

WRITING ABORIGINAL COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY – POONINDIE,
SOUTH AUSTRALIA, 1850-1894

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It is generally supposed that Aborigines have been fighting a losing battle against invasion for the last 150 years in South Australia. They have succumbed to disease, violence (including wholesale slaughter in massacres), alienation of land, denigration of their culture or way of life, and alcoholism. On the whole they are viewed as passive victims, fringe-dwellers, at the bottom of the socio-economic heap. It is acknowledged that a few Aboriginal people in remote areas of the north and west of the state have survived on lands which in the past have been of marginal interest to agriculturalists or pastoralists. These Aborigines have not intermarried with non-Aborigines, have retained their own languages, cultural and religious life and social systems. While this view of Aboriginal history does reflect the Aboriginal past, it does not acknowledge the positive role Aboriginal people have played in maintaining themselves and their identity as Aborigines in these adverse conditions.

In fact Aborigines in South Australia have survived on a much larger scale than is generally acknowledged and it is the people in the southern part of the state who have survived against the greatest odds. Many survived on missions or government stations, yet others survived independently of such institutional structures. For instance the Adnyamathanha in the Flinders Ranges maintained a vibrant cultural life while being employed in the pastoral industry; they did not move on to a mission until 1930. Others in the southeastern part of the state maintained themselves on small farms and seasonal employment, retaining an independent existence from Point McLeay, a large mission at Lake Alexandrina.

These are people who have survived to the present as identifiable groups of Aboriginal people, although they in turn are often amalgams of peoples who could not survive independently. There were others who survived for years or even decades in extremely adverse conditions, but who may no longer be identified with the same communities existing at an earlier period. This phenomenon has been recognised by historians of American and Canadian Indian history who have been revising the history of early contact between Indians and Europeans in the realisation that the survival of present day Indians does not necessarily reveal the most successful survivors of the early years of contact.¹

Similar revisions need to be undertaken for Aboriginal history as well. For instance in South Australia there are few known descendents of the Aboriginal people who originally lived on the lower Eyre Peninsula while those who can trace their ancestry to this area are widely dispersed and do not necessarily identify with the area. Yet when Europeans first established a settlement at Port Lincoln, the hostility of the Aborigines nearly drove them

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¹ See, for example, Trigger 1976.

away. This Aboriginal resistance was maintained spasmodically for fifteen years after settlement. Aboriginal 'outrages' are remembered by the local European community, but there is no direct Aboriginal memory as the people later died or dispersed.

This paper will take up some themes raised by Diane Barwick in her Ph.D. thesis, 'A little more than kin: regional affiliation and group identity among Aboriginal migrants in Melbourne'. It will investigate the survival of one group of Aboriginal people who, perhaps in past, would not have been deemed to have survived because they maintained their identity as an Aboriginal community without retaining a 'traditional' culture, language or religion.² Barwick postulated that Aboriginal identity can exist independently of these factors and showed how strong regional affiliations were maintained in Victoria despite the loss of pre-European cultural ties and knowledge.³ The people under consideration here established a community on an Anglican mission, Poonindie, which was set up 15 kilometres north of Port Lincoln in 1850. I argue that, although Poonindie people came from many different localities and most of the early recruits died, they laid the foundations enabling the establishment of a new, strong, Aboriginal communal identity. Although the mission was closed in 1894, there are many southern South Australian Aboriginal families who trace their descent to Poonindie.

Another theme touched on by Barwick which is elaborated here is that Aboriginal people have not always been passive recipients of external actions and decisions, but have made choices about their own lives.⁴ The options facing them have not always been wide, but they have been there. I shall show that the early recruits for Poonindie went there by choice and left if they did not like it and, that throughout its history, people could always leave if they chose. They were not imprisoned on the mission. The move to Poonindie and the maintenance of the community were important in Aboriginal survival.

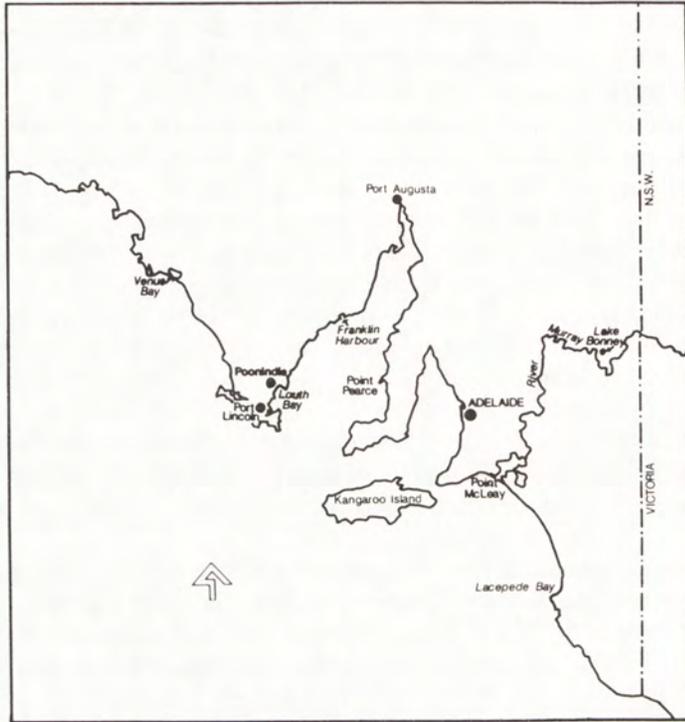
The written sources for a history of Poonindie are voluminous, but come from the authorities; very few were generated by Aboriginal people and even these were directed towards the authorities and therefore did not necessarily represent Aboriginal private views. After ninety-five years, oral history can add little or nothing to the story of the mission. I have, therefore relied heavily on biographical data of Aboriginal residents to build up a picture of life at Poonindie. Biographies of a few individuals might be misleading, as it could be argued that those for whom there is extensive data were exceptional in some way, either because they were noticed by the authorities as being particularly co-operative and dependable or alternately because they were troublesome and needed disciplining.⁵ Both types are certainly well represented in the Poonindie data. However, by extending the accumulation of biographical information to more than 250 people, although much of it is scanty — for instance, a name and date of marriage or death — enough information can be accumulated to delineate certain trends in behaviour, movement patterns, and levels of skills. This information can, for some periods, be corroborated by statistical data.

² Barwick 1963.

³ Barwick 1963:66.

⁴ For example, Barwick 1963:321.

⁵ Barwick and Stanner might disagree with this statement as they advocate that 'an examination of the folk history of Aboriginal communities and the lives of influential individuals is essential for an adequate understanding of policy implementation.' Barwick 1985:185.



Map showing location of Poonindie Native Training Institution on Eyre Peninsula, South Australia.



Poonindie in the mid-1960s. St. Matthews Church, still standing, was built from stone and bricks fired on the site by Poonindie people in 1854.

Photo: South Australian Public Record Office.

The methodology of collective biography, developed out of necessity for this study, has antecedents in the work of American and British historians, in both political and social history, since the early twentieth century.⁶ More importantly for this study collective biography is possibly the way of the future for Aboriginal history. Traditionally Aboriginal interests and concerns have been very localised. Their economic system required that they remain in small, family based food gathering groups and even when they came together in larger gatherings for ceremonies or exchange, these groups of perhaps a few hundred did not compare in size with the large social units of the western world of the nineteenth century. This is not to suggest that they did not have contacts with people far afield. It is well documented that trade routes extended across the continent but direct social contacts did not extend such distances. Since the European invasion Aborigines' primary affiliations and concerns have remained at the local level despite attempts to politicise them through pan-Aboriginal movements. Aboriginal people tend to be suspicious of those who have 'gone to Canberra' or moved away from the local community into the wider world. Aboriginal interest is still focused at the family, local and community level. It is likely that in future Aboriginal historians will move on from the biographical or autobiographical account to write collective biography, some have already done so.⁷

Poonindie Native Training Institution was an Anglican mission which survived for 45 years to the mid 1890s. Archdeacon Mathew Hale, the future Bishop of Perth and Brisbane, established the mission fourteen years after Europeans came to South Australia.

Hale wanted to try an experiment by isolating his prospective Aboriginal charges from the influence of their own people and from the corrupting influence of many of the settlers in Adelaide.⁸ His original choice of location was Boston Island off the coast from Port Lincoln, but he had to abandon this plan because of lack of water on the island.

Hale planned to recruit his people from an Aboriginal school in Adelaide where they had already been exposed to western education, could read and write and were on the path to becoming Christians. He had observed that Aboriginal children sent to the school progressed well at their lessons, but their training stopped when they left school. They either returned to their people in the bush, or, after being employed briefly, strayed aimlessly around Adelaide with no role in either Aboriginal or settler society. Hale planned to continue their training by teaching them, in a protected environment, skills by which they would be able to maintain themselves.

Three years after the establishment of Poonindie Hale's recruitment policy was forcibly altered. The Adelaide school had closed so he had to accept local Port Lincoln people, making isolation from the local Aboriginal population difficult, while the government insisted he accept any people of mixed descent the Protector of Aborigines sent him. This recruitment policy continued with minor modifications until Poonindie was closed in 1894.

Hale left Poonindie in 1856 to become the first Bishop of Perth. A Trust was then established of three members including the Bishop and a government appointee. This Trust was responsible for running the mission and appointing its staff. It hired a series of superintendents and farm overseers all of whom lacked Hale's breadth of vision. Increasingly over the

⁶ Stone 1972:110-13.

⁷ Ryan 1986; Barwick 1981.

⁸ Short 1853:11.

years they became less interested in the welfare of the Aborigines and more concerned about the mission as an end in itself.

While the administrators' views of the function and purpose of Poonindie changed over the years, the mission continued to be a vital base for Aboriginal survival and the maintenance of an Aboriginal identity.

Despite a death rate so high that most of the first generation of recruits did not survive more than ten years at the mission, the people established the basis for a very stable, skilled, self-respecting community. Available biographical data suggest that the perceived advantages of Poonindie outweighed the high morbidity and mortality rates. In the second decade the survival rate greatly improved and a generation grew up most of whom either had been born there or had come as children. They developed a strong affinity for the place. As a result threats of temporary or permanent dismissal were the principal instruments of discipline. People who were dismissed stayed in the district and returned when the bans were lifted. Many indications in the biographical data suggest that most people stayed not because of force or necessity. Many could have left to work as labourers or moved to other missions, but most chose to stay despite the strictly regimented lifestyle imposed upon them.

I shall use a few of the biographies I have collected to illustrate the importance of this kind of data in reconstructing the history of the Poonindie people.

There is virtually no information on the Aboriginal cultural background and lifestyle of the first generation of people who went to the mission. Hale, unlike the German missionaries of the period, saw no value in recording details of traditional Aboriginal life. There is acknowledgment in the records that old values, beliefs and allegiances survived the move to Poonindie. There are a few indications that the first recruits did not instantly modify their behaviour to suit western expectations. But on the whole this line of enquiry did not prove fruitful. On the other hand, the collected biographies can be used to show that, with all its rigours, life at Poonindie was valued because it offered new skills, nourishing meals and protection from European harassment and exploitation.

Initially Poonindie was a death trap with a high mortality rate from disease, especially pulmonary complaints. Between 1850 and 1856 twenty-nine of the 110 people who went to Poonindie died (all young adults).⁹ In the following five years fifty per cent of the residents died.¹⁰ Yet there was no mass exodus from the place (other than to the cemetery). It is conceivable the chances of survival were equally poor in other areas. However, a later missionary superintendent failed in a concerted attempt in 1869 to attract people from the upper Murray River area, from which many of the first recruits had been drawn, because of Poonindie's reputation as a place of death. This suggests that the mortality rate deterred newcomers but was not enough to offset the advantages of the mission perceived by those who lived there.

The following three biographical sketches illustrate the options facing Poonindie people in the early years.

Kandwillan was one of several young people brought to Poonindie by Archdeacon Hale from the Adelaide Aboriginal school on Kintore Avenue before its closure in 1853. He had been a good student and could read and write well. He and his wife-to-be, Tandatko, who

⁹ South Australian Parliamentary Papers, no. 193, 1856:5.

¹⁰ Crown Lands and Immigration Office, Population and morbidity return for Poonindie 1860 in Somerville Collection vol. II:445.

was also a successful pupil at the school, were among the first eleven recruits sent to Poonindie in 1850. They were married by Hale in 1851. Kandwillan worked hard, was intelligent and quick to pick up new skills. He was one of three who learnt to play the flute. He and Tandatko were baptised by Bishop Short when he visited Poonindie in 1853. In the same year Hale sent Kandwillan to Adelaide to have his portrait painted by Crossland, a well established artist of the time.¹¹ This was one of a number of trips Kandwillan made to Adelaide. On any one of these he could have chosen not to return, but each time he was anxious to leave Adelaide and go back to his home at Poonindie.

In 1852 Kandwillan committed such a serious (unspecified) misdemeanour that Hale dismissed him. This upset the whole mission including Hale, so a day later Hale relented and allowed him back.¹² After Tandatko died in December 1856, Kandwillan remarried but his second wife died less than two years later in 1858. He died on 7 May 1860 probably only in his late twenties. Kandwillan, like the other men on the mission engaged in a variety of tasks on the farm, including ploughing, shepherding and clearing land. He helped with prayers and church services in Hale's absence. Such was his devotion to Poonindie that he remained voluntarily at the mission despite the humiliation of temporary dismissal, the death of both wives as well as many of his friends.

The second example, Mempong, provides the only fully documented case of a person who ran away from Poonindie. She originally came from the Murray River and went to Poonindie in the winter of 1851. A few months later she married Keure who treated her roughly on a number of occasions. Keure and Mempong moved to Adelaide where he died of consumption and two days later Mempong disappeared. The authorities claimed she had been kidnapped by a former lover and threatened the Murray River Aborigines who camped on the Adelaide parklands with expulsion if they did not find and return her.¹³ They said she had gone back to the Murray, so a search was instituted and she was found at Moorundie by the Sub Protector of Aborigines who sent her down to Adelaide. When she learnt she was to be returned to Poonindie she became distraught, claiming she would die if this happened.¹⁴ She was allowed to stay at Moorundie, an indication that people were encouraged, but not physically forced, to go to Poonindie. Hale believed that if people were forced to go against their will they would pine away and die. The express purpose of Poonindie was to save Aborigines so they could become 'civilised' and Christianised, not to incarcerate them and kill them.

Monaitya, the third case, was another graduate of the Adelaide school, having been there for five years, but the move to Poonindie seems to have unsettled him. Hale's attempts to find him a wife failed. First he suggested Maria, who had been a servant at Government House, but had taken to drink and loose living before she left the mission. Next Hale tried to match him with Puscumba, who had been abandoned by a European shepherd. Monaitya refused to co-operate with Hale's marital plans; there were complaints that his behaviour was disruptive and he was dismissed in April 1851.¹⁵ He returned to Adelaide and subsequently to his people in the bush.

¹¹ Tregenza 1984:23.

¹² Hale's Diary, 20-21 August 1952, PRG 275.

¹³ Moorhouse to Hale, 2 November 1953, PRG 275 130/199.

¹⁴ Moorhouse to Hale, 2 June 1854, PRG 275 130/203.

¹⁵ Hale's Diary, 18 April 1851, PRG 275.

From such biographical material we glimpse the human realities of early Poonindie. People were not herded onto the station against their will. Although many must have been frightened by the high mortality rate, few ran away. The discipline imposed by missionaries led to the dismissal or voluntary withdrawal of people like Monaitya. But most followed the examples of Kandwillan and Tandatko and helped to establish the basis of an extremely successful farming enterprise which survived for 45 years. Many were converted to Christianity, some with such enthusiasm that they proselytised amongst their own people. They formed a community working together for a common end. The great tragedy of these early, idealistic times was that very few survived them. The people who established Poonindie as a viable community did not live to appreciate the results of their co-operative work.

In 1853 the terms on which the government funded the mission were changed. Henceforward the mission was required to accept any Aboriginal people of mixed descent who might be sent there by the Protector of Aborigines.¹⁶ In 1860 all government monetary support was withdrawn but the conditions remained. As a result an increasing number of people, particularly children, of mixed descent arrived at Poonindie. There was also an influx of people from Western Australia sent by Mathew Hale who had left Poonindie in 1856 to become Bishop of Perth. His concern for Aborigines continued in the west. He took an interest in an Aboriginal school in Albany run by a Mrs Camfield and arranged for a number of its graduates to go to Poonindie. They were a mixed blessing. Among the most highly educated of the Poonindie people (a number taught in the school) they also included several men who did not conform to institutionalised life. These were either dismissed because of their disruptive behaviour or left of their own volition.

The 1860s and 1870s were a period of consolidation for the mission. The mortality and morbidity rates dropped while the birthrate increased. The mission became self-supporting and the men became highly skilled in farmwork and in western sports. In this period Poonindie produced the top shearers and ploughmen of the district as well as excellent cricketers and athletes. The men were in demand as shearers on surrounding properties and many would leave Poonindie during the shearing season to work on properties where they could earn higher wages. Men who earned ten shillings per week for skilled work such as shearing at Poonindie could earn fifteen or even twenty shillings elsewhere. But there were compensations in living at Poonindie: free housing, rations and medical attention, as well as free schooling for themselves and their children. Few families left the mission permanently in search of higher wages. They stayed with their own, self-supporting community.

Most of the biographical information on individuals available for this and later periods concerns men. The only period in which women are mentioned frequently was between 1876 and 1878, when there was no superintendent at Poonindie and a matron was put in charge of the women and children. Nevertheless it is clear from the records that while the women were as highly educated as the men, they were not given opportunities to develop or use their skills. One of the women from Western Australia taught at the school for several years before marrying but women generally were occupied with domestic duties and sewing. The women could earn some money cleaning communal areas, cooking and sewing for the orphan children, or working as servants for the staff. Mrs Randall, the short-lived matron, clashed with a number of the women, temporarily dismissing them when they refused to

¹⁶ Despatch from the Governor of South Australia 7 May 1852 in Somerville Collection vol. I:3.

comply with her often petty and dictatorial directions. This appears to have been the only period when women were dismissed for reasons other than 'immorality', i.e. adultery.

Most of the overseers' and superintendents' reports were concerned with the behaviour and productivity of the men who were the heads of households and whose work on the farm was seen as maintaining the mission. They undertook the full range of farm activities. They did the ploughing, sowing, harvesting, clearing land (although non-mission Aborigines who moved through the district were often employed to do this unskilled work), shearing, boundary riding, and droving sheep to winter pastures north of Poonindie and shepherding sheep there (the last tasks unsupervised). They also did maintenance work on the mission such as thatching, painting and carpentry. The mission always employed a European cook/butcher and Poonindie men were never trained in blacksmithing or mechanical repairs, so machinery was sent to Port Lincoln for repair. Some of the men were skilled at handling oxen and horses including breaking in horses.

Two of the men from Western Australia taught in the school. Some of the most committed and literate Christians helped with church services in the absence of the missionary. One of the men became a lay preacher and evangelist. The men and their families were reasonably mobile. Poonindie was their home base, but they left frequently in search of casual employment elsewhere or to visit Adelaide, or the missions at Point McLeay and Point Pearce. They also could be forced to leave when temporarily dismissed for a misdemeanour.

The following biography describes the fortunes of the Limberrys. Daniel Limberry is mentioned in many reports because he was on the whole a productive member of the community, while his wife, Mary's domestic duties go unmentioned. She is only noticed when she is branded by the matron, Randall, as disruptive and immoral.

Daniel Limberry came originally from the Murray River and arrived at Poonindie in the 1860s. In 1869 he accompanied Superintendent Holden on a recruitment drive along the Murray from Wentworth in New South Wales to Blanchetown in South Australia. The respect Limberry commanded among the people they met impressed Holden.¹⁷ In November of 1869 he married Mary, formerly known as Agnes Hooper, who had apparently had an unhappy childhood while being raised by a European woman. She first married in her early teens and subsequently attended school at Point McLeay mission for a year.¹⁸ There she lived for a time with Jack Hooper before deserting him and moving to Poonindie where she was baptized just before her marriage to Limberry.¹⁹

While Holden remained superintendent the Limberrys were well treated and trusted. Daniel worked without supervision as the boundary rider. After Holden's departure, the supervising matron accused Mary of theft, stopped her rations and harassed her children forcing them to lie about their mother's activities. Mary left her family to escape her persecutor. Later the same year Daniel was dismissed for refusing to reveal who had supplied him with alcohol.²⁰ After six months he was re-admitted, but not his wife. Later he took charge of droving sheep to Poonindie's outstation at Moonabie to the north. In subsequent years the Limberrys were sometimes on and sometimes off the mission. Their marriage seems to have been shaky as

¹⁷ Holden to Hawkes, 16 August 1869, SRG 94 1060.

¹⁸ Taplin to Holden, 13 June 1877, SRG 94 1061.

¹⁹ Holden to Hawkes, 8 November 1869, SRG 95 1064.

²⁰ Blackmore to Hawkes, 6 November 1877, SRG 94 1061.

both had extramarital affairs. They finally left Poonindie in the mid 1880s. Daniel spent some time with the Salvation Army and then seems to have found a good living, independent of institutions, working on pastoral properties.²¹

The Limberrys, particularly Mary, found the restraints and morality of mission life too constricting, yet it was many years before they made a permanent break with the mission. In their absences they left their children at Poonindie, stayed in the district and in close contact with their friends at the mission. This pattern of moving on and off was similar to many other Poonindie families.

The final phase of the Poonindie mission was dominated by an authoritarian superintendent, J.D. Bruce, who penalised those who stood up for their rights and whom he viewed as a threat to his authority. There were also increasing pressures from the local Port Lincoln community to have the Poonindie lands resumed by the Crown and subdivided as working men's blocks. Poonindie was such a successful farming enterprise — it produced the best wheat and wool in western South Australia — that the locals considered that it must, therefore, include the most fertile and productive land in the district. They believed firstly that the land was too good for Aborigines and secondly if Aborigines could do so well on the land, others could do better. By 1895 the mission had closed and most of the land was subdivided and sold as a result of the political pressure of the local community and the loss of missionary commitment of the Anglican Church, and more particularly the role of three Trustees responsible for the mission who negotiated its closure.

The biographies of two families of brothers (the Adams and the Solomons) who came to Poonindie as children in the first ten years of its operation and stayed closely associated with the mission illustrate well how different people with strong commitments to the community fared under different administrations and how overseer, later superintendent, Bruce's influence determined the course of the lives of Poonindie people and their descendants long after the mission closed.

The Adams brothers, Tom and Tim, were brought to Poonindie in 1855 by their white father on the death of their Aboriginal mother. The parents, Thomas senior and Kudnarto were the first European man and Aboriginal woman to be legally married in South Australia.²² While Kudnarto was alive the family had a licence to farm a section of Aboriginal reserve near Clare. On her death the licence lapsed and Thomas Adams, an unskilled labourer, was unable to support his sons so he took them to Poonindie.

The brothers did well at school and became skilled farm hands. Tom the elder was the top shearer in the district for many years. As well he learnt to thatch and do maintenance work around the mission. He assisted with prayers and church services in the absence of the superintendent. His younger brother, Tim, was also very competent, particularly as a shearer. In the late 1860s and 1870s Tom was probably the most highly regarded Aborigine at Poonindie. He worked so effectively and efficiently that he was paid at a higher rate than any other Aboriginal man at the mission. Nevertheless he rightly resented the fact that non-Aboriginal labour employed at Poonindie was paid at an even higher rate. Both the Adams frequently left Poonindie to find more highly paid work on other stations, particularly at shearing time. They were in high demand as shearers. Tom was also a good sportsman, he

²¹ Hawkes to Hale, 18 March 1895, PRG 275 130/206.

²² *South Australian*, 28 January 1848.

was an excellent cricketer (Poonindie had its own cricket team) and athlete.

Tom Adams married Louisa Milera, the widow of Frederick Milera, one of the earliest Poonindie residents.²³ Tom and Louisa had nine children, seven born at Poonindie. Tim married four times. His first two wives died at Poonindie. He had four children by his second wife. The Adams family made many attempts to regain access to the land they had lost when Kudnarto died, but without success. By the 1870s Tom Adams had shifted his attempts to the Poonindie district to get the land he really identified with, because it was where he had grown up, but with equal lack of success.

In 1882 the fortunes of the Adams brothers changed at Poonindie. J.D. Bruce, who had been the overseer since 1878 was promoted to superintendent. He did not like either of the Adams. He resented Tom's privileged position at the mission and took away his privileges and, in the process, Tom's commitment to his work. Tom did not see why, after having worked so hard to build up Poonindie he should be pushed aside and not receive any recognition for his work. He took to drinking, had domestic problems and finally left Poonindie in 1887 to settle at another mission, Point Pearce, on Yorke Peninsula.

Tim seems to have become restless after his second wife's death, and although he married again, he left his children at Poonindie for long periods of time while he moved around. When he was at Poonindie he also clashed with Bruce. Bruce believed the Adams initiated any acts of insubordination at the mission. Tim moved to Point Pearce, probably about the same time as his brother.

Tom was not particularly happy at Point Pearce and continued his attempts to gain land near Poonindie. His last attempt was in 1907, twenty years after he left the mission. This time he was successful, but ironically his wife and children were settled at Point Pearce by this time and did not want to move.²⁴ The descendants of the Adams family stayed at Point Pearce.

The Solomon brothers, George, John and Emanuel, like the Adams, were the product of a marriage between a white man, George and an Aboriginal woman, Rathoola.²⁵ The family obtained a licence to farm a section of land near Rapid Bay on Fleurieu Peninsula. Rathoola died in 1858 and the family therefore lost access to their land. George senior sent his oldest son, George, to Poonindie, the second son, John, to a friend in Enfield and kept the two youngest children himself. In 1860 or 1861 he sent John to Poonindie and in 1870 his third son, Emanuel. George was blind and sick and died in 1878 when he was twenty-eight years old. John and Emanuel survived.

Like the Adams brothers, the Solomons were highly regarded at Poonindie. John married Louisa Connelly, one of the girls who had come from Western Australia. They were a hard working couple. Mrs Holden, the superintendent's wife depended on Louisa's help with domestic work. They left Poonindie briefly in 1874 because John was dissatisfied with his wages, but soon returned as Louisa missed her West Australian friends.²⁶ John won many local ploughing contests and in 1883 entered himself in the Australian championships at

²³ Protector of Aborigines Letterbook vol. 3, 7 February 1867, GRG 52/7.

²⁴ Aborigines Office 72/1907 in Somerville Collection vol. V:164.

²⁵ Moorhouse to Colonial Secretary, 13 January 1851, GRG 52/7.

²⁶ Holden to Hawkes, 20 June 1874, SRG 94 1062.

Ballarat.²⁷ He was also a good horseman and obtained work breaking in horses. The couple had no children.

Emanuel Solomon married Jessie Milera (a daughter of Louisa Adams' first marriage) who died of tuberculosis in 1881. With this second wife, Amelia, he had four children. The Solomon brothers, like many others at Poonindie frequently left the mission to work on neighbouring properties. In 1878 John worked for an overseer, who had been sacked from Poonindie, at double the wage he could earn at the mission. But despite long absences he always returned to Poonindie.

The major divergence in the fortunes of the Adams and the Solomons occurred as a result of Bruce's appointment as superintendent in 1882. He especially liked and favoured the Solomons. When the mission was closed and the land subdivided, Emanuel Solomon was the only Poonindie Aborigine to be allocated land, though many others applied. Bruce helped John in his applications to farm Aboriginal reserve land in the area and in his farming and fishing ventures. Some other Poonindie men failed to obtain licences to farm reserve land because of the bad character references Bruce wrote for them.

While Emanuel Solomon was the only Aborigine to obtain land at Poonindie, other Aboriginal men (including John) obtained leases on Aboriginal reserve land, but lacked security of tenure. By taking up land among the local settler farmers, the Solomons effectively relinquished their links to the Aboriginal community. They were, of course, known to be of Aboriginal descent, but conformed to European ways and had little to do with other Aboriginal people. John survived as a farmer and fisherman in the district until 1946. He was well known in the area because of his alleged gift for long range weather forecasting. His brother's family were raised as Europeans. Most of them eventually moved away, some to Port Lincoln, others further afield. Although those who stayed in Port Lincoln are proud of their Aboriginal ancestry, they are viewed with suspicion by Aborigines in the town because of their failure to identify with them either socially or culturally. Those who moved away have become indistinguishable from the general community.

The contrasting fortunes of the Solomons and Adams highlight two aspects of Aboriginal survival and identity. Both families survived genetically. One as an independent family in a European world but as long as its members remained on the Poonindie lands they were strongly identified with the old mission. John Solomon was caretaker of the Poonindie church in the 1940s. He was said to be very proud of the building and of his association with it, including a memorial chair in memory of his wife Louisa. He did not deny his ancestry and early associations with the Aboriginal mission, yet on the other hand he was not a member of an Aboriginal community. Did he and his family have any other option? They wanted to remain on Poonindie lands, the only way they could do it was as independent farmers, not part of an Aboriginal community; they therefore lost their group identity as Aborigines, which affected the identity of their descendants.

The other family, the Adams, continued to be part of an Aboriginal community but not necessarily from choice. Tom Adams had tried repeatedly to obtain land in his own right, but when the opportunity finally arose his family decided they preferred the companionship of the Aboriginal community to living as an isolated family unit. Today many descendants of the Adams are living in the general community, but they have the choice of maintaining a strong Aboriginal identity or not, options not open to the Solomon brothers in the 1890s.

The biographical data I have collected show that Poonindie did not destroy Aboriginal

²⁷ Bruce to Blackmore, June 1883, SRG 94 1048.

identity. It was, on the contrary, important in forming it. It has often been claimed that institutions of this sort gave only negative reinforcement to Aboriginal people – we are different, we are inferior, we are dependent, we are a dying race, we are second-rate citizens. Whatever may have been the case at other institutions, this was not true of Poonindie. At the time of its foundation Poonindie served as an escape route for Aborigines who had found that life in Adelaide trapped them between two equally unattractive cultural alternatives. Their material base had been undermined so that they could not physically survive, nor could they maintain their cultural and religious life without support from the invaders. European society, on the other hand, was not open to them on terms that offered them self-respect and positive roles to play. Poonindie gave them a home, protected them from the predatory colonial society and isolated them from the tug of other Aborigines who attempted to cling to their pre-colonial ways of life. Most of them chose to stay at Poonindie, despite the threat of death and disease, rather than face the uncertainties of a hostile outside world.

During the 1860s and 1870s the survivors developed into a stable community. They had either come as young children or had been born there. Their geographical isolation and diverse origins worked against the maintenance of any specifically Aboriginal customs, but they had a strong sense of community. Although they suffered frequently from incompetent and harsh supervision, most of them stayed on even when they might have earned much higher wages in rural industry outside.

Some might argue that the Aborigines at Poonindie survived without a strongly Aboriginal identity. Defining the Aboriginality of the Poonindie people is difficult because it is not emphasised in the records. Nevertheless there is evidence that the people at Poonindie had a strong affinity for the place. The children identified with 'wild blacks' in their leisure time activities pretending to throw spears. Kinship structures typical of Aboriginal communities survived with emphasis on extended, rather than nuclear families. At the time the closure of the mission was being negotiated, several men signed a petition (including the Solomons) asking for part of the Poonindie lands to be set aside for them so that they could continue to live as a community maintaining themselves by farming, fishing and collecting guano.²⁸ This suggests that the Solomons' first choice, along with others on the mission, was to remain part of the community rather than to operate as independent farmers. It was only after this option had been closed off that applications were made for independent allocations of land. Thus the historical record indicates that Aboriginal people stayed at Poonindie because it was an Aboriginal community. Although their communal identity included a strong affinity to place, it did not depend on the maintenance of any element of their pre-colonial cultures.

Poonindie was in many ways a highly successful Aboriginal community. It produced an educated population of skilled and unskilled workers. It provided housing, food and medical services, long before any such social services were available to the general community. Its farming and pastoral activities made it self-sufficient. It was not dependent on handouts from either government or private charity. That is not to say that the standard of living was high. It was not. It was very basic. The housing was substandard with primitive water and sewerage services. But at Poonindie no person was faced with the Destitute Asylum by becoming unemployed, sick or old.

²⁸ South Australia Legislative Council Papers, 5 September 1895:291-92. Guano is the excrement of sea-birds and used as a fertiliser.

Training at Poonindie included not only the 3Rs but also agricultural and sporting skills. Poonindie men were among the best shearers in the district. They generally won all the prizes in district ploughing matches in the late 1870s and early 1880s. They played regular cricket matches against Port Lincoln teams and played several matches against St Peter's College (the top Church of England boys' school). So Poonindie people had much to be proud of in their community. They were excellent at cricket and athletic competitions. They were said to have produced the best wool and wheat in the western districts of South Australia. Although they were underpaid as individual workers, the fruits of their communal efforts made them self-supporting and ensured that they were never destitute.

All this hard work was destroyed because local settlers coveted the land and successfully pressured the Poonindie Trustees into negotiating the closure of the mission with the government in 1892 so that the land could be opened for selection. The terms agreed upon ignored the welfare of the Poonindie Aborigines. The Trustees abrogated any responsibility for their future, merely stating that the government must find them positions in other institutions. The Poonindie community broke up. The majority of the people was sent to Point Pearce on Yorke Peninsula, a smaller number went to Point McLeay near the Coorong, one man returned to the bush and a few stayed in the area in the hope of obtaining land.

Many of the former inhabitants continued to think of Poonindie as 'home'. Tom Adams wrote on hearing of Bishop Hale's death in 1895, seven years after his own departure, 'it is very hard for us to think of our dear old homes and white people living there and we've got to pass by like strangers . . . although I did not belong to Poonindie when it was taken away, still we all love our dear old home.'²⁹ Despite its ignominious end, Poonindie had an important part to play in the survival of many Aboriginal families now living in the southern half of South Australia, several hundred of whom can trace their descent from Poonindie.

²⁹ Tom Adams to Hawkes, PRG 275 130/207.

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GRG: Government Record Group; PRG.

SRG: Societies' Record Group.