

**THE VOYAGE OF THE
BONITO: AN ACCOUNT OF
THE FLY RIVER EXPEDITION
TO NEW GUINEA**

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The voyage of the Bonito: an account of the Fly River Expedition to New Guinea by William Bauerlen

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WILLIAM BAUERLEN

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The Voyage of the Bonito

AN ACCOUNT OF
THE FLY RIVER EXPEDITION
TO
NEW GUINEA.

BY
WILLIAM BAUERLEN, BOTANIST.

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PREFACE.

THE writer of this lecture, being a German, handed his paper to me to correct. I found it exceedingly well done, and did not choose to interfere with the idiomatic construction of some of the sentences, which, to my mind, were a grace rather than otherwise, as preserving the identity of the author and his German origin.

THE EDITOR.

SHOALHAVEN, 18th April, 1886.



THE VOYAGE OF THE BONITO.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

As a number of my friends have repeatedly asked me to give an account of my recent trip to New Guinea, I am here this evening to comply with their request.

We left Sydney on the evening of the 10th of June, in the "Bonito," a steam launch, of about 70 tons, and had pretty fair weather during the night and the following day; but on Friday, the 12th, a storm arose and continued up to Sunday morning. This was the time when the "Cahors" was lost, and our little vessel suffered greatly during that storm. On Friday evening a heavy sea struck her and smashed the landing, beside, what was worse, damaging the side of the vessel so that the water came running in quickly, and we had to continue pumping and baling (to keep her afloat) day and night, until we got into Moreton Bay on Sunday morning. The misery of those few days you may imagine, when I tell you that nearly every one of us was so sea-sick as scarcely to be able to stand. Yet there was no help, we had to pump or sink. At Moreton Bay we lay until the following Wednesday. Nothing was done to the vessel until the last hour before the "Wentworth" came alongside us to take us in tow. A carpenter came from the "Wentworth" to mend the leak, and then we went on again. Next day (Thursday) was fine, but a heavy sea on, so that we still had to pump much. However, as by that time I was over the sea-sickness, I commenced to enjoy the voyage, especially as Friday and Saturday were two lovely days, and the wind very favourable. The Percy group of islands and the Whitsunday group are magnificent; in fact, from Keppel Bay to Trinity Bay, you wind through a maze of lovely islands. At one time I counted no less than 54 within sight. That part of the Queensland coast is most splendid, and nothing could be more enjoyable in fine weather.

On Sunday morning we arrived abreast of Townsville, where the "Wentworth" cast us off, and we were taken in tow by the "Alexandra." We left Townsville in the afternoon, and passed Trinity Bay the following morning. About the middle of the day we called at Port Douglass, and then steamed on to Cooktown,

where we arrived about 7 o'clock in the evening, and left next morning about 7 o'clock for Thursday Island.

At Cooktown lay the "Advance," a Queensland Government steamer, which, according to promise by the Queensland Government, was to tow us from Thursday Island over to New Guinea, but when the captain of the "Advance" heard of the matter, he declared that he was never sent on such a mad-brained errand before, and that we could not get over the bars into the Ayrd River, which was our original destination, and if ever we should get in, we certainly would never get out again. Under such circumstances, he said he considered it his duty to point out to his Government the risk and danger he would be running by trying to get into the Ayrd River.

We went on in tow of the "Alexandra" to Thursday Island, where we arrived on Thursday morning before daybreak. The "Alexandra" brought us alongside the hulk "James Paterson," where she unloaded our cargo; and it was proposed that we should leave at Thursday Island such part of the cargo as was not absolutely required, and then leave for New Guinea the following Monday, getting steam up ourselves, and not wait for any steamer to tow us.

As the vessel had been making much water, it was imperative that the leak should be looked to before we started on our voyage across Torres Straits. Therefore the vessel was taken farther in shore on Saturday morning, and put pretty well on her side to get at the leak. This made matters rather uncomfortable on board, as we had to crawl about like spiders going up a wall; and as I was rather impatient to have a look at the island, I went ashore collecting, and spent a most enjoyable day there. But far differently fared my companions.

I told you that the vessel was lying on her side when I left her in the morning. When I got to the vessel again, about 6 o'clock in the evening, they were pumping and baling with buckets as hard as they could. They told me that soon after I had left in the morning the water came in through her side, and she filled so quickly that everything had to be taken out as quickly as possible to lighten her to keep her from sinking. It was only toward 5 o'clock in the evening that they got somewhat masters over the water. Then she commenced to rise, and by 8 o'clock she was pretty free of water. My companions had neither dinner nor tea. They had not a moment's time for eating; and besides that, even the stove was taken away to lighten the ship. All our bedding, and everything else, had to be taken away on board the "James Paterson;" and some of our party had been so much exhausted by continuous hard work, that they had to be taken over to the "James Paterson" to rest there. I myself stayed on board the "Bonito," and we worked hard until 2 o'clock next morning,

taking advantage of the incoming tide to manoeuvre her right into the wharf, so that she should not fill again, and to get thoroughly repaired. The following Monday, the carpenters commenced, but the work went on very slowly; moreover, under any circumstances, we would have to wait now for the next high tide to be able to get into deep water again, and so it happened that through one delay and another we were nearly three weeks at Thursday Island, during which time orders arrived from headquarters to abandon the Ayrd and go to the Fly River. This was a source of great disappointment to us, as the Italian naturalist, d'Albertis, had ten years before explored the Fly River, and it was well known that a great deal of swampy ground extended far inland on both sides of the river. At Thursday Island we took our Malays on board, twelve in number, so that our party by this time consisted of 24—12 Europeans and 12 Malays.

Some time before we left Thursday Island, Mr. MacFarlane, the missionary, arrived in his little ketch the "Marey" from Murray Island. He is a fine old gentleman, who makes a favorable impression at first sight, which is certainly not lessened by nearer acquaintance. I had the honor to dine several times with him at the house of Mr. Douglass, then Government Resident of Thursday Island, and now, as you are aware, appointed High Commissioner for New Guinea, in place of Sir Peter Scratchley. A fine, thorough gentleman, Mr. Douglass is, and I hope he will live many years yet to do good in New Guinea. The "Advance" also arrived at Thursday Island, with orders to tow us across Torres Straits to the mouth of the Fly. At last, everything being ready, we left Thursday Island on Monday, the 13th of July, late in the afternoon, in tow of the "Advance." We made only a few miles that evening, and cast anchor near Horn Island, intending to start early next morning, but during the night signals of distress were seen a few miles off; a large vessel had got stuck on a coral reef, therefore the "Advance" had to go to the rescue. We got steam up and proceeded on our voyage on our own account; the sea was rather rough; we passed several islands, near one of which, Saddle Island, a wreck was lying, and at night we dropped anchor under the lee of Turtleback Island. Next morning we made an early start in a rough sea; coral reefs around us everywhere. We went on well for some time, until about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, when we struck upon a coral reef, with the tide leaving us rapidly. We worked hard to get the vessel away, but it was not a bit of use—there we were, hard and fast, the tide still leaving us, until we had less than two feet of water under us; therefore all we could do was to shore her up, so that she could not lie over again as at Thursday Island, and try whether we could not get her afloat at high tide. Meanwhile the whaleboat was got in order, so that

we could get back in her to Thursday Island, in case the "Bonito" should have to be abandoned. Fortunately, at high tide, about 2 o'clock at night, by dint of hard work, we got her afloat and out into deep water, then we dropped anchor to lay by until daylight, when it was found we could not advance in our course, therefore we had to turn back again the way we came. After doing so for a few hours we saw the "Advance" from afar. We put up the danger signal, the "Advance" came up and took us in tow again, steaming along the Warrior Reef, until low water set in, when we dropped anchor about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, at a place where Mr. MacFarlane, in his ketch, the "Marey," was waiting for us, having kindly volunteered to pilot us into the Fly River. Mr. Douglass was also on board the "Marey," to see us over to New Guinea. Captain Williams, of the "Advance," came on board and told us that the vessel near Thursday Island could not be got off the reef, and had to be abandoned; her name was "Jan de Costa," bound for India, with 160 horses on board.

We made an early start next morning, and were rather excited, knowing that if all goes well, we shall at last, after so much delay and hardship, reach New Guinea, as we had now only about 30 miles to the mouth of the Fly. The excitement even extended to our Malays, who declared that there were men with tails in the country they were going to. The 30 miles of sea we had to cross was fearfully rough, so that nearly all hands were sea-sick again. I was amongst the few who were not sick, so that I was able to steer, but we were all glad to get into the smoother waters of the mouth of the Fly, where we exchanged three ringing cheers with the "Advance," who now bade us "Farewell," and turned back to Thursday Island again.

Being now in the mouth of the Fly we followed the lead of the "Marey" with the shores of New Guinea in sight. The mouth of the Fly is from 20 to 30 miles wide; the water was rather muddy, and fresh enough to drink. Some driftwood floating about gave indication of a recent flood. We soon got Mibu Island in sight, and steamed along it for some distance, until we made round a point, where we cast anchor close to the shore. A missionary boat, the "Venture," was lying there waiting for us, and also informed us that another larger vessel had gone up that channel of the river; this no doubt was the "Mavis," a schooner which had been lent by the Queensland Government to carry our coals, and which passed us some distance away from Thursday Island. Next morning we were impatient to set foot for the first time on the soil of New Guinea, and two steps into the jungle, which comes down to the water's edge, reveals at once no end of wonders. One of the greatest sights was a new kind of coral tree in full flower, the petals of the flowers being pure white, and the stamens red. We had to make our way through about a mile of