

OVERLANDING CATTLE TO FOSSIL DOWNS, 1883–1886

On 4 May 2016, [Dr Cathie Clement](#), a freelance historian who focuses on people and places in the Kimberley, spoke to the Kimberley Society about a trek in which cattle crossed Australia to stock [Fossil Downs Station](#). An accompanying PowerPoint presentation contained a selection of maps and old newspaper cuttings.

Much has been written about the overland cattle drives of the 1880s, usually with the boss drovers portrayed as heroes. [Nat Buchanan](#) comes to mind, as do the [Duracks](#). Before [Charlie and Willie MacDonald](#) even set foot on Fossil Downs, they were feted as heroes. Yet, when journalists later asked Willie for details, they got nowhere. In response to an offer of £500 for a record of his party's experiences, he is said to have replied that it was worth that much to forget the trip.

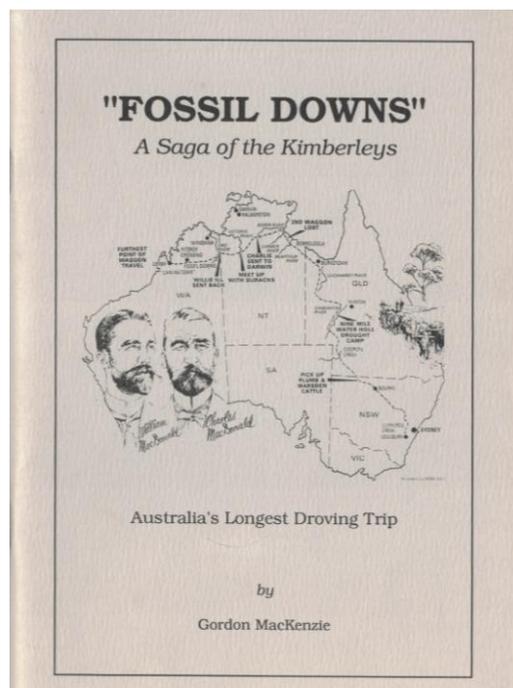
Cathie's research into these cattle drives began more than 30 years ago. She was surprised to find very little contemporary information about the MacDonalds' drive and, in particular, nothing at all about its start. The early research revealed flaws in legends about various overland cattle drives but it stopped short of showing where fact gave way to fiction.

Last year, spurred on by a MacDonald descendant's interest in having an accurate account of the Fossil Downs cattle drive, Cathie set about trying to document that one. Her research included delving deeply into newspaper coverage of the 1880s, a task now simplified by the availability of [Trove](#) – the National Library's repository of full-text digital resources. Searching for key words on Trove is not foolproof but it beats having to scroll through reels of microfilm.

Months passed with little sign of the new research being fruitful. Then, bit by bit, interesting scraps of information began to emerge. Not enough to reconstruct the cattle drive, or even develop a reasonably accurate account of it, but enough to show that the trek was as soul destroying as it was newsworthy.

The story starts in 1881 when families from the [Goulburn](#) area of New South Wales became interested in Kimberley land. The MacDonalds and McKenzies were related by marriage and they might have known other local families – the Duracks, [Emanuel](#)s and [Kilfoyles](#) – whose names also became part of Kimberley history. The McKenzies retained a financial interest in Fossil Downs until 1900 but it was the MacDonalds who did the physical work of establishing that isolated station in [Gooniyandi country](#). When they set off for the Kimberley with a mob of cattle in March 1883, Charlie was 31 and his brother Willie was 23.

Fossil Downs Station has frontage to the Fitzroy and Margaret rivers, which meet below the spectacular feature known as [Geikie Gorge](#). Far from any seaport, that location added to the cost of establishing and running the station. It was also a long way from medical help and, initially, from communications and police protection. Those factors made Kimberley leases cheap. With farmers and graziers having held the best of the grazing land in the settled districts since the late 1850s, their sons and others had been looking towards central and northern Australia for two decades.



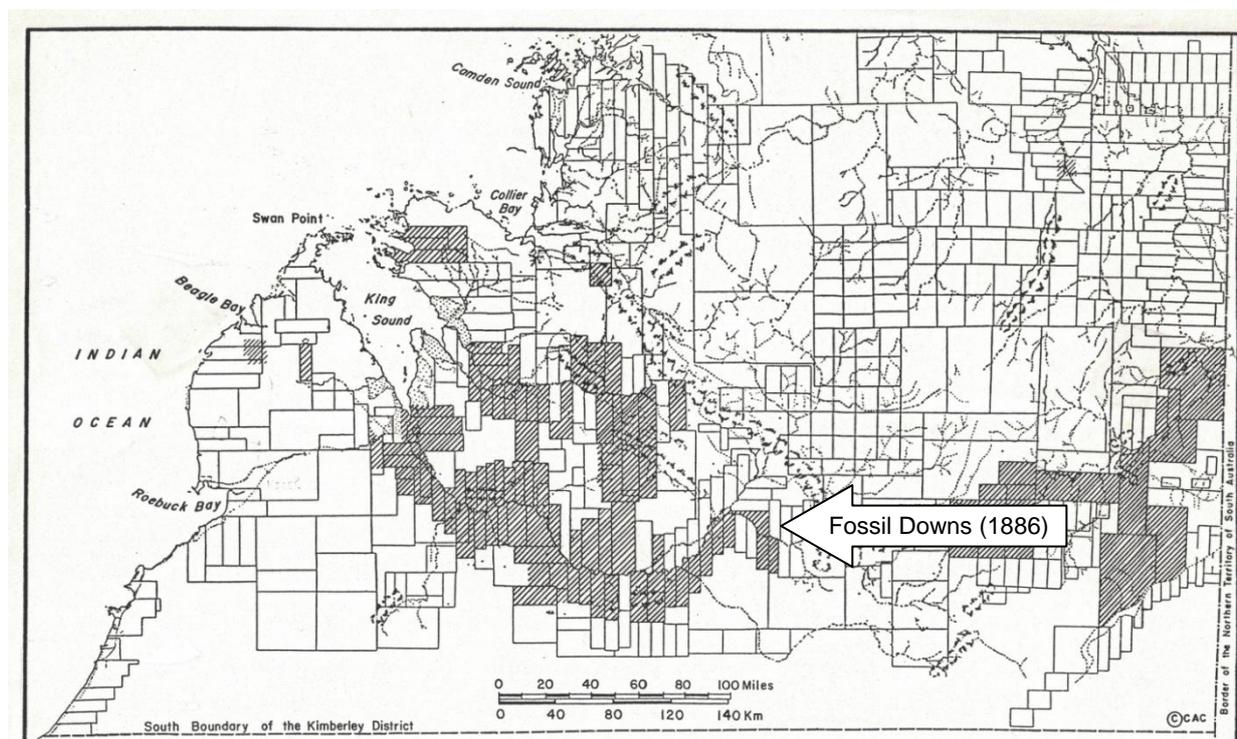
A book cover depicting the MacDonald brothers and the route of the cattle drive.

Entrepreneurs, speculators and would-be station owners pushed livestock outwards in the 1860s and 1870s. Some failed but the Duracks and their kin were among those who succeeded. By 1881, they were old hands at [droving](#) their Queensland cattle to market in Adelaide, covering distances of almost 2,000 kilometres from their stations around Coopers Creek. [Drives](#) of that length were quite common. Only the most savage droughts and floods halted long distance droving.

Another constraint on the selection of the Fossil Downs leases was its timing. Using a sequence of maps to show how Kimberley pastoral lease allocation unfolded in 1881 and 1882, Cathie explained how a cartel headed by two Fremantle politicians circumvented a [ballot](#) meant to ensure fairness. The politicians – bearing surnames that are still familiar to locals – were [the Hon. William Edward Marmion](#) and William Silas Pearce. The cartel lodged 36 per cent of the 448 applications and won 33 per cent of the resulting [lease options](#). Then, in the allocation of the first batch of Fitzroy River frontages, the Surveyor General, [Malcolm Fraser](#), ensured that the cartel received preferential treatment. Its less attractive lease options were spread much further afield, ranging from the Eighty Mile Beach to the Dampier Peninsula, and as far east as the Margaret River headwaters.

Lease options from the ballot in February 1881 covered most of the Fitzroy River frontages below the Margaret River junction. Some speculators tried to sell their options; others discarded them. The discards provided scope for the Duracks and Emanuels to apply for Fitzroy River leases in December 1881. Years later, the Emanuels established [Noonkanbah Station](#) there, and the [Rose brothers](#), occupying leases relinquished by Michael Durack, established Quanbun Station.

In the [Kimberley Land Regulations](#), Clause 12 was intended to curb speculation by requiring mandatory forfeiture of any lease left unstocked, or understocked, two years after its approval. That gave the cartel only two years to position 20,000 sheep – or 2,000 head of cattle – on nine scattered parcels of land totalling one million acres. Marmion put the cost of compliance at £20,000 and, in September 1881, he had the Legislative Council consider a [resolution](#) calling for reduced rents, a halving of prescribed stock numbers, and an extra year for stocking. The Hon. J G Lee Steere mentioned Marmion's personal interest in the resolution but Malcolm Fraser was among those who lent support. The outcome, following referral of the matter to Britain, was a one year extension of the stocking period. Subsequent pressure from Marmion and others saw the stocking requirements relaxed further in mid-1884.



Kimberley land under pastoral lease, 1881 (shown with shading)

At the time of the first debate about the stocking clause, Europeans knew very little about the East Kimberley. [Alexander Forrest's 1879 expedition](#) had ridden down part of the upper Ord, allowing early maps to show the supposed course of that river. A Melbourne magistrate named [Joseph Anderson Panton](#) took a punt on two large leases on the upper Ord and another two on the north side of Sturt Creek. By March 1882, smaller leases had been approved along both sides of the lower Ord, some of them for the Duracks and Emanuels. The following month, the MacDonalds and McKenzies received approval to lease the land that would become Fossil Downs. With all of that, the scene was set for planning and executing the big overland drives.

The first of the mobs, owned by [Osmond and Panton](#), started at the end of 1882. Their 8,000 head of cattle and 200 horses originated in the [Blackall](#) area in central Queensland. Fourteen-year-old Donald Swan joined the drive and, much later, he wrote that he was

the youngest hand of the 300 odd men employed at various times on that lengthy trip (one of 2,250 miles and taking 22 months) yet the only one to travel the whole way from start to finish, except the two blackboys, and G.W. Campbell, the second youngest, who also went right through.

Converted to metric, 2,250 miles is 3,621 kilometres. Looking at a map, the daunting scale of these cattle drives is obvious. Osmond and Panton's got off to a bad start but, once Nat Buchanan took charge, it shaped up as the most efficient of the big overland treks. His mob, destined to be used in the formation of [Ord River Station](#), had the advantage of reaching the Gulf country in north Queensland ahead of the [1883/84 drought](#). Some of the droving parties that followed were less fortunate. None more so than the MacDonalds.

At the start of 1883, as the MacDonalds and McKenzies prepared to overland their cattle from Goulburn to the Kimberley, newspaper [correspondents](#) reported on conditions on [stock routes](#) in and beyond [New South Wales](#). Conversations, letters and telegrams provided additional information. There were, naturally, shortcomings. The scope for receiving information about tracks west of the Queensland border was limited. Drovers were blazing trails as they took cattle to the [Victoria River](#) – west of the [Overland Telegraph Line](#) – but few Europeans had seen the country between the Victoria and the Ord. A private [exploring expedition](#) involving the Duracks, Emanuels and Kilfoyle had examined land west of the Ord in the second half of 1882.

In the [Kimberley](#) – a district the size of Victoria – there was one town. Two had been proclaimed but only Derby was being developed. A [ship](#) owned by Marmion and the Pearse brothers landed police and government officials there in April 1883, leaving them to live under canvas at the mouth of the Fitzroy River. In the hinterland, [settlers](#) and Aboriginal shepherds were establishing a small cluster of stations with livestock delivered by sea from the west coast. The cartel—under the twin banners of the Kimberley and Meda River pastoral companies—owned three of those stations: [Liveringa](#), [Luluigui](#) and [Meda](#). Some settlers had yet to venture out to their leases.

The MacDonalds and McKenzies, situated close to Sydney, might have considered shipping their cattle to the Kimberley and tackling only the last leg overland. If they did, they would have been hard pressed to convince east coast shipping companies to risk a vessel in the little known waters of King Sound or Cambridge Gulf.

A tale about a ship appears in the conflicting accounts and recollections assembled over the years by the MacDonalds and McKenzies. It surfaced in letters sent by Robert A Marsden who believed, firstly, that, in 1882, his father Samuel engaged the MacDonalds to deliver cattle to the Kimberley, and secondly, that, after reputedly letting that mob loose in the Queensland drought, they returned to Goulburn and started out with their own mob. The disappointed owner, on hearing his mob was gone, is then said to have sold a ship purchased to send sheep to the Kimberley, and to have failed to recoup, from his partners, any of the loss stemming from that sale.

Cathie knew of Samuel Marsden holding Kimberley leases with Plumb, Oliver and Pascoe, and she had seen archival evidence of Charlie and Willie being in charge of Plumb & Co.'s cattle in the Kimberley in 1896. Further research produced reports of a June 1885 court case in which John Plumb agreed to pay £700 and half costs in relation to a debt incurred by Marsden in purchasing the s.s. [Alhambra](#) for £2,956 in June 1883, and selling it twelve months later. Oliver, who was Marsden's brother-in-law, maintained 'that he had always told plaintiff he would never have anything to do with the ship'. The proposed shipment of sheep did not eventuate.

The mobs taken overland tended to be either sheep, cattle or horses. In the first half of the 1880s, drovers took more than 200,000 head of cattle and sheep into the Northern Territory from Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales. In tracing those movements, Cathie found only twelve reported sightings of the MacDonalds' cattle. Those sightings began on 26 March 1883, at the departure point north of Goulburn, and ended in the middle of 1885, at the Overland Telegraph Line. Sorting fact from fiction for the period between then and late April 1886, when the cattle reached their destination, has been challenging and, at times, impossible.

The trek from Goulburn into Queensland seems to have been uneventful. The mob followed stock routes through [Carcoar](#) and [Wellington](#), reaching [Brewarrina](#) at the end of May 1883. The MacDonalds had at least 400 head with them but it is not clear whether there was one mob of that size, or two, each containing about 400 head. They spent a long time in northern New South Wales, perhaps lending credence to an assertion by Nigel Austin, *Kings of the Cattle Country*, that they picked up cattle belong to Plumb and/or Marsden in the White Cliffs area west-south-west of Bourke.

August and September sightings in Queensland put the number at 900 as the cattle went through [Langlo Downs](#) and swung westward past [Isisford](#). When they reached Winton in November 1883, the [drought](#) prevented further travel. The [MacDonalds](#), [Duracks](#), [Traine brothers](#), and others were held up for months, putting some of their cattle on agistment. Emanuel, Durack and Clancy's NSW [sheep](#) could not go beyond Coopers Creek. That [flock](#) was put up for sale and plans were made to charter a ship for a [second flock](#). After [rain](#) let the [cattle](#) start again, reports of sightings dwindled.

We know, from an entry in Tom Kilfoyle's diary, that the MacDonalds had crossed into the Territory by January 1885. That was a bad time to be on a sandy track along a swampy coast. The [various mobs](#) sometimes camped, ironically waiting for rain to ease. Supplies were low, fever was rife, and O.P. rum was handy. That combination led to two of the Duracks' men dying – one from malaria and one by his own hand.

The track angled inland at the Roper River, with the Kimberley-bound mobs passing Red Lily Lagoon on their way to the Overland Telegraph Line. Many years later a drover named Charles Hall, originally from Goulburn, told Dame Mary Durack that:

We travelled one mob behind each other, the Durack mobs one day behind each other, Cooper and Stuckley [read as Stuckey] one day behind them and the MacDonalds one behind us... At the Roper my brother George and I left the Cooper and Stuckley party and joined the MacDonalds who had lost all of their men. Here the five mobs left the coast and travelled up the Roper to its head where Charlie MacDonald got the fever very badly and I was sent to pilot him to Darwin. I had to ride beside him, hold his arm and his bridle rein and steady him in the saddle. At the end of the first day's ride we came to a little mining camp and luckily for me there were two prospectors riding to Darwin who took charge of Charlie while I rode back to the cattle.

My brother and I drove the cattle, Willie MacDonald the bullock waggon and a Chinaman cook the tip-dray. We followed the Cooper and Stuckley mob ...

Little is known of the timing these events but the MacDonalds and McKenzies tell of Charlie's brother Dan going to Darwin and taking him back to Goulburn. That might have been around May 1885 when [the leading mobs](#) in the long convoy of cattle reached the Overland Telegraph Line.

Discrepancies arise here, with someone who used the initials [G. O'S.](#) also recalling Charlie's illness and saying that, when he (the elder brother) left for the south, Joe Edmonds took his place. Edmonds, a highly respected drover, was Goulburn-born but had moved to Queensland as a child. The information from G. O'S., who claimed to have gone through to Fossil Downs with the cattle, is at odds with Hall's account in which Edmonds, who had been with Cooper and Stuckey's mob, replaced George Hall on the Victoria River after the delivery of that mob.

It was July 1885 when the [Duracks](#) reached the Victoria River. On 7 August, a Darwin newspaper reported that '[Mr. McDonald](#), who had been two years on the overland track with cattle for Western Australia, is now ill in Palmerston. His cattle are somewhere in the vicinity of the Ord River.' But was it Willie or Charlie? In 1922, Gordon Buchanan (son of Nat) wrote: 'At the Katherine, Charley and one of his brothers contracted malaria, and the attack was so severe that at [Battle Creek](#) they had to return to the Katherine.' Buchanan said Edmonds took over at that point but in 1933, writing in *Packhorse and Waterhole with the First Overlanders to the Kimberleys*, he qualified that by saying that Edmonds 'took command until Charley overtook him'. Battle Creek enters the Victoria River from the south-east.

At the time of the newspaper report, the MacDonalds' cattle were still heading for the Ord, travelling behind the three mobs owned by the Duracks and their partners. Those mobs reached the Ord in [September 1885](#) and, soon after that, a [surveyor](#) reporting cattle movements mentioned 'McDonnell on Negri with four hundred cattle, bound for Margaret'. That McDonnell could have been either Willie MacDonald or [Jack McDonnell](#) (sometimes called McDonald), who, while not related to Willie, is said to have been engaged by him to help with the final leg of the drive.

Another layer of complexity is added with evidence of D (probably Dan) M'Donald sailing from Sydney on the s.s. *Tannadice* on [29 October 1885](#); reaching Darwin on [10 November](#); and becoming the subject of this paragraph in the [North Australian](#):

Mr. McDonald, a southern pastoralist, is now in town with a few head of horses, waiting till the latter get over the effects of the sea voyage, when he purposes travelling inland to meet his cattle now on the road out to the Fitzroy country in Western Australia. Mr. Cooper, who is also interested in country out that way, goes with Mr. McDonald.

It seems that a change of heart might have occurred, with D McDonald junr sailing from Darwin on 21 November aboard the schooner [Ellerton](#), chartered to take goods and prospectors to Cambridge Gulf. Those prospectors were among the earliest of the thousands who participated in the Halls Creek gold rush. The drover Charles Hall later recalled that Willie MacDonald left the cattle on the Ord while he 'rode down the river to its mouth to get supplies, taking three pack horses. At Wyndham he met his brother Dan who came back with him to camp.' On [28 November](#), a prospector 'met Messrs. Durack, Hayes, and M'Donald on their return from the Gulf with packhorses well loaded with rations... making their way back to where they were camped...'

Continuing the story from Hall's recollections:

Willie was then bad with fever and decided to go south. Willie, Dan, myself and a man from Cooper and Stuckley's [read as Stuckey's] camp on the Victoria, rode to Darwin or Palmerston as it was then called, leaving Edmonds and the chinaman with the cattle on the Ord.

We 4 took boat to Sydney and 2 weeks later I saw Willie and Dan at a Goulburn show and talked to them. From then on I lost all trace of them.

And then, with [G. O'S.](#) taking up the thread:

I was sent out by McDonald to assist Joe. Riding from Port Darwin I picked up a blackboy, and arrived at the camp on the Negri on December 27, 1885. A week or so later we collected the cattle and made a start, our party consisting of Joe Edmonds, myself, two blackboys, and a Chinaman cook. Besides the cattle and horses we had a bullock team which gave us a lot of trouble, as there was no road after passing Ord River Station;

furthermore, we had no maps. All we had to guide us was a scratch plan of the country. Finding suitable crossings for the waggon delayed us. Anyhow we got through, landing stock and bullock team at our destination late in April, 1886. After we had formed a camp, Joe joined up with some prospectors, taking all the pack horses we had, and they headed for Derby. There he met both of the McDonalds who had come up with the first boatload of diggers for the Kimberley rush. They took Joe's pack-horses, and with some other men who had accompanied them from the South, they arrived at the camp in May [read as 3 June] 1886, with a good supply of much-needed rations. Joe Edmonds did not accompany them. He took a boat from Derby, and thus ended one of the longest—if not the longest—trips ever connected with cattle. Starting from Goulburn (N.S.W.) and finishing at the Margaret River (Kimberley), the cattle were three years and three months on the road, and not one man that started with them saw the trip through.

While the identity of G. O'S. is unknown, his 1937 account tallies with an innocuous piece of [contemporary information](#) that prompted Cathie, in the 1980s, to begin questioning the legends about various overland cattle drives. That chatty piece in the *Northern Territory Times* of 15 May 1886 mentioned that Messrs C and W McDonald were on a ship bound 'from southern ports' to King Sound. The ship had been in Darwin harbour a week earlier, and it reached Derby on 13 May. The passengers recorded by the Derby police included C McDonald, W McDonald, and one McDonald with no initial. Six days later, the police noted that Thomas Edmondson arrived in Derby from Mr McDonald's cattle station. That man was almost certainly Joe Edmonds, who, as G. O'S. recalled, had ridden to Derby with some [prospectors](#).

On 24 May, in Derby, Charlie MacDonald wrote to John Forrest, Commissioner of Crown Lands in Perth, saying:

I beg to inform you that I have reached my Country on the Margaret & Fitzroy Rivers overland from New South Wales and Queensland with 500 head of cattle. This is the first mob that has ever reached the Fitzroy & Margaret Country overland and I consider I have opened up a track which was hitherto thought impracticable and the 1st class condition that my cattle have reached the country will dispel all fears as to the state of the route.

On the same day, another letter sent from Derby applauded the MacDonalds' 'pluck stamina, and determination' in undertaking 'the longest, most extraordinary, and daring, yet successful trip that has ever been or probably ever will be done in this island'. The island, of course, was Australia. The writer also said:

We feel sure all Australia will wish success to such worthy pioneers. Their names will be handed down in the history of exploration and travels of Australia ...

A [Goulburn newspaper](#) published that letter on 8 July 1886, and in the next three months it appeared, in various forms, in [newspapers](#) throughout Australia. And that, as Cathie's presentation showed, is how the legend of the drive was born.