

Presenting Mining's Past in the Northern Territory

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Mining has for well over a century been one of the Northern Territory's principal industries and a key factor in its social, economic and political development.¹ It is, as a consequence, not surprising that it has an important role in cultural heritage management strategies. This paper is concerned with some of these strategies and, in particular, how the views of individuals, communities and government agencies about Territory mining history are reflected in national parks, museums, and heritage trails.

Nick Merriman observes that 'heritage' has both empirical and transcendental meanings. At the empirical level it exists as 'buildings, objects and landscapes, which have their own existence as material culture' whereas on the transcendental level, 'heritage exists in the form of memories, attitudes and imagination that endow the physical manifestations with meaning'. The public representation of the past, he continues, 'has been the focus for negotiation of local, regional and national identities by competing interest groups'.² 'Cultural heritage tourism', or visiting museums and historic places, provides many examples that support such arguments. It has long been a prime motivation for travel in various parts of the world and in recent decades has grown into a large global industry. This industry, however, increasingly illustrates tensions between tradition and modernity. Challenging issues are methods of interpretation, planning and the relationship between the tourist industry and local communities.³

The Northern Territory includes numerous and diverse reminders of mining that are sometimes of special interest to visitors. Gold was mined in the Pine Creek district from 1873 and later at fields such as Arltunga, the Granites and Tennant Creek. Copper mining took place at Daly River from 1883 with later activity at Tennant Creek. Tin mining occurred at Maranboy between 1913 and 1916. Silver and lead extraction took place at Pine Creek during the 1880s and more recently at McArthur River. The principal area of wolfram mining was at Hatches Creek and nearby Wauchope after 1914. From the 1890s until 1960 almost all Australia's mica came from the Northern

Territory, most being extracted at Harts Range. Bauxite mining has taken place since 1971 at the Gove Peninsula. Uranium mining began at Rum Jungle in 1954, later extending to the South Alligator Valley and Ranger. Manganese mining commenced at Groote Eylandt in 1966.⁴

Since the Territory attained self government in 1978 there has been strong political recognition of the need to develop mining history attractions. Expensive and highly professional Northern Territory Government advertising encourages visitors to see these attractions. Until very recently, however, a primary goal here was to promote a very particular image of Territory history in line with views favoured by the Country Liberal Party (CLP), that was in power from 1978 until 2001. Successive CLP governments championed what Alistair Heatley describes as 'Territorianism', a sometimes aggressively presented sense of regional identity that encompasses statehood and rapid economic development.⁵ There were longstanding conflicts between Territory governments and Aboriginal organisations. Territory history was presented as characterised by excitement, progress and evolving social harmony. Territorians were depicted as the 'true' Australians, rugged individualists who live, as local car numberplates proclaim, in 'Outback Australia'. The Territory, according to the Northern Territory Tourist Commission's 1998 World Wide Web site, was 'the home of the Australian spirit embodied in its people, culture and heritage'.⁶

Arltunga

Many examples of such views can be found in the Territory government's parks. One of the best known of these is the Arltunga Historical Reserve, located in rugged terrain to the east of Alice Springs. Within its boundaries a variety of structures is associated with a gold rush that started in 1888 and had an important impact on the development of the Alice Springs district until the early years of the next century.⁷

Arltunga's visitor centre houses a series of displays outlining the goldfield's history. The centre encourages an appreciation of the goldfield's significance, which, one display board explains, is greatly enhanced by archaeological research. Visitors are asked to think about some of the displays. Besides a large miner's wheel barrow, for example, a sign asks 'Could you push this wheel barrow 600 kilometres?' before explaining that the barrow is a copy of one pushed from the Oodnadatta railhead in

South Australia that carried food, water, mining tools, a swag and some clothes. A large safe, it is explained, was once located in the assayer's room. It held most of the area's gold, 'gold that today would sell for over six million dollars.' An outdoor display allows visitors to 'play miner' and find some gold.⁸

There are two suggested Arltunga tours, encompassing drives and walks. On one of these, the Historic Mines Walk includes two tracks from a parking area. That to MacDonnell Range Reef Mine, provides, according to its pamphlet, 'an outstanding insight into the hardships endured by the Arltunga miners'. Old alluvial workings are seen alongside the track.⁹ At MacDonnell Range Reef visitors can enter an underground mine. They see there 'the seams of quartz that were dug out for the gold they contained' and 'what it was like to work in such cramped conditions'.¹⁰

Museums

As is the case in other parts of Australia, mining is well represented in the Northern Territory's regional museums, most of which receive professional advice and some other support from the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, a government agency. No less than three museums mainly concerned with mining are in the small town of Pine Creek, a couple of hundred kilometres south of Darwin. Another two are at the central Australian town of Tennant Creek.¹¹

The Pine Creek Miners Park, under National Trust control, is an outdoor museum that highlights the industry that has always been the basis of European economic activity in the surrounding district. It includes display boards and various items of mining equipment. Among equipment displayed is very well maintained machinery, including a head frame and stamp battery from a nearby area where the first gold diggings were established in the 1870s. Another National Trust property is the nearby Pine Creek Museum, located in a mainly iron building erected in 1889 to house a mining warden. Among its not always well organised displays are relics of the local Chinese, who for a long time greatly outnumbered Europeans on the Pine Creek goldfield, the recreated interior of a miner's hut and various items of mining equipment. The Pine Creek Railway Station, yet another Trust property, was erected during the late 1880s for a railway that closed in 1976. Its rather curious collection of exhibits includes

a large table covered with disorganised piles of bottles and broken crockery, many of which were illegally removed from the Pine Creek Chinatown area.¹²

Tennant Creek, like Pine Creek, has always depended heavily on mining. At its former Government Battery an ambitious attempt is being made to develop one of Australia's premier mining museums. A local community project, support comes from corporate and government sponsors.¹³ The complex comprises a regional information centre, a working gold stamp battery, a mine, an indoor display area, a nature walk and various buildings and machines with an emphasis on the gold rush of the 1930s. The complex is innovative and attracts many local residents and tourists. Every effort is made to keep visitors interested. An underground mine tour allows participants to encounter a ghost miner.¹⁴ Tennant Creek's National Trust Museum is more modest. Located in a former hospital building, its mining exhibits include a range of machinery, pots, pans and tools and a recreated corrugated galvanised iron miner's hut.¹⁵

Heritage trails

As a means of encouraging tourism and, in particular, persuading visitors to stop at various points, the Northern Territory Government promotes the Territory's major road, the Stuart Highway, as the Explorer Highway Tourist Drive with a very pronounced emphasis on historic places and stories.

Out on the highway you will enjoy a feast of sights and stories that take you back in time to the late 1800s, when hardy and courageous people opened up this amazing country. There are stories of drovers and the laying of the Overland Telegraph from Adelaide to Darwin, connecting Australia to the rest of the world. You will also read about the Afghan camel trains, goldminers and pastoralists who brought their whole families into the Outback without any of the comforts we know today.¹⁶

A key element is the Northern Goldfields Loop, in which the highway towns of Adelaide River and Pine Creek are the gateways to historic mining sites. Information comes in pamphlets and on specially designed signs.¹⁷ The Northern Goldfields Loop is the subject of an extraordinarily detailed brochure, which provides a general history of the area and historical accounts of the principal goldfields communities: Brocks Creek, 'a cultural mix'; Burrundie, 'a short but brilliant career'; Grove Hill, 'heart of the goldfields'. Also included are a timeline, historic photographs, a map, sections on

prominent local figures and visitor information. Particular attention is given to the Chinese. The Loop, according to the brochure, 'is a journey through time – through an area as rich in cultural history as it is in mineral wealth'.¹⁸

Just as important as museums in promoting mining history in Pine Creek and Tennant Creek are special routes designed for drivers and walkers. A promotional brochure describes Pine Creek as 'the only original mining town remaining in the Top End from the gold rush days of the 1870s'.¹⁹ To a greater extent than other Territory communities, nineteenth and early twentieth century buildings are conspicuous in the town's cultural landscape. The Pine Creek Discovery Trail includes many of these buildings, each of which is carefully described in an interpretive sign and a brochure. An example is the nineteenth century Playford Club Hotel.²⁰ Tennant Creek promotes itself as 'the golden heart' where prospectors 'still succumb to gold fever and adventures are still possible'.²¹ A tourist drive there goes to Nobles Nob, once Australia's richest gold mine. The town's heritage walk highlights structures of the 1930s associated with the gold rush era, such as the 1936 Australian Inland Mission building which provided welfare services to miners and their families.²²

Presenting whose past?

Strategies that use the evidence of mining to highlight carefully selected aspects of the Northern Territory's past are obviously based on the need to attract visitors. In the late 1990s the Territory received more than a million visitors each year, three quarters of whom were on holiday.²³ In 1997 almost a third of visitors surveyed described their main activity as seeing historical locations.²⁴ In some parts of the Territory the presentation of mining history is of much greater economic significance than mining itself.

The types of mining history to which these visitors are exposed, however, are quite narrow. Interpretation techniques, even down to the replica miners' huts, are remarkably alike even although Arltunga, Pine Creek and Tennant Creek had rather different histories. Conflict is evident between conserving historic sites and managing museums about those sites. There is strong emphasis on the romance of gold mining, mining's contribution to economic development and aspects of technology. Little if any

attention is given to the mining of important minerals such as copper, tin, silver, lead, mica, bauxite and uranium.

While the standard of interpretation is often high, the overall picture created, almost certainly deliberately in some instances, avoids the considerable conflicts and tensions that pervade much of the Territory's mining history as it is presented in many academic studies.²⁵ It usually fails, in particular, to reflect the role of Aboriginal people. At Arltunga the interpretation only provides scant attention to the significant role of Aboriginal labour. The dispossession of the Warumungu people to make way for mining at Tennant Creek is a very minor aspect of the interpretation at Battery Hill and in the National Trust Museum. The often highly discriminatory treatment of Chinese miners in the Pine Creek district is frequently ignored in local museums and heritage trails. In 1997 a museum curator in the Northern Territory, Glen Dimond, declared at a Museums Australia conference that she and her fellow curators had 'an obligation to avoid hurting people' and were sometimes under 'huge pressure' to keep their stories 'sweet and friendly'.²⁶ In her own case, she was concerned not to offend Territory Chinese people who did not wish to acknowledge extensive anti-Chinese persecution in the past but curators in the Territory have sometimes completely avoided references to other inter-racial conflicts.²⁷ At the national level, one of Australia's most prominent curators, Margaret Anderson, noted as early as 1991 that museum historians in Australia faced considerable opposition in their attempts to present critical exhibitions.²⁸ Critical history is clearly not prominent in the representations of Territory mining I have discussed here.

As mentioned earlier, there has been powerful political encouragement of the notion that the Northern Territory is a frontier for all Australians, a place where history presents Australia as it would wish to be seen. This reflects, as the historian Mickey Dewar points out, the 'expression of nostalgia for a simpler life where the "real Australia" existed out in the Never Never'.²⁹ Residents in and visitors to the Territory interested in experiencing the cultural heritage of mining very frequently encounter such notions, which are much more influential than those found in academic publications.

Endnotes

- ¹ See David Carment, 'Writing the Mining History of Australia's Northern Territory: Past Themes, Current Research and Future Prospects', in *Journal of Northern Territory History*, 7, 1996, pp. 1-8.
- ² Nick Merriman, 'Understanding Heritage', in *Journal of Material Culture*, 1, 1995, pp. 381-83.
- ³ Some of these points are made in Wienda Nuryanti, 'Heritage and Postmodern Tourism', in *Annals of Tourism Research*, 23 (2), 1996.
- ⁴ Carment, 'Writing the Mining History of Australia's Northern Territory'.
- ⁵ Alistair Heatley, *The Territory Party: The Northern Territory Country Liberal Party 1974-1998*, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1998, p. 25.
- ⁶ Northern Territory Tourist Commission Head Office, 24 August 1998, pp. 1-2. See web pages: <http://www.nttc.com.au/pfm/sites/000851/body.html>.
- ⁷ *Arltunga Historical Reserve*, Parks & Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory, Alice Springs, n.d.
- ⁸ David Carment, 'A Relict Goldfield: Arltunga, Northern Territory', in Aedeon Cremin (ed.), *1901: Australian Life at Federation, An Illustrated Chronicle*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2001, p. 46; David Carment, notes and photographs of visit to Arltunga Historical Reserve, 21 July 1998.
- ⁹ *Arltunga Historical Reserve: The MacDonnell Reef Mine Self Guided Walk*, Parks & Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory, Alice Springs, n.d.; Carment, notes and photographs of visit to Arltunga Historical Reserve.
- ¹⁰ *Arltunga Historical Reserve*.
- ¹¹ See David Carment, *A Past Displayed: Public History, Public Memory and Cultural Resource Management in Australia's Northern Territory*, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 2001, chs. 5 & 6.
- ¹² David Carment, notes and photographs of visit to Pine Creek, 27 July 1998; *Pine Creek Railway Station, Pine Creek, Northern Territory*, no publication details.
- ¹³ *Regional Museums Newsletter*, 5, December 1998, p. 1.
- ¹⁴ David Carment, 'Tennant Creek: From Gold to Copper', in Sheena Coupe (ed.), *Frontier Country: Australia's Outback Heritage*, Weldon Russell, Sydney, 2001, vol. 2, pp. 108-111; *History in Action at Battery Hill*, Battery Hill Tourism Complex, Tennant Creek, n.d.; *Sunday Territorian*, 19 July 1998; David Carment, notes and photographs of visit to Tennant Creek, 17 July 1998.
- ¹⁵ *Tennant and District Times*, 24 July 1998; Carment, notes and photographs of visit to Tennant Creek.
- ¹⁶ *The Explorer Highway Tourist Drive from Adelaide to Darwin through the Heart of Australia*, Northern Territory Tourist Commission & South Australia Tourist Commission, Darwin & Adelaide, n.d.
- ¹⁷ *NT Heritage Trail*, Heritage Conservation Branch, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment, Darwin, 1996.
- ¹⁸ *NT Heritage Trail: The Northern Goldfields Loop*, no publication details.
- ¹⁹ *Pine Creek: Gateway to Kakadu Northern Territory Australia*, no publication details.
- ²⁰ *Pine Creek Discovery Trail*, Pine Creek Community Government Council, Pine Creek, n.d.; Carment, notes and photographs of visit to Pine Creek.
- ²¹ *Tennant Creek Region: The Golden Heart of the Northern Territory – Australia*, no publication details.
- ²² Carment, notes and photographs of visit to Tennant Creek.
- ²³ *Australia's Northern Territory: Selected Statistics 1995/96*, no publication details, pp. 6 & 12.
- ²⁴ *Northern Territory Parks Masterplan: 'Towards a Secure Future'*, Parks and Wildlife Commission, Darwin, n.d. [1998], p. 30.
- ²⁵ For a survey of these see Carment, 'Writing the Mining History of Australia's Northern Territory'.
- ²⁶ Glen Dimond, 'Chinese Whispers: ABC Territory', in Ian Walters, Mickey Dewar, Sue Harlow, Jacky Healy, Daena Murray & Barry Russell (eds.), *Unlocking Museums: Proceedings 4th National Conference of Museums Australia Inc: Darwin, Australia, 6-12 September 1997*, Museums Australia NT Branch, Darwin, 1997, p. 159.
- ²⁷ David Carment, 'Making Museum History in Australia's Northern Territory', in *Australian Historical Studies*, 119, 2002, pp. 161-171.
- ²⁸ Margaret Anderson, 'Selling the Past: History in Museums in the 1990s', in John Rickard & Peter Spearritt (eds.), *Packaging the Past? Public Histories*, Melbourne University Press & Australian Historical Studies, Melbourne, 1991.
- ²⁹ Mickey Dewar, 'Frontier Theory and the Construction of Meaning in Northern Territory Writing', in *Journal of Northern Territory History*, 7, 1996, p. 21.