

# (Re-)Assembling Rural Place in Agri-food Globalization

**Michael Woods**

*Aberystwyth University*

[m.woods@aber.ac.uk](mailto:m.woods@aber.ac.uk)

[www.globalruralproject.wordpress.com](http://www.globalruralproject.wordpress.com)

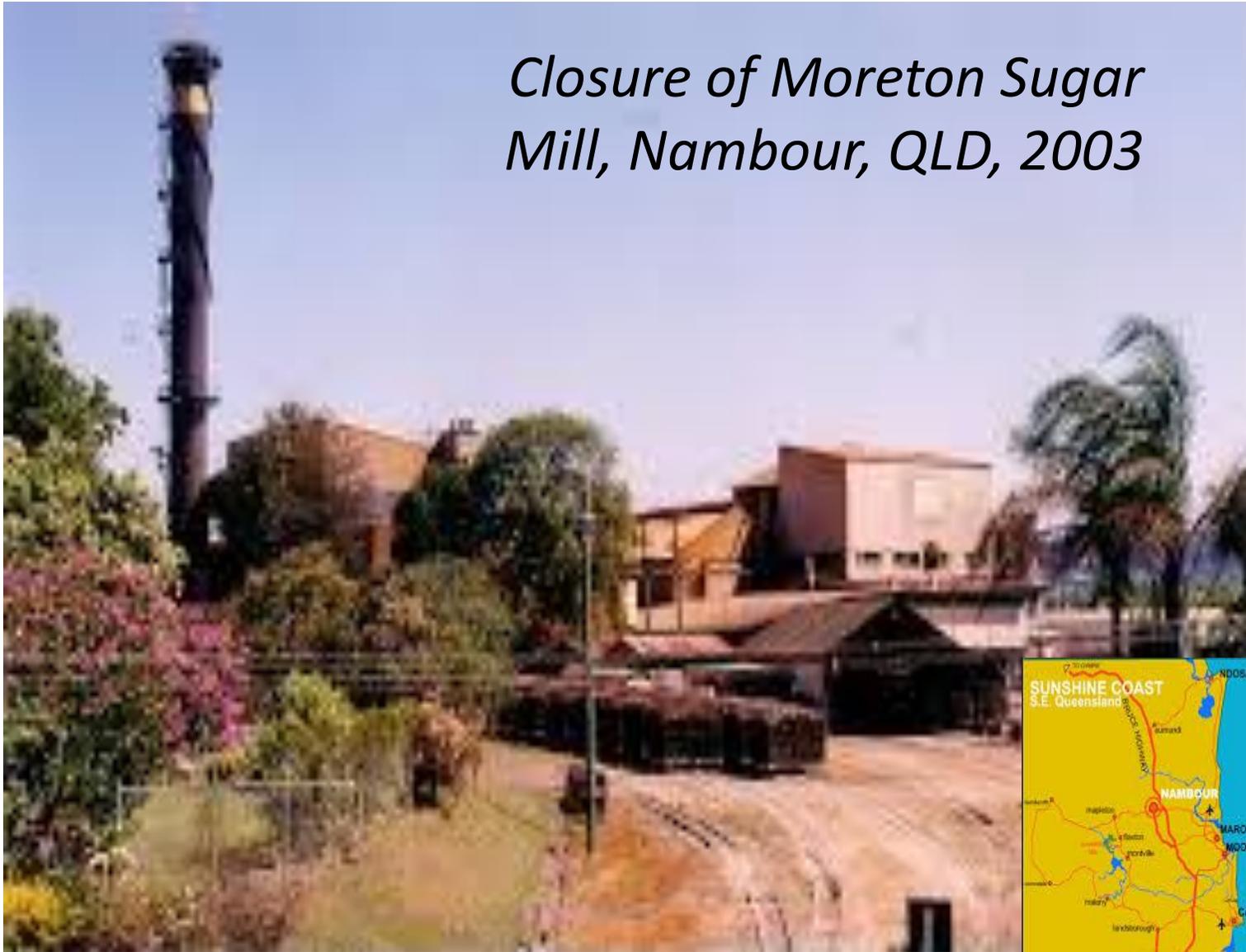
Twitter: @globalrural

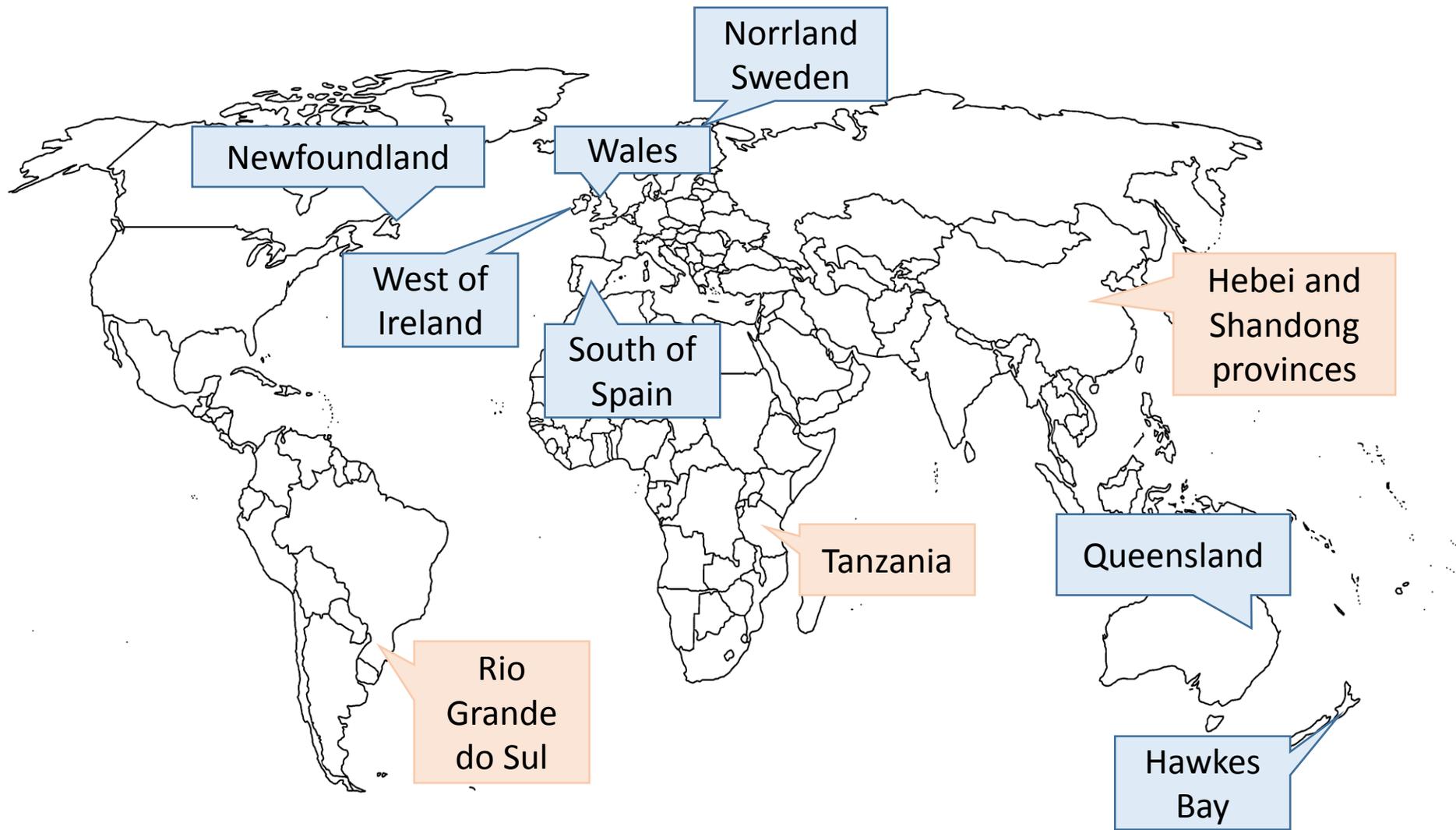


# Agri-food globalization and place

- Agri-food globalization, trade deals and global-level economic restructuring have impacts in rural places
- Empirical evidence of land use change, knock-on economic impacts, loss of employment, out-migration etc
- Political economy analysis provided understanding of global-scale processes and differential national and regional impacts
- Limited knowledge of detailed chain of connections through which global actions reverberate to the local, and the critical points that fix different outcomes in different places

*Closure of Moreton Sugar Mill, Nambour, QLD, 2003*





# GLOBAL-RURAL project

European Research Council Advanced Grant  
2014-2019

 @globalrural

[www.globalruralproject.wordpress.com](http://www.globalruralproject.wordpress.com)



# Assemblage approach

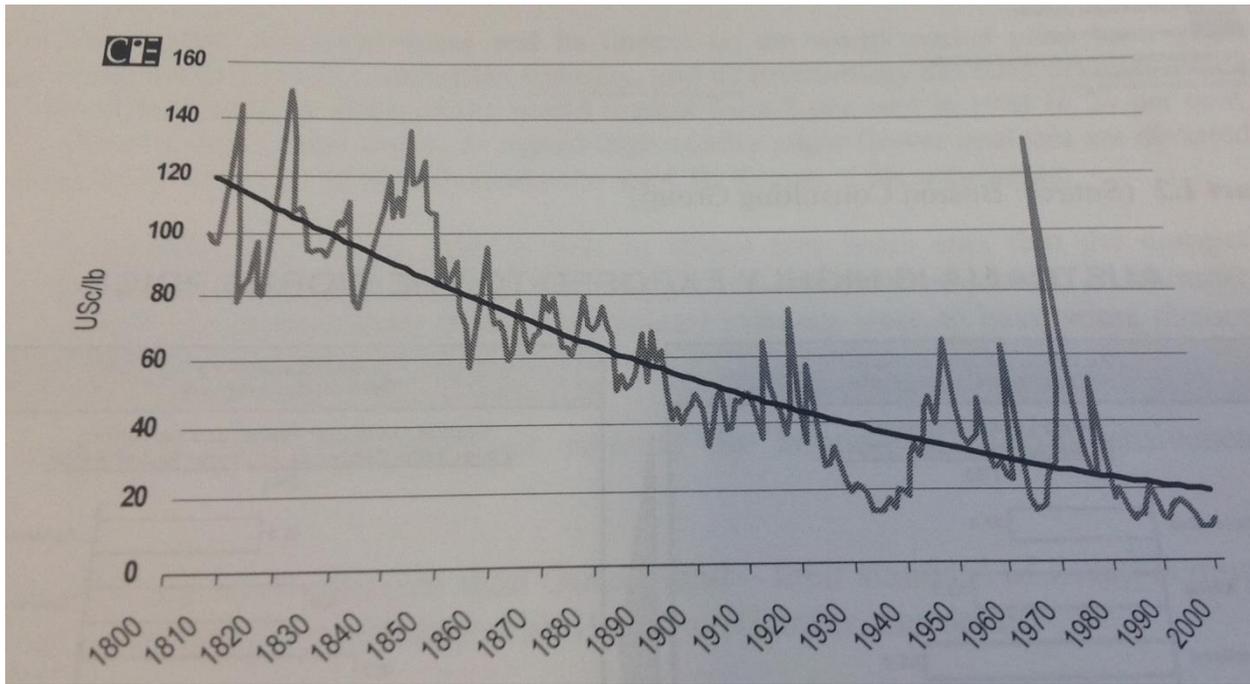
- Emphasises the relational, heterogeneous and contingent nature of social, economic and environmental formations
- Use to explore more-than-human character of agri-food networks, also study of 'global assemblages' (Ong & Collier 2005) (e.g. Hollander 2010 on global ethanol assemblage)
- Follow de Landa's (2006) characterisation of assemblages:
  - Components with material and expressive roles
  - Given shape by territorialisation
  - Given meaning by coding and decoding
  - Defined by exteriority of relations
  - Dynamic, contingent and constantly changing

# Global sugar assemblage

- Components: Cane, beet, raw sugar, refined sugar, mills, refineries, storage, transport, packaging, consumer products, labour, consumers, capital, corporations, regulatory institutions, etc.
- Territorialisation: Commodity chains connecting production and consumption, shaped by regulatory structures and agreements
- Failure of the 1937 International Sugar Agreement
- Striated territorialisation of bilateral preferential agreements between producers and major markets (e.g. UK imperial preference system)
- Underpinned by tariffs, subsidies and negotiated preferential prices

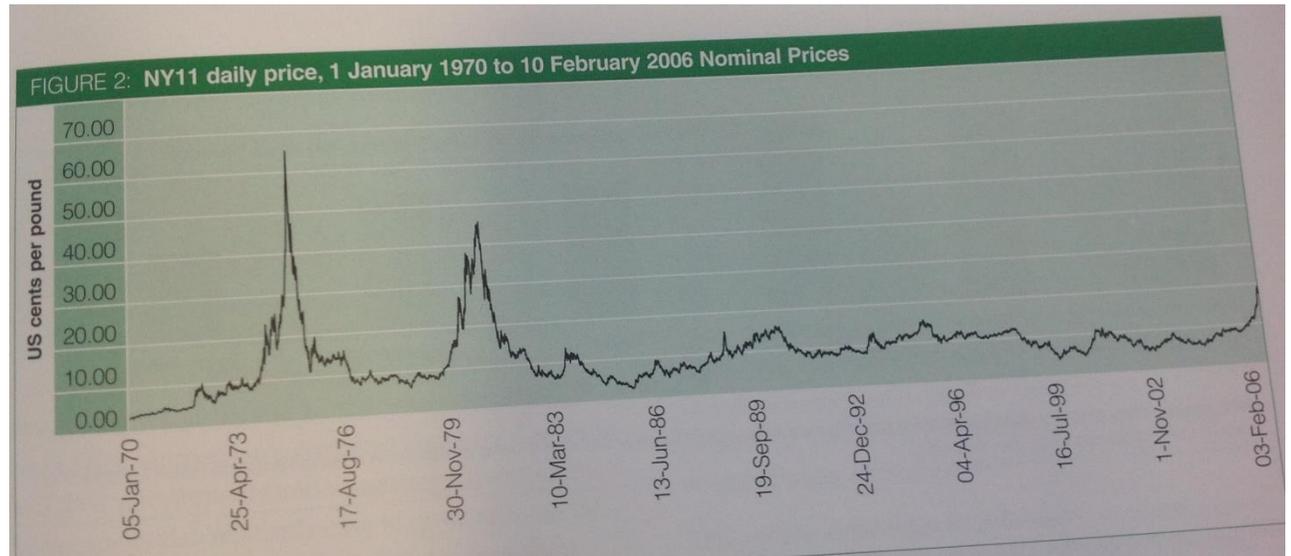
# Global sugar assemblage

- Recoding of sugar in popular culture from luxury to unhealthy food
- Decline in sugar consumption in west balanced by rise in consumption in Asia > reterritorialization
- Negotiation of new agreements for supply to emerging markets, competition between producer nations
- Increase in supply of sugar from Brazil to world market (linked to reconfiguration of Brazilian sugar assemblage with deregulation and end of Proalocool Program), 8% market in 1981 > 21% in 2001
- Global over-supply of sugar and long-term decline of world market price



Long-term trend in world sugar price (Source: Sugar Industry Review Working Party 1996)

World sugar price since 1970 (Source: Sugar Industry Oversight Group Strategic Vision, 2006)

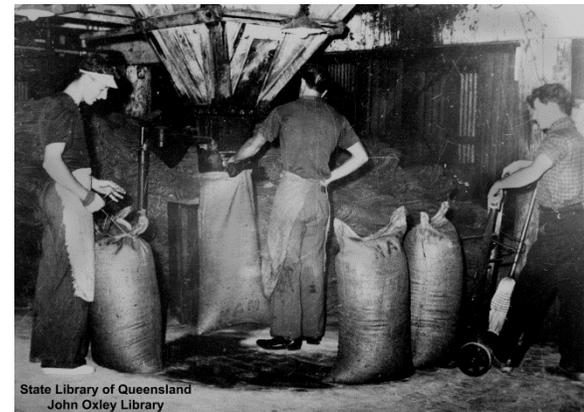




# Australian sugar assemblage

“A key feature of the sugar industry is the strong interdependency between cane growers and mill owners. Sugarcane must be milled within 16 hours of harvesting to prevent deterioration. Similarly, sugar mills represent dedicated capital, which, without a steady supply of cane, have little or no value. Thus, a high degree of coordination between cane growers and mill owners is necessary to maximise returns (for example, coordinating transport arrangements, agreeing on optimal harvesting times, etc.)”

*Boston Consulting Group (1996),  
report for Sugar Industry Review Working Party*



# Australian sugar assemblage

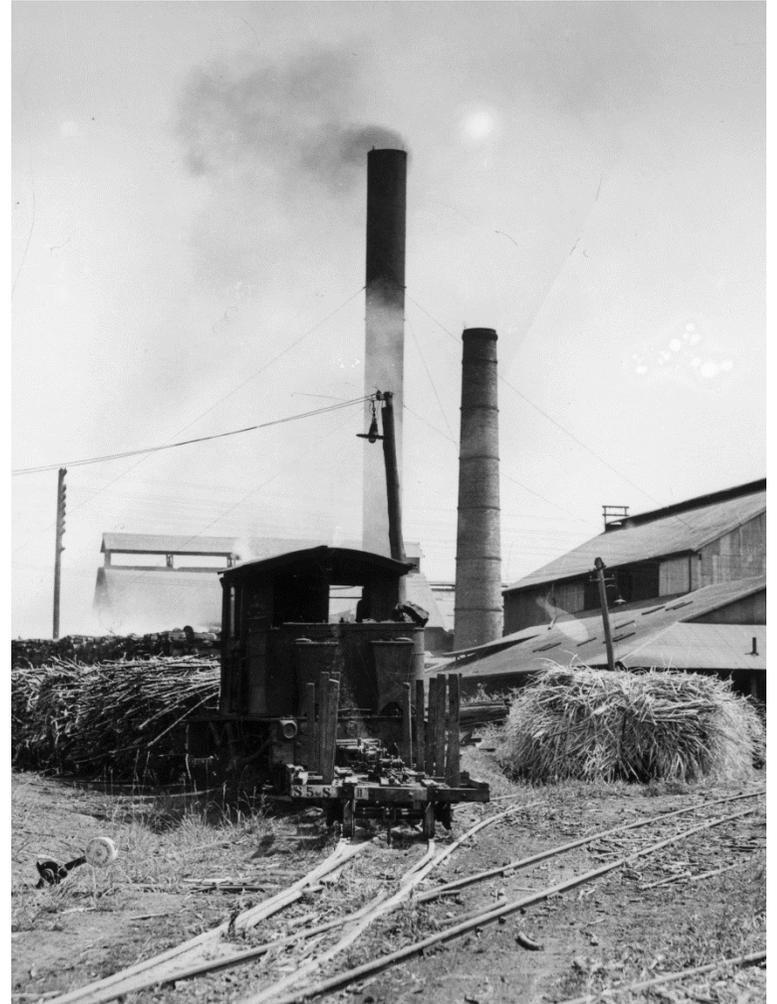
- Over 80% of Australian raw sugar exported in late 1990s
- Australia more exposed to world market fluctuations than any other major sugar producer
- Re-orientation of exterior relations following end of British imperial preference system, search for new markets, especially Asia
- Advocate for liberalisation of world sugar markets and access to protected markets such as USA
- Dismantling of protection of domestic market, removing tariff on imported sugar at estimated cost of \$26.7 million to sugar industry

# Australian sugar assemblage

- Australian competitive advantage in global assemblage relied on productivity, technical innovation and proximity to emerging markets
- Advantages eroded by mobility and mutability of components: incorporation of Australian innovations in other national assemblages, notably Brazil
- Loss of share in Asian markets to Brazil; drop in share of world market from 22% in 1993 to 15% in 2001
- Continuing low world market price of sugar
- Poor weather depressed Queensland sugar harvest in 1998

# Moreton Mill sugar assemblage

- Cane-land
- Cane plants
- Cutters and cutting equipment
- Cane trains
- Mill
- Milling equipment
- Mill labour
- Raw crushed sugar
- Waste and by-products

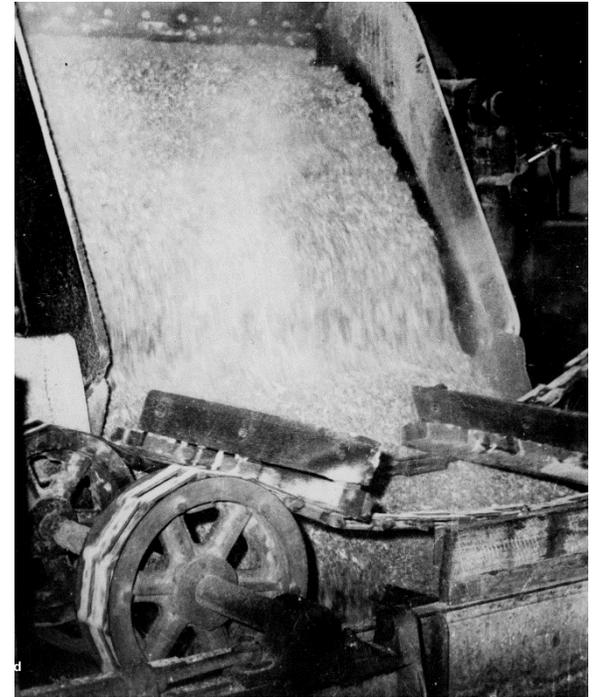




# Moreton Mill sugar assemblage

“The profitability of a mill summarises the return for the sector is relational to inputs, specifically the large amount of capital invested in a highly specialised infrastructure. Profitability at a given price for raw sugar is fundamentally determined by the volume of cane a mill receives, and therefore by its supply area. A threshold amount of cane throughput and its associated raw sugar production are required to ensure profitability.”

*Walker et al. (2004) Regional Planning and the Sugar Industry, p 52*



# Moreton Mill sugar assemblage

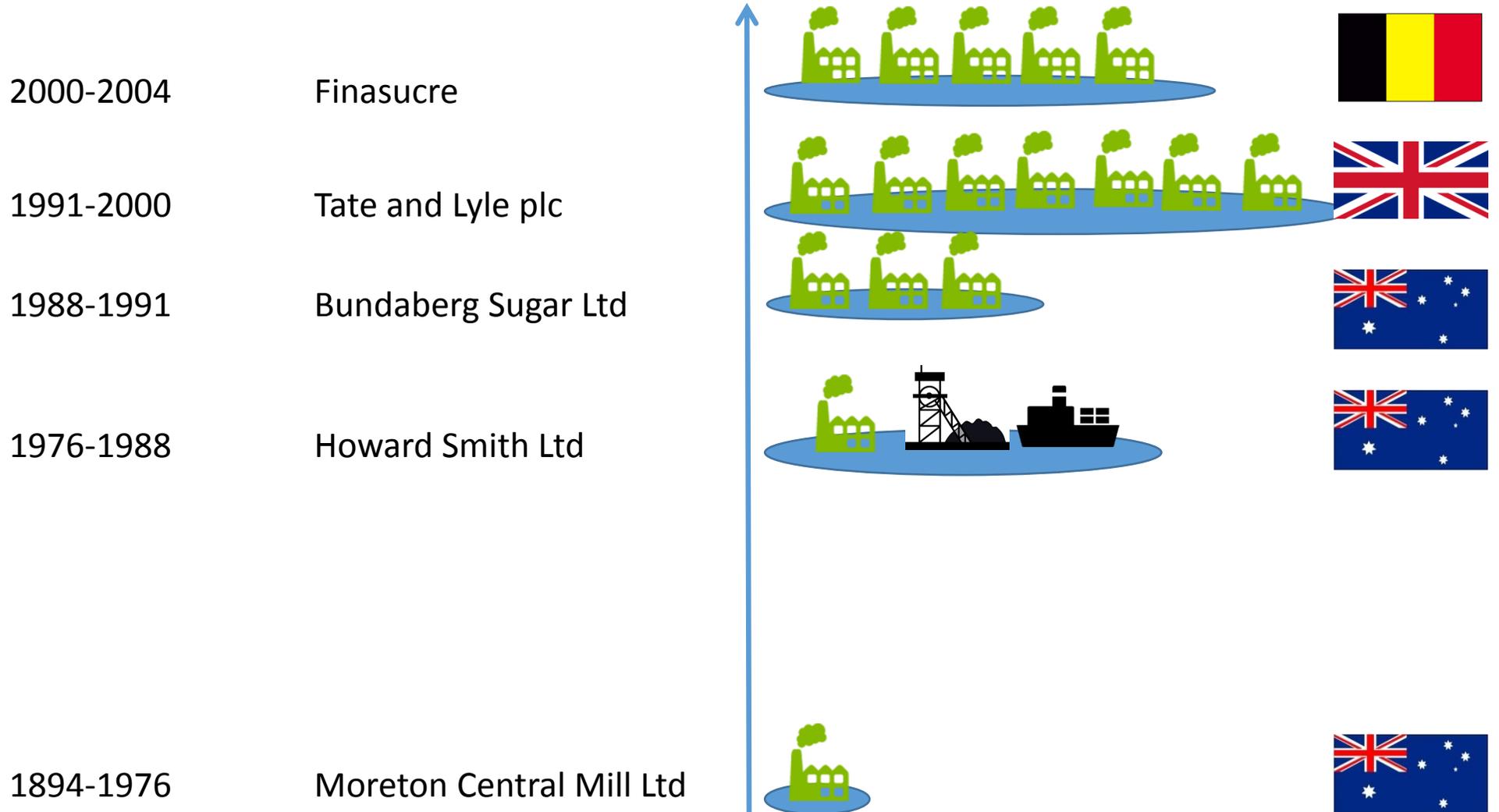
- Consensus view that viability of mill depended on increasing production
- Increasing production required expanding the assigned land: reterritorialisation by recoding and enrolling new components
- Competition for land with alternative assemblages, especially urban development and tourism
- Efforts to protect cane-land through local zoning laws not sufficient?

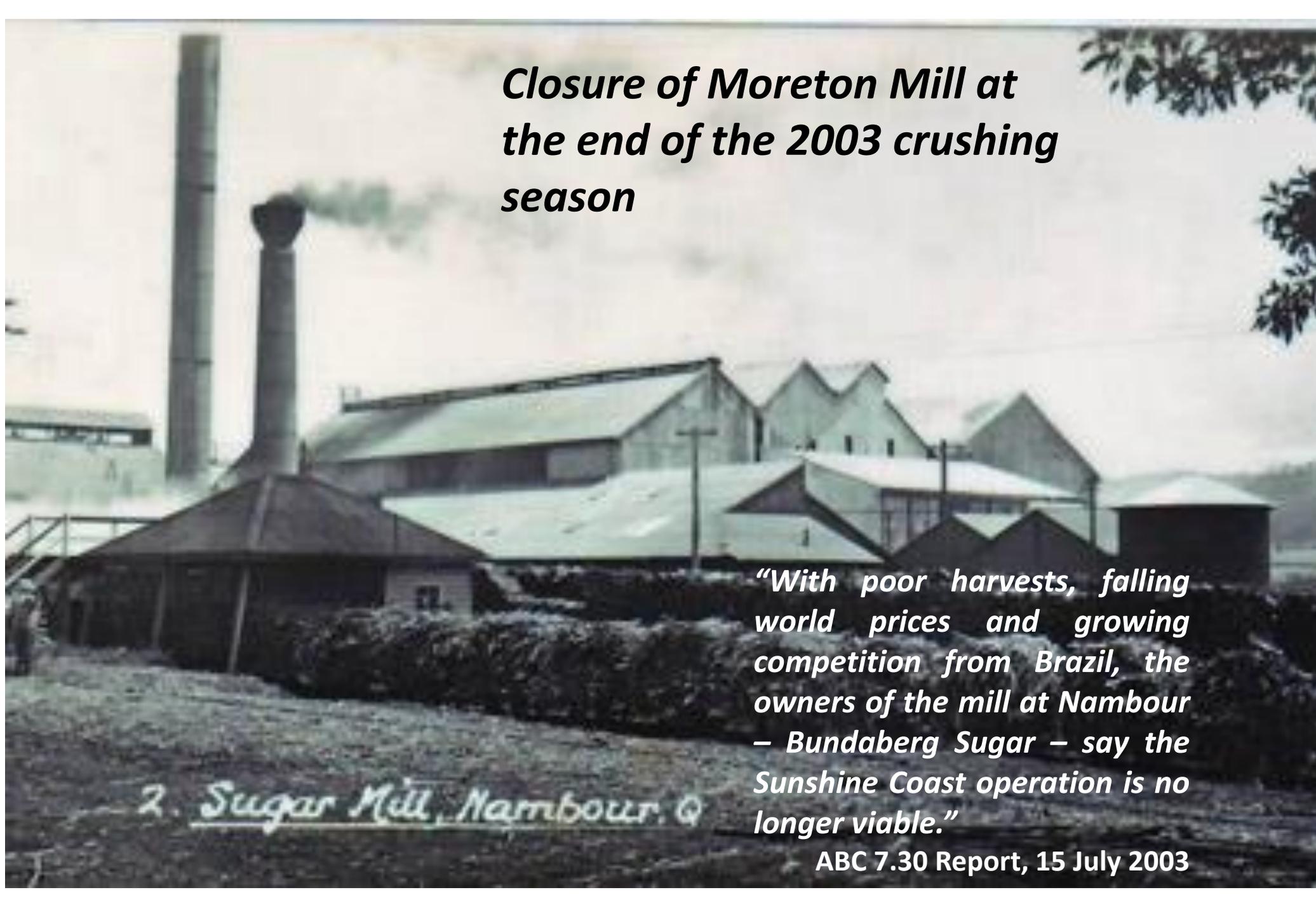
# Moreton Mill sugar assemblage

Long-term viability of the Moreton Mill sugar assemblage constrained by the materiality, arrangement and adaptability of its components, but ultimately defined by exterior relations:

- Geographical location and competition from other local assemblages
- Reconfiguration of the global sugar assemblage and fluctuations in the world market price for raw sugar
- The recoding of Moreton Mill within the corporate assemblage of its owners

# Owners of Moreton Mill





***Closure of Moreton Mill at  
the end of the 2003 crushing  
season***

***“With poor harvests, falling  
world prices and growing  
competition from Brazil, the  
owners of the mill at Nambour  
– Bundaberg Sugar – say the  
Sunshine Coast operation is no  
longer viable.”***

***2. Sugar Mill, Nambour, Q***

**ABC 7.30 Report, 15 July 2003**

# Reassemblage

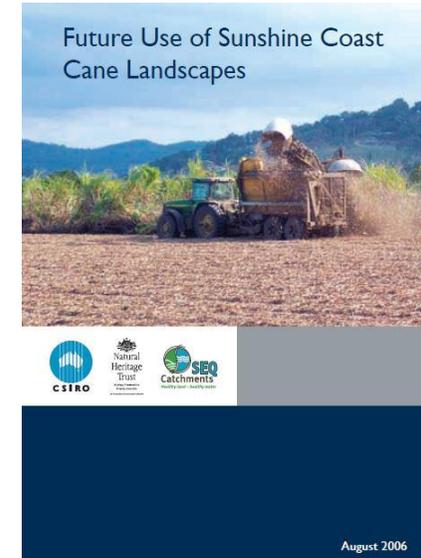
- Initial responses focused on finding alternative uses for cane sugar; i.e. attaching the components to a new assemblage
1. Attach to another sugar mill's assemblage
    - Some cane transported to Maryborough
    - Only economical in times of higher world sugar prices
  2. Attach to the global ethanol assemblage
    - Still required cane to be crushed
    - Growers cooperative sought to buy Moreton Mill
    - Owners refused to sell

# Reassemblage

3. Construct a new assemblage with a new product for new markets
  - Locally developed process to turn cane into stockfeed for cattle, marketed as 'cow candy'
  - Biocane identified markets in Japan and South Korea
  - Used some machinery from Moreton Mill but not site
  - Capital investment required for new plant – government funding replaced by Chinese investment
  - Technical difficulties drained capital reserves and production and supply hit by two wet seasons
  - Biocane went into administration in 2010

# Reassemblage

- Dismantling the sugar assemblage and attaching components to alternative assemblages
- Converting cane land to new uses
- Land suitability study undertaken by CSIRO to identify alternative agricultural uses = recoding land
- Individual farmers converting to turf, farm forestry etc
- Sale of land for housing development
  - Still restricted by zoning to protect cane land
  - Reaffirmed by SE Queensland Regional Plan 2004
  - Limited exceptions, e.g. Cutters' Ridge estate

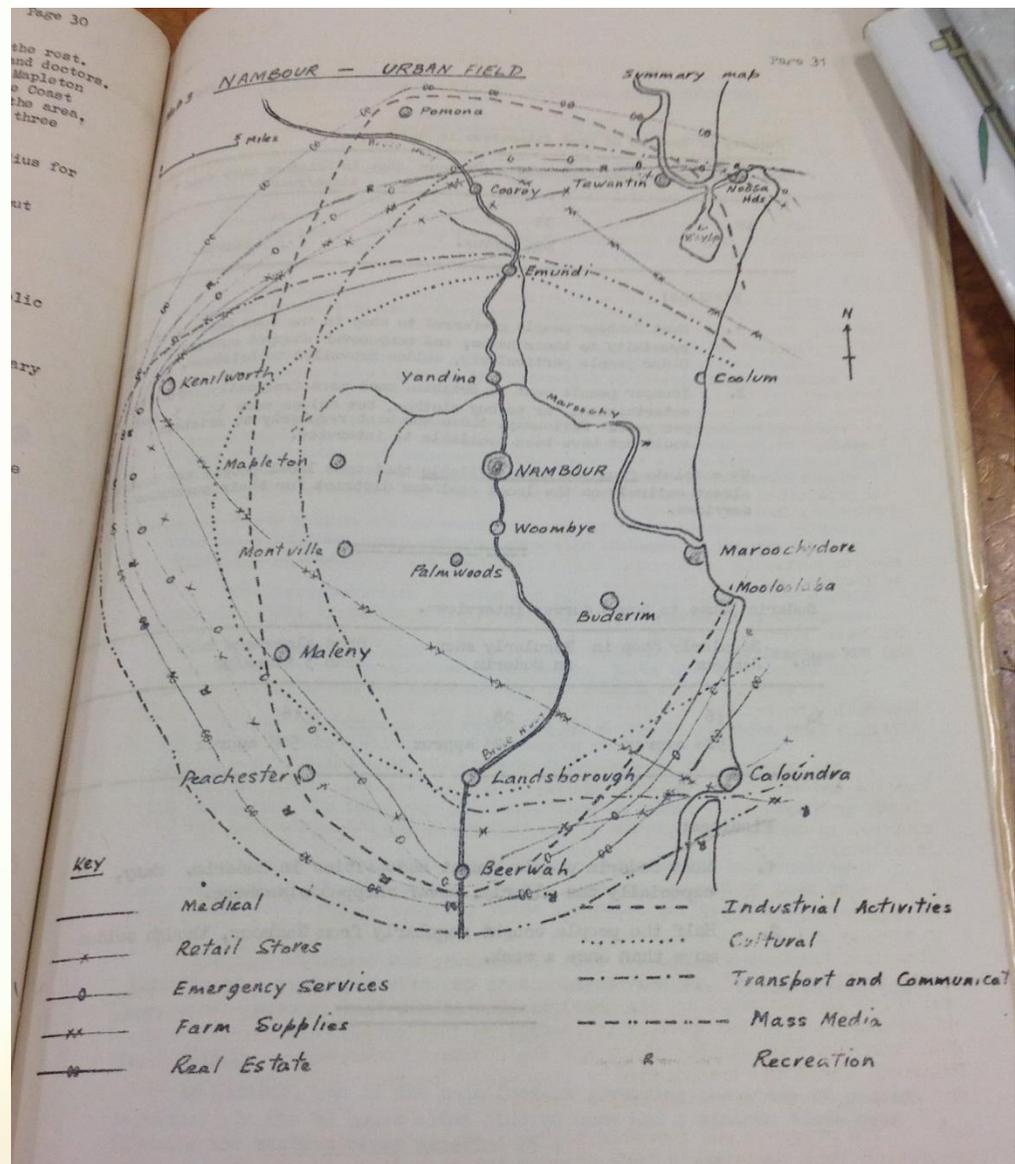
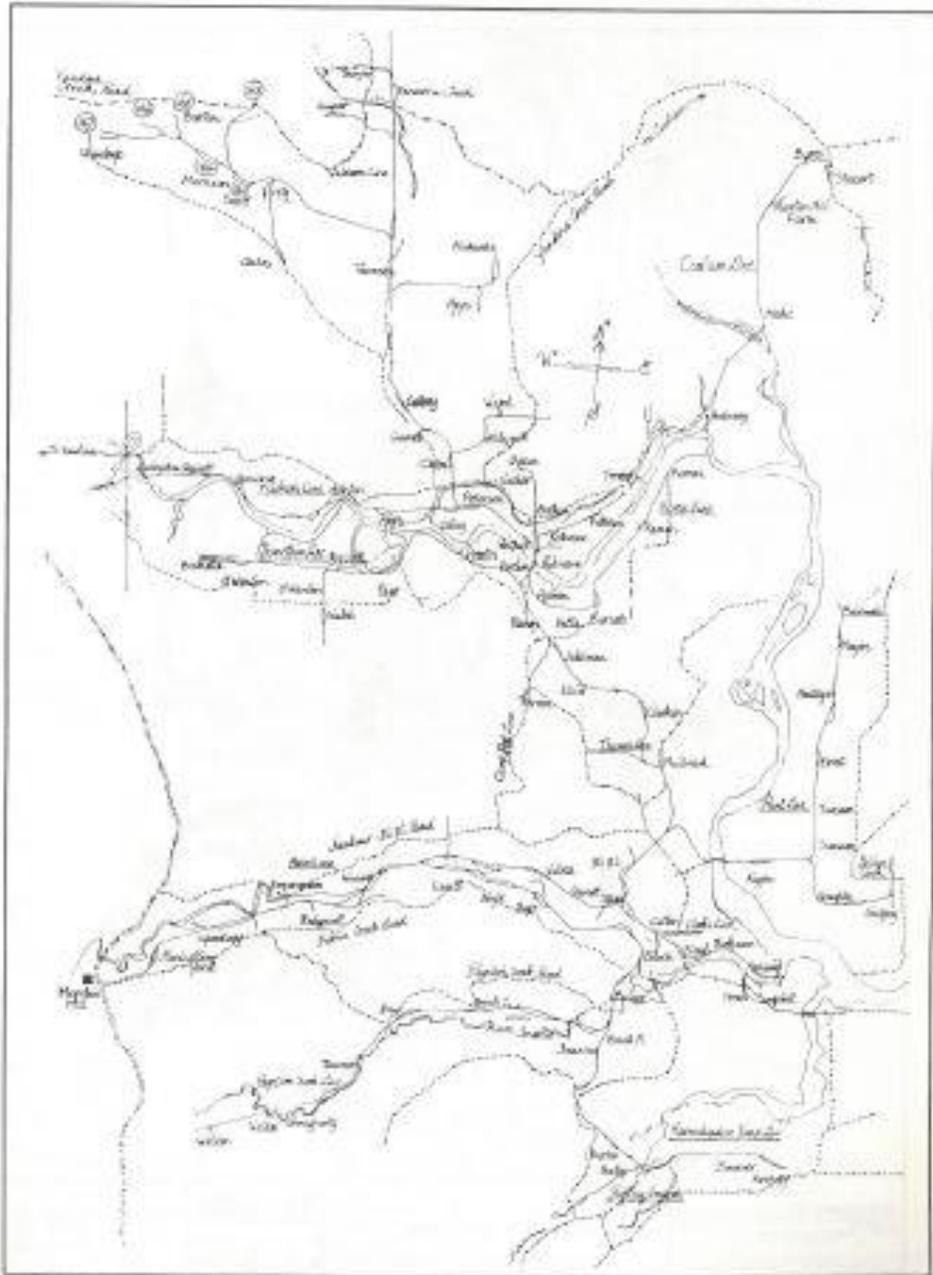


# Nambour as an assemblage

- Mill, canefields, trains and sugar all key components in the place-assemblage of Nambour
- Material role of these components included generating employment and income
- 1970s: 2,300 people employed at peak season and AUS\$4m generated for local economy
- “The economy of Nambour presents a fairly diversified picture but with a heavy dependence on the sugar industry” (*Field Study of Nambour and District* 1971)
- Viability Report 1989: 550 direct jobs, 1100-3300 indirect jobs, direct value of production of up to \$25 million p.a.
- “The sugar industry makes major contributions to the output, income and employment in the region. It is vitally important that this contribution be maintained” (Viability Report 1989)



# MAP OF MORETON'S TRAMWAY SYSTEM CA 1960s



# Nambour as an assemblage

- Mill, sugar and trains also played expressive roles significant to the identity of Nambour

“The dark plume hanging over the town was not the only smoke in the air as bush fires were raging all around the district, but the mill stack was pumping out carbon, oblivious to the housewives’ cries of frustration at having their washing blackened. It was all in a good cause, they were told. The ash from the stack, and the heavy sweet smell of molasses, were the symbols of prosperity not just for the farmers, but for the whole town.” (Richardson 2013, in *Sunshine Coast Daily*, 26/10/13).

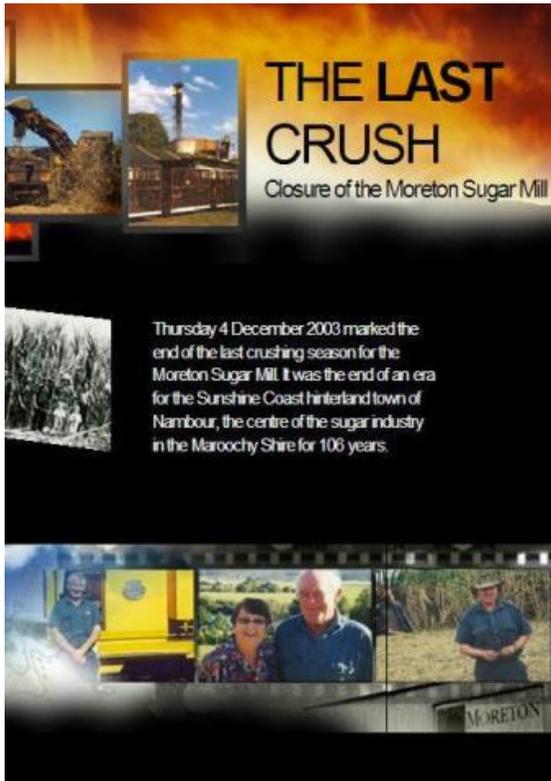


COCLUM

Nambour - 2002

Brad Peaden

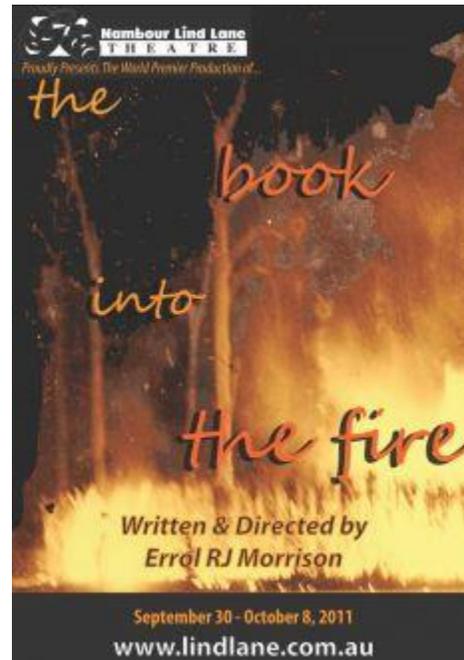
[alcogoodwin@yahoo.com.au](mailto:alcogoodwin@yahoo.com.au)

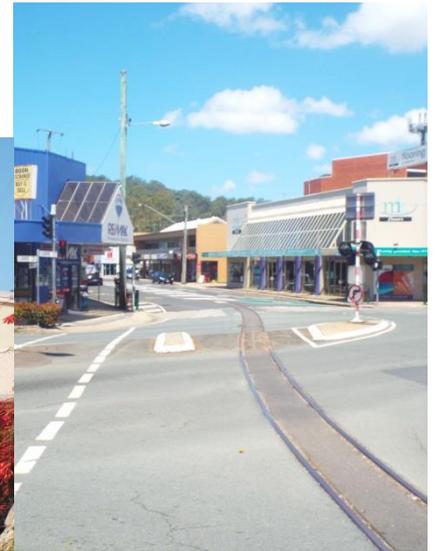


The Last Hurrah Nambour  
by James Fearnley  
(Nambour Library)

“Whatever happens to the cane farms, Nambour and the Sunshine Coast will never be the same again”

ABC 7.30 Report, 15/07/03





# Conclusions

Insights from an assemblage approach:

- Illuminates the microprocesses and connections through which global processes impact on localities
- Global restructuring involves the addition, removal and mutation of components in global assemblages
- External pressures from re-coding of assemblages and components
- Re-territorialisation that changes how components relate to each other

# Conclusions

- Material and discursive nature of components constrains the capacity of local assemblages to respond to external changes
- Globalization impacts on local places by cutting external links, removing or changing the role of key components
- Local responses need to replace lost components to hold assemblages together
- Dismantling of assemblages with components detached and attached to other assemblages
- The expressive role of agri-food industries can continue in rural localities even once the material role has been lost