

# **ABORIGINAL HISTORY**

Volume forty-three 2019



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Volume forty-three 2019



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P R E S S



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# Articles



# The 1918–19 Influenza pandemic and its impact on Aboriginal people in South Australia

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Tom Gara

**Abstract:** In this paper I discuss the origin and spread of the 1918–19 Influenza pandemic and its impact around the world, particularly on indigenous populations. I document the arrival of the disease in Australia in early 1919, and discuss the efforts made by Commonwealth and state authorities to control its spread, and its impact on Australian society. I then explore the effects of the epidemic on Aboriginal people in South Australia. My research shows that the epidemic had little impact on the more urbanised Aboriginal people in the southern part of the state but caused an alarming number of deaths when it spread to Aboriginal communities along the railway line to Oodnadatta and beyond in the middle of 1919, and when it reached the far west coast of South Australia in August.

## Introduction

The year 2019 marked the centenary of the ‘Spanish’ Influenza pandemic reaching Australia. It is believed that the pandemic of 1918–19 killed at least 40 million people worldwide and perhaps as many as 100 million,<sup>1</sup> easily surpassing the 20 million combatants and civilians who died during the Great War. It was the most lethal pandemic of modern times and, indeed, the most lethal since the Bubonic

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips and Killingray, ‘Introduction’, 4, 10, 39, 132; Johnson and Mueller, ‘Updating the Accounts’, 115.

Plague, or Black Death, of the fourteenth century. While AIDS has caused about 35 million deaths over the last 4 decades, the influenza pandemic may have killed 2 or 3 times that many people in about 18 months.

It was not until the 1930s that influenza was discovered to be caused by a virus, and it was only in the 1990s that research on corpses retrieved from Arctic permafrost, and from tissue samples stored in medical museums, revealed that the 1918–19 Influenza was a mutation of an avian influenza that had adapted to human hosts. Alarming, it was strikingly similar to the H1N1 strain of swine influenza that affected much of the world in 2009.<sup>2</sup>

## Origin and spread of the pandemic

The virulent strain of influenza responsible for so many deaths is believed to have first broken out in August 1918 in military camps in western France and southern England, but there is some evidence that it may have originated in crowded military camps in the United States, before travelling with the troops across the Atlantic to France.<sup>3</sup> The virus spread rapidly throughout the Allied and German armies, killing thousands of troops on both sides of the Western Front. It soon dispersed throughout Europe's civilian population via the railways, roads and waterways, killing more than 2 million people, including about 200,000 in England and Wales, 240,000 in France and a similar number in Germany and perhaps 450,000 in Russia.<sup>4</sup> In Spain about 260,000 people died. That country remained neutral during the war and, unlike most of the combatant nations, did not impose press censorship. News of the ravages of influenza there spread around the world; that is why it became known as 'Spanish flu'.<sup>5</sup> The virus crossed the Atlantic in August and within a few months about 675,000 Americans had died, more than the United States lost in all its wars of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> By the time of the Armistice in November 1918, the virus was raging across the globe, spread across the continents by trains and cars and across the oceans by ships. It is estimated that 18 million people may have died in India and perhaps 10 million in China. In Indonesia the death toll was about 1.5 million. Millions more died across South America and Africa. It is estimated that 300,000 people died in South Africa.<sup>7</sup>

2 Taubenberger et al., 'Reconstruction of the 1918 Influenza Virus'.

3 Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic*, 37–38; Johnson, 'Britain and the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic', 37–46; Erkoreka, 'Origins of the Spanish Influenza Pandemic'.

4 Johnson, 'Britain and the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic', 80.

5 Johnson, 'Britain and the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic', 137–38.

6 Johnson, 'Britain and the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic', 79; Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic*, 207.

7 Johnson, 'Britain and the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic', 78–79.

Most people are familiar with influenza's symptoms: a sore throat, severe cough, shivering fits, headaches and muscular pain, vomiting and diarrhoea. The symptoms of 'Spanish' Influenza were the same, only more severe. The attack commonly lasted 3 or 4 days but it left its victims weak and debilitated for weeks afterwards. However, it was not the influenza that caused the high number of fatalities but the pneumonial complications that developed in about 10 or 20 per cent of cases. In those days, prior to the discovery of antibiotics, the only treatment for pneumonia was complete bed-rest and careful nursing, but even then the mortality rate was usually about 30 per cent.<sup>8</sup> In those flu-sufferers who developed pneumonia, infection attacked the respiratory membranes and blood vessels in the lungs, causing the lungs to fill with blood and fluid. Fever and delirium set in and the patient usually lapsed into a coma. The body began to darken due to greatly reduced blood oxygen levels, and death usually occurred within another day or two. In particularly severe cases, a fit, healthy young man who complained of a sore throat in the morning might lapse into a coma by lunchtime and be dead by nightfall. After death the body would continue to darken and sometimes turned completely black. For this reason the epidemic was sometimes known as the 'Black Flu'.<sup>9</sup> Mortality from influenza is usually confined to the very young and the elderly, but the 1918–19 pandemic caused a disproportionate number of deaths among those aged between 25 and 44, particularly men.<sup>10</sup> Infection rates were relatively low for people aged over 50, possibly the result of immunity acquired through exposure to an earlier pandemic.

When news came in October 1918 from South Africa of the high death toll there, the Australian Government imposed strict quarantine procedures at all ports.<sup>11</sup> Australian troops returning home from the war, especially those aboard ships that stopped in South Africa en route, were quarantined aboard their ships in port or in isolation camps such as Torrens Island, near Port Adelaide, until it was clear that none were infected. While these measures failed to stop the pandemic reaching Australia, they delayed it significantly, by which time its virulence seems to have diminished; the virus had evidently mutated into a less virulent strain than the one that had raged around the world in late 1918.<sup>12</sup>

It was, however, still very dangerous when it reached Australia. About 12,000 Australians died from influenza, including 540 in South Australia.<sup>13</sup> The mortality rate in Australia was about 2.3 deaths per 1,000, the lowest of any Western nation. The rate in South Australia was 1.2 per 1,000, the lowest of any mainland state. Tasmania established its own strict quarantine that caused great disruption to its

8 Rice, *Black November*, 24.

9 Rice, *Black November*, 7, 23–24.

10 Curson and McCracken, 'An Australian Perspective of the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic', 104–5.

11 Cumpston, *Influenza and Maritime Quarantine*; Camm, 'The "Spanish" Influenza Pandemic', 13–14.

12 Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic*, 234; Rice, *Black November*, 200.

13 Commonwealth of Australia, *Official Year Book*, 1920, 1128–9. A more recent estimate puts the death toll in Australia at about 14,500 (Johnson, 'Britain and the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic', 81).

economy, but it emerged at the end of 1919 with the lowest recorded mortality rate in the world.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the New Zealand Government failed to establish any effective quarantine procedures. Influenza slipped into Auckland Harbour in October 1918, when the virus was still at its most virulent, and within 2 months it had killed about 8,000 people, including more than 2,000 Māoris. The mortality rate among non-indigenous New Zealanders was about 6 per 1,000, but for Māori people it was 7 times higher.<sup>15</sup> Where medical care was available, the death rate among Māoris was relatively low; but in isolated communities where nearly everyone was suddenly struck down, leaving no one to care for the sick or provide food and water, whole villages were virtually wiped out.<sup>16</sup>

The influenza pandemic had devastating effects on many of the indigenous communities of the Pacific Ocean that, at that time, still had had relatively little contact with the outside world and thus had little opportunity to acquire immunity to diseases common elsewhere. Influenza reached the island of Guam in October 1918 and most of the American navy personnel became ill. Only one American died, but there were 800 deaths among the local islanders, a mortality rate of 45 per 1,000. In Tahiti there were 600 deaths among the islanders, a mortality rate over 150 deaths per 1,000.<sup>17</sup>

A New Zealand ship, the SS *Talune*, with several infected crew members and passengers on board, sailed into Apia Harbour in Western Samoa in November 1918. The New Zealand authorities there failed to quarantine the ship and over the next 2 months about 7,500 Samoans died, about 20 per cent of the population.<sup>18</sup> Australia despatched a team of doctors and nurses but they could do little to help.<sup>19</sup> The authorities in neighbouring American Samoa established strict quarantine regulations that kept that island group virtually free of influenza. Meanwhile, the *Talune* sailed on, with some infected Samoans on board, to Fiji where 5,000 people died, and to Tonga and Nauru, where thousands more died.<sup>20</sup>

The Australian Government established a policy of 'reverse quarantine' in relation to its Pacific territories. Ships leaving Australian ports for the Pacific had to remain in port until medical authorities were sure there was no infection on board. Australia also established strict quarantine procedures for ships entering ports

14 Rice, *Black November*, 263.

15 Rice, *Black November*, 160–61; Mamelund, 'Geography May Explain Adult Mortality', 48.

16 Rice, *Black November*, 159–83.

17 Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic*, 232; Shanks, Hussell and Brundage, 'Epidemiological Isolation'; Mamelund, 'Geography May Explain Adult Mortality', 48.

18 Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic*, 232.

19 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 November 1918, 6; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 February 1919, 8.

20 Herda, 'Disease and the Colonial Narrative', 135–38; Johnson, 'Britain and the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic', 50–51, 82, 123.

in New Guinea and the other territories. Those procedures prevented influenza reaching New Guinea, and probably saved many thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of lives there.<sup>21</sup>

In Western countries, the mortality rate ranged from about 2 per 1,000 (in Australia) up to 10 per 1,000 (in Italy). The mortality rate for indigenous people was in a different league, ranging from Fiji at 30 per 1,000 and New Zealand Māoris at about 40 deaths per 1,000 up to Western Samoa at 200 per 1,000. In 1947, a United Nations report declared that the epidemic in Western Samoa was ‘one of the most disastrous epidemics recorded anywhere in the world during the present century, so far as the proportion of deaths to the population is concerned’.<sup>22</sup>

## Influenza comes to Australia

Despite the strict quarantine imposed by the Commonwealth Government, the influenza virus arrived in Melbourne in January 1919, probably with troops returning from the war. Some of the troops subsequently travelled home to Sydney, taking the virus with them. Over the next 10 or 11 months, the virus spread, in several waves, across the continent, to all the capital cities and larger regional centres and to many smaller country towns and outback settlements. As I noted earlier, at least 12,000 Australians died from influenza during that period.

New South Wales (NSW) was particularly hard hit by the epidemic, recording more than 6,000 deaths, including about 3,500 deaths in the Sydney metropolitan area. About a third of Sydney’s population became infected; factories, offices and schools were closed, hospitals filled to overflowing, sporting events and religious services were curtailed and victory parades for returning troops were cancelled. The sick were quarantined in their own homes or admitted to isolation hospitals. The mortality rate in NSW was about 3 deaths per 1,000. Inner-city suburbs such as Glebe, Balmain and Redfern recorded rates in excess of 5 deaths per 1,000 but in nearby Homebush the rate rose to nearly 10 deaths per 1,000. North Shore suburbs had mortality rates just below the state average, while exclusive Vaucluse recorded only 3 deaths among its 3,000 residents. In general, mortality rates were lower in the country than in the city, but Newcastle, Broken Hill and other mining towns had high death rates, as did other large country centres such as Lithgow and Goulburn.<sup>23</sup>

21 Burnet and Clarke, *Influenza*, 74; Crosby, *America’s Forgotten Pandemic*, 234; Shanks, Hussell and Brundage, ‘Epidemiological Isolation’.

22 New Zealand History, ‘The 1918 Influenza Pandemic: Page 10 – Influenza in Samoa’, [nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/1918-influenza-pandemic/samoa](http://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/1918-influenza-pandemic/samoa).

23 McQueen, ‘The “Spanish” Influenza Pandemic’; Camm, ‘The “Spanish” Influenza Pandemic’; McCracken and Curson, ‘Flu Downunder’.

By late 1919 the influenza epidemic had abated from most of Australia, but early in 1920 there was another wave that affected many Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait islands and, a few months later, a milder epidemic that struck Sydney and country NSW, and caused a few dozen deaths. These 1920 outbreaks, like others elsewhere in the world at that time, are considered to be the final wave of the 1918–19 pandemic.<sup>24</sup>

## ‘Spanish’ Influenza in South Australia

In 1920, the Registrar-General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in South Australia reported that 532 deaths in 1919, comprising 303 males and 229 females, were the direct result of the influenza epidemic, and he considered that ‘some hundreds’ more were attributable to the effects of influenza.<sup>25</sup> The *Commonwealth Year Book* in 1920 assessed the death toll in South Australia as 540.<sup>26</sup> It appears that neither of these sources included Aboriginal people in their statistics.

Adelaide’s first influenza cases were reported in late January 1919. As Western Australia remained free of the disease, passenger trains were cancelled on the East–West line. Freight trains continued to run between Perth and Adelaide, but the crews were changed at the state border to prevent the infection spreading. A special ward was established at the Adelaide Hospital to care for the sick but the 40 beds there were soon filled and an isolation hospital was hurriedly established by the Central Board of Health in the Exhibition Building on North Terrace.<sup>27</sup> Severely ill patients were sent to the isolation hospital, but less severe cases could remain at home. Doctors and nurses were then in short supply, as many were still to return from military service overseas. With a large proportion of the population ill with influenza and hospitals overflowing, local doctors and nurses worked tirelessly treating the sick.

In Australia it was well-known that the pandemic was having devastating effects around the world. Newspapers regularly reported the mounting death toll in Europe, South Africa and the United States. On 14 February, the *Adelaide Register* published a report from *The Times* of London that estimated that 6 million people had died worldwide from influenza during the preceding 3 months.<sup>28</sup>

24 Crosby, *America’s Forgotten Pandemic*, 203; Erkoreka, ‘Origins of the Spanish Influenza Pandemic’, 190.

25 SA, Registrar-General of Births, Deaths and Marriages, *Annual Report*, 1920, 6.

26 Commonwealth of Australia, *Official Year Book*, 1920, 1129. Woodruff refers to 563 South Australian deaths from Spanish Influenza, but does not cite the source of that information. Woodruff, *Two Million South Australians*, 59.

27 Woodruff, *Two Million South Australians*, 65.

28 *Register*, 14 February 1919, 8.



By the middle of March there were no new cases being reported in South Australia, and it was thought that perhaps the worst was past. To that point there had been only about 30 deaths. Almost immediately, however, there was a severe outbreak in Port Pirie, which had its own sea-links with the eastern states, and a new wave of cases across Adelaide. By the end of April, the isolation hospital in the Exhibition Building was treating more than 250 patients.<sup>29</sup> Newspapers printed weekly reports on the condition of the patients there, with each patient identified by a number so that relatives and friends could keep track. The weekly bulletins also listed the death toll for each week, and the locations of new outbreaks.

The first wave of the flu lasted from February to July and claimed about 300 lives,<sup>30</sup> more than half of them in Adelaide. Working-class areas in the western suburbs and the city's West End had the highest infection rates.<sup>31</sup> There were major outbreaks in the Mid-North, South-East and Yorke Peninsula in April and May. Isolation hospitals had to be established in each town or district suffering an outbreak. Schools, halls or other public buildings were commandeered for the purpose. On Yorke Peninsula, all public events were cancelled to prevent the spread of infection. Port Pirie was particularly hard-hit. The virus appeared there in late March and within 2 weeks there were more than 200 cases, and 19 deaths, including the district nurse. The Central Board of Health ordered the closure of all schools, churches and places of entertainment in the Port Pirie district, and restricted all travel in the area. About 30 people there died during May and June.<sup>32</sup> The virus also spread, probably via train crews, to Peterborough and other railway towns in the Mid-North, and to Broken Hill, where there were at least 60 deaths from influenza between May and October.<sup>33</sup>

The epidemic reached Queensland in May and Western Australia in June, when the flu in South Australia seemed to be abating. However, in August there was another serious outbreak in Adelaide, and by September the virus had spread across much of the state, to the Mid-North, the southern Flinders Ranges, River Murray and Yorke Peninsula. The *Register* on 4 September reported that there were about 200 people ill at Murray Bridge, and more than 60 cases at Orroroo in the Mid-North.<sup>34</sup> There was a late outbreak at Streaky Bay and Denial Bay in early October, but by the end of that month the virus was largely gone from South Australia.

29 Woodruff, *Two Million South Australians*, 72–74.

30 *Register*, 12 August 1919, 4.

31 Kako, 'Spanish influenza of 1918–19', 51.

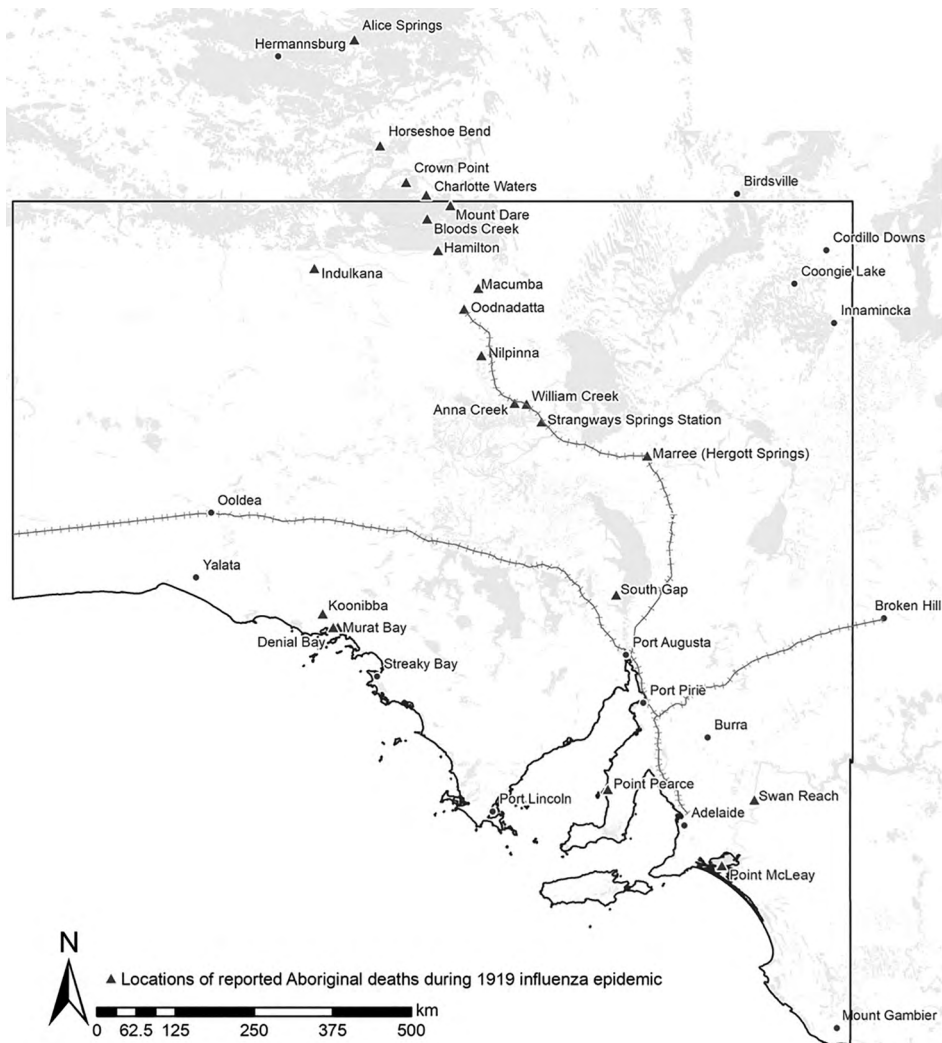
32 Woodruff, *Two Million South Australians*, 72–73; Kako, 'Spanish influenza of 1918–19', 53.

33 Camm, 'The "Spanish" Influenza Pandemic', 22. My research using *Trove* indicates about 60 deaths in Broken Hill.

34 *Register*, 4 September 1919, 8.

## South Australian Aboriginal people and the ‘Spanish’ Influenza epidemic

The official death toll for South Australia of 540 people does not include Aboriginal deaths. The Chief Protector of Aborigines, William South, did not specifically record details of Aboriginal deaths during the epidemic, but Aborigines Department records, newspapers and other historical sources provide some insights into the way influenza spread through the Aboriginal population (see Figure 1), and the final death toll.



**Figure 1: Locations of Aboriginal deaths from influenza in 1919, and other locations mentioned in the text.**

Source: Drawn by Marc Thomas using ArcGIS, location data from data.gov.au.

Chief Protector William South ensured that both Point McLeay and Point Pearce stations were quarantined when outbreaks threatened – no visitors were allowed to enter and residents were not permitted to leave. As a result of those measures, both stations escaped the first wave unscathed. In the second wave, in August, 50 out of about 200 residents at Point Pearce became ill, but there was only one death.<sup>35</sup> At Point McLeay many of the 300 residents, and most of the staff, were infected. The Chief Protector despatched a nurse to assist and there were only 2 deaths recorded at the station.<sup>36</sup> There were apparently no other Aboriginal deaths reported in the South-East, nor along the River Murray, except at Swan Reach. The local policeman there advised the Chief Protector in August that all but one of the 40 Aboriginal people in the district were ill with influenza. He had done all he could to assist them, but there had been 2 deaths.<sup>37</sup> A newspaper noted that most of the shearing in that district was usually done by Aboriginal shearers, and, ‘owing to the outbreak of influenza among the natives’, shearing in the area had been delayed.<sup>38</sup>

Further to the north there was an outbreak of influenza in Port Augusta in July, which resulted in several deaths among the white residents.<sup>39</sup> There were no reported deaths in the Aboriginal fringe camps there and there is no evidence of influenza spreading westwards or north-westwards to affect Barngarla and Kokatha people working on the pastoral stations in the Gawler Ranges and on Eyre Peninsula. In August some shearers from Port Augusta took the flu with them to South Gap Station, near Lake Torrens, and most of the white workers there became ill. The virus spread to the ‘blacks’ camp’ on the station where at least 2 people died: Tommy Yunda, aged 70, the so-called ‘king’ of the tribe, and his wife, Minnie, aged 64.<sup>40</sup> Influenza caused several deaths among white residents at Hawker and Quorn, but it apparently did not spread further to affect Adnyamathanha people in the northern Flinders Ranges.

## Influenza in northern South Australia and central Australia

In the north of the state, the influenza epidemic took a heavy toll on Aboriginal people. The virus spread northwards along the railway from Peterborough in early June, reaching Marree and then Oodnadatta, the end of the line at that time. In July a correspondent of the Adelaide *Daily Herald* who had just returned from the north reported:

35 SA Aborigines Department, GRG 52/1/1919/31.

36 SA Aborigines Department, GRG 52/1/1919/64; see also *Advertiser*, 23 August 1919, 11.

37 SA Aborigines Department, GRG 52/1/1919/65.

38 *Register*, 29 August 1919, 3.

39 See, for example, *Advertiser*, 18 June 1918, 9; *Daily Herald*, 18 June 1919, 2.

40 *Transcontinental*, 29 August 1919, 2.

[Influenza] seemed to break out among the whites after the running of the Oodnadatta mixed train some six weeks or so ago. The whole crew of train men got it and one engine-driver died. It went through the towns of Farina, Marree, William Creek and Oodnadatta, and is now among the blacks. At William Creek there was a camp of six blacks. They all took ill and although the acting stationmaster took them a little food and did what he could they died one by one, and the stationmaster and the engine-drivers and firemen who happened to be there at the time had to bury them. The last to die, poor old Romeo, hung out till early this week, and when the stationmaster called to see how he was he found him dead ... They are also dying at Oodnadatta, and it looks as though there will be few blacks left alive if it continues to spread. They will not keep themselves warm. As soon as their temperature rises off go blankets and clothes and out they go.<sup>41</sup>

In Marree, 80 white residents became sick, but there were no reported deaths. There were many deaths, however, in the Afghan camps and, according to one source, Aboriginal people there too were 'dropping dead like flies'.<sup>42</sup> The disease spread northwards along the railway line to Strangways Springs where, according to a newspaper account, 17 Aboriginal people died.<sup>43</sup> There were more deaths at William Creek and Anna Creek, and in the Aboriginal camps around Oodnadatta.<sup>44</sup> The Chief Protector despatched tarpaulins, blankets and medicine for an isolation camp on the town's outskirts. Dr Tackaberry, the local doctor, took charge of the isolation camp and he was assisted over the next few weeks by the local policeman and a number of the residents, including the Australian Inland Mission (AIM) padre, Rev. Harland, and the AIM nurses, Sisters Williamson and Harvey (see Figure 2).<sup>45</sup> Dr Tackaberry advised the Chief Protector in early July:

influenza is still prevalent among the Aborigines. There have been about 15 deaths in this immediate district, several at William Creek and others in various other parts. Since I have erected the isolation camp there has been a marked improvement and it has proved well worth the trouble and expense. Out of about 20 patients now under observation there has been but three deaths. These were very serious when brought in.<sup>46</sup>

41 *Daily Herald*, 17 July 1919, 3.

42 Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns*, 251.

43 *Register*, 29 August 1919, 5.

44 *Quorn Mercury*, 19 December 1919, 4.

45 Bullen, *Nursing in the Desert*, 63–102.

46 SA Aborigines Department, GRG 52/1/1919/50.



**Figure 2: AIM nurses Sister Harvey (left) and Sister Williamson (right) treat Aboriginal patients at the Oodnadatta isolation hospital.**

Source: Photograph from Rev. C. Harland Collection, courtesy Heatheranne Bullen.



**Figure 3: 'Two sick lubras alighting from itinerant preacher's van at the isolation area, Oodnadatta'. Rev. Kramer used his caravan to transport Aboriginal patients to the isolation hospital.**

Source: Photograph from *Observer*, 16 August 1919, 28.

Rev. Ernest Kramer, an 'itinerant missionary' connected with the Aborigines' Friends' Association in Adelaide, arrived in Oodnadatta with his wife, Euphemia, just after the epidemic struck, and they both helped to treat the sick (see Figure 3). He wrote:

Oh, such sadness and such sights as I shall never forget. They were so neglected and helplessly dying like animals, but with the doctor's and the policeman's help we rigged up an isolation camp outside the town, and then, with four donkeys in the van, the sick were gathered into camp and cared for.

My heart was full of pain, for the sight was sad indeed. Many were carried in one day in hope, and carried out later a corpse. A hole was dug out of the town, then the body was rolled in its blankets and buried, many without the knowledge of a Saviour, without hope in God. Some were so terrified that after their first night in camp, they ran away, choosing to die in the bush country.

Nursing and caring for those alive, we had a busy time for about six weeks, until the epidemic ceased, losing not an opportunity to teach them of the great love of Jesus, who died to save us all.<sup>47</sup>

A resident of Oodnadatta, Horrie Simpson, recalled:

When the Asian [sic] flu hit Oodnadatta in the winter of 1919 some white people went down with it but it was the Aboriginal community that copped it badly, especially the older ones. A big tent, made of railway canvases, was erected at the end of the line and in this the Aborigines were hospitalized and cared for. The huge tent was partitioned off, half for men and the other for women. Those who offered their services to attend the sick were Mr Harland of the AIM, Mounted Constable Percy Welsh, Nurse Kelly and Mr Leo Kelly. These people tended the sick, washed them, and put clean clothes on them, placed the convalescents in the sun and spread out the blankets daily on the gibbers.

The main trouble was with the patients who wouldn't stop in bed and would rush into the cold air, causing a lot to die. Little white mounds leading eastward from the railhead mark their graves. Some of the older men thought their illness was caused by the death bone pointed at them, others thought the white fellows were doing them more harm than good and tried to escape. One young man, Rufus by name, disappeared from the temporary hospital and turned up at Todmorden Station some sixty miles away. He lived to tell the tale.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Kramer, *Australian Caravan*, 13–14.

<sup>48</sup> Simpson and Dallwitz, *Horrie Simpson's Oodnadatta*, 9.

A correspondent of the *Quorn Mercury* at Oodnadatta suggested that the Aboriginal belief in sorcery contributed to some of the deaths, but also acknowledged that others died from grief at the loss of friends and relatives:

One very useful and educated boy recently confided in his employer that he had been 'boned', and there is little hope held out for his recovery. He has been laid up for several days with influenza, and remains in a perpetual state of delirium. Just how many of the fatal cases were the victims of this obsession it would be hard to say, for the aboriginal is not communicative to the white man. It became known, however, that the natives had formed the belief that the white man had poisoned them, and the whole black race had been doomed for extinction. It is improbable, however, that all thought this the case ... One old lubra wandering back to a wurlie a hundred yards or so from the isolation area, and asked where she had been, replied, 'Me bin longa Mary's grave. Me bin cry a little bit. Byembye me go longa cry little bit more'. An old native who had lost his lubra through 'flu was 'too much sorry' to take any further interest in life, and soon followed her to the grave. Two lubras who had been inseparable friends died within a day of each other – the one from 'flu, and the other from apparently the just as dangerous condition of 'too much sorry'.<sup>49</sup>

The spread of the disease would have been facilitated by the overcrowded conditions in the camps around Oodnadatta, as Bruce Shaw, an oral historian, pointed out. One of his informants, Miriam Dadleh, remembered the 'black influenza':

my mother died when I was about ten. That was 1919. That big influenza, 'black influenza' they called it. Returned boys came back you know from the 1914–18 war? Well that's the time that they came back that that flu went through like raided [sic] Aboriginal people and Afghan people and white people and all, up that way. My Dad caught it. He went to meet one of his old friends, Ernie Kempe from Macumba Station. He went and shaking hands and old Ernie Kempe was returned soldier and he was a bit sick. And old man got a germ off him and went back. My mother just had a baby see ... He was born in 1918 and Mum died in 1919.<sup>50</sup>

Herbert Basedow, an Adelaide medical doctor and anthropologist, led 3 medical relief expeditions among Aboriginal people in South Australia between 1919 and 1920. He visited Marree and Oodnadatta in 1920 and reported that influenza had caused many deaths among the local Aboriginal people. He wrote:

49 *Quorn Mercury*, 9 January 1920, 3.

50 Shaw, *Our Heart Is the Land*, 73.

The recent influenza epidemic was disastrous, having in many centres, like Hergott Springs [Marree] and Oodnadatta, almost completely annihilated the resident groups. We were surprised also to note the appalling decrease in the numbers at Anna Creek, once a veritable stronghold of the local tribe.<sup>51</sup>

It was customary for Aboriginal people to immediately vacate a camp where someone had died. Basedow was told that terror-stricken groups had fled Oodnadatta and other settlements for the bush, only to become ill themselves a few days later, when they were far from help. If the whole group was struck down and there was nobody left to find food or water for the sick, or firewood for warmth, few people would survive.

During the early years of the twentieth century, Aboriginal ration depots had been established at Oodnadatta and at Nilpinna, William Creek and Anna Creek pastoral stations further south. Rations were supplied there to the aged, infirm and sick by the Aborigines Department. The ration-issuer was required to provide to the Protector monthly returns showing the number of Aboriginal people at the station, and any births and deaths that had occurred.

These returns indicate that in the 3 years between January 1916 and December 1918 there were usually about 60 to 70 Aboriginal people in Oodnadatta, although this figure sometimes increased to 100 or more and was sometimes as low as 11. Thirteen deaths were recorded during that period, at an average of about 4 per year. The policeman there recorded 7 deaths in June 1919 and 18 more in July, a total of 25 deaths in 2 months, about 6 times the annual average.

Nilpinna Station, south of Oodnadatta, had been an Aboriginal ration depot since about 1906. The records sent in by the ration-issuer there indicate that from 1912 to 1920 there were on average about 20 people there each month receiving rations; sometimes there were 40 people, sometimes as few as 10. From 1912 to 1918, on average, there were about 1.5 deaths per year there. In June and July 1919, when the flu struck Oodnadatta, the ration-issuer at Nilpinna recorded a total of 10 deaths, about 6 times above the average annual rate.<sup>52</sup> Further south at Anna Creek Station, the ration records indicate that there were 14 deaths in June, and at William Creek, further south again, there were at least 6 deaths.<sup>53</sup> It is likely that most of these deaths can be attributed to influenza. At Marree, however, where Aboriginal people were reported to have 'dropped dead like flies' and where influenza had, in Basedow's words, 'almost completely annihilated the resident groups', the ration records indicate only one Aboriginal death in June and another in July.

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51 Basedow, 'Report upon the Third Medical Relief Expedition', 4–5.

52 SA Aborigines Department, GRG 52/26.

53 SA Aborigines Department, GRG 52/26. The 6 deaths at William Creek were confirmed in the *Daily Herald*, 17 July 1919, 3.



Luise Hercus, a linguist who recorded oral histories from Arabana, Wangkangurru and other Aboriginal people from the Lake Eyre Basin, observed that the influenza epidemic ‘wiped out whole families and even whole groups, particularly those camped by the railway line for rations’. Her Wangkanguru informant, Mick McLean, recalled:

he had left a cherished sacred object, a necklace belonging to the *Intara* History, with some old people camped at the Big *Kadnyawi* Spring near Mount Dutton [about 40 km south-east of Oodnadatta]. When he returned some months later he found the entire group had been wiped out by influenza; the sand had blown from the nearby sandhill and buried them and the whole deserted camp.<sup>54</sup>

Walter Smith, an Aboriginal drover and bushman, passed through Wire Creek Bore, just north of Oodnadatta, in 1919 when the epidemic was raging. His biographer, Dick Kimber, an Alice Springs historian, wrote:

the Bore was a place of sad memories for Walter. Here, during the great influenza epidemic of 1918 [sic] which decimated the central Australian tribes, Walter had come across families who had died. They had caught the influenza at Oodnadatta and, in its earliest stages with some of the people still in good health, had begun to walk to Dalhousie Springs. Dalhousie was the great healing centre for all the surrounding tribes, the place where two kinds of ‘minty bush’ grew which enables strongly scented smoke to be inhaled, and where sulphurous smokes were made. The families only managed 35 kilometres of their 100 kilometre walk when they made camp at Wire Creek Bore. There they all died. Many people of European descent died during the influenza epidemic, but the effect was far more devastating in the Aboriginal communities. The tears trickled down Walter’s face as he remembered the men, women and children who had died. He never again made camp at Wire Creek Bore.<sup>55</sup>

Kimber noted that the epidemic brought to an end the large ceremonial gatherings of the type seen by Walter Smith in 1915 near Old Crown Point Station, when about 500 Southern Arrernte, Arabana and Wangkangurru people gathered.<sup>56</sup>

Kim Doohan, an anthropologist who worked with Aboriginal people at Finke in the 1980s, talked to a senior Aboriginal woman there who recalled the epidemic:

[she] was a young girl living on Macumba Station when the ‘flu took big mob, they bin too frightened for whitefella medicine, went bush whole lot, *anangu* [Aboriginal people] bin die that way, Mt. Dare, Macumba, Hamilton and Blood Creek’. She had contracted ‘the flu’ and recalls how her father

54 Hercus, *A Grammar of the Arabana-Wangkangurru Language*, 22.

55 Kimber, *Man from Arltunga*, 53.

56 Kimber, *Man from Arltunga*, 56.

wrapped her in a blanket, 'people really weak, no tucker only *kapi* [water], that's all'. She slept by the fire until she was well. Many died in their swags by the camp fires, 'too many to bury proper way'.<sup>57</sup>

From Oodnadatta, influenza also spread along the bush tracks westwards to reach Granite Downs and Indulkana, then the very limit of the pastoral frontier. The police constable stationed at Indulkana reported that it had caused about 20 deaths among the Aboriginal people there.<sup>58</sup> The virus may have been taken there by the mailman from Oodnadatta.

In November 1919, in his annual report for the year ended 30 June 1919, Chief Protector William South stated that the outbreak of influenza in the Oodnadatta area had resulted in 16 Aboriginal deaths at the isolation camp and 'about 20 at other places'.<sup>59</sup> He also acknowledged that 'it was more than likely that others died, whose cases did not come under the doctor's notice'. The 20 other deaths to which South referred may have been the 14 fatalities at Anna Creek and the 6 fatalities at William Creek recorded in his department's ration records. He apparently did not acknowledge the 10 deaths at Nilpinna, the 17 deaths at Strangways Springs nor the 20 deaths at Indulkana. In his annual report the following year, covering the last 6 months of 1919, he did not refer to the epidemic. The known death toll in the north of the state was thus about 83. There were many other deaths, however; those who 'dropped dead like flies' in Marree and those who, stricken with terror, fled Oodnadatta to die at Wire Creek Bore and other spots in the bush, and others who died further north at Mt Dare, Macumba, Hamilton and Bloods Creek. I consider it likely that at least 130 Aboriginal people died along the railway/telegraph line between Marree and the South Australian border.

Influenza also spread northwards into the Northern Territory along the overland track, probably carried by telegraph linesmen, Afghan cameleers and other travellers. Many Arrernte people at Crown Point, just over the border in the Northern Territory, and at Charlotte Waters and Horseshoe Bend died. The owner of Horseshoe Bend Station later reported:

The blacks here died like flies, and it was the same everywhere, all the way down to Oodnadatta.<sup>60</sup>

The disease reached Alice Springs in August and killed 53 Aboriginal people there, as well as several white residents.<sup>61</sup> Dr Basedow stated that the epidemic had 'wrought havoc' in central Australia, and the number of deaths at Alice Springs and Horseshoe

57 Doohan, *One Family, Different Country*, 18.

58 SA Aborigines Department, GRG 52/1/1919/83.

59 SA, Chief Protector of Aborigines, *Annual Report*, 1919, 5.

60 Strehlow, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, 158–59.

61 Scherer, *The Hermannsburg Chronicle*, 40.

Bend was ‘particularly great’.<sup>62</sup> The Lutheran missionaries at nearby Hermannsburg believed their mission was spared only by ‘the grace of God’.<sup>63</sup> According to the anthropologist T. G. H. Strehlow:

The Spanish influenza epidemic of 1919–20 wiped out the bulk of the ageing, chronically undernourished population in the Southern and Central Aranda areas, and made serious inroads elsewhere. After 1920 full-scale ceremonial festivals were rarely held either in these parts, or among the Eastern Aranda, who had suffered almost as cruelly.<sup>64</sup>

There was clearly a focus of infection along the Oodnadatta railway and the telegraph line to Alice Springs, affecting mainly Arabana, Wangkangurru and Arrernte people, as well as Antakarinya people, recent immigrants to the Oodnadatta area from the north-west. Apart from the outbreak at Indulkana, there is no evidence that the epidemic spread to the remote sheep stations north-west of Oodnadatta. Perhaps the short incubation period and the quick onset of severe symptoms meant that anyone infected – Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal – did not get too far from the telegraph line before they became too ill to travel further, and therefore could not spread the disease to people on the more remote stations.

## Influenza on the west coast of South Australia

Influenza reached South Australia’s west coast in August, probably spread there by coastal shipping. Many white residents were infected and 4 died, including the Streaky Bay doctor. The virus spread to the Aboriginal fringe-camps around Denial Bay, where 5 people died, and Murat Bay, where 8 more died.<sup>65</sup> The *Register* reported in early October that at Denial Bay there were about 20 Aboriginal people sick with flu:

One was buried on Monday, and white residents had to assist in the burial owing to the blacks being too weak to complete the grave. Tarpaulins are urgently required for shelter, as the weather is very cold and windy. Patients are lying in the open, and they include a girl about three years old. The natives break up the camps as soon as a death occurs and residents are doing their best to assist them. The blacks are too weak to procure their own food, and have applied to the Protector for financial assistance.<sup>66</sup>

Nearly 100 adults and 67 children at Koonibba mission, as well as many of the staff, went down with the flu. The Chief Protector later reported 9 deaths at the mission, all of them adult ‘full blacks’.<sup>67</sup> A local newspaper reported a total of 23 Aboriginal

62 Basedow, ‘Medical Inspection of Natives’, 44.

63 Lohe, ‘A Mission Is Established’, 32.

64 Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia*, xxxv.

65 *West Coast Sentinel*, 18 November 1919, 2.

66 *Register*, 2 October 1919, 8; see also SA Aborigines Department, GRG 52/1/1919/77, 80, 81.

67 SA, Chief Protector of Aborigines, *Annual Report*, 1920, 15.

deaths on the west coast: 9 at Koonibba, 5 at Denial Bay, 8 at Murat Bay and one at Bagster.<sup>68</sup> It is likely that there were other deaths that went unreported. There is no evidence that influenza spread further west to Fowlers Bay or beyond to the Nullarbor Plain, or northwards to Ooldea on the East–West Railway.

## Influenza in north-eastern South Australia

A number of secondary sources suggest that many Aboriginal people died when influenza spread down Cooper Creek in north-eastern South Australia in 1919. A newspaper article published in 1937 states:

The Far-west [of Queensland] has cause to remember the 1919 plague of pneumonic influenza; the legacy of battle that crossed the oceans and came to Australia by way of New Zealand. The Cooper blacks died by scores, despite the care and nursing they had at Nappamerrie and other Cooper stations.<sup>69</sup>

In 1950, George Farwell, a noted travel-writer, stated:

in 1920 [sic] ... when influenza was an epidemic sweeping the world, it was noted along the Birdsville Track that the blacks were dying fast.<sup>70</sup>

However, Dr Basedow traversed this region between August and November 1919, visiting Innamincka, Birdsville, Mungerannie, Cordillo Downs and other stations, and he reported no signs of influenza. He observed that the people there:

were fortunately spared the unhappy lot of their western neighbours at Oodnadatta, Marree (Hergott Springs) and other places where the disease swept away numbers of the population.<sup>71</sup>

There are no reports of Aboriginal deaths from influenza in the north-east in the Aborigines Department records in 1919 or 1920, and I believe that ‘Spanish’ Influenza did not reach that area.

In June and July 1923 there was a serious epidemic of pneumonic influenza that caused about 40 deaths in Brisbane and other fatalities in Sydney and Melbourne.<sup>72</sup> The virus seems to have spread inland as far as south-west Queensland, where it caused much sickness, and a few deaths, among white residents at Goondiwindi, Charleville and Longreach.<sup>73</sup> It reached Bedourie and Boulia, north of Birdsville, where the Aboriginal communities ‘suffered severe outbreaks of influenza’, according

<sup>68</sup> *West Coast Sentinel*, 18 October 1919, 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Courier-Mail*, 28 August 1937, 20.

<sup>70</sup> Farwell, *Land of Mirage*, 116–17.

<sup>71</sup> Basedow, ‘Report upon the First Medical Relief Expedition’, 55.

<sup>72</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 21 July 1923, 7.

<sup>73</sup> *Longreach Leader*, 22 June 1923, 13; *Brisbane Courier*, 28 June 1923, 9; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 July 1923, 14; *Toowoomba Chronicle and Darling Downs Gazette*, 28 July 1923, 7; *Western Champion*, 25 August 1923, 15.

to the Queensland Chief Protector.<sup>74</sup> It appears that it was this epidemic that reached the Cooper Creek area, in early July. Its effects on the Aboriginal people there were documented by the *Chronicle's* correspondent at Innamincka. He wrote, on 7 July:

For some weeks there has been an epidemic of colds. Four old blacks at one of the Innamincka Station camps died and were buried by a couple of younger aboriginals, who also became affected. In a couple of days another black and five gins passed out, the three or four remaining alive being too weak to move. At Coongy Lakes, 60 miles out, where many blacks are now congregated, all hands seem to be suffering with the same complaint. Two or three deaths have taken place there also.<sup>75</sup>

On 18 July the correspondent advised:

Influenza is still raging. Six more blacks at Coongy Lakes passed away this week, and a number of others were suffering.<sup>76</sup>

About 2 weeks later, he advised that influenza was 'still prevalent':

It is most severe out Coongy Lakes way, where four more natives have passed off, making the number of deaths there twelve. At Cordillo Downs Station many are suffering.<sup>77</sup>

The correspondent again reported on 9 August that 'fifteen blacks of the Coongy tribe died from influenza'.<sup>78</sup>

The disease spread to the white workers on Cordillo Downs.<sup>79</sup> Mr Murray, the manager of the station for 23 years, retired in 1924. He told a newspaper reporter:

Influenza, which was prevalent in the district two years ago, killed a lot of them [Aboriginal people], particularly the old ones.<sup>80</sup>

Lou Reese, the owner of Minnie Downs Station, wrote to the South Australian Museum's anthropologist, Norman Tindale, in 1927, describing the condition of Aboriginal people in that region:

In this district they are dying out very quickly. The influenza epidemic a few years ago must have accounted for over a hundred. That's from Kanowna and Innamincka north to the border fence.<sup>81</sup>

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74 Qld, Chief Protect of Aboriginals, *Annual Report*, 1923, 5.

75 *Chronicle*, 21 July 1923, 14.

76 *Chronicle*, 4 August 1923, 13.

77 *Chronicle*, 11 August 1923, 14.

78 *Chronicle*, 18 August 1923, 15.

79 *Argus* (Melbourne), 28 March 1924, 14.

80 *Register*, 27 November 1924, 3.

81 Letter from L. Reese to N. B. Tindale, 17 November 1927, AA 298/4/2/2, South Australian Museum Archives.

There is also a reference to many Aboriginal deaths at Arrabury Station, in western Queensland, which may relate to the 1923 epidemic.<sup>82</sup> It is evident that at least 10 Aboriginal people died at Innamincka and another 15 at Coongie Lakes, and there were additional deaths at Cordillo Downs, Minnie Downs and Arrabury, and probably at other neighbouring stations.

According to Hercus, Murtee Johnny, who died in 1977, was the last survivor of the Yandruwanda group in the Strzelecki area; he told her that his wife and children and the rest of the group had died at Innamincka during an influenza epidemic that she believed was the 1919 epidemic.<sup>83</sup> Hercus subsequently agreed that those deaths could have occurred during this later epidemic, in 1923.<sup>84</sup>

Basedow's report indicates that influenza did not reach the north-east of the state in 1919. The Aboriginal people who died in that area were probably victims of a subsequent epidemic in 1923, not the 1919 event. The 2 epidemics have evidently become conflated in oral history and published accounts.

## The Aboriginal death toll

I suggested previously that at least 130 people may have died along the railway/telegraph line in northern South Australia. With the addition of 23 recorded deaths on the west coast, plus another 10 or so unrecorded deaths there, plus the other recorded deaths at Point McLeay, Point Pearce, Swan Reach and South Gap, the death toll across the whole state may have been 160 or more. Aborigines Department records suggest that the death toll was certainly more than 100.

The Chief Protector's annual reports in the first decades of the twentieth century include the number of Aboriginal births and deaths recorded each year (see Figure 4). There is no indication in the Chief Protector's files how these figures were obtained. I consider it likely that the figures were compiled from the monthly returns filled out by the ration-issuers on the various pastoral stations, police stations, missions and reserves. The average number of Aboriginal deaths in the state during the 5 years preceding the 1919 epidemic was about 70 per annum. During the year ending 30 June 1919, there were 107 deaths, an increase of about 50 per cent on the average annual death toll of the pre-epidemic years. In the following year, the figure rose to 160, an increase of more than 100 per cent on the pre-epidemic years.<sup>85</sup> Although these official figures could hardly be considered reliable, they indicate that there

82 *Western Grazier*, 6 March 1942, 3.

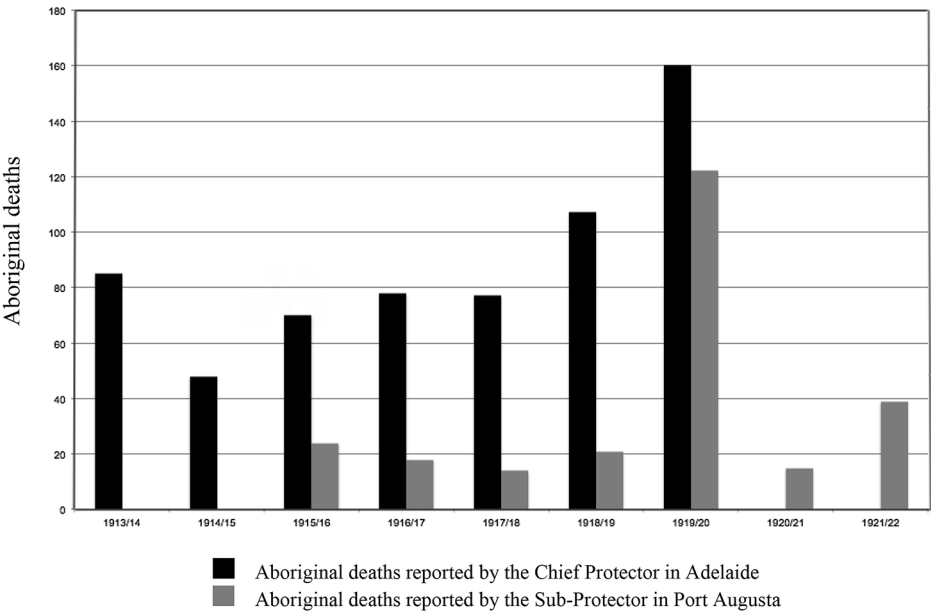
83 Hercus, "How We Danced the Mudlunga", 27.

84 Luise Hercus, pers. comm., 30 November 2013 and 8 April 2014.

85 The Chief Protector's annual reports are available online at 'South Australia: Legislation / Key Provisions' AIATSIS, [aiatsis.gov.au/collection/featured-collections/remove-and-protect](http://aiatsis.gov.au/collection/featured-collections/remove-and-protect).

were about 130 more deaths among the Aboriginal population during 1919 than there were, on average, during the preceding 5 years. After 1920, the Chief Protector did not include the number of births and deaths in his annual reports.

The Inspector of Police in Port Augusta, who was also the Sub-Protector of Aborigines for the Far North (including the west coast), reported annually on the number of Aboriginal deaths in that region (see Figure 4). During the 4 years prior to the epidemic, he reported about 20 deaths each year.<sup>86</sup> Those figures, too, could not be considered reliable; the Sub-Protector was reliant on the returns from his officers at Oodnadatta, Marree, Indulkana and other police stations, and Aboriginal people, customarily, were reluctant to speak of their dead. However, from an average of about 20 deaths per year previously, the death toll jumped to 122 in the year ending 30 June 1920, an increase of about 100 over the pre-epidemic years. This figure probably includes the deaths along the railway line in northern South Australia, the 2 at South Gap as well as those on the west coast, and provides support for the statewide figure of about 130 additional deaths from influenza suggested by the Chief Protector’s annual reports. The Sub-Protector’s figures were probably compiled from the reports sent in to him by the police at Oodnadatta, Indulkana, Marree and on the west coast but do not, of course, include unreported deaths in the bush.



**Figure 4: Aboriginal deaths in South Australia 1913–22.**

Note: no statistics available from the Chief Protector for 1920–21 or 1921–22 or from the Sub-Protector in Port Augusta for 1913–14 or 1914–15.

Source: Aborigines Department annual reports.

<sup>86</sup> The Sub-Protector’s annual reports are included in the Chief Protector’s annual reports.

The Chief Protector estimated that the Aboriginal population of South Australia on 30 June 1919 was 4,815.<sup>87</sup> If we assume that the statewide Aboriginal death toll from influenza was 130, the mortality rate for Aboriginal people was about 27 per 1,000, about 20 times higher than the rate for non-Indigenous South Australians. If the actual death toll was 160, then the mortality rate was about 33 per 1,000, about 28 times higher than that of the non-Indigenous population.

If we look more specifically at northern South Australia, an even more alarming statistic is revealed. Assuming that 500 Aboriginal people lived in the vicinity of the railway and telegraph line between Marree and the Northern Territory border – probably a generous estimate – and assuming that there were 130 influenza deaths in that area, then the mortality rate was about 260 per 1,000; about 25 per cent of the Aboriginal population perished. Similar mortality rates were recorded in some Aboriginal settlements in Queensland.<sup>88</sup> The 1919 epidemic had little impact on Aboriginal people in southern South Australia, who probably had some immunity gained from exposure to previous influenza epidemics. In the far north and west of the state, Aboriginal people had little or no previous exposure to influenza and thus little or no immunity. Their immunity may have been further compromised by malnutrition and the effects of venereal disease, tuberculosis and other chronic diseases.<sup>89</sup> Most of South Australia's Aboriginal people were spared the worst effects of the epidemic, but for those who lived in the camps along the railway and the overland telegraph line or on the adjoining pastoral stations, the epidemic was devastating. The sickness and deaths were seared into the memories of the Aboriginal survivors, as the oral histories recorded by Kimber, Hercus, Shaw, Doohan and others demonstrate.

Official figures cited by Briscoe indicate that the epidemic was responsible for the deaths of 315 Aboriginal people in Queensland, including 69 deaths at the Barambah settlement, and 31 at Taroom.<sup>90</sup> No detailed historical research has previously been undertaken into the effects of 'Spanish' Influenza on Aboriginal people in the other states and the Northern Territory. A search on the *Trove* digitised newspapers website<sup>91</sup> indicates that influenza spread to many Aboriginal missions and communities in New South Wales but the number of fatalities was not great; 12 deaths were reported at Kyogle, 5 at Casino, 6 at Taree and others here and there around the state.<sup>92</sup> The epidemic's effects seem to have been most severe in western NSW where at least 30 Aboriginal deaths were reported at Brewarrina, Wellmoringle,

87 SA Chief Protector of Aboriginals, *Annual Report*, 1920, 4.

88 Cleland, 'Disease among the Australian Aborigines', 65; Curson and McCracken, 'An Australian Perspective of the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic', 105.

89 Dowling, *A Great Deal of Sickness*, 216, 222–24.

90 Briscoe, *Queensland Aborigines and the Spanish Influenza Pandemic*; see also Cleland, 'Disease among the Australian Aborigines', 66; Basedow, 'Diseases of the Australian Aborigines', 9.

91 Trove, National Library of Australia, [trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/](http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/).

92 *Daily Examiner*, 6 March 1919, 5; *Kyogle Examiner*, 17 May 1919, 2; *Northern Champion*, 26 July 1919, 4.



Dennawan and Cultowa.<sup>93</sup> The NSW Aborigines Protection Board declared that the mortality rate was ‘surprisingly low’.<sup>94</sup> In Victoria there were very high infection rates among the Aboriginal people at Corranderk and other reserves and missions, but, according to the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, not a single death.<sup>95</sup>

Briscoe has suggested that there were at least 150 Aboriginal influenza deaths in Western Australia.<sup>96</sup> Newspaper reports show that between August and October there were Aboriginal deaths reported across the Goldfields, the south-west and in the Perth area and there were also a number of deaths at Geraldton, Mullewa and Boolardy Station in the Murchison district.<sup>97</sup> In November there was a severe outbreak in Broome, where about 30 Aboriginal people died. Influenza spread to the Beagle Bay and Lombadina missions late in 1919, where there were at least 50 deaths.<sup>98</sup> It reached Darwin, where at least 10 Aboriginal people died, and spread from there southwards as far as Pine Creek, causing about 50 deaths.<sup>99</sup> There is evidence that it caused some fatalities in the Tiwi Islands,<sup>100</sup> and newspapers report more than 40 deaths on Thursday Island and other Torres Strait islands in February 1920, as well as numerous fatalities at Aboriginal settlements on the western side of Cape York Peninsula.<sup>101</sup>

It is likely that at least 1,000 Aboriginal people throughout Australia died from influenza in 1919–20. Mortality rates among Aboriginal people in southern Australia were generally low, but in those areas where influenza gained a foothold among Aboriginal people who had little immunity – in central Australia, northern and outback Queensland, and in the Kimberley, the top end of the Northern Territory and the Torres Strait Islands – the mortality rate was high, comparable to those of indigenous people elsewhere around the world.

When the Commonwealth Government introduced, in 2008, the Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza (AHMPPI), the national strategy to respond to a future – and probably inevitable – influenza epidemic, no special provisions were made for Aboriginal people. Medical authorities involved in developing the plan were apparently unaware of the high Aboriginal mortality rate

93 *Leader*, 9 July 1919, 2; *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*, 8 August 1919, 2.

94 NSW Aborigines Protection Board, *Aborigines, Report*, 1920.

95 *Herald*, 4 January 1921, 12.

96 Briscoe, *Counting, Health and Identity*, 132.

97 *Murchison Times and Day Dawn Gazette*, 27 June 1919, 2; *West Australian*, 28 July 1919, 5; *Geraldton Guardian*, 19 August 1919, 3; *Great Southern Herald*, 23 August 1919, 3; *Tambellup Times*, 23 August 1919, 3; *Southern Argus and Wagin-Arthur Express*, 30 August 1919, 2; *Geraldton Guardian*, 11 September 1919, 2; *Laverton and Beria Mercury*, 4 October 1919, 1; *Leonora Miner*, 11 October 1919, 2.

98 *West Australian*, 25 February 1920, 7.

99 *West Australian*, 18 December 1919, 6; *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 5 February 1920, 1; *Advertiser*, 14 February 1920, 9.

100 Peterson and Taylor, ‘Demographic Transition’, 14, 17.

101 *Telegraph*, 21 February 1920, 2; *Register*, 21 February 1920, 7. Huggonson (‘Aborigines and the Aftermath of the Great War’, 4) also refers briefly to influenza deaths in the Torres Strait and Cape York Peninsula.

during the 1919 epidemic and the high infection and hospitalisation rates among Aboriginal people during the 1957 'Asian influenza' pandemic.<sup>102</sup> High infection and hospitalisation rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people during the 2009 'swine flu' epidemic, and advocacy by Indigenous communities and their health organisations prompted the Commonwealth and state/territory health authorities to develop special measures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other 'at risk' groups in its revised AHMPPI issued in 2014.<sup>103</sup>

In this paper I have focused on the impact of the epidemic on South Australian Aboriginal people. Detailed research using *Trove* and other documentary sources – mission and government records, and oral histories – are likely to provide additional insights into the way the epidemic spread across the continent, and its impact on Indigenous people in the other states and the Northern Territory. Historical research not only increases our understanding of past epidemics but also has the potential to contribute to shaping the national response to a future epidemic.

## Postscript June 2020

I first came across references to deaths from Spanish Influenza in the Oodnadatta area when I was doing historical research for a native title claim in northern South Australia in the 1990s. Over subsequent decades I found more references to the impact of the pandemic in South Australia in Aborigines Department records, local histories, Aboriginal oral histories, newspapers and other sources. In 2019 I decided it was time to write up what I had found and submit it for publication. I hoped to publish it that year, in the centenary of the pandemic, and it was accepted for publication in *Aboriginal History*. I was putting the finishing touches to it in early January, when south-eastern Australia was engulfed by bushfires. And then came the coronavirus pandemic, and the world went into lockdown. It is now the end of June, and most of Australia is emerging from the restrictions imposed in late March on travel, social gatherings, sports and cultural events and so on. Most of the remote Aboriginal communities in South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory – and some not so remote ones here in South Australia such as Davenport, Point Pearce, Gerard and Nepabunna – opted to restrict access to their lands, requiring all people (except for essential personnel) who wished to enter or re-enter the communities to self-isolate for 14 days prior to entry. There have

102 Miller, Durrheim and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Influenza Study Group, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities Forgotten', 316–17.

103 Australian Government '2.4 Seasonal Influenza, Pandemic Influenza and Pneumonia', 19 December 2013, [www1.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/cda-cdi37suppl.htm-02-vpds-2-4-influenza](http://www1.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/cda-cdi37suppl.htm-02-vpds-2-4-influenza); SA Health, 'Viral Respiratory Disease Pandemic Response Plan (including influenza, COVID-19, SARS & MERS)', 2020, [www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/a7539fe7-7d39-43e0-920d-94ac63983796/SAH\\_Viral\\_Respiratory\\_Disease\\_Pandemic\\_Response\\_Plan\\_final.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE-a7539fe7-7d39-43e0-920d-94ac63983796-niRcgJQ](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/a7539fe7-7d39-43e0-920d-94ac63983796/SAH_Viral_Respiratory_Disease_Pandemic_Response_Plan_final.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE-a7539fe7-7d39-43e0-920d-94ac63983796-niRcgJQ).

been no cases of coronavirus reported in these communities or elsewhere in central Australia. Now that travel between SA, WA and the NT is to be opened up, some of the desert communities are opting out of the restrictions, while others have decided to retain them for a while longer at least. Those communities that have opted out have reserved the right to reimpose restrictions should coronavirus cases occur in the region.

Across the world there have been over 10 million infections from coronavirus, and the death toll has topped 500,000. While many countries have ‘flattened the curve’, the infection rate is still rising alarmingly in the United States, Brazil, India and Indonesia. As far as I can tell from publicly available data, the fatality rate per 1,000 people is presently about 0.38 in the USA, 0.57 in Italy, 0.60 in Spain and 0.64 in the United Kingdom. During the 1918–19 pandemic, the fatality rate in those countries was at least 10 or 20 times higher. So far Australia has escaped relatively lightly, as it did in the 1918–19 pandemic. We have had just over 100 deaths nationally and the fatality rate is 0.004 per 1,000. The New Zealand Government, aware of that country’s disastrous experience in 1918–19, imposed one of the most severe lockdown regimes in the world and by early June had eliminated the virus from the country. The Pacific Island nations that suffered so badly a century ago imposed travel bans and other lockdown measures in March and have largely remained free of the virus. Samoa, which suffered 7,500 deaths in 1918–19 has remained fatality-free. Here in Australia, most of the states and territories have had no new cases for several weeks. The plans to reopen state borders have, however, been thrown into disarray by new outbreaks in Melbourne and there is widespread concern about a possible ‘second wave’. Some epidemiologists and other medical experts have suggested that the 2 or 3 waves of influenza that were reported in the UK, USA, Australia and other countries in 1918–19 were each the natural result of premature relaxation of what we now know as ‘social distancing’ rules. The future is very uncertain, and many people, me included, are worried about what may happen over the next few months.

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# No fish, no house, no melons: The earliest Aboriginal guides in colonial New South Wales

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Annemarie McLaren

**Abstract:** Aboriginal individuals – often men – who went with the colonists on their travels in colonial New South Wales performed various, often vital, roles. While this is well known, less attention has been paid to the ways in which relationships developed between the colonists and those guiding, or how these relationships were dependent on meeting the needs and desires of all involved. By teasing apart some of the earliest, shakiest beginnings of Aboriginal men travelling with and ‘guiding’ the colonists, this article suggests that guiding was negotiated from the outset – the product of intercultural dialogue and deliberation – and that it is a phenomenon that benefits from being more fully contextualised.

There were many tasks to be completed before the expeditionary party turned in for the night. Water had to be drawn, timber chopped and supper prepared, but Colebee and Balloderry had not assisted at all. Having eaten their fill – one officer said they had ‘stuffed themselves’ – they lay down by the fire and slept.<sup>1</sup> The naval officers had thought that these 2 Aboriginal men would prove useful to the success of their exploration, and in later decades in New South Wales, Aboriginal guides would assist travellers and explorers as cooks, hunters, stockmen and more. Yet here, during this expedition of April 1791 just west of the settlements at Sydney Cove and Rose Hill, these understandings were yet to develop. Instead, an association beset with misunderstanding was about to unfold.

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1 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 225.

Indigenous guides and brokers have received much attention in recent years. There is a growing Australian oeuvre committed to re-examining who they were and their roles during colonial expeditions.<sup>2</sup> In these recent considerations, the ‘hidden histories’ of exploration and Indigenous involvement form the focus, and a range of methodologies are employed to search for ways of reading Indigenous involvement, their skills, and their impact on expeditionary outcomes in heavily mediated sources. This scholarship has challenged the aura surrounding expeditionary travel, rendering it a complex affair and the position of a heroic leader highly dubious. We now know just how central the involvement of Aboriginal guides could be, and that they could make expeditionary journeys faster or frustrate their goals.<sup>3</sup> We also know that their involvement could be strategic, that they could have their own reasons for travelling and that they could exert pressure in negotiating the terms of their engagement.<sup>4</sup>

Less attention has been paid to the ways in which relationships between Aboriginal guides and the colonists developed, or how these were dependent on the ongoing negotiation of the needs of all involved. Guiding became a key part of the intercultural social world by the 1820s, with prospectors, newly arrived immigrants, long-term settler gentlemen and more all enjoying the services of Aboriginal guides. So asking how these relationships and understandings developed – and the motivations of these guides – seem pressing questions.<sup>5</sup> Don Baker has delivered key insights here, noting that those Aboriginal individuals who were ‘hired help’ during the expeditions of surveyor Thomas Mitchell in New South Wales in the late 1820s had ‘some degree of independence’ and set the job and the price, with the number of days agreed upon negotiated by holding up fingers.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Tiffany Shellam, one of the few historians to consider the origins of guiding relationships in the new and fragile cross-cultural worlds of the British military outposts on the west coast of Australia, has persuasively argued that the benefits of expeditions ‘flowed both ways’, that they were ‘collaborative accomplishments’ and that there were ‘mutual impacts’.<sup>7</sup> Only recently has a volume appeared that seeks to centre the motivations of mobile Indigenous actors in colonial Australia and New Zealand, including the

2 For example, Blyton, ‘Harry Brown’, 63–82; Douglas, *Science, Voyages, and Encounters*; Jones, ‘The Theatre of Contact’; Konishi, Nugent and Shellam, *Indigenous Intermediaries*; Shellam et al., *Brokers and Boundaries*; Stanfield, ‘Looking Across’; Thomas, *Expedition into Empire*.

3 For example, Baker, ‘Exploring with Aborigines’, 22; McLaren, ‘Entangled Life of Goggey’; *Sydney Gazette*, 23 September 1804, 2.

4 Baker, ‘Exploring with Aborigines’; Shellam, ‘Manyat’s “Sole Delight”’.

5 For example, Atkinson, *State of Agriculture*, 64. Dunn has demonstrated that guiding in the Hunter Valley shifted over time with different waves of colonists. Dunn, ‘Aboriginal Guides’, 72–73, 79.

6 Baker, ‘Exploring with Aborigines’, 22, 37.

7 Shellam, *Shaking Hands*, 139.

ways in which ‘Indigenous people affected mobility, such as through being involved in its creation, shaping its operations, making use of networks for their own ends and travelling for the sake of travel’.<sup>8</sup>

In this article, I want to wind back the clock and consider *how* guiding relationships first developed between Aboriginal people and expeditionary parties in New South Wales. Under what circumstances, and with what intention and anticipation, did colonists desire and acquire Aboriginal help on their expeditionary travels? And with what understandings and expectations did Aboriginal men travel with these colonists? In what follows, some of the earliest, shakiest beginnings of Aboriginal men travelling with the colonists are examined. Though these sources require interpretive caution, as discussed in the next section, my reading indicates that the first time that Aboriginal individuals accompanied the colonists on a true ‘expedition’ – one that had defined goals and was hierarchically organised – that they had no cognisance of what exploration was or what it meant to ‘guide’. This was a curious case of guiding, then, as these Aboriginal men would have abandoned the expedition had they known the way home.<sup>9</sup>

## Sources: ‘The season for observing’

The main primary material in the lengthy accounts of Watkin Tench and John Hunter drawn upon here is familiar to historians of colonial Australia, as is the expedition described. This involved a party led by Governor Phillip in 1791 to discover whether the Hawkesbury and Nepean rivers were a single watercourse. In relying on these accounts, caution is of course required. The publications are travel literature, part of a genre popularly devoured across England and the Continent through feverishly translated editions.<sup>10</sup> Both authors were well aware of the novelty and high stakes of establishing a penal settlement on the other side of the world and so were anxious to chronologically record all the happenings of the colony.<sup>11</sup> Yet, written in the wake of voyages of exploration with lofty scientific aims, the capacity to contribute to this knowledge through observations of the natural world and its indigenous inhabitants was another objective: this was, as Greg Denning described, ‘the season for observing’.<sup>12</sup> The toil of this expedition was completed in the service of England and Empire, yet it was also an adventure, and one that held scientific

8 Stanfield, ‘Looking Across’, 4.

9 Thomas, *Expedition into Empire*.

10 Merle, ‘Watkin Tench’s Fieldwork’, 202.

11 Edwards, ‘Watkin Tench’, 75.

12 Merle, ‘Watkin Tench’s Fieldwork’, 201; Denning, ‘The Theatricality of Observing’, 455–52.

promise.<sup>13</sup> So these accounts were composed not only with career, reputation and an audience in mind, but also were written with specific notions of the duties of exploration, of scientific questing and the nature of genteel English manhood.<sup>14</sup>

This makes for a heady mix. On top of this, Enlightenment science and philosophical ideas about the nature of society were not entirely coherent. There were contradictory threads, and the science itself was changing and would soon harden into a rigid system of racial classification.<sup>15</sup> While Tench said that he chose to describe this episode among many others for its 'amusing' detail, these tensions and goals make themselves felt.<sup>16</sup> A capacity for personal observation was crucial here; as we shall see, he used the first person and was sure to record as much ethnographic information as possible about hairstyles, diet, healing customs and more.<sup>17</sup> Tench was an 'improver' and disagreed with Rousseau's romanticisation of primitive society; for him, the very conditions of Aboriginal society, what he considered to be the vagaries of the climate and the scarcity of food, were degrading.<sup>18</sup>

Yet Tench also insisted that, as individuals, many Aboriginal people held admirable qualities. In this particular expeditionary case, he was describing the actions of men he knew well and, at least at this point, he well liked, even calling Balloderry their 'travelling friend'.<sup>19</sup> This created conditions for a 'mixture of interest and feeling' that 'deeply informed travelling ethnographies', as Harry Liebersohn has described.<sup>20</sup> Hunter was different to Tench. He was decades older, and he was skilled in creating navigational sketches and charts. Hunter also appreciated science and had sent botanical specimens back to Joseph Banks and others in England and published his own book of natural history drawings.<sup>21</sup> He had left the colony just before this expedition took place (though later he would return as Governor), and was relying on Governor Phillip's journal for his secondhand retelling. In including it in his chronicle of the colony in such a lengthy way, Hunter too was aware of the natural history and ethnographic material it contained, including observations about different states of society even amongst quite geographically close Aboriginal groups.

While there are limitations to the accounts in these journals then, the detail is more convincing than in other moments. Here, Tench and Hunter describe people already well known, and their doings and interactions are richly narrated so that even with minor discrepancies between the accounts, they remain coherent. So the same

13 Fabricant, 'Eighteenth-Century Travel Literature', 742–43.

14 Downing, *Restless Men*, chapter 4.

15 Douglas, 'In the Event'; Douglas, 'Philosophers, Naturalists'.

16 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 223.

17 Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, 122–28.

18 Fabricant, 'Eighteenth-Century Travel Literature'; Merle, 'Watkin Tench's Fieldwork', 208; Buchan, *Empire of Political Thought*, 59–60; Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 239.

19 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 239.

20 Liebersohn, *The Travelers' World*, 140.

21 Groom, *A Steady Hand*. For a good discussion of Hunter, see Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, 37–43.

colonial writers who at other times could fall back on tropes and hearsay are here more reliable in their observations.<sup>22</sup> In their provision of a narrative that unfolds day by day, both Tench and Hunter provide an arc of happenings from which the motivations and changing understandings of the Aboriginal men who volunteered to go along can be considered, including the shifting dynamics of the expeditionary unit, as race, hierarchy and different expectations came into conflict. As Maria Nugent has demonstrated in her thoughtful tracing of interactions between the Gweagal at Botany Bay and Captain Cook over 12 days in 1770, and as Tiffany Shellam demonstrated in cross-cultural relations at King George Sound (Western Australia) over 6 months from 1826, this can be a useful approach, even when the meanings of Indigenous action are 'more or less opaque', to draw on Bronwen Douglas.<sup>23</sup> With other meetings scattered through the accounts, these journals also point to the political landscape in which the colonists and their companions were embedded and, more particularly, allow a closer examination of how the very acts of guiding, brokering and mediating that were to become a phenomenon in New South Wales and other colonies began to develop.<sup>24</sup>

## Setting off

Aboriginal people first travelled with the Governor and his party, at his request, in early December 1790. It was 3 months after the spearing of Governor Phillip, and amicable relations had been restored.<sup>25</sup> After the establishment of an agricultural farm on soils hoped to be more fertile than those at Sydney Cove, Rose Hill had become a bustling scene of clearing, sawing and building, 15 miles from Sydney. From here, Phillip began to make a series of 'excursions'.<sup>26</sup> Leaving Sydney Cove at 8 in the morning, he arrived at Rose Hill before noon, travelling by boat along the river systems that were the Indigenous highways of south-east Australia.<sup>27</sup>

It was on one such trip that 'several of the natives were desirous of accompanying him', as naval officer Captain John Hunter wrote in his journal.<sup>28</sup> While the remonstrations of Barangaroo – the wife of the well-known Wangal man Bennelong – meant that Bennelong was unable to join the expedition, Colebee and the 2 other

22 Konishi, 'Wanton With Plenty'; Conor, *Skin Deep*, 90–151. For a brief consideration of the ways in which single authors and writers could produce both stereotypical depictions as well as more convincing ones in the New South Wales context, see Karskens, *The Colony*, 520.

23 Nugent, *Captain Cook*; Shellam, *Shaking Hands*. For a full methodological and historiographical discussion of these close-readings, see Douglas 2006: 3–38. For a close reading of a single event, see Clendinnen, 'Spearing the Governor'. For the Pacific, see Elena Govor's analysis of the 12-day Russian stay in what became the Marquesas Islands. Govor, *Twelve Days at Nuku Hiva*.

24 Jones, 'The Theatre of Contact'.

25 Clendinnen, 'Spearing the Governor', 157–74.

26 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 469–70.

27 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 402; Goodall and Cadzow, *Rivers and Resilience*, 31–32.

28 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 489.

unnamed Aboriginal men went along.<sup>29</sup> In this, there are not many surprises. There is now a rich historiography positing the strategic relationships that many Aboriginal individuals forged with the colonists, and the Aboriginal men mentioned as going along are all familiar characters who had high levels of exposure to and interaction with the colonists at Sydney Cove.<sup>30</sup> On the journey, however, despite being well fed, Phillip was taken aback when all his Aboriginal companions were soon eager to return to Sydney. While Phillip too had previously often returned to Sydney Cove from Rose Hill the same day, a house had now been built for him and it is likely that he expected his Aboriginal companions would sleep at his second house here as they did at his home in Sydney.<sup>31</sup>

His surprise continued when the boat sent to return them to Sydney came back with Bennelong and Barangaroo on board. The latter had, as noted, prevented her husband from joining the party at Rose Hill earlier in the day. Yet evidence that the social relations with the colonists required a good amount of negotiation between the Aboriginal people of Sydney Cove was again displayed: Bennelong and Barangaroo both dined with the Governor and were given all they asked for, but then Barangaroo insisted upon returning to Sydney. So the Governor, having been told by Bennelong that Barangaroo would cry if not permitted to return, was obliged at a late hour of the afternoon to ferry his Aboriginal companions back to Sydney. Phillip was perplexed: he knew that the preference of these coastal people was for fish over the food of the inland. For this reason, he had fed them fish along with possum, and yet it had not been enough to entice them to remain. Once more he must have realised that negotiating the intricacies of strategic 'conciliatory' relationships with these people would not be straightforward.<sup>32</sup> Bennelong and Barangaroo, like those individuals who would in the future travel with the colonists, had their own reasons and motivations.

It was in the context of such short overnight trips to Rose Hill with the Governor that the account of the first landed exploratory journey during which Aboriginal people were present can be situated.<sup>33</sup> This 6-day, 21-person expedition of 1791 was more of an exploratory expedition than any other in the colony to that date. Expeditions were always hierarchical arrangements modelled on the practices of military and naval cultures, but with Governor Phillip at the expedition's helm, as well as Judge-Advocate Collins and his servant, Surgeon White, astronomer Lieutenant William Dawes, Captain Watkin Tench, 8 soldiers and 3 convict marksmen, almost the entire

29 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 223.

30 For example, see Fullagar, *Savage Visit*, 171–87. For a sample of the strategic interactions Indigenous individuals forged with colonists elsewhere, see Liebersohn, *The Travelers' World*, 141.

31 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 469.

32 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 490.

33 For a summary of exploratory journeys in Sydney to date, none of which involved Aboriginal people, see Favenc, *History of Australian Exploration*, 43–46.

social spectrum of the colony was represented in a particularly stratified way.<sup>34</sup> Eager to communicate the aspects of this expedition that would be of interest to curious readers of travel literature – and to demonstrate toil in the dutiful service of Empire – Tench conveyed a sense of what such expeditions meant in practice. Each person except the Governor carried his own heavy knapsack and was encumbered by a kettle, axe, blanket, gun and canteen, all the while being bothered by insects. It was Dawes who was given the unenviable task of counting his footsteps to calculate the distances travelled. Using the compass by day to steer, at night the paces and directions were recorded and ‘worked by a traverse table, in the manner a ship’s reckoning is kept’: an example of how landed expeditions reflected their oceanic heritage.<sup>35</sup> Their goal was to trace the course of the Nepean River, flowing roughly north–south to Sydney’s west, and see if it joined the Hawkesbury River that flowed west–east to Sydney’s north. Although this expedition was modest in comparison to future, much lengthier journeys, it was no less imperial. Waterways were key to navigation, settlement and agriculture in any colony, and if ‘the explorer was the foot-soldier of geography’s empire’, as Felix Driver (building on Joseph Conrad) contends, in settler-colonies such travellers were also the outriders of settlement: they were travelling ‘towards what will become *their* country’.<sup>36</sup>

It was Colebee and Balloderry, 2 Aboriginal people well known to the colonists, who asked to join the party. They came as ‘volunteers’, wrote Tench, with Hunter adding that they were ‘desirous of joining this party’.<sup>37</sup> Colebee was a Cadigal man, inhabiting the suburbs and harbour of today’s eastern Sydney, a man who had survived smallpox and was considerably scarred, and who, along with Bennelong, had been kidnapped by the colonists in 1789 but soon escaped, yet whose relationship with them later continued.<sup>38</sup> Balloderry was a Burramattagal man from near Parramatta and a close associate of the Aboriginal people about Sydney Cove.<sup>39</sup> Both Colebee and Balloderry had been ‘assured that we should not stay out many days, and that we should carry plenty of provisions’.<sup>40</sup> Colebee ‘stipulated ... that during his absence, his wife and child should remain at Sydney under our protection, and be supplied with provisions’.<sup>41</sup> Here, Tench also left a clue as to how the changing socioeconomic world was being negotiated: this excursion with colonists was a novelty that had to be considered in light of pre-existing obligations to kin. Barangaroo, for instance, had used these ties to insist that Bennelong *not* go along with the colonists – and not for the first time. A few months earlier Barangaroo had violently opposed Bennelong going to visit Governor Phillip. This was, perhaps, an unsurprising reaction given

34 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 223.

35 Driver, *Geography Militant*, 2.

36 Driver, *Geography Militant*, 3; Veracini, ‘Settler Colonial Expeditions’, 58.

37 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 223; Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 513.

38 Smith, ‘Bennelong among His People’, 11; Smith, ‘Colebee’.

39 Smith, ‘Bennelong among His People’, 13.

40 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 223.

41 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 223.

that Bennelong had previously been kidnapped by Phillip, his duties to his family unit disrupted. The result was that Reverend Johnson and an Aboriginal woman, Abaroo, stayed with Barangaroo as sorts of hostages to assure Bennelong's prompt and safe return.<sup>42</sup>

## The first day

With Colebee's food-gathering and other duties to his family delegated, he and Balloderry set off with the expeditionary party. In what seems to have been foresight to prevent complaints from usually unencumbered people, each was equipped with a pack much lighter than the others, with the greater part of their share of equipment and provisions delegated to the soldiers and gamekeepers.<sup>43</sup> They steered by compass from the Governor's house in Rose Hill, the nature of the country carefully observed: 'good, full grass'; 'poor stony country'; or 'dry, arid soil'.<sup>44</sup> Spirits were high, at least for their Aboriginal companions. 'They walked stoutly', wrote Tench, 'appeared but little fatigued, and maintained their spirits admirably'. They also laughed 'to excess when any of us tripped or stumbled; misfortunes which much seldomer fell to their lot than to ours'; another reminder that the authoritative colonial gaze was also returned, the capabilities of the colonists were being examined and weighed.<sup>45</sup> Voluntarily sharing knowledge, Colebee and Balloderry told the party that this land was the country of the Bidjigals and, referring to the smallpox epidemic, said that most had died.<sup>46</sup> Later, they passed into another territory, that of the Buruberongal, a people that Colebee described as 'bad', and that as they had no fish, they lived on birds and animals.<sup>47</sup>

Here too were the first hints that 'travelling knowledge' was not foreign to Colebee and Balloderry.<sup>48</sup> There was knowledge gained on travel for ceremonies, 'feasts of seasonal food' and trade across different territories, and there were strict protocols – not all Aboriginal people travelled into adjoining areas, though some linked by marriage and other alliances could move about widely.<sup>49</sup> Colebee and Balloderry had either travelled here before, and so could read the landscape and knew where their country ended, or they had heard the relevant stories.<sup>50</sup>

42 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 188.

43 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 225.

44 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 223–24; Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 513.

45 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 225; In many cases, the colonists were aware of this. *Sydney Gazette*, 17 April 1813, 2; Konishi, *The Aboriginal Male*, 3.

46 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 513.

47 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 225.

48 Shellam, 'Manyat's "Sole Delight"', 121–32; Attenbrow, *Sydney's Aboriginal Past*, 79.

49 Attenbrow, *Sydney's Aboriginal Past*, 79.

50 See R. H. Mathews in Thomas, *Culture in Translation*, 150; Shellam, 'Manyat's "Sole Delight"'; Shellam, 'Nyungar Domains', 87.



Nonetheless, signs of confounded expectations began to emerge even on the first day. The colonists had expected that Colebee and Balloderry would know the country intimately and be able to provide information – a telling expectation of utility to the colonists, a longstanding undercurrent in so many dealings in this colonial context as elsewhere. They also hoped to see how they drew subsistence from the land.<sup>51</sup> Instead, as shall be discussed in more detail, they found that the further they went from Rose Hill, the less their Aboriginal companions knew of the country and the more dependent on the colonists they became.

## The two masters of ceremonies

At camp after sunset, Colebee and Balloderry bade the expeditionary party be silent and listen carefully: voices could be heard in the dark. Here, the journals of Hunter and Tench disagree. Hunter remarked that it was Colebee and Balloderry who wanted to open conversation with these Aboriginal men, Tench that it the officers who ‘begged’ their guides ‘to call to them, and bid them to come to us, to assure them of good treatment’. The latter seems more likely if the inhabitants of the area really were ‘bad men and their enemies’.<sup>52</sup> Either way, with knowledge of the colonists’ directions, intentions and their arms if needed, Colebee whooped aloud, and the signal was returned. This continued back and forth until the voices drew closer. As a lit timber torch was seen shining in the dark, Colebee and Balloderry moved forward, only to retreat again and ask the sergeant to go with them with his gun – a request that was declined, but that points to other relationships and cooperation in the expeditionary unit that frequently go unrecorded.

The man and boy who approached were also careful, and, while again both accounts have slightly different detail, communication began, with each person stating his name and affinity. Balloderry then explained to them who the colonists were, calling them ‘white men and friends, who would give him something to eat’. Though he appeared uncertain about how to proceed, Bereewan (Burrowan, for Hunter), drew the man to their fire and introduced each of the 21-person expeditionary party by name. The party were further described as ‘Englishmen, and *Bùd-ye-ree* (good), that we came from the sea coast, and that we were travelling inland’. Here, cultural brokerage had happened organically, a circumstance not lost on Tench, who called Colebee and Balloderry our ‘two masters of the ceremonies’. This lengthy conversation continued between Colebee and Balloderry, while the colonists remained mute on the sidelines. Bereewan then left when the gifting of provisions by the colonists signalled the end of the meeting.<sup>53</sup>

51 For instance, Ballantyne, ‘Strategic Intimacies’.

52 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 514.

53 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 226.

## Travelling continues

The second day was equally fatiguing for the colonists and their difficulties navigating the terrain continued, much to the amusement of Colebee and Balloderry who 'wound' through timber, vines and nettles with ease, and in the colonists' troubles continued to find 'an inexhaustible fund of merriment and derision'.<sup>54</sup> As the party went along, ducks were shot at, but only one was struck, and Colebee swam for it. They also passed signs of the local inhabitants, including one man who fled, and a hut. Again, the accounts disagree: either they did cut the hut to pieces, or Phillip prevented them. Either way, Colebee and Balloderry seemed displeased at interference in actions taken against their enemies.

Increasingly, Colebee and Balloderry were becoming strangers to the country being travelled through. Coming across a new river, they 'stared at it with surprise, and talked to each other', and in a telling sign that the colonists were testing them, they were asked which way Rose Hill lay and pointed completely in the wrong direction. Instead, they too came to rely on the compass, calling it '*Nää-Mòro*', or 'To see the way'.<sup>55</sup> Yet what is curious here is that Colebee and Balloderry were not completely ignorant, as the colonists suggested. They knew when they were passing through the country of the Bidjigals, and they knew when they passed onto the country of the Buruberongal too. So Colebee and Balloderry knew the landscape, the stories and the markers that signalled whose country one was in, even when such signs were invisible to the expeditionary party.<sup>56</sup>

The country was more difficult the following day, and the party spent most of it clambering over rocks and scrub with little grass. Once more, Colebee and Balloderry delighted in the colonists' misfortunes and gleefully mimicked their falling into nettles and slipping down the rocks. All at the camp that evening were exhausted, save 'our two sable companions', who, after they had received their food, 'began to play ten thousand tricks and gambols', imitating 'the leaping of the kangaroo' and singing, dancing, and play-fighting with spears. They were also asking more urgently for when the colonists would return. Pointing to where they were, they cried "*Weè-ree, Weè-ree*" (bad)', before contrasting this with Rose Hill and Sydney, saying, '*Bud-ye-ree, Bud-ye-ree* (good)'. 'At Rose Hill', Colebee and Balloderry said, were 'potatoes, cabbages, pumpkins, turnips, fish and wine: here are nothing but rocks and water'. Tench wrote that 'these comparisons constantly ended with the question of "Where's Rose Hill; where?" on which they would throw up their hands, and utter a sound to denote distance, which is impossible to convey an idea of upon paper'.<sup>57</sup>

54 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 516; Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 226–27.

55 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 227.

56 Shellam, 'Manyat's "Sole Delight"'.  
 57 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 227–29.

## **‘All sides continued to chat and entertain each other’**

The next day, following a long bed of stones that looked like ‘a pavement formed by art’, the expeditionary unit reached a river and spotted several canoes. Colebee and Balloderry directed the rules of engagement once more and had the party of 21 drop down amidst the reeds. Then, they took the lead in calling to the party, and one, a man of the name Gombeeree being known to Colebee, paddled over. Questions were asked about the river, which he responded to and, having been told by Colebee and Balloderry the importance of the Governor, Gombeeree returned and gave Phillip 2 stone hatchets and 2 spears – he too wanted to further this relationship with this important white man. Phillip, returning the diplomatic gesture, gave 2 axes, some fish hooks and some bread. Colebee had to broker meanings here, telling Gombeeree that the latter was food.<sup>58</sup>

When the expeditionary unit pushed on along the riverbank, Gombeeree followed the party in his canoe, another canoe joining behind him. Noting that the colonists were struggling in their travel, he observed that they were not walking close enough to the water’s edge where the most comfortable path lay. Still the expeditionary party had difficulty, so Gombeeree got out of his canoe and, leading them, brought them to the path that his own people used along the river. When the colonists stopped to make camp that afternoon, they realised that their new companion would camp with them, as did a boy named Deeimba and a young man called Yellomundee.

The colonists were surprised by these Aboriginal people’s confident and effortless interaction. ‘The ease with which these people behaved among strangers, was as conspicuous, as unexpected’, wrote Tench, continuing, ‘they seated themselves at our fire, partook of our biscuit and pork, drank from our canteens’ and, ever anxious to test the effect of their guns on new Aboriginal people, noted that they ‘heard our guns going off around them, without betraying any symptom of fear, distrust or surprise’.<sup>59</sup> This party may not have been in direct contact with the colonists, but they were well informed. The colonists, perhaps used to the remonstrations of Barangaroo, noted that the women who stayed on the opposite bank were content and showed no fear of their designs towards their men.<sup>60</sup>

As Martin Thomas has argued, all expeditions, by virtue of the fact that they were intrusions on inhabited terrain, were ‘intercultural phenomena’ and so became ‘vehicles for cultural display and inquiry’ in the process.<sup>61</sup> The exchanges across the camp that

58 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 229; Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 519.

59 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 230. On colonists and the use of sound, see Buchan, ‘The Civil Noise of Empire’.

60 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 230.

61 Thomas, ‘What Is an Expedition?’, 4.

evening were precisely in this tone, with all the 'mutual curiosity and preparedness to engage' that, as Philip Jones has noted, was characteristic of early encounters.<sup>62</sup> Some of the expeditionary party, their curiosity piqued by Colebee and Balloderry who called these people the Buruberongal men, 'climbers of trees', pressed Gombeeree to climb one – a feat at which he was considered a master despite being an older man – and gave him biscuit upon completion.<sup>63</sup> The colonists' probing continued, and they discovered that as there was only mullet in the rivers, the local Aboriginal people hunted mainly small marsupials and collected roots. The questions asked of the Buruberongal were communicated through Colebee and Balloderry, who the colonists discovered understood this group perfectly, and vice versa, despite speaking different dialects.<sup>64</sup> Here, in a proto-ethnographic style, the words for the moon, the ear, forehead, belly, navel, buttocks, neck, thigh and hair, among others, were all written down and compared with the terms heard at Sydney Cove.<sup>65</sup> Balloderry and Colebee also became true 'masters of ceremonies' that night, refusing to ask the Buruberongal questions about their initiation ceremonies, as private, sacred matters requiring circumspection. 'Neither Colebee, nor Boladeree [Balloderry], would put the question for us', Tench wrote, 'and on the contrary, shewed every desire to waive the subject'.<sup>66</sup>

Tench and other officers had long been curious about the politics of the different Indigenous groups around the colony. In considering why Colebee and Balloderry would not put their question to the Buruberongal, Tench reflected that this was further proof that the extraction of the front tooth among the Cammeraigal about Sydney was an imposition by this strong people – some of their closest acquaintances – upon weaker groups around them. They also deduced that since Colebee and Balloderry had labelled these people as 'bad', that their people of the sea coast must have driven these people inland to maintain their stock of fish, 'the weaker here, as in every other country, giving way to the stronger'.<sup>67</sup> Confusingly for the colonists, when the Buruberongal were out of earshot, their Aboriginal companions 'spoke of them very lightly' despite being 'on very friendly terms with their new acquaintances', and Yellomundee, the youngest of the men, was described as particularly bad by Balloderry.<sup>68</sup> Here, it is difficult to know whether or not Balloderry was reflecting the political realities as he perceived them, or was deliberately striving to turn the colonists off developing close relationships with Buruberongal.<sup>69</sup>

62 Jones, 'The Theatre of Contact'.

63 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 520–21; Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 233.

64 On the difficulty of knowing exact clan boundaries in this area of Sydney, including a discussion of the Bediagal and the Buruberongal, see Attenbrow, *Sydney's Aboriginal Past*, 24–34.

65 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 231; Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 523; Shellam, 'Ethnographic Inquiry', 237.

66 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 230.

67 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 225.

68 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 225.

69 Kathleen du Val has argued that in the Arkansas Valley, 'Indians and Europeans alike sought to control the culture of diplomacy and trade and to define themselves and others in ways that forwarded their own interests'. Kathleen du Val, *The Native Ground*, 4.

The camp that night was friendly and convivial. All sides were ‘stretched out at ease’ and ‘continued to chat and entertain each other’.<sup>70</sup> Yet the conversations and interactions had moved from being dyadic to triadic.<sup>71</sup> They were increasingly dominated by the Cammeraigal and the Buruberongal, and it seemed that little was translated back to the colonists who were straining to catch and understand what words they could. Gombeeree showed them a scar on his side, the result of a significant spear wound, and then explained the circumstances surrounding it. From the officers’ journals, it is clear that the stories of conflict and battle surrounding such scarring was a frequent subject of communication between Aboriginal men, a site of knowledge exchange, performance and construction of self to the other, as well as a way of narrating the political landscape and one’s place in it.<sup>72</sup> In return, Colebee then related knowledge of his own: who the colonists were, their numbers at Sydney and Rose Hill, of their stores of goods, and ‘above all’, wrote Tench, ‘the good things which were to be found among us, enumerating potatoes, cabbages, turnips, pumpkins’. Hunter added that the names of people were also ‘particularly attended to as if their hearers had been intimately acquainted with every person who was mentioned’.<sup>73</sup> Tench also noted that despite the fact that these words were mainly in English, and were ‘perfectly unintelligible to the person who heard them’, nonetheless, Gombeeree listened with ‘profound attention’: they, like the colonists, were collecting intelligence.<sup>74</sup>

Exchanges continued between Colebee, Balloderry and the Buruberongal, this time of specialised services: Yellomundee was a “caradyee”, or “Doctor of renown”, as was his clan. Colebee asked for water and, upon being given a cup by one of the expeditionary party, presented it with ‘great seriousness’ to Yellomundee, who then spat water upon him, and began to suck at his chest. This was a process repeated once or twice and, with the arts of this medicine man, 2 splinters from spears were thereby removed.<sup>75</sup> While Tench considered it a feat of trickery, Colebee was delighted and fully assured that he ‘had received signal benefit from the operation’, giving most of his supper to Yellomundee in return for his healing services, as well as his nightcap.<sup>76</sup> The next morning, a nod of the head between the Aboriginal parties and a ‘lustily’ returned handshake from the colonists ended the amicable meeting, the differentiated protocols of departure signalling a growing understanding of separate codes of politeness between the Aboriginal and colonial cultures.<sup>77</sup>

70 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 231.

71 Metcalf, *Go-betweenes*, 2.

72 McLaren, ‘Entangled Life of Goggey’, 499.

73 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 232; Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 522.

74 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 232.

75 The accounts differ on the number of times this ceremony was performed. The classic yet controversial study of Aboriginal medicine men is Elkin, *Aboriginal Men*.

76 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 232; Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 522.

77 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 233.

## **‘No house now, no fish, no melons’**

Colebee and Balloderry had long been perplexed by this expedition, but on the fifth day tensions reached their height. Hunter had already tried ‘to convey to their understandings the intention of our journey’, but found it impossible: ‘perhaps, no words could unfold to an Indian, the motives of curiosity, which induce men to encounter labour, fatigue, and pain, when they might remain in repose at home, with a sufficiency of food’, he continued, revealing how, to him, the deficit of purpose was linked with the indolence of the savage state.<sup>78</sup> Hunter wrote that Colebee and Balloderry ‘had at first supposed, that Governor Phillip and his party came from the settlement to kill ducks and patagorongs [kangaroos]’, only to be confused when the expeditionary party was not stopping at the places where large numbers of these animals had been seen. So upon questions being put to the Buruberongal about the rivers, Colebee and Balloderry then thought that the journey was to ‘procure stone hatchets’, and so communicated to the colonists that ‘it was a great way to the place where the stone hatchets were to be procured and that they must come in a boat’, asking the Governor to return to Rose Hill.<sup>79</sup> Then, as already related, repeated questions were asked about the direction of Rose Hill, along with opinions that it was a much better place than the country where they were at present.

On this morning, Balloderry had also refused to swim for some ducks that been shot. When asked why, he told the party that the white man ate whatever they swam for, despite them having to take the trouble to fetch it. It was a revealing observation. Accompanying the Governor on this expedition were 2 of the Aboriginal men who dined with him most often, sitting at table with knife and fork, and who drank wine with relish.<sup>80</sup> Yet on this expedition, the hierarchies subverted at Phillip’s dinner table in his eagerness to conciliate key Aboriginal individuals about Sydney – Julie McIntyre has aptly called it ‘dinner-table diplomacy’ – and again on display with the colonists giving the usually unencumbered Colebee and Balloderry only a light pack, had hardened into an order that did not sit well with their Aboriginal companions.<sup>81</sup> Balloderry’s reproof was ‘too justly founded’, noted Tench. Of the few ducks shot, ‘little had fallen to their share, except the offals, and now and then a half-picked bone’. While crows and hawks that were shot were given to them, ‘they plainly told us that the taste of ducks was more agreeable to their palates; and begged they might hereafter partake of them’.<sup>82</sup> In admitting this reality, the colonists had unwittingly fallen back on the hierarchical and class customs of their own culture, forgetting that protocols around the distribution of food also permeated the world of their companions, and that to refuse to offer food, or to refuse to accept it, could be

78 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 225.

79 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 519.

80 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 513; Smith, ‘Woolarawarre Bannelong’.

81 McIntyre, “‘Bannelong Sat Down’”, 39.6.

82 Tench, ‘Settlement at Port Jackson’, 234.

understood as a calculated snub.<sup>83</sup> But perhaps more significantly, this happening pointed to structural violence, writ small. Balloderry's refusal to meet the colonist's request signalled his refusal of the exchange system in operation, one in which the social and material flows had ceased to be mutually agreeable.<sup>84</sup>

It was also promising to be an uncomfortable night: sprinkles of rain were threatening to turn heavy, and they had no tent for the evening. 'Where's Rose Hill; where?', Colebee and Balloderry both asked incessantly. Colebee then talked about his wife and child, saying that the latter would cry, thereby introducing a gendered element of social obligation into the equation. Balloderry also 'lost all patience when the rain began, telling the Governor that there were good houses at Sydney and Rose Hill, but that they had no house now, no fish, no melon' (to the last, Hunter added in parentheses, 'of which fruit all the natives are very fond').<sup>85</sup> Hunter also observed that their Aboriginal companions would have abandoned the party, had they known the way home.<sup>86</sup>

The next morning, when the expedition was called off, Colebee and Balloderry were delighted. When the party reached Rose Hill, the punt was leaving for Sydney Cove. They went straight aboard, eager – according to Tench – to 'communicate to Baneelon [Bennelong], and the rest of their countrymen, the novelties they had seen'.<sup>87</sup> While Tiffany Shellam has convincingly argued for the prestige associated with 'travelling knowledge' at King George Sound, ideas that could and possibly do apply to this episode, returning to kin was probably a significant factor here as well.<sup>88</sup>

## Webs of stories

Following this failed expedition in April, another took place in May, with 3 or possibly 4 of the participants in the previous journey among the company. This time, however, no Aboriginal 'guides' asked to go along. In this earlier period, before the skills of Aboriginal guides as cooks, hunters, trackers and interpreters had developed, not all colonists were convinced of the utility of Aboriginal guides in the most straightforward sense of the term: as individuals who were familiar with the land and so would be able to direct and lead.<sup>89</sup> This expedition of May 1791 was to try to ascertain, once more, whether the Hawkesbury and the Nepean were, in fact, one river. While Tench was nailing his exploratory credentials to the wall – he wrote that this excursion 'completely

83 McLaren, 'Entangled Life of Goggey'.

84 On ways of grappling with different 'schemes of reciprocities', see Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 194–96.

85 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 524.

86 Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 524.

87 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 234.

88 Shellam, 'Manyat's "Sole Delight"', 121–32.

89 Gregory Blaxland, the leader of the expedition that crossed the Blue Mountains in 1813, deliberately chose *not* to harness an Aboriginal guide to come along as earlier he had found they contributed little. Blaxland, *A Journal of a Tour of Discovery Across the Blue Mountains*, 12.



settled the long-contested point' about these rivers and that he and Dawes had in fact unknowingly been this way a full year earlier – they again encountered a local Aboriginal man. This man, Deedora, called out to them using a 'native call'. So they answered, and when he came closer, they 'conversed across the river', though in one of the shortfalls of these journals it is not explained how they communicated, whether by gesture or spoken language.<sup>90</sup>

What is curious about this and subsequent happenings is that Deedora initiated them. It was Deedora who cooeed from the bush and then paddled across the river 'without distrust or hesitation'.<sup>91</sup> It was also Deedora who presented the colonists with 2 spears and a throwing stick: gifts that were exchanged for bread and beef. Then, finding that their party was heading up the river, Deedora offered to accompany them and paddled along until they reached Richmond Hill, where they had to cross the river. Here, the colonists' new escort offered his craft and called to friends on the opposite shore so that they were prepared for the strangers. Dawes and the soldier stripped and put their clothes in the canoe, pushing it ahead of them as they swam across. Morunga, one of the Aboriginal people on the other side of the river, brought the craft back across. Tench and his companion struggled with the canoe, both being frightened of rivers and swimming to various degrees. Knight, in particular, was subject to ridicule, with Morunga 'making signs of the ease and dispatch with which he would land him'. Yet both he and Tench were fearful of the water, a fact that was not lost on Deedora. Serjeant Knight eventually steered his way across while Tench decided to swim. Tench's clothes, half their knapsacks and 3 guns were then transported over by their new acquaintances who 'delivered them ... without damage or diminution'.<sup>92</sup>

In the face of such unbridled confidence, it is telling that Deedora 'appeared to know Gombeeree, of whom he often spoke'.<sup>93</sup> It is also significant that, during what Tench recognised as his party's 'helplessness and dependence', there was 'no rude curiosity to pry into the packages with which they were intrusted; or no sordid desire to possess the contents of them; although among them were articles exposed to view, of which it afterwards appeared they knew the use of, and longed for the benefit'.<sup>94</sup> When a hawk was later shot and fell into a tree, Deedora, knowing the colonists were not able to climb, offered his services.<sup>95</sup> Having been passed a metal hatchet to climb the tree and liking its utility, he requested it, and it was given to him the next morning.<sup>96</sup>

90 For a discussion on the difficulties of body language communication, see Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, 86–118; Clendinnen 2002, 157–74; Shellam, 'Mediating Encounters', 85–102, especially 97.

91 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 235.

92 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 236.

93 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 235.

94 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 236.

95 The botanist George Caley valued this skill highly, and would not travel without a guide. Smith, *Mari Nawi*, 124.

96 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 236–37.



## Conclusion: Dynamic exchanges

What can be drawn from these accounts? The first point to be made is that Colebee and Balloderry had entirely misconstrued the purpose of the expeditionary party, did not know what it meant to guide and had different expectations from those of the colonists. On the first night Colebee and Balloderry did not help set up camp, or chop wood for the fire, but ate and were waited upon. While later in the colony Aboriginal people knew what the colonists wanted in a guide, offered their skills and negotiated their payment, in 1791 these understandings had yet to develop.

It is also clear that the phenomenon of guiding was dependent upon the satisfactory negotiation of the needs of each party, needs that could be very different, and sometimes opposed. Pointing to this reality was the fact that Colebee and Balloderry would not put the questions to the Buruberongal that the colonists had asked them to; their asking of the sergeant to protect them with his gun; their unshakeable desire to return to Rose Hill; and their refusal to help with any more bird hunting. So the dynamics within expeditionary units themselves could be unstable, with different desires and interests at play. The decision to travel with an expeditionary party in the first place also required negotiation. Philip Jones has noted that those individuals who acted as guides 'were often torn between the great personal benefit and material reward associated with being part of an expedition ... and their ambivalences at leaving behind the security of their own countries, languages and kin'.<sup>97</sup> While this was only a relatively short expedition of 6 days rather than the weeks or months of other, much larger expeditions, it too had required Colebee to consider how he could both travel with the colonists and acquit his duties to his family. He negotiated with the colonists for this to happen. He would go, but only if his wife and child would be sheltered and fed by the colonists in Sydney.

In her consideration of the beginnings of guiding at King George Sound, Shellam noted a similar dynamic. Mokaré, a King-ya-nup man, had been misled by surgeon and explorer Thomas Braidwood Wilson in 1829, who deliberately failed to communicate just how far they were travelling.<sup>98</sup> The result was that 5 days into the expedition, Mokaré 'entered into a serious remonstrance' with Wilson, saying that they had little food, were far from King George Sound and that this was a far longer distance than the others usually travelled. Mokaré also added – not dissimilarly to Colebee – that 'the white fellows would cry'.<sup>99</sup> Travel was all well and good, but both Mokaré and Colebee were also thinking about all the people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, left behind, and the travelling parties' other social obligations.

<sup>97</sup> Jones, 'The Theatre of Contact', 97.

<sup>98</sup> Shellam, *Shaking Hands*, 144.

<sup>99</sup> Shellam, *Shaking Hands*, 145.

What of Deedora in the second short expedition related here? A perspective attentive to regional politics offers one explanation. It is probable that Deedora knew about these colonial people and his kinsfolk's experiences with them – including their goods and the presence of 2 foreign Aboriginal men – from the larger expedition of the preceding month. Perhaps the incident related above was an example of cultural curiosity of some form, mixed with a sense of acquisitiveness or a desire to engage with these powerful '*bud-ye-ree*' (good) Englishmen, as Colebee and Balloderry described the colonists to the Buruberongal a month earlier.

Even if Deedora's action was an 'example of disinterested urbanity', as Tench called it, it was not an ignorant one.<sup>100</sup> In repeatedly mentioning Gombeeree, Deedora was establishing his relationships with him, and in the process inadvertently left a clue to the ways in which knowledge about the colonists was gathered and how it spread. After all, Gombeeree had listened in 'rapt attention' to the news about the colonists' settlement at Sydney and Rose Hill, and the foods to be found there, and who had been given a metal axe and a nightcap.<sup>101</sup> He had also seen the colonists' ineptitude at travelling alongside the river, their tumbles and struggles, and had shown them the way. Alternatively, Deedora's actions could be read as an example of what Baker called the guiding of the 'passers on': those Aboriginal people who assisted intruding expeditionary parties 'through their territory with as little fuss and damage as possible'.<sup>102</sup> Either way, Deedora had learnt who these colonists were, what they carried, and their limited skills when travelling country – another reminder of the currents of stories and news that flowed around the colonists, stories that affected their reception.

It is worth dwelling further upon the fact that Gombeeree, seeing the colonists' struggle along the riverbank, responded by taking it upon himself to lead them through the country he knew so well. Another consequence of the colonists' travel was that it brought about circumstances in which both the limitations of their knowledge and of their skill could clearly be seen. The colonists had not asked for guiding help, but it had been offered by Gombeeree nonetheless. Similarly, the colonists had not, at this stage, brought along Aboriginal men to act as cultural brokers, yet circumstances on the ground brought this practice about. Here too, we can see that these exchanges developed dynamically through the circumstances and relationships the colonial presence in New South Wales set in motion.

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100 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 236.

101 Tench, 'Settlement at Port Jackson', 232; Hunter, *Transactions at Port Jackson*, 522.

102 Baker, 'Exploring with Aborigines', 40.

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# Nah Doongh's Song: Grace Karskens and Mark McKenna in conversation

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Grace Karskens and Mark McKenna

**Abstract:** Grace Karskens's biographical essay 'Nah Doongh's Song' tells the story of an Aboriginal woman from Mooro Morack, Penrith. In 2019 the essay won the *Australian Book Review's* Calibre Prize, and in June that year Grace and historian Mark McKenna met at Sydney's Gleebooks for an 'In-conversation' evening to discuss Nah Doongh's story and the historical thinking, sources and methods that made writing her story possible, as well as the wider implications of writing biographies of Aboriginal people. This is an edited transcript of their conversation.

**Mark:** We're here this evening to discuss Grace's recent essay 'Nah Doongh's Song', which has won the 2019 *Australian Book Review's* Calibre Prize.<sup>1</sup> To my eyes it is nothing short of a masterclass in how to write history. So to begin, could you tell us a little bit about Nah Doongh? Why did you become interested in her?

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<sup>1</sup> Grace Karskens, 'Nah Doongh's Song', *Australian Book Review*, No. 413, August 2019, 31–37. [www.australianbookreview.com.au/prizes-programs/calibre-prize/past-winners](http://www.australianbookreview.com.au/prizes-programs/calibre-prize/past-winners).

**Grace:** Thanks very much Mark – and these are good questions! Nah Doongh was an Aboriginal woman, born about 1800 in the area around Penrith, on the Nepean River at the foot of the Blue Mountains. She died sometime in the late 1890s. She was about 3 or 4 years old when white people appeared in her country, and the thing that she talked about was how the settlers shot all the game – the soundtrack of invasion was gunfire. But Aboriginal people in this region were not instantly ‘eliminated’ by settlers. They were dispossessed of their richest lands, and it became more and more difficult for them to live in their Country, but they survived and they remained. So Nah Doongh was one of the first generation of Aboriginal people to grow up in a conquered land. She was of the same generation as other astonishing young people like Maria Lock, who became a matriarch and landowner, and Biraban, the stolen boy who grew up to become a Karadji – a doctor and clever man – and religious leader. These were resilient young people, and they had no choice but to find a way to survive in this unstable, dangerous post-invasion world. So, her story is about survival, but it’s also about *negotiating* that world. How did she do it? How did she live? Where did she go?

I became fascinated by Nah Doongh’s story while I was researching the history of the Hawkesbury-Nepean River for my next book.<sup>2</sup> I’m interested in recovering the stories of marginalised people – the people left out of mainstream history. And there’s a rich source of detailed information about Nah Doongh – which is very rare for a nineteenth-century Aboriginal person, let alone a woman. In 1886 Nah Doongh befriended a white woman named Sara Shand. Sara was a doctor’s wife, a painter and a writer, who had just arrived from the north of England. She was very interested and curious to meet a ‘real Aborigine’, as she put it, and she asked Nah Doongh lots of questions, sketched and painted pictures of her. Nah Doongh often visited Sara, told her stories and even tried to teach her Aboriginal words. Eventually, during the 1891 flood, Nah Doongh moved in with the Shand family and looked after their children. Some years later, Sara wrote some detailed reminiscences about ‘Black Nellie’ – which is what the settlers called her – and they were published in the *Nepean Times* in 1914.<sup>3</sup>

**Mark:** So her life spanned the entire nineteenth century?

**Grace:** Yes, the whole century: from Aboriginal Country to Federation; from the invasion to the railways. It’s extraordinary to think that she saw all that unfold, and she was also part of it.

<sup>2</sup> Karskens, *People of the River*.

<sup>3</sup> Sara Shand, ‘Black Nellie’, *Nepean Times*, 18 July 1914.

**Mark:** I'd like to quote a few lines from the essay, which I think really go to the heart of what you're trying to do. Grace writes of how, in trying to track and comprehend Nah Doongh's life, she 'collided spectacularly with the methodological and ethical dilemmas at the heart of so much Aboriginal history', that is the fact that the richest records are usually created, of course, by the colonists. They come to us, you write, 'shaped by settler colonial ideas, about race and gender', and also as 'memorial archiving', the collection of Aboriginal artefacts, stories and images while Aboriginal people were still alive. Ironically, we know a lot about Nah Doongh because she's there in those European records. And you write very poetically that 'at every turn the evidence is profoundly mediated by happenstance, by vast silences and human figures are indistinct, they're like shapes deep under water, tiny clues flicker, their significance magnified by the unknowns'. You write that you bookend your essay with what you call 'ghost biography' and I'm really interested in getting you to say a little bit about what you understand by that term, 'ghost biography'.

**Grace:** Yes, it is so deeply ironic that the people and system which dispossessed and marginalised Aboriginal people also made the most detailed records about them – relatively speaking. Liz Conor's book *Skin Deep: Settler Impressions of Aboriginal Women* really lays out the extent and depth of racist ideas about Aboriginal women and especially old women like Nah Doongh. Liz Conor shows just how deeply ingrained and taken-for-granted these ideas were in settler society.<sup>4</sup> So the sources *are* tainted; they are often repellent. But, like a number of Indigenous historians, I don't think we should reject these sources as evidence because of this. I believe the racist lens can be identified and called out; and what remains are precious records of people whose lives and presence would be lost otherwise. And we can contextualise them by gleaning meaning from across a range of other sources. We can go through lists, we can look at photographs and maps, we can read the body – we can turn those racist accounts on their heads and read them against the grain.

But, on the other hand, we have to have humility. I can argue a case, weave a story as far as the evidence goes but where it is insubstantial – ghostly – I have to acknowledge that. This is the fallout of colonisation too, of course, the *lack* of proper records about Aboriginal people, because they were not considered important enough to record. I called the parts of the story about Nah Doongh's early womanhood, and about her death, 'ghost biography' because I can't say that I know what happened to her.

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4 Conor, *Skin Deep*.

**Mark:** So if it's ghost biography then it is, by nature, speculative. It has to step back from argument?

**Grace:** It has to step back from argument and be speculative, leave spaces and talk about the evidence: here is what we know; this is what it could mean. For example, we don't know for certain where and when Nah Doongh died. One source says she was buried at St Stephen's at Penrith, but she isn't listed on the burial register. I did find a burial record of an Aboriginal woman called Nellie, who died in the Newington Asylum in 1898 and was buried at Rookwood Cemetery. The certificate said she had 'no friends'. If this was Nah Doongh, the implications are awful – old and infirm, she was taken away from her Country and friends, and left in an alien place to die among strangers. But then, while some of the details fit, like the date, others don't: this woman couldn't speak English, for example, and we know Nah Doongh spoke English well.

**Mark:** You talk about the genre of biography, that it should, ideally, awaken us to the shared predicament of hidden and forgotten people. And also that biography is not a finite business, it's a process, it's a journey. I am wondering then, if the process has to be slow, by definition it takes years to do the digging that's required.

**Grace:** Yes – that's what I mean by slow history. I don't think you could write a respectful, truthful story about someone like Nah Doongh in, say 2 months with everything else that we do! I've been on her trail for a decade at least. This kind of work needs patience, minute detective work, lateral thinking and some serendipity – as well as consultation with Aboriginal people connected to her story. I can't help contrasting it with the way our universities are heading. We're bombarded with the language and values of business and industrial production, so somehow research is all about speed, productivity, efficiency, performance and annual quotas! It's another world from the kind of history that I want to write – I want to bring to people a new way of thinking about history, by writing new histories, forgotten histories, history from the ground up, the history that we need to know. This sort of work involves important questions, forensic research across lots of different disciplines and time to think and write.

- Mark:** There's also the fact that we are still forced into old disciplinary categories – like the ARC (Australian Research Council), for example, where you can tick the box either for 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History' or 'Australian History' *excluding* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History.<sup>5</sup> This is quite remarkable given your work and the work of many other historians – those categories just don't make sense!
- Grace:** Yes. It's astonishing! Why are those categories still there? And in our leading research funding body? As though Indigenous history was not part of Australian history, as though settler and Indigenous histories were not entangled? It's a long time since we thought like that.
- Mark:** Can I take you to the sources in the essay? I really love the way you circle around your sources. A bit like a patient bird of prey in a way. You're eyeing, you're probing, testing, zeroing in, sorting half-truths from fiction, you're winnowing the text, as it were, chiselling away at the barest threads of evidence. You are reading the body, the landscape and art until Nah Doongh emerges more fully formed. I want to take you through how you actually used your sources. Let's start with Sara Shand's piece about Nah Doongh in the *Nepean Times* in 1914. You say this narrative is charmingly written but it has a lot of problems and obscures a lot of things, and also that you found a 'dark' version of her stories. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about both these sources? But first, can you tell the story of how Nah Doongh arrives at the Shand house and Sara's reaction?
- Grace:** Oooh a patient bird of prey, I love that! Yes, it was a fascinating process of discovery! Sara wrote that Nah Doongh would always visit and then return to her little hut on the common. A lot of Aboriginal people lived on commons in this region – they were not private property and often they were still covered with bushland. But the 1890s saw another cycle of great floods on the Nepean. When they hit, Nah Doongh would stay with the Shands for a few days or a week and then she'd leave again. But the 1891 flood was massive, and Nah Doongh, who would have been in her early 90s by then, announced she was going to move in with them permanently. Sara didn't really believe it until she turned up at the house with a cart piled up with all her possessions, smiling cheerily and saying 'I've come to live with you!' And Sara writes, 'What could I do but welcome her?' [see Figure 2].
- Mark:** She moves in of her own accord. Wonderful!

5 '1297.0 – Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC), 2008', Australian Bureau of Statistics, 31 March 2008, accessed 7 November 2019, [www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/E64DBD7D09B306A4CA2574180004C5A6?opendocument](http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/E64DBD7D09B306A4CA2574180004C5A6?opendocument).



**Figure 1: Nah Doongh in old age, Penrith, 1890s.**

Source: Courtesy Penrith City Library, Local Studies Collection.

**Grace:** Yes, it's her own decision – within the limits of her situation, she made decisions and took action. Sara wrote about it so humorously in the *Nepean Times* story in 1914. How she came to write the story is part of the bigger process of settler history-making – one of those times that Tom Griffiths calls 'high seasons of memory'.<sup>6</sup> That year was the 100th anniversary of the building of Cox's Road over the Blue Mountains, and Penrith was celebrating big-time because the road and later the railway were the reason for its founding and growth. One way to mark the occasion – besides a big parade – was to publish the reminiscences of the oldest residents in the local newspaper. They were long, chatty stories, mostly about the pioneering days, bushrangers and Aboriginal people. By this time the Shand family had moved away from Penrith, though they kept in touch. My guess is that Sara read these pieces and was inspired to contribute her own – more elegantly written – stories about Nah Doongh, the 'last of her tribe', as she was known locally.

But I also discovered a 'dark' version of the story – or, that's how I think of it. It's in the Local Studies Collection at Penrith Library. This one was handwritten on lined paper, and I could see that it was George Bunyan's handwriting. He was an early local historian and collector.<sup>7</sup> It's possible he asked Sara for more stories about Nah Doongh and wrote them out longhand. I call it a 'dark' version because it contains far more disturbing material than the published version. It reveals that Sara was quite cruel in the way she treated Nah Doongh, teasing and badgering her about sensitive subjects – her injuries for example, and about death – which Sara must have known was a taboo subject for Aboriginal people.

**Mark:** You write at one point, you're talking to yourself almost, I think, 'What if we placed Nah Doongh at the centre of her own story? What if we begin by listening closely to what she was trying to tell Sara Shand?' I'm really interested in this phrase, 'listening closely' if you can unpack that for me. Because it tells us a lot about how you're reading and interpreting the source, so, what does that process 'listening closely' mean? More precisely, how does it get transformed into historical narrative?

<sup>6</sup> Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*, 197. See 'Reminiscences of Early Penrith', *Nepean Times*, 23 May 1914.

<sup>7</sup> Sara Shand, 'Some Insights into the Character of Queen Nellie', c. 1914, transcript by George Bunyan, Local Studies Collection, Penrith City Library.

**Grace:** Yes, good question. I would call it deep contextualisation. I've spent probably 10 or 15 years researching Aboriginal culture, the environment of the Nepean River, the society that grew up there after the invasion. This was how I began to make sense of what Nah Doongh was doing and saying. The irony is that, if I can borrow Paul Irish's book title, Nah Doongh's stories and words are 'hidden in plain view'.<sup>8</sup> They've been published over and over again in local histories and heritage studies along with her photographs. Yet, no one asked: What does this actually mean? What is Nah Doongh telling Sara Shand? The way to unlock that is to take it bit by bit, to look very closely at what was she saying and doing, and contextualise the words and actions as deeply as possible, especially within Aboriginal understandings and spiritual beliefs. Then, slowly, these unfamiliar words and ideas start to speak.

**Mark:** You say that the most striking example of her voice was her song. Shand recalled that once a month she'd dress in her best clothes and go out. Occasionally returning drunk. There was a song that she sang:

All the Land Belonged to Mr McCarthy One Finger.  
All the Land Belonged to Mr McCarthy Two Finger.  
All the Land Belonged to Mr McCarthy Three Finger.  
All the Land Belonged to Mr McCarthy Four Finger.

**Grace:** Yes, she counted her 4 fingers off as she sang that chorus. There were verses in Aboriginal language, but Shand didn't write them down, unfortunately.

**Mark:** So, let me ask you the question you ask yourself in the essay. What do we make of this song and how do you actually use that kind of process of slow, steady looking and excavation, to get at what she was singing. What does the song mean?

**Grace:** Well, first impression, 'all the land belonged to Mr McCarthy'. Obviously, the song is about a settler, who owns 'all the land', so it seems to be a song about possession and dispossession. There's one clue. But who was Mr McCarthy? Jim Kohen, an archaeologist who's done a lot of work in the region, had already suggested it was a local McCarthy family at Cranebrook, descended from an ex-convict called James McCarthy.<sup>9</sup> They did own some land. But it didn't quite seem to fit, I mean, the *gravitas* of the song, the repetition, the counting off. Why would it be about them? It was only by a long and convoluted route that I discovered who she was singing about – and that she hadn't lived at Penrith all her life.

<sup>8</sup> Irish, *Hidden in Plain View*.

<sup>9</sup> Kohen, *The Darug and Their Neighbours*, 141.





**Figure 2: Nah Doongh, probably outside the Shand home in Penrith, c. 1891.**

Source: Courtesy Penrith City Library, Local Studies Collection.



**Figure 3: 'Black Nellie' outside the tile room at Camden.**

Source: Courtesy Camden Historical Society.

**Grace:** Lorraine Stacker, who is a historian and the local history librarian at Penrith, drew my attention to a photograph in the Camden Historical Society collection. It shows an Aboriginal woman called 'Black Nellie' in a white dress, seated outside the tile room at Camden, which is the estate of the Macarthur family [see Figure 3]. The Macarthurs were one of the most influential families in the colony. How do we know it's Nah Doongh? Because of her hand: it's misshapen, the same as in her Penrith photograph, and she's even holding the same walking stick. So then I wondered why Nah Doongh would be visiting Camden. I re-read Alan Atkinson's wonderful book *Camden* to see if he mentioned her.<sup>10</sup> Well, it turns out that 'Black Nellie' – who was actually Nah Doongh – had married Johnny Budbury, a young Aboriginal man who lived on the estate. She may have lived at Camden for around 3 decades, a member of the larger Aboriginal group who lived on the Camden estate. However, Atkinson also says that Nah Doongh left Camden around 1865. She returned to her own Country at Penrith – Johnny followed her later. So, who is she singing about in the song? Most likely the wealthy, powerful Macarthurs. 'All the land belong to Mr McCarthy' rings true because, of course, they owned vast tracts of land. Also, there had been 4 generations of Macarthurs by this time, which possibly explains the 4 fingers in the refrain. The family was also important to Nah Doongh because she befriended the Macarthur women – just as she later befriended Sara Shand and other women around Penrith. It was one of her survival strategies.

**Mark:** So, it's a song about dispossession and loss of country.

**Grace:** Yes, I think so. I also think Aboriginal people were singing settler history to settlers. Shand was a newcomer, so Nah Doongh is singing to her, she's telling her what happened. We're finding more and more of these stories, and that in some places Aboriginal people were and remain the knowledge-holders for settler history, because they stayed with Country, while settlers often moved on. Samia Khatun's *Australianama* has some remarkable examples of this history-keeping and storytelling, and how that knowledge is being recovered.<sup>11</sup>

**Mark:** You also quote Nah Doongh talking about James Cook – Captain Cook. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

<sup>10</sup> Atkinson, *Camden*, 207, 232.

<sup>11</sup> Khatun, *Australianama*.

**Grace:** Captain Cook, of course! This is the well-known post-contact Aboriginal mythology which Deborah Bird Rose and Maria Nugent have written about so well.<sup>12</sup> Captain Cook is the mythological figure who strides across Country, taking land, bringing death and disease wherever he goes – he’s the archetypal greedy, immoral settler. Aboriginal communities across Australia have different versions of the story. It’s clear that it was already current in the nineteenth century because Nah Doongh knew the story too, and told it to Sara Shand in the 1880s or 1890s.

Why did she tell the Captain Cook story? Sara Shand, like a lot of settlers, was very interested in the first contact story – what was it like? What did you think of us when you first saw us? At first Nah Doongh tells her about Country – how it was still all forest, how the Aboriginal people far outnumbered the settlers. Which is historically correct – the invasion began slowly in this area. But then Sara Shand suddenly interrupts saying ‘Poor Nellie, people taken all your country’. Nah Doongh does a doubletake, but then shoots back her own question: ‘Well what did you come here for then? You’re another white folk!’ But remember, Sara is her friend, and she’s living in her house, she is dependent on her. So she starts the story again, and this time it’s the Captain Cook story, which is a way of deflecting the uncomfortable facts in this personal situation, but also of telling the larger truth. She said that Captain Cook was terrifying, a giant white man who came to Penrith with guns and shot all the game. In the end there was no game left for Aboriginal people and they all died, except for Nah Doongh.

**Mark:** It’s a wonderful quote, and it brings us to landscape, which is itself an archive in all your work. I’m interested in how you track Nah Doongh and her movement across country and you talk about the work of Maria Nugent, Denis Byrne, Paul Irish (as you’ve done already) about life mapping or geo-biography. I’m wondering how you’ve applied those ideas to her life? And how you’ve tried to track her travels across the country?

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12 Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human*; Nugent, *Captain Cook Was Here*.

**Grace:** Sure, as Maria, Denis and Paul have written, geo-biography is a way of understanding past peoples or communities through their movements across Country – especially repeated movements, which trace out ongoing relationships between people and places. It reminds me powerfully of Rhys Isaac's simple but profound words about ethnographic history. He said that we need to watch *people doing things*, especially actions and movements that are repeated.<sup>13</sup> Paul Irish mapped amazing patterns of continuity among the Aboriginal people of coastal Sydney, who were still moving up and down the coast in the twentieth century. This is so fascinating because it reveals those ongoing links, and it also helps us see past the idea that Aboriginal people were static, that they only moved around their own Country. They're constantly making long journeys for ceremonial or family business, so, not random journeys, but journeys with purpose and structure and proper protocols.

Nah Doongh moved a long way over her life too, and she returned to her own Country in her 60s. But her movements as a young woman are still uncertain – part of her ghost biography. It is possible that she went to the Liverpool area on the George's River to become the wife of the well-known leader Coomun in the late 1810s. But the evidence is so slight – it's just 2 names – Nellie and Angelina. Coomun's wife was recorded as Nellie *Colonga* – clearly that's a very different name to Nah Doongh. Then again, Aboriginal people had many different names, including European nicknames. And Nah Doongh wasn't the only young Nepean woman to marry into the George's River group. There was also an alliance between the Nepean and Liverpool Aboriginal people in the early 1820s. So this move and marriage was not impossible.

The other name-clue is 'Angelina'. About the time Nah Doongh's husband died, a young girl named Angelina came to stay with her at Penrith. It's possible this was Angelina Timberly, the great-granddaughter of Coomun and Nellie Colonga. She was born in 1873, which makes her the right age for the girl who came to stay with Nah Doongh. It's a tantalising link, but was she really her great-granddaughter? So much hangs on this one name! Descendants of the Timberly family today say Nah Doongh is not related to them, and she herself never mentioned her family – in fact she said all her family had died.

13 Byrne and Nugent, *Mapping Attachment*; Irish, *Hidden in Plain View*; Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*.

**Mark:** Let's come to the body now: the way that you read Nah Doongh's body. There's a photograph, of course, which you draw on, showing that her left hand is withered and that she holds a walking stick. You go to a specialist, Dr Stephen Oakley, who's a rheumatologist, show him the photograph and the evidence and ask him, 'Well can you help me with what this might mean?' and what does he tell you and why is it significant?

**Grace:** I was absolutely bowled over by this. I thought Stephen might be able to give me some information on how having a disability like that would affect Nah Doongh's daily life – to have one hand that's clawed and withered. He is interested in historical cases and he showed the images to 4 of his colleagues. They looked at the width of the wrist, the way the arm was hanging, the position. And to my amazement they came up with a diagnosis: Nah Doongh had Erb–Duchenne Palsy. This happens when the nerves in your arm are torn away from your neck. It means she wouldn't have been able to use that arm at all. She couldn't feel it, it would have been numb or tingling. So, she really only had the use of one arm. It is strange, because she was quite well-known in the area, yet no one ever mentions this disability, not even Sara Shand. One settler even remembered her as 'very muscular', as though she was big and strong. It's so odd!

**Mark:** To be honest, I can imagine a lot of historians, perhaps in the past, who would have just dropped the photograph in there but not thought to ask, 'Well could I actually find out the significance, what that actually means?' – and you've done that. It's another example of how you're reflecting on every last bit of evidence and getting the maximum amount you can from it.

**Grace:** It's precious!

**Mark:** The essay ends, with this wonderful clinching moment, which is quite extraordinary. You find an image online of Sara Shand's portrait of Nah Doongh ... so tell us about that moment of discovery.





**Figure 4: Portrait of Nah Doongh by Sara Shand, 'Nellie the Cook'.**

Source: Private collection.

**Grace:** That painting haunted me for years! Sara Shand wrote that she painted a portrait of Nah Doongh, and it was quite well-known locally, hung in local shows, mentioned in the newspapers. I always wondered what happened to it. I tracked down a reference that it was hanging in the Penrith School of Arts until the mid-1950s, but then disappeared. I know how easily things like that can be thrown out, sent to the tip, but I kept thinking, what if it is still around, stashed in an attic somewhere? After I'd done most of the research, I Googled it one more time – 'Sara Shand Nellie painting'. I wasn't expecting anything at all, but there was a hit! My internet speed was very slow at the time and it took forever but slowly this painting appeared on my screen, and it was her! I was so shocked and so delighted. There she was grinning good naturedly, wearing the same dress she's wearing in the photograph, with a faded shawl around her shoulders – the shawl was a gift from the Macarthur women [see Figure 4]. The painting was spotted at auction by an art restorer who cleaned and restored it – and then it was sold to a private collector, who unfortunately took it overseas.<sup>14</sup>

**Mark:** One of the great things about your essay is its ability to be comfortable as speculative history, as ghost biography, I guess, but it's not fictional and I'm interested in asking you if you could ever imagine wanting to fill in the gaps, using your own imagination and, of course, historical knowledge, and writing not a ghost biography but a fictional biography? And if not, why not?

**Grace:** Such an interesting question! My first response is: no, I don't think I could write a completely fictionalised story to fill in the gaps. Then again, where are the boundaries between history and fiction? I often reimagine historical vignettes, or people doing things – like the picture of Nah Doongh on the train to Camden to visit old friends, sitting on the dark leather seats in her dress and 7 petticoats. But all this comes out of research. I know Nah Doongh did travel there by train, I know how she dressed and what the train seats looked like at that time. Am I writing fiction? Or using 'historical imagination', as Greg Denning called it. But when the evidence gets too thin and there are gaps in historical records I speculate from what we do know: this is probably what happened, or this is the most likely explanation; and I reveal the evidence that is available – bringing readers into a historical question, but also making them aware of these silences, which are part of the story too.

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14 Duncan Hulme, personal communication, June 2017, and Peter Lane, October 2018.



**Mark:** Yes, I think it depends on the reader too, of course it always does, but when I was reading your essay, I really liked the fact that there were lots of spaces in there. You lay the evidence out, you give us everything we could possibly need to make our own interpretation. It's the best way to approach this kind of biography. There's space there for the reader to do that. I don't want you, Grace Karskens, to say, 'Well this was this, it was ABCD'. I don't want you to do that.

**Grace:** I agree. I think it's important to acknowledge these ambiguities, and to let the readers know what we do. Like, how do we sort these things out? How do we decide whether she went to Liverpool or not? In this case we can't, but we can say why it might be possible or likely that she did.

**Mark:** I thought I'd like to ask you a general question about the arc of your work. As a historian, you've in a way circled what you call Sydney's sandstone arc. You've been in Western Sydney, Prospect, you've been in The Rocks, of course, in Sydney itself, the Cumberland Plain, *The Colony* and, any minute now, the Hawkesbury-Nepean. So, there's this arc, but are you going to head south?

**Grace:** Well, I still find the Sydney region endlessly fascinating – it's so diverse in landscapes, ecologies, people. So many multi-layered stories still to be told! So many mysteries! It has one of the longest Aboriginal histories in Australia, yet it's also the site of the biggest city in Australia. Lately I have been thinking more broadly about the larger region, the 'sandstone circle', the vast area of sandstone country that reaches from say, Wollongong, around to the west escarpment of the Blue Mountains and the Wollemi and then north and east, almost to the Hunter Valley to the north and east. Aboriginal art and sacred and ceremonial sites are linked right across this region – it has its own distinctive regional style. So I thought, imagine working at this scale! Not just the coast or the river, but this whole inspired region. There has been so much work done across the region by all sorts of researchers and writers in history, archaeology, ecology, geology and so on. There are numerous Aboriginal communities and organisations. What if we could pull it all together?

**Mark:** In terms of the future, after this book that's coming out very shortly, do you have an idea of where you want to go?

**Grace:** Right now it is hard to see past *People of the River*, which will be a kind of companion volume to *The Colony*, but looking at the first settler farming frontier on the Hawkesbury-Nepean River – so it’s about the rural origins of modern Australia and how that was entangled with Aboriginal history and culture. I’m also working on an exciting project with a team of Darug researchers called ‘The Real Secret River: Dyarubbin’. It’s based around a list of Aboriginal names for the Hawkesbury and Macdonald rivers that I came across in the library a couple of years ago. That was a shock because I thought the Aboriginal names were lost forever, yet, here’s this list of 178 Aboriginal names, including the names of Windsor, Richmond, the Blue Mountains! What we’re doing is relocating and mapping as many as we can, doing fieldwork and recording Aboriginal memory and knowledge. We’re working with linguist Jim Wafer on glossing the words, and also with archaeologist Paul Irish so we can map the archaeological sites on the river. We’re taking a whole-of-Country approach. Some of the findings are truly amazing. We may be able to map an Aboriginal geography of the river in the 1820s, both the natural environment and the sacred landscape.

So now I’m wondering whether ‘The Real Secret River: Dyarubbin’ project could be a kind of pilot study for a larger regional project – the sandstone circle. I am inspired by what Megan Davis has to say about regional histories, which can be told around landscapes and places. Regional and local histories can be intimate, as you yourself have shown so brilliantly Mark.<sup>15</sup> This is the scale that really speaks to people because it explores, gives deeper meaning to the familiar and everyday. Megan Davis went on to say that the truth about massacres and frontier war has to be told in these histories, but other stories and places could be there too – like the social and ceremonial grounds, and places where Aboriginal people and settlers maintained friendships. She sees these histories as the essential first step towards Makarrata – reconciliation after a period of conflict – because there can’t be reconciliation before a truthful history has been understood and acknowledged.<sup>16</sup>

**Mark:** You’ve just reminded me, there’s one more question I’d like to ask. When you’re looking closely for Nah Doongh’s voice, are there ethical dilemmas in finding it? Is there an edge to that process?

<sup>15</sup> McKenna, *Looking for Blackfellas’ Point*.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, ‘From the Expert Panel to the Referendum Council’.

**Grace:** Yes, there are ethical dilemmas, as there are in any research involving Aboriginal people – starting with the racism embedded in many of the sources I mentioned earlier. I think it's now widely known and accepted that we must decolonise Australian history, but this also means decolonising how we do history. I am a non-Indigenous person; my parents were migrants from the Netherlands and Indonesia. I am committed to researching and writing colonial history as fully as I can – and this means taking Aboriginal and cross-cultural history as seriously as settler history, whatever challenges that may involve. I try to involve Aboriginal people as fully as possible in the research and the writing and acknowledge their contributions. Consulting Aboriginal people for their perspectives is especially important. For 'Nah Doongh's Song' I talked to Michael Ingrey, a Gadhungal man from La Perouse, who knows her story and can speak for the La Perouse people. By an amazing historical twist, Michael is also descended from Sara Shand! So he knows stories about her that were passed down the Shand family. Nah Doongh herself doesn't appear to have descendants, or none who recognise her. This is part of her story. She didn't mention any children, and after her husband died she didn't have anyone besides her white friends when she got old. There were other Aboriginal groups in the region – the people up at Katoomba, down at Burragorang, on the Hawkesbury at Sackville and at the old Blacktown camp on the Richmond Road. But they weren't her people and she didn't like them.

**Mark:** Thanks so much, Grace. It's incredible really because this is a 5,000-word essay and just look at how much work has gone into this, how much time, and what a lesson it is. It's a really inspiring piece of work.

**Grace:** Thank you Mark!

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# Big John Dodo and Karajarri histories

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Darren Jorgensen

**Abstract:** John Dodo (c. 1910–2003) is known in the Australian artworld for making enigmatic sculptures of men’s heads, often wearing ceremonial headbands. This essay draws on new information about Dodo from an archival interview and from the memories of his widow Aunty Rosie Munroe, as well as his grandchildren Anna Dwyer and Mervyn Mulardy Jnr. Among the Karajarri people whose country lies along the coast and inland from the community of Bidyadanga, Dodo is remembered not so much as an artist as a diplomat. Dodo played a central role in negotiating a native title case and in laying the foundations for a cultural revival among the Karajarri today. He is also remembered as a ceremonial leader and a *pikkra*, a person who is a root of Karajarri law. Dodo’s history as a leader suggests new interpretations of his carved heads that may well represent something of this personal and ancestral power.

This essay takes several new sources of information about the artist known as Big John Dodo Nangkiriny (c. 1910–2003) to think through the significance of a series of carved heads he made over the course of his lifetime.<sup>1</sup> These heads, often wearing ceremonial headbands, are now in museum and private collections. They are occasionally auctioned, exhibited and reproduced in publications. The literature on these heads is, however, scant, consisting largely of some brief descriptions by the anthropologist Kim Akerman whose account is repeated in auction catalogues and art gallery websites. He writes that:

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1 Geoffrey Bagshaw, a friend of Dodo’s, points out that Nangkiriny was his actual name. Dodo is also spelt Dudu, but I have chosen ‘Big John Dodo’ because this is the name and spelling used to name his work in art collections in Australia. Please note that if speaking about Dodo with Karajarri people, it is best to refer to ‘Aunty Rosie’s husband’ or to ‘the old man who carved the heads’, as it is impolite to use the name of the deceased.

It was in the early 1960s when Big John first used his artistic skills to portray the human form. This new artistic direction was the result of a dream-visitation experienced by a Karadjeri/Nyangumarta man. In the visitation a spirit named Walkarurra taught the man a new corroboree and also instructed that two human figures be carved. Big John Dodo was chosen to carve the two figures for the corroboree. When the figures were presented to the community it was a resounding success. Encouraged by these initial sculptures, Big John Dodo experimented further, producing heads of mud, wood and stone. He finally settled on stone as a preferred medium.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1: Big John Dodo, untitled, 1968. Carved sandstone with earth pigments, 21 cm high.**

Source: Courtesy of H. Petri Collection, Berndt Museum, University of Western Australia, accession no. WU 5975.

The following essay complicates this origin story, putting the making of the first head back 3 decades earlier, to 1938 or 1939, when the German anthropologist Helmut Petri met Dodo on Anna Plains Station on the north-west coast of Australia. This knowledge comes from Dodo himself, who was interviewed in a video recording by the anthropologist John Stanton in 1985. This essay draws upon this recording, as well as upon recent interviews with members of the Karajarri community and Dodo's family. These interviewees include 2 of Dodo's grandchildren, Anna Dwyer

<sup>2</sup> Ackerman, 'Stone', n.p. Note that Akerman is incorrectly spelt as Ackerman in this catalogue. This text is almost identical to the text of Anonymous, 'Big John Dodo', n.p., which is attributed to information from Dodo, Akerman and Fr Kevin McKelson.

and Mervyn Mulardy Jnr, and his widow Aunty Rosie Munroe (see Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> They remember Dodo less as an artist than as a ceremonial and cultural leader, who fought for the Karajarri Native Title determination, which was awarded by the Federal Court in 2002. Their memories, Stanton's interview and the exhibition history of the heads suggest several interlocking interpretations of the heads in relation to Karajarri histories that are artistic, cultural and political.



**Figure 2: Aunty Rosie Munroe. Photograph by Tran Tran, AIATSIS, 2018.**

Source: Reproduced with the kind permission of AIATSIS and Aunty Rosie Munroe.

## Dodo the Karajarri leader

It is worth beginning by outlining the present situation of Karajarri people living in the community of Bidyadanga, because this situation constructs the way that Dodo is remembered there today. I visited Bidyadanga in May 2018, after having heard that Dodo's widow Aunty Rosie was living there. The trip was also prompted by communications with staff at the Berndt Museum, which holds the video recording of Stanton's interview with Dodo. I took a copy of this interview to Aunty Rosie. This research on Dodo fits into a larger project I am pursuing on art made on cattle and sheep stations in Australia before 1970. Such so-called 'transitional' art

<sup>3</sup> Material from this essay is drawn from conversations with Dwyer, Munroe and Mulardy at Bidyadanga and on a bush trip during May 2018. The final publication was reviewed and approved by the Karajarri Rangers in correspondence with the author, 30 October 2018.

is neither classical, emulating pre-colonial forms, nor contemporary, produced with entirely new materials such as paint and canvas.<sup>4</sup> When I arrived in Bidyadanga, the Karajarri Rangers' headquarters was alive with people preparing for bush trips and looking at photographs of people taken in the 1970s, and kept since then in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) archive: it turned out that I was not the only person bringing materials from museums to show Karajarri people. My visit and that of AIATSIS staff was part of broader revival of Karajarri cultural life.

Mervyn Mulardy Jnr is the Karajarri cultural programs coordinator, and he described to me the way that Karajarri people are focusing on performing ceremonies, and on repatriating stolen human remains, as well as visiting old rock art sites and *jila* (places where underground water comes to the surface, which Karajarri people traditionally imbued with spiritual significance).<sup>5</sup> Mulardy is spearheading a proposal for the Karajarri to set up their own cultural organisation to further the aim of strengthening cultural activities. It has not always been like this, however, and both Mulardy and Dwyer testify to Dodo's role in laying the foundations for this cultural revival. While Mulardy remembers Dodo's ceremonial significance (Mulardy was initiated by him), Dwyer recalls Dodo's leadership on the native title process after it commenced in 1995.

It was of particular significance for the Karajarri to be awarded the rights to their country, since it has long been home to groups of Aboriginal people who had migrated from elsewhere. As La Grange, it was a post office and a government ration station for Aboriginal people before becoming a Christian mission in 1955.<sup>6</sup> These migrations were often forced, as in the arrival of Mangala and Nyikina speakers who were brought on trucks from the government settlement of Udialla in 1949.<sup>7</sup> However, people did have some freedom of movement, as illustrated by those of this group who returned to live in their desert country before returning once more to La Grange in the mid-1950s.<sup>8</sup> Many La Grange residents also chose to work periodically for neighbouring pastoral stations, returning in the summer when the work slowed down. The Udialla group remained a distinct one at La Grange, bringing with them syncretic, anti-European cult ceremonies that also incorporated Christian beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

The arrival of desert people with powerful, esoteric ideas is not an uncommon story in the north-west of Australia in this period. Settlements on the edges of the Great Sandy Desert such as Fitzroy Crossing hosted migrations of people away from

4 See Jorgensen, 'The Art of Station Time'.

5 See Mulardy, Shoveller and Williamson, 'Karajarri Country'. On the importance of *jila* to Karajarri and Dodo, see Yu and Yu, 'Living Water'.

6 Edgar, 'Indigenous Land Use Agreement', 52–53.

7 McKelson, 'Nadya Nadya Country', 215; Petri and Petri-Odermann, 'Stability and Change', 270.

8 Petri and Petri-Odermann, 'Stability and Change', 270.

9 Petri and Petri-Odermann, 'Stability and Change', 263.



a drought, and these people brought with them their own ceremonies and laws.<sup>10</sup> As it became more populated, La Grange became a centre for ritual activity, and not only for the Udiwalla migrants. The Nyangumarta moved their ceremonial base from Anna Plains Station to La Grange, following a shift in population as seasonal pastoral workers took up residence there, and away from the station.<sup>11</sup> Before this, Anna Plains was typical of many pastoral stations at the time that hosted rich ceremonial activity between station work.<sup>12</sup> At La Grange, the ritual worlds came into conflict, as ideas from the desert appeared to be incompatible with those of the coastal people.<sup>13</sup> Mulardy recalls this history as he reports that the desert people went so far as to initiate Karajarri youths, to the detriment of local culture. He says that 'they didn't respect bosses for country like this old man here', referring to Dodo.<sup>14</sup>

While Mulardy recalls Dodo's push to strengthen the position of Karajarri landholders, Dwyer remembers him as a peacemaker. Dodo's leadership in the native title agreement process is remembered as a feat of negotiation in a legally and often interpersonally complex area. Geoffrey Bagshaw, an anthropologist who worked with Dodo on the native title claim, remembers his strength of character, writing that:

Even in advanced old age (I knew him during the years when he was about 85 through to 90) he was mentally alert, gentle, patient, considered, fair-minded and extremely knowledgeable. He was certainly a man of high degree, as the noted anthropologist A.P. Elkin would no doubt have called him.<sup>15</sup>

Dwyer compares Dodo to Nelson Mandela in his fight not only to empower the Karajarri but also to ensure that they were able to live alongside the other residents of Bidyadanga. In this, Dodo carried on long processes of cross-cultural negotiation that Karajarri had been involved with at La Grange.

Anthropologists Helmut Petri and Gisela Petri-Odermann visited La Grange through the 1950s and 1960s, and witnessed Karajarri man Jack Muladi struggling to run meetings between the different people living there, and to counter the dominance of desert groups.<sup>16</sup> It was during this period of heightened ceremonial activity that Dodo's dream-visitation bestowed his carvings with ritual authority. The new ceremony that Dodo received from the spirit world brought the Karajarri and Nyangumarta together, in a precedent for the native title agreement of 2002 that would see Dodo again at the centre of negotiating between these 2 groups. As a Karajarri man who had lived most of his life on Nyangumarta country on

10 Hawke, *A Town Is Born*, 196.

11 McKelson, 'Nadya Nadya Country', 216.

12 Foster, 'Rations, Coexistence', 20; Shaw, *Countrymen*, 159.

13 Petri and Petri-Odermann, 'Stability and Change', 270–72.

14 Mulardy, in conversation with the author, 24 May 2018.

15 Geoffrey Bagshaw, private communication, 11 June 2018.

16 Petri and Petri-Odermann, 'Stability and Change', 271, 274.

Anna Plains, Dodo was ideally placed to bring these people into close rapport. Understanding the multiple obligations and relations between Aboriginal people was even more complex during this period of rapid change, as people moved from place to place amid the changing regimes of government and pastoral power.<sup>17</sup> Conditions of labour on pastoral stations were quickly changing too, as they were mechanised and regulated by a government newly concerned with the fate of Aboriginal people in remote Australia.<sup>18</sup> Such changes led to religious revivals across the north-west, as ritual activity attempted to make meaning out of these transformations, and took advantage of new opportunities to travel.<sup>19</sup>

Dwyer's comparison of Dodo to Mandela is also a comparison of the history of north-west Australia to South Africa. For it was also in South Africa that non-whites worked for little pay and with little legal recourse. In the north-west of Australia, Aboriginal people worked much of their lives for cattle stations who paid little for their labour. Munroe remembers the 'hard work for nothing', work that for her included gardening, ironing and washing clothes. For Dodo this work would have consisted of branding, fencing, maintaining water supplies and droving cattle to Meekathara in a trip on horseback that could take 12 to 16 weeks.<sup>20</sup>

Conditions for Aboriginal labourers began to change in the north-west during the 1960s; as cattle and sheep began to be moved on trucks, missions like La Grange became more attractive, and stations became more reluctant to employ Aboriginal workers as they demanded and were legally awarded wages.<sup>21</sup> When Anna Plains passed to new management, Dodo and Munroe were evicted from their home along with other Aboriginal families. Munroe remembers that they were able to take refuge on another station for around 18 months before moving finally to the La Grange mission.<sup>22</sup> The shift was traumatic for Munroe who had been born onto Anna Plains, and who had known no other home. Dodo was also intimately tied to Anna Plains, not only through decades of labour, but also because he was initiated at Yawinya on the station.<sup>23</sup> 'Little by little', Munroe remembers, 'people moved to Bidyadanga' (that was then called La Grange), steadily expanding its population as stations evicted Aboriginal people, and new groups moved in from the Great Sandy Desert.

17 McKelson, 'Nadya Nadya Country', 216.

18 See Bunbury, *It's Not the Money*.

19 Akerman, 'The Renaissance of Aboriginal Law in the Kimberleys'; Petri and Petri-Odermann, 'Stability and Change'.

20 Thom, 'Kimberley: Out on the Ridges'.

21 Petri and Petri-Odermann, 'Stability and Change'; Thom, 'Kimberley: Out on the Ridges'.

22 I was not completely clear in my discussions with Dwyer on the name of this station, but it is likely to be Nita Downs as the source of Dodo's sandstone lies within Nita Downs, on the boundary with Anna Plains.

23 Geoffrey Bagshaw, personal communication, 11 June 2018.

Publications on art from Bidyadanga invariably tell the story of the Yulparitja, who were the last of the desert groups to move there, arriving in the years between 1967 and 1974.<sup>24</sup> They began painting the waterholes along the Canning Stock Route, and other sites on their country, more than 30 years after leaving it.<sup>25</sup> It is a sign of how far the Karajarri have come in empowering themselves on the community since the 1960s that the Yulparitja set out to ask permission of the Karajarri to paint. Some reports argue that this painting movement was in fact inspired by the 2002 native title decision to recognise Karajarri country.<sup>26</sup> Whatever its origins, after meeting with the Karajarri the Yulparitja decided to paint in saltwater colours, including blue and green, in homage to the Karajarri country on which they lived. Such colours now mark out Bidyadanga paintings from other Western Desert paintings, which are typically in more earthy tones. Although they paint with blues and greens, the subject of Yulparitja paintings are of sites in the Western Desert, sandhills and waterholes that are remembered by the older artists. When I asked Mulardy about this painting movement and its negotiation, he said that other people could do what they liked, but that the Karajarri had to focus on the Karajarri, that ‘now Karajarri people think for themselves, build on their own country and not worry about everybody else’. For Mulardy this is ‘closing the gap’, appropriating the name of a government and community campaign to end the gap in health and life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in order to describe the way in which they have empowered themselves after a period of accommodating the newcomers. Today he emphasises that ‘I believe we have closed the gap’. The tension within Karajarri history, however, lies on Mulardy’s mind, and is a tension that constructs his memories of Dodo, the way in which ‘he didn’t speak for anybody else’.<sup>27</sup>

## Dodo the artist

It is with this complex history in mind, a history that is central to the lives of Karajarri people, that we arrive at Dodo’s carved heads. In his interview with Stanton, Dodo recalls the first head that he made:

I was working on the station, and so I got this station man wanted the place, so he told me to go and clean the tank out. Mud was full in the tank and I had a few blokes with me, to get the mud out of the tank and just chuck it in the barrel, we worked well together, sure we didn’t get that done in the one day, there was too much mud on. Took three days to get the tank filled out, so I had a bit of a look around. At same time the mud started to get cracked

24 McKelson, ‘Nadya Nadya Country’, 216–17.

25 Rohr, ‘Bidyadanga’.

26 See Ashley Crawford, ‘Yulparitja Show Their Colours’, *Age* (Melbourne), 19 April 2004; Lydia Harvey, ‘Announcing Director’s Choice: Lydia Balbal’, email correspondence, Harvey Art Projects, 18 February 2014.

27 Mulardy, in conversation with the author, 24 May 2018.

and dry out and so I started to think about. The mud will crack, and I think about, and I start messing about. I'll try and make a man's face, do it good you know, so I get on with that job, with soft mud, working with a pocket knife, and face and nose and skin ... so I make a man's face ... and then so I think I'll take him back to the camp, I'll show all my people, and so I took him back home.

At the same time the one Dr Petri was there on the station. So he was studying with the people, talking about the study why did it happen, all about with the old people. So I accompany him and I showed that thing what I made and he says ooh geez ... He said to me where you get this from, and I said oh well I get it out of the tank, too much mud, I been working on the tank cleaning mud out, and I think about it ... So he says it's done very well, ooh that good one ... and he says oh I haven't seen one like this before, he hadn't seen one to make a face like a human, he was very pleased to see this.<sup>28</sup>



**Figure 3: Dodo carving in 1985.  
Still picture taken from video  
interview with John Stanton.**

Source: Reproduced with the kind permission of the Berndt Museum, University of Western Australia and Aunty Rosie Munroe.

This took place during 1938 or 1939, when Petri was on Anna Downs. This first mud head, however, fell apart, and upon Petri's return to the north-west in the late 1960s he collected a second head, this time made of limestone (Figure 1).<sup>29</sup> It is not clear whether Dodo was living at Anna Plains, La Grange or another station at the time of Petri's second visit. Petri recalls that, 'The head was made in 1969, and was the first attempt to carve a portrait out of the soft limestone (?) you find at some parts of the coast of La Grange country'.<sup>30</sup> While this is certainly the oldest of Dodo's heads that survives, Petri may be mistaken in writing that this was the first head that Dodo made of stone. Akerman reports that Dodo carved ceremonial heads in the early 1960s, and these may have been from stone, mud or even wood. Sandstone proved a spectacular

28 Big John Dodo, interview with John Stanton, 1985, Berndt Museum, University of Western Australia.

29 Dodo, interview with John Stanton, 1985.

30 Petri to Stanton, 8 October 1985, Berndt Museum, University of Western Australia.

medium, however, as the lines of colour in the stone accentuates the curve of the face as it recedes into the shape of the skull. The rear of these carvings often feature beautiful lines that simulate tied-back hair.

During the 1970s, the heads were sold by Mary Macha, who collected work across the Kimberley for her government-owned shop Aboriginal Traditional Arts Gallery in Perth. At this time, Dodo and Munroe were living at Bidyadanga, and it is likely Macha visited there on her collecting trips through the Kimberley, commissioning them from him. The earliest head with such a provenance was made in 1974 and bought from Macha in 1975 by anthropologist Ronald Berndt, before being put on display in the University of Western Australia anthropology museum (Figure 4). This commercial phase of head making culminates in the mid to late 1980s when the developer Alastair (Lord) McAlpine took an interest in them.



**Figure 4: Big John Dodo, Human Head, 1974. Carved sandstone with green dyed wool, 21 cm high.**

Source: Courtesy the Berndt Museum, University of Western Australia, accession no. 2040.

Kevin McKelson, priest and linguist at Bidyadanga for 30 years, remembers that McAlpine's interest in the heads was inspired by a visit to the Bidyadanga Church in 1984, where a head is still displayed as an altarpiece today.<sup>31</sup> In his interview with Stanton, Dodo remembers this display prompted people to want to buy heads, as people visited the church at Bidyadanga. Stanton also recalls that McAlpine saw one of Dodo's carved heads on display in the anthropology museum sometime in the 1980s, and this may well have preceded his visit to Bidyadanga.<sup>32</sup> McAlpine was a major developer in Broome, and operated an arts and artefact outlet from Broome Zoo that he also built. Through this outlet, he commissioned 100 heads for AU\$1,000 per head. In today's terms, Stanton calculates that each head was worth AU\$3,900, an incredible amount of money in a period of high unemployment for Australia, and for remote Aboriginal people who were among the most impoverished in the country.<sup>33</sup> The offer stimulated other people in Bidyadanga to take up carving, some from other language groups beside Karajarri. The majority of heads that turn up for sale at auction or second-hand in Australia today are not by Dodo, but these other carvers. During the period these heads were made, in the 1980s, Munroe remembers Dodo carving day after day under a tree in Bidyadanga (see Figure 3). This is likely to be the same tree under which Stanton interviewed him amid this frenzy of carving activity, in 1985, and amid the noise of community life.

## The history and meaning of Dodo's Karajarri heads

For what reason did Dodo carve these heads? While money was certainly a motivation for later works, and the prompting of Petri a reason for the revival of Dodo's carving in the 1960s, this does not explain everything. Munroe, who was busy raising a family at the time Dodo was busiest carving, thinks he did it 'for fun'. Dodo's own account of carving from mud supports her interpretation, while a second reason may lie in his working on stations. Munroe remembers him carving whip handles in this period, handles that may have been decorated, and this history of woodcarving may have influenced his heads. Few surviving examples of these handles, carved across the country by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stockmen, have survived. Those examples that are in museum and private collections tend to feature figurative designs, including heads, snakes and representations of the overlaid weaving of leather that tied the whip to the handle.<sup>34</sup> When I asked Munroe

31 McKelson, 'DODO', 575. Mary Macha also told me this story in a private conversation, 2 November 2016.

32 Private correspondence with John Stanton, 18 July 2017.

33 Private correspondence with John Stanton, 18 July 2017.

34 See Grosskopf, *Australian Stockwhips*.

about Dodo's whip handles, she spoke of this weaving pattern, and it may be that Dodo carved this design into his handles, although I did not get a chance to show her a similar design.

Akerman reports that Dodo had experience carving human figures for ceremony, and it is likely he also carved boomerangs, shields and other items of classical cultural practice.<sup>35</sup> Petri photographed boomerangs and shields that were made at La Grange in 1960, and many attributed to La Grange turn up in specialist auctions today, telling of a longer history of a carving industry at the mission and through the region.<sup>36</sup> In any case, the hard work that characterised Dodo's life as a stockman, and as a carver, may constitute a second reason for Dodo's interest in making heads, as he turned his hand to this new kind of carving.

Such reasons do not, however, explain either the choice of subject, the head, or the ongoing inspiration to ornament these heads with ceremonial painting. Here it is possible to draw upon the concept of under-interpretation to think through the many aspects of the heads, and the ways in which the heads represent several aspects of Dodo's life. In his book *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, Andrew Sayers uses this concept to describe the way in which under-interpretation can be used 'in acknowledgement of the impossibility ... of selecting a meaning from a range of possible and often divergent meanings that might be attached to any of them'.<sup>37</sup> The approach runs counter to much of the theoretically sophisticated new art history that has dominated scholarship on art since the 1970s, which instead over-interprets works to determine their ideology, their function and place within Western systems of power.<sup>38</sup>

When I asked Munroe about the meaning of the heads, and whether they derived from ceremony or tradition, she laughed and said that the decorated faces were something of a trick to bring the faces to life. However, she also pointed out that the limestone the heads were carved from was from a site of some significance to Karajarri people. It is possible to speculate on the place of the heads within a particular Karajarri Dreaming; however, we should recall Munroe's memory of Dodo carving for fun and money, rather than with the Dreaming foremost in mind. One meaning does not exclude the other, however, as they can be read as both divergent and simultaneous. McKelson quotes Dodo telling the Dreaming story of Mount Phyre (also spelled Payarr):

A family from ancestral times ... were hunting near Eighty Mile Beach, or Mt Payarr. The young son killed a female goanna heavy with eggs and ate them—an act which was taboo. This angered Pulanj, the rainbow serpent,

35 Akerman, 'Stone', n.p.; Anonymous, 'Big John Dodo'.

36 State Library of Western Australia, BA368/9: 24.

37 Sayers quoted in Allbrook, 'George Coolbul', 54.

38 Harris, *The New Art History*.



who sought revenge first by unleashing violent storms and then by setting out to devour the boy. However the boy's father was a medicine man and had the power to seal the cave in which his family took refuge to withstand repeated attacks by the serpent. Enraged and with gaping jaws it attacked the mountain itself, biting off large chunks of rock. This continued throughout the night whilst the petrified family huddled inside. Finally, at dawn, the Serpent withdrew and the rain stopped.<sup>39</sup>

Akerman reads Dodo's sculpture as expressing something of this medicine man. In 2010, he writes that, 'Dodo's sculpture, carved from the very stone crushed by Pulany, represents the jalnganguru whose powerful spells saved his family'.<sup>40</sup> Dodo alludes to this expanded meaning for his sculptures in a remark in the 1985 interview. Amidst talking about making heads decades ago, he says that, 'I think about him, about carving on big mountain, on big stone, that is what I think about, it might have been some beginning from the old stories ... that is what I think about when carving, you know'.<sup>41</sup>

How to interpret Dodo's enigmatic statement? Here we might turn to Minoru Hokari, who, after spending time with Gurindji people in the north of Australia, writes of the way in which Aboriginal history is constituted by something he calls 'the voice of the earth'.<sup>42</sup> Hokari argues that this is not a metaphor for the Gurindji people he has spent time with, but an active agent in their consciousness, and their consciousness of Gurindji history. Here 'him, about carving on big mountain' and 'might have been some beginning from the old stories' sounds like a description of the Dreaming itself, that long ago creation of the world that remains powerfully at work in remote Australia.

Mulardy, who went through ceremony with Dodo, testified to Dodo's intimacy with the country when he tells of bringing Dodo's body back down the road from the town of Broome for Dodo's funeral. It was a still day, rare in the expanses of the north-west, but when he crossed back into Karajarri country the wind suddenly blew up, as the country saw that Dodo was coming home. Dodo was for Mulardy a *pirrka*, literally translated as 'root' of Karajarri law, one who is deep in knowledge and customs of the country.<sup>43</sup> The process of carving may have been a way of being a *pirrka*. As Dodo created these heads from the mountain, so the mountain was created by the Pulany, in a conception of art that encompasses the art by which the world is made. The process of creating the world, carving the heads, and ceremony are all interrelated. As the heads bring Dodo's power as a diplomat and *pirrka* to mind, the Karajarri configure a history in which he was central to their cultural and political revival.

39 McKelson, 'DODO', 575–76.

40 Akerman, 'Big John Dodo'.

41 Dodo, interview with John Stanton, 1985.

42 Hokari, *Gurindji Journey*, chapter 1.

43 Private correspondence with Geoffrey Bagshaw, 11 June 2018.



This interpretation of Dodo's heads as being at the centre of Karajarri ceremonial and political history constitutes what Howard Morphy has called an Aboriginal art history. This is a history in which Aboriginal discourses and concepts contribute to an understanding of Aboriginal artworks, and to the comprehension of more universal questions around the role of art in the societies to which they belong.<sup>44</sup> Aboriginal art history is by its nature a cross-cultural art history because it is constituted by the intersection of Western art history and Aboriginal art.<sup>45</sup> Morphy's description of the *bir'yun*, the shimmering effect of ancestral power in the cross-hatching of Arnhem Land painting, is an influential example of this kind of cross-cultural art history.<sup>46</sup> *Bir'yun* has been translated as both brilliance and shimmer, and used extensively by non-Indigenous writers to theorise Kunwinjku and Yolngu painting. The difference between Dodo's works and that of the intergenerational art movements of Arnhem Land, however, lies in the way that his heads were largely anomalous and idiosyncratic. While they briefly inspired collectors and imitators, they did not bring about an art movement of any scale, and were not subject to an Aboriginal discourse that would constitute their meaning.

Curatorially, Aboriginal artworks have for the most part been exhibited in special sections of Australian public galleries, and in a network of dedicated private galleries that established itself in the 1980s. Dodo's carvings are no exception, and were largely exhibited alongside other Aboriginal art through the 1980s and 1990s, at the Berndt Museum, the National Gallery of Australia and in the 'Paper, Stone, Tin' exhibition at the Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute in Adelaide in 1990.<sup>47</sup> In recent years, however, art history and exhibition practices around Aboriginal art have become more interested in the relationships of its artists to non-Aboriginal art and artists. Curatorial strategies have become more interested in creating new relationships, rather than affirming the Aboriginality of Aboriginal art.

The National Portrait Gallery may have been the first to use Dodo's heads outside dedicated Aboriginal art galleries. They included Dodo in 2 exhibitions of portraiture, *The Possibilities of Portraiture* in 1999 and *Presence and Absence: Portrait Sculpture* in Australia in 2003. In 2016 Dodo's 1969 head, the one collected by Petri, was included in an exhibition that focused on Dutch colonial history, *Invisible Genres* at the John Curtin Gallery in Perth. Sitting alongside work by Australian, Dutch, Indonesian and South African artists, Dodo's carved head was used to illustrate the complexity of responses to the disruptions of colonial society.<sup>48</sup> Although featuring only Aboriginal work, the 'Paper, Stone, Tin' exhibition of 1990 made a similar

44 Morphy, 'Art Theory'.

45 Morphy, 'Art Theory'; Morphy, 'Moving the Body Painting into the Art Gallery'.

46 Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 194.

47 Ackerman, 'Stone', n.p.

48 See Mateer, 'Invisible Genres'.

point. It featured Dodo alongside old ceremonial masks, spirit and animal drawings, in the process illustrating several very different responses to fast-changing regimes of power in north-west Australia.

There are, then, several interpretations of Dodo's heads, each of which complement each other, as the heads symbolise personal, political and ceremonial histories of north-west Australia. While the heads remind Dwyer of Dodo's diplomacy, Mulardy recalls his *pirrka* qualities, and Munroe proposes they were carved for pleasure. Akerman and McKelson correlate the heads with the Dreaming story of Mount Phyre, while curators have used Dodo's work to emphasise the colonial history of north-west Australia. Such overlapping interpretations speak of Dodo's power as a *pirrka*, artist and diplomat. These interpretations are, however, also produced at different times, and follow the concerns of different generations of Karajarri people, anthropologists and curators. They do not anticipate what the heads might mean for generations to come, instead being indicative of the concerns of those who are invested in Dodo's legacies, whether this be as an artist, ceremonial leader or native title campaigner. That he occupies these multiple roles is symptomatic of the way such realms are not distinct from each other within remote Aboriginal communities, but are intertwined. The authentication of the heads as ceremonially significant in the early 1960s with the dream-visitation of Walkarurra, anticipates the place of Dodo in Karajarri history, making him central to the transition of Aboriginal life from stations to the La Grange mission to the era of native title. The power of these heads lies in their multivalent symbolism, as they sit at the crossroads of the artistic, ceremonial and political histories of the Karajarri and the Bidyadanga community.

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# ‘What’s this about a new mission?’: Assimilation, resistance and the Morwell transit village

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Beth Marsden

**Abstract:** This article demonstrates the destructive intent of assimilation policies through attempts at forced movement into artificially created ‘communities’, such as the Morwell transit village in Victoria, Australia, in the 1960s. It argues that the resistance by Indigenous people to forced assimilation was strong, and that the challenges that they, and their supporters, made to assimilation and housing policies, were effective in contesting attempts to disconnect Indigenous people from their land.

In June 1965, the Victorian Aborigines Welfare Board (the Board) was offered a 15-year lease on 4 acres of swampy land on the outskirts of Morwell, in Victoria’s Latrobe Valley. The site was wedged between the railway line and the busy Princes Highway, prone to flooding, and zoned for industrial use.<sup>1</sup> The Board planned to use the site to develop a ‘transit village’, in order to ‘bring to Morwell all the aborigines [sic] now living at Lake Tyers’.<sup>2</sup> This announcement drew condemnation from Aboriginal leader Doug Nicholls. In a statement on behalf of the Aborigines Advancement League, Nicholls attacked the ‘setting up of a new fringe settlement’ in Morwell, suggesting the plan was a ‘continuation of the Government’s policy of arbitrarily acquiring land and placing Aboriginal families thereon in areas which are alien to them’. Nicholls challenged the government’s approach to assimilation,

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1 National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), B357, 77; Fletcher, Chesters and Drysdale, ‘Past, Present, Future’, 22.

2 ‘Deadlock on Plan to Settle Aborigines’, *Morwell Advertiser*, 17 May 1965, 1.

declaring that no government or person had the right to say that Aboriginal people ‘must assimilate and live in a particular area’.<sup>3</sup> Nicholls’s protests – and those of other Aboriginal leaders and activist groups – against the Morwell transit village were part of the broader and longer campaign by Aboriginal people to stop the closure of the last remaining Aboriginal reserve in Victoria, at Lake Tyers. By the end of 1965 the Morwell transit village scheme had been abandoned by the Board, and the threat posed to Lake Tyers was defeated in part due to their protests.

This article provides a detailed examination of the short-lived Morwell transit village scheme. This research contributes to the examination of the longer history of attempts to dispossess and control Aboriginal people in Victoria through missions, reserves and housing programs. Penny Edmonds has examined the colonial construction of urban spaces as ‘ordered and civilised’ where Aboriginal people were subjected to a range of ‘civilising’ influences.<sup>4</sup> The reordering of space under the hand of missionaries at Ebenezer and Ramahyuck as examined by Jane Lydon and Bain Attwood respectively shows the importance invested in controlling and managing spaces with the aim of affecting the behaviour of Aboriginal people.<sup>5</sup> In particular, this article examines the intended assimilatory effects of transitional housing settlements informed by the motivation of government to disrupt Aboriginal communities and connection to land. Historians Jo Woolmington and Heather Goodall have interrogated the intended assimilatory effect of Aboriginal housing programs in New South Wales, and Corrine Manning has examined the spatial politics at work in transitional housing settlements in Victoria in the postwar era.<sup>6</sup> These scholars have shown how the intended educative and transformative influence of housing was key to assimilation policies in the mid-twentieth century. As the last attempt of the Victorian Government to develop an overtly assimilationist transitional housing program, the Morwell transit village scheme provides an insight into how government aimed to use highly controlled housing settlements to further their assimilationist aims. The ongoing campaign to save Lake Tyers, which has been detailed elsewhere, was part of the broader movement of Aboriginal activism: within this story, the fight against the Morwell transit village demonstrates the complexity of grassroots resistance and political activism against government policies of assimilation in Victoria.<sup>7</sup>

3 Doug Nicholls, ‘Statement on Aboriginal Affairs by Mr Rylah’, 1 April 1965, Council for Aboriginal Rights (hereafter CAR) Papers, State Library Victoria (hereafter SLV), MS12913, Box 3/7, emphasis in original.

4 Edmonds, ‘Intimate, Urbanising Frontier’, 129–54.

5 Lydon, *Fantastic Dreaming*, 100–18; Attwood, *Making of the Aborigines*.

6 Woolmington, ‘The “Assimilation” Years’, 25–37; Goodall, ‘Assimilation Beings in the Home’, 75–101; Manning, ‘A Helping White Hand’, 193–208; Manning, ‘Victoria’s Transitional Aboriginal Housing Policy’, 221–36.

7 See Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*; Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 194–99, 217–57; Taffe, ‘Fighting for Lake Tyers’. The publicity surrounding protests both internationally and within Australia resulted in issues of race becoming more prominent in the public consciousness. Groups such as the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines ensured the dissemination of ideas and strategies for Aboriginal activists and their supporters. The Wave Hill walk-off, the Yirrkala petition and the Freedom Rides were well-publicised symbols of Aboriginal resistance, see Chesterman and Galligan, *Citizens without Rights*.

Aboriginal resistance to the transit village was key to the ongoing campaign to save Lake Tyers and was part of a broader movement of Aboriginal activism during the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> The role of the Council for Aboriginal Rights in fighting to save the reserve has been detailed by historians Sue Taffe and Richard Broome, who show that the growing relationships between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal activists were effective in challenging the Board's policies and practices. Broome's examination of the fierce activism of the Aborigines Advancement League (the League) illustrates the importance of the League's involvement in the campaign for Lake Tyers.<sup>9</sup> These histories also demonstrate how Aboriginal leaders and individuals engaged with and negotiated assimilationist practices as they were enacted politically, and on the ground. This article contributes another perspective to this pivotal time of resistance to assimilation practices enacted without Aboriginal consultation.

The development of assimilation policy in Australia has been examined by many historians. Anna Haebich and Tim Rowse show how assimilation became the dominant trend in Aboriginal policy, yet was interpreted and implemented in multiple different ways.<sup>10</sup> Broome's meticulous history of Aboriginal experiences and resistance to Victorian assimilation policies illustrates the many different ways that assimilation was enacted by the Board, the Board's staff, and non-Aboriginal groups and individuals.<sup>11</sup> This article draws on the work of these scholars to examine how assimilationist practices were contested and negotiated in mid-1960s Victoria, and Rowse argues that there is a need to acknowledge that there was and is no fixed meaning or definition of the term. Indeed, while this case study shows how some members of the Aborigines Welfare Board understood and enforced a version of assimilation that was based primarily on housing and the closure of Lake Tyers, it also illustrates the layers of assimilative pressures enacted by white communities, groups and individuals in the name of assimilation.

The story of the Morwell transit village has, up to this point, received only passing attention from historians in discussions of Lake Tyers and the campaign to save the reserve from closure.<sup>12</sup> This article argues that the failure of the transit village demonstrates how multilayered resistance—both political and grassroots—could operate against government policies of assimilation and dispossession in Victoria. I argue that this resistance, in combination with the publicised campaigning of Doug Nicholls, Laurie Moffatt and the Council for Aboriginal Rights and the Aborigines Advancement League, contributed to the rejection of the Morwell transit village and to the retention of Lake Tyers reserve. The story of this scheme is worthy

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8 Taffe, 'Fighting for Lake Tyers', 157–71; Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 194–99, 217–57.

9 Broome, *Fighting Hard*, 99–116.

10 Haebich, *Broken Circles*; Rowse, 'Contesting Assimilation', 1–24.

11 Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 183–337.

12 Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 106, 109–10; Broome, *Fighting Hard*, 109–10.

of further attention as an example of Aboriginal resistance to the forced closure of Victoria's reserves, and to the destructive aims of the assimilation policy that targeted Aboriginal family and kinship networks that were fostered at Lake Tyers.<sup>13</sup>

This article outlines the context for the development of the Morwell transit village scheme. This includes an overview of the Aborigines Welfare Board's plans for the village, including the involvement of key figures from outside the Board in the spatial and pedagogical aspects of the design. In the second part of this paper, I turn my attention to the political and grassroots activism of Aboriginal leaders Doug Nicholls and Laurie Moffatt to challenge the Morwell transit village scheme.

## **The Victorian Aborigines Welfare Board: Housing, Lake Tyers and the idea of a transit village**

In the postwar period, Aboriginal communities in Victoria based in camps on riverbanks, in the bush and on the outskirts of towns that had previously ignored them began to attract official attention. The Liberal Government commissioned an inquiry and the subsequent report, based on a partial survey of Aboriginal people around the state, undertaken by Charles McLean, a retired Chief Stipendiary, resulted in the Victorian Government formally adopting the policy of assimilation in a new piece of legislation, the *Aborigines Act 1957*.<sup>14</sup> The largely inactive Board for the Protection of Aborigines was abolished, and the new Aborigines Welfare Board was charged with implementing the assimilationist policy encoded in the Act. The main thrust of the Board's activities was directed towards clearing away the camps, moving Aboriginal people into standard housing, and closing Lake Tyers. These policy aims were directed towards Aboriginal people living together in groups, both on and off government-managed spaces, who had a strong sense of community and Aboriginal identity.<sup>15</sup> The proposal for the Morwell transit village scheme in 1965 was one of several attempts by the Board to achieve their aim of assimilation in Victoria.

The Board acted swiftly to break up camps, a process that had been started by local councils in 1957. They established 2 isolated transitional housing settlements, the first at Rumbalara in 1958, on the outskirts of Mooroopna, followed later by Manatunga at Robinvale in 1960. As Corrine Manning has shown, these settlements were designed to facilitate the 'transition' of residents from camps to standard

13 Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 325; Taffe, 'Fighting for Lake Tyers', 170.

14 McLean, 'Report', *Victorian Parliamentary Papers*, 1956–58, Vol. 2, Paper no. 18, 6.

15 Atkinson, quoted in Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History*, 182; Lovett, quoted in Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History*, 186.



houses, but they were poorly designed, the construction was substandard and the surveillance of white managers, who collected rent and tried to prevent visitors, offended many of the residents.<sup>16</sup> The Board recognised that a different approach was required to break up Lake Tyers. The living conditions on the reserve in the late 1950s were dire, following decades of incompetent management and inadequate maintenance. The state government resisted making any improvements or repairs to the infrastructure on the reserve from 1958 on the basis that the reserve would soon be closed in accordance with the legislation.<sup>17</sup> Most of the Board's expenditure went on houses in country towns around the state that were offered first to families living on Lake Tyers, despite the housing insecurity experienced by many other Aboriginal families, particularly in Gippsland.<sup>18</sup>

The new Board met once a month. By 1964, these meetings were dominated by 3 members: Harry Davey, Don Howe and Arthur Holden. Davey, who represented the Minister for Housing, had recently retired from a long career with the Housing Commission. Arthur Holden ran an accountancy firm in Morwell, and Don Howe owned a commercial orchard in the Goulburn Valley that employed Aboriginal workers.<sup>19</sup> As scholar Mark Harris has argued, these 3 members formed a powerful 'coterie', controlling most of the Board's policy and practices by 'rigidly excluding any opinion at variance with their own'.<sup>20</sup> They formed a housing subcommittee through which they controlled the processes of the Board and directed resources towards the acquisition of housing.<sup>21</sup>

Davey, in particular, was very active in his role. He travelled throughout the state buying up blocks of land and houses in country towns, liaising with local real estate agents and building contractors.<sup>22</sup> Although the Board claimed that families from Lake Tyers who decided to take up the offer of a new house would be given a choice as to where they could live, Davey controlled the allocation of housing. The request made by a family from Lake Tyers for a house in Warragul was dismissed by Davey, who commented that they would 'be better located in some isolated small Gippsland town under supervision'.<sup>23</sup> Under his direction, the Board's housing subcommittee operated on the expectation that isolation from larger group structures, as well as the experience of living in 'standard housing' in white communities, would encourage Indigenous people to abandon their culture, lifestyle and values in favour of the white equivalent.

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16 Manning, 'A Helping White Hand', 193–208; Manning, 'Victoria's Transitional Aboriginal Housing Policy', 221–36.

17 NAA, B314, 10.

18 NAA, B336, 1; see also AWB Housing (Member) files B336, 25–27, for example.

19 Broome, *Fighting Hard*, 107–8; NAA, B336, 23.

20 Harris, 'A "New Deal"', 116.

21 NAA, B314, 11.

22 NAA, B336, 1; see also B336, 25–27, for example.

23 NAA, B356, 44.

The Board's housing program provided a visible representation of assimilation at work to white communities around the state. Local branches of community groups such as the Apex Club and the Country Women's Association (CWA) were involved in the provision of housing and material resources for Aboriginal families in Gippsland.<sup>24</sup> The Board, under-resourced and understaffed, encouraged the sense of civic responsibility held by these groups, and directed their resources and enthusiasm towards housing as a community project.<sup>25</sup> In Morwell, the Apex Club directed attention to the 'sponsorship' of families from Lake Tyers. They were heavily involved in the provision of housing for 2 families who moved to Morwell in 1959. 'Sponsorship' came with supervision and expectations: the club informed one man from Lake Tyers that a house was available on the condition that he 'did not bring any relations' with him, adding that 'we sincerely hope this venture will be a complete success'.<sup>26</sup> Arthur Holden had been involved in the Apex Club in Morwell before he became a member of the Board in 1961, and had been the director of the Aboriginal sponsorship scheme launched by Apex in 1956.<sup>27</sup> Following his appointment to the Board, he continued to work with local residents to find housing for families from Lake Tyers as part of Morwell's 'Aboriginal Welfare Board Local Committee'.<sup>28</sup> This group made inquiries into and inspections of property and housing in the area for the Board to purchase, recommended which houses the Board should buy and to which families they should be allocated.<sup>29</sup> The connection between the Board and the local committee in Morwell through Holden is illustrative of the blurring of official policy and the interpretation of assimilation by individuals who had no knowledge of the values, aspirations and needs of Aboriginal people.

For families who moved into country towns away from Lake Tyers, the gaze of community groups and white neighbours was underscored by regular inspections by the Board's property inspector.<sup>30</sup> Residents were not permitted to have guests, or to make modifications to their houses, such as the hanging of curtains.<sup>31</sup> Many residents defied the Board's efforts to control their use of housing and the traces of this resistance is evident in the reports of property officers: those who challenged the inspections were described as 'antagonistic' and one family who shared their house with visitors was described as 'openly defying the Board'. Sometimes residents

24 NAA, B336, 3; the CWA funded a house in Drouin for an Aboriginal family, Landon, *Jackson's Track Revisited*, 412.

25 Community involvement in the project of assimilation has received some attention from scholars, who have examined how the varied understandings of assimilation included expectations and conditions that did not necessarily align with what Aboriginal people wanted, see Woolmington, 'The "Assimilation" Years', 25–37; Jones, 'Aboriginal Education', 122–39; Haebich, *Broken Circles*, 492–94.

26 NAA, B336, 3.

27 Manning, 'The McLean Report', 170.

28 B336, 1; see also B336, 25–27, for example.

29 NAA, B336, 31; Victoria, Aborigines Welfare Board, *Annual Report*, 1962.

30 NAA, B358, 4.

31 NAA, B358, 4.

flatly refused to pay rent or repeatedly stalled on their payments.<sup>32</sup> Other families forfeited their houses by leaving without notice. This frustrated and baffled the Board's staff, as evidenced in comments such as, 'for reasons which have not been completely assessed, the families left the accommodation arranged'.<sup>33</sup> The sharing of houses, in particular, drew the ire of the welfare staff and of the Board. Sharing subverted the aims of the Board's entire approach to housing that was based on separating families from one another in houses designed for nuclear families.

The Board's Superintendent, Philip Felton, challenged adverse representations of Aboriginal use of and movement between housing. Felton was a trained social worker and his views on policy frequently differed from those held by Davey, Holden, Howe and the government.<sup>34</sup> He recognised that the presence of some visitors in Board housing could be problematic for Aboriginal families, but he resisted the generalisation that all visitors and the pattern of visiting needed to be stopped, stating that '[i]t is no solution to urge that "blow-ins" be kept out of houses ... This is part of an accepted way of life; it is not a question of irresponsibility or indigence'.<sup>35</sup> Felton's opinions had little impact on the Board's approach to housing or the management of Lake Tyers, and although he seems to have made genuine attempts at consultation, his attempts to advocate on behalf of Aboriginal people were ineffectual against the combined power of Davey, Holden and Howe.

By the end of 1964, the Board and the government were forced to recognise that the housing program was not having the desired assimilatory effect that they had anticipated. Lake Tyers remained operational and served as a symbolic rallying point for Aboriginal resistance to assimilation. Families who had left to take up new houses applied to return to the reserve, although these applications were routinely denied by the Board.<sup>36</sup> The campaigning of Aboriginal leaders and groups such as the Aborigines Advancement League and the Council for Aboriginal Rights to secure Lake Tyers as a permanent reserve was gaining momentum and support, adding to pressure on the government.<sup>37</sup>

As the Board's housing subcommittee, Holden, Howe and Davey developed a new strategy: the transit village scheme was designed to move all of the remaining residents from the reserve to a single, temporary, managed site, and to therefore expedite the closure of Lake Tyers. Felton had anticipated the announcement of the scheme and authored a report to the Board articulating his support for the retention of Lake Tyers in which he expressed his opposition to 'any proposal to rebuild the

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32 NAA, B357, 166; NAA, B357, 67.

33 NAA, B357, 166.

34 Felton, 'Philip Felton', 57.

35 NAA, B357, 67.

36 Stan Davey, 'Press Release by Aborigines Advancement League', 9 December 1964, CAR Papers, SLV, MS12913, Box 3/8; NAA, B314, 11; Broome, *Fighting Hard*, 105.

37 See Broome, *Fighting Hard*; Taffe, 'Fighting for Lake Tyers', 157–71.

Settlement on any other site'. He warned that such a scheme would 'disintegrate and disorganise the people'.<sup>38</sup> Felton's protest had no impact on the Board's direction, because the ultimate aim of the assimilation policy as it was being implemented in Victoria by the Board *was* to physically separate Aboriginal people and families from one another, to disconnect them from the land at Lake Tyers and to disrupt Aboriginal social and political organisation.

## Planning for the Morwell transit village

The Board began to scout for possible sites for the transit village at the beginning of 1965, concentrating on the Latrobe Valley. Within a few months they were offered 4 acres of land on the outskirts of Morwell (see Figure 1) by the Australian Paper Mills (APM).<sup>39</sup> The lease was free, short and well suited to the Board's plans. The Board's housing subcommittee began to further develop their plans, based on the foundational idea that the village would provide short-term accommodation and training for families living at Lake Tyers before moving them into standard housing elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> The township of Morwell was a convenient location for the Board. Holden's connections with the Apex Club, his prominence as a local businessman, the free short-term lease offered by the APM, and the presence of a branch of the architecture firm contracted to the Board, meant the Board had an established network in the town that would have increased its attraction to the Board.<sup>41</sup> Networks such as these have been identified in the development of Aboriginal housing in the assimilation era, raising questions about the motivations of administrators working for bodies such as the Board in their selection of sites for development.<sup>42</sup> The networks and connections the Board had in Morwell may have informed the confidence expressed by Holden and Davey following their application to the Morwell Shire Council for the site of the transit village to be rezoned as residential land. Following their submission to the Shire Council, the 2 men were so sure the application would be approved they commenced discussions with engineers to begin work on the site.<sup>43</sup>

38 NAA, B356, 44.

39 NAA, B357, 77.

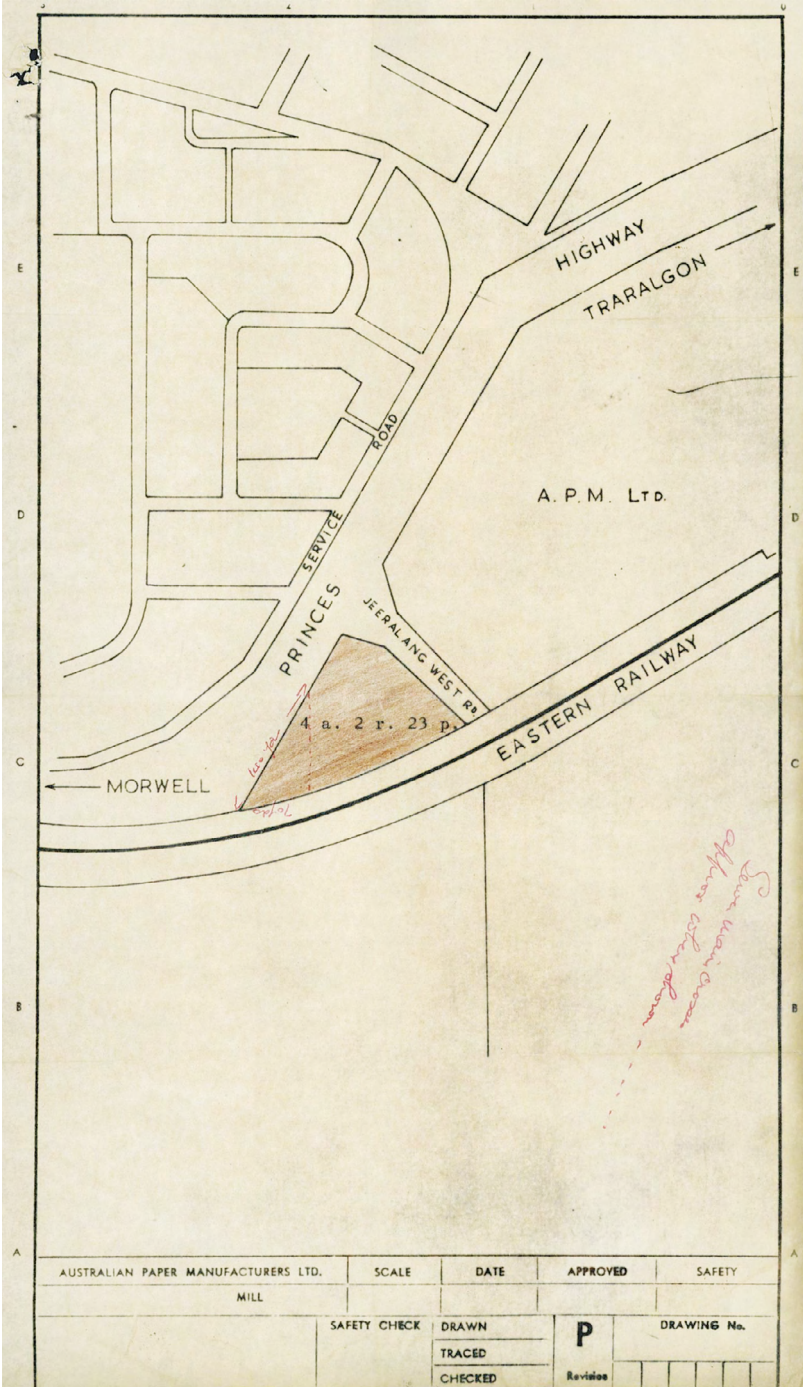
40 NAA, B357, 77.

41 NAA, B357, 77.

42 Woolmington, 'The "Assimilation"', 25–37; Ellinghaus and Healy, 'Micromobility', 46.

43 NAA, B314, 11.

‘WHAT’S THIS ABOUT A NEW MISSION?’



**Figure 1: Map showing the proposed site of the Morwell transit village, on the eastern outskirts of the town.**

Source: NAA, B357, 77. Reproduced with permission of Australian Paper Mills.

It was Holden who authored most of the plans for the transit village. His notes reveal the emphasis on the temporary and transitional aspect of the settlement: it was a 'transit training settlement', 'a staging settlement', and future residents should 'view it as a period for finding their feet'. Holden stressed that the village was not to be a 'permanent home', nor was it a place that Aboriginal people would be permitted to return to once they had left, in contrast to the role of Lake Tyers. The spatial qualities of the transit village were important to the committee. They suggested that 6, 3-bedroom prefabricated houses for families were required, a further 6 for couples, and a motel centre for single people, who the Board expected would mostly be men. It was decided that 'the Board would landscape the area as part of the original concept', and 'start the front gardens', and encourage residents to establish 'their own garden plots'. These plans reveal the expectation of some members of the Board that there was potential for the space to influence how the residents spent their time, and the assumption that residents – although temporary – should invest time and effort in the socially acceptable activity of developing gardens.<sup>44</sup>

The design also reveals the Board's views about how the white community of Morwell could relate to the transit village. The physical location of the transit village was such that the movement of Aboriginal people into the township of Morwell would have been difficult. However, selected white visitors to the site were to be encouraged. Holden, perhaps conscious of his position on the Board and also in the community of Morwell, argued that particular attention should be paid to the 'Community Activities Building', which, he suggested, could be 'something of a showpiece' where local community organisations such as Apex and the CWA could be involved in activities.<sup>45</sup> Other aspects of the appearance of the transit village were also important to the Board: they decided the roof tiles of the houses should be of 'varying colours', and that efforts should be made to make the village 'as attractive as possible, not only for the residents but also for the outside public'.<sup>46</sup> The transit village was to be a showcase of assimilation at work and visible evidence of the Board's investment in Aboriginal housing.

Yet the Board claimed that the 'whole emphasis' of the scheme was on 'training'.<sup>47</sup> Rather than consulting with Aboriginal people about the kinds of education and training they might find useful, the Board contacted the Director of Adult Education, Colin Badger, who suggested the village be used to provide training for residents to become 'members of the general community'. Badger suggested that although male residents of the village should be 'encouraged to make articles they should not be taught or encouraged to manufacture Aboriginal curios', and that

44 NAA, B357, 77.

45 NAA, B357, 77.

46 NAA, B314, 11.

47 Victoria, Aborigines Welfare Board, *Annual Report*, 1965.



'the less reference there was to Aboriginal matters the better'.<sup>48</sup> The history of the production of items such as baskets and boomerangs to generate income and as a way of 'keeping culture' has been well established.<sup>49</sup> At Lake Tyers in particular, as Sylvia Klein has shown, the production of such items served multiple purposes.<sup>50</sup> Their sale to the public generated an income that provided a way of 'circumventing both the ration economy of the reserve and the racial inequalities of the outside world', and the production of cultural items allowed Aboriginal people to 'undercut institutional impositions aimed at their integration into wider Australian society'.<sup>51</sup> The decision of the Board to prohibit the use of the workshop at the Morwell transit village to produce potentially lucrative items such as boomerangs shows the Board's intent to ensure that Aboriginal people engaged with the economy in carefully managed ways that were conducive to the Board's assimilationist aims, and exposes the fallacy of the Board's assertion that the development of the transit village was, in part at least, intended to foster economic independence. Badger's suggestion that the male residents of the village should 'not be taught' to manufacture Aboriginal 'curios' exposes his ignorance of Aboriginal cultural strength in Victoria. A program of deculturation was at the core of the transit village scheme, and Badger's recommendations – that the Board fully accepted – were intended to deprive residents of their heritage just as they had been deprived of their right to stay at Lake Tyers.

Little attention was given to means for increasing employment prospects for residents at the village. The Board's unexamined expectation was that following an undetermined 'trial period' at the transit village, residents would move into a standard house and find work and maintain rental payment. Badger made no suggestions for how practical assistance could be provided to gain entry into the local labour market. Instead, the focus of the scheme was teaching Aboriginal people how to live in white housing and among white communities, with no support for development of skills to improve their employability in the industrial Latrobe Valley. The State Electricity Commission (SEC), the Australian Paper Mill and the Gas and Coal Commission were the 3 largest employers in the growing industrial hub of Morwell in the 1960s and were potential employers. A number of Aboriginal men already living in Morwell were employed by the SEC, and some worked for the Morwell Shire Council.<sup>52</sup> Although the Board emphasised the limited employment opportunities as another key reason for people to leave Lake Tyers, they did not establish any connections with potential industry partners for vocational training in connection with the main industries in the Latrobe Valley. And as the employment market was dominated by heavy industrial work, there were

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48 NAA, B314, 11.

49 See Broome, *Fighting Hard*, 18–22.

50 Kleinert, 'Aboriginal Enterprises', 172.

51 Kleinert, 'Keeping up the Culture', 92.

52 Legg, *Heart of the Valley*, 254–56.

very limited job prospects for women in Morwell.<sup>53</sup> Felton was more familiar with the difficulty that many Aboriginal people faced in securing work, and wrote to the Board's local welfare officer to ask if there was 'an expansion of employment in the unskilled category' in the Latrobe Valley. Felton was also concerned by the limited employment opportunities available to teenaged school-leavers from Lake Tyers.<sup>54</sup>

The transit village site was also ill-suited to younger children, as the location was dangerous, wedged between the busy Princes Highway and the railway line, and the distance from town meant that the children could not walk to school. The Board budgeted for the purchase of a vehicle specifically so that the village manager would be able to transport children to and from school.<sup>55</sup> As members of the Advancement League pointed out, children living at the Lake Tyers could as easily be transported in this way to one of several schools in the district 'as thousands of other Victorian school children travel much longer distances to school'.<sup>56</sup>

The government expressed support for the Morwell transit village scheme and promoted the role of the new settlement as a favourable alternative to Lake Tyers reserve. The Morwell transit village became another argument used to support the government's commitment to close Lake Tyers. The Chief Secretary, Arthur Rylah, argued that the transit village was the 'answer' to the 'depressing and demoralising conditions' at Lake Tyers.<sup>57</sup> The isolation of the reserve was cited frequently as a reason for its closure, measured as geographical distance from jobs, schools and training and unfavourably compared with the site of the proposed Morwell transit village. Yet although the transit village was closer to a town than Lake Tyers, it was also isolated: located on the outskirts of town, bordered by the highway and the railway line. In this way, the transit village was not unlike the camps at Mooroopna, Robinvale and Jackson's Track that the Victorian Government had been so swift to condemn and to dismantle following the passing of the *Aborigines Act 1958*. The transit village shared an isolated and segregated fringe location with the transitional housing settlements of Manatunga and Rumbalara. By 1965 these had both drawn negative publicity, condemned by many Aboriginal people and leaders for their poor design, the excessive surveillance and control of the managers.<sup>58</sup>

There was no consultation with Aboriginal people about any aspect of the Morwell transit village. The Board was aware of reports that Aboriginal people living in Gippsland 'were saying that they would not go to the Village'.<sup>59</sup> Felton asked the local welfare officer, stationed in Morwell, to determine what Aboriginal people

53 Legg, *Heart of the Valley*, 256.

54 NAA, B357, 77.

55 See AWB Housing Sub-Committee minutes, NAA, B314, 11.

56 NAA, B356, 44.

57 *Victorian Parliamentary Debates* (hereafter *VPD*), 277, 2768.

58 *VPD*, 277, 2768.

59 NAA, B314, 11.



'are really saying about the Transit Village proposal'. Their responses show that many Aboriginal people believed that the transit village was just another government institution designed to interfere in their lives. Charles Harrison asked: 'What's this about a new mission ... I wouldn't want to live there'. Rupert O'Rourke agreed, and said he was reluctant to live in the village because '[t]here will be a white manager in charge'. Others suggested that the transit village 'could be a success', but that it depended on the 'type of manager appointed' and that the 'people themselves' should 'have some say in the matter'. The general consensus of Aboriginal people was that 'Lake Tyers [was] being transferred to Morwell'.<sup>60</sup> These comments demonstrate how Aboriginal people understood the Board's aims in developing the transit village: another space where their lives would be subject to the control and surveillance of a white manager carrying out the policies of the government, in the same vein as the missions and reserves of the past. They also recognised that the Morwell transit village scheme presented a threat to Lake Tyers.<sup>61</sup>

## **'We will never leave no matter what happens': Holding on to Lake Tyers**

The campaign to save Lake Tyers reserve received wide publicity due to the political agitation and lobbying by Aboriginal leaders and groups who advocated for Aboriginal rights. Laurie Moffatt and Doug Nicholls, along with the Council for Aboriginal Rights and the Aborigines Advancement League, maintained a visible presence in the media as they challenged the government to improve the appalling conditions on the reserve, and to extend the provision of housing to families living in other areas of the state.<sup>62</sup> Doug Nicholls was a highly visible and vocal advocate for the retention of Lake Tyers under Aboriginal control. He was working as a field officer for the Aborigines Advancement League in 1965 and travelled extensively around the state providing practical assistance such as gaining employment and securing legal advice. With Nicholls as spokesperson, the League lobbied hard to save Lake Tyers, and its members were particularly conscious that the importance of Lake Tyers to Aboriginal people in Victoria extended beyond the historical and cultural connections Aboriginal people had to the reserve. Nicholls expressed alarm that the 'promise of security' that the reserve held for Aboriginal Victorians could be broken, and that eventual rehousing elsewhere would cause 'unnecessary emotional upheaval'.<sup>63</sup>

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60 NAA, 357, 77.

61 Richard Broome characterised the transit village as a 'dagger at the heart of Lake Tyers'. Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 325.

62 Formed in 1957, the League comprised mostly white members and had some 28 branches throughout regional Victoria and Melbourne, see Broome, *Fighting Hard*.

63 Doug Nicholls, 'Statement on Aboriginal Affairs'.

The League and Nicholls were equally strident in their opposition to the Morwell transit village. When the scheme was announced, Nicholls had responded that he welcomed the news that 'after 130 years of Aboriginal Welfare that the Government is prepared to provide adult education' in the Latrobe Valley, but he questioned why such training would be delivered in a 'new fringe settlement' when the money could instead be spent at Lake Tyers where 'the Aborigines desire to live'.<sup>64</sup> The lack of consultation with Aboriginal people was also emphasised by Nicholls, and in July 1965, the Aboriginal Congress (the all-Aboriginal branch of the League) made public 2 resolutions in relation to the village: 'We want the Board to ask us whether or not we want these houses', and 'The Board should also ask the people if they want to move from Lake Tyers to Morwell'.<sup>65</sup>

The developing relationship, in this period, between Aboriginal people and pro-Aboriginal rights groups such as the Aborigines Advancement League and the Council for Aboriginal Rights (the Council) has been well documented.<sup>66</sup> Formed in 1951, the Council comprised a mostly white membership, and campaigned to increase public knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal issues. Although the Council did not have numerous branches like the League, many trade unions, organisations and other groups were affiliated to it, and this increased its capacity to influence government.<sup>67</sup> Gene Mobourne, resident at Lake Tyers, capitalised on the interest of the Council. Mobourne recognised the Board's deliberate failure to intervene when problems arose between residents and the manager and suggested that some of the trouble on the reserve was being deliberately fostered to justify its closure. He shared this information with Pauline Pickford, secretary of the Council, telling her that the Board was 'using' people to cause trouble 'so that all the people will have to go, in other words it will leave no one here on Lake Tyers'.<sup>68</sup> His letters also illustrate the strength of the position of residents fighting against the Board's pressure to compel them to leave. He wrote: 'I've talked to everybody and told them not to leave Lake Tyers whatever the Welfare Board do or say even if they don't supply them with their rations', and that the residents considered the reserve their 'rightful home Lake Tyers'. Mobourne added that he expected the information he was providing to Pickford to 'make a good opening for the Council ... and other organisations to step in and give the Welfare Board what.o'.<sup>69</sup> Letters such as Mobourne's that provided important information to activist groups operating in Melbourne were essential to the campaign against the Board and the closure of the reserve.

64 Doug Nicholls, 'Statement on Aboriginal Affairs'.

65 'Plan for Aboriginal Settlement Condemned', *Age*, 12 July 1965, 9.

66 See Taffe, 'Fighting for Lake Tyers'; Broome, *Fighting Hard*.

67 Harris, 'A "New Deal"', 132–34.

68 Gene Mobourne, 16 February 1965, CAR Papers, SLV, MS12913, Box 7/4.

69 Mobourne, 16 February 1965.

Laurie Moffatt was also active in opposing the closure of Lake Tyers and the development of the transit village. Moffatt, who was born at Ramahyuck and married at Lake Tyers, had long been a fierce advocate for the retention of Aboriginal land. He told *The Argus* in 1952 that: 'We do not want to see Lake Tyers finally sold to the white man in the same way as Ramahyuck, Condah, Ebenezer Mission, and Corranderrk reserves have been sold.'<sup>70</sup> A decade later when residents of the reserve petitioned the government for permission to travel to Melbourne so that they could protest against its closure, Moffatt was the first to sign.<sup>71</sup> He utilised his well-established connections with Aboriginal rights groups and explained to Pauline Pickford the problems at Lake Tyers: no public telephone, no water connected to the houses, insufficient beds, regulations that residents required permission to leave for 'even a few hours', and the lack of 'ownership of their homes'. He concluded with the following demand: 'It is time the Aboriginal people as a group be given assistance and the possibility of running their own affairs.'<sup>72</sup>

Moffatt's grassroots activism was key to stopping the transit village. He had conversations with Aboriginal people living in Morwell and addressed approximately 40 residents at a meeting at the end of August 1965, during which shared disapproval of the transit village scheme was aired.<sup>73</sup> Moffatt was not averse to forming relationships with those whose motivations differed from his own. He worked with groups that he believed could facilitate challenges to government policy and further the aims of Aboriginal Victorians. In 1965 he attended a Morwell Shire Council meeting alongside members of the Morwell Protest Committee, a group composed of 8 residents who lived opposite the proposed transit village site.<sup>74</sup> Harvey Stritch, secretary of this committee, informed the Morwell Shire Council that the group's 'primary objection' to the transit village was due to concern for 'the welfare of these people', claiming that they had 'nothing against the Aborigines being integrated into the community' but that it felt 'the proposed settlement [was] merely isolation and not integration'. Stritch suggested that integration could be achieved by selecting 4 Aboriginal families to be 'scattered throughout the community' and made similar statements to the local newspapers.<sup>75</sup> Stritch's use of the term 'integration' and his assertion that this was better than assimilation are demonstrative of the shifting understandings of what assimilation was during this period. The Morwell Shire Council understood assimilation differently: they had initially rejected the possibility of a 'mass settlement' in Morwell but expressed agreement with the 'assimilation of

70 *Argus*, 28 January 1952, 4.

71 Joanne Bach, 'Moffatt, Lawrence Francis (Laurie) (1897–1966)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/moffatt-lawrence-francis-laurie-13105/text23709, published first in hardcopy 2005, accessed online 1 June 2019.

72 Laurie Moffatt as dictated to Pauline Pickford, September 1961, CAR Papers, SLV, MS12913, Box 7/3.

73 Pauline Pickford, 'Press Statement to the "Age"', 16 September 1965, CAR Papers, SLV, MS12913, Box 5/7.

74 "'Give Us Back Our Land'; Plea Made', *Morwell Advertiser*, 6 September 1965, 2.

75 Morwell Shire Council Minutes 1965, Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 2867, Unit 14; *Morwell Advertiser*, 24 June 1965, 1, 2.

two or three families'.<sup>76</sup> Moffatt was likely aware of the racial prejudices of Stritch and the group he represented. But he shared the same aim as Stritch and the Morwell Protest Committee, and in spite of the different reasons behind their protests, he effectively utilised Stritch's objections to contribute to the eventual defeat of the transit village scheme.

With the exception of items featuring Nicholls and Moffatt, media coverage of Aboriginal opinion on the scheme was limited. Yet the publicised comments made by these 2 leaders were especially powerful in that they focused on land. Moffatt argued that the money the Board proposed to spend on the transit village at Morwell should be spent on Lake Tyers.<sup>77</sup> 'Why can't the Government spend the money on our own settlement at Lake Tyers', he asked at a meeting of the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council, adding: 'We should have the home of our choice instead of being brought to Morwell. We are only asking for a little bit of Australia to be given back to us.'<sup>78</sup> The Victorian Government, and the Board, led by Holden, Howe and Davey, already knew that this was what Aboriginal people wanted. Lake Tyers served as a symbolic point of resistance to the assimilation policy and fostered political awareness and activism among Aboriginal people and their supporters. It was because Lake Tyers was proving such an impediment to the assimilation of Aboriginal Victorians that the government and the Board were so determined to close it down.

## The Morwell transit village in parliament

As the fight against the Morwell transit village played out in Gippsland, the future of Lake Tyers remained uncertain. A new Bill introduced by the government in March 1965 sought to further entrench the policy of assimilation and guarantee the closure of Lake Tyers. The Bill also sought to move administration of the Board away from party politics by shifting its administration to the Minister of Housing. This legislation was fiercely contested by Aboriginal leaders and their supporters. Doug Nicholls called for the government to 'transfer to the Aboriginal people communal ownership of Lake Tyers Reserve'.<sup>79</sup> He organised a march on parliament, along with Laurie Moffatt, and sought the support of the leader of the opposition. Nicholls was well-respected, politically active and articulate: he embodied everything that the government did not want Aboriginal people to be. The government's reaction to Aboriginal political activism is evident in the parliamentary debates. The chairman of the Aborigines Welfare Board, the Minister of Transport Ralph Meagher, suggested that all the 'fuss and propaganda, the marches through Melbourne and the other

76 'Council Object to Mass Aborigines Settlement', *Morwell Advertiser*, 10 May 1965, 1.

77 'Aboriginal Plan Called "Unfair"', *Morwell Advertiser*, 6 September 1965, 2.

78 'Aboriginal Plan Called "Unfair"', *Morwell Advertiser*, 6 September 1965, 2.

79 Nicholls, 'Statement on Aboriginal Affairs'.

claptrap' was designed by the League to defend the residents of Lake Tyers who 'refused' to accept the responsibilities of assimilation and instead wanted to 'stay at Lake Tyers and be fed for sitting down and doing nothing'. Meagher claimed that parliament was inundated by complaints from the Advancement League; another minister accused Nicholls of 'cheap headline-hunting', suggesting that Aboriginal people were 'simple souls' who could be 'used by anyone' such as the Labor party.<sup>80</sup> Such comments are evidence of the effectiveness of Nicholls's campaigning, and the broader groundswell of political and grassroots resistance against government policy.

Through the debating of the Bill, the government continued to question the importance of Lake Tyers to Aboriginal people. The government dismissed any suggestion of the retention of the reserve as an open village as advocated by Moffatt, Nicholls and their supporters, stating that should such a scheme be allowed the result would be 'a large scale settlement of people who were not part of this society of ours but were, in fact, an alien race within it'.<sup>81</sup> The location of the reserve, 'at the end of a bush track, 20 miles from the nearest town, with no employment, no prospects for the future, and segregated, apart and alone', was framed as problematic.<sup>82</sup> But this was one of the qualities of the reserve that many Aboriginal people from Gippsland valued. Lake Tyers was a space of refuge not complicated by the need to negotiate spaces that could be discriminatory or hostile. Even as the government condemned the notion of a separate space for Aboriginal people, they promoted the idea of the Morwell transit village as 'a special place' and a 'haven' for Aboriginal people, perhaps in an attempt to appropriate language used by Aboriginal people to describe Lake Tyers.<sup>83</sup>

The determination and the motivations of government to close Lake Tyers was laid bare in the heated parliamentary debates over the new Bill. The continued presence of Aboriginal people committed to living together as a community on land that held deep significance to them provided an uncomfortable reminder to the government of the position of Aboriginal people as owners of the land. Arthur Rylah aimed to undermine this when he suggested that activist groups had persuaded 'Aboriginal people that they are different, that they are special people ... that the white man has stolen their land, and that they should demand that the white man turns it back to them'.<sup>84</sup> Meagher declared that he would have nothing to do 'with any proposition which seeks to set up in this community two races', and asserted that he hoped 'all people of Aboriginal descent will stop this silly looking back to a past which is irretrievably lost'.<sup>85</sup> This, despite all the explanations and justifications made by the

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80 *VPD*, 278, 3691, 3704. In 1964 Harold Blair had unsuccessfully stood for parliament against Meagher, an act described by the deputy premier Arthur Rylah as using 'candidature as a vehicle for personal attack'; *VPD*, 277, 2772.

81 *VPD*, 278, 3689.

82 *VPD*, 278, 3689.

83 *VPD*, 278, 3689.

84 *VPD*, 278, 3689.

85 *VPD*, 278, 3693.

government suggesting otherwise, was the underlying motive driving the closure of Lake Tyers and indeed the policy of assimilation itself: the government was determined to make complete the dispossession of Aboriginal people. The repeated attacks on Lake Tyers and attempts to undermine Aboriginal people's articulation of their connection to the reserve show that the government understood very well the connection between Aboriginal identity and land and reveals the government's perspective of the *need* for assimilation.

The government's Bill passed. Davey was made Board chairman, with Holden as his deputy.<sup>86</sup> Despite this, the Morwell transit village scheme was defeated when the application to rezone the 4 acres of the proposed transit village site from rural to residential was rejected by the Morwell Shire Council in September 1965.<sup>87</sup> A television program, *Watch This Space*, was broadcast the following day and featured both Nicholls and Moffatt, providing them with the opportunity to comment on the failure of the scheme. They reiterated their opposition to the scheme and to the Board's ongoing disregard for consultation with Aboriginal people. Moffatt expressed frustration that Aboriginal people were 'being pushed around', while Nicholls reiterated his assertion that money approved for the transit village should instead be spent at Lake Tyers, where 'the people are more than happy'.<sup>88</sup> The Council for Aboriginal Rights and the League expressed relief, and the League expressed hope that the failure of the scheme would lead the Board to 'consider a radically new approach to Lake Tyers' based on consultation with Aboriginal people.<sup>89</sup> Felton suggested to the Board that assurances be given to residents of Lake Tyers, and that attention be refocused to improving conditions on the reserve.<sup>90</sup> The opposition of Aboriginal people and their supporters towards the scheme, in the broader context of the contested nature of Aboriginal affairs, including the campaign to save Lake Tyers, had been successful.

Davey was infuriated, but his following attempts to push ahead with a settlement in Morwell proved futile.<sup>91</sup> At the end of October 1965, just over a month after the Shire Council's decision, it was announced by the government that the transit village scheme would be abandoned, due to the prejudices of 'a minority of Morwell residents', and the Shire Council's refusal to rezone the land.<sup>92</sup> It did not acknowledge that the pressure applied by Aboriginal leaders and pro-Aboriginal groups had made public the strong resistance to the closure of Lake Tyers, and the understanding of Aboriginal people that the transit village scheme would be a precursor to this closure. Clearly, the effectiveness of Aboriginal political activism during this period

86 *VPD*, 278, 3689.

87 "'NO" to Site for Aborigines' Transit Area', *Morwell Advertiser*, 16 September 1965, 1.

88 NAA, B357, 77.

89 'Morwell Rejects Welfare Board Plan', *Smoke Signals*, 1965, 14; Pauline Pickford, 'Press Statement to the "Age"'.  
 90 NAA, B356, 44.

91 'Morwell Denies Prejudice over Aboriginal Village', *Sun*, 27 October 1965, 5.

92 'Aborigines' Home Issue Still Alive', *Morwell Advertiser*, 7 October 1965, 1, 7.

was growing, as was the Board’s awareness that efforts would be futile if they continued to make decisions that did not have the support of Aboriginal people and their allies.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusion

The defeat of the Morwell transit village scheme was pivotal to a shift away from the policy and practices of assimilation in Victoria. The space left by the transit village scheme was filled with plans for the development and continuation of Lake Tyers in accordance with Aboriginal aspirations. A new committee, comprising 3 Board representatives and 3 representatives from the Advancement League, began investigating the future possibilities of Lake Tyers reserve. An alternative proposal to a development was made, resulting in the opening of the Lionel Rose Centre in Morwell in 1969.<sup>94</sup> Crucially, this centre operated parallel to Lake Tyers, rather than as an alternative to the reserve, a development in keeping with what Aboriginal people wanted: access to opportunities as well as the retention of Aboriginal land at Lake Tyers.

Towards the end of the 1960s, assimilation came to be rejected by governments all over Australia. The Aborigines Welfare Board was abolished in 1968 and replaced with a Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs. Under the *Aboriginal Lands Act 1970* (Vic), the Victorian Government announced that Lake Tyers would be permanently reserved under the perpetual licence of an Aboriginal trust.<sup>95</sup> This was the first Act of its kind in Australia, and it finally provided official, binding acknowledgement of Aboriginal people’s connection to and ownership of Lake Tyers. The ongoing activism of Aboriginal people changed the way that government wrote policy, and the failure of the transit village scheme is testament to how the government’s relentless pursuit of assimilation faced equally relentless resistance.

## Acknowledgements

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<sup>93</sup> Harris, ‘A “New Deal”’, 166.

<sup>94</sup> Victoria, Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, *Annual Report*, 1970.

<sup>95</sup> *Aboriginal Lands Act 1970* (Vic).

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# ‘The ordered behaviour of the individual himself’: Cecil Cook’s biological politics

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Tim Rowse and Barry Leithhead

**Abstract:** By examining the thinking of a major public health bureaucrat, Dr Cecil Cook, this article contributes to our understanding of the relationship between racial thought and liberalism in Australia’s administration of ‘Aboriginal affairs’. In Cook’s appraisal of the health problems of northern Australia, 2 kinds of distinction were significant: racial (whites, ‘Asiatics’, Aborigines) and capacity for hygienic living. We argue that over the span of Cook’s career as an administrator and commentator (1925–69) distinctions of capacity were more fundamental, for he assumed that both whites and ‘Aboriginals’ could be brought to standards of conduct required of a healthy population. We review Cook’s ideas about what made the Northern Territory different from the 6 states and about the potential of miscegenation and ‘absorption’. We argue that Cook’s nationalism was not simply ‘ethnic’ but also significantly ‘civic’ and that he was fundamentally a liberal assimilationist, albeit cautious and at times coercive in his application of public health ideas to the program of civic equality. In the course of our argument, we comment on other historians’ conceptions of Cook.

It is common to express distaste for the personality, outlook and policies of Dr Cecil Cook, Chief Medical Officer and Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory from 1927 to 1939. Under his authority, ‘half-caste’<sup>1</sup> children were

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1 A note on language: Readers are advised that this article contains descriptive terms for Aboriginal people that were commonly used in the twentieth century. This racial terminology, offensive to contemporary readers, is reproduced here as it is given in the historical record, used only in order to accurately describe Cook’s thought, and that of his times.

removed from native camps to institutions; he permitted or blocked the marital choices of 'half-caste' women. His phrase 'breed out the colour' has come to signify objectionable ways that White Australia handled the so-called 'Aboriginal problem'. Cook has come to personify ideologies, policies and practices of government that seem at best misguided and at worst cruel and racist. However, to evaluate Cook's policies and advice we need a more accurate description of these than some of our leading historians have provided. Histories of Australia's colonial practices – perhaps prompted by empathy for the pain and loss suffered by Aboriginal Australians – include much inaccurate and tendentious writing about Cook's ideas and practices. Without seeking to justify Cook's thoughts and actions, we re-present Cook as a certain kind of architect of the settler colonial state – that is, as a public health technocrat preoccupied by the central problem of liberal governance – the role of human agency (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) in governing.<sup>2</sup>

After leaving his positions as Chief Medical Officer and Chief Protector of Aboriginals in the Northern Territory in 1939, Cook served in the Australian Army, working on tropical hygiene. After the war, he worked for the Western Australian and Commonwealth governments. Throughout his career, Aboriginal health and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships were of great interest to him; at times, they were also his practical concern as a medical professional and administrator.

Our article proceeds as follows. First, we put Cook's professional concerns in a world historical context. We then examine Cook's ideas about Aboriginal policy in 2 periods: 1927–39 and 1950–55. Our narrative of Cook's career ends by considering his 1969 retrospect on his approach to Aboriginal affairs in which he wondered whether intervention into Aboriginal people's lives had encouraged or discouraged Aboriginal people's responsibility. Our article concludes by discussing Russell McGregor's presentation of Cook as an ethnic nationalist: we argue that Cook's nationalism was 'civic' as well as 'ethnic'. Throughout our article, we present vignettes of historians' representations of Cook's ideas and actions and through this recontextualisation aim to show the ways in which they are tendentious and inaccurate.

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2 A note on the authors: Barry Leithhead is in a long-term relationship, starting after Cecil Cook's death, with Cook's daughter, Robin McIntyre, who provided access to Cook's extensive collection of professional and personal papers. Tim Rowse is one of several people invited to comment on drafts of 'A Vision for Australia's Health: Dr Cecil Cook at Work' (Leithhead, *A Vision for Australia's Health*). In the course of their conversations, Barry and Tim agreed that in the scholarly literature on Cook's work as Chief Protector of Aboriginals and Chief Medical Officer there were some misconceptions, factual errors and debatable interpretations; they decided to write a paper to comment on this literature and to present Cook's approach to Indigenous health in a longer time frame, paying attention to statements that he made after 1939. Readers should not assume that Barry and Tim agree with each other in their evaluations of Cook's policies and practices. However, this article expresses the joint view that they have arrived at about how his approach should be described.

## The nineteenth-century background

Cook was a product of a nineteenth-century revolution in health. According to Osterhammel, 3 developments terminated the ‘medical *ancien régime*’: the ability to prevent smallpox and malaria, the rise of laboratory medicine, and the development of social reform movements focused on improving sanitation – that is, providing clean water, sewage and garbage disposal. ‘The global “hygiene revolution” was one of the great breakthroughs of the nineteenth century’, Osterhammel writes. ‘It began after 1850 in western and northern Europe and has continued down to the present day.’ He goes on to refer to a ‘decisive innovation’ in government: ‘the creation of local health authorities under central control but with the leeway to respond to conditions in the area’.<sup>3</sup>

Cook’s professional life as a doctor and public servant from the early 1920s to 1962 exemplifies 2 elements of the social imagination of public health governance: seeing the human as a problematic agent and believing in the capacities of individuals and communities, if properly instructed, to be sanitary and well-nourished. One of Cook’s early patrons, the founding director-general of the Commonwealth Department of Health Dr J. H. L. Cumpston, stated in a 1919 address ‘The Nationalization of Medicine’ that:

The individual man as an animal – the body in all its parts, the senses and their functioning, the nutrition of the body, its growth and development, its powers of resistance – must receive practical consideration. Nor is the individual, taken at any one moment, the whole of the issue. There is his life history, his heredity, his family, his domestic life, his personal habits, his home as well as his workshop. In short, preventive medicine must deal with the man, the whole man, as an individual as well as a member of the community.<sup>4</sup>

Cook considered Northern Territory society in terms of 2 distinctions: racial (the ‘white’, the ‘Asiatic’ and the ‘Aboriginal’ populations, and, within the ‘Aboriginal’, the ‘half-castes’, ‘quadroons’ and ‘full-bloods’) and behavioural (the hygienically competent from the hygienically incompetent). We will argue that the behavioural distinction was of greater long-term significance in Cook’s thought than the racial.

Medical surveillance and Aboriginal protection overlapped functionally, as Cook pointed out in his survey of leprosy: ‘it is impossible in the Northern Territory to conduct a hygiene campaign without arrogating to the Hygienist many of the functions of a Protector’.<sup>5</sup> Again, in 1929: ‘the function of Aboriginal protection is a medical preserve’.<sup>6</sup> In Cook’s public health perspective, Aboriginal people were

3 Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World*, 195–96.

4 Roe, ‘The Establishment of the Australian Department of Health’, 186.

5 Cecil Cook, Report on the Joint Leprosarium in Darwin, [1925?], NAA A659, 1944/1/657.

6 Cecil Cook, Memorandum to Government Resident, Darwin, 1 March 1929, NAA A431, 1946/3026.

not only healthy or unhealthy bodies, but also agents whose educable behaviour mattered to population health. From this perspective, the 'race' of a person was less important than their conduct: he believed that any person could be trained in sanitation. The Aboriginal people on whose conduct he focused in the 1930s were those classified as 'half-castes', but he was aware that eventually the state would have to consider the conduct of the wider 'Aboriginal' (or 'full-blood') population then predominantly under mission management. His advice, by the mid-1950s, was that the state must forge a more inclusive social contract in the north; through assimilation, Aboriginal people would internalise their responsibility for hygiene and nutrition and function as equal citizens. Cook's aspiration for Indigenous Australians was that they progress from a way of life that, under the impact of colonisation, had recently become insanitary to a way of life sustained by acquired competence in personal and communal hygiene.

Some historians have suggested that Cook's policies and his administration of Commonwealth policies were intended to extinguish the Aboriginal way of life and even the very existence of Aboriginal people. Discussing Cook's 'biopolitics', Samia Hossain writes that 'Cook's project to make the white race live in the tropics coincided at times with letting Aboriginal people die'.<sup>7</sup> She does not explain what she means by 'let ... die', and she does not discuss the significance of 'coincides'. Gregory Smithers writes that Cook sought knowledge 'about the (interracial) sexual practices of Aboriginal women' and that he hoped 'to use that knowledge to control their reproductive lives so that Aboriginality could be eliminated'.<sup>8</sup> Smithers does not point to any primary source confirming that Cook wanted to know 'sexual practices' and confirming that he thought that such knowledge would enable him to 'control their reproductive lives'. Smithers does not explain what he means by the phrase 'Aboriginality could be eliminated'. Certainly, Cook was sure that the Aboriginal way of life was rapidly disintegrating under the impact of colonial occupation; his repeatedly stated hope was that colonial authorities could reform Aboriginal people so that they could function as members of Australian society. Historians using terms such as 'die', 'eliminate' and 'erase' should be careful to distinguish the termination of life from changes in way of life and identity. Ben Silverstein does not. Coining the phrase 'Cook's eliminationist necropolitics', he asserts that 'Cook ... pursued a course of action engineered to make white life and let Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal societies, die'.<sup>9</sup> He refers to Cook's 'unwillingness to contemplate the survival of Aboriginal communities', and he writes that Cook was 'celebrating Aboriginal demise'.<sup>10</sup> We contend that Hossain, Smithers and Silverstein blur the

7 Hossain, 'Norman Haire and Cecil Cook', 460.

8 Smithers, *Science, Sexuality, and Race*, 334.

9 Silverstein, *Governing Natives*, 142, 110.

10 Silverstein, *Governing Natives*, 117, 124.



distinction between promoting change in the Aboriginal way of life and seeking to ‘eliminate’ physically those who sought adaptive continuity and did not easily embrace the changes thrust upon them.

## The Northern Territory is not Queensland

To commit to the health of north Australia, Cook advised, the Commonwealth should consider the unusual features of the Northern Territory and not emulate Aboriginal policies of the states.<sup>11</sup> Shortly after Cook’s appointment, in 1928, the Commonwealth sought advice on the Northern Territory from Queensland’s Chief Protector J. W. Bleakley.<sup>12</sup> Bleakley was sceptical of the possibility and benefit of ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory marrying white people, though he did not recommend that the Commonwealth forbid it.<sup>13</sup> Cook’s view of miscegenation was more positive; in March 1929 he responded to Bleakley by explaining to the Government Resident in Darwin why the policies of Queensland should not be models for the Kimberley and in the Northern Territory:

Whereas in Queensland and the greater part of Western Australia the Chief Protector is concerned in caring for the occasional Aboriginal in a country wholly under White civilisation, in the Territory and in the Kimberley district of Western Australia the process is one of regulating inter-racial relationships in a country where the native remains predominant and the White is an occasional settler.<sup>14</sup>

Under the heading ‘Care for the hybrid’, Cook wrote that:

In Queensland the halfcaste has been treated as an Aboriginal and left to his fate among the remnants of his tribal ancestors. In North and Central Australia an effort has been made to save the white element in his constitution from further dilution and to educate him to the standard of citizenship.<sup>15</sup>

Warning against neglect of the potential of ‘half-castes’, Cook also criticised what Bleakley said about the ‘quadroon’. ‘The cross breed with a preponderance of white blood’ whose increase was ‘deplorable’ should be raised in ‘European institutions’ from an early age, Bleakley wrote, ‘for absorption into the white population after vocational training’.<sup>16</sup> Cook explained to his superiors that Darwin’s female

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11 On 1 March 1927, the Commonwealth Government proclaimed the Northern Territory as 2 administrations – North Australia and Central Australia, each with a Resident as its senior public servant. The 2 administrations were rejoined in 1931. We have referred to the 2 administrations as ‘the Northern Territory’ when it is relevant to do so.

12 Commonwealth of Australia, *The Aborigines and Half-Castes*.

13 Commonwealth of Australia, *The Aborigines and Half-Castes*, 27–29.

14 Cook, Memorandum to Government Resident, Darwin, 1 March 1929.

15 Cook, Memorandum to Government Resident, Darwin, 1 March 1929.

16 Commonwealth of Australia, *The Aborigines and Half-Castes*, 28–29.

‘quadroons’ were already under supervision at the Sisters of Mercy at Darwin’s Convent of our Lady of the Sacred Heart and that his strategy included guidance of such young women. He then compared North Australia to Queensland:

It is not true of North Australia that the ‘civilised’ half-caste reverts to the Black. On the contrary the men, with few exceptions choose their wives from amongst half-caste girls, whilst the girls marry either whites or half-castes. In Queensland this may not be true, for there no effort to improve the half-castes has ever been made, and they are brought up with the Aborigines.<sup>17</sup>

What made the Commonwealth’s investment in the ‘half-caste’ necessary, Cook argued, was that the ‘half-caste’ population was growing much faster than white natural increase, so that ‘half-castes’ would equal or exceed whites in the foreseeable future. If the wage rates of ‘half-castes’ were kept below the rates paid to whites, Cook argued, they would displace white employees, stimulating tension and encouraging white exodus, so that the Northern Territory would fail as a region of *white* settlement.<sup>18</sup> The best way to protect white employment and racial harmony, he argued, was to employ ‘half-castes’ on conditions equal to whites. For this, ‘half-castes’ must be enabled by government to be socially equal to whites. This was one reason for Cook’s continuing a practice that was established by the time he took office: removal of ‘half-caste’ children from native camps so that they could be raised in government institutions to become employable citizens.

## Demonising Cook

As we noted in our introduction, criticism of past policies towards Indigenous Australians – particularly child removal – has encouraged distaste for the personality, outlook, practices and policies of individuals (such as Cook) who implemented policies that are now widely seen as at best misguided and at worst (in Robert Manne’s judgement) genocidal.<sup>19</sup> Criticism of Cook’s policies and programs manifests in some historians’ characterisations of Cook as inhumane in his person. According to Andrew Markus, Cook was an ‘almost obsessive’ scientist insensitive to the human dimensions of health problems and naive about the reach of his authority. Markus writes that in Cook’s ‘ideal’ administration ‘the physiological took precedence over

17 Cecil Cook, Memorandum to Government Resident, 11 June 1929, NAA A431, 1946/3026.

18 Moran characterises this projection as ‘paranoia’, which means ‘a mental condition characterized by delusions of persecution, unwarranted jealousy, or exaggerated self-importance’. He offers no evidence that Cook suffered from this condition. Moran, ‘White Australia’, fn 6.

19 Manne, *In Denial*, 39; Manne, ‘Aboriginal Child Removal’, 228–31, 238. The work of Tony Austin is a notable exception. He compares Cook’s approach to ‘half-castes’ to prevailing popular, scientific, governmental opinion between the 2 world wars and declares him ‘remarkably progressive’, though in his methods ‘an extremist among progressivists’. Austin adds that his approach was ‘not understood in the southern states and was resented in the north’. Austin, ‘Cecil Cook, Scientific Thought and Half-Castes’, 119–20. See also Austin, *I Can Picture the Old Home*.

the psychological’.<sup>20</sup> Keith Windschuttle presents Cook as ‘an authoritarian official who never questioned his right to act without consulting his charges’.<sup>21</sup> Noting that some of Cook’s contemporaries characterised him as a ‘crank’, Windschuttle says that they were ‘probably very close to the truth’.<sup>22</sup> Warwick Anderson implies a comparison with Nazi administrators. Describing as a ‘scientific breeding program’ Cook’s supervision of ‘half-caste’ women’s choice of spouse, Anderson remarks: ‘In Germany in the 1930s, these girls might have been regarded as undesirables and therefore sterilised; in Australia, however, they were to be absorbed, in order to produce a biologically consolidated nation’.<sup>23</sup> This sentence states a fact and then a counterfactual. The fact is that the women under Cook’s authority were not sterilised (has anyone ever suggested that they were?). The counterfactual is that the girls might have lived in Germany, not the Northern Territory, in the 1930s, in which case they might have been judged ‘undesirable’ (on racial grounds) and sterilised. What is the point of Anderson’s counterfactual? There is a suggestion that Cook and the Nazis can be placed within a spectrum of state eugenic programs and compared.<sup>24</sup> However, Anderson does not pursue this comparison; he merely hints an analogy between the Nazi-persecuted and ‘half-caste’ women under Cook’s supervision. Insinuation is no argument.

## ‘Breed out the colour’

Cook’s instruments for advancing ‘half-castes’ included continuing the Kahlin Compound (established in 1913) as a place of training in sanitary, communal living. As well, he initiated a small housing program, and he entitled ‘half-caste’ employees to medical insurance and to regulation of apprentice employment.<sup>25</sup> By far the most controversial of his interventions was Cook’s say over Aboriginal women’s marital choice. In 1933 Cook referred to his approach to marriage surveillance by the phrase ‘breed out the colour’. On 7 February 1933, he spelled out how he was using his powers under the *Aboriginals Ordinance 1918* (Cth) to influence Aboriginal reproduction in the Northern Territory: [‘full-blood’] Aborigines to ‘mate’ only with other [‘full-blood’] Aborigines; prohibit ‘mating’ between Aborigines (both ‘full-bloods’ and ‘half-castes’) and non-Aboriginal coloured persons; encourage marriage of vetted ‘half-castes’ to vetted whites and ‘half-castes’. Referring to the

20 Markus, *Governing Savages*, 100–01.

21 Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Australian History*, Vol. 3, 366.

22 Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Australian History*, Vol. 3, 398.

23 Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, 236. Anderson was followed by Gray, *Brass Discs*, 72: Cook’s policy ‘raises the spectre of forced sterilisation and internment camps. Fortunately Australian official policy never quite reached this point’.

24 For a discussion of whether and how we should position the Australian advocates of miscegenation (such as Cook) within the tradition of ‘eugenics’ in which the Nazis figure so horribly, see McGregor, “‘Breed Out the Colour’”, 297–99.

25 Austin, *I Can Picture the Old Home*, 135–42, 155–93.

third point, Cook wrote: 'Every endeavour is being made to breed out the colour by elevating female half-castes to white standard with a view to their absorption by mating into the white population'. J. A. Carrodus, the secretary of the Department of the Interior, used 'breed out the colour' when briefing his minister on Cook's use of his authority.<sup>26</sup> After Cook's policy, represented by this phrase, was made public in the *Report on the Administration of the Northern Territory up to June 30 1933* (in which Cook referred to the 'half-caste coloured aliens' population as a 'perennial economic and social problem'), the Melbourne *Herald* quoted the phrase 'breed out the colour' in a short news item (based on the *Report*) on 29 June 1934.<sup>27</sup>

'Breed out the colour' features prominently in accounts of Cook's work in the Northern Territory – a much recruited fact.<sup>28</sup> The phrase has become notorious for the racist implication that 'black' is bad and 'white' is good and for the authoritarian premise that governments had the right to take control over peoples' most intimate behaviour, their 'breeding'. Distaste for the idea that humans can be 'bred' as if they were animals has led some historians to present Cook's marriage power in the most negative terms. Markus refers to Cook's miscegenation policy as 'Cook's breeding program'.<sup>29</sup> Robert Manne writes that Cook's policy was based on 'thinking of a genocidal kind'; in another essay, Manne uses the subheading 'Dr. Cecil Cook: Breeding Out the Colour' and argues that his thoughts and plans about 'absorption' were 'genocidal', but (fortunately) difficult to implement.<sup>30</sup> Stephen Gray erroneously refers to 'the Chief Protector's arranged marriages'.<sup>31</sup>

It was controversial, at this time, for an Australian government to countenance and even to encourage white Australian men to marry and raise children with women of colour. In June 1933, W. E. H. Stanner, a graduate student of anthropology at the University of Sydney, advised against miscegenation. While 'hybrids are not necessarily inferior' and while 'frequently they are superior to the parental stocks', it was risky to encourage or allow 'hybrids' to produce children with whites because some of their progeny would be dark-skinned and they would be stigmatised by their appearance. Because science was still ignorant of the genetics of Aboriginal hybridisation it was not possible to predict the frequency of such 'throw-backs' (children of darker hue than their coloured parent) and so miscegenation was

26 J. A. Carrodus, Letter to Secretary Department of Prime Minister, 25 May 1933, NAA A659, 1940/1/408.

27 'Half-Caste Aliens in North "Grave Problem"', *Herald* (Melbourne), 29 June 1934, 1. As Connor points out, Cook and others judged that Asian/Aboriginal unions had 'none of the perceived benefits of assimilation'. Connor, *Skin Deep*, 308.

28 Carr, *What Is History?*, 6–8.

29 Markus, *Governing Savages*, 93.

30 Manne, *In Denial*, 39; Manne, 'Aboriginal Child Removal', 228–31, 238.

31 Gray, *Brass Discs*, 71. Windschuttle (*The Fabrication of Australian History*, Vol. 3, 388–98) critically discusses the allegation, made in 1933, that Cook was 'arranging' marriages by offering employment as an inducement to white spouses.

an 'experiment with lives'.<sup>32</sup> A week later, Stanner wrote that miscegenation was 'a blunder'. He observed that prevailing prejudice against 'half-castes' meant that most men who would marry a 'half-caste' woman would be 'poor whites, inferior or "failed" types'. He wished it were otherwise: 'A very different story might be told if above-average whites married above-average native women and if the children were not stigmatised or otherwise penalised'.<sup>33</sup>

Anti-racism can be seen as a field of possible positions, so let us compare Stanner's with Cook's. Stanner rejected miscegenation from the standpoint of a critic of colour prejudice. Before miscegenation could be ventured, he argued, 'a radical revision of the general public attitude towards mixed-bloods' would be necessary ... [including] 'to give the hybrids complete equality of political, legal, and social status and complete equality of economic opportunity. To do less than this would be to court trouble'.<sup>34</sup> While not doubting that Stanner disliked the racial prejudice to which he urged prudent deference, we see Cook's anti-racism as less prudent: he was prepared to accept the risk of miscegenation.<sup>35</sup> Cook pointed to the demography and morality of the Northern Territory: a surplus of female 'half-castes' was emerging, and it was desirable to manage them. That is, in Cook's assessment, a growing number of 'half-caste' women, having been trained by the government, were now too 'civilised' to marry 'boys of their own generation' who had not been removed to government institutions. These excess 'half-caste' women 'must be married to men of substantially European origin'.<sup>36</sup> Encouraging miscegenation would have the additional desirable effect of limiting cohabitation between white men and Aboriginal women – casual arrangements resulting in squalid homes, he suggested. Cook believed that 'many such men would be prepared to marry half-caste females and make decent homes'.<sup>37</sup> That is, Cook's hopes for miscegenation were not only to further the 'civilising' of Aboriginal women but also to arrest the deterioration of the morality of white men who lived within easy reach of Aboriginal camps. Cook also saw eugenic promise in miscegenation:

[A] large proportion of the half-caste female population is derived from the best white stock in the country whilst the aboriginal inheritance brings to the hybrid definite qualities of value – intelligence, stamina, resources,

32 William E. H. Stanner, 'Peril in Racial Crossing: Research Urged on Half-Caste Scheme', *Sunday Sun and Guardian*, 18 June 1933.

33 William E. H. Stanner, 'The Problem of the Half Caste', *Sunday Sun and Guardian*, 25 June 1933.

34 Stanner, 'The Problem of the Half Caste'. For more on the differences between Cook's and others' opinions about 'half-castes', see Austin, 'Cecil Cook, Scientific Thought and Half-Castes'.

35 McGregor (*Imagined Destinies*, 174–75) describes Stanner's views about miscegenation, but Anderson (*The Cultivation of Whiteness*) does not. Stanner's biographers (Barwick, Beckett and Reay, 'W.E.H. Stanner'; Hinkson and Beckett, "'Going More than Half Way to Meet Them'"; Manne, 'W.E.H. Stanner') have so far omitted to work this episode into the Stanner legend.

36 Cecil Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 27 June 1933, NAA A659, 1940/1/408.

37 Cecil Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 27 June 1933, NAA A659, 1940/1/408.

high resistance to the influence of tropical environment and the character of pigmentation which even in high dilution will serve to reduce the at present high incidence of Skin Cancer in the blonde European.<sup>38</sup>

If Cook's miscegenation policy was as much an attempt to 'breed' some of the characteristics of 'colour' into the Territory population, we can see that calling the practice 'breed out the colour' obscured the latitude that he was seeking in the 'White Australia' policy: his attempt to adjust the ideal of 'white' to the demography of the Northern Territory.<sup>39</sup> Cook may have calculated that his phrase 'breed out the colour' would mollify such Australians as Emily Curtis (of the Women's Section of the United Country Party) who characterised 'half-caste' women as 'of illegitimate birth, tainted with aboriginal blood, the offspring of men of the lowest human type, many of whom are Asiatics and other foreign nationalities'.<sup>40</sup> Addressing such fears as those Stanner had voiced only a few weeks before, Cook expressed confidence that Territorians would tolerate any offspring darker than either of their parents. Cook judged that assimilation of 'half-castes' in the Northern Territory was contingent not only on their gradual whitening by miscegenation but also on the changes in their way of life. He represented the 'half-caste' as 'exceptionally assimilable – he has no national outlook, social custom or alien background incompatible with full white citizenship'.<sup>41</sup> His policy 'involves the granting of full citizenship to a generation of persons who may fairly claim it'.<sup>42</sup> He assured the administrator that he knew of several good marriages in Darwin, whereas marriages between half-castes 'are almost without exception attended by social and economic disaster'.<sup>43</sup> His support of limited miscegenation (Asian husbands were not accepted) was complementary

38 Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 27 June 1933. Austin (*I Can Picture the Old Home*, 149) also draws attention to this statement of aims.

39 Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 27 June 1933. Cook adhered to 'White Australia' orthodoxy when it came to 'Asiatics': he would not allow 'half-caste' stock to enhance the Asian-Australian gene pool. To 'limit the multiplication of the hybrid coloured population', coloured non-Aboriginal people should be prevented from mating with the half-caste Aboriginal females whose wifely qualities he championed. Katherine Ellinghaus ('Absorbing the Aboriginal Problem') has argued that for Cook and Western Australia's Chief Protector A. O. Neville, an important purpose of the marriage power was to disallow Asian-Aboriginal unions.

40 McGregor's source is Emily Curtis, Letter to Secretary, Department of the Interior, 19 August 1934, NAA A452, 1952/420, *Imagined Destinies*, 174. Keith Windschuttle (*The Fabrication of Australian History*, Vol. 3, 383–400) has documented considerable opposition from upper levels of the Australian Government to Cook's policy in 1933–34. What he does not say is that the government's embarrassment about the perception that it was running a human breeding program would have arisen not only from perception that Cook's marriage control was an 'offence against human rights' (Vol. 3, 397) (less anachronistically, an infringement on the liberty of British subjects) but also from a popular fear and loathing of miscegenation.

41 Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 27 June 1933. So Cook regretted in 1969 that Aboriginal identity had come to include 'the fiction that the mixed blood is an Aboriginal' (Cook, 'Protection', 24). There is no doubt that he anticipated and welcomed the erasure of Aboriginality as an identity, at least for those of 'mixed blood'.

42 Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 27 June 1933. In this argument, we agree with Austin (*I Can Picture the Old Home*, 149–50) who shows that Cook's practice could better be described as 'breeding IN the colour'. Austin gives official statistics on Cook's approvals: 37 European husbands and 18 'half-caste' husbands.

43 Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 27 June 1933.

to his campaign for political support for the regulation of ‘half-caste’ employment (against the vigorous lobbying of pastoralists) and for a non-discriminatory medical service in Alice Springs (against white residents’ preference for segregation).<sup>44</sup>

## Beyond the ‘half-castes’

Cook urged the Commonwealth to plan for the Northern Territory to be a variant of White Australia, but just how long ‘colour’ would persist in the Northern Territory was difficult to predict, because beyond the ‘half-castes’ that he was able to control there was a vast hinterland of ‘full-bloods’ uncounted by the Census (but estimated in Cook’s *Annual Reports*) – some living on ‘inviolable reserves’ under the supervision of missionaries, others rationed by pastoralists and others under no colonial supervision. Was the ‘full-blood’ population, under these conditions, rising or falling? Government officials who met in Canberra in April 1937 had no definite answer to this question.

Before describing that bewildered Canberra conversation, we review Cook’s advice about the Territory’s remote Aboriginal people in the years 1935–37. The ‘inviolable reserve’ was intended to shield Aboriginal people from all contact with non-Aboriginal people other than a few authorised whites, mostly missionaries. The Commonwealth had declared a reserve in the south-west in 1920 and a large part of Arnhem Land became an inviolable reserve in 1931; throughout the 1930s, scientists and missionaries advocated extending the south-west reserve. Cook was sceptical of inviolable reserves: was the government really protective if it abstained from intervention, he asked? In a memorandum to Minister for the Interior Thomas Paterson in 1935, Cook stated his doubts: empty spaces in the north were, in his view, a security risk, and he thought it a waste to deprive graziers, miners and others of natural resources that they could develop. Missions on existing reserves were breaking down social organisation, by Christian conversion, without training Aboriginal people in the ways of modern Australia. Cook thought that missions lacked the resources, including skilled staff, to keep people healthy. The best path forward for all Northern Territory Aboriginal people, he argued, lay through regulated employment – mostly in the pastoral industry. For those living in areas occupied by pastoral leases, Cook recommended that small reserves be declared; these could include ceremonial centres, but also sites for training in horticulture and goat/cattle herd management; children could gradually be inducted into schools.

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44 Austin (‘Cecil Cook, Scientific Thought and Half-Castes’, 116) writes that ‘few matters concerning Aborigines and Half-castes generated so much heat and voluminous correspondence’ as Cook’s ‘Apprenticeship (Half-castes) Regulations’. On medical services in Alice Springs, see NAA F1, 1938/666, which shows that in 1932, after establishing a Medical Benefits Fund for the Northern Territory whose income included payments from employers of Aboriginal people, Cook sought to use it to subsidise the Australian Inland Mission hostel in Alice Springs, provided that the hostel would service all members of the Alice Springs public, including Aboriginal members of the fund.



For those beyond white settlement Cook conceded that inviolable reserves, possibly with missions, were the best that the government could now provide. However, he urged that the government supervise missions more rigorously: the Chief Medical Officer (Cook himself) should instruct them in clinical and public health, and schools on missions should be government controlled. Fearing too rapid collapse in Aboriginal social organisation, Cook conceded that missions should sustain ceremonial life in selected respects.<sup>45</sup>

Cook's thoughts about responsibility over the most remote Aboriginal people were further stimulated by the recommendations of an inquiry in 1935 into a policeman's fatal shooting of an Aboriginal man in custody in the vicinity of the south-west reserve. The anthropologist T. G. H. Strehlow gave advice to this inquiry and was then appointed in 1936 as the Territory's first Patrol Officer. Strehlow advised Cook that the administration should set up a trading post within the south-west reserve as an incentive for the residents to remain living on it. The reserve-dwellers' desire for goods that they did not produce themselves could be satisfied if they bartered the products of their own economic activity at the trading post, Strehlow suggested. They would then be less likely to migrate to make contact with white people. Cook neither dismissed nor endorsed Strehlow's trading post proposal, arguing that it was difficult to know whether the south-west reserve really was losing its food-bearing value for Aboriginal residents. He was sceptical of Strehlow's and others' suggestion that the south-west reserve be extended north and east. Again, he drew attention to the opportunities lost if colonists could not access natural resources.<sup>46</sup>

Cook's last statement (as Chief Protector) about how the government could take responsibility for the uncounted peoples of the remotest corners of the Northern Territory was his memorandum on missions on 2 April 1938. He questioned the morality of leaving Aboriginal people alone, without giving them the opportunity to develop the skills and outlooks required in the wider society. Cook thought that Aboriginal people had shown their preference and aptitude for the new ways. Shielding them from contact was not only difficult, but also it was a denial of their entitlement to guidance in the new way of life. As well, he added, some features of Aboriginal tradition were so repugnant ('rape', 'murder') that no civilised society should tolerate their continuation: reserves did not 'protect' the victims of these cruel customs. Cook repeated his suggestion that the remote reserves were a security risk.<sup>47</sup>

45 Cecil Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 7 October 1935, NAA A1, 1937/70.

46 Cecil Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 9 March 1937, NAA F1, 1938/418.

47 Cecil Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 2 April 1938, NAA F1, 1944/193 Part 1.



The significance of this series of increasingly critical comments on the inviolable reserve is that they show Cook accepting that the entire Northern Territory Aboriginal population was becoming the government’s responsibility.<sup>48</sup> Other than proposing supervision of missions, Cook did not say how the government should intervene in remote Aboriginal lives. He had developed an array of interventions into the lives of ‘half-castes’, but he had few ways to influence the thousands of Aboriginal people who lived on pastoral leases, missions and reserves.<sup>49</sup> With little power to hold missionaries and pastoralists accountable, particularly in matters relevant to health, he could only speculate on the demography of most of the people of Aboriginal descent living in the Northern Territory. Nonetheless, when Cook met with state officials and other ‘experts’ in Canberra on 21–23 April 1937, he projected an increasing Aboriginal population for the Northern Territory.

## Cook meets with state officials, April 1937

At the initial conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal authorities in Canberra, 21–23 April 1937, Cook began by celebrating the protection that he thought he was achieving by the means so far afforded his administration by government policy: a strategy of equality for ‘half-castes’, aimed at enabling a rapidly increasing ‘half-caste’ population to compete with whites for a limited supply of jobs. Without such a strategy, ‘half-castes’, denied the material benefits of the economy, might ‘rise in revolt’, he speculated, and there would be racial tension.<sup>50</sup> If ‘half-castes’ were enabled to compete with white labour, some would probably migrate to find work in other parts of Australia. ‘That would relieve the tension in the Territory.’<sup>51</sup> An amendment to the *Aboriginals Ordinance* in 1936 enabled him to exempt selected ‘half-castes’ from his control. This concession had been necessary because ‘many half-castes of a superior type who have been provided with homes, for which they were paying, resented the imputation that they were a subject race, and not entitled to accompany their friends when taking refreshment’.<sup>52</sup>

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48 We agree with Alison Bashford’s account of Cook: that ‘contact between races was prevented or discouraged except under the sanctioned politics of assimilation’ (Bashford, *Imperial Hygiene*, p.110). Apart from his views on leprosy prophylaxis, Cook was a critic of segregation in health servicing. The emphasis for him was ‘contact’ ‘under the sanctioned politics of assimilation’ (though Cook used the words ‘adsorption’ and ‘absorption’) not racial segregation as a general approach. Evidence of his hostility to segregation as a general policy can be found in correspondence on NAA F1, 1938/666 (see footnote 44).

49 Warwick Anderson exaggerates when he writes that under Cook’s supervision of marriages ‘the state would take control of Aboriginal reproduction’ (Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, 236). Cook made no attempt to control sexual activity among ‘full-blood’ Aboriginal people – the source of most ‘Aboriginal reproduction’ in the Northern Territory at that time.

50 Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 13.

51 Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 13.

52 Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 21.

Cook then turned to the question of the 'Aboriginal population', the estimated 19,000 people not affected by his strategy of 'half-caste' equality. If they were 'multiplying at a rate far in excess of the whites', the government faced 3 options. To do nothing was repugnant to any 'Protector'; to protect the black population would enable it to 'swamp the white'; to follow a policy of absorption was best.<sup>53</sup> Cook did not propose how to 'absorb' a large and possibly increasing black population, and nor did the other officials. Indeed, not all experts agreed that 'protection' was causing 'full-bloods' to survive and perhaps to increase. Referring to the 'full-blood' population of Western Australia, Chief Protector A. O. Neville said: 'no matter what we do, they will die out'. The only rising population, according to Neville, was 'the coloured people of various degrees'.<sup>54</sup> When Cook questioned Neville's negative assessment of 'full-blood' protection, B. S. Harkness, a member of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board, asked Cook: 'Do you think we should encourage them to breed?' Cook gave no answer.<sup>55</sup> Dissatisfied with this evasion, Professor J. B. Cleland (chairman of South Australia's Advisory Council of Aborigines and advocate of inviolable reserves) asked Cook to clarify his view on the future of 'pure-blood' Aboriginal people: should they be left 'in their present tribal conditions'? Cook answered that where tribal people were left alone, as in the Arnhem Land reserve and as Cleland recommended for the Musgrave Ranges, their population would remain 'much the same as they have been for four or five centuries'. To 'meddle with them, bring them into reservations, attempt to eradicate their bad habits, and give them a white outlook' would be to raise 'another colour problem'. He then asked: 'Are we going to do that or not?'<sup>56</sup>

53 Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 14. Cook had sometimes used the word 'adsorption' – a term used by chemists to refer to 'the process where a substance becomes part of and remains in a state mid-way between mechanical mixture and chemical combination'. Arguably, his use of 'adsorption' envisaged the retention, to some degree, of the distinct identity of people of colour within the society of northern Australia. His colleagues did not grasp this terminological nicety, and so he had abandoned it by 1937. But see Cook to Weddell, 11 December 1933, NAA A659 1943/1/5707; and Leithhead, *A Vision*, 94–95.

54 Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 16.

55 Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 17.

56 Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 18. Cook's tactic of posing questions and sketching possible scenarios has made it difficult to pin down what he was advocating, and some historians have made questionable inferences. In *Imperial Hygiene*, Alison Bashford writes that Cook argued at this meeting that Aboriginal women 'who become sterilised by gonorrhoea at an early age ... should be left untreated' (Bashford, *Imperial Hygiene*, 109). We think it is clear from the transcript that he was not advocating non-treatment but warning that Aboriginal people 'would probably be extinct in Australia in 50 years' if governments did not provide health care to Aboriginal people – a policy of (what he called, on this occasion and later) 'laissez faire' (Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 14). Cook was urging his colleagues to face the consequences of a 'conscientious' protection policy: a rising Aboriginal population. That Cook favoured government interventions that would cause the Aboriginal population to increase has also escaped Samia Hossain who comments on Cook's 1937 words: 'Cook's rhetoric ... suggests that he anticipated, hoped and simultaneously felt uncomfortable with the knowledge that his inaction would render some "full-blooded" Aboriginal women sterile' (Hossain, 'Norman Haire and Cecil Cook', 457–58). Hossain offers no evidence that this is what Cook 'hoped'; and such a 'hope' would have been inconsistent with his record of efforts throughout his career to medicalise the management of the Aboriginal population.

Cook’s colleagues did not answer that provocative question, and the entire exchange demonstrated Cook’s and others’ dilemma: to protect Aboriginal people was all governments’ duty, but effective government (and mission) action had the possible result of maintaining and even enlarging the northern Aboriginal population. How could so many be ‘absorbed’, other than by generations of miscegenation, licit or illicit? Uplift and absorption through miscegenation was imaginable when the target population was relatively small, but no official was willing to say that Australian governments should promote miscegenation on the scale that would be required were the entire ‘full-blood’ population to be ‘absorbed’. The experts did not know whether to express fear or hope for ‘full-blood’ proliferation – a dilemma revealed in Bleakley’s choice of words when he asked Cook to produce ‘more evidence ... to justify the *pessimistic view* that he expressed yesterday as to the menace of absorption of the white race by the coloured race in the Northern Territory’.<sup>57</sup> Bleakley then suggested that the ‘full-blood’ population was decreasing in the Northern Territory and that they would not be a ‘menace to the white people’ if the government controlled them.<sup>58</sup> Responding to Bleakley, Cook agreed that ‘developing a coloured race ... would be a menace to the white population in the north’ and that ‘the policy which this Conference has adopted, may have just that result’.<sup>59</sup> However, he soon explained that the ‘menace’ was not only what blacks might do to whites but also what whites might do to blacks. He referred to reports of whites lynching blacks in the United States:

There is at present no evidence of any such attitude towards the coloured people in Australia, for in this country the aboriginal native is regarded with contemptuous tolerance. But when he has been elevated to a position almost equal to that of a white, conflict may be expected unless that stage is reached only after enlightened development.<sup>60</sup>

But what was ‘enlightened development’?

## Cook’s public health liberalism, 1950–55

When Interior Minister John McEwen decided in 1939 to separate the ‘health’ and ‘Aboriginal’ administrations in the Northern Territory, Cook’s unpublished objections were apparently so vigorous that the Commonwealth relieved Cook of his Northern Territory responsibilities. So Cook did not have the opportunity

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<sup>57</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 19, emphasis added. Note that this was Bleakley inferring ‘pessimism’; the published record supports the inference that Cook considered ‘full-blood’ survival desirable as long as governments found ways to manage their entry into modern Australian ways of life, and his memoranda in the 1930s outlined how this could be done.

<sup>58</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 19.

<sup>59</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 34.

<sup>60</sup> Cook in Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 34–35.

to be part of the experiment in 'enlightened development' that war mobilisation occasioned.<sup>61</sup> The Second World War obliged the Commonwealth to draw remote Aboriginal people into military 'native labour' camps; these new interventions aroused confidence in remote Aboriginal people's educability.

Cook returned to the questions of social change in northern Australia after the war as a senior public servant in Western Australia (1946–49) and then in the Commonwealth Department of Health (1950–62). His 1951 report 'Health Problems in Northern Australia' reflected on the possible reformation of colonial authority in the north. Sticking to his conviction that 'the function of Aboriginal Protection is a medical preserve' (his words in 1929), he argued that how Aboriginal people would now interact with non-Aboriginal authorities would be a major determinant of health in northern Australia.

Characteristically, Cook began with socio-demographic description: 'the Northern Territory, the Peninsula and Gulf Divisions of Queensland and the Kimberley Division of Western Australia' were 'sparsely settled by a white population of low natural increase, a substantial and rapidly increasing mixed blood and a larger but diminishing native population'.<sup>62</sup> Most Aboriginal people, he wrote, lived in squalor on the fringes of towns and in unhygienic missions and settlements. Cook asserted that Aboriginal people were ill-served by their protectors, receiving little training in hygienic living, in work discipline, in thrift, in respect for property and in food preparation. As well, the decoupling of protection and medical surveillance in the Territory since 1939 meant that a large minority avoided medical surveillance. He saw loss of nerve and low expectations among many whites in authority, and he worried that the Aboriginal population was a risk to itself and to white Australians who might migrate to the tropics. Cook urged governments to devote more resources, and he called for greater commitment by mission and settlement staff. In particular, Cook wanted authorities to win Aboriginal people's acceptance of systematic medical surveillance, to build the knowledge base of legitimate regulation of infective persons.<sup>63</sup>

Cook saw the 'mixed-blood' people in the Kimberley and the Northern Territory as continuing to develop along a distinct path, with rising expectations that they be treated as whites' equals. Noting the availability of legal exemption of 'half-castes' in

61 A. Dirk Moses and Dan Stone mistakenly refer to the transfer of Cook to the University of Sydney (School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine) as his 'retirement' (Moses and Stone, 'Eugenics and Genocide', 199) – a mistake that discourages attention to underlying themes in Cook's public service advocacy of population health over the period 1925–69.

62 Cecil Cook, 'Health Problems in Northern Australia', June–July 1951, AIATSIS Library, 1–2. He did not justify his use of the word 'diminishing', nor did he say how quickly this was happening; the rest of his report assumes that northern Australia would continue to have a substantial Aboriginal population. His words were thus typical of a tradition of official commentary on Aboriginal demography until the late 1960s: cavalier, confused and poor in data. See Rowse, *Indigenous and Other Australians*, 134–46.

63 Cook, 'Health Problems in Northern Australia', 6–7.

all 3 northern jurisdictions (since Western Australia’s *Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act 1944*), Cook worried that people of mixed descent were being liberated prematurely from supervision. He spelled out 2 criteria for exemption: Aboriginal people must live at a standard equivalent to the ‘generality of the white population’; and the wider community must be willing to interact with those exempted.<sup>64</sup> Cook observed that ‘in few instances has the more self-respecting element of the white community suffered the halfcaste’s complete integration into white society’.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, he admitted to his own reservations about the capacities of the exempt, recommending that ‘the benevolent surveillance of Government’ continue.<sup>66</sup> Acknowledging that this could arouse resentment among ‘half-castes’, he suggested that governments spell out the rights and obligations of the exempt and develop ‘a system of mutual aid and co-operation in groups influenced and, if necessary, subsidised by Government’. To avert the capture of these groups by communist agents and to allay suspicion of bureaucratic direction these groups ‘should be developed as Church societies’.<sup>67</sup>

It is not a surprising result of Cook’s ‘strategy of equality’ that those most changed by it should be foremost in questioning its continuing intrusion. Cook had been aware of ‘half-caste’ aspiration in the 1930s, when he was obliged in 1936 to accept the ‘exemption’ provision in the *Aboriginals Ordinance*. In 1937, discussing the supply of liquor and drugs to Aboriginal people, Cook had admitted: ‘For some time I opposed the [exemption] amendment, but as the then existing ordinance tended to make them regard the Chief Protector as an enemy rather than as a friend, I agreed to it’.<sup>68</sup> His 1951 report continued to be preoccupied with the disposition of ‘half-castes’ towards governments’ commitment ‘to aid and guide’ them.<sup>69</sup>

Cook made explicit this political dimension of population health in a 1955 paper ‘Health and the Labour Force in the Northern Territory’. ‘Co-operation between the individual native and the health authority ... can only be expected in a thoroughly enlightened and well disposed people’.<sup>70</sup> Essential to health in the north was an Aboriginal person with ‘a full consciousness and acknowledgment of his responsibilities to the community’.<sup>71</sup> To cultivate responsibility, a government should not only impart knowledge but also solicit good will by conceding civic equality. After classifying the illnesses of the Aboriginal population as ‘communicable’ (infections) and ‘deficiency’ (nutrition-based), Cook commented:

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64 Cook, ‘Health Problems in Northern Australia’, 28.

65 Cook, ‘Health Problems in Northern Australia’, 26.

66 Cook, ‘Health Problems in Northern Australia’, 29.

67 Cook, ‘Health Problems in Northern Australia’, 29.

68 Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare*, 22.

69 Cook, ‘Health Problems in Northern Australia’, 29.

70 Cook, ‘Native Health and the Labour Force’, 80.

71 Cook, ‘Native Health and the Labour Force’, 80.

None of the diseases of either group is susceptible of complete control except by the ordered behaviour of the individual himself. The time when prevention could be attempted by restraint imposed upon his person is already past. There is now no alternative to training of the native individually and collectively in the measures of prevention he must himself apply, developing in him at the same time a full consciousness and acknowledgment of his responsibilities to the community.<sup>72</sup>

Authority wielded without:

enlightenment and courage ... may lead to reluctance in the native to undertake responsibility in a community in which he enjoys no full measure of the privileges ... [and so] he is entitled to expect and to receive the privileges of citizenship in their entirety ...<sup>73</sup>

Thus, by 1955, Cook was promoting assimilation as a social contract mandated by the imperatives of population health. The good health of northern Australia was becoming inconceivable to him, except on the basis of an emerging civic equality between black and white. We should note the unsentimental terms of his advocacy. The social contract that he sought was 'no charity prompted by quixotic benevolence' he assured his audience in 1955, nor was it 'a compassionate impulse to redress past wrongs, real or imaginary. It is an insurance premium inexorably demanded of us by self-interest, importunate and unashamed'.<sup>74</sup>

While Cook was conceding increased responsibilities to Indigenous Australians his belief in firm government intervention into Aboriginal lives persisted, in the 1950s, in his advocacy of the isolation of lepers. Charmaine Robson has traced the views of the Committee on Tropical Physiology and Hygiene (CTPH, convened by the National Health and Medical Research Council) about the criteria for judging whether a patient could be discharged from isolation after treatment:

Patients had to have access to a medical practitioner for regular reviews and the means to continue their treatment, a fixed address, 'separate accommodation and utensils, an adequate diet and no domiciliary contact with children'. If the patient had a physical disability, nursing and other support 'to preserve him from hardship, starvation or other factors lowering resistance' was required.<sup>75</sup>

72 Cook, 'Native Health and the Labour Force', 80.

73 Cook, 'Native Health and the Labour Force', 80.

74 Cook, 'Native Health and the Labour Force', 80.

75 Robson, 'Ending Isolation?', 72, quoting from CTPH documents.

In a section defining the cases warranting isolation, the CTPH added what Robson calls a ‘more explicit layer of restrictions on Indigenous patients’: to justify isolation of a ‘European patient’, the clinician should have both bacteriological and clinical evidence, but for ‘native full-bloods’ a clinician needed to be satisfied only that the presenting symptoms were ‘clinically suggestive’ of the disease.<sup>76</sup>

The question to consider here is the relationship between medical authorities’ use of racial classification and their judgement about a patient’s ‘responsibility’. Both were in play for the CTPH, according to Robson: ‘Decisions respecting another racial category, “native mixed bloods”, depended on the extent to which the individual’s way of life resembled that of a “full-blood” or “European”’.<sup>77</sup> While Alison Bashford sees Cook as exemplifying ‘a trend towards more strongly and explicitly racialized practices of segregation’ in Australia’s twentieth-century management of leprosy, she also writes: ‘The discussion [about what categories of sufferers should be confined] increasingly turned on questions of responsibility, on questions of capacity for responsible self-government’.<sup>78</sup>

There is no doubt that in his 1927 report on the epidemiology of leprosy Cook considered Aboriginal people incapable of ‘responsible self-government’. Suspected white cases could be placed under compulsory home isolation, obliged to report for re-examination and treatment until a positive result warranted their admission to a lazaret, but suspected Aboriginal cases were to be kept in a lazaret ‘without recourse to a bacteriological examination’. The difference? Whites ‘can be relied upon to report regularly and faithfully to carry out instructions’, whereas Aborigines must be under restraint because their ‘careless and irresponsible habits render it impossible to keep him under observation, or to submit him to a course of treatment unless he is under restraint’.<sup>79</sup> While we agree with Bashford and Robson that Cook persisted in his belief that isolation of Aboriginal patients was essential to leprosy prophylaxis, we argue that for Cook, as for Cumpston, the primary consideration was not the patient’s race but his/her perceived capacity for self-care. The circumstances of remote Aboriginal life continued, in Cook’s view, to make their self-care unlikely. In 1952, he observed that:

With the concentration of native children on missions, the attendant demolition of intertribal barriers, the uncontrolled herding of the infected and the susceptible under unhygienic conditions, and the debilitation of

<sup>76</sup> Robson, ‘Ending Isolation?’, 72.

<sup>77</sup> Robson, ‘Ending Isolation?’, 72 quoting from CTPH documents.

<sup>78</sup> Bashford, *Imperial Hygiene*, 99. As evidence, she quotes not Cook but J. H. L. Cumpston’s *Health and Disease in Australia: A History*, written in 1928, but not published until 1989. Cumpston thought highly of Cook’s research on leprosy (Cook, *Epidemiology of Leprosy in Australia*), as he revealed in his Preface to Cook’s *Epidemiology*. Note that in the passage quoted by Bashford Cumpston includes ‘indigent and feeble-minded Europeans’ among those who should be confined – a distinction based on judged capability, not ‘race’.

<sup>79</sup> Cook, *Epidemiology of Leprosy in Australia*, 298.



the natives by imported infections and defective diet, leprosy in aborigines had increased in incidence alarmingly and had become largely a disease of children and adolescents.<sup>80</sup>

For Cook, in the 1950s, it followed that authorities should not base their leprosy control policy on recent clinical innovations that increasingly obviated confinement of the infected: the spread of leprosy was best prevented by continuing the isolation policies initiated in the 1890s and endorsed by Cook in 1927.

## Looking back on protection in 1969

In 1969, officers of the South Australian Museum convened a symposium on 'Current problems of Aborigines', under the auspices of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, and they invited Cook to speak. 'Black Power' theory and practice was then challenging all experts to review Australia's 'Aboriginal welfare' record from a human rights perspective, and Cook took the opportunity to say how he considered human rights to apply. In the 1955 address quoted above, he had used the phrase 'wrongs, real or imaginary' – a hint of scepticism towards critical accounts of colonial authority. In his 1969 address, he saw no reason to regret or to apologise for colonisation. Both sides had behaved violently, but colonial authority had manifested 'enduring European goodwill'.<sup>81</sup> He offered his ambivalent review of the purposes, instruments and effects of 'European good will' as he and others had embodied it. On the one hand, he thought the human rights critique of paternalism to be misconceived: 'the principles of human rights as we profess them today' were illustrated by negligent government in nineteenth-century South Australia, resulting in 'the Aboriginal's accelerating progress toward depravity, degradation and extinction'.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, Cook conceded that protective controls over movement were 'open to criticism as a gross infringement of human rights' insofar as governments had used them for too long and had applied them to the wrong people.<sup>83</sup> He argued that the inviolable reserve ('the Australian form of "apartheid"') had been a failed experiment, restricting people's movement and learning. He also objected to policies that had blocked 'the social integration of the mixed-blood into the "white" community', and he celebrated what he saw as the success of the opposite approach taken, under his authority, in the Northern Territory. If some people of mixed descent were now (in 1969) calling themselves 'Aboriginal', it was partly because governments had done too little to extricate them from fringe-dwelling and to encourage them to identify with white Australians.

80 Cook, 'Remarks to Symposium on Leprosy', 568.

81 Cook, 'Protection', 16.

82 Cook, 'Protection', 18.

83 Cook, 'Protection', 19–20.



‘This outcome appears to have been avoided in the north by closer attention to the circumstances of the individual, and the progressive relaxation of restraints as his adaptation progressed.’<sup>84</sup>

Cook acknowledged the difficulty of devising interventions that were not excessive. Much ‘protection’ had:

reared the Aboriginal in a world of unreality, denying him opportunities for progress and frustrating his adaptation by sparing him the responsibility of decision and sheltering him from the consequences of error. Embodied in acts and regulations, these measures of protection acquired the sanctity and permanence of law. Administered by a Public Service seized with the importance of precedent, unresponsive to change and rigid in interpretation, they soon became outmoded in a rapidly changing environment ... creating abuses instead of remedying them.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion: Cook’s liberalism

In Cook’s social medicine, the agency of each individual member of the population was a matter of central concern for a governing authority. In some contexts, Cook saw justification for directly managing Aboriginal individuals (the removed child, the woman seeking a spouse, the leper) while in other contexts (the exemption of selected ‘half-castes’, the welcome implications of citizenship through assimilation, the recognition of the consumer’s part in controlling lifestyle diseases) he advocated relaxation of controls over Aboriginal people in the interest of public health. In Cook’s views on ‘Aboriginal rights’ we see the intersection of the settler colonial imperative to manage the human effects of dispossession and the public health imperative to bring state responsibility and individual responsibility into effective articulation.

If it is reasonable to see Cook’s public health liberalism as contributing to making and remaking a colonial social contract, then we have a fresh perspective on a question raised by Russell McGregor: was Cook’s ‘breed out the colour’ practice an instance of ethnic nationalism? In ‘ethnic nationalism’, McGregor reminds us, ‘blood kinship’ is ‘a unifying myth of nationhood’, and the ‘White Australia’ policy expressed such thinking and feeling about Australian nationhood: Australians were a community defined by descent from the ‘British race’. McGregor presents Cook’s authorisation of ‘half-caste’ marriage to whites and his banning of ‘half-caste’ marriage to Asians as an instance of an official attempt to absorb Aboriginal people genealogically into the ‘white’ community of Australian nationhood. For McGregor,

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84 Cook, ‘Protection’, 23.

85 Cook, ‘Protection’, 24.

while ‘absorptionists’ such as Cook ‘took for granted the dependence of national cohesion on the ties of ethnicity’, they were pragmatic enough to see the necessity for a little ‘racial impurity’.<sup>86</sup>

We agree, but we think this account is incomplete. As McGregor points out, in Federation nationalism ‘blood kinship was not the sole source of national cohesion; *civil* ideals of egalitarianism, democratic rights and social welfare were also potent ingredients’.<sup>87</sup> Were there not ‘civil’ ideals in Cook’s approach to health? Cook’s vetting of possible husbands for ‘half-caste’ women, Austin explains, included ‘medical examination of both parties ... to show them to be free of communicable diseases’ and ‘a white or “half-caste” husband was then required to contribute for at least twelve months to the Territory medical benefit fund to ensure that his wife had adequate medical attention during pregnancy and to ensure that children received medical “supervision”’.<sup>88</sup> We suggest that in these tests Cook was applying standards that were not merely ‘ethnic’. The newly formed household’s inclusion in the emerging socio-medical regime was – to Cook – essential, and this he saw as the responsibility of husbands, whatever their ‘race’. Cook wished to establish a certain standard of manly conduct that was not anyone’s ethnic birthright. It was possible for Cook to be pragmatic about ‘racial impurity’ of European/‘half-caste’ unions because trained capacities for self-care and family functioning were as important as the fact that the husband was not Asian: ethnic and civic criteria here combined.

Recapitulating his 1935 policy proposal in 1951, Cook stated 3 goals of ‘native education’ for ‘natives on settlements and missions’:

an appreciation of property and its relation to personal and community wealth, the value of labour, the necessity for production and the virtue of thrift in a concept of personal and social progress ...; full consciousness of and habitual compliance with the principles of personal and communal hygiene ...; to produce for himself the means for gratifying the new wants which settlement contacts have stirred within him.<sup>89</sup>

These are civic norms, not ethnic. Cook’s criteria of national belonging derived from his public health perspective; they were functional standards that valorised certain dispositions towards the body, towards domestic space and towards the community as an ecology of potentially infective and infected organisms. Throughout his career, Cook held to this biological perspective on human society, and this was not the biology of racial determinism but the biology of disease ecology. For him, the

86 McGregor, “‘Breed Out the Colour’”, 296.

87 McGregor, “‘Breed Out the Colour’”, 295, emphasis added.

88 Austin, *I Can Picture the Old Home*, 149–50.

89 Cook, ‘Health Problems in Northern Australia’, 7. Cook had formulated similar goals for ‘native education’ in 1935, but at that time he was explicit that they applied only to ‘detribalized aboriginals’, e.g. those in the vicinity of Darwin and other towns, not to Aboriginal people on pastoral leases or under missionary supervision on reserves (Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 7 October 1935).

characteristics of Aboriginal people that placed them outside Australia as a civic community were not their bloodlines but their historically derived insanitation and their corrigible ignorance of their biological being as Cook conceived it.

To imagine Aboriginal people as aspiring to hygiene was not wishful thinking. A petition to the Northern Territory Administration from Mudburra and Djingili people living on Newcastle Waters Station on 7 September 1952, signed (mostly with crosses) by over 60 people, asked:

that the following facilities be established at our camp: (1) Water laid from the Newcastle Waters Town Supply to a central point at the camp (distance approx. 1 and ¼ miles; (2) 2 shower huts be provided with 2 showers in each hut: 1 set for males 1 set for females; (3) Lavatory accommodation be provided for male and female residents. Your assistance that our tribe will not be disbanded would be appreciated.<sup>90</sup>

How such a ‘tribe’ could figure in the Australian community imagined by assimilationists such as Cook is not clear, but we can be confident that Cook would have been encouraged by this demand for taps, toilets and showers. By 1955, Cook was explicitly linking disease control and civic membership, but the link had been there since 1927 when he began to administer the Northern Territory as a space of problematic hygiene.

## Appendix: Cook’s views on sterilisation

Cook proposed to the Administrator of the Northern Territory on 30 March 1933 that certain people be sterilised. The memorandum is available online, so readers may wish use it as a basis for evaluating how 2 historians – Samia Hossain and Andrew Markus – have read it.<sup>91</sup>

Hossain begins with the observation that ‘it is unclear’ whether what worried Cook was ‘Aboriginal-ness or mental defectiveness’ being ‘passed on to the next generation’.<sup>92</sup> Cook’s words are crystal clear: his stated concern was a tiny subset of the Aboriginal population: ‘congenital idiots and other mentally defective children’.<sup>93</sup> Hossain’s reading of Cook’s policies and practices suggests a link between 2 concerns of Cook: managing the sexual activity of mentally defective people, and optimising the social benefits (as Cook saw them) of miscegenation. Thus, she suggests that Cook wished to intervene in Aboriginal female reproductive behaviour in a variety of ways: ‘The Aboriginal women who could not be enlisted in his project to “breed out

90 National Australian Archives, NT Region CRS F1 52/463 (reproduced in facsimile by Wolfe, *Crossed Tracks*, 51).

91 NAA A1, 1933/3589, [recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=45528](http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=45528).

92 Hossain, ‘Norman Haire and Cecil Cook’, 457.

93 Cecil Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 30 March 1933, NAA A1, 1933/3589.

the colour” Cook wanted to render sterile’.<sup>94</sup> She presents sterilisation and marital supervision as alternative tactics in Cook’s overall strategy of ‘colonising Aboriginal women’s bodies, through the institution of marriage, to produce babies that would be whiter with every generation’.<sup>95</sup> We see it differently. Cook had an idea of a good family unit and he did not see how a biological parent (male or female) who was a ‘congenital idiot’ could be an effective parent of a child who was likely to have inherited his/her affliction. Indeed, when Cook’s memorandum is read accurately, it reveals a bureaucrat seeking to minimise the restriction on the liberty of persons whose congenital mental deficiency made responsible sexuality and parenting very unlikely.

Markus represents Cook as suggesting to the administrator that:

detaining such individuals in institutions was necessary to prevent ‘propagation of type’; the alternative was a ‘minor operation directed towards the sterilization of the individual’, who could then be granted freedom: ‘there would be no reason whatever for preventing the child’s return to complete liberty with the aboriginals if such a course seemed otherwise desirable in any particular instance’. The operation and subsequent returning of the child to its mother would also result in considerable savings to the government. Cook suggested that power to order sterilisation could be given to the Chief Protector or, if this was inadvisable, then to a tribunal.<sup>96</sup>

The problems in Markus’s paraphrase begin with the fact that Cook presented 4, not 2, possible solutions to the problem that he has described: removal to a southern institution (unsterilised); permanent detention in Kahlin Compound (unsterilised); release to the Aboriginal camps (unsterilised); minimal or no supervision (if sterilised). Markus omits that Cook commended as the most humane (if probably costly) solution not sterilisation but transfer to ‘a southern institution devoted to the care of cases of this nature’.<sup>97</sup> Anticipating that the Commonwealth would not endorse his recommendation, Cook then considered 2 ways that the Northern Territory Administration could continue its oversight: with or without surgical sterilisation. Without sterilisation ‘undue’ restraint by the Aboriginal compound would be necessary; with sterilisation, little or no restraint within the compound would be necessary, or perhaps the sterilised person would not have to be in custody at all. We may infer that Cook saw ethical significance in the distinction between more restraint, less restraint and no restraint. To minimise restraint was his reason for suggesting sterilisation of children whose prognosis seemed to rule out (what he considered to be) responsible adulthood. By writing as if Cook presented only 2 options – permanent detention of the unsterilised ‘idiot’ or freeing the mentally

<sup>94</sup> Hossain, ‘Norman Haire and Cecil Cook’, 458.

<sup>95</sup> Hossain, ‘Norman Haire and Cecil Cook’, 456–57.

<sup>96</sup> Markus, *Governing Savages*, 101.

<sup>97</sup> Cook, Memorandum to Administrator, 30 March 1933, NAA A1, 1933/3589.

incompetent child/youth after sterilisation – Markus is unable to convey that in his canvassing of 4 options Cook was seeking the best way to reconcile liberty with risk management.<sup>98</sup>

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# **Exhibition review**



## **‘Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters’ exhibition National Museum of Australia, Canberra**

5 September 2017 to 28 February 2018

Reviewed by Shannyn Palmer  
The Australian National University

In attempting to define Songlines, we are held back by the limitations of cultural translation and the linguistic impasse that disables any real understanding beyond the merely suggestive. The concept of songlines as a knowledge system can perhaps best be known by what they are not.

– Margo Neale, ‘White Man Got No Dreaming’, 206

The Aboriginal Dreaming, or Dreamtime, is commonly associated with the exploits of the Ancestors that created the known physical world – human, plant and environment – out of themselves as they travelled over a flat, featureless earth. This deeply embedded assumption of the Dreaming as creation myth is a legacy of these loaded English words and testimony to the limitations of cultural translation; the poetic English phrase powerfully conveying the idea of the Dreaming as ‘timeless’, or describing the ‘dawn of time’. It is these temporal meanings in particular that have had a profound impact upon the way in which non-Indigenous people have historically (mis)understood the concept.

The term first emerged in late nineteenth-century Central Australia when amateur ethnographer Frank Gillen used the term ‘dream times’ to describe the Arrernte concept of *Altyerre*, which he understood as referring to an *eternal past*, whereby the Ancestors came into existence and created the world. Gillen and biologist Baldwin Spencer’s 1899 publication *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* was the first ethnographic publication to explore the complex relationship between the landscape, Aboriginal identity, ritual knowledge and landownership in Australia, making it one of the most influential anthropological books in the world at the turn of the twentieth century. Their glossing of this relationship as the ‘dream times’ in later works, such as their 1927 publication *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People*,

had a profound impact on both scholarly and popular understandings of Australian Aboriginal societies, especially the evolutionary idea that Aboriginal people were remnants from an earlier period in human history.<sup>1</sup>

It was a 1953 essay by anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner that shifted the term from 'The Dreamtime' to 'The Dreaming'. As Stanner understood it, neither 'time' nor 'history' as we (non-Indigenous Australians) understand these concepts are involved in the meaning of the concept that the term seeks to convey. According to Stanner, 'one cannot "fix" the Dreaming in time: it was, and is, everywhen'.<sup>2</sup> Attuned to the limitations of cultural translation, Stanner observed that the Dreaming is 'a concept so impalpable and subtle [that it] naturally suffers badly by translation into our dry and abstract language' and that we shall not understand the concept 'fully except as a complex of meanings'.<sup>3</sup>

The National Museum of Australia's 'Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters' exhibition, which ran from September 2017 through until February 2018, constitutes a significant contribution toward a deeper understanding of this complex of meanings for a popular audience. The voices and stories of traditional owners guided visitors on an immersive journey into Australia's central and western deserts and along their sections of the epic Seven Sisters songline; their cultural knowledge that was on display demonstrating to audiences with great effect that the Dreaming is more than mythological consciousness. Rather, by introducing visitors to the ecological, kinship and ritual knowledge embedded in the songlines, it represented the Dreaming, as anthropologist Nancy Munn has described it, as a 'mode of orientation to the world', whereby meaning and memory is inscribed in place.<sup>4</sup>

According to Anangu elder and Traditional Owner of the Seven Sisters songline in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands Inawinytji Williamson, educating a wider audience about Anangu cultural knowledge was a key rationale for partnering with the National Museum to create the exhibition:

*Nganana mukuringkula tjunanyi kutupa tjutaku nyakunytjaku,  
nintiringkunytjaku munu kulintjaku. Anangu piranpa mumu maru kutjupa  
tjutaku nyakunytjaku munu kulintjaku.*

We want to show this major creation story here so many other people can look, learn and increase their understanding. All people, white and black, can come and see and understand.<sup>5</sup>

1 Spencer and Gillen, *The Arunta*; Spencer and Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*.

2 Stanner, *The Dreaming & Other Essays*, 58.

3 Stanner, *The Dreaming & Other Essays*, 57.

4 Munn, 'The Transformation of Subjects into Objects', 141–63. See also Rumsey, 'The Dreaming, Human Agency and Inscriptive Practice', 116.

5 Williamson, 'Foreword', 9.

Crucially, Williamson emphasised that as well as the critical function of intergenerational knowledge exchange – teaching their granddaughters and grandsons – to 'keep culture strong', Anangu made this exhibition so that *everyone* could see and understand that the Dreaming, or *Tjukurpa* as it is known to Anangu, is not a relic from a primordial past. Rather, it is their Law and it 'stands strong today'.<sup>6</sup>

## Songlines

The term songline was popularised by Bruce Chatwin's 1987 novel *The Songlines*.<sup>7</sup> As Philip Jones notes in his essay in the *Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters* exhibition catalogue, by the time Chatwin visited Australia's central deserts in the early 1980s, a burgeoning series of land claims were underway in the wake of the Northern Territory Land Rights Act,<sup>8</sup> which had been enacted in 1976. Jones observes that by this time the anthropologists had established the Dreaming as 'the foundational principle of Aboriginal cosmology' and that land claim reports referred, 'almost without exception', to 'Dreaming tracks' in their descriptions of the ancestral pathways that criss-cross the country. According to Jones, Chatwin's lengthy conversations with anthropologists certainly shaped his thinking at the time, as did T. G. H. Strehlow's epic work, *Songs of Central Australia*, which Chatwin had read. Yet, the term 'songline' and the idea of the song as a map or navigational tool were of Chatwin's own making, negotiated in what Jones refers to as the 'uncertain terrain' between fact and fiction and shaped by his long-standing 'new age' interest in nomads and nomadism.<sup>9</sup>

Like the Dreamtime and Dreaming before it, the term Songline is contested terrain. It is also firmly embedded in present-day vernacular as a result of Chatwin's book. However, whereas Jones refers to such terms as 'confected' and sees them as lacking in authenticity, Margo Neale, Senior Indigenous Curator at the National Museum and lead curator on the 'Songlines' exhibition, argues that despite their limitations as cross-cultural terms, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have readily adopted these terms: 'in fact, there is no question in the minds of Aboriginal people across the country that they own these words'.<sup>10</sup>

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6 Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara are mutually recognisable dialects of Western Desert language. Anangu, meaning 'people', is the term they use to refer to themselves. There are some spelling and pronunciation variations across the different language groups. The same word is Yarnangu in Ngaanyatjarra.

7 Chatwin, *The Songlines*.

8 *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*.

9 Jones, 'Tracks of the Ancestors', 210–11.

10 Neale, 'Introduction', 14–15. Neale notes that 'Songlines' was the national theme for NAIDOC week in 2016. Stanner also noted in his 1953 essay that his use of the term 'Dreaming' was influenced by the fact that many Aboriginal people at the time used this English word to refer to the concept.

Seeking to answer the questions: what are songlines? How do they work? Why are they significant to Aboriginal people today?, the 'Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters' exhibition took visitors on a journey along several sections of this songline and into Martu, Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara and Ngaanyatjatjara Country in Australia's central and western deserts. This journey was critical to the way in which this exhibition was experienced, received and understood by visitors and, as such, in Neale's words 'it shares its DNA' with 2 key earlier exhibitions, the ground-breaking Yiwarra Kuju: The Canning Stock Route, developed by the National Museum of Australian in collaboration with arts organisation FORM in Western Australia, and We Don't Need a Map: A Martu Experience of the Western Desert at the Freemantle Arts Centre.<sup>11</sup> As Neale described it, visitors moved:

from site to site along the Seven Sisters songlines in each of the three countries represented. They literally walk from west to east in the footsteps of the Seven Sisters, with the sites mapped onto gallery plinths ... Visitors are guided from place to place by life-sized projections of senior custodians welcoming them to their respective countries.<sup>12</sup>

This peripatetic way of moving through the exhibition space was a critical feature. As embodiments of the Ancestors travels, songlines also embody traditions of desert storytelling and knowledge transmission. For Anangu, Yarnangu and Martu, knowledge, memory and meaning are commonly conveyed as a series of itineraries – narratives spatially anchored to the desert landscape, punctuated by an inventory of places. As linguistic anthropologist Danièle Klapproth has observed: it is the *journey* that 'is the crucial organising principle in Western Desert storytelling and that this rhythmic pattern of movement from camp to camp forms the structural spine of the narrative[s]' that give life meaning.<sup>13</sup> As senior Martu artist, translator and advisor Ngalangka Nola Taylor describes it:

You gotta follow the Seven Sisters songline only, not any other story. Not any other path, but you got to stick to how they travelled and where they stopped on the way, and left [artefacts and markings behind]. Some part [places] they stopped and left a number of stories, where they stayed and hunted and kept on travelling. A Jukurpa is one particular line, one pathway. It's not any other way, you have to stick to that journey. When you follow that journey you'll see where they [the Seven Sisters] left behind parts of their stories. You gotta follow their footprints.<sup>14</sup>

By drawing upon this rhythmic pattern of moving from place to place as the structural spine of the exhibition, the 'Songlines' exhibition sought to embody an Aboriginal ontology, making visitors' bodies critical tools for seeing an understanding the

11 Neale, 'Introduction', 17.

12 Neale, 'Introduction', 17–18.

13 Klapproth, *Narrative as Social Practice*, 253.

14 Taylor with Girgirba, 'Follow Their Footprints', 27.

world. It also destabilised western notions of linear historical time. As Fred Myers has observed: 'geography, not time, is the great punctuator of desert storytelling'.<sup>15</sup> By introducing visitors to the Tjukurpa as a mode of orientation to the world, the 'Songlines' exhibition also took visitors on a journey into the Tjukurpa, deep time and historical time and, as such, tacitly challenged deeply embedded assumptions about a pre-colonisation and post-colonisation past.

In this sense, 'Songlines' is an excellent example of what cultural theorist Meaghan Morris has called 'critical proximity'. Morris defines 'proximity' as not just establishing a position of nearness to a problem or object, but also in the sense of 'translatively trying to touch a mixed audience'.<sup>16</sup> While acknowledging the inadequacies and failures of translation, Morris nevertheless argues for it as an indispensable cultural practice that can move between different languages *and* institutions. The 'Songlines' exhibition was an act of cultural translation. Rather than assimilate the stories and objects into the traditional mode of museum representation – a series of objects in glass cases with interpretive panels arranged chronologically or thematically – the approach adopted sought to translate the songline, not just from Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara, Ngaanyatjatjara and Martu into English, but as a conceptual framework and way of knowing and being in the world. This was the exhibition's greatest strength; the embodied and experiential nature of the space powerfully communicating the complex of meanings that is the Dreaming.

## The Seven Sisters

The songline tracks the Seven Sisters as they are relentlessly pursued across the continent by a lusty, predatory Ancestral being in the form of a man. As Kim Mahood describes it in her essay 'The Seething Landscape':

Throughout the Central and Western deserts it's a tale of flight and pursuit, as the sisters flee the unwanted attentions of a sorcerer who pursues them relentlessly, spying on them, lying in wait for them, sometimes capturing one or several of them. The violence of his obsession thwarts his attempts to approach the women 'proper way' and manifests as a landscape that seethes and ripples with sexual desire.<sup>17</sup>

Beginning in Martu country in the Pilbara region, where the Seven Sisters are called the Minyipuru and their pursuer Yurla, the exhibition took visitors on a journey eastwards into Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Country in the APY Lands in South Australia and the Northern Territory, culminating in Ngaanyatjatjara Country in Western Australia, near the tri-state border where Western Australia, the Northern

15 Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*, 68.

16 Morris, *Identity Anecdotes*, 5.

17 Mahood, 'The Seething Landscape', 32.

Territory and South Australia meet. As visitors crossed from Martu into Anangu country, they began this section of the songline at Irawa Bore, near Watarrka (King's Canyon) in the Northern Territory. There the lascivious pursuer is known as Wati Nyiru and the objects of his obsession, the Kungkarangkalpa. In the Ngaanyatjarra lands the sisters bear the slightly different name of the Kungkarrangkalpa, while their male pursuer is known as both Yurla and Wati Nyiru, depending on location. As senior Martu woman and traditional custodian of the Minyipuru Jukurpa, Kumpaya Girgirba described it: 'as they travelled through all the countries they changed their language'.<sup>18</sup>

Language was not the only thing that changed along the journey; the sisters and their pursuer were shapeshifters too. As Mahood notes, 'in the beginning there are many more than seven women', but their numbers are greatly reduced 'by the arduous business of bringing landforms into being'.<sup>19</sup> For example at Pangkal, a rock hole 600 kilometres eastwards from Roebourne in Western Australia, the Minyipuru camp and perform ceremonies, transforming into rocks when they become tired, while others emerge out of the landscape to take their place. A number of paintings in the exhibition depict the events at Pangkal as the place where the women taunt Yurla by flying above him and revealing their genitals, while Yurla's penis, acting independently of the man, bursts through the rock hole and proceeds to pursue the women southwards.<sup>20</sup> At other sites along the journey Yurla/Wati Nyiru transforms into an edible snake and also a quandong tree in order to try and trick the sisters. The sisters, too, change shape and form, becoming rocks, trees and flowers in order to conceal themselves and escape his advances.

At Kuru Ala a rocky escarpment in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, under which sit 2 caves that look remarkably like a pair of eyes nestled under a jutting brow, Wati Nyiru captures and hurts the eldest sister. It is here that Wati Nyiru transforms his penis into a carpet snake, which he sends down through a crack in the rocks, where the sisters are gathering medicine plants and food. They pursue the snake across the country and at Minyma Ngampi they catch, cook and eat the snake, before realising that it is part of Wati Nyiru. They then become sick and vomit up the snake and fly upwards to become stars – the constellation known in western astronomy as the Pleiades. This significant event was depicted in the exhibition with life-sized *tjanpi* (grass) sculptures of the sisters that flew high above the visitors in the exhibition space, their arms outstretched above their heads as though, according to artist Anawari Inpiti Mitchell, they were being 'sucked up into the sky'.<sup>21</sup>

18 Kumpaya Girgirba, 'Follow Their Footprints', 24.

19 Mahood, 'The Seething Landscape', 32.

20 Mahood, 'The Seething Landscape', 32.

21 Anawari Inpiti Mitchell quoted in Keller, 'We're All Catching the Wind Ready to Fly', 134.



While there are many ways you could interpret the meaning of the Seven Sisters songline, as Mahood notes 'to interpret the story only as a morality tale' about sexual obsession and desire is to 'undermine its psychological power'.<sup>22</sup> More than embodiments of the Ancestors' travels, the 'Songlines' exhibition demonstrated that Dreaming tracks and the named places that punctuate them are also repositories of ecological knowledge, ritual knowledge and performance and the complex kinship networks that tie people together in place. As senior Anangu woman Alison Milyika Carroll describes it: 'A name is so much more than a name, it is like the key to knowledge'.<sup>23</sup> While each of these elements is integral to life in each of the countries featured in the exhibition, it was curated to foreground particular aspects in each of the regions. This conceptual and curatorial decision is also reflected in the exhibition catalogue: Mahood's essay 'The Seething Landscape' focused on the ecological knowledge embedded within songlines in Martu Country; anthropologist Diana Young's essay 'On Concealing and Revealing' explores *inma* or ceremonial performance (among other art forms) as the primary mode of knowledge exchange in the APY lands; and anthropologist Bryony Nicholson's essay 'Yours Is a Straight Line ... Ours Is a Circle', shows how, in the Ngaanyatjatjara Lands, the Kungkarrangalpa Tjukurpa is bound up with personal experience and, as such, also evokes kinship relationships and human histories. This decision to foreground the ecological, performative and kinship aspects of songlines that link people to place was another critical element of the exhibition, encouraging visitors to move beyond seeing the Dreaming as creation mythology and toward a deeper understanding of it as a constellation of meanings.

There were a range of art forms on display in the exhibition: paintings; *tjanpi* (grass) sculptures; *punu* (wood carving); ceramics; film and the multisensory dome, which was designed to immerse audiences in the significant sites of the Seven Sisters journey. More than just representations of country, many of these various art forms were demonstrated as vessels for knowledge transmission. The Seven Sisters ceramics was a body of work made up of 7 ceramic pots, one for each of the sisters. Alison Milyika Carroll noted that the work had emerged out of a concern held among a group of women at Pukatja (Ernabella) that their children and grandchildren weren't as knowledgeable about the bush as the older women:

We decided that each pot should tell a part of the story of how the women used their environment and their knowledge of culture and *inma* [ceremony] to escape from the dangerous Wati Nyiru...it was decided that the work should include *kapi* – representing water at Aniri claypan and the *inma* performed at this site, as well as five bush foods – *tjala* [honey ants], *maku* [witchetty grubs], *wayanu* [quandong], *ili* [fig tree] and *kamppurarpa* [bush tomato] ... Nintintjaku [young people learning from the old people] is something that

22 Mahood, 'The Seething Landscape', 33.

23 Carroll, 'Seven Pots for Seven Sisters', 89.

we do every day in small ways but this work here represents and shows to the world our knowledge of Tjukurpa and country and how we pass it down through the generations to keep it strong.<sup>24</sup>

As well as educating wider audiences about the importance of the Tjukurpa, this desire to document crucial cultural knowledge for younger generations of Anangu was a driving force behind the collaborations underpinning the exhibition and the Australia Research Council (ARC)–funded project that gave rise to it.

## Museums as collaborators and cultural producers

In 2011, at the first meeting of elders and partner organisations connected to the ARC project 'Alive with the Dreaming! Songlines of the Western Desert', young Anangu man Tapaya Edwards said to those present:

Many young people in my community ... are ngurpa Tjukurpa [they don't know the Dreaming]. People my age ... when the elders pass away, we're going to lose the story, the story is going to be gone. We need to boost this project; we need these things in the lands.<sup>25</sup>

The Australian National University, the National Museum, Anangu Arts and the NPY Women's Council were key partners in the project, of which the 'Songlines' exhibition constituted a major output. As Neale describes it, throughout the 5-year project anthropologists, archaeologists and curators worked collaboratively with Aboriginal Elders and artists, who formed a crucial part of the museum's curatorium. Rather than performing an advisory role, which Neale argues is the more common institutional engagement with Indigenous people and communities, 'the curatorium members were the custodians of the project' and actively engaged in making decisions about how they were represented.<sup>26</sup> Neale's introduction in the *Songlines* catalogue explicitly situates the resulting exhibition as a move away from narrowly defined curatorial practice and towards experimentation in collaboration and co-authorship.

When looked at alongside Yiwarra Kuju: The Canning Stock Route and the National Museum's 2015 exhibition 'Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Objects from the British Museum', 'Songlines' reflects a larger shift in museological practice in Australia, particularly towards new ways of thinking about

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24 Carroll, 'Seven Pots for Seven Sisters', 89.

25 Tapaya Edwards quoted in Neale, 'Alive with the Dreaming', 14.

26 Neale, 'Alive with the Dreaming', 16.

representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in museums. As curator of Indigenous collections at the Macleay Museum at Sydney University, Matt Poll has observed:

These exhibitions demonstrate how embedding community consultation into the rationale for exhibitions is not just ethical, but crucial in transferring the moral authority and ownership of the representation of Aboriginal culture onto the world stage.<sup>27</sup>

Museums in Australia can no longer ignore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights to their cultural materials and heritage and this shift is part of a broader global reckoning with the relationship between museums and colonialism and the implications of this for representing colonised and indigenous peoples.<sup>28</sup>

Knowledge of the Tjukurpa is layered, much of which cannot be revealed to outsiders. As Young points out, the resulting exhibition was the result of making decisions about what to make visible. Rather than uncover something that was hidden, in choosing to engage with the museum and share certain aspects of their culture with the wider public, Anangu, Yarnangu and Martu produced something new while 'operating in a complex arena of sometimes conflicting interests'.<sup>29</sup> As such, exhibitions like 'Songlines' are representative of the continual negotiation that collaboration and community engagement necessarily rests upon, especially in regards to how to tell the story and making decisions about what can and cannot be said.<sup>30</sup>

Importantly, as Young reminds us in her essay, knowledge of the Tjukurpa is also gendered and although men can tell some parts of the Seven Sisters songline, this is primarily women's Tjukurpa. This is not insignificant given that throughout much of the twentieth century the majority of male, non-Aboriginal anthropologists had perpetuated the assumption that it was only Aboriginal men who had ritual ceremonies linked to Country.<sup>31</sup> According to Young, as this assumption was gradually reassessed from the 1970s onwards and the 'rich complexity of women's ceremonies and their contribution to maintaining country' became apparent (to anthropologists), Anangu proceeded to position women's ceremony as the public version of Tjukurpa. As Young observes, it is significant too that it is Anangu women who often assume the role of 'cultural brokers'.<sup>32</sup> In the exhibition, as elsewhere, this cultural brokerage rests upon decisions about what can and cannot be revealed.

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27 Poll, 'Songlines, Museology and Contemporary Aboriginal Art', 38.

28 See Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*; Phillips, *Museum Pieces*; Sleeper-Smith, *Contesting Knowledge*.

29 Young, 'On Revealing and Concealing', 72. See also Myers, 'The Complicity of Cultural Production'.

30 Poll, 'Songlines, Museology and Contemporary Aboriginal Art', 38.

31 Young, 'On Revealing and Concealing', 74. Young notes that this idea was still prevalent among non-Aboriginal men when she first arrived in Central Australia in 1996.

32 Young, 'On Revealing and Concealing', 74.

In this sense, the public version of the Tjukurpa is shape shifting too; constantly renegotiated among those who have the authority to do so. The version of the Seven Sisters Tjukurpa that was on display for the exhibition was suitable for children. As Young sees it, this makes the *details* of the Tjukurpa elusive, noting that ‘even if we are given some specifics, what does that gain us as outsiders?’<sup>33</sup> However, the question of whether or not exhibition visitors can gain anything meaningful if they only experience the children’s version of the narrative misses the point of the exhibition. The ‘Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters’ exhibition did not seek to reveal detailed ritual knowledge of the Tjukurpa. Rather, in tracking the Seven Sisters and taking visitors on a physical journey, the exhibition approached the songlines as vehicle for translating the Tjukurpa as a cultural institution in its own right.

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# **Book reviews**





## ***The Sydney Wars: Conflict in the Early Colony 1788–1817***

by Stephen Gapps

432 pp., NewSouth Publishing, 2018,  
ISBN: 9781742232140 (pbk), \$34.99

Review by Kristyn Harman  
University of Tasmania

*The Sydney Wars* portrays in graphic detail a series of violent encounters between Aboriginal people and the British in New South Wales that did not conclude until almost 30 years after the colony's establishment. Beginning with the petty warfare evident in the first years of the colony (1788–89) and ending in the aftermath of Governor Lachlan Macquarie's punitive expedition of 1816, Stephen Gapps provides compelling evidence to demonstrate how the British military and paramilitary (settlers and convicts) regularly engaged in officially sanctioned operations against Aboriginal people and adapted their military practices to suit colonial New South Wales. At the same time, Aboriginal people engaged in highly organised operations against the British and occasionally succeeded in driving the newcomers off contested lands.

Rather than perpetuating a myth of relatively peaceful 'settlement', Gapps highlights how Aboriginal people resisted the British incursion onto their lands from the outset. He utilises extensive primary source material to leave no doubt in readers' minds that there were many violent incidents between locals and the newcomers from first encounters through until 1817. Surviving records indicate that violence peaked during the 1790s, and again from 1804 to 1805 and between 1814 and 1816. Warfare was almost continuous, being interrupted in the early period only by an outbreak of a disease – thought to have been smallpox – that resulted in widespread deaths among Aboriginal people, thus greatly diminishing their capacity to repel the invaders.

There are a number of strengths apparent in Gapps's work. One of these is his standpoint as a military historian. This has enabled him to reinterpret some of the primary source material with which others have already worked, and to provide a more accurate reading of recorded incidents based on his knowledge of, for example, the rates at which muskets could be reloaded, the different types of ammunition used by the colonists, and the impacts of such factors in situations of violence. He also demonstrates insights into Aboriginal uses of weaponry.

Gapps pays careful attention to evidence pointing to the complex strategies utilised by Aboriginal people in fighting to protect their country, their resources, themselves and their families. As others have done before him (notably James Belich), he has highlighted how Victorian attitudes towards 'race' prevented colonists from truly seeing and acknowledging their opponents' capacity to make and enact elaborate plans. The success of some Aboriginal strategies is highlighted by Gapps's careful reconstruction of acts that can only be read as economic sabotage with farms being abandoned by colonists who suffered losses resulting from actions taken against them. He also provides ample evidence of Aboriginal people forming a fighting force sometimes numbering in the hundreds, clearly indicating strategic alliances being formed that stretched well beyond the fighters' immediate localities.

Another of the strengths evident in this work is the way in which Gapps does not force his primary source material to reveal facets of history that cannot accurately be discerned. He clearly states where, for example, the numbers of casualties resulting from a violent encounter simply cannot be determined. He also writes in a way that does not necessarily presuppose the outcome of the 'Sydney Wars'. This approach enables Gapps to work with the source material on its own terms, interpreting Aboriginal victories where and when they occurred, and watching carefully for shifts in the balance of power, without assuming the inevitability of a colonial victory. He has revealed how, at certain moments, things actually could have gone either way.

Gapps also demonstrates keen insights into key events in the 'Sydney Wars' that derive from his intimate knowledge of the geography. For example, he argues convincingly in relation to the Appin massacre that the Aboriginal casualties probably did not result from people rushing off the edge of a cliff. Rather, Gapps points out that the 'area is not one of sheer cliffs, as many historians and others imagine from the comfort of their libraries' (p. 235), but instead consists of steep terrain that would have provided a planned escape route for the Aboriginal group camped there. Unfortunately the cries of a child alerted the soldiers to the Aboriginal presence and upset the timing of their escape, inadvertently turning their planned escape route into a death trap.

While he acknowledges the usefulness of the descriptor 'frontier wars' at the time this phrase was coined, Gapps questions its ongoing utility. He argues persuasively that 'the "frontier" is always the edge of the expanding colonial centre rather than warfare conducted inside Aboriginal lands' (p. 272). In addition, Gapps argues, 'frontier wars' was a label penned by historians rather than by Aboriginal people. He suggests that it may be time to rethink the terminology used to describe such conflicts.

With its emphasis on the officially sanctioned nature of many of the British sorties against Aboriginal people and its acknowledgement of the Aboriginal alliances formed and strategies enacted, Gapps' work reconfigures the historiography relating to the 'Sydney Wars'. He demonstrates how, at certain times and places, the British victory hung in the balance and was not necessarily a foregone conclusion.

This book will prove illuminating to scholars and students of Australian colonial history and ought also to be of some interest to others whose areas of research extend to Britain's various other colonies. While scholars may be familiar with some or perhaps many of the sources cited by Gapps, they will likely benefit from his critical engagement with the existing historiography and his masterful use of extant primary sources.



## ***Gillen's Modest Record: His Journal of the Spencer-Gillen Anthropological Expedition across Australia, 1901–02***

edited by Philip Jones

483 pp., Friends of the State Library of South Australia, 2017,  
ISBN: 9781876154806 (pbk), \$40.00

Review by R. G. (Dick) Kimber  
Alice Springs

Philip Jones takes the title of this book from Gillen's original title for his account: 'Camp Jottings. A modest record of our doings, day by day'. 'Gillen's Modest Record' was originally written 'to give his wife some idea of his day by day activities', according to his grandson Dr Robert Gillen.<sup>1</sup>

Jones's introduction allows us to understand the main characters. First in significance was Francis (Frank) Gillen who, during his decades of service at the remote Overland Telegraph Stations, Charlotte Waters and Alice Springs, had become accepted by the 'Arunta' as though an initiated man. He persuaded his friend, the brilliant zoologist Professor Baldwin Spencer, whom he first met in 1894, to engage with the 'Arunta' people. As a result they became world-famous anthropologists, and the 'Arunta' the best-known Aboriginal people, following publication of *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* in 1899. Gillen's long-time friend Police Trooper Chance accepted the roles as driver of the supply wagon and general camp assistant. And, equally in importance to success, he had 2 Southern 'Arunta' men who joined them at Charlotte Waters, Parunda and Erlikyalikya. They had probably known him for 25 years, and their tasks were as translators, trackers of the horses and general helpers.

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1 Gillen, *Gillen's Diary*, v.

Gillen had left his dear wife, Amelia, and his much-loved children in the town of Moonta in South Australia to go on the journey by horse and buggy. This anthropological expedition was to make use of the remote telegraph stations as bases for contact with local area Aboriginal people from Oodnadatta to Powell Creek, before branching off to Borroloola on the north coast of Australia.

When I first read the journal I was struck by the ease with which Gillen gives the sense of the living pre-history of the Overland Telegraph Line by his ready use of Aboriginal placenames, often linked to mythological tracks, all along the way. This is complemented by his knowledge of the recent histories of pioneers, many of whom were met during their travels. On a second reading it seemed to me that Gillen had perceived the journey as similar to a Biblical epic.

His humour is also apparent throughout the journal, and as he says: 'I never can write a decent letter without at least exaggerating the truth & my great trouble is to do it in an interesting manner' (p. 148). He comments at their first camp 'Strange to say no mosquitoes, presume the flies have eaten them all up' (p. 5). At Camp 2 there are 'flies! flies! flies! nothing but flies' (p. 6), and by Camp 13:

Up just before daylight but not before the flies. I think of Job & wish that he stood on the banks of this Central Australian river in the month of April & in a good season ... boil plagues any ordinary man might put up with, but flies as they are here would drive a saint to profanity. Three or four hundred million of them camped on our buggies last night, straining the springs to their utmost capacity, & when I awoke & shouted the usual morning greeting: 'How is your liver' to Spencer they charged upon me with a howl of joy that woke old Chance, deaf as he is. (pp. 37–38)

At their first major stop, Charlotte Waters, Spencer introduced the 'Kinematograph', with which he and Gillen made the first-ever ethnographic films of ceremonies in mainland Australia. They also made records of 'corroboree songs' to accompany the films, the first time that such an innovation had been tried in the world (pp. 20–21). These were complemented by a wonderful series of photographs and sketches at all localities along the route.

He is not free from the prejudices of the era, as his language and the names he gives to some Aboriginal people indicate. However, the saving grace is his recognition of each person as a unique individual. Indeed, in my view he is as close as any Australian has been to Chaucer: to paraphrase him, almost every person is 'the best of his or her kind'. Illustrative is his description of a senior man previously unknown to him. He is introduced as 'the gentleman, Ilpalyurkna', who is then described as 'a totem head man of the Unmatjira ---. He is at present a much valued member of our staff, & quite a walking encyclopedia of the lore of his tribe' (p. 160).

Gillen's love of words and languages is evident throughout. He provided anecdotes, humorous or reflective, at either the start or end of the main day's record of activities, that later allowed Gillen to extract the main record of each day and rewrite it for Spencer.

These anthropological records indicated his ability to focus and his remarkable memory. They include the first-ever account of anyone but Aboriginal people following a mythological route, giving the details of the country along which a great snake had travelled (pp. 274–81). They also indicate that in the major ceremonies associated with the great snake, both men and women participated.

The many photographs are excellent and, where they depict Aboriginal people, inevitably show very fit people.

All of the pages are enhanced by Jones's use of footnotes, which illuminate rather than distract, and his indexes of ceremonies, people and so on are also very helpful.

Philip Jones acknowledges the assistance of many people, including researchers and financial supporters. He has, by his editing, created out of Gillen's modest record, a masterpiece of Australian literature.

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## ***Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge in South-eastern Australia: Perspectives of Early Colonists***

by Fred Cahir, Ian D. Clark and Philip A. Clarke

360 pp., CSIRO Publishing, 2018,  
ISBN: 9781486306114 (pbk), \$69.95

## ***Australia's First Naturalists: Indigenous Peoples' Contribution to Early Zoology***

by Penny Olsen and Lynette Russell

228 pp., National Library of Australia, 2019,  
ISBN: 9780642279378, \$44.99

Review by Kelly Wiltshire

Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

In recent years there has been a growing recognition of Aboriginal people's knowledge and management of the Australian landscape as recorded by early colonists, brought about by the popularity of Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011) and Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* (2014). In the introduction to *Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge in South-eastern Australia: Perspectives of Early Colonists*, authors Fred Cahir, Ian D. Clark and Philip A. Clarke briefly acknowledge the contribution of these authors to themes explored in their volume, which presents Aboriginal biocultural knowledge recorded by colonists during early colonisation of south-eastern Australia. This includes accounts by well-known figures from this period including Alfred William Howitt, George French Angas and George Augustus Robinson; however, the extent to which these knowledges are drawn upon seem to vary between the authors. For example, some of the chapters also draw upon knowledges recorded by early twentieth-century researchers such as Norman B. Tindale, Peter Elkin, Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt. In presenting such knowledges, this book aims to include the extent to which colonists understood and used Aboriginal knowledge as well as how knowledge exchange impacted cross-cultural relationships.

In establishing a point of reference for Aboriginal biocultural knowledge, the authors draw upon the words of ethnobotanist and Mbabaram Traditional Owner Gerry Turpin to define such knowledge as ‘knowledge that encompasses people, language and culture and their relationship to the environment’.<sup>1</sup> This is followed up with a further definition as ‘the merging of the cultural and natural worlds’ (Clarke, p. 46), providing a broad framework in which to present the above-mentioned colonial accounts. With this in mind, the volume commences with a collection of chapters by Philip A. Clarke discussing totems and spirits including the legendary bunyip, as well as terrestrial and marine resources with a distinct focus on knowledges relating to the Ngarrindjeri Nation. The chapters by Ian D. Clark cover themes such as water, trade and wellbeing, while chapters by Fred Cahir discuss watercraft, housing and clothing, including a chapter co-authored with Sarah McMaster on the use of fire – a standout piece that contributes a valuable perspective to existing debates by critiquing the generalised nature of historical accounts. It also highlights how Aboriginal use and management of fire influenced colonial–Aboriginal relationships, a theme that is carried through to the next chapter on watercraft, which demonstrates how essential Aboriginal people were in guiding people, livestock and goods across inland river systems. Cahir maintains these historical accounts ‘are testament to how dependent many colonists were on Aboriginal skills in early period of colonisation’ (p. 146).

While the volume presents a wealth of knowledge, the decision to present these chapters as thematic is a curious choice, resulting in content that is slightly disjointed and with a considerable amount of repetitive overlap, not surprising given the authors draw upon some of the same sources. Furthermore, it seems Aboriginal biocultural knowledge is used as an opportune reference point to present colonial accounts in an uncritical manner rather than an opportunity for focused discussion. In an attempt to counter this, the authors ‘acknowledge and support the need for an ongoing role of Indigenous communities in maintaining the Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge of their respective countries’ (p. xiv); however, as another reviewer has noted, it does not appear there was any consultation with the Aboriginal nations whose knowledge is presented.<sup>2</sup> This results in colonial and non-Indigenous voices being positioned as an authority on Aboriginal knowledge; an unfortunate side effect of presenting a volume that seeks to promote colonial perspectives.

Where *Aboriginal Knowledge in South-eastern Australia* fails, *Australia’s First Naturalists* flourishes by seeking to highlight the often marginalised Aboriginal individuals and knowledges in the development of zoology within Australia. In doing so, authors Penny Olsen and Lynette Russell present a thoroughly researched historical account that draws on an extensive range of archival sources. The book is

1 Turpin in Ens et al., ‘Indigenous Biocultural Knowledge’, 135.

2 Bradley, ‘Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge’, 553.

organised periodically, focusing on a 50-year period between 1788 and 1939, with each chapter providing an overview of this period followed by detailed accounts of the relationships that developed between early zoological collectors and various Aboriginal people. In presenting these relationships, some Aboriginal individuals are named but many are not, reflecting the biases of the original collectors. There are some exceptions including Kuringgai man Bungaree, who has recently come into public prominence as the first Aboriginal man to circumnavigate Australia with Matthew Flinders on board the HMS *Investigator*. Prior to this, however, Bungaree and his family assisted Russian Captain Fabian Bellingshausen to collect animals in 1820. Reading against the grain of the available literature, authors Olsen and Russell maintain the likelihood Bungaree assisted collectors on the *Investigator*, which 'collected 23 mammals, 217 birds, 39 fish, 33 reptiles and amphibians and some invertebrates, including several species new to science' (p. 48); however, when Bungaree's death was announced in 1830, 'his involvement in significant voyages of exploration and other achievements as guide, interpreter and occasional natural history collector went unmentioned' (p. 51).

In addition to the lack of acknowledgement Aboriginal people received in assisting various collectors obtain specimens, Aboriginal knowledge and/or names for animals were also rarely used in their scientific description. For the most part, new species were named after prominent men who had sponsored the expeditions. In one rather humorous example, authors Olsen and Russell describe the exploits of William Blandowski who collected specimens in southern and central Victoria for the newly founded Museum of Natural History (now Museums Victoria) and is credited by the authors as 'perhaps the first European to employ whole Indigenous Australian tribes, purely as collectors of animals' (p. 132). To his credit Blandowski enthusiastically acknowledged his debt to Aboriginal people for their contribution to the information and discoveries he recorded, with his list of Aboriginal names for fauna considered the most comprehensive of any part of Australia; however, his work was marred by poor relationships with museum trustees and the emerging scientific establishment of Melbourne, who refused to publish his expedition report in which he named a number of new fish species after key institute members. In particular, Blandowski described these fish as 'big-bellied', 'flat-headed' and 'slimy', ridiculing their namesakes in the process. Despite the humorous nature of this account, it underlies the fact that many Aboriginal people's contribution and knowledge were not afforded the recognition they deserved during this period of colonial 'discovery'.

By the turn of the century, however, there was a willingness to acknowledge the important contribution of Aboriginal people in obtaining zoological specimens; specifically demonstrated by the lamenting of various collectors during this period who failed to obtain specimens due to the disinterest and/or refusal of Aboriginal people to assist their expeditions. In particular, during the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia, zoologist Walter Baldwin Spencer described the

army of Aboriginal women and children who assisted him in the collection of various burrowing mammals and reptiles. Once again, however, many of these contributors remain nameless; but, by detailing the various museum collectors and scientists who employed Aboriginal people as collectors, Olsen and Russell demonstrate the agency of these Aboriginal people who have mostly been marginalised in the development of the discipline of zoology in Australia.

*Australia's First Naturalists* concludes by discussing the ways in which Aboriginal ecological knowledges are being used today in the ongoing management of areas such as national parks, providing the contemporary context that *Aboriginal Knowledge in South-eastern Australia* lacked. In short, *Australia's First Naturalists* presents an accessible and richly illustrated historical narrative, which contrasts with the academic and at times dry content of *Aboriginal Knowledge in South-eastern Australia*. Despite this, both books present a wealth of knowledge that at the very least should increase broader appreciation of Aboriginal people's deep knowledge and vast contribution in better understanding this continent we call Australia.

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## ***The Pilbara Aboriginal Strike***

by Bain Attwood and Anne Scrimgeour

[www.pilbarastrike.org](http://www.pilbarastrike.org), 2018

Review by Jan Richardson  
Charles Darwin University

Here is an exploration of major industrial action taken in 1946 by Aboriginal pastoral workers of the Pilbara region in Western Australia. Its format is a website rather than a conventional book. Its 2 authors are authorities on the subject. It provides welcome access to a remarkable but little-known chapter of Australian history, detailing an event that changed an industry, government practices and life opportunities for Aboriginal people.

The event was a strike initiated in 1946 by Aboriginal pastoral workers. Their plan seemed impossible to implement across a vast district in the north-west of Western Australia, but elders organised their people and succeeded. They were supported principally by the campaigner Don McLeod, who, as evidenced in the selected documents, was a focus of government opposition. The strike affected more than 20 pastoral stations and lasted for 3 years. A significant effect was the emancipation of Aboriginal workers from government-sanctioned ties to pastoral stations. Aspects of the strike have been brought to the public domain through journal articles, books, film and interviews, but before this website they had never been so clearly linked or made so accessible for others to study.

Professor Bain Attwood, who has written extensively on Aboriginal history, brings his expertise to the task of analysing hundreds of documents written about the strike. Anne Scrimgeour, an independent historian specialising in Pilbara history, brings additional personal knowledge gained when teaching some of the strikers' families in their independent school. An outstanding feature of the site is oral contributions by Nyangumarta language speakers whose words are transcribed into English by linguists Mark Clendon and Barbara Hale. Hale, as a prominent member of the strikers' community, adds a special authenticity to the words translated into English. Also contributing are 2 people involved in organisations that aim to preserve their

languages, culture and history: Bruce Thomas chairs the Wangka Maya Language Centre in Port Hedland, and Lorraine Injie chaired the IBN organisation representing Port Hedland Aboriginal people. Collaboration between these authorities brings a distinctive richness to the amount and type of material drawn upon to tell the story of the strike.

On the opening page of the website is a link to a video that provides a summary of the overarching story of the strike. Here Scrimgeour states her judgement that the strike ‘was a remarkable episode in the history of Aboriginal rights in Australia that isn’t widely recognised’. Bruce Thomas and Barbara Hale, members of the strikers’ community, present the fundamental cause of the strike: instead of proper wages, their people received flour, tobacco, tea, sugar and clothes despite working long hours. It led to the workers’ decision to ‘run their own show’ based on their determination that *marrngu* (their people) would be their own bosses. Attwood summarises the controls imposed upon them by pastoralists, police, the Western Australian Government and mainstream press – controls broken only by their decision to strike and bolstered by some allies in Perth. By viewing this video, the reader is well-prepared for the more detailed contents of the site.

A ribbon along the top of the opening page provides 4 choices: ‘Exhibits’, ‘People’, ‘Timeline’, ‘Archive’. Every section is active, leading to detailed information in each category. The website has been further structured under themes: ‘The Strike’, ‘The Cooperative Movement’, ‘Connections’, and ‘Telling the Story’. A summary precedes every section, followed by specialist topics and access to over 400 primary source documents. Citation of sources for each scanned document demonstrates the wide research undertaken, and Scrimgeour’s clear, accurate maps locate the places in the stories and reports.

The idea of an interactive website for this complex story is excellent, allowing the many ways history can be told to be held in balance with each other, and the owners of oral histories to be respectfully promoted. Its creative formatting allows stories to be told by some of the strike participants, thus giving the Aboriginal voice as much prominence as the historical records. A professional website designer has made the website an easy one to use, with a few provisos.

First, the lack of a website map is an unfortunate omission. Such a map would provide a picture of all the content of the website so that a viewer could go straight to the topic that interests them, rather than navigating through the many sections and subsections. Second, the parameters of the history being covered are not clear; titled ‘The Strike’, it extends well beyond 1946–49. Finally, it is not easy to find information about the website’s creators; to do so, go to the bottom of the opening page, locate the small grey word ‘About’.

Despite these minor impediments to a full enjoyment of this bold method of telling history from multiple sources, the website is impressive. It collects together more material than could be gathered in a conventional book, and photographs both enliven the story and aid in identifying people. It has room for many personal opinions and formal reports by people who were there when events happened, and summaries by historians. Scans of original documents allow readers to assess for themselves the authors' interpretation of their meanings. It can reach students and interested members of society who wish to access a reliable source of information about a 'remarkable event' in Australia. This event can now be widely recognised for its profound influence on historical change and the power of Aboriginal people to 'run their own show'.





## ***Remembering the Myall Creek Massacre***

edited by Jane Lydon and Lyndall Ryan

248 pp., NewSouth Publishing, 2018,

ISBN: 9781742235752 (pbk), \$34.99

Review by Libby Connors

University of Southern Queensland

Recent public debates on marriage equality, renewable energy and climate change indicate that the majority of Australians are more progressive than their federal government. So there is a good chance that recognising the frontier wars also has more support than the Australian Government realises. While the Australian War Memorial refuses to expressly commemorate the frontier wars, Australians are increasingly acknowledging this violent history at the community level. For the last 6 years, Toowoomba residents have remembered the Battle of One Tree Hill, while St Mark's Anglican church at Buderim, Queensland, has held an annual service to lament the public execution of local man Dundalli; they are of course some 17 years behind the New South Wales community of Myall Creek, which first hosted a commemorative event in 1998.

Jane Lydon and Lyndall Ryan have produced a very readable collection of work on how the horrific events at Myall Creek in 1838 are being commemorated today, how the massacre was perpetrated and prosecuted and how it was publicised and protested in the 1830s and 1840s.

The chapters are arranged chronologically beginning with historical reconstruction of events at Henry Dangar's infamous station in June 1838. The parts played by different members of the Myall Creek staff on the fateful night, its dreadful aftermath and the investigation and trials that followed are explored in a chapter by Ryan while Patsy Withycombe discusses the role of John Fleming who led the attacking party but who, as a free settler rather than a convict or ex-convict, was able to evade capture and prosecution. Lydon then investigates the representation of the massacre in visual art in the 1840s while Anna Johnston analyses it in literature and places it in the transnational humanitarian movement of that decade. Johnston's

illuminating work shows the extent of community opposition to the horrors of the violence wrought by colonialism. The persistence of the humanitarian campaigners puts the lie to the notion that settlers did not know any better, or that historians must not judge frontier murder 'out of historical context' as apologists like to claim. Their struggle for a humane empire was lost to the pastoral industry's insistence on a genocidal one as Ryan's next chapter on the prevalence of other massacres across the region emphasises. It is then followed by a chapter by an archaeological team working on native police camps that discusses how news of the massacre would have followed songlines north and west into remote parts of Queensland. It helpfully brings the reader back to an Aboriginal-centred approach to settler history.

By taking the book in this direction, however, the opportunity to explore the long-term political effects of the humanitarian political campaign is lost. The Introduction too quickly asserts that the massacre was forgotten within a decade, for this was not the case in Queensland where it was raised in personal diaries and more often in courtrooms throughout the 1850s. The very naming of a native police force is part of this legacy, as settler parliaments strove to deny and suppress constant talk of war by both the anti-slavery activists and the settlers.

The next part of the book includes the speech John Maynard gave at the 2015 commemoration at Myall Creek on the Aboriginal military experience and a chapter by Indigenous art historian Andrew Brook and research assistant Jessica Neath, based on interviews with architects and artists from around the world who have sought to construct memorials to genocide and massacre. These discussions include a wonderfully diverse range of reflections on the difficulty of encapsulating trauma in a way that heals and reconciles. Lastly, we have New South Wales legal personality Mark Tedeschi's speech at the Myall Creek Memorial in 2015, which concludes that the massacre was an act of genocide.

So while there are valuable scholarly chapters, the book is clearly designed to appeal to a wide audience and to that end it includes community contributions. A minor disappointment was a reliance on secondary sources for other massacre events. Since the History Wars of a decade ago, Lyndall Ryan has been progressively checking and cross-checking claims relating to massacres, but it is a sign that systematic reassessment by historians remains an enormous task.

Queensland-based history teachers are desperate for fresh scholarly works on the frontier wars now that they are included in the new Queensland history curriculum, so they will particularly value this book. Its other valuable contribution will be to introduce Ryan's scholarship on genocide and massacre to a broader readership beyond the academy. The Australian War Memorial has begun collecting materials on the frontier wars even if acknowledgement of them is not on the government's agenda and this work will undoubtedly be a valued addition to their collection.

## ***Conflict, Adaptation, Transformation: Richard Broome and the Practice of Aboriginal History***

edited by Ben Silverstein

xiii + 240 pp., Aboriginal Studies Press, 2018,  
ISBN: 9781925302530 (pbk), \$39.95

Review by Liz Conor  
La Trobe University

The year I tutored in Richard Broome's subject 'Australian Aboriginal History' at La Trobe University was 2009. By then it had been overseen by Richard for 32 years and stood as the first such unit to be taught in an Australian university. As 'one of the giants' of our field, as Lynette Russell describes Richard in her foreword (p. v), he was unassuming and encouraging to all. As a true educator and generous mentor Richard is impeccably collegial.

Ben Silverstein's edited collection on Richard's contribution and impact to the field admirably covers his originary and close attention to Aboriginal agency, from his influential descriptor of them as 'voyagers' to his rethinking around paternalism along with 'radical hope' (p. 5). The articles range across south-eastern frontier violence, boxing tents, family memoir, assimilation and resistance in education, all correcting the erasures of Aboriginal history. The collection reflects on Richard's cross-cultural engagement in the 'suturing together' of 'two worlds with a place for all' (p. 15).

In keeping with Richard's advances, the collection foregrounds Aboriginal voice with articles by John Maynard, Julie Andrews and Maxine Briggs. Worimi scholar Maynard tells the incendiary tale of world heavyweight champion Jack Johnson's visit to these shores. An inspiration to Aboriginal boxing champions, themselves 'beacons of pride' (p. 64) to Maynard's community, Johnson 'unsettled white Australia' (p. 68) with his irrepressible talents in literature, political rhetoric, not to mention ring invincibility and his rather antagonising affluence. He finds that boxing confirms Richard's argument, that Aboriginal people were 'agents and manipulators of that power and abuse' (p. 64).

In a moving memoir of her great-grandmother, Wurundjeri and Yorta Yorta scholar Julie Andrews details her community's 'fierce loyalty' (p. 96) to this pioneer of 'resistance literature' (p. 97). Indeed, Theresa Clements penned the first Indigenous autobiography (c. 1954).<sup>1</sup> A Yorta Yorta woman, Clements's knowledge of kinship connections, teaching of Yorta Yorta songs, midwifery, her strategic combination of Christianity with culture and general resilience has left an ineradicable legacy for Andrews who lovingly studied her great-grandmother's autobiography as a 'family heirloom' (p. 119). She writes of her disappointment on discovering this deeply personal historical document was 'public property'. Both Clements's memoir and Andrews's article are resistance to the 'void' of Aboriginal writing that Andrews corrects in Australian history.

In an article that is compulsory reading for white historians Yorta Yorta and Taungwurrung librarian Maxine Briggs describes her work at the State Library of Victoria as 'custodial' (p. 160). Briggs explains how the colonial archive can, through an Indigenous research paradigm, challenge the entrenched assumptions of terra nullius still at large in Australian history. Like Andrews, she describes the importance of the 'continuum' of 'cultural heritage' (p. 165) that, she reminds us, reaches back into pre-invasion past since it is 'only a generation away' (p. 162). Briggs's chapter intervenes in the policy and culture of assimilation and its inherent 'epistemicide' (killing of knowledge systems) (p. 164). Education into white ways of living, she argues, was her people's 'only option for survival'. It is therefore critical that Aboriginal ownership of information is respected.

Lyndall Ryan sifts through the revisions over the decades in Richard's findings of frontier casualties and the staggering 80 per cent drop in population between 1834 and 1851. She notes his emphasis on 'cultural tenacity' (p. 29), but is puzzled by what she sees as an 'oversight' (p. 37) in fully coming 'to terms with the brutal reality of frontier violence' (pp. 29, 36). Ryan applauds Richard's mainstreaming of frontier violence in showing that it was the 'only full-scale conflict' ever fought on Australian soil (p. 27).

Silverstein and McLisky examine Richard's reappraisal of the notion of paternalism as negotiated between missionaries and Aboriginal people as a 'two way dynamic' (p. 38) in comparison with Noel Pearson's response to the 'new paternalism' and his claim that 'paternalist structures are a crucial part of enabling future Aboriginal agency' (p. 41). They note the deliberate misreading by the Conservative government of Pearson's reforms wherein 'community involvement in welfare regulation was essential. For the Howard Government by contrast, policy rested on the idea that community control was the problem' (p. 55). Silverstein and McLisky describe this cooption as part of the 'debris of paternalism' (p. 62).

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1 Clements, *From Old Maloga*.

The genesis for Tiffany Shellam's work on King George Sound in Western Australia was a lecture Richard gave when she was his undergraduate student. From her research into this unusually accommodating, even amicable, frontier relationship between the Mineng and garrisoned soldiers, she crafts the important observation that Indigenous mobility is grounded in place. She notes Aboriginal 'travellers had geographic knowledge far beyond their own domains or estates'. Their maps are thus 'place-statements' (p. 87). Shellam writes of being urged by Richard to look for Aboriginal domain.

In contrast, Jennifer Jones describes the 'alien environment' of secondary education. In case studies of scholarships offered to Aboriginal students, she examines the 'meritocratic assimilation' of kids and how it conflicted with their families' strivings to 'maintain cultural fidelity' (pp. 128, 139). In the recent context of exemption certificates, child removal and discrimination, families were understandably reluctant to entrust their children to any such white schemes.

In Richard's chapter on the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, he deploys Jonathan Lear's notion of 'radical hope' in the context of cultural devastation. Ever attentive to all expressions of agency, he finds parallels between Crow chief Plenty Coups and Wurundjeri *ngurangaeta* (clan head) Billibellary and, later, his nephew, Barak. These men demanded land on traditional country to farm, forging 'a new way of staying Aboriginal and close to the land of the Woiwurrung' (p. 151). Richard shows how this resistance paved the way for the activism of the Aborigines Progressive Association and its remarkable staging of the 'Day of Mourning' in 1938.

Silverstein applauds Richard's emphasis 'on recuperating Aboriginal agency as a response to colonial dominance' and this collection admirably assembles the achievements of Aboriginal modernity in the deployment of memoir, family and local history as interventions in the terra nullius of the colonial archive that Briggs exposes (p. 3).

Not long before his tragic death, historian Patrick Wolfe described Richard to me as 'one of the originals' and as 'going where no one had gone, and before anyone else'. This collection documents the wide reach and enduring influence of Richard's extraordinary intervention into the whitewash of colonial history, about a people whose dignity and continuity were never lost on him.

## Reference

- Clements, Theresa. *From Old Maloga: The Memoirs of an Aboriginal Woman*. Prahran, Vic.: Fraser & Morphett, 193?.



## ***Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia***

by Billy Griffiths

384 pp., Black Inc., 2018,  
ISBN: 9781760640446 (pbk), \$34.99;  
eISBN: 9781743820384 (ebk), \$16.99

Review by Martin Thomas

The Australian National University and University College Dublin

The opening of *Deep Time Dreaming* takes us to the Blue Mountains in 1957 where Professor Vere Gordon Childe was making his way towards a cliff edge. Later that day he would leap to his death. Childe had only recently returned to his native country. In the 36 years he lived in Britain he became known as the doyen of prehistory, publishing canonical texts such as *The Dawn of European Civilization* and *Man Makes Himself*. While the coroner returned an open finding on the circumstances of his death, a letter from Childe, posted to a colleague in London and kept secret for many years, leaves no doubt that his fall was a meticulously planned suicide.

The drama of Childe's passing has tended to obscure his efforts in his final months to encourage archaeological investigation in Australia. John Mulvaney and Laila Haglund were among the young scholars who benefited from his encouragement. As an exemplar of the old paradigm where history happened elsewhere and where one had to leave Australia to 'make it' as an intellectual, Childe stands as something of a talisman in Billy Griffiths' account of the new archaeology that emerged in Australia after the Second World War. Like Childe, who owed his stature as an archaeologist not to his excavations but to his mastery of the literature, Griffiths is an accomplished synthesiser who weaves a compelling narrative from a highly diverse range of sources, spanning more than 50 years.

The place of Childe in this book is interesting, for his oeuvre shows barely the slightest interest in the Aboriginal past. Yet there are clues in his final letters that he sensed that the discipline itself was destined for a remake. Radiocarbon dating,

a by-product of the Manhattan Project, would play havoc with the old chronologies. The big-picture narrative of humanity's emergence and migration would be recast and rewritten in the years ahead, giving rise to an account in which the first inhabitants of Australia are foot soldiers, not footnotes.

Griffiths' study is concerned with this 'deepening' perception of the extent of human presence on the island continent. The intellectual transformation it chronicles is profound. For much of the twentieth century the length of habitation was reckoned at a few thousand years. Such was the power of this orthodoxy that John Mulvaney, when he received radiocarbon dating of 12,300 years for Kenniff Cave, a site he was studying in Queensland, first thought that a zero had been accidentally added to the result. Within decades, such figures would seem almost modest. Occupation has now been pushed back some 65,000 years. Griffiths' book is, in a way, an intellectual history, albeit one that is highly personable. Structured as a collective biography, it is told from the points of view of key archaeologists. Mulvaney, Rhys Jones, Isabel McBryde, Carmel Schrire, Jim Bowler, Richard and Betsy Gould and Betty Meehan are all major players.

*Deep Time Dreaming* extends an avenue of inquiry initiated by Billy's father, Tom Griffiths, in his 1996 study *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*. The intergenerational synergies are evident in the style and approach. *Hunters and Collectors* oscillates between marvel and critique as it describes the passion of the collectors and dilettantes who made the first fumbling attempts at archaeology in Australia. Billy investigates an archaeological scene that is newly professionalised, although driven by similar energy and curiosity.

A notable achievement of *Deep Time Dreaming* is its evocation of vast temporal sequences. The ways in which Aboriginal societies have responded to geology, changing sea levels and climate, and a medley of other environmental transformations are skilfully painted. The peopling of the continent, the changes in technology, art and fire-making, are communicated through case studies that start with the macro and extend outwards.

The book reveals a keen understanding of what happened in archaeology during a period when the profession evolved rapidly, both methodologically and institutionally. This is the era when departments of archaeology and prehistory were introduced to Australian universities. The science and technology were very much in flux. New dating techniques were only one face of it. Chemical analysis greatly widened the data that could be extracted from artefacts and organic material. Interpretive models were also on the move, informed to varying degrees by developments in parallel disciplines. The burgeoning literature in Aboriginal studies – anthropology, linguistics and of course the emerging field of Aboriginal history – could potentially inform one's reading of the archaeological record.



Inevitably, this is a story in which research and politics are intertwined. Indigenous people were becoming much more vocal about the way they and their forebears were being investigated. A broad sweep of interventions would challenge the salvage mentality of many researchers, still so prevalent in 1964 that the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (as it was then) could be launched as a grand national project despite a complete lack of consultation with Aboriginal people. As the decade progressed, and as activists felt newly empowered by the 1967 referendum, archaeologists and other non-Aboriginal experts were being reminded whose story they were telling.

The groundbreaking excavations from Willandra Lakes of the skeletons dubbed 'Mungo Lady' (1968) and 'Mungo Man' (1974) are key examples of the conflicting values and mores at work. The ochred bones of Mungo Man had archaeologists reeling, for they backdated the origins of death rites by tens of thousands of years. Meanwhile, a less jubilant Alice Kelly, an esteemed Mutthi Mutthi elder from the area, courteously queried the absence of consultation. Far less polite was the controversy aroused by *The Last Tasmanian*, a 1978 film project involving Rhys Jones. The imputation that Truganini's death marked the end of her people was angrily denounced by the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, by this time asserting their presence after decades of invisibility in the public domain. Griffiths' account handles these controversies with nuanced understanding. He details some shocking cases of archaeologists ignoring or infringing upon the rights of Aboriginal people, just as he reminds us that the story is complex; that benefits flowed in multiple directions. Politically and culturally, Aboriginal people profited from many aspects of archaeological enquiry, especially the extended chronology of occupation. Hence the persuasiveness of '40,000 years' as a slogan for land rights.

*Deep Time Dreaming* seems destined to enjoy a 'deep' shelf life. A winner of major book awards, it comes emblazoned with lavish endorsements from senior historians. Mark McKenna describes it as a once-in-a-generation book that 'shifts our understanding of the nation's past'. I see it as an important and powerful book, but in some ways a concerning one. The lack of Aboriginal voices can be felt throughout. Apart from a few bursts of travelogue describing excursions to digs, there is no real encounter with an Aboriginal person. Completely lacking is any sort of extended discussion or interview with any of the many who represent the black skin in the archaeological game.

So pronounced an absence in a book that is being upheld as a national history raises concerns about what sort of national future we are heading towards. The author's reluctance to shift into a more dialogic mode left me wondering at the direction in which this dig through archaeological history was headed. The driving motivation *is* in fact stated, but you have to wait until the last paragraph to find it. There, in rhapsodic mode, Griffiths yearns for a moment when:

we can appreciate the ancient voyages of the first Australians as the opening chapters of Australian history, and the songs, paintings and traditions of their descendants as the classical culture of this continent.

It would take a longer review than this to unpack who the 'we' refers to in that utterance. But I am confident that the European notion of a 'classical culture', which is always a culture stripped of the ownership of its original guardians, is not the sort of import that could ever take root in a country that is truly postcolonial.

## ***Etched in Bone***

directed by Martin Thomas and Béatrice Bijon

DVD, 73 min., Red Lily Productions and Ronin Films, 2018,  
\$34.95

Review by Mike Jones  
The Australian National University

Campaigns for the return of ancestral remains from Australian and international museums started more than 50 years ago. Following the removal of Truganini from the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in 1976, the push to repatriate and rematriate thousands of bones gained momentum. Yet many museums, particularly outside Australia, have remained reluctant to participate.

The Smithsonian is one such institution. In 1948, they joined with the National Geographic Society and the Australian Government to mount an American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land. While others focused on mythology, artworks and artefacts, the Smithsonian's Head Curator of Anthropology, Frank Setzler, pursued his interest in anatomy, including the collection of bones.

Despite having a dedicated repatriation unit to deal with local requests under the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), when faced with international requests, including from Australian officials, the Smithsonian Institution initially refused to act. Then they offered to return some of the bones, retaining others for their perceived scientific value. It was not until early 2010 that the Smithsonian gave in to mounting pressure and agreed to return all the bones taken in 1948.

Martin Thomas and Béatrice Bijon's understated documentary *Etched in Bone* – itself 8 years in the making – provides a fascinating and moving insight into the return of these remains to western Arnhem Land. The film is not about the struggle to reach an agreement over the remains, or an investigation into who was responsible. The facts are clear: among the beautifully preserved film footage from the expedition shown in the documentary is vision of Setzler removing bones, including an ochre-covered

skull, from a cleft in the rock. Thomas and Bijon's primary focus is on the trip to Washington, DC, by a small delegation led by Joe Gumbula to collect the ancestors, and their return to the Gunbalanya area, close to the north-east corner of Kakadu National Park.

Central to the story is traditional owner Jacob Nayinggul. He has a wonderful presence on screen, clearly feeling the weight of responsibility as a traditional owner, his quiet authority woven through with a dry sense of humour. In addition to the Washington trip, expedition footage and interviews with Jacob Nayinggul, Joe Gumbula and other community members, we are given full access to the preparations for the reburial ceremony. Women from the community pull huge sheets of paperbark from trees to serve as wrapping for the bones, stripping branches to make the string that will tie them closed. Jacob and his son, Alfred Nayinggul, work through the practical issues of dealing with the remains of many men, women and children. The community comes together to prepare ochre and spread it over the bones with their hands. And we see the director Martin Thomas himself, asking questions and helping to push the wheelchair from which an increasingly frail Jacob Nayinggul directs the action.

Periods of narration from Thomas, who is a professor of history at The Australian National University, help to frame and contextualise the story. But the narration is sparing, and the film avoids becoming overly emotive or didactic. Moments such as the comparison drawn between anthropological remains and the efforts of Alexander Graham Bell to bring James Smithson's bones to the United States (where they received a national welcome) resonate deeply without becoming laboured.

Likewise, discussions about Aboriginal beliefs and knowledge systems are insightful because they remain quotidian and unadorned. The documentary opens with the disks containing the film being smoked to protect us, as viewers, from restless spirits. Jacob Nayinggul expresses concern about the people whose remains were taken, worrying they might have become lost and unable to find their way back home. When asked whether the ancestors would be wondering why the documentary crew was there, he replies without hesitation: 'Oh yeah, oh yeah'.

Jacob Nayinggul speaks of the events and their filming as a 'true document'. He is concerned that it is done well, 'because this is a true story'. While some may try to deflect responsibility from contemporary institutions and disciplines with reference to the different attitudes of the past, Setzler himself knew he was violating cultural beliefs, waiting until his local guides were asleep before taking the bones. Vigilance is required to ensure current practice continues to improve, and appropriate reparations are made. *Etched in Bone* makes a valuable contribution to those aims.

In allowing the documentary makers in, Jacob Nayinggul and the Gunbalanya community clearly understood the value of continuing to raise awareness, and to inform future generations. Despite this, it seems the Smithsonian remained reluctant participants, not allowing staff to be interviewed or appear in the documentary. Yet their mark remains, the film's title referencing the museum numbers and places of origin etched into every bone, literally *objectifying* the remains of the dead. Once the bones have been ochred, wrapped in paperbark and returned to the earth, we see the containers they were sent in – those grey institutional boxes so familiar to anyone who has spent time in museum stores – burning on the red earth.



## ***Recirculating Songs: Revitalising the Singing Practices of Indigenous Australia***

edited by Jim Wafer and Myfany Turpin

426 pp., Hunter Press, 2017,  
ISBN: 9780994586315, \$49.95

Review by Maïa Ponsonnet  
University of Western Australia

*Recirculating Songs* is a substantial volume, comprised of 17 chapters (plus an introduction and index), by 28 authors, on the documentation and revitalisation of songs and singing practices in Indigenous Australia. The seventeenth of these chapters is a structured and annotated list of colonial-era musical translations of Australian Indigenous songs (Skinner and Wafer). The rest of the contributions approach the matter from a range of disciplinary perspectives including ethnomusicology, anthropology, linguistics, and history. Several of the authors are themselves members of the Indigenous communities whose songs are being considered. Given the number of chapters, an unavoidable weakness of the book is that each contribution is very short and can hardly provide in-depth analysis of the situation it presents. However, it is precisely the number and diversity of chapters that makes *Recirculating Songs* an important source book for whoever is interested in Indigenous songs and their revitalisation in Australia. The volume brings answers to key questions on the topic: what, how and why.

### **What?**

*Recirculating Songs* offers a rich account of Australian songs, ranging from a number of traditional styles (the majority of the chapters) to more recent creations (for instance, Kelly and Harkins on songs from the mid-North Coast of New South Wales, which include some English lyrics; Fairweather, Mathias and Whaleboat on Meriem Mir Christian songs). The number of regions covered is also extensive and widely distributed across the continent. Two chapters present what we know of songs

in south-eastern Australia, where little has been recorded due to early colonisation (McDonald, Wafer). More radically modern productions such as rock bands and pop singers are not included. This is understandable as this would require another volume of the same size, but modern practices will be an interesting topic for future publications (see below).

The descriptions of songs in this volume often feature transcripts and scores, supporting specialised discussion of musical structure for the benefit of ethnomusicologists and other specialists (e.g. Laughren, Turpin and Turner on south-east Queensland songs). However, none of the chapters limits itself to such technical formats: the songs are also always discussed in less technical aesthetic terms. The descriptions and analyses of the songs themselves are also well contextualised against musical practices such as *savoir-faire* and concepts surrounding compositional techniques (see Wafer on composition in the Hunter Valley, and his Introduction to the volume) or aesthetical evaluation (McDonald). Importantly, readers are able to readily access recordings, using their smartphone and the QR codes printed in the book.

## How?

Most significantly, *Recirculating Songs* offers a detailed, rich and extensive account of the diversity of revitalisation practices and activities around songs and music in Australia. Chapter after chapter, we discover a myriad of different contexts, purposes and tools. We learn for instance about the central role of digital technologies for some revitalisation projects (Treloyn and Morumburri Dowding on *Thabi* songs of the Pilbara), about ‘revitalization cultural camps’ (Turpin on Arrernte women’s song revitalisation enterprise), teenagers’ programs (Emberly, Treloyn and Googninda Charles on youth programs in the Kimberley), as well as the role of songs in festivals, tourism and other public-performance contexts (Nancarrow and Cleary).

Being marginally involved myself, as a linguist, in a song-maintenance process involving a form of ‘cultural camp’, the volume has greatly helped me to put things into perspective and understand the aims and implications of the activities I have observed. *Recirculating Songs* will be a source of data and inspiration for those willing to assist in and/or develop their own projects.

## Why?

Another central contribution of the book is to show and explain why songs are important, and what their preservation can contribute. Several chapters highlight how songs can serve as ‘snapshots’ of past lives, bearing the marks of the social and cultural contexts in which they were produced (Kelly and Harkins). Songs also inherently encapsulate insights about languages (Brown et al. and Brown and Evans



on Arnhem Land song traditions). As discussed by Bracknell regarding Noongar songs, these insights are not always immediately accessible, but sometimes need to be deciphered – which makes the exegesis of songs all the more important.

Apart from the knowledge they encode, songs are also eminently emotional cultural items to which people are profoundly attached, as highlighted by Hercus and Koch in their discussion of ‘lone singers’ – the ‘last singers’ of songs that will not survive them. Several chapters point to the empowering role of songs (e.g. Emberly, Treloyn and Googninda Charles’s analysis of youth programs). In fact, many of the chapters, authored or co-authored by Indigenous cultural activists, singers or musicians involved first-hand in the projects they discuss, attest *in themselves* to the value of songs as cultural responses to the hardships of colonisation.

One question that may deserve further attention in the future is the nexus between the attachment to songs on the verge of being forgotten, and the cultural flexibility evidenced by resolute musical innovations.<sup>1</sup> Hercus and Koch describe the sadness and nostalgia of ‘lone singers’. At the same time, several chapters in the book document how new generations can also produce and cherish novel forms (Kelly and Harkins; Fairweather, Mathias and Whaleboat). Beyond this particular volume, the vitality of modern musical productions in Indigenous Australia is obvious. Many Indigenous musicians enjoy significant local success (e.g. Blekbala Mujik, Wildflower and other artists produced by Skinnyfish Music, to cite only a few, from the regions I am familiar with); some of them are nationally acclaimed (Yothu Yindi, Gurrumul). While there is certainly no reason to assume a contradiction between these tendencies – preservation and innovation – it will be interesting to see further research discuss how they interact with and complement each other, both conceptually and in practice.

*Recirculating Songs* offers a solid basis for reflection as well as action around the documentation and revitalisation of Indigenous songs in Australia. As such, it will be a precious resource for many readers across related disciplines and fields.

## Reference

Ottoson, Ase. *Making Aboriginal Men and Music in Central Australia*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

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1 Ottoson, *Making Aboriginal Men and Music*.



## ***Gugu Badhun: People of the Valley of Lagoons***

by Yvonne Cadet-James, Robert Andrew James, Sue McGinty  
and Russell McGregor

186 pp., illustrated, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2017,  
ISBN: 9781922102645 (pbk), \$39.95 and open access

Review by Theresa Petray  
James Cook University

As Australia discusses and debates the 3 claims made by the Uluru Statement from the Heart – an Indigenous voice to parliament, a *makarrata* commission and a truth-telling process – some Aboriginal nations are advancing their sovereignty in other ways. Following the terminology of Indigenous Nation-Building scholars, they are beginning to identify, organise and act as sovereign nations.<sup>1</sup>

A key discussion in this nation-building process is data sovereignty and control over narratives. This is, in fact, central to the Uluru Statement's truth-telling process. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices need to be centred in any discussions of Australia's colonising process. To this end, *Gugu Badhun: People of the Valley of Lagoons* is an example of the next great opportunity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. The book offers a concise history of one Aboriginal nation. It builds on the past few decades of historical work that has addressed the unacknowledged history of colonisation in Australia, and the growing recognition of the effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, rather than taking a pan-Indigenous focus, its single-nation focus enables the book to be specific, not just in terms of events that happened but also in the analysis of how these events have affected the Gugu Badhun people.

Gugu Badhun academic Professor Yvonne Cadet-James and her co-authors Robert James, Sue McGinty and Russell McGregor have put together a sharp and engaging history. It builds on previous research by archaeologists and historians, the written

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1 Cornell, 'Processes of Native Nationhood'.

archives and, most importantly, oral histories. Most of these are from Gugu Badhun people themselves, with some collected from white pastoralists and others. The writing is accessible and engaging, with a storytelling style.

A clear argument of this history is that the Gugu Badhun people were not pawns at the whim of governments and white people. It of course acknowledges the unsavoury aspects of history: violent clashes over land with white pastoral settlers; the role of the Native Police; the exploitation of Gugu Badhun workers on cattle stations; the oppressive administration of the Queensland *Aboriginal Protection and the Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* and the removal of Gugu Badhun people from their country and their children from their families. But instead of an exploration of top-down power, Cadet-James and colleagues weave in details that demonstrate how people exercised considerable agency despite the odds that were stacked against them. For example, they chose to leave country to pursue schooling and employment: 'Opportunities for educational and job advancement required both that people made choices and that circumstances made those choices possible' (p. 79). Some readers might be sceptical of the claims of agency as being a contemporary interpretation of the past. But the book uses specific examples and evidence as the basis for its claims. For example, in a chapter on the famous exploration parties that moved through Gugu Badhun country, evidence from Leichhardt's and Gilbert's journals supports claims that 'the Gugu Badhun were equally curious about the intruders' (p. 17).

This focus on agency is well balanced with a recognition of structural constraints. One chapter discusses the experience of pastoral workers and their relationships with white station owners. This chapter includes discussions of the unequal sexual relationships between Gugu Badhun women and white men, but primarily focuses on the positive relationships and 'mutual dependence' that existed between Gugu Badhun people and white pastoral families. This chapter ends, however, with the astute observation that 'living together' was still marked by a power imbalance:

This imbalance of power was mitigated, but never completely removed, by the relationships forged between Aboriginal and pastoral families who grew up and worked together over generations in some cases. There was always a boss and a worker in those relationships, which could never be completely equal. (p. 69)

Another powerful feature of this historical account is the discussion of what Gugu Badhun have done over the past few decades, and will continue into the future, to make the best from history and build on their strengths. Moving off country was important for work and education, but Cadet-James et al. make clear that this does not mean a loss of identity: 'Connection, or re-connection, with country and with each other ensures that distance and time do not diminish the importance of identity and history' (p. 110).

The book demonstrates that culture is constantly changing in response to everything else around it, and that can be a strength. Using technology to re-learn language, for example, is evidence that engaging with the contemporary western world does not automatically mean loss for Gugu Badhun culture. This is because Gugu Badhun are not swept along the current of change, but rather, ‘as ever, they are active players in their own destiny’ (p. 121).

In addition to this history itself *being* an act of sovereignty, it is also aware of itself as such an act. The book opens with a preface, written by my colleague and Gugu Badhun PhD student Janine Gertz and former chairperson of the Gugu Badhun Aboriginal Corporation Dale Gertz, about Gugu Badhun cosmology and the importance of this history in ensuring Gugu Badhun self-determination into the future. The truth-telling in this book is an important foundation for Gugu Badhun nation-building, and it is an important step in disrupting the unequal power relations that still exist on Gugu Badhun country and across Australia. I look forward to reading more nation-specific histories as they become more common.

## Reference

Cornell, Steven. ‘Processes of Native Nationhood: The Indigenous Politics of Self-Government’. *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 6, no. 4 (2015): 1–27.



## Information for authors

*Aboriginal History* encourages the submission of papers that reflect the values that have been central to the journal since its establishment in 1977. These emphasise Indigenous voices, experience and sources. They may involve combinations of oral, written and non-textual forms of history-telling. They may make accessible multi-vocal and interdisciplinary approaches to historical research, providing insight into the ethical practices followed in such research. *Aboriginal History* journal fosters such approaches to historical work, but work based in other approaches to researching Indigenous histories will be considered.

Articles of up to 7,000 words in length (including footnotes and references) are preferred, but submissions of a maximum of 10,000 words (including footnotes and references) will be considered. Book reviews must be 1,000 words or less, and review articles up to 2,500 words in length.

Please submit a Microsoft Word version of your paper to [aboriginalhistoryinc@gmail.com](mailto:aboriginalhistoryinc@gmail.com), addressed to the Editor, together with a short abstract and author biography in a separate Word document.

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## Style guide

Authors should follow the *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers*, 6th edition, John Wiley & Sons, Canberra, 2002.

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## Referencing

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