

Discovery & Exploration of the Adelaide River

JL Stokes Discoveries in Australia Vol 1 Pt 6 of 8

CLARENCE STRAIT.

Passing the latter, we crossed over to the opposite eastern entrance point of Clarence Strait, Cape Hotham, discovering on our way thither a reef nearly awash, about two miles in extent, bearing South 25 degrees West fifteen miles from Cape Keith, and North 10 degrees East fourteen miles from Cape Hotham. The deepest water we found while crossing was 22 fathoms, five miles north of the latter, the general depth being 13 and 15 fathoms. The wind failing in the afternoon, it was evening when we reached our anchorage in nine fathoms, Cape Hotham bearing South 43 West, two miles and a half, and close to the edge of a large shoal which we subsequently found to extend a mile and a half north, and six miles east from the Cape. Here we found the tides set West by South and East-North-East from half a knot to two knots, the westerly stream beginning nearly three hours after high-water, a peculiarity generally occurring in straits.

July 26.

After one of those soft and lovely evenings so common to this part of Australia, with a gentle breeze and cloudless sky, we were surprised to find that the morning opened dreary and gloomy. There was a very fresh South-South-East wind with heavy masses of clouds; the breeze continued until noon, when as usual it subsided. We moved the ship a few miles down the opening in the south side of the strait, and in the afternoon a party went on shore near Cape Hotham. We found the country very poor and sandy, and elevated about fifteen feet above high-water mark. Despite this, the white gum-trees appear to thrive, growing in great abundance, about thirty or forty feet high; there were also others of a different kind, besides a few palms. The rocks were red sand and ironstone blended together. In some places I noticed it had the same glazed and vitrified appearance, as before remarked by me at King's Sound, on the North-West coast.

Mr. Bynoe, who was of the party, added to his collection of birds, a kingfisher, and a specimen of a glossy species about the size and colour of an English blackbird; others were seen and killed, but all common to other parts; the most rare of the latter was the large cream-coloured pigeon I have alluded to, some few pages back.

NATIVE COMPANION.

The white ibis with a black neck, plentiful in King's Sound, and a large bird, a species of crane, were also seen. The latter was of a French grey hue, with the exception of the head, which was black and of the shape of a bittern, commonly known among the colonists by the name of native companion.

It is difficult to imagine how this name could have originated, as there is no instance of the natives making a pet of anything, except the wild dog of the country, and of that only, it is probable, from its utility in procuring them food. On visiting this place a few days afterwards, to repeat the observations for the errors of the chronometers, we saw a few natives, but they avoided an interview, disappearing when we landed. They made the same motions with their arms, throwing them open, and bowing as the natives in King's Sound did. The few huts I fell in with, reminded me of one I had seen near the North-West part of King's Sound, a representation of which will be found in the portion of the work descriptive of that locality.

Those on Cape Hotham, to enter more into particulars, did not exceed five feet in height, nor were they so substantially built; they were, however, well thatched with the same kind of coarse grass. The entrances were carefully closed, except in one instance, when the aperture was so small that it was with difficulty I could crawl in; when I had entered there was nothing to gratify my curiosity.

NATIVE CLOTHING.

Hanging on trees round these habitations, were specimens of an article of clothing, never before seen among the Aborigines of Australia, for which reason I have been induced to give the woodcut of one.* It is a kind of covering for the shoulders, a species of cape, made from coarse grass.

(*Footnote. I have since heard from Mr. Earl, that the women in the South-East part of Van Diemen's Gulf, occasionally wear a covering round their waist, somewhat similar to the representation given.)

Baskets were also left hanging on the trees, bespeaking the honesty of the inhabitants of this part of the country.

The land near the huts was turned up in search of roots, and close by were some large clubs. The thermometer fell in the night to 67 degrees, producing the novel though pleasant sensation of cold.

July 27.

Although apparently we could trace the land, near the head of the opening or bay, still the great set of tide in that direction, left hopes of its being the mouth of a river. We have already alluded to the difficulty of detecting the mouth of Australian streams, and the doubts thus engendered occasioned the greater anxiety.

Impatient to learn the truth, Mr. Fitzmaurice was despatched to examine the head of the bay, whilst the ship was moved towards it, anchoring again one mile North-West from a very remarkable patch of low red cliffs (which from startling circumstances, hereafter to be related, were called Escape Cliffs) and only two cables length distant from the coral ledge, by which this and the shores around were fronted.

VISIT THE SHORE.

Here another party visited the shore, and those whose occupation did not render their presence necessary near the water, strolled into the country, penetrating about four or five miles inland, but they were rewarded by the sight of no novelty, or even variety in the scenery, beyond what was presented to our view on the visit to Cape Hotham, which it will readily be allowed was little enough. Indeed it will in general be found, that in Australia, a change of formation is necessary to produce any of the scenery, which otherwise exhibits a most monotonous sameness.

A coarse kind of ironstone gravel was (if I may use the term) scattered over the face of the country; some of it had a glazed appearance on the surface, being hollow within, and about the size of a musket ball. Properly speaking they are composed of a ferruginous sandstone, but they have been already more fully alluded to when first met with at Point Cunningham, near King's Sound, on the North-West coast. The general formation is the same as at Cape Hotham, itself almost identical with the rocks at Port Essington. A few traces of small kangaroos were seen; but not a bird or any other living thing two miles from the beach. This peculiarity the reader will remember was also noticed in the neighbourhood of King's Sound.

DISCOVERY OF ADELAIDE RIVER.

On returning to the ship we found that Mr. Fitzmaurice had arrived, bringing the expected, and very gratifying intelligence, that a large river with two branches, running South-East and South, with a depth of four fathoms, emptied itself into the head of the bay. The joy a discovery of this nature imparts to the explorer, when examining a country so proverbially destitute of rivers as Australia, is much more easily imagined than described. It formed a species of oasis amid the ordinary routine of surveying, rousing our energies, and giving universal delight. The castle-builders were immediately at work, with expectations beyond the pale of reason.

EXPLORING PARTY.

An exploring party, however, was at once formed, consisting of Captain Wickham, Lieutenant Emery, and Mr. Helpman, who--the next day being Sunday--did not leave before the morning of the 29th, with two boats and four days' provisions.

Many were the anxious and envious looks bestowed on the party as they left the ship on the deeply interesting service of exploring the new river. So strong and native is man's desire for the unknown, that his feelings are never more tried than when on the brink of a discovery,

while those who are in presence of the novelty, and cannot enjoy the satisfaction of tasting that pleasure, must ever experience somewhat acute emotions of regret.

There was no difficulty in finding a name for a river which fell into Clarence Strait; it was at once, therefore, honoured with that of Adelaide, after her most gracious Majesty the Queen Dowager. The bay that receives its waters was called after Vice-Admiral Sir Charles Adam. The remaining part of the south side of Clarence Strait, together with the islands in the western entrance of it, gave ample, though not such interesting employment as the exploration of the Adelaide, to those who were left behind. Several unsuccessful hauls were made with the seine, fish in Adam Bay being very scarce.

NATIVE FAMILY.

Near Escape Cliffs I met a small family of natives, consisting of an elderly man, his wife, and four children; by degrees, advancing alone, I contrived to get near enough to make the woman a present of a handkerchief, in return for which she gave me a large leaf of the cabbage palm, that was slung across her back. I at length drew all the family around me, the eldest child, a youth of about 15, being the most timid. He had a small piece of wood two feet long, sticking through the cartilage of his nose. His teeth and those of the other children were quite perfect, but in the father and mother two of the upper front ones were gone, as we before noticed was the case with the natives at Port Essington, where this ceremony is performed after marriage. The hair of these people was neither curly nor straight, but what I have before called crisp, being of that wavy nature sometimes noticed in Europeans.

They had with them three small-sized dogs of a light brown colour, of which they appeared very fond, and I could not induce them to part with them.

The old man's spear was not barbed, and the womera or throwing stick of the same long narrow shape as at Port Essington. The woman had also the same bottle-shaped basket slung over her neck, as before remarked, and containing white and red earths for painting their bodies.

CURIOSITY AND FEAR.

These people exhibited more curiosity than I had before noticed in the Aborigines, as I was able to induce them to visit the whaleboat that was on shore close by. Here, as in other places, the size of the oars first astonished them, and next the largeness of the boat itself. The exclamations of surprise given vent to by the old man as he gazed on the workmanship of his civilized brethren, were amusing; suddenly a loud shout would burst from his lips, and then a low whistle. I watched the rapid change of countenance in this wild savage with interest; all his motions were full of matter for observation. The mixed curiosity and

dread depicted in his dusky face, the feeling of secret alarm at this first rencontre with a white man intruding in his native wilds, which he must have experienced, added much to the zest of the scene. I, however, at length almost persuaded the old man to accompany me on board; he even put one foot in the boat for the purpose, when seeing the depth of the interior, he recoiled with a slight shudder, as if from immersion in cold water. He was now overwhelmed by the woman and elder child with entreaties not to take such a rash step, and their rude eloquence succeeded.

It was amusing to see the struggle between fear and curiosity plainly depicted in the man's face, as he stood with one foot on the boat, and the other on the shore, hearkening but too credulously to the picture of danger, forcibly drawn by his friends, while curiosity, with almost equal strength, was urging him to dare the perils of the white man's boat.

A desire to be better acquainted with the strangers who had come to the shores of his native land in a large bird--such being their strange idea of a ship, the sails forming the wings--no doubt materially influenced him; but the eloquence of his relatives prevailed over all; and this interesting interview terminated by our leaving the shore without our sable friend, who, however, promised to visit the ship in an old bark canoe, about 20 feet long, that was lying on the beach near at hand. This promise was faithfully kept, for the same evening, a canoe was seen paddling off, containing two young natives in addition to the old man. They stopped at some distance from the ship, moving round to view her on all sides.

ATTEMPT TO ENTICE NATIVES ON BOARD.

Fearing at last that their courage had failed, and that they would not come on board, the dinghy, our smallest boat, was sent towards them, there being only a boy besides myself in it.

I had hoped that thus they would not be frightened, but they instantly began to move towards the shore, and it required some manoeuvring to get near them; succeeding at length, however, I found my acquaintance of the morning anxious to go to the ship, a measure the other two did not at all approve of, as they kept edging away towards the land, whilst I gave the old man the presents I had brought him. At one time the dinghy got between the canoe and the shore, when instantly a gleam of terror flashed across the faces of the young men. One of them was a large square-headed fellow of ferocious aspect, whose countenance was lit up by a look of fierce revenge, as the canoe made towards the land, after I had ceased my endeavours to entice them on board.

Whatever these people may have imagined to be our motive in wishing them to visit the ship, I little thought that my pressing them would have so nearly led to fatal results. I shall proceed to explain this remark by relating the startling circumstances from which Escape Cliffs received their name.

NARROW ESCAPE OF MR. FITZMAURICE.

A few days after my interview in the dinghy with the natives, Mr. Fitzmaurice went ashore to compare the compasses. From the quantity of iron contained in the rocks, it was necessary to select a spot free from their influence. A sandy beach at the foot of Escape Cliffs was accordingly chosen. The observations had been commenced, and were about half completed, when on the summit of the cliffs, which rose about twenty feet above their heads, suddenly appeared a large party of natives with poised and quivering spears, as if about immediately to deliver them. Stamping on the ground, and shaking their heads to and fro, they threw out their long shaggy locks in a circle, whilst their glaring eyes flashed with fury as they champed and spit out the ends of their long beards.* They were evidently in earnest, and bent on mischief.

(*Footnote. A custom with Australian natives when in a state of violent excitement.)

DANCING FOR LIFE.

It was, therefore, not a little surprising to behold this paroxysm of rage evaporate before the happy presence of mind displayed by Mr. Fitzmaurice, in immediately beginning to dance and shout, though in momentary expectation of being pierced by a dozen spears. In this he was imitated by Mr. Keys, who was assisting in the observations, and who at the moment was a little distance off, and might have escaped. Without, however, thinking of himself, he very nobly joined his companion in amusing the natives; and they succeeded in diverting them from their evident evil designs, until a boat landing in a bay near drew off their attention. The foremost of this party was recognised to be the ill-looking fellow, who left me in the canoe with a revengeful scowl upon his face.

Messrs. Fitzmaurice and Keys had firearms lying on the ground within reach of their hands; the instant, however, they ceased dancing, and attempted to touch them, a dozen spears were pointed at their breasts. Their lives hung upon a thread, and their escape must be regarded as truly wonderful, and only to be attributed to the happy readiness with which they adapted themselves to the perils of their situation. This was the last we saw of the natives in Adam Bay, and the meeting is likely to be long remembered by some, and not without pleasant recollections; for although, at the time, it was justly looked upon as a very serious affair, it afterwards proved a great source of mirth. No one could recall to mind, without laughing, the ludicrous figure necessarily cut by our shipmates, when to amuse the natives, they figured on the light fantastic toe; and the readers, who look at the plate representing this really serious affair,* will behold two men literally dancing for their lives.

(*Footnote. See above.)

RETURN OF THE BOATS.

August 2.

This morning the boats returned; they had gone up the Adelaide in a general southerly direction, nearly 80 miles: the windings of the river, which were very great in some places, forming the shape of the letter S. It became at this distance very narrow, and was divided into two branches, one taking a southerly direction, the other an easterly; the latter was too narrow for the boat's oars, while the former was blocked up by fallen trees lying across it. As in addition to the difficulties just mentioned, only one day's provision remained in the boats, the further exploration of the Adelaide was necessarily, though reluctantly, abandoned.

{Extent of exploration may be 12°55'1.28"S - 131°15'34.37"E at the junction as described above – a mile below the Marrakai Road crossing and above the stretch that is still called the 'S' bends some 50 miles by crow from the mouth – 10 miles south of Goat Island.}

BANKS OF THE ADELAIDE.

For thirty miles of the upper part of the river the water was fresh; while the banks, excepting near the point of separation, were low, being not more than five feet above the present level of the river, a circumstance very favourable for irrigation, and the cultivation of rice. Fifteen miles from the mouth they were fringed by the growth of mangroves; and higher up many of the points were thickly wooded, while on either side stretched a vast extent of prairie country, dotted here and there with islands of timber, which served to break the native monotony of the scene. Somewhat less than halfway up, rose on both banks a thick jungle of bamboo, which, in places where the water was always fresh, attained the gigantic height of from 60 to 80 feet. Between 20 and 70 miles from the mouth the soil is a good light-coloured mould; above this, commencing where the bank of the river is marked by a coarse red gritty sandstone projection, the aspect of the country changes from that of low plains to a slightly wooded and gently undulating surface, in some places stony. This character continued to the furthest point reached in the boats, in latitude 12 degrees 57 minutes South, and longitude 131 degrees 19 minutes East.

When they had penetrated thus far into the new lands of Australia, the explorers returned, having experienced those sensations of delightful excitement, to which we have before alluded, and which naturally called forth strong emotions of regret in those who were denied a participation in the feverish enjoyment of discovery.

From the highest tree at Captain Wickham's furthest point, the appearance of the country was, as far as the eye could reach, one wearisome level, broken to the southward, at a distance of ten miles, by a rocky mound about 150 feet high.

UPPER PART OF THE RIVER.

The river, which for some distance had not been fifty yards wide, with a rocky bed in places, and banks from six to twenty feet high, was subject at this point to a tidal change of level of about three feet, but there was no perceptible stream, and the water which a few miles lower down had been muddy, was here quite clear. Small bamboos and other drift were observed in the branches of the trees eight or ten feet above the water, showing the height which the river attains at some seasons of the year. By the hollows on many of the plains, water appeared to have lain some time, and doubtless parts of this low land were periodically overflowed.

On the point dividing the upper branches of the river some coarse sand was washed up, which on examination was found to be of a granitic character, clearly showing the primary formation of the country through which the Adelaide flowed. The only rocks noticed in the parts traversed by the boats were, as I have before said, of red porous sandstone. The smoke of several large fires was observed up the country, but none of the natives were seen.

MONKEY-BIRDS.

Towards the upper part of the river they noticed a strange bird, very much like a guineafowl in size and manner of running along the ground. The colour was speckled white and brown. This, doubtless, from Mr. Bynoe's description of one he wounded on the coast in the neighbourhood of the Adelaide, must have been the *Leipoa ocellata* {Mallee Fowl} of Gould, one of the mound or tumuli-building birds, first seen in Western Australia by Mr. George Moore, and afterwards on the North-west coast, and in South Australia by Captain Grey. Although known to range over a large expanse of the continent, this was the first time it was discovered in Northern Australia. {Not a Mallee Fowl as too far north – possibly a crested bowerbird}

In the reaches where the bamboo grew, flights of large vampires (resembling the *Pteropus rubricollis* {Flying Fox} of Geoff.) were met with: they kept continually flying to and fro close over the boats as they passed up, making a screeching disagreeable noise, which, however, was far less unpleasant than the mildewy odour with which they filled the air, calling to mind the exclamation placed by our immortal bard in the mouth of Trinculo. The heavy flap of the leathern wings of these monkey-birds, as the men called them, was singular, while sometimes a flight would darken the verdure of a bamboo, which, yielding to their weight, bent low, as if before a passing gust of wind. To fix themselves appeared always a difficult, and was certainly a noisy operation, each apparently striving to alight upon the same spot. They first cling to the bamboo by means of the long claw, or hook attached to the outer edge of the wing, and then gradually settle themselves.

The river swarmed with alligators. Fish also abounded; and in the salt water, a kind commonly known in the river Plate by the name of Cat-fish,

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is plentiful. One that we caught was of the enormous weight of twenty pounds. A large kind of dark bream of excellent flavour was taken in fresh water.

WOOD-DUCKS.

Many of the reaches also swarmed with wildfowl, consisting almost wholly of ducks, which, from a habit of perching on the trees, have received the name of wood-ducks. They were very different and far superior in plumage to those found on the south-eastern parts of the continent, and as they have not yet been numbered among the Australian birds so vividly described by Mr. Gould, we may venture to be somewhat minute in describing them.

They are inferior in size to the common European wild duck, but are marked in much the same manner on the breast. The back is a dark brown, while the wings, still darker, are slightly bronzed at the tips. Their singularly long legs are of a pale flesh colour, while the web on the foot is very much arched near the toes, giving greater pliability to the foot and a power of grasping, which enables them to perch on trees. The head and bill, the latter of a pale ash colour, are both large. When on the wing they make a peculiar though pleasing whistling sound, that can be heard at a great distance,* and which changes as they alight, into a sort of chatter. Their perching on trees is performed in a very clumsy manner, swinging and pitching to and fro. We subsequently often found them on the rivers on the North coast, but not within some miles of their mouths or near their upper waters, from which it would appear that they inhabit certain reaches of the rivers only: we never found them in swamps. The farthest south they were afterwards met with, was on the Albert River in the Gulf of Carpentaria, in latitude 18 degrees South, which gives them a range of six and a half degrees of latitude over the northern part of the continent. Their nests never came under our notice, and consequently we are not aware either of the size or colour of their eggs; neither did we see any young birds during the period of our observation, ranging from July to November only.**

(*Footnote. Mr. Eyre has since informed me that there is a whistling-duck, something similar, on the Murray River, but is not aware that it has the peculiar habit of perching on trees.)

(**Footnote. Mr. Gould, who had previously described this bird (Leptotarais Eytoni) being desirous of figuring it in his splendid work, has been furnished with this account.)

EXPLORATION OF THE SOUTHERN BRANCH OF THE ADELAIDE.

August 4.

The southern arm of the Adelaide River, and about fifteen miles near the mouth of the other branch, still remaining to be explored, I started on this interesting service the day of the return of Captain Wickham, August 4th. We soon found that the one we ascended promised nothing, from there being no tidal stream of any consequence; still we hoped to trace its rejunction with the main branch, but after proceeding in a general South by West direction five miles, and East-South-East the same distance, it became so narrow that the mangroves on each side entirely blocked up the passage, and stopped the boat's progress. I here again felt the inconvenience of our not being furnished with one of the pendulum horizons, invented by Captain Becher, R.N.* It being high-water, and as the shore was lined with an impenetrable growth of mangroves, we were unable to land. In vain did I try, by cutting down some of them, to find a rest for the artificial horizon on one of the stumps; they were so connected with each other beneath the water, by a perfect network of roots, that although several of the surrounding trees were felled, a tremulous motion was still conveyed from a distance, and I consequently lost the observation for latitude.

(*Footnote. I strongly recommend this ingenious invention to every seaman. In foggy weather it will save hours of anxiety, and may often prevent the horrors of shipwreck.)

The saltwater arm of the Adelaide we found had another branch, which took us eight miles in a South-West direction, terminating like the other, and at low-water being a mere ditch. There was nothing picturesque in following the windings of these creeks or inlets; a tall growth of mangroves with their stems immersed, rendering the view limited and wearisome. We, however, were urged on by hope, being in momentary expectation that each turn would bring some change, while to add to the zest of our proceedings we felt ourselves to be the first Europeans who had traversed these parts.

Now and then the deep stillness of nature would be broken by the mournful cry of a curlew, disturbed by the splash of the oars, while sometimes a heavy flapping of wings was heard amid the mangroves, and out would start suddenly three or four white ibises with black necks, giving utterance to a peculiar cry, which faintly resembles that of the male guinea fowl. All else was deep unbroken silence.

By evening we had again reached the entrance of the river, where we passed the night, during which there was a very heavy dew.

August 5.

The lower part of the Adelaide having been already explored, prevented us from experiencing that depth of interest which we should otherwise have felt; still we were destined to enjoy our share of pleasurable sensations, as on the result of our examination depended the important fact of whether the river was navigable for large vessels. We therefore started to settle this momentous question, even before the eastern sky was tinted with orange from the rising of the sun, which in these latitudes gives no glimmering twilight: day fading and appearing instantaneously, the rapidity of the change presenting a remarkable effect.

EXTENSIVE REACHES.

Passing a narrow part, formed by two low red cliffy projections, we entered a wide reach that had an extensive flat of 2 and 2 1/2 fathoms water on the south side. The next was similarly circumstanced, the shoal water of the same depth, being, however, on the west side. Still in both there was a 3-fathom channel at low-water, and in the reaches above, seven in number, trending in a general South-South-East direction, about twice that depth. This imparted to our discoveries the stamp of utility, and as Captain Wickham found it navigable for thirty miles higher up where the water is fresh, we may pronounce the Adelaide the deepest river in Australia.

MEET A CANOE.

Proceeding upwards, we met a party of natives about seven miles from the mouth, in a very pretty bark canoe, fifteen feet long, and about two deep. The bark was sewn together with much neatness, and it was altogether the most artistic piece of workmanship I had seen among the Aborigines of Australia. It was the last of that description we met with in this direction, for we did not find canoes in use with the natives to the westward of Clarence Strait, but only rafts, a fact alluded to in an earlier portion of the work.

ALARM OF THE NATIVES.

Two young men only were in the craft, which ran close in under the mangroves, through which we could see other natives passing. By proceeding cautiously and slowly, I got pretty close to them. They were evidently afraid that if they left it we should take their boat, and this gave them courage to face the strange white men. Terror, however, was marked in their countenances, and one of the two leaped on shore, as we approached, in a state of great excitement, jumping and flinging his arms about violently; whilst sometimes he would dip up a handful of water and squirt it out with great force from the corners of his mouth. The size of the boat appeared, as usual, to astonish the lad who remained in the canoe.

He appeared less frightened than the other, and I induced him to accept a few presents from the end of a long stick. Though they had a deficiency in the upper front teeth, they had not disfigured any other part of their bodies. The stature of the two young men was small, perhaps 5 feet 7 inches, but those behind the mangroves were much taller. Alligators being so very numerous I was surprised to notice what little dread the natives appeared to have of them, dancing and wading about in the water near the bank, as if they and the animal had entered into a treaty of amity.

Their alarm appearing to have worn off, we continued our journey, but by hoisting the sail, the good effect was in a great measure counterbalanced, as the sight of it called forth a yell from the whole of them, which catching the echoes, reverberated from side to side, and resounded in our ears for some time afterwards. Proceeding, we gained the end of the twelfth reach early in the afternoon, when we obtained observations for longitude, that being the highest part of the river not surveyed, and distant about fifteen miles from the mouth; we had also just reached the portion frequented by the peculiar whistling wild duck, of which we bagged about twenty, forming an agreeable addition to our evening and next day meals. After concluding the observations, we examined the country for some distance; a level tract met the eye wherever it wandered, broken here and there by patches of low trees. The plains were thinly dotted with a coarse wiry grass. In places near hollows, where water had collected, the soil, which was a dark kind of clayey mould, cracked and curled up with the heat. A few shells were found scattered over the plains, of the kind so common on the north-east coast (Helix).

The tedious uniformity and sameness in the banks of the Adelaide, thus far, may be illustrated by the fact, that to know the boat's position on returning, it was necessary to have the sketch of the river constantly before our eyes, and to reckon each reach as we passed.

ALLIGATORS.

Taking the return tide, we passed the night in the fourth reach; very stringent orders were given to the watch to keep a sharp lookout for alligators, as a great many had been seen during the day, while we knew that on the previous night a monster of this description had attempted to get into one of the boats. We had fired at several, but with one exception had done no mischief. To be roused by the noise of the boat's keel or side grating harshly against the scaly back of an alligator, is far from being a pleasant occurrence, and on such occasions I generally found myself clutching a pistol, always kept near me, for the purpose of executing judgment upon the very first flat head that showed his nose above the gunwale. Entertaining very vivid recollections of our experience on Fitzroy River, on the first start of the boats great preparations were made against the mosquitoes; to our agreeable surprise, however, we experienced but slight annoyance from them.

The exemption, however, was fully made up by the swarms of flies which infest the Adelaide, and during mealtimes availed themselves of the opportunity of popping into our mouths.

There had been a fresh North-East wind the latter part of the day, which dying away was succeeded by a calm and cloudless night with a heavy dew. The thermometer was down to 77 degrees, and in the day varied from 87 to 92.

RETURN OF THE BOATS.

August 6.

We got on board in the forenoon, when the result of our examination was heard with a satisfaction not easily expressed, but which may be readily imagined. We felt that we had discovered a river navigable for vessels of four and five hundred tons, for about fifty miles, and into fresh water, a thing hitherto unknown in Australia. We may then with justice congratulate ourselves on the importance of the discovery of the Adelaide.

ADAM BAY.

The bay into which it flows, named after Sir Charles Adam, is six miles deep and ten broad at the entrance, where there are 9 fathoms. The shores gradually approach each other, and at the head, where it receives the waters of the Adelaide, the width is only one mile.

The mouth of the river is fronted with shoals that extend out five miles; the channel between them is narrow, 3 and 4 fathoms deep, and lies on the western side of the bay. A guide for the mouth of it is the east entrance point of the river, bearing South 40 degrees East.

The generally discoloured state of the water prevents the shoals from being seen, as well as the coral reefs extending from half to three quarters of a mile off the east side of the bay, where there is excellent anchorage. Sea and land breezes prevailed; the former blowing from the North-West which gave it the advantage of being of easy access either from the westward through Clarence Strait, or from the eastward through that of Dundas. The spring tides sometimes rise 18 feet, when the time of high-water is six o'clock. The stream set North-East and North-West from half to one knot, changing to the latter direction two and a half hours after high-water. Our observations place Escape Cliffs (too remarkable and conspicuous to be overlooked, and which ships should anchor abreast of) in latitude 12 degrees 8 1/2 minutes South and longitude 0 degrees 15 minutes West of Port Essington. The variation of the compass was 2 degrees easterly.

I was able at this anchorage, by a bearing of a distant point, to ascertain the local attraction in the ship, which in no instance exceeded 1 degree, being the amount we had found at Plymouth, previous to our departure from England. Our deeply interesting researches on the south side of Clarence Strait, leading to so important a discovery, were now concluded.

Notes

The general area of the river mouth, though unseen, had been commended by Stuart through his first impressions of the river valley & a wish to commemorate his achievement of crossing the continent. Not verbatim - Earl James paper http://www.xnatmap.org/adnm/conf_06_11/c06/aPaper%2006.pdf

“Stuart’s latitudes were correct but his longitudes were less accurate (for navigators of that era, establishing longitude accurately was a serious issue) and so he followed the Mary River and not the Adelaide River to the coast. Half a degree of longitude (approximately 35 miles or 60 kilometres) separated the two rivers. Some critics cast doubts on his achievements and his character. It would be two decades before his tree was located and photographed, with his initials still clearly visible – his name at last was cleared!” JM Stuart Society <http://johnmcdouallstuart.org.au/great-northern-exploring-expedition>

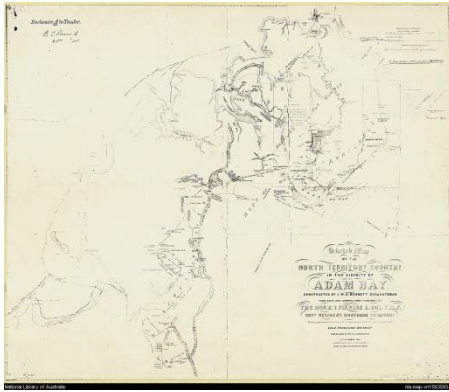
Illustrated Sydney News Saturday 15 September 1866

ENCAMPMENT AT ESCAPE CLIFFS, PALMERSTON

We present our readers this month with a view; taken on the spot, of the site selected by Mr. Finnis the capital of Northern Australia. The sketch represents the government resident's quarters, and the tents of the expeditionary party at present located there, under the direction of Mr. John McKinlay, the well-known explorer, who relieved Mr. Finnis of his duties. It would, perhaps, have been well had some other person than Mr. Finnis been chosen as the first commandant of the infant colony. His administration has been marked by disorganisation, distrust, and inactivity. Notwithstanding the slight; attempts made by the party to prepare for the sickly season, as the rainy season is termed in the tropics, very little sickness has been felt, although very little effort was made to provide comfortable residences, or even adequate shelter from the heavy rains and dews prevalent in equatorial regions.

ESCAPE CLIFFS, PALMERSTON, NORTH AUSTRALIA

The name "Goat Island" possibly originates from an early owner who used the island as a paddock for his goat herd. The island is shown on Finnis / Litchfield / Auld map (Exploration 33) of the country explored from Escape Cliffs in September 1865 and it apparently Litchfield camped on the island at that time. No name is shown on the map.



<http://www.nla.gov.au/apps/cdview/?pi=nla.map-vn1563593-e>

Hutchison and Howard carried out a survey of Adam Bay and Adelaide River in 1864 and showed Charles Point and Point Stephens on their chart of Adams Bay (British Admiralty Chart 1704).

The third voyage of HMS Beagle (1837-1843) is the most significant to Australia when she carried out surveys which were used to produce Admiralty Charts of large areas of the Australian coastline including the north-west coast, north coast and Gulf of Carpentaria. During these surveys some significant discoveries were made including the Port of Darwin, as well as the Fitzroy, Adelaide, Victoria and Fitzmaurice Rivers and new areas charted including Bass Strait, the north coast of Tasmania and the southern coast of Victoria together with the entrance and significant areas of Port Phillip Bay.