

## **UNDER A REGENT MOON: JOSEPH BRADSHAW AND AENEAS GUNN ON THE PRINCE REGENT RIVER**

At the 3 December 2003 meeting of the Kimberley Society, Tim Willing and Kevin Kenneally talked about their research leading to the publication *Under a Regent Moon - A historical account of pioneer pastoralists Joseph Bradshaw and Aeneas Gunn at Marigui Settlement, Prince Regent River, Kimberley, Western Australia, 1891-1892*.

Tim and Kevin both work for the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) and have extensive experience of conducting fieldwork in the Kimberley. Tim is based in Broome and Kevin in Perth. They have an interest in the history of the region, especially when it involves people who have collected plant specimens or made natural history observations during their travels. Their talk was illustrated by numerous slides of the people and places involved in the Marigui saga.

In 1890 Joseph Bradshaw was drawn into the exploration and pastoral development of the Kimberley. He established Marigui Homestead on the remote Prince Regent River. In this endeavour his cousin Aeneas Gunn accompanied him. The pastoral venture failed but Gunn wrote a remarkable memoir 'Pioneering in Northern Australia' in twenty-four articles of graphic prose. It is these long forgotten items that form the basis of the history and background to the Marigui settlement. Gunn was later to be immortalised as "The Maluka" in his wife Jeannie Gunn's Australian classic, *We of the Never-Never*. Bradshaw's name continues to echo through the Kimberley to the present day, due to his discovery of the Aboriginal figurative rock art commonly referred to as "Bradshaw figures".

Prior to his marriage and the Marigui fiasco, Bradshaw had led an overland expedition from Wyndham across the central Kimberley watershed to a point we now know was in Prince Frederick Harbour. Believing himself to be on the Prince Regent River, when he was actually well north on the Roe River, Bradshaw sketched striking tassel-adorned ochre figures observed in some caves. The sketches were later published in his expedition report, making him the first European to document this art style, unique to the north Kimberley region.

Incredibly, it was only in 1997 that Bradshaw's "cave of sketches" was successfully relocated by Kimberley Society members Michael and Wendy Cusack. The name Bradshaw has stuck in rock art literature, although some prefer to call the much-celebrated style by its Aboriginal name, Gwion-Gwion.

The Prince Regent River, in the far north-west Kimberley, remains today as one of Australia's most remote wilderness areas. No roads penetrate its rugged sandstone ranges, and a tide-race with formidable whirlpools restricts access from seaward.

Upstream from the veritable inland sea of St. George Basin, the Prince Regent River runs straight as an arrow into the heart of the Kimberley Plateau, following an ancient fault line. The Prince Regent Nature Reserve, created in 1964, covers some 633,825 hectares, protecting almost the entire river catchment. The Reserve was nominated a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve in 1978, in recognition of its outstanding intact wildlife and pristine values.

The first-known Europeans to gaze on this Regent scene were the botanist, Allan Cunningham, and ship's surgeon, James Hunter, in September 1820 on the survey vessel *Mermaid*, under the command of Lieutenant Phillip Parker King. While the ship was undergoing emergency hull repairs at Careening Bay, the pair had climbed a prominent hill, which they named Mount Knight. From this peak, their eyes were drawn to a glimmering inland tidal basin, as well as a skyline dominated by a spectacular tilted mesa.

In the oral traditions of the Wororra, the local Aboriginal people, this mighty mesa, Ngayangkarnanya, had been carried in the Dreamtime from the north by a vast shoal of fish, sharks and crabs. The colossal weight of the load not only exhausted them, it squashed many flat - creating in the process both rays and shovel-nosed sharks!

Unaware of these ancient legends Phillip Parker King and the crew of HMC *Mermaid* ventured in to explore the basins and navigable lower river, bestowing British names with patriotic zeal. The Prince Regent River was named for the Hanoverian prince, shortly to succeed his incapacitated father, George III, and reign in his own right as King George IV. The 391-metre mesa was named Mount Trafalgar by P P King, in honour of Nelson's great naval victory of 1805. An adjacent lesser peak was named Mount Waterloo, after the Belgian village that witnessed the decisive defeat of Napoleon by the Duke of Wellington's army.

Seventy years later, another sailing ship, gliding in on the flood tide, ghosted into St. George Basin in sweltering November heat. On the deck of the ketch, *The Twins*, three months out from Melbourne, stood hen-coops, dog-kennels, a pair of goats and a dozen expectant humans. Leading the party was Joseph Bradshaw, a Collins Street investor, who one year earlier had secured from the Western Australian Government a one million-acre pastoral lease over the entire Prince Regent basin. Also aboard were Mary Jane Bradshaw, Joseph's musically-gifted wife, her maid, a Chinese cook, a Scottish sea captain and several sailors, hailing from Mediterranean ports.

Bradshaw named their settlement 'Marigui', based on information contained in P P King's published journals. King had visited Kupang (Timor) in 1818 and was advised by one of the fishing fleet leaders that large numbers of Indonesian vessels made

annual visits south to fish for the tropical Asian delicacy bêche-de-mer (also called trepang). King recorded that the name they used for the northern Australian coast was 'Marega'. However, it has now been established that the name Marega was more accurately applied to Arnhem Land and the Gulf of Carpentaria. The name given by the Indonesians to the Kimberley coast was 'Kaju Jawa' or 'Kai Jawa', a name apparently derived from a type of mangrove tree, the bark of which gives the bêche-de-mer a distinctive red colour.

A search for water by Bradshaw's party ensued, leading to the discovery of a spring trickling to the mangrove-fringed shore below Mount Waterloo. Tents were duly pitched under boab trees but Bradshaw's failure to include mosquito nets caused the party much discomfit. Bradshaw supervised the construction of a timber and iron homestead, and laid plans to stock the run with sheep. Observing the scene with a discerning eye for detail, a poet's soul and a larrikin wit was Aeneas Gunn, Joseph's 29-year-old cousin. When the Marigui venture failed, Bradshaw – undeterred as ever – commenced yet another pastoral empire on the Victoria River in the Northern Territory.

In Melbourne, some eight years later, Gunn converted into newspaper prose his vivid recollections of the party's hair-raising northern voyages, philosophical musings and tragi-comic debacles in the service of his hero, Joseph Bradshaw. The modern voyager to the Kimberley coast, aboard a luxury charter vessel, can simply record highlights of the passing scenery on video. This contrasts strikingly with Gunn's era, when a deft literary touch was needed to convey such imagery. Gunn recalled from the deck of *The Twins*:

The run thence [from Cape Londonderry] to the Prince Regent River was along a coast, the scenery of which is to the voyager a long panorama of wild grandeur. Huge scowling cliffs and bluffs of sandstone frown with red-hot angry faces on intruding ship and encroaching sea. The faces are scarred, gashed and wrinkled by the eternal onslaught of the elements. Centuries of ceaseless change have contorted the mountain masses into wild fantastic shapes, or built them into semblances of ruined towered cities, battered fortresses or crumbling amphitheatres. The pushing tides have gnawed deep bays, long reaches, and wide harbours out of their stern adamantine walls or wrenched from them masses of rugged rocky islands.

Day by day we sped past towering islands, clad with rich folds of tropical vegetation from rocky base to flat-topped summit, past tall commanding promontories with rounded basalt bases, down narrow channels fretted through wild lines of ragged rocks, and through noble straits dotted with islands and indented by secret coves

and broad bays. At night the schooner, like a tired bird, would fold its wings and rest in some quiet haven hewn out of rocky hills or lie rolling to her anchor...

Retrieved from obscurity and presented consecutively for the first time since publication in 1899, Gunn's 24 articles were originally headlined 'Pioneering in Northern Australia'. Comprising the heart of the new book, *Under A Regent Moon*, they will be a revelation to all Australians, detailing a forgotten chapter in the history of the Kimberley frontier. Gunn's perspective is without parallel and, at times, frankly controversial in depicting the hostile relationship that soon developed between the would-be settlers and the Wororra warriors, who were defending their country.

Besides editing Gunn's erudite memoirs with extensive footnotes, and locating Gunn's sketches in Sydney's Mitchell Library, Tim and Kevin delved deeply into the State Archives. They uncovered Bradshaw's forgotten pastoral maps and original correspondence, as well as his pressed plant collections preserved in the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne.

In 1988, staff from the Department of Conservation and Land Management, investigating sites for a possible field research station in the Prince Regent Nature Reserve rediscovered the ruins of the Marigui settlement. Encouraged by Chris Done, who was then CALM's Kimberley Regional Manager, a LANDSCOPE Expedition subsequently returned to investigate the area in July 1997. Walking through the dry grassland at the base of Mount Trafalgar, expedition members found a boab tree with the inscription "A J GUNN" carved into the trunk. Kevin and Tim revisited the site again in 2003 on another LANDSCOPE Expedition and a more detailed survey was made of the settlement site. A number of artefacts recovered were presented to the Western Australian Museum.

The strange twist of fate that led to Aeneas Gunn becoming known to generations of Australians as "The Maluka" warrants a comment. After a stint as a librarian in Prahran, Victoria, Gunn had married a Melbourne teacher, Jeannie Taylor, in 1901. The couple swiftly relocated to the Northern Territory, after Aeneas accepted a position as manager of Elsey Station. Malarial dysentery sent him to an early grave in 1903, at the age of 41. Jeannie returned to Melbourne, never to re-marry. She achieved international acclaim as a writer of works that included *We of the Never-Never*, published in 1908.

It remains a poignant irony that Gunn's own fine writing has been allowed to languish in obscurity for over a century – until now.