

*A Journey Travelled: Aboriginal–European
Relations at Albany and the Surrounding Region
from First Contact to 1926*

by Murray Arnold

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Review by Chris Owen
University of Western Australia

More recently the historiography on the interaction between European colonists and Aboriginal people on the frontiers of Australia has been moving away from narratives emphasising one-sided European domination, conflict and conquest to ones that reveal more nuance and detail while emphasising accommodation and exchange. Often of a more localised and intimate style, these histories recognise considerable diversity in both European and Aboriginal interactions. Belonging to this emerging style is Arnold Murray's *A Journey Travelled: Aboriginal–European Relations at Albany and the Surrounding Region from First Contact to 1926* that documents the survival of the Noongar people, the traditional owners of the south-west of Western Australia.

The period covered refers to the 100 years from the 1826 establishment of the British garrison at King George Sound (later becoming the city of Albany) to its centenary in 1926. Murray's aim is to draw attention to what he regards as the 'neglected' history of Albany and the nearby regions. He claims the work as 'a fresh and fundamentally different approach by focusing on Aboriginal–European relations in one major town and its hinterland'. Murray frames his narrative by introducing and outlining the changing nature of Australian historiography of colonisation – from one where Aboriginal people were often ignored and seen as part of the environment to be overcome, along with thirst and drought, to one where Aboriginal actions are given agency and motive.

Murray's achievement is to produce a detailed study in a beautifully written and engaging style. Periodised into seven chapters Murray sympathetically details how local Noongar people 'interacted with a considerable degree of peaceful and close interaction'. Indeed, the relatively slow colonisation and development of the district (due largely to poor farming land and slow population growth over a very large area) meant there was relatively less conflict than in other parts of Australia such as the north-west and Kimberley districts of Western Australia. In the early period Murray brings forward ample evidence of close relationships, mutual interest and even friendships, most notably in the well-documented and published interactions between Noongar man Mokare and Captain Collet Barker. Murray shows how this early period was characterised by colonists showing great interest in those they had colonised, though this interest would dissipate by the 1850s and earlier attempts to 'Christianise and civilise' Noongar people, who did not willingly concede their culture, would fall away to be replaced by increasing government surveillance and control.

Murray details how the advancement of the railway aided European expansion as numerous towns opened up along those lines, leading to extensive land clearing and further contact with Noongar groups. By the late nineteenth century Murray finds evidence of Aboriginal people becoming incorporated into the expanding European world yet whilst they were being acculturated into European ways many retained core aspects of Noongar culture and some, such as Tommy King, formally and passionately sought to claim rights to their land and associated resources. The final chapter deals with the introduction of the *Aborigines Act 1905*, which, far from helping Aboriginal people, simply exacerbated social marginalisation. This period was set against a background of concern about inter-race breeding and the emerging 'half caste issue'. Aboriginal people, far from dying out as was earlier forecast, were increasing in numbers. Murray ends the book with an account of local Albany Noongars Yorkshire Bob and Moses Wybung performing a well-attended corroboree ceremony as evidence of cultural continuity in the district in exactly the spot where Mokare and Barker had exchanged information 100 years earlier.

The value of these new histories for the informed reader is the references cited, although an examination of these in *A Journey Travelled* reveals perhaps its chief limitation. Having set himself the task of writing a local 'intimate' history and going into great depth to emphasise the importance of local histories that dispel the trope of Aboriginal people 'fading away', what is revealed is a comparative lack of engagement with primary sources and oral history material. In the latter chapters these are utilised more forcefully to draw the historical and familial strands together. Murray relies largely on secondary accounts to construct the narrative. Its relative weakness then, having commented on the 'wealth of official documentation' held at the State Records Office of Western

Australia, is how much more of it could have been utilised. There are other puzzling omissions. Murray bemoans the fact that 'no comprehensive study has been published of Aboriginal–European relations anywhere in the state's south-west between 1840 and 1900' but then fails to use one of the key texts for this period – Neville Green's *Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians*, vol. VI (UWA Press, 1989). Unambiguously titled *Aborigines of the Albany Region 1821–1898*, this dictionary contains many hundreds of primary source entries of individual Noongar names from Albany and the 'regions beyond Albany' as European expansion continued from 1840. It contains Colonial Secretaries' Records that detail exactly when and where Noongar people went. Similarly, the wealth of oral history from many descendants of Noongar people from Albany and the wider south-west 'hinterland towns', where Noongar families have remained for generations, could have been better utilised. The result of this is the first five chapters appear richly detailed in terms of Aboriginal cultural detail compared to the final two chapters. These limitations aside, *A Journey Travelled* is an engaging read and Murray's nuanced and detailed interpretation of day-to-day interactions adds greatly to the wider understanding of the Noongar people of the Albany region.

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