

# Cairns history: a northern star is born

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An aerial view of Cairns taken in 1988.

In mid-July 1876, sub-collector of Customs Brinsley Guise Sheridan set out from Cardwell, sailed his sleek pilot cutter up the Queensland coast, rounded Cape Grafton and put in at a muddy, unprepossessing river-mouth. Mangrove creeks, an open stretch of forest country: was this really the ideal port site for the new goldfields of the mid-northern tablelands? His party came across a group of Yidinydji tribesmen cooking fish, “who ran away upon their approach”.

Just two weeks later a second expeditionary vessel set out from Townsville, commanded by the bank manager and speculator Leopold Ferdinand Sachs. This was the steamship *Porpoise*, rapid, well manned and well equipped, carrying a full crew, horses and even two journalists. Sachs anchored at a deep-water landing. A shore party, armed to the teeth, went scouting round: “Bogs to the right of us, swamps to the left of us, and the deeper we penetrated inland, the more confusing became the system and labyrinth of watered scrub and tea-tree swamps.” The men camped in a convenient clearing. All around them, they noticed, were long locks of shorn hair strewn on the sand: it was a Yidinydji graveyard and ceremonial site. In a tree-fork they found a pair of mummified bodies, one of which they stole.

Such were the first acts of foundation: the new settlement of Cairns was already taking shape. Momentum picked up fast. Ships rode at anchor in the bay, miners cut a track through from the high country, surveyors arrived, safe waterways were marked out, a

jetty planned. Soon 400 people were camped at the landing, and by early October a street of tents had sprung up. David Spence, the senior public official on hand, was upbeat, though he felt compelled to report to his superiors that “grog shacks were visible everywhere, filled constantly with the scum of Cooktown and the Hodgkinson”. It might not have been ideal, but it was certainly real: a new coastal township was growing apace in the far north.

Timothy Bottoms provides a sweeping, synoptic history of the city and its wider region, weaving together the experiences of settlers and Aboriginal peoples on the coast and in the ranges, sketching the development of agriculture, railways and harbours, the many triumphs and the counterbalancing reverses, the dreams and hopes and sorrows — all that went into the creation of a new society in the wet tropics. Gold, tin, sugar cane — the reinventions of the north came fast, as did the waves of incomers, Europeans and South Sea Islanders, Chinese and Japanese. Much of this past has vanished from the landscape, and from memory. For Bottoms, one of the chief tasks of the historian is to re-create the texture of lost experience, or, as his great professional exemplar Robert Darnton writes, to “uncover the human condition as it was experienced by our predecessors”.

This project began in the mid-1990s as a commissioned “city biography” for the first amalgamated Cairns Council but swiftly grew into something more complex, budding, bifurcating, embracing detailed studies of riverine ecology, the fine points of hydro-electric dam construction, canefield economics and the inner workings of the north Queensland ALP. It is a highly-coloured tale, all illustrative episodes and well-plucked quotes.

Within a year of the first settlement on Cairns harbour front there were 13 licensed retail spirit dealers, along with fledgling branch offices of the Queensland National Bank and the Bank of NSW. To compete with Port Douglas as the north’s great trading metropolis, a good route from the new township up the coast range was essential: the rough trails the packers used were not for the faint of heart.

The geologist-priest Julian Tenison-Woods went up in 1881 and left a record of the experience: “As we journeyed through the dark green wood the silence and solitude were very striking. About three miles from the river we met two Chinamen with the never-failing baskets and swing jog-trot. On the end of the carrying pole was hung a revolver. A mile or so further brought us within hearing of a packer’s stock-whip, and soon a long line of mules, with jingling bells and small packs of tin ore, were seen picking their way over the rocks and stones. The packer himself was a real specimen of that class of man peculiar to North Queensland. Trousers, shirt (once white), laced leather leggings, heavy boots, and ... Panama hat was the costume. In his hand a small stock-whip, in his mouth a wooden pipe, over the saddle-bow a well-used Schneider rifle were his accoutrements.”

To climb to the top of the first range took three hours. Coming down to the inland plateau was even worse: the way was winding, along a narrow ridge-track, a precipice on both sides. The heavy packhorse traffic had loosened the rock until it was knee-deep in dust and gravel, with “each step thus a sort of slip or slide, ploughing up the ground”.

Word of the new settlement and its lush soils and rich potential spread. In 1879 the Melbourne biscuit manufacturer Thomas Swallow paid a visit, with a view to establishing a large sugar plantation. He built a mansion for his family on the side of a steep hill. Colonial pioneers backed by investment capital followed in his wake, and they hired or imported armies of Chinese and Islander labourers to cut the cane. Cairns now had the beginnings of a moneyed middle class, “some with aspirations to gentry or colonial aristocracy”.

By 1883 the population was 1500. By 1890 it had risen to 7000, 60 per cent of it white, 13 per cent Islander and 23 per cent Chinese. Aboriginal families living in the region were not counted, but there was no such growth in their numbers. On the contrary, their traditional country was being expropriated and they were disappearing from the landscape. Many were gathered into special reserves; many set up in fringe camps around Cairns and the inland towns. Others met a different fate. An undeclared frontier conflict was in its last stages in the back country. Its shock troops were the native mounted police, who operated for a decade from a base camp beyond the Barron River falls. The struggle reached a climax in the mid-1880s: there were dispersals and massacres, all glossed over and well-veiled. In due course a kind of informal truce came into effect. Indigenous men and women were absorbed into the labour force and inexorably removed from their land. Hundreds were brought to the nearby Yarrabah Anglican mission, behind a wooded promontory and conveniently out of sight.

By the turn of the century Cairns was taking on the trappings of a modern Australian town. It had the telephone, and musical entertainment, and horseracing and travelling magic shows. There were seven grocers, nine drapers and 16 hotels. Three newspapers, two of them owned by politicians, flickered in and out of life, while a lush demimonde flourished in the back streets: Japanese geishas, Chinese opium and gambling dens. The settlers had become established and prosperous. Their workforce had also grown and organised itself, and union power began to gain in strength.

Unusual adaptations to the climate were sometimes necessary. There were lamps at each street intersection, and the official lamplighter went round each evening with a ladder to fill the lamps, clean the glasses and light them; during the wet season he was sometimes knee-deep in water on his rounds. Class divisions were strictly enforced: at the dances held in Cairns hospital, a rope was stretched across the midpoint of the ballroom to keep grocers and farmers and their wives well away from couples drawn from the higher orders — the doctors, the mill managers and the kings and queens of the pastoral world.

Tourism was already a niche business, with potential. Visitors who made the trek north would pay 30 shillings a week for board and lodging in a good hotel. The beachcomber and writer EJ Banfield caught the spirit of the place and time well: “The tourist may still drive through gaslit streets to finely appointed hotels and go to sleep amid the melancholy wail of the curlews mingling with the click of billiard balls in the rooms below.”

All seemed well set, but in the first years of the 20th century the inherent drawbacks of life in the tropics hit hard. There were six strong cyclones in the space of 20 years, and they caused havoc in the canefields and the market gardens. Trachoma was still relatively common, as was hookworm — one city street was nicknamed Ancylostoma Alley,



commercial development. An international airport terminal and a grand casino complex were built. The Great Barrier Reef and wet tropics received World Heritage listings. At last the sleepy sugar town had become a Pacific city, a cosmopolitan tourist hub — the effective capital of the north.

Such, in essence, were the grand, climactic lines of the narrative that Bottoms completed, after long archival researches, more than a decade ago, and presented to Cairns City Council, which, appalled by the dark detail of the history, relinquished all rights to publish. The work has continued to evolve; it now comes with a chronology of events and influences, while a lengthy “academic philosophical” introduction is carried on a supplementary website together with companion videos. And here the whole leviathan is, up to date, complete with its wondrous freight of footnotes, and between hard covers at last, thanks to local support that tells us much about Cairns’s character and community spirit.

The book’s printing was backed by the philanthropist and arts patron Paul Matthews. An appreciative context-setting note from the father of northern history, Henry Reynolds, is followed by a preface from Rob Pyne, the local state MP, whose forebear James Pyne was plying the local waters between Cooktown and Cairns in 1876, and donated land for the first Cairns Central School. “One of the reasons why I supported Dr Bottoms’ work,” Pyne writes, “is that it is so important that we don’t forget where we come from and that we don’t repeat the mistakes of the past.” That past, entire, with its remembered and half-forgotten threads, has now been braided back together, blended into “the tapestry that is Cairns history” — a vivid weave.

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## **Cairns: City of the South Pacific — A History**

By Timothy Bottoms

Bunu Bunu Press, 608pp, \$49.95 (available online at [cairnshistory.com.au](http://cairnshistory.com.au)).