

## **BROCKMAN George (Julius)**

The name of George Julius Brockman is one that will be for ever linked with the history of the Western Australian State in the earlier stages of its development. His chief heritage, a spirit of enterprise and indomitable pluck, which carried him through vicissitudes under which a weaker nature would have given way, he found in the country of his birth, a sphere which offered sufficient scope for the exercise of every quality of grit and endurance with which he had been endowed. Born at Guildford, on the Swan River, on January 2, 1850, he was the seventh son of the late Mr Robert Brockman, a one time settler of the Lake Bamban district, near Gingin.

Mr Brockman's boyhood was spent in this neighbourhood, the country consisting of a sandy plain, but well watered and abounding in kangaroos, which formed the chief meat supply, and here occurred the first of his many hairsbreadth escapes from destruction when he was almost burnt to death playing with fire. From Lake Bamban the family moved to Mimigarra, north of the Moore River, a locality situated about 100 miles from Perth and 130 miles south of the then farthest settlement to the northward. This was the present Geraldton, then called Champion Bay, after the British ship "Champion:", sent out by the British Government to search for the sailor marooned there twenty years before, and about 1859 Robert Shaw was employed by the Western Australian authorities to blaze a track from Mimigarra to the coast settlements, which were pioneered by Messrs. Burges, Hamersley, Phillips, and others.

The new bush home of the Brockmans was situated on a swamp on a stretch of unbroken sandy plain reaching from Gingin to the Irwin River. A mud house was built, to which was added a dairy and a small flour-mill, where the home-grown wheat was ground for family use, the surplus being sold in Gingin. Rye was also cultivated and all kinds of vegetables grown, while a flock of sheep thrived well, but was prevented from increasing in payable numbers by the dingoes, which were very numerous. At "Gnumbung," a station situated 30 miles distant in a northerly direction, cattle and pigs were kept, the latter proving a profitable investment. Of plain food there was plenty, and good sport was provided by wild duck, pigeons, cockatoos, emus, and kangaroos, which abounded in great numbers. In 1863 Mr Brockman, sen., took his family farther north to a tract of land which he rented on the Greenough River, and here young Brockman had another narrow escape ;from death, a mud gable crashing through the roof on to his bed during a violent storm.

At the age of sixteen he left home and rode 400 miles to Busselton, with all his worldly goods on the saddle, and after working three years for a Mr Gale, who paid him 30s a month, he took a contract to hunt wild cattle on the Donnelly River, 80 miles south of the port. The country was very densely timbered and the cattle fat, wild, and cunning, so that eventually he relinquished the unequal odds and took a position as foreman of Mr H.C. Prinsep's stations "Henty" and "Prinsep Park", near Bunbury.

Hard work and little compensation awaited him in this service, and he was glad to accept an offer to exterminate wild cattle on Mr A.P. Bussell's run on terms of equal shares. Twelve months passed in this rough life, but he persevered, hoping to earn sufficient to buy a few horses and cattle and return to the north. About this time, however, the pearl fisheries at Shark Bay were discovered and a general rush was made for that region, which Mr Brockman also determined to reach. The story of his journey thither strikingly illustrates the courage and resourcefulness which marked the whole of his career.<sup>1</sup> In 1872 his half-cast discovered a teak log washed ashore, and having shaped out of this a 14ft. boat made a sail of chaff bags and launched her for a trial trip upon the river. Mr Brockman tested the capacity of the craft and purchased her, put out

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<sup>1</sup>Battye - *Cyclopedia of Western Australia, Vol 2*

to sea, and after sailing all day among rocks finally landed on the sandy beach at Hamelin Harbour.

In company with his brother he continued his voyage to Busselton, calling at Margaret River on the way, and from Busselton sailed alone to Bunbury. He knew nothing of sailing and was without ballast, being entirely at the mercy of his bag sail. Keeping close in, he got into breakers and was thrown on shore, where, using oars for rollers, he pulled the boat high and dry, and on the following day launched her again and reached the port safely. Here he had a new set of ribs added to his craft, which he named "White Witch", and having ridden 60 miles to Bridgetown engaged there as captain and sailor names Thomas, who walked into Bunbury, doing the whole distance in twenty-four hours. They set sailed for Fremantle in the middle of December, 1874, having a great crowd of people to see them off, and landed at Fremantle at noon the next day, later proceeding up the river to Perth. The 5 ton cutter which had been built for his brother, Mr John Brockman, was here delivered into his charge and the party, composed of Messrs. Brockman, Thomas, Withers and Kerr, received an additional member, Mr Saw contributing 50 pounds and a barrel of salt meat to allow his son to join the expedition.

A start was made, but some delay occurred when the vessel was stranded for three days on the bar at Fremantle, and on January 25, 1875, having laid in provisions and water, they put out to sea. While at anchor on the night of the 24th the rope slipped the big stone which served as an anchor and the boat commenced to drift ashore some two chains away. The way to safety lay over a boiling, seething reef, which was with difficulty negotiated, and drenched with spray from the breakers the gallant crew shaped for Wedge Island, where another anchor was rigged. Dongarra was gained on the 28th, and it was then discovered that the boat was leaking through being badly finished, and she had to be unloaded and recaulked, work which took two days. Arriving at Geraldton they remained some days, and on February 20 set out for the pearling grounds, being accompanied by James Hough in a small cutter called the "Ada".

The rough coast and cliffs of Dirk Hartog Island were sighted on the last day of the month, and shortly after the pearling grounds were reached, but during the height of a gale which was raging the boat stuck on a shoal, the hull filled with water, with the result that the whole of the flour, sugar, and rice was saturated and had to be carried ashore and placed in the sun to dry. A licence to pearl was taken out, and fair results rewarded the strenuous endeavour which had brought Mr Brockman to the scene of the fascinating industry. From time to time the party essayed to explore Hartog Island, and one night, having moored the boat and landed at Turtle Bay, a gale sprang up and their boat was smashed to pieces. The dinghy, however, was saved, and Mr Brockman, with several others, rowed 40 miles round the coast to a sheep station on the Island owned by Mr von Bibra, where the women on seeing them took fright and bolted the door, thinking them to be pirates. They were able to make themselves known, however, and after a rest and refreshment pulled 30 miles across the channel and reached the pearling camp in safety.

After a week's rest another trip was planned to visit Dirk Hartog, Dorre, and Bernier Islands, and during this expedition the mainland was crossed near the mouth of the Gascoyne River. Three weeks were spent in cruising, and when the return to the camp was accomplished all had given up the wanderers for lost. Being now thoroughly tired of the life, which was not yielding sufficient compensation for its hardships, Mr Brockman accepted a passage in the Government revenue cutter "Southern Cross", under command of Captain Walcott,<sup>2</sup> who had called at the camp on his way north to take control of the pearl fisheries. At Barrow Island Mr Brockman had the novel experience of riding a turtle both on shore and in the water, where he had to keep its head up to prevent it from diving. In due time the vessel made Cossack, and from this date Mr Brockman

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<sup>2</sup>Battye - *Cyclopedia of Western Australia, Vol 2*

began his career as a pastoralist, with which industry his name will be for ever linked, and it was here that he considered his real life began.

After visiting the town of Roebourne he accompanied Mr Anderson, of Messrs Grant, Harper and Anderson, to Mr A.R. Richardson's station "Pyramid", and continued his journey with a 50 mile ride to Mr S.P. Mackay's station, finally arriving at "De Grey" Station at the end of 1875. A return to Roeburn was accomplished under great hardship and difficulties, and subsequently he undertook the management of "De Grey" Station for three months, afterwards managing for Mr Mackay during the absence of the latter on a trip to Melbourne. Before Mr Mackay's departure two men, Messrs Shea and Cooper, had been killed by blacks, and Mr Brockman rode 75 miles to Roebourne to tell the news. His horse, an Arab strain, had already covered 42 miles that day yet he arrived at Roebourne at a trot, the rider being the more tired of the two. A police party and trackers set out, and Mr Brockman, being advised by Mr Mackay, accompanied them. On the first day Turner River was reached, and during the day following the bodies of the murdered men were discovered in a little hollow where they had been set upon while drinking.

Shea was a powerful man, and it was evident that he had not succumbed without a fearful struggle. After interring the bodies the party tracked the natives to a spot where they had held a dance in celebration of the murder, and continued on the trail for seven days to the head of Turner River. They then crossed the ranges to Shaw River, a large tributary of the De Grey, and on the succeeding day came up with some women and children. The native wanted was in hiding, and three days were spent in waiting for him to come in. He was finally captured before sunrise on the fourth day, and after securing a second the party proceeded to the Gillyeling River to two others. Rations now began to give out, and they had to fall back on wild figs and locusts, and sustained by this simple diet finally reached the native camp, only to find that the "wanted" were away fishing. They were at length taken while sleeping, a great struggle ensuing, and the party with their prisoners returned 150 miles to Roebourne.

Mr Brockman next accepted the management of Mr A R Richardson, a block of 40,000 acres which he had taken up on the Yule River. In 1879 he determined to see the Kimberley country, explored by Mr Alex. Forrest in the previous year, and arranged with Messrs Farquhar, McRae, Viveash and Pearse to take 300 sheep and other stock and start a station in that district. The schooner "Ariel" was chartered, and they arrived at Beagle Bay on November 19, 1879, landed all the stock before night, and pitched camp about a mile and a half inland. A log cabin was built and afterwards an iron house of two rooms, and about Christmas time a party of three started for their proposed destination 100 miles east. About this time the Government decided to declare a new district and form new regulations, under which the lease for a tract of country comprising 400,000 acres on the south side of the Fitzroy River, taken up by Mr Brockman, was refused, and an offer of 50,000 acres of inferior land made, which in turn was declined by the settlers.

After further exploration they discovered the Meda River and applied for 250,000 acres of this country, finally accepting the Government offer of 100,000 acres rent free for twelve years. Upon the arrival of the Murray Squatting Company with sheep some twelve months later Mr Brockman moved his camp to Lake Louise, 16 miles on the way to the Fitzroy, where they lived for three months chiefly on game, and during this time they cut a track through the thicket to the Logue River, a distance of 50 miles.<sup>3</sup> Trouble occurred through the hostility of the natives, and at length, after transporting their goods to the mouth of the Yeeda River, where they were landed within six miles of the camp, Mr Brockman arranged with Mr Paterson to look after his sheep for a year and returned to Roebourne, where he bought 1,100 ewes and started up the Yule River to form a station. He was a sufferer by the drought of 1882, and lost a great number of sheep in the succeeding floods, so he sold the remainder to Messrs. Richardson and Welland for 900 pounds,

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<sup>3</sup>Battye - *Cyclopedia of Western Australia, Vol 2*

the largest sum of money he had ever possessed, and purchasing 400 sheep returned by the schooner "Azelia" to the Fitzroy camp.

Here he found the sheep badly diseased with scab introduced by some new settlers from the Williams River, and leaving them with Mr Forrester returned to try to bring some horses and cattle overland from Roebourne. Reaching "De Grey" Station with 170 cattle and twenty-seven horses, a week later he started for Pardoo, and proceeded from there to La Grange Bay, over 200 miles distant. Water becoming scarce, retreat was made to De Grey River and finally to Roebourne, the cattle being left at the 90 mile beach. When the trip was again attempted toward the end of the journey they passed Derby, where the Government had made a settlement and built an iron house for the Resident Magistrate, Mr Fairbairn, and other bush dwellings, and a week later reached the home station, just eight months after leaving Roebourne. A stockyard was built in eight days, and the run, which covered 250,000 acres, was explored, this work taking a month.

The next move was to get his sheep from Yeeda and 400 maiden; ewes from Mr Forrester on the Meda, and these, mixing the common herd, all got badly scabbed. He procured sulphur from Derby, and after then went shearing south to arrange for stores and fencing wire, on which occasion he rode alone 600 miles. Here he encountered hostile natives and scarcity of food and water, but surmounted every difficulty and returned to his station to carry it on for five years, when it was sold to Messrs MC Davies and McLean Brothers & Rigg. Later Mr Brockman visited the Gascoyne country and purchased "Minilya" from his brother Charles for 15,000 pounds, this station comprising 800,000 acres of very dry region, but first-class sheep country when watered and fenced. A month after taking delivery scab broke out on the sheep, but with the aid of some tobacco, which he had to cart 80 miles; at heavy cost, he dipped 24,000 sheep, and repeating the operation was successful in coping with the trouble, which however, recurred and interfered with the sale of the stock.

Three bad seasons succeeded, and though many wells were sunk the water proved salt. Wool was at famine prices, and for ten years little else than hard toil and disappointment confronted him. He fenced a paddock of 20,000 acres during the second year, brought 400 head of cattle from Roebourne, and took up the Point Cloates country, a strip of 60 miles along the coast, hoping to find water which would relieve "Minilya". To reach Point Cloates he procured a boat at Carnarvon, which he called the "Ada May", and on March 2, 1888 sailed out of the Gascoyne, in due course reaching Tuckey's passage leading through the reefs to Yalobia. It is coincidence that Mr Brockman was wrecked three; times within thirteen years along this coast, the name of each boat beginning with the letter A, *ie.* the "Ada"; the "Albert", a cutter sailed by a man named O'Grady, who purposely ran her on to a reef to escape the consequences of having broached her cargo, the property of another man; and the "Ada May".

While negotiating the passage breakers were sighted ahead, but as the tide was out and there was very little water on the reef the native; guide asserted that it was quite safe. At this juncture the boat parted her painter, and this was not noticed until it had dropped 100 yards behind. As they were running before the wind all would have been well, but the steersman, endeavouring to recover the dinghy, luffed the boat amount the breakers, bringing her broadside on, when a great wave struck her, carrying away the mainsail.<sup>4</sup> Two men were washed overboard and the hold half filled with water. The crew scrambled on board again, to be met by a mountain of surf which carried them all away, except Mr Brockman, who had dived and came up again after the wave had passed over the boat. A third wave filled the vessel, and she went down stern first, the jibboom only showing out of the water. They were three miles from the shore with masses of reefs and rough water showing in between, but all began to swim for land as their only chance of safety. The place was teeming with sharks, and suddenly a piercing shriek was heard from

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<sup>4</sup>Battye - *Cyclopedia of Western Australia, Vol 2*

Miller, once of the crew, who disappeared and was never seen again. Mr Brockman was carried into terrible breakers, which nearly ended his career, but though he go very badly knocked about he managed to strike out for shore.

Night had fallen and the outline of the coast was growing faint, but he finally reached shallow water and dragged himself up on the beach in a most exhausted condition. After spending the night with the sand for a couch he started barefoot on a walk of 20 miles to the spot where the cargo had been shipped and overtook two of the crew who has escaped, whom he sent for assistance to the out-station on the Lyndon River. With no water he crawled on through the terrible heat all day, and finding his clothes unendurable threw them away. The naked skin cracked all over, causing extreme pain, the ground burnt his feet, and round him hovered myriads of greenheaded March flies, which stung like hot wire. At 4p.m. he reached Lyndon River, into which he plunged to wet his parched skin, and was within two miles of the camp when a native boy appeared with a kettle of water, which he drank at a draught. He was assisted to the camp, and for three weeks could not lie down through the frightful state of his skin, rest being obtained only by hanging his arms over a padded batten nailed between two verandah posts, in which way he secured a little sleep. A native oiled him twice daily with emu oil, and when partially recovered he returned to the station.

Much illness followed, and a trip to Perth for medical advice left him still in a very unsatisfactory condition. In 1889 his most efficient assistant, Mr Matheson, of whom he spoke in terms of the highest praise, left him. Drought in 1890 preceded the poor season of 1891, but 1893 saw a fair winter with plenty of grass and water. He disposed of a good many cattle at this time, but the following season being dry the purchaser could not take delivery, and he had about 3,000 head of cattle, 22,500 sheep, and 300 horses on the run when the terrible drought of 1895 and 1896 set in and almost the whole country was burnt out. By the end of 1896 there was neither feed nor water, the whole country was one mass of drifting sand, and sheep and cattle were dying by thousands. When at length the rain came 11,000 sheep were mustered and 100 horses and five head of cattle, and an imported bull with two cows and calves which had been sent 30 miles away to keep them alive.

He had to keep them alive. He had 1,000 fat sheep on the coast, which were shipped to Fremantle and brought a good price, as meat was scarce. Mr Brockman now went in for breeding from his own stock, and although 1897 and 1898 saw a long spell of dry weather he was better prepared for the drought, as several windmills had been put up, and as the lambing was good the flock increased to 20,000. After purchasing Messrs Knight and Batemans station, which he stocked with 2,800 sheep and a few cattle and horses, he continued his personal supervision of the properties for a year or two, but finding that his health was seriously affected after twenty-nine years of hard pioneering life in Roebourne, Kimberley, and Gascoyne he sold all his property with the exception of a 60 acre block at Carnarvon, on which was a house and a fine fruit garden. This he let, and coming south bought a farm of 4,000 acres on the Chapman River, and for the next three years engaged in sheep and cattle dealing. Tiring of this he turned his thoughts to travel and took a trip to England, Japan, and America, returning to Guildford, Western Australia in 1906, where he lived in semi-retirement until the time of his death on August 29, 1912.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Battye - *Cyclopedia of Western Australia Vol 2*