Australian history, particularly in the nineteenth century, has its fair share of legendary figures: real characters who have been built into romantic folkheroes. They live on the frontier and most of them have a touch of the villain or larrikin about them, toned down by a "Robin Hood" desire to correct social injustices and confront the harshness of the authorities.

It is often said of these characters, such as Ben Hall and Ned Kelly that they were "legends in their own time". Perhaps they were to those who never met them, but this statement, which has become a cliché needs examination. Very few people are legends, a description which denotes a romantic aura, to their contemporaries, who have the chance of judging them close at hand.

The legend surrounding an historical character is usually the work of romanticising journalists, quasi-historians and story-tellers whose historical errors became perpetuated and often further embellished. Legends may collect round a character because of the remote and exotic terrain in which he operates. This adds to the mystery: a thread in the weaving of legends. The peculiar circumstances of an era, such as a gold rush in which there are adventurous spirits seeking fortunes, may also contribute to the creation of the legendary figure.

This lecture is concerned with Christie Palmerston; the subject of more legends than any other person in the history of far North Queensland. The frontier in the tropical north has produced outstanding pioneers with exciting histories, such as the explorer Edmund Kennedy; Frank Jardine, the pioneer of Cape York; James Venture Mulligan, prospector and discoverer of the Palmer River Goldfields; John Moffat, the tin-mining king of Herberton and Irvinebank and many
others. Yet no one has been subject to the romanticising treatment given to Christie Palmerston. The purpose of this study is to examine the legend and the genuine historical evidence and then to try to account for the transformation of Christie Palmerston, prospector and tracker into a legendary figure.

The area of far North Queensland in which he operated in the 1880s was remote and mysterious in itself: from approximately Innisfail (then named Geraldton) to Port Douglas on the coast, and inland over the ranges to the Hodgkinson goldfield and the tin-mining towns of Herberton and Irvinebank. This included the rain-forests of the Atherton and Evelyn tablelands, roughly 443 sq. miles. The modern motorist cruising at 100 kph on a relatively well-surfaced road sees acres and acres of vivid green canefields with distant back-drops of mountainous rain-forest, dominated by the peak of Mount Bartle Frere. Only very rarely does a small uncleared patch of rain-forest give welcome shade to the road. In Palmerston's time the whole area was covered with dense tropical jungle, except for small patches kept clear by the rain-forest Aborigines. It was an area unique in Queensland, as the first explorer of the region, Elphinstone Dalrymple in 1874 explained in his report to the Queensland government:

In the dense scrubs, or rather jungles to which descend the surrounding hills to the water's edge, we were for the first time introduced to true tropical Queensland, and to a development of vegetation thoroughly oriental in its character and unlike any other in the Australian colonies. Dalrymple and his party painfully and slowly hacked their way to a vantage point on one of the ranges to get a view of the surrounding country. The view was breath-taking but the terrain apparently impenetrable.

Bellenden Kerr Mountains were shrouded in dense clouds of smoke of black's fires, but the lofty peak of Mount Bartle Frere cut the clear blue sky to the N.W. far above them. Thence,
W. and S., ranges beyond ranges bounded the
great coast basin, the whole of the wide-
spread floor of which presented one vast
unbroken expanse of dense tropical jungles.1

And Dalrymple with a sea-borne expedition saw only a fraction of it.
Perhaps it is not surprising that Palmerston, who some ten years later
tried to establish tracks through the area across the jungled ranges to
the other side, assisted by a handful of Aborigines and Kanakas, should
have become a legendary character.

Dalrymple, although only on the fringes of the area remarks
on the frequency with which they encountered Aborigines. By the 1880s
the rain-forest had become a strong-hold because of its impenetrable
nature, of Aboriginal resistance to white and Chinese intruders in far
North Queensland. The unusually stubborn resistance of the rain-forest
Aborigines, in the nature of a drawn-out guerrilla war, which has also
become part of the frontier legend, is a study in itself which we have
no time for in this lecture. Fortunately, Dr. N. Loos has given us a
clear and fascinating study of "Resistance from the Rain-forest", in
his PhD thesis "Aboriginal-European Relations in North Queensland 1861-
1897".2 Certainly part of the legend of Christie Palmerston arose from
the fact that he operated with his own Aborigines in exceedingly
difficult terrain inhabited by ferocious wild blacks, understandably
very much on the defensive against white intruders.

The story of Christie Palmerston begins in Melbourne where he
was born in 1850. He was the son of Casinò Jerome, the tenth Marquis
di Carandini of Sarzano and his wife Mary née Burgess. The name used
on his marriage certificate issued in Townsville (1886), where he gives
his age as 36 and his occupation as explorer was Christofers Palmerston
Carandini. His father was an Italian émigré exiled from his homeland
for revolutionary activities against Italy's foreign Austrian rulers.
His mother was an opera singer, evidently of some note, professionally
known as Madame Carandini.
Christie, for reasons we do not know, abandoned his Italian name in North Queensland and was known as Christie Palmerston. This name led to the myth, that his real father was the famous British Prime Minister, Viscount Palmerston. Biographers of Christie Palmerston have been quick to point out the absurdity of this legend as Viscount Palmerston "was 10,000 miles away at the appropriate time". However, no one has suggested a reason for the inclusion of Palmerston in an otherwise Italian name. Surely the explanation is obvious. Christie's father might even have met Palmerston in London at Shaftesbury's (son-in-law of Lady Palmerston) residence, a "house of call for refugees". It was natural that his father should want to honour the patron of Liberation by including the name Palmerston in those with which his son was christened.

Christie Palmerston turned up at the Palmer River goldfield in 1874. Various suggestions based on weak or non-existent evidence have been given for his going to the Far North. But does going to one of Australia's richest and most spectacular gold rushes really need any explanation except a desire to find a fortune and an adventurous spirit in a young man of 24 years? On the Palmer and in the Hodgkinson gold-rush which followed in 1876, it seems the legends started to collect round his name. It is difficult to find an accurate picture of his appearance, even by people who allegedly knew him.

A former journalist, later Major-General Spencer Browne, in his book *A Journalist's Memories* wrote:

I found him to be about middle height, wiry, lean, very dark, and intensely self-conscious...Christy Palmerston spoke no language but that of the blacks, and his own English, and the latter rather indifferently....In my opinion, Christy Palmerston was an Australian, a Victorian probably, of respectable parentage, but who had drifted. His lonely and rather risky life on the Palmer was temperamental.
Another account given by John Fraser who pioneered Mitchell Vale station gives a different picture:

He was a man over medium height, stout-built, and very active, with black bushy beard, and black thick curly hair. As he wore no hat, it looked like a big mop. He was dressed in what I used afterwards to call his fighting rig. It consisted of a cotton shirt, held round the waist by a broad belt, glistening with cartridges, and holding onto his hip a large sized colt revolver, while a snider rifle hung from his shoulder. 

The most romanticized version of the Christie Palmerston legend can be found in River of Gold by Hector Holthouse: the story seems to be culled from already established legends. Here is a typical example:

He [Christy] arrived on the Palmer early in the rush, bearded, and unkempt as a blackfellow with a carbine slung over his shoulder, Colt revolver on his hip and a small army of half-wild myalls at his back. No one ever saw him digging gold, but he always seemed to have a good supply of it. Old diggers muttered darkly that it came from the miners who had been murdered by the blacks. In Cooktown's gambling dens he was nearly always lucky, and in the dance halls women flocked about him.

Again, "Christie Palmerston was one of the most remarkable men the north ever knew. To the diggers he became a friend in need, to the Chinese a death-dealing terror, and to the cannibal blacks a legendary figure who moved among them unmolested".

All the ingredients of a legend are here. The chivalrous knight who rescued the wives of white diggers, and "once had stayed with a myall tribe for weeks to look after a sick child": the larrikin whom the police were after yet at the same time respected: the self-appointed vigilante who declared war on the Chinese, whom the majority of the white people disliked and distrusted: and the romantic fortune hunter who looked after his own financial interests. And this is not to mention his beautiful singing voice and immediate fascination for women.
JEAN FARNFIELD

In the face of the legend-spinners, the historian is immediately tempted to play-down Christie Palmerston. To do this would be to lose an important character in North Queensland history. Because from the hard evidence available there does emerge the picture of a man who did some remarkable feats of tracking in the rain-forest and established an unusual relationship with the Aborigines of the area.

Conditions in Far North Queensland from approximately 1874-1890 made possible the work which Christie Palmerston actually carried out and also provided conditions for the growth of a legend. From 1876 the North was in a state of flux and considerable confusion. The last of the great alluvial gold-rushes to the Palmer River in 1873-4 had drawn large numbers of people, seeking a fortune, to the Far North. When the alluvial gold ran out they spilled out over the area from Cooktown to Cardwell into the rain-forest and over the ranges, still trying to win a fortune or make a living without becoming "wages men" on a most demanding frontier.

James Venture Mulligan, the veteran prospector, led five prospecting expeditions in 1874-1876 and finally discovered the Hodgkinson field in 1876. After the Hodgkinson, finding little more alluvial gold, the prospectors and fossickers turned to tin-mining in the Herberton area across the ranges. For a time tin gave the same promise of independence and self-employment that alluvial gold digging had offered. Fossickers and miners were then spread out over the rain forest and beyond. Shorter and better communications with the coast than those provided by Cooktown and Cardwell were imperative. Three more coastal townships were established at Port Douglas, Cairns and Geraldton to serve the hinterland. With the Divisional Boards Act introduced by the McIlwraith government in 1879 they became centres of local government. The members of the Boards competed jealously and sometimes viciously to attract custom to their locality.
LEGEND OF NORTH QUEENSLAND - CHRISTIE PALMERSTON (1851-1897)

This was a multi-racial society. Apart from the Europeans there were thousands of Chinese, first attracted to the Palmer gold rush, who afterwards to the great disquiet of the white population took up tin-mining, market-gardening and storekeeping in the small townships as they sprang up. They kept to their own culture and in most places were regarded as undesirable aliens, particularly by the mining community. Along the coast wherever farmers were starting to grow sugar-cane were the Kanakas, imported South Sea Islanders. And last of all, there were the Aborigines either becoming second-class citizens in white society, or fiercely trying to defend their homelands against heedless foreign invaders.

In this environment, Christie Palmerston, an adventurer seeking a living had unusual talents to offer, which Local Boards and the government wanted. Even if one discounts a great deal of the legend he was clearly an outstanding bushman and tracker who could handle Aborigines and spoke some of their languages. The romantic title of the legend, "Prince of Pathfinders", is perhaps somewhere near an accurate description. It is not difficult to understand how "scattered groups of pioneers battling for dear life to make a go of things" might make a legendary hero out of a pathfinder, whose "tracks opened up mineral, timber and sugar lands". Palmerston eventually became known on the Hodgkinson goldfield as an excellent bushman. There is unfortunately no hint of how he acquired this skill which he most likely learnt from contact with Aborigines. In 1876 Cooktown merchants, on the recommendation of J.V. Mulligan, backed Palmerston and W.C. Little to cut a track, from the Hodgkinson goldfield to the coast. This he did in 1877, discovering a route along the Mowbray River which led to the founding of Port Douglas. In 1880 he established a route from Port Douglas to the new Herberton tin fields. In April 1882 the Minister for Works in McIlwraith's government, commissioned Palmerston to examine the ranges between Port Douglas and Cairns to recommend the best crossing of the ranges for a railway route to connect Herberton with
the coast. The economic benefit of being the port terminus was being eagerly sought by Port Douglas and Cairns. Dorothy Jones has given an excellent account with extracts from Palmerston's own report on his search for possible railway routes, in her book *Trinity Phoenix: A History of Cairns*. 7

Palmerston's reports on his various expeditions are well-documented and show an accurate observer, painstaking explorer and an expert in bushcraft. Contrary to legendary assertions, they are not flamboyant. We have no time here for detailed study of reports which are of special interest to geographers and geologists: we will study one report only to examine his relationships with Aborigines, round which so much of the legend has grown up.

Shortly after his completion of the survey for railway routes in August 1882 Palmerston received an offer from the Chairman of the Johnstone Divisional Board to find a track from Mourilyan Harbour to Herberton. As Mourilyan was considerably nearer to Herberton than either Port Douglas or Cairns, the Board wanted to put in a competitive bid for the government railway, but they were not very generous in the remuneration they offered Palmerston for such an arduous undertaking. He wrote, "I was to mark a track from Mourilyan to Herberton for the sum of £300... Should the Government use my track for a railway, the Board should add another £100, this lower sum to be paid in instalments". Palmerston fulfilled his side of the contract and marked out a track from Mourilyan to Herberton and back. But when he asked for his payment, he was told the Board did not have the money; all he received was a cheque for £20 from the ex-Chairman which was dishonoured. Thoroughly annoyed by such shabby treatment he withheld his report on the journey. 8

Just before he set out on this journey, his "faithful little follower", the Aboriginal Pompo died. They had been together for a long time as Christie wrote, "It is not in me to express how much this
little aborigine had endeared himself to me by his bright intelligence and fidelity. He accompanied me through the darkest scenes of my life — sickness, famine, adversity — and saved me from death several times". Rather than the armed gang of myalls at his heels as the legend suggests, it would seem that Pompo had often been his sole companion and part of the secret of Palmerston's success as a bushman.

For the Mourilyan-Herberton exploration he had to get together a scratch team of "two half civilized Kanakas named Trousers and Myloo, two Johnstone aborigines, although myalls — I called one Charlie and the other Williea, and a little Etheridge aborigine named Sam". Through the journey Charlie was thoroughly unreliable and the plague of the expedition. Palmerston described him with the dry sense of humour which characterises his writing. "He was a long lean slab, swivel eyed, very deficient in the matter of calves and thighs, knees the size of pumpkins and more than usual share of mouth". When he arrived at Herberton he dispensed with Charlie and Williea, and took on two Thornborough [Hodgkinson] Aborigines in their place. It is significant that he remarks this was no trouble for him as he spoke their language. He found the Kanakas useless for exploring for they were continually moaning about being lost and naturally had no bush sense. One suspects that his dark mood on the whole of this expedition reflected a profound sense of loss at the death of Pompo.

In his journal of this expedition we can forget the legendary figure "with his myall mob at his heels" for here he describes his outfit and his appearance when he reached Herberton. "Little Sam carried the sugar, the remainder [rations, rifles, tents, blankets and scrub knives] was divided among the other boys and myself. Our swags were done up in horse-collar fashion and carried on our heads, a rifle in one hand and a scrub knife [for cutting through the dense undergrowth of lawyer vine] in the other". When they emerged from the jungle at Herberton, "60 miles from Mourilyan to Herberton, and 50 miles of jungle
without break", he was "almost shirtless, quite bootless and hatless", and bore no resemblance to the equestrian ruffian of the legend, a cross between Ghengis Khan and an American cowboy.

He did not have the power as the legend suggests of communicating and making friends with the wild blacks of the rain forest area. Like any other well-organized, experienced explorer he took precautions and defended himself and his party with firearms when their lives were in danger. Once on this journey as he was exploring a creek with one Aborigine only, they were surprised by a "big mob of aborigines coming down the creek towards us, armed with large swords and shields". Palmerston spoke to them so did his companion, but they did not understand the language. Finally he was obliged to use his rifle, while his Aboriginal companion fought with a scrub knife for he did not understand the use of firearms.

"On my road back", he writes, "I saw a little boy running away, I soon overtook him, laying the barrel of my rifle gently against his neck. He seemed struck with terror and amazement....In my present garb, I should have been an object of terror to a child of my own race - only a shirt and cartridge belt on, my legs being bespattered with blood. He soon became reconciled, however, being very amused with my watch. When passing through a deserted camp he rolled up a native blanket and tramped along like a little man". The little boy was still with them when they reached Mourilyan.

It is difficult to trace Palmerston's movements from early 1883, the end of the Mourilyan-Herberton expedition to late 1886. It seems possible that he lived on and off in Townsville during this period, for on 6 December 1886 he married Teresa Rooney in the Roman Catholic Church of St. Joseph. The Rooneys were a well-known Townsville family and by all accounts a musical one. Teresa herself was a music teacher and their only daughter Rosina became a concert-singer. So the legend
which credits Christie with a passion for music and a fine singing voice may not be far wrong. Although it is stated that Palmerston ran a pub at Ross Island, Townsville for a time, it is very unlikely he really settled down at all, for just a month before his wedding, at the age of 36, he discovered payable gold on the Upper Russell River. The resulting rush was the last of the North Queensland alluvial rushes and Palmerston became fully involved.

All versions of the legend of Christie Palmerston insist on his hatred of the Chinese from his days on the Palmer to the rush on the Upper Russell River. He is described as the "scourge" of the Chinese and a "death-dealing terror" to them. Events on the Russell River gold field and Geraldton (Innisfail) in 1887 certainly suggest that here at least the legend has some substance. The evidence is a report, dated 5 December 1887 furnished by the Senior Magistrate, W.S. Walsh, to the Colonial Secretary "concerning the activities of Christy Palmerston on Russell River goldfield in 1887". This official report purporting to be impartial shows clearly that Christie Palmerston had exploited the Chinese community in Geraldton.10

The story is as follows. In November 1886 Palmerston declared the finding of payable gold on the Russell River and received the government reward of £300. A rush of Europeans followed but by April in 1887 only 25 Europeans remained on the diggings: they left because of the poor yields, the rough terrain, and the difficulty of getting provisions. Palmerston then proceeded shamelessly to sell his indifferent goldfield to the Chinese of Geraldton. He told them they could obtain a certified amount of gold each per day; offered to escort them to his find and protect them from the wild blacks at the rate of £1 per head. At this stage three Chinese businessmen came in and financed the venture for 30 Chinese diggers, paying Palmerston £30. The venture was naturally unremunerative but it started a rush to the Russell of some 200 Chinese from Geraldton and Cairns.
Palmerston then charged all-comers £1 a head, paid in full or by time-payment and issued receipts. He also established a monopoly for supplying meat to the Chinese on the diggings. He enforced his restraint of trade with his own band of Aborigines. "He [Palmerston] surrounded by his armed blacks, meets the advancing importers as they arrive and destroys their meat supplies; rice, flour and such like commodities were exempted and allowed to be taken on to the field". Palmerston's camp was pitched near the river bank where thick scrub forced all travellers to and from the goldfield to pass right by it. A touch of burlesque now enter the story. As his Aboriginals could not understand Chinese, Palmerston issued a passport to bona fide Chinese i.e. those who had paid his fee and went to the right butcher. This consisted of an envelope bearing the address of Palmerston's accredited butcher on the flap and inside a small amount of cowhair. The Chinaman carrying it was then pronounced "all right" by the Aborigines and allowed to go his way.

The Senior Magistrate was obviously embarrassed by his task of compiling this report because the only evidence he could obtain was from the Chinese. He had however seen Palmerston's receipts and the cowhair passports which were easily obtainable in Geraldton. As custodian of the law for the whole area it was his duty to protect the Chinese and he was obviously incensed by Palmerston's behaviour. Especially when two cases of wilful destruction of property, brought against Palmerston by a Chinese merchant Lee Cook, were both dismissed by the local magistrate. Walsh reported in disgust: "The proceedings in the two cases against Palmerston are explicit and require no explanation. They disclose evidence of the accused's guilt and would have justified convictions in both cases. Both cases were however dismissed".

The whole incident raises some very interesting points. Firstly, that the legend-makers are romancing and over-simplifying for dramatic effect, when they describe Palmerston's attitude to the Chinese
as "implacable hatred" compared to his "love" for the Aborigines. His attitude of despising the Chinese was typical of the average prospector and digger in North Queensland at the time, who regarded the Chinese as unwanted, undesirable, aliens out to rob the white diggers of their rightful opportunities. After 1876 the great number of Chinese from the Palmer had spilled out over the Far North like green ants which scuttle in all directions when their nest is destroyed.

The number of laws with amendments passed by the Queensland government between 1876 and 1890 to control the entry of Chinese and their movement onto new gold and tin mining fields is evidence of their unpopularity with the mining community. For instance from 1877 the Chinese were not allowed on a "new" goldfield for 3 years after discovery, unless the field was discovered by Chinese. By the Mineral Lands Act of 1882, the issue of a mining licence, business licence or mining lease to Chinese was forbidden. This applied to all mining other than for gold, and particularly to the new tin-mining. In view of these stringent regulations Christie Palmerston could have argued in 1887 that he was doing the Chinese a good turn by allowing them onto the "new" Russell River field; even if they did have to pay him an entrance fee and use his appointed butcher.

How long Palmerston remained in the Russell River-Geraldton area after 1887 is impossible to determine. It is obvious that from time to time he looked for new employment suited to his talents for exploring and prospecting. Temperamentally he could not settle down to more pedestrian ways of earning a living, if one is to credit the stories of short-lived attempts at running a store at the foot of Mount Bartle Frere and a hotel in Townsville. When the Queensland government under McIlwraith carried out its temporary annexation of part of New Guinea, Palmerston offered his services there, but the government did not take up his suggestion.
Sometime in the 1890s he received an offer from overseas which attracted him. His wife and daughter remained in Townsville but he left North Queensland, as it turned out, permanently. He went first to Borneo and then to Malaya where he was employed as a prospector by the Straits Development Company. There he died at Kuala Pilah on 15 January 1897 from a fever contracted in the jungle.

* * *

This has been a difficult historical exercise as researching a legend always is where romantic stories proliferate and real evidence is scarce. Christie Palmerston emerges as a skilful bushman and prospector with an unusual understanding of the languages and customs of the North Queensland Aborigines. He was an adventurer in the sense that he was always willing to take physical risks and also in the sense that he would rather earn a living as a prospector than by some more settled occupation. What then, apart from journalists' desire to satisfy their public's appetite for a good story, made him into a legendary figure?

I cannot agree with the suggestion put forward at the conclusion of the entry on Palmerston in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* that "Probably because of his theatrical background, Palmerston loved display and mystery-mongering". This surely is still part of the legend which the records do not support and may therefore be discounted as an explanation.

The real explanation seems to come from three considerations. He was an individualist, lonely figure operating in the rain-forest which was to most people impenetrable, and therefore mysterious. He was able to make tracks for other people through the mysterious jungles and open up new opportunities for their employment. In his
explorations he was accompanied only by Aborigines whose customs at that time were little known or understood. That Palmerston could converse with them in some of their own languages was considered little short of miraculous. Finally, the Far North of Queensland was a remote, difficult frontier with very poor communications. Most news or rumour was transmitted by word of mouth, with the result that actualities were soon exaggerated and embellished into legends.

REFERENCES

* Parts of this lecture are based upon the researches of Captain Les Hiddens AAAVN whose assistance is gratefully acknowledged.


8. It was subsequently published in three instalments under the title 'The Explorer' by the Queenslander, 22 September, 29 September and 6 October 1883.
9. For photographs of the large wooden sword and oval shield peculiar to aborigines of the North Queensland rainforest, and for notes on their distribution, see Lectures on North Queensland History, Townsville 1974, pp.143-146.

10. The manuscript report is among the Colonial Secretary's files in the Queensland State Archives, COL 9984/1887.