



Kimberley Society

Book Note

King of the Australian Coast: the Work of Phillip Parker King in the Mermaid and Bathurst 1817-1822 by Marsden Hordern. The Miegunyah Press, [Melbourne University Press](#), Melbourne, 1998. Hard-back, 441 pages, with numerous figures, maps, & colour plates, and 9 lift-out charts. RRP \$39.95.

This is an excellent account of King's five pioneer survey voyages along the Australian coast, researched and written by a former navy commander with a passion for Australian history and the sea. It won the 1998 NSW Premier's Literary Award for General History, and is already in its second (limited) edition.

Kimberley Society members will be aware of the famous Mermaid Boab tree in Careening Bay which was carved with the words **HMC MERMAID 1820** while King's cutter was careened on the beach for about two weeks to repair rotten hull timbers. The Society had a memorable visit to this Kimberley icon in our 1996 coastal expedition. It is all the more rewarding to read the full account of the careening event in this book.

Marsden Hordern has written a very readable account of King's life as a young sailor in the British navy, his travels to Australia, and his detailed voyages surveying the largely unknown coasts, especially in the north and west of the country. He uses enough historical detail to keep the reader on track, but not so much as to lose one's interest. The book is well illustrated with maps, diagrams, and sketches including colour reproductions of King's own paintings of coastal scenes and natural history subjects. The author uses direct quotations from ships logs sparingly, and brings his own intimate knowledge of ships and the sea, and in particular his experience with sailing vessels (he is a long time recreational sailor and Sydney-Hobart veteran) to explain the issues that King faced as the commander of a sailing ship in the uncharted and treacherous waters of the Kimberley and Barrier Reef coasts. To a landlubber like me, this adds a real perspective to the story that would otherwise not be fully appreciated.

Phillip Parker King was a remarkable man. He was born on Norfolk Island in 1791, and was only 26 years old when he captained the first hydrographic survey voyage in the Mermaid in 1817. This book details his adventures with storms and tides, encounters with Aboriginal people, Macassan trepanners, French explorers, and with colonial administrators in Britain, Sydney, Timor, and Mauritius. But above all it recounts his determination to produce accurate charts of the new land that only recently had become known as Australia. As Hordern points out, some of King's charts remained in use by the Admiralty up to 1955, 130 years after they were engraved. King later became the first Australian-born Admiral and a notable member of the Colonial settlement in Sydney. He died in Sydney in 1856.

This is a great book for anyone interested in the history of the Kimberley coast. I hope you can still get hold of a copy.

Mike Donaldson

Note: Sellers now ask in excess of \$200 for good quality copies of this book. A Melbourne University Press [reprint](#) is available (2015) at a RRP of \$39.99 in paperback (ISBN 9780522850437) or \$17.99 as an E-Book (ISBN 9780522863574).