

Correspondence

The Editor

Australian Meteorological Magazine

Dear Sir,

During recent research I have discovered an inadvertant error in two Bureau of Meteorology publications viz. *Bulletin 16 'Australian Hurricanes and Related Storms'* (1925) and *Results of Rainfall Observations Made in Western Australia* (1929). Both these publications report that the coastal vessel *Agnes* was dismasted in a cyclone off North West Cape on 4 February 1876.

The cyclone which caused *Agnes* to lose her masts and part of her cargo occurred on Christmas Eve 1875 not on 4 February 1876. The storm and the sequence of reports leading to the error are well documented in newspaper reports and official records of the Colonial Secretary's office.

On 22nd December 1875 there were at least 55 pearl shell boats scattered along the northwest coast from the mouth of the DeGrey River to the southern end of Exmouth Gulf. The majority of them were concentrated around either the prolific Mary Ann Patch about 50 km northwest of the mouth of the Ashburton River, or on the eastern side of the southern end of Exmouth Gulf, close to the safe Bay of Rest anchorage. *Agnes*, with mail and stores for the pearling fleet, rounded North West Cape and entered the partially enclosed waters at the northern end of Exmouth Gulf.

Whilst the initial effects of the storm were felt on 22 December the centre of the cyclone passed over the Gulf (lowest recorded pressure 943.0 hPa) on Christmas Eve. All told, 3 ships were totally destroyed, 59 lives were lost and several ships were grounded and damaged to varying degrees.

Newly appointed as Customs Collector, a Captain Walcott was aboard the *Agnes* en route to the Lacepede Islands to establish a customs post. He submitted a report to the Governor on 21 July 1876 and wrote of the cyclone:

We anchored near a portion of the fleet at 'Mary Ann Patch' on 22nd same month (December). Very threatening weather decided the Master to put to sea – during a very severe hurricane that ensued and which laid the schooner on her beam ends, the Govt. boat (Walcott's cutter) was sacrificed for safety of vessel. The vessel only being saved by cutting away everything. I am happy to say that my crew contributed largely in saving the vessel. Under jury masts & proceeding on our voyage.....

Reaching Port Walcott on January 4th 1876
I consulted with the Govt. Resident,
Mr Sholl.....

In mid-January the three Perth newspapers received details of the storm. The large death toll and the details of some heroic rescues tended to eclipse the brief outline of the difficulties experienced by the *Agnes*. Pending the arrival of another ship from the North West the matter was ignored for nearly three weeks.

The following undated report appears in *The WA Times* of 4 February 1876 under the by-line 'From our Cossack Correspondent':

'The *Agnes* arrived here on the 4th inst. all her masts gone – she experienced a heavy gale off the NW Cape – had to cut away her masts and throw her cargo overboard.'

The unfortunate use of the archaic 'inst.' implies that the report was current for February. Considering the state of the mail and telegraphic services of the times, with a minimum of 8 days being required to get a message to Perth, it is apparent that 'the 4th inst.' is used in a letter written in late January. Unfortunately this was not appreciated by the earlier researchers who accepted the report as being current as at 4 February 1876.

It would therefore seem apparent that there was only one storm in that period during which *Agnes* lost her masts, that storm occurring on Christmas Eve 1875. The report of a storm on 4 February 1876 is incorrect.
Yours sincerely

R. S. Mauger

Tropical Cyclone Warning Centre

Bureau of Meteorology

Perth Regional Office.

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References

Colonial Sec. Office Records, Battye Library, Vol. 823 Folio 133, Vol. 841 Folios 187-190, Vol. 841 Folios 201-203.

The Herald, 12 January 1876, 29 January 1876.

The Inquirer, 12 January 1876.

The WA Times, 11 January 1876, 14 January 1876, 4 February 1876.

