

BOOK REVIEWS

Geoffrey Hansen, Lyndon Megarrity and the late Diane Menghetti, *Goldfields that made Townsville: Cape River, Ravenswood and Charters Towers*, North Queensland History Preservation Society, Townsville, 2018, ISBN 978-0-97560095-6-9, 210 + xxxii pages, \$33

For over 130 years, Townsville has been the largest settlement in the northern half of Australia, dominating the economy of north Queensland. This book is a chronological study of how that state of affairs came about, attributing the rise of Townsville to a series of gold discoveries in its hinterland, first Cape River, then Ravenswood, then Charters Towers, the third vastly greater than the others. Forty years of prosperity followed. Other industries such as cattle grazing and sugar growing contributed to Townsville's rise, but the 200 tonnes of gold that came from Charters Towers was crucial. The history of Townsville has been told before, but this is a good story, well told.

The content of the book began as a series of academic papers at James Cook University. Geoff Hansen's history of the Cape River is based on a 1996 Graduate Diploma, Lyndon Megarrity's of Ravenswood on a 1997 MA thesis on the New Ravenswood company, and Diane Menghetti's of Charters Towers on her 1984 PhD thesis and a number of published papers. Diane died in 2012. Despite the varied origins of the work, the authors' voices blend well. Hansen and Megarrity have missed some more recent scholarship, including an article in this journal three years ago, pointing out that gold discoveries were being reported in the Townsville hinterland several years before the received wisdom records.¹

The story is a little more complicated than simply the pattern of mineral discovery and development. Townsville certainly achieved dominance by becoming the port for a series of ever-larger goldfields, but its rise was by no means inevitable; in the 1860s when gold was being discovered, it was in active competition with the rival ports of Bowen and Cardwell, both of them with better harbours, as well as the now-forgotten town of Wickham. The geography of Townsville's hinterland assured its success. It was the best place to cross the coastal ranges, and its inland access wasn't obstructed by large rivers or mountains. The moral of the story is if you want to find a good port, don't send sailors to look for it; they'll find a nice sheltered place to moor a ship, but they know nothing about transport on land.

Townsville's good fortune also continued long after the goldfields sank into insignificance. As the last goldfields were closing, the greatest mineral deposits in Queensland were discovered at Mount Isa in the far west. Townsville was in the right place again and has served for eighty years as the port for the Mount Isa base metal mines, smelters and refinery, industries which have lasted twice as long and generated far more wealth than the goldfields.

The goldfield stories raise the role of prospectors in discovering and creating goldfields. This account does not repeat the folklore that Charters Towers goldfield was an accidental discovery made by a boy picking up a stone to throw at a crow. There seems to be a popular impulse to create stories of good fortune turning on a random

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throw of the dice. The discovery of Charters Towers was not the work of an idle boy, it was made by a team of professional prospectors who had been painstakingly searching the landscape for months. And a great goldfield like Charters Towers was not created by someone picking up a specimen; it was created over decades by tens of thousands of workers, and millions of pounds from investors in Melbourne and London.

There were classic prospectors who shaped the development of north Queensland mining: Hugh Mosman, James Mulligan, John Dickie. Mosman became very rich from discovering Charters Towers, whereas Mulligan got very little but fame from discovering the Palmer. There was perhaps a streak of reckless and impulsive behaviour in all of them. Dickie rode a horse overland from Croydon in Queensland to Coolgardie in Western Australia, a distance of at least 2,500km as the crow flies², Mosman accidentally blew off a hand while fishing with dynamite³, Mulligan died from injuries he received in a bar-room fight at the age of seventy, in one version of the story while protecting a woman from being insulted.⁴

Another story the book tells is the role of government in creating goldfields. North Queensland was no California. The Australian colonial governments had a horror of gold rushes becoming disorderly, and strove, usually successfully, to keep their excesses under control. News of the early northern gold discoveries was collated and promulgated by government geologist Richard Daintree, who put the finds of the wandering prospectors in scientific perspective. The more prosperous goldfields quickly had a government Warden in charge, with a police force and a courthouse at his disposal, and local government soon followed. The prosperity of Townsville was greatly assisted by the construction of harbour breakwaters and a railway and telegraph to Charters Towers, all the work of the Queensland government.

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¹ Bell, Peter, 'Discovering Gold in the North: the Evidence Changes,' *Journal of Australasian Mining History* 13, 2015, pp. 11-22.

² <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/205310126>>

³ *Brisbane Courier*, 23 January 1882, p. 2.

⁴ *Queenslander*, 14 September 1907, p. 29.