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Christmas Island: A question of self-determination

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Chapter 2: Historical Background

From the beginning of the European settlement of Australia the various Australian colonies began as part of the British colonial empire. While Australia attained Federation as a Commonwealth in 1901, Christmas Island remained as a British administered colony since settlement in the late nineteenth century until 1958 when ‘sovereignty’ of the Territory of Christmas Island was transferred to Australia without any consultative process with the community by either the British or Australian governments at the time. The history of Christmas Island therefore tells three key stories: the first is the economic and social dominance of phosphate mining since the late nineteenth century, which continues to the present day; the second is the relative recent arrival of ‘Australia’ or ‘mainland conditions’ to the Island despite the formal annexure in 1958; and the third is the unique community that has been created, as evidenced by the remarkable cultural and social composition of the community and unusual administrative and institutional arrangements. The historical development of Christmas Island is intrinsically linked to these key themes and an important contextual background to the thesis is the historical habitation and settlement of the island. The importance of Chapter Two is intended to provide an understanding why the historical development of Christmas Island played such a significant role in shaping its social history that drove (and continues to drive) the notion of self-determination. This chapter will also be used to establish the extent to which colonization of the island may substantiate any local claims of self-determination.

The Early Years

As noted in Figure 1, Christmas Island is an irregularly shaped island approximately 350 km south of the western part of Java, Indonesia, and consists principally of a plateau as part of a distinct volcano mountaintop. As Bartleson describes, far out in the Indian Ocean at 10’ 25’S and 105’40’E, there is a tiny island whose unforgiving
terrain successfully discouraged intrusion by the outside world for hundreds of years. British explorer John Milward made the first recorded sighting of the island in 1615 but did not land. Twenty-eight years later on 25th of December 1643, as he hove to off shore, Captain William Mynors of the British East India Company bemoaned his inability to find a safe anchorage even as he named the island Christmas in honour of the day.79 Adams and Neale also note that Christmas Island was named by a British East Indies Company Captain, William Mynors, on Christmas Day in 1643 when, with many sick crew members, his ship stood off the Island unable to find safe anchorage, presumably because of the ‘swell’ conditions that often occur during the wet season of the year.80 These two references confirm that although William Mynors sighted, named and anchored at Christmas Island in Flying Fish Cove on the northern side of the Island, he did not actually make land. Again, Adams and Neale note that the first recorded landing was made in 1688 by the redoubtable English adventurer William Dampier, searching for water. Further, Christmas Island must have been sighted by Dutch mariners between the period of William Mynors’ sighting and Dampier’s landing because the Island appears named as ‘Moni’ on a 1666 Dutch map by Pieter Goos and for numerous years Christmas Island appeared under different names with the Dutch continuing to use the name Moni until the late eighteenth century.81 The Book of Australia Almanac notes that Christmas Island is inhabited predominantly by people of Chinese and Malay origin, which the publication The Phosphateers supports, with the commencement of phosphate mining operations on Christmas Island and the need to import indentured labour.82 Other references to the indigenous population of Christmas

81 Adams and Neale, 7.
Island are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three of the study regarding the social and cultural demography of the island as well as in other chapters where reference is made to the findings of the University of Western Australia cultural study undertaken on the island in 2016.

While several sightings and (some) expeditions occurred from the first recorded sighting in the seventeenth century to the late nineteenth century, it was an expedition in 1857 by the crew of the ‘Amethyst’ that was the first attempted exploration of the island where they tried to reach the summit of the island but found the cliffs impassable. Some 25 years later in the 1880s, a Canadian-Scottish oceanographic scientist, Dr John Murray, lobbied the British Government to send Royal Navy vessels to visit Christmas Island to obtain rock samples for his research. Two visits in 1887 led to exploration to the highest part of the island, where mineral samples were secured and sent back to Murray in Scotland. They proved to contain phosphate of lime, and Murray made an inspired guess that the island contained major phosphate deposits. He was correct. This is also supported by Adams and Neale who state that Murray confirmed the presence of phosphate in a pebble embedded in coral brought from Christmas Island and was convinced that the sample had formed on land.

Christmas Island was colonised by the British, mainly with Chinese and Malays, to work the phosphate rock, although the actual mining quarry work was undertaken by indentured contract Chinese labour, often then referred to as ‘coolies’. This in fact is the translation applied by Hunt in his publication *Suffering Through Strength – The Men Who Made Christmas Island*, (Canberra: Blue Star Print, 2011), 3.

Adams and Neale, 12.
Men Who Made Christmas Island’ where the literal meaning of ‘coolies’ is applied. Conversely, the Malay workers were employed directly by the mining company, as opposed to the employment of the coolies by a contract labour organisation, and were mainly used in marine work (and later in domestic duties). The Malay Headmen, who brought in relatives from their home kampongs, recruited them and many were able to bring their families with them. They were paid relatively well and were happy. The Chinese coolies did not fare so well, overall. The Company employed a Chinese labour contractor to be responsible for mining recruitment, and conditions of service under which the coolies labored were often harsh, constituting 11 hours a day and eight on Sunday. Later in this chapter, reference is made as to how these conditions were slowly improved because of the work and effort of the Union of Christmas Island Workers (UCIW).

Colony Establishment

In 1900, the Island was incorporated into the Straits Settlement of Singapore that eventually became the Crown Colony of Singapore after the Second World War. This period coincided with the first shipment of phosphate from the Island, and it was characterised by the harsh conditions that the non-European population were subjected to in establishing the social and working environment of the Island. Predominantly, the ‘coolies’ suffered the most with working and living conditions being extremely difficult and characterised by poor diet and health, and separation from their families. This was because of the poorly paid mining work required to extract the phosphate and the brutal regime imposed by the mostly Chinese overseers (Mandors) under the tacit approval of the European mining company (Christmas Island Phosphate Company, hereafter CIP Co.). The mostly Cantonese-speaking coolies were contracted through an astute Singapore-based labour

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85 Hunt, xiv.

86 Adams and Neale, 32.
contractor, Ong Sam Leong. Employed by the mining company, he established a network of more highly paid Island-based foremen known as Mandors to protect his investment. Although technically illegal, the coolies were often subjected to beatings with a cane by the Mandors that were directly linked to the increase of mining productivity. This obviously caused resentment and in some cases as Hunt notes, outright rebellion and murder when coolies killed two Mandors in 1902. Poor housing and sanitary conditions also contributed to the discontentment of the coolies since they were housed in cramped living quarters separated from the European, and even Malay, community.

Adding to this discontentment was the poor diet of the coolies that ultimately led to the outbreak of ‘beri-beri’ that claimed many of the coolies lives. In 1901, it was uncertain whether mining could continue on Christmas Island because the coolies were dying at such an alarming rate. Beri-beri was a little understood vitamin B1 deficiency disease that affects the nervous system and/or heart. Common symptoms include lassitude, loss of appetite, digestive complications, numbness, paralysis and often death. Bartleson notes that the Settlement cemetery, which is over a century old and still in use today, was primarily established to serve the needs of the old hospital where the numbers of deaths from beri-beri reached epidemic proportions by 1901. The coolies believed that the disease was caused by a wind blowing up from their feet into their body, and called it ‘foot swelling breath disease’. Those most susceptible were the new arrivals.

88 Hunt, 32.
90 Bartleson, 27.
91 Hunt, 25.
Figure 2.1 Ceremonial lowering of the flag at Tai Jin House circa 1916.
Figure 2.2 Proclamation of Christmas Island at District Officer’s residence circa 1908.
Figures 2.3 and 2.4 Early Coolie Village at Flying Fish Cove circa 1908.
Figures 2.5 and 2.6 Sikh Police (Jagas) on military parade and on either side of the Island Manager next to sentry box, both circa 1930.
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Figure 2.7 Group of Coolies after a day’s work circa 1910.

Figure 2.8 Group photograph of Mandors with the coolie labour contractor (seated wearing pith helmet) Ong Sam Leong circa 1915.
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Fortunately, beri-beri was eventually controlled and eradicated by the wonderful medical work of Dr Sara Robertson (who died in 1907 and is buried on Christmas Island) and her husband Dr William McDougall. However, ultimately these terrible events culminated to become a tragic and historical part of life for many Christmas Islanders in the early years of settlement on the Island. Hunt notes that the Christmas Island beri-beri epidemic was in some ways one of the more shameful episodes in British colonial history. It reflected little credit on the CIP Co, and even less on Ong Sam Leong, the labour contractor.\textsuperscript{92} Hunt’s comments refer specifically to the neglect by CIPCo. in addressing the epidemic as a result of the harsh (and unsanitary) living conditions endured by the coolies, while Adams and Neale note the work undertaken by Dr William MacDougall through research from 1904 to 1908 that eventually contributed to the eradication of beri-beri on Christmas Island.\textsuperscript{93}

The historical development of Christmas Island in the second decade of the nineteenth century was dominated primarily by the decreasing production of phosphate owing to the outbreak of the First World War and the subsequent reduction in shipping movements to the Island, and although it was not directly involved in the war, phosphate was drastically reduced.\textsuperscript{94} However, as noted in the previous paragraph, while the eradication of beri-beri decreased the death rate of the coolie workers, the work rate demand and appalling conditions for the coolies did not change much. Coolies were put to work upgrading mining facilities, with the most significant improvement being the construction of 11 miles of railway line across the jungle plateau to South Point, the next phosphate deposit exploited after Phosphate Hill. South Point was to subsequently become the Island’s largest settlement, and its lucrative deposits were to be mined for the next 60 years, until

\textsuperscript{92} Hunt, 34.

\textsuperscript{93} Adams and Neale, (1993), 20.

\textsuperscript{94} Neale and Adams, (1988), 23.
1971–1972 when it was abandoned.\textsuperscript{95} The first decade of the twentieth century had been clearly the most profitable for the mining company, who exploited the workforce to maximise these profits at the expense of the health and welfare of the imported coolie labour. Simultaneously, while the early period of the twentieth century tended to ignore the development of facilities on Christmas Island (e.g., housing, transportation, mining infrastructure and health), the second decade allowed for an expansion of amenities that gradually improved the living conditions for the islanders owing to the downturn in phosphate demand. Construction of the ‘Incline’ commenced in 1914 and was completed in 1915, along with the first operation of locomotives bringing phosphate from South Point to the new Drumsite village, to be then transported down the Incline and loaded on the ships at Flying Fish Cove harbour. With the demise of the old Phosphate Hill village settlement, the hospital that was built there to replace the original hospital of plank wood and thatch roof east of Flying Fish Cove was replaced by a new hospital that was constructed at Settlement (not far from the site of the original hospital).

Housing gradually improved, and while the living and housing conditions for the European community was always of a high standard, the housing for the Malay (and small Indian Sikh) community also improved. The Malays had always lived separately from the coolie workers in what is a traditionally Kampong settlement that mirrors their origins in Malaysia and Indoenesia. Their timber houses were set on stilts with atap (coconut thatch) roofs. Nearby were the quarters of the company’s Sikh jagas (watchmen), who stood guard over the European houses.\textsuperscript{96} In this regard, the European community truly retained its colonial status as a part of the British Empire that did not change much until the Japanese occupation of Christmas Island in the Second World War.

\textsuperscript{95} Neale and Adams, (1988), 23.
\textsuperscript{96} Hunt, 45.
The period following the end of the First World War until the commencement of the Second World War saw the expansion again of phosphate mining. The newly developed urban areas of South Point, and to a lesser degree the already established areas of the Kampong and Settlement areas, were upgraded with new infrastructure, such as a hospital, living quarters, road works and mining infrastructure. Hunt notes that during the 20-year period from 1920 to 1940, conditions of life improved generally for all members of the population without threatening the systems of class and racial separation that made possible the continued profitability of the phosphate operations.97 Conversely, Bartleson notes that this did not necessarily coincide with better work or living conditions for the coolie and Malay workforce. By the 1930s, although the mining loading system had changed somewhat and the miner’s work hours had been reduced to 10 hours per day, 6 days a week, with 8 hours on Sundays, conditions remained harsh. When the price of phosphate was reduced during both World Wars and the Depression years, it was the miners, at the bottom of the food chain, who suffered the most.98

While there are differing opinions, the welfare and living conditions of the Island’s (mainly Asian) population remained terrible during this time, but this period generally saw the emergence of prosperity and development for Christmas Island. Further historical developments on the Island during this time included the arrival of the first wireless station (that meant instant and regular connection with the outside world), the first electric lights and the construction of a school in 1929 that initially housed Malay children only but in 1930 expanded to include European children with a Chinese teacher from the Singapore Education Department.99 In 1934, construction was completed on a greatly improved hygienic sanitation system for

97 Hunt, 105.
98 Bartleson, 20.
99 Hunt, 106.
the coolies’ living quarters at Settlement and a new Sikh Temple was constructed.\textsuperscript{100} While there were many Chinese temples around the Island, the Sikh Temple was the first to be built on the Island, together with a new mosque being built and opened in 1938. A steady program of building construction followed with living conditions (housing) and services being upgraded to cater to what was becoming a settled population. Purpose-built police barracks were constructed at South Point where the majority of the population worked and resided owing to the expansion of phosphate mining activities in that area. In 1932, a landslide swept down the slope of the cliffs above the Kampong, dislodging trees and large rocks. The Malay Kampong at the bottom of the slope was engulfed and the houses destroyed.\textsuperscript{101} The subsequent damage required a total rebuild of the Kampong village, and while some of the European administrators advocated a new location for a rebuilt Kampong, the local Malays insisted on the Kampong being built on, or close to, the same location. In 1936, this construction of a new Kampong village was completed at Flying Fish Cove, the same year that the English School moved to larger premises because of the increase in its school population.\textsuperscript{102} The Malay Kampong remains at this location (Flying Fish Cove) currently.

Integral to the success of mining phosphate was/is the transportation of the product to overseas markets, mostly via Singapore that also allowed for the provision of passengers and cargo essential to the Island’s community. The shipping service provided by the mining company to Christmas Island was affectionately known as ‘The Islander’. The first service started in the early 1900s, and in 1907, a second purpose-built ship replaced it. A third vessel of the same name commenced operations in 1929 on the Singapore–Christmas Island route that also included

\begin{footnotes}
\item[100] Hunt, 116.
\item[101] Hunt, 106.
\item[102] Hunt, 67.
\end{footnotes}
regular supply visits to the Cocos Islands and continued until the 1960s.\textsuperscript{103} Currently, Christmas Island receives regular shipping visits from Singapore to transport phosphate out and bring in cargo containers, as well as from Fremantle to bring general cargo. The European community of Christmas Island prospered particularly well during the years between both World Wars, enjoying the colonial lifestyle that the British Empire provided. Most Europeans were provided services such as ‘laundry boys and housekeepers’ that complemented their high salaries and luxurious housing and living conditions, while the majority of the Asian community (especially the coolies) continued to suffer hardships. The exceptions in the Asian community were the Chinese Mandors and the Asian staff employed by the mine in positions such as administrative clerks and domestic duties. Some of the Malay community were also employed in tasks such as fishing and stevedoring, while a majority of the police force on the island consisted of members from the Sikh community.

The discrepancy in the living conditions for coolies is highlighted by Hunt, as the coolies had no real stake in Kasma Town, as they called Christmas Island. They did not have their wives with them—indeed, if they had wives, the women were back in China and they would not see them except after intervals of several years. Living on the Island was a necessity, a way of earning a living, with a few simple pleasures and traditional Chinese festivals to relieve the monotony. They still lived in 16 male-only dormitories, although improved common bathing and toilet facilities were constructed in 1934 and the (mining) company kept their housing in good repair. While the period between the World Wars was historically a tranquil period on Christmas Island compared with the preceding decades, it was still a period of some discontent especially for the coolie labour work force. This was to change

\textsuperscript{103} Hunt, 119.
dramatically with the coming of the Second World War and Japan entering the conflict in 1941, especially for the European population of the Island.

Figure 2.9 Colonial style bungalow of European residence, noting the Sikh Jaga on duty, circa 1919.
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Figure 2.10 Europeans on the deck of the first S.S. Islander ship circa 1915.
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Figure 2.11 Coolie workers extracting phosphate in the quarry using only chankul (hoe) and basket circa 1906.
Figure 2.12 A coolie clearing and preparing land; note that the chankul is still being used; circa 1949.
Figure 2.13 The work of clearing the jungle and laying railway tracks to South Point circa 1915.

Figure 2.14 Photograph of first train locomotive on Christmas Island circa 1914.
Figure 2.15 Japanese soldiers addressing Christmas Islanders at Settlement circa 1942.

Figure 2.16 Japanese occupying soldiers celebrating at phosphate quarry site circa 1942.
**Island Occupation**

During the Second World War, Christmas Island was occupied by the Japanese. However, before the Japanese entered the Second World War, the phosphate mining company suffered shipping losses in its Pacific Ocean operations in 1940 because of German raiders, which led to an increased demand for phosphate from Christmas Island. Increased tonnage production was ordered for 1941 along with an attempt to strengthen and improve the local defence force and infrastructure on the Island, based on the presumption that any threat to Christmas Island would come from the German military operations in the Indian Ocean. A six-inch naval gun was sent to Christmas Island, together with a detachment from the army consisting of a Captain, six other British soldiers and about 30 (Sikh) Indian soldiers. The gun was installed on the cliffs overlooking the (Flying Fish) Cove and the troops accommodated in temporary quarters close by. The next step was enrolling the male civilians in the Malayan/Singaporean Volunteers with some elementary instructions on military training.104 This presumption, of course, changed in December 1941, with the expansion of the Second World War to include Japan having direct and immediate implications for the residents of Christmas Island. Not only were the European community of Christmas Island becoming concerned with the news of Japanese military expansion through South-East Asia (Malayan peninsula), but news of the Japanese atrocities towards the mainland Chinese population, especially at Nanking, also unsettled the Chinese population of the Island.

By early 1942, most of the European population, especially women, children and non-essential persons to the operations of the Island were evacuated, either to Singapore and Batavia (Indonesia), or to mainland Australia. Japanese troops brushed aside all opposition as they advanced down the Malayan Peninsula and by 31 January 1942 had reached the causeway bridge linking Johor and Singapore.

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Christmas Island lost wireless communication with Singapore, and on 17 February 1942, District Officer Cromwell sent a telegram to the Secretary of State for Colonies in London seeking approval for ‘semi-compulsory evacuation’. Neale and Adams note that some of the Christmas Islanders who had left earlier to go to Singapore had been lucky enough to board ‘The Islander’ just prior to the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942 and arrived on Christmas Island on route to Australia to convey first-hand to Christmas Islanders the news.

In January 1942, the Norwegian ship the ‘Eidsvold’ was being loaded at Flying Fish Cove with phosphate bound for mainland Australia. As the ship prepared to move from its moorings, an explosion hit her amidships caused by a torpedo fired from a submarine. With no steering and loss of engines, the ship began to list and drifted to the north side of the Island where she finally ran aground (off Margaret’s Beach) and the crew swam ashore. This was/is the first recorded incident of Japanese aggression against Christmas Island and was a prelude to eventual events. The bombing and utter capitulation of Singapore in February 1942 was an ominous omen for Christmas Island and a realisation, especially by the European community, that Singapore could no longer offer safe refuge or protection for the Christmas Island population. The British and Australian authorities did not consider the 1565 Asian residents of the Island at risk by any imminent Japanese occupation and indeed considered the Asian population on the Island as potentially hostile to maintaining any defence on the Island. In March 1942, Japanese aircraft and naval ships bombed Christmas Island causing the loss of several lives. It was then obvious to the Island’s population that the Japanese could occupy Christmas Island at any time.

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105 Hunt, 176.
107 Hunt, 176.
they chose. The Malays built underground shelters at the back of the Kampong for protection from bombing, and the Chinese population, mindful of the atrocities of Nanking and elsewhere in China, decided to protect their women. The young girls had their heads shaved and were dressed as boys. The prostitutes decided to conceal their identity by seeking out older unattached men of power in the community (many of them Mandors) and moving in with them. In this way, they could pretend that they were married women. The final occupation of Christmas Island by the Japanese in late March 1942 followed one of the most tragic and disgraceful incidents of the Island’s history.

The European community who remained on the Island split into two parties concerning the defence of the Island. One party led by the (then) District Officer Thomas Cromwell wanted to surrender to the Japanese as the only alternative for preserving the lives of the population, arguing that occupation was inevitable. Indeed, during the air and naval bombardment, he (Cromwell) raised the white flag at the gun emplacement then the shelling ceased almost immediately.

However, the army contingent led by Captain Williams opposed any surrender and overrode the decision by Cromwell by raising the British Union Jack and ordering the soldiers to guard the gun emplacement. Unfortunately for Williams (and unknown to him), a large component of the army contingent were Sikh soldiers who were not in favour of any prospect of fighting the impending Japanese invasion on behalf of the British Empire. This dissatisfaction manifested itself in outright mutiny and murder of the British soldiers, including Williams, who were shot while they were asleep. Whatever their reasoning, the mutineers were joined by most of the Sikh police and they murdered Captain Williams and the four other British troops.

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109 Hunt, 179.
throwing their bodies into the sea.\textsuperscript{110} The Sikh mutineers quickly moved to arrest all the remaining European population, including Cromwell, in readiness for the inevitable Japanese landing. They called the remaining Europeans to the Fort (gun emplacement) intending to kill them all; however, their lives were saved by the heroism of the Indian Subadar (Lieutenant) who had taken no part in the mutiny and threatened to take his own life if any more murders occurred. The Europeans were held in captivity for 21 days until the Japanese returned, bombarded the defenceless Island again and made an unopposed landing on 31 March 1942. The Europeans were then held as prisoners of war and were treated far worse than any of the other islanders, who in general were able to follow their own pursuits.\textsuperscript{111} The inevitable occupation of Christmas Island was therefore finalised, which was to be a feature of Island life for the next three years.

The Japanese occupying force arrived on Christmas Island and immediately set about commandeering key installations, such as the military fort at Smith Point and the mining phosphate plant and infrastructure, and emptying European houses.\textsuperscript{112} The majority of the Island’s population, especially the coolies, had fled into the jungle since resistance was out of the question and any show of reluctance was met with slaps and kicks by the Japanese. However, the worst fears of reprisals similar to those that had occurred when the Japanese occupied mainland China were not realised. Initially, the Japanese Commander of the occupying force allowed his soldiers to rampage through the community but the mass rape that had become notorious in China did not occur.\textsuperscript{113} Slowly, the Asian population that had originally fled to the jungle when the Japanese first landed began returning to their homes and

\textsuperscript{110} Adams and Neale, (1993), 70.

\textsuperscript{111} Adams and Neale, (1993), 70.

\textsuperscript{112} Hunt, 183.

\textsuperscript{113} Hunt, 184.
living quarters. The Japanese had made it clear that they had no intention of committing atrocities against the local Asian population and were more interested in subjugating the European population. Indeed, the Japanese motive was to solicit the cooperation of the local Asian population as much as possible to enable them to continue with the mining production of phosphate.

This cooperation occurred mainly through the coercion of some of the local Asian population, who were engaged by the Japanese to ensure the previous workforce could continue with the production of mining activities. In this regard, life on Christmas Island did not cease because of the Japanese occupation, although it could not be categorised as being normal. Food and other essential supplies were in short supply, and as the war continued and the Japanese military suffered defeats, the regularity of shipping to the Island bringing these essentials decreased. Evidence of this occurred when the Japanese ship Nissei Maru was being unloaded at the wharf and was struck by torpedoes from an American submarine.\textsuperscript{114} The sinking of the ship also affected the wharf loading operations, which effectively halted not only the import of freight cargo to the Island but also the export of phosphate. With no regular shipping service available to the Island, the export of phosphate virtually ceased and the workforce was engaged mainly in the storing of mined phosphate and plant maintenance. In December 1943, it was announced that the majority of the Japanese were leaving. Almost two-thirds of the population also left the Island; for the Asian population, this appeared to be mostly a voluntary process. All the Indian soldiers left along with the police and watchmen, about 750 Chinese (mostly coolies), the European prisoners of war and all of the Japanese phosphate company staff. Only the old Island Asian elite, the managers, tradesmen and locomotive drivers

\textsuperscript{114} Hunt, 193.
remained.\textsuperscript{115} The occupation of Christmas Island by the Japanese was left to a much smaller force than that which first occupied the Island in early 1942.

In June 1945, the bulk of the Japanese left and only a sergeant and 14 men remained. About a week after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, the remaining Japanese advised the Island population that they would be leaving, appointed representatives from each racial community to represent the islanders and handed over all the food and everything else to the representatives for distribution to the community. The Japanese hoped that a situation similar to that in Indonesia would develop where the local nationalist movement had been armed by the occupying Japanese administration and was preparing to prevent the Dutch from reasserting colonial rule. In this, they were wrong since Christmas Island was still fervently loyal to the British.\textsuperscript{116} However, the subsequent departure of the remaining Japanese soldiers did not eventuate into any retribution by the remaining Christmas Islanders, merely relief that the occupation was over. The occupation of Christmas Island by the Japanese from 1942 to 1945 did not bring the economic boom in phosphate exports that the Japanese had counted on. Indeed phosphate export production was diminished to an extent where it was nearly non-existent owing to the constant harassment by British and American naval activity in the Indian Ocean vicinity.\textsuperscript{117} The return of the British to Christmas Island finally occurred in October 1945 with the British ship the ‘HMS Rother’ sailing from Singapore to the Island, and the next phase of the history of Christmas Island was about to commence.

\textsuperscript{115} Hunt, 194.

\textsuperscript{116} Hunt, 197.

\textsuperscript{117} Hunt, 196.
Post Second World War

Following the end of the Second World War until the transfer of sovereignty to Australia of Christmas Island, most of the pre-occupying ‘colonial’ governments returned to the countries that they had previously occupied. This included the Dutch in Indonesia (Dutch East Indies), the French in Indo-China and, of course, the British in Singapore and Malaya. In this regard, the British returned to Christmas Island to resume the administration of the Island from Singapore. The first few years after their return were spent mainly on the reconstruction of the Island’s mining infrastructure and housing. Everything was in a shambles with company staff having sabotaged as much of the equipment as they could before the impending Japanese occupation, which was followed by nearly three and half years of neglect.118 Hence, the reconstruction process was long and arduous with little materials and supplies, which were in equal demand from other post-war countries in the reconstruction phase.

In addition to the reconstruction phase of rebuilding Christmas Island, the British administration was intent on bringing the mutineers that had murdered the British garrison soldiers in 1942 to justice. As noted by Hunt on 21 January 1946, two Indian Army Officers and a Royal Engineers corporal arrived from Batavia to conduct an inquiry into the mutiny.119 The eventual outcome after more than a year of the inquiry and subsequent military trial was to find six of the accused mutineers guilty. These mutineers were sentenced to death by hanging, although the main ringleader of the mutiny was never located. However, the mutineers submitted petitions and pleaded for mercy, which led to a delay in their execution and continued imprisonment, first in Singapore and then by transfer on request from the newly created Pakistan Government where they remained in prison in Pakistan.

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118 Adams and Neale, (1993), 76.
119 Hunt, 209.
Coupled with the massive post-occupation reconstruction problems faced by the Island’s mining administration was the acute shortage of labour. The occupation period had not only seen the displacement of the European population in management positions, but more importantly the loss of the mining and associated labour duties needed for the recommencement of phosphate production. A large proportion of the workforce had been taken to Surabaya in 1943, leaving only 260 adult males (some of whom had retired) and a small number of female office and hospital staff.

The pre-war (mining) operation was labour intensive and typically required about 1,000 employees with one source of labour for the (mining) company being on-island recruitment, which had been undertaken for some years before the war. It now became more urgent and the children of the leading Chinese families now found themselves good white-collar jobs in the company office, usually straight from school.\(^\text{130}\) However, this did not entirely relieve the labour shortage problem for mining operations and as the reconstruction phase slowly progressed to the extent of allowing the mining company to recommence production, it became ever more urgent to identify a reliable and effective workforce. This was eventually overcome in part by the importation of labour from Singapore and China through a newly appointed labour contract company. Ong Boon Tat’s (previous) company did not resume its island operations; it had been hard hit by the war, and Koh Ee Whee stepped into the gap. Koh Ee Whee also supplied labourers of an unusual kind: Hakka women from three districts of Sanshui County in Guangdong Province. Many of these were unmarried and physically strong, and they became a feature of island life until the 1960s. Labour was also recruited directly from Singapore on a month-by-month contract basis; however, the mining management (and Island

\(^{130}\) Hunt, 222.
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Administration) soon realised that the new labour workforce was far less compliant than the pre-war workforce, many of them were strong trade unionists and some even sympathised with the outlawed Malayan Communist Party. Therefore, it is impossible to discuss the historical development of Christmas Island and not include the industrial impact. This became particularly relevant in the post-Second World War period of reconstruction and redevelopment, not only on the Island but worldwide, which was equally influenced by the post-war ‘independence’ movements in many of the countries where Christmas Islanders had their origins. For example, India gained independence from the British in 1947, Singapore and Malaya experienced an increasing independence movement that finally succeeded in the late 1950s and early 1960s and Indonesia gained independence from the Dutch in 1949 while political turmoil was underway in China with the Mao Tse Tung Communist regime fighting with the Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-shek.

The demographics of the Island were slowly changing as a result of the required labour demand that would continue into the future and form an important part of the Island’s cultural, industrial and demographic history. The industrial changes to the Christmas Island community eventually arrived in the 1970s and 1980s; however, the influence of the post-war independence movements on the Christmas Island community remains minimal to this day and will receive more attention in Chapter Three.

Amidst the ongoing problems of labour shortage and working conditions was the eventual change of ownership of the phosphate mining company. The British Phosphate Commissioners (BPC) had long harboured a desire to directly control the phosphate mining operations on Christmas Island and had sought to wrest this control from the CIP Co. on several occasions prior to the Second World War.

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121 Hunt, 222.
Critical to these ongoing negotiations was the Chief Executive of the BPC Alfred Harold Gaze, who had managed the phosphate operations on both Nauru and Ocean Islands as the Australasian representative for both the BPC and CIP Co. since the 1920s. The war served to emphasise the total dependence of rural industries in Australia and New Zealand on the importation of raw materials for the manufacture of fertilisers.

The economics of the industry meant that at Christmas Island, as at Ocean Island and Nauru, the Commissioners primarily served Australian and New Zealand rural interests. In this regard, the history of Christmas Island mining is also linked to the British phosphate Islands of Nauru and Ocean Island in the Pacific Ocean. Nauru and Ocean Islands were managed by BPC from the 1920s, and Christmas Island from 1949, when the BPC managed phosphate mining on all three Islands for the direct benefit of the Australian and New Zealand Governments. BPC involvement in Christmas Island continued until 1981, when the Australian Government took direct responsibility for phosphate mining. No such ‘independence’ or de-colonisation occurred on Christmas Island and it was not until the mid-1980s that the Island achieved any level of political representation. Nauru secured independence in 1968 and Ocean Island in 1979 (when it was transferred to Kiribati). As noted by Kerr, the governmental arrangements for Christmas Island changed slightly in 1946, when legislation in the United Kingdom repealed the existence of the Straits Settlements as a single colony. An order-in-council decreed that the Island of Singapore, with the dependencies of Cocos and Christmas Islands, which had been attached to it for administrative convenience, were to be governed and administered as the separate

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Historical Background

Therefore, Christmas Island continued as part of the Colony of Singapore from 1946 to 31 December 1957 and soon after the arrival of the BPC in 1949, Australia raised with Great Britain the possibility of transferring Christmas Island to its own jurisdiction. The motive, of course, was continued access to phosphate deposits, which could not be guaranteed under a soon-to-be-independent Singapore. Further, the Australian Government was concerned not only about a continued supply of phosphate to its rural industry, but also about territorial expansion and consolidation of its political influence in the Indian Ocean. It is also noted by Kerr that Australia had two particular interests in Christmas Island: one as a source of phosphate and two as a strategically located island.

The 1950s brought expansion in all areas of the island since more Australian staff were recruited and the building of houses and facilities increased. In particular, the education of children on the Island increased significantly with the arrival of Mr George Fam Choo Beng from Singapore, who became the first (non-European) School Principal of the ‘Asian School’, which will be given further attention in Chapter Three. The next 20 years would be one of expansion and optimism during which a true sense of community developed. The period also witnessed the gradual movement towards transfer of governance arrangements from Singapore’s control to Australia. Eventually, sovereignty was transferred through detaching Christmas Island from the Colony of Singapore and making it a separate Crown Colony (1 January to 30 September 1958), following which Australia took sovereignty on 1 October 1958. The leader of the majority party in the pre-

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123 Alan Kerr, ‘A Federation in these Seas: An account of the acquisition by Australia of its external territories’, (Canberra: Commonwealth Attorney Generals Department, 2009), 318.

124 Adams and Neale, 77.

125 Williams and McDonald, 352.

126 Kerr, 318.

independence Singapore Legislative Assembly agreed to this arrangement and there was no significant debate about it in Singapore at the time.

To compensate the Singapore Treasury for lost phosphate royalties and taxes, the Australian Government made an act of grace payment of Malayan $20 million that led to the mistaken belief (even today) that Singapore ‘sold’ Christmas Island to Australia.\textsuperscript{128} The Report of the Australian Parliament House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs titled ‘Islands in the Sun – The Legal Regimes of Australia’s External Territories and the Jervis Bay Territory’ in March 1991 provided the first comprehensive review of the legal regime on Christmas Island (as well as other Australian Territories) that had been in force since the United Kingdom had placed Christmas Island under the authority of the Governor of the Straits Settlement (Singapore) in the late nineteenth century. While this will be subject to further detailed discussion in Chapter Four of the study, the relevance in this chapter is to the historical development in the 1950s of the first real indication that Christmas Island was formally progressing towards being a part of Australia, which eventually occurred in October 1958. The transfer was subsequently facilitated by the UK Parliament’s enactment of the \textit{Christmas Island Act 1958}. This was followed by the \textit{Christmas Island (Transfer to Australia) Order in Council 1958}, which empowered and then arranged for the Island to be placed under the authority of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth of Australia formally accepted Christmas Island as a Territory under the authority of the Commonwealth under the \textit{Christmas Island Act 1958}. The Act was proclaimed to come into operation on 1 October 1958.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{128} Hunt, 238.

Historical Background

Transfer of Sovereignty to Australia

By the end of the 1950s, Christmas Island was formally a part of the Australian Commonwealth, at least in a governance and legislative context, although other developments on the island throughout the 1950s continued to affect the lives of Christmas Islanders. This was especially the case, as noted earlier in this chapter, with the regional influence of ‘independence’ movements in neighbouring colonial South-East Asian countries on the predominantly Asian community of Christmas Island. Since it became apparent that colonial disengagement was imminent after the Second World War, independence movements in Singapore, Malaya and Indonesia were of particular relevance to the Asian community of Christmas Island, as well as more broadly in Indo-China, the Philippines, Burma and India. For example, Hunt notes that many in the new labour workforce recruited from Malaya and Singapore after the Second World War were strong trade unionists even though no trade unions were permitted on Christmas Island at that time, and in fact, either sympathised with, or were members of, the Malayan Communist Party.\textsuperscript{130}

The Asian community on Christmas Island had been used to the colonial system that governed their lives from the establishment of phosphate mining. As noted by Williams and McDonald, this created a general demeanor among the labourers of being used to a paternalistic approach, with the older men and many of the younger ones saluting passers-by in a countrified way.\textsuperscript{131} The historical social hierarchy created on Christmas Island, with European colonialists at the top, was a replication of the colonial approach adopted in many of the neighbouring South-East Asian countries. The one pervading characteristic conveying tremendous prestige was their overwhelming power that often went unchallenged. As noted by Ayris, because of its extreme isolation Christmas Island was a human laboratory in which old habits

\textsuperscript{130} Hunt, 222.

\textsuperscript{131} Williams and McDonald, 394.
and customs died hard. Elsewhere in the world, the British Raj style of government had long been on the wane but on Christmas Island, it was almost as though nothing had changed since the mine had opened more than half a century earlier and the colonial way of life and its embedded institutions remained the same. When the BPC took over, Australian supervisors were flown in and they took to white superiority like ducks to water.\textsuperscript{132}

However, from the 1950s, this attitude dissipated slowly over the ensuing decades as the Christmas Island Asian community became more aware of living and working conditions on mainland Australia, together with increasing exposure to the freedom afforded to the Asian populations of newly independent countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, from the previous colonial control of Great Britain and the Netherlands. Further, people born on the Island after October 1958 were Australian citizens by birth, and under the \textit{Christmas Island Act 1958}, adults who were British subjects and ordinarily resident on the Island on 1 October 1958 could apply for Australian citizenship within two years of that date.\textsuperscript{133} One of the first local Asian couples to make the declaration for Australian citizenship was Mr George Fam Choo Beng, MBE, who was the first Principal of the Christmas Island Asian School, and his wife Mrs Pamela Fam.\textsuperscript{134} As the 1950s came to a close, it was evident that the community on Christmas Island was slowly changing. Nevertheless, as Waters notes, two communities on Christmas Island were in fact still quite distinct and different from each other and the lack of opportunities for contact on other than a master–servant basis prevented any understanding developing between them.\textsuperscript{135} This relationship took time to change and the social change that occurred is

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Hunt, 238.
\item Waters, 7.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
discussed in more detail in the next chapter. However, it is important to note in this chapter that economic, social and industrial development historically occurred more rapidly in the 1950s than it had in the previous 40 years.
Figure 2.17 Newly constructed incline that allowed for the transport of phosphate circa 1951.
Figure 2.18 Newly constructed downhill phosphate conveyor system over Murray Road circa 1960.
Figure 2.19 Raising of the Australian flag at Smith Point on the proclamation of Christmas Island becoming an Australian non-self-governing Territory on 1 October 1958.
As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the history of Christmas Island tells three key stories: the first is the economic and social dominance of phosphate mining since the late nineteenth century, which continues to the present day; the second is the relative recent arrival of ‘Australian’ or ‘mainland conditions’ to the Island despite the formal annexure in 1958; and the third is the unique place so created as evidenced by the remarkable cultural and social composition of the community and unusual administrative and institutional arrangements. The 1960s saw these key themes continue to develop at a more rapid rate than had occurred in the previous 40 years as the community adjusted to becoming (officially) a part of Australia. This was especially the case with the development of infrastructure on the Island, not
only to facilitate the phosphate mining industry, but also the social development of the community. A new downhill conveyor system replaced the old incline method of transporting phosphate from the mining operations at Phosphate Hill to the harbour loading facilities, which meant that phosphate could be lowered (and loaded) at a much faster rate.\textsuperscript{136} Road infrastructure also improved with the completion of the Incline road (Murray Road) from the Settlement and Kampong areas up the steep hill escarpment to the settlements of Poon Saan and Drumsite, which was wide enough to accommodate vehicles of all types in both directions. Expansion of phosphate production also meant upgrading communication facilities, although the local island authorities became increasingly concerned because the Asian population now tuned into propaganda from the Sukarno government in Indonesia.

One report from Indonesia was that there was a long-range gun pointing directly to Indonesia (noting that Christmas Island is only about 350km south of Java), but in fact, this was the newly constructed ‘cantilever’ built at the harbour for loading phosphate on ships. Eventually, the local authorities diverted one of the broadcast transmitters for local use only, which was intended to stop the local population from tuning directly to Indonesia, and until date, this transmitter broadcasts locally.\textsuperscript{137} Direct access by the Island community to Indonesia undoubtedly added to their awareness of events not only in neighbouring Indonesia but also in Singapore and Malaysia. This awareness influenced the local Asian population’s views regarding its social standing in a community that was still dominated by the economics of phosphate mining and the colonial management systems in place that ensured its maximum export production. For example, in 1961, in spite of many technical, managerial and political difficulties, Christmas Island (phosphate) production

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Neale and Adams, (1988), 120.
\item Neale and Adams, (1988), 145.
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reached 600,000 tons a year with a projected target of 800,000 tons per year by 1964. In this regard, the continuing economic production of phosphate mining still dominates most aspects of life on Christmas Island, even though the grade quality of ore has diminished, and the improvement of infrastructure and the mechanisation of mining extraction was/is critical to ensuring the Island’s development continues.

In 1960, there were approximately 600 pupils in the ‘Asian Primary School’ and 23 pupils in the ‘European School’, which grew in 1961 to 640 primary school pupils and a combined primary and secondary total of over a thousand pupils at the Asian School. The demand for education expanded rapidly in the post-war period, and the Singapore Department of Education was responsible for providing teachers and teaching material. Even after the transfer in 1958 of Christmas Island to Australian sovereignty, the Christmas Island education system continued to follow the Singapore curriculum until the early 1970s with the eventual closure of the Asian School (which is now the site for the Shire of Christmas Island). The increase in school enrolments was also reflective of the change in the social fabric of the Island, and while this receives more attention in Chapter Three, it is relevant in this chapter to the historical development of the Island, especially in regard to the (social) infrastructure that was required to accommodate these changes.

Social educational infrastructure, although slow in developing, improved the conditions for the community with the assistance, for example, of the WA Department of Education in 1967 of a new Technical Training Centre being built to meet the growing demand for skilled tradesmen. Of course, it was also beneficial

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138 Williams and McDonald, 459.
141 Williams and McDonald, 525.
to the mining company to improve the skills of its employees and shift from the traditional reliance on a migrant semi-skilled workforce that had been in place since the beginning of phosphate mining. Consequently, from the early 1960s, the Australian Government had been faced with ever-increasing responsibilities and it had assumed a more active role on the Island, especially in providing education services.\textsuperscript{142} Most of the Asian children that attended the school from the 1960s onwards were born on Christmas Island, even though their parents (and grandparents) may have migrated to the Island, and were therefore classified as Australian citizens, given that Australia had achieved ‘possession’ of Christmas Island in 1958. However, the Australian Government began expressing its concern over the status of long-term Christmas Island residents since Christmas Island families began agitating towards identifying their rights. Some of these families and individuals were now clearly Australian citizens, while some still had claims to Singaporean or Malaysian citizenship and others seemed to be effectively stateless.\textsuperscript{143} However, territorial transfer did not translate into full incorporation of Christmas Island and its people into the Australian nation.

As noted in the publication \textit{The Phosphateers} and discussed in Chapter Four of this study, successive Australian Governments continued to treat Christmas Island as if it were a colony to be exploited in the manner of a nineteenth century empire and the Island was effectively run by the mining company that generally survived until all discrimination regarding immigration and citizenship was removed in June 1980.\textsuperscript{144}

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{142}Williams and McDonald, 457.\\\textsuperscript{143}Williams and McDonald, 457.\\\textsuperscript{144}Williams and McDonald, 556.\end{flushleft}
Pressure on the Australian Government was not confined only to increasing educational services and infrastructure but was more generally to provide services and infrastructure that would be expected as normal by Australian mainland standards. The initial standards of healthcare (services and infrastructure) were poor since no real development had occurred on the Island after the construction of the two hospitals some 50 to 60 years earlier and the engagement of medical professionals (from Singapore) that was largely in response to the beri-beri epidemic.

Following the eventual eradication of beri-beri, the operation of the hospital by the mining company continued with the provision of healthcare to the community. Medical supplies and health care professionals were sourced from Singapore hospitals. The new hospital that was built in the Settlement area of the Island in the 1920s to replace the previous hospital(s) at Flying Fish Cove, Grants Well and Phosphate Hill was improved by several extensions and renovations in the post-war period. Further, healthcare facilities (and treatment) gradually improved where new sections of the hospital consisted of a ‘labour ward, operating theatre, dressing station, pharmacist and single wards for Europeans’. Instrumental also in the improvement of healthcare, and healthcare infrastructure on the Island, was Mr Walter Oorloff whose life on the island stretched from the earliest coolie times to the post-war years. Of Anglo-Sinhalese origin, he came to the island as a medical dresser with Sara Robertson in 1901 and was held in such respect that he was frequently called ‘Doctor or Uncle’ by the many patients for whom he was their first medical contact. He was able to work among the European population just as easily as he worked with the Chinese and Malay community and contributed significantly to improving healthcare standards on the island, surviving the beri-beri epidemics, Japanese occupation and post-war reconstruction. Critical to the post-war

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reconstruction that rapidly increased in the late 1950s into the 1960s was the mining company’s approach to improving all aspects of the island’s life. The BPC was a more progressive company than the (previous) CIPCo., in matters both industrial and social. They set about catering for the large Asian population in an unprecedented style. They outlaid millions on upgrading houses according to Singapore housing standards and built playgrounds, shops, clubs and (as noted earlier) schools. Accommodation, a public transport system, upgraded hospital and dental services, picture shows, education and all other municipal type services were provided free to the workers, staff and dependents by the company.\footnote{Neale and Adams, (1988), 87.}

This historical period of Christmas Island reflected the post-war reconstruction phase of infrastructure development and services. While the 1960s were characterised by major infrastructure development (both economic and social) and the introduction of the Australian dollar to replace the Singapore currency, it also heralded a change in industrial conditions that became more robust in the 1970s. Again, the link between industrial and social progress is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three with regard to the social and cultural development of the Christmas Island community.

The Modern Era

The rapid infrastructure and social developments that characterised the 1960s, as noted in the previous paragraph, were largely progressed without obstruction or dissatisfaction from the community, who were responsive to these positive changes as they carried through to the early 1970s. A decision was taken in late 1969 to replace the bulldozed emergency airstrip on the island with a permanent runway capable of taking aircraft up to Boeing 727 standard and this airport became
operational in 1974. However, while the 1970s saw the continued development of infrastructure and services improvement on the island, it also saw the beginnings of change in the community with the realisation and awareness of mainland Australian conditions after the transfer to Australian sovereignty in 1958, predominantly in the industrial and political arena. That is, territorial transfer in 1958 did not necessarily change the manner of a nineteenth century empire and, generally, this view survived until all discrimination regarding immigration and citizenship was removed in June 1980. Waters notes that some of the problems that arose in the 1970s had their origin in the failure to realise that the population was no longer just a lot of indentured coolies. The scenario was set for major social, political and economic change as the workers of the mining company (and other employers) on the island began agitating for improved working and social conditions.

Adding to the unrest was the intention of the newly elected Whitlam Government’s Minister for External Territories (LW Morrison) to repatriate the Asian Christmas Islanders to their original country of residence in Singapore, Malaysia or Indonesia, while those who were eligible for Australian citizenship or were effectively stateless could apply for residence in Australia. The Government was confident that the scheme could be implemented without disruption to the phosphate industry and believed that by giving the Asian residents the opportunity to resettle off island in a planned, gradual way, the Government would be discharging Australia’s obligations towards these people and would be acting in their best interest. The best interests of the Asian residents of another of Australia’s external territories had also been in the news at about the same time as the Christmas Island resettlement proposal. Complaints by the Cocos Malays on Christmas Island on behalf of their fellow

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148 Williams and McDonald, 525.
149 Williams and McDonald, 556.
150 Waters, 5.
community members still under the Clunies-Ross regime, had led to an investigation.\textsuperscript{151} In the case of Cocos (Keeling) Islands, it was eventually agreed that should any islanders wish to settle in Australia, their applications would be sympathetically considered.\textsuperscript{152} This set a precedent for Christmas Island to follow.

As noted, the 1970s was characterised by a significant change in the social, industrial and political situation on Christmas Island. This change was not only because the community was more aware of living and working conditions on the mainland (Australia), but also because they translated this awareness into eventual action. Again, the specific details of these social, industrial and political changes are discussed in more detail in Chapters Three and Four of this study; however, the development of these changes are relevant to this chapter in the context of the history of the island. Assisting and promoting these changes was the arrival of Mr Bill Worth in 1975 as the first Administrator of Christmas Island who had power to act. Until his arrival, all the significant decisions relating to the island had been taken in Canberra and the Administrator had really only been a post office for Canberra. Obviously, this colonial attitude could not continue.\textsuperscript{153} This administrative change had come as a result of the creation of a Ministry for Home Affairs, which had responsibility for all territories, including Christmas Island and the Administrative Services to which the Phosphate Commissioners for Australia reported.\textsuperscript{154}

Under the Whitlam Government of 1972–1975, the formation of trade unions had been encouraged, which subsequently assisted the social and industrial changes on

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\textsuperscript{151} Williams and McDonald, 530.  \\
\textsuperscript{153} Neale and Adams, (1988),185.  \\
\textsuperscript{154} Williams and McDonald, 540.
\end{flushleft}
The formation of the UCIW was an important and significant turning point in the short history of the island. It was a formation resulting from several factors on the island, the changes on mainland Australia that the community were increasingly aware of, the ongoing paternalistic approach by the mining management to the Asian workforce, the unequal and substandard living conditions endured by the Asian community, the unfair parity in wage conditions and the (joint) Government and BPC attitude towards recognising Asian members of the island community as having equal access to Australian residency and citizenship status.

Waters notes that there was another community on the island containing people referred to under the generic term Supervisors, who were engineers, accountants, chief clerks and foremen. They were mostly engaged from the Australian mainland. Some had worked for the BPC on Ocean or Nauru Islands. They were often attracted to the island by high salaries free of income tax, furnished accommodation at a low nominal rent and amenities that included automatic free membership of the golf club, boat club and exclusive staff club. Two or three Asians were given this status, such as the Labour Officer, the Principal of the Asian School (George Fam Choo Beng) and, at one stage, the dentist. This meant that Europeans rarely encountered the rest of the workforce in any situation other than the work area, and here almost invariably in the context where the European was the authority figure whose orders could not be disputed.156

Not only was the paternalistic approach by the European management a source of increasing discontent among the Asian population of Christmas Island but so too was the unequal parity of wage conditions and housing standards. While housing

155 Williams and McDonald, 540.
156 Waters, 6.
had been improved towards the end of the 1960s and early 1970s with new concrete blocks of family flats being built to conform to standards set by the Singapore Housing and Development Board, these were unfurnished and had no hot water facilities.\textsuperscript{157} This change in attitude of the Asian community in the 1970s was a significant shift compared with the complacent position of their predecessors who were quite prepared until recently to tolerate the paternalistic European management approach.

The Asian community on the island viewed these changes as too slow, and eventually, events were bought to a head on the island, which also assisted in the creation and formation of the UCIW that was to deal not only with wage parity issues, but the entire social and industrial fabric of the island. The review of wages and conditions on the island was a clear signal for change, and when (Government) officials conducting the review visited Christmas Island in March 1974 they were able to witness the first strike to occur on the island. The strike was provoked not by the dissatisfaction with conditions in the phosphate industry but by the dismissal of Teo Boon How, a government clerk for what was alleged were gambling debts and his method of collecting these. The unprecedented support of the strike by the island workforce reflected not only the political power within the Asian community for Teo Boon How, but also a long standing unease over the status of aged people on the island and the pressure on them to leave at retirement.\textsuperscript{158} Conversely however, Hunt notes that there were several strikes in the history of the mining operations on Christmas Island, namely, in 1901, 1906, 1913, 1919, 1938 and 1946, with the last being a general strike that was called over conditions of work at the ship-loading facility where European staff and crew members of ‘The Islander’ were needed to

\textsuperscript{157} Waters, 8.

\textsuperscript{158} Williams and McDonald, 534.
help operate the cranes to unload the ship. However, the strike called in 1974 regarding the dismissal of Teo Boon How was the precedent for change on the island especially given the effect it ultimately had because of the exposure it received and the fact that the BPC management miscalculated these implications. Teo Boon How was summarily dismissed and ordered to leave the island the next day on a ship already at anchor off Flying Fish Cove on 27 March 1974. By the next day, more than 1,100 workers had assembled in a protest march and did not report for work.

To the shock of the mining management, those in the mob were recognisable as the usually obedient workers who dug the phosphate at the mine daily. By noon that day, Teo Boon How was able to report to the Chinese, Malay and Indian workers that the Acting Administrator had changed his mind and that he no longer had to leave the island and was suspended on full pay pending an inquiry. This was (and is still) seen as a significant turning point in the (previous) unequal relationship between the dominant European management and the Asian community on the island. The formal registration of the UCIW and election of its first (Asian) President, Lim Sai Meng in 1975 cemented this historical change.

The dismissal (and reinstatement) of Teo Boon How had commenced the change needed to improve conditions on the island for the Asian community and the formation of the UCIW. However, it was only the beginning of the process and the remainder of the 1970s saw continued struggle to establish the UCIW movement for improving the social and industrial conditions needed. For example, the arrival of some 20 people from the Commonwealth Teaching Service in 1975 upset all the relativities of salary levels on the island. They were paid much more than teachers.

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159 Hunt, 225.
160 Ayris, 16.
on the island had ever been paid (most of whom had come originally from the Singaporean educational system) and this gap highlighted serious anomalies in the structure of the Administration that needed changing. The Commonwealth Government had sought a review of the education arrangements on the island since 1973 and because of reforms, many of these new teachers arrived in 1975, one of whom was Mr Michael Grimes. Michael Grimes was eventually to become the first General Secretary of the UCIW, although initially on a part-time basis, having been actively involved in various Teachers’ Trade Unions around Australia.

Teo Boon How first approached Michael Grimes to consider becoming the UCIW’s first General Secretary, recognising that the latter had the expertise needed for the UCIW that was not evident among its members. Michael Grimes identified with the cause of the Asian workers on Christmas Island and played a prominent part in establishing the UCIW. Grimes took the view that the UCIW had a prominent place at the centre of the Christmas Island community, although this was not a view shared by the majority of the European management on the island, who were horrified when it was recommended that the segregation of the schools on the island should be abolished. An immediate consequence of this recommendation was almost total opposition from the European community to the integration of the island’s schools, partly on racial grounds but mostly because they believed that the standard of education would be affected. Despite this opposition, the change was inevitable and, at present, Christmas Island students enjoy a harmonious relationship at the one integrated school.

162 Waters, 23.
163 Williams and McDonald, 536.
164 Williams and McDonald, 536.
Most notable in the continued struggle for improved social and industrial conditions on the island was the arrival of a full-time General Secretary of the UCIW in the late 1970s. In September 1978, Grimes resigned and was replaced by Gordon Bennett, who was a much more militant and aggressive unionist than Grimes, more extreme in his attitudes and demands and more inclined to encourage strike action. The tenure of Grimes as the first UCIW General Secretary was one of consolidation rather than agitation, and he would often be criticised for taking a lenient approach to negotiations and arbitration, which was much different from that of his successor. Waters notes that credit should be given to Mike Grimes for knowing when to leave. Having been vital in the formation (and consolidation) of the Union, he had come to dominate the scene to an extent that much dissatisfaction with the Union Executive came to be directed against him. Another man might have been tempted to hold on, but this could have led to serious divisions with perhaps a rival organisation forming; therefore, at the critical moment he removed himself and sought a replacement in Perth. He was as frustrated as the Asian community over the glaring discrepancies in their standard of living and wages compared with those of their white masters. With the departure of Grimes and the arrival of Bennett, this situation would change.

The late 1970s was also characterised by a significant shift in the Australian attitude towards the environment, and it seemed that Christmas Island was not exempt from this change. Although Chapters Four and Six of this study devote more detail to the implications of this environmental change, it is for the purpose of this chapter a significant historical development of the island, given its conflict with the long-established mining phosphate industry. The unique environment of Christmas

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165 Williams and McDonald, 545.
166 Waters, 158.
167 Ayris, 71.
Island had long been a matter of study, with most interest being aroused by the island’s bird life, some of which was under threat. The Asian workforce (had long) found many of the bird species a delicacy, and despite the best efforts of the Administration and BPC management, continuous poaching of young birds threatened the survival of many rare varieties.

While some attempt was made during the 1970s to reforest the mining areas on the island, the interests of the conservationists eventually led to the establishment of the first Christmas Island National Park embracing the southwest corner of the island. Environmental effects of mining (on Christmas Island) became of particular concern in the 1970s, with a particular focus on the Abbott’s Booby bird, a rare seabird that only nests on Christmas Island. In 1974, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Conservation examined the effects of mining and other activities on the island’s flora and fauna as well as the adequacy of attempts to rehabilitate the forest (post mining), to advise on further measures required to protect the environment. One recommendation was that a conservation area be reserved, and on 21 February 1980, the Christmas Island National Park was proclaimed under the *National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1975*.

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168 Williams and McDonald, 532–533.

Historical Background

Figure 2.21 Protest march by workforce outside British Phosphate Commissioners’ office.
Figure 2.22 Some members of the UCIW protesting outside the old Parliament House in Canberra.
Figure 2.23 Photograph of Bob Hawke and Gordon Bennett addressing a crowd of protesters at the Christmas Island airport circa 1979.
Figure 2.24 Group photograph of (from left in foreground) Gordon Bennett, Bob Hawke and Teo Boon How circa 1979.
In 1979, the scene was set for the new General Secretary to make his mark on the island community. At a meeting held at the cinema site in Poon Saan, nearly the entire workforce and community of the island listened to Gordon Bennett address the crowd advocating for the improvement to wage conditions that he had submitted in a log of claims to the BPC. The meeting listened intensively to Bennett and voted in accordance with his recommendation to take strike action. First began a series of selective strikes, which bought the mining operation to a stand still. Within days, the rock bins were full and BPC was paying wages to 1,200 men without producing any phosphate. The strike action was to eventually lead to Bennett and some of the UCIW Executive taking their concerns to Parliament House in Canberra where they established a ‘protest tent camp’ and engaged in a hunger campaign. As Ayris notes, setting up protest camps outside Houses of Parliament was to become almost clichéd in later years but in 1979, it was a novel event. As Bennett had prophesied, journalists were attracted to the small tent site like moths to a candle.

The media had a field day, and headlines appeared in every daily newspaper in the nation along with regular TV and radio broadcasts. The (then) Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) President, Bob Hawke had visited the island and addressed UCIW members in support of their action to increase wage parity and living conditions, a visit that also received broad publicity on the mainland. This ultimately led to the ACTU Executive passing a resolution put forward by Bennett at its Annual Congress condemning the continued social and economic apartheid practised by the BPC and the Australian Government on the Australian Territory of Christmas Island, noting that the ACTU supports: ‘1. Parity of the Christmas Island minimum wage with mainland minimum wages. 2. The same citizenship rights as those

170 Ayris, 97.
171 Ayris, 116.
172 Ayris, 100.
enjoyed by all other residents of Australia. 3. The introduction of social services to protect the unemployed, aged and sick. 4. A Public Inquiry into the operations of the British Phosphate Commissioners.\textsuperscript{173}

Notwithstanding the social, industrial, political and environmental changes on Christmas Island during the 1970s, there was also continued development of infrastructure and services. For example, the newly constructed airport saw the arrival of regular Trans Australia Airlines Boeing 727 flights, which also went once a week to Cocos (Keeling) Islands, and the BPC-operated flights from Christmas Island to Singapore.\textsuperscript{174} The UCIW took an optimistic view of the future for Christmas Island in its Newsletter of 1978 declaring that both major employers, the BPC and the Australian Government, were proceeding with planned expansion programs and the Government was refurbishing and upgrading its transport fleet to ensure reliable transport on the island.

The major construction work at the (Flying Fish Cove) ship-loading facility had commenced and was proceeding rapidly. New transformers were installed to improve the electricity system on the island, and there were plans to install a new telephone exchange system. New road-making and line-marking machinery and plant were purchased to improve road safety and transport access on the island, and (as noted above) improved airline services to the island were expected because of the upgrading of the airstrip runway.\textsuperscript{175} Neale and Adams summarise that the 1970s bought ‘winds of change’ to Christmas Island by which there was a certain inevitability about the course of subsequent events in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{176}

\textsuperscript{173} Waters, 138.
\textsuperscript{174} Neale and Adams, (1988), 201.
\textsuperscript{175} Waters, 59.
\textsuperscript{176} Neale and Adams, (1988), 154.
The 1980s began then with a notable shift in the momentum and approach by the UCIW with Gordon Bennett as its General Secretary and in conjunction with the Sweetland Inquiries of 1980 and 1982, to examine the viability of the phosphate resource industry that was also responsible for dramatic improvements in employees’ living and working conditions. The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Viability of the Christmas Island Phosphate Industry, led by W.W. Sweetland (and assisted by Howard Nathan) who was appointed in December 1979, commenced its work in January 1980 and conducted numerous public hearings at which the UCIW was represented along with 14 other island organisations to give evidence. More specifically, the Terms of Reference of the Sweetland Inquiry allowed the UCIW to express its views and provide information.

The Sweetland Inquiry had significant implications for the island, although understandably not all parties on the island were satisfied with the final report. For example, the BPC were critical in their analysis of the final report commenting that the Inquiry process had not thoroughly consulted all parties of interest in the mining industry. To the (BPC) Commissioners it seemed that the Report of the opinions regarding the implications for the ‘landed’ cost of Christmas Island phosphate rock for the present wage levels for regionally engaged workers on Christmas Island and particular wage levels for such workers up to and including parity with Australian minimum federal weekly wage together with associated industrial Sweetland Inquiry failed to tackle many of the critical issues, that conclusions were sometimes


178 Waters, 143–144.

179 Waters, 143.
in conflict with the evidence presented and that, perhaps, insufficient weight had been given to commercial considerations as they saw them.\textsuperscript{180} Conversely, the UCIW was surprised and delighted with the majority of the Inquiry Report outcomes.\textsuperscript{181} Sweetland had concluded in his report that the Christmas Island phosphate industry was viable. The remaining reserves were a known natural resource of proven quality; there was an established and secure market and demand could be expected to be maintained for about eight years.

The industry’s infrastructure was sound and there was a skilled, experienced workforce. The Commissioner said that the conclusion he had reached on the viability of the industry was based on the assumption that the Australian Federal minimum wage would be paid to workers.\textsuperscript{182} Naturally, the outcome of the Sweetland Inquiry Report led to a general level of optimism for the island community in the early 1980s and the UCIW were applauded by the workers and the general community for its involvement in the process, although there were still some aspects of the Inquiry Report that remained to be pursued. Not all the recommendations of the Sweetland Commission were put into effect quickly. Negotiations, some of them long and protracted, were carried out on the island and in Melbourne and Canberra. Even when agreement was reached, legislation was often required by Parliament and this could entail delay since there were matters other than Christmas Island needing Government attention. The federal election towards the end of 1980 meant that some of the proposed Sweetland recommendations were held up by two or three months.\textsuperscript{183}

\textsuperscript{180} Williams and McDonald, 550.
\textsuperscript{181} Williams and McDonald, 551.
\textsuperscript{182} Waters, 144.
\textsuperscript{183} Waters, 150.
The political landscape continued to change in the 1980s, not only as a result of the Union’s efforts and the recommendations of the Sweetland Inquiry, but also because of the awareness of mainland conditions by the local community and the exposure it was receiving as a result of the media reporting of events on the island. As noted earlier in this chapter, territorial transfer to Australia in 1958 did not translate into full incorporation of the island and its people into the Australian nation. Indeed, as Williams and MacDonald note, every Australian Government since 1958 treated Christmas Island as if it were a colony to be exploited in the manner of a nineteenth century empire and, generally this view survived until all discrimination regarding immigration and citizenship was removed.\(^{184}\)

The Commonwealth *Migration Act 1958* was finally extended to Christmas Island on 23 January 1981, and it officially conferred Australian ‘resident’ status on all those residing on Christmas Island at that time. All residents who were not Australian ‘citizens’ at that time were eligible to apply for Australian citizenship under the *Citizenship Act*.\(^{185}\) While this was in itself a significant achievement for Christmas Islanders in accordance with the recommendations of the Sweetland Inquiry, it did not completely fulfil the community’s expectations. Not until after 1984 with the implementation of the right to access social security, vote in federal elections and the removal of the much-hated resettlement scheme, which required the workers to leave the Island in 1985, did Christmas Islanders begin to feel they were a part of the Australian nation. The right to local decision-making through the establishment of a local government style of Assembly and services was created in 1985, again because of the Sweetland Inquiry recommendations, and this important development will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four of this study. The Christmas Island

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\(^{184}\) Williams and McDonald, 556.

\(^{185}\) Heng and Forbes, 74.
Assembly was established in 1985 and was designed to bring the Island and its community into the mainstream of Australian life. Recommendation 15(b) of the Sweetland Inquiry noted that administrative anomalies that distinguish Christmas Island from the mainland should be progressively removed such that the Island’s social and political institutions were less like ‘those of a colonial possession’. In this regard, Commissioner Sweetland recommended that once an acceptable form of political representation was established, the office of the Administrator should be abolished. However, this did not occur, and Michael Grimes, the first UCIW General Secretary, returned to the island in 1986 as an appointed Administrator after a turnover of no less than four Administrators in that year.

Events in 1987 changed the positive mood of Christmas Island that had arisen because of some of the gains by the UCIW in the early to mid-1980s. The significant change was the shock announcement by the Australian Government’s (then) Minister for Foreign Affairs Bill Hayden that the Christmas Island phosphate mine was to close. While heard through a radio broadcast announcement and unconfirmed, the news spread quickly around the island and dejected islanders were anxious to seek clarification. So too was Bennett who arranged hastily convened meetings with the UCIW Executive, the Administrator and the Mine Manager. Soon, the fax machines on Christmas Island were receiving news reports of the Government’s announcement, such as ‘A commercial liquidator has been appointed by the Federal Government to close down the Christmas Island phosphate mine following a secret Cabinet decision. Although Cabinet has yet to make an official announcement, sources confirm that a Canberra based liquidator

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187 Neale and Adams, 207.
188 Ayris, 182.
would begin assessment of the mine almost immediately. Cabinet made the decision to close the mine a month ago but has delayed its implementation. The same Cabinet meeting supported a recommendation from the Minister for Territories, Mr Brown, to sack the Island's nine man Assembly formerly headed by Mr Bennett for financial reasons. While the references used in this study by Les Waters, Union of Christmas Island Workers (1983), and The Phosphateers: A History of the British Phosphate Commissioners and the Christmas Island Phosphate Commission by Williams and McDonald (1985) were published before these events occurred and were therefore not described in these publications, there is reference to future prospects of mining on Christmas Island that ironically (and unfortunately) became a reality. At the 1979 rate of production, sufficient reserves are available for mining to continue until 1988.

Despite the findings of the Sweetland Inquiry report some six years earlier, it seemed the positive outlook that islanders had started to believe in as a result of the momentum of struggle by the UCIW and the community, was all for nothing. The community was devastated by the announcement but quickly went about arranging a delegation to go to Perth to meet with the government, and lobby for the Government decision to be overturned. The subsequent meeting arranged by Warren Snowdon (Member for Lingiari in the NT), who was the federal elected member representing Christmas Island, was with Senator Graham Richardson and his advisors. The meeting concluded with Richardson advising Bennett and the UCIW delegation that the decision to close the mine was because of poor industrial relations and that he (Richardson) hoped that the UCIW would co-operate with the Government and do the best for their members. Bennett was naturally outraged,

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189 Ayris, 184.
190 Waters, 161.
191 Ayris, 189.
not only because there had been no courteous advice provided before any announcement was made but also because the decision was made by a Labor Government in power, which should have been more sympathetic and understanding of the industrial relations and social implications for the community. Unperturbed, Bennett held a media conference and announced that the UCIW would commission a report of its own into the viability of phosphate reserves on the Island to prove to the Government that mining on the island was still commercially viable.

The subsequent report was detailed and expensive but revealed that there was a viable mining prospect for the Island. In fact, the report was even more optimistic than Bennett and the UCIW had expected. The geologists’ report had forecast an estimate of nearly 1.8 million tonnes of A Grade ore and 9 million tonnes of B Grade ore and with a workforce of approximately 212, the lifespan of the mining operations at production of 920,000 tonnes per year would be more than 30 years.192 This was enough for Bennett to embark on promoting the viability of the mining industry to anyone who would listen to him, but the Government refused to listen to any overtures to revoke its decision despite the overwhelming evidence in the report. Eventually in 1988, it was the (somewhat poorly advised) statement by the then Minister for Territories, Mr Punch, that provided the opportunity that Bennett seized. The statement by Punch was that if the islanders thought the mine was still viable then they should put their money where their mouth is and buy the mine.193 They did, and following a public appeal, the UCIW Mining Fund raised a staggering amount of AUD $3.3 million from community and member donations.194 However, this did still not translate into an agreement by the Government to allow a UCIW

192 Ayris, 200.
193 Ayris, 202.
194 Ayris, 204.
partnership consortium to own and reopen the mine and the struggle continued. This included discussions with other mining companies, such as Century Metals and Mining, Croesus Mining and Orion Resources.\textsuperscript{195} With the Government continuing on its aggressive campaign against Bennett and the UCIW, the situation was becoming desperate on the island for the community as it grappled with the realisation of unemployment and no possible future on the island.

In 1987 and 1988, the recently established Christmas Island Assembly and Services Corporation announced it would abolish the Housing Allocation Committee, which consisted of representatives from the UCIW, the mine and the government administration. Minor repairs and maintenance were to become the responsibility of the tenant, even though the landlord of public housing was the Commonwealth. It would demand rent in advance for new or returning residents to the island. Essential costs of living, such as for water, electricity and sewerage were to be increased and the closure of some of the community assets, such as the swimming pool was also announced.\textsuperscript{196} These measures together with the uncertainty of mining operations were seen as a deliberate approach by the Government to depopulate the island and placed enormous pressure on the community.

Eighteen months after the Government closed the mine, the UCIW had finally won the long and protracted legal battle with the Government to allow a new tender process to commence. It was a significant achievement for the UCIW and the community, and although there was still a long way to go in regard to having some certainty in the economic and social future of the island, it was an optimistic development. Assisting this optimism was the appointment of a new Minister for

\textsuperscript{195} Ayris, 207.

\textsuperscript{196} Ayris, 193.
Territories, Clive Holding, who was in favour of reopening the mine and made his views known to the UCIW and the community during visits to the island. Finally, towards the end of the 1980s the tender process for the sale of the mine was awarded to a consortium between the UCIW, John Booth Saleys and Clough Engineering. Eventually, the UCIW acquired the percentage owned by both other partners and the phosphate mine became solely owned by shareholders of the UCIW members and the community. This was a remarkable result, given the adversity that confronted the UCIW and community only three or four years earlier, although it had taken a personal toll on Bennett’s health. By 1990, the mine was reopened and operated as Christmas Island Phosphates (CIP). The events throughout the 1980s had transformed the community of Christmas Island to the extent that the islanders realised that the destiny of their future could be changed even if only through struggle and determination.

In July 1991, Gordon Bennett, or ‘Tai Ko Seng’ as he was affectionately known by the Christmas Islanders, died of a heart attack. Bennett had fought long and hard, since first arriving on the island for the betterment of the islanders, to improve their working and social conditions. In a mark of respect, he is buried on Christmas Island in a splendid octagonal memorial at the Gaze Road cemetery between the ocean and the towering jungle-clad cliffs and Christmas Islanders regularly visit his tomb to this day. Bartleson notes that its location on a rise overlooking the ‘Coolies Memorial’ and surrounding graves gives it a somewhat higher status than is usual in the traditional hierarchy of a cemetery. The beginning of the 1990s also saw the first comprehensive consideration of the constitutional status and system of laws

197 Ayris, 235.
198 Ayris, 248.
199 Ayris, 261.
200 Ayris, 263.
201 Bartleson, 55.
applying to Christmas Island, when the Parliament of the Commonwealth of
Australia’s House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and
Constitutional Affairs reviewed the legal regimes of Australia’s external territories.
Their report, Islands in the Sun, published in March 1991, proposed a number of
reforms to ensure that the residents of the external territories receive the same
benefits, rights and protection under the law as other citizens of Australia, a
situation that the Committee found did not currently occur. As a background to the
Inquiry, the Committee was mindful of the difficulties arising during 1987 and 1988
in connection with the prosecution for a murder on Christmas Island. The
prosecution of this matter highlighted the fact that the laws of Christmas Island and
the Cocos (Keeling) Islands had not, at the time, progressed sufficiently to ensure the
residents of those Territories a right to trial by jury.202

The Terms of Reference for the House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Legal and Constitutional Affairs Inquiry were developed as an options paper for
discussion with Island residents in August 1990.203 The subsequent Inquiry Report
recommendations are the basis for the current applied laws regime, as introduced by
the Territories Reform Act 1992 that will be subject to more scrutiny and discussion in
Chapter 4. However, from an historical perspective the intention of the Inquiry was
to consider a replacement of the outdated (and at times ineffective) hybrid of
Commonwealth and former Singaporean (British) laws that were irrelevant,
complicated and/or unfair in their application to the daily lives of Christmas
Islanders. In this regard, the Inquiry and subsequent Islands in the Sun report was an
important development in the lives of Christmas Islanders. It is also relevant to note
that the recommendations of the Report imposed SDAs between the Commonwealth
and the WA Government. While these arrangements receive more attention in

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202 Islands in the Sun, 3.

203 Islands in the Sun, 192.
Chapter 2

Chapter Four, this historical development affected the daily lives of Christmas Islanders as a direct result of the WA-based applied laws regime. The creation of the Shire of Christmas Island because of the Report was also a significant development with the appointment of the representatives commencing on 1 July 1992 from the former Christmas Island Services Corporation. A formal election was held in 1993. This was the first democratically elected local representation to occur since the abolishment of the former Christmas Island Assembly by the Australian Government in the late 1980s and heralded locally elected community representatives in the same way as mainland Australian local governments.

While many social improvements, such as specific gazettal of Public Holidays in recognition of the unique culture of the Christmas Island population (e.g., Chinese New Year and Hari Raya) and the establishment of local groups and organisations gained more prominence in the early 1990s and will receive more discussion in the next chapter, it has been demonstrated that the community had begun to recognise for itself its own distinctive culture and social expectations that were reflected in their numerous festivities and celebrations. The 1990s also witnessed a number of ‘boom and bust’ developments. The granting of a casino (resort) license by the Commonwealth in 1993 provided employment to over 300 employees and increased the island population as a result of workers coming from the mainland (and overseas). However, in 1998, the casino resort closed, which created significant social and economic implications for the community. Plans to construct and develop a commercial satellite launching facility were also considered and although planning for the project advanced, actual construction at an identified site at South Point never progressed beyond the planning stage. However, the resilience of Christmas Islanders had been by now well forged through their continued struggles and other development projects continued to be recommended.
The expansion of the Christmas Island Phosphate mining industry resulted in major capital infrastructure improvements to the mine ‘dryers’, the port loading facilities, cantilevers, plant and equipment and company-owned housing stock. Tourism also became a potential opportunity in the 1990s for economic and social development of the island. In 1989, the Christmas Island National Park was extended to incorporate approximately 63 % of the Island.\textsuperscript{204} The Management Plan of the Christmas Island National Parks identified eco-tourism, or nature-based tourism, and visitor services as a potential economic stimulus especially in the area of nature bird watching, diving, snorkeling and land-based tours.\textsuperscript{205} The development of tourism as a viable economic opportunity for the island required significant infrastructure improvements as well as financial support from the Government and island businesses for the potential to become a realistic opportunity. The enhancement of tourism on Christmas Island was subject to a Report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment, Recreation and the Arts in 1990. That is, the development of tourism industries in the Christmas and Cocos Islands is necessary for the establishment of a viable economy in the two Territories.

The report also notes that otherwise the Commonwealth Government will need to heavily subsidise the Islands if local residents are to achieve standards of living and services equivalent to those available to mainland Australians.\textsuperscript{206} Several recommendations were made that included air services to the island. The cost and regularity of flight services to Christmas Island was a major impediment to increasing tourism visitation. While the airport runway and terminal had been


\textsuperscript{205} Director of National Parks, 21.

improved in the 1970s and 1980s to allow larger aircraft to land, the cost of flights to/from Perth were still expensive. It was also a concern to the majority of Christmas Islanders whose origins were in Malaysia and Singapore that no regular flight was available to them, although this changed in the late 1990s with irregular charter flights from Christmas Island Tourism Association (CITA) based on local business and government membership, which enhanced the progress of tourism on the island. CITA became an active lobby group for improved tourism services and infrastructure improvements. For example, the development of nature-based boardwalks and trails in conjunction with the Christmas Island National Parks and Committee on the Environment, Recreation and the Arts, when the Commonwealth should commit to upgrading infrastructure where it is necessary to do so to attract and facilitate the creation and maintenance of tourism enterprises standard tropical island holiday destination.207

However, the Report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment, Recreation and the Arts noted a major impediment to promoting tourism on Christmas Island: Unlike the Cocos Islands, Christmas Island does not have the appearance of an ideal tropical island resort with palm-fringed beaches and coral-filled lagoons. It lacks many of the prerequisites for development, such as shallow inshore reefs that depend upon tide and wave height, making surfing impossible.208 Tourism then would take a long time to develop and was certainly not the immediate panacea to an economic-based activity.

207 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts, ix.
208 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts, 14.
Figure 2.25 UCIW General Secretary Gordon Bennett in deep discussion with a local resident.

Figure 2.26 Gordon Bennett’s memorial at Gaze Road, Christmas Island.
The 1990s was by and large a progressive decade for the community of Christmas Island with evident improvements to the Island’s infrastructure, the implementation of the recommendations of the Islands in the Sun report for political and governance improvements, the reopening of the mine under community shareholder ownership and a more active community through the many social cultural groups and organisations. For example, the Chinese Literary Association became more active in promoting its regular activities, which included opening a specific Chinese Noodle House restaurant to provide low-cost meals to the predominantly Asian community. Similarly, the formation of the Malay Association of Christmas Island provided social-type activities for the Malay community around the Kampong area of Flying Fish Cove that had been previously provided by the Christmas Island Islamic Council, which could now concentrate on providing more religious services (that also included religious teaching to children) to the Islamic community.

The contemporary history of Christmas Island from 2000 onwards was/is characterised by immigration issues (asylum seekers) and the continued aspiration of Christmas Islanders for some form of self-determination status. The Cocos (Keeling) Islands had successfully lobbied the United Nations for some form of self-determination in the 1980s. While not intending to dwell on the process the Cocos (Keeling) Islanders undertook in pursuing their notion of self-determination in this chapter, it has historical relevance to the question of this study as regards how Christmas Islanders felt about the developments of its neighbours on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands primarily because Christmas Islanders felt ignored and overlooked when the referendum for self-determination that was overseen by the United Nations was held on Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 1984. The matter will also receive more attention in Chapter Four of the study where, for example, the formal transfer of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands from Great Britain to Australia occurred before that of Christmas Island. For the purpose of this chapter it is noted that, in possibly the smallest ever act of self-determination and under the auspices of the Australian
Electoral Commission and observed under a United Nations mission, the Cocos Islanders resolved to remain a part of Australia as a ‘Non-Self-Governing External Territory’ under the Cocos (Keeling) Islands Self-Determination (Consequential Amendments) Act 1984. The Cocos (Keeling) Islands community continue to celebrate this occasion annually. While mining continued as a viable economic industry with the extension of mining leases by the Commonwealth Government to CIP Co. in 2012 until 2029, other industries have complemented the economic stability of the island and enhanced the social improvement of the community.

One of the main industries to have affected the historical development of the island (as previously noted) has been immigration and the construction of an Immigration Detention Centre (IDC). On 26 March 2002, 88 unauthorised arrivals on Christmas Island were the first group to be accommodated. These measures also included the excision of Christmas Island from the Australian migration zone and plans for the reception and accommodation of asylum seekers and the processing of their claims for protection at various offshore locations. Thereafter, then Prime Minister John Howard noted that he would try to change Australia’s immigration laws to prevent people who arrived without permission at Ashmore Islands and Christmas Island from applying for asylum in Australia under the Migration Act, by excising these islands from its migration zone.

Although subject to variations, different Australian Governments have maintained the controversial ‘border protection refugee asylum seeker’ policy. The positive and negative effects of the Government’s immigration policy on the community of Christmas Island are contrasted in the ABS Census data of 2011 and 2016. Where

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209 Kerr, 288.
210 Heng and Forbes, 79.
211 Heng and Forbes, 79.
there is a distinct difference in the language spoken at home, employment levels for
the ‘locals’, increased small business activity (e.g., to the supermarkets and trade
areas of plumbing and electrical services), integration of asylum seeker children into
the mainstream Island School and an improvement to infrastructure, such as
increased capacity of the island’s water and sewerage plants, road network and the
construction of a new power generation facility.\textsuperscript{212} Conversely, the mining industry
argues that the increase of traffic on the road network on the island is detrimental to
their own road use requirements for heavy haulage, and organisations such as the
CITA continue to express concerns about the negative publicity that Christmas
Island receives because of the Government’s immigration policy despite the increase
of regular commercial flights to the island.

\textbf{Chapter Summary}

This chapter intended to provide not only an historical description of Christmas
Island but, more specifically, to portray that this historical development has
demonstrated that Christmas Island has an identifiable colonial past, which is
unique and different from the history of mainland Australia that continues to the
present time. The transition from United Kingdom’s (and Singaporean) control to
Australia in 1958 did little to change the daily lives of the Asian population on the
island, who continue to remain subordinate to the Australian Government. This is
demonstrated in recent times with the imposition of the IDC on the island without
any community consultation, or as noted earlier in this chapter, the announcement
by the Australian Government in 1987 that the Christmas Island phosphate mine
was to close, without consultation with the community of Christmas Island or
explanation of its likely effects on the population. Similarly, in 1980, the Christmas

\textsuperscript{212} Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘\textit{Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Census Data} – General
Island National Park was proclaimed under the *National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act* with no reference to the community and ways in which this might affect the economic viability of phosphate mining on which the community relies. While in 1984, some concessions were gained (through the hard work of the UCIW) with the right to access social security, to vote in federal elections and the removal of the much-hated resettlement scheme that required the workers to leave the Island, by and large since 1958 until date, Christmas Island continues to be treated as if it were a colony to be exploited.

The use of historical photographs in this chapter has also been intended to purposely provide pictorial evidence in support of the narrative description of the Island’s population, especially the working conditions of the indentured workforce (mainly Chinese coolies) that reinforced the colonial hierarchy and subsequently gave rise to the resentment of colonial subjugation. This in turn explains to some degree why the local Asian population of Christmas Island desire some form of self-government. Currently, phosphate mining continues as it has done for more than a century as a viable economic industry for the Island although the processing of asylum seekers at the IDC has gradually declined since 2014 as a valuable contributor to the economy, and in fact by 2018 has all but closed. The Christmas Island casino resort is awaiting the outcome of its casino license application with the Commonwealth to reopen again following strong lobbying by the local Shire on behalf of the community. Christmas Island has a unique geography and natural environment owing to it being an isolated oceanic island, and its history is both fascinating and unique in the Australian landscape. So too is its status as a typical South-East Asian pluralist society, the three dominant ethnic groups being people of Chinese, Malay and European descent, which will receive more attention in Chapter Three of the study.