

# ***A White Hot Flame: Mary Montgomerie Bennett – Author, Educator, Activist for Indigenous Justice***

by Sue Taffe

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Mary Montgomerie Bennett (1881–1961) was the daughter of Robert Christison, a successful pastoralist who established Lammermoor Station near Hughenden, in north Queensland, in the late nineteenth century. Bennett spent her formative years moving between London, New South Wales, Tasmania and Lammermoor: it was her time at Lammermoor that sparked her later interest in what had been positioned as the ‘Aboriginal problem’; she dedicated herself to advocating for Aboriginal people following her move to Western Australia in 1930. Author of works including *Christison of Lammermoor* (1927) and *The Australian Aboriginal as Human Being* (1930), Bennett was a prolific writer, educator, humanitarian and human rights activist, and has garnered a significant amount of historical interest. Sue Taffe’s *A White Hot Flame* is the latest monograph to explore her story.

Acknowledging works relating to Bennett by historians including Fiona Paisley, Marilyn Lake and Alison Holland, Taffe locates her intervention in the contextualisation of Bennett’s early life, moving away from a sociocultural analysis towards a narrative biography focusing on her family’s influence. This approach was perhaps employed to address an identified gap in historiography – ‘historians have researched her achievements in public life ... but curiously Mary’s childhood and early adulthood have been of no interest to them’ (p. xv) – and to locate the emergence of what is described as Bennett’s ‘conflicted identity’ as someone who sought to expose injustice while exonerating her own family’s complicity in frontier

violence. For Taffe, Bennett was ahead of her time, an intellectual and moral standout. Heroicised for her dedication to and ‘palpable love’ (p. ix) of Aboriginal people in Australia, it is this picture of Bennett that Taffe paints.

Unlike Holland’s 2015 *Just Relations: The Story of Mary Bennett’s Crusade for Aboriginal Rights*, which employs a human rights lens to analyse Bennett’s work, the current volume offers no critical framing – Taffe’s goal is to provide a biographical grounding for Bennett. This she achieves. The chapters move chronologically through Bennett’s life, describing her parents, childhood, adolescence and adulthood, and her emergence as an author and activist, criss-crossing London, outback Queensland, regional New South Wales, Tasmania and regional Western Australia.

Unfortunately, this approach has resulted in a narrative that – while informative and thick with opportunity – reads as a celebratory account of Bennett’s life. Bennett’s story offers multiple avenues to engage with the complex history of race relations, the entanglements of intimacy and violence that framed much of the frontier experience, the implications of assimilationist policies, and the emergence of human rights discourse in Australia. Moreover, her work has ongoing implications relating to knowledge production, repatriation and personal history, particularly for Aboriginal people whose families intersected with Bennett’s life. Yet such avenues remain unexplored.

Taffe draws on a rich archive of primary sources – Bennett was a prolific writer, and the text is heavy with descriptions of her archival record. While this utilisation of primary material is a strength, there is minimal engagement with relevant historiography, including works written about Bennett herself, leading to a narrative that lacks crucial context and leaves historically significant questions unexplored.

Perhaps the starkest example here is the descriptions of Jane Gordon, a young child of Aboriginal and European ancestry who was taken by the Christisons from Queensland to London in 1898–99. Painted by Taffe as a ‘pretty and adaptable little girl’ (p. 62), Bennett’s mother arranged for her return to Australia just two years after their arrival in London. This, with Taffe’s comparison of Christison’s sending of Aboriginal men from Lammermoor to England in 1881 for education, lacks critical interrogation relating to their removal or experience; while the final chapter informs readers of Jane’s fate – she was sent to Fraser Island before being removed to Yarrabah – this is presented without attending to its ongoing implications, and it ultimately centres Bennett: ‘How Mary ... would have rejoiced to know that Jane’s great grandson ... teaches Aboriginal students at James Cook University’ (p. 408).

The discussion of Jane not only reflects a lack of historical consideration but also points to the more difficult aspect of the book – the Aboriginal people Bennett lived with and advocated for inadvertently become backdrops to her story. While this may be expected considering the book’s aims, combined with a lack of contextualisation,

it leads to some no doubt unintended yet problematic assessments. The Aboriginal people on Lammermoor, discussed initially in relation to how they fitted Bennett's family projections as she sought to position her father's station as a safe haven for Aboriginal people on the frontier, become supporting characters to Taffe's positioning of Bennett: Wyma and Barney are spoken of with fondness, yet Taffe fails to consider their experience or agency, nor critically considers Bennett's own characterisation of them. Rather they become one side of a false dichotomy that pitted Aboriginal people employed on stations such as Lammermoor against a life of 'alcohol and opium abuse [by] the fringe-dwelling, displaced Aboriginal people of north-western Queensland' (p. 62).

Moreover, an attempt to position Aboriginal people as central to Bennett's life has unfortunately led to the diminishing of their experiences. For example, at one point, the class, gender and familial expectations of Bennett are conflated with the dislocation of Aboriginal people from family, culture and Country: 'Jane had no choice as to where her future home might be, nor did her mother or the other family members she had left behind. [Bennett's] future was as an art student in London ... she also would have had little choice in the matter' (p. 57).

Bennett's work spanned the 1920s to the 1960s, and Taffe has touched on many issues of historical and contemporary significance. For example, Taffe points to Bennett's advocacy regarding governmental requisition of Aboriginal peoples' wages, with a description of Bennett's correspondence on the matter: no further interrogation is provided, nor an extrapolation to contemporary cases relating to stolen wages. This is an unfortunate oversight given Bennett's positioning as a forward thinker on matters of racial injustice.

A point highlighted by Taffe was Bennett's characterisation of her father that coloured her assessment of his life, leading her to overlook potentially complicated issues. Yet, perhaps unconsciously, Taffe's portrait of Bennett becomes similarly framed. The narrative is at times repetitive, slipping between past and present tense, which, combined with an emotive tone and unreferenced sections, means it often becomes speculative and somewhat romantic. While this may seem flippant, it speaks broadly to the platforming of white people by using colonised people as a backdrop.

Overall, Taffe has shown that Bennett's life was a fascinating one, her story is rich with opportunity to analyse the histories of race relations and humanitarianism in Australia. For those interested in Bennett, *A White Hot Flame* will be invaluable for its thorough descriptions of Bennett's archival material and biographical information relating to her and her family.

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