7. Australian-born Settler—Rose Scott Cowen: Acknowledging Indigenous Humanity and Integrity

‘the white man is black in his character, and the black man is white’

Illustration 15. Rose Scott Cowen.


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Rose Scott Cowen lived in outback Queensland for most of her life and recalled her knowledge of Indigenous people candidly and directly. In 1961, the year in which she turned 82, The Wentworth Press, Sydney, published her *Crossing Dry Creeks: 1879 to 1919*, a 190-page autobiography of unstructured, sometimes repetitious, anecdotal prose, which fitted the publisher’s ethos of supporting Australian authors (many of them women) writing on literary, historical or biographical subjects.

The metaphor in the title came from western Queensland imagery of the disappointment, even threat to life, when a thirsty traveller came to a dry creekbed that he or she had confidently expected would hold water. Having no option but to cross the dry creek, the traveller would have to continue on the journey in the hope of finding water at the next crossing. As Rose Cowen explains in her prologue, ‘Crossing dry creeks’ came to signify ‘every danger, every close shave; every physical and economic crisis’ and all the droughts, floods, toil and hardship that she had survived in outback Queensland. Marie Mahood in *The Last Dry Creek* describes it as ‘survival of any major unexpected challenge’ or ‘to tackle and overcome an extreme challenge in one’s life’. Rose felt that the title encapsulated the trials in her life.

Rose Cowen’s motive in writing her memoir is unclear. She seemed to enjoy writing and was keen to record her history; she submitted manuscripts on her

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experiences and on her family history to Australian repositories and annotated with names and historical data the Scott and Townsend families’ studio portraits, housed in the State Library of New South Wales. In 1964 she offered her biographical notes on the Scott family, together with some correspondence dated 1856, to the Mitchell Library for photocopying. In *Crossing Dry Creeks*, which she wrote when she was ‘within sight of the Styx’, she recalls the ‘dangers and difficulties’ of colonial and early twentieth-century life in rural Queensland. Her perspective of Aborigines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveals a changing perception that went hand in hand with a loosening of British class attitudes.

**Illustrious pedigree**

Rose was born Annie Rose Scott Hamilton on 24 April 1879 at Tambo station, a 49 square mile (78.4 km²) property, situated on the Barcoo River, 200 kilometres north of Charleville and 950 kilometres north-west of Brisbane. She was the eldest of six surviving children of Alice, born Scott, and Terrick Alfred Hamilton and lived a carefree, outdoor life alongside people of the Wadjalang tribe.

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In the Eye of the Beholder

Illustration 16. Tambo Station 1880. Note Wadjalang people at right of photo.


Rose’s mother’s family was associated with colonial culture and the arts. Rose was the niece of Rose Scott, the feminist and social reformer, after whom she was named. Her grandmother was Sarah Scott (born Rusden), the ‘accomplished linguist and scholar’,⁶ and her great-uncle, Robert Scott—described as a man of ‘superior education and acquirements’⁷—had made his property Glendon, on the Hunter River near Singleton, New South Wales, a cultural hub for artists, scientists, explorers and clergy. During trips to Sydney, Rose visited Lynton in Jersey Road, Woollahra, where Rose Scott and her mother lived, and described it as a place ‘packed with books and all sorts of delightful pictures and old world things’. Rose Scott’s weekly salon, where ‘all the wit and brains’ met, attracted writers, artists, lawyers, doctors, clergymen, scientists, politicians, naval and military men and actors and actresses. Rose and Alice Scott’s cousin, book collector and benefactor, David Scott Mitchell, had bequeathed to the Public Library of New South Wales his collection of books and maps.⁸

Members of Rose’s father’s family were landholders, active in pastoral affairs, and with a connection to the English aristocracy. Terrick Hamilton’s great-grandfather, Sir Walter Farquhar, had been the physician to the Prince of Wales,

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later King George IV, and the Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, and for this work was awarded the title of 1st Baronet in 1796. Sir Walter had been a patron of John Macarthur, whose family maintained a friendship with the Hamiltons in Queensland. One of Terrick’s oldest and closest friends, whom he had known at Eton was the somewhat notorious George Victor Drogo Montagu, Viscount Mandeville, the 8th Duke of Manchester. The duke had visited Tambo, as had New South Wales Colonial Secretary, Sir Edward Deas Thomson; Sir Francis Murphy, a landholder on the Ovens River, former member of the Victorian Legislative Council and, later, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly; the Hon. John Stevenson and the Hon. Boyd Dunlop Morehead, pastoralist and Queensland premier from 1888 to 1890.9 In spite of these connections, Rose maintained a down-to-earth attitude towards everyone she met.

Both Rose’s grandfathers were pioneering landholders. Her paternal grandfather, Edward William Terrick Hamilton, had jointly purchased in 1839 (with his cousin, Henry George Hamilton, and a friend, George Clive), Collaroy, near Cassilis, 200 kilometres north-west of Newcastle. He returned to live in Britain in 1855 and from 1857 to 1898 he was governor of the Australian Agricultural Co.10 Rose’s maternal grandfather, Helenus Scott, had settled in about 1822 with his brother, Robert, on the combined large land grant of Glendon, 50 kilometres north-west of Newcastle. Through her Scott connections, Rose was related to the prominent Hunter Valley pastoral families of the Merewethers, Selwyns, Shaws, Mitchells, Ranclauds and Wallaces.11

Clergymen peppered Rose’s pedigree on both sides of her family. These included two of her great-grandfathers—the Rev’d George Keylock Rusden, first minister of St Peter’s Church of England, East Maitland, and the Archdeacon of Taunton and Rector of Loughton, Essex, Venerable Anthony Hamilton, who was also consultant to the Colonial Office on colonial ecclesiastical appointments; his father and his mother’s father were also clergymen. Rose’s paternal great-uncle, Walter Kerr Hamilton, was the Bishop of Salisbury from 1854–69.12

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‘We should not be snobbish’

Although Rose’s middle-class credentials were impeccable, two factors contributed to her dispensing with class-driven attitudes. One was her father’s exhortation not to be snobbish, and the other was her own long experience, living among the people of outback Queensland.

Terrick Hamilton had been sent to the Australian colonies by his father because of high-spirited behaviour when a student at Eton and Cambridge. He first worked as a jackeroo at Warrah station, near Quirindi, New South Wales—a property of the Australian Agricultural Co. In February 1878 he married Alice Scott, who was from the nearby Glendon station and that year he became the manager of the combined Tambo and adjacent 44 square mile (70.4 km²) Mt Pleasant runs, of which he was a part-owner. With the assistance of the Bank of Australasia (of which his father, Edward Hamilton, was chairman), Terrick became the sole owner in 1890.

As the eldest child, Rose became her father’s ‘inseparable companion’ and identified with his feelings, stories and tasks. She rode daily with him, mustering the sheep, cattle and horses, going to check the artesian bores on the outermost paddocks and joining him at his hobby of blacksmithing. From an early age she helped with the station accounts and the stores, and in the press copying of the business letters. Accompanying Terrick on long buggy rides between sparsely situated outback towns, she listened to the stories of his youthful wild escapades, of his ‘prim old aunts’ and his stern father who disapproved of his passion for horses.13

Rose wrote of her father that:

The Boss was very definite that we should not be snobbish and that we should regard the men and the servants as fellow human beings which I think was the foundation of my deep interest in everybody and their life stories and problems.14

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13 Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 40.
She cites her father’s generosity in his payment to his workers and his assistance to a Tambo overseer with tools and equipment when he took up his own selection. During the 1891 shearers’ strike—which started at Barcaldine, 200 kilometres north of Tambo—the Hamiltons’ shearing shed was left free of assault when others in the area were burned down. Rose attributed this reprieve to her father’s high standing among the working men. When a large bushfire broke out, striking unionists returned voluntarily to Tambo to help fight it. By contrast, grassfires had been started on the nearby Minnie Downs and Langlo Downs.15

When Rose visited her grandfather and aunts at Charters, Sunningdale, eight kilometres south of Windsor, for an English ‘coming out’ year in 1895, when she was 15 years old, she saw at close range the ‘snobbishness of ... class’. She found the formal atmosphere in the house to be stultifying and she hated the pomp and ceremony. At dinner parties ‘the order of precedence was so strict’ with the most important person offered her grandfather’s arm, and then the decision made as to ‘who should follow whom’. Edward Hamilton, despite his colonial experience, embraced British attitudes of class and status, being described as a man who considered himself superior to ‘members of the middle class and the lower orders’. In this ‘awful stiff atmosphere’, Rose ‘ached and ached for the

sunshine and the freedom of my bush home’. Dismissing any notion of a pretty English landscape, she considered the trees to be ‘as prim and smug and correct as [the] people’.  

While in England Rose met aristocracy and foreign royalty, but was impressed by a person’s character, not by his or her social position. Sir Donald Smith (Lord Strathcona), a Canadian, who co-founded the Canadian Pacific Railway, fitted her criterion. He had ‘no social graces but a very impressive sincerity’. Rose’s cousin was a goddaughter of Queen Victoria, but Rose was relieved when a proposal that she be ‘presented at Court and have a London season’ was quashed because Queen Victoria ‘objected to having anyone younger [than 18] presented to her’.  

Rose wrote iconoclastically of the English churches and cathedrals, observing that:

> the thing that impressed me most ... was the dark damp musty smell which I was amazed to find the English did not seem to notice. They seemed to have absorbed through all the years the odor of unwashed bodies and feet, and the dead who were in vaults under their floors or clustered thickly in the yards outside their walls. It certainly added to the awe! Especially if one added “ful” to the word.

My beloved West

After her marriage in 1900 to the grazier, William Cowen, Rose and Bill had brief forays into mixed farming near Clifton in the Darling Downs and at Bauhinia Vale on the Dawson River near Taroom. However, they were ‘yearning for the West’, and so in 1907 they moved to Longford, a sheep and cattle station 25 kilometres south of Jundah on the Thomson River, in the Channel Country. In western Queensland Rose lived among people who were striving to cope with the harsh climate and often grappling with their own demons.

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Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 73, 77.
Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 76.
Rose explained the effect of hardship and discomfort on the local inhabitants:

There were more droughts than good seasons, and the worry and misery of them is indelibly imprinted on my memory. The great heat when the hot wind seemed to sear one's skin and such a dry parching wind that one's lips cracked and one felt that a smile would be to split the skin of one's cheeks like perished parchment. Often the hot wind would come in savage gusts that made one instinctively feel that the Devil was opening and shutting the lid of Hell in order to get some fresh heat from the blazing sun ... It was hard to think aright and only those who had resources of the mind or were creatures of no intellect ... could endure years of it without becoming adversely affected. That is why so many people developed eccentricities in the Outback.19

She described the prevalence of misfits and eccentrics, attracted to the region:

The Outback has so many of these failures, the wrecks that drift away from the civilization which has no time for the vice that is found out (unless it has wealth and position to gild it). They gradually work back

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and back into the Never-Never amongst a community who, living a hard life close to nature and therefore being more understanding and tolerant, accepts them for the good which is still in them.\textsuperscript{20}

In these conditions, social class was irrelevant. Resilience, the ability to work hard, and moral integrity and honesty were the character traits esteemed by Rose, as people endured the heat, isolation and, as she reported, ‘sometimes the shortage of food when we were cut off from communication from the outer world’.\textsuperscript{21}

As a skilled horsewoman, who had won prizes at horse shows in Charleville, Roma and Toowoomba in the late 1890s and had gained the reputation as one of the best lady side-saddle riders in Australia,\textsuperscript{22} she also highly regarded people that showed kindness to horses and who handled them well. She accepted with equanimity the prevalence of drunkenness and swearing, which she saw as normal behaviour among her outback acquaintances, merely writing down the ‘blank’ and ‘blankety’ of unpublishable obscenities. She noted that:

The men of that day were a wild roistering crowd, and what would not be permitted by public opinion today, was in order then. Men drank a lot more and there were always demi-johns of whisky and rum in the station homesteads. Owners and men drank heavily. I can remember that the strictly sober man was a remarkable person, just as now the drunkard is the one who is specially noticed. Men worked very hard in those days and they needed a “pick-me-up” in the evenings, but when droughts and bad times were in control and men saw no way in which they could save their stock, and when they rode out on the run and saw them dying or dead in their thousands, they turned to the whisky bottle or wild excesses to give their tortured minds some relief.\textsuperscript{23}

In a particular example of the type of dishonesty and hypocrisy she abhorred, Rose cited an unscrupulous Tambo publican who later became a warden at a Darling Downs church. Rose recognised him ‘in an odor of sanctity’ but remembered that, as a publican at Tambo, he had poisoned the alcohol and robbed ‘simple trusting men’ on his way to wealth. Repulsed, she immediately turned away from that church.\textsuperscript{24}

Rose assessed all ministers of religion by the same criteria that she applied to other people in the outback. She referred to a ‘fool of a clergyman’ who allowed his two buggy horses to be drowned in a local waterhole. Her general opinion of them was that:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 130.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 164.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Lilley 1973: 60, fn. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 14–15.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 127.
\end{itemize}
the clergy of that day [did not make] much headway with the Bush people. They were so very English, and so very patronising to the “heathen bush people” whom of course they believed had all descended from convicts and must be saved from the eternal damnation that was certainly the lot of all the convicts, men who in many cases had been transported for such paltry crimes as stealing a loaf of bread or poaching – my Father and Grandfathers all said these men on the whole were fine fellows and good and loyal workers.\(^{25}\)

Her regard for an ability to work hard cut across divisions of gender, class or race, as she applied her character standards to the ‘black Malay’ or Chinese cooks, the Chinese gardeners and the many Irish, Scottish and English immigrants on Tambo. She sympathised with the ‘Remittance Men’ at Tambo in the 1880s, describing them as well-educated and ‘fine fellows’, with only the one fault—‘drink’; she censured English class attitudes that had motivated the young men’s expulsion to Australia after they had disgraced their families with ‘minor peccadilloes’, and she directed her most scathing attack onto the clergymen that had displayed a ‘narrow respectability beyond forgiveness’\(^ {26}\) towards their sons. On the other hand, she praised the kind, law-abiding, ‘hard-working’ German families, whom she had met both in the Darling Downs and near Longford, and among whom,

> the women worked even harder than the men, and made use of everything, often turning out really wonderful needlework, knitting and crochet, making all their own jams, preserves and pickles and growing all their own vegetables. They deserved to get on and they did.\(^{27}\)

Rose endured 11 years of heat, dust and isolation but, because of unbearably high temperatures, spent only two summers at Longford. Hard working and wiry, she became a self-confessed ‘bushie’ and a ‘godless creature’.\(^ {28}\) As a person’s gender, social position or race were irrelevant to a capacity to cope, Rose’s Indigenous companions were among those she most admired during her years in the Channel Country.

### Ambivalent attitude to Aborigines

Rose Cowen’s representation of Aborigines falls into two categories. One relates to her father’s stories, the other stems from her own experience. As the child and grandchild of pastoral pioneers, she adopted and accepted the white man’s

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attitudes and actions towards the Indigenous owners of the land. She rationalised settler violence, repeating the concept of Karl Lumholtz, a Norwegian scientist, who lived in Queensland during the 1880s, that ‘it is an immutable law of nature that the strong will prey upon the weak’.  

The question of whether the original inhabitants were justified in trying to destroy the invader is an age old one, going back beyond the occupation of Judea and if one condemns the white race for taking Australia from the aborigine one must go on to a condemnation of every race in the world, including the Danes and Norwegians and Saxons and Normans, Ghengis Khan and Atilla and Alexander who wept because there were no more worlds to conquer – Australia being then a terra incognita. It seems a law of nature that reptile, bird and beast and man must all prey on one another.

She supported the colonists’ argument for retribution:

People today may be horrified by the merciless punishment meted out to the blacks for murder but they should remember that the blacks were very numerous in those days and the whites very few and widely scattered. Therefore they used the black’s [sic] own law of the death punishment for a death – which with the aborigines extended to the whole tribe by the other tribe – and their policy had to be adopted by the whites as the only one they would really understand. Only so could the opening up of the country be safe and successful. I noticed that the Dawson blacks were much better grown and developed than those I had known in my childhood at Tambo and they seemed inclined to be “cheeky” and had the reputation of being treacherous.

Queensland’s early settlement has been referred to as ‘the most troublesome frontier story of all the Australian colonies’, and Rose was privy to some of that history. She knew the story of how previous owners of Tambo had fired into the midst of the local Wadjalang people with shotguns, killing and wounding ‘a good many’. After a ‘wild corroboree’, the Aborigines had come ‘swarming’ up to the homestead and the owners, out-numbered, and not knowing their intentions, ‘made sure of getting in first’. According to Rose,

It had a very salutary effect as the whole tribe decamped and were away for many months before they began to drift back in ones and twos.

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29 Reynolds 1996 [1987]: 123.
30 Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 68.
31 Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 118.
33 Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 2.
Her father had told her that the Aborigines on Warrah, where he had been a jackaroo, were ‘bad and numerous’ and she repeated the tale without qualification.

She knew other stories from her father:

The Boss told me that in the 70’s when he first went to Tambo, there was a very large and sometimes cheeky tribe and therefore the Police, to ensure that they did not get out of hand, would select the cheekiest young men and take them out into the gidyea scrub at the back of the town — ostensibly horse hunting, but they were never seen again and of course the tribe guessed what had happened. People to-day may be shocked at these methods of making a country peaceable but they should remember that there were very few whites in comparison with the numerous aborigines and the wives of those whites, women and children, had to be protected against attack and murder whilst the men folk were out on the runs looking after their stock, and these killings which were few (unless in reprisals as in the case of the Cullinlaringo and Hornet Bank massacres by the aborigines) served through fear of the white man’s swift punishment to make the country safe for settlement ... I admit that sometimes the reprisals went far beyond justice and developed into plain murder as was sometimes the case with the native police of whom some terrible stories are told.  

She herself could identify a site at Juanda on the Dawson River where Aborigines had been driven into a waterhole and shot, as part of reprisals after the murders at Hornet Bank, where members of the Fraser family had been killed. According to Rose, Terrick Hamilton had joined the raids on Aborigines that followed the 1861 Cullinlaringo murders of 19 settlers near Emerald, in central Queensland.

Again, in the 1880s, some Wadjalang men had crept up to Tambo homestead to steal alcohol after their allotted supply had been consumed. Hamilton and two workmen took firearms and,

Just to show them that the folks in the house would stand no nonsense, the Boss fired a couple of rifle shots in the direction of the noise — there was instantaneous silence and suddenly [one of the workers] remembered that his race horse was somewhere about those bushes and was frantic lest the stray bullets should have found him. In the morning the Boss went down to the camp with the shot gun and shot every one

of the dogs to show the aborigines that he was ready to shoot them if necessary. The effect was most salutary, the blacks cleared out and never came back.  

Rose’s most vivid memories of the Wadjalang people on Tambo were of her nurse ‘Dinah’, who with her husband, ‘old Harry’, were ‘king’ and ‘queen’ of their tribe. Because of her adventurous spirit (even as a baby), Rose credits her survival and nurturing to the efforts of Dinah. Harry had succumbed to white authority and wore, suspended on a chain around his neck, the brass plate of ‘kingship’ that the infant Rose liked to hit with a stick. Rose referred to Harry’s ‘gentleness’ and ‘humility’, inferring that he now lived an easy life, with no mention of his former warrior past or of his lost pride and country. Of the Wadjalang like Dinah and Harry, who had decided to return to Tambo, some worked in the shearing shed as fleece pickers or carriers of the wool from the classing table to the bales for pressing.

‘The white man is black in his character, and the black man is white’

In the Channel Country, Rose presented a different view of Aborigines, born of her own experiences at Longford. Applying her test of character equally to the white and black people she knew, she depicted settler laziness, deceit and dishonesty; alcoholic women, drunken doctors, female cooks who were ‘very loose in their morals’; and ‘bad, flashy’ lady helps, one of whom murdered her newborn illegitimate child in the Longford homestead. Another example of white ‘depravity’ was of a cruel station owner, who stamped on Aborigines’ toes to make them sing in church. On the other hand, she wrote of the help that Aboriginal youths gave to settlers, sometimes as expert horse groomers. She cited the story of an Indigenous lad, who saved the life of a landholder suffering from scurvy by ‘boiling a plant and giving him the green mess and the water’. When a white man whose own ‘savagery was inflamed by doped grog’ left his daughter to die in the bush near Charleville after she had drunk her water bag dry, Rose told of how Aborigines ‘succoured’ the child and ‘delivered her safely back at Windorah’ over 300 kilometres away.  

In reference to Aboriginal laws which she deemed ‘much more strict—and moral’ than the white man’s, Rose acknowledged her respect for the taboo

which prevented an Indigenous woman from even looking at a visiting tribal ‘brother’. This behaviour applied to the law that forbade sexual relationship with someone from the same clan. Rose added:

In the early days in attacks on white settlers, the women were killed with their men by the aborigines but there was none of the wicked raping that was practised by the natives of other countries.37

Rose applauded the Indigenous custom of the father leaving mother and child for about a year after childbirth ‘to give the baby a chance’, the community sharing their food with the new mother. Reflecting that this was ‘rather an example to the whites’, she added: ‘Indeed from what I knew of the morals of the people in ... bush townships I was often shamed to think that ... the aborigines in their wild state ... were far more virtuous’.38 She declaimed that:

really one feels that the white man is black in his character, and the black man is white, for the aborigine obeys his tribal laws and the white man flouts his and seeks every opportunity to secretly break them.39

Her acceptance of individuals irrespective of their race meant that she introduced people into her narrative by describing their temperament or character before identifying their racial heritage. For example, a ‘joyous youngster [whom we] all liked ... immensely, he was so happy natured, so unaffected ... our ray of sunshine’ was ‘half Indian’. She similarly identified ‘George’ (a part-Aborigine) as a ‘fine strapping big man [employed] to break horses’, with one failing, ‘drink’, a trait that was common to ‘most of the fine men in the bush’.40

Allegiance to character, not race, saw her supporting George, when a white cook who was a staunch unionist, dedicated to the union’s dictum of ‘white Australia’, refused George’s entry into the Longford kitchen. George went to the Cowens with his concerns that, if excluded from the other working men, he was likely to lose his own union ticket. Rose chose to support George, reporting that:

I had to explain all this to [the cook], adding with a touch of malice “So you see Connors, he is your brother unionist”. Connors mopped his face with the tea towel he was using to dry up and exclaimed: “My God, to

38 Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 184.
40 Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 155–156. Although Indigenous soldiers are difficult to track, recent communication with Gary Oakley, Indigenous Liaison Officer, Australian War Memorial, suggests that George may have been Pte George Robert Aitken, born at Taroom, enlisting on 19 October 1917, serial no. 2367, 52nd Battalion.
think I’d even have to put up with a nigger in my kitchen”. And this was his plaint all the time the men were having their food! It speaks well for George that he never knocked him down.  

When George died as a soldier in World War I, Rose wrote that ‘the West lost a really fine type of half-caste, generous, decent, honest and straight, and a splendid horseman’. Rose had acted upon George’s expressed dislike for military camp life and ‘all this damn saluting’, by writing to the camp commandant, Colonel Flewell Smith, whom she knew, asking that George be considered for active service. George later thanked Rose for getting him ‘away from the camp into the real fighting’. He died in action in France. Rose extended her identification with people of mixed racial heritage, when she added:

So often the half-caste seems to have the vices and weaknesses of both races and these are emphasised by the uncertainty of where they stand in the community – they belong to neither race; the whites looked down on them and the aborigines treated them as being outside the tribe. No wonder the poor fellows felt the injustice and became reckless, bitter and often bad.  

Rose decried the ‘lordly and contemptuous attitude of the early British settlers’, who could have learned about the environment from the Aborigines. Referring specifically to 1916, she wrote that:

The tragic loss of life in the Clermont flood would never have taken place had the blacks’ warnings been heeded. They said “no camp here (when they saw houses being put up) big pfella flood come down, wash um away” and the same thing happened earlier in the St George districts in the early 60’s. The whites would not believe [what the blacks said] so they had most if not all of their flocks and herds swept away and drowned. The aborigines were so weather wise and had such a keen sense of smell that they could smell changes in the weather or a dust storm coming long before it appeared to us, or the smell of smoke, and being such keen observers of the habits and reactions of birds and animals they knew when a dry time was setting in and made their plans accordingly, hence their survival as tribes in such a waterless land. Their knowledge of the properties of plants and trees would have been of inestimable value to the new settlers had those contemptuous whites not been so sure that the black was a “poor ignorant creature”.  

42 Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 156.  
According to Rose, European Australians were ‘the products of a vaunted civilization that could not cope with the primitive in a show down with nature’. Indigenous knowledge, she argued, could have provided settlers with basic survival skills. She cited as example the Burke and Wills expeditionary disaster that occurred in country where ‘the waters teemed with fish, crayfish, mussels’, where there were ‘succulent red pigweed’, ‘great flocks of birds, and the seeds of the nardoo and grass’.\textsuperscript{44}

From her understanding of Indigenous people, Rose reported that while ‘the aborigine will laugh with you [he] hates to be laughed at. So we, and those early settlers, had to learn the hard way, by trial and error and disaster what the blacks could have warned us against’. Indigenous laughter, as the Aborigines enacted ‘for the rest of the tribe in mimicry and pantomime the incredible (to them) mistakes’ made by the white men was, according to Rose, ‘poetic justice’ for the settlers’ ‘woeful ignorance and blunders’.

Jundah resident, B J Rayment, expressed sympathetic opinions similar to Rose’s comments, sometimes using similar language. Having had Aboriginal playmates and workmates, Rayment asserted that ‘there is not one per cent more bad black men than bad white men’ and that ‘[m]ost of our condemnation of the black Australians is just an excuse to cover our rotten treatment of them’. He deplored the fact that ‘we have developed this country to our own gain and to their cost of semi starvation and degradation [a fact which] is surely not right by Christian ways, but I am glad to think that at long last something worthwhile may be done for the survivors’. Deeming the British race, with its ‘vaunted civilisation’ as ‘damned hypocritical’, greedy and selfish, he added that, ‘I hate to harp on these things but it is a great pity that we white people have such a superiority complex’.\textsuperscript{46}

Rose acknowledged the validity of Indigenous lore, writing that:

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When I was a child people laughed at the aborigines for being afraid of bunyips or ‘debbil debbils’, refusing definitely to go near certain places – more especially permanent waterholes. They were dubbed “Silly frightened creatures”. Now ... we know that their ancestors had to really fight for existence with the huge and fearsome reptiles and animals that roamed the land, and the fear was deeply implanted in their whole beings by their legends and corroborees. Now that the land is becoming more settled we are finding the fossilised remains of some of these prehistoric monsters and where scientists are groping now to
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{44} Cowen, \textit{Crossing Dry Creeks}, 1961: 136. 
\textsuperscript{46} Rayment c. 1971: 129, 61, 174, 168. Rayment’s \textit{My Towri} was contemporary with \textit{Crossing Dry Creeks}. Although he published in c. 1971, Rayment wrote much of ‘My Towri’ in 1956.
reconstruct those creatures and guess at their habits, the early settlers could have learnt so much at first hand from the aborigines, had they only shown their interest and sympathy.47

‘My beloved’ Minnie

Rose’s trials at Longford began with the homestead. This was:

a dreadful building of unpainted galvanised iron roof and walls, and the uprights were of bush timber – I barked these myself later on with a tomahawk and a butcher’s knife and the loss of quite a lot of skin off my fingers. The three good sized rooms were unceiled and the cobwebs hung in festoons from the roof. The detached kitchen was also of iron throughout and had ... a kitchen range that I grew to hate with every smarting fibre of my being during the 11 years I was there. The chimneys had holes in them and when a westerly wind blew, the smoke poured into the kitchen from these holes and my eyes so often smarted and stung. It was a very small set-in range and as my husband employed a lot of men (4 jackeroos and one overseer in the house and six men in the kitchen and the two blacks in their camp) it was a fearful daily problem to get the food cooked.48

Domestic work centred on the cleaning and cooking. After the weekly dust storms ‘one breathed dust, ate dust and slept in dust’ and afterwards, ‘dust was everywhere, in our eyes, our mouths, on our teeth, outlining our classic features on the pillow as we slept, going pouf pouf as we walked across the floors [and] on our food’. Cooking on an earthen kitchen floor in summer was ‘just like standing on hot bricks’. After a storm, ‘being lower than the outside, [it] would be awash’ with water. Three times a day, Rose ‘dish[ed] up ... 3 sets of meals simultaneously’, baked ‘quantities of cake’ and made puddings for ‘the house, the kitchen and the blacks’. Every second day, she produced ‘big batches’ of bread and cooked the meat from a sheep. Almost immediately after she had cooked and served the Longford breakfasts, she was required twice a week to feed coach passengers travelling between Jundah and Windorah with a meal that included lamb chops and scones. Located on the main north-south road, Longford had many other (hungry) callers, ‘all unexpected’. While the arrival of the motor car helped relieve the burden of isolation, Rose deplored the fact that, unlike during the horse era, she had little time to stoke up the fire and start cooking after she saw the approaching dust of a traveller’s car.49

47 Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 188.
Rose was helped in her toil by Coorooboolka (Coorabulka) woman, ‘Minnie’, from the Pitta Pitta country near Boulia. Minnie and ‘Tommy’, an Aboriginal man from northern Queensland, had stayed on at Longford when the Cowens bought the property. After Tommy died, her second husband was ‘Dick’, Tommy’s brother. While Minnie was seen as part of the Longford purchase agreement, her position imitated Rose’s evaluation of rural wives, of whom she wrote: ‘Women in the farming districts don’t occupy a very high place in the masculine community—being classed usually according to their degree of usefulness with the other animals’.\(^5\) As the two women strove together to subdue the forces and effects of climate, the divisions of race and class were virtually erased in the shared connection of gender.

Whereas white domestic workers had proved unsatisfactory, Minnie was hard working and dependable. Rose described the women’s shared working arrangements:

> Life was much more peaceful when I did the cooking and Minnie did the heavier work. What made the work so much harder for both of us was that the galvanised iron walls having been put up horizontally instead of perpendicularly held the dust and had to be wiped down regularly once a week. We did a room a day. I climbed up on a chair placed on a table and Minnie did the lower part. Rubbing every corrugation by hand took a long time and I remember that once at the end of the week when everything was bright and shining we had a terrific dust storm in the night and all the corrugations were filled up again with dust. I came into the dining room when Minnie was surveying the walls with a look of utter disgust on her face. “Ah! Minnie!” I moaned “wha you think?” “I tink damn” she replied with great emphasis.\(^5\)

Rose relied on Minnie, likening their relationship to a friendship of mutual endeavour, leavened by humour:

> I don’t think I could have survived that hard life and overwork if it had not been for Minnie who was both loyal and devoted and did all the heavy work, such as the washing and ironing, sweeping, scrubbing and washing up. We were very good friends and when I found she had such a keen sense of humour we had many laughs together.\(^5\)

Minnie assisted in outdoor jobs. She helped fight a bushfire—prevalent in 1918 after good rainfalls in 1917 and 1918; she joined in chasing away dingoes, gathered cow dung for Rose and her two sons to burn in kerosene tins to keep

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the sandflies away, and gently watered and fed a tired, injured horse—a sure way of gaining Rose’s respect. From her research of twentieth-century cattle stations in the Northern Territory, Ann McGrath found that Indigenous women often undertook the heavy jobs such as wood chopping, hauling water in drums and repairing fences. She suggests that Indigenous women consented to the menial, daily tasks required by settlers because:

Women in Aboriginal society were relied upon to provide the most regular and consistent food supply. Their role of food gathering and hunting smaller animals was more routine and required more constant application compared with men’s hunting activities.53

On Longford, the two women supported and protected each other. During droughts, Bill Cowen frequently left the station in the hands of the ‘ineffectual’ overseer and Rose, while he camped with his jackeroos on a distant paddock or checked on the sheep that had been sent out to feed along the roads. Rose then had to cope with the lambs and ewes and often workers, such as scrubcutters. Sometimes she was left alone to manage Longford without the men. On these occasions, she wielded her revolver and shotgun whenever drunk white men approached the station, while Minnie’s defence were her two ferocious half-bred bull-dog cattle dogs that she used against unwanted visitors when the women were alone. When advised to keep away from a coach passenger visiting Longford, Rose and Minnie both retired to the homestead and watched events together through the window.

During racial verbal abuse of Minnie and Dick by Longford’s American horse driver, Rose sided with the Aborigines. She described the American as loud mouthed and a bully, and ‘like all bullies very cruel to the horses’. Rose added to Minnie’s retort: ‘You cruel brute! Good job if [the horse] kickem you!’ by reporting that ‘it was with great joy one day that we saw the biter bit ... Minnie was so overjoyed at the terrific bump the Yank had got that she was chuckling gleefully and saying over and over again: “Good job! Good job!”’.54

Rose accepted Minnie as an individual, describing her without recourse to either conventional racial stereotypes or patronisation. While Minnie was susceptible to drunkenness, she was ‘very virtuous when the temptation was not at hand’. Rose represented her identity and authority as:

a very independent old soul who strongly resented the attempts by cooks or lady helps to shunt all the unpleasant or heavy jobs on to her and would come snorting to me to tell me, “My word, tha’ one lazy

54 Cowen, Crossing Dry Creeks, 1961: 151–152.
phella, wantem me do alla work; I gottem my own. I no askem t’ do my work – you wantem tella the phella.” And tellem I did for I hated such mean tricks.  

Two examples demonstrate a relationship of friendship and care between the two women. After the Aboriginal woman was struck by wind-borne galvanised iron, Rose took her into the homestead to ‘bind her wounds and reduce the lumps and give her a good strong nip of whisky to steady her’. Similarly, when her husband became drunk and abusive, Rose took her to sleep on the veranda outside Rose’s door. Rose affectionately referred to her as ‘my beloved’ Minnie or ‘that silly old Minnie’ and reiterated some of her outraged replies to perceived injustices against her. When a jackeroo laughed at her predicament when she was caught in a dust storm, Rose reported Minnie’s retort: ‘I no more washem your clothes, no more iron em shirts, no more takem ticks off your dog. You bad pfella, I no likem!’, Rose adding that ‘between each threat there was a terrific snort’.  

Separated from her family and female kin in an isolated location, Rose sympathised with Minnie’s similar plight. After Pitta Pitta men killed the settler, Richard Welford, in 1872:

[Minnie] and her father and mother escaped into the country afterwards known as Connemara Station when the whites were exacting reprisals for the murders. They hid beside partly submerged logs in the waterholes in the daylight and fled by night ... and [Minnie] told me very graphically how terrified the blacks were and how they hid the fact that they were of the tribe who killed Welford. But every now and then they would meet ... and hold their corroboree of the flood and the snakes that drove them so far south.

Away from her own country, Minnie had remained on Longford, unlike other Aborigines who had been moved onto missions or reserves in the early twentieth century.

Rose grieved with her when Aborigines being transported from south-western Queensland to the Palm Island Aboriginal Settlement, north of Townsville, passed by Longford. Palm Island was gazetted as an Aboriginal reserve on 20 June 1914:

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58 Copland, Richards and Walker 2006: 123.
When the Government had the silly idea of gathering all the aborigines to the coast on an island (where in that damp climate they promptly died) we had several come along on the coach. They were very frightened as they knew that each one who had been taken away never came back and therefore they must be going to their death. They wailed and talked with my old Minnie who wailed and jabbered back and told me afterwards about “tha pore feller, he go longa island”.

Like Mary McConnel, Rose reported Indigenous autonomy and agency. Unlike Mary, Rose did not qualify her assessment with racial judgements. With an almost envious tone she reported that Minnie and Dick were,

very happy together and their laughter at night from their humpy was good to hear. I often wondered which of us whites they were taking off in that really brilliant mimicry of theirs which was not only of voice and inflection but also of gesture, walk and tilt of the head.

In 1918, Cowen and his partner W J Langmore sold the property and the Cowens left in January 1919. Cowen purchased (again with Langmore) Mount Victoria, near Longreach, where the Cowens lived from 1919 to about 1924. In 1925, Rose Cowen was the registered owner of Kendal No. 2 in the Longreach district, a property that ran 90 cattle and 4,300 sheep. The Cowens had left Mount Victoria by 1925. They later either owned or had equity in Swan Vale (Jundah), Deuce Downs (Longreach) and Eden Downs (Dartmouth, east of Longreach). Bill Cowen died in 1935. Rose spent her later years with her younger, unmarried son, Clive, at Yeppoon near Rockhampton, where she died in July 1971, aged 92.

**Conclusion**

After Rose Scott’s death in 1925 feminist activism continued. In the years between the World Wars ‘the centre and outback [developed] as a new space for feminist attention’, becoming significant places in which women could enact ‘their own responsibilities as world women’ and where ‘white women activists promot[ed] Aboriginal women rights to selfhood and self-protection’. Marilyn Lake has described this period as the ‘golden age of the woman citizen’ when women such as Constance Cooke, Mary Bennett and Bessie Rischbieth all

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worked towards the equality of women—campaigns which included increased rights for Indigenous women. Anthropologist, Olive Pink, similarly brought to public attention the rights of Aboriginal women at this time.\footnote{Lake 1996: 166; Holland 2001: 30–33, 38; Marcus 1993: 111–135.} This was the period, too, when derogatory racial views about Aborigines were beginning to wane, with the lessening of the influencing force of social Darwinism.\footnote{Reynolds 1996 [1987]: 118, 127.} Rose Cowen’s writing reflected these changes.

Rose understood the strength of women. During World War I, on holiday from Longford, she worked alongside other women in the Red Cross kitchen in the Kangaroo Point Military Hospital, Brisbane, serving meals to the wounded and ill soldiers. She herself was a Justice of the Peace and, in London, she had attended a British Women’s Conference.

Rose’s attitude against ‘that despicable fetish of the English, respectability’\footnote{Cowen, ‘Recollections of a bush woman, 1879 to 1900’, n.d., N9, Noel Butlin Archives Centre, ANU, p. 39.} enabled her to disregard the concepts of status and class. Straightforward, even blunt, in her appraisal of people (whether black or white), she embarrassed her family with her outspoken commentary. Circulation of Crossing Dry Creeks was suppressed until 1985.\footnote{Letter from Walter W Stone, editor of Biblionews, 3 July 1963, in NLA Ferguson copy of Crossing Dry Creeks.} She represented Aboriginal people not as stereotyped racial constructs but as individuals depicted without sentimentality or censure.

Rose portrayed Minnie as a strong and endearing personality, weighing 100 kilograms (compared with Rose’s 38 kg), sympathetic to Rose and hard working in helping her in the Herculean task of maintaining British standards of cleanliness in the dusty, arid outback.

Some of the ways that Indigenous women showed friendship to white women have become stereotypical. The examples of Aboriginal women taking lonely rural women on food foraging trips or swimming expeditions to the river or waterhole, or for walks in the bush showed the black women’s generosity to the settlers. Aboriginal women succoured Katie Langloh Parker on Bangate station, near Angledool, close to the Queensland border in north-western New South Wales in the 1880s and 1890s; Ethel Hassell at Jarraumbungup, 170 kilometres north-east of Albany, south-western Western Australia, during the 1880s; and Jeannie Gunn of Elsey station near Katherine, Northern Territory, in the first years of the twentieth century. Some Aboriginal people allowed the settler women to write down their ancestral stories and customs. Katie Parker (later, Catherine Stow) wrote of the Noongahburrah women, members of the larger
Euahlayi (Yuwaalaraay) group, and Hassell of the Willman. Alice Duncan-Kemp lived alongside the Karuwali, Marrula and Mitaka peoples and was able to record their stories in the twentieth century.69

This group of female settlers noted Indigenous women’s independence, dignity and pride. Hassell referred to the Aborigines’ ‘keen sense of justice ... try to humbug a native your labour is in vain ... if they think they are not justly treated they quietly early one morning walk off’.70 Emma Macpherson, on Keera station, near Bingara, New South Wales reported that when she asked Kamilaroi women to do some washing for her, they looked on it ‘as so many favours conferred’ and ‘you can never be sure of the day or the hour that they may not take to the woods and disappear’.71 Parker wrote of the ‘born-lazy saunter’ and sulky pout of one of the Noongahburrah ‘black-but-comelys’. Negotiation and tact were the means by which a Willman woman convinced Hassell to allow a visiting friend to taste her toffee.72

These white women, however, upheld the class difference between themselves and the Indigenous women, allowing them into their homes—if at all—only to fulfil their roles as domestic servants. Hassell, for example, would meet the Aboriginal women ‘at the wood-heap’. The pictures of Aboriginal people in these narratives are distilled through the white women’s interpretation. Indigenous character sometimes emerges indirectly in anecdotes, aimed towards another outcome.

Rose and Minnie’s working partnership, on the other hand, challenges Myrna Tonkinson’s thesis that, on the frontier,

The Whites considered themselves to be superior and, even when they conceded humanity to the Blacks, did not consider them worthy of friendship or other relationships based on equality.73

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70 Hassell, My Dusky Friends, 1975: 84.

71 Foster 2010: 279–280; Macpherson, My Experiences in Australia, 1860: 231.


Rose’s story offers a twentieth-century perspective, depicting a relationship of shared endeavour. She reveals Indigenous authority with her comment that Minnie and Dick would laugh together at night, assuming that the target was one of ‘us whites’. Minnie’s physical and emotional help to the white woman at Longford gains from Rose a warm recognition of the Aborigine’s strong and independent character. By writing honestly about Indigenous Australians, Rose revealed the moral integrity of other Aboriginal people in and around Longford and their hard-working efforts on behalf of the white newcomers. She has shown that, although a perception had grown from the mid-nineteenth century that the demise of Aborigines was inevitable, Indigenous people continued to be vital contributors to the development of Australia. Her acknowledgement of Indigenous identity and authority adds to the developing body of work emerging about nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Indigenous Australians.

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74 Markus 1994: 25. Markus suggests that contributing factors to the perception were the increased deaths of Aboriginal men and the increased number of Aboriginal babies fathered by white men. Russell McGregor’s *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880–1939* (1997), explores the ways in which evolutionary ideas consolidated the expectation that the Aboriginal race would become extinct. This premise underlies Daisy Bates’ *The Passing of the Aborigines* (1938).