

THE WHITE MAN AND THE AUSTRALIAN TROPICS - A REVIEW OF SOME OPINIONS AND
PREJUDICES OF THE PRE-WAR YEARS

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When the first parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia was established in 1901, it was dominated by spokesmen for 'White Australia' who, in the words of Alfred Deakin, desired "to be one people and remain one people, without the admixture of other races." This attitude had considerable significance to the development of the tropical northern half of Australia that is of particular interest and concern to an understanding of the economic development of the region, since it initiated some forty years of debate concerning both the desirability and possibility of furthering the settlement and exploitation of the north on the basis of European labour alone. This debate, essentially between the proponents of the White Australia policy, whose interests were most likely to be served by evidence that settlers of European origin were physically capable of surviving the tropical Australian climate, and its opponents, many of whose attitudes were motivated by a desire to obtain low cost labour rather than by any feelings of international brotherhood, obscured many of the real problems of the north. It was, in many ways, tragic that problems associated with remoteness, unsuitable housing and a lack of basic facilities and foodstuffs were largely ignored, whilst politicians, scientists and journalists argued the ability of the northern population to survive on the supposedly scientific basis of its pigmentation.

An examination of some of the more significant contributions to the debate, selected from supposedly more respectable scientific and government publications, may usefully be preceded by a suggested basic cause for the existence of the debate at all. The attitude commonly held towards the tropical north is probably the consequence of the fact that the Australian continent as a whole was settled by people of north-west European, essentially British, origin. Typical British acquaintance with the tropics, whether first- or second-hand, has long been with the West Indies, India, South-east Asia or Africa in the role of trader, administrator or missionary. A clear distinction has emerged, both popularly and certainly in the English language literature, between what variously have been called 'farm colonies' and 'plantation colonies' or

'hinterlands of settlement' and 'hinterlands of exploitation'. Farm colonies or hinterlands of settlement were those overseas territories, essentially 'temperate', whither the European migrated, and where he settled, farmed, or otherwise earned his living in a way familiar in Europe, and raised his family. Plantation colonies or hinterlands of exploitation, by contrast, were overseas territories, essentially tropical, where the European was solely a temporary resident and undertook supervisory work leaving more energetic employment to 'coloured' peoples, either indigenous or recruited elsewhere for the purpose. Most British overseas dependencies fell neatly into one category or the other, the major exception being Australia, the southern half of which was perceived as temperate, and therefore suitable for permanent settlement, and the northern as tropical, and therefore not. This perception was apparently incorporated on some old maps of Australia on which the north is marked Australindia, as showing its suitability for Asiatic settlement, while the south-west is called Anglicania. Neither name ever came into common use (Tilby, 1912). The establishment in nineteenth century Queensland of a tropical plantation system, the acknowledged means of commercial exploitation of a tropical dependency, is well known, though perhaps less familiar are the efforts that were made to develop sugar, cotton, coffee and cinchona plantations in the Northern Territory.

The 'White Australia' policy was clearly a major challenge to such well established concepts, which apparently were scientifically backed by geographers and others who purported to recognize areas of optimum habitability for the various races of mankind. The best known geographical proponent of this notion was Griffith Taylor who devised a system of 'climographs' based on monthly averages of wet bulb temperatures and relative humidities. His 'white race' climograph was based on twelve 'typical' centres of white settlement from both hemispheres, and suggested that the white man was most comfortable between about 40°F and 60°F with relative humidities between about 70% and 80% (Taylor, 1918). As illustrated by figure 1, the climographs for north Australian centres fell well outside the area designated 'ideal' for the European - though the only grounds on which this area was determined was that it possessed climatic conditions under which Europeans happened to be living in substantial numbers at his time of writing. Griffith Taylor's deeply

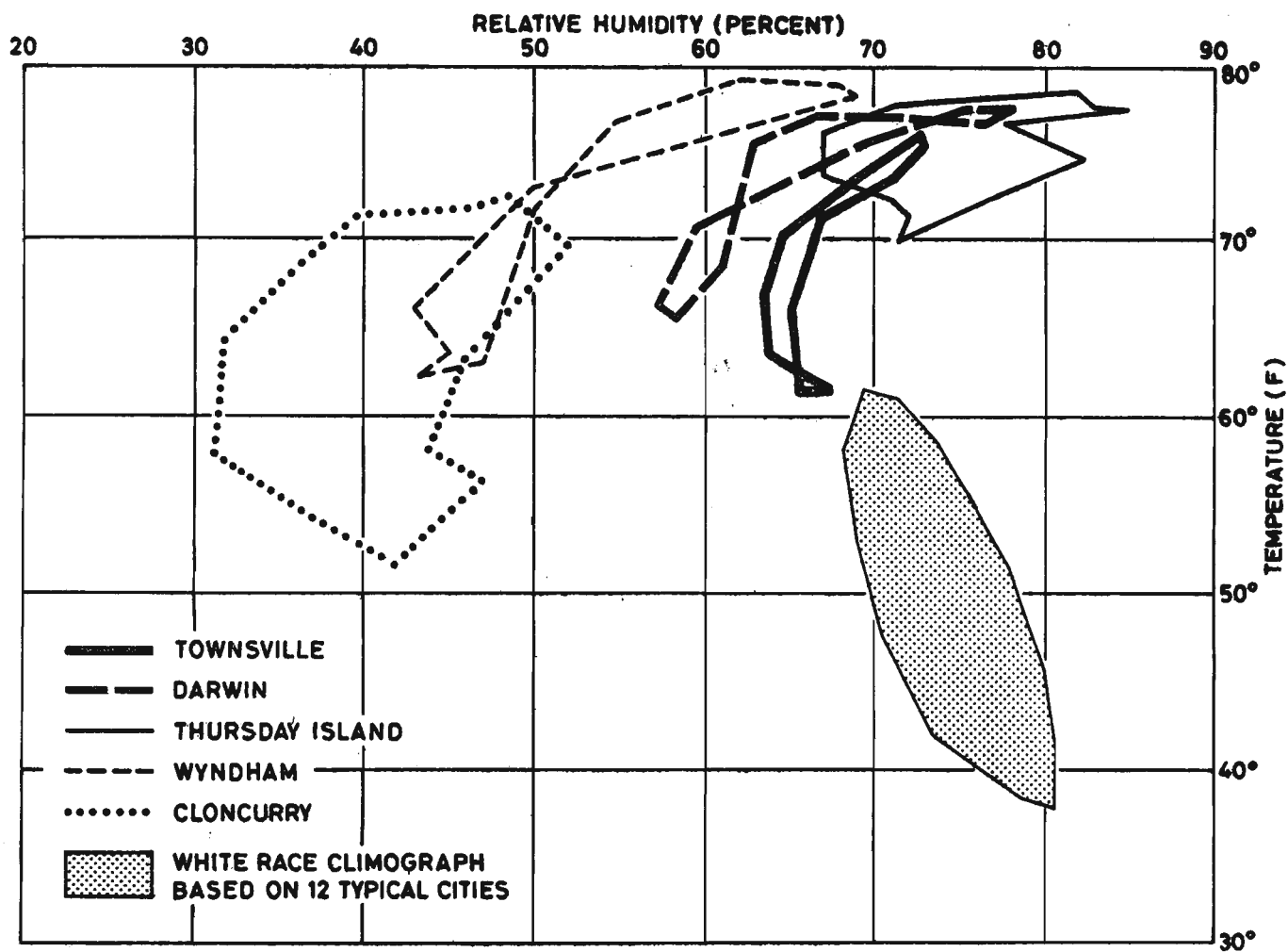


Figure 1. GRIFFITH TAYLOR'S 'CLIMOGRAPHS'
 (Source: Taylor, 1918)

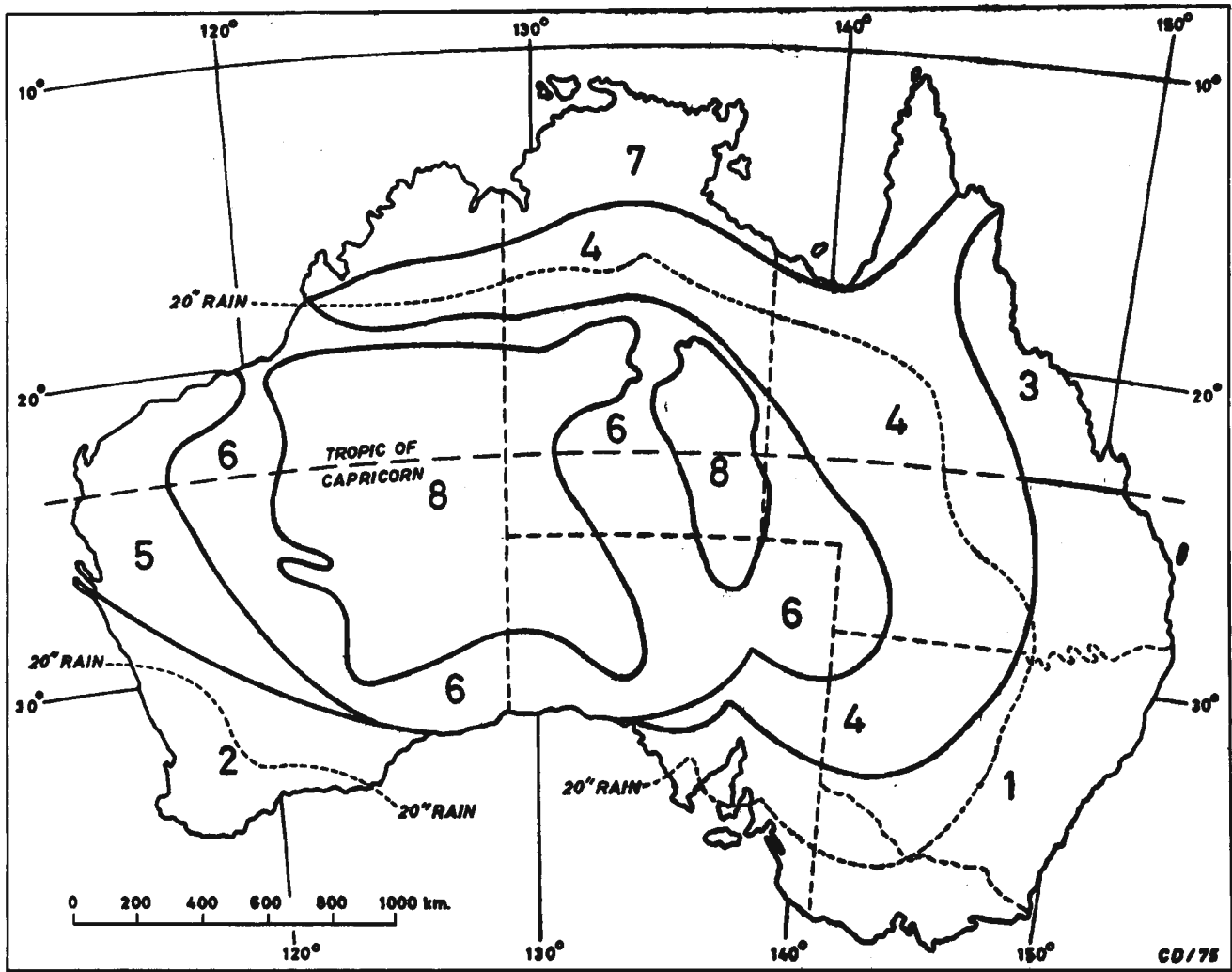


Figure 2. GENERALIZED HABITABILITY MAP OF AUSTRALIA ACCORDING TO GRIFFITH TAYLOR (Taylor, 1926)
 Approximate values of land in descending order 1-8

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ingrained attitude to the 'unsuitability' of the tropics is well illustrated by his 1926 map of the 'habitability' of Australia (figure 2) which suggests that the value of the land of eastern Australia for habitation and development drops from category 1 to category 3 (on an 8 point scale) precisely along latitude $23\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}\text{S}$ (Taylor, 1926).

In a paper, remarkable in retrospect for its naïvete, given before the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science at Adelaide in 1907 (Macfie, 1907), practically every pre-conception and non sequitur concerning the effect of tropical conditions on the European was asserted. Arguing the necessity of coloured labour to develop northern Australia, Macfie demanded:

How can the tropical and sub-tropical area which constitutes so vast a proportion of Australia be most effectively developed? I venture to maintain that the territory included in the heat-belt cannot be effectively developed without the introduction of labor from largely populated countries situated somewhere within that zone, and adapted, by nature, for doing open air work under a vertical sun. In choosing colored workmen I should be disposed to give the preference to our Indian fellow-subjects, although in some respects it is believed by many that Chinese and Japanese are more efficient in field labor. This may appear a bold assertion to those who are more familiar with the cry of a "White Australia" than with the teachings of science on the subject.

Macfie quoted a variety of supposed authorities to support his contentions:

In proof of the marked sensitiveness of the white man's constitution when transferred from the temperate zone to even the fringe of the sub-tropics, Dr. Woodruff shows that the Scandinavians who have emigrated to the southern States of America become liable to alarming disorders and nervous irritability, and die out in the third generation. The main line of his argument - which seems impregnable - is that the world is divided into color-zones, and that each climate is exactly suited by natural law to the particular human racial type evolved under its influence, but cannot be adjusted to any other. He denies that in a permanent change of residence from a temperate to a tropical or sub-tropical zone, acclimatisation is possible, except after a long period, and then only by the very rare "survival of the fittest." Nor, in this case, is the "fittest" the healthiest or the most adventurous, but the darkest man.

Further superficially scientific evidence, which inter alia ignored the fact that Asia stretches practically from pole to equator, was offered:

In his forcible work entitled "Europe and Asia" Mr. Meredith Townsend remarks - "Those who say ... that whites can thrive and develop in the tropics, only dream. History is opposed to them That must have been a most operative law which originally divided mankind so that the white race was confined to Europe, that the black race populated Africa, and that the huge bulk of Asia, the most fertile and tempting of all the continents, was filled with yellow and brown men The white people flourish best within strictly temperate regions. Hot lands do not, with all their natural advantages, ever tend to produce energy The first generation of white settlers in such countries suffers terribly from unaccustomed diseases; from the depressing effect of a change of climate, and from the shock involved in a violent change of daily habitudes as to diet, hours of labors, and general social life.

Clear ignorance of medical facts was apparent in Macfie's use as evidence the statement that:

Dr. T.E. Scholes, in his learned and unanswerable work, "The British Empire and Alliances," published in 1899, holds the view that 'nearly all the malaria which attacks white men in tropical Africa is due to the action of the sun, and that the pigment on the colored man's skin is the only true antidote While whites within the heat-belt become the victims of jaundice, disordered vision, shattered nerves, and sometimes subverted reason, and are compelled to be birds of passage, the black man can live under the severe climatic conditions mentioned with absolute immunity from the risk of such distressing ailments'.

The impossibility of a sugar industry without coloured labour was strongly asserted:

Mr. A.L. Anderson, a sugar-planter from the Herbert River, north Queensland, interviewed at Brisbane, said he had tried white labor in the canefields, and had come to the conclusion that the sugar industry without black labor was impossible. North of Mackay the white labor in the north was not only scarce but utterly unreliable, and as a result of that and uncertainty as to the future of the industry, the farmers were not increasing their acreages.

The whole attitude to the question of the white man's role in the tropics was clearly expounded by reference to a 'trustworthy citizen' who wrote to the Melbourne Argus in the following terms:

I have lived 40 years in the tropics and know that the white man cannot personally work the land. He can guide, direct, supervise, and profit by it when worked by coloured labour. A third generation of pure whites in the tropics is a feeble rarity, and a fourth is unknown. How, then, is the white man going to colonize tropical Australia? If necessary, a colour line could be drawn, south of which these immigrants are not to come.

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The first truly scientific efforts to approach the whole question of European tropical settlement were undertaken by the Australian Medical Congress whose conclusions, presented to their Brisbane meeting in 1920, were largely based on comprehensive investigations made by Breinl and Young (Breinl and Young, 1920) of the Australian Institute of Tropical Medicine, Townsville. A further detailed report, including sociological as well as medical material, was published by Cilento, director of the Townsville Institute a few years later (Cilento, 1925). The Medical Congress generally concluded that, with certain adjustments to tropical conditions of their mode of living, Europeans could live, work and thrive in the tropics as elsewhere. The adjustments suggested included the regulation or prohibition of the sale of alcohol, better conditions of housing and clothing, better diet, and education in hygiene.

Breinl and Young's well-researched report cut convincingly through many of the ignorant pronouncements about the north with its acute insight born of local experience. Considerations of the effects of sunlight, heat and humidity on the human body were examined in the report, drawing upon data and experiments from the Philippines, the (then) Netherlands Indies, Africa and India as well as from northern Australia, and the conclusions reached were said to be 'disappointing' in that they were not conclusive. 'In short, all the efforts to detect physiological changes due to living in a tropical climate have not yielded definite results' (Breinl and Young, 1920). Their examination of vital statistics for Queensland - on the presumption that any unhealthiness of tropical Australia would have left its impress on those statistics - similarly revealed no evidence of high mortality rates. Indeed the record of the state disclosed general and infant mortality rates much more favourable than those of the Commonwealth as a whole. This latter point was severely challenged in the pages of the Geographical Review, by Ellsworth Huntington (Huntington, 1920, 1921) in the form of a criticism of the validity of the statistics in an effort to suggest that the real death rate was probably at least double that given by Breinl and Young. In a less simplistic, and perhaps wiser, era the difficulty of proving or disproving anything from raw vital statistics would more likely have been appreciated.

In many ways, the most valuable part of Breinl and Young's report arose from its comments on the general conditions of life in tropical Australia and their relationship to the broadly pioneering character of the region. In their general resume, they drew attention to the fact that during the first twenty years of the century, population growth in north Queensland and the Northern Territory had been less rapid than in the country as a whole, and that northern Australia was clearly less favoured for settlement than were the southern parts of the Commonwealth. The explanation of this fact, they suggested, was the preference of immigrants for settlement in the less unfamiliar environment of the south until such time as the opportunities were reduced. Settlement in the north - reflecting its frontier-type economy - was frequently of a migratory nature, producing amongst the inhabitants a general desire that their stay in the north should be as short as possible. Much of the man-made environment reflected this attitude. Houses were only rarely built for comfort, town improvements were often only of an ephemeral character and short-sighted policies were frequently the rule. Even the dress of the northern population, reflecting temperate custom, revealed an unwillingness to recognize the need to modify the norms of elsewhere. Breinl and Young write of newcomers 'dressed in their southern clothing (walking) about perspiring'. Experiments with various types of dress led Gibbs (1912) to the conclusion that 'clothing which in the sun will cast a shade upon the body without hindering the air circulation and heat radiation (would) be the most desirable, and if a colour is used which will give a minimum of heat absorption the efficiency is increased. This ideal condition is fulfilled by the umbrella, and it is evident that a large white umbrella lined with a material of a colour agreeable to the eyes, for example a shade of green, will be most efficient.' He adds that 'since custom prescribes that man shall cover his body, this mode of 'clothing' is in fact impracticable'. It would seem that, by the 1970s, many north Queenslanders have moved far towards this ideal dress, though usually - and unwisely - omitting the umbrella!

Cilento's substantial report on 'The White Man in the Tropics', published five years later, expanded on Breinl and Young's work. This report is particularly interesting in that, in addition to reinforcing

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the earlier conclusions that climate alone presented no insuperable block to colonization and that Queenslanders were as healthy as the inhabitants of any other part of Australia, it included the results of what was probably the first sociological investigation carried out in northern Australia. This investigation, unsophisticated in many ways, did however examine a random sample of north Queensland households, stratified to include inhabitants of the hot moist coastal, and coastal plateau and the hot dry inland climates. The picture of daily living conditions in the north in the 1920s revealed by the report was appalling. For example, 50 per cent of the 300 households surveyed in Townsville had kitchens situated on the hot side of the house, 30 per cent had no ice-chests, nearly 40 per cent were without meat-safes and 33 per cent had no water laid on to the kitchen. In general in north Queensland towns, Cilento reported that it was not uncommon to find the water supply, polluted, inadequate and failing to reach 'any recognized standard of desirability', the milk supply inferior, and the amount obtainable trifling and variable, greens almost unprocurable and fruit, forwarded from the south, highly priced and poor quality. Houses were largely iron and wooden structures, built on primitive plans generally totally unsuited to the tropics. Practically nothing had been done to deal effectively with general sanitary problems. The climate was then blamed for the disease, discomfort and premature ageing, especially of the north's womenfolk!

Other writers had also recognized that much of the acknowledged discomfort of life in northern Australia was as much due to the inadequate man-made environment as to the climate, and that this circumstance was largely the consequence of the nature of the regional economy. In 1912 Tilby (Tilby, 1912) had noted that in respect to the unhealthy reputation of northern Australia

the ignorance or carelessness of the settlers has usually been more to blame than any radical defect in the climate or the country itself. The colonist's houses are generally badly built, often of corrugated iron, without verandas, which makes them resemble an oven more than a human habitation; and the sites are often badly chose. If a man makes his abode on a swamp he usually pays the penalty in the shape of rheumatism in a cold country, malaria in a hot one.

Some years later, Barrett repeated the criticism of housing conditions (Barrett, 1925) and came to the conclusion that the settlement of tropical Australia was, 'not a climatic one, but an economic and political problem'. The "tropical neurasthenia" (nervous disability) which was long held up as the bete noir of all white women in the tropics was diagnosed by some as "kitchen neurasthenia" and declared as prevalent in southern cities as in the tropics (Wood, 1925).

Despite the lack of supporting medical evidence, however, the notion that the white man¹ was physiologically less suited than coloured peoples to undertake manual work in the tropics died hard. Less than two years before the outbreak of the Second World War, the report of a government board appointed to enquire into the land and land industries of the Northern Territory (Report of Board of Inquiry etc., 1937) came down unequivocally in favour of the White Australia policy on the basis of the ardent desire of 'all the States, all political parties and all sections of the people ... to maintain racial purity'. The board was concerned, however, about the health of the European population of the Territory and commented especially on the absence of green vegetables and fresh fruit since the cessation of gardening operations by Chinese soon after the taking over of the Territory by the Commonwealth, and on the fact that Darwin women did their own housework. Its solution was simple

We think the speediest method of solution would be to permit a limited number of Chinese gardeners to be indentured so that these gardens might be commenced afresh. Unless the health of the people is guarded, the White Australia policy will be endangered.

Similarly, in regard to housework. Most of the women at Darwin do their own housework. The result is that they have all the disadvantages of living in the tropics without any of the usual compensations which tropical countries provide, such as hours of leisure, social intercourse and labour for household duties. The introduction of a strictly limited number of eastern natives under indenture for domestic duties would, paradoxical as it may seem, help to strengthen the White Australia policy by guarding the health of females on whom the success of that policy depends.

The north was still believed, by some at least, to be plantation country!

1. Admittedly the definition of the 'white man' or even 'European' was gradually narrowed! The Buchanan Report on the Development and Administration of the Northern Territory, presented to the Commonwealth Parliament in 1925, classified schoolchildren, in one incredible table, as European, Greek, Philippine, Cingalese, Spaniard, Chinese or half-caste!

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