

12. The Land Grab: 1907–1910

Tensions Rising

Grampa tried to walk a fine line between his work and life in our community. But, as time wore on, being an advocate for our community and the broader Aboriginal community, and at the same time keeping the white community happy, turned out to be a very challenging task.

George Harris' Arrival

George Harris had arrived at Cummeragunga as a manager in the 1880s. My father-in-law Ronald Morgan wrote about Harris, remembering that Harris had given good service to the community for some years, raising his own family there, but he seemed to become more and more intrusive. Some people believed that he had never been happy having someone as well liked and as competent as Grampa in a position of power as the school teacher. From the time that the Protection Board policy began to focus more on controlling the Aboriginal people by putting in an overseer named Wilkinson from 1906, Harris started to be more aggressive in changing other things. One of the ways to do this was to stop white children from the surrounding area from coming to the school.

Request for a White School

On 10 February 1908, Harris and three other white men in the area, Bremner, Wilkinson and McLeish, wrote a joint letter of complaint to Peters Esquire of Parliament House saying they had already requested (three times) that a white school be established, and that each time their request had been refused. They asked for an appropriately qualified white teacher to be placed at Cummeragunga with Grampa because they said that three members of one family should not be the teachers of their children.

Investigation

Following an investigation by that area's Inspector of Schools, a report was provided to the NSW Education Department and undersecretary. This report revealed Harris's motivation for trying to change the school.



Cummera street scene from later in Grampa's life. Grampa in black suit.

Source: AIATSIS.

It stated:

James and his daughter [Aunty Miriam] are earnest, capable and enthusiastic teachers. They are thoroughly in sympathy with the whole of the coloured parents and children and their influence is a good one. The school has an excellent reputation in the neighbouring NSW and Victorian towns through the public entertainments given to raise funds to provide pleasure for the dark children.

Many of the white children who have passed through the school are in good positions ...

I am informed by responsible people in the locality that *Mr Harris is evidently jealous of the influence exercised by Mr James over the Aborigines* ... I am of the opinion that white and dark children should not be taught in the same school when the dark children predominate and am in sympathy with the petitioners for the need for a separate school. I propose to look carefully into the matter when making the annual inspection.

The report stressed the positive value of Grampa's work in the school, even though it recommended segregation. No action was taken following this complaint made by Harris and his friends.

The Everchanging Policies

This event occurred at the same time as the APB was deciding to change its policy. The Board was no longer composed of independent gentlemen involved in charities, but became entirely composed of public servants, such as officials of the Chief Secretary's Department and the NSW Department of Education.

Breaking up Aboriginal Communities

This Board, focused on saving money, believed that Aboriginal people were getting too confident and settled when it had hoped they would slowly disappear into the white working class community. So the Board decided it needed to get new powers to break up Aboriginal communities and send individuals and families out into the broader community. Aboriginal people like those at Cummeragunga who had some secure tenure over land, were among the most troublesome for the Board, as they were increasingly confident about standing up for their rights.

Taking Aboriginal Children Away

The other thing the Protection Board was already planning was a program to take Aboriginal children away from their families and 'train' them for indentured, domestic service. The Board did not have the power to do this until it got its new laws in 1909 and 1915, but as early as 1906 it was planning the buildings and staff it would need to set up a 'Training Home' for Girls at Cootamundra. To do this, it needed more income than the government was granting it. One source of income was the farming blocks on places like Cummeragunga and Warangesda, where Aboriginal farmers had already shown that the land could be farmed to produce a cash profit.

A New Land Policy

During 1907, while he was beginning his campaign to segregate the school, the manager Mr Harris announced the new land policy to the Cummeragunga Aboriginal community. He told them that they no longer had any ownership or control over the farm blocks. Instead the whole mission was to be farmed for the Protection Board's income – the original block holders could work on this farm

for wages or they could leave the mission! Both Diane Barwick in *'Coranderrk and Cumeroounga: Pioneers and Policy'*, and Heather Goodall in *Invasion to Embassy*, have written extensively about this period.

Robynne: Makes you wonder whether the promise of land was a ploy to get Aboriginal people to clear the land at Cummera just so that it would be ready for white man to take back and use. All the hard work was done for them.

To say that everyone on the mission was distressed is an understatement. Immediately after the land was taken back there were a series of confrontations with the manager. One was described by the local Member of Parliament in the NSW APB Report of 1908, as occurring because the Aboriginal people 'became a mob of howling savages and surrounded the manager's residence and shots were fired [by the manager]', a description which reveals a great deal about white attitudes. The APB reported in 1908 that, in response to what it called 'disappointment' over the loss of the farm blocks, the 'culprits' and 'undesirable residents' were to be forcibly removed from the station, a measure which it was able to achieve even without the powers of the NSW Aborigines Protection Act 1909, because, from 1906, managers had been given the power to charge any residents they thought were 'causing trouble' with 'trespass' and to force them to leave reserve land. The offence of 'trespass' was about being ON a Reserve for the Use of Aborigines and by that 1909 Act the management of all Reserves was vested in the Aborigines Protection Board.

The Sermon

Mrs Harris' Complaint

On Sunday 7 February 1909 Grampa gave his weekly sermon as lay preacher. On the following Wednesday, the manager's wife Mrs Harris wrote a scathing complaint to the secretary of the APB about Grampa's sermon. Among other things, she accused him of dividing the white and Aboriginal community, and inciting unrest about the removal of the Aboriginal farm blocks. Mrs Harris felt that Grampa had been: 'disloyal to the APB who were trying to bring about friendly relations between the blacks and whites'.

Grampa's Response

On 1 March 1909 Grampa wrote to the APB in response to Mrs Harris' charges. He listed each charge along with a detailed explanation. You can feel his anger, pain and frustration in his every word. He very cleverly, with skilful penmanship and quick mind, pulled apart every aspect of Mrs Harris' complaint, providing clear details about his sermon, his intent and how Mrs Harris had contradicted

herself. For it seems that although she was unhappy with his approach and performance, she still continued to attend his sermons after the fact. Grampa was very good at pointing out the farcical nature of her complaint. Eloquently, he went on to say that:

I am aware of the fact that the members of the board are gentleman and have taken up their positions purely for the love of the work and I wish to express my utmost confidence and appreciation impressed as I am with a deep sense of their good will and kindness to the Aborigines.

Walking a Fine Line

Clearly, Grampa was very tactful and clever in knowing what approach to take to ensure the best possible outcome for himself and our Aboriginal community. He knew the detriment that would be caused if he were sent away from the school due to charges such as those outlined by Mrs Harris.

Robynne: I can understand that Grampa may have felt between a rock and a hard place in that he had to be so very careful how he approached issues like this because one wrong move may have seen him sent away from his beloved Cummera. We have come across a number of letters where Grampa pleads to be able to stay at Cummera so there must have been a great deal of uncertainty associated with his employment at Cummera throughout his life there. He really had to tread carefully.

Grampa's answer to Mrs Harris' charges was backed up by a letter of support signed by members of the Aboriginal community. They did not agree with Mrs Harris' views at all. The matter didn't seem to go any further.

The Complaint about Mr Harris – Manager

On 26 February 1910 (one year after Mrs Harris' charges and two years after Mr Harris' complaint about the school) Grampa felt the need to write a letter of grievance to the APB about Mr Harris. His letter was a serious cry for help. Grampa stated in this letter that George Harris had taken a dislike to him approximately two to three years earlier (around the time of the joint complaint by Mr Harris and friends). It seems that this had deteriorated significantly over time.

Grampa wrote:

Mr Harris has been unjustifiably harassing me and thereby hampering me in my work.

In submitting my grievance, I beg to assure you Sir, that I entertain no feeling of ill will to Mr Harris, but am actuated by a sense of duty which

I owe to my Department, to the APB, to myself and my family and to the community in which I have been labouring for the last twenty nine years with a fair measure of success...

Mr Harris has repeatedly put obstacles in my way in relation to the school ... three years ago, noticing his coolness towards me I approached him with the best intention of seeking a quiet conference with him ... to clear away the misunderstanding that had crept between us, but I was met with a sharp rebuff.

Grampa then went on to pull apart the many insinuations and rumours that Mr Harris had put to the township, about Grampa and some of his family. Clearly, Grampa was very upset about the unrelenting harassment by Mr Harris and, after three years, he felt he had no other recourse than to report the facts to the APB, especially as now Mr Harris had started harassing Grampa's children as well.

Mr Harris' magisterial manner toward me, his reckless utterances, his unjustifiable insinuations, are hateful, intolerable and harmful and certainly unbecoming of an officer responsible for the social and moral elevation of this community.

He charged me with treacherously influencing the Aborigines here to petition the board for his removal and my appointment as manager. I denied the charge and quietly repudiated the stigma he had so unjustly hurled upon my character. Again and again he has spoken disparagingly of me to the people in the store and dispensary.

A witness had provided Grampa with a written statement of what they had heard Mr Harris saying about him: 'I will shift Mr James before long ... a coloured man is no good here. We shall have a white man here. I would like to get Miss Bellenger here'.

But whilst Grampa very eloquently explained his concerns, you can see he still has some discomfort in doing so, trying to calm the waters, stopping short of any ill will or harm toward Mr Harris. Grampa had evidently been pushed so far that he felt he had no other option than to now make a formal complaint against Mr Harris.

The Complaint about Mr Wilkinson – Overseer

On the same day as writing the complaint about Mr Harris, Grampa also wrote a letter about the station overseer Mr Wilkinson stating that: 'Mr Wilkinson is acting in such a way that will jeopardize my influence as a teacher here'.

Grampa had been provided with a written statement by another witness who stated that he had overheard Mr Wilkinson saying that: ‘Mr James is no good here, he doesn’t know his own mind, he knows nothing about teaching children ... Mr James is only preaching to gain sympathy’.

Grampa again stopped short of any ill will toward Mr Wilkinson (as he did with Mr Harris), by saying: ‘I felt compelled to bring these unpleasant matters before you and it’s with no desire to inflict a wrong upon Mr Wilkinson. All I wish is that he shall be given to know that it is his duty to help and not to hinder.’



Cummeragunga group photo. This photo is said to be the Maloga community, but I believe it is the Cummeragunga community given Grampa’s apparent age in the photo. He was 29 years old when they moved from Maloga to Cummera. In this photo he looks far older. See Grampa far right. Granny Maggie Nelson in white apron to right of centre spears. Grandfather Henry left of her with beard. Auntie Becky James left of him, resting her arm on her brother Garfield’s shoulder. Uncle Garfield is between the spears. Nanny Pris to left of him in white dress. In front the taller woman with white hair sitting third from the left of photo is my Grandmother Kitty Atkinson.

Source: Ron James.

Empire Day

Celebrations

Four months later, on 14 June 1910, an article appeared in the *Riverine Herald* titled ‘Cummeragunja: Empire Day and Opening of the New Public School’. The opening of the new school at Cummera coincided with Empire Day, and

there were celebrations with entertainment including a brass band -- and the Cummeragunja school children under Grampa and his daughter Aunty Miriam Morgan (nee James) singing choruses and role playing.

Highest Praise

The day included Mr Maloney, a white man from Barmah, praising Grampa and his qualities as a teacher in the highest terms. Mr Maloney told the parents and children that:

they should be proud, gratified, and satisfied to have such a splendid teacher for their children ... I know Mr James to be a splendid teacher, for I am the father of two sons now in the Education Department themselves. They are doing well, and are getting on splendidly. They had to compete with others, and undergo stiff examinations before they got into their present positions, and they have both assured me over and over again, that they owe their present positions in great measure, to the careful and very thorough grounding that they received from Mr James at their school, and for this we owe him a heavy debt of gratitude.

This was yet another example of how much Grampa was loved, respected and appreciated by all.

Cummeragunga Inspection

On 16 July 1910 officers of the APB visited Cummeragunga for a few days to inspect the station for a range of routine matters, including the inspection of the school, manager's office and dispensary. But they were also there to discuss more urgent matters: there was a petition from the residents about the new Act; there were Grampa's charges against George Harris and Wilkinson and there was the problem of how to make the newly seized farm blocks profitable for the Board. Following the visit, the people of Cummeragunga, including Grampa, had to wait for the findings. This report would take some months to be provided.

Stopping the White Children

Within two weeks of the inspection, and whilst still waiting for the report from that visit, Grampa finally had enough of the unrelenting 'harrassment' of both Harris and Wilkinson. Now their efforts had become more focused on stopping white children attending the Cummeragunga School and this was the last straw. So he wrote another complaint about both men to Chief Inspector Lynch, Inspector of Schools, on 25 July 1910 questioning whether Mr Harris had the power to stop white children attending the school.

He laid out the facts to Chief Inspector Lynch and included a list of names of non-Aboriginal children attending the school. He also reminded the Inspector that a few years earlier a group of men including Harris, Wilkinson, Bremner and McLeish had made significant efforts to have another school established on a sandhill at Mr Bremner's property, purely for white children, however this was not approved. Now that some of the families had left the district, Grampa felt there was even less need for a second school. Very little action was taken to either respond to Grampa's complaint, or to support Harris and Wilkinson's efforts.

Report on the Cummeragunga Inspection

The subsequent report by the APB, dated 3 August 1910, outlined the information the Board's officers had obtained on their inspection. Apparently a petition had been put forward by the Cummera residents about the new Act and Regulations. A meeting had been held at Cummera on 16 July 1910 to discuss the Act, and the Board noted in its report that: 'the main provisions of the Act and Regulations were fully explained to those present, who expressed themselves as thoroughly satisfied'.

It's hard to believe that our people would have been satisfied with a true and thorough explanation of the new Act which did nothing but disempower our people further, leave their children completely vulnerable to the APB, and see many children 'stolen' from their families.

Farm Blocks

According to the above-mentioned APB report, the APB inspectors were met on their first day by Mr Colin Campbell, solicitor who had written on behalf of a number of the farm block holders at Cumeroogunga: it seems some of our men had engaged legal council. However, the inspectors would not allow the solicitor to be present at any investigation relating to the farm blocks.

The Inspection report goes on to explain:

We drove over the various farm blocks and heard what those who formerly held them had to say as to what they had done ... improving their blocks and their prospects of successfully cultivating them. There does not appear to be much prospect of any of the men maintaining themselves on these blocks ... As regard to any work the men concerned have done on the blocks, we are of the opinion that the assistance and benefits they have received in the past have amply repaid them for their labours.

Charges against the Manager and Overseer

Whilst the inspectors were at Cummera they also held an inquiry into Grampa's complaints against Harris and Wilkinson. The report findings stated that:

An exhaustive inquiry was held into the charges preferred by the Teacher Mr James against the Manager Mr Harris and Overseer Mr Wilkinson ... while we are of the opinion that the charges are of a petty character and hardly worthy of notice, the inquiry disclosed that there is a considerable amount of friction between the manager and the teacher, and that the services of both officers cannot be retained on the station ... Whether due to the strained relationship with Mr James or not, Mr Harris has lost control over the men on the station and there is little hope of his ever being able to regain such control ... We are therefore of the opinion that a change is necessary in the management and recommend that Mr Harris be replaced by a suitable man.

Even though the Board had not taken him seriously, Grampa had gained a good outcome by firmly standing his ground and maintaining his professionalism at all times. It was clear to the Protection Board that Harris's domineering behaviour had now made him completely untrusted and unsuitable to remain as manager.

Ron Morgan clearly remembered this time in his book *Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cummeragunga and Its Aboriginal People* that:

But even before we say goodbye to Mr Harris (the Manager) we remember that the taking away of the farm blocks caused friction between the people and manager and there were always strained relations between the Aborigines who believed they were exploited by those in authority. Mr Harris gave long service on Cummeragunga where he brought up his family of five children and resigned his position there in the year 1910. (Morgan 1952).

Ron talked about the long period of strain between the Aboriginal people and Mr Harris on Cummeragunga, and how it eventually broke into open conflict, due to the loss of the farm blocks. Mr Harris had arrived at Cummeragunga at the time the farm blocks were allotted to our men, and was still in charge when they were taken away. As Ron saw first hand, the protests by Aboriginal people led to a further breakdown in relationships with Mr Harris. Whilst Ron states that Mr Harris resigned; the APB report clearly stated that he was 'transferred', so I believe he had no choice. It's possible that our people were publicly advised that Harris was merely resigning, in an attempt to help Harris to save face.

This also explains why Mrs Harris was so sensitive about any reference that may or may not have been made to the loss of the farm blocks in Grampa's sermon in February 1909. She knew that her husband was believed to have had a role in the dispossession of the blocks.

Complaint Report

Whilst the inquiry into Grampa's complaints was held in mid July 1910, Grampa still had not been formally notified of the findings months later. In December 1910, an article appeared in the *Riverine Herald* titled 'Cummeragunga – Communicated' about the handling of the Inquiry into Grampa's complaints about Wilkinson and Harris. It stated that:

Time passed on; weeks elapse. A rumour became current that a report had been received by the local committee and by the Manager of the Mission Station (Harris). Weeks became months and almost extended to a full quarter. Still the officer who had sought the inquiry and laid the charges was without the result and minus a report of any description. Acting under advice, Mr James (again through his own department) brought the matter under notice with a somewhat remarkable result, for within a few days he received two reports, and two reports which were by no means replica. The first hand bore date of 24 October from the "Local Committee, Moama", and as it did not contain information concerning the society, board, or club the "committee" localised, nor by any word suggest that such a committee represented anything or anybody, Cummeragunjan or Aboriginal; it could have emanated from the local committee of a cricket club, library, church ... but could scarcely be deemed satisfactory to either of the parties concerned. To give but one example of the informality of this unofficial official document, although a local production, and addressed to a man who had held a public position, and the same position for more than a quarter of a century, and a communication on so weighty and grave a matter, it was addressed to a "J" not "T.S" James.

The second report or finding, of the Inquiry board which was received by Mr James during the same week, was a copy of one issued from the Sydney office of the Board for Protection of Aborigines and was dated 8 August 1910, less than three weeks after the inquiry.

That one of the two parties concerned in the James-Harris inquiry, and also the local committee have been for weeks in possession of the findings of the board, while the other party was in ignorance of the result should be a matter for inquiry in itself.

The APB report of 3 August 1910 outlined the findings of the inquiry into Grampa's complaint and noted the intention to transfer Harris from Cummeragunga. But Grampa was only just receiving the outcome of the report five months after the inquiry whilst Mr Harris had it three weeks after the inquiry.

Grampa's Character

These letters of Grampa's not only tell us about Grampa's day-to-day fight for our rights, his rights and those of his family and the community but they also give us great insights into the type of man he was. As we read his letters we can just see the anguish in his words; the despair and frustration every time he had to write back to those who denied his requests, or failed to see the enormity of the situation he was describing. But still he would at all times be courteous, professional, always knowing his 'place' and never pushing the argument too far.

At the same time that Grampa was defending our community, he was also experiencing racism directed at him. Being a black man in Australia during that era was not easy. He was trying to walk a fine line in balancing the love and needs of his family and our Aboriginal community, with the demands of the APB, NSW Department of Education and mission manager. And we cannot forget the enormous expectations placed on him by the broader community, the judgment of the white man and the day-to-day challenges of balancing his wide ranging responsibilities.