

NORTH AUSTRALIA.

McKinlay's Explorations.

(BY C. PRICE CONIGRAVE.)

At a distance of 80 miles to the east of Darwin is situated the mouth of the Adelaide River, one of the most picturesque but not the longest waterways in Australian tropics. Like most parts of the northern coast, the Adelaide River area is redolent with historical associations, the river itself having been discovered and named by Captain J. Lort Stokes aboard the famous H.M.S. Beagle, in the year 1839. A low line of reddish-coloured cliffs immediately to the east of the Adelaide mouth was called Escape Cliffs by Stokes, by reason of a very remarkable escape from attack by hostile natives that two of his ship's officers had there whilst the Beagle lay offshore.

In the early sixties, directly as a result of Stuart's explorations, the South Australian authorities took up enthusiastically the idea of settling and developing these northern lands. In 1865 Colonel Finnis, an officer of the South Australian Public Service, was instructed to select a site on the northern coast for the establishment of a settlement. He chose Escape Cliffs for such a venture, but a more unfortunate choice could not be imagined. This attempt on the part of South Australia to dig into the far north was anything but successful. It was an unhappy endeavour from the very start. Colonel Finnis seems to have been unfitted temperamentally for the chief position of command, and even before the company under his charge, aboard the ship Henry Ellis, reached the northern coast, there had been serious dissension among the officers. Personally, as one who knows the Adelaide River area intimately, I cannot conceive a more unsuitable spot for a settlement than that selected by Finnis at Escape Cliffs. The country thereabouts is flat and low-lying, and for many months of the year the land behind the coast becomes absolutely water-logged, whilst mosquitoes and other winged pests make life for man and beast a torment.

Following on a very miserable time, during which opposition by the residents at the settlement towards Colonel Finnis increased almost daily, that officer was recalled to Adelaide, and his control of affairs was inquired into by a Royal Commission, the findings of which were followed in 1869 by the departure from Adelaide of the then Surveyor-General of the colony, the late Mr. G. W. Goyder, in charge of another expedition, the object of which was to select another site for a settlement in place of Escape Cliffs. Thus it came about that Mr. Goyder founded the town of Darwin.

But whilst Escape Cliffs was yet in existence the South Australian authorities placed an expedition in command of John McKinlay, the object of this being the examination of various parts of the north.

DEPARTURE FROM ADELAIDE.

McKinlay and his party sailed from Adelaide aboard the barque Ellen Lewis on September 25, 1865, and after a tempestuous and uncomfortable voyage by way of the Great Australian Bight and along the Western Australian coast, Escape Cliffs were reached on November 5. On arrival there McKinlay was disappointed to find that two survey parties were absent from the settlement, these being engaged on survey work along the Adelaide River. In consequence, the only means of transport, i.e., bullock teams, were not avail-

able. In consequence, the only means of transport, i.e., bullock teams, were not available for McKinlay to move his stores as had been proposed originally. A lamentable state of affairs was apparent at Escape Cliffs, valuable stores and equipment being scattered about on the beach, many of these being barely above high-water mark. McKinlay summed up his impressions of the place by writing, "A greater scene of desolation and waste could not be imagined. As a seaport and city this place is worthless."

A fortnight after McKinlay's arrival at Escape Cliffs H.M.S. Beatrice, which had been absent at Timor getting stores for the settlement, returned, and McKinlay then arranged with Commander Howard, R.N., to convey his expedition stores to the Liverpool and Roper Rivers.

Despite the fact that heavy rain had set in, and with a certain amount of foolhardiness, McKinlay, with a party which numbered 14, left Escape Cliffs on January 14, 1866, provisions for 10 weeks being carried. The party crossed the Adelaide mouth with their 45 horses, being assisted in this difficult operation by boat crews from H.M.S. Beatrice. Then, whilst the main party, accompanied by a small flock of sheep, travelled upstream more or less parallel with the course of the river, McKinlay went by boat to a point 70 miles up the river, where a depot camp was formed, and where in due time the entire party assembled. From that camp the party went out east on February 7, plugging over soft, boggy plains, where the heavily-laden horses were constantly in trouble.

Notwithstanding short food supplies, drenching rains, and heavy travelling due to the party encountering fierce sandstone ridges and tablelands, McKinlay and his companions made a gallant attempt to work towards the east. The party was to have met H.M.S. Beatrice at the Liverpool River on March 31, but McKinlay at last recognised that there was little probability of their being there by the end of April, even if at all.

IMPRISONED BY RAINS.

By the end of March the party was practically imprisoned in a small area of country on one of the branches of the Alligator River, by long-continued, torrential rain. Stretches of vast swamp, lines of precipitous cliffs and wild, broken, sandstone tablelands gave McKinlay no promise of a get-out towards the east, the only way he wished to go. More horses died, and with the food supply almost exhausted, McKinlay concluded that he was defeated in his objective. He could neither proceed, nor could he retrace his steps along his outward line of route. He decided, therefore, to construct a craft of some sort, in which, perchance the party might return by water to Escape Cliffs. It was a bold decision.

The remaining horses were killed one by one, their flesh cut into strips and dried—biltong fashion—and the hide of the animals utilised in the construction of what surely must have been one of the strangest crafts ever put together in Australia in such remarkable circumstances.

A flat frame of small saplings was braced together, this being 21 feet long, 9 feet wide, and 3 feet high. This was covered by the horse hides, and, externally, with an old tent, which was the only piece of canvas in the party's equipment. All camp gear having been abandoned, the party was just about to embark in the so-called boat, which had been dubbed The Pioneer, when the men were attacked violently by aborigines, who, until then, had appeared to be most friendly to the white men. However, this scare over with no resultant casualties, all hands launched the Pioneer on June 29, and a start downstream was made on the ebb tide. As the

the Pioneer on June 27, and a short way down stream was made on the ebb tide. As the lower stretches of the river were reached, the water became brackish, and McKinlay then decided to make waterbags from several spare horse hides, as it was essential for a stock of fresh water to be available in the craft when the open sea was reached. Before clearing the Alligator River, therefore, the men filled every article with fresh water, the total quantity thus carried being 100 gallons, the weight of which made the Pioneer crankier still when it came to her being propelled by rough bush-made oars.

On July 2 the party reached the open sea, and the Pioneer was worked across the mouth of the South Alligator River. Under the influence of a strong, westerly breeze the craft wriggled and twisted like an old basket. Furthermore, it leaked like a sieve, and two men were engaged continually in bailing out in order to keep it afloat.

Under the effect of the blazing sun and heat, the hides, with increasing putrefaction, stunk abominably, and what the water that the men were forced to drink, from the hide containers was like may well be left to the imagination!

July 4 was spent in the party battling their way across Chambers Bay, at a point on the shoreline of which, four years earlier, almost to the very day, John McDouall Stuart had planted the flag and thus had celebrated his crossing of Australia from south to north. Next morning, at daybreak, all hands were delighted beyond measure to sight Escape Cliffs in the distance, and on arrival there later the "Cliffites," as McKinlay termed the folk of the settlement, gave the adventurers a very enthusiastic welcome after their remarkable voyage. Some of the men were very sick and feverish, this condition having been induced, it was thought, by the disgusting odour of the decaying horse hides, tainted water, and by the shortness of rations.

More is the pity that such adventurous endeavour was more or less in vain owing to the complete failure shortly afterwards of the Escape Cliffs settlement. North Australian history is somewhat doleful by reason of a long succession of failures; but, against that, the feat of McKinlay and his companions shows that brother Australians in those days pitted their bravery and resource against a set of antagonistic circumstances, and won through successfully.