ROGER SHEAFFE — A PIONEER

by Stephen W. Sheaffe

Roger Sheaffe was a squatter, explorer, pastoralist, miner and politician. He was one of the first white men to visit the head of the Flinders River, an area from Hughenden to Cloncurry. Born in Wollongong on 9 April 1837, he grew up nearby. His father William (and mother Rosalie) arrived in Australia on the 18th August 1834 as a Lieutenant in charge of 200 male convicts.

In 1862 William Landsborough discovered the rich pastoral areas at the head of the Flinders River. His glowing reports prompted a race by squatters to occupy the area. Roger Sheaffe was a participant in this race, driving his cattle from the Hunter Valley. Ernest Henry, Hugh Walpole and Walter Hayes were also participants, each with their own herds of cattle. Ernest Henry’s cattle passed Roger Sheaffe’s leg-weary cattle in poor condition on the breakaway to the Flinders watershed. Ernest Henry set up Hughenden Station, and Roger, Marathon station.

From 1866 Ernest Henry and Roger Sheaffe were exploring in all directions, searching for new pastoral land. Roger occupied extensive tracts of land. He later occupied Fort Constantine station, was a partner with Alexander Kennedy in Davenport station and had other runs at the time. In 1881 he sold 12,000 head of Fort Constantine cattle for 36,000 pounds.

In late 1866 Henry and Sheaffe returned to the area near the Cloncurry River, to examine a black mountain that Henry had noticed on a previous trip. A dray load of its ore was transported to Rockhampton only to find it valueless. On 20 May 1867 Henry discovered red oxides of copper near the Cloncurry River. Sheaffe and Henry went into partnership to mine copper at the site, and they named the mine “The Great Australian Mine”. Firstly they proceeded to Brisbane and Sydney where the media and influential business men embraced the idea of a copper mine. Henry, full of hope, travelled to London intending to float a mine on the English markets. Without the necessary political and social connections the plan was doomed from the outset. He failed to impress any financiers and all he could do was engage a Cornish Captain and 30 miners to travel to Australia to work the mine. Meanwhile Roger Sheaffe employed a foreman, named Sleep, two experienced miners, two brothers from a sheep run, a black boy, an Aboriginal woman and her piccaninny. This motley lot set up camp at the site of the Great Australian mine.

The opening of a port at Normanton gave the mine a closer source of supplies. Copper ore was transported by dray the 270 miles to
Normanton, where it was loaded and shipped to Liverpool. It cost three times as much to haul a bag of ore to Normanton as it did to transport it to Liverpool. The excessive cost of transport, the isolation and heat dimmed everyone's enthusiasm for its future. Many of the disillusioned Cornish miners quickly left and gradually the tents and sheds were deserted and only a skeleton remained. In 1872 22 tons of ore was mined and transported to Liverpool. Despite the lack of success Henry and Sheaffe continued to select land for mining. Sheaffe held many mining leases, including a lease occupying the now Central Business District of Cloncurry. Others were prompted to take up copper leases, but only the Great Australian Mine was ever operational.

In 1867 two men visited Sheaffe and his stockman, Luke Russell, at Fort Constantine station requesting supplies. Both men refused to tell of their business in the district. Being suspicious Roger and his stockman followed their tracks and came upon a successful gold digging the following day. The news soon spread and triggered the Leichhardt gold rush.

Roger's speculative investments in mining, droughts and the recession in the 1890's eventually led to financial disaster. In the end he lost most of his mining and pastoral empire.

On the 14th November 1878 he was elected as the independent member for Burke in Queensland's Eighth Parliament. His parliamentary career ended on the 5th October 1883. During his term he debated a number of Bills; he especially supported mining and pastoral Bills. He opposed the construction of a bridge on the coastal road as the road did not pass his electorate, and similarly he argued against a Bill that intended to raise a tax so as to eradicate marsupials and the Bathurst Burr, as he said these were not problems in his electorate. His arguments in favour of the construction of a railway to the Gulf reflected the racial and bigoted attitudes of the time. He said he didn't want to see the colony overrun with Chinese, but they should be allowed to come in to build the railway as Europeans would not and should not do pick and shovel work on the railway. After State politics he was active in Sandgate politics, and in 1892 was elected Mayor.

Sheaffe had travelled over most parts of the state during his lifetime. He was a keen fisherman and shooter. These skills were necessary to survive in unexplored and unoccupied country. On his explorations with Henry he was more than happy to be responsible for food gathering. At one camp he was fishing in a nearby muddy flow. Much to his embarrassment, and to the laughter of the good humoured natives, it was revealed the flow was only two inches deep. On another occasion on this trip game was difficult to find. Sheaffe happy with
his catch returned to camp with pigeon and said he was going to enjoy a substantial portion that night. Henry and Alexander Kennedy said they saw kangaroo over another ridge a few moments earlier. In excitement Sheaffe rushed off for the hunt. On his return empty handed he found his two friends had consumed all the pigeons.

Roger Sheaffe definitely made a mark in pioneering Queensland as a squatter, explorer, pastoralist, miner and politician. The main street of Cloncurry, a street in Sandgate and a mountain near Cloncurry bear his name. Roger predeceased his wife and four children. He died on 1 December 1895 and is buried in Toowong cemetery.