A visit to Murray and Darnley Islands. Qd. Nat.14:112-120

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EVENING MEETING, 17th November, 1952.—The resignation of Mr. J. T. Woods from the editorship of "The Queensland Naturalist" was accepted with regret. Dr. Ian Hiscock and Mr. and Mrs. D. Wale were elected members of the club. The President reported that sixty members attended the excursion on 16th November to Mr. David Florey's Fauna Sanctuary at West Burleigh. After discussion it was decided that "Proceedings" be reinstated in "The Queensland Naturalist". The President, Dr. E. N. Marks gave a lecture on her visit to Murray and Darnley Islands and Dr. Dorothy Hill spoke of the marine biology of the Torres Strait Islands. The following were among the exhibits tabled by members:—Shells from Grafton by Miss E. E. Baird, pressed flowers from Western Australia by Mr. A. Tucker, a specimen of *Pithecolobium inosum* by Miss D. Williams, fossil and present-day skulls and teeth of lung fish by Mr. F. S. Colliver, and snail shells from Tambourine by Mrs. G. L. Jackson. Supper was served after the meeting.

A VISIT TO MURRAY AND DARNLEY ISLANDS

ELIZABETH N. MARKS

In mid-June, 1952, Dr. M. J. Mackerras and I were sent to help investigate malaria epidemics on Murray and Darnley Islands in the Torres Straits. Several famous scientific expeditions have visited these islands, and some popular authors have written about them, but they are probably as little known to most people as they were to me when I went there.

All the islands of Torres Straits, including several within a few miles of the New Guinea coast, are part of the State of Queensland. They fall naturally into three groups, the Western, Central and Eastern Islands. The Western Islands lie in a broad band running north from Cape York Peninsula to New Guinea. They are, in fact, part of the backbone of Australia and the same types of ancient granitic rocks are found on the Peninsula and in these islands (some of which are quite large and mountainous) and at Mabulatuan Hill in southern New Guinea. Thursday Island, from which we set out in a launch, is one of the smallest and least fertile of them. It was chosen for the government settlement on account of its sheltered, deep-water anchorage.
We passed quite close to several of the Central Islands, which comprise a large number of coral sand cays not rising more than about fifteen feet above the sea. Coconut palms grow abundantly on many of them and some of the bigger islands are inhabited.

After eighteen hours in the launch we reached Darnley Island, the largest of the Eastern group, 125 miles north-east of Thursday Island and about 60 miles from New Guinea. The Murray Islands (Mer, Dauar and Waier) lie 30 miles to the south-east, and the northern tip of the Great Barrier Reef passes about four miles east of Mer.

Fig. 1

Fig. 2
Fig. 1—Medigee bay and village.  
Fig. 2—A village on Mer.

Fig. 3
Fig. 3—Darnley I. beau at the bazaar.

Fig. 4
Fig. 4—Coral bird, Dauar. (Photographed by R. V. Miles.)
The Eastern Islands are high rocky islands of much more recent origin than the Western group. They are composed of volcanic rocks—basalt and stratified basaltic tuff (volcanic ash) which has been deposited after an eruption. The tuff layers lie in various attitudes, in some place due to their position of deposition on the sides of the volcanic cone, in others possibly due to pushing up by the extrusion through them of basaltic lava. The layers of tuff vary in texture from fine sand to coarse agglomerate containing lumps of basaltic glass and pieces of fossil coral up to the size of a football. The coral has been altered in the process, but amongst specimens I collected, Dr. D. Hill was able to identify two species, both of which are still growing to-day on the reefs in the vicinity. It seems probable, therefore, that the eruption which formed these islands took place after the Barrier Reef had begun to form and they represent Queensland's most recent volcanoes, though there is no record of their activity in historical times.

The Murray Islands are composed largely of tuff. On Mer, which is about a mile and three-quarters long and a mile wide, the land rises steeply from close to the shore. The highest point is the hill Gelaum, 750 feet high, at the southern end of the island (Gelaum was a legendary dugong). The strata which form this rim of tuff everywhere dip outwards towards the shore and within the rim is the crater of an extinct volcano, now a valley of rich red basaltic soil. To the north-east the lava flow has breached the rim and basalt rocks occur down to the shoreline. Damar has two hills with a fertile saddle between. Water is almost entirely bare rock and is uninhabited.

Darley Island is about two and one quarter miles long and one and one-quarter miles wide and from all sides it slopes up gradually to a central hill 610 feet high. The island is almost entirely composed of basalt, but on the northwest shore there is an outcrop of tuff and the basalt can be seen overlying it. The sea has cut the tuff cliffs back, forming a flat wave platform about 15 feet wide, very pleasant to walk along.

The tuff does not produce very good soil, but the red soils from the basalt are exceedingly fertile. On both Mer and Darley the upper slopes of the hills are lives of trees and covered with thick, tall kammi grass. Trees grow along the watercourses and closer to the shore. Apparently Mer at least was originally clothed with open forest, but a boat-building industry estab-
lished by the missionaries there in the 'eighties consumed most of its trees and the forests have not regenerated, perhaps because the grassy hillsides are fired each year.

We were told there are snakes and lizards on the islands we visited, but saw only geckos, which squeaked about the house. Birds were not particularly numerous, the most frequently seen being the bright little spin-bird. There was a tame white reelfooted heron on Darnley and we saw the skins of two pelicans hanging in a shed. The butterfly fauna is reported to show affinities with New Guinea rather than Australia. The mosquito species were few but interesting. Anopheles farauti was responsible for the malaria epidemics. A new undescribed species of Aedes was found breeding in treeholes on Darnley. Another species collected there has been recorded only from New Guinea, but until more is known of the mosquitoes of Cape York this cannot be taken as evidence that the fauna originated from New Guinea.

The natives of the Torres Straits are of Western Papuan origin, intelligent, dark-skinned people with fuzzy hair and fine physique. Linguistically they belong to two groups—the Eastern Islanders whose language, though distinct, has affinities with those in the neighbouring parts of New Guinea, and the Western Islanders, whose language is allied to those of aboriginal tribes on Cape York. An explanation of the latter situation is a gradual penetration of these islands by the Papuan stock, who acquired the language of previous aboriginal inhabitants before replacing them entirely.

The Murray Islands are off the usual shipping routes in the Straits and the natives have maintained a relatively pure stock. All estimates of the population at various dates since 1862 have been in the vicinity of 400 or higher—the most recent is 460 on Mer and 100 on Dauar. Darnley Island was frequently visited by pearlers and beche-de-mer fishers, who employed southsea island labour and native missionaries from Loyalty Island intermarried with the Islanders. In 1888 there was a population of 76 Darnley natives and 73 southsea Islanders, so that present population of about 290 is of rather mixed origin. For example, we spoke to individuals whose mother, father or grandfather had come from Cape York (aboriginal), Solomons, Philippines, Rotuma (Polynesia), Jamaica (Negro).

The islands of Torres Straits are administered by
The Department of Native Affairs at Thursday Island. Many of them, including Darnley and Murray Islands, are native reserves, and the only white people allowed are native teachers, when available, and nurses. The local affairs of each island are in the hands of three councillors elected by the natives themselves, and a native police sergeant and constables see that the laws are obeyed. The Chairman of the council is the head man of the island. Another important personage is the Branch Manager, in charge of the island's general store and of the wireless transceiver on which daily conversations are held with the Department at Thursday Island. There are native school teachers and a nurse and a male medical orderly. Many of the island's men go away on seasonal work, as divers or settlers on the pearl-lugger or government launches, as carpenters or labourers on Thursday Island, or even as cane-cutters to North Queensland. Some have their own small boats.

Outside the store is a social meeting place, as only a couple of shoppers are admitted at a time. The women and girls wear loose, printed cotton dresses (some have their own sewing machines). The usual garb of men and boys is a bright coloured lavalava with a cotton singlet. The captain of Mer's lugger, 'Adiana, in which we sailed over to Damar, wore a scarlet singlet and lavalava. The Chairman, who went with us, had a white singlet and pink lavalava with a wide multi-coloured crocheted border down its front edge. Under the lavalava they wear a pair of short, white pants with bright flowers embroidered on the legs, which also have a coloured crocheted border. The lavalava, at first sight a cumbersome garment, can be quickly girded up to a length suited to the job in hand.

The islanders are cheerful, courteous people and there is a strong bond of affection between members of a family. A ten-year-old boy patient was brought back on the lugger from Damar to Mer for treatment, and his parents and six brothers and sisters accompanied him.

The people of Mer are great gardeners and each family has its unfenced plot on the fertile soil over the hill, often quite a distance from the villages which are clustered along the northwest shore of the island. They grow bananas, pawpaws, cassava, many varieties of yams, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, maize and sugar cane. Every coconut palm on the island belongs to someone. A happy sight was a family returning home laden from
their garden, flowers stuck in their hair, father with a palm-leaf basket of yams and a bunch of bananas slung from a bamboo pole across his shoulder, mother with a basket of pawpaws and children with sticks of sugar cane. Some people keep pigs, which are housed in bamboo sties and fed on young coconuts, and some have game fowls. Both are probably only eaten on festive occasions. We saw one goat tethered and there were numerous dogs which seemed to live mainly on sardines washed up on the beach.

Along the shore in front of the villages is a fringing reef about 100 yards wide. When the tide is low the water is often black with small fish about six inches long —so-called sardines. The younger members of the family take bamboo spears with about a dozen prongs the size of large nails bound to one end, plus an enamel wash basin, and wade out amongst the fish. Almost every cast of the spear yields several fish, which are transferred to the basin floating on the water beside the fisher. Fresh fried sardines make a delicious dish. Sometimes sharks come swimming in over the reef after the sardines, but they and the natives do not molest each other and there are enough sardines for all. The reef on the east shore of Mer is famous for its corals, but we did not have an opportunity to visit it at a suitable tide. Running out from the north and east shores of Mer in a series of huge loops are banks, about three feet high, of loosely piled basalt boulders. These are ancient fish traps, built in some past era and still used during the monsoon season. There are similar traps at Daru.

The only other relic of ancient times that we saw was on Daur. The natives had recently found, buried in the sand, a huge white bird skilfully carved from a niggerhead of Paride coral, and had placed it near one of their wells. The head was missing but the well-shaped body (about 2 ft. 6 in. high), in spite of some weathering, showed firm carving of wings and tail feathers, a crescentic necklet band and a broad line down its back. They did not know its history—'God belong olden time, not of our people'. It may represent the Torres Straits pigeon of which smaller carved figures have been described from other islands. There is nothing in accounts of their folk-lore and former customs that seems referable to this figure.

The houses of Mer are set on stumps three or four feet high. The framework is of bamboo, the floor of split bamboo, the walls of plaited coconut palm-leaf and
the roof of grass thatch. There is often a verandah at
either or both front and back. Doors are of planks from
packing cases, and windows may have wooden shutters.
Sometimes there are partitions inside to form two or three
rooms. The original island houses were round and this
type was introduced by the missionaries. The usual bed
is a woven coconut leaf mat that can be rolled up when
not in use. One might pass a patient going home from
hospital with his bed in a roll over his shoulder. Apart
from sleeping and storage of belongings, the inside of the
house is not greatly used. Cooking and other domestic
jobs are done in outside sheds of bamboo and thatch, and
meals may be eaten on the verandah. Most households
have a pressure lamp for illumination. A low line of
stones marks the boundary to each property and the
yards are kept swept and tidy. There is beauty and
peacefulness in these villages set just above the beach
amongst tall coconut palms with here and there a
Pandanus or a spreading fig tree. Poinciana trees grow
in profusion near at hand and must be a wonderful sight
when in flower.

Darney villages are more sophisticated and less
picturesque. Nearly every house has at least a sheet or
two of galvanised iron somewhere about it. They are
built on a series of little bays along the south side of the
island. Into another bay beyond the furthest village runs
a small creek. This watercourse is typical of those on
both islands with dense vegetation along its banks, part
regrowth after clearing and part natural—bananas,
mangroves, clumps of bamboo, taro, conveoi, various rain
forest trees, palms and vines, with Pandanus and man-
groves near the beach. Though the lowest reaches of the
stream are salt, there is no direct communication with the
sea, from which it is cut off by a high bank of sand. A
unique feature of this particular watercourse is a clump
of sago palms, said to be the only ones of the Torres Straits
islands. McGillivray, who saw them about 1846, was told
they had been introduced from New Guinea "many years
ago."

The islanders are Anglicans and keen churchgoers.
Those on Mer have their own native parson and on
Darney have lay-readers. I have never before heard
hymns sung with so much enthusiasm. The churches are
pleasant buildings of lime-washed coral cement with the
font a giant clam shell.

The first missionaries (London Missionary Society)
to come to the Torres Straits landed on Darney Island
on 1st July, 1871. The anniversary is celebrated throughout the islands as a holy day, and on Darnley there is a pilgrimage to the monument at the site of the landing. The day following is a feast day. We were on Darnley for this occasion and received written invitations from the Chairman "for tea, bazaar and dance". These were held on a flat grassy area between shore and hill just beside the church. At the end and part way along one side of the field were palm-leaf and thatch shelter sheds. The Chairman, Tet Thaiday, who was an excellent host, met us on arrival about 3 p.m., and led us to the end shelter where we were seated on benches at Hibiscus-decked tables laden with food. For such special occasions the housewives bring out their best china, good quality English ware in pleasing designs. The people sang a special Grace in their own language and the feast began. Highlight of it was sop-sop, a rich and delicious native dish made of chopped pumpkin, yam and sweet potato soaked in coconut milk, wrapped in green banana leaves and baked. This was accompanied by pork cooked in small pieces, and followed by rice custard and cakes. There were numerous cups of tea and several speeches.

We then moved out to inspect the bazaar stalls set up on the green, and run by the Mothers' Union and the Widows' Guild. Three small trees had been erected and attractively decorated with wheels of palm-leaf. Wares included baskets of yams, bananas, sagoes (native limes), dresses, blouses, children's clothes, embroidered handkerchiefs, woven mats and baskets. It was the direct descendant of an English village fête with real fête prices.

We returned to the scene about 8 p.m. Small children had been put to sleep on mats at the back of the shelters within call of their mothers, who with the rest of the population were seated round the edges of the green. The dancing area was lit by pressure lamps. Two teams of twelve men competed in the dancing and each team came on in turn, accompanied by their own drummer and chorus, who provided the music. The dancers themselves sang also whilst performing strenuous manoeuvres and sometimes shook rattles of goa nuts; their rhythm and timing were impressive. Comedy was provided by several respectable-looking matrons who might hold a lantern in front of a favoured performer, or prance beside him caricaturing his actions, or, highest tribute of all, rush in and shake a tin of baby powder over him, while he continued solemnly performing the dance.
Though the circumstances that caused our visit were unfortunate, we could not but appreciate the opportunity it gave to become acquainted with these fine fellow-Queenslanders and to see something of their interesting islands. It was good to be able to help them. I have far more understanding now of the far-flung responsibilities of our State government and of the way in which it looks after the islands of the Torres Straits.

PODAXIS PISTILLARIS, A FUNGUS GROWING ON TERMITE MOUNDS

*J. W. HERBERT

In many districts in the neighbourhood of Brisbane, as well as in other parts of Queensland and the Commonwealth, mounds of the termite *Entermes magnus* Smith are very common. If the termitaria of such a district, for example Fernvale on the Ipswich-Esk road, are carefully searched at almost any time of the year, fruiting-bodies of *Podaxis pistillaris* (Linn.) More will almost certainly be found on some of them.

This fungus belongs to the Tulostomataceae, i.e., it is one of the stalked puffballs. As may be seen from the accompanying photographs, the fructification consists of a stout woody stalk bearing at the apex an oval peridium, which contains the spore mass and through which the stalk continues as a columnella. The species shows great variation in colour and size; it may be whitish, brown or purple and ranges from two to twenty inches in height.

The largest specimen of which the writer can find record is the one shown on the right in fig. 2, which was twenty inches in height; this would have been taller when fresh, as the specimen has a broken tip.

This puffball is a species of world-wide distribution, found in most places growing in the ground in dry regions; it is not uncommon in Western Queensland, and has been collected in such places as Blackall, Maxwellton, Dalby and Charters Towers. These specimens are usually not more than about six inches tall. The same fungus is, however, common on the termitaria in moister regions, and produces much larger fruiting-bodies (up to twenty inches). In these moister districts, it is not found in the ground.

In South America, an agaricaceous fungus, *Rozites gongylophora*, is cultivated by a species of the ant *Atta*; this ant deliberately grows the fungus within its mound