THE HISTORY OF GREEN ISLAND
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Introduction — I have chosen to present this paper, on the occasion of the centenary year of Cairns, on the history of probably its most familiar area, Green Island. I do this because the broad history of Cairns itself is already well known in the Society's papers through the researches of the late Mr. J. W. Collinson.

Green Island, about 34 acres in extent, lies some 16 miles due east of Cairns. Low and sandy, it is virtually a wooded sand cay surrounded by coral reefs.

On Trinity Sunday, 1770, Captain Cook anchored the *Endeavour* in Mission Bay to look for water, the third landing he had made in what was to be the Colony of Queensland. From this anchorage a "low green woody island" bore 35 deg. E, which he named Green Island. Generally accepted that the naming was to honour the 'Endeavour's' astronomer, I have found only the patently descriptive reference given.

Green Island with its dangers of reef and shoal, flat profile and obvious sand cay characteristics deserved and received no attention from mariners in transit, official or otherwise, who confined their activities to nearby Fitzroy Island with its mainland characteristics and, more importantly, easily accessible fresh water.

After settlement began in the far north Green Island was well known to the captains of the small ships of the sixties sailing a hazardous course out of Bowen through Cleveland Bay, Cardwell and Somerset to Gulf ports, or on a commercial venture in search of sandalwood, pearling or beche de mer grounds. However, tantalizingly out of step with accepted notions as to the period of such activities, J. S. V. Mein, claimed to have been established on Green Island in 1858. It was 1871 when he was not only to claim to have set up a beche de mer station but also to have explored the mainland to the foot of the Bellenden Ker ranges and thus, being indisputably the first man to do so, sought whatever consideration a grateful Government might think his due. His story was actually published in a Sydney newspaper in 1866.
His story is that he joined, in 1857, a speculation to establish a beche de mer station within the Barrier Reef on the north-east coast. A brig was procured and the company sailed from Sydney, mid-November 1857, certainly an inauspicious time, with the hare-brained intention of taking in Cato Reef en route to look for salvage from the wreck of the *Thomas King*, which had come to grief on 17 April 1852 while bound from Sydney to Manila. Mein’s friends were under the impression there might be gold on board. As the *Thomas King* had slipped into water too deep for the Kanaka divers, the party shuttled back to Hervey Bay and worked up the strait between Fraser Island and the mainland to anchor off White Cliffs. Here efforts to enlist Aboriginal men and women to help cure the beche de mer were unsuccessful and the mate and the carpenter deserted. Obliged to put into Maryborough to replace them, they cleared that port on 14 December 1857 for Green Island and anchored on the eve of Christmas at Fitzroy Island.

On Christmas Day, Mein took five South Sea Islanders in the whaleboat to Green Island where he found blacks’ well-beaten pads leading to a large fig tree in the centre which provided the only source of fresh water. This water was held in a hollow in the tree. The surrounding reef abounded with beche de mer, particularly that variety most favoured by the Chinese. A station was formed; a palm thatched store house, a provision house, two houses for the Islanders and one for the whites were erected immediately. A smokehouse was contrived out of a tarpaulin. As the ship at her moorings in the lagoon bumped heavily on coral she was sent back to the secure anchorage at Fitzroy and there left in the charge of the mate, steward and two natives.

Mein and his companions lived a comfortable Swiss Family Robinson existence, embarrassed by a readily available supply of fish and birds with stingray oil for cooking. They cleared the centre of the island and planted seeds from the Sydney Botanical Gardens.

The work was hard, the Islanders sulky and mutinous as they seem to have been under the impression they had been sailing north to go home. As the white workers were little better it was impossible to cure enough fish to make the venture pay. The station was abandoned in February 1858. From Mein’s description it would appear that they weathered a cyclone at Green Island of interest in that the sea almost completely inundated the island.

**EXPLORATION ON MAINLAND**

Before leaving, the mainland was explored, the Trinity Inlet investigated years before it was even discovered by Dalrymple and a landing made in the vicinity of Redbank. This land party walked
to a bald hill which Mein named Crescent Hill, now Green Hill. They quit the coast in April for Timor, encountering en route two American vessels in Torres Strait. One of these, the Simonda was standing by the Catherine aground on a reef near Wednesday Island. Assistance was refused and the Catherine abandoned. Mein's story is extraordinary, principally on the score of the time he claimed to be there. The account, published in 1866, still anticipated exploration by many years so he had available no records of the Inlet's existence to use in a false claim. Internal evidence is unhelpful. I have been able to trace only an unlocated wreck of a Catherine Jamieson scuttled, for 1858. His use of South Sea Islanders, whom he called Kanakas, is possibly out of period. One is left with the impression that if he were on Green in 1858, he should not have been.

Mein found Green Island reefs littered with timbers from wrecks. Probably the Antagonist, wrecked there on a passage to India with a cargo of horses in 1863. There is doubt whether she wrecked at Green Island, Trinity Bay or Green Island, Torres Strait. Rhodes prefers the latter; T. Young, a Government Agent on the labour vessel Sybil. later a Customs officer at Cardwell and Cairns, insists from his own knowledge it was at Trinity Bay.

**ISLAND MASSACRE**

Phil Garland, one of the pioneer beche de mer fishermen, is known to have been at Green Island with the Telegraph in 1868. At the end of the cyclone season the beche de mer boats left their home ports to re-occupy old stations. As wood was essential for the curing fires, such stations were generally on an offshore island which provided the wood and also some protection from surprise attack by mainland tribes.

On 4 March 1873 the cutter Goodwill left Townsville to work a station on Green Island. On board were William Rose, William White and Dan Kelly. Four Aboriginals were recruited with two women at the Palm Islands and Green was reached on 8 March. For security reasons the Aboriginals were made to sleep on the cutter. It has been suggested the women slept on shore, thus causing resentment but Aboriginals did not need any such cut and dried excuse for attack on these coasts. On 12 April, while Daniel Kelly waited in a dinghy for the divers to join him, Rose was chopped to death with axes. Kelly saw White suffer a similar fate as he ran to the sea. The guns were in the hut. Kelly was pursued but managed to row to Oyster Company Island, now Michelmas Cay, where he expected to find Phil Garland. Garland took Kelly back to the Island and buried the bodies. The Palm Islanders had gone; so had the Goodwill. Garland took the news
to Cardwell, where Sub-Inspector Robert Arthur Johnstone was ordered to investigate. He made an extremely risky trip with his native troopers in an open boat only weeks after the massacre of the survivors of the wreck of the Maria. Landing to pick up possible tracks on sandy beaches, he did find the burned remains of the Goodwill near a blacks' camp, probably near Cooper's Point. Obviously the Palm Islanders had been killed in alien tribal territory by these Aboriginals who also attacked Johnstone. He viewed the graves, and on his return examined Moresby’s Gladys River thoroughly, thus disclosing its true worth. For this Dalrymple named it the Johnstone River and retained the name Gladys — pronounced Glad-ys — for the Inlet.

Optimistically or obtusely, Daniel Kelly was within weeks back at Green Island, this time with Smellie and Evans’ ketch Eliza. In this party were Thomas Smellie, John Cardno, William Smith, James Steel and ten Aboriginals from Cleveland Bay. Of these William Smith and Cardno are of especial interest because with John Doyle as leader they discovered a route down the range to Trinity Bay, and Smith discovered a route from the Inlet to the range track. It was after this Bill Smith that the much maligned Smithfield was named.

They were not alone on the island, as the beche de mer fishers of the Florence Agnes were camped nearby. This party consisted of James Mercer, John Finlay, Charles Reeves and a Kanaka, Towie. Most accounts of this incident refer to the Margaret Jane, which indeed she was. The inquest in Townsville uses Florence Agnes. John Miller had been in partnership with Joss, the hermit of Percy Island, in a floating baths venture in Maryborough. He sold his share in the business, loaded his possessions on the Margaret Jane and sailed her to Townsville where he sold her to Mercer and Gorton who renamed her the Florence Agnes. One night the Cleveland Bay aboriginals killed all in Mercer’s camp over a refusal to provide bread for supper that night.

After the cyclone season of 1874 Daniel Kelly was again back at Green Island, this time with the Margaret and Jane, perhaps Mercer’s boat renamed. As he waited off shore one day, again he heard screams and alerted other fishermen. All those on shore were found killed by the Palm Islander workers. Captain Pennefather of the Crinoline took the news of one Green Island massacre to Townsville, perhaps this one. Daniel Kelly had learned his lesson. When Daniel Kelly was in Trinity Inlet in September 1876 in company with the Sachs party on the Porpoise, W. B. Ingham on the Louisa and Phil Garland on the Fairy, he could not be persuaded to set one toe on shore to join excursions, because he said the blacks were dangerous.
THE LEGENDARY YORKEY

Another early beche de mer fisher, George Lawson, or the more familiar Yorkey, had his station on Green not long after these massacres. Like many seafaring men and also like many Yorkshiremen, he was superstitious. To him Green Island was haunted by ghosts, black and white. Often drawing water from the well in the centre of the island he saw the shade of a black woman. He carefully avoided the places of the massacre where an apparition, so he said, stood on guard, nor did he like the eerie atmosphere in the vicinity of the graves. Yorkey it must be appreciated had a reputation for familiarity with those spirits also contained in a bottle by a cork.

1873 was the year of the discovery of the Palmer goldfield. Ranging out from the Palmer, James Venture Mulligan on his third expedition left the Palmer on 6 August 1874 intending to have a look at the valley of the St. George River. He reached that notable landmark, Woothakata to the Aboriginals, Mt. Lilly to Hann, and now Mt. Mulligan. Camped on the Mitchell near the inflow of a new river, he named it after his friend William Oswald Hodgkinson. It was on his largely unknown seventh expedition which left Byerstown 31 December 1875 that he discovered, in conjunction with McCleod, a worthwhile reefing area
on the Hodgkinson. Although newspapers gossiped of the discovery earlier, it was officially reported 21 March 1876. The rush to the Hodgkinson was no less dramatic than that to the Palmer. Carriage was high, so inevitably the miners looked to a port nearer than Cooktown. A route was found with extreme difficulty to Trinity Bay but the embryo settlement could boast a very rough and ready group of mining field larrikin settlers before officialdom got down to trying to reduce this freelance activity to some order.

On 6 October 1876 David Spence and Sharkey were sent up on the Porpoise with pilot boatmen to select a site for opening as a port of entry and clearance. On 1 November 1876 a settlement was formed. The township thus formed was named Cairns after the Governor William Wellington Cairns.

As Cairns was settled and more and more shipping used the sea lanes, more and more were to become uncomfortably aware of the reefs off Green Island. The Adonis out of Bundaberg with timber for building Cairns, wrecked on the reef three miles east of Green Island 19 April 1877. Beche de mer fishers continued occupation of the island almost without a break. In 1885 the cutter Blue Jacket, bound there to join a station, capsized with only one survivor. The Upolu out of Sydney on her way to the South Seas by way of Flora Passage, wrecked on the reef which now bears her name on 25 April 1886. A few weeks later, Yorkey, then on Green Island, reported the loss of a man and his wife who left Green on 3 June 1886 to visit the wreck. They were never seen again nor were a party of eight who left Cairns on 12 June 1886 on the Idalia to visit Green Island.

On 25 June 1887 the Deodarus went aground on a reef 12 miles east-south-east of Fitzroy. The crew abandoned ship and reached Cairns. The Upolu and Deodarus were targets for scavengers, and as usual Yorkey was the most discreetly successful. Although he never lacked a supply of unexpected luxuries such as fine brandy and tobacco, Cairns Customs officers searching the island for contraband were never successful.

SAVED FROM THE SEA

Yorkey was about 40 when, early in July 1884, he and his mate Alfred Rowlings were deserted on a reef twelve miles from Green and left to drown by their Aboriginal workers. Yorkey swam over a mile to their long boat and then rescued Rowlings. The Aboriginals made off to Oyster Cay in the True Love and escaped. Yorkey had had some luck with his ventures and acquired a modest fortune. He took up a homestead block adjoining the Mount Buchan estate in the vicinity of what is now Yorkey's Knob. Here during the off-fishing season he and his boys farmed not very profitably, raising pumpkins and sweet potatoes which the
bandicoots ate, and pigs which the crocodiles devoured. He had the not uncommon notion of the day that all banks were frauds and although he handled much money the publican got most of it. It was not unusual to see Yorkey and his constant companion, a gentle Jamaican negro called John the Baptist, setting sail for Green Island with a distinct list to starboard after a spree in town.

It was late September 1886 that his Aboriginals got him into town with his right hand blown off. He had been dynamiting fish. Dr. Koch amputated his arm below the elbow. The long convalescence coupled with poor seasons meant that Yorkey was again poor. He mortgaged valuable assets for less than their worth and enforced claims wound him up. His selection was forfeited; and one day his boat the Blue Jacket was seized. With an old Aboriginal, Gommory, he set sail in the small 16 foot half decked Carbine gamely cruising the reefs well into the Coral Sea.

About 1897 he and old George Sharpe set out in the Carbine for New Guinea. Heavy northerly gales blew them almost to Bowen. Sharpe died, presumably of scurvy. E. J. Banfield relates the story he heard from Yorkey of the terrible trip the one-armed man made in stormy seas to take Sharpe’s body to Bowen. Yorkey saw Banfield at Dunk Island on his way back to Green Island where he remained until he died.

Green Island of the eighties was a place of no particular beauty, totally different from what it is today. It was covered in shoulder-high burrs so that it was possible to overlook the whole area. No doubt the beche de mer fishers had accounted for the timber that had been there. Nevertheless it was the favourite excursion place from Cairns. By 1889 there were on the island several grass huts, Fijian style. A typical men’s outfit for a weekend shooting and fishing included fowling pieces, breech loaders, Martini-Henry rifles. 16 jars of whisky, 20 charges of dynamite and a bottle of brandy for snake bite. Legend said there were no snakes on Green but it was considered prudent to be on the safe side. More organized pleasure cruises to Green Island were begun in 1890 by the Zeus. At this time a Canadian, Wilson, was established there with a beche der mer station. One grass shed was used by George Kellaway for boat building. Kellaway also ran a beche de mer station, employed 22 boys and two or three men. The beche de mer was boiled on the island, dried in the smoke house, and stored for market. Prices then fluctuated between £25 and £45 per ton.

As the inner reefs were fished out, the beche de mer fleet moved further into the Coral Sea and the ships involved became floating stations, coming into port only to sell their smoked trepang after a six months cruise.
By mid-1896 Cairns was the acknowledged major port of the beche de mer trade. While the *Antonio, Curlew, Griffen, Mercury, Blue Jacket, Clyde* and *Alice* were fitted out in Cairns as floating stations, Nicholas — who may or may not have been Nicholas the Greek — of the *Oranya* had his station on Green. The Cairns firm Sun Wo Tiy was then paying £132 a ton for the best fish, £70 a ton for inferior.

These boats used Aboriginal labour. The tightening and policing of regulations applicable to Aboriginal employment inevitably led to the trade getting into the hands of the Japanese, at first on British-owned boats and then as entirely Japanese manned and owned. The centre then moved to Thursday Island.

At Yarrabah Mission the Rev. E. Gribble had a policy of not only decentralisation of settlement all over the quite huge mission reserve, but also apparently wanted everything else too. The occupation lease he acquired over Fitzroy Island, thus denying it to white excursionists, caused enough heart burning in Cairns. When he made a bid to take over Green Island, supposedly to care for the coconuts planted there by the Government in 1889, he pulled a hornets' nest down about his head. The Government actually did give the island to him. At the time Yorkey was employed at £20 a year to look after the coconuts, and Cairns took up cudgels on his behalf. The Rev. Mr. Gribble suggested a beche de mer venture using Yorkey's expertise and mission labour, but Yorkey had aged, had only one arm and no longer had the nerve in a boat which he once had. He wanted to be left alone with his pittance, fowls and garden to quietly end his days. The Rev. Mr. Gribble gracefully yielded to public censure and rejected his moves towards Green Island. This was in 1905. Green Island was put under the control of the Council as a result of this, Yorkey died there in 1907.

Mineral leases for collecting coral for lime for the cane fields were granted amid loud protests in the early twenties on Oyster Cay, Upolu Bank and Green Island. Thousands of tons were carted away, with the result that whole sandbanks disappeared completely in successive cyclones. At Green Island where the coconuts had been planted, the island actually increased in size.

In June 1931 the Council erected a jetty to facilitate landing and later huts and conveniences for tourists. It was in June 1936 that the Tourist Bureau proposed to lease part of the Island to a northern boating firm interested in providing tourist facilities. This was the enterprise of the Hayles family. On 15 March 1937 Green Island came under the control of the Government and was made a National Park.
It was at Green Island that the Commonwealth Film Laboratories — Noel Monkman and Bruce Cummings in partnership — made the film written by Monkman. "Typhoon Treasure" and other adventure movies, their stars reading like Who's Who of the Australian film world — Chips Rafferty, Bud Tingwall, Rod Taylor. Noel Monkman and his wife Kitty made their home on the Island, where Kitty still lives today.

Green Island is probably best known now for its Underwater Observatory and the Coral Cay Hotel, which are visited by about 200 people a day in the tourist season. From appearances there is little to connect the tourist paradise with its former history.