

Drawing the Local Colour Line

White Australia and the Tropical North

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Abstract

My title paraphrases that of Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds's recent book, *Drawing the Global Colour Line* (Melbourne 2008). As those historians explain, the distinction between white and non-white races was drawn with increasing rigour in the three decades or so on either side of 1900. Locally drawn lines, however, could be more substantive, inscribing boundaries across land and sea which confined white and non-white to one side or the other. The white Australia policy provides a perfect example, attempting to cordon off the continent as the exclusive preserve of the white race. However, the actual location of the colour line around white Australia was disputed in the early decades of the 20th century. While the dominant version of the white Australia policy drew the colour line somewhere north of Thursday Island, a significant body of critics insisted that it be drawn somewhere near the Tropic of Capricorn. This paper explores the arguments and assumptions of those critics.

From the moment of Federation in 1901, White Australia was entrenched as the most sacrosanct of the nation's ideals, 'the indispensable condition of every other Australian policy' as the eminent Australian historian, W.K. Hancock, later claimed.¹ Yet, from the outset, there were critics – admittedly a minority – who insisted that the white Australia policy was not in Australia's best interests and should be abandoned or relaxed. Some critics – a minority within a minority – based their opposition on the principle of human equality.² Most, however, opposed it on more pragmatic grounds, the most prominent of which was that the prohibition on non-white immigrants would stifle the development of the northern third of the continent, thereby jeopardising Australia's economic prospects, subverting the legitimacy of its territorial claims and leaving the country open to foreign condemnation, even invasion. The white Australia policy, these critics argued, was out of place in the tropics since the white race itself was out of place in the torrid zone.

Minority though they were, the critics had science on their side. When the federal government instituted the white Australia policy, it leapfrogged scientific opinion. Scientific and medical orthodoxy of the day, not only in Australia but internationally, held the white race to be congenitally unfitted to the tropics.³ The federal leaders, however, were dedicated to securing an all-white nation in an all-white continent. Some politicians, such as Charles McDonald, member for Kennedy in north Queensland, went so far as to state that 'it would be far better, in the interests of Australia, that the tropical lands of Australia should revert to their virgin state than that we should continue to cultivate them with the aid of coloured aliens'.⁴ Perhaps such effusions of white Australia enthusiasm should not be taken literally; rhetorical grandstanding was as common among politicians then as now. Nonetheless, the fact that such statements were made – and McDonald was not the only one to make them – testifies to both the intensity of white Australia zealotry and the extent of misgivings about the prospects of success in developing the north.

The 'empty north' gnawed at Australian sensitivities for decades. Outside the thin coastal strip of north Queensland, the vast expanse of tropical Australia not only failed to advance economically or demographically but in many instances regressed, despite massive injections of public funds, especially into the Northern Territory after the Commonwealth assumed control in 1911. White Australia enthusiasts conjured up myriad schemes to remedy the deficiency, to turn tropical wilderness into fertile farmland, all predicated on the conviction that only people of their own complexion should be entrusted to fill the empty spaces.⁵ Others, however, equally committed to redeeming the emptiness of the north, equally convinced of its potential for agricultural exploitation and equally devoted to the developmentalist ideal, maintained that the task could never be accomplished by whites alone and that developing the north demanded the involvement of coloured races. It is on the latter that this paper focuses.

In their own times, the subjects of this paper were commonly designated – by themselves as well as by others – ‘critics of the white Australia policy’. The designation is apt insofar as they denied that an all-white continent was desirable or achievable. But they might equally be considered advocates of an alternative white Australia ideal in which the principle of exclusive white occupancy of the continent had to give way to the reality of tropical distinctiveness, though without sacrificing the core value of white ascendancy. These critics agreed with exponents of the white Australia policy that a colour line should be drawn, cordoning off white from non-white races. But, they argued, official policy drew the line at the wrong place, around the entire Australian land-mass, whereas it should be drawn along the Tropic of Capricorn or some contiguous degree of latitude. North of the line, coloured labour should be permitted, though on terms and conditions laid down by whites. Focusing on this strand of critique of the white Australia policy, I have little to say about the handful of contemporary critics who based their opposition to the policy on an ideal of racial equality other than to note that those who advanced the former critique sometimes buttressed their arguments with appeals to the latter principle.

I also have little to say about how Aboriginal people featured in contemporary discourses on white Australia. Commentators of the day were well aware not only of the Aboriginal presence but also of the fact that they still constituted a majority of the population over much of the north. Aborigines, however, were regarded as a passing problem since, according to the prevailing orthodoxy, they were destined soon to die out.⁶ In the meantime, the trend in the early twentieth century was to draw a colour line around the Aboriginal population, confining them to a distinctive legal status and, increasingly, sequestering them in reserves and missions. In the debates over the development of the north on which this paper focuses, Aboriginal people featured only marginally. I shall begin my exposition of those debates with a sketch of northern Australia around the time of federation.

The Piebald North

At the first sitting of the House of Representatives in May 1901, the leader of the federal Labor Party, John Watson, painted a lurid picture of ‘the piebald north’ of Australia, with its ‘multifarious peoples’ making it a ‘cancer spot’ on the nation.⁷ Other mouthpieces for white Australia enthusiasm, such as the *Sydney Bulletin* and the *Worker*, regularly carried pieces about the appalling state of affairs in the north, where white men ‘dined with the Chows and slept with the Japs’. Henry Reynolds vividly describes the northern towns and settlements on the eve of federation, with their numerous Pacific Islanders and diverse Asian peoples, which in some places such as Palmerston (Darwin) and Broome constituted a majority of the population. He suggests that the northern communities were tolerant, reasonably prosperous and successful enterprises in inter-racial cooperation.⁸ While accurate insofar as it documents the racial diversity of the north, Reynolds’s account is misleading in two important respects.

For one thing, inter-racial harmony was far more fragile than Reynolds intimates. In fact, these multiracial communities were riven with inter-racial tensions. A quick scan of the pages of newspapers such as the *Northern Territory Times* will uncover numerous instances of racial vilification.⁹ Even those more positively disposed toward ‘coloured aliens’, such as the *Cairns Morning Post*, repeatedly depicted them in a derogatory and demeaning manner.¹⁰ Insofar as white northerners were tolerant of non-whites, it was primarily for pragmatic reasons, in recognition of their mutual dependence rather than any ideal of the brotherhood of man. Under normal circumstances, inter-racial tensions were held in check, allowing the various racial groups to interact relatively peaceably and productively, but this depended on the other factor minimised in Reynolds’s account: the structuring principle of racial hierarchy.

Racial harmony in these northern communities depended on racial stratification. Whites stood at the apex, certain Asians (often Japanese, sometimes Chinese) on the next rung down, other Asians such as Malays and Javanese below them, Pacific Islanders on the next level down, Torres Strait Islanders below them, and Aborigines at the bottom of the scale. Provided members of each group acknowledged their place in the hierarchy, a pragmatic tolerance prevailed, but this was liable to

break down if any group acted in ways above its designated station, particularly if it challenged white supremacy. Some movement between strata was possible, but these multiracial northern communities were far from egalitarian. They were structured along the lines that the American historian William McNeill has called 'polyethnic hierarchy', an arrangement more typical of pre-modern, pre-national polities than of modern nation-states.¹¹ It was from these stratified northern societies that many of the earliest critics of the white Australia policy came, and their intention was not to institute racial equality but to maintain a structure of white supremacy.

From this perspective, Queensland Premier Robert Philp condemned the Pacific Island Labourers Bill (one of the two items of legislation which instantiated the white Australia policy in 1901) as 'a criminal act'.¹² Other prominent Queenslanders, too, attacked the white Australia legislation for undercutting the foundations of northern prosperity.¹³ So did many northern newspapers. In 1901, the *Cairns Morning Post* railed against 'the platform fetish of "White Australia"', particularly for threatening to deport the north's most valuable workers, Pacific Islanders. This newspaper claimed that, as 'far back as human history has been recorded', it had been shown that the white race 'could not permanently thrive in the tropics'. The best that could be expected was that 'the tropics may be made more habitable on the basis of sanitary science towards the suppression of tropical diseases well known to affect the white man more severely than those of other races'. Its editor doubted that the *Cairns Morning Post* would ever be published in a land which was the 'exclusive home of the white race'. Yet he professed devotion to white Australia. 'We all want a White Australia – we are all bent on promoting the advancement of Australia for Britishers', he declared, though adding that 'the presence of the kanaka in the cane field is in no way a menace to white Australia'.¹⁴ From this northern perspective, coloured races, kept in their place as a servile workforce, were an essential adjunct to white success in the tropics.

In the polyglot pearling port of Thursday Island, Alexander Corran, editor of the *Torres Strait Pilot*, took a different line of attack on the white Australia legislation. He emphasised 'the geographical propinquity of North Australia, where the land is almost entirely uninhabited, to Asia with its overcrowded population of hundreds of millions' and predicted that, in the near future, the rising powers of Asia would take exception to their exclusion and force Australia to open its doors. Rather than blanket exclusions which could not be maintained in the longer term, he recommended compromise. 'Far better it would be', Corran declared, 'for us now to so act that while the white man remains the dominant factor in the country, the coloured man's place and right to live is recognised; to so act that, instead of having the coloured man thrust upon us on distasteful conditions, the evils of his presence amongst us would be mitigated.'¹⁵ Corran saw that global and regional population pressures must eventually – and probably soon – overwhelm the demand for an exclusively white Australia but argued that, if compromise were made now, the crucial kernel of white ascendancy might be maintained. It was an argument repeated many times over subsequent decades.

According to J. Langdon Parsons, former Government Resident in Darwin, any attempt to impose white Australia on the north was 'utterly unscientific, and . . . weird foolishness'. 'From the outset', he declared, 'the Northern Territory has been legislated for as a pastoral, a mineral, and a tropical agricultural country which required coloured labour', and by losing sight of that reality the federal government courted disaster. Parsons specified, however, that coloured labour should come only under stringent terms of indenture and repatriation. 'This is not high-class humanitarianism', he acknowledged,

but it is probably necessary for race preservation, and it will maintain a 'White Australia' in the only sense compatible with the development of its agricultural resources . . . The alternative is the retention of a vast area of arable land, which Australians cannot cultivate themselves, and will not allow others to cultivate. Utilization of land is the strongest and best title to rightful ownership.

Not only would it validate white sovereignty over the continent, coloured labour would also prove a boon to white Australians since it would create 'wide openings for the investment of capital, and for the employment of a very large number of Europeans as overseers, engineers, foremen, artisans, clerks, and sailors to export the produce'.¹⁶ Parsons's son, Herbert Angas Parsons, later wrote in

support of his father's views, claiming in 1907 that there was 'a very considerable body of opinion . . . that only by means of cheap coloured labour can the agricultural potentialities of the tropical parts of North Australia be developed'.¹⁷

Like both J. Langdon and Herbert Parsons, the Queensland agricultural expert A.C. MacDonald believed that northern Australia held vast tracts suited to tropical cultivation, which would remain unused without proper tropical labour. As the deportation of Pacific Islanders loomed nearer, MacDonald protested 'to members of our Federal parliament, and to others who favor a White Australia policy, that such a policy is diametrically opposed to the future progress and prosperity of the Australian Commonwealth'. 'Tropical Australia can only be made a white man's country by the introduction of colored labor', he insisted.¹⁸ The logic of this was lost on white Australia zealots who conceived inter-racial competition in zero-sum terms: any benefit to coloured races was necessarily a detriment to the white and vice versa. MacDonald and his fellow critics perceived a degree of mutuality, though benefiting the white race was their prime concern. In a similar vein, North Queensland cotton-grower David Thomatis explained that

'White Australia' does not truly mean expelling colored races and starving white workers, but encouraging prosperity to white settlers by every legitimate means; and if the work of colored people, especially British subjects, can enrich and benefit white people, 'White Australia' expects not to disregard this means while it can be operative. We wish for a 'prosperous' White Australia, not a starving Australia or an Australia *fed by fads!*

Without coloured labour, the north was being 'kept backward, the land unoccupied, untilled, unsought for'; it was 'simply withering away and returning to wilderness' to the benefit of no one.¹⁹

Both MacDonald and Thomatis approved the white Australia policy for temperate parts of the continent. The tropics, however, required their own distinctive social order. Thomatis recommended the creation of a 'tropical territory' above latitude 18 degrees south, where a 'special labor concession' would be in force, allowing 'the employment of indented [sic] colored laborers' on the Pacific Islander model.²⁰ MacDonald, similarly, stipulated that coloured labour be confined 'to the north of the latitude of Mackay'.²¹ Such views were commonly voiced by northern settlers in the first decade of the 20th century but petered out thereafter. North Queensland sugar-growers, who had initially been among the sharpest critics of the white Australia legislation, were mollified by the system of protective tariffs and bounties instituted by the federal government. Yet this left unanswered the larger question of the viability of the white Australia policy in the tropics. And while local criticisms of the policy, based on first-hand experience of a multiracial north, subsided, a line of critique was maintained particularly by southern journalists and intellectuals.

The Recalcitrant Tropics

Well into the 20th century, widespread credibility still attached to the idea that each race was uniquely adapted to a specific climate zone.²² Advocate of tropical agriculture Matthew MacFie, in a 1907 address to the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, stated that 'the world is divided into color-zones, and that *each climate is exactly suited by natural law to the particular human racial type evolved under its influence, but cannot be adjusted to any other*'.²³ In another antiwhite-Australia diatribe, he proclaimed that the 'immutable laws of nature' dictated that 'white men are constitutionally adapted to live and work only in the temperate zone'.²⁴ The same idea underpinned the 1922 book *A White Australia: is it possible?* by the medical scientist and educator D. Hastings Young. He maintained that 'the vigour and health of the various races of mankind – white, yellow and black – can only be maintained by residence in the zone apportioned to them by nature'; whites who lived for extended periods in the tropics would 'degenerate physically, mentally and morally'.²⁵

The climatic-zone argument featured prominently, but critics of white Australia such as Young and MacFie were prepared to use any available ammunition against the policy. In an exceptionally colourful turn of invective, MacFie lambasted the 'dilettante class' who promoted the white Australia policy:

In their seeming ignorance of meteorological science, and their misdirected zeal to maintain an absurd dignity as belonging to the white race, they have thrown the science of race in relation to climate to the winds, and have loudly raised the irrational cry of a 'White Australia', which is a climatic impossibility. To veil more completely their nescience and prejudice, they have invented a ludicrous companion-phrase, often on the lips of Mr. Justice Barton when he was Prime Minister, about preserving the 'purity of the white race', as if a dark colour was the everlasting brand of heaven's hatred and condemnation, and as if a white skin was the inalienable title to Divine favour, and a guarantee of spiritual perfection to all its possessors.

MacFie invoked an ideal of racial equality, affirming that 'colour was never meant to be a test of intellectual capacity and moral character, and is only "skin deep"'. Racial intermixing, he added, was beneficial to all concerned.²⁶

Yet MacFie's proposals for the admission of coloured races were framed in terms not of racial equality but of white supremacy. 'I have never swerved', he averred, 'from the opinion that Indians and other Asiatics, who ought to be admitted to labour in the undertakings of white men in tropical Australia – for which they are constitutionally specially suited – have no equal claim with white men to be allowed to reside permanently in temperate latitudes.' This was partially counterbalanced by his statement that 'on the other hand, whites, in great numbers, should not be admitted to reside permanently in the tropics to the obvious ruin of their health and vigor'.²⁷ However, MacFie left his readers in no doubt that he envisaged a multiracial northern Australia in which white people were both politically and economically dominant though numerically fewer. Australia's national interests would be protected, he argued, 'by legally restricting Asiatic immigrants to their own latitudes, and by having the management of large tropical and subtropical agricultural undertakings promoted by white capitalists and superintended by men of the same race'.²⁸ His rhetorical appeals to racial equality notwithstanding, the society MacFie envisaged was along the lines of the pre-federation north, predicated on white hegemony and sealed off from a homogeneously white southern Australia.

However, theories of racial acclimatisation gained ground in scientific circles, locally and globally. In a 1928 review of recent research on world population problems, the American demographer A.B. Wolfe stated:

A decade ago it was almost universally believed that only under very exceptional circumstances could temperate zone people, especially the white race, live and successfully rear their children in the tropics. Now, however, there is much difference of opinion among those who have a right to opinion . . . There is also evidence of more scientific caution in conclusions.

He attributed the change to the 'remarkable advances in tropical medicine and sanitation, as well as better knowledge of the geography and climatology of tropic lands'.²⁹ Without doubting Wolfe's assessment, it seems that, in Australia, this shift in scientific opinion occurred somewhat earlier than he suggested.

Australia was precocious on the tropical acclimatisation question because it was more urgently pressing here than elsewhere. In its quest for answers – preferably positive ones – the federal government established the Australian Institute of Tropical Medicine in Townsville in 1910. Unlike institutes of tropical medicine elsewhere in the world (which typically focused on the aetiology and control of tropical diseases), the Townsville institute's research was directed primarily at determining whether a 'working white race' could thrive in the Australian tropics. Its positive findings on this issue, released over the course of the 1910s, underpinned a resolution of the 1920 Australasian Medical Congress which stated that it was 'unable to find anything pointing to the existence of inherent or insuperable obstacles in the way of the permanent occupation of Tropical Australia by a healthy indigenous white race'.³⁰

The 1920 Medical Congress resolution certainly gave a boost to exponents of an all-white north, but it marked no turning point in debates over the issue. The resolution was framed in extremely guarded terms, and, in discussion, some leading medical scientists recommended that it should have been

framed more cautiously still. They expressed particular misgivings over whether white women and children could endure the rigours of a tropical climate. Dr Anton Breinl, director of the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Townsville and one of the major contributors to the Congress's resolution, acknowledged that 'even among the residents of tropical Queensland opinion is divided regarding the suitability of the climatic conditions for a permanent settlement by a white race'. The medical champions of tropical white settlement insisted that, for its success, white residents had to take special precautions against what was implicitly regarded as a potent and potentially hostile tropical environment. They recommended, among other measures, constant hygienic vigilance, regular visits to cooler climes, more open housing designs, looser and lighter clothing and a dietary regime which, for its abstinence from alcohol and drastically reduced meat consumption, might fairly be regarded as un-Australian.³¹ Besides, as Alison Bashford points out, tropical medicine could never normalise the tropics because the discipline itself '*always* suggested that Western science was investigating something exotic to itself, something alien and different to white diseases, white environment; always something other'.³² Bashford's point was appreciated by some contemporaries. In 1914, David Garland, a former resident of north Queensland and the North West, argued that the establishment of the Australian Institute of Tropical Medicine was 'a bad advertisement for North Australia' since it implied that northern Australia was akin to other tropical parts of the Empire.³³

Even the staunchest advocates of white triumphalism in the tropics could not escape the otherness of the torrid zone. There was no stauncher advocate than Dr Raphael Cilento, Breinl's successor as director of the Australian Institute of Tropical Medicine, who condemned the argument that whites could not adapt to the tropics as a denial of the indomitable will of the white race. Yet he also argued that the tropical climate was so potent that it was giving rise to a 'distinctive tropical type' of white man in north Queensland, anatomically and physiologically different from his southern compatriots. Compared with the Australian southerner, Cilento maintained, the tropical white man 'moves slowly, and conserves his muscular heat-producing energy'.³⁴ He represented this as a positive evolutionary adaptation, but, as the prominent Adelaide geographer Archibald Grenville Price pointed out, it sounded suspiciously close to the old doctrine that the tropics were devitalising, and one could well 'ask whether the conservation of muscular heat-producing energy to which Cilento refers may not indicate some loss of vitality and some degree of physical decline'.³⁵ According to Cilento, the tropical white woman would be even more distinctive, acquiring 'a gracefulness of movement that reminds one of those nations of the East that live in similar environments'.³⁶ Again, Cilento himself put a positive slant on this adaptation, but it might equally be interpreted as portending a slide into the degenerate ways of Asia.

Long after the 1920 congress, members of the medical profession continued to express scepticism about the prospects for the white race in the tropics. In the early 1930s, Dr Arthur Wigmore, still asserting the unhealthiness of the tropics, argued the need for indentured coloured labour to develop northern Australia.³⁷ Dr W.H.W. Cheyne, while acknowledging the accumulating scientific evidence in favour of permanent white residence in the tropics, continued to urge caution as the evidence had yet to be subjected to 'the test of time'. He also pointed out that, even if medical science showed that white people could inhabit the tropics, 'whether the north *will* become closely settled by whites is quite another matter'.³⁸ He referred here to the work of geographers, particularly the head of the Department of Geography at the University of Sydney, Griffith Taylor, who showed that most of northern Australia was unsuited to close settlement because the rainfall was low and unreliable, the soils poor and the natural resources scant. While medical science was rendering the tropics more habitable for the white race, geographical science was busily undercutting the prospects for success in the venture. I shall return to the geographers' resource reassessments of the Australian tropics later in this paper. At this point, I shall consider Griffith Taylor's views on climate and race.

Griffith Taylor did not suggest that the Australian tropics were uninhabitable by white people; in fact he claimed that the east-coast strip of north Queensland could support a reasonably numerous white population. He readily accepted the findings of Breinl and other researchers at the Institute of Tropical Medicine. However, the mere ability of the white race to survive the rigours of a tropical climate was not enough, Taylor maintained:

I may emphasise the fact that ‘comfort,’ as a factor of settlement, appears to have been largely ignored up to the present. A very high degree of health may be maintained with constant care and moderation, under circumstances which cannot be termed comfortable. In a huge area like Australia, with much of the temperate zone only sparsely settled, it is obvious that prospective settlers will quite reasonably require something beyond conditions of bare *health*.³⁹

Against those white Australia enthusiasts who claimed that the Australian tropics were somehow more benign than the tropics of foreign lands, Taylor assembled a battery of figures, charts, graphs and maps to demonstrate that the Australian tropics were just as hot and humid, or dry and scorching, as the tropics elsewhere. On crucial climatic criteria, the overseas analogues of north Australian towns such as Darwin, Townsville and Broome were to be found in Gambia, India and the Belgian Congo.⁴⁰ In Taylor’s assessment, most of tropical Australia was too hot, dry and resource-impoverished to support a substantial population, while the small patch of better favoured country on the north-east coast was ‘too “muggy” for the average British settler’.⁴¹ White people might live in those places, but they would forever struggle against the hardships and discomforts inherent to the tropics.

According to Taylor, the white Australia policy was no longer either practicable or wise. A ‘small influx of Chinese’, he recommended, ‘would greatly stimulate our tropical settlement’. He was too sceptical about the resource endowments of the north to suggest that Asian immigration offered a magic bullet to the problems of northern development, but he thought Asians could make a better fist of it than Europeans. Moreover, allowing even a small quota of Chinese immigrants would ‘show China that we recognize her undoubted claim to racial equality’.⁴² On several occasions Taylor pointed to Broome as a multiracial community which functioned at least as smoothly and profitably as other similarly sized Australian towns.⁴³ However, he did not suggest that Asian immigrants should be sequestered in the north and confined to manual labour. Considering Chinese people equal (or superior) to whites, he envisaged their becoming fellow citizens as well as the wives and husbands of white Australians.⁴⁴ These were controversial contentions, but Taylor and other geographers were influential in maintaining an image of the tropics as a place where the white race was never quite at home.

This image insinuated even into the utterances of enthusiasts for white settlement in the tropics. In 1921, Lady Goold Adams, widow of a former Queensland governor, explained that ‘the tropical parts of Queensland were habitable by whites, provided the women and children were enabled to journey to cooler latitudes in the hot months of the year’.⁴⁵ A year earlier, Henry Gregory, a Western Australian member of the Commonwealth House of Representatives, requested the Minister for Home and Territories to allow coloured household servants in the north so white women could live under reasonable conditions of comfort. ‘I have nothing to say against the White Australia Policy’, Gregory professed before proclaiming that ‘to populate the Northern part of Australia, coloured labour for the household is absolutely essential’.⁴⁶ In similar vein, the 1937 Payne–Fletcher inquiry into the industries of the Northern Territory headed its section on the white Australia policy with an affirmation that ‘there can be no compromise on this fundamental principle’, then promptly proceeded to plead for concessions. White women’s circumstances in the Territory were so onerous, it stated, that the ‘introduction of a strictly limited number of eastern natives under indenture for domestic duties would, paradoxical as it may seem, help to strengthen the White Australia policy’.⁴⁷ Paradoxical indeed, but the commissioners’ statement was symptomatic of the still-pervasive notion that the tropics were alien to the white race – or at least its more delicate gender.

Legitimate Claims

Their differing preferences of complexion notwithstanding, supporters and critics of the white Australia policy agreed on the need to populate the north in order to validate Australia’s claim to the continent and safeguard it against invaders. Both sides feared a resurgent Asia, though they differed on how best to meet this challenge. Against white Australia devotees who argued that the total exclusion of Asians was the only viable defensive strategy, Matthew MacFie maintained that the containment of Asia should be accomplished ‘by the whites at once undertaking the development of the latent tropical resources of Australia, abolishing restrictive legislation against colour, and

encouraging the introduction of Asiatics under the supervision and control of whites, limiting the coloured races as a rule, however, to tropical areas'.⁴⁸ Coloured races should be permitted, such critics urged, because it was people, regardless of complexion, who validated title to the land.

After World War I, in an era of the League of Nations and (hoped for) international cooperation, global population pressures assumed increasing importance.⁴⁹ With its vast 'empty north', which supposedly held enormous potential for cultivation, Australia was seen as shirking its responsibility to help resolve this global problem. It was accused of a dog-in-the-manger attitude, insisting that only whites could be admitted to the north but allowing the region to fall into desuetude and decline. Here was a moral and political dilemma admitting no easy solution within the constraints of the white Australia policy.

Gilbert White, Bishop of Carpentaria from 1900 to 1915, laid bare his ambivalence on the white Australia policy immediately after the war. There was 'much to be said for an enlightened White Australia policy', he maintained, but lamented that the policy 'has been advocated in some cases on such purely selfish grounds, with such absurd arrogance and self-conceit, and with such unjustifiable contempt for all coloured races, that decent men are tempted to turn from it in disgust.' At the centre of White's misgivings lay unease over the morality of enforcing the policy in a north which, he explained,

remains practically empty . . . Large portions of it could be easily cultivated with coloured labour, while other large portions are suitable for mining with cheaper labour than can be now found. In a word, it is a huge unoccupied and occupiable portion of the earth's surface, and has Australia any moral right or any actual power to play the dog in the manger, and neither use it herself nor allow any one else to do so? It is difficult to assert any moral right, and it is perfectly obvious that Australia has only the power to keep it owing to British protection.

The recently concluded war, the bishop reminded his readers, demonstrated that Australians could not ignore their responsibilities to both the Empire and humanity.⁵⁰

Among other options, White considered the proposition that the problem of the empty north 'might be solved by a colour line dividing off North Australia, and that within it coloured labour and settlement might be allowed'. This was potentially viable, he suggested. The objection of white Australia devotees, that the coloured population would inevitably seep southward, he dismissed as 'a purely imaginary danger'. Rather, the 'real difficulty would be to prevent white wasters from drifting north and demoralizing the coloured population'. In another passage, however, he acknowledged that the colour-line proposal would not succeed because 'the Labour Party would not consent to it [and] it would be rejected by probably four-fifths of the Australian voters'. Another proposal was to employ coloured labour in the north on strict three-year indentures. 'If properly carried out', the bishop argued, 'there would seem to be little danger in it for the White Australia policy, and it would give employment to a large number of white men.' He admitted, however, that 'White Australia purists' would not accept this option. The third alternative White discussed was 'practically to pay people to live in the tropical North by a costly system of subsidies and a whole army of officials'. This, he suggested, was what was actually done in the Northern Territory. It was 'the system most consonant to the White Australia ideal', but it was inordinately expensive and in the Territory had been unsuccessful.⁵¹ Nowhere did White propound a definitive solution to the problem of northern development. His intention was, rather, to alert his fellow Australians to the moral dilemma in which they were embedded in consequence of their possession of lands vastly in excess of their present needs or capacity to use.

The same moral dilemma threaded through Hasting Young's 1922 critique of white Australia, though Young was far more attuned than White to the imperative of defence. On the first page he declared that 'it is time that a clarion cry went forth, with the object of filling the vast empty spaces of the Australian Continent, if for no other reason than for purposes of defence'. Hemmed in by Asian countries with their 'superabundant and increasing population', located in the danger zone of the Pacific and far from a mother country which might be unable to offer military assistance in the future,

Australia's survival was precarious. Especially tempting to the crowded and covetous nations in the region were the vast stretches of 'unoccupied country, which we possess but fail to make satisfactory use of'. Thus far, white Australia enthusiasts might have agreed with him, but Young went on to argue that the problem of the empty north, and consequently the nation's security, would never be resolved 'until the Australian people are prepared to give up their traditional sentimental policy of a "White Australia"'.⁵²

Young discussed three strategies for implanting coloured races in the north. Indentured labour he considered unlikely to be allowed because, having been trialled once before (with Pacific Islanders), it was found to be too open to abuse. The second option was 'unrestricted immigration of coloured races into Australia', as recommended by E.W. Cole. This, Young claimed, was doubtless motivated by high-minded principle but was completely impractical since most coloured individuals so admitted would move south, compete with white workers there and so negate the purpose of allowing them into the country. Besides, the inevitable outcome of such racial freedom would be 'a nation of crossbred mongrels'. The third and 'most practicable [strategy] to solve the problem of populating and developing tropical Australia is to draw a colour line; say, across the tropic of Capricorn, or even further south'. In this region, under direct Commonwealth control, 'an Indian population from our Empire' should be introduced. Young dismissed the counter-argument that the coloured races would inevitably move south; like Bishop White, he considered 'that a greater source of danger would be the contamination of the coloured people by white degenerates crossing northward'. 'In any case', he remarked with consummate confidence in white authority, 'ordinary military supervision would prevent either contingency.'⁵³

Yet while Young assumed that whites would hold the reins of power, he also pleaded for respect for coloured races. He noted that 'Asia has produced many brilliant intellects and noble characters' and pointedly reminded his readers 'that Jesus Christ Himself was an Asiatic, and in these modern times even He would be banned from Australian shores'. Young paid at least lip-service to the sensitivities of Asians, claiming that the restricted immigration he advocated would appease opinion in India by demonstrating Australians' willingness to share their country.⁵⁴ Above all, however, he sought to safeguard the interests of white Australians. In Young's estimation, escalating population pressures combined with political instability made it imperative for Australia to act immediately: to compromise on the white Australia policy while it could still do so on terms advantageous to itself. The alternative was to sit back and wait to be overtaken by events, losing all control over immigration and enduring terms dictated from outside.

A similar warning – of the need to compromise before being overwhelmed by events – was sounded by the British Empire enthusiast Fleetwood Chidell in 1926. Adhering to the contemporary belief that the primary cause of international tension was land-hunger under circumstances of rapid population growth, Chidell complained that Australians were not living up to their responsibilities, to the detriment of both the British Empire and world peace. With their dogged devotion to the white Australia ideal, they were failing to utilise the tropical parts of their territory, thus exacerbating tensions in a land-hungry world to the point that another world war loomed nearer. 'The northern half of Australia', Chidell claimed, 'could probably support two hundred millions of Asiatics.' It was 'a realm endowed by nature with a great capacity for production [of] cotton, sugar, coffee, tobacco and other tropical growths', but the potential would lie wasted as long as Australia excluded the only people capable of working these lands.⁵⁵

The best means of developing the north, Chidell recommended, was to separate it from the south:

Definite frontiers would be drawn which would divide the regions of coloured development from those which were being worked by white men. The status of all the northern territory within these frontiers would be that of a dependency of the Commonwealth . . . Along the border line the colour bar would be strictly maintained.

Chidell's recommendations on a coloured tropical dependency were more detailed than most, with specific advice on the racial hierarchy to be instituted. Chinese and Indian labour would work under Japanese supervision, with whites in superior positions above them. Additionally, a special zone

would be put aside for exclusive Japanese occupancy (Chidell recommended the Kimberley plateau for this purpose), both to satisfy Japanese demands for an outlet for their surplus population and, Chidell candidly admitted, on the principle of *'divide et impera'* to ensure that the Asiatic north would not unite in hostility against the white south of Australia. He did not shy away from the hard realities of his proposal, acknowledging that many whites 'would be obliged to shift their home to another part of the continent', though he balanced this by pointing out that those who remained would find remunerative employment as plantation overseers, and the value of their land would escalate as it came into productive use.⁵⁶

Chidell claimed that his scheme would achieve an immediate reduction of international tensions – even an 'extinction of the sense of injury' – by providing Asians with what they most desperately desired: land. It would also inaugurate a 'period of great commercial and industrial prosperity . . . shared at once by men of our own race and by those of other nations'. This was an optimistic prognosis for his own scheme, but Chidell's proposal held a strong streak of realpolitik. Acknowledging that his ideas would find little favour among Australians, he argued that they really had little choice:

To place trust in a nominal sovereignty over unoccupied land is to grasp at a shadow. The disposal of Australia has passed out of the hands of Australians. It is being determined year by year in the schoolrooms, factories and arsenals of Asia and Europe, through the insurgence of ideas that are flooding the world. The only option the Australian in reality possesses is that of surrendering a part or of being despoiled of the whole. By grasping at the shadow he may easily lose all.⁵⁷

Chidell republished as a journal paper the section of his book, *Australia – White or Yellow?*, in which he advanced this argument. Lest the reader misunderstand him, he replaced the open question of the book title with a closed question for the title of his journal contribution: 'Is White Australia Possible? – No'.⁵⁸

Reassessing the Tropics

By the 1930s, debates about the north were taking a different tenor. The new tropical medicine, affirming the capacity of the white race to acclimatise to the tropics, was one factor behind this. At least equally important, however, were reassessments of the productive potential of the Australian tropics. Arguments for drawing a colour line, confining non-whites to the north of the continent, had been predicated on the notion that the north contained rich agricultural resources, lacking only manual labour to bring into productivity. New environmental assessments, particularly by geographers, brought this assumption into question. They found that there was no tropical cornucopia in Australia. Beyond the narrow strip of coastal north Queensland lay, for the most part, desolation: lands that no race could successfully develop or prolifically populate. If the Australian tropics were not in fact fertile and fecund like the tropic lands of the Pacific or Southeast Asia, there was little point importing 'tropical labour' to exploit them.

Ironically, it was an opponent of the white Australia policy who spearheaded the reassessment of tropical Australian resources in ways that undermined conventional arguments for a multiracial north. Griffith Taylor collated a vast array of data on the soils, vegetation, rainfall and other natural attributes of northern Australia to conclude that most of it had no prospect of sustaining a dense population and much of it was, in his words, 'almost useless'. For publicising these findings, Taylor came under heavy criticism in the late 1910s and early 1920s, some commentators labelling him 'unpatriotic' for slandering the good repute of Australia.⁵⁹ More astute observers, however, seized on the fact that Taylor's downward reassessment of the resources of northern Australia could help justify the white Australia policy to the world. One of the first to do so was Edmund Piesse, director of the Pacific Branch in the Prime Minister's office, who in 1920 used Taylor's findings to rebut the 'dog in the manger' allegation against Australia. Publicising the resource impoverishment of the north, Piesse argued, would show 'to the rest of the world . . . that it loses little from our [white Australia] policy'.⁶⁰

The realisation that northern Australia was unsuited to close settlement gained ground over the 1920s and 1930s.⁶¹ In April 1933, George Pearce, former Minister for Home and Territories, penned a

cabinet memo which flatly stated that tropical agriculture was ‘out of the question’ in the Northern Territory. Pastoralism, with consequent sparse settlement, was all the region could support.⁶² Following Griffith Taylor’s lead, geographer W. Wynne Williams declared in 1935 that tropical Australia, except the narrow east-coast strip, ‘will never hold a population of any magnitude of our own or any other race of people’.⁶³ Referring to the Northern Territory, A. Grenfell Price stated that ‘no race – white, black, or yellow – can find great profit in settling such lands’. For Price, writing in the 1930s, whether whites could adapt to life in the tropics was still an open question, and the consequences of ‘the remarkable experiment of extending the “White Australia” policy to the tropics . . . are still uncertain’.⁶⁴ In his 1939 international comparative study, *White Settlers in the Tropics*, Price remained agnostic on this question. But he was sure that loose talk about ‘vast empty spaces’ and ‘huge undeveloped potentialities’ was dangerous because it fostered the false notion that the undeveloped state of northern Australia was a consequence of neglect rather than of nature.⁶⁵

No colour line was drawn across northern Australia. Advocates of a colour line had been led up a blind alley, based on the combined beliefs that the north held enormous potential for agricultural development and that only coloured races could perform manual labour in the tropics. As the credibility of both propositions was eroded, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, advocacy of a multiracial north, sealed off from an all-white south, fizzled out. When attacks on the white Australia policy were renewed after World War II, arguments for tropical exceptionalism had only a very small place, and the subsequent dismantling of the policy owed little, if anything, to such arguments. Yet, while proposals to draw a colour line across the north were ineffectual, that does not mean they were unimportant. They offer a window on early 20th-century Australian thinking about race, place and progress, showing that, while there were critics of the white Australia policy in the early part of the century, most critics shared key assumptions and values with supporters of the policy.

Most important of the shared values was whiteness. Rejecting an exclusively white Australia as a geographical impossibility, the critics examined here nonetheless sought to maintain white ascendancy. A second shared value was the imperative of progress. The economic development of the north, culminating in the cultivation of its soil, had to be achieved to validate Australia’s legal and moral title to the land. Third, there was the shared assumption that Australia was in an exceptionally vulnerable position, far from the motherland and adjacent to lands suffering severe population pressures. Both critics and supporters of the white Australia policy insisted that urgent action was necessary to secure Australia’s place in the world.

Where critics and supporters of the policy most significantly disagreed – apart from the mundane issue of the habitability of the tropics – was on the possibility of monolithic nationhood. White Australia orthodoxy insisted on ‘a [white] nation for a continent and a [white] continent for a nation’, to paraphrase the words (without misrepresenting the sense) of Australia’s first prime minister, Edmund Barton. The critics examined in this paper effectively advocated a two-nation solution to the problem of the empty north. There would be a coloured northern Australia and an all-white southern Australia, each based on quite different principles of social structure and cohesion, the south ethnically homogeneous and egalitarian, the north racially diverse and stratified. Both would exist under the jurisdiction of the Australian state, but it would not be a unitary nation-state. Put in these terms, it is unsurprising that the advocates of a colour line failed to achieve their objective, but the fact that such a solution was advocated is testament to the intensity of anxiety over the tropics in early 20th-century Australia.

- 1 W.K. Hancock, *Australia* (London 1930), 66.
- 2 See for example Gizen-no-Teki, *Colorphobia: an exposure of the 'white Australia' fallacy* (Sydney 1903); E.W. Cole, *The White Australia Question* (Melbourne 1903).
- 3 Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: science, health and racial destiny in Australia* (Melbourne 2002), 73–86.
- 4 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (hereinafter CPD), 5 (1901), 5936.
- 5 J.M. Powell, Griffith Taylor and 'Australia Unlimited' (Brisbane 1993), 9–13.
- 6 Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the doomed race theory, 1880–1939* (Melbourne 1997).
- 7 CPD, 1 (1901), 184–85.
- 8 Henry Reynolds, *North of Capricorn: the untold story of Australia's north* (Sydney 2003).
- 9 See for example 'Japanese in Australia', *Northern Territory Times*, 6 Mar. 1896, 2; 'A white man's farewell to the N.T.', *ibid.*, 25 Mar. 1898, 3.
- 10 See for example, *Cairns Morning Post*, 8 Mar. 1901, 4; *ibid.*, 5 Nov. 1901, 4.
- 11 William H. McNeill, *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History* (Toronto 1986).
- 12 Queensland Parliamentary Debates, 87 (1901), 1077. Under the Pacific Island Labourers Act, most Pacific Islanders resident in Australia were deported between 1906 and 1908.
- 13 Lyndon Megarrity, "'White Queensland': the Queensland government's ideological position on the use of Pacific Island labourers in the sugar sector 1880–1901", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 52 (2006), 1–12.
- 14 *Cairns Morning Post*, 8 Feb. 1901, 2; *ibid.*, 29 Mar. 1901, 2; *ibid.*, 10 Jan. 1902, 2; *ibid.*, 10 Jan. 1908, 3.
- 15 *Torres Strait Pilot*, 16 Nov. 1901, 2.
- 16 J. Langdon Parsons, *The Northern Territory of South Australia: a brief historical account: pastoral and mineral resources* (Adelaide 1901), 3, 5, 8.
- 17 H.A. Parsons, *The Truth about the Northern Territory: an enquiry* (Adelaide 1907), 41.
- 18 A.C. MacDonald, 'The cotton industry', *Victorian Geographical Journal*, 22 (1904), 16–17.
- 19 David Thomatis, 'The cotton culture: an opportunity for permanent and prosperous settlement in tropical Australia', *Victorian Geographical Journal*, 22 (1904), 4, 12.
- 20 Thomatis, 'Cotton culture', 8–9.
- 21 MacDonald, 'Cotton industry', 16.
- 22 Nancy Stepan, 'Biological degeneration: races and proper places', in J.E. Chamberlin and S.L. Gilman (eds), *Degeneration: the dark side of progress* (New York 1985), 98–104.
- 23 Matthew MacFie, 'How can tropical and sub-tropical Australia be effectively developed', Report of the Eleventh Meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science (1907), 599, original emphasis.
- 24 Matthew MacFie, *Are the Laws of Nature Transgressed or Obeyed by the Continuous Labour of White Men in the Australian Tropics* (Melbourne c.1910), 1.
- 25 D. Hastings Young, *A White Australia: is it possible? The problem of the empty north* (Melbourne 1922), 25.
- 26 MacFie, *Laws of Nature*, 2, 8, 11–12.
- 27 MacFie, 5.
- 28 MacFie, 'Tropical and sub-tropical Australia', 611.
- 29 A.B. Wolfe, 'The population problem since the World War: a survey of literature and research', *Journal of Political Economy*, 36 (1928), 674–75.
- 30 'Tropical Australia: report of the discussion at the Australasian Medical Congress at Brisbane, 27th August 1920', Commonwealth Parliamentary Paper (hereinafter CPP) 103 (Melbourne 1921), 5.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 4–7, 11.
- 32 Alison Bashford, "'Is White Australia possible?'" race, colonialism and tropical medicine', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23 (2000), 267, original emphasis.
- 33 D. Garland to Secretary, External Affairs, 13 Feb. 1914, A3 NT 1914/1183, National Archives of Australia (hereinafter NAA).
- 34 Raphael Cilento, *The White Man in the Tropics: with especial reference to Australia and its dependencies*, Commonwealth Department of Health Service Publication No. 7 (1925), 73–74.
- 35 A. Grenfell Price, *White Settlers in the Tropics* (New York 1939), 74.
- 36 Cilento, *White Man*, 74.
- 37 Arthur Wigmore, *White Australia and the Tropics* (Melbourne c.1932), 5–6.
- 38 W.H.W. Cheyne, 'White settlement in tropical Australia', *Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 26:5 (1923), 80, original emphasis.
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- 40 Taylor, 'Geographical factors', 42–46; Griffith Taylor, 'Geography and Australian national problems', Report of the Sixteenth Meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science (1923), 449–52.
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- 42 Taylor, 'Geography and Australian national problems', 481–82.
- 43 Griffith Taylor, 'The frontiers of settlement in Australia', *Geographical Review*, 16 (1926), 12; Griffith Taylor, 'Broome and the tropics', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 Jan. 1925.
- 44 Griffith Taylor, 'Racial misconceptions: showing that a mixture of races is always advantageous', *The Home: an Australian quarterly*, 1 Oct. 1927, 20, 50, 54; Griffith Taylor, 'The human race: white Australia aspect: the Mongolians, an advanced type', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June 1923.
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- 51 *Ibid.*, 100–01, 256–57.
- 52 Young, *White Australia*, 3–6.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 42–44.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 44–47.
- 55 Fleetwood Chidell, *Australia – White or Yellow?* (London 1926), 144–45.

56 Ibid., 148–57.

57 Ibid., 150, 158.

58 Fleetwood Chidell, 'Is white Australia possible? – No', *The Outlook: British Empire supplement*, 6 Nov. 1926, 455–57.

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60 Piesse to Secretary, PM Dept, 28 June 1920, Papers of E.L. Piesse, box 1, series 2, folder 1, National Library of Australia (hereinafter NLA), ms. 882.

61 Walker, *Anxious Nation*, 154–67.

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64 A. Grenfell Price, 'Pioneer reactions to a poor tropical environment: a journey through central and north Australia in 1932', *Geographical Review*, 23 (1933), 370–71.

65 Price, *White Settlers*, 52, 121.