THE RUNAWAY CONVICTS OF MORETON BAY

By MAMIE O'KEEFFE

Read to a meeting of the Society on 22 April 1976

One of the problems which the authorities had to contend with right through the convict period in Australia was that prisoners tried to escape. Moreton Bay was no exception, and some of those who succeeded to the extent of living among the aborigines as wild white men have continued to be local legends even when not much else about the Moreton Bay Settlement was known.

They were, however, a small minority of those who absconded. Altogether about 2200 prisoners passed through Moreton Bay. Of these 138 were women, only two of whom are known to have absconded — Honor Connor and Mary Byrne were out together for four days in October 1834. Of the approximately 2062 men, 504 are known to have absconded, many of them more than once, over 700 separate abscondings in all. This is more than equivalent to one man in every three going once, and even though most of the absences were brief it clearly provided the authorities with a problem, to which various solutions were proposed.

The runaways fall into four categories — those who stayed away only a few days or a couple of weeks, those who reached Port Macquarie, those who lived with the aborigines and those who were never heard of again. As many men absconded more than once, some fall into more than one category.

Those who stayed away only a short time are much the most numerous. This partly vindicates the opinion of Governor Brisbane, who told the Secretary of State for the Colonies, when speaking of the advantages of the new settlement, that these included "the almost impossibility of escape" (1). He also, in his initial instructions to Lieutenant Miller the first commandant, stated that the principal object of forming this establishment was to provide a place of security and subsistence for runaways from Port Macquarie (2). This incidentally suggests that the runaway problem at Port Macquarie at the time must have been acute. It also confirms that the impression of Moreton Bay was as a place

Miss O'Keeffe, as Librarian of the John Oxley Library, Brisbane, is well versed in the history of the convict era, as authenticated in original manuscripts and official papers in library possession. She is also Librarian of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland.
of greater security. This intention was not adhered to. An examination of colonial convictions shows some who were sent to Moreton Bay, as runaways from a place unspecified or from an ironed gang, some as ‘repeated runaways’, but they were a small minority of the total. Many of them did not attempt to escape from Moreton Bay.

The reason why so many escapees did not stay gone long was two-fold. Some were brought back by aborigines, or by parties of military or constables or overseers who pursued them. Others returned of their own will, finding it impossible to survive in the bush. Doctor Bowman, Principal Medical Officer, visited Moreton Bay in May 1829 to report on the state of the hospital (3) and in his report dated 13 June 1829 stated that several of the patients were runaways ‘who had been brought into the hospital in a state of extreme debility from starvation in the bush where they had no means of procuring subsistence after consuming the provisions they took with them when they absconded’.

With regard to the aborigines, it had been anticipated that they would help in this regard. Governor Brisbane’s instructions to Lieutenant Miller, already referred to, said ‘You will take an early opportunity of establishing a friendly intercourse with the neighbouring blacks, but you will not admit them to an imprudent familiarity. Whenever they apprehend strayed cattle or runaways small presents are to be issued to them of food, tomahawks or fish hooks, and you are to punish very severely any ill treatment of them’.

Success in this endeavour had come by February 1827 when Captain Logan wrote to the Colonial Secretary.

‘I have much pleasure in reporting the very friendly terms we continue to preserve with the natives, who begin to make themselves useful in apprehending and bringing in runaways. I beg leave to request that a supply of blankets and tomahawks may be sent for them, they value these articles very highly’. (4)

**REWARDS TO ABORIGINES**

A prudent government kept close watch over supplies which were given out in this manner. In September 1833 the amount authorized to be used at Port Macquarie for the next three months as rewards to black natives for their capture of runaways was 28 lbs. beef, 32 lbs. maize meal, 1½ tobacco. The police magistrate, Benjamin Sullivan, objected that this would be insufficient, and the reply was:

‘I am directed by H.E. the Governor to acquaint you that a discretion will be allowed to the Bench of Magistrates, Port
Macquarie, in the respect alluded to, provided a return be transmitted monthly of the quantities actually issued and the services performed, and a certificate that the rewards were bona fide necessary and as small as they could reasonably be made'.

Maybe there was inflation even then, for on 22 December 1834 two Trial Bay natives were given 2 frocks, 2 shirts, 2 trowers and seven days rations 'for assisting in apprehending the runaway prisoners from Moreton Bay'.

There are many references in the Port Macquarie records to runaways being brought in by the blacks, particularly the Trial Bay blacks. On 14 April 1831 the Commandant took particular notice of an incident. (5)

'I have reason to be much pleased with the conduct of the Natives of Trial Bay who yesterday brought in the four Runaways from Moreton Bay named in the margin without any assistance or instructions from myself more than to be always on the alert and apprehend all white men whom they might see in the neighbourhood and to bring them in with a promise of reward. These men were marshalled into the Settlement from Trial Bay, a distance of forty miles, with much care and some ceremony; the greater part of the Tribe being armed with Spears and highlandmen; it is my intention to reward these men in conformity with His Excellency's directions with Slops etc . . .

May I request that a couple of gross of pipes, two hundred of fish hooks (various sizes), twenty lines and forty tomahawks may be afforded me to distribute occasionally as the services of the natives may render it advisable'.

Europeans who captured runaways were also rewarded. At Port Macquarie in the 1830's there are references to a reward of one pound per prisoner being paid, and in one case of 30/- each (6) and to a prisoner receiving 'the usual reward of six months each' for capturing three runaways. (7)

Apart from rendering assistance the aborigines sometimes required it. A letter from the Commandant, Foster Fyans, on 9 May 1837 (8) says:

'On the morning of the 6th of April, four natives came from Bribey's Tribe, with information of Four Bushrangers being there, committing great depredations. In the hope of detecting them, and keeping up a good understanding with these distant tribes, I promised the natives some reward if they would accompany Lieut. Otter in the Boat. On the same day Lieut. Otter and Mr. Whyte with the Boat's Crew left this and proceeded round Bribey's Island, directed by the Natives. After a detention of some time, with considerable
difficulty and fatigue, I am happy to say, the party fully succeeded in securing the four Runaways from the Settlement as per margin and returned in safety on the evening of the 11th instant.

I beg to state for H.E.'s information that in my opinion one of the Prisoners should be removed to Norfolk Island, being a radically bad and infamous character. William Saunders per Larkins has absconded six times, and his name appears in the Books seven different times, and marked on the forehead Thief, previous to his arrival here, he is also under a sentence of Life to a Penal Settlement . . . .'

The Colonial Secretary replied that, Saunders might be removed to Norfolk Island by the first opportunity. The other three should be kept in double irons and properly watched so that further escapes should be impossible. Although the commandant did not bother to mention it, one of the others had also absconded six times and another five. They were two Indians, George Brown and Sheik Brown.

I have come upon only one other instance of escapees captured at Moreton Bay being sent to Norfolk Island, but it was suggested from time to time for those apprehended at Port Macquarie.

**METHODS OF DEALING WITH PROBLEM**

On 3 April 1828 Captain Logan was informed that runaways apprehended in future would be sent to Norfolk Island. The prisoner John Gough per Norfolk who was first apprehended at Port Macquarie but absconded again was taken a second time at Port Stephens, was to proceed there by the first vessell (9). Logan did not think this was a good idea. He believed that prisoners tended to believe that they would be better off somewhere else, and that runaways sent to Norfolk Island would be seen by others as having succeeded, and others would be encouraged to try. The matter must have been discussed during his visit to Sydney later in the year, for on 20 October he wrote. (10)

'Immediately on my return from Sydney I despatched a military party to Point Danger and they have already sent in two runaways who had left the settlement ten days previous. I have every reason to believe that this measure will have the effect of checking absconding to a considerable extent and I beg leave to recommend that the runaways from Moreton Bay now in the Phoenix Hulk should be returned here by the first conveyance and worked in double irons during their respective sentences this I am convinced would have a much better effect than sending them to Norfolk Island'.
A letter of 14 November highly approved the suggestion of returning prisoners to the settlement and in January 1829 twenty-four runaways who had been in the hulk were returned to Moreton Bay by the *City of Edinburgh*. Logan immediately had them formed into a gang by themselves to have them more narrowly watched. In the following May we find him reporting with satisfaction that the prisoners were conducting themselves in as orderly a manner as could be expected:

‘absconding is less frequent which is principally to be ascribed to sending back the runaways from Port Macquarie’.

This was still being done. A letter in the same month informed Logan that the *Mary Elizabeth* would call at Port Macquarie to put on board any runaways the Commandant might have. In April 1830 a letter stated that 18 prisoners and 15 more runaways were being sent.

However on 8 June 1831 the Colonial Secretary wrote to Logan’s successor Captain Clunie that the Commandant of Port Macquarie had reported the apprehension of five prisoners from Moreton Bay and had requested to forward them to headquarters with a view to their removal to Norfolk Island. The letter added:

‘As the Runaways from Moreton Bay appear to be again becoming numerous I do myself the honour to request that you will state by what measures in your opinion this will be most effectually checked. Perhaps a separate establishment can be formed under stricter Superintendence where men of this description can be constantly overlooked and worked in heavy irons’.

The idea of sending them to Norfolk Island seems to have been soon abandoned, for next month (30 July 1831) a further letter stated:

‘Respecting the Runaway Convicts from Moreton Bay and the manner in which they are to be dealt with when returned, I am directed by His Excellency to inform you that eleven such men are now forwarded by the *Eleanor*, having been apprehended at Port Macquarie and sent to Sydney. With the view of preventing the practice of absconding which appears to have been committed by the Prisoners under an impression that they will be sent to Norfolk Island for such offence where the Labor is stated to be lighter, H.E. commands me to request that all Runaways when returned may be worked at the heaviest Labour in Gangs in Irons under a Military Guard, apart from the other prisoners and Lodged in a secure place at Night with a sentry over them’.

There seems no logical reason for treating runaways who succeeded in getting as far as Port Macquarie differently from others
who had intended the same but been recaptured soon after absconding, but it will be remembered that this is what Logan had done with those who returned by the City of Edinburgh.

On 24 January 1832 the Commandant was informed that two prisoners were to be sent to Norfolk Island, to be worked at the heaviest labour in irons for the full period of their sentences and the time they were absent, they being repeated runaways, and the other prisoners were to be told of this.

A letter of 26 March 1833 states that all runaways from Moreton Bay apprehended at Port Macquarie are to be sent to Norfolk Island to complete their Colonial sentences. (11)

In October however we find ten being sent to Norfolk Island and at the same time two others returned to Moreton Bay, and in May 1834 Sheik Brown, a notorious and repeated runaway, was returned. Nine were returned in May 1837, and the next month as we have already seen William Saunders who was taken at Bribie Island was sent to Norfolk Island. Escapes by this time were much less numerous than in earlier years, but in September 1838 Patrick Sullivan was taken at Penrith, having been absent from Moreton Bay since February the previous year. It was suggested that he be sent to Norfolk Island but it is not clear whether this was done. Finally in May 1839 Michael McEvoy per Roslyn Castle and Michael Whelan per Eliza were sent to headquarters from Moreton Bay as incorrigible runaways who had repeatedly received severe punishment without any good effect, and were forwarded to Norfolk Island.

SENTENCE OF DEATH

However in one case more severe measures had been taken. Charles Fagan and John Bulbridge absconded in August 1830. They were taken at Port Macquarie. They had robbed a hut and in attempting to rob another one were taken after a scuffle: for this they were sentenced to death. They were sent back to Moreton Bay to be executed, the letter forwarding them saying:

'The object of their Execution at Moreton Bay is to convince the other Prisoners there of the impracticability of the same mode of escape and you will be pleased therefore to cause as great a number as convenient to be present, taking care of course to ensure the attendance also of a sufficient military guard'.

They had robbed the hut of a gun, a Parramatta Frock, a blue jacket, a pair of half boots, a knife and fork, and kettle and a blanket, also about seven pounds of beef, some flour and some corn meal. They talked of killing a pig but did not. They were about to take the witness’s frock from off his person but did not. They had no hats, shoes nor trowers on and from their appearance
witness considered them to be runaways from Moreton Bay (12). Fagan was stated to have said that it was his fifth time of absconding and that he had twice got as far as Sydney, Bulbridge had been sentenced to Moreton Bay twice, the first time he was sent for 12 months for absconding from his gang. He did not abscond from Moreton Bay that time and was returned to Sydney after nine months. Then in March 1830 he was sent up again for three years for stealing timber the property of the crown.

Sending a frequent absconder to Norfolk Island as an extra punishment did not have the effect intended in at least one case. Richard Bowden arrived in Moreton Bay on 28 December 1826 and absconded 27 days later. He went again in August, and in October 1830 and September 1831. He had been one of those returned in January 1829 by the City of Edinburgh. He was finally sentenced to be sent to Norfolk Island to serve ‘the full period of his sentence and the time he ran’ at the heaviest labour in irons. The only hitch was, nobody told them this at Norfolk Island. When his original seven years were up on 24 May 1833 he was regarded as free. Before he could be returned to the mainland he committed petty larceny by stealing a pair of shoes, and was therefore held in gaol in Sydney while it was considered whether he should be tried for this. It would have meant bringing witnesses from Norfolk Island and did not seem worth the trouble and expense. The Commandant of Norfolk Island wrote (13)

‘I think it necessary to state for H.E. the Governor’s information that the prisoner Bowden has been saying among his fellow prisoners, that the prisoners, and I have it from other sources, that he has been in the bush with the natives the greater part of his seven years. But as there was no proof, and no notice in the indent sent here of his being absent I could not avail myself of the Act No. 3 William the 4th par. 2a’.

It may reasonably be wondered why he had not made enquiries before Bowden’s sentences expired. The rest of the letter may provide a clue.

‘His character was bad landing here, he being one of those that was concerned in the attempt to poison the guard and crew of the Governor Phillip and his conduct has been very bad all the time he has been here’.

It is true that the Commandant concludes

‘I would therefore recommend that he be returned here (if he comes within the intention of the Act) to serve his full time’

but one cannot help suspecting that he was glad to see Richard Bowden go. The Attorney General decided that it was not worth
while proceeding in the matter of the shoes, and that the time Bowden had been in custody waiting a decision equalled the time he had been absent from Moreton Bay (absent on the last occasion, that is The Attorney General apparently was not aware of the earlier ones) and so he became a free man. It is to be hoped that the same thing happened to Charles Bogg, who was sent to Norfolk Island at the same time as a repeated Runaway for what was only his second attempt.

It will be noticed that the runaways which figure most in the correspondence are those who were taken at Port Macquarie. The first party, among the most interesting, was reported in a letter from the Commandant of Port Macquarie dated 18 November 1825. He said that four prisoners had arrived saying that they came overland from Moreton Bay in five weeks. He had thought that they actually came by boat so had had them lodged separately and in due course one made a statement to this effect. John Longbottom gave a graphic and detailed account how nine prisoners seized the barge which some of them were taking down the river to the shingle splitters, after beating up the soldier and constables, having first seized their muskets which had been outside leaning against the hut, and after John Mills, remarking ‘I never liked a red coat in my life, I’ll run the bayonet through him’ ran the bayonet through the lower part of the soldier’s breast and killed him on the spot. After some days at sea the strength of the wind compelled them to beach the boat which was dashed to pieces by the surf and five of the party were drowned: the remaining four, Mills, Longbottom, William Smith and John Walsh reached Port Macquarie six days later. He was asked how it came about that the muskets were left outside the hut, and replied:

‘The Military and Prisoners all live in one hut together: the muskets are generally left outside in the day time: the Prisoners were in the habit of taking them for their amusement when they chose. The soldier, the constables and the working hands of the Gang all sleep in one hut at the shingle splitters’.

This is so surprising that one would like to believe it. Two things however force me reluctantly to treat John Longbottom’s story with reserve. One is that in those days one could be executed for considerably less than murdering a soldier, as Fagan and Bulbridge could testify, but all that happened to John Mills is that he was eventually sent back to Moreton Bay. The Commandant at Port Macquarie was told to retain the men while enquiries were made from Moreton Bay as to what had happened before they left, (14) but I can find no other correspondence relating to the affair at all. The other odd point is that of the five men said to have been drowned when the boat was beached, four were alive
at Moreton Bay four months later, according to a quarterly return of public labour then furnished. Unfortunately the Chronological Register of convicts did not have particulars of abscondings entered in it consistently at this early period.

In February 1826 the next party arrived. The Commandant at Port Macquarie reported the arrival of six crown prisoners on 22 and 23 February who had succeeded in making their escape through the bush from Moreton Bay. This time he does not seem to doubt that they had come overland. Perhaps the first lot were not sufficiently bedraggled. Another came in July and two in November, then for a few years they were a regular feature.

PORT MACQUARIE RECORDS

The Magisterial Records of Port Macquarie February 1830 and April 1832 (15) and the Port Macquarie Bench Book June 1833-September 1834 have survived (16) and contain several entries for men who were tried for being at large or for absconding from Moreton Bay. Unfortunately they usually give no details, merely that the prisoner confessed himself to be a runaway from Moreton Bay and was sentenced to 100 lashes. However when James Bent per *Midas* and Thomas Brooks per *Grenada* were found at large on 9 September 1831 it is recorded that Brooks absconded on 14 July, Bent on 26 July and they joined company near Point Danger and came from thence together. Bent said that at a place called the Passage he was pursued by the authorities of Moreton Bay and William Chaffey and Martin Hughes who had run with him were apprehended. He escaped by running into the mangroves. The entry for William Chaffey in the Chronological Register shows that he returned on 2 August and went again the same day. He must have come south close behind Bent and Brooks for he was charged with being at large only four days after them. He however said that he ran on 14 August, so the repetition of the same date in the register may be an error.

The usual punishment was 100 lashes because the Act 3 Guil. 4th No. 3 provided that Runaways from penal settlements were to be sentenced to 100 lashes and returned to the place from whence they ran. However when James Barlow per *Speke* was charged on 29 August 1833 he was sentenced instead to be worked in irons for twelve calendar months and to be returned to such penal settlement as H.E. the Governor may think fit to direct. The attention of the Bench was promptly drawn to the provisions of the Act and it was directed that Barlow be dealt with accordingly. The President of the Court (Benjamin Sullivan) replied in explanation:

'From the extremely reduced state of Runaway Prisoners from Moreton Bay on their apprehension and the great bodily pain and hardship they must in general endure during
their journey, they are totally rendered incapable of suffering corporal punishment to the extent the law directs which on the individual being placed under the lash the Superintending Surgeon could not permit to have fully inflicted without endangering life, the Court therefore considered that the ends of justice would be better gained by sentencing the individuals to be worked in irons for 12 months which is in a former part of the Act referred to, considered equivalent to 100 lashes and which in fact the Court consider as actually severer than that of the corporal punishment and is so felt by the prisoners themselves in as much as it totally precludes them while under such sentence from partaking of any kind of indulgence and adds so much more to their period of servitude.

With regard to not directing them as the Act directs to be returned to the place from whence they ran you must be aware it was not done in compliance of instructions from yourself with the view of their being removed to Norfolk Island’. (17)

The matter was resolved in later cases by sentencing men to be returned to Moreton Bay and there to receive 100 lashes.

Besides being in a reduced physical condition they were likely to have been stripped by aboriginal tribes which they encountered on the journey. The Journal of Public Transactions at Port Macquarie (18) has two references for March 1830, each to two runaways from Moreton Bay being brought in naked. This was sufficiently common an occurrence for Sullivan to enquire how he should acquire slop clothing for Bushrangers captured in a state of nudity. Being told to indent in the usual way he ordered 20 sets. This of course would be for expected escapees from Port Macquarie as well as from Moreton Bay. (19)

The men who made this trek were the first Europeans to see the Northern Rivers district of New South Wales. Under date of 17 March 1830 the Journal of Public Transactions at Port Macquarie (20) records that four runaways were questioned by the Commandant, John Jobson. It was said that a runaway named Baylis died on the beach near the Big River, the description of which agrees with the situation of Shoal Bay as laid down in the chart.

A week later the Commandant wrote to the Colonial Secretary (21). ‘There are now at this station 12 runaways from Moreton Bay all strong healthy men and young, in questioning them immediately they are brought in I am inclined from the information they give to think it would be practicable to send Bullocks, Sheep or other Cattle to that station from hence, I have presumed to call your attention to this circumstance as a measure of public utility in the disposal of the stock at this station when it is thrown
open to settlers, the invariable statement is "that there is one large river little short of two miles at its mouth and widens very much for many miles up", there is little doubt in my opinion of this being Shoal Bay of which no notice is taken by any of them and all agree in situation with that as laid down in the Chart. I have the satisfaction to say that the Blacks have been largely instrumental in the capture of these runaways, three of whom having before been on this settlement were with difficulty laid hold of. Trifling rewards have been given them'.

This Big River is the one known to us as the Clarence, and this is the earliest reference to it that I have seen. Its discovery is popularly credited to Richard Craig who however did not leave Moreton Bay on the trip that brought him to Port Macquarie until December 1830. Craig was not returned to Moreton Bay. By the time he gave himself up at Port Macquarie in August 1831 he had obtained sufficient knowledge of the local aboriginal language to make the Commandant weak and obtain permission to retain him at that settlement (22). On 28 July 1832 he was equipped for Transport from Port Macquarie to Liverpool Plains to trace down the main arm of a river (known by the name of the Big River) to the Sea Coast. However on 24 August he returned, having reached one of the Stations belonging to the Agricultural Company at Port Stephens but been unable to proceed to Liverpool Plains for the want of provisions. There is no mention of his going again in this book, which ends on 20 September 1833. (23)

Statements which various runaways had made to the Bench at Port Macquarie were quoted in an article in The Colonist on 17 December 1835. All mention the Big River but some also refer to the Half-Moon River and the Black Rock River, which lay between the Tweed and the Big River. James McCarnie swam across the Half-Moon River at low water and a few days later came to the Black Rock River. Francis Mulligan was drowned while crossing the Black Rock River, the raft parting. The distance from the Black Rock River to the Big River was two or three days journey.

RUNAWAYS WHO LIVED WITH THE ABORIGINES

Those who spent long periods with the aborigines and then returned to civilization are mostly well known. The first of these to abscond were George Mitchell and John Sterry Baker, who both ran on 8 January 1826 but appear to have gone in different directions. Mitchell went northward and returned after a couple of years, having learned from another runaway that in the meantime new evidence relating to the offence for which he had been sentenced had resulted in his being pardoned. He told Allan Cunningham that he had been for some time in company with John Graham, who at that time was still out, so there is no reason
why he should not have mentioned Baker if he had been in his company (24). John Dunmore Lang's account of Baker is as follows:

'When Moreton Bay was a penal settlement, a convict of the name of Baker escaped to the woods, and became naturalized and domiciliated among a tribe of black natives in the upper Brisbane district. The natives recognized, or supposed they recognized, in the runaway, a deceased native of the tribe, who had died some time before, of the name of Boraltchou, and who they supposed had reappeared in the person of the white man; and although the convict, who, it seems, did not relish the compliment, maintained that he was not Boraltchou, the natives, who knew better, as they had seen both, insisted that he was, and allotted to him as his own property the portion of land that had belonged to the real Boraltchou'. (25)

He gave himself up on 4 August 1840 and later helped Lieutenant Gorman, the last Commandant, to find a vehicular route to the Darling Downs, the route called Gorman's Gap.

John Graham ran on 14 July 1827 and returned on 9 November 1833, having been out six and a half years. In 1836 he played a major part in the rescue of the survivors of the Stirling Castle, as a result of which he received a ticket of leave. Otherwise, by the provisions of 3 William the 4th No. 3, he would have had to serve the whole period of his absence; this act was passed when he was in the bush and he was ignorant of it until his return.

Also involved in the Stirling Castle rescue, though as he remained in the bush his part was not known until later, was David Bracewell. After two short absences — the first was of four days and after his return he received 150 lashes — he absconded on 8 February 1831 and remained at large until 23 May 1837. He was then brought in with the co-operation of another returned runaway, Samuel Derrington. Derrington was one of a party under Lieutenant Otter which went northwards in two whale boats to ascertain the truth of a story, told by natives, of a shipwreck in the area. In the course of his report to Captain Fyans Lieutenant Otter said:

'I now sent Derrington on shore and in about two hours he returned with three men who said they had heard nothing of any vessel. The next morning (Saturday) I returned to Double Island Point where I had left the other boat, and arrived the following day at Huon Mundy's River, having sent Derrington on before for the purpose of bringing the natives in to us.

The next day (Monday) the natives came in and we ascertained beyond a doubt that the whole story of a vessel having been
wrecked was totally false. I therefore determined to make the best of my way back to the settlement. Hearing however that a runaway of the name of Bracefield who had been out for six or seven years was in the neighbourhood, I remained a day for the purpose of apprehending him, in which I succeeded with the aid of Derrington who persuaded the Blacks to assist us'.

He added that he had every reason to be satisfied with the crews of both boats especially Derrington who was exceedingly active and useful. (26)

As a result of this commendation each of the crew had a year taken off his sentence; those sentenced for life were reduced to fourteen years. Derrington in addition received a gratuity of £5 to be paid into the Savings Bank to his account.

A few months later another expedition on the same nature took place. This time there had been a wreck and some seamen had been killed by the aborigines. The Commandant reported:

'The spirited conduct of the prisoner Sam. Derrington per Speke 3rd, whose name has also been before under notice, is particularly deserving of recommendation; he quitted the party alone, and entirely naked, and having travelled in this manner about thirty miles through the forest, making enquiries, rejoined the party with intelligence, which partly led to the discovery of the murdered bodies'. (27)

Derrington returned to Sydney in April 1838.

**CASE OF JAMES DAVIS**

To return to Bracewell, he fled again on 21 July 1839 and was brought in along with James Davis who had run on 30 March 1829. Davis' account as transmitted to the Colonial Secretary by Stephen Simpson immediately after his return, was as follows:

'James Davis, ship Norfolk, was doing duty in the Lumberyard as assistant to the Blacksmith on 30 March 1829, being then only 17 years of age. The severity of the penal regulations being then very great, some murders had been committed by prisoners with the intention of getting themselves hung: fearing he might fall a victim to some of his fellow prisoners Davis absconded. He directed his course to the North and after travelling 100 miles fell in with the Doomgalbarah Tribe of Blacks near the Noomoowooloo or Wide Bay River, they were about 130 strong: they stripped him, but otherwise treated him kindly and claimed him as a relative. Here he heard of the death of four runaways, named he believes John Lawson, James Murphy, Ned Tracey and John Chapman, murdered he thinks by the Natives in these
parts: he also heard of Yelloman to the North. He staid with
this Tribe about 12 months and then hearing of some
runaways coming on from the Settlement he left them and
went on to the North, about 60 miles along the Beach,
passing in his progress four rivers all opening into Wide Bay
at intervals of from eight to ten miles between them; the
first being Wide Bay River, and the furthest to the North,
according to the Blacks, the Condamine, which rises on the
West of the Dividing Range on Darling Downs, which
appears however to be very doubtful: three of them are
apparently navigable for boats or small crafts, and abound
with oysters, crabs, fish, sea-hogs and turtle. Davis describes
the Country to the North of Wide Bay River as being thinly
wooded and luxuriant, with intervening grassy Plains even
close to the Coast and abounding in Kangaroos — No
Bunya Scrubs or even Mountains of any description to be
seen to the North or N.W. Some eight miles beyond the
supposed Condamine the Beach rises into a high sandy
ridge for many miles and beyond that the Blacks speak of
a large River, perhaps the Boyne — He now returned to
the supposed Condamine and followed it up about 60 miles
into the Interior, being all that distance of considerable
width and very deep at times, when he met with some Natives,
the Gigyabarah Tribe, about 150 strong: he was claimed as
his son by one of the fighting men and has remained with
them ever since; thinking it the safer plan, as there is always
considerable danger in first encountering a new Tribe, for
should no one recognise you as a relative returned to life
again, you are sure to be speared — a few days before the
arrival of the boat at Wide Bay, Davis came down with
his Tribe and two or three others to a fight on the Wide
Bay River, when Mr. Petrie heard of him and through ti...
bold endeavour of Bracewell brought him off on 12 May. (28)

Davis in later life was unwilling to discuss his experiences in
the bush, but not long after his return to civilization he talked to
John Dunmore Lang, who reports as follows:

‘He was . . . transported for some colonial misdeed to the
Penal Settlement at Moreton Bay. He was there employed at
the forge along with another young man in similar circum-
stances . . . Captain Logan was a strict and rather severe
disciplinarian, and so liberal in the application of the lash,
that Davis and his companion, fearing that it might shortly
be their turn to be flogged, although they had never been
punished in the Settlement, absconded, and “took to the
bush”. Proceeding to the northward, they soon fell in with
a numerous tribe of black natives, by whom they were kindly
received, and treated with the utmost hospitality. Davis being recognised as one of their own number, who had died or been killed, sometime before, returned to life again . . . The name of the native whom he was supposed to represent had been Darumboy, and this was henceforth his native name . . . [he] was immediately adopted by the parents of Darumboy, who were still alive, and regularly supplied with fish in abundance, and any other description of provisions they happened to possess.

The tribe in which Davis and his companion were thus naturalized had their usual place of habitation . . . at a considerable distance in the interior, although they occasionally visited the coast to vary their usual sustenance and mode of life by fishing, and it was one of these occasional visits to the coast that Davis was found and brought back to civilized society . . . His companion, however, had in the meantime, and when they had both been only a short period among the natives, fallen a victim of his ignorance of the native superstitions. For the tribe being on the coast, and encamped near some inlet of the sea, where oysters and other shellfish were abundant, and all that were able being employed in gathering the shellfish, Davis' companion being in want of a basket or other receptacle for those he had collected, and observing a dilly or native basket . . . hanging in the hollow of a tree close by, he took it down, and finding it contained only a quantity of bones, he threw them out, and filled the dilly with oysters. These bones however were those of a deceased native of the tribe, which had thus, in conformity to the native usage in such cases, been solemnly deposited in their last resting-place; and the deed which the white man had done quite unconsciously in removing them and throwing them out, was regarded by the natives as the greatest sacrilege, and punishable only with death. The unfortunate young man was accordingly surprised and killed very shortly thereafter'. (29)

The companion who committed the unwitting sacrilege and paid so dearly for it may well have been John Downie, who ran the same day as Davis and never returned.

The other names mentioned by Davis as having been killed by the aborigines are a puzzle. His account implies that he heard of their deaths very shortly after absconding. This does not tally with the Chronological Register, according to which John Lawson absconded in 1827 but returned in February 1831, to go again in September, and Edward Tacey who had run in September 1828 and returned in May 1829 went again in January 1831. Incidentally Davis, who arrived at the settlement on 18 February 1829
and absconded six weeks later, could not have known either of these men at the settlement, nor John Chapman who had absconded before his arrival (on 7 May 1828). It would seem therefore that he must have known them in the bush, to be able to identify them as the men who were killed. (To complete the record, James Murphy was at the settlement the whole time Davis was there. He arrived on 24 January 1829 and absconded on 29 August).

Another who presumably lived with the aborigines was Garrett Farrell, who ran on 10 November 1828 and returned 12 July 1835, but I have no information about him.

Then there were the two Indians, both frequent absconders, both named Brown. George Brown per *Ocean 1* arrived on 24 January 1829. He ran in August 1830 for six weeks, in January 1831 for five months, again the following January for another five months, in September 1833 for a year and nine months and in the following January, after only being back for six months, he took off again for one year and three months. He was discharged free on 3 November 1838 and remained at Moreton Bay as a constable, being said to have considerable influence with the aborigines.

**THE VOLATILE SHEIK BROWN**

Sheik Brown per *Asia 5* (alias Jack Brown, alias Black Jack) arrived at the settlement on 2 June 1826 and ran for the first time five days later, only remaining eight days in the bush on that occasion. His next recorded escape was on 6 May 1828 'from the boats crew' and he was away a little over six months. Next May he went again for twelve days, then in June 1830 he took off and reached the Big River, where he lived for a couple of years, extending hospitality to other runaways who passed through on their way south; on 18 August 1832 one of them reported that he intended to come in 'in about six months when his sentence would have expired'. On 18 August William Dalton, a Moreton Bay escapee, was sent from Port Macquarie to the Big River 'to bring in Black Jack'. He returned on the 27th saying Black Jack was coming, and two days later Brown arrived and gave himself up. He was interrogated next day about the Big River. He gave a very promising statement of the navigation of the river 'which abounds with Fish, the Land excellent in abundance of Emus, Kangaroos, and Wild Fowl are in all directions of the River. Pine, Oak, Gum and other trees of use, for various purposes, are growing here'. (30)

The Chief Magistrate at Port Macquarie wrote that Sheik Brown voluntarily surrendered here on a promise on my part that I would intercede with H.E. the Governor to allow of his
remaining here instead of returning to that settlement’. In the meantime ‘in consequence of the Prisoner being an unfortunate Black from Bombay and unaccustomed to mess with Europeans’ he had taken him on loan into his own service which he trusted would meet with His Excellency’s approbation. It did not, and he was reminded that what he was supposed to do with runaways from Moreton Bay was to place them in irons and report their capture with a view to their being sent to Norfolk Island. (This by the way was inconsistent with the provisions of 3 William the 4th No. 3). In the meantime however Brown had absconded again. Sullivan reported that he had returned to his former haunts ‘where it is likely he will remain from being befriended by the aborigines’. This however was not the case.

He went to the Seal Rocks about 20 miles north from Port Stephens and had himself rescued by the schooner Defiance as a shipwrecked mariner, Jose Koondiana by name, from the Island of Bourbon. He claimed to have been wrecked on the North West coast of New Holland and to have crossed the centre of the continent. Reports of this reaching Moreton Bay it was at once suspected that this was Sheik Brown, and he was therefore taken to Newcastle and examined before the Bench of Magistrates. He completely convinced them. His adventures, including the discovery of a large river in the interior, were written up in the Sydney Herald (31) and he was taken into the service of the Magistrate, Dr. Brooks, who at first refused to credit that he was not what he claimed to be. He had in his possession, incidentally, certain items allegedly from the wreck. He was definitely identified however by Mark Fletcher, then an assigned servant of the Australian Agricultural Company, who had spent a couple of years at Moreton Bay. It seemed as if his luck was still with him, as there was some legal argument as to whether 3 William the 4th No. 3 could apply to him seeing that his sentence had expired before he returned. The decision must have been against him, however, for he was returned to Moreton Bay, arriving on 25 May 1834. Captain Clunie had heretofore interpreted the Act very strictly. Prisoners served extra time to make up for their full absence from Moreton Bay with no allowance for any time spent at Port Macquarie or Sydney after their apprehension. Now for the first time he enquired what time should be allowed to two men who stated that they had not been sent back by the first opportunity to Moreton Bay. One was Sheik Brown, to whom he was apparently prepared to consider the possibility of giving credit not merely for nine months on board the hulk but also for eight months with Major Sullivan and four months with Doctor Brooks.

There is also a well-known incident when a group of eleven escaped by sea. In December 1831 they seized the schooner
Caledonia at Amity Point, forcing the Master, Mr. Browning, to remain on board to navigate her but putting the rest of the crew ashore. Three were killed by the ring leaders during the voyage, one was put ashore at New Caledonia. At the Navigator Islands they scuttled the vessel and went on shore. Shortly afterwards the barque Oldham of London rescued Mr. Browning and secured the ring-leader William Evans but none of the others. Evans jumped overboard and was thought to have been drowned.

A curious point about the runaways considered as a whole is the fluctuation in their numbers. Each year they were more numerous in summer than in winter. Figures for 1825 and 1826 are too incomplete to use, but for 1827 we know of 69, which is 25% of the average number present (for which I have used Professor Gordon’s figures). In 1828 the number was up to 126 but the proportion down to 22%. In 1829 although the number present increased considerably the number of runaways fell to 100 and the proportion was down to 12% with a further fall to 8% the following year. Logan could justifiably feel that he was on top of the problem. Not only was the total for the year down to 74, but more than half of these ran in the last quarter, at the beginning of which he was murdered. In 1831 the proportion was up to 15% again, and in absolute numbers it was the worst year ever, with 142 escapes. From then on there was a steady decrease 12%, 9%, 8%, then a dramatic decrease, 3% and 2%. At this stage it can hardly have been a problem, so that we can understand the letter, surprising in the light of earlier happenings, which Foster Fyans wrote on 14 February 1837. He said:

‘Five men absconded from this settlement the day after the arrival of the Governor Phillip. On so unusual an occurrence taking place I made the best enquiries, the result of which are, that three men Runaways from this settlement as per margin having been apprehended and brought to Sydney by the Revenue Cutter and detained there, have led the prisoners to believe, should they abscond and reach Port Macquarie or Sydney, that they will at either of these places be detained to serve the remaining part of their sentence’.

(The three men in question were directed to be returned to Moreton Bay forthwith).

I have found no explanation for the upsurge of absconding in 1831. It seems unlikely that whatever measures Logan had taken to reduce it would be discontinued by Clunie. For the falling off in later years there are however a couple of contemporary explanations. Governor Bourke in 1837 wrote:

‘Escapes by land from Moreton Bay, which were frequent at the time of my arrival have since almost wholly ceased. None but offenders under short sentences, who are generally
not disposed to run, are now sent there, and encouragement is offered to the Aboriginal Natives to look out for runaways and bring them back to the settlement, a duty they have occasionally performed with great spirit and cleverness'. (32)

This theory as to the cause of the decline in absconding cannot be correct, because short sentence men had always made up the bulk of those sent to Moreton Bay, and the aborigines, as we have seen, had always been encouraged to assist. Backhouse and Walker, the Quaker missionaries who visited Moreton Bay in 1836, relate a conversation with a prisoner constable who told them of his sufferings when on one occasion he absconded and was in the bush for three months. They say, I presume quoting him. 'Absconding is not now common among the prisoners. This is attributable to the encouragement given to good conduct, by relaxation of sentence, and to the regulation, which requires the time spent in the bush, to be made up, before any indulgence, or freedom, by expiration of sentence, is allowed'. (James Backhouse. A Narrative of a visit to the Australian colonies) (33). This seems more probable.

This is a reference to the Act 3 William the 4th No. 3 already alluded to, which provided that a prisoner who absconded from a penal settlement must make up the time of his absence. The principal source of information on individual escapes has been the Chronological Register of Moreton Bay, in which, after the entry for the prisoner which had been made on his arrival, particulars of when he ran and returned have been added in red ink, now much faded. In some cases when men were apprehended in the south but not returned to Moreton Bay no mention of their having been apprehended was added to the Register which therefore shows them as “Run” in the final column which was normally used for the date of a prisoner’s return to Sydney. Altogether 145 are shown in the Register as “run”, but after subtracting those who are shown from the correspondence to have been apprehended (or in a couple of cases died) in the south, as well as those who seized the Caledonia, there appear to be 98 whose fate is completely unknown. Some presumably perished soon after they left the settlement. An article in the Brisbane Courier, 22 March 1930, said to be compiled from notes by one of the first convicts, after describing the immense jungle formerly in the western portion of South Brisbane, said ‘It was during the destruction of the jungle that evidence of the brutal convict system was brought to light, for, amid this primeval grandeur, there were found the skeletons of several human beings, rusted leg-irons still encircling the bones’ (34). We may hope however that at least some met a happier fate, and lived for many years as members of some distant tribe.
REFERENCES

The principal sources of reference in this paper are:—

Archives Office of New South Wales (AONSW).

Colonial Secretary’s In Letters (CSIL), held in Archives Office of New South Wales. Microfilm copies of many of those which relate to what is now Queensland are held in the John Oxley Library.

C(h)ronological Register of Convicts at Moreton Bay, held in the John Oxley Library.

2. AONSW 4/3794 Copies of letters sent to Moreton Bay.
4. CSIL 27/1778.
5. CSIL 31/2793.
7. AONSW 4/3865 Copies of letters sent to Port Macquarie.
8. CSIL 37/5416.
10. CSIL 28/8744.
11. CSIL 33/1542.
12. AONSW 4/5637 Magisterial Records of Port Macquarie.
13. CSIL 33/4689.
14. AONSW 4/3865 Copies of letters sent to Port Macquarie.
15. AONSW 4/5631.
16. AONSW 4/5638.
17. CSIL 33/6879.
19. AONSW 4/3866 Copies of letters sent to Port Macquarie.
21. CSIL 30/2512.
22. CSIL 31/10335.
25. Lang, J. D. Queensland, Australia: a highly eligible field for emigration 1861.
26. CSIL 37/5421.
27. CSIL 37/8851.
28. CSIL 42/4284.
29. Lang, J. D. Cooksland in North-Eastern Australia, 1847, p. 418.
31. CSIL 33/676 CSIL 33/1542.
33. Backhouse, James. A Narrative of a visit to the Australian colonies
34. Steele, J. G. Brisbane Town in Convict Days, p. 29.