

Don Johnson's Charters Towers Mining History: The Importance of Historical Data

By JIM MORRISON and IAN HODKINSON

Don Johnson passed away at the age of 56 on Christmas Eve, 1992, deeply mourned by his family and close friends. At the time of his death Johnson was recognised as Charters Towers' foremost mining historian. As Prof. Don Roderick put it, 'Don's knowledge of Charters Towers was encyclopaedic. He knew all the major and minor players in its history, and he knew more than their names: he understood the intention of their souls'.¹ Fellow historian Glenn Davies estimated that the research for the proposed book had taken almost a decade.² The loss of this enthusiastic and erudite historian, keen artist, and raconteur also had wider ramifications.

In the period prior to his death, Johnson had been occupied for a considerable time in writing a comprehensive history of Charters Towers and its goldfield. With his passing, Johnson not only took with him a great understanding of the Charters Towers goldfield and the critical events that shaped the lives of that community, but also left behind the thorny problems of what to do with his unfinished history and his abundant research records which were proving to be invaluable to mine operators attempting to redevelop the gold reefs beneath the city. This paper addresses those issues as well as aspects of the history and principal characters of the Charters Towers community that so intrigued Johnson.

Figure 1: *Donald Hector Johnson, photographed in Cooktown in the late 1970s.*



Source: Charters Towers & Dalrymple Archives Group.

Don Johnson: Law Student, Military Historian, Artist and Novelist

Donald Hector Johnson (Figure 1), the elder son of Hector and Edith Ann Johnson, was born at Charters Towers on August 10, 1936. At that time his parents Hector and Edith (née Beaumont) lived at Torrens Creek, 150 km west of Charters Towers (Figure 2). His father was employed as a ringer on a local cattle property and had acquired a reputation as a skilled horseman. *The Northern Miner* correspondent, 'W.J.H.' writing in the 'On The Track' column, commented in 1936, 'I will mention a few exceptionally good horsemen of the Torrens Creek and Pentland districts. First is Hector Johnson, of Torrens Creek, who has been riding buck-jumpers since the age of 14, and he has never been thrown'.³

Don undertook his Primary School education at Torrens Creek, apparently showing early academic flair and a talent for art and poetry. Edith Johnson recalled how 'writing and painting were in his blood', two talents which he was to build on extensively later in life.⁴ During the Second World War, Torrens Creek was the site of several airstrips constructed by U.S. Army engineers and in 1942 was the temporary home of the 43rd Bombardment Group of the USAAF.⁵ This almost certainly contributed to Don's later interest in military matters, although he would only have been nine years of age at the end of the war.⁶ The family were regular visitors to Charters Towers during the late 1940s and early 1950s, invariably staying with Edith's sister, C. Smith of Marion Street, although occasionally holidaying further afield in Townsville and on Magnetic Island.⁷ Given the strong connection with Charters Towers it is perhaps inevitable that Don should undertake his secondary education as a boarder at All Souls School in the town, a selfless act which underlines his parents' recognition of the value of an education, despite his father's modest occupation and lifestyle. Don distinguished himself academically at All Souls School and secured a Commonwealth Scholarship to study Law at the University of Queensland.⁸

Johnson completed most of a Law degree and was indeed in the fourth year of his studies in that subject in 1961. However, it appears that he left before finishing his degree to work at the Crown Solicitor's office as a Judge's advocate. It is also reported that he later completed an Arts degree although no record of that has yet been identified at any of the likely Queensland institutions.⁹ His time at University also afforded him the opportunity to test the waters of student politics. The student magazine, *Semper Floreat*, records that he was nominated as Law Councillor (faculty representative) during the 1961 Student Union elections. Don's policy statement was simply, 'Back to Normality', suggesting a personal preference for the days of the Student Council, which had only recently been superseded by the Union.¹⁰ The August 1961 edition of *Semper Floreat* confirms Don's subsequent election as the faculty representative for Law on the 51st Council for the following year.¹¹ During his time at university Don appears to have also authored at least one satirical article for *Semper Floreat*, writing under the pseudonym 'Hydro'.¹²

At an early stage of his academic career Don had forged a close association with the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) as it was then known (prior to it being renamed the Army Reserve in 1973).¹³ At the time of his nomination for the 51st Council he was already 'President ORc mess' of the Queensland University Regiment.¹⁴ He eventually rose to the rank of full Captain and acting Major with a training role in the CMF and was part of the last army crew to raft Tasmania's Franklin River in 1983 before it was scheduled to be dammed.¹⁵

Johnson's involvement in the CMF and an affection for the military merged seamlessly with his now obvious (but until then apparently unheralded) enthusiasm for historical research. That marriage of passions inspired him to write his first book, '*Volunteers at Heart*', a comprehensive history of the Queensland Defence Force, published by the University of Queensland Press (UQP) in 1974. The book, now considered the seminal work on the subject, covered the Queensland Defence Force

from its inception in 1860 through to 1901 and earned Johnson recognition as an expert in the subject. Glenn Davies (*pers. comm.*) concluded that it was a very significant achievement for an unrecognised, 'non-academic' such as Johnson to have a key volume on Queensland history published by UQP. Johnson also submitted two entries to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* in the mid-1980s; Henry Dundas Macartney and Howel Gunter, both with military backgrounds and involved with the Queensland Defence Force.¹⁶

Johnson's interest in military matters persisted over the years and in 1992 he published the inspiring *Torres Strait to Coral Sea – The Defence of North Queensland*, brimming with fascinating anecdotes about some of Charters Towers' larger-than-life characters such as 'Breaker' Morant and Daisy Bates.¹⁷ Matching the diligence of his research was Johnson's imposing command of the English language, both written and as a raconteur.

Johnson had other talents as well. The historian Prof. Don Roderick, who had boarded with Johnson at All Soul's School, fondly recalled that Johnson was 'an accomplished painter, Mr Johnson won the Caltex Oil Australia award for art in June 1979'.¹⁸ Not a lot is known about his life in the intervening years between leaving the Crown Solicitor's Office and settling back into Charters Towers in the mid-1980s. During at least part of this period he travelled extensively through North Queensland and the Cape York Peninsula and spent some time indulging his interest in painting landscapes. Historian Rev. Dr. John Moses, also a friend of Don Johnson noted (*pers. comm.*) that Johnson was also a freelance journalist and reportedly wrote detective novels under the pseudonym 'A.P. Hargreaves'.

Charters Towers

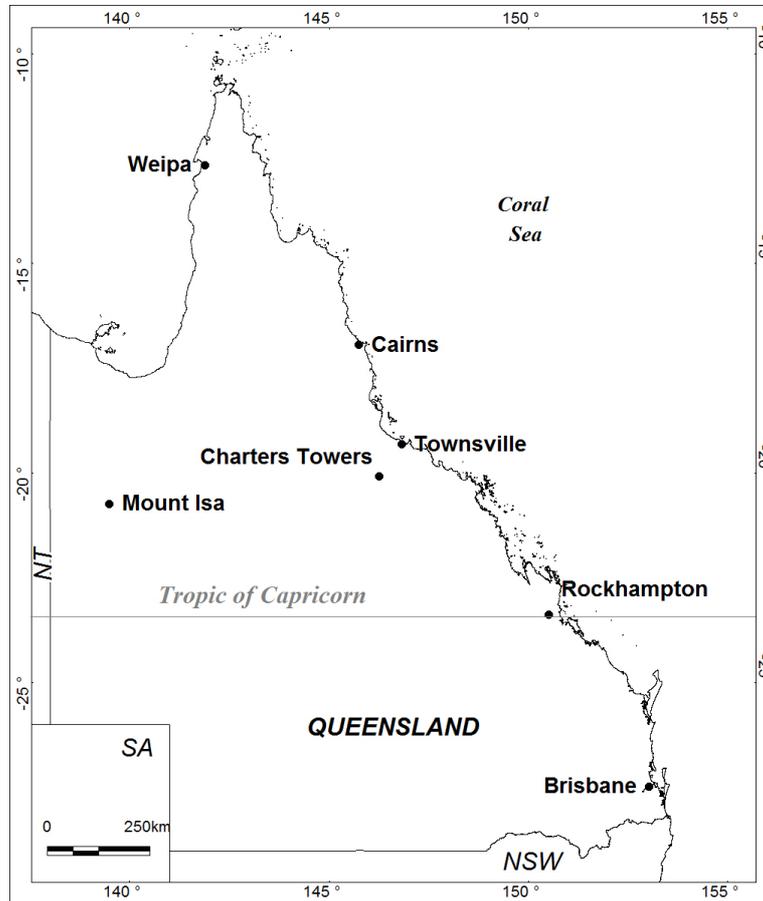
Notwithstanding Johnson's renown as a military historian, his sense of historical enquiry finally returned him to his geographical roots. He commenced a line of research into the history of the city of Charters Towers.

While the individuals involved in the history of 'the Towers' were undoubtedly Johnson's primary interest (and he developed detailed card references and bibliographies for many of the towns identities), his understanding of the mining history was the means by which his research could be turned to commercial advantage. Johnson was commissioned on several occasions by mining and exploration companies to investigate various parts of the gold field and the history of the old mine workings. The limited amounts of cashflow brought by these commissions helped sustain the ongoing research effort, which remained largely a labour of love.

The magnitude of the task of documenting the goldfield cannot be overstated. From its discovery in late 1871 through to the end of the main mining period in the early 1920s the field produced 6.6 million troy ounces of gold (~206 tonnes) from ca. 6.1 million tonnes of ore with a grade estimated to be 34g/t Au or slightly in excess of 1 oz per tonne.¹⁹ In current (2014) A\$ terms the historical production quantity equates to A\$8 billion of which \$2.3 billion was paid out to the venturers in dividends.

Charters Towers was the largest producing gold field in Queensland at that time and the grade of the ore was significantly higher than that produced from the mines in the Victorian and West Australian goldfields during the same period.

Figure 2. Location Map showing Charters Towers, Brisbane and the State of Queensland.



Source: Drafted by the authors.

The wealth generated by the gold mines boosted the town's population to a peak of almost 27,000 during 1900, making the city the biggest outside of the capital, Brisbane. At one stage the city was indeed so critical to the Queensland economy that it was seriously mooted as an alternative capital city. The community attracted a vast influx of both Australian born and immigrant settlers, the latter coming mostly from Great Britain with a significant contingent of German immigrants also present. This diverse community was reflected in a wide range of religious, social, cultural and sporting entities and activities to the extent that this self-sufficient, cosmopolitan city was popularly referred to as 'The World', the name emblazoned on the water supply tank which still overlooks the city.

Johnson steadily built up a formidable and comprehensive archive of chronologically sorted extracts of the various mine managers' fortnightly reports which were a hallmark until the early 1920s of the famous local newspaper, *The Northern Miner*. This required the arduous process of copying the reports from microfilm copies of the newspapers at James Cook University onto paper, cutting them up on an

individual mine basis and then pasting them in date order onto larger sheets of paper to build a sequence of events on a mine by mine basis. This archive allowed a chronological reconstruction of the growth and extent of underground development in the mines under the city area and surrounds. Extensive research was also undertaken in Brisbane, ably assisted by his sister-in-law, Florence Johnson.

After his death, Johnson's records were used to great effect by Citigold Corp. Ltd., which currently holds the mining rights to the city area. Johnson's research had a major impact on the company's mine planning process. In 2004 this significantly reduced the risk associated with underground development adjacent to inadequately surveyed, water-filled mine workings at the Washington mine.²⁰ Had the new development intersected flooded workings, the result could conceivably have been calamitous or, at best, resulted in a serious delay to the proposed mining operation while the workings were drained. Johnson's diligently filed records also helped the company to locate a number of previously unrecognised ore shoots within the old workings and facilitated a search for possible extensions to those ore shoots.

As well as his hard-copy research, a tape-recording of a talk Johnson delivered to a party of visiting American tourists to Charters Towers in 1990 has recently been unearthed. This recording, in Johnson's typical witty and perceptive style, provides much of the quoted passages below regarding the origins of Charters Towers, and the discovery of the gold field was the foundation on which the subsequent history of the gold field, community and characters was built. Johnson recounted with great gusto the events of Christmas Eve 1871 that led Mossman, Fraser and Clarke to stumble on the gold reefs that underlie much of the current city:

In 1868 they found gold at Ravenswood which is about 60 miles east of here, just off the Townsville road, and in 1871 three young explorers known as Mossman, Clarke and Fraser got on their horses and rode up to Charters Towers or to this vicinity looking for gold. They stopped at Mount Leyshon. [At] Mount Leyshon, there were half a dozen diggers getting gold, getting alluvial gold, nothing spectacular, and they could see on the northern horizon, as you camped on Mount Leyshon, a cluster of strange conical and whale backed hills. It was December, very hot, very dry, and they had no water. They were about five or six miles south of this place and debating whether to go back to Mount Leyshon to get water or take a punt, cast for the hills and see if there was water in the hills when a providential thunderstorm came along and solved the water problem for them, because out here in the tropics we do have quite prodigious thunderstorms. But the consequence of the thunderstorm was that their horses bolted and they were left with one horse and one dish.

And the next morning (they camped on the spot) they sent a little Aboriginal boy that Mossman had with him, a black-tracker called Jupiter Mossman, north, to follow the tracks to find the horses. And young Mossman, young Jupiter came through a gap in the hills, in the Towers hills, and according to a very pretty legend he bent down to drink at a waterhole and found a nugget of gold.

Whatever happened, Mossman, Clarke and Fraser came here. Now this entire town area was covered with a dense scrub. It was covered with a lawyer vine tangling (any of you chaps who have been in the Islands would know about that

one), ti-tree so thick that a mosquito couldn't sing in it according to the original miners. And as they wandered around in the first day or two they realised that they had stumbled on one of the largest reef systems in Australia. The Warrior reef projected above the ground about the size of a house and it had gold visible all over it. The St Patrick's, they could literally walk up to these outcrops and chip lumps of gold from them. On the Washington Reef (which is a name with which you should all be familiar, named after your George) they picked up 1,600 ounces of gold in their saddle-bags from the surface, emu bobbed.

And after a couple of days, the three of them wandering around with stars in their eyes, they were jumped by a notorious claim jumper, an Irishman called Patrick Larkin. Now Patrick didn't get a gold scratching himself; he followed the prospectors and the trick was that whoever declared a goldfield, found a new goldfield, was given a thousand pounds reward. And as soon as they saw Patrick Larkin swerving around the hills they realised that, well there was a thousand quid in the offing, so Hugh Mossman hopped on his horse and rode frantically over to Ravenswood, which was the nearest town where you could register the find. Unfortunately for Mossman the Burdekin River was in flood and he sat on this side of the Burdekin for two and a half weeks (in anguish so I should imagine) until eventually the river went down enough for Mossman to get across to Ravenswood and register the gold find.²¹

As chance would have it, the Acting Gold Commissioner at the time was one W.S.E.M. Charters. Unfortunately, why Larkin failed to register the claim is unknown.

A Man as Long as His Name

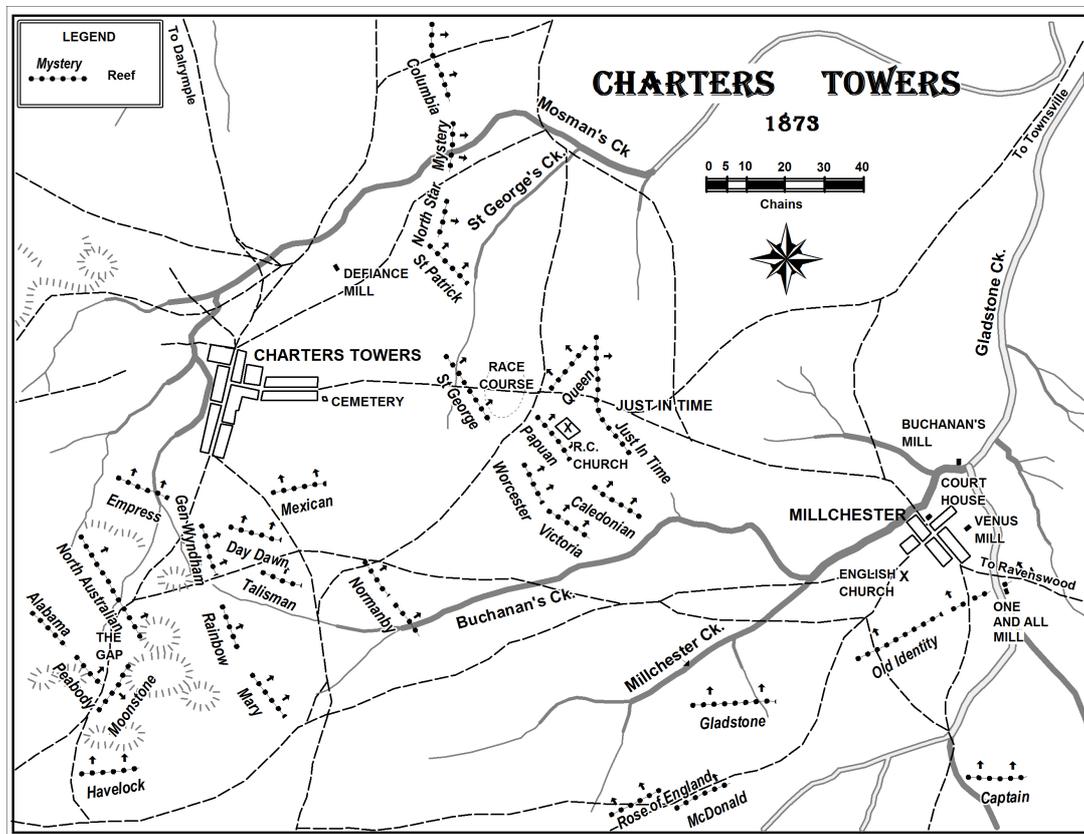
One of the many larger-than-life characters on the goldfield was William Skelton Ewbank Melbourne Charters, once described as 'a man as long as his name'. Johnson had little respect for Charters, describing him as 'about six feet four, a big blustering Northern Irishman' and maintained that Charters had 'mal-administered the Cape River Goldfield for four years and ... was at that time in ... disgrace while the Gold Commissioner from Ravenswood, ... Thomas Ridge Hackett was down in Brisbane'. Hackett's visit to the capital was at the request of his masters so he could explain how he had brought disgrace to his office by being horse-whipped by the President of the Miners' Association, John Macrossan. Hackett was still in Brisbane with Charters temporarily administering the field when, as chance would have it, Fraser lodged the new discovery claims early in 1872. To Charters thus went the opportunity of naming the new goldfield and in typically immodest fashion he named it after himself, 'Charters from his surname and Towers from the ... little conical hills around the place', as Johnson put it. Popular mythology has often suggested that the field and township was originally 'Charters Tors' although Johnson clarified this in his typically dismissive fashion: 'It is one of the characteristic folk legends that ... the town was called Charters Tors and that later it became corrupted to Charters Towers. Load of nonsense! The town was called Charters Towers from the word go'. Anyone who is familiar with the granitic outcrops which dot the moorlands of Cornwall and Devon can well understand the connection with the word Tor.

In later years, Charters was often described as being in ill health and was frequently indisposed or unavailable. His health deteriorated sufficiently in 1885 for him to be taken to Sydney for treatment at the Prince Alfred Hospital where he had part of one of his feet amputated, possibly as a long-term consequence of standing on a nail some 6 years previously.²² Charters died of complications from the operation in Newtown, New South Wales at the age of 53 years on the 16th May 1885.²³

The Growth of a Community

The discovery of gold at Charters Towers caused a predictable rush as the news spread across both the colony and further afield. The early years of the city were marked by the parallel development of two townships, Upper Camp and Lower Camp, the former near the original discovery while the latter took advantage of a more plentiful supply of water available in a large creek at that site (Figure 3). The name Charters Towers was originally and more correctly only applied to the goldfield itself. Over time the larger township (Upper Camp) became the predominant business centre and adopted the name of the gold field, Charters Towers, while Lower Camp took the name Millchester and was forever to be overshadowed by its bigger sister to the west. A small intervening settlement known as 'Just In Time' was eventually also incorporated within the city.

Figure 3: An Early Plan of the Gold Reefs of Charters Towers, ca. 1873 The plan shows the relative locations of Millchester (Lower Camp) and Charters Towers (Upper Camp) with the settlement of Just In Time mid-way between the two. The original gold discovery by Mosman, Fraser and Clarke took place at the Gap in the southwestern part of the map.



Source: After a plan supplied by the Charters Towers And Dalrymple Archives Group. Original source unknown.

The prominent nature of the gold reefs, many of which stood out above the ground as quartz ‘blows’, meant that most of the gold-bearing veins were discovered within weeks of the initial discovery. Amongst these early discoveries were the Day Dawn, the Queen, the St Patrick, the Identity and the North Australian. Subsequent underground mine development identified several major reefs not exposed on the surface in the 1880s: the Brilliant, the Victoria, the Golden Gate and a down-dip extension of the Day Dawn reef (Wyndham). As Johnson described it:

... the field flourished until by 1886 it was the leading gold producer in Australia. At that stage it was comfortably producing its 150,000 ounces a year. The peak was half a million; ounces in one year. But the general average, about 250 - 200,000 ounces. There were 120 hotels that I’ve counted, there may have been more. They had two stock exchanges. They had their own theatres, opera, music, symphony orchestras. It became a capital city. It was in fact the capital of north Queensland.²⁴

The 1890s saw a further discovery on the Day Dawn (Mills United), which enabled workings on that great reef to extend northwards to vertically below the main street (Gill Street) in the vicinity of the post office. The last great discovery was the Queen Cross in 1902 on the eastern edge of the field in an area that had already been heavily exploited for a considerable time. As might be anticipated of a burgeoning, colonial pioneering community dominated by a population of fortune-seekers, Charters Towers can list more than a few notable characters in its pantheon of key players.

Frank Stuble - From Rags to Riches and Back

All goldfields have their tales of fortunes won and lost and the Charters Towers field is no exception. The man who perhaps best epitomises the fluctuating fortunes of the prospector and speculator on the Charters Towers field is one Francis Horace (Frank) Stuble, a blacksmith of Irish descent whom Johnson fondly described as ‘*my favourite*’. Stuble was reportedly born in England in 1833. His metalworking skills were apparently to engineering standards and led him into the ship-brokering business in Melbourne, a venture which failed and made him bankrupt. Johnson takes up the story shortly after Stuble’s arrival in Charters Towers:²⁵

Frank was conned by a group of smart miners into buying a useless lease, they sold him 17/20ths of the St Patrick claim for a song. Out of it in the next six years he took of the order of two hundred thousand pounds worth of gold. His income in ‘75 was a thousand pounds a week; \$2,000 in today’s currency ... fifteen hundred pounds would buy you the biggest pub in town. Frank became so wealthy that he became a joke. He took up an abandoned lease called the ‘Bryan O’Lynn’ and this promptly added another thousand pounds a week to his income. Until 1880 he could do nothing wrong. In 1882 he invested in a shipping and wheat futures market. And in 1885 he died bankrupt and penniless on the road to the Croydon Gold Rush trying to get it all back for the third time.

Johnson’s brief summary omits the fact that Stuble, at the height of his good fortune, was also the independent M.L.A. for the Kennedy electorate in the Queensland

parliament between November 1878 and October 1883.²⁶ In a rare error, Johnson attributed Stubbley's demise to 1885 when in fact he died on 23 February 1886 at Foote's Lagoon Camp near Normanton *en route* for Croydon. 'Heat apoplexy' was mooted in the popular press as the cause of his and several other deaths on a particularly hot summer's day.²⁷

The Five Mad Germans

Amongst Johnson's favourite early speculators and mining entrepreneurs, Frederick Pfeiffer (Christian Frederick Pfeiffer) stands out as one of the more cool-headed and rational operators. Johnson, from his comments, appears to have held Pfeiffer in some regard, if not for his shrewd, some might say cunning, business practices, then at least for his subsequent philanthropism.

While Pfeiffer's later philanthropic acts, his solid, yet understated house on Day Dawn Ridge and the most grandiose of memorials in the Charters Towers cemetery set him aside from his contemporaries. Pfeiffer was but one member of a consortium of eight who held shares in the Day Dawn mine when their perseverance was rewarded in 1878 when the 300 ft [91.44 metres] level came into very rich ground. The discovery was all the more rewarding since the seemingly barren Day Dawn reef had disappointed more than a few in the early days of the field and had tested the patience of the group. Johnson ably summed up the story of Pfeiffer, or '*German Fred*' as he fondly referred to him:

Frederick Pfeiffer, German-French, arrived on this field again at about the age of 40, had been to every gold-rush in Australia and New Zealand and occasionally made a bit, occasionally lost a bit, and pegged the Day Dawn. Now the Day Dawn had been tried by almost every miner on Charters Towers. It was one of those reefs that looked incredibly rich. It was half a mile long; it was projecting along the surface for half a mile. There were rich reefs all around. And no one but German Fred believed that they could make anything out of the Day Dawn. For years I believed that German Fred was the only honest mining magnate on Charters Towers. I was wrong; he wasn't honest either. The legend, and naturally, once you peg a mine this size you write your own legend, the legend was that he had worked diligently, for no pay, until eventually he struck it rich. The reality was that when they struck it rich they dug up a lump of stone with a four inch band of gold through it. And they promptly took it down again and buried it in the mine and galloped around and bought out all the seeding partners for a hundred pounds each, and each of those hundred pound shares was ultimately worth about sixty thousand pounds. And not unnaturally in the courts in 1882, there were quite a spate of seeding partners suing Fred Pfeiffer and his German partners. They were all Germans, the five mad Germans. And the night the last of the court actions was decided Fred held a great German ball up on Day Dawn hill to let them know that he had won. But in spite of his shady beginnings he was a genuine philanthropist. When he died he left two hundred and seventy thousand pounds, he had the largest memorial in Charters Towers cemetery.²⁸

The ‘Five Mad Germans’ was the local pet name for the co-venturers, a name derived perhaps more from their celebratory activities than anything else and one which conveniently ignores the presence of their British partners, particularly Thomas Christian, a Manxman, who was by far the most experienced miner amongst them. As members of one of the smaller ethnic minorities in a largely Anglo-Celtic settlement they inevitably tended to stick together, worked together and played together. The wealth generated from the Day Dawn and other subsequent mining investments by the five helped the development of significant German community resources in the town. After selling the Day Dawn in 1886 the co-venturers donated enough money for the German community to construct a church, St Johannes, on the corner of Ann and High Street. A bell tower was later erected and furnished with two bells imported from Germany. Pfeiffer built himself a large, solid but unpretentious house on Day Dawn ridge near where he’d laboured for so long. This building is now home to the Charters Towers Church of the Latter Day Saints and listed on the State Heritage Register.²⁹ Pfeiffer married Mary Donovan in early 1882 and passed away in early 1903.³⁰

The Lady is Cain but is the Gentleman Abel

Of all the memorable characters in the Charters Towers firmament, from Don Johnson’s perspective, none burned more brightly than the editor and owner of *The Northern Miner* newspaper, Thadeus O’Kane (Figure 4).

Figure 4: *Thadeus O’Kane, Editor of The Northern Miner*



Source: Millchester State School

Johnson happily admitted to O’Kane being his favourite and no doubt admired O’Kane’s journalistic style, his frank, no-nonsense approach to his contemporaries and his colourful, rebellious past and, to quote Kirkpatrick, ‘*independence of editorial outlook*’;³¹ traits which Johnson himself shared in no small measure. Thadeus O’Kane (more properly Timothy Joseph O’Kane) had been offered the job of editor and a half-share in the paper in August 1873 by J.S. Reid who had started *The Northern Miner* almost exactly a year before. In March 1874, O’Kane became the sole proprietor of the newspaper when Reid moved to Cooktown.³² In July 1874 O’Kane reported ‘The Towers solidifying rapidly and giving undeniable proofs that it means to stand’.³³ Such was O’Kane’s confidence in ‘the Towers’ that he moved the office from Millchester to the larger settlement in October 1874 and set about, *inter alia*, destroying his opposition, the *Northern Advocate and Miners’ Journal*. Johnson spoke at length on O’Kane in his address to the visiting American tourists.³⁴

He came to Rockhampton where he edited or sub-edited two papers and got the sack from both of them and in ’73, at the age of 53, penniless and with a fairly interesting background he arrived in Charters Towers and took over the Northern Miner. Thadeus was Irish; he was born in County Cork in 1820. He

was an old man when he got here, oh well he was 50, and he went to Maynooth Seminary to become a priest. Something happened, we don't know what. He never entered the priesthood which was perhaps as well for the Church. He went back to County Kerry in '57 and on the night of the birth of his eldest son his house was raided on suspicion of harbouring Fenians and Whiteboys who were the two local bombing groups back then. Thad took over the Kerry Star, a newspaper called the Kerry Star which he edited for three years, two and a half years. He went broke and he went back to London and in 1863 he sent his wife to interview the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Henry Temple, Viscount Palmerston who was 79. And according to Thadeus, Viscount Palmer was totally overcome by Mrs O'Kane's charms and things occurred. So Thadeus sued Mrs O'Kane for divorce and he named the 79 year old Prime Minister as co-respondent; and he got headlines, he got headlines right throughout the world in fact. Now there is no doubt in my mind that Palmerston was guilty; he was a randy old goat, there's nothing else for him. He had been caught in a compromising situation when he was Foreign Secretary by no lesser person than Queen Victoria and with Prince Albert in tow. Everyone in London thought Lord Palmerston was probably guilty. The joke was 'the lady is Cain (Kane) but is the gentleman Abel (able)': the sort of pun that would appeal to our Victorian forebears. Whatever happened, you didn't sue the PM back in those days: I suspect you'd get about as much change out of doing it now. Thadeus was leaned on very heavily. Mrs O'Kane denied that they were ever married. Thadeus, in one of the neatest bits of legal footwork that I have ever seen, ended up being the guilty party. Mrs O'Kane went to America where some months later she was lecturing in New York on the manners, morals and behaviour of the British aristocracy and if any of you can lay your hands on the text of that lecture, please let me have it. Thadeus came to Australia but he wasn't as guilty as he looked because he was given a job by the same Bishop Quinn who had suppressed the riot here. He was given a job on the Roman Catholic newspaper in Ipswich. Being Thadeus he fell out. Four months later he was sacked. He sued Bishop Quinn and he got his wages. And a week later Bishop Quinn published in the North Australian the fact that Mrs O'Kane was over in New York lecturing. Thadeus O'Kane died on the 17th of May 1890 and by that time the Northern Miner was a byword throughout Australia. He had been sued for defamation by everyone who was anyone in Charters Towers, and half the people who weren't. He was sued by every mining magnate on the field. He was prosecuted for criminal libel by Warden Charters and by Fred Hamilton, but he became and remained probably the most powerful journalist in nineteenth century Queensland.

Shortly before his death Johnson had completed a paper on O'Kane entitled 'To Silence a Jackdaw - Gagging the Northern Miner'. The paper was eventually submitted to the Royal Historical Society of Queensland by the Rev. Dr. John Moses and published posthumously in 1994.³⁵ O'Kane was also the subject of a comprehensive biography, 'The Life & Times of Thadeus O'Kane' by Rod Kirkpatrick, formerly Program Director, Journalism, in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Queensland.³⁶

Craven's Folly

The last of Johnson's critical characters was Richard Craven³⁷. His admiration for Craven's dogged persistence is evident:

In 1887 a bloke called Richard Craven developed a bee in his bonnet that there was a very rich mine two or three hundred metres from here down towards the Railway Station where the Day Dawn line up here and the Queen lode down there intersect. And he persuaded some backers to put in eleven thousand pounds to sink a shaft. Now the whole town with the characteristic Australian jeering haw-haw to anyone who goes outside the norm said, "Call it 'Craven's Folly', you're mad!" And he sank 1,000 feet and got nothing, ran out of money. So they had a pit-head meeting to decide what they would do with this very expensive hole. At about 745 feet the shaft had passed through a slight change in the country, the geology of the rock altered minimally for about 20 feet and they drove the shaft on that alteration and at 20 feet they hit the Brilliant Reef which at that stage was 14 feet wide and 5 ounce stone, 14 feet thick and 5 ounce stone and hundreds of feet across. And I have a sneaking regard for Dick Craven and his partners because at the first crushing the four Directors put a 100 odd pound bar of gold on each shoulder and walked from the Brilliant up to the bank as the way they got back at those who called it Craven's Folly.³⁸

The Brilliant Reef ore shoot ultimately yielded a total of some 1.6 million ounces of gold. In his talk Johnson went on to suggest that 'there is a possibility. a remote possibility that there are still rich shoots they've never found'. It is this hope which has driven the expenditure of many millions of dollars on exploration in the field since the 1980s. The discovery of a new reef would ensure another chapter in Charters Towers' long and proud mining history.

In Decline

The city had boomed during the last quarter of the 19th Century and into the first decade of the 20th Century. However, continually increasing mining costs coincided with a decline in the price of gold and severe inflation while the advent of the First World War resulted in severe labour shortages. The difficult economic circumstances of the time were compounded by declining returns from the reefs, deliberate high-grading to maintain excessive dividends and a decided lack of in-mine exploration and capital expenditure. This 'perfect storm' of factors brought about the rapid decline of the field. Johnson summed up the era:

By 1905 the gold started to go; they had gutted most of the mines. The major mines closed down between 1905 and 1915. Production plummeted and the bulk of the town went - not only the citizens but the buildings. Between 1910 and 1920 Charters Towers exported buildings; houses, hotels, anything. Demolished, taken down. Half of South Townsville, portions of Ingham are all Charters Towers buildings. The population crashed to six or seven thousand. Those who remained were mostly connected with cattle, the cattle industry and then the boarding school industry because all the major buildings around here were bought up cheap and converted to boarding schools. I did my four year sentence in one of them myself! And until quite recently Charters Towers has been

simply an agricultural, small country town. ... but the foundation of the town, the glory days of the town were the gold boom days.³⁹

By 1920 the main field was effectively shut-down with very limited production restricted to a number of small mines outside the town area. The growth and decline of the goldfield's production over the period is shown graphically in Figure 5.

Charters Towers Goldfield – an unfinished history

Sadly, Johnson never lived to see his detailed research into the city's mining history published. At the time of his death his research had crystallised into a draft text approaching 81,000 words and 13 chapters of which nine had provisional titles. The draft work is believed to be about one third of the total of a 40-chapter, two volume publication which Johnson had proposed. Johnson's friend, Debbie Norman, had been responsible for typing the text into a word processing package. This ensured that a digital copy existed with several copies also available on back-up floppy disks.

Some time prior to his death, Johnson had self-published a brief A4 booklet '*The Venus Battery and Millchester*' which was presumably printed at *The Northern Miner*, although this has not been verified.⁴⁰ The eminently readable style and layout possibly hint at the intended style of the bigger project which was sadly not destined to eventuate. Johnson, whose death was unheralded, had, regrettably, made no specific plans as to what was to be done with the unfinished text and his vast repository of records and research notes. There was thus no clear path to follow with regard to making public the great knowledge that Johnson had accumulated. After much discussion it was finally concluded that the majority of Johnson's research should remain in Charters Towers in the custody of the Charters Towers and Dalrymple Archives Group at the Excelsior Library. A portion of Johnson's stored research papers can also be found in the archives at James Cook University, Townsville. Regrettably some items and photographs from the research collection became dispersed but the majority safely found its way into the local archives. Fortunately Johnson's research was not in vain and is frequently used by local government, company and private researchers.

The thirteen-chapter draft of the town's history was, however, effectively lost for close to two decades. An early attempt by several members of Charters Towers' mining community to publish the unfinished book in 1999, using funding available from the Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, came to naught since the loss of Don Johnson was still too fresh in the memory of his surviving family. While a number of copies of the text were securely stored there appeared to be almost no hope of getting the draft published.

The announcement that the combined International Mining History Congress and annual conference of the Australasian Mining History Association was to be held in Charters Towers in July 2014 provided the opportunity for Johnson's work to be made available to the public. Consent was received from Johnson's family for a paper to be presented at the Congress and for the history volume to be published on condition that

the original text was maintained. At the time of writing the various options for publishing the volume are still under review.

Concluding Remarks

Johnson’s diligent research into the history of the gold mines of Charters Towers and its characters has culminated in a level of understanding the like of which is rarely achieved by a single researcher. The research has also had far reaching economic benefits for mining and exploration programmes within the Charters Towers goldfield.

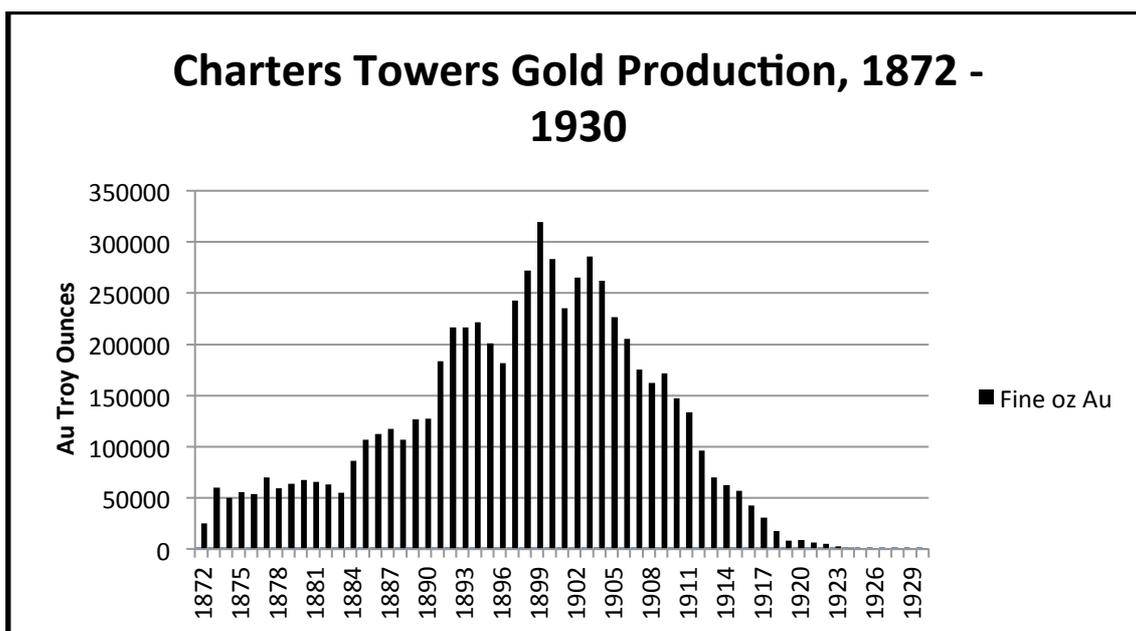
All who have reviewed Johnson’s draft ‘Charters Towers history’ document regard it as potentially a key contribution to the recorded history of Queensland. It is regrettable that Johnson’s unheralded and premature departure prevented the planned publication. While much of his research papers were ultimately safely preserved and remain accessible to the public, it is only now, some 20 years after his death, that the possibility of publication is being revisited.

In his eulogy to Don Johnson, Prof. Don Roderick, recalled that

two figures of early Charters Towers emerged as his heroes. His prime hero was Thadeus O’Kane, an early editor of *The Northern Miner*, whose ability to satirise the local scene has become legendary. His other hero was William Jamieson Allom who turned his back on the mania for making money to pursue a profitless career as a painter of the local scene. Don Johnson was an amalgam of both those gentlemen.⁴¹

The fate of Johnson’s work demonstrates the need for historians to make known what they would like done with their work in the event of their untimely death.

Figure 5: *Charters Towers Annual Gold Production.*



Source: Levingston, Ore Deposits and Mines of Charters Towers 1:250,000 Sheet Area, p. 12.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the many individuals who have helped over many years to preserve Don Johnson's legacy and fostered a deep interest in the mining history of Charters Towers. Firstly our thanks go to Ken and Flo Johnson of Townsville who generously gave their permission for this paper to be published. The endless enthusiasm and assistance of Messrs. Mike Power, Michael Brumby and the late Joe Janacek of the Charters Towers and Dalrymple Archives Group is acknowledged as is the help offered by Bronwyn McBurnie and Haidi Beard of JCU library. The generous input and anecdotal contributions of many of Don's former acquaintances is also recognized: Glenn Davies, the Rev. Dr. John Moses, Marjorie Seccombe-Nielsen, Shiranthi Siyambalapitiya. Mention must also be made of the other original proponents of the earlier unsuccessful attempt to publish the Johnson manuscript: Dale Sims, Mike Power and John Kay who preserved the tape of Don's 1990 talk, and to the many others who assisted. Finally, this list of acknowledgments wouldn't be complete without also mentioning Don's close friend and de facto secretary, Debbie Norman, who originally converted much of Don's hand written research to text and assisted him very capably with much of his compilation and research.

Endnotes

¹ From the eulogy delivered by Prof. Don Roderick at the funeral of Don Johnson.

² 'Vale Don Johnson: Towers mourns loss of "meticulous researcher and writer"', *The Northern Miner*, 6 January 1993, pp. 1-2.

³ 'I saw him, when 17 years of age, give a wonderful exhibition on a bad horse. He rode a horse belonging to the late Tom Burgess in the main street at Torrens Creek, and I expect to see him display his abilities at the next Mt. St. John Rodeo. In my opinion the man who beats him will be champion for 1937', quoted from 'ON THE TRACK', *The Northern Miner*, 6 October 1936, p. 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article81302909>, viewed 24 March 2014.

⁴ 'Vale Don Johnson: Towers mourns loss of "meticulous researcher and writer"', *The Northern Miner*, 6 January 1993, pp. 1-2.

⁵ B. Gamble, *Fortress Rabaul: The Battle for the Southwest Pacific, January 1942-April 1943*, Zenith Press, 2013.

⁶ Torrens Creek Airfield, <http://www.ozatwar.com/airfields/torrencreekairfield.htm>, viewed 9 December 2014.

⁷ Mrs. C. Smith with her sister, Mrs. H. Johnson of Torrens Creek, visited Townsville and Magnetic Island during the week in 'GOSSIP', *The Northern Miner*, 14 January 1850, p. 2, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article83135709>, viewed 24 March 2014.

⁸ 'Vale Don Johnson: Towers mourns loss of "meticulous researcher and writer"', *The Northern Miner*, 6 January 1993, pp. 1-2.

⁹ From the eulogy delivered by Prof. Don Roderick at the funeral of Don Johnson.

¹⁰ 'Faculty Representatives, Law Councillor' nominations list, *Semper Floreat*, vol. 31, no. 7, 12 July 1961, p. 3.

¹¹ 'The Three B's Comedy Group – Union '62, Members of the 51st Council', *Semper Floreat*, vol. 31, no. 8, 4 August 1961, p. 1.

¹² The article entitled 'Palato Perverted' appears to be a satirical comment on a stage adaptation of the novel 'East Lynne' by the University of Queensland's Dramatic Society. The article makes reference to 'the house of Hector Johnstones, a retired army officer (non-commissioned) living at Via Uplandissimus in his villa known as "Anus Mundi"', *Semper Floreat*, vol. 31, no. 6, 20 June 1961, p. 3.

¹³ History of the Defence Reserves – Army, The Australian Army Reserve, http://www.defencereservessupport.gov.au/media/6286/reservesarmyhistory_20110909.pdf, viewed 9 December 2014.

¹⁴ 'Faculty Representatives, Law Councillor' nominations list, *Semper Floreat*, vol. 31, no. 7, 12 July 1961, p. 3. The acronym ORc is unclear to the authors and may relate to other ranks, as opposed to officers.

¹⁵ Glenn Davies, *pers. comm.*; from the eulogy delivered by Prof. Don Roderick at the funeral of Don Johnson.

¹⁶ Donald H. Johnson, 'Gunter, Howel (1844–1902)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 1983, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/gunter-howel-6508/text11167>, and 'Macartney, Henry Dundas (1880–1932)', 1986, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/macartney-henry-dundas-7291/text12645>, both accessed online 19 August 2014.

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- ¹⁷ D.H. Johnson, *Torres Strait to Coral Sea - The Defence of North Queensland*, Townsville, 1992.
- ¹⁸ From the eulogy delivered by Prof. Don Roderick at the funeral of Don Johnson.
- ¹⁹ K.R. Levingston, *Ore Deposits and Mines of the Charters Towers 1:250,000 Sheet Area, North Queensland*, Geological Survey of Queensland Report No. 57, Brisbane, 1972.
- ²⁰ R.J. Morrison, N.J.M. Storey, & C.A.J. Towsey, 'Management of Geological Risks associated with Quartz Reef Gold Deposits, Charters Towers, Queensland', EGRU Contribution No. 62, *Mining and Resource Geology Symposium 2004*.
- ²¹ Transcript of a talk given Don Johnson to a party of American visitors at Ayot House, Charters Towers in 1990, transcribed by Jim Morrison, 2014. A copy of the cassette tape referred to, is in the possession of one of the authors (JM) and was recently converted to digital format and transcribed.
- ²² 'Death of Mr. S. E. M. Charters', *Evening News* (Sydney), 18 May 1885, p. 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article111011148>, viewed 9 December 2014.
- ²³ New South Wales Registry of Births Deaths & Marriages, Death Registration No. 4494/1885.
- ²⁴ Transcript of a talk given by Don Johnson to a party of American visitors ...
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Stublely, Francis Horace, viewed 9 December 2014.
http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/apps/formermembers/memberBio1.aspx?m_id=388,
- ²⁷ 'Fatalities at Normanton', *The Queenslander*, 6 March 1886, p. 368, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article19803731>, viewed 9 December 2014.
- ²⁸ Transcript of a talk given Don Johnson to a party of American visitors...
- ²⁹ Department of Environment and Heritage Protection, Pfeiffer House (former), <https://heritageregister.ehp.qld.gov.au/placeDetail.html?siteId=15185>, viewed 9 December 2014.
- ³⁰ 'THE LATE Frederick Pfeiffer, Esq.', *The North Queensland Register*, 16 March 1903, p. 18, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article82328276>, viewed 9 December 2014; Pfeiffer was reportedly born in 1834/35 in Altenhasslau some 50kms east of Frankfurt-am-Main in Hessen, Germany. Johnson suggests that Pfeiffer is 'German-French' but this is quite some distance east of the border with France and appears to be unlikely.
- ³¹ Rod Kirkpatrick, 'Shooting Folly as it Flies', *Australian Journal Review*, vol. 24, no. 1, July 2002, pp. 99-114.
- ³² Rod Kirkpatrick, 'Unravelling the real birth of the Northern Miner', *PANPA Bulletin*, Issue 251, November-December 2005, pp. 70-71.
- ³³ 'Notes and Events', *The Northern Miner*, 25 July 1874, p. 3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article77040888>, viewed 15 November 2014.
- ³⁴ Transcript of a talk given Don Johnson to a party of American visitors ...
- ³⁵ Don Johnson, 'To Silence a Jackdaw - Gaggling the Northern Miner', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, vol. 15, Issue 6, pp. 299-312.
- ³⁶ R. Kirkpatrick, *The Life and Times of Thadeus O'Kane*, North Queensland Newspaper Company Ltd, Townsville, 2003.
- ³⁷ K.H. Kennedy, 'Craven, Richard (1845-1899)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/craven-richard-5809/text9859>, published first in hardcopy 1981, accessed online 9 December 2014.
- ³⁸ Transcript of a talk given Don Johnson to a party of Americans ...
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ D.H. Johnson, *The Venus Battery and Millchester*, Charters Towers, 1992.
- ⁴¹ From the eulogy delivered by Prof. Don Roderick at the funeral of Don Johnson.