

Our Coasts of Romance.

By FRANK REID.

THAT portion of our coast extending from Broome to Port Darwin might well be termed the cradle of Australian romance. Years before Captain Cook sailed his frail craft along our eastern shores it was the rendezvous of freebooters and adventurers. Dampier had threaded his way through the isles off the coast in his ship the *Roebuck*, and Dampier's Archipelago still perpetuates the name of the famous buccaneer. Many other spots on the Nor-west coast are made attractive by Dampier's association with that locality. The name of the bay, on the shores of which the town of Broome stands, is called after the buccaneer's ship, and there is also the creek where Dampier sought refuge from the fierce blows which periodically sweep over and devastate this hurricane region of Australian waters. Jutting out from the foreshores of the town is a causeway, obviously not the work of Nature, but considered by local historians to have been built by Dampier's men to facilitate loading and unloading when the *Roebuck* came into port. Tradition says that, somewhere in the sand adjacent to the causeway, the buccaneer buried treasure, but so far the secret of the covered-up hoard, if there be any, has not been solved.

Sufficient evidence has been discovered during recent years to prove that proas for a long period, probably centuries, paid annual visits to the Nor-west coast. No doubt gold, pearls, and luscious trepang proved specially attractive to them, and during these early voyages the Malays must have removed from our northern coast millions of pounds' worth of spoil in the shape of trepang, pearls, gold, tortoise-shell, sandalwood, and other timber.

Malay Proas.

IT is also known that a fusion of Malay blood has been made with the aborigines, for amongst the latter have been found many light, yellow-skinned, sturdy-limbed, big-bodied natives, with a better facial angle and features of a softer, more intelligent cast. These always displayed a braver front than their darker-skinned fellows, and in battle forays a light-skinned native was always invariably chosen as leader amongst them.

A fleet of Malay proas was discovered on February 17, 1803, in the Malay road, south of the Cotton Islands, by Captain Matthew Flinders. The chief of the proas, who was named Pobasso, informed Flinders that there were then upon the coast, in different divisions, 60 proas. Their object was to get trepang. Pobasso had made seven voyages to the Nor-west coast within the preceding 20 years, and he related that the Malays had long been accustomed to fish for trepang amongst the islands in the vicinity of Java, but in bygone years one of the proas was driven by a monsoon to the

Java, but in bygone years one of the proas was driven by a monsoon to the northern coast of Australia, and, finding trepang abundant, they had continued to fish there since that time.

The Malays undoubtedly secured the best hauls of pearls on the coast. Thirty years back the master of a proa called the "*Lakara*" showed a visitor from Port Darwin six pickle bottles full of pearls. He also stated that during the previous season a proa had taken away 36 bottles of pearls, but, no doubt, a great number of these were inferior. The aborigines collected

the pearls during the absence of the Malays, for whom they saved them, and received in exchange grog and tobacco. The liquor the Malays supplied to the natives was awful stuff, and the drinking of it led to many tragedies.

In the past the crews of these proas met with some awful calamities. On one occasion a proa was found drifting with 13 corpses, all far advanced in decay, lying on the deck. The cause of this disaster was a mystery. Many crews of the proas have also been massacred by the aborigines. Some years back the crew of the *Erang Polla* was attacked, but the Malay captain kept the natives at bay with an old carbine, and the proa eventually reached Port Darwin after terrible hardships. On another occasion the members of a wrecked proa's crew defended themselves for several days against the aborigines, and eventually escaped with the loss of several of their men. Scores of proas have been wrecked between Broome and Port Darwin, and the crews massacred.

Early Navigators.

MANY relics which were once the property of early navigators and adventurers who visited our Northern coast have been found from time to time, but it is to be regretted that few of them have found their way into our museums. Several years back Peter Erickson, an old Port Darwin resident, discovered an ancient cannon at Cape Bougainville. As this was a notorious place for fierce blacks, it is surmised that the weapon was mounted here for the protection of ships while they were watering. Johnson, a Norwegian at Port Darwin, found on Bathurst Island a tomahawk roughly made from a piece of iron, and which resembled the stone axes of the dim past. The aboriginal who owned the relic stated that there was a tradition amongst his tribe that, long before the arrival of white settlers in the Territory, a sailing vessel was wrecked on Melville Island, and the crew were massacred by the blacks. This tomahawk, which came from the wreck had been treasured by the tribe since the disaster. Another remarkable discovery, little known at the time, was made in 1914, near Broome. A lugger in search of mangrove wood for smoking trepang, anchored off the coast, and landed a party of

for smoking trepang, anchored off the coast and landed a party. The master of the lugger came upon a small cave some distance inland, and by matchlight he found on the rocky floor an ancient rusty sword, a brass belt buckle, two shoe buckles, and several buttons and coins. Stuck in a crevice was a rusted knife, and beside it was carved the letters "PER." Other letters had been obliterated by time. Evidently some old-time sailor had died there, and he may have been one of Dampier's men who was marooned.

Pearls of Price.

CURIOUSLY enough, in none of Dampier's chronicles is there any mention of pearls, and, indeed, even now, on the spot, you only hear of them in a vague, general sort of way, and few people are privileged to handle the big gems that come from the deep. The Broome pearler loves to surround his discoveries with the cloak of mystery. Occasionally, however, Robinson and Norman, the lead-

ing local merchants, whose luggers are numerous on the grounds, permit the stranger a view of some prize brought in. One, an oval-shaped gem of scintillating loveliness, lay embedded in the heel of a shell, awaiting the critical operation of release to decide either a flawless pearl of great value or mere baroque. "If it comes out unscathed," murmured Norman, "it will be worth £2000." Subsequently he was able to announce the successful deliverance of a gem eagerly bought for the London market at the figure mentioned.

Broome waters have given up pearls of much higher price, and there is a story of one, found about 15 years ago in shallow depths by a native swimming diver, which brought the phenomenal sum of £16,000. The famed "Southern Cross," lifted at Coosack in 1874, was sold for £10,000. Then there was the pearl presented to a well-known West Australian journalist, who hugged it to his bosom until, under the moistening atmosphere of a Broome summer day, it melted away. He had been treasuring a prominent brand of pill put up on him by an unfeeling practical joker.

Weird tales are current in Broome of pearls of wonderful lustre sold by night in lay-up time, and one of the most sordid took place in 1907. In that year a Jewish buyer named Leibgild was lured out one night by three Malays with the promise of a pearl for sale. He carried £300 in his clothes to make the purchase; was stabbed, robbed, and thrown into the creek. The Malays were quickly captured and hanged in Fremantle, and to add to the original story the decoy was not a pearl, but merely a glass marble from the neck of a lemonade bottle.

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Sporting Wife: "Yes, and he said John's system was all wrong, which, of course, I knew, for John never backed a winner all last season."