Irvinebank, Mining Community and Centre of an Empire

"GOD BLESS JOHN MOFFAT"


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This paper concentrates on the relationship of a mining magnate to the town of Irvinebank and the growth of its cultural and social activities in tandem with his monopolistic control of the chief mines, the Vulcan, Great Southern, Tornado and Governor Norman as well as the region north to Cooktown and west to Chillagoe.

The year 1984 is the centenary of the opening of the Loudoun Mill at Irvinebank, twenty-four kilometres beyond Herberton, west of Cairns, North Queensland. On Queensland Separation Day 1884 the battery and smelter were christened the Loudoun Mill by Janet Jack, daughter of William Jack, one of the discoverers of the Great Northern Mine at Herberton and partner of Moffat in that mine. A crowd of 150 sat down to lunch in the garden of John Moffat's Loudoun House followed by an afternoon of sports. The Glen Smelting Company, a New South Wales private company of which John Moffat was the North Queensland manager, owned the Mill. It was acclaimed the most complete processing plant in Queensland and became the headquarters of a mining magnate whose career spanned and sponsored the development of the base metal industry in Eastern Australia. He also ventured into oil exploration and sugar technology and financed and constructed towns, dams, tramways and railways.

For decades, Irvinebank, site of the largest tin battery and smelter in Australia, was reached by a narrow gauge tramway which branched off the Chillagoe Railway at Boonmoo. A long

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procession of politicians, journalists, promoters, company directors and two Governors came this way to visit Moffat and the Loudoun Mill. The arrival of the tram was heralded by the shrill roar of the steam locomotive echoing as the tram wound round the curves of Gibbs Creek passing Gane’s Hotel on the flat two miles away. It first came into view at Target Gully, then crossed over the bridge and wound up around Loudoun Mill and Moffat’s house to the Tram Station. The twenty-nine mile trip from Boonmoo took four hours on two privately owned two feet gauge tramways — the Stannary Hills Tramway, fourteen miles up Eureka Creek and into the gorge to Stannary Hills, opened in 1902, and then fifteen miles along the Irvinebank Tramway, opened in 1907, passing Hales Siding, Orient Camp and then Montalbion, the scene of a spectacular silver speculation by Moffat in the 1880’s, and following Gibbs Creek.

Travel on the Stannary Hills Tramway was at the passenger’s own risk, indeed a rough trip in a passenger carriage attached to the end of goods wagons loaded with coke, and town and mine supplies and hauled by wood-burning locomotives — “Pompey”, a Krauss 0-4-0 well tank locomotive or one of the two “Brush” 2-6-0T locomotives or the “Germany”, a Borsig 4-4-2 tender engine. The tramway traversed some of the most spectacular ravine country in the Walsh watershed. Travelling around the notorious horseshoe bend of one-and-a-half chains radius, the line climbed steeply for the last four miles through the Eureka Creek. It snaked along sidelings cut out of granite spurs where in the wet season spray poured down from the cliffs. The train bumped and clattered so violently that some journalists alleged it knocked protruding rocks. At Stannary Hills the tramway headquarters, mines and town were perched on the side of the ravine. Passengers relaxed there with tea and scones before boarding the Irvinebank Mining Company’s tram hauled by “Betty” 0-6-0T German Orenstein and Koppel locomotive or “Old John” 0-6-2T Avonside locomotive for the final stage crossing the 200 feet timber trestle “Black Bridge” over Eureka Creek, the longest bridge on the line. It branched off the line to Rocky Bluffs and ran through open forest country, the deep Yorkie’s cutting, rattling past ore and firewood sidings, horse teams hauling ore and on to Irvinebank.

Irvinebank was a bustling, dusty mining town when Gus Waddell knew it in its heyday in 1912, the year John Moffat retired. Visitors and journalists arriving on the tramway saw the Vulcan Hotel below the Vulcan mine poppet head and the school as they crossed Gibbs Creek bridge near the dam, wound through the Mill and then rose above Jack and Newell’s and Armstrong, Ledlie and
Stillman's stores, the Walsh Divisional Board Offices and the Queensland National and New South Wales Banks on the left. The Tram Station was close to the centre of the action, near the ninety feet smelter chimney belching forth smoke.

The cacophony of sound overwhelmed the visitors — the constant thud of stamps, the rattling, crashing sound of the Krupp Ball Mill, the continual roar of the tin smelters and calciners and the tinkling of the bells of the pack teams. Above were the humming cables of two Aerial Ropeways hauling ore across the valleys from the Governor Norman and the Vulcan mines. Below in the distance over the razor back the mighty shoofing sound of the air compressor of the Vulcan could be heard.

In the dry season the horse teams were identified along the roads by the moving clouds of dust. They plodded in with ore and firewood winding their way up Jessie Street past the tram station and round to the hoppers and firewood lines. Then there was little “Baby” locomotive puffing round the yards shunting. Less than fifty paces away was the house and office.

SHREWD, MODEST SCOT

In constant earshot were the forty head of stamps pounding away twenty-four hours per day except Sunday, twenty head working exclusively on Vulcan ore, the deepest tin mine in Australia — smoothly pounding out the tune, “John Moffat, John Moffat . . .” as his interests held three quarters of the company’s shares. The Irvinebank Mining Company’s Office was in cool rooms beneath the house, a respectable timber home built on eight feet stumps in February 1884. Gus Waddell worked with George (Daddy) Young, Tony Linedale and John Reid, lifetime business associates of the shrewd, frugal, pious, and modest Scott.

Accompanying Moffat through Loudoun Mill on daily inspections, watching the skilled smelter men at work, talking with miners, prospectors and teamsters as they came to receive payments, analysing mining, milling and tramway statistics Gus Waddell obtained an intimate appreciation of operations. The Waddells and Mill Managers also watched the strikers gathering in front of the Vulcan Hotel across the dam where Moffat’s imported white swans swam.

That was how Gus Waddell remembered Irvinebank when he reminisced for Glenville Pike’s articles in the Cummins and Campbell’s magazine and the “Campfire” columns of the North Queensland Register in the early 1950’s. Less than a year after Moffat died the Irvinebank Battery and Smelter had been taken over by the Queensland Government led by Ted Theodore, the
man Gus had seen addressing the strikers in front of the Vulcan Hotel. The glory of Irvinebank had faded. Today 102 years after James Gibbs, Billy Eales and party discovered the Great Southern, Red King, Tyronnell and other chloritic lodes in June 1882, the Irvinebank Treatment Works are still servicing the independent miners in the district. Originally Moffat condemned Irvinebank. George Young had bought the mines in October 1883 for £6,000 when Moffat was overseas. Moffat was critical of Young's reckless purchase fearing that they were being manipulated by their Sydney mortgagees, Caird Maxwell and Company. Herberton journalists jealously praised Young's shrewd investment, optimistic about efficient development of a base metal empire.

North Queenslanders and the mining fraternity remember the modest Scotsman for the prayer, "God Bless John Moffat", which Irvinebank parents taught their children, in appreciation. There was hardly a person in Irvinebank whose livelihood did not depend on Moffat's enterprise. This legendary reverence is an amazing contrast to the reputations of his contemporaries, tainted as share market miners involved in dubious financial and prospecting strategies. Moffat basked in the glory accorded to him in his lifetime, continuing to provide in return full employment at his mines and mills even while assay values declined. He stood aloof throughout the Chillagoe Railway and Mines Limited scandal in 1901, even though he had sold significant shareholdings in the original company and the Mungana (Chillagoe) Mining Company Limited for exceptional profits.
Moffat's significance in Australian mining history is his subtly strategic control of three base metal industries simultaneously. The metal valued at over £4 million exported from Moffat's empire over twenty-five years until his retirement, was equal to 15% of the total output of base metal and silver in Queensland to that time. What was unique about his style was his determination to initiate mineral development through his own investment, coupled with his interest in technology. His extreme disappointments arose from the squandered opportunities of the companies he promoted on the Chillagoe field, at Mount Garnet and at Mount Molloy, floated in 1897, 1899 and 1905.

LAUNCHING A LEGEND

Moffat arrived in Queensland when Sir Thomas Sutcliffe Mort was establishing his copper smelter at Peak Downs. Born into a depressed textile industry at Newmilns in Ayrshire on 26 May 1841, he was reared in the contracting commercial economy of Glasgow in the 1850's where his father operated an oil and lard and importing agency. As the family's second son he escaped to colonial life, emigrating to Queensland on the Whirlwind in 1862. He moved quickly through the occupations of shepherd and clerk before opening a shop in South Brisbane in 1866 and then a branch at Stanthorpe in 1872 establishing a lifelong relationship with the Love family of Glasgow, and Willie Jack and John Newell of later North Queensland mining and shop-keeping fame. Tin buying, smelting at Tent Hill in northern New South Wales including the sobering jolt of liquidation in 1876 determined Moffat's entry to North Queensland mining to secure control and prosecute development of the Great Northern tin lode at Herberton from 1880. A trip to Scotland in 1882–1883 to visit family and secure a £10,000 loan from his father launched the John Moffat legend in North Queensland.

Within four years he acquired and sold the Montalbion silver properties and Glen Linedale tin lodes, floating them at extravagant prices on the British market. He monopolized control of the rich Vulcan in 1889–1890, promoted the Chillagoe field from 1887 and throughout the depressed nineties soaked up every prospect he could in the Hinterland — Stannary Hills, Mount Garnet, Coolgarra, Watsonville, California Creek, Lappa, Koorboora, Wolfram Camp and Mount Molloy. The Irvinebank Mining Company never recovered from the expenditure of £30,000 on the Chillagoe field in the 1890's. Moffat became a railway promoter after his own neglect in the 1880's to lobby for the Herberton Railway. In the wake of his optimistic assessment of the Chillagoe and the Government's refusal to build the Herberton Railway,
Moffat embarked on an enormous programme of mining railway construction. His outlay of over £175,000 between 1900 and 1908 on his private railways — Mount Garnet opened in 1902, Mount Molloy in 1907 and the Irvinebank Tramway in 1907, along with the marked decline in Vulcan assays contributed to the demise of his empire.

Australians have always been dazzled by distant fields. Moffat's original vision for Irvinebank was illustrated in his expenditure of £12,000 in 1884 on battery and smelter on the hillside above Tait's Commercial Hotel. Then at forty-three Moffat built his first colonial home. While Irvinebank was still a dangerous lair for Aborigines, the partners had lived in five canvas tents, abandoning them in wet weather for Tait's Hotel, something Moffat remembered as an unsavoury experience. The house was built of local cedar cleared from the Mill dam site and imported seasoned timber. It comprised a sitting room, two main bedrooms, four side verandah bedrooms, plus a front verandah affording a fine view over the Mill site and dam. The downstairs area was enclosed for cool offices, store and assay rooms. Bachelors' quarters were added twenty years later. The centre of Irvinebank social activity, and focus of John and Margaret Moffat's hospitality for several Queensland Premiers, Governors Norman and MacGregor, a retinue of mining men and destitute persons, the house is still standing. Listed on the Australian Register of the National Estate, it is probably the oldest high-set house in North Queensland and is now used as a Museum Building by the Irvinebank Progress Association.

The battery and smelter were established on German lines achieving a system vertically integrated from mine to metal. He bought the second-hand smelting equipment from Herberton to prevent competition. The battery was a conventional five head obtained from nearby Thompson's Creek six miles south, with classifiers and waterwheel added. Constructed by colleagues, Tony Linedale, Alex Harper and George Seaman, the Mill was incorporated in six terraces on the hillside, laid out with room for expansion. The ore was conveyed by hoppers with an automatic feed to the stamps. Between the second and fifth floors were the jigs and separating tables thirteen feet in diameter and slowly rotating under the control of the twenty feet diameter water wheel. They rotated separately and under a different timing system to the rest of the Mill. The settling tanks, steam regulated, were on the sixth floor.

**EXPANSION OF MILL**

The development of the district was controlled by the capacity of
Loudoun Mill and its crushing charges. The Mill deserved to be better known for its success in separating refractory ores, reported the Mines Inspector in 1886 when the first expansion occurred. Briefly, extra five heads of stamps were added progressively in 1886, 1893, 1899 and an extra ten head in both 1901 and 1904, the smelter being enlarged in proportion. Buddles were first introduced in 1885, while separation facilities were substantially expanded and modernized in 1888, 1893, 1900 (to compete with the nearby Stannary Hills Company), 1902 and 1904. The first Frew Vanner was installed in 1890 and Luhrigs in 1902. The skyline changed with an extra chimney in 1903, three more in 1905 and three more the following year. The value of battery and smelter doubled to £40,000 between 1903 and 1905, the last major expansion before the Krupp Ball Mill was installed in 1907. The water wheel was replaced in 1908, and the Mill was valued at £47,000 when Moffat retired.

The tension in the town over whether Loudoun Mill should be a Custom Mill constantly bedevilled Moffat’s Company. The rich Vulcan mine discovered in 1889 and effectively taken over by Moffat through nominees in 1890 was allocated separate crushing facilities to prevent the Vulcan Company establishing a separate mill. In 1904 a separate dressing plant was allocated for public ore. Electric Light had been installed in 1900, the Compton dynamo type in the battery, house and office and the Jaardus enclosed type in the smelter. The 1907 expansion incorporated a Krupp Ball Mill operated by producer gas, to treat the Governor Norman ore and tailings from the dam. Charles Arbouin was delegated to design the experimental water jacket smelter to reduce the 8,000 tons of slag and tailings. The first strike in Loudoun Mill occurred in this smelter and accelerated the abandonment of this costly and inefficient process.

The major later expansions of Loudoun Mill were not to increase output but to maintain production as ore grades fell. Output declined in the second half of the nineties from a peak of 706 tons valued at £40,000 in 1894 to a low of 303 tons valued at only £10,000 in 1899 and 471 tons in 1900. Alteration of concentrating procedures to handle the mixing of complex and low grade ores after 1900 was in effect a survival technique in addition to the slag treatment begun in 1890.

Moffat was keen for relatives and Irvinebank people to be guided through the Mill by Mill manager, George Bradbury, Allan Waddell, Alec Robb or Arch Morton, but he was unresponsive to journalists’ requests as they exaggerated economic and technical aspects. As well as the extensive belting system of the battery the
fierce roar of the smelters impressed visitors. Seven horse dray loads of ore formed a smelter charge. After separation on copper screens the ore was diverted by various pipes to different classes of vanning tables. Heavier tin was collected in the jigger boxes where magnets collected iron fragments. After washing and drying the tin concentrates were carted by two horse teams to the calciner where impurities were roasted out. Rich concentrates and stream tin then went to the furnace in a mixture. Molten metal ran into vats and was reboiled to remove the dross. The traditional practice of poling, a bunch of green eucalypt saplings lowered into the molten metal accelerated the precipitation of the dross. The molten metal was then ladled into moulds, stamped and transported by mules and later the tramway to Stannary Hills en route to Port Douglas and Britain. The tin was sold three months forward with one and a half per cent commission to the Queensland National Bank in Sydney.

Transport costs using the horse and mule teams which the old timers remembered, sapped the profit margins out of the enterprise. As the Loudoun Mill consumed 100 tons of firewood per day, nearby supplies were exhausted and Moffat was obliged to extend the tramway. Teams ranged across the hills to the heaps of wood cut by Italian woodcutters as well as the ore supplies on slopes inaccessible to wheel traffic. Mule teams also hauled dross coal in corn sacks from the head of the Tramway at Stannary Hills. They plied regularly to Herberton, Coolgarra, Emuford and Gurrumbah. They jogged in endless procession around the Mill and town, creating dust columns. The load was always larger than the mule and the little beasts presented a comical sight with only their head and tail visible. The EE2 type ponies bred by the Athertons of Emerald End, with joints cut off their tails to provide strength, were commonly used. The horses, two abreast only, trotted round downhill bends to keep the wagon close to the inner bank. On the up-hill climb the shafters and pinners strained to haul the load while the other horses maintained its balance.

The economy of Irvinebank largely depended on the Vulcan. It was the first company on the field to pay a dividend. Total dividends paid to 1920 were £185,000. Moffat’s control was so tight that real crushing charges were still kept secret from the directors and shareholders meetings were very stormy affairs. At times ore was stockpiled because the Loudoun Mill was overloaded:

“They couldn’t pay dividends without continuous crushing but they can’t and what’s worse they can’t change things in this respect,” remarked the editor of the Wild River Times on 4 October 1899. The company installed a steel poppet head in 1906,
manufactured by Walkers Foundry and costing approximately £4,000. A huge compressor and steam boiler house containing Babcock and Wilcox boilers was constructed in 1911 to serve the tunnels and shafts which eventually reached 1,460 feet. The company employed sixty men at its peak and was the centre of Amalgamated Workers Association union activities in the town. Transport costs of £1,350 per year were extortionate but the company was forced to use horse team transport, in conformity with Moffat’s policy of full employment. Moffat was effectively General Manager of the Vulcan and he would not tolerate interference. It was not until after Moffat’s retirement that they could install an aerial tramway to reduce costs from four shillings and three pence to four pence half penny per ton.

**VULCAN STARTS TO FADE**

The glory of the Vulcan faded as both ore shortages and strikes closed the mine for long periods in 1907 and 1908. It was rejuvenated in 1909 with new manager, R.A. Rolfe. Substantial low grade ore was extracted at shallow levels, with fewer staff through the controversial use of contract labour for tunnelling and sinking work, and the mine continued as the mainstay of the town until 1920. Tony Linedale, one of Moffat’s managers, admitted that only three mines in the Irvinebank area — the Vulcan, Great Southern and Tornado — were ever properly equipped or prospected at any depth.

The Vulcan was unfortunately also known for its accidents. In 1895 two well known miners, Joseph Bradshaw and George Richardson, were maimed in an accident involving explosives. Bradshaw lost an eye and a leg and Richardson his leg. James Maher, shift boss, was killed in another accident with John Moore
in 1903, when using an iron tamper instead of a wooden one. The shrill mine whistle sounding continuously announced these accidents.

A feature of Moffat’s management in his old age was his resilience and frustrating tenacious control of milling techniques, irritating to managers and retarding development, and in reality encouraging the dislocation by industrial action as a vehicle for change in the mining towns. It is this latter period of Moffat’s management that Moffat’s daughter, Isabel Debenham, recalled to me and which Gus Waddell, Mike O’Callaghan and old timers reminisced about in articles in the Northern Press. At the time of their marriage on 1 March 1890 Moffat cherished the idea that he and Margaret would live in Sydney, rear their family in Cremorne and manage the North Queensland interests from his office at 18 Bridge Street. However both the Vulcan and the Chillagoe District investments absorbed his full personal attention and he realized there was no alternative but to stay in Irvinebank. The Irvinebank community Elizabeth and Isabel knew as very young children was remarkably similar in style to that which John grew up in in Newmilns, Scotland. Irvinebank was a male-dominated society where young boys often ran schooners for their fathers in the afternoon. Playing outside the young fig trees in front of the assay office, Elizabeth and Isabel knew the teamsters bringing ore up to the Mill and also the routine of the Mill workers who trudged down the hill and into the Vulcan, Royal, Cosmopolitan, Commercial, Miners’ Exchange, Orient Hotels in McDonald and Jessie Streets.

Just as in Scotland, the few middle class families like the Moffats and the Waddells (Peggy and Allan), the Bradburys and McTavishs lived in close proximity to both their livelihood and the mill workers. The memory of living in the same street as the woollen mills in Newmilns may explain Moffat’s choice of the Loudoun House site above the town, dam and within earshot of the Mill. The continual discordant sound of the stamps and the hissing of steam through the pipes to the furnace were the daily symbols of the Vulcan profits. A bronze haze engulfed the town daily to the hilltops and in the evening the furnace pots glowed on Loudoun Hill.

Each afternoon the tiny chubby girls basked in the attention the weary, dust-covered workmen, lonely for their own children and grandchildren, bestowed on them as they trudged home whistling. Isabel remembered being carried through the garden by the smelter manager and shift bosses in their black felt hats and grey shirts and trousers and black boots, and smelling the acid fumes impregnating their shirts. The highlight of the children’s daily life was to be
carried by smelter manager, James Tunnie, into their father’s office or to their mother, on the verandah. From there they watched the dim lights inside the hotels and across to the flicker of the lights of the engine houses of both the Vulcan and the Tornado.

Every evening the family and managers gathered at the dinner table with the children’s comments welcomed by their parents. Isabel remembered that when “Daddy” Young interrupted her long stories and complained that Moffat did not discipline his daughters, Moffat retorted that there was no need to when someone else usurped his role. Before returning to his office after dinner Moffat often sang Scottish songs and read regularly to his daughters who remembered him as a generous father.

Moffat’s own social activities revolved around the School of Arts reading room, School functions, and the Saturday evenings in Loudoun House living room with singing and dancing and supper prepared by Margaret Moffat. Sunday dinner often rotated between Moffats and the Waddells, but Moffat himself never participated in any local church services as he was of the Swedenborgian New Church faith and unimpressed by the lack of scholarship of the itinerant clergy of all faiths. The Waddells lived down near the dam and Gibbs Creek in a huge Queenslander with encircling verandahs. George Bradbury’s house was further up the hill. It had been constructed in 1909 out of the smelter manager’s house at Mount Garnet.  

**LORD OF ALL HE SURVEYED**

An old-timer reminiscing thirty-six years later recalled how Moffat intimately combined socializing with mining company management at Irvinebank:

[At Loudoun House] the old gentleman (aged sixty-two) is Lord of all he surveys and but a few hundred yards away the Mill which means so much to the district belches forth smoke and fumes day and night. Like so many men of his type, John Moffat loves to gather about him the old pioneers who were associated with him in his earlier career at Tenterfield and Vegetable Creek tin districts. His home is also open to visitors who wish to view the company’s operations, and he loves to chat about its possibilities. An interesting day is spent at the home of the “Mining King”. At mealtime he presides at the long table which offers hospitality to those who respond to his kindly invitation to “Come and have some dinner with me”. Present are men well worth meeting: “Daddy” Young, his lifetime friend and business associate, John Munday, pioneer of antimony smelting on the Hodgkinson in the 1880’s, now living a life of retirement with his pioneering mate, Tony Linedale, discoverer of the rich tin
deposits at Koorboora, now field manager of the company, and keenly interested in the development of the Chillagoe and Cloncurry copper deposits. They are all there, together with various southern men of note attracted by the fame of the Vulcan. An after dinner chat with the “Tin King” in his office furnishes ample proof of the magnitude of the company’s activities. During this interview men from various sections of the outside tinfield drop in to report to the “Big Boss”. From the Vulcan comes Syd Sheppard to discuss the crushing of a new find of rich ore in the deepest tin mine in Australia and in his courteous way the old gentleman arranges for a visit next day to view the extensive working in the deep ground. Jim Brodie, another expert, drops in to give his impressions of the Gilmore Group, a new deposit of “sensational value”. Then came Jimmy Rogers, chief groom and responsible for the welfare of innumerable heavy draught horse teams. The evening concluded with another rather amusing episode. A couple of ancient gully rakers who were apparently suffering from the result of a night out, filed into the office, and bidding the chief, “Good Day”, placed some tin specimens before him with the remark, “What do you think of that, Mr Moffat?” The old gentleman, after examining the specimens inquired, “Where does it come from?” to be informed, “away on the ridges”. With a twinkle in his eye Mr Moffat quietly put his hand in his vest pocket and handing each of the ancients half a crown, advised, “Go and prospect it and if any good, work it”. As the enterprising couple retired the old chief remarked, “Looks as if they ‘lifted it’ from the battery hoppers, but one never knows”. Shortly after, assayer, Jim Tunnie “blew in” and when handed the samples declared, “that comes from the Vulcan”.

Such descriptions create legends.

The town changed radically according to the prosperity in the mining industry. Townspeople always enlisted the support of the Millowner. Without that, amenities and road improvements were unobtainable. However it was certainly not a mining town in the modern sense, as Moffat did not provide any residential or commercial facilities. His attitudes encouraged an enterprising independent spirit in house building and cultural associations among permanently employed mill workers and miners. Typically, workers owned their own two-roomed iron and timber houses. Only in the boom construction periods did large numbers board in the rough hotels. In the thirty years from 1884 the town developed through the stages of achieving stability with public amenities of school, mail and coach services, School of Arts, and the
atmosphere of a boom town in 1899, and 1906–7 when the tramway was constructed. There were two periods of prosperity — 1888–1890 and 1899–1904 — in response to expansion at Loudoun Mill. From the beginning Irvinebank was known as a pretty little town with private residences surrounded by Chinese gardens and the dam. There was only one general store originally, Jack and Newell’s, incorporating the Post Office, at the corner of the two streets. It was flanked by two hotels, Bethel’s and Gibb’s, with two more, Madigan’s and Brophy’s in Jessie Street, with two butchers, Robson’s in Jessie Street and Halpin’s in Macdonald Street.

Corner of Jessie and McDonald Streets, Irvinebank, 1905
(A.F. Waddell Collection - R.H.S.Q.)

TOWN’S SOCIAL PATTERN

Irvinebank society was always male dominated — women averaged 24% of the town population during three decades and this percentage only declined during the tramway construction period. Women’s activities organized by Margaret Linedale from 1886, centred on Loudoun House. Transport determined the pace and scale of recreational activities, which in the early years consisted of dances in the hall attached to Henry’s Commercial Hotel on Saturdays and shooting on Sundays. The first mail and coach service was instituted by W. McDonald on 21 March 1884. The Progress Association was established in October 1884 at a meeting in Jack and Newell’s store. The School of Arts was opened in July 1885 and the community funded a wide range of mining and literary journals. The second building, the basis of the
present one, was opened in September 1890 and extensions done in 1912. A Post and Telegraph office was also introduced in 1885 albeit by a controversial circuitous route through Coolgarra to the south. The first land sale of allotments in Irvinebank was not held until 23 February 1886. The police station was established in 1885 as a result of an inquiry into the Aboriginal Massacre in 1884 and a building constructed in 1886. The provisional school was opened by Miss McTavish on 18 October 1886 and was converted to a State school from 25 July 1889. Set on a hill away from Mill fumes it was the focus of young people’s adventures and scholarship.

There was constant inter-town rivalry between Irvinebank and Montalbion. The Walsh Divisional Board headquarters were at Montalbion until 1898. The Walsh District Hospital was established at Montalbion in 1889. This was a compromise. Montalbion had the building and Irvinebank controlled the Committee. With the ascendency of Irvinebank the building was transferred to Irvinebank in 1897. Being a significant mining town, highly qualified Glasgow-trained medical practitioners including Dr. Andrew Stewart between 1895 and 1897 were attracted. As the headquarters of the mining fields, Irvinebank also sponsored numerous political organizations right from the beginning. The Progress Association supported the Herberton Railway League from 1884. There was an Anti-Separation movement formed in 1890 and a Labor candidate, J.T. McMahon, stood for the Woothakata electorate in 1899 against John Newell, a clear indication of local support for alternative social structures.

Irvinebank had traditionally been very strong in the sports of rifle shooting and cricket. The rifle club was formed in 1889 and fostered by the Bradshaws, Arbouins, Waddells, James Tunnie, the Bavingtons, and the Richards. The nearest flat ground for a racecourse was near Montalbion, where the race club was formed. Inter-town cricket and football matches mushroomed after the tramway was opened in 1907. Otherwise social life revolved around the hotels and Mrs Moffat’s bazaars and musicals. Margaret Moffat involved the whole of the townspeople in the day’s fun to provide funds the hospitals. The 1899 one held in the grounds of Loudoun House was notable for its football match in costume, the playing of the gramophone, fortune-telling, the Irvinebank Band, and Allan Waddell’s fireworks display. These bazaars, St. Patrick’s Day sports and district employees’ subscriptions raised £150 a year for the hospitals on average.
A ROWDY ELEMENT

Radical itinerant workers invaded the Irvinebank district in 1906 to construct the Irvinebank Tramway as they advanced from one railway project to another creating false mining camp economies based on patronage of hotels. This was the group Moffat never understood. They first arrived in the Cairns Hinterland in 1898 to commence construction of the Chillagoe Company’s railways — European immigrants, Broken Hill men and navvies fresh from other Queensland railway construction projects. Their significance to Moffat’s town and mining companies was their incitement and participation in industrial activities led by Theodore and McCormack at the Vulcan and Governor Norman mines when mine returns were declining. There is a legend, unsubstantiated in either Moffat’s or the Waddell records, that Moffat told the future Queensland Premier and Federal Treasurer to “go away and be a sensible fellow” instead of presenting claims for improved wages and conditions. Surprisingly the industrial activists never publicly took account of the fact that the mining fields were declining. Although enlivened by brass bands, concerts and magic lantern shows, the town consistently declined from 1907 to a stage of mysterious shop and hotel fires as the population aged and dispersed.

The rowdy element comprised the alternative society. Thus incidents like the following one in 1899 occurred periodically on pay nights:

[The constable arrived when] one publican was being dragged across the floor by the heels as a preliminary to being ignominiously hurled into the street. Two gentlemen had collared a cask of ginger beer and thinking it was the genuine “home brew” had playfully knocked on the head and with magnanimous hospitality were inviting the thirsty souls by whom they were surrounded to “wet their whistles”. Another fellow was dancing “Boer fandangle” on the hotel counter and threatening all and sundry who dared to interfere with him that he “would bash their blooming skulls in” with a bottle of dry gin he was flourishing, Indian Club fashion. The counter-jumper aiming a blow at “a constable of the Queen” lost his balance and fraternized with the bottles on the shelves. There was a crash and a smash, and a mate fearing that his pal was “kilt intoirely” seized a brick from the counter and hurled it at Constable Fenwick, striking him on the back, while another “swashbuckler” tore up a flooring board, which he broke over Mr Water’s back. Then there was a medley of arms and legs. The next scene showed the barber, who had been helping the police, emerging from that “Majuba Hill” with the
purple fluid flowing freely through his fingers, and exclaiming "Beddad, but that was a close shave". Two men were arrested.  

Money circulated freely, encouraged by Moffat’s own reckless over-capitalization on railways and local philanthropy, for example in constructing the Queensland National Bank chambers opened in 1905, which ensured an impressive bank building for the town. The shops and hotels straggled around the dam along the length of McDonald Street and up Jessie Street past the battery. There was Denny Gordon’s saddlery and boot repair shop, Armstrong, Ledlie and Stillman’s store, W.K. Donald’s secretarial business, the Bank of New South Wales, Walsh Divisional Board and the Queensland National Bank on one side of Jessie Street. Opposite was Jack and Newell’s store on the corner, and Wade’s Royal Hotel, the “Rialto of Irvinebank”. Near the present day Irvinebank Hotel, originally the Australian Hotel, was Eales’ bakery and the hardware and grocery store owned by Tommy Moran, or more commonly “Anthony Hordern”. In an economy based on expectations and high wages, the rough characters took advantage of the old timers and steady workers. In the early evening, from the verandah of Wade’s Royal, a visitor might see a bucking mule, two fights, a drunken miner fall in the creek, Moffat’s two gully raking scoundrels with their silver coins, sitting eating raw sausages and drinking beer in the street.

Two necessities for the town — water and transport — were constant themes in the development of the town. As early as 1900 Mat Butler had surveyed a dam site on Ibis Creek above the town. Six years later the dam of sixty million gallons was constructed at a cost of £7,000 to supply both the Mill and town and still does today.

**REASON FOR TRAMWAY**

The chief reasons for the construction of the Irvinebank Tramway were to guarantee firewood supplies and also to tap the Mount Mulligan coal mines which Moffat owned. Firewood cost £1 per hour but Moffat stubbornly refused to introduce suction gas which Reid said would have reduced fuel costs tenfold. Moffat had instigated several Tramway schemes under various provisions of the Mining Act for the Irvinebank Tramway since 1900. His aim was also to tap the small tin and wolfram mines in the Lappa, Bamford, Koorboora and California Creek and Sunnypoint areas. In 1902 the Adelaide-based Stannary Hills Mines and Tramway Company was authorized to build a narrow gauge line, fourteen miles long to its mines at Eureka Creek and battery on the Walsh River, under the provisions of the Mining Act. Moffat took advantage of it, making two privately owned tramways in thirty
miles. Surveyor Minehan surveyed the line. R.D. Frew, Chief Engineer, and William Highfield, Resident Engineer supervised construction. Two hundred navvies were employed and the main camp was two miles from Stannary Hills between Jubilee Nos. 1 and 2 bridges.\textsuperscript{60} The first load of firewood was delivered to Loudoun Mill on 28 March 1907 and a party of excursionists went down the line the same day.\textsuperscript{61} The company began transporting goods on behalf of the public from June 1907, running right through to Boonmoo. The official opening of the Tramway was in the form of a grand picnic by invitation and hosted by John and Margaret Moffat at the All But near Fire Clay Gully on the west of the town on 29 June 1907.\textsuperscript{62} Several trains conveyed the 1,500 people including 500 children to the specially cleared site. Businesses closed for the day and all of Irvinebank was there.\textsuperscript{63} On opening, the Irvinebank Mining Company had two locomotives, first the Koppel, of nineteen tons, 0-6-0 side tank with eight wheel tender, named “Betty” after Moffat’s elder daughter. The second was a much smaller 0-4-0T Krauss, of seven and a half tons, named “Baby” after Isabel. Another nineteen tons locomotive, Avonside, “Old John”, 0-6-2T, was bought in 1907 and assembled ready for operation in May 1908.\textsuperscript{64} The Company also built its own passenger carriage and wagons.\textsuperscript{65} There were several sidings en route — Yorkie’s, nineteen miles from Boonmoo, Hale’s at twenty-

\textit{Loudoun Mill and Dam, on a clear day, 1907}

\textit{(A.F. Waddell Collection - R.H.S.Q.)}
one miles, Weinert's near Orient Camp, at twenty-three miles, Victoria at twenty-six miles near Gane’s Hotel on the flat, a temporary station at All But at twenty-seven miles, and Close Up near the Cricket Ground.

Staff came from the Chillagoe Railway, including Charles Blyde, Irvinebank station master, and also the Stannary Hills Tramway and some later transferred to the Government railway when it reached Herberton in 1910. Jack Donaldson was locomotive foreman and John F. (Scotty) Irons, maintenance foreman. Colorful characters operated the services — Jimmy Cifuentes, guard, driver Harry Wiseman after whom Wiseman’s Gap was named, and Arthur Clarke, fireman, whose foot was run over in a derailment on 14 October 1907 on an embankment near All But. There were three trains a week through to Boonmoo and daily ore, ingots and firewood trains plied back and forth to Stannary Hills, hauling up to 100 tons, four tons in four wheel wagons and ten tons in bogie wagons. There were two sidings off the line — one up to the head of Cummings Creek and Pompeii mine towards Bakerville and Watsonville, and another to the Humbug mine.

The Tramway ran numerous excursion specials — the opening of Stannary Hills Methodist and Catholic churches in 1907, an

Town, Loudoun Mill, Moffat's House and Tram Station 1907
Taken from School Hill, A.F. Wadell Collection RHSQ
A.W.A. picnic at Boonmoo in 1913, the turning of the first sod of the Mount Mulligan railway in 1913 by Sir William MacGregor, Governor, and Sunday School picnics. The Tramway sponsored inter-town rifle, cricket and football matches as a welcome diversion from the monotony of working life. It also brought the opportunity of family travel to the coast. However the Tramway disguised the decline in the Irvinebank economy through the reduced haulage costs and popular cultural activities at the expense of the rapid increase in the Irvinebank Mining Company’s overdrafts.

Another worthy and overdue advance was the installation of the one-and-a-half miles long Governor Norman aerial tramway costing £3,500 in 1912. It reduced haulage costs from six shillings to sixpence a ton. Based on the single travelling rope principle, it conveyed 120 tons each eight-hour shift in buckets pasty fifteen supports on trestles, including one span of 1,300 feet across Ibis Gorge. It was installed under the supervision of J.W. Mackie, engineer of Ropeways Limited, of London. The Governor, Sir William MacGregor, opened the aerial tramway when he was in the North for the turning of the first sod of the Mount Mulligan railway in May 1913. Mackie stayed on to install a similar tramway for the Vulcan Company in 1913, after Moffat’s retirement.

**MOFFAT’S RETIREMENT**

When the Irvinebank Mining Company overdrafts reached £58,000, at the end of 1912, the Queensland National Bank demanded Moffat’s retirement. The new manager, John Holmes Reid, Moffat’s partner since 1874, rationalized the Company’s empire causing major dislocation in the work force exacerbating the industrial relations. After MacGregor’s visit Moffat left the North, retired to Cremorne, Sydney, and died at Toowoomba on 28 June 1918 from influenza, when visiting relatives.

On 25 October 1919 the Queensland Government purchased the Loudoun Mill, Irvinebank Tramway, aerial tramways and various mines, for £22,500 as a State Enterprise. A short tramway was immediately laid to the dam to work the payable tailings, and soon after Stannary Hills Tramway was purchased. As firewood was desperately short, a producer gas plant was installed. James Tunnie became manager. The Ball Mill was sold to the Derrick Tin Company at Stannary Hills in the early twenties. During the early thirties, after the abortive Whitworth private enterprise take-over and the Moore Government’s despair, the smelters were dismantled and the chimney stacks blown down. A Lempriere’s representative recovered the J.M. & Co. 1884 inset of bricks and forwarded them to Moffat’s daughter, Mrs Isabel Debenham, who
later donated them to the Cairns Historical Society in 1978. The mill operations were substantially reduced as ore supplies dwindled and population dispersed, and the treatment works were for many decades barely a surviving ghost compared to its former glory as Gus Waddell and Mike O’Callaghan remembered them. When Gus Waddell went back to Irvinebank for the unveiling of a monument to John Moffat thirty-four years ago, he saw the framework of the Thompson’s Creek 1883 battery still standing in the mill. The Vulcan aerial tramway had long since been dismantled. Approval was given by the Mines Department in 1957 for the removal of the Governor Norman aerial tramway for scrap except for the tower near the works. It was not until the sixties that the stamps were abandoned. The scrap metal merchants invaded periodically after the war. The tramway ceased service in 1938, the rails were lifted and sold to sugar mills, the timbers of the Chinaman Creek bridge were used in the ore hoppers. The two locomotives, “Old John” and “Betty” were sold to Marian Sugar Mill and Innisfail Tramway respectively and “Baby” was scrapped on site. The last service on the whole tramway was the trip of the German Borsig, formerly a Stannary Hills Company locomotive, which went out to Boonmoo in a blinding thunder storm on 17 January 1941, and was sold to the Cattle Creek Sugar Mill in 1945, rebuilt and disposed of to the Australian Narrow Gauge Railway Museum Society in Brisbane in 1973.

The Loudoun Mill, the last vestige of Moffat’s empire, has been operated by local miner Mr Frank Hilla since 1 July 1983. He lives in the Queensland National Bank and has undertaken some restoration work, as has the licensee of the only surviving hotel at the opposite end of the town. A director of the Great Northern Corporation, Cr. D.R. Walker of Herberton, owns the Vulcan mine, and the Byrnes family have operated the Great Southern mine since the early 1920’s.

Those who went beyond the hotel and union oriented character of Irvinebank life detected an intriguing personality controlling the mining empire. While Moffat spoke little he was amiable, well informed, and inspired confidence. He had a phenomenal memory and capacity for work and an indomitable drive for achievement. One dream, above all, had attracted him — a central smelting works on the Tableland with advanced electrolytic smelters at the Barron Falls, and that was one of the premises on which the Chillagoe promotion was based: That dream never came true, as all the Northern copper smelters — Chillagoe, Mount Molloy and Mount Garnet were failures, and his expenditure on railways, and the declining assay values determined the demise of his empire.
John Moffat seldom said much. One subject on which he never opened up was his love, first for Jane Vary, sister of his partner, Robert Love, and then for his wife. Moffat never participated in Irvinebank social life although he provided full employment, and felt keenly the inevitable decline of the town he had created. The constant interplay between the millowner’s temperament and his training is perceptively defined in the mixture of necessary attention and inevitable hazard. The awful uncertainty of whether prudence shall overcome fortune, and trade in metals, had all the fascination for him of gambling, without its moral guilt. He was always thinking while the pace of life in Irvinebank continued unrelentingly.

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FOOTNOTES


2. Moffat to George Young. Letterbook 1883-1884 p. 100.

3. His legend is recalled in G. Bolton’s A Thousand Miles Away: a history of North Queensland to 1920, (Canberra, ANU Press, 1963) p. 120 and Mike O’Callaghan’s articles for the Cairns Historical Society.


5. Z31, Queensland State Archives (hereinafter QSA).

6. Moffat to Reid 20 February 1884 Letterbook 1884–5 p. 82; In Houses and Mining Settlement in North Queensland (Ph.D. thesis, James Cook University, 1982) Peter Bell refers to Loudoun House and assesses it as the oldest highset house in North Queensland.


9. Moffat to Reid 23 May 1884 and to Peter Moffat 7 June 1884 Letterbook 1884–5 pp. 182 and 207.


11. M.R. 1886 p. 84.


15. Wild River Times (hereinafter W.R.T.) 30 May 1900 and Q.G.M.J. July 1900 p. 47.


17. MR. 1894, 1899 and 1900.


22. W.R.T. 21 February 1906 ex CP.
23. C.P. 23 January 1912. The boilers came from Nymbool near Mount Garnet after the Smiths Creek Company ceased operations.
25. C.P. 16 December 1913; M.R. 1915 p. 16.
30. For examples of managerial problems see the letterbooks of William Waddell while at Koorboora, 1903-1909, held by Cairns Historical Society.
33. The Aboriginal Massacre on 18 October 1884 is referred to in the Queenslander (hereinafter Q.) 13 December 1884 p. 941 c. 4, Q. 20 December 1884 p. 992 c. 3–4, Q. 7 February 1885 p. 227 c. 4, H.A. 24 January 1885.
34. H.A. 9 October 1885.
35. See Annual Population Statistics in Mines Reports.
36. H.A. 31 January 1890.
37. H.A. 22 March 1884.
38. H.A. 11 October 1884.
40. H.A. 26 September 1890 and C.P. 10 June 1912. (The extensions in 1912 were done by contractor, Winkworth.)
41. H.A. 1 April 1885.
42. H.A. 29 January 1886.
43. H.A. 2 July 1886.
44. Irvinebank School File. EDU/Z1346, QSA.
47. H.A. 9 January 1891.

51. G.S. Bolton, op. cit. p. 293.
52. W.R.T. 22 November 1899.
54. Armstrong, Ledlie and Stillman’s store was opened in 1899. It was totally destroyed by fire on Tuesday morning, 13 September 1904 and was rebuilt. (W.R.T. 4 October 1899, W.R.T. 16 September 1904 and W.R.T. 23 September 1904.)
57. W.R.T. 4 April 1900 and 30 May 1900.
61. C.P. 4 April 1907.
63. T.D.B. 5 July 1907 p. 3.
64. No. 1 Locomotive — “Betty” — Koeppel, built for Krauss, No. 5261 — 1907 — 0-6-0 side tank with tender — 19 tons — sold to Innisfail Tramway in May 1922 — became No. 7, 609.
No. 2 — “Baby” — Krauss — subcontracted to Koeppel — No. 5530 of 1906 — O-4-0WT — seven and a half tons — arrived April 1907 — advertised for sale in 1938 as needing a new boiler — scrapped on site.
No. 3 — “Old John” — Avonside — 0-6-2T — 19 tons — could haul 100 tons gross — No. 153 of 1907 — assembled and began to run in May 1908 — advertised for sale in 1938 — purchased by Marian Sugar Mill in 1942.
(Locomotive notes compiled from Mr G. Bond’s notes and file A/8603, QSA).
68. C.P. 5 April 1913.
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