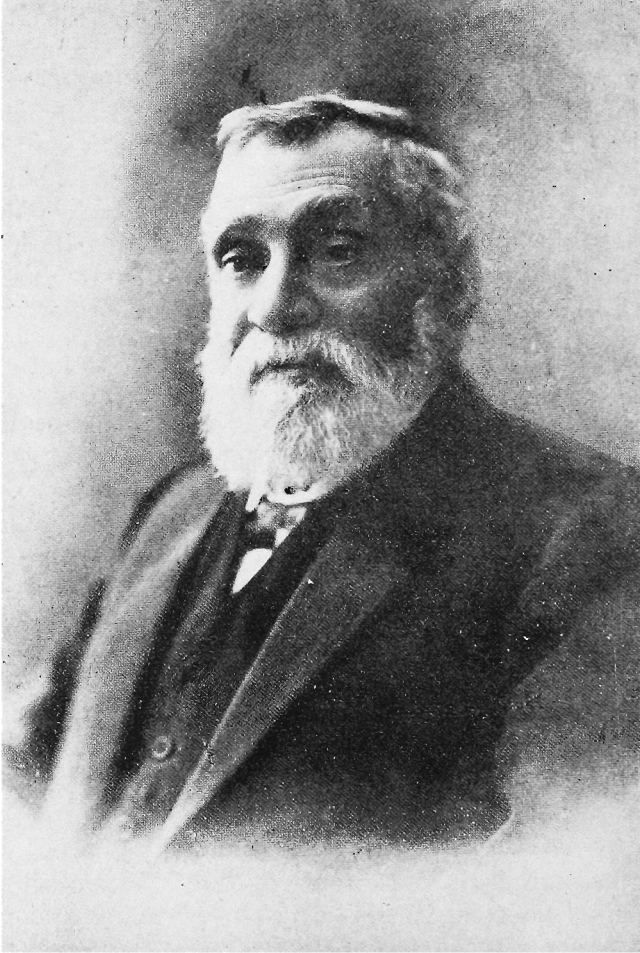
The practice grew of entering in a book in the Booby Island Post Office details of new dangers discovered and tidal streams or ocean currents encountered. This was collected, checked, coordinated, incorporated in charts and given to ships leaving Sydney. Some of it is still incorporated in modern charts of these waters.<sup>36</sup> Stores were left at Booby Island for shipwrecked sailors, and this primitive and isolated cave gave hope and succour to many and was of utmost importance to mariners. As a brief example, in 1853 when the *Thomasine* was wrecked on Holmes Reef, well to the east of Cairns, the first thought of her captain, Henry Holmes, was to reach Booby Island, a thousand miles away where he knew stores were stowed for shipwrecked crews.<sup>37</sup> The stores included casks of salt, beef, pork, biscuits and a tank of fresh water.<sup>38</sup>

An incident — involving Lt. Yule — affords another but quite different example of its use and importance. Yule had surveyed Endeavour Strait and subsequently a Captain McKenzie claimed

that his ship had struck a rock not shown on the chart. On hearing this, Yule declared it a lie; that it was impossible for such a rock to have escaped his notice and that on his next visit to Endeavour Strait he would prove the claim false. Next year in Endeavour Strait, near the alleged spot, Yule went aloft and saw a rippling — the sign of danger. In his gig he discovered a bomie rising abruptly to within three feet of the surface. Yule's crew enjoyed his discomfort. Mockingly one claimed it must have grown up since their last survey as he was sure he dropped the lead on that very spot, whilst others gleefully blamed earthquakes and submarine volcanoes.

Its danger was obvious and Yule, as a true professional, immediately moved to warn of its dangers. He wrote out sailing directions to avoid it, and plotted its position. John Sweatman, his clerk, made copies. Nearby was the *Ariel* from Chusau, collecting trepang, and she was given a copy. One copy was made for the Commander in Chief, one for the Admiralty, and one for the Colonist Secretary for publication in New South Wales. Next day they sailed for Booby Island to deposit copies in the Post Office. There they found the *Marmion* of Glasgow, and Yule laid down McKenzie's Rock, or Heroine Rock as it is now called, on the *Marmion*'s chart and gave its captain extra copies for distribution in the East Indies.<sup>39</sup> Rightly, Melville described Booby Island in 1845 as one of the celebrities of Torres Strait.<sup>40</sup>

Notwithstanding the agitation which followed in the wake of the *Charles Eaton*, establishment of a permanent harbour of refuge was shelved. In 1847 Jukes revived the subject, and in 1852 MacGillivray advanced a six-point argument favouring a port.<sup>41</sup> But it required another shipwreck and massacre to bring things to a head, and this occurred in 1859 with the shipwreck of the *Marina* and *Sapphire* and the massacre of the 17 out of 18 men in a lifeboat. On 4 April 1860 Governor Bowen wrote to the Duke of Newcastle urging the establishment of a small station on Cape York or in the neighbourhood of Torres Strait.<sup>42</sup> The reply merely stated the matter would be brought to the attention of Her Majesty's Government. In another despatch of 9 December 1861, Bowen submitted a proposal for the formation and management of such a station, which was accepted, and Somerset was selected as the site. Both the Imperial and Queensland Governments contributed to its establishment and upkeep. The necessity for Somerset was immediately apparent. In 1866, 40 men being the crews of three shipwrecks were taken south on



**Captain Wm. Collin.**

the *Salamander* from the haven of Somerset.<sup>43</sup> Somerset failed because its anchorage in Albany Pass was bad, and was replaced by Thursday Island.

### **THE PALMER'S INFLUENCE**

Between 1870 and 1873 only 39 ships used the Inner Route.<sup>44</sup> Within a year the whole scene was transformed. One company alone scheduled 24 sailings through the Torres Strait and Inner Route — not by cargo ships, but by passenger ships.<sup>45</sup> The genesis of this sudden transformation was the discovery of gold on the Palmer in September 1873. Certainly there were other significant contributing factors — pearling, steam combustion and the propellor, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and so on — but the final crystallising force was gold! Immediately after its

discovery the Queensland Government chartered the steamer *Leichardt* to carry a survey party to the Endeavour River to establish the port of Cooktown. In 1874 in its first year as a primitive port, 190 ships arrived at Cooktown. For the six months to 30 June 1875 there were 103 arrivals, of which 22 were steamships and 81 sailing ships.<sup>46</sup> The harbour was alive with vessels from ports throughout the world. The word gold spread rapidly — even into remote villages in China. Taam Sze Pui (Tom See Poy) in his tiny village wrote in his Journal: “There was a rumour then that gold had been discovered in a place called Cooktown and the source of which was inexhaustible and free to all”.<sup>47</sup> During the first half of 1875, 10 ships arrived at Cooktown from Hong Kong carrying Chinese.<sup>48</sup> On one day alone, 3 May, 2000 Chinese disembarked from the steamships *Japan* and *Scotland*. A few days later, on 11 May, an additional 650 Chinese arrived.<sup>49</sup>

Whether coming from Hong Kong, Sydney or elsewhere, ships bound for the Palmer had to navigate some of the more dangerous and difficult parts of the Inner Route. Beacons were needed, and the beaconing of the Inner Route was carried out in the ketch *Dawn* by Captain William Collin, who received his appointment from Captain Heath, the Postmaster of Queensland. The *Dawn* sailed from the Marine Department wharf at the bottom end of Edward Street on 6 June 1874. Work commenced on the first and southernmost beacon, which was in the vicinity of Cape Tribulation.

On 16 August the *Gothenburg* spoke to the *Dawn*. By then only a couple of beacons had been erected, but the *Gothenburg*'s captain was so deeply appreciative he gave Collin a live sheep and a sack of potatoes.<sup>50</sup>

On 20 January 1875 the *Dawn* sailed into Cardwell and Collin wired Captain Heath that he had completed his task. Thirty-three painted unlit beacons had been erected. Their discipline was simple. Sailing south, triangular beacons painted red were to be on the starboard side and square black painted beacons on the port.

These 33 beacons were erected as follows:—

	Red and Triangular	Black and Square
Hope Islands	3	2
Point Lookout	1	—
Col Islands and Howick Group	1	1
Princess Charlotte Bay	5	10
Piper Islands	1	3
Young Island	—	1
Cape Grenville to Port Albany	—	3
Prince of Wales Channel	1	1 <sup>(51)</sup>

During the course of his beaconing, Collin also marked a submerged wreck, salvaged a wrecked Dutch East Indianman, and spoke to numerous passing ships. In the month commencing 5 September *Dawn* spoke to the brigs *John Bell* and *Lady Denim*, the steam ships *Gothenburg* and *Alexandria*, the mail steamer *Jadder*, the schooner *Royal Duke* and the mail steamer *Somerset*.<sup>52</sup> Seven ships in a month, yet not quite 10 a year during the previous four years — and these seven were not on the doorstep of Cooktown but in the remote waters of Princess Charlotte Bay. The dangers and difficulties were being mastered.

### REGULAR SHIPPING SERVICE

The Eastern and Australian Mail Company Limited quickly obtained the benefits of the beacons Inner Route. The E. & A. offered a trip from London to the Channel by fast train, by ship across the English Channel, fast train to Marseilles where passengers joined a steamer owned by a French company bound for Singapore. At Singapore passengers joined one of the E. & A. Line ships to Australia.

A typical schedule showed a departure from Southampton on 31 December, with arrival at Brisbane on 1 March, with a return from Brisbane on 3 March and arriving at Southhampton on 26 April. The fleet of steam ships used by the E. & A. Line ranged from 1100 tons to 1700 tons with 850 to 1300 effective horsepower.<sup>53</sup> The *Cleveland Bay Almanac* of 1876 was full of praise of the E. & A. Line and claimed that the owners were sparing no expense to make the route pleasant and safe, that it was growing in public favour and that before long the Torres Strait route would supersede all others.<sup>54</sup> Whilst the editor was compiling the *Almanac*, Harold Finch Hatton, an intending settler of the Mackay district, was en route, recording his experiences. He first sailed on the French liner *Irauaddy*, which he described as a great boat, very clean, ventilated, fast and steady. At Singapore he had to leave the French liner and join the E. & A.'s *Somerset*. He described the *Somerset* as "... about as depressing an old tub as I ever travelled in. In the best of weather she was not good for more than eight knots, and if it came on to blow ahead she went astern.

"Anything like the horrors of that voyage I never remember. The smell of bilge-water and cockroaches in the saloon was so overpowering that it was almost impossible to stay down long enough to swallow a meal. There were 320 Chinese emigrants forward, who not only smelt horribly themselves, but spent their whole time in cooking nauseous oily messes, the stench from

which was wafted aft in a continuous stream from one day's end to another. I used to lie on deck all day and smoke, with a saucer of chloride of lime under my nose as a disinfectant". He then describes the bursting of the boiler, resulting in the *Somerset* being motionless for 17 hours whilst repairs were being made.

"Two nights afterwards we ran down a native boat and drowned everyone in it. The next day we lost a man overboard ourselves. He was on the jibboom, where he had no business to have been, as there was a heavy sea on at the time. The old *Somerset* put her nose right in a wave, and, of course, the man washed away. . . . I believe naval authorities are divided as to the advisability of going astern or turning the ship round to pick up a man overboard; but in the case of the *Somerset* I should certainly have preferred the former process, as she had at all times a natural inclination to go astern instead of ahead. . . . This incident brought the captain's ill humour to a climax and next day, when he found me throwing little pieces of stick over the side to see which way the vessel was going, he became quite uncivil. . . . We passed through Torres Strait, which was adorned with the remains of three recent wrecks, . . . We took a pilot on board at Somerset, but even then we had occasionally to anchor at night when there was no room. . . . I left the *Somerset* with feelings of unmixed joy and with a hearty hope that she might go to the bottom when she got into Sydney harbour, and stay there. Since that time, to the great delight of everyone who ever travelled in any of their boats, the E. & A. Company have abandoned the Queensland mail service, after losing nearly all of their boats. . . . They were altogether a most unfortunate company, and were very badly treated by the New South Wales Government, who induced them to start by the promise of a large subsidy, which promise was repudiated".<sup>55</sup>

Notwithstanding such harsh criticism and the ultimate failure of its service, the E. & A. pioneered its service at a time which was the turning point in the mastering of the dangers and difficulties of these waters. Its first ship, the *Normandy* reached the wharf at Brisbane on 12 December 1874<sup>56</sup> and the E. & A.'s efforts quickly demonstrated that passenger ships could safely navigate — in either direction — between Somerset and Townsville in four days, and that notwithstanding the earlier fears of the dangers and difficulties a strict timetable — so necessary for the carriage of passengers and mails — could be maintained. The E. & A. service heralded a completely new era, faster communication with London, and moreover implemented the important policy of requiring all their ships whilst sailing in

these waters to carry an experienced pilot.<sup>57</sup> The E. & A. was the first commercial line to have such a policy, and so contributed to the foundation of the Torres Strait Pilot Service. Curiously the two important aids — beacons and pilots — had both been advocated by Governor King as early as 1805. In a letter to Sir Joseph Banks, King asserted with remarkable prophetic accuracy that until buoys and pilots were adopted, the intricacy of Torres Strait would be a bar to that route being followed.<sup>58</sup>

The probing voyages of our pioneering mariners, steam taking over from sail, the establishment of harbours of refuge, the efforts of the surveyors, chartmakers and beaconers, and the impetus from the Palmer were bearing fruit!

Some 100 years after Cook ran on to Endeavour Reef and 25 years after the adverse findings in London, most of the dangers and difficulties had been mastered — but not all. Two of Australia's worst disasters at sea were yet to occur here — the wreck of the *Quetta*, with 133 lives lost, and the Cape Melville cyclone with 307 lives and a whole pearling fleet lost.

In 1942 the dangers and difficulties of these waters afforded unexpected comfort — hundreds of unescorted ships sailed openly and with immunity — the waters were too difficult and dangerous for submarines.<sup>59</sup>

Today large ships travel at high speed, neither seeking nor needing the sanctuary of a safe night anchorage. One hundred years after the Townsville-printed *Cleveland Bay Almanac* was exclaiming about the large 1100 to 1750 ton E. & A. ships navigating these waters, the Townsville-printed *Daily Bulletin* was exclaiming about two ships then navigating the waters of the Torres Strait and Inner Route — the *Tyne Bridge* of 169,425 tonnes and the *Mendorino* of 145,092 tonnes.<sup>60</sup> The Torres Strait and Inner Route was rightly one of the great and safe highways of the world.

Notwithstanding today's sophistication for those who seek solitude, fishing or relaxation outside the main channels and in the more rewarding but still uncharted labyrinth of inner reefs, it is still necessary to remain at anchor until the sun's rays reach such an angle that the reefs and shoals can be observed by the naked eye. It is too dangerous to do otherwise.



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