

DARWIN AND THE NORTH COAST



CLIMATE is the main unifying feature of this region. It has shaped the landscape; it has dictated, to a high degree, the pattern of land use outside **Darwin**; and even Darwin owes much of its regional dominance to the lack of competition resulting from a natural environment that presents a severe challenge to a European-based civilisation.

This area has the most sharply differentiated of Australia's tropical wet-dry climates. The Aborigines recognise up to six annual phases based on subtle variations of the two main seasons, the summer 'wet' and the winter 'dry'. Unstable equatorial air masses dominate the 'wet'. From late October, high humidity and thunderstorms are common, building up into torrential downpours driven by northwest winds and the occasional cyclone. They reach a peak in February and die away on the northward retreat of the equatorial air in March and April. Nearly all the year's rain falls at this time, diminishing southward from an annual average of 1500 mm at **Darwin** to 660 mm at Daly Waters. Southeasterly winds follow, dry and mild, spinning off the great high pressure systems of the continent. The land bakes, unwatered, from May to October.

Rivers are ephemeral above tidewater except for the Roper and the Katherine-Daly system, both rising in permanent limestone springs, and all flow to a low coastline and shallow seas, reef-strewn and tide-scoured. In the west the **Victoria River** system dissects stony uplands that grade south and east into undulating plains. A spine of broken, rocky country sweeps northeastward from the Victoria River to the great sandstone massif of the **Arnhem Land** escarpment and southeast from there to border the Gulf of Carpentaria coast. The soils of the region are skeletal or laterised, leached of their nutrients by the fierce storms of the 'wet', hard as stone in the 'dry'. Even the best alluvials on the river margins are impoverished, and these are also subject to disastrous flooding. Where the watertable is high and the site sheltered from dry southeasterly winds, pockets of rainforest occur, with pandanus and melaleuca along the margins of the freshwater creeks: elsewhere, open eucalypt forest with hardy, drought-resistant bloodwoods, boxes and stringybarks predominates. Fire, climate and the ubiquitous termites ('white ants') ensure that millable timber is scarce.

Aborigines found this land rich, abundant in bird and animal life and with fish, turtle and dugong in the northern seas. Aboriginal population density before European settlement was probably as high as anywhere in Australia. Europeans, however, have found the region almost uniformly intractable.

In 1623 the Dutch ship *Arnhem* briefly skirted the eastern shore of the land that bears its name. Then in 1644 Abel Tasman sailed along the whole of the northern coast, charting its outline. For another century the Dutch made occasional voyages to northern Australia, but they were traders who found nothing to trade. The Macassans of their East Indian empire did better, voyaging annually to **Arnhem Land** from before 1750 to 1906 in search of *trepang* for the Chinese market.

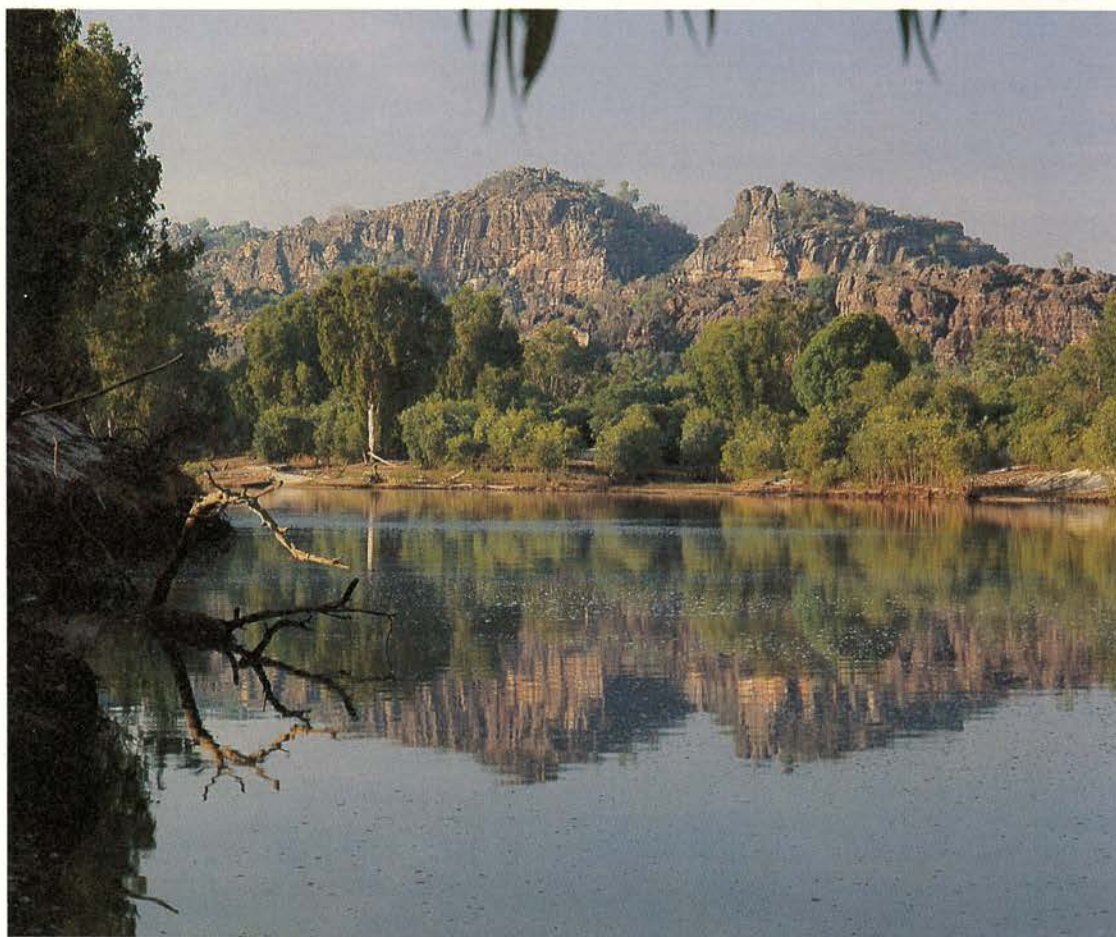
But close exploration and first settlement were left to the British. Matthew Flinders in the *Investigator* (1802-03), Phillip Parker King in the *Mermaid* and *Bathurst* (1818-23), and John Wickham and John Lort Stokes in the *Beagle* (1837-43) all surveyed the northern coast. Three times the British planted military settlements on its shores: at Fort Dundas (**Melville Island**) in 1824; at **Raffles Bay** in 1827; and at **Port Essington** in 1838. These settlements

might have strengthened the British claim to the whole of Australia, but they failed in their primary purpose — to attract the trade of the East Indies — and the last garrison withdrew in 1849.

Meanwhile, Ludwig Leichhardt's party had come overland to **Port Essington** via the Gulf coast and **Arnhem Land** in 1844–45. A.C. Gregory landed at the **Victoria River** in 1855, explored the area and struck eastward for the Roper River and Queensland. Seven years after that, John McDouall Stuart came from the south to reach the northern sea at Chambers Bay.

In 1863 South Australia, knowing no more of the Northern Territory than the contents of the explorers' journals, claimed and received it from the crown. Poor planning and worse leadership doomed the first attempt at South Australian settlement in the north, at **Escape Cliffs** in 1864–67. But in 1869 the surveyor-general, George Goyder, surveyed the site of Palmerston (**Darwin**) and 270 000 ha around it. Within fifteen years the basic pattern of settlement which still exists had been established. Darwin, situated on one of the very few good harbours of the north coast, became the administrative centre and only major port of the Northern Territory. The town's permanence was assured by the coming of the telegraph in 1872, linking Darwin to Britain and the southern cities of Australia, and by the discovery of gold in the stony hills to the south.

By the standards of Victoria or Queensland, the Territory gold rush of 1872–74 was a miserable affair. Harsh living conditions, a fragmented ore body and wild speculation



Kakadu National Park, established in 1979. Photograph by Leo Meier, 1984.

WELDON TRANNIES

ended it almost as soon as it began. But it brought one permanent settlement, **Pine Creek**; the Palmerston to Pine Creek railway; and the first Chinese, forebears of those who have helped to give **Darwin** its present cosmopolitan air. Pearlring, based on the port, added a mix of Malay, Indonesian, Filipino and Japanese blood.

The spectacular growth of the town's population since World War II (from 5000 in 1948 to 63 000 in 1984) has not altered Darwin's role within the north coast region. Defence and tourism have helped its growth, but it is still the commercial, administrative, service and recreational centre for mining projects, though no longer for gold, as well as for a broad pastoral hinterland. **Pine Creek**, however, has been in decline since the railhead moved south to **Katherine** in 1917. The major new mining settlement is **Jabiru**, focal point for the uranium mines of the East Alligator River basin. Much further away and linked to the outside world only by sea and air are Nabalco's bauxite mine and alumina smelter on the **Gove Peninsula** and BHP's manganese mine on **Groote Eylandt**. In each case, the immediate political connection is to **Darwin**, but much of the social and economic stimulus comes from Queensland and the south. Both are pockets of white technological enterprise in a vast area of Aboriginal land.

South Australia had intended **Darwin** to be the centre for thriving tropical agriculture and pastoralism. However, its remoteness, geographic conditions and lack of markets never allowed that. The floodplains of the Adelaide, Daly and Katherine rivers have long supported small farming enterprise, with a success rate ranging from marginal to dismal. Large-scale agricultural enterprise, tried three times between 1954 and 1974, failed entirely when poor management was added to the geographic problems of the north. Hope of an agricultural base for the region is not dead, but new enterprise, stimulated since 1978 by the Northern Territory government and by modern developments in agricultural technology, has hardly passed the stage of experiment. The dream remains.

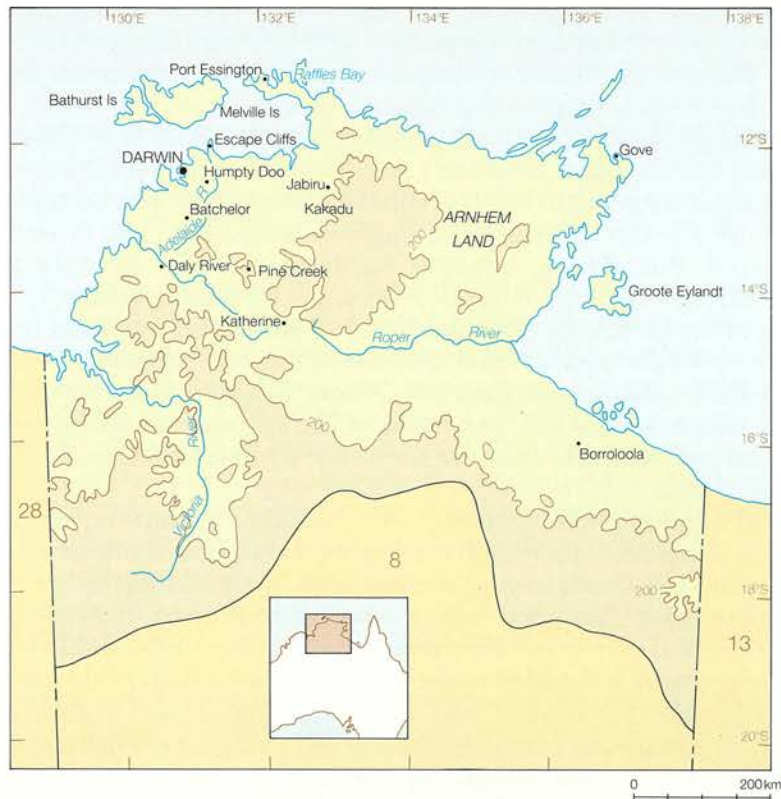
Pastoralism has done better. It has survived. The big cattle stations, ranged across the south of the region from the **Victoria River** basin to the undulating plains of the **Katherine** district and the valleys of the Roper and McArthur rivers, have endured for a full century. Penalties imposed by stock diseases, remoteness, uncertain markets and low carrying capacities, however, mean that even the best of the stations give a low return on capital. Cattle do not thrive on the wetter lands around **Darwin** and the main hope for pastoral development there lies with the current program for domesticating the buffalo that have roamed the area since the British brought their progenitors from Timor to **Raffles Bay** in 1827. Katherine is the pastoral centre with smaller nodes to the south at Mataranka, to the east at **Borroloola** and to the west at Timber Creek. Commercial interests of the western Victoria River district lie in **Kununurra** and **Wyndham** in Western Australia.

The rest is dominated by **Darwin**, the sole port of entry and exit, the capital city and cultural centre of the north, since 1978 the base of the Northern Territory government and home to nearly half the population of the Territory and almost three quarters of that of the north coast region. Given the continuation of high levels of government spending, which have made possible the city's rapid growth, and the starkness of the regional environment, Darwin seems likely to achieve the same pervasive influence over its local region as Sydney and Melbourne exert over theirs. The speed with which the city recovered after World War II air raids by the Japanese and after the devastation caused by cyclone Tracy on Christmas Day 1974 highlights the city's underlying vigour and viability.

Alan Powell

SUGGESTED READING

- D. Lockwood, *The front door: Darwin 1869-1969*, Adelaide 1968.
 J. Makin, *The big run: the story of Victoria River Downs Station*, London 1970.
 P. Taylor, *An end to silence: the building of the Overland Telegraph line from Adelaide to Darwin*, Sydney 1980.



ADELAIDE RIVER [13°14'S 131°06'E]

Popn: 62 (1947), 159 (1961). Discov by John Lort Stokes of HMS *Beagle* in 1839 and named after Queen Adelaide. Abortive early settlements at **Escape Cliffs** near mouth and upstream at Port Daly. Police station by 1880. Attempts to grow rubber, sugar and coffee on banks 1881–86. Recommendation in 1896 for large-scale irrigation project for rice, sugar and indigo, but never implemented. **Humpty Doo** project was on Adelaide R plain: rice growing under consideration again in 1980s. CSIRO research station on middle reaches of river. Rlwy bridge built at town site 1889. Large headquarters during World War II, bombed by Japanese. Only war cemetery on Aust mainland: 432 servicemen and 63 civilians killed in northern Aust buried here.

ARNHEM LAND [13°00'S 135°00'E]

Named by Matthew Flinders after ship of Jan Carstenz expedition who discov coast in 1623. Indonesians, Malaccans and Portuguese might have visited coast as early as the 15th cent. Abel Tasman sailed along coast in 1644, Matthew Flinders charted it in 1803. Land explorers included Ludwig Leichhardt (1845) and David Lindsay who surveyed area in 1883. Pearlery in the 19th cent. Macassan *trepang* trade ended in 1906 due to prohibitive regulations: camps marked by tamarind trees and pottery. Entire area became an Aborig reserve in 1933: location of many important sacred sites and paintings. Area had 8 missions and 3 govt settlements in 1970 with total of approx 7000 Aborigs and European staff. NT

administration bought Paddy Cahill's cattle station in 1916, sold to Anglican Church Missionary Soc in 1925 and developed as Oenpelli, one of major Arnhem Land missions (popn: 508 (1976), 452 (1981)). Other missions include Maningrida (702 (1981)), Milingimbi (564 (1981)), Numbulwar (422 (1981)) and Yirrkala (543 (1981)). Oenpelli area particularly rich in Aborig cave art and with artefacts up to 24 000 years old, but whole reserve has an abundance of significant sites, many on RNE. First scientific account of these by Baldwin Spencer in 1912: work of Norman Tindale in 1928 and the American–Aust Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land from 1948 (under C.P. Mountford) also very important. Narbarlek uranium prospect within reserve explored in early 1970s: govt approval for mining given 1979, mined in one 'dry' season, then concentrate produced from stockpile 1980–81 and yellow cake from 1981.

BATCHELOR [13°03'S 131°01'E]

Popn: 563 (1961), 450 (1966), 308 (1981). Named after Egerton Batchelor, SA politician. Short-lived land boom as SA govt gave blocks away. Some tin and copper mined on small scale. Govt experimental farm estab in 1912. Large Allied air base in World War II, attacked by Japanese. In 1949 Jack White found uranium at nearby Rum Jungle and received a £25 000 reward from the commonwealth govt. Mining project begun in 1952: Batchelor founded as town for miners in 1954 when project officially opened. Ore sent to USA for processing but contracts to supply UK and USA were completed in 1963. Mine closed in

1963, treatment plant in 1971 as remaining ore uneconomic to treat. First discov of high grade rock phosphate in Aust here in 1961–62. Abattoir opened in 1972.

BATHURST ISLAND [11°36'S 130°20'E]

Popn: 895 (1976), 1032 (1981). Named after Earl Bathurst, secretary of state for the colonies, by Phillip Parker King in 1818 when he sailed through strait separating it from **Melville Island**. First known sighting by Abel Tasman in 1644. Roman Catholic mission estab in 1907. Ownership changed from crown to Tiwi Land Council in 1978.

BORROLOOLA [16°03'S 136°18'E]

Popn: 55 (1911), 420 (1981). Name: Aborig = 'tea-tree'. Ludwig Leichhardt crossed McArthur R here in 1845. Surveyed in 1885 as port and centre for **Barkly Tableland** and mining settlements in hinterland. Copper found in McArthur R area in 1891. Once a large Chinese popn. Became almost a ghost town until recent survey for new township following promising mineral finds; may become the world's biggest supplier of lead concentrates. A magnificent library was donated by Carnegie Trust of USA when jokingly asked for reading material: library subsequently kept in local lock-up.

DALY RIVER [13°48'S 130°43'E]

Popn: 430 (1976). Discov by B. T. Finnis and named after Dominick Daly, gov of SA, in 1865. Copper deposits worked from 1882; govt smelter operated briefly c1908. Roman Catholic mission relocated from Rapid Creek near Darwin to Daly R in 1885. Commonwealth govt encouraged settlement in 1911: peanuts and tobacco grown in 1920s. Tipperary Land Corp began commercial sorghum growing in district in 1967, project abandoned in 1973.

DARWIN [12°24'S 130°52'E]

Popn: 3451 (1881), 4898 (1891), 944 (1911), 8071 (1954), 20 413 (1966), 56 482 (1981). Port Darwin reached by John Lort Stokes and J. C. Wickham of the

Beagle in 1839 and named after Charles Darwin. Known as Palmerston 1869–1911.

Under South Australian administration After failure of first settlement of Palmerston at **Escape Cliffs** in 1867, George Goyder, SA surveyor-general, sent to survey new site and Port Darwin chosen: town also named Palmerston after British PM. Govt resident arrived soon after: Govt House built 1870. Northern terminus of **Overland Telegraph** completed in 1872. First newspaper, *Northern Territory Times*, in 1873; Palmerston Council from 1874; first school in NT estab in 1877. Popn in 1874 of approx 600 Europeans and 180 Chinese and Malays; rose rapidly with **Pine Creek** gold rush 1880–1900 (with a Chinese majority), then fell as mining declined. Fannie Bay Gaol (Nat T) built 1882–83. Browns Mart (oldest surviving commercial building), customs office and lands office all built 1883. Pearlring began in 1884. Darwin to Pine Creek rlwy opened in 1889, extended to Birdum in 1929. In 1908 Dutton and Aunger arrived after making the first motor car crossing of Aust from south to north.

Under federal administration NT passed to commonwealth control on 1 Jan 1911 and Darwin (as it then became officially) remained as administrative headquarters. Darwin Town Council estab 1915. Vestey's meat and freezing works set up in 1917, but closed in 1919. Two historic flights arrived in 1919: Ross and Keith Smith from England; and Wrigley and Murphy from Melbourne on first south to north crossing of Aust by air. Amy Johnson landed in 1930 after first England–Aust flight by a woman. Also in 1930, Darwin Town Council resigned as a body as a protest over commonwealth proposals to introduce adult suffrage at municipal elections. First continuous electricity supply in 1932. First regular England–Aust air service in 1934 via Darwin. East Point fortifications built 1936–43 (now in part a war museum); RAAF base estab in 1945. Town Council abolished at its own request in 1937 to be replaced by Town Management Board in 1939. First reticulated water in 1940.

World War II Women, children and non-essential male civilians evacuated in 1941 following Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor: large numbers of US and Aust service personnel remained. First Japanese attack on Aust came with bombing of East Point and Darwin Harbour on 19 Feb 1942: jetty destroyed, 8 ships sunk, at least 243 killed. There were a total of 63 air attacks between Feb 1942 and Nov 1943: many of those killed are buried at **Adelaide River**. Darwin was placed under military administration in 1942 and civilian administration was centred in **Alice Springs** until 1945.

Post-war development Rebuilding continued into the 1950s. Joint airport and RAAF base estab 1945. Incident at airport in 1954 when Commonwealth Police intervened to release Mrs Petrov from her Russian escorts led to her being granted political asylum. Created the first municipality in NT in 1957; became a city in 1959. Steam turbine power station estab 1962; export abattoirs in 1963; television stations in 1971; 2 prawn processing plants in 1972. Darwin Commu-



Geologists surveying the site for the Rum Jungle uranium mine, near Batchelor. Photograph, c1950.

AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES



Darwin Harbour, power station and central business district. The city was rebuilt to withstand cyclonic conditions after the devastation caused by cyclone Tracy in 1974. Photograph by Leo Meier, 1984.

WELDON TRANNIES

ity College opened 1974. Cyclone Tracy hit the city on Christmas Day 1974, destroying the majority of buildings and leaving 66 dead or missing. Large proportion of civilian population evacuated: popn fell from nearly 40 000 to 12 000 but had risen again to 30 000 after 6 months. Rebuilding under control of Darwin Reconstruction Commission. Large numbers of Vietnamese refugees ('boat people') arrived from 1976–77. Old police station and courthouse complex (RNE) of 1884 designed by John Knight also destroyed by cyclone Tracy but restored by early 1980s.

ESCAPE CLIFFS [12°08'S 131°19'E]

Named after escape from Aborigines by two officers of the *Beagle* in 1839. When SA annexed NT in 1863, intended to estab settlement here. Capt B. T. Finnis led party that did so, but 1864 settlement of Palmerston abandoned in 1867 and settlers returned to Adelaide.

GOVE PENINSULA [12°20'S 136°48'E]

Popn: Gove–Nhulunbuy 4400 (1971), 3353 (1976), 3879 (1981). Named after W. H. J. Gove, Aust airman killed in area in World War II. Yirrkala Mission estab nearby in 1934 (popn: 543 (1981)). Bauxite found on Gove Peninsula in 1952. Govt refused to accept initial proposal for mining and Nabalco formed in 1964 to take up lease. In 1965 company agreed to spend \$100m on alumina refinery, port and township as well as mine. Company town of Nhulunbuy built from 1969, has no land links with outside world. First bulk shipment of bauxite in 1971. Aborigines disquiet at min-

ing from about 1963: mounted court challenges 1968–71 on land rights. First stage of alumina plant opened in 1972, plant as whole commissioned in 1974. In the early 1980s 1m tonnes of alumina and 2m tonnes of bauxite exported annually. Under Social Welfare Ordinance royalties on mine production (approx \$1 m per annum in the 1980s) paid into Aborigines Benefits Trust Fund.

GROOTE EYLANDT [13°58'S 136°38'E]

Popn: Alyangula 1181 (1981); Angurugu 597 (1981). Name: Dutch = 'great island'; named by Abel Tasman in 1644. Earlier explored by Jan Carstenz in *Pera* and *Arnhem* in 1623. Circumnavigated by Matthew Flinders in 1803. Created an Aborigines reserve in 1920. Angurugu Mission estab in 1942 to replace one set up in 1915. Manganese discov in 1963; BHP subsidiary Gemco began mining in 1965. First shipment to Bell Bay (see George Town, Tas) in 1966. Manganese now mainly exported to Japan, Europe and USA. Processing plant built 1972. Produces approx 10 per cent of world's manganese (2m tonnes per year).

HUMPTY DOO [12°37'S 131°15'E]

Popn: 1265 (1981). Rice grown in area in late 19th cent to supply Chinese miners. Experimental rice farm estab in 1954 after CSIRO investigation. Territory Rice Ltd received agric leases in 1955–56 of 303 000 ha. Disastrous crop failures because of buffaloes, rats, birds, flooding, poor drainage, saline soils and poor

management led to company abandoning project in 1959 and forfeiting land to govt in 1962. Important agric research station nearby.

JABIRU [12°39'S 132°55'E]

Popn: 1022 (1981). Aborig name for native stork. Uranium discov at Ranger in 1970 and Jabiluka in 1971. Jabiru is residential town for employees at both sites. Commonwealth commission of inquiry into Ranger mining proposals estab 1975, reported 1976–77. Decision to allow mining reached in 1978 when Northern Lands Council signed agreement giving royalties to Aborigs. Processing plant built in 1981: production began then. Only operational uranium mine in Aust in early 1980s. Northern Lands Council signed agreement to mine at Jabiluka in 1982, but govt approval still awaited in late 1985.

KAKADU [13°00'S 132°55'E]

Name: term given to peoples of area by Baldwin Spencer. Creation of 6000 sq km nat pk announced in 1979, as recommended by Ranger Report (see Jabiru). Nominated for World Heritage listing. Park contains vast numbers of significant Aborig sites, including Deaf Adder Creek area (RNE) which has been occupied for at least 20 000 yrs.

KATHERINE [14°27'S 132°15'E]

Popn: 324 (1974), 1302 (1966), 3737 (1981). River named by John McDouall Stuart after daughter of friend in 1862 when he discov it on south-to-north expedition. **Overland Telegraph** line crossed river here in 1871. First lease in NT was in 1876 for Springvale on Katherine R: homestead (oldest remaining in NT) built in 1879 for Alfred Giles who estab station with 2000 cattle and 12 000 sheep driven from SA. Rlwy extended here from **Pine Creek** in 1917: rlwy bridge over Katherine R built in 1928 when line further extended to Birdum. CSIRO experimental farm estab in 1952. Katherine Gorge Nat Pk estab in 1963. Abattoir and meatworks built in 1963, burned out in 1969, rebuilt. Sorghum experiments in area in 1970s.

MELVILLE ISLAND [11°34'S 130°57'E]

Popn: 103 (1947), 554 (1981). Phillip Parker King landed on and named island in 1818 and found Aborigs knew some Portuguese words, presumably learned from earlier visitors. Settlement estab at Fort Dundas under Capt J.J.G. Bremer in 1824, but failed and some settlers moved to **Raffles Bay** in 1827: Fort Dundas finally abandoned in 1829. Buffalo introduced on island in 1826 and multiplied; hunting for hides began in 1890s. Island now an Aborig reserve: ownership changed from crown to Tiwi Land Council in 1978.

PINE CREEK [13°48'S 131°49'E]

Popn: 284 (1911), 83 (1954), 214 (1981). Name descriptive, given during survey for **Overland Telegraph**. Gold discov in 1871, possibly by D'Arcy Wentworth Uhr, an overlander, leading to gold rush. Mining declined rapidly after 1900. In 1880–1910 period,

Chinatown had approx 2000 people, while total popn in district reached approx 30 000. About 15 major mines in the area. Rail built from **Darwin** 1883–89, largely by Chinese labour. Lost rlwy terminus function when line extended to **Katherine** in 1917.

PORT ESSINGTON [11°12'S 132°08'E]

Reached by Phillip Parker King in 1818 and named after Admiral William Essington. Cobourg Peninsula explored earlier by Peter Pieterzoon in 1636, Abel Tasman in 1644, and Matthew Flinders in 1803. Brief (three day) settlement in 1824, but moved to Fort Dundas (see Melville Island). Capt J.J.G. Bremer estab settlement known as Victoria as base for trade with Asia in 1838. Settlement deteriorated and was abandoned in 1849: its popn had never been over 80. Ludwig Leichhardt's journey from **Brisbane** ended here in 1845. Complete structures, cemetery, fencing, jetty and fortifications remain at the site of Victoria (RNE).

RAFFLES BAY [11°18'S 132°23'E]

Named by Phillip Parker King in 1818 after T.S. Raffles. Capt James Stirling was ordered to find alternative site for Fort Dundas settlers (see Melville Island) and landed here in 1826. Settlement known as Fort Wellington set up, but abandoned in 1829.

VICTORIA RIVER [15°10'S 129°47'E]

Reached and named after Queen Victoria by Capt J.C. Wickham in the *Beagle* in 1839. In 1856 A.C. Gregory traced the river to its source and proposed that a new colony of Albert should be estab with capital on river. Alexander Forrest reached river from WA on trip to **Overland Telegraph** in 1879. Victoria River Downs and Wave Hill stations both estab in 1883. Hospital built on Victoria River Downs by John Flynn following malaria epidemic in 1922–23, operated until 1942 by Aust Inland Mission. River used to bring supplies from 1884 to 1930. Gurindji Aborig employees of Wave Hill left jobs in 1966 and staked claim to land on station — beginning of land rights movement. In 1975 3200 sq km excised from lease and returned to Gurindji.



The Stuart Highway, the main street in Katherine. Photograph, c1950.

AUSTRALIAN INFORMATION SERVICE