

## **JOURNEY OF A MASTER PEARLER, 1886–1942**

**John E de B Norman & Verity Norman (2 August 2006)**

The two speakers were welcomed by the President of the Kimberley Society, Mike Donaldson. The meeting was well attended and distinguished guests included Rev'd Fathers Kevin McKelson SAC, AM, LL.D, and Michael MacMahon SAC, both of whom have an enviable experience of the Kimberley its history, polyethnicity and languages. There was Anthony Male, a childhood friend whose father ran *Roebuck Plains* station, Mrs Margret Bullock whose father ran *deGrey* in the old days, and her daughters Mary Charnley and Jennifer Anthony, who grew up on *Kooyna* with brother John represented by Cathy Rowe. Mr JL Stewart's great-granddaughter, Trina Glover, an experienced teacher, took charge of the audiovisual presentation with her characteristic élan. Aviation was represented by a 95 year young Frank Colquhoun who was in Broome when Kingsford-Smith christened *Café Royale*.

Robert Hawkes, serving in the Australian Army, had the distinction of mining the jetty, courthouse, airstrip and numerous pearling luggers.

Dr Graham Blick was represented by his grandson, also Graham Blick, and Dr David Paton by his granddaughters, Mesdames Margaret Hector and Jane-Anne Williams with her daughter, Mrs Fiona Weston. Mrs Hector in turn posed pertinent questions about the life of those early doctors, and in particular *women's business*. Whilst there is much on the record of the life of Dr (later Professor) Tadashi Suzuki, it is contained in the Japanese language and the *Japanese Journal of Paediatrics*. He was the first Broome doctor to establish a medical journal.

Allan Richardson, son of William, was encouraged to hear that his uncle, Hugh (pearler of Moss & Richardson), was a fine man and highly regarded in the community.

Kim Thorson, a military historian whose kinsman Andy Stewart, late of the 10th Australian Light Horse Regiment and Mrs Nerina Coopes, daughter of Lt. Pompey Gull MC, also a Broome pearler, who survived the charge at The Nek and rode with the Anzac Mounted Division on the march to Damascus was in the audience; further and vital links with the past.

The first speaker adverted to the Royal Commission on the *Condition of the Natives* (1905) and this report from the Royal Commissioner, Dr Walter Roth, was reported *verbatim*. The evidence was adduced from divers members of the community including a number of police, pastoralists, priests and pearlers. Dr Roth noted "*The boats' crew suffer a good deal from venereal disease and the loss of their labour is severely felt by the pearlers* [812-3]." Much has been made of the incidence of

*loathsome disease* and the reality was that mariners the world over had a higher incidence and for all the usual reasons.

The earlier report by Resident Magistrate, Michael Scales Warton (1901-1902) whilst less substantial and in respect to quantity but not quality, reflected on the Nor'West pearling industry at the turn of the century. He referred to "*these fat years*" and whilst the zenithal of "*a ton-a-month*" was not often achieved, in its heyday pearling brought prosperity, employment and much-needed revenue for the colony. Most importantly it established a European bridgehead in the north of the state and pearling was the engine of the town's economy.

In 1901 sixty firms or individuals, mostly resident in Broome, controlling twenty-three schooners and 177 luggers, employed 1358 crew at sea or on the shore stations.

The exploitation of Aboriginal Australians on the boats had been proscribed by earlier legislation and it was only in Thursday Island that they continued to be exploited, albeit not by European pearlers but by Japanese who were dummieing boats.

Much has been written about the early days and perhaps some more recent aspects of scholarly and popular literature has tended to ignore James Battye. A trio of Royal Commissioners within a short period of 15 years provided a wealth of material in regard to pearling, taken largely on oath. In regard to the early Western Australian settlers, pioneers, pastoralists and pearlers it is to be hoped that historians will be further encouraged to present a disinterested and even handed account.

With this introduction and with support of a Powerpoint presentation the first speaker provided a brief overview of the nascent pearling industry noting, *inter alia*, that the title of the lecture was an understatement and there were 5 pearling masters in the family, Hugh Norman and his brothers George and Tom, their sister Emily who was not a pearler and William Robison, and subsequently in 1910 Hugh Norman's son Ted, the speaker's father.

Robison & Norman started in a small way. William Robison was, like Fleeming Jenkin an engineer, and part of the Scottish diaspora. He first became interested in pearling in the early 1880s and along with Captain William Kirkpatrick, a master mariner, sent a few boats and a schooner to the Torres Strait shelling grounds. In May 1886 Hugh Norman [my grandfather] had been far from well, with a chronic cough and indigestion, and his doctors gave the usual prescription, not uncommon in those days, to "*take a long sea voyage.*"

Ernestine Hill was my mother's friend and a frequent visitor and she described my grandfather, Hugh Norman, as "A quiet little man with the King Edward beard, who looks like a Presbyterian church elder, and is, has been pearling here among the rabble of the world's end since 1887. The rack and ruin of romance, as such, have strangely passed him by, but his name will be written in historic records, and on three of H.D. Norman's schooners the *Mist*, the *Mina* and the *Ena*, a Jew, a Norwegian, and a Hindu from Allahabad were done to death in three of the goriest pearl murders of the coast."

In truth Mark Liebgliid, a dealer in jewels, diamonds and the odd snide pearl, sustained a fatal head injury on *Mist*, but Dr Graham Blick described his postmortem findings of water-logged lungs and froth in the air passages and opined death was due drowning.

Christian Kanstrup Christiansen was not a Norseman, but a Dane, and he was Hugh Norman's fleet captain. Whilst schooner *Mina* was anchored in Beagle Bay, he was attacked by one of the crew, sustaining a compound fracture of the skull. He died some weeks later in Perth of a cerebral abscess.

A surgeon in Brunei has opined that Dollah bin Kassim, murdered on schooner *Ena*, may very likely have been a convert to Islam, albeit from Allahabad. The skeletal remains uncovered by a cyclonic wind in the tiny cemetery adjacent Norman's lugger camp at Bulla Bullaman Creek in Beagle Bay might have been his. They might as easily have been those of George Norman's diver, Benacio Eradora, disembowelled on his lugger *Heath*. The Rev'd Fathers at Beagle Bay, originally Trappist and subsequently Pallottine, would have officiated at non-Christian burials in this remote outpost of Empire. Rev'd Father Michael McMahon a priest in Broome for nearly 25 years confirmed this. There were other episodes of mayhem and mutiny on the pearling fleets in those early days, to be expanded and illustrated from primary sources in the forthcoming publication.

Contemporaneous records show that the Robison & Norman fleet of thirty boats and two schooners was operated by over 250 crew, and the majority living at Beagle Bay. Upwards of fifty per cent were Muslim, and Hugh Norman recognising their spiritual need, set aside a prayer area. Many pearlers other than our family revictualled in the bay, collecting firewood and water and to the chagrin of the Mission Fathers and Hugh Norman *et al*, cohabiting with Aboriginal women, whose men exchanged their favours for flour, sugar and tobacco.

William Robison and Captain Kirkpatrick offered Hugh Norman a job in 1886 and a partnership was accepted, and he became a shareholder in the 94-ton schooner

*Mist*. The schooner was my grandfather's "verandah" from 1887 – 1902, and he lived on board, as did many of the early masters. The original owners were Robison, Norman and Kirkpatrick, and whilst fiction has *Mist* owned by another pearler, be reassured that from a few months after it being launched on the Clarence River, it was owned by Robison and Norman until the day it was beached in 1902 and converted to a shell store.

Their little fleet of four 38-foot lug-sail rigged double-ended boats painted white sailed from Sydney to Thursday Island. They operated there for a few months and then heard the news of the rich grounds on the northwest coast. A number of places were tried for shell and they made for Bonaparte Gulf, described by my father as "uninviting," and thence to Cape Londonderry, Napier Broome and Vansittart Bays, thence down near the Osborne Islands (made famous by the Paspaley Pearling Company), and eventually entered King Sound to careen *Mist* and the four boats, scrape bottoms and give a thorough overhaul before the commencement of the new season. That was in 1887 in Cygnet Bay on the western shore of King Sound, near where William Dampier careened *Cygnet* in 1688.

When schooner *Mist* arrived in Roebuck Bay the only sign of habitation was a rude tin shed, encircled by chain, used for stores landed on the beach for one of the inland cattle stations. Within a few years a town was established and grew and Wishart's built the Mangrove Point Jetty in 1898 to serve both the pearling and cattle industries.

Cossack was the economic centre of the pearling industry in the 1880s and the pearlery thought little of sailing down to Cossack to purchase stores, take on water and maybe engage and discharge crew. They would stage a rendezvous at sea with a ship trading between Fremantle and Singapore. After business was completed in Cossack, schooner *Mist* rejoined the fleet. In 1888 24 tons of shell were fished from the King Sound grounds, and twice that in 1889. At the end of the season in December 1889 Hugh Norman realised he must have somewhere more convenient and protected for the lay-up and decided on Tapper's Inlet, but the following year set up in Bulla Bullaman Creek, Beagle Bay, which proved most suitable for a large fleet, and continues to this day with the Arrow Pearling Company.

Camp buildings were erected over the next few years and by 1900 the fleet had grown to 14 boats and they ordered schooner *Ena* which was built at Fords' yard in Berry Bay Sydney and she was sailed north about to Broome by Captain Henry Lee. Between 1890-1900 the firm built double-ended boats at Bulla Bullaman Creek, and the Japanese shipwrights completed one or two boats every year, and by 1912 they had increased the fleet to 28. Over the next few years Hugh Norman started a timberyard, and continued to import ships' chandlery, diving equipment, ropes and

canvas and other requirements and these also transhipped via Singapore. The Broome Jetty and the horse-drawn tram could not come soon enough. The tram was replaced in 1912 by a small steam train with an open carriage for passengers and flat cars for crew and freight. In 1942 it served as a hearse after the air raid and Robert Hawkes, here this evening, then a young soldier, recalls that he and six others mined the jetty with high explosive and drums of petrol within days of the raid. By late 1942 it was somewhat belatedly fortified.

My father, writing to his nephew Commodore Neil Boase in 1976:

*"From time to time further additions have been made to the fleet, until at present it numbers 28 operating pearling boats and two schooners, one of which is continually in company with the boats on the pearling ground, whilst the other plys continually to the fleet with stores, wood and water, returning to Broome with shell. This fleet comprises the largest owned by any one business. In the year 1900 Robison and Norman opened a store at Broome, which has grown year by year, until at present it occupies its present proud position. In addition to a full stock of all requirements incidental to the pearling trade. .... The Company acts as agents for many pearlers in a small way [one and two boat admirals] – packs and ships their shell to London. They are also large purchasers of M.O.P. shell, and, with their own produce, handle about one quarter of the total export of M.O.P. shell of Western Australia."*

My grandfather valued greatly the cordial relationship with the Reverend Fathers and the Sisters of St John of God. They provided fresh vegetables and meat, and the lugger camp and our shipwrights repaired their mission schooner and its sails, provided fish and transport to Broome if the mission schooner was not available, and also repaired the boats of other small pearlers. It was not uncommon to see on a Sunday 100 or more boats in Beagle Bay.

It was quite a fleet with *Ena*, the mother ship and floating station, and *Mina*, acting as tender, running between the fleet and Broome with water and stores on the outward run and taking pearlshell on the home run, and not solely for themselves.

The floating and shore stations of pearling and trucking system of victualling were described by the speaker, and the masters recognised the "floating station" system was superior to the shore station. *Ena* carried two 20-foot motor launches and clerks took the launches around the boats collecting shell, packed into bags. A wet and miserable job, according to Ted Norman, Lou Goldie, Jack Howe *et al.* The shell bags or baskets were stacked on *Ena's* deck and at 6 am the following morning all shells were opened by clerks. Captain and Mate then cleaned, weighed by individual boat's take, then packed shell in cases marked "*ready for export*".

These cases were taken by *Mina* to Broome and landed at Broome or Streeters Jetty. Bagged shell was also landed directly from lugger to dinghy and onto the shore at the back of the Dampier Terrace shell shed and it was heavy work lifting these [300 lb] bags onto the beaches, as the photograph showed.

By 1912 there were over 350 boats working out of Broome, but by 1915 this was reduced by about 50%. The white shell openers, masters, mates, clerks, divers and spare divers numbered 250 prior to the Great War, but the majority enlisted at the outbreak of hostilities, and the stealing of shell and pearls increased greatly.

The arrival of the fortnightly Singapore ship was a social occasion in the isolated Nor'West and the town turned out. The cargo south would include passengers and those on business, returning civil servants, children *en route* to school, those undergoing surgery in Perth and even men destined for trial in Perth or the final journey to Fremantle Gaol and the short early morning walk. Justice in those days was Biblical, rarely protracted.

The scholarship of the late Professor Frederick Goldie, Syracuse University NY, was strongly endorsed to the audience. He was Broome born and commenced his education, like the first speaker, at the local school.

Professor HD Turner (University of Tokyo) reminded the speakers that 18th century Japanese woodcuts showed the use of women abalone divers. The photograph used this evening was from the Kurabyashi Archive (1950), and shows women divers were employed in large numbers. In the Torres Strait in the 19th century South Sea Islanders described as bare pelt divers were employed. The use of Aboriginal women divers was much criticised and was proscribed in the closing years of the 19th century. The stories of "Black Ivory" recounted to Ernestine Hill by the redoubtable Mrs Hilliard were, according to the late HV Howe, an early pearler, grossly exaggerated, and this opinion was widely shared.

The dressing of the apparatus diver was illustrated and Mr Hiroshi Hamaguchi, a successful post war pearling master, identified the various pieces of the apparatus, commencing with the Dreadnought drawers (long stockings) and the blanket shoulder padding. The diver was shown wearing VP Heinke twill dress with 18 lb boots with brass toes, leadened soles and heavy straps. The term hardhat was never used prior to 1942, and was always referred to as helmet and corselet.

Dr Joanna Sassoon has pointed out that the admirable EL Mitchell image used so frequently in earlier publications was taken aboard Jackie Pryor's lugger, a mile or so out of Broome. The shell opener, attired in immaculate whites was smoking his Meerschaum and opening shells on an equally spotless deck with the piscine neck

of the shell bag at full gape. A laughing Japanese diver can just be seen in the background. This was not the reality, and that was shown in the 1896 image from John Oxley Library, and the desultory nature of pearling was well illustrated – shell opening one day and schooner mate, diver's tender or cook the next.

There were many successful white divers in Torres Strait, as in the Nor'West, and the suggestion that Europeans were not physiologically capable of diving was wrong. The first speaker noted that the later white divers failed for a number of reasons. The early white pearlers had lived for years in the Torres Strait and Nor'West, often the only European on the boat but speaking the local *lingua franca*, familiar with the customs, the harsh equatorial climate and the food. Logbooks extant from this period describe the day to day activities of successful white divers who made their fortune and elected to demit while they still had their health. The later white divers of Broome, although highly trained Royal Navy divers, senior sailors in the Royal Navy, used to warship diet and serving under King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions, regular medicals, discipline and a common language were not accustomed to working under the harsh and cramped conditions on the pearling grounds. They lacked experience of pearling and their presence was resented by other members of the crew. A detailed account was written by John Bailey, and Rod Dickson has offered another theory.

Hugh Norman wrote to his Member of Parliament on 22nd June 1912:

*“White Divers. You no doubt heard of the death of Messrs Moss & Richardsons man, Webber. Divers paralysis took him off. It is a very sad case indeed. He had an experienced white tender who came out with him. No one to blame except the unfortunate man who lost his life. The Diver was working in about 19 fathoms of water remaining down 1 hour. He signalled his Tender that he was about to ascend. When he ascended to the 10 fathom stage his tender signalled him “stage”. The reply came haul up. He then reached the next stage & his tender again signalled “stage,” but again received the reply haul up; which was complied with. When the diver reached deck, he gave orders to undress, which was being done, when he fell back unconscious. When he recovered consciousness his tender wished him to be put down again for decompression, but he absolutely refused remarking that he would blow himself up from the bottom. This can be done of course by closing the valves. After the refusal to be put down again, he became unconscious for the second time and never rallied.*

*The funeral of the unfortunate man was attended by nearly every white man in Broome. The sad occurrence cast quite a gloom over the Town. I venture to say that the most promising man of the whole importation of White Divers has lost his life. I candidly assert, although we are anxious to comply with the Federal*

*Governments wishes & have white Divers & Tenders, "this is no white mans employment." Robison & Norman Ltd, our company imported two Divers & one Tender. They have been trying with very poor results. They do not like the work, but do the pay £13 per month & Keep. One of them remarked to Capt Harrison our skipper, "Would you work if there was no occasion" or words to that effect. The boat that they are working is costing our company about £60 per month, with little or no result." Contrary to some popular opinion, grandfather and his contemporaries wanted the white divers to succeed for commercial reasons. Diving was a dangerous occupation with a mortality and morbidity and Gracey & Spargo's important paper identified the causes of death in Broome between 1883 and 1994, although those deaths due the air raid of 3rd March 1942 were not entered on the Broome register.*

*"There were 1041 deaths recorded on the Broome register from 1896 to 1915, of which 94 per cent were males and 6 per cent were females. No aboriginal deaths were recorded in the first five years of the register and only 45 (4.6 per cent) of the deaths from 1896 to 1915 involved Aborigines. Three-quarters of the deaths recorded were of persons aged 20 to 40 years. Two-hundred-and-twenty-eight deaths (23 per cent) were attributed to drowning, 373 (38 per cent) to heart disease, 241 (25 per cent) to infections and 47 (5 per cent) to suicides or homicides. .... From 1896 to 1910 there were 147 deaths from drowning, and 307 others (41 per cent) were attributed to ill-defined heart disease of disorders, almost always after diving incidents. Most of these deaths occurred in young Asian males who had recently arrived in Broome, often only days before their deaths."*

Some pearlers and divers continued to ignore the risks, and even when the physiological basis of decompression illness was understood, and the Admiralty tables were widely available, they too were ignored. The claim that the boat always returned to Broome for the burial is not correct. In the tropics it would have been impractical and there was an unknown number of coastal, island and deep sea burials.

The lessons learned nearly a century ago at the principal Royal Naval School of Diving, HMS *Excellent*, Portsmouth continue to be relearned by both professional and recreational divers the world over, from the Barrier Reef to Sharm-el-Sheikh. The first speaker concluded with remarks on the racial riot of 1920/21 and the air raid of 1942, and chapters describing both are based on original material and photographs from men and women who were in Broome at that time.

The second speaker, Verity Norman, introduced the audience to her mother-in-law Catherine Mary Norman (née Nicholson), known as Rene, by way of painting a



picture of Broome as she found it in 1925 as the newly married wife of Edgar de Burgh Norman, known as Ted.

Thanks to a large family archive and her experiences related over thirty years, a clearer understanding of the lives of pioneer women in the Kimberley has been chronicled. Handwritten notes and the oral histories gleaned by Mrs Jennifer Vickers and Ms Trina Glover, the JS Battye Library, the Girl Guides Association, and conversations with her Broome friends gave the opportunity to relate the following:

I would like to take you back to her arrival at the Mangrove Point Jetty in 1925 aboard the *Centaur*, to describe an isolated small town and a life quite different to the one she knew in Perth. At that time the town was divided, with a commercial area including a distinct Asian quarter, known then as Japtown, and an outlying residential area. A tramline ran from the Mangrove Point jetty to end at Streeter's jetty, circling the commercial area and passing the shell sheds nearest the shoreline along Dampier Terrace.

Their home on the corner of Louis and Walcott Streets had been built for a solicitor and sometime Mayor, Walter Clark Hall. There was a large garden with room for a goat, chickens and a vegetable plot, thanks to Ted's tutoring by Brother Augustine Sixt who grew vegetables at the Beagle Bay Mission. A photograph shows Rene at the front of the house standing near a square water tank on a high platform. The hard artesian water was filtered through beach sand, shell grit and charcoal in an effort to make it a little softer for laundry and bathing. Unique photographs of the interior of the house clearly show the nature of the furnishings, not packing case furniture as has been frequently described, but made by a Perth cabinetmaker.

Rene was the proud owner of the New Perfection "Blue Flame" kerosene stove making the kitchen a little, but not much, cooler than with the old wood stove. Housekeeping was a challenge, and it was a constant struggle to keep food fresh in this climate. Without electricity the icebox needed replenishing twice a day, and the Coolgardie safe was merely a stopgap. There was fresh fish aplenty brought to the door on an oar, also oysters were sold for a shilling a mug and live mud crabs with claws pinioned, a delicacy. Meat safe legs stood in tins filled with kerosene and salt to keep ants at bay. Carbide lamps were needed in the house after dark, and one carried a lantern to light the way if visiting friends. The plumber supplied the Jason's wood chip heater in the bathroom, and a large bath with standard Broome plumbing, as succinctly described by Mrs Rosemary Hemphill (née Goldie).

A photograph showing Mrs Sophie McKenzie, who was with the Normans for 16 years, and her sons, William and Frank, with whom John grew up until 1942 was

shown, with the permission of the family. The two women, Rene and Sophie, shared the domestic duties. The ironing was a seemingly endless chore, with Mrs Potts' irons with removable handles heated on the wooden stove, quite a feat in the dusty climate.

There were many hardships and uncertainties for the women and families of the pearlers, long separations and the many dangers of a maritime industry. The numbers of small graves to be found in the Broome cemetery reflect the high infant and maternal mortality rates and the difficulties and hazards of childbirth in that climate at the time. The importance of the "mantle of safety" provided by the Royal Flying Doctor Service continues today, and Jennifer Vickers has written a sensitive chapter on the years that Dr and Mrs Allan Vickers lived in the Nor'West.

This was a précis, a brief condensation of material from a richly illustrated chapter and there was not time to touch on the lives of other women of the Kimberley or the many women who held pearling licences in the latter years of the 19th century and the first 20 years of the 20th century, and that is for another day.

Appreciation and thanks are due Dr Catherine Clement for her sensitive editing of the report. The speakers would encourage the members of the audience and those interested in the subject to contact them at PO Box 3633 Broome WA 6725, Australia; telephone: 61 8 9192 1418; fax: 61 8 9192 1540; email [here](#)

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