

Essay:

No simple twist of fate

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On the day we left Townsville for Bowen, a photo of soldiers wearing white hoods graced the cover of the *Townsville Bulletin*. On a bleak stretch of highway, we narrowly missed the debris of a freshly smashed semi-trailer. This was uncomfortable country. Closer to Bowen, green replaced brown in the rear-vision mirror as we sped by images of tourism kitsch. In the gathering mango plantations, we glimpsed roadside toilets labelled 'Man-goes' and 'No Man-goes'. Driving into Bowen, the town seemed deserted, hot and dusty, its boulevard-wide streets testimony to the broken dreams of a magnificent future. Then, at the far end of Herbert Street, we saw our destination: the harbour – a perfect picture postcard of azure sea and sky fringed by white sand and wisps of cloud.

The harbour makes Bowen. Welcoming Hollywood to town in 2007 for the filming of Baz Luhrmann's movie *Australia*, Mayor Mike Bruncker celebrated his 'Gem of the Coral Coast' as the site for recreating the port of Darwin in the 1930s. Lest the world misjudge the town's tardy progress, he added that it was just lucky 'the planets lined up' to delay development of the foreshore. The harbour was the reason for the town's proclamation in 1861 as the first port north of Rockhampton and the pipeline for men and goods to the new pastoral hinterlands. Today, this link is reversed as coal from the Collinsville mines pours into bulk carriers docked at the harbour's deep-water pier destined for markets in Europe and Japan.

I grew up hearing stories of Bowen's harbour, how a family ancestor had discovered it and was refused his just reward by a new Queensland government with only a halfpenny in its coffers. Captain Henry Daniel Sinclair's sense of injustice and outrage rankled down the generations. He had good reason to end his days a bitter man but he also had his own sins to atone for.

Captain Cook was only one of several explorers to pass the harbour. It was not until 1859, when the romance of Australia's coastal exploration was largely spent, that Captain Sinclair sallied across Edgecombe Bay in his nine ton ketch the *Santa Barbara* and claimed it, watched closely from the beach by thirty Aboriginal men, custodians of the shore, the harbour and its three islands. Visions of a bustling port distracted Sinclair from the extraordinary natural beauty before him, described by later visitors as 'only second to Port Jackson'. Sinclair chose the name Port Denison

in honour of the New South Wales Governor, with an eye to his reward and vast grants of land.

The year 1859 was a time to dream of land and wealth. Queensland was about to be proclaimed a separate colony and vast areas of the fertile, well-watered pastoral land explored by Leichhardt and the Gregory brothers would be opened up for selection. The promise of finding land and a good harbour also inspired George Elphinstone Dalrymple – the tenth son of a Scottish baronet and former soldier for the British Empire in India – to set off in August the same year from Rockhampton, backed by a syndicate of wealthy Sydney businessmen. Dalrymple found land but no harbour. In what seemed like a cruel twist of fate, he – rather than Sinclair – was rewarded and anointed founder of the new harbour town of Bowen and credited by many with its discovery. In fact, the self-serving practices of politicians and their business mates were already well underway in Queensland. The achievements of Sinclair, a master sea captain with twenty-five years' experience at sea, were overlooked and he received neither reward nor land. In a further humiliation, as a founding settler of Bowen he was forced to watch Dalrymple's rising fortunes at close range.

If I were to make a film *about* rather than just *in* Bowen, I would choose these two men as my protagonists. Their intertwined lives embodied the town's chequered history. They were not like historian John Hirst's idealised pioneer heroes who struggled to tame and possess the land for the nation. Nor were they the tragic victims of a hostile country, so beloved by Australians. They were self-serving, self-centred and violent – in short, not very likeable men. In my film they would be flawed anti-heroes, men of flesh and straw, with Dalrymple an arrogant, pumped-up character played by Hugh Jackman and Sinclair a down-at-mouth, irritable Russell Crowe.

Dalrymple had status, money and contacts in colonial political and business circles that he used to promote land deals and his own advancement. Yet his ambitious plans were plagued by failure and, rather than financial independence, he was obliged to fall back on government positions. In the bush, he was a leader of men straight out of the *Boys' Own Paper*, but working in town he overstepped his authority and his arrogance alienated his subordinates in Bowen and his superiors in Brisbane. He never married, but seems to have enjoyed female company. In Rockhampton, his friendship with a colleague's wife led to a 'whispering campaign' and a minor scandal. He was arrested following a fight to defend her honour, narrowly missed prison and was instead forced to pay five hundred pounds in damages to his opponent, the local police magistrate.

Sent to sea at the age of twelve, Captain Sinclair was a rough and ready type. He had no elevated friends, just mates and his own wits, which often let him down. In truth, his discovery of the harbour was accidental, a chance find on his way home. The journal of his expedition shows that he was no leader of men. After years at sea,

he seemed to prefer the comforts of domestic life with his wife and six children, since he never returned to his seafaring life after settling in Bowen. The Sinclair relic at the Bowen Historical Museum – his old rocking chair – is further testimony to this preference. A victim of great injustice, Sinclair refused to submit quietly. Frustrated and bitter, he took to drunkenness but never lost sight of his promised reward. In his will, he bequeathed to his wife ‘the right of action in any Legal Court of Law and Justice against the Government of New South Wales and Queensland for any amounts due to me by them’.

Dalrymple and Sinclair were men of their times; for them, Aboriginal people were innately hostile, savage and treacherous, and this was evident in their cruel and callous disregard for their persons and property. Historian Bruce Breslin emphatically discounts claims by Dalrymple’s biographer Jean Farnfield that his intentions were noble and peaceful, arguing instead that it was clear from the beginning that he intended to ‘arm and alarm the frontier’. Reports from his early expeditions endorsed Aborigines’ reputation for ferocity, and positioned them as people to plunder and punish. The castaway James Murrells (Morrill), who lived for many years with Aboriginal people in the area, alleged that when Dalrymple visited Edgecombe Bay in 1860, his party had shot one of his Aboriginal friends and wounded another. Sinclair emerges from the records as an irascible and impatient man who encouraged violent retaliation against Aborigines.

The story of Sinclair’s expedition is contained in the published journal of his fellow crew member, James Gordon, entitled *How Bowen was discovered: The cruise of the Santa Barbara, 9 tons, in search of a northern port*. In contrast to the usual crafted stories extolling explorers’ bravery, this is an alarmingly honest account of a hastily arranged voyage plagued by poor planning and Sinclair’s erratic leadership. A recurring theme is the crew’s fear of the threat of Aboriginal hostilities and Sinclair’s readiness to shoot on the slightest pretext. As the voyage progressed the crew, initially taken aback by his actions, became swept up in his paranoia and calls for vengeance.

Navigating the Queensland coastline was difficult, especially with equinoctial squalls in their path. On several occasions the men were nearly shipwrecked. Supplies of food and water dwindled and, while the men imagined sheep and goats grazing on the islands they visited, they were obliged to make do with black and white cockatoos, pigeons and the occasional pheasant. They had even less luck with fishing.

Although the men knew of no killings by Aborigines along this coast, the moments of uncertainty when they approached the *Santa Barbara* in canoes or advanced on the crew on shore caused great anxiety. The Captain’s belligerent attitudes exacerbated the situation, and an unknown number of Aboriginal men were shot and possibly killed as a result. When the crew went ashore in their dingy at Edgecombe Bay they were rushed by armed Aborigines. Gordon recorded that Sinclair was ‘savage that we didn’t fire on them and wished to return with us ashore again’. Two days later, Sinclair fired at men

who attempted to board the *Santa Barbara* from a raft. Anxiety levels soared as signal fires appeared 'in all directions' on shore. Following another skirmish in which an Aboriginal man was wounded, Gordon agreed that the 'natives were treacherous scoundrels'. Near Gloucester Island, Sinclair – suspecting a sneak attack – became 'very indignant about their treachery and wished to shoot the blacks while in the water'. Instead the crew commandeered their canoe and broke it up for firewood.

Good spirits returned with the 'accidental discovery' of Port Denison. Gordon described a 'splendid harbour where ships could remain in perfect safety ... the water is perfectly smooth ... We decided to claim the country in this neighbourhood.' However, fear and outrage gripped the men again on their return voyage after the captain narrowly survived an attack by Aboriginal men who chased him out of the bush under a shower of stones. Crew member Ben Poole fired directly at them and they ran off leaving the Captain badly cut and bleeding. Sinclair was convinced that they 'intended to eat him by the significant way in which they smacked their lips ... if not cannibals, they are certainly a treacherous, murderous lot'. Enraged by the attack, Gordon wrote that the crew 'would have liked to shoot every one'.

On October 31, 1859, after eight weeks at sea, the men sailed back up the Fitzroy River towards Rockhampton to announce their great discovery to its citizens. Two misadventures heralded a bad omen for their return. To celebrate their homecoming, Poole fired his pistol and badly wounded his hand. Then the boat became stuck fast on a sandbank. With Poole in agony, it was two days before the tide washed the boat free.

This marked the beginning of an unfolding tale of bad luck scrawled in numerous letters that passed between Sinclair and government officers in Sydney and Brisbane. With the date of separation looming, Sinclair and Gordon sailed to Sydney for an official audience with Sir William Denison and Queensland's soon-to-be Governor Sir George Ferguson Bowen. Sinclair told them that an official advertisement in the *Government Gazette* had stipulated a reward of two thousand pounds. In reply, Bowen asked the men to hand over their maps and assured them the new Parliament would address their claim. He advised them to return to Rockhampton. Once there, Sinclair learned to his dismay that an official expedition sent to confirm his discovery had found no harbour and he had been branded an impostor. Then the new Queensland government informed him that there would be no reward or compensation since they had insufficient funds and were under no obligation to meet promises made by a previous administration. His claims for land were also returned with a note that they were not valid under the colony's new land laws. Faced by mounting debt, Sinclair was forced to sell the *Santa Barbara* and returned to his family in Sydney a ruined man.

Meanwhile, Dalrymple had returned to Brisbane bearing his syndicate's tenders for land in the Burdekin River valley. Like Sinclair, he was informed that the claims were no longer valid. In fact, the *Lands Act* of 1860 was developed with the deliberate intention of preventing unfair advantage to speculators like Dalrymple. However, in

contrast to Sinclair, the government compensated him for his loss by handing him the even greater prize of authority to develop the Kennedy district. At this early date, sinecures were already part of governing Queensland. In August 1860, Dalrymple sailed to Port Denison and confirmed Sinclair's discovery. He was then appointed Commissioner for Crown Lands in the Kennedy district and officer-in-charge of the new settlement of Bowen, as well as police magistrate and commander-in-chief of the Native Mounted Police. When the Mitchell and Kennedy pastoral districts were declared open for selection, Dalrymple and his associates were ready with their claims. For his part, Sinclair was offered the positions of harbour master and chief constable, and a ticket north for himself and his family. There is no evidence to suggest his views or behaviour towards Aborigines changed following this appointment.

The fates of the two men and the town were now interlocked. While Dalrymple travelled overland from Rockhampton with a party of squatters and Native Police, Sinclair sailed north with his family in the *Santa Barbara*, now owned by the government, with the remaining settlers – including women and children – aboard the schooner *Jeannie Dove*. On Dalrymple's orders, the seafarers camped on an island in the harbour to avoid Aboriginal hostilities. His first act was deliberately aggressive and punitive as he led a charge of native troopers on horseback to 'clear off' a large group of Aboriginal families camped near the 'native wells' on the harbour foreshore. Guided by his army experience in India, he was convinced that a show of force would deter Aboriginal retaliation.

Bowen was proclaimed on April 11, 1861, the same day that fighting began in the American Civil War. The town was unusual in being officially planned rather than the usual haphazard frontier settlement. The orderly progress of a bustling port was the image of Bowen promoted by the *Port Denison Times*. The columns of shipping news with announcements of arrivals and departures and long lists of goods were proof of Sinclair's important role as harbour master. However, simmering relations with Dalrymple soon erupted into open conflict, culminating in what would be a further serious blow for Sinclair. Dubbed the 'chief head of all departments of the government', Dalrymple's despotic leadership caused frequent quarrels with fellow officers who resented his interference in their duties and refused to follow his instructions. As harbour master, Sinclair was responsible directly to his superiors in Brisbane; however, this was not the case for his position as chief constable. In 1862, after eighteen months of this treatment, Sinclair's patience finally ran out. He refused to follow Dalrymple's orders to extend protection to a lady of his acquaintance and was dismissed for insubordination and incompetence. A further charge of drunkenness was later struck off. At this stage Sinclair was reportedly an abstemious man. Sinclair's pleas for a fair hearing and his claim of more than two hundred pounds owed to him by the government were rejected. This may have been the final

straw that led to Sinclair's decline into drunkenness. As a friend later explained: 'If the vice [was] ever excusable then Sinclair had trouble and injustice enough to make him wish to drown thought and care by stimulants.'

The newspaper's façade of orderly development hid another story of chaotic expansion west into what some colonists called 'greed country'. Writing at the time, Edward Palmer described 'a great advancing army' of squatters 'confident in their numbers and strength'. At the tent of the Land Office in Bowen, Dalrymple dispensed advice to hopeful young men setting out and consoled the many who returned empty handed. Rather than wealth and success, most found disappointment and failure – the consequence of bad management, changing economic conditions, the harsh climate and the physical and psychological toll of heat and isolation. There was also the 'native problem'.

Breslin writes that imaginings about Aboriginal savagery stalked the frontier, spreading hysteria on all sides and rationalising and exacerbating settler violence. Dalrymple's strategy was to 'strike terror' amongst Aborigines to prevent 'further bloodshed'. The *Maryborough Chronicle* reported that 'the new settlement of Port Denison, under the guidance of misrule and causeless violence, is preparing to undergo the baptism of fire and blood through which it is fondly hoped it will attain civilisation and greatness'. The article noted the intention to hunt Aborigines out of sight and shoot those who could not escape. Aboriginal people quietly dispersed from the town into the surrounding districts.

Over the decade, the region descended into a state of open warfare between colonists and the local Bindal and Juru people. In 1868, the police commissioner reported that pastoralists south of Bowen were abandoning their runs due to the debilitating cost of Aboriginal violence and financial loss from the destruction of stock. Aboriginal people lived in constant danger of attack and were increasingly distressed by settlers and animals destroying essential food and water resources, and the impact of spreading disease and kidnapping and sexual abuse of women and children. The brutalising effect of frontier violence on 'civilised' settlers was expressed in a chilling boast in the *Port Denison Times* in 1867 that where Aborigines took one life 'we take say fifty, exacting not an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but as many eyes or teeth as we can possibly get'.

By the end of the town's first decade, both sides were exhausted by the constant warfare. Settlers began to speak of letting Aborigines into the stations and the town where they could be used as a much-needed cheap source of labour. Aboriginal survivors driven off their lands reluctantly sought safety in the town camps and stations. Ironically, Bowen was already in a state of decline, eclipsed by the emergence of Townsville as the region's shipping and commercial centre of the north and gateway to the northern goldfields. Between 1868 and 1871, Bowen lost a third of its population and efforts to stimulate new industries stagnated due to lack of transport and markets.

In 1868, fate rained its final blow on the broken Captain Sinclair. Early in the year, his brother and twelve-year-old son drowned during an excursion on Bowen harbour. Sinclair followed them to a watery grave soon after in a sailing accident at the St Patrick's Day Regatta on Townsville's Cleveland Bay. The town's muted response to his death suggests that his reputation had reached a low point. Three years earlier, the *Port Denison Times* had printed a long and sympathetic obituary honouring James Murrill, and the whole town turned out for his funeral. For Sinclair, there was only the cool announcement of his drowning and no town funeral. Instead, he was quickly buried in Townsville cemetery.

By this time, Dalrymple had abandoned Bowen. After alienating and dismissing most of his officers, he embarked on an unsuccessful land scheme outside the town, conducted further expeditions into the north, and in 1865 was elected the first state Member for the Kennedy district. When an opponent was persuaded to oppose Dalrymple in the elections, Sinclair was one of the townspeople who signed him in. In 1874 Dalrymple was given charge of the government settlement Somerset on Cape York, but soon after his arrival was incapacitated by fever and a stroke. With declining health and fortunes, he returned home and died in Sussex in 1876.

Sinclair and Dalrymple were both only fifty when they died. In the history of Queensland, Dalrymple has an honoured place. Sinclair has largely been forgotten, but in the town of Bowen his many descendants refuse to let the past go. They still dream of justice and the day when Sinclair's long-overdue reward will be granted.

Troubled sprits roam the town of Bowen. In some places, a prickly feeling runs across your skin. It's easy to imagine a force of retribution that strangles dreams of quick riches and wealth continuing to determine the town's fate. Like the 'horror stretch' between Rockhampton and Mackay described by Ross Gibson in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (University of Queensland Press, 2002), Bowen is imprinted with the destructive forces of 'ecological mayhem, cultural vandalism, genocide, forced labour – these things make country go bad'. The town fits the profile of discomforting places shaped by cultures of denialism and violence – past and present; in the case of Bowen, recent murders and disappearances of local teenage girls. Everywhere the past leaves traces that cannot be erased simply by the determination to forget. As Ross Gibson notes: 'The events of the past rarely pass. They leave marks in documents, in bodies, in communities and places, in buildings, streets and landscape ... To deny the entirety of a story is usually to refuse difficulty, to wish away difference or contradiction. From such refusal melancholy looms.'

Postscript: At the end of my search for Captain Sinclair, I was both surprised and relieved to learn that he was not my direct ancestor after all but the first husband of my great-grandmother's mother. Hers is a quite different story, but of course no one who lived in a violent frontier world was ever completely innocent. ■