

THE KIMBERLEY 1917 EXPEDITION and adventures of Louis de Rougemont

On 1 November 2017, the Kimberley Society's speaker was **Hon. Peter Dowding SC** (former Premier of Western Australia and Member for North Province). He discussed an expedition undertaken on the Kimberley coast a century earlier, treating the audience to extracts from a rare film made during the expedition and to many remarkable still photographs associated it. His summary of the presentation follows.

In early 1917, whilst WW1 was raging in France, Australians by the thousands were being killed or seriously wounded in the service of the British Empire. Back in Australia, a Perth entrepreneur and racing enthusiast, A E Cockram, incorporated a company with a syndicate of business acquaintances to explore the Kimberley coast for economic opportunities that could be exploited.

He was well known as a breeder and racer of elite horses and actually owned the Belmont land on which today's racecourse is built; and, as his granddaughter Hon. Robyn McSweeney proudly informed us in her biography of him, he was the owner of the first Rolls Royce Silver Ghost in WA.

He enlisted the support of a Mr Stuart who was an experienced explorer to lead the expedition, and Mr Jackson, an intrepid cinematographer to take both moving and still photos of the event.

The syndicate chartered the lugger *Culwalla* and sailed from Broome on 3 May 1917.

Mr Cockram remained in Perth as the lugger made its way along the Dampierland Peninsula calling in at Beagle Bay, Lombadina, and Sunday Island. The expedition met three of the most notorious blackbirders of the pearling industry: Harry Hunter, Frenchie D'Antoine and the (by then reformed) head of the Sunday Island Mission Sydney Hadley, but were seemingly unaware of their notoriety. The expedition then headed along the coast into the true Kimberley.

They had a small crew of two men described as Asiatics and four Indigenous Sunday Islanders who had been "lent" to them by Syd Hadley.

They had armed "each white member of the party in case the natives [they] encountered should prove hostile" but, despite having many contacts with the traditional owners, they had a peaceful journey to Wyndham.

The expedition had remarkable contact with some Indigenous people living along the coast and the islands whose day to day lives had largely been unaffected by white settlement. Consequently, the narrative and the photos and film clips are a stunning record of the era.

On their return to Broome, arriving back in October 1917, they reported to Cockram who directed them to keep the information about the journey quiet until he had secured fishing and land rights from the Government for the Syndicate.

His efforts to encourage others from Australia, New Zealand and the UK to invest failed.

The still photos and narrative are recorded in a book published in 1923 by Stuart under the title *A Land of Opportunities : being an account of the author's recent expedition to explore the northern territories of Australia*. Portions of the movie film were shown in Perth and London and seem to have been given or sold to a Mr Greenwood Adams, an impresario from Melbourne who arranged showings in various places including France and the USA.

Tantalising portions of the movie have been retained in the National Sound and Film Archives.

An interesting aspect of the expedition was its link with a notorious story teller known as Louis De Rougemont who raised money from Fremantle gentry in the late 1890s and regaled European audiences with stories of his 30 years in the Kimberley living with an

indigenous community. One of his least remarkable boasts was greeted with scepticism, namely that he claimed to have ridden a turtle in the ocean. The audiences rejected his story and he died a pauper. Stuart was keen to validate the experience—as he did—with a nervous Sunday Islander sliding into Cambridge Gulf on the back of a turtle, thereby, in Stuart's eyes, vindicating the story teller.

PS In the course of this research I came across another movie made by others tracking the same journey as the 1917 expedition. It is inserted in the middle of an appalling Hollywood production called "The Blond Captive" put together in the early 1930s and available on [YouTube](#) for anyone interested.

"THE BLOND CAPTIVE"

The Hollywood production called "[The Blond Captive](#)" is, as Peter Dowding notes above, appalling. It was released in 1931, the year that Edward Arnold & Co., London, published the book titled *The Psychology of a Primitive People : A Study of the Australian Aborigine* by [Stanley D Porteus](#).

It is surprising that Capital Pictures had the gall to state, in the film credits, that it was 'produced by the North Western Australian Expedition Syndicate under the auspices of the National Research Council of Australia'. The two camera-men and [Dr. Paul C. Withington](#) MD, a Harvard professor, did accompany Porteus on his journey through the Kimberley by truck in 1929 but, as can be seen from the quotes below, Porteus was quick to distance himself after Withington's 'most interesting pictorial record' became part of this sordid, sensationalised film.

Having travelled with me as far as Wyndham, Dr. Withington decided to conduct a subsidiary expedition of his own along the little-known Broome coast between Sunday Island and Wyndham. With the assistance of Captain Gregory, of Broome, he fitted out a lugger, and in company with his two camera-men made an adventurous voyage, calling at Mr. Collier's mission station at Sunday Island, Mr. Reid's station at Munja, Mr. Love's mission station at Port George IV and Mr. Gribble's mission at Forrest River. He obtained a most interesting pictorial record of the life of the natives along the coast. It should be clearly understood, however, that this expedition was in no way connected with the Australian National Research Council, nor have I any responsibility for these pictures, the financial arrangements for which were made entirely by Dr. Withington.

And,

... our arrival in Wyndham coincided with the departure of the steamer *Koolinda* for the south, which gave me the opportunity to return to Perth and later to Adelaide, leaving Dr. Withington to obtain a lugger at Broome and visit the coast between Derby and Wyndham and obtain as complete a pictorial record as possible of the life of the blacks there.¹ ...

¹ This journey was in itself a most adventurous one. Their tiny craft, the *Betty Margaret*, under a half-caste skipper and a native for crew, threaded a perilous way through the uncharted islands and reefs of that region. Without a map of any kind, and using a kitchen clock for a chronometer they made the passage to Wyndham with only one mishap, when the lugger grounded and was left stranded high and dry on a coral reef, until a thirty-five-foot tide ebbed and flowed again. The pictures taken provided a most interesting and unique record of native life, but unfortunately this part of the venture, having been financed independently, was outside my control. The cost of obtaining and developing this film was such that its owners were impelled to sell it for commercial display, and as adapted for public exhibition it may have lost all claims to authenticity.

Cathie Clement