

Historical Dramas at the Quail Island Group (which includes BSI)

Uncharted Waters (compiled & edited by A. Raith and L. Raith)

Northern Australia in the mid-nineteenth century was still largely unexplored. In 1839 Commander John Wickham was commissioned to explore the northern coastline of Australia. Wickham had been the first officer of the *Beagle's* famous second voyage to South America on which Charles Darwin was the naturalist, and which led to Darwin's major contribution to the science of evolution and his theory of natural selection.

Now the captain of the *HMS Beagle*, Wickham named the Port of Darwin in honour of his friend. Further down the west coast of the NT he entered and navigated 200 miles up a large river, which he named in honour of Queen Victoria. The location and the generous width of the Victoria River's lower reaches gave a promise of ease of navigation and access to the unexplored interior. With speculation that this may be the large river linked to an inland sea in Australia's north, the possibilities of gold, arable lands and other natural resources must have caused a bit of a stir in England. For in 1856, the North Australian Expedition was commissioned to explore the region and Augustus Charles Gregory was chosen to lead it.

(NSW State Library): Augustus Charles Gregory was employed by the Surveyor-General, John Roe in Perth in 1841 and was promoted to Assistant Surveyor. Working outside of Perth, Gregory was employed in surveying areas marked out for roads and towns.

After several successful exploring expeditions north of Perth, Gregory was selected to lead a scientific expedition of the north of Australia consisting of eighteen men in 1855-56, financed by the British Government and sponsored by the Royal Geographic Society in London. One of the aims of this expedition was to discover the extent of natural resources in the north of the country. Starting out at Moreton Bay (Brisbane), the expedition travelled over 11,000 km by sea, up the Victoria River from its mouth in the north-west of the Northern Territory.

The expedition's eighteen men, livestock, and supplies were transported on two vessels; the barque *Monarch* and a smaller vessel, a schooner the *Tom Tough* (*Captained by Gourlay*). While a fair and dedicated man, and despite his previous successful land explorations, expedition leader Gregory lacked leadership skills, specifically his assessment of competence and character, maintenance of discipline, and handling of conflicts between his men. This lack of competence of some senior personnel was problematic and running aground became a common occurrence for Gregory's expedition, in fact it ran aground several times in Moreton Bay even before embarking on the expedition proper!

(Russell Braddon) As she headed out of Moreton Bay and into the Brisbane River, *Monarch* grounded. A steam tug engaged to tow her up the river struck a rock and sank. Neap tides delayed her refloating. Another tug was hired, but deserted her. Two aboriginals taken on as stockmen got bored and absconded. Eventually the barque was towed to Eagle Farm, where it took on 50 horses, 200 sheep, and hundreds of trusses of hay and casks, and promptly grounded again. For eleven days the fiasco continued. It had become obvious neither captain was particularly competent.

Another unflattering episode is told by Dawson one of the Expeditions' rank and file employees (indicated by the lack of the title Mister). He recounts this event near Melville Island (north of Darwin and the second largest Australian island after Tasmania).

(Russell Braddon): It was all too much for Captain Gourlay - as Dawson observed when he went up on deck in the middle of the night of September 2 to find Melville Island looming only half a mile ahead, and Gourlay so 'beastly drunk' that the man at the wheel, although he pulled the captains' leg for a long time, was unable to wake him. The very next day, September 3, *Monarch* ran on to the reef off Quail Island.

To be fair their nautical charts were inadequate given the coast had not been comprehensively charted. Many incidents however were avoidable, and can be explained by poor seamanship and inattention. The expedition was to skirt Port Patterson (Bynoe Harbour) completely, on the way to the mouth of the Victoria River. Port Patterson, now known as Bynoe Harbour, is a large body of water, bounded by the mainland on its eastern side, and a string of islands to the west. Quail Island and Bare Sand Island are two islands at the northern end of that chain. The northern entrance to Bynoe Harbour contains reefs and sandbars which are hazards when it is not a spring high tide.

(Gregory's Journal): At 9.50 p.m. the Monarch grounded on a rocky reef off the entrance of Port Patterson, the master of the vessel not having made due allowance for the indraught of the tide.

Aboard the *Tom Tough*, employed as the expedition draftsman and storeman was Thomas Baines, who painted many of the sketches and paintings of events during the expedition. Baines was by most accounts a reliable, enthusiastic and competent member of the expedition, and in whom Gregory would soon come to rely upon. Unfortunately for Baines he was not a born leader, while many of his colleagues proved unsuited to an expedition of discovery. He often tried to be the peacemaker in disputes that Gregory either ignored or failed to resolve.

Following too closely astern of the *Monach*, the *Tom Tough* also ran aground nearby on the same reef north of Quail Island. Russell Braddon in his book *Thomas Baines and the North Australian Expedition* takes up the description of the grounding, and supplying the sketches seen here.



Fig 1. Aground at low tide off Quail Island. Sketch by Thomas Baines

(Russell Braddon) When the tide fell Augustus Gregory, who had spent the night aboard the *Tom Tough*, paddled across the reef and discovered that the badly listing vessel (*Monarch*) was wedged in a gutter of coral. Baines immediately joined him and began hacking away the ensnaring coral. It was not his job, nor had Gregory asked him to do it; but as he had begun on that September morning 1855, so he would continue until March of 1857 - eager, enterprising, courageous, and tireless.

Despite all his efforts, when the tide rose, Monarch did not float free; and when it fell again she listed as heavily as ever, to the great distress of the horses and sheep. Baines resumed his hacking. The horses began showing signs of weakness. Another day passed. Neither kedging¹ nor warping could drag Monarch into deep water.

(Gregory's Journal): Unfortunately this (the running aground) occurred at the top

of the spring tide, and the result was that, though every exertion was made to warp the vessel off, the tide did not rise sufficiently to float her...

As the vessel lay on her side at low tide, the position of the horses was extremely inconvenient, and they suffered a greater amount of injury during these eight days than on the whole of the preceding voyage,...



Fig 2. Longboat on the edge of the fringing reef of Quail Island. Still some 100 metres short of the islands' beach. Sketch by Baines

Six of the sheep died. All the animals were suffering from thirst. A few casks were filled with fresh water from nearby Quail Island and lugged back in the longboat. And it was only on the eighth day that Monarch, minus ten feet of her false keel, was refloated.



Fig 3. Expedition members forced to dig a well on Quail Island to prevent livestock from dying of thirst. Sketch by Baines

(Gregory's Journal): Unfortunately this occurred at the top of the spring tide, and the result was that, though every exertion was made to warp the vessel off, the tide did not rise sufficiently to float her until the 10th September, when, by cutting off the false keel and levelling the surface of the rock, we succeeded in hauling her off, with comparatively little damage, as the weather continued calm during the whole of this anxious period.

Even today on nautical charts, the shallow waters around the Quail Island Group are shown as uncharted. Mostly this is because they are too shallow for serviceable use by larger vessels, but also the sandbars and sand-flats continually shift, bullied by large tidal movements and clashing currents around the area's islands. The expedition did recover from the grounding, though the loss of important livestock needed for transport and food did hamper later exploration. Gregory completed his trek across north Australia as commissioned and returned to Brisbane.

(Gregory's Journal):...traced Sturt's Creek for almost 500 km, hoping it would end in an inland sea; however it filtered out into desert. They [??] then ventured east and explored the Eley, Roper and Macarthur River systems, crossed and named the Leichhardt River and then travelled back to Brisbane via the Flinders Burdekin, Fitzroy and Burnett Rivers.

After the *Monarch* dropped the expedition at Victoria River, *Tom Tough* with Baines aboard supported the exploratory shore party led by Gregory. The *Tom Tough* after numerous groundings in the Victoria River finally became firmly stuck with significant damage to its hull. The expedition spent 9 months exploring the region, before Gregory decided to head inland towards the Albert River at the base of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and then to make for Brisbane.



Fig 4. Routes taken by various parties as part of the North Australian Expedition. (Russell Braddon)

While Gregory trekked across the interior, Baines was tasked with sailing the damaged *Tom Tough* to Coepang in Indonesia for repairs. Then to make for the Gulf of Carpentaria and meet up with Gregory's expedition at the Albert River with fresh supplies. For Baines there were to be many trials and tribulations ahead, but that is another story.