Clement – Promising imagery

Promising imagery: northern settlement ideas of the 1850s and sixties

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Various historians have studied early northern Australian settlement but only a few have examined the advocacy that preceded it.¹ This paper looks at the advocacy of settlement on the Gulf of Carpentaria in the period after the British Government withdrew its garrison from Arnhem Land.² At that time, with the best of the continent’s lands already alienated, the far north beckoned. Explorers such as Leichhardt (1844-1845), Mitchell (1846), and Kennedy (1847 & 1848) had revealed something of the landscape,³ but others had yet to fill in the blanks.

One of those explorers was Augustus Charles Gregory. Born in Nottinghamshire in 1819, he emigrated to the newly established Swan River Colony with his parents and siblings in 1829. He grew into a job with an elder brother who was a contract surveyor and, in late 1841, he joined the survey department. In 1846 and 1848, Gregory led two local expeditions of exploration and impressed Governor FitzGerald as ‘a very reliable explorer and one who did not overrate the advantages of his discoveries’. Another expedition in 1852 induced FitzGerald to commend Gregory to the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Henry Pelham-Clinton, 5th Duke of Newcastle) who, in 1854, selected the surveyor to lead an expedition in northern Australia.⁴

The catalyst for the expedition was a Royal Geographical Society paper presented by Ernest Haug, an Austrian geographer who visited London early in 1853 hoping to secure sponsorship for an expedition. Wanting to build on Leichhardt’s findings, he argued that his proposal afforded scope to increase scientific and geographic knowledge. Haug also spoke about the commercial advantages of establishing a port at the mouth of the Victoria River. The audience responded positively and the chances of sponsorship looked good.⁵

Haug proposed using mules and camels to travel from Perth to the central-western coast before tracing the Gascoyne River to its source. He and his party would then ‘pass across the interior, until, following the course of a northern river to a point in the Cambridge Gulf, they could thus make their way to the mouth of the Victoria’. Once there, Haug envisaged replenishing his supplies in a rendezvous with a vessel, tracing the river to its watershed,

¹ Lenore Coltheart’s PhD thesis, ‘Australia Misère, the Northern Territory in the nineteenth century’, Griffith University, 1982 stands out in this regard. It also provides unexpected insight into the advocacy of Gulf settlement.
³ See Coltheart, ‘Australia Misère’, pp. 43–54, for analysis of the rationale behind these expeditions.
⁵ ibid., pp. 76-7.
and continuing southward through the interior to either the Murray River or another settled
district.

Fig. 1. The withdrawal of the British garrison from Port Essington in 1849 left
Australia’s northern coast devoid of settlements.

By June 1853, for reasons now unknown, Haug had refined his ideas. He proposed starting
on the Victoria, tracing it inland, and charting the northern limit of the desert by traversing
streams on the southern side of the watershed. An eastward path would lead to the meridian
of the Albert River, which would take him to the Gulf of Carpentaria. From there, Haug
intended overlanding to the settled districts of New South Wales.

Months of planning followed, with the Royal Geographical Society facilitating the liaison with
the Colonial Office. Somewhere along the way, someone suggested that Haug could
examine the rivers flowing into the Gulf of Carpentaria and rendezvous with a small vessel
there.

Time was tight, with Haug wanting to leave England in November 1853, make his final
arrangements in Singapore, and start work on the Victoria River at the beginning of the dry
season. Public advocacy of northern Australian settlement then complicated matters. John
Calvert, an entrepreneurial gold miner who claimed to have prospected near Roebuck Bay
on the north-west coast in 1847, spoke to a British Association meeting. Trelawney
Saunders, a cosmographer, published a 120-page booklet urging colonisation on the Gulf of

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6 The Times, London, 30 May 1853, p. 7. The northern river in Haug’s proposal fits neatly with the
Ord, named by Alex Forrest in 1879. Desert and semi-arid lands lie between it and the watershed of
the Gascoyne River.

7 The Times, 5 July 1853, p. 5. Burketown was later established near the Albert River.

8 ibid., 24 January 1854, p. 10.

9 ibid., and 4 October 1853, p. 6.

10 Albert Frederick Calvert, Narrative of an expedition into the interior of North-West Australia, London,
Gillingham and Henry, 1892, p. 6.
Clement – Promising imagery

Carpentaria. His vision centred on the Plains of Promise and the creation of a new colony – the ‘Province of Albert’.\(^{11}\) The plains had been named by Captain J Lort Stokes during a survey by HMS *Beagle*. On seeing them, he expressed the hope ‘that ere long the now level horizon would be broken by a succession of tapering spires rising from the many christian hamlets that must ultimately stud this country’.\(^{12}\) The plains, however, held little promise.

Calvert, who has been dismissed as a swindler, had little impact.\(^{13}\) Saunders, a Fellow of both the Royal Geographical Society and the Statistical Society of London, distributed copies of his booklet ‘amongst influential men and associations in England’.\(^{14}\) He claimed experience in public, urban and colonial affairs, and, alluding to Haug’s original proposal, he argued that the proposed exploration should focus on lands at the head of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The continent’s north-west, he wrote, was ‘exposed to hurricanes and the full force of the storms and rains of the N.W. monsoon from October to April’.\(^{15}\)

Saunders’ principal objective was to emulate Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles by opening a free port – similar to Singapore – in Australia. Commercial success would come, he argued, from locating it on the Gulf, a body of water that ‘suggests at once the notion of a Mediterranean Sea’.\(^{16}\) He attributed Port Essington’s failure to its location and he argued convincingly that ‘Port Flinders’, adjacent to the mouth of the Albert River, was a much better site for commerce and trade. He drew heavily on the publications of Stokes, George Grey and Leichhardt, using their impressions of the capabilities of northern Australia to bolster his claims. Sketches of the Plains of Promise, published seven years earlier by Stokes, illustrated Saunders’ booklet. Grey’s romanticised tale of ‘The Overlanders’ showed how readily, and with what rewards, Australian colonists pushed livestock into fresh territories. Leichhardt’s opinion was invoked to link Grey’s tale to the Gulf, and it was cited twice to assert that cattle driven to the Gulf ‘by short stages, and during the proper season, would even fatten on the road’.\(^{17}\)

In deciding how much country to include in the proposed colony, Saunders wrote:


\(^{16}\) Ibid., pp. 3-5, pp. 17-23, p. 46 and pp. 57-60.

The boundaries of a state should be determined by natural conditions, not liable to be mistaken or to vary. One important element in this question is the area drained by rivers; another is the adoption of given meridians and parallels.

Let then the country draining into the Gulf of Carpentaria and the north-east coast, so far as the parallel of 26° south latitude, which is the northern limit of New South Wales, be taken as the east and south boundary; and let the meridian of 133° east longitude, which nearly agrees with the watershed on the west of the gulf, so far as it is known, be taken as the western boundary, subject to such alterations and subdivisions, as the administration of good government may hereafter require.

Saunders’ booklet included a draft Bill for the province’s creation. He also suggested building the first town on the Albert River and calling it ‘Pelham or Clinton, after Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for the Colonies’.  

The Royal Geographical Society President, Sir Roderick Murchison, responded to Saunders’ advocacy by saying that Haug would explore the Gulf country. He did not accept that the expedition should start from the Gulf. More negotiations followed, and Haug withdrew after the Secretary of State nominated Stokes as the expedition leader.

Stokes had long favoured the Albert River as a starting point for inland exploration. Saunders had picked up on that, and Stokes was willing to lead any official party appointed

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19 Ibid., pp. 61-2 and pp. 96-106.
21 Ibid., pp. 42-3; *The Times*, 4 October 1853, p. 6; and 24 January 1854, p. 10; and 6 February 1854, p. 10; and Birman, *Gregory*, pp. 78-9.
to establish a settlement. He and Saunders appear to have communicated frequently, and both were determined to have the Gulf country explored and colonised. Saunders even planned to emigrate in the hope of becoming the new settlement’s land commissioner.

Stokes, however, fared no better than Haug. This time, arguments occurred over how much of the expedition’s time and resources should go into examining country near the Gulf ‘to further the immediate views of the colonists instead of being applied to an exploration towards the interior as the Geographical Society originally intended’. Ultimately, it was Gregory, rather than Stokes, who led the North Australian Expedition.

The Colonial Office instructions issued to Gregory late in 1854 reflected aspects of the expedition originally outlined by Haug. There was emphasis on the need to trace the Victoria River towards the interior, to assess landforms, and to determine whether adjacent streams emptied into the desert or united, either to form an inland sea or to flow to the west coast. All that work had to be completed before Gregory travelled to the Plains of Promise to assess their suitability for colonisation. His final objective, to shorten the overland route by which Leichhardt had linked the northern coast and the extremity of eastern settlement in 1844–1845, also ranked lower than the Victoria River work.

The North Australian Expedition occupied the latter months of 1855 and most of 1856. After closely examining the Victoria River, Gregory noted that the soil in one area, although rich, crumbled into small pieces beneath the summer sun, becoming so soft that livestock sank deeply. He noted, too, that the rains created deep mud, which bogged the animals. Many such comments offset his otherwise positive observations about fertile soil and abundant grass.

On completing the north-western segment of his expedition in June 1856, Gregory split his party. One group left in the Tom Tough to collect provisions at Kupang (Timor) and sail to the Gulf of Carpentaria. The other, led by Gregory, rode to the Albert River, arriving on 31 August. With the dry season well-advanced, the Plains of Promise, although fertile in places, offered little sustenance for the horses. Other problems arose through Aboriginal people being more visible, and seemingly more averse to intruders, than those further west. So,

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24 Stafford, Scientist of empire, p. 43. Some of the correspondence between Stokes and Saunders is listed in Borrow, Prince Albert Land, pp. 7–8.
27 Augustus Charles & Francis Thomas Gregory, Journals of Australian explorations, Brisbane, James C. Beal, 1884, facsimile edition, Victoria Park, Hesperian Press, 1981, p. 117 and p. 119. For examples of the comments, see the entries for 14 October 1855, 25 to 30 November 1855, 10 January 1856, and 17 to 23 January 1856. Gregory’s report of this expedition was printed by the Royal Geographical Society in 1858. It also appeared in the parliamentary papers in Britain and New South Wales and, in part at least, in various newspapers. It was then republished, as part of the brothers’ volume of journals, in 1884.
rather than wait for the *Tom Tough*, Gregory's group left for Moreton Bay. Relating his route to Leichhardt's as he went, he marked his 120th camp site (since leaving the Victoria) on 17 November. Five days later, he and his men reached country occupied by pastoralists, and, on 16 December, they arrived in Brisbane.²⁸

Interest in the Gulf country had not waned. In May 1856, Stokes had spoken up following the delivery of a Royal Geographical Society paper on sea routes to Australia. He urged colonisation at the base of the Gulf but Murchison, like Saunders, preferred its head. Murchison thought that settlers would shortly move there, and that their migration could be complemented by convicts building a town and port, thereby providing 'a safe and certain route to the Indian seas avoiding Torres Strait and rendering a number of worthless men useful'.²⁹ Saunders, too, had envisaged the use of convict labour, observing that 'islands at the mouth of the Albert River present remarkable facilities for maintaining a convict facility'.³⁰

These ideas were not new. The earlier proponents of northern colonisation included Major Benjamin Sullivan, 1833, 1839 and 1842, and John Mayo, 1839.³¹ A penal colony, suggested as early as 1837, came into being a decade later. Known as North Australia, with the settlement of Gladstone, on Port Curtis, as its capital, it embraced all lands north of the 26th parallel, from the east coast to Western Australia's border. North Australia's existence as a colony was incredibly short but it increased the colonists’ geographic knowledge and thus hastened their occupation of the central coast and its hinterland in the 1850s. Some reputedly investigated the Burdekin River area before Gregory passed through it, and others would go there soon after he reached Brisbane.³² The short-lived Canoona gold rush of 1858 contributed to the subsequent expansion and, by the time Queensland was declared a colony in late 1859, Rockhampton's population was comfortable enough to be irritated by the selection of 'acentrically positioned' Brisbane as the capital.³³

While the Queensland pastoralists and prospectors went about their business, other people continued to advocate the creation of additional Australian colonies. The Reverend JD

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Lang's ideas were well known and, as late as 1861, he was still campaigning for seven colonies along the eastern seaboard.\textsuperscript{34}

The possibilities inherent in the success of the expeditions that set out to cross the continent from south to north also fired imaginations. Dr Thomas Embling, an energetic Victorian politician, won colonial but not British support for a proposal to establish a Victoria River colony named 'Alexandrina'. By September 1861, he had nominated Blunder Bay, on the Victoria River, as the site for 'Alexandrina' and was angling for an alternate site somewhere on King Sound in Australia's north-west.\textsuperscript{35}

The 'Alexandrina' negotiations overlapped a fresh proposal to reorganise Australia's internal boundaries. This one, outlined by Gregory for Governor Bowen in September 1860, asked that Britain, firstly, give the western portion of the Plains of Promise to Queensland, and secondly, declare the lands further west a new colony. Like Saunders' 1853 proposal, that colony was to be named after Albert, the Prince Consort.\textsuperscript{36}

A further parallel existed in that geographical factors also dictated Gregory's proposed boundaries. He argued that the parts of Australia suited to European occupation were limited in extent and separated by tracts of sterile country. Those tracts, according to Gregory, bordered north-western and north-eastern Australia and created two natural provinces. Each province, however, came under the control of two governments. New South Wales had

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\textsuperscript{36} Bowen to the Duke of Newcastle, 30 September 1860, Despatch No. 79, C.O. 234/2.
jurisdiction over part of each, while Western Australia held the balance of the north-west province and Queensland the balance of the north-east one. A better arrangement, Gregory suggested, would see the Plains of Promise entirely within Queensland while a new government operating out of a city established on the Victoria River administered the ‘Province of Albert’.37

Gregory had drafted his proposal while working as Surveyor General of Queensland, having been appointed barely a fortnight after the colony’s creation. His position imparted credibility to his proposal and, in recommending it to the Secretary of State, Governor Bowen pronounced Gregory ‘the man, of all men living, most competent to form a correct judgement on this whole subject’.38 Undeniably true, this pronouncement helped to mask Queensland’s strong interest in having his judgement accepted.

Gregory’s proposal arose through the Queensland government having realised, while considering whether to establish a township at the Gulf of Carpentaria, and perhaps telegraphic communication with Timor, that the western segment of the Plains of Promise belonged to New South Wales.39 Dismayed by this realisation, Bowen used Gregory’s expertise to put together a case for relocating the border and creating the colony of ‘Albert’.

In putting his case to the Colonial Office, Bowen contended that, until October 1859, the London officials had apparently shared his government’s belief that the lands granted to Queensland reached across to Western Australia’s border.40 From this viewpoint, it appeared that Queensland was being robbed of land it had once held and, significantly, of the best site for a Gulf town. The case for relocating the border thus appeared strong, especially when viewed against the recently identified environmental constraints.

Gregory, as well as setting down the geographical arguments that favoured the creation of ‘Albert’, suggested that the colony might best be established using convict labour for its public works. Only South Australia, he pointed out, had been founded successfully without importing convicts. Bowen endorsed this approach, likening Gregory’s thinking to that of Lang, and he included in his despatch an extract from an 1852 proposal that Lang had developed for the Victoria River.41 A less appropriate supporting document, given its

37 ibid. This correspondence was printed in British Sessional Paper No. 506 of 1863, House of Commons, vol. XXXVIII, and in Queensland’s Parliamentary Papers. Cumpston, Augustus Gregory, printed Gregory’s report, but not the rest of the correspondence, as Appendix C of his book. In citing the Parliamentary Papers, several authors have misconstrued the correspondence and the proposed boundaries.
38 Cumpston, Augustus Gregory, p. 74; and C.O. 234/2.
39 ibid., p. 84; and C.O. 234/2.
40 C.O. 234/2.
rejection by the Colonial Office, would have been difficult to find. Yet it was not this that decided the fate of the Gregory’s ‘Albert’ proposal. Its timing and its connection with Queensland’s bid for extra lands locked it into a contest where it vied with the lobbying of the South Australian government, and that of Embling and his associates, for jurisdiction over central northern Australia.

In the contest, Gregory’s concept of the natural provinces directly opposed South Australia’s quest to annex part of the north coast. This probably influenced his late 1862 suggestion that Britain, if not prepared to declare ‘Albert’ a colony, should create it as a South Australian dependency until its self-government became feasible. Whether that arrangement would have proved better than splitting the central portion between Queensland and South Australia in 1862 is debatable.

In securing the balance of the Plains of Promise, Bowen and Gregory apparently achieved their objective. Their actions do not indicate that they aspired to gain control over the proposed colony of Albert. Nor is there evidence that they or their associates hoped to profit from its creation. Yet, when Gregory drafted his proposal, his brother Frank happened to be in England seeking funds to explore the north-west of the continent. Augustus Gregory knew about the proposed exploration, having discussed it with his brother in Western Australia late in 1859. Their simultaneous interest in the north-west may have been purely coincidental, but the extent to which their proposals complemented one another was rather convenient. Also, had both succeeded, Frank Gregory might have profited from the creation of ‘Albert’ through being a key contender for appointment as the new colony’s Surveyor General. He had chosen to seek funds for his north-west expedition, rather than accept an offer to become Victoria’s Surveyor General, because he hoped to receive comparable recognition in the west.

Frank Gregory had secured local support for his proposed expedition and, in April 1859, Governor Kennedy had put the idea of the north-western exploration to the Colonial Office. His endorsement, and one from the Royal Geographical Society, no doubt helped, and in-principle agreement from the Secretary of State for the Colonies (the Duke of Newcastle) had come through in August.

It remained for Frank Gregory to find financial backing for his expedition. Progress towards self-government in the eastern colonies had changed the way in which exploration was being

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42 C.O. 234/2. This despatch has caustic notes in its margin where someone, presumably in the Colonial Office, took exception to Bowen calling Lang a ‘writer of large colonial experience’.
44 ibid., pp. 821-6.
45 Birman, Gregory, pp. 209-10, documenting the brothers’ parallel activities but not inferring collusion.
46 ibid., p. 202 and p. 207.
47 ibid., pp. 202-3; and Stafford, Scientist of empire, p. 46.
financed. The Colonial Office had largely withdrawn from that sphere, leaving governments and colonists to finance expeditions into unknown localities. Knowledge of this situation may have encouraged the would-be expedition leader to devise a scheme that involved colonising as well as exploring the north-west. It is also conceivable that the colonisation aspect stemmed from his conversations with his brother Augustus. Either way, it featured Asian labourers cultivating cotton, echoing Grey's ideas of 1841, and it stood to gain support because the civil war in America was affecting English cotton manufacturers' supplies.48

The Royal Geographical Society liked the exploration aspect of Gregory's proposal. This led to additional planning in 1860 and to the idea of extending the exploration to take in another 1,000 kilometres or more to the north-east. That would take Frank Gregory to Sturt Creek, which Augustus Gregory had traced and named in February 1856. A deputation from the society took the proposal to the Secretary of State, reminding him that lands near the northern rivers were reputedly suitable for agriculture and grazing. Other influential people also gave opinions. One who queried the wisdom of colonising such a remote locality was Western Australia's Surveyor General, John Septimus Roe, who had sailed on the north-west coast with Phillip Parker King in the 1820s.49

Frank Gregory undertook his exploration in 1861 but on a much smaller scale than envisaged. Starting from Nickol Bay on the west coast, he mapped the river systems in that locality and noted 200,000 acres (80,937 hectares) of land ideal for growing cotton. Cultivated cotton plants had fared well until destroyed by fire, and flourishing native tobacco, pearl oysters and sandalwood trees had been seen.50 It was, however, Gregory's comments on 'the fitness of this district for the growth of wool' that provoked the greatest interest, both in the pastorally-oriented western colony and in land-hungry Victoria.51

As people considered Gregory's findings, debate about rearranging Australia's internal boundaries continued.52 The Secretary of State had contemplated freezing Augustus Gregory's proposal for 'Albert' before his brother set out but word of that was a long time reaching the colonial governors. When it did, they heard that Britain was not inclined to attach portions of northern Australia to other colonies hastily, or create a new colony 'on the grounds of mere anticipations, or projects, or on notions of fitness on our present

48 Gregory, Journals, p. 52. Stafford, Scientist of empire, p. 47, noted that the British government supported Gregory 'because of its anxiety to develop new sources of cotton'.


50 Gregory, Journals, pp. 52-96.

51 Perth Gazette, 14 February 1862, p. 2. Frank Gregory's report came out as a booklet published by Stirling, Sholl, Co. of Perth. Information from it would have circulated through the colonies in the customary transmission of news items from one newspaper to the next.

geographical knowledge’. Indeed, there was doubt whether Britain could legally annex further territory to an existing colony.\(^{53}\) While sent in reply to Bowen’s despatch, this answer also had relevance to Embling’s ideas for ‘Alexandrina’ and to South Australia’s bid to annex northern lands.

A growing rivalry lay behind the enthusiasm with which the eastern colonies pushed exploring expeditions into fresh territory. Given their short periods of self-government, this rivalry was hardly surprising. A government with productive lands could create revenue and attract immigrants and capital. Economic well-being depended on those activities and, throughout this era, the Australian colonies competed against one another, and against other places, for the most desirable immigrants.\(^{54}\)

Both wealth and prestige could be expected from establishing the first telegraphic link with Asia, and thus with Europe and England. But first, someone had to find a feasible route from the northern extremities of settlement to a habitable part of the north coast. Stuart spent two frustrating months on 11 unsuccessful attempts to go beyond the parallel of 18° south latitude to either the Gulf of Carpentaria or the headwaters of the Victoria River before he withdrew in July 1861. By that time, Burke and Wills were dead, having perished while returning from their sighting of the Bynoe River entering the Gulf east of the Albert River.\(^{55}\)

The advantages of the northern coast in affording a location for a trading port, and perhaps a station for telegraphic communication, figured in Augustus Gregory’s ‘Albert’, Embling’s ‘Alexandrina’, and the South Australian bid for a northern territory. So, too, did gaining lands for agricultural and pastoral enterprises. Only the last of those considerations had immediate relevance to the country explored by Frank Gregory in the westernmost portion of ‘Albert’. Hence, whilst colonists and governments all wanted northern lands, their reasons and objectives varied according to the position of the lands.

The Colonial Office made its attitude to uncontrolled settlement clear when it rejected Embling’s ‘Alexandrina’ proposal. He had stressed that he was not soliciting monetary assistance and merely wanted the ‘first adventurers’ to receive ‘free Grants of lands in proportion to the monies actually taken into the new country’.\(^{56}\) The Secretary of State, providing a benchmark against which to match the outcome of subsequent proposals, ruled that:

\[... \text{it is impossible for Her Majesty’s Government to sanction the erection of a New Colony in Australia without undertaking the responsibilities attaching to such Colonization and that in the present semi-inhabited state of the existing Australian}\]

\(^{53}\) The Duke of Newcastle to Bowen, 26 February 1861, Despatch No. 4, C.O. 324/2.

\(^{54}\) Coltheart, ‘Australia Misère’, pp. 82-3.


\(^{56}\) Barkly to the Duke of Newcastle, 23 October 1861, Despatch No. 88, C.O. 411/8, enclosing Embling’s letter of 24 September 1861.
colonies, and the present posture of public affairs, it would … be especially unwise to incur unnecessarily any such new responsibility.  

British reticence to condone ambitious colonial ventures did nothing to abate land hunger. While Western Australia negotiated with Britain over regulations for the lands explored by Frank Gregory, interest in the Plains of Promise grew with publicity about the findings of the relief expeditions that had searched for traces of Burke and Wills. Those findings also produced rivalry between Queensland (the area’s nominated guardian through the agreement to annex it to Queensland) and Victoria (the source of the Burke and Wills expedition and several of the relief expeditions). The Queensland government and a Victorian entrepreneur thus emerged as contenders for the formation of Gulf settlements. Various accounts of the government settlement of Somerset, on Cape York, have been published but John Hall’s plan for ‘Prince Albert Land’ is less well known.

On 13 June 1862, Hall held a public meeting in Melbourne to discuss establishing a settlement on the Albert River. He read a pamphlet, which he had written, stating that ‘the object was to form an association for the mutual benefit of each of the subscribers, by a well-arranged system of co-operation’. Each subscriber would have an interest in land, either in the proposed town or in the country. Hall allowed for pre-emptive rights over pastoral holdings and he asserted that his group could ‘take possession of this country’ pending a decision from the Imperial government whose permission he would seek ‘by the next mail’.

Hall’s failure to test the Queensland government’s reaction to his proposal before holding his meeting drew criticism, as did the meagre amount of information he presented to the audience. Nonetheless, the meeting resolved to pursue the issue by forming a sub-committee to find out if Queensland and Britain would recognise the colonising association and, if so, on what terms.

No letter to the Colonial Office has been found but, as the sub-committee’s secretary, Hall wrote to the Queensland Government on 16 June. A preamble in his letter argued that the Burke and Wills expedition and the loss of those explorers entitled Victoria to the Gulf country. He asked if he and his companions could settle there, as outlined in a printed attachment, pending a Colonial Office decision regarding the creation of ‘Prince Albert Land’.

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58 Bolton, A thousand miles away, p. 27. For the opinions of William Landsborough and Frederick Walker, see Courier, 23 June 1862, p. 2, and 7 July 1862, p. 3.
59 Political Economist, 27 June 1862, reprinted in Courier, 14 July 1862, pp. 2-3. See also Courier, 17 July 1862, pp. 6-7. The annexation had been mentioned in Courier, 24 June 1862, p. 3.
60 For an account of Somerset, see Peter Pinney & Estelle Runcie, Too many spears, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1978. The settlement is also mentioned by other authors, e.g. Bolton, A thousand miles away, pp. 27-8, and Fitzgerald, From the Dreaming, p. 284.
61 Argus, 14 June 1862, p. 4. It is noted that, although this meeting occurred eleven days before the Courier announced the annexation of the Plains of Promise, Hall had already seen other reports.
62 Argus, 14 June 1862, p. 4.
He also advised that they proposed to establish a town, Burke City, on the Albert River and to seek self-government once they had an agricultural base in the countryside. All the work would be done by ‘300 men with their families’.63

The object of the association, Hall stated, was ‘to prevent the fertile lands of this New Country being tied up by leases for pastoral purposes only, while the climate will grow in the greatest perfection Cotton Tobacco Sugar Indigo Rice and other valuable products’. Had Victoria ‘adopted similar regulations for occupation and settlement of waste lands years ago,’ he continued, ‘she would not now be in her present condition’.64

The Political Economist carried the news of Hall’s proposal on 27 June – the day before a Brisbane clerk opened his letter.65 The Governor sent the letter to the Executive Council for a decision and then advised the Secretary of State that practical men in Brisbane viewed the idea as ‘somewhat utopian’. Bowen saw no reason for Hall’s group to go beyond Queensland’s liberal land regulations. In fact, he wrote, it would attain its aims more easily by utilising the existing land laws and leaving the government to create a township. That view received endorsement from the Secretary of State who commended Bowen for offering a solution that was ‘without risk of encouraging land-jobbing’.66

These negotiations necessarily occupied months. On 20 July, Hall urged the government to answer his letter.67 His proposal was fast becoming recognised by newspapers, if not by the government, as one that would go ahead. Indeed, the editor of the Courier welcomed its likely execution because it would increase Queensland’s chance of being ‘first in the field’ to establish a northern port, thus encouraging shipping and initiating trade with Asia. The perceived rival was Augustus Gregory’s ‘Albert’. The Colonial Office had not yet decided how to redistribute the northern lands west of the Plains of Promise and, in the editor’s mind, Gregory’s natural provinces appeared a likely choice.68

On 23 July, the Courier editor resumed his commentary about the Gulf saga. In particular, he noted that forty colonists from the Swan Hill area, on the Murray River, were about to take livestock overland. Such a move, he argued, demanded swift and decisive action so that the Queensland government could control development at the Gulf.

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63 Queensland State Archives (QSA), Colonial Secretary’s Office (C.S.O.), Series ID 5253, Item ID 846763 Correspondence - inwards, In-letter 62/1650.
64 ibid.
65 ibid.; and Courier, Brisbane, 14 July 1862, pp. 2-3, reprinting a Political Economist article of 27 June 1862.
67 QSA, C.S.O., Series ID 5253, Item ID 846763 Correspondence - inwards, In-letter 62/2187, filed with In-letter 62/2363.
68 Courier, 19 July 1862, p. 2.
It requires only one successful attempt to be made to establish a station on the Albert River, or anywhere else in the neighbourhood of the Gulf, to induce a large number of squatters in every one of the Australian Colonies to put out to the new country with their flocks and herds.\[^{69}\]

At about this time, Hall received what he called ‘a most favourable reply from the Queensland Government’.\[^{70}\] Someone else also began displaying an interest in the Gulf country, proposing that the Victorian government construct a railway to it.\[^{71}\]

The railway proposal excited Embling. Instead of a northern port on Carpentaria, he wrote, why not the Victoria River, or King Sound? He adhered to his argument for a telegraph link with Europe, but this time he added the possibility of a connection with a railway to Britain. Someone else had proposed a scheme – known as the Euphrates Valley Railway – in England, planning to link the town of Chatham, near London, with Burma, via a line through Syria, Iraq and India. If Australia could hold out the prospect of constructing a transcontinental railway with a terminus on the north-west coast, Embling suggested, it would ‘materially influence them in pressing forward this Euphrates scheme, which would then attract the whole of the overland traffic between Australia and Europe’.\[^{72}\]

Others, too, thought the north-west coast afforded a better prospect than the Gulf. On 2 August, the Melbourne Yeoman observed that:

> If the Australian colonies are alive to their interests at the present time, they will strive to increase their prosperity by the extension of settlement to the north-west coast. The unhappy war in America ... presents to Australia an opportunity which should not be overlooked. We have often recommended the formation of a settlement on the north-west coast, where there is a far more extensive and fertile country than exists anywhere near the Gulf of Carpentaria. It appears that the British Government cannot be induced to encourage the formation of a new colony on the north-west coast of the continent, although it has recently consented to establish a military post, in conjunction with the Queensland Government, at the extremity of Cape York. However desirable such a station may be for the protection of shipping and shipwrecked crews, it can be of little or no benefit in any other way; whereas, if a similar establishment were formed on the Victoria River, the whole of that fertile region would soon be settled.\[^{73}\]

Another letter came from a correspondent signing himself ‘Ichabod’. He thought Hall’s scheme for ‘Prince Albert Land’ impressive but he argued that, since the shortcomings of the Gulf as a port had forestalled Stokes’ original plan for its settlement, they should now forestall Hall’s plan. ‘Ichabod’ claimed to have ‘had the whole question of northern settlement under consideration’ for many months and had been waiting only for his plans to mature before making them public. Though this maturity had yet to come, he alluded to them for fear

\[^{69}\] Courier, 23 July 1862, p. 2.  
\[^{70}\] Hall to the Editor (31 July 1862), Argus, 1 August 1862, p. 5.  
\[^{71}\] ‘Northern Light’ to the Editor, Argus, 30 July 1862, p. 6. See also 1 August 1862, p. 4 and p. 6; and 15 August 1862, pp. 5-6.  
\[^{72}\] Embling to the Editor, Argus, 4 August 1862, p. 6.  
\[^{73}\] Reprint from Courier, 18 August 1862, p. 4. The Yeoman was a newspaper printed in the Argus office.
that, if Hall proceeded, 'the bad selection of a site for enterprise on the northern shores of
the continent would cast a damp and discouragement on the whole question'. Hall and
others interested in these matters might, however, join him in colonising the north-west and
thus do far more. He provided his name, now unknown, so the editor could make it available,
and he wrote:

The locality I have selected as the best keystone of all northern commercial, pastoral,
agricultural, and mining enterprise, is the harbour surveyed and named by Stokes
Brecknock Harbour, and known on the Admiralty charts as Camden Harbour. It ... [is]
the nearest and the best point of communication with all Eastern Asia, for the
extension of telegraphic communication to the coasts of Australia, and, in fact, for
everything in that direction which the growth of our southern settlements demands. I
propose to name the settlement on the south shores of Camden Harbour, Grey, or
Grey City, in testimony to the present Governor of New Zealand, who, through much
difficulty, danger, and suffering, first discovered and earnestly drew the attention of
the British Government to the unparalleled advantages of Camden Harbour and its
neighbourhood.74

As well as wanting to meet Hall, 'Ichabod' indicated that a promoter who was trying to form a
compny to grow semi-tropical produce in Victoria might join his Camden Harbour scheme.75
Whether meetings occurred is unknown but the advocacy of settlement at Camden Harbour
had begun.

Hall stuck with his proposal, sending a copy of his pamphlet to Brisbane on 9 August and
mentioning that he might visit.76 Like Embling, he was reluctant to concede that his ideas did
not appeal to the officials with whom he dealt. He continued his quest in September,
unsuccessfully seeking to wheedle more than the regulation amount of land out of the
government.77

Widespread interest in the subject of northern settlement probably reinforced Hall's
determination to win colonial government approval.78 Planning for the official Gulf settlement
was progressing, and newspapers reported on Governor Bowen sailing to Torres Strait to
select the site for Somerset.79 Other items mentioned people preparing to drove livestock to
the Gulf.80 One, a reprint from the Daily Telegraph of 19 August, provides an extreme

74 'Ichabod' to the Editor (6 August 1862), Argus, 22 August 1862, p. 3. The assumption that this
correspondent was male is made by the author of this paper.
75 Argus, 22 August 1862, p. 3. For coverage of The Victorian Sugar, Cotton, and East India Produce
Growing and Manufacturing Company, see Argus, 31 July 1862, p. 5; 1 August 1862, p. 4; and 5
August 1862, p. 4 and p. 6.
76 QSA, C.S.O., Series ID 5253, Item ID 846763 Correspondence - inwards, In-letter 62/2075, filed
with In-letter 62/2363.
77 ibid., In-letters 62/2187 and 62/2363.
78 See, for example, Courier, 16 August 1862, p. 5; 18 August 1862, p. 4; 22 August 1862, p. 2; and
27 August 1862, p. 2. See also Argus, 12 August 1862, p. 4; 19 August 1862, pp. 5-6; 20 August
1862, pp. 4-5; 25 August 1862, p. 5; and onward into October.
79 A diary of this trip was published in newspapers that included Argus, 5 November 1862, p. 6.
80 See, for example, Argus, 14 October 1862, p. 5 and p. 7.
example of the imagery created by advocates of northern settlement. Captioned ‘An English View of the Australian colonies’, it recorded increasing migration to a

... pastoral Canaan, which by its northern settlements will communicate without a doubt with Asiatic ports, and bring India and Australia together, beyond all expectations. Nor have we yet tested the tropical powers of the latter island-continent, as we shall soon be able to do, since Carpentaria promises to be a second Mexican Gulf, with a city on Flinders River for its New Orleans, Calcutta or Bombay for its New York, and England and free institutions for the auspices of its rise.\(^{81}\)

Although public debate about northern settlement decreased late in October, reports from the explorer Howitt (from Victoria) provided fresh information. Copies of Landsborough’s journal and his map of the Gulf country were also published.\(^{82}\) The Colonial Office intention of redistributing northern lands in two longitudinal slices also became known around this time.\(^{83}\) That solution gave Queensland control over the whole of the Plains of Promise and adjusted the western boundaries of South Australia and New South Wales.\(^{84}\)

On the last day of 1862 an article from the Perth *Inquirer* appeared in the *Argus*, reporting on liberal new land laws in Western Australia and suggesting that ‘squatters’ from the eastern colonies would stock the area explored by Frank Gregory.\(^{85}\) Several weeks later, another article told of the West Australian Walter Padbury preparing to take livestock there.\(^{86}\) Only days afterwards, Victorians began seeking permits to take livestock into Western Australia’s North District.\(^{87}\) Their interest lay not in the lands explored by Gregory but in the more remote ones identified by ‘Ichabod’. He had not further publicised his scheme for occupying Camden Harbour but a permit seeker, William Harvey, had communicated with someone advocating such a scheme.\(^{88}\)

The ideas put forward by ‘Ichabod’ had also attracted Hall, whose hopes of establishing ‘Prince Albert Land’ on the Gulf of Carpentaria had been dashed by Queensland. Undeterred, he emerged on 21 January 1863 with an advertisement for a public meeting at which he intended to make arrangements for colonising ‘Prince Albert Land, Northern Australia’. The meeting revealed that the proposed colony now covered the lands west of the Plains of Promise. Whether his Gulf of Carpentaria plan warranted a mention is unknown but Hall’s new plan bore a marked resemblance to his old one. In fact, he seems to have simply

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\(^{81}\) *Argus*, 14 October 1862, p. 7.

\(^{82}\) *Argus*, 22 October 1862, p. 5, and 18 November 1862, p. 5.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 1 December 1862, p. 7, reprinted from *South Australian Register*.

\(^{84}\) See Evans, *A history of Queensland*, p. [76] for maps showing the old and new boundaries. Because other authors provide extensive analysis of the subsequent creation of the Northern Territory and the establishment of settlements there, this paper does not cover those matters.

\(^{85}\) *Argus*, 31 December 1862, p. 6.

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 16 January 1863, p. 6.

\(^{87}\) State Records Office of Western Australia, C.S.R. vol. 515, pp. 420-5.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., vol. 513, pp. 44-6.
relocated the site of his proposed colony westward, enlarging its scope to embrace much of the territory that constituted Augustus Gregory’s ‘Albert’.89

The subsequent promotion of Camden Harbour saw an escalation in the use of imagery. The illusions created, coupled with the liberal land regulations devised by the Western Australian Government, induced people to join settlement schemes and migrate to the north-west coast. That outcome was terribly unfortunate for the hundreds who went there in 1864 and 1865. Those who survived left much poorer for their experience.90 The settlers who headed for the Plains of Promise around the same time fared little better but they appear to have acted as individuals who were taking part in the customary outgrowth of settlement.91 Thus, while promising imagery loomed large in the advocacy of all northern settlement, the Queensland Government can be seen to have shown more prudence than the Western Australian Government in dealing with the advocates’ dreams and schemes.92

89 Argus, 21 January 1863, p. 8, and 27 January 1863, p. 4.
92 I am indebted to Ruth Kerr for helpful feedback on a draft of this paper.