

SHIPWRECKS AND PEARL SHELLS: SOMERSET CAPE YORK 1864-1877.

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At the eastern tip of Cape York lies Albany Passage. It is a narrow very deep channel with strong currents between the mainland and Albany island with steep hills on both sides. It was here on a beautiful mainland site that the British and Queensland governments established in 1864 a settlement they named Somerset.

Mark Twain once remarked that Australian history was full of curiosities; which was what made it so exciting. Somerset was in many ways a curiosity; a throw-back to the early years of Australian settlement when outposts were positioned around the coast as "spring-boards for guarding or promoting a trade route, not beachheads for settling the interior." In the 1860s most Australian colonists were concerned with developing the natural resources of the interior of their continent; mineral, pastoral and agricultural wealth. The main flow of trade was between the south-eastern colonies and Britain. But Somerset at this time was symbolic of matters which had been an earlier interest of New South Wales; guarding a sea-lane, promoting trade with South-East Asia and a maritime industry. It was out of its time, the last of 'the limpet ports'; to use a phrase coined by Geoffrey Blainey.

In conception Somerset was many things to many people who had high hopes for it as a multi-purpose establishment. Its main purpose was humanitarian; to provide a harbour of refuge for mariners from the numerous ships which were wrecked in the perilous passage through Torres Strait. Since the closure of Port Essington in 1849 there was no refuge nearer than Portuguese Timor. The Torres route was being more frequently used with the introduction of steam-ships which were able to proceed in both directions through the Strait. Sailing ships dependent on the south-east trade winds had only been able to sail from east to west.

The British government also thought of Somerset as a strategic outpost to guard the increasingly important sea-lane which linked the Indian and Pacific oceans. The Queenslanders had visions of a busy commercial port; a replica of Singapore. With an optimism blind to the geographical realities they compared the Straits of Malacca to the Torres Straits. The Admiralty and the shipping companies saw the vital necessity of a coaling station to supply the needs of the steamships,

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with an enormous appetite for coal, making the long journey from Batavia to Brisbane. Missionary societies in Britain with a vision of civilizing and Christianizing the poor benighted heathen of the world saw Somerset as a base for evangelizing the Cape York Aborigines and the savages of the Torres Strait islands and New Guinea.

Today Somerset is little more than a memory. The physical evidence of its former existence is the site of the magistrate's house, an old stone wall, and the graveyard close to the beach, for it was abandoned in 1877 as an official outpost. What buildings had survived the destructive erosion of white ants were removed to Thursday Island, which became the administrative centre for the Torres Strait islands. The scenery is as beautiful as ever but the human life has gone except for occasional visitors from the Bamaga Aboriginal Reserve.

On August 1st 1864 the scene was quite different. The beach was alive with men going about their tasks of establishing the settlement or looking round the unfamiliar site trying to assess its capabilities. They were twelve hundred miles and a dangerous sea journey from Brisbane but a government department there had managed nevertheless to make their work doubly arduous by sending up a totally unsuitable dray. According to an eye-witness it was "made entirely of pine, the shafts are not long enough to admit a horse of the smallest size, and the wheels are but three feet high." To get the building materials up to the position they were needed on Somerset point, they had to devise another method, "a tramway laid down along the beach to the foot of the cliff, to which the timber was carried on a truck, and from thence hauled by a winch and block to the top." This incident, one of many, was typical of the Brisbane government's lack of appreciation of the real problems of the isolated settlement.

The two ships anchored in the bay from which men were disembarked and livestock and materials unloaded were symbolic of the unusual nature of the outpost, which was a joint venture of the Imperial and colonial governments. One was a Royal Navy vessel, H.M.S. Salamander under the command of the Hon. John Carnegie, and the other the Golden Eagle, a merchantman chartered in Brisbane. By an arrangement between the two governments, the British government had undertaken to supply the initial finance, a detachment of marines for guard duties, a naval surgeon and

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regular visits by a naval vessel to supply the station. The Queensland government, which insisted on overall control of the outpost, supplied the civilian personnel and some of the buildings.

The 'Imperial personnel', as they were quaintly called at the time, disembarked from H.M.S. Salamander. They were a naval surgeon, and 21 marines in thick English uniforms under the command of a young lieutenant, Robert Pascoe. They had recently made the long voyage from Portsmouth. Garrison duties in far-off outposts were one of the functions of Britain's 'sea-soldiers' but Somerset must have been one of the more outlandish spots where marines were exiled. Two of them lie in the old cemetery; one the victim of tropical fever, and the other of a festering wound from a barbed Aboriginal spear.

The 'colonial party' who disembarked from the Golden Eagle was headed by John Jardine, whom the Queensland government had appointed Police Magistrate in charge of the settlement. Jardine, ex-officer of a Scottish regiment, had had considerable colonial experience on the squatting frontier in the Rockhampton district. He was a disciplinarian, a keen naturalist and experienced bushman with an implacable attitude to Aborigines, whom he regarded as dangerous enemies of white settlement. The harsh methods he used to ensure the safety of the white settlers led to a sharp disagreement between him and Lt. Pascoe. He also regarded the marines as 'babies in bushcraft', and adopted the attitude of the old colonial towards the 'new chums'. All in all relationships were not particularly harmonious until the marines were recalled in 1867.

Jardine had with him his youngest son, 18 year old Johnny, whom the naval surgeon describes as 'looking like the ideal of young Australia' with his 'loose Baltic shirt' showing 'his sinewy, sun-burned neck, his cabbage tree hat' shading 'his brown curls and comely face'. In the first year of the settlement two more Jardines arrived, Frank and Alec, who accomplished an incredible overland journey with horses and cattle from the Rockhampton district to Cape York. Frank remained after the rest of the family had gone south again and twice became government magistrate.

Wilson, the Government surveyor, by all accounts an odd melancholy fellow, was urged to proceed with the town survey of Somerset with all speed. Considering the land was undulating and covered with thick scrub

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he managed very well with a town plan, for town plots in Somerset were sold in Brisbane at well-attended public auctions in April and May 1866.

Merchants, master builders, bank managers, the Dutch consul and other optimists bought 109 town allotments for a total of £2093.3.0.

The idea of a 'second Singapore' certainly caught on in Brisbane and in 1865 Somerset was declared a 'free port', with the hopes of capturing the trade with the islands of the Torres Strait and later of New Guinea. In 1857 the Dutch had declared Macassar a free port, emulating British policy at Singapore, and a Joint Committee of the Queensland Parliament was told in 1865 that they showed signs of being successful in syphoning off the trade of the Torres Strait islands. The Queensland government by use of the free port technique hoped in its turn to capture the trade from the Dutch. However the trade did not eventuate, nor was the town of Somerset ever built. The records do not show whether those who invested in town plots ever recovered their money.

There is a wealth of material describing life at Somerset during the first four years of the settlement; the lengthy reports of the police magistrate, a highly-coloured sensational narrative by the naval surgeon, the letters of Lt. Pascoe, and an account by the surveyor. Their attitudes and personalities are very different but they tell the same story, that the reality of Somerset is strikingly different from the Westminster or Brisbane dream of an important strategic outpost or a successful commercial city. The marines are bored and homesick; they are a garrison force but their military duties seem pointless as there is little to defend in the absence of predicted Malay pirates and foreign 'men-of-war'. They spend their days clearing the bush, trying to grow vegetables or looking after the sheep on Albany island. The only enemies of the white settlement are the Aboriginal inhabitants of Cape York, and the marines do not consider killing Aborigines as part of their assignment.

A major part of the accounts of life at Somerset is concerned with the day-to-day conflict between the white settlers and the Aborigines. It is a typical picture of Australian frontier confrontation exacerbated by the extreme isolation of the settlement. For this was truly black-men's country where the explorer Kennedy had been killed by Aboriginal spears in 1848. Naval ships called but three times a year and down the east coast

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Cardwell was the nearest white settlement. The Aboriginal tribes of Cape York felt themselves, no doubt, in a strong position to repel the invaders of their lands and kill their horses and cattle. None of the Jardines took any risk with the Aborigines. They had brought with them four of their own 'black boys' from Rockhampton whom they trusted with their lives but they regarded the 'wild Aborigines' of Cape York as 'cunning and treacherous' and acted accordingly with stock-whip or gun. At first the naval personnel were shocked at the colonial attitude and sharply critical. They disregarded Jardine's strict instruction that no one should go outside the cleared area without a gun, until one of the marines was fatally speared. The naval surgeon relates the incident:

Here, writhing on the ground was poor Saich, Pascoe's servant, with a four-pronged spear through his arm and another tipped with Kangaroo bone quivering in his chest, close to his heart. I hastened to assist the poor fellow, whose gasping breath came fast as his life blood ebbed away and I saved him, only to linger out six months of weary torture.

The inevitable reprisals followed with four times as many Aborigines killed by white men.

In July 1867 the marines were recalled. The British government was reducing unnecessary expenditure and making the self-governing colonies pay for their own defence. Doubtless the marines were only too glad to leave behind the dangers and moral ambiguities of frontier conflict, but their departure left Somerset very poorly manned. The small number of white people were more than ever at the mercy of Aboriginal attack. Jardine was replaced by Captain H.G. Simpson and the marines by a detachment of 'town' police, an inspector and six men. It is hard to detect the presence of white women at Somerset, except for occasional shipwrecked refugees, but at this time the records do show that one or two of the police had their wives and even children with them for there is talk of 'married' quarters. Mrs. Simpson accompanied her husband, but firmly refused to leave the Magistrate's house and take up residence in the police compound in the interests of safety. She had already, she said, been through the terrors of the Indian mutiny and Somerset was no more dangerous.

Frank Jardine, who some years later married a Samoan girl, resided at Port Vallack, his cattle station a few miles from the main settlement, and when Simpson went south on account of ill-health he took over the duties of

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Police Magistrate. Frank found the white police utterly unsuitable for Cape York and did not hesitate to inform the colonial secretary in one of the most amusing letters written from Somerset. He was obliged to do all the bush patrols himself as "Mr. Howe (police inspector) has never been two miles inland from his Barracks, simply because he cannot find his way home again." The government took notice of Frank Jardine's requests and shortly after replaced the 'town police' by a detachment of Native Police and a number of 'water police'.

All in all by 1870 Somerset had failed except in one respect: as a harbour of refuge. From time to time it did provide a haven for ship-wrecked refugees. Official records show there were 14 wrecks in the Torres Strait between 1866 and 1875 and 85 persons were rescued and somehow looked after at Somerset until a visiting ship could take them to their destination. The harbour of refuge had its deficiencies but it was better than nothing in reef-strewn waters and 'the jumping seas of Torres Straits'. The fate of Somerset hung in the balance between 1867 and 1870: it might have been relinquished like Port Essington, but the harbour of refuge deterred both Imperial and Queensland governments from making the final decision for abandonment.

From 1870 the scene changed. A new lucrative maritime industry grew up in the Torres Strait which transformed the functions of Somerset. This was the Pearl-Shelling industry which operated on the reefs and islands of Torres Strait, covering an area of approximately 80 miles between Cape York and the southern coast of New Guinea.

Many people still make the mistake of thinking that this industry was concerned with diving for pearls. This is a misconception: there were few pearls, and those that were found in the oyster shells were small and of poor quality. The harvest of the sea so eagerly sought by entrepreneurs was the large gold-lipped Pearl Shell, Pinctada maxima, known to the Victorians as 'mother-of-pearl'. All writers on the pearl-shelling industry accept 1868 as the year in which the exploitation of the pearl-shell beds in the Torres Strait began. The 'legend' is that it was started on the Warrior Reefs by a Captain Banner who entered into an agreement with Kebisu, chief of Warrior island, for native skin divers to collect the pearl shell. Banner, the owner of a brig from Sydney, already had a beche-de-mer station and was well acquainted with the area.

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Indirect evidence makes this appear the right date. Police magistrates at Somerset make no mention of pearl-shelling before 1868. Yet by 1874 Aplin, the current police magistrate, reports a rapidly growing lucrative industry with the value of shell obtained at £27,840, and "18 vessels besides 40 boats employing 707 persons", and helmet-diving replacing skin-divers. Obviously what appears a chance lucky find by Captain Banner does not explain the rapid growth of a major industry, especially as pearl-shelling in the north of Western Australia began about the same time. The coveted large gold-lipped shell was already known in Europe, but as a luxury product found in small quantities in the Indian archipelago. So when large beds of the world's best pearl-shell were discovered off the north coast of Australia there was a stimulating demand from Europe and America. This demand was increased by improvements in manufacturing techniques. People in Europe and America wore pearl-buttons made from Torres Strait pearl-shell. The famous gunmen of the American west shot it out with pearl-handled revolvers, and the English gentry matched their red hunting jackets with pearl-handled whips. The coster-mongers, the 'pearly kings' of London's east-end wore whole suits made from small pieces of mother-of-pearl. Upper and middle-class Victorian ladies on both sides of the Atlantic cherished the mother-of-pearl inlaid ornaments among the congested bric-a-brac of their drawing rooms. All of which made a great difference to Somerset at the tip of Cape York.

On the management side this was a white-man's industry but the labour force for boat-handling, work on the shell-stations, and diving comprised Pacific islanders, Malays, Filipinos, Torres Strait islanders and Australian Aborigines. Many were dubiously recruited and highly exploitable in the circumstances. Until 1872 the pearl-shellers operated in an area where there was no official jurisdiction. The native labour employed in pearl-shelling had no protection from the Queensland Polynesian Labourers Act of 1868 which applied only to the use of 'kanakas' in Queensland. The British government was seriously concerned and a number of important changes were made in 1872. The Queensland boundary was extended to all islands within sixty miles of the coast. The British government passed the Pacific Islanders Protection Bill. Known as the Kidnapping Act, this legislation made it mandatory for all vessels employing natives to carry

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licenses obtainable from Australian governments or British consuls in the Pacific. The limits of the Australian naval station were extended to include the Torres Strait and waters around New Guinea, while the Navy provided additional vessels to police the Kidnapping Act.

On 16th February 1872 another naval vessel anchored in Somerset Bay, H.M.S. Basilisk under the command of Captain John Moresby, whose task was to apprehend unlicensed vessels. His whole heart and soul were in the business of catching kidnappers for he was a man brought up in the evangelical, humanitarian tradition of the 19th Century and the son of Admiral Fairfax Moresby, famous for his exploits in suppressing the slave trade on the African coast. Captain Moresby describes Somerset as he saw it.

There are but six white settlers here now, - the Government police magistrate, and his boat's crew; the other fifteen or twenty men resident here are native troopers and pearl-shell divers; and most of the wooden houses are falling into decay from the ravages of the white ant. The gardens cultivated by the marines have now grown wild, and the small cleared spaces before the inhabited wooden houses, alone are free from primeval forest or bush.

Successive police magistrates at Somerset, Frank Jardine, G.E. Dalrymple and H.M. Chester did their best with limited resources to prevent abuses in Pearl Shelling. When possible they visited the shelling stations on the islands in the small cutter Lizzie Jardine provided by the Queensland government. It was the task of the police magistrate as 'shipping master' at Somerset to issue licenses and supervise labour relations between masters and crews. To minimize exploitation the magistrate would have the master line up his men in front of him and explain the contract as far as language barriers would allow. When they returned to Somerset from a shelling expedition the master had to pay his men before the magistrate. Dalrymple had a ship's telescope fixed up in an elevated position to "observe what goes on amongst the numerous fishing boats and shipping with Aboriginal crews constantly coming in from the Pearl fisheries."

Strange dubious stories were the stock-in-trade of ship's masters coming into Somerset without licenses. One of the most extraordinary was related by Chester to the colonial secretary. The vessel was a British schooner the Montiara, registered in Singapore with a crew of 27 natives

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of the Pellew islands in the Caroline group. The master, a Dane, had no license to carry natives but pleaded ignorance of the Kidnapping Act. He showed Chester an agreement signed by the King of Konor, one of the main Pellew islands, witnessed by two British traders. The agreement was as follows:

The men agree to serve as divers on board the 'Montiara' on a voyage from Pellew Island to Torres Strait on coast of Australia on a pearl fishing cruise. Term of agreement not to exceed six months. The master in payment for the work of the divers agrees to carry a cargo of Stone Money from Pellew to the isle of Yap - at the return of the voyage.

Chester was nonplussed and commanded the ship to remain at Somerset for the time being. He went on board and questioned the crew, two of whom could speak a little English. They corroborated the captain's statement concerning the agreement and explained further that the natives of Pellew island made a quantity of stone money every year of great weight which they sold at other islands of the group. Because it was too cumbersome for their canoes, the King had entered into a labour-in-return-for-conveyance contract with the master of the Montiara. As everyone seemed satisfied and Chester formed a good opinion of the Danish master during his stay at Somerset he let the ship go with a certificate of permission in case he should be apprehended by a naval patrolling vessel.

Somerset had only one more year to go after this incident for in 1877 the government establishment was transferred to Thursday Island with any buildings which were in a moveable state. The remainder were sold to Frank Jardine for a nominal sum. Somerset had out-lived its usefulness, and the decision to move the outpost to a more commanding position in the Torres Strait was determined by a number of considerations. Most of the Torres Strait islands were now part of the territory of Queensland; the increasing pearl-shelling industry needed constant vigilance and control from a more central position; New Guinea was being opened up by explorers and missionaries; the Strait was being used by steamships of other Imperial powers who were taking an interest in the area. A strategic outpost much nearer the main shipping-lane seemed important to Queensland and British interests.

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