

# Cobourg Peninsula, Port Essington/Victoria, Garig Gunak Barlu National Park

The **Cobourg Peninsula** is situated at the remote northern tip of Australia, around 570 km (by road) to the north-east of the capital of the Northern Territory, Darwin. It was seen in 1818 by Captain Phillip Parker King of the Royal Navy and named after Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, uncle of Queen Victoria. Parker King also named Port Essington after his “lamented friend, Vice-Admiral Sir William Essington”. Today, the Cobourg Peninsula is part of Garig Gunak Barlu National Park, administered jointly by the traditional Aboriginal owners and the Northern Territory government.

**Historically**, the northern coast of Australia with Arnhem Land and the Gulf of Carpenteria was a region of prolonged cross-cultural exchange between the Indigenous people of Australia, South-East Asians, and Dutch, French and British Europeans. The earliest recorded visitors to the Gulf country were Makassars, fishermen who sailed from the region of Sulawesi (today's Indonesia) to harvest trepang, also called sea cucumber, a marine invertebrate prized for its culinary value and medicinal properties. These “trepangers” commenced their seasonal travels as early as the 1600s. They arrived with the north-west monsoon each December and sailed back home with the south-east monsoon winds six months later. In 1623, the Dutch captain Willem Joosten van Colster, travelling for the Dutch East India Company, sailed into the Gulf of Carpenteria and named Cape Arnhem (after his ship). Other European explorers of the northern coastline included Abel Tasman in 1644 and Captain Matthew Flinders in 1802. In the early 1800s, Britain had established the colonies of New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia on the Australian continent. In the north, European exploration had only encompassed the mapping of the coast. That the Dutch and French had colonies to the north of Australia and were engaged in trade and exploration in the area was seen as a threat to British colonial and economic interests. In 1824, on a narrow sandy headland called Record Point in the bay of Port Essington, Captain Bremer of the Royal Navy unfurled the British flag and buried a bottle with some dated coins, and by doing so “claimed” 3000 km of coastline. In the following years, the British founded settlements with which they hoped to establish a direct line of communication with Asia, India and

the Pacific. Altogether, there were four attempted settlements in the region. Fort Dundas on Melville Island (1824) and Fort Wellington on Raffles Bay on the eastern side of the Cobourg Peninsula (1827) were abandoned in 1828 and 1829 respectively. The third military settlement was Victoria at the natural harbour of Port Essington (1838). Escape Cliffs near the mouth of the Adelaide river was the fourth unsuccessful settlement, before Darwin was founded in 1869 and later became the capital of the Northern Territory.

The site of the **Victoria** settlement belongs to the traditional lands of the Madjunbalmi clan at Ngardigawunyanggi. *H.M. Military Port of Victoria* was situated on the west side of the inner harbour of Port Essington, about 25 km from the open sea. It was founded as a strategic sea base but lasted only 11 years before it was abandoned in 1849. Lack of trade, the oppressive climate, sickness, loneliness, monotony and depression were given as reasons in contemporary travel literature. The settlement consisted of around 24 houses, “married quarters”, a “government house”, a hospital, a gun battery and other buildings. Some were made of brick, others of wood, but their construction was impaired by the lack of resources and skilled labour. Cyclones frequently hit the settlement, one of which completely demolished it on 25 November 1839. Gardens were laid out that for the most part did not flourish; fruit and vegetables were under attack by green ants, as were wooden buildings and wooden roofs by white ants. Especially in later years the houses of the settlement were described as decayed and rotten, the hospital roof was leaking, etc. Ships passed through once in a while, but often none were seen for months or even years on end. For a while, two naturalists set up residence to collect natural specimens: John Gilbert (in 1840) and John MacGillivray (in 1844). Ludwig Leichhardt and his party, at the end of their “overland expedition to Port Essington”, reached Victoria in December 1845 (John Gilbert had also been a member of this expedition, but died in an Aboriginal attack six months earlier). Malaria and fever were rampant among the small population, diseases that in those days were attributed to an “insalubrious climate”. The sick and convalescent were sent to a camp on the outer harbour to escape the “bad air”. Around 40 people lived in Victoria at a given time, and a quarter of the residents had fallen

ill or died when Port Essington was finally abandoned in 1849. Wild pigs, ponies, buffaloes and red cattle, off-spring of the fort abandoned 20 years earlier at Raffles Bay, already roamed about the settlement. When Victoria was given up, its animals were also set free, as were the horses that Leichhardt had left behind. Today their descendants still populate the Peninsula.

There was ample contact with the local population throughout the years of the settlement. An interesting figure in this intercultural context is Angelo **Confalonieri**, a Catholic missionary from Lake Garda in Northern Italy, who had been sent from Rome by Pope Gregory XVI with other missionaries to evangelise Australia. He came to Port Essington in 1846, surviving a shipwreck on the way. He chose to live alone, at a distance from the British settlement on the opposite side of the harbour, and to some extent he even shared the daily life of the local people and their travel around the Peninsula. He learnt the local language(s) – the colonists were amazed with what ease he was able to do so – and produced a bilingual phrasebook with word lists (of which two drafts exist today: one in New Zealand, the other at the Vatican). Confalonieri also produced a map; the names for the “tribes” which he gives are for the most part not Indigenous groupings, but rather Makassarese names for geographical locations. He called the language he translated “Limbakaregio”, which is in fact the Makasarese name for Port Essington, apparently a mix of Garig and Iwaidja, two closely related, neighbouring languages of the Cobourg region. (Garig is no longer spoken today; Iwaidja is highly endangered, spoken by about 150 people.) In his translations Confalonieri tried to grasp some of the complex kin relationships of Aboriginal societies. It appears that Confalonieri was even assigned a skin name himself, what Bruce Birch calls “a useful way of integrating a non-indigenous person into indigenous society”. Confalonieri died of fever in 1848 at age 35.

**Garig Gunak Barlu National Park** and Cobourg Marine Park cover around 4500 km² and include the entire Peninsula, neighbouring islands and the surrounding waters. The majority of the Cobourg Peninsula is freehold Aboriginal Land, and the park (*Garig* - a local language name, *Gunak* - land, *Barlu* - deep water) lies within the clan estates of the Iwaidja-speaking peoples of Western Arnhem Land, with custodianship being shared between five Aboriginal clan groups, the Agalda, Ngaindjagar, Madjunbalmi, Minaga and Muran. The park consists of a diversity of land and marine areas, including mangroves, rainforest, swamps, lagoons, beaches and dunes, sea grass meadows and other marine habitats. Its rich wildlife includes many rare species, for example the Dugong (sea cow). The park is also home to the largest wild herd of Banteng, Indonesian cattle that are now endangered in their native habitat. In 1974, Australia designated Cobourg Peninsula as the world's first Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention (an intergovernmental environmental treaty established by UNESCO). The Cobourg Peninsula was recognised for its diversity of wetland habitats with threatened marine species and significant seabird colonies and for its value as a refuge and breeding site. The Park is managed jointly by the Traditional Owners and the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory. It is a conservation reserve used for regulated tourism, commercial and recreational fisheries, hunting and Indigenous use.

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Port Essington 1838-1849 Port or Fort?



Port Essington/Victoria abandoned due to oppressive climate, sickness, loneliness, monotony, depression



today: Cobourg as a tourist destination, a fishing paradise

They were bored. They performed a play, staged 24 August 1839 **Cheap Living: A Comedy, in Five Acts** by Frederick Reynolds (1797)



Cyclone room at MAGNT (Museum and Art Gallery of the N.T.): recording of Cyclone Tracy 1974



monsoon winds, chart from: A Handbook for Colonists in Tropical Australia, 1863

„environmental anxiety“: when environments did not conform to European preconceptions about their natural productivity or when colonisation set in motion a series of unintended environmental consequences that threatened everything from European health and military power, to agricultural development and social relations (Beattie)

this water tank at Victoria probably had been hammered together by children in England



residents of Victoria as dolls in the Park Visitor Centre



Mrs. Lambrick, wife of Lieut. George Lambrick, first pay- and quartermaster, "later served as aide-de-camp to Queen Victoria", "was the only lady, and with the exception of 3 of the men's wives, the only English-woman in Port Essington"

Mrs Lambrick had a servant, a native who was only ten years old, and having been with the family for two years, she returned to her tribe after being reprimanded by Mrs. Lambrick for roaming around the settlement at night. (Spillett)

All residents have volunteered for the place, but their preconceived ideas formed in England almost always on reaching the place gave way to feelings of regret at the step they had taken.

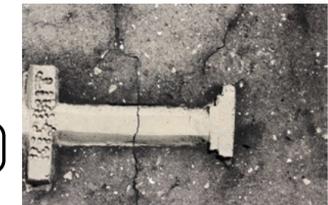
The **unhealthiness** of the place, so often denied, had now shown itself in an unequivocal manner, every one had suffered from repeated attacks of intermittent fever, and another fever of a more deadly character had occasionally made its appearance, and, operating upon previously debilitated constitutions, frequently proved fatal.

landlocked harbour - unfavourable for salubrity - occasionally for days together the sea breeze has not reached as far up as the settlement, and the heat has been almost stifling

His deathbed was described to me as having been a fearful scene. He exhibited the greatest horror of death, and in his last extremity blasphemously denied that there was a God!

In order to comprehend the situation better: these poor people who have lost their native land to the invaders who destroy and scatter their crops and animals, sometimes, driven by hunger, attempt to retaliate against the Europeans. John Bede Polding, Archbishop of Sydney, *Relazione della Missione di Australia fino al 1846*

In view of the fact that the missions have recently been considered a privileged field of investigation for a critical inquiry into the notions of "identity", and that many missionaries have been qualified as empirical "anthropologists" based on how they developed their relations with others, this recent scientific "rediscovery" of the missions has opened the way also to a new interpretation of Confalonieri's activities. (Franchi)



Confalonieri's grave



Confalonieri's map of the Cobourg Peninsula, New Territory Library

**Confalonieri**: The local people mocked him by telling him obscenities when he asked them for translations of certain terms: "When the poor padre came to address the natives, he wondered how it was that they laughed so at his sermons."

**Confalonieri**: While leading this lonely life he seems gradually to have given way to gloomy despondency. I recollect one passage in his diary (which I once saw for an hour) where he expresses himself thus: "Another year has gone by, and with it all signs of the promised vessel. Oh! God, even hope seems to have deserted me."

Reading the descriptions and assumptions about the indigenous people, the writing about women in the 19th century comes to mind, repulsive theories about how and why they are inferior. The 19th century was the worst anyway.

the natives appear to be chiefly deficient in the reflecting and inventive faculties, in the capacity for forming abstract ideas and reasoning upon them; they are said to readily learn to read and write

remember the British sent their thieves off from England to Australia for stealing a piece of bread

**The Journal of John Sweatman. A Nineteenth Century Surveying Voyage in North Australia and Torres Strait, 1847**

the **climate** is such that no European could ever work

insalubrious climate

**unhealthiness** of Port Essington: "there are generally 8 or 10 out of 50 in the hospital, and in two years the party lost one fifth of their number". The sick were sent to a "more airy spot".

**Mildun** (called Jack Davis) when in 1847 he sailed to Hong Kong with two other boys, where the master of the ship died leaving them stranded, around a year later a naval officer recognized them and they returned home. Mildun later joined a merchant crew and travelled to many countries and places; he also lived in England for a few years.

Many of the Port Essington natives have always shown a remarkable degree of intelligence, far above the **average of Europeans, uneducated, and living in remote districts.**

Archibald Sibbald, surgeon posted to Port Essington in 1844: "they have a language they speak to us in and another we do not understand"

intercultural (mis-) communication

John McArthur, commandant of Victoria settlement from 1839 to 1849: "they seem averse to our learning anything concerning them, and ... prefer the adoption of some of our language rather than we should acquire theirs"

**Ludwig Leichhardt** diary 20.1.1846: I should therefore say, that the air and the country have nothing whatsoever to do with the fever of Pt. Essington. The cause must be looked for either in the manner of living of the men or in the communication with ships from those countries which are much subject to fevers. (Added in margin: Capt MacArthur believed, that the place was not exposed enough to the sea breeze.)

Dr. Tilston told me, that the **fever** ceased, when all the country round the settlement was on fire. The blackfellows told him and Mr. John MacArthur, that they burn the grass to prevent disease.



Record Point: in 1824 Captain Bremer unfurled the British flag and buried a bottle with some dated coins and by doing so claimed two thousand miles of coastline.



**Neimal** joined MacGillivray for a few years to collect specimens on the Cobourg Peninsula; he sailed to Sydney in 1845, and later to New Guinea, Singapore, Java.

**Insects** - in 1846 the ship Bramble returned to Port Essington: For some weeks the ever present **cockroaches** had been getting more numerous on board the Bramble and creating a great nuisance amongst the stores and papers and generally making the lives of all on board miserable. The cockroaches, up to an inch and a half in length with great claws, flew about the ship between decks, eating everything that was edible and creating a most disgusting odour. The men found it impossible to sleep below decks for the cockroaches would nibble away the skin from their feet. (Spillett)

on the day trip to Victoria settlement in the bay of Port Essington I reluctantly took a fishing rod and 2 minutes later I had a shark on the hook - abundance of marine wildlife



Abundance of **benthic macroinvertebrates** recorded during mid-dry season surveys of marine/coastal wetland sites. Benthic macroinvertebrates (also known as "benthos") are small animals living among stones, logs, sediments and aquatic plants on the bottom of streams, rivers and lakes. They are large enough to see with the naked eye (macro) and have no backbone (invertebrate).

insects eating up buildings

underwater recordings

Robbie Risk, Indigenous ranger

Keith Risk, Larakia Elder

genocide

Conversations

Payi Linda Ford, Indigenous scholar

Escape Cliffs memory, oral history

knowledge transmissions - a yarn, a story, a Dreaming

bushcraft/bush knowledge



a "pristine" environment

Historical anthropogenic impacts did not appear to affect wetland integrity and were limited to vehicle tracks and middens.



Aboriginal midden

every recording is a framing

sound matter - mapping sounds/data

recording sound

wind recordings ... lying dormant

chimney recording



terra nullius silence condensed, compressed noise



sea industry, Marine Park Report: pearling prawn fishing nets

fractal coral shapes  
tidelines/wracklines  
black coral nets  
red/black coral trees  
sea lettuces  
seaweed  
jewel sticks and tiny droplets  
ochre dripping  
trees suspended out of cliffs  
tree root forms



recording the void

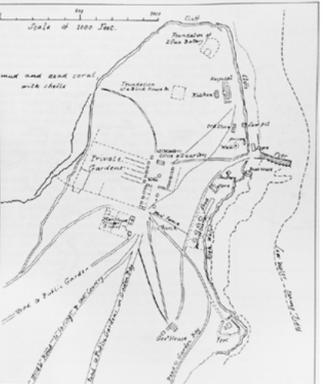
military archaeology



Victoria as an imagined place - Cornwall cottages - a mismatch of imagination and country



Cobourg - the insularity and exteriority of it as a site - they didn't go far in, and clung to the edge



perfect doll-like Cornish/military village - the square, the quartermaster's stores, the married quarters with Cornish chimneys



The loneliness of the isolated settlement meant long hours of boredom, and Port Essington can be seen as a microcosmic example of the situation which was repeated a hundred times in the early history of Australia - those small artificial male-dominated societies that gave rise to the Australian legends of hard drinking and mateship. McArthur tried to curb drunkenness in the settlement and felt no compunction at sentencing marines to seven days in irons on bread and water for being drunk and fighting. (Allen)



Coburg von der Südseite (Germany), around 1850

