6. Mary McConnel: Christianising the Aborigines?

‘All this “yarmen” (land) belonging to me’.¹

Illustration 10. David and Mary McConnel.

Source: Mary McConnel, Memories of Days long gone by, By the Wife of an Australian Pioneer, M McConnel, Brisbane?, 1905.

¹ Mary McConnel, Memories of Days long gone by, By the Wife of an Australain Pioneer, M McConnel, Brisbane?, 1905: 43. The date of publication is tentative. The ML copy has inscription by author, dated March 1909, ‘David Cannon McConnel Biographical File’, ANU Archives. An alternative title on the spine is ‘Queensland Reminiscences 1848–1870’.
Mary McConnel lived among the local Indigenous peoples on two properties: on her husband’s sheep and cattle property, Cressbrook, near Toogoolawah,² 25 kilometres north of Esk and 200 kilometres north-west of Brisbane and, from 1849 to 1853 at their agricultural farm, Toogoolawah, later Bulimba, on the south side of the Brisbane River, eight kilometres downstream from the settlement. Her memoir, _Memories of Days long gone by. By the Wife of an Australian Pioneer_, covers her life’s experiences up to 1878, set down for the sake of her children. It is the textual representation of a white colonial woman’s assumed racial authority over Indigenous people.

The motives behind Mary’s relationship with Aborigines were to civilise and Christianise them. Emily Cowl brought her medicine chest to the outback and Katherine Kirkland her tentative, elevated social standards as contributions to fostering civilisation. Mary’s civilising aims were stronger and deeper. Viewing Aborigines as people in need of ‘improvement’—an idea associated with Jeremy

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² James Henry (Harry) McConnel, Mary’s eldest son, named the town of Toogoolawah, after his birthplace on the Brisbane River. J H McConnel was manager of Cressbrook from about 1871 and became sole owner in 1908, _The Cressbrook Estate: The Property of Messrs J H McConnel & Son_, n.p., Sydney, 71910: 14; Bull n.d.: 15.
Bentham’s utilitarianism—she wished to help them along the relentless tread of ‘progress’. Her flagship was the adoption of middle-class British values; her rallying cry was Christianity. Kindly, energetic and sincere in Eurocentric terms, she fitted the nineteenth-century paternalistic mould of patronisation and benevolence towards the ‘lower orders’, in this case, the Dungibara people (members of the larger Waka Waka group) on Cressbrook. While her efforts to change the Aborigines were only minimally successful, her earnest attempts brought to life the dignified and sometimes humorous reactions of the Aboriginal women and girls. By representing Indigenous opposition to white control, Mary has enabled Dungibara authority and proud identity to enter the historical record, extending and deepening our knowledge of nineteenth-century Indigenous Australians.

**Wealth and privilege**

Mary first arrived at Moreton Bay in the Colony of New South Wales (now Queensland) on 1 May 1849, as the young wife of an established landholder, David Cannon McConnel. McConnel was the eleventh child and fifth surviving son of James McConnel, the Scottish owner of a Manchester fine-yarn spinning firm and, from 1835, the Cressbrook Mill that manufactured lace thread. In 1839 at the age of 21, he gained a share of his father’s fortune. Armed with his inheritance he migrated to New South Wales the following year. Arriving in Sydney, he headed north, buying stock en route and crossed into present-day Queensland via the Darling Downs. Marking trees on 15 July 1841, he claimed ownership of a 240 square-mile section of the upper Brisbane River valley, naming his property ‘Cressbrook’ after his family’s Derbyshire estate. McConnel thereby won the reputation of being the first settler to run sheep in the area. In 1845 he bought stud Shorthorn cows from the Australian Agricultural Co. and imported bulls from England to establish what was to become a famous stud.

During a trip to Britain, David McConnel met Mary Macleod and they married on 25 April 1848 at Old Grey Friars’ Church, Edinburgh. Born in Edinburgh on 4 January 1824, Mary was the daughter of Alexander Macleod, an inland-revenue commissioner, and Katharine, born Rose. In Edinburgh, the family lived in the comfortable southern residential areas of Newington and Morningside and later, at Lauriston, north-west of the city. An older brother, two younger brothers and a younger sister had died in infancy. Mary’s surviving siblings were

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5 Brisbane Courier, 10 January 1910: 7.
two older brothers, a younger brother, Walter, and a sister, eight years younger than Mary. Her eldest brother died from an illness contracted during his service as a naval medical officer in the Crimean War. An interest in health, particularly of children, remained with Mary throughout her life. Well-educated (her father set ‘a high value on education’), she was taught initially by a tutor, along with her then three older brothers. Later, she attended a ‘Ladies’ school’ and, with Walter, three years her junior, went to Henderson Academy where, ‘boys and girls were taught together’. 

David returned to the colony with Mary at the request of his brother John who, with Henry Mort, was managing Cressbrook. The McConnels sailed on the Rev’d Dr John Dunmore Lang’s second chartered ship, the Chasely. Lang, who had been promoting the emigration of industrious, virtuous and God-fearing men and women to improve the ‘moral tone’ of the colony, was appealing in 1849 specifically to Manchester industrialists to invest in the growth of cotton. As the son of a prosperous Manchester cotton mill owner, McConnel answered the call, establishing Toogoolawah (Bulimba) on the Brisbane River.

In 1849, only seven years had elapsed since the governor of New South Wales, Sir George Gipps, had announced that the penal settlement at Moreton Bay would be closed, and the area opened to the trading opportunities of free settlement. In 1846, when the government began to expend money on public works, the population was 950, and by 1851 it had reached only 2,103. There was no store, and government building projects had to wait until Queensland became a separate colony in 1859. Streets were undefined, the layout of inner Brisbane not yet determined. Although roads inland had been surveyed and labelled, they were rutted bullock tracks that became impassable after rain. Few people owned a vehicle (the McConnels were an exception), the main means of transport being boat travel on the river, as yet unbridged. The Government Resident, Captain John Wickham, rode a horse to the settlement from his Breakfast Point residence, Newstead. An early Brisbane shop, opened in Queen Street in late 1849, was the butchery of (later to be) notorious, Paddy Mayne (a murderer who used stolen money to advance his business). Even in 1861, Brisbane ‘was not a very attractive city ... with unformed streets, atrociously kept shops, and houses few and far between’. 

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6 Mary Macleod, afterwards Mrs David C McConnel of Cressbrook, Queensland, ‘Early Recollections’, n.p., n.d., pp. 1–3, 6–7. This document appears to be a manuscript precursor to Memories.


Toogoolawah, later Bulimba

On 1 August 1849, McConnel purchased 173 acres (69 hectares) for his agricultural property. The Yugarabul meaning of Toogoolawah was said to be ‘heart-shaped’, from the shape of the promontory formed by the river on three sides. Toogoolawah was the name used by Mary, who also recognised that during the 1840s, it had began to be called Bulimba. Its location on the southern bank of the Brisbane River facilitated travel by carriage to Cressbrook via Ipswich. The McConnels’ two-storeyed Bulimba House was designed and built by the firm of Andrew Petrie, one of Dr Lang’s 1831 Scottish immigrants. A former Superintendent of Works at Moreton Bay, Petrie had opened a private practice in 1842 after the closure of the convict settlement. Bulimba House was one of his first private commissions. The first stone house in the area, with shingled roof gables made from local cedar, it was described in the Moreton Bay Courier as an Elizabethan-style ‘capacious mansion’—an imposing gentleman’s residence in a society where wealth, mostly invested in property, was the indicator of social worth and success. It formed a contrast with Brisbane’s first private home, Newstead House (the precursor to Government House), a long, low, plastered-brick cottage, built in 1846 on the northern riverbank for Darling Downs farmer, Patrick Leslie. Strategically placed on sloping ground away from rising river levels, Bulimba House faces north-west precisely 400 metres south and 400 metres east of the Brisbane River as it coils around the promontory. It is now located on a large block in a suburban street.

At both Cressbrook and Bulimba, the McConnels embraced the Enlightenment ideals of order, harmony and progress. Both thriving enterprises, these properties resembled self-sufficient private towns, organised along hierarchical lines of British rural society’s concept of paternalism. While McConnel was the ‘paternalist’ by definition, Mary was his willing supporter.

Testament to progress, Bulimba by the time of its sale in 1853 had expanded to ‘220 acres of land, 180 of which are available for tillage’. The estate consisted of eight workers’ cottages, brick outhouses including kitchen, laundry, storerooms, sheds, a carpenter’s room, the smithy, stables, a coach-house, workrooms and a large, two-storeyed barn. Another cottage lay alongside the dairy, which was

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11 Moreton Bay Courier, 1 June 1850: 3. The Government Resident, Captain John Wickham, bought Newstead from Patrick Leslie, who was his brother-in-law, Siemon 2003: 42.
12 Personal communication from the owner in July 2004. A flood in 1841 had been one of the worst in settler experience.
large enough to milk 50 cows. A boatshed stood near the wharf.\footnote{Moreton Bay Courier, 12 February 1853: 3; Fisher 1987: 36. Cf. Conrad Martens, ‘Bulimba on the Brisbane River, D. C. McConnel Esq., Nov. 21, 1851’, Pencil 19 x 29.5 cm (ML PXC972, f.3).} There was an overseer (whose wife kept the poultry yard), men to manage the large dairy cow herd, farm labourers to clear and cultivate the land, a carpenter, coachman, housemaid, indoor servant, two cooks (husband and wife), and nurses to assist with Mary’s first two babies.

As well as the required cotton crop, wheat, barley, maize, oats, millet, sweet potatoes, lucerne and Italian rye grasses were planted. Mary reported that, when the land was cleared of subtropical vegetation, drained and ploughed, the virgin soil encouraged ‘everything [to grow] like mushrooms’. There was of course a kitchen garden, and also orchard trees, including oranges and pineapples, and banana palms. German immigrant families worked as ‘vine dressers’ on the grape vines. In time, ornamental trees and shrubs surrounded the house.\footnote{Moreton Bay Courier, 16 October 1852: 2, 11 December 1852: 3, 12 February 1853: 3; McConnel, Memories, 1905: 25.}

Illustration 11. Bulimba homestead, now located in the Brisbane suburb, Bulimba.

Source: Barbara Dawson, June 2006.

Mary’s mention of the Turrbal people—the local men and women of the larger Yugarabul language group—is scant and did not encompass Christian outreach. The Aborigines, however, showed their curiosity about the newcomers, particularly when they thought that a church service in the South Brisbane Presbyterian Church, built by McConnel in 1850, was a white man’s corroboree. Mary in this instance was not amused, judging their interference as an unwelcome intrusion. She wrote that:
Before [the wooden church] was enclosed the natives or “blacks” as they were called, were much attracted to it. When they saw people going in and singing, etc., they said, “Goorrai! budgery corobery!” and when the sermon began one or two of the men gesticulated like the minister, upsetting him a good deal. It was very hot and the door was open. The disturbance was prevented from happening again.\(^\text{15}\)

William Johnston, whose father James was the Bulimba gardener, recorded that ‘great numbers’ of Aborigines remained at Bulimba and he recalled a peaceful coexistence between the races. The Turrbal continued to hunt bandicoots and pademelons with their dogs and to fish from the riverbanks, using their sophisticated fishing techniques. According to Johnston, his father had ‘got on well with them and was a great favourite of theirs’, being given the name ‘Kiwanan’. Some of the Turrbal made ‘a great display on meeting him, or even on seeing him from the other side of the river’. Johnston observed, albeit in patronising terms, that:

> It is only right to say that the blacks of Bulimba were of a friendly nature, and always remembered those who had been kind to them, and to the last they could never do enough for the old farmers and their families.\(^\text{16}\)

Not only friendly and accommodating, the Turrbal adapted to settler incursion by utilising available food supplies. Johnston again wrote:

> The aboriginals of Bulimba were not lovers of hard work, but they were very useful in burning off, and in gathering and husking maize. They always had their dilly bags handy, and put into them all the loose grains. One [woman], “Duradnah,” was employed a good deal in the house. She scrubbed the floor, and cleaned the boots – she always insisted on polishing the soles.\(^\text{17}\)

For Mary, the years at Bulimba had been busy and at times tragic. Her first child, James Henry (Harry), born in 1850, experienced a near cot death after eating pineapple pulp, though ‘miraculously’ saved. Her brother, Walter, a licentiate of the Free Church of Scotland and the minister of Park Presbyterian Church, Moreton Bay, from 1852 to 1853 had come to live with them in 1852. He was ‘always delicate and needing tender care’.\(^\text{18}\) That year her second son, Alexander, was born, and soon afterwards Mary became seriously ill with a leg infection—possibly a chronic osteomyelitis. Just as it was responding to

\(^{16}\) Johnston 1918: 310–311.  
\(^{17}\) Johnston 1918: 310.  
In the Eye of the Beholder

treatment after seven months, her baby died. After these calamities, the family decided to sail for Britain. On her last visit to Cressbrook before her departure, Mary, still lame, was thrown from the carriage and knocked unconscious. Her main proselytising thrust would have to wait until she lived permanently with the Dungibara people at Cressbrook.

Mary’s evangelism

Both Mary and David were Presbyterian Calvinists. At 17 Mary was spiritually converted after reading ‘Doddridge’s Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul’. In her own words, ‘God’s hand [was] guiding me and it has governed my whole life’. Scottish author Elizabeth Haldane has observed that Calvinists ‘were to live in the world the sanctified life that only those first justified by Faith could live ... this meant a life of strenuous endeavour undertaken with the help of God, and thus advancing His Kingdom’. In 1843 Calvinism split between the Moderates and the Evangelicals and Mary followed the evangelical wing that formed the Free Church of Scotland.19

Unable to proselytise in Britain beyond distributing religious tracts and booklets, Mary regarded her trip to the colony as part of God’s plan. On board the Chasely, a clergymen conducted Sunday services and Mary had her first opportunity to teach religion to the children and young adults. On her decision to join her husband to the colony, she observed that:

My subsequent life, I think, proves that my Father had chosen this way for His child. I was led to decide in favour of going; the cup was a bitter one, but it had its own drop of sweetness.20

During her first visit to Cressbrook, while Bulimba House was being built in 1849, Mary reflected upon her evangelistic vocation, recalling that:

The thought came to me, surely for some purpose I had come to this far-distant life? ... and I thought there was an open door for me; not at that time exactly in Cressbrook, but in the new land to which I had come.21

From the 1820s, Protestant evangelical mission stations had spread throughout the Pacific Islands from the Marquesas Islands to Papua, endorsed by an address in the House of Commons in 1834 to introduce Christianity to ‘colonial natives’.22 Mary’s personal mission in the colony followed the introduction of organised

20 McConnel, Memories, 1905: 3.
21 McConnel, Memories, 1905: 21.
evangelical activity. In 1836 the Church of England Diocesan Committee of the Societies for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts and for Promoting Christian Knowledge had been formed in Sydney for the purpose of building churches and Christian schools, distributing the Bible, Prayer Book and other religious tracts, and for supporting clergymen and missionaries throughout the colonies.\(^\text{23}\) The ‘special call’ of the Society was to ‘make disciples of all the nations’ and to start ‘evangelising the heathen’.\(^\text{24}\) Missionaries had long urged people to instruct the ‘uncivilized part of mankind’ for ‘the welfare and improvement of the human race’ and, in the Australian colonies, this meant converting the Aborigines. Women were particularly singled out for this ‘great duty’.\(^\text{25}\)

In the debate as to whether ‘civilising’ should precede conversion, the Western Australian settler Alexander Collie wrote to his brother in 1831, expounding the merits of ‘civilising’:

> there is here an excellent field for the missionary. Young [Indigenous] boys could easily be accustomed to value the comforts of civilized life and thereby [have] our moral and religious habits instilled into them. Even the older might, I think, be readily educated.\(^\text{26}\)

Nineteenth-century poet and hymn writer James Montgomery believed, however, that the best way to convert Aborigines was to follow Biblical text. His opinion was: ‘The wisdom of man says, “First civilize, and then Christianize barbarians”; but ... The counsel of God is the reverse; “Go and preach the gospel to the Gentiles ... you will civilize them by Christianizing them”’. Evangelical clergy naturally recommended this approach.\(^\text{27}\)

The combination of religious training, the introduction of British cultural standards, education and the targeting of children were all part of Mary’s Christianising quest.

\(^{23}\) A Statement of the Objects of the Committee of the Societies for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts and for Promoting Christian Knowledge (Australia), Stephen and Stokes, Sydney, 1836: 4 (NLA mc N 1475, item 7186).

\(^{24}\) Pascoe 1901: ix.


\(^{26}\) Quoted in Hetherington 2002: 115. This mission focus continued into the twentieth century, McGrath 1995: 189.

\(^{27}\) Maxwell 2001: 124, 123; Gunson 1978: 267 (italics in original).
Taking Alpin Edward Durundur to Britain

Mary undertook a drastic measure in her efforts to civilise the heathen, concentrating first on one particular young boy. When she and David returned to Britain on 13 December 1853, they took with them a seven-year-old Durundur boy, ‘found’ by Cressbrook’s then overseer, Alpin Cameron, on Durundur station—at that time a part of Cressbrook. Cultural confidence and ignorance were her drivers. Selected because he was an ‘orphan’, the Aboriginal lad would have been, as we now know, part of what Anna Haebich has called the ‘overlapping circles of extended family [that] lie at the heart of the lives of most Aboriginal Australians’. From childhood, Aborigines connect with their culture through their networks of family relationships, learning through their kin where they come from, who belongs to them and how they should behave within a ‘wide universe of kin’. Mary, however, could not have understood that the boy’s identity was cast within deep cultural knowledge and extended kinship ties.

Mary hoped for, and no doubt expected, the best. The boy ‘promised well’, and Mary’s ethnographical description of him places her among the nineteenth-century, dispassionate scientific appraisers of human beings. He was:

an average specimen, well-made, not good-looking, he had, like all Australian natives, nice hair, smooth and not coarse. He could not speak any English. Until he went on board ship he wore only a little shirt, but as the weather became cooler he was glad of more clothing, and he very readily adapted himself to the change of circumstances.

The feelings of Alpin—as he was later called—are hidden and can only be imagined from the scant record of his actions and perhaps from the reactions of those who saw him. On board ship he was ‘well behaved’ and ‘became quite a favourite’. In Yorkshire, in the way that P T Barnum’s exotic human ‘exhibits’ were later received, he was regarded as a ‘seven days’ wonder’ and casual observers thought he was a young, black ‘devil’. This idea linked the boy to the tradition of the morality play that had long conditioned audiences to identify ‘blackness’ with the devil. ‘Blackness’, in character as well as appearance, signified to an evangelical Christian the need for redemptive intercession. Alpin unknowingly compounded this image by innocently disregarding the Sabbath

28 ‘Departure for Sydney of Iron Prince with passengers, Mr and Mrs D.C. McConnel, nurse and child’, Moreton Bay Courier, 17 December 1853: 2.
30 McConnel, Memories, 1905: 41.
by going ‘bird-nesting’, earning him the reputation of being a ‘very naughty little boy’. Mary preferred to describe him as a ‘good-natured’ lad, who had ‘tamed-down’, and was learning to speak English.\(^\text{31}\)

First moving from place to place around Britain with the McConnels, Alpin was then left with Mary’s sister in Scotland while Mary and David toured France, Italy, Switzerland and Germany for one year. This entourage included their now three children, McConnel’s nephew, two nurses (Scottish and French) and their driver. We learn little of Alpin’s well-being through bland reports that he had a ‘happy, healthful year’ and ‘grew intelligent’, and was ‘quite contented’. On the McConnels’ return to England, he lived with them in south London, where David bought a house on two and a half acres of land at Tooting Common—later extended to accommodate their increasing number of children. Mary wrote favourably on the boy’s intellectual success at weekday school, and his spiritual progress at Sunday school. By the end of another year, the minister of the local church wished to baptise him. Here he was given his English names, ‘Alpin Edward Durundur’—‘Edward’ (the name of his schoolmaster) being the only one he himself chose.\(^\text{32}\)

Whether these conditions suited or upset Alpin, he had no choice but to accept them. Mary pointed out that family members treated him ‘in every way as we would were he a white boy’, without specifying qualifications in the relationship, or Alpin’s reaction to his circumstances, other than his apparent compliance. The way Alpin chose to spend his free time, however, gives a clearer insight into Mary’s hopes to ‘assimilate’ him. She records without illusion, that:

\[\text{[Alpin] dearly loved all “spectacles”; a circus was his delight; he was never inside a theatre. We were not far from the Crystal Palace [built for the Great Exhibition of 1851]; he had a boy’s ticket, and it was his delight to spend Saturdays and holidays there. We often sent the nurses and children. He loved the Church of England service, never omitted a response, and would go three times to Church on Sunday, if there were three services. I do not mean to suppose it was only devotion that prompted him, but more love of “spectacle”.}\]

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After three years in London, the McConnels returned to Scotland, where Alpin continued his ‘excellent progress’ both at school and in sport. Throughout the nine years that Alpin was to remain in Britain, Mary could report that he was well behaved, ‘obedient and tractable’ and ‘honest and truthful’, and seemed surprised with her comment: ‘Somehow I do not think it occurred to him to tell a lie’. Nor did he use ‘bad words’. Perhaps his behaviour reflected his closeted,

\(^{31}\) McConnel, \textit{Memories}, 1905: 41.

\(^{32}\) McConnel, \textit{Memories}, 1905: 38–41.

\(^{33}\) McConnel, \textit{Memories}, 1905: 41–42.
repressed—even depressed—existence. As he reached adolescence, he ‘began to improve in looks and was well-grown’. Rather than hiding his difference, he was proud of his shiny, wavy black hair—‘his chief extravagance’ being ‘an occasional sixpence for hair oil’.

Mary was confident that her plans to control Alpin’s future within a colonised world had been successful. He had been educated and taught a trade, baptised into the Christian church and had adopted some ‘civilised’ activities. When she and David returned to Queensland in 1862, they took the 16-year-old youth with them, rationalising that the trade of carpentry that he had chosen to follow in Britain would be similarly available to him in Queensland, where they would moreover be able to give the adolescent their ‘watchful care’. However, like the experiment with Bennelong before him, Mary McConnel’s also failed.

The denouement of Mary’s long-term hopes and plans for Alpin Durundur was pathetic. Like Bennelong, Alpin felt the pull to return to his own people, and determined to turn his back on white society. In retrospect, Mary acknowledged that, ‘In truth we ought not to have taken him back to the scenes and people of his old savage life. We did it for the best, wishing to keep him under our own eyes’. Her account of Alpin’s escape unfortunately leaves the Durundur man’s fate unresolved. She recorded that:

he had so long enjoyed a civilised state that we thought he would not care to return to his old life, but the old scenes and his tribe who lionised him were too much for him, and he said one day, “I am tired of this sort of thing,” and became restless. So we thought it best to send him back to the Old Country, and my husband made good arrangements with a very nice kind captain to take him home in his ship. We did not tell Alpin till he was on board. I had packed his box, putting in little things I knew he would like. My husband took him to Brisbane the evening before the ship sailed, went on board with him, told him that he was going back to his friends who had been so kind to him, and that he would come back in two or three years, gave him half-a-sovereign and said goodbye, leaving him with the captain. But the same night he swam ashore, bought a tomahawk, and went into the far-away bush. He never came back, which was a grief to me.

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34 McConnel, *Memories*, 1905: 42.
35 Bennelong was captured on orders from Governor Phillip in 1789. In December 1792, he sailed with Phillip to England and was presented to George III. He returned home in 1795 with second New South Wales governor, John Hunter, after suffering from homesickness and the effects of the cold climate. Imeerawanyee, who had accompanied Bennelong, died in England, Aplin, Foster and McKernan 1987: 45.
Mary rationalised her failure with the explanation that she wrote at length about Alpin ‘to prove that they are not by any means so low down in the scale of the human race as they are generally supposed to be’.\(^{36}\)

**Cressbrook**

Racial conflict in the Darling Downs and Lockyer Valley had been rife in the 1840s and 1850s. The *Moreton Bay Courier* reported instances of Aborigines spearing or stealing sheep and the retribution meted out, some in the 1850s by the notorious Native Police force.\(^{37}\) In the Brisbane River valley, David McConnel and his brother, John, had been caught up in the inevitable conflicts between blacks and whites and their struggles over land. A younger brother, Frederic, who was to return to Britain in 1845, had taken a peaceful path.\(^{38}\)

In 1862 John McConnel took over the formerly joint-owned Durundur, 50 kilometres to the north-east, near the present town of Woodford, leaving David as the sole owner of Cressbrook. According to John’s son, A J McConnel, David McConnel and his neighbours had undertaken ‘stern work’ against the Waka Waka people in the 1840s and 1850s, joining forces for protection and constituting themselves into ‘a court of justice to administer punishment’.\(^{39}\) In an 1844 letter to his mother and sister, Cressbrook’s manager Henry Mort referred to David’s attitude towards the Aborigines:

> John and David McConnell [sic] argued that it is morally right for a Christian Nation to extirpate savages from their native soil in order that it may be peopled with a more intelligent and civilized race of human beings ... F [Frederic] McConnell and myself were of the opposite opinion.\(^{40}\)

Whether Mary knew of this bloodied past is uncertain. Her daughter, Mary Banks, had certainly learned enough to acknowledge violence against the Aborigines in the McConnels’ history, writing in 1931 that:

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\(^{36}\) McConnel, *Memories*, 1905: 42–43. Christina Smith, who lived for 35 years as a lay missionary and teacher, similarly wrote that, ‘It is a general opinion among Europeans that the aborigines ... are too low, intellectually and morally to be Christianised or civilised. [This is] entirely erroneous’, Mrs James Smith, *The Booandik Tribe of South Australian Aborigines: A Sketch of their Habits, Customs, Legends, and Language: Also: An Account of the efforts made by Mr. and Mrs. James Smith to Christianise and Civilise them*, Government Printer, Adelaide, 1880: 33.


\(^{39}\) Evans, Saunders and Cronin 1993: 113.

It was not till years after my childhood that I learnt of cruelties to the blacks, and I refused at first to believe it possible. This I know, that there were very many places where the natives were treated with kindness and affection, and that much of the harshness was due to ignorance and misunderstanding. But for actual cruelty, which unfortunately cannot be denied, no excuse is possible.  

Illustration 12. Cressbrook homestead, Dungibara left foreground.

Source: Conrad Martens, England/Australia 1801–78, ‘Cressbrook looking N.W.’ 1852, watercolour, 18.7 x 28.3 cm. Private collection.

When Mary returned to live at Cressbrook in 1862 the frontier struggle had long been resolved. Nestling comfortably within the confines of the established working pastoral property were homestead, outbuildings and an English garden. Some hints of what had occurred find their way into Mary’s narrative. They relate to a distant past and all refer to violence enacted by Aborigines. For example, John McConnel’s reason for selling the cattle station Crow’s Nest was because: ‘The “blacks” were very troublesome. He did not like being there’. Edmund Uhr of Wivenhoe station planned in 1849 to move to town with his wife and daughter because, ‘[His] brother had been murdered by the natives, and [the Aborigines] continued troublesome’. Of Cressbrook, she wrote that ‘one or two of the [Aboriginal] men were treacherous, that they speared cattle, once an imported bull from England’, although she seems hasty to absolve the men from blame because ‘they had no idea of the value of the animal’.

Mary’s contemporary from the northern rivers district of New South Wales, Emma Macpherson, who knew that her husband ‘[waged] a perpetual guerilla warfare with the wild tribes’ when he was living in ‘the far North-West’, later

42 McConnel, Memories, 1905: 11, 18, 43.
presented her husband as ‘always [having] taken a great interest in [Aborigines], and been perhaps a little too liberal with them’. Mary likewise projected a peacemaking McConnel, who had ‘set himself at once to make friends with [the Aborigines], and they soon got to like and trust him’. She added enigmatically that, ‘He never failed to do what he promised’.  

Mary’s writing represents a time when the settlers had emerged the victors, to reign over a tamed environment of both people and landscape. Interracial distrust and tensions seemed to have dissipated. This time difference between grasp and conquer freed Mary’s text from the dilemma of guilt and friendship that swirled as an undercurrent in Katherine Kirkland’s account.

Cressbrook’s resident Aborigines were, to all intents and purposes, working to assist the McConnels’ plans for a civilised and progressive enterprise. Mary could portray her husband as a benign master of men and was able to concentrate on her own benevolent role, which she as coloniser played in the civilising of the colonised. Her undisputed status enabled her to adopt the tone of a patronising mistress exerting (or endeavouring to exert) control over the Indigenous owners of the land.

As paternalists, the McConnels had conscientiously taken up their duty to guide and help their workers who, in turn, were expected to render to their benefactors loyal service, and to be punctual, polite and show due deference to their master’s authority. The Masters and Servants Act 1857 (NSW) formalised in law the already existing expectations of employer and dependant employees, defining as servants:

- all agricultural and other laborers [sic] shepherds watchmen stockmen grooms all domestic and other servants artificers [sic] journeymen handicraftsmen gardeners vine dressers splitters fencers shearsers sheepwashers reapers mowers haymakers hired and engaged in this Colony.

Aborigines were included in this mix.

Mary underlined her own attitude by reiterating McConnel’s autocratic carrot and stick method of control:

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When the tribe behaved badly my husband would not allow them to come up to the head station, nor give them presents, – a shirt, or red pocket-handkerchief, tobacco or a pipe; when they did no work they got no rations.46

The white man’s perception of Indigenous Australians as inferior to Europeans had been ratified by law: the Licensed Publicans Act 1838 (NSW) forbade the sale or gift of alcoholic drink to Aborigines.47 Restrictive liquor laws were similarly incorporated after 1859 into Queensland legislation that continued in like vein into the twentieth century. The Aboriginal Fire Arms Regulation Act 1840 (NSW) disallowed the use of firearms by either ‘Aboriginal natives and half-castes’ unless by special permission.48 The Queensland Elections Acts of 1872 and 1874 underlined Aboriginal legal inferiority by including Indigenous Australians amongst those not entitled to vote unless possessors of property under British freehold title.49

When building up her picture of life at Cressbrook, Mary focused on the care she and her husband extended to the members of the large white workforce by providing a schoolroom, paying for a teacher for the workers’ children, and setting up a room as a library for the men. They later supported the building of a public school at Esk. At Bulimba, Mary’s chief aim had been to proselytise to the children, a practice encouraged in evangelical missions. Mary had taught a large class of Sunday school girls, while McConnel taught the boys. As respectful children of Bulimba workers, they were ‘very regular in their attendance, prepared their lessons well, and were quiet and attentive’.50 Education was incorporated into religious instruction by having the older children read their lessons out aloud to the McConnels.

Mary’s main narrative focus was on her educational and evangelistic methods at Cressbrook. There, religious observance was strict, ‘the Lord’s Day [being] kept reverently [with a] complete cessation from labour’. During the early 1850s, McConnel had led a service on the Cottage veranda, using the Church of England service, and reading ‘very good sermons’. By 1864, the McConnels employed a Presbyterian minister. In later years, Mary attempted to establish a United Christian Church in a chapel built near the homestead, a plan that ultimately failed because the Church of England, Presbyterian, Wesleyan and Methodist clergymen (who took the service for one week in turn) argued against

46 McConnel, Memories, 1905: 43.
47 ‘An Act for consolidating and amending the Laws relating to the licensing of Public- houses, and for further regulating the Sale and Consumption of Spirituous Liquors in New South Wales’.
48 ‘An Act to prohibit the Aboriginal Natives of New South Wales from having Fire Arms or Ammunition in their possession, without the permission of a Magistrate’.
50 Sangster 1963: 26; McConnel, Memories, 1905: 25.
the teachings of the previous week.\footnote{McConnel, \textit{Memories}, 1905: 20; Kerr 1988: 216; Banks 1931: 36.} To commemorate the McConnels’ twenty-fifth wedding anniversary in April 1873, David bought land in nearby Esk for the 120-seat weatherboard Presbyterian Church of St Andrew, consecrated on 2 February 1876. He also built a spacious manse.\footnote{Kerr 1988: 216–217. Harry McConnel followed in his parents’ tradition by building a chapel on Cressbrook in 1901 on the occasion of his own twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, \textit{The Pastoralists’ Review}, Vol. XX, No. 11, 16 January 1911: 1217.}

As at Bulimba, Mary tried to teach the workers through her Sunday school children, to whom she distributed \textit{Good Works}, \textit{Sunday Magazine} and \textit{Sunday at Home}, and the Rev’d Dr (later Bishop) Ryle’s ‘famous Xmas tracts’. She enjoyed teaching the children to sing, and was heartened when she heard them singing hymns as they walked along the river on Sunday afternoons.

By the 1860s some of the Dungibara had adapted to colonisation by choosing to be ‘station Aborigines’, trading their labouring skills for the opportunity of remaining on their ancestral land along the banks of the Brisbane River. This symbiotic relationship, explored by historians such as Tim Rowse and Robert Foster, was one in which Aborigines ‘came to ... realise the value of good conduct’, as they learned to adapt to the settlers’ demands.\footnote{M. J McConnel, ‘Some Old Stations’, cited in Evans, Saunders and Cronin 1993: 113–114; Tim Rowse, \textit{White Flour, White Power: From Rations to Citizenship in Central Australia} (1998) explores the relationship which evolved around the practice of rationing in Central Australia from the 1890s; cf. also Foster 2000.}

The rub was that adaptation under the McConnels entailed pressure on the Aborigines to conform to the requirements of a British paternalistic social structure, in the pattern of daily life set by a white mistress.

\section*{Civilising the Dungibara?}

In her plans to evangelise to the Aborigines on Cressbrook, Mary followed an established path followed in colonial society of first introducing to Indigenous children the British cultural standards of behaviour, combined with religious training. The fact that she had failed with Alpin Durundur did not deter her or deflect her aim.

Assuming a superior and privileged position over the Indigenous children, Mary tried to gradually separate ‘Topsy’ and ‘Clara’ (the daughters of Aboriginal women, Kitty and Polly) from their families. She arranged a room in the homestead, where she kept their clothes, and she encouraged the girls to take a tepid bath each morning. Although Mary had also hoped that they would sleep overnight in warm beds, she could not ‘wean them from going off to the camp at night to sleep by the camp-fire’. The only success was that she had taught them...
to read a little, to sew, and to repeat and sing ‘simple verses and hymns’. Her attempts to break the pattern of the Dungibara’s cultural practice of gathering in the mountains with neighbouring groups were similarly fruitless. Mary reported that ‘nothing would induce them to leave the little girls behind’.54 Despite her plan to disrupt and disintegrate this collective cultural activity by holding back the girls, Mary revealed through her own disappointment of their resistance to her, the Dungibara’s firm hold on their identity.

The Indigenous girls seemed to react cavalierly to Mary’s attempt to Christianise and ‘civilise’ them. Their flippancy and humour demonstrate their incomprehension, and their cheeky disdain for the different and strange workings of the white woman. Although Topsy (a little girl ‘full of mischief’) and Clara attended Sunday school, when the teacher told them God ‘loved them and wished them to be His very own children’, Topsy retorted, ‘Ah! Miss Shmit, suppose God love me like that, what for he make me black?’. Again, a young woman visiting Cressbrook asked for the care for the girls. Leaving them alone at the homestead while she went out riding, the girls soon found an excuse for having fun. In her absence:

[Topsy and Clara] entered her room, ransacked her drawers, dressing themselves up in her clothes and putting on what trinkets they could find; while admiring themselves in the looking-glass they heard footsteps and scuttled under the bed!55

How did the Aboriginal women at Cressbrook deal with the patronisation of a well-meaning master and mistress and the pressure they exerted on them to become ‘civilised’? And how did Mary, within the constraints of class, race and religion, choose to represent the Aboriginal women with whom she shared a physical closeness, as the Aborigines carried out domestic chores in the homestead? Indigenous dignity, adaptation and sense of humour came to the forefront and Mary portrayed some of the women’s responses.

The Dungibara women were allowed to enter the house only as workers and only after having complied with the basic British middle-class virtues of cleanliness and tidiness. In condoning the close relationship between her first-born child, who as a baby was ‘very fond’56 of Long Kitty, Mary gave the Aboriginal woman ‘a comb and a loose red gown, and she would come up [from bathing in the river] very smart, with her hair parted’ in preparation for looking after Harry. This dictum that Aborigines comply with English working standards was to

54 McConnel, Memories, 1905: 44. The German missionaries at Mount Zion on the Brisbane River had held school classes for Aboriginal children, with an emphasis on Scripture and prayer. Girls were also taught sewing, Steele 1975: 335.
55 McConnel, Memories, 1905: 44–45.
56 I have consistently wondered if ‘very fond’ encompassed a bond between Harry and the Aboriginal woman that involved breastfeeding.
endure on outback stations into the twentieth century. In the late 1970s, Ann McGrath interviewed a white woman from the Northern Territory who recalled that Aboriginal women were required, ‘Every morning ... to wash, change their dresses, and comb their hair in the wash-house before starting work’—a form of domestic training seen as ‘an ideal means of “uplifting” the part-Aboriginal women, for it taught black women the observance of British white cultural norms and middle-class etiquette—at least while in the employers’ home’.  

Long Kitty found a way to both comply with and ridicule the demands imposed on her. When she emerged from the river, spruce and cleansed to British codes of conduct, she would mischievously retort: ‘“likit missus”[?] – and ask for the baby’. Her words expressed elements of resistance and negotiation that bespoke power, not powerlessness. Pride in her land elicited an explicit expression of authority. Stretching out her arms, she told Mary: ‘All this “yarmen” (land) belonging to me’. This open statement against the imposition of white culture serves as an example of what literary theorists Barry Morris and Anne Brewster have coined, ‘developing a politics of identity’. Although Mary had replicated an Indigenous woman’s voice and her claim over the land, she included her own response that, ‘It did seem hard to have it all taken from them, but it had to be. They cultivated nothing; they were no use on it’.

Mary’s ethnocentric attitude replicated the current justification for taking Aboriginal land. Dr Lang, who followed the ‘doomed race’ hypothesis, expressed similar sentiments, asserting that there was ‘no fault in taking the land’ from Aborigines. Emma Macpherson similarly contended that ‘in the interests of humanity and the cause of civilization and progress ... it was the especial hand of Providence which, when the old world was [becoming too crowded] this fair new land [was found]’.

Another story—concerning a woman termed ‘Kitty’—shows Indigenous ingenuity in circumventing Mary’s supercilious control (in the guise of matriarchal care) over the Aborigines. While Mary placed the Indigenous woman in the subservient position of a somewhat recalcitrant child, to be scolded, then forgiven, Kitty showed her authority in her ability to manipulate white attitudes and expectations in order to achieve her own ends. She exercised her authority through discrete and indirect means. Mary reported of Kitty, originally from Durundur, that:

57 McConnel, Memories, 1905: 43; McGrath 1987: 66, 60.
59 McConnel, Memories, 1905: 43. Early settlers, Edward Curr (1841–1851, present-day Victoria) and Robert Christison (central western Queensland, 1864–1910) also identified with Aboriginal concerns. Unlike Mary McConnel, however, they did not try to ‘christianise’ their station Aborigines, Curr 2001 [1883]; Bennett 1927.
Once on my return from England I had bought a piece of red serge to make the native women winter dresses – a loose gown with short sleeves, coming down about half-way from the knee to the ankle. Kitty was very proud of hers, and begged me to allow her to go to Durundur to show it to her sister. It was the rule that when the tribe started on their expeditions they left their good clothes behind, generally wearing the opossum-rugs made by themselves. I gave her leave. By-and-by she returned minus the red serge gown; I said, “Kitty, where gown?” She said, “Missus, baal you be woola (don’t be angry), my sister bin say, ‘give it me gown, kind missus give you ‘nother,’ and I ben give it her.”’ I pretended to be very angry. She said, “Poor sister baal (not) got it gown.” It was quite true what she said, so after a little I gave her another.\footnote{McConnel, \textit{Memories}, 1905: 44.}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Illustration_13_Dungibara_child_wearing_red_coat.jpg}
\caption{Illustration 13. Dungibara child wearing red coat.}
\end{figure}


Mary Banks, from a different perspective as a child growing up among the Dungibara, evoked the idea of friendship from the peaceful co-existence of Aborigines and settlers on Cressbrook. From her point of view:

\begin{quote}
The coloured folk living about us were our friends. We spoke of them as ‘the blacks’. One woman, Kitty, came to scrub the kitchen and veranda floors; she said I was her dead baby girl ‘jumped up white,’ and treated me with every mark of affection. She had a keen sense of humour and we often laughed together. Her husband, Piggy, worked at odd jobs to earn pence for tobacco; Kitty also smoked and had her pipe, and they had rations from the station store. They camped with others of their
\end{quote}
tribe on the river bank near the station, speared fish for us, and walked about with their blankets over their shoulders, watching the strange doings of the white man.\textsuperscript{62}

According to Mary Banks’ interpretation, the Dungibara ‘respected [her] father’s property’: they had learned to adapt. She depicted a relationship of acceptance and cooperation in which the McConnels also respected the Aborigines’ ‘rights to camp in the old haunts, to hunt kangaroos, opossum and fish, and to hold the Bunya-nut feast on the hills’. Banks remembered with affection how ‘King Billy’ would carry her as a little girl on his shoulders over the river to the Aborigines’ camp, and bring her native berries to eat—surely authoritative and protective gestures. She reported also that, when the family returned home after short visits to Ipswich, some of the Aborigines would line up and clap their hands in welcome.\textsuperscript{63}

Mary senior wrote sympathetically in general terms about the Aborigines, considering them ‘much maligned’. She knew some of the Aboriginal women and girls well enough to individualise them, referring to them by their English monikers and describing their appearance and personalities, although keeping to such stereotypical terms as ‘very pretty’ and ‘affectionate’. According to Mary, Kitty ‘grew very fond of [her] and the children’. Mary mentioned Aboriginal men only in relation to their behaviour towards their wives, empathising with the women with her comments that ‘Piggie Nerang’ (Kitty’s husband) was ‘not worthy of her’; and that Polly, ‘another fine “gin”’, was ‘very cruelly used by her husband, she had her teeth knocked out; but she was a gentle creature’.\textsuperscript{64}

Unlike Indigenous women on Victorian missions between 1860 and 1886, described in Diane Barwick’s ‘And the lubras are ladies now’,\textsuperscript{65} the Dungibara women appeared to be largely impervious to Mary’s efforts to civilise them. Nor could Mary record any successes in conversions to Christianity. While the mission women grasped the opportunity to improve their social position by increasing their religious status in white society—a move that increased their power in Aboriginal society as they assumed equal marital status with their menfolk—the McConnels had tried to lock the Dungibara into the position of menial workers under a dominant master and mistress within a pastoral economy. Within this mould, the Aborigines held firm to their own cultural identity.\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{62} Banks 1931: 41.
\textsuperscript{63} Banks 1931: 41–44, 46.
\textsuperscript{64} McConnel, Memories, 1905: 43–44, 45.
\textsuperscript{65} Barwick 1974: 51–63.
\textsuperscript{66} This finding complies with Ann McGrath’s argument in ‘Born in the Cattle’ (1987) that Aborigines on pastoral stations in the Northern Territory negotiated their own terms of adjustment. Also cf. Rowse 1988: 57–73.
In spite of Mary’s narrative tone of superiority towards the Aborigines, the Dungibara assisted, accommodated and protected the settlers. The homestead is located on a saddle of land between the Brisbane River and Cressbrook Creek. It is believed that the Dungibara advised McConnel against his first choice of position, warning him that streams were known to meet and flood in that area. It now faces north across river flats.

Furthermore, ‘King Billy’ took on the role of protecting McConnel. For years after the 1842 murders at Kilcoy, when over 50 Dallambara people were fed poisoned flour at Evan and John MacKenzie’s Kilcoy station (which shared a north-eastern boundary with Cressbrook), the Dallambara vowed to kill any white man who travelled through their country. When McConnel planned to blaze a new trail eastward to Brisbane through Dallambara territory, having ignored the warnings of the Cressbrook Aborigines, ‘King Billy’ accompanied him, running beside McConnel’s horse. At the Indigenous land border, Billy assured McConnel safe passage by assigning him to the care of the Dallambara ‘chief’.\textsuperscript{67}

**Christian Kanakas**

Failing to convert the Dungibara, Mary took comfort in the benevolent care she could extend to eight Kanakas, who worked on Cressbrook for three years in the 1860s. Kanakas (Pacific Island workers) were first imported into Queensland in 1863 to fill a manpower shortage after work by convicts ended and attempts to employ Aborigines or Chinese as shepherds failed.\textsuperscript{68} The first Kanakas were from Hawaii. These men were gentle and ‘happy-natured’, and Christian.\textsuperscript{69} Mary was pleased that they said grace before eating. She supported their faith by buying for them ‘copies of one or two of the Gospels in Mari language, also English testaments in good type, also copy-books and slates’ to help teach them to read. She described how:

\begin{quote}
In winter we had school at night, in summer at 5 a.m. on the veranda; their copies and sums were set the night before, my dear husband helping me. They arranged that in turn one should weekly stay away to prepare breakfast; work began in the heat at 6.30. It was a pleasant time, they teaching me Mari and I them English. They learned to repeat a good deal of Scripture in their own language, also the Lord’s Prayer. They loved singing songs and hymns.\textsuperscript{70}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{67} Banks 1931: 43.
\textsuperscript{68} Greenwood and Laverty 1959: 46; Molesworth 1917: 140.
\textsuperscript{69} Banks 1931: 46–47.
\textsuperscript{70} McConnel, *Memories*, 1905: 49.
David McConnel undertook the task of advising the men on managing their finances, which comprised £6 a year, food, lodging, clothing, and their ship’s passage to and from their homeland. He dissuaded them from buying from hawkers that called at the station and organised a bank account for them so that they could save their money. After they did extra work with the cattle, or the special jobs of sheepwashing and shearing, McConnel paid them each 10 shillings, and ‘this they could spend as they liked’. To assist them, Mary bought whatever they needed on her trips to Brisbane.\textsuperscript{71}

In her later years, Mary continued to espouse her evangelistic and paternalistic attitudes towards the Aborigines, although slightly less stringently. She recorded that:

\begin{quote}
At last after long years of ill-usage the natives, such as are left, are being thoroughly well cared for, humanely and wisely treated, not by forcing them to cultivate habits, but by giving them a certain amount of liberty, teaching them to be a law-abiding people, above all seeking to win them for the Master. Away in the North, not far from Thursday Island, where the natives are comparatively numerous, there is splendid and successful work being done by the Moravian missionaries under the control of the Presbyterian Church of Australia.\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

**Brisbane’s Hospital for Sick Children**

In 1875, Mary and David bought Witton Manor, situated ten kilometres upstream from Brisbane in the present-day suburb of Indooroopilly, where they lived until 1878. Distressed by the many accidents and illnesses afflicting the children of immigrant families living near Witton Manor, in 1876 Mary set up a fund to establish the Hospital for Sick Children. It opened in temporary accommodation at Spring Hill, Brisbane, on 11 March 1878. With financial support from the government, in October 1883 it became a permanent hospital, now known as the Royal Children’s Hospital. The Ladies Committee, formed by Mary in 1877, governed the hospital until 1924.\textsuperscript{73}

From her first arrival in the colony in 1849, Mary returned to Britain 13 times. These trips included extended residence in England and Scotland from 1854

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{71} McConnel, *Memories*, 1905: 49–50.
\textsuperscript{72} McConnel, *Memories*, 1905: 45. During the nineteenth century, Moravian missions spread throughout the world. The missionaries at Nundah (Mount Zion) were Moravian, Maxwell 2001: 133–134; Schindler 1916: 64.
\textsuperscript{73} Mrs David C McConnel, *Our Children’s Hospital: A Story of Twenty-one Years 1876 to 1897*, Thomson Brothers, Brisbane, 1897: 12–18; Pearn 1993: v.
\end{footnotes}
to 1862, 1871 to 1873, and between 1878 and 1881. After McConnel died in England in 1885, Mary returned to Cressbrook to live, where she resided as the matriarch of her large, successful family.

Illustration 14. McConnel family at Cressbrook station, c. 1887.

Source: John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

From the early 1870s, Cressbrook was in the hands of her eldest son, J H (Harry) McConnel, described as having continued ‘most excellently the work of settlement and development begun by his father’. Like McConnel senior, he had assisted both his workers and the progress of the Esk region, including promoting the extension of the railway line to the township of Toogoolawah.  

Her other surviving sons—David Rose, Eric Walter and Edward John—together with Mary Macleod Banks, ran Cressbrook in partnership with Harry from 1873. Katharine Rose (born in 1855) married Henry Plantagenet Somerset, who was a member of the Queensland Legislative Assembly. Two of Mary and David’s sons had died in infancy. Mary died in London on her eighty-sixth birthday in 1910; she and her husband are buried in Ipswich cemetery.

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74 Obituary, HSQJ, Vol. 1, No. 1, August 1914: 16.
Conclusion

Mary McConnel neatly fits the stereotype of M E McGuire’s ‘Good Fella Missus’—an emigrant gentlewoman, a pioneer’s wife, a kind mistress, a motherly figure who tends the sick and a ‘literary woman enshrining herself in a position of benevolence and authority in race relations’. A first generation ‘colonial mother’, Mary also meets McGuire’s description of a ‘missionary seeking salvation for her black brethren’. Secure in her identity as the wife of a wealthy pastoralist, she strove to help people she viewed as less fortunate than herself. She was a ‘good’ woman, with the ‘best of intentions’.

Operating within the clutch of her paternalistic and evangelical impulses to improve the Aboriginal people, what chance did Mary have of representing Indigenous people, unless in terms of their religious and civilising journey? Although her text portrays Indigenous Australians as pawns to be moulded into her idea of a colonised world, Mary represents strong Indigenous women, who emerge beyond her confined expectations to reveal their own feelings and aspirations. While Mary’s anecdotes serve to entertain, the fact remains that the Indigenous women’s expressions of authority and identity were too strong to ignore.

Mary’s attempts to fragment Indigenous tribal life were not successful. The white man’s civilisation held no charm for the Aborigines. Even Alpin tired of Mary’s experiment and returned to his people after nine of his formative years living in Britain. Mary reported her failure without malice or judgment. Looking back towards the end of her life, she still held fast to her views, always hoping, and advocating that, ‘A generation or two of wise, kind treatment would make a great change in [Aborigines], but there were many hindrances, and the tribes would need to be broken up’.

The portrayals of strong Dungibara women inform us that they were not the passive victims or mere onlookers to a changed future. While striving to maintain their identity, they were also contributing to the ongoing future of a developing pastoral property. By repeating Long Kitty’s sardonic reaction to Mary’s civilising techniques and her statement of proud authority over her land, Mary highlighted the Aboriginal woman’s strength of racial identity. Although Mary was happy to incorporate these reflections into her memoirs, as a British coloniser she was unable to accept them.

75 Successive McConnel women also comply with McGuire’s hypotheses: Mary Banks as the second generation ‘Australia’s daughter’ whose ‘girlhood friends were Aborigines’; and anthropologist Ursula McConnel—J H McConnel’s fifth daughter—as the third generation ‘modern urban woman of the twentieth century who ventures into unknown Australia as writer, artist or anthropologist’, McGuire 1990: 124, 149.

76 McConnel, Memories, 1905: 44.
In the Eye of the Beholder

In spite of Mary McConnel’s superior stance, dictated by her race, class and religion, like Emily Cowl, she recorded Indigenous women and girls’ reaction to British fashion and custom, possibly as a literary technique to lighten the tone of her memoir and to amuse her readers. In doing so, both women have contributed to the historical record valuable instances of Indigenous humanity and authority. Mary’s representations offer another perspective of Indigenous strength to counteract the often bleak story of colonisation.