

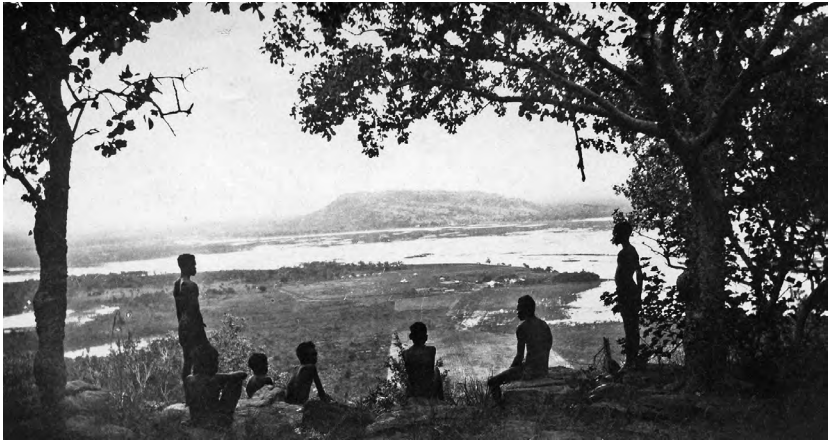
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## ABORIGINAL HISTORIES IN THE MISSION RECORDS

In this book we share the rich documentary and photographic sources from the early years of the Oenpelli mission. Though it consists mainly of records produced by non-Indigenous missionaries, we consider this book a book of Aboriginal history. Why? The letters, reports and photographs that form its core were produced by missionaries who sought to convert and change Aboriginal people. We have done our best to contextualise these sources with Aboriginal perspectives and voices but, ultimately, the main voices represented here are those of the mission superintendent, Alfred Dyer, and his wife, Mary (known as 'Katie').

We hope that by sharing these documents and photographs readers will be able to see within them the ways that Aboriginal people were always present and working. They were working hard to make the most of a difficult situation for their community due to the newcomers on their land.

Times were hard. The invasion of Europeans meant that the community was facing health crises, separation from country, internal conflict and ceremonial turmoil – many of the things Aboriginal communities continue to battle. Through all of this, they were innovative, resourceful, flexible and smart. As Oenpelli (Gunbalanya) community members will remind you: back then, people were strong. They were strong in the mission days, that is how they survived. Of course, Aboriginal people living in and around the mission did not always agree with each other – some took one approach to dealing with missionaries, some took another – but they were always working to make the most of the mission times. In this chapter, we shed some light on the main themes emerging from the sources, beginning to re-read them, first and foremost, as telling a story of Aboriginal people.



**Figure 1.1: Young men and boys at the top of Arguluk Hill looking down on the Oenpelli mission, 1930. Photograph by J.W. Bleakley.**

Source: National Archives of Australia (A431, 8162283).



**Figure 1.2: Alfred and Mary Dyer, date unknown.**

Source: Northern Territory Archive Service (NTRS 694 Box 4a Item 201).

## The missionary intent

The sources in this book also reveal what the missionaries thought they were doing. It was common for missionaries to embark on what they hoped would be a glorious adventure, reaping a spiritual harvest among the 'heathen', only to discover themselves overwhelmed with administrative tasks, abrasive personalities (who were often the other missionaries) and the monotony of the daily work that came with running a station. The Dyers had been missionaries in north Australia for decades when they arrived at Oenpelli, so they were not surprised that the daily experience of being a missionary was mostly just hard work. Still, they were not immune to disillusionment, nor to clashes with their colleagues. They also knew that it was unlikely Aboriginal people would flock to their mission or that they would see mass conversions rush through Arnhem Land (though they did record a number of baptisms). The work would be slow. They believed the mission would continue for decades before seeing its 'fruit'. As 'pioneer missionaries' they were simply 'sowing the seed'; later missionaries, they believed, would reap a Christian community in Arnhem Land.

This future for Aboriginal people, they imagined, would be as an independent Christian people. Like many missionaries, they believed that contact with white Australia was fatal for Aboriginal people. So, at this stage, missionaries were not self-consciously seeking to assimilate Aboriginal people into white Australia (though, they did attempt to reform Aboriginal family life and culture to white norms, which was, of course, a form of assimilation).

The sources here show that Dyer's ambitions were broader than simply converting Aboriginal people to Christianity or providing humanitarian aid to the 'remnant' of the race. Dyer wrote of his dream of an 'Arnhem Land State', commenting that 'a Native State is the only chance for these people'.<sup>1</sup> Through training Aboriginal people in pastoral work and agriculture, and by providing basic education, this state could be 'self-supporting'. Christianity, too, was essential to such an enterprise; it supposedly provided Aboriginal people with the moral fortitude and wisdom to resist temptations introduced by whites: alcohol, gambling and interracial sex. Aboriginal people's existing traditions, missionaries

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1 'Report of the Policy for Oenpelli 1929 as discussed by Staff, Northern Territory Record Series (hereafter NTRS) 1099/P1 vol. 1.

presumed, were either useless in this respect, or so compromised by the pressures of colonisation that they could no longer provide moral guidance. Without this Native State, Aboriginal people were doomed to extinction; missionaries presumed they could not survive the onslaught of Europeans in their land. But fascinatingly, missionaries believed that Aboriginal people should have the right to a form of sovereignty – indeed, that sovereignty was the route to survival. The Oenpelli mission would lay the foundation for this state.

## The need to negotiate

When the missionaries arrived, from the start, they needed to work with Aboriginal people. The missionaries began on the back foot. The Oenpelli community already had a bad impression of missionaries, having heard about other missions in Arnhem Land and Darwin. Local people would need to be convinced to cooperate with missionaries. As much as the missionaries dressed up their work in pious rhetoric, these sources show they had two main strategies for attracting people to the mission: tobacco and education of children.

The letters reveal Dyer's calculus of exactly how much tobacco would be needed to attract workers to the station. He wanted to give out as little as possible and had mixed feelings about addiction. 'I hate the stuff', he wrote.<sup>2</sup> Evangelicals did not smoke. The missionaries did use large Christmas banquets to attract people to the mission. But a general food ration did not work; the community could feast on ducks, wallabies, fish and fruit whenever they wanted, why would they want missionary food? Dyer did record an incident of a 'raid on the potato patch'.<sup>3</sup> But this was opportunism or even a protest, but not hunger. Addiction to tobacco, though morally questionable, Dyer found, had its uses: 'it is a very rare thing for any of them to desire the Gospel but they will travel miles for a bit of tobacco', he wrote.

The main reason the mission needed to produce food was to fuel its other strategy for attracting people to the mission: the education of children. As Dyer reported:

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2 'Report for January 1926', NTRS 1099/P1 vol. 1.

3 'Oenpelli Report May 1926', NTRS 1099/P1 vol. 1.

We cannot follow them but we can attract them to us. They love to see their children taught & gladly leave them. Therefore I must make the home base a food producer, it is a big task but an Australian duty.<sup>4</sup>

It was very important to the Oenpelli community that their children learn to speak, read and write in English. As Frank Djendjulg later remembered, his father, Nipper Marakarra Gumurdul, sent him to the mission school to learn English:

Should have been staying in bush all the time ... but father brought me here ... Father brought everybody here to go to school and learn English. Learned little bit English in school.<sup>5</sup>

Others remembered the mission school as the missionaries' main gift to the community, even as it was important that they were still able to learn their own language and culture. As Frank Nalowerd remembered:

Dyer start school. Him best man. Big mob boys go to school. Went to school right through year. Learn both *bininj* [Aboriginal] and *balanda* [white] way. I been small boy Paddy Cahill time, but I been big man when Dyer come, but still go to school. We learned *bininj* way off mother and father.<sup>6</sup>

It was not that local people did not value their own languages or traditions around communication. They were already familiar with the benefits of being multilingual for negotiating with other groups (Arnhem Land being highly multilingual). So they quickly saw that adding English literacy to their existing linguistic repertoire would give their children an edge when negotiating with (or outsmarting) colonisers in the future. Only a few years earlier, a royal commission exposed how Thomas Cahill (the son of Paddy Cahill, the previous manager of Oenpelli) was exploiting Aboriginal workers. He was able to take their wages partly because they could not read; a bureaucrat signed over their money (forging their marks) on their behalf. Reading in English would give their children a better chance. It is also likely the community wanted their children to know something of the missionaries' spiritual knowledge. The missionaries seemed endowed with material wealth and power – knowing the source of their power might also be useful.

4 'Oenpelli Report for June', NTRS 1099/P1 vol. 1.

5 Frank Djendjulg, oral history interview with Robert Levitus, 20 July 1981.

6 Frank Nalowerd, oral history interview with Robert Levitus, 22 July 1981.

While it seems families were generally eager for children to receive education from missionaries, the Oenpelli community did not consent to being cut off from their children altogether. Some did not consent at all, as Priscilla Girrabul remembered:

The missionaries would take kids into the dormitories from their parents. Parents were angry. Some mothers would take their kids out of the dorms and back into bush, kids of six or seven years of age. That's why many don't speak good English.<sup>7</sup>

Those whose children were held in the dormitory camped at the mission to keep an eye on their children's wellbeing. So when a flood hit the mission in 1930, families rushed into the mission to ensure their children were safe. The proximity of families suited the missionaries too; children were like a magnet, keeping the community within missionaries' sphere of influence. So many came that the mission sometimes struggled to provide work and food for them all:

More are coming in than we can cope with. We take the children, but naturally some parents do not wish to leave the children if they cannot work themselves. More gardens are the solution & we have the soil to do it.<sup>8</sup>

## Community frictions

The dormitory where the children stayed (originally Cahill's 'prison') was also useful to missionaries in their attempts to reform Aboriginal family life. It allowed them to focus their efforts on Christianising the children, as they believed missionaries would have little influence on the adults (rightly, as it turned out). Dyer wrote explicitly that the missionary influence would increase as the 'older ones die'.<sup>9</sup>

But here, again, these sources show that Aboriginal people had their own ideas about what was best for their community. Missionaries were especially concerned by the betrothal ('promising') and marriage of young girls to older men, particularly where men already had multiple wives. To them, this was a moral problem – it was a product of male lust and greed. To the extent that they recognised that Aboriginal

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7 Priscilla Girrabul, oral history interview with Robert Levitus, 11 August 1981.

8 Dyer, 'Report of the Policy for Oenpelli 1929 as discussed by Staff', NTRS 1099/P1 vol. 1.

9 Dyer to R. H. Weddell, 1 February 1929, Mitchell Library (hereafter ML) MSS 6040/12.

marriage traditions were an expression of a kinship system that created intergenerational interdependence, they also considered this problematic because the interdependence of old and young prevented missionaries from influencing the younger generation. So missionaries used the dormitory to delay the girls' marriages until they were older, and to try to match them with younger men. Often the girls themselves preferred young husbands, but the changes created havoc in the broader community, which did not always agree. There are regular accounts of children being taken from the dormitories by parents or promised husbands. Missionaries did not always prevail in these disputes. Such was the power of community wishes that sometimes missionaries found they had to allow the girls to marry. Other times, it suited missionaries to exploit disagreements around marriage among locals. Marriage customs continued as a major source of friction, among Aboriginal people and between Aboriginal people and missionaries.

Another source of tension between the community and missionaries was spiritual. The community continued to practise their ceremonies right through the mission years, even though the missionaries considered them 'superstition'. The Dyers, it seems, were blind (perhaps wilfully so) to the ceremonial significance of sites around the mission. Dyer cut down 'sacred trees' late in 1929 to clear space for a new garden. Apparently, he did not learn that this was a sacred site until after the trees were already felled. Missionaries were ignorant of the spiritual significance of their surroundings, even of sites within the mission grounds. After community outrage, Dyer was compelled to burn the trees away from the mission. But the desecration of the site unleashed an epidemic of whooping cough – many babies died – and destructive floods quickly followed. Local people, naturally, turned to their own healers in the calamity and resented the missionaries. The missionaries blamed Aboriginal discontent on misinformed medical ideas. The cavalier missionary attitude to spiritual danger was more likely the cause.

Sometimes, when missionaries went too far, the community responded with overt resistance. Dyer recorded Aboriginal demands for higher wages and complaints that they were made to do things that were 'not their job'. He even conceded that they were only paid a 'small pocket money allowance', hoping simply that they would be grateful for the little they got. After the potato patch 'raid', Dyer cut off the tobacco supply. The community response was a general strike; these sources also reveal a history of labour relations that were inseparable from the

colonising process. Though Dyer was against guns, he was willing to use corporal punishment. That time, the community gave in and the 'little boys' involved in the potato incident 'got the strap'. But even corporal punishment had limits in effectiveness: Dyer recorded instances of people simply 'running away' after punishment. The missionaries could only go so far if they wanted people to remain at the mission. Another time, the missionaries went on 'strike' after workers demanded higher wages. In this stand-off, Dyer refused to prepare breakfast until they gave up their demands. Through these stand-offs, with passive and overt resistance, on both sides, missionaries and Aboriginal people together negotiated the truces required to allow the little community to function.

When negotiations failed, the other option available to local people was simply to leave. Often they did. The mission model depended on the expectation that Aboriginal people would settle permanently at the mission, but not many did. The missionary records are full of references to Aboriginal mobility as people moved easily between the mission, the 'bush' and other stations. Missionaries found themselves constantly recruiting and retraining new workers as others 'went walkabout'. The constant movement of people, too, was a way of keeping missionaries on their toes and attentive to Aboriginal interests and needs. This is also partly why many other missions in the Northern Territory were established on islands. Missionaries hoped to keep Aboriginal people in and others out. Oenpelli was unusual in this regard and so required a higher degree of tact if it were to keep its contact with its Aboriginal flock.

As well as the complex relationships between missionaries and Aboriginal people, the sources also reveal that the missionaries themselves were not always united. This, too, presented an opportunity to Aboriginal people who developed close ties with some missionaries but not others, potentially playing them off against one another. There is evidence in Dyer's reports that other missionary staff sometimes cut him out of communication. Once he arranged a 'special meeting' to discuss policy, indicating that other staff were concerned about the direction of the mission. The Dyers, in their reports, seem more distant from Aboriginal people than their missionary colleagues. Unlike other missionaries who expressed their concern for and even friendship with individual Aboriginal people, the Dyers tended not to mention people by name in letters and reports. They were known to be socially awkward. Perhaps they were just very introverted. Maybe they had trouble relating to Aboriginal people. Mary described the people at Oenpelli as 'often very unlovable & unlovely' –



the relationship was not exactly warm – though perhaps it was actually she and her husband that went unloved.<sup>10</sup> Maybe Aboriginal people avoided them. This, too, was likely a strategy for upholding Aboriginal interests. The superintendent had little hope of knowing what was actually going on, let alone any hope of controlling Aboriginal people.

## Photographic sources

Scattered through this book are 126 photographs primarily dating to the Dyer years in Oenpelli. Photography was used by missionaries across Australia to document their experiences and educate the church and the wider public on Aboriginal ‘issues’.<sup>11</sup> Images were also great for fundraising. Missionaries all over the world had long used the latest technology to communicate their adventures to the masses, and photography was part of their modern missionary methods.

Of course, the effectiveness of photography also depended on the mission staff and their personal interests and skills with photography. But it seems that Alf Dyer had a good eye for photography. Given the quality of the photos, he clearly recognised the value of his photographic collection even as he was forming it. Around March 1929 he wrote to Rev. John Ferrier, ‘put the films into my collection I hope you are guarding my trust as all these pictures are very valuable to me’.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the mission reports and letters tell us that others may also be responsible for many of the photos in the collection, including Florence Sherrin and Dick Harris. Unfortunately, there is no record of who took each photograph.

The few mentions we have of photography give some insight into his motivations. Dyer complained of using old films and having little time to take photos. The shopping orders also include details of the type of cameras Dyer was using and his practice of developing the photos at the mission. Dyer used his own money to purchase (and presumably process) photographs taken at the Oenpelli mission.

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10 Mary Dyer to Ferrier, 4 August 1929, ML MSS 6040/12.

11 Lydon, *Eye Contact*.

12 Alf Dyer to Ferrier, no date, ML MSS 6040/12.

The resulting photographs are a unique and invaluable collection for the Oenpelli community. They capture life on the mission and, to a lesser extent, life in the fringe camps around the community. They can also be technical images featuring boilers, boats and machinery. Yet, we use them here not simply to illustrate the mission records; they provide an important perspective on this early missionary period in Oenpelli. Of course, this is again a missionary perspective. They reflect what missionaries thought was worth documenting or that they believed might be useful in their publicity efforts. Whatever did not fit missionaries' narrative was left outside the frame. Nevertheless, they are useful to us because many reveal everyday life: children playing in irrigation trenches, women pounding antbed for flooring, and stockmen and their horses. Unlike the stiff and staged photographs of many anthropologists of the time, this collection is personal and full of life.

The photographs we selected for this book, therefore, tell their own story of Aboriginal lives and should be read as such. For local Aboriginal people, these images take on another level of significance. They bring forth a range of emotions ranging from sadness at the trauma being faced by many at that time, to joy at seeing the faces of relatives they may or may not have met. One of our key aims in writing this book was to bring these photographs out of their archival boxes and reconnect them with the Oenpelli community.

## **This book and its sources**

The next chapters of this book provide the historical and cultural context for reading these sources. We outline the history of the Oenpelli region and its rich cultures that stretch back millennia. Then we turn to the arrival of Europeans on Aboriginal land and the establishment of the Oenpelli cattle station. The following chapter introduces the Church Missionary Society (CMS) as well as Alfred and Mary Dyer. Then we move on to the mission documents themselves, the backbone of this book. These are the reports and correspondence in the CMS collections held at the Northern Territory Archives Centre and Mitchell Library (State Library of New South Wales). We have arranged them chronologically (as far as we could discern the dating), blending the two archival collections together, such that you can see the mission story unfold at Oenpelli. Interspersed through these documents are the photographs dating to the Dyer years.

This remarkable, little-known archive is a visual testimony to the lives of the people of Oenpelli. Following the mission documents comes the testimony of Esther Manakgu in her oral history reflecting on the mission times. We hope her words might guide you in your interpretation of the documentary sources, and that her perspective might shed light on the ways Aboriginal people used and experienced the mission.

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