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## Bobby Roberts: Intermediary and outlaw of Western Australia's south coast

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Reinterpreting and juxtaposing a variety of colonial accounts from the south coast of Western Australia reveals particular Aboriginal individuals as active agents engaged in cross-cultural exchange motivated by their own interests, albeit with increasingly limited options.<sup>1</sup> The story of Bobby Roberts may be viewed as an example of such Aboriginal agency exercised in the early colonial context. A Noongar man from the south coast region of Western Australia,<sup>2</sup> Bobby assisted colonial interests as a guide and, later, a 'native constable'. However, colonial authorities also knew him as a brazen criminal.<sup>3</sup>

His former employer, the Surveyor General of Western Australia John Septimus Roe, once lauded the 'instinctive sagacity' of his 'sable friend'.<sup>4</sup> However, it may be argued Bobby's services were not proffered from naivety or 'instinct', but in the calculated hope of advancing his

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1 Shellam 2009.

2 A term used to describe Aboriginal people and language from the south-west of Western Australia, see Douglas 1976: 5; Collard and Bracknell 2012; Bracknell 2013.

3 Scott and Brown 2005; *Inquirer*, 7 May 1851; 2 July 1851.

4 Roe 1852: 37.

position and authority in the emerging cross-cultural arena. Although clearly a complex and talented man, impressively improvising within a brutal historical context,<sup>5</sup> mention of Bobby's name is largely omitted from colonial records and he remains a controversial and tragic figure in Noongar oral histories.<sup>6</sup> Comparing the oral and written sources suggests a narrative of Bobby's early engagement with colonial interests, his subsequent resistance to and conditional accommodation of colonial authorities, and his growing disillusionment.

While he was reportedly the son of a man named 'Jerrymumup',<sup>7</sup> Bobby's great-granddaughter Hazel Brown (née Roberts) explains to her nephew Kim Scott, '[w]e don't know his Noongar name; we only know the name the police gave him. Old Bobby worked with the police ... and he went with the explorers'.<sup>8</sup> While it may *dance* around specific details, as most good stories do, Brown's oral accounts of her ancestor provide a Noongar ideological framework to guide the analysis of colonial source material. Her perspective enriches archival references to Bobby Roberts, providing contextual information and impressions of what colonists and Noongar thought of him:

Bobby, he went with ... Roe, and they made him a good man. He done a stealing but they forgave him ... they pardoned him, after he been in trouble. He was like a boss-man, he kept the Noongars intact, and kept law and order, you know.

Daddy used to say that great-grandfather was a good man, and the white people liked him because he helped the white people a lot, but he said most Noongar people hated the sight of him, because he used to go and grab the people what did wrong.<sup>9</sup>

Brown certainly conveys the impression of Bobby as a complicated, conflicted figure on the frontier.

5 Gifford 2002.

6 *West Australian*, 1936; Scott and Brown 2005.

7 *Perth Gazette and Independent Journal*, 4 January 1850.

8 Scott and Brown 2005: 32.

9 Scott and Brown 2005: 49–50.

## Bobby the intermediary

John Septimus Roe is responsible for the earliest written accounts of Bobby, recorded in his expedition journal as they travelled together along the south coast of Western Australia, from Cape Riche to Cape Arid from late 1848 until early 1849. The writing of Australian explorers, argues Simon Ryan, was informed by ‘pre-existent discourses’ and, ‘filled with pre-formed tropes, which ingest and normalize that which is seen on explorations’.<sup>10</sup> In light of this, as described by Henry Reynolds, Aboriginal people were subsequently cast in two apparently contradictory roles in the saga of Australian exploration.<sup>11</sup> The construct of Australian explorers engaged in a ‘great war with the forces of nature’<sup>12</sup> relied not just on the wild and inhospitable environment, but also on the imminent threat of attack from the ‘still wilder and more miserable savage’.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, the other typical Aboriginal trope was that of the explorer’s guide, his ‘loyal and faithful servant – Forrest’s Windich, Eyre’s Wylie, Kennedy’s Jacky-Jacky – who illustrated the benign consequences of acculturation’.<sup>14</sup> However, despite the power relationship writers often impose upon their guides, Bobby is neither a silent nor benign presence in Roe’s journal.

J. S. Roe remained in the role of Surveyor General until 1871, his impressive networks and political position making him especially influential in opening up Western Australia to pastoral interests.<sup>15</sup> Roe completed an array of expeditions, including some in the south coast region, around Albany in 1831 accompanied by Nakina, ‘chief’ of the Albany tribe, and in the vicinity of Doubtful Island Bay (including West Mount Barren) in 1835 with the Noongar guide Manyat.<sup>16</sup>

In his final expedition journal, describing country including the Fitzgerald, Ravensthorpe, Esperance and Cape Arid regions of south coast Western Australia from September 1848 to February 1849,

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10 Ryan 1996: 17.

11 Reynolds 1980.

12 Murdoch 1929: 129.

13 Eden 1875: 2.

14 Reynolds 1980: 214.

15 *Inquirer and Commercial News*, 1 February 1871.

16 Shoobert 2005.

Roe mentions Bobby, who accompanied him from 2 October to 7 January, more often than any of the 'Aboriginal guides' he employed on that or any prior expedition.

Roe's paternalistic tone is typical of the era, although his growing respect for Bobby is revealed over the course of the journal. He concedes that he 'deferred to the native's judgement' when deciding which path to take up the Philips River. Furthermore, and based on 'the authority of our native',<sup>17</sup> he describes where a major branch of that river originates. Roe's use of the term 'authority' indicates his respect for Bobby's superior geographical knowledge and perhaps reveals Roe's impression of Bobby's high standing in both the Noongar and colonial communities. Later, when Bobby offered advice on the difficulties of travelling up river through the Fitzgerald region, Roe writes 'I learnt from our native ... this changed my first intention ... and induced me to proceed next day in the opposite direction'.<sup>18</sup> By this stage of the journey, Roe is more actively including information about Bobby's impact on the navigation process, signifying growing respect for his guide. In Roe's account, although a relatively young man, Bobby displays confidence and knowledge over a vast expanse of country, indicating impressive networks and influence of his own.

Roe's introduction of 'Bob' seems to suggest he had a considerable reputation among colonists even before joining the expedition party:

I have succeeded in engaging ... an intelligent native lad of this district, known as 'Bob,' from whom I expect to derive valuable information as to the nature of the country as far as it is known to him.<sup>19</sup>

Roe wrote this from Cape Riche where he was the guest of entrepreneur George Cheyne. Cheyne had arrived to 'take up land' at Albany in 1831 when the site, initially established as a British military camp in 1826, was gradually becoming a base for colonial expansion. Shortly after arriving, Cheyne claimed that he was on 'friendly terms' with Noongar, although he acknowledged the apparently frequent need to use 'coercive measures' to maintain his 'rights'.<sup>20</sup> After selling some of his property to Captain J. Hassell in 1840, Cheyne moved

17 Roe 1852: 26, 35.

18 Roe 1852: 45.

19 *Perth Gazette and Independent Journal*, 28 October 1848.

20 Scott and Brown 2005: 36–37.

east to make Cape Riche the centre of his pastoral and sandalwood enterprises, while providing an alternative port for the increasing number of whaling and sealing vessels in the region. His apparent recommendation of Bobby for Roe's expedition party signals the continuation of similar 'friendly', albeit 'coercive' relationships with Noongar in the Cape Riche area.

Prior to Roe's expedition, contact between Noongar and visitors to the area east of Cape Riche had been mostly limited to various interactions with crew from American, French and British ships travelling along the coast.<sup>21</sup> In 1841, Edward Eyre and the young Noongar guide Wylie, journeyed westward via the southern coast from Fowler's Bay in South Australia to Albany, meeting 'very few natives, and those for the most part ... timid but well disposed'.<sup>22</sup> In his expedition report, Eyre provided an early description of the eastern extremity of the Noongar language region:

The language spoken by them [Aboriginal people encountered] is exactly similar to that of the natives at King George's Sound [Albany] as far as the Promontory of Cape 'Le Grand,' and similarly may probably extend to the commencement of the Great Cliffs, in about longitude 124½ degrees E [Cape Arid]. A little beyond this point the language is totally different, and the boy 'Wylie' could not understand a word of it.<sup>23</sup>

Bobby's various interactions with other Aboriginal people encountered on the journey with Roe confirms the accuracy of Eyre's observations about the eastern limits of Noongar language at Cape Arid.

Roe described Bobby confidently attempting to initiate communication with local Noongar over the duration of the expedition. However, only two instances of actual conversation were documented: Roe stated that information about the interior was obtained from 'some natives we fell in with' around Esperance Bay,<sup>24</sup> and, on an earlier occasion, that Noongar from all along the south coast met the expedition:

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21 Gibbs 2003.

22 *Perth Gazette*, 7 August 1841.

23 *Perth Gazette*, 7 August 1841.

24 Roe 1852: 23.

While at the camp, a Cape Riche native known as 'Bob', who had been engaged to form one of our party to the eastward, was visited by several of his friends from Doubtful Island Bay, and other parts, including two who had walked with him from what he represented to be the neighbourhood of Middle Island.<sup>25</sup>

'Middle Island' is the largest island of the Recherche Archipelago, off the coast of Cape Arid, at the eastern extremity of the Noongar language region. Bobby was clearly an important link to the geography, language and people of the country Roe intended to 'explore'.

In light of this, Roe also indicated that he already considered Bobby more reliable than other potential informants, for he 'could gather from them nothing more as to the nature of the interior country than "Bob" himself was able to communicate'.<sup>26</sup> He affirmed his confidence in Bobby, admitting that he 'did not regret [his] inability to engage the proffered services of one of the two who offered to accompany' him.<sup>27</sup> This guide had previously accompanied two geologists who had surveyed the Fitzgerald region prior to Roe's expedition in an unsuccessful attempt to find a 'supposed coal field' he had told them about.<sup>28</sup> Roe's confidence in his principle guide was rewarded, as Bobby 'assured' him that he knew the exact location where 'his friends had told him' they had witnessed a French whaler procuring coal.<sup>29</sup> After almost a week travelling west, 'all former toils and sufferings were amply rewarded by the discovery of extensive beds of coal, occupying the lowest levels in the channel of the river'.<sup>30</sup> Thanks to Bobby's guidance, Roe reported the existence of coal near Cullham Inlet on the Phillips River.<sup>31</sup>

This episode displays Bobby's intricate knowledge of not only his country but also what was happening within it, no doubt due to close communicative relationships across the coastal region. However,

25 Roe 1852: 3.

26 Roe 1852: 3.

27 Roe 1852: 3.

28 '... a native who told us he had been on board a French ship lying at anchor ... east ... of Doubtful Island Bay ... [H]e said, they had met with a seam of black stuff of the banks of the river, which they conveyed in bags on board the ship, and it turned out to be coal of the same description as he, the native, had seen at Sydney and Hobart Town.' *Perth Gazette and Independent Journal*, 29 July 1848.

29 Roe 1852: 32; *Inquirer*, 7 February 1849.

30 Roe 1852: 36.

31 *Perth Gazette and Independent Journal*, 10 February 1849.

as Roe led his party of colonists further inland, seemingly in areas where the local people had not yet encountered British colonists, Bobby Roberts's ability to communicate with other Aboriginal people was not always so effective. For instance, on one occasion north-east of Esperance, Roe reported:

[We] came suddenly upon a small fire, which had just been abandoned by some natives. The embers were under my feet before they were discovered and the country was so thick that I did not immediately perceive near them several long bark baskets, tied up at the extremities, and filled with honey flowers, which the natives had been employed in collecting. Their retreat was so hasty that they had even left behind two carved and well-greased 'womeras,' used in discharging their spears, nor could they be induced by loud calls and invitations of our native to return and give us an interview. We therefore placed some biscuit in their baskets, left everything as we found it and proceeded on our way, Bob being divided in opinion that they would either have taken us for devils and would never venture near the spot again, or that they were concealed at the time within a few yards of it.<sup>32</sup>

It was not uncommon for explorers to describe arriving at places only to find that the Aboriginal people appeared to have made a hasty retreat. Yet it did not mean that they had left and were not there, but rather, as Reynolds and Hallam point out, they would often track and observe the interlopers, communicating their movements to neighbouring Aboriginal groups via smoke signals.<sup>33</sup> Roe reflected the unease that this practice instilled in the explorers:

We had on several occasions reason to suppose that the natives were aware of our vicinity as we passed through the country, and were even watching our movements, but we saw none of them ... although we ... observed their signal smokes rise suddenly up within a mile and a half of us soon after we had passed.<sup>34</sup>

This incident occurred as the party travelled eastward toward the Russell Ranges, which lie inland from Cape Arid.<sup>35</sup> Due to this location constituting something of a linguistic boundary,<sup>36</sup> it is possible that the Aboriginal people encountered primarily spoke

32 Roe 1852: 15.

33 Reynolds 1982; Hallam 1983.

34 Roe 1852: 15.

35 *Inquirer*, 7 February 1849.

36 Bracknell 2014.

Ngadju, the neighbouring Aboriginal language to the eastern extent of the Noongar language region. However, given the multilingualism prevalent among Aboriginal people,<sup>37</sup> it is equally as likely these people understood Bobby's calls and were too overawed and cautious to actively respond.

Roe's journal indicates that most local Aboriginal people encountered on the expedition preferred to observe rather than be observed. At Young River, he observed that '[t]racks and fires of the natives were numerous in this vicinity, but none showed themselves'.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, exploring the upper branches of the Phillips River, he had:

reason to believe that our repast was overlooked by a party of natives from the rising ground above, whose suppressed voices reached the acute and practiced ears of Bob, but whose presence could be nowhere discovered on our searching and calling out.<sup>39</sup>

However, it is entirely plausible that local Aboriginal people had opportunities to converse with Bobby unbeknownst to the rest of the expedition party. On numerous occasions, Roe trusted Bobby to scout ahead of the party or left him alone to tend the horses.<sup>40</sup> After all, Bobby was not a stranger in this country.

## Scratching a small hole in the sand

Henry Reynolds observes, 'While they remained on traditional land, Aborigines retained an unmatched knowledge of their environment, related expertise and a resulting self-confidence which Europeans found hard to understand'.<sup>41</sup> Reynolds has described explorers relying on Aboriginal knowledge of the environment, resources, languages and diplomacy, although McLaren and Cooper have argued that because of the extremely local nature of this knowledge, Aboriginal guides were less useful to explorers the further they travelled from their home region.<sup>42</sup> Tellingly, Roe gave more credit to Bobby as the journey

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37 Dixon 1980.

38 Roe 1852: 27

39 Roe 1852: 33–34.

40 Roe 1852: 19, 39, 43.

41 Reynolds 1980: 225.

42 McLaren and Cooper 1996.

progressed, increasingly impressed by his ability to locate water and well-grassed country the further they travelled from Cape Riche, where he initially joined the party. Near Culham Inlet, Roe wrote:

Bob remembered to have drunk fresh water from a well amongst good feed for the horses ... we reached it and were afforded another proof of the unerring memory and instinctive sagacity of our aboriginal native, in thus being able in so intricate a part of the country, almost totally unknown to him, to walk direct to a small water-hole, entirely concealed from view amongst tufts of grass.<sup>43</sup>

In assuming the Culham Inlet area was 'almost totally unknown' to his guide, Roe seems to have underestimated how well travelled and informed Bobby already was before their expedition together. Indeed, the knowledge of country he shares indicates familiarity with the whole south coast region, from Albany to Cape Arid.

Over 150 kilometres west of Culham Inlet at Mt Barren, Bobby again displayed intricate knowledge of country: 'We found most tempting little pools of fresh-water in the pure sand amongst the limestone rocks and our native said that good water was always procurable here by scratching a small hole in the sand.'<sup>44</sup>

Roe's account of Bobby reveals that the knowledge he shared went beyond the environmental and resource information Aboriginal guides shared with explorers elsewhere in Australia, as discussed by Reynolds and Hallam.<sup>45</sup> Bobby displays a full awareness of the recent history and goings-on across the south coast region from Albany to Cape Arid. When Roe's party encounters a skeleton near the coast, Bobby knew the story of how it got be there:

Our native immediately explained they were the remains of one of three seamen who had quitted a Hobart Town whaler some 18 months ago in the vicinity of Middle Island for the purpose of walking to Albany, a distance fully 350 miles at the shortest ... they became much distressed for fresh water, and at length separated to search for it more inland ... but they never did so re-join or see each other ... The natives seemed to have been fully aware of the death ... and ascribe it to actual starvation and exhaustion, disclaiming most strongly having used any

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43 Roe 1852: 37.

44 Roe 1852: 42.

45 Reynolds 1982; Hallam 1983.

personal violence, but on the contrary, having endeavoured to assist the only one of them they saw before his death, who had, however, though fear or distrust invariably pointed his gun when any of the natives offered to approach him. The unfortunate man now before us was said to be one of them, the other lying somewhere in the sand-hills to the E., in a spot which our native did not profess to know.<sup>46</sup>

Reflecting on the disturbing incident, Roe remarked that the death might have been avoided if the unfortunate party had known that water was 'in abundance within a stones throw, by scratching a small hole in the sand'.<sup>47</sup> Roe's reiteration of Bobby's instructions reveals the significant impression his guide has made.

## A place called Jerramungup

Bobby was clearly more than a navigator and go-between, as he also provided Roe with valuable information on both the potential for mining and farming in the area. Roe named the best-grassed river system Bobby led him to after Western Australia's governor, Fitzgerald, as it was 'more important than any they had fallen in with during their researches, and capable of conferring the greatest benefits on the colony'.<sup>48</sup> He named various landmarks after prominent colonial officials and members of the expedition party, even naming 'Mount Ney', north-west of Esperance, after his favourite horse. Yet Roe did not name anything after his Noongar guide. While his descriptions of Bobby reveal Roe's respect for the knowledge he provides, it seems that Roe either did not hold particular sentimental affection for his guide, or simply assumed that Bobby was too naïve of the practice to appreciate having a place named after him.

One of the few areas for which Roe recorded a geographical name of Noongar origin happened to be 'beautiful country as richly grassed as any that is known in the colony'.<sup>49</sup> Roe writes, 'We were gladdened by the view of a large tract of good grassy country to the N.E., lightly timbered, and at this time well-watered by a river and its numerous

46 Roe 1852: 49.

47 Roe 1852: 50.

48 *Inquirer*, 7 February 1849.

49 *Inquirer*, 7 February 1849.

branches. It is known to the natives as Jeer-a-mung-up'.<sup>50</sup> As he was the only Noongar in the expedition party, one can assume that Bobby informed Roe as to the 'native' name for what arguably proved to be the most important 'discovery' of the expedition. Asserting a name for this particular place arguably indicates Bobby's growing awareness of colonial land values and is an attempt at undermining or subverting Roe's colonisation of the landscape with his own language.

An 1850 news report names Bobby and his father 'Jerrymumup', the 'headman' of the local 'tribe' of the Fitzgerald region.<sup>51</sup> In other reports from this era, Hassell's station is also reported as being called 'Jerrymumup', likely an alternate spelling of the 'Jeer-a-mung-up', originally recorded by Roe. It is unusual for Noongar geographical nomenclature to be derived from the names of individuals.<sup>52</sup> Supplying Roe with the name is perhaps a sign of Bobby recognising the new power dynamics after the British arrival, indicating the place discussed was his father's territory and making a new strategic claim for himself.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Bobby would have been privy to the conversations Roe and his party engaged in when deciding to name rivers, mountains and other geographical features after each other, or respected colonial authorities. Bobby may even have seized upon this imported British practice and emulated it, naming the most 'beautiful country' in the region after its custodian, a respected figure in the community, the 'headman', his father.

By the time the party return to Cape Riche, Roe has grown dependant upon the advice and assistance of his guide.<sup>54</sup> After a few days respite, Roe proposed to commence the journey back to Perth via Albany, but on 7 January 1849:

it was then found that our native had become tired of the service on which he had been engaged, and had gone to re-join his tribe. Finding it impossible to replace him without much loss of time, I had

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50 Roe 1852: 5. Jeer-u-mung-up, later to be officially spelled Jerramungup, is translated as *yira-mo-up*, literally 'up high, yate tree, place' in Forrest and Crowe 1996. It could just as likely be *yira-mangart*, 'up high, jam tree'. *Mangart*, or the jam tree – *Acacia acuminata* – is referred to in Scott and Brown 2005.

51 *Perth Gazette and Independent Journal*, 4 January 1850.

52 Collard and Bracknell 2012.

53 Konishi (2012) describes Bennelong making similar strategic claims in the Port Jackson area.

54 Scott and Brown 2005.

to abandon my intentions of taking a new route ... as all the parties agreed in assuring me that fresh water was then extremely scarce along that line, and could only be found by the aid of a native.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the prejudices of the time, Roe seemed to have been particularly impressed by this particular Noongar guide. However, he still underestimated Bobby Roberts.

On 19 January 1849, travelling back to Perth, he witnessed 'Mr. Hassell transferring his principal station to the fine country we had discovered on the 22nd of October, at Jeer-a-mung-up, on the Fitz-Gerald'.<sup>56</sup> Hazel Brown explains, 'Bobby was the one that took Hassells to Jerramungup and showed them the place there'.<sup>57</sup> It seems Bobby may not have left the expedition 'to re-join his tribe' because he was 'tired'; he left to inform the shipping merchant and emerging pastoralist Captain J. Hassell about good grazing land at the place he told Roe was called 'Jeer-a-mung-up'.<sup>58</sup> Clendinnen and Konishi have discussed instances where Aboriginal people elsewhere in Australia have been effective at repeatedly misleading the British to achieve their own ends because of inherent colonial assumptions that Aboriginal people would be too naïve to operate so strategically.<sup>59</sup> Roe wrote nothing to indicate he recognised that Bobby had abandoned him to assist Hassell claim Jerramungup, perhaps indicating similar underestimation of his guide's judicious thinking.

Hassel had been cultivating relationships with Noongar intermediaries for some time, says Hazel Brown:

See, Hassells went looking for Aboriginal people. Well, for land I s'pose it was. They made friends with people from Bremer Bay, and some of them were camped up at Hunter River. That was Grandfather Bobby; he was there, old Grandfather Bobby Roberts. (His son Pirrup was also called Bob.) They made friends with him ... and he went away on an expedition looking for property for Hassells ... Well, when they came back they settled for Jerramungup. Bobby was only a young man then.<sup>60</sup>

55 Roe 1852: 53.

56 Roe 1852: 54.

57 Scott and Brown 2005: 57.

58 Scott and Brown 2005: 43–44.

59 Konishi 2012; Clendinnen 2003.

60 Scott and Brown 2005: 49.

As a young man, Bobby was making alliances. He was travelling to the eastern extremity of his language region and strengthening networks along the south coast, perhaps accruing a powerful reputation among locals via his association with Roe's expedition party. As Hazel Brown also explains, 'They were all taking womans back in those days, and dumping them, bringing another woman back'.<sup>61</sup> As Captain Hassell's daughter-in-law would later document, marriages between people from distant locations were common and preferable among Aboriginal people in the south coast region.<sup>62</sup> Bobby exploited his position as an intermediary to further his own interests, likely using his journeys eastward to facilitate and maintain relationships of the *most* intimate nature. Even though Roe may have respected Bobby, he seems to have assumed that his guide was simply happy to help, that the assistance he provided was 'instinctive'.<sup>63</sup> In an era of rapid change, Bobby was looking for strategic partnerships.

On 19 May 1849, A. C. Gregory reported again finding coal at Culhum Inlet accompanied by a 'native', named 'Bob'. As their supplies became scarce, they discharged Bobby and returned to Cape Riche. Hoping to set out again, they were told Bobby was at 'Polyungup Spring, thirty miles distant'. After following his track 75 miles without overtaking him they gave up pursuit and returned to Perth.<sup>64</sup> This abandoned expedition seems to have constituted a turning point for Bobby. By disrespectfully dismissing his 'guide' when supplies became scarce, Gregory may have inadvertently impacted on Bobby's willingness to provide assistance to newcomers and provided impetus to actively resist their encroachment onto his country.

## 'Cape Riche Bobby' the outlaw

On 30 November 1849, John Williams, a shepherd working around Jerramungup on the Fitzgerald River, where Hassel had since 'formed extensive sheep stations', claimed three men, 'Jerrymumup and his

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61 Scott and Brown 2005: 57.

62 Hassell 1936, 1975.

63 Roe 1852: 37.

64 *Perth Gazette and Independent Journal*, 1 June 1849.

son Bobby, and Bulliah, a very large native',<sup>65</sup> arranged for a young boy to steal his ammunition and subsequently stole his sheep. Having fled the Fitzgerald region to Albany, Williams stated:

I saw a native with my gun in his hand ... and I have every reason to believe that all the other party are murdered ... The natives were making smokes all the way down the coast, which I understand to be calling the natives together.<sup>66</sup>

On 14 December, a messenger arrived at Albany with news that two of the shepherds had been accidentally wounded in the ensuing panic, but that the Aboriginal 'thieves' had not injured the shepherds, just scared them away and taken possession of their huts.

While 'Jerrymumup' or 'Jerramungup' is described as the 'headman' of the 'tribe', his son Bobby seems to have been at the forefront of the emerging resistance in the Fitzgerald region. On 16 April 1951, a report from Albany stated:

The natives have had so much of their own way lately, that half measures will not do with them now; for instance, a party of them came to one of the stations on the Salt River a few days ago, and they were driving away about 20 of the sheep; the shepherd pointed a gun that he had at them to frighten them, but instead of which, they came all round him with their spears fixed, and told him if he did not put it down, they would spear him; he put the gun down, and one that goes by the name of Cape Riche Bobby, and who is leader of a strong party of the natives, took hold of the gun, and took out the flint; returned the ramrod, and sprung it in the barrel; finding there was nothing in the gun, he said to the shepherd 'that gun nothing in him; you cannot shoot him; all the same [as a] piece of wood', and then threw the gun away from him ... Cape Riche Bobby was considered to be an intelligent and well behaved native, and I believe Mr. Roe found him very useful when exploring to the eastward, but there is no dependence to be put in them; the more they find out our ways, the more daring they get to misbehave ...<sup>67</sup>

This account saw 'Roe's Bob', the intelligent and loyal guide, transformed into the outlaw 'Cape Riche Bobby'. While the *Inquirer* asserts that the two Bobs are one and the same, Aboriginal oral histories

65 *Perth Gazette and Independent Journal*, 4 January 1850.

66 *Perth Gazette and Independent Journal*, 4 January 1850.

67 *Inquirer*, 7 May 1851.

complicate their identities. Hazel Brown uses the name 'Cape Riche Bobby' to refer to two local contemporaries of her ancestor: a man who was killed and from whom Bobby Roberts stole a promised wife; and an 'old blind man'.<sup>68</sup> However, archival records suggest that these 'Bobbys' Brown mentions are likely to be 'Doubtful Island Bobby' who was murdered in 1859,<sup>69</sup> and 'Candyup Bobby', an old man also known as 'Blind Bobby', who died in 1898.<sup>70</sup> Such discrepancies are a consequence of the fact that Noongar names were seldom recorded in the nineteenth century. An overwhelming number of Aboriginal men were variously referred to as 'Bobby', 'Jacky' and 'Billy' in this era, which increases the difficulty of tracking a single individual through the archives.<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, in June 1951, the same 'Cape Riche Bobby' was reportedly captured:

Three of the tribe of natives who have been carrying on a system of sheep and cattle stealing at the Salt River district have been apprehended; they were brought in last week and are now in Albany gaol ... The authorities are in possession of the names of upwards of 40 members of the same tribe who have been concerned in these stock robberies. One of the captives was formerly a policeman in Albany, and is known as 'Cape Riche Bobby' ...<sup>72</sup>

It is possible that immediately after departing Roe's expedition party in January 1849, Bobby showed the Jerramungup area to Hassell, who established extensive pastoral interest there. He was then engaged as a guide for Gregory in May and could also have been employed as a 'native constable' in Albany some time that year, on the recommendation of Roe or Hassell, both of whom he assisted. After his arrest in June 1951, and despite numerous escape attempts, Bobby was in custody at Albany and later Perth, sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment, though he was given a pardon in 1853.<sup>73</sup> While Bobby was imprisoned, his father Jerramungup, described as an old man

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68 Scott and Brown 2005: 55.

69 Green 1997: 111.

70 *Albany Advertiser*, 9 August 1898.

71 Parry (2007) has written about similar complications arising from colonists' habit of bestowing nicknames on Aboriginal people elsewhere in Australia.

72 *Inquirer*, 2 July 1851.

73 Green 1997: 97.

and with his name spelt various different ways, was reported stealing sheep in his son's absence with a group of Noongar in the Fitzgerald region in 1852 and 1853.<sup>74</sup>

## Bobby the 'native constable'

On 18 January 1853, Mr Arthur Trimmer was been appointed as 'Sub-Protector of Natives' at Albany.<sup>75</sup> Shortly after his appointment, Trimmer asked that 'Cape Riche Bobby' be pardoned, as he was regarded as having a good influence on the 'Aborigines of the Jerramungup district and would make a very good policeman'.<sup>76</sup> Trimmer was proven right, as in 1854 he commended Bobby for apprehending three escaped Aboriginal prisoners.<sup>77</sup>

Historian Peter Gifford considers it probable that by this point in frontier history, some Noongar 'had formed the conclusion that there was no defeating the European invaders and that it would be best to take their side rather than continue sporadic resistance which was always met with bloody retribution'.<sup>78</sup> However, there was negligible remuneration or respect for Western Australia's 'native constables' of this era. Bobby was no doubt poorly rewarded for his services to colonial authorities, especially as they would have compromised his relationships and standing in the Noongar community. Upon viewing a nineteenth-century photograph depicting Aboriginal prisoners in chains, Hazel Brown reflects on her ancestor Bobby's role as a 'native constable':

They gave him the Blucher boots and the britches, they gave him a hat and a gun, they give him a stockwhip. They made him a police tracker. I reckon that's really sad, to think that those [Aboriginal] people in chains ... they reckon that those people were Bobby's own relations.<sup>79</sup>

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74 Green 1997: 140–141, 171.

75 *Inquirer*, 12 January 1853.

76 Green 1997: 97.

77 Green 1997: 92.

78 Gifford 2002: 41.

79 Scott and Brown 2005: 49–50.

Few traces of Bobby exist in the archives after 1854. He may have been the unnamed 'native' with whom Charles and William Dempster surveyed the area from Bremer Bay to Cape Arid in April 1863,<sup>80</sup> or the 'native constable' lauded as 'hero of the day' in the Fitzgerald region a year later, capturing a notorious escaped convict who had boasted that 'no policemen should take him alive'.<sup>81</sup> Going 'undercover', without a uniform, the 'native constable' made 'friends' with the convict and at one point offered to shoot an emu. However, once armed, the 'hero' turned the gun on his new 'friend' and secured the arrest in a manner certainly reminiscent of Bobby's confidence and wit. 'Cape Riche Bobby' is recorded again as a witness to the 1870 murder of an Aboriginal man at Jerramungup station,<sup>82</sup> and he could also be, 'Bob, a native constable, who was engaged as a tracker ... and ... gave his evidence in a very intelligent manner' in an 1874 trial for murder at Narrogin.<sup>83</sup>

On 3 June 1882, a 'Cape Ritchie Billy' (likely to be Cape Riche Bobby) deserted the service of the Hassells of Jerramungup station.<sup>84</sup> As the moving frontier extended east from Jerramungup, we could assume that Bobby travelled across the south coast.<sup>85</sup> While there is scant evidence as to what became of Bobby after 1882, he left a conflicted legacy. Reflecting on her ancestor's conditional complicity in 2005, Hazel Brown exclaimed:

I hate the people who put the gun in my grandfather's hands, so they could get control over Noongars, and gave him the chains, so he could chain them up ... He used to work from Bremer and out to Jerramungup, and from Jerramungup he used to go to Ravensthorpe and bring the prisoners back.<sup>86</sup>

80 *Perth Gazette and Independent Journal*, 25 September 1863.

81 *West Australian Times*, 14 April 1864.

82 Green 1997: 97; *Inquirer and Commercial News*, 13 July 1870.

83 *Inquirer and Commercial News*, 11 March 1874.

84 As recorded in the *Police Gazette*, 14 June 1882.

85 Scott and Brown (2005) consider it likely that Bobby arranged for his son to later marry two young women from around the Ravensthorpe district (Ngurer/Monkey and Karbian/Emily Dabb). These women are said to be among the few survivors of frontier violence in the region during the 1880s, as also documented by Grey Forrest 2004.

86 Scott and Brown 2005: 47.

## Conclusion

A pivotal figure in the history of Western Australia's south coast, Bobby Roberts assisted Roe's expedition and helped 'open up' the south coast for pastoral development.<sup>87</sup> He was a well-travelled young man in the middle of the nineteenth century and provided conditional assistance to colonists for the likely purpose of expanding his own networks and influence amongst Noongar and newcomers in the region. Soon after, Bobby was one of many Noongar of the era to engage in a type of economic warfare that consisted of attacks on colonial livestock and supplies, and which frequently held back colonisation in other parts of Australia.<sup>88</sup> However, as the colony expanded and his options decreased, he became involved in the enforcement of imposed colonial laws, before perhaps meeting his end as isolated colonists in the region reverted 'to savagery' in the 1880s.<sup>89</sup> A significant, complex and undoubtedly conflicted intermediary, Bobby Roberts was intelligent, talented and somewhat ruthless. Nevertheless, he would have struggled to retain a sense of agency and maintain relationships on both sides of the moving frontier.

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87 Scott and Brown 2005; Green 1997; Roe 1852.

88 Reynolds 1982.

89 Sheldon 1944: 299.

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