

# Immigration with a difference

► Greek adventures in the South-West Pacific rim ►

Adventurers in the regions  
north of Australia

## Nicholas Minister

On Australia's northern frontier as far as Papua New Guinea's chain of tropical islands such as the Trobriand Islands and D'Estrecheaux Islands, many stories, even as late as the 1930s, were still told of reckless adventurers who constantly challenged their luck even to the point of death in these regions.

One such notorious and most picturesque character was Nicholas Minister, better known as "Nick the Greek".

According to the [Lewis] Lett manuscript (held by the National Library of Australia) "the renowned Nicholas Minister – a Greek by birth- [was of] middle height, powerful, [with] oval face, pleasant resolute features, olive complexion and finely sparkling, hazel eyes".

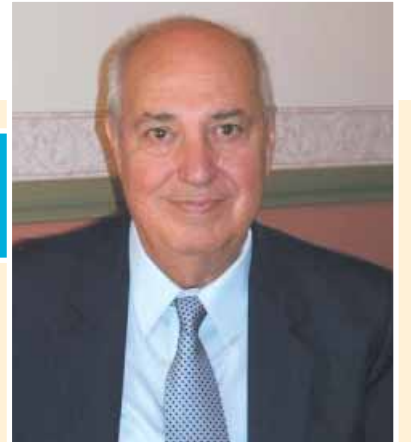
Indeed, Nicholas Minister was Greek, born on the island of Patmos in 1850.

From a poor family, with at least four sons that we know of (Nicholas himself, Peter, Mick and George), the only way to escape the poverty he and his family were experiencing, but also excited by the desire to make money and to see exotic places, like so many other Greek islanders, Nicholas turned his sights to the sea. Still a child, he left his rocky island to work on board a ship. At the age of eleven he was shipwrecked off the shores of Italy, being the only crew member out of fourteen to survive. After this event, he worked on other ships. His determination to seek new experiences and reach distant and unusual destinations was not deterred. So, late in the 1870s we find him in Australia, ready to begin a new chapter in his adventurous life.

He made his way to Queensland and from there to the islands of the Torres Strait and north of Cape York between Australia's northern peninsula and Papua New Guinea. First, he got closely involved with the Torres Strait islanders and was engaged in trade among the islands; then he became a prominent pearler and bêche-de-mer fisherman, leading, simultaneously, an adventurous sea-faring life. His reputation spread throughout Queensland, southern Papua and the islands in-between. A result, according to the Lett manuscript, was his being hired as bosun on the Queensland government



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When referring to immigrants we almost always mean people who, for economic, social, or political reasons, out of need or desire, but willingly, leave their homeland to settle

temporarily or permanently in another country or place of residence.

There is another type of "immigrants", however, those who are more aptly called "adventurers". Possessed by a restless but dynamic spirit, they see immigration as an opportunity to fulfill their life ambitions. They are usually driven, not necessarily by need, but by the desire to explore new places which they consider exotic and exciting, to acquire wealth by other than the ordinary ways, and to meet different people.

As a result, a country like Greece, with national symbols and heroes like Odysseus and Jason and the Argonauts, being deep-rooted in its cultural tradition, folklore and literature, could not be without such "adventurers".

Here we focus on the latter case of "immigrants", excluding explorers, navigators, and the usual types of travellers, on two Greeks who spent years in the north of Australia's regions of the south-west Pacific Rim, with their unconventional life stories and their daring enterprises which sometimes surpassed their human abilities and in the end led them to failure, disappointment and death.

ship Pearl, under Captain Pennyfather "in which capacity he had had on more than one occasion to take part in the capture and punishment of both Australian and Papuan blacks and of whom it was said the natives of the Louisiade [Archipelago] were more frightened than of all the men-of-war of the British Navy".

Indeed, already at the beginning of the 1880s, the Louisiade islanders got a bad taste of Nicholas Minister when he expanded his trading operations (especially the bêche-de-mer trade) to the islands of the Louisiade Archipelago, east of New Guinea, trading on his own account between them and the ports of Papua New Guinea (Port Moresby) and Queensland's Cape York Peninsula (Cooktown). It was reputed that while trading, he also got involved in deceivingly recruiting Louisiade islanders and sending them to work in the Queensland cane fields. Sometimes the islanders would try to take revenge for his wrongdoings. One such case, perhaps his narrowest escape from death, was mentioned by an individual who argued that he was "much exposed over a period of years to the company and conversation of Nicholas the Greek". This account was published in the Sydney journal *The Bulletin* (28 November 1928) as follows: Minister was sailing to Milne Bay of East Cape to take his sick comrades ashore, when, after anchoring his cutter, a group of native islanders came out to his vessel and threw him overboard. Nicholas, thanks to his extraordinary courage and fighting ability which made up for his lack of height, got hold of a trailing rope and slowly managed to climb back on board via the bobstay. Battling his way he dashed to his cabin where he drew the revolver he had in his sling bag, while blood was streaming down his face and shoulders from the numerous blows he sustained from the islanders' long trade knives. Later, according to his own words, "it was just like shooting chickens". Not one of the natives survived and Nicholas threw their bodies overboard to the sharks in the water below.

Many such adventures have been attributed to Nicholas Minister and tales could be written about this larger-than-life character, bêche-de-mer fisherman and buccaneer to, whose whole body from head to toe was covered by criss-cross and ridged scars, silent and permanent evidence of his desperate encounters with the islanders. His innumerable "man wounds" had been inflicted by spears, bullets, arrows, tomahawks, knives and even razors, though most were knife wounds. A contemporary who happened to know him well, wrote in *The Bulletin* (7 November 1928): "I never saw a man with such a mutilated hide as that Islands celebrity, the late lamented Nicholas the Greek". According to this informant, Nicholas used to confide, with that wary grin of his, that "man was the least formidable [adversary] because one always met him in his own element".

Nicholas Minister made a name for himself – some might say he created the material for a legend – with his

fearless but also extremely vengeful character, as the account of the retaliatory action he took against the Brooker islanders in 1884 indicates. After his vessel was seized by a group of these islanders with the intention to loot his cargo of trade goods and he was thrown into the sea, in his effort to climb back aboard, one of the assailants made a mess of his hands with a tomahawk. Despite the fact that he fell into the sea again and was thought to have drowned, the resourceful and unaided man, bleeding profusely from his hands, managed to jump on board. His appearance terrified the islanders so much, that believing it was his spirit which had returned, they jumped panic-stricken into the sea and swam to shore. According to Mollie Lett, a long-time resident of Papua, "the next morning the pigs of the ringleaders were shot, their canoes destroyed and their houses burned to the ground. The Brooker islanders left him in peace ever afterwards".

Over the years, Minister's reputation, not only of his fearsome and adventurous nature but also of his excellent knowledge of the islanders and the water ways around Papua's east end, was steadily growing. The Queensland authorities often took advantage of his expertise, as had happened in the past. This time, because of a long list of attacks against and massacres of traders, captains and their crews, including Australians, which were committed especially by the Louisiade islanders, during the years 1858-1887 retaliation measures were taken with Nicholas Minister's help. Actually, in June 1885, according to the Lett manuscript, Minister was recommended by Commissioner T. Bevan "to Admiral Tryon, H.M.S. Nelson, Sydney, as having the necessary knowledge and experience to help the warship capture the murderers of whites in the Louisiade islands". Bevan later would write that as early as 1883 he had suggested that Nicholas Minister, being a competent guide, should be absolutely necessary to accompany any punitive force. This suggestion was taken seriously and in January 1887, when the Queensland government assigned the Hon. John Douglas, as Special Commissioner to the Protectorate, to lead an expedition in order to arrest the ringleaders and bring the murderers to justice, he commissioned Minister as an advisor to help him catch them. Minister went along on that expedition, not failing to prove once again his tough way of administering justice, following his own motto: "Shoot first, enquire later". One account of this mission describes how he went ashore Joanneh Island and through the forest approached a ringleader's village, shot him, cut off his head and took it back to Governor Sir William MacGregor's ship. He threw the chief's head on the deck in front of the Governor and demanded the cash reward for it. Governor MacGregor (according to his biographer R.B. Joyce) ordered the head to be buried as "an end to that piece of disgrace".

This rough pattern of behaviour should not surprise