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HMS *Bramble* and the south coast of New Guinea

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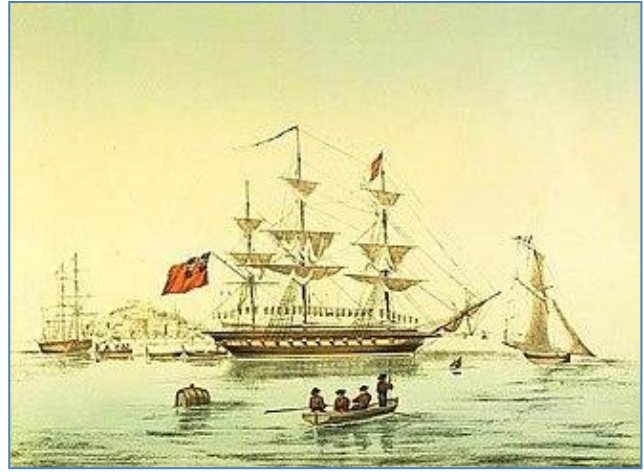
HMS *Bramble* was a 10 gun cutter launched on 8 April 1822 from Plymouth Dockyard. She operated from April 1842 to April 1847 under the command of Lieutenant Charles Yule as a tender to HMS *Fly*. Lieutenant Charles Bampffield Yule (1806 to 1 November 1878) born at Anderton, Cornwall, United Kingdom was a Royal Naval officer, explorer and author of the Admiralty *Australia Directory*. He was the third son of Commander John Yule R.N. who served with Nelson at Trafalgar and a mother who was the daughter of Bampffield Carslake,



In the 1840s Torres Strait was almost completely uncharted and the settlement which was to become Port Moresby was three decades in the future. Torres Strait had gained a reputation for difficult navigation, with dangerous reefs and sand banks. The area also had a reputation for attacks on shipwrecked sailors by the native people of Torres Strait. An important part of the duties of exploratory voyages of the time was to establish a safe route for maritime traffic between Sydney, India and Europe. While a Royal Navy Lieutenant based in Sydney, Charles Yule commanded HMS *Bramble* (see left) as part of the surveying

expedition lead by Captain Frances Blackwood in HMS *Fly* (see next page) from 1842 to 1845. Yule discovered and named Heron Island off Queensland on 11 January 1843 during his New Guinea expedition. Torres Strait waters were dangerous, but increasingly important to maritime traffic as part of the route between eastern Australia and Asia. There were several charting voyages in the mid 19th century by vessels such as the *Bramble*, *Fly*, *Basilisk* and *Rattlesnake*.

HMS *Bramble* (see illustration on page 1) was a cutter of the Royal Navy, rigged with fore-and-aft sails for enhanced maneuverability in coastal and survey operations. She was built to a design for 160-ton revenue cutters adapted for Royal Navy use. Her tonnage was 161 tons burthen for this wooden-hulled vessel constructed at Plymouth Dockyard. The initial armament consisted of 10 guns, typical for a cutter of her size and likely comprising carronades, not heavy cannons, for close-quarters defence, though exact configurations varied by service needs. This lightweight battery emphasized speed over heavy firepower, making her suitable as a smaller survey ship and tender¹ to act in company with HMS *Fly*.



HMS *Fly* in Sydney Harbour

From 1842 onward, *Bramble* acted as a tender to HMS *Fly*, an 18 gun sloop which was commanded by Frances Blackwood from 1842 to 1845. *Bramble* was important as a hydrographic survey tender in the East Indies and Australian stations, under Lieutenant Charles Bampffield Yule. As tender to HMS *Fly* in 1842 to 1845, she participated in the first comprehensive Admiralty survey of the Great Barrier Reef, charting key channels through the reef, in the Torres Strait, the Louisiade Archipelago, and the south eastern coast of New Guinea, including the erection of beacons at Raine Island and soundings in Endeavour Strait. Based at the Australian Station, *Bramble* undertook surveys around Australia including in Torres Strait. Acting as part of Blackwood's surveying expedition, Yule, in January 1843 discovered and named Heron Island off the Australian coast.

After April 1847 *Bramble*, still commanded by Charles Yule, was a tender to HMS *Rattlesnake*, commanded by Captain Owen Stanley. She undertook surveys and explored the southern part of New Guinea and the Louisiade Archipelago. In April 1845 Yule, as captain of the tender *Bramble*, was involved in the discovery of an island off the southern coast of New Guinea, the island being named 'Yule Island' by Captain Blackwood. On this voyage Yule in the *Bramble* acting as HMS *Fly*'s tender, 'took possession of' a part of the New Guinea mainland near Yule Island for the British Crown – a not uncommon practice at that time. The incident described in the following pages occurred on the coast near Yule Island.

Before continuing with the voyage of the *Bramble* in the 1840s, we should look at the concept at that time of 'claiming' or 'taking possession of' recently-discovered land for a particular nation. Google defines this practice as follows: *Taking possession of 'newly discovered' land was a formalized, legal, and often symbolic ritual used by European powers from the 15th through the 19th centuries to claim sovereignty over non-Christian, inhabited territories.* For example, Captain James Cook in 1770, claimed possession of the Australian continent for the British Crown. This practice was rooted in the 'Doctrine of Discovery', which held that European nations gained sovereign rights and title to lands they were the first to 'discover,' disregarding the existing inhabitants. Thus, recently discovered, or unexplored, land was considered as '*terra nullius*' – not owned by anyone. Local native people who were not Christians and had lived there for thousands of years, apparently did not count as landowners.

¹ It was common practice in the mid 1800s for an exploring vessel such as the *Fly* to be accompanied by a 'tender' – a small, nimble vessel which was used for inshore work in shallow waters or those with dangerous reefs.

On board *Bramble* in company with the *Fly* from February 1845 to July 1847, was a young man named John Sweatman who served as Clerk and later Clerk in Charge of provisions on board. He was from a well-to-do family and had been enrolled in Kings College where he showed an aptitude for languages. However, for whatever reason, perhaps a need for adventure, he did not continue with his education, joining the crew of HMS *Fly* when almost 17 in February 1842. He was relatively well educated and during his time in the Royal Navy, he kept a journal. In comparison with some other journal-keepers he had a rather modern view of the native people with whom he had contact during his voyages in the *Bramble*.

A point in his journal follows where Sweatman's diary can be compared with Yule's official log entry concerning a particular incident on 16 April 1845, during a landing in surf not far from Cape Possession on the coast of New Guinea:¹

This was Yule's description:

Immediately on landing I hoisted a union jack and took possession in the name of her Britannic Majesty of all the coast of New Guinea from the S.E. most point of land in sight to where Cpt. Blackwood had terminated his surveying in HMS Fly, according to the usual form ...

Sweatman's account reads:

On landing we found the union jack had been forgotten, we however made a substitute by pencilling a flag on a leaf from the notebook and this being attached to a tree, Mr Yule took possession ... the people giving three very low cheers, lest too much noise should attract the attention of the natives.

Fortunately, no locals heard the landing and the group headed back through the surf to the ship. Now, I ask my readers: which account do you believe? Sweatman, writing basically for himself, had no reason to denigrate his commanding officer's account, and is most likely simply telling us the story as he saw it, and I find his version the more believable. If I am correct, they are 'taking possession' of this coast but are not game to let the local people know it! Although Yule claimed at least part of the south coast New Guinea for Britain, his claim was never recognised by the British government. Great Britain was later to officially claim south eastern New Guinea in 1884.

Yule's survey work was important to navigators and was incorporated into volumes of the *Australia Directory* from 1853 to 1868, assisting in the opening up of Torres Strait waters for commercial vessels. Yule, in HMS *Bramble*, continued on to survey the coast of New Guinea in 1846, assisting Owen Stanley in his New Guinea expedition of 1848–1849 in HMS *Rattlesnake*.

Further Reading

Jim Allen and Peter Corris, 1977 (eds), 127 pages plus xxxii pages of introductory notes, *The journal of John Sweatman, A Nineteenth Century Surveying Voyage in North Australia*, University of Queensland Press, 1977.

J. Beete Jukes, 1847, *Narrative of the Surveying Voyage of HMS Fly, Commanded by Captain F.P. Blackwood R.N.*, T.& W. Boone, London, in two volumes.

¹The following two quotations are taken from *The journal of John Sweatman*, Jim Allen and Peter Corris, University of Queensland Press 1977.