SOME CITIES AND THEIR SITES

(Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Historical Society of Queensland on September 25th, 1947 by the President, Professor H. Alcock, M.A.)

The title of this farrago refers to the location, not the scenic attractions or notable buildings of cities. It does not even refer to their foundation, which, strange as it may seem to those who arrange to celebrate centenaries or sesquicentenaries, is not quite the same thing as the discovery or selection of their location. Indeed, he would be a rash man who would aver that Newcastle was founded in 1797 or Brisbane when Oxley stepped ashore for a short while up the river. Nor is this screed concerned with the dates of such discoveries, but only with some quite trite and ordinary reflections on and applications of principles which are, or ought to be, known to every schoolboy, and not Macaulay's at that. It is, indeed, a matter for close examination whether a city was founded when settlement first began within its vicinage, or when that settlement began to be corporately organised, or when the grown-up town or village, such as Melbourne, acquired officially the style and title of city. It appears to me that here, as in so many other cases, the middle course is to be preferred and that the first evidence of corporate life is the true test, even if but a score or a hundred folk participated, provided there has been no break in the continuity of the nascent urban society.

Perhaps that is too hard a doctrine. It would be difficult to justify excluding Carthage the Great or even some of our Australian ghost-towns from consideration just because they have died, always understanding that there has been a history of social coherence sufficiently protracted. That does not interfere with our accepting, say, ancient Troy into our scope, though city after city rose upon and vanished from its site. In point of fact, such instances would suit us very well, exemplifying as they do the continuing influence of the site itself as a magnet attracting group settlement.

In the sixteenth century the majority of English parliamentary boroughs were situated on tidal water, though many of them were far inland. With some exceptions connected with contemporary election-rigging, most of those parliamentary boroughs were selected to elect members to the House of Commons because they
were more important in point of population or trade or both than other towns. It is therefore natural to surmise that tidal water had something to do with their prosperity. And so it had when England’s overseas trade was a chief asset and access to markets, cheap and direct, meant money. You have only to look at a Morris badge, with the ox’ head over wavy lines meant to represent water, to be reminded that inland towns, far removed from tidal water, like Oxford, had drawn their first establishment from the concurrence of lines of communication.

In those days England was to Europe as Australia is to England to-day, the great source of wool, and so it is not at all surprising that our Australian cities of any magnitude are for the most part also ports. A primary producing country has a one-sided economy after it has developed a taste for manufactured luxuries, and, to rectify the balance, must export. The present warping of the British economy owing to the dollar shortage shows how the opposite kind of one-sidedness, where secondary industry greatly predominates over the primary, causes a demand for export-trade.

Lest you grow impatient of this dallying with thoughts of distant lands though, when I come to showing you some slides, you will have more of it, let me remind you of a large object which you can scarcely have failed to observe. I refer to the Story Bridge. Now that is a confession of failure: the failure of the original site of Brisbane to meet conditions arising from the very success of the city itself, but a success of the city itself, but a success built on an area beyond though absorbing, that site. We all remember the days when the Shire liners berthed between the dry dock and Victoria Bridge and when that reach often proudly displayed an almost unbroken line of stately hulls. Now the tide of commerce has drawn back almost to engulf Newstead House and to surge up again further down-stream. Yet in 1914 it was a novelty that the Orient liners berthed at New Farm instead of at Pinkenba: people said the shipping centre was being made more compact and brought into closer touch with the warehouses and banks.

In view of the present virtual non-existence of coastal passenger trade, we may temporarily forget the melancholy shore of Port Alma and yet take some pleasure in anticipation from the completion of the new harbour at Mackay, doing away with the stomach-
turning trans-shipment of old time off Flat Top. Townsville had its great chance during the recent war and no doubt other Queensland ports will eventually acquire adequate harbour facilities and land connections and establishments, but these must wait upon the development of their hinterlands and those, in turn, on the world markets and their prices and the new investments of capital those may come to justify. If those developments do not occur, there is every reason to anticipate that population in those regions will stagnate or even decline. They will not occur unless there is a sufficient increase of manpower to warrant extensive decentralisation of secondary industry: so we travel in a circle for the time being.

In my schooldays I frequently rode my push-bicycle through Bristol. Invariably I was thrilled by the sight of the forest of tall masts in the old tidal basin, right in the middle of the city, marking the spot whence had sallied out on venturesome quests for the North-West Passage or for lands of gold and spices many a reckless crew in the pay of hustling Bristol merchant-princes in the “spacious days of Queen Elizabeth.” Ten years later than that period of boyhood enchantment, never to be recaptured, I saw in the Brisbane River some of those tall ships which had frequented the old port of Bristol, but by then their number was shrinking rapidly and the port of Bristol had long shifted downstream to Avonmouth. It was much as the Yarra, in far shorter career, lost its virtue for shipping and ugly Port Melbourne took its shapeless form. However, be it noted that neither Bristol nor Brisbane nor Melbourne lost its wealth or population. The change in the location or use of the ports was therefore not decisive in judgment on the worth of the city site.

We must be careful here not to attribute to site properties which rather belong to the mere fact of establishment. In all the three cases quoted the downstream activities had for a long while tended to oscillate with the upstream and, again in all cases, what held the city to its site was the immense and growing weight of the fixed capital sunk in its shops, banks, offices, warehouses and factories. It was more economical to move the goods to and from the distant ships than to transfer the plant and buildings, though, of course, in some instances, new ventures were established in closer proximity to the wharves. Parenthetically I would observe that it seems unnecessary to
dilate upon the effect of changes in the size, motive power and special equipment of ships, or of the evolution of machinery for handling cargo. As against that, we must attribute to the site a decisive influence on the expenditure of so much money on shore establishments. The larger ships become, the less become the chances of the ports which have managed to build up only feeble establishments, rich though their hinterlands may be. Freight finds its cheapest way, very much of it by rail, and railway systems developed from the places, as centres, which had the biggest initial investment of capital. Hence the enormous importance for Brisbane of the Border Range, simply because it became arbitrarily the Border Range at a critical period of colonial history. That the Queensland railway system did not start in or from Brisbane does not affect this issue, for there were only two choice before the builders, Sydney or Brisbane in the long run, for the goods had to be got away by sea.

Rockhampton and Townsville, to mention only two of many possible examples, had similar opportunities, founded on like needs and like possession of fine back-country. However, in Queensland, climate, variety of produce, accessibility, and numbers of settlers, all favoured Brisbane, and, as the Brisbane market grew, so grew the hold of Brisbane on Queensland, despite its location in the south-eastern extremity of the State, and despite also the poor approaches to its wharves.

It will have been noticed that up to this point nothing has been said of the sinister origin of the settlements in some of the Australian cities, including Brisbane, and, be it said in passing, Newcastle. Actually, that origin need concern us very little. Port Jackson was not chosen to be a city or a place of trade, but as a sheltered anchorage with what it was hoped would prove to be sufficient productive soil, in reasonable proximity, to enable the convicts and their guards to be fed without constantly renewed calls for supplies from the Home-land. It was not very different in the case of Brisbane or of Hobart Town. However, the two requirements mentioned were precisely two of the most important for the prospects of in the course of time establishing large urban settlements in those places. The inland cities have also been neglected in this recapitulation of familiar facts, for this reason, among others, that not one of them has yet acquired enough population or attracted to itself a sufficient
variety of industry or big enough industries to raise it above the status of either a precarious mining centre or a quiet country market-town, though one or two in the South show signs of wider development. A little town is not a city, for the purpose of these remarks, just because it has a paper-mill or a technological institute. On the other hand, little Canberra is definitely a city because it is a focal point in Australian society. One is tempted to favour Ipswich and Toowoomba also; almost, not quite.

The question arises, when we turn our eyes to the future, whether the development of cheaper and more evenly diffused supplies of electric power may not alter the whole situation, the whole balance of city distribution. In so far as bulk and therefore transport costs can be reduced by so taking power to the sources of raw material, we must look for the rise of new cities at points related to inland communications and foci of commodity marketing. For examples of such development we need look only to Russia.

From such matters and from such problems as are presented by the curious configuration of our continent I turn now to slides to illustrate by examples from many parts the few points already made.