

CHAPTER ONE

Mapping Australasia

Reflections on the permeability of Australia's northern maritime borders

Paul Battersby

On 18 December, 1978, Australia and PNG signed a treaty delimiting their respective sovereignties in the Torres Strait. The treaty established three boundaries: a seabed boundary that marks the Australia-PNG maritime border, an Australian fisheries protection line extending north to encompass three islands adjacent to the PNG coast and mutually recognised as sovereign Australian territory, and a protected zone extending from the PNG coast to a line south of the seabed boundary. Recognising historical cultural ties between communities on the PNG south coast and the Torres Strait Islands, the treaty permits freedom of movement within the protected zone for 'traditional inhabitants' of this area and apportions a share of commercial fisheries to PNG.¹ Adding to the complex overlay of maritime jurisdictions to Australia's north, the Australian Government insists that, under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), the 'natural prolongation' of Australia's continental shelf allows the delineation of seabed boundaries much closer to East Timor and Indonesia than the Australian mainland. Inherited British colonial territories of Christmas Island, a mere 186 nautical miles south of Java, and Ashmore Island in the Timor Sea give further legal weight to Australia's northward maritime 'boundary creep'. In another minor concession to the fact that juro-political borders disrupt established patterns of human interaction, fishermen from the Indonesian island of Roti are given heavily circumscribed access to 'traditional' fishing grounds around Ashmore Reef.²

The ensuing patchwork of superimposed seabed boundaries, exclusive economic zones and protected areas aptly illustrates the paradox of territoriality in an allegedly borderless world.

Geopolitical borders, write Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan, are 'always domains of contested power'. Inseparable from their frontiers, 'zones of varying width which stretch across and away from borders', they are defined as much by the movement across them of people, money, merchandise and ideas as they are by the actions and decisions taken in the centres of political power.³ This essay explores the economic and social dynamics at the margins of Australia and Asia in the late 19th century, crudely disrupted and subsequently masked by the ideology of Australian nation-statehood. Until Federation heralded stricter demarcation of national political and cultural space, anchoring northern Australia to a southern axis, the waters separating Australia from the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago were a vast lake across which roamed adventurers, migrants, guest workers and tourists from Europe and Asia. Integral to the story of northern development, these Austral-Asian economic, social and cultural transactions also point to a still under-recognised cosmopolitanism at the southern fringes of this once open Australasian maritime frontier.

Geographical Imaginings

The English naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace, claimed in *The Malay Archipelago* (1869) that 'no two parts of the world differ so radically in their productions as Asia and Australia'.⁴ Yet Wallace believed that the 'biogeographic' boundaries of Asia stopped at Bali, to the east of which lay the 'Austro-Malayan' subregion of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago. Reflecting on the structure of this subdivision, he wrote subsequently in *Australasia* (1879), that the Australian continent 'forms its central and most important feature'.⁵ Wallace based his conclusion on the presence of distinctly Australian fauna east of a continuous dividing line, the Wallace Line, separating Bali from Lombok, Borneo from Sulawesi, and the southern Philippines from the Moluccas. Allowing that 'along the line of junction intermigration and commixture have taken place', he claimed the distribution of human characteristics confirmed the accuracy of his zoological observations.⁶

Wallace's Australasia spanned the entire Indo-Malaysian Archipelago, New Guinea, Australia, New Zealand and the South-West Pacific. He was dismayed at the *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* contraction of his geographical idea to encompass Australia and New Zealand only, and maintained in his later study of Australia and New Zealand, also titled *Australasia* (1893), that the island continent was 'geographically a southern extension of Asia'.⁷ Wallace's

Line remains a point of reference for biogeographers, although the 'faunal split' between Australia and Asia moved gradually eastward as geographers and naturalists applied different criteria, from the distribution of mammals to freshwater fish, to map its precise delineation. Even Wallace revised his line in 1910 to exclude Sulawesi from the Austro-Malayan division to eliminate some of the ambiguities caused by overlapping faunal zones.⁸ Modern archaeologists define the vague geographic frontier bisecting Wallace's Australasia as an 'intermediate zone' named Wallacea, between 'Greater Australia' bounded by the edge of the Australian continental shelf, and Wallace's Indo-Malayan division of the archipelago.⁹ A consequence of the historical mobility of fauna, flora and humans across open water in island South-East Asia, this 'intermediacy' renders impossible the delineation of precise and inclusive 'natural' boundaries.

At which point then should the narrative of interactions between northern Australia and the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago begin? In human terms, the story of contact predates the arrival of the voyages of Captain Cook by tens of thousands of years. In his seminal study of contact between northern Australia and the Malay world, Charles Campbell MacKnight asserted the centrality of sea voyages in Australian and South-East Asian history.¹⁰ His is a compelling logic. Indigenous Australians were the first 'accidental' navigators to reach the Australian continent through the archipelago some 40,000 years BP.¹¹ At the end of the last Ice Age, rising sea levels cut northern Australians adrift from their ancestral moorings, but maritime communication remained salient in localised economic and cultural interactions between island and coastal communities along the northern shores of Greater Australia. From localised beginnings, the maritime peoples and entrepôts of island South-East Asia built a vast and intricate trading system which, by the first millennium CE encompassed eastern Africa, the Persian Gulf, India and southern China. According to the South-East Asianist, Oliver Wolters, this system comprised a single ocean bound together by the propensity to trade, in which the sea was perceived as a means of communication, not a prohibitive or defensive barrier.¹²

Not until the 16th and 17th centuries did northern Australia reconnect with the Australasian maritime milieu as Portuguese, Dutch and British navigators made 'accidental' landings along the north-west coast. Contemporaneous with the arrival of European explorers and colonisers, the commercial reach of the seafaring Bajau Laut from southern Sulawesi slowly extended towards northern Australia in the 18th century. A pivotal maritime people in the *bêche-de-mer* (trepang) trading chain reaching northward to China, the Bajau roamed the eastern Indo-Malaysian Archipelago harvesting their catch for Makasarese traders. Depleted trepang stocks forced the Bajau to

probe for new fishing grounds south to Ashmore Reef in the early 1700s and the Coburg Peninsula by 1780 at the very latest, according to anthropologist James Fox.¹³ From the Kimberley coast, Kayu Jawa in Malay, to the Coburg Peninsula and the western Gulf of Carpentaria, known to the Bajau as *Marege*, Aboriginal and Malayan cultural spheres overlapped for more than a century until Australian fisheries law, part of an alien and inflexible British politico-legal regime, forced the Bajau to retreat from their traditional Indo-Australian fishing grounds.¹⁴

Looking far beyond the expanding boundaries of European colonisation, British merchants, navigators and early New South Wales governors alike appreciated the potential value of a 'new Singapore' in northern Australia. Matthew Flinders hinted at the commercial and strategic advantages presented by the 'proximity' to British India trade routes of the coast from Cape Arnhem to Melville Island in his account of his circumnavigation of Australia.¹⁵ Fort Dundas (1823), Raffles Bay (1827) and Port Essington (1838–49) in what is now the Northern Territory were established to attract commerce southwards from the Netherlands Indies and link northern Australia through maritime trading networks to Britain's Far Eastern empire. Poorly planned and provisioned, and only intermittently resupplied, these early experiments failed. Major Australian population centres had no need of such an entrepot. Asia-bound ships sailing from Sydney through the Torres Strait more than doubled in number from 15 to 41 a year between 1832 and 1838.¹⁶ Population growth in NSW increased demand for tropical foodstuffs, such as sugar, which, by the 1840s was sourced primarily from Java and the Philippines. Sugar imports from Java reached 16 million pounds weight in 1842, more than three-quarters the total volume imported for that year.¹⁷ Ready markets for sealskin and sandalwood in China gave impetus to the creation of early Australian maritime corporate empires. Sydney entrepreneurs such as Robert Towns, whose merchant fleet ranged as far north as Canton, secured rich cargoes of tea, coffee, sugar and tobacco to satisfy the appetites of Australian consumers.¹⁸ Australia was the largest and second-largest market for Philippine sugar and coffee respectively in 1847. A decade later, it was the largest market for both commodities, with the bulk of imports entering through Sydney.¹⁹

As Australasia emerged as a field of colonial Australian commerce, the region's richness and strategic significance tempted some to speculate on the future shape of the Dutch Empire. To Australasian colonisers, the Dutch stood between Australia and the dream of a greater British Empire in the East. The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 recognised the Indies as a Dutch sphere of interest, but at the time, Dutch power reached barely across the island of Java and parts of Sumatra. The Van Delden Proclamation of 1828 enlarged Dutch claims to

incorporate western New Guinea, but, as Nicholas Tarling writes, they 'had to accept that their tenure in the Archipelago itself was in a sense conditional'.²⁰ Britain exerted indirect influence over northern Borneo in the 1840s and watched on disdainfully as the remainder of the eastern archipelago was hastily incorporated into the Netherlands Indies. British policy-makers, however, hesitated to extend Britain's territorial reach beyond what was deemed necessary to advance British economic interests and protect major shipping lanes from foreign threats.²¹ Concern for peace and order were common justifications for British colonial interventions, lest potentially hostile powers take advantage of local political instability and establish a strategically sensitive foothold near the vital arteries of British commerce. Colonial Australians were therefore careful to address these concerns when urging the northward expansion of British influence.

Eager to emulate the achievements of Thomas Stamford Raffles, Sir George Ferguson Bowen, first Governor of Queensland, harboured boundary-less aspirations towards the archipelago. Claiming 'destiny' as his guide, Bowen anticipated a 'convergence' of Asian and Pacific trade routes to Australia's north. Advocating the creation of another northern outpost at Cape York overlooking the Torres Strait, he advised the Secretary of State for the Colonies that a settlement properly garrisoned would 'command the whole of the commerce between the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean'. Citing Raffles as his inspiration, he envisioned the Torres Strait would replicate the Strait of Malacca in its commercial and strategic significance. But further:

A station at Cape York could not fail to extend the influence and *prestige* of Great Britain over the Indian Archipelago; while it would form a link between the possessions in Australia, India, and China, [assure] the possession of the north and north-east coasts of the Australian Continent 'and, as it were close the ring fence with which we have girt the fifth quarter of the globe'.²²

Consolidation of British rule on the Australian continent could, Bowen conjectured, lead to the enlargement of Britain's eastern possessions to incorporate 'New Guinea, and *other portions of the Indian Archipelago*' (emphasis added). Expressing the hope that 'the Moluccas shall be freed from the trammels in which they have hitherto been bound', Bowen envisioned an arc of islands from New Guinea through the Moluccas to northern Borneo shaded in imperial red on the map of Britain's empire in Asia.²³

Bowen declared that the 'tide of colonisation in Queensland is sweeping onward at the rate of about two hundred miles each year'.²⁴ Confident in the 'assimilating powers of the Anglo-Saxon race', he echoed the sentiments

expressed by Edward Gibbon Wakefield some 30 years earlier and embraced the prospect of Asian immigration. Branding as ‘Luddites’ those responsible for assaults on Chinese miners at Buckland River and Lambing Flat in NSW, he asserted that Asian migrants were essential to the development of tropical industries in Queensland. Bowen’s claims lent intellectual justification to demands from Queensland businessmen for ‘the successful cultivation of a race habituated to labour in a tropical climate’.²⁵ Thus would the template for British colonial achievement be transposed to Queensland to build a new Australasian colony replete with a bustling northern emporium, an extensive hinterland yielding tropical products for a global market and a Coloured underclass of ‘coolie’ labour ruled by a new class of White Rajahs.

The dream of a ‘new Singapore’ proved illusory. Cut off from the hub of the Torres Strait pearling industry by a maritime boundary that restricted Queensland’s maritime jurisdiction to three miles from the Cape York coast, the settlement of Somerset (1864–77) languished. Denied the capacity to levy tax on cargoes of pearls and *bêche-de-mer*, the settlement also struggled to attract trading vessels passing through the strait.²⁶ Apart from some sputtering attempts to initiate regular steamer traffic between Queensland and the archipelago, an eagerly anticipated steamer service to Batavia (present-day Jakarta) and Singapore failed to materialise. Ironically, the growth of sugar industries in Queensland and NSW arrested demand for imported sugar from Java and the Philippines. With the archipelago’s declining importance in eastern Australia’s sugar trade, shipping companies were unwilling to bear the commercial risk of running a regular steamer service through the Torres Strait without additional financial incentives. The belief persisted, however, that the Australian colonies, Queensland especially, had important interests to protect and advance in the archipelago.

Prospects for a northern emporium improved with two unilateral maritime border revisions in 1872 and 1879. The first, instigated by the Palmer Government, enlarged the Queensland Government’s maritime jurisdiction from three to 60 miles. The urgent need to regulate labour recruitment was used to justify this revision and the subsequent annexation of the strait during Sir Thomas McIlwraith’s first term as premier, which pushed Queensland’s northern maritime border to within half a mile of the New Guinea coast.²⁷ With a ready tax base thus appropriated to fund the apparatus of State control, Thursday Island supplanted Somerset as the commercial and administrative hub in the strait. Riding the expansion of the pearling industry, Thursday Island became a frontier outpost of the Queensland colonial state and a forward base for Australian enterprise in New Guinea and the Indies. As one ‘North Queenslander’ wrote to the *Straits Times*, the colonisation of Cape York offered



Thursday Island views, 1910.

Courtesy of John Oxley Library, Brisbane (Item No. 180490).

the perfect opportunity to ‘command the commerce of a large portion of Australia, of the Indian Archipelago, and of the islands of the Pacific’.²⁸

Thursday Island’s international significance increased with the inauguration of the Torres Strait Mail Line in 1874. To divert the flow of migrants to Queensland, the Palmer Government offered a £20,000 annual subsidy as an inducement to the British-owned Eastern and Australian Mail Steam Company Limited (E & A) to connect with the P & O service in Singapore and bring Brisbane within 44 days of London via Brindisi.²⁹ Articles in the Singapore and Brisbane newspapers heralded the Torres Strait route for the ‘smoothness’ of the voyage and the picturesque beauty of the archipelago, but the monthly service struggled to capture the imagination of Australian tourists or British migrants. A. H. Palmer stood by the mail line his government had created by taking his family on a trip to Batavia in 1874, but the Torres Strait Mail Line carried a mere 101 saloon passengers from eastern Australia to Batavia and Singapore in its first year. British migrants preferred the long-established south-coast shipping routes rather than transshipping at Singapore and enduring the tortures of cramped steerage quarters and the suffocating tropical heat of the archipelago.³⁰ Although E & A insisted that their service terminate in Sydney rather than Brisbane, the Queensland Government persisted with the venture because it was assumed that migrants from Britain would eventually opt for the Torres Strait route, and because Asian emporia beckoned as potential export markets for Queensland’s primary industries.

Commercial necessity dictated that good relations be nurtured with the Netherlands Indies, but, at the level of popular debate at least, the intermediacy of the archipelago continued to invite speculation. The Australian novelist, Marcus Clarke, thought the cultural divide between northern Australia and South-East Asia would one day be transcended. In terms strikingly resonant

with modern theories of cultural globalisation, Clarke wrote in *The Future Australian Race* (1877) of 'that abolition of boundaries' brought by 'waves of social progress', which made it 'easier for men to change skies, to change food, to intermarry, to beget children from strange loins'.³¹ Like Bowen, Clarke appreciated the powerful forces that were reshaping the geopolitical map of Asia. As railways and steam shipping routes converged to increase the frequency and speed of international interactions, so Clarke envisaged a civilisational split in Australasia, not between the Australian continent and the archipelago, but at a line south of Brisbane.

According to Clarke, a 'luxurious and stupendous civilisation' would one day evolve encompassing northern Australia, New Guinea, the Moluccas and 'parts adjacent', leaving southern Australia and New Zealand to form a residual European cultural sphere.³² Clarke's 'waves of social progress' were already changing the northern Australian socio-cultural terrain. Chinese miners from the NSW and Victorian goldfields moved north into Queensland as new gold rushes broke out around Gympie, Ravenswood and Charters Towers. Ships brought more guest workers and settlers from southern China through the Torres Strait to Cairns and Cooktown in the 1870s. 'Malay' and Filipino pearl divers and lugger crews added to northern Queensland's multi-ethnic population.³³ Given the fractious nature of Queensland politics, the idea that increased social and commercial exchanges between northern Australia and the archipelago could reconfigure political boundaries was hardly romantic speculation. Separationists in northern and central Queensland have campaigned since the mid-1860s for the creation of a new colony, partly to liberate their taxes but, equally important to regional business interests, so that the north could be populated with cheap 'coolie' labour recruited from as far afield as India and China. Hot climates, after all, wrote Clarke, naturally induced despotism and slavery.³⁴

Acts to establish the Federal Council of Australasia in 1885 anticipated the possibility of external territorial realignment. In defining the council's terms of inclusion, 'Australasia colony', the legislation read, comprised the six Australian colonies, New Zealand and 'any British colonies which may be hereafter created within Her Majesty's possessions in Australasia'.³⁵ Coveted by business interests in Sydney and Brisbane, eastern New Guinea had been the subject of inconclusive negotiations between the Queensland Government and the Colonial Office for possible British annexation in the preceding decade. But for a disagreement over responsibility for funding the creation of a new British colony, we might remember John Douglas and not McIlwraith as Queensland's most aggressively expansionist premier.³⁶ Acting with the support of southern colonies, McIlwraith annexed New Guinea's south-eastern quarter in 1883,

alleging that a German presence in north-eastern New Guinea presented a threat to Australian and wider British interests in the Pacific.³⁷ Preoccupied in Burma and Malaya, Britain reluctantly agreed to establish and run the new territory as a British protectorate, funded by the Australian colonies, if only to clarify German, Dutch and now British territorial claims on the island.

Nonetheless, the Netherlands Indies Government remained distrustful of British intentions and, with Germany, was hostile towards Australian commercial activity in the eastern islands. Dutch and German sensitivities were undoubtedly heightened by the expanding frontiers of Australian enterprise and the cavalier attitude of many Australian maritime entrepreneurs. From the 1880s, Australian pearling fleets roamed as far afield as Labuk Bay in British North Borneo (Sabah) and the Sulu and Mergui Archipelagos in search of new fishing grounds.³⁸ Australasian colonial expansion remained a matter of public debate as late as 1892, when the *Straits Times* reported that certain Australian business interests were openly advocating a pre-emptive Australian-led invasion and occupation of Portuguese East Timor.³⁹ Responding to an international controversy ignited by imprisonment of the captain of the Sydney-registered whaling ship, the *Costa Rica Packet*, at Ternate in the Moluccas, one German newspaper was in no doubt as to Australian ambitions:

If they could do just what they liked in Sydney, the German flag would not much longer fly in New Guinea, and on the Marshall or Bismark Islands, and in fact that the Australians wish to arrogate to themselves the right of being the 'boss' in the Malayan Archipelago, has been proved by their uncouth conduct in the matter of the pearl fisheries of the Aru Islands.⁴⁰

Across New Frontiers

Suspicion and disdain lurked beneath the surface of bilateral relations, but Australian social and business connections with the Netherlands Indies deepened in the late 19th century. In anticipation of a lucrative trade in dairy produce and frozen beef from Queensland, the British India Steam Navigation Company (BISN) secured the Queensland mail contract in 1881, earning an increased subsidy in return for terminating their fortnightly mail service in Brisbane. As many as 200 British migrants a month passed through the archipelago along the Torres Strait route with the BISN. New Australian, Dutch, German and Japanese-owned steamer services opened the doors to Manila, Kobe and Hong Kong in the 1890s. Australia's primary and secondary ports were integrated into a network of transoceanic steam shipping lines connecting Australia to Asia and the wider world. Thomas Cook and Son offered currency-exchange services, travellers' cheques, telegraphic money

transfers and round-the-world tickets to metropolitan and colonial leisure classes. In a single transaction, Australian tourists and business travellers could purchase the right to circumnavigate the globe by land and sea.⁴¹

Australians travelling to Asia for the first time crossed many boundaries. For the thousands of Britain-bound saloon passengers who endured enforced stopovers at Asian port cities as their steamers refuelled, the changing cultural scenery was little more than an engaging novelty. For a significant minority, however, disembarkation was the beginning of a journey of meaning that, even for the British-born, revealed the depth of attachment to their Australian home. Yorkshire-born Henry Copeland, New England MLA in the NSW Parliament, wrote of 'a genuine regret at leaving Australia behind us' and with it the reassuring continuum of everyday routines symbolised by the 'two-penny post'.⁴² Confronted with glaring cultural differences, the likes of Copeland found that attributes of 'Australia' were a frame of reference against which they gauged new environments and experiences — sometimes with surprising results.

Cast adrift in an unknown world, 'new chum' travellers noticed a perceptible transformation of the land and seascape as they crossed the Arafura Sea. Even the coastline of tropical north Queensland could not compare with the sights that greeted Australians as their steamer crossed the Wallace Line and entered the Bali Strait. New landscapes were quickly followed by the appearance of markers of new cultural terrain. Steaming towards the Java Sea, Copeland noted in his travelogue, *A Few Weeks with the Malays*, that 'curious' sailing craft signalled entry into a new cultural space, populated by a 'strange people'.⁴³ From the comfort of their gilded saloons, travellers were greeted by the 'curious' lateen sails of Chinese junks, forested tropical islands and the exotic 'perfumes' of luxuriant tropical flora.

Mackay parliamentarian Hume Black reported 'disgust and revulsion' at the sight of rickshaw-drawers in Singapore 'being entirely opposed to Australian ideas of freedom'.⁴⁴ Yet Black enjoyed the company of one Rajah Impey, a fellow shareholder in the Australian-owned and operated Raub Australia Gold Mine at Pahang on the Malay Peninsula, who greeted him on his arrival at Port Klang and shared his carriage on a train journey into the interior.⁴⁵ Preconceived notions of Oriental despotism were frequently contradicted by the experience of interpersonal contact with Asian elites. Copeland lauded Chinese merchants for their entrepreneurial flair and their bourgeois values: property, law, order and trade. He struggled to digest the culinary productions of Dutch Eurasian culture, but reserved his strongest criticism for the British. He was concerned at the effect of climate on the moral character of British colonisers, suggesting their penchant for servants resulted from heat-induced idleness. Entertaining a vague notion that one day Australians might assume

the 'white man's burden' somewhere in Britain's eastern empire, he observed that the tropics were suitable only for European north Queenslanders, who were biologically adapted to the stresses of equatorial temperatures. Envisioning Australia's commercial integration into Britain's eastern empire, Copeland reminded his readers of the economic logic for a central Australian railway linking southern capitals to Darwin from whence steamer services would open markets for Australian produce in Malaya and India.⁴⁶ The Netherlands Indies by contrast was but an exotic detour.

Founded on an uneasy accommodation between the imperial powers over respective colonial jurisdictions, trade and tourism encouraged the domestication of Australia's near-Orient. A deliberate policy of tourism development transformed Java into a popular tourist destination for Australians travelling the Torres Strait route to Asia and Europe. After the bourgeois fashion for 'going to the hills', sanatoriums were established at Sindanglaya, Soekaboemi, Garoet (Garut) and Tosari, enhancing the appeal of sightseeing excursions to the restored Hindu temples of the Dieng Plateau and the fabled Buddhist shrine of Borobudur.⁴⁷ Such was the demand for tourist travel that the Australian shipping company, Burns Philp, open a specialised travel department to market Asian holidays. Featuring Java, 'Garden of the East', their 1913 edition of *Picturesque Travel Under the Auspices of Burns Philp & Company Ltd*, directed tourists to the island's 'majestic ruins'. In the romanticised cultural space of the East Indies, potential tourists were enticed by standardised images of an exotic Oriental paradise in which dwelled passive and contented subjects ruled by a benign imperial power.⁴⁸

Trusted Australian investors were also welcome in the Indies. 'Willie' Jack, partner in the north Queensland firm, Jack and Newell, operated a gold mine at Kuandang on the Minhassan Peninsula on the island of Sulawesi in partnership with Dutch investors from Amsterdam during the 1890s.⁴⁹ Burns Philp strengthened their trading links with the Netherlands Indies by establishing their 'Island Line' steamer service and opening an office in Samarang in 1908.⁵⁰ Brisbane pearling magnate James Clark secured a pearling concession near the Aru Islands with partner E. Munro in 1904. Becoming consul for the Netherlands in Queensland the next year, Clark extended his business empire to Ceram, where his family grew cocoa, coffee, sago and rubber until 1942.⁵¹ Australians could and did marvel at the wonders of Borobudur, prospect and mine for gold throughout the Netherlands Indies, and secure markets among the Dutch Eurasian population for Australian meat, dairy products, flour, coal, jams and pickles.

Cultural distances between European Australians and the indigenous populations of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago were substantial. 'A far wider

space than the Arafura Sea separates us and them' wrote an early Australian tourist to Asia.⁵² But, acceptance of Asian cultures was as essential for the productive management of a multiracial workforce in northern Australia as it was for commercial success in Asia. 'Malay' workers were, like their Filipino counterparts, highly regarded by employers in the Australian pearling industry, and were much less likely than Europeans to break the law. Writing of the Filipino presence in the Torres Strait, Rey Iletto describes how Asian and Australian businesspeople valued their mutual contributions to the prosperity of local industry.⁵³

Further south, the introduction of more stringent limitations on the recruitment of Kanaka labour by the Griffith Government in 1885, forced sugar planters to also look northwards to the archipelago to meet their labour needs. North Queensland's 'Malay' community swelled from less than 300 to nearly 1,100 in 1886 as labourers, mainly from Bantam and Sunda on the island of Java, but also from Pahang on the Malay Peninsula, were brought to work on cane fields from Innisfail south to Mackay and Maryborough.⁵⁴ At Mourilyan Plantation, Javanese were considered 'cleaner in their habits than kanakas' and better suited to plantation labour.⁵⁵ It was a measure of the flexibility of work practices that indentured Javanese were permitted to work under Javanese supervisors, 'mandoor's, and, when in breach of company regulations were 'punished by their own code of laws'.⁵⁶ Admitted to the fringes of more populous districts, Javanese sugar workers more readily caught the public eye and were noted for their assertiveness. As one J. O'Halleram, manager at the Innisfail Estate, told the Queensland Royal Commission into the sugar industry, 'They are a class of labour that, if they can best you they will best you and keep you bested.'⁵⁷

Public debate about the 'Malay' character at the time of the 'Black Labour' Queensland election in 1888 highlights the political dynamics of White Australia. Objecting to the repayment of wage advances, a legal requirement under the terms of their labour contract, 50 Javanese plantation employees protested their cause in the main street of Mackay. The *Mackay Mercury* seized on an opportunity to mount a vigorous campaign against the importation of Javanese labour. Depicting Javanese as violent delinquents who 'ran amok' and threatened 'defenceless white people with their long bladed krisses', the *Mercury* invoked images of 'Malay' savagery popularised in the writings of explorers and naturalists such as Wallace.⁵⁸ Discontented with wages and working conditions, Javanese plantation employees frequently 'absconded', but incidents of violent assaults involving Javanese workers were rare. Public fears were, however, further heightened by events at Normanton in June 1888, where a Javanese called Sedin 'ran amok' killing three Europeans and igniting an outpouring of race-hate by the town's White population.⁵⁹



Thursday Island Harbour, 1935.
 Courtesy of John Oxley Library, Brisbane
 (Item No. 42746).

Race relations were reportedly strained by the growing South-East Asian presence in Normanton, mostly internal migrants from Thursday Island.⁶⁰ Before public order could be restored, rioters themselves ran amok causing £5,000 in damage to non-European property in a wild orgy of destruction. Unsurprisingly, the fact that several 'Malays' disarmed Sedin before police intervened earned scant attention in the Queensland press. The *Townsville Herald* vindicated the White townspeople's malevolence as a 'cleansing of its [Normanton's] Asiatic plague'.⁶¹ Acutely conscious of Queensland's tarnished reputation for race relations, Thomas McIlwraith described the rioters' behaviour as a disgrace to the colony but promptly suspended the transportation of another 2,000 Javanese indents preparing to embark in Singapore and Batavia.⁶²

Concerned about the welfare of its colonial subjects, and about Queensland's territorial designs, the Netherlands Indies banned labour recruitment in its eastern islands.⁶³ The Normanton riot merely confirmed Queensland's international image as a predatory, labour-hungry colony. McIlwraith eased restrictions on the recruitment of Pacific Island labour, thereby reducing the need to obtain labour from Malaya and Java, but Javanese were still recruited into the Queensland sugar industry, in much smaller numbers, until all non-White immigration ceased in 1901. By then, an image of the 'savage Malay' was embedded in the popular imagination alongside the Yellow Peril as a physical and moral threat to the security of White Australia.

Guest workers from Malaya and Java who entered Queensland and remained, as Rey Iletto states in relation to Filipinos, merely transferred their allegiance from one colonial power to another.⁶⁴ But the creation of the Australian nation-state severed them from their cultural roots and forced these Indo-Australians to negotiate new political identities while confronting the harsh reality of their place as cultural fringe dwellers who were denied a voice in the politics of Australian nationalism.

Australia or Austral-Asia?

With the exception of New Guinea, the convergences foreshadowed by Bowen did not work towards an expanded British empire in the eastern archipelago. The unrealised idea of Australasia as a federation of British, Asian and Pacific colonies owes more to the exigencies of British foreign policy than to a failure of Australian political imagination. In its place emerged the conviction shared by many among Australia's commercial and political elites that Asia, and maritime South-East Asia in particular, was a natural sphere of Australian business enterprise. Nineteenth-century geographical ideas could still be mobilised to justify these more modest ambitions. Presaging Australian policies of 'engagement' with South-East Asia in the 1990s, J. J. Long's commissioned report on trade prospects with the Netherlands Indies and Malaya stressed mutual interests with neighbouring states born of geographic proximity and economic complementarity. He wrote:

It is not without interest, in view of the nature of my investigations, to note that the inhabitants, the language, the flora, fauna, and the geological formation all support the theory that these islands, large and small, are really but the highland remains of a vast and extensive continent which formerly united Australia to Asia. The corollary, of course, is that they constitute a natural geological outlet for Australian trade, the volume of which — once ... it has attained the possible of normal times — should advance automatically with the increasing prosperity and population of the islands.⁶⁵

Long lamented the slow pace at which Australian business took up the challenge of Asia, but the frontiers of Australian business enterprise crept steadily outwards. In the 1890s, Australian prospectors, gold and tin miners could be found across an arc starting in New Guinea and stretching to the Malay state of Kelantan on the Malay Peninsula. Twenty years later, this mining frontier reached the tin districts of Phuket and Ranong on Siam's west coast, where Australians from Hobart, Melbourne and Sydney formed business alliances with prominent Sino-Thais — much to the chagrin of British competitors.⁶⁶ The idea of Australasia as a

necessary commercial sphere for Australian business persists in Federal Government hopes for an Austral-Asian free trade area, the AFTA-CER. Asian business migrants, valued for their entrepreneurship and investment capital, are today generally welcome in Australia. Australian companies and company managers operate throughout the South-East Asian region, while Asian counterparts deal profitably from corporate 'branch offices' in Australia's capital cities.

The idea of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago as a protective barrier persists in contemporary defence thinking. Recognising the impossibility of a fortress Australia, Paul Dibb defined the strategic significance of island South-East Asia and the south-west Pacific, which formed Australia's 'area of direct military interest'.⁶⁷ Continental defence entailed the development of military links with northern neighbours, which, before and since the collapse of the old imperial order, have proved difficult to manage. The vastness of Australia's coastline made 19th-century defence planners acutely aware that Australian strategic interests were intertwined with the political affairs of the archipelagic states to the north. Relations with the Netherlands Indies were, as they are with its successor state today, consequently tinged with mutual suspicion. Australian strategic interests in PNG and, more recently, Australia's leading role in the independence of East Timor, add important third-country considerations to the calculation of maritime border security. Even the Howard Government, despite downgrading Indonesia's relative significance to Australian defence interests, understands that maritime borders cannot be 'protected' by force alone.

There is a tendency to lament the demise of 'comprehensive engagement'⁶⁸ with South-East Asia, and yet relations with Australia's northern neighbours have historically ebbed as much as flowed as either trade or military security dominated official concerns. The resurgence of a strident anti-Asia rhetoric in the 1990s goaded Australians into accepting a recidivist conservative agenda. Paul Keating's vision that Asia might be a source of national regeneration is not shared by enough Australians to permit the immediate revival of Australasia as a cultural ideal. Perhaps the word Australasia evokes too many awkward memories. From imperialist aspiration to the presumption of Australia's natural right to membership of an Asian political community, Australasia can imply the subordination of Asia. The term also attracts criticism from Rey Ileto for creating a misleading 'indeterminacy' in 'crossing two fictions', Australia and Asia.⁶⁹ As a historical concept, however, Australasia is a reminder that 19th-century conceptions of Australia's 'region', albeit based on a contentious geographical idea, extended deep into the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago. Further, the word captures the intermediacy of the northern Australian maritime milieu and the reality of peaceful accommodation between diasporic Asian communities and Australians, too often drowned out by the strident rhetoric of race and nation.

Footnotes

- 1 An added complication, the treaty also recognises Australian territorial seas surrounding 15 'Australian' islands north of the seabed boundary. 'Treaty between Australia and the Independent State of Papua New Guinea concerning Sovereignty and Maritime Boundaries in the area between the two Countries, including the area known as Torres Strait, and Related Matters.' (Sydney, 18 December, 1978.) In Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, 1979, *The Torres Strait Treaty: Report and Appendixes*, Canberra: AGPS. pp. 5, 7, 8–11.
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Labourers in the pearl-shell industry, 1936.
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