Cadell, Francis (1822–1879)

by Ian Mudie

Francis Cadell (1822-1879), by unknown photographer, c1880

Francis Cadell (1822-1879), river navigator and entrepreneur, was born on 9 February 1822 at Cockenzie, Scotland, second son of Hew Francis Cadell, mine-owner and shipbuilder. He was educated in Edinburgh and on the Continent at Cuxhaven. He joined the East Indiaman *Minerva* at 14, and s

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Francis Cadell (1822-1879), river navigator and entrepreneur, was born on 9 February 1822 at Cockenzie, Scotland, second son of Hew Francis Cadell, mine-owner and shipbuilder. He was educated in Edinburgh and on the Continent at Cuxhaven. He joined the East Indiaman *Minerva* at 14, and sailed in her to the first China war in 1839. He later claimed a part in the siege of Canton and in 1846 a right to the medal struck for officers and men who had served in the China expedition. In 1844 in the *Royal Sovereign* he visited European and South American ports. He was said to have been fascinated by the Amazon and to have planned to navigate its upper reaches in a canoe. He returned to Scotland in 1846 and for a year in the workshops of Robert Napier & Sons in Glasgow studied shipbuilding and the application of steam-power to navigation. In 1849 he attempted to raffle the *Royal Sovereign* in Adelaide and then to sell it in Sydney. He returned to Scotland, had the *Queen of Sheba* built to his specifications and sailed to the Pacific. In 1851 some of his crew deserted in San Francisco and he recruited several natives in the Society Islands, some of whom later helped to man his Murray steamers. He then went to Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, where he arrived in February 1852, took over the *Cleopatra* and made several voyages between Adelaide and Sydney.

Attempts were then being made to establish the steam-navigation of the River Murray. With his agent and partner, William Younghusband, who was a member of the Legislative Council, Cadell negotiated with the South Australian government which had offered a bonus of £2000 for each of the first two steamers to travel up the Murray as far as the Darling junction. In May the council agreed to pay him £500 for taking a steamer through the Murray mouth, £1000 for reaching the junction and another £1000 for continuing to run on the river for twelve months. Cadell arranged to have a wooden steamer built in Sydney and then travelled down the Murray from Swan Hill to Lake Alexandrina in a canvas boat with a crew of diggers from Bendigo. He also examined the Murray mouth.

Cadell's steamer, *Lady Augusta*, arrived at Port Elliot on 10 August 1853 and six days later he took her through the Murray mouth. Soon afterwards he started up the Murray with a barge in tow; his sixteen passengers included [Sir Henry Young], lieutenant-governor of South Australia. They reached Swan Hill on 17 September. Although [William Randell] had left Goolwa ahead of Cadell and taken his steamer much farther up the Murray, Young had three gold medals struck in honour of the 'first successful steam voyage up the Murray', one for himself, one for Cadell and one for the Legislative Council. Cadell acknowledged the award and an address on vellum from the council: 'No devotee could value a relic of the true cross more than I will prize that which no gold can buy and which to me will have a higher value than all the wealth that will ever roll down the Murray stream'. The government also promised Cadell another £4000 for further services.

In the next decade Cadell was active in the navigation of the Murray and its main tributaries. He formed the River Murray Navigation Co., which bought the *Melbourne* and in 1855 imported two steamers in parts from Glasgow. They were assembled at Goolwa and one of them, the *Albury*, reached the town of Albury under Captain George Johnston on 2 October. About this time the New South Wales government made a grant of £2000 for clearing snags from the Murray and Murrumbidgee under the supervision of Cadell. Although his method of cutting snags off just below water-level led to criticism, he was commissioned by the South Australian government in 1857 to supervise the building of the snagging boat, *Grappler*, which became known as 'the White Elephant'.

In that year the company dissolved but Cadell and a partner continued to run the *Melbourne* and *Albury* with their barges. They also bought the *Ruby*, which they ran between Melbourne and Wentworth, at the Darling junction, until intercolonial customs barriers became insufferable. Despite complaints of settlers about his trading methods, Cadell extended his activities into tributaries of the Murray. He took the *Albury* up the Murrumbidgee to Gundagai in September and up the Darling in January 1859 on a pioneering trip with the South Australian governor, [Sir Richard Graves MacDonnell]. On Lake Alexandrina he founded the port of Milang for shipping silver ore from the Strathalbyn mines and put forward plans for irrigating the Yanko-Billabong area.

In April a testimonial fund was opened by river settlers who admired Cadell, and £1100 was collected. This amount was more than offset in November when the *Melbourne*, which had cost him and his partner £6000, was lost at the Murray mouth. In 1860 when he claimed to have lost £17,000 in trying to open the Murray trade, he examined the La Trobe and Snowy Rivers, and proposed without success that the Victorian government finance him in establishing a steamer service between Melbourne, the Gippsland Lakes and the Snowy River. In mid-1861 his business failed, his stores at Menindee, Hay, and elsewhere suspended payment and he was forced to sell the *Albury* and the *Bogan*, which he had converted from a barge to a steamer. This left him with only the *Wakool* which had also been a barge. In August 1862 his father petitioned the [Duke of Newcastle] to grant land to his son, 'a man more of deeds than of words', but the British and colonial governments could not be persuaded. In 1863 Cadell sold the *Wakool* to the New Zealand government and next year superintended steam-transport on the Waikato in the Maori wars. When his work there ended, he was presented with a gold chronometer and with a locket containing likenesses of Queen Victoria and himself set in diamonds.

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In 1870 Cadell was whaling in New Zealand and appears to have unsuccessfully attempted to pacify a mutinous group of Maoris by trading with them. He then traded between Fiji and neighbouring islands and in 1873 pearled on the northern coast of Australia. In 1874 there were suggestions that he should explore the Murchison River area but he was too busy recruiting native labour from the Dutch islands for the pearling fleet. Two years later news of charges against him of ill-treating his pearlers and fishermen led a number of his old South Australian associates to protest that he would be incapable of such an offence. In 1879 he disappeared while either trading or pearling in the Dutch East Indies. Various accounts of his death were reported; according to a letter to his brother from an official in Batavia he was murdered off the Kei Islands in his schooner *Gem* by the cook's mate, who alleged that Cadell had not paid him any wages for five years. The *Gem* was then scuttled with Cadell's body on board.

Cadell is said to have held property north of Lake Victoria and to have gone exploring in company with John McKinlay; both these statements have been disputed. References to him are so confused that they do not agree as to whether he had a red moustache or even how his name was pronounced. According to one writer he was 'pompous and bombastic'; George Johnston, greatest of all the Murray skippers who served under him, described him as 'considerate to self-forgetfulness'. His family name is commemorated by Cadell Strait in the Northern Territory and among other places by a settlement on the River Murray.

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