

The Red Cliffs

A Story of Moreton Bay

1799-1830

by

Mary R. Mennis

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In writing this book, Mary Mennis utilized many sources, including existing publications, interviews, letters and old documents, acknowledgement to which is given in the text

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Author's Note

This story of the Red Cliffs has lain dormant in my bottom shelf since 1990. With the Q150 celebrations being held in 2009, I thought it was time to dust it off. This was partly as a result of meeting Khalim, or Colin, Terare, who came to live next door to me in Aspley, Brisbane, and who has a high place in the aboriginal hierarchy. Khalim is proud of his mixed ancestry that includes a Scottish great-grandmother who married an Afro-American. His father, Billy Terare, had a local Aboriginal lineage including King Sandy of the Ningy Ningy clan who once lived in the Turrbal and Redcliffe areas and was a cousin of the late Neville Bonner. After reading a draft of the manuscript, Khalim interested many of his friends and relatives in the project. These included Florence Watson, Valda Coolwell and some who were direct descendants of King Sandy: Sandra Georgiou, Caroline Bonner and Des Sandy of the Turrbal and Ningy Ningy clans. With their support, I feel justified in producing this book. As one of them said, "The story will show the young people what it was like in the old days."

I have always been interested in oral traditions, especially in Papua New Guinea, where I lived for over twenty years. Here I spent many a day recording the stories of the village elders who were happy to relate their own history as had been passed down for hundreds of years. From my work, I gained Masters Degrees in History and Anthropology.

After we settled in Brisbane in 1982, I carried on this interest on and off. Holidays on Stradbroke Island gave me a chance to meet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), Rose Borey and families. They took me on walks through the bush, told me of many traditions and introduced me to a variety of edible plants.

I was first introduced to the Redcliffe area in the 1960s when we spent holidays near relatives at Woody Point. At the back of Maine Road was Bell's Paddock where the remaining Ningy Ningy people camped in the nineteenth century. Like me, the Ningy Ningy liked Scott's Point with its sheltered headland. They called it Banda Mardo after the white clay found there. Once the men fished here for mullet and tailor and hunted turtles while the women gathered shellfish, various wild berries and fern roots. The children splashed in the quiet bay and played many water games. Each time they had depleted nature's bounty in one area, they shifted to another as far as Toorbul on the Pumicestone Passage.

It has been interesting gathering the material for this book. It has taken me to Dunethin Rock near Maroochydore; to the Bunya Mountains

with its Mount Mowbullan and, of course, to the Glass House Mountains: Beerburrum, Beerwah, Tibrogargan and Coonowrin that have dominated the landscape for thousands of years.

Our time here, even the time of the Ningy Ningy people of Redcliffe and the Joondobarrie of Bribe, is short in geological terms. The rocks on the foreshore in front of the Red Cliffs were formed from volcanic rock up to 25 million years ago. The red soil of the Red Cliffs, rich in iron, was used by the people to decorate themselves and they were known as the red ochre people. They obtained the white clay from Scarborough Beach or Banda Mardo and rubbed it on their skin as a protection against mosquitoes and also as one of their clan colours along with the ochre of the red cliffs.

In writing this book I have utilized many sources and these are listed in the bibliography. I also have many people to thank as well as those already mentioned: Mrs. Margaret Harding of the Redcliffe Historical Society and the people of the Redcliffe Museum; the staff of the Oxley Library in Brisbane and the Queensland University Library; my daughter Mrs. Joanna Hoy; Ms Kathy Carman; Dr Nikki van Kammen; Khalim Terare and his relatives; and finally my husband, Brian, who assisted in getting this book ready for publication.

Mary Mennis M.B.E.

Brisbane,
April, 2009.

Dedication.

Dedicated to my grandchildren Sean, Nathan, Jacinta, Elizabeth, Sophie, Joachim, Christopher, Luke and Timothy Mennis and the latest, Lachlan Hoy, who was born as this book was in its final production. May it help them discover a little of the past history of Queensland which celebrates its 150th birthday this year.

Introduction

The Red Cliffs were once known by the Aboriginal name, *Kau-in Kau-in*, meaning blood-red or the cliffs of running blood. These cliffs at Redcliffe Point overlook Moreton Bay: a beautiful bay of coves and islands ranging in size from tiny Bird Island to the giant Moreton Island. At low tide, seagulls and herons stalk amongst the shallows looking for stranded fish and crabs. In the evenings, the descending sun to the west casts golden rays over sea and sky to the horizon until they seem to meet as one. Today, the cliffs of Redcliffe Point still shine red in the sunlight although there is not much left of them. Children from nearby suburbs clamber up and down covering themselves with the red clay. These red cliffs were once landmarks of the Ningy Ningy clan who roamed the area painted in their tribal colours of red ochre and white stripes. The men would gather at the cliff-top to look over the waters of the Bay.

To the north-west of Moreton Island lies Bribie Island, the home of the Joondobarrie clan. Some of it remains as it has always been, with its lagoons, bush-lands and teeming bird life. However, one end is full of houses, fine gardens and wide roads. The bush has been cut back and the wildlife has been driven off. That part of the island is fenced off for shops, parks and houses. It was not always so. For thousands of years, the Joondobarrie tribe lived on Bribie Island or Yarun, as they knew it, and never had fences. Children were warned away from the waterholes by dire warnings of the *bunyips* who lived in them.

The Aborigines roamed in their family groups around the Moreton Bay area and beyond. From an early age, they learned where the boundaries of their lands were and knew that trespassing could lead to tribal fights. They looked after the land but did not own it. Rather, they belonged to it and, when they died, they returned to it. Some places, like the *bora* rings, were called *mimburi* and were specially protected.

Each person belonged to a totem and was trained to look after the object of their totem. For example, the people in the honey totem looked after the bees and ensured their survival. Tribal fights were occasions of much excitement and preparation: tribal colours were painted on; spears were thrown with the *woomera*; boomerangs were flung; and close fighting was done with *nulla nullas*. Once blood flowed, the fight was stopped and peace was declared. Then all joined in hunting or corroborees: forgiveness came fast and then came the fun!

The Law of the tribe was handed down by the elders and interpreted by both men and women. The Turrbal people lived in an extensive area including Brisbane. The territory of the Ningy Ningy included the Redcliffe Peninsula as far as Pumicestone Passage and beyond. On Bribie Island, the Joondobarrie people held sway and were often feared by the rest of the tribes. It is generally accepted that the Ningy Ningy are part of the Undambi people of the Sunshine Coast. In turn the Undambi are part of the larger Gubbi Gubbi language group.

The women often gathered together busy making their *dilly* bags from fibre. They had their own initiation ceremonies and held an important place in the tribe for were they not the nurturers of the future generations? They were the gatherers of the staple food - the fern root which they collected during the day using digging sticks and carried back home in their *dilly* bags. Here the roots were roasted first and then scraped with sharpened shells or stones. After this the fibrous food was pounded and turned into small cakes.

Rarely did the women return with empty *coolamon* dishes or *dilly* bags. Along the shorelines they collected crabs, lobsters, and oysters. Evidence of their work stations is found in middens which, among other places, remain along the shore at Ningi near the Pumicestone Passage. The women were also the burden carriers from place to place: their babies; *coolamons*; food; and bark sheets for the roofs of their *gunyas* for their next camp. The men carried the weapons, ready to protect the group or to hunt.

Each season provided its own bush calendar. Thus, if there were many pale headed rosellas it was a sign that a good fishing season would follow. When the caterpillars followed each other end to end, it was time for another species of fish to appear. Large turtles were sometimes a sign of big storms or heavy rain. It was a matter of knowing the food chain in nature. The bush abounded with food: berries, snakes, wallabies and emus as well as possums and kangaroos; even poisonous seeds could be soaked to make them edible. The people shared everything and evening meals were times when the families gathered and recounted the day's events.

They felt they were as much a part of nature as the trees and animals: Their real home was the open spaces with the rocks, sacred caves and creeks. They lived on nature with the bush and the sea being the food source for their families. The forest also provided materials to make their huts, fishing nets, *dilly* bags, weapons and possum rugs for the cold weather.

They had no need for fancy houses or jealousy about superior dwellings. It was the best they could do with material from the forest. They could create a lean-to for protection against the wind in a matter of minutes or a more substantial *gunya* in a few hours. These could be as big as four metres by three and made of wattle saplings stuck in the ground to form an arch about two metres high. More saplings were added to strengthen the arched roof and bound together with vines; over the top tea-tree bark was added to make the structure waterproof. These dwellings, located several kilometres apart, were used in a cycle of the seasons depending on the available food.

Changes began to happen to this traditional life with the arrival of the first Europeans. Captain James Cook had sailed past in 1770 but he did not land. Matthew Flinders was the first white man to land on the peninsula and the monument near the red cliffs states: "On the morning of July 17 1799, Lt Matthew Flinders landed near this spot from the Sloop *Norfolk* and called it Red Cliff Point." In fact, he landed at Scott's Point from where he could clearly see the Red Cliffs. Here he saw a *gunya* with a large fishing net nearby which he described as being fourteen fathoms long made from thick twine. Near the *gunya* was a fish trap set in the water to catch the fish as the water receded at low tide. He took the net as a souvenir, leaving a hatchet in exchange.

Matthew Flinders was exploring for rivers and possible future town sites. He also landed on the Bribie Island side of the inlet which he named the Pumicestone Passage. During his visit, Flinders wrote down the names of three Aboriginal elders he met: Bomarigo, Yelbah and Yewoo and these names are used as the main characters of this story.

Their life style is typical of the people of their day: they went to bunya feasts; were initiated in *bora* rings; gathered for oyster feasts; fished with the dolphins and had dugong feasts. Life was not all fun and games. They had to search for food and there were many Laws that had to be obeyed down to the smallest details. The women's side of life is depicted through Boona who is torn between the tribal Law which she knows she must obey and the love she has for Warra Warra who is an outcast of the tribe. Boona marries the elder of the Joondoobarrie clan and faces many challenges in the traditional society.

This story is an historical fiction about life before Matthew Flinders arrived and covers some of the changes that occurred when Moreton Bay became a Penal Colony, showing the interaction between the local clans, the convicts and the guards. The story of the three castaways, Thomas Pamphlett, John Finnegan and Richard Parsons is historical. They left Sydney on 21 March 1823 together with a Scotsman, Thomson,

to collect cedar logs at Illawarra and were forced off course by a large storm. After twenty frightening days and nights at sea during which Thomson died, they were wrecked on Moreton Island and their boat was smashed to pieces. Since they mistakenly thought they had landed far to the south of Sydney, they headed north to return home, crossing to Stradbroke Island and thence to the mainland. They were the first white men to see the Brisbane River which they crossed in canoes.

By the time they got to the Red Cliffs in late June 1823, they had lost their urgent incentive to return to Sydney. The Ningy Ningy people there had a bountiful harvest of fish and looked after the castaways so well they stayed three months painted in their red and white clan markings. About September the three men shifted to Bribie Island where the Joondoobarrie clan daubed themselves with beeswax and soot. This did not suit Pamphlett who retained the red and white Ningy Ningy markings showing his continued allegiance to this clan. After staying for a month on Bribie Island, they set out north again. Parsons continued on but Pamphlett and Finnegan returned and stayed with the Joondoobarrie clan until they were rescued by Oxley on 29 November.

When Oxley arrived on board the *Mermaid*, he anchored offshore from Bribie Island and saw a group of the local men on the beach. Among them was a large naked man who answered his call in English. English? How could this naked man bedaubed in red and white speak the King's English? Oxley was amazed and landed on the beach to meet Pamphlett and the people of the Joondoobarrie clan. Later, Finnegan was found near Toorbul Point happily hunting with the Ningy Ningy people. During his time on Bribie Island, he had been befriended by the elder of the Joondoobarrie and lived in his *gunya*. One can only conclude that the elders of both the Ningy Ningy and Joondoobarrie clans cared for the three castaways.

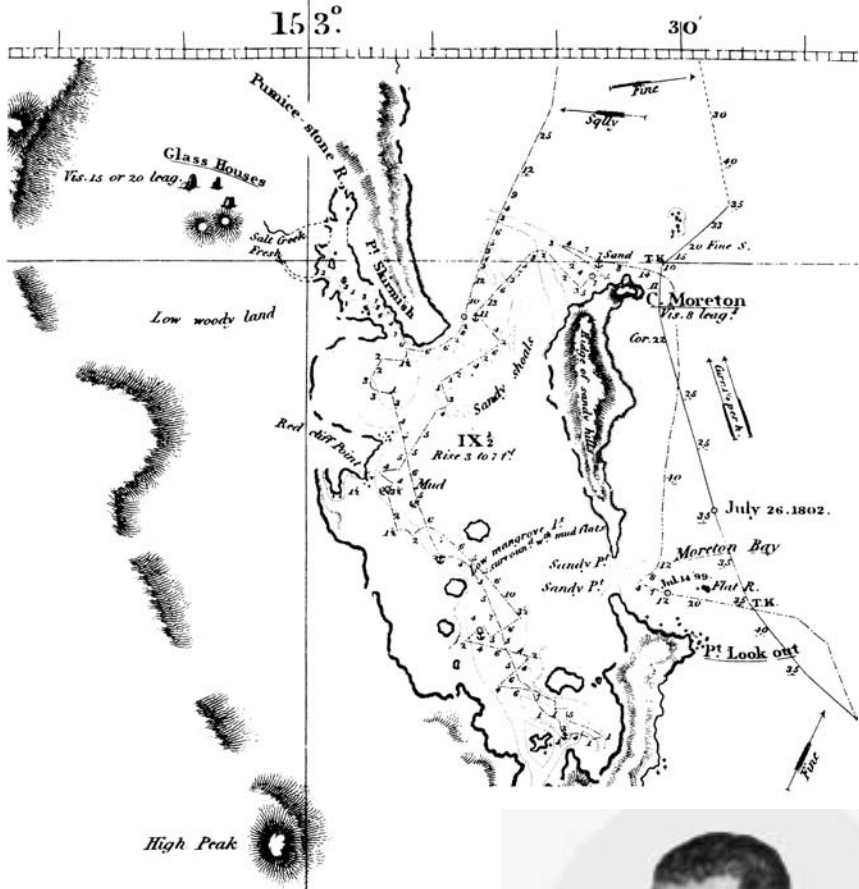
On board Oxley's cutter, the *Mermaid*, was John Uniacke, who was treasurer, storekeeper and naturalist. When he heard the wonderful stories of the castaways, he decided to record them in detail during their return trip to Sydney. Pamphlett began the narration but fell ill so Finnegan continued. Thinking Pamphlett had covered the Redcliffe sojourn of three months he jumped over to their time at Bribie Island describing this in much detail (Steele, 1983: 69-72). The lack of detail about their Redcliffe stay means there is room for conjecture about this time.

According to convict records, Richard Parsons was an auburn-haired man missing two front teeth. On his way out from England in 1812 he was described as having badly bruised fingers on one hand which was

held like a claw. When he was shipwrecked in Moreton Bay, he would have been in his late thirties. John Finnegan, in his early thirties, was terrified of the larger Parsons. Finnegan had not been long in the colony and was quite content to live with the Aborigines, as they treated him like a brother. In his laziness, he did not readily help the other two men, but preferred to just let things happen. A year after his rescue, Finnegan returned to Moreton Bay on board the *Amity* with Governor Brisbane, John Oxley, and others. Finnegan acted as a guide and liaison officer with the Aborigines. Since they were his friends, a peaceful path to the new settlement could be achieved (Pearce, 1993:131). In doing this, did he betray the Ningy Ningy and the Joondobarrie people who had befriended him?

Pamphlett, who had brown hair and eyes, had been a thief in England and was transported to Australia about the same time as Parsons. Of the three convicts, he seems to have been the most stable character, settling disputes between the other men, being helpful to the Aborigines and grateful for their kind treatment. He was married with three children and his thoughts often turned to his family. After he had been rescued by Oxley, he returned to Sydney where he had trouble feeding his family. He was caught stealing flour and was transported to the Moreton Bay Penal Colony as a second offender for seven years. He tried several times to escape and managed it once for a short time. Whether he contacted the Ningy Ningy people during this time is a matter of conjecture.

In traditional Aboriginal society, if men disobeyed the tribal law, they became *tallabilla* and were expelled from the social group for a time. The convicts in Moreton Bay were similar to the *tallabilla* as they too were excluded from society for their crimes. When they viewed the convicts sentenced to Moreton Bay, the Aborigines would have seen them as *tallabilla* of the white people. Their blood and the blood of the local Ningy Ningy people was spilt where the red cliffs stand today making them in reality: the Cliffs of Running Blood, *Kau-in, Kau-in*.



Moreton Bay

From Matthew Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, London. G & W. Nichol, 1814.



Matthew Flinders, aged 27

From an engraving in the *Naval Chronicle* 1814 (Scott, 1929:Vol 1, 352).