

**Historical Report to Townsville City Council**

**Robert Towns' Townsville  
and  
the “Blackbirding” controversy**

***RADIX MALORUM EST CUPIDITAS***

[Chaucer, *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*]

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## **Author's Notes**

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K H Kennedy

31.viii.2004

## Preface

This report was commissioned by Townsville City Council by letter of invitation dated 6 July 2004. The brief was twofold:

- to provide an assessment of Robert Towns' "historical association" with the City of Townsville.
- to examine Robert Towns' "possible involvement in 'blackbirding'".

Council's primary objective has been to provide an accurate account of Robert Towns' "role in Townsville's history", derived from an array of documentation and printed sources, for lodgement in libraries and the Living History Centre.

There has been a secondary purpose in contributing factual information to a long-running community debate over the Pioneers' Walk at Hanran Park.

Four years ago, Townsville CBD Promotions decided to contribute to the Walk by funding research into the activities of John Melton Black and Robert Towns, much of which was subsequently pursued by local historian Jim Manion. This provided the basis for an approach to the Townsville City Image Committee which in turn consulted the Perc Tucker Gallery. The outcome was a decision to erect a life-sized statue of Robert Towns "to be placed at the beginning of the Walk, close to the Mall". Funds were passed over to the Council which had approved the project and assumed responsibility for the monument's commissioning.

When a sculptor's impression was made public early in 2004, a vitriolic debate erupted through the pages of the local newspaper, provoking concerns about "the political correctness of erecting a statue to Robert Towns" amid contentions that he was "a blackbirder", "godfather of the black labour trade".

This report endeavours to arbitrate on vexing historical questions surrounding Robert Towns. Only a super-optimist could hope that its findings will settle discord, too entrenched are individual prejudices and unsubstantiated mythology. If however it contributes to some degree of reconciliation among antagonists, and to mature debate and further empirical inquiry, the hundreds of hours of research will not have been wasted.

The report is presented in four parts with a summary conclusion. Attached are re-typed copies of several significant documents to validate context. Ancilliary materials such as Towns' Will and Codicil, Transcript of Evidence to the NSW Royal Commission on Alleged Kidnapping . . . [1869], Index to the Robert Towns & Co Papers [Mitchell Library], and an assortment of letters from the Queensland State Archives, have been lodged with the Townsville City Library's Local History Collection for public scrutiny.

\* \* \* \* \*

# Robert Towns' Townsville and the "Blackbirding" controversy

## PART 1: Towns' Early Years

### 1. Official Biography

There is no thorough life and times of Robert Towns. The most authoritative account is Dorothy Shineberg's *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry published in 1976, an extension of her acclaimed monograph *They Came For Sandalwood: A Study of the Sandalwood Trade in the South-West Pacific 1830–1865* (1967). The entry is reproduced as **Appendix 1**. (This article should be read initially in order to appreciate the complexities of dealing with Robert Towns in so brief an historical report.)

Shineberg's evaluation in her major monograph is hardly complimentary to Towns. With a broad brush she judges him "authoritarian in the extreme" in character:

Without the advantage of an education, he became a rich and influential man in the colonies by virtue of his native wit and incredible energy. Like many others of this character, he unreasonably expected his employees to be as alert and industrious as himself, in which he was fearfully disappointed ...

Shineberg's meticulous research on sandalwooding however is fundamental to an understanding of Towns as a marine mercantilist, and his attitude to indentured labour. These aspects are detailed in **Part 4** of this report. Her

study nevertheless stops short of careful analysis of Towns' other maritime ventures and his activities on the mainland.

## **2. Broeze's Assessment**

More recent investigation of Towns' business career prior to his investment in North Queensland has been published by Frank Broeze in three sources, *viz*, "Australia, Asia and the Pacific: The Maritime World of Robert Towns", *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol.95 (1990), pp.221–38; "Robert Brooks" in R T Appleyard & C B Schedvin, *Australian Financiers: Biographical Essays* (1988), pp.34–51; and *Mr Brooks and the Australian Trade* (1993). Broeze's 1990 article provides additional information on Towns' maritime career over the two decades after he settled in Sydney in 1843. His assessment of Towns' *modus operandi* is revealing:

The psychological foundation of Towns' entire entrepreneurship lay in his energy, meticulous management . . . and an inquisitive . . . and 'never ending speculative' spirit. The material base for his future operations was twofold: first, his connection with [Robert] Brooks, and, secondly, his own entrepreneurial resources: a small venture capital and, above all, an intimate knowledge of and great experience in shipping management.

By 1844, Towns owned a wharf at Millers Point and several coastal vessels, complementing the flagship *Royal Saxon*. Soon afterwards he entered the sandalwood trade with the barque *Elizabeth* (175 tons) bringing back from Eromanga 100 tons of sandalwood which when sold in China yielded £5,000. His fleet by the end of the decade, despite two wrecks, numbered twelve with another two held in partnerships. Barques such as *Orwell*, *Isabella Anna*, *Avon*, *Statesman*, *Caernarvon* and *Chalco* were familiar sights at Millers Point. Towns expanded his sandalwood shipments, *Elizabeth* alone made six voyages between 1845 and January 1848 when wrecked. He set up a collecting station on the Isle of Pines for sandalwood and beche-de-mer, "run by keepers on a lay system of payment" (i.e. employees received a percentage of the take instead of wages), a practice he adapted from the whaling industry.

Hand in glove with trade in the Southwest Pacific were diverse speculations in the broader Pacific and Indian oceans. From Canton and Manila, Towns' sandalwooders or chartered vessels returned with tea, rice and sugar.

### **3. China Trade**

Broeze generalises: "These [Asian] operations represented both autonomous operations, financed by specific or general credits [from Brooks], and remittances from the proceeds of sandalwood":

Consumption of tea and sugar in Australia had always been at levels many times higher than those of Britain and with the growth of the colonial population the volume of these trades was quite spectacular. At some times also the importation of other foodstuffs, such as wheat and rice, was of great importance. Virtually all of this was imported directly from Asia.

Jardine, Matheson & Co, who dominated exports from China after the Treaty which ended the first Opium War and ceded Hong Kong and ports such as Shanghai and Canton, acted as agents for Brooks and Towns. Towns also used Russell & Co but was never satisfied with that agency, only persisting because of a branch at Manila. It was a profitable period in Towns' business career, providing him with funds to pursue other interests on the mainland of Australia. But there was one aspect of this trade which exposed Towns to criticism in Sydney: the indenturing of Asian labour for New South Wales.

This issue came to the fore in 1854 when a NSW Select Committee of the Legislative Council, chaired by Henry Parkes, took evidence from Towns and others on "the chartering and victualling of ships employed to bring coolies to NSW". It was disclosed that Towns had introduced around 2,400 Chinese in preceding years, several score employed on his Sydney wharves, many hundreds assigned to the Moreton Bay area. Towns complained about wage rates: "20/- to 40/- per month, with rations". However he insisted "he had always given strict instructions for their proper accommodation on board his ships", and boasted that had it not been for Chinese labour, the Moreton Bay colony might have collapsed. In a tame report, Parkes wrote "that, with

the prospect of a continuous stream of population from the mother country, all ideas of a renewal of Asiatic immigration, at private expense, will be abandoned. It is admitted on all hands that the experiment of Chinese has disappointed the expectations of those who at one time strongly advocated their introduction . . .”.

This question is further examined in **Part 2** of the report.

#### **4. The India Connection**

Broeze hints at a connection with India, which Shineberg overlooks. As he wrote in 1990:

. . . [When] Towns arrived at Sydney a more or less regular trade in horses to India had developed. In the course of time this trade underwent severe fluctuations but it became of ever greater importance to both the Indian Army and the Australian breeders of what became known as the ‘Walers’. For much of her life, until she was condemned in 1863 at Hong Kong, the *Royal Saxon* was used by Towns on the run between Sydney . . . and Calcutta . . . Towns retained his interest in the Calcutta trade, mostly for the profitable return freight, and occasionally also invested himself in a return cargo.

The export of “Walers” was investigated by Professor Sandy Yarwood in a volume of the same title. In 1989 he wrote:

In the vast collection of Robert Towns’ commercial correspondence at the Mitchell Library is the evidence of one man’s undeviating persistence in drumming up support from colonial breeders so as to fill up his ships with horses intended for India. Without exaggeration, we might call it the Towns factor in setting up the horse trade.

. . . Towns wrote letters to horse breeders all over the colony, holding out to them the prospects of the India remount market as a ray of economic hope, and puffing the claim of his beloved *Royal Saxon* as a roomy and well-managed ship of 510 tons, apt for the carriage of horses.

Usually Towns charged £25 a head for transport which included fodder and water, payable when the horse was unloaded in healthy condition. Occasionally he went 50-50 with breeders on the net profits after sale (except freight insurance which breeders had to pay).

An important aside raised by Yarwood was the return cargo. On several occasions, it was not tea, sugar or other merchandise, but human cargoes. These took two forms: convicts for Tasmania, and coolies for New South Wales to overcome the labour shortage following the end to transportation in that colony. An extract from Yarwood's commentary is reproduced as **Appendix 2**. Towns' involvement with India would take on broader ramifications after Queensland separated from NSW.

## 5. Californian Interlude

A glimpse of Towns' opportunism is provided by Lloyd Churchward, Reader in Political Science at Melbourne University during the 1970s, in his *Australia & America 1788-1972: an alternative history*. When gold was discovered in California in 1848, several New South Wales merchants put on shipping between Sydney and San Francisco. One was Robert Towns. In January 1849, he laid on the *Eleanor Lancaster*. "Cautiously", Churchward wrote, "he let others fill it", placing on board only £200 of goods and an agent, J C Catton, to whom he gave "very careful instructions":

If on your arrival at California you find any *good* likely to be done between these ports I shall be glad to hear from you on the subject, and if you can recommend shipments from this colony, I will be happy to entertain such to a limited extent, in the event of your recommending such a speculation you will please be very particular in your instructions, both as to pattern, size and quality. I will also be glad to hear from you on the subject of your passage and your opinion on the New Land of Promise.

Reports were favourable. In June 1849 Towns wrote: "People here [in Sydney] are running mad after California – got completely bit by the *yellow fever*". Although several hundred colonists emigrated to California in search of gold, Towns was still hesitant; he increased his trade shipments, "but not yet without misgivings":

He pioneered the shipment of coal and horses. By October he was sending urgent messages to his agent to have his ships turned around quickly, with or without cargo and cautioning against carrying gold dust, or British goods unless 'uncommon cheap'.

Towns lost money on several voyages. His Californian connection waned within two years, coinciding with an unsuccessful emigrant, Edward Hargreaves, discovering gold at Ophir, four months after his return to New South Wales, a subject embraced by Professor Geoffrey Blainey in his works on the Australian gold discoveries.

## **6. Banking and Borrowing**

Following reorganisation of the Bank of New South Wales, Towns was elected to the board of directors on 17 September 1850. The official history by R F Holder suggests: “It was in his capacity as a merchant and successful organiser that Captain Towns became associated with the Bank”. In 1853, he was appointed President, but under the Bank’s constitution was required to step down two years later as “the deed of settlement prohibited immediate re-election”. His replacement was Alexander Stuart who had been appointed assistant secretary and branch inspector in December 1853, only to resign in 1855 when he joined Towns to form Robert Towns & Co. As Holder wrote: “the two of them in succession kept an unbroken line on the Bank’s board from 1850 until 1875”.

Towns did not have it all his own way as President. Admittedly he oversaw branch expansion and foreign arrangements with other financial houses. But in mid-1855 the board rejected an application for cash credits to Robert Towns & Co, and a few months later sacked the Brisbane branch manager, William Craies, only weeks after Towns himself had reported favourably on his balance sheets. Following Towns’ return from England, he rejoined the board in 1861, replacing Stuart whose term had expired. This coincided with a boom in Australia’s economic growth in pastoralism, agriculture and mining. On the Bank’s part, one decision in which Towns was involved was the appointment of Shepherd Smith, aged only 29, as general manager: “he was to prove the most outstanding officer of the Bank in the nineteenth century and one of its greatest general managers”. It was Shepherd Smith to whom Towns turned in 1866 to provide banking facilities in the port of

Townsville, as will be outlined subsequently. It was Shepherd Smith who also carefully scrutinised Robert Towns & Co's overdrafts after Towns again stepped down as a director of the Bank of NSW in 1867. Not even Stuart could arrest the rumour that the firm was in serious trouble at the end of the 1860s, the folly of North Queensland speculations playing a major part in the troubled waters into which the aged former ship's captain had navigated his financial vessel. But this is jumping ahead too far in the narrative.

## **7. Towns' Whaling Fleet**

Whaling reached its peak in the decade to 1841. By the time Towns began acquiring his fleet, whaling was in decline partly from low oil prices, partly from American competition in the southern oceans. The secret to his success was purchasing aged vessels; as Broeze remarks: "As was also the case with his whalers, much of Towns' management of shipping was based on a fine judgement of how to buy cheap second-hand tonnage and how to keep it afloat with minimum expenses". In turn he was able to divert some of his fleet to either sandalwood, equine or general cargoes, at times to human cargoes.

Towns persisted with whaling until the early 1860s, despite vessels being periodically mothballed. When oil prices were low he redirected a ship or two to the guano trade, to coconut oil, to coffee consignments from Ceylon, even to wheat tonnage from Valparaiso. Brooks held a half share in several of them.

Through whaling Towns consolidated his reputation as one of the most influential maritime men in Australia in the mid-nineteenth century. Through whaling and its lay system of payment, extended to sandalwood, he was able to balance his outlays against financial returns. By engaging predominantly non-Europeans on his vessels he was able to further reduce labour costs. This in turn provoked accusations of "meanness and petty

cheating at the expense of his men”, adding to his firm’s notoriety for a high turnover of ship captains and mates. Towns’ autocratic predisposition was similarly reflected in his activities at Townsvale and Townsville.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **PART 2: Townsville**

### **1. Enter Governor Bowen**

Queensland was proclaimed a self-governing colony on 10 December 1859 with the arrival of Governor George Bowen. The population was a mere 25,000. Bowen had in his luggage a personal note from Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, Secretary of State for the Colonies, in which he advised:

The most anxious and difficult question, connected with it, will be the 'Squatters'. But in this, which is an irritating contest between rival interests, you will wisely abstain as much as possible from interference ... Let your thoughts never be distracted from the paramount objective of finance. All States thrive in proportion to the administration of revenue ... Do your best always to keep up the pride in the mother-country. Throughout Australia there is a sympathy with the ideal of a gentleman. This gives a moral aristocracy. Sustain it by showing the store set on integrity, honour, and civilised manners; not by preference of birth, which belongs to old countries.

... As you will have a free press, you will have some papers that may be abusive. Never be thin-skinned about these; laugh them off. Be pointedly courteous to all editors and writers - acknowledging socially their craft and importance. The more you treat people as gentlemen the more 'they will behave as such.' ... The Governor who is the least huffy, and who is most careful not to over-govern, is the one who has the most authority ...

P.S. Get all the details of the Land Question from the Colonial Office; and master them thoroughly. Convert the jealousies now existing between Moreton Bay and Sydney into emulation . ...

Bowen, whose religiosity and desire to please those responsible for his appointment, especially Chancellor Gladstone, took a conservative approach. If Queensland was to progress through development of natural resources, it must have adequate labour. The colony's flocks were increasing; cattle had no market beyond hides, tallow and other by-products of boiling down beasts. Perhaps agriculture held the key, especially two commodities, sugar and cotton, the former in demand in Australia, the latter in Lancashire from

which Manchester merchants in particular were flooding the world with cotton garments.

## **2. Cotton and the Economy**

Queensland was fundamentally pastoral in character when the first Ministry was sworn in: there were over three million sheep, nearly half a million cattle and 25,000 horses pastured in the south-east. One of four Acts of 1860 dealing with land policy was the *Crown Lands Alienation Act* designed to open up agricultural lands. The accompanying Sugar and Coffee Regulations were designed to encourage closer settlement to take advantage of “the richest soil and finest climate in the world”. Cotton was a priority, influenced by tensions in the United States, Britain’s principal source of fibres. Abraham Lincoln’s election as President in 1860 had fractured that nation which was fast plunging towards civil war. This worried the Manchester moguls who exercised considerable power over British trade policy.

Robert Towns saw an opportunity in cotton growing in Queensland following the colonial government’s decision to remit the purchase price of cotton plantations after improvements had been effected, at the same time offering a bounty of £10 a bale on exports. The background, peripheral to this report, was detailed in a 1971 article by Jean Farnfield, “Cotton and the Search for an Agricultural Staple in Early Queensland”.

Towns, it appears, subsequently obtained land near the Logan River in June 1861, in partnership with Brooks. The plantation would eventually be known as Townsvale after the initial 1,280 acres were cleared, tilled and seeded. The Townsvale story has been recounted by John Stevens in his 1966 booklet and a description of the venture was contained in a despatch from Governor Bowen to the Earl of Carnarvon, 16 November 1866, in an extensive and thorough Enclosure. More relevant to this account is the search for labour to work in Queensland’s emerging pastoral and agricultural industries, in which Towns was the fulcrum. His first solution

has mere curiosity value; his second solution has been indelibly carved into one milestone of Australian history.

### **3. Towns' First Solution**

Cotton was a labour-intensive crop. To obtain cheap workers, Towns was fast off the mark. On 9 January 1862 he wrote rather tersely to Robert Herbert, Colonial Secretary:

Sir,  
Being desirous of introducing into the Colony of Queensland Chinese laborers with their families, and as there may be some hesitation on the part of the British Authorities in China, such as I have met with at Madras on my recent attempt to obtain labor from that quarter, I have the honor to request the favor of the Queensland Government communicating with the Emigration Agent at Hong Kong, the conditions and regulations under which the introduction of such labor can be carried out in accordance with the resolutions of the Legislature.  
As my advices to my agents in China in respect to this movement went forward by last mail, it will add to the obligation if you will communicate with Hong Kong by the outgoing mail.

I have the honor to be  
Sir, Your Obedt Sevt  
R Towns

Herbert responded favourably. A letter was sent to Woolcott in Hong Kong on 23 January. Towns was delighted and lost little time replying, "for which I beg to return my sincere thanks, and will feel obliged by your conveying the same to His Excellency Sir George Bowen".

It was an audacious scheme on Towns' part, not that enlisting or transporting cheap labour was new to him as several writers on his maritime ventures have attested, not least Coghlan in 1918.

Between 1847 and 1863, according to Timothy Coghlan, the reputable NSW Statistician [1886-1905], "attempts to bring coloured labour into Australia ... were purely sporadic and unsystematic .... There was no pretence that such labour was better or more suitable to the country than white labour; its only merits, in the eyes of the importers, were its apparent cheapness and the

inability of the labourer to seek redress for any injustice practised on him. This class of labour, however, did not fulfil the expectations of those who introduced it”.

Coghlan suggested Moreton Bay, up to December 1859, was a significant repository for Chinese indentured labour. He claims 225 arrived in November 1851, “and about 2000 others between that date and 1856”. When Sir William Burton, former Chief Justice, was posted to Madras, he arranged for 86 “Eurasians from India”, “mainly working compositors” to come to Australia where they were engaged by Sydney publishing houses:

A Select Committee of the Legislative Council was appointed to consider the question of Asiatic labour, and in November 1854 it presented its report, which was to the effect that the Chinese and Indian immigration had disappointed the expectation of the promoters, and, as immigration from the United Kingdom was so great, any attempts to introduce Asiatic labour ought to be abandoned. If the introduction of Chinese shepherds brought out under indentures to Moreton Bay had stood alone, not much attention would have been paid to the subject; but the Chinese question had already begun to assume formidable proportions in Victoria, and the appearance of Eurasian compositors in Sydney seemed to the working classes of that city ominous of evil, although it was in itself a very small matter.

Towns gave evidence to that 1854 Select Committee, chaired by Henry Parkes, admitting that he was a prime mover in the promotion of Chinese labour for the pastoral industry from the 1840s, and had engaged many on his wharves at payment of 20/- to 40/- per month, with rations. His evidence can be found in *NSW Votes & Proceedings*, 1854, Vol II, pp 11-15, the detail a diversion from this narrative apart from two finer points which were relevant again by 1862. First, that Towns insisted he had always given instructions to his Chinese agents for proper accommodation and stores on his vessels; second, that he would have preferred Indian coolie labour, but had been stymied by the tightening of provisions under the *Indian Emigration Act*. Towns’ proposal to enlist Chinese labourers in 1862 foundered however following developments in other Australian colonies.

The presence of Chinese on the goldfields, especially in Victoria, was an inflammatory issue: 25,000 “Celestials” were undesirable. The new Victorian

colonial government in Melbourne taxed them heavily. Many moved to New South Wales, working old diggings. Between December 1860 and June 1861, a series of anti-Chinese protests occurred, now known as the Lambing Flats Riots. In what was an historical irony in the Robert Towns story, Premier Charles Cowper responded with extreme legislative measures; he had the support of his predecessor, John Robertson. Both were close to Robert Towns, Robertson from 1863 joining Towns in land speculation ventures in the Gulf of Carpentaria which ultimately sent Robertson bankrupt; Cowper on retirement from politics in 1867 temporarily joining “the Great Commercial House of Towns & Co”, according to respective biographers.

#### **4. Towns’ Second Solution**

When the British Colonial Office expressed its disapproval of further Chinese immigration to Queensland, scuppering Towns’ plans for Townsvale’s cheap workforce, Bowen himself admitted because of “events in the neighbouring Colonies, and for a variety of reasons, having reference chiefly to questions of character and social habits, the proposed importation of large bodies of Chinese would be regarded unfavourably by the peoples of this Colony”. However he subsequently took up the suggestion of Sir Charles Nicholson, former Speaker of the NSW Legislative Council when Towns joined that Chamber in 1856, and subsequently president of the Queensland Legislative Council during the first session of the First Parliament. Nicholson and other “land proprietors” wanted Indian labour, especially “for the development of the ‘Central’ and ‘Northern’ portions of your territory under Your Excellency’s Government”. In the second session of 1862, against the advice of the Colonial Office, Bowen and Herbert championed the *Coolie Labour Act*, ignoring workers’ petitions from Brisbane and Ipswich opposing all Asiatic labour. Roger Joyce, Bowen’s biographer, cites a particular despatch of late July 1862 which reflected his despair:

All reasonable men of every side admit that if the resources of the vast intertropical districts of Queensland are to be developed at all, they must be developed by the aid of Asiatics of some race, and that, if capitalists

and colonizing companies are not permitted to introduce Indian labour under proper regulations and supervision, they will ere long deluge Northern Australia with Chinese, Malays, Polynesians, and hordes of other barbarians under no regulation or supervision whatsoever.

The Act and its Regulations subsequently became bogged down in the mire of bureaucratic wrangling between the Colonial Office, the Foreign Office, the India Office and other departments at Whitehall. It was not until mid 1864 that Queensland was given the “green light” under rigid terms which Bowen and Herbert would not accept. The saga of the Indian coolies for Queensland has been examined by Ian Moles, former James Cook University academic, and concerns this report only insofar that while British bureaucrats dithered, another source of cheap labour was harnessed.

In May 1863, Robert Towns advanced his second solution: South Sea Islanders from his sandalwood and beche-de-mer gathering-territory. On 29 May, having victualled the schooner *Don Juan*, and issued written instructions to its Master, to the recruiter who was signed on as second mate, and furnished a letter “To any missionary into whose hands this may come”, Towns orchestrated a new era of cheap labour for Australia’s pastoralists and agriculturalists: the “Kanaka” labour trade.

## **5. The Boyd Experiment**

South Sea Islanders working in eastern Australia was not novel. Towns had employed Islanders in his maritime activities since the 1840s, on his ships which docked at Millers Point and on his private wharves. But there was no systematic design in his recruiting of Islanders at that time. One competitor however had tried indenturing by contract.

Benjamin Boyd was 39 years of age when he landed at Sydney, ostensibly forsaking his career as a stockbroker and banker to pursue grandiose plans in the Antipodes. Armed with funds from the Royal Bank of Australia (set up in London in 1839 with £1 million nominal capital), Boyd began acquiring coastal steamships, vast pastoral runs, a wool store, and two private

townships named Boyd Town [now Eden] and East Boyd, the latter a whaling station. However as *Australian Dictionary of Biography* contributor G P Walsh wrote: “Boyd’s methods of financing his trading, shipping and pastoral pursuits were complicated and obscure; he soon overreached himself in his investments and was in fundamental trouble”.

In 1847, unable to engage sufficient immigrants, either free or indentured, or ex-convicts for his pastoral ventures Boyd went to the Pacific Islands of Tanna and Lifu where he recruited 200 Islanders for work in Australia. Most had to be returned by the end of the year for several reasons. First, they failed to adapt to the work as shepherds, to diet and climate. Second, there was considerable protest that Islander labour would undermine the earnings of unskilled Europeans, and their standard of living. Third, there were rumours of coercion in their recruitment, the innuendo that Boyd was a “slave-trader”.

This was at a time when overseas attitudes towards slavery were hot-blooded. The British Parliament passed the *Emancipation Act* in 1833 and its navy was active around the African continent, and in the Caribbean monitoring the human slave trade, so long a feature of the locality. In the United States the “underground railroad” was in full swing; Theodore Weld, Garrison, Wendell Phillips and other Abolitionist crusaders were at the peak of their agitation. NSW Governor Charles FitzRoy had the allegations of Boyd’s accusers investigated by the Attorney General who subsequently and not unexpectedly found them unsubstantiated.

Insolvent by 1849, Boyd went to California and again failed. Returning to the Western Pacific on his remaining ship *Wanderer*, dreaming of a confederation of islands in the Southwest Pacific, he went ashore at Guadalcanal in the Solomons and disappeared, presumed murdered. His vessel was wrecked off Port Macquarie four weeks later, en route to Sydney. Eerily there are several aspects of Robert Towns’ life and enterprises reflected in Boyd’s earlier schemes and his temperament.

## 6. When the Boat Comes In

The *Don Juan* returned to Moreton Bay in the second week of August 1863. Its cargo of 67 “labour recruits” was disembarked at Redbank and transferred to Towns’ Logan River plantation by 18 August. It was only a matter of days before there was public reaction. Questions were asked in the Parliament, letters written to newspaper editors and to the Governor himself, and on 29 August the *Brisbane Courier* published a scathing editorial [reproduced as **Appendix 3**]. Tongue in cheek, the writer termed Towns “a gentleman who, we must say, has shown every disposition to promote the interests of the colony so long as they were compatible with his own”, and that he was “as a private individual, at liberty to import any amount of Islanders in the same way in which he would import merchandise, but viewing the question as one of importation of a living freight of men, almost savages, the public have a right to speak in the matter. . .

Our object is to have the colony peopled with the poor, but industrial classes of the mother country, who bring with them English ideas, English principles, and English customs . . . If it is found eventually that our cotton and sugar plantations cannot be cultivated by white men, why then must we necessarily have recourse to coolies, or to Captain Towns’ pets.

The government was livid; Towns’ “solution” was to Bowen and Herbert a lever to resolve the impasse over the *Coolie Labour Act’s* Regulations. But not to be perceived as supporting Towns’ actions as such, it was decided to publish the full text of Towns’ instructions and letters as an official parliamentary paper [see **Appendix 4**]. These documents will be analysed in **Part 4** of this report.

On Towns’ part, he was furious. On 31 August he wrote a vitriolic letter to Herbert outlining his programme for Townsvale “upon which speculation I have spent upwards of £6,000 without yet any return”, and blaming assisted German migrants, who he had employed but subsequently discharged, as the core agitators:

Apart from the outburst of angry feeling and the senseless howl with which the ‘Don Juan’'s arrival has been greeted I feel confident I have the

good wishes of the employers of labour, by substituting this native labour, for the generous (!) pale faces who have been brought out at the expense of the country, who delight in scheming about rather than in honest working, and who feel insulted if you offer them, for a day's work, that which they have been accustomed to receive at home for a week's labour.

It is these drones in the hive of industry, whom I call the 'breeches pocket patriots,' who first drove me to the employment of native labour; and it is these men, or others pandering to their feelings and passions, who, after putting the Colony to so much expense for their own passage, and having done little or nothing to repay it, now seek to raise an outcry against those who cost the Colony nothing for their passage, and who, I venture to predict, will leave a lasting benefit behind them.

The question of any species of slavery or kidnapping of these natives is at once confuted by the instructions to the captain of the vessel and the interpreter, and my letter to the missionaries, which I append hereto.

The men thoroughly understand the nature of their contract, both as to their treatment and wages here, and as to my returning them to their own country when their time (which you will observe is only for one year) shall have expired.

It is my intention to persevere in the attempt to grow cotton with this kind of labour, on short agreements; and if the men like the work and country, to try to persuade them to bring their wives with them.

This letter is reproduced as **Appendix 5**.

By the time Bowen had drafted another despatch to Carnarvon, the storm had passed, reflected in enclosures in the 16 September official communique. Towns meanwhile had other pressing business concerns. He was nearly 69 years of age with irons in many fires, requiring tempering. First was how to cope with the declining sandalwood trade with most of the commercial stands cut out. For Towns it was no longer profitable and he withdrew within months. Second was how to deal with the whaling vessels laid up, partly for want of suitable crews, partly for want of higher oil prices. Anecdotally his idle whaling fleet in Walsh Bay was known as Towns' Rotten Row, putrid under the sun from poorly scrubbed decks and holds: perhaps a local exaggeration. However Brooks wanted no more to do with whaling, and if Towns persisted, which he did sporadically, it was on his own account. Third was how to employ his coastal vessels in other economic activities such as coconut oil, pearling and coastal carriage. He jumped at every opportunity available, such as instructing one Master to divert his brigantine

to Bampton Island to collect “any beche-de-mer or other produce they may have ready to ship”, or, as later happened, disposing of surplus vessels, either by charter or outright sale. Fourth, and most importantly, was how to finance his ambitions to conquer new frontiers on the mainland. It was some solace that he had been reappointed to the board of the Bank of New South Wales when Stuart’s term expired. And fifth, there was the prospect of some of his ships being converted for indentured labour carriage. The *Uncle Tom*, a former sandalwooder, might be suitable for such a task.

## **7. Ol’ Uncle Tom**

The South Sea Islanders who arrived on the *Don Juan* were contracted for twelve months. Thus in May 1864 Towns despatched the refurbished aged brigantine *Uncle Tom* to Tanna and other islands for replacement recruits. The vessel docked at Brisbane on 8 July with 54 fresh labourers, all male with ages ranging from 15 to 25. The Queensland State Archives holds the Health Officer’s Report for the *Uncle Tom*, dated the previous evening. A *pro forma* document comprising 17 questions, the meagre information to be gleaned was that the *Uncle Tom* was 166 tons under the command of James Leonard. It departed Tanna on 17 June 1864, sailing directly to Moreton Bay. Its cargo was 30 tons of yams and 54 South Sea Island labourers for Captain Towns’ cotton plantation. En route Leonard encountered the whaler *Three Brothers* of Nantucket, 52 months out with 1,000 barrels of oil on board. *Uncle Tom* had no surgeon, no bill of health, no knowledge of “Epidermal, Contagious or Infectious Disease” from the point of departure, no sickness during the voyage, no deaths, and no need to be quarantined.

This time there was little public reaction, possibly because the transfer to the plantation was conducted clandestinely, although there is no substantive evidence. Towns subsequently instructed his recruiter, Ross Lewin [who is dealt with at length in **Part 4**] to prepare for a return voyage as soon as practicable to honour his obligation to the *Don Juan* contingent. While very

little else was recorded about *Uncle Tom's* June 1864 recruiting activities, the second voyage became a public and political issue.

Captain George Smith sailed from Moreton Bay on 10 September 1864 with 70 South Sea Islanders aboard. Sixty-five were the original recruits, two having died at Townsville. (Tuberculosis was the principal cause of death in the 1860s.) The balance was from the second contingent, either ill or deemed unsuited to the work. Again Towns issued instructions to Master and recruiter. These are reproduced as **Appendix 6** and analysed in **Part 4**.

*Uncle Tom* berthed back in Brisbane on 28 November 1864 with 80 Islanders. Soon afterwards controversy erupted. The historian Edward Docker [see **Part 4**] succinctly outlined the second short-lived public storm:

Early in 1865 there was a rumour in Brisbane's *North Australian* that the *Uncle Tom* was a blatant kidnapper equipped with handcuffs, leg-irons, whips and knouts, harpoon-guns for firing into the sides of canoes and reeling them in, nooses for hauling the occupants aboard, and so on. Towns was so incensed about the articles that he applied to the Queensland Supreme Court for permission to proceed against the publishers. He was refused and that was the end of the matter at the time.

On Lewin's part he was indignant as his letter to Towns of 30 January 1865 reflected, and upon which Towns sought recourse:

Dear Sir,  
I received your letter this afternoon, and I am astonished at the fearful lies printed in the *North Australian* newspaper. I think no person but a great vagabond could be guilty of such a tale. I think I need not tell you there is not one word of truth in it . . .  
. . . I hope you will not let me lie under such an accusation, for of course I am the party accused, and if such things did happen, I must be a great scoundrel indeed . . .

Believe me to be your faithful servant

H. Ross Lewin.

This letter, which detailed Lewin's activities at the Islands, is reproduced as **Appendix 7**.

Towns' next vessel to bring Islanders to Brisbane was the *Black Dog*, a schooner of 149 tons, ex-opium runner and sandalwood carrier, on 16

December 1865 with 118 recruits. Not all went to Townsville, as another cotton-grower, Captain Whish, and sugar pioneer, Captain Louis Hope, acquired many Islanders for their plantations. Towns however was pre-occupied elsewhere and did not greet the *Black Dog* as he had earlier arrivals. His attention was focussed on North Queensland and its prospects for profit.

## **8. Looking North**

In February 1859 a number of Sydney men including Robert Towns and Alexander Stuart provided funds for an expedition to the Burdekin River catchment, led by failed coffee planter [in Ceylon], George Elphinstone Dalrymple. Penetrating as far north as *Valley of Lagoons* the party surveyed several potential runs before returning to Brisbane nine months later, in April 1860. Dalrymple's report was glowing. Each of the subscribers to the expedition were promised a grazing block of five miles square which would have given Towns a foothold, but the scheme was torpedoed by the first *Lands Act* of 1860 and run-pegging temporarily delayed. On 1 January 1861, the Kennedy district was thrown open for pastoral occupation. Towns initially had no pastoral interests in the Kennedy. In July 1861 he provided funding for Robson and Wood at *Strathalbyn* following a visit to Port Denison in the company of Sir Charles Nicholson and the Lands Commissioner, A C Gregory. Within three years however, North Queensland property would become his obsession.

One man who was to have an enormous impact on Towns' business and dwindling fortunes was John Melton Black. According to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography Register*, Black was Edinburgh-born in 1830 and emigrated to Melbourne in 1853. He made his money not from mining gold but carrying supplies to the miners. As Geoffrey Bolton wrote in *A Thousand Miles Away*, Black arrived at Bowen on the ketch *Bonaparte* "a few days after" its foundation; it was late April to be more precise as his party and supplies did not leave Sydney until 19 March 1861:

Black had no pastoral experience whatever, but he had plenty of ambitious ideas for developing the North and the capacity to interest competent and influential men in his schemes. For the moment, he confined himself to 'map grazing' areas totalling over a thousand square miles, and then stocking the choicest sections.

Together, Black and Towns, from 1864, would determine the direction of pastoral developments north of Bowen and establish North Queensland's dominant port of Townsville.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **PART 3: Townsville**

### **1. Historical Literature**

Robert Towns' connection with Townsville has been recorded in a variety of sources dating back to 1887 when *The Townsville Herald* published a special Christmas edition, largely the work of editor Edmund Banfield. Volumes such as W.J. Doherty, *The Townsville Book* (1919) and Austen Donnelly, *The Port of Townsville* (1959) touch upon Towns, but like the heroic scribblings in *Cummins & Campbell Monthly* ought to be treated with some caution.

The first reliable account of Towns and Townsville arrived with Geoffrey Bolton's seminal history of North Queensland to 1920, *A Thousand Miles Away* (1963). Later, specific studies of Townsville's early years were undertaken as theses for the degree of B.A.(Honours) at James Cook University. First was Dorothy Gibson-Wilde's *Gateway to a Golden Land: Townsville to 1884*, submitted in 1981 and subsequently published in the *Studies in North Queensland History* series. Second was Helga-Maria Griffin's *Frontier Town: the early history of Townsville and its hinterland, 1864–1884*, submitted in 1983. There is also John Kerr's *Black Snow and Liquid Gold*. Collectively these works, together with an array of archival documents, diaries and private papers provide sufficient ground for a cursory evaluation of Robert Towns' Townsville.

Rather than treating the works of the above mentioned historians *seriatim*, which was the initial concept and would entail considerable repetition, it is more appropriate, in order to confine the perspective to Robert Towns, that a thematic approach be adopted.

## 2. The Cleveland Bay Settlement

There is no startling difference of opinion over Black's early role in pastoralism in the Kennedy District. His first venture was *Fanning Downs* followed by several other runs which he stocked with sheep, notably *Woodstock*. He took up other properties progressively through 1862, but like another adventurous 28 year-old, John Graham Macdonald, who was equally keen to acquire extensive holdings, one of which was *Inkerman*, he had to turn to the banks for further capital. In short, by early 1864, the Oriental Bank held several mortgages over properties throughout the Kennedy, and was tightening its mortgage and credit policy. Towns through Stuart was aware of the Oriental's desire to reduce exposure and at this point he decided to expand into North Queensland pastoralism. Following overtures by Black in April 1864, Robert Towns & Co clinched deals, acquiring most of Black's and Macdonald's properties and Edward Anthill's *Jarvisfield*, the paperwork taking six months to complete. It cost the firm around £25,000 which seemed a bargain.

Some volumes of the Towns MSS in the Mitchell Library are not only too precarious to copy but too fragile even to read. Dorothy Gibson-Wilde was fortunate to have access to them twenty-five years ago. One letter in particular seems important: Towns to Brooks, 16 April 1864. Gibson-Wilde refers to pertinent points he made:

Towns entered into partnership with Black simply because Black's offer was too tempting to refuse – a half share in 'a small principality' on which a large number of sheep might be raised profitably . . . . All Towns needed was a site for a boiling-down works at which his Pacific Islanders might do all the rough labour. Black could assure him that there was every prospect that such a site could be discovered. Throwing caution to the winds, Towns purchased Black's runs and joined the partnership of Black & Co.

. . . He makes it quite clear that his connection with Black was on his 'own private account' and that he was 'determined to separate my eggs, not to have all in one basket neither to lock up the whole of my capital for other people's benefit'.

Black lost no time seeking out a suitable port site for properties to the north of the Burdekin, the 1864 floods having washed away Anthill's *Jarvisfield*

landing. The story of Andrew Ball and Mark Reid's explorations and recommendation of Ross Creek is well-documented and need not be recounted. In short, Black arrived from Bowen on the *Amy* with Robert Towns' son in tow on 15 November, ten days after C S Rowe had led a party overland with supplies from *Fanning Downs* and *Woodstock*. Work on the settlement at the mouth of Ross Creek commenced in earnest, Black's energy and impatience demanding a relentless pace.

### **3. From Castletown to Townsville**

Andrew Ball was credited with naming his site for settlement Castletown. Although there has been dispute over whether this was after the capital of the Isle of Man or after a hill near Dublin is an historical quirk, as the name was never widely used. Instead for almost a year, the ramshackle dwellings were known as Cleveland Bay Settlement.

There are only three issues during the initial fifteen months of settlement of relevance to this report. First is the business interaction between Black and Towns over port construction, land sales and economic stability. Second is the tenuous relationship between the partners. Third is the introduction and contribution of South Sea Island labourers. While all three are interconnected, the South Sea Islanders at Townsville are treated separately.

Black was anxious not only to make an immediate start on building but determined to shroud his activities under a veil of secrecy, at least from Bowen businessmen who had earlier infiltrated Mackay. The Rowe party arrived with only fifty sheep and motley supplies. Black had organised for Towns to despatch from Sydney aboard the *Uncle Tom* stores and building materials, and indentured labourers from Townsvale. As it eventuated *Uncle Tom's* delayed arrival to 17 January 1865 left the human score at the settlement on the verge of destitution, rather like the First Fleeters at Sydney Cove, until urgent supplies were obtained from Bowen.

Gibson-Wilde makes a strong point on the issue of secrecy, contradicting long-held beliefs. The Colonial government was fully informed of the project from the outset, even though bureaucrats had no idea where the settlement was located:

On 13 September 1864, while maintaining a policy of strict secrecy locally in order to keep out other settlers and obtain pre-emptive rights to as much land as possible in the area, they officially informed the Colonial Secretary of Black's discovery . . . . They claimed that they were prepared to expend large sums to develop the area privately, but believed it was a matter for the government. This was so much humbug. Neither Black nor Towns was so altruistic or so uninformed as to establish a private port without government support . . . and neither was likely to expend his own moneys on harbour and road improvements when government money might be obtained.

The letter and subsequent correspondence are available in the Townsville City Library L.C.PAM. 994.36.DON. Towns' ploy was to obtain 640 acres for their proposed boiling-down works and a claim to allotments within the township, avoiding public auction at the first land sale. The government refused to accommodate him. Towns protested: he argued that he and Black deserved compensation or in-kind consideration. But in the absence of an official survey, not just a sketch map drawn by Black, Executive Council was unmoved.

In March 1865, applications for land were lodged by Towns under the Sugar and Coffee Regulations [See **Appendix 8**]. This coincided with the arrival of government surveyor Clarendon Stuart who officially marked out allotments, clearly having pressure brought to bear by Black in his survey plans which were submitted in May.

By mid year 1865, Black was displaying symptoms of "paranoia" as Griffin detected, and saw himself as a 'local potentate'. This was reflected in his letters to Towns, especially in July [see **Appendix 9**]. Griffin concluded:

The darker side of Black's moods, however, revealed itself gradually in a catalogue of grievances. In reply to accusations from Towns that he was spending too much money on improving the design of the boiling down vats, Black defended the professionalism of his adviser – and not without a hint of his superior practical knowledge in the field.

Indeed, Black's letters of 11, 17 and 22 July betray impatience, anxiety, a man on the edge. To cite a few examples:

I regret you should have misunderstood my remarks with regard to the Boiling Down Plant. The suggestions I made were procured from practical men, acquainted with the working of a steam plant, and I always considered that Chapell & Co. had to furnish the plant complete for the sum you offered, and which I particularly mentioned in my letter to them of the 22<sup>nd</sup> May forwarded to you for perusal beforehand. . . .

I must confess your Sea Captains are like fish out of water when they have anything to do with a tidal harbour . . . I suppose all this bother will be avoided when the Government give us a Harbour Master whose duty it will be to take vessels in and out of the creek a simple and easy matter to any man with brains in his head . . . .

I regret to learn that the place has not yet been gazetted a Port of Entry and clearance as the Colonial Treasurer promised me faithfully that same should be done after I left Brisbane. Pray use every influence you possess to have the place gazetted a Port of Entry and for Courts of Petty Sessions as the promises of the Executive are of little account except when they are kept constantly reminded of them.

Further Black seemed almost overwhelmed by worries about making the creek entrance safe for shipping, about road construction, building materials and costs, harping on the *Uncle Tom* being late again, and finally the forthcoming land sales to be held in Bowen. Tactlessly he complained of Towns' son's behaviour, not explicitly tittle-tattling that young Robert had taken to alcohol. On the 17<sup>th</sup> he added a postscript:

With regard to making advances to your son Mr. Robert Towns I am without special instruction and shall feel obliged therefore by you informing me what amount I am to advance. Your son has had about £36 since I returned. He informs me that he is supposed to be in receipt of £100 p.a. and I have made this enquiry for my own satisfaction so that I may know how to act for the future.

And on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, he noted: "McDonald [Master of the *Amherst*] came on shore this day and previous to my seeing him, it seems he took umbrage at some remark made by your son, and informed me that he would not remain a moment longer in the Bay with his vessel but proceed to sea at once" – leaving wool, tallow and hides unloaded. From closer examination of the letter, and reading between the lines, it is clear that Black himself had provoked this incident.

The land sale was conducted in Bowen on Monday 31 July, postponed briefly as a race-meeting was held on Saturday, the advertised date, much to Black's nervous disgust. The partners fared relatively well, at the end of the day obtaining three acres on Melton Hill where Black's residence was already erected and several blocks along Flinders Street East. Correspondence between Donnelly, author of *The Port of Townsville*, and the State Librarian (see following) provides details of negotiations with the government in lieu of compensation for improvements at the settlement.

In late September 1865, following the land sales and coinciding with the gazetting of Cleveland Bay as a Port of Entry, Governor George Bowen made his second trip to the North, this time on the steamer *Platypus*. He disembarked, was received by Black and other "dignatories", then shunted on foot to the Criterion Hotel which Black and Towns owned. Also to welcome him was James Gordon, the principal government appointee as Harbour Master, soon afterwards to assume duties as police magistrate, postmaster, sub-collector of customs and various other tasks. The discussions which took place are not recorded, nor does the settlement's written memorial survive. If, as on Bowen's previous excursion to the North aboard HMS *Pioneer* in 1862, when he inspected Somerset as a potential "Singapore" of the Southwest Pacific and then called in to Rockingham Bay, Port Denison and Mackay River Settlement, he was not pressured privately for greater government financial commitment and municipal autonomy, then he himself would have questioned his efficacy as Governor.

Short-circuiting the narrative of events, it is sufficient to record that on 6 November an Executive Council meeting received a petition signed by 195 residents of Cleveland Bay Settlement, at which it was agreed to "erection of that locality into a Municipality". [See QGG, 11 November 1865, p.1133]. And this is where Townsville is first mentioned, the *Gazette* also listing the names of signatories. But why should the absentee "landlord" be honoured?

Almost a century later, in 1962, Austen Donnelly, author of *The Port of Townsville*, ruminated over the naming of the city. He wrote to Bob Sharman

(State Archivist) and Jas Stapleton (State Librarian); they replied individually on 14 and 19 March respectively. The new settlement, according to Brisbane-based bureaucrats, was “a port centrally situated between Port Denison and Rockingham Bay”. Stapleton’s keen eye detected that this was the occasion on which Towns and Black’s claim for compensation “respecting their improvements were discussed”. At three subsequent meetings of Executive Council, through to March 1866, references always appeared as “Townsville Cleveland Bay” in official documents, Townsville always in quotation marks. However on 15 February 1866, the municipality of Townsville was formalised.

It could be presumed that J M Black and his coterie suggested the settlement’s name. After all it was Towns’ money, and political influence to a lesser extent, that was so crucial to the settlement’s future, not unlike Boyd with Boyd Town. Equally there is the hint of patronage through Bowen and Herbert, upon Towns’ suggestion [see following], but possibly apocryphal. Towns subsequently visited the port.

Gibson-Wilde however proposed a novel twist on the naming of Townsville. She proposed that even before the Bowen land sales “Towns was proudly informing his friends that ‘the government had honoured him by naming the new port Towns-ville’, a decision of which local residents appear to have disapproved”. She cited the reference: Towns to Black, 11 July 1865, Towns MSS, Item 52, no. 126, but conscientious searching by Mitchell Library staff could not locate this letter.

#### **4. Towns’ visit and aftermath**

SS *Rangatira* arrived in Townsville the very evening the Municipality was proclaimed by official gazette, the coincidence almost surreal. Gibson-Wilde wrote that “Towns brought the news that the township was now gazetted as a municipality and a place where Courts of Petty Session could be held”. Almost certainly Towns had been informed privately that the Municipality

status would become official at that date; but it is difficult to accept this as the reason for his visit. Griffin was more realistic in writing that it was occasioned by business, in order to sign the contract between shipping company AUSN and Black & Co for regular steamer services from Sydney to Townsville.

There was a celebration at the Criterion Hotel. Not Towns but the *Rangatira's* Captain Harley was guest of honour, with Black as Master of Ceremonies. An account of the evening is reproduced as **Appendix 10**. This is from *The Townsville Herald*, regurgitating the report in the inaugural issue of the *Cleveland Bay Herald and Northern Pioneer*. But it creates confusion rather than clarifying why Townsville was so named:

A portion of Captain Towns's speech (which is not fully reported in *The Herald* – [Banfield's remark] referred to the naming of the town. It was he who piloted the steamer in which his Excellency Sir George Bowen visited the then newly discovered harbour at Port Denison. The feat was as successfully accomplished that the Government was anxious to reward Captain Towns in a public way: but that gentleman declined to receive any tangible recognition of his services. It had been proposed to award him an island in Moreton Bay, and to distinguish it by his name; but he laughingly put the honour aside, remarking that his ambition and his name rose superior to a mud island. It was subsequently resolved that the embryo town in which he held such large interests, and which had been named Castletown by Mr. Ball, should bear his name. Captain Towns detailed these facts in the course of his speech, and said that he was highly honoured by the connection of his name with such a promising future.

The tale is fanciful, and Gibson-Wilde carefully demolished the episode of piloting the Governor into Port Denison (see p. 23, *Gateway to a Golden Land: Townsville to 1884*), although failed to add that Bowen's visit in 1862 was on HMS *Pioneer* and Captain Burnett was hardly likely to hand over the wheel to Towns.

On the Sunday following the Criterion Hotel reception, Towns attended a church service convened by Anglican clergyman, Rev Searle, who accompanied the *Rangatira* party from Bowen. Towns read the lesson and subscribed £50 towards the cost of securing a resident minister, promising to use his influence with the Bishop of Sydney. It was then down to business again.

On Monday 19 February, Towns wrote to Shepherd Smith at the Bank of New South Wales about establishing a branch at the new settlement. He was furious that the Australian Joint Stock Bank had stolen a march, opening premises that very morning:

However we have lost the start – let us now do the next best thing and amend our error. . . You must hold me responsible or any action taken in this matter.

That Shepherd Smith would not receive the letter for almost a fortnight did not matter. Towns had with him the Bank's inspector named Peebles, and to Peebles fell the task. The Bank of New South Wales, operating from premises owned by Towns, was in business before the month ended.

Towns' ego was riding high, but it seems his sojourn at Townsville was hardly agreeable. And here again is a problem with source material, the relevant letter-books severely scorched and unreadable. Hence the only account of Towns' impressions are from Gibson-Wilde's volume (pp.71 & 73). She wrote:

While 'much pleased' with the place and forecasting that it would go ahead quickly, Robert Towns found it 'a most isolated place' . . . 'I never felt so unhappy from home in my life what from bites and blight I have been confined to the house since my arrival here'.

For certain he wrote about other matters; he was an inveterate pen-man. But like his explanation of why Townsville was named in his honour, his full impressions may never be known. Towns departed in mid March, arriving back in the south on 28 March. He never returned to Townsville, ignoring the business axiom of constant vigilance and a firm hand on the tiller.

## **5. Rocks Ahead**

Townsville progressed remarkably through 1866. Black was elected the Municipality's Mayor; building activity was vigorous; sporting events were organised, notably the "Burdekin and Flinders Turf Club" in May of which Towns was appointed President (*in absentia*) ; the Thornton's Gap access to

the interior was completed with Islander labour, and the cotton plantation promised a bumper crop. But then in early 1867, disaster hit with a severe cyclone. Damage was estimated in excess of £15,000, Black and Towns' properties suffering damage and with little insurance.

In April 1867, local residents learned that Black had hastily decided to quit the settlement he worked so hard to establish. The official reason was his partnership with Towns having "expired by the effluxion of time and is now in the process of liquidation". Most writers refer to ill-health, but the evidence suggests he was pushed by Towns to whom he was further in debt, their relationship especially over financial matters having deteriorated to its lowest ebb. Robert Towns & Co bought him out, the settlement taking nearly four months to complete and costly to the firm when other ventures such as Townsvale and shipping ex-Sydney were losing money. Black departed Australia, never to return. With Towns' proceeds he set up a successful publishing house in England and died at the age of 89 in 1919. As Donnelly wrote four decades later: "A reasonable submission for acceptance would be that while Towns was the *de jure* founder of Townsville, Black can lay claim to have founded the port *de facto*".

What was the extent of Towns' and Robert Towns & Co's investments in the North at this juncture? Excluding the Gulf properties in which Robert Towns & Co held equity (see **Part 4**), pastoral holdings in the Kennedy were considerable. Without having consulted run files, it is still possible to list *Woodstock, Stanley Plains, Repulse Plains, Strathalbyn, Mt Stuart, Jarvisfield, Balaclava, Harvest Home, Leichhardt Downs, Inkerman, Springfield, Middleham, Landsdowne* and *Glen Avon* – and the list is incomplete. And from 1867 Towns introduced Hereford and Shorthorn bulls to ensure quality stock. At Townsville there was the boiling down works, the plantations on Ross Island, the wharf and commercial and residential properties. But his empire in the Kennedy was soon to crumble, along with his personal wealth.

Robert Towns suffered a stroke in 1870, and recovered. Stuart had been pressuring him to retire for nearly five years. Towns however was determined to stay at the helm, just as he believed that his decrepit ships were capable of more voyages. Partner Charles Cowper re-entered politics briefly in 1870, then accepted the agent-general position in London in December, possibly also pleased to be able to sever his links with Robert Towns & Co. Stuart was almost alone, and the staunchest of remaining allies: his fate was so interconnected with the firm. The retreat to save it from insolvency came into full swing; it was evident from 1868.

## **6. When the Bank Comes In**

Holder's history of the Bank of New South Wales reveals several details of Towns' financial situation which more generalised assessments ignore. Through his research, a clearer picture of Robert Towns & Co's financial predicament by the late 1860s emerges.

From 1868, Australia experienced two years of recession: wool production and prices were down, gold output declined, copper and coal were in the doldrums, and fisheries were a pale shadow of past glory. Commercial and mercantile houses were over-extended, and for the Bank of New South Wales one troubled firm was that of Robert Towns & Co. As Holder wrote, "a large number of large accounts, mainly of leading merchants connected with squatting, were in the red and in excess of arrangements":

One such account was that of Robert Towns & Co, who had mortgaged six squatting properties to the bank valued by then at £216,000 and had given other security valued at £178,000. A valuation pencilled alongside the list of securities, presumably the Bank's own estimates, totalled £270,800. The debt of \$237,000 at the end of 1870 was in excess of their limit. On this basis at least Smith would have little reason to be complacent while the account was still drifting.

Towns visited England in 1868, an inappropriate year to be away from his colonial interests. But he was keen to continue experiments with export of preserved mutton and canned beef. The Bank had declined funding, amid

whispers of directors or former directors gaining favours or advantages. Towns believed Brooks might come to the party or provide introductions to other Houses of Commerce. Brooks however pointed out that Robert Towns & Co had well exceeded their credit limits, and soon afterwards pressed the firm for the sale of several properties.

The Queensland State Archives contains documentation on winding down involvement in the Burdekin district. From the Register of Applications for Leases of 10 Years Currency (1868-73), it is apparent that on 18 March 1869 Towns and Stuart were segregating blocks from several properties for agricultural purposes. From *Inkerman*, 1,800 acres were designated agricultural; the same day, 1,200 acres on the Burdekin River for sugar cultivation was applied for, forfeited two years later for non-payment of rent. In 1869 Towns sought registration of 3,200 acres at *Dargan*; this was surrendered even earlier in the following September. And in August 1872, three more lots (185, 186, 187) were carved out of *Inkerman* in areas of 1,100, 1,012 and 645 acres, partly for sugar, but disposed of following Towns' death.

Holder makes pertinent comment about Towns' predicament after the abandonment of Townsvale and the Gulf of Carpentaria speculations, and gradual withdrawal from Townsville and the Kennedy District:

It was never easy to reverse the course of lending against a tide of optimism. That was why Smith tried to apply the brake well ahead of the tightness he anticipated. But there were always difficulties with lock-ups and hard core debts. The account of Towns & Co. had come through the 1870 difficulties without anything more serious than worry. The debt had risen to £236,625 at the end of 1870 and emergency extensions of limit had been required in 1871 to meet the firm's varied engagements. Thereafter the debt was reduced as business conditions improved, but seasonal requirements were still very high, and the board was dissatisfied with the condition of the account. The firm had not fulfilled its undertakings to sell off property to reduce the debt, and the Bank now laid down a detailed program for cutting down the company's liabilities, a task which it thought would be easier with rising land values. Little progress had been made, largely through Alexander Stuart's lack of cooperation, when in April 1873 Robert Towns died at the age of 79. One of the keen supporters of the reconstituted Bank, a director and for a time president, he [Towns] had breathed some of his own empire-building spirit into it during the past decade, and in turn his enterprises when

under pressure had been assisted by the Bank rather beyond the limits of prudence. Smith virtually saved the firm from collapse, but he had incurred Towns' impatient sea-dog anger for what the latter considered harsh and pusillanimous treatment.

## **7. Towns' Estate**

Considering the amount of money which passed through his hands over his long business career, Robert Towns was not a wealthy man at the time of his demise. Indeed his estate at probate was probably only a quarter of his worth in the mid-1850s, and was assessed at under £75,000. As Shineberg noted, Towns "stipulated that his son Robert should be disinherited unless he conducted himself over the next five years 'in a sober respectable proper and becoming manner'. Daughter Sarah was also to lose her inheritance if she or her children left the Church of England".

Closer reading of the Will reveals a calculating and bigoted old man. Towns was survived by widow Sophia, then fifty-seven years of age, two sons and three daughters. He had reviewed his will as recently as 11 February 1873, and added a codicil appointing Edward Knox, devout Anglican, fellow Union Club member, banker, and chairman of CSR, as an executor on 25 March 1873, a fortnight before his [Towns'] death. The other executors were Alexander Stuart, Towns' partner in Robert Towns & Co, and George King, another Anglican, Union Club founder, bank and insurance company director, and with pastoral holdings in Queensland. Sophia Towns was nominated as the fourth executor, with provisos attached.

Towns instructed his executors to endeavour to wind up his estate within two years. He directed that his son-in-law, Charles Lett, be engaged at the rate of £500 per annum in monthly payments and that the executors pay themselves £250 "free of legacy duties" plus 2.5% "on all the principal moneys" from "the realisation and collection of my real and personal estate . . . for the loss of time and trouble". Couched in legalese, the Will was specific in intent.

Sophia Towns was to receive all of his personal possessions, including carriages and horses and harnesses. Also she was left the *Cranbrook* residence (now a Sydney school) under life tenancy, “if she shall so long continue my Widow she paying all ground rent taxes and rates and other outgoings . . . and insuring . . . against fire to the full value . . . and also keeping the same in good repair and condition”. Should she decide to sell *Cranbrook*, the proceeds were to be reinvested and Sophia would receive an annuity of £2,500 for life. Should she remarry however, the property was to be sold and her yearly sum was reduced to £600 “to permit her to receive during her life” an income, “free from the debts control or engagements of any future husband with whom she may intermarry”.

Aside from Sophia’s brother Robert Wentworth being left a less than generous “clear yearly sum of fifty two pounds by equal quarterly payments”, the residue of Towns’ estate was to be divided among his children equally – “except as hereinafter provided”. The exceptions applied to three of his five children. Robert D’Arcy Wentworth Towns, clearly the “black sheep” who had spent time in Townsville in 1865, was literally placed on probation for five years to mend his ways or be disinherited. Daughter Sophia Ann Kate Osborne was to receive an adjusted entitlement. Her share was reduced by £13,000, “deemed and taken in part satisfaction” – “this provision made by me on the marriage of my said daughter”. And Sarah Mary, who had married Charles Letts, was also on a daunting promise. As the Will noted, “my consent to the said marriage was only given upon the express understanding and condition that my said daughter should remain a Member of the Church of England and the children of the said marriage should be brought up and educated as Members of the said Church and should not at any time be or become members of the Church of Rome”. Clearly Towns was adamant on this point as he dwelt upon this “Church of Rome” matter, insisting that Sarah’s children must remain Anglicans until 21 years of age, “and not secretly or otherwise admitted to the Church of Rome”. If any were baptised, or if Sarah after his death “shall at any time partake of or be admitted to any of the rites Ceremonies or Sacraments”, the Executors were to withhold her

allocation, re-distributing the share as “if my said daughter Sarah Mary Lett had died in my lifetime without having been married”. Of the two other children, there is no mention by name, no caveat.

Towns’ Will reflects his imperious and contrary character, and dogmatic insistence that his instructions be carried out to the letter. There is little doubt that these traits soured his relationship with John Melton Black. There is also the strongest ground for arguing that Towns’ instructions to his Masters and recruiting agents on the treatment of South Sea Islanders brought to Queensland were meant to be observed faithfully.

## **8. Last Post**

Towns was buried in Balmain cemetery beneath an impressive sandstone obelisk almost 3.5 metres in height on a base 900 cm x 750 cm. His monument was admired for almost seven decades. Then in March 1941, the Leichhardt Council received state approval to raze the cemetery for a public park, headstones to be removed, “mortal remains” to stay undisturbed. The local Historical Society prevailed upon the Council to approach Townsville aldermen about the relocation of Robert Towns’ headstone.

Townsville’s Deputy Mayor, Tom Aikens, opposed the offer: “The people in the South are trying to palm the tombstone on to Townsville. It, like the run of tombstones in Sydney is a dirty sand colour”, reported the *Townsville Bulletin*, “and he would not be party to bringing it to Townsville”. Aikens was supported by Communist alderman Fred Paterson who begrudged the cost of relocation. Public opinion however was strongly against them.

The obelisk came to Townsville. In 1949, it was the re-erected atop Castle Hill. It has been desecrated on two known occasions since but remains *in situ* with the modest inscription: “This stone was originally erected in Sydney over the grave of Capt. Robert Towns after whom Townsville was named.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **PART 4: Robert Towns: “Blackbirder”?**

### **1. A Platform for Debate**

Just over 40 years ago, literally on the centenary of the *Don Juan* sailing into Moreton Bay, Geoffrey Bolton passed opinion on Towns and the introduction of Pacific Islanders as indentured labour in Queensland. His evaluation, notwithstanding repetition of chronology previously discussed, warrants recounting for its contextual perspective:

Captain Robert Towns, the first to take advantage of the 1862 Act, proposed to employ Indians growing cotton on the Logan River, south of Brisbane and not far from the New South Wales border. Indians proving unavailable, and Chinese too unpopular for Australian conditions, Towns sent his schooner, the *Don Juan*, under the command of a tough beachcomber named Ross Lewin, to recruit labour in the New Hebrides. As the innovator of the traffic in Pacific Islanders, Towns need not be condemned too harshly. He seems genuinely to have persuaded himself that the influence of Christian civilisation and useful pursuits would benefit the Islanders, and he had at least the intention (although Ross Lewin ignored it) of allowing his recruits to bring their wives with them – a privilege few Islanders seem even to have considered . . .

Inclined though planters were to dismiss most criticism of the labour system as ill-informed sentimentalism, they did not condone the use of fraud and brutality by blackbirders; and when they took pains to convince inquirers that the Islanders were kindly treated, there was no need to convict them all of insincerity. The private letters of Captain Towns, for instance, show an unexpected concern for ‘the darkies’, even though it took the form of giving them mid-Victorian European clothes and a solid but monotonous diet of maize. There was, however, a tendency to assume that the wants of a simple Islander were few, and to provide accordingly.

### **2. The Parnaby Study**

Contemporaneously with Bolton’s work Owen Parnaby’s *Britain and the Labour Trade in the Southwest Pacific* was published. Based on Colonial

Office Confidential Prints, British Parliamentary Papers and Debates, Missionary and Anti-slavery Society journals, and printed books and pamphlets from the nineteenth century, the volume devoted several pages to Towns. Parnaby included standard biographical information, the background to cotton experiments, and the terms of indentures: “He would pay wages in kind to the value of ten shillings per month and provide food and housing. Laborers were to be engaged in ‘field labour of a light and easy description’”. He remarked that “Towns did not show the tact one would expect when, seeking to recommend his proposal to the missionaries, he said, ‘I with my cotton emigration . . . will do more towards civilising the natives in one year than you can possibly in ten’”. Also he dealt with recruiting methods and the person of Ross Lewin [see following], “who came to have a reputation for cruel treatment of Pacific Islanders”.

Parnaby’s contribution was significant on the issues of official British Government attitudes and Queensland Government reactions:

The attention of the Queensland government was soon drawn to what Towns had done. Since no law covered the introduction of Pacific islanders into Queensland, the government saw no need to take any action beyond reporting the circumstances to the imperial government.

The first employers were eminently respectable persons: Towns had as his first partner, Brooks, M.P. for Weymouth in the House of Commons, and later Cowper, who had been premier of New South Wales and was later agent general for that colony. Another employer, Captain Whish, a member of the Queensland Legislative Council, had been an officer on General Jacobs’ staff in Persia in 1856-1857, and his niece had married General Napier, later Lord Napier of Magdala.

The Queensland government was very much in sympathy with the aims of these men . . . Although the government refused to spend any public money on the introduction of colored labor, many of its influential members and the governor himself thought that the resources of the colony could not be developed without it. . . . It was not surprising therefore that the government should leave these employers free to manage their labor as they desired . . . As they were not accustomed to working long regular hours in the islands, and as neither of the two items supplied as rations were part of their island diet, it is remarkable that they proved as efficient workers as their employers stated them to be.

Indeed Parnaby’s third chapter, “Indenture for Queensland: Imperial Approval” is essential reading for a broader perspective on the first decade of

the “labour trade”. He related that with the extension of indentured labour to the sugar industry and pastoralism, there was an increase in demand. The number brought in for 1867 was “almost ten times the average for the preceding three years”. With the *Masters & Servant Act* the only legal recourse for breaches of agreements, the Islanders “had few rights”, and “practically no protection at law”. In 1867, allegations of recruiting abuses and hints of kidnapping attracted official attention. First, Bowen informed Whitehall that the colony was prepared to sponsor legislation to regulate employment terms and conditions. This eventuated with the *Polynesian Labourers Act*, which received assent in March 1868, an administrative measure soon proven to be toothless on the matter of recruiting practices. Second, the NSW government set up a Royal Commission to which Towns gave evidence in August 1869 [see following]; and the Imperial government, acting upon persistent pressure from several missionary societies, and overruling the opinion of the Emigration Commissioners, finally passed the “Kidnapping Act” in 1872, its superior authority bringing on to the scene the Royal Navy in a bid to curb the increasing incidence of recruiting malpractices.

### **3. Docker’s Treatise**

A widely consulted source on recruiting of “Kanaka” labour is Edward Docker’s, *The Blackbirders*, published in 1970. The volume was inspired by author and human rights activist, Faith Bandler, who founded the National Commission for Australian South Sea Islanders four years later. Docker focussed on Robert Towns in his opening chapter, extracts reflecting his line of argument.

First, there was Docker’s assessment of Towns’ character:

Robert Towns, who was an impetuous sort of person and had recently dismissed all the German emigrants on his [Townsvale] plantation, because their families were too large and ate too much, suddenly arrived at the decision to import islanders. It was an impetuous decision . . .

But Towns was no fool. He was a Northumbrian of exceptional shrewdness and determination . . . On one occasion, when somebody had suggested that surely he would not risk such a splendid craft [his clipper *Brothers*] on the China coast, he had replied, 'I'd sail her to Hades and back, if there was a profit in it'. That was the Northumbrian in him speaking both in the language and the true merchant instinct. He had at least one other very north of England characteristic too: a stern Puritan conscience. No drinking at sea, no alcohol even to be carried aboard was the rule on Captain Towns's ships. It was a rule that often made it very hard for him to get crews, and sometimes even cost him a profit, since liquor was a very lucrative sideline with skippers and ship owners trading in the islands.

There was more to this attitude than a mere obsession about drink; he was, in fact, a very conscientious employer, and did not want to see people drinking themselves stupid and 'going to the devil' generally while he was in any way responsible for their moral welfare. Thus, while engaged in the emigration trade to Australia in the twenties and thirties he would ensure that every cabin was supplied with a Bible, a prayer book, several Temperance tracts, and a small volume of cottage maxims. The mere lives of these people were not so important to him (or he would not have sent men to sea in such rotten ships) as their immortal souls.

Docker subsequently turned to Towns' attitude to South Sea Islanders with whom he had a longstanding connection through the sandalwood trade:

Normally he was quite merciless in business, yet he had one noticeable softness, a predilection for the merry-hearted islanders who for twenty years and more had formed the crews of his sandalwooding vessels . . . Thus, personally, his relationships with the islanders were very good. Yet he had shrunk, when first considering it, from the idea of employing them in any large-scale way in Australia . . . However, Towns had an urgent problem to solve in 1863 – the declining health of Townsvale, starved of reliable labour, was faced with its second bad season in succession. He made his decision early in 1863, and although he never doubted its rightness, he was at pains very often to explain that he was driven to it.

Docker justified his assertion on the basis of Towns' instructions to Captain Grueber and to Ross Lewin, his letter to missionaries [see **Appendix 4**] and Bowen's ongoing support for agricultural development in the Moreton Bay region of which indentured labour was an integral feature. Docker continued:

However, if Governor Bowen at least seemed unconcerned about what was being said in certain Brisbane newspapers, Robert Towns was not. He never dreamed that what was in his eyes the innocent voyage of the *Don Juan* would be likened to the beginnings of a new slave trade; that the outrageous remarks of the radical Press would be taken up in the House. 'I was represented as a perfect monster', Towns complained

afterwards. 'My proceedings were scandalous. Every vile epithet was applied to me and I thought something should be done by me to expose the fallacy of these people's statements'. So he embarked on yet another long letter, this time to Robert Herbert, Premier of Queensland. [See **Appendix 5**].

Towns visited Townsvale at Christmas 1863 and again in December 1864. What Docker did not delve into was the increase in the number of Islanders over fifteen months. The *Don Juan's* complement was 67 in number. On 8 July 1864, another 54 were landed by the *Uncle Tom*. This same vessel repatriated 70 on 2 September, and returned to Brisbane with another 80 on 28 November. This meant that Towns was responsible for over 120 South Sea Islanders on the eve of his 1864 visit. (Two of the Islanders from the *Don Juan* had died in Queensland.) Some of their number were reassigned to Cleveland Bay, upon which Docker did remark:

The pick of them, the Tannamen, went with John Melton Black, Towns' dynamic chief manager, to build the port of Townsville. The Tannamen, as already noted, were exceptional. In the vanguard of whatever was happening, they blasted away the rocks at the entrance to Ross Creek, drained the mangrove swamps around the river delta, and drove in the piles for the first wharf . . .

Northern developers, pastoralists and all those who would shortly be employing Kanakas in a variety of tasks, had good cause to be grateful to Robert Towns. He had made the breakthrough; he had assumed all the responsibility; borne the brunt of the initial objections and shown that the introduction of cheap island labour was easier than anyone dared think.

It is surprising that Docker should be so sympathetic to Towns yet so critical of a few Masters and selected recruiters. Indeed his wrath was saved for Ross Lewin and a number of ship captains, and to a much lesser extent the zealotry of George Palmer, commander of H M sloop *Rosario* and certain missionaries. In the person of Lewin, he ignored a strong Towns connection and early confidence in his recruiting capabilities. In time, it would expose Towns as a somewhat naïve, parsimonious septuagenarian whose ideas and attitudes were still entrenched in the early Victorian era.

#### 4. Steering to Port

In 1982, Kay Saunders published *Workers in Bondage*, a revision of her PhD thesis. Theoretically insular in the mould of university historians of the “leftist” genre on race relations, Saunders’ work examined mainly the period following Towns’ death in April 1873. She argued that there were two procedures in recruitment: “overt coercion” and “covert coercion”, the first relating to blatant “slave trading”, which she implied occurred prior to the “Kidnapping Act”; the second entailing “trickery or fraud to procure labourers”, in the 1870s and ’80s. Her sensational examples of overt coercion, within the time-span of this brief, were as follows:

The first method of obtaining Melanesians may be termed spontaneous overt coercion. The first adequately documented case involved the *King Oscar*, a 248 ton schooner owned by Robert Towns. It left Brisbane on 12 September 1867 and returned with 282 Melanesians from the New Hebrides and Loyalty Islands on 13 November 1867. At the 1869 Select Committee on the Operation of the Polynesian Labourers Act of 1868, Alfred Davidson of the Aborigines’ Protection Society produced evidence that Ross Lewin had induced Mii Islanders on board, then ‘placed Mare men around the sides of the ship and said he would beat them if the Mii got away’. At Apie, two men were kidnapped. When one escaped, two other Islanders were shot. Meanwhile, Lewin ordered all the houses and crops in a village to be burnt. Altogether five men were captured and detained in the hold until the master intervened. Further evidence suggested that canoes had been deliberately rammed or destroyed by dropping large weights of iron from the ship’s bow – a technique known popularly as ‘the eye-drop’.

Saunders cited two other cases:

A young girl from Tanna, Narguainambo, alleged she had been kidnapped, repeatedly raped and later dragged through the surf into *Spunkie*. Lewin, part owner of the vessel, was later acquitted due to the absence of proper interpreters. The French Ambassador in London also had complained that the *Fanny Nicholson*, a 285 ton barque, had kidnapped almost half a village in Lifu. The vessel was fired upon by French naval officials, but escaped both damage and capture. The Governor of New Caledonia voiced his suspicions that Queensland vessels were frequently kidnapping in French waters.

Saunders provided examples of “covert coercion”. First was the *Syren*, alleged to have kidnapped “a Tanna chief and six other Tanna men who had unsuspectingly come on board, as well as Malekulans who had swum out to

inspect the vessel”, but added no further analysis. Then she wrote of two other episodes:

In 1869 a Christian Melanesian, Narufu, informed Commander Palmer R.N. that Charlie, the ‘recruiting agent’ for the *King Oscar*, had enticed men on board at Dillion’s Bay, Eromanga with a promise of pigs and tobacco. When the hapless men attempted to leave, they were imprisoned in the hold.

Another widely-used method of covert coercion favoured in low contact areas was for the labour vessels to pose as itinerant missionary schooners. In 1869 the *Spunkie*, anchored in the Banks group, had obtained men by claiming to be a representative of Bishop J. C. Patterson. Once on deck, the crew, fully armed with pistols, would force the Melanesians into the holds ‘to ruminate on the advantages of civilization’.

Saunders’ work has to be treated with considerable scepticism. The *King Oscar*, which both Parnaby and Docker discussed, was a Swedish ex-gunboat and former collier. It was not a Robert Towns & Co recruiter. It was owned in 1867 by Lewin in partnership with a Captain Gibbins. It made two voyages to the Islands, recruiting 225 who arrived in Brisbane on 16 August 1867, returning 9 persons, and bringing back 282 on 11 November 1867. There is no evidence whatsoever which could connect Towns with either recruiting voyage, Lewin having left his employ beforehand.

As for the other cases of *Spunkie* and *Fanny Nicholson*, (also neither Towns’ vessels), these have been distorted to suit Saunders’ agenda. Both were fully documented in Governor Blackall’s despatches to the Secretary of State for Colonies, and did not concern Towns in any way. The newspaper reports on subsequent investigations are available with cross-referencing to official documents, so seriously did the Imperial authorities regard the protests of missionaries and French officials. And always the name Ross Lewin cropped up. Who was this man that Towns engaged for almost three years?

## **5. Ross Lewin – Towns’ Recruiter**

An elusive historical character, Lewin would make an absorbing biographical study, but little is known of his background. Lewin, it seems, was born *circa*

1830 and entered the Royal Navy, serving with the China Squadron. One source says he was cashiered after the First China War, which is hardly likely as this concluded in 1842 and Lewin would have been barely a teenager. Another suggests he deserted in the 1850s and subsequently became involved with sandalwood on Tanna, and guano collection off Peru. When the government at Lima abolished slavery in 1855, Lewin was resident on Tanna. When indentured South Sea Islander contracts for guano collection were re-issued from 1861, there is every suspicion that Lewin began his trade as a recruiter.

How Towns engaged Lewin is not clear: the latter was possibly recommended by Towns' sandalwooders on the Islands. However by the end of May 1863 Towns wrote in his instructions about "our verbal agreement for your present employment on the intended expedition of the *Don Juan*". He also wrote, "As I understand you are no scholar, Captain Grueber will read them for you, and explain what is required of you". To Grueber he wrote on the same day, "I have engaged Mr Ross Lewin, who speaks the native language and is well-known amongst the islands . . . If you find it difficult to procure the natives through Mr. Ross Lewin, you had better run over to Erromanga, to Mr. Henry's station . . .".

Lewin fulfilled his assignment and remained with Towns as an overseer at Townsvale. In early July 1864, the aged brigantine *Uncle Tom* landed a further 54 Islanders at Logan River and immediately prepared to undertake a return visit with a dual purpose: first, to repatriate the *Don Juan's* group whose indentures had expired; second, to recruit more workers for Towns and collect a beche-de-mer consignment. Captain was George Smith; Lewin was again the recruiter. And again Towns issued long-winded instructions to both, dated 10 September 1864. The points of relevance to Smith concerned Lewin's authority:

In the first place, you must consider the comfort of these poor natives, next to your duties on board of the vessel.

Mr. Ross Lewin will have the entire charge of the natives; and being a thorough sailor, and well acquainted with the islands, and a man in

whom I have entire confidence, you will find that duty as regards the natives very simple. The motive and object of your voyage being, firstly to land the natives you take on board here, at such islands as he [Ross Lewin] may point out, and wish you to proceed to; and so on in succession, as he may desire and require, . . . in which case you will please take the vessel to wherever he may require you – it will be his responsibility.

And as I have every confidence in Lewin not running you into danger, he knowing the islands so well, I have every confidence in your success.

At the same time you must bear in mind you are master, and that I look to you for the safe and proper command of the ship, and on no account imperil the safety of the vessel, which I am sure Mr. Lewin will not require you to do . . .

. . . Lewin will procure as many yams as he can, for which you may have to go to other islands.

You are amply found in stores, and I look to you for economy, and be sure and support Mr. R. Lewin in his authority, and be particular that no liberties or freedom be allowed as between your crew and the native women, supposing you have such. The least liberty of this kind may lead to the most serious consequences.

To Lewin, Towns wrote he would “leave the matter in your hands with every confidence that you will do your best to carry it out with success”. He added several specific instructions, underscoring words for emphasis:

You will pay off and settle with the natives whose time is now up, and may be returning to their homes – pay them in accordance with their agreement, strictly, and if any of them deserve a little extra for good conduct, I leave that in your hands to reward them accordingly; but be just to all . . . . I hope you will be able to bring the families next trip, if there are children, you will keep in view all above twelve count as adults, below that half. I am not aware if that law applies to passages on so short a voyage, but will ascertain . . .

. . . In engaging the next lot, their time must be for three years and over if you can get them . . .

If you bring women, you must be particular to have a bulkhead between them and the men, and be particular that decency and strictly moral conduct is observed, and on no account permit the least freedom from the sailors, captain, or officers; such may lead to the most serious consequences, say nothing of the impropriety . . .

I think that I have now said all that is necessary in relation to your voyage, and have only to add my best wishes for your success, in which I have every confidence . . . I may further add the important necessity for cleanliness; take care the women have all they require for their purpose, bunks, steps, etc., and take care to keep them clean. Hoping to see you

in the time you give yourself, but take no risks; this I have told Captain Smith.

These two letters, reproduced as **Appendix 6**, reflect two significant points. On the one hand, Towns issued instructions, as he did for the *Don Juan* voyage, explicitly demanding fair treatment and consideration of the labourers' welfare. Indeed he later told the NSW Royal Commission on Alleged Kidnapping of Natives of the Loyal Islands in August 1869 of an episode on the day of the *Uncle Tom's* departure:

At the time the "Uncle Tom" was despatched . . . I went on board when they were all embarked in the vessel, which was lying at the mouth of the Brisbane River, and then I instructed the captain more particularly what islands he should touch at in order that he might not go to leeward; I called him and Ross Lewin down into the cabin to point out the islands on the chart . . . When I was pointing out the islands I thought it desirable they should touch at, spotting one after another – Lewin said 'I cannot do that'. 'Why?' I enquired, 'Because we must go here' he said, pointing to one of the islands, 'to get our women first.' I should mention that I had previously told them that I wished, if it were possible, for them to bring the wives of the men with them, in order that they might be induced to settle down upon the land – 'What!' said I 'don't you get the women where you get the men?' 'Oh dear no, it is not usual to do that.' 'How is it managed then?' I asked. 'Oh we do the same as they do themselves – get the wives from one island and the husbands from another.' 'And how long then,' said I, 'would it take for courtship, matrimony, and consummation altogether?' I do not think he exactly understood me, but he said 'I think it could be all done in four and twenty hours.' 'Well then,' I said, 'if that is the way the business is done, we will dispense with the women for the present, we will abandon that plan, but if you find in any instance a married man who is willing to bring his wife and family, you can do so.' With all the importations I have had, however, I have never had one woman brought.

On the other hand, the letters demonstrate implicit faith in the integrity of Ross Lewin as his recruiter. But, at the same Royal Commission, Towns was less than complimentary towards him, time having elapsed and confessing misplaced trust:

This man Lewin, after he had been with me for some years, left my service, and became connected with some parties in Brisbane, and went down to the islands on their account; and I have no doubt the natives thought he was engaging them for me, and that he to some extent beguiled these people by using my name, and they came with him under the impression that they were coming to me . . . Ross Lewin was the person I employed in getting these people for me. I employed him in that way because he had been for many years second mate in my employ, and

I understood that he knew the language, but he knew only a few catch words.

Towns and Lewin had fallen out sometime in early 1867, at the very time J M Black called off the Towns-Black partnership and left for England. But what triggered it cannot be ascertained. Lewin however featured very little in Towns' life after he left his employment, and Towns was overseas in 1868. Lewin's reputation nevertheless was coloured by court appearances and imaginative newspaper articles. When Albert Markham, who succeeded Commodore George Palmer as Master of HMS *Rosario*, wrote *The Cruise of the Rosario* in 1873, in the footsteps of Palmer's *Kidnapping in the South Seas* (1871), and termed Lewin a "notorious" person, "who has the unenviable reputation of being the most successful man-stealer in these parts", Lewin could indeed claim notoriety.

He was embroiled in the *Spunkie* and then *Daphne* episodes in 1868 and in 1869, details of which do not relate to this report. He escaped conviction in both, but had his license revoked by the Queensland government. Thereafter he was connected with clandestine recruiting for Fiji plantations. There is no doubt whatsoever that he was a "bad-un", but his infamy was short-lived. Holed up in his fortress on Tanna, protected by armed guards, Lewin's security failed but once, in April 1874. A local Tannaman, intent on avenging the death of a relative whom Lewin had shot for banana-stealing, caught him unaware and calculatedly murdered, in Docker's melodramatic words, "the greatest old blackbirder of them all", almost a year to the day Robert Towns was buried in a Sydney cemetery.

## **6. Towns' Testimony**

Following the 1868 legislation regulating South Sea Islanders' conditions, the Queensland government convened a "Select Committee of Inquiry into the Operation of the Polynesian Act". The evidence heard dealt primarily with matters on the mainland, with little mention of recruiting practices. [See *Votes & Proceedings*, 1868-69, pp. 549ff.] Towns did not give evidence and

there was little reference to his personal business activities. He was however frank in his testimony to the aforementioned NSW Royal Commission in August 1869.

Prior to tabling relevant documents, Towns unhesitatingly stated:

I may say that, ever since I have lived in the Colony, these people have been servants of mine. I have been identified with the island trade during the whole period of my residence here, since 1842, and have had these men employed in various ways on board my vessels and on shore; in beche-de-mering, sandalwooding, and whaling, and also at my wharf, in numbers. In fact, it was from the experience I had of them in an early stage of my career that I was led to turn my attention to them as likely to prove a valuable class of labour for Queensland. It is only quite recently that I have employed them in the cultivation of land, but I have had them at work on my wharf for many years.

Subsequently he remarked:

I think the largest number I have had employed at one time was 257; these have been engaged at my plantations at Townsville [Townsvale?] and Cleveland Bay. After I had split up my camp, I drafted off ten or twenty to Cleveland Bay, some to Redbank, near Ipswich . . . I have at present about ninety-seven of these men employed on plantation work, and in September I shall send away sixty, whose time will then expire. I do not think I shall try to replace them with others, under the present Queensland Labour Act, which renders them too expensive; the regulations under that Act have entirely destroyed the utility of these people, from the expense.

And predictably he saved a parting shot for Lewin, desperately distancing himself from the controversy surrounding his former recruiter:

On the occasion when I tried to get women I totally failed. I told Ross Lewin he was on no account to pursue the course suggested. He was going to kidnap them . . . I put an end to that at once . . .

I am particular in giving instructions for the return of these men to the islands to which they belong; and I believe my instructions are carried out, although it is possible cases may have occurred where men have been put upon the wrong islands. I should hope it has not been, and I do not know of any such cases, but I do not see how it would be possible to prevent it if the captain were an unprincipled man . . .

I am quite of opinion that the continuance of the importation of this Polynesian labour into Queensland will not be prejudicial to the general interests of that Colony, but quite the reverse. It will be beneficial to the employers, and especially so to the natives. If it will not pay me, of course it will not pay anyone else. The result of the restrictions put upon the

introduction of this description of labour, by the recent Act, will be to snuff it out altogether.

The Royal Commission's president never probed into the question of the names of Robert Towns & Co vessels formerly or currently engaged in recruiting, nor the number of indentured labourers introduced to Queensland by the company. There are hints however in answer to these in the reports of the Queensland Immigration Agent.

## **7. McDonnell's Report**

Possibly the most comprehensive document available to researchers of the 1860s is John McDonnell's "Report from the Immigration Agent on the Working of the Polynesian Act", and a supplementary update of 23 March 1869, to be found in Governor Blackall's despatch to the Earl of Granville, 16 April 1869. (*British Parliamentary Papers*, Vol 26 – Colonial Australia, 1869.)

McDonnell listed all vessels transporting South Sea Islanders to Queensland between August 1863 and March 1868, prior to the *Polynesian Labourers Act*. [This is reproduced as **Appendix 11**.] He also detailed the additional eight vessels which brought another 604 Islanders to Queensland from March to December 1868 [see **Appendix 12**]. In addition, there is a statement of the number of Islanders repatriated over the initial period of five years and the port of departure.

McDonnell recorded that on the date of proclamation by *Gazette* of the 1868 Act, there were 1,539 Islanders in Queensland, indentured to 133 employers. He calculated that of the numbers engaged since the arrival of the *Don Juan*, 30 had been deployed to the beche-de-mer industry (those transported by the *Telegraph* to Bowen in July 1865); 277 had been returned to their islands; and 260 were unaccounted for, 100 of whom were presumed dead. With bureaucratic indifference, McDonnell wrote:

It may be that the deaths were more numerous than I have stated but as the deaths reported for 10 months of 1868 amongst the 1,539 were 45, being at the rate of 3.50 per cent per annum, I have, in the absence of any data to guide me, roughly estimated the probable deaths during the previous period at, say, six per cent per annum. The balance unaccounted for, doubtless, consists in a great measure of men who have no regular employment.

For North Queensland he estimated there were 252 in the Bowen district, 142 at Cleveland Bay, 12 at Cardwell and 15 in the Gulf. Pastoral employment was greater than agricultural; at Bowen there were 27 with no regular employment. Specifically in the Cleveland Bay district, there were six listed employers, with 46 Islanders engaged in pastoralism, 26 in the township and 70 in agriculture. (The photograph “Overseer’s house, Black & Co.’s plantation – Showing Kanaka labourers” on p. 71 of Gibson-Wilde’s history has approximately 70 Islanders in the assembly.)

McDonnell also tabulated names of the islands from which labourers were recruited, and causes of death. He reported in considerable detail arrivals since 4 March 1868, the vessel, name of Captain and the recruiting agent. None of the 604 came to Bowen or Cleveland Bay. There was however one puzzling entry. On 17 September 1868, *Spunkie* (not a Towns boat) landed 150 Islanders at Sweer’s Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria, ostensibly for pastoral work. But the properties of the Plains of Promise where Macdonald, Robertson and Towns had taken up runs were being abandoned following plague (“Burketown Fever”). By mid-1869 Burketown was deserted. What happened to the Islanders remains a mystery, although it could be speculated that many went to the pearling and other maritime industries of the Torres Strait. More is known however of the *Heather Bell*’s voyage ten months beforehand, in November/December 1867.

## **8. Voyage of the *Heather Bell***

The *Heather Bell* delivered the largest consignment of indentured labourers to Cleveland Bay during Towns’ lifetime. Unlike other Robert Towns & Co vessels or charters, there is considerable documentation available with

respect to this voyage, two in particular of great significance: Towns' instructions and James Gordon's inspection report on arrival.

Towns' instructions were again explicit, recorded in a Memorandum of Agreement between Towns and Frank Grant:

Witnesseth, the said Robt Towns entered into an agreement with Various Squatters, and others for the purpose of importing Native labourers from the South Sea Islands, and for that purpose chartered the Heather Bell to proceed to the South Sea Islands in Consideration of the agreement made between said Robt Towns of Sydney and Frank Grant dated 29<sup>th</sup> day of Nov. instant relating hereto, and in further pursuance thereof the said Robt Towns hereby Covenants with the said Frank Grant to re-engage, and bring back from the S. S. Islands as many of the natives as can be procured from amongst the old hands who formerly served some time on the Plantation in Queensland and failing to secure the number required say fifty from amongst such old hands, then in that case to Engage other good able bodied young men on the terms hereafter mentioned or endorsed hereon a copy of such terms to be read and explained to each man before engagement through an Interpreter. Great care to be taken to explain the period for which they are about to engage namely three years, or as better understood say /39/ thirty nine moons from the day of landing in Queensland, until they leave the Colony, and It is hereby further understood and agreed on, and to be strictly carried out that no force or compulsion shall be used in the procuring and engaging of the men which must be strictly their own Voluntary Act. The agreements to be in all cases where practicable Witnessed by a Missionary, or other European resident on the Island, but when there are none such other by the Master and Mate of the Vessel Heather Bell.

*Heather Bell*, with 89 recruits aboard, sailed into Cleveland Bay in mid-December 1867. James Gordon, the Port Master, subsequently inspected the vessel and filed a report with the Colonial Secretary [see **Appendix 13**]. In part he wrote:

. . . so far as the treatment of these Islanders on board is concerned it appears to me that Captain Brown is a humane man and I fancy from their general appearance that the Islanders have been treated well as they are nearly all in plump and healthy condition.

Gordon was troubled however by the recruits' understanding of their agreements: "I found that it was an utter impossibility to have any intelligent conversation with them",

. . . and so far as the agreement is concerned I could not satisfy myself that they had any idea at all as to the duration and nature of it, and

Captain Brown virtually acknowledged that he could not make them understand it.

On asking him how they managed to understand the agreement in the first instance he explained that it was explained to them by interpreters who reside in the Islands.

*Heather Bell* sailed for Brisbane, arriving at Moreton Bay on 9 January. At Townsville only 64 Islanders were landed, 25 re-directed south, according to Gordon. McDonald, the Lytton Health Officer (not to be confused with McDonnell) reported that 24 arrived: “All well on board”. Had one died between Townsville and Brisbane? This discrepancy is but one of numerous unanswerable questions which have arisen during the preparation of this report.

## **9. Lacunae**

Constraints of distance from archival repositories, the dispersal of MSS resources around the country and in some instances their loss, and understandably the time factor in which to furnish a report on so complex a topic have been frustrating in addressing several related questions and issues. To nominate a few:

### **(a) Labour vessels**

Despite the effort of Paul Brunton (see **Acknowledgements**), there seems to be no consolidated register of ships owned by Towns or Robert Towns & Co from which labour carriers can be identified. It is known that Towns owned or chartered *Don Juan*, *Uncle Tom*, *Telegraph*, *Black Dog*, *Blue Bell*, *Heather Bell*, *Caroline*, *Woodlark*, and *Melanie* at one time or another. As for the *King Oscar*, *Daphne*, *Spunkie*, and *Fannie Nicholson*, they were not Towns' vessels when alleged to have been involved in recruiting malpractices. E V Stevens' article on “Blackbirding”, with his 103 identified labour traders is incomplete, and found to be erroneous in several respects. *Blue Bell* is not listed, nor is *Caroline*. There is also a grey area with regard to *Heather Bell*. Stevens suggests it was a 188 tons brig built in Aberdeen in 1851 for

McEachern and involved in a fracas in 1878, a year after obtaining its recruiting license. However it seems there was another *Heather Bell*, a former wool trader of 479 tons. This was the vessel which made two visits to Townsville. Possible sources such as Lloyd's *Shipping Lists* and *Shipping Registers* have not been accessible, nor obviously Board of Trade records at the PRO, Kew Gardens, England.

**(b) Conflicting evidence**

McDonnell's list of vessels into Cleveland Bay to March 1868 has three names; *Uncle Tom* cannot be counted as, although a recruiting boat, it was transferring building supplies, stores, and 10 Tannamen from Townsvale, not from the Islands. The three were *Blue Bell*, *Heather Bell* (twice) and *Caroline* [see **Appendix 11**]. Yet Cavendish's "Pacific Island Labour Vessels", the Queensland State Archives' guide, records only three arrivals up to 29 March 1881 when the *Ceara* brought in 129 Islanders for the Burdekin canefields:

24.08.1866	Blue Bell	9
30.10.1867	Blue Bell	54
14.12.1867	Heather Belle [sic]	89

This simply cannot be accurate: the *Blue Bell* was wrecked in December 1866 off Hope Island, and could not have made a return voyage on 30 October 1867. Contradicting evidence can also be detected in the assertions of other researchers.

**(c) Missed Boats?**

Historians Gibson-Wilde and Griffin have contributed to the confusion over labour transport to Cleveland Bay. The former wrote:

The boiling-down works, the sugar and cotton plantations, and the beche-de-mer industry employed mainly Kanaka labour, and once again it was the Towns & Co. vessels *Woodlark* and *Blue Bell* which started bringing South Sea Islanders to Townsville to meet labour demands. Others followed and there was soon an established trade in South Sea Island labour through the port; the notorious Ross Lewin was well-known in Townsville (p. 60).

As the boiling-down works and cotton plantations operated from 1866 to 1870, it is hardly likely that the *Blue Bell* or the *Woodlark* brought in additional Islanders for this purpose. As indicated, the *Blue Bell* was wrecked. The *Woodlark* however was fitted out, on Towns' testimony, only in late 1869 when it was used for repatriation. Its recruiting voyage of September 1870 yielded only 15 Islanders, but at which port they disembarked cannot be ascertained. Equally there is no substantial evidence that "the notorious Ross Lewin was well-known in Townsville", at least from documents consulted.

The latter, Griffin, wrote:

The first 10 indentured labourers in Townsville had inspired confidence in their suitability as workers. They had been repatriated on the *Heather Bell* at the end of their three years service in November 1867, and had been lodged in immigration quarters near the hospital on Ross Creek until the vessel was ready to leave. Townsville provided the depot for Islanders working not only in the town, but in rural areas as well, and well beyond the district of Townsville. By early 1869 another 103 Melanesian workers arrived in Townsville on the *Jason*. Some went onto stations; others stayed in Townsville . . . (p. 132).

It is doubtful that the *Jason* brought Islanders to Townsville in 1869. The schooner, owned by R Travis & Co of Maryborough, did not undertake its first licensed recruiting voyage until June 1870, and from State Archives records was engaged exclusively in shuttling back and forth between Maryborough and the Islands. In 1871, it became the centre of the first successful prosecution of a Master, J W Coath, for "blackbirding": he was fined £50 and sentenced to five years, but pardoned after 21 months.

Even if South Sea Islanders were brought in through Bowen, it is difficult to cross-check numbers. Cavendish's records for Port Denison do not commence until 1875; McDonnell's list is the only source available. This significant area of North Queensland shipping requires further microscopic research.

#### **(d) Silent anomalies**

As suggested with the Sweer's Island group of Islanders, there are many anomalies, at least statistically, because of the "back door" in the Torres Strait. This point was made strongly by Docker:

The pearl-shellers of Torres Strait certainly used the back-door entrance on occasions. They had long been in the habit of running over to New Caledonia and the Loyalties when they needed divers, so it was a relatively simple business to switch from pearl-shelling to full-scale recruiting and back again, according to the demand. Between 1866 and 1868 a Sydney businessman, John Crossley, evidently made a good deal of money out of chartering various pearl-shellers and other vessels from their Sydney owners and sending them over to the Loyalties or the New Hebrides for a speculative cargo. The most successful entrepreneur of them all, however, was Ross Lewin.

Towns had Torres Strait interests. The *Telegraph's* 30 recruits to Bowen in 1865 were redirected as McDonnell remarked: "For beche-de-mer fisheries, for which they were originally embarked". And there was another Towns vessel, *Berengaria*, which in 2004 became the focus of newspaper controversy in Townsville.

The Captain was named Sustenance and he wrote from Cleveland Bay on 9 October 1866 to Robert Towns & Co's shipping management that he had anchored near West Point, off Magnetic Island:

I have been becalmed for the last four days and have still on board about 1500 Staves which have not been taken away owing to the lighters having been loaded with wool since Tuesday awaiting the arrival of the Steamer which has not yet made her appearance. Should I get a fair wind I shall go Staves landed or not - I have received a verbal message from Capt Edwards (per Policeman) directing me to call at Hope Isd where there is a letter in some old hut but Mr Black says he is going to Burketown in the Gulf of Carpentaria with the Commissioners wife as passenger. In that case my chance of seeing him is small It is rumoured that the Woodlark has gone to Darnley Island and that the Melanie is at or about the Eastern Fields

I have had to get water here which is obtained from the Boiling down Establishment, a long distance owing to the tank repaired in Sydney having leaked out The vessel is now cleared and I propose sailing tomorrow morning for Hope Isd

The supposition that the *Berengaria* was involved in the South Sea Islander labour traffic, and could possibly have carried 1,500 "slaves", is absurd.

As for Robert Towns' part, the activities which occurred in the Southwest Pacific islands from the late 1870s to the mid 1880s would probably have been upsetting, given his staunch Anglican background and persistence in instructing Captains and recruiters about their duties and respect for local customs. Admittedly he was impatient with partisan non-conformist missionaries and reacted with ill-temper whenever it was suggested that Robert Towns & Co's ships were in some way involved in blackbirding. Admittedly, encroaching age had dimmed his recollection of troubles when his sandalwooders frequently clashed with Islanders, sometimes with loss of life on both sides, about which Shineberg hinted in her major study. Indeed her remarks, "The origin of the Australian labour recruiting was directly linked with the practice of hiring islanders for the sandalwood trade", peels louder than a brigantine's bell.

Twentieth century value judgements by historians overlook the entrepreneurial and business ethos of the mid-nineteenth century. Molesworth wrote his account in the wake of Edwardian times, and within living memory of men involved in the labour traffic. He was well-disposed towards Robert Towns as a product of the Gladstonian era in which free trade, opportunism and profit were considered virtues, a measure of progress, and personal accomplishment.

South Sea Islanders however understood little about their indentures and conditions in Queensland. Their prospects nevertheless seemed more attractive than Fiji and other British colonies, even Hawaii, where indentured labourers had much to regret after terms of servitude. Only when Queensland premier Samuel Griffith legislated to improve the lot of South Sea Islanders in the 1880s did the litany of kidnapping and malpractices, long and considerable, become more evident in the consciences of Queenslanders, sugar planters aside who desperately fought for a New State to preserve sweated, black labour. These instances have been better documented than those of the era of Robert Towns.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Conclusion**

In terms of the brief set by Townsville City Council the following conclusions are offered:

### **1. Historical Association**

It was commonplace in the nineteenth century for ports and settlements to be named after British politicians, Governors and sometimes their wives. For example, Sydney is named after the British Home Secretary of the day; Melbourne after the British Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne; Hobart after the Secretary of State for Colonies; and Adelaide after the consort of King William IV. In Queensland there is Gladstone and Cardwell, both named after Secretaries of State for Colonies; Brisbane, Cairns, Bowen, and Blackall, named after Governors. It was a fashion of the time. Three North Queensland cities which individually vied to become capital of a separate state of North Queensland in the 1880s were Townsville, Mackay and Charters Towers, the last mentioned named after the local mining warden and with very little hope of becoming the seat of northern government at the time (although in the 1950s it was considered the compromise candidate).

The case of Mackay is interesting because of the mythology which surrounds the exploring party's deeds. John Mackay did not lead the expedition to the Pioneer River valley. It was arranged and financed by John McCrossin from Uralla, and Mackay, then only 22 years of age, was nominally second in command. The river was originally named the Mackay River in honour of young John's father; it was changed to Pioneer after Governor Bowen visited the settlement in 1862 aboard HMS *Pioneer*. John Mackay went back to the area for eight months as an employee, not as a run-holder. He pestered the

Colonial government for recognition of his contribution to opening up the district; the government acquiesced only to put a halt to his hectoring. This has been fully documented in *Mackay Revisited* (2002). Twenty years onwards Captain Mackay returned to the township and subsequently lodged an application for compensation for his self-perceived pioneering work. It was unsuccessful and he returned to shipping activities out of Fiji (which incidentally may have included indentured labour transportation; his command, *Meg Merrilees*, has been listed subsequently as a labour-trade vessel) before retreating first to Cooktown and then to Brisbane as Harbour Master. Mackay at no stage had a guinea to spare for investment in the region to which he claimed to have contributed.

Robert Towns, though Sydney-based, speculated in the North, first on pastoral runs, and more so in the new port of Townsville. Admittedly much of the ground work was done by John Melton Black, employees of their partnership and indentured labour. When Black departed Townsville however, in the Autumn of 1867, Towns persisted, much to his financial regret. Even though he only made one visit to the settlement in February/March 1866, his financial support to establish infrastructure was fundamental to the nascent port's prosperity, which the gold discoveries enhanced within a decade. Perhaps "Blacktown" or "Blackville" might have reflected the respective efforts of the founders, Ball and Reid aside, but then as now money confers social and political prestige and patronage.

**There should be no argument about the naming of Townsville.**

## **2. Involvement in Blackbirding**

From the written documents, and given the character of Robert Towns, undesirable as some aspects may appear to a contemporary citizenry, there is no evidence that Towns personally condoned or was involved in Blackbirding. The term has to be taken semantically; its origins related specifically to kidnapping. While some of his employees, and certainly Ross

Lewin, were guilty of the practice, although never convicted, Towns went to great lengths in his instructions to ensure that indentured labour was treated in a humane manner.

Sceptics might strongly argue that these instructions were self-serving, that Towns was safeguarding his public image and business arrangements from possible legal implications. But prior to the soft 1868 Queensland Act and then the British Parliament's "Kidnapping Act" of 1872, recruitment and the labour trade was unregulated, with few legal constraints. Why would Towns go to such detail if his concerns were not genuine? The issue of informed consent over the contracts of South Sea Islanders is more problematic. Towns insisted his instructions firmly dealt with it, but at the NSW Royal Commission shyly admitted that explaining the terms of employment and indeed returning recruits to their home islands, may have been disregarded by a few of his Masters, and certainly Ross Lewin when an employee.

It is very difficult to warm to Robert Towns. It must be remembered, however, that by the time he became involved in the South Sea Islander traffic, he was an aged man whose fortune was fast dwindling. He displayed the values of a previous generation, was resistant to change and strongly opinionated. The treatment of his children through his Will is hardly commendable, even in nineteenth century terms.

**Robert Towns, on the weight of all available evidence, was not a Blackbirder.**

His name nevertheless will remain ignominious as the man who commenced the recruitment of Islanders on a systematic scale for Queensland agriculture. The abuses of the 1870s, which led to many public inquiries and became sensational, if temporary political issues, occurred however beyond his lifetime.

\* \* \* \* \*

# APPENDIX 1

## ADB Entry by Dorothy Shineberg.

**TOWNS, ROBERT** (1794–1873), merchant and entrepreneur, was born on 10 November 1794 in Long Horseley, Northumberland, England, son of Edward Towns and his wife Anne, née Pyle (Ryle). He had little formal education and was apprenticed to the master of a collier out of North Shields. Determined to improve his position in life, he studied navigation at night when his ship was in port. At 17 he became a mate and within two years had command of a brig in the Mediterranean trade. In 1827 he arrived in Sydney in the *Bona Vista* with a general cargo and in 1832 he brought out his own ship, the *Brothers*; in 1839 he bought the *Royal Saxon*. In 1832–42 he made a voyage to Sydney almost every year, each time staying briefly to seek profitable investments and buy property. On 28 December 1833 at St Phillip's Church, Sydney, Towns married Sophia, the 17-year-old half-sister of W C Wentworth, who had arrived in the *Brothers* that year.

On 9 March 1843 Towns arrived in the *Seahorse* via Launceston to settle in Sydney; his wife and son followed in the *Royal Saxon* in June 1844. He was authorized to represent Robert Brooks & Co., London, in the colony and soon established himself as a mercantile agent. He told Brooks, 'I am thinking of investing any means I have in small vessels for the Colonial Trade', and in 1844 he bought the *Elizabeth*. He sent her to the New Hebrides for sandalwood and she arrived in China with a full cargo to profit by a rise in prices. That year he bought 'Jones's wharf' and moved to Miller's Point; he worked every day from 6 a.m. to 6 or 7 p.m. – 'as regular as the platypus', he said – for the next twenty years, supervising multifarious enterprises, and sending explosive letters to his captains, agents and business associates all over the world.

Towns's ships went to New Caledonia, the Loyalty Islands and the New Hebrides for sandalwood and trepang; by 1850 he had established a depot at the Isle of Pines near New Caledonia, where it was collected, prepared for the market and stored for transport to China. Anxious to reduce competition, from 1856 he combined with Captain James Paddon in a relationship of mutual respect and dislike; they also supplied the new French colony of New Caledonia and brought in settlers. In the 1850s Towns added to his stations in Melanesia and worked the Gilbert and Marshall islands for the collection of coconut-oil and turtle-shell. The high risks prevented insurance of his ships in Sydney and the market was unpredictable at the China ports; but he made his first substantial profits in the island trade and was able to invest them in more certain enterprises. By 1856 he employed ten whalers, though the industry had suffered much from the labour shortage of 'this infernal gold discovery'. He brought out labourers from England, Germany, India and China, and later Asians for other employers; he claimed that he had 'saved Moreton Bay from ruin' with Chinese.

Associated with the reorganization of the Bank of New South Wales, Towns was a director in 1850–55 and 1861–67 and its president in 1853–55 and 1866–67. By the 1850s he was a large landholder and his shipping business extended to Europe, the East and India. Agreeing that he had 'too many irons in the fire', by early 1855 he had taken (Sir) Alexander Stuart as a partner under the style of R. Towns & Co. He was a committee-man of the Sydney Chamber of Commerce for many years and president in 1856–57, 1863 and 1865. He was also a director of the Sydney Gold Escort Co. in the 1850s. A magistrate and member of the Pilot Board, he gave evidence to several parliamentary select committees on marine matters and in the 1860s sat on the committee of the Sydney Bethel Union.

About 1856 Towns began a feud with W.C. Wentworth over his wife's share of the D'Arcy Wentworth patrimony. In 1858 the Privy Council upheld the Supreme Court's decision that her brother John's estate went to Wentworth, who refused to pay John's debts to Towns out of the disputed estate as Towns had put him to much legal expense. Towns filed a suit in chancery in 1860 on Sophia's original share of D'Arcy's estate.

In 1856 he had been one of the first (quinquennial) appointments to the Legislative Council. Towns defended the mercantile interest and was opposed to 'democracy'. On 10 May 1861 he resigned in support of the president Sir William Burton. In 1858–60 he visited

England, and in 1859 served on a London committee to help E C Merewether negotiate a steam postal service between Sydney and England. He was reappointed to the council in 1863.

Townsville dismayed Stuart with his expansion of interests, especially in Queensland. One of the subscribers to George Dalrymple's 1859 expedition in the far north, in the 1860s Towns took up land on the Darling Downs, along the Brisbane and Logan rivers and then vast areas in north Queensland. He foreclosed on pastoralists, often retaining them as managers, and leased properties in 'unsettled districts'. By 1867 he held 42 runs, amounting to almost 2000 square miles in the North and South Kennedy districts alone; 94 runs in partnership with Stuart, including over 1200 square miles in the Burke District, and 60 with Stuart and (Sir) Charles Cowper, including nearly 400 square miles in the Warrego District.

In England Towns had discussed the prospects of growing cotton. On his return he undertook a project on 1280 acres on the Logan, but believed it would never pay 'with labour at the rate of Colonial Wages'. In May 1861 he gave (Sir) Henry Parkes letters of introduction to English cotton interests, hoping to attract immigrants. In May 1863 Towns sent the schooner *Don Juan* to get Melanesian labourers; the captain had a letter seeking the co-operation of missionaries. The first shipload of seventy-three islanders arrived in August; many of them had already worked for him in the islands. He had provided contracts for them for up to twelve months, with wages of 10s. a month with food and housing, and a provision that they should be repatriated if they wished.

Towns failed in his bid to get the support of 'the Exeter Hall Mob', but continued to import Melanesians despite an outburst in the press; he printed his instructions to the master of the *Don Juan* and his letter to the missionaries in his *South Sea Island Immigration for Cotton Culture* (Sydney, 1863). He failed to form a colony of islanders on his plantations as he could never induce married men to bring their wives. The Queensland Polynesian Labourers Act, 1868, convinced Towns that bureaucratic control had made islanders more expensive to employ than Europeans, although he was not opposed to proper safeguards. In evidence to the royal commission into the alleged kidnapping of natives of the Loyalty Islands in 1869, he advised that recruiting ships should be licensed, with 'a proper official ... duly accredited by the Government to prevent any abuses'; his suggestion was incorporated in regulations next year, and proved the most effective of the rules. Towns did not expect immediate gains from the cotton crop, but he hoped to do well by the bounty of £10 per bale payable in Queensland land orders. However, the cotton never made a profit and the bounty only saved the enterprise from ruin. In 1868 the Logan plantation showed a deficit of £5744.

At 70 Towns was urged to retire by Stuart, Brooks and other friends. But new enterprises were the stuff of life to him: in 1863 he had justified to Brooks a branch in Dunedin, New Zealand, as 'self-defence ... but you will I fear say I am *past warning*'. In partnership with J M. Black he took up land on Cleveland Bay, Queensland, in 1865; by mid-year they had a woolstore, wharf and boiling-down works there and owned the adjoining land. Towns soon reported that the 'Government has paid me the compliment to call the town "Townsville"'. Disillusioned with cotton, he now concentrated on Townsville and his Queensland stations, envisaging his own ships carrying his own wool out of his own harbour.

With J G Macdonald and (Sir) John Robertson Towns also took up and stocked stations on the Gulf of Carpentaria. They founded Burketown on the Albert River in 1865, dreaming of a flourishing port closer to the world markets than those of the older colonies. That year Towns & Co. dispatched the first vessel from Sydney to the Albert, the *Jacmel Packet*, with a strange cargo of pigs, dogs, fowls, horses, building materials, drays, rations and rum for the founders of Burketown.

By mid-1865 Townsville had conceded a little to his friends by moving to Cranbrook, Rose Bay, bought from Robert Tooth: he grumbled that 'I suppose I shall [settle] down to it but it is a monster effort'. That year he was elected a member of the Union Club; an early member of the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron, he owned the *Nautilus*, the first steam yacht on Sydney Harbour. He continued working his old ships, against the advice of Stuart, who in 1871 grimly reported to Brooks that the firm was 'steadily working down the debt ... but it is grinding work'.

Towns suffered a stroke in 1870, but recovered and continued in active business. Soon after another stroke he died at Cranbrook on 11 April 1873 and was buried in the Balmain cemetery with Anglican rites, survived by his wife, two sons and three daughters. Leaving personal estate valued for probate at £74,000 he stipulated that his son Robert should be disinherited unless he conducted himself over the next five years 'in a sober reputable proper and becoming manner'. Daughter Sarah was also to lose her inheritance if either she or her children left the Church of England.

Towns was the incarnation of the puritan virtues of thrift, sobriety, industry and 'perseverance'. Bluff and peppery, with simple habits, he was respected by all for his honesty, reliability and especially for his energy and his 'never ending speculative spirit'. By many of his employees he was known as a cheese-parer, full of furious criticism for failure but few words of praise for success. 'A hard but a just master' was about the most flattering comment to come from an employee; it was one that would have pleased him.

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## APPENDIX 2

### **Towns and the ‘Waler’ trade [from A.T. Yarwood, *Walers*, pp.58–9].**

Another mark of Towns’s inventiveness was his use of a ship to convey horses from Sydney to Calcutta, and then to return with a human cargo. That happened twice with convicts being conveyed from Calcutta to Hobart, in 1845 and 1849, and the idea led him into one of the most disastrous ventures of his career. On 1 September 1845 he wrote to his Captain Finley, master of the clipper *Orwell*, giving detailed orders for the care of thirty horses sailing to Calcutta via Torres Strait, and for the purchase of a return cargo of a hundred Indian indentured labourers that were to be brought back between decks as an investment shared with William Charles Wentworth and Robert Campbell. His Calcutta agents, Allen Duffill & Company, were to assist in arrangements for the labourers, whom the captain was cautioned to treat with ‘every kindness & protection’ as the Indian authorities ‘look with great jealousy on the removal of these people from their native country’. Finley’s performance, Towns warned, would help to decide ‘the fate of a question of great importance to this Colony’. He was referring to the desire he shared with other large scale non-resident pastoralists of importing contracted labourers who would replace the sorely missed convicts, notably in point of cheapness and in their being tied for years to hard labour on remote stations. The limit to his concern for their welfare was shown by his drawing the captain’s attention to the Indian regulation calling for the shipment of women with them in the proportion of fifteen per hundred, a mute but potent statistical indictment of the whole Indian indentured labour system – and its exploitation by colonial employers.

The *Orwell* venture turned out in every respect a ‘most ruinous & vexatious affair’, with the head groom, Mason, proving to be an incompetent drunkard, and Towns’s captain and agents letting him down badly with the choice of the labourers, ‘the most disgraceful decrepit set that can be imagined’, he angrily wrote to Allen Duffill on 3 April 1846. Worse still, the *Orwell*’s arrival had coincided with that of the *Theresa*, which carried a larger and classier cargo of horses and so depressed the market. Nemesis had a further card to play, for the *Theresa* returned at the same time as the *Orwell* with a competing cargo of rice and sugar, and it was then discovered that by a defect in their contracts, the labourers could not be held to their engagements. Towns had no option but to send them back to India. Yet he told his new agents that he would persevere.

Towns’s provisioning of his horse ships is detailed in his letter of 8 June 1846 to Captain Dallas offering accommodation for thirty horses on the *Royal Saxon* at an all up cost of £25 a head payable in Calcutta. Ninety days provender was to be put on board at the daily scale of 10 pounds of hay, 5 of bran, 2 of corn, with 6 gallons of water per horse, and grooms in the proportion of one to every eight horses. He was not exclusively committed to Calcutta, which he considered a tediously expensive port, not least from the frequent need to engage a steam-powered pilot for the navigation of the Hooghly’s hundred miles of shoals and currents. So, when writing to Henry Osborne of Marshall Mount in the Illawarra on 23 July 1846 about a shared horse venture to Calcutta in the *Eagle*, he suggested that they join in a similar one to Madras in the *Eleanor Lancaster*.

## APPENDIX 3

### Editorial, *Courier*, Brisbane, 29 August 1863.

Whilst we are, at a great cost to the State, encouraging a useful class of population to come amongst us, there are private individuals who enter into competition with the government – speculators who bring an inferior article into the market with the expectation of making it valuable to themselves, and at the same time endeavour to persuade the public that “black is white,” and that a few natives induced to spend 12 months in Queensland are as useful colonists as those who bring with them, along with their wives and families, civilized ideas, and the pluck which universally marks the track of the Anglo-Saxons, no matter in what quarter of the globe he is found.

For some days past there has been a description of “anti-slavery” question agitated. It appears that a few weeks ago a schooner named, the Don Juan arrived here with a number of South Sea Island natives, consigned to the plantation of Mr. Towns, a gentleman who, we must say, has shown every disposition to promote the interests of the colony so long as they were compatible with his own. The immigrants, as a body, were fine men, and according to the testament of Mr. W.H. PALMER, that worshipper of Messrs. TOWNS, were “free men brought here of their own free will. In fact, they are just hired for twelve months – British subjects,” also “fellow-colonists.” Captain TOWNS is, of course, as a private individual, at liberty to import any amount of Islanders in the same way in which he would import merchandise, but viewing the question as one of the importation of a living freight of men, almost savages, the public have a right to speak in the matter, in the same manner in which one neighbour may complain of the nuisances committed by another. We can understand that Captain TOWNS, as a man of business, considers that if he can procure sixty or seventy South Sea Islanders to work on his plantation at the rate of 10s. *per month with rations*, it is better for him to engage them rather than to employ white labour. But how is it, we would ask, if these men are “just hired for twelve months” that Captain TOWNS can afford to go to the immense expense of chartering a vessel to bring up these islanders? Supposing the practice adopted by Captain TOWNS were generally carried – for instance, supposing the Government, with the advice of the Parliament, recalled Mr. JORDAN, and said, “We do not want people from Britain, to whom we have to give land orders. We can go to a cheaper market. We can send down a few schooners to the New Hebrides, and get as many men from there as we please; in fact, they will rush the ships, so eager has Captain TOWNS or his agents made them to come.” What in a few years would this colony be but a mild representation of the old plantation slave trade ....

It must be remembered that a country does not rest its future prosperity upon uncivilised immigrants who make it their place of bondage for twelve months. That is not the class of people we are now voting annually large sums of money to induce to our shores. Our object is to have the colony peopled with the poor, but industrial classes of the mother country, who bring with them English ideas, English principles, and English customs .... If it is found eventually that our cotton and sugar plantations cannot be cultivated by white men, why then we must necessarily have recourse to Coolies, or to Captain TOWNS’ pets. But as yet it has not been proved that the climate is so severe during the summer months that Europeans cannot work in the field. We want to make this colony different from those in the West Indies. We hope to see it the home of many thousands of the industrial poor from the over-crowded cities of our mother country, and to do that we must oppose most determinedly the thin end of the wedge being introduced, that would create a loop hole through which colored labour would be introduced to the prejudice of the European.

## APPENDIX 4

**Robert Towns' Instructions for the recruitment of Pacific Islander labour for Queensland: *Votes & Proceedings*, 1863, p.597ff, ordered to be printed by the Queensland Legislative Assembly, 26 August 1863.**

Sydney, 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1863.

MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT for engaging Natives for my cotton plantation in Queensland, for six or twelve months.

Witnesseth : I, Robert Towns, hereby engage and undertake to pay as wages to any able adult native that may be hired for my service, at and after the rate of ten shillings (10s.) per month in such trade as he may prefer at the end of his agreement, and to return him to his home within twelve months, should he require such.

2. I also agree to find the Natives huts or houses, or tents, until huts can be put up, and to supply them with good and sufficient food, such as they are accustomed to, and to provide them with cooking utensils, and in every way watch over and protect them, during the period of their servitude.

3. The labor these Natives will be required to perform, will be chiefly field labor, of a light and easy description, such as cleaning and picking cotton when in season, and any other work they may be called on to perform.

Witness my hand this 30<sup>th</sup> day of May, 1863

R. TOWNS

Sir,

Referring to our verbal agreement for your present employment on the intended expedition of the "Don Juan," after a number of natives to be employed on my cotton fields in Queensland.

I now give you my written instructions for your guidance, and, as I understand you are no scholar, Captain Grueber will read them for you and explain what is required of you.

First, you will proceed to, and call at, such islands as you are known to the natives, and then explain to them what your object is, namely, to engage for me from fifty to one hundred natives, all male, on the present voyage, until they are better known in the district and Colony.

I will prefer young lads, from fourteen and fifteen to eighteen, in preference to older men, as the bulk; you must have some old hands amongst the lot to induce the young ones to enlist.

In engaging or persuading these people you must tell them exactly what they will have to do, that is, their chief work will be in the cotton fields, and that they will have good huts to live in, a kind master to protect, and that you will take them back within twelve months, perhaps in six, and that you will be on the station to explain and interpret for them, and that they will be paid in goods at the rate of 10s. per month (over and above their rations) for the able men, and the others according to their worth and value.

I presume you will call at Leifoo or Ware first, and then to Sandwich, I leave this for you and Captain Grueber to arrange; and while I am on this, I must here remind you, that while you are on board the ship you are to act, and do the duty in every way, as second mate, for which service you have signed the articles of the vessel, and in which capacity you

will be paid at and after the rate of £5 (five pounds) per month, which pay will be continued you on the station so long as you remain or other arrangements are made.

In conclusion, I must remind you of my earnest desire that the natives are treated with the greatest kindness and on no account allow them to be ill-used by the crew, or any person on board; if such is offered to them, it is your duty to report the same to the captain. I will be satisfied with fifty young men and boys if you can get them, but will be better pleased with seventy if the vessel can bring so many comfortably; but on no account crowd them or delay the vessel for the purpose.

You must endeavour all you can to keep the natives in good humour and friendly, and on good terms with each other; on no account allow them to quarrel or have any of their national disputes on board, keep all such quarrelling from them; if you find such, unfortunately, to take place, at once separate them, and put up bulkheads between them. Take care none of the old beach-combers – European sailors – smuggle themselves on board with the natives.

You had better call at Leifoo, before Hayes gets there, and leave before he may arrive.

I think I have now said all I have to mention, and hope you may have a successful voyage.

I am, &c.,

R. TOWNS

Mr. Ross Luin.

*To any Missionary into whose hands this may come.*

Sydney, 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1863.

REV. SIR,

Should this meet the eye of any gentleman in that sacred calling, I beg to explain the nature of the voyage on which I am about to despatch the bearer, Capt. Grueber with the schooner "Don Juan."

If I now address an old resident among the Islands, my name will be familiar and justify a belief in the sincerity of my mission to which I am about to explain, and solicit your friendly aid; if, on the other hand the reader has not heard of the writer, I must refer him to Capt. Grueber, or any man connected with these Islands for the last 20 years.

Suffice to say, I have embarked considerable capital in Queensland, in the cultivation of Cotton, and as so much depends on the *rate of Labour* in the ultimate success of this important enterprise, I am endeavouring to try our natives from the immediate adjacent Islands, whose habits, although not strictly industrious, may be rendered most serviceable in the light work of the field labour, in weeding and picking Cotton, as the seasons may require. Such being my views on the subject I have sent this my Pioneer Vessel to enlist a supply, and will be much obliged if you will kindly assist us in this our worldly mission, and, as I have told your worthy Brotherhood, Messrs. Inglis and Geddes, that I with my Cotton Emigration (returning them every 6 or 12 months) will do more towards civilizing the natives in one year than you can possibly in ten – they will see what civilization is and aim to follow it – and if you can supply me with a native *Teacher* or *Reader*, as they may be termed, it will very much hasten the object, at all events if you cannot assist me in this particular, you may be able to point out to the poor unsuspecting natives that they have nothing to fear, as I will bind myself to return them within twelve months from the time they may leave, and more likely in six months.

If my scheme prospers it is my intention to bring over the wives and families of these poor fellows – as a superior race to the ordinary coolie from India, about whom we hear so much – and for the light work of Cotton picking they are well calculated.

I send an interpreter, a man who says he can speak the language, this is very important to make the poor fellows understand.

Trusting to your kind assistance

I remain,

Very sincerely yours,

R. TOWNS

29th July, 1863\*

Dear Sir,

Your vessel now ready and victualled with supplies sufficient for the voyage and return with natives, you will at once proceed to sea, and make the best of your way to the Isle of Leifoo, or such other island as you may first make, for the purpose of procuring natives for the cotton fields, with which you will return to Moreton Bay with all possible despatch, where I will in all probability be to receive and direct you. The above is an outline of your intended voyage.

I will now proceed more in detail to instruct you for your future guidance.

The nature of your voyage is, as before stated, to proceed to the different islands of Leifoo, Ware, and Sandwich, and any other islands you may find it necessary to proceed to for the purpose of selecting the natives, and with a view to collect a useful class of men, lads, and active boys. I have engaged Mr. Ross Luin, who speaks the native language, and well known amongst the islands. This man, now shipped as second mate, will do the needful in engaging the men, which I promise to return to their native land within twelve (12) months from the time they leave. You must endeavour to convince the friends of the people, as well as themselves (those you engage), the honesty of our intention, and if there should be any legal authority, give them guarantee to the same object that the people will be returned in accordance with their agreement.

And as the natives may not be conversant with our language, I wish you to be pleasant when these arrangements are made through the interpreter .... [If] you can procure seventy natives in all, you may do so; but half the number will do. If you find much difficulty in getting them, on no account attempt force to take the people against their own free will and consent. If you find any missionaries at the islands, make their acquaintance, and tell them from me what my object is in engaging the natives to leave the island they belong to, and engage for a short season to serve me in cultivating cotton. The labor will be light, in weeding, cleaning, and picking cotton; and I will engage to provide them comfortable huts, and regular rations of rice, meat, pumpkins, potatoes and yams (if they will grow), and return them to their homes within the twelve months – very likely within six months.

And you may also mention to the missionary, that it is my intention to bring over their wives with them next year if they like the place, and answers my purpose to do so.

I will make their wages for the best men equal to ten shillings per month, with others in proportion. These natives will have every protection equal to Europeans in Queensland, which is a climate as warm as the one they leave. This much you may tell the missionaries; and if they can find a reader or interpreter, I will gladly receive him, and pay him for what he may be worth, over and above his food and lodging, which I suppose will be little; – but he will learn civilization.

I mean to exchange these people every six or twelve months, and bring over their wives and families with them when they get accustomed to the country and the work.

I have now shadowed forth my views and intentions, and leave you to carry them out; and, in conclusion, I will again repeat, on no account allow the natives to be ill-used. They are a poor, timid, unoffending race, and require all the kindness you can show them. You may lead them to anything, and I will not allow them to be driven.

If you find it difficult to procure the natives through Mr. Ross Luin, you had better run over to Erromanga, to Mr. Henry's station, and he may be able to assist you, should such be necessary, but it will be a disappointment to me if you cannot procure for me from fifty to seventy natives for the purpose required.

In reporting your ship inwards from the islands, be particular, and state the number, names, and ages you have on hand as passengers for Mr. Towns' Cotton Plantation – let everything be clear in your proceedings. Mr. Palmer, my agent in Brisbane, will have my instructions respecting you, if I am not in Queensland, to which you will please attend.

Use your utmost endeavour to get over the ground, and land the people as soon as possible. You must be a little easy with Mr. Ross Luin, but if he fails to give you satisfaction, go to Mr. Henry, at Erromanga, or Underwood, at Anstaw, and they will put a man on.

Yours, &c.,

R. TOWNS

Captain Grueber, "Don Juan".

\* This letter inexplicably dated 29 July 1863 was surely the letter that Towns wrote to Grueber on 29 May which was later produced before the NSW Royal Commission on 5 August 1869, but note the difference in the text. Why did the Queensland government reproduce only part of the letter?

“Captain Grueber, ‘Don Juan.’

“Sydney, 29 May, 1863.

“Dear Sir,

“Our vessel now ready and victualled with supplies sufficient for the voyage and return with natives, you will at once proceed to sea, and make the best of your way to the Isle of Leefoo, or such other island as you may first make, for the purpose of procuring natives for the cotton field, with which you will return to Moreton Bay with all possible despatch, where I will in all probability be to receive and direct you. The above is an outline of your intended voyage.

“I will now proceed more in detail to instruct you for your future guidance.

“The nature of your voyage is, as before stated, to proceed to the several islands of *Leefoo*, *Ware*, *Sandwich*, and any other islands you may find it necessary to proceed to, for the purpose of selecting the natives; and, with a view to collect a useful class of *men*, *lads*, and *active boys*, I have engaged Mr. Ross Lewin, who speaks the native language, and is well known amongst the islands; he is shipped as second mate, and will do the needful in engaging the men, whom I promise to return to their native land within twelve months from the time they leave. You must endeavour to convince the friends of the people as well as themselves (those you engage) of the *honesty* of our intentions; and if there should be any legal authority, give them guarantee to the same effect, that the people will be returned in accordance with their agreements.

“Ane as the natives may not be conversant with our language, I wish you to be present when these arrangements are made through the interpreter. I have sketched out a memorandum for Mr. Ross Lewin, to explain to the natives in your presence, the terms of their engagement, and the work they have to do; also, the rations they will receive, at the same time assuring them of every protection the British laws will afford them. In this you will please to observe we wish you to act as our agent, and not allow any advantage to be taken of the natives, even to our interest.

“And when engaged, I look to your seeing that they are *properly carted for*, and they have *proper food* and attention, and that they are made to keep the place in which they live *thoroughly clean*.

“I have put on board two suits of shirts and trousers each for 100 natives; you will please serve out one suit when they first embark, keeping one for their landing. If you can procure 100 natives in all, you may do so, but half the number will do, if you find much difficulty in getting them. *On no account attempt force*, or take the people against their own freewill and consent.

“If you find any missionaries at the islands, make their acquaintance, and tell them from me, what your object is in engaging the natives to leave the island they belong to, and engage for a short season to serve me in cultivating cotton; the labour will be light in weeding and cleaning and picking cotton, and I will engage to provide them comfortable huts, and regular rations of rice, meat, pumpkins, potatoes, and yams, if they will grow, and return them to their homes within the twelve months.

“And you may also explain to the missionaries that it is my intention to bring over their wives with them next year, if they like the place and answer my purpose to do so.

“I will make their wages, for the best men, equal to 10s. per month, with others in proportion. These natives will have every protection equal to Europeans in Queensland, which is a climate as warm as the land they have. You may tell the missionaries, if they can find a *reader* or interpreter, I will gladly receive him and pay him for what he may be worth, over and above his food and lodging, which I suppose will be little, but he will learn civilization.

“I mean to exchange these people every six or twelve months, and bring over their wives and families with them when they get accustomed to the country and the work.

“I have now shadowed forth my views and intentions, and leave you to carry them out; and in conclusion, I will again repeat, *on no account* allow the natives to be *ill used*; they are

a poor, timid, unoffending race, and require all the kindness you can show them; you may lead them to anything, and I will *not allow them to be driven*.

“If you find it difficult to procure the natives through Mr. Ross Lewin, you had better run over to Erromanga, to Mr. Henry’s station, and he may be able to assist you, should such be necessary; but it will be a disappointment to me if you cannot procure 50 to 100 natives for the purpose required.

“In reporting your ship inward from the islands to Moreton Bay, be particular and state the *number*, names, and *ages* you have on board, as passengers for Mr. Towns’ cotton plantation,—let everything be quite clear in your proceedings. Mr. Palmer, my agent in Brisbane, will have my instructions respecting you, if I am not in Queensland, to which you will please to attend.

“Yours truly,  
“R. TOWNS.”

## APPENDIX 5

### Copy of Letter Robert Towns to Robert Herbert, 31 August 1863.

“To the Honorable R.G.W. Herbert, Esq.,  
“Colonial Secretary, Queensland.

“Sir,

“My attention has been called to the report of certain proceedings in the Assembly, in reference to the introduction of a number of natives from the South Sea Islands, by the schooner ‘Don Juan,’ for special service at my cotton plantation on the Logan.

“The remarks in some of the newspapers to which this matter has given rise, I would, as I usually do, have treated with the silent contempt they merit; but the proceedings in this case, in which you have been called upon in your official place in Parliament to answer questions on a subject in which I am alone responsible, seem to me to be out of the ordinary course, and compel me, in justice to you, as well as to myself, to state clearly the principle on which I have acted.

“It may be in your recollection that at the time when so much anxiety prevailed for the growth of cotton in Queensland, with the view to the development of a new industrial resource in the Colony, as well as to supply the want of raw material under which the Lancashire operatives were suffering so much, I applied for, and took up, a maximum grant of cotton land—upon this speculation I have spent upwards of £6,000, without, as yet, any return.

“It is true that the season has been much against the experiment, but the question of labour has had much more to do with this result, and has induced me to embark in the present South Sea Island immigration.

“In the meanwhile I had engaged the services of a number of Germans, imported under the regulations and at the expense of the Colony. These men, led away by the bad advice of their countrymen and others, who, on their arrival, persuaded them that they were working for wages below the current rates, became so discontented that they either bolted, or rendered their services almost worse than useless, so that my agent was glad to give up all claim to the fellows, whose laziness, combined with their large ration-consuming and useless family (for your laws do not seem to reach the wives and children), would have soon ruined the whole enterprise.

“Observing that others similarly engaged in the cotton experiment were, like myself, suffering from the effects of European labour, I came to the conclusion that cotton-growing upon a large scale either must be abandoned in Queensland, or be carried out by cheaper labour.

“It will be in your recollection that the Legislature took the necessary steps to encourage coolie labour from India. Availing of this, I despatched a ship to Madras and Calcutta, to carry it out, but the scheme failed from the unwillingness of the Indian Government to extend the facilities for drawing away the labour from the vast public works now being carried on in that empire,—such as least was alleged as the reason, though, possibly, jealousy of our entering the lists as competitors with them in cotton-growing was not without its influence.

“Thus baffled in the proposed Indian coolie immigration, I turned my attention to a class of people to whom I am no stranger—the South Sea Islanders.

“I have for many years been engaged in trade amongst these co-called ‘savages’, and have had many hundreds of them in my employ, both on shore and on board ship, and found them an industrious, tractable, and inoffensive race. I have always placed confidence in them, and they have, I believe, the greatest confidence in me and in my fulfilling the engagements I make with them, spending as I do many thousands annually amongst them in their own islands.

“For the greater part of the work on a cotton plantation, I believe these islanders will be found well suited; and instead of being attacked and branded in the way I have been, I think I deserve the thanks of the community for the introduction of that kind of labour which is suited to our wants, and which may save us from the *inhumanity* of driving to the exposed labour of field work, the less tropically hardy European women and children; for I suppose the most thorough advocate for European labour will admit that, in cotton clearing and picking, they, as well as the men, must take part in the labour.

“Apart from the outburst of angry feeling and the senseless howl with which the ‘Don Juan’s’ arrival has been greeted, I feel confident I have the good wishes of the employers of labour, by substituting this native labour, for the generous (!) pale-faces who have been brought out at the expense of the country, who delight in scheming about rather than in honest working, and who feel insulted if you offer them, for a day’s work, that which they have been accustomed to receive at home for a week’s labour.

“It is these drones in the hive of industry, whom I call the ‘breeches pocket patriots,’ who first drove me to the employment of native labour; and it is these men, or others pandering to their feelings and passions, who, after putting the Colony to so much expense for their own passage, and having done little or nothing to repay it, now seek to raise an outcry against those who cost the Colony nothing for their passage, and who, I venture to predict, will leave a lasting benefit behind them.

“The question of any species of slavery or kidnapping of these natives is at once confuted by the instructions to the captain of the vessel and the interpreter, and my letter to the missionaries, which I append hereto.

“The men thoroughly understand the nature of their contract, both as to their treatment and wages here, and as to my returning them to their own country when their time (which you will observe is only for one year) shall have expired.

“It is my intention to persevere in the attempt to grow cotton with this kind of labour, on short agreements; and if the men like the work and country, to try to persuade them to bring their wives with them.

“As to the danger expressed by some of the newspaper scribblers, lest the government be put to enormous expense in the additional police requisite to keep these ‘barbarians’ in order, I venture to predict that there will be less crime amongst them, if not interfered with by these agitators, than amongst an equal numbers of European labourers from whatever country they may have been drawn at the public expense.

I have, &c.

R. TOWNS.”

## APPENDIX 6

### **Towns' Instructions for return of labourers, 10 September 1864 [from Public Documents – Miscellaneous, Vol.2, Mitchell Library].**

“The ‘Uncle Tom.’

“Captain Towns to Mr. R. Lewin.

“Brisbane, 10<sup>th</sup> September, 1864.

“Dear Sir,

“Referring to the various conversations we have had on the subject of your present mission, I now give you my views in writing; and from the experience you have had with the natives, and the satisfaction they have given under your management, I have every confidence in your future success.

“The ‘Uncle Tom’ is now fitted and in every way provided for the voyage, and Captain Smith is instructed to take the vessel to any island or islands you may require, and to render you every assistance in his power, with a view to carry out with success the mission you are about to undertake, which I will briefly state, then leave the matter in your hands with every confidence that you will do your best to carry it out with success: –

“1<sup>st</sup>. You will pay off and settle with the natives whose time is now up, and may be returning to their homes – pay them in accordance with their agreement, *strictly*, and if any of them deserve a little extra for good conduct, I leave that in your hands to reward them accordingly; but *be just to all*. I have put on board ample trade, not only to pay them off, but to procure and provide for another batch as many as the vessel will take, according to tonnage – say , but as I hope you will be able to bring the families next trip, if there are children, you will keep in view all above twelve count as adults, below that half. I am not aware if that law applies to passages on so short a voyage, but will ascertain.

“2<sup>nd</sup>. Your next duty will be to proceed with all despatch and return those people to their several homes, in accordance with their agreement. Captain Smith has my instructions to proceed to any island or islands you may desire, not only for landing these people, but with a view to procure others, get yams, or whatever else you think will be of service to us on the plantation. I should like much if you can get a few canes – cuttings – for sugar.

“3<sup>rd</sup>. In engaging the next lot, their time must be for three years and over if you can get them. With regard to the particular islanders, this I leave to yourself; and, as you suggest that two or three overseers or bosses will be an improvement, bring them, only take care they are good working men, or they may do more harm than good. Let the bosses be married men, if you can get them – good men.

“4<sup>th</sup>. In engaging the married men, you must make their agreements so that the women work for their rations, when able. All this must be left in your hands, to make the best arrangement you can.

“I would write out an agreement if you can have it explained *to* them, especially as to the time, and wages, also rations. The latter may be varied – yams, pumpkins, &c., instead of maize meal (no flour), and the less animal food the better in my opinion.

“5<sup>th</sup>. If you bring women, you must be particular and have a bulkhead between them and the men, and be particular that decency and strictly moral conduct is observed, and on no account permit the least freedom from the sailors, captain, or officers; such may lead to the most serious consequences, say nothing of the *impropriety*. I have given Captain Smith particular instructions on this head.

“I think that I have now said all that is necessary in relation to your voyage, and have only to add my best wishes for your success, in which I have every confidence.

“One point I must mention – but this is more in Captain Smith’s duties than yours – viz., the vessel must call at the Bampton Shoals for beche-de-mer, but the detention will only be a few hours. I may further add the important necessity for cleanliness; take care the women have all they require for their purpose, bunks, steps, &c., and take care they keep

them clean. Hoping to see you in the time you give yourself, but run no risks; this I have told Captain Smith.

“Write if you have the opportunity.

“Yours very faithfully,  
“R. TOWNS.”

“Captain Towns to Captain Smith  
“Brisbane, 10<sup>th</sup> September, 1864.

“Dear Sir,

“I now beg to hand you in writing instructions for your future guidance on the voyage you are about to commence.

“In the first place, you must consider the comfort of these poor natives, next to your duties on board of the vessel.

“Mr. Ross Lewin will have the entire charge of the natives; and being a thorough sailor, and well acquainted with the islands, and a man in whom I have entire confidence, you will find that duty as regards the natives very simple. The motive and object of your voyage being, firstly to land the natives you take on board here, at such islands as he (Ross Lewin) may point out, and wish you to proceed to; and so on in succession as he may desire and require, until they are all landed; and it may so happen that he may require you to return to some or all of the same islands, in which case you will please take the vessel to wherever he may require you – it will be his responsibility.

“And as I have every confidence in Lewin not running you into danger, he knowing the islands so well, I have every confidence in your success.

“At the same time you must bear in mind you are master, and that I look to you for the save and proper command of the ship, and on no account imperil the safety of the vessel, which I am sure Mr. Lewin will not require you to do. After landing the first natives, Lewin will collect a further party to return, and as the returning party will consist partly of women, it will be necessary to put up a partition to keep the women from the men. This I must leave to you and Mr R. Lewin, to take care that every decency and proper moral conduct is observed on board during the voyage. Let them have every convenience for their natural requirements, such as buckets, tubs, &c.; and Lewin will take care that they pay proper attention to cleanliness, below and above.

“The above, I think, is all I need say about the natives. Lewin will procure as many yams as he can, for which you may have to go to other islands.

“After completing your cargo, you will make the best of your way back, calling at the Bampton Island, where Captain Bennet has a station, as pointed out to you in Sydney by my firm, when they handed you the card with Captain Bennet's private signal for the man in charge to deliver to you any beche-de-mer or other produce that they may have ready to ship. Here, at the Bampton, you must not detain the vessel, but make all the despatch you can. Get back with the fresh batch of men, who are much wanted on the station.

“It's not unlikely, as you will be much later in reaching the Bampton, that Captain Bennet may have taken off the beche-de-mer and other produce, in which case you need hardly anchor.

“I would here remind you to be very careful while amongst these and other shoals, and to keep in view that you will have many souls on board, and, on that account, to run no risks.

“You are amply found in stores, and I look to you for economy, and be sure and support Mr. R. Lewin in his authority, and be particular that no liberties or freedom be allowed as between your crew and the native women, supposing you have such. The least liberty of this kind may lead to the most serious consequences.

“I therefore intreat and instruct you to be very particular on this point. Set a good example, and see it carried out.

“Wishing you a safe and prosperous voyage, and a speedy return,–

“I remain very faithfully yours,  
“R. TOWNS.”

## APPENDIX 7

### Copy of Letter Ross Lewin to Captain Towns, 30 January 1865.

“Plantation, 30 January, 1865.

“Dear Sir,

“I received your letter this afternoon, and I am astonished at the fearful lies printed in the *North Australian* newspaper. I think no person but a great vagabond could be guilty of such a tale. I think I need not tell you there is not one word of truth in it.

“You wish an account of the particulars of the voyage and the men’s agreement. The first island we called at was Anatam, there we watered ship, and sailed same night for Tanna. The next day I paid off the former men, and took on board twenty-nine others.

“The reason for my not taking them all was that I had to go to Sandwich to return the Sandwich men. It is to leeward, and they would have been too much crowded; besides I had to call there against for sugar-cane and yams.

“I asked for women, but could not get any. I knew years ago that such would be the case. All the men that I discharged were so well satisfied that I might have got a thousand if I wanted them. Their agreement is until the third crop of yams is out of the ground, which is equal to three years. They understand that way of counting better than any other. However, some of them talk good English, and you may send any person that wishes to make inquiries of them. As for the married men, I got them from Mr. Jones, the missionary, and he would hardly lend himself to such proceedings as I am accused of, for you know the captain of the ship had nothing to do with them. They have, since their arrival here, both received and written letters to Mr. Jones. He also read to them my instructions from you, and they were and are quite satisfied.

“I read the paper for them, and they want to know why white men tell such lies. I enclose you my instructions, together with others I have had from you from time to time, and I can prove they have never been disobeyed, and I hope you will not let me lie under such an accusation, for of course I am the party accused, and if such things did happen, I must be a great scoundrel indeed.

“Mr. Evans and I get on very well; I think we are good friends. We never have had any words, and he has never found fault with me. The only thing I object to his doing is his choosing the ‘bosses’ from the gangs”

“Believe me to be your faithful servant,  
“H. ROSS LEWIN.”

## APPENDIX 8

### **Towns' original application for land on Ross Island [QSA LWO/A20 1865/655].**

Surveyor General's Office  
Brisbane, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1865

Sir

I have the honor to submit for your consideration an application by Robt Towns Esq. for a lease of 1280 acres of land under the Sugar and Coffee regulations.

The land applied for is situated in the Kennedy district near the Ross River and the shore of Cleveland Bay and as no surveys have yet been made of the locality I have not ascertained whether they include any land which ought to be reserved from alienation under the regulations referred to.

I would therefore submit for your approval that the application be approved subject to the adjustment of the boundaries on survey and also that they are not found to include any land which it may be necessary to reserve for public services or town site.

I have the honor to be  
Sir  
Your most obt. servant  
A.C. Gregory  
Surveyor General

## APPENDIX 9

### Copy of Letters John Melton Black to Robert Towns, July 1865.

Cleveland Bay  
July 11th 1865

Dear Sir,

Since the date of my last communication June 21<sup>st</sup> I have to acknowledge the receipt of your favour of the 19<sup>th</sup> ultimo, complaining that I had not given you information of my final arrangements with the Government previous to my leaving Brisbane. I would beg to refer you to my letter of May 22<sup>nd</sup> in which I fully explained to you the result of my final interview with the Government, with regard to the allotments on which our buildings were erected.

My last letter June 21<sup>st</sup> also enters into this matter fully, but in order that you may clearly understand our position I will again state what has been arranged with regard to them.

The Government decline to reserve all the allotments on which our buildings are erected, but allow us to take the two allotments on which the Hotel is erected, those on which the Butchers Shop, Store and Iron Store are built, making five in all, also our own Store and Wharfage, Swards & Co. Store and wharfage, Macleods Store and Wharfage, all of which allotments are to be taken by us, at the average rate realised for the land by public competition, or on such other terms as Mr. Gregory informed me the Executive might grant us. Suffice it that these allotments were not to be submitted to public competition.

I endeavoured to obtain the grant of the land on which is erected a private dwelling house on the top of the hill, together with the ground comprising the plateau of the hill, but the Surveyor General considers the position ought to be made a public reserve and in such case we would receive full compensation for our improvements. The allotments on which the remaining portion of the buildings are erected are to be submitted to public competition with the valuations added, as already submitted to you in a schedule I forwarded from Brisbane.

The Government are due to us the sum of £381 for improvements in the way of fencing and clearing on the land to be proclaimed within the town boundary, a claim for which Mr. Gregory told me to make and which was done accordingly.

I have no wish, except agreeable to yourself, to purchase for our joint account any of the allotments on which our buildings are erected, but shall/ since the receipt of your last communication/ except otherwise advised by you, let them be sold with our valuations added, and shall think only of purchasing them if I find bidders are afraid to purchase with the valuations, and that I can obtain them at something near upset price. In that case I consider I should be acting judiciously for our joint interest.

The buildings are now in rapid course of completion, as I have all the men on contract work, and as soon as this work is completed, expense at once ceases, as I shall have only the Boiling Down Plant to erect.

I regret you should have misunderstood my remarks with regard to the Boiling Down Plant. The suggestions I made were procured from practical men, acquainted with the working of a steam plant, and I always considered that Chapell & Co. had to furnish the plant complete for the sum you offered, and which I particularly mentioned in my letter to them of the 22<sup>nd</sup> May forwarded to you for perusal beforehand viz

“As I understand the arrangement with Captain Towns is that the Plant be handed over in proper working order for the use for which it is intended. I must leave the matter entirely in your hands. The suggestions I have made above I considered necessary from what I had seen myself and from the experience of those thoroughly acquainted with the practical working of Boiling Down establishments. To justify the suggestions contained in my letter to Messrs. Chapell against the remarks contained in your last letter to the effect that these additions were unnecessary and were a whim of mine for the sake of additions I would

enclose a letter received from Mr. Edwin Campbell (the son) in charge of the Boiling establishment at Redbank in reference to the necessity of these alternations being made.

July 17<sup>th</sup>

"The Amherst". My last letter June 21<sup>st</sup> informed you of the arrival of the "Amherst in the Bay and that it was my intention to bring her in to the mouth of the Creek as soon as the tide would allow. It that letter I informed you that the vessel was reported to me by Captain McDonald as drawing over 10 ft. 6 inches a much heavier draught than I had expected, and in direct opposition to your letter stating that her draught would be under 8 feet. I was not informed till after the fall of the springs that she was drawing only 9 feet forward which if the vessel had been placed on an even keel would have made her draught about 9 ft 6. Understanding that 10 ft 6 was her draught I did not think it advisable after consulting Captain Till to bring her in these springs but preferred lightening the vessel by the long boat till the next springs. During the neaps, as much cargo as the long boat could manage was brought ashore and on the 8<sup>th</sup> instant the Captain agreed to bring her in, but without responsibility on our part, at the same time we agreeing to render him every assistance in our power. The vessel was reported as drawing 7 feet 6 inches and in the evening of that day the tide over the Bar was 11 feet over the rocks 9 feet 3 inches. The vessel entered the creek remarkably well, but in the absence of a stern line the tide I suppose or bad steering sheered the vessel to the left hand and out of the channel some 20 yards grazing on one of the rocks near the bar of rocks. Here she remained till the mornings tide when the Captain warped her back into the stream and moored her fore and aft at the entrance of the creek in a well sheltered position. I would not consent to the vessel proceeding further, and so the Captain commenced discharging the digesters and boiler which occupied him till the evening of the 17<sup>th</sup> instant, on which evening he warped out into the Bay. I felt extremely anxious with regard to the vessel and had her carefully examined by Mr. Scantlebury, a shipwright, who reported her to be free from any injury except the knocking off of a piece of her false keel at the bow, which he replaced a day or so afterwards.

I must confess your Sea Captains are like fish out of water when they have anything to do with a tidal harbour, and regret that Captain McDonald had not placed his vessel on an even keel when he arrived as Captain Till would have taken him in without the slightest difficulty.

I suppose all this bother will be avoided when the Government give us a Harbour Master whose duty it will be to take vessels in and out of the creek a simple and easy matter to any man with brains in his head.

The digesters and boiler and other portions of the Boiling Down plant have been safely landed.

The cargo has been landed in fair order with the exception of breakage amongst the casements and the short delivery of 20 doors 8 ft 8 by 2 ft 8 purchased from Messrs. Goodlet & Smith expressly to finish the upper story of the Hotel.

I suppose they must have been discharged in mistake at Bowen, And I have written to Ellis Reed about them.

Captain McDonald has had certain repairs done to his windlass by one of our Carpenters & Blacksmiths, which we have charged to Ships A/c as by his papers. A kedge anchor we lent him to warp his vessel out he has lost through he says the carelessness of his mate not attaching a buoy to the anchor. This we have charged him with.

I am in daily expectation of the arrival of the "Uncle Tom" and shall until the rocks are completely cleared not allow him to enter the creek but let him lighter everything on shore.

After the rocks are cleared the risk is gone. Timber will soon be in great demand. Our little community is daily increasing in numbers. Several buildings are now being erected by other persons and the place begins to assume the character and appearance of a settled township.

The Messrs. Macleod and Seward have nearly completed their stores. Our own is complete with the exception of the flooring, which is only temporarily laid, not having suitable timber for a store floor, inch pine being of little use.

The buildings that are framed are at a stand still for weatherboards which I trust the Uncle Tom will bring up. Of scantling and joisting we have a good supply on hand. Our huts consisting of lining, flooring, chamfered and weatherboards. But it is absolutely necessary

we have some other arrangement made with Messrs. Gladwell & Greathead as I am satisfied in my own mind they are under selling us in price by their shipments to Port Denison.

I found on reference to the Bowen Newspaper that Ellis Read as Agent for them is selling undressed timber @ 17/- and dressed timber @ 20/- to purchasers of 100 feet and upwards. Now after deducting what we thought a low rate of freight by 6/- per 100 and 1/- for lightening and 6d for carting & sorting would leave the price equal to 16/6 and 20/6 being 6d per 100 on the undressed and 6d on the dressed timber to pay commission & freight & Insurance. So that the mills must be selling timber under 9/- and 13/- and I have written to Messrs. Gladwell & Greathead to the effect that they must reduce their price and place us on the same footing as their agents at Port Denison. Unless this is done we shall have perhaps to compete against transhipments from Bowen which would never do. I propose fixing our rates until competition sprints up at 25/- and 30/- and am satisfied we shall have a ready sale for all classes of timber after the land sale.

I am making good progress with the rocks at the entrance of the Creek having removed two of the most objectionable ones in the channel. The men can only work at these rocks at dead low water spring tides and not more than an hour and a half each day, so that it becomes a more tedious operation than I at first expected. I am most anxious to get these rocks away as once they are gone the place will form a nice little harbour. I should like that you press the Government for another grant for this purpose, say in all equivalent to about £100.

The road party are progressing remarkably well and they are making a first class job of the work. I expect to have the road so far completed as to be open for traffic in about ten days and it will then be proved whether my ideas were correct, as to the value of property at Cleveland Bay. The road fairly open and the rocks cleared altogether away, will soon send us ahead and enable us to double our population every six months. I regret to learn that the place has not yet been gazetted a Port of Entry and clearance as the Colonial Treasurer promised me faithfully that same should be done the week after I left Brisbane. Pray use every influence you possess to have the place gazetted a Port of Entry and for Courts of Petty Sessions as the promises of the Executive are of little account except they are kept constantly reminded of them. In this particular case it is most important we obtain these necessaries as they are really and urgently required by the inhabitants of the place and residents inland interested in the place. We have now more than three times the population of Rockingham Bay, which place possesses all these advantages.

I am satisfied, as I have always told you, that the granting of these privileges to us, is a sore subject with Mr. Herbert and it is only by bringing pressure to bear on the other members of the Executive that we shall ever obtain what we require.

I note your remarks with regard to the "Ariel" and shall endeavour to purchase her as you request, but at such a figure as I think we can make something out of. So far as the launching of her is concerned, I consider it a very easy undertaking and have no hesitation in saying that I will get her off and float her with very little expense. As to the repairs necessary to be done to render her seaworthy that is a question for shipwrights to decide, as I could not give an opinion.

Should you have in your employ a light draughted vessel for a lighter, capable of carrying about 30 tons, it would be most valuable to us, and would soon pay for itself in lightening goods ashore and ballasting. Such a lighter ought not to exceed 3 feet in draught when loaded, and fitted with lee boards or centre boards. With such a vessel we could discharge a large vessel in a very short space of time and would be a great advantage to the place.

I have nothing further to communicate and so remain,

Yours faithfully,  
(sgd.) "J. M. BLACK"

To

Robert Towns Esq.

With regard to making advances to your son Mr. Robert Towns I am without special instruction and shall feel obliged therefore by you informing me what amount I am to advance. Your son has had about £36 since I returned. He informs me that he is supposed

to be in receipt of £100 p.a. and I have made this enquiry for my own satisfaction so that I may know how to act for the future.

“JMB”

Cleveland Bay  
July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1865.

Dear Sir,

Since the date of my communication of the 17<sup>th</sup> instant written on the evening that the “Amherst” was warped out of the Creek, I have to inform you that I made the necessary arrangements with a Mr. Scantlebury a shipwright and owner of a small schooner called the “Contest” laying here, to ballast the vessel in the Bay. Captain McDonald having stated that it was absolutely necessary that he should have 40 tons of ballast on board before he sailed. The Contest placed 37 tons on board up to the 21<sup>st</sup> and eleven bales of wool. McDonald came on shore this day and previous to my seeing him, it seems he took umbrage at some remark made by your son, and informed me that he would not remain a moment longer in the Bay with his vessel but proceed to sea at once. I informed him that he need not delay a single hour after he had placed the wool, tallow and hides on board laying in the store and obtained his papers and accounts. He informed me that he would neither stay for papers nor wool but proceed to sea at once. I remarked that as the ship was not consigned to our hands we had no control over his actions but that if he went to sea without taking his cargo on board I should by the first opportunity report the matter at headquarters. He informed me in not very polite words that he did not care. That same evening he made sail and was nowhere to be seen the following morning. The cargo that he has left behind I shall reserve for the “Uncle Tom”. I hope to be enabled to give the Uncle Tom about 78 bales of wool.

As the Captain refused to go to the Office to sign the Bill/Lading for wool received I enclose the receipt obtained by the Master of the Contest for the safe delivery of the wool on board the “Amherst”.

What McDonald’s motive could have been for such an extraordinary proceeding I cannot imagine. He appeared to me to be perfectly sober. I am inclined to believe that he did not care about receiving his account for the breakage and deficiency of portions of his cargo as particularized in his accounts.

News has reached us that the place is at last gazetted for sale and that the sale is to come off at Bowen on the 27<sup>th</sup> instant. I shall proceed on Monday on horseback to Port Denison where I purpose arriving on the Wednesday evening the day before the land sale.

As I informed you in my last I shall bid upset price for any of the allotments on which our improvements are erected. Above that figure I shall let them be sold.

I shall not strictly in accordance with your instructions not to lay out any farther money in the place till you are made thoroughly acquainted as to our position with the Government, but if I find any of our allotments are to be obtained at a shade above the upset price I think I should be noting for our joint interest to purchase them.

So far as I am concerned I am of the same opinion now that I always was, that the place is bound to go ahead. Nothing can stop it, and that land in the course of a few months will be of considerable value.

I remain  
Yours faithfully  
(sgd.) “J.M. BLACK”

To Robert Towns Esq.

## APPENDIX 10

### Extract from *The Townsville Herald*, Christmas Edition, 1887.

On the occasion of the arrival of the Rangatira, with Captain Harley in command, a grand banquet was held in the Criterion Hotel, when, as ever since, the tables were "tastefully decorated." Among the guests the reporter for the *Herald* noticed: – "Captain Towns, of Sydney, J.M. Black, Esq., J.P., J. Gordon, Esq. P.M., J.W. Greaves, Esq., J.P., J.A. Brown, Esq., J.A.J. Macleod, Esq., Mayor of Bowen, Aldermen Wills and Seaward, of Bowen, Messrs. Carter, Clifton, Fryer, Aplin, Stewart, Scott, Adams, Ellis, Peebles, Miles, Grimaldi, Hutchison, the Rev. Mr. Searle and the Rev. Mr McGinty, of Bowen, and many other residents of the town and district." The chair was occupied by Mr J.M. Black, who had on his right the guest of the evening, Captain Harley, and on his left Captain Towns, and the vice-chair was filled by Mr J. Gordon. . . .

The next toast of importance was that proposed in the following terms by Mr J. Moore Dillon: – "He had great pleasure in proposing the health of a gentleman now present amongst them, associated with them by extensive interests, a well-wisher to the colony, a name familiar to every colonist of 30 years' standing, not only in this colony, in the sister colonies of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, but, in a measure, known at every civilised port trading with our shores. He alluded to Captain Towns. (Loud and continued cheering.) He was satisfied that the toast would be received in that enthusiastic manner. Captain Towns was an old friend of his – he had known him for he could scarcely mention how many years, and from his personal knowledge, knew that he had done as much good for the colony as any other man in it. (Loud cheers.) Bearing a reputation for colossal wealth, he was not one of those gentlemen who ran away from our country after fortune has smiled upon him, and expended the fruits of his industry in distant lands. No! He was a man attached to the soil – an Australian, if not in birth, in associations. Ever foremost in promoting or developing the resources of this colony in particular, he had been the pioneer of the growth of those rich and tropical products, viz., sugar and cotton, the future mainstay of the country. His wealth was circulated by this means through a thousand channels. All that he could say, and it was needless to say much, was that he sincerely hoped that the township named after him may merit the same good future that has smiled upon our worthy guest." The company then sang, enthusiastically, "For he's a jolly good fellow," and Captain Towns replied. His speech being reported as follows: – "He was at a loss to find words to express his thanks for the kind manner in which his health had been proposed and the manner in which the same had been drunk. He came here to view the town that the government had honored him by naming after him, and he must confess he was greatly surprised to see the progress the place had made since the name of Cleveland Bay became familiar to him. He felt proud of the occasion, and although approaching the sere and yellow leaf, still the honor of the evening would accompany him to the last. To witness an assembly like the present in a place a few months ago inhabited only by the savage and the dingo, was to him most surprising. He was deeply interested in the district, and took a lively interest in the progress of Northern Queensland, as he believed the same to be at present in its infancy. Vast hidden stores of wealth lay at your very feet, and it only required a few more such men of enterprise as the pioneers of this town to send your district ahead, and develop those resources now laying dormant. So far as he was concerned, he would do all in his power to further the interests of Townsville, and nothing he was engaged in would give him greater pleasure than to hear of its becoming a large and important city. He felt flattered by the honor paid him by the Government in naming the place after him, and he would not hesitate by aiding in every means in his power to promote its future welfare". A portion of Captain Towns's speech (which is not fully reported in the *Herald*) referred to the naming of the town. It was he who piloted the steamer in which His Excellency Sir George Bowen visited the then newly discovered harbor of Port Denison. The feat was so successfully accomplished that the Government were anxious to reward Captain Towns in a public way; but that gentleman declined to receive any tangible recognition of his services. It had been proposed to award him an island in Moreton Bay, and to distinguish it by his name; but he laughingly put the honor aside, remarking that his ambition and his

name rose superior to a mud island. It was subsequently resolved that the embryo town in which he held such large interests, and which had been named Castletown by Mr Ball, should bear his name. Captain Towns detailed these facts in the course of his speech, and said that he was highly honored by the connection of his name with a place of such promising future.

## APPENDIX 11

**The Names of Vessels which have brought South Sea Islanders to Queensland from 1863, and number of Islanders arrived in each vessel.**

Names of Vessels	Date of Arrival	Year	No. of Islanders Arrived
Don Juan, Brisbane	18 Aug	1863	67
Uncle Tom, Brisbane	8 July	1864	54
Uncle Tom, Brisbane	28 Nov	1864	80
Telegraph, Bowen	16 July	1865	30
Black Dog, Brisbane	15 Dec	1865	118
Heather Bell, or Blue Bell, Cleveland Bay	6 July	1866	55
Heather Bell, Cleveland Bay	24 Aug	1866	9
Spec, Brisbane	27 Sept	1866	63
Percy, Bowen	29 Sept	1866	50
Prima Donna, Port Mackay	13 May	1867	70
Fanny Nicholson, Bowen	8 July	1867	201
King Oscar, Brisbane	16 Aug	1867	225
City of Melbourne, Rockhampton	4 Sept	1867	26
Mary Smith, Maryborough	7 Nov	1867	83
King Oscar, Brisbane	11 Nov	1867	282
Spunkie, Bowen	3 Dec	1867	138
Heather Bell, Cleveland Bay	14 Dec	1867	89
City of Melbourne, Rockhampton	30 Dec	1867	123
Prima Donna, Port Mackay	6 Jan	1868	78
Caroline, Cleveland Bay	6 Jan	1868	27
Syren, Brisbane	30 Jan	1868	91
Spunkie, Brisbane	29 Feb	1868	148
Undescribed	...	...	...
Total			2107

## APPENDIX 12

**Names of Vessels, 1868, place of arrival, number of Islanders, and names of Captain and Recruiting Agent.**

Vessel	Arrival	Total in each ship	Name of Captain	Name of Recruiting Agent
Spunkie, Brisbane	June 2	138	John Rees	H. Ross Lewin
Julia, Rockhampton	June 3	32	J. Carmichael	Master
Lyttona, Brisbane	July 21	74	J.W. Coath	Taylor Winship
Sir I Newton, Gladstone	August 29	68	John Martin	Joseph Row
Spunkie, Sweer's Is.	September 17	150	John Rees	H.H. Hunter
Lyttona, Brisbane	November 3	75	George Smith	James Martin
Daphne, Brisbane	November 15	52	J.C. Daggett	H. Ross Lewin
Prima Donna, Mackay	December 31	15	Robt. A. Cook	Master

## APPENDIX 13

### Report on Inspection of Heather Bell.

Police Office  
Townsville  
27 Decr 1867

Sir

I have the honor to state that in accordance with the instructions I have received by telegram through Mr Tinnock[?] I visited and inspected on 23 inst the schooner Heather Bell from the South Sea Islands, for the purpose of making inquiry touching the engagements and treatment of 89 South Sea Islanders who have arrived by this vessel at Cleveland Bay for service in Queensland.

I now beg to state that so far as the treatment of these Islanders on board is concerned it appears to me that Captain Brown is a humane man and I fancy from their general appearance that the Islanders have been well treated as they are nearly all in plump and healthy condition.

In regard to the agreements made with these Islanders I enclose a copy of memorandum of same made and signed at the islands by Frank Grant, Agent for R. Towns & Co on the one part as employers, and native labourers on the other part by which they agree to serve as general servants or labourers for the time of 3 years or 39 moons, and for their services they are to receive 10/- ten shillings per month in trade and a certain amount of clothing and rations –

With a view to ascertaining if they understood the nature of their agreement and to make enquiries as to their object in coming to Queensland I had the Islanders mustered on deck but I regret to state that even with the assistance of the Master and officers of the ship I found that it was an utter impossibility to have any intelligent conversation with them, and so far as the agreement is concerned I could not satisfy myself that they have any idea at all as to the duration and nature of it, and Captain Brown virtually acknowledged that he could not make them understand it.

On asking him how they managed to understand the agreement in the first instance he explained that it was explained to them by interpreters who reside in the Islands.

In conclusion I beg to state that 25 twenty five of these Islanders have since proceeded in the Heather Bell to Brisbane and the remainder were landed here to be employed in various capacities by Messrs R. Towns & Co and J.G. McDonald & Co.

I have the honor to be  
Sir  
Your most obt. servt  
James Gordon  
PM

The Honble  
The Colonial Secretary  
Brisbane

## APPENDIX 14

### **Immigration and Emigration of South Sea Islanders.**

Answer to Parliamentary Question by Henry Jordan, MLA East Moreton, *V&P* 1871, pp.715–7.

1. What ships have come with Islanders since August, 1869?
  2. To Whom the Islanders and ship were consigned?
  3. Number of Islanders?
  4. . . .
  5. The number of Islanders returned home since August, 1869?
  6. When, how, . . . they were sent, and in whose charge?
- 
1. “Lyttona,” “Woodlark”, “Jacon”, “Spunkie”, “Marian Renny”, and “Amy Robsart”.
  2. Fenwick and Co., Travis and Co., J.C. Wilkins, Brabant and Co., and G. Anderson.
  3. 684.
  4. . . .
  5. 722.
  6. From 9<sup>th</sup> October, 1869, to 5<sup>th</sup> December, 1870. By the ships “Lyttona,” “Spunkie,” “Woodlark,” “Mystery,” “Amy Robsart,” “Mary Campbell,” “Jacon,” and “Harriett King”. In charge of John Smith, W. Livingstone, A. Macgregor, J.W. Coath, James L.A. Hope, George Smith, Henry Russell, Joseph Irving, James Aitken, W.J. Farquahar, W. Spence and John Rees.

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## **3. Queensland State Archives**

- Items of Interest – People – entry on Robert Towns, pp.96-7.
- In the Will and Codicil of the Hon Robert Towns, A/73034/1875.
- Register of Leases of Ten Years' Currency, 1868-1873, LAG/11B/2.
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- Submissions from Surveyor-General's Office to Secretary for Lands & Works re applications by Robert Towns under the Sugar and Coffee Regulations, LWD/A20 1865/655 & 656.
- Colonial Secretary: Index to Registers of Letter Received, 1864-77, COL/C1-17.
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- Towns & Co applications for presumptive selections to compensate for improvements under 14<sup>th</sup> clause of the Act, LANA17. 1869/2781.

#### **4. Townsville City Library – Local Collection**

- Copies of Letters John Melton Black to Robert Towns, 11 July, 17 July & 22 July 1865 re progress at Townsville.
- Correspondence, R C Sharman (State Archivist) and J L Stapleton (State Librarian) to A S Donnelly re early history of Townsville, 14 March 1962.
- Lease of run No 397 – Middleham, 15 May 1866.
- Copy of Letter Robert Towns to Shepherd Smith, 19 February 1866 re establishing Bank of New South Wales Branch at Townsville.
- Copy of Letter J S Sustenance to Towns & Co, 5 October 1866 re cargo and sailing plans.

#### **5. Mitchell Library, Sydney**

Robert Towns & Co Papers 1828-1896, ML MSS 307. The description list is attached as an Appendix.

The following items were consulted:

- Colonial Letterbooks: Items 61, 62, 63, 64 [February 1865 to May 1866]. This was the period in which Towns was financially active in North Queensland and embraces the short duration of his singular visit to Townsville. (See below ).
- Robert Towns Private Letterbooks: Items 158, 159, 160, 161 [May 1865 – October 1869]. Towns wrote no letters in item 159 between 31 January 1866, when he was preparing to leave for Townsville, until his return in late March. On 30 March he wrote to Lands & Works Minister Macalister, complaining about the Queensland Surveyor General and announced his intention to visit Brisbane in April to resolve disputes.
- Robert Towns Misc. Papers:
  - (i) Item 182 includes correspondence with the Surveyor General 1859-64, and with Governor George Bowen. Only one letter of relevance, viz, Bowen to Towns, 20 December 1861, re labour shortage in new colony.

(ii) Item 202 [Business letters to Robert Towns & Co from J M Black].  
Five letters between July and December 1866 add little to the story, the contents merely regarding accounts and orders.

- Papers of Robert Towns 1862-1873, MSS 1279/3 on microfilm CY 2648. No significant reference to Townsville in this collection.
- Public Documents Miscellaneous, Vol 2, Q328.91/5 contains the Minutes of Evidence Towns gave to the Royal Commission on Alleged Kidnapping of Natives of the Loyalty Islands, 2 August 1869.
- *Cleveland Bay Herald*, No 1 March 1866, MDQ 079/288 on microfilm RAV/FM4/706, describing Towns' reception, and faithfully reproduced in *The Townsville Herald*, Christmas Number, 24 December 1887.

#### **6. James Cook University Library:**

- British Parliamentary Papers, Vol. 25-Colonial Australia 1864-69, and Vol. 26-Colonial Australia, 1871-73, especially
  - (i) Copy or Extracts of all Correspondence relating to the importation of South Sea Islanders into Queensland, 6 July 1868, pp. 443-71.
  - (ii) Copy or Extracts of all Correspondence relating to the Importation of South Sea Islanders into Queensland, 5 August 1869, pp. 639-76.
  - (iii) Further Correspondence relating to the Importation of South Sea Islanders into Queensland, 17 August 1871, pp.31-132.
- Queensland Votes & Proceedings, especially
  - (i) Report from the Immigration Agent on the Working of the Polynesian Labourers Act, 1868-9, pp. 549-57.
  - (ii) Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on the Operation of The Polynesian Labourers Act of 1868, 1869, II, p. 23ff.

#### **7. Topographical Information Services – Place Names, Brisbane:**

Plans of Survey T1181 & T1183, copies provided by A/Principal Cartographer, Graham Taylor, July 2004.