

TROPICAL AGRICULTURE PROPOSALS & ENDEAVOURS – 1836 TO 1941

On 24 to 26 June 2016, the [Kununurra Historical Society](#) hosted a commemorative forum titled *75 years of Ord Irrigation*. The main event was a one-day seminar in which the focal point was a March 1941 paper written by [Kimberley Michael Durack](#). A transcription of that paper, 'Developing the North', is available on the Kununurra Historical Society's website. It discussed climate, rainfall, soils, vegetation, water and cattle, and it 'proposed that a Research Station be established at Ivanhoe, East Kimberley, to cope with the problems confronting the pastoral industry as it exists today, and to investigate the possibilities of future, more intensive land utilisation'.

The seminar, chaired by Jamie Elliott, began with Matthew Durack telling of Kim Durack's life and achievements. Cathie Clement then spoke about early tropical agriculture proposals & endeavours (1836 to 1941). John Durack covered the establishment and operation of the first research station (1941 to 1946). Noel Wilson followed with a discussion of agriculture in the Ord River Irrigation Area (1946 to the present). Mark Warmington then wrapped up with his thoughts on the future of Ord Valley agriculture.

This summary is a précis of Cathie Clement's PowerPoint presentation.

[Kim Durack](#) would have known about some of the things mentioned below. His father, Michael Patrick Durack, had been in the district since 1886 and would have seen some of the early gardens. Other family members would also have shared their knowledge of agricultural ventures and experiments.

[Macassan fishermen](#) were probably the first to introduce exotic plants to our northern coast. They brought tamarinds with them, and the seeds produced trees. Betel nut palms also grew at the Macassan camps.

European mariners on exploration voyages often received instructions to sow seeds that might produce useful plants. They, and botanists who accompanied them, also noted vegetation and soil types. Explorers such as [George Grey](#), who examined country around the Glenelg River in 1838, made observations that would have lasting influence. In the 1860s, misuse of Grey's observations duped settlers into going to [Camden Harbour](#).

A chronology of early events shows the start of a pattern that would continue for decades. Grand plans and reckless advocacy often preceded failed ventures. There was some government culpability, and, inevitably, some bad luck and poor timing.

Some early events related to tropical agriculture in the Kimberley

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| 1836 | A letter sent to the British Government suggested that experiments in cotton and sugar growing should be undertaken in the northern parts of the colony. |
| 1838 | George Grey grew plants, as well as going out exploring, before proposing cultivation of cotton, indigo, sugar and rice on lands between the Glenelg and Prince Regent rivers. |
| 1862 | William Harvey (a resident of Victoria) began advocating that colonists grow cotton on Western Australia's north coast and graze stock in the inland. |
| 1864 | Settlement was initiated at Camden Harbour and Lagrange Bay, only to be abandoned due to hardship and Aboriginal hostility. |

Skipping forward to [Alexander Forrest](#), and his 1879 expedition, we see that he too advocated north coast agriculture. Fortunately, no one took up his suggestion of using [Secure Bay](#). In the wake of his expedition, the government was keen to see the north used for grazing and agriculture. The '[Land Regulations for the Kimberley District](#)' offered a bonus (500 acres of rural land) if £500 worth of tea, sugar, coffee, rice, cotton, tobacco or other tropical produce was exported and sold. Opinions and proposals were put forward. A few people urged caution, but no good came of it.

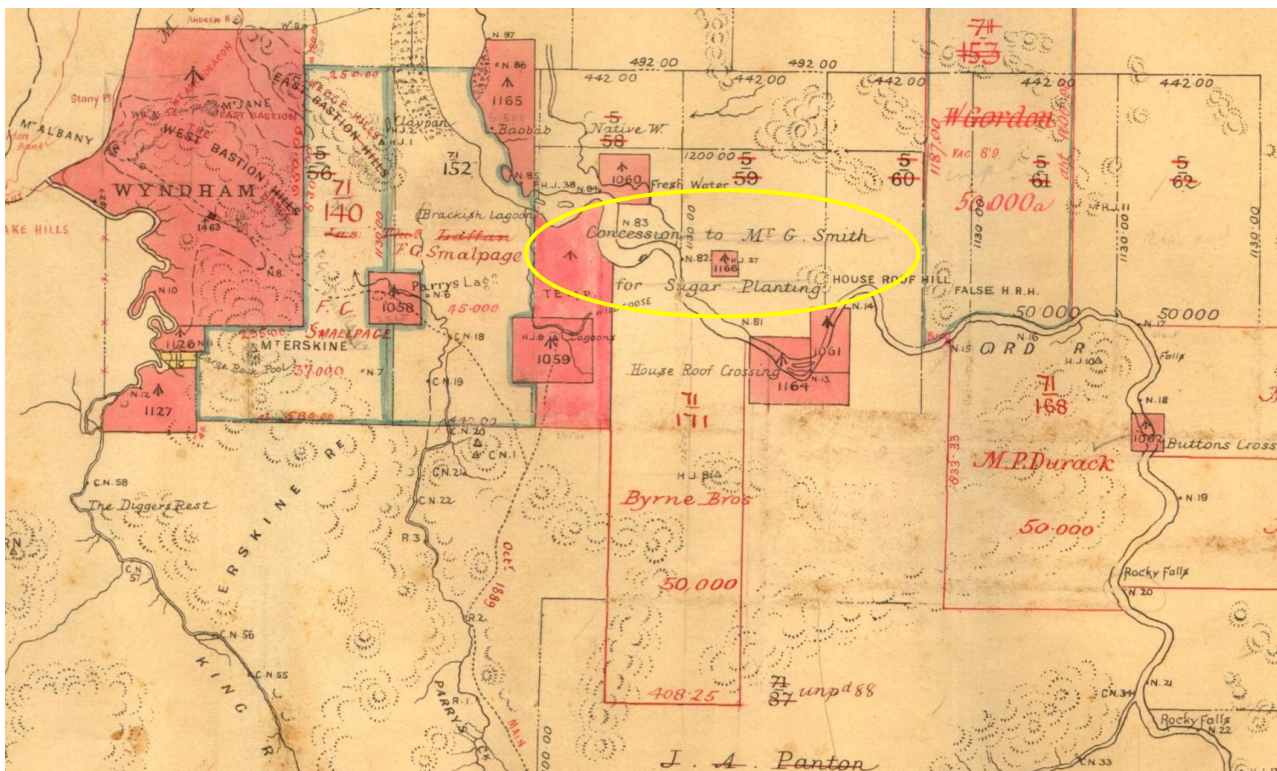
The editor of the Fremantle *Herald* was one who expressed concern. A few weeks before the new regulations came out, he pointed to the risk of releasing the northern land without closing loopholes that left it open to speculation. His concern was well founded. Some speculators tried to find buyers or investors as dozens of others discarded options for [pastoral leases](#) and thus avoided any paying rent.

- 1881 On 1 February, a ballot dealt with the first 448 applications for Kimberley pastoral leases, allocating 102 options for leases of varying sizes. In September, Captain Andrew Lindsay Edgar (a resident of Victoria) sought a grant of 30,000 acres on the Glenelg River to grow sugar. He proposed to start 'with a capital of £10,000, erect a sugar mill and buildings ... and to proceed with all despatch in clearing and planting 200 acres'.
- 1882 A squatting and sugar company was touted, ostensibly to develop two million acres on the Glenelg River.

In 1882, [Captain Andrew Lindsay Edgar](#) continued his correspondence with the WA Government and sought permission to import labourers from the Malabar region of India. In May 1883, as master of the schooner *Albert*, he planted experimental rice, cotton, and other seeds at Beagle Bay and he sailed as far north as Camden Sound.

The following year, [Joseph Anderson Panton](#) visited a sheep station at Lagrange Bay. He pronounced the ground suitable for sugar cane, cotton and tropical fruits. Panton and W H Osmand, anticipating delivery of cattle being overlanded for Ord River Station, were cruising the Kimberley coast on Osmand's yacht. After leaving Lagrange, Osmand called at [Cambridge Gulf](#) and did some experimental planting.

While those plantings were reminiscent of George Grey, the next man on the scene was a Queensland sugar planter, [George Smith](#). In August 1885, he convinced the government to provide a free land grant of 100,000 acres (see notation inside yellow line below). The attached conditions included expenditure of £100,000 and settlement of 1,000 white people. Possibly motivated by publicity about gold finds at Halls Creek, Smith arranged to import labour and sailed to Cambridge Gulf in search of the right land. Nothing came of it.



Portion of Lands Department plan 17K, No. 1, 1887, showing Wyndham, the lower Ord River, pastoral leases and a concession to Mr. G Smith for sugar planting. Courtesy of State Records Office of WA.

By this time, Kimberley people had demonstrated that small scale agriculture was feasible. Lee Sing had crops on 10 acres of freehold land outside Derby. Others had grown produce north of Roebuck Bay. At Wyndham, the police had a small garden near the Three Mile Well and, further out, [William O'Donnell](#) was enjoying success in his experiments with sugar cane and other tropical plants at the Twenty Mile.

More ambitious ideas would be aired but success was limited and fleeting. One idea, articulated in 1887 by “[Explorer](#)”, suggested settling 20,000 families on 175-acre farms in the Fitzroy Valley. They were to grow sago palms, dates, and other tropical produce irrigated from a canal running to Derby from the Fitzroy River headwaters.

While ideas came and went, people relied on the local gardens and imports. By July 1887, a [government garden](#) at the One Mile was supplying Wyndham officials with cabbages and melons. Bananas and pineapples were also coming on nicely. Station gardens were up to two acres in size, and each town had nearby market gardens. By 1889, a Chinese gardener named Ah Ling was operating from the King River (near Wyndham) and a ‘coloured’ gardener named Peter Pise was at Halls Creek.

The lengths to which people went to establish gardens was impressive. In about 1890, Barney Lamond took a bag of banana shoots and pineapple roots by boat from Darwin to Wyndham and put them on Tim Moriarty’s horse wagon for Halls Creek. Doused with a bucket of water each day on the road, the shoots and roots survived. Lamond planted them at a big cabbage palm spring on the Black Elvira River, where they flourished, and he mentioned a fine fruit garden being established there afterwards. The place he described might have been Palm Springs.



Banana plantation, Palm Springs, c. 1920. Courtesy of Peter & Joan Rogasch.

By 1892, Halls Creek had two market gardens, both run by Chinese men. Japanese, Chinese, or so-called ‘coloured’ people initiated much of the early Kimberley agriculture. Their produce was popular but they were expected to know their place. One of the best known was Ah Kim who had a garden at Muggs Lagoon (near Wyndham) and, with his Aboriginal wife Lily, raised a family there.

More events related to tropical agriculture in the Kimberley

- 1894 Adrian Despeissis, a viticulturist and agriculturist, helped to establish the Bureau of Agriculture in Perth.
- 1897 Joseph Bradshaw failed to secure government support for his proposal to settle 500 Europeans on the Prince Regent River.
- 1899 Saltbush was grown from imported seed on Argyle Station, with intentions of adding it to the indigenous grasses. Disaster Bay Mission, a branch of Beagle Bay Mission, had bananas, plantains, sugar, rice, dates, coconuts and vegetables flourishing on 30 acres of land irrigated from a spring.



Ah Kim and his family, photographed in 1918 at their Muggs Lagoon garden by Lil Rogasch, the first Australian Inland Mission sister to serve in the Kimberley. Courtesy of Peter & Joan Rogasch.

Space doesn't permit coverage of the full spread or progress of agriculture, but each year brought new developments.

More events related to tropical agriculture in the Kimberley

- 1900 Plants, cuttings and seeds donated by Beagle Bay Mission enabled Sunday Island Mission to grow bananas, paw paws, figs, sweet potatoes and beans.
- 1901 Frederick Slade Brockman, with a party that included Charles Crossland and Dr F M House, surveyed the north Kimberley.
- 1903 Connor, Doherty and Durack began employing 'a considerable staff' of men to make hay, using it as fodder on Ascot Station and on ships taking cattle from Wyndham to Fremantle.
- 1905 The naturalist on Charles Crossland's survey expedition, W V Fitzgerald, identified arable lands on the Barker and Lennard Rivers. He recommended forming experimental stations.
- 1906 W V Fitzgerald surveyed the valleys of the Fitzroy, Ord and King rivers, identifying arable lands. Boring for artesian water in the Kimberley commenced.
- 1907 Land for tropical agriculture experiments was excised at Udialla Springs, on the Fitzroy River, but the people who went there faced numerous obstacles. Adrian Despeissis, now Under-Secretary for Agriculture, held the view that, although cotton growing experiments in the South West Division had not met with great success, better results would be obtained in the Nor'-West and Kimberley.

While most of the gardeners relied on windmills, a [Japanese gardener](#) near Broome went a step further. By 1907, he was using an oil engine to raise water. Poured onto rows of vegetables from kerosene tins suspended on yokes, that water helped to produce cabbages weighing about five kilos.

It was also in 1907 that [Arthur Haly](#), the East Kimberley Stock Inspector, offered his view. He felt that the 'extensive and never-failing waterholes in the rivers' would be sufficient for irrigated agriculture, negating any need for East Kimberley dams.

The following year, Broome people expressed a desire to see [plantations](#) established. Over in Derby, someone suggested allowing artesian water to form a lake where local prisoners could clear, fence and cultivate an experimental [plantation](#) to feed themselves and the rest of the town.

Knowledge of Kimberley soils and plants had been increasing each year, partly through botanists accompanying surveyors on expeditions. Adrian Despeissis, as [Commissioner for Tropical Agriculture](#), was also expanding and sharing his expertise. By 1910 the prospects looked the best they had been. Yet, as usual and despite the 1911 publication by Despeissis of the 105-page bulletin *The Nor'-West and tropical North*, success was elusive. Some setbacks were due to insufficient water; some to insufficient labour.

In 1912, talk turned to [water conservation](#) and possibilities for capturing some of the wet season rains. But, again, nothing constructive happened. Instead, after a change of government, the position of Commissioner for Tropical Agriculture was abolished.

The demands of the First World War diverted attention from plans for northern agriculture but the mission gardens continued to flourish. Their success owed much to the labour provided by the resident population. That model was also adopted when Aboriginal people were encouraged, or forced, to live on reserves at Violet Valley, Moola Bulla, and other places.

In 1920, after a ministerial tour that included M P Durack, Harry Richard's work at [Palm Springs](#) was held up as an example of what could be done. That oasis always impressed visitors, as did Esau Mahomet's garden at the Brockman.

The following year, the surveyor [W R Easton](#), a returned soldier, led an expedition to examine land on the north coast, assessing it for tropical agriculture and a port. At the time, a government program on Moola Bulla offered returned soldiers training in Kimberley land management. In the years that followed, soldier settlers were among those who tried their hands on experimental plots of cotton, tobacco and peanuts. One of them, Richard G C Prior, told how he and his mate had no luck. Their tobacco didn't grow and they ended up eating half their peanuts.

SCHEDULE 3.

The Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act, 1918.
VL.

CERTIFICATE.

Corres. 2209/20.

To the Manager,
Agricultural Bank, Perth.

This is to certify that Mr. Richard George C. Prior.....duly appeared before the Discharged Soldiers' Land Settlement Board on the.....7th.....day of.....November.....1922, with respect to.....his.....application for * assistance in connection with land for Tropical Culture.....under the Regulations for the settlement of discharged soldiers on the land. The Board, after making due investigation, recommends.....hi.....as a person qualified to hold land under these Regulations, and (not to carry D.S.L.S. Act.....advances.....

Hygo Shrossell Chairman.
J. Meadon Secretary.

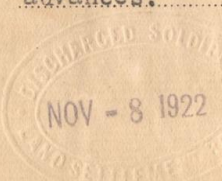
Discharged Soldiers' Land Settlement Board.

Free Railway Pass issued to.....Station.....192.....

* Insert whether for land, for conversion of holdings, or for deferment of rent.
† For any further remarks by the Board.

o 9747/22

COTTON, PEANUT & TOBACCO GROWING. DERRY. 1922



Certificate issued to discharged soldier Richard G C Prior for assistance in connection with land for Tropical Culture, 1922. Courtesy of Ridgway Family.



Soldier Settlers' camp, 1923. Courtesy of Ridgway Family.

Other soldier settlers who had more success included the men who established Nulla Nulla Station out of Wyndham. Their cotton grew, but one of the men, Billy Hay, was killed in conflict with Aboriginal people in 1926. Violent reprisals followed, and the Reverend Gribble's allegations of a massacre led to a Royal Commission into the killings.

More events related to tropical agriculture in the Kimberley

- 1923 Frank Wise, who was later the Premier of Western Australia, was appointed as Tropical Adviser. The WA Government arranged for Colonel Geoffrey Evans of the Empire Cotton Growing Corporation to evaluate the cotton growing experiments and prospects in the Derby area. He concluded that the pindan soils were not suited to cotton. The Kimberley Progress Association wrote a letter in which it appealed to the Imperial Conference (sitting in London) for an Empire settlement scheme.
- 1924 In Melbourne, Stanley Young advocated a new state centred on Broome, with Federal Government assistance and the use of 'coloured' labour for tropical agriculture. Alice Sawdon, who was living at Udialla with her husband Josiah, wrote to the Western Australian Government proposing the implementation of a group settlement scheme. She wanted to continue the cotton growing they had begun before their helpers walked out. No scheme eventuated but Udialla, like Palm Springs out of Halls Creek, was one place that provided a living for people for decades.

Experimental cotton crops were grown near Broome, Derby and Wyndham, and on pastoral leases, mission land, and reserves that included Violet Valley. None of that was irrigated. Grown under natural conditions, it was known as rain cotton. In 1923, three tons of that cotton, packed into 25 bales, was shown in Fremantle on its way to the British Empire Exhibition. Just over half of it came from Nulla Nulla Station. There was no consensus on the feasibility or desirability of cropping. Some pastoralists were opposed to cotton, and some would have feared losing prime land to excisions.

New ideas for settlement schemes emerged. Fresh government appointments were made. Further consideration was given to how tropical crops might be irrigated. After Colonel

Evans condemned Derby soils, people debated whether [irrigation](#) and a more suitable type of labour would overcome the perceived deficiencies.

The pattern of growing tropical products on small scattered holdings continued through the 1930s. Fred Merry grew peanuts commercially on Sale River station, sending his produce to Broome by boat. [Bob Thompson](#) had a tropical agriculture lease nearby, at Marie Springs. He paid one pound a year in rent on a thousand acres, and said he only had to keep five acres under cultivation.

The 1930s also saw the emergence of fresh ideas. With Prime Minister Lyons and the Federal Government wanting to develop Australia's north, [Sir James Connolly](#), who was based in London, devised a comprehensive plan for a new colony in the Kimberley. Announced in 1933, it envisaged railways from Wyndham to Meekatharra and Camden Harbour. Young agricultural labourers from England were to be trained in dairy farming and tropical agriculture, and pastoralists were expected to agree to compensation for giving up their leases for the small farms. In the interval between Connolly's proposal and the next one, Kim Durack finished his studies at Muresk Agricultural College in Northam and returned to the north. There was plenty of scope for him to implement his learning and, with exposure to the next settlement scheme, his ideas would expand.

When a second world war looked likely, [Dr Isaac Steinberg](#) and others formed the Freeland League for Jewish Territorial Settlement. Operating out of London, it sought a new homeland for European Jews who were fleeing the Nazis. The portfolio of properties owned by Connor, Doherty and Durack was on the market, with [George Miles](#), who had been with M P Durack on the 1920 ministerial tour, looking for a buyer. He approached Steinberg in 1938 and 'proposed that the Freeland League create a chartered or limited company with a capital of £200,000 and purchase the land rights, the cattle and the buildings of Connor, Doherty and Durack Ltd'. When interest was shown, Miles worked with Steinberg to create a package in which the League would buy the properties, settle many thousands of refugees there, and begin the conversion to orchards and farms. That work was to be facilitated by damming the Ord River and generating hydro-electricity.

Many events overlapped in this period. A 1939 push for a Royal Commission into the financial and economic position of WA's pastoral industry led to a [recommendation](#) for classification of 100 miles of Ord River country to ascertain the extent suitable for irrigation and pasture development. Various people advocated the implementation of irrigated agriculture on the Fitzroy River, either by the Freeland League or British migrants. The Emanuels had offered to sell their West Kimberley properties to the Freeland League but, when [Steinberg](#) and a young UWA agricultural research graduate named George Melville flew north, it was to be shown over the Connor, Doherty and Durack properties by M P and Kim Durack. On returning to Perth in June 1939, Steinberg and Melville prepared a report on the region's potential, envisaging a research farm as the nucleus of the Jewish settlement. Lobbying continued but the outbreak of war delayed the Federal Government's decision.

In March 1941, Kim Durack produced his science-based study on the potential of the area examined by Steinberg. Titled 'Developing the North', it led to him receiving approval to use Ord River land for agricultural experiments. He and his brother Bill worked at that while the possibility of securing approval for the Jewish Settlement Scheme remained on the table. It was only in 1944 that the Australian Government ruled that [a group settlement](#) of such an exclusive type was not appropriate. That decision cleared the way for Kim Durack to pursue his dreams.