

CORRESPONDENCE

THE BATHURST BAY HURRICANE

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An account was given in Australian Meteorological Magazine No. 23, December 1958, of the Bathurst Bay Hurricane of 5 March 1899, which was probably our worst marine disaster. The writer has long considered that this may have been the most intense Australian hurricane on record and it was with great interest that he discovered the following excellent summary in Pugh's Almanac and Directory, 1900:

"This month will long be remembered, especially in the North, as the occasion of the most terrible calamity that has yet visited Queensland. On the 4th a hurricane some 30 miles wide swept the coast between Cape Melville and Cape Flattery, causing fearful loss of life and property. It lasted about 12 hours and seems to have been accompanied by a tidal wave. It struck the pearlshelling fleet in those waters with such terrific fury that six or seven schooners, over 60 luggers, and 25 diving boats were wrecked, and about 400 lives were lost. All but some 14 of these were coloured men, many of them single, but still they had those near and dear to them, and heartrending scenes occurred at Thursday Island when the sad news came to hand. The Government sent the steamers "Warrego" and "White Star" to search for castaways and assist the distressed, but very few living were found. Drowned were found in all directions, and it is recorded as an indication of the beneficial effects of the new treatment of our aboriginals that they buried many bodies of their own motion. Some idea of the terrific force of the wind and waves may be formed from the fact that trees were entirely stripped of leaves and bark, rocks tons weight were hurled up on the beach, and masses of fish of all kinds — porpoises, sharks, sea snakes, etc. — were found hundreds of yards inland. A police camp on the Coen, about 40 feet above sea level, was swept away, the water rising to the waists of the men, and the wave rushed about three miles inland with overwhelming force. The lightship at Channel Rock, with all her occupants, also fell a victim to the wind and waves. The value of the pearling fleet lost is estimated at £50,000."

Of particular interest is the statement regarding the force of the wind — "trees were entirely stripped of leaves and bark, rocks tons weight were hurled up on the beach". The 40 ft tidal wave which rushed about three miles inland should be constantly borne in mind by town planners and harbour authorities all along our tropical coast; some day there might be a repetition.