

# JCU ePrints

This file is part of the following reference:

**Ryle, Peter Albert (2000) *Decline and recovery of a rural coastal town: Cooktown 1873-1999*. PhD thesis, James Cook University.**

Access to this file is available from:

<http://eprints.jcu.edu.au/19585>



## Conclusion

It is not surprising that the establishment and survival of towns in Colonial Queensland do not always accord with the theoretical formulae proposed by scholars such as Christaller and Innes. The interventionist nature of Government in Queensland, in the Colonial period and after federation, made the market less relevant to the fate of towns than in a more market-oriented society. The Government was even more interventionist in the case of many Queensland towns such as Cooktown. It chose the site, established the town, and provided most of the infrastructure. In this regulated climate, a town's prosperity, and even survival, relied heavily on the Government for the continued provision and maintenance of infrastructure such as roads and water. When the infrastructure was supplied, as with Cairns, the town prospered, but when aid was misdirected, denied or insufficient, as with Cooktown, the town declined. While Cairns profited from its railway and wharf infrastructure, similar Government projects in Cooktown served only to place the area under greater economic threat.

Government regulations determined how local authorities were funded, and, as shown in Chapter eleven, often hindered their efforts to counter the detrimental effects of declining population. This was most obvious when Councils were burdened with non-payment of rates as people abandoned towns to try their luck elsewhere. The remaining population faced increased rates as Councils tried to maintain services with less revenue. Various State Governments attempted to redress the situation by amending Local Government legislation, or by introducing new legislation. Unfortunately, as Cooktown's experience showed, these innovations were sometimes confounded by regulations governing

other departments. By the time the Cooktown Council was able to rid itself of valueless land, it was almost bankrupt. This prevented it from providing the town with services and amenities such as power, water and sewerage. For these, it had to rely on Government funding.

After the revenue from the Palmer River gold deposits declined, the Government was less willing to provide infrastructure for the area. This prevented Cooktown gaining as much economic advantage from the secondary staples in the area as it expected. Tin provided an alternative economy as gold became less important, but as shown in chapter eight, tin miners were hindered by the lack of a good road system to service the fields. The construction of the Annan River bridge helped make cartage to and from the tin fields more efficient and economical, but without complementary roads the benefit was minimal. There is little doubt that if the Government had provided even a small proportion of the funds for roads in the tin mining areas that it had for the gold fields, Cooktown would have prospered more. It is interesting to note that the Government provided more help for coal exploration than for infrastructure on the tin fields. This is despite the evidence from Logan Jack that the coal deposits in the area were not viable, and proof that the Annan River tin fields were very productive.

Agriculture also suffered from the Government's refusal to provide roads. The available agricultural land close to Cooktown was not as fertile as the Cairns area, but there is little doubt that with a good road system and better access to markets, farms in the outlying areas like McIvor River could have been viable. As shown in chapter three, Cooktown district farmers proved the area could produce a variety of crops. Cooktown's most vehement advocate of agriculture, James Dick, demonstrated the area's capacity to produce almost any tropical crop.

Dick's view that the district was prevented from achieving its potential in agriculture mainly because of a lack of transport infrastructure was later confirmed by Government reports. However, the lack of progress in agriculture since the district's roads were improved indicates that infrastructure alone does not ensure success. There were many farming districts closer to the markets, putting Cooktown at a disadvantage both in freight costs and time. Cooktown was virtually priced out of the market. High value - to - bulk products such as sugar could have been successful if Cooktown had a central mill, but this never eventuated.

The two infrastructure projects that gave Cooktown its biggest economic boost ultimately became handicaps to the town. Chapter seven shows how important the port and wharf system was to Cooktown's early progress. Indeed, the town owed its very existence to being the port for the Palmer River gold field. However, the Government undoubtedly did Cooktown a disservice when it sold the wharves to the Town Council. If it had been a normal commercial sale, one could say that the buyer was responsible for any disadvantage it later suffered. However, in this case the seller was the Government, and even in its own view the price asked was exorbitant. It knew from its own information that the wharves had passed their "use by date", and that their revenue was falling rapidly. In the circumstances, the Government had a moral responsibility not to subject the ratepayers of Cooktown to a repayment schedule beyond their capacity. It was vastly different to a commercial transaction, where the buyer makes a commercial judgement and takes the responsibility for the decision. In this case, the buyer was a local authority, and any loss would be carried by the ratepayers. It was incumbent on the Government to act honourably, and in this case it did not. The result was a debt that

hindered any hope of economic recovery. The Government then compounded Cooktown's problems when it built a new railway wharf and deprived the town of wharfage which might have cleared the loan. It later sold the wharf to the Council at cost, but this only placed the Council further in debt.

As seen in chapter nine, the Cooktown to Maytown Railway project also stimulated the town's economy, but not for long. Although this project was abandoned before its completion, it provided many jobs during its construction. It boosted the local economy just as this was starting to suffer from the decline of gold mining on the Palmer River. However, it failed to produce any return on investment, and remained a burden on the Government until it closed. There is no direct evidence that the losses of the Cooktown Railway influenced the Government not to provide further infrastructure in the area, but it is easy to suspect a connection.

Cooktown's experience with its aerodromes contrasts significantly with the wharf and railway. This is due to two factors: the aerodromes were financed by the Commonwealth Government, and much of the expenditure was war-related. Chapter ten shows how the Commonwealth Government continued to pour money into the two defence aerodromes, even when some of the planning and construction work was poorly executed. Ironically, the same Government refused to provide a pittance to build a road to evacuate civilians in the event of invasion. This indicates that the Commonwealth Government's interest in Cooktown was restricted to the town's place in the overall defence strategy, and that it was not concerned with the welfare of the local population. Despite this, the aerodromes had two beneficial effects on Cooktown's economy. The most important was

that they made medical help available at short notice, a service that was instrumental in attracting new settlers and retaining the old. They also contributed to Cooktown's tourist industry, especially after the war, but this could be seen only as a fortuitous result of defence spending, and not as a deliberate attempt to help the district.

Throughout Cooktown's history, its inhabitants fought to secure services that would encourage new settlers and help to reverse the town's decline. They particularly identified three services essential to the town's survival: a good water supply, a road connection to the outside world, and after electricity became available, a reticulated power supply. In view of the increased growth in population, and the consequent improvement in Cooktown's economy since these goals have been achieved, it would be easy to claim that they were correct. However, the tourism on which Cooktown now relies is a post-war phenomenon, and would most likely not have boosted the town's economy much earlier in any case. The best case scenario is that the provision of these services would have helped to retain the population.

Chapter thirteen shows that from the town's inception, the residents of Cooktown agitated for a reliable water supply. Despite the area's contribution to the economy, it was refused the necessary funds. When the Government finally decided to provide a water supply, it chose to fund two separate schemes that its own experts had advised against. It was particularly culpable in this matter. Although the ratepayers were left to pay for the schemes, they had no part in the decision to implement them. The matter was decided by the Government and its appointed Administrator. Cooktown finally achieved a good water supply, but the ratepayers were first forced to pay for two failed schemes.

Cooktown also fought long and hard to secure a road connection to Cairns. As chapter eight shows, the people of the district were quite willing to accept a road either along the coast from Mossman, or inland through Mareeba. The Council exhibited a good understanding of the political process in achieving its aim, and used any lever available. Eventually the Government chose the inland route, although a coastal road was also constructed later. The completion of the Mulligan Highway was followed by an increase in Cooktown's population, vindicating the local argument that the absence of roads was instrumental in the town's decline.

Although the struggle to obtain an electricity supply did not start until 1933, Cooktown pursued it with the same tenacity it used to get a water supply. Chapter twelve gives an indication of the problems sometimes faced by a small town in gaining access to what is now regarded as a basic amenity. The Council had to overcome local opposition and the lack of finances to obtain a power supply. After the town achieved its aim several changes were made to the supply, and even now it is not entirely reliable.

According to Central Place Theory, Cooktown was, for at least ten years the central place north of Townsville. However, certain aspects of Christaller's theory, especially his hypothesis of economic distance, did not accord with the siting of its hinterland settlements. Christaller found that in Southern Germany the distance between central towns and their satellites was determined by "economic distance", but settlements in Cooktown's hinterland were established for more basic reasons. Towns like Laura owed their position to the presence of a reliable water supply in the adjacent river, while other sites were chosen because they were

ideal places to rest horse and bullock teams. These animals could travel only so far without rest and grazing. The district was settled in an era of animal transport, and in Cooktown's arid hinterland, the economy of distance could not compete with the availability of water and fodder. However, Christaller's theory applies in that larger centres suppressed the growth of smaller centres within their economic spheres. Cooktown initially hampered the growth of Cairns, but this situation was later reversed. The sphere of influence exerted by such central places changes, of course, as transport technology changes. Faster, easier transport expands the influence of the central place as many rural towns have found to their cost since the 1960s. However, the provision of better roads has boosted Cooktown's tourist industry, as it has other rural towns. This would suggest that tourism doesn't obey central place theory, and can in some cases counter centralism.

There is no doubt that Staple Theory applies to much of Cooktown's history. The town was established to service the staple gold. When gold revenue declined, the town relied for many years on secondary staples like tin, timber and agriculture, but none of these could replace gold as a revenue earner. The only significant forward linkages, the railway and port infrastructure, failed to generate enough income to keep up the town's population.

Myrdal's economic theory applies to more facets of Cooktown's history than any other single theory. As the town started to decline, commercial and Government services were withdrawn. Merchants like Burns Philp relocated to Cairns, and other commercial establishments, such as hotels, banks and stores, ceased business. The Government withdrew the Supreme Court and closed the gaol, and at the same time reduced the police presence. This caused a deterioration of the

economy and escalating unemployment. As chapter eleven shows, the downward pressures of decline placed the Council in an ever-worsening financial situation. In line with Myrdal's theory, the decline continued until the Government intervened with finance for roads, water, electricity and other services. The funds created jobs, and converted Cooktown from a small rural town with few services to a well serviced town with the ability to attract new settlers.

The steady increase in Cooktown's population since the 1960s demonstrates that small rural towns can reverse a declining economy. However, it is apparent that as we approach a new millennium, most people will live in relatively isolated areas only if basic services and amenities are provided. Cooktown's population increased significantly only after the area was provided with electricity, a reliable water supply, and an all-weather road connection to the outside world. Cooktown's economy has evolved over time as the town adapted to changed circumstances. Until well after the Second World War it had an economy based on primary production. The gold economy that founded the town was replaced by a mixture of tin, timber, agriculture and marine resources. The "new" Cooktown is a service-based economy based on tourism and catering to an influx of "environmental refugees" and retirees. There is every reason to believe that this steady growth will continue.

Although Cooktown's recovery is mainly based on tourism, the people appear to have a different attitude to development than those in many other North Queensland towns. While the majority of Port Douglas and Cardwell residents welcomed large-scale developments, they have so far been rejected by Cooktown. This happened in 1947 with Moffat's scheme, in 1988 with the Q.T.T.C. proposal, and in 1989 with Carver's

scheme. Although the relevant Councils and some townspeople supported these development proposals, the majority of residents rejected them. It appears that most Cooktown people are happy to accept small-scale development that blends in with the town, but reject proposals that threaten to rob them of the real Cooktown. Then again, perhaps they have been led up the garden path so often that they automatically suspect "well-intentioned" outsiders. Having seen the "beneficial" results of development at Port Douglas, it is hard to argue with them.