

ROBERT TOWNS

1794 - 1873



Townsville was officially named in February 1866 after merchant and speculator, Robert Towns. Born in England in 1794, Towns went to sea at an early age and was master of a brig trading throughout the Mediterranean before he was 20.

From 1827 Towns sailed between England and Australia in his own vessel, Brothers, with emigrants and general cargo. Settling in Sydney as a mercantile agent, he subsequently acquired his own fleet and wharves at Millers Point.

Towns' maritime businesses prospered. His ships transported sandalwood from the New Hebrides; whale oil and beche-de-mer from the Pacific; sugar, tea, rice and coffee from Asia; gold-seekers to California; convicts and cheap labour from India and China. His motto was to sail "to Hades and back if there was a profit in it".

By the mid-1850s Towns was wealthy and influential - Chairman of the Bank of New South Wales and a NSW Legislative Councillor. Feted by the Sydney business community and government, he flaunted his success with *Nautilus*, the earliest steam yacht on the Harbour. He then focussed on the north.

Towns established Queensland's first cotton plantation at Logan River. He contracted South Sea Island labourers, bringing several hundred to the colony from 1863. By 1865 Towns' northern interests totalled a million hectares of pastoral land, 42 holdings in the Kennedy district alone.

He also financed the Cleveland Bay settlement established by partner John Melton Black. Without Towns' South Sea Islanders their enterprise would have failed. By hand the Islanders removed rocks barring Ross Creek, cleared the mangroves, tilled the plantations and cut the road through Thornton's Gap, linking the port to the hinterland.

Visiting the area only once in February/March 1866 to inspect the wharf, store, boiling-down works and plantations on Ross Island, Towns wrote: "a most isolated place" and "I never felt so unhappy from home in my life what from bites and blight I have been confined to the house since my arrival here".

The partnership was dissolved the following year, Towns assuming full responsibility for liabilities. By 1870, with the pastoral recession, he was on the verge of bankruptcy and liquidated his Townsville investments soon afterwards. Towns died at his home, *Cranbrook*, on 10 April 1873. He was survived by his wife Sophie (nee Wentworth), and five children.

Visionary or villain?

Historians are divided. Industrious, thrifty and merciless described his business philosophy. Paternalistic but well-intentioned has been the judgement on the contract labour issue. Controversy has plagued the name of Robert Towns both during and after his lifetime. Detractors called him "Godfather of the slave trade". His reputation would have been more substantial without the unfounded rumours of "Blackbirding".



Captain Robert, 1873, photograph by Freeman Studios, Sydney.
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Flinders Street ca. 1884 Reproduced with permission from the North Queensland Photography Collection James Cook University



View from Melton Hill Cleveland Terrace across Ross Creek. 1870
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