

THE BROCKMAN EXPEDITION 1901

On 2 July 2003, Mike Donaldson presented an illustrated talk to the Kimberley Society on the topic of Chief Inspecting Surveyor Frederick Slade Brockman's expedition of 1901. Brockman led an exploration trip through the Kimberley to fill in a vast gap in the geographical knowledge of north-west Australia. Although the coastal outline was well known from marine surveys by about 1820, apart from a minor inland excursion along the Glenelg River by George Grey in 1838, little was known of the interior until Brockman's expedition. Alexander Forrest had travelled along (and named) the King Leopold Ranges in 1879, but these barrier ranges were not crossed by Europeans until a prospecting party found a way through them in 1886. Others followed, and Frank Hann found a way over them in 1898. Hann recognised the pastoral potential of the rolling basaltic hills around Mount House and Mount Elizabeth, and he discovered and named the Adcock, Charnley and Isdell Rivers. But he did not penetrate the north-western areas of the Kimberley.

Brockman left Wyndham on 2 April 1901 with surveyor Chas. Crossland as second in command, and Dr F M House as Naturalist and Botanist. Also in the party were Thos. Hickey, Thos. Wade, J F Connelly, J H Brooking, and two Aboriginal prisoners from Rottneest. The expedition had 70 horses and provisions for at least six months. Government Geologist Andrew Gibb Maitland and Assistant Geologist C G Gibson also accompanied the party for most of the trip.

The expedition initially followed the Chamberlain River, then cut across to the west, approaching Hann's Mount Elizabeth, before following the Charnley and Calder Rivers to the vicinity of Walcott Inlet. Brockman set up a base camp (FB32) on Synott Creek in July, and split the expedition to cover more ground quickly. Brockman took some of the party to the north west, reaching Mount Methuen near George Water before returning to the base camp via the Calder River (named after the prospector he met at that locality). Crossland took another group to the south to the Isdell River, which he followed down to Walcott Inlet (apart from being thwarted by the Isdell Gorge near the river's mouth).

The combined party then proceeded up the Calder onto a tributary of the Prince Regent River. Brockman took a small party to the north west to Grey's Glenelg River, and as far as Mount Trevor, from where they could see Mount Trafalgar across the mouth of the Prince Regent River. The party split again soon after, with Brockman continuing to the north to the Roe and Moran Rivers, then on to the King Edward and Carson Rivers and Napier Broome Bay, near present day Kalumburu. He then went on to the mouth of the Drysdale River before following that river up and cutting south east across country to arrive back in Wyndham on 26 November. Crossland during this time travelled east from the area near Mount Hann, followed

up the Gibb River (which he named after the Government Geologist), then travelled along the Drysdale River before arriving in Wyndham on 18 November 1901.

The expedition travelled some 2,300 km in 6 months and 18 days, and named the Chamberlain, Calder, King Edward, Barton, Moran, and Gibb Rivers, and Gibson and Bachsten Creeks (Bachsten was a member of the Calder prospecting party). They also named Mounts Methuen, Trevor, Beatrice, Dorothy, and Hickey, and the Maitland Range. The geologists identified about 75% of the country as sandstone, the remaining 25% as basalt, and some 5 million acres were considered to be good grassland. However Brockman stated that "in no part of the country did I find timber or any indigenous product of any commercial value".

Of the Aboriginal inhabitants, he was surprised at the low numbers encountered, and noted that "every party ... even in the most remote localities, had axes and chisels made of iron (principally cart tire iron and shovel blades)". Dr House documented numerous remarkable Aboriginal paintings on almost every available smooth, vertical face in the sandstone ranges, and the report of the expedition contains many exceptional photographs of some of the larger sites.

Dr House also collected for scientific purpose 2 mammals (1 headless due to an accident!) and 43 birds representing 29 species. The Director of the WA Museum at the time, B H Woodward, commented that "the Natural History specimens were all in excellent condition, and reflect the greatest credit on Dr. House, as it is not an easy matter to preserve the skins of small birds in a tropical environment". The Museum's Hon. Consulting Ornithologist, A W Milligan reported: "The collection includes . . . one bird absolutely new to science. With a due and proper appreciation of Dr. House's labours and travail, I have taken the liberty of naming it after him, and it will, therefore, bear the scientific name of *Amytis Housei*, and the vernacular name of the 'Black Grass Wren'". It was not reported again for some 60 years.

The expedition was successful in mapping this large remaining blank area on the map of Australia, and left a legacy of valuable observations and photographs from 1901. There does not appear to be any record of the geological observations made by the two Government geologists on the expedition.