

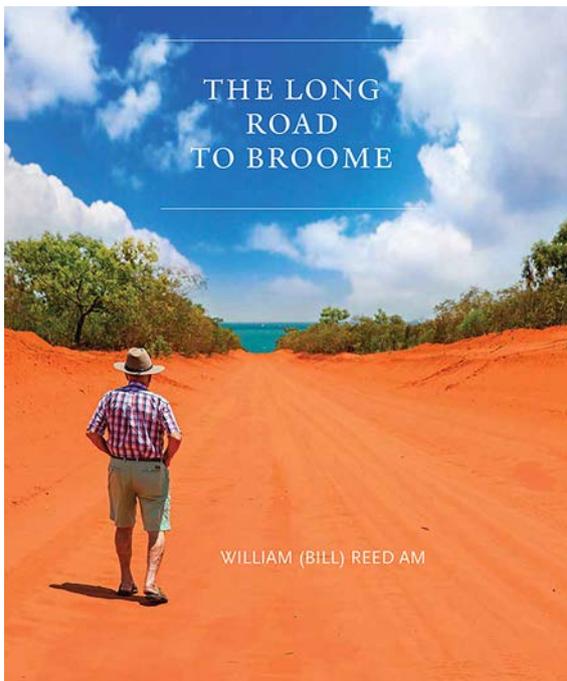
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William (Bill) Reed AM

The Long Road to Broome

Broome: Allure South Sea Pearls, 2016. 136 pp. ISBN 9780994409928. AU\$ 29,90.



What is so fascinating about Bill Reed? If you read my article in the *GASt e-Newsletter* (No. 17, July 2017) about the lovely little town of Broome in the northwest of Western Australia right on the Indian Ocean, and my brief comment on this remarkable man, marine biologist, pioneer, UN expert, pearl expert and modernizer of the pearling industry in Broome, you should not miss reading his autobiography, in which he writes about his equally fascinating and sometimes dangerous life in a number of countries, which finally led him to his ultimate destination, Broome.¹ The autobiography is introduced by two two-page comments about Bill Reed by long-term friends who express their life-long friendship with and veneration for him. A third short text,

which serves as yet another introduction, is by Bill himself and contains a lecture about the history and reproduction of pearl oysters. Characteristically it ends with a punch line, which shows his sense of humour which pervades the whole book.

As a boy Bill Reed lived in a small place on the Sunshine Coast, as it is now called, of Queensland. His schooling was through the "School of the Air", at that time "with the aid of a pedal wireless" since there was no electric power (15). After studying zoology at a university in Brisbane he returned home and worked for a while as a skipper on his father's boat (17). But before long he took over a position with the Fisheries Department in Papua New Guinea. Flying there from Brisbane meant going to Cairns and then on to Port Moresby and took eight hours. His work there revolved round surveying pearl oyster stocks, but he had to leave the humid climate after contracting malaria.

Bill applied for a position with the Food & Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the UN and was sent to the Sudan, climate-wise the extreme opposite of Papua New Guinea, with temperatures rising above 50° in the summer. Working in Port Sudan

1 http://www.australienstudien.org/images/GASt/Newsletter/Newsletter_2017_06.pdf

for seven years he made not only the acquaintance of British colonialism and the lifestyle of their civil servants and expats in African countries, but also of the nomad tribal population as well as missionaries. Since he was embarrassed that he only spoke English, whereas others spoke as many as four languages, he started to learn Arabic and was able to follow Arabic news on local as well as on Israeli radio stations and assess the different perspectives.

During his years in the Sudan, he undertook projects to collaborate with local people and teach them to dive for pearl oysters in the Red Sea. He made numerous friendships and experienced the simple living conditions, the hardships of travelling under difficult circumstances and wide cultural differences, e.g. with regard to Islam and Ramadan, which he observed together with the Muslim men who worked for him. One of the most remarkable experiences was for him to meet Jacques Cousteau, the famous French conservationist, underwater explorer and film maker, who at Bill's suggestion shot an underwater film in the Red Sea that came to be known as "Le monde sans soleil".

After his contract with the UN came to an end, he worked for the Sudan Government to assist locals in setting up their own, i.e. private oyster farms (48). But in 1967 with the Arab-Israel War, in order to avoid suspicion of spying for the Israelis, he chose to leave the country within two days, thus ending seven exciting years. After another successful application to the FAO he was sent to Northern Nigeria to do a research project on fish and the fisheries of Niger and Benue rivers and to make recommendations on "how local fishing methods and conditions could be improved" (49). Two publications came out of this, one about the wide variety of fish species in the area, but then Bill found himself entangled in a civil war between the Igbo and the Muslim Hausa tribes that also affected the printing press of his publication. He was able to save most of his book, but again had to leave in a hurry to escape the atrocities of a civil war.

In the brief interim between two appointments with the FAO Bill Reed got married (56) and then headed off with his wife to Iran, again on a proposed project of pearl farming. But this brief stay proved to be a disaster. Not only were the officials he had to deal with incompetent and corrupt and did not pay him the promised salary, but also he eventually found out that his seeming search for good pearl farming areas was nothing but a search for strategic military sites. All of this happened a few years before the Shah's deposition (57). After managing to procure an Exit Visa for his British wife and get her out of the country he found himself in a quandary because Australia did not have an embassy in Tehran, and it took him some time till he managed to leave the country with the help of the British Embassy. Another adventure had come to an end.

After reuniting with his wife in London it was a stroke of good fortune that he was asked to go to Tahiti for a month (60) to set up a pearl farm and he made the invaluable suggestion to make the farm a success, for it should be possible to collect the post-larval stage of black-lip pearl oysters and rear them to adult size so as to have a reliable supply of operable oysters. Due to his findings, he was invited by the Tahiti Administration to apply for the scientific position to accompany the experimental and developmental work on a number of atolls. In spite of his limited French, he was selected for the job, and he and his wife spent the next seven years in Tahiti, first working for the Fisheries Department and later setting up his own pearl farm.

The family managed to settle and adapt to very simple living conditions on the tiny island.

After the government contract expired Bill started to set up his own pearl farm on the even tinier island of Mangareva in the Gambier group of islands, 1,000 miles southeast of Tahiti. The French at that time were still conducting atmospheric atomic bomb tests in the Mururoa Atoll (63), a couple of hundred miles away. Therefore a meteorological station and a tiny airport operated on the island. Mangareva, where the family set up home, was at that time inhabited by lots of different ethnic groups. Bill had to build the house for his family himself with the help of a few locals. Contact with the outside world relied on the French army, and when they abandoned the tests and pulled out all contact with civilization was cut, and the island had to rely on the few trading schooners that came by.

Unexpected help came through a Tahiti-Chinese businessman, who was looking for a pearl farm and bought Bill's who had the necessary licence (70). He then marketed the black Tahiti pearls very successfully world-wide. Bill and his family had to wait for another stroke of good luck, which came around quickly in 1975, when Bill was asked to look at a pearl farm around 370 km north of Broome, an extremely isolated location by Australian standards, where Bill found Japanese and Papua workers prone to violence on account of their loneliness, which Bill understood only too well. He was offered and accepted the position of a management consultant, and since there were no flights from Sydney to Broome at that time, he and his wife drove for 6,000 kilometres along Nullarbor Plain and up the West coast, with hundreds of kilometres of unsealed track (78).

Bill Reed had come to Broome at a time of major changes both in pearl cultivation, which came about with the assistance of Murdoch University, Perth, and diving techniques and equipment. Again, after his contract had come to an end, he started to set up his own company of pearl farming with the help of men who, like him, wanted to be independent. His brief and sketchy account of his adventurous life at this time is peppered with reminiscences of funny characters and anecdotes of unconventional individuals among whom was his fascinating friend John Lowe, whom my husband and I met a few times in Perth.

By a quirk of bad luck Bill broke his leg and had to rest it for a number of weeks, which gave John the idea that Bill should sit in their shed on Dampier Terrace in the little CBD of Broome selling pearls, and since they did not observe the usual two hour siesta like other Broome retailers, their sales were highly successful (97). And in this way another seemingly unfortunate incident turned into good luck and was the beginning of his highly successful retail pearl business. John persuaded some Broome businessmen to invest in their newly founded company, which they did and after two years' time Bill was able to stand on his own feet. John also helped Bill later to get out of big trouble when Bill invested again in a project in the Sudan and only came away with a substantial financial loss.

But when John wanted to move on and they sold their pearl business another opportunity came up through Alan Linney, who together with Bill started a jewellery business including South Sea Pearls, which in a short period of time proved to be extremely successful. Eventually Bill moved to Broome for good and lived in and later bought an old house, the Quarantine Station next to the harbour, in the mid-

dle of nowhere, but close to nature. With the help of a Japanese friend and pearling technician, Keiichi Mizuno, he introduced a Japanese technique of seeding the Australian South Sea Pearl, which is much larger and harder than Japanese pearls. And this project again proved to be highly successful.

Bill was proud to receive the Order of Australia in 2012 for his contribution to the pearling industry and its development in Broome. Subsequently his partnership with Linney came to an end, and together with his business partner Lindsay Youd he set up another jewellery and pearl business in Broome, “Allure South Seas Pearls”, in 2014. Bill’s autobiography ends with descriptions of the most wonderful little town of Broome on the Indian Ocean, its vicinity to the Kimberley outback and all the opportunities for travelling there, as well as with his gratitude to all the people he met in his long and eventful life.

This review is a summary of his adventurous life which is full of fascinating experiences. Bill’s narrative is peppered with funny incidents and situations and the book abounds in coloured photos, which make their own vivid and illustrative contribution to the story. Moreover, the straightforward chronological narrative is interrupted every now and then by one or two pages of descriptions of individual occurrences or of explanations, which are printed on light gray pages to set them off against his life story proper. They do not only offer additional information but go to show, just as the narrative does, Bill Reed’s vast knowledge and experience, and – above all – his sense of humour and pervading optimism. The autobiography is a fascinating reading but most of all, it is a lesson of Australian cosmopolitanism.