

***THE COAST OF THE FOUR GRAVES***

***A Prose Poem For Narration  
And Accompanying Music***

***Mark Smith***

# **THE COAST OF THE FOUR GRAVES**

## **PROLOGUE**

*The Mala-ola-men  
The Macassans  
European Visitors*

## **PART ONE**

*Fort Dundas on Melville Isle (1824–1829)  
Captain J.J. Bremer  
Captain Manners Barlow  
Major Campbell*

## **PART TWO**

*Fort Wellington – Raffles Bay (1827–1829)  
Commandant Henry Smyth  
Captain Collett Barker*

## **PART THREE**

*Victoria – Port Essington (1838–1849)  
Captain John McArthur RM  
Visit of HMS Beagle  
Ludwig Leichhardt  
Captain Keppel*

## **PART FOUR**

*Palmerston – Escape Cliffs (1864–1866)  
Lt Col Boyle Traviss Finniss*

## **EPILOGUE**

## **POSTLUDE**

*A Fortress Strong*

## **PROLOGUE**

### ***The Mala-ola-men***

*Lost in antiquity  
are the origins of the Mala-ola-men  
the Tiwi of Melville Isle,  
with Pukumani corroborees,  
painted poles, and decorated bodies  
of paint and feathers –  
visitors from the dreamtime  
in an awakening land.*

### ***The Macassans***

*Not so the Bughis of Macassar,  
trepanners of monsoons  
to the great southland  
in fleets of prahus,  
high galleoned stern,  
trident masted, headsailed,  
with outriggered canoes –  
commercial exploiters that band,  
first to ensnare the soul of black –  
not last to invade his land!*

*Wild haired, clean shaven,  
snicker-sneed sarong,  
headbanded, turbaned,  
they gossiped trade,  
with rice-wine, katjes of tobacco,  
tamarind seeds, iron boilers  
in exchange for the bêche-de-mer,  
the favours of aboriginal women.*

### ***European Visitors***

*Portuguese, Spaniard, Dutchman,  
Frenchman, Englishman,  
in turn, visited the northern coast.  
De Sequiera, de Torres, Tasman,  
Nicholas Baudin chartered,  
but only the Englishman, Matthew Flinders,  
conversed with Pobasso –  
the Macassan chief,*

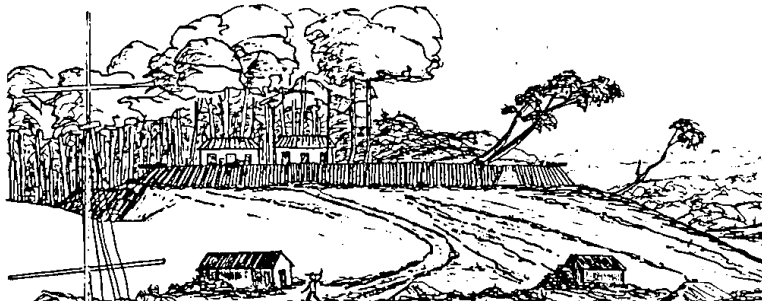
*systematic plunder of sea-slugs,  
that dark-skinned trading thief.*

*It would be the English  
who would return,  
time and again,  
to steal the trade of Pobasso's men.*

*It would be the English  
from New South Wales  
who would seek to establish  
permanent trading posts.  
They started among the Mala-ola-men,  
ended, defeated by their ghosts!*

## **PART ONE**

### **FORT DUNDAS ON MELVILLE ISLE (1824 - 1829)**



*William Barnes, trader of the north,  
alerted Lord Bathurst  
to the successful exploitation  
of the natural resources  
by the Bughis Macassans.*

### **Captain J.J. Bremer**

*In due course,  
the Governor of New South Wales,  
commanded Captain J.J. Bremer*

*to sail with three ships  
to Port Essington  
to Union Jack  
the third settlement outside Port Jackson.*

*HMS Tamar, Countess of Harcourt,  
Lady Nelson – Flinders old faithful,  
sailed from New South Wales  
to New Holland –  
as yet unclaimed, unsettled,  
into the grand harbour of Port Essington.*

*Port entered,  
on the 24th September 1824,  
hoisted colours,  
on that distant shore.*

*For want of fresh water  
Bremer transferred  
the site of the settlement  
from Port Essington to Melville Island  
there to establish,  
in honour of England's First Lord of the Admiralty –  
Fort Dundas.*

*Union Jacked again,  
volleys and thunder,  
Bremer extended west  
the boundary of New South Wales  
royal saluted  
and wet the whistle  
of the third state  
in the land down-under.*

### **Captain Manners Barlow**

*Bremer, on departure,  
expected Commandant Captain Manners Barlow  
to establish a trading post  
that would out-affle  
Sir Stamford's Singapore.*

*Bremer did not stay long enough*

*to realise that the settlers  
would have to contend  
with sandflies, mosquitoes,  
white ants, lack of provisions, scurvy,  
and the Mala-ola-men!*

*Barlow battled on,  
little did he know,  
that in the tropical heat,  
the insidious destruction of white ants,  
he would wilt as the corn  
he sought to grow.*

*Barlow replaced the livestock from Sydney  
with Buffalo from Timor,  
but they trod the sugar cane,  
the limes, the oranges and the bananas.*

*Where the buffalo did not wreak havoc  
he had to contend with cyclone –  
the ghosts of Mala-ola  
someone pointed the bone!*

### **Major Campbell**

*Colonial Secretary Barrow  
relieved Barlow  
by despatching Major Campbell  
to the demoralised garrison  
at Fort Dundas.*

*Campbell's only success was to keep  
Barlow's unblemished record –  
the very presence of the settlement  
repulsed the Malayan prahus.*

*Trade was virtually non-existent.  
Campbell could not contain  
his Scottish temper,  
nor could he contend  
with mould and disease –  
or the spears of the Mala-ola-men!*

*Yes, the spears!  
Dr Gold – thirty one spear wounds,  
storekeeper Green – seventeen,  
plus Lieutenant Hick's wife dead.*

*Clogs for shoes  
clothes all tattered  
to abandon the settlement*

*all that mattered.*

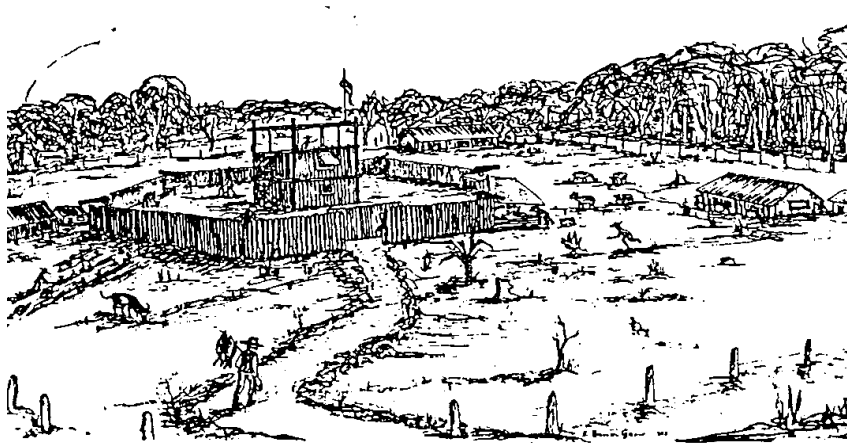


*While Campbell cried to Whitehall for relief  
the East-India Trade Committee  
planned otherwise.*

*A new settlement on the Coburg Peninsula  
where Macassan trepangers sailed.  
Dundas offered no trade.  
No match at all the Bughis'.  
Not when white man paid!*

## **PART TWO**

### **FORT WELLINGTON – RAFFLES BAY (1827 – 1829)**



#### **Commandant Henry Smyth**

*James Stirling eventually landed  
on the Coburg Peninsula  
celebrated the twelfth anniversary  
of the Battle of Waterloo,  
volleyed the weaponry of HMS Success,  
honoured Wellington,  
and drank to the future of settlement 'number two'.*

*He left Commandant Henry Smyth, however,  
to drink the lees,  
life could not be starker.  
mithered by fever,  
squalor, starvation, sandflies  
(and the wily Iwaija),*

*Smyth crumbled  
to be replaced, within the year,  
by Captain Collett Barker.*

**Captain Collett Barker**

*Barker was a different kettle of fish –  
that new-breed of consultants  
who seek peace at any price.  
He sought favour with the Iwaija,  
welcomed the trepang-seekers,  
and the transferred remnants of Fort Dundas.*

*For all of his enthusiasm and optimism  
the powers that be had a re-think.  
Under the direction of Sir George Grey,  
The Colonial Secretary from afar  
Barker abandoned Fort Wellington.  
A disappointed man, he called for a drink.*

*Second blunder in the north,  
another false beginning.  
Against those bureaucratic foes,  
little chance of winning!*

**PART THREE**

**VICTORIA – PORT ESSINGTON (1838 – 1849)**



**Captain John McArthur RM**

*Fourteen years –*

*two abandoned settlements later,  
the possibilities of an Empire  
under a young queen,  
the British Empire builders  
reverted to the site,  
of the proposed first northern settlement –  
Port Essington on the Coburg Peninsula.  
Great coats on and great coats off,  
each false start  
followed by a fresh beginning.  
Stubbornness in the face of failure,  
oft times a virtue –  
sometimes a new way of sinning*

*The Britomart, Alligator and Orontes  
loaded to the gunwales with stores,  
sailed to Adam Head  
and confirmed the new queen  
on the 13 December 1838 \_  
this settlement not to be insular.*

*The streets were paper-barked by huts,  
the Malayan visitors welcomed,  
and Captain J.J. Bremer –  
the mayor of Melville Isle,  
entrusted the new trading post  
to one Captain John McArthur RM.*

### **Visit of HMS Beagle**

*In July 1839 HMS Beagle  
under Captain J.C. Wickham  
called on Victoria.*

*First Officer Lieutenant John Lort Stokes  
used the occasion  
to explore the coast  
and was successful in finding  
a sheltered port which he named  
in honour of the illustrious scientist,  
ferried by the Beagle across the world \_  
none other than Charles Darwin.*

*Stokes, with Fitzmaurice and Keys  
sailed to Adam Bay  
at the mouth of the Adelaide River*

*where they barely escaped with their lives  
at the hands of the Maranangus.*

*Darwin and Escape Cliffs –  
destined to appear on the map  
of Northern history.*

### **Ludwig Leichhardt**

*Not to be overlooked,  
the Germans,  
in the personage  
of Ludwig Leichhardt,  
were represented in northern exploration.*

*Ludwig courted Victoria from afar.  
Naked, footsore, near death,  
he travelled overland from Queensland  
across the Nicolson, McArthur, Limmen and Roper  
for fourteen months,  
to kiss her hand.*

### **Captain Keppel**

*After a period of eleven years  
McArthur asked for relief,  
from such inconsequential vagaries  
as cyclones, earthquakes, shipwrecked supplies,  
death, heat, infestation and disease.*

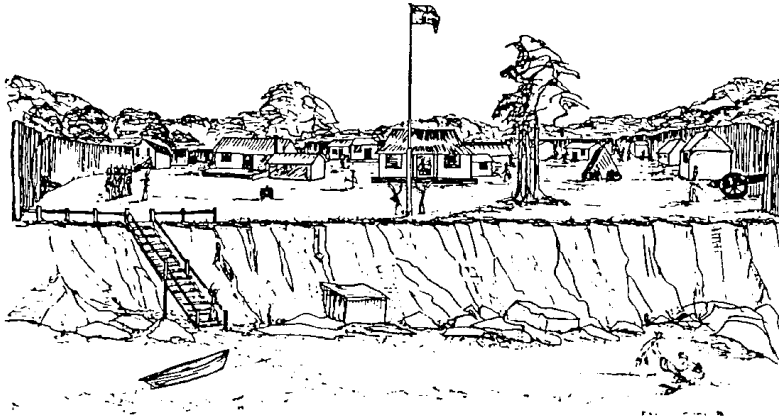
*It arrived in the form of Captain Keppel  
who, taking one look at beloved Victoria,  
decided she should be blasted  
from the face of the earth.*

*When Keppel handed the remnants  
of the settlement  
back to the Iwaija  
another chapter closed.  
on English settlement –  
the third failure.*

*"The most heroic,  
the most hopeless in British history,"  
given back to natives.  
The failure – no mystery.*

## **PART FOUR**

### **PALMERSTON – ESCAPE CLIFFS (1864 – 1866)**



#### **Lieutenant Boyle Traviss Finniss**

*South Australia had, by 1864,  
taken responsibility for development  
on Australia's northern shore.*

*It placed confidence  
in the ignoramus BTF  
Lieutenant-Colonel Boyle Traviss Finniss,  
that "Bloody Thundering Fool."*

*Unlike McArthur of Victoria  
BTF antagonised and massacred the aborigines,  
incited his own to mutiny.  
Stubborn, unwilling to reason  
he lasted a very short season.  
Recalled after two years  
he faced a Royal Commission  
for mismanagement and poor industrial relations.  
The only future left for him:-  
to manage cattle stations.*

*J.T. Manton closed the books  
and left the scrub and the bush  
to cover the grave  
on the fourth failed attempt  
to settle Arnhem's shore.*

*Palmerston, one day, would reappear  
where Stokes discovered Darwin;  
the agony of all the years  
marked an end to isolation.*

## **EPILOGUE**

*The dreaming time is vanishing,  
now settlers have a stake.  
With trading ties developing,  
the land is now awake.*

*Once they lived uncomfortably,  
sickened by their fears.  
Unsuccessful with their trade,  
those embattled pioneers.*

*Four unsuccessful starts,  
against unequal odds.  
Returned at last the land they settled,  
to all those native gods.*

*Those four graves along the coast  
buried false hopes of the past.  
Foundation ventures of the spirit  
Darwin – a settlement at last!*

## **POSTLUDE**

### **A Fortress Strong**

*Between five bells one can live,  
between four graves even more.  
Wanderers search for Eden south,  
settle on Arnhem's shore.*

*Some sailed twice with Bremer,  
others took Stirling's command,  
with Finniss some to Escape Cliffs,  
novice settlers each band.*

*Dundas was first on Melville Isle,  
Fort Wellington at Raffles Bay,*

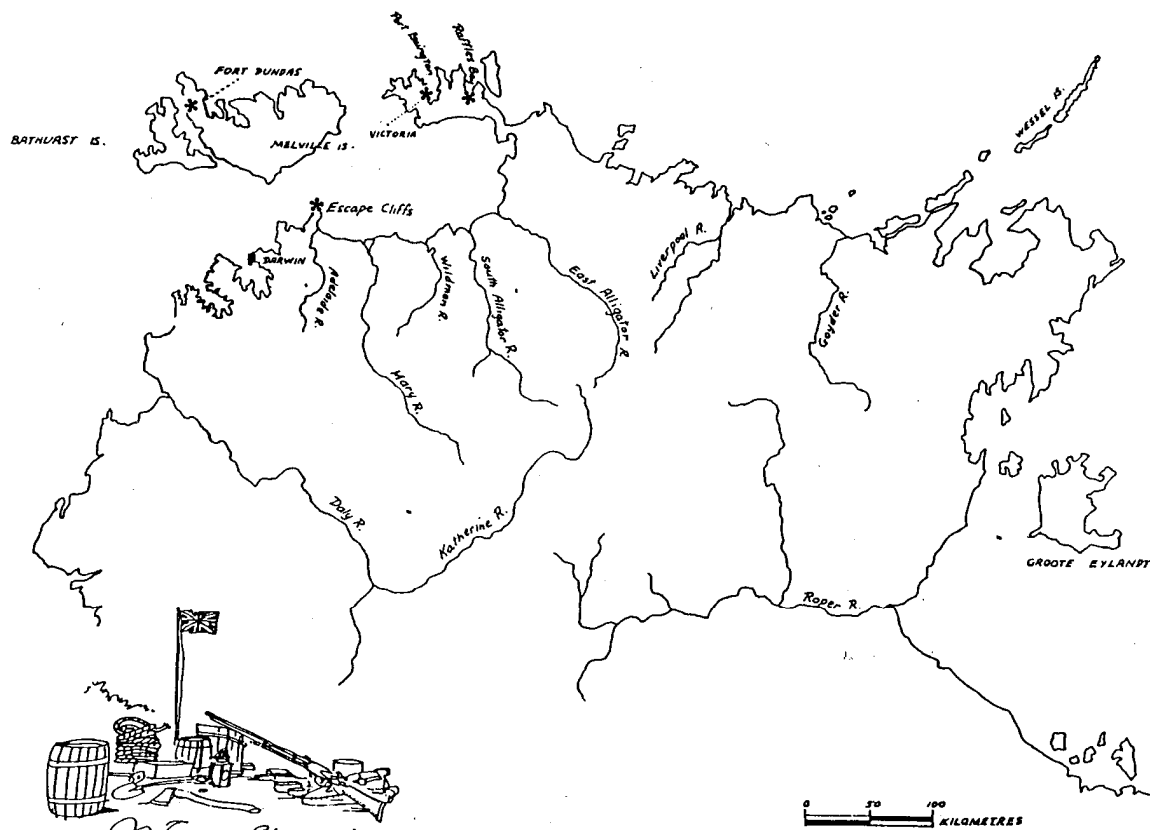
*Port Essington, then the Cliffs –  
all failures in their way.*



*White-anted fortresses diseased in time,  
sited wrongly for good reasons.  
Cycloned, forgotten lays about –  
victims of inclement seasons.*

*Accidents, happily, are one off,  
coincidence comes in twos.  
Synchronous events belong to threes,  
fours give promise of news.*

*Each false start their mettle tested,  
the settlers in those years.  
Darwin stands now a fortress strong –  
proud of its early pioneers!*



*N.T. Showing Early Settlements*

