

# PERILOUS GOLD

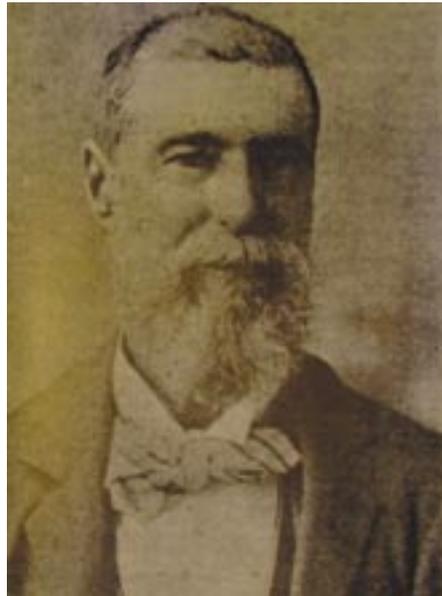
By Jim Foster

Life was downright hazardous on the Australian goldfields from 1850 to 1900. Every prospector and miner had to contend with a multitude of diseases, mostly brought on by their own unsanitary lifestyle. They had bushrangers preying on them, shopkeepers who charged inflated prices, sly grog sellers who sold vile concoctions that would blind a man who overindulged, and moonlighters who would raid their claims at night. Not to mention all the other kinds of thieves and rogues who devised myriad ways to relieve a hard working miner of his gold, and sometimes his life.

With the finding of gold in the colony of New South Wales a tidal wave of immigrants surged from around the world to Australian shores, all eager for a share of the wealth generated by the finding of large quantities of gold. And while prospectors in the United States and Africa had to contend with an indigenous population that was prepared to resist the influx of gold hunters, Australian aborigines were capable of little resistance. Apart from the occasional lone prospector or shepherd being speared, there were few incidents recorded where concerted attacks were made on the southern diggings. One reason was that the southern aborigines were pretty well pacified and thinned out due to introduced disease and severe retribution for any infringements, real or imagined. Another was that they were poorly armed, having only boomerangs, clubs and spears. They rarely owned horses or firearms and so had no hope of attacking any European parties and getting away with it.

## WILDERNESS OF CAPE YORK

When gold was found in the wilderness of Cape York, home to the Merkin tribes, it was a different story.



James Venture Mulligan about 1880



Billy Frost who survived all the perils of the early days to be shot dead in a fight at McKinlay, Queensland in 1926

The Merkin aborigines had lived in the area for perhaps thousands of years. They were a tall, strong race, bronze in colour rather than the darker hues of aborigines from the southern latitudes, and their fighting skills had been honed by centuries of contact with Malay and Chinese bech-de-mer fishermen, and with Portuguese and Dutch explorers.

As early as 1623 the Dutch exploration ship 'Pera' anchored in a swamp-lined estuary on the western side of the peninsula. Captain Carstenz didn't like the country but he gave the river the name it still bears – the Staaten.

Another Dutch explorer, Willem Jansz, of the 'Duyfken', had his men row him up the estuary of the Wenlock River but he liked the country no better. The fact that 200 painted warriors chased him out may have also influenced his opinion.

In 1770 Captain James Cook, sailing north along the east coast, had the misfortune to run up on one of the thousands of coral reefs that littered the coast. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, 1770, he found shelter in the mouth of a mangrove-lined river the aborigines called Charco. Mooring his ship against a steep bank, Cook set about repairing and cleaning the hull.

## GAVE HIM A HURRY UP

Once his ship was again seaworthy, Cook named the river Endeavour and before leaving on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August, climbed Grassy Hill, a 531-foot high granite outcrop the tribes called Janellganell, to pick the course he would take out through the reefs. The aborigines gave him a hurry-up by setting fire to the dry grass and burning part of his camp.

In 1848 the first white explorer of far north Queensland, Edward Kennedy, led an expedition of 13 men into the Palmer River area but only three of the party

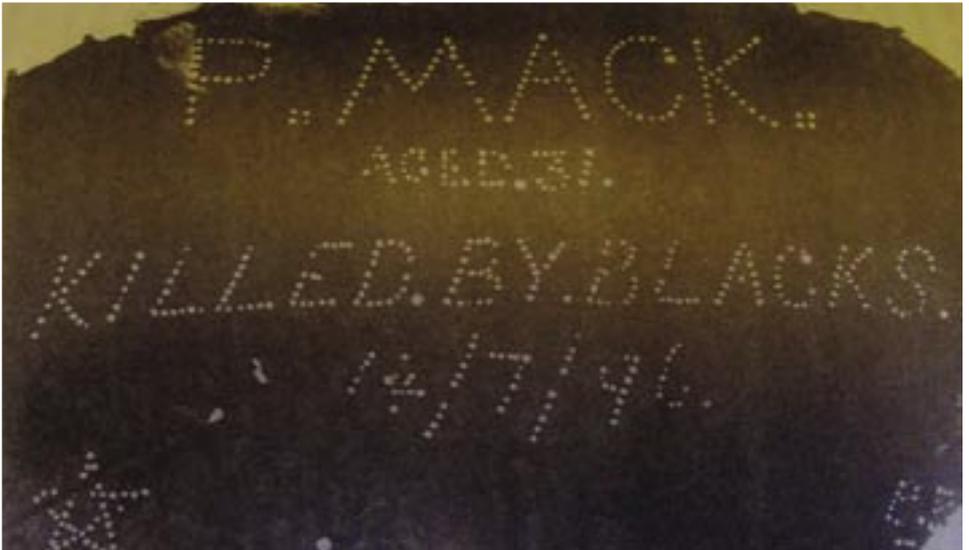
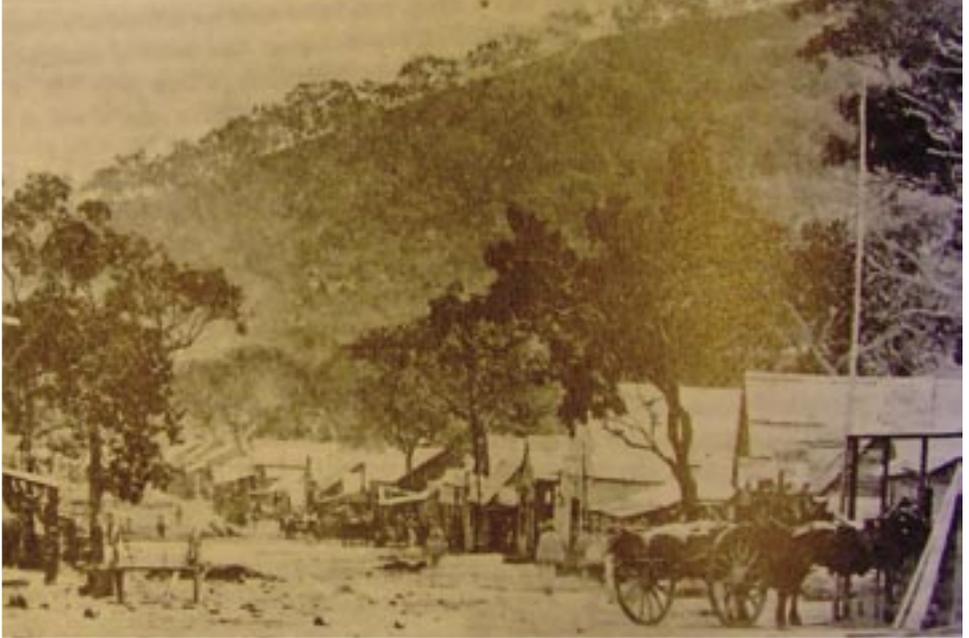


**Above: Mulligan's headstone with incorrect date. He actually died aged 70 in 1907**

**Above, right: Cooktown in 1874**

**Right: Grave marker of P. Mack, the original was made of wood but had possibly become illegible because he was only 21, not 31, when killed by an aborigine wielding a tomahawk**

**Below: Typical prospector and packhorse of the late 1890s**



survived. Kennedy himself perished when speared only a few miles from safety.

When the first gold was found in tropical far north Queensland along the Palmer River, the party of prospectors met natives of such a fierce nature they were astounded. Never before in Australia had Europeans encountered a tribe of aborigines that fought with such disciplined ferocity. These were the Merkin aborigines, great fighters and eaters of their foes. Their weapons consisted mainly of spears and clubs but they also favoured a heavy wooden sword with which they could do great damage. Had the Merkin tribe been armed with the accurate bows and arrows that allowed killing from a distance, or the short metal stabbing spear

of the African Zulu, they may have given a better account of themselves against the repeating firearms of the prospectors.

In June 1872 another party set out to explore as far north as the 14<sup>th</sup> parallel. Led by William Hann, this party found traces of gold in the Palmer River but did not think it payable. The Hann party experienced some trouble from the aborigines but no deaths.

When word got back to civilization that there was gold to be had on the Palmer River, an expedition was organised by the adventurous rogue, James Venture Mulligan.

#### **STARTED A GOLD RUSH**

The 102 ounces of gold his party brought out of the wilderness started a gold rush to the inhospitable north that was to produce at least 100 tons of gold and claim the lives of hundreds.

In October 1873 a party of 108 men was attacked by more than 500 Merkin

tribesmen at a place that became known as Battle Camp. The Merkin were soundly defeated in this battle and subsequently resorted to hit and run tactics. Over the following years they killed an untold number of prospectors, eating many of them.

Their favourite fare however was Chinese flesh which they described as 'long pig'. They found it far more palatable than European flesh and this may have had something to do with the fact that the Chinese lived mainly on a vegetable diet supplemented with fish, whereas the Europeans subsisted on mostly bully beef and damper. No one will ever know how many prospectors were killed by the Merkin but some of the tales that came out of the wilderness at that time were enough to chill the blood of the bravest men.

Meat quickly spoiled in the tropics but the Merkin had an ingenious way of combating that problem. Capturing their prey alive, they would break the

**Left: Contemporary illustration of an attack by Merkin aborigines on Chinese miners on their way to the Palmer diggings**

**Below, left: An earlier photograph of James Venture Mulligan.**

**Below, right: A contemporary illustration of the approaches to Hell's Gate on the Palmer River Track. Many people were killed here by the Merkin**

**Bottom: Two early cap and ball black powder pistols. The bottom one is the remains of an old pepperbox pistol, so called as the six long barrels served both as barrels and chambers. It was found on the diggings at Beaufort in Victoria. The top one is a later model .44 calibre Army Colt, circa 1860.**



arms and legs of their hapless victims rendering them incapable of escape and thus keeping them as a living larder. This practice was not known about until two brothers were captured and one was forced to watch as the other was killed and thrown upon the fire before being devoured. He somehow managed to scratch the story on the blackened surface of his billycan before he too was killed and eaten. The billy was recovered by a search party who found only the bones of the two brothers.

### **MADE LIFE PRECARIOUS**

But it wasn't only the natives who made life precarious on the Palmer. The tropics killed many a man through disease and thirst, while snakes and huge crocodiles also took a considerable toll.

As the gold rushes moved across the top end of Australia, more warlike tribes were encountered but none like the Merkin. In the Northern Territory it was mainly the conditions that killed many prospectors. Natives accounted for some deaths but now most prospectors went heavily armed with modern repeating weapons. Even one or two men so armed could stand off a large number of natives.

Gold was discovered in Western Australia in the late 1880s and by the 1890s prospectors were scouring the huge state for new fields.

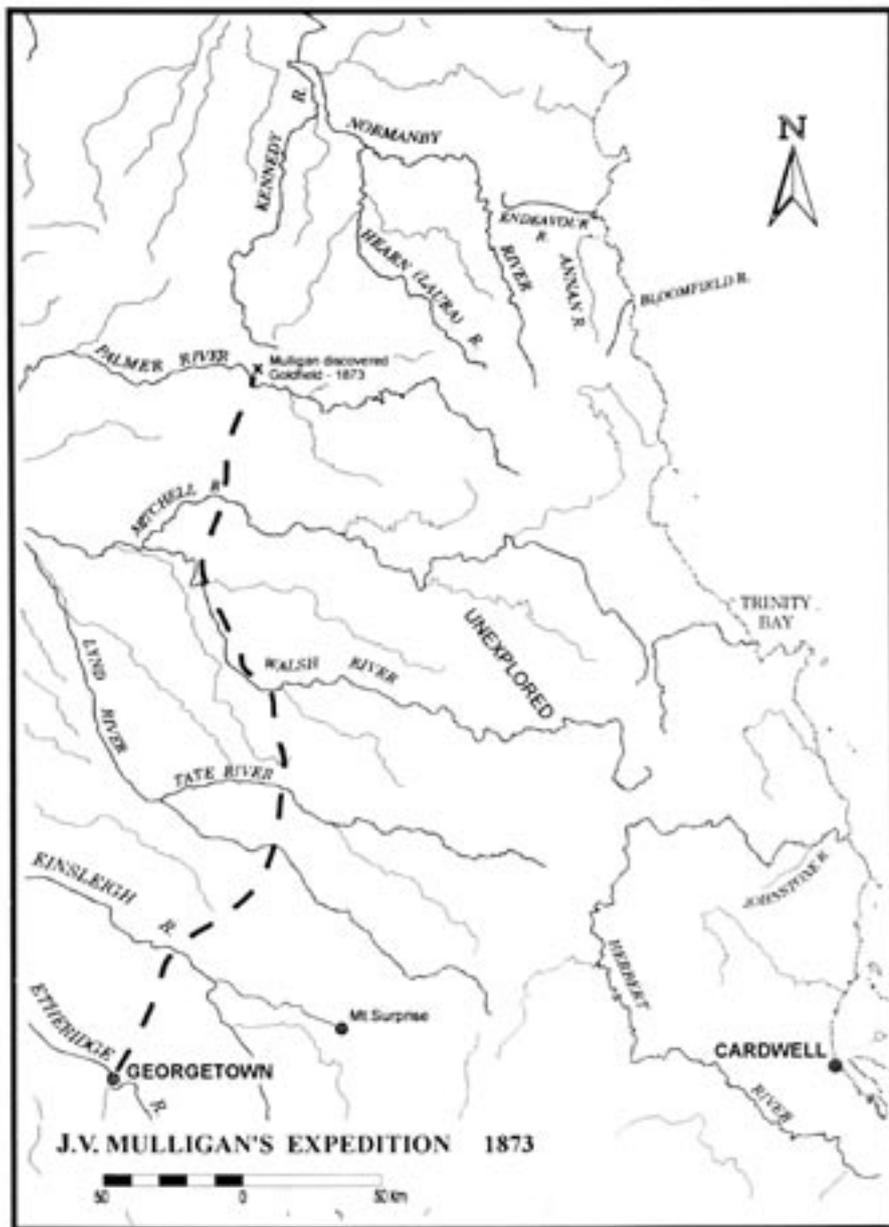
When gold was found at Coolgardie in large quantities, then shortly after at Kalgoorlie in amounts that beggared belief, clashes with natives were already occurring with some frequency.

However it wasn't until prospectors moved further north and came in contact



with the aborigines around the Leonora district that the killings began. While not of the same calibre as the Merkin aborigines,

the Leonora natives proved extremely troublesome to those they rightly saw as interlopers on their tribal land.



**Above:** Chinese miners attended almost every rush in Australia but on the Palmer about 60 per cent of all the miners were Chinese  
**Right:** A map of Mulligan's 1873 expedition to the Palmer. Note that the only coastal town above Townsville at that time was Cardwell, actually known in those days as Cardwell On Sea

### **MOSTLY WELL EQUIPPED**

Prospectors of the 1890s in Western Australia were mostly well equipped, many having pack horses, buggies and even wagons on which to carry their supplies and it was these goods that many natives coveted. They spent a great deal of time and energy working out ways to steal anything they could and if that meant killing the prospectors in the process, they didn't hesitate. A hail of spears whistling out of the darkness disrupted many a night camp in WA and some would lodge where they were aimed, in the body of a prospector.

One party of three prospectors had their camp attacked in such a manner but despite being clubbed and speared, all three survived the attack and beat off the natives. Unfortunately, all three later fell

victim to the elements and died in their search for gold.

More than 100 natives attacked another party of five yet they were beaten off with heavy fire from repeating weapons. Despite this the natives remained in the vicinity for several days taunting the prospectors with words, spears, and their bare buttocks.

In another incident, one young prospector was killed when a native couple came into camp to beg for food and tobacco. While the woman kept the older prospector busy by explaining where the nearest watering hole was located, her partner wandered over to where the young prospector was kneading dough to make a damper. Picking up a hatchet with his toes, the native transferred it to his hand behind his back then brought it down on the back of the

poor young fellow's head with such force it split his skull in two. The older prospector managed to drive the two off despite being badly wounded with the same hatchet.

### **CANNIBALISM WASN'T WIDELY PRACTICED**

While cannibalism wasn't widely practiced by the natives in WA, there were some cases however these were thought to be ceremonial only.

There were many deaths caused by the WA natives but far more were caused by the lack of water. In the goldfields of WA, water was often more precious than gold for often gold was more plentiful than drinking water. The cruel irony is that while there are many large lakes scattered across the vastness of WA, almost all of them are salt lakes.

Despite the perils inherent in any gold rush, for gold is all too frequently found in perilous regions, there were always those ready to join in the rush. The tumultuous excitement, the risk to life and limb and the lure of faraway places was often more of an attraction than the gold itself. 