

FRANK HANN'S EXPLORATION IN THE KIMBERLEY, 1896–98

At our 3 July 1996 meeting, using slides and Hann's diary for illustration, Mike Donaldson and Ian Elliot told the story of Frank Hann—incurable wanderer and marker of boabs; a man who covered more of Western Australia than any other explorer, and whose journeys brought him considerable physical and mental pain.

The Hann family left England in 1845 and, in their first years in Australia, Hann senior pioneered sheep country in Westernport, Victoria. Later, he headed north to go droving with his sons around Charters Towers, only to drown in the Burdekin River. By age 20, Frank Hann was managing Lolworth station, and later Lawn Hill station, where he stayed until age 50 in 1895, when his troubles really started. Not only had he been shot in the chest (though not seriously wounded), but he was overdrawn at the bank and his cattle were plagued by ticks and red-water fever. The bank foreclosed and his cattle were killed.

Hann headed west to prospect for gold and look for pastoral country, but luck was still against him, and he sustained a badly broken leg during a horse-fall. A local doctor set his leg at the accident scene, then departed, leaving Frank to spend the next 5 months under a dray waiting for the bone to set, (and probably cursing Fate)! Eventually, he was able to set off further west, travelling with 6 Aborigines from Lawn Hill. Taking up the story at Halls Creek in 1896, Ian Elliot recounted various episodes along the journey of exploration directly from Hann's diary. It was obvious that Hann and Lady Luck were mortal enemies from Day One, as things steadily went from worse to disastrous!

1897 found Hann in Nullagine, prospecting and—naturally—to no avail, looking for pastoral country! His diary records such calamities as horses drowned and him receiving a severe blow to his head (from his own tent ridge-pole!), which caused him to bleed from the ears for many days. His mental attitude deteriorated through 'disappointment'—no gold, or suitable pastoral land—to 'downhearted'—no money, no letters—and spiralled downward through despondency to black despair, even to the point of considering returning to Queensland.

Around mid-May 1898, with Queensland in mind, Hann headed out of Derby toward Halls Creek but detoured to look at some diggings where gold had been found at Mt Broome. Tempted by what might exist beyond Mt Broome, he pushed on and found good, well-watered country to the north. Now his attitude took a miraculous about-face, and in his diary he became quite lyrical about 'splendid cattle country' and 'much fish' in the rivers. On 8 June 1898 he marked a boab on the Isdell River with the letters "FH". Then began the return journey to Derby to report the new country. On his return, he applied for 793,000 acres (rental of £197.10.0), only to have his

cheque dishonoured. In July, Hann set out on a more extensive examination of the region—a 7 week trip that took him to the upper reaches of the Fitzroy River and traced the course of the Charnley River. He marked another tree at Mount Brennan, and his now very lyrical diary records his sightings of the Fitzroy River and gorge : "I never saw such a gorge before!" and, at the Phillips River (later renamed Hann River), "I never saw such a river before!"

In truth, Hann's voyages of exploration are simply the story of a constant search, punctuated with many disasters, during which he left his mark indelibly on the North West—not just by the boabs which bear his name, but in the many places to which he gave a name : Mt House, Mt Barnett, Mt Elizabeth; the Adcock, Barnett, Charnley and Isdell Rivers; Manning Creek, Caroline Range etc.

Hann went to the eastern states but could not raise money to stock the Kimberley country. He returned to WA. 1901 found him prospecting around Ravensthorpe; 1902–03 around Wiluna and Laverton. While it seems that gold eluded him, he had mined silver and lead near Lawn Hill, and he was the first to find copper in the Warburton Ranges. His extraordinary travels still not complete, he twice journeyed from Laverton to Oodnadatta and back and, in the absence of trees, marked rocks instead!

In 1921, at the age of 76, and after a lifetime spent wandering, Frank Hann died. He is buried in Karrakatta cemetery, WA, and his headstone reads "Pastoralist, Prospector, Bushman, Explorer" an almost adequate epitaph!

Helen Mell