CHAPTER IV.

A HALF-CENTURY OF MINING.

The Quest for Gold a Colonising Agency.—Earliest Discoveries of the Precious Metal in Queensland.—Port Curtis.—Rockhampton District.—Peak Downs.—Gympie.—Ravenswood.—Charters Towers.—Palmer.—Mount Morgan.—Croydon.—Later Discoveries.—Yield at Charters Towers and Mount Morgan.—Copper Mining.—Tin.—Silver.—Queensland the Home of All Kinds of Minerals and Precious Stones.—Mineral Wealth in Cairns Hinterland.—Copper Deposits in Cloncurry District.—The Etheridge.—Anakie Gem Field.—Opal Fields.—Extensive Coal Measures.—Railway Communication with Mining Fields.—Value of Queensland Mineral Output.—Prospects of Industry.

The quest for gold, to say nothing of other minerals, has had much to do with the settlement and development of Queensland, apart from the direct advantages conferred on the State by her mining industry. It has brought to our shores many thousands of people who would not otherwise have come here; it has helped to open up for occupations other than mining previously unknown and unexplored regions that, but for the prospector, might have lain dormant for many more years; while the successful development of the territory's rich and almost unlimited mineral wealth has aided in making our State known in other parts of the world, and thus assisted in attracting hither the people and capital that have been the chief contributing factors to our wonderful progress.

Fifty years ago, when what is now Queensland, casting itself free from the parental skirts of New South Wales, began to walk alone, its mining industry did not exist. It would not be correct to say that gold—here, as elsewhere in Australia, the first to be sought and found of the numerous minerals that have since proved a source of so much wealth to the State—had not been then discovered upon our shores. Fifteen years before, men attached to an official establishment at Gladstone, Port Curtis, found "colours" of the yellow metal; and in 1858, the year preceding "Separation," occurred the Canoona "rush," which
proved so disastrous to the 15,000 or 20,000 adventurers who then swarmed to the Rockhampton district in search of the “saint-seducing gold.” But the so-called “colours” detected at picturesque Gladstone were nothing more than can to this day be traced in scores of places in Queensland; while the find at Canoona proved a fiasco so great as to spread abroad the impression that this part of Australia, as a prospective field for mining enterprise, was a delusion. But was it? Within a dozen miles or so of the scene of the Canoona disappointment was situated the “mountain of gold” that has since earned world-wide fame under the name of Mount Morgan; and by the end of Queensland’s first half-century the Rockhampton (or Central) district has turned out gold to the sum of nearly 3,500,000 fine ounces, representing a money value of over £14,500,000—the bulk of it won within the last moiety of the half-century.

Three years after the foundation of the colony of Queensland gold in payable quantities was discovered on the Peak Downs, inland from Rockhampton; but it was not till the finding of the Gympie field late in 1867—eight years after severance from New South Wales—that Queensland first definitely took rank as a gold producer. Within six months from the time when the wandering digger Nash, fossicking in the gullies running into the upper Mary River, found the promising specimens in his dish which made him hasten to Maryborough to report his discovery, 15,000 men had flocked to the spot from all parts of Australia. The place had hardly been heard of before. Pressmen in Brisbane did not even know how to spell the name “Gympie” when first the news arrived; but within a very few weeks its fame spread far and wide. The gullies in the vicinity of Nash’s claim were rich and numerous. One nugget brought to light weighed nearly a thousand ounces, and was worth £3,675. Soon alluvial gave place to quartz mining, and within five years gold to the value of more than £1,500,000 had been won. Up to the end of 1908—that is, in forty-one years—the field had produced gold worth £10,350,000, and is still “going strong.” Like all other fields, it has of course had its ups and downs, and just now is recovering its feet after one of its “downs.” Last year Gympie produced gold to the value of nearly £270,000; the grade of its ore is improving, and its monthly yields are now showing comparative increases.

Since the discovery of the Gympie goldfield there has been no cessation in the progress of mining in Queensland. From one end of the
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but still much to be desired—was the magnet which attracted the peripatetic prospector away from the comforts of civilisation into the rugged wilds of the coastal ranges and the gullies and stony stream-beds of the eastern watershed; and for a long while it was only the gold discoveries that attracted much attention. A year or so after the Gympie find, the Ravenswood goldfield, south-west from Townsville, "broke out," to use the phrase of the old-time digger. In 1869 the precious metal was found on the Gilbert River, and the Gilbert, Etheridge, and Woolgar fields were proclaimed. Then came Charters Towers, our premier goldfield, in 1872; the Palmer, inland from Cooktown (then the very far North), in 1873; the Hodgkinson, a little more to the south, in 1875; the great Mount Morgan in 1882; Croydon in 1886; and other discoveries, until Dickie, a veteran prospector, found the Hamilton and Alice River fields in the Peninsula—the former in 1899 and the latter as late as 1904.

In its thirty-six years of existence Charters Towers has turned out over 5,800,000 ounces—more than £24,600,000 worth of gold; last year's output was of the value of £700,000; and to-day the indications in the deeper ground of the field are such that there is reason to expect that both the term of its existence and the volume of its output will be greatly extended. At Mount Morgan—the show mine of Queensland, and one of the greatest in the world—there has been quarried out of the hill and dug from the depths beneath stone that, under treatment by works in every way worthy of such a mine, has, in a little over twenty-two years, yielded gold to the value of over £13,760,000; has paid in wages and other expenditure about £7,000,000; and has given to the fortunate holders of its 1,000,000 shares some £7,230,000 in dividends. That is what the big mine has done. What is it doing now? True, the phenomenal yields of gold and the high grade of its auriferous ores that characterised the earlier years of its history showed signs of diminishing as time went on; but diminishing yields were counterbalanced by improved methods of mining and treatment, with consequent reduction of costs; and a few years since copper as well as gold was found in the lower levels, with the result that the mine has become at once the most productive copper and the most productive gold mine of the State. It has already turned out copper to the value of about £1,500,000, which has to be added to the gold yield, given above, to arrive at its total product; while the value of the mine's aggregate output for 1908 (over £1,017,000) was greater, with perhaps one exception, than that of any previous year in its history.

Though for some years gold was the only string to the bow of Queensland's mining industry, that state of things has long since changed. In the early sixties copper was mined in the State, but then and for many years afterwards only to a limited extent. Tin came on the scene in 1872. During the first forty years of Queensland's existence the gold won within her borders was four times the worth of all other minerals and coal produced; but so rapid has been the increase during the past ten years in the production of the industrial metals—or "other minerals," as they are officially termed, to distinguish them from gold—that in 1907 their value exceeded that of the gold yield by over £170,000. Indeed, during the five years ending with that year there was an almost phenomenal expansion. The output of 1902 was of the value of only £89,660. In the following year it increased to £846,280, and then for four years jumped up by leaps and bounds, until in 1907 the yield was worth no less than £2,153,226.

The known mineral-producing country of Queensland extends over an immense area. It begins on the southern border, where the Silver Spur mine maintains a constant output of silver and other mineral products, and where the Stanthorpe district, our first stanniferous field, still materially assists, with the aid of dredges, in the tin production of the State; and extends northerly a hundred miles beyond the goldfield of Coen, in the Cape York Peninsula. Over this immense distance of some 1,300 miles from south to north, and extending inland from 50 to 200 miles from the eastern coast, are located at varying intervals fields producing gold, silver, copper, tin, coal, lead, sapphires, manganese, wolfram, molybdenite, bismuth, and graphite; while further to the west are the opal fields of Jundah, Opalton, and Kynuna, the copper deposits of the vast Cloncurry district, the silver-lead mines of Lawn Hills in the Burketown district, and the Croydon goldfield, also on the Gulf waters. Queensland, with a huge area of 670,500 square miles and a scant population of little more than half a million of people, has a hundred proclaimed gold, mineral, and coal fields, having a combined area of about 50,000,000 acres.

Apart from goldfields, by far the most important and productive of
these areas is the tract of country which forms the hinterland of the port of Cairns—a tract which includes the tin-mining centres of Herberton, Stannary Hills, Irvinebank, Nymbool, and Reid's Creek; the copper and silver-lead mines of Chillagoe and Mungana; the copper mines of Mount Molloy and O.K.; the wolfram, molybdenite, and bismuth mines of Wolfram Camp, Bamford, and Mount Carbine; and the antimony deposits of the Mitchell River. The two large mineral fields into which this portion of the State is now officially divided—Chillagoe and Herberton—have together an area of over 8,500,000 acres. The port of Cairns was not established till 1876—seventeen years after the foundation of the State. Now there yearly pass through it from the area mentioned minerals worth from £600,000 to £800,000, exclusive of the mineral product from the Etheridge and Croydon fields, which also, for the most part, finds an outlet through the same channel. Copper and tin are responsible for more than half the amount named, but the potentialities of the district as far as other minerals are concerned are almost unlimited. Of wolfram—taking only one example—this part of the State alone can supply the world's demand, and have a good deal to spare afterwards. The Queensland Government Geologist has estimated that the wolfram-bearing country in this portion of Queensland extends over an area of 3,500 square miles. Given anything like a permanent demand and a fair and steady market, wolfram production would soon take a prominent position in our mining industry. The historical tin mine of the district is the Vulcan, at Irvinebank, which has attained the greatest depth (1,450 feet) reached by any tin mine in Queensland, and where the appliances for recovering the metal are more up-to-date than at Dolcoath, the most famous tin mine of Cornwall. During the twenty-five years of its existence, the Vulcan Mine has from 106,000 tons of tin ore produced over 9,790 tons of concentrates, worth something approaching £500,000, and has paid its lucky shareholders dividends to the extent of £160,000. The opening up of this large and prolific district is largely due to the enterprise of the Chillagoe Company, which not only has developed extensively its several mines and erected large ore-treatment works, but has built the railway—in length 93 miles—which connects those mines and numerous others with the Government railway at the top of the Coastal Range at Mareeba, and is building a further extension to the Etheridge field, nearly 150 miles further inland.

Queensland is known as a country of magnificent distances, and one
example of its vast expanse is the extent of the copper area of the Cloncurry district, which is tapped by the Great Northern Railway 480 miles westward from the port of Townsville. This district is by far the largest tract of copper-bearing country in Australia, and one of the largest in the world. As the crow flies, it extends north and south for more than 150 miles, and east and west some 80 or 100 miles. Over this large area, covering at least 15,000 square miles, copper has been proved to exist. At the close of 1907 there were on the Warden’s books over 800 mineral leases, besides some hundreds of claims and several freeholds. The outcrops throughout the district have been described by one of the Government Geologists as innumerable and phenomenally rich. But the district is still in the prospecting stage, and it is yet too soon to pronounce an opinion as to whether the deposits generally will live at depth, or of what value they will be if they do, although it may safely be said that the developments in the more important mines during the past twelve months have been distinctly encouraging. Smelting operations are already in progress at two, if not three, of the principal mining centres of the district, and a railway extension from Cloncurry 74 miles southward is now in course of construction. Another Queensland mineral field of vast extent is the Etheridge. It has an area equal to half that of Scotland, and the Warden for the field, when he undertakes his periodical patrol, has an itinerary of about 400 miles.

Passing reference has been made to the sapphire field of Anakie, in Central Queensland, and to the opal to be found in her trackless West. As a matter of fact, isolated finds of many kinds of gems besides these two have been made in widely separated parts of the State, but as a recognised branch of the mining industry opal and sapphire mining has for years occupied an important place. In the Anakie field, 190 miles from Rockhampton, on the Central Railway, the existence of gem-stones was officially reported as early as 1892. Ten years later the Government Geologist, reporting on these sapphire fields, stated that “the total distance along which deposits are found . . . is altogether about fifteen miles. Of an area of 400 square miles examined, fifty square miles contain deposits carrying sapphires of more or less value.” In 1905, another member of the Geological staff reported that the most important recent development had been the opening up of a second bed of the sapphire wash at a depth of 25 feet, and that excellent stones, freer from flaws than those nearer the surface, were being obtained from the lower deposit. Mining
for these precious stones, many of which are of the most beautiful description, has been to a considerable extent detrimentally affected by the difficulty experienced in getting a regular market and what is considered a fair price for the gems; but, notwithstanding this drawback, there was a large expansion in the industry during the four years preceding 1907—the annual production having increased in that period from £7,000 to £35,000 in value. In 1908, however, there was a considerable falling off, mainly because miners were not satisfied with the prices obtainable; but, with an improvement in this respect, renewed activity on the field, which even now supports a population of over 1,000 persons, may be looked for.

The opal-bearing country extends over a much wider area than sapphires. The width of this country is, roughly, about 250 miles, while in length it extends right from the New South Wales border half-way up the State in a curve bending towards the South Australian border. The chief centres of production have been Kynuna (near Winton), Opalton and Fermoy (in the Longreach district), Eromanga, and Yowah (near Thargomindah). The Queensland opal is recognised as being unsurpassed for its brilliance and iridescence, and there is reason to believe that much more will be found than has yet been unearthed; but the quest for it is difficult owing to the arid nature and vast extent of the western plains where it occurs. In good seasons men in those regions find ready employment on the pastoral stations; in very dry ones, they cannot prospect for the precious stone, and the result has been that the industry has fluctuated even more than that of sapphire mining. The highest point was attained in 1895, when the value of the opal product reached nearly £33,000. Of late years Queensland has been blessed with good seasons, and the uncertain occupation of opal mining has, with many men, given place to the more regular and more comfortable station life. While the opal, the sapphire, and other precious stones have been dug from Queensland's earth, her Northern waters have for years yielded the lustrous pearl, and in 1908 pearl-shell to the value of £71,000 was exported.

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the years to come, it would be absurd to suppose that there will be no further advance. As a matter of fact, many well qualified to judge do not hesitate to say that the industry is as yet in its infancy. It has been truly said of gold that "what it is, there it is"; and what you have to do is to find where it is. When it is remembered, however, that the prominent hill known as Mount Morgan, with its millions' worth of golden ore, was within a day's journey of the populous town of Rockhampton, and remained undiscovered until 1882, although alluvial gold had been found at its base for years previously and the disappointed miners from Canoona had twenty-three years before swarmed in its vicinity; when we recollect that only quite recently nuggets have been found in the streets of some of the oldest of Victorian mining townships, who shall say what has yet to be unearthed in the wide expanses of Queensland's bush, a great deal of which is already known to be "rich with the spoils of Nature"?

"Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear;"

and the experience of the last half-century amply justifies the belief that untold millions lie hidden in the earthen depths of Queensland.