

**EARLY GIN GIN**  
**and**  
**THE BLAXLAND TRAGEDY**

(Read by ARTHUR LAURIE, a Vice-President of the Historical Society of Queensland at the meeting of the Society on 27th November 1952)

The town of Gin Gin is situated on the Bundaberg-Mt. Perry line about twenty-nine miles from Bundaberg. It has a population of 660 people and is in the Kolan Shire Council area and Gin Gin is the administrative centre. It is also the centre for dairying, beef cattle raising, sugar growing, general farming and timber getting. To the average person visiting the town, whether as a tourist in a bus or a traveller racing through the district in a high-powered car, it is just another small town. He would give no thought to what had been its past, and would be amazed if he was told that the first settlers there were on the frontier of civilization and carried their lives in their hands and had to fight for their right to live against savages, as well as suffering other troubles such as shortage of rations and isolation.

As the first settlement was the station, it is one of the oldest in the Wide Bay district, following closely behind Maryborough in "1847 and Gayndah in 1848." It can also claim some distinction from the fact that its previous owners occupied high positions in public life. Wm. Forster became a Premier of New South Wales, and later two owners in partnership, Sir Thos. Mellwraith and Sir Arthur Palmer, became Premiers of Queensland and each of these gentlemen have had their names written large in the records of the State, either connected with legislative enactments, or in the advancement of settlement in different parts of Queensland. Gin Gin had its beginning not earlier than April 1847 and I say that definitely because writers to the Press and publishers of historical brochures have at different times given the place an earlier starting period, by saying it was first settled in 1845. My assurance in making this statement lies in the report made by J. C. Burnett, a surveyor-explorer who was commissioned by the New South Wales Government to trace the river Boyne on which stations had been formed only a few years previously.

The belief was that the Boyne known to those settlers was the same river that emptied into the sea in the neighbourhood of Port Curtis. Burnett followed the river through the locality that afterwards became Gayndah when it turned in an easterly direction, and he only stopped when he encountered dense scrub country which could only be penetrated with great difficulty; this scrub was no doubt the famous Wongarra scrub, which now grows sugar cane outside of Bundaberg. He knew he was close to the coast, as the river was under the influence of the tides. On his return journey he stopped for a time at Hawkins Station, then known as Boojinbah, which is now Boonara. It was here that he wrote a report of his activities to the Colonial Secretary, Deas-Thompson, in Sydney. This letter was dated 13th April 1847, and the last paragraph says: "No Stations have as yet been established beyond latitude 26 degrees; this which is the northernmost is in latitude 26 1 48. I believe, however, that much of the country I have been over will be taken up shortly."

That statement convinces me that Gin Gin was not occupied previous to that date as Burnett would have known if there was any settlement north of that location. Burnett's letter to Deas-Thompson was published in the New South Wales Government Gazette dated 22nd June 1847. Incidentally, at a later period Burnett rowed up this river as far as the tidal waters went, and definitely proved that it was not the Boyne. He was rewarded for his efforts by having the river named after him. Unfortunately he did not live long after his success, as he died in 1854, no doubt as a result of the privations he had suffered while exploring.

Returning to the first settlement of Gin Gin it is on record that Messrs. Gregory Blaxland and Wm. Forster had station properties in the Clarence River district in the early 1840's, and they were interested in the reports of good pastoral country to the north of the Darling Downs which at this period was already settled but not fully developed. Gregory Blaxland was the seventh and youngest son of Gregory Blaxland, who shared the honour with Wm. Chas. Wentworth and Wm. Lawson, who opened up access across the Blue Mountains in 1813; this range of mountains had defied all explorers from the date of settlement in Sydney in

1788. Blaxland and Forster were related, being uncle and nephew in that order. Their expedition started from Envoy, Clarence River, in 1847, led by Blaxland and accompanied by Forster, and it is stated that their stock numbered 30,000 sheep and 800 cattle and a large number of horses. The number of sheep appears to be very large when there was no fixed destination in view, but there was a large party travelling—shepherds, bullock drivers, and other employees. Included in the group was a widow and family, Mrs. Pegg, whose husband had been an employee of the firm and had been drowned about two years previously. Mrs. Pegg was befriended by the partners and her elder sons were employed as shepherds. The expedition travelled slowly and they were altogether twelve months on the road, part of the time delayed by lambing, and in the period the flock was shorn, and the wool had to be carted to the nearest port, which would be either Brisbane or Ipswich, the latter town being the head of navigation on the Brisbane River and its tributary the Bremer. However, in the period they got beyond Ned Hawkins' Station, Boojinbah, about sixty miles, which was then the furthest out settlement.

After examining the country in the neighbourhood of what was the lately named Burnett River they picked on the site where the station now stands, which was on the bank of a creek with flowing water. The station was originally named Tirroan, and it held that name for a number of years until it changed ownership and then it was called Gin Gin.

There is no fixed date of settlement in the records, but it would not be earlier than 1848 according to the calculation of travelling time. The location was found to be good pastoral land, but there was one great drawback—the settlers found themselves in the centre of a savage tribe of blacks. They ensured a certain amount of safety by putting up strong buildings of bush timber, some of which can be seen to-day. They were really blockhouses loopholed ready for attack. Their stores and wool were protected, but the management of the stock had to be attended to in the open and they were only safe in the dark hours of the night when the blacks, who were superstitious, did not make an attack until early dawn. Just the same there was a twenty-four-hour service in operation as the sheep had to be

folded and watched at night, and this had to be done continuously

The blacks made sporadic attacks on the shepherds whenever they saw an opportunity, and often broke up the flocks which suited them to get a feast of mutton; sheep would be easier to catch and kill than kangaroos. The first real tragedy occurred on 4th June 1849, when the two Pegg brothers were killed a few miles from the Station. Blaxland organized a punitive party to deal with the savages. He secured some help from his neighbours, Thompson brothers, who had taken up Walla Station on the Burnett River about fourteen miles away. Having the help of friendly blacks, who tracked the savages who had travelled in the direction of the coast, they caught up with them about fourteen miles from Gin Gin at a place now known as The Cedars, which is now part of Gibson and Howes' sugar plantation at Bingera. This locality was then scrub land and Blaxland and his party took up positions suitable for an attack. The blacks were shown no mercy, but it is on record by Blaxland himself, and also by a younger brother of the victims, Abraham Pegg, who was an eye witness, that the blacks put up a mighty fight against the firearms of the whites, they of course having no better weapons than spears. There were no repeating rifles in those days, the weapon was the muzzle loader, which was slow to load at any time but in scrub land would be awkward to handle.

Another feature on the blacks' side was the absence of the woomera or throwing stick, as these savages did not use it. They grasped the spear in the centre and propelled it just by the strength and length of their arm. In the fight they were beaten and many were able to escape by swimming the Burnett River, which was about half a mile away.

Over sixty years later ploughmen on the Cedars plantation unearthed skulls, bones and weapons, which was believed to be the site of the battle. It was thought that after the lesson the blacks had received that they would have quietened down and accepted the presence of the white men on Gin Gin as being a factor that they were incapable of removing from their midst. If so it must have been sullen acquiescence, and no doubt they were awaiting another opportunity for revenge. Blaxland would be regarded as their chief

enemy as all actions against the blacks was directed by him. Just over twelve months after the Pegg brothers were killed Blaxland was found to be missing. A search was started by his partner, Forster, and others, and after some hours his body was found. No white person had any idea how he was first attacked, but appearances show that he must have been clubbed to death. One report says he was in the act of filling water containers in the creek and surprised that way, but that could only be conjecture.

In the uncertain state of the times when settlers were living among treacherous savages, and when a white man was missing and a search was made and he was not found within an hour or so then the worst was expected. In this case it was quickly noticed that the local blacks disappeared while the search was on with the exception of a gin, who showed friendliness to the whites. When Blaxland was buried, which would not be long after he was found, a plan of punitive action was organised as quickly as possible.

About this period Gin Gin would have a few more neighbours. Walla was formed in 1849 by Thompson brothers. Monduran was occupied and owned in 1850 by Landsborough brothers, Kolonga in 1850 by J. Blackman, Eureka by J. Barker, and there were stations in the Upper Burnett, Boonara, Barambah, Boobyjan, and some others.

A force was organized among all these settlers and their employees, and they set out on their mission of revenge guided by the friendly gin already referred to. The fugitive blacks were tracked down the Burnett River, where they had foregathered at a place now called Paddy's Island, not far from the mouth of the river. It was estimated by the white party that there were about a thousand blacks congregated here when the attack was made, and the result was the blacks suffered severely. The avenging whites were determined to end the antagonistic blacks' attitude towards their settlements.

It is not known how many blacks were killed in this fight, but they must have numbered hundreds; but it is also known that a large number escaped into the Wongarra scrub on the south side of the river. This attack really broke the power of the blacks in this region. They continued to be hostile often in individual cases, but were never afterwards a serious menace.

I now come to the date of Blaxland's death. There are written records that differ widely. One says he was killed in 1848, and others say in 1849. In fact one report says it was Forster that was killed and not Blaxland. However, a search in the "Moreton Bay Courier" dated 31st August 1850 reveals this:

### **Murder by Blacks**

"It is our melancholy task to record the murder of Mr. Gregory Blaxland of the firm of Forster and Blaxland by the aboriginal natives of the Burnett district. The only particulars at present known have been communicated in a letter to a gentleman in Brisbane. It appears that the body of the deceased was discovered by his servants within two hundred yards of his head station; spear wounds and other marks of violence showing clearly that the unfortunate gentleman had met his death from the hands of native blacks. Captain O'Connell, Commissioner of Crown lands for the district, held an investigation and came to the conclusion that the deceased had been treacherously murdered by the natives. Only a few numbers back we alluded to the probability of some such terrible catastrophe as this resulting from the continued absence of the Native Police."

This report, which is dated 31st August 1850, allows a reasonable deduction of time, in determining the date of Blaxland's death. There was no telegraph or telephone communication in those days, there would be a horse mail from Gayndah or Maryborough or perhaps Ipswich once a fortnight, and the murder would be about a month old when the news was published. This item of news in the "Moreton Bay Courier" shows the parlous condition of the settlers in what was then known as the unsettled districts. It shows that the pioneer who had courage and enterprise in opening up the country had to take great risks and also had to undertake the responsibility of his own protection.

In after years, and that was early in the present century, curious and interested people in the district raised the question where was the last resting place of Gregory Blaxland and the two Pegg brothers. Up to the present time there is no certainty, but the location of all three must be somewhere within a handy distance of the station. There is a record in the Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane, in the form of a news-

paper cutting which says (and this quotation is abbreviated): "In 1905 a new road was formed from Gin Gin homestead to the Gin Gin reserve passing through the stud paddock, and when a fairly thick patch of timber was cleared for the purpose of erecting new gates four posts that had been burnt off about a foot from the ground were found. It was evidently a grave."

The question was then raised could these posts be the marking of Blaxland's grave. It was then too late to alter the position of the gates so we left things as we found them. This was rather a cryptic decision, and it is a great pity, in view of the interest that is being taken to-day of where Blaxland was buried, that further investigations were not carried out. I would say even after one hundred and two years this could be Blaxland's grave, the mourners fenced it with the idea of permanently marking the spot, but as the station changed ownership less than two years afterwards, and in succeeding years there were other changes. The new owners and their successors would not have the same interest, as the originals, so neglect can be blamed for the lack of knowledge to-day.

The same condition applies to the position of the graves of the two Pegg brothers. The general belief is that they were buried close to station, but there are no markings to that effect. Another record to be seen in the Oxley Library, which was dated 1888, was that on Gramanbulyan Creek there was to be seen the remains of yards and a hut and mounds believed to be shepherds' graves who had been murdered by blacks. This spot is about seven miles east of Gin Gin and the creek is a tributary of the Burnett River, and the name still appears on the modern maps in the Lands Department. This could possibly be the graves of the Peggs, but no names are mentioned. Abraham Pegg; the youngest son, remembered the three murders in his early childhood, and he lived in the district all his life and passed away early in 1908. He could not have left any information about the sites of the burial places as there are people living to-day who remember him well. The Kolan Shire Council has made investigations without result. It is their intention to have a memorial erected to the memory of the first settler, Gregory Blaxland. After the tragedy the other partner, Wm. Forster, found himself in an unsettled state

and was anxious to dispose of the stock and the station.

Negotiations were entered into and a sale was made to two brothers, Alfred and Arthur Brown. It was then that the name of the station was changed from Tirroan to Gin Gin. This would be about 1851. The Browns came from Western Australia where they had a property called Gin Gin, and that is the assumption of why the name was changed. A controversy has been raised even over that because one writer has stated that the name was given because one of the Browns asked a blackfellow what was the name of the place, and he answered, "All about Chin Chin." The new owners were progressive men. They improved the station and the stock, especially the horses. They also took up other properties, Kolan in one case and Barolin in another.

The possession of Barolin and the method of selection became a contentious matter, and was the subject of investigation. It became a political controversy and was the subject of debates in the Queensland Parliament for years afterwards. Wm. Forster when he gave up his interest in Gin Gin went south, and later entered the New South Wales Parliament. He eventually became Premier and later again was appointed Agent-General in London for New South Wales. He had another distinction standing to his credit, and that was he was the discoverer of that living fossil the "Ceratodus" or the lung fish, which is found only in the Burnett and Mary Rivers. This find created great interest among scientists all the world over, and they gave this fish the name *Ceratodus Forsterii*, which was a great compliment to Forster.

The story of Gregory Blaxland's death has an air of mystery in so far as there is very little detail on record. There is no doubt that he was killed by the blacks, who must have been awaiting the opportunity. They could have been watching his every movement about the station, but it does seem strange that he could be done to death without someone on the station other than blacks seeing or hearing the attack being made.

It was the practice in those days when stations were formed to have hut keepers employed. These men were watchmen, guard, or sentry. Their job was



to keep an oversight on the stores, goods and chattels, against the trepidations of marauding blacks, and they were assisted by dogs. The "Moreton Bay Courier's" report says that Capt. O'Connell, the commissioner for Crown Lands, had made an investigation into the crime. His finding was, "Blaxland was treacherously murdered by the blacks." The full report on this matter must be somewhere. Has it ever been published? Capt. O'Connell was not on the spot when the murder was committed, and his investigation must have taken place some time afterwards. His district would be a large one, and he would have to be found by searching as there was no telegraph system operating then. Locomotion would be no quicker than the fastest horse he had to ride. The "Courier" deplored the lack of Native Police in the district, but in those days a Land Commissioner had a troop of Native Police for escort and protection.

There is no record whether Capt. O'Connell took part in the action against the blacks after the murder. I have made searches through Government Gazettes up to twelve months after the date of the crime, and have been unable to find any report.

In conclusion, I want to pay a tribute to the great pioneering expedition of Gregory Blaxland and Wm. Forster, also the Widow Pegg and her family. She suffered the most of all. Inside of three years she lost her husband and two sons under most tragic circumstances. I am not overlooking the rest of the party, whose names are unpublished, as they all played a part in the enterprise.

At the same time I want to say a word on behalf of the aborigines. This was their land, and they had been in possession for thousands of years. Our race, the whites, came along and stole their country from them, and they cannot be blamed for defending their rights of ownership. Whatever they did, it was no worse than the actions of the invaders. History nearly repeated itself less than a decade ago, when Australia was threatened with invasion by an alien force, and it was only due to the fact that we had a superior fighting force ready in the nick of time that we did not suffer the same fate as the original Australians.