KATE LANCE

Author of *Alan Villiers: Voyager of the Winds*

'Brings to light a trove of historical treasure ... presented with quiet passion and exquisite detail'

CAMPUS REVIEW

'Exceptionally accessible, well-researched and written ... wonderfully woven, at times very intimate, story'

API REVIEW OF BOOKS

REDBILL

FROM PEARLS TO PEACE

SECOND EDITION

Western Australian Premier's Book Award for Non-Fiction

Reviews of *Redbill*

On 20 May 2005, *Redbill* won the Western Australian Premier's Book Award for Non-Fiction.

"Built in 1903 for the Broome pearling industry, *Redbill* went on to an eventful life that spanned nearly a century and some major historical events. It was requisitioned by the navy during World War II, took part in Greenpeace protests in the Pacific, and was used to raise funds for the East Timorese. At various times it was crewed by troubled teenagers, crocodile farmers, ecologists and others who all fell under its spell. One of those captivated was Lance, who chronicles with warmth and affection its remarkable adventures."

Western Australian Premier's Book Award comments, 2005

"Not long into this book I found it to be exceptionally accessible, well researched and written. But this is not just a story about where *Redbill* went and how she was used. Here is a wonderfully woven, at times very intimate, story of the life of a vessel and its owners in which the author draws a compelling picture of the social and political environment in which Redbill worked."

***API Review of Books*, July 2006**

"*Redbill* is a clever device that charts a course through 100 years of Australia's economic, political and social development and, in so doing, describes who we are and why we are — even if it pricks our social conscience at times. As *Redbill* maintains its easy pace, Kate Lance explores the wider view … Like an unfolding fractal, the more she delves the more there is to delve into. Lance's ability to hold such a complex set of relationships together is remarkable."

***West Australian*, 8 January 2005**

"Like a diver returning from the depths laden with pearl shell, the story of *Redbill* brings to light a trove of historical treasure. [Lance] has presented the biography of Redbill with quiet passion and exquisite detail … *Redbill* is a portrait of Australian history painted from the experiences of many people."

***Campus Review*, 11 February 2004**

"Author Kate Lance makes it hard not to fall in love with *Redbill* … Books that follow the lives of individual Australian vessels are rare enough. This one, using extensive historic research to chart the entire career of one of these remarkable luggers, and the lives of the people who were involved with her, is unique and ensures that *Redbill* becomes part of Australia's maritime history. It's a voyage across a remarkable century, through war and peace and politics, navigating the shoals of race and labour relations and social issues on the way. This is a unique Australian story that's well worth reading."
***Signals*, September 2004**

REDBILL

From Pearls to Peace

SECOND EDITION

Kate Lance

SEA BOOKS PRESS
seabooks.net

Second edition published in 2026 by Seabooks Press
First published in 2004 by the Fremantle Press

Print ISBN: 978-1-7638066-3-4
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-7638066-4-1

Published by Seabooks Press
seabooks.net

Front cover credit: see image 299
Rear cover: images 9, 8, 121, 147, 3, 7, 39, 99, 127

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Fiction

Shadows in Jade
Harbour of Secrets
Embers at Midnight
Testing the Limits
Silver Highways
Atomic Sea (As CM Lance)
The Turning Tide (As CM Lance)

Non-Fiction

Alan Villiers: Voyager of the Winds

To
the sailors
and skippers
and shipwrights
of the luggers

'Australian history is almost always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer … It is full of surprises, and adventures, and incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened.'

Mark Twain, *Following the Equator*, 1897

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First Edition, 2004

This is the story of a large wooden boat named *Redbill* that began life as a pearlshell-diving lugger in the early years of twentieth century Australia. *Redbill* was once owned by the notorious master pearler Captain Gregory, not only the inspiration for the dashing hero in a handful of novels, but the subject of bitter rumours of betrayal: a man famous for his buccaneering ways and his friendships with Asian people in the days of strict racial segregation.

For two decades Captain Gregory calmly deceived governments with his Japanese-crafted pearling fleet of illicit phantoms that, one-by-one, took over the identities of his officially registered vessels. *Redbill* was to become one of those phantoms.

Redbill's long life as a lugger was unusual enough. She worked out of most of the north-west ports and in Papua, during four very different pearling eras that spanned sixty years of the industry. Yet what was even more unusual was that she went on to a whole new life when traditional pearling came to an end, and others of her kind were left to rot on the foreshore.

Over the years *Redbill* was rebuilt and repaired many times. She was threatened in wartime, abandoned as worthless, sunken, neglected and often forgotten, yet somehow she always survived; perhaps because she had an almost uncanny ability to inspire the kind of love and hard labour it took to return her to seaworthiness.

In wartime Darwin, *Redbill* was commissioned into the Royal Australian Navy as one of His Majesty's men-of-war. In Papua she went crocodile-shooting and pearling with one of the few 'white divers' of the time, then lived with a tribe of ex-headhunters as they revived their traditional arts after decades of discouragement.

Redbill went to work on behalf of Greenpeace, with ecological surveys in the Barrier Reef, environmental protests around Australia and a voyage all the way from Tasmania to Tahiti and back to defy the

French in the South Pacific.

She raised funds for refugees from East Timor, filmed a TV documentary on troubled teenagers sailing in the wild islands of Bass Strait, and helped reunite a young Aboriginal man with his long-lost family.

Redbill took on an epic voyage around the coast of Australia to return to Broome and a new life, but in 2000 she encountered her greatest challenge yet. Over decades she had survived dozens of terrifying storms, but this time, alone, she had to face Rosita, the most powerful tropical cyclone to strike Broome in ninety years.

Woven throughout *Redbill*'s story is the thread of simple happiness felt by everyone who knew her. Witness to a century of Australian history, there was (perhaps) no magic to it: Redbill was just a boat — a large, lucky wooden boat — but she was one that set sail with extraordinary people.

Second Edition, 2025

The first edition of *Redbill* received the Western Australian Premier's Award for Non-Fiction in May 2005, an honour for a first-time author and a tribute to the many amazing people behind the story.

At that time digital copies of books were uncommon, so one incentive for a new version was to create an Ebook, which (software permitting) allows crisp, coloured and enlargeable images.

Another incentive was to add new information and more images, as many had to be culled from the first edition due to space limitations. I also wanted to write a little about what the book has meant to me, as well as an updated 'where are they now' section.

I dislike academic-style superscripts scattered distractingly like ants over a page, so instead have used brief quotes in the endnotes as references. If you wonder where a particular statement originates, just check the endnotes.

Map 1. Australia and its northern neighbours

1. Shell Games (1904-1914)

... the continual coming and going of the pearling boats giving an air of activity, whilst the trade they create makes for the general prosperity ...
J. S. Battye, *The History of the North West of Australia*, 1915

Born in the warm waters of Indonesia, tropical cyclones sweep around every year to make landfall on the north-west coast of Australia, a wilderness of river gorges, bushland and desert, renowned for its exquisite light and colour.

The north-west is famous too as the pearling coast, and at its heart is Broome, a small port of turquoise water, scarlet mud and green mangroves, and the origin of the finest mother-of-pearl shell on the planet. At one time Broome alone supplied sixty percent of the entire world's mother-of-pearl.

Broome's fortunes were founded on the luggers, large wooden boats with rectangular sails, the sturdy, smelly, unglamorous workhorses of the pearling fleet. Like a flock of angular white creatures jostling at the water's edge, the luggers were once as common, and as disregarded, as seagulls.

1. The Broome lugger fleet sailing out, around 1910. *Redbill* was once a straight-stemmed boat like these (State Library of Western Australia, 015179PD).

Built in the early 1900s, a lugger named *Redbill* was just one of almost seven hundred of the hand-crafted sailing boats fishing for pearlshell in tropical waters from Western Australia to the Torres Strait.

Redbill had a twin sister, *Ibis,* like *Redbill* named for a water bird. Constructed side-by-side in Fremantle by shipwrights Chamberlain and Cooper, they were launched in February 1904 and worked together for over forty years.

Redbill and *Ibis* were about 36 feet in length (11 metres) and 12 tons registered tonnage (a measure of volume not weight). They were nearly 12 feet wide, with a shallow draught, just over 6 feet from the deck to the bottom of the keel. They had long counter sterns and their stems were straight or 'plumb', with a distinctive vertical profile from bowsprit to waterline.

2. Pearling lugger under construction in the shipyards of A.E. Brown in Marine Terrace, Fremantle. Mr Brown at right, ca. 1910 (State Library of Western Australia, 015179PD).

When launched they were gaff-sailed schooners, that is, they had rectangular sails on two masts, the taller mast at the rear. The term 'lugger' came from the old lugsail-rigged fishing boats, but was widely used for pearling vessels, even though most were really ketches or schooners. Ketches had the shorter of the two masts at the rear and quickly became the preferred rigging style for luggers.

Like most luggers, *Redbill* and *Ibis* were especially strengthened to handle the strain of frequent beaching from the enormous tides of the north-west, falling and rising up to nine metres in height.

'Redbill' is the common name for the rare sooty oystercatcher (*Haematopus fuliginosus* or *H. opthalmicus*), a large, shy black bird that lives only on the rocky coastline of Australia. An artist who has observed oystercatchers over many years said:

> They seem cautious, not fearful; they peer at you with their beautiful eyes and look practical, utilitarian, somehow *thoughtful*. They're immediately appealing; they have a powerful presence other birds don't seem to have.

3. A Redbill bird, *Haematopus fuliginosus* (courtesy Paul Hackett).

Redbills have scarlet eyes and black feathers, and long red beaks as straight as bowsprits for prising open small molluscs. It would be hard to find a more suitable name for a pearling lugger than that of the shell-fishing, ocean-loving sooty oystercatcher.

In 1688, fully a century before the First Fleet, the 'Respectable Buccaneer' William Dampier noted rich beds of pearl oysters as he travelled the shores of Western Australia. Along the mid-west coast from the 1860s onwards, shell was gathered by dredging, beachcombing and shallow diving, with minor success.

Further north, a broad sheltered inlet named Roebuck Bay was found to be full of pearlshell, and there the port of Broome was gazetted in 1883, nearly two hundred years after Dampier.

Then it was no more than a few rough foreshore camps, but within two decades it was to become the wealthiest pearling town in the world, the 'Queen City of the North'.

From that high point Broome suffered a long decline until the 1990s, when it reinvented itself. Today Broome is the centre of the cultured pearl industry and gateway to the magnificent Kimberley, with expensive resorts, golden beaches, aquamarine seas and camel rides at sunset, seasoned with just a smattering of rose-coloured history.

Yet the town was built upon the life-and-death labours of real people: Japanese, Malays, Timorese, Filipinos, Chinese, Aborigines and Europeans, and today it celebrates a heritage unique in the country.

While the rest of Australia was frantically excluding most of the world from its shores under the infamous White Australia Policy, Broome cheerfully took anyone who could cope with the appalling life of the pearling industry, threw them together in a small red-dust town, turned on heat, peril and cyclones, and brewed an extraordinary culture.

For thousands of years before, Aboriginal people had collected pearlshell for their own trading across Australia. It was seen as the essence of water — life itself to desert people — and was engraved and worn as ritual and decorative ornament.

When the Europeans arrived, they offered Indigenous people trade goods in exchange for shell collected by diving in shallow water. Unscrupulous pearlers sometimes shockingly abused Aboriginal people, and in 1871 laws were passed to prevent Indigenous women and children working as divers.

But cheap labour was essential to the industry, so Malays, Koepangers (Timorese), Chinese, Manilamen (Philippinos) and Japanese were hired to replace them.

In the late 1800s new suits with metal helmets and a constant supply of air permitted shellfishers to go to as deep as twenty fathoms — nearly forty metres, and the humble wooden luggers were what made it possible to take men and equipment far out to sea and bring home tons of pearlshell.

Air was hand-pumped with great wheels to compress it down the pipe to the diver, whose protective suit was called the diving-dress or simply, the dress. (The term 'hard-hat' was 1950s American slang, not used by traditional divers in Australia.)

Around 1900, prices for shell rose dramatically and a maritime gold rush began. Registrations in Fremantle for pearling boats, usually ten or so a year, reached a peak of 103 new vessels in 1903, and *Redbill* was an offspring of that frenzy of creation.

People raced to acquire boats, crew, divers, licences, advantages of any kind. They worked till they dropped in cruel conditions, but all believed they'd strike it rich.

Gradually reality returned.

The fools returned to the cities and, with a little kindness from the sea, the workers survived. It was a hard life, but must have seemed worth it: pearlshell sold for £150 (an average annual male wage) to £250 per ton and a good boat could bring in five tons a year.

The shell came from the oyster species *Pinctada maxima*, which grew to 25 cm, 10 inches, in diameter. It had two varieties — gold-lip and silver-lip, named for the flush of pigment around the inside edge of the shell. In modern pearl farming, silver-lip shells produce white, lilac and silvery pearls, while those from gold-lip are tinted cream, rose and champagne.

Pearls themselves were a bonus — perhaps one would be found every few thousand shells, with only one in a hundred of those a true gemstone. They offered the element of luck that inspired the gamblers of the industry, but the backbone of the trade was the iridescent mother-of-pearl.

4. Shell packing shed, 1926 (National Archives of Australia, nla.obj-138405984).

Out of Australia's north-west streamed shell the size of soup plates, to ornament the palaces and churches of Europe, and adorn fashion, furniture, jewellery, instruments and buttons.

Especially buttons.

Tiny buttons for lacy sleeves, large buttons for winter jackets, round buttons, square buttons, silvery shimmering buttons: piles, hillocks and entire Matterhorns of ordinary, everyday buttons.

Redbill's official number as a merchant vessel in the Register of British Ships for the Port of Fremantle was 119011 and *Ibis*'s was 119018. Both luggers had been commissioned by a partnership of pearlers: Frederick Parkes, Herbert Parkes and Arthur Harding.

When *Redbill* and *Ibis* were launched in February 1904, Fred Parkes noted in his ledger the expense of four shillings to register them and five shilling for drinks for the shipwright.

Two years later the partnership with Harding was dissolved and the Parkes brothers became sole owners. By then they each carefully specified their occupation in the Register as 'Gentleman' rather than the more disreputable 'Pearler'.

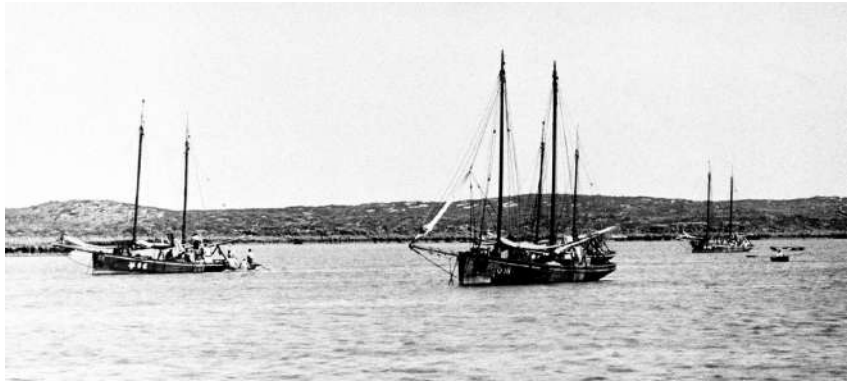
Their company, FL Parkes and Co., had been founded in 1897 by ex-sea captain Frederick Lee Parkes, semi-retired in Perth and now interested mostly in bowls, Freemasonry and his large property portfolio, and younger brother Herbert Maurice — Bert to his family, but known to his friends as Daisy.

It was Bert Parkes who actually ran the business from Onslow, a tiny port roughly half-way between Perth and Broome. Onslow had been settled at the swampy mouth of the Ashburton River as a landing for supplies to pastoralists and pearlers in the mid-1880s.

Onslow's history was shaped by two factors: jetties and storms. The region has the distinction of being perhaps the most cyclone-prone place on Earth, and the first two town jetties on the river fell to the weather.

A new jetty on the nearby coast was built at the turn of the century, but quickly silted up. During *Redbill*'s years as an Onslow lugger the town was dominated by the question of what to do about a deep-water jetty and indeed, what to do about ramshackle, uneconomic Onslow itself.

The Ashburton River was a poor anchorage, prone to tidal surges and floods, so luggers were often based in a cluster of little islands, the Montebellos, located about 150 km north of Onslow.

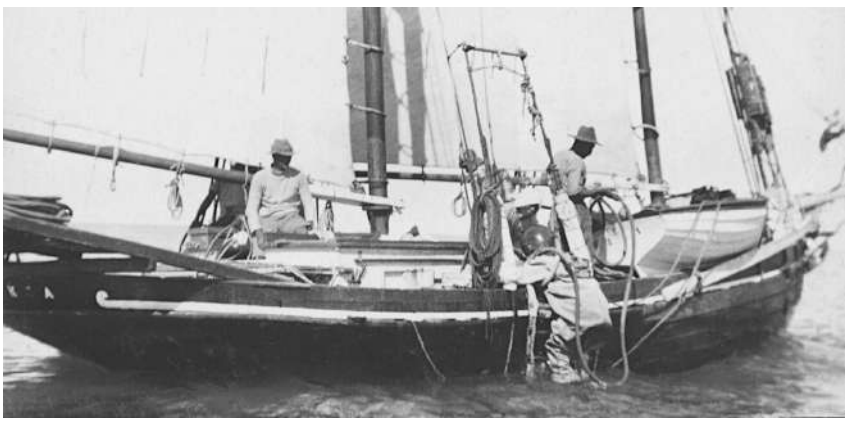


5. Parkes and Co. luggers in the Montebello Islands in 1913. *Ibis* with Parkes' company star insignia at left, probably *Redbill* at right, Nystrom's *Thistle* in the middle, obscuring another boat (Battye Library, 86493P).

The islands are low, weathered limestone hillocks, with scrubby vegetation, little fresh water, wild sandy beaches and clear seas teeming with life. There are roughly one hundred in the group, the largest of them named Hermite, Trimouille and Alpha.

Shell from the Montebellos grew large, and the islands were the site of an early attempt to culture pearlshell by Thomas Haynes. He took out leases in 1902, but his experiments were frustrated by infestations of 'bastard shell', *Pinctada albina*, identical to pearlshell when tiny, but reaching only a few inches in size.

The Parkes set up a foreshore camp and a shed at Lugger Cove, off Stevenson's Channel on Hermite Island. The company insignia was a white five-pointed star painted on the bows of the luggers. Next to the star was the pearling licence number. *Redbill*'s number was O5 and *Ibis*'s O6 — 'O' for Onslow.



6. Diver going over the side (National Archives of Australia, nla.obj-138407481).

Boats were licensed to specific ports, but would fish for pearlshell anywhere along the coast, from Exmouth Gulf to King Sound. Luggers were traded, sold, leased and loaned between pearlers, and the conditions for boats and their crews were much the same throughout the whole region.

In 1907 the Western Australian ports reach their all-time high of numbers of pearling vessels: that year Onslow worked 29 boats and Cossack 27, while Broome dominated the industry with 357 luggers.

Diving took place from fleets of boats that would stay at sea for weeks or months at a time, provisioned by large schooners. The mother ship from each company would collect the shells, which were opened under the supervision of the white master or shell-opener, watching for any easily-misappropriated pearls.

Despite their best efforts the Parkes were unlucky where their small fleet was concerned. Lugger *Rescue* was wrecked at Baldwin Creek in 1897, *Willie* at Cygnet Bay in 1900, *Sea Gull* was lost off the North-West Cape in 1900, and after they sold *Taniwah* she was taken by a mutineer crew and sunk in 1908 at Gantheaume Point near Broome, although the Parkes can hardly be blamed for that.

Parkes and Co.'s mother ship was a schooner named *Cutty Sark* after the famous tea clipper preserved today at Greenwich. Her finest hour came when her flags decorated the Church Hall at Onslow (due to lack of local greenery) when the Governor visited in 1906.

But in March 1907 a cyclone struck Exmouth Gulf and five Japanese men were drowned. Fifteen luggers were driven ashore, *Redbill* and *Ibis* probably among them, and *Cutty Sark*, 'on her beam ends with her port side stove in', was completely wrecked.

Out on the luggers the rhythm of the seasons defined the lives of the boats and men as if they would never end. The pearling year began in February or March, near the end of the monsoon season, the 'blow time'. Not close enough to the end, many felt, as a number of cyclones still occurred into April — but economics demanded the boats return to work in the 'south-east time'.

Luggers in this period usually carried a crew of seven. The master or shell-opener and the first diver shared a tiny cabin at the rear of the boat, while the other crew slept in two-tiered bunks in the forepart.

Amidships were large tanks of fresh water, an open hold for the hand air-pump and a small fireplace, used for cooking with the red mangrove wood that burned away to almost nothing.

The pearling life was achingly hard. Luggers went to sea for months at a time, food was monotonous and work lasted from dawn till dark.

Crew members were sometimes lethally hostile towards each other, the boats stank of rotting shellfish, and crawled with horrifying giant cockroaches that would nibble the skin off pearlers' toes as they slept.

Yet the scenery of the north-west is stunningly beautiful.

Photographs from the old days, in soft sepias and greys, cannot do justice to a landscape that glows like gemstones, with soils of garnet and amber, trees of citrine and emerald, seas of jade, teal, turquoise and aquamarine.

Despite the demands of their work, pearlers must have taken at least some sense of pleasure from their surroundings. Autumn and winter days were unclouded and brilliant, and night offered stars, moonlight and soft breezes. Divers had good pay, high status and great pride in their abilities and, although it was a dangerous life, it clearly appealed to many.

7. Diver and crew in rough sea, 1914 (State Library of Western Australia, 003858D).

The lay-up was in summer, and during a rising spring tide in December, just ahead of the new cyclone season, the luggers would return to the foreshore camps of their home ports.

Most of the indentured men would take steamships back to their homes in Asia (a requirement of their employment), and those that remained would strip the boats of equipment, label and store it.

They would dig channels into the mud and the luggers would spend months there, supported by sandbags and washed by the tides, while tons of pearlshell were carefully graded and layered like china in crates in the packing sheds.

Summer was intensely hot and humid, with almost daily thunderstorms and the ever-present threat of cyclones. Beyond their labours the lugger crews spent their time drinking, gambling, and cramming as much human pleasure into their lives as possible in a few short months, until it was time to ready the boats to go out again for the next pearling season.

While the Parkes' luggers were pearling the turbulent waters of Onslow, an extraordinary man was rising to prominence in Broome, a Welsh sailor named Ancell Clement Gregory.

Gregory would one day become master of *Redbill* and take not only the luggers but the pearling industry itself in a whole new direction. Unlike the Parkes, he always noted his occupation as 'Pearler'.

Gregory was born on 1 July 1878 at Bishopston, South Wales. He went to sea as an apprentice at sixteen, and over eleven years worked on square-rigged sailing ships, carrying cargo all over the world. His references were excellent ('strictly sober, clever, exemplary', 'gave every satisfaction', 'recommend him with every confidence').

By January 1906 he was Chief Officer on the steam-ship *SS Charon*, trading between Singapore, Fremantle and Broome, but left the ship after six months to 'take charge of a Pearling Business in Broome … thoroughly capable and energetic Officer … we regret to lose his services'.

At the age of 27, Gregory, clever, ambitious and restless, had recognised an opportunity in the red dust and turquoise waters of tiny Broome, and in May 1906 he became manager of CN Murphy's twenty-eight boats.

He was to receive £400 a year, plus a yearly commission of 'five pounds per centum upon the net realisation of all the pearls raised by the company'. Later in 1906 Murphy's fleet — at that time the largest in Western Australia — was bought by Mark Rubin, a wealthy European pearl merchant.

No-one dared address Ancell Clement Gregory by his Christian name. He was known only as Greg, Captain Gregory, or the Skipper (Master in Sail Certificate No. 035062), a passionate, intelligent, striking man.

Mary Albertus Bain described him as over six feet tall, 'handsome and daring, with a touch of polished showman in his makeup, but capable too, of violent outbursts of temper which belied his reputation as a calm, logical person.'

Bain quoted 'a business-man from overseas', who said that in forty years he had never met so brilliant a person as Gregory. Hugh Edwards calls him dark and dashing, renowned for his tropical whites tailored in Singapore and his cigarettes rolled personally for him in Cairo.

Gregory was athletic enough to famously test his sobriety by kicking the ceiling fan in the bar of the Continental hotel when in his mid-forties, reported Tom Ronan, a young shell-opener. Ronan made no secret of his dislike for just about everyone, especially women, modern writers, Aborigines and Japanese, but oh, how he worshipped Captain Gregory:

> White-suited and white-helmeted he was, with the torso of an athlete, the light legs of a seaman, and the face of a satyr: a devilishly handsome satyr, but as pagan, as restless and as ruthless as any that ever roamed the hills of old Attica.

Yet for all the admiration Gregory attracted, he was just as often vilified. Sometimes it was envy of his good fortune — itself the result of his charm and energy — but more usually it was because of perhaps his most extraordinary aspect: from his first meeting with a Japanese merchant and photographer named Yasukichi Murakami, the two men formed a loyal friendship that lasted all their lives.

This was a time when 'Asiatics' were regarded, with the full force of the law, as less than human, and when a white man associating by choice with non-whites was a traitor to his race, dismissed in disgust as 'unsound'.

From the Asian side, bias was just as uncompromising: Europeans were no more than naive bullies, lacking any sense of honour or civilisation.

8. Captain Ancell Clement Gregory, about 1910 (courtesy Margo Beilby).

Yet Welsh Gregory and Japanese Murakami were to discover in each other like-minded souls — witty, ambitious and perceptive — and both endured the disapproval of their own kind for decades in exchange for the rewards of their friendship.

'Cockeye-bob' was the local name for a brief squall that would strike suddenly, with 'titanic white and black fleeces rolling one on top of the other'. A longer-lasting storm was a 'willy-willy' and the fiercest of those were the tropical cyclones (hurricanes).

Luggers were most vulnerable to the weather off the great sandy sweep south of Broome, then called the Ninety-Mile Beach, now known, oddly, as the Eighty-Mile Beach (even more oddly, it must be at least 120 miles long).

It offered just a few points of shelter — shallow creeks that could be entered only at high tide — and any boat caught out in a willy-willy on the rich pearling beds of the Ninety-Mile was in great peril.

In late April 1908 an unexpected storm struck La Grange at the northern end of the Ninety-Mile. The *Northern Times* reported on 2 May 1908:

> As it was known that the pearling fleets, under the impression the cyclonic season was over, had gone out, grave fears were entertained for their safety.

Those grave fears were well-founded. Three schooners, forty luggers and one hundred and twenty-three men were lost. The three white men among the dead were publicly mourned in the papers, but the one hundred and twenty Asian men who were also drowned were never even named.

Later that same year in December, a group of boats were anchored near the Ninety-Mile Beach, salvaging wrecks from the April storm. They included the 150-ton *Kelander Bux*, the beautiful mother schooner of Rubin's fleet. The *Bux* was skippered by Captain Gregory, and was famous for her skilful crew in their dashing uniform of sarongs and red caps.

A cyclone closed in on the fleet at night on 7 December 1908. Next morning the luggers made a run for Cape Bossut Creek, but the much larger *Bux*, despite a desperate effort to escape, was caught and smashed up in the massive surf.

Most of the crew managed to get to the dinghies or cling to wreckage. Gregory himself swam 'with half a door' and got to the beach after many hours. He made his way north along the desolate Ninety-Mile and met three of the crew.

They found fresh water in a stranded lugger after walking all night, met another three of the crew the following day, then finally reached the stranded schooner *Alto*. Gregory was interviewed by the *Broome Chronicle* of 26 December 1908:

> On arrival at the Alto we were treated by the staff with every possible kindness … The crew — South Sea Islanders and Malay — behaved splendidly from first to last. No vessel could stand the fierceness of the gale after she struck, with mountainous seas 40ft high. The Bux was a fine able schooner, and given plenty of room would weather anything … [but it was] impossible to run across the front of the cyclone owing to the closeness of the lee shore …

Three of the ten men on board the *Bux* died. The survivors had lost everything they owned, but the bosun told the *Broome Chronicle* that Captain Gregory had given all of them clothing after they returned to Broome. Over forty men, two schooners and fifteen luggers were lost in this storm.

Gregory's sober and generous account contrasts strikingly with that reported in Ion Idriess' colourful fantasy *Forty Fathoms Deep*, which had Gregory floating in the water for two days, being one of only two survivors, and staggering up the beach for another three days with a dead gannet in his hand! (Almost all published accounts of the *Kelander Bux* story contain wild exaggerations and it must have been a classic pub yarn.)

It was probably at this time too that 30-year-old Gregory and 28-year-old Yasukichi Murakami first met. Murakami had been born on 19 December 1880 in Tanami, Wakayama Prefecture, Japan.

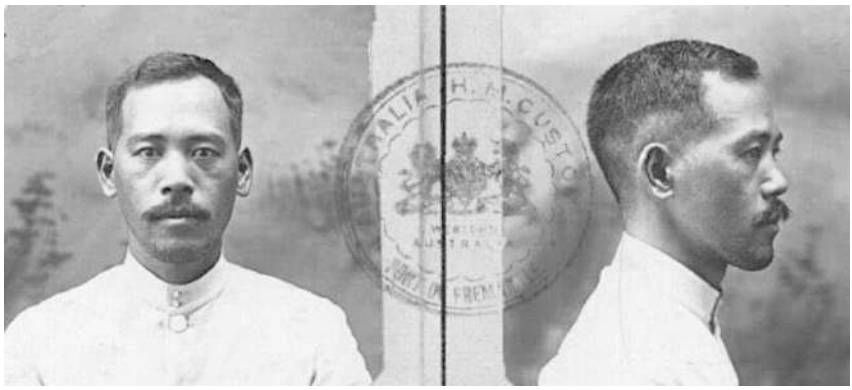
He arrived in Cossack in 1897, where he was apprenticed to merchant Takazo Nishioka and his wife Eki. They moved to Broome in 1900, but Nishioka died in 1901.

Murakami and Eki continued the business, keeping the trade name 'Nishioka'. Their shop carried not only everyday items, but also silks, brocades, tapestries, porcelain, lacquer-ware and other luxury goods. Eki, unusually for her time, was a talented photographer and taught Murakami the trade. They went on to marry in 1906.

9. Yasukichi Murakami and Eki Nishioka, probably at their marriage, 1906 (Noreen Jones' Yamamoto Collection).

Bain described Murakami as 'a strong, youthful person with an outgoing, bright personality', who became highly influential in his own community and mixed easily with all levels of Broome society.

He spoke fluent English, was an excellent book-keeper, studied maritime law and was a banker and advisor to Asian indentured workers. Murakami's standing at the age of only 26 was such that he was at the head of the Japanese signatories to an agreement between the Malays and Japanese communities after a riot in 1907.



10. Mr Yasukichi Murakami, trader, photographer, inventor (National Archives of Australia, from Bain).

Murakami's son Kisaburo Joseph wrote of their father's first meeting with Gregory, as recalled by his older sister, Yasuko Pearl Minami:

> … a dishevelled, unkempt stranger came into our father's premises and asked our father, a relatively prosperous man at the time, to lend him some money. Normally no-one would take much notice of such a wretched-looking man but Yasukichi, with considerable misgivings, decided to lend him about twenty pounds, a large sum at the time, believing that he would never see the man or the money again.

Some years later, Joseph asked Yasuko why Gregory had been in such a 'wretched' state that day:

> Yasuko immediately replied that our father had told her that Gregory had been in a shipwreck and had swum all the way to shore and safety. He looked so miserable that Yasukichi felt sorry for him and decided to lend him the money regardless of the prospects of being repaid.

The shipwreck could only have been the *Kelander Bux*, and Yasuko's words suggest a great deal. By now Gregory had been established in Broome for two years, so had no need of money himself. The loan was more likely to provide for his destitute seamen — those South Sea Islanders and Malays who had 'behaved splendidly from first to last'.

Hence Gregory's care for his crew and Murakami's generosity to a stranger could well have been what led to the partnership that would repay both men many times over through the difficult coming years.

They would be friends and business partners for over three decades. The strength of their bond is indicated by the fact that while Gregory was overseas in Britain in 1912, he scandalised the town by allowing Murakami to live in his home, a gesture that calmly flouted every racial barrier of Broome society. He was powerful enough then to get away with it.

After the loss of the mother ship *Cutty Sark* in the 1907 cyclone, Parkes and Co. bought an elderly schooner named *Rescue* and a new lugger, called *Hawk* after an old one that had also sunk in the storm.

The years 1908 and 1909 brought record catches around the Montebellos. Haynes' culture experiments were given the credit, but since his shell failed to grow anywhere else there was probably little connection.

The new Parkes boats were soon put to the test. In January 1909 a cyclone battered Onslow that lasted for forty hours, and *Rescue* and another lugger lost their masts.

Seven of Parkes' other boats sheltered at the Bay of Rest, where the surging water rose twenty feet above the high tide mark. Four lost their masts and another was beached.

That was not the end of it for 1909. In early April another fierce storm struck Onslow. Six inches of rain fell, and a number of vessels sheltering in the Ashburton River were driven ashore. The *Broome Chronicle* of 10 April reported:

> Anxiety is felt for eight other luggers which put out to sea on Monday, no tidings of which are to hand. No boats are available to go out and search.

On 17 April the *Broome Chronicle* wrote:

> Confirmed a sad tale of loss of life and property … [Parkes'] luggers Penguin, Seagull, Elsie and May lost, and 24 Malays with them.

> One Jap lost off lugger Ada which had a terrible experience in the vortex of a willy willy … Search parties … out looking for wreckage … but all hope of saving life has been abandoned.

Twenty-five men from the luggers had drowned at sea, around one-fifth of all the indentured crewmen of the port of Onslow and half of the Parkes' workforce. It must have been a devastating time for the Asians who survived, but this is the only mention of the deaths in the newspapers.

Redbill and *Ibis* rode out the storm among the other Parkes boats, of which 'three dismasted, one half-mile inland; only one remaining complete'.

On the desk in front of me is an aquarium ornament, a deep-sea diver with a treasure-chest. I remember the childhood cartoons of sunken galleons, cheerful whales, giant clams, Tom (or Jerry) wide-eyed or cunning in a bubbling helmet, with a dancing octopus, a sunken sailing-ship, a swordfish cutting through the air-line … what fun!

From hard labour to cartoon cliché to a toy for the goldfish bowl, the now unimaginable lives of pearlshell divers have passed through and out of our collective memory.

Yet it was all too true: air-hoses snapped, ships sank and divers died in a multitude of ugly and painful ways: the risks were enormous. Tropical waters hosted a wealth of sea creatures that like to eat, poison, sting, or simply entangle themselves with those humans foolish enough to find themselves at the business end of thirty fathoms of air-hose and life-line.

But the greatest danger of all arose around 1910, when engine-pump air compressors started replacing hand pumps. They could increase working depths to 35 fathoms (65 metres), which led to a massive leap in deaths from 'diver's paralysis' — the bends.

Unless divers surfaced in stages they risked agonising paralysis or death, but often carelessness or emergencies brought them up too quickly. From 1910 to 1917 one hundred and forty-five Broome divers (from a fleet of just 300 or so boats) died horribly of the bends.

The diving dress itself was an epic of preparation. The diver would don two sets of flannel pyjamas, heavy woollen trousers, sweater, quilted breastplates, thigh-length stockings and moleskin underboots.

He would wind four yards of flannel around his middle, then climb into the neck of the rubberised canvas diving-dress. His tender would fit a steel corselet, curving down over chest and back, to the neck of the dress with winged nuts. Then he would be helped into his lead-soled, brass-toed, leather diving boots.

11. Diver, tender and crew aboard a lugger (Battye Library, 003987d).

He would climb over the side of the boat, where, half-submerged, an extra 14 pounds (six kilos) of lead ballast would be attached to his chest and 14 more to his back. The tender would click the metal helmet onto the corselet, with latches like a pressure-cooker. The weight of man and suit was close to four hundredweight — about 200 kilos.

Luggers usually drifted with the tide, their divers forced to move constantly forward looking for pearlshell in the small space in front of them — they could not go backwards or too far sideways.

If the air-hose or line became looped around an obstruction and the diver could not signal his tender to halt the boat in time, then his links to the surface would snap and he would probably die.

Strangely, as the diving dress gradually disappeared in the 1960s, another, similar image arose to displace it: the clumsy moon-dress of the astronauts.

It was based upon the same principle — keep inside what is needed for life, keep outside what will kill — but sadly the diving dress was never as good at its job as the astronauts' suits.

Gregory's younger brother, Fleming Clement Gregory, nicknamed Dick, had spent ten years with the British Army in India. When he visited Broome in April 1908 he ran into a cyclone the first time he sailed out on the luggers, but still he decided to stay and set up a business with his brother.

In 1909 Mark Rubin sold four of his luggers for about £4000 — *Postboy*, *Struggler*, *Fanny* and *Idalia* — to the new enterprise of Gregory and Co., discreetly financed by Murakami. To at least pretend to avoid a conflict of interest, Dick was the registered owner of the Gregory and Co. vessels, but the Skipper was clearly the one in command.

Also in 1909, to the fury of the other pearlers, Captain Gregory landed the job of Harbour Master, Marine Surveyor and Inspector of Shipping at Broome. They believed he might profit as a pearler by knowing their sailing plans and they may have been right, but Gregory carried out his duties carefully and conscientiously.

He was one of the few qualified masters among the many 'one-boat admirals' of Broome. As Harbour Master in 1910, Gregory piloted the new Australian warships, HMAS *Yarra* and HMAS *Parramatta*, on their first voyages in local waters, and when in Britain in 1912 he supervised the fitting out and dispatch of two steamships for Western Australia.

At a time when the work safety of even white labourers was of little concern to employers, Gregory prosecuted Captain Fred Everett in 1911 for not providing lifebelts on a lugger which had sunk, drowning two Asian men.

The case was lost because, amazingly, luggers were classed as fishing vessels so they were not required to carry lifesaving equipment. Yet it offers an insight into Gregory's attitude towards the pearling crews compared to those of the other masters — more thoughtful perhaps because he too had experienced the terror of shipwreck.

It was a golden era for the north-west. The pearling industry had been slowing for some years but no-one was paying attention — they were having too good a time.

Broome had its own gambling houses, billiard halls, brothels, Asian eating-houses, market gardens, opium dens, sumo wrestling, tennis courts, newspapers, Japanese hot baths, Chinese laundries, six pubs, a soya sauce factory, a race course, a circus and two outdoor 'picturedromes'.

Cars came to Broome and among the first to have one was Captain Gregory, with a Dodge. Murakami also bought a car in 1912 and hired a white man to drive it as a taxi for Asians, a wonderful novelty. His driver, Hubert Hanstead, was fined £5 for overcrowding and speeding: the limit was twelve miles per hour (six around corners).

During these years Broome was a small country town slowly gaining in confidence, enjoying its role on the wild north-west frontier. Stories from the south about the 'exotic' life of Broome were reported with amusement, yet in the local paper earnest articles on hurricanes, pearls and diving decompression sat comfortably beside those on chicken-raising, dressmaking and household hints.

The wealthier Europeans lived the Edwardian colonial life against a backdrop of scarlet poinciana, green palms, purple jacaranda, golden frangipani, dusty red earth, turquoise seas and towering black storms. After formal balls the local paper would list in detail the rainbow silks and laces of the women's gowns.

There was an annual Yacht Club regatta for luggers — crews could attend for free — and Turf, Rifle and Cricket Clubs. The West Australian Pearlers' Association was flourishing, a telephone system was installed, and electric power was on the way.

12. Captioned 'Left to right: Eki Nishioka, Yamamoto, Toshio Katsuno, Senza's brother in law, Johnstone and Murakami in his Clement-Talbot 43 H.P.' (State Library of Western Australia, Yasukichi Murakami Collection, BA2754/30).

Asian society was as stratified as the European. At the top were the residents — the Japanese doctor, consulted even by the white women, the businessmen and the pearl-cleaners, whose skill could add hundreds of pounds to the worth of a pearl. Further down were the head divers and the shop, brothel and gambling-house owners who lived in the iron and wood buildings of 'Japtown', and at the bottom were the indentured crewmen in the foreshore camps.

National clubs abounded. Malays, Chinese and Filipinos held processions, fireworks, regattas, new year celebrations and colourful religious meetings. The Japanese celebrated the Mikado's birthday with flowers, and held sombre, beautiful O-Bon Matsuri in August. Ernestine Hill wrote:

> … from the Foreshore camps of the Asiatic quarter, tiny luggers are set to sea that bear the souls of the newly-dead. Laden each with a lantern ghostly-blue … they are carried out on a full tide to the muffled chant of the mourners kneeling on the sand.

The Indigenous people were the most marginalised, living in shacks on the outskirts of the town, although many still had strong links to their traditional way of life. Disease, neglect and alcohol took their toll but, unlike other places, there was little open conflict with the pearlers, who yearned for the wealth of the sea, not the land.

After the White Australia legislation in 1901, Asian women were banned from entering the country, so other than a few long-term residents there were only Aboriginal women available to provide company for the indentured men.

As always, exploitation occurred, but also relationships of every kind developed between Aboriginal and Asian people, from brief liaisons to marriage. They were deplored as 'immoral' by whites, but provided the comfort of family life to men a long way from home, and their handsome descendants today make up a large part of Broome's population.

Yet for all its busy activity the industry was being quietly undermined. In 1905 Japan won a war with Russia and crushed a major market for palace and church mother-of-pearl in the process.

The 1908 cyclones sank over forty luggers, another storm in 1910 destroyed twenty-six more and devastated Broome itself, and a third major cyclone in 1912 simply added to the mounting and often unrecoverable bad debt for all traders.

Some of the pearlers faced bankruptcy, so would quietly rent their boats for a season to Asians and remain as the 'dummy' owners. The Pearling Act stated that aliens — foreigners — were not permitted to own, hold licences, or have a financial interest in pearling vessels, but dummying was widely accepted and occurred for years.

In some ways it was little more than a private agreement between master and diver to divide the profits of a lugger trip. Yet dummying provided a small, reliable income during difficult periods when the alternative was financial ruin, and at one time or another — despite their public denunciations — most of the masters had their own stint as a 'verandah pearler'.

It was 'the most disastrous cyclone that ever occurred on land or sea in the Nor'-West', wrote the shaken editor of the *Broome Chronicle* on 26 November 1910. Broome had long believed itself to be fairly safe from tropical cyclones, but on 19 November the town was struck by a terrible storm:

> About 11 o'clock the more flimsy structures commenced to give way, and the wind increasing in force every few minutes, by 1.30 o'clock it became so serious that people were fleeing in all directions seeking shelter from falling roofs and buildings. Sheets of iron were driven before the wind like sheets of paper …
>
> By 2 o'clock the storm was at its height, and the destruction of the town commenced with a vengeance. Roofs were lifted and carried hundreds of yards away, buildings fell in or were blown down, trees were uprooted or broken off; telephone poles were either snapped like carrots or were bent like wax matches … to-day pretty Broome presents a scene of desolation …

13. Damaged luggers after a cyclone: Miss Withers' *Whiteboy*, dismasted, right foreground (courtesy Pamela Gregory Nielsen).

Forty-nine people died and 23 luggers were lost. Condolence telegrams arrived, one from Parkes and Co., Pearlers, Onslow: 'Kindly convey to sufferers disastrous hurricane our deepest sympathy'.

The Parkes had every reason to feel for Broome, but were apparently undaunted by their own situation and in 1910 bought lugger *Chaffinch*. Fred Parkes wanted to commission another: 'I prefer boats of the size of *Redbill* …' he wrote to his brother Bert.

Bert was living on the schooner *Rescue*, but now moved ashore because his wife 'Sis' and their children were returning from a visit to Britain.

The year 1911 in Onslow opened well enough. There was little local competition, only CF Nystrom with four luggers, and H Lister Holmes with two; while the Parkes employed over 40 indentured men and held licences for *Redbill*, *Ibis*, *Chaffinch*, *Lapwing*, *Hawk* and *Rescue*.

But the Onslow region was not called 'cyclone alley' for nothing: yet another major storm struck on 13 February 1911. It stripped windmills in Onslow, but this time the worst of it fell upon the Montebello Islands, said the *Broome Chronicle* on 18 February:

> … the full force of the cyclone had been experienced out there on Monday night and Tuesday morning. These islands are at present being used as the lay-up quarters for the pearling fleets of Messrs Parkes and Co., and Mr C.F. Nystrom.
>
> On Monday morning most of the boats being out working some 15 miles to the Southward, and a very heavy North East swell rolling in with a falling glass, it was decided to run to the islands for shelter. A light South East breeze was blowing at the time the boats reached the lagoon where the schooner Rescue is securely moored for the hurricane months, with her masts out and everything made snug …
>
> After 4 p.m. the glass fell very rapidly, and a heavy swell came rolling in through the lagoon, which is practically landlocked. At 7 p.m. it was blowing almost a hurricane from the Southward, rapidly increasing in force and raining in torrents.
>
> At midnight during the height of the blow the luggers Lapwing and Curlew dragged their anchors and were driven onto the rocks, where they were almost smashed to pieces, the crew fortunately being able to scramble ashore unhurt …

Curlew (owned by Harding) and *Lapwing* were completely wrecked. *Hawk* was driven onto a sandbank, *Chaffinch* and *Thistle* (Nystrom) lost their masts, but schooner *Rescue* remained safe at her mooring. Lucky *Redbill* and *Ibis* were ashore in the lay-up, together as usual, and were relatively unscathed:

> The Ibis and Redbill, which were both being repaired, each lost a rudder, and had their bulwarks slightly damaged …
> The house on Hermit (*sic*) Island, occupied by Mr. T. H. Haynes, who is engaged in trying to cultivate pearlshell, was entirely demolished and blown into the sea, the occupants having a very narrow escape.

Parkes and Co. were seeking investment for a pearlshell culture business to be based near Port Hedland, and Fred Parkes spoke to Thomas Haynes some months after the cyclone. He reported with a touch of cynicism to another pearler:

> [Haynes] says that undoubtedly the bulk of the shells are bastard shells, but that some he grew in his pond he thought were the real thing, only they were too small to determine. And unfortunately they all disappeared, eaten by fish or shrimps, he thought. He evidently is no nearer the solution of successful pearl culture than when he started 9 years ago.

Haynes returned to Britain and carried on lengthy negotiations to extend his leases. He finally abandoned the Montebellos project after war broke out in 1914.

Despite the cyclone the Parkes carried on, and in June 1911 bought another boat named for a bird to join their flock of luggers. 'I have called her the Mopoke,' wrote Fred to Bert, 'I had decided on the Dabchick but found there were already three of that name'.

Fred wanted the company to sell the schooner *Rescue*, so Bert went into partnership with two Onslow seamen, Nilsen and Hansen, to buy *Rescue* as a trading vessel for the North-West Lightering Company. Fred disapproved of his younger brother's new enterprise, and his previously affectionate letters became cooler:

> Very sorry indeed to hear about the Japs. Hansen does not seem to be able to work them … More than sorry to hear we may soon need an overdraft. Was looking forward to another divvy as a Xmas box.

The pearling improved and an overdraft was not required — they actually made a profit of £2,540 in 1911 — but the take the following year was disappointing. Fred wrote: 'Am sorry our boats are doing so little for shell', then, 'Pleased to hear our boats were on a bit of a patch but sorry to know our divers are no class'.

In 1913 Fred took his 12-year-old son Frank, convalescing from illness, to sail on the luggers for three months around the Montebellos, and Frank was much improved by the experience.

Remarkably, without suffering cyclones or other mishap, *Redbill*, *Ibis*, *Chaffinch*, *Hawk* and *Mopoke* worked peacefully for the next few years, but 1913 ended badly for Bert and the North-West Lightering Co. when *Rescue* lost her mainmast just before she was due to take on a lucrative shipment of cargo.

Bert Parkes was also chairman of the Ashburton Road Board, the political power of the region. Argument about Onslow's future had arrived at a dream of building a new, deep-water jetty at Beadon Point on the coast, and moving the entire town to that site, 20 kilometres away. Onslow had 40 houses and a white population of 145 people.

Argument raged, engineers visited, committees convened, but the grand plan finally came unstuck. A severe drought over these years meant the region was simply too poor to support a major public works project and, until the 1920s, Onslow stayed just where it was.

A lugger like *Redbill* would usually carry seven seamen, and in the boom days as many as 2,400 indentured Asian men were employed in Western Australia every year.

Between 1905 and 1915 they crewed on three hundred to three hundred and sixty Broome luggers and on forty to sixty luggers from the smaller ports, Onslow, Cossack and Port Hedland. In Broome itself in the pearling season there were usually around two thousand Asians and one thousand Europeans.

A century after first contact with European missionaries in 1542, Japan resolutely closed itself off to all foreigners. Isolation lasted for more than two hundred years, until the country was forced to open its seaports in 1853 by Commodore Perry's black warships.

The feudal Japanese had to hastily modernise. In 1902 Britain and Japan signed an Alliance Pact, and Japan won minor wars with China and Russia. The world was mad for Empires and Japan wanted to join the club, so it annexed Korea in 1910 and cruelly exploited its peninsula for the next thirty-five years. The island state was sometimes called the 'Great Britain of the East'.

The ultra-nationalists who controlled Japan were of the warrior clans that had ruled ruthlessly for eight centuries, but most Japanese were peasant farmers or fishermen. However, once allowed out into the world they quickly became skilled at anything they took on.

14. Japanese diver (Battye Library, 001276D).

Those who came to Broome from the 1890s were usually fishing folk from a rugged coastland south-east of Tokyo — Wakayama-ken — and many were from from the small town of Taiji and nearby villages.

At the start of the 1900s, pearlshell divers were drawn from a broad range of ethnic groups, but gradually the Japanese dominated. By 1907 half of Broome divers and tenders were Japanese, and by 1915 over seventy per cent were. The prejudiced grumbled that the Japanese advantage was purely physiological, but a group of English divers in 1912 did little to challenge the Japanese reputation.

The 'white divers' were brought out to Broome for a season to test the possibility of replacing Asians with Englishmen, to the great enthusiasm of White Australia legislators. However, it was obvious to the master pearlers that white divers would cost them more and would find life on the luggers very difficult, but several grudgingly accepted the men for trials. (Captain Gregory was not involved as he was on leave for nine months in Britain at the time.)

The outcome of the experiment was a disaster. Some of the English men had only a few months of diving experience and of course, none of them knew anything at all about locating elusive *Pinctada maxima*. The best of the group, William Webber, died of the bends on a lugger near the Ninety-Mile Beach, and another, John Noury, also got decompression sickness and had to spend months convalescing.

There were rumours of sabotage, but it was hardly necessary. The reality of pearling life made this a fairly standard casualty rate even for experienced Asian divers. Most of the surviving white divers left Broome as soon as they possibly could, but two of them remained in the region. Both died of the bends in separate incidents a year later.

Perhaps the Japanese advantage was more of a cultural one — they seemed to be the only group in Broome (and that included the master pearlers) who saw value in working together cooperatively.

They set up Japanese Clubs to provide each other with legal and social protection. They found cohesion in recruiting from their families and home villages, and had the incentive of escaping poverty in Japan, to return with relative riches in only a few years.

They provided an unofficial career structure on the luggers with increasing levels of pay and status, from try (trainee) diver to exalted first diver. The vital job of tender — caring for the airhose and lifeline — was a post for retired men.

Captain Gregory was one of the few masters who understood how much his prosperity depended on good relations with the Asian community. Many of the other pearlers were deeply racist, and the clever, industrious 'Japs' were the embodiment of their worst fears.

It is telling that out of sixty-four photographs of Broome master pearlers, boats, camps and domiciles in Battye's 1915 *History of the North West of Australia*, only two images show the seamen who were the foundation of the industry.

One is a view of sailors assisting a (white!) diver out of the water and the other is 'Messrs. Gregory and Co.'s Pearling Fleet'. With luggers bobbing in the background, Captain Gregory and shell-opener William Clarke stand proudly in the centre, with about thirty Asian men in relaxed poses around them.

15. Gregory's crews and fleet (from *History of the North West of Australia*).

The other 34 pages of the Broome section of the book are full of portraits of stern Edwardians who were remarkably keen on Freemasonry and 'clean, manly sports', otherwise implying that those gentlemen did all the hard work themselves.

Young shell-opener Tom Ronan was typical of his time, although he spread his dislike around fairly evenly to include just about anyone who wasn't white or male. But Ronan offers one moment of grudging appreciation of his fellow workers during a feast on *Albatross* to mark the Mikado's birthday:

> They certainly turned on a party: lashings of gin and port wine, bottles of little plums as red as chillies and as sour as lime juice; cakes made by the first tender, cooked for the occasion, out of rice, sugar and mushy boiled soya beans; shellfish pancakes; raw fish dipped in Soy sauce … Give the Sons of Heaven their due, I don't like them or their ways, but when they turn on the hospitality they don't hedge their bets.

Poor, blinkered Tom Ronan. I expect the Sons of Heaven found him pretty hard going as well.

The Pearling Act 1912 regulated the issue of licences for ships, master pearlers, divers, pearl dealers, and pearl fishers (lugger crews), and one of its requirements was that before issuing a pearl fisher licence the superintendent had to be satisfied that the fisher was a male.

Although women were not allowed to be pearl fishers, they could certainly be pearlers. A few in Broome owned and managed luggers — Rose Gonzales, Anastasia Percy, Amy Chapple — but their occupation was 'married woman' and their property belonged to their husbands.

One exception was Miss Elizabeth Withers. Ion Idriess' *Forty Fathoms Deep* has the intriguing lines:

> And the cruise so far had been profitable. Pleased were the crew and pleased would be Miss Withers, the girl pearler of Broome who owned the *Leighton*.

The Register of British Ships records that 'Lizzie Withers of Broome W.A. (Spinster) Pearler' had bought the *Leighton* in February 1909, and licensed the lugger for pearling every year until 1920. Miss Withers also owned the luggers *Pansy*, *Whiteboy, Onie* and *Swan*, and worked them until the mid-1920s.

She had a younger brother, Ernest David, also a pearler, who worked for Captain Louis Goldie. The *Broome Chronicle* of 25 December 1909 lists nineteen new members of the W.A. Pearlers' Association, including E. Withers and Miss E. Withers.

Lizzie Withers was a recognised member of the white community.

She was prosperous enough to buy and sell a number of houses over the years, and the *Nor'-West Echo* reported her departure on the steamer — 'Miss Withers sailed by the Gorgon on holidays bent' — along with other leading lights of the town in September 1913.

Although the male pearlers and their wives and daughters would attend the town balls, Miss Withers never appears in the listings of ladies and their beautiful gowns, although she once offered a reward in the paper for a fashionable, expensive belt she had lost — 'black velvet with a baroque pearl mounted in gold'.

Her photo shows neither a girl nor a 'spinster'. With her wise eyes and capable hands, Lizzie Withers looks as if she'd rather be out on a lugger herself, were she not so anchored by her coiffeur and corsetry.

16. Miss Elizabeth Withers, pearler of Broome, about 1910 (Battye Library, 213859P).

Ernest Withers joined up in 1916 and arrived in France on 30 April 1917. Two months later he died near Ploegsteert in Belgium, aged 24. The Red Cross society offered Miss Withers its condolences. (Perhaps lugger *Onie* commemorated a pet name for young Ernie.)

After Ernest died, in 1917 Lizzie Withers advertised her foreshore camp, luggers and three houses for auction, but then continued pearling so apparently did not sell up at that time.

Leighton was driven onto the shore near Bannagarra Creek by a willy-willy in April 1920. The crew survived but the boat was wrecked. *Whiteboy* and *Swan* remained registered to her until 1925, then were sold to the 'Department Controlling the Insane' and later damaged in a cyclone. The Chief Pearling Inspector reported to the Fisheries Department in 1927: 'The two boats … once worked by Miss L. Withers, were sold as they stood after the storm for £10 the lot. They were in total disrepair.'

The year 1912 was to be significant not only for the white divers. After a week of squalls, on 21 March the weather blew up into a hurricane stretching from Port Hedland to Broome.

The recently-commissioned coastal steamer *Koombana*, 340 feet long with watertight doors for every compartment, had left Port Hedland on her regular run to Broome, planning to put far out to sea to weather the storm.

She did not arrive, and after days of mounting concern, and weeks of hope that she was simply drifting out of contact, it was finally accepted that *Koombana* would never be seen again.

More than twenty people from Broome disappeared with the vessel and only a few scattered pieces of wreckage were ever discovered. (Fred Parkes in Perth was appointed one of the three Assessors on the *Koombana* enquiry.) The cyclones of 1908, 1910 and now this shocking loss, brought a sombre note to the frontier town.

Just three weeks after the disappearance of the *Koombana*, the liner *Titanic* was sunk by an iceberg, killing over 2,000 people: the treachery of the sea seemed without limit.

The Balkan Wars stopped for a while then started again. Captain Scott's expedition to the South Pole ended in disaster, the men dying in a blizzard-bound tent only miles from a food depot.

The world was suddenly more uncertain than ever before. Yet the 1912 pearling season went well — a number of valuable pearls were discovered and shell was selling for an average of over £250 a ton for the first time.

Luggers with engine air-compressors were starting to appear, and because their divers could now go deeper their average annual take was reaching 10 tons, twice as much as before.

Captain Gregory returned to Broome in October 1912 and was elected to the committee of the Turf Club. A road to Cable Beach ('a real beauty spot' said the local paper) was proposed: Fred Everett and Mr Murakami offered £25 each for a construction fund.

The mile-long Broome jetty, with its little steam tram for passengers and freight, was in a state of disrepair. In July 1913 the tram engine, pushing carriages from the rear towards the town, left the track, tore its buffers off and took the horrified passengers careering along the jetty. Although the ticket collector managed to apply the brake in time, long-term State government neglect of the essential facility remained a sore point.

Another sore point was the municipal council, engaged in endless internal battles, unable to cope with the squalid sewer-less foreshore, the roaming goats, the potholed roads and some suspicious irregularities in the voting roll.

A ratepayers' meeting in November 1913 carried the resolution that the entire council should resign and elections be held. Captain Gregory became one of the new councillors.

The 1914 pearling season began. The Panama Canal was opened. Dick Gregory went to Britain in April for a holiday. A decompression chamber was donated to the hospital from diving-suit makers Heinke. Home Rule for Ireland was much discussed.

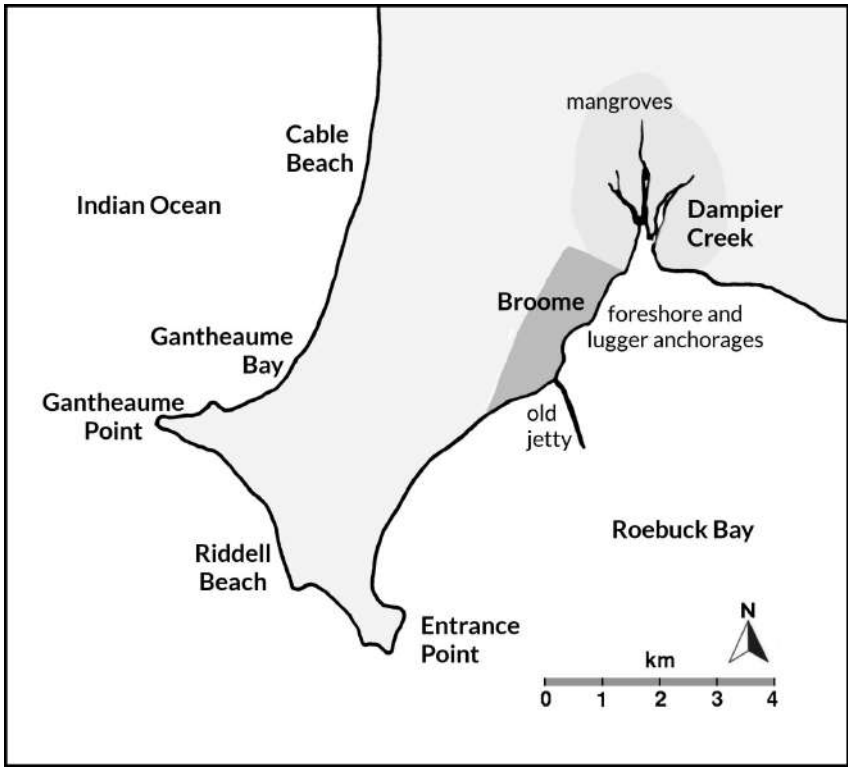
A cockeye squall on the Ninety-Mile sank two luggers and killed two men. There was more trouble in the Balkans. The Broome Turf Club organised a meeting for September.

17. A lost era — tinted plate of the foreshore near Dampier Creek, taken by Yasukichi Murakami in 1914 (National Archives of Australia, nla.obj-142358283).

Several fine pearls were found, one by 'a local lady pearler' — Miss Withers, perhaps? Much shell was raised and record prices were predicted. America and Mexico were close to war.

The deadline for replacing Asian divers with white men was pushed back to 1918, to a general sigh of relief. Another inquiry into the ramshackle Broome jetty began. The children's Fancy Dress Ball was held. Tenders were called for 31 chains of road making.

And on 23 June 1914, in far-off 'Servia' (said the papers), the heir to the Austrian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his pregnant wife Countess Sophia, were shot and killed by a nationalist.



Map 2. Broome peninsula in pearling days

2. Over by Christmas (1914-1921)

Gregory was Broome's brightest citizen but had been born 3 centuries too late. He had all the instincts of an Elizabethan adventurer ...

A.A. Milne-Robertson

Far from Broome's little quarrels, the nineteenth-century European empires for years had been jostling, squabbling and flexing their muscles in alliances with new friends and old foes, and arming, arming, arming.

Like a tropical cyclone, the trigger was insignificant but the environment primed for a cataclysm: and the deaths of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Countess Sophia were the excuse that Germany, aching for war with Russia and France, had been waiting for.

Germany incited its ally Austria-Hungary to declare war on Serbia, knowing Russia would have to come to Serbia's defence, and on 28 July Austria-Hungary obligingly did so. Russia mobilised, and over four days Germany declared war on Russia, France and Belgium, then invaded Belgium and France.

Great Britain declared war on Germany. 'All symptoms of a coming catastrophe prevail', said Reuters in Berlin. Japan allied itself with Britain, and the Commonwealth declared war on Germany. (The United States issued a formal statement of neutrality.)

In August 1914, in a flurry of treaties, mobilisations, and pompous declarations, the Great War engulfed Europe like lava. Everyone said it would be over by Christmas.

The European mother-of-pearl markets collapsed. Factories closed in Paris, Vienna and Picardy. At the outbreak of war, pearlshell was reaching £220 a ton, but the contracts had clauses voiding them in the event of European conflict.

In late 1914 the luggers brought in £70,000 worth of shell, but it no longer had buyers: some masters could not even afford to pay their crews. By Christmas, when they should have been steaming homewards from Broome, many seamen were still waiting for their wages and passage, normally paid for by their masters under the Articles of Indenture.

Fear and uncertainty came close to setting off serious riots, but the worst was averted. By the end of January most indentured men had managed to return to Asia, apart from forty-two who, with great enterprise, were selling their masters' boats to recover their wages.

18. Indentured seamen returning home, early 1915. Broome jetty's infamous steam tram is on the right (State Library of Western Australia, BA318/96/87).

Captain Gregory's brother Dick sailed for Britain in April 1914. He married Alice Griffith two weeks before war broke out, then rejoined his cavalry regiment, the 3rd County of London Yeomanry, and commanded a company in the Camel Corps in Palestine.

Captain Gregory resigned his posts as Harbour Master and Inspector of Shipping to support Gregory and Co., suddenly struggling in an unimaginably altered world. The ownership of the company luggers were signed over from Dick to Gregory in mid-1914.

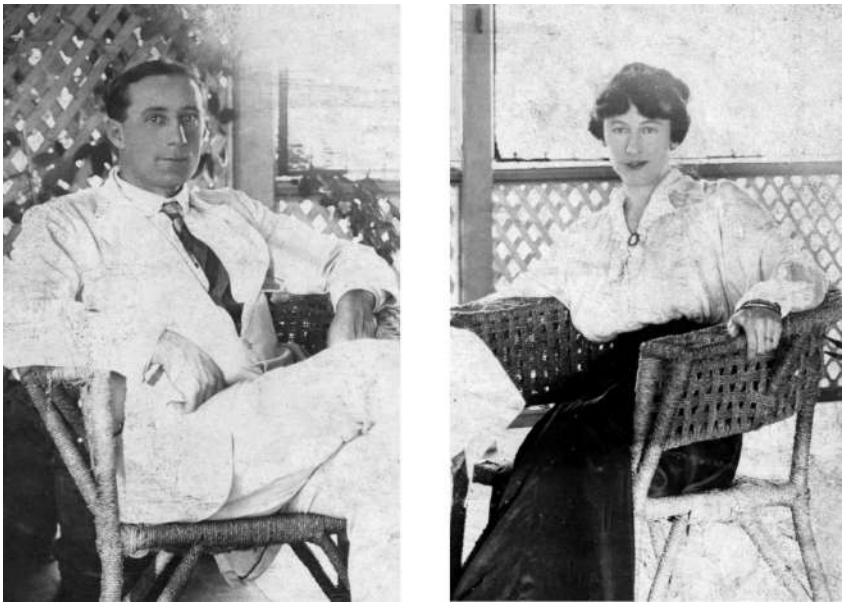
When war broke out, the pearling industry was refused the kind of State subsidy offered to farming and mining. It was seen locally as payback by a White Australia-obsessed government towards a town that had preferred to keep on working with Asian people.

Eventually in 1915 some grudging official support for the pearling industry appeared. The price of pearlshell recovered briefly when America moved into the markets abandoned by the Europeans, but not for long.

19. Captain Gregory in about 1915 (courtesy Pamela Gregory Nielsen).

In April 1915, Gregory married Kate Villiers of Melbourne, an attractive woman with a lovely singing voice and great strength of character. Gregory would bring Kate small gifts every day, like embroidery silks.

They would dress formally for dinner in the evening, and after parties go driving to Cable Beach and back in the humid night air. But for someone from the city, life on the pearling coast was hard. Having servants helped, but the climate was a constant pressure.



20. Ancell and Kate Gregory in about 1916 (courtesy Pamela Gregory Nielsen).

The Gregory house was built in 1915 by a Japanese carpenter, Gurachi Hori, who jointed all the wood together instead of using nails. The frames and fitted floors were made of jarrah, with white-painted corrugated-iron cladding on the walls and roof, a style that became common to the houses of the master pearlers.

French windows opened onto wide latticed verandahs which could be enclosed with shutters during storms. It had three bedrooms and an office extension to one side, and was on the corner of Robinson and Anne Streets, on the same block as the Continental Hotel.

The Gregory fleet now had schooner *Hercules* (part-owned with O.W. Blackman) and six luggers. Three recent additions were *Charlie* (renamed *Langdon*), *Ida* and *Esther* (*Fanny* had been sold in 1913). Nearly 120 luggers, one-third of the Broome total, were laid up.

Some were sold to the remaining masters, others were left to rot. Over the four years of war, Gregory bought five more boats — *Rose Petal*, *South New Moon*, *Meave*, *Heather Flower* and *The Gerald*. (*Esther* and *Hercules* were lost in 1918, *Hercules* blown ashore at Barred Creek.)

The *Nor'-West Echo* told of a cockeye at Broome in January 1916 which caused over £1,000 worth of damage to Gregory's uninsured boats. He shrugged off commiserations, saying, 'It's all in the game'.

21. Interior of the Gregory house, 1920s (courtesy Pamela Gregory Nielsen).

In Onslow, most of the Parkes and Co. seamen had also returned home, apart from two who stayed over wartime. *Redbill*, *Ibis*, *Mopoke*, *Hawk* and *Chaffinch* were laid up. Fred Parkes wrote in May 1915 to another pearler:

> I have no idea of starting again till the war is over and that will not be this year I am afraid. Our boats are better lying anchored in Onslow Creek than losing money by working.

The *Rescue* partnership was bringing difficulties to Bert Parkes.

Fred wrote smugly: 'I am sorry to hear that Nilson has gone back on Hansen and yourself … I would not buy the share as I should not care to be in partnership with either Nilsen or Hansen.'
The brothers began to disagree about Bert's apparently casual style of record-keeping. 'You have absolutely ignored all my requests to keep [a stock book]', wrote Fred, and a month later: 'Only this, if I cannot have an equal say in the management of the business as yourself then I would prefer to be out of it.'

Bert wanted to continue pearling, but Fred insisted that he sell their ageing diving gear, claiming that there was too little profit in working small boats (like *Redbill* and *Ibis)* that did not have air compressors.

The partnership began to fall apart, and Fred wrote to Bert in March 1916:

> I am sorry that you are not in a position to buy my share. However … I only wish to let you know that I want to get out [of pearling] at the first favourable opportunity.

Yasukichi Murakami and the other Broome traders were badly impacted by the war. The younger pearlers, always happy for a gamble and a new horizon, rushed to enlist, while the departure of so many Asian seamen hurt the whole town.

Most businesses survived only on credit or loans, and many traders suffered irrecoverable losses. Murakami had to close down the Nishioka business in October 1915. When Murakami's creditors pressed for repayment, Gregory said:

> I am afraid Murakami [is] having rather a struggle to make ends meet … he is trying to clear himself but with his … increasing family and his unofficial debts he has a very hard row to hoe.

Murakami did indeed have an increasing family, but it wasn't with his wife Eki. In about 1913 he had met a beautiful young Australian woman of Japanese descent, Shigeno Theresa Murata, from a Catholic family of Cossack.

They fell in love, and in 1914 Yasukichi took pregnant Theresa to Japan. She gave birth to their first child, Masuko Kathleen, in Singapore on the way.

Theresa stayed with Murakami's family over the war, while he went back to face an understandably unhappy Eki in Broome. His financial woes came to a head when Eki secretly took as much money as possible from their business and returned to Japan in January 1918, leaving him bankrupt.

She died there of a heart condition in December that year. Theresa and Murakami were finally able to marry in Broome in 1920.

22. Yasukichi Murakami seated on Gregory's verandah, 1916, and Theresa Murakami in traditional dress on her visit to Japan, 1914 (State Library of Western Australia, BA2754/20, and Northern Territory Library, Kilgariff Collection, PH0096_0017).

In 1916 Gregory had bought the Dampier Hotel, previously the Pearler's Rest, from Fred Everett. Murakami was the manager and apparently silent partner as well. He was not only highly efficient, but his presence brought other Japanese to the Dampier, and Gregory was able to have the pick of the crews.

It was, of course, completely illegal for an alien to have an interest in any hotel, but this clearly did not bother either of the partners. The hotel traded at a loss before Gregory and Murakami bought it, but became very popular and made a good profit the following year.

When Murakami's bankruptcy proceedings took place in 1918, both he and Gregory swore he was owed only a half-share of the Dampier hotel's profits, not a half-share of the ownership.

Hugh Richardson, who openly loathed Gregory and Murakami, said they were lying, but the court did not agree and the Dampier stayed out of the distribution of Murakami's assets to his creditors.

Beyond his financial difficulties, another blow came for Murakami when his younger brother Ryozo came from Japan to work on Fred Everett's luggers. Ryozo drank heavily, became ill and died in Broome in April 1917.

23. Ryozo Murakami's funeral procession. The Japanese Club is in the background (State Library of Western Australia, Yasukichi Murakami Collection, BA2754/10).

Like everyone else, at the start of the war the editor of the *Nor'-West Echo* had proclaimed the courage of the 'Broome Boys'.

When the first casualties occurred the paper printed large black-bordered obituaries, with letters of thanks from the grieving parents. As time went by and the appalling scale of the tragedy unfolded, the obituaries became briefer and the parents no longer had the heart for letter-writing.

Before the war there were roughly nine hundred whites in Broome, male and female, and almost every eligible man enlisted.

Out of 232 soldiers, fifty-seven never returned — a loss of one in four and a staggering blow to the small town.

24. Fleming Clement (Dick) Gregory, about 1915 (courtesy Peter Clarke).

On 17 April 1917 the *London Gazette* reported that Acting Captain Fleming Clement Gregory had been awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty: 'He handled his company with great determination throughout the action and was responsible for the capture of two enemy machine guns. He set a fine example to his men.'

Towards the end of the war the death notices had become only a few lines, and on 8 December 1917 the *Nor'-West Echo* noted:

> As we go to press we learn of the death, from wounds, of Captain 'Dick' Gregory'.

That was all. Just one among the many lives so carelessly discarded, at the age of 36 he had been killed in Gaza and buried in Palestine. It was an odd coincidence that the younger brothers of both Murakami and Gregory had died within months of each other, and a shared sense of loss may have strengthened their bond.

Major Fleming Gregory's name appears on the war memorial in Bedford Park, along with that of Private Ernest Withers and fifty-five other young men who loved a gamble and a new horizon.

We can only imagine the effect of the death of his brother on Captain Gregory, so far from his Welsh homeland, but no doubt it was as heartbreaking for him as it was for so many others.

In mid-1917, Bert Parkes' schooner *Rescue* was totally wrecked. His brother Fred could not refrain from rubbing salt in the wound:

> Very sorry indeed to get the news about the loss of the Rescue. Had it happened before she was repaired it would not have been so bad.

The feeling between them had become so unfriendly by 1919 that Fred wrote to another brother about a family wedding:

> Unfortunately there was a rift … Sis [Bert's wife] was receiving … and when Alice & I went in she deliberately turned her head away & did not receive. Neither of us are ever likely to forgive the insult.

The partnership ended that year, but Bert established his own pearling business with skipper Axel Hansen, H.M. Parkes and Co., and bought *Chaffinch*, *Mopoke* and *Hawk*.

The two older boats, *Redbill* and *Ibis*, were put up for sale. Luggers were going for £350 at the time, but in June 1919 Bert accepted cheques of £200 for each boat from a canny buyer.

So it was, that on 10 September 1919, the Register of British Ships for the Port of Fremantle noted the transfer of luggers *Redbill* and *Ibis* to the ownership of Captain Ancell C. Gregory of Broome.

Sadly, Bert's new venture didn't last long. Skipper Hansen died in the wreck of the schooner *Sea Flower* at Cape Leschenault in 1923 and Bert closed down the company. He put *Chaffinch* and *Hawk* up for sale, but the market for old boats was over, so they were taken out to the camp at Lugger Cove in the Montebellos and left moored.

Their remains, sunk by yet another cyclone, gave rise to a local tale of a lugger that had been half-built by one of the Parkes brothers before he marched away to die in the Great War, but it was nothing so romantic. A nephew in Britain had been killed in the war, but the Parkes were too old, and their sons too young, to fight.

It was no more than a foolish family feud that had closed down the company that named its boats for birds, and sent straight-stemmed *Redbill* out to raise the giant iridescent shell of the Montebellos.

When the war to end all wars shuddered to a halt on 11 November 1918, there would still be no relief. Even as the Armistice was signed the first ominous symptoms of 'Spanish Influenza' appeared, and joy at the war's end faltered as the disease spread.

For almost a year the newspapers listed deaths in Sydney and Melbourne: sometimes only a few people, sometimes up to fifty, every single day in both cities. After six months the flu was widespread in Perth, and after nine months it hit Broome.

Two-thirds of the town became ill, but the virus had weakened by then and only a few people died. However there may have been more, because at the time Indigenous deaths were not counted.

It was not until late 1919 that life could begin to return to normal. Only two hundred boats were pearling then, but the industry began to recover and a boom took shell back up to £240 a ton.

Good times had returned, and *Redbill* and *Ibis* were in the thick of it. Their new home was Gregory's foreshore camp near the Customs House (now the Broome Historical Museum). Tom Ronan recalled:

> … with it's founder's flair for getting the best of everything, [the camp] held a larger expanse of foreshore than most of its rivals … from the head of the stairway outside our living quarters we controlled a view of Roebuck Bay from Red Point, its nor'easterly limit, to the sandhills on its southern bank, with their blueness in the midday haze …
>
> Our shore living quarters was the upper floor of a building made, as were all foreshore camps, from discarded parts of old ships. There was an Oregon pine mast in each corner of the square, and one in the middle to hold up the roof … in a high wind it swayed in an almost eerie manner.

Work in the lay-up season would start at six in the morning, with Captain Gregory there before breakfast:

> White-trousered, silk-singleted, white-helmeted, one of his personally imported Egyptian cigarettes forever in his mouth, he watched that work being done … His great strength was that, not only could he criticise most obscenely a job that was not being well done, but he could take it over and give a practical demonstration. … There was no waste, but there was no skimping: the Skipper was too proud of his fleet not to ensure that every ship in it was well found.

World War I had brought an end to the reign of the giant square-rigged ships of the British merchant fleet, which demanded of their crews such endurance and self-discipline. As a boy of sixteen Gregory had signed as an apprentice with Goldberg and Sons of Swansea, and sailed for four years on the four-masted barque *Vanduara*.

In 1900 he became Second Officer on another four-masted barque, *Andorinha*, and sailed to Cape Town, then Newcastle (NSW, Australia), and South America. Back in Newcastle he signed as First Officer on three-masted full-rigged ship *Rhuddlan Castle* and voyaged to Chile, then Antwerp, via terrifying Cape Horn.

His last windjammer was a new three-masted steel ship *Brynymor*. In 1904 he 'moved into steam' with Alfred Holt and Co.'s *SS Sultan* and

SS Charon, until he settled in Broome in 1906. There, Gregory's sailing vessels were on a much smaller scale, yet they required as much care and maintenance as any great wind-ship.

25. Broome foreshore, 1926 (National Archives of Australia, nla.obj-138407180).

During the lay-up luggers would be stripped of all ropes and sails and spars. False floors would be lifted, ballast removed and cleaned, bilges emptied of the 'stinking refuse' of months at sea, and sea-cocks opened for a week, so while the boats sat on the mud the tide entered and, for a time, dislodged the giant cockroaches.

With gleaming red copper the crew would renew the plates that protected the hull from borers. The tops of the masts would be painted with coloured bands to identify boats at sea, and surfaces covered with cheerful hues we might never imagine from old sepia photographs:

> The wood of trodden decks and cabin-tops disappeared between coats of paint as gay as Chinese lanterns, canary-yellow and orange-red and peacock-blue …

A strange quest preoccupied Gregory. For all his buccaneering ways he was a child of the Victorian era, 'as loyal a son of Empire as ever was', said the writer Mary Durack, who knew him well.

He had served as a sub-lieutenant in the British Royal Naval Reserve, and in 1912 had written to the Department of the Navy, offering to set up a branch of the Royal Australian Naval Reserve in Broome. The Navy was enthusiastic until London responded there was no record of his service with the Royal Naval Reserve.

The same letter explained that men who went to the colonies were struck off the register, but the Navy drew back, war intervened and the matter was dropped.

This left a shadow of doubt on Gregory's past which lived on in gossip and was used against him by political rivals. Yet HV Howe, who was later Military Secretary to the Minister for the Army, wrote to Mary Durack that 'Gregory was definitely an officer of the Royal Naval Reserve'. She replied:

> I do remember … Greg one day taking particular trouble to show me his name and standing in some Navy gazette. He must have suspected that I had been told — which was indeed the case — that he had never had any association with the Royal Navy at all.

After the war Gregory tried again. When in Melbourne in March 1920, he took the bold step of calling upon the First Naval Member, who was much impressed with Gregory's idea of setting up a network of Navy agents in remote ports, noting to the Minister:

> I would propose with your approval to appoint Captain Gregory as an Honorary Lieutenant R.N.R. It would be invaluable to us to have a reliable officer acquainted with sea to send us periodical information from Broome and the N.W. Coast.

The Minister approved, but Gregory's orders were not, as he'd hoped, to run a branch of the Reserve. Instead he was given an Australian Merchant Ship Cypher Code Book and told to provide intelligence reports on unauthorised shipping, suspicious characters, coal deposits, unsurveyed ports: and the 'alien populations of Broome'.

He was suddenly in a bind. He wished to honour his commission, but the cost of it might be to provide ammunition to those clamouring for a White Broome, so he had to choose his words carefully.

His first report discussed the Asian communities in the industry, and listed the numbers and professions of local Japanese to such a level of detail it suggests Murakami helped him compile it. It displayed a clear grasp of Japanese political issues:

> The number of Japanese in the Pearling industry has decreased markedly in the last three years, the reasons being,
>
> 1. To the Japanese government placing obstacles in the way of emigration from Japan for pearling purposes, and from information received from Kobe advising the men to go to Mexico or anywhere except Australia.
>
> 2. To social questions in Japan, wages etc having risen tremendously during the war.
>
> 3. To the adverse rate of exchange ruling between Australia and Japan, a large proportion of the Japs wages are remitted to Japan every year, and the rate has been as low as 5 yen 50 sen where the normal exchange was about 9 yen 70 sen.

Gregory also expressed the indignation of a master pearler whose employees have made it clear they know exactly what they're worth:

> There are a few cases of insubordination occurring among the Japanese but generally they are well behaved and as previously stated work hard, where they are not satisfied with their treatment or wages they often adopt the passive resistance theory, at this they are able strategists and can give an owner an immense amount of trouble without giving him any real grounds for charging them with any offence … They are exorbitant in their demand for wages etc, and as the demand now considerably exceeds the supply the rates of pay have more than doubled in the last three years.

There is also a gentle undercurrent of irony. Only Gregory, who had done as much to undermine the racial barriers of Broome as anyone, could report straight-faced on the question of Social Intercourse:

> Practically none. The colour line here is fairly well demarcated, all public entertainments have their coloured section. There have been no cases of intermarriage between whites and any coloured race.

Gregory also wrote, 'There is not … any unrest or disputes at present … amongst the various races of aliens themselves,' which was premature of him, as only eight months later the famous Japanese-Koepanger riots took place, on 20 and 21 December 1920.

Gregory and Murakami took prominent roles in helping calm that situation down. Gregory, Pearling Inspector Stuart, Sub-Inspector Special Police Gull and Police Captain Bardwell also wrote official reports on the riots.

But only Gregory's writing stands out for its vivid sense of the human element. The other three reports barely mention the six Asian men who were violently killed, but focus instead upon minor injuries received accidentally by four white men.

Gregory showed a sense of empathy for the murdered men irrespective of their race — the Koepangers 'met a Japanese diver who had missed his crowd … and promptly killed him with knives and sticks in the most cowardly way. His body was covered with knife wounds and his skull battered in.'

Later he wrote of a Koepanger beaten brutally by the Japanese in retaliation: 'I happened to act as coroner on the inquest on this man and it seemed marvellous that he could have lived the three days he did; he seemed knocked to pieces.'

Despite his necessarily bluff exterior Gregory was an imaginative man who could feel for the life-and-death humanity of the Asian sailors: probably neither trait endeared him to the more prejudiced of his fellow whites.

He also offered political insights into the reasons for the riots, such as the presence of criminals and Fascists — insights that were noticeably absent from the other reports, in which the participants are simply enigmatic and unknowable 'Asiatics'.

Apart from special papers on events like the riots, Gregory sent seven intelligence reports to the Naval Board over two years. The first was more than four long, closely-typed pages.

It was sent to the Minister, and the Naval Members noted approvingly that 'the appointment of this officer has already justified itself'. The second was shorter, and the third even more perfunctory.

In response there arrived increasingly peevish demands that he set out his letters in the approved Naval style. Gregory ignored them. Report seven was less than a page: he had other things to worry about.

He explained that the numbers of indentured men who would be working in 1921 would be largely reduced '… owing to the partial closing down of the industry caused by trade depression … probably at least one hundred [boats] will be taken out of commission at the end of the season'. The boom collapsed as quickly as it had begun.

Gregory's fleet now had the licence numbers B1 to B15, and in 1920, *Redbill* and *Ibis* worked out of Broome for the first time. *Redbill* carried her new number B11 bright on her bow, while *Ibis* was B12.

Many of the similar compact, straight-stem luggers from the boat-building frenzy of the turn of the century were now nearly twenty years old.

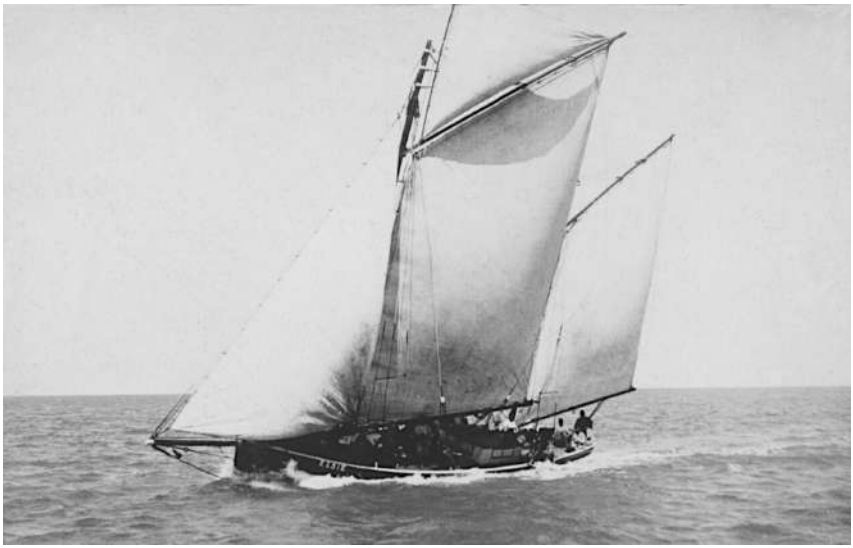
They had been designed only to carry manual air pumps, but the new engine pumps took up valuable space. Even with the better equipment a single diver could raise only a limited amount of shell. For the luggers to remain economic in the downturn they had to work more than one diver at once.

Larger boats were clearly needed, but there were very few shipwrights in Broome. White shipwrights, that is. There were a number of Japanese, but no matter how skilled or experienced they were, indentured Asian labourers were not permitted to build boats.

An abundance of legislation had been proclaimed over the years to regulate those worrying melting-pots, the pearling ports. The state of Western Australia controlled the luggers and pearling itself, while the crews came under Federal immigration law.

And it was from 3,000 kilometres away that the Home and Territories Department in Canberra had the unenviable task of administering indentured labour, usually via telegram or 'aerial mail' to and from the Sub-Collector of Customs at each port. A major impetus of the White Australia legislation was the obsessive fear of Asians taking the jobs of white men for lower pay.

The Sub-Collector had to obtain written permission for any use of Asian labour outside pearling, even for work normally performed by ships' crews, such as sail-mending or boat repairs.



26. An older straight-stemmed lugger, Broome 1926 (NAA, nla.obj-138406380).

After a few years and many telegrams, the Department proposed simplified guidelines. If repairs were to cost up to £100, the approval was at the discretion of the Sub-Collector, £100 to £300 had to be referred to the Department, and for repairs over £300, 'arrangements must be made for the employment of white or free local labour'. A vessel built with white labour could cost £900; with indentured labour the price became a pearler's optimistic estimate, £300 or less.

The Sub-Collector was the public servant who had to balance the requirements of Canberra with the local industry. Every year he would record the names of indentured men allocated to each pearler, with notes on their dates of engagement and discharge, departure to a ship or, chillingly, the numbers of their death certificates.

Mr Rich, Sub-Collector in the late 1920s, and Mr Lee, in the 1930s, were clearly realists with an understanding of the pearlers' needs in difficult times.

It became routine for the Sub-Collectors to seek approval for a boat 'repair' by indentured carpenters that was perhaps a lot closer to a complete rebuild than the Department would ever have countenanced.

Naturally, it was not every pearler who took advantage of Broome's distance from official oversight. In fact, from 1922 until 1929 it was only Captain Gregory who repaired his luggers with such thoroughness that barely a frame remained of their original timber.

Gregory's efforts on behalf of pearlers and Broome were inspired but often little appreciated. He was elected Mayor of Broome in November 1918, but the council was replaced by a Road Board soon afterwards and he returned to being simply one of its quarrelsome members.

He was also president of the West Australian Pearlers' Association for over four years from 1917 and led the proposal for a pearlshell co-operative in 1919. A co-operative would have dampened price fluctuations and given the pearlers control over their market, but this threatened the foreign shell buyers and local forces that preferred 'mongrel' Broome be kept powerless, so the legislative changes were postponed and finally dropped in the late 1920s.

The roads were a constantly-bemoaned disgrace which cost a thousand pounds a year to repair so in 1919, Gregory proposed a public works project to borrow £3,500 for a major upgrade.

It was put to a referendum at the 1920 Road Board elections but was defeated — Gregory lost his seat on the Board then as well. Larger sums had been borrowed for earlier projects, so the rejection probably stemmed from private feuds.

Gregory proposed a manufacturing co-operative for pearlshell buttons; supported the Kimberley Progress Association; lobbied for import taxes to be taken off anchor chain and argued for pearlshell to be declared a 'primary product' exempt from wharfage charges.

He tried constantly, and unsuccessfully, to get the pearlers to see that their disunity and prejudice were crippling the industry. In return he was castigated for pointing out that dummying was the fault of the white man offering the deal, not the Asian taking advantage of it.

27. Kate and Ancell Gregory in the garden shortly after the birth of their daughter in 1921 (courtesy Pamela Gregory Nielsen).

After four and a half years as President of the Pearlers' Association Gregory resigned in mid-1921, on a happy note at last. Every year he had fought to get the government-backed advances that kept many pearlers afloat. Now, even during a slump, he managed to secure an unexpectedly good advance of £100 per ton for up to 750 tons.

The Pearlers' Association placed on record their appreciation of his 'untiring efforts', and stated that 'a less energetic representative would not have got half as much'. Gregory joked that 'the advance was secured by sitting on the Minister's door step until he got tired and gave it for peace sake', and that 'it was nice to know he had done something for his fellow pearlers, but it was much nicer to be told about it.' The motion of appreciation was passed with applause.

In 1921 Kate Gregory gave birth to a daughter, their only child Pamela, christened Audrey Pamela Villiers Langdon Clement Gregory.

Of the boats Gregory would build over the next decade, one was called *Pam* and another *Bunty*, after one of Pam's dolls. At 43, fatherhood had come late in his life but it clearly meant a great deal to him.

During the war, James Clark, the 'Pearl King' of the Aru Islands, wanted to bring his fleet south. Queensland and Papua refused him entry, and the Broome pearlers also fought bitterly to stop him moving into the depressed industry.

Still, in 1916 Clark received permission to bring 34 boats to Broome on condition that his indent permits returned to the enlisted master pearlers after the war.

Clark's crews also brought an innovation to Broome diving. Instead of boats drifting while divers walked on the sea bed, they were slowly sailed, towing the divers through the water as if they were flying, then lowering them at a signal to pick up pearlshell. Most of Clark's luggers had been built on Japanese slipways at Thursday Island, and were large, fast boats with handsome lines.

However, their draughts were deeper than Broome luggers (9 feet compared to 6 feet), so they had difficulties in north-west conditions. They could not enter local shallow creeks for fresh water, and at beaching or lay-up they were vulnerable to flooding before they could right themselves.

Clark's fleet did not stay long in Broome, but he would never be forgiven for bringing so many boats into the vulnerable industry during wartime. In a case against the Compensation Board in 1944, Captain Louis Goldie said, with the grim satisfaction of a man whose permits had been in peril while he was serving at the Front:

> When they went into a creek they never stood up. They lay where they were, and Barred Creek became the graveyard of Jim Clark's fleet.

Yet the Thursday Island luggers had a great effect on the imagination of Broome. John Harcourt was a shell-opener in the 1920s, a contemporary of Tom Ronan, who wrote in his novel *The Pearlers*:

> The Aru ketches were yacht built, slim, graceful things, which could sail a point and a half closer to the wind than the Broome tubs, and could show any of them a pair of heels as clean as a young girl's.

A bit over the top: a point and a half is all of seventeen degrees, and many of the attractive older vessels were a long way from 'tubs', but this suggests their impact.

And they apparently charmed Gregory most of all. The old luggers his shipwrights were 'repairing' on the foreshore started to take on many of the characteristics of the Thursday Island boats. Jack Cryer, who worked for Captain Gregory, said:

> This (Clark's) addition to the industry brought a new and improved ship design, which seems to have influenced local builders ever since — the almost yacht appearance, with low freeboard aft, counter stern with open taffrail suited the divers for going over the side and cleared water off the decks.

A little more exaggeration: low freeboard and counter sterns had always been features of Broome luggers so they were hardly innovations, but they were longer, 45 to 55 feet, and wider, up to 15 feet.

They had the look of Clark's vessels, with raked bows and yacht-like lines, although they kept the solid build and shallow draught of their Fremantle ancestors. The counter sterns of the new luggers also remained elliptical, rather than rectangular like the 'Aru ketches'.

Many of James Clark's boats had 'clipper' or 'fiddle' bows, with a decorative scroll like the neck of a violin under the bowsprit. This style appealed to Gregory, and he insisted on graceful clipper bows for his new boats — he would pay extra for naturally-shaped timber. (Other Broome luggers built between the wars had spoon bows, with simple outward curves.)

Gregory may also have been inspired after buying lugger *Aurora* in early 1924. Built in 1903, she held the sailing record from Fremantle to Broome, under eight days, and also had an elegant fiddle bow. (*Aurora* was not apparently rebuilt by Gregory, as her proportions remained the same until the end of her life in 1942.)

Gregory and his shipwrights brought the best of both styles together in one boat that was perfect for the north-west, and in doing so, built a vessel unique to Australian waters.

28. Thursday Island luggers, date unknown (courtesy Tony Larard).

Beyond their attractive lines, the long counters and raked stems were entirely practical, as divers could now work from both ends of the new vessels, with plenty of room for airhoses and ropes.

The structure of the stern changed for Gregory's luggers too. In older boats the rows of external planks were fixed directly into the stern-post to form a 'hollow heel', like a wineglass in cross-section, covering the deadwoods sitting along the keel.

In Gregory's new boats the planks were fixed in a sweep from the stern down towards the middle of the keel, exposing the deadwoods, a faster and easier method of construction. (The technique was adopted by Broome boatbuilders after World War II.)

The new luggers were built by hand on the copper-sand foreshores of Roebuck Bay, in rough open sheds, with a dilapidated old boat nearby yielding up its usable timber and fittings.

In the 1944 case against the Compensation Board, Mr Louch, acting for Gregory's friend Captain Goldie, explained what was by then an open secret:

> Old luggers never die: they are like soldiers and taxi plates. You get a licence for a lugger and you keep that lugger, and although from time to time it may be necessary to rebuild the ship entirely, using little more than the ribs that went to construct the first lugger, you still call the ship by the same name although it is practically an entirely new vessel.

But Mr Louch had missed the point: the pearling licence was the least of it, being just a port number allocated to a name for a small annual fee to the local Fisheries Department, and could change year on year.

It was the vessel's entry in the Register of British Ships that was far more important, as it defined the vessel's owners, dimensions, place, date and method of construction. (Registration was common for luggers, although not compulsory, but it was useful for insurance coverage and proof of nationality.)

However, once your vessel was officially registered, if you failed to notify the Registrar when and how you had 'materially altered' its structure, then you would face enormous fines — up to £100, plus £5 for every day the offence continued.

On the other hand, if you dutifully notified the Registrar, then Canberra might find out you had been constructing boats illegally using indentured labour.

As a master pearler — a gambler — it was safer simply to rebuild boats from the timbers of old ones, let the 'repaired' vessels quietly assume the identities of the old, and hope that no-one ever found out.

A fairly safe bet: what reason would officialdom ever have to measure the humble shell-fishing luggers of Broome?

3. The Phantom Fleet (1921-1929)

... in my time I have loved ten horses and two ships. The Pam and the Albatross were the ships ...

Tom Ronan, 1964

In 1921 Gregory and Murakami embarked on a new project — they would no longer waste time searching the seabed for elusive pearls, they would grow them instead.

The Chinese had known for seven centuries how to create 'Buddha pearls' by inserting small metal models of the Sage into living oyster-flesh. The unlucky oyster would enclose the foreign body in nacre, an iridescent form of calcium carbonate called aragonite.

A Japanese merchant named Mikimoto began to experiment with culturing in 1888 and created round gems for the first time in 1905, but few could replicate his work.

Still, if anyone had the vision and energy to succeed where Thomas Haynes in the Montebellos had failed, it would be Gregory and Murakami, so Gregory applied to lease 500 acres of coastal waters for pearlshell culture near Entrance Point, three miles from Broome.

His proposal was greeted with enthusiasm by the Minister for the North West, who proclaimed on 12 October 1921 the lease a 'Pearl Shell Area within the Meaning of the Pearling Act 1912', as required by law.

That legislation made no reference to pearls that might also be harvested as part of any experiment, but when Captain Gregory made enquiries of Pearling Inspector Stuart he was officially informed that his lease covered pearl as well as shell culture, so Gregory sent a man to Japan to study culture techniques.

It became folklore that Gregory had 'hidden' the lease application and the government proclamation at the local Fisheries Department, a place frequented by the notoriously gossipy pearlers, but in fact everyone knew about the lease and no-one was perturbed.

Japanese cultured pearls were obvious to experts, and while shell cultivation in the north-west had not been successful so far it might yet offer an easier life to Broome pearlers.

The 'hidden' assertion came from WH Barker, the self-righteous editor of the *Nor'-West Echo*, who had found, like so many media moguls, that a mixture of cloying sentiment and racial hatred sells newspapers.

Even for the times Barker's venom towards Asians and Aborigines was breathtaking. Pearl culture became his scapegoat and he whipped up public indignation with sly, hectoring insinuations.

> The whole of the Australian PEARL industry is in jeopardy if the greed and impudence of the project are permitted to grow without protest; the value of the real gems … must fall with a sickening thud, and the temper of the people won't tolerate armed Japanese guarding culture beds.

Despite the dearth of actual Japanese armed with guns, the Returned Soldiers' League went ballistic, closely followed by the Pearlers' Association.

A mere 500 shells had been laid down at the lease, but Barker claimed that there were 18,000 and even sanctimoniously offered his approval to a threat to dynamite the site.

The Pearlers' Association turned on their ex-President and complained to the Minister, who desperately tried to maintain that the venture was both legal and economically desirable, but now nobody wanted to know.

Political pragmatism took over and suddenly legislation to ban pearl culture was in the works. The only way to terminate Gregory's lease was to declare it 'not satisfactory to the Minister', which took place in July 1922.

In August the Chief Pearling Inspector, Mr Aldrich, came from Perth to supervise the destruction of the shell, despite the Solicitor-General advising him that the Pearling Act 'does not confer the right to remove and confiscate shell, therefore any action beyond inspection must be with the acquiescence of the licencee.'

Gregory wisely knew when to retreat, and duly acquiesced to the destruction of the healthy shellfish. He said nothing publicly at the time but it must have been a terrible blow.

He lost about £1,400 in expenses, yet was told he had 'no legal claim for compensation' by the very Minister who had encouraged the venture in the first place.

The new amendment 101a (1) of Part V, *Pearling Act*, proclaimed in December 1922, read: 'It shall be unlawful for any person to produce or attempt to produce, or to sell or offer for sale, or otherwise deal in culture pearls … Penalty: Five hundred pounds, or imprisonment for not exceeding six months.'

Barker greeted the end of the project with the same gleeful spite with which he reported mishaps to 'niggers', and in a wave of delusory self-protection the experiment at Entrance Point came to an end.

For the next thirty years Japan was the only country in the world culturing pearls. By the 1950s it was earning millions of pounds per year from the trade, while Broome pearling was almost bankrupt.

Gregory and Murakami always believed that culturing would be the future of the industry and were proven correct in the late 1950s, when large gems were created at Kuri Bay by an Australian-Japanese venture. The Brown family of Cygnet Bay were also among the pioneers and were rewarded with their first round pearls in 1961.

The Browns used bead nucleii from the local Fisheries Department that had been sitting there in bags for nearly forty years: ever since the day they were confiscated from Gregory's lease at Entrance Point.