

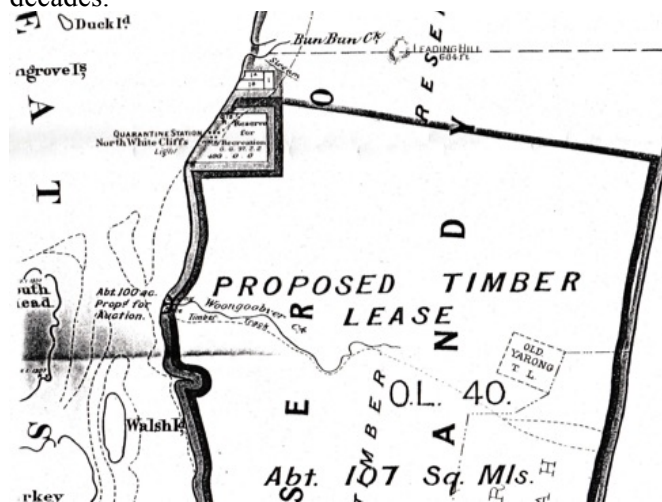
Missions Fail to Save Butchulla Traditional Culture

Balarrgan — A Hub of History — Part 3

Missions Fail to Save Butchulla Traditional Culture

This brief history describes the attempts to soften the impacts of the European take-over of Fraser Island (K'Gari) and the rest of Butchulla territory. It is relatively short because the eviction of the Butchulla from their tradition lands was completed so swiftly. Christianity attempted to save the Aborigines of Fraser Island before it was too late but, ironically, two of the critical events impacting on the Butchulla coincided with Christian holidays — Christmas 1851 and Easter 1897. By 1905 even the missionaries were ousted from K'Gari. Sheer determination to remain on their country enabled a number of Butchulla to escape and survive on the adjacent mainland in what is now the City of Hervey Bay.

Shrunken Aboriginal Reserve: Following the revocation of the island as an Aboriginal Reserve to in 1860, timber-getters moved in with the first logs moving to Dundathu mill near Maryborough in 1863. The industry impacted the lives of the Butchulla with reports of sexual interference with the women. However that was small scale compared with the disruption that followed Nash's discovery of gold at Gympie and the rush that then ensued over the next decades.



Balarrgan (top left with heavy border) is immediately south of the "Collieries [freehold] Block", now site of Kingfisher Resort. When the whole island ceased to be an Aboriginal Reserve Balarrgan was excluded from the proposed timber lease in 1897. Aboriginal land shrank from the whole island to just 480-acres

Rev Fuller's Mission: In October 1870, Rev. William Fuller established his mission at "Balarrgan". It was important to Aborigines because it was one of the most habitable sites along Great Sandy Strait. It is strategically placed opposite the mouth of the Mary (or Moonaboola) River.

It wasn't an easy task to "save" the Aborigines. Rev. Fuller reported how the residents of his Mission would swim out to pilot the ships through Great Sandy Strait in 1870 for biscuits and tobacco: *"If a schooner is passing ... about sunset the natives will sometimes throw sand into the air and blow with their mouths towards the sun in order to make ... (it) go down quickly and thus compel the schooner to come to anchor for the night ... to enable them to get on board and obtain tobacco, biscuits, etc. which the Captains generally supply them with."* Fuller never elaborated on what the "etc." was.

The discovery of gold at Gympie in 1867 triggered a gold rush. The easiest way for interstate and overseas diggers to get to the diggings was to land in Maryborough the closest port to Gympie and walk to

the bustling gold field. Many of the arrivals carried disease and sickness and rather than let them land in Maryborough, they were placed in quarantine on Fraser Island to prevent introduced diseases spreading.

Mission to Quarantine Station: The Queensland Government needed a quarantine station and set their eyes on the Balarrgan site. In effect Fuller was evicted by the Queensland Government that wanted to use the Mission site as a Quarantine Station to serve the needs of the Port of Maryborough which was handling thousands of diggers headed for the Gympie goldfield. According to the official records there were 171 Aborigines living at, or near Fuller's settlement at Balarrgan.

Fuller's records note that Rev J Buckle accompanied a Miss Winstone to Fraser Island and (reports Fuller) ... *"with a minimum of ceremony we changed her (Miss Winstone's) name to Fuller"*. Fuller was only there for two years and left in 1872. However he became the first white man on record to be married on Fraser Island. Fuller went on to establish missions at Noosa and Missionary Bay, Hinchinbrook Island.

Impact of gold rush and shipping: From 1872 to 1896 Great Sandy Strait was a busy port but the ships left more than their passengers behind. The crews of those ships enticed the Aborigines to have sex with them in exchange for opium. They left behind a sad legacy of venereal disease and opium addiction that was to decimate the Aboriginal population for many decades after they left.

When there was a better road between Gympie and Brisbane and a rail link was established, all ships with cargo and passengers for the Gympie gold diggings landed in Brisbane. The quarantine station at Balarrgan was abandoned. The buildings were redundant. The authorities decided that Balarrgan should be returned to its earlier purpose as a refuge or a mission for Aborigines and set about utilizing this asset as a government run mission station.

Mustering Aborigines: On 23rd February 1897, Archibald Meston, Protector of Aborigines, "mustered" 33 men and boys, and 18 women and girls, 51 in all, and moved them to the deserted buildings of the old Quarantine Station. Meston noted that Balarrgan, was *"a favourite camp for ages"*. By May, the number had grown to 73 but Meston's "musters" soon led to Balarrgan being established as a type of concentration camp under the control of Meston's pugilistic son, Harold.

The Aborigines lived in appalling conditions.. Meston's aim was to exile as many Aborigines from mainland Southern Queensland to Fraser Island as possible. Any

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stray blacks on the adjacent mainland who had been "mustered" were deported to Kgari. It wasn't only Butchulla that were sent to Balarrgan. Consequently there was a fair degree of social tension within the mission as ageless hostilities and rivalries between different groups played out.

The biggest disruptions during this period were the loss of language and many traditional practices. Traditional Aboriginal pre-European contact was based on a complex kinship system that related all Aborigines by lore. It also required the traditional language.

Confrontation with settlers: On Good Friday, 16th April, 1897, Aborigines fought off a party of Maryborough excursionists who had landed on the beach at 'Balarrgan'. This led to both a court case and a petition in Maryborough - the first of many collected in that city concerning Fraser Island. 703 petitioners protested against the establishment of another Aboriginal settlement at the White Cliffs which had been ... *"a favourite resort for pleasure parties for over 20 years"*. That 20 year justification was to result in the Butchulla being exiled further away from Balarrgan

Protests in Maryborough: On 13th May, 1897 a public meeting in Maryborough (the first on Fraser Island land use held in that city), was attended by 300 - 400 persons who claimed the White Cliffs as *"their watering place"* since *"Before Queensland got separation"*. They were indignant at having White Cliffs *"wrenched away from them"* believing that this was an *"encroachment upon white man's rights to privileges"*. The Public Meeting achieved the desired results. Only a week later on 20th May, the Queensland Government re-established and re-gazetted White Cliffs as a Quarantine Station reversing a forgotten order of 1894 that had made it a Recreation Reserve. In this very early encounter, the white men were able to show

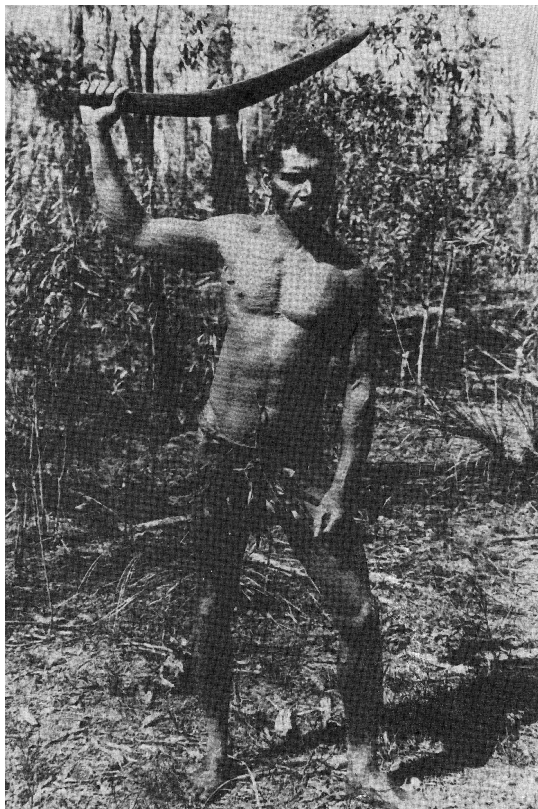
that their *"favourite resort for pleasure parties for over 20 years"* was the basis of a stronger claim to the land in white law than *"a favourite camp for ages"* for the Aborigines.

Transfer to Bogimbah: As a result of these community actions the mission was closed down and it was relocated to Bogimbah Creek. During the next seven years of the Settlement, Aborigines lived in the disgraceful conditions of a concentration camp. Unknown dozens died of malnutrition, dysentery, syphilis, influenza and tuberculosis. The Anglican missionaries who took control from Meston's State in February 1900 abandoned the unfortunate concentration camp in 1904. Rather than release survivors, 117 of the handful of remaining inmates were exiled to Yarrabah near Cairns, 1000 miles from their traditional homeland. Some though were lucky not to be shipped off and remained to form a community nucleus on the Fraser Coast.

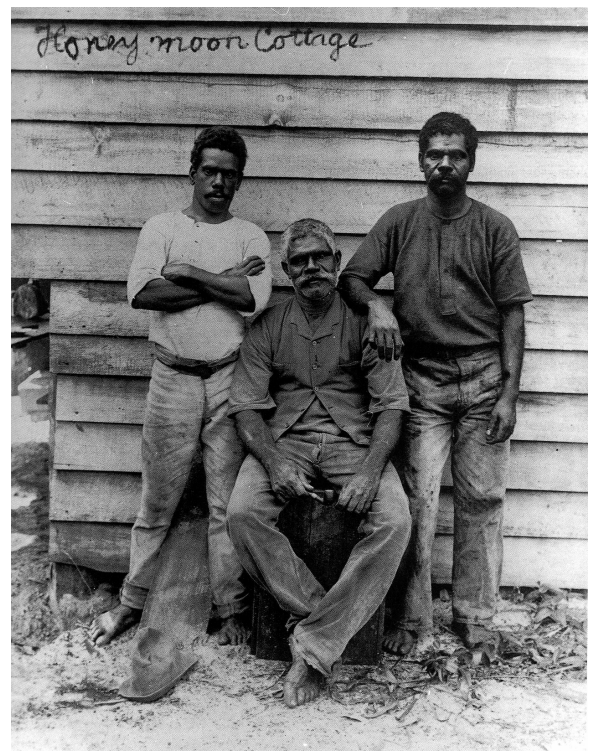
Tragedy: Meston's report to Parliament in 1905 summarized the tragedy: *"Fifty years ago there were from 2,000 to 3,000 aborigines on Fraser Island, an exceptionally fine race of people. Today there are about 20 left on the Island! The food supply from the ocean and the Straits was unlimited. The big scrub provided most of the vegetable diet."*

The decimation of K'Gari's aboriginal population in half a century was described as a tragedy of this race. It prompted one Maryborough resident of the time to write an *"enraged memorial"* asking, *"Isn't this one of the blackest pages in the history of the British Empire?"*

This is FIDO Backgrounder No 74 was compiled by John Sinclair and published as a supplement to MOONBI 135 in March 2016



From this —Butchulla hunter (Oxley Library)



Nugget and some other Butchulla managed to remain on Fraser Island after the mission 1905 evacuation. They were employed in Forestry during the early 20th Century