

Bentinck Island Is Our Stone-Age Outpost

In the Gulf of Carpentaria, It is Peopled By an Unusually Primitive Aboriginal Tribe

By a Special Correspondent

ONE PART OF AUSTRALIA, which, although situated in the war zone, has remained completely unaffected by the war is the lonely and little-known island of Bentinck, in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Following upon the hostile reception received from its inhabitants early in the war by a small patrol of Australian troops, the island was placed "out of bounds" by the military authorities, and since then Bentinck has been left undisturbed.

The inhabitants of this northern outpost are regarded as the lowest surviving form of humanity. Completely ignorant of even the simplest forms of civilised existence, they wear no clothes, build no homes, and sleep on the ground without any covering in all weathers.

A low, densely wooded, sandstone island, about 60 square miles in area, Bentinck was discovered in November, 1802, by Captain Matthew Flinders, who named it after Lord William Bentinck, then Governor of Madras (India).

Swampy in parts, alive with vicious mosquitoes and sandflies, and a haunt of snakes, the island is an uninviting place. Yet from time immemorial it has been the home of primitive natives, who carry on a strange communal life. But very little more is known of these islanders today than was known a century ago, for no white person has yet studied the natives at close quarters, nor has been able even to stay for more than a few hours on the island. From time to

able even to stay for more than a few hours on the island. From time to time missionaries and others have paid visits to the outpost in the hope of winning the friendship of the islanders, but in every case the hostility of the natives has compelled a hurried retreat.

The natives are real Stone Age people, who have repulsed all attempts made to introduce them to civilised ways. They are not exactly warlike savages, but are hostile to all visitors. Very few white people have seen the native women or children, because at the approach of visitors all the women and children are sent to some secret hiding place in the interior of the island, while the men, formidably armed with spears, keep guard, hidden in the bush.

The natives wear absolutely no clothes. Year in and year out they go stark naked. Nor do they build homes of any kind to shelter them from the weather: they simply sleep on the ground in all seasons without any covering at all. In most of their camps, however, they keep piles of dried grass which they use as mosquito "nets." The island is infested with the largest and most vicious of mosquitoes, and to protect themselves during the daytime the islanders keep their bodies thickly smeared with grease, while at night they sleep beneath the grass, which keeps the troublesome insects away without stifling the sleepers.

They use no cooking or eating utensils, except large seashells, in which they carry and store water; smaller shells which are used as drinking vessels; and sharpened stones which are used for opening oysters. They live

used for opening oysters. They live solely on oysters, fish, turtles, and bush berries. All food is simply thrown into a fire and left to roast

for a time, after which it is seized in the hands and eaten after the manner of the carnivora. Fish are caught in primitive basket-like traps which are sunk in the sea, while turtles are speared.

Canoes are unknown on the island, the natives' only seagoing vessels being primitive rafts of a type not seen elsewhere in the Pacific. In shape these rafts resemble an elongated "V." Some of them measure up to 12ft in length and 10ft in width at the broad end; they are constructed of light saplings or logs securely tied together with rope made out of bark fibres and vines, the spaces between the saplings being filled either with tightly rammed grass or a "cement" of clay, grass, and small stones. The rafts are unwieldy vessels, which cannot travel very fast, and they are propelled with long paddles resembling cricket bats in shape.

A patrol vessel recently cruising round the south-eastern end of the island disturbed a native travelling leisurely home on one of these rafts. As soon as he caught sight of the vessel the native dropped his paddle, plunged overboard, and swam madly for the island. On reaching the shore he hurried into the bush without once looking round. Shortly afterwards armed natives could be seen flitting about in the bush fringing the shore, and the whole time the patrol vessel remained in the vicinity they kept a close watch.

THE ISLANDERS are expert spear throwers. The only weapons they have ever been seen carrying are spears ranging up to 12ft in length, the heads being either the needle-pointed spines of stingray tails, sharp bones, fire-toughened wooden barbs, or pieces of razor-sharp flint.

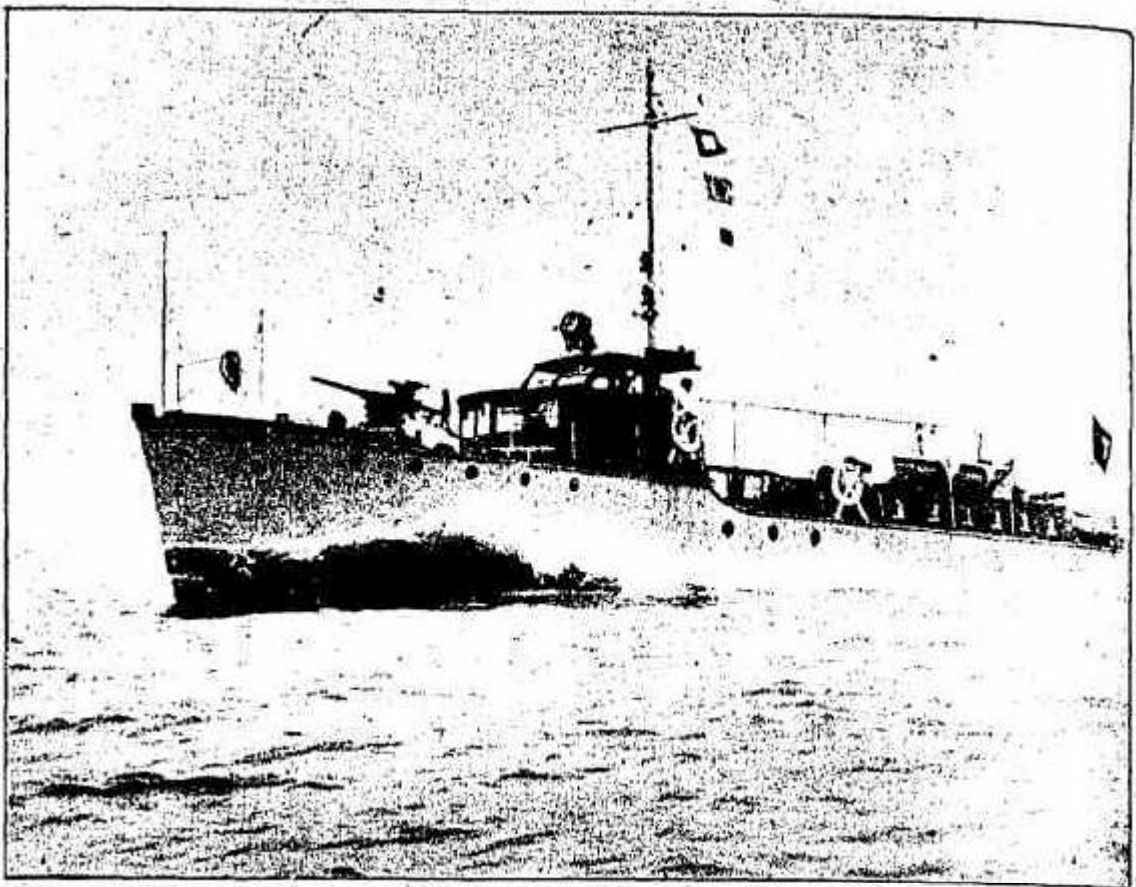
One flint-headed spear thrown at a patrol party landing on the island early in the war struck the side of a rowing-boat with such force that it penetrated a half-inch plank to a depth of nearly one inch and a half.

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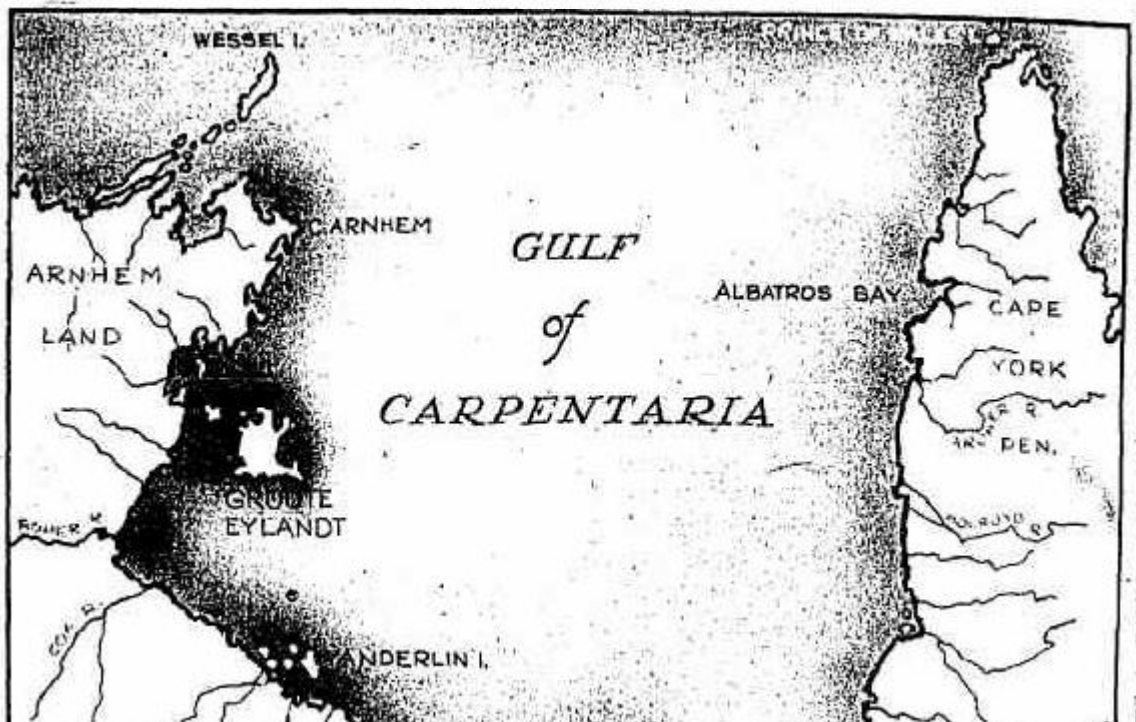
THE ISLANDERS HAVE ALWAYS REFUSED to meet white people, and they have always declined to touch tobacco, and white man's foods, such as sugar and biscuits, which have been left on the island by missionaries. On one occasion a party of missionaries left blankets on the island during the winter months, thinking that the dusky nudists would appreciate them; but the natives merely threw them into the sea.

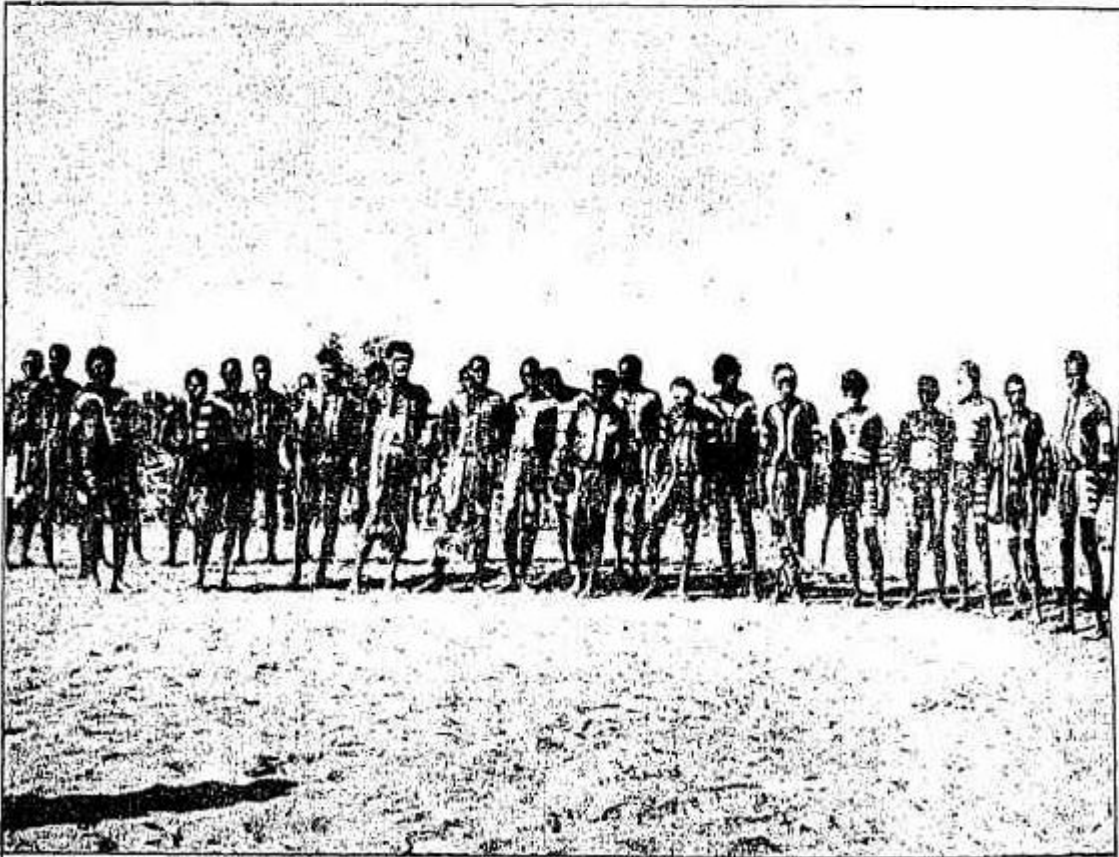
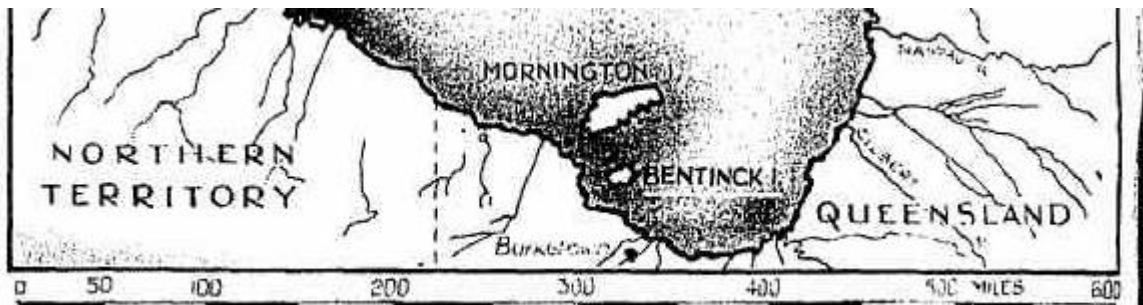
Ten years ago an official Queensland Government party visited the island in an endeavour to make friends with the natives. Gifts of mirrors, beads, tomahawks, &c., were taken ashore, but even these failed to tempt the islanders from the bush.

The population of the island is not known; it is estimated, however, that there are at least 500 of the islanders. The Government of Queensland has proclaimed the island a close native reserve, and anyone venturing there without permission is liable to a heavy fine or imprisonment. Whoever does land there, in any case, takes a risk with the natives, who have clearly shown that they resent the intrusion of white people into their domain. On their lonely island — one of the few remaining real Stone Age islands on the globe — they live as their ancestors lived centuries before them.



Fast motor patrol boats, of which this one is typical, cruising in the Gulf of Carpentaria and neighbouring waters, often meet primitive tribes like the Bentinck Islanders described on this page. Recently, says the writer, a patrol boat surprised a Bentinck native on a raft, but he dived overboard, swam ashore, and fled to cover.





About to take part in a corroboree, these aborigines on Mornington Island, North Queensland, are of a similar type to the Stone Age people who comprise the small, little-known native community of Bentinck Island. Hostile, but not warlike, the Bentinck Islanders have kept at bay the inquisitive white visitor who would like to know more about their customs and their tribal history.