

THE GULF COUNTRY AND CAPE YORK PENINSULA



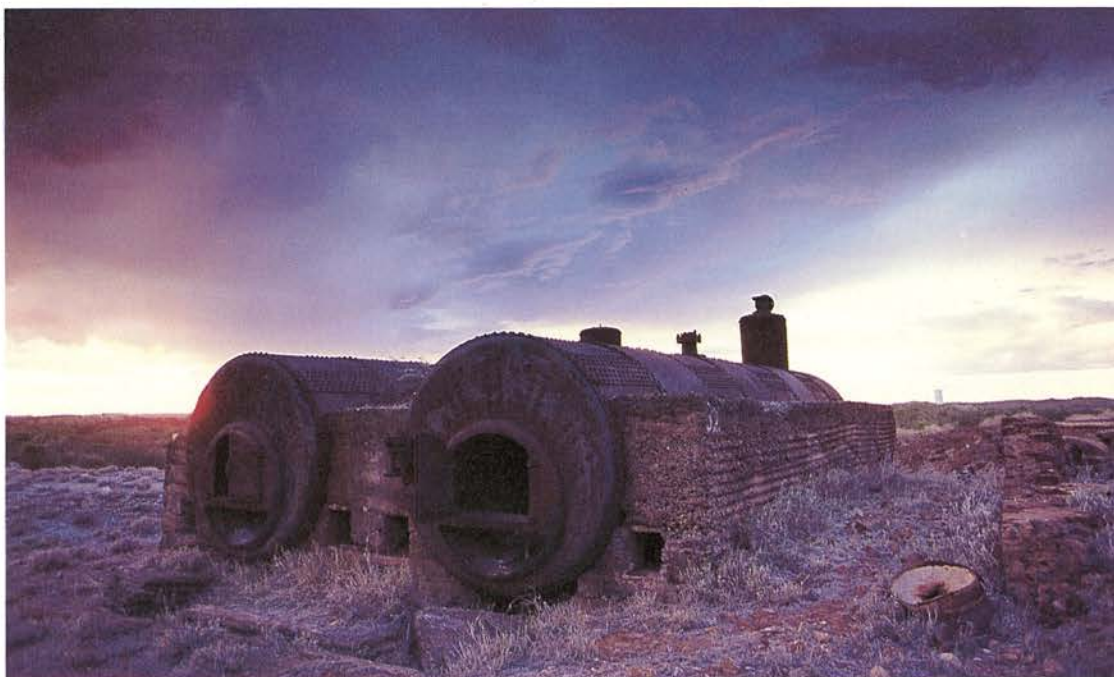
THE FIRST HUMANS who came to Australia might well have arrived in this region. They came to Australia from the north, probably in several separate migrations, perhaps dry-footed on land bridges that at various times during the last million or so years have connected Australia to the islands to the north. Isolated by rising sea levels, they seem to have occupied the entire region, albeit thinly. Hunters, gatherers and collectors, these early people managed to procure a living from the land as it was, something no others have been able to emulate. Aside from changing the vegetation and perhaps the soil in ways not yet fully determined, they altered their environment little. It was into this less than idyllic but essentially stable landscape that Europeans intruded, bringing very different concepts of land ownership, use and development.

As far as can be proven the Dutch were first, the time early 1606, the vessel the *Duyfken* under Willem Jansz. These contacts, made near present-day **Weipa**, were fleeting, unprofitable and unfriendly. Jansz then sailed north past the western end of Torres Strait, unaware that he had discovered a new continent. Luis de Torres found the strait just a few months later, but he might not have seen the Australian mainland and, in any event, his discovery was forgotten. By 1644 the Dutch, having sent two other expeditions to the gulf, had mapped its general outline but, finding nothing of commercial value, they left it alone.

There matters rested until August 1770 when Capt James Cook, after his almost disastrous grounding on a reef southeast of **Cooktown**, coasted the eastern side of the Peninsula at a respectable distance, recording little more than its general outline. He did, however, rediscover Torres Strait. It fell to Matthew Flinders at the end of 1802 to fill in the details of the Gulf's shoreline, and by that time some picture of the body of water upon which this region focuses had emerged.

Transition between maritime and land exploration was provided by John Lort Stokes who, in the winter of 1841, searched for rivers that might give access to the inland. He discovered the mouths of the Flinders and Albert rivers and ascended the latter for at least 80 (river) km. Much impressed with the vast open country, and not having the gift of prescience, he put the name 'Plains of Promise' on the otherwise empty map. Early in the winter of 1844 Ludwig Leichhardt's party crossed these plains heading for **Port Essington**: they had no trouble with the terrain, but the fatal spearing of Gilbert, the expedition's botanist, near the present Dunbar station gave the Peninsula Aborigines a bad name. Edmund Kennedy's attempt to travel overland to Cape York in 1848 suffered even more; only three of the party of thirteen survived. In the late winter of 1856 A.C. Gregory's party crossed the Gulf plains from west to east and gave the first pragmatic assessment of the country, one largely ignored. By mid-century the Peninsula was known as a good place to avoid, but the Gulf country was thought to hold much potential as pastoral land.

Settlement came quickly as a result of enthusiasm accompanying the separation of Queensland, availability of British and Victorian capital and reports of the several parties sent out to search for Burke and Wills in 1861–62. One of these, that of William Landsborough, spoke glowingly of vast, grassy, partially timbered plains south of the Gulf, and by 1863 parties were land hunting in the Norman and Flinders drainage basins. By 1865 much of the downs country had been taken up for sheep and cattle and the first town, **Burketown**, was established. It was soon all but abandoned because of fever and another town,



Boilers from a late nineteenth-century copper mine at Cloncurry. Major mining activity had ceased by 1920. Photograph by Reg Morrison, 1981.

WELDON TRANNIES

Carnarvon, was established on Sweers Island, to be abandoned in its turn with the founding of **Normanton** in 1867. The Peninsula did not share in this expansion. A township, **Somerset**, was founded a few miles from Cape York in 1863 in the vain hope that it would become another Singapore but, apart from the Jardine brothers' trek from Carpentaria Downs to Somerset with horses and cattle in 1864, a feat that served to reinforce the animosity between Aborigines and Europeans, the Peninsula was left alone.

Until European settlement was attempted little attention had been paid to climatic factors, but they then became very important. This part of Australia labours under a markedly seasonal tropical climate in which 80 to 90 per cent of the annual rainfall comes during the warm, humid summer, while the rest of the year is virtually rainless. Such a distribution places serious limitations on activities. Over the region as a whole, rainfall totals range between 2050 mm at Iron Range and 387 mm at **Mount Isa**. Really serious drought is virtually unknown, but natural water supplies for both humans and stock are often short at the end of winter, especially in the headwaters of the Gulf rivers. Such was the case in 1867. At the same time Queensland's first financial crisis dried up credit and put a damper on pastoral expansion.

With heavy falls of summer rain, often the result of tropical cyclones, the low-gradient streams and rivers flood widely, disrupting all surface movements. The summer of 1869–70 was such a season, and by its end the entire Gulf country was all but emptied of stock and its keepers.

The associations of soils and vegetation that developed under these conditions also posed special problems. In general the soils, where not rocky and skeletal, are heavily leached and infertile; very boggy when wet, they become hard and crack deeply when dry. Grasses that provide good pasture for sheep further south grow coarse and rank and are suitable only for cattle, while the prevalence of grass seeds adds to the sheep grazer's woes. Thus the first decade of Gulf settlement forced a reappraisal that has continued ever since. The Gulf country was reoccupied in the 1870s, but with cattle, and much attention was paid to the availability of natural water supplies.

There is, apparently, no place too remote, no discomfort too great and no native too fierce to exclude the gold seeker. Following the discovery of successful fields on the southeastern side of the divide, in 1869 Richard Daintree found payable gold in the headwaters of the Gilbert River, and for the next forty years that incredible mixture of humanity incurably attracted to gold (and reports of it) moved from strike to strike: Etheridge in 1870 (see Georgetown); the biggest of all, the **Palmer River** in 1872; **Hodgkinson River** in 1875; Coen in 1876; Croydon in 1885; Starke in 1890; Wenlock in 1896; Ebagoola in 1899 and the Oaks (**Kidston**) in 1907. The fossicker and miner were the real explorers of the Peninsula and while little of the wealth they dug out stayed in the region, it did bring people, towns, roads of sorts and even 140 km of railway from **Normanton** to Croydon. Some stayed to take up pastoral leases, and thus more permanent settlement came.

Other, baser metals made an even greater contribution. Ernest Henry, the founder of Hughenden in 1864, discovered copper at **Cloncurry** in 1867, and other deposits and minerals were found in the surrounding belt of rough country. Although a smelter was built in 1885 the 'tyranny of distance' levied an impossible charge on the heavy ore and metal: a railway from **Normanton** was begun but was diverted to Croydon. Although Cloncurry had its railway (from **Townsville** in 1908), low prices for copper, bad management, lack of capital and high freight rates prevented the field from returning good profits. On the other side of the region the story was much the same at the **Chillagoe** and Mungana field, although it persisted until World War II.

The greatest mineral discovery of all, silver and lead at **Mount Isa**, was made in 1923; in the late 1920s huge lead and zinc ore bodies were defined and still later, in 1940, even larger copper deposits were found. Mount Isa became, and remains, the most important single mining complex in Australia and north Australia's largest and most cosmopolitan inland city grew up to service it.

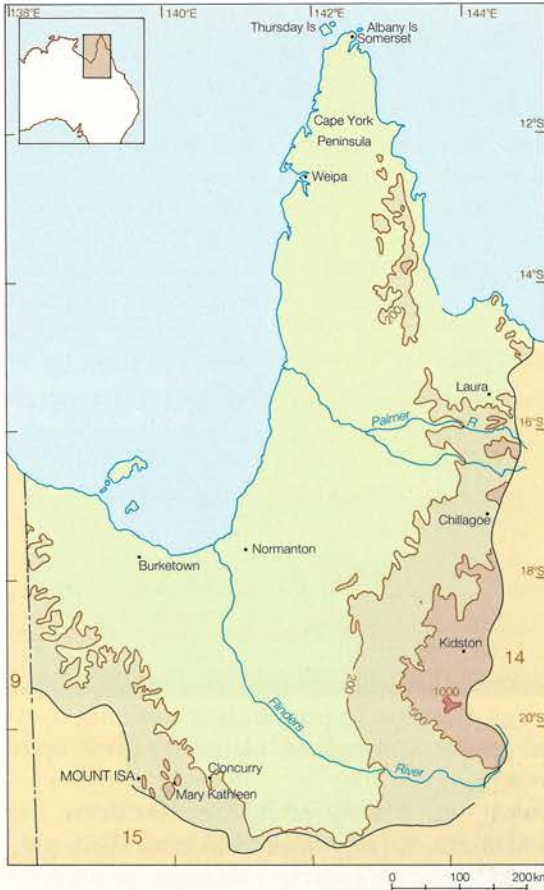
In 1954 a much more controversial metal, uranium, was discovered at **Mary Kathleen**, and again a town and mine, this time with all modern facilities, sprang up to work until 1963, only to be halted to await reopening in 1976 and final oblivion in 1982. In the 1950s note was finally taken of a 1902 report and far up **Cape York Peninsula** extensive manmade hills of bauxite now await shipment from a manmade port at another new town, **Weipa**. Mining has come full cycle, for in 1985 the old, abandoned town of **Kidston** became the centre of the largest and most productive goldmine on the continent.

Other economic activities have been few. Crocodile shooting has had a brief life, and a substantial prawning base has been established at the mouth of the Norman River at Karumba (see Normanton). Tourists, aside from those seeking a genuine 'bush' holiday, have scarcely touched the region. The economy is still based on cattle raising and mining, the one sober and enduring, the other boisterous and flashy, and they have worked well together. Throughout its history distance has been the major element moulding the region's economic development. While the worst strictures of isolation have been broken, it is, even today, a remote land. Still, the disparaging remarks of its Dutch discoverers cannot now in truth be made.

F.H. Bauer

SUGGESTED READING

- F.H. Bauer, *Historical geographic survey of part of Northern Australia. Part 1: Introduction and the Eastern Gulf region*, CSIRO Division of Land Research and Regional Survey, Divisional Report no 59/2, Canberra 1959.
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 G.C. Bolton, *A thousand miles away: a history of North Queensland to 1920*, Brisbane 1963.
 G. Pike, *Queensland frontier*, Adelaide 1978.



Cape named by James Cook in 1770. Probably first part of Aust sighted by Europeans: Willem Jansz in the *Duyfken* sighted Cape Keer-Weer in 1606 and members of his crew landed on the Peninsula. Jan Carstensz also sailed along west coast in 1623. Marine survey of east coast by HMS *Rattlesnake* and HMS *Tam o' Shanter* in 1848. Edmund Kennedy sent to pioneer overland route to Cape York in 1848; only Aborig Jacky-Jacky reached waiting schooner at Cape York. William Hann mapped much of peninsula in 1872. In 1883 John Bradford surveyed telegraph line from Cooktown to Cape York: line built 1884–86. Peninsula opened for cattle in 1864 by Jardine brothers, settlement hastened by Palmer River gold rush and by telegraph. Princess Charlotte Bay hit by cyclone in 1899 and 60 luggers, the entire pearling fleet, and 300 lives lost. All non-combatants ordered off peninsula in 1941. Forward base on peninsula in World War II.

CHILLAGOE [17°08'S 144°31'E]

Popn: 1497 (1911), 124 (1966). Named after run founded by Atherton family in the 1880s on which mine prospect discovered. Copper ore discov in 1888 and led to town development. Many other mining settlements in district, Mungana the most important. Rlwy from Mareeba to Chillagoe and Mungana opened in 1900. Copper, lead and zinc smelters (RNE) opened in 1901, closed in 1914; reopened in 1919 by state govt to treat ore from elsewhere, especially Mungana; finally closed in 1942. Important source of tungsten 1904–18. Mungana mine leases purchased by Qld govt in 1922 leading to political scandal and royal commission. Much prospecting by mining companies in district since World War II.

BURKETOWN [17°44'S 139°33'E]

Popn: 70 (1868), 15 (1871), 265 (1911), 59 (1947), 210 (1981). Named after explorer Robert O'Hara Burke who arrived at Gulf of Carpentaria further east in 1861 after overland journey from Melbourne. Albert R reached by Capt John Lort Stokes of the *Beagle* in 1841 and named after prince consort. Stokes also named the open country the 'Plains of Promise'. Area opened for pastoral settlement in 1864: rush to take up country for cattle runs, partly with aim of curing meat for Dutch East Indies market. Police magistrate William Landsborough and native police landed at town site in 1865. Nat Buchanan and Edward Cornish of Bowen Downs took up large run between Albert and Nicholson rivers: Edkins brothers set up curing works (site RNE) and exported meat and tallow to Batavia (Jakarta) and Singapore. Bowen Downs gave up its holding in the late 1860s. Gulf fever, variously identified as dengue, yellow or typhoid fever and said to have been introduced from Java by visiting ships, took many lives in 1866: site abandoned, survivors relocating to Normanton after temporary stay on Sweers Is. Badly damaged by cyclone in 1976.

CLONCURRY [20°42'S 140°31'E]

Popn: 243 (1891), 2438 (1961), 1961 (1981). Robert O'Hara Burke named river after his Irish cousin Elizabeth Cloncurry; Burke and Wills tree on road to west marked on 1860–61 expedition. Copper traces found by explorer John McKinley while searching for Burke and Wills: prospector Ernest Henry found copper lodes in 1867, opened Great Australian mine. Township laid out in 1876. Further copper deposits to west and southwest discov in 1883. Many battles between Europeans and Aborigs, bloodiest in 1884 against Kalkadoon group at Battle Hill to the north. Hospital estab in 1879, school in 1884, *Cloncurry Advocate* in 1889. Rlwy from Julia Creek opened in 1908. Largest copper supplier in British Empire in World War I, but prices then fell and most major mines closed by 1920. Qantas began first regular Aust passenger flights between here and Charleville in 1922. First flying doctor base of Aust Inland Mission estab here in 1928. US Air Force base in World War II. 'Straw gold' found in 1974. Plan in 1983 for magnetite mining in district.

CAPE YORK PENINSULA [10°41'S 142°32'E]

Cape York Peninsula named Carpentaria Land by Abel Tasman while charting its west coast in 1644.

KIDSTON [18°53'S 144°10'E]

Popn: 456 (1911), 82 (1947). Earlier known as the Oaks. Gold first discov in the 1880s, but location kept secret. Rediscover and gazetted as alluvial field in 1907: 622 000 g produced 1908–11. Several smallholdings

amalgamated in 1915 and open-cut mining until 1921, then in minor way until 1945. Govt battery (RNE) built in early 1920s. Renewed exploration in 1960s and 1970s, mining option negotiated in 1979, mining began in 1985. No town built, headquarters in **Ather-ton**; largest goldmine in Aust by end of 1985.

LAURA [15°32'S 144°27'E]
Popn: 123 (1891), 44 (1933), 116 (1961). Laura R named by Archibald Macmillan after his wife in 1873. James Earl took up run in 1874. Settlement grew in 1870s as stopping-place on route to **Palmer River** goldfield. Men from Laura native mounted police barracks sent to Vic in 1880 to track the Kelly gang. Rlwy opened in 1888 and Laura became the (unintended) terminus for the **Cooktown** to Palmer River line. Many Aborig rock paintings in area, some dating back to 15 000 years ago and often portraying Quinkan or spirit figures: largest known single rock art gallery discov nearby in 1977. Quinkan Reserve to south includes examples.

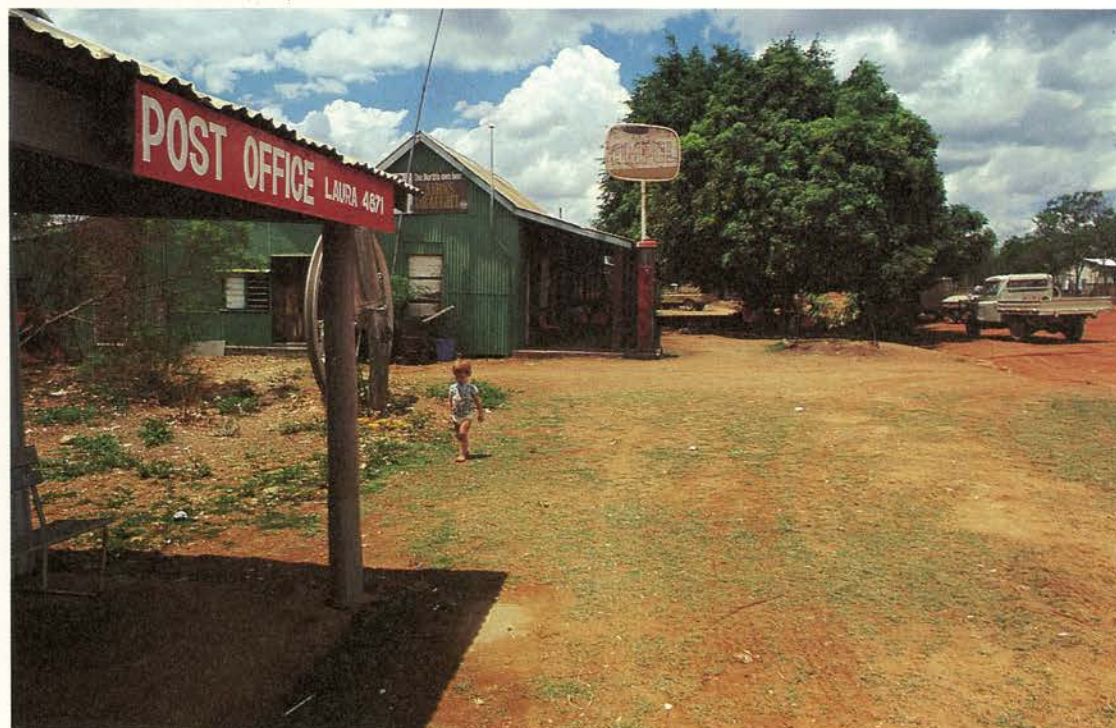
MARY KATHLEEN [20°47'S 139°59'E]
Popn: 982 (1961), 830 (1981). Named after Mrs McConachy, wife of one of discoverers of uranium: she had died two weeks prior to discovery. Robert O'Hara Burke and William Wills in area in 1861. Uranium deposit discov in 1954 and 8-man syndicate formed. Contract to export to UK Atomic Energy Authority signed in 1956. Mining town built in 1957. Uranium produced from open pit between 1958 and 1963. Mine and town placed on care and maintainance

footing from 1963 to 1974, then rehabilitated in 1974–76 when production began again. Town finally closed in 1982, all buildings auctioned in 1983 and all traces of settlement removed.

MOUNT ISA [20°44'S 139°29'E]
Popn: 3241 (1933), 7433 (1954), 16 877 (1966), 25 497 (1971), 23 679 (1981). Discoverer of mineral deposits named prospecting leases Mt Isa, corruption of Mt Ida goldfield, WA.

The early years Copper mined in district from the 1880s, but fields largely deserted after price slump in 1920s. Silver, lead and zinc ores claimed to have been discov by lone prospector John Miles in 1923. Mt Isa Mines Co (MIM) formed in 1924. Initial problems due to isolation and lack of amenities. British investment in 1927 and by 1931 US helped overcome problems. Company's mine opened in 1931, but first profitable yr not until 1937 and first dividend not paid until 1947. Field initially shared with small-scale gougers and other companies. Rlwy opened in the mid-1920s. J.L. Urquhart gained interest in MIM in 1927 and was important in building a company town with low rental homes and necessary amenities including a hospital. Temporary tent houses unique to Mt Isa built 1932–52: two left, one is Nat T. Copper deposit proven in 1942 and developed with govt encouragement due to wartime shortages: blister copper produced 1944–46.

Post-war developments Attention then switched from copper back to silver, lead and zinc. Copper produced again from 1953 when new smelter commis-



Post office at Laura. Photograph by Reg Morrison, 1980.

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sioned. Copper became the main source of profit: ore from Mt Chalmers, Mt Oxide and Wee McGregor mines in district also used. Electrolitic refinery built in **Townsville** in 1956. Deep lodes discov in 1958: now one of largest and most mechanised underground mines in world, though about 2000 men still work underground. Leichhardt R dammed for water supply in 1958 and mill enlarged to become Aust's largest silver-lead-zinc mill. Another large mill built in 1966 and copper smelter replaced in mid-1960s. By 1964 much of old town had been removed as it stood on ore bodies. Mines closed by industrial dispute over wages in 1964-65: martial law proclaimed at one stage. Shire of Mt Isa created from part of **Cloncurry** Shire in 1963; city from 1968. Regional bases for Royal Flying Doctor Service and School of the Air also shifted here from Cloncurry. In recent years has been world's largest single lead producer; second largest silver producer; and in first ten for copper. Annual output has been about 200 000 tonnes of zinc concentrates; 155 000 tonnes of copper; 150 000 tonnes of lead; and 30 tonnes of silver. Total production is worth up to \$300m per year.

NORMANTON [17°40'S 141°04'E]

Popn: 110 (1871), 1251 (1891), 234 (1947), 926 (1981). Explorer Ludwig Leichhardt in district in 1844. Norman R named in 1861 by Frederick Walker after captain of *Victoria*. William Landsborough navigated river and chose site for town in 1867; survivors of gulf fever at **Burketown** moved here. Became recognised as a port for cattle country on Flinders and Cloncurry rivers. District popn peaked at about 3000 in 1891 because of Croydon gold rush. Rlwy to **Cloncurry** planned but built only to Croydon: opened in 1889, use declined from 1907 when Croydon gold depleted. Rail motor introduced in 1922, still running. Boiling-down works operated 1892-94 while meatworks on the lower river operated in mid-20th century. Karumba at mouth of Norman R an important fishing



Interior of Joe's Bar, Thursday Island, c1980.

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port: catching and processing of banana prawns grew from 1965 after govt research in 1963-64.

PALMER RIVER [15°55'S 144°01'E]

Reached and named after Qld chief secretary Arthur Palmer by William Hann in 1872. Gold first discov in 1872, payable colour the next year. Maytown estab as main settlement. Overland route from **Cooktown** estab in 1873, shorter one in 1874. Many attacks by Aboriges on miners and travellers, especially at Hell's Gate. In 1875, 7000 miners' rights issued to Chinese: Tong war at Lukinville, a newly discov field, between Macao and Cantonese groups in 1878. Reefs worked from 1876. By 1877, 17 000 diggers on field. Field eventually declined.

SOMERSET [10°44'S 142°35'E]

Popn: 11 (1871), 187 (1876). Named after Duke of Somerset, lord of the admiralty. In 1863 John Jardine, police magistrate at **Rockhampton** sent to estab outpost called Somerset on **Cape York Peninsula** as defensive and trading post on new sea route. Outpost first on Albany Island, soon moved to mainland. Settlement abandoned in 1879 and moved to **Thursday Island**. Jardine's sons set up cattle station called Somerset near outpost in 1864. Frank Jardine lived at Somerset from 1865 until his death there in 1919, was one of founders of Torres Strait pearling industry.

THURSDAY ISLAND [10°34'S 142°14'E]

Popn: 1418 (1911), 944 (1947), 2551 (1966), 2283 (1981). Believed to have been named by Capt William Bligh. First European settlement when govt outpost shifted from **Somerset** in 1877. By 1883 over 200 pearling vessels based here and new beds being developed: about 1500 employed. CSIRO ran pearling research station from 1948 to mid-1950s, but pearl culture industry ruined by disease in 1970. ss *Quetta* sank nearby with loss of 173 lives in 1890. Fort on Battery Point built in 1891-92 when Russian invasion feared. Green turtle farming attempted, but abandoned in 1980 as uneconomic. Important settlement for Torres Strait Islanders.

WEIPA [12°38'S 141°53'E]

Popn: 110 (1961), 2876 (1976), 2433 (1981). Dutch explorer Willem Jansz sighted coast in 1606: Duyfken Point named after his ship. Jansz mistakenly charted Albatross Bay as Fly Bay. Matthew Flinders commented on the 'reddish cliffs' in 1892. Missionaries Ward and Hay in area in 1891-95. Geologist C.F.V. Jackson mentioned bauxite in area in 1902, but potential not recognised until 1955. Now world's largest bauxite mine and port: reserves of 2500m tonnes will last 250 yrs at present extraction rate. Township planned by Comalco and state govt in 1957, built in early 1960s. First trial shipment in 1960, new port opened in 1962. Calcination plant opened in 1970. Kaolin plant using material underlying bauxite planned to open in 1986.