

# 1. Introduction—An Imperial Man and His Archive

This book is a biography of Henry Charles Prinsep (1844–1922), colonial civil servant, artist, photographer, member of Western Australia's social and cultural elite, and family man. More cogently, it is about a remarkable archive, the orderly mind that put it together, and the drive to record, in words and pictures, life in the Western Australian colony and connections throughout the wider imperial world. It is a collection that spans generations and geographic spaces, incorporating a family heritage going back to the Hastings era of the East India Company in Calcutta, to positions of influence in London business networks and society, and continuing involvement in other colonies throughout the British imperial world, the Indian army and civil service, and the Royal Navy.

From his home in the young colony of Western Australian, separated from the rest of the colonial world by vast distances and irregular communications, Prinsep energetically cultivated his networks, constantly writing letters, sending postcards, photographs and drawings, and attracting information to himself as his correspondents responded. The result is an archive created by Prinsep and his extensive network of family and friends as they moved around the world. Through this correspondence, individuals become an imperial community of family and friends, incorporating disparate life histories, perceptions of life in Britain or the colonies, imaginings of empire and their place within it. The private life of a family emerges as intimately connected through vast and complex networks which transcend oceanic and national boundaries and survive long periods of separation. It becomes possible to explore transnational as well as domestic connections and the intersections between the public and private worlds of family members, and to better understand the way family, social life and cultural formation buttressed the formal institutions of empire. Prinsep's growing Australian identity was framed within his conception of a global network of British men, women and children who lived in widely dispersed places but remained connected by a common sense of Britishness, a belief in the superiority and beneficence of British civilisation and Empire, and thus the legitimacy of the world-wide colonial project.

## Henry Prinsep's colonial life

Despite the richness of the archive, Prinsep is an obscure, even contradictory figure in the narrative of Western Australian history. His entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography describes him as 'estate manager, horse trader, artist and civil servant', and records that he was born in Calcutta in September

1844, second son of prominent, wealthy lawyer and East India Company Advocate-General, Charles Robert Prinsep (1789–1864), and Louisa (née White, 1819–1855), daughter of East India Company Major General, Sir Henry White KCB, a distinguished officer in the East India Company army.<sup>1</sup> At the age of four, he was sent to England with older brother, Charlie Prinsep (1843–1898), into the care of boarding schools and holidays with an extensive network of uncles and aunts in Britain, while his parents and younger siblings remained in Calcutta. The death of his mother in 1855 and his father ten years later forced the young Prinsep into a position of responsibility, both for the welfare of his four younger siblings, Annie (1848–1932), Louisa (1850–1922), May (1853–1936) and Jim (1855–1942), and the affairs of the family estate, under the supervision of three old uncles, executors Thoby Prinsep (1792–1878), William Prinsep (1794–1874) and Henry White (1798–1872).<sup>2</sup>

In a series of articles published in 1955 and 1977, Western Australian historian A.C. Staples described the life of Henry Prinsep, his family 'dynasty' and his activities in the colony after he had arrived from England in May 1866.<sup>3</sup> It was his late father Charles's business interests that led him to Western Australia to take over the 23,000 acre family estates on the Leschenault Inlet and at Dardanup. Located near the small coastal town of Bunbury, 140 kilometres south of Perth, the estates were purchased by his Calcutta-based father nearly 30 years before. Charles Prinsep invested heavily in his Western Australian venture and, in 1838, under the management of associate Thomas Little together with an Indian labour force of over 30 men and women, a stud farm was established to breed and export horses for the Indian market. By the time Henry Prinsep arrived, however, the venture was already in severe financial trouble. His father suffered a severe stroke and returned to England in 1855, and could no longer finance the operation from his lucrative legal practice in Calcutta, while the Indian labour force had left the colony under the terms of their indenture. After eight years of increasingly futile efforts to develop a trans-Indian Ocean trade in horses and timber, in January 1874, Prinsep was forced to dispose of the properties after a declaration of bankruptcy. Thus Prinsep's efforts to forge a colonial career in Western Australia as an estate manager and horse trader failed, a victim of the depressed and cash-strapped economic environment of the colony in the 1870s and ill-equipped

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1 Staples, A.C. 1988, 'Prinsep, Henry Charles (Harry) (1844–1922)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 11, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne; Prinsep Papers, State Library of Western Australia (SLWA), Acc 1972A/3.

2 I refer to Henry Prinsep's siblings and other close family members by the common names that Henry himself used in letters and correspondence, which helps distinguish them from other family members with the same names.

3 Staples, A.C. 1955, 'Henry Charles Prinsep', in *Journal and Proceedings of the Western Australian Historical Society*, Volume 5, Part 1, pp.31–53; Staples, A.C. 1955, 'The Prinsep Estate in Western Australia', in *Early Days*, Volume 5, Part 1, pp.16–30; Staples, A.C. 1977, 'The Prinsep Dynasty', in *Early Days*, Volume 8, Part 1, pp.21–33.

to succeed in the unregulated ‘law of the jungle’ of colonial commerce.<sup>4</sup> The business structure that Prinsep inherited from his Calcutta-based father, with its reliance on Indian finance and contract Indian labour, had worked while his father was alive and could supply the finances to prop up the venture. But on Charles Prinsep’s death and the collapse of his Indian Ocean financial empire, the Western Australian estate was no longer able to compete, either in the domestic sphere or in the trans-oceanic horse trade with India. Without a ready source of finance and cheap labour, there was little that Henry Prinsep could do to succeed, regardless of his level of experience in business and commerce.<sup>5</sup>

The Prinsep family of Henry, Josephine (née Bussell) and daughter Carlotta (born in 1869) moved from the rural property to Perth, where Henry joined the colonial civil service as a clerk and draftsman in the Department of Lands and Surveys. Thus began a public career that lasted 33 years and eventually led to senior positions in the government of Sir John Forrest during the boom years of the 1890s, the period immediately following the discovery of large deposits of gold in Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie and the start of responsible government for the colony. For four turbulent years, between 1894 and 1898, Prinsep was in charge of the Mines Department, where he struggled to keep up with the rush of gold mining activity and was responsible for the initial development of an administrative structure to manage and regulate the rapid expansion of the mining industry.<sup>6</sup>

In 1898, Forrest offered Prinsep the new job of Chief Protector of Aborigines, and it is this role for which he is best known in the narrative of Western Australian history. He presided over a nascent government bureaucracy during a controversial period in emerging relationships between colonists and Aboriginal people. Doubts about the colonial government’s ability to guarantee the protection and welfare of Aboriginal populations led the British Colonial Office to retain responsibility for Aboriginal people on the grant of responsible government in 1890. After eight years of control from London, Premier Forrest succeeded in having what was widely seen as a blight on the reputation of the colonial government removed, and turned to his old friend Prinsep, whose recent administrative experience as Secretary of Mines would allow him to establish a new Aborigines Department, primarily to distribute rations to unemployed and indigent Aboriginal people around the colony.<sup>7</sup> Forrest, a self-proclaimed

4 Staples, A.C. 1955, ‘Henry Charles Prinsep’, p.52.

5 Allbrook, Malcolm 2012, ‘A Triple Empire ... United Under One Dominion: Charles Prinsep’s schemes for exporting Indian labour to Australia’, in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Volume 35, Issue 3, DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2011.649676.

6 Spillman, Ken 1993, *A Rich Endowment: Government and mining in Western Australia, 1829–1994*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, p.93.

7 The two men had been friends since Prinsep’s arrival in Western Australia in 1866 and had worked together in the Department of Lands. They also had close family connections through their wives, Josephine (née Bussell) and Margaret (née Hamersley), who, like Forrest, were ‘native born’ into families who had arrived in the colony during its very early period in 1829 or soon after.

'expert' on Aboriginal affairs, initially retained ministerial responsibility, but had little time for the portfolio and wanted it nullified as a political problem. He directed Prinsep to establish a system based on labour contracts and the distribution of limited rations to Aboriginal people who could not be absorbed into the pastoral industry. To Forrest, government had a minimal role in the management of Aboriginal affairs. The system should be designed to facilitate the absorption of Aboriginal people into employment in the pastoral industry, private domestic work and general labour, leaving the government responsible only for those who, for various reasons, could not be employed. Prinsep however, disagreed with his boss and the two men argued. He wanted much greater powers as Chief Protector and believed that Western Australia should follow the example of Queensland's 1897 *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* and tighten government controls on Aboriginal people. In 1904, well after Forrest's departure for a career in the first Australian Federal Parliament, the State government bowed to widespread public criticism of its management of Aboriginal affairs and pressure from the Colonial Office, and established a Royal Commission under Queensland Chief Protector Walter Roth. The resultant *Aborigines Act 1905* represented the culmination of Prinsep's public career. He left the civil service in 1908 for a long retirement in Busselton, content to leave his legacy to successors, men such as Charles Frederick Gale, who succeeded Prinsep as Chief Protector until 1915, and Auber Octavius Neville, who controlled government administration of Aboriginal affairs from 1915 until 1940. In Neville's hands, the laws Prinsep had introduced became a grindingly oppressive system which affected almost every Aboriginal family in Western Australia for the next 70 years, until the Government started to dismantle the legal apparatus in the early 1970s.

The long term effects of the *Aborigines Act 1905* on Western Australian Aboriginal people, particularly its powers to forcibly remove children from their families, became increasingly controversial as the stories and testimonies of those who been affected became better known. Court cases brought by members of the Stolen Generation, as they came to be known, a national inquiry by the Australian Human Rights Commission, and sustained pressure from a range of community groups, culminated in a Government apology in February 2008, just over a century after Prinsep had retired as Western Australia's Chief Protector.<sup>8</sup> Prime Minister Kevin Rudd told Parliament that policies instigated by Australian governments and the actions of those who had designed and implemented them had been profoundly wrong, had brought 'indignity and

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8 For example, *Kruger v the Commonwealth* 1997, in which a group of Northern Territory Aboriginal people unsuccessfully argued the legality of the *Aborigines Ordinance Act (Northern Territory) 1918*, which authorised the removal of Aboriginal children; Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Canberra.

degradation’ onto a ‘proud people and a proud culture’, and that the pain of forced separation on individuals and families had been ‘searing’, ‘a deep assault on our senses and on our most elemental humanity’. In the States and Territories of Australia, ‘up to 50,000 children were forcibly taken from their families ... the result of deliberate, calculated policies of the state as reflected in the explicit powers given to them under statute’.<sup>9</sup>

Historians have played a crucial role in bringing the stories of the Stolen Generations before the Australian public, and a number of detailed studies and oral histories have documented the development, implementation and impact of the policies as they operated in various parts of Australia.<sup>10</sup> In Western Australia, Henry Prinsep does not fare well in the history of Aboriginal affairs administration. To Leslie Marchant, he was an ‘untrained layman’ dominated by a powerful boss, but who ‘overcame his natural timidity’, became increasingly assertive in his management of the portfolio, and developed the administration into a ‘true example of Twentieth Century bureaucratic control’.<sup>11</sup> Peter Biskup described Prinsep as lacking ‘not only drive but also imagination’, and his tenure as Chief Protector as ‘singularly devoid of concrete achievements’.<sup>12</sup> Anna Haebich regards Prinsep as unsuited to the role of Chief Protector, apart from a ‘guarantee that he would pose no challenge to powerful elites’.<sup>13</sup> Driven by ‘Victorian morality’, a sense of ‘charity’ and ‘responsibility’ to the underprivileged and a ‘nodding acquaintance with colonial policy and practice in British India’, Prinsep earned neither popularity nor respect for the way he went about his job. Haebich says that Prinsep, increasingly frustrated in his efforts to deal with the issues he believed important, focussed on the internal management of his small department, stretching the manifestly inadequate welfare budget by introducing niggardly economies. Marchant, Biskup and Haebich all refer to Prinsep’s Indian background, and hint that this might have influenced the way he saw his job. In a well-known image from the late 1890s, Prinsep is flanked by his two Aborigines Department officers, clerk E. Pechell and travelling inspector G.S. Olivey, the three of them dressed in tropical whites,

9 Rudd, The Hon. Kevin, Prime Minister, 13 February 2008, ‘Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples’, viewed online at [http://www.aph.gov.au/house/Rudd\\_Speech.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/Rudd_Speech.pdf).

10 Haebich, Anna 1988, *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and government in the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900–1940*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands; Haebich, Anna 2000, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous families, 1800–2000*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle; Read, Peter 1998, *The Stolen Generations: The removal of Aboriginal children in New South Wales, 1883–1969*, NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Sydney; Read, Peter 1999, *A Rape of the Soul So Profound: The return of the Stolen Generations*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW.

11 Marchant, Leslie R. 1981, *Aboriginal Administration in Western Australia, 1886–1905*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, pp.24–25.

12 Biskup, Peter 1973, *Not Slaves, Not Citizens: The Aboriginal problem in Western Australia, 1898–1954*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, pp.53–54.

13 Haebich 2000, *Broken Circles*, p.213.

Prinsep with fly-whisk and solar topi, the inspector leaning on his bicycle.<sup>14</sup> The photograph is redolent of a bygone era; Prinsep more the stereotypical officer of the Indian Raj of his ancestors than an Australian colonial official, a relic of another time and place, haughty, detached and unburdened by anxiety over the protection of his Aboriginal wards.

The judgement of history has been much kinder to Prinsep for his contribution to the visual culture of Western Australia as an artist and leader of the small colonial art community. Art historian Janda Gooding describes him as the first professionally-trained artist in Western Australia and one of the few proficient in a range of artistic media, including drawing, watercolour and oils, portrait and landscape painting. His productivity as an artist was significant, while around him developed an art community which shared the ideals of collegiality and companionship, similar to the Pre-Raphaelite artists Prinsep had encountered as a youth in London.<sup>15</sup> In her catalogue of the National Gallery of Australia exhibition *Out of the West*, Anne Gray notes Prinsep's significance in the art world of colonial Perth. Not only was he a productive artist, he also thrived on company and collegiality, and used his organisational skills to set up the Wilgie Sketching Club in 1889. With fellow artists such as Herbert Gibbs, Bernard Woodward and George Pitt Morison and Daisy Rossi, the Society mounted painting expeditions into the bush near Perth, arranged exhibitions and competitions, and later evolved into the Western Australian Society of the Arts.

Prinsep's watercolours, oil paintings and pen and ink drawings are held in major national, state and private collections around Australia, including the National Gallery of Australia, the National Library of Australia, the Western Australian Art Gallery and the State Library of Western Australia. They show the landscapes of Western Australia as Prinsep encountered them: Rottnest Island, Perth and the southwest, the country around Geraldton 400 kilometres north of Perth and the goldfields. They depict the people of the colony at work and at play, excursions into the country and social events, many featuring members of his own family and social network. A series of commissioned pen, ink and watercolour images illustrate some of the great expeditions of discovery in the narrative of Western Australian history, the journeys of Ernest Giles (1875) and John Forrest (1876) into the central regions of the colony, and Alexander Forrest's 1879 visit to the Kimberley.<sup>16</sup>

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14 Haebich 1988, *For Their Own Good*, p.52. The photograph comes from an album of Henry Prinsep images, SLWA, MN 773, BA 1423/347.

15 Gooding, Janda 1987, *Western Australian Art and Artists, 1900–1950*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth.

16 The Art Gallery of Western Australia holds a collection of pen and ink drawings of various episodes from John Forrest's expedition across the Victoria desert in 1875, including an image showing Forrest and his party fighting off a group of Aboriginal people at Pierre Springs, and another of the Giles expedition under attack in a watercolour image 'Ullaring attacked.' A series of lithographs in the SLWA depicts Alexander Forrest's expedition crossing the Fitzroy River in the Kimberley and attempting to cross the Leopold Ranges, SLWA 85B, Volume 39.

As an artist, Prinsep had a significant role in representing Western Australia visually, as it grew from a small outpost of Empire in the south-west corner of the continent to a colony that penetrated the entire land mass within its extensive borders. In Prinsep's eyes, the country is both harsh and benevolent, and the colonists determined and resourceful as they take on and conquer all that this strange and vast country can throw at them. It is a land of great beauty and interest, with an endless number of fine landscapes to record in watercolour and pen and ink drawings. The explorers face enormous challenges in their efforts to cross the deserts and arid lands of the interior, north-west and Kimberley, as they confront Aboriginal people who occupy the lands they pass through and suffer from heat, lack of water and illness. But in the benevolent south-west, Prinsep saw a country subdued, as the colonists turn the wilderness into productive farms, towns and ports. The city of Perth grows and, in a series of paintings showing the Prinsep house and the streets of the city, becomes a place of order and development, where families can live in comfort and in harmony with their community. Some of the images Prinsep produced, particularly his exploration drawings, were published widely in the accounts of the explorers and included in national exhibitions, including the Western Australia display in the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition.<sup>17</sup>

Yet only a portion of the images were intended for public display. Many were created for private purposes, sent to family members overseas or in the country regions of Western Australia and placed into albums or hung as mementoes of family life and history. Prinsep returned to his youthful enjoyment of photography after he had been in Western Australia for five years, cleaned the 'hornets nests and cobwebs' from the camera he had brought with him from England in 1866, and began recording family and social life on film.<sup>18</sup> As a young man in England, Prinsep's photographic interests had been encouraged by portrait photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron, who was part of the extended family. Prinsep's Western Australian albums of black and white photographs in private family collections, the State Library of Western Australia and the Busselton Museum provide vivid portraits of family life in Perth and the south-west during the late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth centuries. Henry Prinsep and his family are pictured going about all kinds of activities as they age and mature over the years, enjoy picnics, outings and fancy dress parties. Also pictured are the private moments of affection between family members: a father reading to his daughter, family pets, the quotidian activities of reading the newspaper, feeding the chickens, and drawing water from the well. The photographs bring to life a family in its social context as it interacts with wider networks and encounters others in the small world of colonial Western Australia: the servants and working people, as well as the

17 Prinsep describes his efforts to produce drawings and paintings for the exhibition in his diaries, 3 June 1880, SLWA Acc. 2882A.

18 Prinsep, Henry C. 'Diaries', 19 April 1871, SLWA Acc. BA 142/201, 1423/904.

Aboriginal people Prinsep was particularly keen to record throughout his years as pastoral manager, civil servant and retired gentleman on his country property. Some were made into postcards, cabinet cards and cartes de visite, and were sent to family and friends in Western Australia, England and the colonies as part of the drive to stay in touch. In return, many were received and carefully placed into family albums. They illustrate a world of connection and interconnection, in which there were multiple ways of exchanging information and maintaining contact with a widely dispersed network of family, friends and associates.

## Histories across space, place and time

By bringing individuals and their networks into the historical frame, the Prinsep archives open up a history that is far broader than narratives of state and colonial development. This is a history that extends beyond national borders and geographic boundaries, which focuses on personal networks and connections rather than on histories of national development. Historians of the British imperial and colonial world have increasingly been prepared to consider the transnational, these 'connections across space', although they have used the term cautiously.<sup>19</sup> 'Colonial histories', Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy remark in their edited volume *Decentring Empire*, 'have in recent times moved beyond the old confines of national, imperial and area studies to explore how global webs of connection and influence shaped the historical experiences of both colonisers and colonised'.<sup>20</sup> Tony Ballantyne has proposed 'new analytical models, that recover the movement of people, ideas, ideologies, commodities and information across the borders of the nation states'.<sup>21</sup> Ballantyne insists that, alongside histories of 'aggressive empire-building', there must be attention to the 'unprecedented movement of peoples over long distances' that fuelled national development.<sup>22</sup> Histories of 'diaspora, imperialism, exile and conflict', of 'journeys as well as moments of departure and arrival, crossings and exchanges, movements, flows, and circulation', extend narratives of bounded national development by exploring empire as an integrative system, and the 'analytical space' of historical investigation 'to the oceans and the wild spaces and borders

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19 Armitage, David 2012, 'What's the Big Idea?: Intellectual history and the longue durée', in *History of European Ideas*, Volume 38, Issue 4, DOI:10.1080/01916599.2012.714635.

20 Ghosh, Durba and Dane Kennedy 2006, *Decentring Empire: Britain, India and the transcolonial world*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, p.8.

21 Ballantyne, Tony 2012, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's colonial past*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, p.26.

22 Ballantyne 2012, *Webs of Empire*, pp.99–100.

that divide them'.<sup>23</sup> In the words of Atlantic historian, Matthew Guterl, they have thus served to replace 'isolationist, cartoonish' images of colonial settlement with visions of 'a densely networked, globally interconnected' world.<sup>24</sup>

The ability of the transnational to transform the way historians approach imperial and colonial history has brought a corresponding increase in the volume of published histories which extend beyond the nation state to incorporate wider systems of trade, movement and exchange. Some have done this by conceiving of place itself as the protagonist in the historical narrative, considering the *longue durée*, and by adopting flexible notions of geographic boundaries and temporal periodisation.<sup>25</sup> In their histories of the Indian and Pacific oceans, Michael Pearson and Matt Matsuda are interested in oceans as places of connection and interaction which bring different people into contact rather than divide them. Theirs are histories in the broad sweep, with the oceans traversed over the *longue durée* by many different people, some leaving but traces of their presence, and others, such, as the British in the Nineteenth Century becoming dominant and making their presence felt over many years.<sup>26</sup>

Other historians have examined the way 'people, paper and things' moved around the empire, and integrated the colonies into a system of movement and exchange. Kirsten McKenzie is interested in 'empires as assemblages of information', and the way that information, including news of scandals and controversies, moved around the networks of empire.<sup>27</sup> Thomas Metcalf, in his 2007 book *Imperial Connections*, explores the means by which Indian colonial experience, in the form of legal and administrative regimes, British management practices and Indian labour was transmitted throughout the Indian Ocean region, to the colonies of Mauritius, East Africa and Natal, and the networks of transport and communication which sustained them.<sup>28</sup> Others have been interested in networks and the way they functioned and were maintained. Zoe Laidlaw, for example, found networks such as the Peninsular War veterans association 'inherently interesting' for their 'role as mechanisms consciously utilised by their members' for 'the transmission of information, or patronage, or money, through the personal connections a network encompassed'.<sup>29</sup> Durba

23 Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, Angela Woollacott, (eds) 2010, *Transnational lives: biographies of global modernity, 1700 – present*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, p. 4.

24 Matthew Pratt Guterl 2013, 'AHR Forum, Comment: The Futures of Transnational History', in *American Historical Review*, February 2013, p. 131.

25 Braudel, Fernand 1980, *On History*, translated by Sarah Matthews, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

26 Pearson, Michael 2003, *The Indian Ocean*, Routledge, London; Matsuda, Matt K. 2012, *Pacific Worlds: A history of seas, peoples and cultures*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York.

27 McKenzie, Kirsten 2004, *Scandal in the Colonies: Sydney and Cape Town, 1820–1850*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, p.7.

28 Metcalf, Thomas R. 2007, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean arena, 1860–1920*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

29 Laidlaw, Zoë 2005, *Colonial Connections 1815–45: Patronage, the information revolution and colonial government*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, p.13.

Ghosh and Dane Kennedy, in their edited volume *Decentring Empire*, emphasise the multiple networks that 'connected colonies to one another as well as to Britain and stretched across the geographical and political boundaries', and that 'colonies as well as metropolises, spun webs of empire from themselves'.<sup>30</sup>

Transnational perspectives on global, imperial and colonial histories have importantly brought new ways of thinking about biography and of using life stories. A life may become 'a stand-in for something else: for the nation, for the world, for the trans-nation ... not offered up in the sense of your typical biography, where the goal is to unearth the minutiae of the everyday, to plot a single human being's circumstance in all of its cradle-to-the-grave detail, and in doing so to explain his or her consequence'.<sup>31</sup> A number of recent histories, including Desley Deacon's, Penny Russell's and Angela Woollacott's *Australian Lives in the World*, Ann Curthoys' and Marilyn Lake's *Connected Worlds*, and David Lambert's and Alan Lester's *Colonial Lives across the British Empire*, have used the life paths of imperial men and women to explore the densely networked, globally connected world of the British empire.<sup>32</sup> Catherine Hall and Julie Evans have used the life of explorer, colonial official and governor, Edward Eyre, in Australia, New Zealand and Jamaica, to explore questions of identity, as 'imperial men' such as Eyre encountered different sites of the empire, each articulating 'different relations of power, different subject positions, different cultural identities'.<sup>33</sup> While England always represented home, Eyre spent almost all his adult life overseas, and his own identity came to reflect a life spent moving in and between different sites of empire and the metropole, an identity ruptured, changed and differently articulated by place and imperial expectations.<sup>34</sup> Eyre's life path, as Julie Evans suggests, enables 'us to see not just a brave explorer at the beginning of his career or a brutally racist governor at its end, but an individual whose personal preoccupation tended to expose, rather than conceal, the coercive essence of colonial rule'.<sup>35</sup>

As well as the transnational, the Prinsep archive also exhibits what David Armitage has termed a 'transtemporal' dimension, concerned with linkages and comparisons across time that are resistant to bounded notions periodisation,

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30 Ghosh and Kennedy 2006, *Decentring Empire*, pp.2, 8.

31 Guterl 2013, 'AHR Forum, Comment: The futures of transnational history', p.130.

32 Curthoys, Ann and Marilyn Lake (eds) 2005, *Connected Worlds: History in transnational perspective*, ANU E Press, Canberra; Deacon, Desley, Penny Russell and Angela Woollacott (eds) 2010, *Transnational Lives: Biographies of global modernity, 1700–present*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York; Lambert, David and Alan Lester (eds) 2006, *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial careering in the long Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

33 Lambert and Lester 2006 *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire*, p.65.

34 Hall, Catherine 2002, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and colony in the English imagination, 1830–1867*, Polity, Cambridge.

35 Evans, Julie 2005, *Edward Eyre: Race and colonial governance*, University of Otago Press, Dunedin, p.10.

‘much as transnational history deals with such connections across space’.<sup>36</sup> Tom Stannage, in his 1979 book *The People of Perth*, wrote about the inadequacy of histories which gain coherence only from ‘the dominance of a set of experiences or events’ which come to symbolise the national story.<sup>37</sup> Periodisation, the practice of dividing history into short chronological periods, disguises ‘underlying or fundamental patterns of social experience, and it tends to set on one side the private time scales and the rhythms of individual lives’. Regardless of the period, people of all ages and social groups went about the business of trying to lead a contented life, finding shelter and employment, bringing up families and coping with the difficulties they encountered along the way. ‘In all periods’, Stannage writes,

People grew old and worried themselves about ailments, Poor Houses, their children, their estates, and the afterlife. In all ages men founded institutions and clubs, bashed their womenfolk and each other and were tender to both. In all periods women coped with the recurrent experience of childbirth, raised families and ran a domestic economy, enjoyed neighbourly conversation and suffered grievously from *anomie*. In all periods, people drank heavily or little, acted ignobly or nobly ... In a single day or a lifetime a person might experience many of these things and much else besides—with transient and long term effects.<sup>38</sup>

Historians have increasingly turned to the private writing of imperial men and women—their letters, diaries and journals—to explore areas largely hidden in narratives of national history, including the voices of women, indigenous people and workers, questions of imperial and colonial identity, and the domestic and global networks people were part of and how they sought to utilise them. Private writing provides an avenue to encounter voices that, until the publication of volumes of colonial women’s writing by Beverley Kingston (1977), Ruth Teale (1978), Kaye Daniels and Mary Murnane (1980, 1993), rarely featured in Australian historical records.<sup>39</sup> In her 2008 book, *Australia Through Women’s Eyes*, Ann Standish suggests that this private sphere served a broader function than that of simply ‘staying in touch’; it allowed women the scope to express their imaginings of empire and their place within it, and thereby complicates

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<sup>36</sup> Armitage, David 2012, ‘What’s the Big Idea?: Intellectual history and the *longue durée*’, in *History of European Ideas*, Volume 38, Issue 4, DOI:10.1080/01916599.2012.714635.

<sup>37</sup> Stannage, C.T. 1979, *The People of Perth: A social history of Western Australia’s capital city*, City of Perth, Perth, p.8.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Kingston, Beverley 1977, *The World Moves Slowly: A documentary history of Australian women*, Cassell Australia, NSW; Teale, Ruth (ed.) 1978, *Colonial Eve: Sources on women in Australia, 1788–1914*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne; Daniels, Kay and Mary Murnane (eds) 1980, *Uphill all the Way: A documentary history of women in Australia*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia; Clarke, Patricia and Dale Spender 1996, *Life Lines: Australian women’s letters and diaries, 1788–1840*, Allen & Unwin, NSW.

and extends discourses of British colonialism.<sup>40</sup> Letter-writing, as Frances Porter and Charlotte Macdonald write in their introduction to a compendium of New Zealand colonial women's writing, 'was not something done to fill in idle hours as a kind of lady-like refinement. It was a necessity, a life line, part of the social existence.'<sup>41</sup> They are 'histories of 'inner lives' rather than descriptions of 'the outer life' and reveal 'something of how women made sense of their lives—in telling stories, framing events, making order out of the novel, sometimes chaotic and always unpredictable circumstances around them'.<sup>42</sup> As well as showing women 'interrogating their own feelings, exploring their own thoughts and reactions', diaries, journals and letters, gave women the scope to create their own accounts of colonial lives, which act 'as a kind of anchor for unfamiliar, unpredictable and isolated situations'.<sup>43</sup>

The private writing of families reminds us that imperial and colonial life was as much about domesticity and private life as it was about career and national development. Furthermore, it is cross-generational in its capacity to illuminate family identities as they develop over the generations, as family values, traditions and identities are formed and handed down, responsive to local circumstances but exercising a powerful influence on the way family members conduct themselves and conceive their role in their colonial or metropolitan lives. Recent histories by Stephen Foster and Emma Rothschild utilise the extensive archives of two Scottish families to illustrate family life and values over a number of generations. Foster follows five generations of the Macpherson family over three centuries, as family members move around the empire to follow their diverse interests in slavery, the East India Company, the Caribbean and North America, and as agriculturalists in Australia and the West Indies, while maintaining a strong sense of family identity and connection.<sup>44</sup> The extensive collection of family letters, documents and diaries reveals an imperial family life at its most intimate and private, as family members confront the highs and lows of colonial life over the generations and become aware of a rich family heritage. Similarly, in *The Inner Lives of Empires*, Emma Rothschild draws on an 'amazing amount of evidence' to illustrate 'an inner life of families as well as an outer', an 'interior, private existence of the mind and an exterior universe of events and circumstances'.<sup>45</sup> Her biography of the Johnstone family 'includes mistresses and servants and slaves, it extends across the frontiers between different kinds

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40 Standish, Ann 2008, *Australia Through Womens's Eyes*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, p.268.

41 Porter, Frances and Charlotte Macdonald (eds) 1996, 'My Hand Will Write What My Heart Dictates': *The unsettled lives of women in Nineteenth Century New Zealand as revealed to family and friends*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, p.13.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Foster, Stephen 2010, *A Private Empire*, Murdoch Books, Miller's Point, NSW.

45 Rothschild, Emma 2011, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth Century history*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, p.4.

of historical inquiry, in that it is a history of economic life, of political ideas, of slavery, and of family relationships'.<sup>46</sup> It presents a history of sentiment, in which family members communicate their affections, share their emotional lives, their achievements, births, deaths and marriages, as well as their inner feelings about empire, their own colonial situations and family lives. It covers long periods of time, following the generations of family members and the connections between these generations, the family history and heritage, and the way these values were transmitted and expressed by successive generations. In some instances, such as in Peter Robb's history of the diaries of architect and surveyor Richard Blechynden in Calcutta at the turn of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, the strong and frequently complex sentimental connections between coloniser and colonised are revealed. In Blechynden's case, it was his relationships with Indian women as concubines and companions, relationships which were certainly governed by inequalities, but were also subject to 'Indian agency and therefore dialogue'.<sup>47</sup>

## Accessing the Prinsep archive

The Prinsep archive in the State Library of Western Australia (J.S. Battye Library of Western Australian History) is an historical record of unusual depth that covers a long span of time and wide geographic spaces.<sup>48</sup> Most of it is concentrated on Prinsep's 78-year life, but the archive reaches back to the time of his grandparents, parents and the many uncles and aunts who had lived in Calcutta (Kolkata) in the service of the British East India Company, from the time of Warren Hastings until the middle of the Nineteenth Century. It also looks forward to the life stories of Prinsep's oldest daughter, Carlotta Brockman, born in June 1869, whose journal details the period from her childhood, youth and adult life in Perth and south-west Western Australia, until shortly before her death in 1960.<sup>49</sup> The archive covers the full range of family life and family history, including: the diary Prinsep maintained from the first day of 1866, the year he left England as a 21-year-old to travel to Australia; boxes upon boxes of letters from family, friends and business associates in the domestic sphere of Western Australia, Britain, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and other Australian colonies; postcards and cartes de visite; albums of photographs and drawings; family bibles and other information about ancestors and family members; poems

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.6

<sup>47</sup> Robb, Peter 2011, *Sex and Sensibility: The diaries of Richard Blechynden, 1759–1822*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p.213.

<sup>48</sup> The Prinsep Papers in the J.S. Battye Library of Western Australian History, SLWA, are accessioned MN 773, and include Acc. 449A, 931A, 983A, 1972, 1274A, 1805A, 2121A, 2140, 2882A, 3150A, 3304A, 3592A, 3593A, 3594A, 3595, 3859A and 7150A. The Prinsep photographic collection is Acc. BA 1423.

<sup>49</sup> Brockman, Carlotta, 'Reminiscences of Carlotta Louisa Brockman, née Prinsep, 1882–1956', State Library of Western Australia (SLWA) Acc. 931A.

and jottings; and invitations and attendance lists. These are interspersed with formal and business documents such as legal agreements and contracts, letter books, accounts and budgets, promissory notes and bank statements, shares and company letters, codicils and inventories.

This is an archive that illuminates the public and private worlds of a colonial family, from attitudes about the bigger questions of politics, race, religion, the affairs of the Empire to the domestic details and internal life of a colonial family, their sentiments and emotions, networks and relationships. It speaks of a world of connections maintained over long periods and vast distances. Of particular importance was the need to stay in touch with family, wherever they might be in the global world of the British Empire. Prinsep's correspondence with his brothers and sisters is remarkable for its regularity and depth. Over a period of 50 years, it follows the highs and lows of an affectionate group of siblings, separated by long distances but prepared to go to great lengths to maintain contact. His correspondence shows just how many people he was connected to and how wide his networks were as he sought to stay in touch, not only with family, but the many people he knew in Britain and the colonies of the Empire, particularly India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Many life stories feature in the pages of the Prinsep archive, some detailed, others but traces of the people Prinsep encountered over the course of his life: friends and social contacts, business associates, work colleagues and fellow artists, Aboriginal people, servants and workers.

The volume and depth of material in the Johnstone family archive lead Emma Rothschild to consider ways of 'connecting micro- and macrohistories by the history of the individuals' own connections ... to proceed encounter by encounter, from the history of a family to the history of a larger society of empire or enlightenment or ideas'.<sup>50</sup> Such a venture, the detailed and time-consuming work of connecting diverse communications over long periods and diverse geographies, demands the use of methods which can tolerate large volumes of archival material, 'new ways of doing old history'.<sup>51</sup> Digital technologies vastly expand the capacity of historians to utilise large and detailed archives, to consider 'microhistories' of the 'uneminent or the unimportant' and connect 'individuals and families to the larger scenes of which they were a part'.<sup>52</sup> 'Digitisation', as David Armitage has commented, offers 'dizzying possibilities for research over the *longue duree*', by allowing historians access to expanding 'corpora of text' and the tools to analyse them.<sup>53</sup> In an archive such as that of Henry Prinsep, the ability to copy, machine-read and search large volumes of family material, letters, diaries and journals, online listings and albums of photographs, expands

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50 Rothschild 2011, *The Inner Life of Empires*, p.267.

51 Ibid

52 Ibid., p.278.

53 Armitage 2012, 'What's the Big Idea?', p.15.

the utility of the archive as a historical source. Digitisation has increased the ability to examine in detail the way that Prinsep developed, maintained and exploited his complex web of connections throughout his domestic, colonial and imperial networks. It offers the potential to plot his networks to reveal their full density and complexity, and to think about the microhistorical. Yet, it does not eliminate the 'human' task of actually handling the archive, of making sense of the densely packed and frequently illegible letters, journals and diaries, of starting to understand the networks and connections. Nor can digitisation recover the simple tactile element of handling volumes of paper and the occasional surprises they may conceal, the locks of hair from loved ones, the pressed flowers, or little watercolours and drawings.

In researching the life of Henry Prinsep, the use of digital technologies expanded the capacity to locate his life within a larger network that extended over generations, as the men and women of the family pursued their colonial lives in other times and places. The ability to access the narratives of Prinsep's forebears in India and Britain through digital collections such as the Internet Archive<sup>54</sup> and online collections of libraries, art galleries and museums, helped uncover a detailed picture of the extended family's relationship to India and the East India Company. Previous generations of Prinseps were similarly committed recorders of their colonial lives in words and art. Most prominent was Henry's uncle, James Prinsep (1799–1840), whose remarkably productive and enthusiastic research and writings on Indian history, language and science, and his role as editor of the Bengal Asiatic Society's *Journal* between 1832 and 1838, were widely praised by his contemporaries and later memorialised by modern authors, Om Prakesh Kejariwal and Charles Allen.<sup>55</sup> Grandfather John Prinsep (1746–1831), and uncles, Thoby Prinsep (1792–1878) and William Prinsep (1794–1874) recorded their Calcutta years in personal memoirs composed after their return from India, while another uncle, Augustus Prinsep (1803–1830), wrote on social and family life in Calcutta and India and published a novel, *The Baboo*, a number of short stories and a detailed journal of his travels from Calcutta to Van Diemen's Land.<sup>56</sup> William, James and Thomas Prinsep were enthusiastic 'lovers of the brush', who joined other artists, including George Chinnery, in India to record the landscapes, streets and people of India, and to portray their social and family lives in the city. The next generation of Prinseps to travel to

54 <http://archive.org/>.

55 Allen, Charles 2002, *The Search for the Buddha: The men who discovered India's lost religion*, Carrol and Graf, New York; Kejariwal, O.P. 1988, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

56 Prinsep, Sir Henry Thoby, 'Three Generations in India 1771–1904', OIOC MSS Eur. C. 97; Prinsep, William, 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', 3 Volumes, British Library, OIOC MSS Eur. D. 1160/1; Prinsep, Augustus 1834, *The Baboo and Other Tales Descriptive of Society in India*, 2 Volumes, Smith, Elder and Co., London; Prinsep, Augustus 1834, *A Man of Sentiment in the Mofussil*, Smith, Elder and Co., London; Prinsep, Augustus 1834, *Theodore, or Coleels the Younger*, Smith, Elder and Co., London; Prinsep, Augustus 1833, *The Journal of a Voyage from Calcutta to Van Diemen's Land*, Smith, Elder and Co., London.

India, Henry Prinsep's cousins, followed their forebears in memorialising their Indian experiences. Augusta Becher, the only daughter of Augustus Prinsep, wrote a detailed memoir of her life in India as the wife of an Indian army officer during the Indian rebellion of 1857. Later, Sir Henry Thoby Prinsep and Val Prinsep, sons of Henry's uncle Thoby, also recorded reminiscences of their Indian experiences.<sup>57</sup> Added to this private collection is an extensive archive of other Prinsep family writings: public reports and letters from their official positions with the East India Company and later the Indian Civil Service, court documents, certificates of birth, marriage and death. Taken together, the records portray lives of intense activity, as family members participated in the challenges, triumphs and tragedies of the Indian colonial enterprise.

This book locates its subject, Henry Prinsep, in the intersections between the private and public worlds of a colonial family, and explores the relationships between these two spheres, accepting that an understanding of one benefits from illumination by the other. It incorporates both the domestic and trans-imperial elements of Prinsep's life, which operated in complex relationship with one another. As well as colonisers, families such as the Prinseps saw themselves as empire-makers who helped distribute and perpetuate the ideologies, imageries and assumptions of the British Empire, all of which they were well-equipped to do by virtue of their long colonial heritage. As the colonial official with responsibility for Aboriginal affairs in Western Australia and the architect of legislation with far-reaching and long-lasting impact on the State's indigenous populations, Prinsep was a central figure in the institutionalisation of the government's response to its colonised populations. His understanding of the role and the way he undertook its duties occurred in a historical and political context in which domestic concerns were complicated by the colony's membership in a global system of empire. Issues of race and colonialism continued to be central concerns of the empire and figured prominently in imperial media, including official documents, newspapers and magazines, as well as the private sphere of letters, drawings and images. These were areas of great controversy, and colonial ideas and practices were frequently and vigorously contested. Prinsep found that it was sometimes difficult to balance the two domains, to satisfy the demands of his colonial contemporaries and imperial critics, for he was himself situated both in the domestic and the transnational, certainly a coloniser but also intimately connected with a larger, more complex system of exchange, influence and patronage.

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57 Becher, Augusta 1930, *Personal Reminiscences of Augusta Becher, 1830–1888*, edited by H.G. Rawlinson, Constable and Co., London; Prinsep, Val C. 1879, *Imperial India: An artist's journals, illustrated by numerous sketches taken at the courts of the principal chiefs in India*, Chapman and Hall, London; Prinsep, Sir Henry Thoby, 'Three Generations in India 1771–1904', OIOC MSS Eur. C. 97.

Presented in ten chapters, the book follows the chronology of Prinsep's life against the settings of a British Indian family heritage, life in Britain and Western Australia. The next chapter examines the Indian world of Prinsep's forebears as it is portrayed in various family accounts, including their orientalist thought and the way that colonial government and attitudes to race and colonialism changed and evolved over the course of the Nineteenth Century. The perspectives of various Prinsep family members provide accounts and perspectives of life in India, including Prinsep's grandfather, entrepreneur and adventurer John Prinsep, orientalist civil servant Thoby, 'scholar-saint' James, merchant and artist William, lawyer Charles, and novelist and journalist Augustus. Chapter Three examines the metropolitan world in which Prinsep grew up and his absorption into the orientalist world of his Anglo-Indian network, before considering some of the debates over empire, race and colonialism that he was exposed to through family connections, and the literature and public imagery of the empire that was emerging in Britain during the 1840s and 1850s. Chapter Four describes Henry Prinsep's initial conception of his colonising role in his new Western Australian home, a period during which he was concerned with the political economy of empire and the potential of the young colony to develop trading relationships with India and other Indian Ocean colonies. Chapter Five discusses Prinsep's interactions with Aboriginal peoples during his early life in Western Australia, relationships which helped shape an ideological framework that was subject both to the influences of domestic priorities and the colony's place in a wider imperial world.

Chapter Six examines Prinsep's life as a colonial civil servant in Perth, a period during which he operated as both colonial functionary and private citizen. Chapter Seven explores his social and cultural world as a member of the colonial elite, intimately involved with the colonial project in both the public and private arenas. The environment Prinsep inhabited replicated that of the metropole and other colonies, and the people he associated with often came from backgrounds very similar to his own. Western Australia was thus connected to its imperial context, subject to its ideologies and mediations and the exchange of ideas and assumptions about the colonised others. Chapters Eight and Nine focus on Prinsep's role as Chief Protector of Aborigines and the ideas, attitudes and assumptions that eventually brought about the *Aborigines Act* in 1905. This was a period during which Prinsep tried to reconcile and balance domestic attitudes to colonisation with perspectives that were frequently critical of the state's policies. While he was absorbed in the complex and absorbing internal problems and relationships of the colonial outpost, his writings show a parallel consciousness of the colony as part of a vast web of external relationships, around which flowed ideas, problems and issues that, in effect, provided the raw material for unifying ideologies of late-Nineteenth Century British imperial

culture and heritage. Western Australia was not alone in its concerns and anxieties, nor were its responses confined within a colonial vacuum; it too was a part of a global system.



**Henry Prinsep in 1898 soon after taking up the position of Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia. An inveterate socialiser, entertaining conversationalist and considerate host, Prinsep enjoyed his social and cultural life much more than his work.**

Source: Author's private collection.



**Henry Prinsep, the letter writer, at his desk, probably at the family home, The Studio, in Howick Street, Perth.**

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 BA 1423/64.



**The young Prinseps circa 1862 at their father's home in Cheltenham. From left to right: Annie (1848–1932), May (1853–1936), Henry (1844–1922), Jim (1855–1942) and Louisa (1850–1922). Missing is the eldest brother, Charlie (1843–1898), who was in India with the 19th Hussars.**

Source: Courtesy of anonymously held private collection.



**This image, taken in Calcutta about 1850, shows Prinsep's sister, Annie, with her ayah, who may well be the woman known to Carlotta Prinsep as Jinny. She had been the ayah of Prinsep and his siblings, and was employed by him in 1870 on his visit to Calcutta to care for baby Carlotta.**

Source: Courtesy of anonymously held private collection.



**Charles Prinsep and daughter Annie in Calcutta, circa 1852.**

Source: Courtesy of anonymously held private collection.



**Henry Prinsep's father, Charles Robert (1789–1864), in 1824, shortly before leaving England to join his brothers in Calcutta. The drawing, entitled 'Studying for a Doctor', was by his sister Emily Prinsep.**

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 Acc 3150A.



**Henry Prinsep in oriental dress, photographed in Singapore in March 1866. He stayed in Singapore for two months to inspect his late father's extensive nutmeg estates, before departing for Western Australia.**

Source: Courtesy Ailsa Smith, Claremont WA.



**An artefact of the British Raj, Henry Prinsep poses with his Aborigines Department staff, travelling inspector G.S. Olivey and his trusty bicycle, and filing clerk Edward Pechell, circa 1899.**

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 BA 1423/347.

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