

REFUGE ON THE ROPER

The Origins of Roper River Mission
Ngukurr

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ACORN PRESS

Published by Acorn Press Ltd, ABN 50 008 549 540

Office and orders:

P O Box 282

Brunswick East

Victoria 3057

Australia

Tel/Fax (03) 9383 1266

International Tel/Fax 61 3 9383 1266

Website: www.acornpress.net.au

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Seiffert, Murray Wilfred, 1946–

Title: Refuge on the Roper: the origins of Roper River
Mission – Ngukurr / Murray Seiffert.

ISBN: 9780908284672 (pbk.)

Notes: Includes index.

Bibliography

Subjects: Roper River Mission—History.

Church of England—Missions—Northern Territory—
Ngukurr.

Aboriginal Australians—Northern Territory—Ngukurr.

Dewey Number: 266.34294295

Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Cover photograph: The Reverend and Mrs H.E. Warren, their children David and Betty; Daniel and Deborah and son Dennis and unknown girl. (c. 1926)

Background image is part of a mural painted by the Ngukurr secondary students in the school 'trips to country' program, 2003–05 under the guidance of art teacher, Simon Normand.

Text layout & cover design: Communiqué Graphics, Lilydale.

Printing: Openbook Howden Design & Print, Adelaide.

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Introduction

This book is about the beginnings of Roper River Mission, established in 1908. What was it about the Church Missionary Society that its people in Victoria should put the bulk of their efforts into this remote part of Australia? What was involved in starting the mission, what were they trying to do, and how did they do it? What was the response of the original residents of the Roper River district? These are the questions at the centre of this work.

In answering such questions, it is best to listen to the people concerned as much as possible. Thus the reader will find lots of quotes of what people said or wrote at the time. When reading these, try to imagine who wrote the passage, when they were writing, and what was going on at the time. The quotes are often longer than one might expect – this is so that the critical words can be seen within their context. An example is the speech by Bishop Frodsham. As we will see, his description of mission work amongst Aborigines as ‘smoothing the pillow of a dying race’ looks different when it is seen in its context of a call for action.

Two voices are particularly significant. One is that of Bishop Gilbert White, the Bishop of the Diocese of Carpentaria, an area which included Cape York Peninsula, the Torres Strait and the Northern Territory. The other is that of an Irishman, the Reverend Arthur Rowley Ebbs, who became the General Secretary of the Church Missionary Association in Victoria in 1902 and held that position for sixteen years.¹ They are an adventurous and thoughtful pair of characters who had high levels of trust in each other. It is not surprising that their visit was remembered 45 years later by residents of Ngukurr.

‘Who were they writing to?’ is always an interesting question. Usually people change the emphasis on what they write, depending on their audience. This is especially the case with a voluntary organization, such as a mission society, dependent upon the voluntary donations of its members and friends.

Be ready to find little stories that conflict with ‘what everybody knows’. You may well have to ask yourself ‘Does this exception to the rule, actually change the rule?’

The events of this work are mainly located at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, with a glance backwards and a glance forwards.

The first chapter sets the scene geographically and institutionally.

Chapter two is concerned with what was happening in the Roper River district late in the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth. In the first half of the twentieth century it seems that people often chose to ignore the cruel side of outback life; then more Australians came to understand how the European settlers dealt with the Aborigines whose land they wanted to occupy. Aboriginal people did not need to be reminded. Late in the twentieth century, the so-called ‘History Wars’ challenged the idea that the Australian outback was, for many years, a war zone of its own.

It is against this background that the second chapter includes a careful examination of written and oral history of the area around the Roper River. It includes material that has not previously been brought together, and gives the reader a chance to see it through twentieth century eyes. It does not make for comfortable reading, and neither it should!

The third chapter deals with the ways that news of the maltreatment of Aborigines was passed on to members of the Anglican Church in Victoria and documents something of their response. Whilst it was CMS, or CMA as it was known then,

who took the initiative, it received support from the Anglican church across the nation.

Chapter four listens to the people, especially the Reverend A.R. Ebbs, who set out to establish the Roper River Mission and the ways that they explained their proposal to their supporters. This is followed by an examination, in chapter five, of the tasks involved in preparing for the mission, including a terrifying trip across the Gulf of Carpentaria and meeting some of the Aborigines of the Roper River district.

We then step back and review the motivations of the people concerned, as much as we can do this from the records which remain. Chapter six challenges the simple explanation that the sole role of missions was to ‘christianize and civilize’, as we so often read.

Chapter seven asks ‘Why did CMS, of all groups, accept the challenge of going to the aid of Aborigines in Arnhem Land?’, a place with which it had no connection. The chapter ventures into territory that has not often been linked to the origins of Roper River Mission, that is, its links to the English Evangelicals who led the campaign against the slave trade. It then provocatively concludes that history was merely repeating itself.

Chapter eight offers a glimpse of life at the new mission, and briefly follows the life of some of the people who were part of its early days.

CHAPTER ONE

Ngukurr – Melbourne – London

The geographic focus of this story is Ngukurr, formerly known as Roper River Mission. Ngukurr means ‘the place of many stones’. It is about 15° South of the Equator, near the south-western corner of the Gulf of Carpentaria (see map).¹ It is closer to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea than it is to Cairns. The trip from Darwin to Ngukurr starts with a trip of about 430 km along the Stuart Highway, or ‘down the track’ as the locals might say, to Katherine and Mataranka. Mataranka is near Elsey Station, the cattle station at the centre of the semi-historical novel, *We of the Never Never*.²

Heading easterly from Mataranka is the Roper Highway, which is mostly sealed; the rest of the road is maintained fairly well. Then to Roper Bar, where a long ford crosses the Roper River which will have water flowing over it. It looks like a great place for a swim, and it is, or at least the crocodiles agree. Another 33 km and you are at Ngukurr! That is in the dry season. In the wet, you will probably get as far as Mataranka, unless the King River is swollen near Tindal Airbase, not far from Katherine. You might even get as far as Roper Bar. You would probably leave your car at the Roper Bar store and charter a small plane to take you across.

In this modern age, there is no longer a regular passenger flight into Ngukurr, and travel is more difficult than it has been for decades! One hundred years ago travel to Roper Bar was by boat, usually from Thursday Island, or perhaps Port Darwin

(known as Palmerston). There is no bus to Ngukurr, so hitch-hiking is still a lively art there! A permit is required for visitors to enter, but this is not new. The entry of Europeans has been restricted for a century, initially at the request of CMS.

The Roper River Area

The Roper River is a majestic and treacherous river. It is one of Australia's most significant waterways, hundreds of kilometres long and very wide at its mouth. Describing the river during the wet season, Ernestine Hill wrote 'The Roper is not a river but a sea'.³

The river is well known for its large number of big crocodiles, reflecting its high population of fish. The locals happily live with the crocodiles, giving due respect. Everyone in the Northern Territory has their favourite crocodile story; nothing is more certain to make front page news in Darwin's *Northern Territory News* than a good crocodile story!

Mrs Gertie Huddleston told me how she used to swim all the way across the river and back, quite a feat in any circumstance, but the big reptiles were probably a good incentive to swim fast! However, God does seem to keep a special eye on his indigenous people!

Crocodiles do not come much bigger than the one shot at the mission in 1914 by the Reverend H.E. Warren.⁴ It is difficult to judge its length, but it was probably over five metres long.

The large size of the crocodiles in the Roper River is something of a legend. Alfred Searcy visited the Roper River area a number of times in the late nineteenth century. He later wrote:

Alligators were numerous. It always seemed to me that the Roper alligators were the largest on the coast. Some, I am certain were over twenty feet [six and a half m.]... However I had reliable information of one twenty-eight feet [nine m.] long having been shot.⁵

It did not take long for the invading Europeans to experience crocodiles first hand. It seems that the first European to be taken by a crocodile in the area was a worker surveying the Overland Telegraph Line in 1870. He was apparently asleep in a small boat! The newspaper suggests that when he was taken, he had his feet over the edge.⁶

Away from the river the higher country is rocky and usually barren in the dry season. To the outsider it looks harsh and unforgiving. To some locals, it is home, 'my country'.

The lowlands have heavy crops of long grass in the wet season, often reaching heights of almost two metres. The long grass is blown over by strong winds after the end of the wet season; this is sometimes called the 'knock 'em down' season. The grass is then burned off, as it has been for generations, so that almost the whole of Arnhem Land is burnt between March and August, creating massive clouds of smoke, with circling birds of prey looking for reptiles. As a result, Darwin is sometimes one of the most polluted cities in Australia. Although the long grass grows near the scattered trees, it is unusual for the trees to catch fire because of the humid conditions of the Top End.

The wet season is always exciting with much lightning and heavy rain. The rains can cause the river to rise many metres! I still cannot imagine what it must be like in a big flood when the Roper River can rise twenty-five metres as it did in 1940! Needless to say European settlers took decades to understand how the river might behave. Of course, Europeans now know that severe cyclones threaten the area most years, and sometimes cause great destruction.

The climate of the Roper River area has little in common with southern Australia, and is quite different from that of Darwin. Ngukurr's average annual rainfall is 810 mm, most of it falling in the months December to April. The other months have almost no rainfall and high levels of evaporation. The

dry season can also be quite windy, moving lots of red dust! Ngukurr's annual rainfall is about half of that of Darwin's, which is 1719 mm.⁷

In the months of October, November and December, the average maximum temperature is about 38°C and the nights are very hot, with an average minimum temperature about 25°C. The hottest day on record was 29 October 2003, 44.3°C!

On the other hand, some nights – and mornings – in the cooler months seem very cold, when the temperature can be below 10°C. The lowest temperatures recorded at Ngukurr are around 5°C. However the humidity also has a major influence on personal comfort, and it is usually high. For the months of January, February and March, the relative humidity at 9.00 a.m. is usually about 75 percent, and the temperature about 27°C. It is not surprising that the residents of Ngukurr worked together to raise money for a swimming pool!

Compared with Darwin, Ngukurr is hotter when it's hot and its nights are much colder in the dry season, but it is considerably less humid.

The early explorers and settlers commented upon the large stands of cypress pine scattered across the countryside. These are attractive trees whose timber is almost always resistant to termites; this is because of the sap in the timber, which has a beautiful perfume. Bauer commented, that by 1900, most of the cypress pine on the mainland had been removed, mainly for railways and firewood.⁸ Cypress pine timber was important in the establishment and maintenance of the missions, which set up their own sawmills. Some of these buildings, such as the mission buildings at Angurugu, are still in existence even after enduring many decades of everything that the tropical climate and termites can throw at them. Their reward for survival is that they have been classified by the National Trust. Of course the missions of Arnhem Land had to work at being self-sufficient

in timber. They were a long way from the railway line and the town of Pine Creek – which does not have significant stands of cypress pine today.

The vegetation in the dry season is sparse, with comparatively little vegetation in between the eucalypt trees, which are of medium height only. The dry areas are rocky and very, very, dry for many months each year. Of course the wetter areas maintain active life for a longer period, including spectacular clumps of grevilleas with long cream and yellow flowers. The blue and white waterlilies on the billabongs are quite unforgettable. Out of sight are big barramundi fish and even bigger crocodiles.

The beauty of the area is rarely noted in historical accounts of the district. Ludwig Friedrich Wilhelm Leichhardt stands out as an early explorer who knew enough botany to give botanical names to many of the plants he saw. His writings reveal understanding and a sense of beauty; Ferdinand von Mueller was probably the same. The missionary H.E. Warren commented on the orchids in flower. Lance and Gwen Tremlett, who probably lived in eastern Arnhem Land longer than any other Europeans, were fine naturalists – who wouldn't be when the bower bird builds his bower in the back garden, a wonderful collection of butterflies breed nearby and the big green frogs pay regular visits – in the toilet bowl? Lance humbly tells tales of standing on the edge of the road near the Wilton River, pulling in big barramundi!

One person who appreciated the beauty of the area was Bishop Gilbert White (1859–1933). That may not be surprising. He was named after his 'great-grand uncle' who was a famous English naturalist, the Reverend Gilbert White (1720–1793) who wrote a book on nature which has never been out of print; he has also been described as one of the 'fathers of ecology'.⁹

It seems that, as the missionaries learned to appreciate the Aboriginal people and their ways, so they often appreciated the beauty as seen through the eyes of the Aborigines. Likewise the Aborigines learned to appreciate things that are important to the Europeans, so we see superb displays of waterlilies picked for special occasions, and palms used to decorate all manner of things.

Some cultural gaps remain, such as I learned when I went hunting with an Aboriginal friend. He aimed his shotgun – quite legally – at the most beautiful Great Egret you could imagine; it was standing almost a metre high in full breeding plumage. He wanted the feathers for his wife's traditional handicraft. I was glad he missed!

The landscapes of the Ngukurr district are picturesque, with rocky hills and small mountains in the distance. The Roper River is, in a word, a majestic river. The smoke and dust in the sky results in spectacular sunsets, none more memorable than when standing in the Fellowship Area in the centre of Ngukurr, watching the sun set across the Roper River.

The Church Missionary Association

The main organization in establishing the Roper River Mission was the Church Missionary Association (CMA) of Victoria. It was formed in 1892, following the visit of two men from the English Church Missionary Society (CMS). CMS was established in London in 1799. The CMA was really the re-organization of a group of Evangelical Anglicans in Victoria who had been active in supporting missionary work for half a century. As we shall see below, throughout the nineteenth century, there were significant links between the English CMS and the Evangelical Anglicans in Victoria.

Through much of the nineteenth century, these people were part of a society within the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, known as the 'Church Missionary Society of Victoria'. Confusing as it may be, it did not have any formal link with the English CMS, nor with a Victorian Auxiliary of the English CMS – this had been formed in 1850. Bishop Perry was President of both organizations.

In parallel with the Victorian CMA, there was the NSW CMA. The two worked independently, until joining as the Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania in 1916, with the two groups acting as Branches of the one Society.¹⁰ The new Society remained 'in full connection with the Parent Society in England', although no longer was the Parent Society responsible for the placement of missionaries from Victoria or NSW. The Constitution of the new body established it as 'a society of members of the Church of England, based upon the Evangelical and Protestant principles, which have been universally recognized as the principles of the Parent Society from its foundation.'¹¹

The continuing connection between Anglicans in Victoria and the English CMS was to become particularly important in defining its direction in the early twentieth century.