

YOU IN YOUR SMALL CORNER

THE LOVE SONG OF ALFRED J DYER: EARLY DAYS OF CHURCH MISSION SOCIETY MISSIONS TO THE ABORIGINES OF ARNHEM LAND¹

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In this paper I use some of the personal accounts of two Anglican missionaries to the Arnhem Land area in the early twentieth century to gain an understanding into their perspectives and motivations. It is a story of love; the love that brought these missionaries to north Australia, and the relationship they shared.

Permanent European settlement of the Northern Territory took place more than three quarters of a century after the settlement of New South Wales. The townsite at Port Darwin was surveyed in 1869 and was 'the last of the colonial capitals to be established, and ... the only one to lie in the tropics'.² Settlers in the Northern Territory were both informed by experiences of other settlers elsewhere in Australia, and of the brief but consistent history of failure of European settlement in the region.³ There was a distinct parallel between the experiences of permanent European settlement and the role of Christian evangelical missionary work in the region. Missionary work in the Top End proceeded relatively late in Australian missionary history and similarly, followed a string of unsuccessful attempts.⁴

Elsewhere in Australia the experience of European settlement had accompanied

loss of life for Aboriginal people through usurpation of resources and spread of disease and so it was widely believed that Aboriginal people were dying out. Missionary work was a sacred obligation for Australian men and women of Christian good will to take up work to disseminate God's message to those who had not heard it, and might not ever have the opportunity to do so.

*The great question for Australia
was how to deal with the masses of
heathen who were within our borders ... it would not be long before
the last of the blackfellows turned
his face to mother earth, and gave
back his soul to God who gave it.
Any work ... might be merely
smoothing the pillow of a dying race;
but that pillow should be smoothed
...*⁵

There had been some nineteenth-century missionary activity on the north coast of the Northern Territory, but it had not been very enduring. Jesuit missionaries established a mission at Rapid Creek (now Darwin) in 1882 which was soon abandoned, and then later three separate stations at Daly River between 1886 and 1891

but by 1899 none were operational. Catholic missions in the Territory ceased temporarily until 1906 when Father Gsell (later Bishop) arrived to establish Our Lady Star of the Sea mission to the Tiwi at Bathurst Island. The Protestant missionaries in the Top End had not been any more successful. An Anglican mission station, 'Kalparloo' ('Coparlgo', 'Kapalgo'), was established in 1899 in the Alligator Rivers region⁶ but after a decade or so, little remained.⁷

The next attempt by the Anglicans was to prove more successful. The Bishop of Carpentaria, Gilbert White, suggested the Church Missionary Association of Victoria (CMS), the evangelical arm of the Anglican Church, found a mission on Roper River. In 1908 a party sailed from Melbourne for the Roper via Thursday Island, Yarrabah, Mapoon and Mitchell River missions and: 'Landed at Roper River ... homesick but full of love for the poor degraded blacks around us.'⁸

The missionaries had to build the mission from a completely (from their perspective at least) virgin site. They had to construct the dormitories, kitchen, church, outbuildings. They had to establish horticultural gardens for a food supply. They hoped to begin running cattle and at the same time intended the Roper site to function as a base for further evangelical missionary incursion into Arnhem Land.⁹ They called it, 'The Gospel of Work' and together with the 'Gospel of Love' this formed the two planks for their aim of 'protecting and uplifting ... the black race in Northern Australia'.¹⁰

But while the Aboriginal people were at home, secure in their physical, spiritual and cultural ways of life that had existed for time untold, life at Roper for the mis-

sionaries was isolated and difficult. Physically and emotionally the conditions were tough. At the same time, the vigour of Aboriginal people and culture was paradoxical to the missionaries. Their positive observations of the society they encountered contradicted the rhetoric. 'A Doomed Race ... Their days are numbered. They are a strong race, fine and active, and when working develop wonderfully'.¹¹ This was in something of a contrast to the personal experiences of the missionaries themselves; many of the journal entries and letters contain descriptions of physical ailments such as tropical ulcers, sores, fever and so on, suffered by the missionaries themselves.

Missionary society formed a tiny enclave in a world and people that they could only comprehend in terms of their own culture and experience. As the missionaries struggled to build a little outpost of empire at the Roper, their hopes lay with the children:

*In my class I have such nice little lads. They are called Campbell, Percy and Wilfred. We have great talks and songs together, and when I have coaxed them to have a good wash each day their little black bodies fairly shine. They sit around me with wonder and amazement in their eyes, while I read them Bible Stories and tell them about the dear Lord Jesus ... I wish we had a cricket set, we could have such grand games ...*¹²

The missionary numbers were small, their resources minimal and their knowledge of the people and environment in which they were working, very limited. As a consequence of their isolation, their

language, behaviour and custom took on an exaggerated formality, no doubt as a mechanism of mediating control between individuals, but also as a way of defining difference and cultural solidarity.

Into this scenario then, comes Miss Mary Crome (mostly called 'Katie') who arrived at the Roper to begin work on the mission just five years after the station had begun. At 39 years of age, Katie was mature and skilled; she had trained as a nurse and was an excellent seamstress who loved gardening. There are references to her acerbity of conversation, so perhaps she had been disappointed by her lack of lover or family. By evidence of her own account and others, she was skilled and practical, moral and supportive of women, particularly with regard to issues of domestic violence or health and child rearing.

Some years later, in 1915, Alf Dyer arrived at the mission. Alf was in his late twenties ten years younger than Katie. Like Katie, Alf had no problem with faith; he was called directly and literally by God; his difficulties only arose when communicating His directions to the Church authorities. Alf was called to serve first in Africa, then in northern Australia, but the CMS, perhaps wary of such witness, did not immediately respond to Alf's message. In all, he applied unsuccessfully at least four times before becoming accepted and it took many attempts before his final and successful ordination. After a considerable career in the field, he was made a lay reader at Christ Church in Darwin,¹³ deacon in 1927 and then ordained to the priesthood the following year.¹⁴ Dyer's faith and conviction in a direct call from God was never challenged by the CMS authorities, but it is clear that the hesitation they showed in appointing him, indic-

ated they suspected a certain erraticism of personality.

* * *

Katie had arrived in 1913 to the little hamlet on the low-lying banks of the crocodile-infested Roper River.¹⁵ Although remote, a police station at Roper Bar and pastoral leases adjacent to the mission lease meant that Europeans were not unknown in the district. The number of Aboriginal inhabitants at the mission station varied from a handful to number in hundreds depending on seasonality, cultural obligations, hunting, and other causes external to, and largely unrecognised by the missionaries. Amenities on the mission station were basic. The physical layout of the mission included the church, single room huts for accommodation, kitchen/dining facility and larger huts which were dormitories for children from the community who were fed and accommodated at the mission away from their families. In the five years of operation before Katie's arrival, the station had nearly faltered due to problems of infighting amongst staff. It was somewhat regenerated by the presence of a new Superintendent, Hubert Warren who had arrived only a little earlier than had Katie that same year.

Although it is reasonable to refer to Roper River as a community, it is apparent from descriptions that there were different social groupings who existed more or less independently. One section comprised the white mission staff. Their language was English. They lived in very basic accommodation on the mission station. Another discrete group were those Aboriginal people in a position of proximity and trust with the mission and staff. They were given 'Christian' names, Percy, Wilfred and so on. The missionaries addressed

them in English, although this was clearly not their first language. They did not seem to have been given accommodation at the mission and at this stage, were not necessarily converts to Christianity, although they did provide practical assistance to the mission staff on the day-to-day running of the mission and through mediation with the camp. The final group consisted of the 'camp' Aborigines. They did not usually come into the mission unless it was a holiday or celebration day of some kind (such as Christmas). They sometimes called into the mission or were brought in by their friends or family, when they were ill. Otherwise, missionary interaction with the 'camp' people took place in the camp.¹⁶ Missionaries visited the camp, usually with the children visiting families, but sometimes with each other, to provide access to Christian spiritual fellowship or medical assistance. The language spoken by the missionaries to the 'camp' people was pigeon English. There were at least three distinct groups within the mission, each with their own distinctive languages of interaction, accommodation and physical space. Much of the interaction was taken up with negotiating these boundaries.

But there were other bounded spaces evident; the world of Roper River was also spiritually delineated. In this period of missionary endeavour, religion for the missionaries was a force that directed not only beliefs, but also day-to-day activities. Although clearly practical, Katie's accounts are full of cooking, dressmaking, nursing and teaching basic literacy, the predominating sense of her personality is her extreme piety. She mediated every experience through her spiritual beliefs.

*Nov 23rd [1913] Seven weeks today since I arrived here and it has been such a quiet but blessed day. There is such a joy in being here to try to tell of Jesus and His wonderful love. If the children will only take in & really realise His love. My heart does ache for the poor old woman in the camp – so sad and desolate no idea of love & Jesus loves her & wants her [and] died for her... Mon Nov 24th Attended to the sick ones today. Poor Mary looks dreadfully ill & I don't know how to speak to her but I told her over and over again Jesus loved Mary and wanted her... The children are very lovable & so funny at times. I do want to have the great love & compassion for these people to love them into the kingdom to stretch out for them God made me faithful & true & have His way in me for them.*¹⁷

This is an area of surprising commonality between the two, both those ministering and those ministered to, that they were operating in a climate where God and the spiritual world was invested in every encounter with every animate and inanimate object. Aboriginal people as a result of their own encompassing spirituality, and this is indicated by their reluctance to engage with Christianity, were clearly aware of the implications of adopting another epistemology. Initially at least, the Christian missionaries appeared less aware¹⁸ and Katie often expressed disappointment at the failure to convert.

The physical and social structure was not fixed, however, since the whole point of the missionary operation was to convert Aboriginal people to Christianity and to settle people within a village-style com-

munity. Accordingly, there had to be some movements to enable this to occur. Like pieces around a chessboard there was one particular move that occurred in nearly every game play.

Thurs 8th [1913] This morning several of the smaller girls said they were going to run away. So after talking it over we decided if they were going, they were to be made to leave their things. Mr Joynt said he had found it [to] answer very well in the early days. They said they did not want to go but afterwards got together & talked it over & went. They are in the camp tonight. Poor little things I feel so sorry for them. It is just a bush hunger seems to come over them & they want to get away. How helpless one feels & can do nothing but pray that God will keep them & in His time & way bring them back here to learn to love & serve Him. Had the women for their reading lesson today expected they would have forgotten what they had learned but they had not & did very well. I do long for them to understand God's word ... ¹⁹

It is not useful here to enumerate the number of times this account is repeated in the writings of Katie Crome, but it was an ongoing problem for the missionaries. The above narration does explain a number of attitudinal values held by both the missionaries and the Aboriginal people. It was difficult for the missionaries to demonstrate the benefits of conversion to the children. Even the first stage of acceptance meant relinquishing family, social and community life and living in a dormitory. In addition, such a move left the

individual subject to missionary disciplines for infractions, and this could include deprivation of treats, or at a more severe level, head shaving, temporary confinement or being physically beaten. On the other hand, children became the focus for sustained interest by the missionaries, they received a more regular food supply and they gained access to material objects. When the attractions on either side are weighed in the balance, it is less surprising that the children moved between camp and mission so frequently. Katie spent much of her journal entries recording the departures and arrivals between camp and mission and correspondingly alternating between hope and disappointment:

Mon Jan 17th [1914] Have had a rather quiet day. My women went walkabout so was not able to give them their reading lesson. I was very tempted today to a lack of love... Tues Jan 18th [1914] Great excitement today Bet Bet and Katie came back ... ²⁰

Limits and boundaries were extremely important to maintain order and to separate the godly from the ungodly. 'Rightly or wrongly' as Dick Harris observed, 'We missionaries were always a "separate people".' ²¹ Not only was it necessary to maintain a daily routine, rung in by a bell before dawn calling people to work, but in order to demonstrate the difference between European and Aboriginal society. After one absconding, the Superintendent, Hubert Warren decided that the girls should be locked in the bathroom all day. Katie recorded, 'They did not seem very unhappy about it. It is hard to know what to do. They must be punished or we could not maintain discipline'. It must have been

extremely difficult to communicate either punishment or disapproval. The next day the girls absconded again, 'It was a great shock,' Katie wrote.²² Later she added, when several of the boys also ran away, 'They do not seem at all sorry for running away & did not want to come back'.²³

There is a strong indication that 'camp' was seen as undesirable and Katie and other staff appear to have successfully communicated this to some of the mission Aboriginal girls. After one absconding, Katie noted, 'They got the strap & are to be treated like camp girls for a week'.²⁴ For the mission staff, debating the issue of how to communicate the disapproval of the children's rejection of the mission was ongoing, complex and unsuccessful. Discussion generally focussed on methods of coercion. Interestingly there appears to have been little attempt to entice the children through access to material objects or food. As previously noted, in one instance the staff refused to let the children take some of the objects given to them by the mission when running away, but apart from that single incident, little additional incentive was provided. Presumably this was because the missionaries believed that the 'Gospel of Work' and Christian fellowship, would be incentive enough. This principle did not necessarily apply to adults although both Katie and Alf disapproved of either the supply of tobacco or withholding of food to encourage religious attendance. Katie wrote to Alf in 1923 that she could not tolerate working under a policy that refused a nursing mother tea, cocoa or milk on the basis that 'she was a camp woman ... & that she could not have any priviledges [sic]'.²⁵ Within the bounded spaces then, there were differing codes of behaviour for children and adults.

It was a tacit acknowledgement that there was little likelihood of Christian conversion when dealing with adults from the camp. Children simultaneously offered more hope and at the same time, could be physically removed from the camp.

But it was also difficult for the missionaries internally. The relentless proximity to their fellows and isolation from any other non-Aboriginal contact meant that they too were bounded within the geographical space of the station. In the period that Warren was Superintendent he organised a mechanism for escape. A small and basic accommodation was set up about sixteen kilometres away at a place they called Mission Gorge. The hut was some hours' walk from the main mission station and provided a holiday retreat from everyday mission life. At intervals, staff members and children, would relocate, perhaps for a week at a time, apart from the mission station and its routine. The children would run messages between the two residences and commodities were sent to those at Mission Gorge.

Katie found the whole experience of relocation from the mission space very pleasurable although, characteristically, she initially did not at first want to leave the main station. But the physical act of being away, once she had come to terms with the idea, thrilled Katie. On the first evening she walked to the top of the hill ' & had a distant view of the Mission Stn'. The next afternoon they returned after preparing the fire for the next day to find two messengers from the main station with 'notes & tomatoes milk and berries etc. It was quite exciting & there are more messengers to follow'. Not only did the Mission Gorge hut offer another view of the mission, there were opportunities for notes

and messages and to act in ways that were not usual at the mission station. Katie went fishing and enthusiastically recorded catches of fish and a freshwater cray. She slept in the afternoon for three hours. Again, Katie went to the top of the hill to see the 'splendid view of the mission'. The missionaries themselves also needed to escape. They too oscillated between the station and another place. By the end of the first week, Katie was longing to be home. Yet when the party arrived with the girls and others on horseback, Katie wrote, 'It seemed more than I could stand & did not feel a bit glad to see them'.²⁶ Spatial boundaries, limitations and barriers seem to constrain Katie almost completely. So totally enmeshed was she within the boundaries, she could not understand how the Aboriginal people could resist them.

The other metaphor that defined interaction, was the duality of light and dark. This, like the notion of bounded space, was employed to delineate between the missionaries and their flock. Official reports, particularly of the early days of the Roper River mission, repeatedly used this metaphor. Within the writing that targeted the lay audience, the writers referred to the Aborigines as the 'Blacks', and used terms like 'spiritual darkness' or 'darkness and awful filthiness'.²⁷ The Christian Fellowship shared by the missionaries as part of their routine was called the 'Daily Light'. Insofar as this kind of generalisation can be made, institutional or official writing depicted a message of binary simplicity, of light (good, Christian and clean) and dark (bad, heathen and dirty).

The general assumption of the 'darkness' and 'superstition' of the Aboriginal people was probably widespread and not confined to the missionary experience.²⁸

The intimacy of the mission station and close contact with Aboriginal people, in fact, elicits a more complex response from individuals. Katie wrote of her first attendance at the birth of an Aboriginal baby:

*The baby arrived at about 11pm.
The 1st black baby I have ever seen
born – poor little thing such a little
girl & not very much different to a
white baby & in fact it does not look
quite as puffy & not showing red
[She] looks better than some white
ones.*²⁹

Katie could only express her response to the infant in terms of her colour or size. How universal is the assumption that darkness means dirt? Dyer reported a conversation following Katie working in the garden at Oenpelli, 'Is she a white lady? She makes her hands like ours.'³⁰ Was the comment about Katie dealing with colour or with the issue of what might be seen by the Aboriginal people as atypical work for a non-Aboriginal woman? Christian and heathen, light and dark, clean and dirty, white and black, mission and camp, male and female, child and adult: all these binary divisions served to distance and constrain the people within the community. That such images were prevalent in the official mission literature suggests that they would have been powerful predeterminates and predictive in the modes of contact.

Katie emerges as a practical loving person, whose chief outlet for that love was her spirituality. Part of the sadness and misunderstandings that arose in her relationship to the Aboriginal people, seem to have arisen because of their rejection of settled life at the mission and the Christian religion. Equally, she appeared,

at least in the early stages of her time at Roper, to be completely unaware that the Aboriginal people themselves had any religious or spiritual obligations that might make them reluctant converts or absentees from mission life. At the same time, Katie was not totally oblivious to the problems of transmission of the Christian message in an Aboriginal context. At one point, when an elderly woman called Maggie was dying she noted, 'Yesterday she [Maggie] told Ada she *saveyed* [sic] Jesus loves her. It is so hard to know because it has not brought any brightness or change in their lives'.³¹

Katie Crome achieved her own life change, however, after Alf Dyer's arrival at the Roper. There are hints that Katie was looking to give love when she arrived. She recorded the comparatively few social events of the mission station, the picnics and riding excursions with hopeful enthusiasm. Yet after describing a group of mission people going off on an excursion Katie wrote wistfully, 'Sometimes I feel very lonely but oh I would not have it different with all the disappointments. It is such a privilege.'³² Anglican historian John Harris notes: 'She particularly enjoyed being rowed down the river by Hubert Warren in his single days, but he was to marry another'.³³ So, as it turns out, was Katie.

The courtship between Alf Dyer and Katie Crome must have been difficult. The intricate social mechanisms employed to separate the missionaries from the Aborigines, also operated to separate male and female missionary staff. They did not, for example, address each other by their first name, on any occasion. Bishop of Carpentaria, Gilbert White, cosmopolitan and urbane, endeavored to convince female

staff that they were allowed into male quarters if any of the men required nursing, but without much success. Even between female staff formality was observed. In her private journal, Katie unfailingly referred to her colleagues as 'Miss Hill' and 'Miss Tinney'. That Aboriginal people associated with the mission were called by their 'first' names is another clue to the barriers and implied social status separating the groups.

Obstacles arose almost as soon as the couple had decided to spend their lives together. The bureaucracy of the CMS took over and they had to seek permission from the Board to marry. The Board was reluctant to give it because they advised Alf that Katie was too old. The couple were not allowed any time alone and another staff member was always required to be present as chaperon. At about the same time, Katie went south on furlough. The couple corresponded enthusiastically but because of the circumstances, the letters often took months to reach their destination. Their letters illustrate their love and passion but at the same time are excellent accounts of their daily life. Finally they were together at the same time and place, Roper River mission, and in May 1917 a day was scheduled for the marriage to take place. Unfortunately Warren woke up sick and asked Alf and Katie to put it off until he felt better. Alf went out to work in the garden but came in to lunch, where they had to eat the wedding breakfast, as the food would not keep. Just as they were eating, Warren walked in with a blanket over his head and said he would marry them. The ceremony took place outside, under a tree. Alf and Katie then rode to Mission Gorge and spent a week alone in the hut for their honeymoon.³⁴

Dick Harris who met them later in their lives described them as follows:

*Rev AJ and Mrs Dyer were a rather unique couple. Mr Dyer 'Alf' ... was a delightful personality and obviously a man of God – 46 years of age of slight built and medium height – a very close clipped head and fair complexion... Reckless to a degree, with a 'try anything once' attitude towards his practical work. Mrs Dyer ... or 'Katie' ... was a remarkable woman of God – trained as a seamstress and in midwifery – was scrupulous, meticulous and economical ... Mrs Dyer was ten years senior to her husband, whom she adored ... The Dyers did not enjoy robust health and the only way they could keep going was by taking three or four days complete rest in bed ...*³⁵

Alf Dyer was a kind of holy fool who appeared to blunder through life often at odds with people but speaking a kind of truth. At times he was a great advocate of corporal punishment for Aboriginal people who transgressed mission or secular law. He used to grimace and make funny faces or jump out and startle people as a joke. In the 1930s in an interview with southern journalists about a proposal for missionary involvement to investigate some deaths in Arnhem Land, possibly forestalling a punitive expedition, he outlined his strategy for defusing tension by taking a toy squeaker to make people laugh.³⁶ A person who had known him well described him to me in unflattering terms, stressing the irritating nature of his personality.³⁷ This was the man of Katie Crome's

dreams and the face of first CMS missionary contact at Groote Eylandt.

What metaphors did Alf Dyer use to make sense of his worldview? Like Katie, all his actions and beliefs were driven by a passionate conviction in Christianity. As eccentric a free spirit as Dyer appeared to be, he was nonetheless subject to the same kinds of stresses of mission life as the others. Dyer roamed freely through all spaces seemingly free from the liminal boundaries that constrained his fellows but sought solace in the high places. Dyer wrote: 'At Roper & Oenpelli I always loved to go to the Mt [Mountain] top to pray and watch the sun go down on your problems to sing some hymns, & watch the stars come out & think what a Father you had ...'³⁸ Connie Bush, who grew up on the CMS mission at Groote Eylandt told me that whenever they saw lights at night, some of the children might become afraid, but the older children would say, 'Don't be frightened; it's just Mr Dyer praying.'³⁹

Like the hill at Mission Gorge, climbing up offered both solitude and another perspective on mission life. About a kilometre away from Oenpelli mission is a rocky outcrop rising above the plains called Arrkuluk which is a sacred site for the Aboriginal people of the region. The focal point of the site is on the top of the hill and it is associated with a goose dreaming. The area around the base of the hill is still used for ceremonial activities.⁴⁰ This is the place where Dyer would climb to pray and gain a new perspective on things. He wrote:

Argoolook, a hill 600 feet high became my choice as it was near the station and easy to climb and the station lay at my feet. The difficulties seemed so little then and the

*Universe above so vast and God so Almighty, who calleth the stars by names. I put a big cross on the top of the rock and bolted it together with an iron bolt but lightning split it to pieces. I suppose the powers of darkness hate the cross, so I put up another with a wooden pin in and that was standing when I left*⁴¹

George Chaloupka, pre-eminent rock art expert recorded an image near the Oenpelli site of: 'A rock painting of a missionary with a sharp-featured face and upraised arm'. Dr Chaloupka said that this image has been identified as that of Dyer.⁴² Significantly though, he also adds that this portrait 'heralds ... the last era of contact' in rock art.⁴³ For this is the last period that Aboriginal people in the area continued to record contemporary events and images in rock art. The missionaries were more successful than they perhaps realised initially.

Attempts to convert Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land to Christianity by the CMS took place within an active program of evangelism for much of the twentieth century. In the initial years, however, the geographical, educational, philosophical and experiential differences between missionary field staff and the Board led to a highly individualised approach to the work. But in the process the missionaries became active agents for a settled village lifestyle. As the Berndts succinctly put it:

The basic intention was to change the socio-cultural systems and the individual lives of the people with whom they worked. It was not simply to Christianise them, because Christianisation was seen as inseparable from the trapping of the

*overall life-style in which the missionaries themselves lived ...*⁴⁴

In the push to evangelise and institute a village settlement lifestyle, both missionaries and Aborigines occupied a continually negotiated space, marked by mutual isolation. The repeated binary images used by the missionaries, both in their official and personal writing, of light and darkness, mission and camp, hills and plains, white and black, God and the devil, civilisation and nature, reveal an unconscious recognition of the disparity and mutual exclusiveness of the two groups. In the writings of both Katie Crome and Alf Dyer, it can be seen that each group had a completely separate agenda. Perhaps the most striking image of the encounters is that of Dyer, climbing to the top of Arrkuluk to look down on the mission from afar. In his prayers and meditations, he erected the cross with the iron support that was immediately struck by lightning. Dyer was completely unaware that the space, which he saw as God's alone, was already occupied and continues to be occupied by, the spiritual elements of the Aboriginal people he came to minister to.⁴⁵

No one could doubt the piety, sincerity and industry that Katie Crome and Alf Dyer brought to the people they ministered to. But they were also aware of the implications of the strong cultural agenda. As John Harris noted: 'Christian faith was not distinguished from Western lifestyle and CMS was, like the Catholic and Methodist missionary organisations, engaged in social change ...'⁴⁶ Although Dyer saw the introduction of work for payment as a benefit, he deplored that the wages were often spent on gambling or alcohol.⁴⁷ Dyer recognised the problem of introduced disease, but argued that this meant that

'our medical help' was therefore essential.⁴⁸ Without any apparent irony at all, he observed: 'I hope the Government does something to see they bank some of the money for a home & their old age ... What a difference modern man can make in the life of a native who never gambled & only drank water!'

The introduction of dormitory accommodation, weakening of the promise wife system, use of written and spoken English, village settlement and so on, were powerful determinants in the longer-term process to subsume the Arnhem Land Aboriginal people within an Anglo-economic and social model. These changes, implemented throughout the first half of the twentieth century, span the period covered in this paper. Alf and Katie served in Arnhem Land until the decade of the 1930s, when Katie became ill and they had to travel south to Sydney. After seventeen years of loving marriage, Katie died of cancer in 1940. Alf remarried in 1949. He died in 1968 as a result of a car accident.⁴⁹

Through the writings of individual missionaries, pictures of real people emerge with idiosyncrasies and feelings. What are less clear are the pictures of the individual Aboriginal people. It is a cliché to say that the two groups were worlds apart, but, in the early period at least, I think it is reasonable to assume that the missionaries and the Aborigines remained, at times well loved, but ultimately, alien to each other.

NOTES ON APPROACH

I returned to this topic of a history of missionary endeavour in Arnhem Land⁵⁰ after research on a number of unrelated

projects. Coming back to topics where you have done a lot of work can be both familiar and off-putting. In my earlier research I was looking for the big picture. Arnhem Land is a big geographical area and missionary incursion highly significant in terms of contact history. Previously I had been looking for issues of commonality, sweeping experiences, policies, legislation and major movements. For this paper I chose a more micro approach.

Arguably policy for missionary endeavour in Arnhem Land, particularly in the period prior to World War Two, was unformed and haphazard.⁵¹ The reality was that it was difficult to find individuals, with both adequate experience and appropriate religious conviction, to go to remote localities in Arnhem Land charged with the task of, not only conversion to Christian spirituality, but settled agrarian lifestyle as well. It was intended at Roper River station, for example, that the 'mission should be industrial and agricultural as well as educational and spiritual'.⁵² The missionaries might number five or six, in a larger community of, at times perhaps two hundred or more. The mechanism for the administration of the mission, often located in a southern capital, was administered by people who might never have even been to Arnhem Land or have any experience of the Aboriginal people who lived there. As Dick Harris noted: 'Our Society ... appoints men to the key position of Secretary to Aborigines Department who have no practical experience on the missions.'⁵³ The policy makers and the practitioners, were mostly worlds apart.

The Anglican Church has been at times defensive about the role of the missions in north Australia, seeing them as the target for 'ill informed and unwarranted criti-

cism'.⁵⁴ I did not want to look at the role of missions in north Australia as a whole, but rather to look closely at one or two, specifically the writings of Alf Dyer and Katie Crome. I doubt whether it is possible to then extrapolate this evidence into that of missionaries elsewhere or in other periods of work. But in the writing, particularly in their use of metaphor to describe their conditions, it is possible to see through Alf and Katie, aspects of the missionary worldview at that time.

I chose Alf Dyer and Katie Crome not simply because of their engaging eccentricity. These two form a useful study for a number of reasons. Firstly, they began work at the crucial first contact stage of missionary endeavour. Later missionary work would be less individually contemplative and more controlled in terms of transmission and persuasion to Christian settlement and spirituality. The second reason they are an interesting study is because they served at a number of sites controlled by the CMS in Arnhem Land. Another reason they provide a valuable perspective, is because Katie Crome came to missionary work of her own volition and not as partner for a male missionary and their writings represent an opportunity to examine their accounts from a cross-gender perspective. In addition, their views are well represented. Alf Dyer, particularly, wrote a great deal about his time in the field and whenever apart, they wrote long letters to each other that included a lot of information about their daily life. Finally, they provide evidence of the individual impact of missionary work, rather than attempting to generalise the cultural impact upon Aboriginal people as a whole.

ENDNOTES

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² Kathy De La Rue, *The Evolution of Darwin, 1869-1911*, Darwin, Charles Darwin University Press, 2004, p. 1.

³ De La Rue notes that the settlement started in 1869 that was to become the modern city of Darwin was the fifth attempt by Europeans to settle the north coast of Australia, *The Evolution of Darwin*, p. 1.

⁴ See for example J. Woolmington, *Early Christian missions to the Australian Aborigines – Study in failure*, PhD thesis, University of New England, 1979.

⁵ *Argus*, 22 November 1906, p. 8.

⁶ *Northern Territory Times*, 10 May 1901; 28 June 1901.

⁷ When Baldwin Spencer visited the site in 1911, he did not note much apart from the name, W. Baldwin Spencer, 1928, *Wandering in Wild Australia*, London, MacMillan, 2 vols, p. 855.

⁸ R. D. Joynt, *Ten Years' Work at the Roper River Mission Station Northern Territory Australia*, Melbourne, Church Missionary Society, Victorian Branch, 1918, pp. 3, 7.

⁹ C. Sharp, 'Extracts from a letter from Mr. Sharp', *The Aborigine*, 3, 1909, p. 10.

¹⁰ R. D. Joynt, *Ten Years' Work at the Roper River Mission Station Northern Territory Australia*, Melbourne, Church Missionary Society, Victorian Branch, 1918, pp. 3, 7.

¹¹ R. D. Joynt, *Ten Years' Work at the Roper River Mission Station Northern Territory Australia*, Melbourne, Church Missionary Society, Victorian Branch, 1918, pp. 6, 7.

¹² R. D. Joynt, 'Extracts from Mr Joynt's letter, Roper River 27 July 1909', *The Aborigine*, 3, 1909, p. 11.

- ¹³ Peter Spillett, Christ Church Darwin, NT: An illustrated history from the days of early settlement, Darwin, Christ Church Rectory, n.d. c. 1960, pp. 24–5.
- ¹⁴ Biographical details on Alf Dyer and Mary Crome, excluding original sources cited separately are from Keith Cole, *Oenpelli Pioneer: A Biography of the Reverend Alfred John Dyer Pioneer Missionary Among the Aborigines in Arnhem Land and Founder of the Oenpelli Mission*, Melbourne, Church Missionary Historical Publications, 1972; and also Keith Cole, 'Dyer, Alfred John', pp. 84–86 and 'Crome (later Dyer) Mary Catherine' p. 69, David Carment, Robyn Maynard, Alan Powell (eds), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, Darwin, Northern Territory University Press, Vol. 1, 96 pp.
- ¹⁵ The Roper Station was relocated to higher ground to, what has become known since 1968, Ngukurr following severe floods in 1940 when the community was inundated.
- ¹⁶ For example, Mary went 'across to the camp with Mr Warren' to check on the welfare of the people there and noted one baby who was not doing well. This baby was brought into the mission the next day 7–8 May 1914. Mary 'went over to the camp with medicine' 25 July 1914. On 9 August 1914, Mary attended the 'camp service' when Miss Tinney had a bad sore throat. Journal of Mary Crome, Northern Territory Archives Service (NTAS) NTRS 693/1.
- ¹⁷ Crome, op. cit., 23–24 November 1913.
- ¹⁸ This was not peculiar to Mary Crome though. 'It is probably true to say that most of the early missionaries did not recognize Aboriginal ritual and mythology as being religious. If they did, it was certainly not in the same way they categorized Christianity. Nevertheless, they regarded it as a force to be reckoned with ...' Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, 'Body and soul: more than an episode!' in Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose (eds), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies*, Bedford Park, Australian Association for the Study of Regions, 1988, p. 48.
- ¹⁹ Crome, op. cit., 8 [December 1913].
- ²⁰ Crome, op. cit., 17–18 January 1914.
- ²¹ Dick Harris, 'Rev Canon G. R. Harris CMS Missionary in Northern Australia 1929–65', NTAS NTRS 694, p. 86.
- ²² Crome, op. cit., 1–2 May 1914.
- ²³ Crome, op. cit., 4 May 1914.
- ²⁴ Crome, op. cit., 26 July 1914.
- ²⁵ Dyer, Rev. Alfred J., letter Mary Dyer to Alf Dyer, 17 March 1923, ms, NTAS NTRS 693.
- ²⁶ Crome, op. cit., 7–18 September 1914.
- ²⁷ See for example, *The Aborigine*, 1, 1908, p. 4; *The Aborigine*, 3, 1909, p. 11; R. D. Joynt, *Ten Years' Work at the Roper River Mission Station Northern Territory Australia*, Melbourne, Church Missionary Society, Victorian Branch, 1918.
- ²⁸ See for the example, the kind of observations in *The Australian Stone Age Men: A Black People Ask for a Fair Deal in a Fair Country*, n.d., anon, p. 9, 'Their Religion. It is a low form. They seem to worship the things God has created ... They know and fear the Devil Devil, and evil spirits. They are very superstitious; they use the magic bone which is sometimes called the death bone ... A person may be sung dead by one of his own tribe' in Cole, NTAS NTRS 694.
- ²⁹ Crome, op. cit., 15 January 1914.
- ³⁰ Alf Dyer, 'Early days at Oenpelli Mission, East Alligator River', NTAS, p. 27, NTRS 693/P1.
- ³¹ Crome, op. cit., 7 July 1914.
- ³² Crome, op. cit., 17 October 1914.
- ³³ John Harris, *One Blood*, Sutherland, NSW, Albattross Books, 1994, p. 713.
- ³⁴ Cole, op. cit., pp. 30–1.
- ³⁵ Dick Harris, op. cit., p. 23.
- ³⁶ Writer Andrew McMillan offers an interesting perspective on Dyer's comments: 'I can relate to his use of a tin squeaker. On a couple of occasions on the Warumpi Band's *Big name no blankets* tour in 1985 potential bloodshed was averted when I broke into a Janis Joplin-inspired falsetto 'Oh Lordy, won't you buy me a diesoline Toyota; All my friends have got Land Cruisers; And this old ute she's got a busted motor.' Laughing at a white loony certainly eased the tension among guys who were ready to tear each other apart'. Andrew McMillan, *An Intruder's Guide to East Arnhem Land*, Potts Point, Duffy and Snellgrove, 2001, p. 138.
- ³⁷ Between about 1984 and 1994 I undertook research on Arnhem Land and events which involved interviews with Fred Gray, founder of Umbakumba community on Groote Eylandt but who knew Dyer after they met in 1934. Fred Gray, a gentle serious man, found Alf Dyer to be highly eccentric and extremely annoying. This estimation is probably confirmed by the CMS's initial hesitation in accepting him for missionary work since he was so dedicated and qualified.
- ³⁸ Dyer, 'Description of first ...' p. 82.
- ³⁹ Connie Bush was brought up at Groote Eylandt. She was uncompromising in her condemnation of aspects of the mission administration of the 'Half-caste' station at Emerald River. She told me stories of systematic cruelty and abuse by some staff mem-

bers (although not the Warrens or the Dyers whom she adored), that are supported by other accounts of the Groote Eylandt station at the time. Typescript of interview with Connie Bush, 21 June 1987, and informal conversation with the author; see also Bill Harney's description of first meeting his wife to be. 'As I watched those children and girls playing about the mission, it seemed to me that a terrible thing that these people should have been taken away from their parents ... The first time I saw my wife, Linda, she and other girls were hauling on a rope, dragging a jinker that carried a log of cypress timber for the sawmill.' W. E. Harney, *North of 23°*, Sydney, Australasian Publishing Co, n.d., p. 155. Connie herself was not immune from the ideological construct of the missions though. In a letter to Mr and Mrs Dyer she, ever the feminist, wrote: 'We need your prayers, and those of your friends to make these people give up their evil ways, especially the little girls who are taken for wives.' Letter to Mr and Mrs Dyer, from Constance Turner, Groote Eylandt, 7 December 1938, quoted in 'The Story of Groote Eylandt', NTAS NTRS 693.

⁴⁰ Barry Renshaw, Registrar, Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, email to the author, 21 November 2001.

⁴¹ Dyer, 'Early days ...', Dick Harris also reported that he 'found myself, quite often, particularly on Saturday afternoon or Sundays, climbing Argulug, simply "to get away from things" and to spend an hour or so – and sometimes hours – as a quiet time'. Dick Harris, op. cit., p. 28.

⁴² George Chaloupka, pers. comm. 3 December 2001.

⁴³ George Chaloupka, *Journey in Time*, Chatswood, Reed Publishing, 1993, p. 203.

⁴⁴ Berndt and Berndt, op. cit., p. 45.

⁴⁵ It is difficult to understand exactly how missionaries such as Dyer or Mary Crome viewed the Aboriginal belief system. There was respect for objects associated with ritual, particularly funerary. Dyer went to some lengths to record Aboriginal creation stories, but they seem to have been accorded the kind of status Europeans would give to Grimm or other folk tales. He wrote: 'The old beliefs of the Aborigines in Animalism is no match for [the] Glory of God and His creative acts in creation and Redemption.' Dyer, 'Early Days ...', p. 27.

⁴⁶ John Harris, op. cit., p. 729.

⁴⁷ Alf Dyer, 'Description of first party to Groote Eylandt', NTAS, NTRS, 693/P1.

⁴⁸ Dyer, 'Early days ...', no page number.

⁴⁹ Keith Cole, 'Dyer, after John 1884–1968', in David Carment, Robyn Maynard, Alan Powell (eds),

Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, Vol. 1, Darwin, NTU Press, 1990, p. 85.

⁵⁰ See for example: Mickey Dewar, 'Strange bedfellows: Europeans and Aborigines in Arnhem Land before World War II', MA (Hons) thesis, University of New England, 1989; Mickey Dewar, *The Black War in Arnhem Land*, Darwin, North Australian Research Unit Australian National University, 1992.

⁵¹ This is confirmed by Dick Harris's account. He joined Alf Dyer and Mary Crome at Oenpelli in 1929 and provides some of the best accounts of them and their lives. He noted, 'At the time [1929] there was no clearly defined "policy" for Aboriginal work, either Government or Mission', Dick Harris, op. cit., p. 18.

⁵² John Harris, op. cit., p. 701.

⁵³ Dick Harris, op. cit., p. 20.

⁵⁴ Keith Cole, *A History of Oenpelli*, Darwin, Nungalinga Publications, 1975, p. 18.