

# *‘Every Mother’s Son is Guilty’: Policing in the Kimberley Frontier of Western Australia 1882–1905*

by Chris Owen

640pp., UWA Publishing, Crawley, 2016,  
ISBN: 9781742586687 (pbk), \$50.00.

Review by Anthony Redmond  
The Australian National University

Conducting anthropological research in the Kimberley region over the last quarter century, I have been made aware of some deeply distressing aspects of contemporary social and political life there. Amongst these I count the painfully high rates of imprisonment of young Aboriginal people (currently 52 times the national average), Aboriginal families’ overwhelming poverty and critical dependence on welfare, the high levels of interpersonal violence attending everyday life and the entrenched power of the elite Euro-Australian pastoral families, both locally and in the Perth political and economic establishment. I would add to this sorry list the demoralising effect of the constantly rebranded, yet so seldom effective, legislative and policy regimes underwritten by that political establishment.

Chris Owen’s painstakingly researched (and often horrifying) history of the deeply entangled relationships between policing, pastoral interests and government policy towards Aborigines in the early period of colonisation of the Kimberley (1882–1905) adds a devastating longitudinal dimension to our understanding of how matters descended into this shocking state and why some of these issues are proving so intractable to change.

Scrutinising, analysing and contextualising the extensive documentary record of policing in the East and West Kimberley in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Owen has carefully prised open a window onto a reign of terror that included illegal public executions, mass enslavement, murder, rape, violent physical and sexual abuse and dispossession created at the behest, and with the direct complicity, of the colonial pastoral dynasties including the Forrest, Emmanuel, Macdonald and Durack families, which today continue to enjoy a wildly disproportionate influence

over political life in the west. In his analysis of the range of archival sources, Owen points out the discrepancies between the mandatory police ‘occurrence books’, which were sent to Perth and were notoriously light on detail and subject to strategic omissions, and the diaries and journals of the local police officers, which were often much more revealing. The author takes as his historical bookends the first major pastoral incursions of the early 1880s and the national and international furore occasioned by the release of Walter E. Roth’s (very much understated) 1905 *Report of the Royal Commission on the Condition of the Natives*.

Owen writes that two distinctive periods of policy and practice can be discerned across that era. The period from about 1880 until the end of that decade was generally one in which ‘European violence against Aboriginal people was the exception rather than the norm’ and during which a number of locally deployed policemen ‘conscientiously investigated allegations of abuse of Aboriginal people by colonists’ (p. 10). Some of these policemen sought to learn local languages and become acquainted with the laws and customs of the Aboriginal people in their districts. The subsequent decade saw the replacement and/or marginalisation of this type of policemen and their de facto policies by much more violent enforcers of the rule of the squattocracy in their undeclared war against Aboriginal people and the desperate and disparate Aboriginal responses to the campaign to remove them from their lands and force them into servitude. This period also corresponded with a much more terse form of police report writing. When Owen sought out these records in the police archive, he discovered a ‘very curious correlation between the absence of records and an area known to have had a large number of police involved in “dispersals”’ (p. 23).

Owen’s assessment of the existing historiography makes it plain that the Kimberley evidence on some earlier police refusals to compliantly do the dirty work of the pastoral dynasties defies an analysis in terms of a blunt ‘dispossession-resistance model’. Consideration of the impact of colonisation on levels of intra-Aboriginal violence, the fact that it was often indentured Aboriginal workers rather than ‘myalls’ who took the fight up to the police and pastoralists, the effects of intra-police hostility and killings, the hostilities between some resident magistrates, police and government, and the nature of some of the face-to-face relationships between a number of earlier-period policemen and local people adds complexity to that blunt model.

Owen’s accessible and page-turningly urgent account identifies macro-political factors influencing the unfolding tragedy of the colonial situation. The first is the period of British colonial control and the *Aborigines Protection Act 1886*, when much concern, even outrage, was expressed from London over the horrific treatment of Aborigines in the Western Australian colony, which was described as ‘the slave state of the Australian commonwealth’. The colony’s mistreatment of its Aborigines represented one of the major obstacles to self-rule, but metropolitan critics of colonial violence and dispossession were derided as ‘Exeter Hall types’.

This period was followed by a more overtly violent and oppressive period under the so-called 'responsible government' period (1890–1901), during which the dominant pastoral class very much ran their own show. This ushered in a decade of intensely violent subjection of Aboriginal people aimed at outlawing 'wild natives' under the guise of preventing 'stock killings'. Here, Owen provides compelling figures to show that drought, a long tradition of cattle duffing and the industry's generally poor management and inexperience were more significant factors. Tellingly, these combined losses did not prevent a massive escalation in stock numbers and profits from meat shipped to other parts of the colony throughout the 1890s.

This period included the 1894–97 police/military operations against West Kimberley rebels Jandamarra and his associates, which resulted in at least 80 Aboriginal deaths officially attributed to police violence and larger numbers to the pastoralists' own 'dispersals'. The situation in the East Kimberley was even more violent: between July and November 1893 alone, police killings amounted to 81 persons in the Osmand and Ord Valleys. In the same year, Alexander Forrest asked in the Western Australian Parliament whether 'the life of one European is not worth a thousand natives' in the interests of expanding their pastoral empires (p. 350). It seems very likely that hundreds of Aborigines were shot with pastoralist consent and assistance. During this period, local police officers were clearing hundreds of people from their traditional lands on charges of cattle killing and also making themselves small fortunes on the side by pocketing the per-head monies provided for rations for their prisoners (a practice that, according to historian Fiona Skyring, continued to make large sums of money for local police in the Kimberley, Pilbara and goldfields under the category of 'meal money' right through until 1992 when the Aboriginal Legal Service made it front page news). In this same period, Premier John Forrest was lobbying strenuously for the repeal of British colonial legislation that mandated a minimal level of support of Aboriginal people rendered destitute by the expanding pastoral enterprises, thus ensuring that a workforce recruited through 'brutal slavery' would continue to be readily available to the squattocracy (p. 368).

Following that particularly violent decade, in 1901 the colony became part of the Commonwealth of Australia, very much against the wishes of the ruling pastoral cartels, which were then subjected to some intense scrutiny from church and union organisations over the blatantly corrupt expansion of the 'meat ring' owned and operated by Forrest-Emmanuel-Connor-Durack family interests. By 1900, close to a third of the surviving Aboriginal population of the Kimberley had been enslaved on pastoral stations and hundreds more had been indentured into the pearling industry on the west coast. Complementing this was a trade in sexual services to the thousands of Asian labourers being brought into the industry. Owen breaks new ground here in his analysis of the impact of these latter forms of servitude, noting that prostitution was seldom policed as it fitted neatly into the dominant racial schema.

Owen notes that any meaningful change in this epoch came from the efforts of sympathetic local magistrates demanding procedural fairness and a semblance of justice for arrested Aboriginal people, rather than from any government initiatives. These changes were furiously resisted by the squattocracy, who threatened to continue to take the law into their own hands if any such procedural rights were implemented.

Across these three periods, Owen identifies five major factors shaping the nature of colonial policing in the Kimberley: political and constitutional changes, the diversity of Indigenous groupings, environmental and demographic features, the different social context of policing the West and East Kimberley pastoral regions (with the former dominated by Perth-based investors and the latter dominated by families emerging from the earlier colonial frontier in Queensland and New South Wales) and the particular models of colonial policing being employed. The latter was very much subject to budgetary concerns based on a calculus of 'policemen per head' of European population (p. 17).

Owen's meticulously annotated account of the entanglement of police violence and government policy with the pastoral dynasties in the Kimberley is essential reading for anyone with an interest in how the wider political and economic context shaped, and continues to shape, contemporary forms of Aboriginal impoverishment, disempowerment, accommodation, survival and resistance.

## Reference

Roth, Walter E. 1905, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Condition of the Natives*. Government of Western Australia, [www.parliament.wa.gov.au/intranet/libpages.nsf/WebFiles/Royal+Commissions+-+Report+of+the+Royal+Commission+on+the+condition+of+the+natives/\\$FILE/Report+of+the+Royal+Commission+on+the+condition+of+the+natives.pdf](http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/intranet/libpages.nsf/WebFiles/Royal+Commissions+-+Report+of+the+Royal+Commission+on+the+condition+of+the+natives/$FILE/Report+of+the+Royal+Commission+on+the+condition+of+the+natives.pdf).

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 41, 2017*,  
edited by Ingereth Macfarlane, published 2017 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.