

# THE PIONEER

THE BUDERIM HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

## OCCASIONAL PAPERS

Historical accounts from the Buderim – Mooloolaba area  
and North Queensland

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### *Author's note*

*The Occasional Paper series has unfortunately been in limbo for a few months due to poor health on my part. However I intend to continue, admittedly at a slower pace, in 2026. In future in keeping with the 28 years I spent in the north working partly on Cape York Peninsula, I will be looking into lesser known, but interesting corners of the history of North Queensland and Torres Strait. Hopefully there will be more on Buderim's history, but I make no promises. [Bill Lavarack]*

## **Occasional Paper No.40 Robert Logan Jack and Captain Billy**

**by Bill Lavarack**

In about 1975 while browsing in an antiquarian bookshop in Brisbane, I discovered a two-volume set of books titled *Northmost Australia* written by Robert Logan Jack in 1921. I had previously been on several field trips to Cape York Peninsula as part of my job as a botanist with Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service. The books were expensive, but the contents were so interesting to me that I had to have them – a purchase I have never regretted.

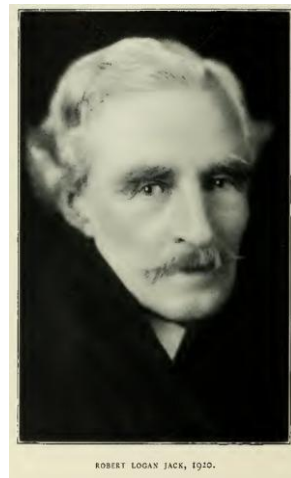
Let me introduce Robert Logan Jack (1845-1921) to those of you are not geologists. In 1876 Jack was appointed Geological Surveyor for northern Queensland and arrived at Townsville in

1877. In 1879 Jack became Government Geologist for the entire colony of Queensland. He was president of the geological section for the first meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science in 1888, and president of the Royal Society of Queensland in 1894.

His accomplishments in the field of geology in Queensland and overseas are too many to list here, rather it is as an explorer that we will meet this talented man. In many respects he was the last explorer of Cape York Peninsula following the ill-fated Kennedy expedition of 1848, the overland trek of the Jardine brothers in 1864/65 and Bradfield's surveys for the overland telegraph line in 1883-87. In the last half of the 1800s northern Cape York Peninsula was wild, unexplored country. Gold miners had established, then recently abandoned, Coen and the Jardine brothers had established a small settlement, (Somerset) at Cape York on the northern tip of the Peninsula, but there was no development particularly on the eastern side. Jack's expedition of 1879 was officially intended to locate potential gold fields at a time when official and un-official gold seekers were looking into creeks and hills all over the continent. The remoteness and the hostile aboriginal inhabitants of northern Cape York Peninsula had kept most white people at bay at that stage, with the Jardine family's establishment 'Somerset' near the tip of the Peninsula being the sole exception.



R. L. Jack 1877



R.L. Jack 1920

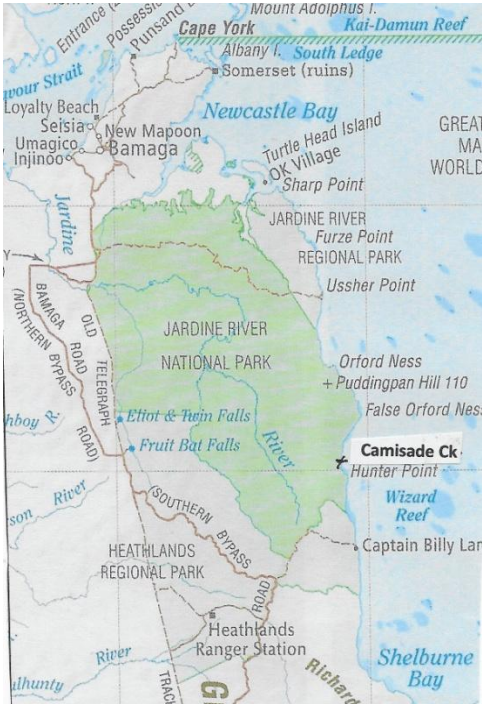
In 1879/80 Jack led a prospecting party to the little known part of Cape York Peninsula east of the track which would eventually be the route of Telegraph Line, and north of the recently abandoned mining town of Coen. While Jack's official objective was to look for possible gold mining prospects in this virtually unknown area, it is clear from his writings that he saw himself as an explorer.

On 29 November 1879 Jack led a combined party of geologists and prospectors north from Cooktown. Jack's geological party consisted of himself as leader, Joseph Macdonald with Jack's stepson James S. Love and an Aborigine named Charlie. The prospectors were James Crosbie, John Layland, George Hume and John Hamil. They proceeded north from Cooktown through the McIlwraith Range (so named by Robert Logan Jack after the then Premier of Queensland.)

Jack's party of four separated temporarily from the prospecting group and on 9 March 1881 they descended from the higher country to the beach in Shellburne Bay between False Orford Ness to the north and Cape Direction to the south (see map below). There they made contact with Aborigines led by an individual who identified himself as 'Captain Billy' and who had 'fair

English'. Jack named a nearby creek 'Captain Billy Creek'. Initially relations were good, if somewhat restrained and careful on Jack's part, as he was wary of treachery.

In his report Jack commented as follows after seeing that natives approaching the camp were trailing spears behind in the long grass. *'As we had repeatedly warned Billy that he and his companions were not to bring spears, we could no longer doubt that they meant mischief. We sent them away for the last time, warning them that we would fire on them if they again approached, and as the place did not afford a good camp for defence, we moved on.'*



Eventually Captain Billy and his group broke contact, although they were seen to be following at a distance. That night Jack's party camped on the high bank of a creek (later, for good reason, he named 'Camisade Creek')<sup>1</sup>. The group took turns at sentry duty, but nothing suspicious was seen until late at night when an attack was launched.

Robert Logan Jack has left us with a graphic description of the events that occurred that night and it now follows<sup>2</sup>: [Note - the use of UPPER CASE is presented here exactly as it was in Jack's report in 'Northmost Australia'.]

**March 9** *We camped on the north side of the creek on an open sand-patch, well grassed and separated from a scrub by the backwaters of the creek. The camp bore W. 33° S. from HALFWAY ISLAND, and NW. from the outermost island of the HANNIBAL GROUP. (CAMP 57.)*

*I have been blamed in some quarters for a want of firmness in not having shot some of the blacks on the first appearance of TREACHERY; and it is easy to see that an opportunity of striking terror and inspiring respect occurred when the two natives were found hidden in the grass. I refrained from taking advantage of that opportunity, simply in the hope that the affair might be got over without bloodshed, and from a disinclination to commence hostilities which might result in the loss of more of our horses, and we could spare no more. We had been free of the despicable savage warfare ever since we left the Nesbit Valley, and I was in the last degree averse to renewing the strife with a new tribe. The night was fine and starry. Considering the terms on which we were with our neighbors, I set a WATCH of two and a half hours per man, the man on duty to keep the horses together and look after the safety of the camp. Macdonald and I*

<sup>1</sup> 'Camisade' is an archaic word for a surprise night attack.

<sup>2</sup> See *Northmost Australia* by Robert Logan Jack pages 539 to 544.

*had finished our watches, and I had turned in for about twenty minutes, leaving Love on guard. I was dozing off to sleep, when a SPEAR came from the edge of the scrub on the other side of the water-hole, pierced the fly, and crashed THROUGH MY NECK above the right shoulder-blade, injuring the deltoid muscle. I rose on my elbow and reached for my revolver, when a SECOND SPEAR transfixed the stretcher from which I had just lifted my head. I gave the alarm and carried my sheath-knife to Macdonald and caused him to cut the flesh (about a quarter of an inch in thickness) above the spear. It would, no doubt, have been better to have cut the spear and drawn it out, but it was so firmly fixed by the tension of the surrounding muscles that all my strength was insufficient to move it. The spear, besides, was of very thick hardwood, and to have cut it would have taken several minutes. Naturally I expected that the flight of spears would be followed up by an immediate attack on the camp; and while I had a spear 8 feet in length dangling across my shoulder I could not have counted for much in the defence.*

*CHARLIE, it appears, had HEARD THE BLACKS stealing down into the waterhole from the scrub. He had tried, as he said, to wake Macdonald, who was sleeping in the same tent. He probably tried, if at all, very gently. As, however, Macdonald did not wake, Charlie's heart failed him, and he crept out of the tent and MADE STRAIGHT FOR SOMERSET. LOVE (who had been rounding up the horses), hearing the alarm at the camp and seeing a naked black fellow bounding along the beach, dropped on one knee and FIRED TWO SHOTS at Charlie, which pulled him up, frightened, but unhurt.*

*All hands kept watch for the remainder of the night, and a fusilade was kept up into the scrub. About an hour after the attack, Macdonald saw two of the blacks at the edge of the scrub, and some shots were fired in the direction, but I think they did no good. Nero, our dog, got on the tracks of the assailants, and we heard him captured by them, but he returned in about an hour.*

*The SPEAR which struck me was 8 feet in length and an inch in thickness at the shoulder. The last 2 feet of it were formed of a light grasstree stem hollowed out at the end for the insertion of the claw of the WIMMERA. It was BARBED WITH 7 inches of quarterinch IRON ROD, beautifully pointed at both ends. It had penetrated the side of my neck for 13 inches over the point, and rested with its thickest part buried in the flesh. It made, as may be imagined, an ugly wound which partially disabled me for the rest of the journey.*

*The SPEARS which entered my tent PASSED directly OVER LOVE'S STRETCHER, and must have killed him had he been asleep, as the blacks had been cunning enough to stand in the water-hole, at a level which enabled them to rake the floors of the tents with their spears. Charlie had saved himself, as has already been related. MACDONALD'S tent had THREE SPEARS in it, besides one which had fallen short outside. His personal safety was owing to the fact that he slept on the lee-side of a pile of pack-saddles and rations. An idea of the FORCE with which the spears may be propelled by WIMMERAS may be gathered from the fact that a spear was found to have PENETRATED A BAG OF RICE, and entered the tin covering of an oil-bottle, which was broken by the shock.*

**March 10.** *It would have been useless to have attempted to follow the blacks, who could easily have escaped to the islands in their canoes. The condition of our horses and rations alike made it*

*imperative that we should push on without the loss of a day, and if possible rejoin the prospectors.*

*Before leaving the scene of the attack, we broke up and BURNED the collection of SPEARS which had been thus unexpectedly forced on us. Quite an armful was picked up round the tents. We had to wait for three hours at the mouth of a third-magnitude creek for the fall of the tide. The place bore W. 15° S. from HALFWAY ISLAND. In 2 miles further we came on a camp of the PROSPECTORS with their tracks leading northward from it. In 3 miles more we found them on FALSE ORFORD NESS, and camped beside them. (CAMP 58.) Crosbie dressed and poulticed my wound, and he and his party overwhelmed me with kindness. For some days the wound was so painful that I had to be hoisted into the saddle and lifted out of it.*

The preceding gives us a clear impression of the dangers faced at that time by groups of Europeans moving in Aboriginal country and of the incredible toughness of Robert Logan Jack. His enlightened attitude is also shown by the fact that he refused to fire at the Aborigines when they first encountered them before the attack. After the affray at Camisade Creek, the two groups - geologists and prospectors, rejoined and pushed on to Somerset, the Jardine's establishment at Lockerbie near the tip of Cape York Peninsula.

## Further Reading

**What is written above is largely taken from two books:**

Robert Logan Jack 1921 *Northmost Australia Three Centuries of Exploration, Discovery and Adventure in and arund the Cape York Peninsula Queensland with 16 specially prepared maps*, published in two volmes by Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co., Hall Court, London E.C.4. Note: less expensive reprints are available e.g.: *Project Gutenberg Astralia* has an online version which can be accessd at no charge.

Felicity Jack, 2008, *Putting Queensland on the Map, the Life of Robert Logan Jack, Geologist and Explorer*, UNSW Press, 275 pages.

