NORTH-WEST EXPEDITION: JOURNAL OF EXPEDITION FROM DEGREY TO PORT DARWIN

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North-West Expedition: Journal of Expedition from DeGrey to Port Darwin by Alex. Forrest

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ALEX. FORREST

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NORTH-WEST EXPLORATION.

JOURNAL OF EXPEDITION

FROM DEGREY TO PORT DARWIN,

BY

ALEX. FORREST, ESQ., F.R.G.S.

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JOURNAL OF EXPLORATION

FROM THE DeGREY TO PORT DARWIN,

BY

ALEXANDER FORREST, F.R.G.S.

I arrived at Cossack, February 3rd, 1879, after a very stormy passage from Fremantle, and at once proceeded to collect the horses which different settlers had promised to furnish, as their contribution towards the expenses of the expedition. Having got them together, I moved on with my party to the DeGrey River station, which we reached on the 20th, and, this station being the actual starting point of our journey, we there made our final preparations and completed the packing of our stores and provisions, receiving much kind assistance from Mr. Anderson.

All was ready by the 25th, and on that day we left the DeGrey River, travelling in a North-easterly direction to Condon, where we camped for the night.

My party consisted of Mr. F. Hill, second in command, and of Messrs. John Campbell, James Carey, Matthew Forrest, and Arthur Hicks, besides the natives "Pierre" and "Dower." We had twenty-six horses, and rations for six months, and were bound overland for Port Darwin, Beagle Bay being our first destination.

At the risk, perhaps, of being found tedious, I think it best in this narrative of my journey to adhere to the diary form in which my notes were originally taken down, rather than to attempt a more connected and flowing description of the incidents of the way, which, although it might prove more attractive to the general reader, could not give, in so life-like and faithful a manner, facts and impressions as they were viewed and received at the time. My diary commences on the date of our departure from Condon.

February 26th, 1879.—Travelled to-day viâ Mulla-Mulla to Pardoo Springs, where we camped for the night, with good grass and plenty of water. The horses gave us very little trouble, considering that this is the first day they have carried the packs. Latitude 20° 8′ by altitude of Canopus.

February 27th.—Started early this morning, and, steering East, two miles brought us out of the grassy country which surrounded the camp. Worthless spinifex sand-ridges succeeded, and over country of this wretched description we travelled for eighteen miles before halting for the night, which we did in a waterless spot. We unpacked, and soon after a heavy shower of rain came on. Shifting two miles farther, enough water was found for the horses, and very fair feed.

Mount Blaze bore N. 353° E. from this camp. Latitude by meridian altitude Reg. 20° 12′.

February 28th.—This morning I started ahead with Pierre, and rode about fourteen miles in a North-easterly direction, over the same kind of wretched spinifex and sandhill country. After some search, we discovered a creek flowing northwards, and following it down for two miles came upon a lake of fresh water about three feet deep. We returned on our tracks, five miles back, met our party, and guided them to the lake, which we reached after dark, the horses being very tired. Latitude of Camp, 20° 1′, meridian altitude Reg.

March 1st and 2nd, Saturday and Sunday.—We remained at the lake to rest the horses. Saturday morning we were busy mending packsaddles, and in the afternoon Mr. Hill and I walked to the top of a small hill not far distant, from which we obtained a fine view of the coast ranges, and of the creek on which we are camped. It runs in a North-westerly direction, and we saw many large pools

here and there along its course, which we afterwards found to be about four feet deep. Shot a few ducks as we came back. On Sunday morning about 4 o'clock it began to rain very heavily, and at seven we were obliged to abandon our camping ground and move to a high sand-ridge about a quarter of a mile off, and across the creek, which by that time had swollen very considerably. The rain left off about nine. We were all drenched, many of our things more or less damaged, and all the afternoon was spent in drying them and putting things straight. The country around is already very boggy.

March 3rd.—Saddled up at eight o'clock and travelled E.N.E. for eight miles through spinifex to the coast. From the coast, steering Easterly, we passed over good grassy country, well adapted for sheep and cattle; but notwithstanding yesterday's torrents of rain we had some difficulty in finding water, and it was not till three o'clock this afternoon that we came upon a little in some clay holes, where we camped, with splendid green feed for the horses. Latitude by Canopus, 19° 53′. 7

March 4th.—Pierre and I started on ahead of the party this morning, and travelled E.N. Easterly for 16 miles over good, grassy, but waterless country. We spent some time searching for water, and at last found enough for one night in some clay pans, surrounded by excellent feed. This was about dinner time, and I sent Pierre back to meet and bring up the party, while I went on alone to see if I could find any more. After riding six miles in a North-easterly direction to the coast, I was obliged to return unsuccessful to the clay pans, where by this time the party was camped. I sincerely trust that I may have better luck to-morrow, or we shall, I fear, be obliged to retrace our steps some considerable distance. Latitude by Canopus, 19° 48′. 8

March 5th.—I started with Carey this morning at five o'clock, and took an Easterly course for about eight miles, which brought us to a native well, some 20 feet deep and nearly dry. We continued the same course for another eight miles, and thence turned towards the North for a mile or two more, but were obliged at last to return to the well, which we reached at two o'clock without having seen a drop of water, or anything but the worst description of country—spinifex and sandy desert. 9

My party did not come up till after dark. There was not enough water in the well for the horses, but we dug it out, and, just as we finished, it began to rain and continued to do so till ten o'clock, which caused us to pass a most miserable night, everything being wet and sloppy. The sky continued overcast and black, and I was unable to observe the Latitude.

March 6th.—We were disappointed when morning came to find that very little water had run into the well from last night's rain. I went on ahead with Dower, and about four miles from the Camp found another native well, and a mile or two farther on a tolerable supply of water in clay pans, and, our horses being rather fagged, I decided to camp and rest here for the remainder of the day. The party came up at ten o'clock, delighted to find so much water and feed. 10

March 7th.—I rode away from the Camp at about seven o'clock with my brother Matthew. We steered North-east, and after travelling five miles, sighted the sea. From this spot up and down the coast, and inland, as far as the eye could reach, grassy plains spread out. We rode over them for five miles and came to some water in clay holes, then bore E.N.E. and E. for about 10 miles, till we found a suitable camping ground, where the rest of the party joined us at 2 o'clock. The whole of the country we passed over to-day was beautifully grassed, and appeared to be well adapted for pastoral purposes; we saw, however, no signs of permanent water. Latitude by Canopus 19° 42′. 11

March 8th.—Campbell and I left Camp at seven o'clock, and rode ahead about fifteen miles, N.E. by E. and E., over country similar in character to the grass plains of yesterday. We found water in a large flat running N.E., and from a rise close by, saw more in the distance. The party came up at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, rather fagged, for the day had been most unpleasantly warm, and the flies had proved a terrible source of annoyance. Last night the mosquitoes came down upon us in such swarms that we could get no rest, and we sat up in extreme discomfort; I never knew mosquitoes so troublesome before. We organized a watch for the first time to-day, and intend to continue it nightly henceforth. Latitude by Canopus and Reg. 19° 40′. 12

March 9th, Sunday.—Rested in Camp and read prayers. In the afternoon I climbed a high sand-ridge, and had a good view of the country Eastward. It looked very promising both for water and feed, and I cannot help feeling some regret that I am unable to go straight from here to the Fitzroy, as I have little doubt that this good country extends all the way. What we saw towards the coast also appeared to be similar in character.

March 10th.—Travelled over level grassy plains this morning, N.E. by N., for about eight miles. There were no indications of water, so I went on ahead with Hicks, following the same course for four miles farther, till I came in sight of a line of trees bearing E.N.E., for which I steered, and, having reached it, followed it up till I found a few holes, with water enough to last us the night. All the country passed over to-day was well grassed, treeless, and remarkably level. 14

March 11th.—At seven this morning Pierre and I rode on North to the coast, in that direction about 10 miles distant from the Camp. We followed its outline for six miles, and then struck out E.N.E. till we came to a native well with some little water in it. The country we crossed was all good, treeless plains with capital feed. Leaving the well we went back in search of some better water supply, and soon saw four natives ahead on the plain. We rode up to them, but were unable to make them understand what we wanted; they appeared excessively frightened, and apparently had never seen white men before. However, farther on, we found a little water, and, returning to the native well, discovered, not far from it, enough to last us three days. The party came up about four o'clock, and immediately afterwards the rain came down. The shower lasted an hour, and left plenty of water in the clay holes. The evening continued cloudy, and the mosquitoes again caused us very great annoyance and a sleepless night. 15

Next day (March 12th) we remained in Camp, and dug out the well, obtaining a very fair supply of water. I think that in all probability this well is permanent, and as it may be useful to travellers in the future I have built up a pile of stones close by, at the North-westernmost point of a granite range. The cairn bears South from the well 14 chains, and in an Easterly direction is about 4½ miles distant from the coast. Part of this day was spent in repairing packs, which proved very troublesome work. Latitude by meridian altitude Canopus 19° 21′. 16

March 13th.—Pierre again was my companion, and we travelled N.N.E. and N.E. by E., about 18 miles altogether, till we came to a suitable Camp, where the rest of the party joined us at about four o'clock in the afternoon. All this country was of the very finest description. The recent rains had covered the last three miles of our day's march with water, and a little creek with full banks runs close by our Camp. I shot a number of ducks, and with my rifle a large bird, which on close inspection we found to be a "native companion," but which in the distance we had taken for an emu. The width of its wings from tip to tip was five feet, and its beak was five inches long. Latitude meridian altitude Reg. 19° 4′. 17

March 14th.—Off again with Pierre at seven, and followed a line of ti-trees which skirted a spinifex rise, in a Northerly direction, and after travelling seven miles found a native well, full of water, which I imagine is permanent. Continuing on a couple of miles farther, we came upon a large native camp, which appeared to have been deserted some weeks before, but were unable to find the water hole; so, as most of our horses required rest, we returned to the well and camped, the party joining us there at eleven. The mosquitoes were so bad during the night that not one of us got any sleep, and towards morning the torment of them was quite maddening.

March 15th.—I made up my mind yesterday to take a flying trip inland for about 50 miles, provided the country proved suitable, and, accordingly, Carey, Pierre, and I started off this morning, and travelled in an Easterly direction about 15 miles, the first part of the day through tolerably fair level country. But the weather was excessively warm, and the prospect ahead became by no means encouraging, so I decided to return to the Camp. During my absence Mr. Hill had been across to the coast, and found Cape Jaubert to bear North 345° from the Camp. West, 2½ miles, was a high sandhill. 19

March 16, Sunday.—Shifted to another Camp on the far side of a large clear grassy plain, and about 10 miles N.E. of the one we left. The party came up at 12 o'clock, and we read prayers in the afternoon. Latitude by Reg. 18° 55′. 20

March 17th.—Started early, and following a Northerly and North-easterly course for nearly 10 miles, we came upon a long, low mangrove flat, running parallel to the coast. We followed this flat down for two or three miles to its end, and there we camped, with plenty of water close beside us, and good feed all around. The country we travelled over to-day was very fine. We came across large numbers of natives, but they would not approach us. This evening they are watching us from some sandhills about two miles off,—whether with friendly intentions or not we cannot say. I went out to take bearings this afternoon, and had a fine view of Lagrange Bay, which must some day become the outlet of this important district. 21

March 18th.—The first 10 miles of our way to-day was over grassy plains covered with water, the consequence of recent rains. Leaving these plains we entered a dense thicket, and I went ahead a mile or two farther to look for water. Seven miles brought me to the coast, and I followed it until I found a little of what I sought by digging in one of the ravines—there was however hardly as much as we required for the horses. All the last ten miles of country we travelled to-day was very thick, but not badly grassed in places. One of the horses, "Rigg," knocked up, but we managed to bring him into Camp. We have seen nothing more of the natives.

March 19th.—Started ahead of the party this morning with Pierre, following the coast. We found plenty of water in the deep ravines running into the sea, but the country soon became so rocky, and the many water courses we had to cross so difficult, as to make travelling by no means easy to the horses. From Barn Hill we obtained a fine view of the country to the North-east, and from Cape Villaret a little further on we sighted Roebuck Bay. Level ground covered with thicket extended in every direction. Returned to the last water seen, and camped, the party coming up at 12 o'clock. Barn and Church Hills bear from camp N. 200° and 188°; and Cape Villaret N. 45°. Marked tree, F 23.

March 20th.—After riding five miles this morning over well-grassed country, Pierre and I reached the Roebuck Bay station. The old well was full of sand and the old buildings burnt down, and it shows but few traces now of its former occupancy. Some four miles farther on we found water in a grassy flat, where the party joined us at 10 o'clock, but after unloading the horses and taking them down to drink, we discovered that what we had taken for fresh water was perfectly salt; more, however, happily turned up in a native well close by. Natives hovered round about the camp during the afternoon, but could not be induced to approach. It seems that this morning after I had started off, thirty natives suddenly made their appearance, but as soon as they were observed they scampered hastily up the rocks, and looked on until the party moved away.

The mosquitoes are so troublesome that nobody can sleep. They are something positively dreadful. Of a peculiar grey colour, they stand erect until filled with blood, when they generally drop dead. Their sting is very sharp—far more severe than that of the ordinary kind.

March 21st.—Although in splendid feed the horses strayed away during the night. We got them back, however, and made a start by eight o'clock, travelling in a North-easterly direction over fine grassy plains for about twelve miles, to a native well, where we halted at 10 o'clock. The mosquitoes again were pitiless; if they get any worse, I really don't know what we shall do.

March 22nd.—Off at 6 o'clock, and followed the line of ti-trees which here runs parallel to the coast. Ten miles of an E.N.E. course over country well grassed and lightly wooded brought us to a native spring and small pool, where we camped. Fresh tracks of natives were seen around, and from the numerous paths branching out from the spring in every direction, I am satisfied that its waters must be permanent.

At night hordes of mosquitoes again tormented us. We left the camp and sought refuge in the bush, but our enemies resolutely followed us up. Some of the party climbed trees in desperation, but even this resort proved of no avail.

Next day, the 23rd, being Sunday, we remained in the same place all day, completely worn out by the want of sleep. Shifting our quarters into the swamp we at last obtained a little relief from our enemies, and a few hours rest.

March 24th.—Riding for some miles over grassy plains, they became at last so boggy that we were obliged to avoid them. Some little distance farther on I saw the palm tree growing, for the first time in my life. The presence of this tree, I am told, is a sure indication of water. After travelling seventeen miles we camped, and seeing a native fire a short distance ahead, Pierre and I went up to it; the moment they noticed us, the natives decamped. We overtook them, however; but, totally unable to communicate with them, we returned to the Camp, where the party joined us about one o'clock.

March 25th.—Matthew Forrest and I rode on ahead this morning, steering North across the plains, which were boggy and covered with rain water, the grass on them growing rankly to a height of ten feet. Eight miles travel brought us to some higher ground, well grassed and covered with timber, and, skirting the plains for two miles farther, we came across a native well with abundance of water. Magnificent country extends all round, and to the Eastward the great plains stretch out as far as the eye can reach. Capital country apparently for cattle, and no doubt sheep also would do well after it had been fed down by the larger stock.