WILEY

Explorations in the Region of the Upper Gascoyne and Ashburton Rivers, West Australia
Author(s): Ernest Favenc
Source: *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*,
New Monthly Series, Vol. 11, No. 8 (Aug., 1889), pp. 492-496
Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of [The Royal Geographical Society \(with the Institute of British Geographers\)](#)
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1801327>
Accessed: 13/06/2014 06:16

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) and Wiley are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Explorations in the Region of the Upper Gascoyne and Ashburton Rivers, West Australia.

By ERNEST FAVENC.*

THE country traversed during this short trip is situated about 24° S. lat.; the region drained by the head waters of the Gascoyne and Ashburton rivers on the coast-fall, and the unnamed creeks and watercourses running into the interior of the continent on the eastern slope. At the present time pastoral settlement has extended to the head of the Murchison river, there being but one small outlying station on the Upper Gascoyne, and the Upper Ashburton is without settlement. My intention originally was to cross from the head of one of these rivers to a point on the overland telegraph line about the neighbourhood of Newcastle Waters, but circumstances of a private nature obliged me to forego this intention and content myself for the present with a shorter trip.

We left Champion Bay in March 1888, but as I had certain areas of pastoral country to examine and report on, the work of exploration did not commence until May 15th, when I left our camp on the Upper Gascoyne to cross on to the head of the Ashburton on the north. I had with me Mr. W. R. Cuthbertson, surveyor, and a West Australian native named Toby, leaving two men in camp until our return. This portion of the continent of Australia partakes of the monotonous character of the great plain of the interior. The forests are stunted and consist chiefly of thickets of mulga, the plains are but poorly grassed, the ridges and ranges excessively stony and invariably covered with the prickly grass known as spinifex. Necessarily the landscape is devoid of any beauty.

Our first night's camp was a shallow brackish pool on the main head of the Gascoyne. The next morning we followed this branch up, and at nightfall found ourselves at the foot of a bold bluff range, rugged and precipitous. In the morning we traced the course of the river for many miles without finding either water or sign of animal life. From the summit of a small hill at the highest point we reached, the view to the eastward afforded nothing but an expanse of low ranges, one mountain of some size being a conspicuous object. The absence of water compelled us to return some distance to a small rocky pool we had noticed the day before. The following day we made straight for the lowest gap we could see in the range, carrying on the pack-horses as large a supply of water as our canvas bags would hold.

After following up a rugged and dry watercourse, we reached the top of the range by a comparatively easy ascent, and found ourselves on

* Author of the 'History of Australian Exploration from 1788 to 1888' (Sydney, 1888). A reference to Mr. Favenc's previous journeys of exploration is given in 'Proceedings R.G.S.,' 1888, p. 743.—[Ed.]

a wide plateau sloping gradually to the north, scantily clothed with stunted shrubs and spinifex grass. Dark level-topped ranges lay in front of us, and we were evidently on the head of a river valley. By dark we had followed down a dry creek strewn with boulders, for some miles; and the country bearing every indication of continuing its rough and inhospitable character, we had to camp on the first clear patch we reached. The utter absence of feed or water for our horses compelled us to tie them to trees with halters to prevent them rambling away, and before daylight had fairly broken, we were once more in the saddle. The creek we were following soon assumed the proportions of a river, running through a valley bounded on each side by rude bluffs; its course was a fair north-westerly one; still it was quite dry and the country through which it took its course was a desert of the worst type. We were now anxiously looking out for any indications of water, as our horses had been without a drink since the morning before.

At noon we crossed a red sand ridge, and struck a dry creek coming from the east; following this down I noticed that some rushes on the bank looked green and fresh about the stems, so we dug a small hole in the creek and found the sand slightly damp. By going deeper, and enlarging the hole, we obtained a scanty supply of water, that sufficed to give our horses a much-needed drink. The process was very slow, and may be said to have occupied the whole of that afternoon and the following night, the water having to be baled out of the hole and poured into an impromptu trough, but it drained so slowly into our little well, that it took nearly two hours to collect sufficient to satisfy one horse.

On the 20th we still followed the dry river, which from its position and course we rightly judged to be the head of the Ashburton, until about the middle of the day, when a welcome change took place, but only for a short time. Crossing a low chain of hills we found that an abrupt transition occurred from a slate to a soft granite formation, the consequence being that at the foot of these hills extended small plains well grassed, leading us to hope that we were at last to emerge from the dreary desert through which we had been travelling so long.

From the top of the hill we had mounted we overlooked a large basin, the course of the river through it being easily traced by the green foliage of the gum trees, contrasting against the dull grey of the mulga. In the distance we noted the smokes of native fires, the first signs of life we had yet met with.

On making for the river, however, we found that the country soon resumed its desert character, and the river, now of great width, consisting of a bed of dry sand and shingle intersected with rocky bars, groves of tall gum trees lining both the bed and banks. At this point it ran a due west course, but up to nightfall we ran it down without finding any sign of water. Continuing our course the next morning we

reached a shallow spring on the southern bank shortly before noon and unsaddled and unpacked to enjoy a well-earned rest. The spring was surrounded by a good growth of bulrushes, which afforded a favourable evidence of its permanency. The water rose during the night, but became absorbed in the sand during the day, a phenomenon I have noticed in other parts of Australia. Resuming our journey, the following morning we steered a north-west course towards a high peak or bluff, the river still running towards the west. After a stiff climb we ascended this peak, and from the summit had a wide panorama spread out before us.

Apparently the river, below where we had encamped on it, ran through a succession of gorges, caused by ranges of broken hills crossing its course. These hills had precipitous sides, in which weather-worn caves were distinctly visible. South of us rose a great pile of ranges, one tall mountain overtopping all the others. To the westward was an open basin bounded by ranges with serrated crests, and northward were more flat-topped hills.

Descending, we came to a large dry creek running through a narrow valley, bounded by fantastically shaped hills of slate, the colours of some varying from bright red to pure white. This creek led us once more on to the main river. After a day spent in examining the basin in which we found ourselves, we made an excursion to the south-west. This entailed taking our horses over what appeared an almost impassable range, and it was only by great good fortune that we reached the crown of it without accident. The southern slope proved less rugged and we descended into a valley, at the bottom of which ran a sandy river nearly as large as the one we had left. It was keeping a north-west course, and would apparently effect a junction with the Ashburton some fifteen miles below where we crossed it.

That night we camped on a limestone tableland, and in the morning, as we were now far enough to the westward, we parted company to rendezvous on the newly discovered river, which I named the Cunningham. During the morning I traversed two or three of the main water-courses, and at noon returned to the Cunningham, where I met the surveyor and black boy with the pack-horses. I heard from them that when they came to the river they found themselves unexpectedly close upon a large body of natives, who refused to make friends or allow them to come to close quarters. As we had no wish provoke hostilities, we did not trouble them with any more attention, but proceeded back to the Ashburton, which we reached the next morning.

We next explored a large tributary of this river coming from the east, which we found drained a well-grassed valley and contained permanent springs at short intervals in its course.

During a stay in this region we noticed a great absence of game, and the large encampment of natives seen by Mr. Cuthbertson was the

only one we encountered. We found the extreme head of the river to be valueless for the purposes of settlement, as it takes its rise in the desert plateau that occupies a large space of the interior. On reaching a lower level, however, the river takes its course through valleys, the flats on either side being well grassed, and covered with many varieties of fodder plants, rendering them capable of being converted into first-class sheep and cattle runs.

After finishing our examination of the north-eastern tributary, we returned to camp by a different route, having been absent nearly three weeks.

Our next excursion was towards the interior, but the results were almost without interest, the country being flat and waterless, and the creeks small and fragmentary; in time, however, with the advancement of settlement, it will be valuable pasture-land.

After our return we proceeded to explore a large tract of unknown country on the southern side of the Ashburton, below our former labours. Our way led us up a creek running into the Gascoyne from the north, heading from broken scrubby ranges. Two large peaks marked the summit of the watershed, and the fall towards the Ashburton we found to be equally stony and rugged.

After some rough experience we reached the lower reaches of the watercourses, which, as formerly, broadened into wide sandy rivers, running through flats covered with different varieties of salt-bush, the whole of the valleys being admirably adapted for sheep runs. Following down one of the largest of these rivers we came to a large and richly grassed valley, through which ran a river receiving all the broken creeks which had so hampered our progress.

This valley of rich pastoral country was one of the finest and most picturesque I have seen during my travels on the Australian continent. The ranges that bounded it were most striking in appearance, presenting precipitous sides towards the valley, whereon the lights and shadows were continually changing. The bottom of this valley was fine open forest country, well grassed, and covered with many varieties of herbage and fodder plants, the whole district forming the ideal of a magnificent sheep and cattle run. On our return we followed up another large tributary river coming down through the ranges in a succession of gorges. In one of these gorges we came upon another large encampment of natives, who mounted the surrounding hills, from the top of which they watched us so long as we were in sight of them.

The result of the whole trip was the discovery of several large tributary rivers of the Ashburton, running through magnificent pastoral country, which will soon become valuable sheep runs. These rivers we named the Cunningham, the Jackson, and the James. We found the physical features of the country different entirely to the conjectural ones placed on some of the Western Australian maps, the supposed course of

the Upper Ashburton being from 20 to 30 miles out of position by the observations taken by Mr. Cuthbertson, who has a high reputation as a careful surveyor. These discrepancies are but natural, as the features sketched in the maps are purely imaginary.

The geological formation of the Ashburton is against the likelihood of any valuable mineral deposits being discovered in the future; on the head of the Gascoyne, however, there is every prospect of the country repaying a careful search for gold, the indications tending towards the existence of a reefing field rather than alluvial deposits.

There is a good underground supply of water on the Gascoyne, at the comparatively shallow depth of from 12 to 15 feet.

The aborigines of this part are of a peculiarly degraded type, being greatly below the average of the natives of the northern and eastern coasts in intelligence. Probably this is owing to the scanty game and food supply, rendering the struggle for existence very keen.

*Colonel Labre's Explorations in the Region between the Beni and
Madre de Dios Rivers and the Purus.*

Map, p. 524.

THE necessity of discovering an outlet viâ the Amazons to the Atlantic for the produce of the rich regions of Northern Bolivia and Southern Peru east of the Andes, which inspired some years ago the bold but unsuccessful attempt to construct a railway past the long line of cataracts and rapids which obstruct the navigation of the river Madeira, has since then led to the exploration of other possible routes, to the west of that great tributary of the Amazons. This arduous work has been undertaken by a Brazilian gentleman, Colonel Antonio R. P. Labre, and has resulted in a considerable addition to our geographical knowledge of the interior of South America. He conceived that the river-basins west of the Madeira would be found free from the physical obstacles to a road or railroad, which are so difficult to overcome on the somewhat nearer and more direct route along the banks of that great affluent of the Amazons; the country also is free from the malaria which is so fatal in the neighbourhood of the falls of the Madeira. Colonel Labre last year read a paper, giving a résumé of his various journeys, to the Geographical Society of Rio de Janeiro. We are indebted to our Associate Mr. Herbert Guillaume, Peruvian Vice-Consul at Southampton, for a copy of the paper, and for much additional information which he has obtained direct from Colonel Labre, as well as for material which has enabled our cartographer, Mr. Turner, to construct the accompanying map. The first explorer of the Purus and its tributaries, it will be remembered, was our Gold-Medallist, Mr. W. Chandless, and one of the interesting results of Colonel Labre's explorations is that they connect