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Queensland Branch

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PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

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THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION  
2020

First Prize in the Open Division

**Craig Cormick**

*The Lost Journal of Edmund Kennedy*

*Cape York Peninsula, Australia, 1848*

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*The Lost Journal of Edmund Kennedy*

*Cape York Peninsula, Australia, 1848*

Edmund Kennedy whips his hand back from the unknown plant sharply, looking at the blood suddenly blooming on his skin. He was trying to feel the texture of the plant, and it has speared him.

He looks across to his Aboriginal guide, Jackey Jackey, bewildered. The young man gives Kennedy a small enigmatic nod, letting him know, perhaps, that the land here will sometimes demand their blood for giving up its secrets.

After they'd landed at Rockingham Bay in the far north of the colony in May 1848, it had taken their party of thirteen two months to proceed just twenty miles through the inhospitable terrain they encountered.

Mangroves.

Wetlands.

Mountains.

Thick scrub.

Creeks.

The land had hampered their every step.

It was not until they turned inland that they began making more steady progress on their planned seven hundred-mile trek to the tip of Cape York.

Only Jackey Jackey's skills and Kennedy's dogged determination kept them going. He had an unending drive and ambition to make an impact on this new land. The party all knew well how he'd arrived in the colony from England in 1840, and had already accompanied Assistant Surveyor General Sir Thomas Mitchell on his expedition to central and western Queensland. They'd charted the dry plains out there, before he was given command of his own expedition, to chart the course of

the Victoria River towards the Gulf of Carpentaria. He had discovered that it did not reach the Gulf at all, but turned back to the central deserts.

And now he had this great endeavour, to chart Cape York and find the elusive overland route to the Gulf. The colonial government, they knew, had dreams of overland trade routes and cattle properties. But Kennedy was finding impenetrable rainforest and marshes – so different to the land out west that he had described to them.

Kennedy had learned well from Mitchell, as he was told that each step they took was only valid if they were able to record it in a journal, and return it to civilisation. And he had begun contemplating his own journal entries more earnestly after that, pondering every word he wrote of those wide western plains, struggling on, word after word, to try and capture the landscape accurately.

*The Warrego maintains its deep sand bed,  
averaging 40 feet in breadth;  
it intersects an open forest country  
with good pasture,  
the forest being generally composed of several varieties of Eucalypti,  
such as iron-bark, box &c,  
the acaci, and pine.*

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He had begun describing the land like that on this journey, but when he was deep in the humid forests of the Cape he began to feel that the literal descriptions of the land were not adequately capturing it. As if this new untrodden land needed new unrecorded words.

He had asked Jackey Jackey endlessly if he knew the native names of plants and land formations – and Jackey Jackey told him over and over that he did not know the land here and so did not know the words of the people here.

He was from the Hunter Valley, north of Sydney, he told him. A land vastly different to the tropical forests and stony hills about them. He had been a teenager when he was recruited to become a guide for the white men, leading them through the land. And Kennedy watched the way he read the land. Watched the way he

moved through it. Knew that he could understand it better than he ever could himself.

He also knew that even though he was not from this part of the land he would need Jackey Jackey's help to capture this land in words.

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The other men in the party could not keep up with them, suffering from illnesses and exhaustion as the land and the humidity took its slow toll. The rain and the heat and insects all wearing them down.

They left eight men near Weymouth Bay.

They left three more near Shelburne Bay.

So there was only Kennedy and Jackey Jackey left to cover the remaining one hundred and twenty miles or so to reach the supply ship waiting for them at the tip of Cape York.

As the two of them made their slow way northwards, Kennedy became increasingly fixated on needing to find the words of the land. He quizzed the dark-skinned forest people and the sand beach people they encountered.

These people had experience with strangers coming for trade from across the seas to the north, and so they traded their words for fishhooks and trinkets, and then escorted the two starving stragglers across their lands to pass them on to the people of the next lands.

Kennedy wrote all the words down in his journal. Tried to get the pronunciations just right, as he transcribed words that had never before been written.

*Yuku – tree.*

*Ingkaawa – flower.*

*Maaya – hill.*

*Chuuchun – cotton tree.*

*Mapangu – grass.*

*Malngkana – beach.*

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But the land continued to slow them down. They fought through thick scrub to climb dry ridges with no water, and then descended again into insect-filled creeks so deep with mud that their horses got stuck.

And then one evening, sitting around their meagre camp fire, chewing their starvation rations of dried horsemeat, and staring at the next blank page in his journal, Kennedy lifted his head to Jackey Jackey and asked him, 'What is your name? Your real name?'

The young man smiled. His teeth showing white in the darkness. 'Galmahra,' he said.

Kennedy carefully wrote the name down and then looked at his travelling companion. Now named.

'Galmahra,' he said slowly.

The young man nodded. Kept smiling.

*'If anything should happen to me,'* Kennedy now said to his young companion. *'Take this book and give it to the Governor. He will give you anything for it. It contains a wealth that he must see and understand.'*

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Still they struggled onwards. Into new lands. They were nearly at journey's end now. Only twenty miles or so to go, Kennedy estimated. Maybe only two or three more days to safety.

But the landscape closed around them.

In torrential rain.

In mud.

In hordes of insects.

The plants pricked them.

The stones turned under their feet.

And the black men stared at them silently.

Kennedy tried to get them to speak to him. To tell him their words for the land. But the dark figures just disappeared into the trees when he called to them.

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Kennedy pushed his thin emaciated body onwards, determined to complete his mission. But the last of their dried horsemeat was gone, and they had reached the banks of a river. Escape River, he named it. Though it was crocodile infested and they had to follow it upstream to find a crossing.

Kennedy was very weak now and found himself having sudden memories of things he had written on his last expedition. Also following a river.

*At about 1 mile the river there turns to the S.S.W. and S.,  
spreading over a depressed and barren waste,  
void of trees or vegetation of any kind,  
its level surface being only broken by small doones of red sand,  
resembling islands upon the dry bed of an inland sea,  
which, I am convinced,  
at no distant period did exist there.*

When he closed his eyes he could almost feel he was still on that journey. As if it were somehow a part of this one.

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They continued upriver where they met a large number of men. Kennedy decided to camp there for the night and he gave them fishhooks in exchange for their words of the land.

He wrote down everything in a now faltering hand.

*Aypany – stone*

*Upangupa – spear grass*

*Ukuru – shore line*

*Yantal – hill top*

*Atava – creek*

*Upudhingu – rainbow*

*Arka – spear*

*Lukuny – blood*

Word after word. His journal was close to full now. But he knew there was still something missing. Some vital words to capture the essence of this strange land, and he pressed the men about him for the names of more things.

But Galmahra said he should be careful, for these men gave away the names of the land too easily, and would soon regret it and want the words back. He told Kennedy that the words told stories of how the land was formed. And not all such stories could be taken away from the land.

Kennedy looked about at the black men around them, and noticed the way they were staring at him when he wrote down their words and then read them back to them.

‘Yes, enough for tonight,’ Kennedy said, and closed his precious journal.

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The next day the black men were all about them, standing in the heavy rain quietly. Kennedy and Galmahra went on and found more and more men ahead of them, as thick as the trees of the rainforest, all armed with spears.

‘What do they want of us?’ Kennedy asked his friend, his feet so swollen he could barely walk now.

‘They want to stop you taking away their words,’ he said. ‘Taking away the creation tales of their land.’

‘Yes,’ said Kennedy. ‘That’s it!’ So close to understanding everything, he felt. There was a word that would knit all the words he had collected together. A word for not wanting your words and your land taken away. A word for knowing that dispossession and death would follow if they were. A word for needing to prevent that. A word for journeys undertaken in the past, the present and in the future. A word that might bridge European understanding of the land and these people’s understanding of it. A word he needed to write into his journal.

‘So close now,’ he said.

A word for the spears that were being hurled at him as he opened his journal to write it. A word for the feeling of the wooden barbs piercing his back and thigh. A word for knowing in an instant that he would die of his wounds. That his last spoken words to his companion Galmahra would be, ‘*Give me paper and I will write.*’ But that he would die before he could. That Galmahra would escape, but that the journal would be left behind. All those collected words of the country seeping back

into the land again. As would his flesh and bones. Becoming a part of the land like the stories of the land.

Seeping into the creeks.

The hills.

The swamps.

The grasslands.

The paths of the people and the paths of their ancestors. And the paths of their future.

And that final word of understanding never written.

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*\*(Italicised prose quotes are from the Statement of Jackey Jackey/Galmahra to William Carron of 1849 and from Kennedy's Expedition to ascertain the course of the River Victoria, published in 1849)*