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Introduction: Race around Cairns

Figure 1.1. 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, indispensible 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.”

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.” 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. Given the complexity of Australians’ response to race and region across the continent as demonstrated by Walker, 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.

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

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

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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.”

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. 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.”

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

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4 Ibid.
5 Walker, Anxious Nation.
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-gear ed 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 maître 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.

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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.
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

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\(^{10}\) D.J. Daniel, \textit{Cape York Peninsula: Around the coast and up the centre}, G.K. Bolton Cairns, w.d., p.11.

The present day incarnation of the \textit{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, \textit{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.”

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, 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.
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,\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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


\textsuperscript{14} Laurie Whitt, 1995, cited in Shroeder and Borgerson, \textit{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 scurvyed 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.”\textsuperscript{15} He would be a “distinctive tropical type, adapted to life in the tropical environment in which [he] is set.”\textsuperscript{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.

\textbf{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.

\textsuperscript{15} Anderson, \textit{The Cultivation of Whiteness}, pp.131-132.
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.” 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

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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.”

![A photograph from the Wimble banquet.](image-url)

*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.

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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 Hambledon 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.”

**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.” 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

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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

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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.” 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.

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.” 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.”

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 Guerard’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.” 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.” 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.” 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.”

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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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{23} Herbert Spencer rejected this proposition, countering that the great man was rather a product of environment, his genesis

\textsuperscript{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.” \textit{Queenslander}, 16 July, 1881, p.72.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{CI}, 10 August 1889, 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.” 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. 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 ascendency 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

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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.
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.”

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.” 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.

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.”

The *Cooktown Courier* was “especially thankful that some…Chinese settlers…have eschewed the uncertainties of gold digging” to grow fruit and vegetables, thereby expanding the otherwise limited diets of northerners. In language reflecting its diminishing hopes for the Cooktown region and touching upon the belief that European well-being was damaged in the

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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 1999, 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.”

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.

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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.” 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.

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. 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.” 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.” 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

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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.
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 – conflations 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.” 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

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\(^4\) *CC*, 18 October 1876, p.3.
\(^7\) 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.
\(^9\) Jones, *Trinity Phoenix*, p.75.
According to Jones, the originals were: “Hatless shoeless drunks, male and female,” who “roamed twenty-four hours a day.” 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

Bolton wrote that with the 1 November proclamation of a town site, “respectability gradually overtook Cairns.” 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

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10 Ibid., p.73.
11 Ibid., p.81.
12 Ibid., p.75.
law prevailed.\textsuperscript{14} If a clarification in the \textit{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."\textsuperscript{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."\textsuperscript{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."\textsuperscript{17}

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\textsuperscript{14} Jones, \textit{Trinity Phoenix}, p.89.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{CC}, 15 November 1876, p.3.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{CC}, 29 November 1876, p.3.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{CC}, 18 October 1876, p.3.

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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.
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.”\(^\text{18}\) 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.”\(^\text{19}\) 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.”\(^\text{20}\)

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.”\(^\text{21}\)

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{19}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{20}\) *CC*, 25 October 1876, p.3.
\(^\text{21}\) *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.” Sour grapes dangled provocatively as the *Courier* scorned the “Trinity Bay craze,” mourned Cairns as a “delusion and a snare,” 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.” The *Cooktown Herald* alluded to “doleful accounts of Cairns,” where there was “not a penny to be had.” Zombie-like residents were observed, wandering about “in a kind of disconsolate manner.” 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.”

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.

### 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

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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. 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.” 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.” The Police Inspector was forced to capitulate, “to avoid bloodshed.” 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 Chinee,” and a scene of “a little excitement.” Later, some Chinese fishermen sailed into the Inlet, apparently seeking fresh water. They beat a hasty retreat under volleys of rifle fire from shore.

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.” A correspondent to the Herald quite approved of the novel social order in Cairns: “No police here and so far none required.” 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.”

30 CC, 18 October 1876, p.3.  
31 CH, 18 October 1876, p.2.  
32 CC, 18 October 1876, p.3.  
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.
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?  

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.” 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

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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.” None of this was unequivocal, but as C.N. Conolly has shown, miners’ stated grievances against the Chinese consistently fell short as explanations for their attitudes. 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 discomforted 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.” 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.”

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.” 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.” This outraged the Courier, who called the Herald’s characterisation “ridiculous misinterpretation...300 men means the entire population, not ‘a few idle men.” 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.

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

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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 Cairnites 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.”

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

\[61\text{ CC, 4 November 1876, p.3.}\]
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.” The *Courier* was less circumspect, saying the Chinese should stay off them because they were “our goldfields.” 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,” 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.

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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. (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. 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.” 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. 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

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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.” 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

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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 discomposed 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.”\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Cooktown Courier} was prepared to call the unpleasantness over, declaring that at Trinity Bay, “anti-Chinese feeling has considerably subsided.”\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{CP}, 15 March, 1890, p.2.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{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 indispensible 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...

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5. Walker, *Anxious Nation*. 68
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.
8 TSP, 7 May 1898, Supplement.
Artists, intellectuals, travellers and writers marvelled at Japanese refinement, zest for life, genius for design and love of the arts. Australian homes, particularly those of the cultural elite, were adorned with Japanese curios and Eastern flourishes. 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.” 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

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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. 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](image)

Figure 4.8. In this (cropped) informal photograph at the Hambledon mill manager’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

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17 Chinese cleared the land then hoe cultivated among the rotting tree stumps. Fieldwork done by Pacific Islanders paid £6 5s per annum, Javanese £9 plus free meat and Chinese £1 5s 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.”\textsuperscript{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?”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{20} Ijima allowed Philp to draw his own conclusions.

Pax Japonica

![Notification from official Yoshizawa Motoi to the Japanese people “of the coastal north,” 1897.](image)

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.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{MP}, 1 December 1899, p.3.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{MP}, 9 December 1897, p.3.
\textsuperscript{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.
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.”

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.

In 1897, white Queenslanders were becoming edgy about the numbers of Japanese workers in the north and T. Matuzaki 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

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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.” Among north Queenslanders, this turn of events met with fewer indications of approval. Military exercises were conducted in Cairns, themed as an Anglo-Japanese War and Japan was coming to be seen as “a direct and distinct menace to English possessions in the Southern Hemisphere.” 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.

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.” 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.” 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.” 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.

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

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 Hambledon

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 Hambledon 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

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⁴⁸ *Worker*, 22 April 1905, p.5.
⁴⁹ *Cairns Daily Times* (hereafter *CDT*), 20 November 1899, p.2.
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 Frances, ‘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.
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. These qualities were said to conceal furthermore, a passionate, ‘native’ sexuality. The combination presented an absorbing prospect to male fantasy. 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.
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

56CP, 27 June 1888, p.2.
Karayuki-san and the Nan’yô

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. 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). 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. 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. Having been sold, the karayuki-san was customarily supplied, at her own

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59 Mihalopoulos, ‘Ousting the ‘prostitute,’ p.175.
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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 Yamazkai 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

\textsuperscript{61} Mihalopoulos, ‘Ousting the ‘prostitute,’ pp.177-179.
\textsuperscript{62} Murakami, The Civilised Asian, p.167.
life and concealment with which former karayuki-san guarded themselves. Women “who returned from the Nan’yō 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.” 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. 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.” Another said she was “shocked” and “saddened” by the tales of the karayuki-san but, “Thinking about their plight fills me with courage.” 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. 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.” 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. 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.” 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

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. 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.

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.” 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.”

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

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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.” 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.” 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.” 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.” 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,” but those who favoured the status quo, who regarded Japanese women in Cairns as nothing more than “a law abiding, if loose-living crowd,” 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.

Thus dragged from semi-obscenity, there was an upsurge in north Queensland Japanese sex industry slang. In this idiom ‘Yokohamas’ were neighbourhoods in which one might find Japanese “ladyspiders” 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. From a trickle to a flood complaints came in. The Home Under-Secretary’s Office in Brisbane received a letter from John McIntyre

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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.
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.”

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.” Still, the normally pro-Japanese Torres Strait Pilot saw cause to lament the mushrooming of “Yokohama houses,” extended its sympathy to Cairnsites for “the troubles of Cairns over Japanese kuruwa,” deplored the “lackadaisical indifference” 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.”

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.” 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.”

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,” 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.”

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.”

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.” 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.” 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. Take “the average man,” it argued:

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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 Ibid, 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?\(^\text{101}\)

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,”\(^\text{102}\) the Post reported. Having previously argued for the control of Japanese prostitution to protect white men from venereal disease,\(^\text{103}\) 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?”\(^\text{104}\) 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.\(^\text{105}\)

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.”\(^\text{106}\) 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.
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?”

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


\[114\] *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 of 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.”  

He said that he did not even consider these residences to be “his property.”

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.”

**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.
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.

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\(^{118}\) 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. 

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.” 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. 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.” But apart from a few oddball sanitation campaigners, municipal authorities and townspeople barely acknowledged the dangers to human health. Popular responses usually fell somewhere between stoicism, fatalism, bravado and the redirection of blame - often to external or ‘alien’ sources.

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

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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.
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. Conferences 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. 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. 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

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8 Ibid., p.34.
9 CDT, 9 January, 1900, p.2.
a flourishing British colony,”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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,”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{11} MP, 21 April 1900, p.2.
\textsuperscript{12} MP, 24 March 1900, p.6.
\textsuperscript{14} Dawn, May 1904, p.16.
\textsuperscript{15} Wild River Times, (hereafter WRT), 20 June 1900, p.3.
\textsuperscript{16} MP, 6 July 1900, p.4.
\textsuperscript{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.” These organisms were banished by sunlight and air, the “natural enemies of malign microbes.” 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. 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.

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.

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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 wallop ing 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 Heath in Brisbane urged Cairns and other Queensland towns to take precautionary measures. 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.” 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

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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.”

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.” 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. 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.

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.” By February’s end, the sum total of the council’s plague precautions consisted of taking out a loan under the Health Act, and bringing “the matter of filling up” under the notice of the Sanitary Committee. 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. 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

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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.
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.  

It concluded: “We are also pleased to note that steps to improve dirty Chinatown out of existence have been initiated.” 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.” 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.” 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 microorganism 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] bruiselike 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.

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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.”

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” and advised against the use of the plague vaccination “until more is known about…its...
characteristics. “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.” 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.”

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.” 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.

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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 funked – 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.