

Government expeditions in the Top End, 1905 and 1911

Herbert Basedow was based in Darwin, in the Northern Territory, on two occasions early in his career. For several months in 1905 he took part in geological investigations in the region and in 1911 served a short term as a senior government official for the newly established Northern Territory Government.

Basedow's work as a geologist in 1905 was again at the instigation of the South Australian Government Geologist HYL Brown, who had recommended him for the 1903 expedition. This time Basedow worked alongside Brown, as well as Lionel Gee, an inspector of mines. The original intention was to investigate the geology of the entire Northern Territory coastline but Brown was unable to secure a suitable boat. Instead he hired a smaller boat that allowed the party to explore the western coastline (including Melville and Bathurst islands) as far east as Port Essington. They also explored inland areas as far south as Bradshaw station near the mouth of the Victoria River. In all, the party spent just over seven months in the Top End.

Despite his inexperience, Basedow undertook some of the field work independently, partly to allow more territory to be covered. During the trip he was able to meet up with an older brother, Erwin, who arrived in the Northern Territory to manage the government smelter on the Daly River south of Darwin. Basedow also accompanied South Australia's Governor, George Le Hunte, to the Adelaide River for a buffalo shooting and sightseeing excursion on the SS *White Star*.

Aside from contributing to the expedition's geological report and map, Basedow exercised his broader interests in the field. He investigated Chinese mining methods in the Top End and the early history of mining in the Northern Territory, contributing papers on both subjects, as well as scientific papers on geology, written jointly with Brown, as part of the expedition's official report.

Basedow returned to the Northern Territory in 1911. On 1 May he assumed the important position of Chief Medical Inspector and Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, initially working in

**Prisoner, charged with
cattle killing, with female
'witnesses', Northern
Territory 1905 or 1911**

reproduced from glass plate negative

Adelaide on policy and practical matters. He arrived in Darwin on 18 July, but resigned from the post after just 45 days. Evidently the administration found him difficult to work with, and working conditions were not to Basedow's satisfaction, especially as he was expected to remain in his office and not undertake fieldwork. Basedow preferred to be out in the field and was quoted as saying that 'he had no intention of sitting down in Port Darwin', as it was known at the time.

The only trip Basedow is known to have made outside of Darwin at this time was to Melville and Bathurst islands to inspect the health of Aboriginal people. Accompanied by one of his health inspectors, JH Kelly, he left Darwin on 1 August 1911 by launch. During the week-long trip, the party proceeded along the southern coastline of Bathurst Island until a gale forced them to shelter in Apsley Strait. From there they sailed along the strait, landing wherever possible and proceeding on foot.

On Bathurst Island, Basedow's party made contact with Aboriginal people living in the bush and visited more than 100 people at the newly established mission on the south-eastern corner of the island. In his 'Notes on the Natives of Bathurst Island, North Australia' published in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* in 1913, Basedow described what was probably a ritualised welcome when encountering armed men on the island:

When we met with men, hunting in the bush, and they had been convinced of our

bona fide intentions, they would approach us in groups of from two to four, and deliver up their long spears to us.

While this may indicate how Basedow acquired some or even all of the spears he collected on this trip, his acquisition of five grave posts from around the grave of an infant, who had died several years previously, on the south-east corner of Bathurst Island, is well documented in his article:

All of [the graveposts] still showed traces of having been painted with ochres in a most elaborate manner. The designs were, however, incomplete, so that I had them freshened up by the natives, who willingly consented to do so and exercised the greatest care to apply the colours in precisely the same positions as they originally occupied.

Basedow took several photographs of the grave and the posts being repainted. He also photographed the posts themselves, presumably back in Adelaide, for the article.

Basedow also saw Aboriginal people on Melville Island. Here he found bark huts with paintings on some of the walls. He may have collected at least two of these paintings: one decorated with hand stencils and depicting a lugger and what Basedow identifies as a frog; the other also depicting a lugger. His findings on the state of health of the islanders were reported in his 1913 article in which he concluded that they were 'comparatively free from any serious disease'.