

# Pioneering in the Ashburton

## THE BATTLE OF MINDEROO

### PERILS AND HARDSHIPS OF THE PAST

On a hot day in February 51 years ago and a little over, a party of 11 persons started out from Perth to penetrate the wilds of the north-west. There were no railways in those days, or motor cars, to obliterate distance, and the men who went forth to open up the country for the benefit of those who came after had to ride a brumby or walk. They had to carry their tucker with them, and supplement it with bungaras, or witchitis or any other insect that came in the way and was capable of being tolerated by the internal regions. There was no Arbitration Court menu for the real pioneers.

This party had a "walk-about" of nearly a thousand miles to accomplish, though the distance direct as the crow flies would be under 700 miles. The objective was the Ashburton River, about where the Henry River junctions with it. The contingent who had to get there included Timothy Hooley, the boss; Dick Kirby, a shepherd; W. Munday, from Guildford; Morton Craig, an apprentice; Godfrey Knight, Storey, Clark, Robinson, Davis, and another white man, and an aboriginal named Tommy, a total of 11. They had with them a number of horses, 3000 scabby sheep, and some cattle. It appears that Tim Hooley, who was a splendid bushman, had blazed an overland route from Roebourne, and as a reward the Government gave him a large area of land on the Ashburton River, and this expedition was designed to take possession of the country and stock it.

They went overland from Perth to Champion Bay (now Geraldton), and from there travelled to Northampton and the Geraldine copper mine; then on to the course of the Murchison River, which was followed for a good distance until where it turns east beyond Mt. Dugal. Then they struck north till they cut the Gascoyne, which was entirely unsettled at that time. Still on they went north, and at last struck the Henry, which they followed until they reached the Ashburton. It looks all very simple now, when motor cars can do the distance in a week, but it took the Hooley party six months to arrive at their destination, and that six months' work was a plodding determined struggle with stubborn nature. Only a leader of exceptional ability and bush craft could have got them through. The wilderness seems to resist invasion.

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serious casualties, and proceeded to establish a ranch. In the country they had passed through and which they had come to occupy, the natives were absolutely wild, and had never seen a white man; but such natives are not dangerous, for they are terrified and regard the white man as supernatural. They will fly at the sight of a pale face and never attack. It is only after the niggers become accustomed to the presence of the whites and gradually recognise that they are only human like themselves that they become dangerous. Once the superstitious fear has been reduced to zero they begin to think of killing the invaders. The blacks regard the whites as usurpers of their country, and fail to realise the possibility of the two races occupying the same territory concurrently. Again, where the natives become more familiar with the habits and foods of the whites they get covetous and plan to wipe out the intruders in order to get possession of their goods.

Shortly after arrival, Hooley, taking Knight with him, went overland to Roebourne and promised to send back meat, as kangaroos were very scarce, and the station stock was too precious to eat. Besides, their supply of ammunition was very limited, and they could not shoot game, as it was wanted for protection if the niggers became troublesome. For the first two years the natives were inoffensive, but then they gradually became bolder and speared sheep. The civilised native Tommy was sent to drive them off, but with instructions not to shoot any; but Tommy never returned, though tracks of his horse were found. From that on the wild niggers grew more aggressive, and lighted fires near the whites' camp, though they were never seen themselves. Then Morton Craig, who was at that time a youth of 16, sent a Fortescue River native to look for Tommy, but as he also did not return within a week, Young, the hutkeeper, a recent recruit from the coast, was sent out 26 miles to investigate. He had only gone a few hours when Hill, the shepherd, who was another addition to the party from the Fortescue, arrived, bringing Tommy's mare, which was badly speared.

Hill said he had found the place where Tommy had been killed and eaten, and expressed the opinion that they would "never see that silly fool Young again." However, Young did turn up with Harry, a native, and it was proposed that he and Young should camp together for safety, but Hill said he preferred to remain with Charcoal, an Ashburton native who had been civilised to some extent: but

Charcoal, an Ashburton native who had been civilised to some extent; but as things were getting serious they were all to converge further down the river, for Hooley had instructed them to be at the coast by May of that year. Hill did not appear at the rendezvous, and when the party reached the vicinity of his camp his dogs came bounding out, showing great delight, but on going to the camp there was no sign of Hill. The native boy then reported that he had discovered Hill's bedclothes almost buried in the sand, with tracks about several days old. The meat at the camp was found to be putrid, and it was thought that perhaps Hill had cleared off to the Fortescue, as he had threatened to do.

That night was a bad one for the party, who feared an attack by the niggers as soon as day began to break, while the dingoes were playing havoc with the sheep. Next morning preparations were made for the retreat, and Morton Craig and the blackboy went looking for Hill's tracks. About a mile and a half away they came upon his body stripped of all clothes, while his head had been terribly smashed with a club. It was concluded that the natives had killed him, or that Charcoal, who was in collusion with them, had done the deed. This is somewhat confirmed by the supposition that the nigger who some years later was hung for the murder of Lazenby at the pearling station was believed to be identical with Charcoal.

The murder was reported to the Government Resident at Roebourne, and a punitive expedition was sent from there down to the Ashburton-

Farquhar M'Cray was the leader, and he had with him W. Shenton (a brother of the late Sir George), Ned Kelch, Thatcher (a concologist and brother of Richmond Thatcher, who was well known on the early Victorian diggings) and others. The Hooley party returned to the station, but the niggers were militant and speared a horse, and a native woman told the camp blackboy that the niggers intended to make a descent upon the camp and annihilate the whites. This was before the Roebourne expedition arrived, but the men on the station held a council of war and determined to anticipate the niggers.

Accordingly a surprise was effected by cutting off the blacks' lines of communication during the night, for the niggers won't move until daylight, owing to superstitious fears, and therefore the whites could not be seen or tracked. When daylight arrived the skirmish was brief and effective and the assailants were dispersed. A few days later the Government expedition reached the station, and the natives becoming more daring approached in larger numbers, and eventually a conflict ensued which was known as the battle of Minderoo, which was celebrated in verse by Thatcher. Here are some of the lines:—

"'Twas Sabbath morn, the rising sun  
had not appeared in view,  
But day contested with the Night at  
lonely Minderoo;

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lonely Minderoo;  
The cork-bark shed a sweet perfume,  
the wild Ashburton pea  
Made sweeter still the morning air  
and birds sang merrily.  
What means this band of armed men  
who ride on fiery steeds?  
What mission brings them thus abroad  
that so much caution needs?

"Now thro' the fading dusk they see  
the dimly burning fires  
That sure betray the crafty foe who  
nurse their grim desires—  
A foe both treacherous and cruel who  
steal from out their lairs  
Must e'er be met with strategy and  
taken unawares.

"But suddenly they see the whites de-  
ploying round the rise,  
And jumping out they fill the dawn  
with wild discordant cries:  
With kyllies and with clubs they seek  
t' intimidate their foes,  
And then the battle rages fierce, with  
casualties and woes.

"Now, Hooley, had that barbed spear  
one hair-breadth nearer been,  
By Heaven above! your wife and child  
you never more had seen,  
But Bob has caught the dusky brave—  
his earthly course is run,  
He'll never throw another spear, nor  
view the setting sun.

"The leader of the savages with fierce  
defiant cries  
Still urges on his yelling horde—but  
reels and falls and dies."

Thatcher as a rhyming war corre-  
spondent would not be too dull, and  
suggests that Philip Gibbs might re-  
lieve his vivid reports from Armaged-  
don by invoking the muse. However,  
the Hooley enterprise had to be aban-  
doned, but the identical country was  
later on taken up by the late Alex.  
Forrest and Lord Forrest, and was  
successfully established — barring  
droughts and dingoes. The present sur-  
vivors of the 11 men who left Perth 51  
years ago are Mr. Munday, who is 72  
years of age and lives at Guildford,  
and our friend Mr. Morton Craig, well  
known throughout the West as a  
stock-owner. He it was who supplied  
the above outlines of an interesting  
episode in the early pioneering days.  
Mr. Craig still has his apprenticeship  
indenture, legally drawn, under which  
Mr. Hooley was to teach him all the  
features of sheep-farming. He had  
many exciting experiences in battling  
with nature and the natives, and per-  
haps more anon.