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Prior to 1911: European discovery and South Australian administration of the Northern Territory

The first of five time periods that will be used to structure this account of the development and deployment of vocational education and training in the Northern Territory covers the era when European explorers initially intruded upon the ancient Aboriginal tribal lands and culminates with the colony of South Australia gaining control of the jurisdiction.

Great Britain took possession of the northern Australian coastline in 1824 when Captain Bremer declared this section of the continent as part of New South Wales. While there were several abortive attempts to establish settlements along the tropical north coast, the climate and isolation provided insurmountable difficulties for the would-be residents. Similarly, the arid southern portion of this territory proved to be inhospitable and difficult to settle. As part of an ongoing project of establishing the borders of the Australian colonies, the Northern Territory became physically separated from New South Wales when the Colonial Office of Great Britain gave control of the jurisdiction to the Government of the Colony of South Australia in 1863 (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1974, p. 83) following the first non-Indigenous south to north crossing of the continent by the South Australian-based explorer John McDouall Stuart in the previous year.

On the political front, in 1888 South Australia designated the Northern Territory as a single electoral district returning two members to its Legislative Assembly and gave representation in the Upper House in Adelaide. Full adult suffrage was extended by South Australia to all Northern Territory white residents in 1890 that demonstrated an explicit and purposeful disenfranchisement of the much more numerous Asian and Aboriginal populations. With Federation in 1901, Northern Territory citizens with voting rights had representation in both houses of Federal Parliament, but this situation would change in 1911 when South Australia relinquished responsibility for the Northern Territory to the Commonwealth due to the heavy financial burden of managing this remote and challenging region.

During this period of British Colonial rule in the central north–south corridor of the Australian continent, much of the contemporary understanding about how a civilised society should operate was being conceptualised in terms of race and Victorian middle-class philanthropy. Price (1949, p. 122) reports that the domestic philanthropic movements in 1830s England were able to engineer policy and programs of government that were intended to apply ‘justice, humanity, civil rights and religion to colonial natives’. This development came about in response to the high levels of physical coercion and extreme levels of violence that characterised the tactics used by British colonists and their interactions with the original populations of various parts of the burgeoning empire. The establishment of colonial South Australia by so-called ‘free settlers’ during this same time period imported these philanthropic notions into Australia:

Missions, and plans for political and social improvement were to be encouraged, and the Australian Aboriginals were to be provided with hunting reservations until such time as they became interested in agriculture. Missionary enterprise was to be the basis of this new endeavour (Price 1949, pp. 123–124).

This style of philanthropy contributed to a South Australian policy of integration of Aboriginal inhabitants of the colony allowing for the preservation of language and cultural values in the face of the imported social and economic system. In his master’s degree thesis, ‘A history of the education of full-blood Aborigines in South Australia: With references to the Northern Territory’, Hart (1970, p. 29) reports that in the earliest days of European settlement in South Australia, the Lutheran missionaries had become aware of ‘the need for a vocational training in skills that would gain Aborigines a livelihood in the new society’. He goes on to note that

specific training experiments were commenced on the missions in 1850. From these imported and humble philanthropically inspired beginnings, a lasting legacy of using vocational education and training in pursuit of social and economic goals was introduced into the Northern Territory. In the pursuit of integration of Aboriginal people into mainstream society ‘the principles of providing both a general education for children and an on-the-job vocational training for youths, with satisfying employment for all adults, could well be copied on some reserves even today’ (Hart 1970, p. 41). This prophetic description of the intended role for vocational education and training still reflects a widely held view in policy circles.

In terms of European settlement, the first permanent township of Palmerston, later renamed Darwin, was established on the north coast in 1869. In the southern parts of the Northern Territory, South Australia began selling pastoral rights to intending settlers shortly after acquiring control in 1863. European incursions into the Northern Territory were further enabled with the establishment of the Overland Telegraph Line, which was completed in 1872. Connecting Adelaide with Darwin, this line provided Australia’s first fast communications link with the rest of the world via an undersea cable to the Indonesian archipelago. The various repeater stations that were established through the centre of the Northern Territory facilitated non-Indigenous settlement in this remote part of the continent.



Figure 3. Charlotte Waters Telegraph Station, near the South Australian border, included a store and post office.

Source: Creator Unknown. PH0057/0002. John Blakeman Collection, Northern Territory Library.

Following the extension of pastoral interests, the Lutheran missionaries moved into the Northern Territory in 1877 with the establishment of the Finke River Mission at Hermannsburg, some 130 kilometres to the west of the present town of Alice Springs. This was done to cater for the perceived needs of the local Aboriginal tribes and as a broadening of privately funded Lutheran missionary operations in the far north of South Australia. In an 1880 report on the activities that were conducted at Hermannsburg, it is described that:

The missionaries seized the opportunity to begin education when the people congregated for rations. Gradually the Aranda people gained confidence and came to settle near the mission. Men were employed in the garden or as the shepherds or in mustering cattle and the women and girls in house work, sewing, knitting and weaving wool from the sheep into blankets (Hart 1970, p. 73).

In summarising the impact of the Lutheran missionaries from the 1860s until World War One, Hart (1970, pp. 69–70) demonstrates the uneasy policy transition from outright coercive violence to philanthropic intention that used education and training, leading to employment, as one of its primary tools to improve the socioeconomic welfare of others:

During the fifty years of its existence when Aborigines in the northern part of the state and in the Northern Territory were being shot down like crows and dispossessed of their lands without recompense, the work of the Lutheran mission shows a genuine concern for the Dieri people. The remnants of the tribe now living around Maree speak with real affection and gratitude for the missionaries. However limited the education and training, those who received it were able to fit successfully into work on other stations or into the mission at Finnis Springs started later by the U. A. M. [United Aborigine's Mission].

In the final decade of South Australia's political and economic responsibility for the Northern Territory, the provision of education and training was seldom treated as a high priority due to the long distances from Adelaide and the small European population. The first primary school was opened in Palmerston (now Darwin) in 1877, but closed shortly thereafter as the teacher was declared to be insane, and by 1911 there were schools on the gold-mining fields at Pine Creek and Brock's Creek in addition to the reopened school at Palmerston (Department of Education and Science 1969). South Australia had not made any provision for formal post-primary school, adult or technical education for the white population during its time in control of the Northern Territory. Vocational education

and training was solely a philanthropic tool used by the missionaries motivated by concerns for the welfare of Aborigines during colonial rule and the early years of Federation.



Figure 4. Finke River Mission, September 1905.

Source: Creator Unknown, PH0763/0003, Smith Collection, Northern Territory Library.

Towards the end of South Australian control, a number of other religious groups became active in their philanthropically inspired desire to both spread their systems of faith-based belief and to improve the living circumstances of the Aboriginal residents of the Northern Territory. For example, the apostolic administrator of the Catholic Church in Darwin, Francis Gsell, persuaded the South Australian Government to grant him 10,000 acres for an Aboriginal Mission on Bathurst Island in 1910 (Donovan 1983). In 1908, the Anglican Church had also negotiated the establishment of a mission on the Roper River in the southwestern Gulf of Carpentaria region of the Territory.



Figure 5. Tiwi people on Bathurst Island, January 1941, with Bishop Gsell.

Source: Creator B. Clarke, PH0094/0002, Duncan Jenkins Collection, Northern Territory Library.

As with Central Australia, the issues facing the Anglican missionary endeavour in the tropical north also reflected the political tensions between violent conquest and the application of British middle-class philanthropy's reliance upon education and training. In addition, eugenic views of race featured prominently in decisions about how to improve the lot of Aboriginal Territorians and moderate the impact of their dealings with the European settlers' voracious appetites for their traditional country and consequent destruction of centuries' old lifestyles. The following account of the first 10 years of the operations of the Roper River Mission describes how vocational education and training was being used as a form of social control over a problematic group of people. It also portrays the environment and use of vocational education and training when South Australia shed its northern responsibilities and the Commonwealth took control of the Northern Territory. Vocational education and training was not for the relative handful of white citizens who had the vote, but was reserved as a significant mechanism of social control and economic improvement on the frontier.

The Reverend RD Joynt (1918) furnished the following descriptions and opinions in *Ten years' work at the Roper River mission station, Northern Territory, Australia, August 1908 to August 1918: A short history of the Roper River Mission written by the Rev. R. D. Joynt, pioneer missionary to the Roper Aborigines*:

They are the original owners of this fair land of Australia, and in the north, and where the white man has not overrun the country, they are able to live the lives their forefathers did (p. 2).

The conditions under which the Aborigine used to live are now changing, and will soon be eliminated altogether. Civilisation is creeping up northwards, and the white man is penetrating the hunting grounds of the black. It is sad to think that, wherever the white man goes, the black man loses his privileges, and works for the white man, thus losing his cunning, which means he is not so at home in the bush as heretofore (p. 4).

The Australian Aborigine is in many ways an asset to the country. There is much more in the black than we whites credit him with. All he needs is the opportunity to develop and a patient teacher to instruct him. The girls can learn to cook, sew, wash and iron splendidly. With training, the boys have done almost every kind of manual labour. They are, on the whole, if treated kindly, faithful friends and valuable workers (pp. 4–5).

Everything is against the Aboriginal population increasing. Customs, change of food, communistic life in place of the nomadic life, clothing in exchange for nakedness. Their days are numbered. They are a strong race, fine and active, and when working, develop wonderfully. They are a lovable race. Many have sweet natures, make good and faithful servants, but by many they are treated worse than animals, and sometimes even referred to as 'black animals,' and terms even worse (pp. 5–6).

There are many deeds of shame and cruelty that could be recorded against the white man. In years gone by the natives have been shot down like game, and hundreds killed in a spirit of revenge. I have met men that boast of shooting the poor, unprotected black, 'just for fun.' These deeds of shame happened in the early days, but even during the last ten years some deeds have been perpetrated that make a man that has any feeling utterly disgusted (p. 6).

The Roper River Mission stands for the protecting and uplifting of the black race in Northern Australia, and the methods used to bring about that result are twofold — (1) The Gospel of Work. (2) The Gospel of Love. Our work is of an industrial nature. Gardening, building, stock work, school, sewing, laundry, and raffia, cooking, house work, cleanliness, all taught under the influence of Christianity: the ideal, of course, being Christ-likeness (p. 7).

Reverend Joynt closes the report on his decade of missionary work with an appeal to both church members and the general public for assistance to continue and further the work of the Roper River Mission. In describing the ultimate goal of converting Aboriginal people to Christianity, he also adds the consideration of race:

A White Australia. Yes, Most Decidedly [sic].
 'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow'.
 The best kind of a 'WHITE AUSTRALIA'.
 Who will help us to make it white?

For reasons unspecified by the British Colonial Office, the transfer of control over the Northern Territory of Australia was not made a permanent arrangement in spite of strenuous representations for its incorporation into the colony of South Australia in the 1860s. When the cost of administering this troublesome and non-productive region began to outgrow the state's financial capacity, the South Australian Premier argued that 'the only way to ensure successful development was either by a chartered company with the free use of coloured labour or by the Commonwealth' (Heatley 1979, p. 25). Given the country's overriding concern with racial matters and maintaining the White Australia policy, the immigration of large numbers of 'coloured' labourers ceased to be a practicable policy option for the colonisation of the Northern Territory. The newly formed Commonwealth Government provided the only socially and politically viable solution to the problems of the North.

In addition to the problems caused by South Australia's settlement strategy that allowed land speculators to hold onto the very best parcels of land while neither paying rates nor developing the plots, a new force emerged. According to Cross (2011, p. 337) encroaching pastoralists represented a 'new breed of colonist':

They were courageous, rough and enterprising, and not always straight in their dealings. Their story is worth telling because it is symbolic of wholly different, rough form of colonisation, marked by strenuous individual toil and loss of government control.

The South Australian dream of establishing instruments of civilisation, like the school, the chapel and the rule of law at the very edges of colonisation, was brought to an end in the late nineteenth century by the actions of these pastoralists and their cattle (Cross 2011). The unruly nature of the Territory, and the consequent need to establish government control,

is a recurring theme in the history of this jurisdiction. Even though the South Australian attempt to replicate the dense settlement patterns that had been used to establish that colony had failed, the dream of improving and making the Northern Territory into a viable economic entity was not diminished and remains central to the events described in the remainder of this story.

The negotiations associated with Federation provided South Australia the opportunity to remove the financial millstone that had replaced the envisaged financial bonanza that was touted in 1863. After five years of negotiations, South Australia passed the *Northern Territory Surrender Act* in 1907 and after further negotiations concluded in 1910, the Australian Parliament enacted both the *Northern Territory Acceptance Act* and the *Northern Territory (Administration) Act* providing for the government of the Territory by an Administrator appointed by the Governor-General (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1974, p. 83).

During this first period of the European history of the Northern Territory, vocational education and training was not a mainstream socioeconomic concern at the cultural boundaries where isolation, survival, matters of race and control of land dominated daily life. However, training Aboriginal people for what is perceived to be useful work was firmly in the toolkit of the missionaries and their philanthropic task of social improvement. The political change in the constitutional status of the Northern Territory, from being part of a state with its constitutional protections to an administered colonial jurisdiction, introduces the next era.

This text is taken from *Vocational Education and Training: The Northern Territory's history of public philanthropy*, by Don Zoellner, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.