PLANTATION AGRICULTURE IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY (1878-1889)

Ian M. Hillock

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Department of Education, NT University, Darwin.
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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>i - iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v - vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>ix - x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The Literature</td>
<td>1 - 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. General background to events</td>
<td>8 - 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The question of labour, logistics and other costs</td>
<td>21 - 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The growth of an idea - 1870 to 1872</td>
<td>35 - 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-Appraisal - The Plantation Idea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The beginnings of the plantation era - 1872 to 1878</td>
<td>45 - 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Outline, Early Promotion and First Negotiations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The development of the idea - 1878 to 1880</td>
<td>55 - 67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans made and seeds sown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Owston selects his site - 1880</td>
<td>89 - 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A change in atmosphere</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The 'Boom' commences - 1880 to 1881</td>
<td>75 - 87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The 'Boom' at its peak - 1882</td>
<td>89 - 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. Some disquiet regarding Delissaville & the 'Boom' continues - 1882/83 102 - 114

11. The Palmerston Plantation Company withdraws its Investment and the immediate aftermath - 1882/1884 116 - 131

12. The end of the saga - 1884 to 1889 133 - 149

13. Analysis: In particular reference to the "sugar" plantations on the Daly River and associated inferences 150 - 161

14. Conclusions 162 - 166

Bibliography 167 - 177

Appendices

i. Goyder's NT Pastoral Compilation: 1885.
ii. Goyder's Map of Owston's plantation from 'Old Vol 1', showing position of Owston's homestead.
iii. Map of Daly River Plantation Company: 1887 with letter showing shareholders and relevant Section No allocated to each.
iv. Topographical map of the Daly River Agricultural Region, showing posited sites of the three plantation areas on the Daly River
v. Section Map of the Daly River Agricultural Area.
vi. Land Unit Key and reference, Daly River Agricultural Area.
vii. Land Unit Map of Daly River Agricultural Area with posited plantation sites.
Abstract

The study of the first major tragic failure of agriculture in the 'Top End' affords an overview of a little-known undertaking to develop prosperous settlement in South Australia's Northern Territory through establishment of sugar plantations. A thriving and vibrant agriculture in the region has been the hope of successive generations of Territorians and the persistent dream of all governments, both State and Federal. This study investigates one of the earliest attempts at sustained agriculture in the Northern Territory.

The story itself spans some twenty years from its beginnings when the South Australian Government first devised the idea and passed an Act offering a bonus of five thousand pounds for the first five hundred tons of sugar produced and manufactured in the Territory. No one ever claimed the bonus.

At the time the scheme evoked tremendous interest not only within the Northern Territory of South Australia and in South Australia itself, but to a lesser degree in the rest of the world.

Today it has been largely forgotten. The ignominious failure of sugar growing in the Northern Territory precipitated a lack of confidence so great that it caused South Australia to eventually opt out of the commitment to the Northern Territory it had so ardently sought, fought and schemed for a few decades earlier and the Federal Government took over ultimate responsibility for Territory administration and development in 1911.

The heroic effort of many of the people involved, though long forgotten, has foreshadowed much subsequent endeavor and resultant failure. Yet its failure was indeed seminal and it, along with the blatant fraud that was associated with mining in the early days, had a disproportionate effect on how the Northern Territory subsequently developed.
Putting together the facts has been no easy task. Apart from a few brief references by contemporary and modern writers very little is known about the particulars of this early attempt. This paucity of information necessitated an undue reliance in the initial stages of the investigation on information almost entirely culled from contemporary newspaper reports. However, information thus garnered eventually produced leads to sufficient archival material to enable evidence from other records. These had to be adequately cross-checked and triangulated, despite a dearth of financial information due to concurrent bank failures which might have been very relevant if available.

Research sources are listed in the Bibliography. Evidence has been extracted from available archival material, from books and newspapers written at the time, from modern writers and government records. The range of material is necessarily limited. Writers of the period have been evaluated, interpreted and compared with more recent material in discussion and interview with various experts and long-term residents of the region.

The study investigates the background to the decision to promote the establishment of plantations and thus encourage large-scale investment, intended to deliver the nucleus around which a viable and long-term infrastructure could be developed, and at the same time provide the required catalyst to population and capital growth.

The years between 1879 and 1889 saw the rise and fall of the first real trial of large-scale agricultural production in the Territory. It involved some 50,000 acres of actual plantation with over 100,000 acres earmarked and 'taken up' by speculators for the cultivation of sugar cane. Total sugar production from the venture probably amounted at best to something under ten tons. The consequent Commission of Inquiry of 1895 resolved nothing.

Research has concentrated principally on the Palmerston Plantation Company's and their successors' effort to establish sugar cultivation on the Daly River. However, it necessarily touches upon, though in less detail, other plantations that briefly flowered and died during that fateful decade.
Definitive identification of the location of the Palmerston Plantation Company's operations presented further difficulties. Though the general area, the Daly River, in which the plantation was established had been recorded, the precise site of the early project could not be identified or specifically located on any known map in my preliminary investigation.

This was a serious problem because without proper site identification no real appreciation of the land capability was possible and therefore no conclusion could be drawn as to the inherent feasibility of the original venture, other than by relying on subjective contemporary reports. However, by field work and with help from those who are identified in the acknowledgments, the most probable site has now been identified and the data relevant to land capability has been adequately processed and analysed.

The complete failure to enable the establishment of any viable agricultural enterprise at all in the Territory may be sheeted home directly to the ineptitude of successive South Australian Governments unable to come to grips with the problem. But for this, the nucleus of an agricultural industry could have been established on the Daly River at that time with concomitant benefits to successive generations. In the jargon of today 'a window of opportunity' was lost.
Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at a university or other institute of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and list of references given.

[Signature]

Ian M. Hillock

February 1999
Acknowledgements

I am indebted to all those who have provided encouragement, advice and help in so many ways. Associate Professor Tony Austin, provided the initial encouragement and support. Michael Christie, my supervisor, continued to encourage and support my endeavour and provided advice throughout. The Northern Territory University made available its facilities in both Darwin and Katherine. The Northern Territory Archives provided essential financial assistance to enable field trips and other travel and research which had to be conducted at long distance.

I am grateful to the staff of Northern Territory Archives and the South Australian Archives, of whom Alyson Hoyle is owed a special thank you for her consideration and very real support.

I wish to thank Duncan Stuart, Department of Lands and Planning and Secretary to the Place Names Committee, who gave of his time and knowledge and who headed me in the right direction so many times, not least towards the discovery of the actual sites of the plantations on the Daly. Many other officers of the Land Records Unit of the Department were helpful in digging out for me land titles, survey maps and other necessary material on historical land tenure. In this regard Mark Powel and Peter Moy rate a special mention.

Officers and staff of the Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries, especially Tom Price, Graham Schultz and Fergil O'Meara, answered many queries. Their knowledge and experience of the area was invaluable as was that of Rink Van Den Brink of the Power and Water Authority.

My special thanks is given to Vern O'Brien, not only for advice on the detail of map records and general background of historical land tenure, but also for generously furnishing me with information from his own research on characters and personalities central to this episode in Territory history.
The staff of the Northern Territory Library Service in both Katherine and Darwin made helpful suggestions and actively supported me. WestPac Archival Services searched for relevant banking archival material and the Securities Commission searched for records of the Palmerston Plantation Company.

A note of appreciation is due to Paul Vandeleur, whose familiarity with the requirements of sugar growing in the tropical north was invaluable in assessing and verifying the capabilities of the soil on the Daly. I thank him also for time spent with me in physical investigation of the potential of the various sites and during many subsequent discussions on the subject.

Others who have been of assistance and require acknowledgment throughout this study include: Alf Salzberger, for many years a farmer in the area of part of the Palmerston Plantation Company’s selection, for help and opinion in response to queries on the topography, soil characteristics and anecdotal history of the Daly Region; Allan and Maureen Smith of Woolianna for kind hospitality to weary travellers, who asked so many questions, and for pointing them in the right direction to further discovery.

Last but not least to all friends, colleagues and members of my family who listened to my problems, and acted as a sounding board for emergent theories and constructions. Some were developed, some required adjustment, some found acceptance and some were discarded. Thank you all.
List of Illustrations

The Telegraph Fleet anchored in Darwin Harbour: 1871
Northern Territory State Library, PH0238/0406, Spillett collection.

Page

The Waterfront at Port Darwin - ships lying off Fort Hill: 1879
Northern Territory State Library, PH0021/0003, Tuxworth collection.

20

Chinese Gardens at Doctor's Gully with Darwin Hospital behind: 1883
Northern Territory State Library, PH0297/0032, Margaret Widdup collection.

34

The s.s Maggie at Owston's Landing on the Daly River: 188?
Northern Territory State Library, PH0560/0021, Marie & Lindsay Perry collection.

68

Sugar growing on part of Owston’s selection near present day Woolianna: 1912
Northern Territory State Library, PHO100/0114, NT State Library collection.

74

Buildings on Poett’s Plantation at Rum Jungle: 1883
Northern Territory State Library, PH0002/0047, Roger Nott collection.

88

Coffee Drying racks on Poett's Plantation: 1883
Northern Territory State Library, PH0002/0140, Donated to Darwin Public Library by Administrator Roger Nott.

101

Chinese procession with Owston’s agents store, P.R. Allen & Co,
in background: 1893
Northern Territory State Library, PH0560/0014, Marie & Lindsay.
Perry collection.

115

‘Once was a sugar mill’ - remains of Brandt’s sugar crushing shed: 1891
Northern Territory State Library, PH0001/0020, Tracey collection.

132
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSIRO</td>
<td>Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRS 1</td>
<td>Minister for the Northern Territory - Correspondence received.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTRS 790</td>
<td>Northern Territory Government Resident - Correspondence received.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTLRU</td>
<td>Northern Territory Department of Lands and Planning, Land Records Unit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTTG</td>
<td>Northern Territory Times and Gazette.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAPP</td>
<td>South Australian Parliamentary Papers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

This study embraces a brief analytical overview of the attempt to promote and develop plantation agriculture in the Northern Territory from the early 1870s until the last year of the following decade. It focuses particularly on a description and analysis of the plantations on the Daly River and the endeavors to establish sugar plantations in that region from 1879 until 1886. It provides therefore a case study of an area that has always been seen as a key to the Northern Territory's agricultural future.

The topic was selected, not only for its intrinsic interest as a case study, but also because very little of its history is known despite its importance at the time. The choice of topic reflects my values and interests. I am experienced in the fields of conservation and land management within Northern Australia, having been directly involved in the assessment and review of land use. I have some thirty years experience of agricultural consulting and business management. This experience covers the broad spectrum - arable, irrigation, pasture, rangeland, horticulture and forestry management - in temperate, tropical and semi-arid regions both within Australia and overseas. As a specialist in project planning and evaluation I have reported on feasibility, planning, appraisal, legal matters and resource development for national and international agencies including World Bank and USAID. My qualifications and experience are pertinent to the interpretation and analysis of the facts, not only in the context and perspective of the time, but also in providing some insight to their relevance today.

There are still large gaps in our knowledge of the applicability of large-scale plantation agriculture to this region. An investigation into the history of one of our most spectacular, if largely forgotten, failures may be of practical value. Public debate on the general subject matter of land use is today as great as it ever was and the study should not only be of interest across a wide spectrum of the general public, but may be of interest also to governmental, educational and agricultural authorities and ecological interests, as well as those interested in Aboriginal community development enterprise.
There is no single collection of archival material relating to this topic. It is also limited and scattered between the Northern Territory, South Australia, Victoria and the United Kingdom. Despite this I believe it is possible to provide interim conclusions and insights as to the various anomalies which have impacted upon agricultural and Aboriginal education systems in the Northern Territory. Findings may prompt other questions which may be enabling in themselves.

The intention has been not only to search for the facts, issues and relevant concepts surrounding the seminal attempt to establish a large-scale agricultural industry, but also to focus on the relevant sociological aspects of its early failure. This thesis describes, analyses and interprets what actually happened. If I have succeeded in presenting this systematic process of searching and interpreting the facts in context, it may help to emphasise and direct attention towards a proper understanding of the episode. This function is necessary because of contemporary 'confusion and overload' and may prove to be empowering in promoting the informed opinion and understanding of Northern Territory agriculture which is essential for current debate across a spectrum of disciplines.

There has been considerable turmoil in Australian historiography in recent years, between the critics of post-modernism for a disregard of painstaking 'empirical' history and others who would argue that post-modernism, by questioning the 'grand narrative', has moved beyond the tendency to generalise from debatable fact. Certainly there has been renewed interest in the history of marginalised groups and regional development. Historians are more aware today that their histories are inevitably circumscribed by their own personal pasts, prejudices, language and culture. They may write of the past but often with an eye that is skewed by current perspective.

My own objective has been to provide an accurate account of early agricultural initiatives in the Northern Territory in the hope that an analysis of it will enable relevant departments and agencies to assist the general public and the indigenous community in a practical way.

Whether the study simply adds to the corpus of historical research in the Northern Territory or assists in solving ongoing problems will depend on how readers use this text. As an agriculturist myself, I believe the conclusions I have reached are germane to the present.
THE LITERATURE

The literature surrounding the plantation venture on Daly River sets the premise for this study and the parameters upon which it is based. It is enlightening to compare modern attitudes to the events under consideration with those of contemporary writers. Today, if early failure in agriculture is considered at all, it merits only a brief reference. But at the time it was of prime importance.

The opinions of writers both past and present differ as to the why of this early initiative but are in full agreement as to its utter failure. The reasons for that failure are not expressed with the same degree of confidence.

Books dealing with this seminal event in the history of the Northern Territory are scant. The few that exist have mixed, at times contradictory, opinions about the potential of plantation agriculture in the Northern Territory. There is however a degree of consensus on the identity of the two major players. Both the Delissa Pioneer Sugar Company and the Palmerston Plantation Company were seen historically as being of importance.

The sources I used include newspapers, government records, court records and some local and Northern Territory historical studies. Of these the following provide a reasonable synopsis of what happened and allow us to compare both historical and modern background material.

Writers contemporaneous with events

Mrs Dominic D. Daly despite the title of her book Digging and Squatting and Pioneering Life in the Northern Territory of South Australia was very much an establishment figure. She came to Darwin, or Palmerston as it was then called, as a young teenage girl amidst all the excitement of establishing the town.
As the daughter of the first Government Resident she was privy to many of the more mundane, and sometimes more important, matters appertaining to early administration of the Territory. She was later to become wife to the nephew of Sir Dominick Daly, who was Governor at the time of South Australia’s acquisition of the Northern Territory, and she never lost her interest in Territory affairs.

Because of her connections she was often able to obtain the inside story and as she says herself when she came to write her book, ‘official reports were kindly placed at my disposal by the Agent-General for South Australia, Sir Arthur Blyth’. For the period 1870 to 1888 her book is a cornucopia of information as seen from the seat and very pinnacle of government.

She kept her faith in the future prosperity of the Territory. Her book reads like a journal entry and provides personal commentary on events for the years under study. It was her firm opinion that the failure to develop the opportunity for plantation agriculture was principally the fault of individual and collective bad management.

Sowden came to the Territory in 1882 with the Parliamentary party under the leadership of Parsons, Minister for the Northern Territory. He played the part of Boswell to Parson’s Johnson. His record of the trip, which he put into book form as The Northern Territory As It Is, is a first-rate chronicle of the events, concerns, interests and aspirations of the time. He is able to involve the reader directly in the topic, whether it is of a commercial, political or sociological nature.

His book is not only entertaining but also can provide a useful guide to the comparative dynamics of population and resources as they impinge upon the subject under review. The narrative is often humorous and displays a degree of whimsy that helps the modern reader ignore and overcome the distractions created by the lack of paragraphs and the syntax of the time. He visited Delissaville in its early stage of development and he was able also to obtain first-hand information of the progress being made on the Daly River.

Newspaper reports furnish the essential underpinning of the narrative to this research. The Northern Territory Times and Gazette, which was throughout the period under the principal editorship of Kirkland, provides a fount of information.
His commentary and opinion were always forthright, though could be often contradictory and extreme. His personality often shows itself through his writing. One can almost sense the heat and humidity and the effort needed to defeat the difficulties under which he constantly laboured. The frustrations he had to overcome in putting and holding the paper together week after week are evident. Kirkland was an intensely human person with the gift of being able to make real even the most mundane of events. It is only to be expected that he could be biased and opinionated at times and that perhaps he was also often less than objective in his judgment. But his greatest value lies in providing necessary insights into the underlying socio-economic background which are of relevance to this study.

He believed that bad management, lack of expertise and general incompetence characterised the failure of plantation agriculture. In his opinion only two of the 'planters' had the necessary ability and expertise. These were Otto Brandt, who according to Kirkland failed because of lack of support and necessary encouragement by Government, and Benjamin Delissa of Delissaville, who was dismissed by his employers. Kirkland was consistent in his opinion that Benjamin Delissa, the founder of the Delissa Pioneer Sugar Company, was badly wronged by his backers.

He maintained this loyalty despite persuasive contrary evidence and went out of his way to defend Delissa. His defence was not always logical. Despite this the paper provides continuity to the historical record and it is used as an essential reference point in triangulating and comparing evidence from the various other sources.

One other writer of the period rates a mention and that is Alfred Searcy, though his reminiscences should be treated with due caution. He can be accused of painting with a large brush and of being overgenerous with his colours, however, he can often provide an authentic backdrop to the nature of things that lie behind events. His observation and comment are often astute and it is to be regretted that, as far as I am aware, he never offered any opinion as to the failure of the plantation dream one way or the other.

According to his own account, he was among other things, police trooper, customs officer, ship's boy, sportsman and rollicking good fellow. The tales of his adventures in the Territory make excellent reading. One suspects that he was not above embellishing a story for effect. Essentially he might better be described as a raconteur, able to capture the flavour of time.
Modern writers

Probably because of the complexity and contradictory nature of the event, modern writers have never gone into the matter to any great extent.

In the first instance, the questions of why the South Australian Government should have expended so much effort to establish tropical plantation agriculture in the Top End, and in the final analysis, why they effectively achieved nothing after a period of some fifteen years in the attempt, has never been examined in any depth. Most often modern writers offer only intriguing glimpses into these problems.

Bauer, in his study on *Historical Geography of White Settlement in part of Northern Australia, Part 2, the Katherine - Darwin Regions*, has provided by far the most comprehensive study of the region's historical development but only very briefly touches upon the plantations and the reasons for their failure. However, he puts forward the view that many theories for this failure were advanced at the time and that many ideas were subsequently advanced to improve agricultural prospects. In his opinion, nothing was done at the time to rectify matters. He says that, 'of far greater importance was the fact that the failures of the 1880s were to haunt the far north for many decades'. He might well have added that their ghosts today are still alive and kicking.

Alan Powell, writing a full ten years after Bauer, in his well-researched short history of the Northern Territory entitled, *Far Country*, again barely touches upon the subject of plantation agriculture but his book provides some insight into the background of early settlement.

P. P. Courtenay presents an economic history of development of Northern Australia. His book entitled, *Northern Australia*, is subtitled and can be summarised as, 'Patterns and problems of tropical development in an advanced country'. His work deals with the inherent socio-economic problems which are common to the region and how the historic and geographic characteristics have affected the parameters within which modern economic development has evolved. He briefly mentions the subject under study and provides some useful background to the proper understanding of events.
P.F. Donovan, in his history of South Australia's Northern Territory entitled, *A Land Full of Possibilities*, devotes more space to the abortive attempt than most. The political background is well covered. He believes that government action had no real bearing on the fortune, or lack of it, of either pastoralism or agriculture and that 'mistakes or negligence of governments, the greed of speculators, or the fluctuations of markets' had little effect compared with the inherent lack of potential and isolation of the region, and that even had ready markets been available, and had all else been equal, there was never any real possibility of substantive success of large-scale agriculture in the Territory of the nineteenth century.

Donovan's arguments are persuasive, his material is well researched and his conclusions incorporate and encapsulate all that has been inferred and conjectured on the subject to date. It is my intention to investigate the matter in all its aspects, in so far as I am able, in an attempt to reach some valid conclusion which will substantiate or otherwise qualify, these findings.
Reference

1. Mrs Dominic D. Daly, *Digging Squatting and Pioneer Life in the Northern Territory of South Australia*, Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, London, 1887, p. 2

2. F.H. Bauer, *Historical Geography of White Settlement in part of Northern Australia. Part 2 The Katherine - Darwin Region*, CSIRO Division of Land Research and Regional Survey, Divisional Report No 64/1, Canberra, 1964, p. 103


4. Donovan, p. 140
No.1 The Telegraph Fleet anchored in Darwin Harbour: 1871
There are three broad aspects to the historical background - the immediate one of the situation in the Northern Territory and its relationship with the colony of South Australia, how that impinged upon the rest of Australia and how these two were encompassed in the general background of world trade, politics and empire.

World Trade, Politics and Empire

With the advent of steam the world had somehow grown smaller. Much still remained to be explored but the influence of Europe and the British Isles was beginning to be felt everywhere. The adolescent United States was still growing and only now becoming conscious of its strength. One of the greatest migrations ever engaged in by the human race was in full cry to all points of the compass. The 1870s and the next two decades was the period in which the geographical and social parameters of the world as we know it today were taking shape.

Everywhere it was the same. Whether in the 'old' or the 'new' worlds the march of 'civilization' was unstoppable. Russia, ever expanding eastwards, had met, in the far north shores of the Pacific, with the ebullient expansion of the United States in Alaska.

The 'Scramble for Africa' was soon to eventuate in vast colonial empires. They waxed early in the name of the European powers before they in turn slowly and inevitably waned over the present century to leave shadows that are still present everywhere in the polyglot pattern that is modern Africa.

All over the globe western civilization rolled ever onwards. 'Wider still and wider shall our bounds be set', was not only the theme of politicians and international statesmen but it was the firm belief and the act of faith which was daily celebrated and witnessed by people everywhere.
Whether expressed on some storm-tossed island off the Scottish coast or somewhere 'beyond the black stump' in far flung Australia or, with a certain gentility in the sophisticated salons of Paris, London and Berlin, the invincible optimism and belief in the absolute morality of the imperial cause and its direction was as reminiscent, and just as evocative, as the cry, 'Deus vult' of the First Crusade.

British capital dominated and to a large extent financed an unprecedented worldwide boom. During the 1870s Australia over all was a stalwart partner and participant as immigrants and British capital flowed in to aid the expansion of Australian cities and the building of industries and railways. In this regard it is perhaps worth quoting a letter, extracted from the Chicago Herald of 1885 and printed proudly in the Northern Territory Times and Gazette, to illustrate the grounds on which that faith was built and underwritten:

Let us (the United States) not delude ourselves with fictitious greatness. There is another country of whose greatness we may well pause for contemplation. Its area exceeds eight and a half million square miles. The basis of its power is not land but water. Its greatness is maritime and its coastline is 28,500 miles long. It lies on both sides of the equator, and its boundaries touch the extreme of heat and cold. Its uncultivated area which can be made to feed unborn millions without the aid of the United States covers millions of square miles. It contains a hundred thousand square miles of forest, which are being jealously preserved while others are being ruthlessly sacrificed. Its population amounts to 315,000,000 souls including pretty well all races known to man. Its revenue for government amounts to more than a thousand million dollars annually, only 1/4 of which is levied in direct taxation. It has nearly a million of men under arms. It has one policeman for every 16 square miles of its entire area. Its 545 war vessels are all in commission, not rotting in harbors. Its merchant navy consists of 30,000 ships manned by 270,000 sailors. Its seagoing tonnage amounts to eight and a half millions. It surpasses in steamers all other powers on the globe and nearly equals their combined total in sailing vessels. Forty nine percent carrying power of the world is under its flag. More than half the ships earning from freights and passengers belong to it. Two thirds of the tonnage annually built belong to it. The Banks of that Empire transact one third of the business of the entire world. Its manufactures comprise one-third those of all Europe. It uses 30% of the horse power of the world. Its enormous debt, which it uses as the most profitable investment of its own earnings, amounts to only nine percent of its wealth. It is the wealthiest State in the world, and its name is Great Britain, and it abandoned, after a full and fair trial, the economic policy to which the United States fatuously clings. It sends its ships to every clime; it offers its wares to every port; it asks no tax on articles offered in exchange, and the cargoes its ships carry back to wharves enrich it as much as those it had borne away.
Although Australia was buoyant, it was still somewhere on the periphery. Consisting now of the five self-governing colonies of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and West Australia it was, however, still a long way from anywhere. The Northern Territory of South Australia, as it was then known, was seen in relative terms almost to be what we today would consider the dark side of the moon - just as difficult to get to and just as unknown.

**Annexation of the Northern Territory by South Australia**

Immersed as it was in the unstoppable optimism of the time, South Australia requested in 1858 that it be permitted to expand its area to the north coast of Australia because it believed that its further development was limited if confined within its existing boundaries.

It had missed out on the vast supply of migrants that seemed to be on the move everywhere else. If it could but acquire this vast 'empty' region it would surely be able to do something about that. South Australia failed and failed miserably. Some would say stupidly. Yet there is still something to be admired in the faith and determination with which it undertook the task.

Early exploration of the 'Top End' of the Northern Territory, as it has become known, had largely overrated the value of pasture and soils. This was, perhaps, for good reason. 'Everything is relative to the eye of the beholder' and the 'beholders' had by and large spent months crossing some of the most inhospitable country in the world on foot. After their immediate previous experience of the desert, their impression of the 'Top End' must have appeared to them as a veritable Garden of Eden.

Interestingly enough it was only the sailor and oceanographer, King, who advised caution. But it was not an age for caution and the South Australians continued to press their urgent requests upon the home government.
The Colonial Office seemed to have had a more realistic idea of the immediate potential for government-led settlement. They described the region which largely comprised the Northern Territory and advised as follows:

parts of (of the area) are said to be well grassed and fitted for settlement but a considerable portion is barren and worthless ... all that seems desirable at present ... is to provide for temporary Government of the Territory until the increase in population shall make a more permanent arrangement desirable. 3

When pressed they preferred to split the area more logically between South Australia and Queensland. However, Queensland was not interested. It was doing very well as it was, thank you; and so South Australia pushed the matter until at last the Colonial Office finally agreed to the annexation of the Territory by South Australia.

A copy of the document granting annexation is contained in an appendice to Mrs Daly’s book and is worth considering in full:

HER MAJESTY’S LETTERS PATENT

Victoria, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland Queen, Defender of the Faith - To our trusty and well beloved Sir Dominick Daly, Knight, greeting: Whereas by an Act passed in the Session of Parliament holden in the fifth and sixth year of Our Reign entitled "An Act for the Government of the New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land," it was enacted that it should be lawful for Us by Letters Patent, to be from time to time issued under the Great Seal of Our United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, to define, as to Us should seem meet, the limits of the Colony of New South Wales, and to erect into a separate Colony or Colonies any territories which then were, or were reputed to be, or thereafter might be comprised within the said Colony of New South Wales: and whereas, by an Act passed the Session of Parliament holden in the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth years of Our Reign, entitled, "An Act to remove doubts respecting the authority of the Legislature of Queensland, and to annex certain territories to the Colony of South Australia, and for other purposes," it was amongst other things provided that it should be lawful for Us, by such Letters Patent as aforesaid, to annex to any Colony which was then or which might thereafter be established on the Continent of Australia and territories which (in the exercise of the powers thereinbefore mentioned) might have been erected into a separate Colony: Provided always that it should be lawful for Us in such Letters Patent, to reserve such powers of revoking or altering the same as to Us should seem fit, or to declare the period during which such Letters Patent should remain in force, and also on the revocation or other determination of such Letters Patent, again to exercise in respect of the territories referred to therein or any part thereof, all such powers and authority as might have been exercised if the said Letters Patent had never been made: Now know you
that We have thought fit, in pursuance of the powers so vested in Us, and of all other powers and authorities to Us in that behalf belonging to annex, and We do hereby annex to our said Colony of South Australia until We think fit to make other disposition thereof, or any part or parts thereof, so much of Our said Colony of New South Wales as lies to the northard of the twenty-sixth parallel of south latitude, and between the one hundred and twenty-ninth and one hundred and thirty-eighth degrees of east longitude, together with bays and gulfs therein, and all and every the islands adjacent to any part of the mainland within such limits as aforesaid, with the rights, members, and appurtenances; and We do hereby reserve to Us, Our heirs and successors, full power and authority from time to time to revoke, alter, and amend Our Letters Patent as to Us or them shall seem fit. In witness whereof We have caused these Our Letters Patent to be made Patent. Witness Ourself at Westminster, the sixth day of July, in the twenty-seventh year of Our Reign.

By warrant under the Queen's Sign Manual.
(Signed) C. Romilly.
True Copy. - R. D. Ross, Acting Private Secretary. 4

It is quite clear from the document that the annexation granted was legally only a temporary measure and this caused some concern in South Australia. However, others considered that whole matter was ill-advised in any case.

Besides the fact that any real settlement under Government auspices could only be undertaken by sea and, of all the colonies, South Australia was least advantageously placed geographically for this, there were bound to be inherent difficulties in developing a region that was still virtually unknown.

*The first attempts at settlement and the fruits of speculation*

The optimism engendered by what had been accomplished in obtaining permission for the annexation created an imperative. In their own minds, they were not only determined to succeed, but certain they would. So, enthused with this expectation, the South Australian Government dispatched their representative, Finniss, with full powers to establish a colony wherever he thought best.

Finniss was fueled by the need to succeed and was given virtually an 'open cheque'. It was assumed that tropical agriculture would soon flourish in the Territory just as it had in India and the East Indies. But unlike these regions there was no basic infrastructure in the Territory upon which to build.
In 1864 the colony was established at the mouth of the Adelaide River. The site was ill chosen and the area selected by him for survey, the flood plains of the Adelaide River which are now designated 'Wetlands', was subject to annual inundation and quite inappropriate for selection.

It seems also that Finniss was something of a martinet, endowed with an unrealistic appreciation of the priorities. Searcy tells us that he was so insistent on target practice to enable the expedition to defend itself from attack that he caused the party to use up all its ammunition within a short time of arrival. In consequence, had any such eventuality occurred they would have been without any means of defence.5

Lacking both the experience and ability to lead the expedition he soon lost both control of the situation and the respect of his men, some of whom at length stole one of the whaleboats and sailed to Perth. They were then able to take ship for Adelaide and alert the authorities to the situation. Nothing was achieved by this first expedition. The resultant scandal necessitated his ignominious recall in the following year and the whole party had returned to South Australia by November 1886.

The consequences were serious for the South Australian Government, for in its first euphoric flush it had enacted regulations which, it was thought, would permit the Territory to systematically pay for itself - instead they had experienced only more expense.

By Act of Parliament on 12 November 1863, the necessary enabling legislation had been put in place. Half a million acres were opened for purchase, before either settlement or survey, in 160 acre lots which could be sold in any number to buyers. A free half acre 'town' block was to be given for each 'country' block. The first 250 000 acres were offered at seven shillings and sixpence per acre and the remaining 250 000 acres at twelve shillings. All purchases then were to be surveyed by government surveyor within five years.

This 'systematic' land sale had been meant to attract 'yeoman farmers' but luckily for them few had had any chance to place their name on required land orders, for most of the land was bought up immediately, either by London and Adelaide speculators or South Australian politicians.
As a consequence of Finniss’s failure, those in the know sold out early to others less fortunate, and by 1867 those who were left holding worthless paper began agitating to get their money back.

Nevertheless, the return of the purchase money was resisted by the Government. It attempted to stifle protest in 1868 by amending the 1863 Act to give unfortunate land order holders twice the amount of land in their original purchase. Few were satisfied and agitation continued for a proper survey to be carried out. There followed bankruptcy for some investors and the repercussions were serious.

The Northern Territory Company of Adelaide went into liquidation in 1869, after failing in the attempt to sell off its shareholders’ holdings. But some five years later, after protracted legal action, one London-based company was successful in getting its money back. It was awarded some £78,000 in costs and refunds which the Government had to pay.

Thus the first great hope of settlement by honest hard-working yeomen farmers on blocks of 160 acres had come to nothing. No doubt the very possibility of failure must now have been feared in many influential circles. However, fateful misconceptions and half-knowledge still predominated in any appreciation of the immediate potential for development in the Territory by the South Australian Government.

It is perhaps conceivable that there was some realisation of its own ineptitude and a growing perception of the magnitude of its task. A few ill-considered proposals for survey were called for and rejected. A site for a new settlement on the Liverpool River was proposed and promptly rejected. Nevertheless, perhaps in reaction to its growing trepidation, the Government still persisted in publically overstating the case for ease of settlement.

\[6\]

Goyder takes command

Overconfidence had certainly placed the administration in an invidious situation. But with the arrival of Goyder in the north in February of 1869 and his rapid establishment of Port Darwin as a base, confidence, if tempered by experience, soon returned. Like the unfortunate Finniss before him Goyder was virtually allowed to ‘write his own ticket’. He was a man of an entirely different stamp and he had done his homework.
He knew where he was going and what he wanted, and what he wanted he got. From the Government he 'demanded and got £25,000 for the survey costs, a £3,000 bonus for himself, £2,000 for his party, and the right to choose 120 men and his own stores'.

He was a man of obvious ability and energy. There was never any doubt as to who was in charge. The Port Darwin base took shape from the first day of his arrival. In rapid order he established his headquarters, laid out the site for the new town of Palmerston (later to be named Darwin) on its present site and also for Southport at the head of navigation on the Middle Arm of Darwin Harbour. He surveyed two other towns to be named Daly and Elizabeth which were never subsequently developed, and within six months it is said that his party had surveyed a total of 665,886 acres.

The South Australian Government was well satisfied, although it did betray some reservations as to future acquiescence of the Aborigines to the 'unauthorized and unwarrantable occupation of their country', unless concomitant with this they were taught the benefits of civilization by 'working for their keep'.

Goyder's success, basic though it was, quickly rekindled optimism and bolstered hope of success. Perhaps the Territory was not to become a great 'white elephant' after all. Goyder reported confidently that:

"Sooner or later it must turn out well. The country ... is first class ... the soil in the slopes, valley, and parts of the tableland is well suited for cultivation and mostly rich.

By the end of August the basic work had been done and Goyder left for Adelaide on 28 September 1869.

The *Adelaide Register* trumpeted on his return, that 'the South Australian Government can now freely transfer the responsibility of the Northern Territory from its own shoulders to that of the land speculators'. In saying this it intended no irony. But in any case, it was wrong on the first but all too correct on the second for within two years of his return, a second 'boom', which was to be prosecuted with unabated faith and optimism, began with the establishment of the overland telegraph line.
The Telegraph, and more speculation

Given the isolation and non-existence of the Northern Territory infrastructure, the line construction itself was a real achievement. It followed the route originally taken by Stuart only a decade earlier. The South Australian Government had used all its persuasive powers to get the necessary backing, against strong competition from Queensland, and obtaining control of this link between Australia and the rest of the world was a tremendous coup.

The construction created its own saga. Taking almost four years of heartbreak and toil, its eventual completion in 1872 gave a much-needed psychological boost to South Australia’s Northern Territory endeavours.

The improbable feat of providing a direct link, not only with Adelaide but with London itself, across the forbidding deserts and boundless oceans, was something to be marveled at and inevitably added greatly to the luster of expectation of an Aladdin’s cave of riches in the north, waiting only for those bold enough to grasp the opportunity. Almost immediately messages were being relayed of various mineral 'finds'.

In all the new countries of the world, financed largely by British capitalism, pastoralism was expanding enormously. What today would be regarded as insurmountable difficulties were overcome or counted as nought as the great cattle empires spread over the pampas and prairies of South and North America.

The Northern Territory shared in the enthusiasm and on the whole was to benefit from it, as pastoralists took up land, most often sight unseen. Within ten years of the telegraph’s completion almost 500 000 square miles (320 000 000 acres) of Northern Territory land had been applied for as pastoral holdings.

Pastoralism had always been the precursor of later development but the nature of the industry meant it could never of itself develop the necessary infrastructure required for greater development. In the case of the Northern Territory gold prospectors followed the pastoralists almost immediately, playing a Pied Piper’s tune to seduce men to voyage all over the world in search of their fortunes.
Goyder himself, as well as others had furnished reports of the 'colour' being found in the Finniss, the Mary and the Katherine Rivers. However, it is said that the first gold from the Territory was found in a ship's ballast loaded at Southport (Darwin) in 1870. Later, when she docked in Adelaide, the gold was discovered. Of such things are legends made.  

Early in 1871, before completion of the telegraph, the first company, 'The Northern Territory Gold Prospecting Association' was formed and by 1872 became the first organised party to reach Darwin. The explosion in speculation was encouraged by promoters in mining shares. In this it seems they were ably abetted by the South Australian Government and the the already liberal twenty acres allowed for a claim under South Australian law was increased to forty acres for a claim in the Territory. This was absolutely unprecedented - the corresponding claim allowance in Victoria for example, was only around half an acre at most. Sowden writing in 1882 recalls:

In several cases (companies) were formed with fluctuating share-lists which did no work at all. Land was pegged out anywhere, leases were applied for and the ventures sold when not a single prospect had been taken. A well known and 'straight' mining manager in one of the principal centers here assures me that years ago he received no fewer than four telegrams in one day from brokers in Adelaide to this effect: 'Peg out claim anywhere. We'll float it.'

The Northern Territory was far off the beaten track, however, and not too many miners arrived. Those that did soon left.

By August of 1872, with the telegraph line completed, the news of strikes came hot off the wire generating all the excitement that we today would experience on the receipt of authentic messages from outer space. The speculation began immediately and by 1873, in Adelaide alone, there were some thirty mining companies registered ready and set to mine for gold.

Machinery was sent north to improve the share price, regardless of requirements. In 1874 the disillusioned Mining Warden reported on some of the more evident results at Southport:
Machinery covers the ground ... much of it seems to have been landed and left ... there is far too much machinery. ... Machines have been sent for claims that have not an ounce of gold ... barefaced false reports telegraphed to Adelaide ... men ... have done little else than build huts and eat provisions ... the whole thing ... a failure.14

One can sympathise with the Warden's frustration for there was gold being produced, even though activity seemed only confined to within a radius of ten miles of the telegraph line. Inevitably many companies that had been floated in ignorance and fraud were soon in liquidation; unfortunately they often pulled some honest ventures with them. Investors were becoming wary of the hyperbole.

But it was not only the armchair investor who was becoming wary. Working men were beginning to learn something of the difficulties. Not only was there a complete lack of logistical support but also during the 'Dry' the work often stopped because of lack of water and in the 'Wet' work came a halt because of too much.

The voyages to and from the North were also risky. For example, the ship Gothenberg went down with all hands and many men of experience and of skill and energy were lost on a voyage south from Port Darwin in the early months of 1875. Such men were difficult to replace.

Investment confidence weakened and legitimate enterprise succumbed along with the 'swindles'. The general effect was to play its part in the future disillusion of investor confidence in subsequent Territory ventures.
Reference

1 Northern Territory Times and Gazette, in State Library of the Northern Territory, hereafter NTTG, 16/5/1885.


3 F.H. Bauer, Historical Geography of White Settlement in part of the Northern Australia, Pt 2 - the Katherine Darwin Region. CSIRO, Division of Land Research and Regional Survey Report No 64. CSIRO, Canberra. 1964, p. 46, quoting South Australian Parliamentary Papers 37/1863 - Colonial Office comment re annexation.

4 Mrs Dominic D. Daly, Digging, Squatting, and Pioneer Life in the Northern Territory of South Australia. Sampson Low, London. 1887, reproduced in full in an appendix.

5 A. Searcy, By Flood and Field. Robertson, London. 1911.

6 Donovan pp 58-70.

7 Bauer, p. 67

8 Bauer, p. 66.

9 Powell, p. 82.

10 Bauer, quoting SAPP, 31/1869-70, p. 20.

11 Bauer, p. 68.

12 Bauer, p. 78.


14 Bauer, p. 82, quoting South Australian Archives 79: 222, 2/6/74.
No. 2 The waterfront at Port Darwin - ships lying off Fort Hill: 1879
The question of labour, logistics and other costs

Bauer notes that there were no consistent returns made of the population over the period and that returns are 'frequently contradictory'. Other than Aborigines, who were in any case unable to be counted and noted in the official census, it is known that in 1871 there were only 201 people recorded. In 1872 and 1883 there appears to have been no record made. In 1873 official records show a total of 1,011 and in the following year there is an estimate of population north of Katherine only of 608. But whatever the exact total, the records are consistent only with a very small permanent population, which was inflated by an occasional and temporary influx. The failure to increase the Territory population substantially from 1870 to 1890 is self-evident from the figures extracted from Bauer's compilation of the various statistics.

Figure 1
Estimates of the population of the Northern Territory
1870 - 1890

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<td>4,141</td>
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</table>

* Census figures
a Estimate for north of Katherine only
b Not including telegraph company employees

Sources: South Australian Archives; Government Resident Reports; Official Census
The Chinese

As can be seen from the above estimates of population for the relevant years 1870 to 1890 (fig. 1), the only immigrants to come in any numbers were the Chinese. At first the generally accepted view was that they provided a worthwhile contribution to the development but it was not too long before this gave way to the prejudices against them that arose in other parts of Australia. Officialdom soon made life difficult for them with petty and not so petty restrictions. Finally a poll tax was imposed in 1888 which effectively put a cap on the numbers arriving.

Ironically life in the Territory, always hard, would have been more difficult without the 'Orientals' contribution. It was the Chinese who provided produce from their market gardens; amenities from their shops; fresh fish caught for local consumption and income from their export of the dried product to the Indies and the Far East.

Some writers have suggested that the Chinese had been associated with the Territory from as long ago as 1843 at Port Essington, on the Coburg Peninsula, which had been abandoned now for some time and that there had also been early negotiations with the Chinese of Singapore.

Now following complaints from mining companies that further development was threatened because of the near impossibility of obtaining good workers and the associated high labour costs, some 196 Chinese were recruited for the Territory in 1874 from Singapore. In the same year Courtney also suggests that government recruitment resulted in a further influx of around 900 from Hong Kong.¹

This is not indicated specifically for that year by Bauer's figures but nonetheless before the legislation was enacted to limit numbers, Chinese immigrants dominated in the Territory then and for many years afterwards. In 1879 they outnumbered Europeans by 5:1.
It is said that the greatest amount of gold produced in the mining districts at that time came from Chinese working on their own behalf on alluvial diggings. Many of them sought to purchase land. Lip service was often given to this hope and though in the beginning there was ostensibly nothing to prevent them purchasing land, very little in fact was done to make it possible. In 1882 at a banquet held by Chinese residents of Palmerston for visiting politicians from the south, representations to this end were made in a speech to the Honourable Minister, Parsons, Minister for Education and for the Northern Territory:

though in some colonies (other parts of Australia) our countrymen have been abused by the lower classes ... people (here) have treated us with that generosity which is extended to other nationalities ... your parliament in its wisdom (has) decided not to restrict the immigration of our race to this portion of Australia ... It has frequently been urged that we are a migratory race, but hitherto no inducement has been held out for us to settle in this country. Had there been, many of us, would have been cultivators of the soil instead of being mere labourers ... If grants of 50 to 500 acres could be made to us on easy terms of purchase, cultivation of tropical products would be entered into, which would prove of great benefit to the entire community.

The Minister replied at length touching upon everything from the integrity of the Chinese migrant, his respect for the Chinese empire, the intelligence of its people and its long and honorable history. Towards the end of his peroration he spoke briefly on the subject of land and expressed concern that, 'there must be some mistake' for, he emphasized, the Chinese should 'thoroughly understand' that land, under the cultivation clauses of the Act, 'was as open to the Chinese as to any one else'. It was left to a Mr Furner M.P. later to gently remind his hosts of Catch 22 which was that under the clauses of the Act - 'They had but to pay the naturalization fee of 10 shillings to be entitled to the privileges of British subjects.

However, it is quite clear from the record that the Chinese were regarded more favourably in the Territory and for much longer than in other parts of the country. They played an integral part in the community for many years. There were of course some ugly incidents motivated by hatred and intolerance, such as the hamstringing of a Chinese haulage contractor's horses at Southport, but of violence there was very little. Nonetheless there developed, without doubt, a gradual and insidious dislike which grew with the years. The concerted anti-Chinese campaign in other colonies from the gold rush years to Federation, spilled over to the Northern Territory in the 1890s.
The reasons for and the psychology behind the prejudice against the Chinese merits a study in its own right for it was as surprising to some then as it is sometimes now. Mrs Litchfield expresses astonishment that white people are quite happy to share amenities with Aboriginais and be in the next bed to them in Darwin Hospital, but are vehement in their denial of the same rights to any Chinese. No matter how ‘respectable’ the individual, all Chinese were denied the use of the public hospital and had to raise funds from within their community to build their own.

European Labour

What was wrong with white men? Despite the vaunted soil and mineral wealth, every possible inducement had completely failed to bring immigrants. Not only did the European population remain static but also the ratio of men to women never appears to have been higher than a ratio of 6:1. Men had come only for the gold but few had stayed any length of time. In 1881:

there called at the Port of Darwin 56 vessels, representing 504,804 tons, and 2,544 men in crews, and that very near the same left. The Immigration was 336 males and 18 females, and the emigration, 1,105 males and 30 females - a considerable loss it may be observed. 3

The men who were arriving by almost every ship and leaving by every other ship were a far cry from the intrepid Urquhart brothers who had agreed each to bring independently separate mobs of cattle from South Australia and Queensland to a pre-arranged meeting point on the headwaters of the Victoria River. Both had arrived individually at what they believed was the appointed spot, set up their lone camps each waiting for the other to arrive. But months were to pass before they met again at ‘Mucka Waterhole’ on Riveren Station. They then realised that they had been living within fifty miles of one another for over a year. Men like these knew how to fend for themselves. 4

There was relatively little sickness in the Territory despite the fact that the climate could be uncomfortable and in comparison with many other similar areas of the world it was quite healthy. Sickness did occur on the diggings, but Searcy, in his reminiscences of the time written in 1909, puts it down to the calibre of the men, drink and fecklessness which caused ‘fever, scurvy, and ailments due to poor housing and poorer grog’. Bauer also confirms this. 5
Generally speaking, Europeans of the period had shown remarkable skill in being able to adapt and survive in as many different environments as were to be found. From the Arctic Circle to the tropics, whether in mountain, desert, prairie or jungle, against all odds they had established themselves in viable communities. But these were not 'Britain's sturdy sons' of popular song nor of anywhere else for that matter.

Wages in the Territory were recognised as being three times higher than in contemporary Adelaide. It is quite evident from all accounts that more often than not the men who arrived at Port Darwin were frequently either drifters or layabouts and often hopeless alcoholics to boot, seduced to the north by tales of easy money. All the writers of the period testify to this.

As individuals they did not last long here, nor contribute much except to add to the costs, keep wages abnormally high and when they left add to the growing doom and gloom with which the Territory was perceived elsewhere. These were quite different from the stockmen and Chinese immigrants who even if they were unfamiliar with the country yet were able to adapt to it, feed themselves and survive.

If it was difficult to obtain good men for the diggings it must have been well nigh impossible to obtain men with the skills required in those days for farm work which were well above those needed today, horse ploughing, cultivation and drill work and the many skills associated with sowing, planting and harvesting.

These skills could not be acquired overnight but took experience that could only be acquired by long acquaintance, practice and the pride of achievement that was almost an art form in itself. Even some forty years later in 1913 one can sympathise with the frustration evident in a letter by the manager of the Daly River Research Farm. He wrote on the quality of his workforce who would rather hang about in Darwin than work:

Most of the men applying for work here are from the cities and towns, with no knowledge whatever of farm or stock work, and the Demonstration Farm is more of a kindergarten than a properly manned establishment. 6
Similarly the Land Files at Darwin show that between 1922 and 1930 the Applications Register for agricultural land in the Daly/Katherine region show that very few applicants described their occupations as being farmers but rather as, 'law clerk, pastoralist, miner, contractor, plumber, agent, seaman, domestic, storekeeper, ... and married woman.' That was the situation between the two World Wars and there is no evidence to suggest that it was any better in the 1870s and 1880s.

**Indigenous Australians**

Given the above it was not surprising that most of the discussions concerning settlement in the north presupposed the introduction of a coloured labour force. Aborigines were sometimes employed as domestics and as unskilled labour and later when plantations eventuated the record shows that some few were also employed on these. But generally speaking their potential as a work force was not considered worthwhile. Their way of life and understanding of the world had not until then encompassed either the concepts associated with the need for regular work or an understanding of the discipline that was its essential concomitant.

The Germans when confronted with the same problem in East Africa some years later had 'solved' it by imposing a small cash poll tax on the Africans. They of course having no money were perforce persuaded that the only way to get it was to work in the employment that was provided.

The Africans naturally resented the imposition and a leader emerged who was able to persuade them that he had a source of holy water, erroneously it seems, that was proof against German bullets. The Kiswahili word for water is 'maji'. So the bloody war that resulted was called the 'Maji Maji' war. The struggle did not last long.

Such measures as these were not appropriate to the very different mores of Aboriginal society and were of course not considered in the Territory but Mrs Daly summed up the problem quite succinctly with the remark, 'Until the question of labour is settled, and a supply of coolies available, it is impossible to expect any great results from the Northern plantation.'
Coolie Labour and attempts to procure it

Some time previous to this a Mr De Koch had planned on the basis of his 'extensive experience in tropical agriculture' to form a syndicate of Adelaide investors to raise cotton, rice and tobacco on the Roper River. He intended to hire coolies from Timor on his voyage northwards. But nothing more seems to have been heard of the matter. The *South Australian Register* was of the opinion that the venture had been 'inpropitious' (sic), which could have meant anything from him having absconded with the funds to him having been unable to raise any finance at all.10

Whatever was 'inpropitious' about the circumstances of Mr De Koch's enterprise, the Government, imbued with the notion of promoting plantation agriculture, became increasingly sympathetic to the idea of recruiting coolie labour.

Later in 1879 the Indian Immigration Act was passed by the South Australian administration. It was unable to receive Royal Assent as the Indian Colonial Government was strongly opposed to allowing Indian indentured labour to be engaged other than in Crown Colonies where they could control the conditions of their employment and ensure their wellbeing.

Because of this restriction and after much skillful negotiation, on the South Australian Government's behalf by Major Ferguson, a modified Act was passed by the South Australian Parliament in 1882 which regulated conditions for the coolies' wellbeing in employment in line with the Indian Government's requirements.

Details of the different aspects of Ferguson's consultations will be dealt with later in context. But for the moment, suffice it to say that a key condition was that a Commissioner be appointed to control and oversee the process.11

It does not appear that this essential appointment was ever made. Therefore no indentured labour from India could legally arrive in the Northern Territory without this, despite newspaper claims that the Northern Territory had been permitted, unlike its tropical neighbour Queensland, to recruit Indian plantation workers.
It was a fundamental prerequisite for recruitment from India and whether the lack of any appointment was due to South Australian oversight or whether no appointment was ever made because no requests for Indian labour ever came from the Northern Territory planters, though this is unlikely, is immaterial.

Powell says that South Australian efforts to attract Indians and Cingalese (Tamils mainly) resulted in a total count of only 150 in 1888, but whether these were regularly indentured labour, and therefore official, must remain in doubt. It is on record as we shall see later that a few Timorese were subsequently employed on at least one of the plantations. But other than the Chinese, these seem to have been the only 'foreign' workers employed in any number in the late nineteenth century.

Transport

Apart from anything else, the extreme difficulty in reaching the Northern Territory from South Australia, or indeed from anywhere, was a major problem. Mrs Daly's advice on the easiest way to get to the Territory from England speaks for itself:

The simplest route is to go to Hong Kong by any of the lines touching at that port, taking a fresh steamer thence to Port Darwin. The British India steamers book passengers to the Northern Territory, but land them at Thursday Island, where they await the arrival of the steamer from Sydney to take them to their destination. And I believe there is another way of going, via Singapore and Batavia.13

There is no thought of going to South Australia first - that must have been entirely out of the question. Not only was the Territory very difficult to get to, but once there it was as difficult to move within it. The distances were huge. There were no roads. Horses were hard to come by and none too reliable. Provisions were scarce and often damaged in transit.

There are various reports. One party going up-country in February and March of 1872 took 40 days to travel from Southport to Howley, a distance of not more than sixty miles.
In 1882 the Parliamentary party traveling no doubt under the best circumstances, and with every possible amenity provided for their comfort, took three days to travel to Pine Creek by horseback from Darwin. It was fully two weeks before they returned:

with horses even more jaded than they looked before, which is almost like saying that a skeleton looks less like a skeleton at times ... (They had crossed) bog after bog, so deep that the riders had to continually jump off their horses and help pull them through and the consequent real hardship ... (it) made all the party look lugubrious, as though they repented their exercise ... morass, swamp, bog; horses led a third of the way; constant dismounting and walking sometimes knee deep in slush.14

Perhaps in reference to travel inland during the wet season, Police Corporal Montague, in a letter quoted by Sowden, should be given the last word:

It may perhaps interest the Ministerial party to know what they would have encountered if they had been a couple of days later on the road. The Stapleton had swollen considerably, and the Adelaide was rising high. The whole of the Adelaide Plains were under water. At Burrell's creek the overflow formed a rapid stream down the road and very deep. The road was washed full of holes, into one of which one of us fell, horse and all. The packhorse got bogged up to the girths twice in a quarter of a mile, and had to be unloaded and dragged out onto firm ground. Bamboo Creek at the crossing was nearly six feet deep, and running very swiftly.

It is interesting to note that the corporal's solution to the problem took the form of assistance from that much-maligned group - the Chinese. He continues:

With the assistance of two chinamen and a long rope we hauled our six horses over, and then got our things to the other side, where we had to dress standing up to our knees in water. We had no sooner crossed than a heavy downpour of rain set in. The road along the flat near Mount Darwent was all under water, and very rotten and boggy. Near Bridge Creek the whole flat was covered about a mile nearly up to my knees in the saddle. The creek itself was overflowing its banks. The Howley was level with the bridge, and running over the confines of the bank a sheet of water. In a flat to the north side of the bridge the deepest part of the floodwaters was about six feet. At the foot of the rise there was over three feet of water on the road. Yam Creek at the old bridge, has been about twelve feet deep, and Brocks Creek from fifty to sixty yards wide. Old trees weighing half a ton are washed right across the road, on which they now lie, and large holes have been made in it in places. Crossing one creek alone took us two hours. 15
It is not to be wondered that, where possible, transport by water was often the favoured method in those days when there were neither roads nor railways and it was often not much better. Today we are used to efficient and powerful engines capable of propelling a ship or boat, all things being equal, at relatively high speed, regardless of wind or tide. Tidal flows round the Top End and up the navigable rivers are quite high and wind direction and strength is notably variable.

A modern vessel can cope adequately under these conditions but in the 1880s it was otherwise. Sailing vessels were not as handy as the modern yacht directionally in coping with the wind, and whether propelled by wind or steam power vessels then were in any case of limited speed. Extremely powerful seagoing vessels, such as the famous clippers, would only be able to achieve a maximum speed of perhaps fifteen knots under favourable conditions. A large seagoing steam vessel, generally wind assisted, could perhaps make ten or eleven knots.

However coastal vessels, much smaller and less handy, would be able to achieve only something between four and a half to seven knots. In a region of variable winds and regular tidal flows of six knots and sometimes above, it is easy to appreciate the difficulties faced by the coastal skipper.

Sowden having experienced an abortive voyage to the Palmerston Plantation Company’s operation on the Daly River considered, ‘the 29 ton steamer Maggie, about as suitable for a 300 mile sea-trip as a pop-gun would be for shooting an alligator’. On this particular voyage the little steamer took four hours to reach Point Charles, only some 12 miles from its departure point and after making good only another two miles in the following hour, the trip was abandoned and it was decided to return to Darwin, where the passengers arrived in darkness, wet and cold after a total voyage of some ten hours.¹⁶ Sowden, however, was not a sailor and there may have been more to this particular trip than meets the eye.

*Concomitant costs*

There was also no jetty in Port Darwin that could be used to off-load cargo, which had to be carried ashore by lighter and this trans-shipment of no more than 300 yards cost fifteen shillings a ton.
Furthermore, because of the scarcity of wagons or other form of transport to take them any higher, more often than not, it seems that the goods were sometimes landed short of high water mark and in consequence there was a considerable loss even after goods were put ashore.\textsuperscript{17}

Should the intrepid importer have his goods landed safe and dry then he needs must bear the further cost of haulage. If this was available, it would cost anything between forty and fifty pounds a ton to cart it up-country.\textsuperscript{18} All this contributed to the high cost for anyone who was unable to fend for himself or for the business compelled by circumstances to provide rations for its workforce.

Some relevant prices

Prices quoted for basic commodities from an invoice of the time were as follows: \textsuperscript{19}

- fresh herrings, 2 shillings and sixpence a tin;
- beef, 1 shilling per pound;
- sugar, 10 pence per pound;
- bar soap, 2 shillings and sixpence
- one singlet, 9 shillings
- 50lb bag of flour, 27 shillings and sixpence
- jam, 2 shillings and sixpence per tin
- salt, 10 pence per pound
- preserved milk, 2 shillings per tin;
- currants, 1 shilling and 3 pence per pound
- dripping, 3 shillings and sixpence per pound
- steel, 2 shillings per pound
- hammer, 14 shillings
- handles, 2 shillings and sixpence each
- pick, 10 shillings and sixpence
- note paper, 5 shillings a packet (price in Adelaide was 1 shilling)
- twenty five envelopes, 1 shilling (price in Adelaide was 5 shillings per thousand)

A good living wage in Adelaide at the time was probably around thirty shillings per week. Wages in the Territory would differ only marginally from those quoted by Sowden in 1882 for wages on a plantation at Rum Jungle. Chinese were paid £1 per week and Europeans received £3 per week plus keep.\textsuperscript{20}
It is difficult to compare the prices between any age with those pertaining today. For the purpose, however, if we take the modern day 'good living wage' to be somewhere around $500 per week (some would say it was much higher) the following equivalents are possible (fig 2.).

Figure 2

(i) Currency - Equivalent Prices - 1881 and 1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1882</th>
<th>1998</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>£1.10s</td>
<td>$500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£1 = 20 shillings</td>
<td>$333.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 shilling = 12 pence</td>
<td>$16.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 penny =</td>
<td>$1.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(ii) Equivalents - Weights and measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imperial</th>
<th>Metric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 mile</td>
<td>1.6 kms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 knot = 1 nautical mile/hr</td>
<td>1.9 kms/hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 pound</td>
<td>0.45 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 acre</td>
<td>0.4 hectares</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reference

4. John Underwood, Riveren
5. Bauer, F.H., *Historical Geography of White Settlement in part of the Northern Australia, Pt 2 - the Katherine Darwin Region*. CSIRO, Division of Land Research and Regional Survey Report No 64, CSIRO, Canberra, 1964, quoting Price and others.
11. South Australian Parliamentary Papers No 42, 1882, *Coolie Labour for Northern Territory*, with supplementary letters relating to Coolies and also to Tropical Products 2, Ferguson, J.A.
13. Mrs Daly, p.357.
15. Sowden, pp 159-160.
16. Sowden, p. 82.
17. Sowden, pp 154-155.
20. Sowden, p. 79.
No. 3 Chinese Gardens at Doctor's Gully with Darwin Hospital behind: 1883
The Act of 12 November 1863 which first regulated the settlement of the Northern Territory had been enacted specifically to enable colonization. It was over ten years now since the Territory takeover. South Australia, founded proudly on the measured certainties of the Victorian age and believing itself to be somewhat superior to the other provinces had still failed despite valiant endeavour to attract settlers in any numbers for its vast new territory. Even the gold rush had been no more than a gleam in the speculator’s eye. Population figures at its height show that the totals were probably no more than a thousand at best and of these almost all were men (see fig. 1).

The costs borne by the South Australian Government in establishing the Territory had been horrific and there seemed to be no end in sight. In 1870 it was suggested in Parliament by A.F. Lindsay that an experimental sugar plantation be established at Darwin at government cost. This was rejected with the riposte that, 'it was now time the owners of land put their hands in their pockets to push the work ahead'.

In the context of the earlier debacle on the Adelaide River and the investors’ nightmare of the 'mining boom' that followed, the comment was more noteworthy for its rhetoric than its logic. There were some obvious problems for the 'owners' of land who would have to overcome the vagaries of the market, climate and problematic logistics. These were all, of course, exacerbated by the known difficulties of labour, both skilled and unskilled, and also by the perhaps lesser known fact of there not being any proper form of land tenure that could effectively overcome the 'normal' uncertainties to long-term investment.

However there is not much doubt that one of the principal reasons, other than to obtain a suitable 'temporary' workforce at reasonable cost, for encouraging plantation agriculture was the self-evident need to find a suitable vehicle or nucleus for the rapid development of much-needed infrastructure.
The colony of South Australia had neither the capital, nor expertise and manpower necessary to effect the issues. The reasons for the failure of the South Australian administration are, according to Bauer, to be found in its own ineptitude. He believes that they had shown, 'abysmal ignorance of the physical nature of the country; political expediency; and the nature of the men making the settlement ... at no time did South Australia provide the Territory with anything approaching leadership'. As with many of Bauer's conclusions this is perhaps an oversimplification but there is certainly an element of truth there somewhere.

According to Bauer, Territory land tenure systems had been nearly as persistently misguided as had appraisal of soil capabilities, not only had the South Australian Government first attempted to plan for small 160 acre blocks but these were surveyed as rectangular blocks with no attention to geographical features. As luck would have it the delay in surveying the country generally had prevented much of this being taken up by those who could least afford to lose, but it had not prevented absentee investors from speculating in blocks in close proximity to Port Darwin and later in other 'town blocks'.

The fingers of the speculators were more often than not burnt but the presence of these absentee owners ruled out any logically progressive development. They effectively prevented not only new settlers amalgamating small acreages to create more viable holdings, but also ensured that very few of the residents in Darwin were able to purchase their own house blocks in the town itself.

The net result of the first underwrote the failure of the initial attempts at agricultural settlement and the result of the second was to ensure that the price of town land was kept artificially high for many years to come. The hopeful newcomer or the more chastened long time resident thus met with prohibitive additional costs over and above what was already an innately extremely high cost of living.

Something had to be done for by now the fear of imminent fiscal disaster must have seemed very real to the politicians in far off South Australia. Even before the Finniss debacle it was assumed that tropical agriculture would develop in the Northern Territory just as it had evolved in British India and the East and West Indies.
Reports from Port Essington settlement had envisaged a new Singapore, an entrepot of trade backed by a large fertile hinterland and supporting a large population.

These illusions it was true had been refuted from time to time, but they were also widely quoted by others who said both land and climate were eminently suited to tropical agriculture. Finniss had established himself at the highly inappropriate mouth of the Adelaide River while the more practical Goyder had chosen Port Darwin as a base. Both furnished the administration with extremely glowing reports. By the 1870s time should have tempered these early expectations. But it had not and gradually a new hope of salvation, emanating from that first construct, of a rich agricultural north took hold.

Various Proposals Considered

As the idea of plantation agriculture for the Territory gradually unfolded, various new schemes were broached in order to develop and augment the population.

There was an organization calling itself the Immigrant and Colonists Aid Corporation Ltd., represented by a Colonel W. Fielding who described it as having been formed to make commercially profitable settlements in British Colonies. He proposed in 1871 that in return for a grant of 1.5 million acres in fee simple he would undertake to settle the area with suitable colonists. He was turned down but, quite undismayed, he then put forward the plan to take over the whole Territory at a price calculated on the total expenditure by the South Australian Government to date. It was no doubt dismissed with appropriate disdain. 4

The Government had suggestions of its own. In 1874 the missionary, L. Skersfield, was paid to come to Adelaide to discuss the possibility of moving ‘hard working intelligent folk’ from his mission in India. Nothing came of that either. 5

There was a Bishop Bugnion who in 1876 proposed settling 40 000 Mennonites, farmers and skilled tradesmen, in the Territory. These were to come variously from the United States, Russia, Mauritius and India. At first the Government was in favour of this. Bugnion is said to have declared the area suitable after a visit to Palmerston.
He was paid by the Government to undertake a round the world recruiting trip and, in point of fact, actually had a shipload ready in the United States to leave when the Government backed down.  

No doubt many schemes were discussed over the port and brandy. Mrs Daly recollects that there was even one to attract Japanese farmers, but that too was abandoned probably, she felt, because they were home-loving and unenterprising in nature. But Bauer is of the opinion that if it had not been for political upheavals within Japan in 1877 negotiations with the Japanese government, begun in 1876, might well have succeeded and the first Japanese might have soon showed up as emigrant farmer settlers.

Mrs Daly in her genteel way also informs us that another of the many schemes explored at the time was:

an offer made to the Government by some English Capitalists to develop the country by way of making a railway, opening plantations, and thoroughly testing the gold bearing district with suitable and efficient machinery. The proposed scheme was as follows. The Capital of the Company was to be £100,000 or double that amount if suitable inducement was offered. A deposit of £10,000 was to be made at the Agent-General’s office in London, which was to be returned to the company when they had spent £200,000 upon the development of the Territory. The company proposed that square mile blocks on alternate sides of the railway should be given them as far as Pine Creek, also fifty acres of land at Palmerston, for station and building purposes, as well as fifteen square miles near the reefs, and 200 square miles for plantations; including miners right over the entire area of land allotted to them. This was a very ambitious scheme, and for some reason not mentioned by the Government at the time, and it, like many another idea for developing South Australia’s ‘white elephant’ has passed into oblivion.

It is probably worth noting on this that the ‘Railway Scheme’ was similar to what was already happening in the United States. The difference was not one of scale but of the potential of the land for settlement that paralleled the track, and this is probably why the first rail route suggested for survey between Darwin and Pine Creek wound its way over the Adelaide and Mary River flood plains rather than following a more practicable route that was laid eventually.
Whether the Government’s actions were inept or not, or whether they were characterised by an ambiance of quiet desperation, the belief in the easy prospect of early development of tropical agriculture remained high. Instructions had been given that the Government Resident was to initiate experiments on the production of tropical produce and that government gardens were to be set up for the purpose. In 1871 Mrs Daly noted that, ‘the experimental gardens are now under the charge of an experienced head, and sugar canes, indigo, cotton, tapioca and rice flourish out on the banks of Fannie Bay’.  

As with everything else all the reports emanating from the experimental garden were sanguine in the extreme and, though there can be many reasons for this, the effect of these overly optimistic reports was certainly not in any way geared to moderate expectation or even to generate caution. The Roper River was soon surveyed and opened up for settlement but there were again no settlers, only applications for land by speculators. By 1872 the Government was now certain that its small freeholder scheme would never get off the ground.

*The Rationale for Sugar Plantations*

To the embattled politicians of South Australia, once they had bitten the bullet, the answer must have seemed obvious. Earlier schemes had demonstrated, as far as they were concerned, that white men were not suited to physical labour in the tropics. The idea of sturdy yeomen farmers on 160 acre blocks in the north simply required some adjustment. To the men entrusted with the government of South Australia’s Northern Territory it surely required only a new way of looking at things. What was needed were capitalists who would create vast plantations of rice, cotton, coffee and above all of sugar cane to be cultivated by thousands of, ‘dark faces and woolly heads... (under European supervision ) ... very happy with as much beef and rice as they can eat, accommodation and 2 suits of clothes a year’.  

Throughout the latter part of the eighteenth century and most of the nineteenth the sugar industry had been a prize over which wars had been fought. It had procured vast wealth for those who first won and then maintained control of its cultivation, manufacture and marketing.
It has been said that to Royal Naval strategists at the time of the American War of Independence the security of the Caribbean sugar plantations from the French fleet was more important than the immediate, close defence at sea of the beleaguered British Army under General Cornwallis at Yorktown. As a result the British remained unsupported and were forced to surrender to the American rebels and their French allies. Nevertheless the Navy remained advantageously positioned to safeguard the plantations and nullify the challenge posed soon after Yorktown to their safety by the French fleet which was accordingly destroyed in detail at the Battle of the Saints by Admiral Rodney.

The sugar industry had been controlled and developed by British interests, and particularly Scottish monopoly through their own mercantile spirit under the protection and adumbration afforded for a very long time by the invincible Royal Navy's mastery of the seas.

At first glance from the latter end of the 20th century it may be difficult to see why any administration could place its hopes of increasing its population on such an exotic vision. However, from the standpoint of those faced with the problem one hundred years ago it was neither exotic nor extraordinary. They had only to look at what was happening in Queensland to see the potential.

By the early 1860s representatives of long established Scottish interests had set up sugar plantations and sugar manufacturing which had had a catalytic effect on the rapid settlement and viability of Queensland. The Sugar Industry today still plays a major part in Australian primary production. However its rapid expansion and evident prosperity were legendary in the 1870s and today it is fully recognised that Mackay and Cairns owed much of their prosperity to sugar cane and that Ingham, Geraldton/Innisfail and Ayr, as well as other towns, were founded almost solely as service centres and ports to the industry.10

We need look no further than a report furnished by the Minister, the Hon J. Parsons, on his visit to the Mackay Sugar District to discover the respect almost amounting to awe in which the Queensland sugar industry was held.
Parsons recounts that he visited over seven plantations varying in area from some 600 acres to around 4 000 acres with the average being about 2 000 acres. He goes into great detail describing everything from the labour force, their quarters and attitudes, to the names of the individual manufacturers of sugar mills supplied by various Glasgow firms.

One can sense his excitement as he describes yields of 1 400 tons to 2 000 tons to the acre at £23 - £33 per ton and machinery, steam engines and railways installed on plantations. The oldest plantation in the district, only established for twelve years, Spiller's Plantation, comprised 2 355 acres and employed fifty-seven Europeans, 245 Kanakas, 120 horses and bullock teams as well.

Kanakas 'looked plump and happy' and were indentured for three years at six pounds per annum and free return passage. More often than not they re-engaged for a further three years.

An estate of 1 100 acres, not long established, had not all of its acreage under cultivation yet crushed 400 tons of sugar per annum. An estate of 4 245 acres, recently purchased by Mackinnon of Melbourne for £95 000, employed 200 Kanakas, sixty Europeans, 130 horses and several large bullock teams, complete with a mill capable of producing 1 500 tons annually, grossed £20 000 in its first year.

He was advised that costs of clearing 'dense scrub or jungle' were £3 10s per acre, this work being done by Europeans. Total cost on 2 500 acres, for clearing and cultivating up to time of crushing, exclusive of the costs of the mill and purchase price for the land, was estimated at £60 000 and that 'before a single penny of return'.

As an indication of the price of land a small plantation of 640 acres had recently changed hands at £10 400 or fifteen pounds per acre. A mill capable of crushing 2 000 tons sugar per annum and supplied by Mirles and Watson of Glasgow would cost between £25 000 and £30 000.
These were huge sums. They prompted Parsons in summarising to comment that:

this ... indicates the confidence which capitalists must have in the Sugar Industry. It also clearly indicates that if the cultivation of sugar is to be successfully carried on in the Northern Territory, it will be absolutely necessary to win the confidence of capitalists, as well as to make provision for the introduction of coolie labour. 11

The logistical requirements of plantations were obviously very large. One of the smaller Territory plantations, Poett’s and Mackinnon’s, was 3 500 acres. It was at Rum Jungle and in 1882 employed six Chinese. In that year one of the partners was sent to Ceylon to arrange for the supply of Tamil labourers. Poett and Mackinnon envisaged that within three years they would require a total work force of 500 men. 12

Whether the information came from Mauritius, the Dutch East Indies or Queensland the message regarding the desirability of sugar growing was the same. Sowden writing later in 1882 at the height of the ‘boom’ is able to portray graphically this expectation. He quotes from a letter from a sugar planter in Java which inter alia provided the information that, ‘the result of the whole operation (annual production from sugar plantations in Java) was a net surplus of some £600,000 for the (Dutch) treasury’.

He then goes on to reproduce information from the same source that the planter had produced around 2 400 tons of good sugar from 700 acres. He sums up the potentials as follows:

Striking a safe average, this is three tons per acre. Allowing the same conditions in the Northern Territory, but a ton less to the yield, and valuing sugar at 20 pounds, and leaving out of the question treacle and rum, and the many articles of which it forms the base, a 5,000 acre plantation will give its owner 300,000 pounds a year to pay expenses and to fill the profit treasury (sic) with. And surely a two-ton average is low enough to build the calculation on? A 5,000 acre farm, with wheat at five shillings a bushel and ten bushels to the acre - a high average in south Australia at least gives less than £13,000. Now let the reader cogitate. 13
So although plantation agriculture as a catalyst for development has often been seen as just another impractical notion of the South Australian Government that should have been dismissed out of hand, given the vast employment requirements of tropical plantations of the period and Government hope that this would lead to rapid development of both population and infrastructure, it was not at all far fetched. The potential return to Government by way of taxes from a prosperous sugar industry was another motive for supporting sugar production.

*Legislation enacted for plantation establishment*

It was therefore with some real hope of success that the Government changed its land regulation from one shaped for the small man to large company plantation agriculture. In 1872 this was first done and revised again in 1875 to permit the holding of large areas of agricultural land specifically to encourage the development of plantations.¹⁴

A bonus for the production of sugar was proposed in Parliament in 1873 but it was not accepted. However in 1874 a bonus of £1 000 was on offer. Consequential upon this the former Government Resident was sent to Singapore to procure 200 coolies for a term of two years and brought back with him 196. In 1875 a £5 000 bonus was offered to any company that first produced 500 tons of sugar grown and manufactured in the Territory.¹⁵

The main provisions of the revised regulations were that any one individual could apply for 1 280 acres and also that they might be able to request a special survey for 10 000 acre blocks. Land was at first priced expensively at twenty shillings per acre. Subsequently it was dropped to seven shillings and sixpence and purchase terms made easier. Credit on the purchase was allowed for an indefinite term with rental charged at sixpence per acre by way of interest until final payment. Title would be by way of Fee Simple in five years if half the total area was under cultivation at that time. The land could be transferred at any time so that it might have a marketable value from the beginning.¹⁶
Reference


2 Bauer, F.H., Historical Geography of White Settlement in part of the Northern Australia, Pt 2 - the Katherine Darwin Region. CSIRO, Division of Land Research and Regional Survey Report No 64. CSIRO, Canberra. 1964.

3 Bauer, pp 96-97.

4 Bauer, quoting from SAPP 91/1871.

5 Bauer, quoting from SAPP, 73/1875.

6 Bauer, quoting from VPHASA, 1877. and SAPP 29, 160/1876.

7 Daly, Mrs Dominic D., Digging, Squatting, and Pioneer Life in the Northern Territory of South Australia. Sampson Low, London, 1887.

8 Mrs Daly, p. 123.


11 NTTG 14/4/1883.

12 W.J. Sowden, The Northern Territory as it is, W.K. Thomas & Co., Adelaide, 1882, p.79.

13 Sowden, pp 94-96.

14 Donovan, p.120.

15 Northern Territory Resident, Correspondence - received, hereafter NTRS 790, thus, NTRS 790: A-900/1875.

The beginnings of the plantation era - 1872 to 1878
General outline, early promotion and first negotiations

The South Australian Government promoted plantation agriculture as a means to establish a basic infrastructure in the north and to enable further economic development. Successive governments were not to succeed with either objective. There are many reasons given for their failure.

The building of the telegraph line was one government activity that stimulated development. Gold was discovered, pastoral country taken up and the splendid hope for plantations was heralded with great fanfare. Over some fifteen long years this hope was assiduously promoted. It was to blossom fitfully for a few short years and in the end only produce disappointment.

The planning, preparation and establishment took almost twenty years to unfold and the failure to understand the underlying reasons of its quietus set the pattern for all subsequent settlement and development, or its lack, in the 'Top End'.

The complete story itself has never been drawn together in a coherent fashion. The inquiry in 1895 certainly does not and many writers, both contemporary and modern, have only touched upon its disparate elements. It is not surprising that the record appears confusing and contradictory when one considers that it covers a period during which some nineteen separate government administrations performed their gyrations, firstly in promoting the idea and then in extricating themselves with whatever dignity they could from its devastating failure.

The saga, from the first real promotion of the plantation idea through euphoric years of seeming success to final disappointment and subsequent inquiry, covered two decades and involved some seventeen separate governments and as many as twenty-nine Ministers in charge. ¹
Whether particular projects were engaged solely in sugar production or attempted to diversify into other products all had failed by the end of the 1880s. For some private individuals honestly immersed in this process it proved a chastening experience full of frustration and disappointment. For others, less fortunate, it ended in ultimate tragedy. Even amongst the inevitable fraudsters and speculators there were few who would benefit.

Contemporary and present-day literature gives every possible reason for the failures - poor soil, adverse weather conditions, lack of expertise, Aboriginal unrest, lack of capital and poor management. There are examples of all of these but the reasons for the disaster to South Australia's dream are more complex. In hindsight one could be easily persuaded that the question should be not so much why they failed but how anything at all was achieved.

An Outline of Events

The history of plantation agriculture in the late 19th century falls naturally into three phases. The first was from 1870 to 1879 when the Government promoted its scheme all over the world. It must have been a time of growing anxiety for successive administrations as they sought repeatedly to publicise and hone the plan in order to attract potential planters. Few exhibited any real enthusiasm.

The second phase between 1880 and 1884 started with high hopes with William Owston's Palmerston Plantation Company's expressions of interest. It then moved with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy from the point when investment seemed to pour in from other companies which followed in Owston's wake, only to end in the devastating and almost simultaneous announcement of abandonment of plantations by Owston and one other of the major planters.

The final phase began almost immediately and slowly ground on to its last dying whimper in 1889 and final burial in the Commission of Inquiry of 1895.

There were two main players, William Owston and Benjamin Delissa, polar opposites of one another, whose activities are pivotal. Both were key, yet controversial, figures in the short-lived 'boom'.
Owston, who paved the way and could well have succeeded, comes across as honest, forthright and capable. He was pilloried as an incompetent at the time. Delissa, on the other hand, whose skills in the art of 'Public Relations' were superb but whose honesty and ability were more debatable was lauded and portrayed as the unfortunate victim of circumstances - plus ca change.

At its peak the total area ostensibly taken up for sugar production was some 100,000 acres. Figures on total production are few and hard to come by and are by any standards negligible, but in this respect we are again indebted to Mrs Dominic Daly for finding the right note. Her journal for 1883 at the peak of the 'boom' records that, 'among the list of exports for 1883 the first shipment of sugar figures - 4 cwt but I do not know from which plantation it was sent'.

The Government's first steps 1872 - 1878

It was to prove a long gestation. Following the 1872 Act, which had offered a bonus of £1,000 for the first successful production of sugar in the Territory, there had only been four applications for land and none of them seemed to have been followed up. It is therefore not surprising that the offer was increased appreciably in 1875 to £5,000 and further refined so that this would be awarded on the first 500 tons produced and manufactured.

But despite the many direct attempts made to attract planters from other plantation areas such as Mauritius, India or closer to home in Queensland, there were no real offers. Nevertheless, there were quite a few proposals for tobacco, rice and sugar plantations made by men seeking government financial backing for their ventures. Bauer opines that if they were sufficiently well capitalised they were not inclined to come and those who might have had the expertise but no money would only come if the Government could be persuaded to finance them, and this, of course, it was not in the least inclined to do.

In 1876 there is a brief mention of an application by a P.M Sers for the bonus for the cultivation of sugar, which was forwarded from Port Darwin to Adelaide, together with the applicant's previous application for citizenship and enclosing ten shillings and sixpence.
Apart from this there does not appear to have been much real interest generated by the increased bonus.

According to Donovan, during the time when Scott was Government Resident in Darwin, there were only four tentative applications made between November 1873 and January 1875. One can only speculate whether this was because of the complexity of the legal implications or for other reasons, but it was not until 1878 that any firm interest was shown by a prospective planter, and even then that was to prove to be conditional.5

The first negotiations to establish a plantation in the north begin

The lack of interest shown must have been rather dismaying to the Government. It is therefore not surprising that they reacted favourably to the first real, though perhaps tentative inquiry from Owston, which was received by the Minister for Education and for the Northern Territory, R Rees, in Adelaide in 1878.

It appears very probable that Owston, who had earlier invested in Territory ventures was now quite wary of any further involvement in anything to do with the South Australian Government’s administration of the Territory. All his subsequent actions tend to support the view that he distrusted government integrity. Nevertheless he had seemingly been approached by Lavington Glyde who had been the first Minister for the Territory after annexation and with whom his relationship was something more than a nodding acquaintance.

His letter, which contains a few gaps where words are indecipherable, reads as follows:

To the Honble the Minister of Education, 83 Toorak Road, 19 Dec 1878
Adelaide Melbourne.

Sir,
I had the honour to receive your letter of the 30 Octr past and the valuable information you so kindly enclosed to me with reference to your land regulations bearing on Sugar Cultivation came safely to hand for which I beg to return you my best thanks.
I had waited your further reply to my respects to you of the 8 Octr and (?) notice your Government have offered to contribute £200 towards the expenses of a person proceeding to the Territory to inspect and select Land for Sugar Cultivation, I would be glad to know of this sum would still be given.

With regard to the Bonus of £5000 voted by your Government, it would be desirable to know in case if any after Competitor, induced by advantages arising from this undertaking, should also claim to a priority in production of (?) quantity of sugar, that they being the first enterprise of the kind in the Colony, should hold a priority of Claim of such Bonus.

In selecting land for Cane growing the Cultivation & Fencing Clause needs some liberal consideration to meet any expense (?) that might arise in clearing the ground, introduction of cane suitable to the Colony, Concentrating the requisite labour etc.

I may mention I am associated with another party in these intentions and it is arranged if satisfactory encouragement be conceded by your Government in time that I shall proceed to part described by the steamer leaving here about the 4 Feby, to inspect and select suitable land for Cane cultivation with the intention of at once preparing the ground etc and during the ensuing season putting under Crop as large an area of land as practicable.

I have the honour to remain,

   Sir, most respectfully

       W. Owston.

After this Owston does not seem to have wasted much time. We next hear of him writing to the Minister actually from Adelaide itself on the 9th of January 1879, his temporary address being given as Messrs Morgan, Connor and Glyde. His letter was intended to 'define most concisely my wishes and intentions'.

Matters have obviously been discussed prior to the written submission of his formal proposals and the letter is very much to the point. Whilst retaining, as far as possible, his own words to present an accurate tenor, I have enumerated its key elements, as follows:

(i) He was careful to make clear that the risks involved in this pioneer enterprise in a new country were high and that he and his partners would require all the help they could get from government towards the accomplishment of any desired success.

(ii) With this proviso and contingent upon it he and his partners were prepared to invest some £30 000 more or less and to commence operations.
(iii) There was to be a Grant of Land of 20,000 acres in one or two blocks, selected by
him which would be given in Fee Simple, subject to stipulations to be arranged, say
when three or five hundred acres of crop had been put under cultivation.

(iv) That the conveyancing of Fee Simple title, should in no way interfere with the right
to compete for the bonus offered by the Government for the production of a specified
quantity of sugar and this undertaking should rank with a prior claim in any such
competition.

(v) A sum of £200 was to be given towards the expenses of proceeding to the Territory
inspecting country and making selection.

(vi) The assistance of Territory surveyors was to be given in making the selection and
use of whatever traveling conveniences at his command.

(vii) Owston was to be furnished with a map of the most recent surveys or any similar
useful information in possession of the Government.

(viii) The Resident at the Territory was to be instructed to offer any reasonable
assistance and necessary information.

(ix) As he (Owston) proposed in the light of discussions to proceed at once to the
Territory to select suitable land, it was desirable that an immediate understanding be
reached, in order that his intentions be carried out.

The government cover note to this document clearly shows its rapid passage through
channels. Cabinet granted all his requests and determined that they would ‘favourably
recommend Parliament to pass a Bill authorising the grant of land upon consideration of
cultivation to be agreed upon’. 7

Having completed the preliminaries Owston now hastened back to Melbourne to
prepare for his trip to the north. On 23 January 1879, only three weeks later, cognisant
of the season’s limitations in the Top End of the Territory, he was now anxious to get
going to take every advantage of the coming dry season.
Apparently, worried lest he literally miss the boat by being unable to take passage on the steamer *General Pel*, because the required documents promised by the Government had not yet arrived, he telegraphed the Minister requesting whether they would arrive in time. The Minister telegraphed back the affirmative to a relieved Owston with the information that the relevant 'Official Reply' to his proposals would leave Adelaide for Melbourne on the following Saturday's steamer.8

*Owston's preliminary search for a site*

Evidently the relevant documents were received, for Owston wrote once more whilst enroute to Port Darwin from Sydney Harbour on 13 February 1879 confirming their receipt and taking the opportunity to request the Minister to telegraph the Government Resident of his imminent arrival and of his requirements, "lest there is any delay in the instructions arriving by mail".9

Some three weeks later the *General Pel* dropped anchor off Stokes Hill and Owston was rowed ashore to at last climb the hill, and no doubt to be greeted to a hero's welcome by the wearied residents of Palmerston (Darwin). The *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* recorded the event with some enthusiasm writing on 8 March 1879 that, 'a very old friend of ours (Owston) who was twenty five years ago a resident of Adelaide arrived by *General Pel* ... He is looking for suitable land to found a sugar plantation and intends making a thorough survey of the country'.10

His arrival and immediate energetic pursuit of his venture provided a much-needed boost to the jaded outpost by giving visible proof that at last something might be about to happen. Their enthusiasm once more rekindled with his coming it seemed that the Territory was on the verge of prosperity at last.

Almost immediately he was invited, as an honoured guest, to a 'Grand Banquet' attended by anyone who was anybody in the town, to farewell the Queenslander Railway surveyors Messrs Favenc and Briggs. The Government Resident, E. W. Price, formally introduced him to the gathering as representing a large Melbourne company and proposed an enthusiastic toast to Owston, 'who had arrived by steamer from Melbourne to look for suitable land for a sugar plantation ... he had considerable experience in the growth of sugar'.
Owston gave a short, intelligent and forthright speech in reply, and said that while he commended everyone for all their hopes for the Territory he reminded them that citizens should not look to Government alone to get things going: 'something more of enterprise is demanded from you in your capacity as colonists than has yet been attempted'. As for himself, he was here to look for suitable land to establish sugar cultivation on a scale of 'some magnitude' and if he found sufficient land to his satisfaction he was then prepared at once to begin operations. He reminded his listeners that he was not here yet as representative of a Melbourne Company, but should for the present be looked on merely as a friend of the Territory. However, he said, 'what we undertake will be carried through'. He then went on to describe himself as being one of the first to become interested in the Territory being the sixty-third on the list of applications for the first settlement at Escape Cliffs. He referred to some other unnamed investments in the Territory and to his long 'colonial career' and said that he hoped to settle in the Territory.11

He was reported on 17 May 1879 as leaving for the Adelaide River with surveyors and as having already seen some splendid country on the Daly River. The newspaper commended him for his foresight in taking care and time to make a proper selection and praised the Government for helping him and covering the expenses of survey. It hoped that others would be attracted to do likewise. In the same issue the editor noted that the Government was starting 'an experimental plantation' for the testing of all kinds of tropical production.12

The feeling was that the Territory was on the eve of something big. On 21 June 1879 there is an account of Owston's survey of land on the Adelaide River on the cutter Larakeya which concludes with the comment that, 'the Government authorities seem to have used their best endeavours to give Mr Owston every facility to assist him in the object he has in view'.13

On 4 August 1879, preliminary investigation over for the moment, Owston formally informed E. W. Price, the Government Resident, by letter that he now intended returning to Adelaide to apply to the South Australian Government, 'for the conditional purchase of 20,000 twenty thousand acres of land situated on the Adelaide River in this Province for cultivation of sugar and other products in terms of arrangements already understood by the Government'.


Within six days of this he left Port Darwin on the ss Ocean and on the 4 September 1879 we find him back in Melbourne formally expressing his thanks to the Minister and suggesting the terms under which he was prepared to act further in the matter. Having had time to fully consider his options on the voyage home, he now adds the rider to his application for 'conditional purchase' that he may reconsider altering his application for land on the Adelaide River to land on the Daly.

It had been a busy time for him since first becoming involved almost twelve months before. But it was not over yet, for there were to be many frustrating weeks ahead which will be examined in detail later. However for the present all seemed to be going well.14
References


3. F.H. Bauer, *Historical Geography of White Settlement in part of the Northern Australia, Pt 2 - the Katherine Darwin Region*. CSIRO, Division of Land Research and Regional Survey Report No 64. CSIRO, Canberra, 1964, quoting South Australian Parliamentary Papers, A-1374; A-900/1875.


   P.F. Donovan, p. 120.

6. Minister for the Northern Territory, *Correspondence - received*, in South Australian Archives, hereinafter GRS 1, thus GRS 1: 6/1879.


8. (GRS 1: 71/1879.

9. GRS 1: 80/1879.


12. NTTG, 17/5/79

13. NTTG, 17/5/79 and 21/6/79


   GRS 1: 435/1879.
The development of the idea - 1878 to 1880
Plans made and seeds sown

Owston's moves were evidently a catalyst to government. Whilst it had earlier determined that it would not or could not establish a suggested experimental sugar plantation, nor help finance any private enterprise, it now went so far as to initiate the Government Experimental Gardens to help promote the scheme by experimenting with a range of tropical crops and in the light of recent developments to trial a wide range of sugar cane varieties.

In a letter of 31 January 1879 the Minister requested that 30 acres be selected, fenced and surveyed for the purpose, on the most favourable position considered suitable by Dr Schonburg, the Director of the Botanic Gardens in Adelaide, who had reported on soil samples forwarded by the Government Resident.

The Minister, however, then went on to advise that before he could submit the 'large sum' of £1 800 pounds proposed as annual expenditure on the project for consideration by his colleagues with next year's Estimates, he required plans of the suggested buildings and a report on the method proposed for securing the 30 coolie labourers required. ¹

The news of the proposed Government Garden obviously became public with Owston's arrival for on 17 May 1879 the local paper announced, with perhaps understandable exaggeration but unwitting irony, that the Government was starting 'an experimental plantation' for testing all kinds of tropical production. ²

The first garden in Doctor's Gully had grown some sugar successfully but apart from supplying government officers with fresh vegetables had not contributed much to the scheme of things.
In 1872 Maurice Holtze, who had studied botany and horticulture at Hanover in Germany and at the Russian Imperial Gardens at St Petersburg,\textsuperscript{3} was appointed to the Palmerston Botanic Gardens, which under the supervision of W. Sergison were subsequently moved, largely on Holtze's prompting to the Resident in November 1878, from Doctor's Gully to a 30 acre site at Fannie Bay.\textsuperscript{4}

Much was made throughout the period of the successful cultivation of coffee, sugar cane, tobacco, arrowroot, rice, indigo 'spreading like a weed' and many other crops all on poor soil, with no irrigation and no fertilizer. No doubt one must take account of the administration's desire to impress, but the glowing reports published regularly by the Government Residents and others must, perhaps, be taken with some caution. A sample of Indigo in which much hope was placed had been sent to London for analysis in 1876. The report from Reckitt's on the sample reads as follows:

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We beg to acknowledge the receipt of your favour of the 12 inst. with enclosures of what purports to be Indigo from Australia. Our opinion is that it is extremely doubtful whether it is Indigo. It certainly does not exhibit any of the properties of Indigo and would be valueless on this market.\textsuperscript{5}
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As regards the quality of the sugar cane soon to be grown at the Government Gardens, despite all the fanfare and publicity with which it was surrounded, those who saw it were often none too impressed when they compared it with other crops, even with those inferior ones on the Cox Peninsula.

Sawden tells how when the Government Gardens provided ten tons of cane to the Delissa Mill for demonstration purposes on Minister Parson's visit in 1882 it had produced only a little bag of sugar and when crushed rendered insufficient juice to cover the coils of the pans. Parsons, the politician, on the other hand had publicly pronounced himself as being satisfied with the demonstration.\textsuperscript{6}

Much was made at the time of the experimental gardens' ability to flourish for years without fertilizer. In practice this would be extremely doubtful. In any case, it should be remembered that the gardens employed some 30 Chinese as labourers who had traditional methods of carefully incorporating right soil in their cultivations.
In this regard there is an interesting snippet in the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*. It reports with some indignation of the distaste, disapproval, not to mention discomfort of Port Darwin residents when the wind blows in the wrong quarter as the Chinese daily carried their night soil in 'open tubs and buckets' through the early morning street. This should be stopped says the paper solemnly. As Sowden would say: 'Let the reader cogitate'.

Nonetheless the Gardens fulfilled their primary function during those years and overall were quite impressive. Many different crops were successfully trialed there for the first time in the Northern Territory and demonstrated some of the possibilities of cultivation on a larger scale. Government and shipping records show just how much plant material, especially sugar cane, was imported from different sources for trial and observation by the Gardens over a prolonged period.

Owston's further negotiations and discrete opposition

Back at his house in Melbourne Owston sat down with a flourish - evident to the reader in his handwriting - to inform the Minister of his intention to commence final negotiations. The text of his letter is worth quoting in full:

To Honbl The Minister of Education,

Ilonga,
Wellington Street.
St Kilda,
Victoria.

4 Sept 1879

Sir,

I have the honor to inform you I have returned from the Northern Territory after an absence of about seven months, five of which I resided there inspecting the River & Coast Lands of that Province for Country suitable for sugar cane and other cultivation and enclosed herewith I beg reference to Copy a letter I addressed the Resident E.W. Price Esq. of Palmerston under date the 2nd Ultimo & in furtherance of any intention expressed therein I have now the honor and beg the favor to be allowed a Conditional Grant of 20,000 twenty thousand Acres of Land in one or more blocks situated on the Adelaide River in the Territory with the reservation to myself of the option of making this selection on the Daly River also within the Territory for the Cultivation of Sugar and other Products.
The boundaries of such selection to be fixed & the survey made by your survey department free of cost to me & the fee simple of the land to be handed over on the completion of this the arranged stipulations which I beg to suggest may consist of say 500 five hundred acres of cane or other products being put under crop or the manufacture of 500 five hundred tons of sugar or the growth of other products of equal value - operations to be commenced within twelve months and the stipulations to be completed within five years from date of conditional grant -

I would also further beg the favor that conditional grant from your Government be made out in my name and that of John Spence and David Spence who are associating with me in this enterprise.

I have further the honor to enclose a Letter of Certificate from the Resident of the Territory & Memo of account for agreed portion of my expenses amounting to 200 pounds & I will esteem the favor of your enclosing me a draft for this amount.

I beg to be allowed to express my high appreciation of the energy and kindness shown by the resident and chief surveyor in promotion of the object of my visit to the Territory trusting that the matter be now promptly dealt with so that advantage may be taken of the present dry season.

I have the honor to remain,

Sir,

Your most obedient servant

W.Owston

However, the Minister in reply on 19 September 1879, said that before laying the application before Cabinet, it would be necessary for Owston to provide him with full information of what he proposes to do - 'names of those interested, Capital to be expended on machinery - planting, labour etc and at as early a date as possible'.

This was a strange reply to give to someone who had been in close discussion on these very points for at least a year and perhaps longer.

Owston must have thought so and immediately put pen to paper. His letter, though couched in the usual respectful terms, barely conceals his frustration and he 'begs to reiterate more concisely what I have already stated in my previous communications'.

The names of the partners interested are John Spence, David Spence and himself at the moment but they reserve the right to include others in the venture. They proposed to cultivate and manufacture sugar as well as to grow other products. The indicative expenditure on labour and machinery would be somewhere around £20 000. They would not commit themselves to anything more specific because they were proposing to establish a plantation in an area where not only had it never been done before, but no cultivation of any kind had ever been attempted. In addition to that everything would have to be imported and there could be no guarantee of success.
Having made that clear he then assures the Minister that, ‘every sound and well
directed effort will be brought to bear and will not be limited by any necessary outlay’.
As for his earlier stipulations as to the conditional Grant of Land these were all
reasonable and he would remind the Government that, ‘whilst the Territory will benefit
from the partners judgment, experience and every shilling expended, (they) neither ask
or claim anything whatever from your Government until the agreed stipulations are
honorably accomplished’.11

The Minister received Owston’s letter on 29 September 1879 and on 4 October 1879
forwarded it to the Commissioner for Crown Lands requesting his opinion on the
applications and also, perhaps seeking support for Owston, asked for a report on it from
the Surveyor General who knew the country and whose ’anxiety to see a permanent
settlement ... entitles him to an opinion’.12

*The Surveyor General expresses opposition*

Goyder, the Surveyor General, reported two days later that the bonus offered by the
Government on 8 February 1876 ‘appears to me to be exceedingly liberal’ as also was,
in his opinion, Owston’s application for 20 000 acres on either the Adelaide or Daly
Rivers. He ‘strongly agreed’ that the Government should obtain ‘more definite
identification of the site to be adopted’. He recommended that Owston should identify
the exact site and that it should be subject to ‘full inspection and report by a
Government Officer... ( prior to) ... the issue of any grant’. This latter point was sound
advice and would, if carried out, have obviated many later problems.13

Crown Lands agreed with the Surveyor General’s report and the Minister, King, wrote
Owston once more on 17 October 1879 for further particulars and enclosed with the
request a copy of the Surveyor General’s report. He suggested also that it might be
advisable for Owston to appoint someone in Adelaide to represent him as this would
greatly facilitate matters.

It is not known whether this last was done but one suspects that there was perhaps
some sort of arrangement made to facilitate discussion. It is known that Owston came
to Adelaide in October and it is probable that he was able to brief Minister King at that
time.14
The Surveyor General advises that Owston's selection be rectangular

On 20 October 1879 a recommendation to authorise an agreement with the Spences and Owston in trust for the Palmerston Plantation Company was now forwarded by the Minister to the Secretary for Cabinet. The draft of this agreement included everything suggested by Owston in his letter of 4 September 1879 with one small, but important, variation - this, on the advice of the Surveyor General, was that the shape of the two blocks taken up on either the Adelaide or Daly Rivers be rectangular with the length not to be greater than twice the width. This addition, which defined the shape of the land, would have the effect of severely limiting the scope of Owston's selection and would cause trouble later.

Cabinet immediately agreed and the Attorney General was instructed on 30 October 1879 to draw up a suitable agreement. The Attorney General now raised various objections, the gist of which was that to have an agreement in this form would require a special Act of Parliament. The Minister, quite obviously aroused by continuing delay, sent off the following memo to the Hon. the Attorney General on 7 November 1879:

I am perfectly aware and so is Mr Owston that legislation is necessary before the issue of the 'provisional grant' of the land asked for can be made. All the requirement now is a draft of an agreement based (legally) upon the memorandum agreed to between Mr Owston and myself and which so far has been approved by cabinet. Upon reading this memo, it will be seen that the whole affair rests upon Parliamentary approval - or in other words the passing of an act authorizing the granting of this 20,000 acres without payment of any money. By the Act of 1872. (?) we have power to grant 1280 acres of land for plantation purposes upon payment of 6 pence per acre for five years - upon compliance with certain conditions the grant of fee simple is open to issue. I should be glad if the Hon the Attorney General will have the draft agreement prepared for approval of Cabinet as per minute of 28/10/79 upon the terms of the memorandum of the same date.15

The Surveyor General recommends further 'slight modification'

On receipt of this memo the Attorney General accordingly sent the Draft Agreement off to the Crown Solicitor who returned it on 25 November 1879 with the suggestion that Mr Spence, with approval of the Minister, receive a copy for 'his perusal'.
Whether Spence ever received a copy we do not know but on 5 December 1879 the Attorney General did send a copy to the Surveyor General for his opinion.

This was received at the Surveyor General’s Office on 8 December 1879 but was not returned to the Minister until 5 January 1880 with the explanation from Goyder that press of official duties and public holidays had prevented his dealing with this reference earlier. He now had no objections to the agreement but recommended only another 'slight modification' that the breadth of the blocks of land be measured on a river or road and not the length and that a non sequitur clause be inserted to allow Spence and Owston to remove fencing and any plant and equipment from the land should it be resumed by Government.

The 'slight modification' dealing with the shape of the blocks effectively reduced the amount of river frontage which Owston could make application for and imposed further limitations to his selection of suitable land. The crucial effect of the 'rectangular block' clause was a time bomb which ultimately was to write finis to all Owston’s endeavour. On 8 January 1880 it was inserted in the draft agreement with full Cabinet approval and the date for final selection of the land was now extended for a further twelve months.16

Owston rejects the draft agreement and proposes some amendments

While all this was going on Owston obviously found great difficulty in containing his impatience. Following the Minister’s prompting he came to Adelaide in October for further discussions and was promised that the agreement would be posted to him. But on 5 November 1879 he had to again write the Minister informing him that despite that promise he had not received the document.

The Ministerial cover note to this letter shows that it went the rounds, first to the Attorney General on 10 December 1879, thence to the Secretary, the Hon. Commissioner of Crown Lands, on the same day. From there it passed to the Surveyor General and finally returned to the Office of the Minister for the Northern Territory on 5 January 1880.17
No apparent decision had been made. So Owston wrote again on the 8th December 1879:

Will you kindly let me have this (agreement) by an early mail as the unexpected long delay in its receipt is seriously interfering with our arrangements to initiate this enterprise.18

There being no acknowledgment to this he telegraphed finally the Minister on 22 December 1879, without the usual courtesies, exactly as follows: 'Oblige by informing me when document will be forwarded'.19

At last he received the draft copy hot from the printers, not from the Minister, but as he puts it, through 'my friend W.D Glyde' and immediately wrote back on 24 January 1880 to say that he and his partners considered it to be 'satisfactory - subject to some trifling alterations in the Clauses', which he now submitted for consideration.20 The suggested amendments can be summarised as follows:

They disagreed that the selection be fixed by rectangular areas. They required for their purposes only 'good river land capable of high cultivation' which was unlikely to extend as far back from the river as twice the distance of the land on the river bank. They would agree to the blocks being of a rectangular shape only so long as the relevant clause was qualified by the inclusion of the words 'as far as admissible' - the shape of the property could be defined only by the extent of suitable agricultural soils in proximity to the river. They noted that a Mr Gray had been granted land on the upper reaches of the Adelaide River whose boundaries were not rectangular but shaped precisely by the limited extent of good river land.

They also requested that the time from the date of their selection of the land to the completion of the covenants with government be extended to six years from the completion of the survey. Finally they hoped that these alterations 'be considered reasonable' and that the Minister would return the completed agreement at the earliest opportunity.21
An agreement reached

There is quite a degree of correspondence between Owston and the Minister on the subject before an agreement was reached and the Minister sent the amended draft to Melbourne. The suggested amendments were inserted by pen on the draft agreement and dispatched to Melbourne with the Minister’s note written clearly upon it: 'Draft altered as suggested by letter and telegram recd. from W. Owston.'

Owston returned the draft, signed and witnessed by the partners on 3 February 1880, with a covering letter requesting that the final completed agreement be returned to them in time for the steamer Tambora sailing from Sydney as they were most anxious to make use of the coming dry season, which would make a good year's difference to their operations.22

Once more the Minister sent it off to Cabinet for approval on receipt, but it did not return to him until the end of the month. Eventually an irate Owston telegraphed on 24 February 1880 that unless he received the final agreement by the next steamer he 'must abandon enterprise your Territory'.23

Whether this telegraph had any effect is not known but we find Owston once more writing on 10 March 1880 thanking the Minister for the receipt of the completed document, which he retained. He returned a duplicate as the Minister requested. In signing off Owston also took the opportunity to request a chart of the Daly River and reminded the Minister of his promise that the Government would extend the period for the sugar bonus. The Minister acknowledged receipt by return two days later and instructed that the relevant chart be forwarded to Owston.24

Growing public expectations

While the idea that sugar plantations were soon to become a reality in the Territory was growing in the eyes of government, the public also through the activities reported in the newspapers were becoming more informed of the imminence of this great development.
From early January 1880 onwards the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* took up the theme, and gave not inconsiderable space to the news that the Northern Territory Land Act and the Indian Labour Act had gone through Parliament, although the latter, having passed both Houses, still awaited the assent of Her Majesty. In the same edition as these announcements were made it also quoted from South Australian newspapers that 'a gentleman' had recently visited the Northern Territory to select and take up 20,000 acres for sugar growing. The Times opines they refer to Owston, 'who we believe will not be long before he makes a commencement'.

The paper also informs its readers that the year's sugar crop in the West Indies had been recently devastated by floods - this could bring benefits for the Territory. On the other hand news that the pursuit of the Kelly's in Victoria is reckoned to have cost the Victorian Government £1,600 to date hardly rates a mention.25

In May, the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* returns to the subject with gusto, describing how miners and civil servants, 'migratory, temporary and hired men' embellished the hardships in the Territory by representing the country:

> as the nearest abode to Hades where vegetation ceased and malaria reigned. It has become general, in the other colonies, to regard the Territory as a wilderness in which nothing will grow, through men endeavoring to enhance their own merits at the expense of a new country.

Despite all that, according to the editor it was undeniably untrue, because almost all tropical industries could be successfully conducted if 'capitalists' would only give the place a trial. There could be very little doubt that the bulk of the flats along the banks of the principal rivers were suitable for sugar cultivation. He was glad to see that capital was now about to be brought into the Territory to prove the fact. Some time ago a Mr Owston had visited the Territory as representative of a company which wished to ascertain by personal examination if sugar plantations could be properly established in the country, and he was evidently satisfied as to the possibilities for it had recently been announced that Messrs Spence Brothers and William Owston, Merchants, of Melbourne, had entered into an agreement, signed on 8 March last, with the South Australian Government to commence the cultivation of sugar on certain conditions.
A synopsis of the agreement was then printed by the paper and reads as follows:

That Messrs Spence and Owston shall, up to and inclusive of the 31st day of December, 1880, have the right of searching for and selecting 20,000 acres of waste lands of the Crown in the Northern Territory for a sugar plantation; the said lands to be comprised of the alluvial River flats in not more than two Blocks of a rectangular shape, the length not to be greater than twice the breadth, the breadth to front a river or a leading road should the land abut thereon. Permission is given to select the site on the Adelaide river or the Daly, if suitable. The survey to be done by the Government surveyor free of cost to Messrs Spence and Owston, who are to commence the planting of sugar cane or other products from the date of their selection. Upon proof to the Government Resident of the bona fide expenditure by Messrs Spence and Owston of 10,000 pounds in cultivating the land and in plant and machinery for sugar manufacture and upon the production of not less than 500 tons of merchantable sugar or other product of equal value obtained from the land selected, Messrs Spence and Owston will be entitled to a grant of the land in fee simple. The decision of the Government Resident in this matter is to be final. Six years are (allowed) for the cultivation of the land and expenditure of the money. This agreement has to receive the sanction of Parliament, but it is not likely to meet with any opposition, and probably by this time it has become law.26

Owston was the hero of the moment and in the edition two weeks later on 15 May 1880 we read that Mr Owston will arrive on the next steamer and, according to the paper, that he was expected to commence operations immediately on arrival.27 Kirkland was, of course, wrong on the last point because Owston was still to finalise the selection of his site and there would be much to do before he could eventually begin his operation. Nevertheless a seed was sown because the the editor seemed to have anticipated an immediate start on the development of Owston's plantation.
 References

1 Northern Territory Resident, Correspondence - received, hereafter NTRS 790, thus NTRS 790: A3363/1879.

2 Northern Territory Times and Gazette, issues 1872 - 1889, 17/5/1879 hereafter NTTG.


4 NTRS 790: A3585. NTTG, 15/1/1881.

5 NTRS 790: A1854.


7 NTTG, 15/1/1881.

8 NTRS 790: A3620, A3663, A3694, A3729, A 4366, A5591, A5592.

9 GRS 1: 435/1879.

10 GRS 1: 450/1879.

11 GRS 1: 450/1879.

12 GRS 1: 450/1879.

13 GRS 1: 450/1879.

14 GRS 1: 450/1879, 532/1879, 557/1879.

15 GRS 1: 450/1879.

16 GRS 1: 450/1879.

17 GRS 1: 557/1879.

18 GRS 1: 560/1879.

19 GRS 1: 565/1879.

20 GRS 1: 75/1880.

21 GRS 1: 75/1880.

22 GRS 1: 90/1880. Records of related correspondence include, (GRS 1:450/1879) a letter written by Owston to the Minister on 3/11/1879 in relation to terminology to be used for other plantation products and that the term for the allowance of the bonus be extended to 1885. (GRS 1:532/1879).

23 GRS 1: 96/1880.

24 GRS 1: 111/1880.

25 NTTG, 10/1/1880.

26 NTTG, 1/5/1880.
27  NTTG, 15/5/1880.
No. 4 The s.s Maggie at Owston's Landing on the Daly River: 1887
Owston selects his site - 1880
A change in atmosphere

Official ambivalence despite Ministerial assurance

The constant delays had prevented Owston from leaving for the Territory on the Tambora as planned. On 8 of April 1880 we find him writing to the Minister once more thanking him for sending on the requested chart and informing him that he now intends leaving for Port Darwin by steamer on 20 April 1880. He once more requests to be allowed the use of one of the two government boats at Port Darwin with which to accomplish his purpose of finally selecting the site for his plantation on the Daly. He explains that on his last trip he had vainly tried to charter a small steamer to fully explore the Daly area but some unfortunate circumstance had frustrated his intentions. He also requested that a government surveyor accompany him so that the exact boundaries of the area selected could be recorded without any delay.1

The Minister was helpful and immediately directed that the Government Resident 'give all the assistance he can - boats or otherwise' and that Owston be advised accordingly.2

The Government is less cooperative

Owston arrived at last in Port Darwin on 27 May 1880 on the ship Bowen to what we must assume was an appropriate welcome.3 The record of what actually happened during Owston’s journeys to and from the Daly over the next three months is unclear. But it is certain that for reasons unknown, his expeditions to the Daly did not include a government surveyor and, from the tenor of the correspondence, it seems unlikely that he obtained much help from government officers in Darwin at all. As in all things there is often something underlying the 'known' facts and unfortunately one can only surmise after over one hundred years what they might have been.
Owston selects his site without government assistance

He was quite clearly determined to get things done and to make an adequate selection and he certainly did just that for he selected almost all of the better land of what is now known as the Daly River Agricultural Area (see Appendix).

Writing from Palmerston (Darwin) on 22 June 1880 to the Government Resident Owston describes, as fully as he was able without the services of a surveyor, the boundaries of his selection. Today it can be clearly identified as comprising land on the eastern bank of the Daly which parallels the river northwards and downstream from Mount Nancara to Brown’s Creek, known on old maps as Owston’s Landing. He describes it thus:

On the Daly River in this Province on the left hand side of the River from the mouth thereof leading up from Anson Bay - Starting at a point from the base of the first Hill or mountain up the River & on the side of the River above described, being the Hill or mountain nearest the river having a range of mountains extending at the back leading on this bank of the river a distance of 30 miles down the river towards the mouth & extending back on the alluvial soil only, the whole comprising an area of 20,000 twenty thousand more or less.
As I have had no sufficient opportunity to make a proper examination of the land & and more accurately fix its boundaries, I have the honor to request meanwhile this block of land as above described may be reserved as a selected Block of Land under the agreement, herein referred to, until I have completed a more sufficient & comprehensive inspection & which I propose doing at once.4

It is important to note that this letter, describing the selection in farmer’s terms, was never subsequently produced, officially at any rate, when Government surveyors disputed the selection some three years later.

The letter itself was certainly noted at the time by the Government Resident but he remained pertinacious about the matter of furnishing the required surveyor. There is some evidence to suggest that difficulties were purposely being put in the way. We find Owston writing again, only three days later, to the Resident from Pickford’s Hotel. The particulars are obscure but the general ambiance of the note is clear. He says:

In the absence of knowledge of the steamers draught with fuel on board and the capabilities of the steamer, I can only assume from your valued information she can ascend the river to our last highest point - this would be
a handy and quick method of carrying my purpose through - Captn Lammond called on me yesterday, but I did not ascertain from him any possible information - he mentioned if such arrangement was carried through he asked to leave on the 1st proximo - with active effort & in the absence of any unforeseen delays the trip should not occupy more than 6 days and might be done in 5 days.
A week or so is not any material delay to me ... the consideration of convenience and comfort in simply getting there & back so long as I can do so safely, is but of small consequence. The steamer undoubtedly offers greatest advantage in carrying out my obligations & fixing boundaries when I am up the river - but either vessel will answer my purpose -
I immensely appreciate your careful and great thought for me & I must really beg to assure you of this additional obligation and my sincere thanks truly yrs,
W. Owston

At length Owston, still fortified by the Minister's apparent support in responding to his stipulated conditions, determined that there was no more to be done for the present in the north and decided to leave for Melbourne on the first available ship to prepare for actual operations.

Apparently he was still unable to obtain the services of a government surveyor to fix the boundaries as both he and the Government in South Australia had wanted, but the ship *Thales* now being available, he sailed for the south on 18 August 1880 and carefully recorded his intentions to the Resident to make assurance doubly sure. He wrote the Resident immediately prior to his departure as follows:

To The Resident
E.W. Price Esq
Palmerston
17 Aug 1880

Sir,
I have the honor to inform you on my recent visit to the Daly River I have in pursuance of the Agreement entered into with the South Australian Government with John Spence, David Spence and myself selected 20,000 Twenty thousand acres the same more or less from the area of land on that River you were good enough to inform me in your reply of 23d June past, was specially reserved for this purpose & as I have waited for some time to learn the Parliament have so confirmed the Agreement, for the purpose of commencing plantation operations I have determined to leave by the present steamer for Melbourne & on arrival I will communicate to the Government at Adelaide particulars defining as far as I am able the selection I have made. Thanking you most kindly for the prompt & valuable assistance you have given me, I have the Honor to remain
Sir Yrs most respectfully,
W. Owston
Press comment and rumour

For whatever reason Owston now seemed out of favour locally. Resentment of continuing favours supposedly lavished by government on Owston is clearly voiced in 3 July 1880's edition of the local paper. Referring to the 'prospector's letter', which it does not publish, it baldly reports that Owston has selected land on Daly River which will be surveyed by McMinn on the latter's return to the Territory. The editor goes on to express disquiet over Owston's costs to government for travel by 'land and water'. The selection of the site of his plantation had, according to the paper, cost the Government over six hundred pounds. This was described as an 'extraordinary liberality'. The article ends with the comment that 'we hope this open handed hospitality will soon cease or some people may think we have no good land to offer them'.

Though there followed something of a flurry of telegrams between government offices in Adelaide and Darwin following this report of £600 attributed by the paper to the costs that government had supposedly expended on Owston's exploration, as far as I can ascertain, this figure has never been substantiated.

The last comment may have been prompted by rumours that other potential 'planters' were beginning to show a real interest in the Territory following the publicity given to Owston. Four weeks later the paper reported that a Mr B.C. Delissa, formerly, it says, a resident of Mauritius, had been granted 10 000 acres on Cox Peninsula (presumably site unseen) for sugar growing on the same terms as Owston.
Reference

1. Minister for the Northern Territory, *Correspondence - received*, GRS 1: 199/1880.
4. NTRS 790: A4070/1880.
5. NTRS 790: A4072/1880.
7. NTTG, 3/7/1880.
8. NTTG, 31/7/1880.
No. 5 Sugar growing on part of Owston's selection near present day Woolianna: 1912
The 'Boom' commences - 1880 to 1881

Owston had left Darwin by ship on 18 August 1880 and arrived home in Melbourne to make preparations for commencing work on the plantation and to bring his partners up to date with what had been accomplished. By now interest in sugar growing in the Territory within business circles had reached a high pitch. Applications to take up land were pouring in to the South Australian Government. It seems in the general euphoria thus generated that the partners were now approached by an S. Petersen and, perhaps, others to join their Company.

On 6 November 1880 Owston on behalf of the Spence brothers and himself wrote to the Minister from Melbourne applying for another 10 000 acre block on the left hand bank of the Daly River under the Northern Territory Sugar Cultivation Act, 'commencing at a point to be indicated by me before survey ... extending up as far as necessary.'

The Minister's note on the official cover to the application recommended on 9 November 1880 that this be granted, 'in lieu of the original provisional agreement for 20 000 acres'. The recommendation was approved in Cabinet on 30 December 1880 and returned to the Minister for action.

This was not of course what the partners had intended. A further note dated 21 January 1881 sheds some light. It refers to a succeeding document which lists apportionment of land for sugar cultivation and advises that approved applicants be informed of the success of their applications and that relevant agreements under the Act would be 'immediately prepared and forwarded to them for execution'. From this document, approved by the Governor, we are able to ascertain that John Spence, David Spence and William Owston head the list of those approved as being granted 20 000 acres on the Daly River in two blocks of 10 000 acres, one to the original partners in the Palmerston Plantation Company and the other to an S. Peterson, who we may assume had now joined the venture. He had been given a half share in the total area, presumably as they had been unable to obtain a third block of 10 000 acres for him.
A flood of applications for land under the Sugar Act

Between July and December 1880 a total of 235,000 acres was applied for. As the Act only permitted a total of 100,000 acres some adjustments had to be made.

The Minister accordingly forwarded an amended list to the Governor for approval with the recommendation that, 'thirty thousand acres having been allotted to the Pioneers, Messrs Spence, Peterson & Owston and Mr B.C. Delissa, there remained only 70,000 acres to be dealt with' for which he recommended twenty-one names. To a man all were from South Australia, except for the Palmerston Plantation Company partners and Delissa. Of those South Australians who were given grants as they required on the 'Cox's Peninsula adjoining Delissa's selection', many were parliamentarians.

These recommendations were approved by the Governor on 19 January 1881. The race for the 'sugar bonus' was now officially on. The Government must have believed that all their hopes for the Northern Territory were at last within reach. As we will discover the chickens had yet to come home to roost.

Press comment - Delissa the new hero, Owston the dilettante

The year as chronicled by the stalwart editor of the Territory newspaper had been full of excitement. The Northern Territory News and Gazette commenced the year with a further attack on Owston and the Palmerston Plantation Company. On New Year's Day 1881 it complained again in more vitriolic terms about the cost:

of the Owston cum Spence's inspection tour ... spent in pleasuring by land and water ... (and) ... they have shown nothing for it despite having been given 20,000 acres of our best country ... (whereas) ... the Delissa Pioneer Company have come - and planted.

Kirkland does not source his claims as to the Government's pleasuring of Owston, but from whatever source it came, the rumours were probably enough to prompt the Minister, without any evident success, to inquire of the Resident on at least three occasions for a breakdown of the costs of transporting Owston to the Daly.
The editor continued in expansive mood with further news of the moment. There is a glowing report on the Government Experimental Farm outlining a lively conversation with Holtze in which it is suggested by the paper that all produce should be sold at a profit, especially sugar cane for planting. This is immediately followed by an equally optimistic report on the Delissaville Jetty at the head of Wood's Inlet which is described as being 15 feet wide, 450 feet long with a wharf at its end about 25 feet by 40 feet on which is raised a derrick capable of raising six tons.5

Two weeks later the editor continues with the latest on the sugar boom. Sergison, described as the one who ably managed the Fannie Bay Experimental Farm, is to be manager of a Sydney company formed to set up a sugar plantation in the Northern Territory with a capital of £100 000 of which £40 000 is already subscribed.

Once again the paper enthusiastically praises the Delissaville Pioneer Sugar Company and contrasts it with Owston's venture. There has been 'no report from that gentleman', and this, labouring the point once more, despite government expenditure lavished upon him by:

placing of fully equipped and well provisioned steam launches, boats, and other means of locomotion by land at the beck and call of any speculative individual more especially as there is room for doubt as to his qualifications in the matter of selecting land suitable for the production of sugar or in fact any tropical produce.

The editor continues - there must be no more free distribution of sugar cane by the Government as this interferes with the proper prerogatives of free enterprise. The right of supply of cane to 'the Owston cum Spence speculation should belong only to Delissa.' 6

Preparations complete - Owston returns

Owston, meanwhile, could not have wasted a moment of his time in Melbourne for there was much to be done. Not only had he to bring his partners up to date and introduce a new member to the venture, but there had, as we have seen, been much to do in further discussions with the South Australian Government.
There would also have been a great deal of business attached to the planning and organising of operational logistics - purchase of plant and tools, horses and harness, seed (not sugar cane, which was to be supplied from the Government Gardens), hiring at least some key personnel, seeing to the procurement of all other necessary supplies and arranging for the shipping of everything as far as Port Darwin where arrangements would have to be organised for trans-shipment onwards to the Plantation on the Daly River.

Within a very short time, with all essential groundwork completed as far as he was able, he was once again on the high seas on his voyage back to the Territory. On 12 February 1881 he arrived back in Darwin aboard the ship Claverhouse.7

The 'Legality' of the Owston venture questioned in Adelaide

Meanwhile in Adelaide people had not been idle either. Apart from the minor matter of dealing with the rumours voiced in the media of government waste over Owston's selection, it appears that there were now other problems for the partners being raised in certain quarters.

On 27 January 1881 the Minister asked whether the agreement signed on 8 March 1880 with the partners 'in any way infringes (the Secretary to the Minister's underlining) the powers granted by the Act'. The matter was referred to the Attorney General for comment.8

To the layman the difference between the Schedule to the Act and the signed agreement appears to have been only marginal. For example the agreement said that the surveying of the lands chosen by Owston would be surveyed 'free of cost to the said John Spence, David Spence and William Owston', whereas in the schedule the cost of surveying the blocks by government surveyor was to be borne by the partners.

Nevertheless, on 7 February 1881 the Attorney General now advised the Minister that he had 'perused the agreement made with Messrs Spence and Owston which appears to be "ultra vires" of this act & therefore of no legal effect'. What the Minister's reaction was to this is not known.
In any case the problem was not to remain with him for long. He was replaced by M.P.F. Basedow as Minister for the Territory a few weeks later at the beginning of March and the document only re-emerged over a year later under another new Minister, now J.I. Parsons, who referred it once more to the Attorney General without further comment on 23 March 1882. So far as is known no direct action was ever taken either to rectify the 'infringement' or to advise the other principals to the agreement as to what exactly was seen as being 'ultra vires'.

One other document may be relevant and raises more questions than it answers. A telegram was sent on 18 March 1881 from the Minister to the Government Resident, Edward Price in Port Darwin, 'Messrs Spence wire "That the surveyors insist on rectangular block & ask that he may survey alluvial lands" please forward a report from Mr McMinn by next steamer.'

Price, good public servant that he was, reacted to this 'Ministerial' by immediately referring the matter to the Survey Department. He was perfectly aware that the parameters of the Palmerston Plantation Company's selection were confined within the extent of the alluvial land adjacent to the river. There is no record of any report having survived from McMinn or Price following this referral. His instructions to McMinn read as follows:

Referral to the Surveyor to report
1st What application Mr Owston made in reference to the shape of blocks
2nd Whether alluvial land is wide enough wherever W. Owston has selected to survey blocks in accordance with the Act, the whole of which will be alluvial
Report on separate sheet' (ie not on the cover sheet).

The newspaper reports progress on the Delissaville project

Meanwhile the Delissaville project seemed to go from strength to strength with never a cloud to darken its prospects. We hear that Delissa entertains and welcomes with garlands a select party of young ladies and gentlemen and Palmerston Sunday School children and teachers at Delissaville. The editor waxes quite lyrical - 'How Beautiful', he says, and 'the cane is looking well and will doubtless yield a good crop of sugar next season'.

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9 See note 9 for further details.

10 See note 10 for further details.
The paper also notes on the same day that Delissa's shares have sold for a premium of twenty shillings in Adelaide. The excitement of the 'boom' was evidently catching and government officers were tempted to participate in the bonanza offered by the rising share prices in Delissa's 'Pioneer Sugar Company'. A telegram on 4 May 1881 and letter from the Minister to the Resident on 5 May 1881 bear witness:

> The Govt know of no regulations against your holding shares but is of the opinion that it would be better that such shares were not held by anyone occupying the position that you do.12

It was also reported at this time, that 'English Capitalists in sugar growing intend forming a company as soon as 2/3 of the required nominal capital of £30 000 is subscribed'. 13

Things were obviously looking up in the Territory and by July the editor notes that because of increase in commerce, notably sugar plantations, there is a need for greater banking facilities at Port Darwin.14

Meanwhile back in Adelaide G. Bean, representing the lessees of the 60 000 acres of land adjacent to Delissaville, prompted the Minister to propose that the Sugar Act of 1880 be amended to further provide for the cultivation of sugar cane and other tropical products under the Act in the Northern Territory, so that all the blocks adjacent to Delissa be counted as a whole:

> as if all of such sections or blocks had been lawfully selected and held under one contract for the purposes of the Act and that an amendment be incorporated and be read and construed together as forming one Act'.

This was approved by the Attorney General, who detected nothing that could be construed as 'ultra vires', and immediately approved by Cabinet.15

However, when the matter was debated in Parliament the *Adelaide Register* was quoted in the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* as hoping that Parliament would not allow any increase in land holdings for companies involved in sugar growing as this might precipitate further land speculation or create an unwanted monopoly.16
Had the land at Delissaville on which they had made their selections been capable of growing sugar, it certainly would have provided tremendous power, authority, and a potential monopoly advantage to the Delissaville Pioneer Sugar Company with which all the South Australian lessees were incorporated. The irony was that the land was not suited to growing sugar.

Owston resumes the business in hand

Owston, presumably unaware of the steps that were being taken to undermine his effort, began operations. On 15 February 1881, just three days after disembarking, he wrote to the Acting Resident, McMinn, from Pickford’s Hotel requesting some sixteen tons in total of two different varieties of cane that he has selected from the Government Gardens.17

We do not know whether he was in fact able to obtain his requirements at this time. The *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* has some report of a ‘rivalry’ between sugar planters as to who should have government cane cuttings. Delissaville, as it said, was now loading cane from the gardens and Sergison and Owston are warned by the editor that they had better make arrangements. On 26 February 1881 it is reported that Owston and party started for the Daly to commence operations at once.18

This last report is followed up on 23 April 1881 when Captain Dunscombe of the *Hibernia*, on his return from delivering Owston and party of ‘only’ seven or eight men and their horses, tells of Aboriginals in canoes escorting the ship all the way up river. On hearing of this the newsman surmises that Owston’s party is too weak to grapple with the mass of natives said to be in the neighbourhood.19

On 7 May 1881 we hear that the *Flying Cloud* had left for the Daly with supplies. The paper hoped that the Owston Party would be found well but doubted that nothing less than a miracle would save them because of Owston’s belief in treating the natives kindly. Owston carried a Derringer pistol in his waistcoat pocket but the writer believed he would be better to carry a revolving rifle.20
Meanwhile Owston seemed to have been progressing steadily with the establishment of the Palmerston Plantation Company on the Daly. Some four months after setting up camp at his headquarter's site in proximity to his landing stage we read of him back in Darwin on company business, sailing a cutter which must have been purchased only recently to bring up supplies and service the general needs of the plantation. It was apparently big enough to have a temporary partition or screen below decks which Owston could use as an office and he seems to have sailed it competently himself on a regular basis to Darwin on business.

Owston evidently had some minor problem with at least one of his workers which he dealt with firmly and fairly. The man had been engaged for a six months contract on an earlier trip to Darwin in early April, when presumably Owston might have been either transporting stores or perhaps purchasing the cutter itself. On the July trip, the man refused to return to the Daly on the grounds that he wanted to go home. Owston, busy writing at the time, had told him to return in the morning but George Burt, as he was named, refused, said he would leave immediately and did just that taking his gear and one of the Company's fowling pieces along with its powder flask as well.

When Owston at length discovered the theft he informed the police who arrested Burt and charged him with, 'taking away one fowling piece and one powder flask, to the value of four pounds on the 19th inst'. At the subsequent court hearing, two days later, Owston seemed satisfied to have the goods returned. It sufficed for him that the Police Court Magistrate, in dismissing the case remarked, that it was fortunate for Burt that he had made no attempt at concealment.21 As a footnote to the above, it seems George did not go home because he was in trouble again the following Christmas. He was fined twenty shillings for being drunk and using profane language on a public thoroughfare. 22

The Northern Territory Times and Gazette complained of Owston's reticence regarding his venture but given what the paper had written about him one can understand his attitude. The paper had to rely on other sources for news of the plantation on the Daly. It was able to ascertain from some of Owston's men that by the beginning of July the Palmerston Plantation Company was making good progress with about twenty acres planted, probably all that there was sufficient cane for, and aiming at a further sixty or so acres by the following October.
According to the paper the men also reported that a constant lookout had to be carried out at night because of natives and that revolvers had to be carried through the day. The reporter suggested that Owston may now have learned that natives are not to be trusted.23

The next we hear of the Palmerston Plantation Company is that the whole party had been attacked by 'blacks' and the paper feared they had met with disaster. However it was only a rumour. Owston, this time not at all 'reticent', was quick to squash the rumour when he sailed into Darwin in October. There had been no trouble with the Aborigines.

He had, however, had trouble with transport. The Company's newly purchased steamer, the Ellangowan, had been sunk after striking a rock in the Daly, fortunately without loss of life. She had been on her first trip from Port Darwin to the plantation with supplies when she struck the unseen obstruction and went down immediately.

Owston had managed to rescue the crew,24 but had probably been unable to salvage any of the goods she carried. It is unknown whether she was insured, although Owston being the man he was he had most likely made certain that the vessel was fully covered and did not appear to be unduly upset by the episode. Nevertheless it must have provided him with one more setback.

More news of the sugar 'Boom'

The paper was full of other news, rumour and comment on sugar. There is a short note to say that there was every indication that the Princess Company, which also seems to have been on the Cox Peninsula in close association with Delissa's company, would soon be able to claim the £5 000 bonus.

There was a report that Sergison's 5 000 acre block on Adelaide River with forty to fifty miles of river frontage was reported as having been surveyed by David Lindsay of the Survey Department and Lyons, the senior partner of Sergison and Lyons, left on or about 17 September 1881 to inspect this and their other properties on Adelaide River in the steamer Maggie.25 It should be noted that the paper's claim of a forty to fifty mile river frontage on Sergison's grant has not been corroborated by other sources.
There is news of an order being given by the Government to ship some 300 tons of surplus sugar cane grown at the 'experimental farm' to Delissaville for processing into sugar. Apparently the idea was to test Delissa's newly installed sugar refining mill. Delissa was obviously playing safe because as the paper comments, 'they say that if the yield turns out to be low it will be because of the distance to the Delisaville mill'.

The Government attempt to procure Indian Coolie Labour

Towards the end of the year 1881 the Government, now believing that the 'planters' would soon have a desperate need of labour, sent Major Ferguson off to India, in an endeavour to persuade the Raj to permit Indian indentured labour to supply anticipated needs.

Ferguson was known to have contacts in high places in India and was given the task, not only to convince Vice-Regal authority of the special needs of the Northern Territory, but also to ascertain which Tropical Products were likely to succeed. If in the interim he was able to interest British planters from India and Ceylon to emigrate and take up land then so much the better. It was known that many of these men had already taken up plantations in what is now known as Malaya and their expertise would be a great boon to the Territory.

As the ever-optimistic Northern Territory Times and Gazette put it:

If Major Ferguson can point out to the Indian planters the advantages which this vast country offers ... and will induce a few of them to come over ... he will do well and his coolie business will be attended to all the same ... if (he) can bring us a number of experienced planters with money, that will be one of the best arrangements he can make, for if they are here ... they will have no difficulty in obtaining as many coolies as they require.

Not everyone was in favour of the proposition that 'coolie' labour was both cheaper and better than European labour. Almost concurrent with Ferguson's mission a meeting was being held in Queensland by the Maryburgh Planters Association to discuss the 'coolie labour question'. Some planters felt, what with the problems of caste and food costs, that Indian coolie labour might prove more expensive than European labour.
On the other hand, the Mackay Society had recently agreed that planters would make a preliminary contribution of five shillings per head for an inquiry into their possible recruitment. A Mr Bass of Bundaberg had said that he had been offered labourers from Indian merchants at the cost of £16 for passage money and a wage of 22 shillings and sixpence per month for a five years agreement. However, it was felt that Polynesian labour would be more acceptable and it had been proposed that a joint stock company be established with two steamers to transport labourers from the Solomon Islands. At that stage nothing definite had been agreed upon.\(^{29}\)

It was well known that though Queensland had made 14 000 000 acres available for sugar growing only 833 000 acres had been selected and while the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Sydney had just acquired lands on which they proposed to invest half a million pounds, the labour shortage was a problem and Polynesians were increasingly difficult to obtain. There was also increasing agitation against their introduction, but according to the *Northern Territory News and Gazette*, it seemed at the time that sugar cultivation in the north would be disastrously checked unless coloured labour was made available.\(^{30}\)

*Addendum to the year of 1881*

But as the editor settled down to review all that had happened, he sounded just a little jaded with it all. Looking towards Christmas he notes that, 'Rome was not built in a day ... in a tropical clime we must be grateful for small mercies and praise God that we are permitted to live outside the cemetery'.

Not downhearted for long, he soon cheered himself up with the memory of the hospitality received by himself and many other Darwinites at a Christmas party hosted by Mr Delissa at Delissaville, where a sugar mill capable of producing 500 tons per annum was already complete and the coming crop was showing 'their tops above ground'. Better things were to be expected in 1882 when he was certain there would be a good crushing of sugar cane from Delissaville in August or September. Mr Owston would probably be ready on the following season at the Daly River. There was more he was happy to remind himself and his few readers about - a new coffee plantation under competent managers was now being formed at Rum Jungle. The New Year still looked promising for plantation agriculture.\(^{31}\)
References

1 Minister for the Northern Territory - correspondence received, hereafter GRS 1, thus GRS 1: 650/1880.
2 GRS 1: 40/1881.
3 GRS 1: 40/1881.
4 Northern Territory Government Resident Reports - correspondence received, hereafter NTRS 790, thus NTRS790: A4511/1881.
5 Northern Territory Times and Gazette issues 1872 - 1889, 1/1/1881, hereafter NTTG
6 NTTG, 15/1/1881.
7 NTTG February 1881.
8 GRS1: 79A/1881
9 GRS1: 79A/1881.
10 NTRS 790: A4545/1881.
11 NTTG, 23/4/1881.
12 NTTG, 7/5/1881.
13 NTTG, 23/4/1881.
14 NTTG, 27/1881.
15 GRS 1: 366/1881.
16 NTTG, 12/11/1881.
17 NTRS 790: A 4446.
18 NTTG, 26/2/1881.
19 NTTG, 23/4/1881.
20 NTTG, 7/5/1881.
21 NTTG, 26/7/1881.
22 NTTG, 31/12/81.
23 NTTG, 16/7/81.
24 NTTG 17/9/1881, 8/10/1881. The Ellangowan was some three years later salvaged by some Darwin engineers who, after providing the local establishment with picnic trip up and down the harbour sold it to the Government for use by the Territory Customs. Alfred Searcy who as the Customs Officer in charge made the first and last voyage she was to make ever again. The story of the continuing misadventures she was to provide for Searcy and his intrepid crew on a round trip to the Roper makes hilarious reading. The poor ship, despite her beautiful name, was never used again and sank quietly at anchor some years later. She lies at six fathoms between Middle Point and Channel Island. (NT Fish Finder, Editor’s Office, Darwin pp27-29).
25 NTTG, 17/9/1881.
26 NTTG, 8/10/1881.
27 J.A. Ferguson, South Australian Parliamentary Papers No 42, 1882, *Coolie Labour for Northern Territory*, with Supplementary letters relating to Coolies and also to Tropical Products 2.
28 NTTG, 10/12/1881.
29 NTTG, 17/12/1881.
30 NTTG, 24/12/1881.
31 NTTG, 31/12/1881.
No. 6 Buildings on Poett's Plantation at Rum Jungle: 1883
The 'Boom' at its peak -1882

1882 was a year during which everything on the surface seemed to be progressing well, but below the surface seeds continued to be sown that were germinating steadily and surely. From these South Australia was to reap a bitter harvest.

The Government draws up a new agreement with the Palmerston Plantation Company

Following governmental argument as to the 'legality' of the agreement negotiated and agreed by Owston prior to his commencement of the plantation, a new contract for the selection of land by the Palmerston Plantation Company had been drawn up by the Government for the two blocks of land. One 10 000 acre block was for the original three partners and the other for the new partner, John S. Peterson. As far as the Government was concerned the new Agreement apparently overcame all earlier 'infringements'. The essential clauses and their import are outlined below:

Clause 1. Provided for the right to search and select land for a sugar plantation up to and inclusive of 31 of December 1881. On the face of it this presupposes that the land had not already been selected and extended the time for selection for another year.

Clause 2. Described the lands as being alluvial river flats of a rectangular shape. Besides being a contradiction in terms, the relevant phrase left out the essential qualification that Owston had demanded and the Minister himself had agreed.

Clause 8. Specified that the time for completion of the covenants would be six years, to commence from the completion of the survey by government surveyor. As the survey had not yet been completed and the Palmerston Plantation Company had already been in occupation for over a year, this in effect extended the probationary period of occupancy indefinitely, dependent upon the decision of government when to complete the survey.1
The subtleties of land selection for a particular agricultural purpose in the Northern Territory, or in any other region for that matter, were beyond the competence of the sleeping partners in Melbourne and Owston, of course, was still down on the Daly, having decided to remain over the wet season and continue with the job in hand.

The new agreement contained all the other requirements and would seem to the partners to have an additional attractive inducement in the extension of time permitted by the Government. Accordingly, in the absence of Owston himself, the document was signed by attorney on his behalf by David Spence on 8 November 1881.

Had he known of this at the time Owston would certainly never have put his signature to the document. Of all the partners, only Owston knew the particularities of the land selected. When he was able to be briefed on the matter is unknown and given the circumstances it is likely that there had been no discussion possible, or if there had that it would of necessity have been of a fragmentary nature. At any rate as late as 31 December 1881 it had been reported that he had been looking well and that work on the plantation continued to progress 'nicely'.

Minister Parsons' visit to the Territory

Of course everything to do with plantations seemed to be progressing 'nicely'. Sowden who recorded Minister Parson's visit gave a complete summary. Apart from the slight contretemps experienced when the Government Gardens which had provided ten tons of cane to the Delissa Mill for demonstration purposes on Parson's visit only produced a little bag of sugar nevertheless Delissa said he expected a yield of three tons of sugar per acre worth £30 per ton in southern markets.

According to the official view, though there might be some 'shepherding' of plantation grounds for other than plantation purposes, there was evidence all around of honest enterprise. To date over £25 000 had been spent by planters and there was every evidence that this input of capital would increase steadily.
Sowden related that 70,800 acres had been applied for on the Adelaide River for sugar growing and similar products under the seven shillings and sixpence purchase clause of the Act. This alone would in time provide employment for thousands of men. The applications were flowing in so fast that the Government had recently decided not to accept any more for a while. The list of existing applicants was indeed impressive. Immediately north of Darwin there were 21,000 acres under application.

On the Cox Peninsula, besides the 75,000 acres occupied under the Sugar Grant Act, a further 1,500 acres had been applied for, and near the coffee plantation at Rum Jungle in the Hundred of Ayres 3,000 acres were being held for plantation purposes.

All round Darwin land was being taken up particularly near South Port. Coffee, spices, quinine, opium - by the Chinese, says Sowden - and many other tropical products were to be tried. Within nine miles of Darwin another sugar mill was to be erected and presumably to be in full operation 'forthwith'.

Sowden’s narrative continues in euphoric strain, and in order to capture the excitement that was being generated, it is worth considering his words. He first discusses the agricultural potential of the Territory:

If these ventures are economically managed by experienced men with capital to back them, there cannot be on the part of anyone who has closely examined the country and witnessed its wonderful productiveness the slightest misgiving as to the result. The purely experimental work has been already done with indifferent soil in the Government Gardens. The planters now can avail themselves of certain knowledge where two years ago all was uncertainty. It has been proved not only that the canes will grow, but that they yield a sugar which would show to advantage placed side by side with samples from the principal sugar manufacturing countries in the world. Outside the Gardens there have been as yet absolutely no fair trial of sugar growing. The only trial, then, has been thoroughly successful. The logical conclusion is that the success will be general as experiments multiply. If our own capitalists do not accept to their own advantage the commercial suggestiveness of that conclusion, they will find in distant places other men who will; they will discover that foreign money will do what they might much more easily have done.
He continues with an explanation of how overseas interest has been further stimulated by investment to date:

The Northern Territory will not for long be the terra incognita it has been. The newspapers are spreading its fame throughout the world, and consular authorities and Government officials at Palmerston are frequently addressed from America, China, Mauritius, and other distant parts by men of capital and practical experience in plantation work, and asked for precise information about a place they have seen referred to in papers in the various countries where they live.

He then describes how enquiries regarding the supply of an adequate labour force are being addressed by government to meet anticipated need:

These enquiries have been answered and in some cases responses have come - generally to the effect that the questioners were satisfied with the prospects, and prepared, when cheaper labour should be obtainable to invest their money here. That labour, steps are being taken to supply, the Indian Coolie Immigration Act having already passed the Assembly. But if it should not become law even now, if the Government do not obtain labour from India, intelligent and shrewd Chinese capitalists will get it from China. They are closely watching the government now. They have told me so on all sides, and some of them have gone to work already. There is a recognised Chinese labour agent in Palmerston and European planters have transactions with him. Already Chinese have invested in plantation land, for several European names upon the land list stand for Chinamen, and the latter have themselves avowed (as I before have noted) to the Minister their intention of establishing plantations.

Of plantations already established, apart from Delissaville and the Palmerston Plantation Company, Sowden mentions: G.T. Bean of Adelaide Plantation Company with 5000 acres on the Cox Peninsula, who had planted twenty acres of sugar cane and erected quarters and outhouses with the help of Delissa. His labour comprised an overseer and six Chinese.

Ericson & Cloppenberg with 320 acres at West Point had planted fifty-six acres of maize, which had failed, probably due to caterpillars, 100 acres of rice of first class yield and quality. They had as well sorghum, peanuts, melons and pumpkins and several hundred pigs and also poultry. They were intending to erect a sugar mill and had established five acres of sugar cane which, though judged better grown than Delissa's by Sowden, was reckoned by the owners to be a probable failure.
There was also Poett's plantation at Rum Jungle employing currently six Chinese and intent upon the production of products other than sugar. Their first plantings were to be of cocoa and coffee.

Sowden's description of Delissa's operations was probably as objective as any that have come down to us over time. He was not an expert in agriculture but his observations are often acute. While seldom ever being overtly critical, his careful choice of words can reveal much to the discerning reader.

He tells us that Delissaville was approached by way of Woods Inlet and a 300 yard long jetty which had been constructed at the head of the inlet. The land itself had a small amount of good black soil in places but was mostly comprised of ironstone - what we would now call lateritic soil which was known then as now to be an infertile cropping medium. From Sowden we learn that Owston had previously rejected the Cox Peninsula on inspection as being unsuitable for the purpose.

When visited by the Parliamentary party Delissa's venture had been going for some eighteen months. There were now some well-constructed roads and a crop of some 200 acres of cane and approximately 20 acres of maize. Delissa informed him that last year's crop had been disastrous because of the depredations of white ants, but that that problem had now been overcome. Sowden judged this year's crop to be healthy but it was not 'very tall' despite adequate rains. It was not as good as the crop he had seen at Fannie Bay.

The plantation workers included some 'handsome Timors', 15 Chinese at 20 shillings per head per week with housing provided. Aboriginal employees were 'permitted to have their lubras with them'. They were fed and housed but did not receive a wage. The aboriginals looked and spoke like intelligent fellows and worked as such on various parts of the estate.

Delissa, we are told, believed that health was the first consideration in the Northern Territory climate, and so had made provision for the bathing of every man under his charge.
Every house had its well, in which the water was beautifully cool and fresh. However, says Sowden all innocence, he would not permit his Aboriginal workers to mix with those in Darwin. They had tried it once but:

he gave them such a fright, by means of rockets and such like, while not injuring them, that they had not tried to do so since ... and if they hint at going over to their old ground, (he) frowns upon them unutterably, frightening them effectually.

The sugar mill was well constructed and cost around £10 000 and there was many month's supply of wood all cut and ready stacked for the steam engine required to run it.

Owston in Darwin for Minister's visit

By now Owston must have been fully aware at least that the matter of rectangular blocks had to be taken seriously. The success of the plantation depended absolutely on the necessity of its being surveyed in accordance with his own description of its layout and shape as described by him in his letter to the Resident of 22 June 1881 and insisted upon by him from the very beginning.

Knowing of the Minister's imminent arrival, he probably decided to come to Darwin himself on the premise that Mohammed must go to the mountain, and persuade him to come down to the plantation to see for himself. On 2 February 1882 as the sun was setting:

an apparently new craft was observed coming up the harbour and caused some speculation as to what the little stranger wanted in Port Darwin. Presently she came to anchor, and all doubts were set aside when that cast iron, intrepid explorer and settler, Mr Owston, stepped on shore. He appeared to be in his usual wiry condition, and as energetic as ever. Our friend doesn't blow; on the contrary it is very difficult to get any information out of him.

On this occasion, at least, the taciturn Owston let those who came down to welcome him know that the plantation bids fair to be a decided success, plenty of rain but no floods, crops growing well and the maize crop, eight to nine feet high with cobs of astonishing size, particularly surpassing even his most sanguine expectations.
If Owston’s reason in coming to Darwin was to convince Parsons, it is also likely that the Minister, ambitious with his own plans for the Territory, was not inclined to interfere lightly with the Surveyor General’s Department under an incumbent of Goyder’s stature and credibility. After all was said and done things were looking quite hopeful at last. Land was being taken up faster than it could be processed and Delissa’s pioneer work on the Cox Peninsula had attracted numerous applicants. Owston would just have to make some accommodations. But as we shall see Owston could not and would not.

We do not know for certain whether Owston now spoke with the Minister, but he most probably did. What we do know is that the Surveyor General himself telegraphed the Government Resident on 16 February 1882, shortly after Owston’s arrival in Darwin, with the instruction: ‘Please wire approximate boundaries of all blocks granted for sugar under Act 194 of 80 eighty and send plan by next of post’. 11

Reports of continuing advancement of Owston’s project

It is unfortunate that Sowden was ultimately unable to reach the Palmerston Plantation Company’s operations on the Daly but he has left a valuable account, related to him by ‘well known authorities on soil and soil products’. Among these were two men who had just returned from the plantation, one of whom was a Mr Edwards, who intended to take over as Plantation Manager when Owston was satisfied that matters were off on a sound footing. He had been a planter in both Fiji and Natal.

The other was a Mr Reece, who had either been or was currently a planter of cotton and sugar in one of the Fijian isles. He had come to investigate the possibility of taking up land in the Territory for either or both products. Sowden interviewed them and, as he says, nearly every man and Government officer who had visited the Daly. From them, as to the soil itself and the appearance of the country, he obtained the substance of what follows, and he believed that it could be accepted as perfectly authentic.

Reece and Edwards told how the journey by sea on the steamer Maggie took three days to the 20 000 acre plantation some forty-five miles up river. The block was irregularly shaped with about fifteen miles of river frontage.
Since the company steamer, the *Ellangowan*, had been wrecked the company had often hired one of the little steamers at Port Darwin when they had cargo to send up. By the time Edwards was to take over as manager they intended to bring into use another little steamer, which they were now obtaining.

The company had been operating on the site for something less than twelve months and already a twenty acre nursery had been planted with cane provided by the Government Gardens. The soil had been cross-ploughed five inches deep and the canes planted in November 1881. Since that time they had made 'between two and four foot of strong wood, much more, it must be confessed, than those at Delissaville can show'. Because of difficulties experienced in the previous year in obtaining and transporting cane from the Government Gardens under optimum conditions as to time and quality, the company had decided that it would develop its requirements for future plantings from its own nursery. The intention was to make its first crushings in 1884, by which time their own mill would have been set up to receive the first crop.

In line with Owston's intentions, which he had made clear to the Government earlier, the company would grow different crops in addition to sugar; there was already a trial crop of maize established which looked exceedingly well. Buildings to date consisted of a few galvanised iron erections and the labour force comprised fifteen Chinese at £1 a week, a European labourer at 30 shillings and rations, and a European ploughman at £2. The land was described as being heavily grassed, flat plain and lightly timbered. There were no white ants. It was reckoned to be about 38 feet above the common level of the river, and there was no danger of inundation.

Temperature was estimated to vary between 90° F and 110° F, 'in a thatched hut on the river bank'. The mosquitoes were reckoned to be five times as big as the average and fifty-fold more mischievous and the 'alligators large and playful'.

However, Mr Reece did not share his companion's opinion that the land was almost perfect for sugar. He feared it was not strong enough but that it was just the thing for cotton. He had offered to take up 20,000 acres, and plant and put machinery upon it at once, if the Government would give proportionately the same bonus for cotton that they offered for sugar.
In summing up Sowden reckoned that the Adelaide River, whilst good for navigation had indifferent land whereas the land on the Daly was good but the river was perplexingly complicated and even dangerous.  

There is another account, given about the same time by an H. Stevens in command of the cutter H.S. of Fishers and Lyons and Company, which gives particulars of the Palmerston Plantation Company's property and confirms in greater detail the account of Owston's progress. Its situation and buildings are first described:

situated about 30 miles up the river on the East side. The buildings, eight in number, are only temporary erections, some of split bamboos, some log huts, with an iron store, the site for which has been carefully chosen where the river banks are fully 25 ft high. The buildings are enclosed with a neat fence and the yard is a picture of cleanliness.

The account continues with a description of the other crops that Owston is growing successfully on trial:

Adjoining the buildings is the garden, in which there are sweet potatoes, watermelons, peanuts bananas, pineapples, sweet turnips, and other plants. In the centre of this garden is a bamboo forcing house. At the other end of the garden is a splendid crop of maize, standing fully ten feet high, which is the second crop for the year. Samples of both crops have been brought to Palmerston by Mr C. Levi, who considers the maize excellent.

Then we are told of the progress made with the first crop of sugar, grown to produce cane for later propagation of the main crop:

Although the sugar cane plants were taken to the Daly from the Government Gardens and were consequently much damaged both in transit and from the length of time elapsed before they could be planted, the results are perhaps more promising than could have been expected even from the most carefully selected plants. The cane at present stands some 12 feet high (including the top leaf) and is of several varieties, the Meera having a slight advantage over various other kinds on the plantation. The company have some 25 acres of cane, all of which looks remarkably well and is still growing.
Finally we are given an appraisal of the soil, stock, labour and of the potential and promise for the future success of the project as a result of Owston's skill and enterprise:

The soil is of several kinds some black, some light sandy loam; but if the cane can be taken as a test of the ground, all kinds are equally good. The company have also a horse paddock containing fine grasses and what stock they have looks A1. The party complain of the Mosquitoes which came in clouds after sunset, rendering the dark a perfect misery, and they are all of the opinion that great credit is due to the manager, Mr Owston, for the indomitable pluck and perseverance he has shown in overcoming the many difficulties he has had to contend against whilst proving to the company that the Daly River is suitable for plantation purposes, and there is no doubt that had Mr Owston the requisite number of hands and horse power to carry on matters on a larger scale, the crops now standing would be ample to form a large plantation during the coming season.13

Minister unable to reach the Daly

Given the favourable accounts of Owston's progress and government's awareness that not only was it an important project, but also had been directly instrumental in precipitating the reawakening of interest in Territorial agricultural prospects, it is perhaps surprising that the Ministerial party did not make greater efforts to reach the Daly. Sowden has described how their attempt to get there had been frustrated in consequence of the remarkable voyage of the steamer Maggie, 'which took five hours to Point Charles and five hours back on 15 March 1882.14 In view of the ultimate play of events it is possible that this was deliberate on someone's part.

The Maggie was a well-known and well-handled vessel. She made regular trips to various points around the coasts of the Top End and may well have been the preferred ship by those who had business in coastal waters. Seamen of the time were highly skilled. The variation, advantages and disadvantages of tidal flow were part of a coastal seaman's daily life. A skipper would automatically know how to take advantage of the tides to make his passages in reasonable time with the minimum expenditure of fuel. A trip that took ten hours to reach Point Charles and back presupposes that the ship left Darwin against the incoming tide and returned against the ebb. A strange proceeding. 15
What we can say with certainty is that the Minister did not visit the Palmerston Plantation Company's plantation on the Daly River, despite having gone to a great deal of trouble to ensure that he saw everything else of note in the Territory of the time. The question remains unanswered as to why he did not take the same pains to visit the Daly.
Reference


2 *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, issues 1872 - 1889, hereafter NTTG, 31/12/1881.

3 NTTG, 19/7/1882.


5 Sowden, p. 90.

6 Sowden, pp 94-96

7 Sowden, p. 84.

8 Sowden, pp 85-89.

9 Northern Territory Resident, *Correspondence - received*, hereafter NTRS 790, thus NTRS 790: A4545/1881, A4070/1881.

10 NTTG, 4/2/1882.

11 NTRS 790: A5265/1882.

12 Sowden, pp105-109.

13 NTTG, 3/6/1882.

14 Sowden, pp82-83.

15 The presupposition is based on my own experience in sailing off Darwin and that of others, including an experienced naval officer who is familiar with these waters through service in Naval Patrol Boats based in Darwin.
No. 7 Coffee Drying racks on Poett's Plantation: 1883
Some disquiet at Delissaville & the 'Boom' continues -1882/83

The Ministerial visit marked the zenith of the South Australian Government's attempt to augment the colony's wealth from the annexation of the Territory. However the dream was to persist for a few more years, albeit with some growing disquiet below the surface.

The Minister left Darwin for Adelaide via Sydney towards the end of March 1882 on the Tannadice. It had no doubt been an exhausting though probably enjoyable visit. But there would be much to mull over on the long voyage home, not least of which was the slow realisation on reflection that all might not be well with the Delissaville project and the worrying question of Owston's apparently growing intransigence on the question of the boundaries for the Palmerston Plantation Company's holdings on the Daly.

For the moment, as far as the general public was concerned, all seemed well and, as the Minister believed, the concept to be fundamentally sound. True within the Darwin 'society' of only some fifty colonists there was a surprising amount of division between two factions which seemed to embitter the private lives of each. Despite this they had all been most hospitable, with each party vying with the other to worthily entertain the visitors.1

Meanwhile, in his own inimitable fashion Kirkland of the Northern Territory Times and Gazette continued to chronicle events and provide opinion about the daily lives of Territorians.

In the final edition of 1881 there had been a letter to the editor from one of the more prominent citizens, T. Burit, who wrote on leaving the Territory because of lack of business and liability to sickness, that he would carry complaints to the South Australian Government of what he called the 'fiasco' that existed in the administration of Territory affairs. Just what 'fiasco' he was referring to is not known but it probably reflected some current general dissatisfaction.2
Delissa leaves for pastures new

There had been a number of references to the successful operations on plantations reported in the early part of the year, mostly to do with the Minister's visit which have already been outlined, but as the months progress it is possible to detect a subtle change in attitude. One suspects that there is more going on beneath the surface than the tantalizingly brief morsels that we are able to glean from the pages.

In the main, however, the stories that are printed are remarkable more for their seeming commonplace interest. In August we learn that a Mr W.H. Thompson, a sugar grower from the West Indies, has arrived to report on the sugar concession grants for concessionists who are suspicious of the Government's liberality in offering such large areas at such a low price.

There is an intriguing piece on Delissa and his partner Sachse, farewelled by Darwin notables who praised their hearty and energetic efforts as pioneers of the sugar industry in the Territory. The pair were leaving for a visit to Borneo.

There are references to speculative companies being favoured by government and some squabbling going on at Delissaville on how best to operate the sugar crushing mill. The Palmerston Plantation Company gets a mention for the high quality of its maize and other products. The paper also informs its readers that government is beginning the survey of the 20,000 acres allotted to Owston on the Daly who, together with Sergison, has fully complied with government stipulations by cultivating for sugar and not 'for the purposes of making a profit as a speculation in land which was received in a gift.'

Then more references are made to Delissaville and the disappointment that it has not yet lived up to its promise. No doubt sugar may be grown ultimately in the Territory but not until the 'present speculative companies cease to exist and bona fide working planters are encouraged ... we do not allude to Delissa Company.' Meanwhile, there are other crops such as cotton that could be grown successfully, says the editor, showing perhaps some evidence of either stress or confusion.
Again the theme of the small farmer versus the bloated 'concessionists' is raised. It is noted that a Bishop O'Reilly of Springfield USA is conferring with Irish members of Parliament in London to persuade Irish farmers to emigrate to Australia where plenty of land is available and cheap.

Next we hear that Mr Thompson is leaving Delissavile with a full report of the project to the company's directors in Adelaide, but not, says the editor, for the press. However, he tells us that he did gather in conversation that there had been some disagreement with Delissa in regards to planting procedures, alteration of machinery and the introduction of a steam plough. The paper, however, makes point of saying that Thompson has the highest of qualifications to report on sugar growing.

On 21 October 1882 the news is announced that Delissa and Sachse are now in Singapore having taken up 20 000 acres on North Borneo 'of a very fertile character'.

The edition of the first week in November gives us the interesting statement that the Minister of the Northern Territory has denied a recent article in the Melbourne paper The Age which had seemingly commented very strongly:

on what they term the South Australian Parliamentary swindle, and charges members of the House of Assembly with buying all available good land at seven shillings and sixpence per acre and then raising the price to twelve shillings per acre. The Honourable J.L. Parsons utterly denies the statements and says that he only holds two or three small blocks in the Territory and they are nowise connected or near any land required for railways or other public works.

Most intriguing of all these is the report of a letter to the Adelaide Register which describes the Sugar Land Grants as an infamous scandal and accuses Members of the House of Assembly that they had passed the Sugar Act only to secure for themselves large grants of land at public expense. This latest accusation was indigantly rebutted by L.L. Furner who pointed out that 'only four members then in Parliament' had taken up land.
Two days before Christmas, to encourage the festive mood, readers of the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* are given a lengthy full-blown description of Delissa and Sachse at a dinner to celebrate their grant of 20,000 acres of land from the British North Borneo Company - a company which, according to the paper and Mr Delissa who presided, had a very great future. There was no doubt whatever that he had a very great company, and Kirkland had no doubt whatever that it would be a great success:

The company had just passed its incipient state; it was based on the same principles and had the same objects before it as the Honorable East India Company at its foundation. It only required energy and capital from outside to make Borneo the great Emporium alike for the East, Australia and England. Directly it became known that the company was behaving so liberally as it was doing, the inhabitants of all those quarters of the globe would flock to North Borneo, and would make the port of Sandakan their starting point with those possessions and countries. Mr Delissa then entered at some considerable length into a description of the Company's possessions at North Borneo. The Bay of Sandakan was superior to the far famed Sydney harbour ... beautiful rivers ... beautiful hills and magnificent fertile country ... there was an enormous tract of such land. The 20,000 acres of land granted to him (Delissa) represented sixteen miles of water frontage, with a depth of two miles back from the river.

It appears that a great time was had by the fairly numerous company assembled, with many toasts, and afterwards for a 'few hours ... wine, song and sentiment flowed freely until a late hour in the afternoon'. There had seemingly been very few social gatherings of such a pleasant character within the memory of any of those present.

The above 'piece' on Delissa's new venture in Borneo had been taken almost verbatim from the Singapore *Daily Times* of 30 November 1882 and Kirkland, editor of the *Northern Territory News and Gazette*, had prefaced it by inference with some fairly robust criticism of Delissavilles's backers in Adelaide, part of which read as follows:

We consider that Mr Delissa was somewhat unjustly censured by his Adelaide directors whom one and all we consider know just as much about the production of sugar as we do about making a pair of boots or the successful leadership of a Salvation Army Corps.

But there were others who were not waxing quite as joyfully over the doings of Mr Delissa.
Word soon arrived by telegraph that there had been a noisy meeting of the Delissa Company shareholders in Adelaide which had condemned his management of the project on the Cox Peninsula and were now endeavoring to obtain the services of an 'experienced' manager to run their affairs in the north.

On 6 January 1883 a letter to the editor, dated 30 December 1882, sheds some light on the matter. It was signed by the new Managing Director of Delissaville (now to be known as Springvale) and had been triggered both by Kirkland's adverse comment and by the 'twaddle', as he calls it, on Delissa. The letter is worth quoting. Commencing with some brief observations on the Delissa 'report' from Singapore he says:

I would remark that it is an unusual proceeding with business men (his emphasis) on concluding a business transaction to go into the highways and byways to buttonhole passers-by and 'shout' champagne at a public house or to 'gush' over the prospects of the English Land Company.

He continues with a brief reference to his directors who had been so badly maligned by Kirkland:

Mr G. Scarfe (Chairman of the Board) is chief partner in G.P. Harris Scarfe and Co, one of the largest firms in Australia, Mr L. Scammell, the chief partner in the old established firm of F. H. Faulding and Co, and Mr W. H. Bean, M.P. the managing Director of Bean Brothers limited. All Highly esteemed for their sterling business qualities and their integrity, wealth and influence; and, moreover, they are peculiarly interested in the Territory to a very large extent. These are not the men to treat anyone unjustly.

He then spells out in some detail why Delissa was no longer with the company:

It was high time that Delissa left; if he had been allowed to remain much longer he would have wrecked one of the best companies ever established in Australia. He was so anxious to get away and evade the inevitable consequences of the fiasco he had made of his maiden attempt at management, that he did not even wait until I arrived at the plantation, but came to me at Palmerston and rendered his resignation; and then he deserted his employ at the most important season of the year, when, if he had any practical knowledge of the cultivation of sugar or manufacture of sugar, his services would have been especially valuable to his employers. The Directors are men of business, and are not supposed to be planters or sugar makers, therefore your remarks are meaningless.
But when they engage as manager a man who represented himself as a 'sugar cultivator and manufacturer of great experience' they were fairly entitled to expect he should possess at least some of the qualifications pertaining to the position.

Finally he rounds on Kirkland himself for his partisanship and accuses him of blatantly 'creating' the facts to suit himself:

I notice also that your Adelaide telegrams have been made to do duty to the 'cause' (of publishing disparaging material). You stated that the Sugar Planter had warmly defended Delissa against the charge of mismanagement made by the directors. It occurred to me that this item was probably a manufactured 'local' and somehow got mixed up with the subscription telegrams, because as a matter of fact the Sugar Planter does not contain a word about Delissa, nor have the directors made any charge against him. They simply let him go, being glad to get rid of him at any price. I don't know if your readers appreciate the constant praising of a discharged servant, coupled with derogatory remarks regarding his late employers. If so, it is a matter of taste.

I am, Sir &c,
G.T. Bean
Managing Director
Springvale, December 30th, 1882.

The truth about Delissa

The Northern Territory Times and Gazette stuck to its guns in defence of Delissa to the bitter end. From time to time there are letters to the editor and other cryptic notes which add nothing to any definitive discovery of who was right and who was wrong in the matter. However there are some clues which can now be examined.

G.T Bean in the letter above gives little detail on Delissa's antecedents. There is a biographical note extant in the Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography which does little more to shed much light. According to this Delissa was born in London in 1839 and died in Sydney in 1898. He had a chequered career. He is said to have left London for Mauritius to learn about sugar and from thence to Adelaide where he was briefly engaged as a police trooper and also as a journalist.
Next, he was engaged by an Adelaide syndicate to 'exploit a sugar manufacturing patent' in Queensland. But the venture failed and subsequently he was employed in an unknown capacity at Cleveland near Brisbane at Hope's sugar mill sometime between 1870 and 1874. We next hear of him in Mackay where as a correspondent for an Adelaide newspaper he reported on the wreck of the *Gothenberg*.

How his subsequent career brought him to Darwin for a short time as Managing Director of the Delissa Pioneer Sugar Company is not clear, nor are the details, if any there are, of his time in Borneo. However, the biography states that he once more returned to South Australia where he was said to be involved in Pyrotechnics in Adelaide, and was also said to have become a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.⁶

A search of the proceedings of the Royal Geographic Society (London) was unable to produce any evidence of this claim. Similarly a search of listings of members of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (SA Branch), founded in 1885 has failed to produce the name of Delissa as either a member or even a contributor.⁷

The testimony may be mixed but of his ability to persuade people as to his talents there are no doubts. His embroilment in Delissaville, and his role in it, is reminiscent of some of the more questionable ventures and financial 'scams' common to the Australia of the 1980s. His ability as a promoter was quite obviously second to none. However his ability as an agriculturist is less obvious.

Had he had anything more than a passing familiarity with sugar growing he would have known, as Owston and others had, that his chosen site on the Cox Peninsula was totally unsuited. Furthermore, his general lack of knowledge in regards to basic requirements of cultivation and perhaps even of propagation of sugar is clear from the evidence. The rate at which he was supposedly able to clear, adequately cultivate and plant 200 acres of sugar on virgin hard soil with hand labour and mattocks is indicative only of complete ignorance and an imperative aimed solely at impressing the innocent observer.
That he was able to drive his labourers to accomplish what they did is evidence of a less than endearing trait of character. He must have been a 'hard man' and would have had to use a deal of severity to hold and force, not only the completely untrained Aboriginal workers for whom daily prolonged physical labour was completely unknown, but also the 'handsome Timorese' who would be all too familiar with it. These Timorese, who did know how to cultivate sugar, would have known instinctively that all their efforts would result in ultimate crop failure.

News of the other plantations

No doubt as far as the public was concerned the upset at Delissaville was regarded as being no more than some sort of personality clash of no real import to the future of the Territory 'sugar industry' and plantation agriculture generally. On 7 October 1882 we learn from the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* that Sergison arrived in Darwin and left almost immediately for the Adelaide River with eight fine draught horses, ploughs, harrows, grubbers and ploughmen. The paper believed that because of Sergison's experience in supervising work on 'indifferent soil' at the Botanic Gardens he might yet claim the bonus in 1884.

We are told as well that Poett, having reassured Adelaide investors following Professor Tate's adverse report, has returned with sound backing to Darwin to set up his mixed plantation at Rum Jungle. The board of directors of his company were now the Hon. W.D. Glyde (Chairman), and Messrs Bickford, Joyner, Lawrence and Newman with the appointed company solicitors being Messrs Ayres and Ayres.

On 14 October 1882 we learn that Sergison had to pay £30 duty on his import of a few ploughs and that traveling the horses overland to the Adelaide River had taken seven days. In the same issue we read that Holtze has visited Sergison's 5 000 acres on the Adelaide and has pronounced it everything to be wished for. However there was obviously some room for disquiet in the publication of the fact that some 300 tons of sugar cane grown in the Government Gardens had been burnt as no planters had required any of it.
It appears that there had been more criticism of this burning from the south, but in the next issue Holtze himself is quoted as saying that the cane burnt was only some that was unsuitable for planting which would not be acceptable to planters even as a gift.

The last month of the year produced some further snippets. On 2 December 1882 Sergison’s cane is reported to be almost a foot high and the Daly River maize crop again is growing splendidly. The editor also notes sourly that the Delissaville Plantation name is to be changed to Springvale Plantation.

On 9 December 1882 we learn that Erickson, one of the small farmers, has provided cane cuttings for Delissaville and Holtze is once more in the news with word of a letter he has received from a German company which has been formed to grow cane in the Territory. They ask is it too late to plant this season. Holtze advises that by now they are too late but still have time to work the ground for next season’s planting.

Meanwhile, the Palmerston Plantation Company on the Daly River seems to go from strength to strength. Apart from the many reports of Owston’s successful management on good soil and of the favourable cropping that was being achieved we also learn that he has supplied quite an amount of seed to many other farmers, amongst whom are Sergison, Cloppenberg and Harrison and Head of West Point; all of which seems to have succeeded admirably. Seedsmen from Adelaide write that maize from Owston’s Plantation is much admired, and they hope that its cultivation will increase because they could handle cargoes of it.

On 23 August 1882 readers are told that samples of maize and cane brought back from the Daly by Collier and Munro are on show at the newspaper office. With an estimated yield of 40 bushels per acre for maize grown in the Territory at seven shillings, as opposed to only 5 bushels of wheat at five shillings elsewhere this will surely demonstrate the value to all those who think of investing in the Territory.
It would appear that Owston himself was absent from his plantation for some time because he is recorded as returning to Darwin in November 1882 and of leaving overland with five draught horses which had arrived by ship for the company. According to latest accounts, says the paper, the cane on the plantation looks splendid and:

we hope that the fact of Mr Owston resuming active superintendence is a sign that the company being satisfied that the land is suitable for sugar, now intend planting on a larger scale than they have done hitherto.

In March 1883 we are told that Harris and Head harvested 2,000 bushels of maize on their farm from seed supplied by Owston and sold it all to the local merchants Adcock Brothers. The paper comments that Southern farmers should note what is being done in the Territory whilst they are almost starving, trying to grow a poor two to three bushels of wheat per acre.

There are at this time apparently many farming failures being reported regularly in the South and Kirkland writes passionately that nothing is being done by government to attract these men to the Territory, where instead most of the land is either held by absentee owners, or is too costly, or is held by pastoralists or large plantations.\(^9\)

**Major Ferguson's negotiations with the Government of India**

The reports from Major Ferguson now added to the general excitement. Ferguson had been sent to India in order to see what could be done to facilitate the import of Coolie labour to the Territory. In February 1882 he wrote a detailed account of his mission from aboard H.M.S. *Shannon* which seemed to bode well for the future.

He had held preliminary talks with Vice-regal representatives and native Indian rulers and on 26 January 1882 he held discussions on the matter with the Viceroy himself who had expressed the concern that, if the matter was to be considered favourably, the Indian Government would have to satisfy itself as to the proper treatment of the coolies. It would at least require the appointment of a Protector of Immigrants, probably appointed and perhaps even paid by the Raj, to oversee and look after the coolies' wellbeing.
According to the paper the matter was still undecided but it was quite likely to meet with approval, if the South Australian Government were to agree to this appointment and to any other stipulations raised for the protection of the coolies. Ferguson followed that up a month later writing again from H.M.S. Shannon, with recommendations of what would be expected to ensure that they would be judiciously and fairly treated should permission ultimately be granted.

The major's report was thorough and detailed moving through the social background of the prospective labour force, their expectations under employment, and the absolute necessity of allowing their normal social organisation and associations to be maintained. He emphasised that:

Care will have to be taken that coolies on arrival are able to satisfy their simple wants cheaply ... (and) it would be well to cultivate, or at least secure a good supply of, the various ingredients of their accustomed diet.

Attention should be given to the type of housing that should be provided and it would be necessary to ensure that both the protector of immigrants and the emigration agent be highly paid and 'high class official(s)' with a thorough knowledge of both Indian languages and the Indians themselves. Men of the required caliber and integrity should reasonably expect to receive a salary of £1 000 per annum.

Finally he reported upon the information that he had been asked to obtain from various planters in India on the cultivation and marketing of tropical plantation products. Again his report is well detailed and he outlined what he had been able to gather as to the particular requirements of soil, climate and cultivation of some ten or eleven different crops, excluding, of course sugar, which as he said was 'already an assured success it is needless to say anything about it'.

But there was now a growing opposition to the whole idea of foreign labour throughout Australia at large. As an example, on 16 December 1882 it is reported from Bundaberg that there are riots when 'Cingalese' coolies are landed to begin work on Bundaberg plantations in Queensland and afterwards that an anti-coolie league meeting was held at which one coolie gave it in fluent English that they had been recruited under false pretences.
An overview of the period - January 1882 to March 1883

At the beginning of 1882 all had seemed well but as the year moved on it became apparent that things were not as they seemed. By mid-year Delissa had gone. Despite all that the Northern Territory Times and Gazette could print in his defence, the accusation by his employers of bad management and at worst of complete incompetence was difficult to refute. In eighteen months he had planted over six hundred tons of cane cuttings from the Government Gardens with absolutely no result.

On the other hand the news that came from the Daly seemed good. The sinking of the Ellengowan had been taken in its stride by the Palmerston Plantation Company and a replacement supply vessel had been subsequently put into commission with the minimum of fuss. All the reports that came back from the Daly seemed to bear evidence of steady progress and all were verifiable. They had established a substantial sugar cane nursery, sufficient for their immediate needs. They had harvested at least one crop of maize with which they had been able to supply seed to all of the farmers and active plantations in the district. As well as being able to attract interest from markets farther afield they supplied a ready demand in Darwin. Delissaville had not received any of this seed, but with the change in management which had been brewing for some time, this is not altogether surprising.

Nevertheless, after the brief mention of Owston's presence in Darwin in February aboard a 'new craft' and then again in November when he collected draught horses to take overland to the Daly, there is no other mention of his personal activities and the inference is that, apart from attending the visit of the surveyors for which we must presume he was present in June, he had not been actively engaged since then in any of the daily running of the plantation.

The obvious and unanswered questions arising from this are: where was he and what was he doing during that time? There is no record of him having left the Territory and we can infer that he had other interests around Darwin. The simple answer is that we do not know for certain, and the problem is further compounded by the fragmentary and confusing picture that emerges from government records which will now be examined.
Reference


2 *Northern Territory Times and Gazette issues 1872 - 1889*, hereafter NTTG thus NTTG 31/12/1881.


5 NTTG, 30/12/1882, 6/1/1883.


7 Alison Hoyle, Archivist, & Rachel Burke, State Records of South Australia, Adelaide; Valerie Sitters, RGS Library, London. 11/1/1999.

8 NTTG, 7/10/1882, 14/10/1882.


10 South Australian Parliamentary Papers No 42, 1882, *Coolie Labour for Northern Territory*, with supplementary letters relating to Coolie and also to Tropical Products 2, Ferguson, J.A., sourced Northern Territory State Library.

11 NTTG, 16/12/1882.
No. 8 Chinese procession with Owston's agents store, P.R. Allen & Co
in background: 1893
The Palmerston Plantation Company withdraws its investment and the immediate aftermath -1882/84

The only thing that is clear from government records and newspaper reports of the period is that Owston and partners had clearly and unequivocally withdrawn their investment by the end of May 1883.

E.W. Price, in March 1883 now retiring as Government Resident, only commented at his farewell presentation that, 'it is a mistake to judge sugar growing by the experiments at the Government Gardens for the soil is totally unsuited to its cultivation ... (and) Delissa made the mistake of also misjudging the soil that he chose for his plantation'. But we also gather from what he says that Sergison and Owston's plantations are well sited and should do well.¹

Probably the first hint that the public got that something serious was amiss was in Price's final Quarterly Report on the Northern Territory, dated 9 January 1883, when he said that while work had progressed steadily over the past year on the plantations not as much had been done as might have been expected.

He had inspected the Cox Peninsula during the year with Mr Holtze, the Government Gardener, 'who agrees with me that the river banks are the most suitable for sugar'. The land on the Adelaide and the Daly was first class and could be cropped for several years in succession without wearing it out, he said. Mr Holtze had visited Sergison's Plantation on the Adelaide and he had told him that the soil on being worked was magnificent, which was good news, he thought, not only because there were millions of acres of similar land in the Territory despite that someone else had voiced the opinion that nothing could possibly grow in 'that'. Nevertheless, said Price, Mr Holtze was a man who was slow to give his opinion unless he was certain.
In summing up his report we can readily understand that apart from a few minor details everything was going swimmingly. However tucked away in the midst of the eulogy came the following:

The Palmerston Plantation Company are, I understand, going to hold their land and cultivate. After the House of Assembly had negatived the proposition relative to the shape being altered, the Company applied for a return of their survey fees, but since that I believe they are going to work it. It would have been a great pity to have seen the plantation deserted after such proof of its fitness for sugar and maize growing; they have now a fine nursery of cane, enough to plant 200 to 300 acres next season, and Mr Owston has received a shipment of five first-class draught horses for ploughing and cultivating.2

Price’s hopes, if hopes they were, that Owston would remain in the Territory did not last as long as it took Parliament to order the printing of his report on 31 May 1883. In the edition of 19 May 1883 the Northern Territory Times and Gazette broke with the story that the Owston plantation’s plant and equipment were to be auctioned by Adcock Brothers.

The paper went on to say that despite the probable effect of this announcement which could not look well for the country, the editor expressed himself as being pleased that the land would now revert to Government because:

the 20,000 acre block would settle 40 planters on the ground. When it is known that cane and maize have grown luxuriantly on the property there will be no difficulty in inducing settlers to come amongst us ... although only one man has been employed on the property for the last three months the canes are looking first class; so good that a portion of the cane is pronounced a fit sample to be sent to (the) Calcutta (Exhibition).3

But that hope too was to remain unfulfilled. Though for a time it looked as if the South Australian Government might be able to pluck something out of the fire, matters managed to drag along from one false hope to the next. There was a certain inevitability that now moved the play towards its final curtain call some ten years later.
Government correspondence (February 1882 - April 1883)

The archival material of Government Correspondence Received, both from the Office of the Minister in Adelaide and from the Government Resident's Office in Darwin is confusing. The story as it appears from these sources is not entirely clear. Some important items have either been misplaced or are missing entirely.

The precise information that was furnished to Goyder on his telegraphed request for information on 16 February 1882 for approximate boundaries of all blocks for sugar under Act 194, (1880) has not been discovered.

Nor has the reason for a telegram of 6 June 1882 from the Resident's Office in Darwin requesting whether the Palmerston Plantation Company's survey fees have been paid in Adelaide. The immediately telegraphed return answer from Adelaide on the same day was that 'Palmerston coy have not paid survey fees here'.

There is an empty file dated 10 July 1882 with the subject, 'Survey of Palmerston Plantation Company's land', from the Minister. It has an initialed annotation, perhaps McMinn's, saying, 'filed in Land Office 27/7/82'. But the file itself cannot be discovered.

Similarly there is a docket cover note dated 17 July 1882 with the information from the Minister's Secretary in Adelaide that, 'Palmerston Coy survey not to be made before payment of fees', but there is no document to accompany it.

On 1 August 1882 the record shows that the Minister asked if the estimate for land sales included land for which surveys had been paid. Again there is no accompanying information that can be identified as being associated directly with this docket.

On 20 August 1882 there is the cover note to a letter from Owston to the Government Resident in Darwin. The subject of the letter is described as being, 'Re Survey of Sugar Blocks Owston, Spence and Peterson on Daly River'.
The letter itself, however, is not there. But there is an annotation initialed again possibly by McMinn, which says 'Filed in Land Office' and is dated 22 August 1882.8

From the Minister's records in Adelaide we learn that a telegram of 22 August 1882 from the Government Resident E. W. Price states:

    McMinn and Survey Party returned from Daly. Mr Owston positively refuses to allow land to be surveyed in accordance with the Act. Am sending correspondence per Menmuir.

On the following day this was forwarded to Cabinet, who returned it to the Minister's Office on 28 August 1882 with a request for information on detail of all land taken up under the Act of 1880.9

On 31 August 1882 this last request was forwarded by telegraph to Darwin and on its cover note we see that it was referred on receipt by Government Resident, Price, to surveyor McMinn who replied on the same date with some contradictory, and perhaps, surprising information to the Minister:

    The only lands that have been definitely applied for under Act No 194 are A.W. Sergison's selection of 5000 acres on the Adelaide River. Survey of this land has been completed also P. Levi 5000 acres on the Douglas Peninsula (ie Cox Peninsula). Fees have been paid on this and survey is now being made. B.C. Delissa accepted boundaries for his selection of 10,000 acres on Douglas Peninsula, but has paid no survey fees. Messrs Owston, Spence & Peterson have each paid survey fees on A/c of their selections of 10,000 acres each on the Daly River but their manager Mr Owston declines to have the survey made in accordance with the Act.

31/8/82   McMinn, Snr Surveyor 10

On 18 September 1882 the Minister again telegraphed the Darwin Resident asking for the amount of the total survey fees under the Sugar Act between 30 November 1881 and 1 June 1882.11 Neither the reason for this request nor its answer has yet been discovered.
On 27 September 1882 the Minister instructed the Resident by letter that, where fees have been duly paid for special surveys of land, the surveys could be completed as early as possible, and payment of purchase money obtained at once. The reason for this directive is not known, but given the terms under which the land was granted, which stipulated that land would be granted in fee simple on completion of a pro rata proven expenditure on cultivation, plant and equipment, and a minimum production of Sugar or its equivalent within six years of the completion of the survey of the land, the term 'payment of purchase money' does not make a great deal of sense in terms of information discovered.

On 9 December 1882 a letter was received by the Government Resident, Price, which was signed only 'Philip R. Allen & Co, Agents for the Company'. The letter requested the return of £1,000, being fees deposited for the survey of the Palmerston Plantation Company's land on the Daly River. Price sent this immediately off to the Minister in Adelaide, for his consideration, with a covering note. The note explained that whilst he had had no intimation that the Company intended to give up their grant of 20,000 acres, he presumed that they intended to do so. He added that £80 of this money had already been spent by the survey team on their abortive survey of 17 August 1883 and reminded the Minister that this land had been occupied by the said company for the last three years, during which time, he said, portions could have been sold.

The letter requesting the return of the Palmerston Plantation Company's deposit for survey went off on its rounds to Cabinet on 8 January 1883 and was returned to the Minister on 9 March 1883. Three days later, on 16 March 1883, the Minister informed his secretary that the Government had informed him that the company had subsequently withdrawn their application for the return of their money and the Government Resident was so advised by letter on 29 March 1883.

But the Minister was misinformed for within a matter of only a few weeks the Northern Territory Times and Gazette made the announcement of the 'abandonment' of Owston's plantation and published an advertisement for the auction of its plant and stock.
Almost as an addendum to this affair, on 9 March 1883, C. Ward as Acting Government Resident in Darwin had sent the Minister for the Territory a return of all blocks that had been surveyed and the cost of these surveys. There had only been one and that had been on a block of 5,000 acres on the Cox Peninsula which had been completed at a cost of £187.10s. The Minister sent this without comment to the Surveyor General’s Office on 5 April 1883 who returned it without comment to the Minister on 30 April 1883.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{The Palmerston Plantation Company finally decides to leave the Territory}

A close examination of all the normal archival sources, including those of the Securities Commission and Banks, is unable to shed many more particulars. Since the Government Survey Party’s refusal to survey the plantation boundaries as Owston himself had delineated in his letter to the Government Resident of 22 June 1880, there is no clear record as to where Owston was or what he was doing. For the most part, it is likely that he remained in the Territory, where we may assume that he had other interests, but he seemed to have been mostly away from the plantation, and certainly must have been in touch with his Melbourne partners by mail and telegraph. Nevertheless a certain amount may be inferred from what has come down to us.

For example, he does not appear to have been on the property when we read in the \textit{Northern Territory Times and Gazette} another rumour from a ‘reliable source’ that two men, Brown and Owens, had been attacked by ‘blacks’ whilst working a quarter of a mile from Owston’s plantation. Brown was struck on the head with a stick, which cut and knocked him down, and a spear was thrown at Owens, which grazed his wrist. Brown had a revolver but before he could use it ‘the darkies bolted’.\textsuperscript{17}

There is good reason to believe that Owens and Brown may have invited the attack. Owens had been charged and jailed for drunkenness for two months in March and also banned from obtaining liquor in Darwin for a further twelve months.\textsuperscript{18} The use and abuse of Aboriginal women was a well-documented cause of such trouble.
The Aborigines did not bolt a few months later when Brown and Owen were caught up in a second incident. News arrived by telegram sometime in mid-October that Brown and Owen were involved in another affray. This time Brown took three spears - one in the lungs which was able to be removed, one in the back between the shoulders and one in the groin which could not be removed.

The story as it was afterwards related was that on 20 October 1882 Owens and Brown were advised by one Bennum, a blackfellow working on the station, that there were 'blacks' in the cane eating and carrying it off and 'maliciously destroying the crop'. Bennum asked them to fetch their rifles and drive them off. They left it to the afternoon and then went with Bennum to the lower end of the cane where the 'blacks' were causing the trouble. They fired over their heads and frightened them off, followed them across a grassy plain and hunted them from their camp in the timber.

On their return Brown had stopped to take a drink from a waterhole and Owens, walking on ahead with Bennum, was attacked and speared and Bennum ran off. Brown turning round, saw one of the Aborigines, named Long Peter, throwing a spear which hit him in the chest. He then fired again and thought that he had hit Long Peter in the left arm. The 'blacks' ran off and Brown then helped Owens back to the plantation. The wounded man was eventually hospitalized in Darwin and the paper was of the opinion that 'too much encouragement has been given to the natives to locate around the plantation ... (and many) have long expected this to happen'.

We next hear that Owston returned to the plantation when he is recorded as having left Palmerston overland to the Daly with five draught horses which had arrived for the company by ship. According to latest accounts, says the paper, the cane on the plantation looks splendid but:

We hope that the fact of Mr Owston resuming active superintendence is a sign that that the Company being satisfied the land is suitable for sugar, now intend planting on a larger scale than they have done hitherto.
It is also possible that one of the Spence brothers came with his wife to Darwin to confer with Owston before they arrived at a final decision to withdraw. For on 27 January 1883 it is recorded in the 'passenger arrivals' to Darwin that a Mr and Mrs Spence arrived on the *Meath*. They were only short-term visitors and left Darwin once more on 12 July 1883 on the *Talmadic*.

But the record is still blank on when and how Owston himself returned to Melbourne. It is just possible that he returned sometime earlier on the company's supply vessel, small though it was, for his signature appears on the extract of a letter to W.D. Glyde, dated and witnessed on 14 July 1883. This letter also seems to confirm that the Mr Spence who was in Darwin between 27 January and 12 July 1883 was in fact the partner David Spence, for his signature 'by attorney' is signed and witnessed on his behalf by his brother John Spence in the same document.\(^{21}\)

However, whatever the detail, with the auction over there is absolutely no doubt at all that the Palmerston Plantation Company now ceased operations on the Daly and effectively withdrew their investment. The possible reasons for this will be examined later but before any proper analysis can be given it is necessary to examine subsequent events. Suffice it to say that it is very unlikely that the company's problems were caused by any insolvency as, apart from anything else, the company was still in existence a decade later and was only de-registered in 1898, five years after Owston's death. His wife died in the same year as the company's de-registration.

*Events as chronicled by the 'Northern Territory Times and Gazette'*

Concurrent with these events the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* continued to blow hot and cold, chronicling episodes with a continuity of contradictions. Kirkland now seems to be 'again' the plantation idea all together, and now enthusiastically for it. We read in February that Springvale Plantation (Delissaville) has received delivery of a full cargo of guano and can deduce that the new management were going to try to fertilize their crop to keep it going.\(^{22}\)
There is in the same month a lengthy article by Kirkland comparing the success that was being met with by men of small means such as Cloppenberg and Erickson,23 or Harris and Head,24 as compared with the lack of it by large holdings on the Daly and Adelaide Rivers and other neighbouring localities. Of course, as we have seen, at the same time he continues to publicize the fame of Owston’s maize crops.

Then on 14 April 1883 he publishes a pamphlet eulogising the benefits of large scale sugar plantations which Minister Parsons had written on his visit to the Mackay Sugar District and of which he had forwarded 100 copies to the Territory Resident for circulation.25

The plantations get more positive coverage again at the beginning of May 1883 with a report of the sugar milling success by the new manager at Delissaville where the samples of sugar had not only been seen by the editor but sampled as well.26

Aftermath - the scramble for Owston’s plantation begins

Kirkland may have hoped that it might have been the ‘small men’ who were to benefit by the Palmerston Plantation Company’s withdrawal. However they were quite unable to gain any advantage from the situation. Soon an unseemly scramble for the vacated land was underway and as a corollary to the company’s withdrawal, necessary measures were taken to eschew any direct responsibility for the debacle.

W. D Glyde, perhaps a relation of Lavington Glyde who had first introduced Owston to the concept, had written to the Minister on 21 June 1883 that he had been instructed by Messrs Spence and Peterson to have their survey fees of £1 020 pounds returned to them as they had decided to abandon the land on the Daly.27

The matter is not clear but presumably the earlier letter on 9 December 1882 for return of survey fees written by Owston’s agent in Darwin, Phillip Allen and Company, referred only to one of the two blocks in the original concession.
In any case this second request was approved by Cabinet and the money was returned on September 1883, less approximately £23 for expenses. Prior to these fees being returned Glyde wrote again to the Minister from Unity Chambers, Currie Street, Adelaide on 15 August 1883:

Re Spence & Peterson Daly River Land Grant
To the Hon the Minister of Education.

Sir,
I am desired by Messrs Spence and Peterson on their relinquishing the above grants of 20,000 acres in the Northern territory for tropical cultivation to ask that you will issue fresh grants in lieu thereof, and under similar conditions and expenditure, but for land on the Adelaide river and in favour of the Hon.(unreadable) and another gentleman ... (to) allow the sum of £1000 paid by ... as survey fees on 20,000 acres of land on the Adelaide River under the ... NT Lands Act to be accepted as payment of survey fees for the 20,000 acres of Land so transferred - and also that your government will return Spence and Peterson their survey fees ... I would respectfully point out that the Government loses nothing by consenting to that which I have the honor to ask ... Mr (unreadable) is associated with a wealthy and thoroughly earnest body of gentlemen ... In addition to the Hon. (unreadable) the Hon. G.D. Longridge - Comm: of Trade and Customs (Victoria) ... (and others - 4 Victorians and more than 5 from South Australia) will hold an interest in the undertaking.

Hoping this proposal will meet with a favourable response and asking the favour of an early answer.

I have the honor to be
Sir
Your obedient servant
W.D.Glyde

The Minister and Cabinet immediately sought the advice of the Crown Solicitor as to the legalities. However, he asked to be excused comment as he himself had an interest in some of the lands under the Act of 1880. But the Attorney General in returning the matter to the Minister gave his opinion at some length to the effect that he did not think that the proposal was permissible at law under the terms and interactions of the Acts of 1880 and 1882.
This letter was followed on 27 August 1883 by another from Glyde requesting that he, himself, be granted 10,000 acres on the Daly River to comprise the plantation made by W. Owston, and extending up and down the River Daly from the said plantation as 'far as may be necessary'. The application seems to have been initially approved by Cabinet and the Government Resident was so informed by letter on 2 October 1883.30

The Government Surveyor in Darwin then required to know whether Glyde knew of the Owston boundaries or whether he required them to be defined by someone else, as Owston 'was to define the boundaries himself, but this was never done'. The Government Resident, faced with this dilemma, telegraphed the Minister asking Glyde to define the boundaries.

This matter of boundaries was next referred to the Surveyor General on 12 September 1883, who returned it to the Minister two months later on 16 November 1883 with the request that the Darwin authorities be asked to send a plan immediately showing the 'claims on the Daly herein referred to', because he was advised that this had been asked for before and the plan had not yet reached this office.

The matter then returned to Crown Lands for the Surveyor General's attention once more. The Surveyor General, having obtained a tracing marked as 'showing the position of the land intended to be surveyed for the Palmerston Plantation Company', returned it to the Minister on 3 January 1884 with the request that Mr Glyde should be informed that the Palmerston Plantation Company must first officially surrender their claim.

The Minister returned to the Surveyor General on 29 January 1884 with the advice that Glyde had been authorised by Spence and Peterson, when the return of the survey fees had been requested on their behalf, and that this fact was registered in the Audit Office.31
On 3 March 1884 the Surveyor General replied that he could not accept Glyde's letter as a surrender of the Palmerston Plantation Company's land. Not only was there no proof of Glyde's identification with the Company, but there was no endorsement of surrender upon the documents sent in.

Minister Parsons' reply was short and to the point and is dated 11 March 1884. It was written as his last shot, only one day before he resigned to take up the position of Government Resident in Darwin. He said that he was 'perfectly satisfied that Mr Glyde was in possession of the necessary authority' and if the Surveyor General required anything else 'it would be well for him to specify what it should be'. Three days, later on 14 March 1884, the Surveyor General said he would be satisfied on receipt of a formal surrender on the part of the company, then the matter of Glyde's application could be dealt with safely.3

*The Minister, E.T.Smith, requires clarification*

On 2 May 1884 the new Minister, now replacing Parsons, asked the Surveyor General if he would be good enough to furnish him with a return of all selectors under the Act of 1882; giving their names, site, acreage and the date of their selection. The Surveyor General replied on 22 May 1884 with the suggestion that the Northern Territory Resident be asked to give an additional report which would outline whether any selectors had complied with the specifications as to cultivation as contained in the Act and, if they had not done so, what action should be taken by the Government to resume the land on which the requisite conditions had not been met.

The Minister complied with this suggestion and a report, dated 3 July 1884, came back from Darwin. It was signed by F.C. Ward and it listed only three of the concessions as currently being cultivated. The total comprised only some 320 acres in all and that on the 10,000 acre block granted in October last to Mr W.D Glyde no attempt had been made to bring a single acre into cultivation.33
The minute to the Surveyor General on receipt of this last information of 30 July 1884 from the Minister, now R.C. Baker who had replaced Smith in June, is quite difficult to read but the gist of it seems to be that some action should indeed be taken.34

A worried ex-Minister Parsons, now Government Resident, directly wrote from Darwin to Minister Baker. Referring to F.C. Ward’s letter, he regretted that this had inadvertently been enclosed with other documents, but he hastened to clarify matters by saying at length much the same thing, adding only that with the exception of two of the concessionists, not even the survey fees had been paid.34

*Decisions taken to allocate the spoils*

The concern that these definitive facts aroused within the South Australian Administration prompted much discussion but resolved nothing to the point. On 16 September 1884 W.D. Glyde wrote once more to the new Minister, J.A. Cockburn, reiterating his claim to the abandoned Owston Plantation on the Daly and backing up his plea with an extract from a letter, dated 14 July 1883, duly signed and witnessed by the four partners, John Spence signing on behalf of his brother David.

The letter itself from which the extract came had nothing to do with the issue. But Glyde in using it explained that he would, one year later, have difficulty in obtaining any further authority from these gentlemen. He therefore requested that it be accepted as sufficient proof of his authority to take over the plantation.

The various annotations to this and associated documents are quite difficult to read in their entirety. But it appears that eventually some 'technical' accommodation was made to allow Glyde to retain rights to one of the 10 000 acre blocks of the original grant of 20 000 acres, subject to his agreement with the Surveyor General’s Office as to proposed boundaries and after negotiation with the Delissa Pioneer Company for the other half.
Agreement was reached and matters finally resolved by mid-November 1884 with Glyde taking the area, now delineated to the satisfaction of the Survey Department, which included Owston's old headquarters, paddocks and nursery. 35
Reference

3. NTTG, 19/5/1883.
5. NTRS 790: A5539/1882.
7. NTRS 790: A5547/1882.
8. NTRS 790: A5575/1882.
9. Minister for the Northern Territory, *Correspondence - received*, hereafter GRS 1, thus GRS 1: 487/1882.
12. NTRS 790: A5680/1882.
15. NTRS 790: A5985/1883
16. NTTG, 19/5/1883.
17. GRS 1: 216/1883. The last two annotations on this docket are quite interesting for they were written eleven years later in 1894. The first is a request for information as to whether a lease had been prepared in this one case; and the second is the reply, 'No lease was issued from this office'.
18. NTTG, 10/6/1882.
22. GRS 1: 858/1884.
23. NTTG, 10/2/1883.
24. NTTG, 17/2/1883.
25. NTTG, 24/2/1883.
25 NTTG, 10/3/1883.
26 NTTG, 14/4/1883.
27 GRS 1: 381/1883.
28 GRS 1: 381/1883.
29 GRS1: 491/ 15/8/1883
30 GRS1: 505/1883.
   NTRS: A 7097/1884
31 NTRS A6460/1884
   GRS 1: 505/1883
   GRS 1: 792/1883
32 GRS 1: 505/1883
33 GRS 1: 414/1884
34 GRS 1: 707/1884
35 GRS 1: 858/1884
   GRS 1: 971/1884
   GRS 1: 1043/1884
No. 9 'once was a sugar mill' - remains of Brandt's sugar crushing shed: 1891
The end of the saga - 1884 to 1889

Though no one yet realised it, the bubble had burst. There was a steady decline in financial confidence that paralleled the stock market crash of 1884 in the United States. In South Australia in 1886 there were many failures in the banking sector.

Companies were forced to liquidate. World prices for primary products, in both mining and agriculture, were falling and a prolonged and severe depression that encompassed the whole of Australia was to follow. The effects of all this produced their own particular repercussions within the fledgling Territory economy and its equally vulnerable administration.¹

Public perceptions

The maneuvering behind the scenes following the Palmerston Plantation Company’s withdrawal would have been largely unknown to Kirkland. As editor of the Northern Territory Times and Gazette of course he would be privy to many rumours, none of which could have provided much elucidation to the struggling newspaper.

Nonetheless he soldiered on, valiantly trying to put the best face on things against an increasingly sombre background and to print the facts as he saw them. His frustrations often show through where his personal loyalties are pulled first one way then the other by the exigencies of a general ambiance of a steadily but surely deteriorating situation.

He had been shocked by the events which had overtaken Delissa. He continued to defend the man, and did his best to put the best ‘spin’ on every morsel of news that might help to maintain the momentum for development.
He continued to push for government to provide incentives for struggling southern farmers to come north. To this end he took every opportunity to present the 'success' of small farmers. He resumed the promotion of the Government Gardens almost regardless of the growing evidence of its limitations. He wrote glowing articles about the plantations, which still existed in name at least, and promulgated the excellent prospects that awaited Poett's enterprise at Rum Jungle. He also printed, almost in its entirety, Parson's pamphlet on the Mackay Sugar District.

When the news broke of Owston's and Sergison's 'abandonment' of their land, he did his best to rationalise the disappointment and put it all down to bad management, saying that both men had lacked practical knowledge:

> a man who has been accustomed to clerical work or one whose life has been spent behind a counter is (not) a fit manager for a large sugar-growing plantation when it must be apparent that he can know nothing about it ... Adequate capital and practical management, are all that are required to develop the sugar growing industry in the Territory; without them failure is certain.

Meanwhile, Biddles, the new manager of the Delissa Pioneer Company, did what he could to make the best of a bad job. His attempts to improve cultivation and the fertility of the soil by spreading and incorporating a cargo of Guano, which he had imported in February 1882, had met with some success and it is reported that he had a successful crushing with enough cane to keep his mill going 'splendidly' for at least a week. But from this effort he was able to export only half a ton of sugar to Adelaide. Obviously it wasn't good enough and he continued to seek better soil in other areas within the company's concession.

In reviewing the year at the end of 1883 and the beginning of 1884 there was little that the ever hopeful *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* could do to avoid being pessimistic. It recalled once more the imponderable failures of Owston and Sergison despite, as it put it, every prospect of success on good land, with splendid cane, etc. It noted also that work on Poett's Plantation at Rum Jungle seemed to be at a standstill.
Cloppenberg and Erickson had hoed out all their cane as had Harris and Head. There was certainly no information from Brandt at Shoal Bay and in the prevailing mood that could be either good or bad. However, Delissaville under the new manager, Biddies, who had arrived in April, looked to be progressing well with marketable quantities of sugar being manufactured, much land cleared and the current crops looking good. But then he was unable to resist the cautionary remark and qualifier, 'we hear the case but we have not visited the plantation for some time'.

It must have seemed therefore a pleasing prospect for Kirkland when he received the news, which he immediately printed, that after seeing to the delivery of a sugar mill from Saigon to Borneo, Delissa and Sachse were to visit Darwin once more. True to his word Delissa arrived back in June to a rapturous welcome from the editor who promulgated the story of the pioneer work in the establishment of his new sugar enterprise in Borneo and its wealth of timber of all kinds.

We are not told the reason for the visit of the indomitable pair but it is likely that they had returned to see what they could wrest from their past associates at Delissaville who were already thinking of taking over Owston's plantation on the Daly.

What exactly they were doing is not clear. Amongst other things they may well have held consultations with V. L. Solomons, because there is a Special Survey of Sections 10 and 11, which comprised 300 acres on the Cox Peninsula. This was lodged with the Lands Office in Delissa's name. These sections were soon afterwards in the name of V.L. Solomons on 13 October 1884.

*The Cox Peninsula - addressing the problems*

The *ss Palmerston* left Darwin for the Daly River with the Government Resident, Favenc, Holtze and the Delissaville manager, Biddies, in mid-June 1884. There was not much that anyone could do to progress sugar growing at Delissaville. Consequently there was a growing interest in the prospects on the Daly.
This received further impetus when the Duke of Manchester and party, who had recently arrived on the *Menmuir*, left with the Government Resident on the *Maggie* for the Daly River to look at land in that locality.

As background to the visit the newspaper reported that the Duke of Manchester had met with the Government Resident and representatives of the mercantile and banking community, and the Resident had shown them some 2 tons of sugar grown from around two acres at Fannie Bay and crushed at Delissaville. As it was known that the Government Gardens had been established on 'poor soil', it was therefore entirely feasible, said the Resident, that sugar was a paying proposition for the Territory. He had then quoted average yields obtained for sugar in Queensland for the years 1881 and 1882 at being just over a ton to the acre, which showed that yields reached at the Fannie Bay Experimental Gardens compared very favourably with Queensland - thus, 'quod erat demonstrandum'.

The evidence of the past two years at Delissaville would seem to have shown otherwise, but the Duke concurred that this looked to be the case and advised his listeners not to put all their eggs in one basket, but to grow a wide variety of produce as 'the utter dependence upon any one staple article was injudicious'. Experience in Mauritius, Jamaica and Ceylon had shown as much. Nevertheless, the Duke felt certain that when the railway was completed, the Territory would become a great and prosperous country, what with immense goods, traffic from inland, and the fine port we possessed, success and prosperity must follow. 18

It is likely that Owston, had he been present, would have echoed the Duke’s sentiments and advice on product diversification. But it was soon evident to all that the matter of Delissaville and its associated agricultural enterprises on the Cox Peninsula were in real trouble.

To unravel the complexities and the incestuous nature of the different companies on the Cox Peninsula was probably difficult at the time but today, over one hundred years later, it is an almost impossible task.
The shareholding and directorships were often inextricably mixed and were generally comprised of members of the Adelaide, or at least the South Australian, establishment. Personal relationships and rivalries within that small coterie inevitably produced a turmoil that impinged upon normal business and even ethical relationships.

In early November of 1884 there is a report, extracted from the Adelaide newspapers, of the winding up of the Adelaide and Port Darwin Sugar Company. It is difficult to glean much factual meaning from the Northern Territory Times and Gazette account of the matter because of the subjective nature of the writer's comment. However, the 'Adelaide and Port Darwin' appears to have had some connection with Delissaville and other so-called 'incorporated' sugar concessions on the Cox Peninsula. We are told that one of the executives, a Mr Bean, had been in London for six months trying to sell the property known as the Palms but that it had subsequently been withdrawn from the market on directors' instructions, as soon as they were convinced of the valuelessness of the estate for the purposes for which it had been selected. Kirkland's comment was quite apposite:

We cannot regret the collapse of such a Company, and we trust the lesson taught by the result of the large concessions to syndicates of speculators will show our Government that it is the deserving farmer who deserves support and not the capitalist. 19

The formation of Daly River Plantation Company

If the news of the wind-up of the Adelaide and Port Darwin Sugar Company was bad, there was worse to follow. On 30 December 1884 the Chairman, George Scarfe, of the Delissa Pioneer Sugar Company called a half-yearly meeting of shareholders at the offices of the Company Secretary at 2 Pirie Street, Adelaide. The Directors' Report was tabled and read.

It stated that operations of the company had been confined within the narrowest of limits in order to keep down expenditure. The total crop yield for 1883/84 had only crushed four and a half tons of sugar.
Shareholders were reminded of the June report from their new manager which had provided comprehensive details concerning the nature of the soil and its total unsuitability for sugar production. This had been confirmed on the directors' behalf by others, including Holtze of the Government Gardens, and it fully explained earlier crop failures, despite Mr Delissa's assurances to the contrary. The directors had been forced accordingly to immediately suspend all operations. Their attempt to increase the capital of the company by raising a Preferential Share Issue had been unsuccessful.

The directors apologized for the waste of shareholders' capital which had followed upon their being persuaded by Delissa to purchase his interest in the government concessions on useless soil. As a result of this the whole of the company's subscribed capital had now been called up and it had accumulated liabilities of £1,000. The directors therefore recommended that the company now enter into voluntary liquidation and that the assets be realised as soon as possible.

However, all was not yet lost as the report continued - at some length. Shareholders might be able to extricate themselves from the awkward situation they now faced, by transferring their selection of 10,000 acres at Delissaville to the Daly River. The directors had already sought permission from the Government to do this and authorization had been granted, subject to certain conditions. If this arrangement met with the shareholders' approval a new company might be formed which would be able to take over, on what would be undoubtedly favourable terms, all the plant and machinery of the extinct company and would thus be in a position to start operations (on the Daly) at once.

The Chairman then addressed the meeting, elaborating on the Directors' Report, by giving greater detail of the misdeeds and mismanagement of Delissa and by explaining that the land they were negotiating for with government was none other than the land that had been surrendered by the Palmerston Plantation Company.
Mr Glyde had already been promised 10,000 acres of this by the Government and the company, if they so wished, would be granted the remainder by mutual agreement between themselves and Mr Glyde as to the boundaries to be fixed between the two blocks.

In taking questions from the floor, the Chairman further explained that the company was indeed close to virtual bankruptcy and this was the reason for their recommending that it be wound up. However, the shareholders must be aware that if a new company was not formed, and if they were to recommence operations successfully on the Daly with the existing Company they might find that Delissa would lay claim to part of the bonus offered by the Government. Given the damage his mismanagement, outright chicanery or ignorance had caused the company, this was certainly not to be desired.

The meeting closed with the decision to follow the Directors’ recommendations. The Secretary was instructed to continue negotiations to this end and a special meeting was to be called at an early date to execute those recommendations.

Within a month tenders were called for the Delissa Sugar Pioneering Company’s crushing mill and other plant and machinery, and early in March 1885 it was announced that it had all been sold to the new syndicate as planned. Biddies, the manager, was to have his service terminated at the end of the month and the syndicate was expected to commence operations on the Daly immediately.

By the end of January the new company was floated. It was immediately dubbed the ‘Phoenix Company’ by a cynical editor. But its proper name was to be the Daly River Plantation Company whose objects were to grow sugar on the Daly, the relevant concessions having been granted by government to transfer the rights of the original 10,000 acres at Delissaville to the Daly. Thus with many twists and turns and some sleight of hand the Daly River Plantation Company was formed and now prepared to recommence operations on what they believed to be part of the land that had been selected by Owston some six years before. It was not; and it is unlikely that they ever realised their mistake, but that is only part of the irony of the situation.
Repercussions

The full realisation of what had been 'accomplished' in the winding up and immediate formation of the new company was not at first apparent locally but it was not long in coming. The liquidation was to hurt many honest citizens and the Northern Territory Times and Gazette was scathing in its condemnation of those associated:

Capitalists of the city of cant and churches, because, the only loss has fallen on the business people of Palmerston and the employees, who have, we say it advisedly, been systematically and designedly swindled by men who, if report is correct, are rolling in wealth, who are shining lights of the churches, pillars of respectability, and amongst the most honoured of men in South Australia. These models of every virtue have gone out and studied 'a new way to pay old debts'... (by) ... robbing the bone and sinew of the country they profess to wish to advance; men who spend every shilling made in the Territory where it is made, and without whom the place would soon perish, or at most exist merely as a government station ... the small shareholders ... have been ignored and the creditors ... have not been paid. The wire-pullers have as usual skinned the lamb ... a new syndicate is formed, and apparently without let or hindrance ... take over the concession, buy the old company's plant for a song ... and leave the creditor ... to whistle for claims.

According to the newspaper, Biddles, the loyal servant, had also been dismissed and was still owed much of his salary. A new manager was soon to be appointed and the Company's creditors were paid only five shillings in the pound.24

But the repercussions from these maneuverings were wider spread than was known to the editor, because from a copy of an undated agreement which has only recently come to light, it would appear that many of the directors of the 'old company' were soon to be replaced after the events just described. The document apparently originates from the Daly River Plantation Company's Secretary, Wilkinson, and was drawn up in his office at 2 Pirie Street, Adelaide. It purports to list Bullock, Gray and a Saul Solomon as the three directors of the 'new' company and was filed in the Land Office on 30 July 1886.
The Solomon now listed in the agreement may or may not have been the prominent Darwin businessman, V.L. Solomon, who later represented the Territory in the South Australian Parliament and who had, prior to the wind-up, registered Delissa's most recent application for a 300 acre block on the Cox Peninsula which would have presumably enabled him to become part of the original syndicate (appendix iii).

The beginning of the end

Whatever the new arrangements were they did not last long and nothing further was to be achieved. The newly appointed manager of Daly River Plantation Company, W.W. Heath, arrived on the Woosung in May and presumably carried out his intention of shifting the plant and machinery from Delissaville to the Daly within a few days of his arrival.25

Meanwhile, the Queensland sugar industry, first started in 1865, which had invested over £5 000 000 and had hitherto produced some £1 000 000 per annum for that Colony, was now in trouble due to world over-production caused by the expansion of the sugar beet industry on the continent of Europe and particularly in newly unified Germany. This situation had been exacerbated by the high cost of labour due to government regulation. Mills were closing and no cultivation was being done.26

That mainstay of the British sugar monopoly, the West Indian plantations, were in dire straits and it was expected that they were about to collapse completely without any hope of recovery. All tropical products were similarly affected.27

Poett's plantation, whose land incidentally had been approved for special survey in the name of W.D. Glyde,28 was also wound up and its plant and equipment put under the hammer of Adcock Brothers on 6 March 1885.29

In June 1885 it was decided that the 10 000 acres on the Daly, which W.D Glyde had acquired subsequent to Owston's withdrawal, was to be subdivided into small blocks suitable for small settlers and to be sold at auction.
By March 1886 there were many failures in the Northern Territory following the collapse of the Commercial Bank of South Australia which had occurred a month earlier on 24 February 1886. By May a full-scale financial crisis affected every sector of the infant economy with, as Kirkland put it, "defalcations, insolvencies, poverty and distress ... frightful depression", on every hand.30

The *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* mirrored the general feeling and many current emotions. Comment swung between despair and anger, frustration and hope. Why should the southern part of the colony's 'stupidities' be allowed to unduly affect the Northern Territory with 'retrenchment', when the potential of the north is so much higher than the south? 31

The bonus for sugar should be stopped, it said, and transferred to something that has an immediate market in the Territory, such as rice which had an annual consumption requirement of 827 tons and would return over £10 000 per annum.32

Concern was expressed that if it was seen that the sugar industry had failed, how would the Territory be able to encourage European settlers. Perhaps they could be attracted from Germany with the promise of the allocation of fifty blocks of 100 acres of best land for a corresponding number of farmers and their families. Inducements could also include an assisted passage.33

Additionally it asked, why are Chinese occupants of government land being warned off, despite their having succeeded with their cultivations. They deserve to be given some form of title as rent-paying tenants. To make matters worse land speculation in town allotments at Burrundie had now pushed rents even higher than in Darwin itself.34

Kirkland continued - why are Queensland sugar planters reported to be going to the Cambridge Gulf with encouragement from the West Australian Government? They should be motivated to come to the Territory where there were good prospects for obtaining cheap, imported coolie labour.
The South Australian Government had put too much emphasis, he said, on encouraging development of large blocks of land which were only suitable for syndicates and speculators whilst bona fide settlers were discouraged by having every obstacle thrown in their way.35

'Working Men's Leases', as they were known had been adopted in the Crown Lands Amendment Act of 1885 by the South Australian Government but the Northern Territory had been excluded. This Act provided for blocks, not exceeding twenty acres, to be made available at a rental dictated by supply and demand. It was mooted, by Kirkland, that if this were to be adopted in the Territory it would solve many problems, not the least of which would be to enable the settlement of unemployed Chinese on land on which they could grow very much needed produce for the colony. This would surely be a better solution than having them 'loafing about Cavanagh Street or playing fan-tan night and day'. 36

Why, he bleated, are small farmers not being induced to migrate from the poverty-stricken lands in South Australia to come north to the Daly and Adelaide Rivers where there were large tracts of land to be broken up and developed successfully? Sergison's plantation at Beatrice Hill on the Adelaide River, now under the management of Fisher and Lyons, was demonstrating every sign of success in the cultivation of coffee37 and, as he had pointed out earlier, there was some magnificent land on the banks of the Daly River just recently surveyed which he hoped would be opened up to small farmers. 38

The Sugar Industry continues to be promoted

Through every complaint and flight of fancy there still ran the thread of hope for the recovery and success of a revived and efficient sugar industry. Kirkland never ceased to remind his readers of what might have been, had Delissa only been permitted to bring his great talent to bear on the situation. He still hoped, it seemed, for a second coming.
On 23 January 1886 he gives an account of that great man’s return to Singapore from England whence he had been seeking a subsidy for shipping lines to call at ‘his’ harbour at Sandakan which was to provide an immense impetus to the already growing trade between Australia and Sabah. All that had prevented the establishment to date of a vigorous and viable sugar industry was ‘want of capital, hasty selection of land and bad management’.39

Otto Brandt, a comparative newcomer, seemed at first to have had some success at growing sugar at Shoal Bay. He had been one of the earliest to apply for a grant of land under the Sugar Act of 1880, but had been turned down. Nonetheless, he was a persistent man, and by all accounts a farmer of ability. Frustrated in his earlier attempt to acquire a more substantial holding under the Act, he satisfied himself with a smaller acreage at Shoal Bay on land which must have given every impression to him of being similar to the Polders of Holland which had been reclaimed from the sea, which were, and continue to be, immensely fertile and entirely suitable for long-term and sustainable cultivation.

What he did not know was that in climates where precipitation is greater than evaporation and the land is drained, as in the Polder, there is no danger from the salts which have previously permeated the soil from the seas which have once covered it. These conditions do not exist in Australia where evaporation rates for much of any year are very high. In consequence, where those climatic conditions apply, salts, from sea inundation no matter how ancient, can be eventually drawn upwards to sterilise the surface soil. The rate and mechanics of the process can be complex. Suffice it to say that in Shoal Bay it did not take long before cultivation inevitably caused salinization with disastrous effect to Brandt’s enterprise.40

At any rate he tried and that was good enough for Kirkland to devote a great deal of copy in promoting his success for as long as it lasted. During May 1885 the Government’s newly acquired steamer Palmerston arrived ex Maryborough with Brandt’s sugar refining machinery.41 By then he employed eighty men and intended having 200 acres under cane in the next season.42
Brandt is reported to have started crushing on 3 July 1886. All his machinery seemed to work well \(^4\) and though he had started with the poorest part of his crop, which showed what was described as the ill effects of the late dry season, he managed to produce fifteen tons of a darkish sugar.\(^5\) However, shortly afterwards the mill broke down and he had to send to Adelaide for spare parts.\(^6\) He managed to somehow get the machinery going again, probably by the end of August, so that he was able to produce at least a sample of good white sugar.\(^7\)

But it was not to last and the paper sadly reported in January of the following year that only a further ten tons were produced. The editor let his readers know that he believed that the failure was due to the land being impregnated with salt and went to say that if only the lands of the Daly had been opened up to bona fide planters such as Delissa and Brandt the Territory would now have scores of well-to-do planters cultivating its best lands.\(^8\)

*The short life of the Daly River Company - the last act*

Passages to and from the Daly River were now running regularly and smoothly with cargoes from the copper mine that had recently commenced in the area. In July 1886 there are reports of the barque *Nordenskold* loading with dispatch with already 360 tons of ore on board and also of the cutter *Perseverance* having returned from the Daly after another very smart run.\(^9\)

Apparently, however, by 1886 the Daly River Plantation Company was showing obvious signs of a shortage of capital and there are complaints by 'locals' that the estate should be broken up to give others a chance.\(^10\)

In September of the same year we read that the Company has only about thirty acres ploughed because they are strapped for funds. They have only one team of three horses, 'and that a poor one', so that they are unable to plant anything, not even maize for which there is a ready market.
They had reportedly a small nursery, which was being prepared for coffee, cocoa and tobacco, worked entirely by 'blackfellows'. In Kirkland's opinion the large landholders should be compelled to cultivate a stipulated acreage annually or forfeit their holdings so that they can be broken up into smaller holdings.\textsuperscript{50}

The play was not to last much longer and the curtain fell on a last scene that had all the trappings of a Victorian melodrama, but which was none the less tragic in its consequences for the people involved. The full report from the pages of the \textit{Northern Territory Times and Gazette} is still well worth reading for its vivid portrayal of loneliness, betrayal and the sad consequences of human frailty in that Godforsaken era.

The bare bones of the story are soon told. Wright Wainright Heath, the manager of the Daly River Company, was an elderly man with a son from an earlier marriage and a young wife and daughter. His health was none too good. His foreman, Donald Mackinnon, forced his attentions on the young wife and a regular liaison soon developed. On 31 August 1886 Heath became suspicious and taxed his wife with having an affair, and she, poor woman, tearfully confessed all.

Mackinnon was sent for and shot dead with two blasts from a shotgun within yards of the hut in which they lived. Heath then sent for the manager of the nearby copper mine and word was somehow got to Darwin by telegraph. On receipt of the news, Constable Finch of the Northern Territory Police sailed to Daly River to bring back the body of the murdered Mackinnon and Heath, who had immediately surrendered himself.\textsuperscript{51}

Heath was charged with murder and committed for trial at a hearing a few days later.\textsuperscript{52} He was found guilty on 8 October 1886. The jury recommended leniency, and the judge, taking this into account, sentenced him to 10 years hard labour. The prisoner requested that on account of his age and previous good character he be permitted to have the sentence carried out in Adelaide. He also requested that the sentence be backdated to the day on which he freely surrendered himself.
Many people wrote advocating some mitigation of Heath’s sentence in view of his state of mind at the time, on the joint grounds of provocation and self-defense and his excellent character. His sentence was ultimately shortened to two years which he served in Adelaide.

It is recorded that his son together with Heath’s wife and child returned to Darwin from the plantation on the Zulieka on 1 October 1886, after an eventful trip which resulted in three groundings, two on the river mouth and one more seriously on the Horse Shoe Reef at two o’clock in the small hours. Much of the cargo of ore had to be thrown overboard before the vessel was eventually floated off and the ship able to proceed under the direction of one of the engineers, as the captain was deemed to be incompetent.

Thus ended the last attempt at plantation agriculture on the Daly River. Whether it could ever have succeeded and what difference its failure made to the subsequent history of the Territory will be considered in the concluding chapters.
Reference

2 *Northern Territory Times and Gazette issues 1872 - 1889*, hereafter NTTG24/2/1883.
3 NTTG, 10/3/1883, 30/6/1883.
4 NTTG, 3/3/1883, 19/7/1884, 21/6/1884.
5 NTTG, 31/3/1883.
6 The announcement of Sergison's decision to give up the struggle was coincidental to Owston's decision, and as far as we can judge, was due to liquidity problems and he followed his own judgement in the matter.
7 NTTG, 14/7/1883.
8 NTTG, 8/2/1882
9 NTTG, 5/5/1883, 9/6/1883, 30/6/1883.
10 NTTG, 9/6/1883.
11 NTTG, 5/1/1884.
12 NTTG, 24/5/1884.
13 NTTG, 7/6/1884
14 NTTG, 21/6/1884
15 noted on NT Bk 4/179
16 NTTG, 15/8/1884.
17 NTTG, 23/8/1884.
18 NTTG, 8/11/1884.
19 NTTG, 31/1/1885.
20 NTTG, 24/1/1885.
21 NTTG, 7/3/1885.
22 NTTG, 31/1/1885.
23 NTTG, 28/3/1885.
24 NTTG, 30/5/1885.
25 NTTG, 31/1/1885.
26 NTTG, 22/11/1885.
27 NTRS 790; A5538, A5573)
28 NTTG, 21/2/1885.
NTTG, 6/6/1885, 27/6/1885.
NTTG, 6/3/1886, 1/5/1886.
NTTG, 24/7/1886.
NTTG, 26/7/1885.
NTTG, 15/11/1885.
NTTG, 15/11/1885.
NTTG, 14/8/1886.
NTTG, 28/8/1886.
NTTG, 24/4/1886.
NTTG, 2/1/1886.
NTTG, 23/1/1886.
NTTG, 8/1/1887.
NTTG, 23/5/1885.
NTTG, 2/1/1886.
NTTG, 3/7/1886.
NTTG, 10/7/1886.
NTTG, 24/7/1886.
NTTG, 4/9/1886.
NTTG, 8/1/1887.
NTTG, 3/7/1886, 10/7/1886.
NTTG, 21/8/1886.
NTTG 4/9/1886.
NTTG, 11/9/1886.
NTTG, 18/9/1886.
NTTG, 4/12/1886.
NTTG, 9/10/1886.
Analysis: In particular reference to the 'Sugar' Plantations on the Daly River and associated inferences

The Survey by the CSIRO in 1946/47 of the 'Top End' of the Northern Territory showed that whilst good agricultural soils are to be found their distribution can be patchy, difficult of access and, as in other agricultural areas throughout the world, sometimes subject to flooding.

Bauer, in an extrapolation of Survey findings has postulated that probably no more than 12,000 square miles throughout the whole region could be classed as agriculturally useful.

Twelve thousand square miles, or some 7,680,000 acres, is still a substantial area, though as a proportion in percentage terms of the total region it is less impressive, and the selection of any particular area for a specific agricultural purpose requires a degree of care premised upon a knowledge and experience that are adequate to the task.

The evidence of Delissa's inadequacy in this respect has been fully demonstrated. It is now necessary to consider the degree of Owston's proficiency in the selection of land suitable to his purpose and to further consider the competence of the then South Australian Government in this particularly difficult field.

It could be said that the blind enthusiasm which allowed Delissa to settle on the Cox Peninsula is evidence enough of successive South Australian administrations' ignorance in such matters. The various government officers, who were supposed to be able to advise the responsible Ministers on this, have all subsequently been said to have disapproved of the Delissaville site. This looks like wisdom after the event.

Nonetheless, a comparative analysis of the relative merits of the three different plantation areas, two delineated by the Survey Department and the other by Owston himself, should adequately discover the truth of the matter.
Owston's requirements

The basic requirements to be taken into account in the selection of agricultural land can be summed up as follows. There must be first a proper understanding of its purpose and, as a corollary of that an understanding of the demands of the product as to climate, soil and logistics.

For the present purposes we can ignore other factors such as labour, capital and marketing though it would be possible to demonstrate that Owston had considered these as well.

As far as the Government was concerned the purpose was quite clearly, solely to establish the viable and successful long-term cultivation of sugar cane. Owston on the other hand had a wider vision in view. This was, in his own words, not only to successfully propagate sugar, but to grow 'other products' as well which would be suitable to the soil and climate. He had no intention of becoming involved in a monoculture and his early correspondence on the wording of his contract with the Government to include other crops as well as sugar was categorical in its insistence on this point.

Sugar Cane (Saccharum officinarum) is a member of the Gramineae family and is cultivated in tropical and subtropical areas of the world. Mature canes may reach ten to twelve feet tall (3-6 m) and are from one to three inches (2.5-7.5 cm) in diameter. The crop requires at least 60 inches of rain (1,500 mm) or its equivalent in irrigation and takes from nine to as long as twenty-two months to mature, dependent on climate. In the sugar growing districts of Australia a growing period of some fifteen months is general.

It can be harvested year round, but this is generally done during the cooler months of the year. Propagation is generally by vegetative methods by planting cuttings or by 'rattooning' where, after harvesting, a portion of stalk is left from which is produced a succeeding crop. 'Ratooning' can be repeated two or three times in succession, but it is on a cycle of decreasing yield.
Sugar cane is grown on red volcanic soils or on the alluvial soils adjacent to rivers. It requires a deep friable loamy well-aerated soil. The ideal alluvial soil has an optimal mixture of sand, silt and clay which includes a measure of organic material. Drainage in these soils is good and where necessary can be augmented by either surface or underground drainage, dependent upon topography. Deep cultivation and preparation of the soil prior to planting is essential.

Varieties of sugar cane have improved markedly over the past hundred years and it can now be grown successfully over a wider spectrum of the essential soil type. However, in Owston's day it was necessary to be able to select a soil as near to the optimal as possible. These soils are naturally quite rare and on the Daly River are limited to those coming under the description of 'levee soils' - a classification that was probably coined by Owston himself and insisted upon by him as necessarily comprising the bulk of the soils on his chosen plantation site.

Similarly the prospective sugar grower in those days had to be aware of the need to maintain, and even improve upon, the inherent fertility of the soil. This would require, amongst other measures, as far as was possible, a rotational system that involved complementary mixed cropping. The need for, and the design of, such systems, tailored to specific areas was not only well recognised by British agriculturists and landowners of the time but was a characteristic of their farming method.

In addition the choice of site would depend upon the ease with which an adequate transport system, able to move large quantities of bulky product and to bring in supplies of fertilizer from time to time which, apart from organic waste from the sugar manufacturing process itself, was in those days almost entirely limited to importation of the equally difficult and bulky guano. This logistical imperative could only be maintained by water transport. Hence Owston's interest in seeking to obtain a chart of the river before finalising his selection.

It should be noted also that Owston was further constrained in his selection of a suitable site. He was not selecting only for himself but was obligated to select an overall area capable of being divided equably into two blocks of comparable potential and utility.
Three plantation sites compared

It is instructive, therefore, to compare the three plantation areas in this context of their potential utility. No titles were ever issued for these three sites but their areas are quite easy to identify: Owston's Plantation from the description that was given by Owston for the 20,000 acres (see p.70 and appendices iv. and v.); the other two from the Survey Department's draft sketch of their 20,000 acres which were subsequently divided into two equal blocks of 10,000 acres each and allocated to the Daly River Plantation Company and W.D. Glyde respectively (see appendices ii. and iii.).

From the land unit survey compiled and surveyed by Fogarty and Gibbs (see appendices vi. and vii.) it is possible to calculate with a fair degree of accuracy the relative cropping potential for each of the three blocks, which for the purpose of this exercise are designated:

(a) Owston's Plantation
(b) Glyde's Plantation
(c) The Daly River Plantation Company

The table shown overpage (fig. 4) has been drawn up from the Land Unit Map constructed by Fogarty and Gibbs and the descriptions of the type of soils and their potential use are based on their Land Unit Classification. For ease of demonstration the land units have been simplified and grouped according to basic soil type and utility within broad parameters and can be verified from the study itself. Relative areas are as accurate as can be achieved without actual ground truthing and can be considered as being truly indicative of the relative agricultural merits of the three posited areas.

Verification has also been obtained in a series of field trips to the area and by discussion with Officers of the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and of the Power and Water Authority who are familiar with the area. Additional confirmation of the relative merits of the different soils and of their agricultural potential for sugar growing and other cropping has been obtained from a well-known practical agriculturist of many years experience in the Territory, who is also well experienced in the Queensland sugar industry. The comparative table may be considered therefore as a valid tool in establishing the relative merits of each area and of the ability of the people who selected them.
Comparative Indicative Appraisal of Land Selected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Soils</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>acres</th>
<th>Sugar Rating</th>
<th>Other Rating</th>
<th>Potential for Cropping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Owston's Billabong &amp; Swamp</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2,200</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variable clays</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Med/low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levee Soil</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>8,200</td>
<td>Yes Med/low</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High/med</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Glyde's Billabong &amp; Swamp</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variable clays</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Med/low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levee Soil</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>Yes Med/low</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High/med</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Daly River Billabong Plantation &amp; Swamp</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Variable clays</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>4,700</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Med/low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levee Soil</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>Yes Med/low</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High/med</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Owston's selection indicates quite clearly that he knew what he was about. Over 80% of his selection has good agricultural potential and half of that area is suitable for sugar production to a varying degree. The distribution of the agriculturally useful areas within the overall selection is easily capable of being divided into two blocks of similar potential.

However it is quite a different matter with the 20,000 acres 'selected' by the Survey Department and which they had attempted to foist upon Owston. In the first instance it would have been virtually impossible to divide it equitably into two blocks. Virtually 26% of the total area was completely useless for agriculture and of the rest much of it was too far from the river to provide ease of working, and is virtually impossible to traverse for a great part of the Wet Season.

Its subsequent subdivision into two blocks is illuminating. Glyde, who was allocated the better half, purely by chance, as he had demanded the area that included Owston's buildings, nursery and initial cropping area, did absolutely nothing with it.

The Daly River Plantation Company, the last great hope of the South Australian Government, was allocated an area which comprised 51% that was completely useless, and according to a well-known local farmer who has farmed in the area for over forty years, the only area theoretically capable of growing sugar is completely inundated every year during the wet season.

Further to that the vegetation covering the rest of the area is so dense that, apart from any other consideration, the cost of clearing it would be substantial to say the least. The tree and bush cover is so heavy that helicopters tend to avoid overflying the area if at all possible. Indeed the area is so bad as an agricultural proposition that one would be tempted to think that its allocation to the Daly River Company was done on purpose to finish the whole thing off once and for all.

However, there is a limit to be placed on any 'conspiracy theory'. The most likely reason for it lies in the ignorance of the financiers who were backing the scheme and the inefficiency of a Survey Department which preferred to draw lines across the map irrespective of any requisite purpose.
Who and what was Owston? We know that he was born on 27 July 1818, only three years after the Battle of Waterloo, in the hamlet of Thorpe Basset close to the northern boundary of the East Riding of Yorkshire. It was a prosperous agricultural area, and as the son of a country gentleman he would be well versed in the organisation of the mixed arable farming of the time which was well advanced in both its science and its practice. Married in 1851 he was living in Brighton, South Australia in 1853 and some three years later moved to Melbourne. He is described as a merchant and seems to have been involved successfully in enterprises there as well as in Sydney and the Northern Territory. He died aged seventy-five in 1893, survived by his wife, son and two daughters and was buried on 7 November 1893 in Melbourne Cemetery.

That is the sum total about him that can be gleaned at present from any of the normal sources. But from the foregoing investigation of his time in the Territory we can make some reasonably safe assumptions. He was a man of tremendous energy and wide experience. Yorkshiremen are often recognised as being straightforward, bluff and are often characterised by a nature that does not suffer fools gladly. Owston was all of that. There is also not much doubt as to his competence as a farmer and manager.

That he was well versed in the best science and practice of the agriculture of his day is evidenced, not only by his ability to select from virgin land one of the very few areas well suited to his purpose, but also by the testimony that has come down to us of his successful cultivation. This could only have been effected by someone who was thoroughly capable and able to farm successfully with limited resources. There was, in any case, no one who could have helped him given the circumstances of the Territory in those days.

The many different crops that he pioneered are still the crops that are seen as being proper to the Daly River, and even sugar, though not attempted as a commercial crop today, is still grown there for domestic purposes. On the other hand the land allocated to the Daly River Company broke many hearts and has never been able to be brought under subsequent successful cultivation.
Finally Owston had the sense to realise when the game was not worth the candle. In spite of the tremendous amount of energy, time and money that he had expended on the ill-fated project, he still had the strength of character to extricate both himself and his partners in a timely fashion and not indulge in false hopes. Of all those involved in that great but useless vision, the Palmerston Plantation Company partners were probably the only ones to come out still wearing their britches.

*The role of the South Australian Government in ultimate failure.*

The only logical and repeated rationale made by successive administrations that makes any sense for the promotion by government of large-scale plantation agriculture was to mobilise private capital and initiative to provide the basic infrastructure upon which successful colonization depended. However, that whole concept was continually to be undermined, not only by governments confusing speculation with proper capital development, but by a lack of understanding and hard commitment to its implications and needs.

Letters and comment in the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* are indicative. On 24 February 1883 one correspondent refers to:

> the wail of pity for Mr Delissa and managers of unsuccessful companies in general ... the sugar industry is not ruined because one company has yet failed in its manufacture. If people select land unsuitable for the growth of any crop they generally fail.\(^5\)

Similarly on 26 January 1881 the paper reported on the dissatisfaction of "terriers' (Territorian battlers) with the public servants who were purchasing town areas of good land taken up under the plantation clauses of the Land Act only for the purpose of speculation, and which effectively prevented others with more practical needs from being able to purchase at all.\(^3\)

Parsons, both as Minister and later in his role as Government Resident, is recognised as being absolutely committed to the ideal of Territory development. Nevertheless, he exemplified the lack of understanding of what was needed in his attitude, not only to Owston but also in his two-faced dealings with Brandt who has only briefly been mentioned in this study.
Suffice it to say that there are clear indications that Brandt was ambitious of success and probably had the required ability. Nevertheless, he was thwarted in his every effort to obtain land on the Daly, and Parsons, while pledging him support, was at the same time actively engaged in undermining him:

with the exception of the Delissaville Company who might be allowed a block (on the Daly) the work done ... at Brandts plantation forms no ground for asking any concessions ... the land on the Daly is too valuable ... to be given away and should be offered in blocks of hundreds not thousands of acres.4

The Commission of Inquiry refers at one point to badly disciplined survey parties as a reason for the initial problems in the establishment of the Finnis settlement which immediately followed the annexation in 1863.5 The evidence of things being little better subsequent to Goyder's appointment as Surveyor General and throughout his long tenure is at best mixed.

Lavington Glyde, who had been Minister responsible for Territory affairs four times between 1863 and 1868, raised the question when in opposition, of McMinn's unexplained behaviour in leaving for the Roper River in 1871 and thus delaying the completion of the Telegraph Line. Lavington Glyde believed this to have been deliberate on McMinn's part because he had been an unsuccessful tenderer for the contract to construct the northern section of the line.6

Very little in real terms was achieved by the Surveyor General's Department and there were many instances of dissatisfaction with slipshod work. For example there is a letter written in 1876 to the Government Resident from Katherine. The writer complains that his block has been wrongly placed by the Survey Department. He had selected good land to the south of the telegraph station, but the Department had sited it on inferior land (comprising mostly rock) to the north of the station. Unless this was rectified, the complainant said, he would be obliged to request the return of rent which he had already paid.7

There are other examples, but even if these were able to be disputed there still remains the fact that land allocations permitted in association with Delissa on the Cox Peninsula were allowed to go ahead, virtually without let or hindrance, whereas anything to do with Owston's selection on the Daly was objected to by Goyder at every turn.
A check of the principal surveys that were completed under the Act shows that there would appear to be no consistency in the application of rectangular blocks, and only in the case of Owston’s selection are the proportions of breadth to length in the survey of land stipulated and applied.\(^8\)

**Aboriginal involvement**

It would be too much to expect any immediate real understanding between divergent cultures in the late eighteen hundreds. The record is clear on that. Understanding comes only with time and mutual respect, which requires willingness on the one hand and realisation of actual interdependency on the other. Owston himself was often blamed for being too friendly with the Aboriginals but there is no evidence to show that either he or they were unable to develop a necessary understanding. On the contrary it is only when he was not on the plantation that any trouble developed. The evidence shows that on both Owston’s Plantation and the later Daly River Plantation, Aboriginals gained employment without any coercion being applied and shortly afterwards when the Jesuit Missionaries established their Mission very close to where Owston set up his headquarters they were able to successfully initiate agricultural training with Aborigines of the area. Aboriginal involvement was essential to Owston’s plans since, nineteenth century agriculture, especially tropical agriculture, was labour intensive.

**Late nineteenth century agricultural machinery**

It has been said that the lack of suitable machinery was a factor in the failure to establish a viable large-scale agricultural industry. That argument has no validity. Owston had been careful to select an area where horse implements could be used for cultivation without difficulty. But even had this not been the case, steam ploughs were available and in use at the time which, though less maneuverable, were fully as capable of efficient cultivation in heavy soils as anything we have today. In ploughing, the technique was to use multiple furrow reversible mouldboard ploughs, winched by heavy steel cable between two traction engines set at either end of the paddock and were capable of covering four to five acres per day. I have, myself seen this, done by nineteenth century traction engines in an area and under conditions that would be impossible for any wheeled tractor today.
The Northern Territory Commission

A Commission of Inquiry was ordered by the South Australian House of Assembly in 1895 to investigate the reasons for 'the present unsatisfactory condition of the Northern Territory'. In essence it was really an attempt to find reasons for the failure of all their efforts since the Annexation of 1863. It held thirty-five meetings, interviewed sixty-nine witnesses and its report comprised almost two hundred pages of closely printed script. The Commission was unable to unravel what it called 'the contradictory nature of the evidence' and it has been described by others, including Bauer,11 as being little better than a cover up. That is probably unfair, but the inquiry produced no clear findings and its recommendations at best were merely an attempt to close the stable door. Owston himself was dead and of those who did give evidence many were from Queensland or were either too closely involved with the unsavoury aspects or not involved at all.

Nevertheless, the Commission listed some of the most common reasons given by witnesses for the sorry state of affairs that had eventuated in the Territory. Though these were not endorsed by Commissioners many would seem to have been germane to the question. Generally speaking, as far as the agricultural industry was concerned, nothing to the point emerged. The reasons were to remain buried under a sea of inadequate verbiage, hardly to be touched upon by anything of relevance.

The Commission's recommendations produced nothing better than a few illogicalities, irrelevancies and motherhood statements. The gist of these were: that experts should look into the matter; that experimental farms should be established; that sugar mills should be set up by government at strategic locations; that the public should be encouraged to take up 160 acre blocks; that the importation of coloured labour should be discouraged; and, last but not least with some admission of the truth of the matter, that they could see no reason why the Northern Territory 'under suitable laws and administration' should not be successful. In keeping with the nature of matters under inquiry the Board of six produced four dissenting votes and the recommendations passed accordingly.
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1 Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Melbourne and Adelaide.
2 Northern Territory Times and Gazette issues 1872 - 1889, hereafter NTTG
   24/2/1883
3 NTTG 26/1/1881.
4 NTRS 790: 679/1884
5 South Australian Parliamentary Papers, No 19, 1895, Report of the Northern
   Territory Commission, Minutes of proceedings, evidence and appendices.
   Chairman, Wiliam Haslam, p. xix.
6 P.F. Donovan, p. 47.
7 NTRS 790: A 1771/1877.
8 Northern Territory Government, Department of Lands and Planning, Land Record
   Unit.
Conclusions

The complete failure in the 1880s to enable the establishment of viable agricultural enterprises in the Territory may be sheeted home directly to the ineptitude of successive South Australian Governments in coming to grips with the problem. Not only were successive Ministers unable to understand the basic requirements of agricultural development but they were apparently quite unable, even if they saw the need, to set up departments or appoint government officers who were suitably informed and who had sufficient credibility to effect desired outcomes. This lack caused them to depend too much upon the Survey Department for advice. There also seemed to be a type of chauvinism that favoured South Australians, which produced at best an unfavourable bias against people from other colonies. It was a common enough phenomenon in the Australia of the time; but it had fatal consequences for Territorian agriculture.

There are many associated ironies. The reasons for the failure of plantation agriculture were never properly examined by the Commission of Inquiry of 1895. The recognition of the Government of South Australia's absolute failure to establish a viable colony in the Northern Territory was ultimately acknowledged only when it handed over the Territory's administration to the Federal Government in 1911. There is no doubt that the two events are linked. The attempt to establish plantations represented South Australia's last great hope of promoting agriculture, and their complete failure precipitated the necessary final loss of confidence.

Both contemporary and present-day literature presents every possible reason for this failure - from poor soil, poor weather conditions, lack of expertise and suitable labour to Aboriginal unrest, lack of capital and poor management. There are examples of all of these but the reasons are less complex.

Given the speculation, almost amounting to peculation, and the active encouragement by government to 'investors' to take up unsuitable land, one could be persuaded that the question should be not so much why they failed but how anything was achieved in the prevailing circumstances.
There was no one in successive governments capable of a basic understanding of the requirements of establishing large-scale agricultural ventures, or if there was, they were certainly unable overcome to the maneuvers of the Survey Department. A succession of short-term government administrations permitted little continuity between Ministers. Too much power devolved upon long-term public servants, in particular those of the Survey Department, which under Goyder was thus enabled to influence events well beyond what was wise. There is the basis of at least one good script for 'Yes Minister' in the relevant documentation.

With the vagaries of the international marketing situation as regards sugar and the escalating and protracted nature of the financial crisis that beset Australia, and in particular the colony of South Australia, in the decade 1885 - 95 it seems unlikely that plantation agriculture could have succeeded in the Territory.

However, the Palmerston Plantation Company, taken as a particular case study, could well have survived. Neither soil, capital, nor expertise were lacking.

As a merchant of long standing and experience Owston would have been able to develop suitable markets. Furthermore, if in the long or short run 'Plantation' development of agriculture proved untenable because of labour problems, he would have been able to adapt the concept suitably along lines that were being developed in the arable areas of east of England and Scotland with which he would be familiar. But, as he was well aware, any hope of sustained success had to be premised upon long-term security of tenure. Ultimately this was effectually denied and was the principal reason for the company's withdrawal.

A further irony emerges with the successful 'cover up' of the real site of the blocks which had been chosen by Owston. These, if properly identified, could have provided an immediate nucleus of successful agricultural development. On the other hand, the inferior land allocated to the Daly River Plantation Company, which Owston had rejected, was erroneously believed for many years to be an example of some of the best land in the Territory. The areas suitable for agriculture which had first been selected by Owston had to be rediscovered and pioneered gradually over many subsequent years.
Because of the lack of a viable agricultural industry there was no place for the skilled agricultural worker who could have survived despite the high cost of living. The possibility of men being able to fend for themselves was circumvented by government regulation which made it difficult for the stranger to the region to become established. Wages though high relative to other areas, were never sufficient to cover the costs of the basic necessities of life for a man with a family.

For a labouring family to survive in these circumstances it was essential that their income be augmented adequately in the way that was possible only with farm work. An agricultural worker would normally supplement a wage by living off the land and receive other benefits in kind which were absolutely necessary.

In essence nothing of relevance to the future had been achieved. Not the least of the opportunities lost was that no foundation was left on which the very necessary aspects of 'learning' from the experience could be built. It has been left to successive generations to 'reinvent the wheel' time and time again.

The consequences have been serious for the Territory. Even forty years later in 1921/22 this analysis was given:

the few settlers now in the Territory are not sufficient in number or generally in calibre, to make any general headway in agriculture. There are practically no local markets for produce which are large enough to keep even these in prosperity. The only hope of attracting any settlement here is to establish crops that will sell on the world's market and will pay for the growing and the freight. By the individual efforts of good farmers, I am convinced that such crops as cotton, tobacco, peanuts and so on, offer the chance of this being accomplished, but the country has been given so poor a reputation that I fear the government will have to demonstrate that this can be done before settlement will come this way.

Small wonder that it has taken years for the Territory to develop. The establishment of a viable agricultural industry at the outset would have also created an ambiance in which indigenous Australians would have been enabled gradually to be trained in a worthwhile way towards ultimate individual and collective economic independence.
Not only would they have developed useful skills on which further education, practical and theoretical, could have been founded, but managers and others of a ‘respectable’ white workforce could have rapidly learned to adapt to the Northern Territory’s particular difficulties. The necessity of adaptation would have been the enabling process in which they learned to work with and relate to their Aboriginal neighbours.

Aboriginals had not asked for the colonists to come to their land. Their ways had developed over thousands of years and were different. Essentially they had developed their own economic independence and did not need European mores or technology to survive. Yet willy nilly they had been swept up into participation, no matter how marginal, in the nineteenth century explosion of intercontinental immigration from Europe. Typically there was resentment and reciprocal misunderstanding.

The natural and necessary development of mutual respect, understanding and transfer of learning could have been enabled very early by the people themselves, both black and white, if they had been directly involved together, in viable enterprise that offered advantages to both.
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GRS 1:652/1878: From W. Owston, 19/12/1878, requesting information on grant of £200 towards expenses of proceeding to select land for sugar cane.

GRS 1:6/1879: From W. Owston, 9/1/1879, purposes to proceed under certain conditions.

GRS 1:71/1879: From W. Owston, 23/1/79, asking if papers will be forwarded in time for sailing of the *General Pel*.

GRS 1: 80/1879: From W. Owston, 13/2/1879, requesting Govt Resident to be advised of his intention to select land for sugar cultivation.


GRS 1: 450/ 1879: From W. Owston, 24/9/1879, re Palmerston Plantation Company’s intentions of expenditure on development.
170

GRS 1: 532/1879: From W. Owston, 3/11/1879, stipulation as to broader definition of produce.

GRS 1: 532/1879: From W. Owston, 3/11/1879, documentation re conditional grant of land not yet received.

GRS 1: 560/1879: From W. Owston, 8/12/1879, documentation re land Grant still not received.

GRS 1: 565/1879: From W. Owston, 22/12/1879, telegrams documentation re land Grant still not received.

GRS 1: 75/1880: From W. Owston, 24/1/1880, from Owston, requesting alteration to draft agreement.

GRS 1: 76/1880: From W. Owston, 27/1/1880, requesting alteration to clause six of draft agreement.

GRS 1: 78/1880: From W. Owston, 27/1/1880, re expenditure under the Agreement.

GRS 1: 90/1880: From W. Owston, 3/2/1880, returning draft agreement as negotiated and urging early attention.

GRS 1: 96/1880: From W. Owston, 24/2/1880, telegram requesting final Agreement to be returned or he will abandon the enterprise.

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GRS 1: 199/1880: From Owston, 8/4/1880, requesting use of Govt boat at Darwin to survey land on Daly and Adelaide rivers.

GRS 1: 650/1880: From Owston, 6/11/1880, applying for 10,000 acres on Daly in approximate area that already outlined. Min. recommends that this application be granted in lieu of original 20,000 acres.

GRS 1: 79A/1881: From Minister, 27/1/1881, Re Owstons concession - appears to be ‘Ultra Vires’ the Act No 194/80.

GRS 1: 121/1881: From Minister, 21/2/1881, request for list of applications under Act. All selections to be fixed by 31/12/1881.

GRS 1: 366/1881: From Minister, 12/7/1881, proposed amendment to Sugar Act to permit in response to Cox Peninsula concessions to amalgamate.

GRS 1: 487/1882: From Govt Resident, 22/8/1882, Owston refuses survey on Daly in accordance with Act. Minister refers matter for further discussion in Cabinet in view of spirit of Ministers King’s decisions.
GRS 1: 23/1882, From Govt Resident, 11/12/1882, Forwarding letter from Palmerston plantation Company requesting return of fees. File note of 11/3/83 refers Minister's understanding that Company has withdrawn this application.

GRS 1: 216/1883, From Govt Resident, 9/3/1883, Return of Sugar Blocks surveyed. One only.

GRS 1: 381/1883, From W.D. Glyde, 21/6/1883, on behalf of Palmerston Plantation Company, requesting return of survey fees. Ordered paid less expenses of approx 22 pounds.

GRS 1: 491/1883, From W.O. Glyde, 15/8/1883, on behalf of Melbourne financiers, applying for land grant of Owston's selection. Not recommended. 27/8/1883.

GRS 1: 505/1883, From W.D. Glyde, 27/8/1883, applying on his own behalf for 10,000 acres of Owston's selection.

GRS 1: 792/1883, From Govt Resident, 17/11/1883, enclosing tracing of Survey Depts intended survey for Owston's plantation which Owston would not accept.

GRS 1: 414/1884, From Minister, 2/5/84, requesting details on progress on 'sugar plantations. details supplied by Ward.

GRS 1: 707/1884, From Govt Resident 19/7/1884, return of detail requested by minister on 2/5/1884. Earlier detail 'inadvertently' supplied by Ward.

GRS 1: 858/1884, From W.D.Glyde, 16/9/1884, re transfer of Owston's selection to himself.

GRS 1: 918/1884, From Delissa Pioneer Sugar Company, 11/10/1884, application for transfer of site to the Daly River.

GRS 1: 918/1884, From Govt Resident, 13/10/1884, Delissa Pioneer Sugar Company seek concessions on Daly River.

GRS 1: 971/1884, From David Lindsay surveyor, 21/10/1884, with suggestions for Glyde's Plantation to incorporate Owston's buildings and nursery.

GRS 1: 1011/1884, From Delissa Pioneer Sugar Company Deputation, 11/11/1884, asking that certain concessions may be made.

GRS 1: 1043/1884, From Delissa Pioneer Sugar Company, 14/11/84, request for plans of Owston's 20,000 acre selection on Daly

GRS 1: 21/1885 From W. B. Wilkinson, 8/1/1885, applying for grants of 10,000 acres on the Daly River on behalf of shareholders of the Delissa Pioneer Sugar Company.

GRS 1: 76/1885, From Delissa Pioneer Sugar Company, 23/1/1885, receipt of 500 pounds being survey fees for land on the Daly River.
NORTHERN TERRITORY RESIDENT - COORESPONDECE RECEIVED (NTRS 790A), sourced Northern Territory Archives.

NTRS 790: A 1854/1876, From Reckitts, 9/8/1876, Re Indigo sample.
NTRS 790: A 1771/1876, From Harris, 16/10/1876, Survey of Block at Katherine in wrong place.
NTRS 790: A 3957/1876, From Minister, 31/1/1878, advising of Owston’s arrival and requesting that he be given every assistance.
NTRS 790: A 3363/1878, From Schonburgh, Director Botanic Gardens, Adelaide, 18/11/1878, recommendations re establishment Govt Garden.
NTRS 790: A 3578/1879, From Owston, 2/8/1879, advising of his return to Adelaide to make application for a conditional purchase of land on the Adelaide River.
NTRS 790: A 3589, From Sergison, Manager Gardens, 8/8/187?, concerning pay dispute. Requesting McMinn to communicate Gov’t’s decision to the men.
NTRS 790: A 3992/1880, From Minister, 13/4/1880, advising of Owston’s return to Darwin and requesting that he be given every assistance.
NTRS 790: A 4038/1880, From Minister, 26/5/1880, Telegram advising of Sergison’s appointment as Warden.
NTRS 790: A 4070/1880, From Owston, 22/6/1880, advising of his selection on the Daly and providing a full description of its position so that it may be reserved as a selected block.
NTRS 790: A 4072/1880, From Owston, 25/6/1880, requesting government assistance to finally fix the boundaries on the block selected.
NTRS 790: A 4100/1880, From Price, 19/7/1880, Telegram informing of his return on 29th, asking if Owston has returned.
NTRS 790: A 4109/1880, From Minister, 26/7/1880, telegram informing that Bill re Owston’s land now before Parliament.
NTRS 790: A 4103/1880, From Minister 22/7/1880, Delissa’s land grant of 10,000 acres approved on same terms as spence and Owston - survey to include Peninsula contained by Pt darwin, Bynoe Harbour, Charles Pt., West Pt., and Talc Hd.
NTRS 790: A 4128/1880, From Owston, 17/8/1880, confirming receipt of the Government Residents Letter of 23/6/1880 which confirmed that Owston’s selection has been specially reserved for himself and his partners which he has selected at his own cost. He leaves for South to prepare.

NTRS 790: A 4278/1880, From DeLissa, 17/10/1880, Thanking for supply of cane - no more till further notice.

NTRS 790: A 4271/1880, From Delissa, 18/10/1880, Applying for ten tons sugar cane with instructions for Holtze on how to to the job.

NTRS 790: A 4273/1880, From DeLissa, 19/10/1880, saying that the gardens will be unable to supply him with enough cane and enclosing a ‘private letter’ accusing Holtze of possible sabotage of his crop.

NTRS 790: A 4272/1880, From Delissa, 19/10/1880, more about quality of cane supply and concern with blacks.

NTRS 790: A 4280/1880, From DeLissa, 23/10/1880, Re cane (unreadable)

NTRS 790: A 4288/1880, From Delissa, 23/10/1880, requesting various tropical plants from Govt Gardens.

NTRS 790: A 4511/1880, From Minister, 1/12/1880, Re Owston’s expenses. no initial record of same.

NTRS 790: A 4475/1880, From DeLissa, 20/12/1880, re loan of packsaddles and success of Pioneer voyage up the creek.

NTRS 790: A 4446/1881, From Owston, 15/2/1881, request for 16 tons Sugar cane.

NTRS 790: A 4529/1881, From Minister, 10/3/1881, All particulars of boundaries under Sugar Act to be surveyed and full info to be furnished through Minister for Surveyor General.

NTRS 790: A 4540/1881, From Lyons, 12/3/1881, Applications for 10,000 acres adjoining Sergison’s block with bank Guarantee as to payment of fees.

NTRS 790: A 4542/1881, From Secy to Minister, 16/3/1881, no site except Delissa’s to be fixed on Cox Peninsula until full list from Minister’s office is received.

NTRS 790: A 4557/1881, From Sergison, 25/3/1881, Application of Fisher Lyons for 10,000 acres on Adelaide River. Approved subject to necessary public access.


NTRS 790: A 4587/1881, From Lyons, 14/4/1881, Re transfer of special survey into name of Brown, Fisher, Lyons, Sergison.
NTRS 790: A 4613/1881, From Cloppenberg, 29/4/1881, applying for enough sugar cane to plant fifty acres in following September.

NTRS 790: A 40/1881 From Minister, 8/1/1881, List of applicants for Sugar concessions approved by Cabinet and Governor. (Contained in letter to Resident of 5/4/1881).

NTRS 790: A 4630/1881, From DeLisa, 6/5/1881, Application for special survey on Cox Peninsula of 10,000 acres.

NTRS 790: A 4545/1881, From Minister, 9/5/1881, Re Spences query on Surveyors' insistence on rectangular blocks on their selection. McMinn to report.

NTRS 790: A 4636/1881, From Minister, 9/5/1881, Re advice No Shares to be purchased by Govt Resident.

NTRS 790: A 4042/1881, From Minister, 14/5/1881, Cost of survey to be deposited before survey (no document).

NTRS 790: A 4655?/1881, From McMinn, 31/5/1881, Fwdg past application Fisher Lyons/ Sergison for transmission to Adelaide.

NTRS 790: A 4708/1881, From Minister, 1/6/1881, No shares in sugar companies to be held by Govt Resident.

NTRS 790: A 5547/1881, From Secy to Minister, 18/8/1881, query on survey fee receipts and rent licences.

NTRS 790: A 5265/1882, From Surveyor General, 19/2/1882, requesting info on boundaries of all blocks under sugar Act. Plan to be sent by next post.

NTRS 790: A 5580/1882 From Minister, 10/6/1882, telegram requesting detail on surveys made on sugar concessions. McMinns reply - Palmerston Plantation Company Fees paid, but decline to have survey made in accordance with Act.

NTRS 790: A 5457/1882, From Minister, 14/6/1882, re withdrawal of NT lands for sale until further notice.


NTRS 790: A ??74/1882, From Surveyor General, 30/5/1882, Re purchase money Fisher and Lyons on Adelaide River.

NTRS 790: A 5537/1882, From Minister, 10/7/1882, Delissa's application for fifty acres on Cox Peninsula not granted.

NTRS 790: A 5477/1882, From Minister, 18/7/1882 (?), telegram requesting info on completed special survey and fees received. Advising that future fees to be received in Adelaide.

NTRS 790: A 5538/1882 From Minister, 10/7/1882, approval for Glyde's special survey. No document. File note refers 'filed in Land Office 27/7/82'.- (not discovered).

NTRS 790: A 5515/1882, From Secy to Minister, 17/7/1882, Palmerston Plantation Company's survey not to be made until payment of fees. No document.

NTRS 790: A 5547/1882, From Secy to Minister, 1/8/1882, asking if estimate of land sales includes land for which survey fees have been paid. No document


NTRS 790: A 5563/1882 From G.T. Bean 9/8/1882, Minister has assured him that survey fees need not be paid in advance.


NTRS 790: A 5611/1882, From Minister, 8/9/1882, get payment of survey fees from G.T Bean if concessions applied.

NTRS 790: A 5607/1882, From Minister, 18/9/1882, Telegram for immediate info on survey fees received.

NTRS 790: A 5680/1882, From Minister, 28/10/1882, requesting that where survey fees have been received, survey is to be completed as early as possible and purchase money to be obtained at once.


NTRS 790: A 5985/1883, From Minister, 18/4/1883, Palmerston Plantation Company have withdrawn their application for the return of fees.


NTRS 790: A 5986/1883, From Parsons, Govt Resident 29/3/1883, Re Fisher Lyons payment.

NTRS 790: A 57097/1883, From Minister, 13/8/1884, Re survey of Glydes land Daly River. Glyde to supply definition of boundaries (Owstons Plantation).

NTRS 790: A 6691/1882, From Parsons, 15/11/1882, advising of his resignation as minister and appointment as Govt Resident.

679/84: Unallocated File from Land Office, date unclear, from Govt Resident Parsons to Minister.

NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT, DEPARTMENT OF LANDS AND PLANNING, LAND RECORD UNIT, sourced Land Records Unit.

File from Land Office, dated 30/7/1886 and providing a list of Shareholders and directors of The Daly River Plantation Company with Section Nos allocated to each.

Maps, Leases, Title Registrations and Data Plans on Historical Land Tenure - Daly River, Adelaide River and Cox Peninsula.

Daly River
Record of salient information adjacent to Owston's Landing, Hundred of Hawkshaw.
1882 Pastoral Lease 33.
1883/84 Survey plans by Cuthbertson and Hingston, Hd of Hawkshaw, plans 1,5, & 9.
1884 Data Plans of NT Pastoral Leases, Old Volume 1, Folio 32, signed Geo Goyder 28/11/1884.
1885 Data Plans of NT Pastoral Leases, Old Volume 1, Folio 35, showing land proposed to be resumed
1885 Goyders NT Pastoral Compilation
1887 First published Map of Hundred of Hawkshaw - DALY RIVER PLANTATION.
1888 First registered Title over Section 1 at 'Owston's Landing' to William Bunting Brown
1896 Pastoral lease 1857, Hd of Howard/ Daly River
1899 Survey of Daly River Mission Station by Copley Playford, Hd of Hawkshaw, Sections 2 & 3 - no recorded title.
1912 Plan 6, Hd of Hawkshaw resurvey by Cummins.
1912 Plan of resurvey of Daly River Agricultural Area
1915 Pastoral Lease 2249 issued over Sections 12 to 17.
1927 Pastoral lease 2249 re-issued as 155, current till 1954.

**Adelaide River**
1882 Hd of Guy, Fld Bk No 4 pp 4&5, with notations against SG1 "applied for by Lyons and Segison 7/9/1880 - now held by Fisher surveyed by Lindsay 1881" (from p. 37 of N.T.Pastoral Leases Data Plans of Old Vol. 1.)
1885 Hd of Guy, Fld Bk 1a, p.111, Sections 145 & 146 with notations against these, "applied for by Sergison 26/8/1881. Transferred to W. H. Gray. Grant issued 13/10/1884, surveyed by Hingston 1883" (from p. 37 of NT Pastoral Leases Data Plans Old Vol.1)

**Cox Peninsula**
1883, NT Bk 4/179, with annotation "showing position of P. Levi grant and position of DeLissaville Homestead".
Notice of resumption of all land grants on Cox Peninsula in association with Delisaville was published in the South Australian Government Gazette of 26/3/1885.

1883 NT 5 with annotation "Special Survey of 300 acres for Mr B. De Lissa"
The only lodged survey for Delissa is that of sections 10 & 11 (1883 Special survey above) registered in the name of V.L. Solomon on 13/10/84 (Mark Powel, Land Records Unit).
Appendices

i. Goyder’s NT Pastoral Compilation: 1885.
ii. Goyder’s Map of Owston’s plantation from ‘Old Vol 1’, showing position of Owston’s homestead.
iii. Map of Daly River Plantation Company: 1887 with letter showing shareholders and relevant Section No allocated to each.
iv. Topographical map of the Daly River Agricultural Region, showing posited sites of the three plantation areas on the Daly River.
v. Section Map of the Daly River Agricultural Area.
vi. Land Unit Key and reference, Daly River Agricultural Area.
vii. Land Unit Map of Daly River Agricultural Area with posited plantation sites.
Goyder's NT Pastoral Compilation: 1885.
Goyder's Map of Owston's plantation
from 'Old Vol 1'
showing position of Owston's homestead.
Northern Territory

Scale 32

3 Chains Reserve along River
in terms of 1 ft. of contour

(2) Geo. Cooney
Surveyor General
21st Feb. 1873
Map of Daly River Plantation Company: 1887 with letter showing shareholders with relevant Section Nos allocated to each.
Topographical map
Daly River Agricultural Region
showing posited sites of plantation areas
Section Map
Daly River Agricultural Area.
Directors

Section | Acres
-------|------
18     | 66.5
23     | 47.4 - 32
24     | 47.4 - 30
26     | 47.6
29     | 45.7
30     | 45.6
31     | 38.3 - 42
32     | 35.1 - 25
33     | 41.9 - 50
34     | 46.0 - 24
35     | 56.3 - 84
36     | 48.9 - 20

Total: 558.4 - 0.8
Land Unit Key and reference
Daly River Agricultural Area.
Land Unit Map Daly River Agricultural Area
with posited plantation sites.