

CHAPTER THREE – NATURE IN NAMES

Australian history is almost always picturesque ... It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies... – Mark Twain, Following the Equator...

In recent celebratory histories of settler achievements, the Atherton Tableland is often described as “one of Nature’s outstanding accomplishments” (Atherton Centenary Committee 1985). Indeed, the Shire of Eacham today acclaims itself as the “Garden Shire of the State” and actively promotes its “picturesque virgin rainforest, evergreen fields, its crater lakes, numerous waterfalls and streams set under Mt Bartle Frere.” Glossy posters extolling the “breathtaking beauty” of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area also draw our attention to “sweeping vistas”, “light-dappled woodlands” and “spectacular forest landscapes”. While the historical trajectory of these viewpoints are quite different, one borne out of the conservation movement in Australia, the other anchored in the foundational processes of discovery and settlement, common to each of them is the perception of these ‘picturesque places’ as natural.

Imperial history and historians often treat the accounts of early European explorers as merely describing what already existed or simply repeating what happened. Yet, as Paul Carter points out, these discoverers and settlers, in their journeys and through their writings, actively constituted both space and history. The lie of the land is not a given but is brought into being through the social actions and cultural perceptions of these individuals. In this sense, arriving explorers and settlers enacted an already historical space – the “country did not precede the traveller: it was the offspring of his intention” (Carter 1987: 349).

In this chapter, I examine the writings of some of the earliest Europeans to venture into *Yamani* country, and what later became known as the Wet Tropics. In particular, I focus upon the 1885-86 diaries of explorer and gold-pro prospector, Christie Palmerston, and the 1889 and 1904 reports of Archibald Meston, newspaper editor and one-time member of the Queensland Parliament, and from 1898 to 1903, Protector of Aborigines. It is through these and other colonial accounts that a landscape – a poetic and historical picture – slowly emerges.

It is important to keep in mind here that for the general public, Palmerston’s exploits and his mineralogically-focused descriptions of the world he encounters, subsequently serialised in the newspaper, *Queensland Figaro*, and reported in Queensland Parliamentary Reports, constitute all that is known of this environment in the mid to late 1880s.

As Paul Carter points out, explorer journals like Palmerston’s, “describe the country in its pre-mapped state” (Carter 1992: 9). These are accounts that are characterised as much by geographical discontinuity, personal inability and historical failure as they are by heroic deeds and the effects of colonial perseverance. The world described in these accounts is fragmentary – first encounters with geographical objects and human subjects – that are only later joined together to form the omnipotent view of the map or chart. The descriptions of Palmerston, Meston and others build the various elemental layers – stone, wood, water – of this emergent landscape, in the process creating a cultural space of historical proportions. Critical to this process of landscape formation is the act of naming – places, people, fauna and flora, little escapes the process of inscription. This process of making and remaking the world through the ascription of names is part of what Stephen Greenblatt calls ‘linguistic colonialism’.

While often glossed over in later narratives of settlement and civilisation, European exploration and occupation occurred within existing Aboriginal landscapes. Glimpses of these landscapes can be seen in the early historical sources. Moreover, it is apparent from these writings that it was these already cultured spaces that made European colonisation possible (see Carter 1987: 339). The diaries of Christie Palmerston give us a clear view of this paradox of imperial history.

NATURAL FOUNDATIONS: CHRISTIE PALMERSTON AND THE MINERALOGICAL FANTASY

As previously mentioned, Christie Palmerston ventured into Ngadjon-Jii country on four occasions. In 1884-85, Palmerston journeyed through the rainforests from Herberton to the Barron Falls. This was a circuitous trip by today's standards. Palmerston and his party travelled from Herberton, past what is now the township of Millaa Millaa, southeast along a route which is today marked by the Palmerston Highway and then turning to the northwest, followed the North Johnstone River towards its source, before breaking from this course somewhere near where Malanda is now, and eventually joining up with Robson's Track, east of Atherton.

In the later half of 1886, Palmerston undertook three prospecting trips up the Russell River towards its headwaters in the vicinity of the area that later became known as Boonjie. On the Herberton to Barron Falls journey, Palmerston spent about a week in Ngadjon-Jii country, from 20 to 27 January 1885. He spent considerably more time exploring what later became known as the Russell River Goldfield, in all about three months, and for this reason I largely focus on Palmerston's incursions along the Russell River and its tributaries.

At the beginning of his diary describing his explorations along the Russell River, Palmerston makes clear to the reader his intentions and motivations regarding these journeys. As he states, "metals alone being my aim and object" (cited in Savage 1992: 190). Palmerston is of course referring here to gold (as well as tin) and his endeavours to discover and open up another field similar to the highly rewarding Palmer Goldfield. In these undertakings Palmerston was not alone. As Paul Carter points out, discovering a gold mine was a "mineralogical fantasy on everybody's mind" (Carter 1987: 301). Given Palmerston's interest in 'metals', it comes as no surprise then that his account of his travels through the catchment of the Russell River reflects this interest. From Palmerston's account, the geomorphological layers of the landscape are gradually deposited through each hard-won step, each hardship encountered, each sentence in his diary. Palmerston's description of the Russell River betrays his geological fantasies and fascinations:

The whole of the river assumed just the auriferous formation to excite the mineral explorer's expectations. The formation consists of a series of coloured rock – sandstone, black, blue and a grey-greenish slate, banded with a fair proportion of quartz. The riverbed is still broad, very crooked, and with exceptional rapids, of a grade not great considering the mountainous country through which it descends (cited in Savage 1992: 201).

Descriptions of various rock formations – 'consolidated lava', 'mountains of granite shale', 'volcanic soil', 'granite boulders', 'monster spurs', 'protruding crags', 'slated ravines', 'quartz reefs', 'alluvial terraces of river sand', dominate the diary. Each crag, ravine, spur, mountain, gorge, bank, creek-bed is described in terms of its auriferous potential. The colour of each rock, stone and boulder is given – 'white crystals', 'black sand', 'light-grey granite', 'chalky slate of variegated colours', 'blue slate', and 'the finest colours of gold', as further indication of the gold-bearing possibilities of this craggy and tumbled landscape. For all the talk of

discovery in Palmerston's writings, particularly of gold, the diaries also reveal that Palmerston perceives a world which is also familiar and it is this that he embraces in his journey and descriptions thereof. This is the rock-solid world of geology – of granites, basalts, quartz, shales, sandstones, slates, volcanic soils and river sands.

Palmerston does more than just naively describe a world that is already there. His descriptions classify, and give form and meaning to this world. The rocks he sees are not just rocks, but types or classes acknowledged within the discursive field of geology. The application of these geological terms serves to constitute the very object world encountered by Palmerston. Moreover, the use of these particular names also embodies the mineralogical passions and ambitions of Palmerston himself. Naming the world he experiences in this way, Palmerston not only brings "history into being", but he also invents "the spatial and conceptual co-ordinates within which history could occur" (Carter 1987: 46).

The discovery of this familiar geological space had both a utilitarian and strategic function. The bedrock spaces described by Palmerston suggest that subsequent Europeans could act in this environment in terms of one of their customary practices, mining, and that there was a link between these new landscapes and the more familiar ones in the home country. Palmerston, like other prospectors, was required to report his 'metal' finds to the authorities, for which he was handsomely rewarded. The authorities in turn subsequently declared the upper Russell River area a goldfield. The discovery of gold along the Russell River not only contributed to the wealth of riches of the state but it also facilitated the State's control of this space.

The natural world Palmerston perceives and describes is elemental – it is one, which appears to consist of little else than rock and water and the land-gouging interactions and effects of these two base materials. Unlike many other explorers of the Australian continent, who saw waterways as facilitating travel, for Palmerston, 'flooded creeks', a 'cavalcade of waterfalls', 'relentless rapids', the 'ice-like water' of swiftly-flowing rivers, the 'miles of white tumultuous waters' that sweep down the river's 'irregularly quarried gorges', and the incessant tropical rain are all regarded as obstacles to exploration and discovery.

From Palmerston's descriptions, while there are many references to "rain, rain, ceaseless rain" (Savage 1992: 195), the forests associated with this rainfall are all but absent from the world he presents. Like the "wild, appalling streams" of this area, the forests are reduced to impenetrable "dark, repugnant, thorny jungle" (ibid: 219) or useless "scrub". Any details about this dense and dank impediment are largely confined to Palmerston's cursory comments about economically valuable timber encountered, such as when he notes the position of "some young cedar trees" (ibid: 197). On the Russell River expedition, Palmerston allegedly 'discovered' a new species of kauri pine, which the Government Botanist of Victoria named *Agathis palmerstoni* (Savage 1992: 285).

In addition to these scant references, Palmerston provides descriptions of the fauna and flora his Aboriginal 'boys', and those Aborigines they encounter, eat and use:

We got an early start ... soon passing large stages piled with "kunkee" nuts [yellow walnut] ... This nut, in size and shape, resembles the "coohoy" nut [Queensland black walnut]; but the "kunkee" contains properties of the most deadly poison, and requires to go through processes of much fire and water before it can be made fit for food (Savage 1992: 198).

Palmerston's diary is peppered with references to the procurement and eating of these nuts and other Aboriginal food stuffs: "some of the boys had a few possums; others climbed the mountains and gathered some 'coohoy' nuts for the night's victuals" (Savage 1992: 216). While Palmerston and his party relied extensively on these sources for sustenance

throughout their time along the Russell River, it is also apparent that Palmerston did not consider these items to be 'civilised' food. On one occasion, on their ascent of Mt Bartle Frere, Palmerston refers to himself and his 'boys' as 'beasts' as they prepare for their evening meal of possum and grubs (Savage 1992: 227). Palmerston's attitude towards the Aboriginal diet (and the Aborigines) is neatly summed up in his comments following his meeting with fellow prospector, George E. Clarke, along the upper reaches of the North Johnstone River:

He graciously gave me food that he knew he could in a short time ill-spare. I ate this with relish that sank the best of the blackfellows' fare to the level of mere animal existence that no civilized being could envy (Savage 1992: 219).

In much the same way that the various elements of the riverine environment failed to congeal into picturesque forms for Palmerston, then so too the Aboriginal occupants of this 'dark' and 'repugnant' (Savage 1992: 219) nature enter European history – described by Palmerston as "savages" (ibid: 211), "foul brutes" (ibid: 218), and "niggers" (ibid: 224). On his expedition up the Russell River, Palmerston is accompanied by his 'boys', a force of seventeen Aboriginal 'swagmen' recruited from around Mourilyan. When not procuring fresh food from the rainforests, these men were burdened with '80lb' packs containing Palmerston's gear and supplies. They also assisted Palmerston in his prospecting activities, panning for gold along the many creeks they traversed. Of this initial party of Aboriginal labourers, Palmerston identifies two as 'civilised boys', while the remaining men are referred to as 'myalls'. It appears that Palmerston's Aboriginal workers were also joined at times by local Aboriginal people, who generally followed and more rarely assisted Palmerston and his Aboriginal labourers for a few days at a time.

As Palmerston and his party travel up the Russell River they regularly encounter "large mobs of niggers" (Savage 1992: 191). Palmerston frequently describes these encounters as 'surprises' and the subsequent reaction of the startled Aborigines as a "panic-like scatter" (loc. cit.). Palmerston's talk of chance encounters is embedded within a broader narrative of violence in which ambush and sudden attacks by 'hostile natives' are met with the 'retributive justice' of Palmerston's rifle. Not all encounters between Palmerston's party and the local Aboriginal occupants are hostile, however. In a number of places in his account, Palmerston talks about how his 'boys' were presented with 'kunkee' or yellow walnut by the 'Russell River blacks'.

While Palmerston's narrative treatment of his often violent engagements with the Indigenous population is somewhat brusque and dismissive, it is also apparent that the spatial presence of the Aborigines was not just a threat to Palmerston's interests. The dense jungle which was the object of conquest and the context of contestation, and which Palmerston saw as affording protection to 'hostile Aborigines', also facilitated his movement through this space. As Paul Carter remarks, "in 1788, Australia was already a highly cultivated space. Aboriginal occupation had created tracks and clearings ..." (Carter 1987: 337).

While the nature of Palmerston's exploration entailed wading through and following creeks and rivers for signs of gold, throughout his diaries Palmerston also refers to the many, well-used Aboriginal tracks that he and his party of 'black boys' travelled along as part of this mineralogical quest:

We met with and crossed the largest native path I have seen in these jungles (Savage 1992: 193) ... A fair-sized aborigines' pathway crosses the mountain just here, and we followed it (ibid: 195) ... along the summit of which ran a large and freshly-used native path, going about east, which we followed ... when it led us straight into an aborigines' camp (ibid: 197) ... we again steeply

ascended a table-land's summit, where we picked up a lot of fresh nigger tracks, which led us into a large encampment by sunset (Savage 1992: 198).

Encountering a camp, often rapidly abandoned by the Aboriginal residents in the most “terror-impressed disorder” (Savage 1992: 197), Palmerston and his party would sometimes ransack the thatched dwellings and hanging baskets for food and other items of value. On a few occasions, particularly when the camp occupants were known to the Aboriginal members of Palmerston’s party, they pitched camp at these clearings in the rainforest. On other occasions, Palmerston and his party spent the night at “an aborigines’ old camping ground, named Pantapo” (ibid: 208).

While it could be said that “exploration civilised the country by translating it into English” (Carter 1987: 63), and in the case of Palmerston, translating it into the familiar language of geology, Palmerston’s diaries retain many of the Aboriginal names for places along the Russell River. Indeed, once Palmerston leaves the already colonised and thus lexically familiar environs of the lower South Johnstone River, he travels in a country without European names, where no settler roads exist. The objective of Palmerston’s journey is not a known place or a final point in a linear trajectory. As Paul Carter observes, explorer narratives “lack plot” (Carter 1992: 11). It is the historical experience and description of space that forms both the content and aim of these accounts.

In his wanderings around the Russell River, an Aboriginal space becomes visible in the form of named bora grounds, camps, animals, plants, waterfalls, rivers and people. For Palmerston, and subsequent prospectors, these Aboriginal names constituted a useful form of spatial communication, which enabled the Europeans, led by their native guides, to move around a landscape which had few notable points of reference, as far as they were concerned. As Palmerston once commented, the rainforests were a “jungle in which one’s eyes could not pierce much further than one’s own length” (Eacham Historical Society 1985: 32). It was perhaps the very nature of the country that Palmerston journeyed through that made the imposition of European names so difficult. Although credited as the first European explorer of this region, from his diaries it appears that in the three months Palmerston spent in the Russell River catchment, he did not once ascribe a European name to a place or geographical object. In many respects, the Aboriginal names recorded by Palmerston have served the same purposes as imposed European ones. These Aboriginal names soon became fixed onto maps and transcribed into subsequent settler experiences of the region. For instance, many of the native names for geographical objects recorded by Palmerston in 1886 appear two years later in the report and on the accompanying map of the government geologist, Robert L. Jack. While retaining their Aboriginal names, the places signified by these names had undergone a rapid transformation. Tachappa, an Aboriginal bora ground in late 1886, had by February 1888 been transformed into a “butcher’s shop and store, and about a dozen Chinese dwellings” (Jack 1888: 2), while many of the original Aboriginal paths had been overlaid with “digger’s tracks” (loc. cit.). Local Aboriginal people, referred to by Robert Jack, as “half civilized blacks” were reduced to ‘beasts of burden’, carrying rations and other gear to the fast-appearing European and Chinese diggings. As Jack’s account and map attest, authorised by the foundational act of exploration and preserved out of context in this way, Aboriginal names allowed Europeans to move around and make some momentary sense of the environment they were soon to radically transform. Moreover, as Carter points out, when taken out of context by Europeans, and placed on maps for example, the use of Aboriginal place names symbolised more the historical presence of Europeans than indicating the *a priori* status of the country as Aboriginal (Carter 1987: 344).

The issue of native place names and European naming practices is very much at the forefront of Archibald Meston’s meditations on his scientific expedition to Bellenden-Ker and Mt Bartle Frere in June 1889. Meston’s account of his travels with F. M. Bailey, the Colonial Botanist, and Kendall Broadbent, the Zoological Collector with the Queensland Museum,

adds another layer to the emerging landscape, adorning Palmerston's bare, geological surfaces with the fauna and flora of the region.

MEANINGLESS NAMES AND A PLEASING GEOGRAPHICAL NOMENCLATURE

Archibald Meston claimed the distinction of being the first European to ascend the summit of the Bellender-Ker Range in June 1889, less than three years after Christie Palmerston made a similar claim with respect to Mt Bartle Frere. While exploratory, it is apparent that Meston's travels are presented as being for a greater scientific and national good, as opposed to the more personal interests of Palmerston's journey along the Russell River. Indeed, Meston boasts that the trip to the Bellenden-Ker Range is the first "purely scientific expedition" in Australia. Both journeys are, however, dominated by economic concerns, in the case of Meston's expedition, the discovery of economically-valuable plants – new species as lucrative as coffee or tea perhaps. From Meston's report on the expedition, it appears that the region's fauna are of secondary significance to the more important task of ascertaining the nature of the "timbers of the district".

On the subject of 'geology', which dominates Palmerston's diaries, Meston writes that there is "little to report". Palmerston's travels had already achieved that act of discovery.

Meston's report is arguably the first 'scientific' account of the Aborigines of the area and he specifically devotes a section to the 'Bellenden-Ker blacks'. This said, Meston's descriptions are quite general and are more focused upon comparing and contrasting local Aboriginal traits with those of other 'blacks' in the region and groups further south, supposedly known to Europeans in the later part of the nineteenth century. Meston's attempt to scientifically classify and arrange the Aborigines of the Russell, Mulgrave and Barron Rivers into a broader taxonomic scheme is informed by evolutionary ideas of the time, notably the social Darwinian notion of 'survival of the fittest'. Within this interpretive framework, the 'Australian blacks', like all "savage and inferior races" (Meston 1889: 9) are "destined to disappear" (loc. cit.) – a fate, which Meston suggests is analogous to that of the dinosaurs. In suggesting that the 'white strangers' "walk over the graves of a dead race" in much the same way that the "blacks themselves trod over the rock sepulchres of the diprotodon" (loc. cit.), Meston also points to the *a priori* and multi-layered cultural and natural dimensions of the landscape.

From Meston's report, it is apparent that the more significant peaks, rivers and prominent geographical features in the region have already been ascribed a European name. This is not a landscape in an entirely pre-mapped state. Indeed, it is this emerging map of named fixed points that, unlike Palmerston's account, provides a plot structure to Meston's narrative – a linear story about the ascent of two mountains.

While integral to Meston's narrative of exploration and discovery, he takes issue with the "utterly meaningless names" (Meston 1889: 1) conferred by surveyors and local residents. He suggests instead, the adoption of native place names. Meston's intentions here are two-fold – to establish what he regards as a more "pleasing geographical nomenclature" (loc. cit.) and preserve aspects of the native dialects "doomed to deplorably early annihilation" (loc. cit.). To this end, Meston informs the public that "special efforts" were made on the scientific expedition to obtain the native names for "creeks, mountains, rivers and other conspicuous geographical features" (loc. cit.).

Notwithstanding these noble intentions, Meston and his party proceed to ascend the Bellenden-Ker Range accompanied by "four strong kanakas", men from Tanna Island in the Solomon Islands. Moreover, as if suffering from some form of lexical amnesia or not yet fully

aware of the ambitions expressed in the revised and elaborated report of the expedition, Meston and his party proceed to ascend the range, conferring English and Latin names on the flora and fauna encountered, and on those geographical objects considered worthy of memorialising with the names of their benefactors, or other prominent Europeans at the time, or commemorating one's own importance.

At a height of 2,300 feet we again found the remarkable fruit which Mr Bailey has named Garcinia Mestoni, or "Meston's Mangosteen" ... (Meston 1889: 3).

Upon coming across a series of imposing waterfalls, Meston records that:

The scene at this spot in the wet season must baffle the human imagination. Even in the dry weather it was a picture of fascinating loveliness, the future paradise of the artist and the lovers of the beautiful, the scenery-hunting tourists of years to come, when the lower ravines of the Bellenden-Ker are become familiar to the outside world of amateur explorers.

To this series of splendid cascades I have given the name of the "Morehead Cataracts", a deserved compliment to the Chief Secretary and Premier of a Government possessing the honourable distinction of being the first to send out in any part of Australia a purely scientific expedition (Meston 1889: 2).

On the eastern face of Bartle Frere is a cataract falling sheer down over two thousand feet ... To that cataract I have given the name of the "Hume Black Falls", in honour of the present Minister for Lands (Meston 1889: 7).

Meston's lyricism about the country he sees stands in stark contrast to the ragged and often despairing words of Christie Palmerston. Palmerston's open-ended and fragmentary account further contrasts with the landscaping efforts of Meston's overarching narrative. This is particularly apparent in the closing paragraphs of Meston's report, where abandoning the shackles of scientific description, Meston describes the scene witnessed from the peak of Bellenden-Ker. Peppered with allusions to Greek mythology, Meston's description of the view thus encountered incites a tradition of landscape perception and experience that renders the foreign historically familiar. Moreover, as Carter remarks, references such as these are not merely words of description but are "instruments of cultural conquest" (Carter 1987: 118), in this case, bearing the authority of the beginnings of European civilisation.

References to Greek mythology surface again in Meston's discussion of the 'Bellenden-Ker blacks'. In a meditation on civility and savagery, Meston considers the words of Minerva to the Furies in his contemplation about the one-sided nature of historical reckoning. Stripped of sentimentalism and euphemism, Meston tallies up the ledger of European-Aboriginal contact, and finds that the "white man has, beyond all question, been the most unscrupulous and deliberate murderer of the two" (Meston 1889: 9).

Acknowledging the savage and 'conspicuous facts' of white colonisation does not, however, prevent Meston from alluding to Darwinian ideas of natural selection to account for the disappearance of the 'Australian blacks'. Less than three years after the initial encounters between Europeans and the Aborigines of the Russell River catchment, Meston declares that "their epoch of time is near its termination. The shadows are deepening towards the everlasting night" (loc. cit.).

Through its notable absences, Meston's report reads as a self-fulfilling prophecy of this "mournful picture" (loc. cit.). In contrast to Palmerston's enlivened account of his encounter with local Aborigines, Meston's description refers largely to signs of prior Aboriginal occupation. Meston and his party travel along "old blacks' tracks", they come across "old

blacks' camp", and they discover the "skeleton of a blackfellow". For their ascent of Mt Bartle Frere, Meston arranges a "native black" to 'accompany' them to the summit. Yet, with the exception of this one reference, Meston's report on the expedition reduces Aboriginal occupation to relics or remnants, or relegates the Aborigines to the latter part of the narrative, sandwiched between a brief account of 'geology' and the more detailed descriptions of the 'timbers of the district', and the region's other natural productions, including flora and fauna.

As for the noble intentions mentioned at the start of his report, Meston concludes his account by suggesting that Aboriginal spatiality is perhaps far more complex than his original idea of adopting their 'pleasing geographical nomenclature' might suggest. To avoid the 'hopeless confusion', in European eyes at least, resulting from the Indigenous fact of places and objects having a number of different names, Meston identifies the need for 'considerable discretion'. As white history has shown, the discretion exercised by Meston and others in response to this issue – fundamentally, a problem of two cultures occupying the same country – resulted in both the erasure of this difference and the appropriation of those Aboriginal places names which remained.

For all of Meston's gloomy pronouncements and the suggestion of an area deceptively unpopulated, there are terse and tightly-loaded allusions to an ongoing Aboriginal presence. Before the expedition reaches the summit of Bellenden-Ker, Constable Whelan of the Native Mounted Police and his 'boys', who accompanied the expeditionary team soon after they commenced their travels, are called away to attend to "some murders by the blacks" on the recently declared Russell River Goldfield. Less than three years after Palmerston's journey into this very same region, Meston reports that:

[L]arge numbers of blacks have been acting as prospectors for the diggers ... [while] ... About 200 have also come in from time to time and worked on the Johnstone River plantations. Several diggers have been killed by the Russell blacks, who have also murdered three or four settlers on the Russell and Mulgrave (Meston 1889: 9).

While cursory, these comments are characteristic of white colonisation across Australia. As Paul Carter comments, "the influence of aboriginal culture in succouring and locating European society in Australia was considerable" (1987: 342). Explorers like Palmerston and Meston were not so much accompanied by native guides, but were led by native scouts. Unwittingly, these Aboriginal guides led the way for their own dispossession and dispersal. Murdered and driven from their own country, the survivors, like those on the upper reaches of the Russell River, were drafted into the workforce as menial labourers. In North Queensland, like so many other places in Australia, this scenario was repeated over and over again with each new wave of white encroachment and colonisation. However, as discussed in the next chapter, strangely familiar relationships were created between colonists and colonised as the earth was sluiced and the trees felled, and new spaces were made and negotiated in the emerging historical landscape.

CONCLUSION

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, a strange and sparse view of the landscape of North Queensland is presented to the public gaze.



Figure 9: Statue of 'Christie Palmerston and his Aboriginal Companion Pompo' at Millaa Millaa, Atherton Tableland (Photo: Sandra Pannell).

For the white readers of local newspapers, such as *Queensland Figaro*, the *Townsville Herald* and the *Queenslander*, and those members of the public familiar with state parliamentary papers, Palmerston's descriptions portray a barren world of rock and water. The elements of this fractured and eroded world are coloured by the lure of immediate economic gain and shaped by personal hardship and perseverance. It is left to Meston and his 1889 account of exploration of the Bellenden-Ker Range and Mt Bartle Frere, to cloak the hard-won surfaces of Palmerston's narrative with a verdant covering of Linnaean taxa and Latin names. As the natural elements of this landscape are painstakingly brought into view by the likes of Palmerston and Meston, the already cultural dimensions of this space, an Aboriginal space, begin to disappear, or so these narratives would have us believe. Yet, as the following chapters indicate, in the ensuing years the Aboriginal occupants of the Russell River region do more than just "loiter on the edge of our historical clearing" (Carter 1987: 327).