

Christie Palmerston – A North Queensland Pioneer, prospector and Explorer

by

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Christie Palmerston was born about 1851; the son of Madame Carandini an Italian singer of high repute. There is no certainty as to his father's name; as with many enigmatic figures of his day, several titled persons have been mentioned by writers when discussing his paternity. This however is certain, the name on his marriage certificate, issued at Townsville on 5th December 1886, appears as Christoforo Palmerston Carandini. His bride was Townsville violinist Teresa Rooney, and his only child, a daughter Rosina, was born on 13th June 1889.

Palmerston as a youth was brought from Hobart Town by Mark Christian and worked on that gentleman's Millanjie Station in the Broadsound district. When the Palmer River goldfields rush occurred, (1873) he went there as a young man and some time later in this area came into conflict with authority and went bush to escape questioning.

This seemed to set the pattern of his wanderings and, although he had other white men with him on various occasions, most of his explorations were done with the companionship of one or more Aborigines. His particular mate was an Aborigine named Pompo whom he had picked up as a boy at Leadingham Creek. Palmerston raised a headstone over his grave at Herberton, when he died in 1882.

It is fitting perhaps to give a description of Palmerston by one John Fraser who pioneered Mitchell Vale Station and who knew him intimately.

He was a man over medium height, stout built, and very active, with a black bushy beard, and black thick curly hair. As he wore no hat, it looked like a big mop. He was dressed in what I used afterwards to call his fighting rig, it consisted of a cotton shirt, held round the waist by a broad belt, glistening with cartridges, and holding onto his hip a large sized colt revolver, while a snider rifle hung from his shoulder.

He was, firstly, a prospector, and like some others of his day became an explorer by opening up large portions of unknown North Queensland in search of gold. His superb bushmanship was well known and respected by some of the famous men like J. V. Mulligan who, when approached by the Port Douglas people to find a track over the coastal range, recommended Palmerston for the job. With the arrival of Chinese gold miners in North Queensland, Palmerston entered into various deals with them, especially in the alluvial fields of the Russell River. He professed to hate them; yet it is known that at one time some 300 odd worked for him!

He opened a store at the foot of Mt. Bartle Frere which he knew so well; later on he sold this to a Chinaman and went to Townsville where he married Miss Rooney, and ran a hotel at Ross Island. After a short period as hotel keeper he went first to Borneo and later Malaya where he worked as a prospector for the Straits Development Co. He became ill in the jungle, was carried by stretcher to a hospital at Kuala Pilah where he died on 15th January 1897 at the age of forty-five years. No headstone marks his grave. His wife and daughter were resident in Townsville up to this time. It appears that Christie Palmerston was befriended by Mr A. N. Dumeresq of Raub in his last days, and on one occasion Palmerston mentioned that he had saved no money but then pointing to a large box in the

room he said "My Diary is in that box. It is worth money". This diary was later stored in the Government Offices at Kuala Pilah and it is understood that whilst so stored it was destroyed by white ants.

Through his amazing singlehanded explorations he became a legendary figure in his own time and many campfire stories were told about him, some of which are known to be untrue or exaggerated. Palmerston's own writings are stark terse accounts of journeys done under extreme hardships.

His diaries cover explorations of the Daintree and Bloomfield Rivers, and Mount Peter Botte, when he was accompanied by Henry Fraser and Pompo. He describes on another occasion a trip from Herberton to the Barron Falls, but this is misleading as he did not reach the Barron Falls as we know them today. Further writings tell of his ascent of Mt. Bartle Frere.

Invariably, he clashed with the natives, and he has given graphic accounts of fights when the snider rifle and revolver, which he always carried, took terrible toll. Yet he learned some of the native languages and befriended many of these "Cute creatures" as he terms them. Palmerston saw the jungle Aborigines before white contact changed their way of life and his notes on them and their material culture are today as valuable to Anthropology as the gold which he was invariably seeking would have been to him.

In the latter part of the diary which follows, Palmerston makes constant reference to "Douglas' tracks". This was a reference to the tracks of Sub Inspector Douglas of the Herberton Police who had been instructed by the Hon. John Macrossan, Minister for Lands, to find a track from Herberton to Mourilyan. Douglas left in May 1882 with two diggers (Harry Redman and Jack McLennon) four native Troopers and five Chinamen as porters. He reached Mourilyan Harbour in twenty-eight days after surviving great difficulties due to illness and short rations, and reported that the road was quite impracticable.

It would appear that the Johnstone Divisional Board then sought the services of Palmerston with a view to finding a better route. Thus the campsites of Douglas which Palmerston mentions were about six months old and he also makes the point that his own track was by far the better. At this time there was great rivalry between the three ports of Mourilyan, Cairns and Port Douglas as the Government was considering a railroad to the newly discovered tin fields of the Herberton Tableland. Feelings became intense and bitter words ensued between Mr A. Meston, then Chairman of the Cairns Divisional Board, and Palmerston, whose Mourilyan-Herberton report and personal integrity were questioned. Letters from these gentlemen appeared in the *Brisbane Courier* of 2nd June and 30th July 1883. Although obviously known to some people, Palmerston's diary was not made public until September of the same year when he gave the reasons for with-holding it for so long.

It is to be noted that the Beatrice River, which Palmerston named, appears as such on modern maps, but his naming of the Katie River has not endured officially; this now appears simply as part of the North Johnstone River.

His journal (diary) describing the trips was known to exist somewhere from vague references in odd writings but we were never able to find where it was published until one of us

(F. P. W.) while at the Oxley Library seeking information on an associated item for a joint paper, with the help of Miss Walker of the Library staff, quite by accident came across a reference to the journal as being published in the *Queenslander*.

A search was then instigated through the early files of this publication, first at the Oxley Library and then at the Parliamentary Library through the kind permissions of the Librarians at both these places and eventually the long sought-for articles came to light and proved to be fascinating historical documents.

Many issues of the *Queenslander* around the date of publication of the journal have now deteriorated to such a degree that the paper cracks with even the most gentle handling and this prevents copying by photostatic means. This record was taken by voice on tape, typed from the tape and then corrected for punctuation etc. against the only Queensland original still intact, i.e. the Queensland Parliamentary Library copy. We have used this journal in our writings on the North Queensland Aborigines but feel it should be more widely known and thus we offer this copy to a wider group of readers through *Queensland Heritage*.

The information *re* people and places in the main was culled from newspaper clippings and other such items mainly collected together by the late J. W. Collinson and now kept as volumes 1-5 of Historical Data, Cairns and North Queensland generally, in the Oxley Memorial Library.

The following contents were spoken on to tape on 7th February, 1967 by F. P. Woolston, at the Parliament House Library.

Permission to make the tape was kindly granted by the Librarian, Mr S. G. Gunthorpe.

The subject matter is in three parts in three issues, of "The *Queenslander*", in a column entitled "The Explorer". The dates are as follows:—

Vol. XXIV — NEW SERIES No. 417 — September 22nd,
Pages 477-478

Vol. XXIV — NEW SERIES No. 418 — September 29th,
Pages 518-519

Vol. XXIV — NEW SERIES No. 419 — October 6th,
Pages 557-558
in the year 1883.

The Explorer

First Part, From Mourilyan Harbour to Herberton, by Christie Palmerston.

Introduction

"The great interest that is taken in Mourilyan Harbour owing to the very large area of scrub land that exists between there and Herberton, not only by persons in Queensland, but by others — for I have received many letters from perfect strangers in the sister colonies, enquiring about these fertile lands, and as for the chances of Herberton and Mourilyan being united — has determined me to publish the diary I kept during my exploring trip last year. First, however, I must relate how my services were solicited, and the agreement entered into was violated, by the Johnstone Divisional Board, for this will, I think, be ample explanation why I hesitated in giving it publicity.

On the evening of the 18th August, 1882, I was introduced to Mr H. M. Stapleton, at that time Chairman of the Board, also to Mr R. A. Ryan, of Brisbane. They immediately entered into an agreement with me, the purport of it being that I was to mark a track from Mourilyan to Herberton subject to the approval of arbitrators, and if approved of, I was to receive the sum of Four hundred pounds; if not approved of, I was to be paid nothing. Ten days subsequent to the drawing up of this agreement, I saw my faithful little follower, Pompo, buried. This irreparable loss, plunged me into great misery. Even now, it is with an overwhelming sense of grief and swimming eyes, I copy these lines. It is not in me to express how much this little aborigine had endeared himself to me by his bright intelligence and fidelity. He accompanied me through the darkest scenes of my life — sickness, famine, adversity — and saved me from death several times; and these troubles were much harder to bear than many can imagine, because they came upon us when cut off from all communication from civilization while exploring the wilds of North Queensland.

I sailed from Cairns in the beginning of September, on board the steamer Gunga, but the weather being exceedingly rough, the Captain would not venture to land me at the Johnstone River so I was taken to Townsville, where I met Mr Stapleton again. He informed me that they could not raise £400 and asked me if I would cancel the agreement which I consented to do. A

new agreement was then drawn up between myself and Mr H. M. Stapleton. He informed me that the Johnstone Divisional Board had authorised him to engage my services. I do not know whether it is a usual custom for Divisional Boards to ignore their Chairman's agreement in such a shabby manner as the Johnstone Board did and not for very clear reasons in my estimation. The purport of this second agreement was that I was to mark a track from Mourilyan to Herberton for the sum of £300, subject to the approval of Mr A. Munro, that gentleman being appointed by the Chairman of the Johnstone Divisional Board. Should the Government use my track for a railway, the Board would add another £100. If not approved of, I was to receive £100, this lower sum to be paid in instalments, £40 to be paid at the beginning of October, the remaining £60 to be paid in the two following months by the first of January, 1883.

Although I am questioned every day of my life, of late, about Mourilyan, it is but seldom I find a person acquainted with its real position, so I will just add a few lines which will explain nearly all the reader wishes to know about its geography. Mourilyan Harbour is about forty miles to the northward of Cardwell, and is situated in latitude 70° 35' S. The entrance between the headlands is less than an eighth of a mile in width while the available channel is narrowed by rocks to a width of Forty yards. The available depth between these dangers is 20 ft. at low water springs. After passing through this entrance, the channel widens out and forms a small basin about one-third of a mile east and west, and about one-sixth north and south, with a depth varying from four to twelve fathoms. It is well sheltered, and there is a good wharfage round onto the north side and small frontage on the south shore near Camp Point, a great part of this harbour being shallow — from 4 ft. to 6 ft. The Moresby River enters it from the southern end of Mourilyan. For the first mile after entering this river, the depth of water has not less than ten foot at low water; I do not know what distance this depth continues but it is a short river — in fact, it can only be termed an arm of the sea, and the tidal stream above it is sluggish, its banks being fringed with mangroves. A short distance up however, its banks become high and covered with dense jungle.

The Johnstone River empties itself into the Pacific, northward of Mourilyan Harbour, I think about ten or twelve miles in latitude 18° 30' S. It has a bar entrance which is dry at low water. The stream is sluggish at tidal water — beyond that it runs very rapidly in places. The Johnstone is only navigable for about ten miles for small craft. A few miles from the heads, it divides into two large rivers, known as the North and South Johnstone. The North Johnstone which takes its rise close to Herberton is again divided into two large rivers with terrific falls and rapids, winding their way through magnificent basalt tablelands, which are covered with tropical vegetation. These two rivers junction a little to the south of Bartle Frere, the branch that runs northward hugging Bartle Frere round to the west rising close to the Barron River. This I named the Katie; the southern, that comes in a more direct line from Herberton, I named the Beatrice, in honour of two friends in Melbourne. I have been asked repeatedly whether this extensive area of jungle is well watered. The smallest riverlets are gurgling with ice cold streams, the coolness of the water being accounted for by the dense foliage protecting the creeks from the sun's rays. Many of these small tributaries, where they break through basalt precipices, are impassable gorges, they being blocked by heaps of huge sized basalt boulders broken from the face of these precipices by the action of heavy flood, and hurled from great heights into a mixed mass into the beds of the creeks, in some places forming bridges. But there is not the slightest necessity to go into these gorges, unless to gratify one's curiosity; with perseverance all these gorges can be headed and good travel obtained. The South Johnstone River issues from the same area of scrub land, only much further to the south, equally well watered and winds its way close to the Basilisk Range, some six to seven miles behind Mourilyan, there being a marked tree line from this River to Mourilyan — all scrub of course, very little swamp. These jungles are well explored around Mourilyan and a few miles up the Johnstone by the District Surveyors, traverse lines being cut in all directions. To anyone traversing the beds of either of these large rivers for about ten or fifteen miles the country has an extremely rough appearance and is not promising for the land seeker. But it is merely a rough basalt face, and once encountered, the land is as level as on the Lower Johnstone, being covered in places by masses of very large banana trees. The soil is deep and a rich chocolate colour, and all around the intersecting materials is similar for a very great distance. I passed over places where there was not a tree — one mass of vine interwoven and twisted in all directions; the bamboo cane being exceedingly hard and the scrub knife ringing in the vine, and flying from it just as if it was wire. By tracing these tablelands, one surmounts the Coast Range, scarcely noticing the difference of altitude. After having been twice through to Herberton and exclusive of those trips, having been many miles up the North Johnstone and examined a great deal of country between these two rivers; having also traversed the South Johnstone down to its junction accompanied on that occasion by Mr R. A. Ryan and Mr Stamp, I have no hesitation in saying that there is the largest area of prolific soil in Colonies lying dormant, inhabited by a hapless race; having every convenience excepting one — that holds back the energetic capitalist — the rivers are not navigable, and the construction of even temporary roads through such an immense stretch of rich land would involve a great outlay and then not be of much use, there being no pastoral land; and moreover, I do not think such rich soil would ever become consolidated. The only road to effect any permanent good through such a length of scrub land that has the appearance of inexhaustible fertility is the Iron Road. Not an acre of wasteland, such a line could not be other than remunerative even leaving out the importance of the western extremity. Beyond a certain altitude the climate may not be very suitable for sugar cane, which has been proved a great success on the Johnstone River, yet it would furnish homes for a very large

population of our contented and laborious farmers; and from prospects I have got from several places along the new route, I may add, that mineral wealth is bound to follow in the wake of such a line which in its present state miners have not a shadow of a chance of unearthing, the difficulties with which they would have to contend being so great. The wealth of untouched timber this tropical forest contains does not require any enumeration; and if sugar in the area is remunerative as reported, this would be the garden of Queensland.

DIARY

Tuesday, 31st October, 1882 —

I crave forgiveness from the reader for not indulging my correct courses and distances having good and clear reasons for with-holding them. I, having examined the whole of the Mourilyan and Johnstone District, find it as level as one could wish. The South Johnstone would have to be crossed a little to the north of the Basilisk Range; the northside of Mourilyan could be approached by passing over very little swamp — All jungles of course; in fact the whole of the scrub for about twelve miles in a westerly direction of Mourilyan, is well explored by the District Surveyors, traverse lines being cut through the scrub in all directions. My party consisted of two half civilized Kanakas named Trousers and Wyloo, two Johnstone aborigines, although myalls — I called one Charlie and the other Williea, and a little Etheridge aborigine named Sam. We started at about ten o'clock at night on this date, from the Johnstone township, in Mr K. O'Doherty's boat, Mr Stamp's blackboy accompanying us to take the boat back. Rowed up the North Johnstone for about eight miles and camped on an island near Surveyor Boughton; raining slowly towards morning.

November 1 —

Rowed just round the bend; threw our things onto the South bank and started Mr Stamp's boy back with the boat. Camped here all day regulating our swags; our resources being 100 lbs flour, 100 lbs salt beef, 20 lbs sugar, 3 lbs tea, 100 snider cartridges, three snider rifles, one revolver, one tent, blankets, scrub knives and other necessaries. Little Sam carried the sugar, the remainder was divided among the other boys and myself. Our swags were done up in horse-collar fashion and carried on our heads, a rifle in one hand and a scrub knife in the other — a terrible handicap.

November 2 —

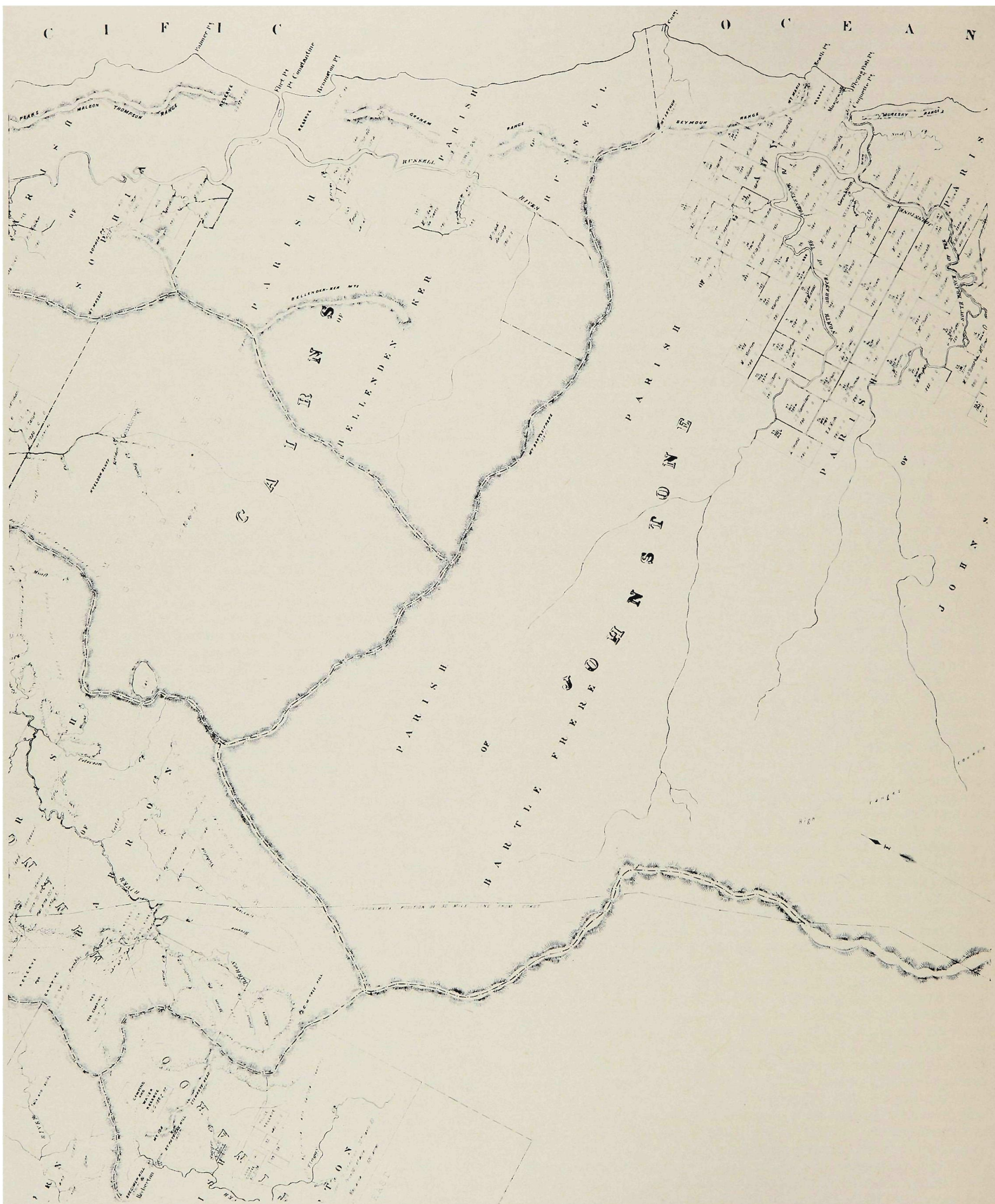
Started along the South bank of the river taking advantage of Surveyor's traverse lines sometimes. Vegetation and banana trees very dense. In about four miles, went into the bed of the river. Ran into one of Surveyor Reid's kanakas dragging the chain. We were on top of him before he saw us, giving him a terrible fright. Had dinner here with Mr Reid. Got on the South bank again, it being high alluvial formation, densely covered with jungle and herbage. Continued our journey until sundown, when we turned into the river bed and camped; the same beautiful land continuing on both sides of the river.

November 3 —

Continued along the southside of the river, the country gradually rising and forming basalt tablelands, with rich chocolate coloured soil; Jungle very dense in places. Struck the river again about two o'clock. Charlie rolled down the basalt bank drenching his swag, so had to camp and dry his things. Got nice shotty colours of gold all along the bed of the river. Country on north-side of the river very broken and scrubby, likely looking creeks for gold coming in on that side, their beds being of slate formation; large bars of rocks crossing the river which is full of rapids, current very strong. Southside of the river high basalt tablelands with very abrupt faces; level when surmounted.

November 4 —

Rained all night with a vengeance, soaking everything we are possessed of; River rising rapidly. Had the boys up early lighting fires to dry our things they being overweight while wet.



Part of a map of the country between Mourilyan Harbour, Cairns and Herberton, 1884, showing the district traversed by Christie Palmerston. [The original map from which this was taken is drawn to a scale of two miles to the inch. In copying, this has been reduced to four miles to the inch. A pointer to indicate North is shown on the right-hand side, two thirds of the way down.]

Little Sam was watching the two Johnstone aborigines gathering wood, but they gave him the slip and cleared out taking all our scrub knives. I took my rifle, one johnny cake, only my shirt and a pair of handcuffs. Swam the Johnstone — not pleasant considering we saw an alligator there; followed the river down on the northside all day; then swam back again on the southside, the water, that cold chilling one's flesh into an icy quality. Examined the river bed very carefully but could discover no tracks going down it so lay in ambush under a leaning ti-tree. It can easily be imagined what a pleasant night I spent; no fire because it would sell me; nothing but a wet shirt on; a chilly easterly wind coming southing up the river, a misty rain sifting through this bush all night, oh! and such a long dreary night.

November 5 —

The long looked for daylight still found me at my post. In another hour these cute creatures very nearly walked on top of me. Just imagine their astonishment when I stepped out in front of them with my rifle! Charlie commenced singing out "Baal, baal". I put the handcuffs on them and marched them back, they very depressed in spirits, and I with cold and aching limbs, foul weather still continuing. Charlie entailed considerable trouble, proving a worthless wretch. He was a long lean slab, swivel eyed, very deficient in the matter of calves and thighs, knees the size of pumpkins and more than usual share of mouth. Pen cannot describe the voraciousness of this uncouth creature. Johnny cakes, snakes, nuts, lizards, frogs, leeches and in fact almost everything rolled into this broad ugly mouth and disappeared with a quickness and precision of some enormous self-feeding machine, he showed nothing but the whiteness of his eyes while occupied with gluttonous meals. It was about two o'clock in the afternoon when we returned to camp, kanakas very pleased to see them brought back saying "My word, you plenty savee black fellow." Rolled up the swags wet and heavy, leaving the boys to fix up camp. I took one aboriginal with me and travelled several miles up the river on the south bank until we came to the Coast range which resembled a huge rampart of basalt formation or like layers of dried mud, their colours varying. Scores of newly made shields stood up on the lower shelves of this precipice for the sun to season them. Got fine colours of gold all along the bed of the river with a billy lid, river slate bed formation, odd bars of cloandyke (?) crossing it in places, tremendous rapids and rocks swept very clean, some beaches with exceedingly heavy basalt wash. Saw a few large cedar trees. This basalt wall appeared to continue towards Bartle Frere, high broken country on north side of the river, southside high basaltic tablelands, all close with dense scrub. Branded tree on the northside in a bend "P". Fancied I could see a strong running creek junctioning on opposite side, too dark, would not be positive. When returning a large mob of niggers kept in front of us for a short distance leaving us a large basket of nuts and fishing nets. Should not have seen them, but they were left in a place we could not well avoid. Could discern the niggers because they were plastered thickly with white clay. The boy brought the basket of nuts into camp, he refused to swim the river on our way back — frightened of alligators, midnight when we arrived at camp.

November 6 —

Raining fast all night. Arose at the dawn of day and started by myself from the southside of the river in a south-easterly direction for about two miles through scrub with thin undergrowth, surmounted the basalt tableland beforementioned dividing the north and south Johnstone. Followed this tableland west for a mile through light scrub then turned back for my boys. Charlie was busily roasting the nuts we bought to camp last night, scarcely giving them time to cool before they were into his mouth, chewed up into dough and deposited on a flat stone in small quantities until he had accumulated enough for a damper which he roasted in the fire offering me half of it. I not relishing this very primitive method of mixing up bread, declined to share this delicious meal. Packed up and followed the route examined this morning, following the tableland in a westerly direction for about four miles through light scrub, soil extremely rich. In two more miles, I crossed what I take to be Douglas' track bearing about north and south and very faint. Went half a mile further and camped on a small running creek. Still raining heavily. I have surmounted the Coast range scarcely noticing the altitude. It is about twenty-two miles distant from Mourilyan; country between this camp and Mourilyan very level — all dense jungle of course.

November 7 —

Still raining. Started back to examine Douglas' track leaving all the boys in camp. With a little trouble, I followed it one mile due north then went down a precipice into a very gorgey creek, the bed of which was full of huge boulders, a strong stream of water rushing amongst them and among these boulders on the south side of the creek there were old tent frames — Douglas' I presume. He must have come down the steep precipice to get into this rough shop. I believe it was this creek's junction I saw through the dimness of the evening on Sunday, the fifth, at that remarkable precipice. I named it Douglas Creek in honour of that gentleman, I should say his camp was about two miles up from the junction. I turned back to my party altering my course to about north-west and in about three miles struck Douglas Creek, looking over a perpendicular precipice I could see a beautiful waterfall in front of me, at its base, there were hundreds of large logs stacked up so neatly that one could imagine it was done by human hands. Kanakas were delighted with this sight saying it resembled falls in their Island. I turned my course south for a short distance and gradually worked my way north west, again over chocolate coloured soil and through very thin undergrowth heading the waterfall just described, it being Douglas Creek with a clean sweep basalt bottom covered with a broad shallow stream and very rich and level on both sides. Left the boys and followed the creek down about one quarter of a mile. Then I stood on the brink of the waterfall, went a short distance in a north-westerly direction and camped on a small tributary of Douglas Creek. Still raining. I believe our swags are a hundredweight a piece.

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(To be continued).