



The Northern Territory of Australia

Historical Overview

by Bob Alford*

Inhabited over thousands of years by Aboriginal Australians, the first recorded sighting of the Northern Territory coastline by a white man was by William van Colsten aboard the Dutch vessel *Arnhem* in 1623.

Maccassan seamen had probably visited the coast long before that, in effect producing the first Australian export commodity, trepang (sea slug), from along the Arnhem coast.

Dutch and French interests saw a concerted effort by the British into settling the north of Australia. After first proclaiming possession of the north coast in the name of King George IV, the first settlement, at Fort Dundas on Melville Island, was established in September 1824. This, and two other attempts at settlement, Fort Wellington in 1829 and Port Essington in 1849, three years after the proclamation of the Colony of North Australia, failed. Reasons for the failures included illness, lethargy and a lack of trade.

An epic journey from south to north by John McDouall Stuart in 1862 (see JMDS suite on this site) resulted in a successful attempt by South Australia to wrest control of the territory from New South Wales. Letters Patent were transferred, with the Territory, on 6 July 1863.

A year later, an abortive fourth attempt at settlement, this time at Escape Cliffs, resulted in the commander, Lt Col Finnis, being recalled by the Government.

Undeterred, the Government dispatched George Goyder, a government surveyor, who began surveying at Port Darwin in 1869. Within six months surveys were completed and building commenced.

Exploration of the Territory then commenced in earnest: epic treks by McKinlay, Giles, Leichardt, Gregory and others explored the Centre, Gulf and Victoria regions, paving the way for future development.

In 1870, the South Australian Government committed itself to building an overland telegraph line from Port Augusta to Port Darwin after signing an agreement to lay a submarine cable from Java to the tiny northern settlement.

Under the energetic Charles Todd, and despite numerous difficulties including the climate, the lines were finally joined at Frews Ponds on 22 August 1872. The Overland Telegraph Line was the beginning of the end to isolation of Australia's northern coast. New settlements evolved as a result, the town of Stuart (later called Alice Springs) in 1888, among others, and represented the beginning of a new era of development and failure.

Workers on the Overland Telegraph Line discovered gold near Pine Creek in 1871. This discovery brought diggers, mining companies and Chinese immigrants with a reputation and capacity for hard work. In the south, gold was discovered at Arltunga in 1887, but neither Arltunga or Pine Creek lasted past the turn of the century.

With the gold rush, however, came pastoralists. Droving from South Australia commenced during the construction of the OT Line and provided meat for work crews. By the 1880s, the pace of droving had increased substantially. Drovers from Queensland and South Australia saw the Territory opened up and, by the late 1880s, most lands were tenured, much of it by larger companies and conglomerates.

Nat Buchanan stocked Glencoe Station near Brocks Creek in 1878. Eight years later, he pioneered what is arguably the most difficult stock route of all: the Murrarji track. A new settlement, Newcastle Waters, evolved as a result.

Pastoralism brought new settlements; Katherine and Borroloola were two of the townships. As stock routes, including the 'Queensland Road', developed further, new runs were built and a viable industry was born, until Redwater Fever decimated the herds. The Duracks, Buchanans and Farquharsons persisted, however, contributing to an emerging Territory.

Palmerston (as Port Darwin was known) became an important administrative centre. The Public Service established itself in new buildings and the Government Resident assumed office. With it came a bold new scheme to improve transportation from the south with the construction of a railway line. Lack of finances resulted in the abandonment of the line with only the Palmerston to Pine Creek line completed by 1889 (see www.northernexposure.com.au/rail).

Settlement and pastoralism resulted in disruption to the Aboriginal population: hostility on both sides led to violence and an emerging police presence under Inspector Paul Foelsche. Mounted constables were based at remote centres throughout the Territory. In 1877 the Lutherans established Hermannsburg Mission (near Alice Springs) to care for Aborigines in the area. Later, Jesuit missions were established at Darwin and the Daly River. In 1892 the first Aboriginal Reserve was gazetted.

On 1 January 1901 the Commonwealth of Australia was formalised, though it did little for the Northern Territory. The northern colony was costing some £130,000 annually and, with a stagnant economy, an escape was sought and found.

On 1 January 1911, control of the territory was passed from South Australia to the Commonwealth, Palmerston became Darwin.

Optimism followed but was short lived, along with the new Commonwealth initiatives of Demonstration Farms on the Daly River and at Batchelor, and later the Experimental Farm at Mataranka. World War I saw the huge Vestey's empire pour millions of pounds into its giant meatworks in Darwin. It opened in 1917, but inferior cattle, insufficient labour and industrial disputes force its closure in 1929, causing an economic collapse.

In 1925, work commenced on extending the railway line, but the Depression halted it four years later. The Port Augusta to Alice Springs section was completed in 1929.

The 1930s were a little better, the result of a gold strike at Tennant Creek. A rapid increase in defence works in Darwin, including Larrakeyah Barracks, a boom net across the harbour, development of Manton Dam, the RAAF Station and East Point gun turret facilities improved conditions from the mid- to late 1930s with the looming threat of war. The north-south road (now the Stuart Highway) was also developed and with it came new townships.

War time came to Darwin with military convoys from the Territory's rail head and arsenal at Alice Springs. It had been a distant conflict until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and subsequent evacuations from Darwin when Japan threatened all of Asia within a few short weeks. Darwin was bombed from its lethargy twice on 19 February 1942. Over the ensuing 21 months, Darwin was bombed a further 44 times. In all, 64 raids were recorded over the Top End of the Northern Territory extending as far south as Katherine which was raided on 22 March 1942. A huge build-up of Australian and American forces resulted, and the tables slowly turned in favour of the Allies. Airpower played the key role, from the USAAF and later RAAF fighters and bombers, to the myriad support units. The Navy also played a vital role in escort and resupply missions to the northern islands. The RAN was instrumental in sinking a Japanese submarine I124 near Bathurst Island in January 1942.

For the Army, it was more a waiting game, although its Anti-Aircraft defences, 'Gull' and 'Sparrow' forces, Z Special Unit and others all contributed to forcing the Japanese to retreat from the home islands.

The dropping of the Atomic bomb on Nagasaki and

Hiroshima ended it all: Victory in the Pacific (VP) Day was declared on 15 August 1945 following the collapse and surrender of the Germans in May.

War's end brought abrupt changes to the Territory. The military all but disappeared and civilians drifted back to rebuild their shattered lives and homes, assisted over the years by a Government commitment to stabilising the economy.

New townships had sprung up at military staging points along the north-south road; Larrimah and Elliott developed as military towns and remain today.

Uranium was discovered at Rum Jungle and iron ore was exported from Frances Creek until 1974. Agriculture was again attempted, this time at Humpty Doo, Katherine and later at Tipperary. Again, it failed.

Alice Springs provided a glimmer of hope, celebrating its Centenary in 1971, with a new industry: tourism.

On 25 December 1974, Cyclone Tracy struck and devastated Darwin. It was the fourth disaster in 77 years for the town. Millions of dollars were poured into the reconstruction of the city and from the rubble emerged a modern, cosmopolitan capital, the centre of Territory Self-Government since its

declaration on 1 July 1978.

Dogged by failure in agriculture, mining and pastoralism, and the abandonment of the Darwin to Birdham rail link in 1976, the Territory is slowly emerging from this tenuous history. Mining is the Territory's largest industry with tourism running second. The Northern Territory Government recognises that tourism is a massive industry and has spared nothing to promote the Territory as a great Australian destination.

In the wake of the successes and many failures, there remains a unique, tangible heritage throughout the Northern Territory.



The Eye of the Explorer.

This mosaic sculpture is a tribute to John McDouall Stuart and is located in Bicentennial Park on Darwin's Esplanade. It marks the termination of the Stuart Highway in the north and was funded by Darwin City Council.
Photo: R Smith

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Photograph: The Commercial Hotel on Darwin's Esplanade, circa 1880.