

'THE ROCKHAMPTON DELUSION' A Brief History of the Canoona Rush

by
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Canoona remains, perhaps unjustly, an infamous name in the history of Australian gold mining because of the so called 'duffer rush' in the last quarter of 1858. This was the first worthwhile discovery of gold in what was then the far north of New South Wales and for that reason it created a great amount of romantic excitement in Sydney and Melbourne. The 'old' fields around Bathurst, Bendigo, and Ballarat were no longer paradises for the man equipped with nothing more than a pick, shovel, and dish, so the opportunists and the uninformed became fired with enthusiasm for the distant prospect, much as Europeans had been early in the decade by wondrous tales of the first Australian goldfields.

Earliest reports of events in the far north usually referred to the 'Port Curtis rush' for Canoona was then an unknown pastoral run which, like Gladstone and Rockhampton, was within the boundaries of the Port Curtis Pastoral District, proclaimed by the New South Wales Government on 10 January 1854.¹ In mid-1858 the European population of the district was restricted to the few vast pastoral leases which had been stocked, and the small government settlement at Gladstone. Rockhampton had two buildings and a Native Police camp.² It was to this remote and practically unknown part of the country that an estimated 15 000 people flocked in September, October, and November 1858. Events leading up to the rush indicate that while the Government encouraged the discovery of gold in the north in order to attract European population, no misleading or exaggerated reports of gold recovered at Canoona were circulated by it. Contemporary evidence reveals that those people who later reviled the Rockhampton field as a 'delusion' or a 'swindle' were themselves guilty of irresponsible behaviour in their desire for instant wealth; many seemed incapable of resisting the contagious gold-fever madness which swept through the southern capitals. These were the

people who had, in the end, to be rescued by their colonial governments or given charitable treatment by shipping companies, and then tried to justify their foolish actions by naming a scapegoat. 'I Deeply Regret that I was one of the unfortunate dupes of the Rockhampton delusion' wrote one of these men in 1860, and then admitted, 'To make the Fitzroy outfit I sold off Everything . . .'.³

The history of the rush to Canoona begins with the establishment of a government settlement at Gladstone on Port Curtis Harbour early in 1854.⁴ Captain Maurice O'Connell (later, Sir Maurice), a grandson of Captain Bligh of *Bounty* fame, was appointed Government Resident on 2 January 1854 and took up his duties in March of that year. Within a month he showed his interest in the discovery of gold in the Port Curtis District by persuading a shipwrecked English seaman, William Gibson, an experienced miner from one of the southern goldfields, to join a survey party just then setting out to explore the country towards the Fitzroy River.⁵ This was the geological survey led by the New South Wales Government's first official geologist, Samuel Stutchbury, and one of its chief objectives was to search for auriferous country.⁶ While O'Connell's primary duty was to administer the Port Curtis District, his interest in the discovery of a viable goldfield was undoubtedly the result of government policy to attract Europeans to the frontier; Gladstone could never become capital of the new colony after Separation from New South Wales without an adequate population. In fact, Sir Charles Fitzroy on his initial visit to Gladstone had impressed on O'Connell the importance of discovering a permanent goldfield in the district.⁷ The squatters also wanted a white labour force; Stutchbury's northern surveys were the direct result of requests from the Leith Hay brothers and Leslie in 1851 that 'a competent person' be sent to discover whether gold existed in the Darling Downs District. By the time O'Connell reached Port Curtis in March 1854, the Leith Hays had already been squatting for more than a year at Rannes, 172 km from Gladstone and were experiencing the usual difficulties in obtaining labour beyond the settled districts. A goldfield in the region would inevitably provide a surplus of disappointed diggers willing to accept station work.

Samuel Stutchbury first arrived in Gladstone in December 1854⁸ and during the following months he organised the geological survey of the surrounding country. Because he suffered severe illness as the result of infected sandfly bites, and then a broken arm in a fall from a horse, he was obliged to put his assistant, Charles Birch, in charge of part of the survey.⁹ In his Sixteenth Report, dated 20 November 1855, Stutchbury refers to gold having previously been found on the Calliope River (near Gladstone), but after a laborious search he found only minute particles and believed it unlikely that remunerative quantities would be found there.¹⁰ Sometime between March and August 1855 a survey party led by Birch proceeded through the Narrows (in a boat borrowed from Captain O'Connell for ten days) and up the Fitzroy River for a distance of about 160 km, and although they found the Stanwell coal measures, every effort to test the auriferous claims of the district had failed. Stutchbury had little doubt that gold would later be found at the heads of the rivers between Wide Bay and Port Curtis. While the Colonial Geologist was looking for likely gold bearing country in 1855, the Archer brothers were establishing their head station at Gracemere eleven kilometres from the Fitzroy River which they had discovered and named in May



The significance of Canoona in the establishment of Rockhampton was acknowledged by the Rockhampton and District Historical Society with the unveiling in 1965 of a memorial near the site of the rush.

1853. Gracemere was the first run north of Rannes to be stocked, but the Archers were soon followed by their friends the Elliotts who had taken up a run which they called Canoona; it was north of the Fitzroy and about sixty kilometres from the site of Rockhampton. Other squatters began run hunting in the district, so in mid-1856 Richard Palmer arrived to set up a store on the southern bank of the Fitzroy not far from the Rocks.¹¹ The Government then requested William Henry Wiseman, Commissioner for Crown Lands in the Leichhardt District, to select a suitable site on the Fitzroy for a township. In consultation with Charles Archer, Wiseman decided that as the Rocks formed the head of navigation the settlement should be situated in that area. Archer, Palmer and Wiseman agreed that the name 'Rockhampton' was particularly suited to the environment.¹² In the following year Richard Parker's Bush Inn became the township's second building and with the Native Police Camp to complete it, the isolated community existed peacefully until the great rush to Canoona began.

According to legend a man named Chapple (or Chappel) first discovered gold at Canoona in July or August 1858¹³, but Captain O'Connell's correspondence shows clearly that he was the original discoverer of gold north of the Fitzroy and that this took place in the year before the Canoona rush. As Commissioner for the Port Curtis District, O'Connell gave the facts to the Chief Commissioner of Crown Lands on 25 November 1857:

'As it is possible some exaggerated accounts of the recent discovery of a promising gold field made by me in this district may reach Sydney, I deem it a duty I individually owe to my country . . . to lay before you, for the information of the Government, an account of what has actually taken place here . . .

'Having occasion . . . to leave Gladstone on the 11th of last month, on an extended tour to the northern portion of my district, and having long felt convinced that some part of the country I was about to travel over was auriferous . . .

'I took with me a very competent practical miner, and on arriving at the outside limit of present occupation on the northern frontier of the Colony,—that is, on the very last station,—on Saturday, the 17th November, I caused some pans of earth to be washed, and discovered, both in the beds of the creeks and on the surface soil of the surrounding country, very promising prospects of gold . . .'¹⁴

O'Connell commented that news of gold travels fast and at the time of writing another party of four had returned to Gladstone with much more gold than he had found, but they had been frightened away by Aborigines. Consequently, the people of Gladstone decided to provide rations and equipment for a party of twelve who were to stay out for six weeks. O'Connell was convinced that there was a rich and extensive gold field in this neighbourhood because gold had been found at different points over a distance of more than ninety-six kilometres. He ended his letter on a moderate note:

'I am not yet in a position to address you officially with a request to have a gold field proclaimed, and merely forward this communication as much excitement has been caused here, and inquiries may be addressed to the Government on the subject'.¹⁵

When the rush was at its height in the following year, Colin Archer referred back to O'Connell's discovery: 'A prospecting party, set on foot principally I believe by Capt. O'Connell, after pottering about for some six months or more, did discover a gold-field near Canoona, yielding gold in paying quantities for a limited number of men'.¹⁶ O'Connell was in Sydney in July 1858 when he drew the Government's attention to the success of the measures he had initiated for the development of the field which, he emphasised, had been his discovery. As public attention had already been attracted by the success of his working party, he expected a considerable increase in the population of the district and therefore requested the Government to provide adequate protection to life and property on the new gold field. Its locality was on 'the very outskirts of occupation, and in the immediate neighbourhood of very numerous tribes of wild blacks . . .'.¹⁷ They had already killed one man on Canoona Station two years earlier and severely wounded Elliott. For this reason he believed he should be given authority to take up with

him a sergeant and three troopers to be stationed on the Fitzroy. But the Secretary for Lands and Works did not think 'so large a force' was necessary and advised O'Connell to return at once to his district so that he could report on the prospects and requirements of the new gold field.¹⁸



Canoona Creek, one of the 'small but famous spots of Canoona's brief and departed days of golden glory'. (Sinnett, 1859)

Meantime, Wiseman had just returned to Rockhampton from a visit to the Canoona diggings and he informed the Chief Commissioner for Crown Lands that about 200 men were all finding gold in satisfactory quantities. Some experienced American miners who had just arrived thought well of the diggings and the general appearance of the ranges. If gold were found in deep diggings where the men were working, he believed it would be safe to assume that the Fitzroy goldfields were valuable. He intended to inspect a site between the mouth of the Fitzroy River and Casuarina Creek which Colin Archer thought might be suitable for a seaport town. Finally, he stressed the need for a Chief Constable and other police in Rockhampton as he was receiving continual complaints of 'men roaming about in uncontrolled drunkenness'.¹⁹ Wiseman's letter was factual and unemotional, and yet when it was read in the Legislative Assembly it brought about an incredible response which Colin Archer described just before the rush reached its frenzied peak:

' . . . all Sydney was seized with an excitement almost amounting to madness, and many hundreds of people have left good situations and comfortable homes to seek their fortunes on the Fitzroy, thinking they would have nothing to do but pick up the gold which, they had deluded themselves into the belief, was to be found in nuggets on the surface of the ground . . .'.²⁰

Before the end of September O'Connell confirmed that the progressive increase in the gold from Canoona met 'the most sanguine anticipations' and that about 350 ounces had already been sent to Sydney, despite the fact that many diggers were still in possession of most of their gold. Four vessels had arrived in Keppel Bay that very morning and he believed a large number were being laid on for the Fitzroy. According to the latest reports there were between five and six hundred at the diggings and he was just about to proceed there himself. He hoped that the Government would appoint a Resident Commissioner at Canoona and that meantime he himself would be authorised to issue miners' rights.²¹ O'Connell had written that letter from a practically deserted Gladstone, but one week later he was in Rockhampton and at the centre of frantic activity. The *City*

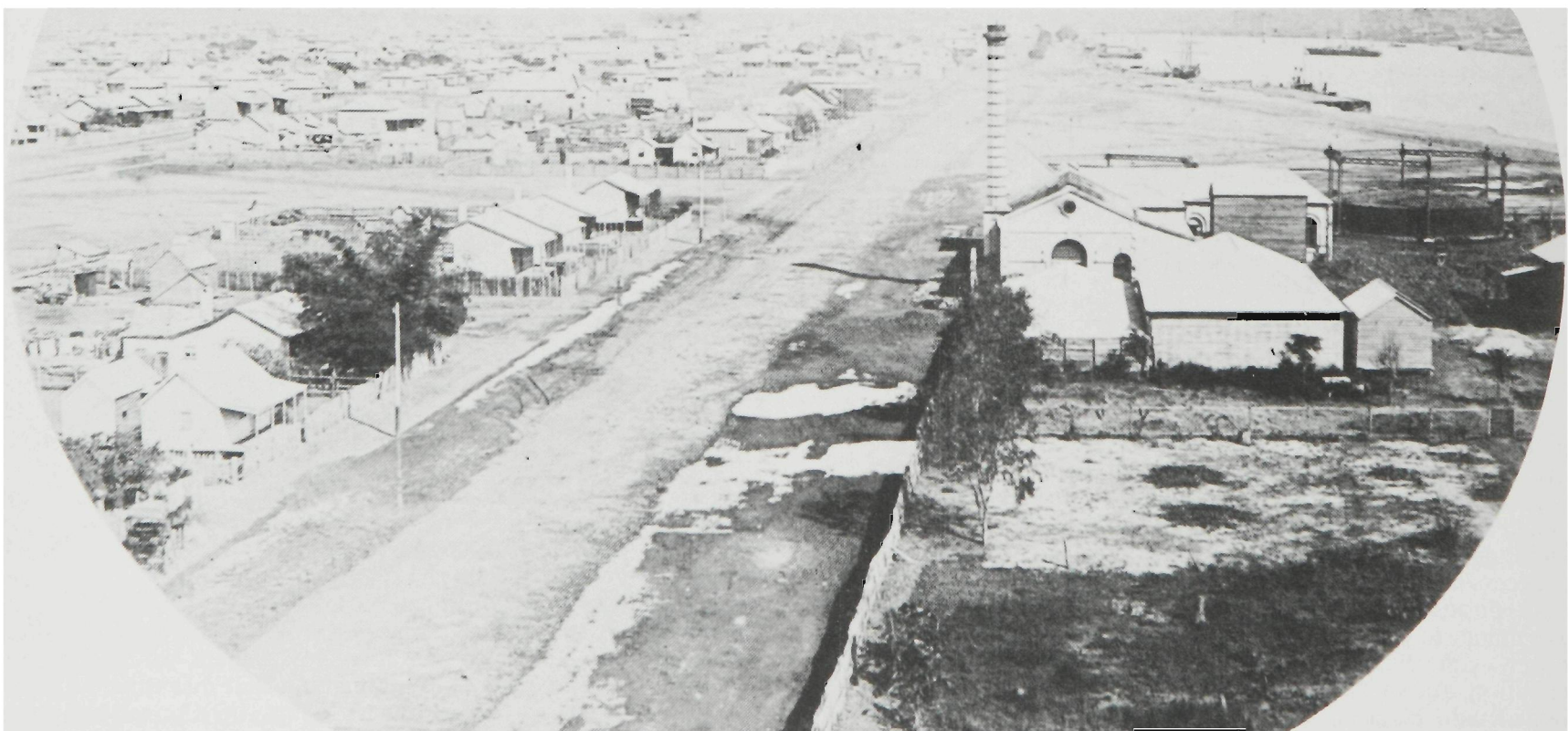
of Sydney had reached Keppel Bay with a number of government officers on board, including Inspector Read and his mounted police and their horses, so he could not visit Canoona until they were landed in Rockhampton. He expected that Read and his men would proceed to the diggings when their horses 'whose legs are somewhat cramped from the voyage' were rested and refreshed. During the last few days about 1000 people had landed, of whom about 700 had gone to the diggings. Favourable reports were still coming in and many of those who had left Gladstone were now taking their families to Canoona.²² If the local people were contented, it soon became apparent that many of those who had arrived from the south with high expectations were bitterly disappointed.

After 'a fatiguing day under a hot sun' O'Connell was feeling the strain of the influx of inexperienced diggers, so he was not pleased to hear the first complaints from the late-comers who found all the workable ground at Canoona already occupied. He was disgusted that they were not prepared to look for fresh ground, although admitting that the current dry weather (normal in September and October) made this difficult. He feared that new arrivals would be discouraged by these reports and he was even more alarmed to hear of greater numbers on their way north. The pressure of such a large increase in the population had already increased food prices considerably, while the high cost of carriage to the diggings ('25s. per cwt.') would make subsistence very expensive.²³

Inspector Read, while his men hastily erected tents on the bank of the Fitzroy and his horses stretched their cramped legs, began entering in his *Journal*²⁴ his refreshing impressions of the Fitzroy, Rockhampton and Canoona. Despite the discomfort of the overcrowded *City of Sydney* sticking fast on a mud bank, right under a mountain (probably Broadmount) which had been set on fire by Aborigines, Read retained his sense of wonder in what, to a Sydney-sider in 1858, must have seemed as strange as a foreign country. When he eventually reached Rockhampton and met Chapple 'who had got into great notoriety as being the original founder of the Gold Fields', he thought he would obtain all the information he required, but 'a lass [*sic*] I found that Mr. C... had evidently been spending a

succession of convivial nights with our host Mr. Gannon'.²⁵ Read, like Frederick Sinnett, has left a description of Chapple which indicates an extrovert character with unusual taste in dress. He appeared to be between fifty and sixty years old and was short and bow legged; unlike most men of the day he was close shaved, but had long black hair tinged with grey and worn 'in ringlets'. He was dressed in a panama hat with a green veil, a scarlet blouse and enamel 'Napoleons' with pants. Read at first thought it was his own lack of bush experience which accounted for his inability to appreciate 'this equisite' who 'clipped her Majesty's English in a manner quite unintelligible' to him, so he was glad to leave him at Parker and Gannon's Bush Inn and move on to Palmer's store; he found it well stocked with groceries, saddlery and hardware, but as he could see no road or other evidence of traffic he was puzzled as to where the customers came from, for even at the river bank there were only a few gaps cut through the mangroves.²⁶

Maurice O'Connell was most anxious to get Read and his troopers out to the diggings, but it took several days to purchase stores and arrange for their transport to Canoona in Feez's two drays at twenty-five pounds a load. The night before they left was made memorable by the visit of a sixteen foot crocodile (which Read called an alligator) among the tents on the river bank, but as it was also seen by 'Captain Feez and several other respectable persons' he knew he had not imagined it. In the morning he and his men set out for the diggings, calling at Gracemere where they saw dozens of Aborigines immersed to their necks while fishing in the lagoon with hand nets made from brigalow. As they rode along the southern side of the river, then the road to Canoona, Read was impressed by the beauty of the country with its deep alluvial soil and the many lagoons swarming with pelicans and water fowl. It amazed him that until the diggings were discovered, this splendid country was in the possession of savages and wild animals, but he was kept in touch with its present problems by the large number of dejected diggers they met—sometimes as many as fifty together. He was aware that many of them had sold all they possessed to pay for their passages north and now had neither money nor gold. Read was touched by their misery and admitted that it spoiled his pleasure in the 'truly magnificent' countryside.²⁷



View of Rockhampton, 1888.

At the diggings Inspector Read found an orderly company of diggers who, in the absence of police, made their own code of laws which he believed the evil doers feared more than the formal laws. On 3 October he reported to the Inspector General of Police that despite the sorry plight of some returning miners, there were many who were doing well, particularly those of the first rush 'amongst whom are the many unemployed who were sent at the expense of the Government'.²⁸ He also saw the two correspondents of the *Sydney Morning Herald* returning 'as discomfited as the rest'.²⁹ About ten days later another newspaper correspondent arrived at the diggings, Frederick Sinnett of the Melbourne *Argus*. As well as reporting back to his paper, Sinnett published a book in the following year called *The Rush to Canoona*. Unlike Read's, which was a personal journal, Sinnett's was written with his Melbourne readers in mind, but while it is entertaining, it is also factual.

Sinnett travelled the 50 kilometres by river to 'the landing place' and then walked the remaining 20 kilometres to Canoona. Instead of waiting two days for the steam-clipper *Canoona*, he accompanied newly appointed Gold Commissioner Cloete in the flat-bottomed sailing boat *Pancake* whose owner had sailed her safely from Wide Bay to Rockhampton after prayers had been publicly offered for the safety of the crew. There must have been moments during the river trip when Sinnett wondered if prayers should also have been offered in Rockhampton, for the promised one day trip dragged out to three. The half dozen passengers included the Commissioner's horse, a 'pompous and exacting traveller' with a body-servant to wait upon him. Sinnett, whose luggage consisted of 'a note-book, a tooth-brush, and a revolver', was thrown on the mercy of Cloete for food which consisted of biscuits, sardines, and bottled porter for breakfast, dinner and tea each day. In the end he was glad enough to jump on board the *Canoona* 'that masterpiece of steam naval architecture' which had overtaken them. The captain brought with him the latest news from Rockhampton: Captain McEwan had organised groups of disappointed diggers awaiting passages home to make two tons of damper because the biscuits had run out; and the two 'enterprising free and enlightened citizens of the United States' who had promised a coach service between Rockhampton and Canoona were taking their coaches back again.

At last the little steam boat reached 'the landing place' near the mouth of Alligator Creek, then named Pheasant Creek because of the large numbers of those birds in the vicinity. Monsieur Thozet had fastened a pheasant's tail to a board bearing the inscription 'Pheasant Place' and nailed it to one of the trees at 'the landing place' (not far from the later township of Yaamba).³⁰ Thozet³¹ was waiting for drays to take his goods to the diggings where he set up business in a tent as an unlicensed publican. While waiting at the river the French professional botanist (who was to play a significant role in Rockhampton's development) spent his time collecting specimens—animal, vegetable and mineral. Later at the diggings, Sinnett became his first guest in the makeshift hotel.

One of the diggers, a 'very intelligent, energetic kind of man' named Hall who had been in the first rush told Sinnett that his party was doing well and that he estimated 2500 ounces of gold had been won already (mid-October)³², although Captain O'Connell told the journalist it was about 2000 ounces.³³ The scene at the diggings had all the appearance of a Victorian goldfield with considerable numbers of tents pitched on the 16 or 20 ha flat. Sinnett noticed a good many women there, but thought they added nothing to its pleasant appearance as a diggings rush was not a 'woman's sphere'. He also saw 'Mr Chapel, a celebrity of those days' whom he described as 'a short, thick, Hebraic looking man with long black ringlets and a very loud waistcoat . . .'.³⁴ He confirmed that Chapple had been employed by Captain O'Connell to search for gold, and also that violence against him had been threatened by some disappointed diggers. Sinnett walked with Hall a little way to see 'Chinaman's Gully and Golden Point and the other small but famous spots of Canoona's



In October 1858, Frederick Sinnett described this flat as having 'all the appearance of a Victorian goldfield with considerable numbers of tents' pitched on it.

brief and departed days of golden glory'.³⁵ The present diggers, he said, were but gleaners after the harvest, for the great yield had been in the top layer of soil, seldom more than a foot deep overlying the slaty rock which the diggers wrongly called serpentine. Those who were prepared to work were making better than day wages. Sinnett believed that at least half those who had come north had turned back at Keppel Bay, another quarter had gone no further than Rockhampton, while of those who made the journey to Canoona, probably only one in five had dug in earnest. The journalist returned to Rockhampton on the waterman's boat *Admella*, taking less than one day for the trip downstream. His description of the Canoona diggings and some of the people associated with it is not only a most valuable record of part of Rockhampton's founding history, but touched as it is with perception and humour, it is a fine piece of journalism.

The Government in remote Sydney had become aware by mid September that O'Connell's earlier predictions of a large population on the Fitzroy were now reality, and despite its previous reluctance to send an adequate police force, it at once appointed Rockhampton as a place for holding Petty Sessions and appointed a Clerk who was also Gold Receiver and Deputy Customs Clerk. O'Connell was most grateful for this assistance and for the police contingent because of the trying circumstances existing in the district, but he believed still more police were needed while 'elements of disorder' remained. Each day more ships were arriving with eager gold-seekers, but they often returned with almost as many disgruntled diggers. Small wonder that O'Connell was alarmed to hear that thousands more were on their way from southern ports. Like Read and Archer, he was aware of the basic cause of discontent:

'I am also bound to take into consideration the fact, which is notorious, that many have come up to this newly located country with but trifling means of support, under a vague hope that gold is to be obtained without that expenditure of time and labor which its very value ought to teach them is necessary for its production'.³⁶

Captain O'Connell, like most government field officers of the time, was expected to maintain normal office procedures with respect to communication between himself and Sydney, irrespective of the

primitive circumstances in which he was placed. While camped at Canoona he was obliged to write his report to the Colonial Secretary with 'only a very indifferent light' and without the convenience of a table. Even so, his anxiety for the preservation of peace and the maintenance of good order in face of both the influx and reflux of population is very evident. Complete panic now possessed the minds of some who had hurriedly left their occupations to rush to Canoona. Some had disposed of their tools 'at a ruinous sacrifice' while others had simply thrown them away in the bush.³⁷ O'Connell had already advised Hutchinson, Clerk of Petty Sessions, to provide immediate maintenance for the absolutely destitute, but he was uneasy because he had to spend government money without authority and he hoped this would be rectified. In spite of the very real problems faced by so many, he was not yet prepared to state that the diggings were a failure—many men were still doing well and he believed they would remain. None of the reports sent to Sydney about the quantities of gold obtained were exaggerated (as had been claimed by so many), but the actual amounts recovered.

William Hutchinson was able to hand over some of his duties to Assistant Commissioner Cloete who had just arrived on 6 October. Hutchinson, like O'Connell, had to take desperate actions for which he had no authority, such as serving clearances to several vessels which were obviously overloaded. He did so because he feared that 'the congregation of a destitute and discontented population would lead to injurious results', and because he had only three constables in Rockhampton. Many of the people there had never put a spade in the ground and although the A.S.N. Company had reduced return fares to £3 10s., while sailing vessels were taking people back to Sydney for less, a lot of the men could not even raise these small amounts.³⁸

Cloete was placed in charge at Canoona, thus allowing O'Connell to attend to his many duties, one of which was to take out a prospecting party as far as the Connors Range, inland from Brousdound, but in five days they found no gold. Nor had any extension of the auriferous patch at Canoona been found, although gold had been discovered in small quantities at Gracemere, Rannes and in the Gladstone area. In reporting these matters in mid-October to the Secretary for Lands and Public Works, O'Connell concluded:

'From what I have stated above it will be evident to the Government that matters here are passing through a crisis, whose issue mainly is in the hands of Providence.

'If there is no more gold than what has already been obtained neither human labor nor human enterprise will produce it . . .'³⁹

Providence, it seems, decreed that Rockhampton should be transformed from a camp-site to a permanent town, for on 1 October the Government despatched a second-hand iron building removed from Port Phillip and four wooden pre-fabricated buildings (the largest, 24' by 12') to be used for Customs, separate male and female hospitals and a dispensary. Accompanying them were James Moore, Clerk of Works and six carpenters and a labourer.⁴⁰ The Colonial Architect apparently preferred not to enlist even one labourer from among the northern unemployed.

While the construction work was progressing the gold rush was reaching its climax. Between 1 October and mid-November no less than seventy-three ships cast anchor in Keppel Bay, and in addition the *Timandra* had been wrecked nearby and the *Sybil* was lying on her beam end in the river with a ruined cargo. From these seventy-three ships, more than eight thousand passengers had been landed at Rockhampton, while almost four thousand people returned by them in the same period.⁴¹ That astute observer of human nature, Inspector Read, described some of the strange types who were his fellow passengers on the *City of Sydney*. There were 375 altogether, ' . . . as motley and perhaps diversified an assortment as ever sailed out of any Harbour . . .'⁴² They ranged from 'filibusters' from South America and Mexico, to a little clerk 'fantastically dressed and full of hope', whose thin, delicate hands were quite unsuited to hard work on the diggings. There was also a respectable looking man with

capital to invest in store keeping. Read recognised some of the company as 'black legs' (swindlers), card sharps, gamblers and sly grog sellers, nine in all who were going as a 'joint stock affair' complete with three horses and carts, grog and gambling devices. These were hardened adventurers, but there was another class on board, those who had only lately been infected by 'gold fever'; these had left a mixture of occupations, some having run away from their employers to gain independence and then used their new found liberty to get drunk and become noisy. Almost every man on board was armed, usually with a five-chambered revolver and a large bowie knife in the belt. Even the second mate and the whole ships' crew were affected by the excitement, despite the widely held belief that few of the number would ever return because of the rumour that fever and ague were rife in the unknown country at journey's end. With expectations on the one hand of golden nuggets for all, and on the other of an unhealthy tropical land in which a romantic death was almost inevitable, it is not surprising that the reality of a small goldfield surrounded by lightly timbered country and overlooked by a dry stony hill was an unbelievable anti-climax. The realists among Read's shipmates were the nine hardened adventurers and the merchant who set up a store to supply scarce goods at high prices.

By early December the crisis had passed and so O'Connell decided to replace Read and his mounted troopers at Canoona by men from the Rockhampton Constabulary. 'Mr. Reid [*sic*] has been particularly active and useful . . . and with much tact acquiring the respect of his own men and the public also', wrote O'Connell to Captain McLerie (Inspector General of Police), 'we have had some trying moments when it seemed as if the weight of a feather would have turned the balance between comparative order and scenes of great violence. . .'.⁴³ He did not elaborate, but according to legend both Chapple and O'Connell were threatened with lynching.⁴⁴ The authorities obviously expected violence to break out, for as well as the contingents of mounted and foot police, the Government sent up a 'sloop of war', the *Iris*, which remained in Keppel Bay during November to preserve the peace. The Victorian Government also sent its war ship, the *Victoria*, with orders to the captain to bring back all Victorian diggers unable to pay their fares; they were to work out their passage money on return to Melbourne.⁴⁵ Captain Moodie of the *City of Sydney* also returned on the *Victoria*, having already despatched his own Company's ships—many of them carrying indigent diggers whose fares were to be paid by the Victorian Government.⁴⁶



Remains of old mine workings at Canoona.

Before the rush had completely exhausted itself, Colin Archer described its effect on the isolated district as 'a great revolution'.⁴⁷ Like all revolutions, some of its effects were immediate and unpleasant for individuals, others had long term implications for central Queensland. In Rockhampton at the end of 1858 the rush already seemed like a dream to the government officials who had been sent north in great haste during the crisis, but with time on their hands they began to realise the inconvenience of their makeshift accommodation and their isolation from their friends. James Moore had already returned to the Colonial Architect's Office, leaving his friends lamenting his departure. 'I hope you have fallen into more comfortable quarters than you enjoyed in Rockhampton', wrote O'Connell to Moore, 'which by the bye would not be difficult'.⁴⁸ Henry Lumsdaine (Customs) told Moore that although Rockhampton was not yet a deserted village it was very dull⁴⁹, and a week later he commented that there was nothing new under the torrid sun of Rockhampton.⁵⁰ Three months passed, but the roof still leaked, the office was still too small, and the township was not exactly lively: 'Write to me in my loneliness', he begged.⁵¹ William Hutchinson complained to Moore that the place was affected by 'wasting atrophy' and was daily becoming more desolate and deserted.⁵² These men were temporary exiles in the new town as a result of the rush to Canoona, but there were other government officials such as William John Brown (Customs) and Frank Beddek (Clerk of Petty Sessions) who established their homes in Rockhampton and played significant social roles in its development.



New Zealand Gully, ca. 1871. Gold was discovered in 1870 in a branch of Stony Creek, near Rockhampton, which was named New Zealand Gully.

In the long term, Canoona fulfilled the hopes of the early pastoralists for a northern goldfield, for the many diggers who either chose not to return south, or were unable to do so, provided a surplus of labour for squatters, storekeepers, and government works throughout 1859. As early as October 1858 the Archers were employing some of the failed diggers to dig wells and trench the garden at Gracemere, but they advised all to go further inland where the squatters would pay better wages.⁵³ (In the Gracemere garden, 120 years after the Canoona rush, there are stone walls which were built by impoverished diggers who possibly learned their trade in Cornwall). There were also men of substance attracted to the Port Curtis District in 1858, not by golden nuggets, but by business

prospects. Some of these who remained in Rockhampton to be numbered among its leading citizens were Albrecht Feez, Captain R. M. Hunter, and Monsieur Anthelme Thozet, a colleague of von Mueller. They saw Rockhampton as the natural port and business centre for a potentially productive hinterland, and realised that they held some advantages over later arrivals in being able to choose the choicest sites for their enterprises. Some had erected buildings before the town was surveyed and were obliged as 'temporary tolerated occupants of small portions of Crown Lands' to petition the Government in September 1858 either for security of tenure or compensation. They feared that because of the great increase in population strangers and foreigners without the scruples of their neighbours would bid against them at the first land sale (held in Rockhampton, 17 November 1858), and so cause them to lose their property.⁵⁴ One of the buildings listed was the property of Captains Hunter and Moodie who were old friends, but although Moodie commanded the *City of Sydney* which brought so many to the rush, he had no desire to emulate his friend Hunter and remain in Rockhampton. By November he was 'quite full up of gold rushes after two months terrible mental strain and great discomfort'.⁵⁵ The Government heeded the petitioners, and A. F. Wood was instructed 'to embrace the different buildings on separate allotments'⁵⁶, so it seems that Rockhampton's first business men in their choice of building sites were responsible for the original street alignments, including the fine river front boulevard, Quay Street.

The 'revolution' also had lasting effects on the lives of the many individuals infected by gold fever and deluded by their own irrational imaginations. One of these was a Sydney man named James Jones who for the previous seventeen years had followed 'the well known life destroying calling of steam boat fireman'. About eighteen months after the rush he wrote to John Dunmore Lang 'the friend of the poor' confessing that he had been one of the unfortunate dupes of 'the Rockhampton delusion'. He sold everything he possessed to make up his outfit for the goldfields, despite the fact that he had a wife, Elizabeth, and five children. During his absence one of his children died and his wife became very ill and was for long in a precarious state as the result of 'the Embarassment occasioned by the Fitzroy Delusion'. Since his return he had been unable to obtain regular work and for the past three weeks he had not earned a shilling. He assured the 'Rev^d and Most Worthy Sir' that he did not know where to raise the rent. At the end of four long pages of 'humble supplication' in which he tried to show that he had shared 'on rather a large and unequal scale the vicissitudes of Colonial Enterprise', the letter was signed 'Your truly Grateful, Humble, & Disconsolate servants, James & Elizabeth Jones'.⁵⁷

'The very name of Canoona conjures up so many dismal recollections that we fear to dwell on it', commented the *Rockhampton Bulletin* on 31 May 1864 with reference to the news that half a dozen diggers were retesting its auriferous prospects. These 'dismal recollections' haunted every new field discovered in the district throughout the 1860s and although 37 500 ounces were exported from Rockhampton in one year, 1867, no large rush had taken place.⁵⁸ In the years since the 'great revolution' Canoona itself has been worked profitably from time to time. Assays from Hutton and Company's claim in 1888 ranged from 1.75 ounces to over 4 ounces⁵⁹, and a well defined reef was still being worked in the late 1890s.⁶⁰ Canoona was pronounced the most promising of the numerous fields around Rockhampton in 1907, with two companies active—one of them on the actual site of the original diggings.⁶¹ In 1931 four men recovered approximately eighty ounces of gold, chiefly in nuggets ranging from a few pennyweights to ten ounces, and they found these about four feet below the surface of the old Canoona diggings.⁶² This same gold was available in 1858 to any of the thousands who complained of being duped. As O'Connell said at the time, instead of vague hopes that gold could be picked up without effort, they should have realised that its recovery depended on 'expenditure of time and labor'.⁶³ Although Canoona was a small



Derelict mining gear beside Canoona Creek provides evidence of the more recent 'rushes' of the 1930s.

goldfield quite incapable of accommodating a massive rush, it was never a 'duffer'⁶⁴—that term should be reserved for those seized by what Colin Archer called 'unaccountable mania' on news of a gold discovery in far away Port Curtis. Nor did Rockhampton delude them, but like James Jones they deluded themselves—'unhappily proving to the Letter, That all that Glitters is not Gold'.⁶⁵

The significance of the rush to Canoona extended far beyond its effect on individuals: in attracting the nucleus of a permanent population to Rockhampton, it forever put an end to hopes in some quarters that Gladstone would become the capital of the new Colony of Queensland (proclaimed in December 1859). O'Connell recognised the threat to Gladstone's future early in the rush and tried to divert attention from Rockhampton. He pointed out to the Colonial Secretary the need for a Customs House at Gladstone 'to compel all foreign vessels to call in there'. He emphasised the difficulties of navigation in the Fitzroy and the dangers of foreign vessels unloading in Keppel Bay where there was no settlement and so opportunities for 'many frauds upon the revenue'. Rockhampton itself was unsuitably sited in his opinion and two other townships might be laid out above and below it.⁶⁶ O'Connell's concern was futile, for the Government responded by proclaiming Rockhampton a port of entry, setting up a pilot station on Curtis Island (Keppel Bay) and building a Customs House in Rockhampton, thus approving it as the port for central Queensland. This was no delusion: Canoona had already carried with it the seeds of the future.

ENDNOTES

1. *New South Wales Government Gazette*, 10 January 1854, p. 50.
2. For a brief description of the area see J. T. S. Bird, *The Early History of Rockhampton, Dealing Chiefly with Events up till 1870* (Rockhampton, 1904). For the settlement at Port Curtis and Gladstone, see J. F. Hogan, *The Gladstone Colony: An Unwritten Chapter of Australian History* (London, 1898). For the development of the Native Police, see L. E. Skinner, *Police of the Pastoral Frontier: Native Police 1849–59* (Brisbane, 1975), p. 117.
3. James Jones to John Dunmore Lang, 23 June 1860 (Mitchell Library, Sydney A2227: Papers of John Dunmore Lang, vol. 7, p. 154).

4. For the history of the proposed North Australia Colony and the subsequent settlement at Gladstone, see Hogan, *Gladstone Colony*.
5. W. H. Traill, *A Queenly Colony* (Brisbane, 1901), pp. 84–5.
6. W. H. Bryan, 'Samuel Stutchbury and Some of Those Who Followed Him', *Queensland Government Mining Journal* (hereafter cited as *Q.G.M.J.*), vol. LV, no. 634 (20 August 1954), pp. [641]–6. For a copy of Stutchbury's report on the Port Curtis area see 'Geological and Mineralogical Survey, Ordered . . . to be Printed, 19 December 1855 [16th Report]', *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Council of New South Wales*, 1855, vol. I, pp. 1193–8.
7. Hogan, *Gladstone Colony*, p. 93.
8. 'Evidence of S. Stutchbury to Select Committee on the Government Resident, Port Curtis, 3 October 1855', in 'Report of the Select Committee on the Office and Establishment of the Government Resident at Port Curtis with Minutes of Evidence', *N.S.W.L.C.V.P.*, 1855, vol. III, p. 982.
9. S. Stutchbury to C. W. Birch [February 1855?] [Archives Office of New South Wales, 4/3276].
10. 'Geological and Mineralogical Survey, Ordered . . . to be Printed, 19 December 1855 [16th Report]', *N.S.W.L.C.V.P.*, 1855, vol. I, pp. 1196–7.
11. Petition from Householders of Rockhampton to Sir William Denison [1858] [Queensland State Archives SUR/A2].
12. *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 23 September 1871.
13. Bird, *Early History of Rockhampton*, pp. 9–10.
14. 'Commissioner of Crown Lands, Port Curtis District to Chief Commissioner of Crown Lands, 25 November 1857', on 'Discovery of Gold at Port Curtis (Correspondence Relative to)', *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales*, 1858, vol. II, pp. 989–90.
15. As for endnote 14.
16. Colin Archer, *Journal*, 8 October, 1858 (Mitchell Library, Sydney, MS 3920).
17. 'Commissioner of Crown Lands, Port Curtis District to Chief Commissioner of Crown Lands, 29 July 1858', in 'Discovery of Gold at Port Curtis . . .', *N.S.W.V.P.*, 1858, vol. II, p. 990.
18. 'Under-Secretary for Lands and Public Works to Commissioner for Crown Lands, Port Curtis District, 3 August 1858', in 'Discovery of Gold at Port Curtis . . .', *N.S.W.V.P.*, 1858, vol. II, p. 991.
19. 'Commissioner for Crown Lands, Leichhardt District to Chief Commissioner of Crown Lands, 26 August 1858' in 'Gold Fields (Report of W. H. Wiseman, C.C.L., on Port Curtis Diggings)', *N.S.W.V.P.*, 1858, vol. II, p. 1000.
20. As for endnote 16.
21. 'Commissioner of Crown Lands, Port Curtis District to Chief Commissioner of Crown Lands, 20 September 1858' in 'Gold Fields (Letter from Captain O'Connell respecting Canoona)', *N.S.W.V.P.*, 1858, vol. II, pp. 1001–2.
22. 'Commissioner of Crown Lands, Port Curtis District to Chief Commissioner of Crown Lands, 27 September 1858', *N.S.W.V.P.*, 1858, vol. II, pp. 1003–4.
23. As for endnote 22.
24. W. R. Read, *Journal*, 18 September 1858–12 January 1859 (Mitchell Library, Sydney, MSS A2483).
25. Read, *Journal*, 26 September 1858.
26. As for endnote 25. See also Frederick Sinnett, *An Account of the "Rush" to Port Curtis, Including Letters Addressed to the "Argus" as Special Correspondent from the Fitzroy River* (Geelong, 1859), p. 74.
27. Read, *Journal*, 30 September 1858.
28. 'Letters to the Editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 1858, p. 5, cols. 4–5.
29. As for endnote 27. See also 'Fitzroy Diggings [From our Special Correspondent] No. 2, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 1858, p. 5, cols. 1–4 and as for endnote 27.
30. Sinnett, *Rush to Port Curtis*, pp. 50–63.
31. Anthelme Thozet (1826–78) born at Chitnien, France, migrated to Australia in 1854 with his Swiss born wife. As a Republican and member of the 'Extreme Left' in the French National Assembly of 1848, he had found it necessary to emigrate after the *coup d'état* of 1851. He came to Rockhampton at the time of the Canoona rush and after setting up a (legal) unlicensed hostelry on the goldfield, in 1859 he built the young town's second hotel, the Alliance, in East Street. Soon afterwards he established an experimental nursery garden at Kalka, North Rockhampton, where he grew cotton, tobacco and sugar to

prove their suitability to the climate and also grew a wide range of tropical fruits and trees. He was a distinguished botanical collector and exhibited at the London and Paris Exhibitions of the 1860s. He also collected for his friend Ferdinand von Mueller after whom he named his house 'Muellerville'. In 1877 Thozet was awarded the medal of the *Société Centrale d'Agriculture et d'Insectologie Générale* for his discovery of the Australian fruit boring moth about which there had been much controversy. In the following year he died from fever developed while collecting in the scrubs west of Rockhampton. By his own wish he was buried at Muellerville 'the spot that he loved above all others in Australia'. Refer 'Sir George Bowen to the Duke of Newcastle, 5 November 1862', in S. Lane-Poole, *Thirty Years of Colonial Government* (London, 1889); *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 28 July 1866; 8 December 1868; *Morning Bulletin*, 3 March 1877; 3 June 1878.

32. Sinnett, *Rush to Port Curtis*, p. 72.
33. Sinnett, *Rush to Port Curtis*, p. 79.
34. Sinnett, *Rush to Port Curtis*, p. 74.
35. Sinnett, *Rush to Port Curtis*, p. 80.
36. As for endnote 22.
37. 'Commissioner of Crown Lands, Port Curtis District to Colonial Secretary, 3 October 1858' in 'Gold Fields (Canoona, Port Curtis)', *N.S.W.V.P.*, 1858, vol. II, pp. 993-4.
38. 'W. Hutchinson to Colonial Secretary, 6 October 1858' in 'Gold Fields (Canoona, Port Curtis)', *N.S.W.V.P.*, 1858, vol. II, p. 995.
39. 'Commissioner of Crown Lands, Port Curtis District to Secretary for Lands and Public Works, 16 October 1858' in 'Port Curtis Gold Fields (Letters from Capt. O'Connell relative to)', *N.S.W.V.P.*, 1858, vol. II, pp. 1008-9.
40. 'Colonial Architect to Secretary for Lands and Public Works, 1 October 1858' in 'Gold Fields (Shipment of Buildings, &c. to Port Curtis)', *N.S.W.V.P.*, 1858, vol. II, p. 1011.
41. 'Port of Rockhampton (Return of Shipping since 2 October, 1858)', *N.S.W.V.P.*, 1858, vol. II, p. 1013.
42. Read, *Journal*, 18 September 1858.
43. O'Connell to McLerie, 21 December 1858 (Mitchell Library, Sydney, MSS A2483).
44. Bird, *Early History of Rockhampton*, pp. 12-13.
45. Archer, *Journal*, 18 November 1858.
46. As for endnote 45.
47. As for endnote 45.
48. O'Connell to Moore, 24 June 1858 [N.S.W.A.O., 2/623].
49. Lumsdaine to Moore, 17 December 1858 [N.S.W.A.O., 2/623].
50. Lumsdaine to Moore, 22 December 1858 [N.S.W.A.O., 2/623].
51. Lumsdaine to Moore, 4 March 1859 [N.S.W.A.O., 2/623].
52. Hutchinson to Moore, 9 February 1859 [N.S.W.A.O., 2/623].
53. Archer, *Journal*, 8 October 1858.
54. As for endnote 11.
55. As for endnote 3.
56. Instructions to the Surveyor Laying out Rockhampton, 8 September 1858 (Q.S.A. SUR/A2)
57. As for endnote 3.
58. *Morning Bulletin*, 15 February 1868.
59. *Morning Bulletin*, 24 July 1888.
60. *Morning Bulletin*, 24 January 1899.
61. *Morning Bulletin*, 19 March 1907.
62. *Q.G.M.J.*, vol. XXXII, no. 375 (15 August 1931), p. [301].
63. As for endnote 22.
64. By 1860 Canoona had produced approximately 4000 ounces of gold. A. G. Kirkegaard, R. D. Shaw, S. C. G. Murray, *Geology of the Rockhampton and Port Curtis Areas* (Brisbane, 1970), p. 111.
65. As for endnote 3.
66. 'Memoranda [n.d.] appended to Commissioner of Crown Lands, Port Curtis to Colonial Secretary, 27 September 1858' in 'Gold Fields (Canoona, Port Curtis)', *N.S.W.V.P.*, 1858, vol. II, p. 1004.