

SOME EARLY ILLUSIONS CONCERNING NORTH QUEENSLAND

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*We would rather be ruined than changed
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die*

W.H. Auden

Our assessment of any landscape results as much from how we view it, as from the reality of what is actually there. As Brookfield said "decision makers operating in an environment base their decisions on the environment as they perceive it, not as it is".¹

The Europeans who explored tropical Queensland entered an unknown land which they were required to examine and then offer an assessment of its potential. Since the environment confronted the explorers with a situation of complete uncertainty, a subjective error component was inevitable in their description and analysis, but in fact their reaction to the new environment was affected by what they wanted to see, or thought they saw, as much as by what was actually there.

The image of new country recounted by each explorer resulted largely from his response to visual stimuli in the new environment. Since observation and interpretation are enhanced by some degree of familiarity, a history of prior exploration in the south might be expected to improve the performance of explorers in the Tropics, but this was no criterion for an objective appraisal of the new areas.

After three successful journeys of exploration in southern states, the Surveyor-General Major (later Sir) Thomas Mitchell concluded his trip to central Queensland with a spectacular blunder; Edmund Kennedy had a background of inland journeys, but died in a disastrous attempt on Cape York. On the other hand, one of the most impressive journeys in the history of Australian exploration was led by Ludwig Leichhardt, a frail Prussian naturalist with no previous experience of "the bush", although he too perished on his second venture.

When the accounts of the explorers' journeys were published as private journals or in government papers, they met with an avid audience of readers in southern cities and overseas. Although each account purported to present a true and objective appraisal of the new environment, it was in fact that explorer's conception, or mental image of that environment. In the translation from the real environment in north Queensland to the printed page in Melbourne, distortion was inevitable: the explorer's perception must itself be a gross simplification of reality; from this perception, he then constructed a conceptual version of reality, or image, in his own mind; this had to then be expressed through the medium of language in a form

meaningful to its recipients. Finally the terms he employed could well have semantic and other connotations which evoked a different set of concepts in the mind of a reader.

The settlement of northern Australia could be viewed in the terms of the 'behavioural matrix' developed by Pred.² The decision to move north depended on the quantity and quality of information available (ranging from none to the theoretical perfect knowledge), together with the person's ability to use that knowledge (ranging from total inability, or rejection, to complete aptitude). In north Queensland, the quantity of information increased with each new journey, but the quality was variable, while much available information was ignored or rejected if it conflicted with predetermined mental images.

The history of the exploration and settlement of tropical Queensland thus demonstrates clearly the contrast between simple exploration and the emotional involvement of goal-directed exploration.

The explorers of the north frequently sought land for development, which, at that time, meant pastoral development and their reports praised unequivocally the new pastures, grasses and soils. Several of the explorers were themselves pastoralists. In contrast, Leichhardt's goal was the northern coast, and his recorded views on land quality are not as extravagant in their praise as those of the former group. Mitchell sought, and believed he found, a great river flowing to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

After the pastoral lands were taken up with incredible rapidity in the 1860's, and the harsh realities of many locations were manifested, the emphasis of exploration shifted to gold, which was almost immediately found in payable quantities. The goldfields were all situated inland and the next step was exploration for suitable ports.

The Queensland Government, fully aware of the transitory nature of settlements based on alluvial gold, encouraged exploration seeking suitable agricultural land in the tropics, which was soon found in the 1870's. Thus a number of explorers visited the same particular area and each gave a quite different assessment of its place utility, depending largely on the purpose and nature of their journey. Some specific cases of this goal orientation will now be examined.

THE GULF LANDS

It is possible that the Portuguese visited this area in the sixteenth century, but the first substantiated discovery of the continent of Australia by Europeans was the visit to the eastern shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria of the Dutch ship "Duyfken" in 1606 under the command of Captain William Jansz.³ The Dutch sought gold, and other metals, valuable timbers, spices, or, failing all else, a nation with whom they could trade. They found none of these in Australia. When Jansz sent a party ashore to investigate, several men lost their lives in a native attack. Jansz recorded "that there was much land for the most part waste", and there was no further interest in this unpromising area until 1623, when the Dutch East India Company dispatched the "Arnhem" and "Pera" commanded by Jan Carstenz to investigate further. He reported that:

The land from 13° to 17°8' is a dry and poor district, without any fruit trees or what men could derive benefit from; it is low and uniform without hills or heights, wooded in various places with undergrowth and brush; with little fresh water.⁴

His conclusion was a deterrent to further Dutch interest: "in our judgement this is the most arid and barren region that could be found anywhere on earth".

As early as 1606, a few months after Jansz's voyage, the Spaniard Luis Vaes de Torres had discovered a strait between New Guinea and Australia, but later voyagers seemed unaware of his discovery, until finally Abel Tasman was sent out in 1644 with three ships to determine whether such a strait existed and to explore the Southland again. He failed to find the passage, then revisited the eastern Gulf and was the first to explore the south coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, which however revealed "nothing advantageous".

In addition, the Dutch had received very unfavourable reports about the arid north-west coast, reinforcing the impression that the whole south land was of no commercial value. Tasman's voyage thus effectively marked the end of Dutch interest in Australia,⁵ and over a century elapsed before the more favoured east coast of the continent was discovered and claimed for Britain by Captain James Cook, and the subsequent history of the Gulf is one of British development.

The next navigator to visit the Gulf was Matthew Flinders in the "Investigator" who remained from November 1802 to March 1803, charting the area and repairing his vessel. Unlike the Dutch, Flinders was not seeking avenues for trade or valuable crops or metals, but was instead highly pleased with the fine natural harbour and water supply at Investigator Road (Sweers Island). When he finally left the Gulf, he wrote

It was not without much regret that I quitted the coast; both from its numerous harbours, and better soil, and its greater proximity to our Indian possessions having made it become daily more interesting.⁶

The charting of the Gulf waters was continued by Captain P.P. King in the "Mermaid" in 1820, and sustained British interest in Northern Australia was demonstrated by the establishment of settlements at Melville Island in 1824 and at Raffles Bay in 1829. This interest increased further as proposals were made for a telegraph line linking Australia through Timor and Java to Britain. When Captain Wickham was in Rockingham Bay with the "Beagle" in 1839, his second in command, John Lort Stokes predicted that large rivers and "fertile and valuable" land lay behind the ranges and around the Gulf of Carpentaria. On Wickham's retirement in 1841, Stokes took command and in June of that year he visited the area at the south of the Gulf where he saw;

A vast boundless plain... here and there dotted over with woodland isles. The soil was a light coloured mould of great depth, without a particle of stone.⁷

Stokes was so impressed with what he saw that he named the area "Plains of Promise".

Stokes' voyage marked the end of the great sea explorations of Northern

Australia; the outline of the continent was complete. Of more interest here is his report on the lands he 'discovered', marking a complete revolution in opinion from the negative evaluations of the Dutch to his most optimistic visions for the future of the area, where

even in these deserted plains, equally wanting in the redundance of animal, as in the luxuriance of vegetable life, I could discover the rudiments of future prosperity, and ample justification of the name which I bestowed upon them. I could not refrain from breathing a prayer that ere long the now level horizon would be broken by a succession of tapering spires rising from the many Christian hamlets that ultimately stud this country.⁸

The overland journey of the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt in 1844 next served to draw attention to the potential of the Gulf area. He thought the southern lands around the Gulf were "excellent country, available almost in its whole extent for pastoral purposes".⁹

Leichhardt's journey was of an exploratory nature; he sought no specific mineral or pastoral area. He intended to show that a route could be found from the south to the northernmost parts of the continent, and in thus doing, to gain a measure of personal fame. Although his exploits were widely admired, his reports did not attract any immediate development of the north.

In 1848, two expeditions set out to ultimate disaster in north Queensland, Kennedy in the rugged hills of eastern Cape York, and Leichhardt somewhere in western Queensland, as he attempted to cross the continent from east to west. Optimism about these new north Queensland regions ran high in Britain, as in the southern cities, and speculation about the future prospects of the north loomed large in the popular imagination. One of the extravagant plans was that of Trelawny Saunders, who suggested that the Gulf would become the "Asiatic Mediterranean" following the establishment of the city of Port Flinders, as a centre of trade and commerce, and an outlet for the agricultural and pastoral produce of the rich Plains, as well as linking the Port to Sydney by road and by telegraph to Britain.¹⁰

This plan never reached fruition, and the abandonment of Port Essington in 1849 was a setback in terms of northern development; thoughts soon turned to the riches offered by the southern goldfields from 1851. The northern parts of Queensland were too remote, even for pastoralists, at this time. Heightened public interest in the north, together with the unsuccessful outcome of the Leichhardt and Kennedy expeditions, led the British Government to authorise an expedition, under the command of A.C. Gregory, to investigate thoroughly the potential of the north. Of all the explorers, Gregory seems today to have been the most realistic in his assessment of lands he explored. He had previous experience in seeking pastoral lands in Western Australia and it is interesting to note his comments on both the Plains of Promise and later on the Barcoo (Victoria river) areas (see below). In mid-August, 1856, he reported of the former:

It is possible that some small tracts of available country may exist between our track and the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria, but to the

south there is little to expect besides a barren sandy desert, as on every occasion that the tableland has been ascended, nothing but sandy worthless country has been encountered.¹¹

He found the country on the Leichhardt River "inferior" and described it as "a level country of very bad quality" where "the common flies are very troublesome".

Still the conflict between observation and myth resulted in illusion being preferred to reality. Watson has described the similar persistence of myth and illusion in the exploration of north America.¹² Although northern Australia was not settled until the latter half of the nineteenth century, when communications and technology were relatively developed, the persistence of illusion has been remarkable. Men's notions about the environment have affected the subsequent course of events as much as the environment itself.

After the Gregory expedition, several other explorers were moved to praise the Gulf lands. Nearing the Gulf in January 1860, Wills found the country of "the most verdant and cheerful aspect; abundance of feed and water everywhere", although he found the weather "Most oppressively hot and sultry".¹³ Three of the Burke and Wills search parties also traversed the Gulf lands, the first led by William Landsborough who, in a speech in Melbourne on his return said:

I hope flocks and herds will soon follow, so that the fine pastures of Carpentaria, instead of lying waste, will soon become profitable, not only to Australia, but to the whole world.¹⁴

Landsborough's second in command was George Bourne, who also praised the Gulf:

When we came here in October, though water lay on the ground, the grass was dry and parched. The grass is now very green and long.

It is, no doubt, a fine country about here and well suited to horses, sheep and cattle,¹⁵

although he warned that stock might be carried away by floods.

The expedition led by Frederick Walker also passed through the Gulf lands and he reported that the Gulf was "very good pastoral country, but I fear too hot for sheep".¹⁶ Similarly, John McKinlay, who set out from Adelaide, reported of the southern Gulf lands:

If these lagoons are permanent, this is a splendid pastoral country—feed good enough for any stock, and timber to suit almost any purpose.¹⁷

But even among the pastoralists, men who knew stock and could evaluate grazing potential, we find the same examples of misplaced optimism. When J.G. MacDonald explored the lower Leichhardt River in September, 1864, he found "fine, rich, undulating plains, being some of the finest sheep country I have seen in Queensland",¹⁸ while Corfield described a contemporary journey in different terms:

We had to cross the 'Plains of Promise'. These consisted at an uninterrupted run of about thirty miles of devil-devil country. It was a succession of small gutters and mounds.¹⁹

A major source of errors in judgment was the climatic regime which prevails

in northern Australia. Rainfall is markedly seasonal, and concentrated in the summer months. Thus, an explorer who viewed the luxuriant pastures in May could not know that the grass would be dry and unpalatable by September. As well as this extreme seasonal variation, the reliability of rainfall could only be appreciated through actual experience. After five years of average seasons, heavy rains in 1870 caused disastrous flooding throughout these low-lying areas. On the other hand, a few years of below average rainfall could lead to hardship, although even the "Great Drought" of 1899-1902 was less severe in the Gulf than in other parts of pastoral Queensland.²⁰ A recent study has shown that while rainfall variability has declined markedly in the Gulf, mean rainfall has decreased slightly.²¹ Such hindsight and the use of statistical techniques allow us to perceive the environment differently from the early settlers.

When Captain Pennefather explored the Gulf waters in 1880, he continued to praise the "magnificent open plain, well-grassed, extending for some miles, beyond which open forest country was visible."²² A decade of settlement had revealed the inherent problems of isolation, but he also warned that the numerous alligators would endanger Gulf settlements "until at least civilization and traffic should have reduced their numbers, as has been the case at Townsville, Mackay and Rockhampton".

The early hostilities between Dutch and aborigines in the Gulf seemed to cease. Only Leichhardt lost a member of his party (Gilbert) in a native attack. Possibly the later peripatetic explorers represented no threat to the natives. As more people and animals came to settle the area however, Pennefather commented realistically that "the blacks are exceedingly numerous, (and) must be reckoned a source of great danger and annoyance to the settler".

THE CENTRAL WEST

A good example of how goal-seeking behaviour led to errors in perception is provided by the final trip of Sir Thomas Mitchell to Central Queensland in 1846. His expedition was financed by the Government and its stated aim was to find a large river providing an overland route to the Gulf, where a port for trade with India might be established. The Australian experience of inland exploration provides a contrast to the American experience, where the early settlers believed that a great desert lay to the west, until the discovery of the Mississippi system changed their opinion, and the west was then conceived of as the Garden of the World.²³ In Australia, the earliest settlers believed that rich land and great rivers lay to the west. Even after Sturt demonstrated that the Murray flowed south, there was still every expectation that a great river to the north would be found. As soon as this mental image was proven false by later explorers' discoveries, a search began for a new reality to fit the old image. So Maslen's map, drawn in 1827, showed "The Great River or the Desired Blessing" flowing through what is now central Queensland, Northern Territory, to enter the Indian Ocean near King Sound.²⁴ The mental image was not abandoned but re-located further north, in an area of greater uncertainty.

Mitchell set out in 1846, still seeking the great river. Although he was

Surveyor-General, and this was his fourth, and last, Journey of inland exploration, there seems to have been some doubt about his ability as a leader. Today the colloquialism "to Major Mitchell" is used to refer to his blundering methods of exploration.²⁵ His party examined the Belyando and Suttor in turn, but these proved not what they sought; the Nive seemed a good prospect and was traced until it turned south; finally they came to a new river and Mitchell had "found, at last, the realization of my long cherished hopes, an interior river falling to the north-west". Mitchell traced the river a short distance to a point where it ran nearly due north, then returned, giving it the name Victoria, and describing the area as "the finest I had ever seen in Australia".²⁶

Again the desired goal was thought to have been found, but the Victoria was to prove as great a disappointment as the "Plains of Promise", through which it was supposed to flow. The following year, Mitchell's second in command, Edmund Kennedy, was sent to trace the river. He found that it flowed south-west and lost itself in the desert previously found by Sturt.

Mitchell led the best equipped of any expedition, laden with equipment and supplies, burdened by a large number of livestock for consumption, and even dragging two iron boats, into the arid central west. His behaviour in failing to follow the Victoria was excused by the necessity to turn back before supplies for his large equipage were exhausted. A different school of thought concerning the outfitting and provisioning of exploring parties preferred, conversely, to carry a minimum of gear, and to live off the land. While equipment to meet every foreseeable contingency seemed a safe and prudent measure when embarking into new territory, such equipment impeded progress. Its abandonment to enable faster travelling had the inherent dangers of hunger and privations. Kennedy's failure has been attributed partly to delays occasioned by excessive gear and stock, but Leichhardt was censured by his men for insufficient rations. Gregory and Landsborough also preferred a light equipage, while the ultimate example was set by the almost legendary Christy Palmerston, who crossed the rain-forested coastal ranges barefoot and unclothed, carrying only a rifle.

While ease of traverse had some influence on terrain evaluation, high quality pastoral land demanded not only level plains, but a good grass cover and an assured water supply. As in the Gulf, it was Gregory who warned of over-enthusiastic appraisal. In 1857, Gregory set out on an expedition in search of Leichhardt (or traces of his fate), and by April 1858 he reported: "The rich vegetation on the open downs, which had excited the admiration of Sir T. Mitchell on his discovery of the country in a favourable season had wholly passed away, leaving little but a bare surface of clay, the deep fissures in its surface giving evidence of long-continued drought".²⁷

On reaching the Thompson River shortly afterwards, Gregory commented: "Nothing could be more desolate than the aspect of the country... the desert character all around".

The major difference again between Gregory and Mitchell (or between Gregory and Stokes) was that Gregory was seeking no goal. Nevertheless, Gregory's discouraging reports were soon eclipsed by the remarkable fame

of the tragic Burke and Wills expedition and of its subsequent search parties. By 1860, the excitement of southern gold had waned and governments desired expansion and permanent settlement, so a Select Committee was appointed to enquire into "The Formation of A Settlement on the South-eastern shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria". The Burke and Wills expedition was sent out under the auspices of the Royal Society of Victoria, with the aim, once again, of finding a practicable inland route to the Gulf. Wills led a small party almost to the Gulf, and as surface waters dried rapidly, they struggled back to Cooper's Creek, where they would ultimately perish: yet even in his last despatch on April 6th, 1861, Burke maintained:

"We have discovered a practicable route to Carpentaria, the chief portion of which lies on the 140th deg. of e. longitude. There is some good country between this and the Stony Desert. From there to the Tropics the country is dry and stony. Between the Tropics and Carpentaria a considerable portion is rangy, but it is well watered and richly grassed".²⁸

It was the search parties for the Burke and Wills expedition which really opened huge unknown areas of central Queensland. Undoubtedly the most publicised of these was that led by William Landsborough, who enthusiastically praised not only the Gulf Plains, but also the central Queensland area, although he was later censured for failing to follow the Burke and Wills tracks, and exploring instead the area where, in partnership with Nat Buchanan, he held a lease called "Bowen Downs".

In central Queensland, Bourne too was impressed. "On reaching the Barcoo, or Central Victoria, his (the squatter's) trials will be quite at an end" but he added a warning note: "The uncertainty of rainfall will always be a great drawback to this part of the country, otherwise very rich".²⁹

Walker also found the central west "splendid sheep country".³⁰

The land rush of the 1860's resembled the later Queensland gold rushes, in that each new area was vaunted as the richest and best yet discovered. Oscar de Satge, one of the first pastoralists at Peak Downs recalled:

Reports came in before 1866 that neither the Darling Downs nor the Peak Downs, good as they might be thought to be, were a patch on the Barcoo; but its early settlers had to fight against long carriage and high wages, to say nothing of finance difficulties.³¹

The drought hazard, which should have been apparent at least from Gregory's reports, caused losses to pastoralists before the end of the 1860's, and water shortage remained a persistent threat. Yet as late as 1897, the author of a "Guide to Queensland" wrote:

The natural supply of water in the Colony generally is not, however, nearly as scanty as has been popularly supposed. In addition to the noble streams which traverse many of the pastoral properties, there are numbers of lakes—some more or less salt—which will become generally known and utilized as close settlement takes the place of unwieldy and oftentimes unprofitable cattle-runs.³²

Even at present, there is a widespread reluctance to accept or admit to the arid nature of inland Queensland. A 'good' rainfall year is one of well-above-average rainfall, while the 'bad' years are those of merely average

(i.e. low) rainfall. This syndrome is common to American wheat farmers, as well as Australian graziers.³³ The emotive power of drought is realized and actively promoted by the media. The year 1956 brought the highest recorded rainfalls in a century to parts of the central west, followed by a period of widespread and unprecedented flooding. Yet residents of those areas remember that as a 'good' year, and a large newspaper headlined an article last year "since 1956, the outback of northern Queensland has been drying up".³⁴

PEAK DOWNS

When Leichhardt discovered and named the Peak Range area, he wrote: "This would be a most beautiful country, if it contained a constant supply of water".³⁵ His views were echoed in the appraisal later given by Gregory: "If this part of the country were well supplied with water it would form splendid stations for the squatter; but from its level character and geological structure, permanent surface water is very scarce".³⁶

Yet the area was eagerly taken up in the early 1860's. Three possible explanations are given by the pioneer pastoralist Oscar de Satge for the ignoring of explorers' words: firstly, "there is a Kind of 'greed of country' that comes over the pioneer"; secondly, his first view of the area, "this vast stretch of open land, clothed with the richest herbage and grasses" was just after a period of "abundant and unusual rains"; but the third and most important explanation was found in his admission that he saw the land with "dreams of future success and its accompanying fortune".³⁷ He later disclosed that the country never again appeared in such splendid condition as when he first saw it.

The British Foods Corporation's subdivision of the Peak Downs area for intensive grain farming in the late 1940's was yet another example of illusion in the perception of economic and physical environments.

GOLD

Although it was the explorers' expeditions which aroused great interest in the new areas, there had been, prior to 1861, a small but steady infiltration of tropical Queensland by pastoralists looking for new holdings. The first pastoralists in tropical Queensland were the Archers who established the famous "Gracemere" near Rockhampton. The year 1859 marked a number of successful searches for new pastoral land; Landsborough travelled as far as Aramac Creek; J. G. MacDonald was on the Belyando; G. E. Dalrymple travelled the Burdekin area on behalf of a syndicate of Sydney squatters and reported it was "capable of becoming one of the finest and largest pastoral and agricultural regions of Australia",³⁸ echoing the words of Leichhardt fifteen years earlier: "water, grass' hills, mountains, plains, forest land; all the elements of a fine pasturing country were here united".³⁹

All the new pastoral areas were taken up with almost incredible speed in the 1860's, as we have shown. It was not until the 1870's that the harsh realities of many new areas really manifested themselves to the new settlers. In the Gulf, fever decimated the small population; sheep did poorly

in the heat and on rank grasses; remoteness and high costs made wool growing uneconomic; and the floods of 1870 were devastating.⁴⁰ In the central west, six years of drought were interrupted by a year of floods in 1864; remoteness and transport costs were likewise a problem; while wool prices fell sharply throughout the period. The emphasis in exploration shifted to the search for gold.

As with the pastoral lands, what was sought was soon found. The remarkable geologist Richard Daintree, part owner and manager of "Maryvale" from 1864 to 1868, had already discovered the Cape River, Etheridge and Gilbert River fields but refrained from publicising them.⁴¹ Still the elusive metal attracted droves of itinerant prospectors to the Gilbert, as soon as news leaked out. Extravagant reports were circulated, despite Daintree's warning that the field was suited only to reeving.

When William Hann travelled north in 1872, he found only "second rate pastoral country" and was not encouraging about the "traces of gold" along the Palmer River. He concluded his report "that which did not exist could not be found".⁴² Yet on this slender chance James Venture Mulligan opened up the chaotic Palmer field in 1873, where rich alluvial gold was found.

The environmental requirements for pastoralists were water, level country and grass; but during the gold rushes the presence of the mineral over-rode all considerations of practical reason. Lack of water, shortage of supplies, and hostilities with natives were no deterrent to thousands who travelled the tracks to the new goldfields, spurred by the falsest but most enduring illusion of all, the easy acquisition of riches. Most of the rushes were transitory, and no real development occurred, with the exception of Charters Towers, which has maintained a reasonable size to the present day, largely because it services a rich pastoral area.

AGRICULTURE

The Queensland Government, aware that the ephemeral lure of gold was no means to ensure permanent northern settlement, explored the suitability of lands for tropical crops.

In 1873, G. E. Dalrymple led the North East Coast Expedition, an exploring party travelling by boat, whose chief aims were to investigate all river mouths seeking suitable ports and to assess the value of soils for agriculture. He was enthusiastic about a number of rivers, large tracts of rich soil and good pasture lands. He had his own (mis)-conception of true tropical Queensland as "dense, scrubs or rather jungles . . . and a development of vegetation thoroughly oriental in character and unlike any other in the Australian colonies". The lands seemed to him ideal for growing coffee. Exploring the Johnstone River, Dalrymple declared:

At a rough computation, not less than half a million acres of a soil unsurpassed by any in the world—all fitted for tropical agriculture and fully 300,000 acres of which are suitable for sugar—spread far around us, penetrated in three different directions by navigable rivers, with a fine harbour and river estuary visible on its sea-board. We had suddenly come face to face with a true tropical Australia—with a vast and hitherto hidden region, the qualifications of which for every description of

tropical cultivation at one stroke place our noble colony not only far beyond all Australian competition as an agricultural country, but—the vexed labour question settled—on a par with older tropical countries, the names and products of which are household words.⁴³

The image of northern agriculture encompassed lush plantations, worked by happy, docile, imported 'kanakas'. Although the fertile soil, high temperature and heavy rainfall are unequivocal, the only type of agriculture presently viable is sugar cane farming on a small-holder basis. Even though highly mechanised, the sugar industry has at times been subsidised by a high home support price.

Dalrymple later estimated that 40–50,000 acres of agricultural land were to be found on the Mulgrave and Russel rivers, and, in keeping with the other image of the time, he mentioned "the more than probability of discovery of good auriferous country behind it in the interior".

CLIMATE

The previous examples serve to demonstrate how the optimistic initial appraisal of a new area was coloured by illusion, and a perceived environment differed from reality. The situation was further compounded by the extreme seasonality of northern rainfall; the landscape quality itself could vary greatly from one season to another, and in the more arid regions, the unreliability of the rainfall was not accepted for many years.⁴⁴ In the same way as terrain evaluation was variable, so an explorer's reaction to hot weather or to insects was also dependent on his personal tolerance of discomfort, and might be conditioned by factors such as age, length of residence in Australia, extent of bush experience and state of health, which was usually not good, owing to inadequate diet and harsh conditions. Thus Bourne found flies so troublesome he was compelled to make canvas and netting goggles for his eyes,⁴⁵ and Gregory found "the common flies were very troublesome" on the Lachlan River, in September, 1856.⁴⁶

Some explorers, such as Mitchell, carefully recorded temperatures each day, and Flinders noted that the constant sea breezes at Sweers Island kept temperatures on board at 81 to 90°F (20–32°C). Others gave only a personal judgment of the ambient conditions. In June 1844 in the Gulf area, Leichhardt remarked on the good state of health enjoyed by his party despite their privations, attributing this largely to the current weather conditions: "The mornings and evenings are very beautiful, and are surpassed by no climate I have ever lived in".⁴⁷

Wills found February weather "most oppressively hot and sultry". Bourne wrote that April nights were cold but days very pleasant, while McKinlay in the same month wrote that evenings, nights and mornings were beautifully cool and the days were "quite hot enough". Walker was perhaps the first to suggest the Gulf was "too hot for sheep", although his words were ignored by many early pastoralists. Cold temperatures seem to have been tolerated better than heat or humidity, which is still the case today. Mitchell in August 1846 on the Suttor River found "the weather was most pleasant, temperate, and Englishlike, though we were still within the tropics".⁴⁸

The chief environmental concern of explorers however, was not with temperatures, nor directly with rainfall, but with the finding of fresh water for each day's campsite. Land explorers, provided the requisite water supply was at hand, usually camped in the open air, since the climate was so mild, and in any case bodily (thermal) discomfort was always out-weighed by economic and material considerations. De Satge wrote in the 1870's "If the summers were hot the winters were delightful, and as everything was progressing and the returns good, a man felt in good heart with himself".^{4,9}

Inevitably, there is a time lag between the birth of the truth and the death of an illusion. The current mental image of north Queensland, which is propagated by the tourist bureaux, combines palmy beaches with a backdrop of lush forested hills. The illusion lives. There is no place in this panorama for the discomfort of searing heat, the danger of shark-infested waters or the shocking roads.

In the early days of this century Griffith Taylor was publicly censured when he pointed out that much of northern Australia was useless and incapable of agricultural development.^{5,0} Northern development is still an emotive political platform, although economists have clearly demonstrated the negative aspects of investing scarce capital to grow crops in the tropics which can be grown more cheaply in southern Australia.^{5,1}

Yet even for residents of the north, the mental image of the environment is out of focus with reality, and is at best an illusion-based adjustment to the real world. These illusory perceptions may be vested with individual hopes, or with preconceived ideas, and are no doubt just as selective and goal motivated as the perceptions of the early explorers.

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