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THE WRITING OF NORTH QUEENSLAND HISTORY

This paper does not pretend to be exhaustive, or even particularly thorough, in its discussion of works on the history of North Queensland. It is simply a brief survey of some of the major contributions to the topic, with an attempt to identify some of the themes evident in those works.

The first decades of European exploration and settlement in this region produced a number of works which, while not histories in the modern sense, require mention as the earliest substantial accounts of events in North Queensland, and the starting point for historians of the region today. The maritime explorers, Cook, Flinders, King, left broad accounts of topography and natural history, and were followed by the smaller-scale surveyors and hydrographers: Stokes, Stanley, McGillivray, Blackwood; many of whose journals were published. These later voyages are of greater interest, both in being more detailed, and in complementing the early attempts at inland exploration and coastal settlement.

The land explorers, especially Leichhardt and Gregory, left journals that were widely read, for they preceded the first wave of pastoralists who spread outward from Port Denison after 1861. Leichhardt's journal, published in 1847, must have been in nearly every saddle-bag as the flocks of sheep followed his tracks to the Burdekin valley, then on to the Lynd and the Flinders. Kennedy's disastrous expedition of 1848 fortunately left the journal of Carron, the botanist. Leichhardt's botanist, Gilbert, also kept a detailed journal of the 1844-45 expedition until his death on Cape York Peninsula, but it was never published, possibly because it paints a less flattering picture of his leader's capabilities than does Leichhardt's own account.

With pastoral settlement, followed within a few years by

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mineral discoveries, the first more comprehensive accounts of human activity were written. The most authentic and historically useful of these remained largely unknown until recent years: Rachel Henning's letters, for example, not published until the 1950s. The letters of Charles Bowly and the diary of Arthur Neame, an early planter on the lower Herbert, have become available only in the last decade. A wealth of such material probably still awaits discovery and publication.

The accounts published at the time, the travelogues and reminiscences of the early years, are of value in providing first-hand evidence of every day life, free from the influence of the later myth-makers and the historian's preoccupation with what is going to happen next. Allen's *A Visit to Queensland and her Goldfields*, Eden's *My Wife and I in Queensland*, Carrington's *Colonial Adventures and Experiences by a University Man*, and Weitemeyer's *Missing Friends* all describe North Queensland in the 1860s and 70s with a clarity which can never be equalled by the most diligent researcher.

Alongside the genre of first-hand reminiscence, and sometimes disguised to resemble it, arose the didactic literary tradition devoted to promoting North Queensland's attractions. Commencing with overt immigrant's handbooks such as Earl's *Handbook for Colonists in Tropical Australia*, and Daintree's *Queensland, Australia*, the tradition influenced reminiscences such as Kennedy's *Four Years in Queensland* and Thorne's *Queen of the Colonies* into resembling tracts as much as memoirs.

Toward the turn of the century, the promoters poured forth a deluge of works designed to lure the immigrant and the investor. Traill's *A Queenly Colony*, Lees' *Goldfields of Queensland*, and Marsland's *Charters Towers Gold Mines*, are simply investment prospectuses. Morrison's *Aldine History of Queensland* and the *North Queensland Register's Mining History of Charters Towers* are not histories at all, but thinly-disguised business directories.

When the first works on North Queensland's history were written in the late nineteenth century, they were influenced by these existing traditions in writing on the region, and by advantage of retrospection in surveying the events of the preceding

three decades. Their writers no longer thought of North Queensland as a southern extension of the East Indies and Melanesia, as had earlier writers such as Earl, but as a remote outpost of south-eastern Australia, populated by Europeans diffusing outward from Sydney. These writings were firmly within the Whig tradition of interpreting the past as an orderly progression of events toward the achievements of the present: of identifying the antecedents of the triumph they saw around them. Thus in the euphoria of economic prosperity, the turn of the century, Queen Victoria's Jubilee and the coming of Federation, there arose the cult of the pioneer.

A new genre developed, specifically devoted to identifying the founders of North Queensland. Cunningham's *Pioneering of the River Burdekin*, Bartley's *Australian Pioneers and Reminiscences*, the anonymous *Queensland – a Narrative of the Past: together with Biographies of the leading men* were followed for decades by works such as Fox's monumental *History of Queensland*, which is in fact a selective directory of pastoral families, and Black's *North Queensland Pioneers*. Bennett's *Christison of Lammermoor* falls within the genre, but as a far better-written and more authoritative example than those just named. Such works have a legitimate and indeed important place in the writing of North Queensland history, but as they became accepted as the mainstream of historical writing on the region, they began to do damage to the historical record, not by what they said, but by what they left unsaid.

Because North Queensland had by the early twentieth century developed a prosperous male-dominated European society, those who wrote of the past in an attempt to explain their present stressed only those things which had conspicuously contributed to that present. In other words, the subject matter of North Queensland history became the activities of successful European males. The roles of European women, of Chinese, Aborigines, Melanesians and Malays, of the poor, the transients and the failures, became subordinate, or were left out of the record entirely. Thus historical writing on the region came to concentrate on a small group of people who were, on numerical grounds, an atypical minority throughout the period 1861-1900.

This tendency is shown too in the second wave of reminiscences, published in the early decades of the twentieth century. Unlike the first-hand contemporary accounts, the later memoirs are much distorted by the passage of time, and coloured by the effects of folklore in the intervening years. In general they are unreliable as historical evidence. Corfield's *Reminiscences of Queensland* recount his personal participation in so many of the great events of his time that the reader's credulity is strained past breaking point. Binnie's *My Life on a Tropic Goldfield* describes in great detail things that happened during his early childhood, suggesting that much of what he purports to recall at first-hand comes from tales told in later years by his father. Bicknell's *Travels and Adventures in North Queensland* combines his own experiences and tales told by others into an indistinguishable whole. Most notorious in this category is Hill's *Forty-five Years' Experience in North Queensland*. Hill, a native mounted police officer and minor official in many parts of North Queensland, gave a stirring account of himself as an upstanding and courageous frontier administrator—a mixture of Lachlan Macquarie and Wild Bill Hickock. Like Corfield, Hill's presence at a remarkable number of well-known events arouses the reader's doubts; but Hill's reminiscences became extremely widely known, and their influence is apparent in historical writing to the present day.

The more austere official correspondence in the state archives reveals that Hill was regarded by his superiors as lazy and incompetent, and by the public as an officious bully—every word of his memoirs must be regarded with suspicion by the historian. The official record also reveals the historian's reliance on pure chance in determining whose reminiscences will survive—among Hill's contemporaries in the colonial service were such able and sensitive administrators as Sellheim, Hodgkinson and St. George, none of whom left memoirs or substantial papers; and all of whom were safely dead before Hill's gripping tales went to press. Reminiscences of a higher order of reliability, although written long afterward, include Spencer Browne's *A Journalist's Memories*, Gray's *Reminiscences of India and North Queensland* and Bedford's *Naught to 33*; the latter a colourfully biased account by one of the lesser mining magnates.

Something of a watershed came in 1921-22, with the publication of Jack's *Northmost Australia*; the first sustained scholarly account of the history of North Queensland. Jack was a Queensland government geologist from 1879 to 1899, and wrote with the advantage of first-hand acquaintance with all of the terrain and many of the people his work described. The work has flaws: it is deeply imbued with the pioneer cult, and is pre-occupied largely with the doings of the explorers; it contains inaccuracies and a few bad guesses. But it still commands respect as the definitive work of its time in synthesizing the available written evidence into a coherent survey of the first sixty years of European activity in North Queensland. For the following forty years, *Northmost Australia* was the foundation for all historical writing on the region.

During those forty years, North Queensland's history passed into the hands of the gentlemen-scholars. Amateur histories, usually of a small area, and often in response to a specific anniversary or jubilee, dominate the period from 1922 until about 1960. These works are no longer reminiscences, since their authors do not claim first hand knowledge of the events described; but nor are they history in a sense understood by the professional practitioner of that craft, with its insistence on a scrupulous accounting for the evidence behind every judgment. Doherty's works on Townsville, Bowen and Innisfail, Collinson's on Cairns, and Borland's on Cairns, Mareeba and the North generally exemplify the genre. The newspapers were also publishing a large quantity of historical material during the period — both Doherty and Collinson were journalists, and Borland wrote a regular column in the *Cairns Post*. *Cummins and Campbell's Monthly Magazine*, established in 1925, provided a vehicle for much writing of a similar kind. This tradition survives to the present in the works of Glenville Pike, best known for *Pioneers' Country* and *Queensland Frontier*.

The work of the gentlemen-scholars varies greatly in quality. The best of it is very good, and even at its worst it performed a service in preserving material from ephemeral and oral sources which would otherwise have been lost. But lack of interpretation, uncritical use of evidence and failure to cite sources are all

reckoned grave sins in our more demanding age of historical writing, and most writings of this tradition are found guilty on all three charges.

There were more serious crimes committed in later years. During the 1950s Ion Idriess gained prominence as a popular writer, whose works gradually took on a historical component. In one of his forays into North Queensland history, *The Tin Scratchers*, Idriess gave a plausible enough account of his own experiences on the Cooktown tinfields, leavened with a few spicy old tales about the roaring years of the gold rushes. But his *Back O' Cairns* contains little first-hand experience, relying rather on a credulous spinning of improbable yarns, with never a trace of evidence produced.

Idriess, or popular taste, opened the floodgates to a succession of sensational writings which unfortunately are often mistaken for history by the public at large. Writers such as Farwell and Holthouse have created a fantasy world in which every mining town had sixty hotels, opium-crazed Chinese engaged in savage tong wars, and cannibal blacks devoured scores of pioneers daily. This disreputable genre of recent decades has done enormous damage to public understanding of the region's history, and regrettably its influence is even appearing in the work of some professional historians who ought to know better.

All was not lost, however, for contemporaneously with the rise of the sensationalist tradition came the beginnings of serious research into North Queensland history. Blainey's *Mines in the Spinifex* was the work of an imported academic historian, followed the next year by an indigenous work, Dorothy Jones' *Cardwell Shire Story*, the first thoroughly researched local history by a North Queensland writer.

In 1963, the second watershed came with Bolton's *A Thousand Miles Away*, the product of several years of research funded by the North Queensland Local Government Association. Bolton's work can truly be described as definitive: although relatively brief, it transcends the influences of the pioneer-worshippers and the sensation-mongers to present an authoritative and balanced account of North Queensland to 1920. A decade of detailed academic research into various North Queens-

land topics and local areas subsequently has resulted in no serious questioning of Bolton's work. Indeed, in the absence of a good history of Queensland, despite attempts in that direction, *A Thousand Miles Away* has state-wide significance as the next best thing: a good history of Queensland's Northern half.

With the availability of a reliable general history and the establishment of tertiary educational institutions in North Queensland, the writing of the region's history has taken on new authority in the last two decades. Not all of the recent work, however, has come from these tertiary institutions. Jones' histories of Innisfail and Cairns, Beale's *Kennedy of Cape York* and John and Ruth Kerr's several recent works are all quite independent of their influence. Local historical societies, particularly in Cairns and Bowen, are producing bulletins and pamphlets which while not presenting historical comment at any length, are preserving valuable source material for future use.

The formal contribution of James Cook University to the writing of North Queensland history commenced in 1968 with the publication of Jean Farnfield's *Frontiersman*, a biography of G.E. Dalrymple. I do not propose to comment in detail on more recent work, since it constitutes a continuing process in which I am personally involved. But there are certain themes evident. One is that greater intensity is possible in academic research: the student can study a single industry, a single town, decade or person, and write with authority on that topic. There is slowly being assembled an extremely detailed fragmentary picture of North Queensland's past, which should coalesce in interesting ways with the passage of time. The second is that the pioneer cult is being replaced by a clearer understanding of the complexity of the region's history. Bolton showed that there is much to be learned from the study of the unheroic past: the losers, the oppressed and the ordinary. And the third is the discovery that many widely held views about Australian history are in need of revision in this region. Anne Allingham showed that the simplistic vision of Australian pastoral settlement in the nineteenth century as a steady and successful outward flow of sheep from Bathurst does not hold for the Kennedy district. The first ten years of wool growing here ended in disaster, and

the search for a new staple. Kett Kennedy is demonstrating that mining company directors knew many ways of becoming wealthy men without doing any mining. Clive Moore and Tricia Mercer have exposed several myths about the supply of Melanesian labour to the sugar industry. These discoveries do not lead to any suggestion that this region is unique – that would be incautious – but rather to the suspicion that events in many other parts of Australia may prove to be more complex than formerly believed when closely examined by historians.

I am not going to plunge myself into the Whig trap of implying that the writing of North Queensland history has come into some golden age because of the establishment of a university history department. Indeed, what may be gained through the increased skill of academic historians is sometimes lost again by their narrower preoccupations. As the product of historical writing is in the public domain, it is for the historian's audience to ensure that the process of historical enquiry is guided by the interests of the reader as well as those of the writer.

I emphasize in conclusion that this survey in being brief, is selective and a little simplistic. Writers have for convenience in discussion been bundled into categories where some of them fit rather uneasily. Others who belong to no obvious category have been ignored. I am particularly conscious of excluding the large body of school and church histories which are in the main thorough, if narrow in their interests. But the general themes are evident; and can probably be identified in the writing of regional history throughout Australia.

