

# STEADFAST SHIPS OF THE NORTH Epic Of Our Seas

By **ERNESTINE HILL**

**G**ROPING their way by charts that Flinders made from the masthead of the Investigator in 1802, two little cargo-ships, the Maroubra and the Noosa, are to-day the sole links with civilisation of a couple of thousand miles of North Australian coastline.

*Neither of these vessels is fitted with wireless; each is utterly out of touch with the world for weeks at a time.*

The story of their voyaging across the hurricane-swept waters of the Timor and Arafura Seas and the Gulf of Carpentaria, through the jungle waterways of magnificent tropic rivers, and along unknown and uncharted shores where the natives are still frankly hostile, will be read, in years to come, as one of the most inspiring chapters in our sea-history.

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**R**ECENT tragic events in the Territory have focussed a bright spotlight of publicity on these two little ships of the North, useless in the matter of defence, yet surely the most gallant in Australian waters.

Plying regularly across the Gulf from Burketown, in Queensland, to the Roper, the Noosa has been commissioned to extend her journey to Groote Eylandt, carrying stores and ammunition to the party of police stationed there for the wet season, anticipating

dition to the party of police stationed there for the wet season, anticipating a possible attack by wild blacks. A few weeks ago the Maroubra, from the eastern shores of the Territory, brought to Darwin tidings of the almost certain murder of two white prospectors, Koch and Arinsky, in the Fitzmaurice country of the Victoria River. It is not the first time that the Maroubra has carried news of this nature.

## **Solitary Pilgrims**

**E**XCEPT for the passing of two coastal steamers, monthly from the east and bi-monthly from the west, swinging round in a big deep-water circle to Darwin these two ships, each of them 26 tons and flat-bottomed for the passage of the rivers, are the solitary pilgrims, each on its own beat, of more than 2,000 miles of coastline practically uninhabited.



*The Maroubra in a reach of the Daly.*

To book your passage in either—and the writer has travelled on both—is to take your chance with wind and sea and throw down the challenge to adventure. But don't ask for a state room, with bath.

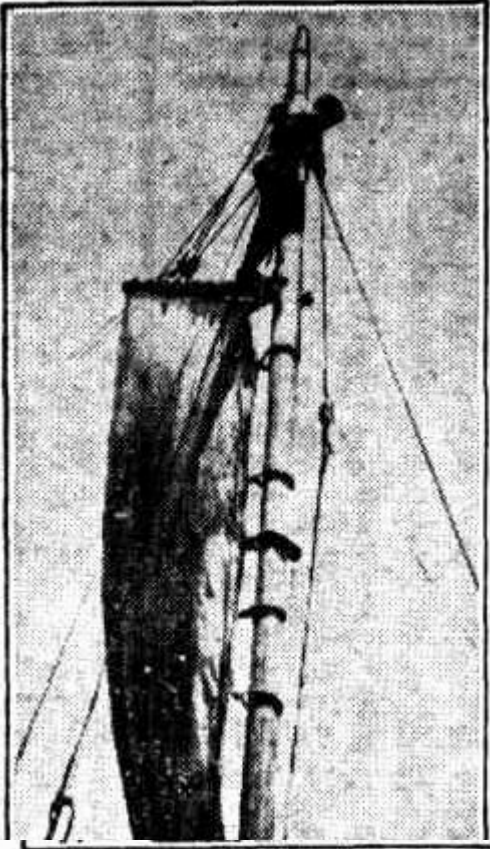
A swag unrolled on deck under the wheeling pageant of the night skies, a "thumb-piece" of salt goat and bread a fortnight old snatched on the hatch at meal-times, and a bucket for the morning ablutions—because it is a juggler's job to hold water in a dish in the south-easter—all these will be your lot. You will come back star-blind and sun-dazzled, burnt browner than a Maori, and with some of Australia's best secrets in your keeping.

### ***Top Of Australia***

**O**NCE in six weeks or so, from the haven of Darwin Harbor, the Maroubra, little more than an overgrown launch, slips out into the rollicking waters of the Indian Ocean, that are swept, in the summer season, by swift and menacing hurricanes. Her way lies out past Melville Island and the lighthouses of Point Charles and Cape Don, right at the top of Australia, 500 miles eastward to the isolated missions of Oenpelli and Millingimbi, in the Crocodile Islands, and 500 miles south-east along the Daly and Victoria Rivers

She carries a few bundles of mail, a few tons of stores, and is, perhaps, the only ship of her size in the world that can boast two skippers, Captain Jack Hayles, her owner, and Captain Harry Lawson, an old sea-dog of the Territory, who has sailed its waters for nearly 30 years, and knows them like a book. More than 70 years of age, with his sight now sadly failing, Captain Harry Lawson is one of the most popular of northern pioneers, beloved at Darwin for his unflinching fund of stories of "the old A.V.H. days," and incidentally the best repertoire of Gilbert and Sullivan north of the 20th parallel! The only other member of the crew is a half-caste boy.

caste boy.



*A look-out in the Gully.*  
**Odd Places Of Call**

**O**UT where there is no signal but a native smoke to tell her coming, skirting islands and shores unreclaimed from the wilderness save for the occasional abandoned camp of a beach-comber, she takes her course, loaded and unloaded by more or less civilised blacks, sometimes calling to a Chinese saw-mill of the Liverpool River for a cargo of cypress pine, and once in two years or so, when the hunters are in the vicinity, putting in to the old military settlement of Port Essington for buffalo hides.

It is 100 miles south-east of Darwin, just below the deserted tin-mining settlement of Anson Bay, that she enters the mouth of the Daly, one of the loveliest and most remote corners of Australia, and adventure begins.

For 70 miles, crisply her prow cuts through narrowing reaches of silver in this glorious tropic river, its deeply-wooded banks clothed with the living green of banyan and Leichhardt and glossy native fig, palmy clumps of pandanus that the black man loves, rich foliage of vines and creepers tangled in graceful arch and garland, with gentle geometry of nutwood and milk-

in graceful arch and garland, with gentle geometry of nutwood and milk-wood and the white-limbed paperbarks. Clouds of brilliantly-plumaged cockatoos fly screeching before her, heron and crane and jabiru stand motionless in the shallows, and at dawn and dusk millions of geese and quail and water fowl darken the sky.

**Barter With Natives**

**A**T every bend of the river she is met by tribes of the Berinkan and Mulluk-Mulluk, out in their crude canoes paddled by a bamboo pole, living silhouettes clad only in nagas of scarlet, eager to trade fish for tobacco. From the sandbanks and the rushes, disturbed by her thudding engines, literally thousands of crocodiles make for their own camps and disappear in

its silver ripples. For, for all its beauty and wealth of natural history and native life, the Daly is the most notorious breeding-ground of the great scaly brutes in the whole of the north.

For two days in the river, the Maroubra makes her round of the peanut farms, where a few settlers still are faithful, fighting the ever-victorious jungle single-handed. Into those dug-out canoes and at the police and copper landings, she unloads her little quotas of stores, bags of flour and tea, sacks of seed peanuts, coils of fencing wire, and the cases of "iron-clads" that are always the principal item of diet of these settlers, taking back their peanuts for sale and shipment at Darwin, with commissions for the next trip, and their letters home

**Mosquito Hordes**

**F**ROM the Daly it is another 100 miles of open sea to the Victoria, past the "bad nigger country" of Port Keats, Point Pearce, and worst of all, across the Mosquito Flats, where at all seasons the anopheles rises from the sandbanks in dark swarms of countless millions, a Chinese torture of concentrated malaria. Navigable for 80 miles to Gregory's Depot, the Victoria is a very different proposition from the Daly. Its low mangrove shores and poor cattle country are devoid of interest save for the outpost of the Fitzmaurice station, where a white manager, except in the mustering time lives wholly alone, and one steep hill, standing clear of the range that is known as Bradshaw's Tomb. On the beaches below, many years ago, they found the remains of Fred Bradshaw and three other white men, tomahawked to their deaths on the launch Bulwarra.

**Lost For Three Weeks**

**A**RRIVED at the depot, a tumble-down landing in the mangrove mud,

down landing in the mangrove mud, stores are taken on by donkey team for the outlying stations of the Vic-

torias, and the Maroubra turns her prow for Darwin.

From these tragically lonely outposts, several times she has brought the first news of a native slaying, old settlers found dead in their camps, derelict luggers drifting with the tide after the slaughter of a Japanese crew, white prospectors and trepangers who failed to put in an appearance at the rendezvous under suspicious circumstances. On the ensuing trip, sometimes months later, she carries out police parties to search for the guilty, and brings them back, naked and unashamed, with all the gruesome exhibits, to trial for murder in the Darwin court. Occasionally she has been lost or disabled herself, stranded on shores where the blacks are uncertain, or held up either by a hurricane or the rising of the rivers, at the beginning of the wet, to the tops of their trees.

There was one occasion, only last year, when three weeks overdue, with no tidings received, Darwin had given up hope of seeing genial Jack Hayles and the old skipper again. A search patrol was about to be organised when the missing Maroubra hove in sight.

### **Cruise Of The Noosa**

NO less heroic and an even more picturesque ship personality is her sister in desolation, the Noosa, a tiny auxiliary ketch that travels alone the mighty windswept waters of Carpentaria each month for a thousand miles. The Noosa is manned by a whole family. Captain Fred Ruska, his wife, who accompanies him as mate and house-keeper, and his eldest son, to swing the lead and tend the old-fashioned engines to say nothing of Sandy, cook and chief steward, a burly young Torres Strait Islander, who can do more with pumpkin and salt goat than any liner chef.



*Crew of the Noosa—father, mother, and son.*

Each month the Noosa picks up her cargoes from the Queensland coastal ship Wandana, at the mouth of the Albert, and makes westward through the Wellesley and the Sir Edward Group, with a call to the Presbyterian mission at Mornington, sole habitation of the Gulf. Threading the islands that few have seen since Flinders—islands of blown sand and sea-grass, where the turtles and seabirds nest in myriads, undisturbed in a silence of centuries, 45 miles up the Macarthur River, she comes to the ultimate settlement of Borroloola, a pub and store in the wild bush, with a permanent population of five. Often she is held up for days in the snags and shallows of this pretty river. Often the captain wades up to his armpits in its crocodile reaches to stake the channels with mangrove sticks and beacon them with hurricane lamps for the night passing. Over the worst crossings he is piloted by one of the Yanyuella blacks.

### **To The Mission Station**

FROM the Macarthur, 90 miles across the Limmen Bight, she makes to the Roper, Congo of the north, cutting its broad silver track through the jungle, and navigable for 90 miles at any tide and at any season by a boat drawing eight feet of water. The Noosa travels them all, her only stopping places being the mission station 70 miles up river and the police station 30 miles further.

Her mails delivered and her stores carried up the banks on the shoulders of the natives, she hurries down again and, across the bar, faces the steady beating of the trades, that blow mercilessly for ten months of the year in the Gulf.

### **Helpless For Days**

ALONE on a wide sea, helpless for days, with her oil-tanks lashed down and her galley careering about the deck, she battles every step of the way, 300 miles back to the lee of Mornington. Many a time she is ignominiously driven back to the island for shelter or stranded on a sandbar waiting while the Gulf blows over to New Guinea and back. Many a time her crew, no hope of lighting a fire aboard her, lives upon ship's biscuit and raw potatoes and cold water, when those sweeping head winds make a ten days' journey of one. An old skiff patched and repatched, twice already the ship has gone down, once in the Macarthur and once in the Roper. Refloated each time with the help of a mob of myalls, still she lives to tell



doated each time with the help of a  
mob of myalls, still she lives to tell  
the tale. Shou'd she meet the same  
fate in the Gulf, it would be good-by  
to her brave little family, and Burke-  
town wou'd not begin to miss her for  
three weeks!

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**B**UT all things come to an end, even  
the battling of the Noosa in the  
south-east trades. Back across the bar  
of the Albert, her sails furled in a  
glass calm, with good luck she can  
anchor for five days of serenity, wait-  
ing for the Wandana again. There  
in the quiet evenings, Sandy bends his  
black fuzzy head over a comic in the  
miniature foc's'le, while the Ruska-  
sett's to three-handed bridge on the  
hatch by the light of a hurricane lan-  
tern. With a smoke screen of damp  
mangrove to stifle themselves and the  
sandflies, ever merry and philosophic  
they are modestly unconscious that  
their lives are a drama of the sea.