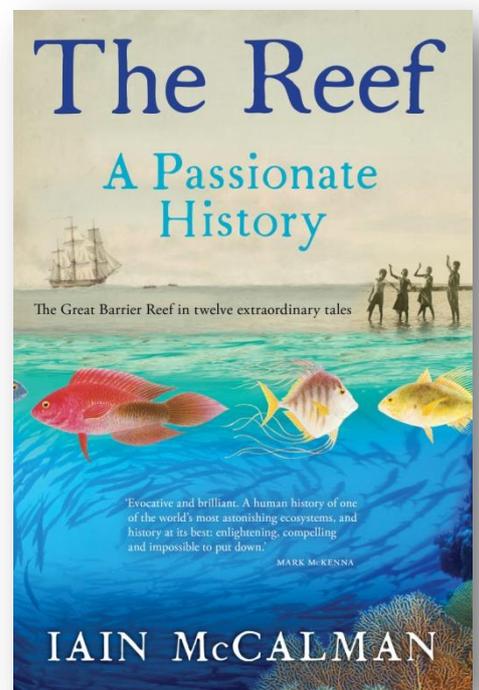


The Reef: A Passionate History

AUTHOR: IAIN MCCALMAN



Extract

Prologue

A Country of the Mind

The afternoon of 25 August 2001 is the closest I've come to fulfilling the dreams of my boyhood, when I would lie in bed looking up at the mosquito net and imagine I was Captain Hornblower, sailing a square-rigger to exotic places. And now here I am, sitting on a small beach of scuffed white sand that curves to meet the vast Pacific Ocean. Tamed by the shoulders of the Great Barrier Reef just over the horizon, it kicks up little white breakers that streak towards shore. In the distance bobs a three-masted barque, the HMS *Endeavour* – a replica, admittedly, but real enough for me.

I'm taking part in a re-enactment of James Cook's eighteenth-century voyage through the Reef, which is being filmed as a television series called *The Ship* for Britain's BBC and the US Discovery Channel. I can see the pinnacle and the longboat crawling over the shallow green bay, each boat supervised by one of the dozen professional 'officers' who will lead forty-six volunteer sailors. One officer stands swaying slightly in the prow of the longboat, calling out the rhythm to volunteers pulling awkwardly on the heavy oars. She and the pinnacle officer are overseeing their attempts to row out to the ship in batches.

I have to wait on shore for several hours because I'm in the last scheduled batch of putative sailors – part of a special group of 'expert' advisers comprising historians, literary scholars, astronomers, botanists and Indigenous guides. We've been assigned to the mizzenmast, the least lofty of the three. We're generally older and more sedentary than the other volunteers – all of them lithe and lissom young adventurers from Britain and the United States – so this will presumably be the least testing of the ship's watches.

I don't mind waiting for the last boat. I sit with my back to a palm tree, half shaded from the fierce sun, chatting excitedly to a few old friends. Now and then I take a slurp of tangy milk from a green coconut that Rico Noble, one of our Aboriginal guides, has given me after kindly lopping off the top with a machete. I'm mentally re-enacting another favourite boyhood scene, from R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, in which Peterkin, after drinking from a coconut, 'stopped, and, drawing a long breath, exclaimed: 'Nectar! Perfect nectar!' I

True, we're not yet on a coral island, though I can see one shimmering on the horizon, behind our ship. It is Green Island, complete with fringing reef and lagoon – the first purely coral island to be recognised by Cook and his aristocrat associate, Joseph Banks, in 1770. I can't see any coral from here, but this lovely palm-fringed spot at Mission Bay in the Aboriginal community of Yarrabah, just outside Cairns, could easily be the site where our fictional precursors, Jack, Ralph and Peterkin, were so providentially marooned.

That was the last moment of unalloyed pleasure I experienced for the next fortnight.

My first shock was of outraged pride. Scrambling from the longboat onto the deck, I learnt that neither the historians nor the Aboriginal advisors were to share the privileges of the scientific 'experts'. Unlike the botanists and astronomers, who'd been allocated private cabins and offices, we would work as full-time

able seamen – to be freed from sail handling only when needed to provide a semblance of historical authority for the television agenda.

Though used to the lowly status of historians within the university world, I'd not expected such attitudes on what was, after all, a *historical* re-enactment. The captain, Chris Blake, a genuine grizzled seaman with forty years of square-rigger experience, proved more sympathetic than our TV masters. He found us a small space at the rear of the ship, normally reserved for spare sail bags, and he granted us leave, in the odd intervals between sail handling, to study our own voyage journals and charts, and to ponder all aspects of discovery and encounter. We'd hoped that our three Aboriginal comrades might be allowed to join us, but they were refused leave from sailing duties.

But simulating the life of an able seaman on a converted coal barque gave me no time to brood. My annoyance soon turned to terror. Like most tourists, I'd vaguely thought of the Reef as a specific place – perhaps an island resort, a beach or a section of coral seen while snorkelling. Instead we found ourselves dwarfed by a vast country of sea, reef and coast.

The Great Barrier Reef is so extensive that no human mind can take it in, the exception perhaps being astronauts who've seen its full length from outer space. Gigantism pervades its statistics. Roughly the size of England and Ireland together, it encloses some 345 000 square kilometres of coastland, sea and coral. It extends for 2300 kilometres along Australia's east coast, and encompasses around three thousand individual reefs and a thousand islands. So vast is it, in fact, that it's only since the 1970s, with the establishment of the Marine Park Authority, that a size has been more or less agreed upon. Prior to that, explorers and navigators gave varying figures for its length.

Having to tack our way through such an intricate maze forced us into continual sail changes. I struggled to endure what Cook's veteran salts had taken for granted: working 112 different ropes, hauling myself upside down over the futtock shrouds, balancing over the yardarm to control a thrashing sail while the deck swayed 40 metres below. I ground my teeth on hardtack biscuit that even the reef sharks wouldn't eat, retched on salt pork, and forced down bowel-churning sauerkraut as an antiscorbutic. At night I lay in a hammock a third of a metre wide with a stranger's bottom hovering inches from my nose, while the fo'c'sle resonated to the snores and farts of a human bat colony. Along with the sleep deprivation and lack of privacy, my squeamish modern sensibility had also to contend with the shame of public toilets and the petty indignities of naval discipline.

Everything I liked Cook's crew had hated, and vice versa. They'd been haunted by the thought of a coral 'labyrinth' and by the terror of drowning, and they fretted about being marooned in a savage wilderness with no signs of cultivation – their signifier of civilisation. I, by contrast, longed to jump off the ship and swim in the silky waters around us, to visit the casuarina-fringed cays and forested 'high islands' sliding past the gunwales, and to bronze my white body in a tropical sun. So irrevocably had the fearful connotations of 'wilderness' changed since the eighteenth century that where Banks and Cook saw a cruel and capricious seascape, I saw a paradise. *The Coral Island*, published nearly a century after Cook's Reef voyage, and similarly romantic books had instilled in me the idea that beautiful wild places would heal all my discontents.

From my three Aboriginal messmates, however, I began to learn of another, less benign side of the Reef. Rico Noble, an ex-boxer with a shy smile, and Bob Paterson, wiry and serious, both lived in the Yarrabah community from where our voyage had started. Though young they were regarded as elders: custodians of the Gurrjiya Gunggandji and Gurugulu Gunggandji clans respectively. Bruce Gibson, burly, self-confident and articulate, was head of the Injinoo Land Trust further north on Cape York Peninsula. He too was an elder, of the Guarang Guarang clan, and was keen to develop an ecotourism business for his people.

As a member of the mizzenmast watch, I spent a deal of time in the company of these three, and they laughingly nicknamed me 'the old fella'. Overhearing my complaints of tiredness one evening, Bruce advised me to stop cramming myself into a hammock and join them on thin mats rolled out on the timber floor. From then on I slept more comfortably, rolling with the rhythm of the ship. I had the additional pleasure of listening to their soft conversation each night.

Like so many Australian Aborigines, Rico and Bob – in particular – were nostalgic for their original homelands, located elsewhere on the Reef. Being separated from their Country in this way was unbearably sad. Their ancestors and families had been forced out of these heartlands – the geographical, cultural and spiritual places of origin that had once defined their identities. As the great Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner long ago explained: 'Particular pieces of territory, each a homeland, formed part of a set of constants without which no affiliation of any person, no link in the whole network of relationships, no part of the complex structure of social groups any longer had its coordinates.' Losing one's country, he said, could induce 'a kind of vertigo of living'.²

Rico's and Bob's clans had lost their jurisdiction over stretches of sea as well as coast: they had always treated beach, sea and reef as inseparable elements that flowed into and over each other. 'Country' denoted for them not just a particular geographical environment known and cared for in every detail, but a cultural space alive with stories, myths and memories. It furnished food, drink and shelter, as well as every sort of sustenance for the mind and spirit. Even so, they spoke about these animated places not in tones of hushed reverence, but with an easy intimacy, as if talking about old personal friends.

Most nights I also heard stories of spray-soaked outings in tinnies to spear stingray, green turtle and dugong, or to catch barramundi, Spanish mackerel and trevally. They assumed that these fish and animals were theirs to eat or sell, yet they also expressed a strong connection to them as fellow creatures and a genuine concern for their species' survival. Under existing Queensland and federal legislation, 'limited traditional rights' to marine resources are recognised. In some park zones Aborigines can be issued with permits to hunt dugong and turtle under restricted conditions, though the practice has attracted strong criticism from some environmental quarters.³

Critical of Cook's legacy as an imperial invader, each of the three elders had decided to join our voyage to draw attention to their people's struggle to secure land and sea rights. As long as anyone at Yarrabah could remember, Rico told me, the clans living around Mission Bay had used Green Island as a seasonal base for fishing and hunting, yet the community had just lost a legal case claiming long-term association with the cay and its waters because a European farmer once held a lease there during the nineteenth century. Such was Australian law. Now, Rico said, that same law protects Green Island's fancy tourist resort.

On deck, in the slow, early-morning hours of anchor watch, the three men told stories of how their families and clans had been scattered by the frontier expansion that began in the Reef region in the 1850s and has continued ever since – successive waves of European settlements, institutions and policies that also wrested children from parents 'for their own good'. Behind the men's stoicism I glimpsed endless sequences of fracture and migration, of families and friends being shunted between missions, foster homes, stations, townships, prisons and reserves.

On 31 August the replica *Endeavour* anchored off modern-day Cooktown, where Cook and his crew had come ashore to repair the ship's coral-impaled hull. While our botanists were being filmed foraging for plants, we historians were allowed ashore to meet with local Aboriginal representatives. Bob Paterson introduced us to his famous relative, the MP and Hope Vale elder Eric Deeral, who was accompanied by his feisty and articulate daughter Erica.

Eric described how the sight of our *Endeavour* replica in the mouth of the river had overpowered him. He'd felt a direct frisson of empathy with his ancestors across the centuries, picturing them standing on the grassy knoll and watching the strange spectacle of the three-masted barque. He and his clan group, the Gamay Warra, are part of the black cockatoo totem, and a subset of the Guugu Yimithirr people. To support their claim to the surrounding district of Cooktown, Eric had assembled a set of portfolios placing local oral traditions and topographical investigations alongside research done on Western lines, thereby creating an empirically based record of the long-term presence of this tribe and its clans in the area. In 1997 the Guugu Yimithirr of Hope Vale were among the first Aboriginal people to be given legal ownership of their lands under the Native Title Act that followed the path-breaking Mabo case of 1992.⁴

Eric and Erica admitted that it was thanks in part to Cook's journals that their claim had succeeded. Eric's understanding of the history of Cook's visit was nuanced and realistic; he did not gloss over the tragedies

that many of his people see as its consequence, but he himself no longer felt any anger. After all, he said, grinning broadly, Cook was now helping to repair some of the damage he'd begun.

The Reef presented yet another face to me on 4 September when we anchored off Lizard Island, 240 kilometres north of Cairns. We'd again prevailed on the BBC organisers to allow us a few hours to visit this crucial site of Cook's original voyage, and after being taken ashore at 6.30 a.m. three of us set off under the guidance of a young scientist from the island's marine research station. Debbie invited us to follow her up a steep rocky peak known as Cook's Look.

Apart from a clump of palm trees that had been planted around the resort, Lizard Island managed to resist the stereotyped South Sea images I'd started out with. From a distance, streaked by early-morning mist, it looked bleak and forbidding; close to, it was dry and brown. We clambered over jagged tourmaline outcrops and pushed past gums that had been stunted and twisted by the southeast trade winds and then scorched by bushfires. In between them grew ragged-edged paperbark trees and kapok bushes covered in yellow flowers. Debbie found some tiny green bush passionfruit that we demolished, revelling in the scent and flavour. Clumps of tussock grass brushed at our ankles and two species of doves tried to drown out each other's calls.

That walk proved life-changing in two ways: I found the island's land and seascapes achingly beautiful, falling in love with what I now realise is a distinctively northern Reef aesthetic, and I had my first intimation of the threats to the Reef's survival. I'd read a few newspaper stories about stresses to corals around the world, but never taken them too seriously.

Debbie was proud of the efforts of the research station to preserve the pristine character of local reefs, but had to admit that even with this much care the corals were showing alarming signs of degradation. She doubted their capacity to resist impending forces of destruction that I only later came to understand. What I did gather from the sombre tone in her voice was that she and her scientific colleagues at Lizard Island believed the entire Reef system to be under threat of extinction.

When we reached the summit I stared northwards to the horizon, where Cook and Banks had first seen the monstrous 'ledge' of reefs that threatened to entrap them permanently. The thin, creamy line in the water now looked to me more fragile than fearsome.

We walked in sober silence down the hill to wait for the longboat. I took a quick farewell swim. Gliding over the multicoloured coral bommies, I watched tiny pink-and-blue shell fragments pulsing on the sand with the movement of the waves. Goggle-eyed parrot fish flicked out of reach between clumps of emerald seaweed. Suddenly all of this – even the faux Hawaiian resort around the corner – seemed inexpressibly precious.

Since that voyage nearly a dozen years ago I've visited the Reef many times, and as I got to know its seascapes and stories better I fell deeper under its spell. The Great Barrier Reef, as I learnt, was built by human minds as well as by coral polyps. To adapt what Robert Macfarlane says in his wonderful book *Mountains of the Mind*, coral reefs are contingencies of geology and biology, 'products of human perception . . . imagined into existence down the centuries'. Now that we're in the Age of the Anthropocene, where humans have for the first time begun to influence geological change, this 'collaboration of the physical forms of the world with imaginations of humans' has surely never been more important.⁵

This book is a story of encounters between Reef peoples and places, ideas and environments, over more than two centuries, beginning with James Cook's bewildered voyage through a coral maze and ending with the searing mission of reef scientist John 'Charlie' Veron to goad us to act over the impending death of the Reef. It explores how the Reef has been seen variously, and sometimes simultaneously, as a labyrinth of terror, a nurturing heartland, a scientific challenge and a fragile global wonder. Yet I don't pretend to offer a comprehensive survey of its modern history. Being drawn instinctively to human stories, I've chosen to

write a series of biographical narratives – of around twenty extraordinary individuals, men and women, who've shaped our ideas and attitudes to the greatest marine environment this planet has ever seen.

I've focused mainly on three types of people: first, the Western explorers, resource seekers and scientists who investigated the Reef; second, the Indigenous peoples, and the castaways they adopted, who lived on and managed the Reef's coasts, islands and seas just before these were overrun by Europeans; third, the romantic beachcombers, artists, photographers and divers who found creative inspiration in the Reef's beauty.

Some of my protagonists are descendants of people who have inhabited the Reef for at least as long as it has existed in its present form. Others were thrown there by chance, and discovered nurture and love from the kindness of strangers. Some sought money or power, some fled there to escape civilisation's discontents or the guilt of personal crimes. Some were drawn by ambition, revenge or scientific curiosity, some by the beauty and marvels of the corals, beaches, forests and creatures. Whatever their motives, they all eventually shared one thing – a passion for this coral country which is like no other in the world.

In the process of writing I've also come to a strong personal conviction. It is only by melding our specialised scientific understandings of the Great Barrier Reef with the ideas it engenders – the sensory, the spiritual, the aesthetic – that we will fully appreciate why it demands we be its global caretakers.