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Edmund Kennedy and Cape York Peninsula

by Bill Lavarack

The history of exploration of the Australian continent is one of both triumph and failure. Among the former, names like Gregory, Cunningham and Stuart stand out, but it is the tragedies of Leichardt, Burke and Wills and that of Edmund Kennedy that are the best known with their stories of poor planning and just plain bad luck that capture our attention. In the following pages we will look at the ill-fated exploration of Cape York Peninsula by Edmund Besley Court Kennedy.

Kennedy was born on 15 September 1818 on Guernsey in the Channel Islands. His parents were British Army Colonel Thomas Kennedy and Mary Ann Smith and he was the sixth of nine children.



Edmund Kennedy ca 1848

Early on he had an interest in surveying and obtained a certificate in surveying. A family friend offered him employment in Australia and he arrived there in 1840. He was offered employment as assistant surveyor in the New South Wales Survey Department. He was then transferred as a surveyor to Melbourne, travelling there overland from Sydney.

After returning to Sydney in 1845 Kennedy was appointed as second in charge under Sir Thomas Mitchell of a large expedition designed to trace inland rivers in the central north of the continent. These rivers were thought, at that time, to flow north to the Gulf of Carpentaria when, in fact, most flowed south to Lake Eyre.

In 1847 Mitchell gained funding for a second expedition to trace the course of the Victoria River which he believed would flow into the Gulf of Carpentaria. It was later shown that the 'Victoria River' flowed into Cooper Creek and it was renamed the Barcoo River.

Mitchell organized two expeditions into the heart of the continent and Kennedy held important positions on both. Although these did not show the link to the Gulf of Carpentaria which Mitchell had hoped to prove, they provided Edmund Kennedy with valuable experience in leading an expedition into unknown country.

At that time trade between Sydney and Asia via the east coast of Australia and through Torres Strait, was growing. Port Essington on the north coast of the present Northern Territory was the only settlement on the north or north east Australian coast and it was in decline.

This led Owen Stanley, captain of HMS *Rattlesnake*, based in Sydney at the time, to propose that the east coast of Cape York Peninsula should be explored with the view that a settlement which could re-supply ships, could be placed near the tip of Cape York Peninsula. He further suggested that an overland route back to Sydney from the tip of the Peninsula down its west coast, could be investigated. He suggested that any overland expedition should examine this proposal in the field. He proposed that eighteen months might be needed for such a return journey and that it be re-supplied at Cape York.

Captain Stanley's proposal was adopted and Edmund Kennedy, now experienced in leading exploratory expeditions, was chosen for the position of leader of the expedition. Kennedy and twelve men boarded the barque *Tam O'Shanter* in Sydney on 29 April 1848 equipped with horses and carts, and a flock of sheep – a formidable expedition. They were escorted by HMS *Rattlesnake*.



The European leaders of the group were: Kennedy as leader and second in charge was William Carron, a 26 year old botanist.

Jackey Jackey - Kennedy's loyal Aboriginal assistant.

An Aboriginal named Jackey Jackey (or 'Jackey') was to prove an extremely useful member of the expedition. Many of the other members of the group were trusted convicts.

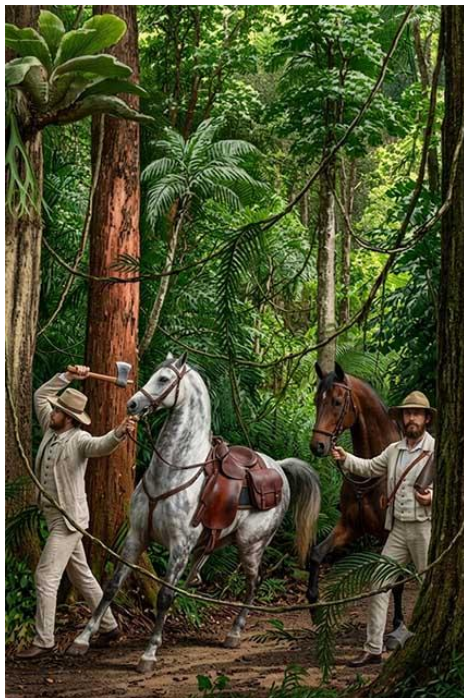
They were landed at Rockingham Bay on what is now the north east coast of Queensland. The landing site was south of the present town of Mission Beach. It was little short of a disastrous choice. On the then blank map it seemed a simple task to proceed north west away from the landing site on the coast, then head north. Virtually nothing was known in 1848 of the vegetation and topography of the area which is now known as the ‘Wet Tropics’.



The vicinity of the landing site was covered with rainforest, mangrove forest and swamp.

Landing the horses from the *Tam O'Shanter*.
From a very dramatic painting by Captain Owen Stanley

The rainforest was particularly dense with tall trees festooned with many epiphytic and climbing plants such as lawyer cane *Calamus* - a thorny cane climber with tough spiny stems and leaves and tendrils covered with dense spines and known as ‘lawyer vine’. This was virtually impossible for horse-drawn carts and extensive cutting and clearing was needed for horses and other live stock to make any progress.



This illustration gives some indication of the nature of the rainforest the expedition had to pass through in the first few weeks. It was dense tropical rainforest thick with robust vines and with trees spaced closely together. In fact it was usually even more difficult than the illustration shows and, even after abandoning the carts, it was laborious work cutting a path and herding live stock through.

The mangroves were impassably thick and grew in mud which was flooded by high tides. The fresh or brackish water swamps, as the name suggests, were impossible for the livestock and particularly for the carts. Crocodiles were present in the fresh or salt water areas.

In short, the party had landed in just about the most difficult environment on the coast and it extended more than a hundred kilometers north and south.

Had they landed in Cleveland Bay near the present site of Townsville, the way north, although longer, would have been through open eucalypt forest, admittedly with some rough river gorge country, but with open forests far more trafficable than the coastal rainforests. The delay that the rainforests caused was to prove a major contributing factor in the eventual fate of the expedition. Glenville Pike calculated that they made three or four kilometers per day in the rainforest (see ‘Sources’). Much of this country remains little changed today. The carts proved to be impossible in the rainforest and swamps and were abandoned along with some supplies.

After nine weeks they had travelled some 60 km since leaving the landing site but only 20 km in a northerly direction towards their objective of Cape York. This extremely slow start meant that later they were two months late and missed a planned rendezvous with the supply ship the *Bramble* (captained by Lieutenant Yule) at Princess Charlotte Bay. They were rapidly running low on supplies. At this point Kennedy discovered that the store man was stealing food from the store and he was demoted. Kennedy gave his right hand man, botanist William Carron, the task of monitoring and distributing the supplies on a daily basis.

Eventually they reached country better suited to the struggling party. The expedition then tracked around Princess Charlotte Bay and then between the McIlwraith Range and the coast.

With men and horses sick and tiring, Kennedy came to the decision that he must take drastic action. Only nine horses remained alive. As horses had become too weak to travel, they were killed and eaten. He decided that he would leave eight men, some of the surviving horses and much of the stores in a base camp near the mouth of the Pascoe River at Weymouth Bay.

He would then push on with a reduced group of the four strongest members of the party, travelling as quickly as possible to the tip of Cape York where he hoped to rendezvous with the supply ship.

With him Kennedy took four men including the Aboriginal Jackey Jackey, and seven horses. This left eight men under the leadership of Carron at a base camp on a hill with a view of the sea near the mouth of the Pascoe River in Weymouth Bay.

But things got worse a few days after Kennedy and his small group left the Pascoe camp. One of the group accidentally shot himself while unloading a horse. Kennedy left the wounded man and two others, while he and Jackey Jackey pushed on towards the tip of Cape York Peninsula and, hopefully, a waiting ship.

By this time Kennedy himself was in poor condition, but pressed on as he realised that the fate of not only himself and Jackey Jackey, but also that of the men left behind, depended on him reaching the rescue ship which he hoped would be waiting.

Kennedy and Jackey Jackey had been closely followed by Aborigines. On the bank of the Escape River, Kennedy was fatally speared by Aboriginal tribesmen, dying in Jackey Jackey's arms only some 20 kilometers short of their objective at Cape York.



Death of Kennedy near the Escape River, only 20 km south of the waiting rescue ship.
From: William Carron's *Narrative of Kennedy's Cape York Expedition*, publ. by Les Hiddins

Jackey Jackey concealed Kennedy's body as best he could and hid Kennedy's maps and journals in a hollow tree.

He pushed on and after about ten days spent evading the Aborigines and with no supplies, Jackey Jackey finally made it to Cape York and the waiting *Aerial*. Once aboard and having told his story, the ship set out to search for the remainder of the expedition. They searched unsuccessfully for Kennedy's body, then for the three men most recently left behind, and their fate is not known to this day. They then went to Weymouth Bay where they were able to rescue only Carron and one other man, Goddard, while under actual threat of attack by Aborigines. The other expedition members left at Weymouth Bay had died of sickness and starvation and had been buried in shallow graves.

Along with Jackey Jackey, only the two men, still just alive at Weymouth Bay, survived. Both were in extremely bad condition. In fact, they were little better than living skeletons. In Carron's case the bones of one knee and one hip were actually protruding through his skin and his legs were swollen to three times their normal size. He could walk only if supported by two men, but they were able to retreat to the ship. However they were forced to leave diaries, botanical specimens and other belongings behind. The health of the two survivors rescued at Weymouth Bay by the *Aerial*, improved on the voyage back to Sydney. William Carron lived on to the age of 53 but never fully recovered from his ordeal.

So only three men survived this tragic expedition - Carron and Goddard at Weymouth Bay and the faithful Jackey Jackey at Cape York. Jackey Jackey was subsequently praised and was rewarded for his bravery and loyalty with a purse of 50 sovereigns.

Several months later Jackey Jackey was able to lead the crew of the *Freak* to salvage some artifacts including Kennedy's journal and maps from the hollow tree where he had hidden them after Kennedy's death. Both journals and maps were very badly damaged by water and rats, but the parts of them that were legible shed a little more light on the travels of the ill-fated Kennedy Cape York expedition.

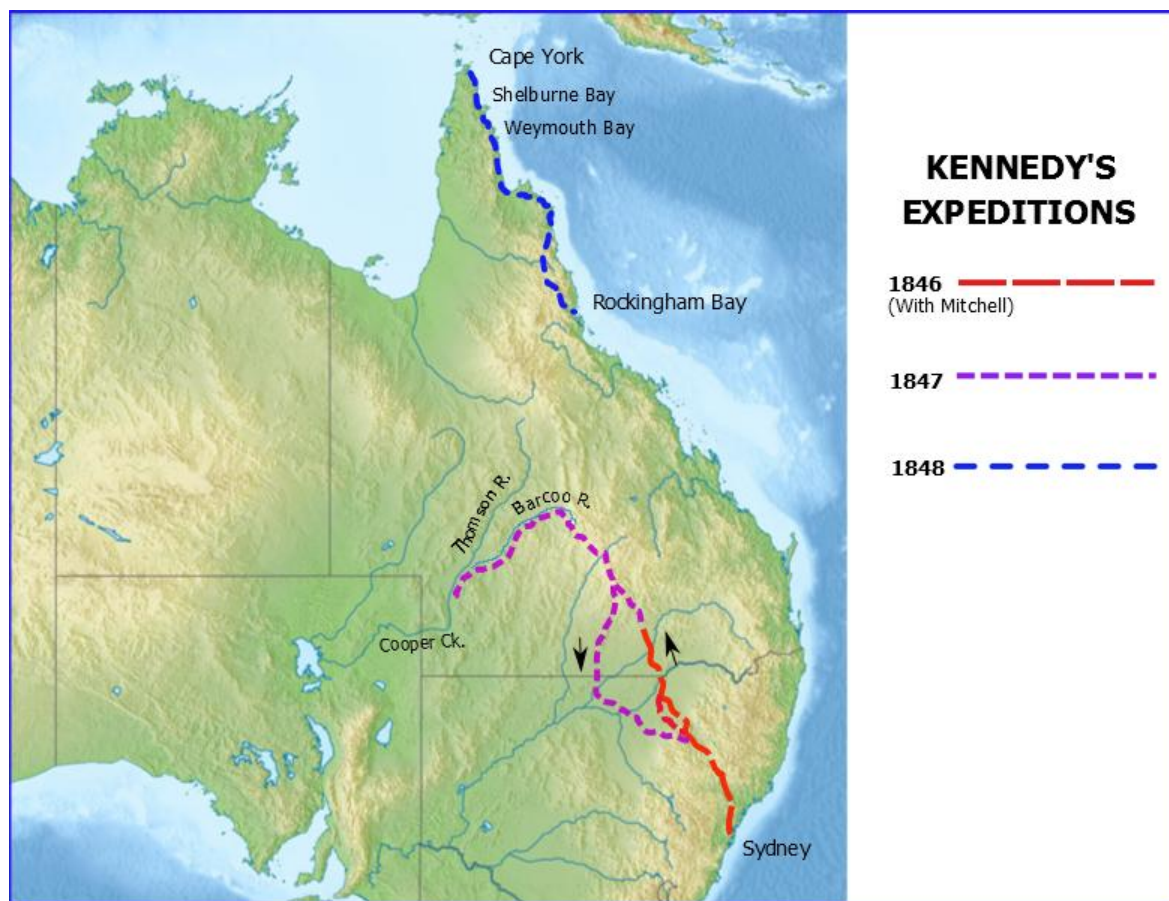
Sources

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A map of Kennedy's three expeditions.
From *Wikipedia*.

ADDENDUM

A new species left behind by William Carron. by 'Bill' (Peter) Lavarack



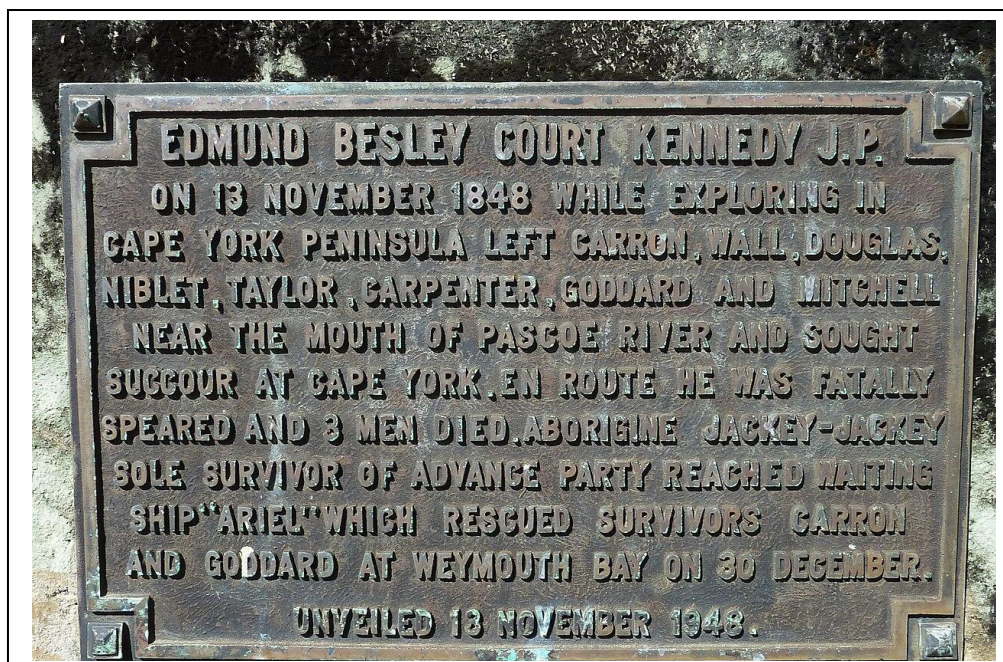
Dendrobium carronii.

This attractive miniature orchid grows epiphytically mostly on paper bark trees in sub coastal areas on the Peninsula. I found it to be quite common east of the McIlwraith Range; in the Iron Range area and north to the Pascoe River, all country through which the Kennedy expedition



passed late in 1848. It flowers in late Summer and Autumn and it is highly likely that William Carron would have collected specimens of this species on his way north. However in the hurried circumstances of his rescue, his collection of plant specimens had to be left behind and this attractive species remained unknown to science. While working for Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service on

Cape York Peninsula in the 70s and 80s I frequently came across this small attractive orchid species which had not been formally described and, in cooperation with Dr Phillip Cribb of Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, we described it as a new species - *Dendrobium carronii* (see 'Sources' above).



This memorial was unveiled at Portland Roads, Weymouth Bay in 1949, 100 years after the fateful Edmund Kennedy expedition.