

# GHOST TOWNS OF QUEENSLAND

## Part I

### THE CLONCURRY COPPERFIELD

[By P. FYNES-CLINTON]

(Read at a meeting of the Society on 26 August 1965.)

Last year after I had had the privilege of addressing you on the centenary of the City of Townsville it was suggested that I might take for a subject the ghost towns of Queensland—those towns which became extinct, or almost so, after the mineral deposits which sustained them had petered out.

Until I spoke to an elderly friend who has a wide knowledge of mining in the north, I had not realised the magnitude of the task I had undertaken.

It is not generally known that in the hinterland between Cooktown and Cairns there are at least forty towns and hamlets where at some time or other the intrepid miners dug a living for what it was worth from gold, tin or copper, or, in some instances, from wolfram, molybdenite and the other compounds of steel.

Cooktown and the Palmer is a story in itself and one which I hope will be taken up in due course by one more competent than I.

### BOOM AND COLLAPSE

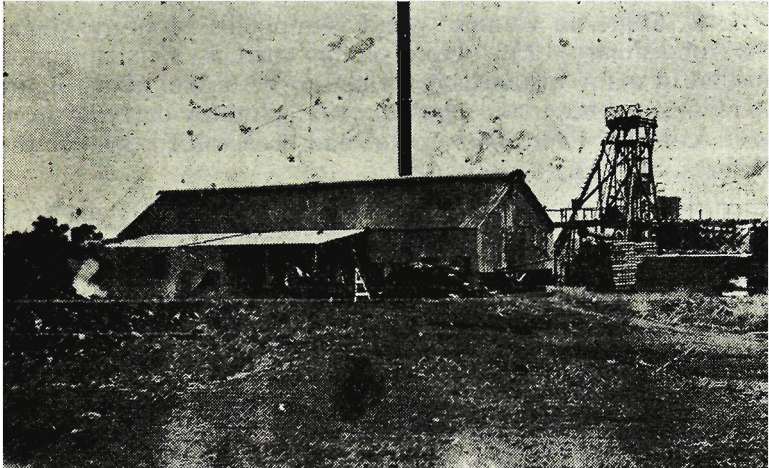
Because of the sweeping scope of the subject I have, with your approval I trust, decided to confine this evening's talk to the lost towns of the Cloncurry copper field, its trials and tribulations, its short-lived boom of prosperity, and its final collapse under stress of economic frustration, and to some degree, of the folly of human errors.

The towns which, for some years in the early part of this century, illuminated the night sky with the glare of their smelter stacks and slag dumps were *Kuridala* (originally called Friezeland), *Selwyn* (or Mt. Elliott) and to the north, Mount Cuthbert.

The keen, and at times, bitter rivalry, between the Mount Elliott and Hampden-Cloncurry companies forms one of the most romantic and exciting chapters in the history of North Queensland mining.



ERNEST HENRY (1855) at 18 years of age, in the uniform of the 72nd Highlanders, now The Seaforth's. He fought in the Crimean War as an ensign.



The Great Australian copper mine near Cloncurry, discovered by Ernest Henry in 1866.

*Photo courtesy Mt. Isa Mines Ltd.*

## DOUR FRONTIERSMAN

The Cloncurry copper field was opened up by Ernest Henry, that dour pastoralist-explorer who took to horse each time misfortune forced him to abandon his latest acquisition. In 1867 his exit from the Flinders, forced by drought and poor markets, took him to Cloncurry where he discovered the Great Australian mine.

Henry was no geologist and knew little of minerals, but like John Campbell Miles at Mount Isa, more than half a century later, he was intrigued by the weight of the material he broke from the rugged outcrops. Assays at Rockhampton confirmed the presence of copper, and Henry soon learned that the green tint distinguished copper. His first discovery, the Great Australian Mine, was near the town of Cloncurry itself. He later discovered the Argylla and Mount Oxide mines to the north.

## EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Fred Gibson opened up Hampden (later Kuridala) and James Elliott took up the first Mount Elliot lease near Selwyn.

A. Kennedy and Sons developed the Duchess, to the west of Kuridala, or Friezeland, as it was first called, and Anthony Allis was mainly responsible for opening up the Macgregor and Trekelano mines in the same region.

The Mt. Cuthbert Company was promoted by Power Bros.

Together these mines formed a pattern of some 200 miles running north and south over a width of 80 miles.

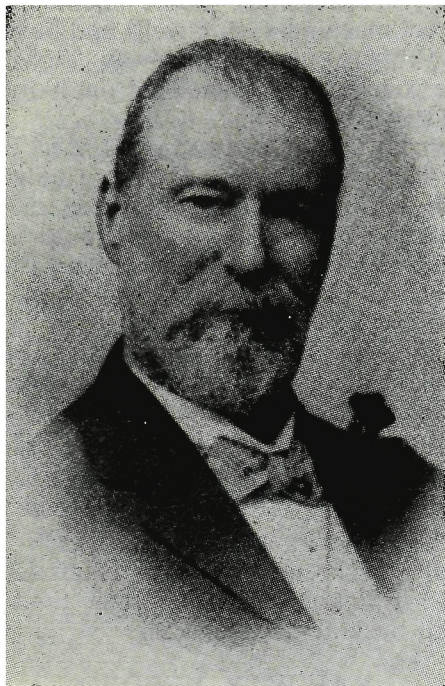
I. L. Styne, in Cummins and Campbell's *Monthly Magazine* of January 1933, wrote of this tract as a phenomenon in that in many instances it seemed to be broken along many lines of weakness, and hot aqueous solutions carrying iron, gold, copper, silver and sulphur, had been forced through the fissures, and thus deposited.

Mount Isa subsequently proved the existence of all these in a single lode.

## FOLLIES OF DEVELOPERS

The sad part of the Cloncurry copper story is the failure of its promoters to widen their exploration and to prove reserves, if reserves there were.

Actually many competent authorities were deceived by the surface extent of the lode and neglected to assess its true values. It was this lapse that in later years caused the two major smelting companies — Mt. Elliott and Hampden-Cloncurry — to miss Mount Isa.



JAMES VENTURE MULLIGAN

In the early 1880's James Venture Mulligan, discoverer of the Palmer goldfield, led a party to the Cloncurry area and is presumed to have gone very close to Mount Isa. Mulligan's assessment was that the field could not be a successful gold proposition, but he did believe that the field was so auriferous that the gold would pay expenses and make copper profitable. His prediction had some ring of truth for in the early production days of Mt. Isa the gold content in the silver lead bullion covered the freight cost to the refineries in Europe.

#### PROPHECY UNFULFILLED

Among those who shared Ernest Henry's optimism was Robert Logan Jack, a geologist of high repute, who went to Cloncurry by horseback in 1881. He classified the Great Australian mine as a "mountain of copper," Mt. Leviathan as "a mass of the purest possible iron ore," and Cloncurry "the future industrial city of the west." Jack accompanied Henry to his Argylla mine and prophesied that it would richly reward him.

#### AN EARLY FAILURE

In 1884 a Scottish group, acting on the report of J. R. Robertson, a retired Indian Army officer, practising as a geologist, purchased the Great Australian from Henry.

The company erected water jacket smelters and employed 200 men to erect machinery, sink wells and burn charcoal for the furnaces. There was no railway and supplies and materials were road-hauled 270 miles from Normanton where they were landed by ship.

The first furnace was lighted in June 1885. The mine soon disappointed the shareholders. Copper slumped from £70 to £44 per ton, and in thirteen months the smelter produced only 192 tons of copper. The mine closed in 1887, after having won only 404 tons of copper worth £15,500—a poor result from the millions of tons predicted by Warden Uhr three years earlier.

Geoffrey Blainey, summing up the results of this first commercial venture in his authoritative work, *Mines In The Spinifex* (Angus & Robertson) said:

“Above all the directors themselves had gambled on the ore being far more extensive than it proved to be. The mine laughed at their folly, yielding in two years less ore than Mount Isa smelts in a day.”

In the meantime Fred Gibson, at Hampden, and James Elliott, at Mt. Elliott, were developing their leases. The Kennedys were busy at the Duchess.

### RAILWAY NEEDED

After the failure of the Great Australian venture the prospect of further smelting depended on price recovery and the provision of rail connection. The agitation for a railway was rife. Ernest Henry led a Government surveyor over a proposed route from Cloncurry to the Gulf at Normanton.

Other suggestions were for connecting Australian cities by a transcontinental line running from Melbourne through Bourke and Charleville to Cloncurry. In 1880 the then Premier (Sir Thomas McIlwraith) endeavoured by land grants to encourage pastoralists to finance the connection of Cloncurry with Roma, then the western terminus from Brisbane.

The proposal attracted the interest of Major-General H. Fielding, representing London and Paris financiers. Fielding surveyed the route from Roma, taking ship in the Gulf to return to Brisbane. He informed McIlwraith of his doubts concerning the quality of the land on offer and that proposal also fell through.

### RUST AND DECAY

In 1890 over 3,000 tons of rails were offloaded at Normanton for the start of a line to Cloncurry, but not a length was laid. The whole steel cargo rusted into decay on the salt pans of the Gulf shores.

## ANOTHER SQUIB

Towards the end of the century Coates, the cotton magnate of Glasgow, announced its intention of building a railway to Cloncurry and hope simmered again among the tin shanties of Cloncurry. According to Geoffrey Blainey, Ernest Henry broke a long silence by saying: "I have been waiting thirty-three years for this chance of opening up the mines, and I think the time is now arrived. I cannot wait another thirty-three."

But the Coates project was another "damp squib."

The railway did come eventually from the unexpected source.

In 1906 William Kidston, Queensland Premier of the day, having survived a rail trip to Richmond, or possibly Winton, embarked on the Cobb and Co. mail coach to travel another couple of hundred miles over unformed roads to Cloncurry.

Kidston must have travelled far enough to see the crunching windlasses and the sweat that produced ore for horse and wagon transport to distant smelters.

The line was extended from Richmond until Cloncurry, a town of many hopeful men and fewer women, brave as they were, saw the first train steam into the 'Curry.

By that time, the pioneer copper miners were disappearing from the scene. They were in truth landholders who were trying to establish their independence far away from the settled pastoral frontier.

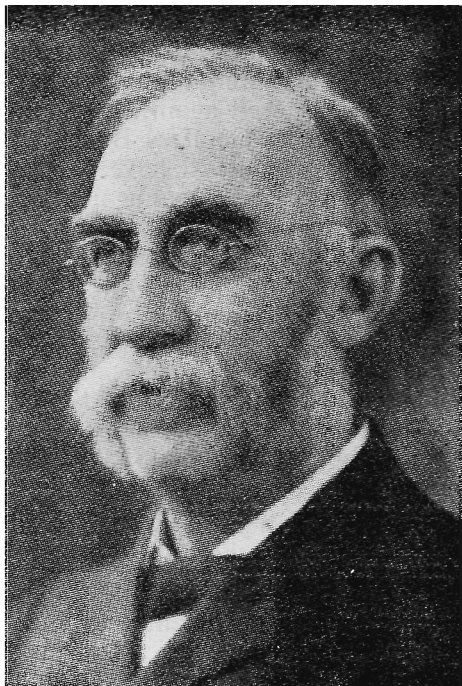
## ADVENT OF MOFFAT

James Elliott had not the financial resources to develop his lease. He sold the mine to another pastoralist, James Morphett, who in turn sold to John Moffat, the founder of Irvinebank, and a recognised master promoter of mining ventures. Moffat invested large capital in his new acquisition. Elliott died in 1907, a tired, lonely man. He had departed by the time Moffat had floated the Mt. Elliott company on the London market.

By this time a Melbourne syndicate headed by William Orr, who became chairman of directors, had acquired the Gibson interests in the Hampden or Friezeland area.

And so, by the time the iron horse found its new terminal at Cloncurry, the short-lived but turbulent, exciting towns of Mount Elliott and Kuridala were shaping.

William Orr and his Melbourne compatriots, flush with the increment from Mt. Lyell, were eager to establish a new empire in this faraway region of the continent.



JOHN MOFFATT

Mt. Lyell, as some of you may remember, had all the semblance of a "damp squib" until, in the mining vernacular, it came good.

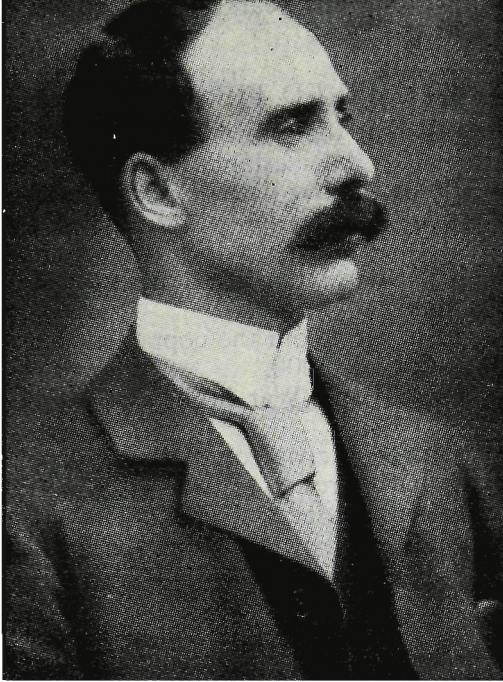
#### SMELTER SITES FIXED

The Hampden-Cloncurry company explored the Hampden, Duchess, Mount Elliott, and Mt. Cuthbert at great expense. They had settled on Friezeland-cum-Kuridala as the centre of smelting operations.

Then into the arena came William H. Corbould as the local manager for the London company which owned the Mt. Elliott mine and resolved upon Selwyn, or Mt. Elliott, as the site for their smelting activities.

Neither company spared expense in developing their separate interests. When the railway was extended to Cloncurry, William L. Bailleau arranged with the Queensland Government to extend the line 71 miles south to the Mt. Elliott mine at Selwyn. As the line was surveyed to pass the Hampden mine, that company agreed to pay its share.

The two companies deposited £94,000 which the Government repaid when the railway became profitable.



W. H. CORBOULD

*By courtesy Angus and Robertson Ltd.*

Long before the line reached Selwyn, wagon trains had hauled machinery and boilers for the mine and smelters. A new town was born.

Another was ready to spark not far north at the Hampden, or Kuridala, as we who are old enough have come to know or remember it.

What towns they were! It was Charters Towers and Gympie all over again!

### PROSPERITY BEGINS

On Saturdays and pay nights the streets were monopolised by miners off shift. They fraternised in the "pubs" or in the pool rooms while the women and children fluttered around the shops and stores, glad to be away for a few fleeting hours from the dim light of the kerosene lamps and the overbearing atmosphere of galvanised iron cottages with their myriads of tantalising insects.

The sky for miles glowed with the multitudinous reflections from the smelters.

Both companies prospered, and as the blister ingots flowed through the rail hub at Cloncurry there was an air of



prosperity which for many years had eluded the arid country beyond the rolling downs.

### 7,000 LIVED FROM COPPER

It is estimated that the Kuridala and Selwyn enterprises, and the third smelter later established to the north of Cloncurry at Mt. Cuthbert, gave direct employment to 3,000 men in the smelters and in the mines from which the ores were won. The work force of railwaymen, carriers and businesses encouraged by the development of this new industry would easily have doubled that figure.

At the height of the boom the copper industry alone supported a population of 7,000.

When the First World War broke out the boom swelled higher.

The miners and their civic compatriots enlisted in respectable numbers to have a round or two with Kaiser Bill.

But there was always a pool of workers to maintain the flow of production.

### WARNING SIGNS

However, in the inner counsels the ears of informed men caught the murmur of approaching difficulties.

Corbould began to worry about the capacity of his available ores. The high-grade ores in the upper levels of the Mt. Elliott mine were diminishing and he feared the economies of treating the lower sulphide ores which, in his estimation, would yield only a third at most of current working values.

Hampden-Cloncurry had similar anxieties and a "rat race" developed between the two companies for other mines.

Mt. Elliott scored a tactical victory with the acquisition of the Hampden Consuls mine, almost on the boundary of the Hampden-Cloncurry company's Hampden smelters at Kuridala.

### ORR'S PREDICAMENT

William Orr, as chairman of Hampden-Cloncurry, was also a director of the Consuls mine. He faced his fellow directors of Hampden-Cloncurry at their next meeting without diffidence. As a director of one company he had supported the better offer.

Nevertheless, the two companies which had invested vast sums in independent tramways to transport their ores were crossing their own paths, so to speak.

Efforts to effect a merger and arrange centralised smelting were unavailing. The two companies were irreconcilable in their determination to survive as the fitter.

Mt. Elliott had done fairly well in the wartime boom. It spent £100,000 in deepening the Mt. Elliott mine and, having failed to obtain permission for establishing a small refinery at Townsville, erected the plant on the Bowen coalfield. In 1917 the company doubled the length of its furnace, so that it could handle a larger tonnage of low-grade ore, but when it was commissioned the smelter hands said it was dangerous. Corbould thereupon closed the smelters and shortened the furnace by ten feet.

Then a heavy wet season ensued and fire broke out in the Consuls mine for a second time, necessitating closure of the main workings for most of the year.

### BEGINNING OF THE END

In May, when the smelters were again working smoothly after the flood, industrial trouble closed them down for another two months.

In 1918 Hampden-Cloncurry fared better. The company paid out in dividends £437,000, a large sum in those days. William Orr's influence in securing the Hampden and the Duchess enabled the company to maintain a satisfactory smelting combination.

But the conflict between the two groups was approaching disaster. Neither had sufficient reserves to operate economically after the war boom had ended.

In November 1918 a serious breakdown occurred in the Hampden smelters. About the same time a broken crankshaft ended a record run at Mount Cuthbert. With the Mt. Elliott men on strike it was a poor Christmas.

Only Mt. Elliott opened in the New Year, but the slump in copper prices forced the company within two months to pay off its 650 employees.

And so the short-lived copper boom was at an end. Mt. Elliott and Mt. Cuthbert operated on a very reduced scale until 1920 when the furnaces finally went out.

### THE FINAL FLING

Mt. Elliott alone sparred for a revival. In 1925 it raised enough money to build a new treatment works at Cloncurry, but the plant never turned a wheel. It was said at the time that the plant breached an overseas patent.

The company continued to search for mines beyond Queensland. Corbould, with his faith in a revival of the old works under single control, apparently lost patience with his London bosses, and resigned as their Australian representative.

It was a bitter disappointment for Corbould, who was sure that he had proved that low-grade ores could be profitably treated at a central smelter, despite the cost eaten up by locomotive smoke on the long haul of some 480 miles to the sea outlet at Townsville.

It is a fair presumption that with Corbould's departure the Mt. Elliott company lost Mount Isa.

In later years Corbould formed a company which acquired some of the more valuable Mount Isa leases. These were subsequently sold to Mining Trust, the first operator of the field.

### LIGHTS FADE OUT

On the old copper field only a few isolated remnants of brick and mortar, and possibly a stray beast which had wandered from more congenial pastures, give any sign of the excitement of yore.

Selwyn, Kuridala and Mt. Cuthbert are mere ghosts of that harsh, but exciting era.

The glow that lighted the horizon for miles around with a splendour more spectacular and more realistic than a dozen pyrotechnic displays went out forever.

Only the moon at its full now illumines the night and all it reveals is the spinifex.

### THE 'CURRY STILL THERE

Cloncurry itself survives somewhat becalmed, but solid in the centre of the vast beef reservoir that sustains it.

Maybe its citizens are a little bewildered at the turn fate has taken, first by the excision of the new mineral giant from its sphere of local government and later the transfer to Mount Isa of the great air terminal where Qantas and the Flying Doctor pioneered world and State-wide aerial communication. These services, originated at Cloncurry, have made distance and isolation small matters in comparison with the days of past glory.