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The Macassans
A study of the early trepang industry along the Northern Territory coast

by

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Two volumes and a case

Volume 1

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PART IV : TWO QUESTIONS OF TIME

Chapter 12

When did the Industry Begin?

Nearly every writer who has ever mentioned the Macassans, has ventured an answer to this question. More than once, it has been predicted that detailed archaeological work would resolve the problem, and this was certainly one of the hopes with which the present project began. Yet despite the accumulation of a considerable amount of new evidence, certain intractable contradictions remain. This chapter is intended as a complete review of all forms of evidence bearing on the problem, and as a justification for my current opinion.

It is necessary to begin with a clear statement of the question. This is the date at which praus from the archipelago began to visit the coast of the Northern Territory for the purpose of collecting trepang. Problems such as the first non-Aboriginal discovery of the continent or the frequency and nature of drift voyages across the Arafura Sea are related, but distinct.

In view of present difficulties, some useful perspective is gained by considering the history of opinion on this question. The point at which to begin is the statement of Flinders that Pobassoo, whom he met in 1803, 'had made six or seven voyages from Macassar to this coast, within the preceding twenty years, and he was one of the first who came' (Flinders 1814, 2:231). Later at Kupang, similar information was obtained. 'The natives of Macassar had been long accustomed to fish for the trepang
amongst the islands in the vicinity of Java, and upon a
dry shoal lying to the south of Rottee; but about twenty
years before, one of their prows was driven by the north-west
monsoon to the coast of New Holland, and finding the
trepan to be abundant, they afterwards returned; and had
continued to fish there since that time' (Flinders 1814,
2:257). It would be possible to maintain that this second
statement refers to the discovery of the Kimberley coast
rather than the Northern Territory coast, but there can be
no mistake about the first. This is a direct answer to
our question. The substance of this first statement is
also confirmed in the journals of Brown (1802-3) and
Fowler (1802-3).

From this time until quite recently, the field lay open
to speculation based on no further evidence. Occasionally
considerable antiquity was suggested, as by Dubouzet in
1839. 'Since time immemorial, the Bugis of Macassar have
carried on this fishery on the north coast of New Holland.;
there they doubtless preceded the first Dutch navigators'
(after Dumont d'Urville 1844:251). However Flinders' clear
statement tended to have a restraining influence. For
example Searcy, who usually contents himself with a vague
statement, suggests in one passage that contact lasted
'about two centuries' (Searcy n.d.:9). Warner also
thought that Flinders must be in error, but only speaks of
the industry being carried on 'from an early date'
(Warner 1937 (1964:445-8, 455)). His imaginative attempt
to obtain a date from the tamarind trees at Macassar Well
unfortunately proved abortive.

Further work by anthropologists in Arnhem Land produced
greater detail on the effects of Macassan contact on the
Aborigines, but this material is notably unsuitable for
estimating the time involved. In fact, the controls on the
rate of acculturation are so vaguely understood, that it seems to me that to estimate the time required to produce certain visible effects is to stand the problem on its head. However despite this fundamental difficulty, a number of authors have offered their opinions on the question.

Thomson, who worked in the area just before and during the Second World War, stressed the essentially conservative nature of Aboriginal society and the considerable extent of Macassan influence. He concluded that 'although there is no conclusive evidence as to the time when these Macassan visits commenced, there is reason for the belief that they occurred over a relatively long period' (Thomson 1949c : 83). His more specific statements suffer from so many qualifications as to be almost meaningless, but his general opinion seems to be that the industry began in the early eighteenth century (cf. Thomson 1949c : 5, 7, 82, 83; 1952 : 1, 5 n.6). It is worth noting that one important argument used by Thomson is invalid. He states that 'the evidence of Asiatic influence on this coast, which Flinders had already recorded on this voyage before his meeting with Pobassoo, indicates that these visits were probably of considerably greater antiquity than suggested by Pobassoo' (Thomson 1948 : 146; cf. 1949c : 7). It is not clear whether Thomson means the material remains of Macassan activity recorded by Flinders (as fully listed in chapter 5) or his remarks concerning the influence of the Macassans on the Aborigines. As perceived by Flinders, this influence consisted of a knowledge of fire arms, a propensity to steal iron implements and perhaps the habit of making some small recompense for theft (Flinders 1814, 2 : 213). Elsewhere he conjectures that the apparent hostility of the Aborigines may have been due to clashes with the Macassans,
of which he was told by Pobassoo, and he dismisses the question of the diffusion of circumcision (pp. 198, 231-2). The only material evidence of influence he observed (and this is highly dubious) was a broken spike nail in a hut on Cotton's Island (p.235). The sum of this evidence, whether material remains or influence, cannot possibly support Thomson's assertion.

Much more widely known and quoted is the work of R.M. & C.H. Berndt, who have worked in Arnhem Land from 1946 until the present day. Their knowledge of the anthropology of the area, including matters relating to Macassan influence, is unrivalled. In one of the first publications resulting from this work, they tentatively suggest that there was 'early Macassan or late pre-Macassan (Baijini) contact, in perhaps the first part of the sixteenth century' (Berndt & Berndt 1947a : 133). This, in essence, remains their opinion. It should be emphasized that this is simply a very well informed guess based on the evidence of Macassan influence on Aborigines.

Also based on fieldwork experience is the opinion of McCarthy and Setzler, who did archaeological work in Arnhem Land during 1948. Although they carefully avoid drawing any direct chronological inferences from their archaeological material, they do suggest contact 'within the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries' (McCarthy & Setzler 1960 : 215; cf. also 294).

Finally, there is the invaluable contribution of Cense (1952) who draws attention to the passages by Dalrymple and Forrest discussed below, although Cense himself does not offer an opinion on when the industry began. More recently, Coolhaas (1960) has discovered another reference which is discussed below.
In addition to the evidence adduced by these previous writers, the present study has produced some fresh information. It is now necessary to review this total sum of evidence.

The most convenient place to begin is at the point of demand for trepang in China. As Professor Wang Gungwu shows in appendix 1, the earliest evidence of any possible demand for trepang from Southeast Asia is from about the seventeenth century. It would seem improbable that the Australian coast was among the first to be exploited.

This is supported by the absence of any mention of trepang in the trading records of Southeast Asia for the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as discussed in chapter 1. If the range of interest is restricted to the Buginese-Macassarese seamen sailing from Macassar, (and the only possible evidence for not so doing is the question of the Baiini), then, as also discussed in chapter 1, it is extremely difficult to see a pattern of activity into which this industry would fit, before the first part of the seventeenth century. A very clear indication of this is the map in the back of Abdurrazak daeng Patunru (n.d.) showing the extension of Macassarese influence up to 1660. Apart from a few sixteenth century dates in South and Central Celebes, all the dates in other parts of the eastern archipelago are from the early seventeenth century. The date \( 1640 \) appears over western Arnhem Land.

It must be stressed that this date in the early seventeenth century is only an early limit of possibility. It does not imply that the trepangers were actually coming to Australia so early.

There is, however, one piece of evidence which has been taken to indicate contact at this early date. Coolhaas
(1960) has drawn attention to a passage in an official Dutch letter of 1654 reporting, at secondhand, that 'behind Damar are situated yet a great crowd of islands (south), whereof some are as big as the island of Buru and bigger, producing slaves, wax, tortoise-shell, etc., which were sailed to annually by the Macassarese...' (my translation). Coolhaas believes that because the Dutch already knew of the Tanimbar and Aru Islands, this may be a reference to Australia. However such an argument seems to be rejecting the most simple and straightforward interpretation on very slender grounds. Not only does the geographical description fit the islands to the east of Timor precisely, whereas it would be a singularly poor geographical description of the Australian coast, but also the list of products, particularly wax, is less likely to have come from Australia. The absence of trepang from the list should be noticed. The easiest explanation of the difficulty, which is very slight anyway, is a certain understandable vagueness in the original information. The passage cannot, therefore, be accepted as the earliest mention of the Macassan trepangers.

This distinction belongs to the passage from Dalrymple (1769 : 83) quoted in the introduction. This is purely a geographical statement saying that Bugis seamen had reached New Holland. Very considerable reliance can be placed on this information from Dalrymple, who was not likely to make a casual slip on such a point. Furthermore it is confirmed a few pages later in another context. Speaking of the possible trade of the region, he says, 'the Bugguese describe New Holland to yield gold, and the natives, who are Mahometans, to be well inclined to commerce: this must be referred to the northern part, which seems to be what Marco-Polo calls Lochae' (Dalrymple 1769 : 92). At first sight, these details encourage distrust, but a number of
points need to be considered. Firstly this passage is in fact separate from the previous one; secondly there is no other nearby area to which the description applies any more exactly; and lastly, only the most generalized source is given for the statement. The conclusion from this would seem to be that some time in the early 1760s when he was in the South China Sea area, Dalrymple was given a general account of the range of Bugis sailing, which certainly included Australia, but perhaps the informant was rather vague on the most distant areas. It would also be unwise to understand the term Bugis too rigidly.

The only other eighteenth century notice of the Macassans is much more helpful. In a general description of Celebes and its people, Captain Thomas Forrest remarks that 'I have been told by several Buggesses, that they sail in their Padrakans to the northern parts of New-Holland, possibly Carpentarian Bay, to gather Swallow (Biche de mer), which they sell to the annual China Junk at Macassar; they say also, gold is to be got there. I make no doubt but that our settlements in New-Holland will soon be visited by the Buggesses, when the English extend from port Jackson further north into a warm climate' (Forrest 1792: 82-3). This information may have been obtained at any time over the preceding thirty years, which could make it contemporary with that of Dalrymple. Again, though here there can be not the slightest doubt that the Macassans are being referred to, there is also mention of gold.

The greatest probability of finding an earlier reference to the Macassans than those by Dalrymple and Forrest, would seem to lie in archival material. No exhaustive search has been attempted, but the work that has been done has failed to turn up any information. In reply to my enquiries, the General State Archivist (Algemeen Rijksarchief) in the
Hague has replied as follows. 'In the registers of "Van Batavia Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren" were found for the period September 1757 - September 1797 accounts of ship movements to and from the port of Makassar. These lists contain information on the ports of departure and destination of the ships and on the cargo. Indeed many of the ships arriving in April, May or June brought in quantities of trepang. However it seems that all these ships departed from nearby islands as Sumbawa, Bonerate, Bima, Ambon, Endeh, Butung, Bugis, Bulekomba, Salaja, Ternate and Timor (Colonial Archives, inventory number 2825, 2882, 2915, 3073, 3385 and 3701. Archives of the Oost Indisch Comité, inventory numbers 92-96).

Our provisional investigation produced for the period before 1757 only one list giving ship movements from October 1734 till September 1735. This list again does not mention any part of Australia (Colonial Archives 2206 folio 213)' (letter D 216 dated 26 June, 1969. A.E.M. Ribberink to C.C. Macknight).

There is no need to conclude from this information that vessels were not coming to Australia at this period, as other evidence indicates, but it would seem that detailed work is required to locate the reason why Australia is not specifically mentioned. Perhaps only the last port of call is specified or perhaps there was some reason for concealing from the authorities the fact that praus were sailing to Australia.

There are also some similar eighteenth century documents from Macassar preserved in the Arsip Nasional, Djakarta, but a preliminary search in the "daghregisters" by Miss Soemartini (pers. comm.) has failed to locate any mention of the industry. As far as it was possible to discover
in 1969, there are no archives remaining in Macassar itself.

In addition to European records, it is necessary to consider the native historiography. In this respect South Celebes is outstanding (Noorduyn in Soedjatmoko 1965). Unfortunately however, the attention of these writers is very far from such humble matters as the trepang industry and no references to it have been noticed (Dr J. Noorduyn pers. comm.).

It is now possible to turn to the evidence actually emanating from the area visited by the Macassans. The earliest positive written evidence is that of Flinders, which has already been discussed. However Flinders was not the first European in the area. Two previous British vessels had touched the Arnhem Land coast. In December 1791, McCluer touched western Arnhem Land, but the visit was so brief and the surviving record so poor that nothing can be deduced with reference to the Macassans (Dalrymple 1792; Hockin 1803 : 47; Flinders 1814, 1 : xv). In about May of the same year, a boatload of convicts, who had escaped from Sydney, also touched the Arnhem Land coast. In one account there appears to be a garbled version of attacks on the boat by Macassans, and it is so interpreted by the editors (Becke & Jeffery 1896 : 235). However another account shows quite clearly that the boat was pursued by Papuans on the east side of the Gulf of Carpentaria. On the western side of the gulf, the escapees probably only landed briefly in the Wessel Islands (Ingleton 1952 : 13 - 15).

Much more important are the records of the early Dutch explorers in the area, in which there is no mention at all of the Macassans. Very little is known of the first two voyages along the coast of Arnhem Land, that of the Arnhem in 1623 and Tasman's voyage of 1644, and nothing about
the Macassans can be inferred (Sharp 1963: 52-4, 88 - 91). A number of other voyages are not to exactly the right area, notably those of Janz (1606), Carstensz (1623) and Gonzal (1756) to the eastern side of the Gulf of Carpentaria and that of Pieterszoon (1636) to Melville Island (Sharp 1963; Heeres 1899). These voyages do serve to show, however, that the north coast of Australia was known in some detail in the seventeenth century, and many maps of the period demonstrate that this knowledge was by no means secret (e.g. Heeres 1899: chart 14).

One voyage deserves rather closer attention. In 1705, three vessels, the flute Vossenbosch, the sloop De Waijer and the patchiallang Nieuw Holland spent the period from 2 April to 12 July sailing eastwards along the coast from the north point of Bathurst Island to Bowen Strait (Major 1859: 165-173; Heeres 1899: viii, 87-90). They appear to have crossed Dundas Strait in about mid-May. A number of points should be noticed: no Macassans were seen (though it could be argued that this was rather late in the season); the Aborigines had only bark canoes; and there is specific comment on the absence of iron implements. As discussed in greater detail in chapter 11, these observations, probably on the Cobourg Peninsula, suggest a lack of Macassan contact. Another point of great interest is that the first two vessels returned to Macassar, where the official maps of the voyage were improperly detained. It is difficult to believe that these were not seen by local captains. In fact, the name of the third vessel, which returned to Banda, suggests that it was a tender, perhaps of native construction, specially engaged for this voyage. There may well have been Macassarese or Bugis sailors on her, or the other vessels.

It is, of course, impossible to argue rigorously from
such negative evidence, but it is difficult to believe that if in the seventeenth century there was a flourishing trepang industry in northern Australia and regular fleets sailing there from Macassar, this phenomenon would never be mentioned in the relatively complete records of Dutch exploration. Furthermore it can be shown to be highly likely that at about the beginning of the eighteenth century, local sailors in Macassar would have been aware of the existence of the north coast, though whether or not for the first time we do not know.

The dating of objects actually found on Macassan sites has been dealt with in chapters 8, 9 and 10, and the main points can be briefly restated. One or two pieces of import ware might have been made in the seventeenth century, but most date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We have no means of judging the time between manufacture and deposition. The earthenware is undated, as are many of the miscellaneous finds. However there are several eighteenth and nineteenth century coins from Macassan contexts, several nineteenth century clay pipes from doubtful contexts and considerable collections of glass, probably from the nineteenth century.

Two important points need to be made. Firstly, on a purely subjective opinion, the quantity of Macassan artefacts to be found in the Northern Territory could easily have accumulated over a period of about a century and a half. There is no prima facie indication of greater antiquity. Secondly, any of the sequences or processes tentatively proposed, could also have taken place within that order of time. Thus to take only one example, if there really was a pre-glass stage to the industry, this can be easily accommodated in the mid-eighteenth century before the
introduction of the earliest dated glass at the end of the century or the beginning of the next.

One artefact requires more detailed discussion. The blue and white porcelain saucer from site 30a, illustrated in plate 8.9, was originally identified by Mrs Kamer Aga-Oglu as 'a typical Ming blue and white...dating not later than the very beginning of the sixteenth century and may very well be of the late fifteenth century' (McCarthy & Setzler 1960 : 294). However further work over the last 20 years has entailed many revisions of previous ideas. Mrs Aga-Oglu has therefore kindly re-considered the sherd and concluded that 'the dating I assigned to the blue-and-white sherd in 1950...should indeed be altered. That sherd cannot be earlier than the late 16th century (Wan Li, 1573-1619) and may in all probability be of the first half of the 17th century, a late Ming product' (letter of 13 October, 1969). She also dates various other sherds found in 1966 and 1967 to the same period (but no earlier), and certainly this sherd is by no means exceptional. As mentioned in chapter 8, even these dates seem to me to be rather early. In relation to this particular blue and white sherd, two points can be made. Firstly, the closest parallel I have seen is a sherd from Djakarta Bay collected by Mr Abu Ridho and dated by him to about the eighteenth century. Secondly, the only other dateable artefact from the site, the transfer printed sherd 1024, is probably nineteenth century. There is nothing about the site to suggest an unusually long period of use.

The most aberrant and controversial dating evidence for the Macassans are the carbon dates. These have each been recorded in detail in the relevant places, but the six are conveniently summarized below.
Site 9. S.L. 2 125 ± 57 B.P. (ANU - 61) Modern
S.L. 7 500 ± 75 B.P. (ANU - 316) 1450 A.D.
S.L. 17 740 ± 70 B.P. (ANU - 240) 1210 A.D.

Site 13b. buried S.L. 830 ± 80 B.P. (ANU - 242) 1120 A.D.

Site 32a. S.L. 8 430 ± 70 B.P. (ANU - 317) 1520 A.D.
S.L. 13 780 ± 75 B.P. (ANU - 241) 1170 A.D.

A number of points need to be made about this series of dates. From what slight archaeological evidence is available, the dates from sites 9 and 32a, appear to be in the correct relative order. Furthermore, with the 'modern' date of ANU - 61, this relative sequence is brought up to a date consistent with other forms of evidence. The three oldest dates in particular, show a rather surprising consistency between sites. This is perhaps partly explained by the fact that, on archaeological grounds, these samples were selected as being relatively old. The samples themselves are all of excellent quality, consisting of lumps of charcoal. Associated charcoal with sample ANU - 317 at least showed that the original wood consisted of relatively thin branches, thus eliminating any significant tree-ring effect. Although the samples were taken from relatively close to the surface (all less than 1m.), it is difficult to think of any source of contamination, particularly as this would need to be older contamination. There are a number of special factors which need to be considered when converting carbon 14 years into calendar years. However with dates of this age, particularly the three oldest dates, no significant alteration is produced and the dates are more conveniently quoted in their original form.

Finally, it is important to be quite clear what is actually being dated: this is in each case, the death of
the wood used in a trepang boiling fireplace. If the fireplace was used more than once, as most probably were, an average date is obtained, assuming random selection of charcoal. The use of this type of fireplace for boiling trepang is quite certain in the nineteenth century; they were not constructed for other purposes; and they are remarkably distinctive. Therefore, quite irrespective of the Macassans, the carbon dates are directly connected with trepanging.

The only remaining form of evidence to be discussed is that relating to Macassan influence on the Aborigines. Some doubts have already been expressed about the validity of attempting to produce a date from such evidence. However, if the attempt must be made, it is my opinion that the evidence discussed in chapter 11 is not inconsistent with a period of Macassan influence extending over about two centuries. The problem of the Baiini and the question of the influence of drift voyagers, both of which are marginally relevant to this conclusion, have been treated in chapter 11. It is perhaps worth noting that the only really contrary opinion to this, based on specific anthropological fieldwork, is that of the Berndts.

At the beginning of this chapter, it was stated that certain intractable contradictions exist in the evidence relating to when the industry began. These can now be briefly summarized. Firstly, there is a significant difference between the statement of Pobassoo that the industry began in about 1783 and the information of Dalrymple that it was in progress during the early 1760s. Secondly one can oppose the sixteenth century date of the Berndts against the silence of the historical sources in the seventeenth century on both the trepang industry in general and
specifically on Macassarese or Bugis praus visiting Australia. It should be noted that even if Coolhaas's reference were to be accepted as relevant, this is still over a century after the earlier date.

Finally there is the unbridgeable gulf between the carbon dates and all other forms of evidence. It must be pointed out that these dates are about double the oldest other inferences drawn from the evidence, and introduce a quite new order of age. To accept these entails not only a fundamental reappraisal of such subjects as the earliest non-Aboriginal activity in Australia and the pre-European trade of the eastern archipelago, but also a complete revision of matters such as Chinese contact with Southeast Asia, the dating of certain very well known types of Chinese pottery and the whole question of influence on the Aborigines - and that is to mention only the outstanding problems. Yet not to accept the dates is either to cast doubt on their stratigraphic association (which is virtually impossible in the absence of earlier strata, to say nothing of the difficulty of repeating the mistake on different sites) or to suggest the presence of some disturbing physical or chemical factor, as yet unknown. Specific discussions with Mr H.A. Polach of the A.N.U. radiocarbon laboratory have failed to suggest any possibilities for resolving this problem, which undoubtedly merits considerable further work.

In attempting to assess the final conclusion to be drawn from all this evidence, one deceptively alluring possibility presents itself, that of there being more than one period of trepanging activity, perhaps by groups other than those known in the nineteenth century. It is true that with ingenuity some difficulties can be so explained, but fresh problems arise, notably the reasons for such alterations.
Furthermore it does nothing to resolve difficulties associated with the date of the trepang trade itself, which is the very thing which the carbon dates relate to directly.

It is not possible to conclude this chapter without offering my own opinion as to when the industry began. On the present evidence, this seems most likely to have been about the beginning of the eighteenth century. However it must be recognized that this date is in conflict with the specific statement of Pobassoo, the opinion of the Berndts and five out of the six radiocarbon dates.
Chapter 13

The End of the Industry

In 1863 South Australia, in the face of considerable internal dissension and deftly moderated competition from Queensland, annexed to itself the Northern Territory. Although the Macassan trepang industry had been described in the well known narratives of Flinders, King and Stokes, there is no evidence to suggest that the wealth of the sea, or the possibility of extracting gain from the Macassans, featured in the thoughts of those in favour of the annexation. In contrast with the earlier British settlements, the prime object of the South Australians was pastoral development, though the hope of mineral discoveries was never far behind and from the very beginning there was the dream of an Overland Telegraph.

The initial South Australian attempt at settlement, the Northern Territory Expedition of 1864, was a sorry failure. The poor site of the main town at Escape Cliffs has been largely blamed for the disaster, though the incompetence and fractiousness of individuals were probably more potent causes.\(^1\) In the two years seven months before the settlement was abandoned in January 1867, there was no sign of interest in contact with the Macassans. Indeed there was some slight apprehension (Stow 1866:42), though when Howard met several

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\(^1\) For a brief modern account of the early history of South Australia in the Northern Territory, see Threadgill (1922), Price (1930), Bauer (1964), Lockwood (1968) and appendix 12. The best detailed account is still that by Roberts (1908). The South Australian Archives contain voluminous records on the various settlements and expeditions, of which I have been able to consult only a small part.
praus in Mountnorris Bay and near the Goulburn Islands early in 1866, he remarked that 'the Malays seemed a quiet set of people, and took little notice of us' (SAPP 1866-7/79:1).

In the dry season of 1867, Cadell was sent north to select a better site for a settlement. He did see a single prau returning home, but made no contact beyond showing his flag (SAPP 1868-9/24:10; Napier n.d.:30). In his reports recommending the mouth of the Liverpool River for settlement, he made no reference to the considerable numbers of praus which passed this site each year.

However, Cadell's recommendation was ignored, and when Goyder arrived with another settlement expedition in February 1869, he went straight to Port Darwin. The founders of Palmerston, as the new town was called until 1911, were fully occupied at first in the immediate vicinity. Their only contact with Macassans was when, in April 1869, the Aborigines brought in two survivors from a prau wrecked two years previously. They were sent back to Kupang (Lockwood 1968:103, quoting Goyder).

However, one part of the coast visited by the Macassans came into prominence comparatively early in a rather unexpected way. In the dry season of 1871, the Government Resident, Douglas, visited Port Essington and noted the numerous cattle remaining from the British settlement. Several government officers sensed an opportunity for profit, and applied for leases, only to find that they had long ago been outfoxed by the wily Captain Cadell who, in May 1868, had sought leases covering the entire Cobourg Peninsula. The scheme collapsed very smartly anyway when the file reached Goyder, who had returned to Adelaide as Surveyor-General. He pointed out the irregularity involved in government

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2 For convenience, it will be referred to here as Darwin.
officers holding leases, particularly since they had been in
government employ when inspecting the area, and secondly,
that Cadell also had little right to the leases, since the
wild cattle, which were supposed to satisfy the stocking
provision, must still belong to the Crown (SAA 790/1871/230).

This incident revealed the potential of the Cobourg
Peninsula. It is easy today to forget that the northern
coast of the peninsula and the area immediately to the east
have been almost continuously occupied by Europeans and other
visitors from the early seventies. Official attitudes towards
the Macassans and European contact with them in this final
period must always be seen in the light of events along this
limited part of the coastline visited by them. A list of the
area's advantages and resources explains why, for more than
30 years, it was the only settled part of the coast away from
Darwin: there were the introduced livestock, cypress pine,
trengang and other marine products; communication with Darwin was
comparatively easy; there were good harbours; the Aborigines,
some of whom still remembered the British settlements, had
long been conditioned to visitors; and until 1907, there was
some employment by the Customs authorities.

As early as 5 August 1872, about a year after his visit
to Port Essington and before the exploitation of the area had
begun, Douglas wrote to the Commissioner of Crown Lands in
Adelaide proposing a scheme for issuing licences to the
Macassans (SAA 790/1872/330). In view of later events, this
scheme has a number of interesting features. Pearlshell was
specifically mentioned and it was in this commodity that
competition with Europeans was expected. A seasonal licence
costing £10 was to be issued, which would entitle a licensed
vessel to fly a distinctive flag. Initially, licences were
to be collected by a small armed vessel, but after the first
season, praus were to be forced to come to Darwin. Douglas
also recommended that provision be made to prevent the
exploitation of Aborigines. It is perhaps significant that
he crossed out the word 'the' and wrote 'our Aborigines.' From the phrasing of the letter, the effective stimulus for the plan was clearly the new settlement's need of a small vessel. Douglas began by referring to previous requests, and this scheme was designed to demonstrate another possible use. In due course, the necessary provisions for issuing licences were inserted in legislation (Northern Territory Lands Act, 28 of 1872, section 79), but no vessel was available to implement the scheme. The whole question then fell back into limbo for another decade.

However, interest continued in the Cobourg Peninsula area. When he was visiting the Roper River in September 1872, Douglas received a proposal offering the government £1 per head for any cattle over a year old, which would be taken from the peninsula to the new goldfields. Douglas, when forwarding the proposal to Adelaide, noted that £1-10-0 or £2 would be a better price and suggested the appointment of a Crown Lands Ranger. The Commissioner of Crown Lands remarked that the Ranger himself should be able to move the stock and relieve the hungry miners (SAA 790/1872/372). Nothing came of this, or a similar application to shoot buffalo on Melville Island (SAA 790/1873/52).

Early in 1874, a party of three Europeans, led by a man named Sinclair, were picked up in Port Essington after a long series of adventures. Their rescuer, Captain Marsh, remarked on the kindness shown to the party by the Aborigines, particularly Jack Davis, who had been well known to the British and later visitors (SAA 1374/A176). He and 'about 100 of his people' were not so helpful a little later when a boatload of shady characters arrived in the area.

Berndt & Berndt (1954:74,217) in a rather garbled account of this episode, imply previous mention of the Macassans. However it is clear from the original letter that this is the first time Douglas has referred to them.
though this may have been the result of an unfortunate misunderstanding (SAA 1374/A305). The first mention of European trepanging in the area is in a letter from Sinclair to the new Government Resident, Scott, on 12 January 1875. He claimed to have spent about £200 'trying fishing for trepang at Port Essington', and requested the reservation of two small blocks, one at Port Essington and the other at Trepang Bay, out of the pastoral leases for the area (SAA 1374/A636). This attempt at trepanging was probably before his rescue by Marsh, since he was now without a boat. In March 1875, he was compelled to ask whether he could hire the government cutter Flying Cloud to reach Port Essington (SAA 1374/A726). By June, the Government Resident could report to the Minister that 'a small fishery establishment for curing Trepang is being carried on at Port Essington and some of the produce has been shipped' (SAA 1374/A900). E.O. Robinson, of later fame (see below), may also have been involved in this (Searcy 1905:47). The same report informed the Minister that Messrs Lewis and Levi had started out with a strong party to take up the pastoral leases on the peninsula, their intention being to bring cattle back to Darwin. This matter had been under negotiation throughout 1874, and the station of the Coburg Cattle Company, established just south of the old British settlement, proved important for the Macassans (see site 3a; Allen 1969: plate I-3; Lewis 1922: 129-56).

In November 1876, Price, the Government Resident, visited Port Essington and reported on the fine station run with Aboriginal labour. A man, Lake, was now trepanging in the area, while further east in Raffles Bay, Dewar and party were shooting buffalo and tanning the hides locally (SAA 790/1877/52; Register 30.4.1892; Searcy 1905:47).

Of these enterprises, only the Coburg Cattle Company lasted any time. As Price pointed out later, when explaining the failure of several early European attempts at trepanging,
'the price obtained for the trepang when cured did not pay.' Even with the assistance of Malays (presumably from Darwin), 'the sample sent from here was not good.' The industry needed 'plenty of beche-le-mere [sic] and very cheap labour and few expenses' (SAA 790/1878/461).

At this early stage when actual contact with the Macassans was minimal and when development of the area was still exploratory, the official attitude of the South Australian government was one of non-interference, partly because of the lack of any effective means of control, but also because they were unwilling to act without a much fuller understanding of the situation. Their attitude was clearly demonstrated in a number of incidents.

The new settlers on the Cobourg Peninsula, particularly Levi and Dewar, had taken it upon themselves to issue some rations to Aborigines and to demonstrate some interest in them. Levi was given a small sum of money for these purposes and it was suggested that he be made a Sub-Protector (SAA 1374/A1798; SAA 790/1877/81). On 11 July 1877, he wrote to the Government Resident mentioning first that the Macassans had destroyed two horses, but adding that an estimated 500 men on a fleet of 30 praus 'have also this season greatly abused the natives and the result has been in some instances death to our natives.' To meet this situation, he suggested some kind of tax. When forwarding the letter to the Minister, the Government Resident pointed out the difficulties in providing for such a tax. He observed that although the stations were unprotected, there was no reason for the Macassans to trouble them. The Minister, and eventually Cabinet itself, agreed on the difficulty of imposing a tax and restricting Macassan activities (SAA 790/1877/435). In his reply to the Government Resident, the Minister suggested that any 'misbehaviour' by Macassans should be reported to the commanders of naval vessels visiting Darwin (SAA 1374/A 2584).
A second demonstration of the same official attitude followed almost immediately, though the origins of this incident are to be found somewhat earlier. In 1875, the government of the Netherlands East Indies introduced new regulations controlling the employment of native labour beyond the archipelago. This inconvenienced a number of pearlers in Western Australia, who were using divers from Kupang, Macassar and elsewhere. To judge from two cases of reported ill treatment of Malay divers by the ubiquitous Captain Cadell and a Mr Broadhurst at Shark Bay in mid 1875, the control measures were justified. ⁴ The new regulations were evidently enforced: in 1876, two captains in Macassar were not permitted either to employ or even re-employ some of the small group of Aborigines there, (estimated to be about 17 and mainly from Port Essington), without paying the due deposit of 200 rupees (c. £16) per man (SAA 1374/A1798).

The Northern Territory Protector of Aborigines, in reporting this information to the Government Resident, pointed out that the Aborigines thereby unemployed were British subjects, accidentally in Macassar, and that Malay vessels had unrestricted access to Australian pearlimg and trepanging grounds.

Cadell was also concerned about the situation. However he solved his labour problems, at least in part, by recruiting Aborigines to work away from their homes. Whether rightly or wrongly, he again provoked charges of ill treatment, this time by removing men from western Arnhem Land to work in Torres Strait (SAA 1374/A2645, A2646, A2884, A2944, A3060

⁴ See Out Letter book of Governor of W.A.: To Secretary of State for Colonies 94(7.8.1875), 100(28.8.1875), 115(15.10. 1875), 158(17.11.1876), 19(23.2.1877); all contained in SAA D 4926 (L). The background to the situation included ill treatment of Aborigines too. See Bach 1962:203-4.
and Register 15.11.1878, 18.11.1878, 17.12. 1878). It was an unfortunate background to a remarkable request he put forward in mid 1878. Relying on his reputation to clear him of any charges, he sent a letter to the Minister of Education, who also controlled the Northern Territory, in which he referred to several conversations he had held with the Premier some months previously, regarding the trepang fishery on the Northern Territory coast. From a good summary account of the industry, he deduced four highly dubious points: that Macassan economy defied European competition; that the Macassans stripped the trepang beds so thoroughly that their regeneration for European trepangers might take ten years; similarly that the improfitability of pearling in Northern Territory waters was a result of Macassan incursions; and lastly that 'the anomaly of a foreign flag borne by a semi-savage race in British waters should be put a stop to.' He stated that he had previously suggested the value of a lease as a means of stopping the industry, and he now applied for a ten year lease to cover the entire coast of the Territory, east of where other European trepangers were working on the Cobourg Peninsula. In return for a minimal rent, he would not demand any form of government protection in the likely event of trouble. In fact, in consideration of his position with the government, perhaps he might have the lease at quit rent 'as let bloated Chinamen at Macassar have it for nothing.' Furthermore, he continued, cessation of Macassan visits would prevent the debauching of the Aborigines, and as he would be shortly in Macassar, he would, if empowered by the government, attempt to claim 'any stray N.T. natives for the purpose of returning them.'

It is highly unlikely that Cadell could either have prevented the Macassans coming or made any profit whatever the lack of competition, but the scheme is an intriguing example of the distortions which prejudice and self-interest produce.
The Minister, and Cabinet, were unimpressed. 'I do not recommend the acquiescence of the Govt. in Captain Cadell's proposal. It would I think lead to serious embarrassment, if without much fuller enquiry, we were to empower the Captn. to prevent a trade which he himself says has obtained for centuries—if the matter is considered of sufficient importance a special Commissioner should be sent to report on the whole subject. In the mean time I will instruct [the] Govt. Resident in his despatches to give me all the information he can on the subject' (SAA 790/1878/351). Despite Cadell's reputation, or perhaps because of it, the government was not going to be drawn.

Although no commissioner was sent, further information was received. In August 1878, the Government Resident wrote confirming the disappointing results achieved by the few pearling vessels that had so far worked in Northern Territory waters; he also mentioned the Macassan trepang industry and described the failure of European attempts to date, though 'a Mr Robinson is now at Croker Island and has stated his intention of trying trepang curing again'; Cadell was said to visit the coast only to get natives for pearling in Torres Strait; and a few Chinese had begun to cure fish (SAA 790/1878/461).

In November, Morgan, the manager for the Coburg Cattle Company at Port Essington, reported that some sixty or seventy praus came, that the Macassans took profitable cargoes of timber as well as trepang, and that they debauched the Aborigines (SAA 1374/A3199). At least he was mistaken in his figures, since Cadell wrote again a month later, this time from Macassar itself, stating that the fleet for that year amounted to 23 praus. However, his chief concern was once more the 200 rupee deposit on pearling divers; the trepang industry was secondary. Even the 'numerous Aboriginal Australians' were not permitted to join 'the vessels of their fellow subjects' (SAA 790/1879/83). This concern with the deposit is yet more apparent in the supporting letter from
four other pearlers who were similarly placed. 'We cannot help regarding the Policy of the Australian Government that sacrifices the rights of Free born Englishmen to the compulsory labour of the Foreigner, with the strongest feelings of contempt and disgust and gladly avail ourselves of the present opportunity of entering our Protest against the continuance of the unjust and condemnable apathy shown by our Colonial Government in this matter' (SAA 790/1879/84).

Even such words as these did not move the government, and the matter lapsed, probably largely because, in the following year, Cadell, who had clearly been the chief instigator, was murdered by his native crew in the Arafura Sea.

The final incident before some control was imposed, shows how the government was inevitably drawn into some regulation of the industry. It was a function of the current expansion of settlement and increasing contact between Macassans and Europeans.

On 1 January 1880, the Government Resident informed Adelaide that Robinson, whom he had mentioned two years before being at Croker Island, had returned from there with the news that Aborigines had murdered his mate, Wingfield (SAA 790/1880/1). A police party was despatched with as much speed as the sorely misnamed government cutter Flying Cloud could manage, but by the end of the month the Government Resident could only report that the murderers had probably joined the Macassans and any further action would have to await their departure (SAA 790/1880/70). On 16 June, Foelsche, the Inspector of Police, put in two reports; the first identified Wingfield's murderer as Wandi Wandi and suggested that the only way to capture him was to offer a reward of £50 to the Macassans to bring him to Port Essington or Port Darwin. The second report was more general. Foelsche
suggested, and from other accounts he seems to be at least partially correct, 'that the original cause of the murder is traceable to supplying the natives with intoxicating liquor for which they do any kind of work, and do anything to obtain it - and for the craving after it the Malays ... are to blame.' He continued, 'I think it would be advisable to make the Captains of these proas obtain licences from here [Darwin] and pay a fee of, say, £10 each yearly, which would be a moderate charge.' The Government Resident, in forwarding these reports, agreed with the suggestions, but in familiar terms, pointed out the need for a steam vessel in place of the Flying Cloud, if there was to be any hope of catching a prau under sail (SAA 790/1880/371).

Wandi Wandi was eventually captured without the help of the Macassans and once again, the matter lapsed.

The first money extracted from the Macassans by the South Australian government was not for licences, but in payment of duties, and indeed this was always a more important source of revenue than licence fees. In 1880 after various changes over the previous decade, a modified form of the South Australian tariff was re-imposed on the Northern Territory (Bauer 1964:142). In late 1881, Little, the Sub-Collector of Customs in Darwin, wrote to the Government Resident saying that Robinson, now manager for the Coburg Cattle Company at Port Essington, had reported that the Macassans, who would soon be arriving, 'bring considerable quantities of rice, tobacco, spirits, & other dutiable articles.' Little suggested that Robinson be appointed a Customs officer on £20 a year to collect the duties. It would also be necessary to appoint Captain Marsh of the Flying Cloud 'or any other officer ... at any time sent to control these fisheries' (SAA 1374/A5167). Robinson was duly appointed Acting Landing Waiter (SAA 790/1881/721; SAA 1374/A5175).
Edward Oswin Robinson was a key figure in the events of the next two decades. He had first come to the Territory in about 1874 (SAPP 1884/53B:8; SAA 790/1892/130; Register 30.4.1892). For the next three or four years, his activities are rather obscure as there was at least one other Robinson in the area, but in general terms he was 'knocking about the coast, ... pearling, trepanging, and buffalo shooting' (Searcy 1905:47; 1907:21). It is apparent however that he was no ruffianly beachcomber. Much later in life he was described as 'a medium sized, wiry, grey man, with a keen eye, and a quiet manner, he was found to be courtesy itself at a pleasant interview with him at the Austral Club' (Register 25.5.1897). There is a portrait in Searcy (1905:opp.7). His reports show that he was well educated and certainly he excelled in the gentlemanly art of billiards (Searcy 1907:20). Unlike many of his fellows, he knew how to make money and how to put it to good use. In 1889 he recuperated from an illness by visiting Japan (SAA 790/1889/47), and in the nineties he used some of his profits from buffalo shooting to visit England. He eventually retired to Melbourne in some comfort (Register 30.4.1892, 20.5.1897, 25.5.1897, 1.6.1897; Conigrave 1936:237-8).

As described above, in 1878 he established himself on Croker Island. When Wingfield was murdered, Robinson was left with 'certain liabilities', and to work them off he became manager of the cattle station in Port Essington. At that time, at least, he was not always the perfect clubman as 'his full dress ... consisted generally of a strap and revolver' (Searcy 1907:20). Not unnaturally perhaps, he was wary of Aborigines, though his attitude of stern justice does seem to have inspired respect, particularly among his immediate assistants. He can hardly be expected to have avoided the contemporary conviction of European superiority, but the worst that can be said of his interest, perhaps
employed, which would add materially to the revenue.' The only expense would be an annual trip by the Flying Cloud to issue licences; alternatively, they could be issued at Port Essington.

The Government Resident, when forwarding these reports to the Minister, reverted to a familiar theme; there would be no difficulty collecting licence fees when the Territory had a steamer. He also thought Robinson's suggested licence fee excessive and proposed 10/- per ton for the first twenty tons and 5/- per ton thereafter. The Minister, Parsons, who led rather than followed the period's expansive optimism, ignored the lack of a suitable vessel, and recommended that Cabinet approve the Government Resident's proposal. There had been a subtle move from Robinson's tentative ideas about the advisability of imposing licence fees to Parsons' assumption that the only question was the size of the fee. On 30 June 1882, Cabinet approved the scale of fees suggested by the Government Resident and the regulations were framed under the act of 1872. By the end of September, 50 copies of the relevant Order-in-Council and 500 licence forms had been despatched to Darwin (Robinson's reports and subsequent minutes in SAA 790/1882/346; Order-in-Council in S.A. Government Gazette 31 August 1882, p. 2739).

Meanwhile, Police Inspector Foelsche submitted another report, including a long extract from a letter by Robinson giving more details on the untaxed profits of the Macassans, the condition of the Aborigines and the need to protect European trepangers. A licence fee of 20/- per ton was again suggested, but by the time the letter reached Adelaide, the relevant decisions had been taken (SAA 790/1882/552).

At the end of October 1882, the Government Resident acknowledged receipt of the regulations and commented that as soon as the government steamer arrived there would be no trouble issuing the licences. As, according to the regulations, a Customs officer was necessary for this, he
could also collect the various duties (SAA 790/1882/736). The reply from the Minister was a telegram on 8 December saying that the steamer would not arrive until the next year, and that, if possible, some action should be taken during the present season (SAA 1374/A5815).

It is a tribute to the various government officers in the Territory that despite their long-standing complaints about the government cutter Flying Cloud, a trip was organized in her. The moving spirit was probably the new Sub-Collector of Customs, Alfred Searcy, who had been transferred from Port Adelaide in the middle of 1882 as the growing importance of Port Darwin and the imposition of the full South Australian tariff was thought to merit a more experienced officer (SAA 790/1882/316; Searcy 1907:8). As well as being experienced, the twenty-eight year old Sub-Collector possessed dash and enthusiasm, which extended to writing vivid and detailed reports. For a few years after leaving school, Searcy had worked as a journalist and it was at the instigation of a newspaper editor that he later adapted his reports, in some cases with only minor alterations, for publication. Because of the verve of his writing, there is some danger of exaggerating the rôle played by Searcy. However it was apparently on his initiative that the regulations relating to the Macassans were strictly enforced, and this accords well with the picture of him in other fields as the active, upright and imperialist public servant. What better adventure could there be than patrolling the remotest bounds of the Empire, to regulate the industry of the alien, and to enforce impartially the fees and tariffs of the colony for the benefit of the Territorial revenue?

Searcy's companions on this trip in the Flying Cloud were the commander, Captain Marsh, the crew of ten Malay seamen who had been sent from Surabaja in 1880, and
Inspector Poelsche who had come 'to get acquainted with the natives east from Port Essington and the business, trade and other relationships that exist between them and the Malays' (SAA 1374/A5855). They left Darwin on 19 March 1883 and went first to Port Essington where they collected Robinson. Not only was he useful in gaining information from Aborigines, but he also knew enough Malay (perhaps even Macassarese) to act as a check on the regular interpreter, who was the serang or boatswain of the Malay crew.

No sooner had they cleared the entrance to Port Essington than a single prau appeared from the east, moving along the coast on its way home. When the Flying Cloud hoisted the Customs flag and pendant, the prau hove to and the master was called on board, bringing his ship's papers. This first interview shows the effect that each side was trying to make on the other. Searcy arrayed himself in his Customs uniform with gold braid and brass buttons, though Bangkasi, the master of the prau, appeared even more resplendent. As far as business went, Bangkasi apparently made an offer of some pearls to Robinson, since he assumed that the prau was in a situation where help might be needed. However Searcy was only concerned to warn the praus of what was impending. His message was exact and tough. 'Tho' the serang I informed Ban Kassi of the regulations made by the Govt. of South Australia with regard to trepang fishing. I also told him that all prows must first call at Pt. Darwin or Pt. Essington to obtain a license before trepanging on the coast. That a correct list of all stores on board must be produced to the Officer of Customs and duty paid before a license would be granted. That if any stores be found on board and not on the list the same would be forfeited. That if a prow was found trading upon the coast and duty not paid on goods she would be forfeited and all cargo on board. Next year that a steamer would visit the coast and that any prows found acting contrary to the
regulations would be forfeited' (SAA 790/1883/319; Searcy 1907:22-3). Searcy then endorsed the prau's papers, and the two vessels went their respective ways.

The next evening four more praus were discovered in Bowen Strait and given the same message. Two days later, another four praus arrived and were duly warned. After waiting several days in Mountnorris Bay, the Flying Cloud returned to Port Essington, where a further three praus were found. The party finally got back to Darwin on 8 April.

Searcy's report on the trip concludes with several general remarks. He confirmed the general size of the industry and despite some trouble with the masters concealing quantities of spirits, he obtained figures roughly comparable with those of succeeding years. It is notable that no attempt seems to have been made in this season to collect any duties, despite Robinson's efforts in 1882.⁵

On balance, Searcy pronounced himself in favour of the scheme for controlling the industry. Apart from producing some revenue, it offered white men 'a chance to compete which ... would bring trade direct to Pt. Darwin.' Competition would be further promoted by protecting Aborigines, even to the extent of driving the Macassans off altogether, so that Europeans would find labour easier to get and to hold. A few practical details needed attention, such as sending copies of the regulations and tariffs to Macassar, and including pearls and pearlshell in the regulations. More importantly, there was no provision in the regulations for the punishment of offenders. Finally, Searcy reiterated the need for a steamer (SAA 790/1883/319; for Marsh's report see SAA 1374/A6008).

⁵ In the Statistical Register for 1883 there is an unexplained item of import, 1930 lb. rice worth £15 from Macassar.
The day after sending in this report, Searcy applied for a Customs uniform for Robinson, and even the Collector of Customs approved it as 'a good thing in intercourse with Malays' (SAA 790/1883/323; SAA 1374/A6173). Later in the year, Robinson was also issued with a revolver (SAA 790/1883/667).

This warning trip was not without effect. In October, the Minister in Adelaide received a request from the Netherlands Consul for information about the regulations. The Consul had been informed that duty had to be paid on goods used as rations as well as licence fees, and reported that the Macassans 'complain about the said duties being imposed upon a trade that was in existence long before the settlement of the Australian Colonies' (SAA 790/1883/632). The reply by the Minister's secretary set out the 1882 regulations and confirmed that normal duties had to be paid on imports. Furthermore, 'the Minister desires me to say that his attention has been directed to the fact that the Malay fishermen greatly injure the aborigines by supplying them with drink' (SAA 793/1883/409 p. 122). In fact the Minister's minute had been even stronger on this last point, saying that 'the necessity for action had arisen' because of it.

There was an immediate reply from the Consul pointing out that 'the Trepang fishermen consider it a hardship to have to visit Port Darwin or Port Essington for the purpose of procuring the necessary licenses ... it is stated by them that once put into Port Essington with its western entrance it is most difficult to get out to sea again the more so as the Trepang fishery lies to the Eastward.' To get over this, he suggested that the South Australian government might be able to appoint an agent in Macassar. Other suggestions from the fishermen themselves were that duties should be levied only on goods for trade or barter, not on rations, and that
they should be given the tariff rates in order to assess the profitability of fishing the Territory's coast. When this letter reached Cabinet, it was decided that 'arrangements should be made to issue licences on the spot.' The size of the fee certainly did not warrant an agent in Macassar (SAA 790/1883/698).

The inadequate reply to the Dutch representatives provoked another letter and on 26 November, the Acting Consul in Adelaide apparently interviewed the Minister, Parsons, in person. He pointed out first that the trepangers objected not to the amount of the licence, but to the difficulty of procuring one. On this matter, Parsons replied that Searcy had gone to Port Essington to arrange matters. (In fact Searcy did not leave until 30 November.) The matter of the duties was more difficult. Parsons gave the Acting Consul to understand that the rations were not dutiable (SAA 793/1883/433 p. 148; SAA 790/1883/728; SAA 793/1883/446 p. 163). However when Searcy met the praus, he took no notice of the official Dutch manifests which carefully divided the cargoes between export and provisions for the crew. He says that he had specifically explained the previous year that duty had to be paid on both categories, and when returning the papers to the masters, he gave them a copy of the regulations endorsed with the statement that 'duties must be paid on all stores as well as cargo' (SAA 790/1884/177).

Although there is no documentary evidence, it seems that when Parsons received Searcy's report in the following February, he realized that there was no good reason for excepting rations consumed in territorial waters from the regular tariff and that his previous decision had been in error. The report arrived on Friday, 15 February 1884; on Monday Parsons wrote his first minute on it; on Wednesday, while the Treasurer had the report and before it went to the Collector of Customs, the Acting Consul was advised of
the change (SAA 790/1883/728. Minute by Parsons on 26/2/1884. See also dates on minutes to SAA 790/1884/177).
Certainly the change had been made before the Collector of Customs returned the report. In due course, the Acting Government Resident was informed of the change (SAA 793/1884/197 p. 21).

There was no reply that the Acting Consul could make to the change, particularly as he had in the previous December informed Parsons that the government of the Netherlands Indies had been officially informed of the South Australian complaints about the Macassans supplying the Aborigines with alcohol (SAA 790/1883/797).

This complicated correspondence is interesting in that it shows that the Macassans, or at least their entrepreneurs, had access to official channels of complaint and were fully aware of the administration behind the collection of the duties and licence fees. It is a good indication of the sophistication of the industry. Furthermore, the Macassan representations did have some effect. Although the South Australians could not conceive that their impositions were anything but justified, they did agree to issue licences on the spot, though this was also a practical necessity. On the question of the duties, it is ironic that communications broke down not between the Macassans and the Minister, but between the Minister and Searcy.

As there was still no steamer available, Searcy had set out again in the Flying Cloud at the end of November 1833 to meet the praus and instruct Robinson in his duties (SAA 1374/A6429, A6444; SAA 790/1883/694). His first destination was Robinson's camp in Port Essington. It was not until 23 December that an Aborigine arrived with the manifests of two praus waiting in Bowen Strait. The Flying Cloud took two and a half days to move around, by which time another prau had arrived.
Searcy's first question to the masters was why they had not called at Port Essington. They answered that they had been blown past, which may or may not have been unavoidable. However Searcy himself now had enough experience to perceive the advantages of Bowen Strait as a reporting station.

The issue of licences, at the rate laid down in the 1882 regulations, appears to have been straightforward, but the Customs duties proved troublesome. Our understanding of events is confused by the fact that Searcy, on his return to Darwin, compiled a summary of the arrangements in which the figures are substantially in excess of those on other Customs forms. These discrepancies cannot be reconciled, but the main issues are clear enough. Firstly Searcy ignored the official Dutch manifests brought by the masters, and allowed no distinction between stores and trading supplies. He made his own estimates of quantities and calculated duty accordingly. Secondly the masters, who at first declared that they had only been given 100 rupees each (c. £8), eventually found about £20 each in various currencies, though even this may not have been all that was on board (see below).

There can be little doubt that the masters had worked out a joint line beforehand and feigned poverty in the hope of charity. Undaunted, Searcy took out part of the balance owing in rice and spirits. Yet even he could not remove more than a certain quantity of supplies, and when it was discovered that one prau had less than first thought, he allowed it some remission. This left a small balance to be paid, but this seems never to have been collected. The masters did, therefore, win a small concession, though it can hardly have appeared in this light to them.

The immediate result of this tough policy was that the praus tried to bolt before handing over the supplies, but
this was prevented. A more lasting result was that the general level of imposition and a policy of firmness had been established. For good measure, the masters were each presented with a copy of the regulations bearing several important endorsements, including the information that in future a Customs officer would meet the praus in Bowen Strait and that all duties must be paid in cash current in South Australia (effectively in gold English sovereigns). As in the previous year, verbal communication on these issues seems to have been fairly successful through the serang of the *Flying Cloud*, who came from Macassar and actually had a brother on one of the three praus.

The *Flying Cloud* waited until 13 January before returning to Darwin. Instructions were left with Robinson at Port Essington in case any of the further praus which were expected should arrive there. In fact, the final total for the season was 8 praus, of which one was wrecked. This small total may reflect some discouragement. (The main file on this trip is SAA 790/1884/177; see also SAA 1374/A6591, A6592, A6601; Searcy 1907; 44-75.)

It was only a few months before two items of news prompted another trip to the Arnhem Land coast. In early March, Captain Marsh reported that on his regular visit to the Chinese timbermen cutting cypress pine behind Mountnorris Bay, he had found two murdered by Aborigines and the remaining fourteen insistent on leaving (SAA 1374/A6686). A little later, Robinson reported that he was having trouble with Aborigines who missed their usual supplies from the Macassans, and that this had occasioned the murders (SAA 1374/A6878). This scarcity had been caused partly by the small number of praus coming, and partly by the fact, also reported by Marsh, that some had arrived further east than usual, thus avoiding their payments. The government chartered the steamer *Fleetwing* to investigate the murders and catch the unlicensed praus (SAA 790/1884/267).
The party, with Searcy in charge, left Darwin on 11 March 1884 and picked up Robinson two days later, together with some Aboriginal guides who had been down the coast with the Macassans. It was soon obvious that there was no hope of apprehending the murderers, but on 14 March off South Goulburn Island, two more praus were discovered. Since they had sent word to Robinson that they had been blown past Port Essington, Searcy, after extracting the usual licence fees and duties, partly taken out in rice again, showed some mercy by imposing a fine of only £10 on each prau.

Although this was as far as he had originally intended to go, Searcy now proceeded eastwards. He must have realized that this would mean an overdue return, but the party was probably enjoying the adventure and Searcy was determined to catch all offending praus. The next was not found until Mallison Island, but that one was quite unexpected.

The master, Bapa Palu, who had come down for the two previous years in charge of another prau, had been specifically informed of the regulations, and this time, unknown to the other masters, had sneaked down straight to eastern Arnhem Land. Searcy regarded it a clear case of evasion. He considered at first towing the prau back to Darwin, but finally imposed a £50 fine over and above the other impositions. As the master possessed only about £4 cash, most of this had to be taken out in trepang and tortoise-shell. This particular master had a reputation for ill treating Aborigines, and as some of the others considered his actions to have been the cause of government interference in the first place, the punishment caused no general grief, except to the crew of the prau in question. After supplying some materials to stop a leak in the prau, Searcy sailed off eastwards again.
Two days later, two praus were discovered in Melville Bay, but one of these had been licensed in December and the other, which had been separated during a squall from those visited at South Goulburn Island, was again fined only £10. Searcy was somewhat chagrined to find that the extra sovereigns for the fine were borrowed from the other captain, who had solemnly declared in December that he had not enough cash to pay his own fine. Searcy got his revenge however by selling the offending master some rice at a vastly inflated price.

Even now, although already a week overdue, Searcy considered pressing on to Port Bradshaw, but the chance of discovering more praus seemed slight and the party returned to Darwin - to find a search party being organized. The results of the expedition were well summarized by Searcy in his report. 'I believe that this visit in conjunction with the fines inflicted, will prove conclusively to them that the Government are in earnest in this matter, and will have the desired effect' (SAA 790/1884/445; see also Searcy 1907: 76-97; SAPP 1884/53B:8).

Around 1884, it did indeed appear that the government were in earnest about the control of the industry. It was a period of optimism for northern development, and it is not surprising that old dreams were revived. On 21 February 1884, R.D. Ross, the Speaker of the South Australian House of Assembly, when discussing the Northern Territory Excesses, developed the theme of Port Darwin as a trading emporium for eastern Indonesia (S.A. Parl. Debates 1883-4:2114; Register 21.2.1884). In his report for the last quarter of the same year, Parsons, now Government Resident, took up the subject again and connected it directly with the trepang industry. The reader is left wondering to what extent this trade was to be in conjunction with the Macassans and to what extent as European competition (SAPP 1885/53:9; see also SAPP 1888/53:16).
Meanwhile more practical matters were also in hand. On 27 February 1884, the Governor-in-Council approved a new set of regulations relating to the issue of licences, which incorporated Searcy's suggestions of the previous year (see above). The annual licences now covered fishing for 'pearls, pearl-shell, trepang, and other shells or shellfish' and detailed provisions for penalties and other minor matters were spelled out. It was a much more thorough piece of work, and designed to cover European vessels engaged in these activities as well as Macassan. The most important change was an increase in the licence fee which was now calculated at £5 for every vessel under two tons, and 10/- for every extra ton up to fifty tons. For an average sized prau of, say, 18 tons this meant an increase from £9 to £13. No mention is made of the reasons for this increase. These new regulations reached Darwin a few months later and were in force until 1891 (SAA 790/1884/381; SAA 1374/A6711).

The second practical matter arranged at this time was Robinson's move to Bowen Strait. Searcy had again recommended this in his report in April, but nothing was done for some months. It would appear that in the meantime Robinson's position as manager of the cattle station at Port Essington had come to an end, and that the £100 per annum, which had been suggested as his new salary, was needed to make it possible for him to return to the area. Parsons, the Government Resident, in his usual style, went ahead and granted the increase in salary, which in view of the revenue expected, and in fact collected, was not unreasonable, but Baker, the new Minister in Adelaide, was less than enthusiastic. A spate of telegrams ensued and a very apologetic letter of explanation from Parsons, but the matter was not finally cleared up until August 1885, and that after a change of Minister. Meanwhile Robinson had been paid from 1 July 1884 (SAA 790/1884/917, 1160; SAA 790/1885/4; SAA 793/1885/5 p. 226).
The last matter arranged in readiness for the next season was the implementation of another proposal by Searcy in his April report, that a letter be written by Macassar to obtain a list of the praus leaving for the Northern Territory coast. The eventual reply did not reach Searcy in Darwin until the end of March 1885, but it did confirm the effectiveness of the system as by that time, all praus had been accounted for (SAA 1374/7826; SAPP 1885/54:13).

From the point of view of the South Australian government, the 1884-5 season was a complete success, and set the general pattern for future years. The first prau anchored off Robinson's new camp in Bowen Strait on 20 December, and over the next fortnight a further twelve arrived, making a total of thirteen for the year. From these, the licence fees amounted to £155 and the duty to £442, most of which was willingly paid in gold sovereigns (SAA 790/1885/423). The Government Resident in a long section on the Macassans in his official report, noted that this total had already exceeded Searcy's estimated revenue of £500. Optimistic of yet greater returns, he suggested that 'that race will prove much more honest than the rest if it should be found that every proa has reported and paid duties' (SAPP 1885/53:8).

The authorities were given the chance to confirm that no more than thirteen praus had come. Early in January 1885, the new government steamer, the Palmerston, which had at last arrived in the north, was making a trip to the Roper and McArthur Rivers. Searcy again went on the voyage, partly on other Customs business and partly to check on the praus. As the letter from Macassar had not yet arrived there was still considerable doubt whether all had reported (SAA 790/1885/13, 204). In the event, eight out of the thirteen were interviewed and no news heard of any but the other five. (For reports on this voyage see SAA 790/1885/423; SAPP 1885/55; Searcy 1907:98-135.)
Naturally the profit made by the government from the Macassans was a welcome addition to Territorial revenue, but there was yet another benefit to be extracted. Throughout the period of South Australia's control of the Territory, there were always voices in Adelaide willing to attack the whole northern involvement as extravagant and unprofitable. On the other hand, the optimists never wearied of praising the possibilities for development, if only encouraged by a little government expenditure. The complaints of the pessimists seem to have been particularly prevalent around 1885, so that Searcy, an optimist, was eager to help the balance of the Territory's overall budget by adding an apparently profitable enterprise. Consequently he instructed Robinson to obtain an estimate of the value of the goods removed by the Macassans. As he explained when presenting the figure of £5240 for trepang and tortoise-shell exported to Macassar in 1885 (against total imports for the season of only £653) 'I ... think it only just that we should have the credit of the export, as the imports by the prows ... are taken into account and duties collected on them' (SAPP 1886/53:19).

The general trend of the industry over the following two decades can be seen in the figures set out in table 13.1. Despite some gaps in the records and reservations about certain figures, the overall picture is one of decline and increasing difficulty. This can be demonstrated in detail by considering each of the columns.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Total number of praus on S.T. coast</th>
<th>Number of licences issued to Macassans</th>
<th>Revenue from licences issued to Macassans</th>
<th>Revenue from duties paid by Macassans</th>
<th>Total Revenue from Macassans</th>
<th>Topping exported by Macassans</th>
<th>Price of topping exported by Macassans</th>
<th>Shillings per picul</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1882-3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>[3]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883-4</td>
<td>7(1)</td>
<td>[6]</td>
<td>198.18.3stä¹</td>
<td>296[a]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884-5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>47/6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885-6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>486.0.11d</td>
<td>669.0.11d</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>53/5d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886-7</td>
<td>13(3)</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>41/6d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887-8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>662</td>
<td>47/6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888-9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>[8]</td>
<td>115.16.6</td>
<td>473.3.6</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>52/9d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889-90</td>
<td>10(1)</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>127.10.0</td>
<td>393.10.0</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>53/5d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890-1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>[7]</td>
<td>112.9</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>559</td>
<td>52/9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-2</td>
<td>8(2)</td>
<td>375.6</td>
<td>370.15.0</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>40/2d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892-3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>40/2d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893-4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>50/5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894-5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39/7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895-6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42/0d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896-7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>[5]</td>
<td>240.7</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>47/6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897-8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20(5)</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>45/6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898-9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>[5]</td>
<td>40(8)</td>
<td>321.11.d</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>35/7d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899-00</td>
<td>5(1)</td>
<td>[5]</td>
<td>250.7.8.</td>
<td>293.7.8.</td>
<td>105]</td>
<td>40/4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901-2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>89.25</td>
<td>59/10d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902-3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>328.5.7</td>
<td>370.5.7</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>40/6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903-4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>238.13.4</td>
<td>270.13.4</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>50/4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904-5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>96.16.4</td>
<td>110.16.4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>49/5d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905-6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>228.3.4</td>
<td>252.3.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906-7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907-8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908-9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes

1. For the sources, see appendix 7. Some of this information is also represented graphically in table 13.6.

2. Figures in round brackets give the numbers of extra praus which left Macassar, but were wrecked or listed as missing. Praus working on the Kimberley coast are not included.

3. Perhaps not a complete total.

4. For 6 praus only, the figures for columns 3, 4 and 5 are 184 men, £80.10.0 and £299.13.6.

5. An estimate of 25 men per prau is given for these years in SAA 1374/13848.

6. Three praus paid a total of £21.

7. According to SAA 790/1892/130, the difference between these two figures should be £2 greater.

8. According to the method described in appendix 7, this should be £36. The total revenue figure may be wrong.

9. The calculated duty sometimes differs slightly from that actually paid. Where the figure is available, that actually paid has been given.

10. Also £80 in fines, half of which went to the Customs officers concerned.

11. Also £20 in fines, and various goods seized.

12. This figure given in SAA 1374/10241 slightly exceeds the sum of columns 4 and 5.

13. Later revised to at least 130 tons.

14. The figures given for total trepang production (i.e. Macassan and local) in SAA 1374/13848 for these years varies from those in the Statistical Registers.

* See explanation of how these figures were calculated in appendix 7. The figure of 4 praus in 1892-3 seems very low compared to the figures for that year in columns 5, 6 and 7 and must be regarded as highly dubious.
Except for those seasons marked with an asterisk, the figures for the number of praus coming to Arnhem Land can be accepted with some confidence, since considerable efforts were made to contact all praus, and it is difficult to see how many evasions can have occurred once the system was operating. Furthermore, in later years the number of prau was confirmed during the season by a letter from the Dutch authorities in Macassar. Although the actual lists sent from Macassar were forwarded to Bowen Strait and have thus not survived, there does not appear to have been a single unexplained discrepancy in the final tally for any year in which a list was sent. As mentioned above, the first letter was sent in 1885, but no further reference to the practice is made until January 1889 when Robinson suggested that another list be obtained (SAPP 1889/28:22). This suggestion seems to have arisen out of the apparent fall in numbers from eleven to six praus. Robinson had heard that some praus had gone west of Darwin and this was to be a way of checking on the situation (SAPP 1889/28:22). Although Robinson fell ill and went off to Japan to recuperate, Searcy set out on a search down to the mouth of the Victoria River, but without success. A similar disappointment was met with by Stretton, who was ordered to search in the Pellew Group (SAA 1374/462). In commenting on Searcy's report, the Government Resident said that he proposed writing to the authorities in Macassar to clear up the matter for the next year (SAA 790/1889/47,147; Searcy 1907:188-199). However, perhaps because three late arrivals appeared at Bowen Strait in April, nothing further was done. In August 1897 Stretton, who had replaced Searcy in the previous year, dug out the letter of 1885 and sent it to Dashwood, then Government Resident, asking that another request be made for an annual list (SAA 1374/7826). This was done and a reply received for the 1897-8 season, though it did not arrive in Darwin until the end of March (SAA 1374/8153). Thereafter the Dutch appear to have kept up
the annual dispatch of letter and list, referring back to the request of 1897. As is clear from the situation in 1900, when a missing prau was accounted for independently of the normal collection, the list only acted as a check after the event (SAA 1374/9505, 9847). Letters for the following seasons are preserved, the last two saying that no praus had left for Marege': 1901-2, 1903-4, 1904-5, 1907-8 and 1908-9 (SAA 1374/11225, 12628, 13830, 17153 and 18001).

On the information available it is not possible to account in detail for the praus that ceased coming to the Northern Territory coast, or perhaps, since the span of a man's career is longer than the life of a prau, it is more meaningful to look for the alternative employment of the individual masters. Certainly as appendix 8 shows, a master such as Using, despite his changes of command, came more consistently that any prau he captained. Nevertheless some general points can be made about the praus that did not come.

The most obvious alternative was to go to the Kimberley coast and thus avoid the financial impositions of South Australia. In the 1883-4 season after the first large scale collection, three praus were said to have gone to the northwest coast (SAA 790/1884/177). Robinson mentions that in 1887-8 some had had a very successful season there and that at least six had gone there in the following year (SAPP 1889/28:22). There appears to have been some difficulty with this alternative however, as three of the six eventually reported at Bowen Strait in April 1889, and in January 1890 two out of three praus which had set out south sou'east from Roti had lost their way and ended up with Robinson (SAPP 1890/28:12,18).

Moreover the financial difficulties of the industry in this period would have made it difficult to replace those praus which had outlived their usefulness or been lost by
misadventure (see chapter 2). The following table, which is probably incomplete, shows the extent of this last factor.

Table 13.2

Praus wrecked or missing on the voyage to the Northern Territory coast: 1881 - 1907

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Praus wrecked</th>
<th>Praus missing, perhaps lost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1881-2</td>
<td>1 (Melville I.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883-4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886-7</td>
<td>2 (Melville I.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889-90</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894-5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898-9</td>
<td>1 (?)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899-1900</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: see appendix 7.

These losses were all the more significant for the owners and outfitters as the fleet shrank in size. In 1894-5 all four praus, two of which were wrecked, had a single owner (SAA 790/1895/175). For this situation, the wreck of a prau must have been a serious capital loss, though as late as 1900 replacement was possible (SAA 1374/9505).

Only one prau continued to come throughout the period for which we have adequate records. The Mannongkoki (prau L) appears in the first full list in 1882-3 and it is almost certainly the same prau of that name which came in 1905-6. Only one other prau from the eighties, the Erang Poleang (prau C), was still coming at the turn of the century.
The clearest expression of the growing difficulty in making an economic success of a voyage is seen in the increasing size of crews and the decreasing amount of rice for each man. The larger crews were presumably thought to be more efficient, though as the figures given below indicate, the actual return per prau does not seem to have grown. The return for each individual was consequently reduced. Column 3 in table 13.1 gives the available total numbers of men. As these are obtained from the separate crew totals, they are probably fairly reliable. In one case where an actual crew list is preserved, it agrees exactly with the figure given elsewhere (SAA 790/1903/438). When these totals are divided by the number of praus, the increasing size of crews is apparent (table 13.3).
Table 13.3

Average crew size and quantity of rice per prau

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Total crew</th>
<th>Rice (lbs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1883-4</td>
<td>28.3 (for 3 praus)</td>
<td>8085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884-5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885-6</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>9036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886-7</td>
<td>30 (for 2 praus)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887-8</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888-9</td>
<td>30.7 (for 6 praus)</td>
<td>9086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889-90</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>7428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890-1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892-3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>18585*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893-4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894-5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895-6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896-7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897-8</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>9165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898-9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899-1900</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901-2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902-3</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>9887</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This figure is based on the very dubious estimate of 4 praus for this year, and should be disregarded. See notes to table 13.1.

Sources: see appendix 7.
The third column in table 13.3 is calculated by dividing the amount of rice imported from Macassar by the number of praus. The precise accuracy of the rice import figure is questionable, though in the years such as 1898, when it is possible to check this against the total of the individual prau assessments at Bowen Strait, the difference is comparatively small. However on the available figures, the amount of rice does not increase at the same rate as the size of the crew. Even the slight rise in the quantity of rice is open to some suspicion. Stretton notes in 1900 that the quantities allowed for the journey back (which were not subject to duty and therefore not recorded as imports), had been reduced, and that as the captains made no complaint 'it is fair to presume that they had sufficient to take them back' (SAA 1374/9505).

This conclusion from the overall figures is supported by particular examples. The actual manifests of prau M in 1883-4 and of prau L in 1902-3 invite comparison. Both vessels were of about the same size and class.
Table 13.4
Comparison of the cargoes of 2 praus, according to their manifests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Prau M</th>
<th>Prau L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Season</td>
<td>1883-4</td>
<td>1902-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonnage as given</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18-75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crew</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisions for crew</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>67 piculs</td>
<td>70 piculs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco</td>
<td>1 picul</td>
<td>0.75 piculs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrack</td>
<td>2 cases</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>10 piculs</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrack</td>
<td>5 cases</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piculs of rice per man</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Provisions only</td>
<td>1.91 piculs</td>
<td>1.37 piculs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Total</td>
<td>2.20 piculs</td>
<td>1.37 piculs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Provisions less</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 piculs</td>
<td>1.46 piculs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: see appendix 7.

Unfortunately it is not possible to confirm these figures by reference to the amounts of duty paid. For prau M, the figures are very confused (see above). Yet it should be noted that the master was able to provide 16 piculs of rice and 2 cases of arrack as part payment, and this despite the fact that he had begun with a smaller amount of rice per man than the other two praus interviewed on the same occasion. In the case of prau L, the duty actually paid exceeds by nearly 20 per cent what should have been paid at current rates for the goods on the manifest.
However, even allowing for all these uncertainties, the figure of 1.91 piculs of rice per man for the prau in 1883-4 is notably greater than the later figure of 1.37. Even if we assume that all the 16 piculs used to pay duties in 1883-4 were taken from the crew's provisions, and not from the rice brought for trading with Aborigines, the amount per man is still 1.46 piculs.

These figures have more meaning when seen on an average daily basis. Allowing time for the voyages to and from the coast, the supply of rice was intended to cover about six months. An allowance of 1.91 piculs per man for this period means 1.4 lb. per man per day, whereas the later figure of 1.37 piculs reduces this to 1.0 lb. per man per day. Perhaps a working figure was a cattie (1.3 lb.) per day, but the result depended on how generously this was interpreted (see also chapter 2).

The figure of 1 lb. per man per day is getting rather low for a basically rice diet. Clearly, in later years particularly, there was little surplus for Aboriginal consumption.

Column 4 in table 13.1 gives the annual revenue derived from licence fees. The payment of these has been discussed above. In 1891 there was a sharp reduction in the rate with new regulations introduced under the Northern Territory Crown Lands Act 1890 (para. 84). The reason for this reduction may have been a desire to stimulate local pearling enterprise. The new rates were £1 for a boat over 2 tons and 10/- for one under that. The Macassan canoes were usually charged at the higher rate, but at least this removed the small variations resulting from seemingly random changes in a prau's registered tonnage.

Column 5 in table 13.1 shows the total duties paid by the praus in successive years, an imposition of far greater importance than the licence fees. To set this in
perspective, it should be noted that a substantial part of total government revenue for the Northern Territory, as for the separate colonies, was derived from import duties. In a sense, these duties were the equivalent of more direct taxes.

The duties in force when the Macassans first began to pay, were essentially those of South Australia, except for some higher rates on a few commodities (SAA 793/1883/446 p. 163). One of these higher rates was that on rice which stood at ½d. per pound. In 1885, the rate for tobacco was increased from 2/- to 2/6 per pound and for spirits from 12/- to 14/- per gallon. This was probably partially responsible for the fact that after the next season, there were virtually no spirits brought down, or at least declared. In 1886, the duty on rice was increased to 1d. per pound, though this was not collected until the 1887-8 season. A suggestion in 1889, that the rate for rice be increased to 2d. per pound for the Territory in order to promote Chinese agriculture, was not taken up and the rates paid by the Macassans remained the same until the Commonwealth took over Customs responsibility (SAPP 1890/28:6). In 1902 the rate for rice was lowered to 6/- per 100 pounds and that for tobacco raised to 3/3 per pound, giving much the same result in total.

The effect of these changes in licence fees and duties was that the average revenue derived from each prau remained roughly constant throughout the period. Since the costs to the government were little more than the salary of £100 for a Landing Waiter at Bowen Strait, a small profit was always achieved. Until the end of the century, some portion of the revenue continued to be paid in kind, usually rice. In 1899, one captain even provided a canoe. This arrangement had advantages on both sides. Goods were probably obtained in Macassar at a lower price than their
value in Australia, and Robinson was able to dispose of the rice in particular to buffalo shooters and other Europeans about the coast. Conversely, the real cost of English sovereigns in Macassar was inflated by the difficulty of procuring them from Singapore (SAPP 1896/45:20; Dashwood 1902:43 q.518-20). In 1898 an attempt was made to get all the revenue paid in gold, perhaps chiefly because there were fewer buffalo shooters. Although in the next season the captains denied knowledge of the new instructions, more gold was used in the last years of the industry (SAA 1374/8502, 8745).

The figures in the last two columns of table 13.1 are comparatively unreliable, as they are taken from the figures in the annual Statistical Registers and it is unlikely that the Landing Waiter at Bowen Strait had any accurate means of measuring the quantity of trepang. In fact, Brown who succeeded Robinson in this position stated that the quantity was only estimated by bulk, and sometimes he himself did not actually see the prau (Dashwood 1902:42 q.458,462). Nor do we know the basis on which he assessed the total value, from which the price has been calculated. On at least one occasion, Robinson admitted that he had very seriously underestimated the quantity of trepang. Yet whatever the uncertainties, the figures are reasonable when calculated as an average for each prau (table 13.5). They have already been quoted in chapter 3.
Table 13.5
Average cargo of trepang per prau

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Tons</th>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Tons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1884-5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>1895-6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885-6</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>1896-7</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886-7</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>1897-8</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887-8</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>1898-9</td>
<td>15.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1888-9</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>1899-1900</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889-90</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>1900-1</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>10.9</td>
<td>1901-2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-2</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>1902-3</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892-3</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>1903-4</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893-4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>1904-5</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894-5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: see appendix 7.

The prices indicated by the stated quantity and value of the trepang exported to Macassar are also reasonable and agree with various contemporary estimates. Two matters however, cause some concern, though in neither case is sufficient detail available to resolve the issue. Firstly, the Macassan price is usually below the price calculated in the same way for the product of the local industry. From the evidence presented in chapter 2, this seems improbable, but perhaps the disparity in quantities for most of the period is responsible. Secondly, the Macassan price fluctuates over nearly 100 per cent, but these variations, which can be clearly seen in table 13.6, occur in a remarkably regular cycle. The reason for this is not known, since the factors influencing the price are not understood. The variation is clearly not just a matter
of the Customs officer's whim, as three out of the five dramatic falls are specifically commented upon (1886-7: SAPP 1887/53:11 assuming that Robinson transferred his low price of 1886 to the 1887 valuation; 1891: SAPP 1892/181:18; 1903: SAA 790/1903/471). As an example of the possible factors at work, the war between China and Japan was said to have lowered the price of trepang at Thursday Island for a few years before 1900 (Dashwood 1902:62).

The average price however over a complete cycle remained fairly constant. The general effect of this was to produce a sort of stability in price, which perhaps explains why the price fluctuations do not appear to have had any marked effect on the number of praus setting out the following season. This was rather contrary to the natural expectations of the various Customs officers who, viewing things on a more limited basis, assumed a fairly direct connection (e.g. SAPP 1887/53:11; SAPP 1899/45:20). There is a similar lack of correlation between the quantity of trepang obtained per prau and the number of praus the following season, though again some connection was predicted (SAPP 1888/53:28). Even the most direct measure, the average financial return per prau, which is shown on table 13.6, does not appear to have had any effect.

It is interesting to observe that the average quantity of trepang per prau and its financial return remain roughly constant. This is not what appeared at the time. In 1902 Dashwood asked Brown who had recently become the Customs officer at Bowen Strait, why, if duty charges made the industry unprofitable, any praus at all kept coming. Brown answered that the lack of competition made it easier to get a larger cargo (Dashwood 1902:142 q. 468-9). Tingha, when he was asked, quoted an earlier figure for an average cargo of about 100 piculs (5.9 tons), as against a current 250 piculs (14.7 tons) (Dashwood 1902:43 q. 506). Yet when
Table 13.6

Sources: table 13.1 and appendix 7
the scale of the industry a century before is recalled, Brown's decrease in competition over the last twenty years is obviously minimal: Tingha's figures are just not substantiated, though it is possible that he had in mind the estimate of Flinders, passed on in some way.6

No other commodity was available to make up this decreased profit. Although some attention was given to other items as detailed in chapter 3, there is no evidence to suggest that trepang was supplanted as the chief object of the voyage. In fact for tortoise-shell, which is the only other commodity listed in the Statistical Register, there is some evidence of decline. From 1884-5 to 1893-4 about a ton, valued at £1000 is regularly mentioned. In 1894-5, the amount was 500 lbs, and thereafter the quantities were probably too small to notice. Both Brown and Tingha told Dashwood in 1902 that only a little was then obtained (Dashwood 1902:42-3 q.457, 471-2, 509, 511-2). In 1901, £50 worth was exported to Macassar and £90 to Britain, but it does not otherwise appear in the figures for these later years.

It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the level of financial imposition by the government gradually strangled the industry. Although occasional profit was still to be made, this was not sufficient to replace capital losses or to attract new merchants into financing voyages. A small number of merchants and captains continued the industry on a reduced scale, more out of habit than the expectation of great gain. As discussed above, the alternative trepanging grounds in Western Australia do not seem to have been entirely satisfactory, and certainly the major part of the praus and men lost to the

6 On Tingha, see appendix 12:182 n.6. He is frequently mentioned in the records and clearly played a major part in the practical business of dealing with the Macassans.
Northern Territory did not transfer there. They were merely absorbed back into the general maritime activity originating from Macassar.

That this would be the result of the impositions was apparent before 1890. Both Robinson and Searcy expected that the increased duty on rice for the 1887-8 season would deter a number of praus (SAPP 1887/53:11; SAPP 1888/53:20). There is also direct evidence that this was the case. When asked why the number of praus had declined, Brown replied to Dashwood in 1902, 'the Malays have told me that the duties imposed by the Customs were too heavy to make the industry profitable', and Tingha thought that more Macassans would come if the duties were not so high (Dashwood 1902:42-3 q.468,517).

The only slight break in the decline of the industry was in the late nineties, when the fleet built up to six praus again. Stretton linked this with the increasing price of trepang, but his explanation is less convincing when we see that there was no immediate reduction following the price crash of 1899 (see table 13:6). As only one or two praus are involved anyway, the increase may have been caused by purely individual circumstances.7

The severity of the South Australian impositions can be judged in two ways. On the one hand, a tax of usually more than £50 for a prau with a gross income often less than £500 was extremely heavy. Furthermore in the circumstances of the industry, the duty on the basic rice ration, which was the most important item of expense, was rather unreasonable. On the other hand, all industries had to pay import duties on various items and the level of licence fees was not excessive.

7 The current economic situation in Macassar would also have had an effect. However the task of reconstructing that in meaningful detail would be laborious indeed.
In 1893, Saville-Kent (1893:227) gives the licence fees in Queensland as 10/- for a small boat (i.e., canoe), and £3 for a ship or lugger of 10 tons burden plus 10/- for every extra ton up to a maximum of £20. Not only was this rate higher than that introduced for the Northern Territory by the 1890 bill, but the number and efficiency of the Aboriginal workers (who also had to be paid) was undoubtedly less.

Once the system of collection at Bowen Strait had been established in the mid-eighties, there were few administrative changes or complications. However it did take some time for the initial flurry of action to die down. At the end of 1885 Robinson was appointed an Assistant Health Officer in addition to his Customs position, but the job seems to have been purely nominal (SAA 793/1885/753 p.364). In the coming season he was busy enough trying to outwit and overawe the captains, who were still not resigned to paying up without a struggle. As Searcy remarked, 'there is no doubt that Mr Robinson had a very hard and trying time of it.' One of his minor troubles was persuading a man from one of the crews who had been in Darwin and thought he knew what went on, that he was not interested in smuggling opium. It seems unlikely that much, if any, ever came on the praus (SAA 790/1886/356).

In fact, the bulk of the revenue for the season, the largest ever collected, was nearly lost. By chance, Robinson was able to send in most of it on the government steamer, but coming in later with the remainder himself, his lugger was wrecked and he barely escaped with his life (SAA 790/1886/356). In re-establishing Robinson after this disaster, Searcy requested that he be provided with a small safe to protect the revenue, and a barometer and other weather gauges to keep meteorological records. He received only a new uniform and set of Customs flags (SAA 790/1886/355).

In June 1886, Robinson asked for a subsidy of £100 towards the cost of a new and more substantial building at the Bowen
Strait site. The earlier one had been destroyed by white ants (SAA 790/1886/644). This request was rejected, but the following year when the Government Resident was going to Adelaide, Robinson asked him to draw the Minister's attention to the matter, and the grant of £100 was eventually approved (SAA 790/1887/572). The cement floor apparent on the site today (see site 6b) probably belonged to the building financed in part with this money. At about the same time a small iron safe was sent up for Robinson, and a pair of steel yards to enable a more accurate assessment to be made of the rice imported by the Macassans (SAA 790/1887/477).

The establishment of machinery to levy the duties and fees on the Macassans had involved more than the original idea of an annual steamer trip, but at least it was a system that worked. In April 1888, Parsons, the Government Resident, visited Bowen Strait and summed up the reasons for the success. 'The site appears to be well selected as a calling-place for the Malay proas. The buildings are substantial and suited for Customs purposes. Mr E.O. Robinson, the landing waiter in charge, is the very man for the work, having a thorough knowledge of the coast and having a great influence over native races' (SAPP 1889/28:10).

From this time on, much less is heard of the Macassan industry and the work of collection. In part this is due to the general slackening of enthusiasm and drive which affected virtually all aspects of government in the Territory at about this time. But it also means that the annual collection had become a fixed routine for both parties and caused comparatively little trouble. Indeed it is possible to observe the growth of mutual acceptance and almost friendship between Searcy and Robinson on the one hand, and the regular captains on the other. In 1895 for example, Robinson sent in a report describing the arrival in canoes of two crews whose
praus had been wrecked in northeast Arnhem Land. When forwarding this to the Government Resident, Searcy suggests in a covering note that, as everything had been lost, the moneys paid by the two praus for that season should be refunded. Of the two masters, Using and Sulemang, he says, 'I have had personal dealings with these men, and can testify to their being honest and always willing to pay their duties. Mr Robinson also endorses this (and his knowledge of them extends over many years) and speaks highly in their favour.' The money was not refunded (SAA 790/1895/175).

Robinson continued to receive his salary of £100 per year, while the work, with the drop in the number of praus, became easier. In view of his increasing involvement in other activities, he probably regarded it as a useful and reliable bonus. He even missed a number of seasons. In 1889 he was in Japan (see above) and on another period of sick leave, probably early in 1890, part of the work was left to unsatisfactory replacements (Searcy 1907,288). In 1897 he went to England and may again have missed some time (see above).

In December 1899, Robinson wrote to Stretton, who had succeeded Searcy as Sub-Collector of Customs, resigning his position at Bowen Strait. He announced that he had sold his schooner, his camp at Bowen Strait and the goodwill of his business to V.V. Brown, the Darwin auctioneer, whose son Alfred Joseph Voules Brown was to carry on there. He recommended young Brown for the Customs position, noting that Tingha would still be there to help. It must have been a position with its attractions, as four other applications were received. Brown was appointed with some haste, as the praus were expected soon. Although when making the appointment, the Government Resident promised to review the method of collection after twelve months, things carried on much as before (SAA 790/1899/497; SAA 1374/9316). By 1902, it would
appear that the camp was no longer habitable as Brown was described as being always on board a small lugger (SAPP 1903/45:19). The reason for Robinson's resignation is not clear, but he may possibly have wanted to concentrate on his growing interests in other fields, particularly buffalo shooting.

Although the collection of money from the Macassans came to be regular and accepted, this was not the end of government interest in the coast. The two most persistent matters of concern were occasional murders and the arrival of castaways from the north. Neither of these matters was directly connected with the activities of the Macassans, but because they were to some extent confused with Macassan activities, they make up part of the total background to government attitudes. A number of these incidents generated considerable public controversy and extensive official files, but all that is necessary here is a summary list for the period.

The murder of Robinson's mate, Wingfield, by Wandi Wandi on Croker Island in 1879 has already been mentioned. The culprit was apprehended and served a gaol sentence. However nothing came of the attempts to locate the Aborigines who murdered the two Chinese wood cutters in Mountnorris Bay in 1884. Six years later, a buffalo shooter, R.C. Spencer was convicted of the murder of an Aborigine at Bowen Strait. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, but after serving ten years he was back trepanning around the coast. In 1904 he was in turn murdered by Aborigines in northeast Arnhem Land (SAA 790/1890/188; SAA 1374/13497; Searcy 1907: 287-90; Register 26.12.1895, 6.1.1896; Bartlett 1954:207; see also below).

In 1892 Robinson reported the murder of six crewmen from a small prau which had come ashore near Brogden Point. This
prau, together with a larger one with which it may have been in company, seems to have been blown away and completely lost. At the time it was thought that they must have had some knowledge of the coast since they asked for 'Tingha', but this sounds like a misunderstanding. What is significant is that both Robinson and Searcy used the incident to urge another inspection of the Macassan praus, although they were certainly aware that this was not a regular prau (SAA 790/1893/96). In the event, seven Aborigines were arrested, charged and convicted. A notable public debate then erupted, relating also to several other contemporary murders, in which doubts about the impartiality of justice spilled over into seeking motives and causes. In this confusion, even Dashwood, who had presided at the trial, failed to see the distinction between the regular Macassan trepangers and chance castaways. Eventually only one Aborigine, Wandi Wandi, who had already been convicted of Wingfield's murder, was executed at Port Essington (SAA 790/1893/286; see also SAA/1892/453; SAA 790/1893/220; SAPP 1893/64; Register 9, 18, 28.11.1892, 11.7.1893 to 9.8.1893, 1.10.1896).

In 1899, there was some suspicion of foul play by a European captain who abandoned a Malay crewman at Port Essington, but a police investigation discovered that the man had died of venereal disease (SAA 1374/8745, 8765).

In 1902 a trading prau sailing from Banda to Ceram was blown away and wrecked near Cape Wilberforce. Only one crew member survived an Aboriginal massacre and was eventually rescued by a Macassan prau. This man, an Arab from Banda, was left with Brown at Bowen Strait and eventually reached Darwin. The authorities obtained permission to search for the Aborigines who had murdered the other nine men, but the scheme fell through when neither the survivor nor the Macassan captain could supply sufficiently precise information (SAA 790/1902/220; SAA 1374/11779; SAA 801/1902/220 p.384, 389, 395, 416).

In late 1904 another prau from the Moluccas, with eight men on board and a cargo of sago and palm leaf baskets, was
rather more fortunate to get blown into Port Essington. The crew were sent to Darwin where one man died, but the remainder were eventually sent off to Surabaja (SAA 790/1905/198; SAA 1374/13497).

In these last two cases, there appears to have been no confusion about the purely accidental nature of the voyages. Such castaways have continued to arrive occasionally up to the present, just as they no doubt did before records are available.

The basic reason for the South Australian government's decision to end the Macassan trepang industry was an attempt to encourage and protect the local industry. Other possible motives, such as the protection of Aborigines, anti-Dutch sentiment, or racial discrimination, which were occasionally mentioned, are subsidiary to this basic reason and by themselves would clearly have been without effect. Such protectionism was of course unexceptional in early twentieth century Australia, or, for that matter, in the Netherlands East Indies.

The evolution of policy was thus linked directly with progress in the local trepang industry. The beginnings of this industry have been described above, and it always remained primarily located in the bays of the Cobourg Peninsula and along the nearby coast to the east. Table 13.7 reveals two clear phases of local activity.
Table 13.7

Production of the locally based trepang industry in the Northern Territory: 1881 - 1909

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tons</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
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<td>9.15</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1905</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<td>Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
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<td>898</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
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<td>1272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>1906</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes
The majority of these figures represent the annual trepang export to places other than Macassar. Hong Kong is the main destination. Due to a new accounting system, the figures for the years 1904-6 are difficult to ascertain. The lack of any non-Macassan export in 1904 is difficult to believe. In 1906 the total figure of 94.3 tons, worth £6056, certainly contains some local production. The prices obtained from this table do not correspond with those in Table 13.1. No figures are available before 1881: for a continuation, see Bauer 1964:180,246, though there are some minor errors in his tables. All figures in this table have been checked in the Statistical Registers and Government Resident's reports.

The first phase reached its very moderate peak in the few years after 1885. The bulk of the trepang came from Robinson and his associates, such as Tingha. Great expansion was, of course, predicted, but even Robinson could not fully overcome his Aboriginal labour problems, and that in spite of the decline in the quantity of Macassan spirits (SAPP 1886/53; SAA 790/1885/423; Searcy 1907:101).

Comments suggesting restriction and discouragement of the Macassans, which as shown above, were current when duties and licence fees were imposed, continued throughout this period.

In 1888, Robinson bewailed the pilfering of his trepang and other goods by Aborigines for barter with the Macassans and suggested that praus be prohibited from
working within ten miles of his camp (SAPP 1888/53:28). The following year Searcy wrote that 'we cannot expect any great fishing being done by local people until the proas are driven off the coast' (SAA 790/1889/147). When commenting on new and more restrictive Dutch pearling and trepanging regulations introduced in 1893, he suggested that, 'if it should be found necessary at any time to restrict the issue of licences as to foreigners it would be well to remember the action of the Dutch Government, and provision will have to be made in dealing with the Malay proas who visit our coast every season, the crews of which are all Dutch subjects' (SAPP 1894/53:20; a copy of the regulations is in SAA 1374/8280).

But if the theme of competition was continuous from the days of Cadell, the local demands were not strong enough to force the government to exercise further its comparatively tenuous authority. Current financial demands had greatly reduced Macassan numbers anyway, and naturally Robinson, who seems to have at least partially resolved his problems with Aborigines, did not seek complete prohibition, which would have deprived him of his salary. Finally a drop in the price of the dollar in 1895, brought the local industry to a standstill (SAPP 1896/45:20).

In 1899, the second phase of the local industry began with an export of 9½ tons. Quite a good price was obtained for this, but the explanation for the resumption of the industry is more complicated than merely an increase in price. In the late nineties there was considerable enthusiasm

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A statement by Searcy that the Macassans were prohibited from fishing westwards of De Courcy Head in 1885, appears to be the result of confusion with the later prohibition (Searcy 1907:101).
for pearling out of Darwin (SAPP 1898-9/45:19). In 1899 new regulations were introduced prohibiting Asiatic ownership of pearling vessels and among those affected was Tingha (SAPP 1900/45:13; SAA 1374/8701). He therefore returned to trepangning and probably inspired several others to do the same. Stretton commented with approval on this renewed activity, though he noted persistent problems with Aboriginal labour (SAPP 1901/45:22).

A useful review of the situation in 1902 is provided in the evidence tendered to the Dashwood inquiry. This inquiry, under the Government Resident, had been set up to inquire into many aspects of the marine industries in Northern Australia. Brown and Tingha, who were currently trepangning in Bowen Strait, provided much useful information. They reported some diminution of the trepang beds, but not sufficient to require any restrictions, so long as no great expansion of the industry occurred (Dashwood 1902:42 q. 489-94, 43 q. 521-2). Both were quite neutral towards the Macassans.

In fact, the actual situation on the coast seems to have been considerably less satisfactory than appeared from this evidence. The basic problem lay in European relations with the Aborigines. While Tingha seems to have been perfectly

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9 See Bach (1962) for the background to this situation.

10 Question 487 refers to a reserve for Europeans established at this time. I know of no other specific mention of this, though a reference in 1900 to De Courcy Head as the western limit of Macassan activity may indicate some reserve in force at that time (SAPP 1900/45:19). If there currently was a reserve in force, it is difficult to see the need for concern about the Macassans in 1903. There is also a specific statement by Brown, in his letter of 18 May 1903, that although the Macassans mainly worked east of the Goulburn Islands, they sometimes worked for a time in Port Essington (SAA 790/1903/438). If some reserve did exist, it was probably only in the immediate vicinity of the Revenue Station.
correct when he told Dashwood that the Macassans brought their own labour force (Dashwood 1902: 43 q. 513), there is no doubt also that they continued to have considerable dealings with Aborigines, partly in buying tortoise-shell and the like (Dashwood 1902:42 q. 481), and partly because of the natural attraction any camp exercised on local Aborigines. The Macassans can hardly have been unaware that the local industry was totally dependent on Aboriginal labour and perhaps, as the Aborigines believe, they foresaw the trouble that Europeans would bring with them, and tried to influence Aboriginal opinion against the local trepangers (Warner 1937 (1964:474-5)).\textsuperscript{11} Whatever the exact truth, there was certainly trouble, at least for some local men, in retaining their labour force from the comparatively few Aborigines available (SAA 790/1903/438).

This problem appears to have been at the bottom of a strange incident in April 1903. The infamous R.C. Spencer was trepanging near Guion Point when two praus arrived on the scene. Spencer's Aborigines were entertained on the praus and when he tried to prevent this, an argument ensued. Next day, and only possibly due to a misunderstanding, some shots were fired. It is now impossible to get to the truth of the matter as only Spencer's letter of justification to the Government Resident is available, but Brown, though he did not report the affair, seems to have taken the part of the Macassans (SAA 1374/12557).

At about the same time, two letters were sent to Dashwood, the Government Resident, and to the two members for the Territory in the South Australian parliament, one of whom was the future Government Resident, Herbert. The authors of the letters were C.E. Gore, who had done a little

\textsuperscript{11} Berndt & Berndt (1954:69) have perhaps another version. I have been told the same story at Elcho Island mission.
trepanging in Bowen Strait and had labour troubles, and jointly, J. Cleland and C. Pfitzner. Cleland had unsuccessfully applied for Brown's position at the end of 1899 (SAA 1364/9316), and a few months later, on a pearl prospecting voyage, he had the satisfaction of extracting some dues from an unlicensed prau in Melville Bay. Pfitzner had just started trepanging in partnership with Spencer. The letters urged that the Macassans should be prohibited from visiting the coast. They contained most of the usual charges: that the Macassans debased the Aborigines with liquor and worse; that they introduced disease; that they evaded Customs duties and licence fees in various ways; that the Dutch regulations were unfair and generally that the profits of the industry should be reserved for local Europeans (SAA 790/1903/483,461).

Dashwood sent off his letters to Stretton for comment and received long reports from both Stretton and Brown rebuffing the charges and exposing the untrustworthiness of the authors. Stretton would have been quite prepared to stop the Macassans if it would help the local industry, but this was not the case. Brown was even more specific. 'I see no reason why the Macassans should be undesirable for they are in my opinion doing nobody any harm and also are a source of revenue' (SAA 790/1903/438). It is therefore clear that Brown and Stretton at least, were not concerned at this stage with Macassan competition against the local industry as it then existed. But as Brown had told Dashwood in the previous year (see above), no great expansion was possible. He had many interests in maintaining the present situation.  

There is a rather puzzling letter from Stretton to Dashwood earlier in 1903 which may also relate to the apparent disagreements among various individuals. Stretton asked that most of the north coast of the Cobourg Peninsula be made a government reserve. A minute suggests that Pfitzner had also made some sort of application. From later events, nothing seems to have come of either request (SAA 1374/11878).
Although in conflict with his earlier evidence, Brown was not being altogether inconsistent when just over a month later he wrote to Stretton suggesting 'that the coast between Cape Don and De Courcy Head be a closed ground for trepang fishing purposes for a period of two years' (SAA 790/1903/471). The ostensible reasons for this were to allow the beds to recuperate after over-fishing by both Macassans and locals and to encourage local fishermen to open up new areas further east. As suggested in chapter 4, it is possible that the area was being exhausted, and Brown was becoming concerned about the future for those already engaged in the industry, probably including himself. Stretton forwarded Brown's letter to Dashwood, with his confirmation that the areas were being over-fished, and when Dashwood asked for the relevant statistics, he replied that for 1903 there had been licences issued at Bowen Strait to six praus, carrying thirty-six canoes, and to six local canoes.\footnote{Perhaps remembering Brown's remarks before him at the previous year's inquiry, Dashwood recommended to the Minister that the specified area be closed to allow recuperation, 'and this would be the case even though perhaps the trepang fishers might be making it pay.' As for the difficulty of enforcing the reservation, Dashwood was satisfied that the locals would respect it and that a letter to the authorities in Macassar would achieve the same result with the Macassans. The Minister agreed to the closure from September 1903 for two years, and a letter was eventually sent to Macassar (SAA 790/1903/471; SAA 1374/12158).}

\footnote{This last figure which comes from Brown, has to be reconciled with his statement in May 1903 that 'this year (a fair sample of past years) there are on the coast, seven different local people as owners [of trepanging boats]' (SAA 790/1903/438). Some of these seven, perhaps including Brown himself, must have taken out their licences in Darwin and not at Bowen Strait. Dashwood missed the distinction in his minute for the Minister.}
The two years passed without incident on the coast and presumably the reserve was respected. It is clear however that there were further attempts to get the Macassans prohibited. It was even reported in the Register on 9 September, 1904, that after certain representations had been made to him, the Federal Minister for Customs had decided to close the station at Bowen Strait, thus forcing the praus to visit Darwin to pay duties, a feat that was acknowledged to be sufficiently difficult to deter them coming at all (Searcy 1907:vi). If the Minister did make this decision, it seems to have been reversed when it was discovered that the praus were actually licensed by the Marine Department of South Australia and the matter was therefore a State affair (see Herbert's minute of 8.2.1907 in SAA 790/1906/360; also SAPP 1905/45:25).

In his annual report for 1905, Herbert, now Government Resident, considered the matter of the trepang industry. He noted the growth of the local industry which had produced 32 tons out of a total of 62 tons for the year. (The figure of 30 tons for the Macassans, which was the lowest on record, is depressed because only two praus came. Fifteen tons for each of these was a good catch.) As he saw it, 'now that the local boats are exploiting the coast, and the Malay proas are so few..., there can be no valid reason for continuing the issue of licences to Malays.' Furthermore, 'those who should know, and on whose judgment I can rely, aver that it [contact with the Macassans] tends only to demoralise the natives' (SAPP 1906i/45;16). Perhaps the propaganda had had some effect.

However nothing was done, and in September 1905, the previous reservation expired. In the 1905-6 season, four praus arrived and worked the coast with various local trepangers (SAPP 1907/45:38). This led Brown to initiate, possibly unintentionally, the chain of events which resulted in the
closure of the whole coast to the Macassans.\textsuperscript{14} Probably in May, 1906, Brown suggested to Stretton that the area previously closed be reserved exclusively for local boats. In his letter of 28 May on the subject to Herbert, Stretton's only reason for implementing this suggestion was that it would facilitate execution of Customs business if the praus had all to pass to the eastwards through Bowen Strait on arrival and westwards on departure. In view of the operation of the system over the last two decades, the excuse is remarkably fatuous. An important factor might have been the 'great deal of ill-feeling' on the matter shown recently by witnesses at a Customs inquiry.

Before proceeding, Herbert consulted further with Stretton. He learnt that only one of the four praus was west of De Courcy Head, though the others would terminate there. There were also another four local boats, all inside the reservation. Brown seems to have been the only European owner. The total revenue from the Macassans alone had been £110/16/4 for 1905, and £252/3/4 for 1906.

Armed with these facts Herbert forwarded Stretton's letter to Adelaide, with a long minute, reiterating his 1905 opinion, that the whole coast should be closed to the Macassans. After allowing for the saving of Brown's salary, he estimated the loss in revenue to be about £80 per year which he expected be made up in increased revenue from the local industry. This was exceedingly optimistic, and the figure of £80 was only based on the returns for the previous two years, one of which was far lower than any other year on record. Herbert opposed the suggestion of Brown and Stretton

\textsuperscript{14} The basic files in Adelaide and Darwin relating to the following incident are SAA 790/1906/360 and SAA 1374/15236 respectively. The more important documents are to be found in both files, though naturally minutes will be found only on the appropriate one.
on the grounds that a distinction between Macassan and local boats in the specified area would be 'individuous'. In either case, it would be necessary to contact the Dutch authorities again.

On 26 July 1906, O'Loughlin, the Minister in Adelaide approved Herbert's recommendation. Thus it was finally decided that the praus, which for so long had made their annual voyage to the coast, would be henceforth prohibited, or rather that no further licences would be issued to them.

The necessary business arising out of the decision was immediately put in hand. The Dutch Consul in Adelaide was notified and he communicated the decision to the authorities in Macassar. Although Stretton had earlier urged the value of a Customs officer in the area, Finiss, who was the Acting Harbor Master, reported that no officer was required at Bowen Strait. As Brown was now a Federal public servant, the matter had to be referred to the Commonwealth authorities.

Stretton's doubts of 1903 about the effect of prohibiting the Macassans on the local industry, proved to be well founded (SAA 790/1903/438). Although his report on the Marine Department for 1906 predicted progress (SAPP 1907/45:38), by the following year this was not apparent. Both Stretton and Herbert offered excuses in the need for time to allow the trepang beds to recoup again and more significantly, the difficulty of obtaining Aboriginal labour (SAPP 1908/45:17, 42-3,47). Stretton also noted that the whole trepang industry was then in the hands of Europeans, as Tingha had died and the other local Asians were working for Europeans (SAPP 1908/45:47). The industry has persisted in the Territory almost up to the present, but production has never attained the level of even the most disastrous year before 1906 (Bauer 1964:180-1, 245-6; Development Committe 1946). The chief reason for this stagnation is not far to seek and had been clearly foreseen by Brown in 1903. 'The native
population is too scarce to supply labour to many people, and unless there is other cheap labour imported, or some other method discovered for the working of trepang, the industry will never be much good" (SAA 790/1903/438).

It is fortunate that enough documentation survives for the period of contact between the Macassans and the South Australian officials to enable a fairly detailed account of events, with some idea of the causes of specific decisions and of the motives of the chief characters, to be reconstructed. Behind this mass of detail, there is a consistent logic.

When South Australia annexed the Northern Territory, it was exclusively interested in exploiting the resources of the land. Only gradually and as the very considerable practical problems were overcome, did concern for the wider range of affairs which make up the business of government, become apparent. Given the modern theory of the sovereignty of the state over precisely defined territory, the regulation of the trepang industry on the north coast was only a matter of the expansion of effective power. In the early eighties, this had reached the stage at which the visitors were subjected to the current obligations of contributing to government revenue. Given the power to control events, which in this case was caused as much by the decline in Macassan activity as by an extension of government power, it was perhaps inevitable that the government would seek to supplant an industry controlled from abroad by local enterprise. It was simply a matter of time and opportunity.
That this is the correct interpretation to put on events, can be confirmed by showing briefly that certain other possible motives did not enter significantly into the consideration of the government.

Firstly, the scale of finances involved in the industry, whether Macassan or local, was not large, even in the limited context of the Northern Territory budget. Though revenue and production of any sort were welcome enough, no great hopes of financial benefit ever motivated the government. Thus changes in Customs duties and licence rates can be explained without reference to the trepang industry. Furthermore, although the regular exactions eroded the economic base of the Macassan industry, there was never any financial discrimination against them. Apparently this applied in practice as well as theory.

Secondly, there are many references over the years to the need to protect the Aboriginal population from the supposedly baneful influence of the Macassans. Undoubtedly the duty on spirits did prevent some drunkenness at points of contact, and this change is often commented on with approval. Yet it cannot be shown that there was any forceful or coherent policy of Aboriginal welfare in force at the time and in most cases, complaints about the ill effects of Macassan influence on the Aborigines are only too patently a blind for self advantage on the part of the writer.

Lastly, it might be thought that prejudice against non-Europeans, such as that manifested in many parts of Australia in the late nineteenth century, affected the issue. Although it is possible to find a few expressions of such sentiments in connection with the trepang industry, these never seem to have been a major factor in conditioning decisions. Thus the Macassans were prohibited because they were foreign, not because they were Asiatic. In this, there is a major
difference with the much larger pearling industry for which legislation was introduced in 1899, prohibiting local Asiatic ownership of pearling vessels. As Northern Territory opinion has always been rather more pragmatic on this issue than elsewhere in Australia, this difference with the pearling industry is largely one of the size of the industry and the nature of competition experienced. Although in fact the local trepang industry did drift into the exclusive control of Europeans (SAPP 1908/45:47), the rigid anti-Asian regulations proposed by a Queensland Royal Commission in 1908 were thought inappropriate for the Territory (SAA 1374/17772; Qld Report 1908:1xxvii-471).

The decision of the South Australian government in 1906 to cease issuing licences to the Macassans was final, but there is one further episode in the story of Macassan enterprise in Northern Territory waters. It serves as a reminder that the visitors were not altogether passive receivers of government edicts.

On 30 January 1907, Brown arrived in Darwin from Port Essington with the surprising news that at least some Macassans had appeared on the coast despite the information that had been sent to Macassar the previous year. The matter was immediately referred to Adelaide where the Netherlands Consul was asked to confirm that the authorities in Macassar had in fact been contacted. A week later the Consul General in Melbourne replied confirming that the authorities had been contacted, but asking for full details about the praus involved. He pointed out that the praus could be merely blown off course and have no connection with the usual Macassans. The Government Resident's office was duly instructed on 6 February to obtain the relevant details and take any necessary action to warn the praus off the coast. This was all very well, but as Stretton had pointed out when first reporting Brown's news, the station at Bowen Strait
had been closed and Brown was no longer employed by either the State government to look after the Macassans (though he was still able to issue licences (SAA 1374/15129)) or by the Federal Customs authorities to collect duties. In this difficulty Stretton suggested that Brown be offered £10 to try and obtain the necessary information. As Brown was about to leave Darwin an urgent decision was required. The Minister agreed to pay the £10, only to learn the next day that more complications had arisen with the Customs aspect of the affair. The Collector of Customs in Adelaide, to whom Stretton had also reported the matter, had been in contact with the Minister's office to say that the matter had been referred to Melbourne, and Herbert, the Government Resident who happened to be in Adelaide at the time, thought that as no State licences had been issued, the affair was entirely a Commonwealth matter to be dealt with under the Federal Immigration Restriction Act. In the event, the Customs authorities replied that no duty could be collected except at a port, but Brown could be asked to warn the praus that a prosecution would follow an entry elsewhere. The State government seems to have been left to pay the £10.

On 12 February 1907 Stretton officially informed Brown that he was offered £10 to obtain the relevant information and then warn the praus of the coast, 'at the same time notifying them that they are likely to be seized.' Brown accepted the offer and proceeded to Bowen Strait, where he discovered the information he was looking for. A single prau had called leaving the following letter:
Honored Sir.

The present will be handed to your goodself by Oesindaeng Manrangka, Poongawa of my prau BOENKAWA INJAYA with 2 Saroongs from this country, which please accept as a token of friendship.

It has been reported here that to fish Tripang from Port Darwin up to Pellew Islands, no licenses are allowed any more, so the people do not dare to go out fishing Tripang over there.

As, at the time (May or June) when my proas were at your port, nothing was known about this new regulation. I cannot believe it is really true, but for prudential reasons, I now send only one prau, to see how matters lay and I will feel very much obliged to you for instructing my people how they are to act.

I will also feel very thankful if, on arrival of the bearer you will kindly inform me, by a couple of lines by mail how the situation is in reality.

Offering many thanks in anticipation.

I remain, Honored Sir,

Yours faithfully

POE DDOE DAENG TOMPO

Brown gave the two sarongs to the Aborigines and brought the letter to Darwin. In his minute Stretton suggested sending a Customs officer on the next ship to the Gulf of Carpentaria 'to enforce the order to warn the proas off our coast' A letter to Macassar would have been just as effective, and more polite.