

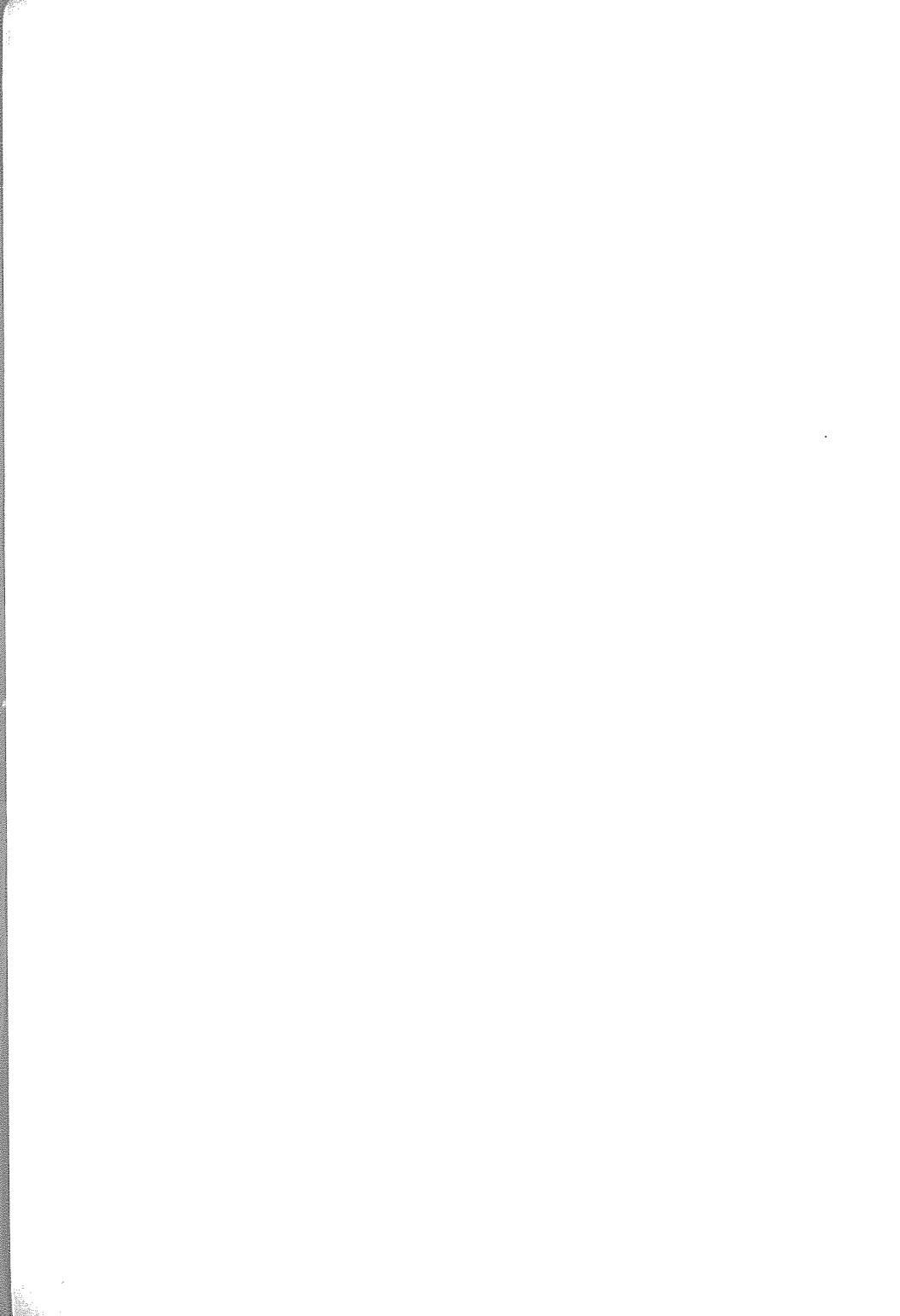
Mount Isa

Oasis of the Outback

Noreen Kirkman



MOUNT ISA: OASIS OF THE OUTBACK



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1998

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Kirkman, Noreen, 1952-.
Mount Isa: Oasis of the Outback

Bibliography.
ISBN 0 86443 658 0.

1. Mount Isa (Qld.) - History. I. James Cook University of
North Queensland. School of History and Politics. II.
Title.

994.37

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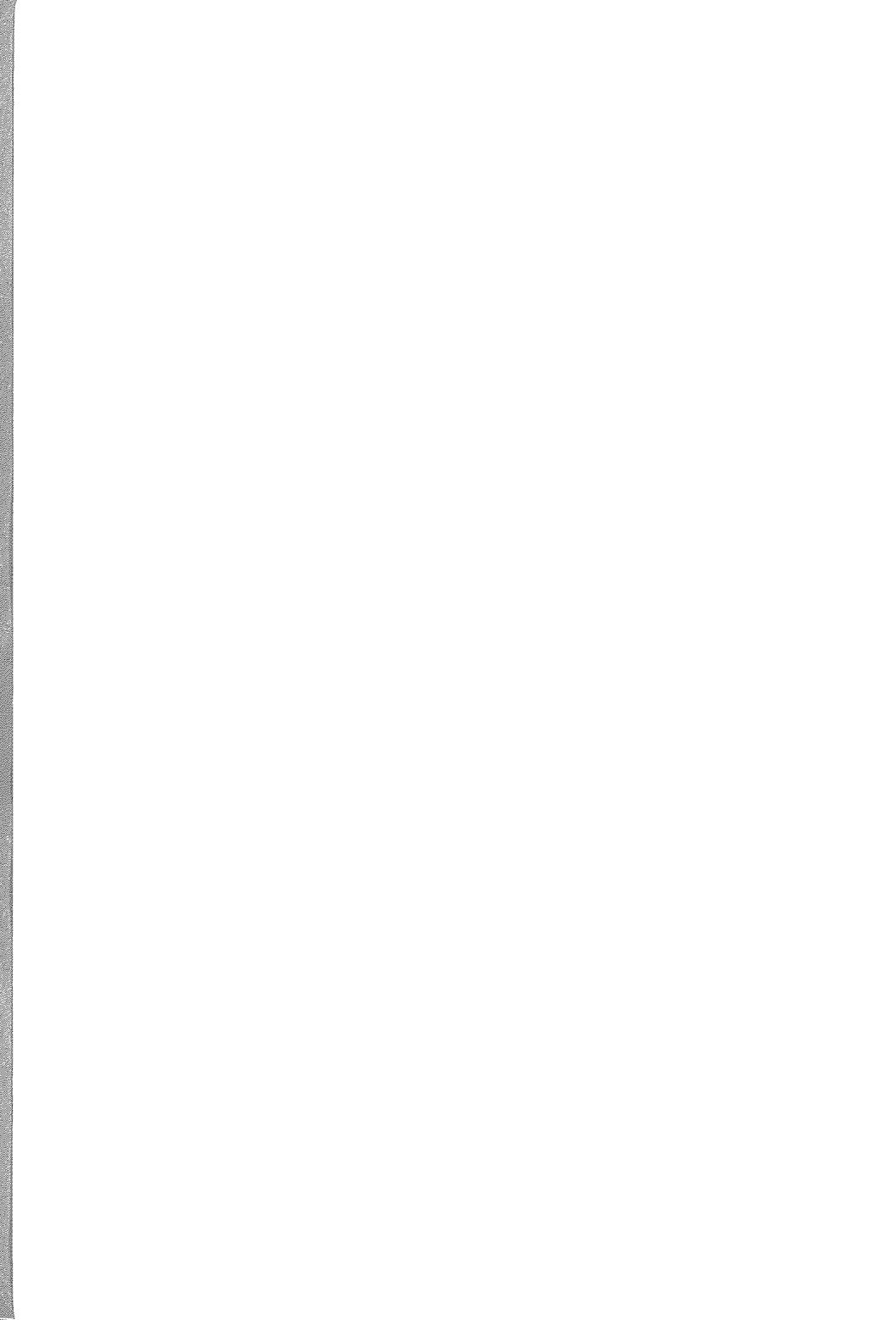
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Currency, Weights and Measures

In an age of decimal currency and metric weights and measures a note on conversion is appropriate. Conversion of £1 is misleading as it is difficult to compare the purchasing values of £1 in the 1920s and \$2 in the 1980s. A relative yardstick would be the earnings for a miner, which in the 1920s averaged over £5 a week, and for a contract miner in the 1980s would be around \$1000 a week. Other relevant conversions are as follows:

1 ton	=	1.02 tonne
1 ounce	=	.031 kilogram
1 foot	=	.305 metre
1 mile	=	1.60 kilometres
1 acre	=	.405 hectare
1 gallon	=	4.55 litres
40°C	=	104°F



Recollections of the Isa

I arrived in Mount Isa in 1960, more by chance than anything else, to a vibrant, confident, resourceful community.

There was something of a 'country town' atmosphere there, but the people were more purposeful and upbeat than one would expect in a country town.

On a Saturday morning soon after my arrival, I remember passing through the throng of people in West Street. The friendly bubbling animated crowd passing the Boyd Hotel corner was reminiscent of a racecourse crowd after the favourite has won the Cup. Saturday morning was obviously a social event in West Street because the footpaths, pubs and shops were so crowded it was difficult to avoid bumping into people.

Like so many others, I certainly had no plans to spend a lifetime in Mount Isa, but there was and is something particularly attractive about the people and the countryside, which is not present in other places. That intangible quality is still there today.

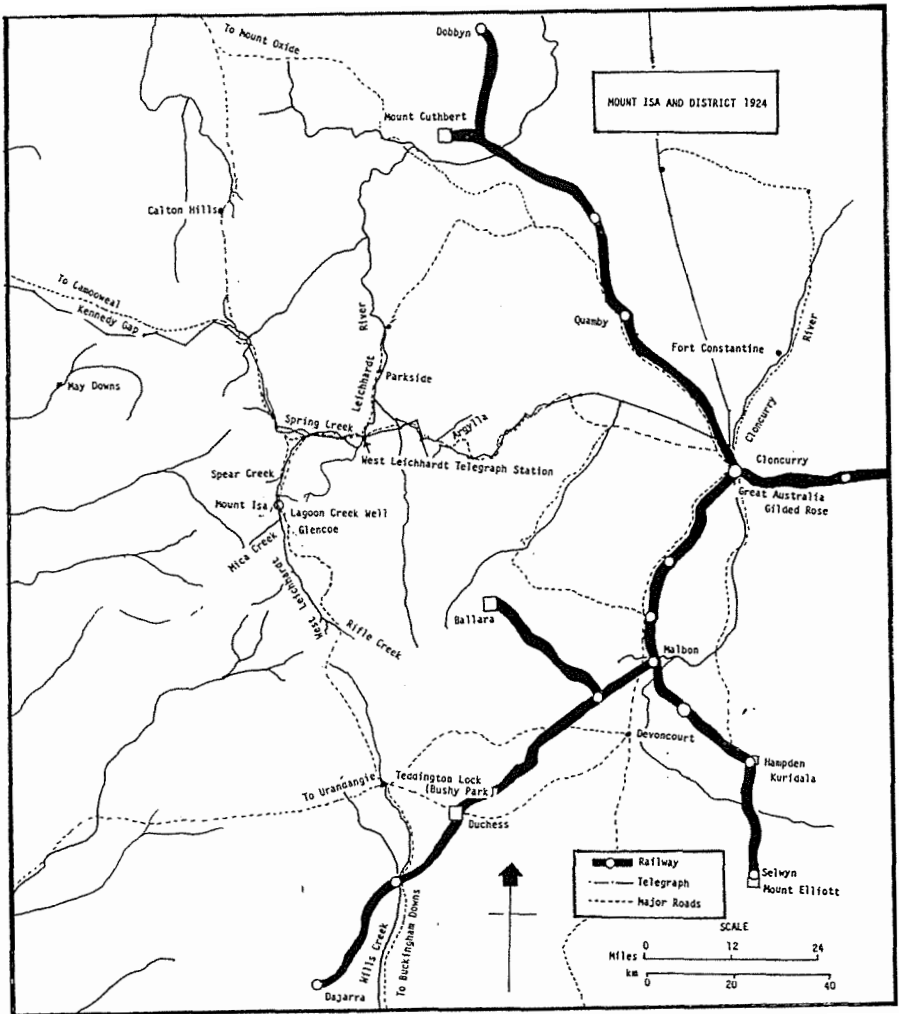
The independence, strength, pride and confidence in self which made Mount Isa a great place in which to live in those early days, has ensured this great mining City has a future.

Today Mount Isa is a much more sophisticated place than the mining town of its early days: buildings are modern; homes are more splendid; while an extensive variety of eating places and trend-setting Clubs have changed the habits of those early unruly inhabitants to a more relaxed appreciative community.

The spirit of Mount Isa has been transported all over Australia, and in many places Mount Isans meet regularly to revel in and share the memories of their past experience there. That same spirit and energy of the past has survived in spite of the challenges of the nineties, and the future of the City seems assured far into the next century.

The exuberant, cosmopolitan, brash, vigorous mining community of the past has become an ambitious, focused, diverse centre for the whole region.

Cr Ron McCullough
Mayor of Mount Isa



Mount Isa and District 1924.

Prologue

Here is the place... where people would prefer to live more than anywhere else....

Geoffrey Blainey, 1987

Mount Isa is the largest inland city in terms of population in north Australia. It is also one of the youngest cities, celebrating its 75th year in 1998. Situated on the west branch of the Leichhardt River, over 900 kilometres by rail from the east coast of Queensland, its location can only be described as remote. It exists because of the copper, silver, lead and zinc deposits mined there, with mineral reserves that should see its continued existence well into the twenty-first century.¹ Unlike Broken Hill, there is only one Company - Mount Isa Mines Limited - which has been a part of the town since 1924. While the relationship between Mount Isa Mines and the town was like parent and child in the past, the Company and city now coexist independently in this oasis of the outback.

Whichever way one approaches Mount Isa - by road, air or train - one can only be impressed by the distinctive landscape of weathered red hills. The vegetation on the hills is sparse, mainly of hardy spinifex, which contrasts with the gums along the bed of the Leichhardt. During the long summer, temperatures are often over 40°C. There is no denying that the area is dry: the annual average rainfall of only 370mm has a high evaporation rate; in some years the wet season does not come at all. The river is usually a dry bed of sand, with "islands" and waterholes dispersed along its course. Water filters through the sand as soaks, although in extremely dry years even these get close to depletion. With the coming of the wet season, the river can be transformed within hours into a raging torrent, carrying drowned animals and other debris north to converge with the East Leichhardt, and then to the Gulf of Carpentaria. The torrent subsides as quickly as it rises, leaving in its wake uprooted trees, damaged bridges and crossings, and a line of flotsam along the riverbank - evidence of a few hours of fury.

¹ Extensive copper reserves have been located at a depth of 1,500 metres.

In spite of what some might see as a hostile environment, Mount Isa's population is around 21,800.² There are some locals who have links with the city's first years and others who can trace their family's association back five or six generations. These include the Olsens, Beards, Smiths, Holleys, Kaesars, Boyds, Isaacsons, Gatherers, Evans, Campbells, and the Elys. Mount Isa grew up around these people and the mines: its very existence sustained by the physical and financial risks that the earliest settlers took during a time of great uncertainty about the mines' future and a world-wide depression. Today, Mount Isa comprises many people who do not have direct links with the difficult years of the 1920s and 1930s, and may not be aware of the city's history. Many will admit that they did not intend to stay. So often have I heard it said: "I came for only 2-3 years and that was... (20, 30 or 40) years ago!" Many have left but returned, as John Williamson's song says: "Here I am back at the Isa."³ Why do people stay, why do others come back, and why do others identify as Mount Isans after they leave?⁴ The reasons are numerous. For those with links with the 1920s and 1930s, the reason is mainly historical. Their families have been here for generations, and will probably stay for at least the life of the mines. For some, mining is the attraction: 20% of the population are employees of Mount Isa Mines Limited, and underground blasts which shake the buildings at the end of each shift, are a constant reminder that Mount Isa is built on a mine. One finds, however, that work is not the entire reason. Lifestyle and recreation are very important, and always have been, as much for camaraderie as for physical activity. The size of Mount Isa means that it is large enough to have good services and facilities - several schools, a modern hospital, and a choice of hotels and clubs. At the same time, it is small enough to develop strong community feeling, consolidated by its remoteness - a "good place to raise children."

Attitudes to climate are also significant. True the temperatures are high. However, as long as it remains dry, the heat is considered bearable, and for some, preferable to the humidity of the coast. Indeed, the acceptance of the vicissitudes of the climate is interesting. While air-conditioning has added considerably to the comfort of the office, the home or the car, its widespread

² The population was as high as 30,000 in 1973. The decline thereafter is linked with the collapse of the metal markets.

³ A popular song in Mount Isa during the late 1980s was John Williamson's, "Back at the Isa". J. Williamson, *Mallee Boy*, Annandale, 1986. [Sound recording]

⁴ Brisbane, Redcliffe, Maroochydore, and Buderim have significant ex-Mount Isa communities which meet regularly.

installation does not explain why people jog around the streets or the oval in 40°C heat! According to Geoffrey Blainey, there has been a conspicuous change in white Australians' preference in climate, and this has contributed to Mount Isa becoming the preferred home town of many people. Addressing an audience in Mount Isa, Blainey remarked:

Here is the place which quite clearly is becoming home, where people would prefer to live more than anywhere else; where old people's homes are being built; where people are retiring. This is a profound emotional change, it's almost a discovery, and that's something of which everybody in Mount Isa can be proud - to build up a distinctive looking town, in an environment which is hostile to European eyes, that's an achievement.⁵

The temperatures will always be high in summer and there will always be dry years. Thunderstorms still build up before the Wet, but the dust-storms - the "Bedourie Snowstorms" - are no longer as frequent nor of the same intensity, visible only as a reddish haze, although still accompanied by blasts of hot wind from the south or west. Trees, lawns, and sealed roads have tamed aspects of local climate.

This history attempts to describe how the community of Mount Isa developed over time. An integral part of this story is the experience of Isa's pioneers: the hardships they encountered and overcame. For the rise of Mount Isa was indeed a paradox, occurring as it did at a time of world-wide depression during the late 1920s and 1930s, and in the social dislocation of the war and post-war years. In this book, changes to living conditions, housing, education, health, and entertainment are described, as is the role of Mount Isa Mines in its employee welfare schemes, which were ultimately to bring about greater permanency of its workforce and of the inhabitants of the town itself. Mount Isa's history is not only a story of great adversity and perseverance, but also a story of spirit and camaraderie.

⁵ G. Blainey, "Writing Australia's History", *Fourth Norm Smith Memorial Lecture*, 5 May 1987.