

NIBBLING AT THE CHEESE: Charles Price Conigrave and the Kimberley Exploring Expedition of 1911

On 1 July 2015, speaking on behalf of **Michael P. Rainsbury**, who lives in Durham, England, **Mike Donaldson** delivered a PowerPoint presentation that covered their joint interest in Charles Price Conigrave. Michael's summary appears below.

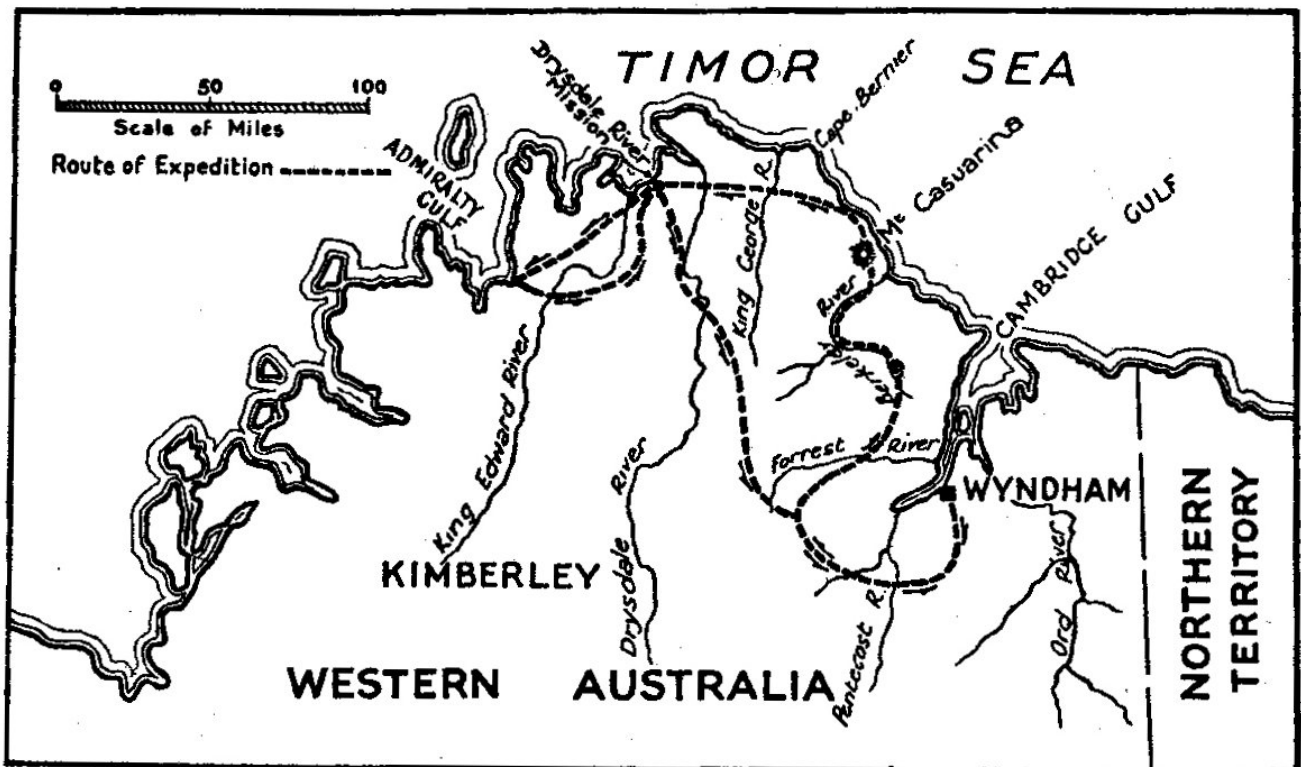
The Kimberley Exploring Expedition of 1911 was perhaps the last of the classical expeditions in the Kimberley. It was conceived and instigated by Charles Price Conigrave (1882 - 1961), a zoologist at the Perth Museum.

In 1911 Conigrave decided to explore the Kimberley for the purpose of zoological collecting. Acting Chief Surveyor Fred Brockman offered a government subsidy of £150 if he explored the unknown north-east Kimberley and supplied copies of the expedition report, maps and photographs.

In March 1911 the Kimberley Exploring Expedition sailed for Wyndham to great public interest. The expedition members comprised Conigrave as leader, Lachlan McKinnon Burns as second in command, and Roy N Collison. Conigrave and Burns were the zoologists and passionate ornithologists. Collison was the botanist and an old school friend of Conigrave. Four more people were recruited in Wyndham to make up numbers for safety: J Murray-Prior, Jack Wilson and 'native' police assistants Killy and Quart-Pot.

The Kimberley Exploring Expedition left Wyndham in June 1911. It was a party of seven led by Conigrave, plus two dogs and seventeen horses, of which the government grant paid for twelve. For supplies they carried just a few tins of compressed vegetables and 50lb bags of flour taken for the ubiquitous damper. Later, once salted and tinned meat had been used, they subsisted entirely on what they could shoot or fish.

The expedition had three fixed points on its westerly arc through the north-east Kimberley. The first was meeting a resupply boat on the Forrest River, the second to make for Mount Casuarina, and the third to visit Drysdale River Mission at Pago for further resupply.



Route of the Kimberley Exploring Expedition (from C Price Conigrave, *Walk-About*, 1938)

A traverse of terribly broken sandstone country took them to the Durack River. A big lagoon to the west was named Broлга Lagoon on account of the huge flocks of Native Companions there. Conigrave lamented he was unable to take photographs of the birds on his arrival as they made a glorious sight taking off in a flock of several hundred birds.

Conigrave reported a new form of Aboriginal art. A patch at the edge of the marsh had ground paintings – large animal and human figures portrayed on the ground. The surrounding high grass was burnt and the ashes brushed away outlining strange ground figures. The hot sun baked the surface hard so they seemed to have survived more than one wet season. The art included a crocodile thirty feet long, grotesque human beings, a tortoise and other figures.

A depot camp was set up at the head of tidal waters of the Forrest River to meet the planned resupply boat from Wyndham. They stayed for two weeks allowing the horses to rest and undertaking zoological collecting of birds and mammals. They met local Aboriginals and were invited to a corroboree.

Their route took them north to Mount Casuarina which was well known to maritime navigators but never visited or climbed by white men. En route a creek they thought was a minor tributary to a river trended north and increased in size. Their arrival on the edge of a gorge with the river flowing below confirmed this was a new river and Conigrave named it the Berkeley after his brother Berkeley Fairfax Conigrave.

At Mount Casuarina they stayed for a fortnight, circumnavigated the hill, climbed to the summit and built a cairn with deposited note, and carved details on a tree to commemorate their visit.



From left to right: J O Murray-Prior, Roy N Collison, C Price Conigrave & Jack Wilson alongside Expedition's marked tree. Courtesy of State Library of Western Australia (090190PD).

The expedition turned west towards Drysdale River Mission at Pago. Midway between Mount Casuarina and the Drysdale River they found another major northwards flowing river. This was named the King George. Lack of supplies prevented them investigating the river further.

The party crossed rough country to the Barton River and then to the Drysdale River Mission. They arrived at the Mission to some concern as the Benedictine monks thought they were an Aboriginal war party and had prepared for a fight. The monk's guns had been put away before the party entered. Theirs was the first party to reach the Mission overland. A letter announcing their intended visit had not arrived. They found no relief boat stores awaiting them, nor had the Mission any stores to spare as it was awaiting its own resupply.

Rather than awaiting the supply boat, the expedition travelled west to visit Admiralty Gulf and Mount Connor via the King Edward River. Admiralty Gulf was rich in fauna to be added to their scientific collections, and provided examples of rock art. Conigrave compared them to the paintings seen by George Grey over seventy years earlier, being human figures painted without mouths, what we would recognise today as being Wandjina art.

With no relief boat at the Mission the expedition decided to head back to Wyndham as they were worried they might get trapped by flooded rivers with the Wet advancing. Their journey back was a miserable affair being on short rations and in the rain. The party crossed over to the Barton River junction and south following the escarpment to rejoin the Drysdale River and onto Drysdale Gorge. They had a difficult job leaving the gorge. Rather than crossing south and following Brockman's route, they turned east up the gorge and after a kilometre or so climbed up on top of the north escarpment. This was a very difficult ascent and they lost at least one horse. They arrived on the swollen Pentecost River on Christmas Eve 1911 and entered Wyndham a few days later.

Conigrave, Burns and Collison returned to Perth to great public acclaim and a civic reception was held in their honour on 8 March 1912. It was attended by the great and the good including the Mayor (Mr Malloy), Fred Brockman, Sir John Forrest and Bishop Riley. The WA Premier Mr Scaddan wrote expressing his regret at being unable to attend due to a cabinet meeting. Forrest's closing remarks recounted a comment made on the return from one of his exploring trips by Captain Roe, "Well, well, Jack, we're still nibbling at the cheese!"

One of the main aims of the expedition was to secure bird specimens and they collected thousands of bird skins across the Kimberley. As was the custom of the day Conigrave sold the collection to offset expedition expenses. It was bought by Australian ornithologist Gregory M Mathews who was in England writing his book *Birds of Australia*. In a similar vein 138 native artefacts collected were sold to the South Australia Museum. In an interview given before departing for Wyndham, Conigrave alluded to a falling out with his former employer the Perth Museum, and said he would not be collecting or supplying them with anything.

The expedition had great newspaper coverage in Western Australia as well as interstate. Over one hundred articles either by Conigrave or about him were published. Gossip columns told of, or invented, a perceived rivalry with explorer/surveyor W H Carr Boyd.

Conigrave gave public lectures to great acclaim in Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne. He had taken lessons in public speaking from Lionel Logue, now famous from the film *The King's Speech* for teaching George VI.

Conigrave is now little known, and his name is just a footnote with the discovery and naming of the Berkeley and King George rivers. He wrote no definitive academic papers of the results of his travels, nor a book or monograph at the time of his exploration. The loss of the seaplane *Atlantis* in the 1930s renewed interest in the Kimberley and prompted Conigrave to write first a magazine article and then an autobiographical book of his travels, *Walk-About* (1938).