

## Emergent Tropicality: Cyclone Mahina, Bathurst Bay 1899

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On Sunday 5 March 1899 a terrifying cyclone—easily Category 5 by today’s standards—hit the Queensland pearling fleet at Bathurst Bay on the northern tip of Cape Melville 160 kilometres northwest of Cooktown in Far North Queensland, sinking 55 ships and killing over 400 people. Its historical status is complicated. Measured by the numbers of lives lost, it is the most severe natural disaster in Australian history since European settlement. But most of the pearlers were either indigenous or ‘alien’ (foreign), excluded from the national imaginary. Hence the acknowledgement of Cyclone Mahina’s status in national weather history had continually to be postponed. This is despite the fact that, in world weather history, for many years, Mahina has held the unofficial record for storm surge, being estimated at 13 metres (43 feet).

Compared to Cyclone Tracy—which was a much smaller cyclone with a much lower death toll—Mahina has not until recently figured much in the national literature. This paper asks the question: why? The answer is deeply related to ideas of gender and race in



the national imaginary. It is entangled too with the biographies of the colonial administrators Clement Wragge, Queensland’s first appointed meteorologist, and Walter Roth, the first Northern Protector of Aborigines—both key figures in the emergent imagining of the Tropical Australia.

**Fig. 1.** The *Zanoni* washed ashore on Cape Melville. Source: [ABC 26 Dec 2014](#)

### Forecast

Today international weather satellites provide continuous monitoring of weather patterns over the entire region. But these systems were not developed until the 1950s and 60s; and the Australian Bureau of Meteorology, which has responsibility for gathering and authenticating the historical data, did not commence operations until 1908. So the precise cyclogenesis of Cyclone Mahina is impossible to know.

The Queensland Government Meteorologist at the time of the disaster, Clement Wragge, was an experienced forecaster, founder of the Meteorological Society of Australasia and a pioneer in research relating to cyclones (and/or typhoons) in the southwest Pacific. He

was well aware that a local weather reckoning required a much broader geographical purview; and from the time he was appointed Government Meteorologist in Queensland in 1887 he had begun establishing a vast network of weather stations connected by telegraph, bringing New Caledonia into the network as soon as the cable was completed.

On 3 March 1899, he issued a warning to the effect that weather conditions in the Coral Sea north of New Caledonia looked ‘suspicious,’ and that ships’ captains should be alert to the possibility of a storm tracking toward the Queensland coast. On 6 March he issued a stronger warning, about a ‘tropical disturbance’ he named Mahina, located 350 miles southeast from Vanatinai Island (or Sudest, as it was then) in the Milne Bay district of Papua New Guinea (Pichon 24-25).

It was Wragge who commenced the tradition of individualising cyclones by providing them with personal names; and Mahina was the first cyclone he named:

Now, ‘Mahina’ is a girl’s name, culled from fair Tahiti with its coral reefs, waving palm-groves and mountain peaks, the loveliest of all the lovely islands in the wide Pacific, and mothers will agree that no infant daughter can bear a softer, prettier name. (‘Meteorology of Australia’ 3)

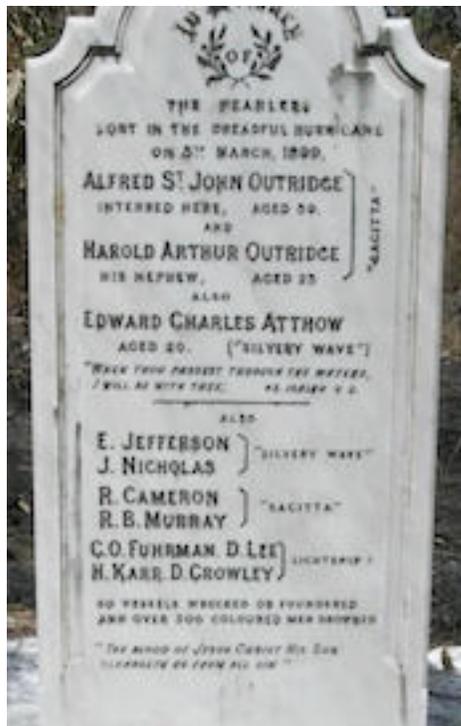
Tropical loveliness is known to be deceptive; and Wragge did warn that Mahina might prove difficult to handle. But the warning came a day too late. The cyclone had struck already.

### The Cyclone

It had been a bit early for the exodus south of the pearling fleet from its base on Thursday Island, but the divers had already exhausted the northern beds of shell and the Admiralty

charts indicated there should be no bad weather above Cooktown. So they had set sail for the southern grounds—more than a hundred luggers, over a thousand men, women and children, comprised of an estimated twenty-six different nationalities. They were Egyptian, Indian, Jamaican, Japanese, Javanese, Makassan, Malay and of course Aboriginal, as well as Tiwi and South Sea Islanders.

The overwhelming majority of the drowned pearlers too were ‘coloured.’ So their names were not recorded in the official list of the dead. But the local indigenous fatalities were not even counted in the toll. The tsunami that engulfed Kenny’s camp at Barrow Point, when it turned,



**Fig. 2** Pearlers’ memorial. The bottom reads ‘50 vessels wrecked or foundered and over 300 coloured men drowned’. Source: [ABC 6 March 2015](#)

swept over a hundred Aboriginal people with it out to sea; the wind swung about and most could not regain shore. Yet the heroism of the survivors is legendary.

The most famous was a young woman from Darnley Island (Erub) in the Torres Strait, named Muara (Lifu) Wacando.<sup>1</sup> She was the first Indigenous Australian woman to receive a Royal Humane Society medal (Shnukal 33). She battled the turbulent seas for seven hours and swam more than three kilometres to shore with her two sisters on her back. Most accounts prefer to identify these two as white men, reversing the trope of the Kipling poem, 'The White Man's Burden'. Published in the US a few weeks before the cyclone, and in Australia two weeks after, the poem provoked numerous parodies and satires. But the revisionist narrative of Muara's rescuing of two white men instead of her black sisters is neither satirical nor ironical. It works rather to ensure that her heroism is meaningful to White Australia.

One white child survived. Margaret Porter, the wife of Captain William Porter of the *Crest of the Wave*, told how her eighteen-month-old daughter, Alice, had been swept from her arms when the windows smashed and the cabin filled with water. It was ten o'clock at night, pitch black, waves were washing in and the ship was sinking. When her



feet swept out from underneath her she tried to resign herself to her fate, but could not, for the terrible thought of her baby tossed into that dreadful sea. Groping about frantically in the collapsing cabin, she found the child 'dripping wet and gasping for breath' and hung on into the next day, when fortunately a British-India Company ship en route from London to Brisbane stopped to rescue them (Lehane 181).

**Fig. 3** *The Crest of the Wind* survived Mahina. (Artist unknown)

Source: [ABC 26 Dec 2014](#)

The first definite news of the extent of the disaster reached Cooktown on 9 March. By the time a search party arrived the Aboriginal survivors had already commenced the urgent task of burial. The tropical heat and humidity worked quickly and the stench and accumulation of flies was overpowering. The beaches of Bathurst Bay were littered with bodies (some horrifyingly mutilated by sharks), human and non-human. 'Dead fish of all kinds were piled up, including porpoises, sharks, dugong, sea snakes, also seabirds, land birds and wallabies' (Whittingham 23). The trees were skeletons, and the great black boulders of the Cape had been tossed and scattered. Salvage parties managed to re-float two of the larger vessels but most of the ships and luggers were lost. The precise number of fatalities remains unknown.

### **Protecting: Giving/Taking**

One of the main purposes of state-sponsored meteorology is to predict and enable protection against extreme weather, thereby minimising the effects of potential 'natural' disasters. But the health and wealth of the settler population as it expanded north into Tropical Queensland relied upon a whole range of other protective measures as well. There were protections for the developing industries in the form of intercolonial tariffs, employment protections to maintain the pool of cheap alien labour, and there were protections for and against the Indigenous population. The purpose was twofold: on the one hand to ensure that the indigenous population was not contaminated by the imported coloured population (the 'aliens'), and to maintain the 'purity' of the European settler stock. Protection was an aspect of colonial governance essential to the progressive tropicalisation of modernity in the North. While its social technologies and institutions varied from one sphere of human behaviour to another they were ideologically linked, and they functioned alike, to manage and control the human population.

To protect against the extreme of the tropical weather, the government initially had commissioned Wragge to advise on the reorganisation of its Meteorological Service. His subsequent appointment as Government Meteorologist located him within the Post and Telegraph Department, where he was answerable to the Postmaster-General. His literary exuberance in proclaiming the protective value of his profession made him readily available for satire:

Thus when he prophesies in the Brisbane paper a hot day, he adds a column or so as to the effect that hot day will have on different classes and individuals, and tells them 'what to take for it,' or when he announces a change, he shows just how that change will react through the gout or rheumatism of some great personage upon the community at large. Thus the people of Brisbane know their meteorological stormy petrel as a universal genius who is as ready to tell them what to do with their sons as what to feed to their chickens, and when to come in out of the wet ('Books and Their Makers' 144).

This was a peculiarly tropical satire, proclaiming the pathetic character of Queensland's southerners. But Wragge took seriously his role as a Universal Counsellor, issuing all kinds of advice in the daily press—what to do if you have the cramp, how to induce vomiting, as well as how to behave in a raging storm. He was a humanist as well as a scientist, and he realised that disaster management required the preservation of human agency. This is why he individualised cyclones, imbuing them with literary character: Conroy is 'sinister-looking'; Jenkins, 'ugly and suspicious'; Lesina (named after the member for Clermont), 'cute' (Adamson 360-361).

But if weather events in the late nineteenth century were not generally regarded as human, neither were some people. The Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (1897) created two positions, a Northern Protector and a Southern Protector of Aborigines. In the North, the position went to Dr Walter E. Roth, previously

the government medical officer at Normanton (1896-97). He reported initially to the Commissioner of Police, and was stationed at Cooktown. But the administration of the Act took up so much of the Commissioner's time that it soon devolved upon Roth himself, which meant he answered then only to the Minister. He had considerable power, which he wielded through the police and other public service officers whom he appointed as local protectors.

The protection policy he administered 'aimed at isolating and segregating full-blood Aborigines on reserves and at restricting contact (and interbreeding) between them and outsiders, while attempting to assimilate half-castes, and especially their children' (ALRC Report np). Roth's remit was to remove such children—whom we now recognise as the Stolen Children—from their families. But on his tour of the hinterland of Princess Charlotte Bay, the year before the cyclone, he was more concerned about the abduction and sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by 'low-caste European' and 'Chinamen'. He made a number of recommendations for the 'better protection, and improvement,' of the indigenous population in his charge, including the creation of an Aboriginal reserve at Cape Melville, which was never approved (Roth, *Aboriginals* np) But despite his 'enthusiastic interest in the welfare of the blacks' (as the Police Commissioner put it) and the obvious 'humanitarian' implication of his position, the real purpose of the protection policy was to limit indigenous agency and protect the 'seedling' white community from hybridisation.

Aboriginal protagonists in the cyclone's aftermath had obviously acted in accordance with their own cultural values and without expectation of reward for the assistance they had given. But the settler society could not comprehend this kind of attitude, contradicting its own beliefs in the White Man's Burden and the necessity to protect those it considered morally inferior. So the Under Secretary instructed Roth personally to locate all those who had 'given' assistance and deliver the government's 'gifts' to them—'a hundred Government-issued red shirts, a hundred turkey-red dresses, eight dozen tomahawks, one ton of flour, one gross of pipes, 123 ½ pounds of tobacco, two hundred knives.' (Townsend 350)

Roth set out from Cooktown with his 'servant,' Frank, and the police tracker, Euro. They went ashore a little to the north of Cape Bowen, where the landscape was so utterly devastated that Euro had difficulty picking up the track through the tangled wreckage of mangroves and the slippery mounds of putrid mullet and rock cod. He came upon Constable Kenny and his trackers, with a few men from the Cape Barron mob, who embarked upon a criminal investigation following reports of a spearing. At Ninian Bay, where Roth's schooner lay waiting at anchor, they found a few more indigenous survivors. They had lost all of their canoes, their weapons and their hunting gear; and of course their local food sources had been destroyed. Roth distributed the government's gifts and told them to gather the rest of the mob to receive and meet him at Cape Melville the next day.

More than a hundred men, women and children were waiting there on the beach when he arrived. He thanked them for their services and gave out his gifts, along with three loud

cheers for the good Queen and her benevolent Government. He took in return a series of before-and-after photographs. The subjects before appear ‘savage,’ barely clothed and unaccommodated. After, they are transformed, presented in dresses and shirts, ‘civilised.’

Yet the next day as he approached the camp at Bathurst Bay, the sight of the troopers’ sent everyone scampering; and Roth had to send Euro after them to persuade them of the government’s good intentions. On Flinders Island (Queensland) the troopers had again to ‘muster’ the indigenous survivors to receive their gifts. By this time Roth was in a hurry, eager to see and photograph the rock paintings on Clack Island recorded by the botanist, Allan Cunningham, on his voyage with Phillip Parker King on the *Bathurst* in 1821.

In any case, as the ethnographic photographs taken at Bathurst Bay testify, the giving of gifts is only part of the narrative. The 2000 artifacts (and 240 photographic negatives) listed in the Australian Museum’s catalogue as purchased from Roth—‘one of the most complete collections of Aboriginal artefacts ever gathered together from one area’—includes 22 items from Bathurst Head, three from Cape Melville and eleven from Flinders Island, most dating from the year of the cyclone. These include a bark fibre skirt (‘incomplete,’ probably damaged in the cyclone), and several emblematic objects of mourning, one a thread of hair spun from the head of a corpse. But Roth mentions none of these in his official report of the gift-giving expedition; and he had little to say in his ethnographic bulletins either about the people he encountered at Cape Melville, Bathurst Head or Flinders Island (Khan 163-186).

### **Ian Townsend: *The Devil’s Eye* (2008)**

The origin of the cyclone, as Wragge explained it—for he was a spiritualist as well as a scientist—was Energy, the ‘Great Maker’. Nothing in Nature was accidental. The popular conceit, however, was that he himself was responsible. Meteorology then was an arcane science; and while he might easily be scorned for failing to forecast a storm, Wragge was also widely revered as a prophet. One newspaper feature even compared him to the Archangel Gabriel, his utterances lingering ‘like the murmur of the shell’ in the ear of Adam. But Wragge was an unorthodox angel, a Faustian figure, whose forecasts seemed to conjure cyclones from the most ‘uncanny’ places, to call up winds of such heat as to imply ‘diabolical derivation’, and to bring forth waves of such ‘intoxicating carriage’ that one might well imagine ‘they had foregathered with whisky, vodka, absinthe, or some such temperance drink’ (‘Notes of the Day’ 7).

Roth’s inquiries into the cyclone, on the other hand, found that it might have been produced by Aboriginal agency:

At the Melvor River, in June, 1899, I came across a man named Ngamumarko (= mother-rock oyster, i.e. the son of the Rock-oyster) who was believed to have made the terrible cyclone of the previous March. He belonged to the coast-line further north, but could not get home again, as the Cape Melville and Barrow Point natives, through whose country he

would have to pass, had made up their minds to be revenged on account of the serious injury he had done them. (Roth, *North Queensland* np)

Ngamumarko assured Roth that in fact he had *not* made this particular cyclone, though he was perfectly capable of it.

White literary imaginings of Mahina have proved equally supernatural. Thus, in Jack Dey's novel, *Mahina* (2013) the fishermen of the Torres Strait believe to this day that it is bad luck to anchor in Bathurst Bay. When the southeast gales hit, you can hear the souls of the lost crying for salvation in the darkness. Even Ian Townsend's recent novel, *The Devil's Eye*, despite its devoted historical reconstruction of the events of the cyclone based on survivor's accounts and newspaper reports, relies heavily on supernatural explanation. In it, before the cyclone hits, a black cockatoo appears in the rigging of the *Crest of the Wave*, like a heathen god screeching a curse.

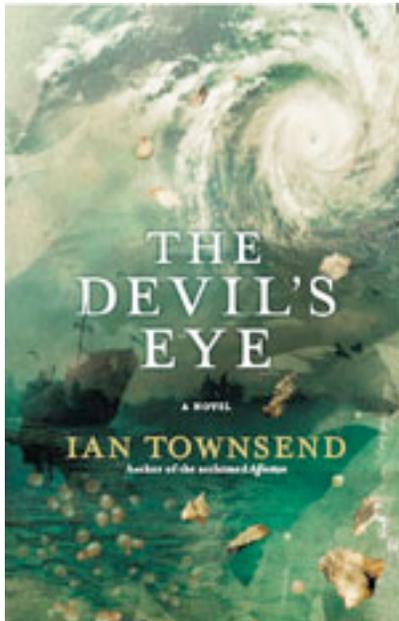


Fig. 4 HarperCollinsPublishing

*The Devil's Eye* is undoubtedly the most vivid and complex imagining and remembering of the cyclone to date. It contains three narratives providing three different perspectives on the storm, as though transmitted from three different weather stations. Each of these takes place in a different geographical setting. But they are linked as part of a larger informational system and narrative tracking of the cyclone toward its disastrous landfall. From Thursday Island, the home of the pearling fleet, we have the perspective of the aging and guilt-ridden Government Resident, John Douglas, a former Queensland Premier of disappointed ambition. Then we have the multi-ethnic perspective of the pearling fleet on its fateful voyaging down the coast toward Cape Melville. And in the hinterland, travelling north from Cooktown, we have Roth, Kenny, and their indigenous entourage.

Each of these narratives has its own intrigue, a kind of uncontainable surplus that is nonetheless part of the larger design. John Douglas, for example, while shackled to Thursday Island and completely dependent on telegraphic communications from the south, has two daughters. Maggie Porter, the wife of the captain of the *Crest of the Wave*, is with the fleet, accompanied by the Resident's granddaughter, Alice. She is also secretly pregnant. The Resident's other daughter, Hope, is nursing in Cooktown, and has recently become engaged to Constable Kenny. Her father remains ignorant of this fact. Roth, however, must tell Kenny that Hope is not who he thinks she is, or indeed who *she*, until recently assumed she was. She has fled her home on Thursday Island in anger and shame after learning that her mother, her father's former servant, was 'a halfcaste Cape Aborigine'—which makes Hope herself also Aboriginal in the eyes of the law. Each narrative, caught in tension with the other, seems headed for disaster: Maggie will be lost in the cyclone; Kenny will need the Police Commissioner's permission to marry his fiancée and will probably lose his job as a result;

and Hope's racial identity will have to be revealed, which means that the Resident is well on his way to losing her as well. As these three narratives converge, the repressed histories of Australia and Queensland are caught up in the cyclone and begin to unravel. Kenny is annoyed to find Roth accompanying him. What should the spearing of a couple of pearlers have to do with him? It's not his job to protect aliens! But Roth's purpose in fact is to protect the Aborigines from the Police Constable.

The tension between Roth and Kenny shows the contradiction at the heart of the protection policy, and of tropical governance in Australia more generally, for both men bear responsibility for maintaining the social order and are equally representative of its dominant ideology. But policing and protecting are clearly at odds. Ironically, the farther north they go, the more accustomed they become to each other's views, the clearer the contradictions appear; and all the time they are moving slowly, surely, unwittingly into the cyclone's path. Constantly circling, ready to pounce, together in fact they constitute the cyclone's mirror image. Even before they leave Cooktown, Kenny is spinning around on Roth, 'fury hollowing out his voice' (27). As he sees it, Roth is 'a black cloud' (71) following him. Strangely, they look alike.

At Bathurst Bay the breeze hits like bullets; and the world seems to hold its breath as though anticipating the apocalypse. Then a loud boom rolls out across the water. On the *Crest of the Wave*, the boom falls on the bosun, 'a South American negro as black as the mountains' (89). Bandaged up in his hammock, he murmurs: 'Huracan. The God of Evil is about.' (273). But the affective character of the Taino deity is the same as the Aboriginal Wind that lives in the Cliff Islands off Princess Charlotte Bay. 'Cheeky' is how Euro describes him—which, in Aboriginal English, means angry, mean, dangerous, devilish. He's cranky, and 'sometimes blows everyone away.' (246)

At Barrow Point the Aboriginal camp is deserted and the wind in the trees creates a sense of dread. Kenny checks his revolver. The trees weep in the downpour. Out on the ocean, Maggie imagines she hears gunshots. The cyclone echoes the violence of the frontier. Maggie's death is particularly pointed because in reality Margaret Porter did survive. (There is no record of her being pregnant either.) But in the novel the pregnant white woman is sacrificed, and with her the perfect white pearl she imagines growing inside her. The modality of her death is 'tropical gothic,' its setting a dark ship's corridor: broken boards, light flickering dimly through a crack in the hatch, a storm raging. Of course, bad weather—dark, gloomy, stormy—is stock and trade for the gothic genre. But one does not expect gloom in a tropical setting. So the 'dark state' of tropic gothic requires some kind of glooming device. Typically, this is a cyclone, a force of nature that masks the contrivance. Nonetheless, the formal qualities of the genre are culturally determined.

Benedict Anderson used the term 'tropical gothic' to describe the 'grimly amusing' social and cultural distortions produced by metropolitan capital to justify the exploitation of colonial societies. Historically speaking, that specific derangement—characteristic of and essential to the operation of colonialism—is racism (Anderson 137). This fits with Victor Sage's understanding of the gothic more generally as a 'momentary derangement of the perceptual apparatus' in which 'characters struggle to adjust their perceptions of sensory experience against the rational structures that sustain their world view' (Sage 176). It

occurs when one is fleetingly convinced of the reality that one glimpses out of the corner (or tail) of one's eye, when the normal (or frontal) reality slides out of focus and is momentarily displaced. It is a racially haunted moment. In other words, tropical gothic is a peculiarly postcolonial permutation on the genre.

Perhaps the most memorable instance of this haunting occurs when Maggie Porter kicks her way out of her cabin, which is in danger of becoming her coffin. The door opens 'like a gallows trap door' and she plunges in a rush of water into another cabin—the main cabin. She is up to her breasts in water, choking on the derangement—splintered furniture, paper, clothes—and the dreamlike vision of the body of Japanese diver, floating face down. And in that moment of tropical derangement, surrounded by the cyclone swirling and hissing like a serpent, she instinctively wonders: is this the raft sent by God to save her baby?

A Barrow Point, the police party's camp is flattened by the wind. The tents collapse. The Protector is left with just one blanket to protect the entire group. Black and white, they assemble under it in a trance, holding hands, a symbolic tableau of an alternative community, born of the cyclone. It is a community modelled in retrospect on reconciliation ('breathing each other's breath' (Townsend 306)). But the cyclone is also a serpent. Kenny looks down between his own knees and sees the devil rising from the earth. The surge is upon them. The blanket flies off 'like a witch into the darkness' (326).

One of the last sounds Maggie hears before she falls into the ocean abyss is the sound of a lantern, hanging from the ship's ceiling at such a 'mad angle' (321) that it keeps striking the upper deck. On Thursday Island, her father imagines God tapping out a telegraph: *Urgent*. But he can do nothing. The next thing his daughter hears is the sound of an axe, which is her husband up on deck cutting away the masts, a final indication that 'all is lost.' The gothic moment of derangement dissolves into reality. 'Slowly, the floor became the floor again, the wall the wall. The Japanese diver floated by' (322). As Roth says: 'When we return to where we were, we see it differently, having learned something new' (351).

Every good story, in the Protector's view, begins with a question, such as 'why does the porcupine have spines?' A good story reaches its conclusion with formal predictability: 'That's why the porcupine has spines.' But in the end the reason that the porcupine has spines hardly matters. It matters only that we having learned 'something new.' Constable Kenny wants the meaning of the journey all wrapped up with a message. ('Why *does* the porcupine have spines?' he demands (351). But Roth slides away from the answer, as the novel also refuses to tell us how we should understand the cyclone. But when the steamer docks at Thursday Island, it is Hope who emerges at the top of the gangway. She has come back to her father, and she is cradling her dead sister's child. This reordering of the family's social reality is nothing if not suggestive for the nation's future—as it might have been.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Local historians, Jim McJannet and Omar Bin Awel, uncovered her grave in 2009, stating the tomb perpetuates inaccuracies, one of which is the spelling of the name, which they contend is 'Mohara'. See Royal Geographical Society of Queensland website <http://www.rgsq.org.au/11-142c> Accessed 15 Dec 2015. [*Editor's Note*]

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