

## Paper 6

# The Ill-fated Escape Cliffs (Northern Territory) Survey Expedition 1864-66

Earl Bruester McDonald James A.M.

[earl.james@bigpond.com](mailto:earl.james@bigpond.com)

### ABSTRACT

In 1863, the British government ceded control of the Northern Territory to South Australia thus providing that colony with a corridor along which to construct an overland telegraph line to meet a submarine cable from Asia. To provide a place for such a cable to come ashore the South Australian government sent, in 1864, a large expedition to the north coast to establish a settlement that was to become the capital of the Northern Territory. The leader of the expedition was given free reign to select the site for the capital, and this he did with what some consider to have been undue haste. For two years, whilst surveys of two towns and hundreds of rural lots were being carried out, criticism of his selection raged backwards and forwards between the site and Adelaide until he was eventually recalled and the settlement was abandoned.

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Earl James commenced his professional career as a cadet surveyor in 1952 in the Darwin office of the Northern Territory Administration, Lands and Survey Branch, rising to Senior Surveyor responsible to the Surveyor General for topographic surveys within the Territory. In 1968 Earl joined his father in private survey practice and in 1980 commenced practice in his own name, Earl James & Associates. The firm still operates in Darwin today, enjoying the considerable reputation built by its founder.

In 1992 Earl was elected President of the International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) for a four-year term. Earl was also the President of the International Union of Surveys and Mapping (IUSM) between 1994 and 1997 and is a Past President of the Institution of Surveyors, Australia (ISA). Although retired from his profession a number of years ago, Earl continues to make a valuable contribution to local government and political debate as well as actively participating in the community.

His work in the profession has been recognized by his peers who have bestowed upon him honorary fellowships of the Institution of Surveyors Australia, the Planning Institute of Australia and the Spatial Sciences Institute. He is an Honorary President of the FIG and a Member of the Order of Australia.

## **The Ill-fated Escape Cliffs (Northern Territory) Survey Expedition 1864-66**

### **The Site**

Escape Cliffs - A god forsaken spot on the north coast of Australia situated about fifty five kilometres northeast of Darwin. A place that few residents of the Territory have ever heard of let alone visited and known to even fewer other Australians. Local fishermen may have reason to visit its low red cliffs on occasion but no others have any interest in the place, save for a few archaeologists probing the secrets of its very brief human occupation. And why the archaeologists? Because Escape Cliffs was once declared to be the site for the capital and centre of administration of the Northern Territory of South Australia and was in fact settled for that purpose for a short while between June 1864 and January 1867. Note that I said South Australia. It was not until 1911 that the Territory achieved its present status as a Territory of the Commonwealth of Australia.

The site lies at the mouth of the Adelaide River on the eastern shores of Adam Bay at the western end of Van Diemens Gulf in what is now known as the Cape Hotham Forestry Reserve. The reserve occupies approximately eighty square kilometres of the Cape Hotham Peninsular, a very large percentage of which is wetlands and mangrove swamp. A cursory glance at the hundred thou map will show that the area around the cliffs themselves is one of the few areas of high ground on the peninsular and, more importantly, that the total available area of high ground is hardly sufficient for the development of a capital city however small. Never the less, that is where the servants of the South Australian Government, in 1864, decided to establish the first of three Northern Territory towns to bear the name of Palmerston, an appellation designed to honour the then Prime Minister of England. The present city of Darwin also was initially called Palmerston until the name was changed in 1911 to honour the great anthropologist after whom the Darwin Harbour was named. The PM's name was finally perpetuated in the satellite city of some twenty-five thousand souls which lies about twenty-five kilometres south of Darwin and which was created around 1980.

Escape Cliffs was aptly named, for as we shall see, those involved in the heart breaking work of creating the settlement were none the less glad to escape from it when the site was finally abandoned in January 1867.

### **The Name**

It is highly probable that Escape Cliffs was visited by Macassan fishermen since time immemorial though there is no hard evidence of their presence at the site as there is at many other places along the north coast of Australia where they left tamarind trees, cooking pots and other paraphernalia associated with their *bêche-de-mere* and trepang fishing. Further evidence of their presence over a long period is provided by the obvious social and cultural integration that took place with the northern salt-water aborigines. It is also possible, according to Menzies (2002), that the great Chinese navigator Cheng He or one of his fleets sailed these shores around 1421. But the first recorded sightings of the cliffs made by a European was in 1839 when the British survey ship HMS Beagle, under the command of Commander J.C. Wickham, anchored in Adam Bay and sent a party ashore to check the

variation of the compass. Such a task involves determining true north by means of stellar or solar observation and comparing the result with that of the compass. The task involves the use of a steady observation platform such as a theodolite.

The incident is well recorded in a number of contemporary chronicles. Wickham sent two men, Fitzmaurice and Keys, ashore with the necessary equipment to carry out the observations. They decided to do it at the base of some cliffs, presumably because it provided them with a convenient westerly aspect. History does not record whether or not they completed the task but it does tell us that at some stage they were threatened by aborigines from above. Because their weapons were out of reach and the threat of spearing was imminent, they decided to try amusing the savages with a dance and embarked upon an impromptu rendition of a sailor's hornpipe or some such other seafarer's jig. The dance had an immediate effect on the aborigines who lowered their spears and gawked in amazement at this "theodolite ballet" as Ernestine Hill (1951) has called it.

Their amazement lasted only as long as the "ballet" was in progress. They no doubt related the performance to their own corroboree dancing but the moment the dancing ceased the spears were again raised in threat. Never the less the two sailor stalwarts were able, during their cavorting, to gather up their weapons and instruments and finally make a dash for their boat in which they hurriedly made their escape. In the light of this remarkable adventure Wickham bestowed the name "Escape Cliffs" to the site. (Horden 1989)

### **North South Communication**

As early as 1858, the first telegraph line on the Australian continent was completed between Adelaide and Melbourne. One man stood out against all others as being the most influential in convincing the Colonial Governments of the need for telegraph lines, and that man was Charles Todd, later to become Sir Charles. He was appointed to the colony of South Australia in 1855 as Government Astronomer and Superintendent of Telegraphs. With the advent of submarine cables it was Todd's dream that South Australia should control the telegraphic traffic between Australia and the rest of the world, and that South Australia should thereby reap the profits of such a venture. His vision was for an Australian continent where all the colonies were linked by a telegraph wire and for a line originating in South Australia connecting, somewhere on the north coast, with a submarine cable from India or Java. Adelaide would then control communication between the Australian Colonies and the Motherland.

Melbourne and Sydney were quickly linked in 1858 and continuation of the line to Brisbane was completed in 1861. A submarine cable laid between Melbourne and Tasmania, together with a landline to Hobart, was commenced early, but it ran into problems. It was eventually completed, successfully, in 1859. By 1861, all colonies, except Western Australia, were linked by telegraph line and the need then, was for a connection to the outside world.

Even so, there still was a need for a submarine cable from Asia, but where was it to come ashore? All colonies were vying for the privilege of having any subsidiary land line under their control. Various proposals were put forward by entrepreneurs only to be discarded through the vacillations of government. On the other hand Todd convinced his government to take positive action. He proposed that a cable should come from Timor to the north coast of Australia, that being the shortest undersea route, and that a north/south overland telegraph

line should be built linking the cable with Adelaide.

The Administrators of the colony of South Australia agreed with this proposal and set out, one way or another, to bring it to fruition. They were determined that if somebody laid a submarine cable to Australia, then South Australia was going to reap the benefits. But South Australia needed control over what is now known as the Northern Territory of Australia for this plan to become effective and the Northern Territory was then part of New South Wales.

Meanwhile, explorers like Stuart, Babbidge, Warburton and Goyder, men who were mostly surveyors, were exploring northwards from Adelaide (not for the purpose of a telegraph line but for pastoral purposes, looking for grazing land for sheep and cattle) and were proving that the country was passable to the north of Adelaide, even though it was dry. These men reached as far north from Adelaide as the 27th parallel. Gregory, on the other hand had crossed the country from west to east in 1858 but no-one had as yet crossed the continent from south to north.

In the hope that a practical route to the north coast could be found the South Australian Government, in 1859, offered a reward of £2,000 (Pounds) to the first man to reach the north coast. Among others, John McDouall Stuart took up the challenge and finally completed the task, although it took three separate attempts, and cost him his health. On Stuart's third and final attempt, he reached Chambers Bay on the north coast of Australia, some 130kms east of the present site of Darwin. He accomplished this on 24 July 1862 and proved that an overland telegraph line was feasible. This feat on the part of Stuart had a great influence on the British Government who, having made three unsuccessful attempts to colonise the north themselves, and not wishing to spend more money in the area, then agreed to give the Northern Territory to South Australia.

### **Colonisation of the North**

The Territory was transferred to the colony by Royal Letters Patent in 1863. How the Government of South Australia convinced the Queen of England and the English Government of the day to make this gesture of faith is a matter for conjecture, but with it, an area of one half million square miles of un-explored hinterland in north Australia became part of South Australia. This corridor, stretching as it did from the Antarctic Ocean to the Arafura Sea was perfect for an overland telegraph line, and it was controlled by only one colony.

For any plan to link Adelaide with London to be successful there was a need for a base on the north coast. There was also a need to raise the funds necessary to construct the telegraph line. To achieve both these ends the South Australian Government determined to colonise the north. This would not be the first attempt at such colonisation. The British government had tried three times to do just that with military settlements at Fort Dundas on Melville Island in 1824, Fort Wellington on the Cobourg Peninsula in 1827, and Victoria, on Port Essington in 1838, also on the Cobourg Peninsula. None of these settlements lasted more than a few years before they were abandoned for various reasons, principally lack of trade, loneliness, hostile indigenes and malaria, a disease that in those days was attributed to an insalubrious climate. Victoria was the last to be abandoned in 1849. The administrators of South Australia were sure they could do better using free settlers.

They hastily matured a plan for colonisation of the Territory that would put modern

entrepreneurs to shame. They took their cue from one Edward Gibbon Wakefield, well known in South Australian circles, who, we are told was released from prison in 1830 after serving a sentence for abducting a 16 year old girl and marrying her (Clune 1955). This man had never been to Australia but he advocated migration of free settlers. He proposed that land be sold at low prices to capitalist settlers and the money be used to pay the fares of the labouring class. I am led to understand that his methods were used in the colonisation of South Australia and now they were to be used again in north Australia.

In November 1863, South Australia passed the Northern Territory Act which authorised the sale of 500,000 acres of country land and about 1,560 town lots on the north coast of Australia - site unseen - no surveys. There was to be no requirement for the purchasers to reside on the land, nor was there a requirement to improve the sites. While hoping that a significant number of settlers would take advantage of the proposal it was essentially a money raising scheme aimed at absentee speculators, and sales boomed. Nothing is new is it? Having sold title to the land the government set about to provide the lots necessary to complete the sales and to provide a site on the north coast for the terminus of an undersea cable from Asia. For lack of better information, Escape Cliffs was the suggested site.

### **Boyle Travers Finnis**

Land sales opened in London and Adelaide on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1864 so it was essential that a start should be made on providing the land and appropriate titles to satisfy the sales. This was especially important as a very large volume of sales was made to members of the South Australian government (Powell 1982). The land had to be surveyed, and quickly. A plan was drawn up to send a party to the north coast to peg the first 250,000 acres of town and rural lots. The man selected to lead the party was Boyle Travers Finnis.

Finnis was an ex British army officer who became a politician in South Australia. The NT Dictionary of Biography tells us that he was born at sea in 1807 and that he joined the 88th Regiment as an ensign in 1825. By 1827 he was a lieutenant at Sandhurst Military Academy and was shipped out to Mauritius in 1833 where he supervised the construction of a large bridge. What other training he had in the use of theodolite and chain is unknown but apparently it was enough for him to resign from the army in 1835 and make an ambitious application for the position of Deputy Surveyor General of South Australia. Whether he attained that position is not known but it is known that he assisted Colonel Light in the survey of Adelaide and it is said that he surveyed the town of Gawler to the north of Adelaide. After a short spell as a private practitioner, during which he obviously fared poorly, he was appointed Commissioner of Police in 1839. From there he went on to become Registrar General and Treasurer which entitled him to a seat in the Legislative Council. In 1852 he became the first Premier of South Australia and retired from politics in 1862.

This then was the man who was to lead the expedition. In 1864 Finnis was appointed the first Government Resident in the Northern Territory and tasked with the job of establishing the capital city of the Territory at a site suitable for a town and a port with good accessibility to the hinterland. There was no mention of submarine cables or telegraph lines in his instructions (SAPP 36/1864). Some may wonder why the job should have been given to a fifty seven year old man with only ten years in the army, less than four years experience as a surveyor under urban conditions some twenty five years earlier, and no real experience of exploration or of living under the conditions likely to be encountered on the tropical north

coast of Australia. The NT Dictionary suggests that it may have been “a sinecure for an unemployed politician” and this opinion is reinforced by Cossill (2005) who states “he (Finniss) was down on his luck at the time. His investments had failed and the government of the day thought they would help him get back on his feet”.

The expedition got underway, with Surveyor John Manton as second in command of a complement of forty men which included Junior Surveyors Wadham and Manton; draftsmen Watson and Bennett; and eight chainmen. Their equipment included three transit theodolites, one 7 inch theodolite, four 5 inch theodolites and twelve measuring chains (SAPP 36/1864). They departed Adelaide on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1864 in three vessels, the barque *Henry Ellis*, the survey vessel *Beatrice* and the tender *Yatala* and sailed east about, calling at Sydney for supplies. They arrived at Adam Bay on 20<sup>th</sup> June. On the 1<sup>st</sup> July of that year, according to Hill (1951) they “proclaimed a colony around a barrel of beer in a tent.” For the fourth time in forty years a European settlement was founded on the north coast of Australia. But for the first time it was a settlement of free settlers and surveyors, not one of soldiers and convicts (Pike 1972). Little did those pioneers know that the settlement was to suffer the same fate as the three earlier ones.

### **The Site for a Capital**

Much has been written about the selection of the site for a capital of the Northern Territory. Pike (1972) describes the settlement fairly accurately as:

*“a fort of logs, a log stockade and a huddle of bark huts [that] housed eighty men and two women on the only dry ridge at Escape Cliffs, practically surrounded by a waste of mangroves and, when the wet season came, by floodwaters from the Adelaide River which made the Hotham Peninsula an island.”*

One can only speculate on the mental processes that possessed Finniss to cling so adamantly to the belief that he had selected an appropriate site.

There were two schools of thought amongst potential settlers in Adelaide as to where the settlement should be established - those interested in cattle and those interested in agriculture. The former preferred the Victoria River area based on A.C.Gregory’s description of the country compiled during his many months of exploration along the river in the previous decade. These people were interested in pastoral activity and the Victoria River district seemed eminently suitable for such an industry.

The others were more interested in agriculture and all reports to date had suggested that the Adelaide River area was more appropriate for farming. Wickham had explored the river in 1839 and had written glowing reports about its agricultural potential. This was supplemented by a more recent report by G.W.Earl who had sailed past the area in early 1864. Obviously, neither had seen the Adelaide River in flood and had mistaken the black soil flood plains for low lying agricultural silt common to rivers in other climes. However their claims were strengthened when the government received a report from a Lieutenant Helpman who had visited both rivers in 1859. He claimed that while the Adelaide River was a benevolent environment for shipping, the Victoria by contrast was difficult to navigate due to numerous sandbanks and that the surrounding land was barren in the extreme.

In the end the agriculturalists won. The government decided on Adam Bay “as the first location to be considered for settlement”. Chief Secretary Ayers’ instructions to Finniss stressed that:

*“Adam Bay should be judged on its ability to provide:*

- \* a secure, easily navigable and well-located port, and*
- \* a healthy site for a capital with close proximity to water and timber.”*

Equally stressed by the Chief Secretary was that if Adam Bay proved to be unequal to the government's requirements Finnis was to explore the suitability of Port Darwin to the west, Port Patterson even further to the west and even the Victoria River. In the event Finnis resolved, on arrival, that Adam Bay and the Adelaide River fulfilled all the requirements of his instructions.(SAPP 36/1864)

With the negative results of the earlier attempts at settlement by the British in mind, the health of intending settlers was of paramount concern to the South Australian government. Instructions to Finnis included the following specifics:

*"Salubrity of climate is of the utmost importance; therefore swamps, mud banks and land-locked harbours must be avoided, as such are the chief sources of malaria."*

One has to wonder why Finnis would consider the Hotham Peninsula and the Adelaide River to comply with such specific instructions - an opinion he appears to have reached hastily and one from which he would not resile even after experiencing most of two wet seasons in the area.

Finnis did, in October '64 and later in April '65 when ordered to do so, investigate the other sites suggested in his instructions. It made no difference to his opinions. He viewed the Adelaide River as a convenient channel for communication between his proposed port and the hinterland, the former being ideal in his opinion and the latter being described as fertile by explorers such as Leichhardt, Gregory and Stuart. Such convenience was, in his opinion, lacking in all the alternate sites north of the Victoria River. Settlements in those other areas would have to rely on road transport with all its attendant problems in the rainy season. He had his river!

Those of us who now live in the present metropolis of Darwin find it difficult to appreciate how anyone, let alone a surveyor of Finnis's experience, could think that Adam Bay and the Adelaide River was a more salubrious site for a capital city than Port Darwin. But that was the conclusion reached by him and one which he maintained throughout his subsequent tribulations. He must have been influenced by the south-easterly trade winds prevailing at the time of his arrival in June and by the balmy sea breezes of the tropical nights. Such has convinced many since Finnis of the salubrity of the Top End's climate.

### **Arrival and Initial Difficulties**

When the *Henry Ellis* arrived in Adam Bay on the 20<sup>th</sup> June 1864 Finnis did not immediately start his surveys. As one would expect he carried out a significant amount of reconnaissance of the Escape Cliffs area and of the river from which he formed his initial opinion that the Cliffs would be a suitable site for a town. However a supply of fresh water was essential, and finding none at the Cliffs he was forced to make a depot on the banks of the river some forty five miles upstream from its mouth above the tidal flow. This was not as simple as it sounds as the skipper of the *Henry Ellis* would not submit his vessel to the vagaries of the channel while it was fully loaded. Cargo therefore had to be transhipped to the tender *Yatala* and ferried in several journeys up river to the camp. Since this involved transferring cattle, sheep and horses as well as stores from ship to ship and then from ship to shore the task was not easy nor could it be done quickly. It was not until the end of August that fresh water was finally found in the vicinity of the Cliffs and the camp was transferred back to that locale.

In fact, no surveys were carried out until the middle of December. Finnis was fully occupied with problems associated with the housing of his party, the husbanding of his stock, the preservation of the stores, replenishment of fresh food supplies which had to come from Timor, exploration of the hinterland, perceived threats from aborigines and, worst of all, complaints from his crew. Discontent was growing as they became more and more familiar with their surroundings. Finnis was a prodigious writer and his frequent reports to the administration in Adelaide were full of complaints and told of a litany of problems, none the least of which was his obsessive fear of aborigines. It was very early in the piece that his men started to be restless about his selection of a town site and Finnis was soon seeing conspiracy everywhere. Complaints came from all directions urging him to look for a more suitable site but his only response was a strengthening of his resolve to remain where he was. A growing distrust of the men resulted, and volumes of critical reports to the authorities in Adelaide were the result.

In early September, for example, the resident doctor advised him that the drinking water at the Cliffs was contaminated and he saw this as a not too subtle attempt to make him change his mind about the suitability of Escape Cliffs as a site for his capital city. In his official report in early October he said:

*"I shall not be deterred from doing my duty towards the purchasers of land on the selection of a site for survey ..... by any agitation, pressure or intimidation which the doctor has done his utmost to bring to bear against me." (SAPP 89/1865)*

This is but one example of his reaction to criticism, perceived or otherwise. There are many more.

In early August about forty aborigines entered the river depot and Surveyor Pearson was speared in the leg. One aborigine was killed. The subsequent inquiry found that it was justifiable homicide but was very critical of Finnis for selecting such a site for his depot considering it was surrounded by dense scrub. Judging by its position on the map the scrub was probably mangrove. From then on Finnis became obsessed with security and potential conflict with aborigines and on a number of occasions is known to have ordered his men to shoot them on sight. This obsession eventually graduated into orders for the construction of a stockade and the sighting of cannon facing landward instead of seaward in the traditional manner. His attitude towards the indigenous population was in direct contrast with that of the leader of the second group to arrive at Adam Bay. Surveyor R.H.Edmunds, who arrived in December 1864, was not afraid of the aborigines and spent much of his diary writings extolling their virtues. He became something of a healer to them after administering successfully to a number who had been hurt in tribal fights. On many pages of his diary he admonishes Finnis for his confrontist attitude towards the aborigines.

By the 6<sup>th</sup> October Finnis reported that the stores had not yet been housed, due principally to the fact that they had been uplifted so many times that they were strewn far and wide across the country. His men were still living in tents. Prefabricated houses had been transported from Adelaide but they were not yet landed at the Cliffs. They had come ashore from the *Henry Ellis* onto a beach and were still there. They were still there in the following February. As all transportation of men, stores, equipment, stock and housing materials had to be done by boat Finnis was at the mercy of the tides which rose and fell up to five metres twice a day leaving wide mud flats that made movement of these items from ship to shore only feasible during periods of mid-tide. From the base of the cliff below the settlement goods then had to be hoisted by means of a derrick to the top. This, together with constant patrolling against aborigines, makes it easy to understand why no surveys were carried out during the first five



months of the life of the settlement.

### The Second Expedition Arrives

At the end of the year Finniss and his men were joined by the second contingent from Adelaide which sailed in the steamer *South Australian* arriving on the 5<sup>th</sup> December. This group consisted of forty persons led by Surveyors Edmunds and Packard. It also included two land agents, Stow and Stuckey and a selector named Bauer. These three were to become the real agents of Finniss's downfall. After a brief visit ashore these men condemned the site outright:

*“While the capital of a new settlement required everything to attract, the proposed site of Palmerston has everything about it to repel settlers. ....We feel ourselves, after utmost serious consideration, utterly unable to imagine upon what grounds we could expect the proposed capital to attract population or become a commercial town.”(Reece 1991)*

This initial opinion was given in writing to Finniss who declined to reply. It was also forwarded to Adelaide with the returning ship.

It was the first of many such reports to find their way to Adelaide decrying the site and the man in charge. They were received in such numbers that on the 10<sup>th</sup> February 1865 Chief Secretary Ayers wrote to Finniss advising him that virtually every man and his dog was saying that the site was “utterly unfit for a principal town.” It had no effect on Finniss's attitude and the growing dissent among those on site resulted in numerous defections.

Edmunds, in his diary relates that in April 1865 Dr.Goldsmith, Surveyor Pearson, Junior Surveyor Hamilton and chainman McMinn had all resigned; Seventeen men left on the supply ship *Bengall*; Stow had bought a small boat from that ship; and in May seven men set sail for civilisation in that small boat. They eventually arrived at Geraldton in Western Australia where they transhipped for Adelaide and spread the bad news about Escape Cliffs.

Edmund's arrival in December 1864 created an excellent opportunity for him to observe the character of the man to whom he would be responsible for the foreseeable future. As the *South Australian* hove into view, the members of the original expedition were so excited that Government Resident Finniss proclaimed the day to be a public holiday. Edmunds however, was eager to unload his stores as the ship's master was desperate to depart and the stock on board was running short of water, but to do so he needed the assistance of those on the land. Finniss refused to countermand his promise to the men so Edmunds was forced to use his own resource. Edmunds described the situation thus:

*“Mon. 5<sup>th</sup> Dec: I found the settlement was not besieged by blacks, nothing had been done in the way of surveying the town. .... There appeared to be very little control over the men at the settlement who were nearly all drunk before noon and the Officers could do nothing without instructions from Mr. Finniss. .... The cargo [eventually] was landed on the beach under the cliffs .....[and] remained there for some weeks. I frequently urged the Government Resident to have them removed from the beach before the spring tides made (sic) and Mr King the storekeeper informed me that he could not without instructions [from Finniss] and there they remained until they were awash with the tide ...”*

There can be little doubt that this introduction to the site and to the expedition's leader was the root cause of the latent cynicism evident throughout Edmund's diary.

On a lighter note, the *South Australian* also brought to the settlement the first women and children to reside in the Territory. One was the wife of Surveyor Packard and the other was Eliza Bauer, wife of the selector. Women had, of course, been present at the earlier British military settlements on the north coast but these were the first colonial pioneer women in the

newly created Northern Territory of South Australia. Eliza had her ten year old son with her and when her husband was drowned in October '65 she and her son returned to Adelaide. Mary Packhard, on the other hand, arrived at the site with a four month old daughter and went on to make history by being the first white woman to produce a child in the Territory. She bore another daughter in December '66. (James 1989)

### **Town and Country Surveys**

Ten days after his arrival Edmunds placed the first survey peg in the ground.

*"14<sup>th</sup> Dec: I commenced the survey of the City of Palmerston when I laid the first chain in the Territory. I consider the site most unsuitable."*

Finniss had decided that the capital city would be on the cliffs overlooking Adam Bay and that the port would be about seven miles south at The Narrows just inside the mouth of the river. Without benefit of any sort of topographic data he had designed townships for both sites and had decided upon starting points for each. At a later time he was to do the same for the required rural land surveys much further up stream.

His design of both towns was classic rectilinear. His instructions required him to create a town of one thousand six hundred lots each of half an acre. His experience with Colonel Light in the survey of Adelaide must have had some effect on his design skills and I am sure that Goyder's instructions must have had a similar effect. Goyder had included with his instructions a sketch which bore a remarkable resemblance to the town of Adelaide with a grid pattern of allotments along both sides of the river. (SAPP 36/1864) It was a suggested design for the capital. How he expected Finniss to bridge the mighty Adelaide River he did not reveal. Finniss had his own ideas and kept his towns on the east bank, but he did allow for future planning by providing an area for future expansion on the western bank of the river at The Narrows and for a road into the interior. This last point is interesting as it shows that he had realised that the land on the eastern bank of the river, the bank on which the towns were being surveyed, was quite unsuitable for road making, being mostly swamp and black soil flood plain. He was relying on the river as the primary means of communication.

While Edmunds occupied himself with pegging the capital city, Pearson and Hamilton were sent to commence surveys at The Narrows where one man fell into the water and was taken, so Edmunds says, by a crocodile. Pearson had apparently recovered from his spear wound but was soon suffering from a malady known as *purapura* which is a disease characterised by purple or livid spots on the skin. Finniss adamantly refused to allow him to return to the Cliffs for medical treatment and insisted that he continue working. Finally, in mid February 1865, he was allowed to return and Finniss appointed a labourer by the name of Smith to be a junior surveyor with instructions to continue Pearson's work at The Narrows. Edmunds notes at that stage, that Hamilton had surveyed only forty chains (800 metres) in five weeks which was either an admonition of Hamilton's abilities or, more likely, and admission that the vegetation being encountered was dense in the extreme.

In late February Finniss instructed Manton, his second in command, to form a survey party and help in the survey of the town. As the only other surveyor on site one has to wonder what he had been doing during the previous seven or eight months. Edmunds claims that Manton did not actually start work on the survey until the 7<sup>th</sup> March and immediately proceeded to lose himself in the swamps at The Narrows. While checking Hamilton's and Smith's work Edmunds found "numerous errors" and ended one day with the comment:

*"Tues 4<sup>th</sup> April - I find that the greater portion of this town is under water each spring tide. A creek*

*intersects it by its windings in all directions and a considerable portion is densely covered with light mangroves. It is perfect madness to continue the survey which is laid out according to a plan made in the office without reference to creeks or any other natural feature. I have reported this and urged Mr Finnis to inspect the site. He desires me to proceed with the survey."*

This is but one example of numerous entries in Edmund's diary in which he condemned the sites chosen by Finnis and in which he claims to have informed the Government Resident of his views. The diary also claims that Finnis' reaction was always the same.

*"8<sup>th</sup> May - I have described the site to the Government Resident and urged him to visit and inspect it but he will not do so and suspects me of exaggeration and trying to thwart him in his endeavours to make a successful settlement."*

By the end of June 1865 the survey of both the city and the port township at The Narrows had been completed and Finnis instructed Edmunds and Manton to proceed upriver to a point chosen by him and to commence the survey of the necessary rural lots or "Provincial Lands" as he called them. It took them five days to sail the one hundred miles upstream to the start point where they made camp near the river. They laid down a standard for their chains and both Edmunds and Manton observed the star Alpha Parvonis for true north. Edmunds calculated the magnetic variation to be 2° 25' East and Manton made it 2° 24' E. Finnis on the other hand claimed it was, by his observations, only 1° 33' E. "As reliable as most of his doings" was Edmund's comment that night.

A common line inland westerly from the river was marked out and Manton was to be responsible for surveys north of the line and Edmunds for those south of it. Here they were expected to create approximately one thousand five hundred allotments averaging one hundred and sixty acres each to fulfill the land orders sold in London and Adelaide. The purchasers of course expected arable land but what they would be getting was, once again, flood plain. Observations for the latitude of the camp were made on two separate nights and the result proved to be 12° 45' 25" South. Because they were on the flood plain the provision of survey pegs, which had to be cut from standing timber, was a problem to be overcome. While Edmunds complained continually that "the country had every appearance of being inundated during the wet season" his complaints were ignored and surveys proceeded. By September, survey reports and Diagrams were being forwarded regularly to Finnis.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> September 1865 the party experienced an earth tremor, probably the first to be recorded in the Territory's history, which lasted about twenty seconds and on the 19<sup>th</sup> Manton found that he had made an error of ten chains (200 metres) in the position of one of his lines, so it had to be re-run. Finally, on the 11<sup>th</sup> November a messenger from the Cliffs came to advise them that Finnis had been recalled to Adelaide and that Manton was to take over command. They were also informed that the explorer John McKinlay had arrived with a large party to explore the country eastwards to the Liverpool River to determine if there were a more suitable site for a capital in that direction. Edmunds was directed to accompany McKinlay as second in command and navigator, leaving completion of the rural surveys to Manton, Packard and Watson.

### **Commission of Inquiry**

Finnis returned to Adelaide where he faced a Commission of Inquiry at which the government accused him of "delay in taking steps to ascertain the nature and capabilities of the country." (Reece 1991) The charges against him included, among other things, bad

management, failure to carry out his instructions, ordering surveys to be carried out on worthless lands and an over-zealous reaction to the presence of aborigines.

A majority of commission members found Finnis guilty of virtually every charge and in particular of:

*“Prematurely fixing the site of the capital ..... without sufficient examination of the coast and adjacent country” (Reece 1991)*

What is interesting though, is that they provided a rider to their judgement which reflected the prevailing attitude of many in the south at the time. Notwithstanding the evidence put before them by men of substance who had personal experience at the site, the commissioners were so beguiled by earlier stories of the economic potential of the Adelaide River region that they said they were:

*“Far from thinking that the land surveyed is ‘utterly worthless’. On the contrary, the evidence places beyond a doubt the fact that the soil is rich, and that the land adjacent to the Adelaide River will prove very valuable for the cultivation of tropical productions such as cotton, sugar, coffee, rice &c.” (SAPP 17/1866)*

Today’s lack of any real development along the river, and the demise of all who have tried it, is evidence of how wrong they were. This “we know better than you” attitude displayed by the commissioners is one that has prevailed by southern politicians and bureaucrats throughout the Territory’s history.

### **Exploration by Misadventure**

In the meantime, McKinlay, who should have launched into his exploring journey with haste considering the time of year, for some unknown reason vacillated about his departure even though he was constantly urged to move by his second in command. It was not until the 14<sup>th</sup> January 1866 that the party actually started out, only to be hit by severe tropical downpours. McKinlay went upstream by boat leaving Edmunds to cross the river with the horses at The Narrows and to follow the west bank of the river southwards until he met up with McKinlay. Their experience on the very first day of their journey was a harbinger of what was to come. Edmunds made it to The Narrows in a thoroughly drenched condition where he and his party camped. They spent the next day drying out and on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> January were fully occupied crossing the river where they again camped. Here Edmunds marked a tree “JMCK2 - Jan 17 LXVI.”

The journey that followed was recorded by Edmunds as a litany of woes, the worst of which was the slow progress due to the saturated nature of the country and the loss of stores through being waterlogged by rain. The ground became so waterlogged that horses were sinking to their bellies in mud. At one stage they were forced to camp on a low knoll near a creek for more than a month before the ground dried out enough to allow their passage. The party eventually arrived at the East Alligator River in an emaciated condition with nothing much to eat but horsemeat that was little more than skin and bones. Here McKinlay finally realised they could go no further and that they had no hope of returning to the Cliffs overland. He proposed the building of a punt from local saplings using the skins of the remaining horses for the shell but it was Edmunds who won the design competition and who supervised the construction.

After a terrible voyage down the river and around the coastline the party eventually arrived back at Escape Cliffs on 6<sup>th</sup> July having achieved nothing that hadn’t already been known. “Directly the punt touched the beach it literally fell to pieces. It could not have lasted another

night at sea” was Edmund’s comment that night.

### **Port Darwin - G.W.Goyder**

When McKinlay’s report (SAPP 131/1866) reached Adelaide the government were at a loss as to what to do. Manton was left to continue the rural surveys until the end of 1866 when the whole expedition was recalled. And so the first City of Palmerston came to an ignominious end as they finally departed Escape Cliffs on the *Rangatira* in January 1867. The widely circulated negative reports and the results of the Commission of Inquiry had so affected the minds of the holders of Land Orders that these people were threatening litigation to recover their money.

Bearing in mind that the enabling legislation allowed the government five years within which to make the land available for selection, the government decided to call tenders for the necessary surveys with the site being selected by the successful tenderer. Eleven tenders were received, including one from the disgraced Finniss, but on advice from Surveyor General Goyder they were all rejected. Goyder was fearful that there would be similar problems to those experienced with the Escape Cliffs saga if selection of the site were left to the contractor. He insisted that the site first be selected by an officer of the government.

So they sent another so-called expert, by name Capt. Francis Cadell to look for and select a suitable site. His efforts, while they ranged much further afield than did McKinlay’s, were confined to exploration by sea (SAPP 178/1867) and were just as unprofitable as were those of McKinlay.

Finally, the government gave the job to Surveyor General Goyder who had no hesitation in selecting Port Darwin as the site for a port and for a capital city. He landed there on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1869 and he and his surveyors completed the survey of the second City of Palmerston on the plateau overlooking the harbour by the end of March. On the 27th September that year he reported the completion of the survey of over six hundred thousand acres of rural lands and three small townships within the rural area of Palmerston.

### **Heritage**

In January 2000 the Escape Cliffs site was recognised for its heritage value with the gazettal of NT Portion 5799(A) around what remains of the settlement. The main features remaining include the bakehouse oven, ship’s water tanks, a survey point, a well, the clay brick floor of the Government Resident’s house, the remains of a kiln and a pathway. The Statement of Heritage Value contained in the gazettal notice included the following:

“While the settlement was never a success, the experiences of those settlers based at Escape Cliffs were to provide valuable knowledge of the climate and environment of The Top End and the difficulties which would have to be overcome if any future settlement in the north was (sic) to succeed.”

One wonders why those lessons were not learned from the three earlier attempts at settlement by the military.

### **Conclusions**

Many have crucified Finniss for his obstinacy. Some, like Barter (1989) and Savage (1999)

have defended him as simply following his instructions. Indeed, even one of the Inquiry Commissioners held the same opinion. But it is hard to understand why, given the alternatives available to him that he adamantly continued to stick to his original decision that Escape Cliffs was an appropriate site - an opinion that he forwarded to the Chief Secretary as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> August 1864 with typical eloquence of the day:

*"I do not believe that [there is] a more healthy site for a settlement on the whole north coast than Escape Cliffs." (SAPP 89/1865)*

One possibility that has not been explored to a large extent is the fact that speed was of the essence. Having sold the land the government was obligated to make it available as soon as possible. Hence the Finniss expedition left Adelaide for the north only one month after land sales had been completed. The Surveyor General, G.W. Goyder, further emphasised the need for haste in his instructions to Finniss on the method of survey to be used in creating the allotments needed to fill the land orders. No doubt because he had responsibility for the issue of titles Goyder wanted the surveys to be carried out as expeditiously as possible and wanted the record of those surveys as quickly as possible. Hence he said:

*"In a new country - whose settlement is only attempted on the strength of lands applied for and sold prior to the blocks being marked on the ground - delay in effecting the survey should be carefully avoided." (SAPP 36/1864)*

My own view is that his fall from grace as a politician, combined with financial losses, most probably caused Finniss to be suffering from depression, a state of mind that would account for his belligerent and autocratic attitude during the following couple of years when his army training came to the fore and he reverted to being a disciplinarian and authoritarian who brooked no dissent and would accept advice from no one. On the other hand his persistent conspiracy theories may be indicative of a latent undiagnosed schizophrenia. Indeed he could even have been suffering from what is now known as "Mixed Personality Disorder," a mental state that exposes patterns of behaviour which drive everybody else crazy. People afflicted with such a complaint, while completely unaware of it, persistently bear grudges and misinterpret the action of others in a negative way. They see conspiracy everywhere.

I think Barter (1989) and Savage (1999) are correct when they say that Finniss was simply doing what he was told to do. I think Finniss honestly believed that he had selected an appropriate site but it was the real or perceived need for haste which caused him to make what turned out to be a precipitous decision. His immediate decision, without benefit of exploration of alternative sites, was based on an honest view that Escape Cliffs and the Adelaide River complied with all of the criteria given to him. The Cliffs provided a site which appeared to have a salubrious climate. The river provided an excellent means of communication to the hinterland for ships of the day and the mouth of the river provided an excellent anchorage of those same ships. He would never have envisioned the need for enough land to accommodate a population of sixty thousand people as exists in modern day Darwin or for a harbour that could take massive container ships. To him the flood plains along the river appeared to be fertile farming land. He could not know that six months after his arrival those same plains would be waterlogged nor that they would be waterlogged at the same time every year. But that does not absolve him from the crime of obstinacy.

In his depressed state of mind his nature was such that dissent from any of his decisions was regarded, as the evidence shows, with disdain and suspicion. As it became evident to others that his site selection was not as salubrious as he proclaimed it to be, he could not bring himself to admit that he was wrong and he resolved to stick to his decision through thick and thin.

## References and other material

- Diary of R.H. Edmunds  
 The Territory  
 Overland Telegraph  
 Wm. Patrick Auld  
 Frontier Territory  
 A Land of Possibilities  
 Far Country  
 NT Chronicle  
 NT Dictionary of Biography(Vol I to 1945)
- No Mans Land  
 No Place for a City  
 Mariners are Warned  
 Four Expeditions in Search of a Capital  
 They Led the Way  
 Escape Cliffs Fiasco Revisited  
 NT Portion 5799(A)  
 1421, The Year that China Discovered the World  
 BT Finnis & the Escape Cliffs Debacle  
 South Australian Parliamentary Papers:
- R.H. Edmunds (1864/66)  
 Ernistine Hill 1951  
 Frank Clune 1955  
 Patrick H. Auld 1964  
 Glenville Pike 1972  
 P.F.Donovan 1981  
 Alan Powell 1982  
 Helen Wilson 1982  
 Edited by David Carment, Robyn Maynard and  
 Alan Powell 1982  
 Barbara James 1989  
 Leith F. Barter 1989  
 Marsden Horden 1989  
 Robert Reece 1991  
 Geoffrey Helyar 1999  
 Sally Savage 1999  
 NT Gazette 12 January 2000  
 Gavin Menzies 2002  
 Carl Cossill (Unpublished) 2005
- SAPP 36/1864 Instructions to Boyle Traverse Finnis  
 SAPP 89/1865 Correspondence Relative to the Settlement of the Northern Territory of South  
 Australia.  
 SAPP 17/1866 Report of Commission to Inquire into the Management of the Northern Territory  
 Expedition  
 SAPP 83/1866 Despatches from the Northern Territory - From Government Resident to Chief  
 Secretary  
 SAPP 134/1866 Northern Territory Correspondence - Government Resident to Chief Secretary on  
 Recall to Adelaide  
 SAPP 188/1866 Tenders for Northern Territory Surveys.  
 SAPP 16/1867 Despatches from J.T.Manton, Acting Government Resident N.T to Chief Secretary  
 SAPP 178/1867 Northern Territory Exploration - Report of Explorations by F. Cadell  
 SAPP 131/1866 Northern Territory Exploration - Report of Exploration by J.McKinlay.