

White Gold, Deep Blue: Greeks in the Australian pearling industry, 1880s–2007*

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Since the late 1880s, Greeks have been involved in Australian pearling — initially in the pearl shell industry and then in pearl cultivation. The significant strength of the Greek contribution to Australian pearling far outweighed the actual numbers involved. Key Greek individuals, families and regional groups who are featured include: Mary Dakas (nee Paspalis), most probably Australia's only Greek female pearl lugger operator; her brothers Michael and Nicholas, of whom the latter went on to establish the internationally renowned Paspaley Pearling Company; Denis George, whose research and experiments were pivotal to the development of pearl cultivation in Australia; Michael G. Kailis, who established Broome's first successful pearl farm; the Haritos brothers, George, Jack and Nicholas, who were part of the attempt to revive Australian pearling after World War II; and the pioneering early Kastellorizian pearlery who were later followed in the 1950s by crews from another Dodecanese island, Kalymnos.

For approximately 120 years, a persistent Greek presence has existed in Australian pearling. Other groups from non-English speaking backgrounds succeeded in numerically dominating the industry, but the ongoing Greek contribution has been, at times, exceptionally pivotal. Their involvement has extended across both major phases of Australian pearling's development — initially, pearl shell harvesting, and later pearl cultivation.

Pearling in Australia commenced as early as the 1850s, around Shark Bay in Western Australia. Gradually the activity progressed further north along the continent's north-western coastline. Initially, the pearl shells were gathered only from shallow water, but gradually the activity burgeoned into the more highly organised

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This presentation has been developed upon the foundation of a much earlier Greek-Australian print-media article published by the authors (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1990:64-69).

and commercial deep-sea pearling. Pearl oysters were not only sought for their pearls, but more importantly, the real commercial undertaking of the pearlers was to supply local and overseas markets with oyster shell. The shell was highly valued for its iridescent lining — mother-of-pearl — which was utilised in the manufacture of buttons, a variety of ornaments such as pearl cameos, belts, fan and knife handles, jewellery boxes, and inlays on clocks.

Early Australian pearling ports included Nickol Bay, Onslow, Cossack and Port Hedland. By the 1890s, Broome, located on the northern point of Roebuck Bay in Western Australia, had become Australia's chief pearling port. At the same time Darwin in the Northern Territory had begun to play a small part in pearling operations. East of Darwin across the Gulf of Carpentaria, regular pearling had begun north of Thursday Island. By 1904, there were 403 pearl luggers in Western Australia, the majority in Broome, 378 at Thursday Island, located just north-west of Cape York, and approximately 50 in Darwin. During its heyday Thursday Island was reputedly the largest pearling port that ever existed (*The Bateman Concise Encyclopedia of Australia*, 1984:496; Powell, 1982:105).

These Australian pearling ports attracted adventurers, seafarers and migrants — potential danger, the romance of the sea and employment proved too persuasive for many, either in combination or as separate entities. Some established, or were engaged in assisting with, the provision of land-based goods and services required by the luggers and their crews, while others opted to live precariously close to the razor's edge and dive for the white gold in the deep blue. Perhaps not surprisingly, Greeks figured amongst the conglomerate of international faces drawn together by the enticing lure of these pearling ports. As Norman Bartlett, one of Broome's "old timers" points out:

In the rip-roaring days before 1914 there were 600 Japanese in the town and hundreds of other nationalities — "Koepangers" (from islands in the Dutch East Indies such as Timor), "Filipinos" (from the islands of the Philippines), Chinese, Indians, Malays, "bighis", as we called the Aborigines, "creamies" or mixed bloods, Greeks, Spaniards and French to say nothing of a few Americans and Germans. There were more than 2,000 coloured people to 400 or 500 Europeans (Madigan, nd:np).

One of the earliest Greeks known to have become involved with the Australian pearling industry was Athanasios Avgoustis (Arthur Auguste), who is said to have sailed to Broome around 1888; though his passport indicates late 1890 (Appleyard and Yiannakis, 2002:13, 278). He is reported to have "for some time worked at the pearling grounds" (Mirmikidis, private papers), before departing for Fremantle. Interestingly, Antonio Julian, who arrived with three other Greeks in Albany, Western Australia, early in 1870, appears to have journeyed north to Cossack where he undertook work as a pearler — how soon after his arrival though is unknown; he died in 1887 in Cossack (Appleyard and Yiannakis, 2002:11).

Another early Greek pioneer pearler was Theodosios Michael Paspalis, who arrived with his family in Port Hedland during 1919. A tobacco merchant from Kastellorizo,

who had sailed his own trading vessel around the islands of the Aegean, Theodosios purchased a share in a pearling lugger whilst also establishing a grocery store business. Regrettably, Paspalis died after only five years in Australia, but his interest in the local pearling industry was later taken up by his sons, Michael and Nicholas, and daughter, Mary (Paspalis, 1987; Paspaley, 1987).

Georgios Marinos and Georgios Thomas were also early Greek pearl-ers working out of Port Hedland (Gilchrist, private papers). Both had commenced pearling before Paspalis' arrival, as had Jack Kootsookis who operated out of Broome (Christie, nd:86). A little later, Broome became the home port for Greek pearl diver Michael Canaris (Papadonakis, J., 1987; Papadonakis, J. and Liveris, 2006), and another Greek pearler of the period, John Theoharris, is said to have been based on Thursday Island. Theoharris was, reputedly, affectionately dubbed by the local Indigenous people, "King John" (D'Ercole, 1987).

Like these men, other Greeks (overwhelmingly from Kastellorizo) had also succeeded in undertaking work at Australia's pearling ports before the early 1920s — primarily as divers, crewmen, carpenters or pearl shellers. Some, like Georgios Thomas, obtained several pearling permits, and although these were threatened with suspension during World War I, he and other such enterprising Greeks benefited from the boom times that followed the war (Christie, nd:122). Broome, for example, by 1925 boasted 400 pearling luggers, it produced 80% of the world's market of mother-of-pearl (New York and London were the major markets), and had acquired a population of some 5,000 inhabitants (*Shire of Broome Community Information Directory*, 1986–1987:54; *Contact*, 1981:8).

From the late 1920s, global economic depression forced a decline in the mother-of-pearl industry, and although it survived, the dynamism and vitality that had previously characterised Australian pearling could not be resuscitated. With the entry of the Japanese into World War II, the industry dramatically collapsed. In Broome alone, some 500 Japanese were employed by pearling companies, and all were to be rounded up and interned as enemy aliens. Many luggers were set ablaze on the beaches for fear that they would fall into enemy hands, while others were commandeered and sailed to the relative safety of Perth (*Contact*, 1981:10; Edwards, 1994:60).

Following the war, with the barring of Japanese divers and crews from the Australian pearling fields (Edwards, 1994:60), a major chapter of Greek involvement with the industry opened. Replacements had to be found if Australian pearling was to be rekindled.

The Kalyrnian Brotherhood in Sydney (formally constituted in 1951), suggested that replacement crews should be sought from amongst the unemployed sponge divers on Kalymnos, one of the Dodecanese islands (Tsougranis, 1980–1981:8–10); a synthetic cellulose sponge had been developed and demand for the natural product had slowly begun a downwards slide, which after 1958 would be accelerated by the large scale European production of a high quality synthetic sponge (Christie, nd:144–145). The suggestion was taken very seriously, particularly given the highly successful

use of Kalymnian divers at Tarpon Springs in Florida, USA, from 1905 until just after World War II; Tarpon Springs was the world's largest producer of natural sponges during the mid-1940s (Moskos, 2003:143; Frangos, 2003:167; Christie, nd:144).

A government report was prepared by an Australian Immigration Department official, Eugene Gorman, on the feasibility of the proposal to bring out the Kalymnians. When he visited Kalymnos in late 1951, Gorman found numerous potential recruits, all intoxicated by the possibility of migrating to Australia (Christie, nd:144; Kotis, 1990; Halkitis, 1990; Fountis, 1990; Papadonakis, T., 1987). Two Greek characters from Charmian Clift's and George Johnston's collaborative novel, *The Sponge Divers*, written during their nine-month sojourn on Kalymnos from December 1954 to August 1955, suggest the emotional effervescence ignited by the possibility of migration to Australia:

All Kalymnos is unsettled, restless, drunk with these ridiculous hopes and expectations [...] If it's handled right we'll all be able to go to Australia [...] There'll be plenty work for everyone, good money, nobody will go hungry (Clift and Johnston, [1955] 1992:168, 177).

With the acceptance of the idea amongst both Greek and non-Greek lugger operators in Broome and Darwin, which included the Haritos brothers (George, Jack and Nicholas had commenced pearling in 1952), A. E. and W. T. Duffield, Bowden Pearl- ing Company, Michael Paspalis, Nicholas Paspaley (Michael's brother, who had anglicised his surname) and H. O. and R. N. Hockings, the project was given the official go ahead. As George Haritos, who managed the Haritos' pearling enterprise recalled: "We were asked if anyone wanted Greek divers — Paspaley, Gonzales, Billy Sing, Curly Bell and ourselves; these were the luggers (lugger owners) at the time. I volunteered to give them (the Kalymnian divers) a try" (Haritos, 1987).

Two Kalymnian diving crews were brought to Australia at government expense, the first in 1954, and the second in 1955 — the Inter-Governmental Committee for European Migration (I.C.E.M.) arranged for their passage (Cigler and Cigler, 1985:173; *Northern Territory News*, 22 February 2000, Peter Forrest). Both crews totalled twelve men. The first crew was based in Darwin and the second in Broome (Halkitis, 1990; Christie, nd:144). Unfortunately the diving experience and skill of the Kalymnians were negated, principally by two factors. The diving system used by the Australian pearl luggers was different to that with which the Kalymnians were familiar — "half" deep-sea diving suits were employed rather than "full" suits — and the huge tides and murky tropical waters off the north-west Australian coast were a stark contrast to the calm clarity of the Mediterranean where tidal changes are often imperceptible. According to Nomikos Pasterikos, who was "*capitanos*" amongst the 1954 Kalymnian contingent, "when you bent to pick up the shell, the water came up over your head — we couldn't wear the 'half' suits" (Pasterikos, 1987). Both Pasterikos and Tony Papadonakis (a line tender) firmly indicate that the conditions were dangerously unfamiliar (Pasterikos, 1987; Papadonakis, T., 1987). One diver, Theo Halkitis, recalls that diving was undertaken "with quite antiquated methods and equipment"

(Christie, nd:145). Halkitis was injured when his air supply line became caught in the lugger’s propeller shaft — no protective guards had been installed (Christie, nd:145; Halkitis, 1990; Pasterikos, 1987). Whilst Halkitis was lucky to escape with his life, tragically on 24 May 1956, Hristos Kontoyiannis was not. The Coroner’s inquest found that the death of the chief diver of the Kalymnian-crewed lugger, *Postboy*, was the result of

asphyxia, due to sudden distension of the lungs when the propeller cut the air-line [...] The accident was caused when the lugger proceeding at a very slow pace was forced backwards by three heavy and unexpected waves thus fouling the air-line which was in its normal position over the verandah protruding from the stern (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1990:68).

While no evidence of negligence on the part of the crew members was uncovered by the Coroner, public gossip ridiculed the unfortunate seamen with suggestions that such a mishap would not have occurred with a Japanese crew (*The West Australian*, 25 June 1956, Roy de Pedro). For some of the Kalymnians, such talk underlined what they sensed to be a strong desire by a number of lugger operators to regain the use of cheap Japanese labour (Papadonakis, T., 1987; Pasterikos, 1987). In 1976, the dead diver’s son arrived from Greece both to retrieve his father’s bones, and to uncover the “real story” surrounding the tragedy. He returned to Greece unconvinced by the Coroner’s report (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1990:68).



Funeral of Hristos Kontoyiannis, pearl-shell diver, Broome Cemetery, Western Australia, 1956. The Kalymnian crew of the pearl lugger *Postboy* pay their last respects to their chief diver. Standing at the centre of the group is Mary Dakas (nee Paspalis)

(Photo courtesy Papadonakis family, from the “In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians”, National Project Archives, Macquarie University)

Disheartened by the unfamiliar conditions and equipment, members of each Kalymnian crew broke their contracts and sought land-based employment in Darwin. The project's dismal failure was an embarrassment for the Australian Government, but not for too long, as a crash occurred in the pearl shell market at the close of the 1950s — plastics were superseding mother-of-pearl in the production of buttons and other shell-related goods. Most lugger operators quickly abandoned the industry — though faint echoes of it remained until the early 1970s — while the Kalymnian crews primarily immersed themselves in Darwin's booming building industry; the town's reconstruction and expansion, following the Japanese bombing during the war, was continuing with vigour (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1990:68).

Despite the failure of the Kalymnian experiment during the 1950s, the period did witness the successful establishment of an unusual Greek pearler within the industry — Mary Dakas (nee Paspalis, the sister of Michael and Nicholas), who went into pearling in her own right in 1949 and whom we consider as “most probably Australia's only Greek female pearl lugger operator” (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1990:68; Alexakis and Janiszewski, 1998:74).

Left with boats and a marine workshop in Fremantle after the accidental electrocution of her second husband, Christopher Dakas, in 1948, Mary quickly resolved to enter into the staunchly male domain of pearling. Her decision was possibly tempered by her father's experiences in the industry during the late 1910s and the early 1920s, the pearling activities of her brothers, and the potential commercial resurgence of the sea-based enterprise after the war. However, Dakas' strongest influence was probably her mother's (Chrisafina Paspalis) dabbling in the trading of pearls, after Mary's father's death, to supplement the income from the family grocery store. Moving to Broome, she was soon operating luggers out of Broome and Port Hedland (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1990:68; Lance, 2004:185; Paspaley, 1987). As Mary explained:

I had four boats pearling. I started with the *Swallow* in 1949. My son Manuel built the *Kestrel* (*Kestrel Mannina*) on the beach at Broome, and we added the *Jedda* and one other (*Marigo*) to the fleet. We did well while the price of shell held up (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1990:68).

When the pearl shell market plummeted in the very late 1950s, Mary was unable to sell her original lugger, *Swallow*, and it was left to rot on the beach amongst vessels abandoned by other lugger operators — the sands were a graveyard for the last vestiges of a passing era. Mary died in 1985, aged 76, and was buried at Perth's Karrakatta Cemetery. A Dakas Street exists in Broome today as a tribute to a unique Greek-Australian pioneer pearler who has been described by Julie Morrell of the Broome Historical Society as “a fascinating lady” of “very strong character” because “to take over the running of her luggers as she did [...] was against all the conventions of a very class conscious Broome of the 40s and 50s” (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1990:68).

One of Mary's younger brothers, Nicholas Paspaley, also succeeded in making quite a name for himself in pearling. Nicholas acquired his first lugger during the early

1930s. After World War II he purchased four luggers from the navy and became the “first man back into pearling out of Darwin” (Bowditch, 1981:29). His fleet remained economically viable until the crash of the pearl shell market in the late 1950s. Yet this was not the end of Paspaley’s romance with the sea but rather a new beginning. As Nicholas’ wife, Vivienne Paspaley, points out: “When the price fell (for pearl shell), we went solely into pearl culture” (Paspaley, 1987).

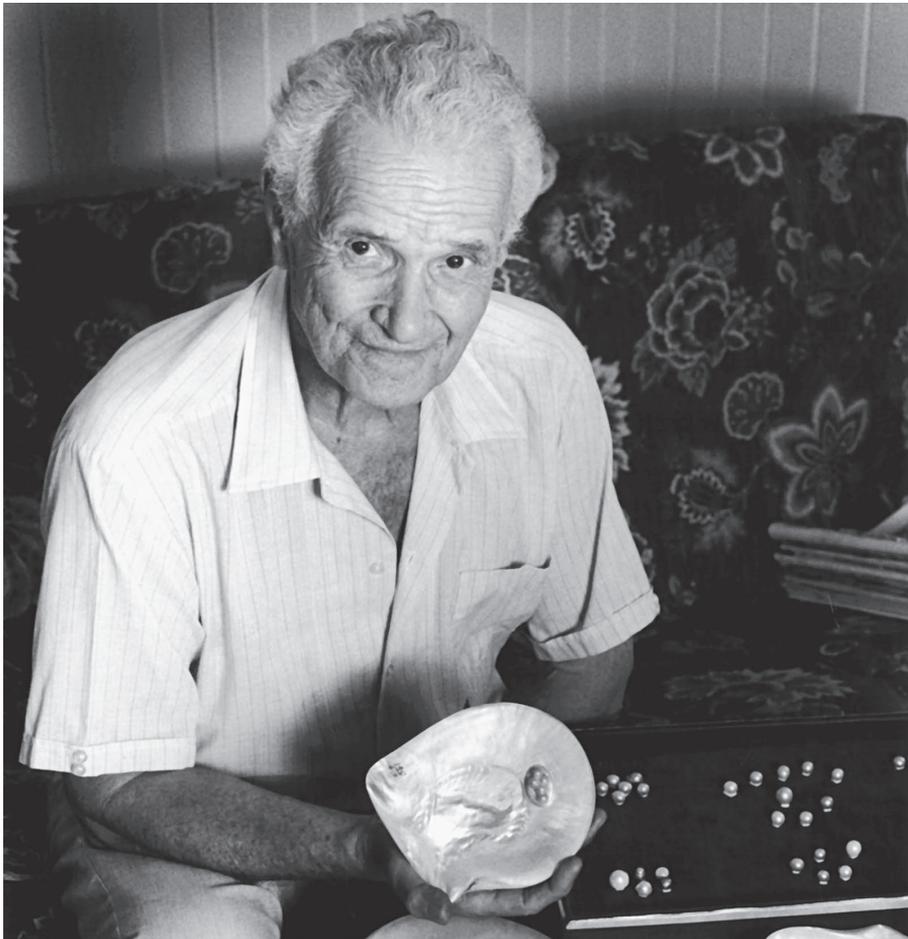
Nicholas Paspaley’s course was now set on becoming a master pearler in commercial pearl cultivation. The pearl would replace the pearl shell as the central focus of his activities, though the shell would be retained as a by-product for the inlay market. Cultured pearl farming had arrived in northern Australia in a very big way with the establishment in 1956 of a joint Australian, American and Japanese cultured pearl farm at Kuri Bay, some 420 km north of Broome. Under the guidance of Japanese businessman T. Kuribayashi (after whom Kuri Bay is named), the venture developed into the largest pearl culture farm in the world (Edwards, 1994:63; Doubilet, 1991:111, 114; Lance, 2004:204). Nicholas was inspired.

In 1963, the Paspaley Pearling Company entered into a working arrangement with a Japanese firm, Arafura Pearling Company, and commenced cultured pearl operations at Port Essington, part of the Cobourg Peninsula east of Darwin. Initially Paspaley’s arrangement with the Japanese was unsuccessful, but they later reached an agreement. While the Japanese would contribute the technical knowledge and skill, Nicholas’ company would provide the necessary vessels, the farm, much of the equipment, and the living pearl shell. From then on, Paspaley never looked back — during the early 1980s his Port Essington pearling farm was using up to 70,000 shells per year in its production. Nicholas died in 1984 in his late 60s, but the company continued to prosper under his son Nicholas Paspaley junior, who managed the enterprise with his sisters Roslynne and Marilynne (the latter also took up a successful acting career). By the early 1990s the Paspaley Pearling Company was said to control some 60% to 70% of Australia’s cultured pearl industry; in 1986 it had purchased the Roebuck Deep Pearls Company and in 1990, the firm of Pearls Proprietary Ltd, which included the historic Kuri Bay pearl farm (*N.T. Rural News-Magazine*, 1978:9–11; *Australian Fisheries*, 1980:13; Bowditch, 1981:29–30; Doubilet, 1991:122–123; Edwards, 1994:10).

During the late 1970s, another Greek of Kastellorizian background became interested in Australia’s cultured pearl industry: Western Australia’s prawn-fishing magnate, Michael G. Kailis. Kailis’ Broome Pearls was the first company to train Australian pearl technicians and it established Broome’s first successful pearl farm. Michael and his wife, Dr Patricia Kailis, were often described as a “formidable team”, and following her husband’s death in 1999, Patricia has continued to be involved in pearl cultivation (*The Australian*, 12 July 1999, Graeme Cocks; *Neos Kosmos English Weekly*, 17 June 2002, Effy Alexakis and Leonard Janiszewski).

Despite Paspaley’s and Kailis’ achievements in the commercial development of pearl cultivation in Australia, they were both preceded in their area of interest by another Greek: Con Denis George (Georgiades), who preferred to be addressed as

Denis George. Born in Constantinople (now Istanbul), George migrated from Athens to Sydney in 1948. As a youth, he had acquired a deep familiarity with the sea, and in 1949, whilst reading for leisure in Sydney's libraries, he became fascinated by Australia's pearl shell. The thought of possibly cultivating a south seas pearl for commercial distribution germinated, nourished by the fact that the large Australian pearl oyster would provide a cultured pearl much bigger than the small Japanese oysters. Pearl cultivation techniques had popularly been associated with the Japanese, but George discovered that during the late 1880s and early 1890s an Australian naturalist, William Savelle-Kent, had successfully experimented with south seas pearl oysters and a cultured pearl had resulted. Between 1952 and 1966, George experimented with oysters around Stradbroke Island, Cairns, Fitzroy Island, Thursday Island and nearby



Denis George, pearl cultivator, with his life's work, Cairns, Queensland, 1987

(Photo by Effy Alexakis, from the "In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians",
National Project Archives, Macquarie University)

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Packe Island. At the same time, he attempted to attract government and private backing to commercialise his technical achievements (Alexakis and Janiszewski, 1998:75; Davies and Dal Bosco, 2001:30–33; George, 1987). George wanted to set up a solely Australian owned pearl cultivation enterprise arguing that: “The (local cultured pearl) industry could and should be controlled by Australians. Australians could be taught how to do the operations. I could teach them, as I taught myself. The C.S.I.R.O. (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) could teach them” (*Sunday Mail*, 19 January 1964, Larry Foley).

Disillusioned by the failure of his efforts to achieve his goals for commercialisation, and believing that official Australian support was being directed towards Japanese ventures, and unashamedly withheld from sole Australian pearl cultivation activities, Denis George left Australia for Papua New Guinea. He spent the next sixteen years on Pear Island, just off Samarai Island, in Milne Bay, where he continued his work in pearl cultivation. After returning to Australia, George concentrated on documenting and publishing his technical knowledge and experience. He died in 2001 still dreaming of a profitable wholly Australian owned pearl cultivation industry stretching from Shark Bay, Western Australia, right across the continent’s northern coastline to Brisbane’s Moreton Bay. George’s work has been recognised as one of the pivotal contributions to the pioneering of Australian pearl cultivation (Alexakis and Janiszewski, 1998:75; Davies and Dal Bosco, 2001:30–36; George, 1987).

Throughout the greater part of the development of the Australian pearling industry, Greek involvement became increasingly conspicuous. Yet, many earlier historical glimpses of the industry have failed to recognise their consistent and at times, influential, contribution. This paper is part of the process of addressing such a serious flaw.

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