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Race Around Cairns:
Representations, perceptions and realities of race
in the Trinity Bay district 1876-1908

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For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of History

James Cook University

Statement on the contribution of others

I was fortunate to receive moral and material assistance to pursue the ideas which became *Race around Cairns*. For financial support in the form of a four year stipend I am grateful to James Cook University and the Commonwealth Government of Australia. For providing conditions in which to work I thank James Cook University and Deakin University. I thank particularly the staff, librarians and archivists of James Cook University, Cairns Historical Society, Menmuny Museum, University of Queensland, John Oxley Library, Queensland Museum, Queensland State Archives, National Archives of Australia, National Library of Australia, Australian National University, Noel Butlin Archive, Joskeleigh South Sea Islander Museum, Bundaberg Historical Museum, Mackay City Library, Deakin University, Alfred Deakin Research Institute, State Library of Victoria, Chinese Museum, Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo Chinese Association, Edo Museum and the Hong Kong Museum of History.

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Race Around Cairns: Representations, perceptions and realities of race in the Trinity Bay district, 1876-1908

Abstract

With the colonisation of the Trinity Bay district in the late nineteenth century, people arrived from many points of the compass. Not only Europeans, but also Pacific Islanders and East and South-east Asians imposed themselves on the numerous Aboriginal groups who inhabited Cairns and its vicinity. European Cairnsites perceived their world in strongly racialised terms, in which innate biological and cultural inequalities were assumed to exist between and among the diverse peoples of the area. They built a society based on racial hierarchy with themselves – white Australians – at the apex, the other races ranging down through varying degrees of inferiority. Despite the racial stratification and despite the significant – sometimes murderous – intercultural tensions, this was an interdependent colonial society characterised, to a large extent, by peaceable accommodations and productive inter-racial relationships. Europeans understood themselves to be out of place in the tropics, so when they imagined the district's future they typically saw non-whites continuing to play an important part – a vision not shared by the Australian mainstream around the time of federation. This thesis scrutinises words and images from early Cairns, to recover the ways in which racial representations were used across a range of social and cultural contexts and how they were transformed over time. It shows that European Cairnsites constructed a local racial vernacular, in some ways discordant with the white Australia ideal, in other ways consistent with it, but always serving the interests of white dominance.

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List of Abbreviations

AIATSIS: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

AN: Aboriginal News

ANU: Australian National University

ANU:NB: Australian National University Noel Butlin Archive Centre

BC: Brisbane Courier

CA: Cairns Argus

CC: Cooktown Courier

CDT: Cairns Daily Times

CH: Cooktown Herald

CHPRA: Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser

CHS: Cairns Historical Society

CI: Cooktown Independent

CP: Cairns Post

CSR: Colonial Sugar Refining

HA: Herberton Advertiser

HRE: Herbert River Express

JOL: John Oxley Library

MC: Mackay Chronicle

MP: Morning Post

MS: Mackay Standard

NAA: National Archive of Australia.

NA: Northern Advocate

NEB: New Endeavour Beacon

NLA: National Library of Australia

NQH: North Queensland Herald

NQR: North Queensland Register

PDMR: Port Douglas and Mossman Record

QJCU: James Cook University, University Library Archives

QSA: Queensland State Archives

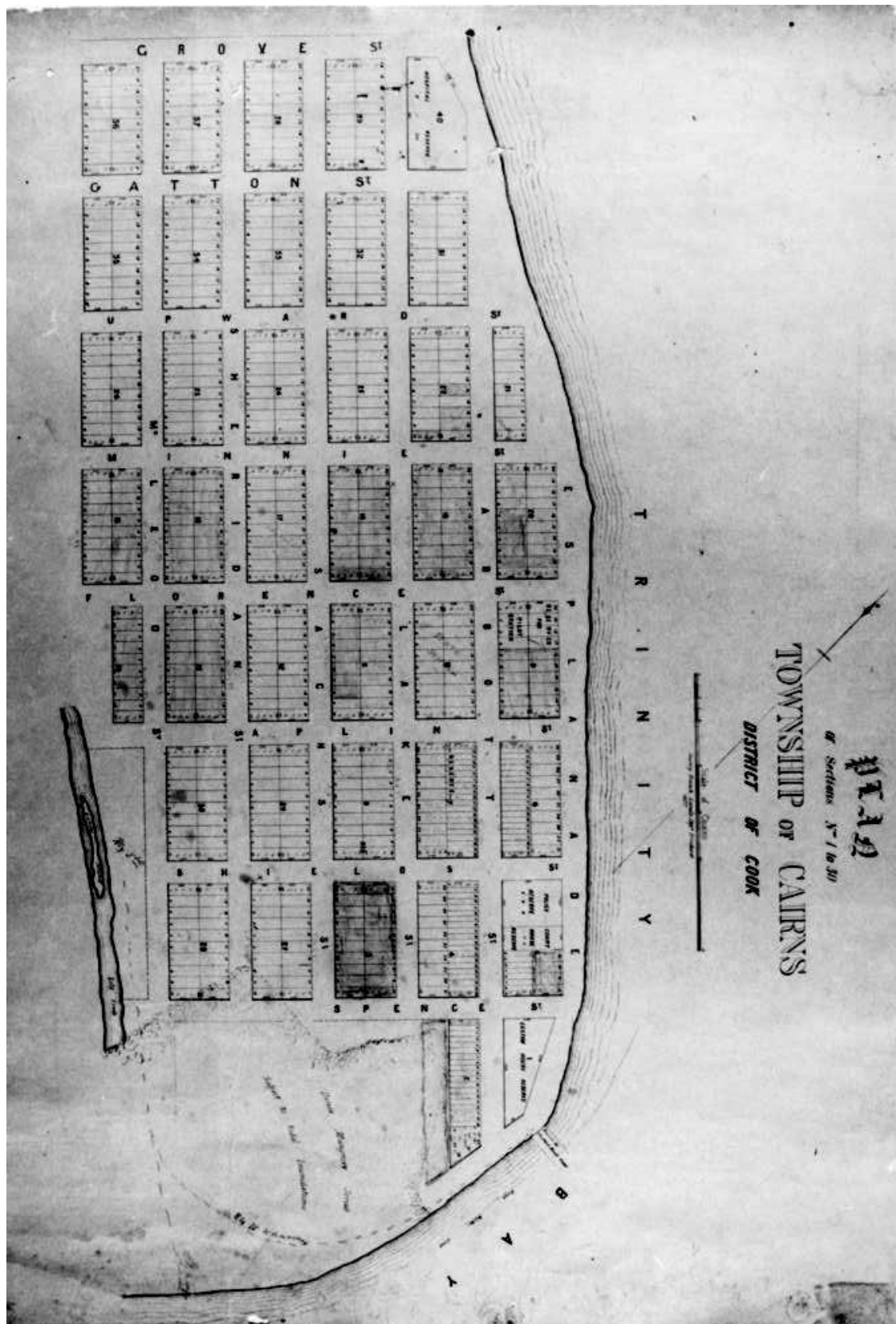
TSP: Torres Strait Pilot

TT: Trinity Times

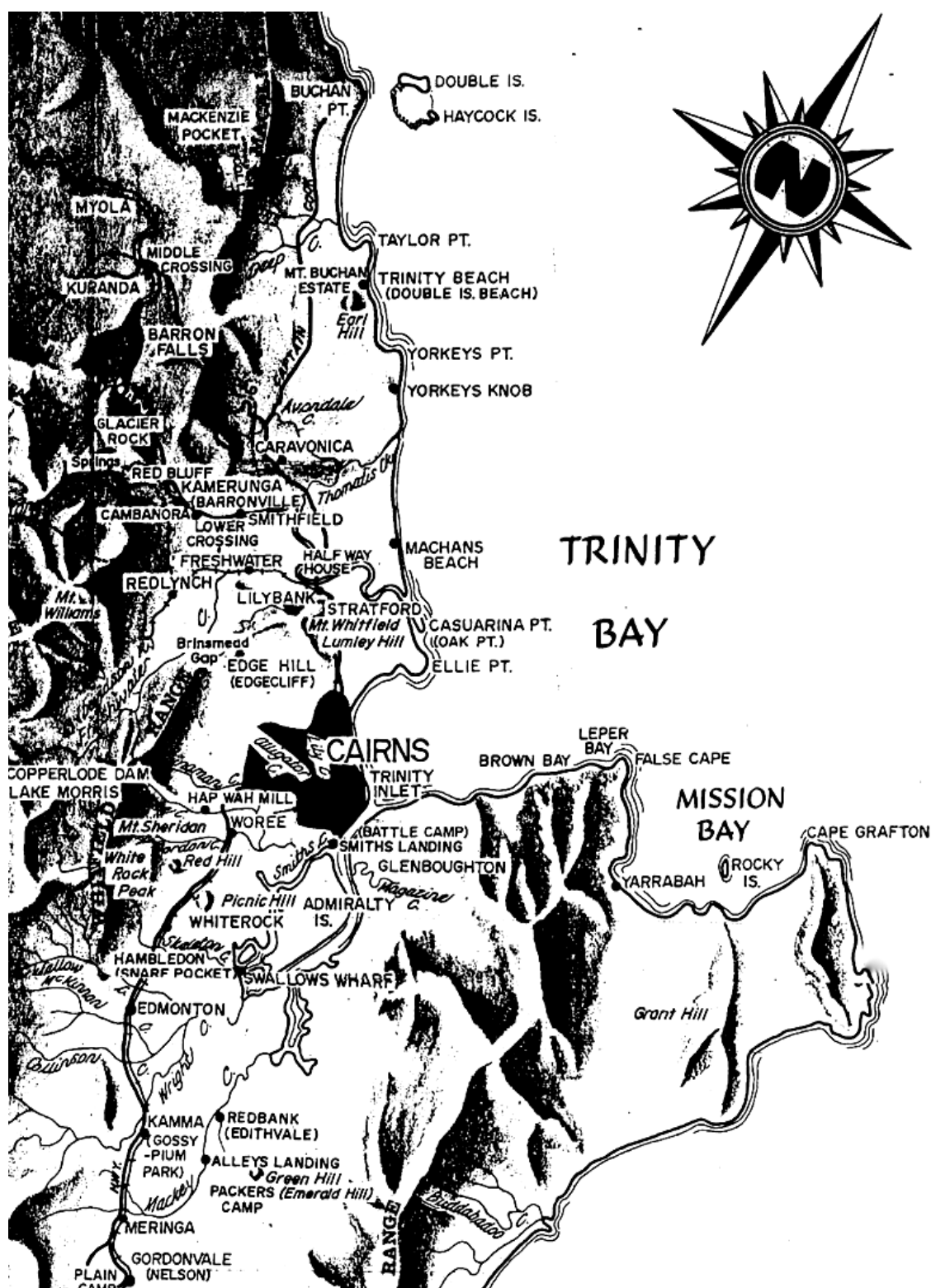
UQFL: University of Queensland Fryer Library

WRT: Wild River Times

Maps: Cairns and its district



Map 1. The streets of Cairns, 1877. JOL image no.133415.



Map 2. Historical map of the Cairns district. Dorothy Jones, *Trinity Phoenix*, Cairns Post, 1976, flyleaf.

Introduction: Race around Cairns

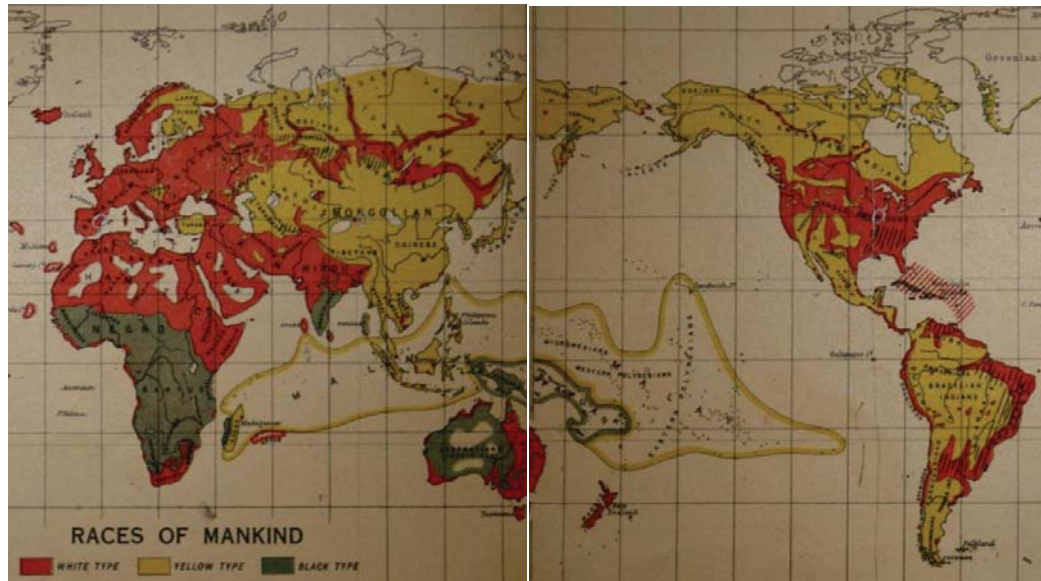


Figure I.1. Race around the world. By the taxonomy of the *Oxford Advanced Atlas* circa 1910, the earth's populations could be divided, broadly speaking, into three racial 'types' – the white type, the yellow type and the black type, with subsets. Interspersed 'native' and 'settler' populations created difficulties of representation for the cartographer, who elected to proceed with a simplified scheme. By the reckoning of the *Oxford Advanced Atlas*, Cairns was, at the dawn of the twentieth century, a 'white' place. Illustration: *Oxford Advanced Atlas*, Oxford University Press, c.1910, p.20.

In the late nineteenth century, the residents of the Trinity Bay district surrounding Cairns in north Queensland hailed from a remarkably wide range of geographical locales and cultural traditions. As well as Europeans, to the several Aboriginal kinship and language groups of the area, colonisation had added Pacific Islanders, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Malays and other non-Europeans. This was not a multicultural society as the term is currently understood, as interactions were based on acknowledgment of a racial hierarchy, not equality, according to prevailing European racial assumptions. Within this polyglot community, European Cairnsites typically anticipated a white-dominated future for north Queensland, but did not necessarily share the same vision of white Australia foreseen by the federation leaders. Through their words and images on matters they considered historically and culturally important, and through their self-conscious representations of race, early Cairnsites expressed their beliefs, aspirations and anxieties sometimes bluntly, sometimes with exceptional subtlety. The aim of my research is to apply new analytical approaches to the exploration of racial representations in words and images to develop a more nuanced understanding of the construction and use of racial inscription around Cairns in the years immediately before and after Australian federation.

Federation of the Australian colonies and the early decades of Cairns coincided with what was arguably the apogee of European race theory, but while their cultural expressions were replete with racial meaning, highly structured racist ideology rarely found voice among the European members of Cairns community. Alongside references to civilisational progress and concerns about white peoples' suitability for tropical labour, glib allusions to Charles Darwin and the extinction of 'inferior' races were recorded, but these were usually proposed as forms of historical wisdom rather than scientific certainty. The work of key individuals contributed to local notions of racial difference such as Walter Roth's compilations of ethnographic and ethnological information, Alfred Atkinson's frank photography, Thomas Swallow's miniature colonial empire and the Reverend Ernest Gribble's efforts towards the temporal and spiritual redemption of 'the blacks,' but those few who claimed a thoroughgoing expertise on the subject of race had their views subjected to the 'no prisoners' journalism of the popular press.¹

Yet vital questions of race concentrated the minds of European Cairnsites. Races around Cairns were understood to be the physical manifestations of competitive historical trajectories. In another sense, they existed as locations of enquiry and patterns of response to which White Australia formed an interjection. The very future of Cairns seemed to hang on the resolution of questions of race. In Cairnsites' discussions of colonial development and imperial dominance The Coloured Labour Question connected to The Chinese Question, adjoining The Japanese Question, in turn inseparable from The White Man in the Tropics Question and its dark shadow The Aboriginal Question. As in rhetoric, these questions were fitted out with tropes or figures of racial speech, tuned to local idiosyncrasies. Aborigines could be portrayed as a menace to pioneers, as loyal helpers to missionaries and as morally-imperiled young women. Chinese might be seen as a disease-spreading massed threat to white industry and morality, when not a boon to tropical development. Similarly Japanese could be secret agents and 'ladyspiders,' or represent agricultural salvation. Pacific Islanders endured a collection of stereotypes with elements of slavery or dangerous sexual savagery comprising a blot upon Queensland's escutcheon, or they could represent malleable, physically-powerful simplicity, indispensable to the north. These typologies are best understood as Europeans interpreting their relationships to each group and as such they provide a window into the European colonial imagination with the potential to disclose the thoughts, beliefs, fears and aspirations of their creators. Subjected to closer scrutiny, finer detail begins to emerge from stereotypifications which appear limiting and monolithic at first glance. *Race around Cairns* asks therefore: What forms of racial representation did Europeans apply to Aborigines, Chinese, Pacific Islanders, Japanese and themselves? What influenced their choices of racial representation? To what extent and why

¹ The *Bulletin* once quipped that "the two great levellers of this world are no doubt a rural editorial imagination and back block fighting rum." *Bulletin*, 7 October 1882, p.9.

were these representations transformed between 1876 and 1908? How did representations of race connect to race as a lived experience? How did these representations shape social development and the play of local and national politics? How and why was the racial future foreseen by white Cairnsites dissimilar to that of other Australians? How have representations of race informed historical imagination?

In attempting to answer these questions, a conventional historical methodology was used to undertake analysis and contextualization of a wide range of texts. The study looks at race and cultural difference as ideas existing within unique circumstances and interacting in complex ways with other ideologies. A cultural-materialist approach was employed, by which culture is understood to be embedded in a material context of economic and power relations. The thesis is a cultural history of racial thought, as expressed through a period of rolling socio-political instability, conflict and transformation in which Australian federation followed hard on the heels of colonisation of the Trinity Bay district. It is not an examination of race relations *per se*. Perspectives of cultural difference were markedly dissimilar for displaced Aboriginal groups moving into radically different fields of social relations, and for immigrants from Asia and the Pacific, but due to the limitations of extant sources, this study confines itself to European points of view.

Most similar historical investigations of Cairns have focused on either race relations or on single, ethnically-defined groups, which can imply homogeneity, changelessness and the nation-building paradigm of Australian history, but as the experience of race weighed heavily on contemporary ethnicisation, this form of delineation became a critical starting point. Specific sections have been dedicated to European, Aboriginal, Chinese, Pacific Islander and Japanese peoples, not to demonstrate the presence of racism, or to reinforce grand narratives of race, but rather to examine the ways in which these identities were constructed within a colonial discourse. Passages focusing on 'Aboriginality' for instance, seek to examine the connection between the racialisation of Aboriginal people and dispossession or Christian conversion. Europeans are considered in terms of a 'white' identity, to attempt to widen the focus from dichotomous ethnic relations between Europeans and non-Europeans to a more broadly-based perspective of a cultural milieu.

This thesis gives emphasis to visual communication. The sense of sight plays a leading role in our apprehension of race and by using a range of analytical approaches from the visual arts I have sought to develop fresh understandings of contemporary racial belief in Cairns. Cairnsites reflected upon their community and attempted to direct perceptions of it through photographs and other imagery, which in turn helped to propagate ideas about race in north Queensland.

Racialised images conveyed through the specialized medium of photography had the imprimatur of science; they were proofs from an age of wonders, scientific achievement, geographical reach and historical consequence. Racialised images were in addition, widely distributed as popular culture – as postcards. The photographic analysis in *Race around Cairns* was stimulated by Jane Lydon's *Eye Contact*, which examined the relationship between Aboriginal people and the camera at Coranderrk Station in the colony of Victoria. The thesis extends scholarship dedicated to a clearer comprehension of the relationship between race and the camera, which historians have regarded as an instrument of symbolic control, but which in practice, as Lydon argued, produced "mutual, sympathetic [and] contested forms."² Generic, leaden images of race from early Cairns continue to appear as historical illustrations, which rather than providing a critique can serve to reinscribe and perpetuate the racial stereotypes they contain. Yet among those many photographs and illustrations are images that seem subtly calibrated to the specific peculiarities of the local experience, through which the Trinity Bay district can be seen as a location of human interaction.

Henry Reynolds' *North of Capricorn*, David Walker's *Anxious Nation* and Regina Ganter's *Mixed Relations* provided critical impetus to the conceptualization of the thesis. Ganter and Reynolds have clarified the distinctiveness of Australia's tropical history. In her study of Asian-Aboriginal contact in northern Australia, Ganter encouraged us to approach "Australian history from the north, where it properly begins."³ Reynolds offered a complimentary argument, envisaging two 'Australias' at the time of federation, divided approximately by political differences relating to questions of Australia's supposed white future and the tropic of Capricorn.⁴ Given the complexity of Australians' response to race and region across the continent as demonstrated by Walker,⁵ I am not convinced that this is an effective historical paradigm. From my reading of the historical record, I also believe that Reynolds has underplayed the levels of race consciousness in northern Australia in the late nineteenth century. In *Race around Cairns*, the form of tolerance apparent within the community of Trinity Bay is considered to be contingent upon racial stratification and pre-supposed white dominance. Their community was stabilised by interdependency, but Cairnsites remained intensely race conscious.

² Jane Lydon, *Eye Contact: photographing Indigenous Australians*, Duke University Press, London, 2005, p.10.

³ Regina Ganter, *Mixed Relations: Asian-Aboriginal Contact in north Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley, Western Australia, 2006, Introduction.

⁴ Henry Reynolds, *North of Capricorn: The Untold Story of Australia's North*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2003, Introduction.

⁵ David Walker, *Anxious Nation, Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999.

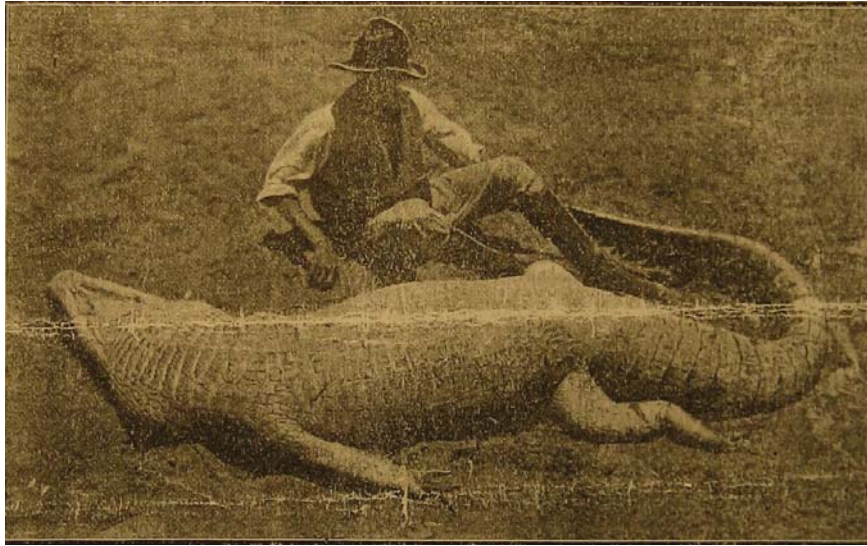


Figure I.2. From Archibald Meston, 'Outdoor Australia, In the Far North: Tragedies of the Barrier,' *Sydney Mail*, 27 July 1921, p.12.



Figure I.3. Illustration accompanying another Meston account from 'The Land of the Crocodile.' Few did as much as Archibald Meston, former resident of Cairns, newspaper editor, active self-promoter, Aboriginal Protector and crocodilian antagonist, to drive the giant reptiles to extinction. "Eight years continuous residence in crocodile country, from 1881-1889, it is fair to say I shot more crocodiles than any man in Australia" wrote Meston with his customary absence of modesty.⁶ Keen to establish his credentials as a man of action and as an autodidactic colonial polymath, Meston insisted on 'crocodiles' when most northerners were still referring to 'alligators' and 'saurians.' To secure his place in history, Meston wrote it, generating a large body of highly-coloured and acutely-racialised reminiscence of life in and around colonial Cairns. Vigorously opposed to Chinese immigration but holding sugarcane interests, Meston was conflicted by the potential loss of the cheap labour supply upon which so much of the north's agriculture was based. According to the illustrations above, crocodiles shared Meston's prejudice against Chinese people, making short work of them on the Barron River while providing practical demonstrations of white racial fitness when up against Meston himself. Europeans delighted in tormenting 'new chum' Chinese with stories that they were a delicacy to both crocodiles and Aborigines. Fishing was predominantly a Chinese concern, meaning that Chinese were more likely to fall victim to crocodiles. The other claim was simply hogwash.

⁶ Quotation and illustration I.3 from A. Meston, 'Crocodile Tragedies, One of the World's Most Dreadful Animals: Their History and Habits,' *World News*, 4 March 1922, p.12.

Thesis overview

European Cairnsites of the late nineteenth century constructed racial otherness with a confidence that was, in retrospect, misplaced. To introduce the reader to Cairns and the topic, Chapter 1 'Cairns in Colour' commences the thesis in the present day, considering ways in which white Cairnsites think about themselves in relation to others now, highlighting the impermanency of racial delineations and without making specific linkages to the past, creating contextual points of reference. Then, from more than a century earlier, Chapter 2 'Historical Projections' considers the power of historical imagination in the making of race around Cairns. In the pages of the northern press, ideologies of race usually gave way to notions of history from which an energetic present could be explained and a wondrous future predicted. But viewing the occupation of north Queensland as a racial contest, European colonists made historical projections based on what they saw as the interaction of races and the passage of time. As they measured their own capacities against Aboriginal, Chinese and other people, white colonists enshrined a model of history which supported both colonial encroachment and white dominance.

The successful extension of British power encouraged some over-imagining of white greatness, but there was no certainty that it would endure. Experiences with Chinese people had made Europeans cautious, as they showed in full abundance at the birth of Cairns. Chapter 3, 'Asking the Chinese Question,' considers the dramatic reaction of the first European colonisers to the presence of the first Chinese colonisers at Trinity Bay. Barring Chinese entry to the new settlement appears have been an early expression of White Australian consciousness, and in a sense it was, but it is better understood as the desire to establish white hegemony in Queensland, not white exclusivity. Based the picture they had created of the Chinese, European Cairnsites feared being numerically overwhelmed or having their wages undercut, but as mutually beneficial patterns of behaviour had already been established between Chinese and Europeans in the north, permanent exclusion was not insisted upon.

With white colonial privilege established in the Trinity Bay district, workers from the Pacific Islands, Japan and elsewhere were brought in, or came of their own volition, seeking opportunities. Cairns grew. White Cairnsites probably amazed themselves with the level of cooperative effort that was possible between themselves and those whom they had viewed as civilisational competitors and adversaries. However, with Japan's mounting military strength, and its citizens' willingness to assert themselves at Thursday Island, a sister settlement of Cairns, racial vigilance was maintained. Chapter 4 looks at Cairns as 'The Great Northern Sin Garden,' (as the *Bulletin* called it), dogged by depictions of racial immorality and degradation.

As the town's racial mixture and interactions fell further out of step with the strident race nationalism on the march in Australia, Cairns found itself betwixt and between. Forming the basis of Chapter 5, 'A Plague on Cairns' threatened – a reproach according to one observer. Pressed, European Cairnsites referred again to race and history, associating plague with a lack of advancement, wondered about their own civic progress and sought advice from the higher authority of science. Usually around Cairns, problems posed by racial difference were considered to be societal, but disease fell within the auspices of medical enquiry from which affinities between races and specific diseases had been proposed. A practical application of scientific racism in Cairns proved ineffectual in the face of a public health threat.

A favourite tool of the scientifically curious was the camera. Victorians loved photography for its ability to combine art and science in a thoroughly modern way, and for its powers of categorisation and dissemination. The interactions of indigenous and non-indigenous residents of the Trinity Bay district were described with cameras, images created from the point of view of the coloniser, but met by Aboriginal participation. At Yarrabah Aboriginal mission, Ernest Gribble was awake to photography's potential to present 'Faithful Delineations' of advancement and progress, but as he harnessed the medium to create an historical narrative for the mission, layers of Aboriginal meaning in the unfolding events were also captured and these are examined in chapter 6. An unwelcome consequence of the photography of Aboriginal people was that it drew attention to the sexualised relationship between colonists and the colonised. As racial alarms sounded among white Australians, Aboriginal women were subject to ever more domineering scrutiny. Racism, misogyny and other 'Blurred Visions' of Aboriginality shaped the Queensland government's policy response to Aboriginal Protection and Chapter 7 considers this road paved with good intentions. Searching for ways out of destitution, and as sought-after employees and sexual partners, relations between indigenous women and colonists had led to a 'baby boom' of mixed descent children. These innocent human beings were dreaded by white society and commonly taken from their families to be reared on missions. At Yarrabah, young Aboriginal women were subject to the full measure of behavioural realignment. 'The Keynote is Love,' said Gribble, and this becomes the title of Chapter 8. Detailed in the Matron's Log and in photographic representations, Yarrabah Senior Girls pursued closely curtailed lives involving tremendous hardship and relentless religious instruction in the name of moral uplift and the preservation of their race, but through which they managed to live, thrive and survive.

Around 1900, the various communities around Trinity Bay faced a unique dilemma. Chapter 9 shows that on the one hand there was a push from without and within the district to bring about a 'White Cairns,' which was considered to be a progressive initiative. On the other hand

however, the logic of social progress as a unilineal, uni-racial thing came undone in the Cairns district, where development had come about and seemed to hang upon the manual efforts of non-Europeans. Not only was the work undertaken by Pacific Islanders, Chinese, Japanese and others considered to be a matter of racial speciality, the same tasks were thought dangerous and damaging to Europeans who were not a 'tropical breed.' Investors, humanitarians and others demanded a tropical variation of White Australia. A majority of white male residents however, many of whom were labourers with options perhaps of itinerancy, voted it down. In Chapter 10 it is clear that early 'Historical Reflections' on this monumental redrawing of the social landscape of Cairns considered that the right choice had been made, but later historians were far less certain and a revaluation of this history was undertaken. The thesis concludes with a perspective taken again from the present day, to frame matters of Cairns' history and identity as it is currently understood.

Chapter 1

Cairns in Colour



Figure 1.1. Near the Barron River, feathery sugarcane seed tufts catch the late afternoon sun and sway gently on the warm tropical breeze. The cultivation of this apparently innocuous crop has loomed large in both the development of Cairns and the historicisation of whiteness in the Trinity Bay district. Present day Cairns contains many answers to the most vexing questions of culture and biology that members of Cairns' first generations could ask themselves.

Photograph: M. Richards.

Introduction

Implicit in early Cairnsites' constructions of racial otherness are subjective interpretations of their own white identity. This identity was influenced by contemporary political imperatives and shaped by the dynamic tension that existed between historical experience and historical interpretation. As such it was unstable. Despite efforts to secure unitary models of history or undeviating characteristics of race, certainties of both proved less durable than expected. Histories which were created to acknowledge particular narratives of race went on to spawn other histories, and white identity shifted. In early Cairns, white Cairnsites used models of geography and biology to categorise other races as 'tropical,' calling themselves 'European.' Present day white Cairnsites proudly identify *themselves* as a tropical people, perfectly at home

in their environment. Within the context of increasing cultural diversity and demographic change in Cairns, the reinvention of 'the white man in tropical Queensland' has been included here as a reminder of the fluidity of self-identification and the instability of the racial representations which fill forthcoming chapters.

The tropical Trinity Bay district

At the dawn of the twentieth century, race was thought to represent destiny and the future was usually projected from the past. It was believed that each race had a distinctive constitutional character suited to its ancestral environment. Building a healthy white race in north Queensland, so climatically dissimilar to northern Europe, would prove to be one of the more contentious aspects of the great national experiment of White Australia. In 1908 a philosophical *Morning Post* thought it had been emphatically shown as "far back as human history has been recorded," that "the white man," despite being "the most powerful type ever...could not permanently thrive in the tropics." The best that might be expected was that "the tropics may be made more habitable on the basis of sanitary science towards the suppression of tropical diseases well known to affect the white man more severely than those of other races." It was only from advances in tropical medicine that any optimistic calculations "about the tropics and their future" could be made.¹ The *Post* doubted that it would ever publish from a land that was the "exclusive home of the white race," and viewed with "a grim gleam of satire" this "democratic forecast of an earthly paradise."²

It was not so for the Brisbane *Worker*. By 1910 the Labor organ was proclaiming that under the policy provisions of White Australia, occupancy of north Queensland had been a resounding success and the white race had triumphed in the tropics. "It was said to be impossible for white men to work in tropical Queensland," the *Worker* reviewed. Sadly, beyond its own lonely voice of reason there had been "absolute unanimity [that] the tropical part of our country" would be, as a field of whites-only endeavor, "doomed to perpetual barrenness." It was further said by those who lacked the foresight and race patriotism of the *Worker*, that if they were not allowed to continue as multi-racial communities, districts such as that of Cairns faced "cataclysm" and "utter ruination." Indeed, they "must die."³ Claiming most of the credit for this disaster having

¹ *Morning Post*, (hereafter *MP*), 10 January 1908, p.3.

² *MP*, 10 January 1902, p.2.

³ *Worker*, 12 May 1910, p.13.

been averted, the *Worker* crowed that the “prophets...were wrong – Labor’s great effort to save Australia for the white races” had been “successful beyond our wildest hopes.”⁴

If by ‘successful’ the *Worker* meant that the policies associated with White Australia had ‘saved’ the north for a grand white future that was prospective only, while conspicuously failing to stimulate any demographic or developmental fillip for that large section of the continent, then the *Worker* was quite right. Aboriginal people had been dispossessed, it was argued, so that Europeans could develop the resources of the country, but beyond some areas on the coast, little development had occurred anywhere in the north. Immigration policies restricted the growth of Chinese and other non-white communities and Pacific Islanders had been ejected, but filling the continent from end to end with white people had always been hopelessly optimistic. At the time, white people, and with them European hegemony, were seen to be under demographic threat from higher birth rates in Asia and Africa, as well as political, perhaps even military, threat from the astonishingly and impressively risen Japan. Some wondered if the ‘empty spaces’ of tropical Australia held the key, not only to Australia’s future, but as the last place on earth in which the white race could regenerate and renew itself.⁵ But white race building in the north was proving marginal – at best. Development floundered. Potential colonists steered clear. Most European immigrants to Australia feared and eschewed the tropical reaches and their racially mixed communities. Supported by the best medical advice, Europeans imagined a tropical atmosphere that was harmful to their white constitutions and would somehow damage their future progeny. To many, tropical Australia was seen as a hostile and uninviting place, a place of disease, punishing temperatures, degeneration and miscegenation. The northern press even avoided using the term ‘tropical’ as it was something of a pejorative. To transform this image took a concerted publicity campaign, the birth of several healthy white generations and the vigorous pursuit of medical dead ends. As Anderson put it, only gradually did “confidence in the continuity of racial type overcome fears of European constitutional decline in a depleting environment.”⁶

But with the passage of time, much has changed. In the twenty-first century the malign reputation of the tropical north is long forgotten. ‘Tropical’ has mainly positive connotations and white people feel entirely at home in places such as Cairns. Shoeless beneath a gently whirring ceiling fan in Cairns, I find it difficult to imagine the threat that once haunted districts such as this. Outside the window Cairns spreads long skinny tendrils of suburbia through the

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Walker, *Anxious Nation*.

⁶ Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science Health and Racial Destiny in Australia*, 2002, p.118.

fast-disappearing sugarcane fields of the Barron River flood plain, then some way up the sides of the surrounding craggy mountains and through its cool river valleys. Visitors admire its attractive setting, its lushness and its topography. The town dips its toes into the mangrove-fringed waters of Trinity Bay and nestles among rainforest-clad ranges, swept by billowing clouds precipitously proceeding to the cooler Tablelands rising in the west. Just beyond Trinity Bay lies the Coral Sea and the extraordinary Great Barrier Reef, drawing tourists in their hundreds of thousands each year. The climate is wet tropical, with dramatic heavy rains, swirling mists, high humidity for much of the year and gloriously sunny days in winter. Although the waters of Trinity Bay are not ideal for swimming, there are palm-fringed beaches upon which to languish and numerous cool rainforest streams tumbling over water-worn boulders which are delightfully refreshing in summer.



Figure 1.2. More than a century ago, the Barron River falls near Kuranda came to Australians' attention via a turgid and widely-published piece of neo-Romantic prose from the pen of Archibald Meston. Meston had a financial interest in the railway that carried passengers to Kuranda and visiting the falls was touted as the tourist highlight of Cairns. From these humble beginnings, greater global integration, crucially through the creation of an international airport and with it, the steady introduction of cheaper airfares, has brought people and prosperity to the Trinity Bay district on a scale hitherto unimagined. In the photograph above, the city centre and airport are to the left of the Barron River, the suburbs of Machans Beach and Holloways Beach in the foreground, to the near right. Photograph: M. Richards.



Figure 1.3. Souvenir images showing the changing face of communing with nature in the Trinity Bay district, from posing before the Barron falls in flood to postcards of colourful flora, fauna and white women, soaking up the sun under tropical skies. In a rare example of a north Queensland icon that is not male, touristic representations of Cairns often include images of semi-clad women in a powerful (if retrogressive) conflation of Queensland, paradise and femininity, echoing old insinuations of Cairns as a sexually accessible place. Cairns Historical Society.

Figure 1.4. Postcards at the Cairns Night Markets. Photograph: M. Richards.

Around federation, Cairnsites had supported White Australia as a general principle of racial prestige but were less certain of the wisdom of racial exclusion. Many feared that ridding the district of its non-white businesses and labour forces invited economic calamity, or would at the very least, thwart its prospects. Cairns did not die, but by the measures used by early Cairnsites, progress faltered. The Trinity Bay district, which had shown so much promise late in the nineteenth century remained very quiet for much the twentieth. It was not the slow unravelling of White Australia that brought about the resurgence in the town's fortunes, but opening the district to the world in the 1980s through the creation of the Cairns International Airport. The local economy was largely re-gearred from primary industry to mass tourism, including many thousands of peaceful emissaries from lands to Australia's north. Job opportunities, warm weather, abundant sunshine, the lack of crowds and traffic, ease of access to friends and family interstate – or the very human desire to reinvent one's life away from them – have drawn many new residents to Cairns from other parts of the country. From a population of about 3000 in 1900, there are now more than 110,000 people calling Cairns home. The transformation has brought mixed blessings to Aboriginal communities, placed the unique ecology of the region under pressures of popularity and caused angst to some older residents who long for quieter

times, but Cairns is now a significant regional city and bursting with self-confidence. With its demographic churn and against a backdrop of rural conservatism, social democrats are now seen to be playing a more prominent role in the politics of Cairns. Local political leaders espouse multiculturalism as a mainstream policy response. Earthly paradise is no longer commensurate with white exclusivity.



Figure 1.5, Figure 1.6. Echoes of the past in the present. A replica of a Chinese trawler plies the waters of the northern coast while a North Cairns Chinese restaurant dishes up ‘chow’ by numbers. Photographs: M. Richards.

The population of Cairns has now returned to levels of cultural diversity similar to that of its early days, reflecting both its history and its Asia-Pacific location. The scourge of racism has not been eradicated in north Queensland or anywhere else in Australia, and while, socialised by the mainstream media to believe it, many white people regard themselves as the most valid Australians, the imposition of a strict racial hierarchy in response to cultural complexity is no longer acceptable. Thousands of international visitors and temporary residents are welcomed to the region each year. Many young Chinese, Japanese and other Asian people arrive in Cairns to study, live or to gain overseas professional experience. Unlike their nineteenth century equivalents they are able to engage with Australia on more equal terms. Descendents of earlier waves of non-European immigration are still found in Cairns and Chinese-styled restaurants do a roaring trade in dishes never seen in China. The aesthetic hybridity of one establishment we visited is in itself worthy of investigation. Notable features included the apparent Chinese ancestry of the *maitre d'*, contextualized with shorts, ‘Strine’ accent and the receding memories of a 1970s hairstyle. Carved Pacific Island souvenirs, a Japanese beckoning cat, Italian-style plastic checkered tablecloths, European-style knives and forks and Queenslanderly fishing photos, sporting memorabilia, crocodile artifacts and sharks jaws completed the mise-en-scène. Those of Pacific Islander descent in Cairns are more likely to be Australia citizens than holders

of temporary work visas. They tend to be clustered in lower paid work but are spread across a range of industries. Editors of the nineteenth century *Cairns Post* might spin in their graves to know that the demographic makeup of my postgraduate cohort include individuals once known to Europeans as ‘gentle Kanakas,’ ‘inscrutable Celestials,’ ‘wily Japs,’ (potentially) ‘amok Javamen’ and ‘Manilamen,’ ‘Hindoos’ and Australia’s very own ‘Sable Lords of the Soil.’

In debating White Australia, little attention was given to Aboriginal people who numbered in their tens of thousands but were widely believed to be disappearing, dying off and being absorbed into the white population.⁷ Reverend Ernest Gribble, a founder of the Yarrabah mission, might marvel at the nuggety persistence of the Aboriginal ‘remnant’ into the twenty-first-century, and that the former mission across Trinity Bay is now a self-governing concern. Although it is not wealthy and not free from the social problems that plague so many Aboriginal communities, racial extinction has not snuffed out its population. Cairns in the twenty-first century would astonish members of its first colonial generation for the continued existence and relative mainstream inclusion of Trinity Bay’s Aboriginal people, or Bama as they also call themselves. Cairns bears little resemblance to its former frontier self and tolerance is more conspicuous than its opposite, but a polarising dynamic persists between indigenous and non-indigenous people. Despite significant normalisation, older hostilities from each direction die hard and the problems of entrenched antagonism, the legacies of intergenerational disadvantage and a white community rhetorically unequipped for Aboriginal survival cannot be quickly overcome. Jan Elder has argued that that the acceptance of hostility towards Aboriginal people has been used as a measure of the successful integration of non-white residents into north Queensland.⁸ I cannot speak of Aboriginal antagonism towards whites, but I was made very aware that in some circles, acceptance of racism against Aboriginal people is supposed to be a local standard. Newcomers to Cairns will at various times find themselves regaled with horror stories about the violent criminality of local Aboriginal people, drunkenness, welfare dependency and anti-white racism, stories which many newcomers undoubtedly accept and perpetuate. Fortunately, many Cairnsites are more thoughtful in their reading of the social dynamics of their community and Australia’s deepest historical scar.

⁷ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, p.163.

⁸ Jan Elder, *Ideologies of Difference: Racism in the Making of Multiculturalism in North Queensland*, PhD thesis, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1996.



Figure 1.7, Figure 1.8. Domestic pioneering tribute in North Cairns (left) and some trans-national white patriotism on the back of a utility (right), combining British, Australian and American symbols, and arguably, white authoritarianism and fear of the other. Towards 1900, Australia's democratic settler society was reformed and modernized. During this time, Australians embraced an intense brand of nationalism which gave them identity, status and a sense of security. They were responsive to the calls of the new imperialists to define themselves as members of the British diaspora and members of the Anglo-Saxon race, loyalty to which was unmistakable in their support for the Empire at war and echoes of which are with us today.
Photographs: M. Richards.

The community of early twenty-first century Cairns is more culturally varied than most Australian regional cities, but there are those who continue to promote an earthy white male identity as north Queensland's most *bona fide* self. (A female equivalent is difficult to locate.) It is in the main, an older form of white Australian masculinity with its origins in the British liberal vision and Chartist beliefs of the British working class of the mid-nineteenth century, refashioned through the race patriotism of the 1890s, historicized in rural Australia, remolded by the frontier experience and seasoned by natural disasters and warfare. Early northern colonists struggled with a social life that appeared disordered and against strange diseases in a climate that was foreign. The weather and the very earth upon which they walked were accused of being devitalising and feminising, to which vigorous, manly overcorrection might appear to be a response. Isolation and decades of relative demographic homogeneity helped social conservatism, contempt for metropolitan centres and Aboriginal objectives to flourish, aided by the historical ambience of the 'white and progressive' ideologies that shaped Cairns' growth, including colonialism, Laborism, rural protectionism, white paternalism, a belief in rapid economic expansion and more recently, urban utopianism in which Cairns is configured as paradise. Reynolds blamed southern Australia and the White Australia policy for making northern Australia into "a backwater," which became "increasingly mono-cultural, socially

conservative, provincial,” and then patronising it for being so.⁹ This is quite a series of accusations, but not untrue.

Yet there are diverse threads woven and blended into the white Cairnsite identity. Pacific and Asian influenced décor prevails and twenty-first century white Cairnsites display attitudes and behaviors which were once more closely associated with Aboriginal, Pacific Islander and Chinese people, such as an intimate relationship with place as a source of self, freedom in the landscape, an enthusiasm for fishing, even communal outdoor eating and fear of the cold. It was once thought that Pacific Islanders would be unable to survive outside of the tropics whereas relocated white Cairnsites ought to be able to readily adapt to the more temperate regions – a horrifying idea to many contemporary Cairnsites. Perhaps the recent population influx has given renewed emphasis to the need for local validation around Cairns. Questions of roots and identity suffuse local museums and histories. Bookshops commonly include self-published histories, which are an important and valuable contribution to the cultural base, but can also help to sustain a collection of unsubstantiated racist myths from Cairns’ past, such as the one about the “Chinese [being] much sought after by cannibalistic Aborigines because of their rice-based diets.”¹⁰ Housed in humble surroundings, the Cairns Museum is a small but sophisticated historical research centre. Most other museums in the north are similar to regional museums Australia-wide in that they give less attention to interpretation and more to the stockpiling of interesting detritus of white pioneering, from flat irons to rusting farm equipment. They usually include some Aboriginal artifacts of uncertain provenance.

Before tourism claimed the ascendancy, Cairns’ economic staples were sugarcane cultivation, and to a lesser extent forestry and fishing. With the Glasshouse Mountains forming a backdrop and astride a vintage tractor progressing slowly through spiky fields, a laconic farmer icon was developed for the marketing of tinned pineapple in Queensland. Perhaps the nearest equivalent attempt at romanticising sugar growing could be found in CSR television advertisements from the 1980s which portrayed twinkling-eyed, weather-beaten cane farmers gazing wistfully at huge palls of purgative flame lighting up the night sky, a precursor once, to the harvest. The image of the cattleman has proven to be a more resilient icon of pan-northern masculine

⁹ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, pp.188-189.

¹⁰ D.J. Daniel, *Cape York Peninsula: Around the coast and up the centre*, G.K. Bolton Cairns, w.d., p.11. The present day incarnation of the *Cairns Post* is a tabloid shadow of its witty and, once in a while, sapiential ancestral self, and little less racist: “For those familiar with the history of the Palmer River gold rush, there are plenty of Chinese ghost stories to be had in this neck of the woods. Despite the tens of thousands of pig-tailed Chinamen converging on the goldfields in the 1870s, there is not one burial post in the Cooktown graveyard denoting a dead Oriental. Beyond the ardours of the outback, they also had to run the gauntlet of cannibalistic blacks who favoured the flesh of a Chinaman.” Chief Reporter Peter Mitchell, *Cairns Post*, 28 January 2006, p.4.

identity, black and white, than the anonymous agriculturalist on a tractor. Away from the coast especially, but not exclusively so, many northerners identify with the cattleman through themes of endurance and independence from the decadent and self-regarding capital cities, even as Cairns itself becomes increasingly decadent. “Today’s cattlemen,” wrote D.J. Daniel, have “a spirit of self reliance little different from the early pioneers...Many are third generation descendants of the pioneers...all are renown [sic] cattle and horsemen in their own right.”¹¹ 1950s Hollywood and the culture of the American west has been influential. North Queensland’s rugby league team is known as the Cowboys rather than the Cattlemen and a cowboy mode of dress – the dress of the coloniser – finds favour with older Aboriginal men, many of whom remember a pastoral industry built on their labour. Around Cairns, those of Pacific Islander descent do not fetishise the bland khaki dress code of the cane farmer. As a rule, young people of Islander and Aboriginal-descent identify more closely with the powerful ‘world blak’ imagery of urban African American culture, which they reinterpret along local lines. Jamaican Rastafarian styling is also not unknown among those born in the 1960s and 1970s, and from which we turn to the final piece of the white identity puzzle in north Queensland: the question of tropicality.

Earthly paradise

On the doors of the Battistero di San Giovanni, in sculptural relief, Lorenzo Ghiberti’s bronze doors propose contrasting scenarios of the afterlife: salvation and damnation, the rewards of paradise versus the torments of hell. With what would appear to be harmless local pride and wry good humour, Cairnsites who love where they live confidently refer to their region as paradise, drawing not-so-subtle climatic and cultural distinctions between north Queensland and the outside world. The idea of a pleasure garden appeals to Western tourists, symbolising a normalised white place which is exotic, but not *too* exotic. To many interstate re-locators, paradise means a simpler, *better* Australia than the one that they already know; a place in which to escape and ‘go native’ without surrendering the comforts of suburbia. Fitting Hobsbawm and Ranger’s description of an invented tradition,¹² it can be a strategy for integrating, reassuring and seeking to create bonds of loyalty in a community peppered with the transient and the newly-arrived. Signaling a loose collection of attitudes and ways of living and embedded with

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Cairns as paradise is “governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual of a symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour.” Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions,’ Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger (editors), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, pp.1-13.

the utopian dream of an ideal society, paradise *is* the Cairns that exists for many Cairnsites. Sometimes the motif of paradise is used to represent Cairns as a blissful bubble in which authentically Australian characteristics and behaviours perceived to be under threat elsewhere can still be enjoyed. Imagining one's homeland as 'God's own' is a widespread phenomenon, but I am concerned with the use and historical function of the idea of paradise in Cairns because of its relationship with white identity. Cairns as paradise resonates with specific conflicts from local history, saying emphatically that white people belong and are the rightful, natural occupants of the tropics.



Figure 1.9, above left: In *Paradise* by Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625), at least two species of tropical parrot coexist harmoniously with European woodland creatures, as well as wild and domestic animals in the peaceable kingdom that will arrive with the Messiah; according to Isaiah 11:6: "the young lion and the fatling together." In Brueghel's painting no child leads them. artcyclopedia.com

Figure 1.10, above right: In a very early iteration or a precursor of tropical paradise in the Trinity Bay district this image from about 1900 shows an Aboriginal group resembling 'noble savages' leading an untroubled life in a hidden Shangrila, on the Mulgrave River perhaps. Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library, Hume Collection.

The Trinity Bay district is abundantly fecund, much of it is cultivated or garden-like but the image of Cairns as paradise relies rather on the romantic tropics of the post-war United States and its sunset-through-the-palm-trees postcard imagery. From their early forays into the Pacific during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans began to conceive ideal societies of

materially unencumbered noble savages, living in blissful isolation and bounteous abundance on balmy islands strewn across the South Seas. Long before Pacific people became an attractive source of colonial labour (and a different set of images came into service), Europeans questioning runaway modernity idealized life among the coral atolls and jungle-clad, black sandy volcanic mounts of the Pacific. Far from London's fogs, soot and relentless toil of the industrial age, generously provisioned it seemed by nature alone, and freed from the containments of clothing and Western guilt, Pacific people could be imagined living pacific lives of idyllic contentment on the shores of their fish-filled lagoons. The fantasies of lusty sailors, dreamy artists and disillusioned philosophers spun out and the notion of tropical island paradise was born.



Figure 1.11. Wenzel Peter (1745-1829) found room for a crocodile in his vision of paradise, albeit in a far corner of his painting *Adamo ed Eva nel Paradiso Terrestre* and at a safe distance from Adam, Eve and their menagerie, and possibly sizing up a white swan for lunch. Vatican collection. Photographed and cropped to a tiny fragment of the original: M. Richards.

The black man's burden?

Cairns as paradise derives from the successful marketing of Hawaii as paradise, which furthered the assimilation of Hawaii into the United States by portraying it as an attractive destination for tourists, new residents and investment. Cairns as paradise serves similar ends, further

assimilating an Aboriginal space into the Australian nation. Mirroring the Hawaiian experience as observed by Shroeder and Borgerson, Cairns as paradise substitutes a complex legacy of culture and history for an imaginary cultural heritage,¹³ akin to Laurie Whitt's description of the colonial process being completed as Euro-American culture "established itself in indigenous cultures by appropriating, mining and re-defining what is distinctive, constitutive of them," and thereby facilitating "cultural acquisition via conceptual assimilation."¹⁴ The fantasy of Cairns as paradise annexes tropical authenticity from indigenous Aboriginal and Pacific Islander cultures to conceptually install white people as authentic north Queensland natives. Unlike Hawaii, the assimilation of the Cairns district has occurred without incorporating a cultural tradition of the exotic other.

Cairns as paradise obscures the facts of colonisation and the divisions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. The Cairns region, its reef and rainforests now constitute important commercial possessions of Queensland, although the economic independence of many Aboriginal people around Cairns remains perilous. I am uncertain that residents of Yarrabah or the less-affluent suburbs of Cairns readily characterise their circumstances as paradisiacal. No human society is Utopia, but an Eden-like image of pre-contact life around Trinity Bay district can be constructed: by the bay's gently rippling waters brilliant blue butterflies dance in the warm sunlight, acid-green frogs squint in the rain, cassowaries charge through the undergrowth, geckos whisk up rock faces and huge fat snakes drape themselves along tree branches. The bay and its surrounding rainforest burst with natural abundance, all intimately known and carefully managed by Aboriginal people who want for nothing as they have practically and conceptually woven themselves into their surrounds and its subtle rhythms.

Only from the most hypocritical heights of self-righteousness could colonisation be portrayed as the Aboriginal Fall, so citing the absence of recognisable farming techniques, permanent housing and other attributes of European village life, colonists characterised pre-colonial Aboriginal life as dystopian savagery, and colonisation a sort of restoration. From this thinking, paradise came to be seen as a *perfected* state of nature, credited to Western civilisation. In starkly colonial terms, white people may feel they have earned the rewards of paradise via pioneering efforts, whereas black people have not. Popular local histories normalise the settler presence, explaining that Europeans released the potential of the Trinity Bay district by introducing modernity and making the district progressive without squandering its primitive

¹³ *Packaging Paradise: Organizing Representations of Hawaii*, Jonathon E. Shroeder and Janet L. Borgerson, presented at Against the Grain: Advances in Post-colonial Organization Studies, Critical Management Studies Conference, Cambridge, July 2005, p.9.

¹⁴ Laurie Whitt, 1995, cited in Shroeder and Borgerson, *Packaging Paradise*, p.5.

allure. The district has been adapted to the needs of tourists and the urban Australian mainstream, palms replacing mangroves, houses replacing rainforests as Aboriginal legitimacy has been steadily erased.

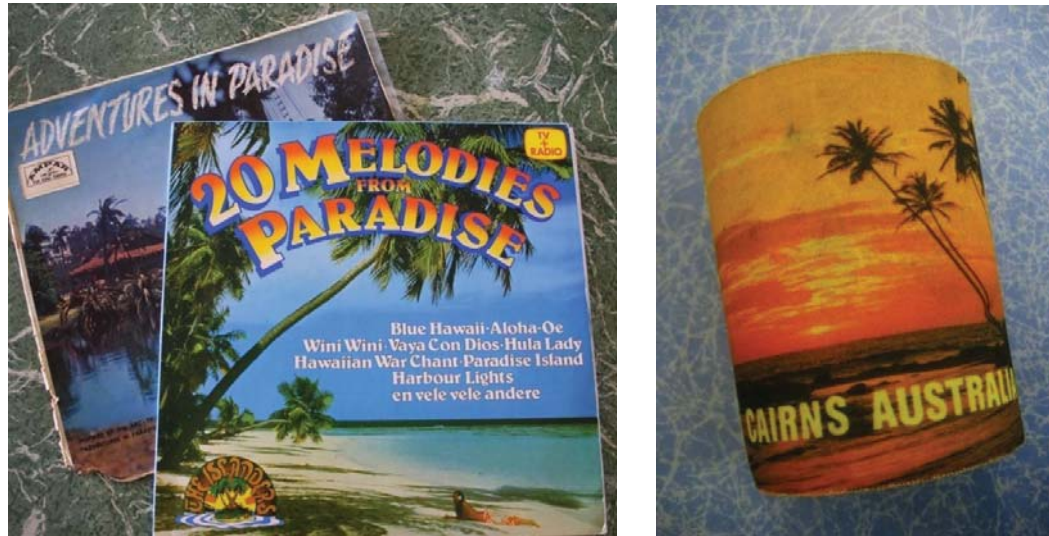


Figure 1.12, left. Record covers making thematic use of Pacific paradise, but of peculiar provenance. *Adventures in Paradise* was recorded in Melbourne in the 1960s by bands including The Islanders and The Tahitians who were almost certainly white session musicians, while *20 Melodies from Paradise* was recorded in the Netherlands in the 1970s by Jan Theelan and Frans van Oorschot. It represents Hawaii, not the Dutch East Indies.

Figure 1.13, right. This beer cooler from a tourist shop in Cairns is emblematic of the successful branding of Cairns as tropical paradise. The image and the object convey a sense of alcohol-fuelled leisure and serve to remind the departed visitor of an enjoyable stay in Cairns. There are some discordant elements in the photograph suggesting that paradise is a state of mind rather than a precise location. The scene is not unlike Trinity Bay but anomalous details such as surf, a strange rocky outcrop and the sun appearing to set over the sea rather than over the mountains to the west of Cairns indicate that this photograph is a stock photograph of a beach. The image is at variance with Hawaiian iconography in that there are no 'native ladies of easy virtue.' A subtext of Hawaiian tourist promotion was the story of beautiful Polynesian women who were, according to ancient sailors' tales, unconstrained by European sexual mores and provided warm welcome to even the most sun-blistered and scurried seafarers. Sexual relations between nineteenth century colonists and Aboriginal women have not been woven into the romantic myths of north Queensland, so no semi-clad, shapely Bama women lure male tourists to Cairns. Perhaps the poor image of contemporary Aboriginal life in non-Aboriginal Australia makes Aboriginal cultural tourism more easily sold to international tourists. The targeting of tourist material seems to support this. The absence of humans in representations of Cairns could reflect a common view of Australia from abroad: that it is blessed with natural wonders, but has no culture or history worthy of the names. One might otherwise consider an un-peopled landscape building the contention that Cairns is not an Aboriginal, Asian, Melanesian or Polynesian place, but a racially-neutral locale, which is a conventional self-interpretation of whiteness.

Photographs: M. Richards.

The aptness of white tropicality is promoted with an urgency that seems to respond to long forgotten historical uncertainties about white occupation of the north. Elements within present-

day discourses of white Cairnsite identity are in tune with the hopes of early optimists who argued not only for the white habitability of the tropics, but for a white race improved by its tropical surrounds. Dr Raphael Cilento was convinced that “the peculiar Australian combination of European stock, a tropical environment and modern preventative medicine would ultimately produce a superior type of tropical white man.”¹⁵ He would be a “distinctive tropical type, adapted to life in the tropical environment in which [he] is set.”¹⁶ Few long-standing Cairns families consider themselves to be a new biological form, born of weird circumstances, but many Cairnsites do see themselves as being closely attuned to their physical environment and use physiological reference points as well as cultural reference points to confirm their white tropical identity.

Conclusion

Early twenty-first-century Cairns is thriving and although reconciliation between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Cairnsites is incomplete, the community of Cairns is culturally diverse, tolerant and the old racial hierarchy has been flattened. The genealogy of whiteness in Cairns is an amalgam of cultural attributes, including non-white cultural attributes, and a combination of cultural heredity and invented tradition. In searching for ways by which to define themselves Cairnsites have upheld a storied past of white pioneering, crucially contingent upon relationships with indigenous and non-white Australians, borrowing freely from ‘traditional’ white masculine identity formations but fusing them with more contemporary perspectives relevant to a modern regional city. It was once warned that whites had no place in the tropics. If they stayed, they would be racially disfigured. Cairns as paradise hails white tropical aptness. Cairns is a tourist town, responsive to touristic tropes, but there are echoes of its past in the adoption of paradise as a unifying theme as it is one which effectively privileges whiteness.

¹⁵ Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, pp.131-132.

¹⁶ Raphael Cilento, cited in Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, p.137.

Chapter 2

Historical projections

Introduction

A central and motivating rationale for the expansion and consolidation of British colonialism in Queensland was the idea that races existed in competitive historical trajectories of biological potential. From the 1870s, control was systematically wrested from Aboriginal groups. As Europeans, Chinese and others flooded into far-flung pockets of the colony's north, Europeans made reference to theories of race to situate themselves in relation to others in time, space and legend. As representatives of the dominant culture, Europeans readily imagined themselves to be the agents, drivers and authors of history. Providing context to European constructions of racial otherness, the social ordering of Trinity Bay and the history of White Australia in the north, this chapter considers the 'historical white man' in north Queensland, viewed through the aesthetics of the frontier and ideas of tropical development and nation building.

The men to whom we look

North of the Tropic of Capricorn, ideas about race were given a special twist. In the early 1900s the Labor magazine the *Worker* took the view that the Australian tropics were perfectly habitable by whites and that those white people who lived there were far from being "weak, anaemic degenerates" as its readers may have imagined. The *Worker* offered proof from Cairns, observing that white children raised in the town showed "a marked capacity for steady and sustained work."¹ Yet for reasons best understood by itself, the *Worker* published a speculative discussion of race by Dr H.I. Jensen, which, closely read, seems to undercut the newspaper's proposition that white people would not degenerate in tropical Australia. Jensen reasoned that the historical and physical environment of a human society forged not only its racial characteristics but also the "moral and mental character of a nation." As products of their historical environment, Jensen weighed up the moral and mental character of white Australians. Making keen observations from popular songs, he was somewhat disappointed by what he found. Stirring ballads about King Arthur and the Spanish Armada would have revealed wholesome influences shaping the progress of the Australian people, Jensen thought, but the

¹ *Worker*, 12 May 1910, p.15.

popularity of the (bawdy?) *Song of the Shirt* told a very different story. “Historical environment” Jensen gravely intoned, “harbours many of the factors which tend to degrade man to the primitive state.” The author then considered the influence of geography on moral and mental character. By Jensen’s measure, a town such as Cairns, with its “broad coastal plains...well-provided with navigable rivers” ought to get its “fair share of commerce.” This would help the “education and training for the intellect” of current and future Cairnsites, but could also foster “commercial unscrupulousness and to habits of lying and cheating.” Tropical residence presented further dangers to the moral and mental disposition of residents. In a “hot damp climate” Jensen warned, “abundant food supply makes the struggle for existence very light. The warm, moist air and the well-stuffed belly makes the inhabitants lazy and dull-witted. They also become sensual and quarrelsome.”²



Figure 2.1. As the Wimble banquet may have appeared.
 Photograph without identifying information, John Oxley Library, Archibald Meston papers OM64/17 Box 2.

One hot damp night in 1890, at a banquet held in his honour, the newly-minted M.L.A. and former *Cairns Post* founder/proprietor Frederick Wimble rose to speak. It was the wet season.

² H.I. Jensen, ‘The Effect of Environment on National Character,’ *Worker*, 23 February 1910, p.4.

From the worked-up retelling in the press, one senses that it was also a ‘well-oiled’ affair. Barron River land holders had made representations to Wimble requesting more land for selection. As befitted a formal political dinner in a colonial outpost, in a room bedecked with potted palms, pressed shirts and the district’s leading citizens, Wimble drifted far from the question of land availability to admire generally the heroic and history-making efforts of north Queensland’s pioneers. “These men” Wimble implored, “are the men to whom we look.” It was less a memorable speech than a windy oration, blowing out to a lengthy eulogy to the honourable struggles of the colonists. It was true that even after fifteen years of European occupancy, the Trinity Bay district, in the remote coastal north of the colony, remained a strange and difficult place to subdue. But “these men,” Wimble was sure, “were the men,”

to wield the magic wand...to turn the solitude of the scrub, with its mysterious sounds, its rope-like intricacies of gigantic vines and its solemn shade, into smiling homesteads where the sun can shine, where happy families will thrive, and where crops will be grown that will...make the district famous.³

As he had done through the pages of his own newspaper on many other occasions, Wimble took the opportunity to both flatter his audience and put a message in a bottle to future historians. As he continued, Wimble sought to assuage the doubts of his listeners, that theirs was an epic quest for enlightened ideals. He gathered up their modest hopes and pitiful struggles and refashioned them into objects of eternal magnitude. Wimble exhorted those weary pioneers to a mighty redoubling of their exertions. Out there in the dangerous anonymity of the rainforest and among the nipping sandflies of the coastal bushland a snider rifle might crack from time to time against the lingering possibility of a spear in the ribs. Out there grubby, sweaty men lacerated their shirts and selves on wait-a-while vines; put axes to *Zamia* palms, tulip oaks and celery wood; set fire to piles of hairy fig and quandong branches, fended off malaria with alcohol and smoked coarse tobacco. Upon their feats hung historical import; national destiny accompanied their labours. These were the great acts of creation, not destruction, from which Cairns and Wimble’s real Australia would rise, phoenix-like. “Let us found a noble country,” Wimble rallied:

let us raise up a nation, let us hand down a heritage, and let us make future Australians proud of the founders of a grand country. (Loud applause). Let them say that the old fellows who had started a real Australia, had handed them a noble heritage and made the country of Australia one of the grandest countries on the face of God’s earth.⁴

³ *Cairns Post*, (hereafter *CP*), 15 March, 1890, p.2.

⁴ *Ibid.*



Figure 2.2. Before: Pacific Islanders in the solitude of the scrub, with its rope-like intricacies, mysterious sounds and ecology that was both wondrous and incomprehensible to most pioneers, being cleared for cane planting.
JOL image no. 60914.



Figure 2.3. After: The smiling homestead of Hambleton house in 1890, with the sun shining, the happy Swallow family thriving, crops growing and Pacific Islanders at leisure in the foreground.
JOL image no. APU-025-0001-0001.

With this the house may well have been brought down. But as Wimble and his loudly applauding white audience well knew, most of the people actually wielding the ‘magic wand,’ that is the axe and the fire-stick, clearing scrub, cutting firewood, hauling water and cultivating crops were Chinese, Pacific Islanders, Japanese, Aborigines and other non-Europeans (and there were women among them too). This was an unusually mixed community but the fact was difficult to acknowledge so Wimble fudged and made no mention of smiling Chinese homesteads, yeoman Islanders or happy Aboriginal families – these may or may not have been included in Wimble’s vision.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups imagined history differently. Each had its own means by which to obtain and transmit knowledge of the past. In the rainforest and coastal scrub of the Trinity Bay district, each group represented the physical and cognitive continuance of cycles and arcs from a range of historical pasts. In other colonial situations, Chinese and Japanese people would have opportunities to regard themselves as the ennobled directors of history. Here in colonial Queensland it was Europeans claiming moral right and legal auspice, arbitrating the cultural core, presenting living proof that Europeans belonged at these latitudes and imposing a European heritage upon the land. The coming ‘real Australia’ was the optimistic tale Wimble and his cohort told about their own national destiny. Although they represented perhaps two thirds of the local community and just a tiny speck of European history in the vast human story of the Australian continent, they saw themselves as the only Australians living locally. But as with other settlements scattered across Australia’s tropical coasts, Cairns and its district had many noble heritages.

In 1900 another Cairns newspaper editor was less sanguine about the nation he saw being raised up and the noble heritage being handed down by the old fellows of Trinity Bay. When Edwin (‘Hoppy’) Draper gazed into a crystal ball and saw Cairns in 2000AD, he did not see resorts, swimming pools and international air traffic, nor did he see any Aboriginal people at all. Instead Draper perceived that the legacy of his own generation would be a poor, degenerate hybrid culture of ‘mean white’ and Guangdong villager. Draper expected that a tourist visiting Cairns in this future would witness:

Cairns natives on a Sunday morning; the crowns out of their cabbage tree hats dressed in grass suits probably made by Chinamen, riding bare-backed upon a donkey or mule with a rooster under each arm, off to a cock fight among the swamps.⁵

⁵ *MP*, 27 July 1900, p.4.

Did the Labor politician King O'Malley read the *Morning Post* or was it *vice versa*? According to Anderson, O'Malley had argued for an Australian capital in a cold climate because he had seen Europeans in San Domingo "on a Sabbath morning going to a cockfight with a rooster under each arm and a sombrero on their heads," from which he concluded: "We cannot have a hope in hot countries."⁶

The fighting time

In the 1870s, the gold and other mineral wealth of the colony's distant northern areas had appeared sufficiently promising to lure many thousands of men and some women to the alternately baked and flooded Palmer river region. The influx gave rise to Cooktown, then the Hodgkinson field, which in turn gave rise to Cairns, before moving on to other fields. Territorial and racial conflict between Aborigines, Europeans and Chinese marred earlier discoveries elsewhere in the Australian colonies, but so too had fortunes been made and splendid, Italianate and 'boom style' towns burst into life. Hopes were high that in north Queensland similar riches could be wrung from the bosom of the earth, but hopes were quickly tempered by harsh realities. From many lands but predominantly Britain, European colonies and southern China, fortune seekers, the adventurous and the determinedly curious snaked their way into Aboriginal territory. Competition for land and resources saw familiar triangular patterns of conflict, moving into tension and accommodation between the traditional owners, Europeans and Chinese. Rough, isolated and often impermanent settlements began to appear. Small pieces of the physical and cultural infrastructure of colonisation came in. Full colonial control took decades to complete and in the meantime, changes in traditional Aboriginal life, many of them destructive and devastating, escalated.

Queensland's newspaper editors gazed in philosophical wonderment at the age in which they lived. To them, history of a distinctly Whiggish variety accompanied the thrust of British civilisation into the last recesses of a 'timeless' land. *The Moreton Mail and South Brisbane Times* saw itself living in a "triumphant hour of expanding civilisation where man's ingenuity has annihilated space and time."⁷ So much appeared to be happening and at such a rate that the historical record keepers, as newspaper writers saw themselves, could scarcely keep up. The *Mackay Chronicle*, a newspaper whose very masthead suggested an expanding historical account, noted that apart from a handful of similarly-minded editors, other Queenslanders

⁶ Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, p.95.

⁷ *Morton Mail and South Brisbane Times*, 31 January 1890, p.8.

would “rarely stop in this age to make a retrospect.” The chronicler begged its readers to claim, at the very least, a moment of reflective pause to better gauge the historical magnitude of their astonishing present, and to calibrate historical fact with their mnemonic impressions. In so doing, they would gain a proper sense of Queensland’s historical progress. “Events multiply so rapidly, and overlap each other in turn so completely,” worried the *Chronicle*, that “unless their record is rolled back in the books, memory...only grasps a general map of...advance or retrogression.”⁸ Britain’s colonial extension seemed inexorable and there was little doubt that the colonisation of Australia represented historical and civilisational advance. “Progress!” exclaimed the *Cooktown Herald*, “it is but a little word. Yet how full of meaning in the North.”⁹

How full of meaning indeed! The *Cooktown Courier* defined progress as the “mighty word of modern civilisation” and “the watchword of the brave and hardy race.” Working up a head of steam, the *Courier* furthermore thought that members of this brave and hardy race, otherwise known as British, English, Anglo-Saxon, European, Caucasian or white, were:

Men inured to peril and hardship [who] bring after them civilisation thereby opening up the road to Anglo-Saxon energy and perseverance...for their own aggrandisement, no doubt, but thereby adding to the colony at large...hitherto the habitat of the wild savage.¹⁰

A writer in the *Herald* concluded breathlessly that the “English people [are] the best colonists in the world.”¹¹

Convinced by the superiority of European civilisation, inspired by new imperialist ideas of pride in the British race and perhaps wishing to appear learned, newspaper editors bandied about ideas of blood heredity and social Darwinism, combining unilineal theories of social progress with popular racism, but furnished with little detail. The occupation of Queensland’s north was the most recent acquisitive foray from which Britain, as Queensland’s senior partner, had achieved an extent of global reach never known before. Marveling at this power and looking to legitimise imperial conquest, indigenous dispossession and the imposition of hierarchical relationships upon fellow inhabitants of these lands, white Britons celebrated themselves as a progressive race, a governing race. Europeans felt themselves tested biologically in the colonial sphere. The *Port Douglas and Mossman Record* looked fondly upon “the fighting time of pioneer work.”¹² By winning battles here the race was energized and

⁸ *Mackay Chronicle*, (hereafter *MC*), 13 January 1902, p.2.

⁹ *Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser*, (hereafter *CHPRA*), 10 March 1876, p.2.

¹⁰ *Cooktown Courier*, (hereafter *CC*), 16 May 1874, p.2.

¹¹ *CHPRA*, 5 September 1874, p.3.

¹² *Port Douglas and Mossman Record*, (hereafter *PDMR*), 28 August 1901, p.2.

renewed, it progressed as it demonstrated the competitive qualities of race with which civilisation advanced. This accorded with natural law. The strong must prevail – there was no room for sentimentality. “When savages are pitted against civilisation” explained the *Herald*, “they must go to the wall; it is the fate of their race...it is absolutely necessary, in order that the onward march of civilisation may not be arrested.”¹³ Linnaean and Darwinian theory which espoused biological continuity between humans and animals had caused a crisis in Christian consciousness in the mid-nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, northern commentators who argued from Christian standpoints were still discomforted with evolutionary ideas, but incorporated forms of racial thought. They saw moral collapse in the failure to dominate the natural world and countenanced eugenic ideas of retrogression to justify the decimation of Aboriginal populations brought on by colonialism. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof but it is all divinely designed for subordination by man” the *Record* pontificated:

When man fails to wrest from nature some of her inexhaustible stores of things then man is on the road which ends in extinction. Vide the moribund Aborigines of Australia...this world is no place for non-progression.¹⁴

Colonists perceived themselves to be locked in a desperate fight to survive in an unforgiving world, a world which could be brutally indifferent to their needs. The danger of complacency and loss of progressive momentum remained ever present, and not all white men in north Queensland were living up to their billing as men of energy and perseverance. As payable gold on the Palmer dwindled and dreams of golden glory faded to the west of Cooktown, the *Cooktown Herald* became less generous in its estimation of Anglo-Saxon attributes, referring to miners still out there as “scores of hulking fellows, who do nothing but grumble, eat, smoke and drink.”¹⁵ When difficult times came to Port Douglas, the school-masterly *Record* was grave: “Even the British race is not always without reproach,” it admitted, blaming complacency and self-satisfaction. “Pioneering deeds are sometimes followed by a seductive somnolence which gives opportunity for the insidious growth of aggrandising weeds.” These must be removed, the *Record* continued, “as it was previously [necessary] to remove the scrubland and clear the forest.” Readers were assured however, that “a condition of backward drift is one which the Anglo-Saxons do not...allow to continue very long.”¹⁶

¹³ *CHPRA*, 24 June 1874, p.3.

¹⁴ *PDMR*, 17 July 1901, p.2.

¹⁵ *CHPRA*, 23 August 1876, p.3.

¹⁶ *PDMR*, 4 September 1901, p.2.



Figure 2.4. Aboriginal man, dwarfed by rainforest surrounds, near Cairns approximately 1890. With its suggestion of a close affinity between Bama and nature, this could be an unusually sympathetic portrayal of Aboriginal life, but I suspect that to many white settlers, the photograph read as an argument for the destruction of sheltering jungle. Demonstrating the incredible breadth and precision of detail which glass plate negatives were able to capture, this lucid, elegant and epic composition could be a very modern photographic re-interpretation of Eugene von Geurard's paintings of 'native figures in the Australian landscape.' Many invaluable photographs survive from this time, but regrettably, no breakthrough in Australian painting occurred in colonial north Queensland. One can imagine studies of the gritty realities of frontier life, the conflicts of democratic ideals, unequal societies and race nationalism in a period of rapid social change, all rendered with the exploding light and colours of the tropics. JOL image no. 100129.

Historical reflections on the grand old race

By the early 1880s, the once bustling gold port of Cooktown had lost most of its allure to the itinerant thousands chasing flashes of opportunity which shone now more brightly elsewhere. The rival township of Cairns was on the march. Cooktown fell into decline. One can picture the sun baking empty streets, skinny dogs sprawled panting under wide shop verandas and a handful of idle workingmen slaking dusty thirsts as a Cooktown newspaper editor cast about for material to fill an edition. Some spirit lifting jingoism of a type peculiar to republican Anglo-Australians of the 1890s seemed in order. Political power in the Australian colonies was understood in terms which included race, history and divine right, signified by the Union Jack. In print, white north Queenslanders almost never meditated on the subject of a specific identity for themselves. Loyalty to their race, the British flag and north Queensland seemed sufficiently defining. But in developing the theme of British glory from which Australians would emerge, the *Independent* touched upon some of the certainties and dilemmas in this self-representation, showing whiteness as a historical reality, changing over time.

The *Independent* worked on the assumption that the coming Australia and the coming Australians would rise even higher in both political and evolutionary terms than their predecessors. Rather than the Whiggish goal of constitutional monarchy with the Crown as a sacred institution of blood and the mystical nation, a progressive new form of the British race would reveal itself in Australia's bright republican future. The *Independent* did not reject Britain; it leapt onto the giant's shoulders. As the extension of the "the grand old race," readers were urged to exult in their genetic inheritance. They might also be grateful for their political inheritance: "the might and right of Britain," if not its "worn out royalty."¹⁷ The Union Jack was considered an honoured symbol of Australian foundation, the sight of which made "the blood surge hotter and the heart beat prouder of all those who are worthy of having sprung from the grand old race," but it was a flag which would one day "take a dip of honour from the Australian banner."¹⁸ Until that day, white Australians would have to satisfy themselves with a British flag and British achievements, also deemed grand. In fact, according to the *Independent*, British history was "the grandest history in the roll of nations, a history of which even Australian republicans are proud."¹⁹ It was a history which Australians would continue to annex "even when republican...without King, Queen or Princess" on the grounds that "our fathers," in Britain, have "given Australia a history and a reflection of historic glory."²⁰

¹⁷ *Cooktown Independent*, (hereafter *CI*), 10 August 1889, p.2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

The *Independent* may have overestimated the willingness of future Australians to hoist a banner which explicitly distinguished the Australian nation from British colonialism, but the column is of particular note because it conveys a direct sense of north Queenslanders' experience of white identity as a transitional state, and the sometimes contradictory figments of nation, history and race upon which this identity was built.²¹ On the frontier, the psychic need for inspiring stories to deepen connections between colonists and territorial claims was at its most acute, particularly while indigenes persisted. However locally-based narratives of achievement were hampered by the brevity of European occupation, fickle fortune and the fact that Anglo-Australians were members of an imperially-dependent and culturally-derivative society. White Queenslanders revelled in new buildings and land clearing as indicators of progress and dignified themselves as an improvement upon the hide-bound social order of Britain, but were aware that they could not yet match the political achievements of the republican United States and nor were they accepted as the cultural equals of Europeans in Europe. Some may have winced that any Australian glory might be seen as a mere reflection of Britain, but most conceded that without Britain, Australia had no history at all. Whiteness provided a huge banner under which to march; a single conceptual entity masking multitudinous sectarian, national and other divisions and reconciling what is more, Australian republican aspiration with British Empire loyalty.

The *Independent* called the British flag the "glorious banner of Blake and Nelson."²² Both Nelson and Blake were Carlylean 'heroes.' At the time, a 'Great Man' approach to history was in vogue among British historians. Thomas Carlyle, foremost among them, considered that the "history of the world is but the history of great men."²³ Herbert Spencer rejected this proposition, countering that the great man was rather a product of environment, his genesis

²¹ Beyond the Napoleonic wars, the 'nationalities question' caused endless re-drawing of European and colonial maps, going on to make a significant contribution to the onslaught of World Wars I and II. On a smaller scale of consequence, but demonstrating the difficulties of ethnic-national categorisation, early immigration documents from the port of Cairns show no less than a permanent state of confusion on these matters, from which, given the precedents, Queenslanders were probably entitled to classify themselves as a distinctive race, had they wished to do so. At Cairns, travellers from Britain and Ireland were categorised under numerous subheadings, presumably of their own choosing. Scottish and English people could be regarded as members of separate races; Australians could be British nationals, members of the British race, or the Anglo-Saxon, White, Caucasian or Celtic race – or another variant; 'Hindoo' could be a racial category applied to almost anyone from the Indian Sub-Continent including Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs; and Chinese people were variously categorised by customs officials as belonging to the Chinese, 'Mongolian,' even 'Celestial' race or nation. Then there was the question of residency status. In reference to the Chinese, the *Queenslander* sighed, "Nature has stamped the real nationality of these people in unmistakable characters on their countenances. But when it comes to a question of deciding their on their legal nationality...we are inclined to match Chinese astuteness and Chinese unscrupulousness against all the machinery that Sir Henry Parkes may devise." *Queenslander*, 16 July, 1881, p.72.

²² *CI*, 10 August 1889, p.2.

²³ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, Frederick A. Stokes and Brother, New York, 1888, p.2.

dependent upon “the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown.”²⁴ While the environmental influences of north Queensland had not yielded any ‘great men,’ readers of the *Independent* could take comfort in their promising lineage. Any race which included the luminary painter and poet William Blake must be a race of creative genius, watched over by God.²⁵ A race from whom Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson sprung was a race capable of strategic brilliance, nonchalance and valour, with the desire to conquer coursing through its veins, (although going against the republican spirit of the *Independent*, Nelson fought to put down the rebel colonies in the American War of Independence). As a Flag Officer of the Royal Navy, Nelson was entitled to fly a flag representing his area of command. His 1805 victory at the Battle of Trafalgar established British sea power from which commenced the planting of British flags across the globe, including the banner flying in the mind of the Cooktown newspaper editor.

Rise and fall

Did race precede history or did history precede race? Besides the retrogressive tendencies of some white residents, other dangers to British civilisational ascendancy seemed to be showing in the north and among these, Chinese colonists loomed large. In the guise of a Socratic questioner, the *Cooktown Herald* reasoned:

If we comprehend aright the genius of British colonization, if we desire to see the blackfellow superseded by the highest type of Anglo-Saxon, and the great mineral and other resources of this country developed and utilized for his benefit, now is the time to take this Chinese difficulty into our very careful and attentive consideration.²⁶

A correspondent under the nom-de-plume Free Thought gave the issue careful and attentive consideration, and in so doing offered the *Herald* some particularly candid observations. The Chinese “are blamed for coming here and as soon as they get a rise, for returning,” commented Free Thought:

Pray, what did we come here for? We had no idea of benefitting Queensland; we only

²⁴ Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology*, Henry S. King and Co. London, 1873, p.34.

²⁵ No first names were given and it is possible that the author was thinking of Robert Blake, the English Civil War naval Commander.

²⁶ *Cooktown Herald*, (hereafter *CH*), 23 August 1876, p.3.

intended to rob her of all we could get and like the Chinese return to our homes...I know myself I came and went to the Palmer to get a rise intending to return from whence I came...but alas, like many more, my hopes were blighted and now here I am nearly two years and likely to remain as many more and I believe this is the case with most of us...in the north...Many of us have failed, many of them [Chinese] have succeeded, and we envy them.²⁷

More commonly, Europeans in north Queensland were apt to configure Chinese as rivals for resources, in the labour market and as a civilisational threat. These themes fill the written record around the beginnings of Cairns. European hostility to Chinese on the Australian goldfields during the 1850s did not sit well with democratic ideals of all men having been created equal. Neville Meaney has argued that the discriminatory acts from this period which were aimed at the Chinese were based on the assumption that they were ‘uncivilized.’ Discriminatory acts, according to Meaney, “did not represent the acceptance of a racially-based definition of a society,” but were “a liberal era’s pragmatic response to a particular problem of social order.”²⁸ However, as a result of the new race patriotism which flared in the later-nineteenth century, Europeans responses to the proportionally fewer Chinese on the northern goldfields “assumed an uncompromising character.”²⁹

With a small collection of oft-repeated arguments, dissatisfied Europeans saw the Chinese as possessed of racial attributes which were neither modern nor progressive, but of sufficient power when combined to endanger white colonial dominance in the north. Popular alarm was triggered in the northern fields when Europeans saw themselves outnumbered by Chinese on the Palmer. They harked back to the experiences of the 1850s and saw national danger as they peered into the future. With its proximity to Asia, miniscule European population and non-European climate, northern Australia was considered particularly vulnerable to Chinese incursion. Advocating on behalf of white miners in the north, the *Northern Advocate* gushed a common basis of racism: the horror of physical and cultural difference. The *Advocate* called the Chinese “peculiar” and “utterly repulsive” in its milder moments, but armed with a fantastical array of racial types could lapse into excited terror. The “Mongolian is extremely qualified to hold his own against all competitors in the struggle for life,” it argued grimly. He “is able to preserve his capacity for labour under conditions climatic,” such as those of north Queensland, which would utterly defeat “the Hindoo, the Malay, the Bornian Dyak, the Pnonsh savage, the

²⁷ CH, 25 October 1876, p.2.

²⁸ Neville Meaney, *Towards a New Vision: Australia and Japan Through 100 Years*, Kangaroo Press, 1999, p.15.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.17.

miserable half-bred (Mestizo) of the Philippines, and even the hardy Caucasian adventurer.” The *Advocate*’s Chinese man was superhuman: “His industry is indefatigable, his versatility is unlimited, his resources are boundless.”³⁰ He should be, therefore, feared.



Figure 2.5. The hardy Caucasian adventurer: Carl Lumholtz in 1882, with trusty companions canine and carbine. To drive history in nineteenth century north Queensland it was thought that one needed a birthright of steely self-possession, shrewd alertness and manly vigor. The artist has used several strategies to tell us that Lumholtz possessed these attributes in spades. Keenly vigilant but emotionally unencumbered, the subject(s) gaze out of the frame, uninterested in the effete vanity of portraiture, interested in going out to explore, to face dangers and to claim territory. Carrying at least two guns and perhaps a knife, Lumholtz appears soldierly and independent, dashing with a touch of whimsy, but dressed for the field, not the parade ground. His clothing and arm muscle ripple with restless energy while his weight rests nonchalantly on one hip in the style of a Greek Hero. He is not an automaton. Lumholtz’s dog is disciplined, but sprung to go at command; a glossy picture of fitness to the supporting task. Not at all afraid of having his head blown off, Lumholtz’s rifle points at his chin. An alternative – Freudian – interpretation might draw attention to the manner in which Lumholtz grasps his gun, the line of which runs directly through his crotch.

Image culled from Carl Lumholtz, *Among cannibals: an account of four years travels in Australia and of camp life with the Aborigines of Queensland*, Murray, London, 1889. JOL image no.187609.

³⁰ *Northern Advocate*, (hereafter *NA*), 29 April 1876, p.3.

Ignoring the goldfield rivalry, the dashed hopes, hardships and scapegoating identified by Free Thought, the *Northern Advocate* saw an evolutionary struggle in the fight for colonial spoils. The Chinese were possessed of hereditary endowments which the *Advocate* believed granted them unfair advantages over Europeans in the tropics, and they were known to be numerous. Without establishing Chinese intent, the *Northern Advocate* whipped up alarm, rousing its readers – some of whom would be present at the birth of Cairns later that year – with the urgency to restrict Chinese ingress. It claimed a “mighty torrent” of Chinese was set to “pour over the tropical countries.”³¹ In the colonial world superior numbers did not necessarily guarantee cultural dominance, but on the vast and difficult terrain of northern Australia, numbers and professed biological advantages counted for a lot.

The *Cooktown Herald* looked into the future and imagined the difficulties of trying to make sense of the ‘Chinese question,’ suggesting that the “historian would have considerable difficulty in distinguishing [its] reasonings.”³² While some saw the sky falling in, others voiced strong support for Chinese immigration, based on the same racial characteristics that caused fits of anxiety. Mr. Thornton told Queensland parliament that:

Chinese as a race were adapted above all others, to develop the resources of the Northern districts of the colony...we [have] only the population of a small town in England in the whole colony and we should invite people from all parts, including China.³³

To Thornton, Chinese interest in tropical pioneering was highly desirable. Chronic shortages of white labourers and white colonists hampered colonial expansion in the north. Opportunities existed in the form of industrial niches which Chinese were prepared to take, and with a logic developed elsewhere in the imperial realm, some saw advantages in harnessing Chinese willingness. A *Cooktown Herald* contributor urged the Queensland government to support the recruitment of Chinese “cooks and house coolies, men who do all the odd jobs about a house.”³⁴ The *Cooktown Courier* was “especially thankful that some...Chinese settlers...have eschewed the uncertainties of gold digging” to grow fruit and vegetables,³⁵ thereby expanding the otherwise limited diets of northerners.³⁶ In language reflecting its diminishing hopes for the Cooktown region and touching upon the belief that European well-being was damaged in the

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *CHPRA*, 26 August 1876, p.2.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *CHPRA*, 1 July 1874, p.2.

³⁵ *CC*, 18 September 1875, p.3.

³⁶ The typical colonist’s diet was said to consist of “[too] much meat, too much tea, too much frying pan and generally too little attention to the art of cooking,” *Worker*, 1 September 1899, p.3.

tropics, the *Courier* allowed that in settling locally, the Chinese had chosen “a part of English territory which...could never be colonised with advantage by Europeans.” The *Courier* thought it “may be fairly said that the Chinaman may supplant our efforts in those parts of our empire where an Englishman cannot take up his abode without serious loss of health.”³⁷



Figure 2.6 (above), Figure 2.7 (below). Late Qing dynasty postcards of Chinese in China, possibly made for Western consumption. In Figure 2.6, a wiry, sun-baked peddler plies his humble wares, reminiscent of the ‘beasts of burden’ image of Chinese people. In Figure 2.7, five Chinese are displayed as workers with the tools of their trade, and in the case of the business personage, some sweet potatoes. From their occupation of Hong Kong (and designs on mainland China), an image of Chinese servility had resolved in the minds of many Britons, an image which appealed to some Anglo-Australians even as it was becoming clear in Queensland that Chinese did not regard subservience to Europeans as their natural state.

Collection of M. Richards.

³⁷ CC, 3 November 1875, p.2.

A short time after Cairns was established, the *Cooktown Courier* took a Laborite orientation and became less convivial towards Chinese colonists developing the resources of north Queensland. It warned: "There are those [who] wish for the founding of settlements...in which a few white capitalists shall dominate over a mass of Coolie labourers, excluding the white working man and the settler altogether." A visitor to such a settlement will find "the boat in which he lands manned by a Chinaman; his luggage will be taken by a Chinaman," he will find "the cook a Chinaman; the butler a Chinaman...the nurse a Chinaman, and every department of life occupied by the Chinese race."³⁸ But the *Courier* feared that white dominance of Chinese could not be sustained. As had been possible for European working men in the Australian colonies, the wage bargaining power afforded by labour scarcity would enable Chinese workers upward social mobility:

The demand for labour all over the tropical world is so large and the supply to be obtained from India so comparatively small that John Chinaman is master of the situation. He will become too expensive; that is to say he will cost as much as European labour [and he] will make northern Australia a Chinese colony bringing...plenty of hard work, self denial and cooperative power [but] coolies in the old sense of the word you will not get.³⁹

Among colonial politicians, bursts of enthusiasm for the Asian prospects of tropical hinterlands cracking the hard nut of northern settlement had dissipated by the century's end.⁴⁰ By 1895 some regarded Queensland as the 'buffer state' between white Australia and threatening Asia. According to Reynolds, Governor Bowen's vision of "a productive multi-racial north closely linked to Asia...failed to appreciate how strong the resistance would be...how overwhelming would be the demand to keep Australia British and White, how threatening Asia would appear."⁴¹ In 1875 Premier Macrossan had thought "Northern Queensland a grand field for Asiatic labour" and expected, without panicking, that in northern Queensland Chinese labour "would very soon supersede white labour."⁴² Acknowledging the erosion of European colonial control expected to result from a large Chinese presence, Macrossan also called for the importation of labourers from the British colonies of the Indian subcontinent. Indians and Sinhalese were considered to be 'tropical breeds' and unlike Chinese, readily dominated by Europeans. The *Townsville Times* was aghast: "We want Anglo-Saxon men and women," it

³⁸ CC, 24 April 1878, p.2.

³⁹ CC, 18 September 1875, p.3. By 1901 the *Courier* had entered its third phase of reacting to the Chinese, calling for white people to settle in north Queensland, to "form a protectorate over that portion of the Commonwealth easily accessible to Asiatic hordes." Few answered the call. *Cooktown Courier*, cited in *Morning Post*, 18 June 1901, p.4.

⁴⁰ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, p.ix.

⁴¹ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, p.x.

⁴² *Townsville Times*, 4 December 1875, p.2.

remonstrated. “Anglo-Saxon body and soul...we desire to see no slave caste here whether advantageous or otherwise to the capitalists. There is no folk like our own folk.”⁴³ Whither then, the north?

Conclusion

Whiteness as a historical reality was changing through the colonial experience in north Queensland. As they pursued opportunities in the north, Europeans borrowed from theories of social progress and biology, seeing themselves engaged in a battle and fighting a good fight to establish and obtain dominance over the natural world and hold off flanking threats of human rivalry – conflation of race and history. With an eye on the future, Europeans attempted to establish their historical authority and looked to inspire themselves with symbols of the British race and its heroic achievements. This was a battle for the death or glory of the race. Newspaper editors regretted the decline of ‘moribund Aborigines’ and amid proposals to harness Chinese energies to tropical development worried that Europeans could be ‘Aboriginalised’ by an uncontrolled ingress of Chinese.

⁴³ *Townsville Times*, 19 January 1876, p.3.

Chapter 3

Asking the Chinese question



Figure 3.2. At a port on the Pearl River delta, southern China during the late Qing dynasty, fishing nets are hung to dry in the sun. The people are Hakka, identifiable by their loose fitting dress called *shanfu* (literally shirt and trousers), who used nets, lines and traps to catch fish from *shok ku tor* trawlers and smaller craft. Hong Kong Museum of History.



Figure 3.1. On the shores of Trinity Bay and at about the same, Cairns was inaugurated. Based on a photograph taken in 1876, the drawing above by an unknown artist is entitled *The First Landing at Cairns*. Unlike 'history paintings' depicting the commencement of other British colonies in Australia, this illustration includes no Union Jacks or soldiers, nor anyone bearing overt insignia of official rank or status. Instead, working men pass around a bottle, while atop some wooden cases, a speaker holds forth. Addressing a receptive audience of disgruntled miners, speakers holding forth at Cairns' commencement called for Chinese exclusion.

JOL image no. 24477.

Introduction

It was a truth, not so much universally acknowledged as widely understood, that in the 1880s and 1890s, Cairns was fed and economically sustained by the industries and labour of its Chinese residents. Although relations were, as Cathie May described them, “a mirror of contemporary racism,” Cairns was more-or-less “a pro-Chinese town.”¹ The establishment of a Chinese community in Cairns proved to be widely beneficial, yet in 1876 the first Europeans to land on the site of proto-Cairns were certain that Chinese moving into the area spelled disaster, or warranted at the very least, strenuous objection. As boats began to arrive at the new port, ferrying Chinese people, a determined resistance was organised against their landing. At this moment, anti-Chinese feeling was a unifying cultural and political principle at Trinity Bay and arguably never more intense. For weeks, against an impotent colonial authority, the improvised port was hamstrung by anti-Chinese demonstrations which intertwined with, and largely overshadowed, the formal inauguration of the town. As they pegged out new land claims and fended off Chinese ‘incursions,’ Europeans identified themselves, launching Cairns with displays of folk nationalism or racism. The resistance then collapsed. Principles asserted, objections sheeted home, Chinese were admitted to the district.

Shedding light on race as an artifact of history and the relationship between representation and the making of race, this is a chapter about contemporary European thought in which the Chinese form the backdrop to constructions of white identity. To Europeans, the Chinese existed an important and influential element of colonial life. The story of Cairns which would unfold put paid to strongly held Europeans convictions that the Chinese were an inassimilable element with whom white people could not co-exist. This chapter illustrates the high point of anti-Chinese feeling in Cairns, from which racial sensibilities and European ideas about their own identity would shift.

Interesting gentlemen and the Queen’s land

With thousands of Chinese arriving in Queensland during the 1870s, opposition to this influx had become a cause célèbre of the popular press. The Chinese were met at Trinity Bay in 1876 with exactly the sort of response that one might expect from intoxicated, time-rich and cash-poor itinerant prospectors, late of north Queensland’s goldfields. Regarding the anti-Chinese

¹ Cathie May, *Topsawyers, the Chinese in Cairns 1870-1920*, James Cook University, 1984, p.167.

protests as a colourful and somewhat undignified side-show at the birth of Cairns, most historians have attached little significance to the protracted standoff and the nasty series of fights that erupted – or ignored them altogether. The work of Hector Holthouse contains little else but exuberant racism, murder and mayhem, but in his account of the birth of Cairns, Holthouse roared with mirth at drunken horses and dogs seen staggering about at the “unofficial christening,” but fell into a studied silence on the question of European anti-Chinese viciousness.² Geoffrey Bolton did observe the rejection of the Chinese, and suggested that “a group of three hundred unemployed men at the approach of a tropical summer was not likely to be particularly cooperative with the authorities.” According to Bolton, both anti-authoritarianism and the defense of a “white Cairns” were “characteristic of the Australian ethos.”³

In *The Founding of Cairns*, Timothy Bottoms acknowledged the anti-Chinese protest and cited the *Cooktown Courier's* description of “an important and unanimous demonstration.”⁴ Bottoms acknowledged the unanimity of feeling among Europeans, but dismissed its importance. Noting the Lambing Flat riot, Bottoms concluded: “Anti-Chinese attitudes were not peculiar to North Queensland.”⁵ Dorothy Jones linked anti-Chinese feeling at Cairns to events on the Palmer, a view supported by Cathie May.⁶ Sandi Robb attributed the outburst to “miners who had brought their anti-Chinese feelings with them from southern goldfields.”⁷ Unquestionably anti-Chinese attitudes were an Australia-wide phenomenon, interpreted through a “framework of existing images, stereotypes and expectations which had originated in earlier agricultural and mining situations,”⁸ with no single point of origin.

Jones provided the most forthright denunciation of what she described as anti-Chinese riots.⁹ Otherwise writing with great sympathy for her historical subjects, Jones was not at all taken with the first Europeans to reside at Trinity Bay, quoting Sub-Collector Spence’s objections to mushrooming gin shanties “filled continually with the scum of Cooktown and the

² Hector Holthouse, *River of Gold*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 2001, p.186.

³ Geoffrey Bolton, ‘The Founding of Cairns,’ *Royal Australian Historical Society Journal*, vol.45, Sydney 1960, pp.32-33.

⁴ *CC*, 18 October 1876, p.3.

⁵ Timothy Bottoms, *A History of Cairns: City of the South Pacific*, PhD thesis, Central Queensland University, 2002, Footnote 88.

⁶ Dorothy Jones, *Trinity Phoenix: a history of Cairns and district*, Cairns Post, 1976, pp.75-80, Cathie May, *Topsawyers*, 1984, p.7.

⁷ Sandi Robb, Cairns Chinatown Cultural Heritage Study, Report to Cairns and District Chinese Association Inc. and Cultural Heritage Branch Queensland Environmental Protection Agency, September, 2004, p.23.

⁸ Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders and Kathryn Cronin, ‘The urban anti-Chinese movement,’ in *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland: A History of Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1993, p.292.

⁹ Jones, *Trinity Phoenix*, p.75.

Hodgkinson.”¹⁰ According to Jones, the originals were: “Hatless shoeless drunks, male and female,” who “roamed twenty-four hours a day.”¹¹ In a memorable paragraph Jones described the first Cairnsites as being:

on the whole an unimpressive lot of loafers, bad marks, malcontents, speculators and those who frankly wanted a swift passage out of the north...the originals were a poor lot indeed with a singular lack of that largeness of spirit with which inheritors are accustomed to endow their predecessors.¹²



Figure 3.3. Pioneers on the range, near Smithfield. Contradicting Jones, both wear hats.
Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library, Hume Collection.

Bolton wrote that with the 1 November proclamation of a town site, “respectability gradually overtook Cairns.”¹³ Drinking, brawling and gambling appear to have declined only gradually, particularly as there was next to no gainful employment to be had and, initially, no police. As tends to happen in a power vacuum, there was a jostling for supremacy. Semi-anarchic goldfield

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.73.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.81.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.75.

¹³ Bolton, ‘The Founding of Cairns,’ p.33.

law prevailed.¹⁴ If a clarification in the *Cooktown Courier* is any indicator, unflattering accounts of „the originals“ were leaking out. The suggestion that Cairns “swarms with thieves” offended the dignity of one, who argued: “Probably never was there less crime of any kind committed in any place where a heterogeneous crowd of 400 or 500 people have been so hastily thrown together and so compelled to depend upon their own resources, than at Cairns.”¹⁵

Press coverage from those opening weeks and months by the bay was thick with descriptions, surveys and speculations about the environs. Untapped resources were identified with conspiratorial glee, industries were hotly imagined; risks and rewards weighed up, superlatives aired. One writer mused, “We are all here I presume to make money, not, I am sure, to benefit our health by change of air.”¹⁶ The eyes of those already *in* money may have widened to learn that “the back country [is] flat with occasional belts of scrub, and the soil that description of deep loam that which sugar planters hold in such high esteem.”¹⁷



Figure 3.4. Far horizons: in the scrub near Cairns. The photographer appears to be presenting us with a heroic man of Empire, on forward reconnaissance. The arrangement is literally that of a white man, foot planted in conquest and sleeves up for action. Over his shoulder we gaze away and down to a dark, semi-resolved texture of wilderness against which his civilizing energies are directed. The marker post on this periphery indicates both commencement and further intention. The deictic gesture was much used in images of exploration and frontier extension in the north, and causes us to ask: at what, or at whom, are we to suppose he is pointing?

Sidney Richardson, 'River Mulgrave at Goldsborough', Sidney Richardson Collection, UQFL243, photograph no. 29, Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library.

¹⁴ Jones, *Trinity Phoenix*, p.89.

¹⁵ CC, 15 November 1876, p.3.

¹⁶ CC, 29 November 1876, p.3.

¹⁷ CC, 18 October 1876, p.3.

The visual similarities between Trinity Bay and Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour do not seem to have caught journalists' eyes. Instead, one romantic swooned that Trinity Bay "lacks only an active volcano on 'Walshes peak' to render it equal to the Bay of Naples in point of grandeur."¹⁸ A photographer was spotted capturing Cairns' "salient points," which included "a blackfellow in the costume of his country diving under the steamer's keel for a keg of nails which had been dropped overboard under the benign influence of whiskey."¹⁹ Others made optimistic appeals to British racial energy to settle the district. A new Cairnsite boasted "we have men with indomitable pluck and energy among us who will not allow the matter to rest until it becomes a complete success," and with no false humility added, "it is really astonishing the amount of intelligence we possess, and especially in the exploring element."²⁰



Figure 3.5. See Cairns and die? 'The Bay of Naples,' hand coloured wood engraving by S. Read, from the *Illustrated London News*, 1856. A Romantic view of Trinity Bay's future perhaps, overlaid with fetishised antiquity? In their basic attributes, similarities between the two bays certainly do exist. However, given that in 1876, to Europeans, Trinity Bay stood in a remote and intimidating tropical locale, clad in wild jungle, its shore invisible for mangroves; it might be seen as an insight into a Victorian mind that projected a controlled Renaissance picturesque. Photographs of Trinity Bay did not dispel the belief of the *Cooktown Herald* that "the new port is all vanity and vexation."²¹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *CC*, 25 October 1876, p.3.

²¹ *CH*, 14 October 1876, p.2.

Still, some reserved doubts about the viability of the new port. Questions lingered about its accessibility from the Hodgkinson goldfield. With the opening of Cairns, Cooktown's future hung in the balance. The *Cooktown Courier* fretted that the Queensland government was fostering Cairns "just as if the annihilation of Cooktown was [its] chief object."²² Sour grapes dangled provocatively as the *Courier* scorned the "Trinity Bay craze,"²³ mourned Cairns as a "delusion and a snare,"²⁴ and doubted the mental health of land grabbers, rushing with "insanity to reap the fortunes which they imagine to be lying loose among the mangroves."²⁵ The *Cooktown Herald* alluded to "doleful accounts of Cairns," where there was "not a penny to be had."²⁶ Zombie-like residents were observed, wandering about "in a kind of disconsolate manner."²⁷ Cooktowners who had "rushed madly to what they thought would turn out a panacea for all pecuniary ailments" were said to have returned to Cooktown "sadder but wiser men."²⁸ The self interest and exaggeration of Cooktown's editors is clear, but the fact remains that many of the ill-nourished and sandfly-bitten Europeans at Trinity Bay, drinking briny water and gin, and sleeping rough under calico, had been hammered by the odds before. Many were financially stricken and desperate for economic salvation – salvation, if it came, that they were not necessarily keen to share. The *Cooktown Courier* exculpated its peers:

European miners suffer a great deal in traveling the wilds of an unexplored country like this, in the hope of opening up new and rich goldfields, exposed alike to the spear of the savage and the many diseases which lurk in malarious climates, rendering their lives but a fickle tenure of a moment, and when they have obtained the object of their search it is hardly compatible with human nature or the spirit of the age to submit quietly or allow the hard won fruits of their labour to be wrested from them by hordes of chinkees.²⁹

Quite an important demonstration

In mid-October 1876, the *Lord Ashley* arrived at Trinity Bay from Cooktown, carrying eight unnamed Chinese men and officials Warden St George and Inspector Clohesy, to declare Cairns open and to bestow Queensland's imprimatur on the venture. The Chinese had, according to a

²² CC, 16 August 1876, p.3.

²³ CC, 7 October 1876, p.3.

²⁴ CH, 15 November 1876, p.2.

²⁵ CC, 25 October 1876, p.3.

²⁶ CH, 15 November 1876, p.2.

²⁷ CH, 18 October 1876, p.2.

²⁸ CH, 15 November 1876, p.2.

²⁹ CC, 29 November 1876, p.3.

correspondent “the intention of settling here in the capacity of gardeners, cooks & c., and to, of course, form the nucleus of a Chinese colony.” They met “forcible resistance” and were refused exit from the steamer.³⁰ The *Cooktown Herald* was told that “the residents” would be having no Chinese gardeners, cooks or colonies at Trinity Bay, and had “decided on keeping out the Celestials.”³¹ A spanner crunched in the gears. Hours passed, and while little waves lapped the bows of the coastal steamer, the eight Chinese sat aboard the *Lord Ashley*, contemplating their vicissitude. On shore, Europeans struck a blow for what they saw as their democratic freedom, standing fast against Chinese disembarkation, guarding the gateway to the Hodgkinson. Conversations across the bows were not recorded. The Chinese made a couple more attempts to come ashore but were ousted “rather roughly.”³² The Police Inspector was forced to capitulate, “to avoid bloodshed.”³³ Almost a day into the impasse, the captain of the *Lord Ashley* elected to sail on to Townsville, leaving behind Cairns, “free from the heathen Chinees,” and a scene of “a little excitement.”³⁴ Later, some Chinese fishermen sailed into the Inlet, apparently seeking fresh water. They beat a hasty retreat under volleys of rifle fire from shore.³⁵

According to the jubilant *Courier*, this had all been “quite an important and unanimous anti-Chinese demonstration.” How the action was begun and by whom was left unstated by the press, perhaps because the action was illegal and the residents remained answerable to a higher authority, even if it had difficulty reaching them. Apart from figures of authority, press coverage of the protest cloaked participants in protective anonymity. “The people” wrote the *Courier*, “opposed the landing as one man.”³⁶ A correspondent to the *Herald* quite approved of the novel social order in Cairns: “No police here and so far none required.”³⁷ Flushed with a rare win against the Chinese and the Queensland government, (which miners felt inadequately responsive to goldfield exclusions), a manifesto of sorts appeared. It testified to “a fixed determination both here and on the Hodgkinson that...the port and the goldfield should be kept entirely free from Chinese innovation.” The fixed determination tapered off though, as it would apply, only for “so long as it is possible.”³⁸

³⁰ CC, 18 October 1876, p.3.

³¹ CH, 18 October 1876, p.2.

³² CC, 18 October 1876, p.3.

³³ Bolton, ‘The Founding of Cairns,’ p.32.

³⁴ CH, 18 October 1876, p.2.

³⁵ Jones, *Trinity Phoenix*, p.75.

³⁶ CC, 18 October 1876, p.3.

³⁷ CH, 18 October 1876, p.2.

³⁸ CC, 18 October 1876, p.3.



Figure 3.6. Caption reads: "The Leichhardt unloading the first cargo in Cairns October 1876." Note men posing on a narrow and precarious connecting plank, a plank which Chinese would find particularly difficult to traverse.
Cairns Historical Society, CHSP 00708.

Although it hardly disapproved of hostility towards Chinese, the *Courier* took the opportunity to slate the upstart Cairns and to submit some unsolicited advice:

We advise our friends at Cairns not to continue a resistance which must be hopeless... Trinity Harbour is not like the Hodgkinson where [it is] difficult and expensive to enforce the law...A telegram to Sydney would bring up a war vessel at very little cost, and then what chance of resistance would the new settlers have?³⁹

The *Courier* appears to have been not at all displeased by the thought of a war vessel pointing its guns at Cairns, but the prospect seems to have unnerved Cairnsites, who rounded up a petition to the Governor of Queensland, "praying that force not be used to establish [Chinese] here against the will of the people."⁴⁰ But, having tested colonial authority and found it wanting, the resistance gained momentum. Another steamer was on its way. Nine or ten more Chinese had left Cooktown via the *Blackbird*, with the legal right to land in Cairns, a right which they and an accompanying Police Magistrate intended to uphold. With the arrival of the *Blackbird*, the *Courier's* correspondent updated the shipping notes of Trinity Bay. Upon receiving word

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ CC, 1 November 1876, p.3.

that there were Chinese aboard intent on making Cairns their home, “the same determined spirit as before was evinced to prevent it...the Captain wisely advised John not to make the attempt.”⁴¹

As the Chinese on the *Lord Ashley* had been compelled to do, the Chinese on the *Blackbird* languished just off shore, from early morning to late afternoon, the authorities – such as were present – confident “that the patience and the patriotism of the crowd would subside, and that they would abandon the defense.” This was perhaps to over-estimate the range of diversions available in Cairns at the time. The standoff dragged on, and then suddenly a new front was opened. The *Louisa* carrying six Chinese passengers made its poorly-timed arrival into Trinity Bay, a boredom-banishing development which “fully awakened the excitement that had slumbered during the hours there had been nothing to feed it,” and which possibly “betokened something serious.” The Europeans sprang into action. The *Courier* reported “an instantaneous roll up” which it believed was “more in earnest and more determined” for the presence of St George and the Police Magistrate on board.⁴²

The onshore patriotism observed by the *Cooktown Courier* comprised intersecting orders of allegiance: to race, to Empire, to class, to Queensland or north Queensland. Colonial Australia in 1876 and China, under disintegrating Qing rule, were not sovereign nations in today’s understanding of the term, and neither was Trinity Bay unclaimed territory. All new arrivals were immigrants and all were part of the colonies’ mobile populations. The germ of the new settlement included Aborigines from inside and outside the area, South East Asians, sub-continental Asians and other non-whites. The crowd standing its ground against the Chinese onboard the *Louisa* was, according to the *Courier*, gathered in good humour, as if at a sporting contest. Barrackers on the sidelines cheered the difficulties of getting passengers ashore by dingy and “the floundering of the mixture of whites and blacks – Lascars, Malays and aborigines as they made their way through the deep mud.” St George attempted to bestow calm while it was said “a pure-bred Ethiopian pestered him with a series of dissertations...on the reasons for keeping the Chinese out of the country.”⁴³ But the *Cooktown Courier* was growing concerned about recriminations for the anti-Chinese hostilities in Cairns, and dismissed their escalation with increasingly forced amusement.

It was now the turn of the Chinese to come ashore from the *Louisa*. The crowd had become “demonstrative and excitedly talkative.” A man named Duffy ascended some porter cases on

⁴¹ CC, 18 October 1876, p.3.

⁴² CC, 1 November 1876, p.3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

the beach to exhort the assembled. Duffy, whose resume boasted stints as a policeman, (a calling to which he now stood opposed), publican and storekeeper, is the only individual identified at the centre of the demonstrations. The arguments made by Duffy were not new. He was said to have had “only the old story to tell,” which consisted mainly of goldfield grievances. According to Duffy, the Palmer field was nearly exhausted because of the Chinese, without whom it may have provided sustained incomes to Europeans, when they returned presumably, from other rushes. Chinese profits were said to be remitted to China and in general, they were “driving the white man before them.”⁴⁴ None of this was unequivocal, but as C.N. Connolly has shown, miners’ stated grievances against the Chinese consistently fell short as explanations for their attitudes.⁴⁵ The problem with the Chinese was their threat to white hegemony in an uncertain colonial context, aggravated in the emotionally charged context of gold seeking.

Duffy listed some ‘highlights’ of European hostility towards Chinese on the goldfields: Buckland, Victoria and Lambing Flat, New South Wales. The most notorious episodes of violent racial conflict on the Australian goldfields had taken place some twenty years earlier and were becoming increasingly common reference points in the anti-Chinese commentary of 1876, as the fuse of hostility was re-lit in the north and Queensland turned once more towards exclusionary measures against the Chinese. From here Duffy drifted into the ineffabilities of xenophobia felt by culturally discomfited Europeans. The Chinese were said to be “a pestilence” and “something worse than a plague,” their “immoralities” were noted, and they were in summary, “a curse to the colony.”⁴⁶ Resolutions were now tabled by the emboldened agitators. Firstly that “the introduction of Chinese into this port will be detrimental to the interests of the Hodgkinson Goldfield and to the settlement of the northern territory of Queensland,” and secondly a warning of the “great risk [that] authorities in Trinity Bay will incur by using physical force to introduce Chinese into this port.” Whether activists saw themselves as guarding Cairns, the Hodgkinson or Australia is not clear. Things were not looking promising for the Chinese on board the *Louisa*. Ill-concealing its schadenfreude, the *Courier* noted them growing as “white with fear as their yellow complexions would allow.”⁴⁷

Exhibiting all the courage of his sword-wielding namesake, St George presented the case for the Chinese, distinguishing between the more and less acceptable Chinese colonists. The Chinese had come according to St George, “only to make gardens [and] he would give them no

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ C.N. Connolly, ‘Miner’s Rights,’ in *Who are our enemies?: Racism and the working class in Australia*, Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (editors), Hale and Ironmonger, Neutral Bay, NSW, 1978, pp.35-47.

⁴⁶ CC, 1 November 1876, p.3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

protection beyond three miles outside the township.” Beyond that boundary of course, lay the goldfields. This however, “was not accepted as sufficient by the anti-Chinese party.” The less phlegmatic Clohesy decided that this had gone on long enough and weighed in, declaring gamely, “I’m going to bring a Chinaman ashore; let’s see who’ll take him from me!” A frenzy broke out and according to the *Courier* “200 excited men rushed to the water’s edge.” A plank joined the *Louisa* to the landing and it was across this wobbly highway that Sub-Inspector Douglas attempted to escort a Chinese man, while all available police, “white and Native,” tried to secure their egress from the “dense, surging excited crowd.” The melee spilled into the muddy water. “Every other officer [was] jostled about helplessly and right into the sea,” it was reported. The “gallant and impetuous” Douglas “bared his arms with apparently the full determination of striking down one hundred of the ‘irreconcilables.’” He was flung into the drink.⁴⁸ An astonished *Courier* reported that notwithstanding:

the wild expostulations of the few who battled hard against the many, and their several desperate attempts to rally and keep themselves and the Chinaman on *terra firma*, all was of no avail...the Chinaman was fain to get on board again with a whole skin.⁴⁹

Democratic feeling had prevailed. The “people were victorious...the leaders of both parties [adjourned] to Weir’s bar to discuss the situation.” The steamers departed Trinity Bay with their Chinese passengers and St George sent an urgent communication to the Colonial Secretary, advising of the situation.⁵⁰

Despite what appears to have been a rugged encounter, the *Courier* was happy to vouch for the anti-Chinese demonstrators, certain that “very few blows were struck... casualties few and not serious.”⁵¹ The whole affair *was* in fact serious. “The forcible resistance offered to the landing of the Chinese at Trinity Bay,” ran the leader of the *Cooktown Courier’s* Saturday edition, “is becoming a serious affair...A police Magistrate and Inspector of Police have been roughly handled, and the law has been openly set at defiance.”⁵² In severe editorial tones it warned: “our

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* The Colonial Secretary received a telegram from St George stating that “300 settlers have refused to allow Chinese passengers to land and assaulted them, Mr. St. George and the police and pushed them into the water. Mr. St. George advises sending a strong body of police to vindicate the law.” CC, 1 November 1876, p.3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² CC, 21 October 1876, p.2. Jones wrote: “There has been a tradition carried on that it was only the respect the miners held for Howard St George which quelled the riot. This note has been introduced in later years – no doubt occasioned by conscience – by people then there, and is always associated with reminders of the fair play, mateship and integrity of the miners – attributes sometimes as conspicuous by their absence as observance. This was not so. St George not only had no hope of quelling the riot but was as roughly handled as the rest.” Jones, *Trinity Phoenix*, p.91.

fellow Europeans at Cairns...have begun a contest in which they will inevitably be worsted, which may result in bloodshed and must, if continued lead to disastrous consequences.”⁵³ The dissembling *Cooktown Herald* on the other hand reported only “a few idle men at the settlement [attempting] to repel the landing of some passengers.”⁵⁴ This outraged the *Courier*, who called the *Herald’s* characterisation “ridiculous misinterpretation...300 men means the entire population, not ‘a few idle men.’”⁵⁵ The blockade continued. The *Florence Irving* steamed into Cairns, whereupon “the appearance of some of the obnoxious race on the deck” stirred the vigilantes standing guard, “kindling another flame.” Assurances were swiftly made to the effect that these passengers were headed further south.⁵⁶



Figure 3.7. Caption reads: “First Hotel in Cairns October 1876.” The heavy thinking that took place at this sort of venue and its less formal shebeen cousins may or may not have contributed to the events of October-November 1876. Even the camera seems drunk. National Library of Australia, 70523r.

The birth of Cairns

A copy of *The Queensland Magistrate* had been procured and arrived in Cairns beneath the arm of an official. Police, troops and government representatives poured into the township; the

⁵³ *CC*, 21 October 1876, p.2.

⁵⁴ *CH*, 28 October 1876, cited in *CC*, 1 November 1876, p.3.

⁵⁵ *CC*, 1 November 1876, p.3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

former to quell the anti-Chinese putsch, the latter to inaugurate the port. The two had intermingled. The *Cooktown Courier* filed its report of the official 2 November opening of Cairns under the heading “Trinity Bay: The Chinese Difficulty.” Word had reached Cooktown that if the Chinese from that port wished “to attempt another experiment at landing [in Cairns] they had better do it at once while there was an overwhelming protecting force on the ground.” Before a crowd of several hundred – which seems to have not left the beach since its arrival – troops were paraded, musketry discharged and speeches made. The speeches, said the sardonic *Courier*, impressed “from a military point of view.” Cairns was declared open, though not, in the view of the common citizenry, to Chinese. The *Courier* saw “police guns glittering in the sun,” and a reserve posted in the mangroves, ready to “do or die.” As had been anticipated, the steamers arrived from Cooktown. Police and troops stood ready to facilitate the landing. Anti-Chinese Cairnsites gathered in warlike attitudes, prepared to resist the incursion. The first vessel, the *Victoria* carried Inspector Clohesy, who assumed command, but to the palpable disappointment of the crowd, brought no Chinese. The *Louisa* and the *Lord Ashley* were nonetheless soon to follow.⁵⁷

The first Chinese to step ashore in Cairns were filled with trepidation by the situation into which they had been thrust. As one vessel moved into port, the *Courier* reported “no difficulty spotting five Celestials, pale green with terror, half-hiding on the deck...They appeared very much as though they wished they were anywhere rather than in Trinity Bay just at that moment.”⁵⁸ One can scarcely blame them. St George attempted to communicate across the language divide, entreating them to leave the vessel under protection, the certainty of which, if they had grasped his meaning, seems not to have reassured them. “If the poor wretches had received sentence of death,” reported the *Courier*, not at all displeased by their torment and conjuring scenarios of their demise, “that they were to be hung drawn and quartered, or blown from the muzzle of a big gun they could not look more morose.”⁵⁹ Under heavy guard, and to an ominous, baleful silence from their new neighbours, one by one, anxious Chinese came ashore. The “whole thing was suggestive of the ‘Dead March in Saul’” recalled the *Courier*, as a Chinese “business personage” and four labourers made their way with police escort (25 Europeans, 10 Aborigines) to their temporary quarters.⁶⁰ While “they were not met in a very kindly part,” they were said to have been able to proceed “without let or hindrance on the part

⁵⁷ CC, 4 November 1876, p.3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Probably Andrew Leon (Leong Chong), later the founder of Hop Wah and community leader who was instrumental in much of the agricultural development of the district. Robb, Cairns Chinatown Cultural Heritage Study, p.24.

of the people.” The *Courier* added portentously: “What will happen to them remains to be seen.”⁶¹

The wretched Asiatic



Figure 3.8. Chinese labourers crammed onto a dock in Hong Kong, headed abroad. In such circumstances, several hundred thousand impoverished rural labourers departed their homeland for overseas destinations including the Australian colonies, California, New Zealand and South Africa. The photograph seems to support the claims of anti-Chinese activists in Australia: that Chinese were an anonymous, undifferentiated flood of desperate human beings, many in number and ‘working as one.’ The photograph is displayed in the Hong Kong Museum of History in a display denouncing “the shameful traffic in coolie labour” and “the harsh treatment of these people,” which prompted “public indignation in Hong Kong.”
Hong Kong Museum of History.

It was on the mineral fields of the Australian colonies (and abroad) that Chinese were subject to Europeans’ most bitter resentment. It was in this context that competition between Chinese and Europeans was seen at its most stark. As Cathie May put it: “Chinese could actually be seen taking minerals which Europeans felt would otherwise be theirs.” May added that as finite

⁶¹ CC, 4 November 1876, p.3.

resources, gold and other minerals had a “certain mystique.” As such, “even those who encouraged other forms of Chinese enterprise felt that the mineral wealth should be reserved for Europeans.”⁶² The *Courier* was less circumspect, saying the Chinese should stay off them because they were “our goldfields.”⁶³ The promise that in this land there were riches to be got teased fortune seekers roaming across it, but the difficulties of finding riches could lead to resentment easily turned on others. Chinese Palmer veteran Taam Szpui described the search for gold as “like trying to catch the moon at the bottom of the sea,”⁶⁴ but frustrated Chinese were less likely to surrender face by venting their feelings on Europeans.



Figure 3.9. The above water colour presents a less commonly seen, benign conception of Chinese on a colonial goldfield, in this instance Victoria. The image is comparable to similar renditions of Europeans trying their luck against a pleasant pastoral backdrop – not the blasted landscape which was the alluvial field reality. The Chinese here are few and Europeans, hostile or otherwise, are none.
NLA an24794265-v.

⁶² May, *Topsawyers*, p.160.

⁶³ Under the heading ‘Chinese Invasion’ the *Courier’s* editor explained that the “importation of Chinese into North Queensland in large numbers and especially their occupation of our goldfields, is admitted to be a matter deserving of the most serious reflection.” *CC*, 6 September 1876, p.3.

⁶⁴ Taam Szpui, *My Life and Work*, 1925, p.25. Szpui (later See Poy) certainly had no short road to wealth. He worked from the age of 11 until a rumour of limitless gold to be had at Cooktown lured Szpui, his father and brother to the Palmer. There they endured five gruelling years in that baked, scrabbly place, before Szpui turned to restauranting, then market gardening before finally finding success as a merchant on the Johnstone River (Innisfail).

Population estimates of the Palmer vary wildly, but to perhaps 10,000 Europeans the presence of 10,000 Chinese, with possibly more on the way, was both maddening and distinctly disconcerting.⁶⁵ (Less is known about how the Chinese felt in this situation). In 1874 the Queensland government had favoured the importation of Chinese to work in the canefields but the large-scale immigration to the Palmer caused the Queensland government to rethink its position. The direct political impact of the anti-Chinese protest at Cairns is difficult to ascertain, but by 1877 the Queensland government had become far less biddable to Chinese immigration. Nudged along by the situation on the northern goldfields, violence and the threat of violence, exclusions and restrictions against Chinese were reintroduced.⁶⁶ The view that a majority Chinese population in the north represented a strategic danger to the colony was gaining popularity.

It was the situation on the goldfields about which the most compelling arguments against the Chinese could be mounted. Demands for Chinese exclusion on the basis of racial resentment were a less tractable position in 1876 than demands for miners' rights. "There are doubtless many arguments – and strong ones, too – in favour of [Chinese] importation," the *Courier* reviewed, "and many against it – not so much against their importation as against their occupation of the alluvial fields."⁶⁷ Beyond these places, the threat posed by the Chinese in a developing colony became more difficult to articulate. In north Queensland, it was rare to hear elaborate racist ideology expressed with any precision.⁶⁸ Indeed, editors and others appear at times to be struggling to find enough vitriol to sustain an anti-Chinese 'yellow agony' piece, as if it were self-evident that the Chinese were objectionable.

During the standoff at Trinity Bay, the *Cooktown Courier* rounded up any pro-Chinese or anti-Chinese argument that was going, including a piece by the imperious A Correspondent, who discoursed on the "Mongolian invasion." Having perhaps never met one, A Correspondent expressed certainty that Queensland's European gold diggers were "peaceful and industrious." The writer was aware, however, that European miners carried "great antipathy" to the Chinese. The source of this antipathy was not stated; nevertheless the belligerence born of it was admired as one of the noble traits by which the Empire was won, in the course of "many a bloody engagement" which had made "John Bull's name known all over the earth." When "roused," A

⁶⁵ In 1876, the field was deteriorating rapidly and most Europeans decamped to the Hodgkinson and other strikes south and east of Cairns, so that by 1877 the ratio of Europeans to Chinese on the Palmer had blown out in overwhelming favour of the Chinese – a shock to those Europeans who returned to reclaim it. Noreen Kirkman, *The Palmer Goldfield 1873-1883*, B.A. (Hons) thesis, James Cook University 1984.

⁶⁶ May, *Topsawyers*, p.160.

⁶⁷ CC, 6 September 1876, p.3.

⁶⁸ The most notable exception to this and other journalistic rules was Herberton's *Wild River Times*, a newspaper of Plutonian orbital eccentricity and Uranian orbital inclination.

Correspondent continued truculently, antipathetic miners revealed “all of the pluck and physical stamina which has characterized our forefathers.”⁶⁹ Stopping short of admiring the possibilities of a cheap coloured work-force, A Correspondent favoured Chinese immigration as a fair exchange for European expansion into China, quite consistent with the moral strictures of British imperialism and pre-Darwinian ideas of progressive and unprogressive races. Unlike most miners, A Correspondent was veritably drenched in colonial theories:

Western civilisation has been knocking for admittance on the door of China...to open the entire empire to foreign intercourse. Sooner or later this must come...retrogression is impossible, and in the end European energy must triumph over Chinese conservatism. [It would be therefore] neither logical nor just to close in the face of the Chinese the door we profess to keep open for all.⁷⁰

At the height of the Trinity Bay drama, the *Cooktown Courier* ran its most impassioned editorial for the year, one which suffices well as a response to the ruling class opinion expressed by A Correspondent:

It is quite time to drop all high sounding phrases about the Chinese and their patience, industry and perseverance; as well as the moral axioms about British soil being free to all comers. We are brought up short in the midst of our fine speeches with the indisputable fact staring us in the face that *where the Chinese get a footing we Europeans generally go to the wall*. We know that they are industrious – no race on earth excels them in industry; they are frugal; they are persevering; and it is by the very exercise of these virtues that they hustle us into a corner. It is useless for opponents to twit us with showing fear of the wretched Asiatics, and ask where is the superiority of race that we claim? We reply that we are being pressed on by the Chinese, as the squatters are by wallabies, or the South Australians by rabbits [the Chinese] elbow us into...insignificance on this our own soil, won for us by the daring and enterprise of our own countrymen.⁷¹

⁶⁹ CC, 29 November 1876, p.3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ CC, 21 October 1876, p.2. Italics in original.

The good Chinaman



Figure 3.10, Figure 3.11. The above images of Chinese at work, as seen by an unknown Macao artist, give emphasis to harmoniousness. Most of early Cairns Chinese earned their livelihoods as agriculturalists and shop-keepers. Here, rice punting and tea selling are here imbued with the honour and dignity of accepting one's lot in life. Collection of M. Richards.



Figure 3.12, Figure 3.13. Queensland or China? Net spinning and rice cultivation, Guangdong. Were the gold to peter out, Cantonese Chinese had other knowledge that could be useful in north Queensland, such as fishing and the cultivation of staples: rice, vegetables, cash crops such as sugar cane, peanuts and jute, and traditions of collective tenant farming.
Hong Kong Museum of History.

The 1870s was a period of large population movements, migrations and re-migrations. There was an ongoing, inter-colonial traffic of prospectors and a ‘Chinese question’ that was evolving through these networks across far-flung fields. White nomads of the north eked out a precarious

living somewhere between fortune and ruin – but usually closer to ruin. Colonisation could be exciting, but it was also frightening, dangerous, boring, uncertain and potentially disastrous to health and wealth. European miners in north Queensland spent a lot of time fantasizing about how much better things could be and resenting Chinese who managed to ‘out eke’ them. The *Courier* expiated along social Darwinist lines, that in their hostility to Chinese, Europeans were “only obeying the instinct of self-preservation.”⁷² The mobilisation and maintenance of large Chinese work forces on the Palmer, on such a scale, at such a distance from China, in a region so inhospitable and considered remote even now, was a truly remarkable achievement that discomposited Europeans, who dreaded another wave of colonisation following their own.

The sense of competition between Europeans and Chinese in agricultural districts was far less tangible than on the mineral fields. The Chinese had been both advantageous and disadvantageous to the Europeans of Cooktown, although European opinion broke decisively towards the latter. The *Courier* claimed that support for the action at Trinity Bay had “the sympathy of nine tenths of the European inhabitants”⁷³ of Cooktown, but the demonstration did not spread to Cooktown – the ‘international’ port at which most Chinese in north Queensland arrived. Throughout 1876, the *Cooktown Courier* was vexed by questions of Chinese immigration, wishing to see the north developed but not at the expense of European ascendancy.

The *Courier* usually resolved this dilemma by “admitting that the rights of the Chinese should not be invaded,” then proceeding to rescue sales by arguing the opposite, before sneaking back to its first position.⁷⁴ Compelled to oppose the action at Trinity Bay as “wrong, because undertaken in the wrong manner,”⁷⁵ the editor despaired: the “position of a journalist is at all times a most unpleasant one.”⁷⁶ Less grandiose than *A Correspondent*, the *Courier* could even find justification for the admittance of Chinese into Queensland, on the basis of the “good qualities of the Chinaman.” It elaborated: “He is a good gardener, a good labourer, a fair house servant and not at all a bad ‘washerwoman.’” Chinese immigration would therefore “enable us to avail ourselves of their services as menial servants.”⁷⁷ By complying with their appropriate role in the racial hierarchy and remaining a dependent and controllable minority, Chinese could be absorbed within the colonial order and made acceptable to Europeans:

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *CC*, 25 November 1876, p.3.

⁷⁵ *CC*, 21 October 1876, p.2.

⁷⁶ *CC*, 16 August 1876, p.3.

⁷⁷ *CC*, 6 September 1876, p.3.

The Chinese came here first as a weak race, useful as gardeners, fishermen, and in all manner of petty employments; and some people were eager to welcome them as Heaven-sent hewers of wood and drawers of water for a population too busy to do these things for themselves. Now they make up more than half the [Cooktown] population.⁷⁸

The option of market gardening could provide a steady living in the north, but not many Europeans were inspired by its possibilities: “The few Europeans in the shape of agriculturalists we have” explained the *Courier*, “do not bestow on it that attention which is necessary they should do to meet with success.” They preferred “a shorter road to wealth.”⁷⁹ For Europeans, the liberty to abandon selections and even payable claims to chase new strikes or speculations did not necessarily translate into spectacular gains. Being bound by social and economic obligations to village, family, clan, employer and financial backer, Chinese in north Queensland enjoyed less freedom but still had the opportunity to prosper. Chinese usually worked as tightly structured, mutually reinforced groups, often in industrial niches such as market gardening, fishing, laundering or as cooks. Steadiness of return was given precedence over potentially higher yields but less predictable profitability.⁸⁰ It “is different with the European,” explained the *Courier*. “He cannot wait in these young communities for slow but sure remuneration. It must come at once. Hence he will not cultivate the ground or drag the waters for fishes...but prefers going to the diggings to seek a more rapid...road to fortune.”⁸¹

Few could disagree that the Chinese were a boon to both agriculture and tropical labour. They engaged in labour-intensive land clearing, which would be much needed at Cairns, stump-grubbing, then hoe farming for a period until it was possible to introduce the preferred agricultural method of Europeans, the plough. Furthermore, after a long spell on damper and jerked beef, the thought of hearty potatoes, tender peas and juicy carrots, even Chinese-grown, must have made mouths water. Still, Trinity Bay, its hinterland and the Hodgkinson further inland symbolized hope, European hope, and there was not a ‘Chinaman’ in sight. The inauguration of a new port offered a gilt opportunity to slate the Queensland government for its ‘laxity’ vis-à-vis Chinese on the goldfields and the opportunity to register objection to the Chinese in history’s spotlight came with the flow of press and officials into Trinity Bay.

⁷⁸ CC, 21 October 1876, p.2.

⁷⁹ CC, 6 September 1876, p.2.

⁸⁰ This level of local systematisation had developed in China over a long period and helped people to survive in a weak state and proved highly effective in colonial Australia, where precariousness of existence continued to be a part of life.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*



Figure 3.14. Agriculture on the Barron River, 1890. This photograph was taken as Wimble made his call for pioneers “to turn the solitude of the scrub...into smiling homesteads where...crops will be grown that will make the district famous.”⁸² Apart from being Chinese, the market gardener depicted seems to have satisfied all of Wimble’s requirements. Pineapples and bananas are seen under cultivation, the second of which had become Cairns’ economic staple. However, by this time, the Cairns district was becoming better known for its racial mixture than the crops it grew. JOL image no.70254.

By mid-November 1876, the *Cooktown Courier* was prepared to call the unpleasantness over, declaring that at Trinity Bay, “anti-Chinese feeling has considerably subsided.”⁸³ Preventing Chinese from pioneering a tropical agricultural district made little sense to Europeans or the Queensland government, and surrendering Trinity Bay to ‘Chinese innovation’ was a perfectly acceptable trade off for Chinese exclusion from the Hodgkinson. Once the Chinese entered Cairns, press coverage leaves the impression that tension simply evaporated. As well as being the likely result of some strategic journalistic smoothing over, it was probably also due to the fact that the Chinese very quickly came to be seen as an asset to the community. There was some residual ill-feeling and tensions periodically flared up between Chinese and Europeans in Cairns over the next several decades, but in general, relations between the two groups became more sophisticated and, stabilised by interdependence, tended towards the benign. In the Cairns district, the Chinese helped push the white man in.

⁸² CP, 15 March, 1890, p.2.

⁸³ CC, 15 November 1876, p.3.

From China to Queensland: culture contact, continuity and change



Figure 3.15, above left: It was from Guangdong villages such as this that many of north Queensland's Chinese left to seek their fortunes abroad.
Hong Kong Museum of History.

Figure 3.16, above right: Cairns first Chinatown 1886 in Canton Street, now Draper Street. Having settled in Cairns, Chinese did not recreate buildings in the Guangdong vernacular but adapted an architectural language of utilitarian, Australian colonial construction. Chinese gathered into language, clan and occupational groups for convenience and fraternity. The built presence of Chinatown made a physical statement of the self-sufficiency and integration of the Chinese community, however building in timber rather than brick or stone was not only an inexpensive option but carries the suggestion of sojourning impermanency in Queensland.
Cairns Historical Society.



Figure 3.17, above left: A shok ku tor on Victoria Harbour, Hong Kong, late Qing dynasty.
Hong Kong Museum of History.

Figure 3.18, above right: Similar vessels made from locally-grown cedar on Trinity Bay, 1907. There was no practical reason to vary traditional boatbuilding practices, sailing techniques and fishing methods which fitted perfectly to conditions around Trinity Bay.
JOL image no. 16203. Image has been cropped.

Conclusion

The opening stanzas of Cairns were replete with self-conscious markers of identity. As steamers arrived at the fledgling port of Cairns with supplies for the tent town and newcomers to totter the lengths of planks over the salty mudflat and through the mangroves, Chinese passengers were emphatically denied, sent packing by the new landlords and bodily beaten back. This was 'British soil,' Europeans said, won as the Empire was won, by "our own countrymen." As such it was supposed to be free to all comers, but such ideas were dismissed as "moral axioms." This was a jostle for supremacy in a colonial struggle that was heavily racialised, so martial attitudes were struck and appeals to British racial energy and militant statements of collective security were made. As they sized up the Chinese prospect, the "instinct of self-preservation" was triggered. Europeans had no wish to reassess their sense of collective self from a lower rung on the social hierarchy, or to be sent to the wall by a rival civilisation. Two possible Chinese types filled their thoughts: the good Chinaman who was patient, industrious, persevering, a useful colonist and a member of a weak race. Then there was the wretched Asiatic: the unfair competitor who worked on goldfields to which he had no rightful claim and devalued working men's labour in the cities and towns.

Correlating to the wretched Asiatic image learned from the goldfields, at this point anti-Chinese feeling was a unifying cultural and political principle in Cairns, and never more intense. Defying the Chinese was considered an act of race patriotism and the desire to brand Cairns an anti-Chinese town from the outset was considered to be of symbolic and history-making importance. Although the wretched Asiatic image lingered on through Cairns' early decades, coming to greater prominence was the idea of the good Chinaman, clearing land, tending vegetable gardens and performing other pioneering roles which complimented European interests rather than competing directly with them. Suggestive of racial inscription as a shifting artifact of history, interaction caused Europeans to re-imagine not only the Chinese, but also their own sense of identity. It became necessary no longer for anti-Chinese antagonism to comprise a fundamental component of whiteness.

Chapter 4

In the Great Northern Sin-Garden



Figure 4.1, above: Meiji postcard from Yokohama with English and Japanese inscription.
www.ikjeld.com

Figure 4.2, below: In the midst of Chinatown, Cairns Yokohama was a smaller and less colourful strip, but one which nevertheless inspired terror, intrigue, moral outrage and calls for cool-headed reasonableness, and a place whose notoriety spread far beyond north Queensland.
JOL image no. omp00005.



Introduction

In 1888, European actors painted their faces, drew sloe shapes around their eyes and lit up the stage in Cairns with performances of Gilbert and Sullivan's light opera 'The Mikado.' More than a decade earlier, a troupe of real Japanese performers had taken the ancient artistry of the enchanted isles on tour through the rough frontier communities of northern Queensland, and although one can imagine audience members and performers gazing directly into mirrors of bewildering exotic otherness, the Japanese Troupe was rapturously received. In 1878 a Japanese acrobat named Sacarnawa Deconeski married a white woman in Melbourne and settled peacefully into farming life near Herberton.¹ Many more of his countrymen and countrywomen were to follow. First regarding them as a striking novelty, by the 1890s European Cairnsites had come to regard Japanese people as indispensable to their community – to the horror of the white nationalist press. Into the twentieth century, north Queenslanders had begun monitoring the movements of Japanese people and reporting them to the authorities. A "suspicious incident" was detected and police enquiries instituted when a white girl who sang "vulgar songs" with a party of "very inquisitive Japanese" were observed, "ostensibly conducting a cinematograph entertainment."² The Cairns *Morning Post* reminisced that it had been not long ago that "Japan was known chiefly as a picturesque background for opera,"³ now Japan stood accused of demoralising Cairns with prostitution as its navy readied itself for conquest, to make the north "an appanage of the Mikado."⁴ Caught between perceptions of Japanese menace, the practical considerations of tropical development and the inflamed expectations of White Australia, Cairnsites searched for a way out.

The marvellous Japanese

During the late nineteenth century, Japan had risen in the minds of Westerners to be no less than a wonder of the age.⁵ The rapid advancement which had followed the restoration of the Meiji emperor in 1868 showed no signs of abating. A comprehensive reorganisation of Japanese society had been brought about with the intent to usher in modernity, to meet the West on equal terms without sacrificing the finest elements, the *essence* of Japanese tradition. Japan's evident success presented a live example to set social theorists spinning. Racial calculations had been

¹ J. Armstrong, 'Aspects of Japanese Immigration to Queensland before 1900,' *Queensland Heritage*, Vol.2, No.7, November 1973, p.3.

² *Brisbane Courier*, (hereafter *BC*), 2 April 1909.

³ Mr Sims M.L.A., from a speech to Queensland Parliament about "how best to invade North Queensland," *MP*, 3 May 1899, p.4.

⁴ *MP*, 30 September 1897, p.4.

⁵ Walker, *Anxious Nation*.

made from the emergence of European countries, as the *Torres Strait Pilot* described it, “from mediaeval barbarism [to] the van of civilisation,”⁶ but the rise of an Asian people to such civilisational heights was considered a “revolution of an extraordinary and far reaching character.”⁷ To the *Pilot*, the swiftness of Japan’s progress was “simply marvellous...in the last few years she had certainly come well within the ranks of the civilised nations.”⁸ Britain saw its own reflection, and took credit for the tutelage of Dai Nippon. Flying its imperialistic colours, the *Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review* put Japan's success down to “her national unity...intense patriotic spirit,” and “the happy possession by Japan of an ancient, hereditary, enlightened, manly and intelligent aristocracy.”⁹



Figure 4.3, above left. In *The Connoisseur* by Australian painter Bernard Hall, a Western aficionado examines a *sometsuke* vase painted in cobalt-based pigments on white porcelain. This technique was developed in China but taken up in Japan, as were Chinese characters. Hall’s vertical composition, complete with floating, untranslatable calligraphy, (as if the ineffable thoughts of the connoisseur), takes its inspiration from, and makes reference to, scroll painting. Ian Potter Gallery, Melbourne.

Figure 4.4, above right. Tea and verandahs upon which to drink it were among many innovations the British brought back from their colonial adventures in the East. Japanese (and Chinese) artefacts could be readily purchased in early Cairns. In this image, with the owners’ Oriental caché on proud display, guests at Hambledon Plantation take tea from miniature tea cups on the verandah amid other Eastern pieces including a wicker birdcage and table covered with a patterned cloth. Photograph: C.O. Randell, Hambledon Mill Records, ANU:NB.

⁶ *Torres Strait Pilot*, (hereafter *TSP*), 9 October 1897, p.2.

⁷ ‘The War Between China and Japan,’ *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review and Oriental and Colonial Record*, Vol.19, series 2/9, January 1895, pp.1-20.

⁸ *TSP*, 7 May 1898, Supplement.

⁹ ‘The War Between China and Japan,’ pp.1-20.

Artists, intellectuals, travellers and writers marvelled at Japanese refinement, zest for life, genius for design and love of the arts.¹⁰ Australian homes, particularly those of the cultural elite, were adorned with Japanese curios and Eastern flourishes.¹¹ The subtleties of Japanese visual language revealed grace and beauty beyond the compositional laws of European classicism and spoke with a refreshing directness to Victorians on aspects of human nature, from which woodblock printmaking was rediscovered in Europe and modernist painting was revitalised. Japonisme and art nouveau flourished in the West from the seeds of Japanese art.

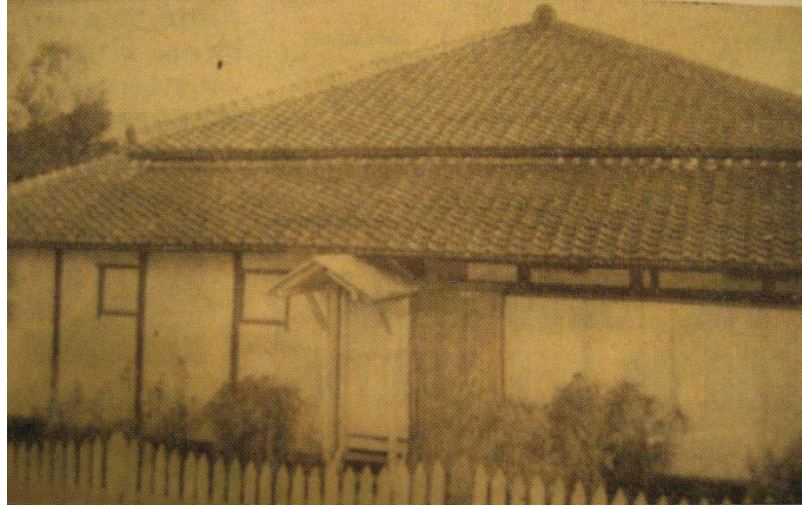


Figure 4.5. Photographed prior to its removal to Ingham in 1962, Judge G.W. Paul's 'Japanese house' was built in New Farm, Brisbane and inspired by his visit to Kobe in 1887. JOL OM90-124 Anonymous Box no. 9255.

It was during the 1880s and at a more intimate level that Japanese and Queenslanders began to meet each other more often. An uncounted workforce of Japanese men from Wakayama Prefecture was plying the pearling coasts of tropical Australia and Japanese prostitutes were beginning to appear in northern towns. As Japan's mercantile marine grew, diplomatic and commercial opportunities beckoned from which Queensland seemed poised to benefit. "The trade of the East" said the *Pilot* licking its chops, "was a great prize for which...Australia had the advantage of position."¹² With sugar prices high and diminishing prospects for Pacific Island labour, Queensland – more willing than other colonies to be flexible on questions of racial uniformity, always short of labour and ever eager to develop its tropical lands – looked to

¹⁰ Walker, *Anxious Nation*, p.50.

¹¹ Trade statistics record that the export of Japanese curios to Australia peaked in 1888, but continued to sell well through the 1890s and experiencing a further resurgence around 1900. Dai Nihon Teikoku Boeki Nenpyo (Annual Statistics of Foreign Trade of the Empire of Japan 1882-1900), cited in Yuichi Murakami, *The Civilised Asian: Images of Japan and the Japanese as viewed by Australians from the early Nineteenth Century to 1901*, PhD History thesis, University of Queensland, 1999, p.212.

¹² *TSP*, 7 May 1898, Supplement.

Japan. Agents and commissioners began to arrive, to investigate Queensland's possibilities.¹³ Despite initial hesitancy from Japanese officials (tales of the ill-treatment of Pacific Islanders made them wary), Japanese indentured workers and free agents made their way to the colony.¹⁴ While numbers of Japanese remained small and prostitution discreet, the exercise was roundly hailed as a success. The 1897 pearl shelling Commission described Japanese workers as "industrious, frugal, cleanly, tractable and law-abiding." Japanese were compared, and compared themselves, favourably with Europeans and other races. They were "on a higher plane of enlightenment and intelligence than...other aliens," it was said – the "Scotchmen of the East," no less.¹⁵ The manager at Hambledon put it plainly: "We are adding gradually to the number of our Japanese employees and these men are in distinct demand at each station in the mill where Europeans have proved so markedly unsatisfactory. At the centrifugals, fires and lumping work the Japanese are almost indispensable."¹⁶

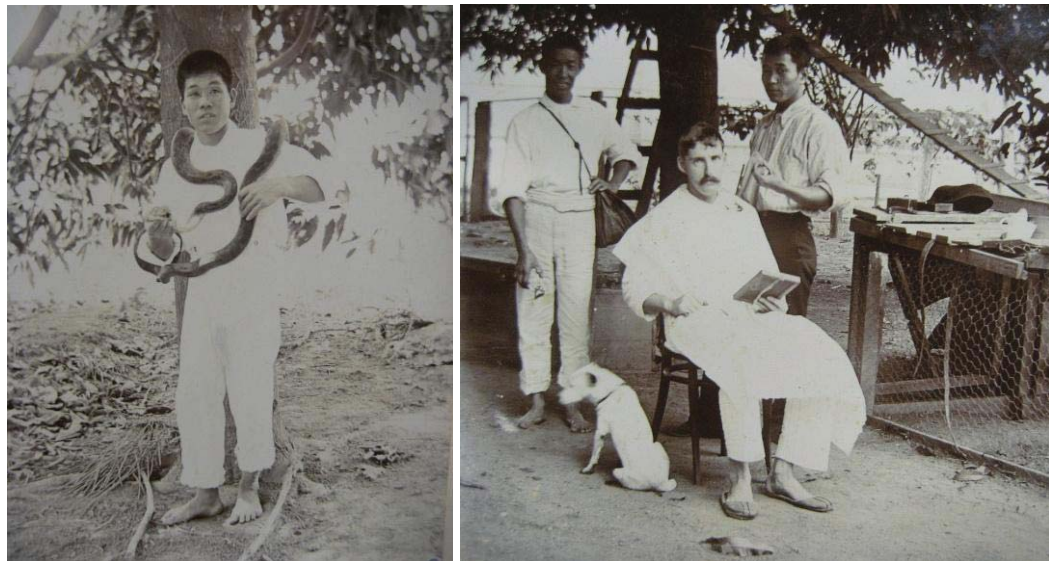


Figure 4.6, Figure 4.7. The many talents of the 'Scotchmen of the East.' A Japanese employee at Hambledon performs an early version of a Queensland live animal act while next to the fowl house, and in a spirit of relaxed, interracial intimacy, two Japanese 'barbers' fashion *le dernier cri* upon a customer. Photographs: C.O. Randell, Hambledon Mill Records, ANU:NB.

¹³ Armstrong, 'Aspects of Japanese Immigration to Queensland before 1900,' pp.3-8.

¹⁴ Between 1892 and 1910, more than 2500 Japanese were recruited to Queensland. Japanese immigrants were first reported in north Queensland in 1888, employed on three year contracts at Mourilyan mill, earning £20 per annum and brought to Queensland by the Japanese Immigration Society, known as Yohiya inil Kaisha or YIK. In 1891, 12 Japanese arrived at Thursday Island, Queensland's first port of call. In 1891, 110 arrived. 264 arrived in 1893. In 1900 there were 538 Japanese in Cairns comprising 484 men and 54 women, a Japanese laundry and at least one Japanese storekeeper. Of the 116 Japanese women counted in Queensland in 1897, 115 were said to be prostitutes. Murakami, p.166. Beyond employment data, official estimates of Japanese numbers are not always reliable and discrepancies suggest that they were the often the result of guesswork. In the nineteenth century, immigration and emigration were not and could not be closely monitored.

¹⁵ Murakami, *The Civilised Asian*, p.166.

¹⁶ Colonial Sugar Refining, *Hambledon Managers book*, 30 July 1904, Noel Butlin Archive, ANU.

Hambledon plantation was established by the wealthy Melbournian biscuit manufacturer Thomas Swallow on Aboriginal land and a wave of misplaced optimism brought about by the high sugar prices of the early 1880s. The extended Swallow family resided at the Chalet House during the cooler months of the year, with an army of servants, staff and field employees, whose pay and conditions were determined by racial delineation and such organisational clout as they could muster. Swallow preferred Pacific Islander men and women as field hands, but employed Javanese, Malay and Singhalese men when Islanders could not be obtained in sufficient numbers.¹⁷ Chinese and later Japanese men also worked in fields, but Japanese were usually granted more senior positions such as planting, mill working, cooking and laundering and as domestic servants. Europeans at Hambledon operated ploughs and functioned as overseers. The European mill manager had a well appointed home with Pacific Islander, Chinese or Japanese servants.



Figure 4.8. In this (cropped) informal photograph at the Hambledon mill manger's house, 1890s, we see two Japanese 'houseboys' and a fuller-figured man bearing a striking resemblance to 'Hoppy' Draper, editor of the *Morning Post* and a man usually sympathetic to the Japanese of the Trinity Bay district. Photograph: C.O. Randell, Hambledon Mill Records, ANU:NB.

Japanese employees at Hambledon were racially configured as intelligent, reliable and civilised, superior to Chinese, and, accordingly demanded and got better pay and conditions than other workers for their 80 hour working week. A Japanese-style bath and Japanese-style food were among their requirements. In his role as court translator, Hambledon Japanese agent Yokoyama

¹⁷ Chinese cleared the land then hoe cultivated among the rotting tree stumps. Fieldwork done by Pacific Islanders paid £6 5 s per annum, Javanese £9 plus free meat and Chinese £1 5 s per week. Europeans operated ploughs and acting as overseers received 42 s – £ 4 per week. Allan McInnes, *Hambledon Plantation 1882-1982*, Cairns Historical Society, 1982, p.6.

insisted on a higher fee than that paid to Chinese interpreters, which the *Post* saw as a lesson to those who made “the mistake of placing the Chinese and the Japanese on the same level.”¹⁸ The *Post* praised Yokoyama for making himself available and enquired, “How many white men in Queensland would thus sacrifice their time and leisure to do the state a service?”¹⁹ Regarding Japanese employees as an improvement on their European counterparts, K. Ijima, the Japanese Consul in Townsville wrote to the Queensland Premier saying that he would not “attempt to draw a parallel between...European immigrants and Japanese labourers in regard to their respective suitability for agricultural pursuits and their mental quality because, I know, the choice is made on sentimental ground.”²⁰ Ijima allowed Philp to draw his own conclusions.

Pax Japonica



Figure 4.9. Notification from official Yoshizawa Motoi to the Japanese people “of the coastal north,” 1897. Motoi appealed to Japanese residents of the north to uphold the law of Queensland and to encourage others to do the same. This they ought to do to maintain the good reputation of Japan and secondly, because there were those who wished to restrict the immigration of Japanese to Queensland, believing them to be on the same level as indigenous Australians other Asians. Document: QSA SRS 5384/1/101.

¹⁸ *MP*, 1 December 1899, p.3.

¹⁹ *MP*, 9 December 1897, p.3.

²⁰ Letter to Queensland Premier Philp from K. Ijima, Japanese Consulate Townsville, QSA 5384/861850, n.d.

A new wisdom was shaping in the minds of north Queenslanders. In the words of the *Torres Strait Pilot*: “Japs...make good servants...but difficult competitors.”²¹ In the competent, civilised and proud Japanese men, who regarded themselves as at least the equal of Europeans and certainly an improvement upon other Asians, some Europeans began to detect challenges to white hegemony. As John Douglas, the Thursday Island Governor in Residence explained:

The Japanese largely predominate in numbers and considered as citizens they are as a class desirable being law abiding civil and industrious people. Considered economically in relation to Europeans they must I think be regarded as dangerous.²²

While there were fewer than 4000 Japanese in Queensland and only a handful ever showed a desire to reside permanently in Australia, the presence of skilful Japanese plantation workers, labourers, artisans, mechanics, launderers, cooks and domestics (and prostitutes) was causing unease among members of the white community. The *Pilot* reported: “There is no need for us to recount the Jap’s abilities – their superiority over other Asiatics, their vitality, their wonderful self-confidence, their unlimited capacity to absorb for themselves whatever they set their intentions upon.” However, “the Jap must be controlled or Australia must submit to be controlled by them.”²³ As Alfred Deakin later explained, “Japanese require to be excluded because of their high abilities...the Japanese are the most dangerous because they most nearly approach us, and would, therefore, be our most formidable competitors.”²⁴

A softening of outward-bound restrictions had made egress from Japan possible, but now, despite warnings that Queensland “should be slow to do anything that might seem to wound the national pride of the [Japanese] people,”²⁵ a steady tightening of regulations pertaining to Japanese emigration occurred.²⁶ This met protests from Japan, which believed its own monitoring systems to be perfectly adequate and was acutely sensitive to racist condescension from Westerners.²⁷ As the Japanese Consul in Townsville complained, “From our standpoint, no more concession is possible without detriment to the interest and dignity of the country [Japan].”²⁸ Moreover, “there is neither intention nor desire on the part of the Japanese

²¹ *TSP*, 19 October 1897, p.2.

²² John Douglas, 9 July 1895, QSA 5384/861850.

²³ *TSP*, 2 October 1897, p.2.

²⁴ Alfred Deakin to Federal Parliament, Murakami, *The Civilised Asian*, p.187.

²⁵ *TSP*, 7 May 1898, Supplement.

²⁶ These were the introduction of a passport system in 1888, restrictions on pearling licences in 1897 and immigration restrictions from 1901.

²⁷ Murakami, *The Civilised Asian*, p.171.

²⁸ Japanese Consulate Townsville, QSA 5384/861850.

government to dispatch permanent immigrants to this colony at present. What they do want is that the 'Status in quo' of our interest be strictly observed."²⁹ Issues of status chafed. As a Divisional Board meeting at Thursday Island was told:

aliens should not be the dominant race. If Japanese are to come here they should be servants and not owners of boats... We do not wish to hurt the Japanese, or to clear them out of the country. That would be too much... We are all very friendly with the Japanese; but this is a British colony so let us be the dominant power.³⁰



Figure 4.10. Japanese men at Hambledon 1896.
JOL image no.172494.

In 1897, white Queenslanders were becoming edgy about the numbers of Japanese workers in the north and T. Matzuzaki the Chief Inspector of the Yoshisa Immigration Company and the Toyo Imin Goshi Kaisha had cause to complain to a journalist that "newspapers always published the arrival of batches of Japanese labourers, not the departures, hence a misconception as to the number in the colony must be expected," *Torres Strait Pilot*, 31 July 1897, p.2. The *Post* reported that the "Jap will according to present indications, soon form a considerable portion of the population of north Queensland. He is being engaged by planters throughout the north... They are all picked men with ages varying from 19 to 35. The work of selecting them was left in the hands of the Japanese emigration society... and during their stay in Queensland their interests will be watched by one of this society's officers... The landing in Cairns of the labourers, who were dressed in white uniforms, their head gear being large straw hats, was quite an imposing scene. These men are now engaged at Hambledon." *MP*, 30 June 1898, p.3.

In 1894-5 Japan waged war upon China in Manchuria and emerged victorious, in so doing announcing its expansionist intentions. European commentators were impressed. The *Review*

²⁹ Letter to Queensland Premier Philp from K. Ijima, Japanese Consulate Townsville, QSA 5384/861850, n.d. From 1897, a hinge year in Japanese-Queensland relations, Japan's own emigration provisions and then federated Australia's immigration restrictions saw numbers of Japanese resident in Queensland dwindle.

³⁰ *TSP*, 18 February 1899, Supplement.

proclaimed, “Japan...as Minerva from the brow of Jove has sprung full panoplied into the foremost ranks” from which “she might now engage any nation...with every prospect of success,” except “of course, the British.”³¹ Among north Queenslanders, this turn of events met with fewer indications of approval. Military exercises were conducted in Cairns, themed as an Anglo-Japanese War³² and Japan was coming to be seen as “a direct and distinct menace to English possessions in the Southern Hemisphere.”³³ In 1904, Japan squared up to Russia in Korea, a clash redolent with racial and geopolitical implications. The *Post* bit its nails:

The Japanese have defeated the Chinese with a certain ease but...they have never yet contended in battle with European troops...If...they can defeat the Russians then the politics of all countries held by the yellow race, and of many European states will enter upon a new shade.³⁴

With Japan’s defeat of Russia, alarm bells in Australia were set ringing. The Queensland Minister for Education fell into fearful repetition, in quick succession referring to Japanese in Queensland as “the danger...the danger...the menace,” and indeed, “the danger.”³⁵ A Japanese man was said to have chided Australians, saying they “do nothing to deserve their colonies,” and that Australia was “a dog in the manger among nations.”³⁶ Something seemed to be afoot. The *Morning Post* reported that “since the war the little brown men,” that is to say the Japanese on pearling luggers and plantations, “have become...pugnacious and troublesome.”³⁷ In the sparsely populated, undefended and only vaguely defensible north, residents felt themselves acutely prone to attack from either the Japanese navy or the Japanese fifth columnists whom Queensland had foolishly allowed to enter. A retired seaman had a theory:

Japanese are already spying in and around every available quarter with a view to finding an outlet for their crowded countrymen as well as to increase their prestige and territorial strength...[They] have their eyes chiefly on Northern Australia.³⁸

Queensland Parliament was told that the Japanese in Queensland were “the greatest danger Australia had to contend with.”³⁹ The *Post* spied on assemblies of Japanese agents lurking in the

³¹ ‘The War Between China and Japan,’ pp.1-20.

³² *MP*, 14 October 1897, p.3.

³³ *MP*, 13 January 1898, p.2.

³⁴ *MP*, 5 January 1904, p.4.

³⁵ *TSP*, 3 July 1907, p.2.

³⁶ *Mackay Standard*, (hereafter *MS*), 20 January 1904, p.4.

³⁷ *MP*, 28 November 1905, p.2.

³⁸ *MS*, 20 January 1904, p.4.

³⁹ *TSP*, 24 July 1897, p.3.

community hall. “Large meetings of the local Japanese have been recently taking place...our reporter endeavoured to find out the purpose...but the wily Jap was most reticent and merely said that they were trying to form a club.”⁴⁰ When “Japanese Pseudo Fishermen” were spotted on the Great Barrier Reef, readers were warned that there was “trouble ahead.”⁴¹ A correspondent to the *Post* reported Japanese “making soundings” near the Daintree River, adding that “while we in the Far North of Australia are quietly slumbering the Jap is very wide awake.”⁴² Another contributor to the *Trinity Times* claimed that the Japanese “know every anchorage and fresh water along the coast...we will...wake up some morning and find a fleet of Japanese cruisers in the offing with their guns pointed towards us.”⁴³ Malone, a Cairns police officer attempted to hose down speculation, assuring his superior that there was “no truth in the rumours of Japanese officers in the guise of fisherman surveying the Barrier Reef.”⁴⁴ Malone continued, “Since the war between Japan and Russia, I often hear the man in the street say that the Japanese would soon come and take Australia,” and that “most of the men in charge of bêche-de-mer boats were simply spies.” Malone had a more mundane explanation. “Europeans are not able to compete with the Japanese in bêche-de-mer fishing, hence the hostility.”⁴⁵

The Japanese housemaids of Hambleton

Some years earlier, during the early-to-mid-1890s, two Japanese women working as housemaids stood on the path in front of the mill manager’s house at Hambleton and posed slightly awkwardly for a photographer hunched beneath the black camera cloak further down the same path. The women’s kimono are light-weight *yukata*, usually worn in summer with *tabi* (socks) and *geta* (wooden sandals). In attempting to capture a broad panorama of the house and grounds, the photographer has made the women appear tiny and doll-like, framed by foliage, creating visual harmony and control by attention to the laws of coherence and rational order prescribed by the Renaissance perspective model. Faced into the bright, hot sun, the women look slightly dazzled. The presence of Japanese housemaids deep within the colonial realm of the plantation creates visual links to Western imaginings of the Imperial Orient. There is a decorative craggy bean tree and a path leads our eyes through an ornamental garden to the house, which could suffice for a pagoda. There are no ornamental boats, bridges or still, fish-filled pools of contemplation, but the elegant women could be a visual parallel to the circling

⁴⁰ *MP*, 27 February 1907, p.2.

⁴¹ *Daily Mail*, 29 April 1908.

⁴² *MP*, 11 August 1909, p.2.

⁴³ Daniel Smythe, *Trinity Times*, 14 August 1909.

⁴⁴ Letter from Malone to Brisbane office, QSA 14812/86510, 2 June 1908.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

birds of the English Willow-ware design, their humanity rhetorically shrunk to two small visual highlights displayed among the Swallow's other possessions. The Japanese housemaids stand at an angle to the viewer, facing out of the frame. Their eyes are not submissively downcast. Their heads are not bowed. Their hands are the hands of people accustomed to work, held peremptorily and unselfconsciously at their sides. Their performance is not mannered. It is simple and direct.



Figure 4.11. *The Japanese housemaids of Hambledon* is one of only two known photographs of Japanese women from early Cairns. The photograph has been variously dated at 1891 or 1896; the latter would coincide with the arrival of Japanese men at Hambledon. JOL image no. 172504.

The pictorial lineage of the photograph is ambiguous. Perhaps the photographer had in mind only the utilitarian conventions of ‘people out the front of their building.’ During the 1890s many dozens of photographs were commissioned by European Cairnsites, who lined-up in front of the family home or business. These photographs needed to be comprehensive so all family members, employees and sometimes horses, dogs and bicycles were gathered. The Swallows on the other hand, could afford to be more profligate with photographic resources and amassed probably the largest family album in nineteenth century north Queensland. Many of these images show the plantation's numerous buildings and its extensive grounds; others are more

intimate viewings of friends and family enjoying relaxing afternoon teas, or children playing in the garden attended by house staff. Photographers wanted to take photographs at Hambledon. Goings-on there were news in Cairns, and given that studies of women and non-European people were saleable commodities, the oddity of Japanese housemaids employed at the plantation provided a unique commercial opportunity for a canny lens-man.⁴⁶

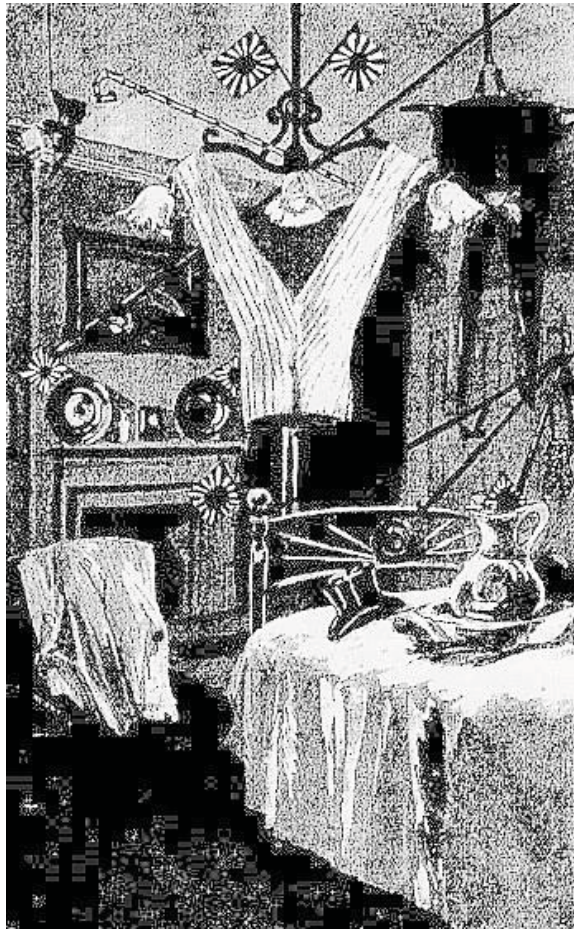


Figure 4.12, Figure 4.13. In a short story about a Japanese housemaid who spoke no English, the *Lone Hand*, which did not approve of middle-class pretention or Japanese immigration, amused itself with ideas of race-and-gender-based absurdity. Shino “the little maid” struggled to follow the landlady’s instructions for making up a room.⁴⁷

At Hambledon, the maids, seamstresses and laundresses were Pacific Islanders or Japanese women. Japanese housemaids in Queensland were expected to work long hours for meagre pay.

⁴⁶ A northern newspaper contributor objected to photographers “making money out of coloured aliens,” and demanded that every commercial photographer post a notice stating: “Photos of coloured folks not taken here.” *TSP*, 30 October 1897, p.2.

⁴⁷ G. Eromluf, *Lone Hand*, 1 June 1908, pp.192, 193.

The *Worker* once compared the unsatisfactory remuneration of Newcastle coal workers to a “Jap female starvation wage.”⁴⁸ Housemaids were on duty even as they slept. The *Cairns Daily Times*, a newspaper sharing the class sensitivities of the Swallows, described the Domestic Servants Regulation Act of 1899 as “most unworkable,” for proposing to “limit the hours of labour to eight, and prohibit the mistress from giving the servant a child to attend or nurse during the night or her hours of rest.”⁴⁹ In another passage, the *Cairns Daily Times* explained:

The domestic servant is just now the subject of a good deal of discussion both in England and in these colonies. At home, the scarcity of domestics is the source of considerable trouble and inconvenience to society...[There] is a suggestion to introduce Japanese servants to London... In Australia things are not very much better but in the more tropical districts the Asiatic is supplying the deficiency.⁵⁰

In early Cairns there were never more than 60 Japanese women present at the one time, and while they worked as domestic servants, launderers, in shops and other industries, most Japanese women were engaged in sex work in Chinatown’s Yokohama area. To official record keepers, *all* Japanese women – short of the Consul Ijima’s wife – combined otherwise respectable services with prostitution.⁵¹ It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which this is an accurate depiction and one wonders if the limiting stereotype has contributed to the near absence of Japanese women from Cairns’ histories.⁵²

⁴⁸ *Worker*, 22 April 1905, p.5.

⁴⁹ *Cairns Daily Times* (hereafter *CDT*), 20 November 1899, p.2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ According to the Commissioner of Police, “with the exception of the wife of the Japanese Consul’s in Townsville, the whole of these women, numbering 115, gain their living by prostitution.” From the Queensland Commissioner of Police to the Under Secretary of the Home Department, 29 September 1897, QSA SRS 5384/1/102. Sissons referred to this despatch, proposing that in 1897 there were 116 Japanese women in Queensland and 16 in Cairns and “all but the Consul’s wife were prostitutes.” Sissons considered that the larger Japanese population of Thursday Island would have been sufficient to sustain some ‘respectable’ services, but stated, “It is doubtful whether there would have been the same degree of ‘respectability’ among the Japanese elsewhere in Queensland.” Sissons, ‘Karayuki-san: Japanese prostitutes in Australia 1887-1916,’ *Historical Studies*, vol.17, April 1976, pp.324-5.

⁵² As Raelene Francis has pointed out, during the nineteenth century, any women whose behaviour transgressed class and race based notions of feminine modesty, such as those in de facto relationships, were considered to be prostitutes. Raelene Francis, ‘The History of Female Prostitution in Australia,’ R. Perkins, R. Prestage, R. Sharp and F. Lovejoy (editors), in *Sex Work and Sex Workers in Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1994, pp.27-52.



Figure 4.14, Figure 4.15. Meiji post-cards of *bijin* (beautiful women). The image at right appeared in travel guides and was widely distributed in postcard form. Westerners regarded it as an iconic image of Japanese beauty, but Terry Bennett has argued that in her own country, the young woman was considered to be of Eurasian appearance.⁵³

Left: Edo Museum, Tokyo.

Right: oldphotosjapan.com

Middle and upper-class Victorians loved to collect and display the exotic, which in the colonial context included the human exotic. Dressed in their elegant finery, and with their reputation for impeccable efficiency and absolute compliance, Japanese women made prized domestic acquisitions for the affluent. The sexualised fascination for Japanese women added another layer of intrigue. During the late nineteenth century, as Western women were challenging the restrictiveness of the entrenched feminine ideal, the sexuality of Japanese women became the subject of lurid contemplation to Western men. Writers had fed compelling portraits of Japanese women into male imagination, images of alluring, supremely graceful women who were beautiful, demure and silently obedient to male authority.⁵⁴ These qualities were said to conceal furthermore, a passionate, 'native' sexuality. The combination presented an absorbing prospect to male fantasy.⁵⁵ To Victorian men, women were the archetypal gendered symbol of Japan. Numerous travelogues from Japan found their way into the press of Cairns, which hinted at the

⁵³ Terry Bennett, *Old Photos Japan*, <http://www.oldphotosjapan.com>

⁵⁴ Walker, *Anxious Nation*, pp.52, 134-136.

⁵⁵ Jean Pierre Lehman, *The Image of Japan: From Feudal Isolation to World Power, 1850-1905*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1978, pp.90-91.

erotic potential of Japanese women as a subject of particular interest to foreign observers. “A Japanese wedding must be a very melancholy affair,” began one such article, since:

In Japan it is not good form for a bride to admit that she enjoys the prospect of getting married... three or four days before the event, she is expected to set up a loud bellowing and keep it up day and night until the ceremony comes on...[then] richly dressed for the occasion, she is expected to make a show of resisting her attendants’ efforts to lead her to the bride groom.⁵⁶



Figure 4.16. Two women in an ornate wooden bathhouse in Meiji Hakone. For Japanese people, bathing traditions were (and are) cherished for their social aspects of friendly, unguarded intimacy and shared relaxation at the end of the day, quite as much as they were a means of getting clean. Buttoned-down Western men were interested in the fact that bathing in Japan was mixed. Photograph: Kusabe Kimbe, oldphotosjapan.com

⁵⁶*CP*, 27 June 1888, p.2.

Karayuki-san and the Nan'yô



Figure 4.17, Figure 4.18. Post cards of Saigon-based karayuki-san sold to Westerners. Yamazaki Tomoko, *Sandakan Brothel No.8*.

Known to Japanese people as *karayuki-san*, the Japanese women of Cairns were impoverished, barely educated teenage girls from the rural south. Mostly came from western Kyushu on the Shimabara Peninsula in Nagasaki Prefecture and the facing Amakusa Islands in Kumamoto Prefecture, a region where too little rice fed too many mouths. While the etymology of *karayuki-san* relates more generally to male and female workers, the term *karayuki-san* is synonymous with Japanese prostitution overseas.⁵⁷ *Karayuki* derives from the idea of people disappearing into distant realms beyond the horizon, metaphorically speaking, to China. From Japan, north Queensland is part of the Asia-Pacific south, the *Nan'yô*, into which thousands of Japanese people ventured during the Meiji era (1868-1911).⁵⁸ With few options and little more knowledge about its possibilities than gossip and hearsay, some young women were sold into, or sought work overseas, for a better life, for their fathers, their villages and the Emperor.⁵⁹ The process began at a seedy *kuchi-ireya* (employment agency) with agreement of a purchase price, usually 200-300¥ and an agreed remittance to parents. At this point, the young woman became the commodity of Japanese people smugglers controlled from Hong Kong and Singapore, with links to Australia.⁶⁰ Having been sold, the *karayuki-san* was customarily supplied, at her own

⁵⁷ Bill Mihalopoulos, 'Ousting the 'prostitute': re-telling the story of the Karayuki-san, *Post-colonial Studies*, Vol.4, 2001, p.175.

⁵⁸ James F. Warren, review of Yamazaki Tomoko, 'Sandakan Brothel No.8: An Episode in the History of Lower Class Japanese Women,' *Intersections: Gender History and Culture in the Asian Context*, issue 4, September 2000, <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue5/sandakan>

⁵⁹ Mihalopoulos, 'Ousting the 'prostitute,' p.175.

⁶⁰ Sissons, 'Karayuki-san: Japanese prostitutes in Australia 1887-1916,' pp.328-340.

expense, with two sets of night clothing, two yukata, a head dress, geta, tabi, a blanket and a small wardrobe chest, plus liability for the cost of the voyage out to be repaid from future earnings.⁶¹ If she survived her three or four years' indenture, liberation from her own and her family's poverty became a real possibility. Japanese officials called *karayuki-san* a "disgrace to their countrymen," but did not effectively discourage them.⁶² At the end of the nineteenth century women and children comprised a major export for Japan when it had few others.



Figure 4.19. For most rural workers, labour in Meiji Japan meant grinding poverty, twelve hour working days with few breaks, and survival on meagre provisions. Edo Museum, Tokyo.

The *karayuki-san* present a challenge to historians of Japan and occupy a difficult place in Japanese memory. What they signify and the extent to which they were coerced or free is subject to continuing debate. As in the Pacific Islands and in China, the feeling lingers in Japan that indentured labour in nineteenth century Australia was unacceptably exploitative, and is therefore shameful. In the 1970s, the historical writers Yamazaki Tomoko and Morisaki Kazue portrayed the *karayuki-san* as the quintessence of all Japanese women's suffering, a romantic image reused in poems and songs. Tomoko emphasised their "broken ties, lost years, constant yearning, and...nightmares." On return to Japan, there were difficulties of re-adjustment to rural

⁶¹ Mihalopoulos, 'Ousting the 'prostitute,' pp.177-179.

⁶² Murakami, *The Civilised Asian*, p.167.

life and concealment with which former karayuki-san guarded themselves. Women “who returned from the *Nan'yô* rarely revealed to their own families, spouses or friends their own past, overseas. These memories were often so painful and sometimes so dangerous that they kept them secret,” burying them “deeply in their hearts and minds.”⁶³ Karayuki-san were often stalwart patriots who earned, and remitted a fortune to Japan, sustaining entire regions and contributing to the ushering-in of Japan’s modern era.⁶⁴ Among twenty-first century Japanese career women, the karayuki-san can be represented as trailblazers who were victims of their times. In 2005, one told the Japan Times Online “I respect the karayuki-san. They lived hard in unfamiliar places where they couldn’t understand the language. They must have been so strong. I’m grateful to the karayuki-san.”⁶⁵ Another said she was “shocked” and “saddened” by the tales of the karayuki-san but, “Thinking about their plight fills me with courage.”⁶⁶ Bill Mihalopoulos has commented on the manifold ways of presenting the karayuki-san:

It is exemplary how effectively the Japanese administrators' prewar concepts, which cast the karayuki-san as obscene and harmful, have been debunked by feminist reinscription of these women as a by-product of history resulting from the malfunctioning of fundamental forces and mechanisms of Japanese society.⁶⁷

Mihalopoulos has condemned the “sentimental moralism” with which the karayuki-san have been discussed and “the prevailing understanding we have of their existence as victims,” which “implicitly reproduces the notion of the women’s passivity.”⁶⁸ He emphasised the validity of their choice against a background of severe rural hardship in the social and economic upheaval of Meiji restructuring, traditions of women earning their dowries by working as domestics away from home, the lack of opprobrium attached to sex work and the greater shame attached to failure to preserve one’s household, in the case of karayuki-san, via remittance from overseas.⁶⁹ Women who became karayuki-san, argued Mihalopoulos, “managed to transform themselves into persons of greater social capital and responsibility, through the fulfilment of their duties in the maintenance, survival and material development of their households and local communities.”⁷⁰ However, the brute realities of colonial power and exploitation ought not to be under-estimated. Prostitutes in north Queensland usually reported that they had been deceived

⁶³ Warren, ‘Sandakan Brothel No.8: An Episode in the History of Lower Class Japanese Women,’ <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue5/sandakan>

⁶⁴ Sissons, ‘Karayuki-san: Japanese prostitutes in Australia 1887-1916,’ p.337.

⁶⁵ Rumiko Motoyama, *Japan Times Online*, <http://www.japantimesonline.com>, 18 June 2005.

⁶⁶ Yuko Gan, *Japan Times Online*, <http://www.japantimesonline.com>, 18 June 2005.

⁶⁷ Mihalopoulos, ‘Ousting the ‘prostitute,’ pp.169-170.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.179-180.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p.184.

into servitude by traffickers and given that some were sold into prostitution as young as 13, arguments about agency can border on the nonsensical.

Vile traducers

In 1903, the *Morning Post* told 'A Plain Tale,' a story whose column-inch magnitude exceeded another on an outbreak of bubonic plague in Cairns by four to one. The *Post* seized the opportunity to hammer the Herbert Labor candidate 'Bamboozle' Bamford as an "unmitigated and unscrupulous political adventurer," while the supportive *Trinity Times* called him "as great a fool as ever masqueraded in print," for daring to tell a public meeting that white women in north Queensland had sex with Pacific Islanders.⁷¹ The *Post* quoted Bamford:

It has been argued that the kanakas were often induced to return to north Queensland...it is our vices and not our virtues that prove the attraction...the kanaka in north Queensland CAN ENJOY THE EMBRACES OF THE WHITE WOMAN...FOR A FEW SHILLINGS.⁷²

When the "vile aspersion" was challenged by outraged audience members, Bamford challenged back, telling them they "knew it to be true." According to the *Post's* ideas of chivalry, Bamford's assertion made him "the most unscrupulous and dishonourable charlatan who ever had the effrontery to address a meeting of decent men and women."⁷³ The story grew with the telling. Again with the qualification that it was "vile slander," the *Post* related Bamford's mountebankery; that "the kanaka was not anxious to earn money by sugar plantation work, but because they knew they could pick and choose among the white women of the North for immoral purposes." Bamford's unsubtle insinuation that white women in the north were lascivious traitors to their race was shocking and outrageous to Europeans, but we can be less certain that white prostitutes in Cairns refused paying custom. To the *Post*, Bamford had "sought to rob the women of North Queensland of their good names, and to hold them up to reproach by Southerners who...believe any lie...about North Queensland."⁷⁴

An easy target for local labour agitators and distant race nationalists, exaggerated portrayals of broken racial taboos and lust-filled savagery continued to harm the reputation of the north. The

⁷¹ *MP*, 4 December 1903, p.2.

⁷² *Ibid.* Uppercase in the original.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

terror of brown hand upon white flesh was a powerful weapon in the armoury of White Australia proponents. According to a poetic *Worker* there was:

a noise in the North,
Coming down on the breeze,
'Tis the bluster and froth,
Of the brown Japanese
With his treacherous grin
And he says what he'll do...
He has lust in his eyes
And his mouth is askew
And he'll get a new suit
And he'll look in at eight...
He is waiting to call, on our Susan and Kate.⁷⁵

The *Post* ground its teeth and took:

strong and definite exception to some remarks made in the Southern papers with regard to the Northern alien question...[which] accentuate the belief of the mass of Southern people that North Queensland is a hotbed of crime vice and iniquity, and that the sooner every alien is swept out of the country the better for the morality of the rest of the Commonwealth.⁷⁶

The *Post* harrumphed at “glaring untruths” that were being “disseminated...per medium of the Sydney Bulletin,” such as the one about the “Mayor of a Northern town [who] decided to import a number of Japanese women for the use of the aliens in the community.”⁷⁷ This was an old story, but it stung.

Ladyspiders

On an earlier occasion the *Post* had sung the praises of Japanese prostitutes in Cairns. “They look very nice in their light, flowing oriental costumes, and, woman-like, know it,” the *Post*

⁷⁵ *Worker*, 4 February 1905, p.4.

⁷⁶ *MP*, 10 February 1903, p.2.

⁷⁷ *MP*, 20 February 1903, p.2.

decided. It continued, “Jap women...totally eclipse their white competitors. They are particularly clean, modest sober [and] exceedingly polite.”⁷⁸ Later, in quite a different frame of mind, the *Post* saw the same Japanese women “attired in the flaring and garish livery of their degradation, boldly challenging by glances of their painted eyes the admiration of men old and young.”⁷⁹ As White Australian expectations slowly enveloped the north, the whiff of interracial sexual contact was becoming an increasingly “malodorous subject.” Cairns resembled less and less its former frontier self. Brothels had once been accepted as almost necessary infrastructure when Cairns had been an overwhelmingly male community, because it was said, that although “sin of any kind is an undesirable thing,” that particular “fire cannot be extinguished.”⁸⁰ But in settled, family-oriented and increasingly race-conscious Cairns, the public presence of prostitution was upsetting to ideas of decency. It supposedly made “some of the streets impassable for respectable women on social and moral grounds.”⁸¹ The social and moral ideals of a white middle class were an ill-fit for longer-standing European Cairnsites, who were willing to place white female purity on a pedestal, but had been traditionally pragmatic about the behaviours of single men, especially the armies of workers employed in the sugar industry. Now civic authorities were being called upon to act against prostitution. The *Post* “would rather have seen the whole unsavoury subject remain in that semi-obscurity from which [it was] dragged by a few enthusiasts,”⁸² but those who favoured the status quo, who regarded Japanese women in Cairns as nothing more than “a law abiding, if loose-living crowd,”⁸³ were now placed in a very awkward situation. From 1897, Japanese numbers overall but Japanese prostitution in particular upset northern equanimity, attracted the ire of the south and made the news as far away as Tokyo.⁸⁴

Thus dragged from semi-obscurity, there was an upsurge in north Queensland Japanese sex industry slang. In this idiom ‘Yokohamas’ were neighbourhoods in which one might find Japanese “ladyspiders”⁸⁵ residing in their ‘Yoshiwarras,’ (named after the red light district of Tokyo), or ‘kuruwas’ (fortified Japanese castles). According to some, in these houses the brutal passions and desires of men were accommodated, while their morality was immolated, their conscientiousness blunted, and their better nature stifled.⁸⁶ From a trickle to a flood complaints came in. The Home Under-Secretary’s Office in Brisbane received a letter from John McIntyre

⁷⁸ *MP*, 16 November 1895, p.2.

⁷⁹ *MP*, 2 December 1902, p.2.

⁸⁰ *MP*, 25 September 1903, p.3.

⁸¹ *MP*, 7 July 1897, p.4.

⁸² *MP*, 22 July 1897, p.2.

⁸³ *North Queensland Register*, (hereafter *NQR*), cited in *MP*, 5 August 1897, p.2.

⁸⁴ Murakami, *The Civilised Asian*, p.167.

⁸⁵ *MP*, 19 May 1898, p.3.

⁸⁶ *TSP*, 28 August 1897, p.2.

at the Presbytery of Townsville regarding “the large number of Japanese women...from Japan...in our country for immoral purposes.” Using an unconventional Latin formation to make the plural, they were McIntyre felt, connected to “yoshiwarri.”⁸⁷



Figure 4.20. A kuruwa familiar to many of the karayuki-san working in Queensland: Kumamoto castle in Shimbarra, western Kyushu, 1874. Nagasaki University Library.

Investigations by J. Hughes, Sub-Collector of Customs came to little. Hughes concluded that in actual fact, Japanese prostitution was not widespread, and that “Thursday Island and Cairns are the only places” in the north where “Yoshiwarras are being carried on.”⁸⁸ Still, the normally pro-Japanese *Torres Strait Pilot* saw cause to lament the mushrooming of “Yokohama houses,”⁸⁹ extended its sympathy to Cairnsites for “the troubles of Cairns over Japanese kuruwa,”⁹⁰ deplored the “lackadaisical indifference”⁹¹ of the police, and concluded that it was “extremely unpleasant to have neighbours whose modesty is down to zero, and whose code of

⁸⁷ Letter from John McIntyre to the Home Under-Secretary’s Office, Brisbane, QSA 5384/861850, n.d.

⁸⁸ J. Hughes, Sub-Collector of Customs, QSA SRS 5384/1/102, 27 August 1897.

⁸⁹ *TSP*, 6 August 1897, p.2.

⁹⁰ *TSP*, 28 August 1897, p.2.

⁹¹ *TSP*, 6 August 1897, p.2.

morality is extremely accommodating to the passions of men who are brutal in their desires.”⁹² It had been proposed that the 53 prostitutes of Thursday Island’s Yokohama area “should be segregated for the practice of their profession.” John Douglas disagreed, arguing that “the formation of a settlement for the practice of promiscuous sexual intercourse will be very objectionable.”⁹³ The *Cooktown Independent* took a pot-shot at Cairns, protesting the loss of custom from a naval vessel which anchored off Cairns rather than Cooktown. “If Cairns is preferred because of its Japanese females, we are willing to concede the questionable advantage,” it allowed, which the *Post* called “despicable, coarse, and quite beyond the mark.”⁹⁴

The *Post* made the very progressive argument, in so far as the “surest method of dealing with [prostitution] was by regulating it and not by abolishing it,”⁹⁵ but authorities who had, up until now, attempted neither, were nudged into action. A police officer in Cairns wrote to his senior officer informing him that every effort had been made “to prosecute some of these Japanese women for keeping a disorderly house,” but it had been found impossible “to obtain evidence to establish a case.” The officer had “never yet heard of an instance of the Japanese women creating a disturbance and only on one occasion has one been seen drunk. She was locked up.”⁹⁶ The “whole subject has been very much exaggerated,” he admonished. “These women aren’t a nuisance by reason of their calling...[They] are so orderly in their conduct that a stranger coming to town would have to seek them before the women find them, that is they are not prominent to public view.”⁹⁷

Nevertheless, a petition was got up in Cairns, with over 190 names attached; insisting that the Council “take action to suppress the Japanese brothels in the town.”⁹⁸ The *North Queensland Register* was amused: “The clergy and one hundred and forty four citizens of Cairns are determined that the thirty-seven Japanese ladies now residing in the town shall go to Japan...my sympathies are with the thirty seven.”⁹⁹ A somewhat facetious *Morning Post* thought it “a good thing to make the town as moral as possible,” and while it did not “intend to enter into the psychological controversy as to the inherent depravity of man,” it had some opinions regarding the suppression of prostitution.¹⁰⁰ Take “the average man,” it argued:

⁹² *TSP*, 28 August 1897, p.2.

⁹³ John Douglas, Governor in Residence, QSA 5384/861850, 18 July 1898,

⁹⁴ *MP*, 28 November 1899, p.2.

⁹⁵ *MP*, 19 August 1897, p.2.

⁹⁶ Cairns Sub Inspector of Police to Brisbane Police Commissioner, November 1897, QSA 14812/86510, n.d.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *MP*, 7 July 1897, p.4.

⁹⁹ *NQR*, cited in *MP*, 5 August 1897, p.2.

¹⁰⁰ *MP*, 22 July 1897, p.2.

the man with the white, the black, the yellow, or the red skin...fry him in the pan for a saint and you will find that nothing remains in the pan but the fat...Do these petitioners think...that if they put an end to the brothels in Cairns they will alter the natures and the morals of the men who frequent them?¹⁰¹

In Cairns the white-skinned average man might be just a callow youth. European adolescents were said to be among the visitors to Japanese *kuruwa*. It was “well known beyond all doubt that boys of fifteen, sixteen and seventeen constantly frequented these houses of ill-fame,”¹⁰² the *Post* reported. Having previously argued for the control of Japanese prostitution to protect white men from venereal disease,¹⁰³ the *Post* was now forced to argue for the retention of prostitution in order to preserve the sanctity of white women. It was considered better that white women be shocked by the idea of prostitution’s existence than be defiled in its absence. The subject needed to be “debated on other grounds than purely moral ones,” the *Post* intoned. “It involves the safety, the security and purity of wife, mother, sister and daughter.” Around Cairns “we have a large alien population who do not bring their women with them from their own countries.” Had not petitioners read “in the daily press of the horrific outrages on white women and children in other sugar growing districts where no outlets are provided for the evil passions of such men?”¹⁰⁴ The Cairns newspaper found support from an unusual quarter – the customarily crass *Truth*:

[The] aliens are there and they have brought with them their native animal cravings. These must be satisfied...it is not wildly unreasonable that the presence of some such class of women as these simpering Japanese misses is desirable. Judged in their class these little brown women of the wicked north are models of maidenly deportment.¹⁰⁵

In keeping with the racism and misogyny of the time, Japanese women were thought to be a crucial safety valve to sexual danger in a multi-racial community. Their sexual exploitation was tolerated furthermore because their own immoral natures, as women and as Japanese, condemned them. At the time it was common practice to blame women for social ills – in the words of the *Post*: “nothing was ever done yet but what there was a woman at the bottom of it.”¹⁰⁶ Women were easily thought of as the biblical originators of sin, bringing about men’s undoing. Some who mistrusted international alliances between Japan and Britain (and in effect

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *MP*, 9 September 1897, p.4.

¹⁰³ “The Contagious Diseases Act may ‘ere long be operative in Cairns” reported the *Post*, “in view of the influx of Japanese women.” *MP*, 1 August 1899, p.2.

¹⁰⁴ *MP*, 22 July 1897, p.2.

¹⁰⁵ *Truth*, cited in *MP*, 15 March 1899, p.3.

¹⁰⁶ *MP*, 22 July 1897, p.2.

Australia) saw parallels between beautiful and dangerous ladyspiders and 'honey-trap' Japan, seducing a credulous West. All of this was of course, grist to the Laborite and White Australian mill, bolstering arguments for all coloured people to be driven out of the country. Queensland Labor newspapers including the *Patriot*, the *Democrat* and the Charters Towers *Eagle*, rounded on the *Morning Post*. The *Eagle* called the *Post* "immoral, degraded and libidinous, even as the town of Cairns itself."¹⁰⁷ The *Post* quite logically accused the Labor press of wanting "to have the Japanese brothels in Cairns abolished because they are Japanese – because the Japanese are an alien and coloured race."¹⁰⁸ Cairnsites wanted to them to *remain* because they were Japanese.

Yet with its larger Japanese population, Thursday Island's *Torres Strait Pilot* wrung its hands about the continuing presence of kuruwa, beseeching, "[Are] these places...to be considered necessary?" The "individual who can argue in favour of necessary evil...is deficient in his knowledge of what is best for mankind."¹⁰⁹ Apparently, what was best for mankind was that the sanctitude and spotlessness of white women be preserved, at any cost to coloured women. Using phraseology that would be echoed in the Cairns council chambers, the *Post* asked if petitioners would rather see "drunken, degraded, unsexed and utterly brutal white women taking the place of the Japanese?"¹¹⁰ The *Truth* mapped out the dilemma with its usual lack of sensitivity:

The presence of a number of Japanese hoydens seems to have revolted and outraged the great moral sense of Australians...some one of them might have before this have condescended to offer some practicable suggestions as to how the lustful cravings of two thousand aliens are to be satisfied. Would they prefer to see brown prostitution superseded for white; the Japanese harlot give her place to the European?¹¹¹

The *Register* chimed in, arguing that if Japanese prostitutes were expelled from Cairns it was "more than likely that their places will be taken by an equal number of our own countrywomen who might rise in their wrath and drive into exile the clergy and the saintly 144." Alluding to Cairns' growing notoriety for interracial immorality, the *Register* concluded "Everything is possible at Cairns."¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ *MP*, 19 August 1897, p.2.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *TSP*, 28 August 1897, p.2.

¹¹⁰ *MP*, 22 July 1897, p.2.

¹¹¹ *Truth*, cited in *MP*, 15 March 1899, p.3.

¹¹² *NQR*, cited in *MP*, 5 August 1897, p.2.



Figure 4.21. JOL image no.omp00006.

A Japanese woman sits on a step in Sachs Street Cairns. Entrepreneurial Japanese women who did not pretend to the same racial prejudices claimed on behalf of white women, who were discreet and did not produce many mixed-descent babies, seemed to be the solution to the specific difficulties of sexual deviance in a multi-racial community. On the other hand, Meiji nation-building programs emphasised chastity and female dependency as rules of progress. In 1892, a Japanese man named Sasaki implored Japanese prostitutes at Thursday Island to find other employment. At least one took the trouble to answer his concerns: “You boors do talk a lot of rubbish,” was her riposte. “In Japan poor people like us have sweat on our brow night and day and working like beasts of burden. Now that we are living overseas...as for things heavy we pick up nothing more than a knife or fork...we wear gorgeous clothes and have our fill of fine food...if I can live the rest of my life in my own home in comfort, why should I concern myself?”¹¹³

With the “notorious Japanese petition”¹¹⁴ before it, the Cairns Council fell into wholehearted agreement with the *Morning Post*. In addition, Alderman Boland worried that “a section of the

¹¹³ Letter to Sasaki, Thursday Island, 25 August 1892, cited in Mihalopoulos, ‘Ousting the ‘prostitute,’ pp.181-182.

¹¹⁴ *MP*, 19 August 1897, p.2.

Queensland press has had a lot to say regarding the Japanese brothels in Cairns” and that “the town of Cairns had become notorious through the matter.” The Mayor A.J. Draper regarded Japanese prostitutes as preferable to Cairns’ European prostitutes, whom he had seen “drunk and stripped to the buff in the street fighting and using such language as would make a bullock driver shudder.” Draper spoke in favour on the grounds that the Japanese women looked “clean and tidy and [did] not perambulate the streets,” but the Mayor was forced into an awkward defence of his own pecuniary interests. Denying that he was a financial beneficiary of prostitution, Draper maintained that “properties I own in Chinatown are let on long leases and if the lessees let their premises to undesirable tenants I am powerless to interfere.”¹¹⁵ He said that he did not even consider these residences to be “his property.”¹¹⁶

On the front foot, Draper hit out at petitioners and their pleas for “the morality of the district” and its “crying evil.” From this, one might be forgiven, Draper thought, for imagining that the document had been issued by “a Presbyterian Conference,” but the truth was, according to the Mayor, rather more squalid: “Why I have seen photos of some of the men signing the petition that show them to be alongside naked prostitutes...Fancy men who have their photos taken with absolutely nude women of ill fame signing a petition got up on moral grounds.” It was an extraordinary thought. An alderman anxiously enquired, “About those photos, who has seen them?” Draper replied, “I have for one, and other persons have seen them too. The thing would be absolutely ridiculous if it were not so disgraceful.” The council resolved that Japanese prostitutes should “not be allowed in Spence Street,” but councillors could “see no objection to Chinatown.”¹¹⁷

Conclusion

Fascination and threat, enthusiasm, admiration and trepidation shaped European Cairnsites’ responses to Japan and the Japanese. From without, Japanese naval vessels were imagined at anchor beyond the Great Barrier Reef, while from within, Japanese prostitutes were a daily reminder of the incompleteness of White Australia in the north. The small Japanese community has a local historical prominence far in excess of its numerical presence. Cairnsites ideated an energetic, intelligent, masculine and warlike Japan with a refined, enticing, perhaps even necessary succubus other – the Japanese demon in female form. A heady blend of approbation

¹¹⁵ *MP*, 9 September 1897, p.4.

¹¹⁶ Cairns Municipal Council Minute Book, QSA 14812/86510.

¹¹⁷ *MP*, 9 September 1897, p.4.

and abhorrence for civilised, sensual and traitorous Japan was projected onto prostitutes working in the Yokohama section of Chinatown. To the *Bulletin*¹¹⁸ and the *Worker*, Japanese prostitutes were emblematic of the debased north. The Japanese ‘ladyspider’ became an iconic image of Cairns itself; a symbol of the town’s uniqueness and the contradictions of its relationship with both Japan and wider Australia, but to many Cairnsites, Japanese prostitutes represented a practical solution to tropical peculiarities against which abstractions of national purity were an irrelevancy.

¹¹⁸ The *Bulletin* coined the phrase “the great northern sin-garden” in reference to the multi-racial north. *Bulletin*, 21 August 1886, p.5.

Chapter 5

A Plague on Cairns



Figure 5.1. Cairns from Trinity Bay, late nineteenth century. It was from this general direction that came many of the problems, perturbations and death-dealing dangers faced by Cairnsites. With overland travel both slow and expensive, the wharf was Cairns' 'front door,' the point of most ingress and egress. Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library, UQFL 243 SR 29.

Introduction

By 1899, it had become clear that a devastating bubonic plague outbreak in central China was achieving the proportions of a global pandemic. Of the approximately 3000 residents of Cairns at that time about a third was Chinese, but the pragmatic equanimity that usually existed between Chinese and Europeans was about to be disturbed by the unwelcome intruder from beyond the horizon. European Cairnsites' image of plague corresponded not so much with the mediaeval terror of the Black Death as with an idea of peculiarly Oriental squalor and

accordingly, skewed the official plague response towards the Chinese. Racial feeling lit up. To the Cairns Municipal Council, the Cairns Health Officer and the local press, Chinatown was not only filthy, but there may have been a saprogenic rapport of a distinctly racial character between bubonic plague and the Chinese community of Sachs Street.



Figure 5.2. The risk, both real and imagined, of Chinese spreading smallpox and other diseases in the Australian colonies was commonly included among arguments for immigration exclusion. *Bulletin*, 23 April 1881, p.13.

Plagues and alien plagues

Early Cairns offered an abundance of opportunities for festering malady. A visitor wrote: “Looking at the place, one would pronounce it a feverbed...unhealthy in the extreme,” and was surprised to find Cairnsites *not* dropping like flies.¹ “In our flat smelly town,” sighed the

¹ *Australia*, 1874, p.95.

Post in 1900, “the plague, if it comes, will come to stay a while.”² Atrocious sanitation was an acknowledged reality the length and breadth of Cairns, and particularly so in Chinatown with its close confines and improvised residential structures. Cairns was built upon and surrounded by swampy ground; it had no reticulated water supply, systems of drainage, sewerage or garbage removal; stagnant pools of horribly corrupted water lay everywhere for much of the year; waste piled up in back yards or was shoved beneath houses; closets overflowed their excremental contents; rats roamed in their thousands and for most of the year the humid air rang with mosquitos swarming in their pestilential millions. Its early decades had been marked by periodic outbreaks of deadly, inadequately understood and frequently misdiagnosed diseases arising within a largely transient population encumbered by bad diet and hard living conditions.³ Life in the tropics came with the ever-present prospect of debilitating and potentially deadly fevers and ‘agues,’ and in remote communities, medical care was poor, even by the standards of the time: “Many of the doctors who practise in the Far North” claimed the *Bulletin*, “are a disgrace to their profession and to civilisation.”⁴ But apart from a few oddball sanitation campaigners, municipal authorities and townspeople barely acknowledged the dangers to human health.⁵ Popular responses usually fell somewhere between stoicism, fatalism, bravado and the redirection of blame - often to external or ‘alien’ sources.⁶

With the possibility of plague reaching the Australian colonies in 1899, a scientific conference was convened in Melbourne to formulate a response and to ensure that up-to-date information

² *MP*, 17 March 1900, p.2.

³ Most usually a European workingman’s diet consisted of meat – which was cheap and plentiful – and damper, washed down with alcohol and sugary tea. A man might enjoy this fare thrice daily with little variation beyond perhaps the addition of some molasses. In the light of contemporary nutritional understanding, ‘that tired feeling’ of the common complaint may have had more to do with malnutrition than climate, so too the prevalence of gout, scurvy, indigestion and constipation. Peter Bell, ‘Health, diet and mortality among the nineteenth-century alluvial miners in tropical Queensland,’ in *Health and Healing in Tropical Australia and Papua New Guinea*, James Cook University, 1991, pp.171-175. The Chinese on the other hand, kept a table considerably more inclusive of fish, fresh fruit and vegetables. Simplified versions of Cantonese rice, meat and vegetable dishes flavoured with soy sauce, brown sugar, chinkiang vinegar and shaoxing wine were served in Sachs Street ‘cookshops.’ Away from town, bush tucker was prepared Cantonese-style to feed Chinese and Aboriginal workers – a truly original Australian cuisine. Athol Chase, ‘All kind of nation: Aborigines and Asians in Cape York Peninsula,’ *Aboriginal History*, Vol.5, No.1, June 1981, pp.7-20.

⁴ *Bulletin*, 5 August 1882, p.11.

⁵ Enid Barclay, ‘Fevers and Stinks: some Problems of Public Health in the 1870s and 1880s,’ *Queensland Heritage*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1971, p.3.

⁶ The *Mackay Standard* noted that difficulties in pinpointing the origins of influenza had led people to claim the disease “came to them from another country. The Germans for instance called it the Russian pest, while the Russians called it the Chinese catarrh.” *MS*, 15 June 1904, p.3. For its part, the Queensland paper regretted that the source of influenza was Victoria, born as the ‘fog-fever’ outbreak of 1885. North Queenslanders also had to contend with hookworm, Weil’s disease, cholera and leprosy – whose introduction was attributed to the non-European low waged indentured labourers of the district. Graham Cossins, ‘Twixt mudflats and mountains: a short history of general practice in Cairns,’ in *Bridgeheads of Northern Health*, John Pearn and Peggy Carter (editors), Amphion Press, Brisbane, 1996, p.6.

about plague was available to Australian medical practitioners. The flea of the black rat had been identified as the vector for plague in the 1890s and vigorous rat destruction was recommended as a first-line defence against the spread of the infection.⁷ Conferees were also informed that plague was difficult to accurately diagnose without a biopsy owing to its symptomatic resemblance to other conditions. Unfortunately, distance precluded the participation of doctors from north Queensland.⁸ Municipal councillors, clerics and newspapermen from Cairns might also have benefited from attendance, to receive assurances that ‘plague’ in this instance referred to specific strains of bacterial infection, not to be confused with a generic term for disease or pestilence. Furthermore plague was not generated through the mysterious workings of ‘miasma’ and finally, its morphology was not in any sense ‘Chinese.’

The *Cairns Daily Times* considered plague a question of civilisation, governance and colonial exposure to alien bodies:

This matter of alien plagues...demands our attention. The extension of British trade and commerce in the East has brought with it disadvantages as well as advantages... European administration and example have in some instances had some good results but... plague among these people of the East is now fraught with considerable danger to Western races... but the real danger lies in the immigrants who have been drawn to countries occupied by Western races... [In] some of the northern centres there are considerable congregations of these Asiatics... We in Cairns have these defects before our eyes every day, and thus it behoves us to keep a watchful eye not only on these aliens among us, but on the East.⁹

To the *Cairns Daily Times* the danger of plague was contingent upon racial trajectories and historical progress. In this reading, Western civilisation represented the advanced, scientific, torch-bearing hope for humanity’s great future while its opposite, the East, was an under-evolved world, crawling with disease and surplus population, synonymous with backwardness.¹⁰ Europe had suffered its Black Death during an unenlightened period, since transcended. Conversely, China had regressed from ancient glory to now lie mired and inert, a breeding ground for lethal contagion. The *Morning Post* alluded to plague in Sydney as revealing “a state of things which would be a disgrace to an oriental city, let alone the capital of

⁷ Christine Amiet, *The Second Angel: Plague in North Queensland 1900-1922*, B.A. (Hons) thesis, James Cook University, 1995, p.31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.34.

⁹ *CDT*, 9 January, 1900, p.2.

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Penguin Books, London, 1995, pp.1-28; Walker, *Anxious Nation*, pp.227-232.

a flourishing British colony,”¹¹ although admittedly, Cairns was little better: “As far as sanitation is concerned, Cairns is at present upon a par with European towns in the dark ages.”¹² A further complication was that European races in the tropics were also imagined to have certain physical vulnerabilities due to ideas of biological difference. As well as challenging white tenability in these regions of the globe, these ideas contributed to the development of tropical medicine as a separate discipline and the pursuit of racial characteristics, rather than social circumstances as explanatory factors for disease.¹³ The racial logic of health was extended to the Chinese, who were imagined to have special tendencies to harbour leprosy and smallpox. “We,” wrote *The Dawn’s* medical expert, “are differently constituted to Mr. Chinaman.”¹⁴

To some observers, Cairns Chinese (and Japanese) were a human plague, corrupting Europeans. Chinatown was construed as both a deadly fever-bed of disease and a vile hot-bed of sin. To this end, Herberton’s *Wild River Times* equated plague in Australia with a biblical reckoning, calling it “the assumed reproach.”¹⁵ In Cairns, a visiting sin-chaser was greatly disturbed by the moral outrages he deduced to be taking place in the “black plague spot” of Chinatown. To the Reverend Lilley, the Chinese quarter “with its joss houses, Japanese brothels and gambling dens,” was a “sad blot upon [Cairns’] escutcheon.” It was a veritable promenade of evils, the more so because Europeans were being drawn into “horrid quagmires of licentiousness,” where they were “foully debased in body and soul. It is well known that the most horrible diseases are spread through the community here,”¹⁶ Lilley maintained.

Along with the wages of sin, there was a price to be paid for Chinatown’s special tendency to harbour miasmatic nuisances. The turn of the twentieth century marked a period of transition during which old notions of miasma and fermenting ‘zymotic’ disease had not entirely given way to new understandings of germ theory.¹⁷ By the orthodoxy of miasma, swampy ground, drains, rotting matter and pretty much anything that stank was believed to give off a deadly whiff of spontaneous contagion. This ‘bad air’ was, according to *Planter and Farmer*, “very similar to its apparent source [and] derived from an infinite number of exceedingly minute

¹¹ *MP*, 21 April 1900, p.2.

¹² *MP*, 24 March 1900, p.6.

¹³ Anderson, pp.95-139; Donald Denoon, ‘The idea of tropical medicine and its influence on Papua New Guinea, *Health and Healing in Tropical Australia and Papua New Guinea*, James Cook University, Townsville, 1991, pp.14-15.

¹⁴ *Dawn*, May 1904, p.16.

¹⁵ *Wild River Times*, (hereafter *WRT*), 20 June 1900, p.3.

¹⁶ *MP*, 6 July 1900, p.4.

¹⁷ Not before 1904 were the pathogens causing malaria and fevers positively identified by microscopy. Cossins, ‘Twixt mudflats and mountains,’ p.6.

germs or living organisms with which the soil is filled.”¹⁸ These organisms were banished by sunlight and air, the “natural enemies of malign microbes.”¹⁹ The gentle sea breezes wafting in from Trinity Bay not only cooled homes along the Cairns Esplanade but were thought to dissipate accumulations of bad air.²⁰ Elsewhere, spacious town planning and wide-spread construction in all but Chinatown allowed in sunlight and air to combat the miasmatic menace. The senior health official of Cairns was the popular Dr E.A. Koch, whose own home caught the breeze on the Esplanade. Koch’s medical training was not recent (1870) and he was a firm believer in the sunlight and air principles of public health, neither of which could be particularly effective against bubonic plague.²¹



Figure 5.3. Before the bacteriological basis of plague was fully grasped, doctors in Germany, Koch’s homeland, treated plague patients wearing a bespoke leather hood. Its beak-like protrusion was stuffed with herbs and sponges soaked in vinegar, protecting the wearer from ‘bad air.’ Berlin Museum of History. Photograph: R. Cairns.

¹⁸ *Planter and Farmer*, July 1885, p.154.

¹⁹ *Dawn*, May 1902, p.17. A London *Times* article syndicated in Queensland newspapers recommended combating illness with “ventilation,” that is, “an abundant supply of clean pure air by which the poison may be oxidised and destroyed.” *Times*, cited in *NA*, 17 June 1876, p.4.

²⁰ The Cairns hospital was located on the Esplanade. Unfortunately, it also backed onto the miasmatic danger of a swamp.

²¹ Cossins, ‘Twixt mudflats and mountains,’ p.6. Koch had a fervour for fever, sustaining a long interest in the mechanisms of malaria. Now known to be transmitted by mosquitoes, Koch associated malaria with long wet grass, stagnant water and swampy ground, from which country around Cairns he was likely to receive most of his malarial cases. Koch’s own prophylactic against malaria contained a whopping dose of quinine, isolated in 1820 from bark and which had been used to treat malaria for centuries. Jones, *Trinity Phoenix*, pp.218-219.

From a mere dullness and torpidity to acute violent mania

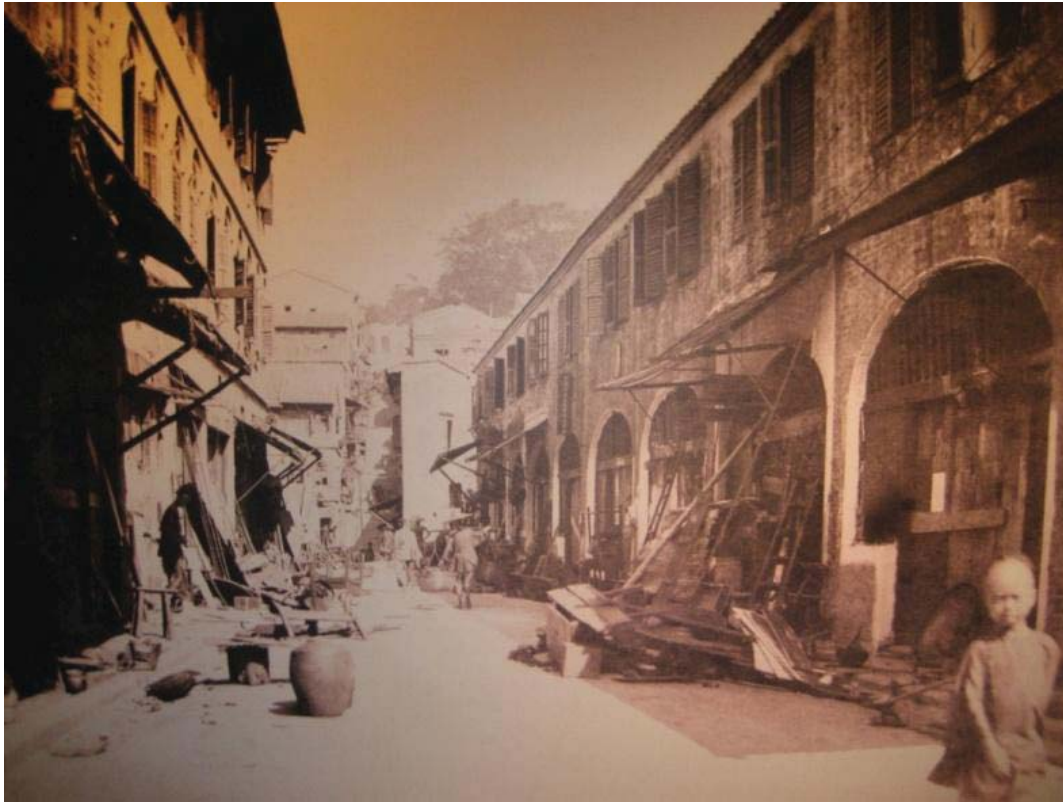


Figure 5.4. Plague affected area in China: Tai Ping Shan district (now Shun Wan), 1890s. The area resembles a war zone, with only a handful of residents remaining.
Hong Kong Museum of History.

From China to Noumea, with the rat-borne fleas riding the shipping routes, plague travelled to Australia. By 19 January 1900 it had claimed its first Australian victims in Adelaide and Sydney. This news was met by the *Morning Post* and Cairns authorities with no indications of concern. The Central Board of Health in Brisbane urged Cairns and other Queensland towns to take precautionary measures.²² Cairns Mayor R.A. Tills disregarded the recommendation, sure that “this did not much affect” the town. Upon consideration, though, Tills thought the Board of Health might send up 100 copies of the regulations, “in Chinese.”²³ Later, Tills met with Queensland Premier Philp and gave his reasons for Cairns being “absolutely in an insanitary condition.” Local authorities had been forced to choose between two options: “to have a nice clean town at the expense of the business of the town,” or “to open up and develop the big

²² Cairns Municipal Council Minute Book, 13 February 1900, p.453. QSA 4634/806954.

²³ *MP*, 10 February 1900, Supplement. In June 1900, the *Chinese Australian Herald* printed 500 copies of a plague information pamphlet, ‘in Chinese,’ at the request of the Queensland Government. QSA 12950/18187.

agricultural resources of the district...and let the town improvements wait for a while.”²⁴ They had chosen the latter.

Time passed. The *Post* began to construct an argument with which to motivate the town authorities “to fall in line with the demands of civilisation” and address “the all important question of public health.”²⁵ In February, the specifics of its case were those of the dubious water supply of Cairns causing widespread illness and noisome nuisances: rotting refuse about town and accumulations of green, stagnant water.²⁶ In early March as plague drew nearer, the *Morning Post* launched into a satirical rail, declaring Cairns to be:

perhaps the worst drained town on the Queensland coast and the only reason why epidemics have not decimated the population is that the town fortunately happens to be built on a sandy site... [It] is disgraceful that for days together our main streets and footpaths should be uncrossable - except on stilts.²⁷

In the meteorological estimation of the *Post*, the primitive gutter-ways of Cairns had their effluvious contents shifted only “when under the pressure of an eight or ten inch rainfall.”²⁸ By February’s end, the sum total of the council’s plague precautions consisted of taking out a loan under the Health Act,²⁹ and bringing “the matter of filling up” under the notice of the Sanitary Committee.³⁰ By early March however, the real possibility of bubonic plague reaching Cairns was engendering disquiet. Cairns was ill-equipped to handle an epidemic. Abandoning its ineffectual hinting, the *Post* squared its editorial shoulders and demanded the plague precautions urged by Brisbane be immediately implemented. In its sights were the “municipal stinks and fever beds” of Cairns.³¹ The *Post* then turned its heavier artillery upon the Chinese.

The *Morning Post* and town officials had a sudden convergence of mind. The municipal decision makers of Cairns burst into action. The circular issued by the Central Board of Health had called upon all local authorities:

to institute an immediate systematic cleansing of all insanitary conditions such as accumulation of refuse, foul drains, tanks, dirty tenements, yards, overcrowding of

²⁴ *MP*, 14 April, 1900, p.2.

²⁵ *MP*, 3 February 1900, p.2.

²⁶ Dysentery, one of the top ten killers of colonial Queenslanders was caused by contaminated water.

²⁷ *MP*, 10 March 1900, p.2.

²⁸ *MP*, 17 March 1900, p.2.

²⁹ Cairns Municipal Council Minute Book, 27 February 1900, p.462. QSA 4634/806954.

³⁰ Cairns Municipal Council Minute Book, 13 February 1900, p.458. QSA 4634/806954.

³¹ *MP*, 17 March 1900, p.2.

lodging houses etc...plague obtains a footing earliest and spreads most quickly in the less sanitary portions of the town, and it is consequently suggested that particular attention be given to these quarters where coloured races congregate.”³²

If “the bubonic plague does get a hold in Cairns it will not cease its ravages until it has wiped out Chinatown and half the European residents of Cairns,” opined the *Post*.³³ Fears were discharged through Sachs Street. The Mayor, Aldermen Bates and Lyons appointed themselves “a Sub-Committee to immediately inspect and report on...the present unhealthy condition of Chinatown.” The Sanitary Committee was granted powers to “take steps as they deem necessary.”³⁴ Wong Foy’s allotment was to be filled in and a motion was carried to close all gambling houses in Chinatown.³⁵ Hotels and boarding house keepers were ordered to equip their businesses with “a bin or box in which to deposit refuse.”³⁶

“There [was] room in Chinatown for a tidal wave of carbolic,” declared the *Morning Post*. “Half-measures are useless, and people who have an inclination to sloth and dirt must be prodded with the official rod until they learn.” Dr Koch seized the official prodding rod and took it with him on “a close inspection of Chinatown,” where the “fever-laden ground [was] once more...examined and the official malarial whiff inhaled.” On the basis of this nuisance inspection, Koch ordered the demolition of eight or ten buildings in Chinatown, then later several more.³⁷ The ambition to raze buildings to allow sunlight and air to penetrate hit a snag however, when its actual legal enforceability came into question. When the Municipal Council meeting next met, this exchange took place:

Ald. Brown: And supposing the Chinamen refuse to pull them down?

Ald. Mayers: We will pull them down for them...We should carry out the work of placing the town in a fairly sanitary condition by pulling down the dilapidated houses in Chinatown...The only way to disinfect Chinatown was to let in the sun and the air.³⁸

The *Post* gave its mordant approval, observing that:

³² Wilton Love, *MP*, 17 March 1900, p.2. The plague in China, Hong Kong, India, Noumea and Australia had obtained its earliest footing and spread most rapidly around wharf areas where rats from ships disembarked.

³³ *MP*, 24 March, 1900, p.6.

³⁴ Cairns Municipal Council Minute Book, 6 March 1900, p.470, QSA 4634/806954.

³⁵ Cairns Municipal Council Minute Book, 10 April 1900, p.481, QSA 4634/806954.

³⁶ Cairns Municipal Council Minute Book, 6 March 1900, p.470, QSA 4634/806954.

³⁷ *MP*, 17 March 1900, p.2.

³⁸ *MP*, 14 April 1900, p.3.

Ald. Mayers...has given notice of a motion providing for that section of the Municipality [Chinatown] being proclaimed 'first class' – a measure which provides for the erection of brick or stone buildings *only*, and prevents our Celestial friends from erecting edifices of the duck house or pig-sty variety of wooden architecture.³⁹

It concluded: "We are also pleased to note that steps to improve dirty Chinatown out of existence have been initiated."⁴⁰ Alderman A.J. Draper, brother of the *Morning Post's* editor and a man well-connected to the Chinese community by way of the banana trade made a dramatic renunciation, predicting: "If the bubonic plague should break out in Cairns I can tell that there will not be a single house in Chinatown left standing...the whole of Chinatown will be burned down."⁴¹ Others stage-whispered into the ear of the *Post*, including Mayers, who raised Draper's stakes by "dimly hinting even worse things occurring than the destruction of Chinatown by fire." The *Post* endorsed the Council's coercion and bluster "to take certain action regarding Chinatown...legal or illegal, on the grounds that the public health must not be jeopardised...because [of] one or two filthy Chinamen."⁴² The Chinese in general and one or two of them in particular were well and truly put on notice. If plague arrived in Cairns, they would be held responsible.

In March, the *Morning Post* printed a lesson in germ theory from bacteriologist Dr Hodgson. "The plague itself is due to a minute micro organism or germ," wrote Hodgson. The effects of these microbes could be hideous. They began with:

First perhaps a slight shivering fit. Then the temperature of the body rises. There is fever and delirium...Speedily following this there comes great loss of muscular power and rapid feeble pulse...the mental symptoms [include] derangement of the intellect, from a mere dullness and torpidity to acute active violent mania...a fine spotty rash may appear [or] bruise-like spots [known as] 'tokens,' the dreaded diagnostic sign of plague. At the time the lymphatic glands of the body enlarge...in the armpits, the groin, the neck...Death may occur from plague within 24 hours.⁴³

³⁹ *MP*, 17 March 1900, p.2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *MP*, 28 April 1900, p.6.

⁴² *MP*, 24 March 1900, p.6.

⁴³ *MP*, 31 March 1900, p.3.

In June however, the *Post* was still labouring under the misapprehension that air and sun killed plague. It took comfort from the fact that Cairns was “not a closely built settlement...Air and sunlight, both keen antagonists of the plague can penetrate in most directions.”⁴⁴



Figure 5.5. The extension of British trade and commerce in the East. Above, ‘natives of China’ handle tea on the docks of Hong Kong. Do they also transmit plague? Hong Kong Museum of History.

In their campaign against plague, the newspaper editor and town officials were acting upon the advice of Dr Koch. The Government Medical Officer and Health Officer to the Cairns Municipal Council was highly skilled when it came to sawing off redundant limbs (while simultaneously acting as his own anaesthetist), but epidemics were not his area of expertise. Koch appears to have been inadequately informed about plague’s particulars, or in his own words, he did not think that plague was “thoroughly understood by medical men”⁴⁵ and advised against the use of the plague vaccination “until more is known about...its

⁴⁴ *MP*, 1 June, 1900, p.2.

⁴⁵ *MP*, 31 March 1900, p.4.

characteristics.”⁴⁶ Koch was concerned about rats, but wanted to disinfect ‘fever-bed’ soil, and thought that heat might “generate checks to the plague.” Koch frustrated the work of the government appointed bacteriologist Dr Turner and worried about “tea which may have been handled by the natives of China or India affected by the plague.” He was however sure the disease “would be stamped out utterly, at least in civilised countries.”⁴⁷ Most vegetables in Cairns were grown by Chinese. Koch advised readers of the *Morning Post* to rinse them in permanganate of potash and having also used carbolic acid in their ablutions, readers might then “go about in a plague infected town and laugh at the disease as far as [they] are concerned.”⁴⁸

The Chinese spring, more or less, into action

Whether through fear of reprisal, fear of the plague or a general motivation to self-preservation, the Chinese of Cairns mounted a thoroughgoing cleanup. The *Cairns Daily Times* disapproved of the Chinese community’s inclination to keep its own counsel: “they never display any great anxiety to give information on these matters; indeed they are more inclined to suppress it.”⁴⁹ There is some evidence however, to suggest that Chinese compliance with plague precautions came about with reluctance. Filling in allotments to prevent the pooling of rancid water was legally the responsibility of landowners. Most occupants of Sachs Street were lessees. As with many other Cairnsites, the Chinese may have considered the plague peril exaggerated or a ruse, the more so because it created an opportunity for a municipal authority to use illegal and exploitative overreach to force the Chinese into improving the property of mainly European landholders. The Health Committee made an inspection of the area:

We visited Chinatown to satisfy ourselves that the filling up ordered by the council was being done. We found evidence that the instructions were being attended to but the progress is so slow that it will take months at the present rate to complete.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *MP*, 31 March 1900, p.4. Perhaps he was a *Bulletin* reader. That magazine published what was probably an exaggerated account of hysterical scenes accompanying the first round of plague inoculations in Sydney. Recipients are said to have shouted and sworn; or clung to each other and wept, wondering if they were going to die on the basis of a rumour that they had been injected with “stuff out of niggers in Injer,” Cited in *MP*, 5 May 1900, p.4.

⁴⁷ *MP*, 31 March 1900, p.4.

⁴⁸ *MP*, 5 May, 1900, p.2.

⁴⁹ *CDT*, 9 January 1900, p.2.

⁵⁰ *MP*, 14 April 1900, p.3.

The Inspector of Nuisances, the Sanitary Committee and the Government Health Officer all beat paths to Chinatown. As the respective reports were lodged, it became clear that a dramatic transformation was in fact taking place. The Nuisance Inspector testified that:

A good deal of cleansing has been done to the town during the month especially in Chinatown. Nineteen Chinese householders have purchased carbolic acid or other disinfectants and have been instructed in the use of them...Wong Fong filled in 51 loads of sand on his allotment...Sun Shun Lee has had a few loads of sand put in his yard and has thoroughly cleaned up his premises.⁵¹

Koch reported that “a vast improvement in the cleanliness of the yards had taken place” and offered the back-handed compliment: “at the present time Chinatown...is quite equal to other parts of Cairns.”⁵² The extent to which this transformation had taken place made the continued lambasting of the Chinese critically unsustainable. Alderman Mayers still clung to the hope that “the day would come when Chinatown would be removed to some other locality, for it was now a festering sore in the heart of town,”⁵³ but as plague moved still nearer to Cairns, the anti-Chinese sentiments of the *Morning Post* receded like its carbolic tide. It reaffirmed Koch’s assessment with a shaming message for the town: “The backyards of Chinatown are now clean – cleaner in fact than those of many Europeans.” It even took the opportunity to mock a rival newspaper for exhibiting anti-Chinese tendencies: “There is just as much danger from dirty yards kept by Europeans as from those kept by Asiatics.” The *Advocate* blames the Chows and the Japs for the introduction of the Bubonic plague into Australia, but in its senseless denunciation of everything that it doesn’t like it forgets that not one Asiatic alien has yet been infected in Australia.”⁵⁴

Apparently satisfied by its own efforts, the *Morning Post* resuscitated its racially neutral public health theme:

Cairns may have no drainage system; it certainly does swarm with rats and until the past week or two refuse of a superlatively smellful nature has been allowed to freely accumulate in typhoid plaguey heaps in backyards, under dwellings and on vacant allotments...Let us trust that our citizens will recognise their individual responsibilities...and not lean too heavily on either Providence or the Joint Health Board.⁵⁵

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *MP*, 14 April, 1900, p.3.

⁵⁴ *MP*, 31 March 1900, p.7.

⁵⁵ *MP*, 1 June 1900, p.2.

By April, plague was spreading in Adelaide, Sydney, Fremantle and Melbourne. As had been noted, of the many dozen lives claimed, none so far was Asiatic. Then, courtesy of coastal steamers, Cairns caught the plague. As July became August, the official plague tally for Cairns stood at five. None was Chinese. Defying earlier predictions, the alien plague bypassed not only aliens and coloured people, but also those quarters where they congregated. The pattern was repeated throughout Australia. The plague bacillus seemed to have no special affinity with the Chinese or any of the other non-Europeans.

After a few excitable months interest in plague deflated. The *Wild River Times* reflected generally upon the response of officials to the outbreak of plague in Australia, chiding them for their lack of compassion. It hoped that:

the exaggerated prominence...accorded [to plague] will be withdrawn, and also that the terribly drastic and cruel proceedings which have been resorted to...will be abandoned. Callousness and heartlessness are themselves diseases of the most formidable character, and infinitely more degrading and deteriorating in their effects than any mere febrile disorder.⁵⁶

The *Morning Post* felt the compulsion to heap praise upon the Chinese. In an editorial piece aimed at Labor activists, but which could be read as an apology of sorts for the newspaper's previous excesses, the *Post* made an extraordinary plea for tolerance, highlighting the pioneering role and economic contribution of local Chinese:

The Chinaman is here and under the British flag must have his rights respected, and so long as he pursues the even course he is now travelling we fail to see the harm attached to his presence...He did in the first place what the European desired but fumbled – he felled the jungle covered land and cultivated it...we tax him heavily on his rice, we hit him...very hard on all his imported eatables and drinkables...The Chinaman cane and corn growers do a big volume of business with our leading storekeepers and without the energy of the Chinese banana grower where would a large number of wharf-hands...earn a living?⁵⁷

Antagonism toward the Chinese the *Post* put down to envy.

⁵⁶ *WRT*, 20 June 1900, p.3.

⁵⁷ Catching a whiff perhaps of the stink in Britain caused by Australia's embarrassingly overt racism, *MP*, 2 November, 1900, p.2.

Conclusion

Cairns in 1900 was a public health nightmare. The *Cairns Argus* had once observed that with “a tropical sun to act upon such a bed of contamination...the dullest imagination can evolve fever and malaria galore [and] a plague [breaking] out at any moment.”⁵⁸ There was nothing dull about the imaginations of Cairns officials, however. Spontaneous generation of plague was eminently possible therein. The belief that plague would obtain its earliest footing and spread most rapidly within Chinatown, was readily enforced by the play of local politics whereby the sanitary shortcomings of Sachs Street helped divert attention from everyday European squalor and a plethora of public health failures. As plague loomed, competing disease paradigms and well-worn cultural assumptions confused the town’s response. Scientific knowledge of preventative and curative medicine blurred against the tenets of miasma, while the known Chinese origins of the pandemic forged imaginary links between race and contagion. By the time plague had taken root in Cairns, the *Morning Post* had lost interest in the image of Chinatown as hotbed of disease. Perhaps this was because it felt its exhortations to have succeeded, or perhaps because the issue was one of hygiene not race. Once the plague danger had passed, the *Post* felt inclined to re-establish relations with the Chinese on a more cordial footing. From their politically circumscribed position, the Chinese seem to have worn the indignity with good grace. The *Post* had argued before that the Chinese were crucial to the well-being of Cairns, but during a plague outbreak, with the stabilising influence of European self-interest in jeopardy, this was not an easy position to maintain.

⁵⁸ *Cairns Argus*, (hereafter *CA*), 22 December 1891, p.2.

Chapter 6

Faithful Delineations

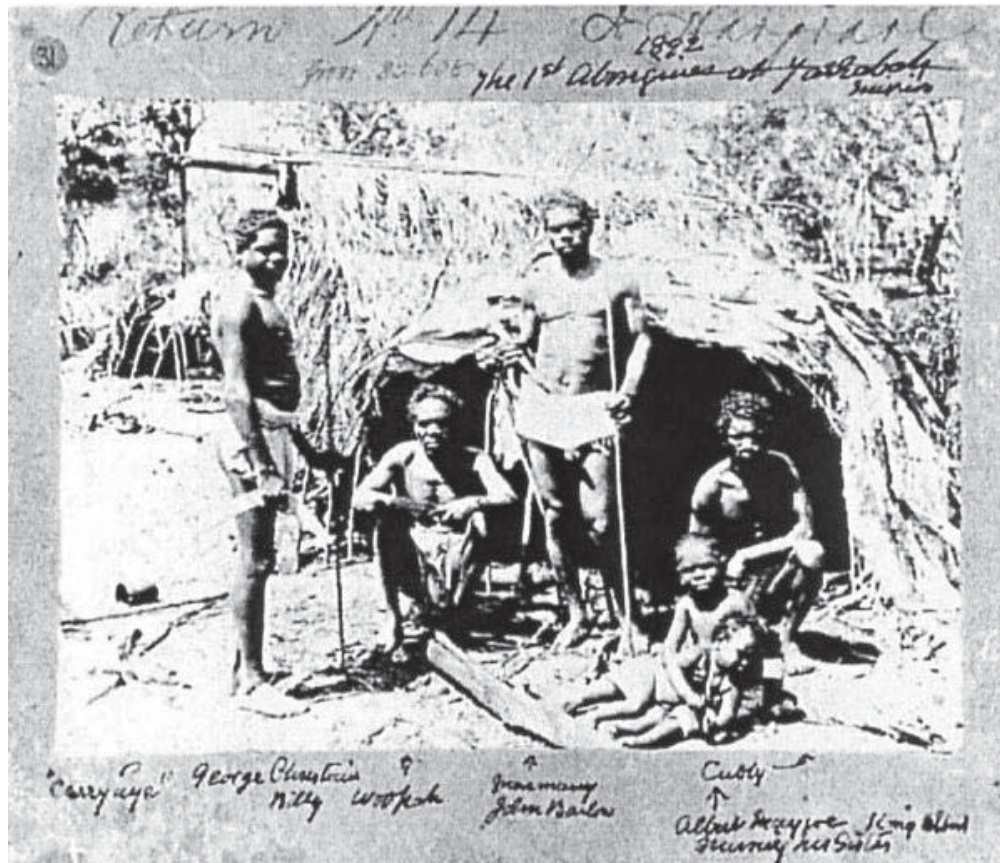


Figure 6.1. *First Aborigines at Yarrabah Mission, in front of shelter, some with spears, 1892*, Alfred Atkinson, with inscription by an unknown hand. Cairns Historical Society.

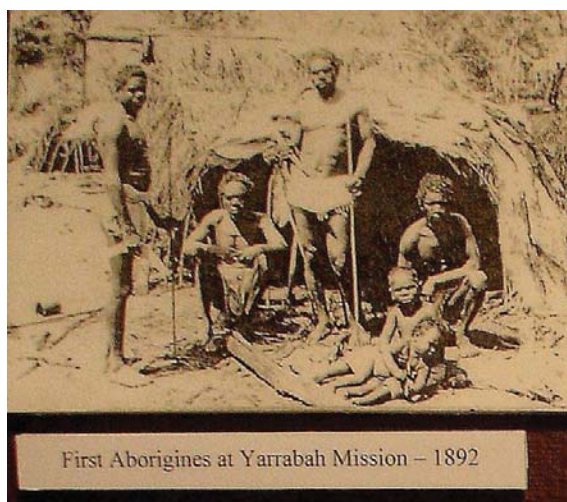


Figure 6.2, above left: *First Aborigines at Menmunny Museum, Yarrabah.*

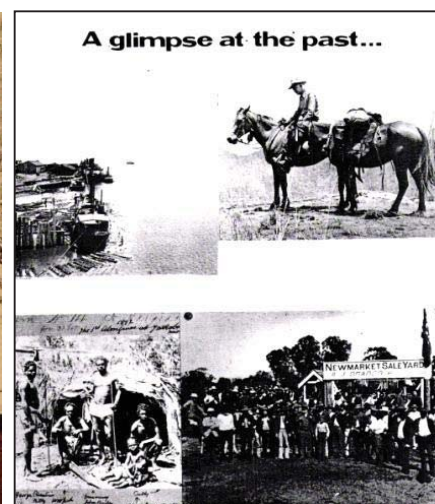


Figure 6.3, above right: *First Aborigines in a 1970s Cairns tourist brochure.* Cairns Historical Society.

Introduction

Had *Cairns Post* editor-proprietor Frederick Wimble suffered the expense of a photographer to illustrate his several-paged publication of the 1890s, he could have done worse than to employ local lensman Alfred Atkinson. The intensity of frontier conflict between Aborigines and colonists of the Cairns district reached a crescendo in the early 1890s and a new phase of relations was unfolding. It was during this critical period that Atkinson captured a defining image. Known as *First Aborigines at Yarrabah Mission, in front of shelter, some with spears, 1892*, the photograph is currently displayed in the Menmuni Museum in what is now the township of Yarrabah on Cape Grafton, south-east of Cairns. The photograph was once hung in Yarrabah's St Albans church, adjacent to an altar containing fragments of 'holy rock' upon which the first Christian service was held in the area.¹ It was said that in the days before the mission, just near the church's consecrated ground, a wandering European naturalist was savagely killed by Gungganydji.² Reverend Ernest Gribble, son of the mission's founder Reverend J.B. Gribble, could show Yarrabah's visitors the approximate scene of the crime. Among Torres Strait Islanders, the introduction of Christianity achieved an historical momentousness, immortalised in the Coming of the Light festival celebrated yearly. The non-hierarchical social organisation of Gungganydji conspired against sudden, community-wide conversion, but a celebratory narrative for Yarrabah's development harking back to the old days was no less important to the mission's sponsors. An image of success was important to the mission's future prospects and relics, such as those mentioned, were summoned to the folkloric cause. The *First Aborigines* photograph is one of these.

From mission artefact, and cultural sensitivities about images of deceased Aborigines notwithstanding, *First Aborigines* found another career, that of historian's tool. It has been frequently reprinted to the point of becoming a stock illustration with which to ornament local history accounts, commemorative editions and academic theses with each usage adding a fine layer to the myth. I estimate that it is the single most reproduced image of Aboriginal people from early Cairns. Particularly popular is the version on which a looping hand has identified its subjects in their mix of Christian and Gungganydji names: George Christian, Billy Woopah, Cubby,³ Albert Maywe and his sister Ballawoorba,⁴ and Menmuni,⁵ or King John Barlow⁶ as

¹ *75th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Community of Yarrabah by the Church of England*, 1967, pp.13-15.

² *Aboriginal News*, (hereafter *AN*), November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101. Gribble blamed Billy Woopah with the murder.

³ Cubby is sometimes referred to as Tubby.

⁴ Also known as Balla or Bella.

⁵ Menmuni, also known as: Menonomonee, Menomonie, Manmuni, Minminiy, Menymeny and Menmurray.

he became known. Local legend holds that the people we glimpse in *First Aborigines* had been baptised sometime earlier on the shores of the Cairns Inlet, although this was probably not the case.⁷

In reproductions, the photograph's title or a close paraphrasing of it is always used, perhaps leading the viewer to incorrectly assume that *First Aborigines* represents *First Contact*. The figure of Menmuny is compositionally central to the image. The enigmatic Gungganydji warrior took the extraordinary step of aligning himself with Ernest Gribble. Menmuny's influence and web of relations proved pivotal to Yarrabah's foundation and Gribble used the story of King John of Yarrabah as a proof of the mission's success. While it is true that all of the Gungganydji of *First Aborigines* did become associated with the mission to different degrees, the photograph could otherwise have been entitled *The First Gungganydji to co-operate with a photographer associated with the mission being constructed on their land*. This chapter reconsiders *First Aborigines* as a site of memory. It examines the events that surrounded its creation, cultural change, colonial expansion and the rivalries of historical construction.

Theatrical coups

In capturing images of Aboriginal people, professional photographers in Cairns responded to commercial imperatives with a blend of curiosity, artistic license, neo-Darwinistic assumption and some formulaic cliché. The technical limitations of fiddly, cumbersome cameras militated against spontaneity, as did the expense of plate glass negatives, customers' requirements and the aesthetic traditions of the medium. Compositional elements were carefully arranged. Racial belief was codified in a visual language that took inspiration from the natural sciences and popular ethnography. The historical value of these photographs notwithstanding, it is an open

⁶ Ernest Gribble renamed Menmuny 'John Barlow' after the Bishop Barlow of North Queensland, Paul Smith, *Like a Watered Garden: Yarrabah 1892-1909*, B.A. (Hons) thesis, James Cook University, 1980, p.136.

⁷ There are inconsistencies among the sources and perhaps some wishful thinking. A Yarrabah commemorative booklet claimed, "The first man baptised it is believed was the famous 'King John,' John Menymeny Barlow who was baptised 'on the shores of the Cairns Inlet 1891,' by Fr. John Brown Gribble." *75th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Community of Yarrabah by the Church of England*, 1967, p.10. Judith Thomson concurred. *Reaching Back: Queensland Aboriginal people recall early days at Yarrabah Mission*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra 1989, p.xiii. Plausibly, Paul Smith placed Menmuny's baptism in early 1894, the year he was renamed John Barlow. Smith, *Like a Watered Garden*, p.136. The *Cairns Post* maintained that J.B. Gribble died without ever meeting any Gungganydji, leastways not on their own country. Apparently independently of each other, Melbourne-based Presbyterian clergyman and controversialist Professor John Rentoul and Anglican J.B. Gribble interacted with Cairns-based Aborigines at Gordon Creek (near present day Woree) during August, 1891. The *Post* believed that baptisms had been conducted by Rentoul: "ladling out...wares in the spiritual line" as it put it. *CP*, 3 October 1891, p.2. While unlikely, it is possible that Menmuny was among those baptised on that day, and therefore, baptised twice.

question as to what can be learned about Aboriginality from them.⁸ Bicultural Aborigines working for whites were enlisted by photographers and encouraged to remove their European habiliments and to wield spears and boomerangs, revealing their savagery. These images served to not only confirm expectations, to thrill the viewer and flatter colonial fortitude, but by reducing the feared enemy to a caricature, may have helped help to neutralise prevalent European anxieties about uncontained ‘wild blacks.’

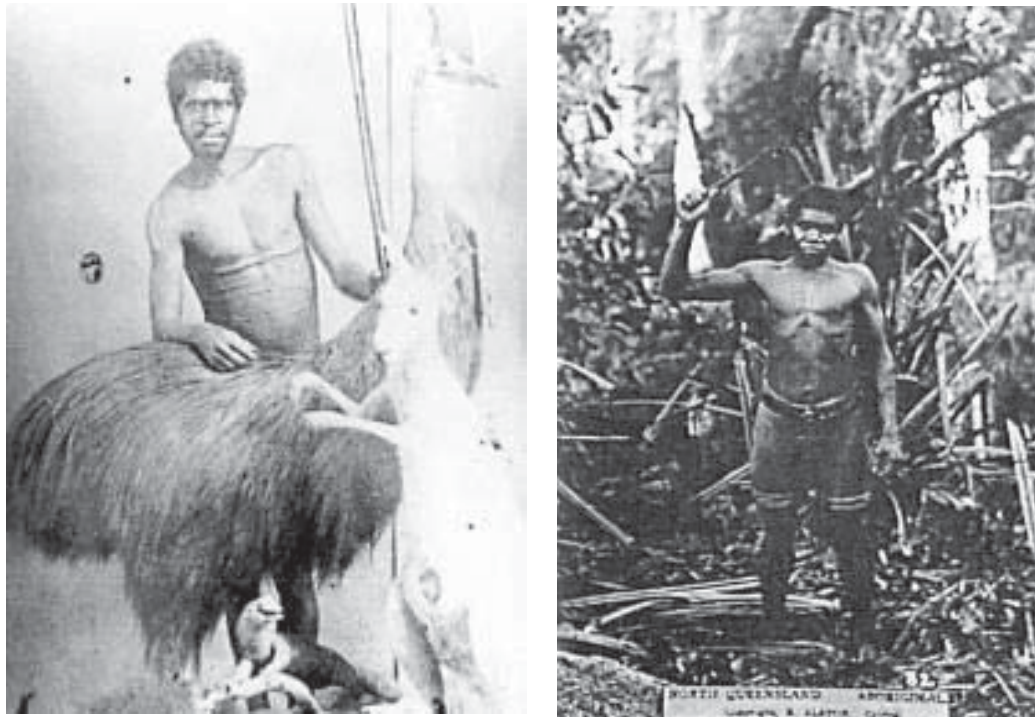


Figure 6.4, Figure 6.5. In the bush and in the studio: unnamed Aborigines of the Cairns district. Note the disconsolate expression worn by the rainforest marauder in shorts. Cairns Historical Society.

A steady trade existed in post-cards of Australian colonial exotica. These images were produced by Europeans for European consumption and did not make authenticity a priority. The framework was generally demeaning but may not necessarily have been experienced as such by the Aboriginal subjects. As well, there existed opportunities for Aboriginal participants to conceal culture, knowingly misrepresent themselves or display their attainments. Photographers in Cairns were adepts at interpreting and recasting the ‘state of play’ between Europeans and Aborigines. Cultural change among Aboriginal people was categorised through a convenient system of archetypal groupings: ‘wildness,’ ‘tameness’ and ‘degradation.’ The visual motifs of

⁸ The African American historian W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of the “double consciousness,” that of seeing one’s self through another’s eyes, and “the veil” by which we experience cultural separation. Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois: Race and Visual Culture*, Duke University Press, 2004, pp.20-25.

post-cards most commonly depict the former two. One could send a greeting to far-off friends and family on the back of a picture of Aborigines lined up in Victorian domestic costume, shaking spears at the viewer, or standing in the studio with dried foliage, stuffed animals and other bush ephemera. Otherwise photographers pictured Aborigines headed for racial extinction; scratching themselves in squalid fringe camps, wearing rags and chomping unhappily on tobacco pipes. Images of degradation appear to answer a great psychological need to transfer to Aborigines responsibility for their own apparent retrogression. Photographs also served public relations functions, and from the outset, Yarrabah Mission was in need of good publicity.

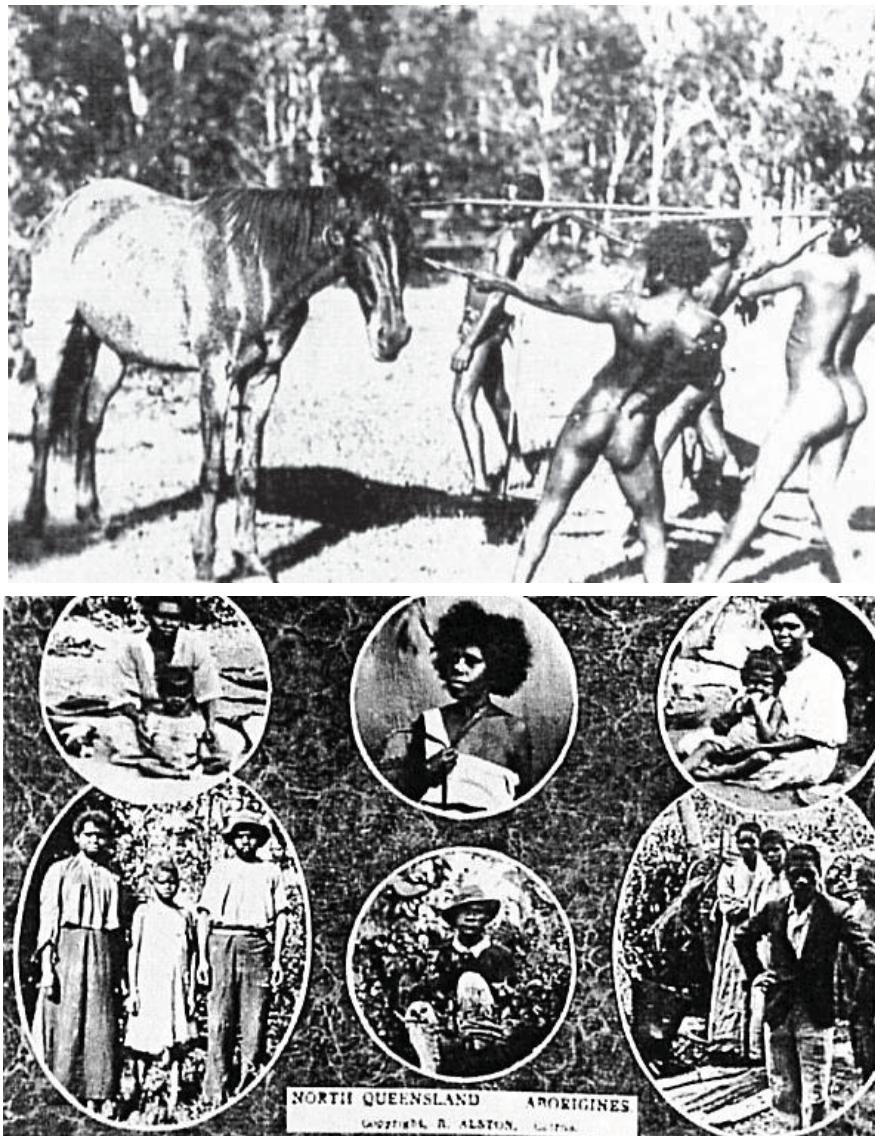


Figure 6.6, Figure 6.7. 'Wild' and 'civilised blacks' postcards: a horse spearing staged by Atkinson (above) and a composite of Aborigines working for Europeans by Robert Alston (below). Cairns Historical Society.

The walls of the Handley and Atkinson photographic studios in Abbott Street displayed Aboriginal artefacts, moths and butterflies pinned out within glass cases, shells, corals and examples of the photographers' work. Prior to Atkinson joining the business, James Handley advertised that he was unavailable on Mondays. On these days he took his camera *en plein air*, scouring the district for suitable photographic subjects. Most of Handley and Atkinson's compositions are illustrative of progress: railways, buildings, the growth of Cairns and its various industries, some landscape studies and portraits are still around, and as we know, Handley and Atkinson also took photographs of Aborigines.⁹ Not included within the conventions of portraiture or nude study, Aboriginal photography existed as its own discipline, with its own requisite visual system.



Figure 6.8, Figure 6.9. Aboriginal bush life as seen by Alfred Atkinson. Cairns Historical Society.

⁹ At the 1891 Cairns Show Handley and Atkinson swept the pool: Photographs; 12 portraits from life (professionals). Order of merit. 1st prize; Photographs; landscape and architectural (professionals). Order of merit. 1st prize; Photographs; Enlargements, portraits (four). Order of merit. 1st prize; Photographs; enlargements, landscape (one), Order of merit. 1st prize; Photograph (12); scenery and studies from life (professionals). Order of merit. 1st prize. They were however the only entrants in each division. *CA Supplement*, 15 September 1891. They also received some free promotion from the other Cairns newspaper: "Messrs Handley and Atkinson have shown us an excellent panoramic view of Cairns taken from the top of the Cairns Hotel. This should be in great demand by those wishing to possess a copy of Cairns to date. This firm have [sic] also about completed a series of views of the Freshwater rush showing the various workings." *CA*, 31 July 1891, p.2.

In one scene staged by Atkinson, taut-buttocked Aboriginal men hold spears in threateningly close vicinity to the wrinkled hide of a gloomy-looking old horse, giving illustration to the stock-slaughtering depredation bemoaned in ‘the settler’s lament.’¹⁰ More convincing is an Atkinson image of three Aborigines demonstrating astonishing unaided tree climbing ability, many vertiginous metres up the smooth trunks of rainforest giants. Names of the Aboriginal people featured were rarely recorded. In language that recalls Rousseau’s ‘noble savage’ ideal and ‘man in a state of nature,’ Atkinson’s daughter Beatrice Wiles described this mode of viewing as capturing Aboriginal people “in their natural state.” Wiles juxtaposed this perspective with the later nineteenth century representation of Aboriginality – that of the ‘ignoble savage.’ Her father had recalled that around Cairns in the 1890s there were Aborigines “in the bush with their spears...who definitely were in their wild state - and close to town,” although she “heard nothing of any skirmishes with the blacks.” When asked how it was that her father was able to convince Aboriginal people to participate in his photographs she speculated, “in the bush and in the studio...I would say that the aborigines who posed for the photographs were not wild.” Wiles assumed they demanded some token payment for their troubles, or as she put it, they were “not at all beyond accepting some tobacco or coin to pose.”¹¹



Figure 6.10. Although the (unknown) photographer may have been marvelling at ‘Stone Age’ technology, this postcard image is less burdened than others with kitsch, judgemental overlay. Irrespective of photographic intentions, occasionally the dignity, subtlety and genius of traditional rainforest life can be discerned from contemporary images. www.oceaniaethnographica.com

¹⁰ This was a favourite expression of the *Cairns Post*.

¹¹ Interview with Beatrice Wiles, *Cairns Historical Society Bulletin*, no.358, June 1990, Cairns Historical Society, D 1475.



Figure 6.11. *Charlie, Aloomba, 1880*. 1880 is very early for an Aboriginal person near Cairns to have adopted European dress and grooming and to have been able handle a horse. It is possible that Charlie was a Native trooper from beyond the district; otherwise, he was a very quick adapter. From this image of a well-turned-out young Aboriginal man, one senses confidence in his considerable cross-cultural accomplishments, worthy of a commemorative photograph. The photograph demonstrates furthermore, that indigenous and non-indigenous residents of the district could communicate effectively, albeit in the case of Native Mounted Police, in the consolidation of colonial control. Cairns Historical Society.

On one level, the relationship between the Gungganydji of *First Aborigines* and Atkinson was that of colonised people and the camera as an instrument of symbolic control, a relationship that has been examined by scholars. Jane Lydon considered photography “part of the West’s objectifying mode of perception, to know and control indigenous peoples.”¹² In its missionary context, historians have seen the photographing of Aboriginal people as part of the disciplinary apparatus identified by Michel Foucault, a mechanism of “surveillance, identification, classification, labelling, analysis and correction.”¹³ Roslyn Poignant argued that “the West’s appropriation of colonial spaces in the course of the imperial enterprise was paralleled by the

¹² Jane Lydon, *Eye Contact: photographing Indigenous Australians*, Duke University Press, London, 2005, p.3.

¹³ Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, third edition, Routledge, London, 1996, p.166.

construction and presentation of savage otherness.”¹⁴ Certainly, late nineteenth and early twentieth century postcards of Cairns’ Aborigines can be read as colonial souvenirs which create ‘Aboriginalities,’ but as Lydon argued, in practice the photographing of Aboriginal people produced “mutual, sympathetic or contested forms.”¹⁵

On an initial viewing of *First Aborigines*, those familiar with nineteenth century Western modes of perception might see savagery through Atkinson’s lens. Others may ponder the Christian overlay of the scenario represented and imagine symbols of Christian iconography: Gungganydji saints, sinners, wise men, apostles, martyrs and innocents, even perhaps the nativity? But Atkinson was not a philosophical photographer. His constructions of Aboriginality were conventional. By comparison with many surviving postcards which supposedly depict Aboriginal life around Cairns, *First Aborigines* seems to crackle with life. It is as if the orchestration was met directly by Gungganydji engagement and it is this factor, as well as the intrigue of the photograph’s title, which gives the image its dramatic tension.

The *Cairns Post* recognised and was concerned about the persuasive potential of photographs of Aboriginal people. Missionaries, it alleged:

go south with some cheaply acquired photographs of tame niggers and some doubtfully obtained native weapons, and they give a magic lantern entertainment...and the dear old ladies say ‘Oh what terrible risks the dear missionaries run [on account of] the poor dear blacks.’¹⁶

When in late 1891, J.B. Gribble and Professor Rentoul were evangelising among Aborigines close to Cairns, the irreligious *Post* pretended to be scandalised by the fact that baptisms had been conducted, that is: “A minister of the gospel of Christ considered it fitting to burlesque the most cherished and venerated tradition of the church.” It bewailed the “air of tragedy over the whole affair.” Particularly was the *Post* concerned about the implications of visual artefacts, “the historical photographs” which were “secured...that bright Sabbath afternoon.”¹⁷ It pored over one of these historical photographs:

Whatever is said of the theatrical *coup* which readied up the wretched half-civilized town outcasts into picturesque savages for the occasion, that deprived them of their vermin-

¹⁴ Roslyn Poignant, *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2004, p.6.

¹⁵ Lydon, *Eye Contact*, p.10.

¹⁶ *CP*, 30 September 1891, p.3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

haunted breeches and nondescript shirts for the nonce? Is it outrageous to infer that the 'readied up' picture, so pretty and so unnatural with its spears and boomerangs and nullas nullas was required not necessarily for publication but as a guarantee of good faith, for exhibition to the dear old ladies of the south?¹⁸

In terra incognita

Before they were photographic models, the Gungganydji occupied their peninsula, not in splendid isolation exactly, but relatively free from outside interference. In September 1881, this state of independence was coming to an end. A detachment of Native Police under the direction of Sub-Inspector Carr ploughed across Trinity Bay in the pilot boat and into Gungganydji country, to reconnoitre with them. The Sub-Inspector "ordered the boys out in search of blacks," and "issuing strong injunctions against using firearms," ordered that "what niggers might be met with should be arrested and brought to camp."¹⁹ The "boys' instinct knew where to find their fellow countrymen" thought the *Queenslander*, and soon enough, the troopers:

returned with four [elderly] men, two women and three children, trembling for their lives, which feeling was certainly not improved when they saw Sub-Inspector Carr. No doubt they considered immediate death was their doom.²⁰

The men, women and children who had been placed under arrest "were scarcely prepared for an immediate reprieve in the shape of a good 'feed' followed by presents of blankets and tomahawks," reported the *Queenslander*. "Signs were made to them of future protection." This confusing and frightening diplomacy was described as having been "eminently successful."²¹ In January 1882, four months later, the Gungganydji sent an envoy of their own into Cairns. "Not satisfied with the visits paid *them* by the government and clergy," complained a correspondent, "the blacks...have visited *us*. Some canoes came over from False Cape...half a dozen niggers landed and were duly received, feasted clothed and sent away."²² Calling for a second time, the Gungganydji found that niceties were now exhausted. "They were set to work clearing the beach road of weeds, an exercise they apparently cared little for."²³ In spite of the fact that

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Queenslander*, 10 September 1881, p.326.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Queenslander*, 7 January 1882, p.7. Italics in original.

²³ *Ibid.*

indigenous and non-indigenous people continued to represent – among other things – death and danger to the each other, their objectives being commonly, *fundamentally* at odds, and in spite of the fact that it was consistently shown that peaceable accommodations between the two groups were possible, (and one would have thought, desirable), diplomacy of any kind was little used by the occupying power in the district, and tokenistic. In 1881, Christie Palmerston had wondered at the ferocity of Aboriginal antipathy towards colonial incursions alongside their mistrust of whites:

It was impossible for me to hold converse with the natives, as they resented anything like a friendly approach, and if they listened to a few words would reply by inviting the party into ambush...Neither would the male aboriginals drop their spears by any inducement of mine. Being particularly anxious to prospect their country well, I explored it...with the most pacific intentions towards the natives, and in return have been hunted by day and night.²⁴

Palmerston concluded with the familiar frontier logic, that the ‘natures’ of Aboriginal people, rather than their legitimate grievances, were the sticking point. “To establish friendly intercourse will be the work of years, and, from the character of these natives, I judge will never be thoroughly accomplished.”²⁵

Ten years later, with friendly intercourse still a work in progress, the *Cairns Post* dedicated a column to the romance and heroism of the colonial enterprise. “Many a pioneer leaves his bones on the rough road he has hewn” it began. These “heroes of civilization...what dangers they have faced – hunger, thirst, cold, fever and death at the hands of treacherous niggers...in *terra incognita*.”²⁶ During the 1870s and 1880s, the situation in Bama country surrounding Cairns could be fairly described, as it was in the *Queenslander*, as a slow moving “war of extermination,”²⁷ on in which the bones of many – pioneers and others – were left behind.²⁸ In north Queensland, Aboriginal numbers were relatively great and European numbers relatively few in comparison to southern Australia and the inland. With rainforest providing good cover and mountainous terrain being difficult to traverse on horseback, Aboriginal people of the coastal north held out longer than was possible elsewhere, but the balance of power shifted ever

²⁴ *Queenslander*, 22 January 1881, p.109.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *CP*, 30 November 1892, p.3.

²⁷ *Queenslander*, 8 October 1881, p.645.

²⁸ It is estimated that 38 non-indigenous people associated with the colonisation of the Cairns district were killed in the period 1873-1892. Aboriginal deaths are more difficult to estimate but there were perhaps eight ‘dispersals’ during the same period. *The War for the Land: a short history of Aboriginal-European relations in Cairns*, Cairns Historical Society.

further in the colonist's favour. Poisoned food was left in the rainforest.²⁹ Sporadic shootings and spearings continued into the 1890s. Deadly attacks provided a rich resource of exciting news copy but the specifics of possible Aboriginal fatalities were handled with a deliberate vagueness, offsetting legal ramifications. For example: "The aboriginal nuisance along the Barron Valley on the range is approaching a critical stage" the *Cairns Post* reported:

The blacks until recently had a comparatively high time of it and now that they are again being thrown chiefly upon their own resources, all the cunning and treachery of which their savage natures are capable are set to work to obtain by fraud or force the white man's luxuries [and] to prey upon the defenceless selector and depopulate the district.³⁰

A Native Mounted Police assault which followed, gave the *Post* cause to make the (premature) calculation: "There will be no more outrages committed by the blacks of the Barron River...and the selectors may now sleep in peace. The dignity of the law has been upheld, and justice has descended on the head of the dusky wrong doer."³¹ As early Cairns resident J.W. Collinson explained, "aboriginals on this part of the coast...learnt to respect the white man's firearms."³² Subjugation of Aboriginal people achieved at the point of a Snider rifle was then maintained through other forms of intimidation, such as an attack upon an Aboriginal camp described by the *Post* as "an agreeable diversion." Certain "individuals rejoicing in the dignity of white manhood set fire to several of the gunyahs; the conflagration being with difficulty extinguished by the frightened myalls."³³ The *Post* enjoyed thumbing its nose at humanitarians. In 1892 W. Garrett enquired of the *Post*, "my residence was plundered by the thieving treacherous aboriginals of this district...Can you tell me what liability would attach if we were to shoot one or two of the thieves?"³⁴ With the pugnacious swagger that reminds us to treat such stories with caution the *Post* replied:

In the event of any of the aboriginals getting killed in defending [Garret's] life or property, there is not a jury in the Cairns district, I may say in North Queensland that could be found

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *CP*, 14 September 1892, p.3.

³¹ *CP*, 1 October 1892, p.2.

³² J.W. Collinson, *Early Days of Cairns*, W.R. Smith and Peterson, Brisbane, 1939, p.60. Collinson elaborated: "Blacks thieved camps when the men were absent, and in retaliation were shot on sight. Their fishing and hunting grounds were filched from them, and they were gradually driven back into the scrubs. They watched every opportunity to rob the camps, way-lay pack teams, drive off cattle and horses and raid maize or sweet potato patches." Collinson, *Early Days of Cairns*, pp.61-62.

³³ *CP*, 20 January 1892, p.2. Deriving from the idea of a potentially hostile stranger from another Aboriginal group, the word myall was in common usage in early Cairns to denote Aboriginal people relatively inexperienced in European ways, or 'wild blacks.'

³⁴ *CP*, 10 September 1892, p.3.

to convict him of any offence. In fact he would probably be hailed as a public benefactor.³⁵

With the destruction, devastation and upheavals in Aboriginal life brought about by the colonial onslaught, there also transpired closer, daily interactions and collaborations between indigenous and non-indigenous residents. Working for Europeans on or near traditional lands around Cairns made it possible for displaced Aborigines to maintain some links and uphold some ceremonial life. By 1892, many were maintaining Aboriginal heritage and adapting European ways as they lived across the frontier, either voluntarily or in some cases as abductees. To Aboriginal people, this involved a mental absorption of Europeans into an Aboriginal order. To Europeans, it was Aborigines being 'let in.' However, the profound disruptions to traditional life and the disappearance of Aboriginal space came with severe and demoralizing consequences.

The *Cairns Post* once chuckled that "the only chance of safety for the nigger is to place the greatest possible number of miles between himself and civilisation,"³⁶ but curiosity, necessity and opportunity had drawn Aboriginal people into Cairns. The attractions of food and tobacco escalated rapidly towards dependency for many as hunting ground was steadily lost and food ran chronically short. Life was meagre for the displaced and demonised people living on the fringes of Cairns, trying to prevail in the haphazard overlap of two worlds. Lawless brutality, sexual and occupational exploitation were rife. At this time, the *Cairns Post* was absolutely unsympathetic to their plight, demanding on behalf of white settlers, ready access to Aboriginal labour, while refusing to have its gaze affronted by spectacle of Aboriginal habitations and the starvation, desperation and chronic illness within them. "Cairns is infested...[by] stunted, degraded, deformed blacks and their gins"³⁷ it complained, "vermin and disease stricken wretches" who "infest the town and its outskirts."³⁸ The *Post* took exception to the "annoyance of hungry blackfellows stalking around demanding food" and summoned the law: "Trooper Higgins...one of the most successful constables in the Force in dealing with the blacks has been instructed to patrol the district...to protect the residents."³⁹ A visitor to Cairns was disgusted by the visibility of Aboriginal people and left the town, having seen "quite enough of them."⁴⁰

³⁵ *CP*, 14 September 1892, p.3.

³⁶ *CP*, 20 January 1892, p.2.

³⁷ *CP*, 27 August 1892, p.2.

³⁸ *CP*, 20 February 1892, p.2.

³⁹ *CP*, 24 September 1892, p.2.

⁴⁰ Arthur C. Bicknell, *Travel and Adventure in North Queensland*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1895, p.143.

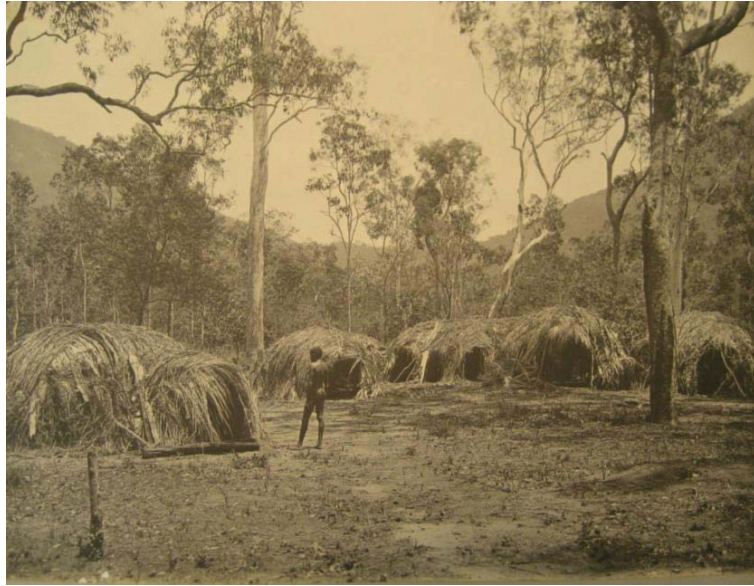


Figure 6.12, above. 1890s Aboriginal village near Cairns, with highly combustible gunyahs. Cairns Historical Society image.

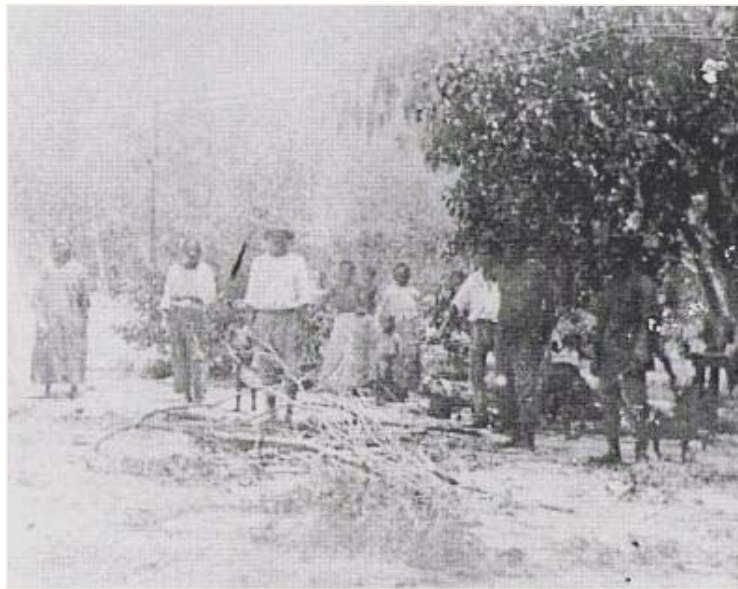


Figure 6.13, above. Aboriginal camp in Lake Street, Cairns, 1890s. Both photographs on this page were taken at about the same time, and while an outlying camp was likely to be more 'traditional' than a town camp, it is also possible that elements within the photographs have been introduced or removed to create, alternately 'pure' and 'more civilised' pictures of Aboriginal life. Colonists required Aboriginal people to wear clothing and incorporate other 'elevating' aspects of Western culture (the Lake Street camp people are literally upstanding for the photographer), but encumbered by a fervent belief in racial hierarchy, Europeans viewed the results with horror. Aboriginal acculturation to white ways seemed to make a mockery of ennobled white culture, while being considered somehow degrading to Aboriginality – as understood by whites. "Wherever we find a degraded aboriginal" wrote Ernest Gribble, "he has become so through contact with our boasted civilisation."⁴¹ Gribble attempted to resolve this dilemma by pursuing a segregationist ideal, combined, paradoxically, with the intensive culture contact of missionary re-education.

Cairns Historical Society image.

⁴¹ Ernest Gribble, *The Problem of the Australia Aboriginal*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1932, p.66.

Other townsfolk were offended by the re-colonisation of the colony:

Mr. Editor, who has the power of controlling the movements of the blacks in Cairns? Apparently they, the blacks, have the liberty to camp wherever they please and at present there is a native village in the upper part of Lake street...It was time such a danger was put on one side with a strong hand. Cairns seems to be going backwards instead of forwards.⁴²

He was told in reply, "it is the duty of the inspector of nuisances to report the squatting of blacks in the precincts of the town...if the white neighbours would only kick up a bit of a row...the police would clear the camp out."⁴³ Despite being periodically driven off, a fringe camp developed in West Cairns in the early 1880s. By 1886 it had swollen to about 100 people,⁴⁴ its number including for a time the young Menmuny.⁴⁵ From the Cairns camp, Menmuny had the chance to observe and interact with Europeans. Before the advent of Yarrabah, Menmuny had gained enough English to slot into the role of Gribble's translator.

Natural laws

Pre-contact bush life was demanding by contemporary Australian standards, but structured and healthy. Now unprecedented levels of chaos, squalor, malnutrition and contagion were taking their toll, exacerbated by psychological duress, fights, alcohol, tobacco and opium abuse. More than other contact situations, fringe camps encouraged Europeans to believe in laws of progress and degeneracy. In 1895, Arthur Bicknell recorded some impressions of Cairns. According to Bicknell, "Year after year slips by, and the Australian black makes little progress...he is content to subsist, and cares nothing about civilisation and the progress of the outside world."⁴⁶ Enlightenment ideas of progress and Spencer's 'survival of the fittest' filtered through popular discourse of the Trinity Bay district, with an expectation that Aborigines were a dying race. The *Post* reported that in two town camps, "one the habitation of the Cairns blacks, the other the lodge of the Mulgrave blacks. Death...stalked into the both camps; in one day four sable gentlemen were carried off."⁴⁷ It seemed quite conceivable that Aboriginal people were headed

⁴² *CP*, 5 October 1892, p.2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Jeremy Hodes, *Darkness and Light: Yarrabah and Cairns 1891-1910*, Masters of Letters thesis, Central Queensland University, 1997, p.15.

⁴⁵ Christine Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, 2002, p.27.

⁴⁶ Bicknell, *Travel and Adventure in North Queensland*, p.43.

⁴⁷ *CP*, 20 February 1892, p.2. The 'Mulgrave blacks' were the consanguineous Gungganydji and Yidinydji, and the 'Cairns blacks' were the Djabugganydji (Djabugay).

inevitably towards racial extinction. This was not simply, as might be thought, a veil thrown over the destruction of Aboriginal society as a result of colonisation, but held to be the process of a natural law in which the inferior species/race must decline against its superior.⁴⁸

The *Cairns Argus* considered that a dying Aboriginal race was entitled to some special consideration in the form of a reserve. “At least while there is a remnant, let those have free space to die in whose country we live in,” it argued. Europeans could no doubt cede “a little scrap of territory for the people whom we have dispossessed of the whole.”⁴⁹ Unlike the cold-blooded, white-advancement-at-all-costs *Cairns Post* of the 1880s and early 1890s, the *Cairns Argus* applied scientific orthodoxy to formulate an ethical response to the situation of local Aboriginal people, arguing “We plead for fair play.”

Every sentiment of justice, every sentiment of chivalry urges consideration for the weakness of those who, were they as strong as us we, would have a better title to Australia than our own...The transaction is defensible no doubt by... theories of the survival of the fittest and the divine right of the English ascendancy, [but] we owe the blacks more than contemptuous annual alms of blankets can repay. In New Zealand...the Government buys its land. Here it steals it.⁵⁰

The *Argus* did not think that a mission could succeed in civilising Aboriginal people on such a reserve, but thought that in the name of justice it was it was worth a try:

[Missionaries] believe, in spite of science, that a low type can be raised to a high one without passing through the countless graduations by which nature effects the elevation...that what’s bred in the bones cannot come out in the flesh. We know they are wrong; but we do not know that they do wrong.⁵¹

Having got wind of J.B. Gribble’s proposed mission, the *Queenslander* offered support for its objectives:

aiming as it does at the social and, intellectual and moral elevation of the long-neglected natives of the far North, it ought to command the earnest practical sympathies of the entire community, for certainly no harm can come of it, while the chances are that as in the other

⁴⁸ Russell McGregor *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939*, Melbourne University Press, 1997.

⁴⁹ *CA*, 10 May, 1892, p.2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

colonies, where the experiment has been tried with considerable success, lasting benefits will accrue to the blacks.⁵²

The *Herberton Advertiser* thought only a mooncalf could be convinced of this:

the blacks, whose detestable condition; both moral and physical had aroused the sympathies of those foolish enough to imagine these interesting individuals are suffering extreme hardships and have a small chance of salvation. It is a pity that Mr. Gribble and his associates cannot find better employment than endeavouring to save a number of people who cannot understand them and would laugh at them if they did.⁵³

Knowing the blacks

The Gribbles, the *Argus* and the *Post* found rare concord in predicting Aboriginal extinction. The *Post* emphatically ruled out Christianising Aborigines as a solution to their ills, regarding this as both undesirable – exposure to Christian teaching could make Aboriginal employees difficult and unmanageable – and impossible. According to the *Post*, civilising simple, unpredictable and animalistic creatures of impulse was a hopeless undertaking. The “instincts and traditions of centuries cannot be wiped out,” it declared. “It would be easier to convert alligators or dingoes than the myalls.”⁵⁴ The *Post* launched a vicious attack on the reputation of J.B. Gribble, threatening to expose his allegedly sordid past,⁵⁵ and tried valiantly to build up an extensive list of rebuttals to the mission, contending that “hundreds of arguments could be advanced against...the stupendous folly of the proposed outrage on common sense,” but all of which rested upon the conviction that missionaries, humanitarians, southerners and others did not know the north Queensland blacks.

⁵² *Queenslander*, 17 October 1891, p.751.

⁵³ *Herberton Advertiser*, (hereafter *HA*), 24 June 1892.

⁵⁴ *CP*, 16 March 1892, p.2.

⁵⁵ “It may have been as well for the REV. GRIBBLE if he had allowed sleeping dogs to sleep because it now behoves us to publish his history in Western Australia.” *Cairns Post*, 11 June 1892. Upper case in the original. This threat was in extremely poor taste. Gribble had undertaken mission work at Gascoyne River, in the north of Western Australia and in drawing attention to ill-usage, perhaps even atrocities being committed against Aboriginal people; Gribble drew the ire of settlers. After two attempts were made on his life, Gribble fled, smuggled out of WA at night under heavy police escort. Geoff Higgins, *James Noble of Yarrabah*, Mission Publications of Australia, Lawson NSW, 1981, p.4; also Lynne Hume, ‘Them Days: Life on an Aboriginal Reserve 1892-1960,’ *Aboriginal History*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1995, p.4.

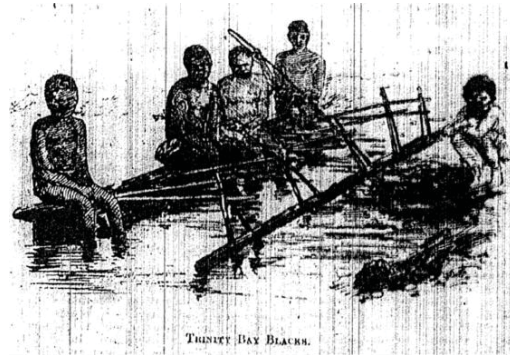


Figure 6.14, above left: Cairns Historical Society. Figure 6.15, above right: 'Trinity Bay Blacks,' (Gungganydji?), *Queenslander*, 17 October 1891, p.144.

Figure 6.16, below left: Cairns Historical Society. Figure 6.17, below right: 'Myalls of Bellenden-Ker,' *Queenslander*, 17 October 1891, p.144. Could the image at bottom left be one of the "historical photographs" that so enraged the *Cairns Post*, secured on that "bright Sabbath afternoon"?⁵⁶



'Knowing the Barron blacks' through photographs and illustrations: Alfred Atkinson photographs and their hand drawn equivalents, published in the *Queenslander*. While in popular discourse, thoughtful discussions about the fate of Aboriginal people tended to be subsumed by the political objectives of white settlers, scholarly interest in Aboriginal culture continued to be stimulated and sympathetic views expressed. For example, an 'Aboriginal studies' author named Dawson told the *Queenslander* that "the more intelligent natives are better informed on some subjects than the ordinary run of what we call the middle classes." Dawson doubted "considerably whether those same middle class white people [knew] as much of their own laws, or as much about natural history, or the nomenclature of the heavenly bodies, as the aborigines do." *Queenslander*, 23 April 1881, p.522.

According to the *Cairns Post*, to "old pioneers the blacks are an open book."⁵⁷ Missionaries, on the other hand, were no more than "peripatetic pilgrims" who "visit a district for a few hours and in the shortest time on record pretend to acquire an accurate knowledge of the aborigines."⁵⁸ Evangelisers Gribble and Rentoul had despaired of the north, Rentoul arguing

⁵⁶ *CP*, 30 September 1891, p.3.

⁵⁷ *CP*, 16 March 1892, p.2.

⁵⁸ *CP*, 9 September 1891 p.3.

that in “no part of Queensland have the aborigines been more wantonly and cruelly wronged.”⁵⁹ The *Post* fulminated: “North Queensland is misrepresented on all sides, from the quidnuncs of Exeter Hall to the itinerant preacher who scrapes together an audience of old women of both sexes telling fairy tales regarding the poor dear blacks.”⁶⁰ It condemned the “ignorant and goody-goody people of the South” with their “lovely fictions in connection with the cruelty shown by the whites to the blacks,”⁶¹ and exclaimed, “how old pioneers and old experienced police inspectors must grin when they come across the twaddle written by these frigate birds.”⁶² While across the Cairns Inlet, the Bellenden-Ker, later Yarrabah⁶³ Mission, stumbled and faltered into being, the *Post* exploded with rage:

The fact of “baptising” out of a billy can a few degraded specimens of the tame town blacks, readied up for the occasion hardly suffices to prove any intimate acquaintance with [Gribble’s] dear black brothers...a few photographs of the niggers and a few weapons (taken from the niggers) form this man’s stock in trade, and with these the Brisbane officials have apparently been satisfied.⁶⁴

An overwhelming sense of racial and cultural superiority meant that only a tiny minority of Europeans ever approached Aboriginal people on Aboriginal terms, or through Aboriginal languages. Most assumed, as did the *Cairns Post*, that Aboriginal people had belonged to the region for no more than several hundred years. And while few European Cairnsites could demonstrate any detailed comprehension of the culture of the Gungganydji,⁶⁵ Yidinydji,⁶⁶ Yirrganydji,⁶⁷ Dyabugganydji,⁶⁸ Muluridji, Kuku-Yalanji and Mbarabram living within two days’ ride from Cairns,⁶⁹ anecdotal evidence and apocryphal accounts were presented in the pages of local newspapers with the confident air of conclusiveness. Europeans were alert to the

⁵⁹ *CP*, 3 October 1891, p.2.

⁶⁰ *CP*, 4 June 1892, p.2.

⁶¹ *CP*, 11 June 1892, p.2.

⁶² *CP*, 3 October 1891, p.2.

⁶³ J.B. Gribble called the mission Bellenden-Ker in reference to the mountain range which, to gales of laughter from the *Cairns Post*, proved to be nowhere near Cape Grafton. Ernest Gribble reported that the Gungganydji name for the area was ‘Eyerabba,’ meaning a place of meeting, so putting his own stamp on it, renamed it Yarrabah. Ernest Gribble *A Despised Race: The Vanishing Aborigines of Australia*, Australian Board of Missions, Sydney, 1933, pp.34-37. “The name Yarraburrah describes the flight of Yarraburrah or Guyala the fishhawk as he hunts for fish on slanting wings over Mission Bay. Yarraburrah the fish-hawk was a Bulleru (totemic ancestor) and his home is near a spring of water near to where the old dormitory was once situated. On the beach, three large rocks preserve the memory of Kudya: Bi (Bulleru) – his wife and lawyer cane dilly bag.” Menmyny Museum.

⁶⁴ *CP*, 16 March 1892, p.2.

⁶⁵ Also known as Kongkanji or Goonjanji.

⁶⁶ Also known as Yetinji or Majanji.

⁶⁷ Also known as Yerkanji.

⁶⁸ Now refer to themselves as Djabugay.

⁶⁹ Timothy Bottoms, *Djabugai country: an Aboriginal history of north Queensland*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards NSW, 1999.

fact that harmonious relations did not exist between Aboriginal groups, a situation intensified by European land occupancy effectively corralling antagonists and inflaming violent conflict. “Persons who know...the habits and character of the blacks around Cairns,” observed the *Post*, “are well aware that the various tribes do not mix together, and that one or two little wars are continually going on in a quiet and deadly sort of way.”⁷⁰ From such observations, Europeans believed that they ‘knew the blacks.’ There was no suggestion that Aboriginal epistemology might be intricate and not readily accessible, appreciable and determinable to Europeans. Using a system of English nomenclature, the *Cairns Post* referred to Aboriginal groups from surrounding areas as the Mulgrave River blacks, the Barron River blacks, the Port Douglas blacks, the Herberton blacks and so on. A guffawing *Post* reprinted an article from the *Queenslander* in which these groups were called the “the Yarra-burra, Bandoos, Mamoo, Najung, Jiroo” and “Yeddai Yilgunyee.”⁷¹ This reminded the *Post* of its own expertise as a student of Aboriginality and southern obliviousness.

Years later, Ernest Gribble would reflect upon the fact that while they had “not benefited as a race,” Aboriginal people had “played a very important part in the development of the country we have taken from them...as shepherds, shearers, horse-breakers, stockmen, letter carriers, police trackers and domestics.”⁷² As well as depriving colonists of resources that may be required in the future,⁷³ the mission threatened the supply of Aboriginal labour. The *Post* championed the cause of “the unfortunate whites of Cairns,” asking how it could be that “a few poor and struggling men utilize a little cheap aboriginal labour” only to have it “stopped in favour of missionary enterprise?”⁷⁴ J.B. Gribble was badgered into assurances that he would not under, any circumstances, “endeavour to influence any blacks working for settlers to come to the mission.”⁷⁵ Rentoul had described Aboriginal workers near Cairns, “along the [train] line chopping wood and carrying water for the navvies and storekeepers and all this for a little ‘ki ki’ (food).”⁷⁶ Noting this common mode of employment for Aboriginal people, or mocking Gribble in biblical parlance, or citing Joshua’s curse on the Gibeonites – a biblical reference used in defence of slavery – one member of the Cairns Divisional Board argued that “the blacks were much better employed as hewers of wood and drawers of water for scrub pioneers than in singing hymns for the missionaries.”⁷⁷ The consensus view among Europeans was that

⁷⁰ *CP*, 15 June 1892, p.2.

⁷¹ *CP*, 28 October 1891, p.2.

⁷² Ernest Gribble, *The Problem of the Australia Aboriginal*, p.66.

⁷³ The “land, timber & c. that [Gribble] is locking up.” *CP*, 16 March 1892, p.2.

⁷⁴ *CP*, 16 March 1892, p.2.

⁷⁵ *CA*, 10 June 1892, p.3.

⁷⁶ Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS MS 1515/2.

⁷⁷ *CA*, 11 March 1892, p.2. “Now therefore you are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being slaves, and hewers of wood and drawers of water.” Joshua 9:23, *Holy Bible*, American King James

Aboriginal people should be socialised only as an underclass serving the interests of whites and “not enter into slavish competition with the white man.”⁷⁸ Rentoul felt it was hazardous to allow egalitarianism to creep into relations between blacks and whites, noting the death of a white Cairns man named Hobson who had been killed by his Aboriginal employees. “Terrible murder,” wrote the Professor. It “would seem that Mr. H. was extremely kind to his blacks. But with kindness there must be a constant and uniform firmness in one’s treatment of the myalls; and incidental yielding may be taken for weakness. Then the danger comes.”⁷⁹

Yarrabah

In mid 1892, the missionary party dragged its cutter up the beach at Mira: wun gula, (Mission Bay). The Gungganydji can hardly have been filled with optimism. Strange boats disgorging Europeans were not likely to be harbingers of good fortune. Hazel Barlow, grand-daughter of Menmuny explained, “When Father Gribble came here he was looking...to see if any coloured people would come out [and] one evening he heard [them] all talking amongst themselves like they wanted to fight because there was a white man here on their land.”⁸⁰ The cosmology of Gungganydji country and its beaches, bushland, swamps and wildlife was perilously poised, but intact. In Halse’s estimation, there were 200-300 Gungganydji living in scattered extended families of 40-50 when missionaries arrived in the area.⁸¹ Gungganydji land was accessible only from the sea or through the dense rainforest across a small mountain range which completed the area’s enclosure, and made an ideally isolated location for remnant preservation. Some interlopers may also have been dissuaded by the Gungganydji reputation for cannibalistic ferociousness, which made thrilling telling.⁸² Constructions of Aboriginal savagery were eagerly woven into local folklore, sustaining missionary and colonial objectives as well as bolstering the self-image of colonists. Squaring up to the challenge of missionising Cairns’

Version, American Bible Society, New York, New York, 1980. “Therefore you shall be under a curse and your race shall always be hewers of wood and carriers of water” Joshua 9:23, *Douay-Rheims Bible*, Loreto Publications, Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, 2009. The iniquity of fathers being visited upon their children, cursed also were the Canaanites, supposedly the black African descendents of Ham: “Cursed be Canaan. The lowest of slaves will he be to his brother.” *The Holy Bible* New International Version, Tyndale House Publishers, Illinois, 1984.

⁷⁸ Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

⁷⁹ Later, Rentoul grew doubtful about Hobson’s kindness, stating that Hobson was “kind to the blacks,” but only “as compared to others,” and “at the same time erratic.” Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS MS 1515/2.

⁸⁰ Interview with Hazel Barlow, Yarrabah, 30 December 1984, cited in Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.26.

⁸¹ Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.25.

⁸² A reputation for unusual ferociousness was bestowed upon all of the Aboriginal groups around Cairns at various times, depending upon the state of relations between indigenes and settlers.

Aborigines, J.B. Gribble had told the *Queenslander* in 1891, that “one of their most desirable pastimes [is] the capture and eating of hostile tribes.”⁸³ The *Queenslander* soberly considered the matter: “This is the kind of material to be operated upon by the missionaries.”⁸⁴ Ernest and J.B. Gribble had convinced themselves (and others) that the Aborigines of Cape Grafton were cannibals, but did the Gungganydji have any appetite for Christianity?



Figure 6.18. A scene resembling perhaps the birth of Yarrabah mission. Its occupants having wandered off, a small wooden cutter has been dragged some way ashore at Leper Bay, Gungganydji country, 1890. Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library, UQFL 243 SR 23.

Missionaries keen for converts tended to bypass Aboriginal Australia for the more fertile fields of the Pacific and elsewhere. “In those days everyone looked askance at missionizing the blacks,” Ernest Gribble recalled. The “most kind hearted old ladies who would willingly subscribe...for the heathens in the Cannibal Islands would do but little to assist the conversion of the Queensland blackfellow.”⁸⁵ J.B. Gribble became increasingly ill and was forced to leave.

⁸³ *Queenslander*, 17 October 1891, p.751. The practice of cannibalism was probably not part of Gungganydji culture, or if so, was of a ceremonial nature and easily confused with certain mortuary practices.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *AN*, 14 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101. The Australian Board of Missions did eventually agree to direct some small finance towards the mission. The bishop of north Queensland warned Gribble against commenting publicly on European ill-treatment of Aborigines and Pompo Katchewan, Gribble’s

On his deathbed he wrung from his unhappy son Ernest an undertaking to continue the mission's work. Ernest Gribble assumed the role with no knowledge of Gungganydji language or culture, nor any intention to gain any. The transition would be entirely unilateral. Gribble was according to Halse, groomed for this work by "nearly a quarter of a century on a staple diet of imperial ideology and liberal rations of the 'White Man's Burden'...fortified by copious doses of missionary example," but he was untrained as a cleric, as an educator, administrator or agricultural producer, and he brought no specific competencies to the work the missionaries had assigned to themselves. If Gribble the younger were able to succeed in preserving a remnant of Aboriginal Christians, it would be quite an achievement - a reputation-making triumph, and Ernest Gribble was ever mindful of his legacy.

As with the Gospels, there are differing accounts of the following events. Mission staff cleared land and erected the first buildings apparently alone at Cape Grafton. The *Post* was happy to report "the blacks of the district decline any connection with...Gribble."⁸⁶ The missionary pondered his situation. "It was a peculiar position in which I now found myself – in charge of a Mission but with no natives. There seemed to be [none] in our vicinity...I sighted a solitary native fishing, but as I approached him he fled into the scrub."⁸⁷ In the scrub, the need to respond was growing urgent. Amid apprehension, cautious curiosity and outright hostility, which it is said Menmuny worked to calm,⁸⁸ the Gungganydji considered their options. They resolved to act. An advance was made, with a warning. Gribble recalled:

I was on the ridge of the new school-church...when I suddenly heard a shout from the beach. It came from three old blacks. A few presents in the form of tobacco and food soon convinced them of our friendly intentions...they gave us to understand that they were not the only blacks in the vicinity...I offered to accompany them to their camp but they were not anxious for my company.⁸⁹

Later, Gribble offered another version of events in which the visitors "gave us to understand that they were the only blacks in these parts, in fact the last of the tribe."⁹⁰ Either the three old men spoke English or they were highly articulate hand-signal communicators, discouraging further missionary encroachments with the well-worn dying race trope 'the last of the tribe.' In

Aboriginal assistant, was barred from the rectory as "parishioners were not in favour of aborigines being about the church." Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.18.

⁸⁶ *CP*, 27 August 1892, p.2.

⁸⁷ Ernest Gribble, *Forty Years With the Aborigines*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1930, p.60.

⁸⁸ Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.27.

⁸⁹ Gribble, *Forty Years With the Aborigines*, pp.61-62.

⁹⁰ The contributor of this article did not identify himself, but it is written from a perspective that can only have been Gribble's. *AN* cited in *CP*, 4 July 1907, p.4.

this draft of Yarrabah history, the first Aborigines at Yarrabah Mission were “three old blacks.”⁹¹ Among the party that became known as the *First Aborigines at Yarrabah Mission*, only one was an old man - Gribble’s nemesis Billy Woopah. The three ‘last of the tribe’ Aborigines were said to have made several visits prior to Menmuny’s official opening of negotiations and one might reasonably expect Gribble to remember an early meeting with Woopah. They attracted Gribble’s censure for their failure to share like good Christians. The “old fellows who had been visiting us had gone and camped by themselves in order to keep the food etc given by us for themselves,”⁹² Gribble wrote, but given Gungganydji traditions of sharing resources, it smacks of interpretive invention on Gribble’s part, consistent with his dislike of Woopah. Arguably, Woopah was an unsuitable First Aborigine. More time passed. Tobacco and a “good feed,” Gribble wrote, “that was the best way to a native’s heart.” And shortly, Yarrabah received its first ‘rice Christians.’⁹³ 12 December 1892⁹⁴ is the recognised date upon which the First Aborigines, including Menmuny, approached Yarrabah Mission. More arrived the following day. When in his memoirs, Gribble revisited this inaugural ‘breaking of bread,’ there were prayers while “the blacks looked on in wonderment”⁹⁵ and Gribble’s gleeful departure from Gungganydji protocol by which he served the women first.⁹⁶ It is possible that wounds were also treated and clothes distributed on that day.⁹⁷

Either before or after the first rice banquet, a permanent Gungganydji camp was established on the beach at a safe two kilometres from the mission, the camp to which Atkinson was admitted.⁹⁸ Gribble later decided that “through it [rice] and the doctoring of their wounds we won their confidence.”⁹⁹ Gribble fed all visitors (one meal per day, followed directly by lessons),¹⁰⁰ and promised regular meals to anyone who settled.¹⁰¹ Some may have suspected Gribble’s overtures to have been a trap, although in a culture where food was not used as a disciplining device, few could have foreseen it as lure to an increasingly debilitating entanglement that would lead to institutionalisation. Apparently Gribble was unaware that he

⁹¹ Gribble, *Forty Years With the Aborigines*, pp.61-62.

⁹² *AN*, cited in *CP*, 4 July 1907, p.4.

⁹³ Gribble, *Forty Years With the Aborigines*, p.60.

⁹⁴ *AN*, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

⁹⁵ *AN*, November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

⁹⁶ “We gathered them together and at once knelt down and asked God’s blessing...We gave them a meal of boiled rice which we cooked in a kerosene tin. The feast was most amusing. I made the blacks sit in a circle and gave into the hands of each a supply of food. I began with the old women, but as I proceeded, one old fellow came and expostulated with me and gave me to understand that the men ought to be served first. I went my own way, much to his disgust.” Gribble, *Forty Years With the Aborigines*, p.61.

⁹⁷ In an alternative telling of this story, Gribble remembered treating wounds and distributing clothing – the trying on of which greatly entertained him. *AN*, November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.

⁹⁸ Another time Gribble remembered that before the mission received visitors: “We...discovered that there was a very large camp at the south of us.” *AN* cited in *CP*, 4 July 1907, p.4.

⁹⁹ *AN* November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

¹⁰⁰ Gribble, *Forty Years With the Aborigines*, p.63.

¹⁰¹ Hume, ‘Them Days: Life on an Aboriginal Reserve 1892-1960,’ p.6.

was being absorbed into the Gungganydji system of reciprocity and displaying only the generosity expected of him.¹⁰² Perhaps it had become clear that the missionaries intended to continue their occupancy and the Gungganydji moved to assimilate the newcomers and share their food. The Gungganydji would always be pleased to ‘bandicoot’ mission crops, the responsibility for which was directed at strangers from beyond the mission. “If we made inquiries we were told that the wild blacks had been about and we would even be shown the tracks of ‘wild blacks.’”¹⁰³ Gribble credited himself with the changed circumstances. His specific intention was to eradicate traditional Aboriginal culture, which Gribble regarded as pagan, uncivilised and inferior, and replace it with an approximation of a Eurocentric brand of Christianity, under his absolute authority. To Gribble, Christianity was indistinguishable from European culture - economy, work patterns, attire and home life, language, games and so on, and these he set out to instil.

Menmuny took his giant leap into the political unknown and settled himself at the mission. At some point, his family was pared-down and Christianised (one wife instead of three), “and from that time to the present they have been resident here,”¹⁰⁴ wrote Gribble. In Menmuny, Gribble had found a translator and ally. The crucial link to Gungganydji was made.¹⁰⁵ As for taking up at Yarrabah Mission, Menmuny is reported to have said, “New way now. Help missionary.”¹⁰⁶

The first Aborigines at Yarrabah Mission, in front of shelter, some with spears, 1892

The interlocutor credited with having brought Gungganydji to Yarrabah is the compelling and illusive Menmuny. Was his ‘new way’ a desperate retreat? A calculated pretence? A practical solution? A betrayal? A shrewd alliance? An ambitious quest to square with the coloniser? An opportunity too good to refuse? None of these? In the iconic *First Aborigines* photograph, Menmuny stands almost free of European clothing, glowering defiantly at the camera – or is he

¹⁰² Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.27.

¹⁰³ *AN*, November? 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

¹⁰⁴ *AN*, November? 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

¹⁰⁵ The second group of residents included Menmuny’s brother Dick Yimbungi, his father-in-law Billy Church, his wife Goondoon and her three sons, Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.28.

¹⁰⁶ Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.28. In the words of his grand-daughter: “Minminiy, John by Christianity, well then John was able to get through to his people, you see, to bring them in...That’s why they took their time because they were watching. Watching to see what was going to happen. They made sure of that and when they saw their leader had already settled down, I think that was time they thought they’d have to follow their leader and settle down too...Maybe otherwise they could have gone away on their own and just carry out in the natural. And then when they knew it was time to move home to the mission they moved home then into the mission.” Lorna Schreiber, cited in Thomson, *Reaching Back*, p.15.

squinting into the sun? Out of the darkness of the gunyah and into the light? Menmuny's very stance seems to speak an interior monologue. He rests his weight St Sebastian-like on one hip, but unlike St Sebastian, Menmuny is armed and unbound and appears untroubled as he faces not plague-infected arrows, but the future and its unknown dangers. Could Gribble refashion Menmuny into his own Holy Helper? An *athleta Christi*?



Figure 6.19.
Cairns Historical Society.

To Menmuny the eye returns and it is from Menmuny that the overarching emotional themes of *First Aborigines* are derived, but the mood of *First Aborigines* is complex. Billy Woopah and Cubby looks discontented. George Christian and Menmuny are armed, but they are not off to hunt or to battle. George wears an affable grin. By including their weaponry and gunyahs - not mission buildings - Atkinson invites us to view the *First Aborigines* as rude savages about to leave this life behind for one of Christian virtue. But this is an image of crossed and intersecting purposes as much as transitions. The Gungganydji we see have already absorbed knowledge and experience of wider cultures. They wear improvised loincloths, show no fear of the camera, their Christian names are recorded and a billy can is in their camp (which disappears from other shots taken that same day). Otherwise these strong, healthy looking people, bearing deep

cicatrices diacritical of initiation, give little indication of a significant departure from Gungganydji ways.

There is a predictive aspect to *First Aborigines*, implying ‘there will be more.’ The cultural transformation is implicit and retrospectively anticipated. It is unlikely that Gribble communicated to the Gungganydji that his vision for their preservation involved their capture and the stripping away of all outward manifestations of Aboriginality. Posed naturalistically and picturesquely before some gunyahs and in a style that combines Atkinson’s bush and studio photography, there is an interesting, if incidental, congruence between Gribble’s plan and Atkinson’s photographic arrangement. The photograph centralises Menmuny. The future ‘monarch’ of Yarrabah anchors *First Aborigines* - a powerful, muscular core standing squarely to the viewer. He is ‘attended’ by the very properly named George Christian. The two have a loose hold on the equipment of bushlife: spears, a boomerang and a nulla nulla.

More so than rosary beads or crucifixes, the humble ‘billy’ was to the *Cairns Post* the perfect ideogram of Aboriginal conversion. Some irony attaches then to the co-incidence of *chichal-barra* (clever man) Woopah, Gribble’s greatest spiritual rival – a dabbler in diablerie according to the missionary – receiving the same name as the purported baptismal item.¹⁰⁷ Gribble mocked Billy Woopah’s supernatural abilities and subjected him to ongoing brutality. In *First Aborigines* he is reduced to a squat with Cubby. Writing in 1906, Gribble meditated upon another photograph featuring Woopah, to denounce the reputation of his now-deceased rival:

Upon my table as I write there stands a picture of a group of the members of the Mission some thirty in number. The children of the group are now married men and women of the Mission and have spent most of their lives here never left since their arrival in 1892. Conspicuous among them stands a man named ‘Woopah,’...he died three years ago.¹⁰⁸

Gribble did not mourn Woopah’s passing – far from it. According to Gribble, Woopah was a murderer, a wife beater and a “thorough scoundrel,” whose opposition to white intrusion generally and Yarrabah’s aims in particular, caused “much trouble to the mission in the early days.” But to Gribble’s chagrin, “all were afraid of him and always treated him with a marked

¹⁰⁷ The old women of the camp and in particular Menmuny’s mother also proved a determined challenge to Gribble’s authority. Menmuny’s mother “had a great objection to the mission, holding that we would make the young folk ‘too much like white fella.’ This poor old soul was frequently seeing visions and dreaming dreams, and frequently conversed with the dead, from whom she from time to time received new songs for the use of the tribe. [Menmuny] held her in dread, having great belief in her powers...her death was a blessing for the Mission.” Ernest Gribble cited in Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.30.

¹⁰⁸ Gribble, *AN*, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

deference and respect,”¹⁰⁹ that is, until he was publicly humiliated by Gribble and left the mission for a time. Missionaries claimed powers similar to Aboriginal clever men and Menmuny had seen the power of Gribble’s medicine. In the *First Aborigines* photograph, Menmuny’s infant daughter Ballawoorba, cradled by her brother Albert Maywe¹¹⁰ was saved by Gribble’s medicine when a traditional remedy had failed – and for which Menmuny became indebted to Gribble.¹¹¹



Figure 6.20. The image above, taken in the early 1890s by an unknown photographer seems to be the photograph to which Gribble referred. Menmuny scowls from the far left, while his three wives, Maggie 1, Maggie 2 and Nora sit next to him. Gribble and Mr Reeves at rear, stand in charge. The man third from the viewer’s right appears to be the emasculated Billy Woopah. Cairns Historical Society.

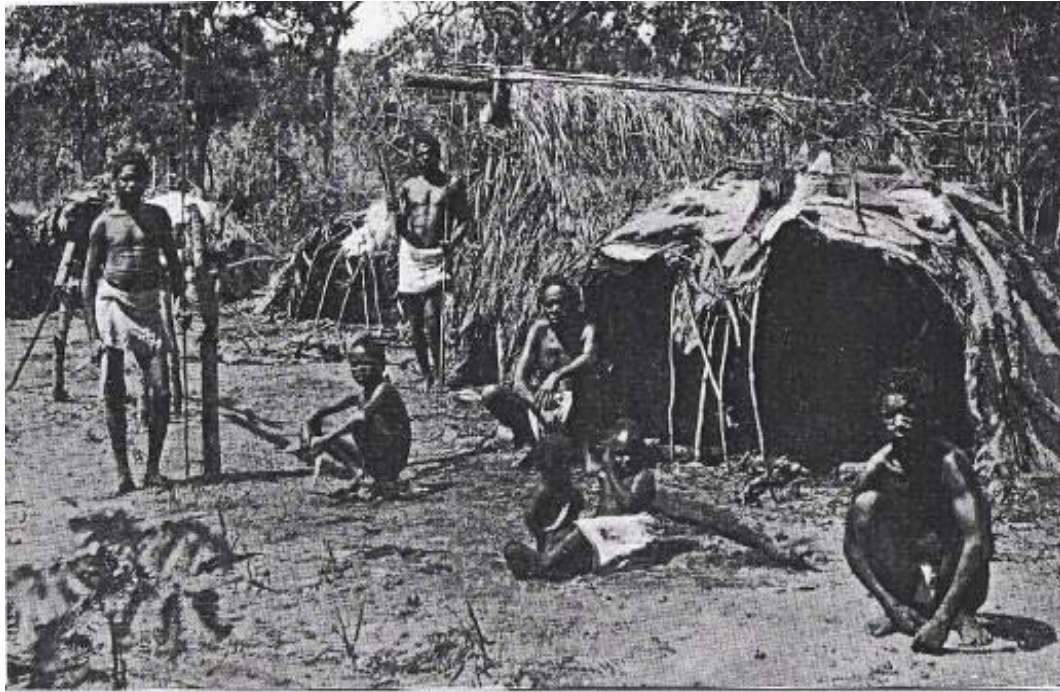
As well as undermining traditional authority, Gribble intended to disrupt Gungganydji kinship rules which he found abhorrent. There are no women in *First Aborigines*. Is Atkinson telling us that men are the makers of history? This was after all the reason for his visit. But there are children present. Aboriginal children accompanied adults almost everywhere, to observe and to

¹⁰⁹ Gribble, *AN*, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

¹¹⁰ Albert Maywe was the future King Albert of Yarrabah.

¹¹¹ Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.147.

learn through participation. The future of the mission was children. Gribble accurately predicted that he would struggle to convert elders and so he directed his efforts towards the children.¹¹²



6.21. Another view of the beach camp and the people of *First Aborigines* in which a third child has appeared, from Ernest Gribble's *Forty Years with the Aborigines*, page n/a.

Mission accomplished

Looking back, Gribble wrote, "On Dec. 12th 1892, all the blacks came into the settlement."¹¹³ In actual fact, until about 1910 there were two distinct strands of community life on the Yarrabah peninsula, those of the mission and its outstations, and the traditionally-oriented beach camp, the setting for *First Aborigines* and from which most of Yarrabah's initial population had come. The older Gungganydji in particular continued to avoid the mission altogether while others participated in mission life as they saw fit.¹¹⁴ While Gribble made it increasingly difficult for

¹¹² Prior to Yarrabah, Aborigines around Cairns already believed that missionaries stole children. When embarking upon the first land clearing, J.B. Gribble had identified the common method by which to bring about deculturation, proposing "to gather about a dozen young boys to begin with and to teach and train them carefully working from the children to the elders and endeavouring by degrees to influence them for good." *CP*, 10 September 1892, p.3.

¹¹³ *MP*, 4 July 1907, p.4.

¹¹⁴ Despite escalating pressures, the Gungganydji did not abandon traditional life in their own country. They were attracted to Gribble's food, tobacco, the trappings of European clothing, accommodation, medical care, to gain a type of prestige, to escape tribal obligations or circumvent tribal restrictions such

them to do so, the camp served as a crucial repository of Gungganydji tradition, making it possible for mission dwellers to continue to participate in ceremony.¹¹⁵ Its population fluctuated over the years, growing to several hundred at times with Aboriginal movements through the area. The early hostility to the mission dissipated and things began to follow a routine. In a letter from 1893 Gribble counted twenty children attending the school and 50 or 60 people occupying the beach camp, adding:

Johnny also attends the school, he is a fine fellow... [He] looks after the children, taking them to camp after evening prayers and bringing them back again just after daylight in the morning...The children will never leave us now. The mothers and fathers are quite content to go away and leave them in Johnny's care.¹¹⁶

By 1910, an estimated 60 of the 300 people at Yarrabah were Gungganydji¹¹⁷ and the Rector Alfred Burton was surprised to find that the beach camp had become a retirement home for a dying race. He reported "a small camp in the bush not far from headquarters where seven poor old women were comfortably camped in two huts erected by the erstwhile king of Yarrabah, an old fellow who appeared content to reign over this ancient remnant, and to do it with dignity and fatherly care."¹¹⁸ A "quaint notice...was pinned up in the church," the visitor wrote: "King John, native head of the tribe and acknowledged head of the mission - as long as his conduct was good."¹¹⁹ While their relationship was unequal, it was patent that Menmuny and Gribble enjoyed each other's company. "Many were the journeys we made together by boat and many were the exciting experiences we had together," Gribble would later recall.¹²⁰ In practice, Gribble relied more heavily and seems to have formed a closer bond with fellow missionary Willie Ambryn, a Pacific Islander, but gave emphasis to the role played by Menmuny.¹²¹ "John has been a very faithful adherent of the Mission and in those days of hardship and trial he gave

as those concerned with marriage, and to receive the rudiments of a European education. The Gungganydji may have mistakenly believed that these attributes would enable them to engage with Europeans in the wider world on equal terms. Neville Green's estimation of another of Gribble's missions in Western Australia is equally applicable to Yarrabah: "Neither acculturation...nor assimilation...was attained or attempted...Gribble was not preparing people for a world beyond the mission...If anything, the reverse was the common policy which, by its very nature, fostered inmate dependence on the mission." Neville Green, 'The Mission as a Total Institution,' *Lectures on North Queensland History No.5*, James Cook University, 1996, p. 200-201.

¹¹⁵ Smith, *Like a Watered Garden*, pp.130-131.

¹¹⁶ Letter from Gribble junior to Gribble senior, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

¹¹⁷ Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.31; Simon Glen, *Missionary Education, Yarrabah and the Royal Readers III: An Essay on the Dynamics of Imperialism*, Masters thesis, James Cook University, 1989, p.147.

¹¹⁸ Gribble Collected Papers, newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

¹¹⁹ Gribble Collected Papers, newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

¹²⁰ Menmuny ferried Gribble into Cairns regularly, but more often the boat was used as a fishing vessel crewed by Menmuny, George, Pompo and Willie Ambryn.

¹²¹ In his notes, Gribble customarily referred to Ambryn as: "Willie Ambryn (S.S.I.)"

much help.”¹²² Receiving a Christian name from Gribble created a kinship link and a corresponding link was created when Gribble was dubbed Dadda Gribble. A leader, Menmuny was perceptive enough to recognise an opportunity and courageous enough to act on his people’s behalf, to augment, not surrender traditional life on Gunganydji land. His ability to adapt within Gribble’s theocratic regime was remarkable. While Menmuny may not have been part of the Gunganydji leadership group prior to the establishment of Yarrabah mission,¹²³ under Gribble’s patronage he became captain of the Yarrabah boat and was anointed ‘King John of Yarrabah.’ In return, Menmuny gave up two of his wives and helped Gribble track down promised wives that were taken from the mission.



Figure 6.22. JOL image no.31350.

Gribble’s interior monologue: inside St Alban’s church. Gribble made the case that protection from rapacious settlers was the necessary first step to preserving a doomed remnant and exclusion from white settlement the second. The motto of Yarrabah’s newspaper, *The Aboriginal News* was “Lift up thy prayer for the remnant that is left.”¹²⁴ The phrase was also painted across the sanctuary of St Alban’s church for the contemplation of the Aboriginal congregation assembled before it daily. “Lift up thy prayer for the remnant that is left” was said to have been coined by J.B. Gribble at the first Christian service conducted at Yarrabah and reused at his funeral not long after.¹²⁵

¹²² Gribble, *AN*, November 1906, QSA, SRS 5356/1/101

¹²³ Smith, *Like a Watered Garden*, p.135.

¹²⁴ QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

¹²⁵ *TT*, Gribble Collected Papers, newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

The stated aims of Yarrabah Mission were: “1. The evangelisation and elevation of the Aboriginals by the preaching of the Gospel and teaching them habits of industry. 2. It is believed that this can be done by:-

In 1905, the “Rev E.R. Gribble gave a short history of the Mission” to the *Morning Post*,¹²⁶ explaining that “the Government’s every experiment” had proven “a failure, while Yarrabah was a success.”¹²⁷ For the financial well-being of Yarrabah (and perhaps for his own sake), it was vital to create pictures of mission success. Gribble expended no little energy promoting a successful image in interviews, Yarrabah’s own *Aboriginal News* and in subscription-raising lecture tours far away, illustrated with photographic proofs. “The photographs that I took when I visited you,” wrote the Rev. R.T. Gardner to the people of Yarrabah, “have been made into lantern slides and so I have been able to show many people...who like me thank God you are all trying so hard to learn your lessons and to do your work and to serve God as well as love you neighbour.”¹²⁸ Others were impressed with Gribble’s work. The missionary collected their words in a scrapbook. The “very fact” wrote one, of Gribble using “his influence in civilising cannibals proves him to be unselfish for his own welfare and sincere.”¹²⁹ In a clipping from 1899, F.G. Foxton called Yarrabah “the most successful of all the missions visited by him on his northern tour.”¹³⁰ In another, the *Trinity Times* said that “far less meritorious work has been trumpeted abroad and the world called to see it.”¹³¹ In yet another, the *Morning Post* declared that “Rev E.R. Gribble has raised to himself in Yarrabah a monument of fame which will remain for all time.” It continued:

[The] whole of the North knows that it is to his self-sacrifice and almost superhuman labour that Yarrabah is the model Aboriginal station in Australia today...Mr. Gribble has starved himself in order that he might carry out his great scheme of the regeneration of the aborigines... his sterling work is admired by all men and women in North Queensland the primal and final cause of the success of the mission.¹³²

In 1907 a contributor to the *Morning Post* wrote:

[To] look at Yarrabah today with its green lawns, flower gardens, fruit trees, plantations and its happy well-ordered community no-one would realise the scenes that took place in the early days of the Mission... We who have been here from the beginning have seen

(a) Gathering them into communities surrounding them with Christian influence and protecting them from evils too often associated with European service, (b) By getting them to take an interest in themselves as a people, and cultivating self-respect.” *AN*, April-May-June 1907, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

¹²⁶ Although the *Morning Post* which commenced publication in 1895 later claimed the moniker *Cairns Post*, it was a very different newspaper to the original *Cairns Post* which had ceased production in 1893.

¹²⁷ *MP*, 13 September 1905, p.2.

¹²⁸ *AN*, November 1906, QSA, SRS 5356/1/101.

¹²⁹ Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

¹³⁰ *CDT*, 13 October 1899, p.2.

¹³¹ Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

¹³² *MP*, 18 January 1907, p.2.

many wonderful changes.

This image was contrasted with a picture of pre-mission savagery:

[The] beach where the Mission jetty now stands [was once] strewn with broken shields and spears...the Mission store [was the scene of] aboriginal burial rites...The Cape Grafton tribe were inveterate cannibals...three old Aboriginal men were killed at what is now known as Leper Bay...cut up on the beach...cooked and eaten.¹³³

And the culprit? “The man who organised the whole business is the present King of Yarrabah...our kindly intelligent King John.”¹³⁴ Menmuny was crucial to the power structure of Yarrabah, but he was of no less importance as a symbol. As the leading example of Aboriginal Christian redemption, “the famous ‘King John’” was central to the myth.¹³⁵ Many were taken with the redemption of the inveterate cannibal Menmuny. “Ten years ago the King of Yarrabah was a wild savage with three wives.” wrote J. Cumming. “He is now a Christian with one wife and lives a constant life.”¹³⁶ Gribble enthusiastically spun blood-curdling tales of ‘cannibal feasts,’ and placed a human thigh bone, which he had retrieved from a burial tree, in the Mission museum, as “witness to the indisputable fact that the people of these parts were once cannibals.”¹³⁷

The Bishop of Carpentaria proclaimed Yarrabah to be “one of the most remarkable instances of successful mission work in modern times.”

Before Mr. Gribble began his work the blacks were living as savages; now they were leading sober, respectable lives in houses erected by themselves, and kept scrupulously clean. They worked year in year out to support themselves and families.

Raising the possibility that savagedom was not ‘bred in the bones’ after all, the Bishop added, “there appears to be no tendency to break back into savagedom.”¹³⁸

¹³³ *MP*, 24 April 1907, p.4.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ 75*the Anniversary of the Foundation of the Community of Yarrabah by the Church of England*, 1967, p.10.

¹³⁶ J. Cumming, *The Story of my Trip to Queensland*, A.N. Wallace, Sturrock st., 1903, p.73

¹³⁷ Gribble, *AN*, 21 November 1906, QSA, SRS 5356/1/101.

¹³⁸ *MP*, 26 October 1900, p.3.



Figure 6.23. King John: appearing older, wiser and peacefully composed as he fishes the 'old way' in his homeland, dressed in a pair of mission strides. A veteran, Menmuni could look back upon the cataclysmic clash of traditional and historical pasts that in one generation drove the Bama to the brink. From his unique position however, Menmuni looked forward. Displaying Gungganydji leadership founded on knowledge and reciprocal relationships between people and country, Menmuni squarely faced the challenges of his time.
Cairns Historical Society.

Conclusion

In researching the early development of Yarrabah Mission, one is first faced with what appears to be a baffling quagmire of contradictions among the sources, adding to the intrigue of the *First Aborigines* photograph. A cacophony of opinions surrounding the image, from the contemporary press, settlers, scientific theorists, politicians, humanists and religious groups, and from those who have later picked up their stories. Ernest Gribble's contribution to the historical record is especially problematic as his versions of events have been privileged and his position at the centre of the enterprise meant that for a long time his recollections went largely unquestioned. While Yarrabah was called a success, commentaries generated within the mission or by its sympathisers venerated Gribble. Some oral accounts are similarly generous to Gribble,

while others provide scathing recollections of the mission's operation, if not Gribble himself. Yet Gribble was an unreliable witness with a tendency to exaggerate or misrepresent events.¹³⁹

First Aborigines at Yarrabah Mission, in front of shelters, some with spears, 1892 sustains many meanings, the most obvious being the rapid, profound and frequently painful cultural change that was coming about within the Aboriginal communities of Cairns. *First Aborigines* was captured during a key period of negotiation between and within Gungganydji people, mission enterprise, the colonial project, and what might now be called popular culture and public relations within the Cairns district. The subjects of *First Aborigines* were to experience an acceleration of this change at Yarrabah Mission which, with the exception of the children, seems to have been to some extent self-directed. Curiously enough, the beach camp in which they stand came to represent Gungganydji cultural continuity rather than change. The standard usage of *First Aborigines* has, inadvertently or otherwise, blurred artefact and artifice. To the mission, the symbolic importance of the photograph was its use as a piece of evidence for Christian transformational uplift - a 'before picture,' the 'kind of material operated upon.' With remnant preservation, this formed the mainstay of the mission's *raison d'être*. An image such as *First Aborigines* indicated Gribble's effective communication with cannibal savages, contrary to popular opinion, Gribble did indeed 'know the blacks.' The first usage proves Gribble's success as a communicator, the second as an administrator. Once Yarrabah Mission had put down roots in the country, with local recruits, the image could be used to reminisce about the journey travelled.

¹³⁹ For instance, in Gribble's usual telling, the beach camp materialises *after* the rice banquet, implying that the missionary had certain powers of persuasion with regard to the Gungganydji. However, he did once allow that the missionaries had been oblivious to the presence of the beach camp until they were introduced to it, *before* the rice banquet. The latter version suggests Gungganydji initiative, not Gribble's entreaties to have been responsible for the establishment of the beach camp. *MP*, 4 July 1907, p.4.

Chapter 7

Blurred visions



Figure 7.1. A Gribble scribble? And of what significance?
E.R. Gribble Journals, 9 July 1904, AIATSIS, MS1515/1.

Introduction

The *Morning Post* saw itself and those with whom it shared the Cairns district as inhabitants of an “infinite Universe whose implacable laws are around us like a chain.”¹ The domination of women by men and weaker races by those which were stronger were included among the links of the *Post*’s metaphorical chain, against which strained reformers, remnant preservers, Aboriginal protectors and others. By the 1890s, Aboriginal people living near Cairns were seeking new ways to survive amid the destruction of traditional life. In 1897, Queensland

¹ *MP*, 19 August 1897, p.2.

legislated its response to the 'Aboriginal problem' and moved into the era of Aboriginal Protection. Leaving little room for the pursuit of Aboriginal objectives, controls on Aboriginal people were tightened. The work begun at Yarrabah entered a new phase as the 'schemes for the blacks' coterie stepped up its campaign against settlers claiming rights to Aboriginal labour and a free hand in its usage. This was to no small degree a European battle over the sexuality of Aboriginal women (as it was understood), between those who wished to control and contain it to protect 'helpless' Aboriginal women from themselves, to engineer an Aboriginal revival and to quarantine the supposed racial purity of the Australian nation, pitted against those who sought the domestic and sexual servitude of Aboriginal women. Photographers from this period continued their efforts to define and respond to Aboriginality through ethnographic documentation of traditional Aboriginal life and with a slippage, or so it was thought, towards lewdness when photographing Aboriginal women.

On the sexual frontier: free agents, concubines, kombos, and half-castes

In the early 1900s, newspaper editors in north Queensland were given to reminiscence about the frontier years, now past, brimming with admiration for the dynamic and uncompromising white man. Hinting at masculine sexual power as a driver of progress, the editor of the *Record* maintained:

The distinctive attribute of a new country peopled by the Anglo-Saxon race is virility. For successful colonisation, and the onward march, manhood in its most vigorous condition is absolutely necessary. There has to be a combination of energy, brains and courage – energy to subdue, brains to direct and courage to conquer.²

Being the most exposed to the hardening race logic and the tyrannical tendencies of some, the misuse of colonial power could be devastating to Aboriginal women. As Broome has stated, "Quite a number of Europeans on the frontier, especially in the violent initial phase, simply took Aboriginal women in relations not of agreement or care, but of force, violence and rape."³ In the struggle for their own survival and that of their kin, finding a way to control European behaviour represented the greatest challenge faced by Aboriginal women. While the gender balance tipped heavily in disproportion towards men, opportunity for Aboriginal women lay in

² *PDMR*, 4 September 1901, p.2.

³ Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance 1788-2001*, Allen and Unwin, NSW, 2002, p.60.

the great demand for female sexual partners and domestic workers. In recognition of this, “Aboriginal women offered themselves to the Europeans or were offered by their husbands.”⁴ This was not however:

a relationship of prostitution in the eyes of the Aborigines, despite the fact that this was how the Europeans saw it. The Aborigines believed that they were establishing kinship and reciprocal ties in a traditional way...creating friendliness, obligations and thus repayments between kin, or establishing good relations between groups in potential conflict.⁵

Where Aboriginal women became more regular companions for white men, Frances has argued: “It was also, no doubt, sometimes a matter of personal preference on the part of Aboriginal women, who welcomed the novelty the white men provided and perhaps also wished to cast in their lot with the ascendant power in the region.”⁶ But the sexual behaviour of Aboriginal women could expose them to further dangers, often became a source of interracial conflict and was poorly understood by white society. As Cairnsites’ attitudes to prostitution show, a dividing line was drawn between women who were respectable and women who were not. By Victorian moral standards, the marital prospects of respectable women (but not men) depended upon them refraining from pre-marital sex. Within marriage, curtailing sexual activity was used to control fertility. Men (but not women) were regarded as having base natures and strong sexual urges for which some leniency was granted to pursue women who were not respectable. The lissom nakedness of Aboriginal ‘Eves’ tantalised the imaginations of colonial men, from whose perspective female ‘immodesty’ signalled sexual availability. For their lack of sexual conservatism, Europeans tended to view all Aboriginal women as the embodiment of moral failure, as fallen. First cast as ‘wild nymphets,’ Aboriginal women became ‘brazen harlots’ in the minds of contemptuous colonists. Compelled into transacting sex to survive, Aboriginal women were stuck with an image of universal whoredom to which Europeans responded with moral disgust, paternalistic humanitarian fears for their well-being and concerns for the future of the Australian nation.

Aboriginal women frequently took up with, or were claimed by white men, but serious dangers could come with these arrangements. In 1892 “a Good Samaritan” found an abandoned Aboriginal woman, lying in agony with her leg shattered. The injured woman related: “Me belong Yorky. He got eight fellow jins and want to kill me because I sick.”⁷ ‘Yorky’ was the

⁴ Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p.57.

⁵ Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, pp.57-59.

⁶ Frances, ‘The History of Female Prostitution in Australia,’ pp.27-52.

⁷ *CP*, 5 October 1892, p.2. Reflecting upon the early years of Yarrabah, Ernest Gribble told a similar and equally sickening story. There “was across the bay a poor woman with a broken leg, she was the wife of

popular Cairns identity George ‘Yorkey’ Lawson, a white fisherman who operated around the northern beaches of Trinity Bay (near present day Yorkys Knob), and who was said to be the father of George Christian.⁸ Men who engaged in relationships with Aboriginal women, or ‘kombos’ as they were known, defied the law and drew the ire of the white community. Whether prompted by theories of race or realities of colonial power, consent was considered to be uncertain. In 1900 Gribble wrote to Dr Walter Roth, the Northern Aboriginal Protector, complaining about the presence of timber gatherers on the Yarrabah peninsula, or more specifically, the transactions of sex, food and tobacco Gribble suspected to be taking place between the timber gatherers and Gungganydji women off the mission. Such ‘immorality’ was to Gribble, “deplorable to our community.”⁹ A non-Aboriginal man living with an Aboriginal woman was considered to be ‘harbouring’ and risked legal penalties. Near Ingham in 1900, two European men were charged with cohabiting with Aboriginal women in relationships which reformed despite police breaking them up. To the *Morning Post*, their deviation was cultural rather than legal. It issued a warning to readers engaged in such domestic arrangements with a column entitled: “To Those Whom it May Concern: A Tip to the Depraved.”¹⁰ The *Post’s* definition of depravity was the white man “whose inclinations are towards those of the female Queensland aboriginal.”¹¹

A particular difficulty arose from the fact that unlike Japanese prostitutes, Aboriginal women brought mixed-descent babies into the world. Early contact between Aboriginal people and Europeans was marked by ethnocentrism. By the end of the nineteenth century a sense of European racial superiority had taken over, flourishing in a ferment of inter-cultural misunderstanding, sustained by a growing body of race theory, not helped by a deficit of sympathy and a surfeit of contemporary myth-making in which the pioneer was pitted against the savage, and all of which rationalised Aboriginal dispossession and decline as the workings of a higher law.¹² In a society increasingly beholden to racial ideology, convinced that in whiteness lay greatness and that in ‘admixture’ lay relegation down the racial hierarchy, the main danger posed by mixed-race relationships was miscegenation. In the White Australian consciousness of Parry-Oakeden, the children of mixed race parents, or the “offspring resulting

an old fellow who had no less than six wives. The old fellow had in a rage broken this poor creature’s leg...I found her with her leg broken again at the same place her husband had given her a kick which had again fractured the newly knit bone.” *AN*, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101. It was not a white woman but Gribble himself who played the Good Samaritan in the missionary’s version of the story. Gribble seemed to assume, furthermore, that an Aboriginal man had committed the assaults.

⁸ *CP*, 10 January 1910, p.2.

⁹ Letter from Gribble to Roth, 14 July 1900, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.

¹⁰ *MP*, 10 March 1900, p.3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, pp.92-97.

from such intercourse are, I think, by no means a desirable addition to the population.”¹³ Those who sought to regulate such aberrations including Gribble, Roth and Meston, were unable to accept that mixed relationships were formed on any basis other than the amoral opportunism of all parties. Meston argued:

This marriage of white men and aboriginal women requires emphatic discouragement. Such marriages are degrading and mean and also increase the half-castes, a result to be earnestly avoided. White women of decent character are not scarce in Queensland and the white man who cannot induce a white woman to marry him is not fitted to be the father of half-caste or any other children.¹⁴

The *North Queensland Herald* lamented the “evil of miscegenation,” claiming that “Nature punishes rebellion against her sexual laws” and that “nothing but harm can result to both races from an intercourse which is in popular opinion both discreditable and degrading.”¹⁵ Despite this, children of mixed-descent were everywhere around Trinity Bay, according to Roth, because “the general morality of the settlers etc. in these far districts is at so low an ebb.”¹⁶ Members of the white community attached deep shame to the birth of children from relationships that did not conform to European conventions of matrimony, including conventions of racial pairing. For Aboriginal people, race seems to have had lesser importance than the challenge of totemic incorporation for the children of mixed descent, but to most Europeans, babies born to Aboriginal mothers and non-Aboriginal fathers were not simply descended, as we all are, from two parents, but fundamentally, *biologically* mismatched between a higher and lower race and dysgenically half-caste. In other colonies, fear of miscegenation had led to policies designed to soak up half-castes in the broader Australian population while the doomed full-blood Aboriginal remnant died out on the missions and reserves.

The Act – and other acts

The Aboriginals’ Protection Act and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (1897 and 1901), better known as ‘the Act,’ signalled a new era of race relations: the era of Aboriginal Protection.

¹³ W. Parry-Oakeden, 4 September 1901, QSA 15038/1/27.

¹⁴ A. Meston letter to the Under Secretary, Home Office, 12 September 1902, QSA PRV 10729/1/41.

¹⁵ *NQH*, 31 May 1910.

¹⁶ *MP*, 10 February 1903, p.3.

The title of the Act suggested a race being hastened into decline not by European colonisation, but by ‘oriental vices,’ and while the Act clearly sought to satisfy a number of Anglo-Australian concerns, it was certainly prompted by an endemic situation of Aboriginal destitution, substance abuse, sexual and economic exploitation. Its consequences included the intensification of governmental controls which systematically contracted the citizenship rights and freedoms of Aboriginal people. The *Brisbane Courier* recognised the infantilism and criminalisation of Aboriginality inherent in the policy response to the ‘Aboriginal problem,’ and thought that its effect was to treat even adult Aboriginal people as “little better than children...But then we do not treat children as criminals.” With prescience, the *Courier* hoped that Aboriginal people would “not find in protection something to stir up feelings of more intense bitterness against those who seek to help them.”¹⁷



Figure 7.2. Supreme confidence and quiet confidence? Southern Aboriginal Protector Archibald Meston, left and Northern Aboriginal Protector Dr Walter Roth right, pose for a studio portrait. JOL 187178, from the *Queenslander*, 19 October 1901.

The Act was suffused with racial anxieties and scientific theories of race. Aboriginal Protectors monitored the marriages and employment of Aboriginal people, the second to the great irritation of employers and the press of the north, and the state-sanctioned removal of children. A memo

¹⁷ *BC*, 16 November 1897.

from the Chief Protectors Office in Brisbane explained: “Queensland has passed special legislation for the care, protection and amelioration of the native race.”¹⁸

Except where already in service under proper agreement, all full-blooded and half-caste children, especially the girls are gradually being drafted into the mission stations...every child of an aboriginal woman being a neglected child under the Reformatories Act.¹⁹



Figure 7.3. Postcard, 1890s: Bama mothers and their infants. Europeans were intensely anxious about Aboriginal children with any degree of white descent being raised with their Aboriginal families, preferring that they be socialised as a low class of orphaned Europeans.
www.oceania.ethnographica.com

Most observers believed that history would forgive the removal of Aboriginal children: “Humanity may well excuse the detention of the child in the interests of its upbringing and [separation] from the opportunities of vice,” suggested a correspondent to the *Morning Post*.²⁰ The editor of the *Post* reflected with satisfaction upon a comparable situation in New South Wales and efforts there to gather up the “large number of half-castes and other children, some of whom are almost white at the various stations and camps...to train the girls in domestic duties [and] proper spheres of usefulness.”²¹ As useful labour, Aboriginal children had often

¹⁸ Memo from the office of the Chief Protector of Aboriginals, 17 May 1904, QSA RSI 14962/1/1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ John Hill, letter to the *MP*, 18 July 1905, p.3.

²¹ *MP*, 26 August 1908, p.5.

been stolen by native police and colonists and transacted among the settlers of Trinity Bay, to be reared as household help. Common consent was given to the view that Aboriginal children were legitimately a resource to be used by Europeans as they saw fit. These forced orphans were raised it was said “as a part of the family.” In his role as Protector, Roth instigated the removal of children from Aboriginal mothers, but was concerned by the prevalence of Aboriginal child labour in the north. He viewed “with some anxiety the increased tendency to take the young women away from their natural associations...and make them the domestic servants of the white people.”²² Roth was particularly concerned with the exposure of these girls to sexual abuse, writing “it is my conviction that the little half-caste female is especially sought for destruction.”²³

The stories of Aboriginal people from this period are scarred with the pitilessness engendered by Europeans’ sense of racial superiority. In 1902, Roth received a letter from a former domestic servant of Anglo-Australians, begging for the return of her child. Alberta Mossman had been taken from her own people and raised by the North family as their servant. When she became pregnant to Mr. North, she was exiled to a mission. In a moving four page letter, she told her story to Roth: “I was never a bad girl [but] I disgraced myself having a child to Mr. W.R. North Esq. Then after the trouble he got me in he left me to do as best I could.” An unnamed man proposed to marry Alberta, but the marriage was refused by Southern Protector Meston. Instead, Alberta and her infant son George were sent to Fraser Island. Here she met, and with Gribble’s permission married, Nobel Mossman, “a good man.” Domestic stability was not to be found at Fraser Island however. Alberta quarrelled with an official, “said things [she] oughtn’t to have said,” and found herself and her family again cast adrift. They obtained employment “for tucker only” in Rockhampton, before Gribble ordered George to be brought to Yarrabah.²⁴

Gribble met Alberta, Nobel and George in Cairns and rode the oil launch with them across Trinity Bay to the mission. As they approached Yarrabah, Gribble launched a stinging rebuke upon Alberta, “saying that I disgrace the [Fraser Island] mission...he also gave orders to the boys to pull me about, and little boy too [and] gave one of his servants orders to search my bag,” whereupon Gribble “got all my letters and read them.” For reasons not given, George remained at Yarrabah, but Alberta and Nobel did not. Alberta implored Roth that they not have to return: “We don’t wish to go back to the mission any more...please don’t let us go back” and begged for the release of her child. “I want George to be brought over to me from Yarrabah”

²² *Queenslander*, 29 July 1905.

²³ *MP*, 10 February 1903, p.3.

²⁴ Letter to Roth from Alberta Mossman, QSA SRS 4356/1/54.

Alberta implored, “please...bring my child over to me now Sir...I am not strong and...fret a lot over the child.”²⁵

I was unable to locate a response from Roth, but his general position was, as he told the *Morning Post*, that:

we are working on correct lines in dealing with the transfer of half-caste and full-blooded children...If left to themselves, the majority of the girl half-castes eventually become prostitutes and the boys cattle and horse thieves.²⁶

Pompo

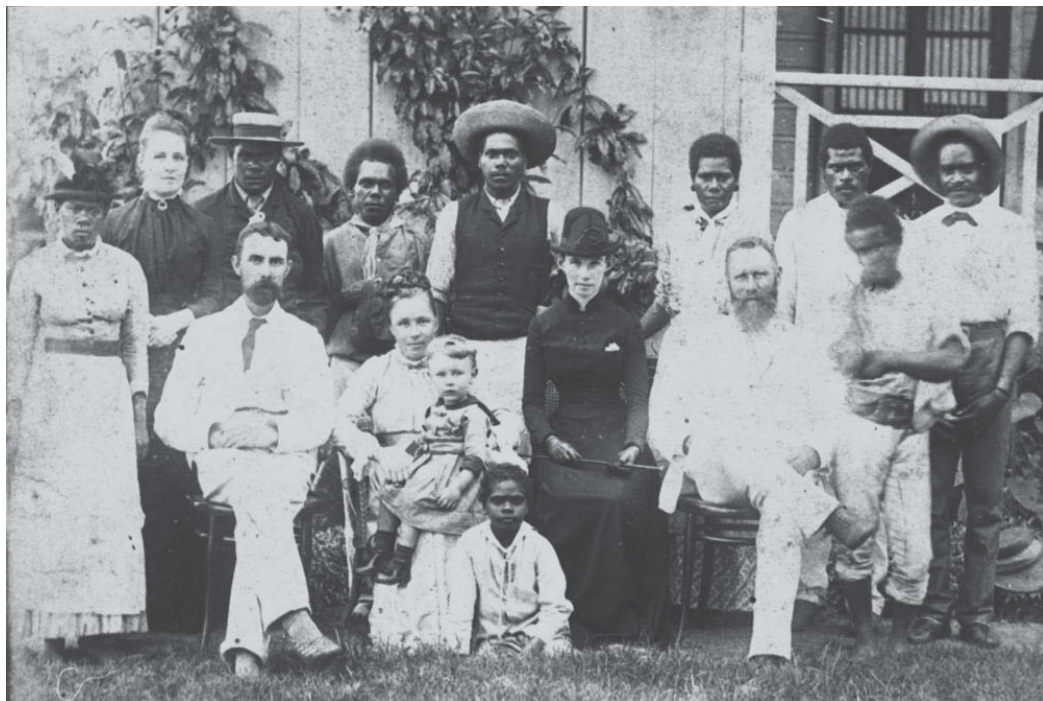


Figure 7.4. Pompo Katchewan seated on the grass with the Swallow family and Hambledon domestic staff 1889.

Photograph: James Handley, JOL image no. 171012.

The trajectory of Pompo Katchewan through colonial society illustrates the curtailed freedoms of Aboriginal people, children in particular. The Yarrabah stalwart, assistant to Gribble and

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *MP*, 10 February 1903, p.3.

bugler of repute, Pompo was in today's terminology a stolen child. In the late 1870s, and with his usual cavalier attitude to dealings with Aboriginal people, Christie Palmerston had snatched an infant in the rainforest north of Cairns, as cassowary chicks were snatched for pets. Palmerston renamed the child 'Pompo' and presented him as a gift to the Swallow family at Hambledon. If the Swallows felt any misgivings about this, they did not find their way into the historical record. With the demise of Hambledon in the 1890s, Pompo was relocated to Yarrabah to work closely with Gribble, where he married a young woman named Jinny. Pompo may have come to regret his association with the Gribble family. According to Halse, after a fleeting and quite possibly coercive encounter with Gribble's younger brother Bert, Jinny Katchewan became pregnant and later gave birth to a mixed-descent child. Bert Gribble was exiled from Yarrabah. Pompo's reaction is not known.

Jeannie

The pillar-to-post story of Jeannie Forbes, formerly Jeannie Brown, later Janie Clarke, is also indicative of the cruelty and callous disregard practised against many children of Aboriginal or part-Aboriginal descent, the gulf between moral rhetoric and sexual practice, but also the concerns of some at the injustice of this. Born to an Aboriginal mother and European father near Mareeba about 1887,²⁷ the child Jeannie was abducted from her kin and shunted into the domestic service of the Patience family in Townsville who in time grew weary of her, or as Thomas Givens told the Queensland Parliament, "a little half cast girl was got by a man named Vallyely, who gave her to a lady [who later] professed to find her incorrigible."²⁸ Jeannie had not wanted to leave her adopted home, so "a pious fraud was perpetrated." Jeannie was told she was being sent to join her mother in Sydney, but was instead sent to Cairns and given to the Forbes family, with the advice that they might send Jeannie to Yarrabah "if they wanted to get rid of her."²⁹

Over the course of the next three years however, Jeannie "blossomed satisfactorily and turned out a useful child...very much attached to Mrs' Forbes and family." Scarcely more than a child herself, Jeannie was said to have "developed into a devoted servant of the children and a handy little household help."³⁰ The "new proprietors or custodians had become fond of the child," at

²⁷ Willie Clarke, son of Jeannie and Willie Clarke. Thomson, *Reaching Back*, p.16.

²⁸ *MP*, 1 January 1901, p.3.

²⁹ *MP*, 25 September 1900, p.3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

which point, Mrs. Patience decided she wanted Jeannie back, but was refused. Roth learned of the dispute and made a personal visit to the Forbes family in Cairns where he ordered Jeannie's arrest as a neglected child, "by virtue of the simple fact that she was the half-caste offspring of an Aboriginal mother." Mr. Forbes steadfastly refused to relinquish Jeannie and "absolutely forbade [the police] from kid-napping or body snatching the youngster." A telegram from the Customs Office changed Forbes' mind.³¹

Jeannie protested emphatically, but finally left amid the sobs and wrath of the entire Forbes household...and said clearly that she did not want to go to the Aboriginal Mission Station, neither did she want to go to Mrs' Patience, but wanted to stop with Mrs. Forbes.³²

Queensland Parliament was told that Mrs. Forbes had proposed "to rear the child as her own daughter" and that if Jeannie was to be returned to the Patience family, "she would probably become a slave." The Home Secretary impatiently "regretted that the time of the Committee should be taken up with matters of this sort [and that if] anybody was entitled to the ownership of the aboriginal Children it was the Crown." Jeannie was sent to Yarrabah.³³

The *Morning Post* thought Roth's handling of Jeannie's case "far from creditable" but its empathy was incomplete. It argued that the Protector ought to have exercised:

wiser discretion in the matter of half, three-quarter or full-blooded 'myalls.' [Jeannie] was a hundred times better off with Mrs. Forbes than herding with the half-civilised niggers at the mission station.³⁴

After a challenge from the *Cairns Argus*, the *Post* launched a salvo at its competitor: "We admit that the *Argus* has a big claim on the nursery department at Yarrabah," then proceeded to slightly modify its position regarding Jeannie from one of respect owing to 'whiteness,' even in degrees, to the question of personal liberty, a right which the serially uprooted Jeannie can barely have imagined herself to have possessed. "The old rum-deluded *Argus*," chided the *Post*:

states that our remarks were positively awful, libellous and all sorts of things...Our

³¹ *MP*, 1 January 1901, p.3.

³² *MP*, 25 September 1900, p.3.

³³ *MP*, 1 January 1901, p.3.

³⁴ *MP*, 25 September 1900, p.3.

contention was that the girl's liberty was violated and that she should not have been removed even to Windsor Castle unless with her freely given consent.³⁵

At Yarrabah, Jeannie was taken into the Gribble household, as housekeeper and nanny to Ernest and Amelia and their three boys, just as Gribble's marriage was crumbling. Gribble became smitten with Jeannie and rumours about a relationship between the two began to spread. The Cairns press got wind of improper dealings between the missionary and his domestic servant, sparking insinuations that Gribble "made immoral use of mission women."³⁶ Queensland Parliament was told that "although white people were excluded from the mission station, half-caste children were still born there," and that while Gribble "could not be blamed for all that went on there," the subject "was one which wanted a good deal of explanation."³⁷ In 1902 Gribble wrote in his journal: "Took Jeannie Brown" into Cairns. "Find that one of the local papers has again attacked us but statements are false of course."³⁸ Amelia left Ernest, taking their boys and Jeannie away to Sydney, then Brisbane.³⁹

"Dear Old Dadda," Jeannie had written from Sydney:

I am writing in the place of poor Mamma. The place seems so lonely, [but] we have to put up with these things [and] you must not trouble about us. We will be alright and we must put our trust in God. We are waiting for a letter from home it has been two weeks since we have had one from you Dear Daddy...I remain your true little girl Jeannie.⁴⁰

In 1906, Jeannie was sent back to Yarrabah whereupon she re-entered Gribble's domestic sphere. Guilt-stricken and distraught, Gribble attempted to cauterise the resurgent relationship. In 1907 he married Jeannie to Roth's former Aboriginal domestic servant and cabin boy Willie Clarke. Willie otherwise continued his preferred relationship with Yarrabah Senior Girl of 1908 Ada Pickles, and according to Halse, the marriage made no appreciable difference to the relationship between Ernest and Jeannie either. In September 1908, Jeannie gave birth to Gribble's (unacknowledged), blue-eyed, half-caste daughter Nola.⁴¹

³⁵ *MP*, 13 November 1900, p.2.

³⁶ Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.85.

³⁷ Thomas Givens, *MP*, 1 January 1901, p.3.

³⁸ Gribble's journal, 5 November 1902, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/2.

³⁹ Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, pp.85-88.

⁴⁰ Letter from Jeannie Brown, *AN*, May 1906, QSA, SRS5356/1/101.

⁴¹ Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.86.

Full-bloods, half-castes, quadroons, octoroons and Gribble

Among the scientific facts accepted by Europeans of the Cairns district were a hierarchy of races and fixed biological difference, evident through skin colour and comportment. As a consequence, one's racial delineation steered one's destiny. A nearly-white child had the potential to be partially reclaimed by white society; a nearly-black child could not. Anglo-Australians of Trinity Bay were acutely conscious of subtle degrees of 'non-whiteness' from which social standing was determined, but it was an imprecise science, reliant on the perceptions of the beholder. Everyone was an expert. The Cairns Police Magistrate P.G. Grant lacked confidence in Gribble's ability to accurately perceive degrees of race. After visiting Yarrabah, Grant fumed that it was "a painful sight to see almost white children [at the mission] brought up on the same level as blacks."⁴² Gribble on the other hand, was not convinced that the Cairns police had any greater expertise in making such determinations. On one occasion Gribble wrote to Roth:

Cairns police have handed over to me a little boy of about four...Such a child should without a doubt be sent to a orphanage and brought up as a white child [I describe] him as octoroon...and write asking that for his own sake he be sent to an orphanage.⁴³

Allotting a place for these mixed-descent children was not easy. They were, according to the *North Queensland Herald*, "unpleasant problems raised by human nature...the products of promiscuous intercourse between blacks and white." But these people were not simply unpleasant problems for white society; they were tragic, comic and hideous. In their presence, only the "earnest and steady-minded...neither laugh nor cry" claimed the *Herald*.⁴⁴ Grant too gravely mourned for the mixed descent child who:

opens its eyes in a world wherein there is no haven of refuge save that which love and sacrifice has provided for them, in institutions like Yarrabah...The mission provides shelter and teaching for all those unfortunates, whatever their colour, half caste or quadroon.⁴⁵

⁴² Letter from Cairns' Police Magistrate P.G. Grant to the Under Secretary, Brisbane, 12 March 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.

⁴³ Letter from Gribble to Roth, 30 May 1901, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.

⁴⁴ *NQH*, 31 May 1910.

⁴⁵ Lancelot E. Ferris, letter to the Under Secretary, Home Office, Brisbane, 17 August 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.

There is no doubting the strength of Anglo-Australians' belief that half-caste children represented genetic debasement of the worst possible kind. Freakish and spurned, those of mixed-descent needed to be isolated from the mainstream, both for their own good and for that of the community, so that Cairnsites need not gaze upon the grim spectacle of their very existence. Choking back tears, the hardened Police Magistrate wished to draw a "veil [to] shut out the horrors of a living death to these poor people."⁴⁶

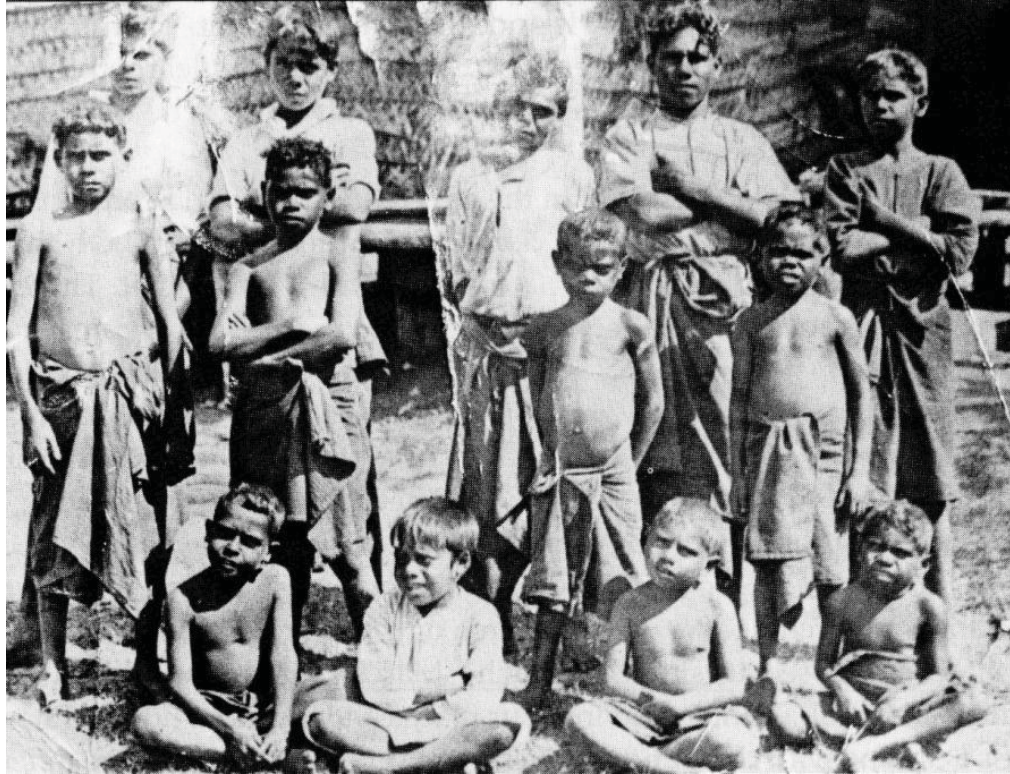


Figure 7.5. Living death? Boys at Yarrabah about 1910. They are wearing sulus, which are discussed later.
Cairns Historical Society.

In the 1900s, Yarrabah was portrayed as providing charitable asylum for the racially outcast. A visitor to Yarrabah composed a reflective newspaper piece, which Gribble pasted into his journal and which commenced with Gribble's own slogan. "Lift up thy prayer for the remnant that is left" it began, before adding some familiar hand-wringing about Aboriginal dispossession to the newer legend of the half-caste:

When one remember that Yarrabah is sheltering the remnants of the once free tribes now

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

scattered by advancing civilisation, their homes broken up and their hunting ground destroyed; that it is the last refuge of the wretched aboriginal women who have been made the victims of the newcomer's vices and then abandoned; that it is the only place that half-castes can call home and that but for it they would be buffeted about from pillar to post no man's concern; when one remembers these things the full pathos of the inscription comes home.⁴⁷

Although disinclined to discuss his racial understandings or marital policy at length and unwilling to be perceived as wielding undue influence, Gribble was nevertheless encouraging and refusing certain types of marriages at Yarrabah based on percentages of Aboriginal 'blood.' Consistent with general policy in Queensland, Gribble did not believe in 'breeding out the colour,' rather he sought to 'breed it in.' The *North Queensland Herald* crassly explained that Gribble's approach was "to regard [half-castes] as aboriginals and to encourage them to mate with each other or with pure-bred blacks."⁴⁸ After a visit to Yarrabah in 1906, the *Trinity Times* offered a similarly distasteful insight into Gribble's racial thinking, published under the heading 'A Study in Sociology and the Regeneration of a People.' "Consideration of the problem of our aboriginal population," began the author:

would not be complete without some mention of the matter of half-castes and quadroons.

A very large proportion of the children at Yarrabah are of mixed blood. The mission has always freely taken half-bloods in and offered asylum to aboriginal domestic servants about to become mothers (on the condition of course that the mothers shall remain).

[Gribble] does not believe in going away from the aboriginal strain but opines, rather, that the black blood should not be there worked out. With that end in view he would encourage the marriage of a quadroon or a mulatto with a full black rather than the opposite.⁴⁹

Grant disagreed, stating that this "marrying of almost white girls to blackfellows should I think be discouraged,"⁵⁰ whereas the *North Queensland Herald* alluded to the 'natural' repulsion that ought to be felt across racial divisions and the dishonour of its transgression. Encouraging those with any visible proportion of Aboriginal blood "to mate with each other" was, it believed, necessary to protect them from "sexual appeal which can never be openly and honourably

⁴⁷ Undated *TT* clipping, Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

⁴⁸ *NQH*, 28 May 1910.

⁴⁹ 'A Study in Sociology and the Regeneration of a People,' *TT*, cited in *AN*, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

⁵⁰ Letter from Cairns' Police Magistrate P.G. Grant to the Under Secretary, Brisbane, 12 March 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.

gratified by intercourse with the superior race.⁵¹ Taking a pseudo-Darwinian turn, the *Trinity Times* expressed belief in a natural attraction existing between people of similar complexion and therefore racial descent: “natural selection one would think would tend to bring about marriages between the lighter-coloured people.” This argument also disguised Gribble’s hand in the process. But having left the reader with the distinct impression that Gribble was running an Aboriginal stud farm at Yarrabah, the author of the *Trinity Times* made sure to add that in the selection of partners, Gribble “allows of course freedom of choice.”⁵²



Figure 7.6. The wedding of Menmuny’s son, Albert Maywe, with the similarly-hued Lottie Wallace, 1908.
Cairns Historical Society.

While Gribble may have enjoyed the approval of sections of the scientific community, his interference was culturally inappropriate by Aboriginal law. It cut across human beings’ most basic rights and fed Cairns’ rumour mill, but there was little danger of a groundswell of opposition from the larger settlement of Trinity Bay. When the ‘Study in Sociology’ article was published, the *Trinity Times* claimed that Yarrabah had not been visited by any member of the

⁵¹ *NQH*, 28 May 1910.

⁵² *AN*, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.

Cairns press in fourteen years.⁵³ It was through Yarrabah's self-representation and not direct observation that most Cairnsites knew anything at all about Yarrabah. In his efforts to raise money for the mission, Gribble desperately sought publicity through public lectures, photographic exhibitions⁵⁴ and performances of the Yarrabah band, but as a rule, Cairnsites displayed little interest in goings-on at the mission. Gribble may have regretted the lack of support from the Cairns community, but the absence of scrutiny gave him free reign.

"Have been accused of forcing [a Yarrabah] girl into marriage," Gribble wrote wearily in his journal, adding that "needless to say there is no truth in such a libellous statement."⁵⁵ By attempting to control Aboriginal sexuality, Gribble faced accusations that marriages at Yarrabah were biologically inappropriate or coerced. These were questions taken up by Lancelot E. Ferris of the Brisbane Home Office. While rejecting the suggestion raised by some commentators that marriages "between half-caste and full blooded aboriginals were a failure," Ferris accepted the opinion of the Cairns Police Magistrate that at Yarrabah, matrimonial "alliances are quite uninfluenced." Ferris stressed "the idea that they [Aborigines] are a free people must be maintained."⁵⁶

The ballad of Annie and Johnnie

Into the twentieth century, Aboriginal people had less direct experience of freedom and were absorbing the language and ideology of the mission. In 1901 Roth's office received a letter written by Gribble, protesting the removal *from* Yarrabah of Annie because "Annie earnestly desired to remain" at the mission and that it would be "in the girl's best interest to remain here."⁵⁷ Signatories included King John Menmuny, Pompo Katchewan, William Reeves, Amelia Gribble, Jeannie Brown, Ada, Minnie Mays, Albert Maywe, George Christian, Willie Ambryn and Gribble. In 1906 Yarrabah's *Aboriginal News* fended off claims printed in a Geraldton paper that at the mission "half-caste girls are forced into marriage with full-blood aboriginals of doubtful character."⁵⁸ The *Aboriginal News* cited the case of 'Annie the half-

⁵³ *TT* clipping, Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

⁵⁴ Gribble in Brisbane 1900 gave the Anglican Board of Missions "the benefit of his lengthy experience." *MP*, 24 February 1900, p.2. "Lantern slides showing the daily life at Yarrabah were exhibited." *MP*, 3 March 1900, p.3.

⁵⁵ Gribble's journal, 16 November 1901, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/2.

⁵⁶ Lancelot E. Ferris, letter to the Under Secretary, Home Office, Brisbane, 17 August 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.

⁵⁷ Gribble letter to Roth, QSA RSI 15038.

⁵⁸ *AN*, 14 November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.

caste.’ Annie made three attempts to escape from Yarrabah only to be recaptured and returned to the mission. Having made his way by steamer to Yarrabah, Johnny “an aboriginal full-blood” arrived at Yarrabah to argue for Annie’s release but elected to remain with her for a time on the mission.⁵⁹ As reported in the *Aboriginal News*:

Annie the half-caste and this boy claimed to belong to the same country and wished to marry. This they were allowed to do. Some time after the marriage the girl persuaded the husband to abscond...as we fully expected the girl took to evil living though still living with her husband who is hardly what we would term a reformed character.⁶⁰

Later, the *Aboriginal News* printed a letter from Yarrabah’s Minnie Burke, which had been sent to the editor of the *Geraldton Sentinel*, rejecting allegations of forced marriages at Yarrabah and enlightening readers about racial politics as discussed at the mission:

Sir, I am a half caste aboriginal and I married a fullblooded aboriginal and so far we have lived together two years and a half and we have never thought of the different colour and I have a little child since I have been married and one little quadroon girl before I came to the Mission. That is al a white man is good for making a fool of a half caste girl and then the white man turns round an kicks up a row with her for marrying a black man. I would like to know what white man would wait nine months for either a black or a half caste girl. I have known a black man to follow his lady love all the way from Hughenden to the Mission after being separated all that time.

Mr Gribble does not give the girls to any of the boys but the girls pick which ever boy they like. We would like to know who the girls are going to marry if they do not marry the boys. It is much better to be married and living on the Mission than to be about white people’s towns and living with any man we can first come across unmarried. Johnny and Annie always were in trouble on this place. They picked each other and bothered Mr Gribble to get married; and when Annie was single she was always running away into Cairns after bad life, and now she is married by God’s own law. She has gone and done a worst thing than ever besides telling a lie by saying she was forced to be married. Please do not call those two Mr Gribble’s boy and girl. This is the truth.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Letter from Cairns’ Police Magistrate P.G. Grant to the Under Secretary, Brisbane, 12 March 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.

⁵⁹ *AN*, 14 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Minnie Burke, ‘An Answer to the Geraldton Sentinel,’ cited in *AN*, May 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101. Spelling errors in original.

Domestic girls, moral laxity and unmanly insinuations



Figure 7.7. Unnamed women resident at Hambledon. It may have been be at the photographer's request that the women threw their arms around each other's shoulders, but this image conveys an uncommon candour and warmth.

Hambledon Mill Records, ANU:NB.

In north Queensland, the pregnancy of a domestic girl often resulted in her being exiled to Yarrabah. Authorities commonly accepted that the 'natural' sexuality of Aboriginal women was disorderly and primitive, and that they were incapable of its management. Bearing in mind Jeannie's predicament, Gribble maintained opposition to Aboriginal 'girls' employment in the domestic service of Europeans on the grounds that in such a situation, moral compromise was virtually inevitable. The *North Queensland Herald* agreed that such employment "must end in their physical ruin."⁶² Gribble and the Bishop of North Queensland were of the view that Aboriginal servants were "more open than white girls to the attack of unprincipled men"⁶³ but the *Trinity Times* blamed the purported sexual nature of Aboriginal women for their inconvenient impregnation. Adding another layer of blame, the *Trinity Times* thought that an Anglo-Australian family might see a servant's pregnancy as displaying a lack of gratitude, but

⁶² *NQH*, 31 May 1910.

⁶³ Bishop of North Queensland, letter to the Under Secretary 6 August 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.

thought it “unreasonable on the part of the family to exclaim ‘How ungrateful after all we have done for her’...it is not ungrateful only natural.”⁶⁴ A contributor to the *Trinity Times*, possessed of an even more energetic imagination, wrote of helpless white employers in being lured into carnal disgrace by irresistible native passions. The domestic “black girl is not unsexed,” the writer confidently pronounced:

[She] has the same strong passions as the free denizens of the forest but without the opportunity of gratifying them so when the inevitable happens [it is] only natural. That is almost the invariable history of aboriginal females in domestic service.⁶⁵

Similarly, the *North Queensland Herald* identified the “animal passions” of Aboriginal domestic servants as the problem. “Usually they are the tempters not the tempted,” it concluded.⁶⁶ Discussions of the plight of the pregnant servant reused much of the operative pathos reserved otherwise for half-castes. Thus disgraced, she could “never hope to marry,” said the *Trinity Times*. The “family she is living with would never countenance a man of her own race about, and no white man would marry her.” According to that Cairns newspaper the only acceptable solution was to ship these women to the mission, “to marry the girls to their own people...that is by far the best for them.”⁶⁷ The institutions of matrimony and Yarrabah represented the only acceptable means of containing hot native passion and its shameful reproductive consequences.

In his report to the Home Office, the Cairns Police Magistrate countered with the popular gripe that the corollary of this policy was Anglo-Australians being robbed of valuable labour, in this case ‘white enough’ domestic labour. Grant perceived that among the mixed-descent residents of Yarrabah there were “girls who could earn their living anywhere if they were allowed...I think it is a pity that they should be immured for life at this Mission Station.” According to Grant, half-castes were the “poor unfortunate victim[s] of lust,” but as he shook his head, dismayed at “white man’s passions,” Grant indulged his own sensual nature, being “greatly struck by the number of good-looking, well grown girls.” As with the ‘natural appeal’ within racial groups already mentioned, female attractiveness was to the Police Magistrate, a question of hue. Running an expert eye over the well-grown girls, whom Gribble had deemed half-

⁶⁴ *AN*, November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *NQH*, 31 May 1910.

⁶⁷ *AN*, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.

castes, Grant thought “a number of them” – the best-looking ones? – “appear to be quadroons...and when I think of the demand that exists for that class of servant.”⁶⁸

Upon receipt of Grant’s report, Lancelot Ferris exploded at “the suggestive remark” it contained, warning that “missionaries should be married.”⁶⁹ Grant had wondered vaguely that missionaries might struggle to resist temptation. The basis for Grant’s remark was not disclosed. One newspaper described it as “saying either too much or too little” on the matter.⁷⁰ Ferris leapt to the missionaries’ defence, mortified by Grant’s “unmanly insinuation of moral laxity on the part of [the] devoted men and women” of Yarrabah, and haughtily clarified once and for all that “the source from which the Mission derives its half caste members is Cairns and the surrounding district.”⁷¹

Roth’s ethnographic photography: worse than anything in Port Said

Between 1904 and 1905, a new insinuation of moral laxity was added to the image of the Aboriginal woman in the puzzle of indigenous and non-indigenous relations in north Queensland. The spiteful circulation of some photographs taken by Roth triggered a populist scandal and moral panic entangling the Chief Protector and destabilising his authority. As the scandal unfolded in Queensland, northerners seized the opportunity to vent their displeasure with Aboriginal Protection, and to express mistrust of scientists and ‘foreigners’ (Roth was Hungarian-born), but of particular interest here, the scandal also prompted north Queenslanders to clarify the distinctions they drew between socially acceptable and socially unacceptable photographic images of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people could be represented unclad without conveying romantic beauty or lascivious intent but despite their stated horror for the ‘brutal body,’ Anglo-Australians enthusiastically captured ethnographic photographs not entirely dissimilar to Victorian pornography. Ancient Greeks and Romans had revelled in the unclad human form and as their cultural imitators, Victorian sophisticates admired controlled artistic nudes. The introduction of the camera however challenged their sense of naked decency, revealing as it did nudity very different to the muscular hero in alabaster, or the voluptuous Venus rendered sans nipples or genitals. The camera revealed a confronting, vivid nakedness of

⁶⁸ Letter from Cairns’ Police Magistrate P.G. Grant to the Under Secretary, Brisbane, 12 March 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.

⁶⁹ Lancelot E. Ferris, letter to the Under Secretary, Home Office, Brisbane, 17 August 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.

⁷⁰ Unmarked newspaper clipping regarding Grant’s report, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.

⁷¹ Lancelot E. Ferris, letter to the Under Secretary, Home Office, Brisbane, 17 August 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.

sagging breasts, pubic hair and life-like genitals. To European consciousness, such images could only be sexualised when the subject was white, female and devoid of overt classical references. However, despite their cultural constraints, Anglo-Australians of Trinity Bay were unable to be ‘naturally’ and completely repelled by the brutal body. Their enthusiasm for photographs of unclad Aboriginal people, photographic scandals such as that which would envelop Roth and of course the prevalence of mixed-descent children all point a racist repugnance that was far from absolute.

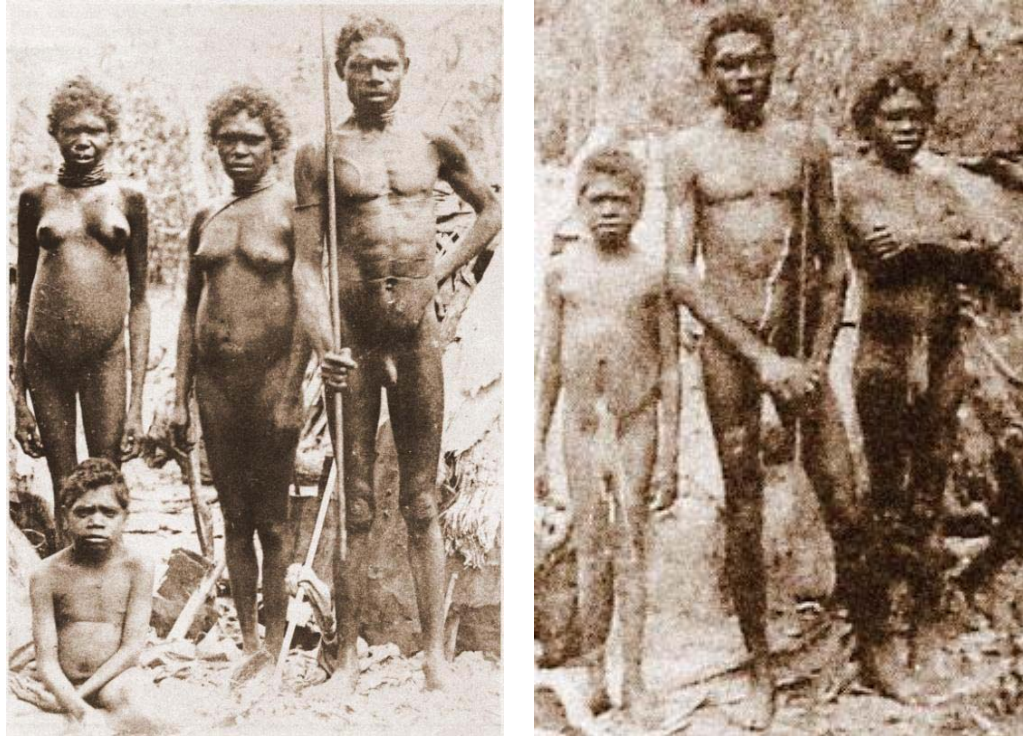


Figure 7.8 left: Cairns Historical Society, Figure 7.9 right: Menmyny Museum.

Two undated photographs (above) from the Trinity Bay district point to the photographer’s difficulties in establishing incontrovertible meanings in relation to indigenous people, with foggy notions of public and private. The imposition of a metaphorical fig leaf to the biblical ‘naked shame’ of Aboriginal people in their ‘garden of Eden’ is suggestive of what Margaret Maynard has called the “fears and anxieties that whites had about their own sexuality and that of the subject race.”⁷² Both photographs further remind us of what Elizabeth Edwards has termed “the materiality of ethnographic photographs as socially salient objects.”⁷³ The

⁷² Margaret Maynard, ‘Staging Masculinity: Late Nineteenth Century Photographs of Indigenous Men,’ *Journal of Australian Studies*, issue 66, 2000, p.129.

⁷³ Elizabeth Edwards, ‘Material beings: objecthood and ethnographic photographs,’ *Visual Studies*, Vol.17, No.1, 2002, p.67.

photographs appear to have been taken on the same day. Despite their similar provenance, they were retrieved from separate photographic collections; their separate trajectories as artefacts being perhaps the result of the different information they contain – one meets a basic Anglo-Australian level of nineteenth century decency (right), the other (left) does not.⁷⁴ Why did the photographer require or choose to photograph two distinct poses? The ‘modest’ photograph at right was a saleable, postcard image. The ‘immodest’ photograph is of a more ambiguous commercial value. The photographs were taken by Roth.

Roth was a doctor of medicine, anthropologist and ethnographer who produced an impressive body of work, including the monograph *Ethnological Studies among North-West Central Queensland Aborigines* (1897), which established his international reputation. *Ethnological Studies* contained a hand-drawn illustration of a “peculiar method of copulation” used by Aboriginal people, which Roth included as part of a series of “natural postures which every anthropologist make inquiries about, with a view to ascertaining connections (if any) between the highest and lowest types of man.” Some of Roth’s anthropological peers expressed doubts about the “peculiar method of copulation” and demanded further evidence of its existence among Aboriginal people in north Queensland. Despite what Roth called “the natural modesty of the untutored savages,” which he “invariably admired and respected,” in 1900 or 1901 Roth found a married couple south of Cairns who agreed to demonstrate for his camera, although Roth stated that “they could hardly refrain from laughing” at his request, and “were a bit afraid of the camera at first.”⁷⁵

For most of Roth’s tenure as Aboriginal Protector, it was another act entirely that concerned north Queenslanders most – the Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act. Roth occupied the roles of Northern Protector 1898-1904 (Cooktown), then Chief Protector 1904-1906 (Brisbane), working to meliorate the exploitation of Aborigines in employment and marriage, while documenting Aboriginal cultures, often with a camera. At the turn of the century, many or most Anglo-Australian employers saw the regulation of Aboriginal employment as onerous and openly flouted its requirements. Employers enjoyed minimal reference to the law, if not impunity from it, and had been accustomed to treating ‘their’ Aborigines as they felt appropriate, arguing that Aboriginal ‘inefficiency’ justified peppercorn wages, or that “the amount of wages should be left optional with the employers to be paid in accordance with the merit of the employee.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ In my copy of the image at right, bark ‘fig leaves’ appear to be worn, but I thank Jane Lydon for pointing out to me that these may in fact be scratched out details.

⁷⁵ Walter Roth letter to Bishop White, 19 June 1904, QSA, SRS 4356/1/155.

⁷⁶ Petition from Gregory Downs, to James Forsyth MLA, 28 August 1903, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.

New sensitivities however, were becoming apparent in the language of the Cairns' press in its discussion of race relations. In their public pronouncements, white northerners were more willing than ever to express their sympathy for the plight of Aboriginal people. Initially, the *Port Douglas and Mossman Record* spoke in favour of the Act. We were "worse than savages" it maintained, "if, as a superior race, we did anything less than cherish the remnants of the inferior race which we have so unceremoniously supplanted."

Never again should a young gin be discoverable as a 'hand' on a pearling boat. For malevolent intrusion upon blacks camps white ruffians should suffer unmitigated penalty. Food and clothing should be given without any sign of meanness to the disinherited people. The Chinese opium vendors should be severely punished and completely ostracised.⁷⁷

Less pleased by Aboriginal Protection, but inclined nevertheless to couch in humanitarian terms its objections to the governmental response to the 'Aboriginal problem,' the *Morning Post* argued: "since Dr Roth's appointment the natives of Queensland have been far worse off in every respect than in the days when no such 'protection' existed."⁷⁸ The *Post* was unhappy to report the regulation that:

no female aboriginal or half-caste over fourteen years of age shall be employed at a wage less than 2/6 per week...at which wage good white servants may be obtained anywhere. As no aboriginal woman can compare with white women as to efficiency...the new regulations simply mean that no aboriginal women will be employed...those aboriginal women who are now decently clothed, housed and fed will be forced to go to the camps there to starve or engage in a life of prostitution.⁷⁹

On another occasion the *Post* frowned upon the misappropriation of wages, arguing: "Today it is very difficult to get an Aboriginal girl or woman to 'sign on,' they know that if they do their wages have to be paid to the protector to be 'put away for a rainy day' and that is the last the unfortunates see of the money."⁸⁰

There were long-standing residents who clearly felt that Europeans were indebted to Aborigines in the wake of colonisation, but other, harder attitudes from the frontier period, still littered

⁷⁷ *PDMR*, 28 August 1901, p.2.

⁷⁸ *MP*, 17 July 1905, p.2.

⁷⁹ *MP*, 4 March 1904, p.2.

⁸⁰ *MP*, 13 December 1905, p.3.

private correspondence. For instance, Roth's office was informed that on a property claiming 150 km of river frontage, local Aboriginal people were seeking access to the watercourse to hunt. The property's manager Mr. Robertson told Sergeant Whelan that he "would not allow no blacks on the run," and that "the trackers should shoot them – that was what they were kept for."⁸¹ Roth's unloved administration was bombarded with similar letters objecting to its interference with the status quo. Usually, objections to Aboriginal Protection carried the implication that the racial and economic hierarchy was being flattened by the new regulations, making "blacks too independent and more difficult to deal with as servants."⁸² Petitioners presented Roth with the common complaint that, in their opinion: "under the Aboriginal Act our blacks are becoming insubordinate and useless."⁸³ Leonard M. Cutter wrote "in despair about the aborigines."⁸⁴

I had thought that I could exercise some sort of control over them...but officialdom has beaten me...it quite nullifies any attempt by an individual... to do anything in the way of elevating or controlling them.⁸⁵

E. Jackson of Atherton objected to a contract being drawn up for his employee named Echo:

We have had our boy 26 years. He has never known what it is to live with the blacks, for he was but a little fellow when he was given to us by Inspector Whelan...He certainly does not like to be signed on...he said he thought this was a free country.⁸⁶

The personal dignity and self-respect of Aboriginal people notwithstanding, the expectation remained among Anglo-Australians that Aborigines must occupy the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. That they must remain in their subordinate place was reinforced by the white community at every juncture, even through the language of dress. Gribble delivered a lecture on "foolish pride" which he called the "besetting sin of mission boys and girls," and a 'sin' Anglo-Australians found "cockie [and] objectionable." According to Gribble, Aboriginal people ought

⁸¹ Letter from Whelan to Roth, QSA RSI 14962/1/1.

⁸² Telegram from W.M. Lee Bryce to Roth, 1902, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.

⁸³ Petition from Gregory Downs, to James Forsyth MLA, 28 August 1903, QSA SRS 4356/1/155. In response, Roth worked through the list of petitioners names, telling Forsyth that one was "the reputed father of a h.c. child; another is a reputed 'kombo' said to be living with his aboriginal female stock woman; another is a 'kombo' who lately enquired re. necessary permission etc. to marry his black paramour; another was (and probably still is) employing blacks who were sent to him in chains by a friend from a distant district." Letter from Roth to Forsyth, the Under Secretary of Lands, 22 December 1903, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.

⁸⁴ Letter to Roth from Leonard M. Cutter, 4 April 1900, QSA RSI 14962/1/1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Letter from E. Jackson of Atherton to J. Tolmie, Minister for Agriculture 18 April 1912, QSA PRV 10729/1/31.

to be proud only of their “truthfulness [and] obedience” – to Europeans – but instead, they were sometimes “proud of what they could do, or what they knew, or what they wore.”⁸⁷ At Yarrabah men wore sulus,⁸⁸ through which Gribble imposed a bizarre, oriental vision of racial otherness. An observer at Yarrabah saw:

picturesque forms of natives dressed in red or white sulus of India and the East, for it is part of Gribble’s methods not to get his people to imitate whites even in dress, ‘You cannot be white folk, but you can be good blackfellows,’ he tells them.⁸⁹

Sulus were even worn on excursions across Trinity Bay, which in the minds of many, was going too far. Gribble was accused of public indecency when Yarrabah residents visited Herberton in a “semi-nude condition.”⁹⁰ The *Cooktown Independent* thought that only “ultra sensitive prudes are shocked by the scanty wardrobe furnished by the Police and the charitable,”⁹¹ but the *Morning Post* took a less moralistic line. When the *Post* witnessed Yarrabah men and boys adorned in “about 3d worth of turkey red,” it argued that “the blacks are...in all common decency entitled to at least a pair of pants...Heaven knows pants are cheap enough.”⁹² While in the scrub Aborigines could dress or not dress as they pleased, but on the boulevards of European settlements, clothing was mandatory. The mayor of Cooktown once told a council meeting that “the manner in which the Blacks were allowed to parade the streets and parade round the suburbs was a disgrace to the town and the people...in the state they were often in.”⁹³ However, by absent-mindedly including that he did “not think anything of the gins” doing so, the mayor elicited “roars of laughter” which caused him to become “unusually rosey [sic.]”⁹⁴

Accusations of Gribble’s indecency went no further. For his trafficking of Aboriginal artefacts, Roth had been accused of “prostituting his office” but for this offence, he was spared a public excoriation.⁹⁵ Allegations of indecency directed at Roth however, threatened to topple the Protector. From displeasure with administrative mores subverting the normative expectations of Anglo-Australians, by 1905 residents of the north fast developed an animus for Roth the man. Public meetings began clamouring for Roth’s dismissal, a matter in which the “whole press and public of north Queensland” was said to be “unanimous.” Roth’s only supporters were

⁸⁷ *AN*, May 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.

⁸⁸ See Figure 7.5.

⁸⁹ *TT*, cited in *AN*, 14 November 1906.

⁹⁰ *MP*, 21 December 1905, p.2.

⁹¹ *CI*, 26 January 1889, p.2.

⁹² *MP*, 27 November 1905, p.2.

⁹³ *CI*, 2 February 1889, p.2.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ W. Dallaghy, letter to the Home Secretary’s Department, 15 July 1901, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.

characterised as the ancient enemies of patriotic north Queenslanders: “clerics [and] goody-goodies down south.” The *New Endeavour Beacon*, called the Protector “worse than useless [and] an incubus upon us,” claiming that a “strong feeling of abhorrence and detestation... circles round the very name of Roth.”⁹⁶

In 1905 the Minister for Lands in Brisbane received a letter from An Old Resident in North Queensland, who appears to have been a paternalistic humanitarian, something of a sexual conservative and a Christian. The Old Resident insisted that the “Protector of Aboriginals should be loved and trusted by that unfortunate and helpless race” – meaning Aborigines – and from him they “should receive only kindness.” The Old Resident assured the minister that Aboriginal people shared Europeans’ aversion to Roth, for his “inhumanity and indifference” and in particular, Roth’s lack of “modest politeness” towards Aboriginal women. For this reason, the Old Resident thought, “Church people would give Roth a wide berth if they knew his true character.”⁹⁷

The deficit of ‘modest politeness’ to which the Old Resident referred was Roth’s “notorious” activities with a camera, constituting “grossly indecent actions with...women.” The Old Resident claimed to have viewed photographs taken by Roth which were “worse than anything I saw in Port Said,” for which “the author...ought to be in St. Helena instead of the public Service of Queensland.” Two incidents of Roth’s ethnological indecency were cited, with a third general charge being laid by the Old Resident. A “trooper named George told me that Roth behaved in a disgraceful manner examining some gins seated on a log...the gins afterwards expressed intense disgust,” he wrote.⁹⁸ Beyond the incongruousness of native troopers claiming the moral high ground, the ambiguity of this statement makes the alleged examination very difficult to comment upon. The Old Resident explained the dilemma of explication as that of “sailing as near as possible in the law of libel in discussing Roth’s transaction.”⁹⁹ More detail was furnished, however, in the second example in which the Old Resident was far from convinced that Roth had honourable scientific intentions. Roth was travelling on horseback with Aboriginal police when:

two wild naked gins ran across the track and were stopped by the troopers. Roth got down and photographed them in front, the two women standing shivering with terror...

[Apparently] any prurient-minded blackguard can be guilty of any act of indecency to

⁹⁶ *New Endeavour Beacon*, (hereafter *NEB*), 14 July 1905, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.

⁹⁷ Letter from An Old Resident in North Queensland to the Minister for Lands, Brisbane, 20 July 1905, QSA RSI 14962/1/1.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

aboriginal women if he calls himself an ethnologist.¹⁰⁰



Figure 7.10, Figure 7.11. The photographs above are from a suite of images which appear to have been captured on one of the big sandy rivers south of Cairns. Included among the idyllic Bama village tableaux and scenes of traditional life, displayed by a cooperative clan group, is an image of two young women, singled out for a closer photographic study. The two ‘wild gins’ gaze warily at the camera, most likely operated by Meston’s photographer White on the Bellenden Ker expedition of 1904, or by Roth at about the same time.

Both photographs: Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library, Hume Collection.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

From hard-learned experience, Aboriginal people halted in the scrub by armed native troopers had every reason to be fearful, their fear not alleviated by the presence of an Aboriginal Protector whose identity and works may well have been a mystery to them. Combined with the arcane processes of photography the experience would be, at the very least, intimidating and confusing to the two young Aboriginal women, but we cannot be certain from this that Roth's photographic motivation was lascivious.

Around Cairns in the early 1900s, photography was used as an effective means of public promotion, or as a visual art, aping the traditions of European romantic painting. At the Cairns Show in 1908, Best Photographs by an Amateur were entered under the following categories: Landscapes, Views of the Cairns District, Views, and Portraits. At the show, "photographs occupying prominent positions" advertised the efforts of Yarrabah missionaries with images of Aboriginal acculturation to European ways, in postures of patriotism, work and rank: "photographs of the church, the land, the oil launch and the leading people of Yarrabah saluting the flag and ploughing" – presumably not at the same time.¹⁰¹ However, the photographic legacy of this period created by Alfred Atkinson and others includes a great number of photographs depicting naked and semi-naked Aboriginal people, apparently created for the private pleasure of middle-class Anglo-Australians, captured in the private Aboriginal space of the rainforest, which could not be displayed before the Cairns public. As far as can be ascertained, no one ever accused Atkinson of being a prurient-minded blackguard who belonged in gaol, or blamed him for "violating the sense of shame and modesty of the women, and outraging the feelings of the men."¹⁰² Whether or not viewers of Atkinson's work were titillated by his images, the photographer was not targeted for public outrage and accused of entertaining thoughts "beyond the worst imagination in Post Said,"¹⁰³ but then Atkinson's images were ambiguous in their sexual content or subtext, Roth's were not, and Atkinson was not an Aboriginal Protector.

In 1905, Queensland parliament received a petition against Roth, calling him "guilty of taking grossly indecent photographs, and conniving at immorality...etc."¹⁰⁴ The chivalrous pretensions of white men in the north were grievously affronted by Roth's actions, and many bore testimony of the Protector's misdealing with Aboriginal women. Others claimed to have viewed Roth's photographic portfolio and were able to make informed comparisons with the

¹⁰¹ *MP*, 22 July 1908, p.3.

¹⁰² J. Hamilton letter to Minister for Lands, 14 June 1904, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *MP*, 2 December 1905, p.3.

pornography available in Port Said – the benchmark for visual indecency. No fan of Roth's Aboriginal Protection, the *New Endeavour Beacon* lingered on Roth's greatest crime:

The bawdy photographs...taken 'in the interests of science [which would] disgrace a common Port Said exhibition – and Port Said photos are...the dirtiest filth on earth. There is not much Aboriginal Protection in depicting filthy and degrading as well as unnatural scenes.¹⁰⁵

The two photographs – a front and a side view – had been removed from Roth's office and were being circulated by John Hamilton M.L.A. Under the cloak of anonymity, one witness described the images as "the most disgusting thing I ever saw." Another said: "What manner of man took these? He ought to be in gaol." Still another said: "Those pictures haunt me. They are terrible! Terrible!"¹⁰⁶ As we have seen, photographs of unclad Aboriginal people were widely available to Europeans, and discretely handled, did not fly in the face of respectability. Roth's images however, displayed two Aboriginal people engaged in sexual activity, flouting taboos of sexual depiction and the sexualisation of Aboriginal people. Roth retorted that his photographs were taken "in the interests of ethnological science" and that the Prince of Wales had been "pleased to accept a copy" of his work.¹⁰⁷ Hamilton then summoned three "impartial ethnologists"¹⁰⁸ to agree with him that:

no ethnological society, and no respectable ethnologist in the world deals in pictorial filth, a mere glance at which would be a cause of shame and disgust, to any respectable man, leaving all types of womanhood out of the question.¹⁰⁹

Bishop Gilbert White of Carpentaria, from whom a vigorous response might have been expected, had the photographs waved accusingly under his nose by Hamilton, "in the interests of religion and morality." The Bishop may have been naïve, but he could not be certain that they represented any sexual act with which he was familiar. He reasoned mildly and with a lot of sense, "I did not think it my business to sit in judgement on such matters so long as they were confined absolutely to strictly scientific and medical work."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ *NEB*, 14 July 1905, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in J. Hamilton letter to Minister for Lands, 14 June 1904, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Bishop Gilbert White of Carpentaria letter to Roth, 3 June 1904, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.

In responding to the accusations, Roth's choice of words, that is, his "interest in the flesh and blood of the native," gifted the *Morning Post* with a sensational headline, but with its traditional pragmatism to the fore, the *Post's* response to Roth's purported indecency fell short on outrage.¹¹¹ The *Morning Post* saved its strongest language for Roth's failings as an Aboriginal Protector, calling him an "iniquitous...useless and mischievous official," responsible for "the smothering of the bêche-de-mer industry and the starvation and misery of the majority of the aboriginals," while admitting that "Dr. Roth took a keen interest in Aboriginal ethnology," that is to say, "inventing aboriginal legends [and] taking indecent photos."¹¹² If "the government must go in for the luxury of an aboriginal historian," it "should confine Dr. Roth to making photographs of more or less indecent pictures, and of chronicling the ways and habits of a disappearing race."¹¹³

By 1906 Roth had resigned citing ill-health, and departed Australia for South America.¹¹⁴ Unbowed, unapologetic and flatly rejecting the "scurrilous and slanderous abuse"¹¹⁵ directed towards him, Roth declared himself "not ashamed"¹¹⁶ of having taken the photographs and "guilty of no conduct unworthy of a man of honour."¹¹⁷ The scandal in which he had been embroiled was in part a proprietary battle over indigenous bodies, played out through discourses of gender and morality. Through Aboriginal Protection and the lens of a camera, Roth claimed rights of "identifying and categorising the individual within the corpus of the state,"¹¹⁸ but knew that colonists presented a rival claim:

I was well aware that the general opposition to my administration and to myself
Personally was mainly due to my interference with what has for many years past been
considered a vested interest in the flesh and blood of the native.¹¹⁹

The anger directed towards Roth however, speaks not only of Anglo-Australians' resentment of Aboriginal Protection undermining their rights to Aboriginal labour, but highlights their understanding of the workings of their own society, in which some unscrupulous white men took sexual advantage of black women.

¹¹¹ *MP*, 2 December 1905, p.3.

¹¹² *MP*, 24 August 1905, p.3.

¹¹³ *MP*, 4 March 1904, p.2.

¹¹⁴ Barrie Reynolds, 'Roth, Walter Edmund (1863-1933),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.11, Melbourne University Press, 1988, pp.463-464.

¹¹⁵ *MP*, 2 December 1905, p.3.

¹¹⁶ Walter Roth letter to the Under Secretary, Home Department, 27 February 1903, QSA 4356/1/155.

¹¹⁷ Walter Roth letter to Bishop White, 19 June 1904, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.

¹¹⁸ Simon Popple, 'Indecent Exposures: Photography, vice and the moral dilemma in Victorian Britain,' *Early Popular Visual Culture*, Vol.3, No.2, September 2005, pp.113-133.

¹¹⁹ *MP*, 2 December 1905, p.3.

Conclusion

Aboriginal people persistently blurred the expectations of the white community and those who attempted to classify and command them. Less than three decades had passed from the first colonial incursions at Trinity Bay to the birth of a race-obsessed and sexually uncomfortable Australian nation and the Queensland government was behaving as if a mess made on the frontier needed to be cleaned up. Its policy initiatives however pleased few, being extreme and at odds with the wishes of indigenous and non-indigenous people alike. Socialised to believe that their own advancement was a right, Europeans had shown little concern for the destruction of Aboriginal families and had no qualms about pressing Aboriginal people into their service. Being 'blanker canvasses,' children were particularly sought. Although commonplace, sexual interaction between white men and black women was shocking to white society and babies born of such unions horrifying. People of mixed descent blurred the visual and caste distinctions which were considered crucial to social order. With steadfastly-held beliefs in racial absolutes, Europeans found 'half-castes' a morally repugnant threat to their colonial legitimacy. Such was the power of racial thought at the time that removing mixed descent children from their families and either dragooning them into white service or marrying them off at the mission was considered to be a pragmatic solution and in pursuit of a humanitarian and national good. As well as concerns for settlers' rights to unfettered access to Aboriginal labour, the scandal which engulfed Roth speaks of the complex network of taboos surrounding interracial interactions, fears about sexuality and its implications for lineage and well-founded concerns for the wellbeing of Aboriginal women.

Chapter 8

The Keynote is Love

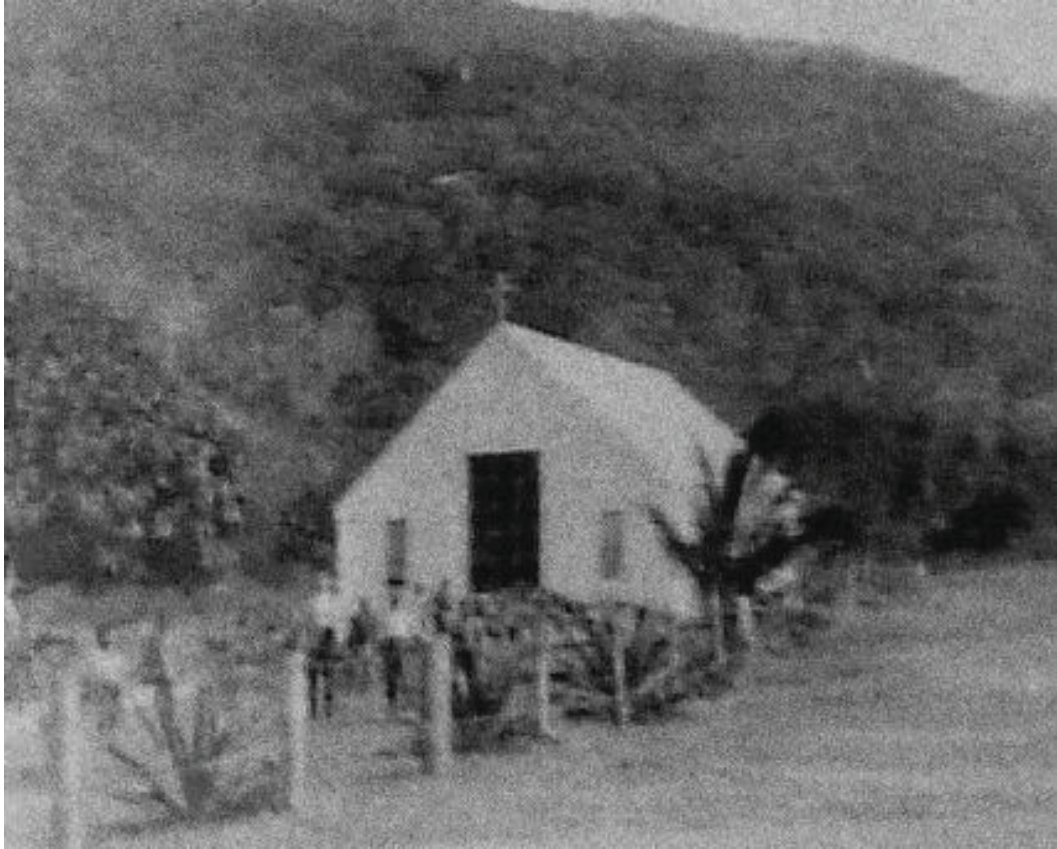


Figure 8.1. St Albans church 1904. Central to the transformative hopes of missionaries at Yarrabah was the humble St Albans church, an institution which required rebuilding on more than one occasion (the version above was destroyed by cyclone in 1906), housed the *First Aborigines* photograph, and was the venue for many hours of prayerful reflection by the Yarrabah Senior Girls of 1908. *Coles Album* p.9, Menmyny Museum.

Introduction

Around Trinity Bay, Aboriginal people were entangled in webs of others' expectations. This chapter takes the example of a cohort of young women, known as the Yarrabah Senior Girls of 1908, to look more closely at the relationship between racial expectations and lived experiences. Around Trinity Bay, ordinary Anglo-Australians constructed images of Aboriginal women exemplified by the derogatory stereotype of the bawdy, dishevelled, wastrel 'gin,' brutally oppressed by Aboriginal menfolk. This image emphasised the innate wretchedness of Aboriginal people and ennobled

Europeans' experiences as occupiers of Aboriginal land, employers of Aboriginal labour and as saviours and civilisers, while playing down settlers' prevalent sexual objectification of Aboriginal women. Around 1900, representations of Aboriginal society informed debates about the management of the indigenous population. White fears of racial mixing found expression in the supposed problem of the 'half-caste,' which focused its attention specifically on the behaviour of Aboriginal women. Among its other roles, Yarrabah mission functioned as a kind of racial laboratory, shaping the behaviour of Aboriginal people towards white Australian reproductive ideals. Perhaps influenced by the 'child race' theory of Aboriginality, the Yarrabah Matron infantilised her charges, but unlike Gribble, emphasised the shared humanity of all people. This contradiction between paternalism and humanism is apparent in photography from the time, which otherwise continued to contrast 'wild' Aboriginality with the improvements of civilisation.

Nun shall ye know



Figure 8.2. Caption reads: *Senior girls at Yarrabah Mission in 1908*, photographer unknown. L-R: Laura, Lucy Long, Phoebe, Miss Cheffins, Lucy Gumgaro (Gomeraa?), Caroline, Mary Pentacost and Minnie Winton (seated centre) and Polly with baby. Others may include Rosie Northedge, Rosie (?) Naleen, Mary (May?) Bignell and Mary Dayand.¹ Cairns Historical Society.

¹ Thomson, *Reaching Back*, p.30.

A photograph from 1908 (above) shows the Yarrabah Senior Girls and their supervisor Miss Cheffins² being just as perfect ladies. According to Gribble, Aboriginal school girls ought to aspire to being “just as perfect ladies” despite being encumbered with the twin disadvantages in turn-of-the-century Australia of being female and “black as saucepans.”³ Goings-on at Yarrabah took place beyond the view of the Cairns community. Adding ideological weight to an apparently simple document of schooling, photographs such as the *Senior Girls at Yarrabah 1908* image helped to popularise certain ideas about Aboriginal people, their capacities, potentials even their relationship to the Australian nation. The *Senior Girls* image is in a sense an index of Aboriginal women’s progress as a reformed gender and class order within a settler society. Cleanliness and order have been imposed. The dress and demeanour of the Senior Girls ‘prove’ their capacity for, and acceptance of, Christian conversion. All of these were considered measurable by visual inspection.

The *Senior Girls* photograph is monotone, grainy and frozen, but it not difficult to imagine the day: the heavy air, the vivid tropical greens of the foliage, the din of insects, rustling dresses and school girl chatter accompanying the photographer’s task; his polite requests communicated through the Matron directing the girls. Miss Cheffins appears to have performed the wide-ranging responsibilities of Yarrabah Matron during 1908 and was the keeper of the related, succinct-but-informative Matron’s Log. By Victorian conventions of reading character in the face, the connection between Cheffins’ inner being and her visage in this image is misleading. Thick-lipped features and crabby eyes may go with moral rectitude but seem mismatched to the patient and kindly tone of the Matron’s Log. In the photograph, Cheffins presents to us as a squarish woman in moralistically high-collared, pinch-waisted Victorian dress, scarcely the height of looser Edwardian fashions, signifying ‘standards’ rather than being climatically appropriate to the tropics. A primary objective of the Yarrabah mission was to contain the sexuality of Aboriginal women within marriage and to prevent sexual relations between them and non-Aboriginal men. The Senior Girls are thus prophylactically armoured in sack-like, figure-disguising and nunnish ‘habits,’ probably sewn by their own hands. Their jewellery is limited to large suspended crucifixes and rosary beads, creating a very ecclesiastical impression of almost suffocating modesty overall, and surely enough to put to flight any man of lecherous intent. The photograph effectively captures the strict, gendered religiosity of the setting, but is expressed with friendly informality. The message is one of morality not brutality.

Subtle calibrations of the Yarrabah experience are transmitted through the photograph. The girls are lined up according to the conventions of the group shot wherein the tallest form a line at the rear, then the smaller form a line before them. A mascot was often added to such images, like a decoration on a

² I am confident, but not certain that Cheffins was the Matron during 1908. The role of Matron appears to have been a general one, encompassing hospital, kitchen, dormitory and educative functions.

³ *AN*, May 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.

cake, and this photograph is no exception for its inclusion of a dog, which managed to stay still long enough to not blur the image. The authority figure Cheffins has been placed at the composition's centre and the photographer has taken care to arrange the girls according to the lightness or darkness of their dresses. The seated girls all hold their hands modestly in their laps, a familiar, polite pose for them. The girls appear more accustomed to being photographic participants than were Yarrabah's 'First Aborigines' fourteen years earlier, and strike poses that reflect their mission training, the photographer's expectations and their personal inclinations. Hymn singing occupied many hours of the Yarrabah week and Caroline clasps her hands in a chorister's 'monkey grip.' Some excited smirking is apparent among others. Minnie Winton sports a gorgeous grin. As with the *First Aborigines* photograph, a small child has been included, sitting in Polly's lap, but in this instance the visual device would appear to relate to the mission's role in taking in disgraced, pregnant domestic servants. In the years since Atkinson first ventured into Gungganydji country, much seems to have changed.

In addition to the handful of photographs which have survived, the Yarrabah Matron's Log of 1908 contributes snippets of information to our understanding of the life an Aboriginal girl might expect to lead within the 'protecting shelter' of Yarrabah. The Log was subtitled *A daily record of work done, misdemeanours etc., wants and acquirements* and tells us that in January 1908, there were 126 scholars on the school's roll and approximately thirty Senior Girls, aged about fifteen, not all of whom appear in the Senior Girls class photograph. Even by the gruelling standards of the day, the Senior Girls' working days were lengthy and strenuous, and while they received only smatterings of formal education, no more than a few hours ever passed without prayer.⁴ Children respond to security and structure and day after day the matron recorded the girls' work as having been well done and their conduct good – remarkable considering the hugely disrupted backgrounds and traumas most had experienced. An official record, the Matron's Log promotes an image of Christian hard work, discipline, simplicity and happiness, which is consistent with Aboriginal oral history of Gribble-time.⁵ Cheffins' entries are filled with affection for her charges and hopes for their 'betterment.' Her tenor is authoritarian but relentlessly positive. When reprimanding the girls, softness suggests disappointment rather than anger, tending to mild resignation in later entries.

⁴ Fundraising for the mission took a much higher priority than the girls' education: "There was no school [today]...May Pitt came in the evening to teach the girls some new dances for the forthcoming concert in Cairns." Yarrabah Matron's Log, 9 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁵ Mollie Coleman *Green meat and oily butter: memories of Yarrabah*, published by Ros Kidd, Brisbane, 1999; and Thomson *Reaching Back*.

Yarrabah Matron's Log: Work done

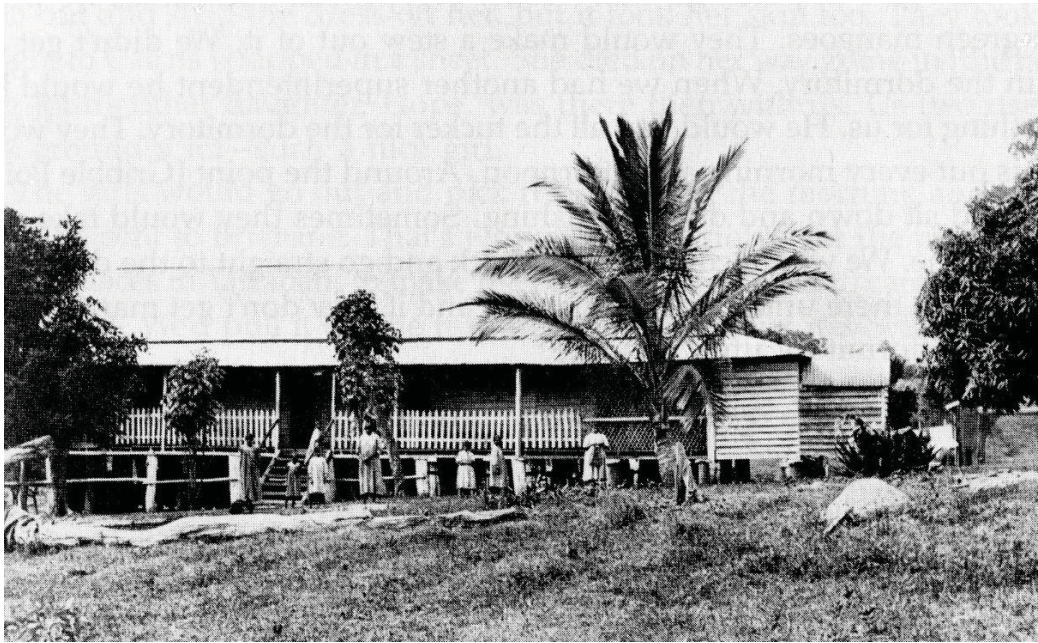


Figure 8.3. The girls' dormitory 1907. Only certain types of photographs were ever made at Yarrabah. One can find many images of residents which emphasise domestic order, re-education and discipline, but there are none which might be interpreted as taking a critical view of the institution, showing for instance conditions within the dormitories or the humble repast of meal times. Cairns Historical Society.

The behaviour of the Senior Girls as interpreted and directed by Cheffins gives us the opportunity to consider the moral program of Yarrabah in action, and the girls' response to it. Cheffins' notes were often brief statements to the effect that all was well with the girls, that they were happy, behaving well and working hard: "Work: good cooking baking washing; Conduct: good: girls all very good,"⁶ and "work well done, same as usual....Conduct good"⁷ being typical examples. They may have been hungry; the weather may have been hot and rainy, but even in their full-length mission garb, the Senior Girls always worked hard. Cheffins was effusive in her praise for their efforts: "work splendidly done and promptly and well" was a common sentiment.⁸ The work performed by Yarrabah girls was purported to be educative, vocational training but was in effect unpaid labour, serving to reduce the running costs of the mission. The girls worked as handmaidens to all of the residents. They cooked, cleaned, made and washed clothes, polishing the boys' belt buckles and the band's musical instruments,⁹ as well as labouring on the mission plantation and maintaining their own vegetable

⁶ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 15 January 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁷ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 17 January 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁸ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 24 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁹ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 29 April-2 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

gardens. Gribble's stand-in Selwyn Chase once told a disbelieving *Morning Post* that at Yarrabah "work is not laborious, nor the hours long."¹⁰ In comparison to what, one might ask?

In April 1908 Cheffins documented a list of extra tasks accomplished by the girls:

In addition to ordinary work today the outside of the kitchen was white-washed, & the roofs and & walls swept of the two rooms used as bedrooms. Some weeding was also done by the 5 dormitory girls, also plantation work. All the senior girls who could went grass gathering in the afternoon [for mat-making], school windows cleaned. Bible class held this evening.¹¹

On the previous day:

[The] kitchen was whitewashed inside and thoroughly cleaned...the verandah walls & roof were well swept & washed down and books dusted the church walls were swept both inside and out, the school thoroughly cleaned only the girls forgot to clean the windows.¹²

Work as a moral imperative infused Cheffins' monitoring of individual efforts:

Plantation in the afternoon; the girls picked 2 baskets and 1 kerosene tin of cotton. Lottie was cook & neglected her work in the afternoon to make a baby's dress. There was time for both but her duties should have come first, then she would not have to scrub down her tables when the bell was ringing for church.¹³

When Lottie was seen as working unsatisfactorily she was accused of wasting time,¹⁴ and being moody and pert.¹⁵ Lucy Gomerra was said to be "doing her work very well indeed, showing that she can do things properly when she sets her mind to it."¹⁶ Leisure and relaxation were not altogether unknown to the Senior Girls. From time to time they enjoyed 'free evenings' in the School Hall,¹⁷ sometimes there were excursions into Cairns to go to St John's church, pay respects at the cemetery or

¹⁰ *MP*, July 15 1905, p.3.

¹¹ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 10 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

¹² Yarrabah Matron's Log, 9 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

¹³ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 23 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

¹⁴ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 31 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

¹⁵ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 6 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

¹⁶ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 24 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

¹⁷ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 28 January 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

visit the Chinese temple.¹⁸ There were intermittent ‘free afternoons’ to ride around Yarrabah on the creaky old pony,¹⁹ to go on picnics to the outlying settlements off the mission,²⁰ to play tennis and football, once with such enthusiasm that Cheffins noted: “they managed to burst the windbag in the boys’ football, but it was pure accident.”²¹ On one of these idyllic afternoons, Gribble gave the girls a tin of lollies and some coconuts - a real treat for them.²²

Wants

Usually however, the girls could only dream of tins of lollies. The *Trinity Times* ventured that at Yarrabah “the girls...are provided with plenty of interest in life [within] the protecting shelter of the Mission,” that they “are comfortable, well-fed,” and in short, a “black girl has a far better life at Yarrabah than she could possibly get in the bosom of the best white family that ever existed.”²³ There was less chance of an unmarried girl becoming pregnant at Yarrabah than in outside domestic service and perhaps there was an expectation that Aboriginal girls ought to be grateful for anything they got, but life at Yarrabah was hard. As to the girls being well-fed, this was pure sophistry on the part of the *Trinity Times*. Yarrabah never achieved a consistent, nutritious food supply and the grim partnership of hunger and toil was well-known to the Senior Girls. A shoestring budget and agricultural ineptitude meant that at mealtime residents might expect to see the odd sweet potato but were usually served damper or runny gruel made from wheat, corn or rice, with perhaps some skerricks of dugong, turtle, fish or wallaby thrown in at Christmas.²⁴ Although it is hard to imagine anyone preferring either, Cheffins maintained that the “girls do not like the wheat meal as much as they do the corn meal,”²⁵ and later assured the reader that in lieu of starvation, the girls were indeed, “very glad to have corn-meal.”²⁶ The food alone caused many to flee the mission and poor publicity from this prompted the above defence from the *Trinity Times*.²⁷ Making interesting usage of the idea of shared humanity, in 1905, the *Morning Post* called it:

¹⁸ “Dadda took all the senior girls to visit Maggie Short’s grave in the Cairns cemetery...We went into the Chinese temple and also had a rest in St John’s church.” Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 3 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9. Gribble’s interpretation of Chinese religious belief would make fascinating hearing.

¹⁹ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 15 January 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

²⁰ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 12 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

²¹ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 8 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

²² Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 15 January 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

²³ *AN*, 21 November 1906, QSA, SRS5356/1/101.

²⁴ *MP*, 20 July 1905, p.2.

²⁵ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 1 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

²⁶ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 2 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

²⁷ In 1905, a small controversy erupted when a groups of Yarrabah escapees informed police in Cairns that at the mission “the only food allowed them was maize-meal either in the form of skilley or baked into a damper; that neither fish nor flesh of any kind was allowed them; and that there was no fruit or vegetables...it was an

a standing disgrace to our common humanity that men and women, no matter what their colour...should...under pains and penalties be forced to work for a ration such as no other human beings on the face of the earth are expected to exist upon.²⁸



Figure 8.4. Disciplined, cleaned, enlightened, civilised, overdressed, hungry and ill. The staff of Yarrabah's St Lukes Hospital whose adjoining mortuary was not likely to inspire confidence in the treatments available, 1908. Cairns Historical Society.

Even as Cheffins was declaring the girls “well and happy...all very good,”²⁹ they were sick, fainting from hunger and sequestering food during their kitchen duties. Cheffins was unable to conceal the girls’ unhappiness at surviving on insubstantial, unvaried and unpalatable fare, or the food pilfering and resentment that occurred. When they had the opportunity to do so, the girls risked retribution by helping themselves to unauthorised morsels such as crusts of bread in the kitchen.³⁰ When one of the hungry girls (Lottie) passed out, the Matron saw this as a moral lapse and chided the future Princess Albert of Yarrabah.³¹ Cheffins caught Jessie Keppel hoarding flour,³² and when Ada Pickles and some other girls were discovered making an unauthorised foray into the food store, Cheffins challenged

utter impossibility to do [plantation] work unless more nourishing food was allowed them.” *MP*, 14 July 1905, p.2.

²⁸ *MP*, 14 July 1905, p.2.

²⁹ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 15 January 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

³⁰ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 4 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

³¹ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 6 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

³² Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 29 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

them and was smartly told to “shut up.”³³ The girls’ punishment is not recorded, but Gribble reserved the right to cancel weddings over such misdemeanours:

Some of the girls [kept] back a damper which had been baked out of the day’s dough... and must have been eaten by some of the girls. In consequence of this serious lapse in behaviour the weddings to have been celebrated next week are to be postponed.³⁴



Figure 8.5. Yarrabah kitchen and dormitory, 1899. In this image of Yarrabah, the photographer has employed a graceful swirl and other classical elements of European romanticism in the composition, incorporating a plunging, tree-clad horizon line falling from right to left and ending with the great splash of two heroic eucalypts, which restore the gaze to the central, steady symbols of civilisation and balance. From this distance, the buildings (Man) are of a mortal scale relative to God/Nature. JOL image no. APA-050-0001-0012.

Unsurprisingly, with human health poorly understood and malnutrition the order of the day, death stalked the residents of Yarrabah. The communities of the greater Trinity Bay district were well-used to the abrupt and early departures of loved ones and strove to be stout-hearted about it. Gribble believed that Aborigines were a race dying out and perhaps this explains the mundane acceptance of residents’ deaths in mission records. In February 1908, Cheffins described in the most prosaic terms

³³ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 12 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

³⁴ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 22 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

the death and burial of a resident, who must have been well known to the girls: "All girls attended the funeral service...some who could be spared went to the cemetery."³⁵

Acquirements

Commencing with a Shakespearian quotation, the *Australian Journal* once explained to its readers, "Ignorance is the curse of God, Knowledge is the wing wherewith we fly up to Heaven." Therefore "vulgar superstition, especially where it is in contradiction to Divine teaching...is one of the worst evils attendant. The rude and barbarous tribes of the earth prove this most truly as the uncivilised life they lead is but a convertible term for their ignorance." It seemed that the only means for indigenous people to lift God's curse was to seek redemption by accepting Christianity and getting a "proper education," that is a European education, through which, according to the *Australian Journal*, "much has been done to civilise the world."³⁶ Re-socialisation was to be achieved through no less than the transformation of the soul. At Yarrabah, religion and education were virtually indistinguishable, being part and parcel of the same progressive influence. In 1908 readers of the *Morning Post* were assured that missionary work was not fruitless, that Aboriginal people were capable of receiving religion and that its civilising power was demonstrable in a check-list of their progress:

three hundred Aborigines...dwelling peacefully together, practising industry, living for each others' good, behaving remarkably as intelligent, warm-hearted Christians. They are a striking refutation of the incapacity of the Aboriginal for education and religion, and they supply another illustration of the truth that religion is the most effective agent in the uplifting of man.³⁷

The *Trinity Times* concurred that Aboriginal people had a capacity for Christianity and had therefore some limited prospect of uplift:

Mr Gribble...against the common conception that the Queensland blacks are too degraded and low on the scale of human evolution to do anything with [has] clearly demonstrated that they are [as] capable of receiving a fair amount of education and enlightenment indeed and by the aid of a suitable environment can be lifted to as high a scale morally as many white people.³⁸

³⁵ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 20 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

³⁶ *Australian Journal*, 1 July 1875, p.607.

³⁷ 'A Visitor's Impressions,' *MP*, 25 July 1908, p.6.

Roth's pessimistic view of white people's morality notwithstanding, this backhanded compliment was the most Aboriginal people might expect from European Australians, whose efforts at Christian humanism were consistently thwarted by their paternalistic sense of racial superiority. Even when observers noted the residents' scholarly aptitude in the foreign culture, patronising attitudes betrayed scepticism that blacks could ever match the intellectual achievements of whites. The Yarrabah School, wrote a correspondent:

was a revelation as regards the adaptability of the aboriginal...The children, on average quicker of perception than white children take so kindly to learning that their recent copy books would do credit to a state school.³⁹

The purpose of this education was not to level the racial hierarchy, but to Europeanise Aboriginal people, to erase indigenous culture and replace it with the language, habits and disciplines of the colonisers, to make Aboriginal people more acceptable inferiors to Europeans. The Queensland government did not see fit to provide a schoolhouse and teacher's salary for children at Yarrabah, as it did for white children elsewhere.⁴⁰ Instead, volunteers and untrained teachers provided a mishmash of instruction in which Anglican mnemonics towered over all other pedagogical priorities. "Gribble...feels the keynote of [the teacher's] work is Love," it was said, as though this was educationally sufficient.⁴¹

During 1908 an Aboriginal man made the wry observation to Police Magistrate Grant that "the only Supreme Being he knew anything about was the lock-up."⁴² The Senior Girls of 1908 were given ample opportunity however, to become better acquainted with a Christian Supreme Being through prayers, singing, Bible classes and Anglican services conducted sometimes thrice daily. For them, Christianity was reduced to a set of rituals and memory exercises, tailored to a people whose capacities were praised, but whose advancement was deliberately curtailed. 'Bush agnosticism' seems to have been the predominant faith of north Queensland's Europeans, but newspaper editors were still willing to argue in support of Christianising Aborigines. The *Trinity Times* admired St Albans church, which it saw as the source of Gribble's vaunted success in civilising members of an 'immature race':

From that little temple all the laws that guide Yarrabah have been promulgated [and] all the teaching that has reformed the lives of the dusky inhabitants...People often credit me

³⁸ *AN*, 14 November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.

³⁹ Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

⁴⁰ Report of visit to Yarrabah made by A. Burton, 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.

⁴¹ *AN*, 14 November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.

⁴² *MP*, 22 September 1908, p.5.

with being indifferent to churches and with disbelieving in their efficacy. Perhaps I do for adults, [but not for] the younger brothers of our humanity.⁴³

To Miss Cheffins, work and prayer were the central features of a civilised, virtuous Christian life. By these measures, Cheffins usually judged the Senior Girls “good on the whole.”⁴⁴ On a typical day Cheffins wrote in the Matron’s Log that:

the girls worked well all day. Sixty-nine rows were done at the plantation...attended morning service, midday instruction and some of them evening service [and] a few of us gathered late for a special prayer.⁴⁵

When the torrential rain of the wet season set in, the girls worked and prayed in their quarters: “It rained heavily until nearly noon,” Cheffins wrote in February 1908, so “instead of going to the service we had prayers in the cottage. A good deal of sewing was done and the girls were set to washing when the rain abated. We closed the day with hymns and prayers.”⁴⁶ To Cheffins’ chagrin, happy compliance with the demanding religious programme was not always guaranteed: “It has been found necessary,” lamented the Matron, “to make a rule that no senior girl shall leave the church during service, owing to quite an epidemic among the girls for doing so.”⁴⁷ Later Cheffins added that “Jessie Keppel was naughty about going to the evening service,”⁴⁸ and was vexed by the fact that some “of the older girls are not very reverent in church.”⁴⁹ In March, Cheffins was shocked by one of the girl’s strong disinclination to go to church: “Lucy Gomarra lost her temper today because I insisted upon her attending the midday service, & she said she ‘would hit’ me.”⁵⁰

Sometimes Cheffins was encouraged by and encouraging of the apparent Christian development of the girls. “As we left the church,” she wrote one night:

Eva Byrung said very earnestly that they ‘are going to be good,’ & Annie and Jessie Mason gave their promise...so there is room for hope with regard to them; I told them they can only be good in one way, that is asking Jesus to help them.⁵¹

⁴³ AN, 14 November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.

⁴⁴ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 21 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁴⁵ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 10 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁴⁶ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 20 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁴⁷ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 23 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁴⁸ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 2 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁴⁹ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 11 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁵⁰ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 31 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁵¹ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 6 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

The first Aboriginal people residing at Yarrabah during the 1890s seem to have regarded Anglicanism as an irrelevancy, or a set of rituals to be practiced strategically. The Senior Girls of 1908 give the appearance of being more devout than their predecessors, but wore their religion lightly, even as they bore witness to the sacred expressions of their Aboriginal ancestors being reduced to an evening's light entertainment at Yarrabah, in parodies of song and dance. Gribble's cross-cultural tolerance extended to permitting residents to perform corroboree-style entertainments of indeterminate cultural significance to be performed for visitors to Yarrabah. These shows were extremely popular among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. "A great corroboree was held in the school last night after the meeting,"⁵² Cheffins wrote enthusiastically after one such event, which she was pleased to report "received the congratulations of the [visitors]."⁵³ In the private Aboriginal space of the bush, ceremonies – generalised by Gribble as 'corroborees' – continued to be conducted among the 'camp blacks' of the Yarrabah peninsula. It is reasonable to assume a significant variation in content between the ceremonies of Gungganydji people among themselves and shows put on for white visitors to Yarrabah, but it is also worth considering that more may have been taking place, overlooked by missionaries.

Misdemeanours etc.

Cheffins devoted a good many pages of the Matron's Log to assessing the virtue of the Senior Girls, praying for their souls and imploring them to strive towards Christian salvation. The Matron placed great stock in maxims: "May Thyme, I believe, is learning to think before she acts,"⁵⁴ but was sometimes disappointed: "May Thyme is behaving badly again."⁵⁵ Cheffins measured the goodness of the girls in their obedience: "Late last night Caroline was punished for disobedience and naughtiness,"⁵⁶ and chided the girls in its absence: girls "talked too much during the latter part of the public meeting."⁵⁷ Cheffins' displeasure peaked at very low levels: "There was some trouble in the early morning owing to some leaves having been removed from the work book,"⁵⁸ and she accentuated the positive: "Conduct was good on the whole. Only one of the older girls is really unsatisfactory, Ada Lyall."⁵⁹ Or on another occasion: "The conduct of the girls today has been

⁵² Yarrabah Matron's Log, 29 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 8 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁵⁵ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 22 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁵⁶ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 13 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁵⁷ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 11 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁵⁸ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 12 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁵⁹ Yarrabah Matron's Log, 8 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

satisfactory with 3 exceptions, but I trust the trouble will soon pass over; the sad part of it is that there would be none but for one girl, or so it seems.”⁶⁰



Figure 8.6. Rank, discipline, order, examination: hand-tinted post card of the Yarrabah band, undated. When this musical ensemble began giving performances in Cairns in the early 1900s, it filled halls and received rave reviews in the *Morning Post* as an object of absolute wonder for its proof of a racial characteristic – higher order musicality – with which Aboriginal people had not been credited by Europeans.⁶¹ Yarrabah concerts were said to “furnish an object lesson to those in doubt as to whether the aboriginals are capable of attaining a higher civilisation.”⁶² As such, the band was an effective generator of publicity and much needed money for the mission, as well as forming a part of Gribble’s disciplinary regime. Apart from its repertoire, the band was notable for quasi-military drill, a rifle-wielding guard and Orientalising, mock-Fijian/Ghurkha-style dress. In this image, the band’s musical director William Reeves stands off in seeming irrelevancy to the viewer’s right; the titular head, the ‘drum major’ (Menmuny?) in pith helmet, stands impotent and barefoot to the left; while Gribble imposes his authority, surveying the troops from the side, having equipped himself with a riding crop which he appears ready to use, and outfitted himself in a similar style to a British Boer War officer.
www.oceania.ethnographica.com

Cheffins’ outlook remained determinedly optimistic and her tone resolutely kind. The same could not be said for the mission’s other journal-keeper, the put-upon Gribble, who scratched out terse, hard-bitten phraseology in the wee small hours, gnawed by the insubordination he saw all around. It was common for girls, absconders in particular, to be locked in their dormitory as punishment. “Sarah and

⁶⁰ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 2 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁶¹ “For those who have been accustomed to regard the Australian aboriginal as a wretched specimen of humanity so far as intellect and laxity of purpose is concerned, no greater surprise could have experienced than to have encountered the Yarrabah Brass Band...the performances may be regarded as little short of marvellous.” *MP*, 5 January 1904, p.3.

⁶² *MP*, 18 September 1905, p.2.

Anne ran away when church service going,” wrote Gribble: “Locked them up.”⁶³ Cheffins, on the other hand, gave different emphasis to the same punishment: “Jessie Mason has gone back to the dormitory and will be a good girl I hope.”⁶⁴

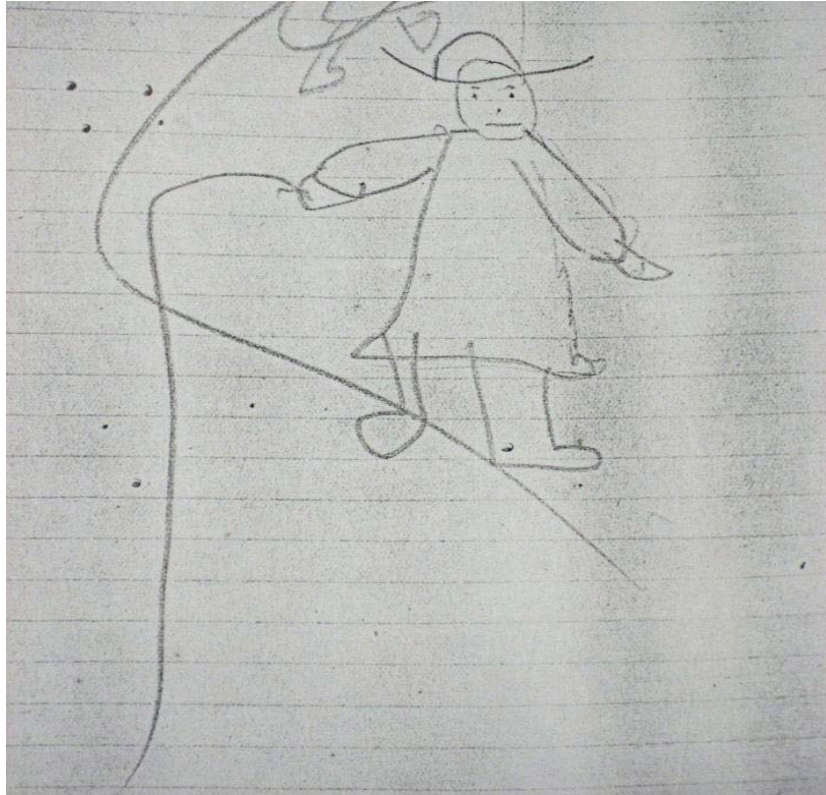


Figure 8.7. In priestly hat and cassock – and wielding a stockwhip – this would appear to be a portrait of the mission head, composed perhaps by one of his young sons. Ernest Gribble is well remembered at Yarrabah and his sincere concern for the well-being of Aboriginal people is not in question, his work was hampered by his personal shortcomings and the destructive racial overlay of Yarrabah’s objectives. Gribble’s letters and diaries create a picture of a man who was undoubtedly courageous and dedicated, but also dangerously ill-equipped for the role he had undertaken. Gribble transformed in time into a religious despot, enforcing his scheme of ‘uplift’ through rigid and violent discipline.

E.R. Gribble Papers, AIATSIS, MS1515/1.

The Matron much preferred shows of remorse to the imposition of punitive measures. She was impressed by obedience, male authority and honest confession; even if the latter was not always standard practice at Yarrabah and the second sometimes misused. Cheffins’ preferred to leave judgement to the higher authorities in the patriarchy – Gribble and Jesus: “Dadda’ had a very serious talk with the girls in church tonight...May Bignell and May Thyme are very both very penitent for all

⁶³ Gribble’s journal, 11 June 1905, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.

⁶⁴ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 21 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

past disobedience and wrong-doing...May the Saviour help them.”⁶⁵ Two days later the Matron was still expressing hope that the unspecified unpleasantness would be shortly resolved by the intervention of the patriarch: “Last night ‘Dadda’ had a long talk with some of the girls and the result seems to be a better understanding all round; I feel we can rest assured that all serious trouble is over with the senior girls.”⁶⁶ It might be remembered that as this official version was being drafted, Ada Pickles was conducting a relationship with, and possibly pregnant to, Willie Clarke, who was married to Janie, with whom Gribble was pursuing a relationship and who, in September of 1908 bore him a child.⁶⁷ When Ada Pickles publically accused Janie of carrying Gribble’s baby, Gribble banished the appellant to Fitzroy Island.⁶⁸ To place this in the context of Cheffins’ moral framework: “A cup was broken during tea time. Ada Pickles, without pressure admitted she did it in a temper, but the open honesty of the confession made a few earnest words from ‘Dada’ all that seemed to me was needed.”⁶⁹ The sin of breaking a cup would seem by comparison, a minor one, but the Matron’s Log was certainly not the place to weigh the soul of the mission’s head.

There are hints that Cheffins knew that the Gribble marriage was in terminal decline. Cheffins noted that Amelia Gribble (who loathed missionary life), was in the habit of confining herself to her quarters and “not being well.”⁷⁰ Once Amelia Gribble had left, Cheffins cautiously observed “girls now baking regularly for Dada in the mission house.”⁷¹ There were many girls at Yarrabah whose worldliness undoubtedly exceeded the cosseted reality of the prim Miss Cheffins, yet whatever she knew, or secretly feared, Cheffins made no mention of any of this, clasped her rosary beads and spoke to the purported Senior Girls as children: “May Thyme’s behaviour today has been ridiculously foolish and babyish,”⁷² or: “Caroline is a good girl now.”⁷³

Most Senior Girls would be married before the age of twenty, pending Gribble’s authorisation. At the mission they were drilled in a dogmatic brand of morality which emphasised female sexual purity but patently did not accord with the moral order of the Trinity Bay district or the complexities of their lives. Many knew the harsh realities of having been stolen children, abused domestics and abandoned teenage mothers, or had perhaps been dragged from a fringe world of racially unacceptable relationships, alcohol, opium ash, violence and prostitution. It is probable that many bore the scars of serious psychological harm. There are tell-tale signs of the stressfulness of the girls’ lives at Yarrabah,

⁶⁵ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 1 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁶⁶ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 3 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁶⁷ Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, pp.74-92.

⁶⁸ Halse, *A Terribly Wild Man*, p.88.

⁶⁹ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 11 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁷⁰ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 20 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁷¹ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 14 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁷² Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 13 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁷³ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 8 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

persistent bed-wetting for instance, for which girls were punished. One girl “still has a wet blanket” wrote Cheffins. She “hides it if she can; & tells lies about it if found out.”⁷⁴ To Cheffins, bed-wetting represented a form of moral failure.

Topsy, Kitty and Goon Goo

The behaviour of Topsy troubled Cheffins: “Topsy is not herself. There was a little misunderstanding last night and that may account for it, but Topsy is a little disappointing.”⁷⁵ The Matron may have been disappointed by Topsy, but this paled in comparison to the ‘disappointment’ caused *to* girls such as Topsy by the dominant culture. In 1901 in a single police action, two Aboriginal girls, Topsy and an older girl named Kitty, were removed to Yarrabah from their residences on the Atherton Tablelands. The reasons given for Topsy’s removal are not clear but mixed-descent would be the simple and usual trigger for such an action. Roth had believed Topsy’s removal illegal, but in 1908 she was still at Yarrabah, a Senior Girl. Kitty on the other hand was removed because local Europeans objected to her relationship with a Chinese man named Goon Goo. Goon Goo was charged with harbouring and fined £3 plus costs. On learning of this, Roth demanded Kitty’s “immediate release from Yarrabah” and vented his fury at the “high-handed action”⁷⁶ of the local Protector Shepherd, who had acted beyond his authority. In the meantime, Kitty took matters into her own hands. She took flight from the mission and brought three others with her. They were shortly recaptured by police but Kitty defiantly told them that she would not be detained at Yarrabah.⁷⁷

Roth received a letter from Goon Goo requesting permission to marry Kitty, adding that he was willing to cover any costs involved with her return to Herberton.⁷⁸ Shepherd had informed Goon Goo that while “not unlawful,” the marriage was “undesirable,” and therefore refused.⁷⁹ The Commissioner of Police Parry-Oakeden was drawn into the matter, explaining to Roth:

I have always regarded it as inexpedient to permit co-habitation between Chinamen and aboriginal women and have sought to discourage or prevent it as much as possible; and I was under the impression that the other ‘Protectors’ held similar views.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 25 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁷⁵ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 6 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁷⁶ Roth letter, QSA 15038/1/27.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Goon Goo letter to Roth 13 August 1901, QSA RSI 15038/1/27.

⁷⁹ Letter to Roth from Goon Goo’s solicitor, QSA RSI 15038/1/27.

⁸⁰ W. Parry-Oakeden, 4 September 1901, QSA 15038/1/27.

Yet “Beyond being a chinaman,” Roth could “find nothing against Goon Goo’s character.”⁸¹ In October 1901, Goon Goo and Kitty married.

Minnie Mays

The disconnection between Cheffins’ constructions of the Senior Girls and their personal experiences, known and presumed, is remarkable. One evening in February 1908, Cheffins wrote in the Matron’s Log: “Am sorry to have to report Minnie Mays for disobedience and surliness,”⁸² later adding: “Minnie Mays is again manifesting a resentful spirit.”⁸³ This was not to be the end of Cheffins’ sorrow regarding Minnie Mays and her spirit. In March she wrote:

Am sorry to have to report that Caroline’s disobedience was chiefly the result of Minnie Mays influence. Minnie has shown a very bad spirit today but I hope...earnest words will have effect.⁸⁴

Evidently earnest words had no such effect. Minnie Mays did as many others had done and ran away from the mission. “Minnie Mays did not return to the cottage during the night,”⁸⁵ wrote Cheffins. She “was brought back during the day.”⁸⁶ The Matron steadfastly maintained her hopefulness: “The cloud hanging over the house for the last few days has, I trust, passed. There was a good spirit throughout the day today. I was made very happy in the early morning to see Minnie Mays taking Caroline lovingly under her care.”⁸⁷ Cheffins’ optimism was extending but foundered a month later when she noted: “After evening service, ‘Dadda’ sent 5 of the elder dormitory girls here for special discipline as their conduct is unsatisfactory, but we hope they will improve; they are Jessie Watson, Minnie Winton, Annie Callaghan, Eva [Byrung], Minnie Mays.”⁸⁸ More is known of Minnie Mays through some surviving correspondence from the previous year. In 1907, a letter written by a man named Fred Mays had reached Mr. Howard at the Aboriginal Protector’s Office. It read:

I beg to tell you that I have an adopted daughter Minnie Mays...whom Dr. Roth had taken away from her home six years ago last August...Since Minnie went away I have news

⁸¹ Roth letter, undated, QSA 15038/1/27.

⁸² Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 24 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁸³ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 31 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁸⁴ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 12 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁸⁵ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 13 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 14 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

⁸⁸ Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 6 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

from her constantly that the Missionary wants her to marry, also she sends her word that she wants to come back to her home. I wish to ask you whether Minnie may be allowed to come & also be sent to me. Her mother took it very much to heart after Minnie been taken away and died soon after. Will you be good enough to let me know whether you will have Minnie sent home.⁸⁹

Howard contacted Gribble, seeking further information about Minnie Mays and to establish the facts of the matter. Gribble gave Howard his interpretation of Minnie Mays' situation, crediting her with being a year or two older than was likely and highlighting the racial blending and therefore moral ambiguity of her origins. "Fred Mays," wrote Gribble, "is an aged South Sea Islander who lived with her mother (an abor.) for a short time. Minnie's own father is European...Minnie is a bright, active and happy girl [who is] happy and contented...about seventeen years of age."⁹⁰ Again, Gribble was forced to fend off the familiar, rumours of forced marriages being conducted at Yarrabah. "There is no such thing as any girl being forced to marry against her wishes or intentions," Gribble wrote. Minnie has:

repeatedly written to Fred Mays when he has written having heard all sorts of rumours through others, telling lies...I have shown [to Minnie] Fred Mays' letter and told her to reply.⁹¹

And indeed, a letter to Howard from Minnie Mays was forthcoming. "I do not want to go back from yarrabah," it began:

I was here six years now and I am not going to go back. I am going to stick to yarrabah as long as I live because it is the black peoples home, and the missionaries are giving up their lives for the people...Mr Gribble shewed me the letter and I read it, what it said in that letter it is not true, I did not send word back saying that I wanted to go back, and the missionaries did not even try to make me marry any of the boys at yarrabah I could please myself...There are some one that are trying to make trouble in the mission they are not going to get me back from yarrabah.⁹²

⁸⁹ Fred Mays, letter to Howard, Protector of Aborigines, 29 December 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

⁹⁰ Gribble letter to Howard, Protector of Aborigines, 4 February 1907, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Minnie Mays letter to Howard, Protector of Aborigines, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

Realities, representations and runaways



Figure 8.8. A postcard from the early 1900s shows a visit of Lord Hopetoun to Yarrabah, with white people in black and black people in white. The silhouetted figures of authority loom on the horizon as the discipline of the official welcoming group wavers somewhat; arms are crossed, heads are bowed and regimentation is only vaguely acknowledged.

JOL image no. API-039-0001-0004.

Beyond the Act, Gribble rarely referred to Queensland law; even less Gungganydji law, operating instead as the supreme authority, the self-appointed judge and gaoler of the Yarrabah peninsula. Individual acts of resistance brought forth imprisonment and beatings. Residents were “punished for defiance of authority”⁹³ and punished if thought to be considering departure.⁹⁴ While some still preferred Yarrabah to the uncertainties of the outside world, others took their chances and escaped. “Launch returned 10 o’clock having on board 8 absconders (of 14 who had taken their leave) & 2 children under warrant in charge of a police constable,”⁹⁵ Gribble recorded in June 1905, adding later, “Sarah and Anne ran away when church service going...Nellie & Amelia packed up and ready to leave. Locked them up in dorm.”⁹⁶ Sarah, Anne, Nellie and Amelia were persistent absconders. In 1905 Sarah made several attempts to escape with other girls. On the first attempt and unable to find the road out, Sarah and Annie returned to Yarrabah. “Sarah asked Annie to go with her so locked her

⁹³ Gribble letter to Roth, 12 July 1900, QSA 5356/1/101.

⁹⁴ Gribble’s journal, 1905, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/1.

⁹⁵ Gribble’s journal, 5 June 1905, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.

⁹⁶ Gribble’s journal, 11 June 1905, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.

up.” Later that day, Gribble added that Sarah had “ill-treated Annie so locked her up again.”⁹⁷ Two days later Doris became Sarah’s travelling companion: “Doris Smith and Sarah packed up clothing to go away at dusk, locked them both up.”⁹⁸

For many young Aboriginal women, the freedom and familiarity afforded by even the most rugged camp life had greater appeal than the harsh restrictions and indoctrination experienced in Yarrabah. “Five girls ran away this afternoon,” Gribble noted. “These girls have been sent to us by the police and Dr. Roth having been living with Chinamen & Malays...Sent Phillip & Andrew & Denis in dinghy after the runaways.”⁹⁹ In 1902, Gribble had written to Roth requesting Amelia be removed to the Fraser Island mission:

I have again had difficulty with the girl Amelia who has again gone off to the Chinese settlements on the Mulgrave. This is the fourth time she has done this, and taken two others with her...Amelia is an incorrigible...The old craving is in her and what with opium and drink, her future is awful to contemplate.¹⁰⁰

Gribble added later: “Amelia and her companion Rebecca otherwise Lucy are over here [Yarrabah]. They were found by the lads just over the range in a S.S.I. camp.”¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, Amelia was determined to part company with the mission, to take others with her and to assert their legal rights if necessary. In 1905 Roth received another letter explaining:

Nellie Smith, Amelia, Sarah and Nellie Port Douglas were brought here by one of the mission boys who said he found them camped on the beach in the mangrove on the other side of the inlet. They had refused to return to Yarrabah and said they wanted to see the police...The gins...were asked if they would return to Yarrabah and they said no they would rather go to gaol than go back. They said the food was hard and they got no change and they did not like the treatment they got and did not want to return.¹⁰²

Gribble wrote to Roth requesting:

the assistance of the Government in promptly returning those who abscond...The police tell me that they have no power to detain those who abscond from Yarrabah & that they

⁹⁷ Gribble’s journal, 13 June 1905, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.

⁹⁸ Gribble’s journal, 15 July 1905, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.

⁹⁹ Gribble’s journal, 12 June 1905, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.

¹⁰⁰ Roth quoting Gribble letter, 30 September 1902, QSA SRS 4356/1/54.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Office of Protector of Aborigines, Cairns, 17 June 1905, QSA SRS 53356/1/101.

have received meat & other rations while in their care. Can it be wondered at why they chose to leave the reserve?¹⁰³

The child race at home



Figure 8.9. In the image above, nuclear families and domestic order are passed off as the reality of an outlying settlement of Yarrabah.
Cairns Historical Society.

Those who did not choose to leave the reserve, or were unable to do so, had their lives represented as if they were characters in children's story book. A clipping from Gribble's scrapbook records the impressions of a visitor who toured the premises with the Matron, apparently stepping through the looking glass in the process. It has been included here as a final statement in the contemporary representation of Aboriginal women at Yarrabah:

¹⁰³ Gribble letter to Roth, 12 July 1900, QSA 5356/1/101.

After breakfast...the wives trooped up to the store with their ration bags. More girls most of them, many very pretty...endowed with the large expressive eyes and sound white teeth of their care. Some had tiny piccaninnies in their arms or clinging to their skirts. All were clean and neatly enough dressed...Later on we saw those childish matrons on their own hearthstones, during the visit of inspection which takes place every day. Each married pair have their own particular nest – snug little one roomed cottages with fireplaces for cooking, blanketed beds, small dining tables on which the day's allowance of damper and fruit are laid and clean swept earthen floors. In many of the tiny homes there were pathetic little attempt at adornment...but the absence of even the shadow of luxury made one draw distinctions between black and white races decidedly to the discredit of the latter. For in those simple surroundings there was an air of almost idyllic contentment.

As the lady inspecting passed from one to another of the small dwellings the young wives met her with artless tales and displayed various small accessories with pride. Then when the matron praised the little devices, laughing and dimpling like the children they were, they would hide their head on her shoulder and doubtless blush with pleasure under their swarthy skins. One or two loiterers caught gossiping in the very act, ran like naughty children when they saw the matron coming.¹⁰⁴

The account perfectly captures the feminised and infantilised constructions of Aboriginality projected by missionaries as they sought to reform Aboriginal people, as well as the constant surveillance to which mission inmates were subject – even in the allegedly private sphere of the home, and the yawning chasm that opened up between representation and reality at Yarrabah. The *image* of Yarrabah and its works as promoted by the missionaries could scarcely have been at greater variance to the work re-education camp from which inmates ran. “I left Yarrabah with regret,” the visitor concluded. “I seemed to be leaving behind a peaceful haven where no whisper of outside turmoil could come; no war news or plague scares to ruffle one’s serenity and I envied Mr. Gribble his lot.”¹⁰⁵

Conclusion: chastity, discipline, acculturation and labour

In 1908, removal to Yarrabah had become the conventional response for dealing with elements deemed racially and morally problematic to the white community. Although many would elect to

¹⁰⁴ Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

¹⁰⁵ Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

remain there, few who had come to Yarrabah during the Protection era had done so of their own volition. The sexuality of Aboriginal people generated great undercurrents of racial anxiety among Anglo-Australians for its fraying of the racial distinctions so necessary to the colonial project and its hierarchy. The psycho-sexual drama of discipline and punishment unfolding on behalf of the chastity of Senior Girls at Yarrabah speaks of this fear. Gender reform had become a central object of the mission's ideology with special scrutiny towards young women over whom singular control was exercised. The paradisiacal image promulgated by the mission bore little resemblance to the thudding reality to which residents awoke each day. As well as being stolen, half-starved, subject to physical assaults and imprisonment, there were fights and numerous attempted escapes. Yarrabah girls were locked in their dormitory by night until they married, or died. Daily life was dominated by strict routine and long hours of hard work. 'Language' and traditional Aboriginal cultural practices were forbidden, while untrained teachers gave the Yarrabah young women some crude exposure to Western literacy and numeracy on top of relentless Christian observance and endless domestic duties. This was considered an adequate education for an Aboriginal girl. There was no expectation among staff that there could be, or ought to be, any future for Aboriginal women other than in servitude to Europeans and men, preferably in the controlled setting of the mission.

The voices of the Senior Girls themselves are faint in the historical record, but a few isolated letters and documents help to give a sense of their subjective impressions. About to be shunted into adult responsibilities, the Senior Girls of 1908 were only in their mid-teens. They were not simple blessed angels of shining Christian love graduating from a sort of Aboriginal convent finishing school, but complex human beings with infants, stories, broken connections, hopes, purposes, reflections and experiences, most of which were alien to the Yarrabah Matron. Cheffins appears to have had almost no understanding of Aboriginal culture or saw it as a shallow thing and it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which she related to the Senior Girls as *Aboriginal* girls, rather than young women placed in her care. She seemed to regard them as children undergoing training and being brought to order. Cheffins left the specifics of race theory to the theorists and worried more for the well-being of her girls, upon whom so much was inscribed.

Chapter 9

White Cairns

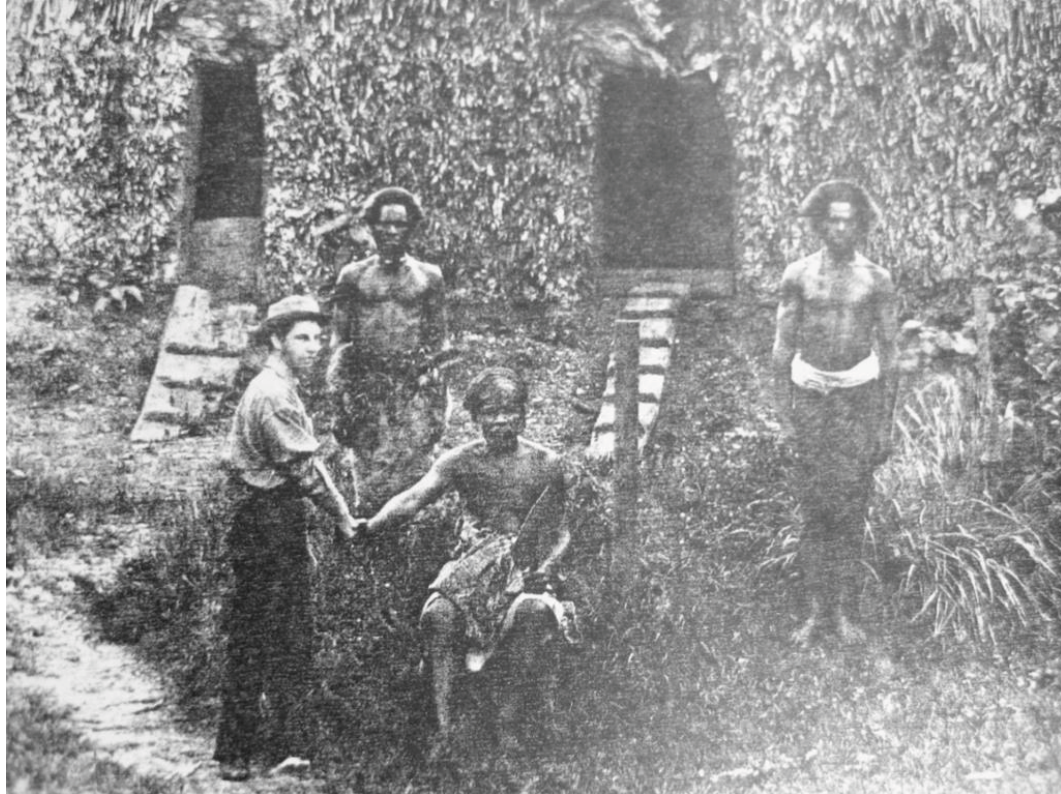


Figure 9.1. Hambleton Mill Records, ANU:NB.

From archived documents of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company, the origins and purposes of this enigmatic image are unknown, but the contrived account of amicable colonial relations seems to relate to the question of coloured labour. The composition includes a man displaying props of Aboriginality, a boomerang and an animal skin, and as the bush hut is constructed from cane trash rather than the plant material used in the Pacific islands, the photograph was probably taken in Queensland. The posture of the central figure alludes to a European conception of regal importance, a 'king' bestowing favour upon the courteous approach of a cane industry representative by way of a European handshake. This message of stately diplomacy is reinforced by the presence of two 'noble courtiers' in the form of Pacific Islander 'advisors,' stripped to the waist, as Europeans imagined Islanders, not as Islanders dressed in Queensland. While a combined 'black court' may have been an acceptable piece of colonial nonsense for European postcard recipients, the idea might have been very strange to Pacific Islander and Aboriginal people, whose interactions were often positive, but quite not so theatrical. Who is the intended audience? The image would be interesting if composed by missionaries or on a cane-farming photographer's whim, but its CSR provenance, elaborate staging and unusual language point to other purposes. Around 1900, the public image of cane growers and labour recruiters was dreadful in the minds of many white Australians and this photograph could have been a confused attempt at winning back support, but its problems of plausibility make this unlikely. Aboriginal people would recognise that expressions of European tribute paid to Aboriginal authority were almost non-existent in colonial Australia, so one assumes the photograph was not a piece of propaganda directed at them. Is the message of harmonious intercultural exchange in Queensland directed at Pacific Islanders, whose trust and labour were sought by companies such as Colonial Sugar Refining?

Introduction

In the early years of the twentieth century, Australia was experiencing something of a colonial hangover. The shock of rapid modernisation had brought about an intensification of nationalist ideology, in which racism was becoming entrenched. The *Mackay Chronicle* considered the conundrum of linking national progress to racial uniformity. “We seem to take it for granted” began an editorial piece, “that huge developments of science, art and literature and the mighty commercial and financial schemes afloat must necessarily bring what is called social advancement.” But progress in north Queensland presented “difficulties and problems not yet solved.” In “our own part of the world there has been one vexing question,” it was “the question of coloured labour.”¹ The new Australian nation had confirmed white race building as a founding principle, but the towns of the rainy north survived on a just a handful of primary industries, industries which could be obliterated by blanket immigration restrictions against non-whites. Commissioner Dr Reed had told the Sugar Commission that without Pacific Islanders “it was hard to realise what practical use North Queensland, especially that portion...on the eastern seaboard could be put to.”² In Cairns, many thought that without Pacific Islanders, the district was doomed. The *Morning Post* turned to pathos as it mused upon exclusive white nationalism in the tropics and the Cairns district expunged of Islanders, as was sought by local Labor man and *Trinity Times/Cairns Advocate* editor Thomas Givens. Should Givens win office, thought the *Post*, the white “working man need work no longer. He will be dead. Want and misery will have killed him.”³ The *Post* lampooned:

Over the deserted city of Cairns will rise the plaintive wail of the blacks’ corroboree.
Posterity will drive their four-in-hand over the graves of the dead white men...On the rocks of Cape Grafton the billows will roll as they rolled before, and the tidal waters ripple on the shores of the inlet as they may have done for countless ages, but no beating of the churning screw or the rattling of the anchor chain will be heard; but the bark canoe will steal over the placid waters carrying posterity to visit the home of their forefathers at deserted Yarrabah.
Hooray...for a White Australia.⁴

Responding to concerns about immigration, national security, defence and racial purity, Australians were becoming increasingly concerned to preserve a White Australia. This put the northern district in a very awkward situation. Located in a geographical realm deemed

¹ *MC*, 13 January 1902, p.2.

² *MP*, 4 June 1901, p.3.

³ *MP*, 18 February 1902, p.2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

hazardous to white physiology, the attractions of Cairns and its verdant hinterland had not been irresistible to great numbers of European colonists. In its arid and humid variants, tropical Australia was the climatic antithesis of northern Europe and in accordance with colonial convention, north Queensland's coastal industries were heavily dependent upon coloured labour. This situation was further complicated by the expense and scarcity of white workers. Cairnsites expressed extreme scepticism that northern Australia could be effectively occupied or developed without coloured labour and this belief formed the basis of their objection to racial exclusions. While it seems that most were unconvinced by the horrific scenarios of white debilitation said to be caused by long-term tropical exposure, few were willing to risk toiling in the canefields or in banana plantations to prove their immunity. Neither did this work appeal to their sense of racial dignity. At the dawn of the new century, Cairns stood at a fork in the road. Either the nation must accept a tropical variation in the White Australia ideal, or a fundamental logic of race – that Europeans could not work and thrive in the tropics – must be discarded.

From the vortex

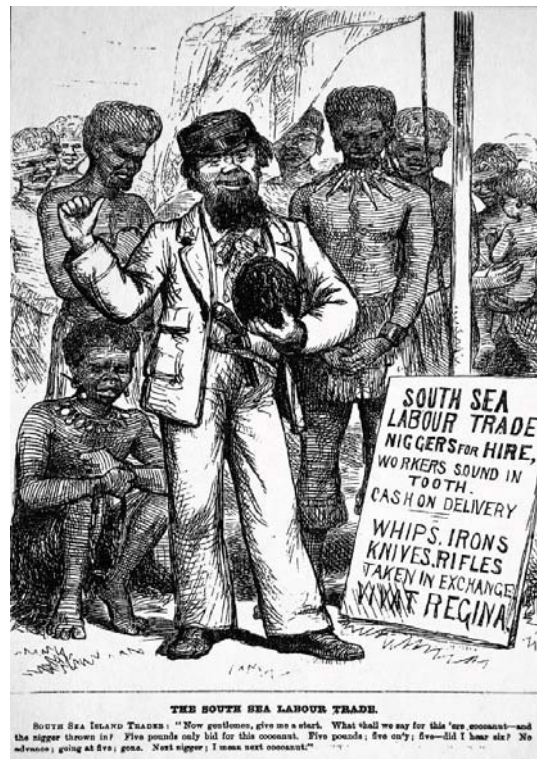


Figure 9.2. In contrast to the previous image, a cartoon from the *Bulletin* in which Pacific Islanders are auctioned for less than the price of a coconut, fits more closely with many Australians' assumptions about the violent and exploitative basis upon which the Pacific Island labour trade was founded. *Bulletin*, 30 April 1881, p.13.

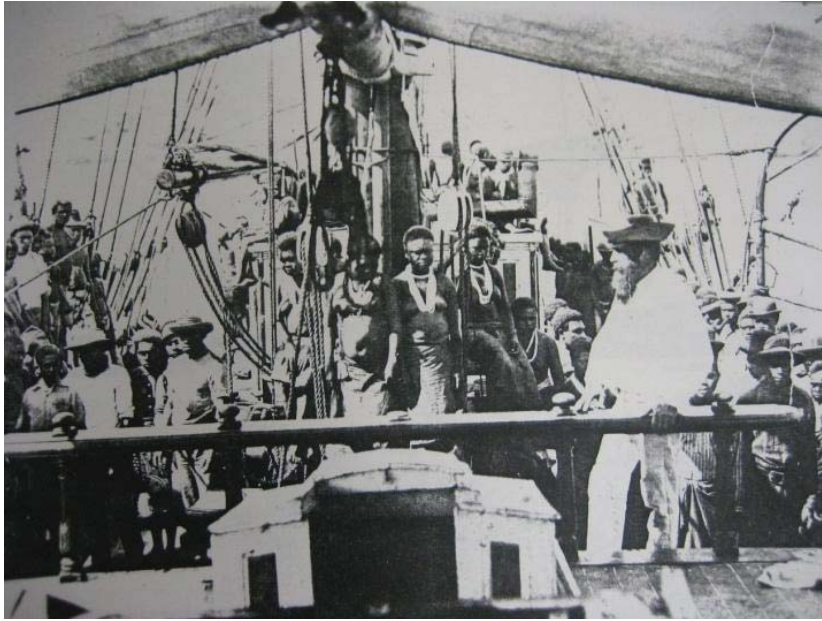


Figure 9.3, Figure 9.4. Images from the labour trade. Top: Pacific Islander men and women not yet outfitted as workers in Queensland are gathered, apparently freely, on the deck of the *Fearless*, a labour vessel from which many Cairns planters received workers. No stinking slave-holds, whips, chains or other accoutrements of slavery are in evidence. Bottom: Bristling with firearms, Islanders and recruiters have been assembled in a formation that blends the aesthetics of a Victorian museum display case and the informal posturing of a sporting club photograph. Unlikely to match the supreme fitness and powerful musculature of the Islanders, the recruiters wisely retain their shirts, which processing limitations have caused to glow with angelic radiance. With no less than three rifles trained in his direction, one recruiter appears slightly apprehensive but the overwhelming message of this photograph is of a state of trust existing between all parties.

Top: Cairns Historical Society.

Bottom: National Library of Australia nla.pic-an5770757-v.

Plantation workers in the Cairns district included Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Sinhalese, Javanese and Malaysians, but most were Melanesian people, known in Australia as ‘Kanakas,’ drawn from the arc of Pacific islands north-east of Queensland including the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides. Most came from the islands of Malaita, Guadalcanal, Tanna, Ambrim, Aoba and Epi. The Pacific Islander labour trade had a particularly poor image beyond the sugar districts, never having recovered from the damaging allegations of the 1860s and 1870s from which members of the Australian public formed a view that labour-trading ‘blackbirders’ were little better than kidnappers and murderers, and the perception that Pacific Islanders, as a race, were their helpless patsies. “The Kanaka is at best a savage,” it was once said in the *Queenslander*, “often tractable and biddable, but still undeniably a savage...a child to be protected from the ill-usage or deception of cruel or designing men.” He was, furthermore, “incapable of guarding his own rights.”⁵ An image of slavery or semi-slavery clung to the importation of Pacific Islanders, not helped by the aristocratic pretensions of planters who filled their canefields with workers physically resembling African slaves.

By 1900 the Pacific Islander labour trade had been thoroughly made over. The worst excesses of the blackbirding days were long past and a combination of plunging sugar prices and political pressures had caused the breakup of the large plantations, but the *Post* still found itself rejecting accusations from an earlier time, “sugar growers are...not the bloated aristocratic nigger drivers as most Southerners paint them,”⁶ it protested. The *Post* refuted the *Bulletin’s* allegations that white Cairnsites “revel in the worst vices of slavery, immorality and greed; that every citizen owns at least half a dozen abject and fear-stricken slaves,” and that “our tropical plantations...are manured by the bodies of these slaves,”⁷ but doubts about indentured overseas labour had become embroiled in the push for a White Australia. Islanders were now represented as threat to both industrial cohesion and Australian racial unity. Intent focused on the cessation of indentured Pacific Island labour.

⁵ *Queenslander*, 14 May 1881, p.625.

⁶ *MP*, 8 February 1901, p.2.

⁷ *MP*, 20 February 1903, p.2. Clive Moore has shown the extent to which contract work in Queensland was voluntary and appealing to Pacific Islanders, and examined the persistence of its remembrance as slavery in relation to the Labor party, White Australia and current injustices experienced by Islanders. Clive Moore, ‘Kanakas, kidnapping and slavery: myths from the nineteenth century labour trade and their relevance to Australian Melanesians,’ *Kabar Seberang Maphilindo*, no 8-9, 1981, pp.78-92; *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Mackay*, Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, Boroko, Papua New Guinea, 1985.



Figure 9.5, left: www.oceaniaethnographica.com.
 Figure 9.6, right: JOL image no. 172010.

Figure 9.5 is a postcard image entitled *A Noted Headhunter, Roviana, New Georgia, Solomon Islands*. Figure 9.6 was captured on a plantation in Queensland in apparent replication of the cannibal trope. Standing outside what appears to be a residential hut; stripped of his work clothes and clad in a loincloth and holding an arrow (?), we might perceive the cane worker to be glowering at the indignity. Emphasizing the most rhetorically useful features, Europeans constructed different Kanakas: Laborites wanted Queensland free of ‘servile races’ to preserve high wages, White race builders wished Pacific Islanders gone for fear of their genetic contribution to the Australian nation; humane members of the general public were dismayed that Pacific Islanders with long-term connections to Queensland might be ejected against their strong wishes, or repulsed by the idea that slavery might exist in Australia; planters wished to carry on as per usual and missionaries wished to recruit Islanders to their own cause. At the height of the labour abuses imbroglio the *Queenslander* had argued: “The Kanaka is a savage...whose short contact with civilisation works little change in him.”⁸ Later, during the push for a whiter Australia, the *Post* countered: “The kanaka is not a blood thirsty cannibal.”⁹ The “Kanaka...has a heart – a soul if you will...he has a sensitive nature, capable of recognizing a kindness and returning a favor and can be appealed to much more effectively with a kind word of authority than with a green hide.”¹⁰ The *Post* added, the “majority of the Islanders are the picture of health and always ready with a laugh, and some of the old hands can crack a joke which might even penetrate the skull of a Federal Minister.”¹¹

⁸ *Queenslander*, 14 May 1881, p.625.

⁹ *MP*, 12 March 1901, pp.4-5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *MP*, 8 February 1901, p.2.

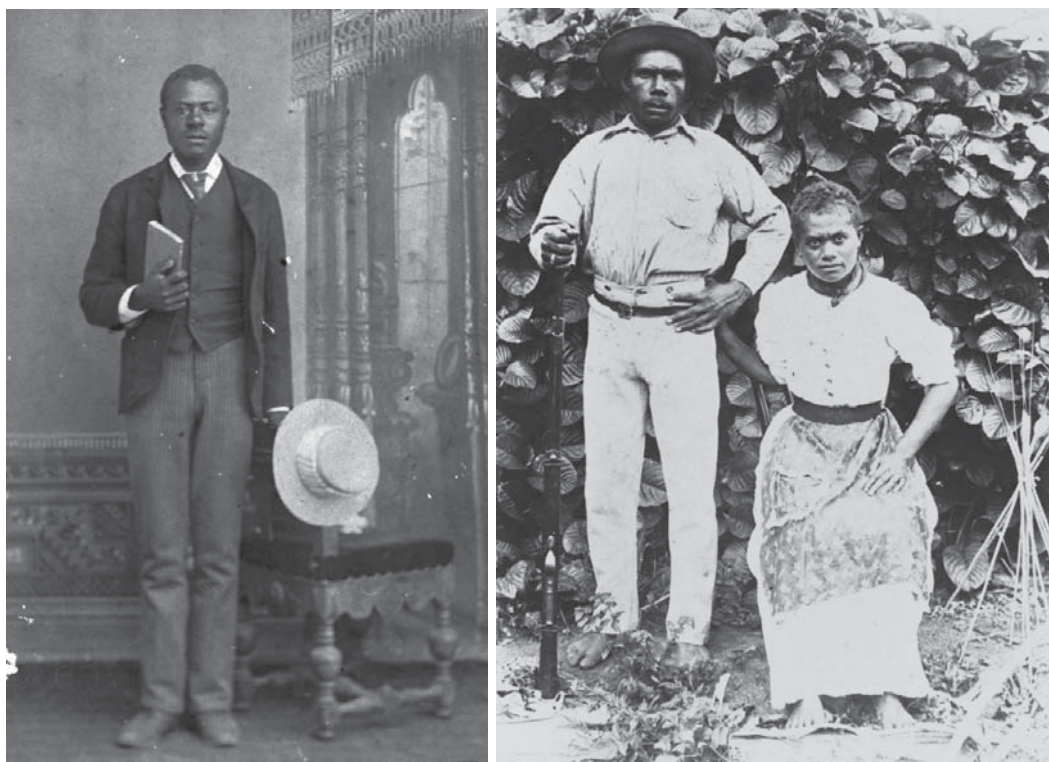


Figure 9.7, left: JOL image no.156946.

Farewell Australia. According to the *Post*, the “old Exeter Hall cry that the kanaka is merely a slave has long ceased....The kanaka, as we find him in Queensland is not [a] naked, brutalized savage....He dresses well, houses well, feeds well, works well, and...‘spends his money like a toff.’”¹² Indeed, prior to their departure, many Pacific Islanders had photographic studio portraits of themselves made, displaying their finest clothes and other symbols of achievement in Queensland, such as learning from books. A reporter observed ‘time expired boys’ at liberty in Cairns during their final week in Queensland: “our local outfitters made a larger number of cash sales than usual. The boys were resplendent in their new found glory. Their hats were decorated by nosegays of an extremely gaudy hue and in the ears of several of them were fastened small brass clock wheels.” Some had their feet “encased in bluchers” and smoked silver pipes with amber tips.¹³

Figure 9.8, right: JOL image no. 9925.

Australia manqué? The clothing and gender representation of Figure 9.9 are very much in the style of rural, working class Queenslanders from the end of the nineteenth century, which is – White Australia notwithstanding – precisely what immigrant Pacific Islanders were. In the view of the *Post*, “White Australia appeals to the miner...to the bricklayer, carpenter, linen draper or general artisan” who cries, “do away with the leprous black and leave the country to the white man.”¹⁴ The “working classes in Queensland...oppose the employment of kanakas...on political and sentimental grounds,” meaning the working classes identified Pacific Islanders as class and racial rivals.¹⁵

In Cairns at this time, White Australia was an evolving debate about race, nation and tropical development. Unadulterated racism certainly played its part. “There are few white men, if any,”

¹² *MP*, 8 March 1901, p.2

¹³ *MP*, 1 October 1901, p.4.

¹⁴ *MP*, 29 March 1901, p.2.

¹⁵ *MP*, 8 March 1901, p.2.

the *Post* ventured on one occasion, “who desire to be associated with coloured aliens.”¹⁶ A letter writer concurred, objecting to “the inconvenience which the public suffer” from having to stand in close proximity to non-whites at the Cairns Post Office, or in other words “a motley crowd of niggers, kanakas, and sundry other evil smelling subjects of his majesty...not nice company at any time.”¹⁷ As a principle of white racial prestige and high wages, White Australia was a popular catchcry. In the cities and mining areas it meant the exclusion from Australia of non-whites, but in the sugar districts, the presence of Pacific Islanders was not necessarily seen in contravention of the principles of a White Australia. A correspondent considered the paradox, recalling that “we shouted ourselves hoarse with ‘White Queensland,’” but now objected to “the newly fledged Commonwealth putting its foot down on the sons of guns called kanakas.”¹⁸ The *Morning Post* filed reports from “a battle of the moderates against the extremists,” in which the “moderates were just as anxious for a white Australia as the extremists.”¹⁹ It claimed: “We all want a White Australia, we are all bent on promoting the advancement of Australia for Britishers,”²⁰ but the “presence of the kanaka in the cane field is in no way a menace to White Australia.”²¹ The *Port Douglas and Mossman Record* made reference to the “White Labor policy”²² and lectured its readers that “the rational thing to do is to strictly regulate the [coloured] labour which can produce wealth...and leave the white man to do what he can do, that is, supervise and direct.”²³ N.P. Petersen of Aloomba agreed that non-European labour advanced white interests:

It is not fair that the pioneers...of North Queensland, who have tackled the mighty scrub or uprooted the forest and made it productive, not only for the benefit of themselves directly, but indirectly for their fellow man should...run the risk of losing their all through the vagaries of a few faddists.²⁴

In 1901, Labor was claiming that “the voice of Queensland,” had “pronounced against kanaka labour.”²⁵ In 1902, Thomas Givens, who laid claim to “an unbounded knowledge of the Chinese, the Japs and other alien races, (not of course losing sight of the kanaka),”²⁶ became

¹⁶ *MP*, 18 June 1901, p.4.

¹⁷ *MP*, 1 February 1901, p.3.

¹⁸ *MP*, 5 November 1901, p.4.

¹⁹ *MP*, 11 October 1901, p.4.

²⁰ *MP*, 29 March 1901, p.2.

²¹ *MP*, 8 February 1901, p.2.

²² *PDMR*, 5 October 1906, p.2.

²³ *PDMR*, 28 May 1902, p. 3.

²⁴ N.P. Petersen, Aloomba, *MP*, 6 August 1901, p.5.

²⁵ *MP*, 24 May 1901, p.2.

²⁶ *MP*, 19 November 1901, p.5.

Cairns' local Member of Parliament.²⁷ Givens explained to a public meeting that he “was a firm believer in White Australia. Our State could never be great unless it was populated by our own people, and unless the aliens were done away with Queensland would be the alien part of Australia.”²⁸ Givens even regarded his ideas as the inspiration for Barton’s vision of a White Australia.²⁹ With its least-preferred model of a White Australia appearing a fait accompli, the *Post* raged against the “rabid ‘White Australia’ cry,”³⁰ and “the platform fetish of ‘White Australia,’”³¹ which it described as having arisen “from the vortex” of a “thousand devious devices,”³² and out of a “dense cloud of political bigotry.”³³

The *Record* noted “increasing anxiety...in the Anglo-Saxon world” on questions of immigration.³⁴ Playing down the non-white presence already established, it argued that without Pacific Islanders, “North Australia...will be deserted by settlers and end up the happy hunting ground of the long shore scoundrels of the islands about.” The “Chinese, Malays and other races will find their way into it, and it will become a scene of debauchery.”³⁵ Apprehensive about the near north, others emphasized race building as a matter of national security. Whipping up fear of Asia, the *Truth* warned that “Australians, as a rule, regard this country as a natural home, the divinely-designated abiding place of the white race. It is nothing of the kind. It is the habitat of the black, the brown and the yellow men who regard the white man as an impudent interloper.”³⁶ A meeting at the Cairns Shire Hall was told that “Unless the Commonwealth built up a wall of white flesh and blood they could not keep out the yellow men,” and that “before too long there would be a miniature China in North Queensland.”³⁷ The *Courier* imagined a bulwark of white men’s bodies in north Queensland forming “a protectorate...over that portion of the Commonwealth easily accessible to Asiatic hordes.”³⁸ Givens had talked up “the probability of war with China,” stating that “it would be a sorry day for Queensland if we had to rely on the alien population to fight for us.”³⁹ Australian Prime Minister Alfred Deakin agreed

²⁷ Givens’ parliamentary tenure was brief. White Australia did not lose its grip on the north beyond his term, but remained contentious.

²⁸ *MP*, 8 March 1901, p.4.

²⁹ *MP*, 15 November 1901, p.5.

³⁰ *MP*, 10 December 1901, p.2.

³¹ *MP*, 29 March 1901, p.2.

³² *MP*, 18 October 1901, p.2.

³³ *MP*, 15 November 1901, p.5.

³⁴ *Times*, cited in *PDMR*, 23 October 1901, p. 3.

³⁵ *PDMR*, 28 May 1902, p. 3.

³⁶ *Truth*, 17 September 1910, p.2.

³⁷ *MP*, 13 October 1906, p.3.

³⁸ *BC*, cited in *MP*, 18 June 1901, p.4.

³⁹ *MP*, 8 March 1901, p.4

that care had to be taken to ensure that “future settlers in the North would be those who could take their places in the fighting line.”⁴⁰

In the anxious eyeing of ‘yellow hordes’ the *Post* saw an opportunity to push for the retention of Pacific Islanders. Workers from various parts of south and south-east Asia were important to the district, but their success in challenging European hegemony meant that if push came to shove, they would be considered expendable. The *Post* mounted the case that there were “no two opinions about the desirability of Queensland severing connection with the Asiatic alien, Japanese and Indian,” but wondered:

[What] possible menace are Polynesian Islanders? They do not intermarry with the white race, they do not enter competition with our tradespeople or citizens, they spend all they earn in the colony, and their observance of the law is not slacker on average than that of the every day laborer. All sections of the community are prepared to follow any laws for the purpose of militating and stamping out the evils attendant upon the presence in our midst of Japanese, Chinese, Hindoos, Javanese and Malays... [but] ‘White Australia’ can be established without erecting a barrier against the Polynesian.⁴¹



Figure 9.9. Malaytown Cairns, home of many of the smaller ethnic minorities of Cairns including Malays, Javanese, Sinhalese, Torres Strait Islanders and others. Cairns Historical Society.

The *Post* accused Laborites of focusing exclusively on Pacific Islanders, whom it wished to retain, while overlooking the racial dangers of other Queensland residents, whom, (if necessary), the *Post* was willing to sacrifice:

⁴⁰ *MP*, 1 February 1906, p.3.

⁴¹ *MP*, 8 March 1901, p.2.

I beg to draw the attention of the Labor party to the existence among our midst of races not purely hewers of wood, drawers of water and trashers of cane, but engineers, tradesmen, and what is worse still, financiers...The brainy subjects of the Mikado and the Brothers of the Sun are an entirely different crowd to...Tommy Tanna, Johnny Samoa and Co.⁴²



Figure 9.10, Figure 9.11. Examples of documentation required by Chinese to enter Queensland in the early 1900s. At left is the negative impression of the palm print of Lee Fong, a passenger from Port Darwin travelling to Cairns in March 1908. A similar identifying palm print is also included on the reverse of the photograph at right, from the certificate of Queensland domicile belonging to Canton-born Foy (?) Lon. A resident of Hambledon and referred by Thom Swallow, in 1905, Foy was visiting the land in which he had been born 29 years earlier. “John Chinaman,” quoth the *Post*, “is a tourist, and when he comes to live and accumulate money in Queensland he finds an occasional visit to his celestial home indispensable to his comfort and his peace of mind.”⁴³ National Archive of Australia.

In imitation of hustings oratory, the *Post* indicated that it was prepared to trade away all other non-Europeans in the Trinity Bay district for Pacific Islanders: “Away with the Chinaman’ and we are with you,” it declared. “‘Away with the Javanese and the Japanese’ and we are with you also, but when you cry ‘Away with the kanaka’ then we protest.”⁴⁴ It argued that Cairnsites

⁴² *MP*, 12 November 1901, p.4.

⁴³ *MP*, 19 November 1901, p.3.

⁴⁴ *MP*, 8 March 1901, p.4.

“every day admit that the kanaka is all right but the Chinaman, Coolie and Jap must go...something must be done to give the Asiatics a fall and preserve Australia for our own race.”⁴⁵ It quoted Dr Reed, who anticipated that reason ought to prevail, that “the White Australia cry...be confined to Asiatics only.”⁴⁶ White Labor wrote to the *Post*, to argue that Pacific Islanders had not caused a lowering of white wages or “left any lasting stain on the community at large.” It was rather “the Japs and others of the Asiatic aliens that are the menace to us.”⁴⁷ Another wag wrote of Queenslanders demonstrating the strength of their support for a White Australia by trading with Chinese, thereby “helping them to make enough money to retire and go home to China.”⁴⁸ The *Post* claimed that “Local electors of all shades of politics are united on the alien question...legislation is imperative with a view to preventing any further influx of competitive Asiatics.”⁴⁹

The *Port Douglas and Mossman Record* was disgusted with the proposal to ship Pacific Islanders out of Queensland and loath to believe that the “Imperial Parliament would so belie its traditions as to allow a despotic system like the one proposed to prevail, under which, simply because of their race and colour, Kanakas may be forcibly deported from this country.” With huffy liberalism, it described this as an “arbitrary blow to freedom in Australia,” and “contrary to the general conceptions of equality which have been the guiding principle[s] of British rule throughout the Empire.” In Britain, the *Record* claimed, “there are thousands of foreigners of diverse colours” and “interference with their liberty...would be energetically resented by the generality of the British public.” Although delivering with grandiloquent pomposity, the *Record’s* heart was in the right place when it claimed that in Britain:

the white student and the coloured student study together. Race or colour can be no natural bar to ability. Hundreds of representatives of different races have ere now proved themselves to be the equal of white men in intellectual ability, and have risen to prominence in their professions, trades and other occupations in spite of vulgar prejudice. In Australia today there are considerable numbers of Kanakas, who, by their prolonged stay amongst us, have acquired an intelligence.⁵⁰

Under the heading “Kanaka Intelligence,” the sympathetic *Torres Strait Pilot* took the extraordinary step of publishing a letter of protest from a disgruntled Pacific Islander,

⁴⁵ *MP*, 24 May 1901, p.2.

⁴⁶ *MP*, 4 June 1901, p.3.

⁴⁷ *MP*, 5 November 1901, p.4

⁴⁸ *MP*, 15 November 1901, p.4

⁴⁹ *MP*, 8 March 1901, p.2.

⁵⁰ *PDMR*, 11 December 1901, p.2.

powerfully evoking the sense of betrayal, hurt and anger felt by many.⁵¹ Apologising for not having “right good lingo,” but calling himself by the impressive Latin nom-de-plume Bene Nota Cavetu, (approximately: ‘Mark well and beware’), the writer began:

My dear Mr. Pilot, Will you be good for me and put my letter in your Newspaper so the other white people can see how the government in Queensland treat the malata man when they done with him and how the malata man and plenty more south sea man think very bad about it...the South Sea man feels bad and sorry what Queensland Guverment do belonga him... guverment policeman he hunt me all a same wild dog...till schooner go away to my Island malata and policeman – plenty policemen – take me and five my country man longa schooner all a same we been stealem watch belonga guvner.

What for whitemen bring us longa his country we all right at malayta Islands and no want to come, and now he finish longa us to cut sugga cane because he say we swallow up all a Kaikai from the white man, White man no good for work longa sugga plantation, he work little bit and make small fella money, then he clear out and he say b – r cut im sugga cane he work belonga nigger.

Suppose we strong, plenty people and plenty big fightin ship, guverment not game treat us all a same dog, like hes doing now, he fears we bring fightin ship and plenty man and knock guverment house and Brisbane and all the guverment places down all the same hurricane in our Island, and suppose we kill all the white people and take their country and keep it for we feller, all the same Japanese man talk he going to do some time...but we feller no want your b – y country, b – r im country, b – r im white man, come our country, he look out.⁵²

⁵¹ In the Pacific Islands, hurt and anger still echoes in historical memory. A Solomon Islands webpage entitled ‘The Kanakas and the Canefields’ focuses on the early (and most troubled) period of the labour trade. In an account which is highly-coloured and factually problematic, but nevertheless important for the strength of its conviction that Pacific Islanders were wronged by Australia, Jane Resture tells the “story of the Kanakas.” It is, Resture argues, “a sad chapter in Australian history” and “a very shameful part of Oceanic history,” which “should be never allowed to be forgotten.” Insisting that “Melanesians had no concept of indentured labour,” (which is contestable), the author describes the “malodorous trade...of blackbirding,” which was “the stealing of young Melanesians...by Europeans in big ships with muskets, axes and mattocks...to work in the canefields.” Islanders were taken, Resture claims, “sometimes by force and sometimes by deception and shoved into the putrid hulls of ships and carried...to Australia.” This was, at its worst, “a form of slavery.” As Pacific Islanders “toiled in the fields,” they were supervised “by overseers, often on horseback and armed with stock whips.” Later, by the late 1890s, “most of the really hard yakka (work) had been done and white labourers figured they could handle it from here,” so with few exceptions, “the men and women who cleared and farmed Australia’s sugar fields” were deported. It was, according to Resture, “Australians themselves who eventually rebelled against the employment of Kanakas, however, they did so not out of human sympathy, but fearing that the South Sea Islanders posed a threat to their standard of living.” Resture goes on to explain that Pacific Islanders’ descendents in Australia refer to themselves as ‘The forgotten people’ because “discrimination and neglect are constants in their history.” <http://www.janeresture.com/kanakas/index.htm>

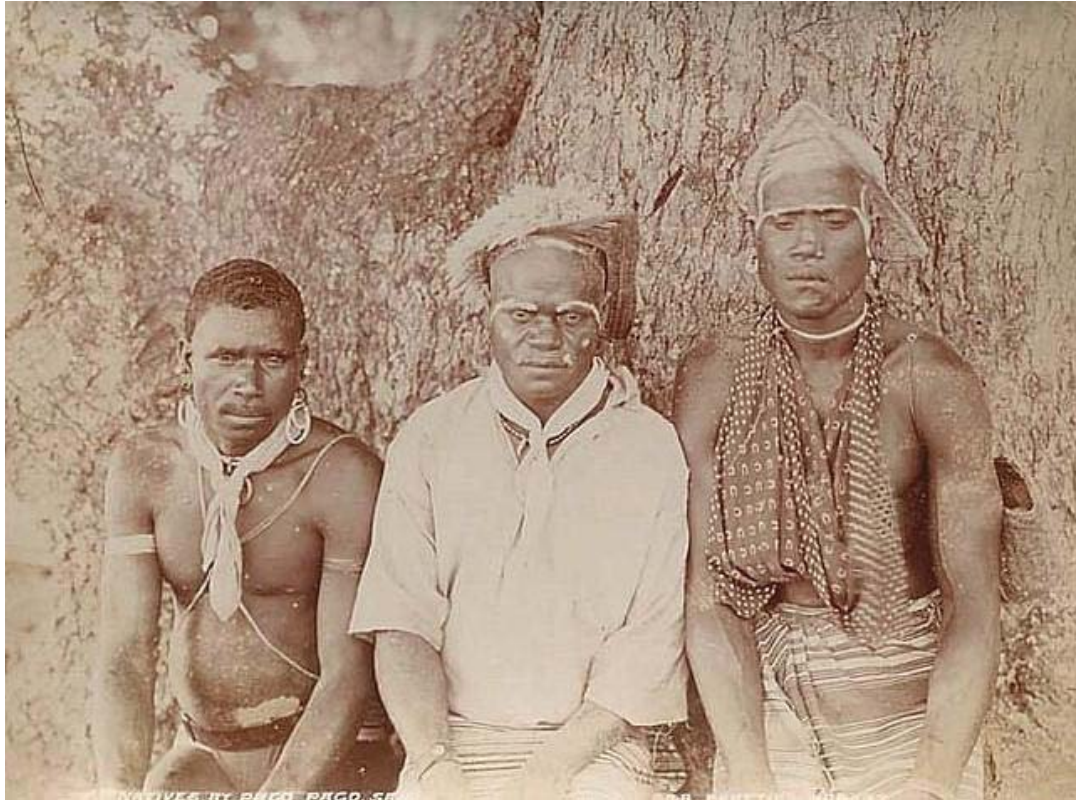


Figure 9.12. This postcard from 1900 is said to show Pacific Islanders returned from Queensland to Savo Island in the Solomons, divested of their European clothing and preparing to be ceremonially reinstated to island life. They appear pensive.
Photographer: J.W. Beattie, www.oceania.ethnographica.com

“It is easy to recognise why the Kanaka has been specially chosen,” said the *Post*. “He has only his bow and arrow and his war paint to defend himself, whereas Japan has her modern warships and advancements in civilisation which demand respect; and India will compel respect from the intervention of England to protect her subjects.”⁵³ Pacific Islanders’ periods of residency in Queensland ranged from several months to many years. Some remained or attempted to remain indefinitely as they had put down roots in Australia, converted to Christianity and raised families. The *Post* made a plea for the rights of Pacific Islanders citing the example of a man in Cairns who was to be repatriated despite having been in Queensland for twenty-two years. “All his friends were dead and there was little doubt as to what would happen to him when he was put ashore. Some of the men are married to aboriginal women and have families.”⁵⁴

⁵² Bene Nota Cavetu *TSP*, 23 February 1907, p.3.

⁵³ *MP*, 18 October 1901, p.2.

⁵⁴ *PDMR*, 19 March 1902, p.3.

Despite the best efforts of sections of the northern community, the case for exempting Pacific Island labour from the policy provisions of White Australia was failing. Throughout 1901 the frustration, disillusionment and dismay of the *Morning Post* would continue to escalate as it vainly fought for the continuation of the practice. Attempting to placate Labor voters and white racial unitarians the *Post* threw editorial continuity to the wind, vacillating wildly in its quest to form strategic alliances and isolate enemies. In the racially charged atmosphere, it shamelessly courted then spurned old foes including Christians and humanitarians, and turned on non-European community members whom it had previously supported, then later expressed sympathy for their plight. The *Post* approved of Professor Harper who asked, “Is the policy of White Australia morally justifiable?” and concluded that it was “excessive and unreasonable,”⁵⁵ but disapproved of Professor Rentoul, who argued that the Pacific Island labour trade should cease as it was “contrary to the rights of man, and to the hope of a united white Australia,”⁵⁶ for which he was called a “great, noisy Presbyterian holy man [who is] just as much innocent of reason as he is rhyme.”⁵⁷ Perhaps sensing that its Labor readership was already lost, the *Post* dined out on sour grapes, dismissing opposition to Pacific Island labour as the “puppet-like response of an unthinking crowd who troubled not to weigh the truth of arguments hurled broadcast by fanatics.”⁵⁸

Finally, the *Morning Post* surrendered. It acknowledged that “the general expression of public opinion for a ‘White Australia’” was “a consummation most devoutly to be wished.” It yielded therefore, to “the expressed wish of the majority of this state.”⁵⁹ In 1906, at the end of a decades-long battle to keep the district open to workers from the Pacific Islands, most of Cairns non-Pacific Islander population seems to have turned out in a strange spirit of discomfort, resignation, optimism and relief, to watch the first repatriating steamer depart to the islands. As the vessel moved away from the wharf, the exiled Islanders taunted spectators merrily: “Goodbye Queensland, goodbye White Australia, goodbye Christians” their Parthian shot. “Evidently” the *Post* reported, “the kanaka has a satirical strain in his composition.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ *MP*, 16 August 1901, p.2.

⁵⁶ *MP*, 6 August 1901, p.3.

⁵⁷ *MP*, 13 August 1901, p.2.

⁵⁸ *MP*, 24 May 1901, p.2.

⁵⁹ *MP*, 18 October 1901, p.2.

⁶⁰ *MP*, 17 November 1906, p.2.



Figure 9.13. Displaced persons: Pacific Islanders herded together on the Cairns foreshore, ejected from White Australia in 1906.
JOL image no.23842.

North and South

The *Cooktown Herald* once ascertained that “southerners see us as a noisy discontented people whom ‘no King could govern and no God could please,’” not appreciating that northerners simply enjoyed “exercising the Englishman’s right of grumbling.”⁶¹ Always sensitive to condescension and caricature from afar, north Queenslanders had a slightly testy relationship with Australia’s metropolitan centres. “The North is robbed” bellowed the *Herberton Advertiser* on another occasion, “its industries handicapped and its progress retarded by the South.”⁶² It was not without justification that north Queenslanders felt ignored and overridden by the more numerous and politically influential southerners, whose interests rarely coincided with their own. In debating various proposals to whiten Australia, points of difference and a sense of southern persecution were acutely felt and sharpened along lines of the north’s racial composition. In the foment, white Cairnsites were stung by criticism in the metropolitan press suggesting that Cairns was a traitor to the White Australian cause. Brisbane’s *Worker* called

⁶¹ *CHPRA*, 8 April 1874, p.2.

⁶² *HA*, 27 December 1889, p.2.

Cairns “the blackest spot in Australia.”⁶³ Givens provoked his audience in Cairns, claiming that: “We were now held up to scorn by Southerners, and Cairns was always specially referred to in that connection.”⁶⁴

To burnish Cairns’ White Australian credentials and to defend the town’s reputation the *Morning Post* made vivid proclamations, to chase from Cairns anyone who was not Pacific Islander, European, or Aboriginal (presumably). However an attempt by the newspaper to demonstrate some patriotically White Australian Sinophobia backfired when in 1901 it launched a campaign against Chinese gambling in Cairns. The *Post*’s column was picked up by Sydney’s *Truth* and used to demonstrate the urgency of racial exclusion. The *Truth* furthermore repeated a claim in Sydney’s *Bulletin* that in Cairns, Europeans degraded themselves by raising their hats to Chinese, but called the accusation “vile slander.”

Surely [Queensland] has richly earned the opprobrious epithets applied to her – Kanakaland, Chowland, Mongrelia, Leperland and the like...at Cairns, where it is reputedly the fashion for the whites to habitually take off their hats to the Chinamen...the people are pretty well inured to the wiles and wickednesses of Mongrelia in the bulk, and of the Chow in particular.⁶⁵

Queensland parliament had been assured that the north posed no threat to the racial limpidness of Queensland, that as “long as proper care was taken there was no danger in the Kanaka contaminating the white people of the state,” but some southerners worried that the ‘contamination’ had already begun.⁶⁶ Queensland received some unwelcome attention from S. Mauger M.H.R., who told listeners that in the north, “vice was rampant and Australians were being dragged down to the level of beasts by the Japanese and other aliens who infest the town.” At Cairns, Mauger reported, “half the population of about 3000 were whites, the other half were all sorts – Japanese, Chinese, Kanakas, Aborigines, Cingalese and Coolies,” and there were among them “half-castes of all kinds.” Mauger concluded that “Australia would have to point out respectfully but firmly to the British Government that we were determined not to allow our race to be mixed with inferior blood.”⁶⁷ Donald Macdonald also visited the state to observe its racial make-up first hand. He recorded his impressions in the Melbourne *Argus*. For many, preserving white racial purity was a higher priority than purging the continent of non-whites. Although MacDonald was happy to report that the reality of Queensland did not live up

⁶³ *Worker*, cited in *MP*, 19 April 1901, p.2.

⁶⁴ *MP*, 8 March 1901, p.4.

⁶⁵ *Truth*, cited in *MP*, 25 June 1901, p.3.

⁶⁶ *PDMR*, 16 October 1901, p. 3.

⁶⁷ *MP*, 28 June 1901, p.4.

to the most frightening stories which had been put about, his review did confirm the horror of miscegenation felt by some white Australians. “So much had we in the south been swayed by innuendo, insinuation, and an occasional scare,” wrote Macdonald, “that we had come to look upon Queensland as being socially and morally in rather a desperate condition.”

The population...was becoming mongrel and depraved. Curt, picturesque and almost invariably abusive phrases were coined to describe the awful condition of that fallen state upon which the Kanaka and the black alien of every quarter had left his smudge. I had imagined...a race that had almost lost its sense of national self-respect and pride in the white man’s birthright...I looked for this mongrel Queensland and failed to find it – yet I am not colour blind.⁶⁸

Happily unable to detect traces of miscegenation in white Queenslanders, Macdonald demonstrated his expertise as an observer of racial typologies and their relationship to questions of labour and progress. He saw Japanese in Queensland: “Short, thick-set, muscular and never suffering, apparently from exhaustion, they are ideal labourers. Neat in everything, their attention always concentrated on their work.” Macdonald was less impressed with “the Hindoo in all his variations from Afghan to Lascar. At best he is a poor thing,” without “physique or willingness.” He was “the least use to the country...the least to be feared as a labour competitor” and the least to be desired as a colonist.” As with the *Post*, Macdonald’s preference was for the “manageable kanaka,” whom he regarded as “the least objectionable of the three.”⁶⁹

It was an over-simplification, but within the north Queensland press, those who argued for the continuation of Pacific Island labour located southern Australia and Britain as opposing centres of antagonism and sympathy. The industrial relationship between Britain and the colony of Queensland was that of manufacturer and supplier of raw materials. Britain had actively encouraged the migration of British workers to Queensland, but when their numbers proved insufficient to the colonial task, had supported the calls of Queensland employers to obtain ‘cheap’ labour from elsewhere. “At this point,” wrote Castles and Miller, “the economic interests of Britain came into conflict with the nascent Australian labour movement.”⁷⁰ The Labor organ, the Brisbane *Worker* reviled “kanaka labour” as a “ghastly holocaust of slavery,”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Donald Macdonald, ‘In Tropical Queensland: a study in black and white,’ *Argus*, cited in *MP*, 1 October 1901, p.3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, The Macmillan Press, 1993, p.53.

⁷¹ *Worker*, cited in *MP*, 19 April 1901, p.2.

prompting the *Post* to peer out its door, but fail to see any such “corpsy arena.”⁷² Eventually, the *Port Douglas and Mossman Record* would denounce the “wild eyed cranks [of] the Southern Press,” but in 1901 it was distressed, and looked to Britain for succor.⁷³ Admitting that the coloured labour question was causing “much anxiety in Queensland” and “not a little” anxiety in Downing street, the *Record* cited the *London Times*, which dressed up its opinions in science and the authoritative language of the reasoning Victorian:

It seems to be certain that the northern part of the colony [of Queensland], between the Tropic of Capricorn and lat. 12 deg., can be cultivated only by coloured labour. The question then arises whether this immense region, with all its possibilities of production...is to be abandoned in order to please the urban artisan of the Southern States.⁷⁴

Pleasing the urban artisan was, in the view of the bourgeois *Times*, pushing things “to extremities.” Somewhat satisfied, the *Record* called its London contemporary “the most reliable authority on matters of deep Imperial import.”⁷⁵

Less concerned with matters of imperial import, the *Morning Post* and other north Queensland newspapers returned the ‘compliments’ of the *Worker*, *Truth* and *Bulletin* in kind, directing their hostility at the south, which included the south of Queensland. The *Post* derided the *Worker* for its displays of “southern ignorance”⁷⁶ and condemned “Southern men,” whose words and actions had “caused considerable discussion and ‘language’” in Cairns.⁷⁷ Ignoring arguments mounted within its own community and within its own pages no less, the *Post* flatly blamed “the South” for “the hair-brained war cry of a ‘White Australia’”⁷⁸ and asked, “Does it ever strike the people in of the South” that “they are trying their best to ruin thousands of white men?”⁷⁹ The *Post* rounded up its antagonists: southerners, Labor voters, humanitarians and Prime Minister Edmond Barton, the “fat lazy Sybarite.”⁸⁰ In Cairns, “the white population is placed in jeopardy and threatened with utter extinction just because a sybarite sitting in a high state [Barton] chooses to listen to the blithering idiocy of a parcel of neurotic humanitarians or the blatant howlings of a mob of political adventurers.”⁸¹

⁷² *MP*, 19 April 1901, p.2.

⁷³ *PDMR*, 22 June 1906, p.2.

⁷⁴ *Times*, cited in *PDMR*, 23 October 1901, p.3.

⁷⁵ *PDMR*, 23 October 1901, p.3.

⁷⁶ *MP*, 19 April 1901, p.2.

⁷⁷ *MP*, 8 February 1901, p.2.

⁷⁸ *MP*, 5 November 1901, p.4.

⁷⁹ *MP*, 8 February 1901, p.2.

⁸⁰ *MP*, 12 November 1901, p.2.

⁸¹ *MP*, 13 August 1901, p.2.

Clearly this was a hard fought battle. A Cairns Farmer weighed in, writing: “I would like to point out to our friends in the South that we also have our rights.”⁸² Another cane grower thought the demarcation line between north and south might be closer to Cairns than was usually imagined, proposing that a “colour line” could be drawn at Townsville.⁸³ A Cairns Farmer accused the southern pot of calling the northern kettle black. Multi-racial communities were not confined to northern Australia. A Cairns Farmer reminded readers that Australia was dotted with ‘Chinatowns,’ with a conspicuous presence of Chinese merchants and artisans in cities and regional towns across the continent.⁸⁴ Another correspondent alerted readers to the presence of Anglo-Indian workers on Victorian onion farms.⁸⁵ Queensland Parliament was told that in “New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, they would find more aliens than in Queensland...and yet they talked about a ‘White Australia.’ People in Victoria should look out their own doors.”⁸⁶ While the *Post* reminded readers that “North Queensland voted solidly for Federation, placing her interests unreservedly and with blind faith in the hands of the South.”⁸⁷ Queenslander Thomas Glassey told Federal Parliament that voters in his state had supported federation primarily because they wished to see an *end* to Pacific Island labour.⁸⁸ The *Times* thought that if federal authorities halted coloured labour, Queensland ought to secede, its “loyalty to the newborn Commonwealth [being] subject to severe strain.”⁸⁹ Loyalty to Britain was also subject to strain as its support for coloured labour prompted renewed calls for an Australian republic.

The *Post* enquired, “How can we expect ‘the man in the street’ down south to grasp our position [given the] crass ignorance displayed by the leading politicians in the south anent to this question?”⁹⁰ Anglo-Indian accused “sapient legislators” of being “childishly ignorant of...difference between races” and asked: “what is to militate against the importation of Indian coolies? ...They are specially adapted for work in hot, steaming tropical fields.”⁹¹ A Cairns Farmer attempted to disabuse both the ignorant man in the street down south and Anglo-Indian. The industry of sugarcane farming, A Cairns Farmer explained, is “a tropical one and the Anglo-Saxon is at a disadvantage when transplanted from his frigid zone to the tropics.” This necessitated the use of coloured labour. However:

⁸² *MP*, 7 June 1901, p.3.

⁸³ George Neilson, *PDMR*, 11 May 1906, p.3.

⁸⁴ *MP*, 7 June 1901, p.3.

⁸⁵ *MP*, 18 October 1901, p.3.

⁸⁶ *PDMR*, 11 September 1901, Supplement.

⁸⁷ *MP*, 18 October 1901, p.2.

⁸⁸ *MP*, 26 November 1901, p.5

⁸⁹ *Times*, cited in *PDMR*, 23 October 1901, p. 3.

⁹⁰ *MP*, 8 February 1901, p.2.

⁹¹ *MP*, 7 June 1901, p.3.

The Indian will do our work, but he is a danger to our race, as he will bring out his family or intermarry and create the piebald Australian, which is so much feared...With the Chinaman the same arguments may be used, with the addition that he soon goes out of his groove and competes successfully with the merchant and the artisan...But with the Kanaka it is different. He is a source of profit to the country from the day he lands until he leaves...and as he neither increases naturally nor intermarries in this country he can be no menace to future generations.⁹²

Sports, strains, national self-respect and the white man's birth right

The *Morning Post* made a simple calculation: "The Kanaka will never travel South for the simple reason that he couldn't live in the climate, and for the same reason the white cane cutter and trasher will never travel North [but] must be bred here."⁹³ Southerners need not, therefore, fear any influx of Pacific Islanders any more than northerners could expect to be overwhelmed by white southerners desperate to cut sugarcane in the tropics. The subtle distinctions between evolutionary development, acclimatisation, habituation and acculturation were never clear in common usage on questions of white tropical labour. While it had faith in evolutionary development: "Progression by slow and gradual changes [being] the law of the universe," the *Post* did not aver that Europeans were transformed in a single lifetime and at a cellular level by the tropical environment; rather that like plants, they could become gradually acclimatised to different environments.⁹⁴ Although it did not enter into the mechanics of the process, the *Post* and most other commentators referred to theories of animal husbandry from which they deduced that climatic adaptations needed to be bred into a strain, or race, over generations. "The conditions of the cane field are not suited to the constitutions of the present race of whites" argued the *Post*, "but in time by the adaptability of the human system a white race might be evolved equal to those conditions."⁹⁵ A public meeting in Cairns was reminded that Europeans of the district had "derived immense benefit from the presence of the Chinese. He cleared the scrub land and made it fit for occupation." The Chinese man was able to perform these tasks because he "was immune from [sic] dysentery, ague, fever, such as ravaged the white man's health when he attempted such work."⁹⁶ The smoothing hand of evolution had fitted races to climates as gloves fitted to hands and it was considered foolish, irresponsible and possibly even

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *MP*, 12 March 1901, p.5.

⁹⁴ *MP*, 19 August 1897, p.2

⁹⁵ *MP*, 29 October 1901, p.2.

⁹⁶ *MP*, 19 November 1901, p.4.

dangerous for races to be forced to perform outside of their evolutionarily determined regions. Writing from the climatic safety of Hobart, a contributor to the *Port Douglas and Mossman Record* thought that “the white race might develop sports and produce by degrees a breed of children who could be at home in the most torrid regions,” but really:

the white man has no business at all [in the tropics] as this is not the part of the earth assigned to him for a dwelling place. However, as he has a much better brain than the black...he can do a great good by directing labour and by bringing his capacity for order to promote the well-being of the darkey.⁹⁷

The *Record* disliked the flouting of colonial convention, stating that local cane growers with “experience in Mauritius, the West Indies and other tropical countries regard the proposal to cultivate, trash and harvest cane with white labour as altogether in contravention to the methods all over the sugar growing world,” and insisted that “coloured races everywhere show their adaptability to the work.”⁹⁸ The *Post* declared: “We Northerners only want the tropical bred Polynesian to do work which we would be sorry to ask our fellow white man to tackle at any wage.”⁹⁹ Arguments against white labour began with cultural expectation and ended with scientific opinion, but for the sake of white seemliness were usually made in reverse. “We confidently assert that white men cannot and will not do [canefield] work,” howled the *Post*, “work, which has been truthfully described for years as ‘blackfellows work.’”¹⁰⁰ Combining the arguments of the *Post* and the *Record*, the *Cooktown Courier* elaborated: “Certain portions of the work were not meant for white men to do...White men can supervise and do much of the work demanding greater intelligence,” but “he lacks the inclination to do work which he has stated over and over again rightly belongs to the black races, a race adapted by nature to perform such work.”¹⁰¹

The *Post* ran into difficulties by arguing that white men were too feeble to perform strenuous tasks in the tropics, which only tended to spur them on. Forced to recant, in late 1901 it allowed that while white men might be able to perform canefield labour, their sense of racial superiority should alert them to the fact that they were demeaned by it. They should greet the imposition with resentment. “Barton and Co. [argue] that all the white man in the North is useful for is to do black man’s work...A learned judge could grow vegetables – that is no reason why he

⁹⁷ *PDMR*, 28 May 1902, p. 3.

⁹⁸ *PDMR*, 26 June 1901, p.3.

⁹⁹ *MP*, 29 March 1901, p.2.

¹⁰⁰ *MP*, 8 February 1901, p.2.

¹⁰¹ *CC*, cited in *MP*, 18 June 1901, p.4.

should become a market gardener.”¹⁰² Increasingly isolated and becoming repetitious, the *Post* resorted to insults. With faltering grammar, it mocked the intelligence of Labor supporters, as well as canefield labourers: “The man who harvests the cane in the tropics” it maintained, “is on the same intellectual level as the Kanaka or Hindoo, thus degraded beyond the power of thinking for themselves.”¹⁰³ If a loss of esteem was not sufficient to dissuade white labourers, the spectre of racial degeneration might be. “Everyone, except Mr. Barton and his allies knows that the white race deteriorates in tropical countries,” maintained a correspondent, “even without hard labour.”¹⁰⁴ The *Post* made vigorous use of this unproven danger. Assuming the authority of science but being persistently vague about the damage to white prestige or the white body, the *Post* affirmed:

What is really being brought about is the deterioration of the white race. Such work is, by a consensus of opinion amongst those in north Queensland most fitted by their long experience to know, more fitted for black than white will only serve to bring the white thus employed down to the back man’s level.¹⁰⁵

Habitat and biology

Resolving questions of white viability in the tropics were crucial not only to the agricultural and general future of Cairns, but to the national consolidation of Australia as a ‘white man’s country.’ A correspondent to the *Post* framed the problem of white occupancy of the tropics in terms of a global race struggle, influenced perhaps by Charles Pearson’s *National Life and Character*,¹⁰⁶ which was a seminal text for proponents of White Australia:

The ruling races and nations of the earth today are unquestionably those which inhabit the temperate zones. As far back as human history has been recorded this has always been so...the white man – the blonde man who has been recognised as the most powerful type ever since the Greeks made their gods fair-headed – could not permanently thrive in the tropics. And the white races instinctively refuse to admit that the yellow brown or black will ever get so far ahead of them to really rule them.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² *MP*, 29 October 1901, p.3.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *MP*, 7 June 1901, p.3.

¹⁰⁵ *MP*, 29 October 1901, p.2.

¹⁰⁶ Charles H. Pearson, *National Life and Character: a forecast*, Macmillan, New York, 1894.

¹⁰⁷ *MP*, 10 January 1908, p.3.

W.A.M. was optimistic about the white man's prospects:

[It] is beyond doubt that our white races have an hereditary physique which will enable them to surpass in endurance that of any other race on the globe. They are beyond the brightest type of physical humanity as yet evolved. I take this as an established scientific fact...This continent has been committed to our trust by the Powers who are guiding and controlling the destinies of the Earth's races, and it is for us to rise to our high vocation.¹⁰⁸

Some believed that if white Australians were to safely occupy the tropics in perpetuity it would be an unsurpassed evolutionary and civilisational triumph, "a grand conquest over nature," but in the first years of the 1900s, strong currents of pessimism flowed.¹⁰⁹ Europeans remained unsure of the contents of their own constitutions and the consequences of tropical exposure, which many suspected to be unhealthy, even degenerative. Initially, scientific orthodoxy and pseudo-scientific mumbo jumbo resembled each other closely on this subject, and there were many grim forecasts made from speculative diagnoses. One writer thought Europeans could not survive the tropics "like the coloured races...because the white man has only one liver. The coloured man has practically two livers, for his skin acts as one, and thus he survives while the white fades away and dies out."¹¹⁰ Another explained:

The white man is affected by the moist hot air...on the coastal lands round Cairns. In the first place profuse perspiration goes on, generating a craving for liquid, instead of a normal appetite for food. Soon the stomach and intestines become catarrhed, which...lessens the power to absorb nutrition.¹¹¹

Then from being "all day in sweat soaked clothes...he catches chills" and suffers "Anaemia, lassitude, and a general relaxation and exhaustion of the system." His "working power and endurance are greatly diminished and finally used up." The consequences would be intergenerational. His progeny would be "born puny, with...a general flabbiness of constitution."¹¹² We might assume that white Cairnsites regarded such talk as balderdash, but its prevalence as a theme in the popular press, the scientific attention bestowed upon tropical health and the popularity of supposed remedies for tropical ills suggests that there was at the very least some hedging of bets. Probably a fictive character or otherwise one of north

¹⁰⁸ W.A.M., *MP*, 5 October 1906, p.3.

¹⁰⁹ *MP*, 18 June 1901, p.4.

¹¹⁰ *PDMR*, 28 May 1902, p. 3.

¹¹¹ *MP*, 10 September 1901, p.5.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

Queensland's more impressive hypochondriacs, R. Murrie described the constitutional consequences of his life in the tropics:

I was about as done up as a man can be...the feeling of lassitude was so great upon me that I had no desire to go about at all...I was in the most awful state of wretchedness [with] no interest in life...[I was] weak as a kitten...my appetite had gone altogether. Giddiness affected me [there were] sensations in the chest...and under the shoulder blades [and] small of my back...my nerves [were] as jangly and as rickety as possible. My spirits were terribly depressed...I slept but very little.¹¹³

Dr Roth advised that anyone suffering from neurasthenia or brain-fag brought about by tropical living, "should go into fresh air, or better still, into the water."¹¹⁴ Dr Koch advised in favour of air and sunlight. Dr Reed of C.S.R. Hambledon contributed a detailed explanation of the inappropriateness of white labour in the tropics, arguing that the white man was unsuited to cutting sugarcane. On the tropic coast, argued Reed, the "hot and oftentimes humid atmosphere acts persistently on [the white man's] nerve cells, bringing about a lassitude and rendering him unfit to perform manual labour."¹¹⁵ Reed reviewed current thinking on the subject which called into question white occupancy of the tropics:

Nature has apparently decreed in its original scheme that the black races should inhabit the tropical regions of the earth, and, although the white races might live in the coloured man's habitat for certain periods...it is soon found that a white man quickly begins to deteriorate physically after a few years...he eventually finds his constitution in revolt against what to him is unnatural surroundings, induced by climate.¹¹⁶

Perhaps permanent white occupancy of north Queensland was a biological impossibility? Having failed to find the telltale signs of miscegenation among white north Queenslanders, Donald Macdonald wondered "whether the white man of tropical Queensland was degenerating":

Nature never intended the white man for the tropics, and if he will go there and stay there he will surely pay the price, though the full penalty may never be evident until the third or fourth generation. The degeneration will vary with the position and be worst in the furthest

¹¹³ *Herbert River Express*, (hereafter *HRE*), 1 September 1910, p.3.

¹¹⁴ *MP*, 28 February 1908, p.2.

¹¹⁵ *MP*, 4 June 1901, p.3.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

north...in proportion will the tropical settler bear his share of the 'white man's burden.'¹¹⁷

There was a risk that no amount of race patriotism could overcome the shortcomings of whiteness in the tropics. Macdonald recalled white children that he had observed in Ceylon, "poor little paper-faced bloodless white infants who have not been given a chance to build up in a more genial climate." Evidence "of decay" could be seen in "thin, anaemic children...thin-faced, cheerless, broken down women," and from an era when weight gain was considered a feature of good health, Macdonald was saddened by the sight of young "men who [shot] up in height as they [decreased] in width."¹¹⁸ Whether "it be possible to train the white race to withstand the climate of the tropics" wrote Reed, "has yet to be determined." At best, "artificial means may sometimes improve the minor details of part of Nature's scheme,"¹¹⁹ The British in India fled to hill stations and even back to Europe during the hot months of the year, from which they imagined themselves to be preserving their health. Anglo-Australians were susceptible to British authority on most questions, including white health in the tropics. A *Post* correspondent argued from the Indian colonial precedent:

Anglo-Indians have to be sent away to Europe in order that they may grow up stalwart Englishmen. Keep them in the Indian hothouse and they become weedy and limp. So it must be with the children growing up in the far North. They can never grow into...stalwart men and buxom women.¹²⁰

Dr Reed thought the "climate is even worse in North Queensland than...Egypt, the Hawaiian Islands and Fiji,"¹²¹ and concluded that in north Queensland it would probably be "necessary to renew white labour in that country with fresh and vigorous men from temperate climates."¹²² Such displays of geographical inconstancy appalled white Australian nationalists who sought to spread white people from one end of the continent to the other. The member for Herbert, gave "the White Australia Policy [his] a hearty and unreserved endorsement" and said that "having lived and worked for fifteen years in the tropics," he was convinced that there was "no insuperable difficulty in settling the Northern portions of the Commonwealth with people of our own race and color."¹²³

¹¹⁷ *MP*, 1 October 1901, p.3.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *MP*, 4 June 1901, p.3.

¹²⁰ *MP*, 7 June 1901, p.3.

¹²¹ *MP*, 4 June 1901, p.3.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *HRE*, 7 March 1910, p.2.

However some thought the government should be doing more. The *Record* asked, is “the Federal Legislature doing its duty in order to get white men to go into this tropical region? Does it not owe some duty to the race?”¹²⁴ Cane grower Frederick Barnard told the *Record* that Queenslanders “could not expect men to come from the centres of civilisation...to come and live at Mossman.”¹²⁵ In the Mossman district, the major form of employment was cane laboring, which Barnard considered “not fit for a white man, any more than living in the Mossman district was fit for women and children.”¹²⁶ Women and children were crucial to race building and considered the most at risk from tropical exposure. “Much stress is usually laid upon what is possible for the white man; but it is of immeasurably greater significance to the locality and to the State,” readers of the *Post* were informed, “that it be rendered fit for the white woman, for the future has its root in her.” The “white woman is rendering a tribute involving her beauty and her blood, for the populating and settlement of the Northern coastal areas which inspires the greatest praise, but also the greatest concern...the power of high temperatures to do the woman hard is greater.”¹²⁷ Another contributor to the *Record* argued that the “physiological reason for white women keeping out of the tropics is very well known and we apprehend that the white ought not go where he cannot rear a family.” In the tropics, “the white child is languid, pallid, feeble and killed off in a very rapid manner...doctors have told me...the climate of North Australia was calculated to make one lose faith in the principle of a White Australia.”¹²⁸

The delicate flowers of white womanhood seemed drastically imperiled by tropical life. Countless advertisements in the Queensland press offered remedies for “climatic debility,” or “the trials of hot latitudes.”¹²⁹ Mrs. M.J. Thomson of Charters Towers complained of chronic dyspepsia in “The Trials of the Tropics.”¹³⁰ Mrs. J. Peace of Townsville could barely leave her bed in “The Enervating North.”¹³¹ Living in north Queensland sent Mrs. Mary Quinn, “headlong on the downward grade.”¹³² She reported:

The heat seems to get right into one’s system and sap every grain of vitality out of one’s body...my liver became seriously affected...I suffered terribly from biliousness, weakness, nervousness...feebleness...the least little thing would frighten me...a bad taste was in the mouth, sleeplessness...loss of appetite...liver cough...aching sensations...headaches [and]

¹²⁴ *PDMR*, 28 May 1902, p. 3.

¹²⁵ *PDMR*, 11 May 1906, p.3.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *MP*, 10 September 1901, p.5.

¹²⁸ *PDMR*, 28 May 1902, p. 3.

¹²⁹ *TSP*, 12 April 1902, p.3.

¹³⁰ *TSP*, 26 April 1902, p.3.

¹³¹ *TSP*, 8 November 1902, p.3.

¹³² *HRE*, 23 June 1910, p.3.

giddiness.¹³³

All of this was the direct “result of a hot climate.”¹³⁴



Figure 9.14. Cairns Historical Society.

Aboriginal women often appeared in postcards from early Cairns but while doubts lingered about their viability in the tropics, white women were rarely seen. The above postcard from about 1910 however, shows white women and by extension the white race, not at all imperilled, marasmic or disfigured by tropical life. Indeed, tropical conditions are presented as being ideal for racial advancement. The composite image bursts with fertility as amid natural wonders, modernity and touristic points of interest, alluring white women confound expectation, thriving, maintaining their beauty and like delicate hibiscus flowers, flourishing in the tropical hothouse. Offsetting any risqué overtones, one woman is at prayer among the artist's models and fashion plates who may or may not have been photographed in Cairns. This is a description of race building, purity and health in the tropics. The unlikely inclusion of a man resembling Charles I strikes an odd note, but could be a cipher for 'culture' and perhaps 'lineage.' Within the idealised gender representations we might perceive the national desire to bolster the white population of tropical Australia alongside Cairnsite desire to no longer be seen as the 'Great Northern Sin Garden.' In the late nineteenth century Cairns was regarded by southerners as being dangerously multi-racial, a morally bankrupt community fallen into tropical degeneracy and sinful miscegenation to which this postcard is a rejoinder. This is Cairns, devoid of Aboriginal people, Pacific Islanders, Japanese and other 'ethnic curiosities' that so fascinated outsiders. The Chinese-dominated banana industry is shown as a racially neutral local industry, empty of people. The postcard asserts the racial purity of Cairns, describing a healthy and successful white occupancy of a climatic region thought unsuitable for whites. It implies furthermore, that tropical conditions can bring about an improved racial type. No longer should the white race fear defeat and purgation in the tropics. It rises in triumph in its own paradise.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

What sensible wife and mother would risk tropical exposure? What chivalrous husband would compel it? The white nationalist press was disgusted by such talk. "It is generally regarded as quite the thing," said the *Herbert River Express*:

to rail against the climate of North Queensland, and the fearful things predicted as likely to happen by continued residence in the tropical part of the state are enough to make one's hair stand on end... [Such] predictions are all, or a good deal, moonshine...the longer the White Australia policy is continued the less likelihood does there appear to be of the North being inhabited by...men in all stages of physical deterioration, women scarcely able to move about and children doomed to a heritage of anaemia and other diseases.¹³⁵

Cane and ability

Queensland Premier Philp told Queensland Parliament that he "knew the Cairns district well, and if it had to be entirely dependent on white labor for growing cane, no cane would be grown," but with the government paying a bonus to employers of white gangs, the transition from coloured to white labour in the canefields began.¹³⁶ Some months into the scheme it was reported that in "the Cairns district little attempt has been made to secure the bonus for the cultivation of sugar with white labour as there is a general impression that it cannot be done."¹³⁷ Pessimism abounded. "We confess there is no faith in us," said the *Morning Post*. "We are fully satisfied that for work in the tropics which required something more than spasmodic effort, white labour...is valueless."¹³⁸ It made "no apology" for questioning the "exorbitant demands" and "unreliability of the white,"¹³⁹ and promoted the view that while "Tommy Tanna is an exemplary workman...Weary Willie and Tired Tim are bores and loafers of the worst description."¹⁴⁰ From the rise and rise of White Australia in the Trinity Bay district, the *Post* seems to have developed a scathing contempt for the white working man, mocking him mercilessly for what it saw as his deficiencies as an employee and as a man. Venomous, the *Post* divested itself of any residual Laborite readers:

[The] man who takes on the demoralising and degenerating work of a navvy or worker in the

¹³⁵ *HRE*, 29 August 1910, p.2.

¹³⁶ *PDMR*, 11 September 1901, Supplement.

¹³⁷ *PDMR*, 19 March 1902, p.3.

¹³⁸ *MP*, 30 August 1901, p.2.

¹³⁹ *MP*, 7 February 1902, p.2.

¹⁴⁰ *MP*, 17 December 1901, p.2.

canefields is the lowest type of our civilisation. He is [a] dead-beat...not capable of continuous hard work, and only seeks it a respite from the prickings of a sensitive conscience, or a refuge from starvation, a rest from the gnawing remorse of a misspent existence – a rest from drunken sprees and aimless existence...He has no objective but to get away from his dissolute self...works a week or two then seeks relaxation [in drink]...has no ambition [and] no thought beyond gratification of his own selfish desires...He is in fact a black but for the color.¹⁴¹



Figure 9.15. Black but for the colour?
Hinchinbrook Shire Library Album 4 photo 10.¹⁴²

Early efforts of white gangs were not encouraging and many employers continued with coloured labour where possible. The “the alien is reliable, and the farmer, whose chief requisite is reliability, prefers him,”¹⁴³ it was said, “while on the contrary, there is not a single instance where white men have been found reliable.”¹⁴⁴ At Hap Wah plantation, a white gang was employed “for cutting only...At the end of the month the whites confessed defeat and the Hap

¹⁴¹ *MP*, 7 February 1902, p.2.

¹⁴² On the Hinchinbrook Shire Library website, this image has had its title trimmed and it is captioned: “First of the Cane Cutters in Ingham,” which of course they were not.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *PDMR*, 26 June 1901, p.3.

Wah management finished the season with Chinese.”¹⁴⁵ It was noted that in “the Cairns district white labor falls into the lowest condition of efficiency and value, and reaches its highest wage.”¹⁴⁶ During one season, a mill in Cairns, which required 88 hands to function, had 489 white labourers pass through its books.¹⁴⁷ Reasons given for white cane labourers ceasing employment included giving up, insubordination, intemperance and being placed “in the hands of the law.”¹⁴⁸

Commentators cast about for elucidation. “Instability” was said to be “greatest in the Northern district where the personal endurance of work of the white man is lowest.” This was the result of “natural conditions,” rather than the “loose, unstable habits of the white.” It was noted that even “races born to labour in tropical conditions...islanders, Chinese and Hindoos...became reduced in labour efficiency” during the hottest month of the season.¹⁴⁹ Fears of white degeneracy were slowly beginning to fade however. Dr Elkington “saw no evidence of race deterioration amongst the people of the North” and “no trace of degeneracy.”¹⁵⁰ While some still claimed that the “unsettled and unreliable state of white labor in the north is less a matter of moral disposition than...‘conditions of nature,’”¹⁵¹ Dr Breinl argued that “alcoholism and other debilitating habits do much more than cane cutting to impair the health of the workers.”¹⁵² The work habits of these men were unlikely to have been improved by the belief that alcohol, which was cheap and plentiful, preserved the white constitution against tropical ailments. In 1908 another editor acknowledged the ongoing fears of tropical debilitation, but reprised the *Post’s* early assessments that inclination to the task was a more pertinent explanation for the inefficiencies of white gangs:

[The] northern white man, upon first taking up residence for work in the tropics, is apt to deride what he is told about the debilitating influences of the climate, and to declare he is quite able to do as much as in a colder region...Then he changes his ideas and fall into the local ways and breaks down.¹⁵³

In 1910 the *Herbert River Express* reviewed the recent past: “When the Commonwealth Government...laid hold of the sugar industry, it was generally looked upon as a good thing – an

¹⁴⁵ *MP*, 5 November 1901, p.3.

¹⁴⁶ *MP*, 10 September 1901, p.5.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *PDMR*, 4 September 1901, p.3.

¹⁴⁹ *MP*, 10 September 1901, p.5.

¹⁵⁰ *HRE*, 29 August 1910, p.2.

¹⁵¹ *MP*, 10 September 1901, p.5.

¹⁵² *HRE*, 29 August 1910, p.2.

¹⁵³ *MP*, 10 January 1908, p.3.

exceedingly good thing – for the white labourers and a valiant step in accomplishing the ideal of a White Australia.” The *Express* said that opposition “to the deportation of the kanakas was based on the belief that white workers were not ‘reliable,’” and a “good many white men have shown by their conduct that there was considerable force in the argument.”¹⁵⁴ The *Post* chiseled an epitaph for them:

the white men who have been obtainable for sugar harvesting in the North...have been emphatically the most avowed opponents of commendable energy, the most bare-faced imposters on liberal and good-natured employers – and the most consummate failures as labourers that it is possible to imagine. These are no figure of speech – they are facts, proved time after time by men who have sought to give effect to the White Australia policy.¹⁵⁵

But qualifications were being added now to the performance reviews of white workers, if not the White Australia policy. There could be no celebrations that whites had triumphed in the tropics however; not while there was harrumphing to do:

The history of the sugar industry during the time that harvesting has been done by white men is far too full of records of failure of a large number of those men to be pleasant reading... their love of strong drink has been their undoing; and their employers have been heartily glad to see the last of them...the sober and industrious Italian and Spanish labourers have gained the confidence of employers, who are not such models of patriotism that they prefer drunken men of their own nationality to sober men of another race.¹⁵⁶

Conclusion

Life in a mixed-race community did not fill white Cairnsites with horror and neither did it cause them to fret tremendously about the future of the national gene pool. Believing that labouring under tropical conditions was both indecorous and dangerous for Europeans, it was for a long time tacitly understood that white occupation of the north Queensland tropics rested on the labour of climatically-adapted coloured people. This clashed directly with the objectives of democratic nationalists, who hailed an Australian society free from social stratifications and which, given the understood hierarchy of races, could be achievable only through Australia-

¹⁵⁴ *HRE*, 20 October 1910, p.2.

¹⁵⁵ *MP*, 24 January 1906, p.4.

¹⁵⁶ *HRE*, 20 October 1910, p.2.

wide unity of race. Increasingly Laborite but with significant capital investments, multi-racial Cairns faced its fin-de-siècle dilemma. White Cairnsites broke in two directions. Some supported the progressive 'whitening' of Cairns, believing that white people could thrive in all climatic regions of the Australian continent. Others sought to maintain the multi-racial status quo as a necessary tropical exception. Although it would be erroneous to suggest that multi-racial Cairns was an experimental society, coastal north Queensland was clearly regarded by some as a kind of racial and historical proving ground.

Chapter 10

Historical Refractions



Figure 10.1. Whose history? As the expropriated, depopulated hillocks visible through the trees suggests, Christie Palmerston's history-making contribution was to the expansion of white colonialism in the north – at the expense of Aboriginal society. Palmerston was a celebrated bushman but also a murderer of Aboriginal people. The repetition of similar, readymade and uncritically Anglo-centric views of the past help to perpetuate and normalise white history as 'our history,' a history found not in our shared past and the realities from which our present has emerged, but in the past pursuit of white interests. *Brisbane Courier* newspaper clipping, w.d. JOL, Anonymous Box no. 9255.

Figure 10.2. There are other ways of thinking about north Queensland's past. On the Cairns foreshore, a Cairns history display offers interpretation of Bama shield designs, information regarding language groups, traditional life and nomenclature as well as discussion of Aboriginal dispossession. One wonders how visitors reconcile the inclusive messages of the information boards with the black and white discord apparent on the streets of Cairns. Photograph: M. Richards.



Introduction

Race is to a considerable extent an artefact of history, that is to say it is derived in part from people using history to make meaning. Social contours in the present are not simply the corollaries of past events, but are contingent upon the ongoing interpretation of these events. Histories created to acknowledge particular narratives of race transform and spawn other histories. In a continuing dialogue of identity, Cairnsites combine serviceable stories of the past with detailed historical interpretations through which to account for realities of the here and now. In so doing, they implicitly and explicitly interact with ancestral myths such as those of pioneering, progress and tropical whiteness and other refashioned narratives of race from early Cairns. Subjective constructions of white identity underlie many strands in the historicisation of Cairns from its public memorials, its twenty-first century journalism, and its popular and academic histories. To frame my interpretation of race in the Trinity Bay district and to establish some wider points of reference, this chapter reviews a broad historiography and the landmark developments in the historical construction of Cairns' past.

An epitome of progress: the pageant of a beautiful and fruitful northern area

From the late nineteenth century and from an almost exclusively white selection of colonists in north Queensland, a tradition of colonial memoir-writing cued future remembrance. Misty-eyed authors looked back with nostalgia at the colonisation of the north, recalling their roaring days in tropic 'wilderness,' how they were struck with gold fever, survived skirmishes with 'the blacks' and recoiled at 'Asiatic invasion.' In a style later revived and embellished by authors of historical fiction, or 'faction,' many old colonials sought to preserve their memories in what became a large and often entertaining literature of the north. Beyond the Great War, the publication of titles dedicated to colonial recollection thinned dramatically as old colonials went on to their reward and public tastes shifted. From the 1920s and 1930s Cairnsites looked back to the beginnings of their town with evident affection for the (white) pioneers, but ripping yarns and outrageous tales from the 'Land of the Crocodile' must have seemed a little moth-eaten to a younger generation born of the machine age and steeped in military carnage on an unthinkable scale. Times had changed.

It was becoming clear that culturally and geopolitically, Britain's 'Imperial Century' was ending and although not fought over colonial issues, war in Europe had fractured confidence in the moral underpinnings of imperialism. Many believed that Victorian and Edwardian social

principles were at the heart of Europe's tumult and its appalling aftermath. Among intellectuals in the Northern Hemisphere, a critical re-evaluation of European history – and within it, nationalism, imperialism, Spenserian sociology, vulgar Darwinism and cultural triumphalism – had begun. In Cairns, the sustained catastrophe in Europe did not immediately inspire searching revisions of the history of Australian colonialism. As academic historians in Europe and North America were taking up arms against the juggernaut of partisan, exultant and didactic narratives of progress and achievement, which were at their peak during the 1930s, in another corner of the world, J.W. Collinson put out his 'meat and potatoes' *Early Days of Cairns*, the first of a successful series.¹ A conscientious recorder of history who wrote in an engagingly low-key style and with minimal race chauvinism, Collinson remembered the Cairns in which he had grown up half a century earlier. In its introduction, the Honourable F.A. Cooper M.L.A captured the fundamentally Eurocentric historiological mood of the time, the desire of colonial society to obliterate Aboriginal history, the blurring of distinction between past events and their interpretation, and the idea that events proceeded in a linear trajectory with inherent purpose. More accustomed perhaps to opening things, Cooper ventured forth with vague specificity:

Australia has had an opportunity that few countries have had of recording its history from the beginning of things. Queensland is the most fortunate of the eastern states of Australia because she has been blessed with people keen enough to record those happenings which go to make history.²

From here Cooper seems less sure of what else to say on the business of Queensland history so he introduced a quotation, a trusted recourse for public speakers the world over, albeit one which undermined his own argument:

Lord Chesterfield said 'History is only a confused heap of facts.' The history of Cairns and District which Mr. Collinson gives us in this valuable work rather contradicts the noble Lord. It is no way confused, but is a clear recording of the pageant of one of our most beautiful and fruitful northern areas.³

Perhaps Cooper had on his shelf Thomas Macaulay's monumental *The History of England from the Accession of James III* and glanced for inspiration at its introductory remarks wherein

¹ J.W. Collinson, *Early Days of Cairns*, W.R. Smith and Peterson Pty Ltd, Fortitude Valley Brisbane, 1939; *More about Cairns: the second decade*, Smith and Paterson, Brisbane, 1942; *More about Cairns: echoes of the past*, Smith and Paterson, Brisbane, 1945; *Tropical Coasts and Tablelands*, W.R. Smith and Peterson Pty Ltd, Fortitude Valley Brisbane, 1941.

² Hon F.A. Cooper M.L.A, J.W. Collinson, *Early Days of Cairns*, Preface.

³ Cooper, *Early Days of Cairns*, Preface.

Macaulay argued that “the history of our country during the last 160 years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, of intellectual improvement.”⁴ Cooper was not, it would seem, familiar with a more recent text, Herbert Butterfield’s hugely influential *The Whig Interpretation of History* in which Butterfield attacked the conviction that history is a story of progress towards the present, and characters within it either heroes who advanced the cause of progress or a villains who impeded it.⁵ Butterfield believed in evoking “a certain sensibility towards the past,” and “going out to meet the past,” to study “the past for the past’s sake.”⁶ Unlike Butterfield, more like Macaulay, Collinson appears to have had faith in a line of causation, believing that the historian should search for meaning in the passage of events, rather than attempt to reconstruct the past:

To bring the past present, to bring the distant near, to place us in the society of great men is not the functioning of history today, but rather to record the passage of events and the principal actors, to trace cause and effect, and draw general lessons of political or moral significance therefrom.⁷

To Collinson, the most significant political and moral lessons that one might learn from the history of Cairns all related to the development and progress of the town. By the 1930s, repatriations, immigration restrictions and ‘marrying out’ meant that Chinese, Japanese and Pacific Islander communities had drastically shrunk as distinct ethnic groups and although predictions of their racial demise had proven hasty, Aboriginal people also seemed to be fading from view. The need to include non-Europeans in the history of Cairns had also diminished, but non-Europeans had not disappeared from Collinson’s recollections. As he gathered the historical facts he considered to be most important, Collinson dedicated chapters to ‘The Aborigines,’ ‘The Chinese Influx’ and ‘The Pacific Islanders,’ and having no sense that Cairns’ progress had been the work of whites alone, Collinson did not emphasise a Cairns district saved by White Australia. Race-conscious but moderate in tone, Collinson responded to Cairns’ nineteenth century past without recourse to jingoism, while elsewhere, Cairns’ history was reframed as the advance of a ‘white man’s country.’

⁴ John Warren, ‘Whig History,’ *New Perspective*, vol. 5 no. 3, www.history-ontheweb.co.uk, accessed 12 October 2009.

⁵ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, New York, 1931.

⁶ Adrian Wilson and T.G. Ashplant, ‘Whig History and Present-centred History,’ *The Historical Journal*, Vol.31, No.1, 1988, p.10.

⁷ Collinson, *Early Days of Cairns*, Preface.

Floreat Cairns

In *A Resume of Advancement and Progress* (1930), W.M. Simmonds compiled some pertinent historical facts about the development of commerce and governance in Cairns, recounting the town's beginnings with a level of obliviousness to Chinese competition and Aboriginal occupation that the industrially-agitated, tender-ribbed first settlers did not share:

Early in the seventies several parties of inspection sought a point on the shores of Trinity Bay to found a port for the mining hinterland; but in November, 1876, an official party landed at the spot now marked by the Strand hotel. That visit might be termed the beginning of the town and environs because from it resulted the first surveys and naming of streets. A canvass town sprang up and the new settlement was given the name of Cairns.⁸

Although a process of 'tidying up' Cairns history was well underway, the hard realities of colonial incursion continued to be a source of pride to those of a belligerent and boastful bent: "The pioneers were of the hardy school," wrote Simmonds, "who came to conquer."⁹ In 1926 the 50th Jubilee of Cairns was commemorated with the *Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir*¹⁰ and *Floreat Cairns*!¹¹ Both were crammed with photographs and told a supremely confident story of white achievement in the district. *Floreat Cairns* recorded that in Cook's day "the Inlet had yet to be discovered and opened up to the march of northern settlement."¹² However:

the half-century that has passed since Cairns was baptized...has been full of enterprise, achievement, ambition...Cairns was in the grip of the scrub, the swamp, the forest primeval. Impenetrable jungle wrapped it round about. It was glorious, but it was unprofitable. The aboriginal was lord of the domain. The North was a no-man's land. It was rich and rare; it held within its bosom untold wealth ready for the men and women of resource to come and claim it, to open it...The pioneer spirit...a spirit of enterprise, of faith, of grit in the spirit of this Northland imbued the pioneers to face the perils of the unknown...to hew out of the wilderness the germ of a city.¹³

⁸ *Souvenir of the Cairns Shire Council Commemorating the 50th Year of its Foundation with a Resume of its Advancement and Progress*, 1930, p.9. W.H. Simmonds is the only acknowledged author but it is possible that there were other contributors.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Published by the Cairns Post.

¹¹ Published by the Cairns Post and compiled by S.H. Martin.

¹² *Floreat Cairns*, November 1926, p.II.

¹³ *Ibid.*

In 1926, Cairnsites could smilingly reminisce about the first white child born in Cairns among the slab huts, grog shanties and shrubby-faced pioneers in ill-fitting, string-belted strides, whose photographs were printed adjacent to images of fine new brick commercial buildings and springy-whiskered, energetic-looking bank managers. The implied civic and racial trajectory of the town is unmistakable. Hailing “the memory of the old pioneers and...the splendid things they wrought,” the district’s first white residents were eulogized and their deeds suitably framed in picture and prose across numerous galleries and columns in both souvenir editions, with portrait studies, group shots and some representative samples of pioneering ‘types’ including the miner, the alderman, the industrialist, the Freemason and the ‘identity.’ Christie Palmerston is affectionately described as a raffish “romantic nomad of the early days of the North.”¹⁴ The district’s non-white past had brought Cairns material success, but with it notoriety, and by the 1920s and 1930s only the faintest traces of non-whites remain in official accounts. Chinese swarm over the Palmer field, robbing its rightful European owners of their gold, then are gone. Pacific Islanders never were. Aborigines appear only to menace the pioneers with their spears and their treachery then disappear, or in one photograph to hunt fish, the ‘Stone Age’ way.

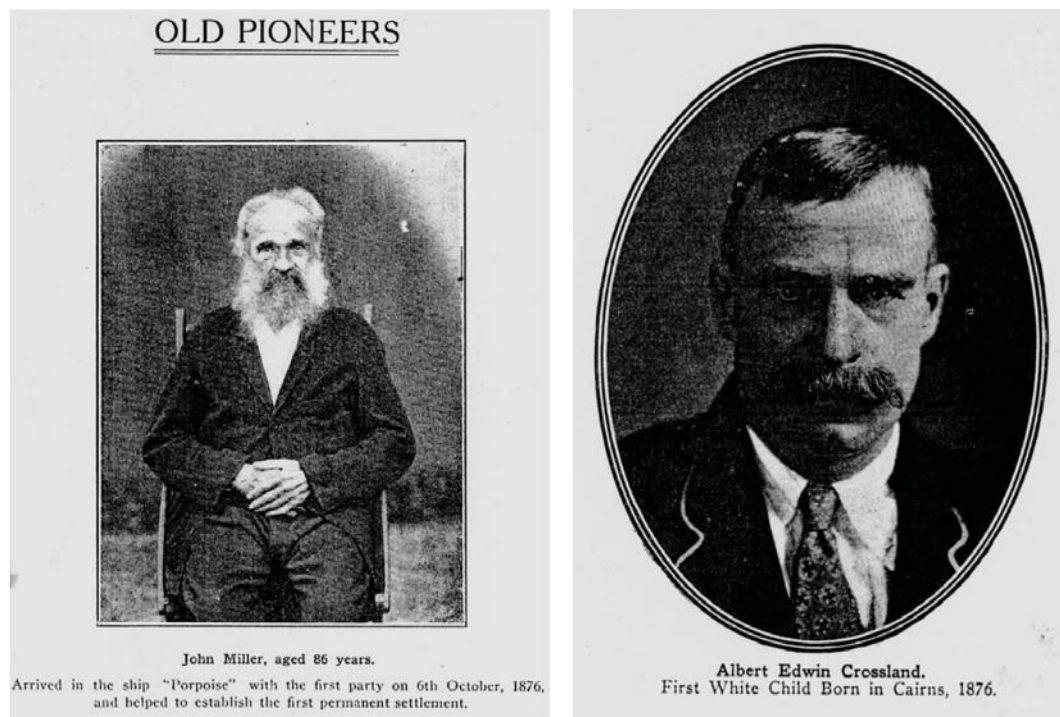


Figure 10.3, Figure 10.4. An ancient survivor from Trinity Bay’s ‘Mayflower,’ the *Porpoise*, and right, the first white child born in Cairns, now a mature man. *Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir*, pp.54-55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

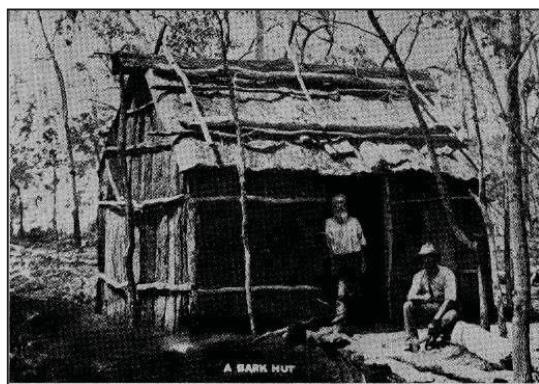


Figure 10.5, Figure 10.6. The architectural advancement of Cairns: from bark huts to buildings such as the handsome new court house, which may be read as signifiers of Anglo-Saxon grit (left) and Anglo-Saxon administrative genius (right).

Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir, p.51, left, and p.61, right.



Some Old Residents of Cairns.

Standing (left to right): Abo., Abo., W. Innis, W. P. Reddan, W. Pryn.
Sitting (left to right): C. Lavis, E. Roberts, —, Robson, T. Thomas, C. O'Brien, I. Hartill, W. Collinson, F. Brown, —, Wreide, A. Keeble, J. Miller.

Figure 10.7. Aboriginal people, no longer lords of their primeval, unprofitable domain and reduced to nameless figures among the heroes of progress: men of resource, ambition and achievement, whose pioneer spirit of enterprise, faith and grit marched settlement into the rich and rare no-man's land to claim its untold wealth. Pith helmets are still being worn by a few and the author of *Early Days of Cairns* sits among the Old Residents.

Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir, p.60.



Figure 10.8. On the Mulgrave River was the first *central* mill in the Cairns district. The first sugar mill was Hop Wah (later Pioneer), a short-lived Chinese concern run by Andrew Leon. By 1926, memories of non-white sugar cultivation were being supplanted by memories more acceptable to the racial ideology of the time. *Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir*, p.n/a. Image is dark and murky in the original.

Holding his own in north Queensland was Kelly the Tailor (Figure 10.9). “Once the aborigines held the sway,” readers of *Floreat Cairns* were told, “now Kelly holds it as a tailor.”¹⁵ The visual dialogue of Kelly’s advertisement extends numerous metaphors of colonial history. Kelly ‘models his own,’ not in crumpled hat and ‘gawd-blimey’ trousers, but in a dapper white suit with the appearance of linen. For most of the nineteenth century the lightweight, sun protective white linen suit was the veritable uniform of Britain’s émigrés in its tropical dependencies and a potent symbol of whiteness. Here, modern Kelly has forgone the pith helmet that usually provided the finishing touch. The figures of Kelly and ‘the aborigines’ seem to have been cut out by hand, probably from a studio image, then superimposed against a background of fleeting tropical twilight so poorly resolved and abstracted that it looks post-apocalyptic and from which we might draw historical analogies. While his questioning mouth and heavy eyebrows betray a whisper of uncertainty in the role of photographic subject, Kelly’s bright whiteness illuminates

¹⁵ *CP*, 1 November 1926, Supplement.

the image, spot-lit by bursting phosphorous flash. Strange, dark background shapes resolve themselves into ghostly silhouettes of Aboriginality. The three figures resemble a family, but there is no suggestion of 'racial admixture' here. A slight Aboriginal adult stands pensively behind and to one side, clad in a fancy, groin-concealing neckerchief, hand thoughtfully touching chin. She seems to be little more than a shadow, a fading memory. Although children can symbolise the future, the black babe cradled by Kelly is so dark as to appear gone already; most definitely of the past.

P.O. Boz 153 'Phone 470


"KELLY"

The Tailor

LAKE STREET, CAIRNS

50 years ago the aboriginals held
the sway ;

To-day "KELLY" holds it as a
Tailor



HOLDING HIS OWN IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

Figure 10.9. *Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir* p.108.

Authors of the Cairns jubilee booklets brushed away any lingering doubts of racial degeneration in the tropics, and as they gazed into the future, they were dazzled. While the blather, bluster and bombast of white success ought not to be read as a continuing unease at being a tropical white race, *Floreat Cairns* spoke nevertheless, of a white race 'flowering' in the tropics. It presented copious photographic evidence of large groups of rudely healthy generations, all bred on the dangerous side of Capricorn. Here was proof that north Queensland had sired:

its own people, who have been reared and nurtured in its sun-kissed clime...This beautiful

and sunny North is building up a race of virile people. It has proved itself to be, in essence and fact a white man's country...a district, a province worthy of 'The Golden Age.'¹⁶

The race militancy of the age seemed to grip the *Floreat Cairns* wordsmith who toasted, "on the tablets of the mind as well as on the scroll of history...matters of moment must be impressed...Floreat Cairns! To the future you! The present to us!"¹⁷



Figure 10.10. Mr G. Strutton's contribution to white race building in the north. Capitalisation adds a sense of divinity to this program. Unless displaying their exceptional fertility, white women scarcely appear in the Cairns souvenir booklets.

Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir, p.86.

Race, Cairns, historians

It was with the progressive national mood of the 1970s, the expansion of university research in the north and a new generation of talented historians that brought about a small and continuing

¹⁶ *Floreat Cairns*, p.I.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

revolution on the tablets of the mind as well as on the scroll of history in that part of the state. With parallels to the academic challenge of the interwar period, (and with respect to earlier notable figures including Geoffrey Bolton), some historians began to turn their attention to the large non-white pockets of Queensland history which lay relatively unexamined. Strange silences, lingering historical injustices and overemphasis on white achievement seem to have provided some motivation – there is a cathartic quality to the exposure of full-blooded, race-based horrors of exploitation, exclusion and extermination – but the yield proved richer than might have been expected from simple attempts to exorcise white guilt. Attempts were made to better comprehend the perspectives of Chinese, Pacific Islanders and others, alongside efforts to gaze back from the other side of the frontier and to understand the frontier as less a sharp line of conflict than a more diffuse zone of interaction, and to consider the historicisation of this space. Clive Moore dismantled the belief that Pacific Islanders were simply helpless victims of the labour trade and with Patricia Mercer built up a complex picture of a historically marginalized Australian community.¹⁸ Cathie May¹⁹ and later Sandi Robb²⁰ transcended the colonial clichés to show the remarkable degree of co-operation that existed between Chinese and Europeans in early Cairns. Other studies, including those by Dawn May²¹ and Timothy Bottoms²² revealed

¹⁸ Clive Moore, 'The place of the Pacific Islander in Queensland history: an oral history approach,' in Campbell, Joan (editor), *Oral History '75: papers presented at the Second Oral History Conference*, 6 Feb. 1975, La Trobe University, Melbourne, pp.43-61; Clive Moore, 'Whips and Rum Swizzles,' *Lectures on North Queensland History, Series II*, James Cook University, 1976; Clive Moore, 'Kanakas, kidnapping and slavery: myths from the nineteenth century labour trade and their relevance to Australian Melanesians,' *Kabar Seberang Maphilindo*, no. 8-9 1981, pp.78-92; Clive Moore, *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Mackay*, Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, Boroko, Papua New Guinea, 1985; Clive Moore, C.; Leckie, J., Munro, D., (editors), *Labour in the South Pacific*, James Cook University, 1990; Clive Moore, 'Me blind drunk': alcohol and Melanesians in the Mackay district, Queensland 1867-1907,' in Macleod, Roy and Denoon, Donald (editors), *Health and Healing in Tropical Australia and Papua New Guinea*, James Cook University, 1991, pp.103-122; Clive Moore, 'A precious few: Melanesians and Asian women in northern Australia,' in Moore, C., and Saunders, K. (editors), *Gender relations in Australia: domination and negotiation*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Sydney, 1992, pp.59-80.

¹⁹ Cathie May, 'The Chinese Community in North Queensland,' *Lectures on North Queensland History*, James Cook University, 1974; Cathie May, 'Chinese and Europeans in North Queensland: A Study in Race Relations,' *Lectures on North Queensland History, Series II*, James Cook University, 1976; Cathie May, *Topsawyers: The Chinese in Cairns 1870-1920*, James Cook University, 1984.

²⁰ Sandi Robb, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Wives of Chinese men in North Queensland, strategies for survival, 1875-1935*, B.A. (Hons), James Cook University; Sandi Robb, Cairns Chinatown Cultural Heritage Study, Report to Cairns and District Chinese Association Inc. and Cultural Heritage Branch Queensland Environmental Protection Agency, September, 2004.

²¹ Dawn May, 'The Health of Aborigines on North Queensland Cattle Stations,' in Macleod, Roy and Denoon, Donald (editors), *Health and Healing in Tropical Australia and Papua New Guinea*, James Cook University, Townsville, 1991, pp.123-141; Dawn May, *Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

²² Timothy Bottoms, *Djarrugan, The Last of the Nesting: A Revisionist Interpretation of Aboriginal European Relations in the Cairns Rainforest Region up to 1876*, MA (Qualifying) thesis, James Cook University, 1990; Timothy Bottoms, *A History of Cairns: City of the South Pacific*, PhD thesis, Central Queensland University, 2002. Timothy Bottoms, *The Bama: people of the rainforest: Aboriginal European relations in the Cairns rainforest up to 1876*, Gadjia Enterprises, Cairns, 1992; Timothy Bottoms, *Djabugai country: an Aboriginal history of north Queensland*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards NSW, 1999.

historical agency, not simply victimization. White colonists are rarely heroic in these accounts, but neither are they as a rule, arch villains.

With new emphasis given to Aboriginal Australians, white and non-white immigrant communities and the interactions between them in north Queensland's past, historical trends in Australia closely matched those of other new world settler societies. 'Ethnic' histories proceeded from a model of nation building towards other ways of thinking about identity in Australia's past, at times the result of interdisciplinary cross-pollination. In 'race studies' there was a general movement from race relations to culture contact and racial representation, interconnected with studies of Aboriginal missions, labour, race and Australian nationalism. The reconsideration of Australia's non-European past contributed momentum to 'internationalising' Australian history and stimulated new enquiry into Australia's relationships with its region and its influence upon our country, with renewed attention given to opponents of the White Australia policy. From this, I wonder if Australians will ever collectively accept an 'our past,' without what Tony Bennett called "partisan affective intensity."²³

North of Capricorn

Having made an enormous contribution to understanding our Australian past, Henry Reynolds began a foray into White Australia with *North of Capricorn: The Untold Story of Australia's North*. Reynolds made the compelling observation that the "tension between history, culture and identity on the one hand, and geography on the other was always most apparent in North Australia," where "cosmopolitan and multi-racial" coastal communities "most clearly and closely resembled [their] geographical milieu," and had more in common with Melanesia and South East Asia than the temperate south. Around 1900 it was here, in the tropical third of the Australian continent that "geography threatened to engulf history." Dividing Australia approximately at the Tropic of Capricorn, Reynolds saw "strong contrasts between north and south," contrasts of geography, demography and political outlook relating to questions of Australia's supposed white future. There was the Australia which was "Southern, settled and overwhelmingly white," a region which was "very different from, and particularly hostile to, the multi-racial society in the tropical north."²⁴ According to Reynolds, the policies of White

²³ Tony Bennett, 'Out of which past?: Critical reflections on Australian museum and heritage policy,' *Cultural Policy Studies: Occasional Paper No.3*, Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, Griffith University, 1988, p.4.

²⁴ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, pp.iii-xvi.

Australia grew out of “general ignorance about the actual conditions of society in the north of the continent,”²⁵ and on “highly prejudiced accounts of life in the small multi-racial towns of tropical Australia.”²⁶ The reality of life in the north was, that of an “existing, dynamic and successful multi-racial society.”²⁷ According to Reynolds, the multi-racial societies of the north:

were a serious threat to white Australia...not because they were beset with social problems and racial tension but because they were successful and challenged the most compelling ideal of the time, the dream of an absolutely White Australia, free from the contamination and the degrading influences of inferior races.²⁸

I support Reynolds’ main contentions, but draw the reader’s attention to detail presented within this thesis which is indicative of a reality – in at least one northern community – that was more complex than Reynolds’ interpretation allows. Taking an example of the Trinity Bay district, there were at federation clear demographic and political differences between the community of Cairns and Australia’s miniature metropoli, but from this it is difficult to conclude that Cairns was threatening to White Australia because of its success rather than its racial mixture. While in Cairns, debates flared from time to time about “law...order, health and social relations,”²⁹ and complaints were aired that “Cairns with its large alien population [was] an exceedingly lively place from a police point of view,”³⁰ the town was not beset – as some visitors expected – with inter-racial conflict. Cairns was indeed a dynamic and flourishing multi-racial society at federation, with a population reflecting its Asian-Pacific situation, but commentators in the town were no more inclined to emphasise the politically sensitive topic of non-white pioneering than were their southern contemporaries. The level of race consciousness in early Cairns has been underplayed by Reynolds. It needs to be borne in mind that racial tolerance in this district was contingent upon racial stratification and white dominance, stabilised by interdependency. In response to *North of Capricorn*, Russell McGregor argued, with precision, that:

the conflict between northern and southern Australia was not so much between a racist south and a less racist north, as Reynolds intimates, as between two different styles of racism. In the north, racial hierarchy legitimised social structure; for southerners, racial hierarchy justified national exclusion.³¹

²⁵ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, p.161.

²⁶ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, p.163.

²⁷ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, p. xi.

²⁸ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, p.176.

²⁹ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, p.167.

³⁰ *MP*, 11 January 1899, p.5.

³¹ McGregor, Russell, ‘Review of North of Capricorn: The Untold History of Australia’s North,’ *Queensland Review*, vol.11, no.2, December 2004, pp.107-8.

On the question of a prospective White Australia, the polarity between Australia's north and south was not always stark. Herberton's *Wild River Times* eagerly anticipated Australian federation "consolidating the British race in Australia," bringing together "people of the same race, speaking the same language, living under the same laws...bound by ties of blood and kinship...proudly exulting in the supremacy of our race."³² The political impetus for White Australia was generated in Australia's cities, which faced radically dissimilar economic and social realities to Australia's tropical regions, and Cairnsites were tormented by a prospective legislative garrotting from White Australia, for which they blamed the south, but conceded that the movement had won popular support in north Queensland. Around Cairns, White Australia morphed into arguments about coloured labour versus white labour in tropical regions, entangled with problems of territorial occupancy, development and race building. Those who stood opposed believed that White Australia would destroy the local sugar industry. Supporters saw it as their best chance to secure good wages, and believed that Australia and the Australian tropics could be, and ought to be, white. While their portraits of Pacific Islanders were closer to fully fleshed-out characters than the vile caricatures of the *Worker*, *Bulletin* and *Truth*, Cairnsites did not differ from other Australians in characterizing Pacific Islanders as a servile race. Like other Australians, Cairnsites saw a white-dominated future. In 1902 a groundswell of faith saw white labour campaigner Thomas Givens swept into office, race-based immigration restrictions were tightened and most Pacific Islanders were deported – leaving a bad taste in many mouths. From the twenty-first century we might imagine Cairns sliding then into a lengthy White Australian dolour, but commentaries from early to mid-century commentators trumpeted White Australia as a veritable triumph in the tropics.

It was unhappily noted in the Cairns press that the south was overwhelmingly, but not uniformly, white. In particular, the conspicuous presence of Chinatowns, Chinese business people, labourers, artisans and Chinese-owned market gardens were wryly observed. In rural areas there were many small communities of Chinese residents living interdependently with Europeans, interacting with similar patterns of hostility, tension and accommodation familiar to Cairnsites. Frequent inter-racial contact and mutual interest seem to have improved the prospects of sympathetic understanding in these places, supporting Reynolds' contention that ideological purity "flourished best when not confronted by complexity, contradiction or by real living people."³³ White Australia condemned these communities also. In an investigative style pioneered in California and copied even in Cairns, journalists thrust themselves into Australian Chinatowns, seeking out vice and the exotic grotesque. With diseases suspected to have a racial

³² *WRT*, 14 June 1898, p.3.

³³ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, p.173.

basis, the *Morning Post* whipped up a racist panic when plague threatened Cairns, accusing the Chinese of being unusually squalid before conceding that the entire town was unusually squalid.



Figure 10.11., Wood engraving of the Chinese quarter of Sandhurst (Bendigo), late nineteenth century by Charles Gregory. The artist does not appear to have regarded the area as a breeding ground of malfeasance, although he has included a beggar, which could suggest social evil, and an affluent-looking Chinese miner – the enemy of the European prospector. Two European men are locked in earnest discussion, about what?

Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo.



Figure. 10.12, left. Seo Young and family, Eaglehawk 1905. A mine tailings manager, Young employed both Chinese and Anglo-Australian workers in the Bendigo district.

Bendigo Chinese Association AP0007.

Figure. 10.13, right. Charles Fun Chung came to Bendigo to mine gold and married Nellie Duffy in 1886. The photograph above shows the Fun Chung family in Bendigo 1902.

Bendigo Chinese Association AP0215.

In her study on the Chinese of Cairns, Cathie May gave thought to the tempering effect on interactions brought about by the fact that Europeans felt racially superior to Chinese, but were dependent upon Chinese industry.³⁴ Drawing upon May's research, Reynolds considered the Cairns Chinese, their pioneering role and the generally good relations that became established between themselves and others in the district. Reynolds quoted May, who provided an accurate snapshot of Chinese-European relations in the town. While "community life, even in a pro-Chinese town such as Cairns was a mirror of contemporary racism...the image was softened and its outline considerably blurred by the amiable every day circumstances which local circumstances promoted." In Cairns, "the more terrifying tenets of xenophobia had no place."³⁵ I agree with May, but note the conspicuous spikes in interracial tension during which Cairns newspapers happily published racist vitriol, well before White Australia had arrived as a legislative reality. For example, "We are with the Premier in his policy of exclusion of the Chinese," the *Cairns Post* opined. "In a word our motto is 'Let this fair land belong to the white man.'"³⁶ On another occasion it proclaimed, "Let the cry be set a-going...Queensland for the white-skinned race – Drive the dirty Chinkee out!"³⁷

It is true that proponents of a White Australia in the south invented outrageous accounts of life in the north to support their claims. In his chapter on the Cairns Chinese, Reynolds touched upon southerners' derision for the interracial conviviality sometimes seen in the town. Cairnsites responses to accusations that they ate with, or took their hats off to 'Chows' suggest that when forced to choose between other white Australians and the local Chinese, they reluctantly chose the former. "It is a standing joke with the Sydney Bulletin," said a saturnine *Cairns Argus*, "that the people of this district take off their hats to a Chinaman."³⁸ The "name of Cairns has become a byword and a reproach through the tender regard for the Chinaman displayed by its residents."³⁹ The *Argus* challenged its readers: "Is Cairns doing anything calculated to wipe away so sorrowful an impression?"⁴⁰ But as an example of southern derision, the 'hats off to the Chows' slur is complicated by the fact that its source was a former resident of Cairns. The informant tattled to the receptively racist *Bulletin* that reciprocations of politeness to Chinese shopkeepers as happened in Cairns represented a lowering of white dignity. The *Cairns Post* refuted the claim, maintaining that "no-one – not even the Bulletin itself – believes that the alien races in this town are regarded in any other light than that which

³⁴ May, *Topsawyers*.

³⁵ May, *Topsawyers*, p.167.

³⁶ *CP*, 11 April 1888, p.2.

³⁷ *CP*, 4 April 1888, p.3.

³⁸ *CA*, 5 February 1896, p.2.

³⁹ *CA*, 8 February 1896, p.3.

⁴⁰ *CA*, 13 May 1896, p.2.

prevails in Sydney.”⁴¹ The *Post* was not intimidated by the self-admiring *Bulletin*, but insulted the Chinese as it justified their presence:

The Chinese population of this town have ever proved a law-abiding race, and as such they deserve to be treated fairly and justly...The majority of the Chinese in this district are engaged in those forms of agriculture which, for some reason, are not in favour with Europeans...We...regard them as a necessary evil...we recognise that it is in our interest that the Chinese should remain. The Chinese are looked upon and treated as an inferior race and they have never been looked upon in any other light.⁴²

Defence of Cairns’ honour came from an unexpected source – in the south no less. Noting that “these Queensland communities are small and far removed,” the *Truth* weighed up Cairns’ image problem among the journalistic exemplars of nationalist chauvinism, accounting for it as follows:

Cairns comes in for some very pointed attention...An impression seems to prevail among...Southerners that the concentrated vice and immorality of this great Australian continent are centred in Cairns...When any derelict metropolitan scribe of this scavenging brigade experiences a slump in his stock of marketable sensations he betakes himself to his lurid imagination...he pauses, muckrake in air, over some far away northern community – over Cairns for choice, the generally accredited Port Said of the Farthest East.⁴³

The scribe then looks to the “comprehensive charge sheet” of “infamies so rampant in the unregenerate north,” such as the “foul heathen orgies,” the “opium and gaming dens; the wholesale procurement of white girlhood for the satiation of yellow lust; of the periodical transfers of Japanese chattels,” the “diabolical alien trading corporations who...indent shipments of harlots from Japan...the private graveyards and local Golgothas attached to every sugar estate in this unregenerate moral wilderness.” All of these are then “duly reported by the ghoul hunting press harpies for the edification and enlightenment of a trembling world. Truly these gentlemen of the yellow press perform their work but ill,” which was of course the yellow press calling the yellow press yellow.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *MP*, 8 June 1897, p.2.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Truth* cited in *MP*, 15 March 1899, p.3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Cairns was “the subject of contemptuous comment...in the south” wrote Reynolds, “because it was a multi-racial and multi-cultural community.”⁴⁵ It was also subject to contemptuous comment in the north for the same reasons. But more importantly, as characterised by Reynolds, the threat posed to White Australia by a town such as Cairns may encourage readers to accept a (hyphen-less) multicultural model of north Queensland’s past. In her review of *North of Capricorn*, entitled ‘Multiculturalism in the Australian Tropics,’ Dawn May picked up Reynolds’ observation that “Southern contemporaries often commented scathingly on the multicultural nature of Cairns.”⁴⁶ May also considered that *North of Capricorn* was relevant to “a number of academic debates,” including “the appropriateness of multiculturalism as a government policy.”⁴⁷ Cairns was a place of racial and cultural diversity but cannot be fairly regarded as a multicultural society by the current usage of the term. Australians in 1900 did not share our world views or moral standards and racial equality was anathema to them. While mingling and familiarity may have eased tensions, it did not flatten the racial hierarchy, which was assiduously maintained even in the close interpersonal proximity of bêche-de-mer boats, mission stations and plantation residences.

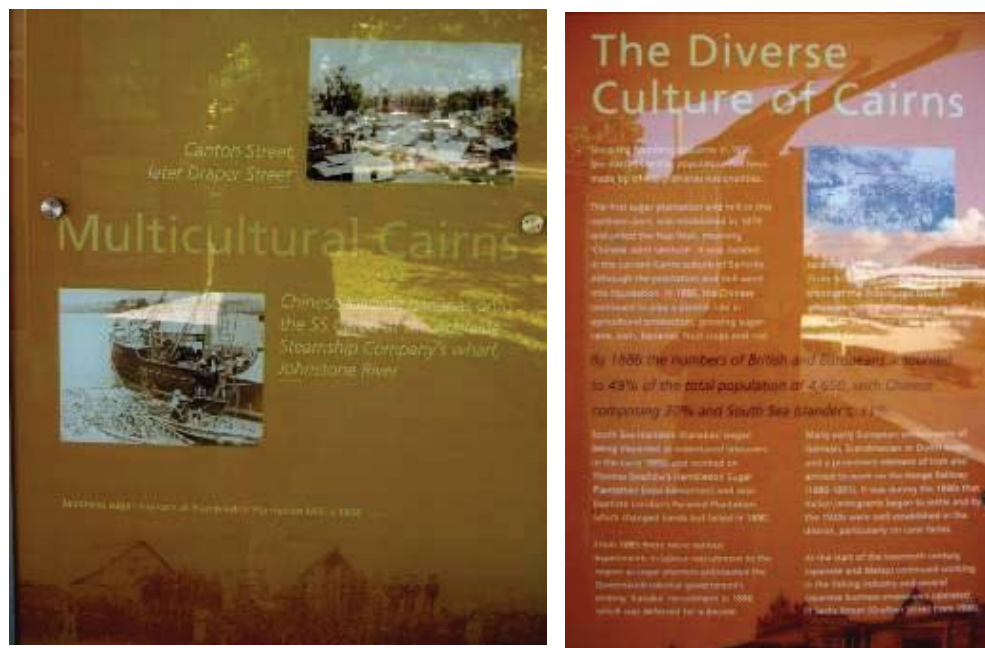


Figure 10.14. Details from the local history information boards on the Cairns foreshore. The idea of a multicultural nineteenth century Cairns has been taken up in Cairns’ public memory, but while acknowledgement of the diverse cultures of early Cairns is welcome, we need to be careful to avoid anachronistically recreating the past according to current sensibilities. Photographs: M. Richards.

⁴⁵ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, p.61.

⁴⁶ Dawn May, ‘Multiculturalism in the Australian Tropics,’ *etropic: electronic journal of multidisciplinary studies in the tropics*, Vol.2, no.1, 2003, www.jcu.edu.au/etropic.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

North of Capricorn's north-south paradigm historicises the sense of distinctiveness that many north Queenslanders felt and continue to feel. The social, climatic and historical differences between Australia's temperate and tropical regions are real enough, so it is reasonable that the device has been employed by successive waves of historians seeking to clarify the uniqueness of Australia's history, north of Capricorn.⁴⁸ In her study of Cairns Chinatown for example, Sandi Robb externalized anti-Chinese feeling in Cairns, denouncing negative influences and attitudes as 'southern.'⁴⁹ Robb argued that upwellings of Sinophobia were the result of "new arrivals...who brought popular xenophobic views from the southern states."⁵⁰ Robb also questioned the fact that historians have made "little mention about the influence of southern agitators," influence which was limited in the northern districts according to Robb, due to the efforts of locals who "strove to create a degree of fairness within the community."⁵¹ It might be observed however that many prominent figures in early Cairns hailed from southern Australia, (including the Drapers brothers, the Swallow family, Archie Meston, Ernest and J.B. Gribble), and others arrived from abroad, (Fred Wimble from England, Thomas Givens from Ireland, Alfred Atkinson from New Zealand, Walter Roth from Hungary and Albert Koch from Germany). As such, it is difficult to characterise their expressions of racial tolerance (and intolerance) as peculiarly northern.

Opponents of White Australia in the north were portrayed in the south as heartless and undemocratic 'nigger drivers,' or debased 'Jap' and/or 'Chow lovers.' It seems that this experience confirmed in the minds of some Cairnsites that federal governments and southerners would willingly ride roughshod over them, while holding the north up to ridicule for perceived deviations from racial ideals. Reynolds condemned southern Australians for legislatively strangling the multi-racial north, then mocking the white rural society that followed:

Cut off from a fruitful and productive relationship with its geographic environment, North Australia stagnated. It became a backwater – increasingly mono-cultural, socially conservative, provincial – which is the way it was seen by outsiders during much of the twentieth century. It also became more racist than it ever had been in the past, to be eventually condemned and patronised by the urban southerners who rarely knew anything about the multi-racial society that has been deliberately undermined.⁵²

⁴⁸ An earlier use of the title was made by Sir Kenneth Fraser, 'Glimpses of yesterday: north of Capricorn,' *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, vol. 8 no. 2 (1966-7), pp.358-73.

⁴⁹ Robb, *Cairns Chinatown Cultural Heritage Study*, p.23.

⁵⁰ Robb, *Cairns Chinatown Cultural Heritage Study*, p.58.

⁵¹ Robb, *Cairns Chinatown Cultural Heritage Study*, p.23.

⁵² Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, p.188-189.

The idea of a benignly tolerant north being overwhelmed by a belligerently intolerant south appeals to a certain sense of historical injustice and perhaps a desire to shake-off a hackneyed and undeserving 'redneck' image, projected from a condescending south. North Queenslanders bristle at perceptions of misrepresentation abroad, particularly the unfair charge that north Queensland is a place of exceptional racism, present or past, which gives the multicultural model of Cairns' history added appeal, and positions north Queensland at the forefront, not the rear of enlightened thinking. In his concluding speculation, Reynolds alluded to the ongoing debate about how Australia's past is read and the effective relationship between history and identity:

If Australia continues to emphasise its European heritage then the history of the north can be dismissed as a short-term aberration...But if Australia's future is to be that of an increasingly Eurasian society, at ease in its environment, then the northern experience will come to assume greater significance...Tropical Australia will be seen as having given life to the first abortive attempt to reach beyond the British/European heritage of a homogenous settler society. The precursors of the emerging Australia will be the hundreds of men, women and children of diverse backgrounds who day by day learnt how to live peacefully and work profitably together.⁵³

Life in the past lane: murals, memorials and monuments



Figure 10.15. Mareeba mural: members of a multi-racial, multi-cultural community working peacefully and profitably together through their shared history.
Photograph: M. Richards.

For more than a century now, north Queenslanders have been using history to structure a sense of belonging. In the following examples of public representations of history in the north, relationships between Reynolds' conjecture of *emphasis* and the construction of Australian

⁵³ Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, p.191.

identity can be found. At Mareeba, a mural shows men, women and children of diverse backgrounds living peacefully and working profitably together, at ease in this locality. Some emphasis is given to Mareeba's European heritage with white people lauded through a series of pioneering archetypes: the timber feller, the stockman, the miner, the farming family and the happy, healthy, wholesome, adventurous white progeny of the tropical outdoors. Placed at the cultural and compositional pivot is the figure of the white bushman. It is not clear from which time period he has sprung, as if he has always been there, complete and unchanged, a fully-formed cultural entity in a broad-brimmed hat with sleeves rolled up, enamel mug, cigarette and laconic grin. He is of this land and anchored to it in a campfire-side squat.⁵⁴ In contrast, 'immigrants' are worthy contributors but not drivers of the nation building project. Not shown are Chinese men who cleared the tablelands and grew maize (before immigration restriction then soldier settlement purged most of their remainder from the district), but a Chinese woman in Edwardian dress has been included. An Italian market gardener offers the viewer potatoes. Rather than challenging the national story, Aboriginal cultural heritage is absorbed into it.⁵⁵ The Aboriginal character resides on the periphery, not spearing or mustering cattle, but perhaps satisfying touristic expectations, happily clutches some bush tucker and appears adjacent to a grandstand, suggesting sporting prowess.

Tolga



Figure 10.16, left. Chinese man's house.

Figure 10.17, right. Chook McKewen and friends, also working peacefully and profitably together.

Among the many positive renderings of the early decades of settlement, local history displays in the Cairns region direct attention towards contact history, with explicit acknowledgement of

⁵⁴ The 'Cunnamulla Feller' whose statue towers over the main street of Cunnamulla in western Queensland, adopts the same pose and is equipped with the same props.

⁵⁵ Bennett, 'Out of which past?' p.4.

frontier conflict, (notably at the Cairns museum, Speewah picnic area and also the Irvinebank Museum where an entire display is dedicated to a notorious nineteenth century massacre of Aboriginal people perpetrated by the Native Mounted Police). The strong implication is that these events are integral to local identity, as are other intercultural experiences. At the Tolga Railway Museum, images of inter-racial bonhomie are included and references to Chinese eviction from the tablelands are implied. The caption for Figure 10.16 (above) reads: “Chinese House and Detached Quarters...built by Chinese...prior to the establishment of the Soldier Settlement Scheme after World War 1. Jack Ward, a soldier settler lived in the house until 1938.” Photographs can be re-contextualised with changes in historical emphasis, but monuments – and this is part of their appeal – are less amenable to similar treatment.

Innisfail



Figure 10.18. Reproduced as a postcard in this instance, a white cane cutter at Innisfail has been immortalised in the form of a fountain, with neoclassical and art deco elements. The monument may conjure an image of a white god of the harvest, or one may read it as a racist and nationalistic statement of Anglo-Australia from between the wars, familiar to readers of *Floreat Cairns*. It is also possible that by constructing a white marble fountain which takes its inspiration from Imperial Rome, the creator was making an oblique reference to the Italian cane cutters who replaced Pacific Islanders and made Innisfail their home. Image: www.flickr.com

At Innisfail, a white marble fountain makes a characteristically 1930s approach to culturally inclusive acknowledgement, (in so far as its intent appears to be not at all inclusive), while a more recently created mural in the same town provides an alternative reading of the history of local industries.



Figure 10.19. Detail, Innisfail mural.



Figure 10.20. Detail, Innisfail mural.



Figure 10.21. Detail, Innisfail mural.



Figure 10.22. Detail, Innisfail mural.
Photographs this page: M. Richards.



Figure 10.23. Detail, Innisfail mural.

In comparison to commemoration in stone and concrete, murals are inexpensive and impermanent. Both characteristics are advantageous for refreshing our historical understandings with changing times. As does the Mareeba mural, a mural at Innisfail presents a detailed, multi-racial picture of Innisfail's pioneering past. The Innisfail mural gives emphasis to community members working peacefully and profitably together. Transporting sugar cane in the nineteenth century, there is shown a horse and dray under the control of a Pacific Islander man. The European man is shown to be human, not more or less heroic than the Pacific Islander performing the same task. Chinese can be seen loading their bananas onto boats headed south. The representation of Aboriginal people is of particular interest. As well as a positive image of a family group living in the rainforest, Aboriginal cultural adaption on the frontier is also shown. Two Aboriginal men in European dress wrestle a crocodile. The mural avoids what Amanda Nettlebeck has called the "over-determined vision" of history, that of "either moral disgrace or heroic achievement" in which it often appears that "remembering one must incur forgetting the other."⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Amanda Nettlebeck, 'Contact history, social memory and the construction of white belonging,' *ACH: The Journal of the History of Culture in Australia*, 26 (Annual 2007): 195(15), e-journal.



Cairns: The white man in white marble and coloured concrete, with variations

Figure 10.24. Koch's memorial
Photograph: M. Richards.

While on the Cairns foreshore, large information boards celebrate a multi-racial past in which Cairns community members managed to find ways to work peacefully and profitably together, elsewhere in Cairns memorials commemorate the town's British/European

heritage. The first public monuments in Australian colonies emphasized colonial legitimacy by situating pioneering history within a wider, usually imperial, history.⁵⁷ Rather than grand (and costly) memorials, written words and images made this case in nineteenth century Cairns, so no bronze Empress of India lurks among the poinciana trees on the foreshore, or amid the RSL's canons, plaques and forest of flags. Cairns' first public monument was dedicated to local hero Dr Koch, the town's eminent physician who died in 1901. Only a year before, Koch had directed the public response to an outbreak of plague in Cairns. Few considered this to have been Koch's finest hour, but such was the esteem in which the doctor was held that in quick time, an impressive stone tribute to him was got up. In an interesting historical twist, Koch's white marble face is turned quizzically and in perpetuity towards the old Chinese quarter.

Public discussions of historical importance have a long history in Cairns and retain the ability to mobilize portions of the community. Debate surrounding the fate of a crumbling, four metre ferro-cement James Cook statue is indicative of the ways in which public and personal histories can intertwine, and the problems of establishing incontestable historical meanings. In 2008, with the demolition of the backpacker hostel whose forecourt the sculpture had graced, and the sale of the land on which it stood, community concern for the local landmark was roused. Sentimental Cairnsites expressed affection for the work, which had stood beside the highway for as long as most could remember. The dour Cairns Heritage Group argued that the magnificent retro folly ought to be removed from its inauspicious location to a more solemn spot on the Cairns foreshore, from which Cook could fix his concrete gaze upon the sea and forever wonder about the French.

⁵⁷ Hilda Kean, 'Public history and two Australian dogs: Ishlay and the dog on the tucker box,' *Australian Cultural History Journal*, Vol.24, 2006, p.144.



Figure 10.25, left. A decaying Cook with dramatic impasto effects formed by a concreter's trowel. The historical figure of Cook, even in vernacular tribute, polarises indigenous and non-indigenous Cairnsites. On Australia Day 2007 the latter was used in protest against the former, suggesting that historical debate concerning the proper place of Cook is still alive.

Figure 10.26, right. Cook after restoration, 2008.
Photographs: M. Richards.

Consultants were called. Cook was subject to a thorough-going examination with worrying results – concrete cancer was diagnosed. While the prognosis was not terminal, the sculpture was declared too frail to be moved. A white knight emerged in the form of a local paint and hardware proprietor. \$20,000 was raised to save Cook. With such largess becoming available, all subtlety was thrown to the onshore breeze. The resulting over-restoration saved the sculpture from the fate of the accompanying hostel, but betrayed an unexpected desire to re-write history, to create Cook anew. The sense that the sculpture was embarrassingly outdated had surfaced, so pastel hues which had placed the work so effectively in time were blotted out and red, white and blue tin soldier livery took their place. Cook was reborn, not to the satisfaction of all however. In 2009, Cook was once more reincarnated, this time in russet-hues, with yet another layer of historical meaning splashed across his form.



Figure 10.27. The latest incarnation of the Cook memorial, 2009.
Photograph: R. Cairns.

Cook's town: bronzed Australians

Arguably, public monuments connect to community self-perception more so than the work produced by historians. An impressive collection of memorials make a case for tiny Cooktown's outsized historical significance, consolidating a sense of local identity through pioneering narratives and the legend of Cook, whose vessel was laid up for repairs at the mouth of a river he renamed the Endeavour. Not particularly given to non-white commemoration, a statue in Cooktown commemorates the word 'kangaroo' which entered the English lexicon during the Endeavour's stranding nearby. Also among Cooktown's retinue of memorials are statues struck in dedication to Cook and a hardy gold-seeking individualist, from Europe rather than China – the country from which most of the Palmer goldfield's population had come and who landed in their thousands at the port. Another white gold-seeker in the form of a heraldic figure can be found outside a Cooktown caravan park, although when I visited, his pan was missing. The visual effect was that of a gold-seeker with hands raised in supplication. Given the actual conditions on the Palmer, this interpretation may be the more apt.



Figures 10.28, 10.29, 10.30. From Cook to kangaroo: Stages of ascent in becoming Australian?
Photographs: D. Richards (left) and M. Richards.

The white man in the tropics



Figure 10.31, Figure 10.32.
Photographs: M. Richards.

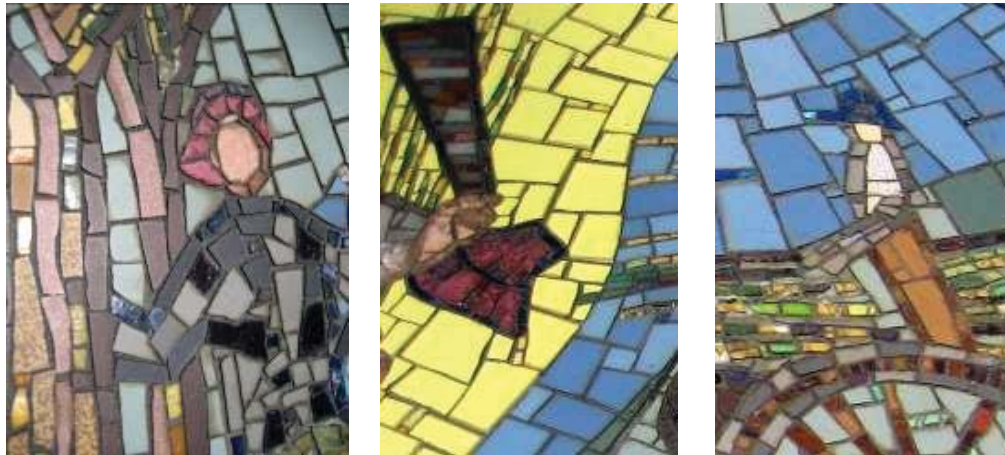
In 1995, in the park at Gordonvale near Cairns, a monument was erected, as its plaque states, “Celebrating 100 years of history of the sugar industry in this area.” Around Cairns, one hundred years earlier, sugar growing had been underway for approximately ten years. 1895 marked the transition from the plantation era to smaller, whiter holdings, central mills and the winding back of Pacific Island labour. The Gordonvale memorial is two works really, a sculpture and a mural jammed awkwardly together. A visitor first meets a typecast – quite literally – of a white cane cutter with a determinedly furrowed brow. The figure towers over a circular, broken tile mural in the style of a classical Roman mosaic floor, which aside from the plaque’s quirky date is the creative highlight of the work. Unlike the bronzed cutter, whose sturdy form can be seen from a distance, the mural, featuring an historic montage of sugar cane cultivation and the flags of several nations, can only be seen close up.

Figure 10.33, right.
Photograph: M. Richards.

On my visit, it had been defaced. Creamy coloured tiles indicating whiteness had been used to portray cutters, a driver and a woman standing before rows of cane. Figures seen undertaking tasks such as weed chipping and loading of the cane,



normally performed by Pacific Islanders had their racially-identifying coloured tiles chiseled away from the cement base. I have no explanation for this except to note that sensitivities about Pacific Islander labour continue to run deep in both white and Pacific Islander communities. As Kleist observed, “Memorials are a weak indicator of how a society deals with the ongoing problems of its past even if its symbolic representations and commemorations seem to signal otherwise.”⁵⁸



Figures 10.34, 10.35, 10.36. Representations of people in the early sugar industry: a white woman posing with the crop, a white hand cutting it and a white man transporting it. Photographs: M. Richards.

Edmonton

A more egregious example of historical obscurantism can be found in Cairns. The suburb of Edmonton now occupies land, 650 hectares of which, during the 1880s and 1890s, comprised Hambledon plantation and its armies of coloured labourers. Hambledon’s last remaining canefields were recently swallowed up by housing developments, but Edmonton revels in its cane growing past – or select aspects of it. References to Hambledon abound. There is the Historic Hambledon Hotel, the Canecutter’s Restaurant, Swallow road, Thomas Swallow Gardens (with old cane crushing wheels re-used as sculptural features), Sugarworld water-park and Sugarworld housing estate. Clearly Hambledon and the Swallow family have not been forgotten. But all of this historical revelry notwithstanding, a visitor could still come away oblivious to the fact that there was ever a plantocracy and an era of coloured labour in north Queensland.

⁵⁸ J. Olaf Kleist, ‘Heal divisions so a new day can dawn,’ *The Age*, 28 January 2009.



Figure 10.37. The plaque reads: “Tribute to Hambleton Sugar Pioneers from Citizens of Edmonton,” undated, and with an interesting correlation between the Historic Hambleton Hotel and ‘thirsty work.’ Photograph: M. Richards.

According to Edmonton’s commemorative sculpture, the sugar pioneers of Hambleton were white men who dared to take on some of the most strenuous manual labour known. We know that cane cutting was hot and strenuous work because the sculptor has rendered one figure on the point of collapse, the other slugging litres of water from a jerry can. The familiar pioneering motif of a dog stands buffed and shiny from the pats of passersby.

Regarded as something of a historical wrong turn, the plantation era is not celebrated in popular memory, but the censorship of the Sugar Pioneers memorial insults the memory of the real sugar pioneers, the Pacific Islanders, Chinese, Japanese and others who worked at Hambleton for lower pay, with fewer rights and under worse conditions than the white workers who followed them. The sculpture is an anachronistic pastiche, reminiscent of 1930s Australian nationalist sculptures which redrew pioneers as soldiers.⁵⁹ It conveys messages of heroic struggle and hardships overcome at the naissance of Cairns. Cast in bronze, it says that this is the final interpretation of the past, that its meanings are immutable.



Figure 10.38. Sugar pioneers at Hambleton 1880s or 1890s. Pacific Islanders still await a dedicated public tribute in Cairns. Hambleton Mill Records, ANU:NB.

⁵⁹ See for example the cane cutter memorial at Innisfail, Figure 10.18.

Conclusion

The past is a difficult beast to tame. Bringing it into the service of the present is not easy. Early attempts to historicise Cairns were informed by understandings of race and progress in which the fittest race that continued to assert its ascendancy would prevail. History, it was thought, had shown this to be true. From negotiating with a multi-racial present, Cairnsites then found themselves negotiating with a multi-racial past. Historical reflections were informed by ballooning racial vanity in Australia and colonial traditions of 'improvement' were applied to nineteenth century north Queensland. Later, historians attempted to reintegrate excised and lost pieces of the past, encouraging Queenslanders to accept the north's gloriously, notoriously multi-racial history as a promising precursor to Australia's multi-racial present. Reynolds's question of emphasis hovers over this present, and generations socialised in white cultural centrality. While in places the historical glamour of an heroic white past hold obstinately firm, difficult and intriguing variations born of collective memory and review nudge themselves into prominence. Debate has broken out among the monuments.

Conclusion: Race around Cairns



Figure Conclusion.1. Race around the time of William Wellington Cairns was a complex matter of building certainties on the shifting sands of history. The Governor of Queensland from whom the northern settlement got its name was a white man who had made his home in the tropics as Governor of Malacca, St Kitts and Honduras, but was relocated to the cooler climate of South Australia to improve his ill health, bought on, it was thought, from his tropical exposure. JOL image no.146255.

Five general points regarding the history of racial representation in the Cairns district can be made. Firstly, it is clear that the social order of the Cairns district was founded upon racial hierarchy and deeply-entrenched ideas of race. Born of colonial expansion with its traditions, ideologies and cultural practices relating to ethnic conflict and nation building,¹ it could hardly have been otherwise. It was an order based on white dominance and stabilised by an interracial network of dependency. Backed by scientific reasoning, historical experience and new political urgencies, racial certainties grew stronger in Australia with the advance of the nineteenth century and spilled forward into the twentieth, but the edifice of racial thought was always imperfect and always shot through with ambivalences and contestations. Under certain

¹ This historical explanation for racism is from Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, p.30.

circumstances European Cairnsites made explicit reference to racial science, such as at the onset of plague, for the containment of Aboriginal heredity, or in consideration of white viability in the tropics, but usually their racial thought filtered more diffusely through words and images or found form in patterns of behavior. Choices about racial representation were influenced by social factors including the play of local politics and the need for Europeans to assert and maintain their power and legitimacy, which included where necessary, a redrawing of past/present/future.

Secondly, racial configurations embodied Europeans' fears, beliefs and aspirations, creating a contour map of their perceptions and sensitivities about the past, present and future. Sustained by cultural and biological theories of advancement and decay, Europeans in the Trinity Bay district saw themselves locked in a struggle to establish and hold dominance over a social order and the natural world, but theirs was also an internal struggle. While it is clear that Japanese loomed large in the imaginations of north Queenslanders, Malays, Javanese and other minority groups have only a sketchy presence on the record Europeans left. The existence of Pacific Islander men and Japanese women was handled discreetly until their presence was threatened, at which point they were dragged into full historical view. Images of other non-whites can also be seen transforming with shifts in the socio-cultural milieu. In 1900 Pacific Islanders were at once devout Christians and roaming savages, free agents and unthinking victims. Similarly, representations of the Chinese in Cairns moved through a range of positive and negative typologies, correlating with the self-identification of Europeans and their sense of security in the community and in the tropical north. Rallying points in political struggles were racialised and historicised on the Cairns foreshore (and in federal parliament) but, suggestive of racial inscription as a shifting artifact of history, interaction between Europeans and Chinese around Cairns caused Europeans to re-imagine not only the Chinese, but, also themselves. This thesis has concentrated on white perspectives, but undoubtedly transformations were multidirectional.

Thirdly, Europeans understood an incompatibility to exist between their place in history and their geographical situation. Yet powerful feelings of historical destiny informed the actions and imaginings of Europeans as they established themselves in a region which, being geographically part of the Asia-Pacific and Australian in name only was an atypical home for white people. The occupancy of north was necessary to consolidate territorial acquisition of the continent and against the sense of foreboding that they may have strayed too far from their proper racial locale; white Cairnsites placed themselves on an historical proving ground. Geography could not be altered but history could, so a new type – the tropical white Australian – was invented for north Queensland, but from here, difficulties arose in representing an idealised past. Initially unsure of their relationship to the north and unconvinced by the

necessity or desirability of white exclusivity, Europeans' sense of tropical identity was a work in progress. Propelled by modernity and a growing sense of racial vocation however, confidence grew.

Fourthly, Early Cairnsites generally anticipated a white-dominated future for their town (and country) but one in which non-whites still played an important part. When, from the late nineteenth century, white Cairnsites imagined the future, they, like other Australians saw a white-dominated nation, but unlike the Australian mainstream most Cairnsites did not construct a future in which non-whites were absent. This clashed directly with the objectives of democratic nationalists, who hailed an Australian society free from social stratifications and which, given the understood hierarchy of races, could be achievable only through Australia-wide unity of race. This critical point of difference grew starkly apparent around federation, before being overwhelmed by White Australia. Despite significant and occasionally murderous intercultural tensions, peaceable accommodations continued to be found. Daily contact between different races and personal relationships seemed to erode the heightened sense of threatening racial otherness experienced by many Anglo-Australians who did not live in close proximity to non-whites, but in 1900 the future of Cairns teetered precariously on a national response to race.

The fifth and final observation I make is that the analysis of visual images can give additional depth and generate additional insights into the history of race and human experience around Cairns. In view of its richness as an evidential base, it is odd that visual history has sometimes been regarded as history's poor cousin. I admit to having first incorporated contemporary photographs as a means by which to consider the camera as a disciplining device in a colonial context, but then my interest expanded. It dawned on me that images were a doorway into another historical dimension, that images, – including images of race – cannot be confined anywhere between literal statements of exposition and high abstraction. I believe that I gained a more sympathetic sense of early Cairnsites through their photographic representations which, when juxtaposed with their words, jangle with contradictions and ambiguities, prompting fresh lines of enquiry. This research has been undertaken in the spirit of keeping as close as possible to the original sources, retrieving (and contextualizing) actual language from the past (including images), and it was from this that the narrative 'through line' of *Race around Cairns* revealed itself: that race around Cairns persisted as both an artifact of history and a changing historical reality against imperatives to secure unitary models of both history and race.

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