

MISSION PIONEER OF ELCHO ISLAND

Rev. J. C. Jennison Visits Pirie

Describes Early Work In Arnhem Land

A keen anthropologist and a man who has given the greater part of his life to the advancement of the lot of the aborigine, Rev. J. C. Jennison, a retired Methodist minister and missionary, has been spending a day or two in Pirie.

While here he has been the guest of Mrs. R. E. Allan, Vera street, Ellendale. He will leave this morning on return to Adelaide.

Mr. Jennison is a foundation member of the Anthropological Society of South Australia and a member of the Royal Geographical Society. As a representative of that body he recently attended a congress in Canberra of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science. Two years ago he was vice-president of the geographical section at a similar congress in Auckland.

In an interview with "The Recorder" yesterday the veteran minister said that he had been deeply impressed at Canberra by the sincerity of Mr. J. McEwen (Minister of the Interior). He seemed to be a man out to give the natives of Australia a fair deal, and he placed before the congress some excellent proposals for the betterment of their lot.

"Unfortunately," said Mr. Jennison, "national affairs are so pressing in another direction at present that the native must wait. But in Mr. McEwen they have a firm friend, and he intends to go through to Central Australia at the first opportunity to study some of their problems."

Two Years in Arnhem

Mr. Jennison spent two years in Arnhem Land, between 1921 and 1923. At that time he was chairman of the Methodist Northern Territory Mission to Natives, of which he was one of the founders.

"I was asked to go up into the difficult Arnhem Land country to see what could be done to help the natives there," he said. "My objective was to examine and explore all possible islands and coastal regions of the Gulf of Carpentaria to discover where natives were most numerous.

"I sailed from Thursday Island in a boat purchased with gifts made by the late Mr. J. M. McBride. It was the crack lugger of the pearling fleet, and named Picton. I renamed it J. M. McBride.

"It took seven months to have the name changed, as it had to be done through Lloyds, in London. I personally painted the name on bows and stern, and chiselled it on the main beam, as required by regulation. All the boat slips at Thursday Island, by the way, were in the hands of Japanese pearlers.

"I sailed thousands of miles in that boat in two years. She now lies a wreck on the 'roof of Australia.'

First Flag on Elcho Island

"With a native crew, a white assistant, and a white carpenter I sailed 400 miles round the coast, searching all islands, until we arrived at Elcho Island. You may have noticed publicity given a police officer who recently hoisted a flag on Elcho. But many years before that I ran up the flag on a fine pole—the mast of a wrecked ship.

"At Elcho Island," said Mr. Jennison, "I found natives numerous. So we stayed there and constructed a mission house. At first the abos. were shy and watchful, but finally we won their confidence, and they went so far as to leave all their women with us while they went bush.

"Sailing among the islands at one time I explored Truant Island, an uninhabited spot, so named by Capt. Matthew Flinders because it seemed to be apart from the other groups.

"We put in there to take refuge from a monsoonal storm, and beyond wreckage of two vessels found nothing round the shores. Our boat was short of water, so I took a native named Jimmy Nundal and went on the island to search. There was a great

island to search. There was a great clump of trees near the centre, and to enter them we had to crawl on hands and knees through jungle.

"We eventually emerged in a clearing, and were astonished to discover a wonderful natural oval. We were looking on a fine city football oval, green sward and all. It seemed incongruous to discover such a spot in that wild land. Truant Island must have been a marvellous retreat for sea rovers of other days."

Mr. Jennison remarked that in the monsoonal season Elcho Island was a somewhat damp spot. In one year, between December 1 and March 26 the rainfall registration was 72 in.

Colorful Story of 1923

It was this veteran Methodist who did much to explode the story of 1923 that three white women were in the hands of the natives of Arnhem Land. They were supposed to have been survivors of the Douglas Mawson.

"The whole thing made a prime story," said Mr. Jennison, "and a lot of searchers went out (all at award wages) to find the outcasts. Naturally they were never found. I was out from Elcho Island in the same monsoonal storm which hit the Douglas Mawson, and I knew that it was impossible for the boat to make across the Gulf of Carpentaria in the teeth of a gale blowing at anything between 60 and 90 miles an hour. The search was a paying proposition while it lasted, though."

Mr. Jennison retired last year from circuit work. But he still retains all his old interest in native affairs. The Methodist Church, he says still has a fine mission in the northern islands. The Church of England and the Catholics were still doing valuable work. It was a good thing for many of the natives that Father Gsell, of the latter mission, was there.

"There remains plenty to be done up there, however," he concluded. "I often have wished there were more young men to go out and help the far-flung mission stations."