

Balarrgan — A Hub of History — Part 2

The End of the Dreaming

After possibly 40,000 years when Aborigines had the exclusive use and occupation of K'Gari, their traditions, culture and lifestyles began to be increasingly impacted by the advent of Europeans into Australia and for the Butchulla their intrusions into the Great Sandy Region. This FIDO backgrounder (No 73 — October 2015 by John Sinclair) traces those intrusions and impacts up to the end of the 19th Century

Early European Contact

Portuguese: It seems likely that Portuguese navigator Christado de Mendonca was the first European to come into contact with Fraser Island. He set out from Mallaca (northern Sumatra) in 1531 on a secret voyage to spy on land which the Pope had nominally assigned to Portugal's hostile neighbour, Spain, in the Treaty of Tordicilla in 1494. Although the Lisbon archives were destroyed in a disastrous fire in 1755, a Portuguese chart published in 1536 AD shows what is believed to be Fraser Island (K'Gari) as an island.

Further evidence came from scientists seeking the age of the shoreline near Hook Point in the 1980s. They found a roll of sheet lead believed to be a sinker for a fishing line buried amongst pumice which came from a volcano that exploded around 1500 AD. Metallurgical tests revealed that the lead came from Portugal's neighbour, Spain. This plus the early map make it likely that de Mendonca who spent two years charting the eastern Australia coastline, explored the length of Great Sandy Strait.

Flinders: The first verifiable records of marine exploration around Balarrgan occurred in 1799 when Matthew Flinders sailed the 16-ton ship "Norfolk" into Hervey Bay. He named Woody Island and he reported that he found an Aboriginal canoe at what he called Curlew Islet, (presumed to be Little Woody Island) as "a means of passing over the water to short distances". He marked "White Cliffs" on his chart in the vicinity of Balarrgan and 'entertained a conjecture that the Head of Hervey's Bay might communicate with Wide Bay', but was unable to prove his theory because of the maze of sandbanks at the head of Great Sandy Strait.

On a return voyage in the "Investigator" in 1802 as he passed Wide Bay he noted: "...the sandy land becomes very low (Inskip Point) and a small opening was seen in it (Great Sandy Strait) leading to a piece of water like a lagoon (Tin Can Bay); but the shoals which lie off the entrance (Wide Bay Bar) render it difficult to access..."

Edwardson: It wasn't until 1822 when Governor Brisbane sent Captain William Edwardson in the cutter "Snapper" to locate a river location suitable for a new penal settlement that Flinders' conjecture was confirmed. Edwardson sailed up Great Sandy Strait but was deterred from going further because he was afraid of "natives" which he noted on his chart at Urangan, Woody Island, Turkey Island and Hook Point. Because of this fear he failed to discover the Mary River and for better or worse prevented this area becoming the penal settlement which instead went to Moreton Bay.

Edwardson described Great Sandy Strait as "...a safe and capacious anchorage having from 14 to 3 fathoms for many miles. Soft muddy bottom and forming a channel of straight into Hervey's Bay rendering the Great Sandy Peninsula of Captain Flinders an island of 70 miles in length and in some parts 14 to 15 miles in breadth..."

Moreton Bay convict escapees: The end of the exclusive occupation of Balarrgan came to a relatively abrupt end following the establishment of the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement in 1824. Although the settlement was outside the territory of the Great Sandy Region people, eventually the establishment of that settlement led to the tragic demise of the Aboriginal people of the region. The first inroads were made when convicts escaped from the tyranny of the penal system to be befriended by the Aborigines. The Butchulla

knew them as "bundas" (white blackfellows). Some lived with their adopted Aboriginal clans for many years. This was true of James Bracefell whose Butchulla name was "Wandi" (meaning great talker).

Bracefell: Bracefell described his 12 month sojourn on Fraser Island in about 1840 to Dr. Simpson who made these notes before Bracefell's untimely death in 1842: "He now accompanied these Blacks to their Island (Dooliwa) (Woody Island) in Wide Bay, lying between the main land and Fraser's Island, where he remained a month and then passed over in a Canue to Fraser's Island, called Carina by the Blacks. The tribes here, who go by the general appellation of the (Baltelus), are very numerous, thousands he thinks, for he states at their great fights he has seen them covering the Beach for four miles in length.

"The Island itself shuts in Wide Bay to the Eastward and may be from 50 - 60 miles long but formed principally of sand hills like Moreton Island but well watered. There is also abundance of fish, crabs, turtle, sea-hogs, kangaroo and opossum, also the Honeysuckle and a kind of nut growing on a shrub (macrozamia cycad), which is rendered eatable by being pounded and washed in a running Stream."

Eliza Fraser: The two events which most contributed to the demise were the strong antipathy which was developed as result of some of the more lurid stories told by Eliza Fraser of her "capture" and "mistreatment" as the hands of the Aborigines on Fraser Island and Cooloola in 1836. Although her stories were contradicted by some of her fellow surviving ship-mates, it was her stories which received most of the publicity.



Eliza Fraser's saga resulted in reprisals against Butchulla

Mary River settlement: The British were determined to occupy northern Australia at a faster rate to prevent a French settlement. Thus they abandoned Moreton Bay as a penal settlement and threw the whole state open to squatters. Andrew Petrie led an expedition in a precariously small craft to locate and explore the Moonaboola River which he had heard of from Aborigines. He located and collected Bracefell at Noosa Heads on the way and with Bracefell's aid obtained an Aboriginal guide at Ballarrgan. They then followed up the Moonaboola (Mary) River (which Petrie called the Wide Bay River) assessing its potential for timber and grazing. Petrie reported on Fraser Island's superb forests while seeking the remains of Captain James Fraser who had died there. Petrie's exploration rapidly led to squatters taking up selections along the Mary River and the establishment of a settlement at what is now Maryborough within a year and to the exploitation of Fraser Island's forest within two decades.

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Maryborough: Maryborough, first called *Baddow*, was surveyed in 1846 as a township. The town and the river were renamed following the death of lady Mary Fitzroy, wife of colonial Governor Fitzroy. She had been killed in a carriage accident in Parramatta. The settlement of Maryborough had tragic repercussions for the Aborigines.

In 1848, a settlement was begun at Baddow. The settlement received a strong impetus in its development in 1867 following the discovery of gold at Gympie. Most of the supplies for the mining field were ferried up the Mary River and transported overland. Soon Great Sandy Strait and Fraser Island were well known to coastal navigators.

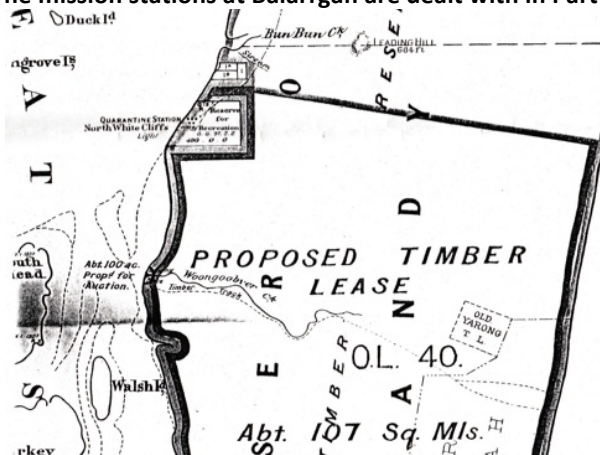
1851 Massacre: After many lethal skirmishes and massacres of Aborigines in and around Maryborough, Commandant Walker and 24 Native police, supported by a number of "special constables" who had volunteered, spent eight days on Fraser Island carrying out what was euphemistically described as an examination of Aborigines. Subsequent reports indicate that this was a pretense for a series of massacres which occurred between Christmas Eve and 3 January. It may have been seen as a little "silly season" or Christmas sport.

1860 Reserve: In an effort to purge the mainland of all Aborigines, in 1860 the whole of Fraser Island was gazetted as an Aboriginal Reserve. The idea of establishing a "homeland" for Aborigines under a kind of apartheid regime was short-lived. Within three years, this would be rescinded to facilitate commercial timber-getting exploitation.

Timber eviction: A wily Scot, William Pettigrew, had established a sawmill at Dundathu on the banks of the Mary River to exploit Fraser Island's kauri pine (*Agathis robusta*) known to the Butchulla at *Dundathu*. Kauri and white beech (*Gmelina leichhardtii*) were the first targets for timber exploitation of the region starting in 1863.

Major port: Clippers travelling from Sydney or Melbourne back to Europe preferred the route through Torres Strait to take advantage of the South-east trade winds. They soon developed a preference to cut through Hervey Bay to avoid the treacherous Breaksea Spit. Great Sandy Strait became an international shipping channel. This allowed ship crews a sheltered waterway and an opportunity to replenish their fresh water supplies more easily than anywhere else. Rather than deviate 80 kilometres into Moreton Bay and up the Brisbane River, many clippers carrying cargo for Brisbane would drop it off in Great Sandy Strait at North White Cliffs and proceed through Hervey Bay towards Torres Strait. They would stop off at Balarrgan to unload goods into the Brisbane merchants' small coastal vessels. For a decade or two Great Sandy Strait was Queensland's main port.

The mission stations at Balarrgan are dealt with in Part 3



Ballarrgan was excluded from a proposed timber lease in 1897 when Aborigines were evicted from the "mission" as a result of Maryborough protests. The "mission" was relocated to Bogimbah and the 480-acre Ballarrgan site just south of the "Collieries Block" was redefined as Recreation Reserve.

In 1866, even before the discovery of Gympie's gold, Pugh's "Queensland Almanac" in "Sailing Directions Great Sandy Island Strait and Mary River" gave directions on how to navigate through Great Sandy Strait: "... Stand to the northward until the hollow in the centre of Baupal Mountain (a very conspicuous mark on the mainland) is shut in behind the high land on Fraser's Island.... When inside Great Sandy Island Strait the best anchorage is off the White Cliffs. There is also good anchorage for small craft between Woody Island and the spit which runs northward from its south-east extreme. Good water can be obtained from a running stream which flows over the beach just to the north-ward of the White Cliffs. There is a pilot vessel stationed in Hervey's Bay and the Mary River...."

Opium addiction: The seamen took advantage of these breaks to go ashore. However, the seamen on the merchant vessels left more than their wares behind. They traded alcohol and opium with the Aborigines in return for sexual favours. They left behind venereal disease and drug addiction. That contributed even more to the Aboriginal demise than the massacres and other degradations.

Gympie Gold: Due to the discovery of gold in Gympie in 1867 and the rapid growth of Maryborough, European population expanded rapidly. The easiest access to Gympie for the prospectors rushing to the goldfield was by ship through Great Sandy Strait to Maryborough and thence overland. There was no road from Brisbane. Great Sandy Strait for a significant period was a major shipping channel for sailing vessels.

Quarantine and customs: To handle the stream of immigrants to the goldfields, Maryborough developed its own Customs House and Fraser Island became quarantine and immigration station. Another reason for the Quarantine Station was that Maryborough became the centre of the Kanaka trade. Kanakas were brought from South Pacific islands (many times they were shanghaied) to work as indentured labourers on the cane-fields. In "The Port of Maryborough", Ronald describes how this infamous trade developed here. "When New Caledonia first became a penal settlement, Maryborough being the nearest port for timber supplies saw quite a number of sailing ships take away cargoes.... (Between November 9, 1867 and 1903) a total of 12,073 islanders were landed at Maryborough in thirty different vessels".

Defence outpost: While still serving as a Quarantine Station the strategic importance of Balarrgan was recognized during the 1880s Crimean War. Australians were paranoid that the Russians might invade Australia. Every outpost of the thinly populated State of Queensland demanded to be defended against a perceived potential marine invasion. In 1885 the Cooktown Council begged the Queensland premier "to supply arms, ammunition and a competent officer to take charge of the same as the town is entirely unprotected against the threat of a Russian invasion". The bureaucracy responded by sending an 83-year old cannon "3 cannonballs, two rifles and one officer".

There was more generosity in the bid to defend Maryborough which was then Queensland's principal seaport. In addition to the three guns still mounted in situ in Queens Park overlooking the Mary River, another smaller gun was placed at Balarrgan overlooking the entrance to the Mary River. 90 years later the Ballarrgan gun was retrieved and is now located at the Visitor Centre at Central Station.

Impacts: By the end of the 19th Century all Aborigines had been evacuated from Balarrgan and their land taken over to be exploited for its timber resources and recreation. They were forced to reside in a much less suitable location. In just 50 years after settlement of Maryborough, their population had been decimated by disease, demoralization and addictions.