

PALM BRIEFS

A Visit to Lord Howe Island in November, 1971

It was my good fortune to join a tour of 65 California nurserymen to the South Pacific for 24 days in the fall of 1971. Roughly, the itinerary was from Los Angeles to Tahiti, to Australia, New Zealand, Fiji Islands, Samoa, Hawaii, and home. The nurserymen's tour was geared to horticulture, which means botanical gardens, private estates, universities, horticultural research facilities, wholesale and retail nurseries, meetings with nurserymen's associations in various countries, besides all the other niceties of traveling life, 18,700 miles in all.

Besides all this, my main purpose was to take advantage of a long desired opportunity to visit a remote tiny island in the Sea of Tasman, between New Zealand and Australia, just a little south of the 30th degree of latitude on the other side of the equator. This island has furnished a product to our nursery, the most essential in our business of growing and selling plants for the last 20 years. It is the seeds of a palm tree, *Howeia forsteriana*, indigenous only to this lonely island where it grows with three of its relatives, *Howeia belmoreana*, *Hedysepe canterburyana* and *Clinostigma mooreanum*. Now, these names mean nothing to you, or very little at most; suffice it to say that one of them is the palm that you find in lobbies of hotels, business houses, sales and convention rooms, churches, as decorative background in magazine pictures, or the palm behind your President when he addresses the American people.

Not only was it my desire to get acquainted at close range with these palms on Lord Howe Island, but also to learn at the source the reasons for the ever

diminishing quantity of seeds available in an ever increasing market.

Regrettably, it was necessary to cut short my visit in Tahiti to meet a 3 A.M. departure date, November 4th, from the Rose Bay seaplane airport in Sydney, Australia. Flying trips to Lord Howe Island depend on high tide conditions in the lagoon, therefore schedules change for every flight, which happen once or twice a week. A steamer stops for freight—no passengers—only every three to eight weeks.

We departed in a foam of spray raised by the pontoons, soon penetrated through the cloud cover and floated in the eerie light of a southern full moon over fantastic cloud billows, white castles, grotesque dream formations, with off and on a glimpse through to the black ocean underneath, smooth and slick like a mirror, reflecting the unearthly light of the moon. The whole scenery was so unreal, that I pinched myself to find out whether I was still alive or dead. Dawn finally broke, gloriously the sun emerged over the horizon from which the clouds had disappeared in defeat and then, at once, the green island appeared below, narrow, hilly, with two steep formidable mountains at one end.

The white breakers of the coral reef marked the lagoon. Soon the Sandringham Flying Boat set down in a cloud of spray again on the shallow blue-green, immeasurably clear waters. We were boated out and set foot on the small jetty of the island.

Imagine a tiny island, about seven miles long by one mile wide at the widest south end where the two volcanoes of seven million years ago—by scientists' calculations—pushed themselves 2800 feet out of the ocean. The island is the creation of volcanic forces; the coral reef the southernmost of the

southern hemisphere. Discovered in 1788, it showed no previous human habitation, no prehistoric remnants of natives were found. Settlers arrived in 1834, but it was not before 1840 that settlers came to stay for good, making their livelihood from sales of water, wood and vegetables to whalers. When whaling stopped, for a long time nothing happened, until another source of income for the 200 inhabitants showed up: collection and sale of *Howeia* palm seeds, more often but incorrectly called *Kentia*, which found a ready market in all civilized countries of the world.

This is the remarkable story of the kentia palm: it is as much of a puzzle—as many things in the universe remain unexplained to the human mind—how of all places and numerous possibilities four species of palms could develop to such perfection in millions of years on only this mere speck of land, surrounded by vast oceans of the South Pacific away from contact with anything from the outside world! These four palms have been found indigenous (native) to Lord Howe Island only. Its average annual rainfall is 67 inches, lowest temperature 50° F., highest temperature 79° F. over the last 27 years by record; these making it marvelously subtropical. The palms are found in great numbers and groves in four distinct belts from sea level to the tops of the two extinct volcanoes, Mt. Lidgbird and Mt. Gower, each belt overlapping the next one. *Clinostigma mooreanum*, shortest and sturdiest of the four grows on top, especially on top of 2840-foot-high Mt. Gower which has a summit platform of nearly 100 acres.

It was my desire to find and study all four species on Mt. Gower for which purpose I had engaged a guide to take me up. I was fortunate to find a most knowledgeable and sociable guide in

Max Schick, partially Polynesian with a magnificent physique. Had I known the difficulty and exhausting effort of the ascent—and descent—I probably would have backed out. But, once started, I was too proud to give it up halfway. The ascent to Mt. Gower begins at the base of its neighbor Mt. Lidgbird. The southwestern portion of this mountain falls almost perpendicular to the sea and it is here that the Lower Road is situated. An explorer's description of his journey, recorded in N. S. W. Parliamentary Notes of 1870, is very accurate and of particular interest, because it describes the feelings of the average person who is foolish enough to travel along this path. R. D. Fitzgerald wrote: "On turning a rock, they got the first glimpse of the 'bad bit,' and a 'bad bit' it was—a track across the face of the precipice. The precipice rose sheer and naked, perpendicular as a wall for a thousand feet; then a little rubbish, with here and there a stunted plant. The track not more than two feet wide, then down to the palms 500 feet. Now came a slope covered with loose gravel and the caution is: 'Have a care now, if you once begin to slip, you will—there don't mention it please! 'Now the path is level, with a few loose stones, probably sent down from the ridge above by the wild goats. The smallest of them had it fallen then, might have been death. [A huge basalt boulder blocked the path on our own trip, down by erosion.] Kick one off the path—oh, the horror that it makes no sound—nothing could make a sound out there, over the edge of that path, what a treasure those little bushes are, but there are places where there are none, where there is nothing to grasp but the roughness of the perpendicular rock; and there are places—'gulches'—where the path itself is gone, and footholds have been cut out with a

pick in the rock, and where it is dreadful to start with the wrong foot. 'Is this ever coming to an end?' is the thought as each angle is rounded; and in all that dangerous track the rounding of the angles is the worst, when you cannot see where you are going and grasp at anything with one hand reluctant to let go the other, and the other is sidled on over nothing. But the last angle is turned, and they stand again on the talus of the precipice, and it is grand—wonderfully grand to look up to it—1000 feet of grey perpendicular basalt, the very highest mass of which overhangs the base. A sight that one turns to look at again, again and again to imprint it on the memory. A sight of awe and fascination."

We passed through a forest of banyan trees, over windswept ridges, with breathtaking vistas across the ocean, the reef, the narrow green strip of the isle, up and up, until we met the most welcome tiny streamlet in Erskine Valley, crystal clear over a sheet rock polished in millions of years by torrential downpours. We lay flat on our bellies to sip the cool drink. Then to the ridge connecting Mt. Lidgbird with Mt. Gower, and up the long steep ascent to the top. We had left behind us long ago the belt of *Howeia belmoreana* and higher up of *Hedyscepe canterburyana* with its silvery-white crownshaft and its beautifully curved crown of leaves. We were now entering the high range of shrubs, dwarfed trees, grasses, ferns and lichens. First singly, then in stands, *Clinostigma mooreanum* were showing up, first mixing with the *Hedyscepe*, then bolder and in more perfect shape—shorter than the other three species, stubbier stronger, with a knobby, rounded crownshaft, stubborn, fighting the ever menacing forces of winds, fog and rains. They are kind of stalwarts. Finally—the top!

We threw ourselves down in a grassy clearing out of the range and protected from the harsh winds. I was too worn out, weary and exhausted to eat the lunch Max had carried up here. But to fortify myself I had to for the steep descent, so I ate and said to Max: "If we had *only one* cool drink!" "Just wait," said Max, "let's walk 30, 40 yards to the other side." There, what seemed a miracle, was a break-off, a cut in the near level top, a hanging garden, as we know them from the High Sierras, but this one deep in darkest shade of the trees, bushes, ferns and palms, a veritable paradise. A perpetual spring, crystal clear out of the red volcanic rock, really not enough to run in a stream was trickling in a heavy drip, which we caught in our cupped hands. It never gives out, summer or winter! Where would the water come from so near the top of the flat mountain?

After we had our fill of the spring water, we went back to our grassy, sunny resting place. While dozing on our backs, we heard suddenly a strange rasping noise—we had a visitor, a bird of oddest dimensions, a rockhen, bird without wings, but with strong legs, a powerful, long, curved beak. The strange bird was the size of a bantam hen, red-brown of color, one of the remainder of a species which had "lost" its wings. Originally these birds had no enemies and thrived on the island, where there are neither snakes nor rodents, owls or the like. Then a shipwreck brought rats on drifting boxes to the shore and because they had no natural enemies either, they took over, fed on the eggs and newly hatched young of the rockhens until they are nearly extinct. They also climbed the palms and feasted on the seeds, to become a detrimental pest. In the lowland a bounty of five cents was paid to rat hunters for each tail;

so many were brought in that rat tails were used as currency, but I don't believe the story somebody told, that a tail was found once in the collection plate of a church. Anyway, the rats in the inhabited areas are well under control, whereas it has been impossible to eradicate the pest in the nearly inaccessible places. The remaining rockhens are now under government protection. Some that I saw on the mountain were banded. They look similar to New Zealand kiwis. Let us hope that the government rat poison will do the job, and that these lovable almost tame birds on top of the two mountains will have a chance to survive.

The sun had been shining all day. All at once, it disappeared; it became dark. A heavy cold fog drifted in and all around us. It remained. We began to shiver, specially as we had left our sweaters down the mountain to be picked up on the return. Gone were the views. The only thought: down, down, before night comes, to where it's warm. My knees were buckling, I had to stop often,—and then again that terrible Lower Road. But we made it, long after a glorious sunset, long after the shadows of night hid the palms, the banyans, even the path home.

To take leave from Lord Howe Island is like leaving paradise. In fact Lord Howe Island is called the "Paradise of the Pacific." It's a world different from ours. The people are different, wild creatures are and so is its flora. I feel affection in my heart for the island and its kindly people and sorrow that I had to say 'Good bye.'

OTTO MARTENS

Facts & Figures of Lord Howe Island

Location: In the Tasman Sea, 360 miles east of Australia, 436 miles east-north-

east of Sydney; ca. 7 miles long, 1 mile or less wide.

Transportation: By Sandringham Flying Boat since 1947, once or twice a week, ca. 40 passengers: 1 or 2 narrow roads, a number of paths, few motor cars, many bikes.

Facilities: Bottled gas imported; rain-water collected in cisterns from metal roofs, a few private mediocre wells, a small creek. Electricity by local power station.

Government: Island belongs to New South Wales, Australia. Local Board of Control manages local affairs, under directions from headquarters in Sydney. No courthouse, no jail, no policeman, no sheriff or constable, nobody to make an arrest, no lawyer, no need for any of these.

Hospital care: Retired doctor resident. Each flight ticket includes insurance for emergency flight to Sydney hospital. Small hospital on the island, operated by one beautiful nurse.

Schools: All grades in three elementary classes. High School by correspondence course.

News: Radio. No T.V.

Miscellaneous: Nobody has ownership of land, lease only. No land sales possible, outsider cannot buy lease of vacant property. No poverty; everybody has an income. Everybody owns a home, some small, some larger. All capable male help must collect palm seed, sales return go into general fund, workers are paid from this fund; same with unloading freight from steamer. First export of palm seeds in the 1880s. Sales now managed by government.