

## ***Too Much Cabbage and Jesus Christ: Australia's 'Mission Girl' Annie Lock***

by Catherine Bishop

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Catherine Bishop has done a prodigious amount of research over multiple archival and library collections tracking down the subject of this biography, Annie Lock, and her peripatetic life in South Australia, New South Wales, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. While Bishop has done a great job of tracing her life, the woman herself remains somewhat elusive. Annie Lock's life in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries is extraordinary and it is easy to understand Bishop's fascination with her.

Annie Lock was born into a large family in rural South Australia in 1876. Her parents had emigrated from England and worked hard to establish a life for themselves and their many children. Annie left school early with a truncated education and seems to have earned money as a dressmaker before moving to Adelaide at the age of 25 to undertake training as a missionary in a two-year course at Angas College, a non-denominational institution run on faith lines. The belief that one could rely on God to provide sustenance and support underpinned the rest of her life.

Annie Lock's missionary life took her first to New South Wales where she worked on three sites in quick succession at a time when the government policy was to remove children of mixed descent, 'half-castes', from their families and place them in homes. This was a policy that Lock endorsed for much of her life. Most Aboriginal children were barred by local non-Aboriginal residents from attending local state schools, so some Aboriginal communities such as the one at Forster wanted a missionary to set up a school for their children, which Lock did in the short time she spent with the community. In 1909 Lock moved to Western Australia, first to an orphanage in Perth, then two postings in the south-west before going north to Sunday Island off the Kimberley coast, where she stayed for five years – her longest stay on any mission.

This was her first encounter with Aboriginal people of full descent whose lifestyle and culture had not been devastated by colonial intrusion. Bishop suggests that Lock learned a lot from the missionary Montague Sydney Hadley, including the benefits of an isolated mission station, self-sufficiency and cultural negotiation.

Lock's next destination was Oodnadatta in northern South Australia where she went without informing the Australian Aborigines' Mission (AAM, UAM from 1929). Here she established what was to be a long-lived children's home, Colebrook Home. She then moved further north against explicit instructions from the mission society to Central Australia where she established herself in a number of localities, earning notoriety as one of the few people in the region who criticised the police over the mass killing of Aboriginal people known as the Coniston massacre, or Coniston killings as Bishop describes them. The last mission Lock set up was at Ooldea Soak a few miles north of the east–west railway line. Exhausted, Lock left Ooldea in 1936, too old and sick to begin all over again. She married in 1937 at the age of 60 and spent the last five years of her life with her husband living in a caravan and proselytising among the white population on Eyre Peninsula.

What a life, and what a job Bishop set herself tracing it. Most of the archival material Bishop found is Lock's reports and correspondence relating to her work. There were few personal letters or accounts, and while Bishop tried to track down Aboriginal people who knew Lock, she found few who, after all this time, had first-hand knowledge of Lock. Still, much can be inferred from the records that do exist and Bishop is careful to point out when she is speculating rather than relying on hard evidence.

The person Bishop traced was, in many ways, a person of her times with the racial prejudices and expectations of her era, but she was also a very eccentric person of her times, and over the years her experience of living in close contact with many Aboriginal communities did modify some of her views and behaviour. However, her belief in a God that would always provide never wavered, despite living what most people would regard as an impoverished existence with very little, if any, external support. Most of her working life was spent setting up missions and then leaving them within a few years. She would take Aboriginal children she considered neglected into her home (often nothing more than a tent or temporary structure) and treat them as foster children, mothering them in a kindly and loving manner, while ensuring they maintained the strict standards of cleanliness and behaviour she deemed necessary. But when she moved on to the next project she would leave them in a children's home or occasionally with another family. She would provide rations, cooked meals and medicines for those adults and families who joined her camps. She often set up schools to educate the children and nursed the sick, and, perhaps most importantly, offered a buffer between the Aboriginal people she gathered round her and the often hostile and predatory white society of the rural and outback areas in which she established herself.

Lock never attempted to learn any Aboriginal languages. After her five years on Sunday Island she did take more interest in Aboriginal cultural forms and values, although her prime focus as with other missionaries of the era was to proselytise and prepare people of mixed descent to join the lower echelons of colonial society. Despite her close association with many different Aboriginal societies, Lock did not regard Aboriginal people as equal to non-Aboriginal people, nor did she expect the education she offered would allow them to participate on an equal basis with the mainstream Australian society.

However one might judge her work, both against the values of her time and those of the present era, she was an extraordinary woman – courageous and self-reliant in going out on her own into regions remote from any support or assistance; strong willed; dogged in the most adverse conditions; skilled at making do with whatever was at hand, such as cooking for large numbers over an open fire and sewing clothes – maintaining order as she perceived it, and hardworking, until she became exhausted and unwell and had to retire from her calling for a few months every few years to recuperate and recharge while travelling to cities in the south to publicise her mission. Bishop finds she was regarded both as kindly and ‘lovely’ but also a crank and someone hard to get on with – a woman of contradictions, but a fascinating one.

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