

# ENVIRONMENT, RACE, AND NATIONHOOD IN AUSTRALIA

REVISITING THE EMPTY NORTH

RUSSELL MCGREGOR



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Revisiting the Empty North

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*To Caitilin and Lachlan, with love*



## PREFACE

“Beware of keeping the Far North empty,” American President Theodore Roosevelt warned Australians in December 1905. He also advised them to shed their fixation on British immigrants and, for the sake of peopling the north, encourage “the immigration of Southern Europeans, who will cultivate the rich country and become good Australians.”<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt’s warning against leaving the north empty was widely publicized in the Australian press, to universal approbation. His recommendation of southern European immigrants drew mainly favorable press commentary, although sometimes with an edge of apprehension. The president’s representation of northern Australia as “rich country” also attracted media attention, mostly in agreement although some drew a different picture. One newspaper described the Northern Territory as a “torrid, malaria-stricken, almost rainless, and uninhabitable portion of the Commonwealth” which would remain a burden to whatever government held responsibility for it.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, this newspaper, like all others, heeded Roosevelt’s counsel on the dangers of an empty north.

One incentive for paying heed lay only a little further to the north. Apprehensions about Asia had intensified in the latter years of the nineteenth century, and at the beginning of the twentieth many feared that an awakening East might overwhelm the recently created, sparsely populated, and poorly defended Australian nation. Roosevelt delivered his warning only three months after Japan had defeated Russia in the first major military victory of an Asian power over a European country in modern times. From Australia’s perspective, Japan’s victory was proof that a formidable new threat had arisen in the region. And Japan was not alone. While other



Asian countries had not yet acquired Japan's military strength, Australians knew that they held millions of impoverished people, supposedly eager to pour into the empty lands that lay invitingly close beneath them.

Yet fear of Asia was not the only incentive for Australians to fill their northern lands. There was a powerful sense of moral obligation—to the world at large and to Australia as a nation—to make full use of available resources and not allow land to sit idle and unproductive. While this attitude was pervasive throughout the Western world, it may have been held with exceptional fervor in settler-colonial societies like Australia. After all, the ultimate justification for dispossessing the Aboriginal inhabitants was that as an advanced, progressive people, Britons could make better use of the land, and sustain millions more people upon it, than could wandering tribes of supposed primitives. In the north, with its paltry population and precarious enterprises, that claim rang hollow. As the geographer Sydney Upton explained, in “the eyes of the world Australians are not making full and proper use of their country and therefore have no more right to its unutilized lands than had the aborigines whom the forefathers of the Australians dispossessed for the same reason.”<sup>3</sup>

For seven decades after Roosevelt delivered his warning, Australians fretted over what they called the “empty north.” They were well aware that northern Australia was not literally empty, that there were towns in the north, and farmers, graziers, and miners were scattered across its vast expanse; that the northern population included relatively large numbers of Asians and Pacific Islanders and more Aboriginal people lived there than elsewhere in Australia. The “empty north” was a trope for tropical Australia, a form of words to draw attention to the north's demographic deficiency. Perhaps, too, the allegation of emptiness facilitated disregard of Indigenous entitlements to territory, although it did not preclude acknowledgment of the Indigenous presence. The term “empty north” was embedded in a set of attitudes toward land, resources, race, and nationhood that can be fairly characterized as colonialist; but it was far more than merely a convenience for side-stepping Indigenous claims. It was a piece of hyperbole charged with anxieties.

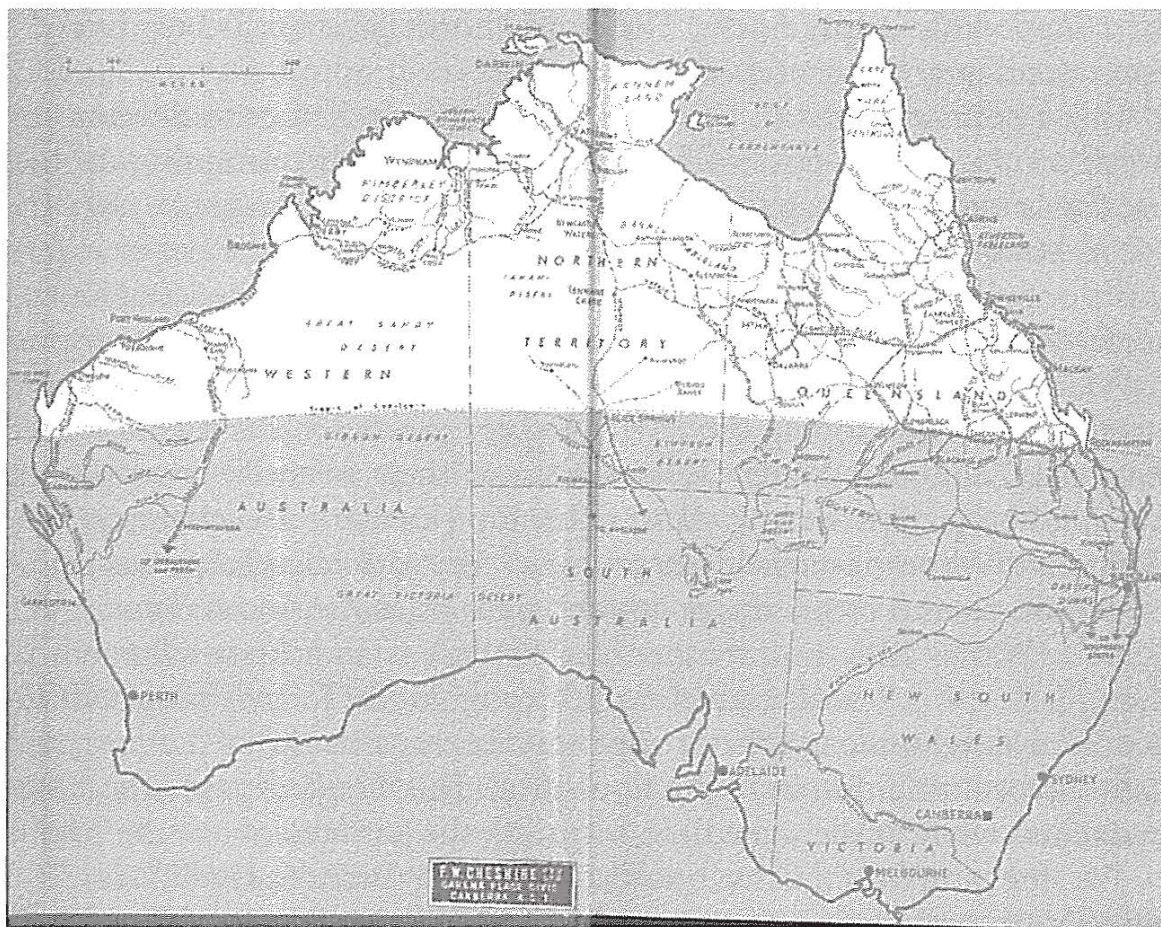
This book tells the story of Australian apprehensions about the empty north from federation to the mid-1970s. During those decades, Australians considered an underpopulated north vulnerable on three counts: to moral censure, to international condemnation, and to military conquest. They seldom kept those three vulnerabilities rigorously apart, instead sliding freely—and often confusingly—from one to the other. Further

complicating the narrative were two lines of dispute that intersected with the perceived vulnerabilities, often at awkward angles. One concerned the environment, in particular the question of whether the north was a rich and fertile land awaiting intensive settlement or a resource-impooverished tract incapable of sustaining more than a meager population. The other line of disputation concerned race. An early controversy was over the fitness of the white race for residence in the tropics; but even as that question was settled, contention continued over how (or whether) Australia's racially restrictive immigration policy could be reconciled with the north's scanty population and proximity to Asia. In addition, there was the Indigenous presence, and settler Australians found no consensus on what that meant for a supposedly empty north. The empty north generated controversy, a point that lies at the center of this book.

It is a point we need to be reminded of, since schemes to develop the north continue to be put before the public, inevitably prompting debate. Proposals regularly reappear, to transform northern Australia into the "food bowl of Asia" or a Special Economic Zone, to dam more northern rivers or build "education hubs" servicing the north's international hinterland.<sup>4</sup> Critics routinely respond by pointing out the pitfalls in such proposals.<sup>5</sup> Governments issue green papers and political parties put out vision statements on developing the north. Expert panels such as the Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce issue their scientific assessments, while lobby groups such as Australians for Northern Development and Economic Vision push their pet projects.<sup>6</sup> Yet with few exceptions, these proposals, counterproposals, policy declarations, and vision statements are made as if they have no precedent; or if there is an acknowledgment of their history, it is bowdlerized beyond recognition. Today's proposals for northern development are not the same as those made in the past, but there are continuities and commonalities. This book exposes the commonalities while at the same time honoring the particularity of the past.

For the purposes of the book, I take "northern Australia" to refer roughly to that portion of the continent above the Tropic of Capricorn, but the boundaries are deliberately imprecise. Over the period under consideration, different people and organizations offered wildly variant conceptions of "the north"; or, more commonly still, they used the term without any attempt to define it at all. My concern is with how historical actors conceived the north, so in these pages "the north" refers to their conceptions of that zone insofar as it can be retrieved from the historical record. Another term in common currency at the time was "empty

spaces,” a term of wider geographical applicability that connected with a similar set of anxieties and apprehensions. This book spills onto the broader landscape of Australia’s “empty spaces” where appropriate, for no rigid distinction between it and the “empty north” was made at the time under consideration; commentators switched easily from one term to the other. The “empty north” had an advantage of greater specificity. While it did not quite specify a location, it specified a direction: the direction of both Asia and the tropics, around both of which clustered constellations of often-contradictory anxieties and anticipations (Plate 1).



**Plate 1** Map of Australia with the area north of the Tropic of Capricorn highlighted  
 BR Davidson, *The Northern Myth*, 3rd edn, Melbourne, 1972, courtesy Melbourne University Publishing

## NOTES

1. "Roosevelt's Message to Australia," *Brisbane Courier*, 5 December 1905, 4.
2. "The Arid North," *Bega Budget*, 30 December 1905, 2.
3. S. Upton, *Australia's Empty Spaces* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938), 271.
4. See, for example, "Developing Australia's North," *Australian*, 9 April 2013; *Rethinking the Future of Northern Australia's Regions: More than mines, dams and development dreams* (Canberra: Regional Australia Institute, 2013); *The Coalition's 2030 Vision for Developing Northern Australia*, June 2013, <http://lpaweb-static.s3.amazonaws.com/Policies/NorthernAustralia.pdf>.
5. See, for example, Michael Slezak, "Australia's epic scheme to farm its northern wilds," *New Scientist* 11, 23 (July 2014), <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25870-australias-epic-scheme-to-farm-its-northern-wilds>.
6. See, for example, *Sustainable Development in Northern Australia: A report to government from the Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce* (Canberra: Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, 2009); ANDEV, "Why Develop the North," <http://www.andevo-project.org/about-us/why-develop-the-north/>.



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## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AAAS	Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
ANU	Australian National University
ANZAAS	Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science
BITRE	Bureau of Transport, Infrastructure, and Regional Economics
CDUP	Charles Darwin University Press
CPD (HoR)	<i>Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)</i> , House of Representatives
CPD (Senate)	<i>Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)</i> , Senate
CPP	Commonwealth Parliamentary Paper
CSIR	Council for Scientific and Industrial Research
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
CT	<i>Canberra Times</i>
CUP	Cambridge University Press
FCAATSI	Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders
JCU	James Cook University
JRAHS	<i>Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society</i>
MUP	Melbourne University Press
NAA	National Archives of Australia, Canberra
NAA(D)	National Archives of Australia, Darwin
NADC	Northern Australia Development Committee
NARU	North Australia Research Unit
NAUK	National Archives of the United Kingdom

NCBD	National Council for Balanced Development
NLA	National Library of Australia
NTAS	Northern Territory Archives Service
NTT	<i>Northern Territory Times</i> (before 1927 <i>Northern Territory Times and Gazette</i> )
NTUP	Northern Territory University Press
PTNC	People the North Committee
QPD	Queensland Parliamentary Debates
SMH	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
UNSW	University of New South Wales
UQP	University of Queensland Press
ZPG	Zero Population Growth

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## Anxieties Aroused

In 1907, Chris Watson, leader of the federal Labor Party, began an article on “Our Empty North” by quoting President Roosevelt’s warning against leaving it so. By then, Roosevelt’s admonition had been repeated so many times it barely needed quotation. Watson reiterated the president’s claim that rich lands lay in Australia’s north and, more stridently than Roosevelt, he stressed the dangers of Asia:

An immense area, practically unpeopled, unguarded, stretches there at our most vulnerable point, while, distant a few days steam, cluster the myriads of Asia, threatening ever to swarm across to the rich fields of a land, attractive in all respects to a frugal, industrious people, condemned at present to exist in a much poorer country.

Legions of white settlers were needed to garrison the north, he declared, and tropical Australia held the resources to sustain them.<sup>1</sup>

Watson, who had been Australia’s first Labor prime minister three years earlier, wrote his “Empty North” article shortly after touring the Northern Territory. While expressing some concern about the tropical climate, he thought it would “prove no serious deterrent to successful settlement.” The issue that consumed most space in Watson’s two-part article was the north’s suitability for farming, for as he explained: “Settlement must depend, in the main, upon agriculture.” Here, Watson conformed to long-established convention, upholding the cultivation of the soil as the only viable means of both sustaining a large population and validating

title to the land. Cattle-grazing offered no secure occupation, he stated, while mining was an “industry of secondary importance”: worth pursuing provided Chinese miners could be squeezed out, but unable alone to adequately people the north. Close settlement depended on agriculture, and Watson affirmed the Territory’s possession of abundant lands for that purpose.<sup>2</sup> However, he side-stepped the question of why, if the Territory was so well endowed for agricultural pursuits, there were not already flourishing farms there. Other Australians were more perturbed by that anomaly.

This chapter explores three factors behind federation-era anxieties over Australia’s northern spaces. The first is the long history of failure to either build sound economic foundations or establish a viable population. There were some successes, all concentrated in a thin strip along the north-east coast of Queensland, but across the vast expanse from the Great Dividing Range west to the Indian Ocean, settlers were scarce and their enterprises precarious. The second section considers how Australians’ changing attitudes toward Asia influenced their perspectives on that part of the continent closest to it. After federation, the white Australia policy barricaded the nation against Asia, but as the third section shows, contemporaries were well aware that the great white walls had been breached before they had been built.

### A LACKLUSTER PERFORMANCE

The first attempt at colonizing northern Australia was at Fort Dundas on Melville Island in 1824, followed by Fort Wellington on the nearby mainland in 1827. Both were abandoned in 1829. Their primary purpose was to assert British sovereignty over the north of the continent, with a secondary purpose of extending British commercial interests in the East Indies. The same motives underlay the third attempt at colonization, at Port Essington in 1838, with an additional purpose of providing refuge for survivors of the growing number of shipwrecks in the Torres Strait. Given the distance between Port Essington and the Torres Strait, the last of these motives was unlikely to be fulfilled. It wasn’t; nor was a viable trade with the Indies established, while the strategic motive quickly subsided since no rival power showed the least interest in colonizing northern Australia.<sup>3</sup> Sickness and starvation stalked the settlement while the monsoon heat sapped the colonists’ energy. Thomas Henry Huxley, visiting Port Essington as a young surgeon–naturalist on *HMS Rattlesnake* in November 1848, damned it as “the most useless, miserable, ill-managed

hole in Her Majesty's dominions."<sup>4</sup> A year later, the colonists of Port Essington burned the settlement to the ground and sailed away.

The American historian C. Harley Grattan observed that by the middle of the nineteenth century "the British had not solved the problem of settlement on the northern coast but they had securely established a pattern of failure which was to stand as a model for some years to come."<sup>5</sup> There was undoubtedly a pattern of failure, but the would-be colonizers clung to an image of northern Australia as a land with enormous potential for cultivation and commerce. Europeans then conceived the region very differently to how it is seen today. What we now call Southeast Asia was then Austral India or the Indies, an exotic land of tropical abundance, spices, and riches. Northern Australia was imagined as a southward extension of the Indies, with similar potential for agriculture and commerce. Prominent among those who promoted this vision was the entrepreneur George Windsor Earl, who spent six years at Port Essington trying to transform image into reality.<sup>6</sup>

At first, Earl's ambition was to build a trading base in northern Australia, "an emporium of the Archipelago of the Arafura" extending along the northern coast and nourishing "a thriving trade with China."<sup>7</sup> Without abandoning that ambition, by the mid-1840s, his emphasis had shifted to tropical agriculture using the plentiful Asian labor available nearby. Earl envisaged a plantation economy in the region now called the Top End, with European planters supervising a numerous Asian workforce and with a multi-racial merchant community similar to that of Singapore.<sup>8</sup> This was the conventional model for tropical colonization. Earl's vision, shared by many of his contemporaries, presumed that the tropic lands of Australia held the fertile soils, abundant water, and other resources essential for intensive cultivation, and all that was needed to make the wilderness bloom was an injection of energy and enterprise. Such environmental optimism proved far more resilient than the aspiration for a multi-racial north.

When South Australia took control of the Northern Territory in 1863, its leaders shared Earl's vision. They too regarded northern Australia as a southward projection of the Indies and imagined it had a climate and physiography much like Java's. So they sought to establish tropical agriculture and cultivate trade with Asia, thereby building the combined South Australia–Northern Territory into a "Great Central State" extending from the Great Australian Bight to the Arafura Sea. They tried to do so according to the tenets of systematic colonization on which South Australia itself had been founded. Settlement would be carefully planned,



with the institutions of civilization—schools, churches, law, government—established at the outset and development proceeding in a rational and orderly fashion. But reality belied grand intentions. Bumbling beginnings at selecting and surveying a site for the capital were followed by lackluster efforts at development and settlement. Trade with Asia faltered; tropical agriculture floundered; and the Territory's meager goldfields failed to attract a stable population. Into the 1880s, some South Australians continued to dream of Palmerston (Darwin) becoming another Singapore, but it was becoming clear that systematic colonization would not prove the success in the north that it had been in the south.<sup>9</sup>

European expansion into north Queensland was unencumbered by ideals of systematic colonization. It was conducted in brasher, more nakedly materialistic style, driven by graziers' greed for more lands on which to pasture their sheep and cattle. Shortly before Queensland separated from New South Wales in 1859, squatters and goldminers had nudged north of the Tropic of Capricorn, as far as present-day Marlborough. In 1861, the frontier surged further north with the opening of the Kennedy district. From their base at Port Denison (Bowen), pastoralists quickly took up runs along the length of the Burdekin River and its tributaries, then pushed further west and north toward the Gulf of Carpentaria. On 1 January 1864, the government threw open two new pastoral districts, Burke and Cook, thereby making the entirety of north Queensland available to pioneer graziers.

Yet pastoralism did not reign alone in north Queensland. Plantations were established along the north Queensland coast from the late 1860s, the area under sugarcane expanding rapidly from the mid-1870s onward. Many field workers, especially in the early years, were Asian; some plantations were even owned by Asians, such as the Hop Wah plantation south of Cairns. But the majority of canefield workers were Pacific Islanders, known as Kanakas, who were indentured for periods of three years or longer, at low rates of pay and poor working conditions. Sugar was not the only crop; nineteenth-century north Queensland grew a wide range of tropical produce. But no matter what the crop, the plantation workforce was always predominantly non-white and the field laborers exclusively so. This accorded with both established practice in tropical colonies and the contemporary medical doctrine that members of the white race were unable to perform physical work in the tropics.

North Queensland's economy was further diversified by mining, primarily of gold. After several short-lived alluvial rushes scattered around

the region, the discovery of the rich reefs of Charters Towers in 1872 put gold-mining on firm foundations. Charters Towers grew into a city of over 26,000 people in the 1880s—the biggest in Queensland outside Brisbane—with grand public buildings and its own stock exchange. With three branches of primary industry—pastoralism, agriculture, and mining—functioning with as much success as could be expected in a recently colonized region, north-eastern Queensland was set on a demographic and economic trajectory unique in tropical Australia. By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the coastal region was reasonably populous and prosperous. West of the Great Dividing Range, things were very different, with insecure industries, little economic diversification and a tiny non-Indigenous population.

Although agricultural success stories were confined to north-eastern Queensland, they buoyed faith in the north more generally and helped sustain an image of the entirety of northern Australia as a land of tropical fecundity. What had been achieved in east-coastal Queensland, many commentators maintained, could and should be achieved elsewhere in the north. J. Langdon Parsons, South Australia's Minister for Education and soon-to-be Government Resident for the Northern Territory, took this line after touring the sugar plantations around Mackay in 1883. From what he saw there, Parsons drew the conclusion that for sugarcane to flourish in the Territory, all that was needed was capital investment and colored labor. He betrayed no hint that factors such as climate, rainfall, and soil might be relevant to a region's suitability for cane-growing, writing instead as if the tropical location of both Mackay and Palmerston guaranteed equivalence in sugar-growing potential.<sup>10</sup>

By the time Parsons conducted his tour of Mackay, several sugar plantations had been established in the Territory, including the Delissaville plantation on the Douglas Peninsula across the harbor from Palmerston. By 1884, £20,000 had been invested in Delissaville, for a total output of five tons of sugar that year and seven tons the year before. It folded in 1885. A few plantations struggled on but all were wound up before the end of the decade, and with them went a good deal of confidence in the future prospects of the Northern Territory.<sup>11</sup> Maurice Holtze, curator of the government gardens at Palmerston, continued trying to prove the Territory's suitability for agriculture by raising plots of sugarcane, cotton, indigo, tapioca, rice, tea, coffee, arrowroot, and other tropical produce. Despite success under the ideal conditions of the gardens, no crop was commercially successful. This was calamitous according to contemporary tenets

of settlement, for as Holtze explained: "Agriculture must ever remain a Country's mainstay. Without successful agriculture no lasting prosperity is possible. The richest mines will at last become exhausted, pastoral occupation is suitable only for sparsely populated regions, but agriculture, like the brook, goes on forever."<sup>12</sup>

For settler Australians in the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, agriculture meant far more than merely growing crops to fill human bellies. In a European tradition stretching back centuries, agriculture was imbued with moral qualities and the cultivation of the soil elevated to the highest form of land use, sealing claims to sovereignty over, and ownership of, the country. Colonial governments welcomed the growth of the pastoral and mining industries, but these alone could never secure the stability or density of population they sought. As the liberal member of the Queensland Legislative Assembly, Henry Jordan, explained in 1886:

To till the ground is properly to possess it. To feed sheep and cattle over the wilderness is but one remove from the occupation of it by the poor aboriginals of Australia ... I think we should always remember that pastoral occupation is but one step towards what is properly called "settlement" in the Australian colonies, which, I understand, means population, agricultural progress, wealth and British colonisation in its highest form.<sup>13</sup>

This set of assumptions would course through decades of debate over northern Australia.

Although many Australians clung to an image of tropical luxuriance stretching across the north of the continent, not everyone was seduced by that fantasy. In 1882, South Australian geologist and botanist Professor Ralph Tate reported that the Northern Territory's agricultural prospects were meager, with an unreliable, seasonally restricted rainfall and only small patches of fair-quality soil scattered across an otherwise unpromising land.<sup>14</sup> Tate's somber assessment drew criticism from some South Australian politicians, but this was merely a mild instance of disagreement over the agricultural potential of northern Australia which would generate a great deal of heat in future decades. It raised heated debate because the question could never be confined to mundane matters of resource appraisal but inevitably became entangled in moral and political issues concerning sovereignty and title to land.

Although the South Australian elite who propelled the colonization of the Northern Territory looked down on pastoralism and yearned for the

advent of the plough, by the 1880s, the Territory's most viable industry was cattle-grazing. It had come across the Queensland border in the 1870s when cattlemen from that colony drove their herds westwards in search of new grasslands. This was the penultimate stage in the vast expansion of squatting that had begun west of the Blue Mountains in New South Wales in the 1810s, spreading northward and westward until it reached north-eastern Queensland in the early 1860s and north-western Queensland in the mid-1860s. The final phase came in the 1880s when the Queensland–Northern Territory cattlemen pushed across the western border of the Territory into the Kimberleys, where they met the vanguard of a smaller arc of pastoral expansion that had moved in stages up the Western Australian coast. Pastoralism was beset with difficulties, droughts, and depressions, but from the late nineteenth century, it was the most economically successful industry across northern Australia. Its big drawback was that it could never sustain a dense population.

### THE AWAKENING EAST

At first, Asia represented opportunity. Early enthusiasts for colonizing northern Australia saw connectedness with Asia as a means of making the north prosperous and populous. When Fort Dundas was founded, John Barrow, Second Secretary to the Admiralty, predicted that it would soon “become another Singapore.”<sup>15</sup> This meant acquiring a cosmopolitan social profile, drawing merchants and workers from the Indies, China, India, the Middle East, and Europe. The London-based North Australian Association, lobbying in 1862 for the colonization of the north, advertised one major benefit as “trade with the great Austral Archipelago” and another as “labor from the neighbouring archipelago.”<sup>16</sup> These were among the strongest motives impelling South Australia to acquire the Northern Territory. Cultivating connections with Asia was less a motive for Queensland's northward expansion but not entirely absent. Somerset was founded in 1864 near the tip of Cape York Peninsula in hope of becoming a “Singapore of Australia.”<sup>17</sup> It met the fate of all other projected Singapores in northern Australia, quickly declining into a seedy retreat for pearl-ers and a ramshackle outpost of government authority.

Later in the nineteenth century, many colonists continued to envisage an Asian future for northern Australia. Journalist William Sowden, who visited the Northern Territory as part of a South Australian parliamentary delegation in 1882, enthusiastically reported that local Chinese

businessmen had assured him Port Darwin would “become a second Singapore ... a greater Singapore.” With equal enthusiasm, he predicted that the “future population of the Northern Territory will be two-thirds Chinese.”<sup>18</sup> In similar vein, Mrs. Dominic Daly, daughter of the Territory’s first Government Resident, William Bloomfield Douglas, hoped to see a massive influx of Asians, for she could not “believe in any great success being attained in colonizing tropical Australia until it has become the home of the Chinese and Malay races.” This meant, she specified, not merely accepting Asian people as workers but welcoming them as culturally distinctive residents of the north:

When the entire coastline becomes a sea of waving palms, with Chinese and Malay villages fringing the shores, which are at present mere barren wastes of mangroves, with plantations of pepper, or gambier, and of tapioca and rice, the Northern Territory, backed up by the unswerving energy of the Australian squatter, miner, and planter, will present a spectacle almost unknown in the scheme of British colonization.<sup>19</sup>

In Daly’s vision of northern Australia’s future, the landscape would be Asianized but Europeans were reserved a dominant place in the social hierarchy.

While Daly lavished praise on the qualities and capabilities of Asians and Pacific Islanders, she dismissed Aboriginal people as “the most uninteresting race of human beings in the world.” Besides, they were believed to be doomed to extinction, so Daly took no heed of them when writing on northern Australia’s future:

In all other tropical countries over which the British flag flies we have taken possession of densely-populated Oriental settlements; here we have come to a country which requires such a population, and until it has been coaxed to come and to make it a home, we shall not reap the reward of the many years of toil and hardship that have been spent by the pioneers in Arnheim’s Land.<sup>20</sup>

In her view, there was something intrinsically Oriental about the tropics, and tropical lands would never reach their full potential until they had been thoroughly Orientalized.

Although Daly was adamant that Asian people must not be regarded as mere units of labor, she unabashedly celebrated their labor value when countering the “absurd and senseless” notion then gaining currency, “that

North Australia, unlike any other tropical country in the world," could be developed by white people alone. It must be understood, she persistently reiterated, that developing the north was an instance of "tropical colonisation" and "to ensure its success different methods to those adopted in more temperate regions were necessary."<sup>21</sup> Many of Daly's contemporaries, including most overseas experts on colonizing the tropics, shared her views.<sup>22</sup> Writing on the centenary of the colonization of Australia, prominent Congregationalist pastor Robert Dale predicted that:

If tropical Australia is ever to be thickly populated, it will not be by men belonging to the great race which has created Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide; for they cannot endure severe and continuous labor in a tropical climate.... Englishmen, Scotchmen, Irishmen may find the capital, and may direct the labor; but the labourers themselves, who must form the great majority of the population, will be coloured people.<sup>23</sup>

But by the time Dale and Daly wrote, this long-held assumption about the tropics was under attack from devotees of an all-white Australia.

Anti-Asian views had been expressed in Australia, sometimes violently, since the gold rushes of mid-century, but from the 1890s, they took a sharper edge as the notion gained currency that the East was "awakening." Asians, it was feared, were poised to assert themselves on the world stage, perhaps overthrowing the dominance of the West. Sometimes, China was placed at the vanguard; sometimes, Japan; sometimes, an amorphous Asia was imagined to be awakening. Regardless of which Asian country roused first, geography consigned Australia to an exceptionally dangerous position, far closer to the awakening giant than any other country of predominantly European population. Northern Australia was in the most dangerous position of all, for while it was sparsely peopled, adjacent Asian countries held, in the cliché of the day, "teeming millions." Surely, Australians thought, those millions cast covetous eyes on Australia's north and would soon be in a position to turn covetousness into conquest.

Prominent among those who forecast the imminent rise of Asia and consequent decline of the West was an English scholar resident in Australia, Charles Pearson. His book *National Life and Character*, first published in 1893, placed China at the center of a rising tide of colored races who would soon submerge the erstwhile "higher races" of Europe. With evident distaste, Pearson prophesied a world of independent colored nations, in which the white race would be "elbowed and hustled,

and perhaps even thrust aside by peoples whom we looked down upon as servile.”<sup>24</sup> His book attracted enormous attention around the world. Its many reviewers included future American president Theodore Roosevelt, who accepted Pearson’s prediction of China’s rise to world-power status but argued that he was mistaken in assuming that this necessarily presaged the subordination of the white race.<sup>25</sup> Pearson, according to his critics, was too pessimistic about the adaptive powers of the white race, too credulous about the capacities of Asians. However, his book struck a chord among apprehensive Australians and was a major influence on the white Australia policy.

On the first page of *National Life and Character*, Pearson flatly stated that “the higher races can only live in the Temperate Zone,” a point he reiterated throughout the book. Yet in the one passage where he pondered the fate of northern Australia, assurance wilted into equivocation. There was “still a question whether the white race can ever be so acclimated as to live and labor in the Northern parts” of Australia, he wrote, immediately followed by a rousing defense of the white Australia ideal. If colored races were allowed into the north, Pearson warned, they would soon overwhelm the south as well, so they should be prohibited from the entire continent, including its tropical regions. But if they were debarred entry, and white people were as incapable of living in tropical Australia as in the tropics elsewhere, what would become of Australia’s northern estate? Pearson gave no explicit answer though he implied that for the sake of maintaining an all-white continent—or as he put it, “guarding the last part of the world, in which the higher races can live and increase freely, for the higher civilization”—it was better that the north remain unpeopled than it be opened to the “lower races.”<sup>26</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, Japan had become the leading “yellow peril.” While Australians recognized that by modernizing and industrializing, the Japanese had become more “like us,” this was commonly considered to intensify the danger. It was the Japanese people’s “very virtues that make them dangerous to the things we wish to protect,” Tasmanian commentator A.J. Ogilvy explained, adding that they were “a splendid race, a model in many ways to ourselves.” However, he had no doubt that the Japanese craved access to Australia, “especially to our unpeopled north,” and may try to force access by military means. “What would England do in such a case?” he worried, particularly since England “has all along disapproved our ‘white Australia’” policy.<sup>27</sup>

Australians' uneasiness about their geographic location was sharpened by misgivings about the Motherland. Britain's treaty with Japan in 1902 raised eyebrows in Australia. So did Britain's unsupportive response to the white Australia policy. According to Victorians Oswald Law and W.T. Gill, the British press "seems unable to sympathise" with the cause of white Australia, while British politicians "profess amazement at what they consider the arrogance of a handful of white men, most of whom are clustered on the eastern fringe of a vast and partially-explored continent, in attempting to stem the tide of foreign immigration." Britishers should be supportive, Law and Gill pleaded, because white Australia embodied a noble desire "to preserve pure forever the British stock" on Australian soil. Moreover, Britishers needed to understand Australia's vulnerable situation, "in close proximity to Java and the teeming millions of Southern and Eastern Asia, who at any time may bear down in a flood upon the scanty forces of the defenders." In fact, they claimed, on the northern shores of Australia, Asians had "already broken through the thin red line of the British, and have firmly established themselves in the country beyond." Behind the hyperbole, the reality was more prosaic. Law and Gill soon revealed that they were referring to no more than the fact that the Japanese had elbowed most Europeans out of the pearl-shelling industry on Thursday Island.<sup>28</sup> That this could be represented as a rupture of British sovereignty testifies to contemporary insecurities.

Some portrayed the peril in more apocalyptic terms. Dr. Richard Arthur, founder of the Immigration League of Australia, confessed that the "thought of the empty North" pressed on his brain "as a hideous nightmare." In his vision of doom:

Asia will begin to pour her millions into Australia through the unpopulated and unguarded entrance of the north. And those myriads of yellow and brown men will not tarry there, but will spread as the lava of a volcanic eruption all over Australia, submerging completely the organised society that has been so painfully built up here during the last hundred years. Believing this as I do, it is small wonder that I regard all other political questions of infinitely little moment compared to it.<sup>29</sup>

More often sensationalist than apocalyptic were the invasion-scare novels that first appeared in Australian bookshops in the 1880s (Plate 1.1). Not all Australian invasion-scare novels were set in the north, though most were. They followed a fairly standard narrative line: Japan, China,



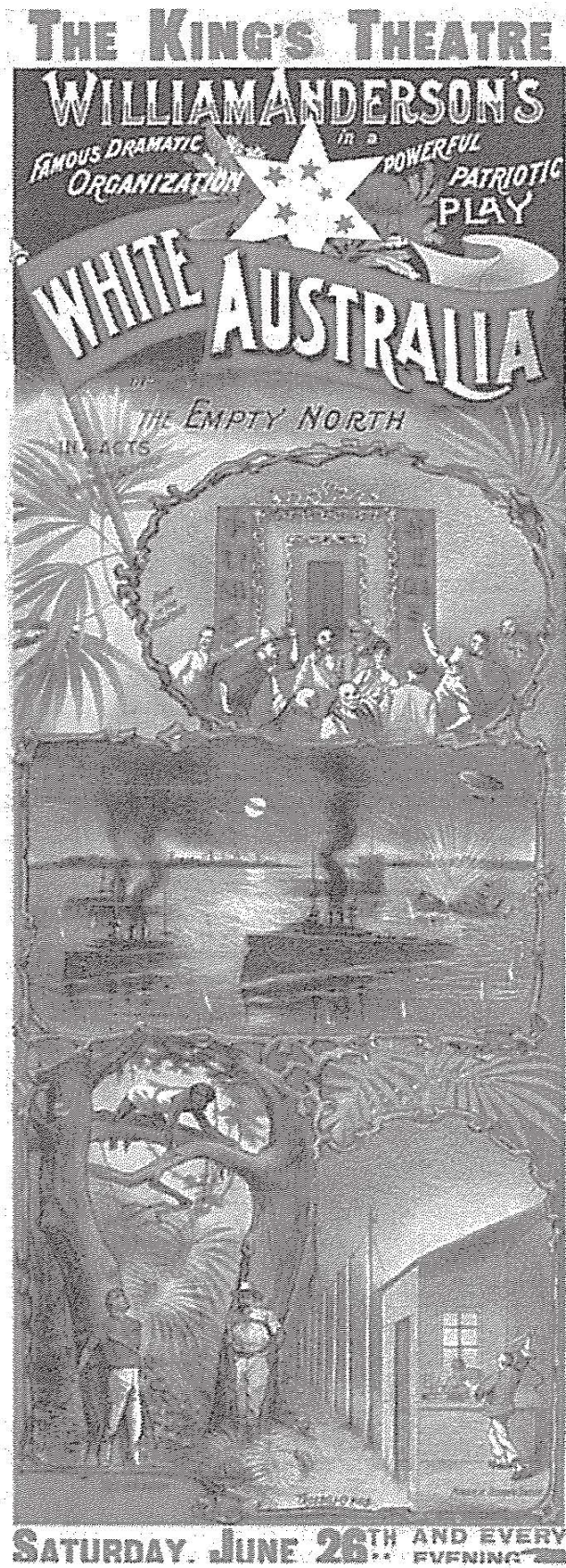


Plate 1.1 "White Australia, or the Empty North," 1909  
First performed in 1909, Randolph Bedford's melodrama *White Australia, or the Empty North* was one of many invasion-scare literary works written around the turn of the twentieth century. Its title, along with the lurid images on this theater playbill, attests to the connections commonly made between Australia's national policy and the vulnerability of its northern lands. Troedel & Co. *White Australia and the Empty North* 1909. Image courtesy of the State Library of Victoria

or some unnamed but identifiably Asian country launch an invasion; they occupy part of the north after ineffectual resistance by effete, comfort-loving, city-dwelling Australians; the invaders show themselves to be ruthless tyrants, often with a predilection for defiling white women; ultimately they are repelled by manly bushmen fired up with zeal for the white Australia cause. Alongside the contrast between the bushman and the effeminate city dweller, invasion-scare novels commonly contrasted the idealism and purity of white Australia with the grubby machinations of British capitalism.<sup>30</sup>

Australia's sense of vulnerability was compounded by the common practice of asserting the richness of its north alongside allusions to its proximity to Asia. In a January 1906 peroration on Roosevelt's speech of the previous month, Dr. Arthur warned of the dangers deriving from the "fertile lands" of northern Australia lying "within easy reach of the patient, untiring toilers of the East."<sup>31</sup> A *Sydney Morning Herald* article described the Northern Territory as a land of enormous potential, "entirely unprotected, almost entirely unoccupied, and within four or five days' steam of that corner of Asia that teems with nearly half the human race." The article also acknowledged that Asia offered commercial opportunities, stating that "the very distance of the territory from Eastern Australia is what brings it right up against the Asiatic market, and is thus at once its peril and its economic opportunity." By putting people into the north, Australia could both avert the peril and seize the opportunity.<sup>32</sup>

As the *Herald* article indicates, federation-era Australians, while preoccupied with the threat of Asia, were not blind to the opportunities. During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, northern pastoralists tried to tap into the live-export market to Southeast Asia, with occasional success.<sup>33</sup> In 1901, Asian countries took only about 3% of Australia's total exports, and accounted for the same proportion of its imports. The proportions grew over following years, such that by 1906, Asia took 6% of Australia's exports and provided 9% of its imports, but at that low level, trade with Asia stalled until the outbreak of the First World War.<sup>34</sup>

Many public figures urged a stronger trading relationship with Asia. A few recommended exchanging people as well as goods. Colonel George Bell, former US Consul, was one who advocated both increased trade with Japan and Japanese immigration, particularly to populate northern Australia. Contrary to Pearson's prophesy, Bell expected the rise of the East to usher in a more beneficent era in human history and believed that

modern commerce would inaugurate peace and harmony on Earth. His 1906 book, *The Empire of Business, Or How to People Australia*, drew the venom of white Australia devotees for both its celebration of capitalism and its acclamation of Asians.<sup>35</sup>

### THE PIEBALD NORTH

At much the same time as the East awakened, the Australian colonists came to conceive themselves as a nation. The essential, inviolable quality of that nation was whiteness. Like other Western peoples at the time, settler Australians considered nationhood dependent on race. Arguably, Australians were more insistent than most that a sense of national community depended on "purity of race," while their assumption that white and non-white peoples could never cohere into a nation was reinforced by Australia's geopolitical situation.<sup>36</sup> The white Australia policy was directed against all the non-white peoples of the world, but Asians had a special place in its demonology. Under the policy, Asians were not only excluded from the Australian nation; they were what the Australian nation defined itself against (Plate 1.2).

The white Australia policy was instituted to keep Asians and other colored races out of the continent. But members of those races were already inside, nowhere more numerous than in the north. Tens of thousands of Chinese miners had rushed to the northern goldfields; others came as workers on projects such as the Palmerston to Pine Creek railway; others again as merchants, servants, gardeners, and a host of other occupations. The Japanese had securely established themselves in the northern pearling ports, while people from India, Java, Malaya, the Philippines, and elsewhere in Asia performed vital roles in the northern economy. On top of those, the Pacific Islander population was still being augmented by the South Seas labor trade. Attempts by Premier Samuel Griffith in the 1880s to end Pacific Islander labor in the Queensland sugar industry had failed; and even the breaking up of the big plantations and their replacement with small family farms in the 1890s did not diminish the Pacific Islander presence. No less than the old planters, small farmers depended on Pacific Islanders to do the hard work in the canefields. In fact, while sugar-farming was being transformed, Pacific Islander numbers in Queensland grew from 7979 in 1893 to 9841 in 1902.<sup>37</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, non-Europeans (primarily Asians) comprised between 20% and 25% of the total non-Indigenous population



**Plate 1.2** “A White Australia: Keep It So,” 1912

In February 1912, Henry Robinson of Sydney applied for copyright over what he described as “a geographical design ... setting forth the ‘White Australia’ policy and emphasizing the proximity of other countries thickly populated with black, brown and yellow races which may become a menace to Australia.” As the image shows, he emphasized proximity by vastly foreshortening the distance between Australia and its neighbors.

Henry Musgrave Robinson. *A White Australia: Keep It So* [postcard]. 1912. National Archives of Australia: A1861, 2546

of around 115,000 in tropical Australia. The proportion of Asian people was much higher in particular areas. For example, in 1901, the Northern Territory had 902 European inhabitants, 2733 Chinese, 187 Japanese, 144 Malays, and 38 “others.” Even in east-coastal Queensland, where the vast majority of northern Europeans lived, the Asian presence was substantial, comprising, for example, around a third of Cairns’s population of 3557 and a tenth of Townsville’s 12,717 inhabitants. On the east coast, the European population was growing but elsewhere in the north, it was stationary or declining.<sup>38</sup> Statistics on the Aboriginal population are not available; probably it was declining but still numbered over 100,000 across the north.

At the first sitting of the Commonwealth House of Representatives in May 1901, Labor leader Chris Watson painted a lurid picture of “the

piebald north,” whose “multifarious peoples” made it a “cancer spot” on the nation.<sup>39</sup> (On other occasions, Watson sounded the alarm about “our empty north” but this in no way diminished his abhorrence of the “multifarious peoples” who lived there.) Other mouthpieces for white Australia zealotry, like the *Bulletin* and *Worker* magazines, damned the multi-racial makeup of the north with equal ferocity, dubbing Queensland’s north “Queensmongreland” and the north-west “Japstralia.” Their depictions of the north reeked with disgust at “the festering human offal of a Piebald Australia.”<sup>40</sup>

Henry Reynolds paints a broadly positive portrait of the multi-racial north on the eve of federation. He suggests that the northern communities were reasonably prosperous and successful ventures in inter-racial cooperation, which were wrecked by the imposition, from the south, of the dogma of white Australia.<sup>41</sup> While apposite insofar as it documents the racial diversity of the north and highlights the gulf between northern and southern Australia at the time of ostensible national unification,<sup>42</sup> Reynolds’ account is misleading in two respects.

For one thing, inter-racial harmony was far more fragile than Reynolds intimates. In fact, these multi-racial communities were riven with tensions. A quick scan of such newspapers as the *Northern Territory Times* will uncover numerous instances of racial vilification.<sup>43</sup> Even those more positively disposed toward “coloured aliens,” such as the *Cairns Morning Post*, repeatedly depicted them in disparaging and demeaning ways.<sup>44</sup> Insofar as white northerners were tolerant of non-whites, it was primarily in pragmatic recognition of their mutual dependence rather than from any ideal of the brotherhood of man. Under normal circumstances, inter-racial tensions were held in check, allowing the various groups to interact relatively peaceably and productively, but this depended on the other factor minimized in Reynolds’ account: the structuring principle of racial hierarchy.

Racial harmony in these northern communities depended on racial stratification. Whites stood at the apex; certain Asians (often Japanese, sometimes Chinese) on the next rung down; other Asians such as Malays and Javanese below them; Pacific and Torres Strait Islanders on the next level down; and Aborigines at the bottom of the heap. Provided members of each group acknowledged their place in the hierarchy, a pragmatic tolerance prevailed, but this was liable to break down if any group acted in ways above its designated station, particularly if it challenged white supremacy. Some movement between strata was possible, but these multi-racial northern communities were far from egalitarian. They were structured

along the lines American historian William McNeill has called “polyethnic hierarchy,” an arrangement more typical of premodern and prenational polities than of modern nation-states.<sup>45</sup> It was the hierarchy, as much as the color, that antagonized exponents of the white Australia policy.

A primary motivation behind the white Australia policy was to secure an equal and democratic nation. In line with the contemporary truism that the human races constituted a natural hierarchy, it was assumed that a multi-racial society would necessarily be a stratified society. Additionally, most Australians believed that, as Law and Gill put it: “Western institutions, especially that of Parliamentary representation, are absolutely foreign to Asiatics,” so an Asian presence could only debase the political traditions they treasured.<sup>46</sup> Such justifications of the white Australia policy, grounding it in democratic, egalitarian idealism, were commonly voiced in the federation era, and elaborated in the first scholarly book on the topic, Myra Willard’s *History of the White Australia Policy*.<sup>47</sup>

Yet while democratic, egalitarian idealism was a factor impelling the white Australia policy, raw racial bigotry was not far behind. Law and Gill wrote of racial intermixture with a horror bordering on hysteria, characterizing the consequent degeneracy as “Reversion ever dragging Evolution in the mud,” a turn of phrase as resonant as it is meaningless. The “Asiatic canker-spot makes its appearance everywhere,” they shrilled, but was “most strongly marked in the northern portion of Queensland, where it is not uncommon to find in the State schools as many children of half-yellow or half-brown complexions as of white.”<sup>48</sup> Miscegenation incited special horror, but the mere presence of “coloured aliens” provoked the antagonism of white Australia nationalists.

Impelled by a combination of democratic idealism and racial bigotry, the federal government instantiated the white Australia policy in its first two substantive items of legislation: the *Immigration Restriction Act, 1901* and the *Pacific Island Labourers Act, 1901*. The first, continent-wide in scope, aimed at stopping non-white (primarily Asian) immigration but made no provision for getting rid of non-white people already legally resident in Australia. The second targeted north Queensland in particular, stipulating not only that the labor trade would end but also that all Pacific Islanders resident in Australia would be deported by 1907.

White Australia devotees looked forward eagerly to the deportations. Branding the Islanders a “stain on the escutcheon” of the nation, Law and Gill urged no consideration be allowed to impede their speedy removal.

Certainly, no consideration as base as mere commerce or as trivial as the Islanders' own wishes should intrude:

It matters not that the sugar industry is of the greatest importance, not only to Queensland but to the whole continent; that Government legislation, supervision, and regulation have reduced the evils incident to such a traffic almost to vanishing point; that the islanders are so well fed, housed, and paid that they frequently return to renew the term of their original contracts (three years), the moral and social effect of the institution is bad, and Australia has decided that it must and shall be ended.

When the last Kanaka had been deported, they enthused, Australia will have taken another great step “towards the realisation of her great national ideal—purity of race and the preservation of Greater Britain for the Anglo-Saxon stock.”<sup>49</sup>

Asian residents could not be so readily removed, but they could be socially and economically marginalized. The urge to do so could surface in the most unlikely places. *Cottage Gardening in North Queensland* by Townsville resident Henry Treloar was a forty-seven-page booklet bearing on its title page a homely photograph of pawpaw trees beside a timber cottage, and dispensing advice on how to grow granadillas and guada beans, how to produce well-rotted manure and outwit the cutworm pest. The preface began with a paean to the beauties of Townsville, until the third page when the tone changed abruptly. A “*yellow blot*,” Treloar blustered, “controls the fruit and vegetable trade of every Northern town and city; ... it vitiates our city with its filthy slums, the city’s very heart; it pollutes the air we breathe, with its reek of incense ...; it corrupts our youth with its canker, our manhood and womanhood with its loathsome contact.”<sup>50</sup> In an anti-Chinese tirade that went on for several paragraphs, Treloar made it clear that the main point of growing pawpaws and cabbages in the backyard was to squeeze Chinese gardeners out of business and thereby preserve the north for the white race.

Early-twentieth-century Australians were well aware of the sea change in attitudes over the preceding hundred years. A.W. Tilby began a 1912 article on “white colonisation of the Australian tropics” by drawing a contrast between the attitudes of British colonists in the early nineteenth century and the Australians of his own day. The former, who invited Asian immigrants into northern Australia, “thought of the commercial development of the country” whereas the latter, dedicated to the white

Australia ideal, “put commerce for the moment on one side, and looked at the national development of the people.” There was much to be said for both views, Tilby conceded. He assumed that a multi-racial society would necessarily be a hierarchical society, noting that historically, this had been a common arrangement and often successful, “as the examples of the Roman Empire and British India sufficiently attest.” But, he warned, “the rule of one race by another obviously shatters the democratic ideal at its base, and democracy is instinct in Australian nationalism.” Without pronouncing definitively on which attitude—early-nineteenth-century British or early-twentieth-century Australian—was morally preferable, Tilby intimated that Australia’s commitment to immigration restriction was a reality that simply had to be accepted.<sup>51</sup>

## NOTES

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18. Sowden, *Northern Territory*, 127–28.
19. Mrs. Dominic Daly, *Digging, Squatting, and Pioneering Life in the Northern Territory of South Australia* (London: Sampson Low, 1887), 269–70.
20. Daly, *Digging, Squatting*, 244, 270. "Arnheim's Land" was a term then applied to an area much larger than present-day Arnhem Land; it was a near synonym for what is today called the "Top End."
21. Daly, *Digging, Squatting*, 212, 231, 235–36.
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43. See, for example, "Japanese in Australia," *NTT*, 6 March 1896, 2; "A White Man's Farewell to the N.T.," *ibid.*, 25 March 1898, 3.
44. See, for example, *Cairns Morning Post*, 8 March 1901, 4; *ibid.*, 5 November 1901, 4.
45. William H McNeill, *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986).
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49. Law & Gill, "White Australia," 154.
50. H Treloar, *Cottage Gardening in North Queensland* (Townsville: T Willmet & Sons, 1913), 9. Here, and throughout this book, emphases in quoted passages follow emphases in the original texts.
51. AW Tilby, "White Colonisation in the Australian Tropics: Its present position," *United Empire* 3, 4 (1912): 319–320.