

THE SAGA OF THE ST PAUL

Col Davidson

In July of the year 1858 Captain Pennard prepared to cast off his ship in the Port of Hong Kong. Little did he realise that the chance circumstances of this voyage combined with the actions of a rather malignant native chief named Muwo, would be disastrous for most of the people on board and would change forever the affairs of the island of New Guinea and affect the lives of thousands of people.

The Captain sailed from Hong Kong in his ship, the *St. Paul* of Bordeaux, a three masted ship of some 600 tons. The ship was a relatively new one, having been built in 1847, and had recently had its keel covered in copper sheet to prevent damage by marine worm. It was manned by a crew of twenty sailors and had a cargo of 327 Chinese coolies on their way to the Australian goldfields in Queensland.

A good ship, a good crew and a full cargo - what more could a captain want?



The voyage, however, from its very beginning, was anything but routine. The *St. Paul* was beset by a period of calm weather and, because this prolonged the journey, they found that they did not have enough food to last the voyage. Normally Captain Pennard would have followed the customary route to Sydney through the Solomon Islands but, because of the change in circumstances, he was now forced to take a more dangerous but also more direct route which passed near the Louisiade chain of islands to the east of New Guinea.

Unfortunately, after the calm came the storm. As he approached the Louisiades, the ship met bad weather and, finally, heavy fogs lasting for three successive days. With no sun to plot his position, Captain Pennard entered uncharted waters and, a few hours before sunrise on 30th

September 1858, his ship ran aground on a coral reef. In the darkness and confusion the Chinese, who would have mainly been peasants from rural areas, were frightened out of their wits. These terrified men rushed onto the deck in panic but were quickly forced back below by the captain and crew to wait out the night.

As the sun came up the next morning a dismal sight met the passengers and crew of the ill fated ship. They were hard aground on the tip of an immense coral reef from which they could see a mountainous island a kilometre or so in the distance. With waves crashing against its timbers the *St. Paul* began to break up and those on board were forced to abandon ship. Being a merchant ship with only one long boat and two smaller dinghies, there was no way to accommodate all of the people. Fortunately, those not in the boats were able to clamber over the exposed reef to a tiny coral islet some 20 metres wide by 35 metres in length.

The only edible items that could be saved from the wreck were a few barrels of water soaked flour, two or three quarters of salted meat and a small number of tins of preserved food. Thus it was that 348 men found themselves clustered together on a tiny coral outcrop with practically no food, no fresh water and thousands of kilometres from civilisation.



Copper sheathing and lead recovered from the wreck of the St Paul

Captain Pennard, accompanied by his crew and some of the passengers, rowed to the mainland and set up a camp at the side of a stream, only a few metres from the beach. He was still in sight of the islet which was later named *Isle de Refuge*. They found a few of the native inhabitants of the island who seemed quite timid and the Captain succeeded in obtaining some coconuts from them which augured well for the future. They settled down and began preparing for the arrival of the remainder of the passengers. However the natives' timidity did not last. As the sun rose on the following day the camp was attacked without warning by a horde of black savages armed with spears and clubs. The fighting did not last long as those in the camp were heavily outnumbered. Many were killed in the skirmish, some saved themselves by swimming out to the *Isle de Refuge* and the few remaining were saved in the captain's boat which had been preparing to transfer those left on the islet.

When they counted their losses, they found that eight sailors and a number of Chinese were missing - whether killed in the fighting or drowned, or simply hiding in the forest, they did not know.

They retreated to the *Isle de Refuge* to decide on future action. Their options were not great as they did not have enough boats to land in reasonable numbers and they possessed only a few axes and five or six guns as offensive weapons. To add to this the Chinese were completely demoralised. The group decided to wait for a better opportunity.

The natives came out to the *Isle de Refuge* in their canoes with the obvious intention of attack but the crew were able to keep them at bay with rifle fire. Even with their armaments they found that Lady Luck was still frowning on them. Although they had guns, powder and shot, they had not been able to rescue any of the percussion caps needed to fire the weapons. They were reduced to using burning slivers of wood to touch off the guns - much in the same way that muskets were fired some centuries before. As a consequence, it took two men to fire each shot - one to aim and the other to set the powder alight.

In the early morning after the attack Captain Pennard returned to the site of the raid hoping to reconnoitre before any natives were about. He found the encampment devastated with no sign of life or of his lost companions. Back on the *Isle de Refuge* he discussed the situation with the Chinese and suggested that he, with some of the remaining sailors, set out in one of the boats to try and reach Australia and return with help. There was really no option and this proposal was accepted. It was decided that those leaving would take with them a dozen boxes of tinned food and a little fresh water - the guns and ammunition would remain with the Chinese and the remaining crew members.

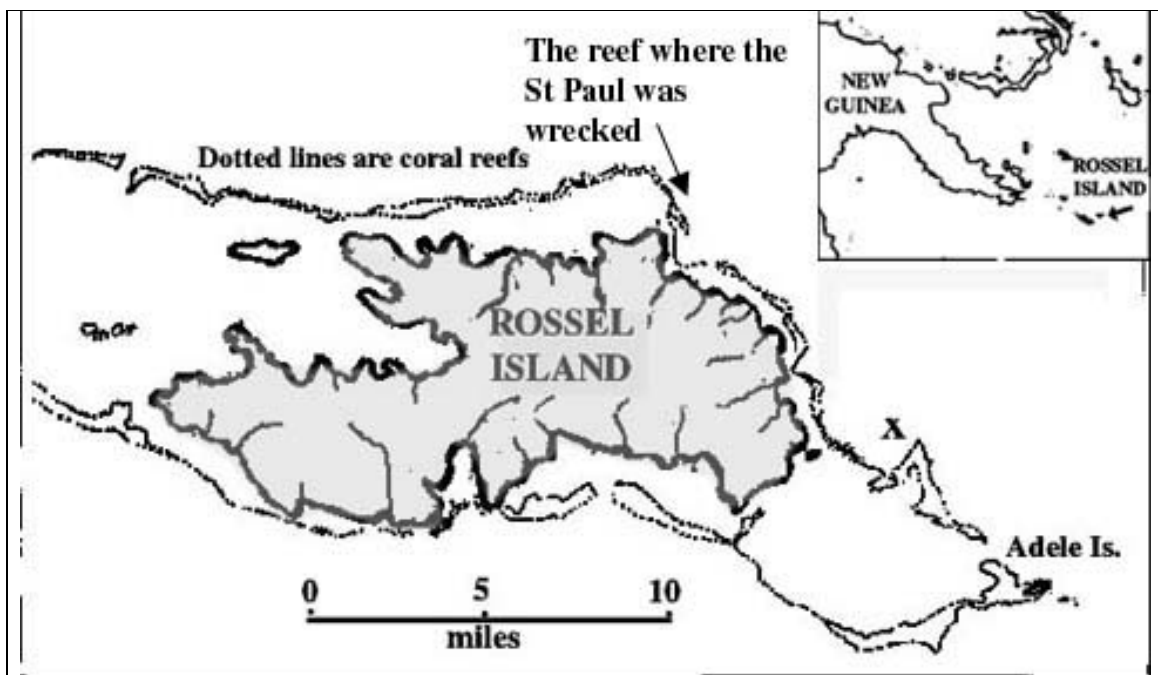
Captain Pennard and eleven crew members set off in the long boat - the largest of the three boats, being some 7 metres in length. Their intention was to make their way to the Australian mainland some 1200 kilometres to the south-west and, from there, south to the nearest settlement. Nearing the Australian coastline Captain Pennard showed himself to be an incredibly stern disciplinarian as it is recorded that, in an act of remarkably severe reprimand, he marooned a cabin-boy in the Cape York area. He continued southwards and was within a few kilometres off the Australian mainland, but far from any useful port, when he was picked up by the schooner Prince of Denmark on October 15th, after having been in the open boat for about a fortnight. He begged Captain MacKellar of the Prince of Denmark to sail immediately for the nearest port to obtain assistance for the shipwrecked survivors. Mackellar, however, had a beche-de-mer crew working some of the islands and had to provision those men who had been left in isolated areas. Thus it was another two months before they brought news of the wreck to the French Settlement at New Caledonia. It was now 77 days since the *St. Paul* had foundered.

The authorities immediately commissioned the French steamer, Styx, to go to the assistance of the survivors of the shipwreck. Captain Pennard, with the French ship's company left Port de France in New Caledonia on 27th December bound for the wreck of the *St. Paul*. Pennard knew only the general area in which the shipwreck had occurred and was of the opinion that the major island concerned was Adele Island, the most easterly of the Louisiades.

On 5th January 1859 they approached Adele Island but realised that it was not the correct isle. In the far distance they could see a much larger island - Rossel Island, and on their way

towards it found the reef on which the *St. Paul* lay. They could still see part of the wrecked ship and it was immediately obvious how close the line is between disaster and success - a few metres more and the *St. Paul* would have missed the reef entirely. They sighted the *Isle de Refuge* but found no sign of any living person. On landing on this islet they found a tattered tent, a constructed water reservoir, pieces of cloth and a large quantity of discarded shells - the food of those shipwrecked. They also found the bodies of two of the Chinese buried in a shallow grave.

They left the *Isle de Refuge* and approached Rossel. Finding a suitable anchorage at the mouth of a river they put down anchor and began a search for survivors of the *St. Paul*. Six natives were seen in two canoes but, on trying to make contact, the natives quickly paddled to land where they disappeared. Continuing on their journey they saw in the distance a small near-naked man, in water up to his waist, who was signalling to them to come closer. He was apparently too afraid to cry out and, when the boat reached him, they found that he was one of the shipwrecked Chinese who threw himself into the arms of Captain Pennard crying "All dead".

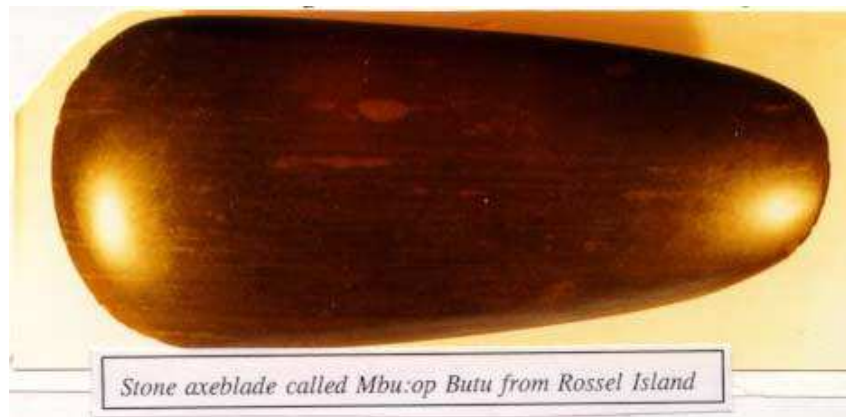


ROSSEL ISLAND

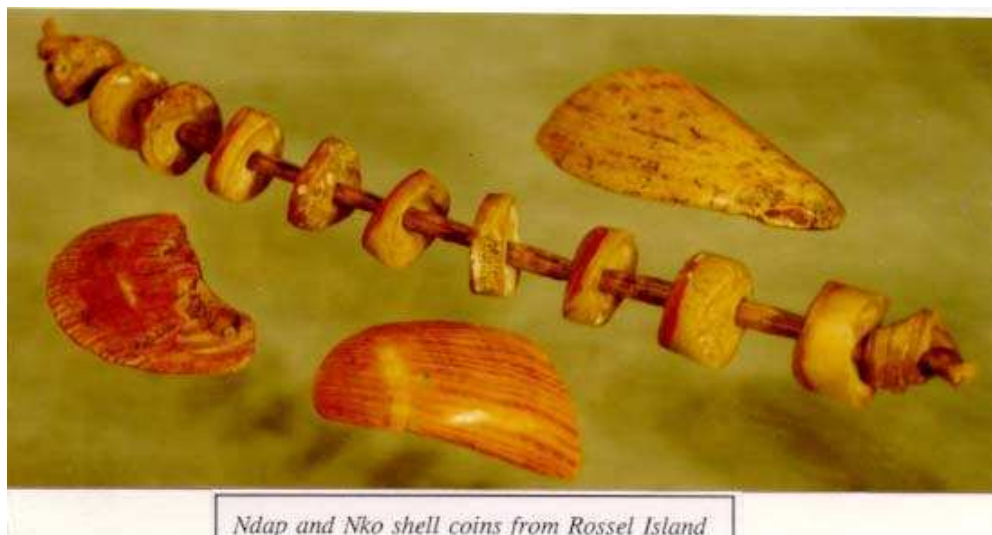
The Island of Rossel, the most easterly inhabited island of the Louisiade group, occupies a position of extreme isolation protected as it is by a treacherous sea and dangerous coral reef. It is about 100 square miles in area, its greatest length about 20 miles and its breadth about 10. In the 1920s it had a population of some 1400 souls. The men of the island averaged about 5'4" in height and their only weapons of offence were spears (although stones were thrown by hand). Villages were small, rarely containing more than half a dozen houses and the main foods were sago and banana (although coconut, breadfruit, taro, yams and sweet potato were also eaten).

One thing which differentiated the Rossel Islanders from other Melanesians was their money system.

The main money items on the island were the shell coins called Ndap and Nko and the striated green stone axeblades called *mbu:op butu*.



There were 22 different denominations of the Ndap shell coins and 16 of the Nko. The Ndap consisted of roughly triangular shells, holed in one corner, ranging in colour from white to a lovely red with most showing signs of being extremely old. The rarest denomination had only seven examples in existence and the "commonest" some two hundred. Each Nko consisted of a short rope of banana leaf on which was strung ten thick discs of clamshell - the larger the discs the higher the denomination and value. Their rarity is similar to that of the Ndap and Armstrong found that there were about one thousand in total of the Ndap shell coins and only eight hundred of the Nko in existence. It is said that the Ndap was made by their god for the use by men and the Nko solely for women's use only. The stone axeblades, mentioned above and called *beku* by the Trobrianders, all came from Woodlark Island via hundreds of kilometres of the Kula trade routes.



The lower denominations of shell money were used in ordinary minor purchases of food and the like, while the higher were regarded as sacred and were used in important ceremonial payments for canoes, huts, land, concubines, bride price and funerary presentations. Both the

shell money and the axebledges were used as payments for the flesh of a victim at a cannibal feast.

Another matter which differentiated the Rossel Islander from most other Melanesians was the fact that he was a cannibal. Cannibalism was instituted on Rossel by the supreme god, Wonajo, who was also a cannibal.

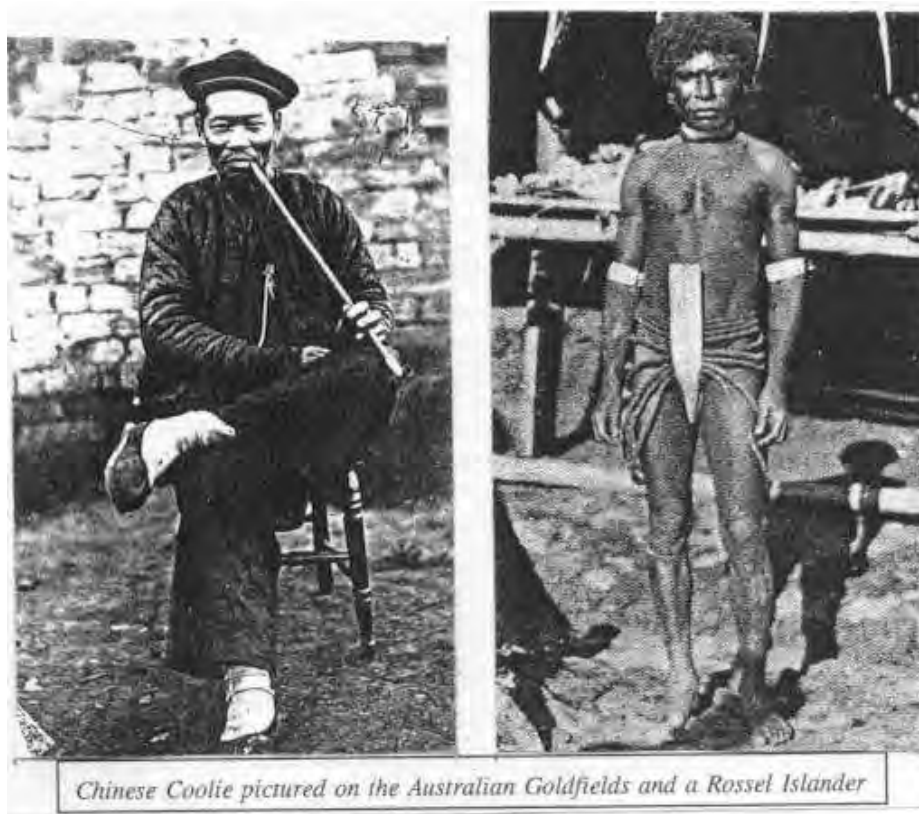
It was the custom in Rossel when a chief died that a person would be killed to be eaten at the funeral feast - this was done in a quite civilised manner, with payments of the Ndap and Nko shell coins being made to the relatives of the victim - certain denominations of Ndap and Nko being payment for the back, lower denominations being paid for an arm and so on. No flesh could be cooked or eaten until the accepted payments had been made to the relatives of the victim and they had departed - it was regarded as unacceptable that they would have to endure the smell of the cooking fires.

Human flesh was by custom, only normally eaten at the funerary feast of chiefs - but some customs tend to be disregarded if a man is powerful enough - and Muwo was a VERY powerful man.

MUWO

Muwo was a chief who lived at Praga, near Bamba on the south coast towards the western end of the island. He was the son of a chief, one of the most powerful on the island. He had an extremely unpleasant disposition which showed even at an early age; when quite small he accidentally received some dirt in his eye from a commoner with whom he and a few other children were playing. Although apologies were given and the offender brought a present of Ndap and Nko, Muwo was not satisfied and begged his father to kill the boy. The father reluctantly consented to this, and even to the son's request that he should eat some of the flesh. This apparently was the beginning of that craving for human flesh which obsessed Muwo in later years and made him a terror to his neighbours. The power he later gained seems to have resulted mainly from the acquisition of wealth. He is said to have acquired ten wives, ten houses, five ceremonial canoes, ten sailing canoes, fish nets, money and other valuables. Much of this wealth was obtained by virtual theft - if a canoe was left close to his own he would claim it and the owner would be afraid to protest. It is related that another chief's canoe came in before Muwo's in a race - this was regarded by him as an insult to his prestige and he had the chief killed and actually ate him the same day. Any excuse would do to satisfy his craving - being bitten by mosquitoes, his garden damaged by pigs, his hut by the weather. He would lay the blame on some person or that person's sorcery and send out his men to kill him as compensation. The victim would then be eaten. No shell money compensation would be paid in these instances but in others, where Muwo would simply be hungry for human flesh, and send out his men to secure a victim without having an excuse, he would compensate the relatives as was demanded by custom.

It was at this time, at the height of his power and with his overwhelming hunger for human flesh, that the *St. Paul* was wrecked on a close by reef - an encounter which was probably fortunate for many would-be islander victims of Muwo - but not so fortunate for those shipwrecked.



Chinese Coolie pictured on the Australian Goldfields and a Rossel Islander

THE CHINAMAN'S TALE

After the crew of the French steamer, *Styx*, picked up the Chinese survivor, they obtained from him, in his broken English, the tale of the events since the wreck of the *St. Paul* - some three months before.

His story made a grim tale.

After Captain Pennard and his eleven crew members had left to obtain help, the Chinese set about the harsh business of survival. They succeeded in making drinkable water by means of a crude distillery of large shells and pieces of leather channel from the *St. Paul*. They dug holes and used tarpaulin to make reservoirs to hold the water but quickly used up the food left with them and saw two of their companions die from hunger. At this time, about one month after the shipwreck, the natives again attacked. The only white man left with the Chinese, probably the ship's carpenter, armed himself with a cutlass and killed a great many of the islanders before he was overpowered. The Chinese however, even though they had firearms, were completely demoralised and threw down their weapons and gave themselves up to the mercies of the Rossel Islanders.

The islanders then appeared to become quite friendly with the victims and gave them food and water. For a short time the islanders continued to bring provisions to the Chinese and made it known that they would take them to the mainland. After their sufferings from starvation and other hardships the Chinese readily agreed to this and were transferred, over a period, to Rossel Island. They were transported three by three at a time as this number was all that the native canoes would hold.

As soon as they reached the mainland, and were out of sight and hearing of the islet, each small group of Chinese was stripped, their pigtailed pulled out by brute force and they were then butchered and eaten. The young Chinese saw ten of his fellow passengers slain in front of him. This state of proceedings continued and so, over a relatively short time, some three hundred Chinese were killed and eaten with little, if any, fight. The Chinese survivor and four of his companions, including the ship's carpenter, were saved from the cooking fires because they took the fancy of some of the chiefs and were "adopted" by them. These five were dressed in native fashion and appear to have been treated well, although the one European man had been tied up for a time - presumably to prevent his escaping.

When the steamer, *Styx*, was sighted and the French boats started for shore, the natives took four of the survivors up into the mountains. The young Chinese was sick and lame and contrived to conceal himself in the rocks near the shore until the boat approached closer and he was able to make himself known.



Shell Trumpet from Abeleti Village, Rossel Island

After picking up the Chinese survivor the French party continued on in search of the other four. The Chinese youth directed them to a nearby village of about 30 people. These natives made signs to the Chinese youth trying to convince him to return to them as they seemed to hold a great affection for him. He refused to return to them and the natives, armed with spears, became threatening. Convinced that nothing further could be gained from this group the French continued on their way finding the place where Captain Pennard had first set up camp after the wreck of the *St. Paul*. The French were horrified by the heaps of clothes and pigtailed - for this was the spot where the Chinese had been killed and eaten. The killers had stripped each Chinese, pulled out his pigtail by force and then cut his throat with a spear. (A tree trunk lying on the ground had served as a block where the necks of the victims were placed). After this the body was disembowelled and the flesh apportioned amongst the islanders to be cooked and eaten at feasts organised by Muwo.

The French party, continuing in its search for the survivors, were attacked by the islanders with a shower of stones and forced to retire to the ship. During the night that followed, shouts could be heard together with the sounds of a shell trumpet which probably signalled a gathering. The next morning the party returned to the same village where they were forced to kill three or four natives in defence of their own lives. A second village was approached by

boat but the French were again attacked by a large number of hostile natives throwing rocks. The small boat cannon was fired and the French marines attacked, finding very little resistance, and burned the village.

On returning to the ship it was decided that nothing further could be gained by staying and so, on 8th January 1859, the French ship, Styx, left for Sydney.

The first news of the misadventure was given to the world in general by the Sydney Morning Herald on Wednesday, January 26, 1859. The headline read "Wreck of the *St. Paul* and Massacre of Her Passengers." It caused a major sensation at the time and was the main topic in all conversations.

This and subsequent newspaper articles had a major detrimental effect on the affairs of the island of New Guinea. In 1864 the story was incorporated in the British Admiralty's "Sailing Directions" which was read by Masters of all ships travelling in the area. This official recognition of the story by such an august body made sure that the tale was soon known throughout the South Pacific.

At about this time the New South Wales Parliament addressed an official petition to the British Government requesting that it exercise jurisdiction over New Guinea. It was mainly the story of the *St. Paul* that resulted in the proposal being refused. The petition, if acted upon, would have ensured a single domination over the area later divided between England and Germany, and would have permitted development of a primitive people in a period when technology was still fairly simple. If the proposal had been accepted the resulting law and order brought to the area by the British Administration would probably have stamped out, almost at its inception, the practice of blackbirding which became prevalent in the islands and which resulted in villages being burned, men and women enslaved, the reign of lawlessness being prolonged and a bitter enmity arising between many Melanesians and the Europeans.

Now over 140 years have passed and Rossel island is once again the quiet backwater where the use of their rare shell coins still continues, the name of Muwo is almost forgotten and no-one remembers the name of Captain Pennard. However the story of the *St Paul* and the massacre of the Chinese is resurrected every decade or so but is usually accepted as legend or fiction rather than the fact that it is. What still remains is the terrible aftermath of that ill fated voyage. Over three hundred Chinese were horribly killed in the original massacre and, as a result of the adverse publicity stopping British intervention in the area, many more hundreds of men, women and children were killed by the depredation of blackbirders and the continuing lawlessness of the area. We are still seeing some of the consequences in the obvious growing pains of the fledgling Papua New Guinea as it strives for adulthood - far reaching consequences for what began as such an ordinary voyage.

POSTSCRIPT

It is interesting to note some additions to the story which are to be found in various historical texts;

(i) the lone survivor rescued by the Styx was later convicted of running a sly-grog shop in South Australia but the magistrate, on being told of his terrible experiences among the cannibals of Rossel, let him off with only a caution.

(ii) in 1865 Captain Charles Edwards in the schooner Bluebell rescued two Chinese from Port Lifou, on an island in the Loyalty Group. The two survivors told their rescuers that they had been sold by the Rossel Islanders for axes.

(iii) on April 11th 1875 the Pearl Schooner John Bell found a white man, in the Cape York area, who had been living with the Aborigines for seventeen years. He was Narcisse Pierre Pellatier, son of a shoemaker of St. Gillies in France - he was the cabin boy so callously abandoned by Captain Pennard and had been rescued by the Aborigines, treated with great kindness and adopted into their tribe. He returned to France a few months after having been rescued and later had a book published of his time among the "savages".

(iv) MUWO was indeed powerful, but he was also mortal. He died in the latter half of the nineteenth century, succumbing to sorcery which had been directed against him from all sides. Hated and feared as he was he was still a great chief and, for his funerary feast, five persons were killed and eaten. Muwo's skull could still be seen in the 1920s in the bush near the village of Praga.



(v) the New Guinea Administrator William MacGregor visited the island in 1892 and was given an 1852 Mexican Dollar with Chinese characters stamped into its surface. It was stated that the coin came from the wreck of the ship identified as the St. Paul.

(vi) it is ironic to think that, even if the Chinese were not wrecked on Rossel, some of them might still have suffered the same fate. It is recorded fact that, during the goldfields era in Queensland, a number of Chinese were killed and eaten by the Australian Aborigines, many of whom were cannibals in their own right.

(vii) a later visitor to Rossel noted that the islanders have among their songs a number of Chinese chants - apparently picked up when the shipwrecked Chinese were being transported to the mainland. The unfortunate men, under the impression that they were on their way to safety, were singing songs of joy - instead they were being led to a horrible death.

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