Journey Into Torres Straits

Edited by

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Introduction

Henry Marjoribanks Chester, the author of the letter which is being used as the basis of this article, was born on 30 December 1832. He was first appointed to the Queensland government service, on the recommendation of the Hon. W. Thornton, on 1 January 1866, when he became Commissioner for Crown Lands, Warrego district, and Police Magistrate at Charleville. He had previously held a post with the Union Bank of Australia. The Commissionership was abolished after twenty months, and Chester was unemployed until April 1868, when he became Land Agent at Gladstone. From January to May 1869 he was Land Agent at Gympie.

When, about the middle of 1869, Frank Jardine, the Police Magistrate of Somerset, Cape York, left his post on extended leave, Chester was appointed to take his place, filling the various offices of District Registrar, Police Magistrate, Clerk of Petty Sessions, Postmaster, Meteorological Observer and Shipping Inspector. Chester seems to have been under the impression that the post was permanent, and he protested when, in August 1870, Jardine returned to the Police Magistracy at Somerset, which position he (Chester) had to relinquish. He decided to remain at Somerset, however, and was not employed by the Queensland government again until 1875. From August 1870 till about March 1872, he spent much of his time cruising around the Torres Strait Islands engaged occasionally in pearl shelling. An enquiry into the management of the Somerset settlement, held in 1873, throws some light on Chester's activities in Torres Straits. In evidence given on 22 December, A. H. Palmer, the Colonial Secretary, said:

... when Mr. Jardine was first appointed Police Magistrate at Somerset, in 1869, I gave him instructions to endeavour to foster a trade with the natives of the adjacent islands as much as possible, and for that purpose furnished him with a quantity of "trade" from the Colonial Stores. A shipment of tortoise-shell and pearl-shell was sent down by Mr. Jardine, in 1871, in payment for these stores, and he represented that he had had to engage someone to look after this trade, and that he had engaged Mr. Chester, who

Henry Marjoribanks Chester.

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was his predecessor at Cape York; and also that Chester had been away in the boat for a considerable time, and he thought it was only fair that he should have one-half the proceeds for his trouble.

Chester had been a Lieutenant in the Indian Navy and this fitted him well for the command of the various vessels in which he made his trips. Later, he joined the Queensland Marine Defence Force as a Lieutenant on the retired list.

In October 1875 Chester was again appointed Police Magistrate at Somerset, and he was the first P.M. at Thursday Island, it having been decided to move the Colony’s northern most settlement from Somerset to the Island.

Chester achieved some fame in 1883 at the time of the McIlwraith government’s annexation of New Guinea:

He [Chester] left Thursday Island in the “Pearl” on 24 March, and sailed for Somerset . . . . He reached Port Moresby on 3 April . . . . At 10 a.m. on 4 April he formally took possession of the eastern part of New Guinea “and the adjacent islands” in the name of Queen Victoria. H. M. Chester was one of Queensland’s most experienced stipendiary magistrates, though little recognition of his ability and devoted service to the Colony was ever accorded to him. He held the post at Thursday Island until April 1885 when he moved to Cairns to become Police Magistrate and Polynesian Inspector there, and stayed until May 1887. He spent a short time at Cloncurry before moving on to Croydon where he remained as Police Magistrate for three years (until the end of 1890). As P.M. at Cooktown, to which place he next moved, he carried out the additional duties of Gold Warden and Inspector of Pacific Islanders. He left Cooktown in December 1898 to become P.M. at Clermont, acting in several capacities, including those of High Bailiff, Warden and Mineral Lands Commissioner. After December 1898 he became formally responsible to the Mines Department, rather than the Colonial Secretary’s Office, to which he had previously made his reports. But he continued on as Police Magistrate at Cooktown until April 1902. He then went to Gladstone as P.M., taking leave of absence from April to July 1903, at the end of which time he retired. Chester died in Brisbane in 1914 at the age of 81.

The document which we publish is a letter of 10 August 1871 written from Somerset, and addressed to the Colonial Secretary. (Q.S.A. COL/A 160. In-letter 2499 of 1871). The P.M. at Somerset at the time, Frank Jardine, forwarded the letter to Brisbane for Chester under a covering note which stated:

I now have the pleasure to forward a narration by that gentleman [Chester] of his experiences for the last eight months in the Pearl Fisheries, and among the Islands in the Straits. This information has been acquired at some risk, and with very insufficient means, and will I daresay be found interesting.

(Ibid., in-letter 2498 of 1871).

REFERENCES

1. Chester to Colonial Secretary, 8 May 1869. Q.S.A. COL/A 122. In-letter No 1687 of 1869.
4. Queensland Blue books and list of officers of the Colonial Secretary’s Office. Q.S.A. COL/42/9.

Colonial Secretary’s Office in-letter 2499/1871 [The document which follows is a copy of]

Notwithstanding that a considerable portion of our commerce with India and China passes annually through Torres Strait, it has rarely received public attention since the surveys of Capts. Blackwood and Stanley in 1843-46, and except for a passing paragraph in an Eastern newspaper recording some wreck or massacre, which tended to keep up the high rate, 12½ per cent., charged by Insurance companies it was, perhaps, seldom thought of except by those whose business it was to encounter its risks and dangers. The foundation of the settlement at Port Albany in 1864 seventeen years after it had been strongly urged upon

5. Capts. Blackwood and Stanley in 1843-46

Captain F. P. Blackwood, R.N., commanding H.M.S. “Fly” was the leader of a survey expedition to Torres Straits in 1842. He was followed by Captain Owen Stanley of H.M.S. “Rattlesnake” in 1844-46. Chester’s recollection of the dates is not quite correct.

6. Foundation of the settlement at Port Albany in 1864

The establishment of a settlement at Cape York had been proposed many times over a period of years before it came into being in 1864. In 1860, Sir George Bowen began urging that a settlement be established there after the merchant vessel “Sapphire” was wrecked in Torres Straits and the survivors were thought to have perished. Bowen visited Cape York himself in 1862 with Commodore Burnett in H.M.S. “Pioneer” and became even more firmly convinced that the settlement was necessary as a harbour of refuge for distressed seamen.

Finally on 14 July 1864, H.M.S. “Salamanader”, commanded by the Hon. J. Carnegie, R.N., left Moreton Bay, with a detachment of Royal Marines on board, bound for Cape York. Acting under Admiralty instructions, two large merchant vessels, “Golden Eagle”, for the conveyance of civilians, stores, supplies, sheep, and the framework for the buildings, the latter having been prepared in Brisbane under the supervision of the Colonial Architect.

An overland party left one of the northern settlements of Queensland at the same head of cattle and a few horses to Cape York. The party included a surveyor whose task was to set out the town site. The hydrographer, Captain Richardson, R.N., who visited Cape York in H.M.S. “Hecate” in 1863, had recommended that the town be situated on the mainland at Somerset Point—a site which was elevated and healthy, with abundant pasture, timber, good soil and fresh water. “Somerset” was chosen as the name in honour of the First Lord of the Admiralty.

John Jardine was appointed Police Magistrate and Commissioner for Crown Lands at Somerset; he had held both positions previously and went to Somerset with some experience of the work to be done. He was authorized to call on the armed force to aid the civilians in an emergency, but he was not empowered to deal with military matters. (Governor Bowen to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 16 Jul 1864. Q.S.A. GOV/24. pp. 70-79)

Jardine wrote his first report on the new settlement on 6 September, and addressed it to the Colonial Secretary. (Jardine to Colonial Secretary, 6 Sep 1864. In-letter no. 2744 of 1864). Bowen, being personally interested in the endeavour, noted certain points in the margin of Jardine’s report, including “This is a very interesting report” and “I think Mr Jardine should be told that the Gov’t are quite satisfied”.

The 20 Royal Marines disembarked from H.M.S. “Salamanader” on 3 August and the civilian party landed next day, the site having been chosen. The 232 sheep were landed on Albany Island. The south-eastern slope of Somerset Point, facing the Bay, was to be the site of the Marines’ barracks, the high ground between Somerset and Sheridan Points was selected for the Police Magistrate’s house, and the work of erecting the buildings began. Although great difficulty was encountered in clearing the dense vine scrub, only a month after the party’s arrival, work was well under way on the clearing of land for the quarters of the officer commanding the Marines, Lieutenant Pascoe, quarters for the Naval Surgeon, Dr Haran, and a store-house. Jardine undertook to have completed within six months, all the buildings which would be required for some time to come.

John Jardine was pleased with the choice of Somerset:

... some of the best land is to be found in its neighbourhood. As a town site I think it good—the features are well marked and commanding, the ascents have gradual slopes, the lines have good curves, and the whole is highly picturesque and beautiful—The climate is unexceptionable. (Carnegie to Governor, 19 Sep 1864. Q.S.A. GOV/A 1. pp. 593-9)

The Royal Marines were withdrawn from Somerset in August 1867, making Somerset a wholly Queensland-controlled settlement. The Imperial government, however, continued to contribute £1,000 per annum towards its upkeep.
the home Government? was the result of newly awakened public interest. It was fully anticipated that besides affording a harbor of refuge to vessels wrecked in those waters, it would act as a check upon the treacherous and bloodthirsty natives of the neighboring islands, and prevent in future such massacres as are recorded in the book of sailing directions for Torres Strait and the Coral sea. So far from this having been the case, so late as the beginning of 1869 a vessel⁸ was taken within thirty miles of Somerset, and her crew cruelly murdered by natives who for the preceding five years had constantly maintained friendly intercourse with Europeans.

During all this time the people at the settlement were without the means of ascertaining what was going on in their immediate vicinity, and when, three months afterwards the news reached Somerset there was not a boat fit to venture outside Albany Pass. More recently, news of the wreck of the Schooner “Honusulu” in the N.E. channel reached Somerset from Batavia via Sydney three months after it occurred, and, but for an accident, the discovery of the valuable pearl fishery¹⁰ at Warrior reef would have been published in Sydney before it was known at a port only fifty miles distant. This discovery has had the effect of again creating an interest in all that relates to Torres Strait. Seven vessels employing about thirty large boats are now engaged in this profitable pursuit, which is, however, entirely monopolised by our neighbors of New South Wales. Owing to the absence of all maritime enterprise in Queensland, this wealth so profusely scattered over the reefs fronting her N.E. coast has been gathered year after year by the merchants of Sydney; yet it will now, perhaps, surprise people to learn that since 1864 this represents a total of upwards of £80,000.¹¹

7. seventeen years after it had been strongly urged upon the home Government.

A. Bogue of Sydney wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Earl Grey, on 21 January 1848, enclosing his pamphlet entitled “Steam to Australia, its General Advantages considered; the different proposed Routes for connecting London and Sydney compared; and the expediency of forming a Settlement at Cape York in Torres Strait, pointed out in a Letter to the Right Hon. Earl Grey, Secretary of State for the Colonies.” was published in Sydney in 1848. (Historical records of Australia, Series I, vol. XXVI, p. 461, despatch from Earl Grey to Sir Charles Fitz Roy, 20 June 1848.)

Chester may have been referring to Bogue’s proposal to the Secretary of State for the Colonies for the establishment of a settlement. Bogue may have been acting independently, or his pamphlet may have been the result of moves by others in New South Wales at the time to settle Cape York.

On 2 June 1848, when Sir Charles Fitz Roy wrote to Earl Grey enclosing a copy of the instructions issued to Edmund Kennedy for his expedition to Cape York, he wrote:

It was considered that an early report on the Country in the vicinity of Cape York and Port Albany would be acceptable to Your Lordship in the event of Steam communication being decided upon by Her Majesty’s Government, with a view to the formation of a Settlement as a Coal depot, and a place for assisting in cases of distress or emergency, or supplying provisions to Vessels making the passage to and from India by the way of Torres Straits. (Historical records of Australia, Series I, vol. XXVI, p. 440, despatch from Sir Charles Fitz Roy to Earl Grey, 2 June 1848.)

8. so late as the beginning of 1869 a vessel was taken within thirty miles of Somerset.

Chester was referring to the massacre of the crew of the “Sperwer” by the natives of the Prince of Wales group of islands in April 1869. (See note 21) Jardine, reporting the massacre of the crew of the “Sperwer”, did mention that, according to the Cape York natives, another vessel was taken somewhere near “Mount Ernest” about 5 months back, but as this is the first I have heard about it, I cannot believe the report to be true . . . (Jardine to Colonial Secretary, 26 June 1869. In-letter no. 1655 of 1870.)

However, when Chester reported the action against the Kolkalee tribe of Mount Ernest for their part in the “Sperwer” affair, he was of the opinion that the ship’s gear found with the blacks confirmed the story that a vessel had been taken as reported by Jardine. (Chester to Colonial Secretary, 14 April 1870. In-letter no. 1655 of 1870.)

9. wreck of the schooner “Honusulu”

The three-masted North German schooner “Honusulu” was seen aground on an unknown reef in the North East Channel of Torres Straits by the master of the barque “Loch Awe” on 20 July 1870. The ship was within 30 miles of the harbour of refuge at Somerset, but the “Honusulu”’s master had no knowledge of its existence. Chester first heard of the incident on 19 October when the brig “Western Star” arrived at Somerset with a Sydney newspaper, containing news of the wreck. The news had reached Sydney from Batavia.

Chester used this instance as an argument in favour of removing the settlement from Somerset to Lord Island, his report to the President of the Marine Board in Brisbane. (Chester to the President, Marine Board, 24 Oct 1870. Colonial Secretary’s in-letter no. 3445 of 1870. Q.S.A. COL/A (151).) He stated that for every vessel passing within sight of Somerset, ten used the North East Channel, making Somerset refeetual as a harbour of refuge.

10. discovery of the valuable pearl fishery at Warrior reef

Chester visited Warrior Island on his way to New Guinea and learned of the discovery of the pearl banks quite by accident. On his return from New Guinea, he went to the Colonial Secretary, forwarding his “Account of a visit to Warrior Island in September & October 1870 with a description of the Pearl fishery on the Warrior Reef.” (Chester to Colonial Secretary, 20 Oct 1870. In-letter no. 3425 of 1870. Q.S.A. COL/A 151.)

Chester left Cape York on 17 September 1870 in a whale boat belonging to the schooner “Active”, arriving at Warrior Island (called “Toot” by the natives) on the 19th. The island was being used as a station for the beche-de-mer fishery in the region, under the control of Captain Banner of the schooner “Bluebell.” About seventy Kanakas were employed by Captain Banner in the beche-de-mer trade. Towards the beginning of 1870, Captain Banner and his men (man of about 200) during Banner’s absence, the Kanakas took the Takaka to a part of Warrior Reef where they collected pearl-shell. By April, when Banner returned, six tons of shell had been collected and this was sent to Sydney in the brig “Pakeha.” By mid-October, they had collected 50 tons, which induced them to turn their efforts towards pearl fishery, a more lucrative business than the beche-de-mer fishery. The shell was then shipped to Sydney in “Bluebell” and “Pakeha” which had returned to Warrior Island shortly before Chester’s arrival there.

Captain Banner used six of his seven 30-foot boats in the fishery, the other being used to fetch water to the harbouring islands. The boats were capable of carrying a load of about four tons each. The routine was to leave the station at first light on Monday morning, returning late on Saturday night. Their largest catch had been 2,500 pairs of shells, but by the time Chester’s visit supplies appeared to be dwindling and boats were often bringing in only one hundred pairs of shells.

Frank Jardine, in his official capacity as Police Magistrate, also reported the discovery of the pearl banks to the Colonial Secretary, Jardine to Colonial Secretary, 1 Nov 1870. In-letter no. 3424 of 1870. Q.S.A. COL/A 151. His information being supplied by Chester. Jardine noted that five vessels were on the fishing ground at the time—the brig “Pakeha”, schooners “Bluebell”, “Kate Kearney” and “Melanie” and the cutter “Fanny”—together employing about 160 Kanakas.

In his quarterly report (Jardine to Colonial Secretary, 31 Mar 1871. In-letter no. 2915 of 1871.) for 1 January to 31 March 1871, Jardine wrote that “in the year 1870 all seems as productive as ever”, but later in the year the trade was not quite so successful.

11. a total of upwards of £80,000

The majority of ships engaged in the fisheries in Torres Straits were N.S.W. vessels, e.g. Captain Banner’s fleet operating from Warrior Island was composed of Sydney vessels. Banner’s catch was invariably forwarded to Sydney.

A “Return showing the Number, Tonnage, Crews, and Ports of Registry of Vessels which have Cleared from Queensland Ports, or passing through Torres Straits, from 1st January, 1870, to 31st December, 1872” shows that of a total of 36 vessels bound for, or passing through Torres Straits, 20 were Sydney vessels; the total tonnage of the 20 vessels was 1,866 tons, indicating that the majority were under 100 tons each. (Queensland Votes and Proceedings, 1874, vol. II, p. 593.)

There is no record to suggest that Chester’s estimate of the value of “upwards of £80,000” is correct, but in his Report on Pearl Fishery in Torres Straits, dated 7 October 1877, he wrote:

Until recently there was no official record of the exports from Somerset, but the following estimate from the books of the E.P.A. Co’s agent furnishes a close approximation to the truth:—

1875—280 tons shell at £18 per ton, value, £50,400.
1876—170 tons shell at £110 per ton, value, £18,700.
1877—60 tons shell at £100 per ton, value, £6,000.

These figures indicate that for the period 1864-1871, £80,000 total value for beche-de-mer and pearl-shell fishing would be a not unlikely estimate.

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Towards the end of last year the harbor of refuge at Cape York became possessed for the first time of a boat capable of going any distance from the port. On 18th December 27 of the survivors from the wreck of the brig "Freak"[12] arrived at Somerset, and their boat being no longer required was purchased by the Police Magistrate. The Government of Queensland desiring of encouraging trade with New Guinea had authorised Mr. Jardine[13] to incur any reasonable expense [sic] within certain limits in so doing. It was therefore determined to employ the boat in paving the way for this desirable end, by cultivating friendly relations with those tribes who are in the habit of trading with the natives of New Guinea.[14] Unfortunately their intentions could only be partially carried out, as on the arrival of HMS. "Rozario"[15] the shipwrecked Kanakas who formed the boats crew were forwarded to their homes; consequently a projected expedition to New Guinea which was about to start had to be abandoned.

12. wreck of the brig "Freak"

The 217-ton Sydney brig "Freak" was wrecked on a detached reef near Providential Channel, Great Barrier Reef, on 27 November 1870. Her master, William Walton, and crew were engaged in the beche-de-mer fishery at the time of the accident caused by "stress of weather". All 33 members of the ship's company were saved. (Casualty Report forwarded by the Portmaster, G. P. Heath, to the Government, 28 November 1871, Q.S.A. GOV/A 15, p. 288.) The crew was engaged in the "Freak" boat (i.e. "a boat capable of going any distance from the port") in which twenty-seven of the survivors reached Somerset was purchased by Frank Jardine for £5. (Jardine to Colonial Secretary, 30 Dec 1870, In-letter no. 784 of 1871, Q.S.A. COL/A 154.) The crew left Somerset in the "Pakeha" as the "Freak" could not be salvaged.

13. Mr. Jardine

On 28 January 1868, Frank Jardine, son of the first Police Magistrate, John Jardine, succeeded Henry Simpson as Police Magistrate at Somerset. He had no previous experience as this was his first appointment in the Queensland government service. He also assumed the complementary duties of Inspector of Police, Clerk of Petty Sessions, Postmaster and District Registrar (from 21 August 1868). From August 1869 until August 1870, Jardine took leave of absence and Chester assumed his duties.

Chester was under the impression that his appointment was permanent and that the then Colonial Secretary, Hodgson, had made it without reference to any leave granted to Jardine. He protested vigorously to A. H. Palmer, the Colonial Secretary, against his recall from Somerset and against the fact that the government had no further need for his services. (Chester to Colonial Secretary, 17 June 1870. In-letter no. 2441 of 1870.) However, Jardine arrived back at Somerset on 17 August and took charge five days later. (Jardine to Colonial Secretary, 22 August 1870. In-letter no. 3422 of 1870.)

14. trading with the natives of New Guinea

Frank Jardine reported to the Colonial Secretary (Jardine to Colonial Secretary, 31 March 1871, In-letter no. 2915 of 1871) that since he had purchased the boat from the Captain of the "Freak", she had been cruising continuously between Somerset and the Torres Straits islands. He added that Chester had established trade and good relations with tribes who had little previous contact with Europeans, particularly the Gamaulag or Gamaleg tribe of Maribiack [Jervis Island] who traded with the New Guinea natives, Jardine hoped to establish trade with New Guinea through the Jervis Islanders.

Chester had already visited New Guinea during September and October 1870, (Chester to Colonial Secretary, 20 Oct 1870. In-letter no. 3425 of 1870.) and had collected a vocabulary of about 180 New Guinea words during his stay at Darnley Island.

15. H.M.S. "Rosario"

H.M.S. "Rosario" was one of the fleet of the Australian Station. A ship of the fleet was supposed to visit Somerset twice yearly, free of expense to the Queensland government, for the relief of men, stores and supplies. The visits to Somerset were less than regular, and the Queensland government was obliged to send ordinary sailing vessels to Somerset at considerable expense to itself.

Under the command of Captain Henry Challis, H.M.S. "Rosario" left Moreton Bay in March 1871 bound for Sydney. Supplier for the settlement had already been sent to Somerset by the schooner "Early Dawn" in January, and "Rosario" could not accommodate the horses required for Cape York, making the visit less purposeful than it would otherwise have been. (Jardine to the Administrator of the Government, 9 March 1871, GOV/A 4. pp. 79-91.)

My offer to take charge of the boat was accepted and it is owing to the cordial co-operation and assistance of Mr. Jardine that I was enabled to collect whatever information is contained in this paper.[16]

My first visit was to Jervis Island [Native name Marbiack]. This island being quite out of the track of vessels navigating Torres Straits was merely approximately laid down by the surveyors, and until the close of the year 1870 was never visited by Europeans. It is situated to the Northward of Mulgrave island and is about sixty miles distant from Cape York. The boats of the "Pakeha" and "Melanie"[17] were the first to call there and obtained a quantity of pearl and tortoise-shell. The natives had recently returned from a successful foray on Banks island in which they had killed thirteen of the Italeega and carried off several women. The fresh skulls were then hanging in their huts.[18] They saw also a quantity of damaged tobacco, which probably came from the wreck of the "Honolulu", and purchased for a handkerchief a large tarpaulin. On arriving at the island I ran the boat into a small bay on the NE side where I found no less than fifteen canoes hauled up on the mud and a crowd of men on the rocks. An interpreter from Cape York explained to them the reason of our visit and warned them that not more than one canoe would be allowed alongside at a time with some little difficulty, due to the stupidity of the interpreter, they were made to understand that the price of a tomahawk or small knife was 10 pair of shells; of a large knife 15 pair; while three would purchase a fig of tobacco, and five pair a piece of iron for a fish spear. When the first tomahawk was handed out, it was exhibited in triumph to the people on shore who set up a great shout and sent off in haste for the shell stowed away in their huts. Amidst much laughter, scraping of hands and incessant shouts of Maribiack taag—taag[*] the trading went briskly on, and in a very short time I had purchased 200 pair of shell. At first all the usual precautions adopted when trading with savages were observed, one man covering me with

[*] Jervis island. Peace! Peace!

16. I was enabled to collect whatever information is contained in this paper

Frank Jardine wrote to the Colonial Secretary on 31 March 1871: Mr Chester has just left with the view of carrying out these arrangements [to establish trade with New Guinea through the Jervis Islanders], and I consider that I could not better fulfil your instructions as to incurring a moderate expense [sic] in encouraging trade with "New Guinea", than by furnishing you with supplies, arms, and ammunition, for that purpose... (Chester to Colonial Secretary, 31 Mar 1871. In-letter no. 2915 of 1871.)

Jardine and Chester seem to have co-operated admirably in their work in Torres Straits (Jardine in his official capacity, and Chester in a private capacity) despite the fact that there were causes for ill-feeling between them. Certain similarities of word and phrase in Jardine's and Chester's reports point to the fact that the cooperation between them extended to the comparison of notes and to the reading of each other's correspondence.

17. boats of the "Pakeha" and "Melanie"

The brig "Pakeha" and the schooner "Melanie" (Captain McAusland) were two of the vessels employed by Captain Banner in the beche-de-mer fishery, stationed at Warrior Island, prior to the discovery of pearl-shell on Warrior Reef. After the discovery, the ships were employed in fishing for pearl-shell, and moved further afield when the supply on Warrior Reef was exhausted. (See note 10.)

18. The fresh skulls were then hanging in their huts

Among the natives of the Torres Straits, it was a meritorious deed to kill foreigners either in fair fight or by treachery and honour and glory was attached to the bringing home of the skulls of the inhabitants of other islands slain in battle. (Alfred C. Haddon.—The ethnography of the Western tribe of Torres Straits. London, Harrison and Sons, 1890. p. 314.)

The practice of displaying such trophies seems to have been common among the Islanders of Torres Straits.
his carbine while I was stooping over the trade box, but before long the arms were laid aside and all hands were busy receiving and stowing away the shell. Neither then, nor afterwards during my whole intercourse with them, was there the least attempt to extort more than the stipulated price; indeed, some weeks later when a dearth of tomahawks was impending, and I raised the price to 15 pair of shells, there was no dissatisfaction expressed. By this time mutual confidence had been established, and two of the tribe volunteered to go with me to Mulgrave island, and were away in the boat for three days. On returning to Maroiback I went on shore and was received by some 30 or 40 men of the tribe. From much whispered consultation in which the words “Ipiyik, and taq—nino—taq,” were frequently repeated, I gathered that they were debating as to whether the women should be sent for, and the matter was apparently decided by my two friends vouching for our peaceful intentions. A present of beads distributed among the women and children who then came forward from the mangroves, behind which they watched our proceedings, was received with much rejoicing, and, what is rare among savages there was no begging for more. In five subsequent visits to these people in each of which I spent a week at the island I never had reason to alter the very favorable opinion I formed of them during our first intercourse. Such confidence had they that two of their principal men on one occasion returned with me to Cape York, and seven on another. The latter were detained longer than was expected as I had to take some natives who had been cast away in a canoe back to their own island, so that it was three weeks before the Maroiback men could get home. The joy at their return was great; nearly the whole population of the island flocked down to the beach and crowded into and around the boat. Their wives brought their youngest children and placed them in the arms of the men, who fondled them in the boat while relating the wonders they had seen. What appeared to have struck them most during their stay was the shooting of a bullock, for though they had mostly likely heard of the effects of firearms, they had evidently never witnessed their power, and could not understand how so large a beast could be so easily killed.

One day while awaiting the favorable time for fishing I occupied myself in taking down the names of the tribe and afterwards calling them over. In this manner I got the names of the whole male population amounting to 114 persons. I also collected a short vocabulary of their language which closely resembles that of the Prince of Wales islanders.

A physiognomist would probably form a low estimate of the character of the Gamaleega* from the low type of countenance so frequently met with, in which cunning and cruelty are strongly depicted; but as regards affection for their children, intelligence and energy, which latter quality was to me their principal recommendation, they far surpass all other natives of the Strait with whom I have come in contact. They have never yet been known to take part in any of the massacres of whites, but the very qualities which distinguish them from other natives would render them all the more formidable if provoked, as recent events have shewn.

Of all the natives employed in the pearl fishery, those from the island of Mare are undoubtedly the best and bravest, but at the same time the most lawless and difficult to restrain. A boats crew of these men were suddenly set upon by the Gamaleega in revenge for something they had previously done; their firearms were wrested from them and they were compelled to make a hasty retreat to their boat with one of their number badly cut about the head by a tomahawk. The guns were afterwards recovered through the Agency of the Warrior islanders.

My next visit was to Mulgrave island, called Badoo by the natives. For many years the Badoloega, who are very numerous, have borne the worst reputation for treachery and cruelty, and the evil influence exercised by the white man Wini10 who lived with them for years, but who has died since the settlement at Cape York was founded, nullified the efforts to bear fruit. A long series of massacres of defenceless people perpetrated with absolute impunity has accustomed these miserable savages to regard Europeans as an easy prey, and until last year they have congregated every S.E. season at the Prince of Wales group in readiness to take advantage of any disaster that might occur to shipping. It was these people who instigated the “Sperwer” massacre in 186921 and of the three tribes who took part in that tragedy they are the only one that has escaped all punishment.

20. white man Wini
John Jardine described the neighbourhood of Somerset in a paper which he presented to the Royal Geographical Society, London, on 22 January 1866. Referring to the Banks and Mulgrave Islands, he wrote:

21. “Sperwer” massacre in 1869
In November 1868, the cutter “Sperwer” left Melbourne, under the command of Captain James Gascoigne, bound for Batavia via Torres Straits. The crew was said to consist of two white men and five Malays. In about April 1870, the Captain and crew were murdered by islanders of the Prince of Wales group, and the cutter was burnt to the copper. The story told by the natives was that the ship was anchored off Wednesday Splug, trading for pearl and tortoiseshell, when her crew was murdered in two groups, one of which was given a signal—those on the vessel (the Captain, his son, a cook and two seamen) and those on the shore collecting wood. It was believed that the Captain’s wife had been taken by the natives of Badu (Banks Island).

Captain McCaulden of the “Melanie” loaned two of his boats and crews to Frank Jardine, and with four native troopers, they made up the party who went with Jardine to Prince of Wales Island to investigate. They found the camp full of ship’s gear and clothing. Jardine reported (Jardine to Colonial Secretary, 26 June 1869. In-letter no. 1655 of 1870.) that the bodies of those murdered had been “put up into trees” near Red Point, and that the cutter had been run up on shore and burnt. Jardine took his leave of absence before any further enquiries could be made, so the next visit was left to Chester.

The master of the schooner “Georgina Godfrey”, Captain Godfrey, placed his vessel at Chester’s disposal. Chester left for Prince of Wales Island on 2 August with two native troopers and nine natives of the Cockaynega and Gudang tribes. They found the vessel and also discovered the bodies of two white men on the beach; the skulls and arms had been removed, so they buried the remains. Chester surmised that the rest of the crew had been killed on the vessel and their bodies thrown overboard. (Chester to Colonial Secretary, 10 Aug. 1869. In-letter no. 1655 of 1870.)

Following continued reports that Captain Gascoigne’s wife and son were living with the Korraregus of Prince of Wales Island, Chester manned and armed a boat and set off for Albany Island early in December 1870, when it was reported that a group of them had landed there, hoping to discover news of Mrs Gascoigne and the son. Chester managed to capture the head man, “Teapot”, and keep him in irons in the gaol, using him to induce the others of his tribe to surrender their hostages. He had to be released after twelve days as there was no sign of Mrs Gascoigne or the child.

(See next page for continuation of this note.)

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*Name of tribe inhabiting Jervis island.

19. short vocabulary of their language
Chester seems to have taken great interest in native languages; he had also collected a vocabulary of New Guinea words from the Papuans he met at Darnley Island (Chester to Colonial Secretary, 20 October 1870. Attached to in-letter no. 3425 of 1870.) This enabled him to better communicate with the natives, without relying too heavily on interpreters.

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Strait is probably the only part of the world where [sic] outrages like these can be committed with impunity, although, perhaps, nowhere could they be more easily prevented or punished.

With some difficulty and after cruising right round the island I found their camp in a small bay close to N.W. point. There were about a dozen canoes on the beach and at anchor in front of their huts, but not a man was visible. The two Marbiack men who were with us landed, and in a short time a number of natives emerged from a scrub close by from whence probably we should have been shot at. A flight of arrows had we attempted to land. A few tortoiseshell masks and some stone clubs was all they had to dispose of, as the boats of the "Melanie" and "Kate Kearney" had left only a day or two before with full cargoes of pearl shell, which the Badoooleega had assisted to collect.

The narrow channel between Banks and Mulgrave has been fished with great success, and the small islands North and South of the latter have been scarcely less productive; but for some time past no new patches of pearl shell have been discovered.

The tides which flow with great rapidity through these narrow channels cause the shell to accumulate in certain sheltered spots just beyond their influence, and it is not improbable that after a few months' rest places that are now exhausted will again pay for working, but not upon a large scale. Patches like those on Warrior reef are not likely to be again met with, and already there are signs of a general exodus of the pearl fishers to the N.W. coast of Australia. The diving apparatus with which several of these vessels are supplied, and from which so much was expected, have proved comparatively useless owing to the way in which the shells are scattered.

It was only after numerous attempts to communicate with the Italeega of Banks island that I at length succeeded in overcoming their timidity and inducing them to trade. Living in perpetual dread of their powerful neighbors of Badoo and Marbiack they are compelled to be constantly shifting their camps, which they take great care to conceal on the side to seaward; so that I passed and repassed several without any idea of their vicinity. The men complained piteously of the Gamaleega and bewailed the destruction of their tribe which was, they said, no longer able to contend with its numerous enemies; but if the whites would only assist them they would soon be revenged for all they had suffered. They argued that we ought to help them against the Badoo men particularly, who had so often killed white men while the Italeega had always been friendly, and, no doubt, should it ever be necessary to punish the Mulgrave islanders for future outrages it might easily be done with the assistance of these people, who are familiar with their country and camping grounds. I had no means of estimating their number owing to their distribution in several camps, but they cannot be very numerous. They appeared to have few canoes and being afraid to venture out on the reefs are mainly dependent for subsistence on the roots and fruits furnished by the island. They have a few small groves of cocoa-nut trees and their island appears to be the Southern limit of this useful tree in these waters.

The setting in of the S.E trades, which have this year blown with unusual violence put a stop to further intercourse with these islands, as it was not prudent to go so far to leeward with a boat crew consisting often of only two boys; but this objection did not apply to the Prince of Wales group, or the islands in the N.E channel.

Since the Sperwer affair the Prince of Wales islanders have not visited Somerset in their canoes as was their custom previously; but the natives of the main land have kept them well informed of all that has transpired and have acted as agents in disposing of their tortoiseshell &c. I had, however little difficulty in making friends with them on first going there in June last, and have since had from ten to fifteen employed in diving for pearl shell; but with very indifferent success. During this time I have camped for days together at the very spot where the cutter was burnt, and with the men who took part in the massacre of her crew, yet thanks to the terror inspired by the Police stationed at Somerset, I was under no apprehension of sharing their fate. For a time these men worked well, but it soon became apparent that they were quite incapable of sustained energy. Much as they coveted the large knives, tomahawks and tobacco with which I was amply supplied, they could hardly be induced to earn them.

A curious feature in their character is the readiness with which they condone the greatest offences and acts of treachery on the part of the Cape York blacks. It would seem as if they were utterly insensible to feelings either of hatred or affection; and even revenge which with savages is the most powerful of all emotions is subordinate with them to motives of self interest. They can only be controlled through their fears. Poor Capt.

24. terror inspired by the Police stationed at Somerset

Chester is probably referring to the shooting by native police troopers of three of the ringleaders of the Kolkaalega tribe in the "Sperwer" massacre. The natives were probably terrified more by the retributive power of the firearms than by the police themselves. [See note 21.]
Gascoigne had traded with them for a long time and bore the reputation of being a kind hearted and just man in his dealings with natives, yet they murdered him after all. Like the natives of the main land, the islanders of the Strait and N.E. channel believe firmly in the power of certain individuals to bewitch them. In each tribe there is generally one or more old men supposed to possess this power, and who by working upon the superstitious fears of the younger men often manage to obtain an influence to which, perhaps, their prowess as warriors had not previously entitled them; but they are usually regarded with feelings of mingled awe and aversion. One of the modes of proceeding is to procure a number of small bones of the human arm and leg; these are sharpened to a point and the operator having selected a suitable spot in some dense scrub, retires to it at dusk and spends the night in darts these little spears into the imaginary body of his enemy, accompanying each dart with a cry of exultation as if it had actually taken effect. Should the person thus bewitched fall sick or die within the next few months it is universally attributed to "Takandinya" which is the name applied both to the ceremony and to the person practising it. Several Koraregas whom I questioned concerning large ulcers on their legs gravely assured me they were the victims of "Takandinya". If a strong breeze springs up while they are away in their canoes it is generally ascribed to the incantations of their enemies; and if I happened to make a quicker trip than usual I was told it was owing to their successful exertions on my behalf.

Some of the masks made by them display much ingenuity and even humor. One in my possession consists of an alligator's head made of tortoise-shell surmounted with a capital imitation of a frilled lizard carved in wood. Another is a dog about two feet long made of tortoise-shell. These ornaments decked with paint and feathers are worn as head dresses in their dances, and seen by the lurid reflection of the camp fires have a singularly grotesque appearance.

The impurity with which for the last eight months a single boat, with a crew never exceeding six men has been able to visit islands and trade with natives who have long been the terror of these waters, is due in a great measure to the presence in the Strait of an unusual number of vessels with strong crews. In a short time, however, most of them will have left, as the recent intercourse with whites, and missing their accustomed supplies of tobacco, of which they are passionately fond, will not be able to resist the temptation to satisfy their wants where the risk involved is so slight. Yet there would be no difficulty in exercising a wholesome control over these people. They already stand in considerable awe of the Police at Cape York and a small craft capable of carrying a good boat on her deck, attached to the settlement and cruising occasionally among the islands would be sufficient to hold them in check, and might at the same time frequently render valuable assistance to vessels in distress.

Somer set
10th August 1871.

25. poor Capt. Gascoigne  
Captain James Gascoigne of the cutter "Sperwer" who was murdered by the Prince of Wales Islanders in April 1869, along with the rest of the ship's crew. [See note 21.]

26. Koraregas  
The Koraregas were the natives of Prince of Wales Island.

27. the fishery is nearly at an end  
In July 1871, Jardine reported the return of H. M. Chester from a short cruise in the North East Channel, and wrote:

From Mr Chester . . . I have learned the following particulars, relative to the Pearl Fishery &c. The total quantity of shell obtained, since the commencement of the year, by all parties, does not, probably exceed 50 tons and of this quantity about three fourths has been collected by the Melanie, Kate Kearney, and Pakeha, for some time past the returns have been comparatively small, and if no improvement should take place it is likely that several of the vessels will leave for the N.W. Coast or turn their attention to the "Beche de mer" for which they have come prepared— (Jardine to Colonial Secretary, 1 Jul 1871. In letter no. 2498 of 1871.)

As the figures for 1875-76 show [see note 11], the fishery was not at an end. It is more likely that the grounds had been fished out and that they recovered after a few years' rest.

The pearling industry in Queensland reached its peak in the period 1893-1900 and in 1899, the total value of 1200 tons of shell was £130,105. (Q.S.A. HAR/48.)

28. small craft capable of carrying a good boat on her deck  
Both Jardine and Chester made frequent references in their reports to the need for a suitable vessel attached to the Somerset settlement. Jardine had purchased and repaired a boat belonging to the "Alerte" and Chester had repaired an abandoned boat which he named the "Alerte". Neither of these vessels was sufficiently seaworthy for venturing far beyond Somerset. Of necessity, Chester made a practice of either borrowing boats from fishing vessels or of accompanying other vessels when cruising in the Straits.

In October 1871, the Colonial Secretary, A. H. Palmer, in writing to the Governor, the Marquis of Normanby, also raised the matter:

I would . . . invite Your Lordship to make such representations . . . to the Imperial Government as might induce them to afford assistance . . . by providing for service at Cape York a Schooner or other suitable vessel of moderate size.

This vessel should be well armed—of light draught—with a crew of from twenty to twenty five men.

It is difficult to overrate the advantages that would be afforded by such a Craft being permanently attached to the Settlement, and cruising occasionally amongst the islands. (Colonial Secretary to Governor, 26 Oct 1871. GOV/A 4. p. 371.)

Palmer enumerated the advantages—to keep a check on the natives, to protect those engaged in the fisheries, and to aid vessels in distress.

The repeated requests for a vessel came to nothing and in 1872 Jardine ordered the "Vampire" from Sydney at his own expense. She was used for government service until a vessel was finally provided in 1873—the cutter "Lizzie Jardine". (Queensland Votes and Proceedings, 1874, vol. II, pp. 1001-35.)