John B. Cameron, Fellow of the Royal Society, 1843-1897.
The author wishes to acknowledge the valuable assistance of Mr A. E. Creelman of Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, who by inserting an advertisement in the Melbourne Age was responsible for enabling the author to contact Mr and Mrs N. Haughton of Kew, relatives of John Cameron. They provided me with much valuable information on John Cameron’s family, including letters written by him and a photograph. I thank the Department of Mapping and Surveying for making time available for research into the life of John Cameron.

EARLY DAYS

The eldest of eight children, John was born in the parish of Kilmonivaig, County of Inverness, Scotland on 31 December, 1843.1 His father, Ewen Cameron, Joiner of Stronaba and Mary McTavish of Unachan were married at Blarour School house by the Rev. Donald MacIntyre, missionary of the Braes, on 2 March, 1843.2 The family emigrated from Scotland 8 June, 1853 and arrived in Port Phillip on 13 September of the same year.3 This was very much a family affair as John Cameron’s Uncle, Ewen Hugh Cameron (later a member of the Victorian Parliament) and other relatives also sailed on the “Hurricane”.

Throughout his life John corresponded on a regular basis with his Uncle and it is obvious from his letters4 that there existed a good rapport between them. Not a great deal is known about John’s early life except that he attended school first at Richmond, Victoria, where his father was a builder and later at Healesville where he lived on the family farm “Glenwatts”. By the time he was eighteen he had proved himself to be intelligent and ambitious, and his capacity for physical achievement was demonstrated at school by his athletic ability and success in other “manly sports”. This physical stamina was

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Mr Bill Kitson, B.Surv., L.S., FRGSA, is the Curator of the Museum of Mapping and Surveying within the Department of Mapping and Surveying. During his career as a Staff Surveyor he was in charge of the State Border Surveys and therefore had the good fortune to check John Cameron’s Border Survey.
to benefit him later on in his work as a Surveyor in Australia, Fiji and New Guinea. The lure of adventure and riches attracted young Cameron first to the Victorian gold fields and later to the west coast of New Zealand.

On his return to Victoria he joined a Government Geodetic Surveying party who were triangulating the country in the Mt. Baw Baw area. (Geodetic Surveying is a higher branch of surveying involving Astronomy, Geodesy and measurement of the surface of the earth.) It was during this period that he decided upon a career in Surveying and studied under a Mr McKay.

In his search for knowledge and adventure he went to Fiji in 1869 to work as a surveyor with the Polynesian Company. During his stay he surveyed the Town of Suva and acquired a considerable land holding on the Navua River. His Fijian experience made him well acquainted with the requirements for the cultivation of sugar and cotton and he had considerable experience in the buying of land from the natives and employing them as a labour source. These qualifications were to make him eminently suitable for the positions he was to hold in British New Guinea many years later. On his return to Victoria in 1872 he specialized in the higher branches of Surveying and Geodesy.

**THE N.S.W. PERIOD**

On 3 August, 1875, he was appointed as a licensed surveyor with the New South Wales Lands Department and by July 1879 he had risen to the position of 1st Class Surveyor of the Trigonometrical Branch. In August 1879 he was elected a member of the Royal Society of New South Wales. This prestigious body listed among its members at that time such men as H. C. Russell, Government Astronomer; P. F. Adams, Surveyor-General and W. J. Conder, Geodetic Surveyor, who was Cameron's superior on the Triangulation Survey of New South Wales.

Perhaps the most widely known achievement of John Cameron is his survey of the Queensland-New South Wales border. While there had been much discussion in relation to the need for such a survey for many years, it was not until mid 1879 that matters relating to cost, method of survey and the selection of suitable surveyors were finalised, and by June that year parties from both colonies met at the New South Wales town of Barringun, a town close to the Queensland-New South Wales border (Lat. 29 degrees S) and connected to Sydney by electric telegraph. The Queensland surveyor was George Chale Watson, a man older than Cameron and not familiar with geodetic surveying but still a very competent surveyor. Cameron alludes to this in one of his letters to his Uncle Ewen Hugh Cameron dated 2 September, 1879 at Camp 1 Barringun.
Mr Watson is responsible for chainage while I am for the astronomical portion in finding true meridian, giving true bearing, setting off the chords, and finding latitude at every convenient site. Such is our modus operandi. While on the subject I may say that the Surveyor Mr Watson is a good old sort, one of the old school a little behind the times for this kind of work. I see by instructions that I am to teach him in the Astronomical Department. On this account we are not likely to fall out.

But in a very short time they had fallen out. Cameron states that "The Queensland Officer and I don't hit it very well". Watson in many letters to the Queensland Surveyor-General highlights the same problem but blames it on the lack of understanding and a communication breakdown between the two surveyors. In a letter written just before he withdrew his team from the Border Survey, Watson stated "As I believe Mr Cameron capable of working within great precision and he is evidently a painstaking officer over his professional duties, I have no reason to doubt but that the work would be precise enough for all the purposes of scientific accuracy as Mr Cameron, added to his other qualifications, has a supreme regard for his own reputation." On commencing the survey at the zero obelisk, the team experienced floods in both the Warrego and Paroo river systems but as they moved further to the west of Barringun drought conditions prevailed.

After surveyor Watson withdrew at the one hundred mile post, Cameron said that "I was determined to carry out the work at all hazards". Twelve months and fifteen days after starting from Barringun, the survey of the border west from the zero obelisk at Barringun to its intersection with the South Australian Border (Longitude 141 degrees E) was finished. After some difficulty due to drought conditions in the area the team returned to Barringun and recommenced the survey in an easterly direction. The nature of the country with its many river crossings made the eastward journey a lot easier on man and beast and the MacIntyre River was reached on October 1881. To celebrate the completion of such a difficult survey Cameron cut and placed a one ton wooden post on the river bank. This mark is still there today with his name carved into the post — J. CAMERON GS — and bears witness to a great Australian Surveyor. During the next few years Cameron continued his work on the Triangulation Survey of New South Wales and then in 1883 he sought and was granted twelve months leave (without pay) from his official duties. In this year he became one of the founding members of the New South Wales branch of the Geographical Society of Australasia. At their inaugural meeting on the 22nd June, 1883 over seven hundred people listened to a paper by the Honorary Secretary of the Society Mr E. Martin la Meslee on Past Explora-
tion of New Guinea, and a scheme for Scientific Exploration of the Great Island. It must have fired the imagination of John Cameron for he departed from Sydney for New Guinea on the 21st July, 1883.

It was this exploratory journey to New Guinea in 1883 that was to set the scene for later events. With a Syndicate, he visited the Kabadi Area and purchased from the natives 15,000 acres on which he proposed to grow cotton, sugar, tobacco and other crops. Cameron’s visit and land purchase caused the missionaries, Chalmers and Lawes of the London Missionary Society to set the Kabadi people against him, as well as the Australian Press along with the Governments of Britain and Australian Colonies. With the provisional annexation by Queensland, April 4, 1883, and finally the Erskine Proclamation of November 6, 1884 which forbade any acquisition of native land pending the arrival of the High Commissioner, it looked like Cameron would not be able to settle his land. It was enough to discourage Goldie, Cameron’s partner in the land venture. Cameron continued to ply the Government on the subject of his land and on the 3rd February, 1894 two grants of 2145 and 500 acres in the Kabadi district were issued to John Cameron.¹⁰

When Cameron returned to Sydney in November 1883, he answered the various adverse reports on his recent “land grab” by

*The Zero Obelisk at Barringun.*
placing supporting articles in the Sydney Press. He returned to the Triangulation Survey of N.S.W. in December of 1883 to work in the county of Argyle on the network and early in 1885 he triangulated the southern part of the New England Tablelands before resigning from the N.S.W. government on the 16th August of the same year.

A NEW BEGINNING — NEW GUINEA

In September 1886 he resigned from the Royal Society of N.S.W., his address given then as Kimberley Plains, W.A. With the thought that he may at last be able to settle in his home state of Victoria he became licensed under the Transfer of Land Statutes on 6 August, 1887 giving his address then as Kangaroo Ground but it was not long before he was back in British New Guinea where in April 1888 he carried out surveys in the Port Moresby Area.

Later that year he became the Warden of the Sudest Gold fields, but on 9 March, 1889 he relinquished that position to take up the position of Private Secretary to Sir William MacGregor, Administrator of P.N.G. and thus forming a friendship that was to last until he died. It was during this period as private secretary that John B. Cameron accompanied MacGregor, on perhaps his most famous journey of discovery, to Mount Owen Stanley. In MacGregor's report dated 1 July, 1889, Government House, Port Moresby, we read about the hardships and dangers the explorers endured. Cameron had to remain behind at one of the line camps because
of ill health but his services as Surveyor were remembered by his leader with the name Mt. Cameron appearing in his report and on the map of the expedition’s route. MacGregor wrote “I cannot but express the hope that the historic names that have been bestowed on this expedition, every one of which has been given on public and not one on personal grounds, will become identified with the possession”.

At a Council meeting of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (Victorian Branch) held on 28 August, 1889, Cameron was present by invitation and read a paper entitled ‘Dr Sir William MacGregor’s ascent of Mount Owen Stanley’, and at this meeting he was also elected as a corresponding member. A letter was read from Sir William MacGregor to the effect that the society should give suitable presents to those members of his party who were of most service on this expedition; for Cameron, Surveyor to the Expedition, he proposed a Prismatic compass. The Council cordially accepted Sir William MacGregor’s suggestion.

In September 1889 Cameron was appointed to the position of Resident Magistrate Western Division, a very remote and difficult area with the Government Station on Mabudauan Hill at the mouth of the Pahoturi River. The chief duty of a Resident Magistrate was broadly to administer justice but involved everything from farming to midwifery, enough to try the patience and skill of any man. To these jobs was added the responsibility of the Country’s Surveyor and Map Maker, which earned Cameron much praise from Sir William. “To Mr J. B. Cameron we are indebted for the originals of most of the maps that accompany this report . . . all prepared by Mr Cameron with great care and much ability”. As well as protecting the native population from exploitation by some unscrupulous whites he was there to protect the more timid tribes from being killed by the aggressive and warlike ones like the Tugeri who “come east during the north west season and plunder and kill all before them”. A difficult and thankless task which at times earned Cameron little praise from MacGregor.

“I am not prepared to blame Mr Cameron for going to Badu, but clearly his force was too small to overawe the tribe; and no previous approach had been made to them and he was accompanied by their armed enemies . . . Mr Cameron could not have gone, and the collision would not have taken place. Both officers were no doubt prompted by zeal in their work but did not reckon sufficiently with the native character in matters of detail”.

With hindsight MacGregor offered the following advice for Cameron to follow:
MINUTE FROM THE ADMINISTRATOR TO THE
GOVERNMENT SECRETARY

1. I shall not be able to meet Mr Cameron at Mabudauan so early as I hoped, and I wish therefore to give him a hint for his guidance on an important matter until I visit his district.

2. With respect to the inland tribes Mr Cameron's idea is, as they are said by him to be "troublesome" to put up posts etc., beyond which they are not to come and they treat them with the strong arm. This is diametrically opposed to the course that should be pursued. What we want is free intercommunication, not isolation; friendly intercourse and the exercise of moral influence. Recourse to force is justifiable only in self defence.

Instead of organising hostile parties Mr Cameron should visit the country of the unfriendly tribes and leave for them or give them presents; induce them to visit the Station and coast tribes. This will require tact and patience; but this is the only policy that will meet with my approval.

3. It is true I spoke of erecting posts for the guidance of the Tugeri, but at our boundary, as they are foreigners who invade our territory. But to apply this to our own tribes would be both illegal and impolitic.

4. Mr Cameron should impress on the coast natives that my orders are that peace and trade are to be established with the "bushmen", and that I shall reward any coast chief that can induce the inland people to come to the Government Station to make peace and receive presents.

In 1890 John Cameron was elected a Fellow the Royal Geographical Society of London truly a great honour."

By the middle of 1892 there were two compelling forces which dictated a change in direction for John Cameron: the frustrations associated with the job as Resident Magistrate; and secondly, his ever present belief in the free enterprise system that had earlier driven him into gold mining and land development in Fiji.

He resigned from the position as resident magistrate in July of 1892 and returned to Victoria. He was sadly missed by MacGregor who had depended heavily on him for advice and instruction in the 'Art of Surveying'. "So long as I had Cameron, there was little necessity for me to trouble my head with theodolite manipulations, but now he is gone I must tackle and must master those".28

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH JOHN GREEN

Cameron returned to New Guinea in September of the same year with John Green a friend of his family at Healesville in Victoria, and a young man of good character with close family ties. Like Cameron himself who wrote monthly letters to his Uncle in Victoria, Green wrote a daily letter29 to his family in Victoria posting it when opportunity presented itself which due to remoteness was not very often and so the length of the letter home often exceeded fifty pages.
After a short stay in Port Moresby where Cameron avoided the local parties, “J. B. C. has just come in, he says he gave them the slip as they are all nearly drunk now, some of them quite so. I can hear them singing from here”, they made arrangements with some natives to transport their timber and iron to Kabadi some forty miles up the coast. This cargo was to be for their dwelling on Cameron’s land at Kabadi, ironically the same land that he had been unable to obtain from the Government a few years previously. An agreement between Cameron and the Government had been reached in relation to his land claim but the missionaries (Lawes in particular) still insisted that “if J. B. C. had not been a Highlander like Sir William he would not have got the land” which Green goes on to say “I don’t suppose that influenced the Governor in the slightest as he is not that sort of man”.

The next few months at Mareva were spent in building the house, planting 5000 coconuts and establishing a vegetable garden, truly a scene of horticultural delight. Amidst all of this activity Cameron found time to dash off into the wilds of New Guinea with Sir William on Surveying and Exploring trips leaving John Green to look after the property. One such trip as Green writes was “to survey the western boundary of New Guinea, he could not say when he would be back”.

Leisure hours were generally taken with writing letters and reading. Great emphasis was placed by Cameron and Green on receiving letters from home thus allowing them to catch up with all the “local news”. Newspapers were read and reread and copies of the *Queenslander*, *Town and Country Journal* and *Royal Geographical Journal* as well as the occasional comic book were also received. Cameron assisted his young friend to further his education and many a night was spent in “giving me lessons in Surveying and calculating land and I am learning fast under his tuition. While he is away I am going to peg into trigonometry. I still ‘peg’ away at the Kabadi language”. Green’s ability at languages was later to impress Sir William MacGregor.

Shooting for food was another sport both men enjoyed. Cameron was considered an excellent shot and many a native’s dog was shot while raiding John Cameron’s hen house. In his letters Green paints a picture of John Cameron as a kind man easy to get along with and always ready for a bit of fun. At night they had spear throwing competitions and on special days Cameron arranged sporting competitions for the young natives of the village.

Native food was plentiful, the principal kinds of game being wild boar, cassowary, kangaroo, pigeons and turkey. The natives supplied at very little cost, bananas, sago, taro, coconuts and many other native fruits. Fish were also plentiful. These items were embellished
with vegetables and chicken from their own larder. Banana fritters were Cameron’s speciality, served on very special occasions with a tablecloth, laid upon the table.

By the middle of 1893 Cameron’s intermittent attacks of fever had become more frequent and severe. Green writes “Quinine is like alcohol; one gets to like it and depend on it . . . J. B. C. who is used to it and takes 10 grains at a dose; in very severe cases he has given 20 grains with 5 grains of Autifebrine”. Being an outdoors man those periods of confinement were a “great humbug” to him as he hated having to stay inside.

MacGregor recognised Green’s ability and in 1894 he offered him a position as his Private Secretary and later in 1895 the position as Government Agent on the North East Coast. This naturally was a great blow to Cameron and his plantation for not only had he lost a close friend but also it was Green who supervised the running of the plantation while Cameron was away on his many surveys and explorations. Cameron would have undoubtedly sung young Green’s praises to MacGregor and when Green was offered the position it was Cameron who advised him to accept.

The Green letters now become a diminished source of information about Cameron and Green refers to J. B. C. only when their paths cross.

In a letter to his Uncle dated 20 July, 1895 from “Mareva”, Cameron expresses his high hopes for the future of his plantation. He forwarded information to be inserted in the Argus to attract partners and capital for his venture into sugar growing. He also had influential friends acting for him in Sydney. If both avenues were unsuccessful — he said he would raise the capital himself.

He hoped that the Government could recruit the labour, and that capitalists “would be induced to invest in sugar and other tropical products”. The difficulty he foresaw with sugar in New Guinea was the high capital cost of the mill itself estimated to be £20,000. He highlighted his own problem, of his being away exploring with Sir William or surveying thus leaving his plantation without a reliable manager. To add to his problems the banking collapse of 1893 caused his considerable assets in the Queensland National Bank to be frozen. He continued to survey isolated portions for the missions and government as well as look after his plantation until 1896, when he was appointed Government Surveyor.

From 1891 MacGregor had tried to foster European investment in the agricultural and mineral development of New Guinea without much success. To solve this problem he devised a scheme in 1895 whereby rather than giving free grants of land to settlers he would employ “a surveyor to select and lay off by flying survey, blocks of land in different parts of the country suitable say for planting
The Memorial to John B. Cameron in Toowong Cemetery.
tobacco and sisal hemp. These blocks laid off in this preliminary way, could then be advertised as open for selectors”. The only difficulty with this scheme was where to find the funds to pay such a surveyor. To this end he approached the three contributing colonies for the money to attract such ‘a man of local knowledge and experience’.

Such a man was John Cameron and in October of 1896 he was appointed Government Surveyor. His duties were the selection of suitable agricultural land for the different types of agriculture proposed. This also involved the negotiation of price with the natives if the area required was settled. The final action required of such a man was the field survey of the blocks, and we see from the annual report of the Government Surveyor October 1896 to September 1897, just how much work John Cameron did during his final year in New Guinea.

In January 1897, John Green was murdered at his post on the Mambare River. Later the same year, John Cameron went back to Victoria to attend to Green’s personal affairs. On his return journey to New Guinea on the steamer Aramac, he arrived in Brisbane and booked into the Grand Hotel for a stopover. He was found dead in his room on Friday 31 December, 1897, the cause of death attributed to ‘New Guinea Fever’. He was buried the same day in the Toowong Cemetery.

**EPITAPH**

The work of John Cameron is best summed up by Sir William MacGregor after Cameron’s death when he said “the late Mr J. B. Cameron, a native of Victoria, a gentleman who had few equals, perhaps no superior, in his profession in Australia. To myself, personally, the recent death of Mr Cameron, who had been my intimate friend and my faithful companion in many a difficult journey, and my teacher in regard to some very important work, was a great grief, while it was a very serious loss to the profession”. MacGregor was seldom prone to sentiment.

MONCKTON said of Cameron that “he imagined that Surveyors were not for the purpose of surveying the earth, but that the earth was created solely for them to survey”.

WATSON also paid tribute to John Cameron when he said “and so passed away an energetic spirit worthy of classification as a man of genius. His boundary marks on the Queensland boundary will remain an imperishable monument of his skill as an astronomer.”
APPENDIX I: QUEENSLAND BOUNDARY

During the year 235 miles of the boundary between Queensland and New South Wales have been surveyed and marked, to the point where the 29th parallel crosses the 141st meridian or western boundary line of the Colony.

This important work was commenced in 1879, when the latitude of Barringun, a station near the boundary, was determined by means of a zenith telescope, having 2½-inch object-glass, and 30-inch focal length, by Mr Conder, of the trigonometrical survey staff; also the latitudes of three other stations were observed and connected therewith by traverse, so that the resultant value for Barringun Station being the mean of four values, each deduced from a large number of observations, was cleared as far as practicable from errors of observation, as well as those to be expected from abnormal inclination of the plumb-bob.

The difference in longitude between this station and Sydney was then determined by telegraphic interchange of star observations and clock signals with the Sydney Observatory.

On the completion of this preliminary work, by which the locus of the boundary, that is the 29th parallel and the longitude of a point on it, became known, Mr Surveyor Cameron started the survey west from that point to the South Australian boundary-line. The direction of the true meridian having been found by azimuth observations of stars, from a point in it considered as the bisection of a 5-mile chord of the small circle of the parallel, the prime vertical or great circle at right angles to the meridian was set off and measured 2½ miles east and the same distance west, that is to the terminals of the first chord which are points on the boundary; this first chord was then produced for 5 miles west from its western end, and offsetted south a computed length (27.95 links) to the terminal of the second chord, also a point on the boundary; and so on. The same process of producing the chords and measuring the offset to the end of the next chord was repeated until the 141st meridian was reached.

The line has been defined by posts at every mile, stone obelisks at the extremities of the chords, and permanent marks at all important points.

To ensure accuracy every part of the line was chained twice, and some portions of it several times, by different persons; and, as a check on its direction, observations for azimuth were made with an 8-inch transit theodolite at all convenient points. The latitudes of five stations between Barringun and the South Australian boundary were also determined with the zenith telescope, the average difference between the observed values and 29 degrees being 1½ second.

The position on the river Murray of the initial point of the South Australian boundary, which is the 141st meridian, was defined in 1868 by the Government Astronomer of New South Wales and the Superintendent of Telegraphs of South Australia. This line has since been marked, and the distance measured between it and Barringun was 10.64 chains greater than that obtained by computation, viz., 285 miles 14.32 chains. From the observed latitude of the initial point the calculated distance to the 29th parallel is 345 miles 65.45 chains, whilst the position of the same deduced from the latitude of northern terminal point of the same boundary-line is 24.39 chains less, the mean distance being 345 miles 53.26 chains from the initial point.
on the Murray; and the Queensland boundary, as laid down by Mr Surveyor Cameron, intersects the 141st meridian 38 links north of this mean position.

In the progress of the survey of this boundary, difficulties of a very serious nature were encountered, from the dryness of the season and the description of country through which it passes. Water for the use of the party had to be carted in some cases over upwards of 50 miles, and instances occurred of a stretch of 134 miles without water; also, owing to the impossibility of obtaining proper food and vegetables, the party suffered very severely from scurvy.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cameron Family Bible.
3. Passenger List of "Hurricane". Glasgow to Port Phillip. 1853. VPRS 3501 Microfilm Copy of Passenger Lists of Unassisted Immigrants from UK 1852-1923 — Reel 5 — August-September 1853.
4. Cameron family papers MS 11424 La Trobe Collection.
6. A Mr Alex McKay of Richmond appears in Baillieu's Victorian Directories as a surveyor in 1868.
8. *Ibid*.
12. List of members of the Royal Society of New South Wales 1884.
13. For details of the method of survey see First Annual Report of the Department of Lands 1880. (Appendix 1)
14. Cameron family papers MS 11424 La Trobe Collection.
15. *Ibid*.
18. This intersection now bears the name "Camerons Corner".
21. In 1886 the KIMBERLEY area of Western Australia was experiencing a Gold Rush and correspondence with Ms C. A. Clement of Mt. Lawley W.A., shows that a J. Cameron, Miner, signed a petition to the Governor W.A.
23. Index of Surveys carried out in the various Districts of New Guinea. Lands and Surveys Department, Port Moresby.
24. Cameron family papers MS 11424 La Trobe collection.
25. The initial “B” is often used with his signature, and stands for Brewer. This information comes from the Deed of Grant to his Land in New Guinea.
31. The name of his plantation at Kabadi.
32. John Green’s letter, 8 January, 1893, PMB 420.
33. John Green’s letter, 1 June, 1893, PMB 420.
34. John Green’s letter, 3 September, 1893, PMB 420.
36. C. A. W. Monckton, *Some Experiences of a New Guinea Resident Magistrate*; “The Bodley Head” 4 Ed. 1921, p.13. Charles Arthur Whitmore Monckton was born in New Zealand in 1872, went to New Guinea in 1895 and established himself as a Trader and Prospector. In 1897 he was appointed to the magisterial service of the Government, a position in which he excelled. He retired from New Guinea in 1907 to return to New Zealand. After a posting to India during World War I he returned to England and died in London in 1936. He wrote many books on his adventures in New Guinea and was awarded fellowships in the Royal Anthropological Institute and The Royal Geographical Society.
37. ‘Experiences of Forty Years in the Civil Service of Queensland’ by G. C. Watson. Collection of unknown newspaper cuttings. No date. John Oxley Library, Brisbane. Watson was the Queensland Surveyor who worked with Cameron on the Qld-N.S.W. Border Survey in 1879.