

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>



Chapter 1

REVIEW OF SOURCES.

Primary Sources.

The historical resources available to research this thesis were adequate for the purpose. Research material came principally from primary sources, including reports and correspondence from departments and personnel in all levels of Government. State and Commonwealth Archives in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra provided a variety of information. The Cook Shire Council made its records and correspondence available, as did the Mareeba Shire Council. Unfortunately, the Douglas Shire Council refused access to letters concerning a proposed road link between Cooktown and Mossman. These letters were not critical to the research, but they would have provided an insight into the Douglas Shire Council's thinking on the project.

The archives of the Cook Shire Council provided a significant starting point. They contain correspondence from 1894 to 1950, and although much of the earlier material has been lost, enough remains to provide an important resource. The correspondence led to relevant information in the Queensland State Archives and the Commonwealth Archives. Cooktown resources also included Minute and Rate Books of the Daintree Divisional Board, the Hann Divisional Board, the Cooktown Town Council, and the Cook Shire Council. The Cook Shire Council library holds copies of interviews conducted with people who had personal knowledge of matters relevant to this thesis.

The resources of the State and Commonwealth Archives in Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney provided a significant amount of information from Government departments and personnel. In many cases the margin notes of Ministers and Departmental officers provided an insight into the actual views of politicians and Government officials, as opposed to the official views expressed in correspondence and in the press. This information was especially important in providing a balance to the correspondence emanating from the local authorities and the local press.

Primary source material also includes the Votes and Proceedings of the Colonial Government prior to 1901, and the Parliamentary Papers and Debates of the Queensland State Government after that date. These sources provide reports of various Government departments, including comprehensive statistics. Further information was sourced from the Statistics of Queensland, and the publications of the Departments of Agriculture and Mining.

However, difficulty was encountered in locating some Departmental correspondence. For instance, finding relevant material in the Queensland Department of Health and Home Affairs files was frequently difficult, and in some cases impossible. This Department had a broad area of responsibility, and while information on matters of health was easily located, files on the interaction between the Department and local authorities, especially in respect to land tenure, were sometimes impossible to locate. Although the Archives staff were very cooperative, they also had difficulty in locating various files from this Department.

The records of The Historical Society, Cairns, North Queensland Inc proved a valuable source of information and photographs, which were

readily made available. The Society holds copies of newspapers from many areas of North Queensland, which provided information on various aspects of Cooktown history, especially for the period prior to the First World War. Newspapers from Brisbane and Sydney also contained some information relevant to the Cooktown area. Unfortunately, many early issues of some newspapers, and those from Cooktown in particular, have not survived. Other sources included the Almanacs and Gazetteers produced by various commercial organisations. Despite their inaccuracies, the almanacs provided information not available elsewhere.

There are a number of primary published sources. One example is the book by Richard Semon, a German naturalist, who visited the area in the period 1892-94 and made some perceptive and detailed observations. His account of the Cooktown area gives an insight into the social and commercial life of Cooktown. However, he displays racism towards the Chinese that is strikingly similar to the majority of the European inhabitants of the area. For instance, despite a lack of evidence to support the statement, he claimed that "... the Chinese, wherever they go, are perpetrators of a hideous immorality, and of the fearful vice of opium-eating, we cannot be surprised at the Australians trying to guard themselves against such visitors".¹²

Secondary sources.

An investigation of secondary sources provided little reliable information about Cooktown. Academic literature concerning Cooktown's history is scarce, the only comprehensive work being Ormston's PhD thesis, *The Rise And Fall Of A Frontier Mining Town:*

¹² Richard Semon, 1899. In *The Australian Bush And On The Coast Of The Coral Sea*, Macmillan And Company Limited, London.

Cooktown 1873-85, which covers the first twelve years of the town's history.¹³ This thesis is important because it dispels decisively the many inaccuracies written by popular writers about Cooktown's early history.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the title of Ormston's thesis gives the impression that Cooktown was a mining town, whereas its role was primarily a port and supply point. The title also suggests a dramatic cessation of activity when the town "Fell" in 1885, which Ormston clearly indicates did not happen.

G. C. Bolton's A Thousand Miles Away: A History Of North Queensland To 1920 makes some references to Cooktown's history and economy, but does not provide much detail. Bolton gives few references to indicate where his information came from. This is unfortunate, as in some instances his claims are at variance with official indicators. For instance, he said that Cooktown had 62 licensed hotels,¹⁵ whereas the statistics provided in the Queensland Votes and Proceedings show the maximum number of licenses granted as 40.

The few other instances of academic literature on Cooktown for the period after 1885 are restricted to specific areas of interest. Several historical articles, which have made passing reference to aspects of Cooktown's history, warrant inclusion. Geoffrey Blainey includes Cooktown in a study of the relationship between mining fields and their ports, but little effort was made to analyse or expand on the

¹³ Robert Ormston, 1996. *The Rise And Fall Of A Frontier Mining Town: Cooktown 1873-85*, PhD Thesis, University of Queensland.

¹⁴ Ormston showed that the population of Cooktown at its height was in the vicinity of 4,000 people as against the exaggerated claims of up to 70,000 by some "faction" writers. He estimated from the sources available that the transient population was about 200 at any given time. This dispelled the myth of vast numbers of brothels that catered for the travellers.

¹⁵ G.C. Bolton, 1972. A Thousand Miles Away: A History Of North Queensland To 1920, Australian National University Press, Canberra, p. 66.

information.¹⁶ Cathy May also makes brief reference to the Chinese merchants of Cooktown in her account of the Chinese in North Queensland.¹⁷ Edwin Brady, in *Australia Unlimited*, makes various references to Cooktown. However, although he speaks as an observer who is present in the area, his statements are so inaccurate that one must doubt he ever visited the town. Brady describes how "Mt. Peter Botte" provides an imposing backdrop to Cooktown, when in fact it is near Bloomfield. Mount Cook is the dominant feature near Cooktown. Brady also asserts that the Annan tin fields was the "greatest tin-producing fields in the Far North".¹⁸ This is patently false. The Herberton field produced over 105,000 tons of ore in 1881 alone.¹⁹ This compares with the total production of 9,520 tons from the Annan field between 1885 and 1914.²⁰ Brady seems intent on providing a glossy "feel good" vision of Australia and its potential than on facing reality.

The majority of literature concerning Cooktown's "history" was produced by popular authors, who wrote what is termed "faction" stories. These are an amalgamation of fact and fiction, similar to the sensationalised American Wild West stories. In the absence of a credible history of the area, these stories have gained general acceptance.²¹ A comprehensive "factual" account of Cooktown was given in Farwell's *Ghost Towns Of Australia*. Unfortunately, Farwell

¹⁶ Geoffrey Blainey, 1969. *The Rush That Never Ended: a history of Australian mining*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton.

Cathy May, 1984. *Topsawyers: the Chinese in Cairns 1870 to 1920*, History Department, James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville.

¹⁷ Cathy May, 1984. *Topsawyers: the Chinese in Cairns 1870 to 1920*, History Department, James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville.

¹⁸ Edwin J. Brady, 1918. *Australia Unlimited*, George Robertson And Company Propy Ltd., Melbourne, pp. 453-457.

¹⁹ Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away*, p. 119.

²⁰ E. Cecil Saint-Smith, 1916. *Geology And Mineral Resources Of The Cooktown District Tinfields (Annan River, China Camp, Mount Poverty Etc), North Queensland, 1914*, Government Printer, Brisbane, p. 173.

²¹ "Faction" refers to the dramatised reconstruction of some real historical situation or event. *Longman Family Dictionary*, 1987. Chancellor Press, London.

relies on the opinions of "old residents" for much of his information, rather than official sources. For instance, despite readily available statistics giving Cooktown's maximum population as around 4,000, he quotes "official estimates" of 55,000 inhabitants, and gives credence to the opinion of old locals that up to 85,000 people lived in the town.²² Farwell's account of the Cooktown to Laura railway also lacks research and analysis. Although he concedes that the line finished at Laura, Farwell said that the train ran twice daily to the Palmer River, and in the 1880s carried 20,000 passengers and 10,000 tons of freight in one year.²³ This contrasts with Railway Department statistics, which show that in 1888, the peak year of trading, the Cooktown to Laura railway carried 13,968 passengers and 8,925 tons of freight.²⁴ The total annual freight carried on the line never again exceeded 5,000 tons. Farwell adds to the misinformation when he claims that the rail motor which transported goods and passengers from Cooktown to Laura in the latter period of the line's history was a converted London bus.²⁵ In reality, the rail motor referred to was converted from a car previously owned by the Premier of Queensland.²⁶

Amateur and popular histories have been included in an effort to illustrate that, in the absence of credible information, popular "faction" can, and often does, provide the publicly accepted "history" of an area.²⁷ It also helps to establish that Cooktown's decline was not as

²² Despite the publication of the population of every significant town in Queensland each year in the Queensland Votes and Proceedings, Farwell claimed that no official records were kept of the population of Cooktown in its boom years. He did not state where his "official estimates" came from. Farwell, Ghost Towns Of Australia, p. 158.

²³ Ibid., pp. 170-171.

²⁴ Q.V.P., 1889, Vol. 3, p. 642.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ J.W. Knowles, 1966. The Cooktown Railway: Australia's most unusual railway, The Australian Railway Historical Society, Queensland Division, Brisbane, p. 29.

²⁷ Correspondence from various Shire Clerks of the Cook Shire Council quoted population figures in Cooktown's boom period of 30,000 to 60,000. This would reflect the information contained in "faction" literature as opposed to the population statistics readily available in the Statistics of Queensland.

dramatic as indicated by the misleading information contained within such works. Unfortunately, even credible academics have included "information" from these sources in their works, without verification or critical analysis.²⁸

Included in the literature that contains references to Cooktown is the genre which purports to present the history of the area, but in effect concentrates on sensationalised accounts which have little to do with reality. Glenville Pike's various "historical" books show little attempt at verification or analysis of the material used. These comments would apply similarly to the works of Hector Holthouse, such as River Of Gold. Unfortunately some otherwise commendable works resort at times to a rehash of the stories of sensationalist writers. Although Frank Dempsey's work on mining towns contains valuable information, his comments on Cooktown's brothels and hotels show little regard for the information readily available in official documents.²⁹

A third genre includes accounts of matters of general interest and statistical information. S.E. Stephens and Sir Raphael Cilento produced a history of the James Cook Historical Museum that also includes a

²⁸ For instance Fitzgerald quoted from Carroll's Australia's Mines and Miners: "In the deserted streets, lean goats try to exist on empty bottles and jam tins, and retire for their siesta to the verandahs of the public buildings". He offered no criticism despite the availability of information showing that in the period Carroll referred to, Cooktown was enjoying a buoyant period, with a population of over 3,000, just 1,000 below its peak in 1875. Ross Fitzgerald, 1982. From The Dreaming To 1915: a history of Queensland, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, p. 171.

²⁹ Dempsey claims that Cooktown had 63 licensed hotels and 40 brothels in 1875, but cites no references to justify the information. He also gives the "working names" of fourteen prostitutes who worked at Cooktown. Unfortunately he gives no indication where this information came from. (During the research for this thesis very few references were found to prostitution in Cooktown. No mention was found of any "nick name" for a prostitute.) Dempsey, Frank, 1980. Old Mining Towns Of North Queensland, Rigby, Adelaide, p. 40

³⁰ Stephens, S.E. and Cilento, Sir Raphael, 1974. James Cook Historical Museum and Joseph Banks Garden, Cooktown: Introduction To Cooktown & District and its Museum, National Trust Of Queensland

general synopsis of the town and surrounding district.³⁰ Alexa Gallop's account of her husband's role as engineer and administrator of the Cook Shire was helpful, as it gives a revealing insight into a critical time in the area's history.³¹ An important source of Cooktown's history is also revealed in James Manion's account of the newspaper industry in North Queensland.³² Also included is Knowles' history of the Cooktown railway, which is a valuable source of information on that subject.³³

The recent increase in Cooktown's population has been accompanied by a heightened interest in the town's history, and this led the Cooktown and District Historical Society to publish a series on various aspects of Cooktown history.³⁴ Another important publication by Don Sinclair, a Cooktown resident, investigates the part played by Cooktown during the Second World War.³⁵ A useful source of information on any district is the local cemetery, as an appreciation of the hardships suffered can be gauged by the incidence of premature deaths, especially those of children. The Cooktown Burial Register is an informative source of such information.³⁶

Theoretical models.

³¹ Alexa Gallop, 1979. The Bush Engineer: early road construction and development in Northern & Western Queensland, A.E & G.D. Gallop, Cairns.

³² James Manion, 1982. Paper Power In North Queensland: A History of Journalism in Townsville and Charters Towers, The North Queensland Newspaper Company Limited, Townsville.

³³ Knowles, The Cooktown Railway.

³⁴ John and Bev Shay, c 1998. Pubs and Publications of Cooktown: in the beginning, Cooktown and District Historical Society, Cooktown.

³⁵ Don Sinclair, 1997. Cooktown At War: a record of activities in Cooktown during world war II, Self published.

³⁶ Cooktown Burial Register to 1920 & Monumental Inscriptions to 1986. Compiled by Cairns & District Family History Society. Cairns.

The search for literature to explain the establishment and subsequent decline of a town such as Cooktown presents various problems. The investigation of rural decline in Australia, as elsewhere, has been influenced by the perception that rural regions rely primarily on mining, agricultural or pastoral production.³⁷ Cooktown has, since its inception, been associated with the mining and pastoral industries of Cape York Peninsula, and in its formative years it also boasted a diverse agricultural economy. However, unlike many western Queensland towns, Cooktown's economic base also included timber, fishing, and tourism. The town does not conform to the pattern of those mining towns that relied exclusively on minerals, and which disappeared when mining ceased. It also differs from towns that relied exclusively on pastoralism and agriculture, for although these staples have contributed to Cooktown's economy, they have not been absolutely critical to its survival.

A comparison of the histories of other Australian rural towns provides some interesting similarities. However, they also highlight that each town has its own history and its own particular influences on its chance of survival. Griffiths' history of Beechworth shows some similarities to Cooktown's experiences. Both towns were reliant on gold, but whereas Cooktown was a port and supply town, Beechworth was the actual centre of a mining field. However, both towns see tourism as the salvation of their economies. Like Cooktown, Beechworth promotes its local "myths" to encourage tourists to visit. Some of these "myths" are strikingly similar. For instance Beechworth has the tale of its first elected representative riding to the Victorian Parliament on a horse

³⁷ T. Marsden, P. Lowe, S. Whatmore, 1990. "Introduction: questions of rurality", in T. Marsden, P. Lowe, S. Whatmore, (eds), Rural Restructuring: global processes and their responses, David Fulton Publishers, London, p. 1.

shod with shoes made of gold.³⁸ Cooktown has the story of the prostitute Palmer Kate, who is said to have had a chamber pot made entirely of gold from the Palmer River. This story is still repeated, despite the absence of any evidence to support it. In both cases many of the locals refuse to believe that these stories might not be true.

Both towns have further similarities. Cooktown was undoubtedly the leading centre north of Townsville until it was eclipsed by Cairns. Beechworth was in a similar position, being at one time regarded as the "capital of the Murray District". For many years it was the principal shopping centre for the district, but by 1952 most locals were shopping elsewhere.³⁹

In "The Urban Sprinkle" Weston Bate contends that an appreciation of the history of regional areas must include an appreciation of the part played by a town's hinterland, how the land is used, and what transport facilities are available.⁴⁰ It is clear that these factors are important in a town's survival. Once Cooktown and its hinterland lost the stimulus of the staple gold, the lack of transport facilities and arable land mitigated against an alternative agricultural future. In contrast, towns like Ballarat, which had a fertile hinterland and transport connections to large markets, could overcome the decline of mineral wealth.⁴¹

Rural towns in Australia were established for a variety of reasons. Some, such as Tully and Mount Surprise, grew out of supply points set up at strategic places to cater to pastoralists or farmers. Others, like Chillagoe and Mount Isa, were established to exploit mineral resources.

³⁸ Tom Griffiths, 1987. Beechworth: An Australian Country Town And Its Past, Greenhouse Publications, Richmond, pp. 27-29.

³⁹ Griffiths, Beechworth, p. 45.

⁴⁰ Weston Bate, 1970. "The Urban Sprinkle: Country Towns And Australian Regional History", Australian Economic History Review, Vol X, No 1, March, p. 204.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 205.

Many grew from railway junctions and service centres which later expanded to service surrounding primary producers. In many cases these towns have declined. This has occurred in some instances because the products that formed the mainstay of their economies have been exhausted or become uneconomic. In other circumstances the towns have declined because improved transportation facilities have provided easy access to larger centres with their cheaper shopping facilities.

The search for a theoretical model to help explain Cooktown's decline proved difficult, as models developed elsewhere do not fit Cooktown's experience well. The investigation of the dynamics of regional structures was based initially on the European experience, particularly in Germany. Regional theories that evolved from this area reflected the reality of closely settled countries with established regional structures, and usually a significantly sophisticated infrastructure. Many works by North American theorists concurred with their European counterparts, although problems were encountered when the theories were applied to North American colonial settlement. European regional theories were incapable of explaining the growth and decline of New World settlement in the embryo United States and Canada. Alternative theories were proposed which it was felt could apply to the development of "new world" regions, including Australia.

Regional dynamics also came under the scrutiny of economists and geographers, who used their particular expertise to explain the fluctuations of regional growth. Time and distance were critical to Australia's development, and spatial theorists studied its influence on the establishment and survival of towns. Unfortunately not enough emphasis has been placed on the influence of politics on the fortunes of particular regions. This omission is difficult to understand, especially

in light of the well-known interventionist policy of Government in Australia since the advent of European occupation.⁴²

Central Place Theory.

One of the most significant European theories on regional growth was proposed in Christaller's Central Places In Southern Germany. Christaller identifies the relationship between a central place, which can be viewed in its most basic sense as a supply point and market, and the hinterland region supplied by the central place. Central place and hinterland are essential to each other, and complementary to the entity of the region. Christaller describes the system as one in which an "importance deficit" in the hinterland is counterbalanced by an "importance surplus" in the central place.⁴³

Intrinsic to the central place theory is the economic distance goods can be transported from the central place to the hinterland market, or of produce from the hinterland to the central place. Christaller proposes that the cost of the goods, plus the on-costs of freight and insurance determines the economic distance such goods can be carried. Economic distance applies similarly in the situation where the purchaser travels to the central place to access goods or services.⁴⁴ Presumably when the economic distance is reached the cost of transport will mean that the price of goods will rise to such an extent that a new central place will become viable.

⁴² The lack of interest in the influence of politics is puzzling given the description of politics as "deciding who gets what, when and how". T.P. Wiseman, G.R. Elton, Ronald Hutton, Roy Foster, John Turner, Kenneth O. Morgan, 1988. "What Is Political History?", in Juliet Gardiner, (ed.), What Is History Today, Macmillan Education, Hampshire, p. 26.

⁴³ Walter Christaller, 1966. Central Places In Southern Germany, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, p. 22.

However, some commentators regard this view as simplistic, because the buying pattern of people is more amenable to change than suggested by Christaller. They argue that when the price of goods exceeds the ability of a consumer to pay, they will probably find an alternative cheaper product with similar characteristics.⁴⁵ It is obvious that Christaller assumes that alternative suppliers and a free economy exist in his theoretical region. This was not so in pioneer settlement areas like Cooktown's hinterland, as all goods entered through the port at Cooktown, and there was no alternative supply point. It is also obvious that economic distance is not as relevant in those instances where a business is willing to operate at a loss to secure a market or to damage the economy of a competitor.⁴⁶

Christaller recognised that merely categorising a town as a central place is not sufficient to guarantee its progress, or even to ensure its survival as a central place. It is imperative for the development of a central place that the net income of its business community is adequate to encourage further investment. Volume of trade alone is not sufficient to guarantee progress.⁴⁷ Also necessary to the success of a central place is what Christaller describes as "importance", or the "combined

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ It has been suggested that people buy characteristics, not specifics. For instance dietary carbohydrates can be supplied by rice, potatoes or pasta, with similar choices for other needs. The consumer can counter the tyranny of distance and price to some extent by using alternative products. H.O. Norse, 1978. "The Economics of Central-place Theory: an alternative approach", in R. Funk, J.B. Parr, (eds.), the analysis of regional structure: essays in honour of August Losch, Pion, London, p. 76.

⁴⁶ For instance, in the 1980s, bread was taken from Cairns to Cooktown and sold at reduced rates to force the local baker out of business. Similarly, bread was carried from Townsville to Cairns and sold at a competitive price when two national flour companies were "at war".

⁴⁷ Christaller, Central Places In Southern Germany, p. 28. Investigations of the Hillsboro district of Iowa revealed that central place theory might be more applicable to an earlier period of this century and that the commercial importance of areas might change more than would be expected under the theory. Brian J.L. Berry, Duane F. Marble, 1968. Spatial Analysis: a reader in statistical geography, Prentice-Hall, Inc., New Jersey, p. 347.

economic effort of the population".⁴⁸ "Importance" could possibly be assessed in contemporary language as economic critical mass, which Cooktown never reached.

Entrepreneurship is also important. It could possibly explain the early success of Cairns at the expense of other towns in the region, including Cooktown. Despite its many deficiencies, including a shallow entrance to the harbour and the swampy landscape, Cairns soon became the principal town north of Townsville. Ironically, many of the prominent pioneers of the Cairns community originally came from Cooktown. Among the many factors that influence the progress of an area, the capability and personality of the inhabitants is critical. A central place can lose its supremacy over other areas in the region when its inhabitants become complacent, or lose the will to fight. If the spirit of entrepreneurship that helped establish the town disappears, the town will lose its momentum.⁴⁹ The struggle for supremacy between industries and communities determines which community reaps the benefit of profit and progress. Invariably rural and remote towns, where technology and infrastructure are usually inferior or lacking, are at a disadvantage compared to their urban neighbours in the struggle for survival.⁵⁰

Cooktown's experience in this regard is interesting. It was for a time the centre of European economic and civil power north of Townsville. The Cook electorate covered an area from Cairns in the south to the tip of Cape York Peninsula, and from the eastern seaboard to Mount

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁹ Gunnar Myrdal, 1965. Economic Theory and Underdeveloped Regions, Methuen, London, p. 36.

⁵⁰ Harry Dieman, 1980. "The Institutional Church For The Rural Community", in E. Martinez-Brawley (ed.), Pioneer Efforts in Rural Social Welfare: first hand views since 1908, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, p. 56.

Surprise in the west. Cooktown was a judicial centre, and for many years all serious criminal trials from Thursday Island to Cairns appeared before the Supreme Court sittings in Cooktown. It was also a medical centre, and serious medical cases were transported to Cooktown hospital from throughout the area, with fever-ridden miners being brought from as far away as New Guinea for treatment. For a time it was without doubt the central place north of Townsville.

Cooktown became the central place in this area only because it was the obvious port to service the Palmer River mineral field. Hinterland towns like Maytown and Byerstown were established not because they were a particular distance from the centre, but because of the presence of gold. Smaller settlements or way-stops, which usually included liquor outlets and butcher shops, were determined by the average distance horse drawn wagons could travel in one day, or by the presence of permanent water. For instance, Laura was established as a supply centre and police depot only because there was a permanent supply of water in the river at that particular place.

Laura's survival was guaranteed by the route taken by the Cooktown to Maytown railway, and because the railway terminated there. It is reasonable to assume that if the railway had progressed past Laura it would have remained just another wayside stop along the route. It survived the closure of the railway only because it had become an established fuel supply point for motor vehicles, and because it boasted a general store, hotel, and police station.

Under the concept of Central Place Theory, Cooktown could be regarded as the central place in Far North Queensland during its formative years. However, as the Palmer gold declined, Cairns usurped Cooktown's position of leadership, despite competition from other

suitable ports, such as Port Douglas and Innisfail. Cairns prospered despite its many disadvantages as a port, including a shallow harbour entrance, a swampy foreshore, a high incidence of fever epidemics, and a mountain barrier between the coast and the hinterland.⁵¹ Its success was assured when the Government decided to construct a railway over the coastal range to service the hinterland. This victory over the other contenders, Innisfail and Port Douglas, was largely due to superior political manoeuvring.

Cairns did not owe its growth as a centre to any advantage in access to southern markets. All export produce was carried in ships, and the difference in cost to Johnston River (Innisfail), Port Douglas, Cairns or Cooktown would be negligible. Undoubtedly its inhabitants had a more aggressive entrepreneurial spirit and superior political skills, and these helped to overcome the opposition. It is ironic that many of those entrepreneurs, like Louis Severin and Callaghan Walsh, came from Cooktown.

Christaller sees the central place as being in a pre-eminent position in its relationship with its complementary region. He suggests that the range of goods offered by the central place determines the region.⁵² However, any such relationship must be viewed as symbiotic, as the regional market will determine the range of goods offered by the central place. Christaller proposed his theory after he studied a region in Southern Germany, but it is obvious that some of his statements have global application. His assertion: "It is quite clear that for the creation, development, and decline of towns to occur, a demand must exist for

⁵¹ A report on malaria in Cairns during the Second World War said that there were still swamps within the main business district and an abundance of malarial mosquitos.

⁵² Christaller, Central Places In Southern Germany, p. 101.

the things which the town can offer"⁵³, would obviously apply in all circumstances.

Cooktown was established to supply miners already on the Palmer River gold field with rations, and to supply goods that would be needed as the field developed. The Government's swift reaction in establishing a supply point for the Palmer was influenced by the earlier disaster on the Canoona field, where many miners faced starvation when food supplies were insufficient for the number of people on the field. The Government's original intention was not specifically to build a town, but to provide an access point on the Endeavour River to supply miners already on the Palmer field.

However, by the time the Government party reached the Endeavour River it was obvious that a more extensive and permanent settlement would be needed. While anticipated demand, rather than actual demand might have precipitated the establishment of Cooktown, the essence of demand for "the things which the town can offer" was the motivating force. When the gold disappeared, the other products which Cooktown had to offer were less in demand and it became vulnerable to challenge from other towns as a central place.

Location Theory.

The factors that influence the actual location of a town or settlement are in themselves the subject of investigation. Losch thought that location was critical to the success or decline of a particular area. He identified "actual location" and "rational location" as being two distinct factors in the siting of a town, and that they need not necessarily be

⁵³ ibid., p. 3.

coincidental.⁵⁴ An example of the impact of these two factors would be the establishment of a settlement near a river to secure a water supply. The actual site chosen would be determined by the ability to deliver the water necessary for the town's survival with available technology. However, the rational location for the settlement would be above danger level during flood periods.

Even though Cooktown was established to resolve the urgent problem of supplying the miners, it could be claimed that its actual location was the most rational place for a port for the Palmer River gold field. Later, the deficiencies of the location, such as the lack of a close viable fresh water supply, became apparent. However, at the time Cooktown was first settled by Europeans, the available water supply was comparable, and in many cases superior, to other settlements.

Sulman also thought that a suitable location was critical to the success of a town. He said the prerequisites for laying out a town were the availability of sufficient good agricultural land, the presence of mineral reserves, or position on a transport link for trade. Any or all of these factors would provide the conditions for growth.⁵⁵ He argued that these advantages would help a town become established, but they would not necessarily guarantee its growth or survival. Obviously other factors were also important. Cooktown was blessed with all three of these factors to a greater or lesser degree in its formative years, but their presence could not prevent its decline.

Marxist theories.

⁵⁴ August Losch, 1964. The Economics of Location, Yale University Press, New Haven, p. 4.

⁵⁵ John Sulman, 1890. "The Laying Out Of Towns" Proceedings of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, Vol. 2, p. 730.

Some Marxist theorists saw central place theory as too narrow in explaining the relationship between the centre and its hinterland. For instance, Stilwell argues that hinterland expansion is not necessary for growth of the centre, and that internal forces alone can generate development.⁵⁶ He also questions the idea that exports, on either the national or local level, are essential to generate growth.⁵⁷ Clearly this view is not valid in the Australian situation, where primary production has always exceeded the domestic market. It is also irrelevant for small rural towns without the population mass sufficient to generate a significant domestic market. Nor has secondary industry, with a few exceptions, been capable of supplying the needs of the population on an economic scale.

Stilwell explained the absence of Government action to halt regional decline, especially in rural areas, as a deliberate move to provide cheap labour for urban workplaces.⁵⁸ If this were the case, it would be a replay of the poor laws of the early 19th century, which forced the poor to work for low wages. While there is no direct evidence to link this theory to the Cooktown experience, for many years seasonal workers migrated from Cooktown to larger centres in search of employment. This no longer occurs, but there is nothing to indicate why the practice stopped. It is possible that the introduction of mechanised cane harvesting, replacing the manual gangs, and improved unemployment benefits were partly responsible. The change in community attitude towards social service recipients could also have been a contributing factor. The stigma associated with being on the "dole", and being called

⁵⁶ Frank Stilwell, 1992. Understanding Cities & Regions: spatial political economics, Pluto Press, Leichhardt, pp. 87-88.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 90. As example Stilwell cites the growth in the global economy despite the inability of the world to export. The growth is internal in this case and could be replicated within countries.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

"bludgers", was replaced by an acceptance that work was just not available in Cooktown.⁵⁹

Myrdal's economic theory.

Various economic theorists also attempted to provide an understanding of regional growth or decline. A prevailing economic theory in the 1960s was stable equilibrium, which claimed that any change in economic circumstances would invoke a reaction in the opposite direction. Gunnar Myrdal debunked this theory in 1965.⁶⁰ Although he focused primarily on international economics, Myrdal's theory on under-developed regions is relevant to the decline of regional areas in Australia. His theory of "interlocking, circular inter-dependence within a process of cumulative causation" is particularly revealing in its insight into the cumulative effects of economic and/or commercial recession.

In contrast to the accepted theory of opposite reaction, Myrdal said that any change in economic circumstances precipitated an accelerated move in the same direction.⁶¹ He explained how regressive effects accelerate once a region loses momentum in its economic or productive capacity. Demand and income decrease, placing pressure on business enterprises and social institutions alike. Each regressive factor results from previous regressive factors and is in its turn cumulative.⁶² This results in a reduction in turnover and profits, and places pressure on business to shed staff or relocate. This in turn

⁵⁹ The public acceptance of Social Security payments such as unemployment benefits became more positive during the depression of the 1930s. The view that the poor and unemployed were to blame for their own circumstances was replaced by the concept of "minimum rights for the many". D.J. Walmsley and A.D. Sorensen, 1993. Contemporary Australia: explorations in economy, society and geography, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, pp. 150-151.

⁶⁰ Myrdal, Economic Theory, p. 13.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., p. 11.

encourages workers, especially the young and fit, to migrate to areas with greater prospects.⁶³ When Cooktown started to decline many men left town to work in other areas. Most of these worked on seasonal jobs and returned to Cooktown at the end of the season.⁶⁴ However, over time the population drift away from the town became significant.

Myrdal claims that once a region has lost momentum, its decline can be halted only by intervention to cause a change in direction. This change can come through the direct intervention of Government or industry, or by a new source of staple production such as minerals.⁶⁵ Government intervention can take the form of industry subsidies, or can be injected directly into the community as social security. The type of Government intervention will be dictated by the political and economic views of the relevant Government. Politics is also important in deciding whether or not to offer help, as the extra cost of maintaining a particular town would have to be weighed against the political, defence and economic ramifications of letting it die.⁶⁶

Stilwell used Myrdal's theory to explain the advantages of growth enjoyed by the original towns in newly settled areas. He claimed that in most cases the initial surge of growth gives the original town a head

⁶³ Ibid., p. 23.

⁶⁴ L. Buhmann, interview. Buhmann said that in the 1930s many Cooktown men were employed in the sugar industry around Mossman. This claim was verified by the local council. Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Honourable M.P. Hynes M.L.A., Minister for Labour and Industry, Brisbane, in Cook Shire Council Minutes, 27 November 1934.

⁶⁵ Myrdal, Economic Theory, p. 23.

⁶⁶ Lawrence cites the costs of non-intervention as underdeveloped human resources and underutilised infrastructure. The cost of social support for those who migrate is also significant. Geoffrey Lawrence, 1990. "Agricultural Restructuring and Rural Social Change in Australia", in T. Marsden, P. Lowe, S Whatmore (eds), Rural Restructuring: global processes and their responses, David Fulton Publishers, London, p. 123.

start over subsequent settlements, which is difficult to overcome.⁶⁷ Unfortunately for Cooktown, Cairns was able to overcome the disadvantage of being "second sister" and thereafter kept Cooktown's economy depressed.

Staple theory.

Harold Innis believed that the European theories could not explain the growth and decline of frontier trading towns in colonial Canada, and this prompted the search for an alternative approach.⁶⁸ He found that the fur trading and cod fishing centres of newly developed Canada existed solely to act as export points for the staples won by hunters and fishers, and to supply these people with essentials. The existence of such towns was reliant on a continuing supply of staples for export, and not on an ever-increasing market for the central goods they supplied. Despite the early acceptance and expansion of Innis' work by other Canadian historians, staple theory subsequently lost much of its influence in North America.⁶⁹

In applying staple theory to Australian conditions, McCarthy identified some prerequisites for the establishment of a staple economy. He said the staple must be in demand on an external market, be of sufficient value to justify high shipping costs to the market, and require little infrastructure for initial exploitation.⁷⁰ Once the region was established, autonomous growth was essential if it was not to decline once the flush

⁶⁷ Stilwell, Understanding Cities, p. 94. Stilwell's argument was not relevant to Cooktown. Although it and Cardwell were the first and most important towns north of Townsville this did not prevent their eclipse by Cairns.

⁶⁸ Harold A. Innis, 1956. in Mary Q. Innis (ed)., Essays in Canadian Economic History, University Of Toronto Press, Toronto, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Melville H. Watkins, 1963. "A Staple Theory Of Economic Growth", The Canadian Journal Of Economics and Political Science, VOL. XXIX, No. 2., May, p. 142.

⁷⁰ J.W. McCarthy, 1964. "The Staple Approach", Business Archives And History, Vol.4, No.1, February, pp. 4-5.

of staple exports declined.⁷¹ This growth would be significantly dependent on the prosperity of resident businesses, which were drawn to the centre to service the staple industries.⁷²

McCarthy argued that staples such as alluvial gold mining provided little impetus to create backward and forward linkages, and that secondary avenues of employment developed only when the economy turned to deep mining and agriculture. These industries encouraged road and railway construction as well as the manufacture of support products.⁷³ McCarthy agreed with other theorists on the limitations of staples alone to sustain regional growth. He said that once the growth period peaked following the initial exploitation of the resource, further expansion could come only if production techniques changed, other staples were found, or industry developed.⁷⁴ He found that in many instances second generation staples replaced the high-value staples of the initial European settlements.⁷⁵ McCarthy claims that in many cases the railway lines built to develop staple resources led in turn to the expansion into secondary staples. McCarthy's version of Staple theory has patchy relevance to Cooktown's experience. Unfortunately, the Cooktown to Laura railway, which was constructed to exploit the gold deposits believed to be available in the Maytown area, did not appreciably benefit either primary or secondary staples. Although a considerable port infrastructure did develop, sea-based commerce, including the beche-de-mer and pearl shell industries, failed to generate enough trade to replace the staple gold. Cooktown's supporters predicted that timber exports would contribute substantially

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷² David McSwan, 1983. *Consequences Of Rural Decline In Small Towns Of Central Western Queensland*, PhD Thesis, James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville.

⁷³ McCarthy, "The Staple Approach", pp. 6-7.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

to the economy of the area, but this product also failed to fulfil expectations.

Blainey agreed with McCarthy's views on the place of staples in Australia's European history, but he had a different interpretation of the generation of linkages. Whereas McCarthy claimed that linkages were more likely to result from "second generation staples"⁷⁶, Blainey said the creation of linkages relied more on the advanced state of the economy and higher population.⁷⁷ He cited the failure of the copper mining industry in South Australia in the 1840s to produce linkage effects. In later years, when the economy and population had expanded, base metal exploitation encouraged a wider diversity of linkages.⁷⁸ Blainey could also point to the greater availability of British investment capital after the late 1850s, which assisted the development of base metals and associated linkages.

Neither Blainey nor McCarthy appears to have considered the influence of the development culture that pervaded the commercial and political sphere in the late nineteenth century. This attitude saw vast sums invested in railway infrastructure around the world with little apparent justification. In the Queensland context, the decision to build railways appears to have been influenced significantly by political considerations. The frantic pace of railway construction in North America impressed some local politicians, but others were thought to have been motivated by baser instincts. Some influential politicians were accused of having pecuniary interests in the purchase of railway materials from the United Kingdom, and this could explain the decision

⁷⁵ Cooktown relied on tin, pearl shell, beche-de-mer and timber during and after the alluvial gold boom.

⁷⁶ McCarthy, *The Staple Approach*, p. 5.

⁷⁷ Geoffrey Blainey, 1964. "Technology In Australian History", *Business Archives And History*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 124-125.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

to build railways without sufficient investigation of the potential for profitable returns. As well, there was a belief that development would follow the railways.

Unfortunately for Cooktown, the linkages created to exploit gold did not stimulate further growth. While Cooktown was regarded initially as one of the premier ports in Queensland, the absence of any high-value staple to replace gold condemned the wharves to be an economic drain on the town. Following the decline of the Palmer field, revenue from the wharf facilities seldom exceeded maintenance expenses. The railway, with its direct access to wharf facilities, could have offered sea transport as an alternative to driving cattle overland. However, the excessive charges of the shipping companies made this alternative uneconomic. The failure of both the railway and the wharves to produce economic returns would not have encouraged the Governments to contribute more funds to the Cooktown area, nor would it have created the economic conditions likely to attract commercial investment.

Regional and economic theories, or parts thereof, can apply to specific areas at any given time. However, it is interesting to note that changes can occur which render the application of any one theory untenable. Recent experience has shown that some rural areas have benefited from changes in social and environmental attitudes in many countries. Towns that were in decline are now showing signs of recovery, despite the lack of the usual economic stimuli needed for such a result. In contrast to historical reasons for growth, the revival of these towns is lifestyle driven. Urban drift has been replaced in some areas by a "green revolution" which has seen an exodus from cities to more

environmentally acceptable rural areas.⁷⁹ In Europe and North America the drift from the cities has targeted the "rural lifestyle" in general, but in Australia, the urban "refugees" prefer escaping to rural coastal towns.⁸⁰ The Cooktown area has benefited from the urban drift for almost thirty years, and while many young "alternatives" later returned to the cities, a significant proportion chose to remain.

It is apparent that in identifying the criteria that influence progress in a given area, not enough prominence has been given to personality driven factors. These include irrationalism, political opportunism in the public sphere, and a combination of egotism and deliberate criminal activity in the private arena. Maladministration and incompetence at all levels of Government, as well as in the private sector, can also have a disastrous impact on the local economy. The history of the North Queensland mining industry contains ample evidence of malpractice in both the private and public sector. In general, any investigation of the factors that contribute to the economy of a town or district relies on the lawful pursuits of the inhabitants of the area. However, unlawful activities can also have a critical effect on the economy, especially of smaller towns. Police have located extensive marijuana crops in the vicinity of Cape York settlements in recent years, and this indicates that the economy of these areas is influenced to some extent by these unlawful pursuits. The local economy benefits from the increased disposable income of the growers, and by the increase in law enforcement personnel. While illegal activities will not be treated in detail, the impact of such factors on the economy of these areas is sufficient to warrant their inclusion as determinants in regional growth.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Marsden, Lowe and Whatmore, "Questions of Rurality", p. 2.

⁸⁰ Walmsley and Sorensen, Contemporary Australia, pp. 58-59.

⁸¹ Police have been recorded as finding and destroying drug crops valued at hundred of thousands of dollars. It is accepted that not all such crops are discovered and destroyed. We must assume that significant funds are generated in the area from

An examination of many of the pioneer rail lines and mining facilities in Northern Queensland leads to the conclusion that linkages in the form of infrastructure were determined not only by the presence of either first or second generation staples but by a variety of irrational causes, including "gut feeling" and wishful thinking. The Cooktown to Laura rail link, which was planned to go to Maytown, was built to exploit the reef-gold *assumed* to be present in the conglomerate ranges near Maytown. Supporters believed the gold would be accessible once the railway could deliver heavy machinery to the site. There is no excuse for the Government's failure to properly investigate the gold reserves, as it had a diamond drill available. Although it made the drill available to investigate coal deposits, it never attempted to assess the gold reserves of the Palmer field before the rail project began.

Private enterprise was just as inept. A similar lack of competent investigation allowed the construction of the Mount Molloy smelter and rail line, which lacked the resources to justify the expenditure of construction. These linkages were provided to exploit base metal deposits, but the driving force was a "feeling" or belief that the minerals were present in sufficient quantities to warrant the outlay, rather than the knowledge that they were available in sufficient quantities.

The construction of the Cooktown to "Maytown" railway should have provided a salutary lesson for the necessity for informed decision making. The lesson went unlearned. The Chillagoe and Mount Molloy railway lines were constructed by private companies, and this indicates that the flurry of State railway construction activity in that era was not merely a political expedient. Unfortunately, there was a backlash

illegal crops. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant number of people appear to have spending capabilities well above their supposed earning power.

against the failure of these grand schemes. The decline of many north Queensland towns, including Cooktown, was undoubtedly influenced by the failure of projects, many of which were ill-conceived, to provide a return on capital. Exploitation of resources on a scale more in keeping with the availability of proven reserves would have assured a longer life for many of these projects, and given investors better returns.

This thesis will demonstrate that a combination of factors led to Cooktown's decline from its prominent position in the early European history of Queensland. No single theory cited in this work could by itself explain Cooktown's economic and social progress.⁸² However, it will be shown that elements of Central Place Theory, Staple Theory and Myrdal's economic theories can be applied to various phases in the life of the town. It is inconceivable that any single theory could apply to regional areas having widely differing social and economic structures. The dynamics and individuals present in any situation must influence the course of events and ultimately the progress of the region.

⁸² "Concrete problems are never simply economical, sociological, psychological or political. A theory of under-development or development which works only with "economic" variables is for logical reasons doomed to be unrealistic and thus irrelevant". Myrdal, Economic Theory, p. 162.