

THE ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF THE SUGAR INDUSTRY IN THE CAIRNS DISTRICT

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The history of the development of this State during the past 100 years has been a record for the most part of primary production, in which the mining and pastoral industries played the principal role in the early stages. Agricultural possibilities were no doubt realised, but there was little encouragement in this direction in the early days except the necessity to keep supplied the needs of the different settlements. Even the famous Darling Downs came under the imputation of not being able to grow a cabbage. The first efforts to establish staple products such as cotton, sugar and wheat met with various fluctuating fortunes and failures—mostly failures—sugar in especial passing through many troubled phases during the early seventies. The story of cotton, wheat, and arrowroot and other enterprises designed to develop our latent resources provide sufficient material for an interesting study, and the same may be said of the gradual expansion of the sugar industry founded at Ormiston in 1863.

In a comparatively short period investors in sugar lands found their way northwards, and in turn Maryborough, Bundaberg, Mackay and Cardwell districts attracted settlement. Again the story would be beyond the limits of a paper such as this, and the settlement at Cardwell in the years 1870 onward marked the most northern of the sugar plantations. In 1873, G. E. Dalrymple left Cardwell in charge of the expedition to open a port to the Palmer Goldfield, and made a most favourable reference to the rich lands of the Johnstone River. That expedition reached the Endeavour River one day ahead of the steamer bearing the Government party, to found the port of Cooktown in October 1873. Three years later other mining developments led to the founding of Cairns on Trinity Inlet in October 1876. The feverish, hectic days of mining "rushes" and the saddened, disillusioned fossickers who found their way to the coast, did little to further per-

manent settlement, as the disappointed ones were usually penniless.

Chinese Enterprise

Among those who felt the decline of gold-seeking on the Palmer, were a number of stranded Chinese, some of whom found their way to Cairns. A syndicate was formed by an educated Chinese, Andrew Leon, who had acquired knowledge of tropical agriculture in the West Indies; and it was said that 100 Chinese contributed £25 each and became working partners. Their first efforts turned to cotton, coffee, and rice. A cotton gin was installed, and though there is no direct record of production, cotton lint to the value of £140 was exported from Cairns in 1882. But it was soon decided to grow sugar, and by August 1882 the first sugar mill, called the Pioneer, was erected by Walkers Ltd., and opened with the usual ceremonies. The only European employed was the engineer, and Chinese were doing all the other incidental work both in the mill and the field. The mill closed down in 1886 after a five years run, primitive machinery and primitive methods in the fields each having contributed to its failure. Though Hop Wah had commenced crushing in the 1882 season, other developments had taken place on the Johnstone River. At the end of 1879 and the beginning of 1880, T. H. FitzGerald, after visiting Mossman and Cairns, decided to take up land at what is now called Innisfail. It is now customary to look upon FitzGerald as the pioneer of sugar growing in the far North, as indeed he was (with Spiller and Davidson) the pioneer of sugar at Mackay.

G. E. Dalrymple's expedition was commissioned by the Government to make a careful investigation of the coast line from Cardwell to the Endeavour River, and to find, if possible, a suitable port to connect with the Palmer Goldfield. Hann's trip in 1872 had established the possibility of reaching the coast at what he thought to be the Endeavour River, but his progress southward was baffled by the impossibility of taking horses through the mountainous and scrub-clad country. After being entangled in the scrub of the Bloomfield and Upper Daintree Rivers he abandoned the attempt.

Dalrymple, who had with him Walter Hill, the Government Botanist, was in a position to report fav-

ourably on the fertility of the river basins, and refer to the harbour facilities of Trinity Inlet.

FitzGerald's Choice

Although Cairns was established as a port for the Hodgkinson goldfield in 1876, it was not till the latter end of 1879, that the Brisbane press announced the return of T. H. FitzGerald from a trip along that coast from the Daintree River to the Johnstone, when he must have contacted most of the timber-getters who were engaged in cedar-getting on all the rivers from the Bloomfield to the Johnstone. His choice of the Johnstone River was easily understood. It was accessible by sea for small steamers, and had been specially referred to in Dalrymple's report in glowing terms. On the other hand, Cairns presented a mangrove foreshore and a comparatively useless-looking flat to the mountain foot, and there was little indication of the fertility of the valleys of the creeks, or the volcanic soil of Green Hill. Although he did not say so, FitzGerald probably saw what the Chinese were doing at Hop Wah; and, if he went to the Mulgrave, it would be in his own boat to Redbank Landing, and thence to Riverstone.

Hambledon Plantation

But shortly after Hop Wah commenced crushing, another pioneer arrived in Cairns in the person of Thomas Swallow, and after a look at the district beyond Hop Wah, applications were lodged for some eight or nine square miles of the country comprising the valleys and embouchures of Skeleton, Blackfellow's, McKinnon and Wright's Creeks. In August 1883, the plantation was firmly established, a mill erected, and production of sugar commenced. Hambledon plantation has thus continued production for the past sixty years without intermission. Mr. Thomas Swallow was a man of practical ideas, and the proximity of deep water at the Inlet was fully availed of from the very inception, minimising transport costs. Later the building of the Mulgrave Tramway in 1897 simplified transport to the Cairns wharves and Swallow's wharf was abandoned.

From the very first, Hambledon became the centre of social life in Cairns, and many notable visitors were entertained there. One interesting family connection was due to the marriage of Will. H. Swallow (the eldest son), to Caroline, younger daughter of R. A.

Kingsford, whose elder daughter Catherine was the mother of Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith.

After the death of Thomas Swallow in 1890, his estate disclosed losses, principally in the building boom in Melbourne, and as a result Hambledon was sold, R. A. Kingsford being the purchaser. Swallow Bros. then took the plantation on lease, but the strain of financing was too great and in 1897 the property passed to the C.S.R. Co., by whom it is still held.

In 1883, another company established a mill on the Mulgrave Valley, under J. B. Loridan and his brother, under conditions which proved too severe a handicap. In order to secure sufficient land and to find a suitable site for a mill that building was erected too far from transport facilities; and the repeated application for a tramline to the head of the Inlet was lost in the archives of the Divisional Board. The mill crushed for a few seasons from 1885. Loridan failed in 1887 and the Bank took possession; and, after working the mill for a few seasons, ceased operations altogether. Most of the staff went over to Hambledon.

Disastrous Developments

The sugar industry had faced great reverses during that early pioneering period. The high price of sugar which tempted investment fell rapidly with the bonus given by Germany to the production of beet sugar on the Continent and, coupled with the passing of the South Seas Islanders legislation in 1883, caused a landslide in all the sugar districts in Queensland. It only remained for the depression of 1893 to bring final disaster to many who had built their hopes and spent huge fortunes in the industry. The report of the sugar commission of 1889 throws full light on the conditions under which the industry was struggling at the time.

The next stage in the history of sugar at Cairns had its beginning with the passing of the Sugar Works Guarantee Act of 1893. Under that Act the landowners, particularly of the Mulgrave area, immediately moved to secure a Central Mill; another movement at Freshwater Creek failed, the lands were too heavily encumbered with the banks to secure a mill. But at the Mulgrave a number of settlers who had tenaciously held on through times of stress, banded together. It was significant that those first provisional directors were men who had pioneered the district, one instance at least of men who reaped where they had sown. In

1896 the mill commenced crushing, and in 1897 the opening of the Mulgrave Tramway provided the necessary transport facilities to the Cairns Wharf. Subsequent years saw the extension of this line, to Aloomba in 1898, Harvey's Creek in 1903, and Babinda in 1910, until in 1911 the whole system was purchased by the Queensland Government and is now part of the Sunshine Route to Brisbane. The opening of the Babinda Mill in 1915 formed a fitting coping stone to the development of the sugar industry in the Cairns district.

The advances made in that district are doubly interesting to me whose earliest recollections of the Mulgrave Road nearly sixty years ago are of merely a dray-track, mostly used by pack-horses though passable at most times by sulkies and light two-wheeled vehicles. For this reason I have preserved many relics of the almost forgotten days, when the trip from Cairns to Gordonvale and back was never considered less than one day's undertaking. Even in 1893, I do not remember so lonely and unfrequented a road in all my subsequent wanderings.

I have not referred to coloured labour in the fields, or to the change over in other directions from the old primitive methods. The sugar producing area in the Cairns District lies along the base of the coast range, extending over thirty miles from the Barron River in the North to the Russell River in the south, and it is in this comparatively narrow tract of coast lands that the three great mills of Hambleton, Gordonvale, and Babinda operate, unlocking wealth that is mostly put into circulation in its own district.

Poetic fancy can weave many romantic settings; vistas of ploughed fields; kaleidoscopic beauty in the long thin lines of sprouting cane in the furrows in the brown soil; of fields in waves of varying shades of green bending to the breeze; of cruel gaps cut in the standing cane; puffing engines and loaded trucks; or the weird pall of smoke and leaping flames of burning off; but the white crystals of commerce tell no story except to those who have travelled through cane districts during every season of the year.

What further opportunities lie in the direction of spirit distilling, and the utilisation of waste products is a consideration which belongs to the happier years ahead; but Cairns in its harbour, and in that self-contained district, has in its keeping one of the fairest jewels of the State of Queensland.