

Review Article

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From Colonized to Colonizer: Innisfail, An Irish Colonial Settlement in North Queensland

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The paper focuses on Johnston shire, named after explorer Robert Arthur Johnstone, who was George Dalrymple's officer in charge of the native mounted police in the expedition that set out from Cardwell in September 1873 to explore and chart the north east coast between Cairns and Townsville. Between the late 19th century and the 1970s Johnston shire developed as one of the main centres of cane farming and sugar cane processing, a typical colonial business that started with the establishment of Thomas Henry FitzGerald's company. FitzGerald was Irish and he called his plantation Innisfail, an Irish name meaning 'the Isle of Destiny' in English.

This paper examines why and how North Queensland, a remote area so far away from the traditional channels of 19th century Irish emigration, proved attractive to a sizeable number of Irish emigrants and how subsequent Irish immigration in the area, itself a consequence of the colonisation of Ireland by the British crown, came to serve British imperial and colonial interests.

In 1985, Johnstone Shire in north Queensland adopted its own flag. On the occasion the Shire chairman, Ross Overton, declared:

If Australia is the lucky country, then Johnstone is the lucky shire: we've got the lot. We're green with beauty, while the rest of the country is green with envy [1].

There is however one further reason why the colour green fitted so well in the Shire: it is the importance of the Irish settlement in the area in the second part of the 19th century. Two men played a crucial part in the early colonisation of the Johnstone river basin, and both were Irish by birth. The first was Thomas Henry Fitzgerald, who was a civil engineer who started sugar cane production in North Queensland. Fitzgerald called his 10,000 acres estate Innisfail, an Irish name which translates as "the isle of destiny", and which was given later to Johnstone's main town. The second was the first Catholic Bishop of Queensland, James (O') Quinn, who not only was a shareholder in Fitzgerald's company, but also secretly owned the North Australian newspaper and was at the head of the Immigration Society.

Any discussion as to how the Johnstone Shire developed as one of the main centres of cane farming and sugar cane processing -which in the mid-1970s experienced the highest population density of any local government area in Queensland- must take into account

the early Irish influence.]

This paper therefore aims at assessing the reasons why such a part of north Queensland, a remote area far away from the traditional channels of Irish emigration, proved attractive to a sizeable number of Irish immigrants. This point will lead us to explore how Irish immigration in north Queensland, itself a by-product of the colonization of Ireland by the British Crown, came to serve the interests of British colonial rule in Australia.

Before the 1850s and the gold rush, free Irish immigration to Australia was substantially government-assisted migration financed from the sale of colonial lands by individual Australian colonies that sought a labour force for development.

A century after Captain James Cook's ship struck a reef off the present-day site of Cooktown and forced him to beach his vessel in the Endeavour River for seven weeks, it was a gold reef that lured Europeans, many of them of Irish stock, to the wild far north. The folk song "Dennis O'Reilly" portrays a common Irish perspective:

*When first I left Old Ireland's shore
The yarns that I was told
How folks in Australia
Could pick up lumps of gold.
How gold dust lay in all the streets
And the miner's right was free
Hurrah I said, my loving friends,
That's just the place for me [2].*

Irish explorer James Venture Mulligan discovered gold on the Palmer River in 1873, and the colonial Queensland government chose the mouth of the Endeavour River as the port for the field, naming the township Cooktown.

Three years later, Mulligan announced a new find on the Hodgkinson River, west of Trinity Bay, but the only access to this new field was a long and difficult journey from Cooktown and a more direct route from the coast was soon necessary. To this end, Thornton, a settlement of tents, was established at the mouth of Trinity Inlet in September 1876. The township was surveyed later that year and was renamed Cairns in honour of Queensland's new governor, Sir William Cairns.

However, various forms of assistance remained crucial to Irish immigration. Colonial government schemes remained central to those used by the Irish. Where such assistance could not be found, or was insufficient, nominated chain migration operated strongly: many Irish immigrants owed their passage money to those who had preceded them, relatives, friends paid back from wages after arrival as there was a strong sense of Irish kin obligation, even when the kins were personally disliked.

Nomination schemes allowed local Irish to deposit cash in relation to specified migrants, for whom the colonial government paid the rest of the passage. To that was added a whole variety of private schemes and ventures, operating in limited times and places.

The colonial nature of the landlord system in Ireland was also instrumental. In the 1840s, Lord Monteagle helped many of his Limerick tenants to Australia. He was believed as a benevolent landlord, but his motivation was not entirely altruistic. He explained to Lord Grey in October, 1846 that emigration would help both his tenants and himself at a time of severe crisis in Ireland: the Great Famine not only led many to starvation, but was also a strain on the finances of the landlords [3].

Other privately sponsored schemes ranged from small kinship arrangements to the ambitious plans of Bishop Quinn which brought 4,000 Irish to Queensland in 1862-'65. Among the Irish people who migrated to Australia at that time there was one Thomas Henry Fitzgerald, who must be considered as Innisfail's founder. Fitzgerald had not come straight from Ireland. Born in 1824 in Co Monaghan, Fitzgerald qualified as civil engineer at 18. He then migrated to New Zealand and earned himself a reputation in construction works. He landed in New South Wales in 1862, and quickly left for Queensland where he surveyed part of the township of Mackay. He then became interested in sugar production, and decided to establish his own company on the North Johnstone river basin, which had until then been considered unsuitable for cane growing.

Thomas Fitzgerald took up a 10,000 acres land grant funded by the Catholic Bishop of Brisbane and All Hallows' Sisters of Mercy. With 10 Irish and 35 South Sea Islanders (Kanakas) as workers, he began planting sugar cane in the cleared rainforest lands. Fitzgerald's estate was located on the basin of the North Johnstone river, named after 'sub-inspector' Robert Johnstone who first explored and charted the two branches of the river in 1873. There are no records of the Aboriginal tribes who lived there at the time, mainly the Yalandji people. These people were 'displaced' by the European settlement as their way of life was an obstacle to the development of cane planting and sugar cane processing. The mention of 'Kanakas' as field workers clearly indicates that the natives were not integrated in the settlement process, and were driven out of the land where rainforests were cleared [4].

On the other hand, records of the activity of men like Johnstone and Seymour are well documented. Johnstone was David Seymour's right hand man in the native police paramilitary force, and earned himself the name of "the Butcher" because of his behaviour with local Aboriginal people. Numbers are difficult to assess, but according to the local press Aboriginal people were not only forced out of their land when the rainforest was cleared in the Johnstone shire. It is estimated that Johnstone and the native police and their auxiliaries are responsible for the torture and murder of thousands of Aborigines, men, women and children alike, and the north Johnstone basin did not escape the trail of blood claimed by Johnstone himself in his memoirs [5].

Fitzgerald turned the first sod of his sugar mill in August 1881, and by January 1882 some forty tons of sugar had been produced. This might seem meagre by today's standards, but at the time the ratio per acre was excellent. Fitzgerald had proved his point. As a result there was a rush to the new district, which in 1882 took the name of Geraldton as a tribute to its founder. The district was renamed Innisfail in 1912, after the name Fitzgerald had given to his own estate [6].

The settler community grew rapidly on the proceeds of sugar production. The Mourilyan mill was built in 1882, the Goondi mill in 1885, the Babinda mill in 1914, and South Johnstone mill in 1915. Irish influence is again palpable in the development of sugar processing as the main industry in the area. In 1910, a Royal commission was appointed to take evidence regarding sites for new sugar mills, and gave a favourable reply to an application on behalf of South Johnstone. The steering committee in charge of revising the evidence was led by Harry Noone and J.T. McNamee. Noone was a leading member of the local Hibernian society, and Hibernians were prominent in the steering committee. As a result of the work of the committee, Babinda and South Johnstone mills were established by the Sugar Works Act of 1911. Thus sugar drove the growth of predominantly European Innisfail and still exerts a major influence today.

Multi-cultural Settlers.

The settlers who moved into this region from 1889 were of various origins. The first influential European group were the Catholic Irish, but they were outnumbered by "Kanakas" "South Sea Islanders". In 1888 Goondi mill for instance employed 271 Kanakas, 120 Europeans, most of whom were Irish or of Irish origin, and 44 Chinese. The predominance of the Irish among European settlers at the time is directly connected to the person of Bishop James Quinn. In 1859, the year the Moreton Bay District became a separate colony under the name of Queensland, The Catholic church erected the Diocese of Brisbane. Quinn arrived in Brisbane in 1861 with five priests and six sisters, in 1861. With the approval of the Government, he organised the Queensland Immigration Society, which brought settlers (mainly Irish Catholics) to the colony. Considerable numbers of these were placed on land granted for the purpose by the Government. Racial and sectarian passions soon grew: a clamour arose that the colony was being inundated with Irish Catholics, and that it would soon deserve to be called, not "Queensland", but "Quinn's Land". The Immigration Society bent before the storm and dissolved in 1865, after having enriched Queensland with ten shiploads of picked colonists.

Bishop Quinn established a Catholic paper, *The North Australian*, funded two orphanages and an industrial school, erected the cathedral of St. Stephen and other endowments. State aid was finally withdrawn from all denominational schools with the close of the year 1880; but at his death on 18 August, 1881, there were 52 Catholic primary schools in the diocese, attended by 6,510 children.

Quinn had found fertile soil in Queensland, as Irish immigration had already been quite important in the first part of the 19th century, in what was then the Moreton Bay district of NSW. Irish presence was identified by explorer John Oxley, when he was led to the mouth of the Brisbane River in 1823 by the ticket-of-leave castaway, John Finnigan. A large percentage of the recidivists serving time at the Moreton Bay penal settlement were Irish, as were four of the seven commandants - Bishop, Logan, Ryans and Gorman.

According to a survey conducted by Jennifer Harrison, [...] between the years 1848 and 1852, 1,852 official immigrants arrived in the Moreton Bay district of New South Wales. Of these 1,051, or just over 57 per cent, were Irish born with 543, just over half, coming from Tipperary and Clare [7].

In 1852, the last year of Jennifer Harrison's survey, four vessels came in quick succession between July and September. The final group of passengers to arrive in 1852, in September, was that on the *Rajahgopaul*, at 969 tons a much larger vessel than its antecedents to Moreton Bay.

Only 99 of the 350 immigrants were not from Ireland and once more the counties of Tipperary, sending 71, and Clare, sending 45, predominated as place of origin. Offaly sent 17 whilst Galway and Armagh contributed 15 each. For the first time, Donegal featured with 11 sent from there.

In summary, the religious background of the Irish held true to the county of origin and, as on the whole 124 were Protestants from the north, while Catholics numbered about 927, almost exactly half of the total number of immigrants.

In 1885 Queensland agreed to put an end to Kanaka 'recruitment', which had started in 1863, and in 1890 Sir Samuel Griffith, Queensland's premier, decreed that no more licences would be issued for the recruitment of Kanakas.

Because it was founded by an Irishman and first settled by Irish immigrants sponsored by Bishop James Quinn, Innisfail began as a predominantly Irish town. The end of Kanaka recruitment and their repatriation in 1906 changed the ethnic pattern of the town and of the Shire, as the change meant a great need for cheap labour, which triggered southern European immigration. Maltese, Spaniards, Croats, Greeks and Italians came to Johnstone to work in the canefields. The largest communities were the Greeks and above all the Italians. By 1920 more canecutters had come, and some who had been cutters now joined the ranks of the farmers. Some cutters put their savings together and purchased the *Empire café*, which became Greek owned in 1917. The first Greek bakers were in business at South Johnstone in 1914. The influx continued in the 20's and 30's, and Innisfail became the centre of a burgeoning Greek community in far north Queensland, to the extent that in 1935 a Greek orthodox church was built, the first to be built in Australia outside a metropolitan area.

A large Italian migration began before WW1 and continued into the 1930s and post WW2. By the late 1930s, one third of all Australia's Italian migrants lived in the cane-growing regions of Queensland. Italians also became involved in market gardens, comprising about 40 per cent of Queensland's market gardeners. There is evidence of racial tension in the Johnstone shire between the communities. This was the case with the Maltese community in 1927 when Maltese canecutters refused to join in the strike, and tensions occurred between the Irish and the Italian communities, as they were in direct competition not only in the canecutting business, but also for the ownership of land. In the first part of the 20th century, many Irish-held farms passed into the hands of southern Europeans, a majority of them being Italian. Changes in owners' names in the period testifies of this change, from Hynes, Downing, O'Briens, Caseys, Hernons to Cristaldis, Darveniza, Dalla Vecchias, Martinuzzis...

Religion played an important part in defusing tensions, as a large number of southern Europeans were Catholics, and therefore

shared the same denomination as a majority of the Irish community. The influence of many priests -fathers Mizzi, Clancy and Cahill to name but a few whose names are still remembered today in Innisfail- proved vital in keeping the community together.

Much of Innisfail's present culture is of Italian derivation, including the evocative Canecutter Monument on the river Esplanade. The amalgam also heralded the limits of what would later be called multiculturalism, as Aboriginal people and kanakas were absent from the picture. Johnstone shire, in short, epitomized a dominant western culture based on individual private ownership of the land and of the means of production, dedicated to cash crops in tune with the economy of the colonial empire. This was made possible by the initial settlement of men and women who were themselves as a people the victims of imperial ventures and policies.

What about Irish presence today?

There are clear signs indicating that Johnstone shire and Innisfail are no longer a place of strong Irish immigration.

First, general trends must be accounted for. One of the major factors has been the decline of differentials between Australian and European living standards. As a "rule of thumb" it has been asserted that a gap of at least 25% in measurable incomes is necessary for mass migration from one country to another to be sustained. That gap has simply disappeared for most of those Western European countries that had contributed to Australian population growth (in the 50's and 60's). There is now almost no sustained movement from historic sources such as Italy, Greece or Malta. Even though Britain and Ireland sent more migrants than those countries in the 1990s, a comparison between the 1991 and 1996 censuses reveals the erosion of Irish immigration in the late 20th century: the 1996 census recorded 51,469 Ireland-born persons in Australia, a figure which is remarkably similar to that of the 1991 census (51,642) (peak 1891, 277,698). The 1996 census also reveals that the median age of the Ireland-born in 1996 was 46.5 years, compared with 44.2 years for all overseas-born, and 34.0 years for the total Australian population. The picture we have is that of a stable, ageing Irish-born population, which tends to indicate that Ireland stopped exporting its youth. Such a trend is confirmed by the historic reversal of migrating flows in and out of Ireland in the 1990s under the influence of the "Celtic Tiger". For the first time in more than 150 years, the Republic of Ireland shifted from the position of a country of emigration to that of a country of immigration [8-9].

Moreover, according to the Australian Bureau of Immigration and Population Research, the relative significance of the Irish-born in the total Australian population declined markedly: from being 6% of the total overseas born in 1947, they made up only 0.3 % in 1991 [10].

Such a decline is also explained by the huge influx of migrants coming from a wide range of other countries following the end of the Second World War, and it is worth noticing that this decline has not been evenly shared in terms of geographic distribution. It has been particularly important in Queensland, where the 1996 census recorded 6.998 Irish -born persons, that is to say 13.6% of the overall Irish born community (Western Australia 18.3%, New South Wales 34.2%, Victoria 23.6% Southern Australia 7%, Australian Capital Territory 1.5%, Tasmania 1.2%, Northern Territories 0.7%).

Innisfail and the Johnstone Shire did not escape the general trend, and several signs corroborate the notion that Irish immigration and more generally the Irish connection belong more to the past than to the present and future of the area. An Irish Catholic association such as the Hibernians was structured and had a strong membership at the beginning of the 20th century, so much so that it was very much instrumental in the development of sugar cane processing. We also remember the decisive influence the Catholic Church in the settling of large numbers of Irish migrants from the second part of the 19th up to the early 20th centuries. Today there is no organised and living Irish association left in the Johnstone shire. This feature is particularly striking in the case of the Queensland Irish Association, which is the biggest Irish oriented and the longest continuously operating National Association in Queensland.

The nearest places where Irish clubs can be found are Cairns, Mackay and Rockhampton (Brothers Leagues Club - Cairns, Brothers Capricornia Club - Rockhampton, Mackay Irish Club - Mackay). The Catholic Church, another Irish stronghold, also bears signs of change as the Irish Augustinians, who accepted pastoral responsibility for the area in 1884, withdrew from Innisfail parish in 1993. The Catholic school founded in 1903, passed into the hands of a lay head in 1979, while in 1974 the decision to move into a total co-educational secondary situation paved the way for the integration that now exists at both primary and secondary levels.

Today, the town of Innisfail has a population of about 9,000, and the Johnstone Shire was amalgamated with the shire of Cardwell in 2008 to form the Cassowary coast region. Before amalgamation the shire harboured about 19,000 people. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the 2001 census revealed that 2,307 people living in the shire mentioned Ireland as their country of ancestry (the figure does not include overseas visitors). 18 people claimed that Ireland was their country of birth, but this figure includes overseas visitors. Such figures suggest that people of Irish descent, though they still represent a substantial minority –slightly over 12% of the overall shire population- are no longer a dominant group. The absence of Irish clubs and associations also supports the idea that they no longer see themselves as a distinct community. The very low number of Irish-born residents eventually suggests that the connection with Ireland – at least in terms of organized chain migration- is broken. By 1996 according to the Shire Council, Johnstone Shire residents spoke 47 different languages along with English, and Irish was not one of them.

The reasons why Innisfail lost its Irish character are manifold, but the fact remains that the town and the shire became multi-ethnic a long time before the beginning of the process that changed colonial Australia from a monocultural to a multicultural society. The initial importance of Irish -and more particularly Irish Catholic-immigration in the area contradicted the vision of a British Protestant and Anglo-Saxon Australia, and probably contributed to create the conditions -not in ideological terms but in practical terms- of the emergence of a multi-ethnic and multicultural society, far removed from Alfred Deakin's racist statements [10-11].

Deakin, who was three times Prime Minister of Australia, vowed to uphold the White Australia policy and claimed in the first federal parliament that Australia must remain white forever, and be "One people without the admixture of other races [12].

The truth is that there probably never was a British White Australia in North Queensland, such as to match Deakin's concept of an

ideal Australian type of English culture and Nordic or Germanic racial origin. Even as Deakin spoke, a place like Johnstone shire was already a multi-racial society, where people of Irish stock, Italians, Spaniards, Maltese, Greeks, Chinese and other Asians, descendants of Kanakas, Aborigines, largely outnumbered Anglo-Saxons. In his book "Immigration", James Jupp argues that:

Australia in 1947 was one of the most monocultural societies in the world [...] Australia could claim to be 99% white, and 96% British. [...] The major cultural differentiation was between Catholics and Protestants, reflecting Irish and British origins in most cases. [...] All immigration, settlement and citizenship policy until the 1970s was designed to maintain British privileges [13].

Because of the peculiar nature of their ethnic distribution, the Johnstone shire and Innisfail never completely fitted in the scheme even though they would participate in the white Australia policy. Although on a much smaller scale and in a completely different economic and historical context, they heralded the multicultural evolution of the country... as well as its limits. In this respect, the impact of early Catholic Irish influence prevented the shire from becoming a kind of WASP zone without questioning the nature of the colonial presence. This example epitomises the words of Charles Gavan Duffy, the Irish rebel. Arriving in Melbourne as an immigrant in 1855, he began a long and successful political career, and he told later at a predominantly Irish welcoming banquet:

[...] This was not Ireland, but Australia - Australia, where no nationality need stand on the defensive, for there was fair play for all... But let me not be misunderstood, I am not here to repudiate or apologise for any part of my past life. I am an Irish rebel to the back bone [14].

The limit of such an idyllic portrait of the country is that Gavan Duffy forgets that in colonial Australia he was regarded as white in spite of his ethnic origin and political leanings. As such he did not share the fate of the Aboriginal population nor of the Kanakas who came in numbers to contribute to the development of the sugar cane industry but were never considered as legitimate settlers. The Irish who settled in Australia as a result of the colonial nature of British-Irish relations eventually participated in the colonial development and economy of the British empire. The peculiar history of Innisfail and of the Johnstone shire provides a perfect illustration of the trend through the sugar cash crop business.

Footnotes

1. By courtesy of Innisfail & District Historical Society.
2. <https://folkstream.com/029.html>. Last accessed 14 September 2026.
3. Bévant, Yann (2014) *La grande famine en Irlande 1845-1850, histoire et représentation d'un désastre humanitaire*, Collection Univers anglophones, Rennes, PUR, ISBN : 978-2-7535-3491-9
4. Mostly Melanesian people abducted from South Pacific islands or Papua New Guinea, a practice known as 'blackbirding'.
5. Johnstone, Robert Arthur, *Johnstone-Need JW (James Walter) 1906 (1984) Spinifex and wattle reminiscences of pioneering in North Queensland*, J.W. Johnstone-Need, ISBN 978-0-9590470-0-4
6. One explanation is that the change was a tribute to Yeats' poem "The lake Isle of Innisfree", and a testimony of Fitzgerald's Irish and Gaelic background. Yet local records mention the fact that the change was due to a mistake made by a Russian steamer. Another place was named Geraldton in Western Australia and the captain of the steamer got mixed up, thereby

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. "Johnstone (S) (Local Government Area)". 2006 Census.QuickStats.

¹² <https://www.australianculture.org/immigration-restriction-bill-brilliant-speech-1901/> Last accessed 14 September 2026

¹³ Jupp, James, *Immigration*, p.132-135 ; Sydney, Sydney University Press, 1991.

¹⁴ Oldfield, Audrey, "The Historical Background " in *Forum on Republicanism*, p. 3, State Library of NSW, 1999.

- making an unnecessary journey of thousands of miles.
7. Harrison, Jennifer (2012) "Week after week, the eviction and the exodus' Ireland and Moreton Bay 1848-52 in Crowley, John, Smyth, William J. and Murphy, Mike, *Atlas of the great Irish famine, 1845-52*. Cork, Cork University Press p.561-567.
 8. Dossche Maarten (2024) "Immigration and the distribution of income, consumption and wealth in the euro area Implications for economic policies" in *Journal of Policy Modeling* 46: 5
 9. Australian Bureau of Statistics (1996) census.
 10. Australian Bureau of Statistics (1991) census. It must be noted that there has been a surge in Irish-born residents over the past decade, but they are mainly located in Sydney and Brisbane.
 11. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) "Johnstone (S) (Local Government Area)". *Census.QuickStats*.
 12. <https://www.australianculture.org/immigration-restriction-bill-brilliant-speech-1901/> Last accessed 14 September 2026.
 13. Jupp, James (1991) *Immigration*, Sydney, Sydney University Press p.132-135
 14. Oldfield, Audrey (1999) "The Historical Background " in *Forum on Republicanism*, State Library of NSW p. 3.

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