THE HISTORY OF PORT AUGUSTA

from Aboriginal times to about 1908

by

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A thesis submitted on 1 September 1988 to the History
Department, University of Adelaide for the degree of
Master of Arts.

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SUMMARY

This thesis examines the History of Port Augusta from
Aboriginal times up to but not including the coming of
the Commonwealth Railways, nominally put at 1908. The
aspect of early European exploration has been covered
elsewhere.

The first Chapter examines the situation of the
Aborigines when confronted by the invaders. Prior to
the invasion, the economic life of the Aborigines was
enhanced by favorable geographical circumstances.
Their beliefs and customs and those of far-distant
inland tribes, were powerfully influenced by the
phenomenon of the ever-narrowing, serpentine Gulf which
penetrated this arid region. Explorers came up the
Gulf, overlanders went around the Gulf and soon after,
pastoralists came along the relatively well-watered
Flinders Range in a northward spreading riband. (The
Range runs along the Gulf's eastern shore and passes
within 12km of Port Augusta.) As happened in colonial
situations elsewhere, the new settlers pre-emptorily
cast aside the original native occupants of the land.[2]

The second Chapter looks at the first era in Port
Augusta's township history, by which time "the struggle
to gain a foothold in the colony had been overcome", as
Williams[3] said, and the colonists had "began to take a
closer look at the problems of colonising the less

attractive lands".   Port Augusta was surveyed at a time

when the government was sporadically creating ports,

service centres and staging posts to serve the

expanding but increasingly arid pastoral frontier. [4]

Instead of being leapfrogged by another new settlement,

as Adelaide, Gepps Cross, Gawler, Clare and Gladstone

had been, Port Augusta remained virtually the last town

before the frontier.   Its geographical position as the

port at the tip of Spencer Gulf made it the frontier's

port, without peer.   These influences of the frontier

were present to some extent at Port Augusta, with the

dependence of the town on the pastoral industry, the

seasonal influx of outback pastoral workers, the

evidence of the pastoral workers' prolifigate drinking

and references to their independence and love of

freedom.

The Third Chapter develops the arguments of the

previous pages and examines the bond between the Port

and the hinterland and how the fortunes of the

hinterland impacted on the town.

Chapter 4 is taken up with the examination of a

remarkable collection of Port Augusta business records

from the 1860s and 1870s, revealing a surprisingly

sophisticated regional commercial network to develop,

exploit and service many parts of the inland.

Chapter 4 discusses the great expectations for the

inland. Port Augusta rose on these expectations, until
their eventual demise. The chapter argues that,
although government influence was somewhat removed by
distance and temperament, nevertheless because of the
Port's geographically advantageous position two
government initiatives for the interior had terrific
impacts on the Port. These initiatives were the
erection of the Overland Telegraph and the construction
of Great Northern Railway.

Optimistic expectations of the inland saw wheat make a
spectacular advance to the east and north of Port
Augusta, followed by a disasterous retreat. The story
of this northward advance and its drought-dogged
retreat has been told by Meinig.[5] It, and other
deleterious influences, had a depressing effect on the
Port, examined in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5's Tide of Rail and Wheat led to a violent
boom, examined and described in Chapter 6.

Constant downward estimations of the supposedly
exponential resources of the inland led to an
unremitting slide in local expectations and fortunes,
the subject of Chapter 7. The Port's geographical
position, so valuable when there were great
expectations of inland development, and largely
accountable for the boom, proved practically worthless.

Seemingly imprisoned in this hopeless fact, Port

Augusta made its way into the twentieth century.

NOTES

1   Anderson R J, 1984, Early Sea and Land Exploration of
        the Kangaroo Island - Spencer Gulf Region to 1835-6,
        unpublished MA Qualifying essay, History Department,
        Adelaide University.

2   Carter H, 1973, An Introduction to Urban Historical
        Geography, Arnold Pty Ltd, London, p50.

3   Williams M, 1974, The Making of the South Australian
        Landscape, Academic Press, London, p32.

4   Op cit, p337.

5   Meinig D W, 1972, On the Margins of the Good Earth,
        Rigby Seal, Adelaide.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to explain and account
for the history of Port Augusta from Aboriginal times
until 1908, the year the Commonwealth Government opened
serious planning for the Commonwealth Railway, the
harbinger of the new era in the town's existence.   The
thesis reveals how the town responded to changing
situations and why it and its history developed as it
did.

Most previous historical writing on Port Augusta can be
traced to Alan A S McLellan's 273 articles written
between 1961 and 1967 for the local paper The
Transcontinental and some other historical research he
undertook (acknowledged in the bibliography).   I had
McLellan's collected articles published in 1986, along
with annotations, a list of contents and a sizable
index - see Anderson, Bob (Ed), McLellans
"Transcontinental" Articles on the History of Port
Augusta, TAFE, Port Augusta.   In turn, McLellan's
research was drawn upon by others wishing to sketch
historical details.[1]   McLellan's work was a useful
reference but it is often antiquarian, and occasionally
dilatory and repetitive.   It concentrated on the period
1877-81, with fair surveys of 1800-76, but patchy
treatment of the period 1882-93, little after 1895, and
negligible coverage of Aboriginal affairs.

Other sources examined were the works of
anthropologists McCarthy (1939), Berndt (1945), C J
Ellis (1964, 1966, 1970) and Tindale (1974), which
raised matters bearing upon Port Augusta's place in the
Aboriginal world, illuminated in the thesis. Rodney
Cockburn (1925) occasionally wrote descriptively and
revealingly about Port Augusta in the course of his
biographies of pastoral pioneers. Cockburn's writing
tended to place the town within the ambit of Russel
Ward's "Australian Legend" and some of these
references, as well as useful descriptive information,
were used in the thesis. A reasonable number of cameo
newspaper articles[2] were chanced upon, usually written
from an Adelaide perspective. They reinforced
Cockburn's illustrations of the strength of bush values
in Port Augusta, often portraying the place as a wild
and rollicking frontier town.

Two anecdotal primary school centenary booklets were
examined.[3] Added to data located in the South
Australian Parliamentary Papers (SAPPs) and the
writer's training and interest in education, they
allowed a more precise reconstruction of local
attitudes to education. This in turn reflected the
nature and perspective of the town in particular eras.
Finally, Hans Mincham's book on the Flinders Range
provided useful background, including a chapter on the
town. Otherwise there is little historical writing

about the Port Augusta.

The thesis is far more coherent, methodical and
comprehensive than anything previously written. The
arguments it presents and the analysis it offers about
the fate of the Aborigines, geography and climate,
local society and demography, commerce and economics,
trade, shipping and transport, and social history have
not been previously attempted.

Port Augusta figured prominently in the development
plans of the colonists until the mid 1880s and 1890s.
This was reflected in the sources, particularly the
number of SAPP Commissions and Reports which included
examination of the town's needs and the needs of the
region it served. Within the SAPPs, the Reports of the
local police and Sub-Protector of Aborigines provided a
virtual blow-by-blow account of relations with the
Aborigines until 1855, when the offices and Protector
and Sub-Protector were abolished.

Shipping records were studied forming the basis for a
definitive analysis of local shipping fluctuations,
important in the development of generalisation about
the Port's economic life.

By a lucky chance, the enormous archive of Bignell &
Young, one of the oldest existing storekeeping business

in Port Augusta, was located and examined. The records
are an extraordinarily comprehensive archive of a
country storekeeping business, probably unique in
Australia. They are itemised in Appendices 2, 3, 4 and
5. The letterpress copies of outward correspondence
between 1871-77 was carefully studied and used as the
basis for a detailed examination of local economic and
commercial history in those years in Chapter 4.

In addition, a good deal of contemporary descriptive
social history material was examined, much of which
touched upon the spirit and frontier ethos of Port
Augusta in the period covered by the thesis.[4]

The thesis makes use of the technique of "urban
biography", - including economic history, historical
geography, and social history - as described by
McCarthy and Schedvin.[5] The issues of economic
history, are described and analysed, particularly in
Chapter 4, and the thesis could be described as a town
biography with an economic bias, which makes it a
relatively unusual local history.[6] The historical
geography is rich in generalisations and impressions,
supported by facts and arguments, especially so in
Chapter 7's conclusions. And there is colourful and
energetic social history, particularly in Chapters 2, 5
and 6.

The rise and demise of Port Augusta was dominated by

the town's symbiotic relationship with its hinterland. This fits nicely within McCarty's definition of a "commercial" township, primarily established to facilitate the opening of new lands.   True to Eric Lampard's generalisation, it is only by understanding the changing relationship between Port Augusta and its hinterland that one can explain and even predict its history, in the period under consideration at least. In exploring this relationship, the thesis opens the door on an important but little examined region of South Australia history.

The thesis further embroiders Lampshed's position and illustrates McCarty and Merrett's point that the size and rate of a town's growth was determined by its relationship to its hinterland[7] while its hinterland - the inland - was presumed to hold great promise.   The failure of the inland to live up to these expectations largely accounted for the declining fortunes of the town between 1885-1908.   Indeed, it is true to say that Port Augusta's fortunes were dominated by its hinterland and not visa versa.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the theoretical perspective of the thesis is the ease with which it fits within Russel Ward's argument that bush values were transmitted to urban areas.   The thesis cites numerous reports of the presence of bush values in the

Port, a phenomenon which, from the town's inception, repeatedly impressed newcomers. In the face of this, Ward's views provide a much more feasible explanation than they might in the capital cities.

The alternative to urban biography, the study of the historical pattern of Port Augusta's urbanisation, has not been undertaken because its more detailed methodology does not suit a general historical study of this township, the population of which did not exceed 2610 in the period under examination. Some of the concepts used in studies of the historical pattern of urbanisation could be applied but they lack dynamism in this instance. For example, suburbanisation was still-born in Port Augusta and the place did not grown beyond what has been termed a "walking" town.[8] Nevertheless, the main example of internal differentiation, the existence of Port Augusta West on the opposite shore of Spencer Gulf meant that transport across the Gulf was an issue of varying significance, and Port Augusta West developed differently to the larger settlement on the eastern shore. But this example of differentiation is painfully simple alongside Stannage's discussion of Melbourne's evolution into "an authentic metropolis", and McCarty's comparisons of Sydney, San Francisco and Buenos Aires when they had populations of between 130 000 and 1 500 000.[9]

Because Port Augusta was a "commercial" town and despite its modest scale, it was in a position of relative primacy in the region, partly reflecting the simplicity of the wool economy upon which it was based, but also reflecting its strategically dominant position at the head of Spencer Gulf combined with the inhospitably arid nature of the region. For a time there was no room for or need of any other town. Nevertheless, in accordance with Professor Berry's model,[10] as nearby Quorn grew it challenged Port Augusta's primate position, although both towns were blighted by the poor prospects the hinterland ultimately presented.

In this unhappy situation, Port Augusta made its way into the twentieth century.

NOTES

1   For works that appear to be partly or largely
    based on McLellan's writings see Mayes R, 1974,
    Pictorial History of Port Augusta, Rigby, Adelaide;
    also Branson Y M and Millsteed R, 1977, Port
    Augusta Sketchbook, Rigby, Adelaide; also Oates T
    J, 1967, "A History of Methodism in Port Augusta,
    1866-1963", Journal of the South Australian
    Methodist Historical Society, vol 1, October, pp4-
    16.

2   PAD 14.5.1880, 21,5,1880, 28.6.1880, 12.6.1880;
    Quiz and Lantern 11.8.1893; The Mail, 21.11.1925;
    Adelaide Chronicle 21.7.1932, 17.11.1932.

3   Centenary History of Education at Port Augusta
    Primary School, 1978, Centenary Sub-Committee, Port
    Augusta; Port Augusta West Primary School, 1981,
    Echoes of the Past, Port Augusta.

4   Contemporary descriptions include A Trip to Port
    Augusta and Back by a Citizen of Adelaide, 1881,
    Adelaide; "Report from Port Augusta", South
    Australian Presbyterian Magazine, May 1883, no 115,
    p76 and November 1883, no 149, p121; Memorials of
    Port Augusta, 1885, Bible Christian Church, Port
    Augusta; Bruce R, 1902, Reminiscences of an Old
    Squatter, Adelaide; (Burgoyne T ?), 1902, "Some
    Early Attempts at Forming an Institute", South
    Australian Institutes Journal, 24 February;
    Richardson N A, 1927, The Pioneers of the North-
    West of South Australia, Adelaide; Hayward J F,
    1927, "Reminiscences", PRGSSA, vol 29, pp79-170.

5   McCarty J W and Schedvin C B, (eds),1978,
    "Introduction", Australian Capital Cities, United
    Press, Sydney, pp 1-8.

6   Blainey G, 1954, "Scissors and Paste in Local
    History", Historical Studies - Australia and New
    Zealand, vol 6, no 23, November, pp339-344,
    stresses the importance of describing economic as
    well as social history when writing local history.

7   McCarty and Schedvin, op cit, p2-10.

8   Ibid

9   Stannage C T, 1982, "Australian Urban History"
    Osborne G and Mandle W F, New History: Studying
    Australia Today, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney,
    pp164-174.

10 McCarty and Schedvin, op cit, p15.

STATEMENT

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University, nor, to the best of my knowledge does it contain material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

ABBREVIATIONS

A   = Anderson R J,(Ed), 1986, McLellan's
        'Transcontinental' Articles on the
        History of Port Augusta, T A F E
        College, Port Augusta

AIAS   = Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies

B&Y   = Bignell & Young (or their records - see
            Appendice 2)

CPP   = Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers

CSO   = Colonial Secretary's Office Records held by
            the PRO

GRG   = Government Record Group within the PRO

ha   = hectares

Ibid   = in the same place (ibidem)

km   = kilometres

LBSA   = Libraries Board of South Australia

l   = litres

L   = Loads

m   = metres

ML   = Mortlock Library

mm   = millimetres

MS   = Manuscript

MUP   = Melbourne University Press

nd   = no date known

OLT   = Overland Telegraph Line

op cit   = in the work cited (opere citato)

OUP   = Oxford University Press

nd   = no date

no   = number

p   = page

PAC   = Port Augusta Corporation (local government

           council)

PAD   = Port Augusta Dispatch newspaper

pp   = pages

PRG   = Private Record Group within the ML

PRGSSA   = Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society

           of South Australia

PRO   = Public Records Office, previously S A Archives

t   = tonnes

SAGCR   = South Australian Gazette and Colonial

           Register newspaper

SAGG   = South Australian Government Gazette

SAPD   = South Australian Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)

SAPP   = South Australian Parliamentary Papers

SAR   = South Australian Railways

SUP   = Sydney University Press

UQP   = University of Queensland Press

Trans   = The Transcontinental newspaper

vol   = Volume

Note In 1986 the South Australian Archives were

abolished and replaced with the Public Records

Office (PRO) and the Mortlock Library (ML) South

Australian Government and official records were

retained by the former, and business and private

records kept in the latter.