

JAMES MORRILL

1824 - 1865



Townsville's Earliest European Pioneer

James Morrill, sailor, came from Essex, England. He went to sea at an early age, and was carpenter's mate in the *Peruvian* when she left Sydney for China on 27 February, 1846. In a cyclonic gale the barque was wrecked on Horseshoe Reef off the Great Barrier Reef. Twenty-two survivors took to a hastily-constructed raft, on which they drifted for forty-two days, often coming within sight of land but each time being driven off by contrary winds and tides. Morrill, an active and robust young man, did all he could to preserve the castaways by catching fish and even sharks, which were eaten raw, but despite such efforts only five people eventually survived the landing near Cape Bowling Green.

Of these, Miller, the shipwright, vanished in an attempt to bring rescue by paddling to civilisation in an Aboriginal bark canoe found on the beach. An apprentice boy, White, succumbed to malnourishment not long after the party was discovered by Aboriginals. This left the master of the *Peruvian*, Captain Pitkethley, his wife and Morrill; they were adopted into communities of wandering Aboriginals, to whose habits of life they soon conformed completely. The Pitkethleys joined a community around Cape Cleveland but were both dead within two years. Morrill lived for seventeen years with a neighbouring community, centred on Mount Elliot and ranging between the Black and Burdekin Rivers. He was fairly well treated and adjusted himself well, but found his superior craftsmanship was useless as the Aboriginals took from him any tools or artefacts which he made himself.

With the opening of North Queensland for pastoral settlement in 1861 Morrill's isolation was at an end. News of the interlopers was followed by one or two unpromising contacts. A white horseman who murdered a native who was mourning his father was himself speared. But Morrill's wish to join his own people remained strong; his opportunity came on 25 January 1863 when he and a party of Aboriginals hunting for kangaroo came to an outstation of a sheep property. Overcoming great shyness, Morrill left his companions, washed himself as clean as he could and revealed himself to two astonished station hands with a cry of: 'Don't shoot, mates, I'm a British object!' He was recognised as a white, and his hosts reluctantly parted with him.

Honoured in Brisbane, he was presented at Government House, but does not seem greatly to have interested Governor Sir George Bowen. Appointed to the Department of Customs at Bowen, Morrill returned to North Queensland, where his knowledge and experience of the Aboriginals made him much in demand as interpreter and go-between and often promoted peaceful conciliation. His knowledge of the country and its seasonal variations was often consulted by squatters and explorers. In January 1864 he accompanied George Dalrymple on the expedition to open the port of Cardwell, and in April 1865 he was in charge of the *Ariel* bringing the first cargo of bonded goods to the settlement on Cleveland Bay which later became Townsville. But his privations during his years of wandering had weakened his health, and on 30 October 1865 he died at Bowen. Aboriginals for many miles around came into town for a memorable mourning ceremony.

Morrill was married in 1864 to Eliza Ann Ross, a domestic servant employed by the police magistrate at Bowen. She remarried after his death, and died at Charters Towers about 1923. They had one son, whose descendants, in 1966, were still living in the Burdekin Delta district of North Queensland.

