

Food and governance on the frontiers of colonial Australia and Canada's North West Territories

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In recent decades historians have been turning from a national towards a transnational framework to examine the patterns and processes of colonial governance. This paper aims to contribute to those debates by examining the roles and outcomes of ration distribution as an institutionalised tool of Aboriginal governance on the nineteenth century settler frontiers of colonial Australia and north-west Canada.¹ In so doing it is not our aim to rehearse established scholarship on the history of rations policy in specific times and localities,² but to consider the degree to which the evolution of rationing policies reflects shared administrative goals and dilemmas in Aboriginal governance across different colonial contexts. To date, there has been little attention to the role of rationing policy across Australia's colonies, let alone in comparison with other jurisdictions of British settlement. In some key respects, Australia from the 1840s and western Canada from the 1870s represent two ends of a spectrum in shared colonial policy across British settler colonies. On the one hand, they shared a set of similarities in the issues and problems their governments faced with the rapid expansion of settlement after the mid-nineteenth century, of securing Aboriginal people's amenability to British rule, and of approaching the management of Aboriginal populations through a mixture of conciliatory and coercive measures. On the other hand, administrative approaches to Aboriginal peoples in these two jurisdictions evolved in light of some crucial differences.

The origins of these differences lay in the fact that in Canada, unlike Australia, the expansion of the west was always conceived in terms of centralised development designed to ensure a relatively seamless transition to the authority of Ottawa. This entailed the arrival of 'law and order' ahead of settlement in the form of the North West Mounted Police, the negotiation of land cession treaties with First Nations peoples of the prairie lands, and the managed process of their transfer onto designated reserves. In comparison, Australia's settler frontiers evolved in a much less administered and more circular fashion. There was no

1 This paper connects to a larger study of the legal subjugation of indigenous peoples on the comparative settler frontiers of Australia and Canada with Russell Smandych (University of Manitoba) and Louis Knafla (University of Calgary), supported by an ARC grant. The authors would like to thank Geoffrey Gray for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2 In the Australian context, see for instance Reece 1967; McGrath 1987; Rowse 1998; Foster 1989, 2000; Smith 2000; Jebb 2002; Wells 2003; O'Brien 2008, 2011.

single discernable frontier phase but a series of evolving frontiers, from colony to colony and from decade to decade, in which settler occupation of Aboriginal lands took place without land cession treaties, and ahead of any concerted support from a distant seat of government. Across Australia's colonies, the expansion of settlement without the controlling oversight of effective government established a pattern of conflict between Aboriginal peoples and settlers that colonial administrators found repeatedly difficult to resolve. Nonetheless, it was well understood by colonial administrators that European settlement had a devastating effect on Aboriginal access to traditional resources, and that this was an actual or potential source of conflict with settlers. Strategic interventions in forestalling the risk of violence and opening communication with Aboriginal groups came to include the distribution of food and other kinds of provisions, a formal governmental practice initiated in 1814 by New South Wales' Lieutenant-Governor Lachlan Macquarie with his 'feast for the natives'.

Yet rations policies, as they became more formalised over time in Canada and Australia, were at the heart of a much more complex matrix of administrative intents and purposes. As Tim Rowse has argued in relation to Central Australia, rations policy constitutes 'a site of rich meanings, a central generator of colonial ideology'.³ In both emergent colonial nation-states, the distribution of provisions furthered an objective to gain control over Aboriginal populations, but the means by which this was achieved varied markedly, and the pivotal point of difference was the question of Aboriginal settlement on reserves. Over the course of the 1870s most of the Aboriginal nations of Canada's North West Territories signed land cession treaties which preceded their move onto reserves. Over time, rations became increasingly key to a centralised policy of Aboriginal containment that the reserve network facilitated. In Australia, where there were no land cession treaties, the reserves that were established during the nineteenth century under the control of private missionary groups served only a small percentage of the Aboriginal population. The majority of Aboriginal people were remade in the eyes of settlers and of the law into landless people trespassing on country once their own. Tim Rowse has argued that in so far as rationing practices in twentieth century Central Australia were transferable across a variety of institutions – from the mission enclave to the police station to the pastoral station – they reflect a diversity of institutional approaches to Aboriginal governance.⁴ This institutional diversity is also true of how rationing practices evolved in Australia's colonies over the second half of the nineteenth century, and helps to describe how, in contrast to Canada, rations policy contributed to the colonial governance of Aboriginal people through a broad objective of dispersal.

3 Rowse 1998: 4.

4 Rowse 1998: 5.

Food and conciliation

One of the clearest initial parallels in the intention and rationale of rationing as it evolved in nineteenth century Canada and Australia was its shared origins in the giving of food as a gesture of reconciling Aboriginal people to colonial rule. The practice of distributing provisions to Aboriginal people at ceremonial gatherings as a show of goodwill, and implicitly as a means of establishing Aboriginal acquiescence to colonial authority, was of course a long established tradition of British colonialism. In Canada, gifts of food and other provisions typically accompanied land surrender or friendship treaties negotiated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and were intended to inspire Aboriginal people's confidence in the government's bounty and future benevolence.⁵ The various treaties negotiated between the First Nations of the prairies and the Canadian Dominion over the 1870s endorsed the exchange of First Nation lands and loyalty to the Crown for monetary annuities, medical and agricultural supplies, education, and other goods.⁶ Only one of the numbered treaties included provisions for rations in case of famine, a condition that would become contested as the era of starvation bit across the North West Territories.⁷

In Australia's colonies, where no land cession treaties were entered into, the provisioning of Aboriginal people with food, blankets and other goods held perhaps a stronger moral imperative, and the practice was often understood by government officials and ordinary settlers alike as a necessary compensation for taking possession of Aboriginal lands.⁸ As one correspondent to the Brisbane press observed in 1851, the government's annual distributions of blankets to Aboriginal people were 'but a trifling compensation ... for the usurpation of their lands'.⁹ Richard Broome has examined colonisers' obligation to provide for dispossessed Aboriginal people in terms of mutual (as well as asymmetrical) understandings of 'right behaviour', an ethic which unofficially underpinned a system of exchange between settlers and Aboriginal people and which extended from the frontier into the post-frontier period.¹⁰ With reference to the history of Victoria's Coranderrk reserve, he argues that this was an obligation Aboriginal people actively sought to remind colonial officials of, with mixed results.¹¹ Colonisers also raised the argument that Aboriginal people should be provided with some 'equivalent of what we have taken from them' not just as a humanist sentiment but as an economic strategy: as Western Australia's Agricultural Society suggested in 1834, a small annual expense on Aboriginal welfare would aid in 'the attainment of ... a territory more extensive than ever yet owned'.¹²

5 Ray et al 2000.

6 First Nations held considerable negotiating power in the forging of the early treaties up to 1875, before the bite of the starvation era. Tobias 1983: 520-521.

7 Carter 1999: 121-127.

8 O'Brien 2011.

9 *Moreton Bay Courier*, 31 May 1851.

10 Broome 2006: 43.2-43.3.

11 Broome 2006: 43.3.

12 *The Perth Gazette*, 11 January 1834.

If the informal obligations of provisioning Aboriginal people held more force in Australia's colonies where, unlike Canada, no negotiations for Aboriginal lands were ever formalised, Australia's and Canada's governments shared other, more strategic intentions to enlist rationing as a means of eliciting from Aboriginal people the kind of conduct the colonial state desired. In both jurisdictions, in the early phases of contact when colonial relationships had yet to be fully determined, the distribution of provisions was seen by officials to hold powerful leverage as an inducement to peace. For instance, Samantha Wells has examined the conciliatory role of rations in the late nineteenth century context of the Northern Territory, where government distribution of rations to the Larrikia was specifically regarded as a strategy for impressing upon them the advantage of 'leav[ing] alone the property of the white people'.¹³ The use of provisions to induce Aboriginal people not to interfere with European property was similarly employed by the Canadian government when the telegraph line was being built across the prairie lands. In 1876 Inspector of Surveys Leif Crozier was sent out to inform Aboriginal people along the telegraph line's path that they would receive 'presents' of food and other supplies on the condition that 'they did not interfere with the public work'.¹⁴ As it turned out, this was not easily done. Crozier undertook a ten week journey across Saskatchewan following the telegraph line's route, but early snow had already driven most Aboriginal bands much further south. Aware that the authorities required his assurance of Aboriginal people's 'peacefulness' before proceeding further with the works, he persisted until he was able to make his required distributions to as many scattered groups as 'I could hear of', before leaving the remainder of the task till the following spring.¹⁵

Crozier's anxiety to assure the government that he had done his best to fulfil this duty provides a glimpse into the leverage held by Aboriginal people in using the government's 'gifts' to negotiate their own terms in the colonial relationship. In this case, Crozier reported his failed efforts to enlist the help of Cree chief Big Bear to gather people together for the distribution of the government's provisions. Big Bear declined, Crozier suspected, because he was suspicious of the government's motives.¹⁶ Similarly, when the Blackfoot nation was negotiating Treaty 7 with government representatives in September 1877, some Blackfoot chiefs refused the provisions brought by the treaty commissioners until they received assurance that 'their acceptance would not be regarded as committing the Chiefs to the terms proposed'.¹⁷ In colonial Australia, also, as Jessie Mitchell has argued, the acceptance or refusal of colonisers' 'bounty' gave Aboriginal people leverage to negotiate the nature of those relationships.¹⁸ Additionally, Aboriginal people might demand recognition of their rights by voicing their

13 Wells 2003: 209.

14 Inspector Crozier to the Police Commissioner, 17 February 1876, RG 18, vol 10, file 108, Library and Archives Canada [henceforth LAC].

15 Inspector Crozier to the Police Commissioner, 17 February 1876, RG 18, vol 10, file 108, LAC.

16 Inspector Crozier to the Police Commissioner, 17 February 1876, RG 18, vol 10, file 108, LAC.

17 Morris 1880: 256–257.

18 See for instance Mitchell 2006.

grievances when government provisions were reduced or cancelled. Robert Reece has examined, for instance, how the annual distribution of blankets in 1830s New South Wales, as a residual form of Macquarie's original annual 'feast for the natives', was regarded by Aboriginal people as an entitlement and its discontinuation as a 'breach of faith'.¹⁹ In this respect, as an important aspect of establishing colonial relationships, rations and other provisions were not simply a tool of social management controlled by colonial agents and institutions, but were part, even if an asymmetrical one, of what Richard Broome has called 'a complex two-way flow of power'.²⁰

If the distribution of provisions to Aboriginal people initially featured for colonial administrations as an instrument of conciliation and inducement to peace, the systems of rations distribution that subsequently evolved in both Australia and Canada emerged more clearly as part of a systematic means of Aboriginal governance, as well as a response to necessity. In both jurisdictions, colonial authorities were aware that provision of food and other goods could prove to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, rations were regarded as a primary means of inducing a return in the form of Aboriginal labour, and thereby of furthering a goal of Aboriginal 'civilisation'. In Canada in particular, one of the rationales behind treaty-making was of reducing Aboriginal people's dependence on the hunt - and their capacity to range the prairies that this entailed - by providing them with the seed, stock, farming equipment and instruction that would turn them towards agricultural self-sufficiency. In colonial Australia, while it was rarely imagined that Aboriginal people would become a self-supporting agricultural class in the same way, it was anticipated that they would at least become a fruitful source of labour for settlers, and educated into an ethic of industry. On the other hand, the idea that food should be distributed gratuitously to Aboriginal people invited fears in both Canada and Australia that such a policy could encourage 'indolence' rather than 'industry', 'dependency' rather than 'self sufficiency'. In this respect, rations policy held a visibly contradictory place within colonial ideology, and was at the heart of official anxieties about how best to induce Aboriginal engagement with a colonial economy.

Ultimately, in both these jurisdictions, competing ideological concerns about rations as a tool of Aboriginal governance were to some degree forced into the background by the pressing problems of Aboriginal starvation that came to the Canadian prairies with the disappearance of the buffalo from the 1870s, and to the Australian colonies with the ongoing and uncompensated appropriation of Aboriginal lands. Although ration distribution had its strategic uses and setbacks, it also proved to be an unavoidable government response to mass want. But although these administrative concerns were shared in Australia and Canada, the intents and effects of ration distribution were shaped by rather different forces that underpinned some key divergences in the ways that the governance of Aboriginal people evolved.

¹⁹ Reece 1967: 197-205; see also O'Brien 2008: 162.

²⁰ Broome 2006: 43.10.

Rations in colonial Australia

In a number of Australia's colonies, the origins of a formalised ration system lay in the consequences of violence on the frontier and the efforts of colonial governments to conciliate Aboriginal people to settler occupation of their lands. Until the 1830s in New South Wales, Port Phillip, South Australia and Western Australia, government-sponsored 'feasts' – accompanied by the provision of clothing, blankets and other goods – were one means by which Governors or other colonial officials sought to pacify Aboriginal people in the wake of frontier violence and communicate the government's message of benevolent intentions.²¹ Later, more formalised systems of rations distributions evolved as a means of maintaining peace in frontier districts. In the wake of the Rufus River massacre in South Australia in 1841, in which more than 30 Maurara people were killed following conflict with overlanders from New South Wales, Governor Grey established a post at Moorundie on the Murray River. Grey's proposal was that 'presents' of flour would be distributed from this post to Aboriginal people on 'every other full moon' as a means of pacifying Aboriginal peoples not yet acquainted with European settlement, and its distribution would be 'dependent on their good conduct'. Such regular assemblies would also, he hoped, provide an opportunity for Aboriginal people to bring grievances to his notice, and 'prevent a recurrence of scenes similar to those' that had lately occurred on the Rufus River.²²

The Governor came to regard the distribution of rations as an effective frontier strategy for Aboriginal pacification, and it was henceforth adopted as policy. By the late 1840s a broader system had been established in South Australia geared around remote police posts. As police were posted to newly opened frontier locations, their tasks included the monthly distribution of rations to Aboriginal people on the full moon, and a 'registry' was kept of those who attended.²³ Over the next decade the system was refined to a daily ration of 1 lb of flour, 2 oz of sugar and a half oz of tea, to be distributed once a week. Blankets were issued once a year on the Queen's Birthday. As the Protector of Aborigines put it in 1852, rationing Aboriginal people at 'feeding stations' in frontier districts where violence was likely to flare provided a preventative means of 'keeping them quiet'.²⁴

Similar systems were adopted in other colonies. In Moreton Bay, blankets were initially distributed to Aboriginal people as a gesture of conciliation across the different police districts, though in later years the distribution became limited to the 'aged and infirm' or otherwise 'most necessitous and deserving'.²⁵ In Western

21 For contemporary reportage of Governors' or Chief Protector Robinson's 'feasts' see for instance *The Sydney Gazette*, 31 December 1814 and 20 April 1839; *The Perth Gazette*, 28 March 1835; *The South Australian Register*, 25 May 1839.

22 Governor Grey to Lord John Russell, 30 October 1841, GRG 2/5/1841/52, State Records of South Australia [henceforth SRSA].

23 Matthew Moorhouse to the Colonial Secretary, 5 March 1847, GRG 24/6/1847/286, SRSA.

24 Protector's Letterbooks, 1 November 1852, GRG 52/7, SRSA.

25 The practice lapsed and was resumed in 1848. *Moreton Bay Courier*, 6 May 1848 and 26 May 1849.

Australia, food depots were established in the early 1830s in districts outside of Perth, where monthly distributions of flour were made to Aboriginal people 'in the event of [their] good conduct or rather the absence of misdemeanour'.²⁶ The Protector of Aborigines Charles Symmons considered the system successful in providing a 'check to violence and aggression' and therefore as a form of protection to settlers.²⁷ It also had the perceived benefit of keeping Aboriginal people away from the township of Perth, where their 'annoyance' of the white inhabitants was regarded as requiring additional policing.

As the examples of outlying food depots indicated, the assembly of large numbers of Aboriginal people was perceived as undesirable when places of distribution were in the vicinity of settled townships.²⁸ After Moreton Bay's annual blanket distribution starting taking place from Brisbane's police office, settlers complained that Aboriginal people would commit 'outrages' on their way to and from the town, and urged that the distribution should take 'in their own districts'.²⁹ In comparison, the system of distributing rations from outlying police stations was regarded as an advantage because it kept Aboriginal people away from townships and further aided in their surveillance and control. For police, rations could be used as an effective tool of reward and punishment. In the early years of settlement in South and Western Australia, police might withhold rations from a group as a punishment for crime such as stock theft, and as a means of inducing the group to give up the perpetrators. As early as 1840 in Western Australia, the withholding of rations took the form of a preventative model of self-policing: Native Constables were employed on the payment of daily rations, which were withheld if any 'outrage' were committed amongst the Aboriginal people they policed.³⁰ By the same token, extra rations or tobacco were given to groups as rewards for compliant behaviour such as identifying an alleged miscreant, or for providing a desired service to the authorities.³¹

However, underlying the perceived advantages of rations systems in the Australian colonies as an effective means of Aboriginal pacification, surveillance, and reward for 'useful' conduct were concerns that unless they served as payment for labour, rations would produce the opposite of their desired effect. In 1833 *The Perth Gazette* expressed some disapproval that food depots provided Aboriginal people with 'bread &c without any return', and warned that they 'are becoming most accomplished beggars'.³² South Australia's Protector of Aborigines Edward Hamilton also warned that the provision of supplies, 'except in exchange for an equivalent of labour', could lead 'to improvident habits and indolence'.³³ A popular perception amongst settlers was that a rations system could do little in

26 Protector's Quarterly report, 31 December 1840, *Perth Gazette*, 9 January 1841.

27 Protector's Quarterly report, 31 December 1840, *Perth Gazette*, 9 January 1841.

28 For instance, Wells 2003: 209–212 on complaints about ration distributions in Palmerston in the Northern Territory.

29 *Moreton Bay Courier*, 31 May 1856.

30 Protector's Quarterly report, 31 December 1840, *Perth Gazette*, 9 January 1841.

31 Protector's Quarterly report, 31 December 1840, *Perth Gazette*, 9 January 1841.

32 *The Perth Gazette*, 2 March 1833.

33 *South Australian Government Gazette*, 18 March 1875.

‘educating’ Aboriginal people into industry, and that no amount of food, clothing or instruction would deter Aboriginal people from their own ‘uncivilised’ habits.³⁴ As Anne O’Brien has argued, although settlers did not entirely shed a consciousness that provisions formed some kind of reparation for dispossession, this increasingly became displaced by a belief that Aboriginal ‘pauperism’ was the ‘natural’ result of indolence.³⁵

In order to encourage the able-bodied to find work in the colonial economy, ration distributions became restricted in a number of Australia’s colonies to the elderly, infirm or destitute, a practice later formalised after the establishment of Aboriginal Protection Boards. This left open the possibility that Aboriginal people could continue to support themselves through traditional means by hunting and fishing. From 1859 in South Australia rations were not to be given to ‘able-bodied natives if there is reason to believe they can get work or can obtain their subsistence by fishing or hunting’.³⁶ Similarly, from the 1850s in Western Australia food distributions were narrowed down to a modest ration of flour, sugar and tea to the destitute or the sick.³⁷ The fact that governments at this stage did not include meat within rations was a symptom of the assumption that Aboriginal people could continue to practice traditional means of subsistence on the land.

In this respect South and Western Australia’s practices differed somewhat from the ration distribution system in Victoria, where from the 1860s a more extensive network of reserves and missions prevailed under the authority of the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines. Although meat was provided within the standard ration to the elderly and the infirm, it was not provided to the able-bodied who, it was expected, could provide their own meat either by buying it with their modest wages or by hunting and fishing. However, as Richard Broome has argued in relation to conditions at Coranderrk reserve, this led to a Catch-22 situation whereby, lacking the means to purchase meat, men might leave off paid work to hunt or fish, only to have their flour, tea and sugar ration cancelled because they were not working.³⁸ The purpose of rations within the mission system entailed a more explicitly moral goal of encouraging ‘civilisation and Christianisation’ than the goal of ‘keeping the peace’ that underpinned distributions from police stations,³⁹ though at least this was something which Aboriginal people had power to ignore. As early as 1843, for instance, Port Phillip’s Assistant Protector William Thomas recorded his discouragement at seeing Aboriginal people leave his mission station supplied with flour and

34 For instance, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 September 1865; *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 26 January 1876.

35 O’Brien 2011.

36 Report of the 1860 Select Committee of the Legislative Council upon the Aborigines, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, no 165 of 1860: appendix, ii.

37 Hasluck 1942: 102.

38 Broome 2006: 43.9.

39 See, for instance, Broome 2006; Mitchell 2006.

blankets, knowing they were unlikely to return; this was a situation, he wrote, which 'enervates the hope I once held and the zeal that glowed in my breast of civilising and Christianising these people'.⁴⁰

In Australia's colonies rationing systems might have evolved from the combined objectives of Aboriginal pacification and inducement to labour, underpinned by an assumption that people would continue to sustain themselves on natural game, but there was little doubt amongst colonial observers that European monopolisation of the land produced widespread Aboriginal deprivation. As settlement expanded from colony to colony, police, administrators and settlers often understood that hunger was a significant cause of Aboriginal attacks on settlers' stock and property. South Australia's Commissioner of Police reported in 1851: 'We see the Native driven from his hunting grounds and his food ... we see the White man, in possession of food and water in abundance ... and [the] results are murder and robbery'.⁴¹ Similarly, in his 1842 'Proposal for the Better Treatment of the Aborigines', influential Port Phillip grazier John Hunter Patterson observed that Aboriginal 'depredations' on settlers' property were committed for the 'sole purpose of obtaining food', and argued that 'an adequate provision must be made for supplying them with the first necessaries of life, for it is idle to talk of reforming, or even of retraining, by punishment or otherwise, a starving population'.⁴² By the late nineteenth century in Western Australia, the Resident Magistrate at Derby observed that Aboriginal people in the region were almost entirely 'dependent on charity', as the availability of natural game was 'insufficient' to keep them.⁴³ If the concept of conciliating Aboriginal peoples to colonial rule had partly underpinned early practices of providing food provisions, the impact of Aboriginal starvation as a direct consequence of the spread of settlement revived debate about the obligations on colonial governments to provide compensation.

In response, some colonial governments initiated variations on rationing practices. In Western Australia, ration distributions were managed in outlying regions by the Resident Magistrates who represented the seat of government in remote districts, but rations were only provided to those for whom 'out-door relief' was deemed unavoidable, and only then by application to the Governor. The adult daily ration scale set in 1878 for such cases was 1 lb of bread, 1/3 oz of tea, and 1 1/2 oz of sugar, with the rider that 'no extra allowance will be sanctioned, excepting on a Medical Certificate that it is absolutely necessary'.⁴⁴ Over the years, as Western Australia's government attempted to reduce its expenditure on 'out-door relief', increasing Aboriginal destitution invited considerable

40 Protectors' reports in *Despatches of the Governors of the Australian Colonies, with the Reports of the Protectors of Aborigines*, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers (HCPP), no 627 (1844), 324.

41 Chief Secretary's Office correspondence files, GRG 24/6/1851/1733, SRSA.

42 John Hunter Patterson, 'A Proposal for the Better Treatment of the Aborigines of Australia Felix', *Australasian Chronicle*, 28 June 1842.

43 Resident Magistrate at Derby to the Chief Protector of Aborigines, 10 August 1898, Acc 255, file 28, 1898/15-1900.49, State Records of Western Australia [henceforth SROWA].

44 General Order No 11, 19 July 1878, Acc 527, file 1059 (1878-1883), SROWA.

public controversy, one settler writing to the Chief Protector that limitations on Aboriginal rations effectively constituted a policy 'to starve – morally to murder considerable numbers of them'.⁴⁵

By the end of the century in Western Australia, however, rations had become distributed as payment for work from pastoral stations, for by this time it was established that Aboriginal labour constituted 'a most useful factor in the prosperity of settlers'.⁴⁶ In 1896, after a tour of pastoral stations in the Kimberley region, George Marsden reported to the Aborigines Protection Board that whereas in the northern districts cattle were previously 'being killed wholesale' and 'Police had to be sent out there to put down the trouble', now Aboriginal station workers considerably outnumbered white station workers. What is more, fewer Aboriginal people now received government rations at all, because Aboriginal station workers shared their rations with 'outside natives'.⁴⁷ Pamela Smith has examined the evolution of the Aboriginal rations system from the 1890s on pastoral stations in the Kimberley region in light of two economic imperatives: one was that providing rations to Aboriginal people proved to be effective in preventing cattle killing, and the other was that it enabled pastoralists to gain control over a cheap labour force. As elsewhere, flour, tea and sugar comprised the basic ration, though depending on the generosity of the station owner, salt beef might also be provided to those who worked at the homestead.⁴⁸

In South Australia, the innovation of transferring responsibility for ration distribution from police or magistrates to pastoral stations occurred earlier, from the early 1850s. On the surface, a government decision to pass responsibility for ration distribution to pastoral stations might have seemed counter-intuitive, since the pastoralists who now managed Aboriginal rations were those who not many years previously had been driving Aboriginal people from their runs. However, the introduction of pastoral leases gave new logic to the shift. In 1848 the imperial government authorised a new system of 14-year leases which replaced the system of annual licences. These were designed to give sheep and cattle farmers more secure tenure and the government more control over the dispersion of settlement, but most importantly, the leases specified that they were 'not intended to deprive the natives of their former right to hunt over these Districts'. Although these terms were intended to apply to all the Australian colonies, they were more fully articulated in South Australia because just as the form of pastoral leases was being debated locally, the government was seeking to address the problem of frontier violence in the colony's western districts.⁴⁹ According to the conditions of the lease, Aboriginal people had an 'unobstructed right' to access pastoral lands, use its 'springs and waters', erect dwellings, and to 'take and use as food birds and animals *ferae naturae* in such a manner as

45 Robert Bush to the Chief Protector, 1 August 1898, Acc 255, file 28, 1898/15–1900.49, SROWA.

46 1883 Native Commission report, cited in Hasluck 1942: 31–32.

47 Report of George Marsden to the Aborigines Protection Board, 24 October 1896, Acc 495, item 35, file 2146/1896, SROWA.

48 Smith 2000: 80–81.

49 *South Australian Government Gazette*, 30 January 1851. See also Foster 1998: 1–2.

they would have been entitled to do' before the lease was granted. Pastoralists now risked forfeiting their land if they denied Aboriginal people these rights. Perhaps most importantly, experience had by now shown that Aboriginal people were adept at station work. In country where it was difficult to attract European labour, Aboriginal people were available, exploitable and skilled. By providing station owners with rations to distribute, the government not only gave them a means of attracting Aboriginal labour to the station, but also of subsidising its cost. The government rations still comprised only flour, tea and sugar with the expectation that Aboriginal people would secure meat through wage labour or traditional hunting.

From the settlers' point of view, distribution of rations from pastoral stations gave them access to a government-subsidised labour force. From the government's point of view, sub-contracting the management of rations to settlers established a means of Aboriginal administration that was not only economical but also effective, encouraging the entry of Aboriginal people into the colonial economy while obviating the need to establish additional government-run reserves or appoint more regional administrators. From an Aboriginal point of view, rations provided from pastoral stations offered a reliable source of subsistence to compensate for declining traditional resources. But most significantly, an incidental benefit of this system in the longer term was that it enabled Aboriginal people to remain connected to their traditional lands and customs. Pastoralists generally demonstrated little concern about the traditional practices of Aboriginal life, provided that Aboriginal labour was reliable and the business of the station was unaffected. As a consequence Aboriginal people were able to speak their language, continue living in their country, and maintain their religious and cultural practices.

Rations in Canada's North-West Territories

In Canada's North West Territories, as in Australia's colonies, a regular system of ration distribution emerged more from circumstance than planning. In an ideal world, the land cession treaties undertaken through the 1870s would have led to the form of managed development of the North West Territories imagined by Ottawa, in which the forfeiting of First Nation sovereignty would lead through agricultural education to Aboriginal people's assimilation within the colonial economy. The reservation of agricultural land for Aboriginal use, the payment of annuities, the provision of seed, stock, agricultural equipment and farm instructors would, according to this ideal, have obviated a need to supply rations. But establishing independence through agriculture did not proceed as planned. Brian Titley has suggested that as early as 1877, soon after the signing of Treaty 7, the government's capacity to implement the anticipated Aboriginal transition from hunting to agriculture was compromised by a range of practical obstacles: these included a chronic shortage of equipment, supplies and suitable personnel; the cumbersome paper trail required to approve expenditures from Ottawa; and the government's own fear of 'encouraging idleness'.⁵⁰

50 Cited in Titley 2008: 55; see also Carter 1990: 88-102.

By the end of that decade, the fast decline of the buffalo from the prairies had truly taken its toll. Only Treaty 6 had provided for the possibility of famine, making the provision of food to First Nations people an unanticipated expenditure. Missionary Constantine Scollen, who in 1876 had urged the Canadian government to forge a treaty with the Blackfoot nation, was by 1879 writing to the Assistant Police Commissioner that people were now suffering from 'unparalleled' want. The government was 'not prepared for the emergency', he wrote, and if the coming year was to be as bad as the last, 'we shall either have to provide for the Indians or fight them; there is no other alternative'.⁵¹ With the loss of the buffalo as a traditional staple, the Department of Indian Affairs was obliged to take on the responsibility of a rations policy whose expenditure it would spend the next decades attempting to shrink. The peoples of Treaty 7 were most affected by starvation: Vic Satzewich has calculated that through most of the 1880s, the people of Treaty 7 were the highest recipients of 'supplies to destitute Indians', their cost running up to half and sometimes as high as 70 per cent of the total Department of Indian Affairs' annual budget.⁵² Government efforts to reduce rations expenditure, therefore, went hand in hand with the rations policy from the moment of its inception.

In Australia's colonies, colonial governments had avoided including meat in rations on the grounds that Aboriginal people could continue to hunt native game, though the gradual disappearance of game from lands given over to pastoral use made this assumption increasingly problematic. On the Canadian prairies, meat was a necessary inclusion in rations not only because the buffalo were fast disappearing, but also because the traditional hunt, now required to cover ever-expanding distances, ran counter to the goal that people would settle down to their reserves. Along with flour, the primary ration was beef; it was relatively economical and could be readily sourced, initially from Fort Benton south of the border, but later in support of the local ranching industry in western Canada. A primary difficulty, however, was that there was never enough food to meet the need. Another on-going difficulty was that the supplies provided by traders for distribution on the Indian Agencies were frequently of a substandard quality; the Indian Agent on the Blood reserve in the Treaty 7 area, for instance, complained constantly of musty flour, underweight supplies and inferior coal.⁵³

Vic Satzewich has argued that the Department of Indian Affairs' rationing policy in the Treaty 7 region of Alberta, where the need was highest, was shaped by four competing forces: on the one hand, it furthered the Department's objective of Aboriginal confinement and supported the economic interests of the ranchers who supplied the beef; on the other hand, it was constrained by the Department's obsessive concern with economies, and was constantly vexed by the grievances of First Nations people.⁵⁴ These competing forces inevitably produced a set of dilemmas for the Department of Indian Affairs. If Aboriginal people in want of

51 Scollen to Assistant Commissioner Irvine, 13 April 1879, RG 10, vol 3695, file 14/942, LAC.

52 Satzewich 1996: 197.

53 Correspondence files 1899-1906, Blood Indian Agency, M1788, Glenbow Archives.

54 Satzewich 1996: 193.

food had to go further and further afield to obtain it, the government's efforts at containment were undermined. If on the other hand Aboriginal people were provided too readily with supplies, it was feared that the 'civilizing' agenda would be undermined by a culture of idleness and dependency. As in Australia's colonies, this fear led to various government schemes whereby rations would serve as reward for labour or government service.⁵⁵

Yet underlying these ideological anxieties was the constant pressure to cut costs, and from the late 1880s, the most pragmatic solution to cost-cutting was to whittle down the amount of beef rations. Agents in charge of Indian Agencies in treaty areas were told to reduce rations to 'make beef on hand last' until the next budget allowance.⁵⁶ Indian Agent reports in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were replete with accounts of how and how much ration costs had been reduced.⁵⁷ Indeed, Vic Satzewich notes that by the late 1880s, 'an Indian Agent's chances for promotion were tied, in part, to his success in reducing rations expenditures in his Agency'.⁵⁸ The attack on a farm instructor in 1893 and the fatal shooting of a ration issuer in 1895 were just two consequences of these economies.⁵⁹

Faced with the prospect of famine, attacks on ranchers' cattle might have seemed an obvious option for relief, but as the mounted police discovered, ranchers often held an 'exaggerated idea' of cattle theft from Aboriginal 'depredations'.⁶⁰ That cattle theft was lower than might be expected was perhaps less the result of natural forbearance than of the efficient system of policing that kept Aboriginal people in check and contained on reserves. Aware that hungry people would kill cattle if the opportunity arose, the North West Mounted Police monitored the risk of Aboriginal cattle theft with constant patrols, the Police Commissioner assuring the government that it would be 'impossible for us to do more than we are now doing'.⁶¹ Nonetheless, as mediators between the ranching industry, the government and Aboriginal people themselves, the police were well aware that reductions in ration expenditure created an ever increasing problem. They reported to their superiors the complaints they regularly received from Aboriginal people about the government's shrinking rations; Chief Red Crow from the Blood reserve warning Superintendent Sam Steele that although he tried to keep his people 'law abiding', he 'could not answer for their actions if they were not properly fed'.⁶² But unwilling or unable to relax the department's constraints, the Indian Commissioner insisted that although rations had been somewhat short, times were hard across the country and one could also find white settlers 'without a mouthful of meat'.⁶³

55 Carter 1990: 84–89; Tobias 1983: 526.

56 Blood Indian Agency correspondence files, 14 June 1904, M1788, Glenbow Archives.

57 For instance Blackfoot Agency reports and returns, 15 June 1907, M1785, Glenbow Archives.

58 Satzewich 1996: 200.

59 See Correspondence regarding the attempted murder of Farm Instructor Nash, RG 18, vol 73, file 233/1893; Correspondence regarding the shooting of Frank Skynner, RG 10, vol 3912, reel C-10197, file 111/762, LAC.

60 For instance Sam Steele to the Police Commissioner, 7 July 1890, RG 18, vol 43, and 9 March 1893, RG 18, vol 80, file 258/1893, LAC.

61 Police Commissioner to Indian Commissioner, 11 March 1893, RG 18, vol 80, file 258/1893, LAC.

62 Report of Sam Steele, 7 May 1897, RG 18, vol 137, file 333/1897, LAC.

63 Indian Commissioner to NWMP Comptroller, 28 June 1893, RG 18, vol 82, file 387, LAC.

Because in most treaty areas rationing was a matter of government discretion rather than formal obligation, it could be strategically adapted as circumstance dictated. Although the provision of rations was understood as a necessary response to dire need, few historians disagree that the government's power to regulate ration distribution was instrumental in gaining authority over Aboriginal people after the signing of treaties, and of ensuring their acquiescence to federal Indian policy. Hugh Shewell has argued that government relief in the form of rations was enlisted over decades as part of the Department of Indian Affairs' determination to erode Aboriginal people's political and cultural autonomy.⁶⁴ Gerard Friesen and Sarah Carter have also argued that although emergency rations were necessary interventions from the late 1870s, the government was not slow in using food as a means of coercion.⁶⁵ Through the coming years, the settlement of Aboriginal peoples onto reserves was facilitated by the supply or withholding of the rations upon which they were increasingly dependent. Cree leaders who were resistant to the treaties were 'starved into submission'; and when the Assiniboine resisted leaving Cypress Hills for a new reserve at Indian Head, their rations were whittled down until they were compelled to move.⁶⁶ Once First Nations peoples were settled onto reserves, the withholding of rations was a strategy employed to maintain obedience by individual Indian Agents. On the Blackfoot reserve, for instance, Indian Agent Magnus Begg would stop the rations of 'young bucks' as punishment for leaving the reserve without permission.⁶⁷ On the Blood reserve, Indian Agent William Pocklington withheld rations as a means of inducing the group to give up local perpetrators of crimes.⁶⁸

As was also the case in Australia, rations could serve not just as the stick but also as the carrot in securing Aboriginal people's acquiescence to government policy. In early 1885, in the climate of the simmering tension that would become the North West Rebellion, Commissioner Dewdney sought to secure Aboriginal loyalty by increasing distributions of food and other goods to those people who remained on their reserves and exchanged supplies for labour. In the Qu'Appelle area, where chiefs lobbied him with their grievances, he increased flour, tea and bacon rations for all bands. In the Treaty 7 region, he increased rations as a gesture of 'goodwill', and travelled to Blackfoot Crossing himself to provide chiefs with tea and tobacco.⁶⁹ On individual agencies, such as Hobemma in the Treaty 6 region, the Indian Agent used bacon as a means of keeping the atmosphere of rebellion at bay.⁷⁰

These measures, however, lasted only so long as the crisis required. Within the decade the Police Commissioner was warning the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs that Aboriginal discontent was becoming an urgent matter, that

64 Shewell 2004.

65 Friesen 1987: 150-151; Carter 1999: 142-143.

66 Carter 1999: 143-148.

67 Inspector Wood to Superintendent Howe, 2 May 1896, RG 18, vol 122, file 333/1896, LAC.

68 Inspector Sanders to Sam Steele, 7 March 1893, RG 18, vol 73, file 233/1893, LAC.

69 Titley 2008: 178-179.

70 Samuel Brigham Lucas papers, 15 April 1885, M699, Glenbow Archives.

the current ration scale was in his opinion 'totally insufficient to sustain life', and that if Aboriginal people were to live, the settlers' cattle must suffer.⁷¹ Over the years, the North West Mounted Police forwarded reports to the Department of Indian Affairs of petitions received from Aboriginal peoples that government rations were inadequate to the point of starvation.⁷² Nonetheless, with bad winters on the prairies and reports of poverty amongst settlers, the government's very provision of rations to Aboriginal people helped to fuel resentful sentiment amongst the non-Aboriginal community that settlers were 'not nearly so well supplied' as Aboriginal people, who had 'little to complain of'.⁷³ The inadequacy of government efforts were not lost on some settlers, however, who feared the risk of an Aboriginal uprising if the government did not provide better rations, for as one correspondent to the press warned, the ration allowed 'is not sufficient to keep a dog alive'.⁷⁴

That Aboriginal deprivation was a consequence of their dispossession was a cycle also observed by mounted police on Australia's frontiers some decades earlier. Ironically, however, the very absence of land cession treaties in Australia's colonies seemed to increase the imperative to provide compensation by way of provisions, while the formality of land cession treaties in Canada's North West Territories, where rations were not included in most of the treaty terms, seemed to justify the authorities' efforts to cut them back. Observing in 1851 that no increase in police numbers would reduce Aboriginal stock theft when it was driven by desperate want, South Australia's Police Commissioner argued it is 'but a bare act of Justice' to alleviate that want 'with an equivalent for that food of which he has rightly or wrongly been deprived'.⁷⁵ Yet when a similar argument was put to Judge Macleod in defence of 16 men from the Blood reserve on trial for cattle killing in 1894, he responded with the prediction that if the cattle killing continued there was a likelihood of their rations being cancelled 'as there was nothing in their Treaty calling for rations'.⁷⁶

Over time, the Canadian government's efforts to reduce ration expenditure were largely successful, even though its goal to create agricultural self-sufficiency on Aboriginal reserves was not. In 1899, the Secretary to the Indian Commissioner compared the results of plans over the past decade to make the North West Territories' First Nations self-supporting. In 1888, he reported, there were 15,000 Aboriginal people living on reserves in the North West, excluding Manitoba. Almost all were rationed, at the annual expense of \$372,000, and only 2500 were self supporting. A decade later, the government's ration expenditure had been reduced by more than half to \$180,000. The number of self-supporting people on

71 Police Commissioner to Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 30 September 1894, RG 18, vol 101, file 75/1894, LAC.

72 For instance RG 18, vol 19, file 1888; Correspondence regarding the Condition of Indians, Battleford District, RG 18, vol 101, file 509/1894, LAC.

73 Indian Commissioner to NWMP Comptroller, 28 June 1893, RG 18, vol 82, file 387/1893, LAC.

74 Letter to *The Free Press*, 18 April 1893. See also Lux (2001) on the inadequacy of rations compared to settler sentiment about government benevolence.

75 Chief Secretary's Office, Correspondence files, 10 June 1851, GRG 24/6/1851/1733, SRSA.

76 Satzewich 1996: 207.

reserves had increased, as had the value of produce from Aboriginal farming, but the figure of those dependent upon rations remained high, at almost 10,000 people.⁷⁷ Despite the government's plans, the reserve system's rigid constraints on Aboriginal mobility, coupled with the ranching industry's monopolisation of the land and the disappearance from the prairies of natural game, had created a subjugated class of people reliant for their subsistence upon rations.

Conclusion

With its origins in early practices across the Empire of providing food and other goods as a means of conciliation, a system of ration distribution evolved in both Australia and Canada as part of a broader administrative agenda for Aboriginal management. In both jurisdictions, rations were strategically increased or withheld, as circumstances dictated, as a means of ensuring Aboriginal acquiescence to colonial policy. In this respect rationing held instrumental value in the governance of Aboriginal people, even in face of administrative anxieties that dependence on government supplies would impair rather than induce the contributions to the colonial economy that Aboriginal people were desired to make. Yet the intended role and effect of ration practices also varied across these jurisdictions in light of differently evolving circumstances.

In Australia, where no formal negotiations ever took place for appropriation of Aboriginal lands, rations served variously over time as a means of pacification to offset the risk of frontier conflict, of keeping Aboriginal people away from pastoral stations, stock and townships, and of maintaining surveillance in outlying regions. Although rationing emerged from a series of *ad hoc* processes rather than as dedicated policy, it came to hold considerable purchase as a strategy shaped initially by a broad colonial objective to disperse Aboriginal peoples from lands now taken up by pastoral settlement. At the same time, in the absence of any foundational recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty, it was also understood, although not consistently, as a government obligation in the face of profound Aboriginal deprivation caused by European settlement. In this respect, rations can be seen as part of a larger policy agenda that emerged in the Australian colonies after the 1830s defined by the concept of Aboriginal 'protection' - a concept which, despite failing to fulfil its stated objectives through a rule of law, was perceived to justify Aboriginal dispossession. In the wake of campaigns by settlers and mounted police to secure control of Aboriginal lands, the growing importance of Aboriginal labour to the pastoral industry changed the nature and purpose of rationing. This change took place early in South Australia with the introduction of new pastoral leases in 1851 which formalised Aboriginal people's rights of access to those lands. Although these rights were often not honoured by settlers in newly-opening districts, an inexorable shift was occurring whereby the pastoralists who had earlier lobbied for police protection from Aboriginal attack were now requesting rations to help them secure Aboriginal labour. The

77 Report of the Indian Commissioner Secretary, 26 June 1899, RG 10, vol 3993, file 187/224, LAC.

South Australian government's outsourcing of the ration system to pastoral stations in the 1850s was an early example of this economic pragmatism, but a consequence of the system was that Aboriginal people were able to maintain connection to their traditional country and customs as workers in the pastoral industry, a pattern that unfolded across Australia over the second half of the nineteenth century. In contemporary native title cases, this has served to prove continuous occupation of traditional country, and case by case, might be said to contribute to a form of retrospective 'treaty making' two centuries after British settlement.

In Canada's North West Territories, where people were more immediately confined to reserves, rations more quickly became a government dilemma in face of its unsuccessful plans for a self-supporting industry of Aboriginal agriculture. On the surface, it might seem that treaty negotiations gave the First Nations peoples of Canada's North West Territories more power than Aboriginal peoples in Australia's colonies to set the terms of their relationship to the new colonial state. Some historians have argued that rather than being simply imposed settlements, the treaty making process provided Aboriginal peoples with crucial negotiating power.⁷⁸ Others have argued that the treaties fell so far short of their promise as to reduce Aboriginal rights within the first decade of European settlement to a cycle of 'oppression, land theft and starvation'.⁷⁹ What remains undisputed is that the era of starvation that followed on the prairies, and people's subsequent containment on reserves, meant that the vision promised by the treaties – of an altered form of autonomy within a new colonial economy – remained primarily unfulfilled. By the end of the nineteenth century, Dominion control of the North West Territories was firmly established and First Nations peoples were designated to reserves in line with government policy. In an age of extreme want on the prairies, the strategic supply or withholding of rations had been instrumental in facilitating this process. Even into the early twentieth century, reserve lands shrank as the government sought out country suitable for new settlement; and as Andrew Graybill puts it, while waiting for the sale of land to ranchers, the government 'offset its financial shortfall by reducing the natives' promised beef rations'.⁸⁰

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⁷⁸ For instance Freisen 1987: 147.

⁷⁹ Harring 2005: 92.

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