The genuine pearl is the only gem which comes from the sea and is the only one made by a living process. It is the result of entry of foreign matter to the pearl oyster, which coats this irritating intruder with layer upon layer of nacre.

Not all gem pearls are of salt water origin: some fine ones of delicate colour are found in fresh water mussels, notably in the great Mississippi, but these are not so highly prized as the salt water gems.

Pearls are believed to acquire their colour from the shell lining, or even from the part of the shell near where they are formed. A cream or rose-coloured pearl would not be expected in a pearl oyster where the shell lining was of any other colour. Pearls may be of rose, cream, white, blue, yellow, green or mauve. The preferred colours in the jewellery trade were rose, cream, white and black.

The world's finest rose and cream-coloured pearls came from the Persian Gulf, grown in a small pearl oyster seldom exceeding three inches in diameter. The pearl oysters of Northern Australia yielded fine silver-white gem pearls larger than those from the Persian Gulf, but the Australian pearl oyster sometimes attained a diameter of from twelve to fourteen inches and the shell was very valuable.

PEARLS: THE QUEST OF CENTURIES

For centuries pearls from the pearling grounds of the Persian Gulf, Ceylon and the Mergui Archipelago off Burma went to China, Persia, the Courts of Europe and to the princes of India. It is only a little over a century since Australia began commercial pearling and sent the treasures from its northern sea beds throughout the world.

Those who sought them had to face the dangers of hurricanes, of deep diving, of sharks and other marine hazards. In the cemeteries of Broome, Darwin and Thursday Island are the graves of many divers who died from the "bends" and other causes.
Hurricanes took heavy toll of lives and vessels: A plaque in the Quetta Memorial Church at Thursday Island bears mute witness to the worst of these which, in March 1899, decimated much of the pearling fleet and claimed the lives of 307 who sailed with it.

On the outbreak of World War II, whilst patrolling and examining vessels using the port of Darwin, I met Captain Gregory, who was a survivor of the hurricane or cyclone which wrecked a section of the pearling fleet off the coast of Western Australia on the 90-mile beach with great loss of life in 1911.

Gregory was operating with other pearlers in 1939 from Darwin, numbers of their luggers passing to and from the pearling grounds. These were fine sailing craft about 60 feet long and fitted with diesel engines. Captain Gregory, whilst our patrol craft was undergoing a short refit, kindly placed one of his luggers, the “Flying Foam” at my disposal for a week.

THE PEARLING CREWS

He manned his luggers with crews of mixed nationality. His first and second divers with their tenders were either all Japanese or all Malays, the remainder on board consisting of different races, on the theory that this would keep a check on the pearls recovered, whereas this might not be so if the crew were all of the same nationality.

Whilst this system of “espionage” did not prevent pearls from being retained by some members of the crew, it ensured that a fair proportion were brought back to the lugger owner.

I observed an instance of how the system worked when on board one of the luggers: Gregory noticed that a diving
dress had a large rip in one of the sleeves, obviously made by a shark. Turtles, regarded as a delicacy among the crews, are also highly prized by sharks, which can be driven at the scent of turtle to frenzy. Their highly developed sense of smell could detect this on the hands of a diver, which are not covered by the diving dress.

For this reason Gregory had issued orders that no divers handle turtle before diving and, on seeing the torn diving dress, taxed the diver in no uncertain terms with having eaten turtle before going down to the pearl beds. This was vehemently denied by the diver, but, nevertheless, Gregory asked other crew members if it was so and several nodded their heads.

Japanese pearlers were still working the pearling grounds outside territorial waters, mother ships servicing their pearling craft. These were about 100 tons: one which was boarded before entering Darwin to replenish supplies and water was fitted with Spartan simplicity, very different from the comfort of the Australian schooners which serviced their pearling fleets until these reverted to working from shore bases.

**THE HEYDAY OF PEARLING**

In the heyday of pearling, Australia supplied up to 80 per cent of the world’s requirements of shell, principally to the American market; half the total came from the West Australian fleet with Torres Strait next and then Darwin.

Gold or silver lip shell was the largest and most valuable, bringing up to $2,000 per ton; black lip was worth $520 per ton, whilst the smallest and least valuable came from Shark Bay, in Western Australia, where William Dampier, the navigator, naturalist and author, remarked on it when he visited the north-west coast in 1699.

Pearl shell was the main aim of the industry, the pearls recovered being regarded as a bonus, but the bonus was an extremely good one, pearl buyers coming regularly from Paris, London and New York to buy.

At Broome a Cingalese pearl cleaner, named T. B. Elles, was regarded as the most skilful in the world in the delicate art of “skinning” pearls to reveal their beauty.

**SOME FAMOUS PEARLS**

Australia’s finest pearl was found by one of James Clarke’s luggers off Broome in Western Australia. Named the *Star of the West* it weighed 100 grams and was a drop shape pearl about the size of a sparrow’s egg. Exhibited in Melbourne in 1917, $20,000 was offered for it and refused; later it was sold at Christies for $12,000.
The unique Southern Cross, formed of nine pearls in the form of a crucifix, was found also at Broome in 1883, by a boy while opening a shell gathered from the beach. When on display at Wembley in 1924, it was valued at $20,000.

Commercial pearling appears to have commenced in Western Australia in 1861 when a vessel called the Flying Foam, sent from Fremantle to Nichol Bay, gathered 910 shells and 150 pearls in the vicinity, a result regarded as disappointing.

An American sailor, named Faye, who went there in 1867, found Aborigines gathering shell by hand at low tide for their pastoralist employers.

With the backing of a publican from Tsien Tsin, he introduced a more productive method of skin diving by both men and women Aborigines, who took shell from depths of up to 10 fathoms (60 feet). When regulations forbade the use of women, Javanese, Timorese and Malay skin divers were brought in. Later the diving dress for deep diving was introduced from Torres Strait.

By 1873 more than 80 boats were pearling, working from Cossack, until 1890 when Broome on Roebuck Bay replaced it as the main pearling base and by 1903 had 300 vessels operating.
CAPTAIN BANNER'S ENTERPRISE

It was in 1868 that pearling began in Torres Strait, where beche-de-mer fisheries, with native skin divers, were already established. Captain M. Banner in the brig Julia, of Sydney, was searching for beche-de-mer on the Warrior Reefs, a long line of coral formations stretching for some 40 miles across Torres Strait towards New Guinea.

At low water he noticed great quantities of splendid pearl shell and collected a large number. Some that he opened contained pearls and these, with some of the shell he sent to Sydney to ascertain the commercial value.

Back came instructions to forget the beche-de-mer and load with pearl shell, a comparatively easy task, as it could be gathered in hundreds at low water.

The hatches were filled with shell and Banner sailed to Sydney; there more craft were then fitted out and sent north, where they spread to other reefs.

As the numbers of vessels operating grew, scarcity of shell at the low water mark forced them to search for new beds in the waters off the reefs.

SWIMMERS WORKED FURTHER FROM THE REEFS

Swimming divers from the Torres Strait islands and others indentured from the South Seas were employed. As the shell in the shallow waters thinned out, the swimmers worked further from the reefs and the shore until the water became so deep that diving apparatus was used. First introduced in Torres Strait about 1874 it was used initially by white pearlers, who included Andrew Sinclair, Frank Summers and Frank Dwyer.

Those who wore diving dress were termed divers and the others swimmers.

As time went on those in diving gear were used more and more, as they operated from boats and luggers from a shore base. The swimmers also began working from swimming boats, as they were called, but tried to keep clear of the divers' areas, claiming that scraps of food thrown over from the divers' boats attracted sharks. In their diving gear the divers had some protection against these, but the swimmers had none.

The diver first walked the bottom in his clumsy gear, a slow method of searching, but later was towed near the bottom in a bight of rope, signalling to his tender by tugging the line when a patch of shell was sighted.

The diver was the lugger captain, and the tender handled
the craft according to his orders, tending the lines and air
supply to the diver from the hand-worked air compressor.

By 1877, operating from Somerset on Cape York and
island bases, there were 109 vessels, 63 with diving
apparatus.

THURSDAY ISLAND BECAME CENTRE

In that year the official settlement was transferred from
Somerset to Thursday Island, which became the main port
for Torres Strait and the headquarters for its pearling opera­
tions.

Though the pearlers in Torres Strait continued to work
their boats from shore bases, those from the north-west had
a different system, using schooners as mobile bases. Each
schooner operated with six to eight dinghies or “swimming
boats” and anchored on the pearling ground.

Each morning the dinghies pulled over the banks with the
swimmers who dived for the shell. At sundown the dinghies
returned with their catch to the schooner and were hoisted
on the davits for the night. The advantages of the system
were obvious, but the diving apparatus had not yet come to
the west.

However, new pearling grounds were found off Port Dar­
win in 1884 by Captain Chippendall, of E. W. Streeter’s
fleet.

A hundred luggers went there from Thursday Island, in­
cluding many belonging to James Clark. Finding the ground
disappointing they went on to the west, where the Queens­
landers introduced apparatus diving and adopted the plan of
having schooners from which operations were directed. This
combination proved most successful and became the
standard system for pearling. If shell became short in an
area the schooners, complete with stores for a long period,
could move with luggers and other craft for hundreds of
miles to new grounds.

An influx of Japanese into the industry began from 1885
onwards and gradually they became the principal operators
as captain-divers, tenders and part crew, working the luggers
diligently under contract to the Australian pearling com­
panies; they also became the main shipwrights. The luggers,
some up to 60 feet in length, sailed splendidly and were fine
sea boats, as they had to be with sudden storms and changes
in the weather.

As the years went on fewer white men sailed, even as
shell openers, preferring to control the business from the
shore. But this and the introduction of the internal com-
bustion engine, which added to the mobility of the luggers, were far in the future.

The extent to which the Japanese participated in the Australian pearling industry—and lost their lives—can be seen in the cemeteries of Broome, Darwin and Thursday Island.

**LEGISLATION AND EXODUS**

Prior to Federation and *The Immigration Act of 1901*, pearlers had no official barrier to employment of Asian labour. Now it appeared that the new Commonwealth's attitude would signal the end of this very large existing labour force in the industry, experienced in handling vessels, diving and its techniques, with a knowledge of the northern coast, its weather and its pearling grounds. This knowledge and experience had taken a long time to gain and the pearlers pointed out that if the new act was applied to them, they would either abandon the industry or move it to Dutch territory as, with white labour only, it would be impossible to carry on at a profit, if at all.

Later, the pearlers convinced the authorities that they could not survive without Asian labour, partly on account of the great cost of completely training white replacements for a start and partly as, in any case, insufficient white labour was available.

So the application of the Act was postponed for a while and the pearlers breathed more freely, but in 1905 being harassed by this legislation, they moved most of their fleets to the Aru Islands in Dutch territory. Here they worked with reasonable success in the waters where the Bodillas—wealthy Arabs and great pearlers—had long held the concession.

By 1908, although the problems of Australian legislation still existed, some of the pearlers decided to return to Australian waters.

**THE PEARLERS—JAMES CLARK**

James Clark, known as the *Pearl King*, started life as a plasterer's boy in Brisbane and, after making a fortune from pearling, turned to the pastoral field with equal energy, acumen and success.

He also worked tirelessly for the benefit of both industries.

His pearling fleets operated in Torres Strait, the Aru Islands and off Broome in Western Australia, where one of his luggers found Australia's finest pearl. Named *The Star of the West* it was exhibited in Melbourne in January 1917. Weighing 100 grams and a perfect oval in shape, almost half
an inch long, it was sold in London at Christies for nearly £6,000 ($12,000).

Born on the Hunter River in 1858, Clark was orphaned while not quite three years old. His father, who was owner and master of a large cutter trading to ports north of Sydney, was lost overboard. The crew of one, his eldest son, Steve, aged 13, navigated the craft to safety alone.

Coming to Brisbane with the family in poor circumstances, Clark had only two years of elementary education before having to look for work. His heart was always with the sea and the cottage in Market Street, where he lived, was adjacent to the waterfront. It was also close to the warehouse of James Campbell and Co., so it was natural that he found his first job with the firm, which he joined as a plasterer’s boy in 1872.

Always interested and enthusiastic in his work, young Clark attracted the attention of James Campbell, Senior, who had him drafted to the office. Later, armed with some experience of accounting and business methods, he was sent out to get business for the firm. This he did extremely well, displaying plenty of initiative.

After nine years of hard work he had his first holiday. Having listened to tales from the waterfront, those from the pearling grounds of the north fired his imagination and with his savings, to the north he went.

**JOINED FRANK JARDINE**

Joining Frank Jardine at Somerset on Cape York Peninsula, he later became a partner. When the partnership was dissolved, the fleet of boats was divided. Jardine continued at Somerset with his half, whilst Clark took the remainder and worked from Friday Island as his base. Later he converted the pearling station at Goode Island to a repair base.

His fleet grew as did his leadership in the pearling industry. When he extended operations to Western Australia, using modern equipment, he helped to develop new pearling grounds from Broome to Darwin.

Returning from the west to Thursday Island, his fleet was increased to 130 craft including schooners.

After the great cyclone of 1899 the fleets, having suffered great loss of life and vessels, recovered from the severe setback and the industry continued to prosper until 1905 when it was harassed by Commonwealth legislation to a serious degree.

Clark led his fleet, accompanied by those of other pearlers, to the Aru Islands in Dutch territory, where he set up his headquarters.
As mentioned earlier, here the Bodillas had long held the concession, and Clark worked originally in conjunction with them, not in competition, but eventually assumed a commanding position in the trade.

**A TEST OF GENIUS**

Then came the test of his inborn genius. Overproduction of shell had imperilled the market and his interests. Sending instructions to his London agents and financing with accustomed daring, he practically cornered the market for shell and pearls, secured the future and paved the way for his retirement from pearling.

This completed, he disposed of his fleet in that area to a Dutch company just before World War I. He had already been established in the pastoral industry since 1898 when, with Mr. Peter Tait, "Boongoondoon" station was purchased. The interests of Clark and Tait expanded until the partners owned some of the best and most highly improved sheep properties in the Commonwealth. In 1928, Barcaldine Downs alone shore 140,000 sheep.

James Clark built a handsome residence *Wybenia* in Elystan Street, New Farm, facing the river and his boats, for he loved yachting and Moreton Bay.

A keen supporter and patron of the turf, a number of his racehorses were named after places in the bay such as Coochie-Mudlo, Tangalooma and Bribie.

In earlier days he took a cricket team from Thursday Island to Normanton in 1880 and another from Darwin to Port Headland in Western Australia.

An outstanding figure as a business man, Clark in private life was a benefactor to many causes and people in an unobtrusive way.

He died at his home on 9 July 1933.

**THE PEARLERS—R. A. C. HOCKINGS, “WANETTA” PEARLING COMPANY**

Reg. Hockings, a grandson of Norman Hockings, who had established Hockings' wharf and store in the 1840's at South Brisbane, started his early business career with Parbury, Lamb & Co. of Brisbane.

He made many business trips to North Queensland for the firm before finally resigning to become a pearler. The schooner *Wanetta* sailed from Sydney in 1897 for Thursday Island to become the mother ship for his luggers and Hockings became a partner of James Clark in 1898.

The pearling fleets continued to work from Thursday Island until 1905 when, due to what the pearlers termed
“Harassing Legislation”, the greater part of the fleet left Australian waters for the Aru islands, where they worked successfully.

Despite these problems which still existed, Hockings decided to return with the Wanetta fleet to Torres Strait in 1908. At this time his partnership with James Clark was dissolved, though he and Hockings remained life-long friends.

Hockings then formed the Wanetta Pearling Company, selling the schooner Wanetta and operating the luggers from a land station at Thursday Island, where he built a home, office, store and slipway.

**ACQUIRED TEAK FORESTS IN CELEBES**

Early this century he diversified his interests by acquiring virgin land with teak forests on the island of Boeton in the Celebes, Dutch East Indies. In addition to exporting teak he developed coconut plantations and became Vice-Consul for the Netherlands at Thursday Island. Malays from the Dutch East Indies were indentured by him for his lugger crews.

In 1911 Reg Hockings, who was a bachelor, was joined by his nephew, Harold Norman Hockings, and some years later by Frank Edgar Hockings, sons of Harold Joseph Hockings, a well-known mercantile broker of Brisbane.

The two brothers managed the Wanetta Pearling Company whilst Reg Hockings was absent on frequent oversea visits, some of which coincided with the test matches in England, as he was a keen cricket fan.

Offering his services in World War I, Reg. Hockings, with two of his Malay boys, engaged in Naval Intelligence work in the Dutch East Indies and the Malay Archipelago. For this he was awarded an O.B.E. Much of the intelligence was passed to Norman Hockings at Thursday Island, who decoded the signals and transmitted the information to the authorities.

Norman Hockings went to Boeton for two years and then was relieved by his brother, Frank. The plantation developed well until World War II, when the Japanese invaded the area, destroying the buildings, many teak trees and much of the plantation. After the war control of the plantation was regained; it was rehabilitated only to be taken over by the Indonesian Government after the Dutch had departed and only handed back in recent years.

Reg. Hockings had brought Malayan deer from the East Indies to Friday Island, where some still exist. Having virtually made his home on the plantation between his wan-
derings, he was buried there when his sudden death occurred in 1932 in Macassar having retired from the Wanetta Pearl­
ing Company in 1930. Norman then became Netherlands Vice-Consul.

**FLEET OF SIXTEEN LUGGERS**

Norman and Frank in partnership carried on with a fleet of 16 luggers until World War II began when, with Thursday Island becoming a military zone, the civilians were evacuated to the mainland and the luggers and launches were taken over by the services.

After the War Frank decided not to return to the island. Norman came back with his family to find only two of the 16 luggers remaining. These were in poor shape as was his home which had been occupied by the Army.

He set to, rebuilding the fleet and the business, his two sons, Harold and Reg., joining him in 1948; they later formed their own pearling company, H. O. & R. N. Hock­ings Pty.

Owing to a scarcity of Torres Strait Island and Japanese divers, the latter not allowed to come to Australia, Okinawa divers were permitted to work on the luggers. Having been brought at much expense, they were found to be inexperienced and were returned. Local divers were then trained.

Norman Hockings became ill in 1969, leaving for Bris­bane where he died in the same year and the Wanetta Pearl­ing Company became defunct.

His son, Harold (Hal) left with his family for Brisbane in 1971, severing the connection of the Hockings family and its interests with Thursday Island after a period of 73 years.

**THE GREAT HURRICANE OF 1899**

Outridge brothers were also well-known pearlers who had, with James Clark, conducted salvage operations on the wreck of the British India Company steamer *Quetta*, which sank near the tip of Cape York in 1890. Some of the fittings they recovered rest in the *Quetta* Memorial Church at Thursday Island, whilst the binnacle from the ship is in the Museum of our Society at Newstead House.

After Alfred St. John Outridge and his nephew, Harold Outridge, lost their lives with so many others in the great hurricane of March 1899, their nearest relatives with pains­taking research from all available sources, compiled an account of this tragic happening for circulation to relatives and others interested.

It describes the awful suddenness with which twin cyclones met and struck the pearling fleets, the tidal wave
which followed, and the days of waiting before help came.

The Weather Bureau in Brisbane had referred to a tropical disturbance out in the Coral Sea away from the coast, but in those days had little means of tracking its progress, and no way of issuing a warning to vessels at sea, for wireless telegraphy had not yet come.

Watching his barometer carefully from time to time, Captain Porter of the pearling schooner *Crest of the Wave*, late in the evening, which had hitherto been peaceful, predicted a rough night but considered that as long as the wind did not change, the fleets would be safe in the sheltered anchorage.

The Overland Telegraph Line ran from Brisbane through Cooktown, thence up the centre of Cape York to Thursday Island. Hence, though some 100 miles from the disaster, Cooktown was the nearest place on the coast with telegraph communication.

But messages to and from vessels passing could only be transmitted by visual signals through the signal station on
Grassy Hill. When bad weather affected visibility, signals could not be passed, a factor which prevented the first ships from the area from reporting what they had seen. It was three days after the tragedy before the first news reached Brisbane and five days until a full report was telegraphed and rescue arrangements organised. Meanwhile the survivors waited.

**THE DOOMED FLEET**

The large pearling fleet of over 100 vessels had sailed from Thursday Island for the pearling grounds some 250 miles away to Princess Charlotte Bay area where they were at anchor on the evening of March 4.

It was a Saturday and the luggers were gathered near the schooners to deliver shell, replenish stores and give their crews some relaxation. The Channel Rock lightship, with a crew of four, belonging to the Queensland Government, was anchored about two miles from Cape Melville.

As the prevailing wind for the previous three weeks had been from the south-east, most of the vessels were close to the land for shelter and the convenience of gathering wood and water.

The dispositions of the vessels and the names of the owners were—

**At Princess Charlotte Bay**

Owners: Queensland Pearling Company; Schooner: *Tarawa*, 124 tons; 18 luggers.
Owners: Bowden and Doyle; *Meg Merrilees*, 143 tons; 14 luggers.
Owners: James Clark & Co.; *Olive*, 92 tons; 14 luggers.
Owners: Munro, Outridge & Co.; *Aladdin*, 102 tons; 14 luggers.

**At Bathurst Bay** (Some 45 Miles Distant)

Owners: James Clark, Outridge Bros.; *Sagitta*, 84 tons; 10 luggers.
Owners: James Clark, E. Jefferson and Others; *Silvery Wave*, 98 tons; 15 luggers.
Owners: Geo. Smith, James Clark and Others; *Crest of the Wave*, 112 tons; 12 luggers.

Captain Porter, in charge of *Crest of the Wave*, had with him Mrs. Porter and their infant daughter. The small schooner *Admiral*, tender to the James Clark combination, had arrived that morning from Thursday Island and was anchored nearby.

At Barrow Point the lugger *North Wales* owned by Aplin Brown & Co. lay at anchor.
Hockings schooner *Wanetta* with the luggers of the *Wanetta* Pearling Company being anchored further to the north, fortunately were out of the main cyclone area and escaped damage.

Unknown to the pearlers, cyclone *Nachon* approaching from the north-west across the Gulf of Carpentaria and Cape York and cyclone *Mahina* coming from the north-east over the Coral Sea, were converging on the area.

The peaceful Saturday evening scene was soon to change. By 11 p.m. the wind veered to the south-west, blew with hurricane force then swung to the north accompanied by heavy seas, torrents of rain, vivid lightning and reverberating thunder.

Between 3 and 5 a.m. on Sunday 5, a tidal wave swept along the coast completing the ruin begun by the cyclone.

By 10 o'clock that morning the wind had eased considerably. In the few hours since the previous evening the pearl ing fleet had been decimated and the lightship sunk with all
Schooner "Crest of the Wave"
Only vessel out of 45 anchored near Cape Melville, which weathered the hurricane
From Monograph of Outridge family

hands. Three hundred and seven of those who manned them were dead.
Four of the schooners and 54 luggers were totally wrecked; of the remainder three schooners were disabled and 12 luggers sunk, but later refloated.

AN EXPERIENCE ON LAND
Constable J. M. Kenny, in charge of the Eight Mile Police Station, Cooktown, was able to relate his experience of the cyclone on land, having arrived with four native troopers and horses on March 4 to search for a missing South Sea Islander.
He reached the coast at Barron Point and camped on a ridge 40 feet above sea level about half a mile from the beach with scrub and high sand ridge between the camp and the shore. By midnight both tents were carried away by wind and falling branches.
The party made for open space guided by vivid lightning, shielding their hands and faces with blankets from the pelting rain which hit as hard as hail.
By 2 a.m. the wind was blowing with hurricane force and at 5 a.m. veered to the north-east increasing in velocity still further. Suddenly an immense tidal wave swept onshore and reached the party on the forty foot ridge who stood waist high in it. The wave travelled between two and three miles inland.

Late that day fragments of the camp gear were put in a place of safety, as it was impossible to travel with the horses (four of which had been killed by trees) owing to the flooded rivers.

On Monday, March 6, a start was made on foot for Munburra. Kenny saw no boats and very little wreckage, but there were great piles of dead fish, porpoises, sharks, dugong, sea snakes, sea birds, land birds and wallabies.

The leaves, twigs, branches and bark were stripped from the trees, he says, and the country presented a brown and desolate appearance.

WRAGGE'S FORECASTS

Clement Wragge, the Government Meteorologist, on March 3 had issued the following advice—

“Conditions are again becoming suspicious between the Louisiades and the north of New Caledonia and, although no new danger yet threatens the Queensland coast we must needs keep a bright lookout.”

Wragge, whose forecasts and weather charts were of assistance to mariners, probably through lack of information was only able to refer indefinitely to the cyclone called Mahina which later with Nachon caused the appalling disaster.

Even if a more definite forecast had been possible there were no means of communicating a warning to shipping in the area.

After the cyclone, but before the news reached Brisbane, the Weather Bureau issued a report on March 6 stating—

“A new tropical disturbance which we have named Mahina is about 360 miles south-east from Sudest and as it is not improbable that it will make south westing, shipping along our coast will do well to be on the alert. Now Mahina is a girl’s name culled from fair Tahiti with its coral strand, waving palm trees and mountain peaks. . . What is evidently a new monsoon has made its appearance over the Gulf of Carpentaria. This we have named Nachon and further squalls and heavy rains are almost certain to occur over the peninsular and Gulf districts generally extending north-westward to Port Darwin and
we have sent special warnings to Thursday Island and Gulf ports accordingly."

**BUREAU REPORTS**

Again on March 8, three days after the tragedy, the Bureau issued a long statement advising that their charts of that day had "An ominous outlook, the monsoon *Nachon* possessing very considerable energy and reaching from Cambridge Gulf across the Territory and Gulf of Carpentaria to the base of Cape York Peninsula. Then there is the tropical disturbance *Mahina* the centre of which is about 300 miles south from the Louisiades while its western edge very nearly touches the Queensland coast between Bowen and Princess Charlotte Bay. We fear that *Mahina* will not prove so soft and gentle as the Tahitian maiden of that name . . ."

Continuing, the Bureau stated that the tropical disturbance was about 400 miles east-north-east of Townsville and that the monsoon *Nachon* still overlapped the Northern Territory and the Gulf, concluding with the following: "Thus our northern friends must make the best of existing conditions . . . and we trust they will take heed of our remarks and forecasts and not be caught napping, should *Mahina* on the one hand or *Nachon* on the other cause ugly cyclonic squalls in our fair tropics."

**ASSISTANCE TO THE WRECKED**

On March 5 the British-India Company ship *Duke of Norfolk* (Captain Jenkins), from London to Brisbane passed the scene of the disaster, but did not stop to assist, reporting that several sailing vessels were under way and no distress signals were showing.

About dusk the dismasted schooner *Crest of the Wave* was sighted two miles from Channel Rock flying distress signals. Captain Jenkins anchored, and sent a boat, when captain Porter of *Crest of the Wave* reported the hurricane and the disaster to the pearling fleet, requesting assistance. Porter's wife and child were taken on board the steamer, which lent a boat to the dismasted vessel. It could not be taken in tow owing to the bad weather and, after remaining at anchor all night, the *Duke of Norfolk* proceeded on her way early next morning, March 6.

Meeting the *Duke of Portland* shortly afterwards, Mrs. Porter and her child were transferred to this ship for passage to Thursday Island.

That evening, off Cooktown, Captain Jenkins advised the loss of the lightship to the signalman at Grassy Hill, but
thick weather and darkness setting in prevented further communication.

The news was wired to Brisbane and the Harbour Master at Cairns instructed to send a vessel to search for the lightship. Captain Jenkins proceeded with all speed to Townsville, arriving on March 8 and reporting what he had seen and heard from Captain Porter. Only then was the alarming news wired to Brisbane.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN ON WRECKAGE

Whilst the Duke of Norfolk was anchored near the Crest of the Wave on March 6, men, women and children were floating on wreckage. Some subsequently got ashore, but others died from exposure and drowning. No boats were sent from the steamer to search, which may well have saved some of those who did not survive.

The Japanese steamer Kasuga Maru (Captain Haswell), was the next ship to arrive at the locality of the wrecks on Wednesday, March 8, and stopped near the dismasted Crest of the Wave when Captain Porter repeated his statement given to the captain of the Duke of Norfolk and advised further that the schooners Sagitta, Silvery Wave and three fleets of luggers were lost.

The Kasuga Maru then proceeded south at full speed and was off Cooktown at 4 p.m., but could not report fully to the Signal Station owing to thick weather. Not until arrival at Townsville on March 10 was a full report given and wired to Brisbane.

The A.U.S.N. Company steamer Warrego (Captain King), had, however, arrived at Cooktown the previous day from the north and her report wired to Brisbane on March 9 conveyed the first definite news of the magnitude of the disaster with the great loss of life, which was read by anxious relatives of the pearlers a day before Kasuga Maru’s report was received, although the latter ship had been at the scene some hours before Warrego.

Arrangements were made by the Government for Warrego to coal with despatch and proceed with provisions and stores to render aid to surviving crews, also to search for missing vessels including the lightship.

Warrego sailed from Cooktown on March 10, whilst on the same day the White Star, a small steamer, arrived at the Claremont Islands, having been sent from Thursday Island by Hon. John Douglas, the Government Resident, who had heard of the disaster from the ship Duke of Portland, which had brought Mrs. Porter and her child from the scene. On board White Star were Mr. G. H. Bennett, Sub-Collector of
Customs at Thursday Island, and Mr. George Smith, Representative at the island for what was known as the Clark Combination of Pearling Fleets.

On March 10 also, the steamer Australian, north bound accompanied by the small steamer Victory, spoke to the Crest of the Wave, which was at last towed by Victory to Stanley Harbour in the Flinders Group after riding at anchor for five days off Channel Rock.

**JAMES CLARK LEAVES FOR SCENE**

James Clark, soon after receiving the news in Brisbane, left on March 11 for the scene to ascertain the damage and to re-organise the pearling fleets. Transhipping to the pearling craft Gleam at Cooktown, he arrived at Cape Melville on March 19. Parties were organised to bury the dead and to search along the coast, after which steps were taken to refloat vessels which were worth salvaging. These, with others still afloat, were taken to Thursday Island for refitting.

A plaque was placed in the Quetta Memorial Church at Thursday Island in memory of the 12 white and 295 coloured members of the pearling crews and the lightship, who perished in the cyclone.

**THE HEROINE OF TORRES STRAIT**

A heroine of Torres Strait was the first native woman in the world to receive the Royal Humane Society's gold medal. This was Muara Lifu. Two of the white men who were saved owed their lives to Muara, who was on one of the wrecked luggers. She was a young woman of fine physique, a native of Darnley Island, and she saved the two men by swimming with them supported on her back to the shore, about two miles away. For almost seven hours she battled through the raging seas, and was exhausted when the shore was reached. Her remarkable performance was honoured by the Society, which presented her with its gold medal. Muara died about 1930, and over her grave at Thursday Island is a beautiful memorial of coral shells made by Darnley Island natives.

**POACHERS**

From early in this century growing numbers of Japanese owned luggers and mother ships began pearling. They were required to operate outside Commonwealth Territorial Waters, although it was difficult to police the long north-west coastline from Darwin to Broome.

The Gayundah, once the flagship of the Queensland
Marine Defence Force, but then belonging to the Naval Forces of the Commonwealth, was sent early this century in 1911 to police the pearling grounds. Finding two Japanese luggers within territorial limits and firing a shot across their bows, the ship took the craft in tow for Broome, where they were confiscated.

The Japanese vessels continued to operate until after World War II began. Not long before this, the Commonwealth Government had built two patrol craft, the Larrakia and Kuru to operate from Darwin for poaching prevention.

On the entry of Japan into the war, pearling came to a standstill. The luggers and other craft were requisitioned for use by the services, whilst most of the civilian population was evacuated.

**POST-WAR PEARLING**

Pearlers faced difficulties in post war years in endeavouring to re-establish the industry. Firstly it took time to regain possession of such vessels which had survived the work for which they were used during the war. Those which were handed back required repairs and refitting.

Secondly, there was almost a complete scarcity of divers. Few Torres Strait Islanders with any experience were available and Japanese divers were not permitted to come to Australia.

The pearlers were allowed to bring divers from Okinawa, but after bringing them at great expense, these were found to be inexperienced and had to be repatriated. More local divers were then trained and pearling continued on a somewhat limited scale. There were other problems, including plastic buttons which took the place of those made from Mother of Pearl in the high class clothing trade.

But the era of the pearlers of Northern Australia with their fleets and methods of operation was to end; for in far off Japan, Mikimoto, after successful experiments with culture pearls, established a new technique in the pearling industry.

**NOW CULTURE PEARLS IN TORRES STRAIT**

Luggers and divers still operate on the pearling grounds of Torres Strait, Darwin and Broome, but the numbers are few and all the shell is brought to Thursday Island, the centre of the culture pearl industry. Interestingly, it has been found that the shell from Broome produces the best culture pearls of the three areas.

But no longer are the oysters completely opened, searched for pearls and the shells graded for export, for now after a
meticulous operation performed on each one, they are returned to the sea to await the course of nature in developing the pearls.

In the waters between Thursday Island, Friday Island and Cape York there are moored long narrow sections of flotation structure, underneath which hang baskets containing the treated shell. A catwalk along the top enables the baskets to be taken along and hung in place. The baskets are partitioned so that each oyster has a separate section to itself.

Seated in a hut with an array of delicate instruments before him, the Japanese expert performs the delicate operation. Carefully prising open a small section of the shell, which is held in a vice, he inserts a wedge of wood. Then with a minute scalpel he makes an incision in the flesh of the oyster in which he places a small piece of nacre to provide the irritant which, when covered with protective layers by the oyster should produce a culture pearl. Removing the wedge, the oyster closes, and is then taken in the basket to flotation as soon as possible.

Having developed to early maturity in their natural habitat the sea bed, the oysters now have to obtain their sustenance from the waters just below the surface until it is time for them to be harvested: culture has come to the pearls of the north.

Some of the culture pearl firms have their offices and stores in the warehouses of the early pearlers. These are on the foreshores of Thursday Island and the sight now and again of a lugger, manned by Torres Strait Islanders, returning from the pearling grounds is a reminder of the schooners and the great pearling fleets that are no more.