



us. Just one year earlier the Sydney newspaper The Daily Telegraph (9 July 1886) had reported that “Nicholas Minister, a notorious character, half bêche-de-mer fisherman and half buccaneer, against whom a charge of robbery and piracy on the high seas was lodged by Mr Kissach, Captain Thomson’s partner at Teste, as well as of kidnapping native women, has been required by the High Commissioner to proceed to Cooktown and meet his accusers there”. Similarly, a missionary, Reverend Chalmers, protested officially about Minister’s acts succeeding in the latter being declared an outlaw.

Although he was considered a ruffian and reckless – how much was true and how much was part of the tales that grew up around this “island legend” we will never know – “Nicholas the Greek” had some good deeds to his credit. For example, as The Bulletin (7 November 1928) relates, on one occasion off the North Queensland coast as he was trying to rescue the life of a native girl, eleven islanders appeared before him brandishing

tomahawks and knives. During the ensuing confrontation he was badly slashed before he managed to escape and reach shore through shark infested waters. As for his wounds he sewed them up with a packing needle and thread!

A story mentioned by Hugh Gilchrist is that Minister, despite the kind of life he was leading and that he never revisited Greece, never forgot his Greek origin and identity. This is evidenced by the fact that in 1901 he donated £6 towards the building of Holy Trinity, the Greek Orthodox church in Sydney.

What is fascinating about Minister’s life is that it is also studded with some very humorous stories. The tale most frequently retold by the old-timers of North Queensland still in the 1930s, was how Minister eluded a cruiser off the New Guinea Coast.

The most amusing as well as most exaggerated version is in the January 1929 issue of The Bulletin. According to this account a Dutch cruiser was anxiously searching the waters of New Guinea for

Nick to bring him to justice because he had caused some trouble in Dutch territory. The captain saw Nick’s cutter and inquired as to whether he knew the whereabouts of somebody called “Nicholas Minister”. Nick agreeably accepted to offer his services and piloted the cruiser through the dangerous reefs to parts of the coast where the rogue could be found. To the crews of the lowered boats Nick gave instructions on how to avoid the reefs and then proceed straight ahead. Nick then returned to his cutter, loaded with gifts and the captain’s expressions of thanks and went on his way. An hour later the boats were immobilised lying stranded on mud banks. The Dutch never found out that their helpful pilot was “Nick the Greek”, the man they were searching for.

By 1890 “Nick the Greek’s” pearl-fishing activities were flourishing. As his business was expanding and he needed more hands, he brought his three brothers (Peter, Mick and George) from Greece, and eventually a Greek “colony” was said to

have sprung up.

So, the Greeks, with Nick, sporting his favourite Trobriand calico costume and as loquacious as ever, as their leader, quickly secured the pearl trade in this region and became as firmly established as their compatriots in the Sydney cray and oyster industries. The reputation of the Greek pearl trade spread beyond the region and overseas, and eventually their beautiful black, pink and yellow pearls attracted buyers from France and Germany to their trading posts on Samarai Island off the coast of east Papua as well as at the Trobriands.

On 18 January 1915, “Nick the Greek” died of dysentery, after three weeks of illness at the age of sixty-five, at Teavi in the Trobriands. Despite the several fortunes he had made, he left behind him an estate worth only £197. What is more significant is that Nicholas Minister remains a striking Greek adventurer – a legend on the frontier north of Australia.

To be continued tomorrow.

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