

Discovering Gold in the North: the evidence changes

BY PETER BELL

Most accounts of North Queensland history say the first discovery of gold was made in 1865, resulting in the Star River rush. Geoffrey Bolton, writing the first scholarly history of the region in 1963, described how in September 1865 the business community of Townsville, eager to attract population, offered a reward of £1,000 for the discovery of payable gold in their hinterland:

Results soon followed. Two months later a station overseer named Gibson reported gold on Michael Miles' Star River station about fifty miles west of Townsville. In January 1866 a public meeting at the port voted him £500 reward, and a small rush set in.¹

For two generations since, writers of theses, books and articles on mining in the north - the present author among them - have faithfully reported the inauguration of mining in the region by Gibson's discovery on the Star River in November 1865. As usual, the story was more complicated than that. Only ten days after the reward of £1,000 was offered, George Osborne and Michael Miles reported gold on Keelbottom Creek, but there was no reward paid, for reasons that will be discussed later.² Then in January, overseer Gibson of Star River station claimed the reward, and was paid £500, implying that the Townsville entrepreneurs were only half-impressed by his find.

Attentive readers will have noted the repetition of the name Michael Miles. It seems that one of the early unsuccessful claimants just happened to be the owner of the station where the later successful claimant found gold. However, the threads of the story are already becoming unravelled, because the payable discovery was not on Star River at all. That was where Gibson worked, but the location of his discovery was described as: 'at the head of a small tributary of Keelbottom Creek, about two miles from the junction of Speed's Creek, and between that and Keelbottom'. That puts it close to the route of the Greenvale nickel railway built 110 years later, about 2km south of the feature named Mount Gibson. It was in fact on the adjacent Dotswood station near Keelbottom Creek, although the find was usually given the name of Star River diggings, or occasionally the Cleveland Bay Rush. Geologist Richard Daintree, experienced on the Victorian goldfields, visited the field soon after and identified an extensive gold-bearing area: 'This tract of auriferous country seems to be bounded by the Star River on the one side and Keelbottom Creek on the other'. The Bowen newspaper lamented that 'wealth untold is lying scattered around us, and there is no-one to gather it'.³

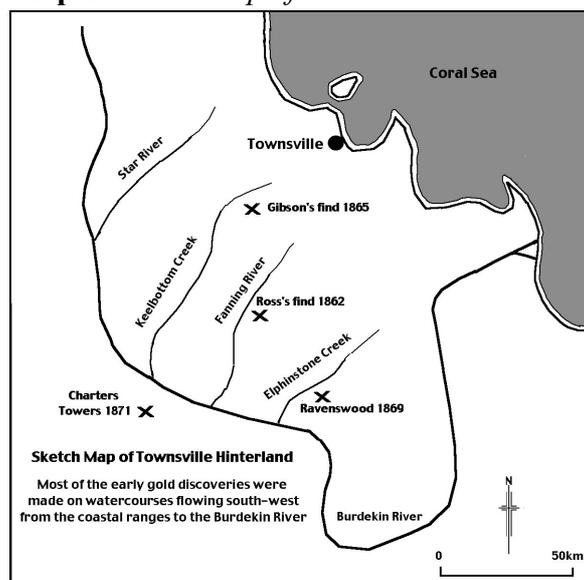
There was a small rush from Townsville, Bowen and other places to the field in the early months of 1866, described by one newspaper correspondent as 'large numbers of diggers from this and even the other colonies'. Their true numbers are unknown, but the rush probably amounted to a few hundred people. The diggings were inaccessible and waterless in that unusually dry summer, and they found very little gold. The same writer

warned that the district was flooded with ‘unemployed and in many cases penniless people’:

The real facts are that men who have been working for months have been unable in some cases to make a bare subsistence, while the most fortunate have not been able to realise sufficient to pay them for their labour. Doubtless there is gold, only there is one fatal drawback, viz, want of water, or rather there is no water at all.⁴

Daintree believed that the country could only be worked successfully by large groups of miners cooperating to build dams, and warned intending miners to come well-equipped for the conditions: ‘I would warn all those who may wish to prospect these districts that a preliminary outlay must always be incurred before an adequate return can be hoped for, as water will be very scarce except for about four months in the year, and that simply a pick, shovel, dish, and hope, are not the only things required for a start’.⁵ By May, all but a dozen diggers had given up, and the majority were to be seen at the stations throughout the district, ‘loafing about, sitting for hours on the rail speculating what to do next’. The Star River rush soon fizzled out, but it had encouraged prospectors to the region, and in rising order of importance, the Cape River goldfield followed in 1867, Ravenswood in 1869, and Charters Towers in 1871.⁶

Map 1: Sketch map of Townsville hinterland.



Source: Cartography by the author.

The much larger Ravenswood and Charters Towers goldfields established the mining industry which dominated the economy of the Townsville hinterland for the next forty years. After its few months of fame, only itinerant fossickers ever visited the Star again; the total gold production there has not been recorded, but must be very small. When Government Geologist Robert Logan Jack visited the field in 1877, he found only one miner working in the bed of Scrubby Creek on the Little Star. Tin had also been discovered on the tributaries of the Star by that time. Jack commented that the diggings ‘have for a good many years attracted a few miners, whose labours have

been fairly, but seldom richly, rewarded’. This situation continued for many decades; the Six Mile diggings, opened near Ben Lomond in 1890 and worked until the 1930s, can be regarded as a late revival of the Star goldfield.

However the beginning of this story is wrong. Gibson was not the discoverer of gold; that had already happened three years earlier. How it really began is a far more complicated story containing some extraordinary coincidences, appalling behaviour on the part of prominent citizens, bad faith, acrimony, a court case, accusations of perjury and a whiff of official corruption.

To understand the history of early mining events in North Queensland, it is necessary to digress briefly into the history of pastoral settlement in the region, because many of the same people were involved in both. European settlement of the North Kennedy district commenced with the founding of the government administrative centre of Bowen on Port Denison in 1861, and pastoral settlers spreading out through the hinterland. The entire district was taken up for sheep and cattle grazing within two or three years, although at first it remained dependent on the distant port of Bowen. Some graziers had already made reconnaissance visits to the region, and immediately the North Kennedy district was proclaimed, two more rival parties set out to select land. One was a syndicate of southern business interests headed by John Melton Black, with associates including William Longshaw and William Ross. They had financial backing from wealthy businessman Robert Towns of Sydney. Early in 1861 they set out from Bowen in search of grazing land, selecting leases on the coastal plain and the Fanning River.⁷ Between 1861 and 1864, the Black-Towns group acquired about seven pastoral leases and established the private port of Townsville in 1864 to service these holdings.

Another expedition had left Rockhampton some time earlier, this one composed of experienced graziers: Christopher Allingham, Edward Cunningham, Philip Somer, William Stenhouse and Michael Miles. They went further afield, exploring the Burdekin, Clarke, Broughton and Fanning river valleys, and each selected land parcels. Cunningham took up Burdekin Downs, Allingham took up Hillgrove, Somer took up Dotswood, Stenhouse took up Niall and Michael Miles took up several blocks on the Fanning River.⁸

The process of registering a pastoral run involved going to Bowen, and lodging an application with the Commissioner for Crown Lands for an occupation licence, stocking the land, and then later applying for a grazing lease. The Commissioner was George Dalrymple, himself an aspiring squatter. On 15 April 1861, Michael Miles had applied for licences for Cleveland East and Rosewood runs in the valley of the Fanning River, and was granted them on 1 July. He had stocked the land with cattle in May. The precise location of those blocks is not certain, but they probably covered the later Fanning River homestead area. There was a period of confusion, with counter-claims by other applicants, including John Melton Black. The outcome was that when Miles applied to convert his licences to leases, they were refused. Black disputed his tenure on the grounds that Miles had not stocked the land in the time that the regulations required. Dalrymple declared the leases forfeited. Not surprisingly, in 1862 the Denham Park run on Fanning River - approximately Miles' Cleveland East - was taken up by Black, to be managed by William Ross.⁹

It is difficult to know what to make of this. It looks like a dispute between two of the dominant factions in the north, the Black-Towns group of city entrepreneurs, and the Allingham-Cunningham group of graziers. The non-stocking charge seems odd, as Miles said he had stock on his land within a month of taking out a licence. In the uncertainty created by the unsurveyed run boundaries, Black had a reputation for aggressively disputing other people's claims, and became known around the district as 'Jumping Jack', as in claim-jumping.¹⁰ But Black had officialdom on his side. It seems that in the dispute over the Fanning River runs, Dalrymple took Black's part against Miles. Events were complicated when Miles sued Black for perjury, though without success. The Bowen

magistrates also took Black's part against Miles. He got a very small revenge by calling the next lease he applied for Perjury Plains.

Which brings us back to the first gold found in the north. In fact, the first gold discovery in North Queensland was made on Fanning River station in November 1862, the same month the homestead run was formally registered by Black. The discoverer was his overseer, William Ross. It was a very early discovery in the context of Queensland history, only four years after the infamous Canoona rush, the first in Queensland, and five years before the discovery of Gympie.

At the time of the gold discovery, Townsville didn't exist and Bowen didn't yet have a newspaper, so there were no local reports of the news, but the *North Australian* newspaper in Ipswich, nearly a thousand miles to the south, reported 'two valuable mineral discoveries in the north country':

The first we shall detail is the discovery of gold in the sandy bed of the Fanning River, which runs into the Upper Burdekin from the coast range. The *locale* is the station of Mr John Melton Black (late of Melbourne), "Cleveland", distant from Port Denison about one hundred and fifty miles. The discovery is due to Mr Ross, partner of Mr Black; and it was he who washed out a very good specimen, a quarter of an ounce of which was submitted to our inspection by Mr Dalrymple, who himself visited the "diggings". The whole neighbourhood is remarkable for the quartz reefs in which it abounds, with other auriferous indications, and Mr Ross is very satisfied that a remunerative gold-field will be proved to exist there. The gold is of a dark colour, nuggetty and rugged, but slightly water-worn, and having all the appearance of recent detachment from its matrix. The largest piece was nearly the size of a pea.¹¹

This earlier discovery is little known because nothing much came of it for over thirty years. Some aspects of the discovery are puzzling. The location is not given, except as 'the sandy bed of the Fanning River'. Yet there are no quartz reefs in close proximity to the river; the closest ones are at Golden Valley, over two kilometres away. The riverbed was never mentioned as a source of gold in later episodes of mining. The name 'Cleveland' is also odd, for at the time the head station of what later became Fanning River cattle station was on Denham Park run. Cleveland East was the name Miles had given the run a year earlier, but Black had re-named it Denham Park. Cleveland Plains was another run owned by Black nearby, but it was on the coastal plain, not on the Fanning River. These discrepancies may simply result from confusion on the part of a journalist nearly a thousand miles away, but with hindsight there is some reason for suspicion about the report. The Black and Towns enterprise later had a pattern of making exaggerated announcements of gold discoveries. Their motivation is not hard to work out, for a gold rush would attract local customers for beef. Yet Dalrymple was no fool, and the gold certainly existed; there can be no doubt that William Ross discovered a small quantity of gold somewhere close to the Fanning River in 1862.

Michael Miles' name has of course re-appeared in our story. Before tracing the outcome of the Fanning River gold discovery, let us sum up what we know about the role of Miles in North Queensland prospecting:

- 1 He owned the pastoral holding where the first northern gold discovery was made in November 1862, but had been forced to relinquish it shortly before the discovery,
- 2 He reported the discovery of gold in November 1864, very soon after a reward was offered, but the reward was never paid, and
- 3 He was lessee of Star River station when the popularly-reputed 'first' discovery was made nearby and named after his property. In fact the discovery was on the neighbouring Dotswood run.

Thus we have three first discoveries, and Michael Miles was involved in all of them! What was going on? Was it possibly coincidence that Miles just happened to be involved in all these events? The most probable answer is that Miles was caught up in a cloud of deceptive behaviour emanating from the Black-Towns group. The crucial economic link between grazing and mining in the north was that a gold rush brought customers for beef. Most of the land around Townsville was not suitable for sheep, so all the stations ran cattle, which were much less profitable. Freezing, chilling and efficient long-distance transport of cattle were all far in the future, and most carcasses were simply boiled down for their fat and hides. What graziers needed was a local market. When Miles and Osborne reported gold on Duabar Creek, a tributary of Keelbottom Creek in 1864, the circumstances suggest that there was more behind their discovery than prospecting. Robert Towns, who had invested heavily in his new port, was backing them financially, and gloated that their goldfield 'will swamp both Port Denison and Cardwell', the rival ports. Most curious of all was that Miles' letter to the Queensland government reporting the discovery was written not from his new goldfield, but from Sydney, where the head office of Towns and Company was located. It would be interesting to know why the committee decided not to pay Miles and Osborne a reward for their very rich-sounding discovery. There seems to have been a feeling in the north that this dubious report of gold was a transparent attempt by Towns to drum up business for his private port.¹²

We do not have enough information to make sense of it all, but some things can be inferred. Although Miles arrived in the north as a member of a rival faction, and had a serious falling-out with Black, he seems to have aligned himself with Towns. It was probably chance that Ross discovered gold in 1862 on land that Miles had just relinquished, although it may have opened Miles' eyes to the potential of mining to create a market for beef. The 1864 gold report seems to have been made in collusion with Towns, and was regarded skeptically by the reward committee. In 1865 there was a real, if modest, gold discovery by Miles' overseer on land adjacent to his holding. Dotswood, the run where the gold was, belonged to Philip Somer, who was outside the Black-Towns group; indeed like Miles he had arrived with the Allingham-Cunningham group. There was no commercial benefit in publicising his land, so Star River was the name given to the goldfield.

Although much of this is mere surmise and suspicion, we have another well-documented case of a grazier not far away intervening in the process of gold discovery. These small gold finds had encouraged prospecting throughout the Townsville hinterland, and in late 1868 there were reports of a new field:

News reached Townsville during the week to the effect that an important discovery had been made on the Burdekin, in the vicinity of Elphinstone Creek and the Roby Range, situated about one hundred miles from town. It appears that some men who have been working in the neighbourhood for a week or two have got onto payable ground, and have sold gold at the stations in order to pay for their rations. They state that they have prospected the Creek for four miles, and obtained a good prospect wherever they sunk. There is a considerable depth of washdirt, and the sinking is very shallow. From what we can ascertain, there seems to be little doubt that the ground is rich and extensive enough to enable a moderate number of diggers to get wages.¹³

These discoveries of alluvial gold were on G.E. Forbes' Ravenswood station on the Burdekin River: 'Gold is being found at Ravenswood, ninety miles from Bowen.'¹⁴ An eyewitness account written fifty years after the events names Thomas Aitken, an employee of Ravenswood run, as the original discoverer of gold. Next door to Ravenswood was the Merri Merriwa run, taken up by the Curr brothers - Montague, Marmaduke, Walter and Julius - with its homestead on the Burdekin River. A party of prospectors arriving from Townsville to follow up Aitken's find were met on the road by Marmaduke Curr - previously experienced as a gold miner in Victoria - who guided them north to other prospects on his family's Merri Merriwa run. His motivation is clear; the Currens were keen to encourage prospectors to explore their land, because a successful gold discovery would allow them to sell beef to the diggers. Richer discoveries were made on Merri Merriwa in the following weeks. The best early finds were on two tributaries of Connolly Creek named Trieste Creek (Lower Camp) and Tucker Creek (Middle Camp). The Upper Camp, which had the main cluster of gold reefs and would become the town of Ravenswood, was discovered slightly later.¹⁵

The Ravenswood Goldfield was gazetted on 3 November 1870.¹⁶ Although all the significant gold discoveries had actually been made on Merri Merriwa run, the name Ravenswood had stuck. Perhaps it had been assisted by the fact that the name was familiar in Australian gold diggers' folklore, because the sheep station where the Bendigo goldfield had been discovered in March 1851 was also called Ravenswood.¹⁷ But Marmaduke Curr's clever plan to attract miners onto the family cattle station proved more successful than he intended; when the annual lease expired in 1872 the government resumed the run because so much of it had been occupied for mining purposes.¹⁸

Back at the original discovery 60 kilometres north, gold on Fanning River station reappeared in the newspapers from time to time. In 1866 there were reports of a rush to the Fanning, but it was hard to make sense of them. 'All sorts of reports are current, and the truth nowhere. I do not believe that a single man knows where he is going...'. These reports may be confusing the Fanning with the Star River even further north, where there was still excitement going on at the time. There were dark suspicions that the Black-Towns group was spreading rumours. One journalist commented, 'We have good reason to suspect that these gilded reports emanate from Cleveland Bay land jobbers'.¹⁹

Similar reports of short-lived rushes were repeated several times. In 1875 came a report that 'a gold discovery has been made at the head of the Fanning River, eighty miles from Townsville'.²⁰

The men who have returned from the rush at the head of the Fanning River report favourably of the district, but deprecate a large rush. The gold is of a mixed description, and the country is very rugged, with granite ridges.²¹

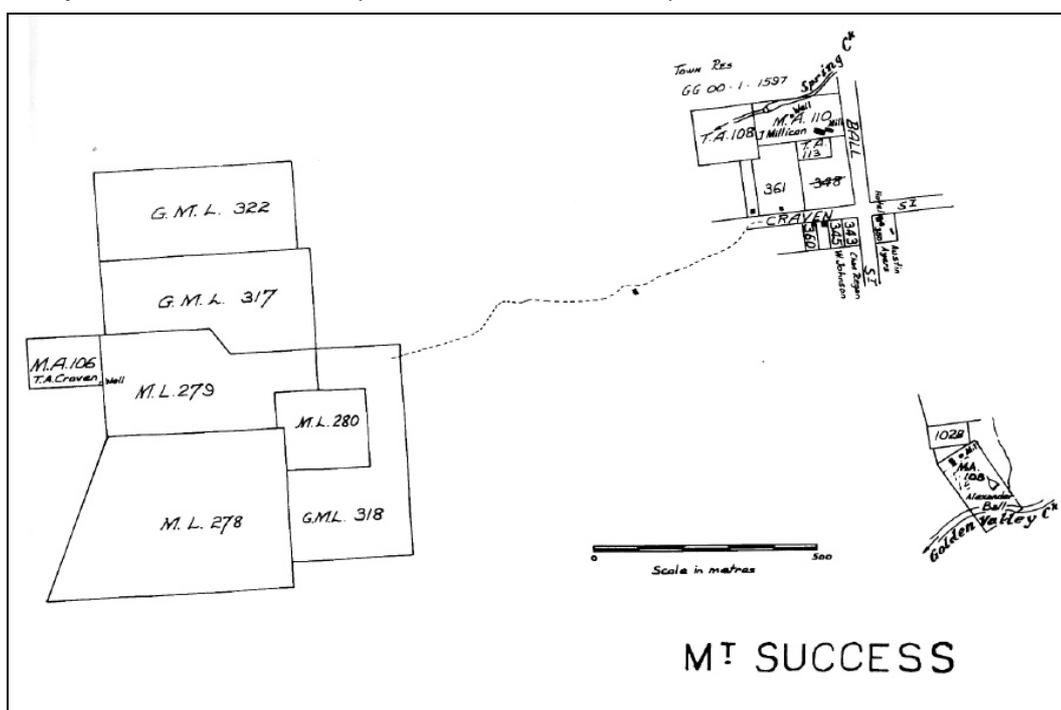
It attracted a few miners away from the reefing field of Charters Towers, and the warden reported that applications for miners rights that month doubled, as prospectors left for the Fanning.²² By the following year the excitement was over, and the warden reported that ‘numbers of men have visited the place from Charters Towers, and left again, pronouncing it a failure’.²³

In 1879 the cycle was repeated. The role of the squatters was once again obvious, for this time the prospector was Henry Abbott, manager and part-owner of Fanning River cattle run. In April there was a new rush from Charters Towers to the Fanning River, where it was said gold reefs had been discovered.²⁴ It was barely a month before the papers were saying ‘The rush to the Fanning River is reported to be a failure, and several miners have returned’.²⁵

The first unequivocal reports of reef mining on Fanning River station began in 1896. In March a prospector called ‘Phil the Belgian’ found alluvial gold at Mount Success, a few miles from the homestead. Miners who followed him found reefs in the granite hills, and ore crushed in Charters Towers yielded two ounces to the ton. There was a small rush for a few months, about 50 people working alluvium and reefs, but they were driven out by lack of water when the dry season came, and the warden reported that ‘the earnings are very poor indeed’.²⁶

In 1897 there were new discoveries in the vicinity of Mount Success [Map 2], and a new reef system was discovered at Golden Valley about two kilometres to the south.

Map 2: Survey plan showing the locations of Mount Success township, gold mining leases, Craven's first and second battery sites, and Ball's battery.



Source: C. Hooper, *Angor to Zillmanton: Stories of North Queensland's Deserted Towns*, Aebis Publishing, Brisbane 1993.

Two ore crushing batteries were built that year. The warden reported, 'Mr Craven put up a small crushing battery to test the Mount Success reefs. It has not proved a success'.²⁷ Thomas Craven was the son of Richard Craven, one of the wealthiest mine-owners of Charters Towers. His five head stamp mill was right beside the Mount Success mines, and depended on a well for its water supply. It must have failed in the dry season, for he later shifted his operation to Spring Creek (now called Battery Gully). Alexander Ball built a ten head mill on Golden Valley Creek and started operating in September.²⁸ The Golden Valley reefs were richer than Mount Success, but much of the gold was in sulphide ore, mixed with iron and zinc and had to be sent to the Pyrites Works in Charters Towers for specialist treatment.²⁹

If the Fanning River gold mines had a heyday, then it was probably 1897. A small settlement grew up near the mines. 'There are two very comfortable boarding houses, and the site for a little township is almost an ideal one, although it is doubtful whether the water supply in the immediate vicinity would be sufficient for a large population'.³⁰ A government surveyor marked out the Mount Success township on a flat area east of the Mount Success mines, although it wasn't gazetted until 1900, when most of the excitement was over.³¹ It had two streets, named Craven Street and Ball Street after the two battery proprietors who were at the centre of the town's economy.³² The town even had a hotel called the Mount Success, licensee Austin Ayers. His licence application described the hotel as

containing two sitting rooms and five bedrooms, exclusive of those required for my family, and having a four-stalled stable, buggy house and harness room etc, and which I intend to keep as an Inn or Public-house.³³

Ayers kept the licence until 1900, but by 1901 had moved to Brookville near Ravenswood.³⁴

A visiting journalist described the settlement in 1898, and he mentioned the link between grazing and mining:

The principal camp [Far Fanning] ... is situated about 35 miles from Ravenswood Junction, from which place there is a very good bush road. Seventeen miles from the junction the Mount Success camp is reached, where Mr Ayres [*sic*] has a very good bush hotel, and where dinner can be obtained.

The battery erected by Mr T A Craven is situated here, and was engaged on Gelling's Golden Valley stone. The stone is heavy mundic, and appears to be good enough for 3oz to the ton. The battery consists of 5-head of stamps, with grinding appliances, and appears to be well equipped.

About five miles from Mount Success is the Fanning Station, the manager of which, Mr Henry Abbott, has expended a considerable amount of capital in developing the mineral resources of the district.³⁵

The hotel was apparently licensed from 1897 until 1900, indicating the lifespan of the town of Mount Success. In 1899 Craven was vigorously talking up the mines, saying that there were 300,000 tons of payable ore, and he was planning to increase the size of his mill to 50 head.³⁶ However, the warden reported that 'mining has seriously retrograded during

the past year'. He described Mount Success as 'nearly deserted', although there was still some activity at Golden Valley.³⁷ By 1900 it was much worse. Both mills and the hotel had closed, and 'Mount Success camp is almost abandoned'. Golden Valley was 'almost deserted' although 'work is still being carried on in a half-hearted way'. Ball had closed his Golden Valley mill and removed it to Ravenswood.³⁸

Craven's mill was described as 'partly dismantled' and the situation there was more complicated. In 1900, with a group of Charters Towers investors, Craven launched a public company, Mount Success Gold Mines Limited, nominal capital £20,000, with the object of buying the principal mines at Mount Success and working them in conjunction with his mill. However, Craven should have had a better lawyer, as a dispute arose over the terms of the transaction, in which the vendors would receive one quarter of the company's capital as payment for their mines. Craven believed the contract meant one quarter of the company's paid-up capital, which was negligible, but the vendors maintained they were owed a quarter of the company's nominal capital, which was £5,000. The Charters Towers court found in favour of the vendors, and the company float was abruptly abandoned.³⁹

The collapse of Craven's company signalled the end of intensive development at the Fanning River mines, although small-scale activity persisted for many years. The warden didn't mention the mines in 1901, and in 1902 described them as 'simply dead'. In 1903 there was 'no work worth notice' and in 1904 they were 'just about the same as last year'. A few men were 'making tucker', that is, earning enough for subsistence, but with no profit.⁴⁰

There was a small revival between 1905 and 1907. Tom Davies took over the Mount Success lease, employing five men and using a portable steam engine to power his winding gear and pump. What was worrying was that the ore being raised at Mount Success now contained less gold, and more copper and silver. Barclay and party were working one of the Golden Valley mines, pumping with a steam engine, but raising ore by means of a horse-powered whim. The warden's notes show how energetically some of these mines had been worked in the early years: the main shaft at Mount Success was down 200 feet (60m). Some of the Golden Valley mines were even deeper: several vertical shafts went to 60m or more, and an underlie (i.e. diagonal) shaft at the Golden Valley No. 1 East was 370 feet (113m) deep. There was a five-stamp mill at work on Spring Creek, presumably Thomas Craven's restored to working order, and there were plans to install a cyanide treatment plant. This was probably an indication that gold extraction was disappointing.⁴¹ Mount Success closed late in 1907, but Golden Valley went on working in a small way until 1915, when the First World War closed the gold mining industry all over Australia.

There were rumours of new activity at Golden Valley in 1919. Machinery was delivered for construction of a new battery, but the proposal was apparently abandoned before the mill was built. There was another brief revival in 1921-22. George Gard and sons took up the Golden Valley No. 1 East, and re-named it the Belinda Extended. They installed a steam-powered winder and pump, and a two-head battery, but by 1923 the field was abandoned again.⁴²

In the decades that followed, there were numerous projects to re-open the Fanning River gold mines. Most involved a single warden's report or a newspaper story, and were never mentioned again. Mining flickered again in 1933 when the Mount Success mine was

re-opened by the North Queensland Gold Mining Development Company, who were also working the Golden Hill mine at Ravenswood. In 1939 a six-head battery was to be erected at Golden Valley. In 1950 Lewis Drake applied for a lease over the Mount Success mines. Nothing seems to have eventuated from any of these proposals.⁴³

Figure 1: Prospectus of Craven's Mount Success company.

PROSPECTUS
OF THE
Mount Success
GOLD MINES, LIMITED.
Ravenswood Goldfield, Queensland.

TO BE REGISTERED UNDER 'THE COMPANIES' ACTS 1863 TO 1892.'

CAPITAL: £20,000 in 80,000 SHARES OF 5/- EACH.

24,000 Fully Paid-up Shares to be issued to the Vendors in full payment for the Property.
50,000 Contributing Shares are offered to the Public at 3d on Application and 3d on allotment.
6000 Contributing Shares are already applied for by the Vendors on the same terms as the Public.

NO CASH TO VENDORS.

The whole of the cash received from the application and allotment money will be placed to the credit of the Company less brokerage and flotation expenses. Should the Company not be floated all application and allotment monies will be returned in full.

CALLS.

It is not anticipated that more 1d per month will be required, and the Articles will provide that not more than 3d per month per share can be called up. Allotment will take place in accordance with priority of application, and the Company will be registered as soon as the shares are applied for.

PROVISIONAL DIRECTORS.

T. AUSTIN CRAVEN, Esq., Mine Owner, Charters Towers.
D. McINTYRE, Esq., Manager Defiance Cyanide Works, Charters Towers.
J. J. CONNOLLY, Esq., Merchant.
E. SILVA, Esq., Commission Agent, Charters Towers.
HENRY GRANT, Esq. (Late of the Pyrites and Preston Cyanide Works, Charters Towers).
D. WINTERBOTTOM Esq., Excelsior Hotel and Theatre Royal, Charters Towers.
LEO. WATKINSON HOWLETT, M.E., Sydney.

Source: *Northern Miner*, 25 August 1900, p. 5.

There has been no significant gold production from the Mount Success mines since 1907, or Golden Valley since 1922. The productive lives of both groups of mines were short. Total production reported at Golden Valley between 1898 and 1914 was 2,227 tons of ore raised, producing 4,923oz of gold, worth £16,350. Production at Mount Success between 1896 and 1907 was much less, 797oz of gold, worth about £2,700.⁴⁴ However, all these figures are conservative, for unknown amounts of ore from Fanning River were railed to Charters Towers mills for treatment, and the gold they yielded was included in the statistics for that field.

William Ross's 1862 discovery did not create a Bendigo or Charters Towers. In the short term it had no impact at all, then slowly led to the establishment of a small goldfield, which produced a few thousand ounces of gold and for a few years provided sustenance to a few dozen families. It created a township and a bush pub, which have now vanished virtually without trace. However, its consequences were far more significant than those of Gibson's find three years later.

The story of Ross and his Fanning River gold was not forgotten. The following year geologist Reverend William Clarke mentioned it in a letter to the Sydney press: 'along the Fanning River, Gold has been dug and washed by Mr Ross, a settler there, and I have a sample of it forwarded to me by Mr Commissioner Dalrymple'.⁴⁵ In the twentieth century the memory survived in reminiscences about the pioneers. 'To Mr W.A. Ross is due the credit of the first discovery of gold near the Fanning River'.⁴⁶ Nearly 70 years after the discovery, an article on Townsville mentioned that its harbour was in Ross Creek: 'This creek derived its name from the fact that it was W.A. Ross, with a party, who discovered gold near the Fanning River'.⁴⁷

So how did Bolton and the other historians of more recent decades, including this author, get it wrong? The answer is simply because of the methodology of research, which changes over time. When Bolton began his research in the 1950s, no historian anywhere in the world owned a computer, and the internet did not exist. Even microfilm was a recent luxury. Research began in libraries, reading yellowing broadsheet newspapers page by page, and taking handwritten notes. But the discovery of gold had been in the proto-historical period, only a year after the first white settlers arrived in the north, and before the region had any newspapers. Instead, it was reported in Ipswich at the other end of the colony, in a paper that saw its role as promoting regional affairs. No one in the 1950s would read an Ipswich newspaper to learn about North Queensland. In terms of geographical distance and relevance, that would be almost like reading *Pravda* in hope of researching the history of Ireland.

With the advent of the National Library of Australia's Trove project, most of Australia's nineteenth century newspapers are now searchable on any home computer. When Trove is asked to find references to gold on the Fanning River, it doesn't ask what newspapers you would like it to search within. The amount of evidence at our fingertips and the speed with which it arrives have both grown astonishingly, and the implications for researching and writing history are enormous. This paper outlines one small discovery in one corner of Australia; we will see many more.

Author's note: the research that gave rise to this paper was done in the course of consulting work for the Department of Defence on sites within the Townsville Field Training Area, which includes the former Star River, Dotswood and Fanning River cattle stations.

Endnotes

¹ G. Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away: a history of North Queensland to 1920*, ANU Press, Canberra 1963, p. 44.

² D. Gibson-Wilde, *Gateway to a Golden Land: Townsville to 1884*, James Cook University, Townsville 1984, p. 57.

³ *Port Denison Times*, 28 March 1866.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24 March 1866.

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- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 28 March 1866
- ⁶ Bolton, *Thousand Miles*, pp. 44-45.
- ⁷ R.L. Jack, *Report on the Geology and Mineral Resources of the District between Charters Towers Goldfield and the Coast*, Geological Survey of Queensland Publication 1, 1879, p. 4.
- ⁸ Gibson-Wilde, *Gateway*, p. 57.
- ⁹ A. Allingham, *"Taming the Wilderness": the First Decade of Pastoral Settlement in the Kennedy District*, James Cook University, 1977, pp. 24-25; J. Black, *North Queensland Pioneers*, Country Women's Association, Charters Towers, c.1930, pp. 25-35; Bolton, *Thousand Miles*, p. 25; M. Cunningham, *The Pioneering of the River Burdekin*, Argus, Rockhampton, 1985; R. Tan, 'Fanning River Station', typescript attached to letter from James Stapleton to Hon Peter Delamothe, 22 January 1964, in North Queensland Collection, James Cook University Library.
- ¹⁰ Tan, Fanning River, pp. 2-3.
- ¹¹ *Cleveland Bay Express*, 29 September 1866.
- ¹² *North Australian*, 11 November 1862, and see *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 1863. The second discovery referred to in the article was copper ore a short distance away, a find that sank without historical trace.
- ¹³ Gibson-Wilde, *Gateway*, p. 57.
- ¹⁴ *Cleveland Bay Express*, 14 November 1868.
- ¹⁵ *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 19 November 1868.
- ¹⁶ H.H.C. Hurlle, 'The Discovery of the Ravenswood Goldfields', *Historical Society of Queensland Journal* 1, no. 6, 1919, pp. 338-340.
- ¹⁷ B. Dunstan, *Queensland Mineral Index and Guide*, Geological Survey of Queensland Publication 241, 1913, p. 851.
- ¹⁸ J. Flett, *History of Gold Discovery in Victoria*, Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, 1970, pp. 217 & 228.
- ¹⁹ Register of Payment of Rent on Pastoral Runs in the District of North Kennedy 1861-1906, Queensland State Archives, TRE 16.
- ²⁰ *Queenslander*, 10 March 1866.
- ²¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 April 1875. The present article does not include activity at what was called the Far Fanning goldfield, which was not on the Fanning River at all, but on Dotswood station about 15km to the north-west.
- ²² *Queenslander*, 24 April 1875.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 15 May 1875.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4 November 1876.
- ²⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 26 April 1879.
- ²⁶ *Queenslander*, 3 May 1879.
- ²⁷ *Annual Report of the Under-Secretary for Mines (AR)*, 1896, p. 90; *Northern Miner*, 29 July 1897.
- ²⁸ *AR* 1897, p. 90.
- ²⁹ *Northern Miner*, 17 September 1897.
- ³⁰ W. Rands, *Report on the Gold Mines at the Fanning and Mount Success*, Geological Survey of Queensland Bulletin no. 8, 1898, p. 10.
- ³¹ *Northern Miner*, 29 July 1897.
- ³² *Queensland Government Gazette*, 16 June 1900, p. 1,597.
- ³³ C. Hooper, *Angor to Zillmanton: Stories of North Queensland's Deserted Towns*, Aebis Publishing, Brisbane 1993, p. 347.
- ³⁴ *Northern Miner*, 26 September 1898.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5 April 1900; *North Queensland Register*, 12 August 1901.
- ³⁶ *Northern Miner*, 8 October 1898.
- ³⁷ *North Queensland Register*, 16 December 1899.
- ³⁸ *AR* 1899, p. 90.
- ³⁹ *AR* 1900, p. 112.
- ⁴⁰ *Northern Miner*, 25 August 1900 & 17 October 1900; *AR* 1900, p. 112.
- ⁴¹ *AR* 1902, p. 100; 1903, p. 101; 1904, p. 95.
- ⁴² *AR* 1905, p. 92; 1906, p. 100; 1907, pp. 101-102.
- ⁴³ *AR* 1919, p. 104; 1921, pp. 89-90; 1922, p. 84; 1923, p. 92.
- ⁴⁴ *AR* 1933, p. 114; *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 17 March 1939; *Northern Miner*, 5 January 1950.
- ⁴⁵ *AR* 1921, pp. 89-90; K. Levingston, *Mineral Deposits and Mines of the Townsville 1:250,000 Sheet Area, North Queensland*, Geological Survey of Queensland Report no. 61, 1974, pp. 11 & 13.
- ⁴⁶ *Sydney Mail*, 2 May 1863.
- ⁴⁷ *Western Champion*, 28 October 1922.
- ⁴⁸ *Sydney Mail*, 14 May 1930.