

A U S T R A L I A N SHORT STORIES

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Image: HMAS Pioneer

Front Cover of Australian Short Stories 1993

HMS PIONEER

(extracted from *The Territory* —
(Angus & Robertson) inspiration for the
cover of this issue)
by Ernestine Hill

When the heroes of *Forlorn Hope* came safely home to Adelaide, Finnis was recalled, and John McKinlay appointed to lead the expedition in his stead. There was news from the north. That sailor of fortune, Captain Francis Cadell, who opened the Murray River to paddle-wheeler trade in the good ship *Lady Augusta*, now in a pearling schooner cruising Carpentaria, had discovered the mouth of the Roper, another grand waterway, and added it to Matthew Flinders' chart.

John McKinlay, from the banks o' Clyde, came out to be a farmer — his old stone farmhouse is standing at Gawler in South Australia still. Ten thousand miles of adventure and a name among the explorers he won in the years between. Searching for Burke and Wills in 1861, he crossed the continent from Lake Eyre nearly to Carpentaria, first to drive sheep and cattle, as stores for his expedition, through the Queensland west. With a presentation gold watch from the Royal Geographical Society he had settled down to a quiet time when the South Australian Government called him to follow the no-hoper Finnis, to find the capital and found the colony in the north.

In cramped meagre notes of his tiny surveyor's diaries, McKinlay was to write the most amazing page in our history of exploration, his odyssey the queerest, his faith in ordeal and resource in leadership second to none.

In November 1865 he left Adelaide with fifteen men, most of them qualified surveyors. Leading citizens fitted them out with a first-class team of forty-five ponies, two from the vice-regal shafts, no less, of Governor Daly's carriage. They would cover the whole coast from the Roper to the Victoria, the schooner *Beatrice* attending them by sea.

New Year in the tents by candlelight, a gay farewell from Davies' shack store bedight with swords and flags, they were out from Escape Cliffs on 14th January for a half-moon ride of reconnaissance south through the hills of Adelaide River, then north-east to Hawkesbury Point, where *Beatrice* would meet them in six weeks' time with stores

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for Arnhem Land. The wet was down, but this cheered McKinlay. After ordeal by drought in the Dead Heart, he revelled in the rain — or so he thought. In the gig *Julia* he sailed Adelaide River a hundred miles to the depot, the party bringing the horses and sheep on what should have been land.

That night a shower of six inches washed the party away. However, it collected itself, and in three days of deluge crossed creeks, bogs and marshes into heavy sand. Crisp and Mayo went back for a lost dog. Mayo returned alone, and four men went back to look for Crisp. They searched eight days, found his horse, swag and rifle, and were giving him up for dead when they saw him naked and mad, aiming a rusted revolver at them from behind a tree. Restored by black tea and damper, he told of a murderous gang of Malays that had been riding him down for a week, the chief on a grey horse . . . they realized he had been dodging them. A fortnight late at the depot, they loaded up for the bush.

Pack-bells in the jungle, ringing the white man's coming to earth's last wildernesses . . .

Through weeping rains till the horses, belly-deep in hot mud, could flounder only a mile between sun-up and sundown, on 5th February they crossed a rushing stream in the dark and camped on a flat. It was under water by morning. They swam for a rise and waited a fortnight for floods to go down.

No hope to go back through Adelaide River swamps, two weeks to meet *Beatrice* at Hawkesbury Point . . . digging the horses out of bog they lost one day in two. The sheep, in agony of grass-seeds, were shorn in the steaming scrub and stung to death by mosquitoes. The six weeks' stores were nearly done — tea, jerked beef, medicines, all gone. Each man's weekly ration was nine ounces of flour, ropy and gluey, 'a nest of spider's webs'. On 9th March the pack pony Nigel, hopelessly bogged, was shot, cooked and eaten. A diet of horse began.

Weary miles round every creek, through lanes of twenty-foot grasses, they struggled waist high in mud, carrying the last of the sheep, the dogs crawling after, soon to die. When the rain stopped, the heat was a hundred and nine fetid degrees in those rank swamps. So they passed from April into May.

Sometimes, to passing blacks, they gave fish-hooks, tomahawks, necklets, for a bit of bush tucker or to keep the peace. Sometimes they caught a fish and drew lots, or camped at a pretty lagoon to live on cabbage-palm and cockatoo stew. One 'excellent breakfast' of three kites, two galah parrots, three small turkeys, a sheep's head with the wool singed off and the trotters, was shared by sixteen men. No salt. They craved salt. Crisp cut a rag of sheepskin from under his saddle, stewed it in his quart-pot and gulped that vile liquor salt with