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## Unravelling the real birth of the *Northern Miner*

By Rod Kirkpatrick

Sometimes one of the greatest difficulties in presenting the history of a newspaper is determining just when it began. If you don't know when it began, the odds are you cannot explain why it began.

The *Northern Miner*, Charters Towers, is one of those newspapers whose early files did not survive and so there has been confusion over the years about its date of birth. This article sets out to tell the story of how that newspaper really began.

Five newspapers had been established in Queensland by December 10, 1859, when what had been the Moreton Bay district of New South Wales became a colony in its own right. Brisbane, not an automatic choice as the capital of the new colony, had two newspapers — the *Moreton Bay Courier* and the *Moreton Bay Free Press* — and the rest were in reasonably close proximity: two at Ipswich and one at Drayton, soon to be part of Toowoomba.

Separation boosted Queensland immensely. It encouraged (a) more people to shift north and (b) greater pastoral expansion. These factors and the comparative proximity to a seat of government encouraged provincial newspaper development initially in the Darling Downs and Burnett regions and later in the north of the colony.

Titles were established at Maryborough (two) in 1860, Gayndah, Toowoomba and Rockhampton in 1861, Warwick in 1862, Rockhampton in 1863, Bowen, Warwick and Clermont in 1864, Dalby and Rockhampton in 1865, Townsville and Mackay in 1866, Warwick in 1867, and Gladstone and Gympie in 1868. A new wave of newspapers began with the mining discoveries in the 1870s and the *Northern Miner* at Charters Towers rode the crest of this wave.

One Irishman, James Smith Reid, established the *Northern Miner* and a second, Thadeus O'Kane, etched the *Miner's* name into the annals of Australian newspaper history in the 1870s and 1880s as one of the most fearlessly outspoken journals the country has seen.

Reid began as a printer's devil on Bowen's first newspaper, the *Port Denison Times and Kennedy District Advertiser*, in the mid-1860s. His master was Frederick Thomas Rayner, who established the paper on March 5, 1864, and published it for 36 years. Rayner trained Reid well and the printing apprentice with good journalistic skills and even better entrepreneurial instincts struck out on his own soon after he had concluded his time at Bowen.

He found an opportunity on the Queensland goldfields. Gold had been discovered at Gympie (originally called Nashville) at the end of 1867 and a bi-weekly newspaper, the *Gympie Times*, had been established there in February 1868. During the following decade, there were to be rushes of greatly varying size and duration to such fields as Ravenswood, the Gilbert River, Mount Wyatt, the Etheridge, Broughton River, Seventy Mile, Rochford, Charters Towers, the Palmer, the Hodgkinson and Coen, with Charters Towers and the Palmer outstanding.

In half of the years from 1873–1906 Queensland exports of gold and metals would exceed wool. The impact of gold on Queensland's growth was powerful, says Geoffrey Blainey. A small rush began at Ravenswood, 110km south-west of Townsville, at the close of 1868, but progress was slow initially.

By 1870 access to the coast, and especially Townsville, had improved and interest in the field was rekindled. Necessities were cheaper than on other northern fields and the early introduction of crushing machinery was feasible. In April 1870, William Oswald Hodgkinson, who had failed as a newspaper proprietor at Rockhampton (1865–66) and Mackay (1866–67), set up a 10-head battery on the Ravenswood field.

Within 12 months the canvas village of Top Camp was giving way to Ravenswood town, iron-roofed, weatherboard, with banks, churches and a courthouse giving its 2,000 inhabitants a satisfying impression of permanency. The effusive Hodgkinson probably tipped off the 22-year-old Reid to the opening for a newspaper on the fast-developing field.

The rush for riches in mining towns inspired Reid to launch six newspapers — four in Queensland and two in New South Wales — between 1870 and 1884. The *Ravenswood Miner*, which began publication on October 15, 1870, was the first of them. Reid was the sole proprietor of the weekly journal. In retrospect, the Ravenswood paper can be seen as a learning experience for Reid, a building block for later ventures.

Less than two years later, he set his sights on Charters Towers and expansion. He would start another newspaper on a field that was becoming increasingly the subject of articles and editorials in the *Ravenswood Miner*.

The opening was facilitated by the closure of a distant newspaper, the *Gladstone Observer*. John Druery, backed by Clermont newspaper proprietor Charles Hardie Buzacott, had established the Gladstone paper on January 4, 1868. It closed on February 26, 1872, with editor Druery prepared to sell the plant at half-price. A visitor to Gladstone found the plant stored up in “melancholy idleness”.

In the columns of the *Ravenswood Miner*, Reid mourned the death of the *Gladstone Observer* “after a long and plucky struggle”. He regarded the *Observer* as a well-conducted, well-written paper and was sorry that the Gladstone people were so blind to their own interests as to let their local paper die for want of support. “Yet this is the place that we talked of as the new capital of the colony!”

A new goldfield was emerging in Reid’s bailiwick: Charters Towers. At the end of January Hugh Mosman, George Clarke and James Fraser had registered their claims at Ravenswood after finding gold among a small cluster of peaks north of the Seventy Mile field. They named the peaks in honour of the mining warden, W.S.E.M. Charters. The area they called Charters Tors, and it was soon popularly miscalled Charters Towers.

By May Reid had decided to rescue the *Observer* plant and put it to good use at Charters Towers. The rush there was without precedent anywhere in Australia for a field almost entirely lacking deposits of alluvial gold. Ravenswood men were leaving, thankful to try the easier pickings of Charters Towers, especially because crushing machinery was introduced even more quickly than at Ravenswood.

Reid read the signs, studied the returns, visited the new field, and decided to establish another miners’ journal, the *Charters Towers Miner*, to be available at Charters Towers and the Broughton every Wednesday morning and at Ravenswood on Wednesday evening. Until a few days before the new paper’s issue, Reid intended to call it the *Charters Towers Miner*.

But he suddenly saw a much broader scope for his new journal than simply serving Charters Towers and so gave it a regional title, the *Northern Miner*. With the purchase and shipment north of the *Gladstone Observer* plant, the rumours about a newspaper for Charters Towers had seeped out by late May. The *Rockhampton Bulletin* believed a Mr Silvester was going to establish it.

Reid’s own *Ravenswood Miner* gave the most reliable accounts of progress, and reliability is crucial, for various claims have been made that the Charters Towers paper began on August 2, 1872, or even as early as June 2. Let Reid, the man who launched the new paper, tell the story, for no copies of the first 21 months of the *Northern Miner* are extant.

**June 1, 1872:** The plant for the *Charters Towers Miner* is now on its way [from Port Curtis], and will be in [Cleveland] Bay by the first steamer.

**June 22:** The *Charters Towers Miner* will be published early in June [sic]; it will be a weekly newspaper specially devoted to the interests of the miners of Charters Towers, the Broughton and Seventy-mile.

**June 29:** The plant of the *Charters Towers Miner*, consisting of two printing presses, and sixteen cases of material, arrived by the *Queensland* in Rockhampton on 11 June. It is therefore confidently expected by the next steamer from that port, which ought to arrive in Townsville early in the beginning of next week. The material for the office was dispatched to the Towers from Ravenswood this week, so that there can be no doubt that the new journal will appear in a few weeks from that date.

**27 July 27:** The *Charters Towers Miner* will shortly be published.

**August 3 and 10:** The first number of the *Charters Towers Miner* will appear on Wednesday, 14<sup>th</sup> instant, and will be circulated in Ravenswood the evening of the same day.

**August 17:** The *Northern Miner* is now published.

From Bowen, Reid's former master, Rayner, welcomed the "addition to the strength of the Northern Press", which he said had begun on August 14. Both the *Brisbane Courier* and the *Ipswich Observer* found the *Northern Miner* "one among many evidences of the astonishing progress which the North is making". In the *Courier's* view, the *Miner* was quite equal in appearance to some country newspapers of many years' standing.

For nine months after the establishment of the *Northern Miner's* office at Jardine Street, Millchester, Reid was proprietor of both the Ravenswood and Charters Towers *Miners*. He probably concentrated his energies at Charters Towers, leaving his brother, William Douglas Reid, in charge at Ravenswood.

In May 1873, Reid sold the *Ravenswood Miner* to brother William, whose first issue appeared on May 24. Charters Towers was growing and the *Northern Miner* had become the organ of a very small clique. The general feeling of the goldfield was against it.

There was an opening for another newspaper and on July 19, 1873 John Murtagh Macrossan, a miners' leader with political aspirations, published the first number of the *Northern Advocate and Miners' Journal*. The *Northern Miner* had an opponent with staying qualities: the *Advocate*, which changed its name to the *Towers Herald* on June 2, 1877, was published until its incorporation in the title of the *Charters Towers Mining Standard* on November 18, 1899.

Responding to the advent of competition with the instinct of an entrepreneur, Reid appointed a top-class editor to run the *Northern Miner*. He lured O'Kane to Charters Towers by selling him a half-share in his journal, and he joined the *Miner* as a partner from August 1, 1873.

On September 3, a little over a month later, a handwritten notice was nailed to the bark wall of a mining warden's office. It announced: "J.V. Mulligan reports the discovery of payable gold on the Palmer River. Those interested may inspect at this office the 102 ounces he has brought back."

Reid investigated the new rush that began soon afterwards and reckoned that Cooktown was the place to start his third newspaper. He turned to his brother who reported that the Ravenswood field, already a comparatively forlorn place before the Palmer rush, was now almost deserted.

William Reid published the final issue of the *Ravenswood Miner* on January 17, 1874, shut up shop and shifted the plant to Cooktown. James Reid and J.E. Larkin launched the *Cooktown Courier* on 7 March. Five days earlier, Reid had sold his share in the *Northern Miner* and all the book debts to O'Kane, who thus became sole proprietor a month after a storm had blown the roof off the newspaper's office "like so much tissue paper". One issue had to be printed on a half-sheet because falling timber had broken up so much of the matter already set in type.

Within two years of the *Northern Miner's* establishment at Millchester, significant change was taking place. O'Kane reported in July 1874 that the Towers was solidifying rapidly and giving undeniable proof that it meant to stand. O'Kane shifted the *Miner* office from Millchester to Charters Towers in October 1874.

The *Northern Advocate* too was about to move to the Towers after having done its best to damage that town in every way in the past. It deserved a warm welcome, observed O'Kane. The

people ought to “appreciate its readiness to come to its rescue — even at the eleventh hour”. With typical modesty, he offered the view that there was “another claimant on the field with better letters of introduction to show”.

O’Kane was adamant that his paper would not go down in the battle. “We intend to ‘survive’ even on a crust!” On the other hand, in O’Kane’s view, because the *Advocate* was run by a limited company, it could close without anyone suffering. Some business firms in Charters Towers had already committed to the *Miner*. Others, including ‘Messrs Hishon, Long, E.P. Graham and that ilk’, supported only the *Advocate*. Both papers were appearing on Saturday.

On the day that the *Miner* began its fourth year, O’Kane wrote that the “best proof we can give of our success is the fact that the *Northern Miner* will appear twice a week for the future”. From August 18, 1875, the *Miner* appeared on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

O’Kane made the paper a tri-weekly from August 20, 1878, an evening daily from July 2, 1883, and a morning daily from November 6, 1886. O’Kane died at Ipswich on May 17, 1890 (there is a fuller account of him in my book, *The Life & Times of Thadeus O’Kane*).

The *Northern Miner* became part of the newly formed North Queensland Newspaper Company Limited on June 10, 1910, upon linking with the *Townsville Daily Bulletin*.

The *Northern Miner* continued as a daily until the beginning of June 1951 when it became a tri-weekly. It became a bi-weekly on November 6, 1973, and has been printed in Townsville since June 1984.

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