

The Valley of Lagoons: A Rehearsal for Canberra?

On an English spring evening in 1856 two young men were engaged in an animated discussion in the common-room of All Souls, that Oxford college where, without the distractions of undergraduates, some of Britains' finest intellects devote themselves to research and thought. Failing to reach agreement, they called for the College Betting Book, and there recorded the subject of their disagreement.

‘Scott bets Herbert £5 that the Empress Eugenie is more than five foot four inches in height.’¹

Herbert was Robert Herbert, the clever younger son of a younger son, who three years later found himself bound for Australia as private secretary to Governor Bowen and, for over six years, to serve as Queensland's first and most unlikely Premier. Having the good fortune to preside over a period of pastoral boom, he returned on leave to England in 1862 and there sought out his old friend Arthur Scott with a proposition. Small fortunes were to be made through judicious investment in pastoral properties on the expanding Queensland frontier, and Herbert, through a convenient intermediary, had an option on a splendid prospect. Would Scott be interested in visiting Queensland and coming in as senior partner in the property?²

Scott came. Not quite thirty years of age, he was the eldest of four sons of a rich Hampshire squire whose family had prospered a generation or two earlier as builders and property developers in the western suburbs of London, and who had then followed the classic road to respectability by purchasing an estate and turning

country gentleman.

The property, situated on the upper Burdekin was all that Herbert had claimed for it. It had been first described by Leichhardt during his overland expedition of 1845 [4 May]:

About five miles north-west by west from our camp, we discovered an extensive valley with large lagoons and lakes, and a most luxuriant vegetation, bounded by blue distant ranges, and forming the most picturesque landscape we had yet met with. A chain of lagoons connected by a reedy brook followed the outlines of the tableland along the foot of its steep slopes. Water, grass, hills, mountains plains, forest land; all the elements of a

...a city situated at the Valley of Lagoons might well have anticipated Canberra...

fine pasturing country were here united.³

Raising £51,000 from his father, Arthur Scott became senior partner in the property which came to be known as the Valley of Lagoons. He installed his

Geoffrey Bolton was the 1998 Harold White Fellow at the National Library of Australia and is currently senior in residence at Murdoch University. He has previously held chairs of history at Western Australia, Murdoch, the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (London), Queensland, and Edith Cowan. He was general editor of the *Oxford History of Australia* and 1992 Boyer Lecturer for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. He is currently working on a biography of Edmund Barton.

brother Walter as manager, and himself returned to England with grandiose schemes for the development of his new empire.

As Arthur Scott wrote to his third brother, Charles: ‘You’ll know the way to make a fortune is to find out a want and supply it. Now the great want in England among the Upper Classes is how to dispose of its sons without a great outlay of capital. This is the want which Queensland is adapted to meet.’⁴

An elegant scheme to the ignorant

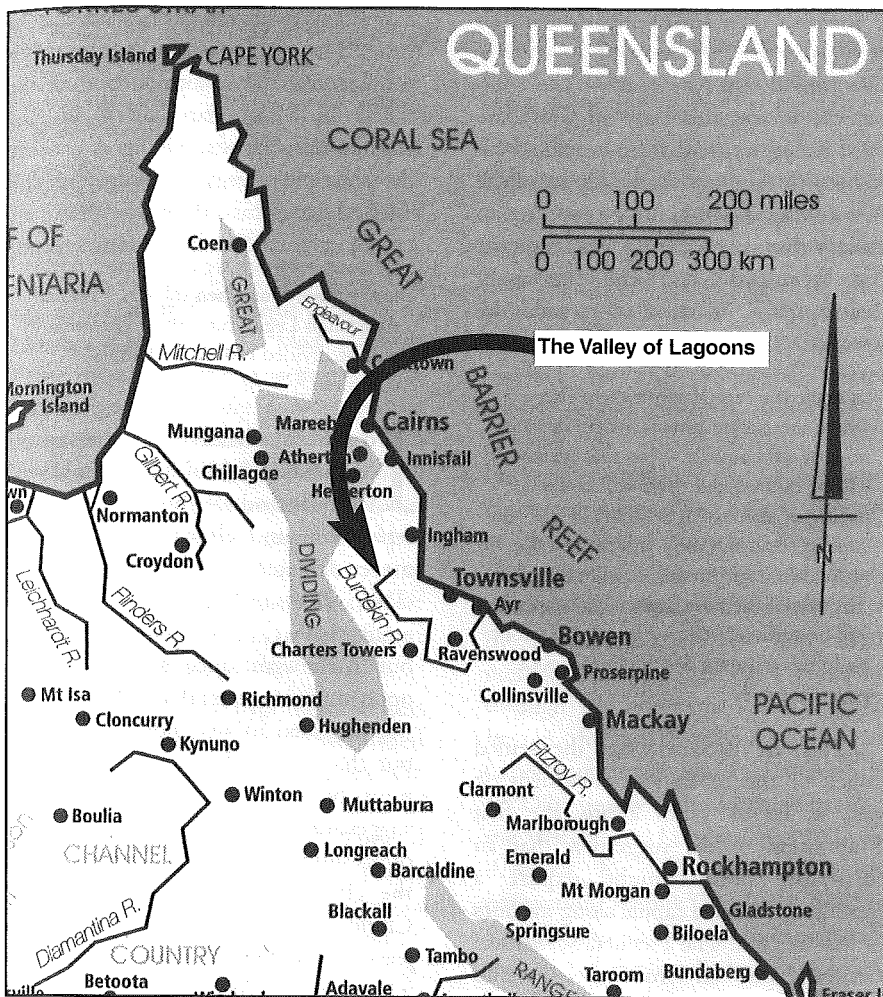
Arthur Scott proposed that aristocratic families should send their surplus younger sons to the Valley of Lagoons to work as jackaroos for three years learning the art of managing a sheep station and in the process building up flocks of their own. During this period they would pay for their keep and tuition and allocate one third of their profits to the Scott brothers. After three years each would be allocated a block of land on the outskirts of the Valley of Lagoons, thus creating in time a kind of White Highlands society of like-minded English gentlemen whose exile would be alleviated by congenial neighbours. It must have seemed an elegant scheme to anyone entirely

1 *All Souls Common Room Betting Book*, Private Printed, Oxford, 1915, April 1856.

2 The Scott brothers enterprise is described more fully in G. C. Bolton, ‘The Valley of Lagoons: a study in exile’, *Business Archives and History*, 4, 1964, pp. 99-116. All extracts from the Scott family correspondence are taken from the Scott Papers, Rotherfield Park, Hampshire, England, and reproduced by permission of the late Sir Jervoise Scott. A microfilm copy is held at the N. G. Butlin Archives, Australian National University, Canberra.

3 L. Leichardt *Journal Of An Expedition From Moreton Bay to Port Essington* London 1847 p.250.

4 Arthur Scott to Charles Scott, 18 February 1865.



ignorant of the environment, the strength of the Aboriginal resistance and the practicalities of pastoral life.

Due to the quality of the Valley of Lagoons country and the perseverance of Walter Scott as manager the venture survived for thirty years, but only at the price of lavish unprofitable investment and the gradual abandonment of Arthur Scott's elaborate schemes. Like the rest of Northern Queensland, the Valley of the Lagoons had to change from sheep to cattle.

As Walter Scott wrote: 'Cattle are certain ruin, but sheep are a little quicker', and during the 1870s the gold rushes at Charters Towers and the Palmer provided a welcome local market for beef. Arthur Scott remained unwilling to give up his plan for developing the Valley into what Walter disparaged as 'a Seminary for Young Gentlemen.' A succession of inexperienced young dudes arrived for supervision by an increasingly exasperated Walter Scott, and the results were uniformly disastrous. Walter Scott's letters

tell the story of a young man named Barrett, he reported:

...a career of stupidity and forgetfulness without parallel, laid poisoned baits one night and never thought of fastening up the Station dogs. He succeeded in poisoning all of mine, three in number, and a favourite and most useful cattle dog of Stone. As he was useless for all station purposes, he is now in the Native Police, where I believe he is far better.⁵

The Duke of Northumberland's great nephew, Edward Henry Percy, fell victim to 'the colonial weakness' and was dismissed:

He is now one of the road-party on the Gap, a pick-and-shovel man at 5/- a day. He has sold all his clothes in Cardwell; and I hear every other man has 'E G H Percy' across the pit of his stomach.⁶

Then there was Bathurst, a baronet's son, who quit after an altercation when he told the head stockman that he was 'not a bloody stockman' and received the reply 'That's what you're paid for anyway.' Waiting for a ship at Cardwell, Bathurst

continued to misbehave:

He and the Banker, Scougall, do not speak now, Bathurst having thrown a banana into Scott's lavish eye for some private reason. He can have no one now to speak to: his last impressions of 'the land of misery' will not be cheerful.⁷

Bathurst was the last of his kind. During the remainder of the 1870's and the 1880's the Valley of the Lagoons functioned as a conventional cattle station, breaking even in good years, accumulating deficit in bad. Because of the Scotts' lavish investment the quality of the cattle was regarded as one of the best in the district, especially by unscrupulous neighbours with branding irons at the ready on dark nights. The Valley of Lagoons was also noted as one of the finest pieces of country, probably the finest on the upper Burdekin. This pre-eminence had unexpected implications for the wider history of North Queensland, to which we must now turn.

Queensland was separated from New South Wales in 1859, just in time to benefit from a major push forward by pastoralists. In the five years of 1861-65 the frontier of invasion and settlement advanced nearly 2000 kilometres from Mackay to the Gulf country beyond Burketown. Cattlemen, sugar planters and goldminers established themselves in the first decade, the sugar industry introducing a contentious element through the use of indentured Melanesian labour — the so-called 'Kanakas' brought more or less willingly from Vanuatu and the Solomons. Almost immediately some North Queenslanders began to demand separation into a new colony. Partly they were simply complaining about remote administration, just as Queensland itself had complained of the parent colony of New South Wales, but the racial factor injected an additional sharpness into the debates over north Queensland separation. After a period of recession during the mid-1870s, sugar shared in the 'McIlwraith booms' of 1879-83, generating a demand for plantation labour from new sources. The original Melanesians were reinforced by Chinese, from the Palmer and Hodgkinson gold-rushes, Japanese, Sri Lankans, even recruits from the islands off that scarcely-opened field of enterprise eastern New Guinea. Liberal politicians responded

5 Walter Scott to Arthur Scott, 7 December 1877.

6 *ibid.*, 22 May 1874.

7 *ibid.*, 15 March 1880.

readily to working-class alarm lest this underpaid alien labour should not be confined to sugar and other forms of tropical agriculture, but might come to compete for their jobs everywhere. The image was projected of tropical Queensland as 'the Black North', where callous employers exploited those of non-European race, regardless of the consequences for working-class living standards, public health or sexual morality.⁸

Separationist feelings revived

In face of such criticism it was not surprising that separationist feelings revived in the coastal towns of North Queensland (though Charters Towers and other inland mining centres, as bastions of white labour, stayed aloof). In 1882 a group of Townsville businessmen and publicists launched a National Separation League. Within three years support for the League swelled to the extent that a petition containing 10,000 signatures was despatched to the Colonial Office in London seeking separation from Queensland. Sagely observing that sugar did not sweeten the tempers of those who grew it, the mandarins of Whitehall refused to take action without the consent of the Queensland government. This was unlikely, as the Premier was now the Liberal Samuel Griffith who had come to power on a policy of restricting alien labour and who legislated in 1885 for an end within five years to the traffic in Pacific labourers. Nevertheless in 1886 John Murtagh Macrossan, one of the members for Townsville, moved in the Legislative Assembly for approval of the separation of North Queensland.

Macrossan, whose background was in mining rather than tropical agriculture, was a logical, thoughtful, and at times an impressive politician. He was well aware that one of the main impediments to North Queensland autonomy was the enduring rivalry between the major ports in the region. Bowen, oldest of the North Queensland settlements but situated on the wrong side of the Burdekin River, envied Townsville. Normanton vied with Burketown. In the circumstances, and although he was

a member for Townsville, Macrossan advocated the formation of an entirely new capital city. As he said in the 1886 debate, it was necessary to overcome local jealousies, and if Townsville were to become temporarily the capital of the new colony, it would not be expected to sustain that role for long as its site was too cramped for the necessary development. Instead it would be sensible

to make the capital somewhere else, where there is no town — where there is no land sold already — so that no one will be injured and there will be no feeling of jealousy in any part of the country. And not only will that be the result, but a further result will take place. The sale of the new lands of the capital will be sufficient to pay for all the public buildings required for the purposes of government.⁹

This, he declared, was the settled policy of the separation movement. It was, as far as I am aware, the first enunciation of the suggestion that an Australian polity might require a specifically planned capital along the lines of Washington. The Premier, Sir Samuel Griffith, was far from receptive to Macrossan's idea:

Well I do not believe that any particular advantage would be gained by taking a spot in the wilderness to start a new capital in. It is a big enterprise to start a new town. Who will be the residents? The ministers and public officers? It will be a sort of Government residency. I am afraid, Sir, that very large salaries would have to be paid to Ministers to conduct business in a place like that. They would not be able to do any other business and there would be a strong probability that the Government would fall into the hands of political adventurers.¹⁰

As Macrossan's motion was defeated by nine votes to forty, the controversy about the capital did not require an early solution. The separation movement, however, failed to go away. Instead it was joined by a second campaign advocating the creation of a colony of Central Queensland based in Rockhampton. By the time Griffith became Premier for the second time in 1890, this time in coalition with his old rival McIlwraith, he

had changed his mind on a number of issues. He was, for instance, prepared to countenance the re-introduction of the traffic in Melanesian labour. To the Separationists he was willing to concede the principle of regional budgeting, and asserted, almost as a throwaway line:

Of course I think we may almost take it for granted that when there is a Federal Australian Legislature [that] Queensland will be divided into at least three colonies.¹¹

In these changed circumstances Macrossan in 1890 was emboldened to re-introduce his proposal for separation, and although it was once more defeated, the margin was far closer: 26 votes against 32. Few new arguments were canvassed in the debate, but Macrossan once again took the opportunity to stress that separation was not intended to aggrandise Townsville, but that a entirely new inland capital must be built. He himself made no suggestions during the debate, but one of his supporters, John Hamilton, urged the claims of the hinterland behind Cairns, albeit in terms so vague as to leave it unclear as to whether he was advocating the Atherton Tablelands or a position in the ranges around Kuranda:

It is accessible on account of the railway; it is 3,000 feet above the level of the sea; the scenery is unrivalled. The Barron River can be seen winding its silvery course thousands of feet below the ranges, and there is the best agricultural land there in the North, in fact it is the garden of Queensland.¹²

But Macrossan had his own alternative. He also favoured an inland site because of the defence factor. A capital city on the coast was in danger of bombardment by hostile warships. (Here he renewed the consideration going back at least as far as Captain James Stirling, founder of the colony of Western Australia in 1829: Stirling decided against establishing the centre of government at or near Fremantle because of its vulnerability to naval attack, preferring instead the site of the current city of Perth — which incidentally offered far more convenient access to his own land holdings in the Swan Valley). Macrossan

8 For a further account of these issues see G. C. Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away: A History of North Queensland to 1920*, ANU Press, 1963.

9 *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xlix, 20 August 1886, pp. 441-2.

10 *ibid.*, p. 452.

11 *ibid.*, lxii, 1890, p. 994.

12 *ibid.*, p. 1087.

on one occasion nominated the Valley of Lagoons as an ideal spot. Possibly he was put in mind of it because the managing partner, Walter Scott, died in June 1890 and it was widely and accurately reported that before long the property would be up for sale. It also counted that, nearly half a century after Leichhardt's original praises, the Valley of Lagoons was still regarded as one of the most picturesque localities in North Queensland. Had North Queensland become a self-governing colony, and eventually a State in the Australian Commonwealth, and had Macrossan become its first Premier, as he very well might have been, a city situated at the Valley of Lagoons might well have anticipated Canberra as the prototype of a custom-built capital designed to deflect rivalries among longer-established commercial centres.

Of course the hypothesis is open to objections. Macrossan died in 1891 while attending the first Federal Convention. Deprived of his leadership, the North Queensland separation movement lost impetus, particularly after Griffith as premier artfully procrastinated in providing measures of local devolution. Moreover, Queensland stayed aloof from the campaigns and negotiations of the

Federal movement in 1897-98, and there is no direct evidence during those years of any awareness during the debates of the possible location of a Federal capital on the North Queensland precedent. One indirect possibility may repay exploration. The compromise by which it was decided that the Federal capital should be at a location in New South Wales at least 100 miles (160 km) from Sydney was reached at the so-called 'secret' conference of Premiers in January 1899. Among its members was James Dickson, premier of Queensland, representing his colony for the first time at any of the national forums on Federation. Dickson has not come down to posterity as one of the heroes of the Federation movement. An elderly merchant pitched into the Premiership through the unexpected death of T.J. Brynes, he was unpopular with the Labor movement who caricatured him as 'Oily Jimmy'. He is remembered as the delegate to London in 1900 who deserted his colleagues over the contentious section 74 restricting Privy Council appeals. He was fortunate to be included in the first Federal cabinet and receive his knighthood the week before he died.

But it is just possible that Canberra may be his monument, and that his name deserves its place of honour among Canberra's inner suburbs. Dickson had been present in the Queensland Legislative Assembly in 1886 when Macrossan introduced his original motion for Separation, and, as a member of Griffith's front bench, he spoke in the debate. He must have remembered Macrossan's compromise formula for settling the rivalry between North Queensland's older established parts by establishing an entirely new capital in a beautiful inland site. He would have been uniquely well placed, in his suave and diplomatic way, to bring forward the concept, suitably adapted, as a means of resolving the debate over the location of the federal capital. Lacking documentation, one can put the possibility no stronger. Remembering Leichhardt's original description of the Valley of Lagoons: water, grass, hills, mountains, plains, forest land; all the elements of a fine pasturing country were here united — it is difficult not to be reminded of the Molonglo valley, and perhaps to identify one clue in unravelling the skein of circumstances which led eventually to Canberra.