

## THE WEST CENTRAL REGION

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**T**HE WEST CENTRAL REGION of Queensland is a vast expanse of pasture between the Great Dividing Range and the **Simpson Desert**, its western edge established in 1862 when the colony's western boundary was shifted by three degrees to incorporate the broad strip that would eventually encompass **Mount Isa** in the north and **Birdsville** in the south. It is a land of small to tiny towns, great distances apart: the eastern band of townships stretches from **Cunnamulla** in the south to **Winton** in the north; the western band comprises the **Channel Country** townships from Quilpie in the east to Birdsville in the west, and Boulia in the north to **Thargomindah** in the south. The distribution of the unevenly scattered and meagre population of this region is determined by the course of its rivers, their numerous and changing channels and the waterholes that survive when the rivers cease to run in times of drought. Just as the early overlanders followed the rivers and the waterholes to keep their stock and draught animals alive, so did the early settlements cling to this basic necessity of survival before the resources of the Great Artesian Basin began to be exploited from the mid-1880s.

The opening up of the Central West followed the travels of the European explorers, and they followed the courses of the great rivers (see Channel Country). In 1845 Charles Sturt traced the route of the Mulligan, and gave the name of Cooper Creek to the lower reaches of the Barcoo. In 1846 Thomas Mitchell investigated the Balonne, the Maranoa, the Barcoo and its tributaries; the next year Edmund Kennedy followed the Warrego, established that the Barcoo was an extension of Cooper Creek and named the Thomson; and the following year Ludwig Leichhardt disappeared, possibly near the Warrego. Between 1858 and 1861 A.C. Gregory, Nat Buchanan, William Landsborough, Robert O'Hara Burke, and William Wills further explored the Barcoo, the Thomson, and Cooper Creek. John McKinlay, in search of Burke and Wills, travelled the lower reaches of the Diamantina in 1862; Landsborough, on a similar mission, reached the headwaters of the Georgina. The following year McIntyre followed the lower Barcoo into the Flinders–Cloncurry area, and by the mid-1870s the rest of the **Channel Country** and the land between the Cloncurry River and the Northern Territory border had also been explored.

Exploration was followed by European settlement and the surveyors came shortly after the squatters. By the late 1840s the impetus from the Darling Downs in the east had reached the **Roma** district and some hostile encounters with Aborigines had occurred. By 1862 the Warrego had been reached, and J. T. Allen had brought cattle onto the Barcoo. Settlement spread quickly in the late 1860s, and **Charleville** was surveyed and named in 1868, by which time other small townships were being established in the Mitchell grasslands as the push to the northwest continued. In the southwestern corner of the region the impetus for settlement was to come from the south, in a movement dominated by the Irish. Lands were occupied from the mid-1860s and over the next twenty years scattered townships emerged, held together by a lifeline of grog shanties that supplied the needs of a growing population, never again to be so large.

The rise and decline of specific towns within the whole area is to be explained by changing patterns of transport as camel trains and teams of bullocks and horses gave way to railways and later motorised transport and air travel. Cobb and Co coaches conveyed passengers and mail over most of the settled region from the 1860s. In the early years South Australia

served the needs of **Birdsville** and even **Bouli**, and its influence on the far west has remained strong with the continuing passage of cattle to **Adelaide** as long as the Birdsville Track has remained open. **Broken Hill** has been an alternative link. New South Wales, **Bourke** in particular, was, however, the main supplier for the towns and stations of the west as routes stretched north and eastwards, even as far as **Charleville**. The development of Queensland's railway network changed that situation dramatically. The gradual extension of the southern and central lines brought prosperity to each new temporary terminus and permanently changed the orientation of the western towns from New South Wales towards their own state. By 1888 the **Brisbane** line had reached Charleville and by 1898 **Cunnamulla**. Trade that had gone south to Bourke was now directed eastwards through these centres. Charleville became the centre of an enormous carrying trade and a main supplier of the towns of the southern **Channel Country**. Those of the north could be reached by the railway from **Rockhampton** or even by the northern line from **Townsville**, and the intertown competition for trade dominance was now being fought out within the region as new centres such as **Longreach**, a railway terminus by 1892, emerged. From the 1920s a slowly developing network of sealed roads later increased the catchment areas of the railway towns.

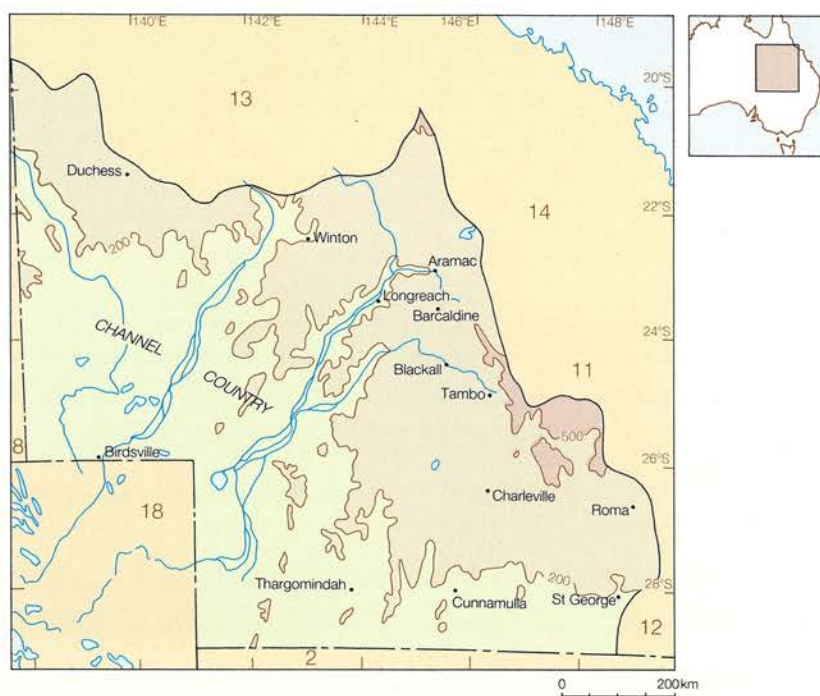
The economy of the region has been dominated by the pastoral industry and occasionally inspired by the illusory and elusive wealth promised by the discovery of opals in the **Channel Country** towns in the 1890s; the unjustified hopes of steady wheat production even as far west as **Cunnamulla**; the tantalising promise of oil and natural gas in strong production in the Surat Basin and elsewhere since the 1960s; or the small sweet wine industry around **Roma**. Sheep and cattle have sustained the economy, from the grazing pastures of the mid-west that so excited Thomas Mitchell in 1846 to the low rainfall lands of the far southwest where desert looms nearby. Pastoralism has been notoriously unstable, an industry of booms and depressions over the decades, with a poor capacity to sustain close settlement of the population, the consistent employment of labour, or subsidiary industrial enterprises in towns beyond the scale of scouring plants, boiling-down works, carriage shops, or blacksmiths.

As the population of the western shires has declined in modern times the region has become the political territory of the National Country Party, an area of large but underpopulated electoral divisions. This is an ironical fate for a region with a historical self-consciousness dominated still by the great shearers' strike of 1891, the contests between the Australian Workers' Union and the United Graziers' Association and the impulse given by trade unionism to the formation of a political party for labour in the days when all seats west of the Great Dividing Range were seen to be there for the taking.

Malcolm Thomis

#### SUGGESTED READING

- G.O. Armstrong, *In Mitchell's footsteps: a history of the Balonne Shire*, Brisbane 1968.  
R.L. Heathcote, *Back of Bourke: a study of land appraisal and settlement in semi-arid Australia*, Melbourne, 1965.

**ARAMAC**

[22°58'S 145°15'E]

Popn: 130 (1876), 639 (1911), 488 (1947), 654 (1961), 428 (1981). Named after Robert Ramsay Mackenzie, premier of Qld, who carved 'R R Mac' on tree in area while exploring for pastoral land in the 1850s: Aramac Creek so named by William Landsborough, who explored district in 1859. Area previously known as Marathon. Nat Buchanan and Landsborough took up land in district at Bowen Downs in 1861: they formed company that went into partnership with Scottish Aust Co Ltd, latter company becoming sole holder in 1869 and celebrating its centenary in 1963. By 1866 there were about 60 people at virtual township on station (1911 popn of 69). Property split into smaller runs from 1872. Aramac station taken up in 1863 by Rule and Lacey. Aramac village founded in 1872. First agric show held in 1886. Rlwy opened in 1913. Artesian water supply for domestic use estab in 1896.

**BARCALDINE**

[23°43'S 146°08'E]

Popn: 2482 (1891), 1829 (1911), 2042 (1933), 1682 (1947), 1779 (1966), 1432 (1981). Donald Cameron named Barcaldine Downs station in 1865 after relative's home in Scotland. Proclaimed a town in 1886 when became terminus of new rlwy to **Rockhampton**; settlement prospered. Headquarters of Cobb & Co's western coaching network: last coach to **Aramac** in 1914, yr after private rlwy between towns opened. In 1891 camp regarded as headquarters of shearers' strike movement set up on edge of town (site RNE): 300-400 shearers camped here. Strike committee arrested by defence force sent to town by govt and 12 given hard labour; two later became MPs, including Tommy Ryan who was elected to Qld parliament in 1892 as first successful endorsed labour candidate in the

world. Claimed as birthplace of Aust Labor Party. Also became headquarters for Qld Laborers' Union, Carriers' Union, and Qld Employers' Assoc (pastoralists' group) during strike. Short-lived co-operative settlement estab at Alice R after the strike.

**BIRDSVILLE**

[25°54'S 139°20'E]

Popn: 77 (1891), 52 (1961). Probably named for number of birds in district, officially confirmed by F.A. Hartnell when he laid out town in 1885. Known earlier as Diamantina Crossing. Robert O'Hara Burke and William Wills passed through area on 1861 expedition. District taken up in pastoral leases in the 1870s. Stockmen's store estab in 1882 where stock routes from **Channel Country** converged; town grew around it from 1885 when Birdsville Hotel (RNE, Nat T) built. 'Frontier town' in the 1890s: 4



*The legendary Birdsville Hotel. Birdsville and Marree, 500 kilometres away in South Australia, mark the beginning and end of the Birdsville Track, once one of the roughest stock routes in Australia. Photograph by John Carnemolla.*

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*A wool team en route from Charleville to Cunnamulla. Australia today, 1906.*

BOOROWA PRODUCTIONS

troopers and 21 black trackers stationed here, partly to quell conflict with Aborigines. Also served as customs post on stock route into SA, the Birdsville Track — now more of a tourist route, but one that has claimed a number of lives. Royal Hotel (built c1882, ruins RNE) acquired by Aust Inland Mission in 1923 for hospital. Town declined with federation and drought years.

#### **BLACKALL**

[24°25'S 145°28'E]

Popn: 43 (1871), 2217 (1961), 1609 (1981). Named in 1868 after Samuel Blackall, gov of Qld when town surveyed and gazetted. District explored by Thomas Mitchell in 1846 when he followed Barcoo R. Earlier settlement estab about 6 km east of present town in 1864. Large pastoral runs subdivided into smaller grazing properties from 1880, 740 000 ha affected by 1886. First bore into Great Artesian Basin sunk here in 1885 for town supply, replaced by new one in 1962. Main western town until rlwy terminated at **Barcardine** in 1886; branch from Jericho to Blackall opened in 1908. Unsuccessful attempts to grow various crops in the 1880s–90s, but reliance on sheep continued. In 1892 Jackie Howe estab still standing blade shearing record of 321 sheep in 7 hours 40 minutes on Alice Downs station. Blackall wool scour built by syndicate in 1906: most complete surviving relic of wool scouring industry in western Qld. Electricity supply connected in 1953, sewerage in 1957. Plans for growth in the 1960s–70s thwarted by recurrent drought. More than 0.5m ha of gidyea scrub cleared and planted with buffel grass for improved grazing in the 1970s.

#### **CHANNEL COUNTRY** [24°00'S 140°00'E]

Named because of the numerous channels of the Barcoo, Diamantina, Georgina and Thomson rivers and

their tributaries and distributaries. Barcoo R explored by Thomas Mitchell in 1846 who named it the Victoria R. Edmund Kennedy sent to trace its course in 1847, found it was upper reaches of Cooper Creek and used its Aborigine name: he also named Thomson R after E.D. Thomson, colonial secretary. First European settlement in district in 1861–62 by J.T. Allen at Eniskillen. Diamantina R explored and named Mueller R by John McKinlay while searching for Burke and Wills in 1862; renamed in 1866 after Lady Diamantina Roma, wife of George Bowen, first gov of Qld. First pastoral settlement of area not until 1873. Much land in Channel Country generally taken up in the 1860s–70s for beef cattle: for example, Durack family took up Thylungra run in 1868. More people in region in the 1880s than ever since: decline followed financial crisis and droughts of the 1890s. In the first decade of this century Sidney Kidman acquired three-fifths of southwest Qld. Access improved when rlwy reached **Charleville** in 1888 and **Quilpie** in 1917. Many smaller towns have declined over recent decades as transport has improved. Beef roads built in the 1960s and early 1970s also important in improving links with ports and meatworks and decreasing isolation. Important oil and gas finds in Eromanga–Cooper Basin since 1981: Jackson to **Brisbane** pipeline opened in 1984.

#### **CHARLEVILLE**

[26°24'S 146°14'E]

Popn: 58 (1871), 1934 (1911), 3460 (1947), 5154 (1961), 3523 (1981). Named after town in County Cork, Ireland, in 1868. Edmund Kennedy passed near town site and explored Warrego R in 1847. William Landsborough explored district in 1861–62. First European settlers in district took up Gowrie station in 1862. Village estab on station in 1865, gazetted in 1868, became

a municipality in 1894. All Cobb & Co coaches built here after opening of factory in 1893; closed in 1920. Rlwy opened in 1888. In the 1890s 500 bullock teams passed through town each wool season to link stations with rail terminus. Ross and Keith Smith landed near town on flight from England to Aust in 1919. First regular Qantas air service from here to Cloncurry in 1922.

**CUNNAMULLA** [28°03'S 145°43'E]

Popn: 45 (1871), 2234 (1961), 1627 (1981). Name: Aborig, probably = 'big waterhole'. Thomas Mitchell passed through area in 1846, Edmund Kennedy in 1847. William Landsborough explored district and Warrego R in 1862. European settlers soon after. James Tyson took up Tinnenburra run in 1867 and it later became largest holding in Aust: opened for selection in 1888 following Crown Lands Act of 1884. Town gazetted and post office opened in 1868. Cobb & Co estab coaching station on eastern bank of Warrego R; first coach from Bourke in 1879. First regular newspaper estab in 1884. Rlwy from Charleville opened in 1898. Last big Aborig corroboree in district in 1910. Many local Aborigs were moved to Cherbourg in the 1930s.

**DUCHESS** [21°21'S 139°52'E]

Popn: 74 (1911), 67 (1961). Copper mine discov in late 1890s, not mined until 1904–06, became richest mine on Cloncurry field. Rlwy opened in 1912. In 1966–67 first major finds of phosphate rock in Aust 32 km to the south: rlwy extension to area built in 1968.

**LONGREACH** [23°26'S 144°15'E]

Popn: 157 (1891), 2511 (1911), 3871 (1966), 2971 (1981). Named for a long reach of Thomson R. Explorer William Landsborough in district in 1861. First cattle in area in 1862. Harry Redford rounded up 1000 head of stolen cattle in district and drove them to SA and sold them; tried in Roma in 1872, he was found not guilty. These events were basis for Rolf Boldrewood's novel *Robbery under arms*. Town grew from teamsters' camp on Mt Cornish run, a subdivision of Bowen Downs (see Aramac). Gazetted in 1887, first sale of town lots in 1888. Rlwy from Barcaldine opened in 1892: link to Winton and Hughenden opened in 1928. Bush Brotherhood of Anglican Church began with estab of Brotherhood of St Andrew in 1897. Wool boom in the 1920s led to town growth. Qantas began operations here in 1921: main booking office here 1921–30; aircraft built here 1925–31; hangar built in 1923 (RNE) still stands. Hospital begun in 1938, finished by US army and airforce when based here in World War II. First flying surgeon in Qld based here in 1959. Stockman's Hall of Fame estab in the 1980s to preserve outback history.

**ROMA** [26°33'S 148°49'E]

Popn: 60 (1861), 1698 (1891), 3157 (1911), 5996 (1961), 5706 (1981). Named after Lady Diamantina Roma, wife of George Bowen, first gov of Qld. Earlier known as Reid's Crossing or the Bungil. Thomas Mitchell explored district in 1846. First European settler

was A. McPherson in 1847 at Mt Abundance station on which town site selected by A.C. Gregory in 1859. First town to be gazetted in new colony of Qld in 1859; proclaimed in 1867. Vineyard planted in 1863 by S. Bassett; state's oldest existing one, still in family and now largest in Qld. Rlwy from Brisbane opened in 1880. Oil discov in 1900; not commercially viable then, but natural gas used to light town for a time. Oil exploration in district in 1950s; natural gas discovery in 1960 led to first commercial field in Aust and local power station was first commercial user in Aust. Connected to Brisbane by natural gas pipeline in 1969. Liquefied petroleum gas plants under construction at Silver Springs and Kincora in Roma district in 1984–85.

**ST GEORGE** [28°03'S 148°38'E]

Popn: 22 (1864), 900 (1891), 667 (1911), 2204 (1981). Thomas Mitchell crossed Balonne R by ford here on St George's Day 1846. Border police patrol stationed near town site in 1859. In early 1860s commissioner's camp here crowded with quatters eager to file land claims. First referred to as town site in 1862, reserved in 1863, first land sales in 1864. Municipality incorporated in 1902. Construction of irrigation weir began in 1948, opened in 1953. Irrigated area since extended, has attracted US interests and grows most of Qld's cotton.

**TAMBO** [24°52'S 146°15'E]

Popn: 83 (1871), 539 (1933), 404 (1947), 586 (1961), 451 (1981). Town gazetted and surveyed on Carrangarra run in the early 1860s, founded in 1862. Began as camping place for carriers with blacksmith and other necessary services. First hotel estab in 1865, became stopover for weekly packhorse mail from Charleville. Telegraph service estab and became main repeating station for southwest Qld. Post office, courthouse and hospital all built in 1882. Early wooden cottages from late 1860s or early 1870s remain.

**THARGOMINDAH** [27°59'S 143°50'E]

Popn: 338 (1891), 96 (1947), 224 (1966). Stopover for carriers taking wool to Bourke for transport down Darling River. Electricity generated in 1893 from what was probably Aust's first hydro-electric scheme: water from artesian bore drove generator.

**WINTON** [22°23'S 143°03'E]

Popn: 625 (1891), 1551 (1933), 1351 (1947), 1784 (1961), 1259 (1981). Named after suburb of Bournemouth, England, birthplace of first European settler Robert Allen (1873). Known as Pelican Waterholes until 1880. Village founded in 1875 when store and hotel estab 1.5 km west of present site — relocated after severe flooding in 1876. Township from 1879, first land sale in 1880. Over 500 shearers camped just south of town in 1891 strike; brick oven used by them remains. 'Banjo' Paterson's 'Waltzing Matilda' first sung in public at hotel here, perhaps based on local events. Rlwy opened in 1899. First meeting of Qantas directors held in Winton Club in 1920.