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“A Land of Great Silences”

Histories of Northern and Regional Australia

Introduction

Embarking on an epic quest from Melbourne to Arnhem Land in 1910, explorer John Stuart Love described northern Australia as a “land of great silences; of wide, unpeopled spaces; of far-off”¹. The vivid imagery reflected the relatively undeveloped nature of the north in terms of people and infrastructure - a stark reality that has haunted, daunted and inspired many Australians right up to the present day. Love’s description also serves as an apt metaphor for the historiography of northern and regional Australia. Since colonisation, the majority of Australians and the majority of Australian historians have lived and worked in the south-east of the continent. Northern and regional Australia have been the focus of some significant research but it remains a land of great silences with many of its stories yet to be told. This special issue of the ‘Zeitschrift für Australienstudien | Australian Studies Journal’ makes some small effort to break this silence.

This special issue is intended to be a lasting outcome of the 2025 Australian Historical Association conference hosted by James Cook University (JCU) and Central Queensland University (CQUniversity) between 30 June and 3 July. The event took place in Townsville, Queensland, representing the first time the peak event for Australian historians had taken place in northern Australia for 30 years. One of the conference streams focused on histories of northern and regional Australia and the articles in this special issue come from those papers. While the broad theme is northern and regional Australia, the focus of the articles is generally on Northern Queensland. In this edition, we define ‘Northern Queensland’ as those parts of Queensland which are north of the Tropic of Capricorn. There is just the one article venturing as far south as the Boyne Valley in Central Queensland - still 500 kilometres north of Brisbane.

In addition to nine articles, this special issue contains an essay on the writing of northern Australian history, focusing on a dynamic period of scholarship in the History department of James Cook University. Taken as a whole, the research presented here demonstrates the variety of ways governments and citizens have tried to develop the ‘neglected north’.

The contributors in this issue of the journal are often building upon academic work on Northern Queensland that has emerged since the 1960s. Geoffrey Bolton’s ‘A Thousand Miles Away’ was the first academic study of North Queensland published,² and it influenced the work of other scholars in the field. In particular,

1 Sarah Irving: *Governing Nature*.

2 See G. C. Bolton: *A Thousand Miles Away*.

Bolton's emphasis on primary industry (sugar, mining, pastoralism) tended to overshadow the urban history of the region.

Since the publication of Bolton's influential general history, much scholarly work on the north has been the product of historians working at James Cook University³ in Townsville and, later, at its Cairns campus. Due in large part to the encouragement and efforts of JCU's head of history (1967-1989) Professor Brian Dalton, JCU-based historians such as Henry Reynolds, Clive Moore, Peter Bell, Diane Menghetti and countless others produced important historical work in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, often self-published by the JCU Department of History and Politics. Independent historians such as Ruth and John Kerr also contributed greatly to an understanding of the history of the north's major industries such as sugar and mining.⁴

In more recent decades, the origins and development of the 'Empty North' concept has captivated many historians, both those residing locally and in other parts of Australia. Those who saw the north this way believed that its very emptiness was a temptation for foreign powers to invade. Such rhetoric was also coupled with the notion that the north's potential would be fulfilled through government investment in industry and services. The 'Empty North' was a key focus of Russell McGregor's 2016 monograph on northern development. Elsewhere, the history of Northern Australia loomed large in Warwick Anderson's historical work on tropical medicine and David Walker's study of Australia's anxiety towards Asia (the so-called 'near north'). A younger generation of scholars such as Lyndon Megarrity and Pat White have also explored the history of northern development in their work.⁵

While much previous research has focused on rural industries and 'big picture' development, this special edition encouragingly showcases the diversity of regional and northern Queensland historical research being pursued in the mid-2020s. It includes articles on the visual arts, tourism, literature, academia, soldier settlement schemes, tropical architecture, South Sea Islanders, and music. It also features essays that discuss the history of Townsville as a civic and commercial centre.

This special issue seeks to remind readers that the Australian story has always been far more than the experience in its bustling southern cities. There are still many 'silences' and gaps to fill regarding the story of the north in particular. It is vital that the regions and tropical Australia are more comprehensively considered by historians who make generalisations about the nation as a whole. The editors hope that readers not only enjoy learning about regional and Northern

3 JCU was originally known as the Townsville University College (established 1961), attached to University of Queensland until it became the autonomous James Cook University of North Queensland in 1970.

4 It should be noted that especially since the 1970s, Australian National University has been a strong contributor to studies of Northern Australia, particularly in relation to the Northern Territory and Indigenous affairs. CQUniversity and its predecessors have also had a strong record in promoting the history of their region through scholarship.

5 Russell McGregor: *Environmental, Race and Nationhood in Australia*; Warwick Anderson: *The Cultivation of Whiteness*; David Walker: *Anxious Nation*; Lyndon Megarrity: *Northern Dreams*; Patrick T. White: *Northern Promise*.

Australia but that future scholars feel inspired to write Northern Australia back into the national story.

References

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