Occasional Papers No. 51

The Twelfth Eric Johnston Lecture
delivered at
the Northern Territory Library,
Parliament House, Darwin
in 1997

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INTRODUCTION

The Eric Johnston Lecture series was established to fill a serious gap in Darwin's cultural calendar, since the city had no lecture series dealing in depth with the Territory's culture and history in all its diverse ramifications.

The series was named after the Territory's then Administrator Commodore Eric Johnston. Commodore Johnston himself delivered the first lecture in 1986, and has taken a personal interest in the series ever since.

The Eric Johnston Lectures are delivered annually, in general alternating between a prominent Territorian and a reputable interstate/overseas personality. The topics of the lectures can cover any subject providing the central theme relates to the Northern Territory. The lectures are published by the Northern Territory Library (successor to the State Library of the Northern Territory) in its Occasional Papers series, and are recorded for subsequent broadcast by either the ABC or one of the other local radio stations.

The Eric Johnston Lectures have already established themselves as a prestigious and scholarly annual event in Darwin and have made a real and lasting contribution to the spread of knowledge on Territory history and culture throughout Australia.

All Eric Johnston lecturers have been leaders in their fields, accomplished speakers and orators, but the 1996 lecturer set new standards for future speakers to strive to achieve.
ERIC JOHNSTON LECTURES

1986
Commodore Eric Johnston
Operation Navy Help: Disaster Operations by the Royal Australian Navy, Post-Cyclone Tracy

1987
Professor Charles Manning Clark
Writing a History of Australia

1988
Dr. Ella Stack
Aboriginal Pharmacopoeia

1989
Sir Edward Woodward
Three Wigs and Five Hats

1990
R G Kimber
The End of the Bad Old Days: European Settlement in Central Australia, 1871-1894

1991
Sir Paul Hasluck
Pioneers of Post War Recovery

1992
Dr. John Hargrave
The Best of Both Worlds: Aboriginal Health, Then and Now

1993
Professor D J Mulvaney
The Search for Collet Barker of Raffles Bay

1994
Miriam-Rose Baumann
Aboriginal Education

1995
Roslyn Poignant
Lost Conversations, Recovered Archives

1996
Mandawuy Yunupingu
New Love Songs for an Old Land

1997
Dr Goff Letts
The Great Banteng Muster
WELCOME - Katherine Hunt

Good evening. It’s nice to see such a large audience here tonight for what, I am sure, will be a very enjoyable and entertaining evening. Your Honour, Minister, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Twelfth Eric Johnston Lecture to be delivered by Dr Goff Letts. I am Katherine Hunt and I am currently acting as the Assistant Secretary in charge of the Northern Territory Library. I would like to outline this evening’s programme for you. I will very soon call on the Honourable Tim Baldwin, the Minister with Responsibility for Libraries, to introduce the lecture and the lecturer. Next will, of course, be the main business of the day; the speech by Dr Goff Letts, “The Great Banteng Muster”. After Dr Letts’ speech there will be time for questions from the audience. His Honour the Administrator, Dr Neil Conn, will then move the vote of thanks. That will bring to an end the formal part of the evening, but I do hope that you will all stay on for the lighter side and enjoy a little of the Library’s hospitality. And now I would like to ask the Honourable Tim Baldwin, Minister for Parks and Wildlife, Minister for Aboriginal Development, Minister for Housing and Local Government and Minister with Responsibility for Libraries, to introduce our speaker, Dr Goff Letts.

INTRODUCTION - Honourable Tim Baldwin, Minister for Parks and Wildlife, Minister for Aboriginal Development, Minister for Housing and Local Government and Minister with Responsibility for Libraries.

Thank you Katherine. I guess the important thing there is Minister Responsible for Libraries. His Honour the Administrator, Dr Neil Conn and Mrs Conn, Parliamentary colleagues, they are all still sitting downstairs so I guess none of them are here. I believe we have the Indonesian Consul, Mr Widodo and Mrs Widodo here tonight. Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome, as Katherine said, to the 1997 Eric Johnston Lecture, the twelfth of the series, and, before I introduce tonight’s speaker I would like to say personally how sorry I am that Commodore Eric Johnston, after whom this lecture is named, is no longer with us. As you would know, Eric Johnston passed away earlier this year, and his death was certainly a significant loss to the Territory community. However, I am sure that his memory will live on in this series of lectures and it is with great pleasure tonight, in this lecture, that I have the pleasure of introducing to you Dr Godfrey Alan Letts, or Goff, as he is known to his friends. He is the latest in a long line of distinguished speakers who have made the Eric Johnston Lecture series the prestigious event it has come to be recognised as. Goff now joins personalities such as Mandawuy Yunipingu, Sir Edward Woodward, Professor Derek Mulvaney and, of course, Commodore Eric Johnston himself, as members of an elite band of Eric Johnston lecturers.

Goff, of course, is well known to most of you but I will briefly recap on his history. He attended Melbourne Grammar and the Universities of Melbourne and Sydney, emerging as a member of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists. He first came to the Territory in 1957, the year, Goff, that I was born in Darwin; so that’s something we’ve got in common. He worked for that well known organisation called the Northern Territory Administration. In 1963 he was appointed Director of Primary Industries, a post he resigned in 1970 to enter politics. He has served on many boards and committees, including the Feral Animals Inquiry of 1979, the Australian Uranium Advisory Council and the Conservation Commission, and he is currently a member of the NT Wetlands Taskforce. On the political front he was the member for Victoria River from 1971 until 1977. Goff was also Majority Leader from 1974 until 1976, and, in the days immediately preceding self-government, Chief Secretary from 1976 to 1977. In his official capacity he was appointed a member of the Legislative Council from 1967 to 1970 and I am certainly particularly pleased to be introducing Goff tonight, as the former incumbent of the electorate of Victoria River, the seat that I now hold.
Goff, of course, is with us tonight to talk about the elusive Banteng and his many trips into the Cobourg country of Northern Territory, and without further ado Goff, I will ask you to come forward and entertain us with your lecture. Thank you very much.
The Great Banteng Muster
by
Dr Goff Letts

Your Honour the Administrator, Minister Tim Baldwin. I had a long list of honourable guests that I was going to mention but, when I looked around the room, I saw that there were too many of them not on my list that would be missed, so I’m going to take a leaf out of Katherine’s book and say, distinguished guests and ladies and gentlemen and, above all, friends because I think nearly everybody I see here tonight is a friend. G’day Flinny, even you.

It’s a great honour to be invited to give the 1997 Eric Johnston Lecture. I knew Eric well and I give my thanks for the invitation, which came to me through Michael Loos, who has been very helpful in getting me here and looking after me. It’s also a great pleasure to talk about one of my favourite subjects, and places, and well-remembered experiences, and to catch up with some people who are here tonight who shared them.

My Territory associations over nearly thirty years gave me many opportunities and adventures, for example, surveying the Alligator Rivers region in 1969, now Kakadu Park, with Vern O’Brien, a very memorable experience; canoeing down part of the Amazon River a few years ago with Graham Webb and John Hannon, a couple of Territorians; on crocodile work, was another great experience. But, of all those things, the Cobourg expeditions still stand out in my mind, so let’s get started.

I start by asking the question, “What is a Banteng?” According to Webster’s dictionary it’s a species of small, wild ox, native to the Malay and Indonesian archipelagos. But to me it’s more than that. It’s a reminder that Northern Territory is still a land of adventure, of challenge and opportunity; a place full of surprises, where natural beauty abounds and where colourful history has been made and sadly, in some cases, forgotten.

So tonight we’ll journey to that place, lift the veil on other times, and touch on some messages that those memories call to mind. I can’t hope to show you the full canvas of the expeditions to Cobourg but, from a few snapshots that we will have on, your imaginations, I hope, will fill in the gaps.

The Cobourg story really began in 1957 when I came to work up here as a young veterinarian - I say young, I was still in my twenties - in Northern Territory Administration. In Alice Springs en route to Darwin, my boss and Chief Veterinary Officer, the legendary Colonel Alfred Lionel Rose, delivered me my riding instructions. Included was something along these lines, “There are rumours of wild Brahman cattle on the Cobourg Peninsula, left overs from early settlements. If you get a chance, check it out.” It was more than an academic interest, in the 1950s a complete ban had been placed on the introduction to Australia of ruminant animals and materials for fear of foreign diseases, especially Blue Tongue. Blue Tongue, at that stage, had spread from Africa, through the Americas, it was through to Europe through the Iberian Peninsula and, while the virus was carried by all ruminants, it would have been disastrous if it had got into the sheep flocks of Australia, so there was a complete ban put in place. But the Territory badly needed tropical genes, and if there was any substance in the rumour it could have some important practical applications.

When I got to Darwin, my contact with the Horitos brothers and other sea-faring people, including Leo Hickey, heightened my curiosity. They indicated that in sailing around the Cobourg Peninsula coastline, and stopping there occasionally to take on fresh water, they had observed some strange bovines on the beach. The first opportunity to put the matter to the test came in 1960, after our commitments with cattle movements on the stock-routes had
finished. By then I had become Assistant Director of the Animal Industry Branch under Jim Whittam, who succeeded Colonel Rose.

Just to remind you, at that time in 1960, Darwin was a town of about 10,000 people. Over 90% of the cattle movements in Northern Territory, from the Top End of Northern Territory were driven to distant stations in Queensland or to Windham meatworks, on the hoof; there was very little road transport, very little roads that could take road transport. The North Australia Railways was still running spasmodically, Larrimah to here, and the Cobourg Peninsula was virtually unoccupied territory. There were three light-house keepers at Cape Don and a small band of Aboriginals who camped in that vicinity, while there were other Aboriginals as far afield as Cooper’s Creek and Oenpelli who visited the area from time to time on hunting or ceremonial purposes. Ah Mat’s timber camp on Buffalo Creek near the isthmus of the peninsula had been closed.

So our preparations began: a team was selected, made up of James William Hart Fawcett, commonly known as Jim, sitting over here tonight, a fourth generation Territorian and ex-buffalo shooter, who was appointed as the Land Rover driver, mechanic and wireless operator. I think it’s right Jim, correct me if I’m wrong, but your great-grandmother, Eliza Tuckwell, was reported to be the first European woman to come to Darwin in 1870. The other member of the team was Stock Inspector Arnold George Baker, who was, at that time, the Darwin water ski champion, a great man on the water. He was in charge of planning and the small boat operations. As the Team Leader I doubled as navigator, plant collector and recorder.

For many days the lounge-room of our home at Fannie Bay, we lived then in Morgan Street, Fannie Bay, was covered with aerial photographs which were being used to plot the route of this reconnaissance expedition. Night after night I was down on my hands and knees with a stereoscopic viewer poring over these photos, much the chagrin of my wife and young children.

Our plan was to load a Land Rover plus a ten foot aluminium dinghy and gear onto Leo Hickey’s light-house servicing launch, the motor vessel ‘Zena’. I don’t know if any of you remember the ‘Zena’ but I call it a launch, it was sort of a cross between a launch and a barge, and it was nearly as round as it was long, and then to journey across Van Diemen Gulf to the western tip of the peninsula, near Cape Don, and to drive eastwards as far as Port Essington.

This is a .... a big problem here tonight that many people won’t be able to see what’ on that screen from time to time but anyway, for those who can; this is just a locality map which shows that Darwin here and the Cobourg Peninsula is up here. We were to leave Darwin, sail across Van Diemen Gulf, round the tip of Cape Don and to land up around here.

There were no roads on the Cobourg Peninsula and, as far as we knew, ours would be the first motor vehicle to traverse that part of Australia, the western half of the peninsula. So on October 18th 1960, the Land Rover was loaded onto the ‘Zena’ and chained down with the front and back wheels resting on the gunnels on either side - it wasn’t a very big boat. And as the trusty ‘Zena’ rolled her way laboriously across Van Diemen Gulf the front bumper bar and the back tail gate were often kissed alternately by the waves.

We overnighted off the Vernon Islands the first night because of the tides. The ‘Zena’ could do about seven knots at full gallop and when the tide was running eight knots in the reverse direction we would be going backwards towards Darwin, so we had to camp at the Vernons. We moved on the next day and camped the next night in fact in Cape Don Bay. I think I’ve got a slide... I’ve got the slides haven’t I... wait a minute I’ll see if I can make this thing
work. That’s just a shot of Cape Don Bay, sometimes the vessel might even be the ‘Zena’ at anchor there. This is the kind of country... there is a total mangrove fringe round that Cape Don area and I never ceased to wonder how the Aboriginal group could exist there because, we went up to the light-house, there were three light-house houses, and we were just completely covered grey with sand flies, moving from house to house they would just attack you like a swarm and inside the houses the light-house keepers had constantly, 24 hours a day, burning drums of sawdust to try to keep the sandflies at bay.

We finally got to unload the next day, the Land Rover, in Popham Bay Channel. Could we have the next overhead please. We now go to a close-up map of the Cobourg Peninsula and this is Cape Don here where the light-houses are and this is the Cobourg Peninsula and the mainland over here. I noticed in a lot of the maps, including the Gurig National Park Plan of Management that shows them being joined across there but there is a tidal channel that runs between Cape Don, which is virtually an island, and the mainland of Cobourg Peninsula. We pulled in here and we unloaded the Land Rover.

Could we have the next overhead please Tony. Some of these old slides and things of mine are well past use-by date, so whether they are going to work or not is a matter of conjecture. Here we are unloading the Land Rover. This is the intrepid Leo Hickey standing here, the Master of the ‘Zena’. This is the intrepid James William Hart Fawcett, driving his Land Rover ashore. We cut the poles and spars, put a bit of marsden matting on them and just rolled her off the boat onto the bridge and away we went.

We had our first disappointment at this point. Arnold Baker, Sir Arnold Baker and Leo Hickey... we had contacted an Aboriginal at Cape Don and asked him... and retained his services to act as a guide for us but, as we unloaded the Land Rover we looked around, and our Aboriginal guide had melted away into the bush never to be seen again by us. I guess that the sight of us must have been too daunting for him and I can’t really blame him for that.

The next problem we faced was very quickly evident; it was this that, after the photographs had been taken, a cyclone had through the western part of the Cyclone Peninsula and had laid many of the large trees flat and strewn them about in all directions. So the careful plans and marks I’d made on the aerial photos and plans as to where we were going to go were totally useless and we had to improvise the navigation.

I might have a... I don’t know what this next picture... oh I know what this one is, I missed that. That’s the, ha you can’t see the top of it, but that’s the light-house at Cape Don. We went up there and it was an interesting place because, not long before we’d been there, there’d been a fairly severe earthquake and most of the mercury had been spilt out of the bath at the top of the lighthouse and tumbled down the staircase and they had to import a ton or two of mercury in order to refill the prisms - it must have been quite a big job.

We’ll go back to that map, Tony, the overhead of Cobourg if you don’t mind. So we’re here somewhere. We proceeded slowly, mainly along the beach line, through a bit of timber until we... yeah this part of the map’s not particularly good... we proceeded across here actually. This little bay here... in Northern Territory there are a couple of Blue Mud Bays. One of them is over in the Gulf of Carpentaria off the eastern coast of Arnhem Land and this one was also called Blue Mud Bay, we called it Little Blue Mud Bay. We camped... our first camp that night was here, on the shores of Little Blue Mud Bay.

We celebrated our arrival with a tot of Rum and a light meal and then listened to the transceiver radio for a while, before retiring to our swags. Next morning we faced the first real challenge of the trip - the transceiver had been left on too long, the Land Rover battery
was flat. The vehicle operator, Jim Fawcett, reached behind the seat for the crank handle - it was back in Darwin. But he and Arnold Baker then displayed great initiative by jacking up the rear wheels of the vehicle, rigging up a rope truss and turning the wheel over and starting the motor. We never made the mistake of leaving the wireless on too long again after that.

We launched the dinghy and climbed on board and it immediately sank. It took water over the stern and sank. Arnold Baker again showed great ingenuity by pulling a fruit case, a wooden crate, to pieces and building a high transom on the stern of the boat which enabled us to refit the outboard motor and this time it didn’t sink quite so badly.

But meantime Jim’s legs had suffered a painful jelly fish sting which required some first-aid. Jim I think we might have rubbed a bit of rum on it, that’s about what we did in the way of first aid. (Jim: It was our only medicine.) It was the only medicine we had that’s right.

So we sailed across in the little dinghy, across Blue Mud Bay, across to a point somewhere here, and went ashore. A we went ashore we picked up, and followed, a well-marked animal pad or trail. After a few metres of walking, a movement in the distance caught our attention, and there was a family group of feral Timor ponies at play on an open flat. They picked up our scent and came cantering straight towards us, stopping perhaps a hundred metres away. And then the lead stallion came on snorting, stamping, pawing the ground, until he was almost within touching distance. We stood still, not from fear, but spellbound, until apparently he was satisfied that we were inferior beings, and he trotted off back to his family. At the time we called the place Pony Point, it’s now recognised by its Aboriginal name Araroo Point.

We returned to the dinghy, sampled a few succulent oysters off the rocks en route, but then trouble struck again. The tide had retreated, leaving about half a metre of water in the bay, and by the time we got back here to our camp, we faced the dismal prospect of dragging the dinghy the last 400 metres or so across the mud flat, where every step we sank up to the waist and the mud was full of sharp little shells - Blue Mud Bay was very well named.

So we got out of there, we moved our camp to the east side of Araroo Point, over here, looking out across Trepang Bay. We used that as a base from which to traverse that large... some of these lines indicate our path in that first trip. We explored points of interest down in the bottom of Trepang Bay, down in this corner here. Arnold and I, Arnold Baker and I, carried out the first excursion, the highlights of which included spending quite a bit of time going round a large swamp which was very rich in new flora, to me, that I collected quite a bit from. But the real highlight of that day was observing young pony stallions, at close quarters, within twenty metres of where I was standing, engaged in serious combat. It’s something, you know, that you could never forget, these two young colts hard at it, everything going, hooves, teeth, reach down and grab one another by the fetlock, turn around and kick. They kept it up for about ten minutes till they got sick of it and trotted. I just wished that I’d had a video camera.

The sun had set as I returned to the dinghy and there was no sign of Arnold, we’d gone our separate ways. While cutting mango sticks for fish spears, Arnold had lost his bearings, but he managed to rejoin me after I fired off a salvo of .303 shots into the air. So it’s pitch black dark by the time we got going and then we couldn’t start the outboard for a while, and we got going, and it’s pitch black and it’s about a seven or eight kilometre trip across Trepang Bay in the dark. It was quite interesting: I bailed energetically, while dodging the occasional flying fish that flashed past, as Arnold steered a roughly west course. But
fortunately Jim Fawcett had the presence of mind to light a large bonfire on the cliff back at the base, so by the time we were half way across we could see this guiding beacon.

We lived pretty well on... I think it’s time I showed another slide. That’s just a sample of some of the terrain we had to traverse, and in the distance, for those who can see, is the bottom end of a Banteng cow, the white marks and the brown colours. That’s getting a bit ahead of myself. We lived well on sand crabs, and the next day we went on another expedition and caught quite a few sand crabs which we had for lunch. But we had sighted no cattle up to this point. Then a real problem emerged - the water tanks in the Land Rover ran out of water and there was no readily alternative supply where we were. For one day we scooped brackish water, heavily contaminated with pony urine and pony dung, from a beach soak at Araroo Point, but then we were forced to move to search for a better supply, or die of thirst.

After driving all day in four-wheel drive, and gaining perhaps eight kilometres, because we were in four-wheel drive all the time, it was very, very sandy soil; we came late in the day to a shallow... a dry shallow, creek line which was draining northerly. By then we were experiencing the discomfort of extreme thirst plus the anxiety of not knowing where the next drink was coming from. I took off from the vehicle and walked along a wallaby pad towards the coast. The pad was growing more distinct as other pad joined it and the ground became damp, and suddenly in front of me there was a buffalo wallow half full of muddy water - I drank. A little further on the creek-line entered a swamp, thickly timbered with giant Melaleucas interspersed with tall Kentia palms. It was a most attractive bower. I sat on a fallen log, taking in the lush green ferns climbing up the paperbark trunks and observing the hundreds of red-collared lorikeets, noisily feasting on the palm berries. I felt very close to paradise, particularly as there were pools of good, fresh water nearby. Shakespeare wrote about sermons in stone; well these weren’t stones, they were trees, but I know what he meant.

I’ll pass quickly over the next couple of days, not wishing to dwell on the allegation that I, as navigator, lost the way temporarily, or on the vicious attack from a swarm of ground wasps which was my punishment. We’ll move on to Camp 5. Could be go back to... yes that one. Here we are. Let me just retrace quickly where I am. This is where we found the water in here; this is where we got lost in here, we suddenly found ourselves looking at the Southern Ocean instead of the northern ocean. There is a very good explanation for that, but I won’t go into it tonight. We moved on and we came to Camp 5 which is down here. There’s Mt Bedwell, the Twin Hills as they were called on Cobourg, Mt Bedwell and Mt Rowe, and about half way between there was our Camp 5, with the bottom of Port Essington over here, we camped in here. This is important this one.

It was my turn to be off camp duty, not having to cook or wash up or anything that night, so I reconnoitred, I went for a walk. And as I was about a kilometre from the camp, as I was edging my way through a patch of saplings, I stopped short on the other side because, there in front of me, was what I was looking for. Ten metres away, with their heads down, quietly grazing were two very curious beasts. Deer, I thought, going by their confirmation and colour. But then they had heads that were typically bovine, more like a jersey cow. So I went back to camp and reported the mystery to my colleagues and, although we were to see many, many more of these during the following two weeks, there identity remained a mystery until we were back in civilisation.

Next morning we headed north west towards our main destination, Victoria Settlement, stopping en route at the old cemetery. Now this is one of those past use-by slide, but it shows the Land Rover with the dinghy on top and here is one of the gravestones of the old Victoria cemetery and here is this tall grey stone here, for those of you who can see it, it the
grave of Mrs Lambrick and child. That was an emotion charged experience. Visions surfaced, I’m sure, in all our minds of life and death at the settlement 120 years earlier, of the high hopes dashed by hardship and despair, of the isolation, loneliness and social problems that we can only begin to imagine. Of the frustration and strangulation by Whitehall red tape which the worthy Commandant Captain John Macarthur experienced all those years before. We were standing on hallowed ground; an historical landmark, the importance of which in the history of the Territory, and indeed of Australia, had virtually been forgotten.

We moved on a little way to the ruins of Victoria Settlement where our final base camp was established for the remaining ten days. We’d been away for a week and all efforts to contact the works base in Darwin, 8 Alpha Quebec, by radio, had proved fruitless. In these days if you were totally out of radio contact for eight days, somebody would send out a big search party I suppose, but nobody seemed to worry about us. Our callsign was Sierra Foxtrot Alpha, and that seemed increasingly appropriate. To our relief, and presumably to that of our families, on the seventh day signals were exchanged loudly and clearly. I won’t go into that Jim, but you and I know the story.

The next ten days were packed with great interest. They included a fairly hairy trip around to Knocker Bay, to Leo Hickey’s Two Fella Camp where there were fresh water soaks, in an overloaded boat. Tony, could I put that shot of the map back on again, thanks. So here we are, we are now at Victoria Settlement, which is here, and we’re going by boat around in Knocker Bay to where Hickey’s Two Fella Camp is in here. We got to about the middle of Knocker Bay, somewhere there, a little bit choppy, and I kept looking over; Arnold was steering, Jim was up the sharp end. And I looked over and I kept seeing this big log drifting on the water about 400 yards away. Then all of a sudden I looked again and the log turned and it was throwing a large bow wave and it was heading straight for us. It was a close encounter with the largest crocodile I’ve ever seen, which, when it got to within about... fortunately it got about a hundred metres from our little boat, heading straight toward us, it’s head went down and it’s tail came up clear out of the water and it dived. And we got every ounce we could out of the seven horse power motor, heading for the beach at Knocker Bay. That’s the area where Nick Paspaley subsequently had his first pearling lease.

During the time we were at the Victoria Settlement we explored the ruins, we made trips abroad down to Mt Bedwell area. Footwalking away from the camp, some distance, and using the capture gun and tranquilliser dart, I managed to catch an old cow, a pensioner. We were able to undertake a closer inspection of her. I shot the dart, she ran away with the herd, I followed along the tracks, looking at the ground, then all of a sudden I heard a noise ahead and I turned around and she was coming back - flat out, straight at me. But fortunately by that time the tranquilliser had started to take effect and we managed to come to an amicable agreement. Arnold boated solo up to Smith Point where he observed deer for the first time. Arnold went up here on his own in the boat to Smith Point, saw some deer. He also dropped me off, where are we? Record Point over here on the other side of Port Essington; Arnold dropped me off there, here ??????????? and I footwalked over to Point Brammer and that’s where I saw very large herds of these cattle over there.

The beach at Victoria Settlement, where we camped, was dotted with old Tamarind trees which were relics of the visits by Trepangers from Indonesia, the so-called Macassar Trepangers from the distant past, and their stone cooking ovens could also be found on some of the beaches.

Out diet of canned tucker was relieved by lashings of rock oysters, fresh snapper, Magpie Goose and wallaby stew, and I remember Jim’s quotable quote when he was halfway
through a plate of these beautiful, large oysters. He said, “Goff, you know, we’re being paid to do this. Those bloody yanks would pay thousands for this privilege.” And he was right.

Melbourne Cup Day came and went while we were out there and eventually Leo Hickey came back and anchored offshore to pick us up. Getting the Land Rover back on board was the reverse of the way you saw it come off, and not without difficulty. Jim drove carefully up the ramp, got on board. Leo standing on the other side suddenly said ‘whoa’. Jim applied the brakes but unfortunately the brakes had been completely shot through travelling in the beach so he went backwards down into the water at the rate of knots, so we had to do it all over again.

I don’t know what this slide is... that’s near Victoria Settlement, I think, that’s near Minto Head. That just shows some of the countryside there with the laterite ironstone top and the sort of, I don’t know, ilamite clay probably, underneath.

Back home, when we got back home from that expedition, I compared notes with Colonel Rose, who had recently returned from an advisory mission to Indonesia. With the help of his photographs we identified the mystery bovines as Bali Cattle, derivatives of the native Banteng. I followed this up with some research at the Mitchell Library in Sydney, where, with the aid of documents, including Captain John Macarthur’s diaries, it was possible to piece together a picture of early life at Victoria Settlement, and the origins of the domestic animals introduced there, mainly from Indonesia. My findings, and the research on those ancient documents, were published in the Australian Veterinary Journal.

Letts, Fawcett and Baker prepared a report to the Director of Animal Industry and that was tabled in the Legislative Council in 1961, and this is a copy of the report that was tabled, there. It was well received. Separately, I had made recommendation that, because of its natural heritage and historical value, the whole of Cobourg Peninsula should be declared a wild-life sanctuary, under new legislation being drafted. This advice went forward to the Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, who accepted it and moved promptly to effect the declaration, firstly establishing the whole peninsula as a flor and fauna reserve in 1962.

The other recommendations proposed another expedition to the peninsula to capture some of the feral cattle and ponies and bring them to Darwin for breeding experiments. So in 1961 the old MV ‘Zena’ was again pressed into service as our main carrier. Its small hold was converted into little stables to accommodate horses for use in the capture plan. We took two horses, Little Red and Boxhead, which were given to us by Byrne Brothers at Tipperary Station.

Out destination this time was Danger Point, which is well to the east of Port Essington. It was chosen as the best place to unload the horses and catch cattle, after an aerial survey.

**GAP IN TAPE : changes to other side**

This is Point Bremmer, to the east of Port Essington, and Danger Point would be there, so this is where we are heading for by sea.

The catching party who travelled out by sea on the ‘Zena’, myself, Senior Stock Inspector Nage Ganley, Stock Inspector Arnold Baker and two very competent horsemen, Stock Inspector Cameron Murray-White, who is with us tonight and Aboriginal Stockman Colin Holbert. At the same time as we went by sea, a group of chickens, sorry of foresters, sorry Smithy, botanists and zoologists, accompanied by the Crown Law Officer, Ron Withnall,
travelled overland in two Land Rovers via Oenpelli and Merganella and there was no road from there on so they scrub-bashed their way through to Danger Point and they stayed with us for a few days.

Summarised, among the main features of the Cobourg II expedition, approximately in order were the loading of horses at the Darwin Wharf, ably assisted by Terry Baldwin, Tim’s father, with his mobile crane. Severe sea-sickness affected most of the team on the outward voyage, and Colin Holbert swore he would never go to sea again: I don’t think he ever did.

Much drama accompanied the horses’ unloading. We had a plan that didn’t work. The plan was that the ‘Zena’ would come alongside a rock shelf at Danger Point and we would virtually put a couple of planks there and the horses would be lifted up and then walk ashore. But we couldn’t get anywhere near that rock-shelf as it turned out, there were too many coral heads close to it, and we had to anchor well off it and swim the horses ashore. Now that is something that is easier said than done.

I’ll just do this one for a minute... oh no, that’s ok, that’s some of the fish we ate when we were at Victoria Settlement, we’ll move quickly on. Now we’re getting somewhere. This is a very poor slide but some of you will be able to get the idea... this is the hold of the MV ‘Zena’ and this is Ignatious Kevin Ganly, who as you can see was a very big, powerful man, especially selected for helping to lift Banteng cattle on to the back of Land Rovers. Down here is Kevin Murray-White, sitting over there, and this ????? looking bugger here, this is ????? the slide, I didn’t really look like that I was just ??????? like that, but that’s me.

What we’re doing there is we’re rigging a sling underneath the horses, because the way we had to do it then was, we had to put a sling under the horses. You can see the chains and blocks here, that was attached to the boom. We lifted the horses off the deck, the hard part was to get their feet off the deck quickly so that they didn’t struggle too much. Once they were off the deck they were ok. Then we lifted the boom up, then I crawled out on the boom with the butcher’s knife and swung the boom over the side of the ‘Zena’. I crawled out on the boom with the butcher’s knife, I cut the rope and the horse dropped into the ocean. The idea was the Arnold George Baker was down below in the dinghy and he was to start the motor, grab the halter and take the horse ashore. The only problem with the first one, my pride and joy Little Red, was that he couldn’t start the outboard motor, and by the time he fooled around for about ten minutes, Little Red was heading straight for Papua New Guinea or somewhere in that direction. And I took a running dive off the back of the ‘Zena’, swam out, got hold of the halter and then swam with the horse ashore till we could get our footing and walk ashore. That seemed to be reasonable at the time but, when I was coming back out for the next one, I looked up and there was, out the back of the boat, about fifty yards behind me, was about a twelve foot shark cruising past, so I decided I probably wouldn’t repeat that.

I then went on ahead to see if we could select a camp site. We had a bit of local knowledge that there was a place where we could get water, not far from where we were pulled up in the boat, ashore. I went ahead with Nelson, who was the Aboriginal boat-hand, with Leo Hickey, he was going to show us where the site was. Nelson nearly burnt us out before we got started because I was walking along admiring the beauties of the countryside, Nelson was walking along ahead of me on a Banteng track, towards a clump of paperbarks in the distance, and I looked down at the ground and all of a sudden there was a spot fire about the size of a dinner plate burning to one side of the track. I looked up and there were two or three more, twenty yards on. And Nelson was walking along with a box of matches, I think they were wax matches, striking them and dropping them to the left and to the right. I stamped the fires out and asked him to stop and he said, “Oh you’ve got to burn this country our for hunting Goff.” I said, “No, that’s not the idea Nelson, where this grass is where we
are going to catch some animals.” It didn’t matter much because a few days later the bloody foresters burnt us out anyway so Nelson might as well have had his way I suppose.

Ron Withnall, dear old friend and great fellow as many of you know, he was with us. He was sort of self-appointed photographer and he insisted upon, when we found this spot where we were supposed to be able to get water, Ron insisted in sinking the well. He proved to be a very energetic well sinker. We’ll take a couple of slides now. I’m sorry you won’t all be able to see this. That was the site of the camp roughly, and the significance of that is, this clump of trees is where we hoped to find water. This is the typical plain on Cobourg in behind the beach line, it’s covered with not actually a grass but a sedge called Phedrostylus, and this is what the Banteng fed on in the dry season, and this was the ideal catching ground for us because it was open and we could move about on it fairly easily.

That’s our tent at the camp. The remains of a Banteng that we picked up with fairly good horns, stores in there, table to this side, swags and beds a bit further to the left. That’s the actual team - the late Nage Ganly, a great bloke and dear friend; that’s Cammy White; that’s Colin Holbert, the late Colin Holbert and Arnold Baker. A bit sad there’s only three of us out of the five left now but, oh well, we’ll soldier on Cam won’t we. Another one. This is Windel’s Well. This is ????????????? up here, he finished up covered in blisters but we couldn’t stop him. He’s out of sight, his head couldn’t be seen from the ground by the time he got down there. And that’s water in the bottom there - amazing. And this is typical again of that type of plain and the type of vegetation with little patches of sort of semi-monsoon forest and little dwarf fig trees and things growing on it. That’s a Banteng bull grazing away on a bit of sedge there. You may have observed from the earlier photos, those of you who could see it, the bull was a dark colour and the cow was a light brown colour. Well that is typical of Banteng, or Bali cattle, they have this somewhat unusual sexual dimorphism where the males go, well they eventually go jet black, and the females remain a beautiful golden yellow colour. There’s a very, very old, pensioner, Banteng cow eating Casuarina leaves that had fallen off the tree near the beach. And that’s near our camp, that’s a fresh water lagoon we called Banteng Lagoon. Very thick Eucalypt forest here, beautiful paperbarks there, freshwater here. During most of the time we were there it was absolutely covered with bird life.

Could we have another overhead please Tony. I should have had that one on earlier, but this is one of the shots I had actually taken on the boat and this is absolutely typical of what we saw that first day on Pony Point. It’s a family group of Timor Ponies there and that’s a little stallion of the type that came right up to us.

The first cattle we captured were thrown by tail from horseback and tied up but unfortunately they late died of stress, from being tied up near the camp. The Banteng has a very unusual conformation; it’s got a relatively heavy body and very light legs and the pasterns are very straight, and when you tie them up, say by a rope by the horns to a tree or a post, they will lean back on it and strain the ligaments and tendons in their legs and eventually knuckle over and are unable to get up again. So that was a great disappointment. We solved the problem we built some yards out of Pandanus palm rails and paperbark posts and we walled them in with hessian. We switched to catching the cattle from the Land Rover and bringing them very quickly back to the yards and putting them in and leaving them on their own very quietly, to walk around in the yard. And it worked very well, once we had the first two or three coachers quietened the rest just sort of fitted into the picture and we soon had over twenty head in hand.

I don’t know what this next slide is but... that’s not very clear but that’s Cam and Colin Holbert with the first one we caught; that’s a young bull calf that we caught. This is Arnold Baker with an older cow that we caught, colours again and the markings on the behind. This
is the first shot of the yards that we built, over here the rails, and we... I think this one shows the yards covered round with hessian and with the first lot of cattle in them.

We were short of gear to build those yards. We were short of hessian, we didn’t have any hessian. The RAAF came to the rescue, very nobly; they carried out an airdrop, dropped of bolts of hessian to make the yards, bales of hay for fodder and a pack of tetanus anti-toxin, so I could treat Nage, who by that time had run a nasty, rusty nail through his foot. That was an anxious moment because on the packet it said ‘some people react with enaphalactic shock to this and can die very quickly. So there we are, 400 miles overland from the nearest hospital, with Nage on the bed and me acting as doctor. He lived through that anyway.

Then we had our VIP visitors, the Administrator of the day, the Honourable Roger Knott, the Assistant Administrator, Reg Marsh, and our Director, Jim Whittam, decided that they should come and see what we were up to. So they came out in the administration boat, the ‘Gunyanah’. Roger Knott was the first Administrator to visit Cobourg. We could tell a lot of stories about that but we won’t; we haven’t got time. We did catch a Timor pony while they were there. I’ve got a shot of it. There’s the ‘Gunyanah’ at anchor off our camp. There’s Ron Withnall taking a photo of the ‘Gunyanah’ off our camp. That’s a little bit further on, I’ll come to that in a moment.

On the way back to Darwin, we did find out they had a very large and well stocked refrigerator on board the ‘Gunyanah’, so when they got half way back to Darwin we got this curious radio signal. It came in and said that as we were doing so well we should stay on for another month and catch another 200 cattle. That was the direction from the Administrator. Our wireless operator, Arnold Baker, went into a deep panic at this point and said, “What will I do Goff.” I said, “Do a Lord Nelson.” He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Pretend we haven’t received the signal. Turn the bloody radio off.”

We were running a dry camp because, in the circumstances we were operating in, it was quite hazardous work and, if anybody happened to get hurt, I didn’t want people to say, ‘well they were on the grog out there’. So we had a dry camp - well almost. When the Administrator and Reg Marsh left, they left us one bottle of beer, amongst five thirsty men, but I suppose one.... yeah.

With the Land Rover, we would go out on those plains that I showed you in the photos, where the bare ground was. We would sneak out to where we knew the Banteng were; sneak out through the thick Eucalypt forest in the Land Rover, till we got to the edge - and we’d do this very early in the morning or late in the evening, when they were coming out to graze - we’d watch and we’d spot the herd out there and then we’d put one fellow on each mud guard, one in the back, one driving and we would go very fast and the Banteng would spot us and gallop off, but they were like buffaloes that you could turn the lead and just keep them moving in a circle constantly. And you could do that for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes until they started to tire and then move closer to them, the men would jump off the vehicle, grab one by the tail, throw it, tie it up with the belts they had round their waist and then we would land it on the Land Rover. In some runs we got up to four or five by that method.

The transportation of the cattle back to Darwin presented a challenge. We used two methods. There was Lockheed 10 aircraft operating out of Darwin, very noisy, very rattly, run by a man called Bob Carswell. We got him to take all the seats out of it and to bring it out to land on an unmade airstrip at Danger Point and we then had two flights back to Darwin, carrying five Banteng in each flight. I tranquillised them and we tied them carefully, loaded them onto the aircraft and arranged them like the spokes of a wheel in a circle. I sat in the middle holding the heads while Bob Carswell flew the aircraft and in the first run I remember there was about a thirty knot crosswind blowing and the plane was
probably a bit overloaded and as it went along it would take off then bump down again, then take off, and every time it did that it would move a little further across to where there was a ridge of coral limestone. We finally just managed to get off before we got to that. We did two flights that way and the balance of the animals went back to Darwin as live cargo, replacing the horses in the ‘Zena’.

This slide... the beach sand was so soft that we couldn’t carry the cattle across the soft sand without building a corduroy so we cut quite a few Pandanus palms and be built the corduroy right across the beach in order to be able to load the dinghy and then the ‘Zena’. There wasn’t room and there was no way we could reload the horses on the boat and, as I said before Colin Holbert refused to travel back by sea. So we packed him and the two horses, one was a saddle horse, Little Red, and the other one, Boxhead, we rigged up as a pack horse. And off went Colin to ride alone, the approximately 200 km over an unmarked route he’d never seen before, back to Oenpelli. He made it in about 2-2½ days I think.

So by that stage the great Banteng muster was at an end, and voted a resounding success. The animals went to Beatrice Hills and the Berrimah Farm. Little Red went on to win the Adelaide River Cup four years later.

In 1962 we had the Cobourg III, a fairly small exercise. A camp was established on Smith Point and was used for further reconnaissance and cattle capture. The most memorable feature of that trip, I recall, Arnold was out there again. We had a new veterinarian, Bruce Pain, who went on to win the Tomaris Sweep a few years later. Bruce Pain was out there. We had an Aboriginal man from Oenpelli helping, and I was out there for some of the time.

The most memorable feature was a long distance, unscheduled rowing exercise from Vasham Head, if I could have that map back on again please Tony. Over here is Vasham Head and up here we’ve got our camp on Smith Point. One morning, very early, Arnold Baker and Bruce Pain and I set off and went across to Vasham Head. We split up there and I went north up into this point, Bruce was unloaded somewhere here and surveyed in this area, and Arnold came back here and had a look around this area. And the idea was that about five o’clock in the afternoon Arnold would come back with the boat, pick up Bruce first then pick up me and we’d go back to Smith Point and have a lovely tea.

Anyway five o’clock came. I’d been walking around all day eating those red apples that grow on the trees up there, to quench my thirst. I got back to where I was supposed to be at five o’clock - no sign. I lay down in the sand and went to sleep. About nine o’clock that night someone was gently kicking me in the ribs and there was Bruce and Arnold. They’d been having trouble with the outboard motor, they’d eventually got back to me, and when we went to get in the boat and get going, the outboard motor wouldn’t work at all. So I pulled it to pieces in the dark, put it together again. It still wouldn’t work. So we held a council of war. We had two choices: we could either try and row back across Port Essington, at its widest point, or we could get someone to footwalk about seventy or eighty kilometres around here and back to the camp to get some help. So we made the decision to row back, and there was a good reason for that because Bruce Pain, the other veterinarian who was on that trip, Bruce had been a champion oarsman. He’d rowed for Geelong College in a winning Head of the River crew. And I thought ‘this is a bit of all right’, you know. So we had a hell of a job, first of all, to get over the reef and the surf that breaks, the breakers you get on the reef along here. And about three times we swamped the little dinghy before we finally got it over there and out into the calm water and clambered on board, and away we went and gave Painy the oars, ‘here y’are, champ, your go’. He immediately rowed around in a complete circle. I said, “What’s going on here?” He said, “I only ever rowed with one oar before, rowing in one of those long eights.” So that was OK, we eventually took turns. We struck a cockeyed bob in the middle of Port Essington, that
was exciting. The tide carried us well off course. Fortunately Colin Holbert who was
back at the camp, back over here, he had the presence of mind, so to climb a tall tree with a hurricane lamp, or you know a gas lamp, and stick it up in the high
branches, by the time we got half way across we could actually see this light bobbing
every now and again as we came on top of the waves, and we made for that, but that didn’t
really matter because the tide carried us about three miles off course. And when we finally
go to the other side at dawn we still had about a couple of miles to walk back to camp, but it
was better than walking right round.

The other thing that was interesting about the Smith Point venture was the magnificent coral
reef off Smith Point, and the several active jungle fowl nests that we also discovered on
Smith Point. This is some of the coral that was photographed by me. I shot off two reels of
film, I couldn’t stop on Smith’s Point. I’m not going to show you all them but I’ll show you
two slides. I think, Dave, that it was largely destroyed, that reef, by a storm a bit later; was
that right? It deteriorated unfortunately - it was a beautiful reef.

After that third expedition it was decided to establish a permanent Ranger Station at Black
Point. Doug Gordon was our first Cobourg Ranger, followed by Dave Lind who was
assisted by Big Bill Nougie. In the early 1980s, when Frank Well was Ranger, and we’ve
had some very distinguished Rangers, including Frank, Sir Zelman Cowen and party
camped on Smith Point for a couple of days and he was the first Governor General to visit
the sanctuary and the area.

So finally, that’s a shot of me in Bogor, with a genuine Bali cattle, at the Research Institute
at Bogor on Java.

In conclusion there are a couple of brief points I would like to make. The ease with which
we were able to organise and carry out the 1960/61 Cobourg expeditions and to implement
the recommendations for a reserve and sanctuary stood out in stark contrast from the
burdensome, bureaucratic Canberra controls which threatened to choke the Northern
Territory soon afterwards, and which eventually took my life in a different direction.

I believe that the Cobourg history: the story of the intrepid, and some would say foolhardy,
band who struggled with almost impossible odds between 1838 and 1849, deserves to be
much more widely know, both in our local Territory culture and throughout Australia. I’ll
expand on that in a moment.

The rediscovery of the forgotten Cobourg feral herds demonstrated the great gaps there are
in knowledge about what goes on in parts of our country and the vulnerability to diseases
and other things that goes with that ignorance. The creation of the Gurig National Park in
1981 and the transfer of title to the traditional owners and the development of joint
administrative arrangements for the park was a significant initiative in the reconciliation
process. But I found it a trifle strange that there was no reference in the 1987 Plan of
Management to the events of the 1960s which I’ve touched on tonight and which led
progressively to the initiative of declaring the national park.

For me the Cobourg Peninsula will always be a magic place with great memories, some of
which I’ve shared with you here tonight. It must be cared for and sustained while providing
education and enjoyment for those who are able to visit the area. It’s a place very dear to
my heart - a second home. I promised myself I wouldn’t be controversial tonight, but let me
just say this: when I read that 1980 Plan of Management, a copy of which I have here, for
Gurig National Park, I was a little surprised that there was so little reference to the early
settlement and virtually no reference to the exploration and discoveries of the early ‘60s,
which were the source from which the modern history of the Cobourg Peninsula and the
Gurig National Park developed. The settlements go back 170 years and are important as being the first European outpost, not only on the Northern Territory coast, but on the north coast of Australia between Brisbane and Perth. They are an essential part of the Northern Territory and Australian history. Their stories add to our heritage and should perhaps be remembered a little more prominently and proudly in the way we portray Northern Territory culture, and I believe that could be done without detracting in any way from the significance to the Aboriginal people of this area. A special place should be reserved for Father Confolonieri who worked so hard to gain an understanding of the local Aboriginal culture and recorded observations that are still being used.

Another little point of interest was that the conventional veterinary wisdom still holds that cattle tick were introduced to Australia through Darwin. That was Dr Gilruth’s conclusion, but to me it is absurd. They must have come in decades earlier with the domestic stock introduced to Cobourg, and that story needs to be clarified still.

I believe there is also a need to further explore the potential offered by Bali cattle in the Top End and perhaps we need some Indonesian stockmen to teach us how to handle them properly.

Finally, I extend my personal thanks and appreciation to all those who shared the Cobourg experiences with me in the ‘60s and I’d tell Colin or anyone else here in a position of power that I would be happy to volunteer my services to organise and lead any future Banteng musters or anything else connected with the Cobourg Peninsular. Thank you very much.

Katherine: Dr Letts will now answer some questions from the floor, so if you have a question could you please raise your hand, wait for me to acknowledge you and then stand and identify yourself.

Goff: Joseph Vincent over here.

Q: Joe Vincent, Goff, you know me. I did a lot of bauxite exploration in Cobourg in the early ‘60s and had a camp at Vasham Heads and it was my impression that the deer and the Timor pony were concentrated on the western side and the Banteng on the eastern side. Is that correct?

A: Not entirely Joe. You were right about the ponies, the ponies certainly are concentrated more on the western side and the cattle are from the centre across to the eastern side more, extending even further afield towards... oh, there are ponies at Merganella too, but I think the deer are to be found where there are patches of tropical rainforest. Dave Lindhusrt and Frank Well know a lot more about the present distribution of the deer than I do, but they are associated with patches of rainforest, I think Dave, is that right?

Dave: Yes they right down to Buffalo Creek.

Goff: Yes, deer extend further east Joe.

Joe: I do agree with you it’s the most beautiful area????????

Goff: Joe, I have to say that you are a good friend of mine but you did have me worried at one stage. So did the foresters. At various stages ??????????? we were doing these things. The foresters had a plan to woodchip part or all of the Cobourg Peninsula and then the miners got in doing the exploration and finding the bauxite and I thought, ‘oh hell it’s going
to be a warfare here before this is all over’, but fortunately neither of those initiatives ever went any further and I hope they won’t.

Q: David Lind. I was formerly ??????? as Ranger out there and had one occasion to treat Malcolm Fraser very badly ??????? of Goff Letts but in relation to the woodchip foresters, I was told to arrest them on site and ???????? never saw them again.

A: Yes, I used to give some good directions David. Unfortunately you never took any bloody notice of them. I know you would have taken that one seriously.

Q: My name’s ?????????????????, I’m a fairly recent arrival to the Territory. One of the things that’s greatly impressed me is the degree to which many things are signposted and the number of plaques commemorating either events or what have you. What specifically do you think should be done in relation to Cobourg Peninsula such that your ?????? and the previous century might be better remembered.

A: Well what we are talking about here I guess is a matter of communication. I’m not talking about taking vast herds of people into the Cobourg Peninsula and sort of tramping over dunes and things. It’s a hard place to get to still and anybody who can get there and observer the rules within the rules, limited access and so on, well that’s fine because the more people who do understand what it’s about the better. But there all the methods of communication through media, documentaries and newspaper articles. I did a twenty minute session at the ABC earlier today that will probably be broadcast tomorrow. You know, you just have to keep people constantly aware and interested in history and in conservation matters in the Northern Territory. You have to have a strategy for communication.

Q: Goff, there were a lot of buffalo also escaped from Fort Wellington and Port Victoria settlements and they by and large tended to ???????????? the peninsula whereas the Banteng cattle stayed there. Have you any thoughts about why?

A: Pure guesswork, but you are talking about animals with totally different temperaments; buffalo are very phlegmatic animals, curious and inquisitive and so on and the Bali cattle are extremely shy animals and I think pretty territorial. The buffalo... see Fort Wellington, on which there was a previous lecture a while back, one of these lectures, Fort Wellington was established in 1828 and then abandoned a bit over a year later and the buffalo were let go, the buffalo that were brought across from Melville Island were let go at Fort Wellington. Well when they came back to resettle in 1838 and G Windsor Earl was on board the vessels that came back: he observed on the shores near Goulburn Island, on the shores of mainland near Goulburn Island, herds of buffalo, small herds of buffalo, up to fifty head. So by then, in that relatively short space of time, ten years, the buffalo had already got out that far. But I think it’s purely a matter of temperament.

Q: But they did have ??????????????? fairly narrow confines ?????????????????

A: I think it’s still anybody’s guess. If anybody else has a theory that would be good.

Q: What about the British cattle? British cattle were also let go from Port Victoria. There is a record in John Lewis’ book ??????????????????? he mentions British cattle up there - shorthorns.

A: I think he also mentioned the fact that the failed to thrive. When John Lewis went to the Cobourg Peninsula, and this was an interesting record that I found; when John Lewis went to the Cobourg Peninsula they actually came across a buffalo near the isthmus of the
peninsula beyond Merganilla, where Merganilla now is, and there’s a story in John Lewis’ journal about the buffalo chased the Chines cook up a tree and they eventually, to rescue the Chinese cook, they shot the buffalo. And when they were cutting it up for provisions, John Lewis recorded that it had tick on it. That, to my knowledge is the first record of what were presumably cattle tick on buffalo in Australia, and it’s been totally ignored in all the literature. Yes there were a range of other animals introduced to Cobourg, other domestic animals. I published a paper in the Australian Veterinary Journal too in the 1960s, that was.. a whole.. poultry.. and most of them were let go when the settlement was abandoned. They just failed to thrive in that environment. The animals which were beautifully adapted, perfectly adapted to the environment were the Timor ponies, the Bali cattle and the buffalo. The buffalo moved out also because there aren’t a lot of great buffalo habitats on Cobourg. I think that’s part of the story there; they need fresh water and creeks and things. They could find it better when they moved off Cobourg and moved toward Merganella, a lot better habitat.

KATHERINE: I’d like to now ask the Administrator, His Honour Neil Conn, to move the vote of thanks. We at the Northern Territory Library are very grateful to Dr Conn for so readily agreeing to continue the association these lectures have enjoyed with Government House. Dr Conn.

VOTE OF THANKS -

Territorians and distinguished guest, particularly Goff, we have to call you a distinguished guest these days, you don’t come here often enough. In reading your biography tonight, I was struck again by the tremendously distinguished career you have had in the Northern Territory, and outside it for that matter. Before I revert to that again, I was admiring particularly the political skills you were developing in your speech tonight, which started off seductively with some pretty pictures and interesting asides on your adventures in the Cobourg area, and the way in which you brought it to a very fine point at the end saying ‘hands off Cobourg, leave it as it is; don’t interfere’, and I even heard an anti-tourism commercial in there somewhere and I don’t know whether Col Fuller’s smiling at me or glaring at me at the moment.

You really have had a most distinguished life. You have given us some fascinating insights into it tonight with that tremendous expedition that you led back in that time. It’s really hard to believe, looking at that shock of grey, distinguished hair, that that speckled figure in the.. only a mere 37 years ago was really you.

Also, I think the most striking thing in the way in which you presented this is not just your laconic charm, but that enormous modesty in which you gave us a throw-away line towards the end “which took my life in a rather different direction”. He was talking, of course, about the bureaucratic shackles imposed from Canberra and the efforts that Goff Letts himself, and a few other very special people in the Territory’s history made in breaking those shackles. And Goff is well-known as the father of self-government here in the Northern Territory and we will always be grateful to him for that.

The other thing I think I like about Goff particularly is that he knows how to spell his first name. In a somewhat whimsical moment I was wondering whether I should say, ‘well you could spell it like that other Gough who was around at the time’, but then I’d have some trouble knowing whether to pronounce it Gough as in through or Gough as in tough, but there is neither goo nor guff in that particular speech you gave us tonight. It was enthralling, exciting, charming, all the qualities that we expect of you. So, with all that goo and guff out of the way, thanks very much for a splendid speech in this series tonight. It’s a matter of
slight sadness to us that Eric’s not here to give the vote of thanks tonight, as he did for so many years in the series, but I’m sure he’s looking down on us at the moment saying, “Letts that’s a pretty good sort of speech, almost as good as the one that I set this whole series off along with.” So thank you very much on behalf of all of us here tonight, and it’s a big crowd, testimony to the regard with which you are held up here. Thank you for a splendid evening, an entertaining evening. We just wish there’d been a bit more of it. Thanks very much, and would you join with me in saying thanks to Goff Letts.

KATHERINE: That concludes the formal part of this evening’s entertainment, however I’m sure many of you would like to renew old acquaintances with Goff so light refreshments and drinks are now being served so please stay on and enjoy the rest of your evening. Thank you.