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Chapter 9

The Cooktown Railway: The track from "nowhere to nowhere".

To emphasise his [Mr Shipke's] multifarious duties, it was said that he sold an intending passenger a ticket at the window wearing a Station Master's cap; rushed to the gate in a porter's cap to check the ticket; submitted a shunter's hat to check the points; then donned a guard's cap to blow the whistle; and finally changed his headgear to a rail motor driver's cap and drove his rail motor Westwards to Laura! He usually collected all tickets - both forward and return - before the motor left Cooktown; he explained it saved time that way.⁷⁵⁶

This was the job-description of Fred Shipke, officer-in-charge of the Cooktown Railway, who retired in 1939 after twenty-three years of service. It illustrates how far the reality of this project differed from the rhetoric of those who had fought for its construction. After the line was completed to Laura in 1888, six people were employed in the traffic branch, five in the locomotive section, and eighteen on maintenance. By 1925 only five maintenance personnel were employed on the line, which had sixty-seven miles of track and eighty-four bridges.⁷⁵⁷ It was obvious that such a small crew could not keep the line safe, and by 1950 there were eleven regular employees. Additional staff was engaged as needed for emergencies.⁷⁵⁸ Little changed until the line was dismantled in 1961.

The building of the "Cooktown to Maytown" railway, which only reached the terminus at Laura, illustrates comprehensively the complexity of factors that influenced the developmental stage of European settlement in Queensland. While the provision of road and port infrastructure in

⁷⁵⁶ Knowles, *The Cooktown Railway*, p. 38.

⁷⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Cooktown and the associated gold fields was justified by the returns from mining, no such claim can be made with respect to the rail system. The construction of this rail line is significant, for it was built after the justification for its existence ceased to be relevant. The railway never reached its intended destination, but instead terminated at a bridge that was never used for practical purposes.⁷⁵⁹

The final justification for proceeding with the construction of the Cooktown to Maytown railway is difficult to assess. Political support for the project waxed and waned during the planning stage, as it did during construction. While the rhetoric of politicians who supported the project would indicate an honest belief in the viability of the scheme, it is difficult to understand, in view of the decline of the Palmer field, how this faith could be justified. It could be said that the decision to build the Cooktown to Maytown railway was governed by perceptions rather than by reality.

While a variety of reasons have been promoted to explain the Government's support for the railway, only one substantial investigation of the subject has occurred. Robert Ormston offers the view that the line was built because bureaucratic inertia prevented the project being abandoned before it started.⁷⁶⁰ This lassitude towards the responsibilities of office was influenced by the "tyranny of distance", in which the politicians involved found it easier to accede to the requests for infrastructure funding than to be subjected to continuing pressure from the various interested groups.⁷⁶¹ It could equally be argued that the construction of this railway was predicated by political expediency that is, for electoral purposes. This is not unknown in Australian

⁷⁵⁹ The only time a train crossed the bridge was to test the structure. Knowles, The Cooktown Railway, p. 1.

⁷⁶⁰ Ormston, "The Rise And Fall Of A Frontier Mining Town", p. 312.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., p. iii.

politics.⁷⁶² However, the similarity of the Cooktown Railway to privately constructed railways of equally dubious viability, such as the one between Mareeba and Chillagoe, would suggest that railway building was a symptom of the "development at all costs" attitude of many European citizens of the period. It certainly reflects the general belief that railways were the harbingers of progress. Certainly the American experience fostered that belief.

Despite Ormston's claims of political inertia, the available evidence indicates that a vigorous political debate accompanied all stages of the Cooktown railway project. The supporters of the scheme, both inside and outside Parliament, believed in the project, and in the viability of the mining fields the line would service. With the benefit of hindsight, a geological survey of the mining area would have demonstrated that the project could never be viable. However, the decision to build the line was little different to a variety of similarly ill-advised political decisions that have been made by other Governments. Such decisions usually indicate political expediency rather than incompetence or corruption.⁷⁶³

Irrespective of the justification of the Cooktown to Maytown railway, it is obvious that the project failed to prevent the decline of the area. In all probability the failure of the line to generate business, and the consequent financial drain this placed on the Queensland economy, would have accelerated the decline. As noted earlier, a succession of Governments of various political persuasions, faced with maintaining a

⁷⁶² For instance, the construction of the dam on the Ord River in Western Australia was widely considered to have been determined on political rather than economic grounds.

⁷⁶³ Charges were made that Thomas McIlwraith had pecuniary interests in purchasing railway construction materials in England but he was exonerated. D.B. Waterson, 1978. "Thomas McIlwraith: A Colonial Entrepreneur", in D.J. Murphy and R.B. Joyce (eds), Queensland Political Portraits 1859-1952, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, pp. 126-130.

railway “from nowhere to nowhere” at a considerable loss, refused to provide funds for any further substantial infrastructure in the area.

The Byerstown route: the first choice.

The principal justification for a railway to the Palmer River gold field was that the high transport costs to the field were impeding progress. This applied especially to hard-rock mining, where heavy machinery had to be transported to the field. However, the original proposal for a railway line to the gold fields involved a different route to the one that was finally adopted. In 1877 miners and residents of the Cooktown area petitioned for a railway to be constructed between Cooktown and Byerstown on the Palmer River.⁷⁶⁴ The petitioners said that freight charges of up to £16 per ton from Cooktown to the Palmer were excessive. They claimed that in the four years the field had been producing gold, the cost of freight was never lower than £9 per ton. The effects on the miners was significant, as an average of 400 tons of freight came into the harbour weekly, most of which went to the gold field.⁷⁶⁵ The Member for Cook, Mr Murphy, presented the petition to parliament, and moved successfully for a Committee of the Whole to consider allocating £3,000 for the survey of the route.⁷⁶⁶

The Government's response was half-hearted. It professed sympathy with the proposal, but allocated only £1,500 for the survey.⁷⁶⁷ After this it took no further action, prompting Murphy to ask the Secretary of Public Works if and when the survey would proceed. He was told that the Engineer-in-Charge had been instructed to start the survey as soon

⁷⁶⁴ *Q.V.P.* 1877, Vol. 1, p. 128.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 335.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 167.

⁷⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 237.

as possible.⁷⁶⁸ Murphy maintained pressure on the Government but achieved little success. Ironically, he was blamed for the lack of progress. Cooktown residents questioned his credibility, and accused him of lack of action on the town's behalf. The matter came to a head at a public meeting in Cooktown in April 1878, when the Mayor said that the local Member had ignored the Council's complaints about the lack of progress.⁷⁶⁹

Parochial rivalry was common between northern towns, and the Mayor exploited this sentiment, claiming that the Government was ignoring Cooktown while giving support to other areas. He told the meeting that Cooktown had been virtually ignored while Townsville had received £750,000 for infrastructure, despite the Government receiving more revenue from Cooktown than it did from Townsville. The meeting called on the Government to immediately begin the survey, as the line would lower freight costs, and would return a profit of £7,500 per annum.⁷⁷⁰ The survey was eventually undertaken and a plan of the route prepared, but no further action was taken at this stage. A proposal to allocate £15,000 in the 1878 budget for work on the line did not receive support.⁷⁷¹

Change of route: the Maytown connection.

In 1879 the preferred terminus for a line from Cooktown to the gold fields was changed. Rather than having the line go to Byerstown, supporters of the railway now concentrated on having a line from Cooktown to Maytown, which was central to the field, and showed promise as a reef mining area. They said the new proposed route had

⁷⁶⁸ Q.V.P. 1878, Vol. 1, p. 36.

⁷⁶⁹ Cooktown Courier, 27 April 1878.

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁷¹ Knowles, The Cooktown Railway, p. 2.

two advantages: proximity to the reefing field, and the vast coal deposits that existed close to the proposed route. The Cooktown Courier urged the local Member to push for a line to Maytown as close to the old road as possible. It claimed that cheap transport would provide the impetus needed for the Palmer to deliver its hidden riches and provide a boost for Cooktown.⁷⁷²

However, the scheme was not without its detractors. The project was threatened when the Opposition questioned its economic prospects. They queried the existence of viable coal deposits, and cited a report by Dr Logan Jack on the Little River area near Laura, which suggested that the coal was of doubtful quality.⁷⁷³ The local Member, John Walsh, who supported the line, told the Railway League that the Government could be persuaded to finance the railway if it could produce reliable evidence of a viable coal deposit.⁷⁷⁴

As discussed in chapter two, the members of the Railway League, a local association formed to promote the railway, proved as adept at political manipulation as the politicians in Brisbane. The League heard a report by John Rilley, an experienced miner, who claimed to have found one good seam of coal in the area investigated by Logan Jack. The League thought the report was not quite strong enough, and embellished it before presenting it to the Government. They said Rilley had found two seams of good quality coal over four feet thick each, and that the deposit was very close to the proposed rail line.⁷⁷⁵ It was, of course, a gross exaggeration.

⁷⁷² Cooktown Courier, 28 June 1879.

⁷⁷³ Q.V.P. 1882, Vol. 2, pp. 785-790.

⁷⁷⁴ Cooktown Courier, 27 August 1879.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid.

Railway construction schemes were popular throughout Queensland at the time, and supporters of the Maytown rail scheme used the considerable interest in a proposed "transcontinental" rail link between Roma and Point Parker,

occasion with a torchlight procession through the town.⁷⁸³ The festivities culminated in a Railway Ball, costing the Municipal Council £253/4/3.⁷⁸⁴ Despite evidence that the boom years for gold production at the Palmer were past, many people continued to believe the railway would rejuvenate the field. This faith was not confined to the locals. In supporting the provision of funds for the project, the Minister for Works, Hon. W. Miles stated, "It is generally conceded that the Maytown Gold Fields are very rich indeed, and the construction of this line will induce capitalists to go there and develop the mines".⁷⁸⁵

In its construction phase, the railway provided a much needed boost to Cooktown's economy. Most of the work, including ancillary infrastructure such as the wharf, locomotive sheds and railway station, was performed by private contractors, and provided about 400 jobs.⁷⁸⁶ Railway staff working in Cooktown during the construction period included the District Engineer, a clerk and storekeeper, two inspectors, one surveyor with assistant, and seven operational staff including the Station Master.⁷⁸⁷ The initial supply of rolling stock included one brake composite van, one seven-ton travelling crane, five covered wagons, six low-sided wagons and eight decked timber wagons. These were all were built in Queensland, at either Brisbane or Maryborough.

Once the project started, progress was impressive. While Bashford & Co constructed the first section of the line, another contractor, J.C. Clunn & Sons, began work on the Stationmaster's residence and other railway buildings. By late 1885, Clunn had erected a carriage shed, two-stall engine shed, turntables, a store for goods, and a shed with

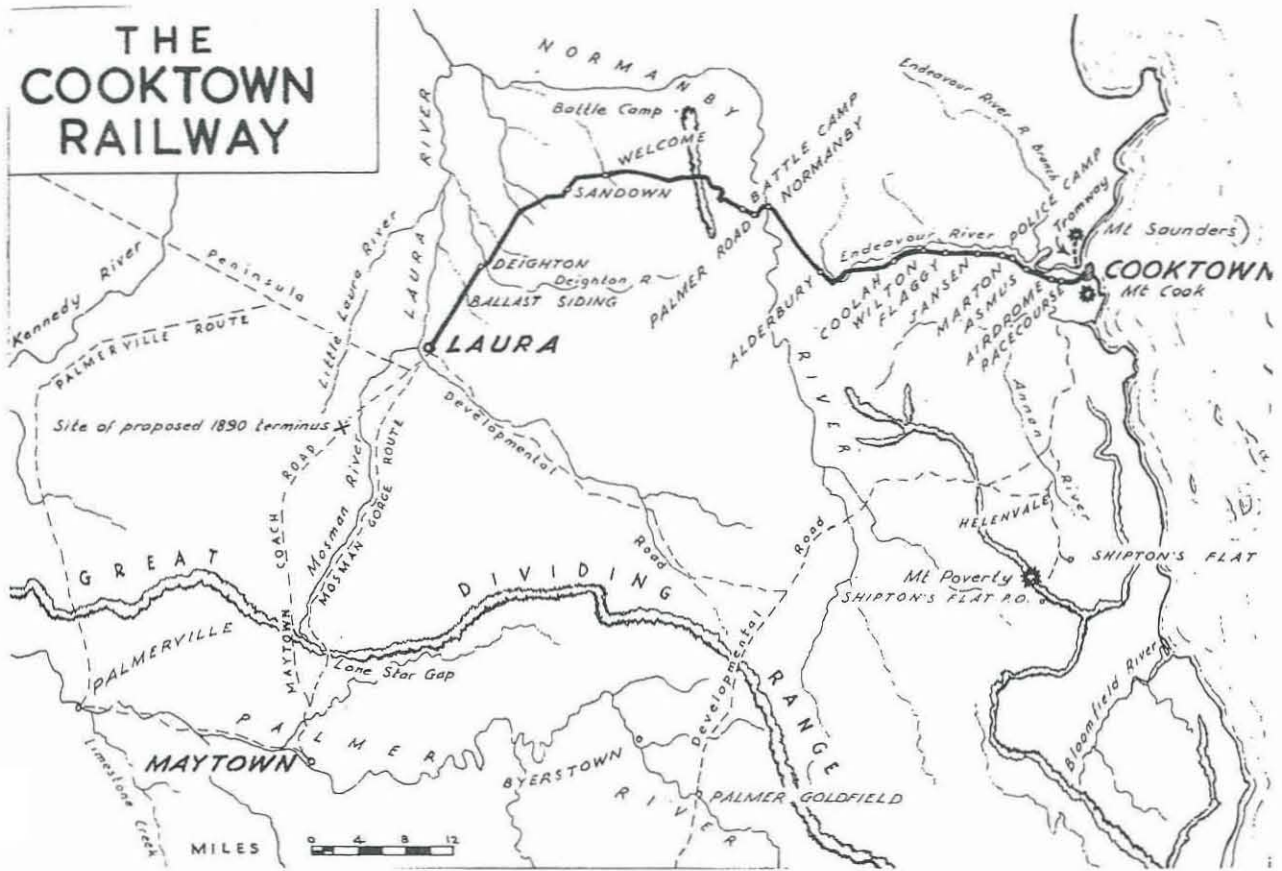
⁷⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁸⁴ Municipal Council of Cooktown Minutes, 10 April 1884.

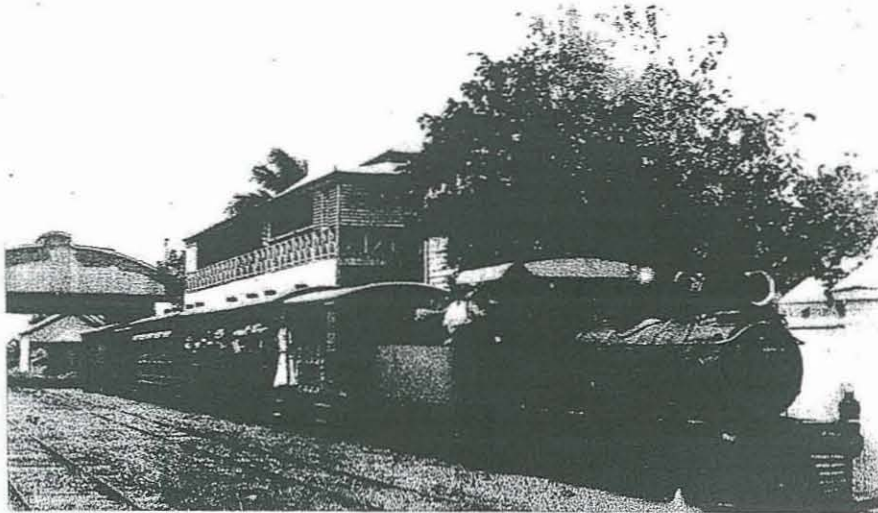
⁷⁸⁵ *Q.P.D.* 1884, Vol. 19, p. 1810.

⁷⁸⁶ Knowles, *The Cooktown Railway*, p. 3.

⁷⁸⁷ *Q.V.P.* 1886, Vol. 2, p. 253.



Route of Cooktown to Laura railway. (Knowles, The Cooktown Railway).



Train at Cooktown Railway Station, c. 1890s. (Knowles, The Cooktown Railway).

machine shop. A well had been sunk, and a tank erected with pump and washing-out pit. A rail siding had been constructed at the wharf, and a crane erected to unload cargo from ships. The Stationmaster's residence was also nearing completion.⁷⁸⁸

The Government was not as enthusiastic about providing sufficient funds for the survey of the second section of the line. Given the disagreement in the community about the route the line should take, this is understandable. The Municipal Council wanted to keep Maytown as the terminus, but the Daintree Divisional Board argued that this route was too steep and rough. They thought the line should go to Palmerville, a slightly longer but more accessible route to the Palmer River.⁷⁸⁹ Despite the controversy, £19,000 was eventually allocated for the survey of the second section, although this was later reduced to £10,000. The cut in funds angered the local population, with critics claiming that not enough workers had been employed on the survey to complete the job in a reasonable time.⁷⁹⁰

The contract for the second section of the line, 19.5 miles, was awarded in March 1886 to W.J. Blunt & Co, for £52,966/14/4.⁷⁹¹ After he inspected the section, the Chief Engineer for Railways suggested that the line should be extended from the end of the second section, which was lacking grass and water, for another four miles. This would bring the line to Landy Creek, where good grazing and water was available, and was an ideal site for a station. He said the move wouldn't compromise the decision on which route the line should take, as it

⁷⁸⁸ Q.V.P. 1886, Vol. 3, pp. 325-327.

⁷⁸⁹ Daintree Divisional Board, Cooktown, to The Honourable, The Minister For Works, Brisbane, 15 February 1885, A/9235 1883-88, Q.S.A.

⁷⁹⁰ Cooktown Courier, 5 June 1888.

⁷⁹¹ Q.V.P. 1886, Vol. 3, p. 223.

could head towards either destination from there.⁷⁹² However, the Government continued to procrastinate, and when the second section of the line was completed the Chief Engineer was still waiting for instructions on which route it would take.⁷⁹³

Eventually the section from Laura to the 97.5 mile peg, on the escarpment above Maytown, was approved in November 1888.⁷⁹⁴ Despite this, some politicians still insisted that the line should go to Palmerville. Those in favour of the Maytown terminus argued that it was the centre of a large auriferous field, whereas Palmerville was outside the recognised gold field, and thirty miles downstream from the reef deposits.⁷⁹⁵

The Minister for Justice tried to resolve the issue in 1888 when he moved that the proposed extension of the line to the 97.5 mile be adopted. However, many Members protested that not enough technical information was available for a decision to be made, and the debate was adjourned to allow them to gather more information.⁷⁹⁶ It was obvious that the line to Maytown would be a major engineering project. Eight tunnels were required to gain access to the summit of the sandstone escarpment dividing Maytown from the Laura valley. The escarpment was steep, and curves of five and six chain radius, and grades of one in fifty would be required, making the line difficult and expensive to build.⁷⁹⁷

⁷⁹² Memorandum from W. Hannam, Chief Engineer, to Commissioner for Railways, Brisbane, 15 June 1886, A/9235 1883-88, Q.S.A.

⁷⁹³ Telegram from W. Hannam, Townsville Railway, to Commissioner Railways, Brisbane, 28 September 1886, A/9235 1883-88, Q.S.A.

⁷⁹⁴ Q.V.P. 1888, Vol. 1, p. 198.

⁷⁹⁵ Q.P.D. 1885, Vol. 47, pp. 1128-1130.

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid., 1888, Vol. 54, pp. 126-128.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

Eventually a compromise was reached, and the engineers prepared plans to take the line to the Laura River. The contract for the third section of the line was won by Overend & Co. at a price of £39,444.⁷⁹⁸ The completion of this section took the line to 67.5 miles from Cooktown, very close to the Laura River. From there the line was taken to the bank of the Laura River, a distance of thirty-five chains, where a blind siding and a water tank complete with a pump and engine were provided.⁷⁹⁹ The Government also planned to build a five-span bridge over the river. This would be the most substantial bridge on the line, and would have lattice iron girders supported by concrete piers.⁸⁰⁰

Although the residents and public organisations of Cooktown continued to agitate for the completion of the line to the gold field, they got little reaction from the Government. When the Council asked about plans for the next section, the Minister for Railways said he could not say when tenders would be called.⁸⁰¹ A public meeting protested the lack of action, and asked the Government to allocate enough money out of the next loan to complete the railway.⁸⁰² The line was inspected in late 1889 by the Railway Commissioners, who agreed to meet a deputation of locals while in the area. They were told that the Palmer had already produced six million ounces of gold, and would produce much more once the railway was completed. Supporters said once heavy machinery was delivered for underground mining, the railway would earn three times the revenue of the Charters Towers line, as the Palmer was a much richer field.⁸⁰³

⁷⁹⁸ Q.V.P. 1888, Vol. 3, pp. 544-5.

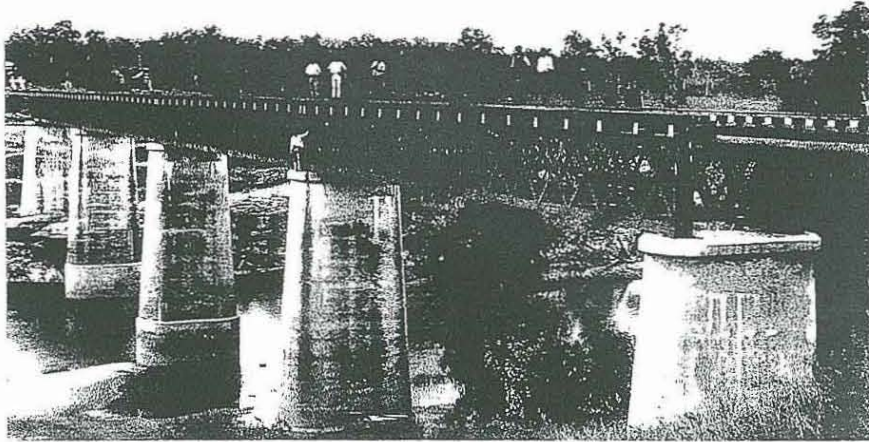
⁷⁹⁹ Ibid., 1890, Vol. 3, p. 538.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 553.

⁸⁰¹ Cooktown Courier, 2 August 1889.

⁸⁰² Ibid., 27 August 1889.

⁸⁰³ Ibid., 3 September 1889.



Laura River bridge, c. 1890s. (Knowles, The Cooktown Railway).



Laura Railway Station, c. 1890s. (Knowles, The Cooktown Railway).

When he was criticised for the delay, the Minister for Railways said that the Government would not float any more large loans for railway construction. He said the Cairns line was an example of bungling and maladministration, and the Cooktown line was as bad. The Commissioners promised that funds would be made available to complete the bridge, and to lay the line for seven to ten miles on the other side of the river, but no further.⁸⁰⁴ It was generally conceded that to be of any benefit to the miners on the Palmer, the line would need to be extended beyond the Laura River to allow coaches and carriers to access the railway.

The Government had £22,000 left in the railway budget, and it proposed allocating £14,000 to construct the bridge and line extension. However, following obstruction in the Parliament, the Government withdrew all but £12,500 of these funds, leaving only enough to build the bridge.⁸⁰⁵ Although it was completed, the only full train to cross the bridge was on 10 October 1891, when it was tested under load.⁸⁰⁶

The bridge was destroyed in a flood in 1940, and little of the structure remains. A report by the Shire Council foreman at the time said that the centre concrete piers were broken off about ten feet from the top. The three centre spans had been washed from their fittings and lay in the river bed, but the steel frames remained in good condition.⁸⁰⁷ Although there was a protracted debate on the viability of completing the railway to the Palmer, no further extensions were made to the line.

⁸⁰⁴ Cooktown Courier, 13 September 1889.

⁸⁰⁵ Knowles, The Cooktown Railway, p. 10.

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 11.

⁸⁰⁷ F.J. Bak, Cooktown, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 6 July 1940. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

Despite the high expectations for the railway, the project was a financial failure from the start. Income covered working expenses for only two years, in 1886 and 1888.⁸⁰⁸ The line was still under construction in this period, and the contractors for the second and third sections of the line paid freight on the materials used in its construction. In other words, the line's only profits were made from carrying materials used in its own construction.

Revenue from the line declined steadily, and the Government reduced maintenance costs and working expenditure to the lowest level possible without compromising safety. The Railways Report for 1894 commented that it was difficult to forecast a future for the line, as there was no good agricultural land near it to provide an alternative economy to gold.⁸⁰⁹ From a high point of 8,925 tons of freight in 1888, only 709 tons were carried in 1893-94. Passenger numbers were maintained at a reasonably constant level from 1886 to the turn of the century, after which they too declined. The line was at this time costing five times its revenue to operate, and the Department attempted to minimise losses by reducing the service in 1901 from three to two trains each week.⁸¹⁰

Transfer of the line to Council control.

In a move reminiscent of its action in selling the wharves to the Council, the Government offered the line to the Municipal Council in 1902. The terms were not acceptable to the Council, and the line was closed in January 1903. However, in late 1903 the Government again offered to lease the line to the Council, this time for only £1 per year, on condition that the line and equipment was maintained in good order.⁸¹¹ The Council officially took control of the line on 14 September 1903, and

⁸⁰⁸ Knowles, *The Cooktown Railway*, p. 23.

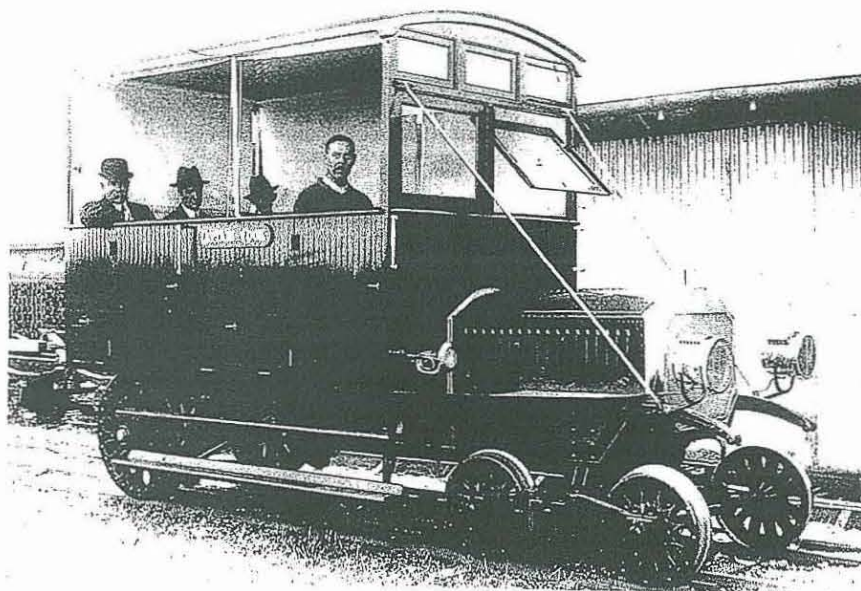
⁸⁰⁹ *Q.V.P.*, 1894, Vol 3, p. 1204.

⁸¹⁰ Knowles, *The Cooktown Railway*, p. 23.

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 24.



Train picnic excursion, Cooktown Railway, c. 1900. (Knowles, The Cooktown Railway).



Rail motor *Captain Cook*, 1916. (Knowles, The Cooktown Railway).

immediately raised freight rates and passenger fares by 50%. Despite the much vaunted coal deposits in the area, which were cited as part justification for building the line, no coal was available to power the steam engines. Instead, contracts were called for the supply of cord wood for fuel.⁸¹²

The Council was innovative in its efforts to generate extra income for the railway, and provide alternative entertainment for the citizens of Cooktown, but this sometimes brought it into conflict with most of the church organisations. For instance, an advertisement by the Council for an excursion train on Sunday 18 October 1903 was severely criticised. The representatives of church organisations and Christian societies claimed that such an excursion "will not tend to the wellbeing of the citizens of Cooktown". They claimed that to "frequently run such trains would have disastrous results on the upbringing of the rising generation".⁸¹³ This put a stop to the excursions, a testament to the influence of such organisations at the time.

Resumption of Government control.

Questions arose about the Council's legal position in operating the railway, and the Government promised to introduce legislation to rectify the position. However, the promise was not honoured, and the Government resumed control of the line again in July 1904. This time

⁸¹² Ironically, when the discovery of coal was announced in 1874 the Cooktown Herald said that it would save the trees from being felled to fuel steam engines, and thus bring more rain to the area. Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser, 10 March 1874. The contract stipulated that no black labour was to be used in the supply of the wood. Cooktown Town Council Minutes, 30 July 1925.

⁸¹³ G.Y. Turliwell, Acting Rector, A. Rich, Rector's Warden, T.E. Thomas, People's Warden, J.V. Penno, Christ Church Cooktown, John L. Fox, Pastor of Methodist Church, J.H. Hargreaves, Circuit Planner, W. Millar, Society Steward, E. Millar, Secretary C.E. Society, M. Lequeue Adams J.P., Cooktown, to The Mayor and Aldermen forming the Municipal Council of Cooktown, 13 October 1903. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

however, staff numbers were considerably less than when it had previously operated the facility.⁸¹⁴ Unfortunately, there was little or no increase in business, and the line continued to be a financial burden.

Various proposals were put forward to improve the commercial viability of the line. For instance, the Cooktown Chamber of Commerce suggested that if the line was extended to Mungana, the increase in catchment area would make it more profitable.⁸¹⁵ The local Member, H.A.C. Douglas, brought the matter up with the Premier, who said he would send the Minister for Railways to inspect the proposed route. The link would connect Cooktown with Cairns, through Chillagoe, and the local authority and people of Chillagoe were asked to support the extension of the railway, which would benefit both districts.⁸¹⁶ However, this attempt to extend the line also failed.

The line continued to record losses, and in 1916 the Government again tried to rid itself of the problem. The Railways Department told the Town Council that substantial repairs were necessary to keep the line in operation, and it had the option of closing the service, or again transferring it to Council control. The Town Council was asked if it was prepared to take responsibility for the line.⁸¹⁷ Any change would also impact on the Daintree Shire Council, and it joined the Town Council in rejecting any attempt to either close the line or to transfer it to local

⁸¹⁴ Q.P.P. 1905, Vol. 2, p. 927.

⁸¹⁵ Fred Schmidt, Secretary, Cooktown Chamber Of Commerce, Cooktown, to His Worship The Mayor, Cooktown, 17 January 1911. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸¹⁶ Cooktown Town Council cited the presence of gold on the Palmer, limestone on the Walsh, coal on the St George and Little Rivers, and the grazing areas along the proposed route. Charles Patching, Town Clerk, Cooktown, to A.W. Daniels, Shire Clerk, Chillagoe, 3 March 1911. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown

⁸¹⁷ W.M Pagam, Deputy-Commissioner for Railways, Northern Division, Townsville, to The Town Clerk, Cooktown, 9 May 1916. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

Cooktown Railway opened for traffic 10 August 1885.						
Year	Revenue	Working Expenses	Nett Revenue	Capital Expenditure	Tickets Issued	Goods Carried (tons)
1885	214	455	-241		576	125
1886	4 210	3 749	461		11 083	4 072
1887	6 145	9 617	-3 472	256 838	12 780	4 736
1888	7 666	7 164	502	320 904	13 967	8 825
1889-1890	5 149	11 108	-4 959	341 087	12 598	2 462
1890-1891	5 116	9 880	-4 764	352 988	11 127	4 692
1891-1892	3 691	6 729	-3 038	356 773	7 238	1 251
1892-1893	3 336	6 669	-3 333	348 957	5 521	1 007
1893-1894	2 597	5 384	-2 787	349 617	4 168	709
1894-1895	2 406	5 300	-2 895	349 322	4 894	857
1895-1896	2 215	5 816	-3 601	350 671	5 431	1 023
1896-1897	2 850	5 931	-3 071	350 755	7 013	3 271
1897-1898	2 269	5 230	-2 961	350 861	4 336	1 895
1898-1899	2 037	5 429	-3 392	351 162	5 547	775
1899-1900	2 247	5 183	-2 936	349 394	6 450	639
1900-1901	2 178	10 800	-8 622		5 151	808
1901-1902	2 025	8 542	-6 517	352 120	4 774	696
1902-1903	1 334	4 672	-3348	205 457	1 742	519
Line withdrawn from sei service 31/1/03. Resumed under Council control 14/9/03. Govt. took over again 1/7/04.						
1903-1904	-3	253	-250			
1904-1905	1 773	2 146	-373	352 338	3 508	473
1905-1906	1 959	2 146	-187	352 338	5 594	512
1906-1907	1 985	2 864	-899	352 338	5 672	534
1907-1908	1 818	4 205	-2 387	352 338	7 432	607
1908-1909	1 599	6 564	-4 965	352 327	6 972	677
1909-1910	1 528	4 983	-3 455	352 268	7 441	742
1910-1911	1 588	3 767	-2 199	352 304	7 958	818
1911-1912	1 517	4 205	-2 688	354 112	7 025	622
1912-1913	1 625	5 174	-3 549	377 505	5 408	671
1913-1914	1 829	3 639	-1 810	378 004	7 770	780
1914-1915	2 031	3 630	1 599	377 703	7 976	1 089
1915-1916	1 793	3 591	-1 798	375 949	5 216	679
1916-1917	1 815	3 353	-1 538	376 103	5 306	833
1917-1918	1 732	5 353	-3 621	373 985	4 515	505
1918-1919	2 105	5 381	-3 276	373 295	5 685	629
1919-1920	3 167	5 309	-2 142	373 317	4 898	896
1920-1921	1 812	5 022	-3 210	372 743	7 172	804
1921-1922	1 737	5 168	-3 431	372 616	6 968	641
1922-1923	1 520	4 409	-2 889	372 297	5 588	440
1923-1924	1 461	3 866	-2 405	372 466	3 404	559
1924-1925	1 453	5 025	-3 572	372 549	2 853	383
1925-1926	1 160	4 821	-3 661	372 755	937	242
1926-1927	1 492	4 703	-3 211	372 261	1 857	349
1927-1928	1 436	4 283	-2 847	372 528	2 048	333
1928-1929	1 373	3 406	-2 033	372 486	1 185	247
1929-1930	1 495	3 600	-2 105	372 371	1 421	279
1930-1931	734	2 994	-2 260	372 093	1 392	256
1931-1932	827	2 884	-2 057	212 087	1 144	312
1932-1933	738	2 560	-1 822	212 064	1 105	239
1933-1934	725	2 739	-2 014	212 033	959	208

Cooktown Railway statistics 1885-1934. (Statistics of Queensland).

authority control.⁸¹⁸ They told the Railway Department that the Town Council was not in a position to accept responsibility for the line, and that its closure:

would practically compel seven-eighths of the people, who have lived in this town and District for years, and who have reared families, under difficulties, to get away and further crowd the cities or districts adjacent thereto, which would certainly be ANOTHER INJUSTICE TO THE NORTH OF QUEENSLAND.⁸¹⁹

Faced with this concerted opposition, the Department continued its service.

In 1926 another attempt was made to connect Cooktown with the main Cairns hinterland line, as the locals believed this was their best chance of retaining the railway. This time another route was suggested, and the Town Council tried to interest the Government in constructing a line to connect Cooktown and Mount Molloy. It asked the Woothakata Shire Council, based at Mareeba, for its support. The Mount Molloy line joined the Cairns line near Mareeba, and both towns would benefit. Two alternative proposals were offered for consideration, the first to connect Laura to Mount Molloy, thereby giving access to the Palmer River gold field. The alternative route would connect at Marton or Flaggy, close to Cooktown, and would allow the exploitation of good timber reserves. It was argued that either route would provide an alternative port for towns in the Cairns hinterland.⁸²⁰

The Council timed its proposal badly. The world economy was worsening, and the Government was faced with the need to cut costs.

⁸¹⁸ Charles Patching, Town Clerk, Cooktown, to The Clerk, Daintree Shire Council, Cooktown, 2 June 1916. Resolution of Daintree Shire Council "That the members of the Daintree Shire Council unanimously desire to enter a protest against the closing of the Cooktown-Laura Railway line or to handing over the control of same to any local authority...". (No date) Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸¹⁹ Charles Patching, Town Clerk, Cooktown, to The Deputy Commissioner, Queensland Railways, Northern Division, Townsville, 24 May 1916. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

Proposed retrenchments in the railway service were seen as a threat to the weaker lines, and attempts to have the Cooktown line extended were soon replaced by a concerted effort just to keep the service open. The Council realised that the Cooktown to Laura line was more vulnerable than most, and asked the local Member, H.J. Ryan, for support. The locals knew their position was not strong, and feared that an overt campaign could antagonise prospective supporters in the Government. Therefore, they asked Ryan not to make a "formal or official request or protest of any kind", but to support their cause whenever practical.⁸²¹

Cooktown people had cause to be apprehensive. The Brisbane Courier reported in January 1927 that the Railway Department intended to close two rural lines that were recording unacceptable deficits. These were the Normanton line, which had lost £18,000, and the Cooktown line, with a deficit of £21,000. The Government was asked to confirm the claims, but the Railway Department said only that no decision had been made on the closures.⁸²² Local residents met to protest against the proposal, which they saw as another blow to the district. The people of Laura were particularly vocal, claiming that if the line closed their town would cease to exist.⁸²³ The protests were successful, and the Council was told in late January that the Cabinet had no intention of closing the line.⁸²⁴

World War Two.

⁸²⁰ Charles Patching, Town Clerk, Cooktown, to The Clerk, Shire Council of Woothakata, Mareeba, 8 August 1925. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸²¹ Charles Patching, Town Clerk, Cooktown, to H.J. Ryan, M.L.A., Parliament House, Brisbane, 8 December 1926. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸²² The Brisbane Courier, 1 January 1927, p. 13.

⁸²³ Telegram from C. Donald, Laura, to Secretary, Progress Association, Cooktown, 4 January 1927. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸²⁴ Telegram from H.J. Ryan, Brisbane, to His Worship, The Mayor, Cooktown, 19 January 1927. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

After the line was built, the only real boost to railway traffic came during the Second World War. In the absence of roads, provisions and equipment for the armed forces operating in the area north and west of Laura were railed from the wharf at Cooktown. By 1940 freight traffic had fallen to less than four hundred tons per year. However, an influx of service personnel following the Battle of the Coral Sea saw trade rise to 2,064 tons in the year 1942/43. This tapered off as the threat of Japanese invasion passed, and by 1957/58 only 147 tons were carried. Passenger rates followed a similar pattern, with only 665 people using the railway in 1940, rising to 1,378 in 1942/43. This fell steadily after the war until 1960, when tourism bought a small increase in passenger numbers.⁸²⁵ Tourists came to Cooktown for a variety of reasons, including its important place in Queensland's history, but some came to Cooktown specifically because they "must have a ride on the funny little train".⁸²⁶

Post-war decline.

Although the town relied on the railway and fought to keep the service, the Council was willing to "take on" the Railways Department to protect the town's interests. However, the Council did not always win. For instance, the Council came into conflict with the Railway Department in 1947, when it asked the Department to fit flood gates under the line between the railway station and the wharf. The culverts under the line were constructed to take natural flood water from the town, but could be fitted with flood gates to prevent tidal intrusion.⁸²⁷ At high tides the

⁸²⁵ Knowles, The Cooktown Railway, pp. 42-43.

⁸²⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

⁸²⁷ Acting Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Secretary, Department of Health & Home Affairs, Brisbane, 18 March 1947. H.J. Landy, Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Director of Local Government, Department of Local

water inundated the town dump, causing a mosquito breeding hazard. The Council wanted the flood gates fitted to help control mosquito-borne diseases,⁸²⁸ but the Department said that only essential work would be performed on the line.⁸²⁹

The Council asked various Government departments for support, but the Director of Local Government said the Council had no jurisdiction over the land in question. To make matters worse, he suggested that the Council was to blame for the situation by placing the dump within the town area.⁸³⁰ The Council backed down, and decided to relocate the dump. It also promised that the present dump would be cleaned up, and the mosquito breeding areas eradicated.⁸³¹ It was quite common for people to dump some rubbish over the back fence in small rural towns at that time, but the practice was not condoned officially. However, the siting of a public rubbish dump almost in the centre of the town is an indication of the decline of morale of both population and local authority, and shows the Council's lack of progress on health matters.

The Council was convinced that better transport facilities and improved access were critical to an improvement in the local economy. They thought the weekly rail motor service to Laura would have to be

Government, Treasury Buildings, Brisbane, 22 April 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸²⁸ Acting Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Officer In Charge, Railways, Cooktown, 18 February 1947. Secretary, Cooktown Progress Association, Cooktown to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 23 February 1947. Transcripts in Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸²⁹ G.V. Moriarty, General Manager, Queensland Government Railways, General Managers' Office, Townsville, to The Acting Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 3 March 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸³⁰ Director of Local Government, Department of Local Government, Treasury Building, Brisbane, to The Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 12 May 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸³¹ J.H. Landy, Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Director of Local Government, Department of Local Government, Treasury Buildings, Brisbane, 18 June 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

improved to attract further settlers, and in 1950 asked the Department to increase the service. The local Member was told that attempts to encourage more farmers to the tobacco lands at Laura were hampered by the poor transport service.⁸³² However, the move was unsuccessful. The Minister of Transport said that over the three months from September to November, an average of only forty-six passengers travelled on the rail motor between Cooktown and Laura each month. He refused to increase the service, but promised to review the situation when the volume of passengers increased.⁸³³

The Cooktown to Laura line was eventually closed in December 1961, after the main road to Laura had been upgraded to "all-weather". The move was premature, as the "all-weather" road proved impassable during the next wet season, and the Government reluctantly reopened the rail line to deliver urgently needed supplies to Laura. This service was operated by the demolition sub-contractors.⁸³⁴ A tender for the purchase and removal of the line and all infrastructure was won by P. and G. Freighters and Pacific Distributing Co. Pty. Ltd, of Brisbane.⁸³⁵

Conclusion.

Many people have asked why the Government continued to subsidise a railway from "nowhere to nowhere" to carry very few people and even less freight, for ever diminishing returns. In reality it had little alternative. Without a road connection to Cooktown and Laura, the only method of delivering supplies to the inland Peninsula settlements was

⁸³² Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to C.F. Wordsworth, M.L.A., Parliament house, Brisbane, 14 November 1950. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸³³ John Duggan, Minister for Transport, Office of the Minister for Transport, Brisbane, to C.F. Wordsworth, MLA, Parliament House, Brisbane, 15 January 1951. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸³⁴ Ibid, p. 54.

by the Cooktown Railway. From Laura, the access track servicing the telegraph line was used to carry goods to the surrounding cattle properties and small settlements. The lack of alternative access was cited in Parliament on several occasions as the reason the Government allowed the service to survive, despite its losses⁸³⁶.

Although the Cooktown Railway could be seen as an economic failure, it provided a service at a time when there was no alternative access. The line had some economic benefit to the area. It provided cheaper cartage of mining materials to the struggling Palmer field, and gave those farmers who lived near the line a means of sending their produce to market. The line also had social benefits. In addition to the jobs provided, it allowed the people of the Cooktown hinterland to buy regular supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables. In emergencies, the railway was available to take people from outlying areas to the Cooktown hospital for treatment. The railway also proved useful during the war, when it provided the only means to transport personnel and materials from the coast to inland areas.

The failure of the Cooktown railway to justify the cost of its construction reflects on the political and economic imperatives of the period. Before it was constructed, there was no serious examination of the viability of the Cooktown to Maytown railway, an omission common to the experiences of private mining railways such as the Chillagoe and Mount Molloy lines. The deciding factor in the decision to build these rail lines was the perception that sufficient minerals were available to justify the expenditure. Little attempt was made to determine the economic reality of this assertion.

⁸³⁵ Knowles, The Cooktown Railway, p. 55.

⁸³⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

Before construction began, the Government had a moral responsibility to ensure that a railway such as that from Cooktown to Maytown was economically justifiable. However, those members of Parliament who supported the concept relied on information supplied by people with a vested interest in the project, such as the members of the Railway League. It would appear that independent experts like mining engineers and geologists were not sufficiently consulted, or if they were, their advice was disregarded. As a result, the Cooktown railway was doomed to be a financial failure. It made the Government cautious about investing more money in the area and did little itself to aid development in the region. The railway accelerated, rather than hindered, the decline of Cooktown and its surrounding district.

Christaller's Central Place Theory appears to have little relevance in this situation. The only other town connected to the Railway was Laura, and its position was determined before the line was built. Unlike Christaller's secondary towns whose positions are determined by "economic distance", Laura's reason for being was determined by the presence of water in the river, as it was for many inland towns in Queensland. It then survived simply because it was the railhead.

Staple Theory is relevant to any investigation of the Cooktown Railway, as it was built to exploit the staple gold. It is clear that the Palmer River gold field was already in decline when funds were voted for construction. However, it could be seen as a reflection on the capabilities of those responsible for the decision. Although the line's supporters claimed that secondary staples like coal and agriculture would contribute towards its viability, these also failed to live up to expectations.