Chapter 9
White Cairns

Figure 9.1. Hambledon Mill Records, ANU:NB.
From archived documents of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company, the origins and purposes of this enigmatic image are unknown, but the contrived account of amicable colonial relations seems to relate to the question of coloured labour. The composition includes a man displaying props of Aboriginality, a boomerang and an animal skin, and as the bush hut is constructed from cane trash rather than the plant material used in the Pacific islands, the photograph was probably taken in Queensland. The posture of the central figure alludes to a European conception of regal importance, a ‘king’ bestowing favour upon the courteous approach of a cane industry representative by way of a European handshake. This message of stately diplomacy is reinforced by the presence of two ‘noble courtiers’ in the form of Pacific Islander ‘advisors,’ stripped to the waist, as Europeans imagined Islanders, not as Islanders dressed in Queensland. While a combined ‘black court’ may have been an acceptable piece of colonial nonsense for European postcard recipients, the idea might have been very strange to Pacific Islander and Aboriginal people, whose interactions were often positive, but quite not so theatrical. Who is the intended audience?

The image would be interesting if composed by missionaries or on a cane-farming photographer’s whim, but its CSR provenance, elaborate staging and unusual language point to other purposes. Around 1900, the public image of cane growers and labour recruiters was dreadful in the minds of many white Australians and this photograph could have been a confused attempt at winning back support, but its problems of plausibility make this unlikely. Aboriginal people would recognise that expressions of European tribute paid to Aboriginal authority were almost non-existent in colonial Australia, so one assumes the photograph was not a piece of propaganda directed at them. Is the message of harmonious intercultural exchange in Queensland directed at Pacific Islanders, whose trust and labour were sought by companies such as Colonial Sugar Refining?
Introduction

In the early years of the twentieth century, Australia was experiencing something of a colonial hangover. The shock of rapid modernisation had brought about an intensification of nationalist ideology, in which racism was becoming entrenched. The Mackay Chronicle considered the conundrum of linking national progress to racial uniformity. “We seem to take it for granted” began an editorial piece, “that huge developments of science, art and literature and the mighty commercial and financial schemes afloat must necessarily bring what is called social advancement.” But progress in north Queensland presented “difficulties and problems not yet solved.” In “our own part of the world there has been one vexing question,” it was “the question of coloured labour.”1 The new Australian nation had confirmed white race building as a founding principle, but the towns of the rainy north survived on a just a handful of primary industries, industries which could be obliterated by blanket immigration restrictions against non-whites. Commissioner Dr Reed had told the Sugar Commission that without Pacific Islanders “it was hard to realise what practical use North Queensland, especially that portion…on the eastern seaboard could be put to.”2 In Cairns, many thought that without Pacific Islanders, the district was doomed. The Morning Post turned to pathos as it mused upon exclusive white nationalism in the tropics and the Cairns district expunged of Islanders, as was sought by local Labor man and Trinity Times/Cairns Advocate editor Thomas Givens. Should Givens win office, thought the Post, the white “working man need work no longer. He will be dead. Want and misery will have killed him.”3 The Post lampooned:

Over the deserted city of Cairns will rise the plaintive wail of the blacks’ corroboree. Posterity will drive their four-in-hand over the graves of the dead white men…On the rocks of Cape Grafton the billows will roll as they rolled before, and the tidal waters ripple on the shores of the inlet as they may have done for countless ages, but no beating of the churning screw or the rattling of the anchor chain will be heard; but the bark canoe will steal over the placid waters carrying posterity to visit the home of their forefathers at deserted Yarrabah. Hooray…for a White Australia.4

Responding to concerns about immigration, national security, defence and racial purity, Australians were becoming increasingly concerned to preserve a White Australia. This put the northern district in a very awkward situation. Located in a geographical realm deemed

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1 MC, 13 January 1902, p.2.
2 MP, 4 June 1901, p.3.
3 MP, 18 February 1902, p.2.
4 Ibid.
hazardous to white physiology, the attractions of Cairns and its verdant hinterland had not been irresistible to great numbers of European colonists. In its arid and humid variants, tropical Australia was the climatic antithesis of northern Europe and in accordance with colonial convention, north Queensland’s coastal industries were heavily dependent upon coloured labour. This situation was further complicated by the expense and scarcity of white workers. Cairnsites expressed extreme scepticism that northern Australia could be effectively occupied or developed without coloured labour and this belief formed the basis of their objection to racial exclusions. While it seems that most were unconvinced by the horrific scenarios of white debilitation said to be caused by long-term tropical exposure, few were willing to risk toiling in the canefields or in banana plantations to prove their immunity. Neither did this work appeal to their sense of racial dignity. At the dawn of the new century, Cairns stood at a fork in the road. Either the nation must accept a tropical variation in the White Australia ideal, or a fundamental logic of race – that Europeans could not work and thrive in the tropics – must be discarded.

From the vortex

Figure 9.2. In contrast to the previous image, a cartoon from the Bulletin in which Pacific Islanders are auctioned for less than the price of a coconut, fits more closely with many Australians’ assumptions about the violent and exploitative basis upon which the Pacific Island labour trade was founded. Bulletin, 30 April 1881, p.13.
Figure 9.3, Figure 9.4. Images from the labour trade. Top: Pacific Islander men and women not yet outfitted as workers in Queensland are gathered, apparently freely, on the deck of the *Fearless*, a labour vessel from which many Cairns planters received workers. No stinking slave-holds, whips, chains or other accoutrements of slavery are in evidence. Bottom: Brising with firearms, Islanders and recruiters have been assembled in a formation that blends the aesthetics of a Victorian museum display case and the informal posturing of a sporting club photograph. Unlikely to match the supreme fitness and powerful musculature of the Islanders, the recruiters wisely retain their shirts, which processing limitations have caused to glow with angelic radiance. With no less than three rifles trained in his direction, one recruiter appears slightly apprehensive but the overwhelming message of this photograph is of a state of trust existing between all parties.

Top: Cairns Historical Society.
Plantation workers in the Cairns district included Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Sinhalese, Javanese and Malayans, but most were Melanesian people, known in Australia as ‘Kanakas,’ drawn from the arc of Pacific islands north-east of Queensland including the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides. Most came from the islands of Maliata, Guadalcanal, Tanna, Ambrim, Aoba and Epi. The Pacific Islander labour trade had a particularly poor image beyond the sugar districts, never having recovered from the damaging allegations of the 1860s and 1870s from which members of the Australian public formed a view that labour-trading ‘blackbirders’ were little better than kidnappers and murderers, and the perception that Pacific Islanders, as a race, were their helpless patsies. “The Kanaka is at best a savage,” it was once said in the *Queenslander*, “often tractable and biddable, but still undeniably a savage...a child to be protected from the ill-usage or deception of cruel or designing men.” He was, furthermore, “incapable of guarding his own rights.” An image of slavery or semi-slavery clung to the importation of Pacific Islanders, not helped by the aristocratic pretentions of planters who filled their canefields with workers physically resembling African slaves.

By 1900 the Pacific Islander labour trade had been thoroughly made over. The worst excesses of the blackbirding days were long past and a combination of plunging sugar prices and political pressures had caused the breakup of the large plantations, but the Post still found itself rejecting accusations from an earlier time, “sugar growers are...not the bloated aristocratic nigger drivers as most Southerners paint them,” it protested. The Post refuted the Bulletin’s allegations that white Cairnsites “revel in the worst vices of slavery, immorality and greed; that every citizen owns at least half a dozen abject and fear-stricken slaves,” and that “our tropical plantations...are manured by the bodies of these slaves,” but doubts about indentured overseas labour had become embroiled in the push for a White Australia. Islanders were now represented as threat to both industrial cohesion and Australian racial unity. Intent focused on the cessation of indentured Pacific Island labour.

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5 *Queenslander*, 14 May 1881, p.625.
6 *MP*, 8 February 1901, p.2.
7 *MP*, 20 February 1903, p.2. Clive Moore has shown the extent to which contract work in Queensland was voluntary and appealing to Pacific Islanders, and examined the persistence of its remembrance as slavery in relation to the Labor party, White Australia and current injustices experienced by Islanders. Clive Moore, ‘Kanakas, kidnapping and slavery: myths from the nineteenth century labour trade and their relevance to Australian Melanesians,’ *Kabar Seberang Maphilindo*, no 8-9, 1981, pp.78-92; *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Mackay*, Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, Boroko, Papua New Guinea, 1985.
Figure 9.5 is a postcard image entitled *A Noted Headhunter, Roviana, New Georgia, Solomon Islands*. Figure 9.6 was captured on a plantation in Queensland in apparent replication of the cannibal trope. Standing outside what appears to be a residential hut; stripped of his work clothes and clad in a loincloth and holding an arrow (?), we might perceive the cane worker to be glowering at the indignity. Emphasizing the most rhetorically useful features, Europeans constructed different Kanakas: Laborites wanted Queensland free of ‘servile races’ to preserve high wages, White race builders wished Pacific Islanders gone for fear of their genetic contribution to the Australian nation; humane members of the general public were dismayed that Pacific Islanders with long-term connections to Queensland might be ejected against their strong wishes, or repulsed by the idea that slavery might exist in Australia; planters wished to carry on as per usual and missionaries wished to recruit Islanders to their own cause. At the height of the labour abuses imbroglio the *Queenslander* had argued: “The Kanaka is a savage…whose short contact with civilisation works little change in him.”\(^8\) Later, during the push for a whiter Australia, the *Post* countered: “The kanaka is not a blood thirsty cannibal.”\(^9\) The “Kanaka…has a heart – a soul if you will…he has a sensitive nature, capable of recognizing a kindness and returning a favor and can be appealed to much more effectively with a kind word of authority than with a green hide.”\(^10\) The *Post* added, the “majority of the Islanders are the picture of health and always ready with a laugh, and some of the old hands can crack a joke which might even penetrate the skull of a Federal Minister.”\(^11\)

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\(^8\) *Queenslander*, 14 May 1881, p.625.

\(^9\) *MP*, 12 March 1901, pp.4-5.

\(^10\) *Ibid*.

\(^11\) *MP*, 8 February 1901, p.2.
Farewell Australia. According to the *Post*, the “old Exeter Hall cry that the kanaka is merely a slave has long ceased….The kanaka, as we find him in Queensland is not [a] naked, brutalized savage…He dresses well, houses well, feeds well, works well, and…‘spends his money like a toff.’” Indeed, prior to their departure, many Pacific Islanders had photographic studio portraits of themselves made, displaying their finest clothes and other symbols of achievement in Queensland, such as learning from books. A reporter observed ‘time expired boys’ at liberty in Cairns during their final week in Queensland: “our local outfitters made a larger number of cash sales than usual. The boys were resplendent in their new found glory. Their hats were decorated by nosegays of an extremely gaudy hue and in the ears of several of them were fastened small brass clock wheels.” Some had their feet “encased in bluchers” and smoked silver pipes with amber tips.

Australia manqué? The clothing and gender representation of Figure 9.9 are very much in the style of rural, working class Queenslanders from the end of the nineteenth century, which is – White Australia notwithstanding – precisely what immigrant Pacific Islanders were. In the view of the *Post*, “White Australia appeals to the miner…to the bricklayer, carpenter, linen draper or general artisan” who cries, “‘do away with the leprous black and leave the country to the white man.’” The “working classes in Queensland…oppose the employment of kanakas…on political and sentimental grounds,” meaning the working classes identified Pacific Islanders as class and racial rivals.

In Cairns at this time, White Australia was an evolving debate about race, nation and tropical development. Unadulterated racism certainly played its part. “There are few white men, if any,”

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12 *MP*, 8 March 1901, p.2
13 *MP*, 1 October 1901, p.4.
14 *MP*, 29 March 1901, p.2.
15 *MP*, 8 March 1901, p.2.
the Post ventured on one occasion, “who desire to be associated with coloured aliens.”16 A letter writer concurred, objecting to “the inconvenience which the public suffer” from having to stand in close proximity to non-whites at the Cairns Post Office, or in other words “a motley crowd of niggers, kanakas, and sundry other evil smelling subjects of his majesty…not nice company at any time.”17 As a principle of white racial prestige and high wages, White Australia was a popular catchcry. In the cities and mining areas it meant the exclusion from Australia of non-whites, but in the sugar districts, the presence of Pacific Islanders was not necessarily seen in contravention of the principles of a White Australia. A correspondent considered the paradox, recalling that “we shouted ourselves hoarse with ‘White Queensland,’” but now objected to “the newly fledged Commonwealth putting its foot down on the sons of guns called kanakas.”18 The Morning Post filed reports from “a battle of the moderates against the extremists,” in which the “moderates were just as anxious for a white Australia as the extremists.”19 It claimed: “We all want a White Australia, we are all bent on promoting the advancement of Australia for Britishers,”20 but the “presence of the kanaka in the cane field is in no way a menace to White Australia.”21 The Port Douglas and Mossman Record made reference to the “White Labor policy”22 and lectured its readers that “the rational thing to do is to strictly regulate the [coloured] labour which can produce wealth…and leave the white man to do what he can do, that is, supervise and direct.”23 N.P. Petersen of Aloomba agreed that non-European labour advanced white interests:

It is not fair that the pioneers…of North Queensland, who have tackled the mighty scrub or uprooted the forest and made it productive, not only for the benefit of themselves directly, but indirectly for their fellow man should…run the risk of losing their all through the vagaries of a few faddists.24

In 1901, Labor was claiming that “the voice of Queensland,” had “pronounced against kanaka labour.”25 In 1902, Thomas Givens, who laid claim to “an unbounded knowledge of the Chinese, the Japs and other alien races, (not of course losing sight of the kanaka),”26 became

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16 MP, 18 June 1901, p.4.
17 MP, 1 February 1901, p.3.
18 MP, 5 November 1901, p.4.
19 MP, 11 October 1901, p.4.
20 MP, 29 March 1901, p.2.
21 MP, 8 February 1901, p.2.
22 PDMR, 5 October 1906, p.2.
23 PDMR, 28 May 1902, p.3.
24 N.P. Petersen, Aloomba, MP, 6 August 1901, p.5.
25 MP, 24 May 1901, p.2.
26 MP, 19 November 1901, p.5.
Cairns’ local Member of Parliament. Givens explained to a public meeting that he “was a firm believer in White Australia. Our State could never be great unless it was populated by our own people, and unless the aliens were done away with Queensland would be the alien part of Australia.” Givens even regarded his ideas as the inspiration for Barton’s vision of a White Australia. With its least-preferred model of a White Australia appearing a fait accompli, the Post raged against the “rabid ‘White Australia’ cry,” and “the platform fetish of ‘White Australia,’” which it described as having arisen “from the vortex” of a “thousand devious devices,” and out of a “dense cloud of political bigotry.”

The Record noted “increasing anxiety…in the Anglo-Saxon world” on questions of immigration.” Playing down the non-white presence already established, it argued that without Pacific Islanders, “North Australia…will be deserted by settlers and end up the happy hunting ground of the long shore scoundrels of the islands about.” The “Chinese, Malays and other races will find their way into it, and it will become a scene of debauchery.” Apprehensive about the near north, others emphasized race building as a matter of national security. Whipping up fear of Asia, the Truth warned that “Australians, as a rule, regard this country as a natural home, the divinely-designated abiding place of the white race. It is nothing of the kind. It is the habitat of the black, the brown and the yellow men who regard the white man as an impudent interloper.” A meeting at the Cairns Shire Hall was told that “Unless the Commonwealth built up a wall of white flesh and blood they could not keep out the yellow men,” and that “before too long there would be a miniature China in North Queensland.” The Courier imagined a bulwark of white men’s bodies in north Queensland forming “a protectorate…over that portion of the Commonwealth easily accessible to Asiatic hordes.” Givens had talked up “the probability of war with China,” stating that “it would be a sorry day for Queensland if we had to rely on the alien population to fight for us.”

27 Givens’ parliamentary tenure was brief. White Australia did not lose its grip on the north beyond his term, but remained contentious.  
28 *MP*, 8 March 1901, p.4.  
29 *MP*, 15 November 1901, p.5.  
30 *MP*, 10 December 1901, p.2.  
31 *MP*, 29 March 1901, p.2.  
32 *MP*, 18 October 1901, p.2.  
33 *MP*, 15 November 1901, p.5.  
34 *Times*, cited in *PDMR*, 23 October 1901, p. 3.  
35 *PDMR*, 28 May 1902, p. 3.  
36 *Truth*, 17 September 1910, p.2.  
37 *MP*, 13 October 1906, p.3.  
38 *BC*, cited in *MP*, 18 June 1901, p.4.  
39 *MP*, 8 March 1901, p.4
that care had to be taken to ensure that “future settlers in the North would be those who could take their places in the fighting line.”

In the anxious eyeing of ‘yellow hordes’ the Post saw an opportunity to push for the retention of Pacific Islanders. Workers from various parts of south and south-east Asia were important to the district, but their success in challenging European hegemony meant that if push came to shove, they would be considered expendable. The Post mounted the case that there were “no two opinions about the desirability of Queensland severing connection with the Asiatic alien, Japanese and Indian,” but wondered:

[What] possible menace are Polynesian Islanders? They do not intermarry with the white race, they do not enter competition with our tradespeople or citizens, they spend all they earn in the colony, and their observance of the law is not slacker on average than that of the every day laborer. All sections of the community are prepared to follow any laws for the purpose of militating and stamping out the evils attendant upon the presence in our midst of Japanese, Chinese, Hindoos, Javanese and Malays… [but] ‘White Australia’ can be established without erecting a barrier against the Polynesian.41

Figure 9.9. Malaytown Cairns, home of many of the smaller ethnic minorities of Cairns including Malays, Javanese, Sinhalese, Torres Strait Islanders and others. Cairns Historical Society.

The Post accused Laborites of focusing exclusively on Pacific Islanders, whom it wished to retain, while overlooking the racial dangers of other Queensland residents, whom, (if necessary), the Post was willing to sacrifice:

40 MP, 1 February 1906, p.3.
41 MP, 8 March 1901, p.2.
I beg to draw the attention of the Labor party to the existence among our midst of races not purely hewers of wood, drawers of water and trashers of cane, but engineers, tradesmen, and what is worse still, financiers…The brainy subjects of the Mikado and the Brothers of the Sun are an entirely different crowd to…Tommy Tanna, Johnny Samoa and Co.\textsuperscript{42}

Figure 9.10, Figure 9.11. Examples of documentation required by Chinese to enter Queensland in the early 1900s. At left is the negative impression of the palm print of Lee Fong, a passenger from Port Darwin travelling to Cairns in March 1908. A similar identifying palm print is also included on the reverse of the photograph at right, from the certificate of Queensland domicile belonging to Canton-born Foy (?) Lon. A resident of Hambledon and referred by Thom Swallow, in 1905, Foy was visiting the land in which he had been born 29 years earlier. “John Chinaman,” quoth the \textit{Post}, “is a tourist, and when he comes to live and accumulate money in Queensland he finds an occasional visit to his celestial home indispensable to his comfort and his peace of mind.”\textsuperscript{43} National Archive of Australia.

In imitation of hustings oratory, the \textit{Post} indicated that it was prepared to trade away all other non-Europeans in the Trinity Bay district for Pacific Islanders: “Away with the Chinaman’ and we are with you,” it declared. “‘Away with the Javanese and the Japanese’ and we are with you also, but when you cry ‘Away with the kanaka’ then we protest.”\textsuperscript{44} It argued that Cairnsites

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{MP}, 12 November 1901, p.4.  
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{MP}, 19 November 1901, p.3.  
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{MP}, 8 March 1901, p.4.
“every day admit that the kanaka is all right but the Chinaman, Coolie and Jap must go…something must be done to give the Asiatics a fall and preserve Australia for our own race.” It quoted Dr Reed, who anticipated that reason ought to prevail, that “the White Australia cry…be confined to Asiatics only.” White Labor wrote to the Post, to argue that Pacific Islanders had not caused a lowering of white wages or “left any lasting stain on the community at large.” It was rather “the Japs and others of the Asiatic aliens that are the menace to us.” Another wag wrote of Queenslanders demonstrating the strength of their support for a White Australia by trading with Chinese, thereby “helping them to make enough money to retire and go home to China.” The Post claimed that “Local electors of all shades of politics are united on the alien question…legislation is imperative with a view to preventing any further influx of competitive Asiatics.”

The Port Douglas and Mossman Record was disgusted with the proposal to ship Pacific Islanders out of Queensland and loath to believe that the “Imperial Parliament would so belie its traditions as to allow a despotic system like the one proposed to prevail, under which, simply because of their race and colour, Kanakas may be forcibly deported from this country.” With huffy liberalism, it described this as an “arbitrary blow to freedom in Australia,” and “contrary to the general conceptions of equality which have been the guiding principle[s] of British rule throughout the Empire.” In Britain, the Record claimed, “there are thousands of foreigners of diverse colours” and “interference with their liberty…would be energetically resented by the generality of the British public.” Although delivering with grandiloquent pomposity, the Record’s heart was in the right place when it claimed that in Britain:

the white student and the coloured student study together. Race or colour can be no natural bar to ability. Hundreds of representatives of different races have ere now proved themselves to be the equal of white men in intellectual ability, and have risen to prominence in their professions, trades and other occupations in spite of vulgar prejudice. In Australia today there are considerable numbers of Kanakas, who, by their prolonged stay amongst us, have acquired an intelligence.

Under the heading “Kanaka Intelligence,” the sympathetic Torres Strait Pilot took the extraordinary step of publishing a letter of protest from a disgruntled Pacific Islander,

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45 MP, 24 May 1901, p.2.
46 MP, 4 June 1901, p.3.
47 MP, 5 November 1901, p.4
48 MP, 15 November 1901, p.4
49 MP, 8 March 1901, p.2.
50 PDMR, 11 December 1901, p.2.
powerfully evoking the sense of betrayal, hurt and anger felt by many. Apologising for not having “right good lingo,” but calling himself by the impressive Latin nom-de-plume Bene Nota Cavetu, (approximately: ‘Mark well and beware’), the writer began:

My dear Mr. Pilot, Will you be good for me and put my letter in your Newspaper so the other white people can see how the government in Queensland treat the malata man when they done with him and how the malata man and plenty more south sea man think very bad about it…the South Sea man feels bad and sorry what Queensland Guverment do belonga him…guverment policeman he hunt me all a same wild dog…till schooner go away to my Island malata and policeman – plenty policemen – take me and five my country man longa schooner all a same we been stealem watch belonga guvner.

What for whitemen bring us longa his country we all right at malayta Islands and no want to come, and now he finish longa us to cut sugga cane because he say we swallow up all a Kaikai from the white man, White man no good for work longa sugga plantation, he work little bit and make small fella money, then he clear out and he say b – r cut im sugga cane he work belonga nigger.

Suppose we strong, plenty people and plenty big fightin ship, guverment not game treat us all a same dog, like hes doing now, he fears we bring fightin ship and plenty man and knock guverment house and Brisbane and all the guverment places down all the same hurricane in our Island, and suppose we kill all the white people and take their country and keep it for we feller, all the same Japanese man talk he going to do some time…but we feller no want your b – y country, b – r im country, b – r im white man, come our country, he look out.52

51 In the Pacific Islands, hurt and anger still echo in historical memory. A Solomon Islands webpage entitled ‘The Kanakas and the Canefields’ focuses on the early (and most troubled) period of the labour trade. In an account which is highly-coloured and factually problematic, but nevertheless important for the strength of its conviction that Pacific Islanders were wronged by Australia, Jane Resture tells the “story of the Kanakas.” It is, Resture argues, “a sad chapter in Australian history” and “a very shameful part of Oceanic history,” which “should be never allowed to be forgotten.” Insisting that “Melanesians had no concept of indentured labour,” (which is contestable), the author describes the “malodorous trade...of blackbirding,” which was “the stealing of young Melanesians...by Europeans in big ships with muskets, axes and mattocks...to work in the canefields.” Islanders were taken, Resture claims, “sometimes by force and sometimes by deception and shoved into the putrid hulls of ships and carried...to Australia.” This was, at its worst, “a form of slavery.” As Pacific Islanders “toiled in the fields,” they were supervised “by overseers, often on horseback and armed with stock whips.” Later, by the late 1890s, “most of the really hard yakka (work) had been done and white labourers figured they could handle it from here,” so with few exceptions, “the men and women who cleared and farmed Australia’s sugar fields” were deported. It was, according to Resture, “Australians themselves who eventually rebelled against the employment of Kanakas, however, they did so not out of human sympathy, but fearing that the South Sea Islanders posed a threat to their standard of living.” Resture goes on to explain that Pacific Islanders’ descendents in Australia refer to themselves as ‘The forgotten people’ because “discrimination and neglect are constants in their history.”

http://www.janeresture.com/kanakas/index.htm
“It is easy to recognise why the Kanaka has been specially chosen,” said the Post. “He has only his bow and arrow and his war paint to defend himself, whereas Japan has her modern warships and advancements in civilisation which demand respect; and India will compel respect from the intervention of England to protect her subjects.”\textsuperscript{53} Pacific Islanders’ periods of residency in Queensland ranged from several months to many years. Some remained or attempted to remain indefinitely as they had put down roots in Australia, converted to Christianity and raised families. The Post made a plea for the rights of Pacific Islanders citing the example of a man in Cairns who was to be repatriated despite having been in Queensland for twenty-two years. “All his friends were dead and there was little doubt as to what would happen to him when he was put ashore. Some of the men are married to aboriginal women and have families.”\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} Bene Nota Cavetu TSP, 23 February 1907, p.3.
\textsuperscript{53} MP, 18 October 1901, p.2.
\textsuperscript{54} PDMR, 19 March 1902, p.3.
Despite the best efforts of sections of the northern community, the case for exempting Pacific Island labour from the policy provisions of White Australia was failing. Throughout 1901 the frustration, disillusionment and dismay of the *Morning Post* would continue to escalate as it vainly fought for the continuation of the practice. Attempting to placate Labor voters and white racial unitarians the Post threw editorial continuity to the wind, vacillating wildly in its quest to form strategic alliances and isolate enemies. In the racially charged atmosphere, it shamelessly courted then spurned old foes including Christians and humanitarians, and turned on non-European community members whom it had previously supported, then later expressed sympathy for their plight. The *Post* approved of Professor Harper who asked, “Is the policy of White Australia morally justifiable?” and concluded that it was “excessive and unreasonable,” but disapproved of Professor Rentoul, who argued that the Pacific Island labour trade should cease as it was “contrary to the rights of man, and to the hope of a united white Australia,” for which he was called a “great, noisy Presbyterian holy man [who is] just as much innocent of reason as he is rhyme.” Perhaps sensing that its Labor readership was already lost, the *Post* dined out on sour grapes, dismissing opposition to Pacific Island labour as the “puppet-like response of an unthinking crowd who troubled not to weigh the truth of arguments hurled broadcast by fanatics.”

Finally, the *Morning Post* surrendered. It acknowledged that “the general expression of public opinion for a ‘White Australia’” was “a consummation most devoutly to be wished.” It yielded therefore, to “the expressed wish of the majority of this state.” In 1906, at the end of a decades-long battle to keep the district open to workers from the Pacific Islands, most of Cairns non-Pacific Islander population seems to have turned out in a strange spirit of discomfort, resignation, optimism and relief, to watch the first repatriating steamer depart to the islands. As the vessel moved away from the wharf, the exiled Islanders taunted spectators merrily: “Goodbye Queensland, goodbye White Australia, goodbye Christians” their Parthian shot. “Evidently” the *Post* reported, “the kanaka has a satirical strain in his composition.”

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55 *MP*, 16 August 1901, p.2.  
56 *MP*, 6 August 1901, p.3.  
57 *MP*, 13 August 1901, p.2.  
58 *MP*, 24 May 1901, p.2.  
59 *MP*, 18 October 1901, p.2.  
60 *MP*, 17 November 1906, p.2.
North and South

The *Cooktown Herald* once ascertained that “southerners see us as a noisy discontented people whom ‘no King could govern and no God could please,’” not appreciating that northerners simply enjoyed “exercising the Englishman’s right of grumbling.”61 Always sensitive to condescension and caricature from afar, north Queenslanders had a slightly testy relationship with Australia’s metropolitan centres. “The North is robbed” bellowed the *Herberton Advertiser* on another occasion, “its industries handicapped and its progress retarded by the South.”62 It was not without justification that north Queenslanders felt ignored and overridden by the more numerous and politically influential southerners, whose interests rarely coincided with their own. In debating various proposals to whiten Australia, points of difference and a sense of southern persecution were acutely felt and sharpened along lines of the north’s racial composition. In the foment, white Cairnsites were stung by criticism in the metropolitan press suggesting that Cairns was a traitor to the White Australian cause. Brisbane’s *Worker* called

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61 *CHPRA*, 8 April 1874, p.2.
Cairns “the blackest spot in Australia.” Givens provoked his audience in Cairns, claiming that: “We were now held up to scorn by Southerners, and Cairns was always specially referred to in that connection.”

To burnish Cairns’ White Australian credentials and to defend the town’s reputation the Morning Post made vivid proclamations, to chase from Cairns anyone who was not Pacific Islander, European, or Aboriginal (presumably). However an attempt by the newspaper to demonstrate some patriotically White Australian Sinophobia backfired when in 1901 it launched a campaign against Chinese gambling in Cairns. The Post’s column was picked up by Sydney’s Truth and used to demonstrate the urgency of racial exclusion. The Truth furthermore repeated a claim in Sydney’s Bulletin that in Cairns, Europeans degraded themselves by raising their hats to Chinese, but called the accusation “vile slander.”

Surely [Queensland] has richly earned the opprobrious epithets applied to her – Kanakaland, Chowland, Mongrelia, Leperland and the like…at Cairns, where it is reputedly the fashion for the whites to habitually take off their hats to the Chinamen…the people are pretty well inured to the wiles and wickednesses of Mongrelia in the bulk, and of the Chow in particular.

Queensland parliament had been assured that the north posed no threat to the racial limpidness of Queensland, that as “long as proper care was taken there was no danger in the Kanaka contaminating the white people of the state,” but some southerners worried that the ‘contamination’ had already begun. Queensland received some unwelcome attention from S. Mauger M.H.R., who told listeners that in the north, “vice was rampant and Australians were being dragged down to the level of beasts by the Japanese and other aliens who infest the town.” At Cairns, Mauger reported, “half the population of about 3000 were whites, the other half were all sorts – Japanese, Chinese, Kanakas, Aboriginals, Cingalese and Coolies,” and there were among them “half-castes of all kinds.” Mauger concluded that “Australia would have to point out respectfully but firmly to the British Government that we were determined not to allow our race to be mixed with inferior blood.” Donald Macdonald also visited the state to observe its racial make-up first hand. He recorded his impressions in the Melbourne Argus. For many, preserving white racial purity was a higher priority than purging the continent of non-whites. Although MacDonald was happy to report that the reality of Queensland did not live up

63 Worker, cited in MP, 19 April 1901, p.2.
64 MP, 8 March 1901, p.4.
65 Truth, cited in MP, 25 June 1901, p.3.
66 PDMR, 16 October 1901, p. 3.
67 MP, 28 June 1901, p.4.
to the most frightening stories which had been put about, his review did confirm the horror of miscegenation felt by some white Australians. “So much had we in the south been swayed by innuendo, insinuation, and an occasional scare,” wrote Macdonald, “that we had come to look upon Queensland as being socially and morally in rather a desperate condition.”

The population…was becoming mongrel and depraved. Curt, picturesque and almost invariably abusive phrases were coined to describe the awful condition of that fallen state upon which the Kanaka and the black alien of every quarter had left his smudge. I had imagined…a race that had almost lost its sense if national self-respect and pride in the white man’s birthright…I looked for this mongrel Queensland and failed to find it – yet I am not colour blind. 68

Happily unable to detect traces of miscegenation in white Queenslanders, Macdonald demonstrated his expertise as an observer of racial typologies and their relationship to questions of labour and progress. He saw Japanese in Queensland: “Short, thick-set, muscular and never suffering, apparently from exhaustion, they are ideal labourers. Neat in everything, their attention always concentrated on their work.” Macdonald was less impressed with “the Hindoo in all his variations from Afghan to Lascar. At best he is a poor thing,” without “physique or willingness.” He was “the least use to the country…the least to be feared as a labour competitor” and the least to be desired as a colonist.” As with the Post, Macdonald’s preference was for the “manageable kanaka,” whom he regarded as “the least objectionable of the three.” 69

It was an over-simplification, but within the north Queensland press, those who argued for the continuation of Pacific Island labour located southern Australia and Britain as opposing centres of antagonism and sympathy. The industrial relationship between Britain and the colony of Queensland was that of manufacturer and supplier of raw materials. Britain had actively encouraged the migration of British workers to Queensland, but when their numbers proved insufficient to the colonial task, had supported the calls of Queensland employers to obtain ‘cheap’ labour from elsewhere. “At this point,” wrote Castles and Miller, “the economic interests of Britain came into conflict with the nascent Australian labour movement.” 70 The Labor organ, the Brisbane Worker reviled “kanaka labour” as a “ghastly holocaust of slavery,” 71

68 Donald Macdonald, ‘In Tropical Queensland: a study in black and white,’ Argus, cited in MP, 1 October 1901, p.3.
69 Ibid.
71 Worker, cited in MP, 19 April 1901, p.2.
prompting the Post to peer out its door, but fail to see any such “corpsy arena.” Eventually, the Port Douglas and Mossman Record would denounce the “wild eyed cranks [of] the Southern Press,” but in 1901 it was distressed, and looked to Britain for succor. Admitting that the coloured labour question was causing “much anxiety in Queensland” and “not a little” anxiety in Downing street, the Record cited the London Times, which dressed up its opinions in science and the authoritative language of the reasoning Victorian:

It seems to be certain that the northern part of the colony [of Queensland], between the Tropic of Capricorn and lat. 12 deg., can be cultivated only by coloured labour. The question then arises whether this immense region, with all its possibilities of production…is to be abandoned in order to please the urban artisan of the Southern States.

Pleasing the urban artisan was, in the view of the bourgeois Times, pushing things “to extremities.” Somewhat satisfied, the Record called its London contemporary “the most reliable authority on matters of deep Imperial import.”

Less concerned with matters of imperial import, the Morning Post and other north Queensland newspapers returned the ‘compliments’ of the Worker, Truth and Bulletin in kind, directing their hostility at the south, which included the south of Queensland. The Post derided the Worker for its displays of “southern ignorance” and condemned “Southern men,” whose words and actions had “caused considerable discussion and ‘language’” in Cairns. Ignoring arguments mounted within its own community and within its own pages no less, the Post flatly blamed “the South” for “the hair-brained war cry of a ‘White Australia’” and asked, “Does it ever strike the people in of the South” that “they are trying their best to ruin thousands of white men?” The Post rounded up its antagonists: southerners, Labor voters, humanitarians and Prime Minister Edmond Barton, the “fat lazy Sybarite.” In Cairns, “the white population is placed in jeopardy and threatened with utter extinction just because a sybarite sitting in a high state [Barton] chooses to listen to the blithering idiocy of a parcel of neurotic humanitarians or the blatant howlings of a mob of political adventurers.”

72 MP, 19 April 1901, p.2.
73 PDMR, 22 June 1906, p.2.
74 Times, cited in PDMR, 23 October 1901, p.3.
75 PDMR, 23 October 1901, p.3.
76 MP, 19 April 1901, p.2.
77 MP, 8 February 1901, p.2.
78 MP, 5 November 1901, p.4.
79 MP, 8 February 1901, p.2.
80 MP, 12 November 1901, p.2.
81 MP, 13 August 1901, p.2.
Clearly this was a hard fought battle. A Cairns Farmer weighed in, writing: “I would like to point out to our friends in the South that we also have our rights.” Another cane grower thought the demarcation line between north and south might be closer to Cairns than was usually imagined, proposing that a “colour line” could be drawn at Townsville. A Cairns Farmer accused the southern pot of calling the northern kettle black. Multi-racial communities were not confined to northern Australia. A Cairns Farmer reminded readers that Australia was dotted with ‘Chinatowns,’ with a conspicuous presence of Chinese merchants and artisans in cities and regional towns across the continent. Another correspondent alerted readers to the presence of Anglo-Indian workers on Victorian onion farms. Queensland Parliament was told that in “New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, they would find more aliens than in Queensland…and yet they talked about a ‘White Australia.’ People in Victoria should look out their own doors.” While the Post reminded readers that “North Queensland voted solidly for Federation, placing her interests unreservedly and with blind faith in the hands of the South.” Queenslandlander Thomas Glassey told Federal Parliament that voters in his state had supported federation primarily because they wished to see an end to Pacific Island labour. The Times thought that if federal authorities halted coloured labour, Queensland ought to secede, its “loyalty to the newborn Commonwealth [being] subject to severe strain.” Loyalty to Britain was also subject to strain as its support for coloured labour prompted renewed calls for an Australian republic.

The Post enquired, “How can we expect ‘the man in the street’ down south to grasp our position [given the] crass ignorance displayed by the leading politicians in the south anent to this question?” Anglo-Indian accused “sapient legislators” of being “childishly ignorant of…difference between races” and asked: “what is to militate against the importation of Indian coolies? …They are specially adapted for work in hot, steaming tropical fields.” A Cairns Farmer attempted to disabuse both the ignorant man in the street south and Anglo-Indian. The industry of sugarcane farming, A Cairns Farmer explained, is “a tropical one and the Anglo-Saxon is at a disadvantage when transplanted from his frigid zone to the tropics.” This necessitated the use of coloured labour. However:

82 MP, 7 June 1901, p.3.
83 George Neilson, PDMR, 11 May 1906, p.3.
84 MP, 7 June 1901, p.3.
85 MP, 18 October 1901, p.3.
86 PDMR, 11 September 1901, Supplement.
87 MP, 18 October 1901, p.2.
88 MP, 26 November 1901, p.5
89 Times, cited in PDMR, 23 October 1901, p. 3.
90 MP, 8 February 1901, p.2.
91 MP, 7 June 1901, p.3.
The Indian will do our work, but he is a danger to our race, as he will bring out his family or intermarry and create the piebald Australian, which is so much feared…With the Chinaman the same arguments may be used, with the addition that he soon goes out of his groove and competes successfully with the merchant and the artisan…But with the Kanaka it is different. He is a source of profit to the country from the day he lands until he leaves…and as he neither increases naturally nor intermarries in this country he can be no menace to future generations.92

Sports, strains, national self-respect and the white man’s birth right

The Morning Post made a simple calculation: “The Kanaka will never travel South for the simple reason that he couldn’t live in the climate, and for the same reason the white cane cutter and trashe will never travel North [but] must be bred here.”93 Southerners need not, therefore, fear any influx of Pacific Islanders any more than northerners could expect to be overwhelmed by white southerners desperate to cut sugarcane in the tropics. The subtle distinctions between evolutionary development, acclimatization, habituation and acculturation were never clear in common usage on questions of white tropical labour. While it had faith in evolutionary development: “Progression by slow and gradual changes [being] the law of the universe,” the Post did not aver that Europeans were transformed in a single lifetime and at a cellular level by the tropical environment; rather that like plants, they could become gradually acclimatized to different environments.94 Although it did not enter into the mechanics of the process, the Post and most other commentators referred to theories of animal husbandry from which they deduced that climatic adaptations needed to be bred into a strain, or race, over generations. “The conditions of the cane field are not suited to the constitutions of the present race of whites” argued the Post, “but in time by the adaptability of the human system a white race might be evolved equal to those conditions.”95 A public meeting in Cairns was reminded that Europeans of the district had “derived immense benefit from the presence of the Chinese. He cleared the scrub land and made it fit for occupation.” The Chinese man was able to perform these tasks because he “was immune from [sic] dysentery, ague, fever, such as ravaged the white man’s health when he attempted such work.”96 The smoothing hand of evolution had fitted races to climates as gloves fitted to hands and it was considered foolish, irresponsible and possibly even

92 Ibid.
93 MP, 12 March 1901, p.5.
94 MP, 19 August 1897, p.2
95 MP, 29 October 1901, p.2.
96 MP, 19 November 1901, p.4.
dangerous for races to be forced to perform outside of their evolutionarily determined regions. Writing from the climatic safety of Hobart, a contributor to the *Port Douglas and Mossman Record* thought that “the white race might develop sports and produce by degrees a breed of children who could be at home in the most torrid regions,” but really:

the white man has no business at all [in the tropics] as this is not the part of the earth assigned to him for a dwelling place. However, as he has a much better brain than the black…he can do a great good by directing labour and by bringing his capacity for order to promote the well-being of the darkey.\(^97\)

The *Record* disliked the flouting of colonial convention, stating that local cane growers with “experience in Mauritius, the West Indies and other tropical countries regard the proposal to cultivate, trash and harvest cane with white labour as altogether in contravention to the methods all over the sugar growing world,” and insisted that “coloured races everywhere show their adaptability to the work.”\(^98\) The *Post* declared: “We Northerners only want the tropical bred Polynesian to do work which we would be sorry to ask our fellow white man to tackle at any wage.”\(^99\) Arguments against white labour began with cultural expectation and ended with scientific opinion, but for the sake of white seemliness were usually made in reverse. “We confidently assert that white men cannot and will not do [canefield] work,” howled the *Post*, “work, which has been truthfully described for years as ‘blackfellows work.’”\(^100\) Combining the arguments of the *Post* and the *Record*, the *Cooktown Courier* elaborated: “Certain portions of the work were not meant for white men to do…White men can supervise and do much of the work demanding greater intelligence,” but “he lacks the inclination to do work which he has stated over and over again rightly belongs to the black races, a race adapted by nature to perform such work.”\(^101\)

The *Post* ran into difficulties by arguing that white men were too feeble to perform strenuous tasks in the tropics, which only tended to spur them on. Forced to recant, in late 1901 it allowed that while white men might be able to perform canefield labour, their sense of racial superiority should alert them to the fact that they were demeaned by it. They should greet the imposition with resentment. “Barton and Co. [argue] that all the white man in the North is useful for is to do black man’s work…A learned judge could grow vegetables – that is no reason why he

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\(^97\) *PDMR*, 28 May 1902, p. 3.
\(^98\) *PDMR*, 26 June 1901, p.3.
\(^99\) *MP*, 29 March 1901, p.2.
\(^100\) *MP*, 8 February 1901, p.2.
\(^101\) *CC*, cited in *MP*, 18 June 1901, p.4.
should become a market gardener.” Increasingly isolated and becoming repetitious, the Post resorted to insults. With faltering grammar, it mocked the intelligence of Labor supporters, as well as canefield labourers: “The man who harvests the cane in the tropics” it maintained, “is on the same intellectual level as the Kanaka or Hindoo, thus degraded beyond the power of thinking for themselves.” If a loss of esteem was not sufficient to dissuade white labourers, the spectre of racial degeneration might be. “Everyone, except Mr. Barton and his allies knows that the white race deteriorates in tropical countries,” maintained a correspondent, “even without hard labour.” The Post made vigorous use of this unproven danger. Assuming the authority of science but being persistently vague about the damage to white prestige or the white body, the Post affirmed:

What is really being brought about is the deterioration of the white race. Such work is, by a consensus of opinion amongst those in north Queensland most fitted by their long experience to know, more fitted for black than white will only serve to bring the white thus employed down to the back man’s level.

Habitat and biology

Resolving questions of white viability in the tropics were crucial not only to the agricultural and general future of Cairns, but to the national consolidation of Australia as a ‘white man’s country.’ A correspondent to the Post framed the problem of white occupancy of the tropics in terms of a global race struggle, influenced perhaps by Charles Pearson’s National Life and Character, which was a seminal text for proponents of White Australia:

The ruling races and nations of the earth today are unquestionably those which inhabit the temperate zones. As far back as human history has been recorded this has always been so…the white man – the blonde man who has been recognised as the most powerful type ever since the Greeks made their gods fair-headed – could not permanently thrive in the tropics. And the white races instinctively refuse to admit that the yellow brown or black will ever get so far ahead of them to really rule them.

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102 MP, 29 October 1901, p.3.
103 Ibid.
104 MP, 7 June 1901, p.3.
105 MP, 29 October 1901, p.2.
107 MP, 10 January 1908, p.3.
W.A.M. was optimistic about the white man’s prospects:

[It] is beyond doubt that our white races have an hereditary physique which will enable them to surpass in endurance that of any other race on the globe. They are beyond the brightest type of physical humanity as yet evolved. I take this as an established scientific fact…This continent has been committed to our trust by the Powers who are guiding and controlling the destinies of the Earth’s races, and it is for us to rise to our high vocation. 108

Some believed that if white Australians were to safely occupy the tropics in perpetuity it would be an unsurpassed evolutionary and civilisational triumph, “a grand conquest over nature,” but in the first years of the 1900s, strong currents of pessimism flowed. 109 Europeans remained unsure of the contents of their own constitutions and the consequences of tropical exposure, which many suspected to be unhealthy, even degenerative. Initially, scientific orthodoxy and pseudo-scientific mumbo jumbo resembled each other closely on this subject, and there were many grim forecasts made from speculative diagnoses. One writer thought Europeans could not survive the tropics “like the coloured races…because the white man has only one liver. The coloured man has practically two livers, for his skin acts as one, and thus he survives while the white fades away and dies out.” 110 Another explained:

The white man is affected by the moist hot air…on the coastal lands round Cairns. In the first place profuse perspiration goes on, generating a craving for liquid, instead of a normal appetite for food. Soon the stomach and intestines become catarrhed, which…lessens the power to absorb nutrition. 111

Then from being “all day in sweat soaked clothes…he catches chills” and suffers “Anaemia, lassitude, and a general relaxation and exhaustion of the system.” His “working power and endurance are greatly diminished and finally used up.” The consequences would be intergenerational. His progeny would be “born puny, with…a general flabbiness of constitution.” 112 We might assume that white Cairnsites regarded such talk as balderdash, but its prevalence as a theme in the popular press, the scientific attention bestowed upon tropical health and the popularity of supposed remedies for tropical ills suggests that there was at the very least some hedging of bets. Probably a fictive character or otherwise one of north

108 W.A.M., MP, 5 October 1906, p.3.
109 MP, 18 June 1901, p.4.
110 PDMR, 28 May 1902, p. 3.
111 MP, 10 September 1901, p.5.
112 Ibid.
Queensland’s more impressive hypochondriacs, R. Murrie described the constitutional consequences of his life in the tropics:

I was about as done up as a man can be…the feeling of lassitude was so great upon me that I had no desire to go about at all…I was in the most awful state of wretchedness [with] no interest in life…I was weak as a kitten…my appetite had gone altogether. Giddiness affected me [there were] sensations in the chest…and under the shoulder blades [and] small of my back…my nerves [were] as jangly and as rickety as possible. My spirits were terribly depressed…I slept but very little.113

Dr Roth advised that anyone suffering from neurasthenia or brain-fag brought about by tropical living, “should go into fresh air, or better still, into the water.”114 Dr Koch advised in favour of air and sunlight. Dr Reed of C.S.R. Hambledon contributed a detailed explanation of the inappropriateness of white labour in the tropics, arguing that the white man was unsuited to cutting sugarcane. On the tropic coast, argued Reed, the “hot and oftentimes humid atmosphere acts persistently on [the white man’s] nerve cells, bringing about a lassitude and rendering him unfit to perform manual labour.”115 Reed reviewed current thinking on the subject which called into question white occupancy of the tropics:

Nature has apparently decreed in its original scheme that the black races should inhabit the tropical regions of the earth, and, although the white races might live in the coloured man’s habitat for certain periods…it is soon found that a white man quickly begins to deteriorate physically after a few years….he eventually finds his constitution in revolt against what to him is unnatural surroundings, induced by climate.116

Perhaps permanent white occupancy of north Queensland was a biological impossibility? Having failed to find the telltale signs of miscegenation among white north Queenslanders, Donald Macdonald wondered “whether the white man of tropical Queensland was degenerating”:

Nature never intended the white man for the tropics, and if he will go there and stay there he will surely pay the price, though the full penalty may never be evident until the third or fourth generation. The degeneration will vary with the position and be worst in the furthest

113 *Herbert River Express*, (hereafter HRE), 1 September 1910, p.3.
114 *MP*, 28 February 1908, p.2.
115 *MP*, 4 June 1901, p.3.
north...in proportion will the tropical settler bear his share of the ‘white man’s burden.”

There was a risk that no amount of race patriotism could overcome the shortcomings of whiteness in the tropics. Macdonald recalled white children that he had observed in Ceylon, “poor little paper-faced bloodless white infants who have not been given a chance to build up in a more genial climate.” Evidence “of decay” could be seen in “thin, anaemic children...thin-faced, cheerless, broken down women,” and from an era when weight gain was considered a feature of good health, Macdonald was saddened by the sight of young “men who [shot] up in height as they [decreased] in width.” Whether “it be possible to train the white race to withstand the climate of the tropics” wrote Reed, “has yet to be determined.” At best, “artificial means may sometimes improve the minor details of part of Nature’s scheme,” The British in India fled to hill stations and even back to Europe during the hot months of the year, from which they imagined themselves to be preserving their health. Anglo-Australians were susceptible to British authority on most questions, including white health in the tropics. A Post correspondent argued from the Indian colonial precedent:

Anglo-Indians have to be sent away to Europe in order that they may grow up stalwart Englishmen. Keep them in the Indian hothouse and they become weedy and limp. So it must be with the children growing up in the far North. They can never grow into...stalwart men and buxom women.

Dr Reed thought the “climate is even worse in North Queensland than...Egypt, the Hawaiian Islands and Fiji.” and concluded that in north Queensland it would probably be “necessary to renew white labour in that country with fresh and vigorous men from temperate climates.” Such displays of geographical inconstancy appalled white Australian nationalists who sought to spread white people from one end of the continent to the other. The member for Herbert, gave “the White Australia Policy [his] a hearty and unreserved endorsement” and said that “having lived and worked for fifteen years in the tropics,” he was convinced that there was “no insuperable difficulty in settling the Northern portions of the Commonwealth with people of our own race and color.”

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117 MP, 1 October 1901, p.3.
118 Ibid.
119 MP, 4 June 1901, p.3.
120 MP, 7 June 1901, p.3.
121 MP, 4 June 1901, p.3.
122 Ibid.
123 HRE, 7 March 1910, p.2.
However some thought the government should be doing more. The Record asked, is “the Federal Legislature doing its duty in order to get white men to go into this tropical region? Does is not owe some duty to the race?” Cane grower Frederick Barnard told the Record that Queenslanders “could not expect men to come from the centres of civilisation…to come and live at Mossman.” In the Mossman district, the major form of employment was cane laboring, which Barnard considered “not fit for a white man, any more than living in the Mossman district was fit for women and children.” Women and children were crucial to race building and considered the most at risk from tropical exposure. “Much stress is usually laid upon what is possible for the white man; but it is of immeasurably greater significance to the locality and to the State,” readers of the Post were informed, “that it be rendered fit for the white woman, for the future has its root in her.” The “white woman is rendering a tribute involving her beauty and her blood, for the populating and settlement of the Northern coastal areas which inspires the greatest praise, but also the greatest concern…the power of high temperatures to do the woman hard is greater.” Another contributor to the Record argued that the “physiological reason for white women keeping out of the tropics is very well known and we apprehend that the white ought not go where he cannot rear a family.” In the tropics, “the white child is languid, pallid, feeble and killed off in a very rapid manner…doctors have told me…the climate of North Australia was calculated to make one lose faith in the principle of a White Australia.”

The delicate flowers of white womanhood seemed drastically imperiled by tropical life. Countless advertisements in the Queensland press offered remedies for “climatic debility,” or “the trials of hot latitudes.” Mrs. M.J. Thomson of Charters Towers complained of chronic dyspepsia in “The Trials of the Tropics.” Mrs. J. Peace of Townsville could barely leave her bed in “The Enervating North.” Living in north Queensland sent Mrs. Mary Quinn, “headlong on the downward grade.” She reported:

The heat seems to get right into one’s system and sap every grain of vitality out of one’s body…my liver became seriously affected…I suffered terribly from biliousness, weakness, nervousness…feebleness…the least little thing would frighten me…a bad taste was in the mouth, sleeplessness…loss of appetite…liver cough…aching sensations…headaches [and]

124 PDMR, 28 May 1902, p. 3.
125 PDMR, 11 May 1906, p.3.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
129 MP, 10 September 1901, p.5.
128 PDMR, 28 May 1902, p. 3.
129 TSP, 12 April 1902, p.3.
130 TSP, 26 April 1902, p.3.
131 TSP, 8 November 1902, p.3.
132 HRE, 23 June 1910, p.3.
giddiness.\textsuperscript{133}

All of this was the direct “result of a hot climate.”\textsuperscript{134}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Cairns Historical Society.}
\end{figure}

Aboriginal women often appeared in postcards from early Cairns but while doubts lingered about their viability in the tropics, white women were rarely seen. The above postcard from about 1910 however, shows white women and by extension the white race, not at all imperilled, marasmic or disfigured by tropical life. Indeed, tropical conditions are presented as being ideal for racial advancement. The composite image bursts with fertility as amid natural wonders, modernity and touristic points of interest, alluring white women confound expectation, thriving, maintaining their beauty and like delicate hibiscus flowers, flourishing in the tropical hothouse. Offsetting any risqué overtones, one woman is at prayer among the artist’s models and fashion plates who may or may not have been photographed in Cairns. This is a description of race building, purity and health in the tropics. The unlikely inclusion of a man resembling Charles I strikes an odd note, but could be a cipher for ‘culture’ and perhaps ‘lineage.’ Within the idealised gender representations we might perceive the national desire to bolster the white population of tropical Australia alongside Cairnsite desire to no longer be seen as the ‘Great Northern Sin Garden.’ In the late nineteenth century Cairns was regarded by southerners as being dangerously multi-racial, a morally bankrupt community fallen into tropical degeneracy and sinful miscegenation to which this postcard is a rejoinder. This is Cairns, devoid of Aboriginal people, Pacific Islanders, Japanese and other ‘ethnic curiosities’ that so fascinated outsiders. The Chinese-dominated banana industry is shown as a racially neutral local industry, empty of people. The postcard asserts the racial purity of Cairns, describing a healthy and successful white occupancy of a climatic region thought unsuitable for whites. It implies furthermore, that tropical conditions can bring about an improved racial type. No longer should the white race fear defeat and purgation in the tropics. It rises in triumph in its own paradise.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
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What sensible wife and mother would risk tropical exposure? What chivalrous husband would compel it? The white nationalist press was disgusted by such talk. “It is generally regarded as quite the thing,” said the *Herbert River Express*:

to rail against the climate of North Queensland, and the fearful things predicted as likely to happen by continued residence in the tropical part of the state are enough to make one’s hair stand on end… [Such] predictions are all, or a good deal, moonshine…the longer the White Australia policy is continued the less likelihood does there appear to be of the North being inhabited by…men in all stages of physical deterioration, women scarcely able to move about and children doomed to a heritage of anaemia and other diseases.$^{135}$

**Cane and ability**

Queensland Premier Philp told Queensland Parliament that he “knew the Cairns district well, and if it had to be entirely dependent on white labor for growing cane, no cane would be grown,” but with the government paying a bonus to employers of white gangs, the transition from coloured to white labour in the canefields began.$^{136}$ Some months into the scheme it was reported that in “the Cairns district little attempt has been made to secure the bonus for the cultivation of sugar with white labour as there is a general impression that it cannot be done.”$^{137}$ Pessimism abounded. “We confess there is no faith in us,” said the *Morning Post*. “We are fully satisfied that for work in the tropics which required something more than spasmodic effort, white labour…is valueless.”$^{138}$ It made “no apology” for questioning the “exorbitant demands” and “unreliability of the white,”$^{139}$ and promoted the view that while “Tommy Tanna is an exemplary workman…Weary Willie and Tired Tim are bores and loafers of the worst description.”$^{140}$ From the rise and rise of White Australia in the Trinity Bay district, the *Post* seems to have developed a scathing contempt for the white working man, mocking him mercilessly for what it saw as his deficiencies as an employee and as a man. Venomous, the *Post* divested itself of any residual Laborite readers:

[The] man who takes on the demoralising and degenerating work of a navvy or worker in the

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$^{135}$ *HRE*, 29 August 1910, p.2.
$^{136}$ *PDMR*, 11 September 1901, Supplement.
$^{137}$ *PDMR*, 19 March 1902, p.3.
$^{138}$ *MP*, 30 August 1901, p.2.
$^{139}$ *MP*, 7 February 1902, p.2.
$^{140}$ *MP*, 17 December 1901, p.2.
canefields is the lowest type of our civilisation. He is [a] dead-beat…not capable of continuous hard work, and only seeks it a respite from the prickings of a sensitive conscience, or a refuge from starvation, a rest from the gnawing remorse of a misspent existence – a rest from drunken sprees and aimless existence…He has no objective but to get away from his dissolute self…works a week or two then seeks relaxation [in drink]…has no ambition [and] no thought beyond gratification of his own selfish desires…He is in fact a black but for the color.141

Figure 9.15. Black but for the colour?
Hinchinbrook Shire Library Album 4 photo 10.142

Early efforts of white gangs were not encouraging and many employers continued with coloured labour where possible. The “the alien is reliable, and the farmer, whose chief requisite is reliability, prefers him,”143 it was said, “while on the contrary, there is not a single instance where white men have been found reliable.”144 At Hap Wah plantation, a white gang was employed “for cutting only…At the end of the month the whites confessed defeat and the Hap

141 MP, 7 February 1902, p.2.
142 On the Hinchinbrook Shire Library website, this image has had its title trimmed and it is captioned: “First of the Cane Cutters in Ingham,” which of course they were not.
143 Ibid.
144 PDMR, 26 June 1901, p.3.
Wah management finished the season with Chinese.” It was noted that in “the Cairns district white labor falls into the lowest condition of efficiency and value, and reaches its highest wage.” During one season, a mill in Cairns, which required 88 hands to function, had 489 white labourers pass through its books. Reasons given for white cane labourers ceasing employment included giving up, insubordination, intemperance and being placed “in the hands of the law.”

Commentators cast about for elucidation. “Instability” was said to be “greatest in the Northern district where the personal endurance of work of the white man is lowest.” This was the result of “natural conditions,” rather than the “loose, unstable habits of the white.” It was noted that even “races born to labour in tropical conditions…islanders, Chinese and Hindoos…became reduced in labour efficiency” during the hottest month of the season. Fears of white degeneracy were slowly beginning to fade however. Dr Elkington “saw no evidence of race deterioration amongst the people of the North” and “no trace of degeneracy.” While some still claimed that that the “unsettled and unreliable state of white labor in the north is less a matter of moral disposition than…‘conditions of nature,’” Dr Breinl argued that “alcoholism and other debilitating habits do much more than cane cutting to impair the health of the workers.” The work habits of these men were unlikely to have been improved by the belief that alcohol, which was cheap and plentiful, preserved the white constitution against tropical ailments. In 1908 another editor acknowledged the ongoing fears of tropical debilitation, but reprised the Post’s early assessments that inclination to the task was a more pertinent explanation for the inefficiencies of white gangs:

[The] northern white man, upon first taking up residence for work in the tropics, is apt to deride what he is told about the debilitating influences of the climate, and to declare he is quite able to do as much as in a colder region…Then he changes his ideas and fall into the local ways and breaks down.

In 1910 the Herbert River Express reviewed the recent past: “When the Commonwealth Government…laid hold of the sugar industry, it was generally looked upon as a good thing – an

145 MP, 5 November 1901, p.3.
146 MP, 10 September 1901, p.5.
147 Ibid.
148 PDMR, 4 September 1901, p.3.
149 MP, 10 September 1901, p.5.
150 HRE, 29 August 1910, p.2.
151 MP, 10 September 1901, p.5.
152 HRE, 29 August 1910, p.2.
153 MP, 10 January 1908, p.3.
exceedingly good thing – for the white labourers and a valiant step in accomplishing the ideal of a White Australia.” The Express said that opposition “to the deportation of the kanakas was based on the belief that white workers were not ‘reliable,’” and a “good many white men have shown by their conduct that there was considerable force in the argument.” The Post chiseled an epitaph for them:

the white men who have been obtainable for sugar harvesting in the North…have been emphatically the most avowed opponents of commendable energy, the most bare-faced imposters on liberal and good-natured employers – and the most consummate failures as labourers that it is possible to imagine. These are no figure of speech – they are facts, proved time after time by men who have sought to give effect to the White Australia policy.

But qualifications were being added now to the performance reviews of white workers, if not the White Australia policy. There could be no celebrations that whites had triumphed in the tropics however; not while there was harrumphing to do:

The history of the sugar industry during the time that harvesting has been done by white men is far too full of records of failure of a large number of those men to be pleasant reading…their love of strong drink has been their undoing; and their employers have been heartily glad to see the last of them…the sober and industrious Italian and Spanish labourers have gained the confidence of employers, who are not such models of patriotism that they prefer drunken men of their own nationality to sober men of another race.

Conclusion

Life in a mixed-race community did not fill white Cairnsites with horror and neither did it cause them to fret tremendously about the future of the national gene pool. Believing that labouring under tropical conditions was both indecorous and dangerous for Europeans, it was for a long time tacitly understood that white occupation of the north Queensland tropics rested on the labour of climatically-adapted coloured people. This clashed directly with the objectives of democratic nationalists, who hailed an Australian society free from social stratifications and which, given the understood hierarchy of races, could be achievable only through Australia-

154 *HRE,* 20 October 1910, p.2.
155 *MP,* 24 January 1906, p.4.
156 *HRE,* 20 October 1910, p.2.
wide unity of race. Increasingly Laborite but with significant capital investments, multi-racial Cairns faced its fin-de-siècle dilemma. White Cairnsites broke in two directions. Some supported the progressive ‘whitening’ of Cairns, believing that white people could thrive in all climatic regions of the Australian continent. Others sought to maintain the multi-racial status quo as a necessary tropical exception. Although it would be erroneous to suggest that multi-racial Cairns was an experimental society, coastal north Queensland was clearly regarded by some as a kind of racial and historical proving ground.
Chapter 10
Historical Refractions

Figure 10.1. Whose history? As the expropriated, depopulated hillocks visible through the trees suggests, Christie Palmerston’s history-making contribution was to the expansion of white colonialism in the north – at the expense of Aboriginal society. Palmerston was a celebrated bushman but also a murderer of Aboriginal people. The repetition of similar, readymade and uncritically Anglo-centric views of the past help to perpetuate and normalise white history as ‘our history,’ a history found not in our shared past and the realities from which our present has emerged, but in the past pursuit of white interests. 
* Brisbane Courier* newspaper clipping, w.d. JOL, Anonymous Box no. 9255.

Figure 10.2. There are other ways of thinking about north Queensland’s past. On the Cairns foreshore, a Cairns history display offers interpretation of Bama shield designs, information regarding language groups, traditional life and nomenclature as well as discussion of Aboriginal dispossession. One wonders how visitors reconcile the inclusive messages of the information boards with the black and white discord apparent on the streets of Cairns.
Photograph: M. Richards.
Introduction

Race is to a considerable extent an artefact of history, that is to say it is derived in part from people using history to make meaning. Social contours in the present are not simply the corollaries of past events, but are contingent upon the ongoing interpretation of these events. Histories created to acknowledge particular narratives of race transform and spawn other histories. In a continuing dialogue of identity, Cairnsites combine serviceable stories of the past with detailed historical interpretations through which to account for realities of the here and now. In so doing, they implicitly and explicitly interact with ancestral myths such as those of pioneering, progress and tropical whiteness and other refashioned narratives of race from early Cairns. Subjective constructions of white identity underlie many strands in the historicisation of Cairns from its public memorials, its twenty-first century journalism, and its popular and academic histories. To frame my interpretation of race in the Trinity Bay district and to establish some wider points of reference, this chapter reviews a broad historiography and the landmark developments in the historical construction of Cairns’ past.

An epitome of progress: the pageant of a beautiful and fruitful northern area

From the late nineteenth century and from an almost exclusively white selection of colonists in north Queensland, a tradition of colonial memoir-writing cued future remembrance. Misty-eyed authors looked back with nostalgia at the colonisation of the north, recalling their roaring days in tropic ‘wilderness,’ how they were struck with gold fever, survived skirmishes with ‘the blacks’ and recoiled at ‘Asiatic invasion.’ In a style later revived and embellished by authors of historical fiction, or ‘faction,’ many old colonials sought to preserve their memories in what became a large and often entertaining literature of the north. Beyond the Great War, the publication of titles dedicated to colonial recollection thinned dramatically as old colonials went on to their reward and public tastes shifted. From the 1920s and 1930s Cairnsites looked back to the beginnings of their town with evident affection for the (white) pioneers, but ripping yarns and outrageous tales from the ‘Land of the Crocodile’ must have seemed a little moth-eaten to a younger generation born of the machine age and steeped in military carnage on an unthinkable scale. Times had changed.

It was becoming clear that culturally and geopolitically, Britain’s ‘Imperial Century’ was ending and although not fought over colonial issues, war in Europe had fractured confidence in the moral underpinnings of imperialism. Many believed that Victorian and Edwardian social
principles were at the heart of Europe’s tumult and its appalling aftermath. Among intellectuals in the Northern Hemisphere, a critical re-evaluation of European history – and within it, nationalism, imperialism, Spenserian sociology, vulgar Darwinism and cultural triumphalism – had begun. In Cairns, the sustained catastrophe in Europe did not immediately inspire searching revisions of the history of Australian colonialism. As academic historians in Europe and North America were taking up arms against the juggernaut of partisan, exultant and didactic narratives of progress and achievement, which were at their peak during the 1930s, in another corner of the world, J.W. Collinson put out his ‘meat and potatoes’ *Early Days of Cairns*, the first of a successful series.¹ A conscientious recorder of history who wrote in an engagingly low-key style and with minimal race chauvinism, Collinson remembered the Cairns in which he had grown up half a century earlier. In its introduction, the Honourable F.A. Cooper M.L.A captured the fundamentally Eurocentric historiological mood of the time, the desire of colonial society to obliterate Aboriginal history, the blurring of distinction between past events and their interpretation, and the idea that events proceeded in a linear trajectory with inherent purpose. More accustomed perhaps to opening things, Cooper ventured forth with vague specificity:

> Australia has had an opportunity that few countries have had of recording its history from the beginning of things. Queensland is the most fortunate of the eastern states of Australia because she has been blessed with people keen enough to record those happenings which go to make history.²

From here Cooper seems less sure of what else to say on the business of Queensland history so he introduced a quotation, a trusted recourse for public speakers the world over, albeit one which undermined his own argument:

> Lord Chesterfield said ‘History is only a confused heap of facts.’ The history of Cairns and District which Mr. Collinson gives us in this valuable work rather contradicts the noble Lord. It is no way confused, but is a clear recording of the pageant of one of our most beautiful and fruitful northern areas.³

Perhaps Cooper had on his shelf Thomas Macaulay’s monumental *The History of England from the Accession of James III* and glanced for inspiration at its introductory remarks wherein

Macaulay argued that “the history of our country during the last 160 years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, of intellectual improvement.” Cooper was not, it would seem, familiar with a more recent text, Herbert Butterfield’s hugely influential *The Whig Interpretation of History* in which Butterfield attacked the conviction that history is a story of progress towards the present, and characters within it either heroes who advanced the cause of progress or villains who impeded it. Butterfield believed in evoking “a certain sensibility towards the past,” and “going out to meet the past,” to study “the past for the past’s sake.” Unlike Butterfield, more like Macaulay, Collinson appears to have had faith in a line of causation, believing that the historian should search for meaning in the passage of events, rather than attempt to reconstruct the past:

To bring the past present, to bring the distant near, to place us in the society of great men is not the functioning of history today, but rather to record the passage of events and the principal actors, to trace cause and effect, and draw general lessons of political or moral significance therefrom.

To Collinson, the most significant political and moral lessons that one might learn from the history of Cairns all related to the development and progress of the town. By the 1930s, repatriations, immigration restrictions and ‘marrying out’ meant that Chinese, Japanese and Pacific Islander communities had drastically shrunk as distinct ethnic groups and although predictions of their racial demise had proven hasty, Aboriginal people also seemed to be fading from view. The need to include non-Europeans in the history of Cairns had also diminished, but non-Europeans had not disappeared from Collinson’s recollections. As he gathered the historical facts he considered to be most important, Collinson dedicated chapters to ‘The Aboriginals,’ ‘The Chinese Influx’ and ‘The Pacific Islanders,’ and having no sense that Cairns’ progress had been the work of whites alone, Collinson did not emphasise a Cairns district saved by White Australia. Race-conscious but moderate in tone, Collinson responded to Cairns’ nineteenth century past without recourse to jingoism, while elsewhere, Cairns’ history was reframed as the advance of a ‘white man’s country.’
Floreat Cairns

In *A Resume of Advancement and Progress* (1930), W.M. Simmonds compiled some pertinent historical facts about the development of commerce and governance in Cairns, recounting the town’s beginnings with a level of obliviousness to Chinese competition and Aboriginal occupation that the industrially-agitated, tender-ribbed first settlers did not share:

Early in the seventies several parties of inspection sought a point on the shores of Trinity Bay to found a port for the mining hinterland; but in November, 1876, an official party landed at the spot now marked by the Strand hotel. That visit might be termed the beginning of the town and environs because from it resulted the first surveys and naming of streets. A canvass town sprang up and the new settlement was given the name of Cairns.\(^8\)

Although a process of ‘tidying up’ Cairns history was well underway, the hard realities of colonial incursion continued to be a source of pride to those of a belligerent and boastful bent: “The pioneers were of the hardy school,” wrote Simmonds, “who came to conquer.”\(^9\) In 1926 the 50\(^{th}\) Jubilee of Cairns was commemorated with the *Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir*\(^10\) and *Floreat Cairns!*\(^11\) Both were crammed with photographs and told a supremely confident story of white achievement in the district. *Floreat Cairns* recorded that in Cook’s day “the Inlet had yet to be discovered and opened up to the march of northern settlement.”\(^12\)

However:

the half-century that has passed since Cairns was baptized…has been full of enterprise, achievement, ambition…Cairns was in the grip of the scrub, the swamp, the forest primeval. Impenetrable jungle wrapped it round about. It was glorious, but it was unprofitable. The aboriginal was lord of the domain. The North was a no-man’s land. It was rich and rare; it held within its bosom untold wealth ready for the men and women of resource to come and claim it, to open it…The pioneer spirit…a spirit of enterprise, of faith, of grit in the spirit of this Northland imbued the pioneers to face the perils of the unknown…to hew out of the wilderness the germ of a city.\(^13\)

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\(^8\) *Souvenir of the Cairns Shire Council Commemorating the 50\(^{th}\) Year of its Foundation with a Resume of its Advancement and Progress*, 1930, p.9. W.H. Simmonds is the only acknowledged author but it is possible that there were other contributors.


\(^10\) Published by the Cairns Post.

\(^11\) Published by the Cairns Post and compiled by S.H. Martin.

\(^12\) *Floreat Cairns*, November 1926, p.II.

\(^13\) *Ibid.*
In 1926, Cairnsites could smilingly reminisce about the first white child born in Cairns among the slab huts, grog shanties and shrubbery-faced pioneers in ill-fitting, string-belted strides, whose photographs were printed adjacent to images of fine new brick commercial buildings and springy-whiskered, energetic-looking bank managers. The implied civic and racial trajectory of the town is unmistakable. Hailing “the memory of the old pioneers and… the splendid things they wrought,” the district’s first white residents were eulogized and their deeds suitably framed in picture and prose across numerous galleries and columns in both souvenir editions, with portrait studies, group shots and some representative samples of pioneering ‘types’ including the miner, the alderman, the industrialist, the Freemason and the ‘identity.’ Christie Palmerston is affectionately described as a raffish “romantic nomad of the early days of the North.” The district’s non-white past had brought Cairns material success, but with it notoriety, and by the 1920s and 1930s only the faintest traces of non-whites remain in official accounts. Chinese swarm over the Palmer field, robbing its rightful European owners of their gold, then are gone. Pacific Islanders never were. Aborigines appear only to menace the pioneers with their spears and their treachery then disappear, or in one photograph to hunt fish, the ‘Stone Age’ way.

Figure 10.3, Figure 10.4. An ancient survivor from Trinity Bay’s ‘Mayflower,’ the Porpoise, and right, the first white child born in Cairns, now a mature man.
Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir, pp.54-55.

14 Ibid.
Figure 10.5, Figure 10.6. The architectural advancement of Cairns: from bark huts to buildings such as the handsome new court house, which may be read as signifiers of Anglo-Saxon grit (left) and Anglo-Saxon administrative genius (right).
*Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir*, p.51, left, and p.61, right.

Figure 10.7. Aboriginal people, no longer lords of their primeval, unprofitable domain and reduced to nameless figures among the heroes of progress: men of resource, ambition and achievement, whose pioneer spirit of enterprise, faith and grit marched settlement into the rich and rare no-man’s land to claim its untold wealth. Pith helmets are still being worn by a few and the author of *Early Days of Cairns* sits among the Old Residents.
*Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir*, p.60.
Figure 10.8. On the Mulgrave River was the first central mill in the Cairns district. The first sugar mill was Hop Wah (later Pioneer), a short-lived Chinese concern run by Andrew Leon. By 1926, memories of non-white sugar cultivation were being supplanted by memories more acceptable to the racial ideology of the time. *Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir*, p.n/a. Image is dark and murky in the original.

Holding his own in north Queensland was Kelly the Tailor (Figure 10.9). “Once the aboriginals held the sway,” readers of *Floreat Cairns* were told, “now Kelly holds it as a tailor.” The visual dialogue of Kelly’s advertisement extends numerous metaphors of colonial history. Kelly ‘models his own,’ not in crumpled hat and ‘gawd-blimey’ trousers, but in a dapper white suit with the appearance of linen. For most of the nineteenth century the lightweight, sun protective white linen suit was the veritable uniform of Britain’s émigrés in its tropical dependencies and a potent symbol of whiteness. Here, modern Kelly has forgone the pith helmet that usually provided the finishing touch. The figures of Kelly and ‘the aboriginals’ seem to have been cut out by hand, probably from a studio image, then superimposed against a background of fleeting tropical twilight so poorly resolved and abstracted that it looks post-apocalyptic and from which we might draw historical analogies. While his questioning mouth and heavy eyebrows betray a whisper of uncertainty in the role of photographic subject, Kelly’s bright whiteness illuminates

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15 *CP*, 1 November 1926, Supplement.
the image, spot-lit by bursting phosphorous flash. Strange, dark background shapes resolve themselves into ghostly silhouettes of Aboriginality. The three figures resemble a family, but there is no suggestion of ‘racial admixture’ here. A slight Aboriginal adult stands pensively behind and to one side, clad in a fancy, groin-concealing neckerchief, hand thoughtfully touching chin. She seems to be little more than a shadow, a fading memory. Although children can symbolise the future, the black babe cradled by Kelly is so dark as to appear gone already; most definitely of the past.

Authors of the Cairns jubilee booklets brushed away any lingering doubts of racial degeneration in the tropics, and as they gazed into the future, they were dazzled. While the blather, bluster and bombast of white success ought not to be read as a continuing unease at being a tropical white race, Floreat Cairns spoke nevertheless, of a white race ‘flowering’ in the tropics. It presented copious photographic evidence of large groups of rudely healthy generations, all bred on the dangerous side of Capricorn. Here was proof that north Queensland had sired:

its own people, who have been reared and nurtured in its sun-kissed clime…This beautiful
and sunny North is building up a race of virile people. It has proved itself to be, in essence and fact a white man’s country…a district, a province worthy of ‘The Golden Age.’”

The race militancy of the age seemed to grip the Floreat Cairns wordsmith who toasted, “on the tablets of the mind as well as on the scroll of history…matters of moment must be impressed…Floreat Cairns! To the future you! The present to us!”

Figure 10.10. Mr G. Strutton’s contribution to white race building in the north. Capitalisation adds a sense of divinity to this program. Unless displaying their exceptional fertility, white women scarcely appear in the Cairns souvenir booklets. Cairns Jubilee Official Historical Souvenir, p.86.

**Race, Cairns, historians**

It was with the progressive national mood of the 1970s, the expansion of university research in the north and a new generation of talented historians that brought about a small and continuing

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16 Floreat Cairns, p.I.
17 Ibid.
revolution on the tablets of the mind as well as on the scroll of history in that part of the state. With parallels to the academic challenge of the interwar period, (and with respect to earlier notable figures including Geoffrey Bolton), some historians began to turn their attention to the large non-white pockets of Queensland history which lay relatively unexamined. Strange silences, lingering historical injustices and overemphasis on white achievement seem to have provided some motivation – there is a cathartic quality to the exposure of full-blooded, race-based horrors of exploitation, exclusion and extermination – but the yield proved richer than might have been expected from simple attempts to exorcise white guilt. Attempts were made to better comprehend the perspectives of Chinese, Pacific Islanders and others, alongside efforts to gaze back from the other side of the frontier and to understand the frontier as less a sharp line of conflict than a more diffuse zone of interaction, and to consider the historicisation of this space. Clive Moore dismantled the belief that Pacific Islanders were simply helpless victims of the labour trade and with Patricia Mercer built up a complex picture of a historically marginalized Australian community.\(^\text{18}\) Cathie May\(^\text{19}\) and later Sandi Robb\(^\text{20}\) transcended the colonial clichés to show the remarkable degree of cooperation that existed between Chinese and Europeans in early Cairns. Other studies, including those by Dawn May\(^\text{21}\) and Timothy Bottoms\(^\text{22}\) revealed

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historical agency, not simply victimization. White colonists are rarely heroic in these accounts, but neither are they as a rule, arch villains.

With new emphasis given to Aboriginal Australians, white and non-white immigrant communities and the interactions between them in north Queensland’s past, historical trends in Australia closely matched those of other new world settler societies. ‘Ethnic’ histories proceeded from a model of nation building towards other ways of thinking about identity in Australia’s past, at times the result of interdisciplinary cross-pollination. In ‘race studies’ there was a general movement from race relations to culture contact and racial representation, interconnected with studies of Aboriginal missions, labour, race and Australian nationalism. The reconsideration of Australia’s non-European past contributed momentum to ‘internationalising’ Australian history and stimulated new enquiry into Australia’s relationships with its region and its influence upon our country, with renewed attention given to opponents of the White Australia policy. From this, I wonder if Australians will ever collectively accept an ‘our past,’ without what Tony Bennett called “partisan affective intensity.”

**North of Capricorn**

Having made an enormous contribution to understanding our Australian past, Henry Reynolds began a foray into White Australia with *North of Capricorn: The Untold Story of Australia’s North*. Reynolds made the compelling observation that the “tension between history, culture and identity on the one hand, and geography on the other was always most apparent in North Australia,” where “cosmopolitan and multi-racial” coastal communities “most clearly and closely resembled [their] geographical milieu,” and had more in common with Melanesia and South East Asia than the temperate south. Around 1900 it was here, in the tropical third of the Australian continent that “geography threatened to engulf history.” Dividing Australia approximately at the Tropic of Capricorn, Reynolds saw “strong contrasts between north and south,” contrasts of geography, demography and political outlook relating to questions of Australia’s supposed white future. There was the Australia which was “Southern, settled and overwhelmingly white,” a region which was “very different from, and particularly hostile to, the multi-racial society in the tropical north.”

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Australia grew out of “general ignorance about the actual conditions of society in the north of the continent,”\textsuperscript{25} and on “highly prejudiced accounts of life in the small multi-racial towns of tropical Australia.”\textsuperscript{26} The reality of life in the north was, that of an “existing, dynamic and successful multi-racial society.”\textsuperscript{27} According to Reynolds, the multi-racial societies of the north:

were a serious threat to white Australia…not because they were beset with social problems and racial tension but because they were successful and challenged the most compelling ideal of the time, the dream of an absolutely White Australia, free from the contamination and the degrading influences of inferior races.\textsuperscript{28}

I support Reynolds’ main contentions, but draw the reader’s attention to detail presented within this thesis which is indicative of a reality – in at least one northern community – that was more complex than Reynolds’ interpretation allows. Taking an example of the Trinity Bay district, there were at federation clear demographic and political differences between the community of Cairns and Australia’s miniature metropoli, but from this it is difficult to conclude that Cairns was threatening to White Australia because of its success rather than its racial mixture. While in Cairns, debates flared from time to time about “law…order, health and social relations,”\textsuperscript{29} and complaints were aired that “Cairns with its large alien population [was] an exceedingly lively place from a police point of view,”\textsuperscript{30} the town was not beset – as some visitors expected – with inter-racial conflict. Cairns was indeed a dynamic and flourishing multi-racial society at federation, with a population reflecting its Asian-Pacific situation, but commentators in the town were no more inclined to emphasise the politically sensitive topic of non-white pioneering than were their southern contemporaries. The level of race consciousness in early Cairns has been underplayed by Reynolds. It needs to be borne in mind that racial tolerance in this district was contingent upon racial stratification and white dominance, stabilised by interdependency. In response to \textit{North of Capricorn}, Russell McGregor argued, with precision, that:

the conflict between northern and southern Australia was not so much between a racist south and a less racist north, as Reynolds intimates, as between two different styles of racism. In the north, racial hierarchy legitimised social structure; for southerners, racial hierarchy justified national exclusion.\textsuperscript{31}

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{26} Reynolds, \textit{North of Capricorn}, p.163.
\bibitem{27} Reynolds, \textit{North of Capricorn}, p. xi.
\bibitem{28} Reynolds, \textit{North of Capricorn}, p.176.
\bibitem{29} Reynolds, \textit{North of Capricorn}, p.167.
\bibitem{30} \textit{MP}, 11 January 1899, p.5.
\end{thebibliography}
On the question of a prospective White Australia, the polarity between Australia’s north and south was not always stark. Herberton’s *Wild River Times* eagerly anticipated Australian federation “consolidating the British race in Australia,” bringing together “people of the same race, speaking the same language, living under the same laws…bound by ties of blood and kinship…proudly exulting in the supremacy of our race.” The political impetus for White Australia was generated in Australia’s cities, which faced radically dissimilar economic and social realities to Australia’s tropical regions, and Cairnsites were tormented by a prospective legislative garrotting from White Australia, for which they blamed the south, but conceded that the movement had won popular support in north Queensland. Around Cairns, White Australia morphed into arguments about coloured labour versus white labour in tropical regions, entangled with problems of territorial occupancy, development and race building. Those who stood opposed believed that White Australia would destroy the local sugar industry. Supporters saw it as their best chance to secure good wages, and believed that Australia and the Australian tropics could be, and ought to be, white. While their portraits of Pacific Islanders were closer to fully fleshed-out characters than the vile caricatures of the *Worker, Bulletin* and *Truth*, Cairnsites did not differ from other Australians in characterizing Pacific Islanders as a servile race. Like other Australians, Cairnsites saw a white-dominated future. In 1902 a groundswell of faith saw white labour campaigner Thomas Givens swept into office, race-based immigration restrictions were tightened and most Pacific Islanders were deported – leaving a bad taste in many mouths. From the twenty-first century we might imagine Cairns sliding then into a lengthy White Australian dolour, but commentaries from early to mid-century commentators trumpeted White Australia as a veritable triumph in the tropics.

It was unhappily noted in the Cairns press that the south was overwhelmingly, but not uniformly, white. In particular, the conspicuous presence of Chinatowns, Chinese business people, labourers, artisans and Chinese-owned market gardens were wryly observed. In rural areas there were many small communities of Chinese residents living interdependently with Europeans, interacting with similar patterns of hostility, tension and accommodation familiar to Cairnsites. Frequent inter-racial contact and mutual interest seem to have improved the prospects of sympathetic understanding in these places, supporting Reynolds’ contention that ideological purity “flourished best when not confronted by complexity, contradiction or by real living people.” White Australia condemned these communities also. In an investigative style pioneered in California and copied even in Cairns, journalists thrust themselves into Australian Chinatowns, seeking out vice and the exotic grotesque. With diseases suspected to have a racial

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32 *WRT*, 14 June 1898, p.3.
basis, the *Morning Post* whipped up a racist panic when plague threatened Cairns, accusing the Chinese of being unusually squalid before conceding that the entire town was unusually squalid.

Figure 10.11., Wood engraving of the Chinese quarter of Sandhurst (Bendigo), late nineteenth century by Charles Gregory. The artist does not appear to have regarded the area as a breeding ground of malfeasance, although he has included a beggar, which could suggest social evil, and an affluent-looking Chinese miner – the enemy of the European prospector. Two European men are locked in earnest discussion, about what?

Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo.

Figure. 10.12, left. Seo Young and family, Eaglehawk 1905. A mine tailings manager, Young employed both Chinese and Anglo-Australian workers in the Bendigo district.

Bendigo Chinese Association AP0007.

Figure. 10.13, right. Charles Fun Chung came to Bendigo to mine gold and married Nellie Duffy in 1886. The photograph above shows the Fun Chung family in Bendigo 1902.

Bendigo Chinese Association AP0215.
In her study on the Chinese of Cairns, Cathie May gave thought to the tempering effect on interactions brought about by the fact that Europeans felt racially superior to Chinese, but were dependent upon Chinese industry.\textsuperscript{34} Drawing upon May’s research, Reynolds considered the Cairns Chinese, their pioneering role and the generally good relations that became established between themselves and others in the district. Reynolds quoted May, who provided an accurate snapshot of Chinese-European relations in the town. While “community life, even in a pro-Chinese town such as Cairns was a mirror of contemporary racism…the image was softened and its outline considerably blurred by the amiable every day circumstances which local circumstances promoted.” In Cairns, “the more terrifying tenets of xenophobia had no place.”\textsuperscript{35} I agree with May, but note the conspicuous spikes in interracial tension during which Cairns newspapers happily published racist vitriol, well before White Australia had arrived as a legislative reality. For example, “We are with the Premier in his policy of exclusion of the Chinese,” the Cairns Post opined. “In a word our motto is ‘Let this fair land belong to the white man.’”\textsuperscript{36} On another occasion it proclaimed, “Let the cry be set a-going…Queensland for the white-skinned race – Drive the dirty Chinkee out!”\textsuperscript{37}

It is true that proponents of a White Australia in the south invented outrageous accounts of life in the north to support their claims. In his chapter on the Cairns Chinese, Reynolds touched upon southerners’ derision for the interracial conviviality sometimes seen in the town. Cairnsites responses to accusations that they ate with, or took their hats off to ‘Chows’ suggest that when forced to choose between other white Australians and the local Chinese, they reluctantly chose the former. “It is a standing joke with the Sydney Bulletin,” said a saturnine Cairns Argus, “that the people of this district take off their hats to a Chinaman.”\textsuperscript{38} The “name of Cairns has become a byword and a reproach through the tender regard for the Chinaman displayed by its residents.”\textsuperscript{39} The Argus challenged its readers: “Is Cairns doing anything calculated to wipe away so sorrowful an impression?”\textsuperscript{40} But as an example of southern derision, the ‘hats off to the Chows’ slur is complicated by the fact that its source was a former resident of Cairns. The informant tattled to the receptively racist Bulletin that reciprocations of politeness to Chinese shopkeepers as happened in Cairns represented a lowering of white dignity. The Cairns Post refuted the claim, maintaining that “no-one – not even the Bulletin itself – believes that the alien races in this town are regarded in any other light than that which

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{34} May, \textit{Topsawyers}.
\item\textsuperscript{35} May, \textit{Topsawyers}, p.167.
\item\textsuperscript{36} CP, 11 April 1888, p.2.
\item\textsuperscript{37} CP, 4 April 1888, p.3.
\item\textsuperscript{38} CA, 5 February 1896, p.2.
\item\textsuperscript{39} CA, 8 February 1896, p.3.
\item\textsuperscript{40} CA, 13 May 1896, p.2.
\end{itemize}
prevails in Sydney.”41 The Post was not intimidated by the self-admiring Bulletin, but insulted the Chinese as it justified their presence:

The Chinese population of this town have ever proved a law-abiding race, and as such they deserve to be treated fairly and justly…The majority of the Chinese in this district are engaged in those forms of agriculture which, for some reason, are not in favour with Europeans…We…regard them as a necessary evil…we recognise that it is in our interest that the Chinese should remain. The Chinese are looked upon and treated as an inferior race and they have never been looked upon in any other light.42

Defence of Cairns’ honour came from an unexpected source – in the south no less. Noting that “these Queensland communities are small and far removed,” the Truth weighed up Cairns’ image problem among the journalistic exemplars of nationalist chauvinism, accounting for it as follows:

Cairns comes in for some very pointed attention…An impression seems to prevail among…Southerners that the concentrated vice and immorality of this great Australian continent are centred in Cairns…When any derelict metropolitan scribe of this scavenging brigade experiences a slump in his stock of marketable sensations he betakes himself to his lurid imagination…he pauses, muckrake in air, over some far away northern community – over Cairns for choice, the generally accredited Port Said of the Farthest East.43

The scribe then looks to the “comprehensive charge sheet” of “infamies so rampant in the unregenerate north,” such as the “foul heathen orgies,” the “opium and gaming dens; the wholesale procuration of white girlhood for the satiation of yellow lust; of the periodical transfers of Japanese chattels,” the “diabolical alien trading corporations who…indent shipments of harlots from Japan…the private graveyards and local Golgothas attached to every sugar estate in this unregenerate moral wilderness.” All of these are then “duly reported by the ghoul hunting press harpies for the edification and enlightenment of a trembling world. Truly these gentlemen of the yellow press perform their work but ill,” which was of course the yellow press calling the yellow press yellow.44

41 MP, 8 June 1897, p.2.
42 Ibid.
43 Truth cited in MP, 15 March 1899, p.3.
44 Ibid.
Cairns was “the subject of contemptuous comment…in the south” wrote Reynolds, “because it was a multi-racial and multi-cultural community.” It was also subject to contemptuous comment in the north for the same reasons. But more importantly, as characterised by Reynolds, the threat posed to White Australia by a town such as Cairns may encourage readers to accept a (hyphen-less) multicultural model of north Queensland’s past. In her review of *North of Capricorn*, entitled ‘Multiculturalism in the Australian Tropics,’ Dawn May picked up Reynolds’ observation that “Southern contemporaries often commented scathingly on the multicultural nature of Cairns.” May also considered that *North of Capricorn* was relevant to “a number of academic debates,” including “the appropriateness of multiculturalism as a government policy.” Cairns was a place of racial and cultural diversity but cannot be fairly regarded as a multicultural society by the current usage of the term. Australians in 1900 did not share our world views or moral standards and racial equality was anathema to them. While mingling and familiarity may have eased tensions, it did not flatten the racial hierarchy, which was assiduously maintained even in the close interpersonal proximity of bêche-de-mer boats, mission stations and plantation residences.

Figure 10.14. Details from the local history information boards on the Cairns foreshore. The idea of a multicultural nineteenth century Cairns has been taken up in Cairns’ public memory, but while acknowledgement of the diverse cultures of early Cairns is welcome, we need to be careful to avoid anachronistically recreating the past according to current sensibilities. Photographs: M. Richards.

47 Ibid.
North of Capricorn’s north-south paradigm historicises the sense of distinctiveness that many north Queenslanders felt and continue to feel. The social, climatic and historical differences between Australia’s temperate and tropical regions are real enough, so it is reasonable that the device has been employed by successive waves of historians seeking to clarify the uniqueness of Australia’s history, north of Capricorn.48 In her study of Cairns Chinatown for example, Sandi Robb externalized anti-Chinese feeling in Cairns, denouncing negative influences and attitudes as ‘southern.’49 Robb argued that upwellings of Sinophobia were the result of “new arrivals…who brought popular xenophobic views from the southern states.”50 Robb also questioned the fact that historians have made “little mention about the influence of southern agitators,” influence which was limited in the northern districts according to Robb, due to the efforts of locals who “strove to create a degree of fairness within the community.”51 It might be observed however that many prominent figures in early Cairns hailed from southern Australia, (including the Drapers brothers, the Swallow family, Archie Meston, Ernest and J.B. Gribble), and others arrived from abroad, (Fred Wimble from England, Thomas Givens from Ireland, Alfred Atkinson from New Zealand, Walter Roth from Hungary and Albert Koch from Germany). As such, it is it is difficult to characterise their expressions of racial tolerance (and intolerance) as peculiarly northern.

Opponents of White Australia in the north were portrayed in the south as heartless and undemocratic ‘nigger drivers,’ or debased ‘Jap’ and/or ‘Chow lovers.’ It seems that this experience confirmed in the minds of some Cairnsites that federal governments and southerners would willingly ride roughshod over them, while holding the north up to ridicule for perceived deviations from racial ideals. Reynolds condemned southern Australians for legislatively strangling the multi-racial north, then mocking the white rural society that followed:

Cut off from a fruitful and productive relationship with its geographic environment, North Australia stagnated. It became a backwater – increasingly mono-cultural, socially conservative, provincial – which is the way it was seen by outsiders during much of the twentieth century. It also became more racist than it ever had been in the past, to be eventually condemned and patronised by the urban southerners who rarely knew anything about the multi-racial society that has been deliberately undermined.52

49 Robb, Cairns Chinatown Cultural Heritage Study, p.23.
50 Robb, Cairns Chinatown Cultural Heritage Study, p.58.
51 Robb, Cairns Chinatown Cultural Heritage Study, p.23.
52 Reynolds, North of Capricorn, p.188-189.
The idea of a benignly tolerant north being overwhelmed by a belligerently intolerant south appeals to a certain sense of historical injustice and perhaps a desire to shake-off a hackneyed and undeserving ‘redneck’ image, projected from a condescending south. North Queenslanders bristle at perceptions of misrepresentation abroad, particularly the unfair charge that north Queensland is a place of exceptional racism, present or past, which gives the multicultural model of Cairns’ history added appeal, and positions north Queensland at the forefront, not the rear of enlightened thinking. In his concluding speculation, Reynolds alluded to the ongoing debate about how Australia’s past is read and the effective relationship between history and identity:

If Australia continues to emphasise its European heritage then the history of the north can be dismissed as a short-term aberration…But if Australia’s future is to be that of an increasingly Eurasian society, at ease in its environment, then the northern experience will come to assume greater significance…Tropical Australia will be seen as having given life to the first abortive attempt to reach beyond the British/European heritage of a homogenous settler society. The precursors of the emerging Australia will be the hundreds of men, women and children of diverse backgrounds who day by day learnt how to live peacefully and work profitably together.53

Life in the past lane: murals, memorials and monuments

Figure 10.15. Mareeba mural: members of a multi-racial, multi-cultural community working peacefully and profitably together through their shared history. Photograph: M. Richards.

For more than a century now, north Queenslanders have been using history to structure a sense of belonging. In the following examples of public representations of history in the north, relationships between Reynolds’ conjecture of emphasis and the construction of Australian

identity can be found. At Mareeba, a mural shows men, women and children of diverse backgrounds living peacefully and working profitably together, at ease in this locality. Some emphasis is given to Mareeba’s European heritage with white people lauded through a series of pioneering archetypes: the timber feller, the stockman, the miner, the farming family and the happy, healthy, wholesome, adventurous white progeny of the tropical outdoors. Placed at the cultural and compositional pivot is the figure of the white bushman. It is not clear from which time period he has sprung, as if he has always been there, complete and unchanged, a fully-formed cultural entity in a broad-brimmed hat with sleeves rolled up, enamel mug, cigarette and laconic grin. He is of this land and anchored to it in a campfire-side squat. In contrast, ‘immigrants’ are worthy contributors but not drivers of the nation building project. Not shown are Chinese men who cleared the tablelands and grew maize (before immigration restriction then soldier settlement purged most of their remainder from the district), but a Chinese woman in Edwardian dress has been included. An Italian market gardener offers the viewer potatoes. Rather than challenging the national story, Aboriginal cultural heritage is absorbed into it. The Aboriginal character resides on the periphery, not spearing or mustering cattle, but perhaps satisfying touristic expectations, happily clutches some bush tucker and appears adjacent to a grandstand, suggesting sporting prowess.

Tolga

Figure 10.16, left. Chinese man’s house.  
Figure 10.17, right. Chook McKewan and friends, also working peacefully and profitably together.

Among the many positive renderings of the early decades of settlement, local history displays in the Cairns region direct attention towards contact history, with explicit acknowledgement of

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54 The ‘Cunnamulla Feller’ whose statue towers over the main street of Cunnamulla in western Queensland, adopts the same pose and is equipped with the same props.  
55 Bennett, ‘Out of which past?’ p.4.
frontier conflict, (notably at the Cairns museum, Speewah picnic area and also the Irvinebank Museum where an entire display is dedicated to a notorious nineteenth century massacre of Aboriginal people perpetrated by the Native Mounted Police). The strong implication is that these events are integral to local identity, as are other intercultural experiences. At the Tolga Railway Museum, images of inter-racial bonhomic are included and references to Chinese eviction from the tablelands are implied. The caption for Figure 10.16 (above) reads: “Chinese House and Detached Quarters…built by Chinese…prior to the establishment of the Soldier Settlement Scheme after World War 1. Jack Ward, a soldier settler lived in the house until 1938.” Photographs can be re-contextualised with changes in historical emphasis, but monuments – and this is part of their appeal – are less amenable to similar treatment.

Innisfail

Figure 10.18. Reproduced as a postcard in this instance, a white cane cutter at Innisfail has been immortalised in the form of a fountain, with neoclassical and art deco elements. The monument may conjure an image of a white god of the harvest, or one may read it as a racist and nationalistic statement of Anglo-Australia from between the wars, familiar to readers of Floreat Cairns. It is also possible that by constructing a white marble fountain which takes its inspiration from Imperial Rome, the creator was making an oblique reference to the Italian cane cutters who replaced Pacific Islanders and made Innisfail their home. Image: www.flickr.com

At Innisfail, a white marble fountain makes a characteristically 1930s approach to culturally inclusive acknowledgement, (in so far as its intent appears to be not at all inclusive), while a more recently created mural in the same town provides an alternative reading of the history of local industries.
In comparison to commemoration in stone and concrete, murals are inexpensive and impermanent. Both characteristics are advantageous for refreshing our historical understandings with changing times. As does the Mareeba mural, a mural at Innisfail presents a detailed, multi-racial picture of Innisfail’s pioneering past. The Innisfail mural gives emphasis to community members working peacefully and profitably together. Transporting sugar cane in the nineteenth century, there is shown a horse and dray under the control of a Pacific Islander man. The European man is shown to be human, not more or less heroic than the Pacific Islander performing the same task. Chinese can be seen loading their bananas onto boats headed south. The representation of Aboriginal people is of particular interest. As well as a positive image of a family group living in the rainforest, Aboriginal cultural adaption on the frontier is also shown. Two Aboriginal men in European dress wrestle a crocodile. The mural avoids what Amanda Nettlebeck has called the “over-determined vision” of history, that of “either moral disgrace or heroic achievement” in which it often appears that “remembering one must incur forgetting the other.”

While on the Cairns foreshore, large information boards celebrate a multi-racial past in which Cairns community members managed to find ways to work peacefully and profitably together, elsewhere in Cairns memorials commemorate the town’s British/European heritage. The first public monuments in Australian colonies emphasized colonial legitimacy by situating pioneering history within a wider, usually imperial, history.\textsuperscript{57} Rather than grand (and costly) memorials, written words and images made this case in nineteenth century Cairns, so no bronze Empress of India lurks among the poinciana trees on the foreshore, or amid the RSL’s canons, plaques and forest of flags. Cairns’ first public monument was dedicated to local hero Dr Koch, the town’s eminent physician who died in 1901. Only a year before, Koch had directed the public response to an outbreak of plague in Cairns. Few considered this to have been Koch’s finest hour, but such was the esteem in which the doctor was held that in quick time, an impressive stone tribute to him was got up. In an interesting historical twist, Koch’s white marble face is turned quizzically and in perpetuity towards the old Chinese quarter.

Public discussions of historical importance have a long history in Cairns and retain the ability to mobilize portions of the community. Debate surrounding the fate of a crumbling, four metre ferro-cement James Cook statue is indicative of the ways in which public and personal histories can intertwine, and the problems of establishing incontestable historical meanings. In 2008, with the demolition of the backpacker hostel whose forecourt the sculpture had graced, and the sale of the land on which it stood, community concern for the local landmark was roused. Sentimental Cairnsites expressed affection for the work, which had stood beside the highway for as long as most could remember. The dour Cairns Heritage Group argued that the magnificent retro folly ought to be removed from its inauspicious location to a more solemn spot on the Cairns foreshore, from which Cook could fix his concrete gaze upon the sea and forever wonder about the French.

\textsuperscript{57} Hilda Kean, ‘Public history and two Australian dogs: Ishlay and the dog on the tucker box,’ \textit{Australian Cultural History Journal}, Vol.24, 2006, p.144.
Consultants were called. Cook was subject to a thorough-going examination with worrying results – concrete cancer was diagnosed. While the prognosis was not terminal, the sculpture was declared too frail to be moved. A white knight emerged in the form of a local paint and hardware proprietor. $20,000 was raised to save Cook. With such largess becoming available, all subtlety was thrown to the onshore breeze. The resulting over-restoration saved the sculpture from the fate of the accompanying hostel, but betrayed an unexpected desire to re-write history, to create Cook anew. The sense that the sculpture was embarrassingly outdated had surfaced, so pastel hues which had placed the work so effectively in time were blotted out and red, white and blue tin soldier livery took their place. Cook was reborn, not to the satisfaction of all however. In 2009, Cook was once more reincarnated, this time in russet-hues, with yet another layer of historical meaning splashed across his form.
Cook’s town: bronzed Australians

Arguably, public monuments connect to community self-perception more so than the work produced by historians. An impressive collection of memorials make a case for tiny Cooktown’s outsized historical significance, consolidating a sense of local identity through pioneering narratives and the legend of Cook, whose vessel was laid up for repairs at the mouth of a river he renamed the Endeavour. Not particularly given to non-white commemoration, a statue in Cooktown commemorates the word ‘kangaroo’ which entered the English lexicon during the Endeavour’s stranding nearby. Also among Cooktown’s retinue of memorials are statues struck in dedication to Cook and a hardy gold-seeking individualist, from Europe rather than China – the country from which most of the Palmer goldfield’s population had come and who landed in their thousands at the port. Another white gold-seeker in the form of an heraldic figure can be found outside a Cooktown caravan park, although when I visited, his pan was missing. The visual effect was that of a gold-seeker with hands raised in supplication. Given the actual conditions on the Palmer, this interpretation may be the more apt.

Figures 10.28, 10.29, 10.30. From Cook to kangaroo: Stages of ascent in becoming Australian? Photographs: D. Richards (left) and M. Richards.
The white man in the tropics

In 1995, in the park at Gordonvale near Cairns, a monument was erected, as its plaque states, “Celebrating 100 years of history of the sugar industry in this area.” Around Cairns, one hundred years earlier, sugar growing had been underway for approximately ten years. 1895 marked the transition from the plantation era to smaller, whiter holdings, central mills and the winding back of Pacific Island labour. The Gordonvale memorial is two works really, a sculpture and a mural jammed awkwardly together. A visitor first meets a typecast – quite literally – of a white cane cutter with a determinedly furrowed brow. The figure towers over a circular, broken tile mural in the style of a classical Roman mosaic floor, which aside from the plaque’s quirky date is the creative highlight of the work. Unlike the bronzed cutter, whose sturdy form can be seen from a distance, the mural, featuring an historic montage of sugar cane cultivation and the flags of several nations, can only be seen close up.

On my visit, it had been defaced. Creamy coloured tiles indicating whiteness had been used to portray cutters, a driver and a woman standing before rows of cane. Figures seen undertaking tasks such as weed chipping and loading of the cane,
normally performed by Pacific Islanders had their racially-identifying coloured tiles chiseled away from the cement base. I have no explanation for this except to note that sensitivities about Pacific Islander labour continue to run deep in both white and Pacific Islander communities. As Kleist observed, “Memorials are a weak indicator of how a society deals with the ongoing problems of its past even if its symbolic representations and commemorations seem to signal otherwise.”

![Figure 10.34, 10.35, 10.36. Representations of people in the early sugar industry: a white woman posing with the crop, a white hand cutting it and a white man transporting it. Photographs: M. Richards.]

**Edmonton**

A more egregious example of historical obscurantism can be found in Cairns. The suburb of Edmonton now occupies land, 650 hectares of which, during the 1880s and 1890s, comprised Hambledon plantation and its armies of coloured labourers. Hambledon’s last remaining canefields were recently swallowed up by housing developments, but Edmonton revels in its cane growing past – or select aspects of it. References to Hambledon abound. There is the Historic Hambledon Hotel, the Canecutter’s Restaurant, Swallow road, Thomas Swallow Gardens (with old cane crushing wheels re-used as sculptural features), Sugarworld water-park and Sugarworld housing estate. Clearly Hambledon and the Swallow family have not been forgotten. But all of this historical revelry notwithstanding, a visitor could still come away oblivious to the fact that there was ever a plantocracy and an era of coloured labour in north Queensland.

According to Edmonton’s commemorative sculpture, the sugar pioneers of Hambledon were white men who dared to take on some of the most strenuous manual labour known. We know that cane cutting was hot and strenuous work because the sculptor has rendered one figure on the point of collapse, the other slugging litres of water from a jerry can. The familiar pioneering motif of a dog stands buffed and shiny from the pats of passersby.

Regarded as something of a historical wrong turn, the plantation era is not celebrated in popular memory, but the censorship of the Sugar Pioneers memorial insults the memory of the real sugar pioneers, the Pacific Islanders, Chinese, Japanese and others who worked at Hambledon for lower pay, with fewer rights and under worse conditions than the white workers who followed them. The sculpture is an anachronistic pastiche, reminiscent of 1930s Australian nationalist sculptures which redrew pioneers as soldiers. It conveys messages of heroic struggle and hardships overcome at the naissance of Cairns. Cast in bronze, it says that this is the final interpretation of the past, that its meanings are immutable.

59 See for example the cane cutter memorial at Innisfail, Figure 10.18.
Conclusion

The past is a difficult beast to tame. Bringing it into the service of the present is not easy. Early attempts to historicise Cairns were informed by understandings of race and progress in which the fittest race that continued to assert its ascendancy would prevail. History, it was thought, had shown this to be true. From negotiating with a multi-racial present, Cairnsites then found themselves negotiating with a multi-racial past. Historical reflections were informed by ballooning racial vanity in Australia and colonial traditions of ‘improvement’ were applied to nineteenth century north Queensland. Later, historians attempted to reintegrate excised and lost pieces of the past, encouraging Queenslanders to accept the north’s gloriously, notoriously multi-racial history as a promising precursor to Australia’s multi-racial present. Reynolds’s question of emphasis hovers over this present, and generations socialised in white cultural centrality. While in places the historical glamour of an heroic white past hold obstinately firm, difficult and intriguing variations born of collective memory and review nudge themselves into prominence. Debate has broken out among the monuments.
Conclusion: Race around Cairns

Figure Conclusion.1. Race around the time of William Wellington Cairns was a complex matter of building certainties on the shifting sands of history. The Governor of Queensland from whom the northern settlement got its name was a white man who had made his home in the tropics as Governor of Malacca, St Kitts and Honduras, but was relocated to the cooler climate of South Australia to improve his ill health, bought on, it was thought, from his tropical exposure. JOL image no.146255.

Five general points regarding the history of racial representation in the Cairns district can be made. Firstly, it is clear that the social order of the Cairns district was founded upon racial hierarchy and deeply-entrenched ideas of race. Born of colonial expansion with its traditions, ideologies and cultural practices relating to ethnic conflict and nation building,\(^1\) it could hardly have been otherwise. It was an order based on white dominance and stabilised by an interracial network of dependency. Backed by scientific reasoning, historical experience and new political urgencies, racial certainties grew stronger in Australia with the advance of the nineteenth century and spilled forward into the twentieth, but the edifice of racial thought was always imperfect and always shot through with ambivalences and contestations. Under certain

\(^1\)This historical explanation for racism is from Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, p.30.
circumstances European Cairnsites made explicit reference to racial science, such as at the onset of plague, for the containment of Aboriginal heredity, or in consideration of white viability in the tropics, but usually their racial thought filtered more diffusely through words and images or found form in patterns of behavior. Choices about racial representation were influenced by social factors including the play of local politics and the need for Europeans to assert and maintain their power and legitimacy, which included where necessary, a redrawing of past/present/future.

Secondly, racial configurations embodied Europeans’ fears, beliefs and aspirations, creating a contour map of their perceptions and sensitivities about the past, present and future. Sustained by cultural and biological theories of advancement and decay, Europeans in the Trinity Bay district saw themselves locked in a struggle to establish and hold dominance over a social order and the natural world, but theirs was also an internal struggle. While it is clear that Japanese loomed large in the imaginations of north Queenslanders, Malays, Javanese and other minority groups have only a sketchy presence on the record Europeans left. The existence of Pacific Islander men and Japanese women was handled discreetly until their presence was threatened, at which point they were dragged into full historical view. Images of other non-whites can also be seen transforming with shifts in the socio-cultural milieu. In 1900 Pacific Islanders were at once devout Christians and roaming savages, free agents and unthinking victims. Similarly, representations of the Chinese in Cairns moved through a range of positive and negative typologies, correlating with the self-identification of Europeans and their sense of security in the community and in the tropical north. Rallying points in political struggles were racialised and historicised on the Cairns foreshore (and in federal parliament) but, suggestive of racial inscription as a shifting artifact of history, interaction between Europeans and Chinese around Cairns caused Europeans to re-imagine not only the Chinese, but, also themselves. This thesis has concentrated on white perspectives, but undoubtedly transformations were multidirectional.

Thirdly, Europeans understood an incompatibility to exist between their place in history and their geographical situation. Yet powerful feelings of historical destiny informed the actions and imaginings of Europeans as they established themselves in a region which, being geographically part of the Asia-Pacific and Australian in name only was an atypical home for white people. The occupancy of north was necessary to consolidate territorial acquisition of the continent and against the sense of foreboding that they may have strayed too far from their proper racial locale; white Cairnsites placed themselves on an historical proving ground. Geography could not be altered but history could, so a new type – the tropical white Australian – was invented for north Queensland, but from here, difficulties arose in representing an idealised past. Initially unsure of their relationship to the north and unconvinced by the
necessity or desirability of white exclusivity, Europeans’ sense of tropical identity was a work in progress. Propelled by modernity and a growing sense of racial vocation however, confidence grew.

Fourthly, Early Cairnsites generally anticipated a white-dominated future for their town (and country) but one in which non-whites still played an important part. When, from the late nineteenth century, white Cairnsites imagined the future, they, like other Australians saw a white-dominated nation, but unlike the Australian mainstream most Cairnsites did not construct a future in which non-whites were absent. This clashed directly with the objectives of democratic nationalists, who hailed an Australian society free from social stratifications and which, given the understood hierarchy of races, could be achievable only through Australia-wide unity of race. This critical point of difference grew starkly apparent around federation, before being overwhelmed by White Australia. Despite significant and occasionally murderous intercultural tensions, peaceable accommodations continued to be found. Daily contact between different races and personal relationships seemed to erode the heightened sense of threatening racial otherness experienced by many Anglo-Australians who did not live in close proximity to non-whites, but in 1900 the future of Cairns teetered precariously on a national response to race.

The fifth and final observation I make is that the analysis of visual images can give additional depth and generate additional insights into the history of race and human experience around Cairns. In view of its richness as an evidential base, it is odd that visual history has sometimes been regarded as history’s poor cousin. I admit to having first incorporated contemporary photographs as a means by which to consider the camera as a disciplining device in a colonial context, but then my interest expanded. It dawned on me that images were a doorway into another historical dimension, that images, – including images of race – cannot be confined anywhere between literal statements of exposition and high abstraction. I believe that I gained a more sympathetic sense of early Cairnsites through their photographic representations which, when juxtaposed with their words, jangle with contradictions and ambiguities, prompting fresh lines of enquiry. This research has been undertaken in the spirit of keeping as close as possible to the original sources, retrieving (and contextualizing) actual language from the past (including images), and it was from this that the narrative ‘through line’ of Race around Cairns revealed itself: that race around Cairns persisted as both an artifact of history and a changing historical reality against imperatives to secure unitary models of both history and race.