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Crossing There and Back, Living to Tell a Tale

Karckynjib Wombil Moony approached the hut with caution. A friend's wife had come with him (perhaps to help convey that the approach was friendly), but when she caught sight of the sheep, she fled. Moony bent down to a small waterhole and washed himself as white as possible. Then, climbing onto the fence above the snapping guard dogs, he took a deep breath and called out: 'What cheer, shipmates'. A man emerged and, surprised, withdrew again. His hearing sharp with anxiety, Moony heard the man say, 'come out Bill here is a red or yellow man standing on the rails, naked, he is not a black man, and bring the gun'.

Moony knew there would be a gun. A friend had been shot dead a few months earlier approaching strangers who had landed on the coast near the mountain Bibbiringda. Just a few days before, a message had arrived from the clan on Mal Mal (now the Burdekin River): a group of men on horseback had shot a number of their kin. These were not the clumsy single-shot arms that Moony remembered; report had it they could fire over and over again. At least now he knew these men spoke English.¹

1 Morrill told Thomas Murray-Prior that he had had difficulty understanding reports of firearms that could produce multiple shots. It was an innovation that had entered general use since Morrill had departed the industrialising world in 1846. He told C. S. Rowe he was worried that the white intruders might have been Spanish or Portuguese. Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior, Private Letter Book ('Journal of Tour of Inspection' [1863]), Mitchell Library (hereafter ML), MS 3117, CY Reel 495, 18; Rowe, 'Rowe's Memoranda', 113.

The two stockmen came back out of the hut aiming the gun at Moony's chest. 'Do not shoot me. I am a British object—a shipwrecked sailor.'² The gun was lowered (but not put away).

James Morrill had been about 22 years old, an able seaman on the *Peruvian*, when it was wrecked in 1846. He was one of only four to survive the wreck, a long drift to shore on an improvised raft and a fortnight scavenging shellfish from the rocks. The four were taken in and nursed back to health by two of the Birri-gubba clans based around Mount Elliott and Cape Cleveland near today's Townsville. The other survivors died after two or three years, but Morrill lived, worked and loved as an adopted Birri-gubba man.³ A correspondent to *The Courier* reported that Morrill had been named Karckynjib Wombil Moony 'after one of their chiefs'.⁴ When the two stockmen, Hatch and Wilson, informed him that the date was 26 January 1863, Morrill was astounded; he had lived among the Birri-gubba people for 17 years.

Queensland was declared a separate colony in 1859 and settlers and their flocks of sheep streamed northward by sea and overland.⁵ Like hundreds of others, C. S. Rowe travelled north from Melbourne to take up land near the Burdekin River. He later recalled the attitude, and the armoury, with which he and his companions set out, saying:

We looked on the North of Queensland, as a terra incognita inhabited by fierce tribes of Cannibals and all sorts—so that thorough preparations were made for our defence. The arms procured were, six Tranter revolver rifles, six revolvers of the same make, two shot guns, one Ferry's rifle, six cutlasses and no end of ammunition.⁶

It was men not unlike Rowe who had terrified and, in some cases, mortally wounded Morrill's adoptive kin. These men would go on doing so, attempting to expel the Birri-gubba people and their neighbours from

2 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 14–21.

3 I follow the advice of Eddie Smallwood, Chairman of the Gudjuda Corporation, in referring to Morrill's adoptive people by their language-group name. Others have attempted to chart his association with Birri-gubba clan groups, particularly the Bindal and Juru people, but this is not necessary for the story I wish to tell.

4 *The Courier*, 11 March 1863.

5 Evans, *A History of Queensland*, 82–83.

6 Rowe, 'Rowe's Memoranda', 104–05. Noel Loos found that the Aboriginal peoples of North Queensland had gained a formidable reputation for ferocity by the 1860s. The first settlers set out for Port Denison from Rockhampton to meet a 'strong party of Queensland Native Police' who it was intended would keep the peace and protect their interests. Loos, 'Frontier Conflict in the Bowen District', 113–17.

pastoral leases that, on paper, allowed them to stay.⁷ Rowe later claimed not to have had any trouble from the 'blacks'; he attributed the calm to the activities of the native police, the official war machine of this invasion of the north.⁸

Rowe encountered Morrill as he travelled from the stockman's hut into the fledgling town of Bowen to report to the authorities. He noted that Morrill carried rather than wore his trousers and that:

There was no mistaking him for any but a white man ... he had the manner of an aboriginal. From some feeling of uncertainty about his new friends, he had a wild stare about him, and his eyes constantly shifted from place to place.⁹

This wary, troubled man had found a home far from home. He was now faced with a sudden re-adoption. He travelled south, under escort, telling his story at Bowen, Rockhampton and Brisbane. It was neither an easy nor a safe story to tell, and his listeners were so voracious that their (often sharp) questions, as well as their tacit expectations, were imprinted deeply into the shape of his story.

Morrill returned to Bowen, which is where he died just two years and nine months after making himself known to the two stockmen, Hatch and Wilson. He had found work with the customs service and married Eliza Ann Ross, who was pregnant with their son when he passed away. North Queensland was still being drawn into the influence of the colony. The sporadic, diffuse war between the settlers and the Birri-gubba and their neighbours wore on, and ambitious commercial ventures prepared to set out for Cape York and the Gulf country, men and their stock ready to claim what they could. Morrill's story continued after his death, developing a life of its own that is imprinted on the history and history-making of North Queensland. Morrill's story, as it survives today, was not a product of leisurely reminiscence; it was a story of survival, and a story told *to survive* as he made two dangerous crossings. Morrill's story was his raft.

7 The Queensland Land Act of 1860 allowed Aboriginal people access to pastoral leases, but they were denied access to food and water by pastoralists. Breslin, *Exterminate with Pride*, 82–83. See also Loos, 'Frontier Conflict in the Bowen District', 142–44, 171.

8 Rowe, 'Rowe's Memoranda', 105; Breslin, *Exterminate with Pride*, 82; Evans, *A History of Queensland*, 96–97.

9 Rowe, 'Rowe's Memoranda', 115.

After 42 days drifting at sea, catching rain in a sail canvas and baiting sharks with the limbs of their dead companions, James Morrill and six other survivors finally beached their raft. They had buried 14 souls at sea. Three men had wandered off in separate directions seeking food and water and had perished; Morrill had stayed on the beach with Captain and Mrs Pitkethly and the cabin boy, eating oysters from the rocks.

Two weeks later, these four were discovered by a party of Birri-gubba men. As they later explained to Morrill, shooting stars had been seen over the coast several nights in a row—a clear sign that something was amiss in that direction—and had led them right to the rocks where the survivors struggled for life. Investigation under the damp rags confirmed that these bedraggled strangers were human beings, male and female. After some debate, the Aboriginal men extended an invitation to their camp. When the strangers agreed to go with them, the men performed a ‘corroboree’. The survivors felt they could not participate, perhaps through exhaustion, and instead sang a hymn, ‘God moves in a mysterious way/his wonders to perform’,¹⁰ in a spirit of reciprocity.

The men gave the hungry four some tasty, starchy roots to eat and, carrying the exhausted cabin boy on their backs, led the way to their camp. Another small Birri-gubba group was soon encountered, and the party paused to repeat the previous night’s corroboree for their benefit. When the main camp was reached, Morrill remembered:

The first thing that they did was to lay us down and cover us over with dried grass, to prevent our being seen [until] the appointed time. They then collected together to the number of about 50 or 60—men, women and children—and sat down in a circle; then those who discovered us went into the middle, dressed up in the things that they had taken from us ... and danced a corroboree, in which they explained ... what they had discovered, from whence they had brought us, and all they knew about us ... That being over, we were led into the middle in triumph.¹¹

This performance was repeated for the ‘near tribes’ the following evening, and then night after night for a seemingly endless stream of visitors. On one of these evenings, when the survivors dragged their feet, it was gently but firmly indicated that participation was compulsory.¹² This

10 First published in Newton and Cowper, *Olney Hymns in Three Books*.

11 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 8–12.

12 *Ibid.*, 11.

process of identification and introduction was apparently essential to the survival and prosperity of Morrill and his companions in their new community.

Seventeen years later, another process of storytelling began. Morrill's plea to the two stockmen—'do not shoot me. I am a British object'—was his initial passport. He needed to negotiate a new place in the world. When he spoke positively about his experiences among Aboriginal people, perhaps wanting nothing more than to soften the effect of this sudden invasion, he found he might be despised by association with his adoptive people. Yet, at the same time, as soon as he opened his mouth, he was expected to add to geographic, ethnographic and botanical knowledge about the region. He was also expected to entertain. Audiences crowded around him to hear his story of survival, appetites whetted by a popular literature about shipwreck victims, escaped convicts, renegades and captives. This time he was on his own. The four survivors of the wreck of the *Peruvian* had been nursed back to health by the Birri-gubba people, and they gradually learned how to work, live and speak anew. However, after two or three years, the cabin boy, then the captain and his wife, died one after the other in quick succession. Morrill was the only one left to tell their story.

Stumbling over his forgotten first language, Morrill was 'cross-questioned' by the stockmen, Hatch and Wilson, about his wreck and survival. His life hung on his story as he spent one more night with his Birri-gubba kin, returning to the stockyard in the morning. Hatch and Wilson had apparently told him 'that if I did not come back in the morning they should conclude that I had told them a lie, and that they would put the black trackers on our track and shoot us'.¹³ After a fortnight at this outpost of Mr Anthill's Inkerman Station, Morrill was washed, clad and passed along a line of settlers to the commissioner's orderly, who escorted him into Bowen (known then as Port Denison), a journey of over 100 kilometres.¹⁴

Morrill made a statement at the Bowen Court House on 23 February 1863 in which he explained how the *Peruvian* had been overcome by high winds and driven onto a reef, and how he had come to be the sole survivor. He testified to his desire to make contact, 'which I had always been trying

13 Ibid., 15–16.

14 *The Courier*, 11 March 1863, 2.

to do, from the time I heard there were white men settled near me', and tried to ward off suspicions that he may have acted in aggression from the Birri-gubba side. Though he admitted that he had heard that a white man had been killed by Birri-gubba men, and although he acknowledged that the town of Bowen had been in existence for some time, he professed not to have laid eyes on a white person between his last contact with his fellow shipwreck survivors and his deliberate encounter with Mr Anthill's stockmen.¹⁵

Morrill was interviewed in a less formal manner too as a 'white-blackfellow'. His incredible story of shipwreck and 'exile amongst the blacks', given credence by a crocodile bite on one leg and impressive rheumatic holes in his forehead, arms and body, would put Port Denison on the map. One of his interlocutors, under the pseudonym 'Advance Australia', supplied a report to the newspapers that enlivened the courthouse statement with sufferings 'impossible to describe', including an account of the virile frontier dialogue exchanged by Morrill and Hatch and Wilson as they had faced each other across the outstation yard a month earlier. This account, which narrated the four survivors' adoption by one of the Birri-gubba clans and emphasised their kindness over the years, nevertheless concluded with confirmation of their cannibalism and the strange statement that Morrill would 'not trust them generally'.¹⁶

Trust was surely a pressing issue for Morrill as he was passed from pillar to post, from courtroom to drawing room, and as he saw in the colonists' attentive faces curiosity mixed with aggression. He needed to explain himself, promptly. From the perspective of the colony, he was a man of fighting age living as part of an Aboriginal group at a time when the native police and the settlers themselves aimed to clear away the Aboriginal presence to facilitate British exploitation of the land.¹⁷ What was he doing

15 Copy of a statement made by James (Jimmy) Morrell before one of Her Majesty's justices of the peace for Queensland in the Court House, Bowen, 23 February 1863, State Library of Queensland, Heritage Collections, James Morrell Papers, Box 8923, Reference Code OM74-92, typescript viewed courtesy of Phillip Murray.

16 'Advance Australia's' report, dated 25 February 1863, appeared in *The Courier*, 11 March 1863, 2; *Queensland Guardian*, 12 March 1863.

17 The *Port Denison Times* provided candid reportage of conflicts from its first issue in March 1864, and a thorough local assessment of the policies pursued up to 1869 as the 'letting in' of Aboriginal groups was debated. The 1861 Select Committee enquiring into the native police force included open debate on the effectiveness of the force employed in the region to that point. The native police 'dispersed' (i.e., shot at any large group of Aboriginal people encountered), but this alone could not ensure the protection of the settlers and their interests—settlers also needed armed stockmen to patrol their own runs. Loos, 'Frontier Conflict in the Bowen District', 120–38, 157–68.

on the wrong side of the frontier? Was he a renegade or criminal? C. S. Rowe accounted for the nervousness of Hatch and Wilson by explaining that ‘they suspected he might be a bushranger’. Several escapees from the Moreton Bay penal settlement had set precedents for such a career. One of the more famous was John Graham, known as ‘Moilow’ to his adoptive people, who escaped in 1827, took part in the rescue of Eliza Fraser and then disappeared from the colony again. As an escaped convict who had joined an Aboriginal group for survival’s sake, he would still have had cause to make an account of himself. William Buckley escaped from the short-lived penal settlement at Port Phillip in 1803 and, after 32 years living on and off with the Wathaurong people, approached the fledgling second settlement with great trepidation, anticipating that his sentence would be resumed.¹⁸ Even known shipwreck victim and captain’s wife Eliza Fraser struggled to provide an account of the wreck of the *Stirling Castle* and her interactions with the Butchulla people of Fraser Island that met with the satisfaction of the Crown and the public and preserved her own and her husband’s reputation.¹⁹ Morrill’s claim that he had not even seen a white man, let alone been party to any hostile action from the Birri-gubba side, did not stop contemporaries from speculating, as Rowe did, that ‘Morrill knew more about some affrays between blacks and whites than ever he cared to relate’.²⁰

Morrill was bundled onto the *Murray* steamer bound for Rockhampton, where his arrival was awaited with ‘considerable excitement’. Onlookers waited on the wharf, craning their necks for a glimpse of this ‘new Robinson Crusoe’ (as the *Queensland Guardian* would style him).²¹ Here, he was interviewed by Police Magistrate John Jardine and a select audience of gentlemen who anticipated that ‘much valuable information could be extracted from this man’.²² The questions put to him ranged from the curious (had he heard report of the camels accompanying exploring parties?) to the downright hazardous (how much did he know of the numerous murders that had occurred in the district?).²³ At least some of those in attendance were left frustrated. Despite Jardine’s ‘unwearied

18 Morgan, *The Life and Adventures of William Buckley*, 86, 89–90.

19 Rowe, ‘Rowe’s Memoranda’, 114; Mulvaney, ‘John Graham’, 109–45; Morgan, *The Life and Adventures of William Buckley*, 86, 89–90; Schaffer, *In the Wake of First Contact*, 34–39.

20 Rowe, ‘Rowe’s Memoranda’, 115.

21 *Queensland Guardian*, 17 March 1863. A crowd also awaited his arrival on the wharf at Brisbane, *The Courier*, 16 March 1863, 2.

22 *Queensland Guardian*, 17 March 1863.

23 *The Argus*, 18 March 1863, 6 (quoting correspondence from the *Rockhampton Bulletin*).

patience and ... exemplary desire to confine his examination to matters of public interest', Morrill furnished 'monosyllabic replies ... [that] augmented rather than satisfied the thirst of his audience for information', one correspondent complained.²⁴ Part of this thirst was for information that would lead to wealth; though Morrill had never knowingly seen gold-bearing rock, and was somewhat baffled that he should be expected to recognise it, he was repeatedly asked whether the country he knew so well was 'gold-bearing country'.²⁵

A second steamship conveyed Morrill to Brisbane, where he met with Governor George Bowen and Mayor George Edmonstone. Several correspondents to *The Courier* anticipated that Morrill must be lacking funds, and offered their assistance in generating a subscription for him if only he would appear in public in Brisbane, as he had in Bowen and Rockhampton.²⁶ All along this journey south, Morrill was 'besieged' by the curious.²⁷ As Marcus Clark later put it, 'snatched from barbarism, he ran the usual round of tea parties. People were eager to hear this newly caught lion roar'.²⁸

In Brisbane, Morrill told his story to journalist Edmund Gregory at *The Courier* newspaper office. It was published under the title *Sketch of a Residence among the Aboriginals of Northern Queensland for Seventeen Years; Being a Narrative of My Life, Shipwreck, Landing on the Coast, Residence among the Aboriginals, with an Account of Their Manners and Customs and Mode of Living; Together with Notices of Many of the Natural Productions, and of the Nature of the Country, by James Morrill*. This slim pamphlet was advertised in *The Courier's* classifieds from mid-April 1863 (with a second thousand in print within a month), promptly reached readers in Victoria and South Australia, and had apparently travelled as far afield as Boston by 1864.²⁹ Morrill hoped that the booklet, as well as bringing in a small income, would alleviate the pressure to 'wait on persons for the purpose of narrating my past sufferings ... day after day'.³⁰

24 Ibid.

25 Dortins, 'James Morrill: Shipwreck Survivor', 65–86.

26 *The Courier*, 21 March 1863, 2; 13 April 1863, 2; 29 April 1863, 3.

27 Edmund Gregory used this phrase in his second edition of *Sketch of a Residence*, published in 1865–66, 16–17.

28 Clarke, *Old Tales of a Young Country*, 194.

29 *The Courier*, 18 April 1863, 8; 16 May 1863, 6; *The South Australian Advertiser*, 6 October 1863; Welch, *17 Years Wandering*.

30 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 2.

Indeed, when the curious sought Morrill out in Bowen over the following two years, they seemed to have read it. Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior visited Morrill in the closing months of 1863 and questioned him on, among other things, his marital status as a Birri-gubba man, telling him ‘that it was all humbug to try and make me think that a man would be 17 years with the natives without a lady love’, as Morrill’s published account would have him believe.³¹ Although something can be learned from the writings and reminiscences of these curious visitors, as well as the newspaper reports of Morrill’s appearance and travels, *Sketch of a Residence* remains the most detailed account of Morrill’s life.³² In fact, the curious among Morrill’s contemporaries often short-change today’s curious by leaning on the booklet and neglecting their own memories of other accounts. E. B. Kennedy, writing a version of Morrill’s story for a popular magazine, stated that, although he had heard parts of the story from Morrill’s own lips 50 years earlier, Morrill had also given him a copy of the story printed at the Brisbane *Courier* office. Kennedy’s story is an abridged version of *Sketch of a Residence*, adding only a few details from his own recollection. Tantalisingly, William Robertson, speaking on 2BL radio in the 1920s, claimed to have talked to several men of the ‘Mal Mal’ clan who had adopted Morrill at Cleveland Bay in the 1880s; however, Robertson described the published booklet as ‘the real history’ and proceeded to paraphrase it.³³

As I waited, one of the curious, for *Sketch of a Residence* to emerge from the depths of the Mitchell Library into the light of the reading room, my expectations of this definitive account were enormous. I wanted the 24-page pamphlet to provide a key to understanding Morrill’s life as a Birri-gubba man. Did he adopt Birri-gubba ways of thinking? Did he marry in and bring up children? Did he remain on the outer edge of their society, or was he part of his clan’s most important decisions and conflicts? Was he happy? Would he have chosen to remain part of the Birri-gubba world if the choice had been open to him? The title of the book suggests that it is about Morrill’s ‘residence’ with his adoptive community. However, I soon found that Morrill’s Birri-gubba life is very

31 Murray-Prior, *Private Letter Book*, 19.

32 It is possible that he was working with E. J. Byrne towards a more extensive account of his experiences when he passed away in 1865; however, it would seem that no such account was published. *Port Denison Times*, 1 November 1865, 2; 3 September 1902.

33 E. B. Kennedy, *Seventeen Years amongst Queensland Blacks*; Robertson, *Coo-ee Talks*, 143.

little *lived* in its pages. The middle years of Morrill's life as a Birri-gubba man are summed up in a single, pregnant sentence: 'I lived on year after year in the tribe as one of themselves—nothing particularly happening'.³⁴

I am not the only reader who has been disappointed. Scholars have been apologetic about how little *Sketch of a Residence* illuminates Birri-gubba life and Morrill's part in it. Here he was, in the perfect situation for cultural observation—complete social immersion; yet, his account barely touches on so many vital aspects of Birri-gubba life. Historian Noel Loos, working on his master's thesis in the late 1960s, wondered how Morrill could be so 'exasperatingly reticent'. Was he a little dim or lacking in curiosity? Was his interviewer, impatient to publish, a poor listener?³⁵

The context in which Morrill told his story raises questions that touch on the relationship between Morrill and his interviewer, Gregory; however, it also raises questions that are much broader than the character and intelligence of these two men. Why did Morrill's story focus on his departure from and return to civilisation, rather than his life as a Birri-gubba man? Did Morrill deliberately shut off difficult questions about love, loyalty, power and happiness as he wrote *Sketch of a Residence* with Gregory? Was the day-to-day life of Morrill as a Birri-gubba man a story that could be told in Queensland in 1863? Indeed, can such story be told today? These are some of the questions that fuel this 'life' of Morrill's story.

Sketch of a Residence is a slender account; it is not difficult to say what it lacks. This makes it all the more important to ask what it *does not* lack—that is, what it contains and emphasises, and why. *Sketch of a Residence* tells Morrill's story in three parts. The first part provides a vivid account of the wreck of the *Peruvian*, the adoption of the castaways by Birri-gubba people, and the deaths of the cabin boy and Captain and Mrs Pitkethly. The second furnishes a rather more reserved account of Morrill's experience of the rapid entry of settlers and their flocks into Birri-gubba country and his 'return to civilisation'. The third and final chapter presents information about Aboriginal life and local natural resources in response to the interests of his anticipated readers. The statement resulting from Morrill's appearance at the Bowen courthouse and several newspaper

34 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 13.

35 Brayshaw, *Well Beaten Paths*, 20; Breslin, *Exterminate with Pride*, 47; Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 24; Moore, *Islanders and Aborigines at Cape York*, 10; Loos, 'Frontier Conflict in the Bowen District', 23–24, 37.

reports of his appearances at Bowen and Rockhampton also favoured a three-part narrative: Morrill's departure from civilisation and his return, followed by a smattering of information about his adoptive people and their country. Though *Sketch of a Residence* added much to these shorter reports, it followed a similar pattern.

As Morrill told his story, this time with the help of the colonists, there was a superfluity of reasons for it to focus on the story of his crossing out of, and crossing back into, civilisation. Like the corroborees that had facilitated his adoption by the Birri-gubba 17 years earlier, Morrill's storytelling was a vital part of his re-adoption. British historian Linda Colley, making a study of the narratives of British captives and renegades in Morocco, southern India and Canada from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, found that, for those absent without leave from European civilisation, publishing a first person account of their experiences played a significant role in their re-admission into the fold of Empire as moral, social and intellectual beings. Accounts of the events of 'capture' by, and 'escape' from, the natives were essential ingredients that had become part of a lively literary tradition.³⁶ In stories like Morrill's, then, the conceptual centre was 'civilisation'—the British Empire or Europe more broadly—being the shared home of the storyteller and audience. Amid the ongoing warlike situation in the region, the interest in Morrill's journey out of and back to civilisation had an urgency about it, but one that was admixed with fascination.

The first task of *Sketch of a Residence* is to locate Morrill as an Englishman.³⁷ The reader is presented with a portrait of Morrill as a young man in Essex with a 'restless disposition', who found his father's engineering workshop 'too confining'. The Blackwater River, passing close by his home, offered continual temptation to 'get amongst the shipping'. Short voyages around the British Isles did not sate his appetite, and he sought employment on the open ocean.³⁸ Morrill's own adventuresome thoughts as he breathed the salt air may have been fanned by the burgeoning genre of seagoing adventure, inspired and typified by Daniel Defoe's story of

36 Colley, 'Going Native, Telling Tales', 170–74.

37 Corroboration of Morrill's identity and story was to come later; the account of his family, situation of birth, childhood and career as a sailor that was printed in 1863 was reliant on his own recall and the trust of his readers. The 1865–66 edition of the pamphlet corrected the spelling of Morrill's remembered name; apparently his real name had been Murrells. Gregory, *Sketch of the Residence of James Morrill*, 3.

38 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 3.

Robinson Crusoe, as truly popular literature began to take off in the mid-nineteenth century.³⁹ Certainly, contemporaries saw in Morrill something of a Crusoe. Morrill was of the 'middle state' of life, with prospects for a comfortable existence if he was willing to apply himself, as Crusoe's father prudently counselled his son. However, like Crusoe, Morrill's head was 'filled very early with rambling thoughts' and he would be 'satisfied with nothing but going to sea', signing up to a seagoing vessel on the spur of the moment without informing his mother or father.⁴⁰ By the time Morrill was telling his story in the mid-nineteenth century, De Foe's 150-year-old story was both a 'charming book of [one's] childhood' as well as the story of a wanderer whose moral fibre would be put to the test.⁴¹ Knowing something of his class and family life, and his route into the unknown, was essential background information for this test: how would Morrill measure up?

The possibility of mismanagement hung over shipwrecks and their aftermath, and so did a suspicion of selfish acts on the part of those who may have survived at the expense of others; in particular, the humanity of survivors who stooped to eat the flesh of their dead companions.⁴² Morrill's accounts of the wreck of the *Peruvian* were, in part, a testament to honourable conduct: the captain's, the Birri-gubba people's and his own. *Sketch of a Residence* gives a powerful rendition of the wreck and the long, soul-destroying voyage on the raft, not only provoking sympathy, but also attesting to the durability of the survivors' morality. The dead are accounted for as far as Morrill's memory can stretch, and he describes good government on the raft via the democratic division of provisions and the respectful sea burials of the perished (with some flesh taken as bait to catch sharks).⁴³ This was of acute interest to families of the other crew and passengers. The story quickly reached Perthshire, Scotland, where

39 Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire*, 10–12, 23–28.

40 *The South Australian Advertiser*, 6 October 1863. At least one northern newspaper story was headed 'The New Robinson Crusoe', *Queensland Guardian*, 17 March 1863; De Foe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, 2–5. Colley noted that British narratives of captivity and return became 'coloured' by the novels of Defoe, Swift and others. See Colley, 'Going Native, Telling Tales', 174.

41 *The South Australian Advertiser*, 6 October 1863; Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire*, 25–26; Green, *The Robinson Crusoe Story*, 22.

42 An unwise and 'apathetic' captain might bear much of the blame, as in the wreck of the *All Serene* en route to Sydney from Vancouver. See *Empire*, 21 June 1864, 2. The survivors of the wreck of the *Elvina* were apparently driven to eat those who had died as they drifted. See *Geelong Advertiser*, 6 October 1864, 2. Kay Schaffer understood Eliza Fraser's initial testimonies as centring on her role as captain's wife, defending the integrity of her husband's good government. Schaffer, *In the Wake of First Contact*, 34–39.

43 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 7.

Captain and Mrs Pitkethly had left family behind. It was also read by the friends and family of the distinguished Mr and Mrs Wilmot, and Mr Quarry, passengers of the *Peruvian* who had departed Melbourne for India never to be heard from again.⁴⁴ On adoption by the Birri-gubba clan, the narrating voice is equally concerned to vouch for the courage and dignity of the captain and his wife, and the kindness and generosity of their Aboriginal rescuers. Morrill's anticipated readership had particular concerns about the fate of white women among savages; for example, Eugene Fitzalan, botanist and early resident of Bowen, versified about the 'bitter feelings' in Mrs Pitkethly's breast as she was forced to 'herd with human beings / Little raised above the beast'.⁴⁵ The narrating voice in *Sketch of a Residence* assured the reader that his Aboriginal rescuers respected the privacy (after establishing her gender) and married status of this sole white woman survivor.⁴⁶

After several months, just as the four survivors had begun to pick up the local language, a large event was hosted by their adoptive clans. When visitors from the south returned home, the four slunk away with them, apparently hoping they might make contact with ships or a settlement of some kind. It was there, away from Mt Elliot, that the cabin boy and Captain and Mrs Pitkethly died. Morrill stated that he had ensured a Christian-style burial for the couple (according to this narrative, the usual Birri-gubba practice was to cremate the dead). Feeling 'lonely', he then decided to return to his original adoptive clan on Mt Elliot, 'thinking they would take more care of me'. Whereas, in the eyes of those who had adopted the other three castaways, Morrill was responsible for their deaths, Morrill's own adoptive clan protected him from the 'crack on the head' that the other clan felt he deserved.⁴⁷ With the strongly Christian gaze of Captain and Mrs Pitkethly extinguished, *Sketch of a Residence* leaves off its conscientious account of Morrill's movements, and the reader loses sight of him for more than a decade. Morrill had acquitted his responsibilities to the dead as best he was able. More broadly, in the moral courtroom

44 *Queensland Guardian*, 17 March 1863.

45 Eugene Fitzalan, 'Lines', as reproduced in Bowen Historical Society, *James Morrill: His Life and Adventures*, 1–3. Fitzalan wrote this verse some time before his death in 1911. See also *Queensland Guardian*, 17 March 1863, in which Morrill seems to have been asked about the preservation of Mrs Pitkethly's dignity.

46 Darian-Smith, "'Rescuing" Barbara Thompson'. The reader is assured that Mrs Pitkethly died uncorrupted, very soon after her husband, Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 10, 12–13.

47 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 12–13.

of the British Empire of the mid-nineteenth century, the narrative had established that Morrill's defection from civilisation was not deliberate, but was the result of catastrophe.⁴⁸

When the account resumed, a fresh project was at hand. Surveys of the coast around Cape Cleveland had begun in the late 1850s, and settlers and native police detachments had begun to venture into the hinterland soon after the establishment of Bowen in 1861. Why was it that Morrill had not 'given himself up' until more than a year later? Under cross-examination at Bowen, Morrill insisted that he had known of white men in the region for only one month before his appearance.⁴⁹ In the interview at Rockhampton, he was more vocal about the dangers involved in his position. He was highly cautious about approaching white men as he expected to be recognised as an Aboriginal man and shot summarily, for 'that is the ordinary salutation an Aboriginal gets from a white man'. Openly seeking information from the Birri-gubba about the settlers in this warlike situation also had its dangers, and Morrill said that he felt it necessary to maintain a semblance of indifference about the possibility of meeting the colonists.⁵⁰ The second chapter of *Sketch of a Residence* gives a careful account of Morrill's near misses with reconnaissance and settlement parties, his attempts to catch up with them and his explanations to Aboriginal associates of his desire to meet with the newcomers.⁵¹ Most significantly, an encounter between a government schooner, the *Spitfire*, and a Birri-gubba group had been officially reported as an attack repulsed, followed by a subhuman cacophony on shore as the boat retreated. Morrill provided another side to the story. According to him, the Birri-gubba approached the *Spitfire* party to tell them about Morrill, as he had asked them to do whenever they encountered white men; yet:

48 Kay Schaffer found that John Curtis constructed a courtroom-like narrative in his *Shipwreck of the Stirling Castle* (1837–38)—the narrator is the counsel and judge and the reader part of the jury, sitting in judgment on Eliza Fraser's negotiation of the civilised and the savage. Schaffer, *In the Wake of First Contact*, 66–67.

49 *The Courier*, 11 March 1863, 2.

50 *Queensland Guardian*, 17 March 1863.

51 For example, on one occasion, Morrill spied a ship, but 'she was too far out for me to attract her attention'. On another occasion, his people came in contact with a party that landed near Cape Cleveland, but Morrill himself was on Mt Elliot. Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 13–14.

Nothing is said in the report about shooting the natives, but one ... stout, able-bodied blackfellow, a friend of mine, was shot dead by some one in the boat, and another was wounded; and the hideous yelling was the noise they usually make over their dead.⁵²

Morrill's counter-reportage was subversive, suggesting that even government parties were not honest about their dealings with Aboriginal people, and that they might shoot too readily. It was also subversive in that it vouched for the gentleness and goodwill of the Aboriginal men involved. At the same time, it formed part of Morrill's defence against the potential accusation that he had participated in attacks on British parties, or that he had known about the settlements and could have made himself known to colonists sooner than he had. In Ross Gibson's view, this was the key to the colonists' nervousness about Morrill; his story provided a glimpse of Aboriginal meetings, movements and trade in knowledge. There was no simple, silent wilderness occupying the spaces beyond settlement; instead, there was a 'coherent confederacy of Aboriginal intelligence' abuzz with information.⁵³ Morrill was able to live as a respected, married man in Bowen for the short time left to him. *Sketch of a Residence* perhaps helped to form a foundation for this new life by ascribing humane, yet non-partisan, motives to Morrill and giving an account of the uses to which he put his knowledge of the colonists as he watched them from the other side of the frontier (if, indeed, that is what he did).

Morrill had already answered to representatives of the Crown at Bowen, Rockhampton and Brisbane. By the time he was retelling his story with Gregory, the need to testify, and to demonstrate his own integrity and innocence, was less urgent; however, it may have been significant on another level. The rituals that might be necessary to ensure a man's re-adoption following an extended period in 'savage' society are exemplified by the experience of Narcisse Pelletier, a young French castaway who lived with the Sandbeach people of Cape York for 17 years. According to local tradition, Pelletier was subject to exorcism by a priest at Saint-Gilles; despite his return to France, his family wished to return him more completely to the Catholic beliefs of his childhood. Morrill's rebirth into

52 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 14. *Sketch of a Residence* includes an extract from the Spitfire's official report, 15–16 September 1860, presumably located and copied by the journalist or his assistants. Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 13–14.

53 Gibson, *Seven Versions*, 88. For a closer examination of what can be known about Birri-gubba knowledge networks in that period, and how Morrill may have participated in them, see Breslin, *James Morrill*.

the Christian universe was less extreme, but no less significant; he gave a public profession of his faith in Christ and was re-baptised.⁵⁴ He also returned to the world of science via an excursion into the forest with a visiting French botanist, and translating some of the knowledge he had learned from Birri-gubba teachers into Latin plant names and points of interest for the scientific reader.⁵⁵ No less important was his rebirth into the republic of letters, the rational and commercial world of the press, and the reconstitution of his British self under the gaze of the reading public—something that Morrill achieved with Gregory's assistance through *Sketch of a Residence*. Certainly, he 'became something of a celebrity', as the Bowen Historical Society observed in 2002. Yet, his repeated storytelling was not simply a matter of responding to the invitations of the interested; it was also a complex cultural and social process, no less vital to Morrill's survival and prosperity than the assimilative 'corroborees' had been 17 years earlier.

If there were reasons for Morrill's narrative to focus closely on his crossings out of and back into civilisation, there are also possible reasons why his story of life as a Birri-gubba man could *not* be told. First, Gregory published a story of a 'residence' centred on a narrative void: 'I lived on year after year in the tribe as one of themselves—nothing particularly happening'. Second, bringing to life in story form any of the desires of his Birri-gubba life may have been inimical to his published narrative's main objective: his re-assimilation into the British world.

Day-to-day life is not the stuff of adventure, no matter where it is lived. In J. M. Coetzee's novel *Foe*, the narrator is a female companion to Crusoe and Friday who realises the narrative failure of their story while the trio are still marooned on the island. She worries: 'let it not ... come to pass that Cruso [sic] is saved ... for the world expects stories from its adventurers'. The problem was a lack of willpower resulting from a contentment of sorts:

There was too little desire in Cruso and Friday: too little desire to escape, too little desire for a new life. Without desire, how is it possible to make a story?⁵⁶

54 Anderson, *Pelletier*, 171–72. Rev. B. G. Wilson, a Baptist Minister, apparently performed the service. Gregory, *Sketch of the Residence of James Morrill*, 17.

55 Dortins, 'James Morrill: Shipwreck Survivor', 67–88.

56 Coetzee, *Foe*, 34, 88.

Part of Coetzee's irony is, perhaps, that most versions of Robinson Crusoe's story are replete with utterly tedious detail about day-to-day survival. Constant Merland, presenting the story of Narcisse Pelletier to the French public in 1876, grappled with a similar problem. He wrote that 'although their tribe is constantly on the move, the life of the savages is generally uniform and monotonous', and that Pelletier, like Crusoe and Morrill, had settled into these new patterns of life.⁵⁷ Merland attempted to solve this literary problem by moving quickly from castaway narrative to ethnography. Once his subject's clothes had rotted away, he relinquished Pelletier's personal story and allowed it to merge with the textures of Sandbeach life:

It is no longer the cabin boy Narcisse Pelletier who will be the subject of our discussion but Amglo, citizen of the tribe of Ohantaala. His personality will often recede into the background as we turn to the description of the customs, habits and beliefs of tribes among whom civilisation has not yet penetrated.⁵⁸

He was no longer present in Merland's story as someone with his own desires; in fact, as Merland's translator Stephanie Anderson observes, it was 'as if Pelletier [was] in suspended animation as his years of residence with the Sandbeach people' passed.⁵⁹

Morrill and Gregory solved this same problem of narrative by creating a there-and-back story linked to the desire to survive—first the shipwreck and later the coming of the colonists to the north. Commentary on day-to-day Birri-gubba life was largely left to a separate chapter at the end. This problem of narrative, and its solution, was tied up with what sorts of desires could be spoken of, and heard, as Morrill (and, of course, Pelletier too) told his story. In *Sketch of a Residence*, there are glimpses of Morrill acting on Birri-gubba motivations. For example, in responding to a question about whether the country might be gold bearing, Morrill recalled that 'once when out, looking for coloured earths to paint myself with', he found an interesting, heavy piece of rock. Likewise, while summarising the knowledge he had of white settlement in the area, he explained: 'four stray cattle were seen in our district, but I was on the coast with ... my brother-in-law, making a possum skin rug'.⁶⁰ Like

57 Anderson, *Pelletier*, 182.

58 *Ibid.*, 156.

59 *Ibid.*, 41.

60 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 14, 24.

Morrill's brush with Birri-gubba justice after Captain Pitkethly's death, these asides give a fleeting glimpse of his negotiation of kin relationships and his participation in the economic and ceremonial happenings of his adoptive people. This was a life no doubt full of 'desires' capable of driving interesting stories during the course of his 17 years residence; however, since these stories did not find a place in *Sketch of a Residence*, we can only reach towards them via imagination and empathy.

As he prepared to return to Inkerman Station on 26 January 1863, Morrill's adoptive family wept; they did not believe they would ever see him again. *Sketch of a Residence* recounts, in Morrill's first person narrating voice:

The remembrance of their past kindness came full upon me and quite overpowered me. There was a short struggle between the feeling of love I had for my old friends and companions and the desire once more to live a civilized life, which can be better imagined than described.⁶¹

The outcome of this struggle was Morrill's return to colonial life. According to Linda Colley, this was the 'imperially correct' outcome.⁶² Yet, it was not enough that Morrill had made this decision; his audiences were also listening out for his *desire*. In fact, his contemporaries had difficulty understanding how it had been suspended for so long. A correspondent to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, though he acknowledged that it would have been almost impossible for Morrill to reach the southern colonies, marvelled that 'he does not seem to have been ever inspired with a desire to force his way on foot down to the settled districts'. The question of why his fellow survivors had not lived long after their adoption by Birri-gubba people was readily answered; they had died from 'sickness of the heart, and hope deferred'—they could not reconcile themselves to life away from civilisation. Inexplicably, Morrill survived.⁶³

Morrill's published narrative is not unlike the waterfowl he liked to snare in the Burdekin wetlands; above the waterline, it seems to make its way without effort, yet, beneath the surface, webbed feet paddle furiously (though not necessarily consciously) working on Morrill's disentanglement from Birri-gubba kin and lifeways. In *Sketch of a Residence*, the physical and social processes of his passage out of 'civilisation' are reversed as he is restored to it. Discovering Morrill on the beach, the Birri-gubba men had

61 Ibid., 16.

62 Colley, 'Going Native, Telling Tales', 176.

63 *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 March 1863, 6.

transcended mutual fearfulness and begun to assimilate him by making him naked, sleeping alongside him and providing him with food. The first impulses of Hatch and Wilson, after they lowered their guns, were to offer him bread, tea and clothing. In both cases, Morrill then began the hard work of overcoming a language barrier and integrating himself into the community's economy.⁶⁴ *Sketch of a Residence* invites us to think that our protagonist is arriving, as he speaks, back at 'square one', an uncomplicated English sailor. However, we should not be lulled into forgetting how culturally complicated an English sailor might be, how he might find resonances in Aboriginal ways of thinking, and how peculiar the culture and language of the colonists was. Novelist Alan Garner instructively imagined William Buckley travelling along an intriguing cultural and linguistic spiral as his world view as a Cheshireman, re-wrought via shipboard and convict life, became shot through with Wathaurong ideas via the warp and weft of his 32 years living around Port Phillip Bay.⁶⁵

In the most literal sense, Morrill was 'restored' to a frontier town that was not even dreamed of when he crawled onto the beach in 1846, a town full of strangers. Yet, as Morrill himself anticipated by announcing himself a 'British object', *Sketch of a Residence* presumed that readers near and far would understand that Port Denison, Rockhampton and Brisbane represented the bosom of empire. It was this home, rather than his family in Essex or the familiar shipboard life, to which this narrative safely delivered him.⁶⁶

At the opening of the third chapter, Morrill's narrating voice proclaimed:

The aboriginals among whom I have been living are a fine race of people, as to strength, size and general appearance; but like those of other parts of this colony, they are treacherous, jealous and cunning.⁶⁷

This lofty comparative perspective is hardly one that Morrill himself could have gained. His Australian experience, apart from Birri-gubba life, consisted of a few days in Sydney, a short stop in Rockhampton and

64 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 2. Morrill was at first dependent on his Birri-gubba adopters to feed and care for him, but, once he recovered, he began to pull his weight by working, finding the snaring of waterfowl particularly satisfying. When he wrote *Sketch of a Residence*, Morrill was not yet financially independent; he hoped his published account 'may yield me what I much need—the means of living'. Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 12.

65 Garner, *Strandloper*.

66 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 10. Morrill's family in Essex were amazed to hear that he was alive and expressed a desire to be reunited with him. *The Courier*, 19 August 1863, 2.

67 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 17.

a few weeks in Brisbane, and he had had little leisure time for reading the papers or comparing notes with others. With this statement, Morrill became a civilised man looking down on savages. As much as his journey into Bowen, this statement returned him to civilisation.

The third chapter presents a brief account of the Birri-gubba people. It is arranged according to ethnographic categories (e.g., familial structures, language and diet) and attempts to provide information of interest to pastoralists and miners.⁶⁸ Looking back, Morrill's involvement in Birri-gubba life is converted into information. As the narrating voice explains how fire is made, how children are raised and how the dead are honoured, we can no longer see Morrill participating. All his adoptive kin—the brother-in-law with whom he made a possum skin rug, his friend shot dead by the *Spitfire* party—are absorbed into a 'race' and into the collective third person: 'they have sunken eyes, broad noses ... they get their living by fishing, hunting, digging ... they think they have power over the rain'. Morrill's own role as kin to the dead and, possibly, a father to children, is not acknowledged. If he had once partaken of ceremony to make the rain (durgun) come or go, the third chapter of *Sketch of a Residence* gives the impression that he, as a Christian and civilised man, had never considered these beliefs plausible.⁶⁹ His observations are generally sympathetic, but they are just that, observations. Morrill's 17 years 'residence', advertised in the title, becomes a mere 'sojourn' in a British life, as James Bonwick put it. He becomes something of an explorer-in-retrospect, returned from an expedition from which he was always destined to return, and on which he was always destined to report.⁷⁰

History-makers have continued to disentangle Morrill's information from his Birri-gubba experiences. A local history published in 1988 remarked that 'as is understandable in one who lived off the land for such a long time, Morrill's knowledge of the vegetation and indeed the fauna, was, by the layman's standards, prolific'. The author cited botanist M. Thozet's observation that 'had explorers Burke and Wills had the benefit of Morrill's knowledge of indigenous foods, their own safe return would have been more than a probability'.⁷¹ It is well known that Burke rejected

68 Ibid., 18–20.

69 Ibid., 21–23.

70 Bonwick, *The Wild White Man*, 17.

71 London, *The Burdekin*, 72–73. See also Kerr, *Black Snow*, 15. Thozet accompanied Morrill on a tour of local food and medicinal plants in March 1863.

Aboriginal assistance when it may well have saved his life.⁷² Morrill was neither scientist nor layman (and he was certainly no Crusoe inventing knowledge in isolation); instead, he learned from Birri-gubba teachers within adoptive relationships. Noel Loos found *Sketch of a Residence* a valuable source for his account of the Aboriginal people of the Burdekin region, along with the accounts of coastal surveyor Joseph Beete Jukes and Curr, a sympathetic pastoralist. However, to show how much more might have been documented, Loos assessed the value and nature of Morrill and Gregory's third chapter against the thorough, methodical anthropological work of Ronald and Catherine Berndt and other twentieth-century authorities on Aboriginal life. In this light, Loos found Morrill's account lacking in detail and neglectful of important matters, such as the governing structures of his Birri-gubba clan.⁷³ Yet, it must be remembered that Morrill's participation in ethnography was quite different from that of his contemporaries Jukes and Curr (and, most certainly, from that of professional anthropologists more than a century later). Whereas for them, ethnography involved documenting what they gleaned from the exercise of curiosity, sympathy and cross-cultural communication, for Morrill, it signalled the transformation of his Birri-gubba knowledge into something that could be understood, and used, by his re-adoptive community.

Morrill told his story as conflict continued around him and as he became further embroiled in it. In the interview reported in the *Rockhampton Bulletin*, he had offered to act as an interpreter and to share his knowledge of the country with the settlers.⁷⁴ He apparently set off for Brisbane intent on dialogue with the government about the best way in which he could act both to 'protect the aboriginal blacks' and 'make the white settler feel secure'.⁷⁵ Morrill's survival and his testimony to Aboriginal kindness did kindle hope in some breasts that conciliation might be possible in the north, a hope that many had seen as vain after the killing of settlers who had shown friendliness and compassion towards Aboriginal people at Hornet Bank and Cullin-la-ringo in 1857 and 1861.⁷⁶ In some readers, his story inspired a sense of obligation to prevent unnecessary violence against the Birri-gubba and their neighbours, as these same people had succoured

72 Fitzpatrick, 'Burke, Robert O'Hara (1821–1861)'.

73 Loos, 'Frontier Conflict in the Bowen District', 16–17, 23–24, 37.

74 *Queensland Guardian*, 17 March 1863.

75 *The Argus*, 18 March 1863, 6, printing correspondence from the *Rockhampton Bulletin* office.

76 Loos, 'Frontier Conflict in the Bowen District', 78, 80.

a white man for so many years.⁷⁷ Yet, others cautioned against being lulled into a false sense of security by Morrill's testimonies while Aboriginal groups continued to perpetrate 'outrages' on an almost daily basis. One pastoralist promised to shoot Morrill if he attempted friendly intercourse with the Aboriginal people anywhere near his property.⁷⁸ In the midst of an extended discussion of the native police in the Queensland Legislative Assembly, Member for West Moreton, Dr Henry Challinor, suggested that Morrill might do good employed as an interpreter explaining British law to Aboriginal people in the north; however, the discussion quickly returned to the remuneration of the native police and the most effective way of 'dispersing' Aboriginal groups on pastoral runs.⁷⁹

In the event, Morrill's potential as a go-between appears to have been little utilised. The *Rockhampton Bulletin* implied that authorities had deliberately hobbled Morrill by putting him in 'charge of colonial candles and dispensation of official soap' in the customs service; the reporter hoped that Morrill would be able to exceed those responsibilities.⁸⁰ Having carefully considered the economics of the region's settlement, Loos suggested that government's lack of interest in Morrill's potential as a negotiator reflected its unwillingness to make a change that would incur any additional costs.⁸¹ On one occasion, Morrill acted as a guide on an exploratory mission that resulted in the founding of Cardwell (a port town about 360 kilometres north of Bowen). Among the exploration party was George Elphinstone Dalrymple, founder of Bowen. Dalrymple was among those published letter writers refuting Morrill's positive accounts of Aboriginal character. Morrill's central role in the undertaking was to explain to the Aboriginal people of the envisioned port that Europeans were taking their land and that they should vacate it.⁸² Given these circumstances, the experience must have been highly ambivalent for Morrill; yet, his diary records a conference just prior to the return of the

77 See, for example, *Empire*, 19 March 1863, 2; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 March 1863, 2; *The Courier*, 23 March 1863, 3; 31 March 1863, 3; 15 July 1863, 2; *Port Denison Times*, 4 October 1865, 2. Several of these correspondents were writing from Sydney.

78 *The Courier*, 20 March 1863, 3; 19 June 1863, 2.

79 *The Courier*, 7 August 1863, 2–3.

80 *The Courier*, 15 May 1863, 3, quoting from the *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 6 May 1863.

81 Loos, 'Frontier Conflict in the Bowen District', 154–55.

82 See Maynard and Haskins, *Living with the Locals*, 188–89.

exploring party in which a petition to the governor was mooted asking that ‘the land occupied by the present inhabitants’ (i.e., the Aboriginal inhabitants) be withdrawn from the first land sale.⁸³

Not all of Morrill’s contemporaries were convinced that the struggle over his loyalties had been as short, or as readily resolved, as it appeared in *Sketch of a Residence*. Indeed, even within that narrative, his desire to return to civilisation was tepid, an ambivalent mixture of ‘hope’ and ‘unease’. Morrill’s palate betrayed him; the roots he was offered on first meeting the Birri-gubba were described as enjoyable and nutty, whereas the bread he was given by Hatch and Wilson stuck in his throat and the tea was too sweet. The bread and tea were also redundant, as Morrill and his group ‘had caught 20 small grey wallabies’ that day.⁸⁴ Gregory, preparing a new edition of *Sketch of a Residence* in 1896, apparently felt that Morrill’s joy on returning to British cuisine required augmentation. He embellished Morrill’s first meal with the stockmen with the jubilant ejaculation: ‘Oh, for that supreme moment of my life, with knife and fork in hand once more, and that salt and pepper, can I ever forget it!’⁸⁵

The report of Morrill’s interview at Rockhampton described his life with the Birri-gubba as a state of ‘captivity’ and regarded his meeting with Hatch and Wilson as an escape ‘by strategem [sic]’.⁸⁶ However, some of those who met and conversed with Morrill at Bowen were convinced neither that he had ‘come in’ to the settlement of his own accord, nor that he wished to stay. Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior speculated:

My own impression is that Morrill knew about the whites being in the neighbourhood long before he came in and was either detained forcibly or had become reconciled to his savage life and attachments and only came in when he was afraid of being shot by his own countrymen.⁸⁷

Had he ‘returned’ not (or not only) because he wished to leave his Birri-gubba clan and live once more a British life, but because he meant to intercede on their behalf or because he was sent by a council of Elders? A correspondent to the *Port Denison Times* considered Morrill a ‘deputation to the whites’ sent by the Aboriginal people of the Kennedy

83 James Morrill’s diary, Monday 14 January 1864, quoted in Bowen Historical Society, *The Story of James Morrill*.

84 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 10, 14, 16.

85 Gregory, *Narrative of James Murrell’s*, 31.

86 *Queensland Guardian*, 17 March 1863.

87 Murray-Prior, Private Letter Book, 21. See also Carrington, *Colonial Adventures*, 165–66.

District to offer an agreement about a division of land. On his way back north, Morrill left the *Rockhampton Bulletin* office with the impression that he was en route to see his Birri-gubba clan, not only to deliver presents from the government, but also to report back to them more generally. His obituary in the *Port Denison Times* suggested that he may not have been entirely trusted by colonial authorities, as there was some fear that he ‘might again join the natives and act, perhaps, in unison with them’.⁸⁸

Morrill was about 20 years old when he began his Birri-gubba life and, despite occasional sightings of ships, for the most part he must have resigned himself to living out his life in his adoptive community, committing himself to Birri-gubba lifeways and connections. Historian and Worimi man John Maynard and historian Victoria Haskins, looking at adoptive relationships partly from the point of view of the structure of Aboriginal communities, estimated that Morrill was well integrated into Birri-gubba life (after all, he spoke no less than eight dialects of the local language); however, they wondered about his position of ‘acceptance’ as a Birri-gubba man. As noted by Maynard and Haskins, there was no indication that Morrill bore the ceremonial cicatrices on his body that would have signified initiation, and thus full manhood status, among his adoptive people.⁸⁹

In the minds of Morrill’s colonial contemporaries, the question of his status as a Birri-gubba man was closely connected with the question of whether he had had a wife or female companion and, in turn, with his ongoing loyalties. At Rockhampton, Morrill explained the polygamous practices of his adoptive people, and the early age at which girls were often married. Rather coyly, it was reported that he had ‘fought shy of the seductions of female blandishments’ (i.e., the flattery and persuasion of Birri-gubba women).⁹⁰ In *Sketch of a Residence*, Morrill is said to have told his adoptive people ‘from the first that I had a wife and two children, knowing they would not think it so strange at my wanting to get away’. Later editions added: ‘and because I could the better excuse myself from being too closely linked in with them by taking a wife, which I knew

88 *Port Denison Times*, 4 October 1865, 2; *The Courier*, 15 May 1863, 3, with a report taken from the *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 6 May 1863; *Port Denison Times*, 1 November 1865, 2. For further examination of the clues to Morrill’s movements and interactions with locals after his return to Bowen in mid-1863, see Breslin, *James Morrill*.

89 Maynard and Haskins, *Living with the Locals*, 191–92.

90 *Queensland Guardian*, 17 March 1863.

would be dangerous in many ways'.⁹¹ This danger may well have been a real one. Morrill stated elsewhere that the 'wars, fights and feuds' of his adoptive people were typically waged over wives.⁹² However, it is equally possible that he felt a sense of danger around this issue as he told his story. One of the returned British subjects Linda Colley discussed, Thomas Pellow, claimed in his memoirs that, after being allocated a wife from the Moroccan sultan's harem, he rejected seven black women and seven 'mulattos' before being offered the white-skinned woman he took as his wife. Colley saw this as 'a concession to opinion in England, where Pellow was by then desperately trying to reintegrate himself'.⁹³

As we have seen, Thomas Murray-Prior pressed Morrill on this point, telling him he could not believe that he would not have had a 'lady love' among the Birri-gubba. Morrill replied that his claim in *Sketch of a Residence* was that he had had no wife. However, he had frequently been loaned the wives of others, a convention that caused no ill feeling between men. Murray-Prior posited that he had been 'a greater favourite than was good for his constitution'.⁹⁴ Attestations to the presence of Morrill's Aboriginal descendants in the region today are sometimes accompanied by similar suggestions that his sexual involvement in Birri-gubba life was notable. Henry Young, a local historian residing in Bowen, told me that he knows about eight people locally who believe they are descended from Morrill's children with Birri-gubba women and that he 'wasn't a bad old bull'.⁹⁵

Speculations about Morrill's allegiances were not unconnected with the settlers' own feelings about their part in the violence of the frontier. George Carrington wrote about his experiences in North Queensland in the mid-1860s on his return to London, and was frank about the violence involved in staking claim to this country. He let his reader in on the true meaning of the colonising verb 'to disperse (i.e. to shoot) the blacks'. With a heavy sense of irony, he discussed the virtues of the native police

91 Gregory, *Sketch of the Residence of James Morrill*, 14.

92 Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 18.

93 Colley, 'Going Native, Telling Tales', 170.

94 Murray-Prior, Private Letter Book, 19. Their conversation appears to have been a cordial one. It is not known whether Morrill would have been aware of Murray-Prior's involvement in the retaliatory action that followed the killing of the Fraser family by Aboriginal people at Hornet Bank in 1857. McKay, 'Writing From the Contact Zone', 57–58.

95 Henry Young, in conversation with the author, 23 November 2010.

who were not 'wanting in zeal, and are not likely to err on the side of injudicious mercy'. He implied that Aboriginal women were killed as the surest way of eliminating the race.⁹⁶

Carrington, who had been tramping along the coast looking for shepherding work, recalled stopping at one station where he was offered a job, only to discover that he was to replace a shepherd killed days before by the 'blacks'; no-one had gone out to look for the body.⁹⁷ He took a similar job at the next station. One day, out alone with the sheep, his horse and his gun, Carrington spied movement in a nearby patch of grass and, without thinking, shot twice. He had shot a man. He approached and the man was still alive but seemed fatally wounded, so he shot him again, in the head. He asked the reader what else he could have done; was this not the kindest—the only—course of action? Carrington turned almost immediately to Morrill's story. He recalled, from talking to Morrill, that 'he had several wives, and, I suppose, would have spent the rest of his life with them had it not been for an accident'. This 'accident' was his meeting with the stockmen Hatch and Wilson. 'After talking a while he wished to re-join his companions, but his new friends prevented him, and he was sent down to Port Denison.' Carrington's Morrill 'did not live long, and would much have preferred going back to his wild life with the blacks, but one of his wives came to inform him that, should he return, the blacks would kill him'.⁹⁸ Morrill's story seemed to speak to Carrington as he recalled his own part in the larger 'accident' that was the beginnings of pastoralism in North Queensland. His Morrill was caught up in a personal tragedy, its push and pull meshed with the tensions of a warlike situation, but also strongly hitched to a universal humanity, as Carrington felt he was.⁹⁹

The reported visit to Morrill by his wife, which apparently closed his relations with the Birri-gubba, had a melancholic resonance for Carrington as he remembered his own experiences; yet, this does not foreclose the

96 Carrington, *Colonial Adventures*, 151–53.

97 *Ibid.*, 156–57.

98 *Ibid.*, 163–65.

99 With some similarity, W. Robertson, in his 'Coo-ee' talks of the 1920s, concluded Morrill's story with the account of the fate of a friend with whom he had once visited 'the remnants of Murrell's tribe', and who was always on 'good terms with the aborigines'. The friend's unrelated family tragedy evokes feelings similar to those Robertson and his listeners might have felt towards Morrill's kin (but displaced from them). Robertson, *Coo-ee Talks*, 147. Frank Reid reported in 1929 that some of the old-timers in Bowen remembered how Morrill 'used to relate some very touching incidents concerning that race, which often brought tears to their eyes'. *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 2 October 1929, 9.

possibility of Morrill receiving such a message of renouncement. For Bruce Breslin, writing in 1992, Morrill's story formed a window onto the dangers and uncertainties of the North Queensland frontier. He believed that news of Morrill's involvement in the colonising activities of the settlers, including the founding of Cardwell, which did involve some conflict, would have travelled fast among the Aboriginal peoples of the Herbert–Burdekin region. Breslin understood Carrington's story of the final spousal visit as reflecting Morrill's own anguish, the open 'psychological wounds' that would lead to his early death in 1865.¹⁰⁰ Morrill's story, even as he told it himself, became an entanglement of history and feeling, allegory and aspiration, laid over with shifting patterns of the said, the unsaid and the unsayable.

100 Breslin, *Exterminate with Pride*, 81–82. It is not clear whether the wife's visit is held by Breslin to be an occurrence in fact that *caused* Morrill's anguish, or a story told by him to Carrington that *expressed* his feelings. In *Sketch of a Residence*, the Birri-gubba and their southern neighbours seemed to keep a close eye on Morrill once they realised the extent of his intimacy with the ways of the newcomers; on his departure, some apparently told him to 'go and get drowned with the other white men' in the context of their belief that a great flood was approaching. Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 14–15. Today, although several Birri-gubba clans tell positive stories about Morrill, the Wulgurukaba are apparently hostile to his memory. Russell McGregor, associate professor in history, James Cook University, in conversation with the author, 29 November 2010 (information from Dorothy Savage).

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