

EARLY EXPLORATION ON THE KIMBERLEY COAST

On 18 October 1995, the Society heard an interesting address by historian Ian Elliot who provided background to his story of early exploration on the Kimberley coast with a 1589 depiction of the unknown Southland (Maris Pacifici of Ortelius) and the Toscanelli map of 1471 which shows an Australia-like land-mass below Java, with what appears to be a well-defined Gulf of Carpentaria 135 years before the *Duyfken* voyage. Other interesting snippets followed.

Ian noted that the first known European contact with the Kimberley coast occurred in 1644 when the Dutchman, Abel Tasman produced a general outline of it. He then showed a slide of the Mar id India map by Janssonius (1657) as evidence that subsequent maps depicted the Kimberley coastline more or less accurately in shape, if not in its exact longitudinal position.

Englishman William Dampier careened his ship *Cygnets* on the coast in 1688. Professor Les Marchant's researches in recent years have led him to conclude that this activity took place at Karrakatta Bay, west of Sunday Island in King Sound. Dampier published the record of his adventures in 1697 and, two years later, returned to Australia's northwest in HMS *Roebuck*. On this voyage he noted pearl oysters south of present-day Broome and had a skirmish with Aborigines at Lagrange Bay. His 1699 chart did not show his landing on the Kimberley coast, and later charts showed little change. Much was now known about the west coast of New Holland, however, and Ian used a French chart of 1753 as a dramatic illustration for the benefit of anyone who was under the impression that Captain Cook discovered Australia.

There was little activity in the 18th century and, whilst the Frenchman St Allouarn skirted the Kimberley coast in 1772, he added little to outside knowledge of it. By comparison, the 19th century saw a lot of mapping and naming of places on the Kimberley coast. In 1801, Captain Peter Heywood in HMS *Vulcan* named Red Island which is off Camden Sound. In the same year, a French expedition undertook exploratory work that included using the *Geographe*, under Captain Nicolas Baudin, to examine coastal islands and identify great discrepancies in the way parts of the coast were laid down on contemporary charts. Other personnel on this voyage included Francois Peron and the geographer Boullanger.

Having noted that the initial results of the 1801 visit were inadequate and inconclusive, Ian told how Baudin and the *Geographe* returned to the Kimberley coast in 1803 accompanied by Sub-Lieutenant Louis de Freycinet in the *Casuarina*. This time the expedition named many coastal features but, because it did not come in close, the French names are restricted to the outer islands. Of note is that a fleet of Malay fishing proas was seen near the Institut Group of islands.

Australian-born Phillip Parker King, sailing in HMS *Mermaid*, began to fill in the gaps in what was known about the coast in 1817. Also on board was John Septimus Roe, later to be WA's Surveyor General. In 1819 King visited Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, explored Cambridge Gulf, and then rounded Cape Londonderry to Sir Graham Moore Island. An examination of Vansittart Bay involved contact with local Aborigines and King also visited Admiralty Gulf and Port Warrender. In assigning names to islands and other features, King used Freycinet's chart and

retained the French names where he could recognise the relevant places. In 1820, he resumed the survey of the coast at Cape Voltaire, charting Montague Sound, Scott Strait, York Sound, and Prince Frederick Harbour. His crew repaired the hull of the *Mermaid* in Careening Bay and the famous inscription "HMS Mermaid 1820" was carved onto a boab tree. Excursions were made to Bat Island and Mt Knight and, after repairs were completed, the party examined Brunswick Bay and St George basin, rowing up the Prince Regent River as far as King Cascade.

King returned the following year in HMS *Bathurst*, revisiting Careening Bay and the Prince Regent River before clashing with Aborigines at Hanover Bay. Survey of Port George IV and Rogers Strait followed before King sailed from the Camden Sound area to King Sound, Cape Leveque and Roebuck Bay. A fourth and final voyage took place in 1822 when King again used the *Bathurst* and examined the area around the Buccaneer Archipelago and King Sound. At the close of his survey, three geographically important openings had not been examined and there were conflicting opinions as to whether these openings were passages that led to other parts of the coast.

In closing his comments on King, Ian identified an interesting link in that his next command took King aboard HMS *Adventure* where he came into contact with midshipmen John Lort Stokes and John Clements Wickham. These men arrived on the Kimberley coast aboard HMS *Beagle* in 1838 and explored Roebuck Bay, King Sound (including part of the Fitzroy River), Collier Bay and Secure Bay. They named many more coastal features but missed George Water and the mouth of the Glenelg River. This river had been seen by George Grey whose land exploration was discussed at the September meeting of the Society. The name Doubtful Bay recorded the incompleteness of the examination and the mystery attached to the area was not solved until Kenneth Brown led a party into Camden Sound 25 years later.

Ian noted that the Brown expedition of 1863 can practically be said to have ended the true exploration of the Kimberley coast. The first pastoral settlement in the Kimberley took place shortly afterwards at Camden Harbour but added little to the known outline. Further Royal Navy hydrographic surveys were undertaken and Ian named some of those that preceded the work under Commander F.A. Reyne (1913) which named such places as Rice Rocks, Wilson Point, Buckland Point, Viney Island, Comber Rock and Nicolle Reef.

Ian's talk was illustrated with many slides of old maps, the ships and the places explored. Altogether the audience found it very enlightening to hear how mariners gradually built up knowledge of the details of the Kimberley coast.

Lindsay Peet