

## 5. Meeting Aboriginal people

By marrying into the Bussell family, Henry Prinsep became part of a nascent colonial elite with substantial land holdings throughout the south-west of the new colony. In March 1830, soon after the establishment of the Swan River Colony, four Bussell brothers had arrived on *The Warrior*, accompanied by Captain John and Georgiana Molloy, expecting to be granted land in the vicinity of Perth and Fremantle. With most of the good land allocated, they soon left for the outpost of Augusta on the south-western tip of the continent, where they were granted land in the heavily forested Blackwood River region. In 1834, the Bussells and Molloys relocated their holdings to a more fertile 3,500-acre grant at the Vasse, where they established Cattle Chosen and a number of other farms, and a new settlement, which they named Busselton. The leader and family patriarch was oldest brother, John Garrett (1803–1875), who, before emigrating, had studied theology at Oxford with the aspiration of following his father William into the clergy. The younger members of the family, some of them born in the colony after John had brought back a new wife from a return visit to England in 1837, widow Charlotte Cookworthy (née Spicer), grew up in the rural south west and married into other colonising families, such as the Brockmans, who had similarly extensive agricultural interests on the Swan River and at the Warren, about 90 kilometres south-east of Busselton.<sup>1</sup> By the time Henry Prinsep arrived, there was already the beginnings of a colonial gentry in the new colony, a small group of families who held much of the good land and whose influence in the colony continued through the activities of their children.

John Garrett Bussell was an avowed humanitarian who largely supported the colonial government's policies of non-violence and benevolence towards the region's Aboriginal people. Yet his primary purpose as a coloniser was clear. His family sought to own land and carve out an estate exclusively for its own benefit. His humanitarianism might allow the giving of food, and sometimes shelter, to the region's prior owners, and might extend to good relations, even friendships, but not the sharing of land and its resources.<sup>2</sup> Family biographer, E.O.G. Shann, believed that Bussell 'recognised the white man's duty to provide for the black, out of the surplus his better use of the land would provide'.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, the Noongar traditional owners were troublesome, untrustworthy and of limited value to the colonial project, but Bussell also respected and often

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1 Carmody, Freda Vines 1966, 'John Garrett Bussell', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 1, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

2 Shann, E.O.G. 1926, *Cattle Chosen: The story of the first group settlement in Western Australia, 1829–1841*, Oxford University Press, London, p.99.

3 Ibid., p.92.

depended on them for their knowledge of the country.<sup>4</sup> Bussell wrote of his fear of encountering Aboriginal people in the bush: 'there is something that makes one shudder when he crosses unawares in his path the naked "lord of the forest"', but at the same time, he eulogised their willingness to guide him to water.<sup>5</sup> Despite what he believed to be their innate deficiencies, Bussell believed they were capable of eventually benefiting from British civilisation and, in the process, growing to be useful labourers for the mission of colonisation. Once their initial opposition to colonisation had been overcome, the process of civilisation could proceed through the agency of local relationships based on patronage, loyalty and labour.

Like his father-in-law, Prinsep believed the status of coloniser carried a duty to dispense Christian teaching, benevolence and patronage, and to assist Aboriginal families by distributing blankets, clothes and food, and by raising funds for orphanages and schools. Colonisation had devastated Aboriginal societies, and compensation was due, but this was to be solely on the terms of the coloniser, in the form of missionary activity and rations.<sup>6</sup> Since 1835, there had been pressure within the colony for official support of missionaries. An early colonial official, Frederick Chidley Irwin, believed that 'a formal treaty' should be negotiated 'as a measure of healing and pacification'. Calling for the Church Missionary Society in England to send a missionary to Western Australia, he lamented Australia's poor treatment of Aboriginal peoples: 'Not only has Australia ... experienced none of those compensatory results ... but, on the contrary, evils which are of rare occurrence in colonisation—evils the most inflicting and appalling have been—thoughtlessly it is hoped, inflicted.'<sup>7</sup> In 1882, Church of England Bishop, Mathew Blagden Hale, a friend of the Prinseps, declared the 'solemn obligation' of the coloniser to impart to Aboriginal people 'the blessings of Christianity':

These aborigines have suffered grievous wrong at our hands. If they were poor and destitute before we came amongst them, their destitution and misery have been enormously increased by our intrusion ... We have in short, in a variety of ways, increased their suffering, and made

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4 Contemporary south-western Aboriginal peoples identify and refer to themselves collectively as Noongars, which is pronounced and spelled in various ways according to particular regions. This convention is followed throughout this book. Within the culturally contiguous south-western Noongar block, a number of interrelated groups are recognised, although terminologies vary considerably. The language group of the south-western coastal area from Augusta to Bunbury is widely known as Wardandi, the coast and hinterland from Bunbury north to Mandurah and Pinjarra is Binjarub, and the Perth region Wajuk. Thieberger, Nicholas 1993, *Handbook of Aboriginal Languages South of the Kimberley Region*, Department of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra.

5 Shann 1926, *Cattle Chosen*, p.56.

6 Haebich, Anna 2000, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous families, 1800–2000*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, pp.166–7; Attwood, Bain 1989, *The Making of the Aborigines*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p.82.

7 Irwin, F.C. 1835, 'The State and Position of Western Australia: commonly called the Swan River Settlement', cited in Bruce Kaye (ed.), *Anglicanism in Australia: A history*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, pp.227, 340.

their lot in life more miserable than it was before ... it must be our duty to impart this blessing to those who are here at our very doors, and to whom we owe a heavy debt of reparation.<sup>8</sup>

This obligation, however, did not undermine the basis of colonisation, nor the means necessary to secure the land required for the colonial project. Even a mild-mannered and polite young man such as Henry Prinsep acknowledged that force might be necessary to induce Aboriginal people to accept that colonisation would be to their ultimate benefit, that initial conflict and violence might be an inevitable phase on the path to eventual pacification and civilisation. Like children, Aboriginal people were in need of guidance and firmness before they would understand that colonisation was in their best interests. If, because of their 'innate deficiencies', they eventually proved incapable of benefitting from British civilisation, then this was part of the 'inexorable laws of natural selection', their extinction sad but inevitable.<sup>9</sup>

Although the Colonial Office and early Australian governors in Western Australia, including Stirling, warned settlers to avoid violence against Aboriginal peoples, populations throughout Australia declined drastically in the aftermath of colonisation. In the face of widespread evidence of the failure of policies of non-violence, humanitarians deplored aggression against Aboriginal people, but were 'unwilling to cease or radically amend the colonisation project', instead accepting population decline as an inevitable part of colonisation.<sup>10</sup> The 'silent condoning, sometimes agonised acceptance' of the 'rhetoric of Indigenous decline' drowned out other options, such as negotiating the use and ownership of land. These were 'choices they were not prepared to entertain because they fundamentally approved of the civilising process in which they were engaged'.<sup>11</sup> The 'primary logic' of settler colonialism rested on the elimination of the Aboriginal presence, an imperative that undercut the 'redemptive hope' of humanitarians and liberals that indigenous peoples would eventually assimilate to the structures and imperatives of the coloniser. Liberal and humanitarian concerns over the decline of Aboriginal populations in the Australian settler colonisation process were 'much less altruistic than much current white Australian historiography has tended to assume', as they operated within a context that sought to better manage colonisation, to 'make it more godly, liberal, profitable and populous, hopefully the sexual division of labour and avoiding prodigious waste of "native" life'.<sup>12</sup> The decimation of indigenous populations at the hands of colonisation

8 Hale, Mathew Blagden, 1882, 'The Responsibility of the Church of England as Regards the Aborigines of Australia, the Chinese, and the Polynesians', in *Supplement to the Church of England Messenger and Ecclesiastical Gazette for the Dioceses of Melbourne and Ballarat*, 23 December 1883, pp.20–1.

9 Attwood, Bain 1989, *The Making of the Aborigines*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp.87–8, p.6.

10 Ibid., p.29.

11 Ibid.

12 Kociumbas, Jan 2004, 'Genocide and Modernity in Colonial Australia, 1788–1850', in A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier violence and stolen indigenous children in Australian history*, Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, p.90.

thus came to be seen, not as a consequence of colonisation and dispossession, but of the immorality of the lower classes of white and the assumed moral debasement of Aboriginal peoples.

Contradictory as they were, such views found expression later in Prinsep's life when he assumed official responsibility for the colony's Aboriginal policy in 1898. He never questioned the morality of the colonising project, his humanitarian principles dictating that dispossession was necessary in order to bring the benefits of civilisation and modernisation to Aboriginal peoples. His concerns were not the destruction of Aboriginal societies, but the incapacity of Aboriginal peoples to benefit because of their own deficiencies and the debasing influence of white lower classes. Colonisation was the province of gentleman and ladies with the necessary codes of morality and chivalry to bring Aboriginal people to a state of enlightenment. Colonisation could and probably would result in their extinction, but the responsibility of colonisers was to mollify its worst excesses and look after those indigenous peoples who, because of their deficiencies, were its unintended and helpless victims.

## **'Fatigue, fear and anxiety'**

After the establishment of the Swan River Colony in June 1829, government policies sought to simultaneously guarantee Aboriginal rights of protection under British rule of law and the proprietary rights of the colonisers. What Biskup termed the 'twin design' of colonial policy was intended to promote imperial commercial interests while 'imparting the blessings of civilisation' to the indigenous people through the propagation of Christianity.<sup>13</sup> In his proclamation speech, founding Governor James Stirling stressed that colonists behaving in a 'fraudulent, cruel, or felonious manner towards the aboriginal inhabitants of this country ... will be liable to be prosecuted and tried for the offence as if the same had been committed against any others of His Majesty's subjects'. At the same time, anticipating 'attacks of hostile native tribes', he ordered all male colonists between the ages of 15 and 50 to enrol in a militia 'to assist His Majesty's regular troops in the defence of the lives and property of the inhabitants of the territory'.<sup>14</sup> During the early years of the colony, there was considerable conflict between Aboriginal populations and colonisers, often backed up by members of the small military force, the 63rd Regiment.<sup>15</sup> Colonists

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13 Biskup, Peter 1973, *Not Slaves, Not Citizens: The Aboriginal problem in Western Australia, 1898–1954*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, p.11.

14 Kimberly, W.B. 1897, *History of Western Australia: A narrative of her past, together with biographies of her leading men*, F.W. Niven and Co., Melbourne, p.41.

15 Carter, Bevan 2005, *Nyungah Land: Records of the invasion and theft of Aboriginal land on the Swan River, 1829–1850*, Black History Series, Swan Valley Nyungah Community, Perth.



were, in effect, encouraged to defend themselves and their property, and, by early 1833, Government Resident in Perth John Morgan made it known that firearms were available from his office to inflict 'prompt and heavy punishment on the natives, should their conduct at any time be considered to deserve it.'<sup>16</sup>

The first half of 1833, while Stirling was absent in England, pleading the colony's case for greater support from the Colonial Office, was a particularly traumatic time for the new colony, as the Wajuk Noongar traditional owners resisted their dispossession ever more fiercely. In May, Midgegooroo, Munday and Yagan, three of the leading Wajuk men, were declared outlaws by Lieutenant Governor Irwin, who offered a reward for their capture, 'dead or alive'.<sup>17</sup> Within a few weeks, Midgegooroo was captured and executed without trial by a military firing squad. Soon after, his son Yagan was shot by a 16-year-old boy. The killing of Yagan was celebrated by the colonists, who believed that his death marked the end of resistance and harassment by the traditional owners. He had been one of the most notable of the Perth Noongars during the first three years of the colony, 'tall, slender and well fashioned ... of pleasing countenance', and was apparently prepared to accept the new colonial regime and act as a broker between the colonial government and his people. 'No meeting was complete without him', according to an anonymous correspondent to the *Western Mail* in 1915, 'and no dinner party could take place without a song and a dance from Yagan'.<sup>18</sup> His seemingly inexplicable transformation from 'friend' of the colonisers to an implacable and brutal enemy confirmed what many Swan River colonists had long assumed: Yagan's abandonment of his 'thin veneer of civilisation' showed there was no prospect of coexistence with a people so incapable of benefiting from British colonisation.<sup>19</sup> One year later, the colonial government confirmed its stance of official intolerance to Noongar resistance when it ruthlessly attacked the Binjareb Noongar people, the so-called 'Murray tribes', whose traditional lands lay 90 kilometres south of Perth. James Stirling joined a combined military and civilian posse to attack a riverside camp of about 70 people near the small outpost of Pinjarra, killing between 25 and 30 men, women and children in a dawn raid.<sup>20</sup>

16 Stannage, C.T. 1979, *The People of Perth: A social history of Western Australia's capital city*, City of Perth, Perth, p.41.

17 *Perth Gazette*, 4 May 4 1833.

18 *Western Mail*, 16 July 1915.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Perth Gazette*, 1 Nov 1834. A website created by contemporary Binjareb Noongar people lists the names of 21 people killed at Pinjarra, and includes detailed archival information on the massacre: <http://www.pinjarramassacresite.com/>. See also, Biskup 1973, *Not Slaves, Not Citizens*, p.8; Green, Neville 1984, *Broken Spears: Aborigines and Europeans in the southwest of Australia*, Focus Education Services, Perth, pp.71–8; Fletcher, Christine 1984, 'The Battle for Pinjarra: A revisionist view', in Bob Reece and Tom Stannage (eds.), *Studies in Western Australian History*, Issue 8: European–Aboriginal Relations in Western Australian History, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, pp.1–6.

To landholding families such as the Bussells, who were 200 kilometres from the seat of colonial government, the killing of the Perth Aboriginal leaders and the massacre at Pinjarra were evidence that their views and concerns were finally being heeded. To Charles Bussell, violent retribution was the only way to counter Aboriginal harassment. Like many colonisers, he was critical of the benevolent policies of the colonial government, which allowed 'offenders to escape ... exciting a wild and savage population to further acts of revenge and bloodshed'. In 1837, he wrote approvingly that the change in tactics at Pinjarra had guaranteed the security of the colonists. 'The natives', he argued, had only got what they deserved. They had 'kissed the rod by which they have been scourged, and the white is permitted to walk unarmed and unharmed through scenes which have witnessed repeated murders of his unfortunate countrymen'.<sup>21</sup> The government's previous refusal to allow colonisers to punish local Wardandi people for attacks on property, he argued, imposed unbearable hardships and anxieties on the family enterprise. 'How will all these wars and rumours end?', Bessie Bussell wondered in an 1835 letter to an aunt in England. 'The natives completely beset us':

They nearly drive me out of my mind. I am obliged to stand around and watch them, and when I am able to return to my lawful labours I find myself thoroughly tired ... To me now it seems sacrilege to breathe the name of native in an hour of rest, it is so fraught with fatigue, fear and anxiety.<sup>22</sup>

The conflict between the Bussells and Wardandi traditional owners escalated over the next four years, as the family increasingly adopted harsh tactics to stop Wardandi from visiting their farms and imposed their own punishments for the theft of flour, potatoes and attacks on livestock and property. As well as firing on intruders, the brothers increasingly resorted to taking hostages, on one occasion holding a 'little girl', on another, four women and a child.<sup>23</sup> In June 1837, they were involved in a massacre in which at least nine Wardandi men and women were killed in retaliation for the spearing of a servant. Bessie Bussell wrote that she feared 'more women were killed than men'. Her brothers, Vernon and Alfred, later 'went down to the estuary, and saw that the natives had been afraid to return and bury their dead. So they left their cows and came home for spades to perform this last office for them. They threw in the dirt and laid the sods carefully like an English grave.'<sup>24</sup> In a letter to John Bussell in England, Charles reported that 'the war with the natives had been properly conducted', and expressed satisfaction that so far no European had died, although the

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21 Shann 1926, *Cattle Chosen*, p.102.

22 Ibid., p.104.

23 Ibid., pp.98, 106.

24 Ibid., p.107.

family had been admonished by the government for taking the law into their own hands. After his return from England with his new wife, Charlotte, John used his powers as a Justice of the Peace to arrest Nungandung, a Noongar he suspected of trying to spear his servant Dawson, near Bunbury, but was ordered by Bunbury Government Resident, G.F. Eliot, to release him. In February 1841, after the killing of George Layman, a settler at Wonnerup near Busselton, John put aside his humanitarian leanings to join a posse. At least seven Wardandi were killed 'in the confusion', and a number of others were wounded.<sup>25</sup> In his monumental 1897 volume, *History of Western Australia*, American freelance-historian Warren Bert Kimberly called this 'one of the most bloodthirsty deeds ever committed by Englishmen':

The soldiers and settlers ... surrounded the black men on the sand patch. There was now no escape for the fugitives, and their vacuous cries of terror mingled with the reports of the white men's guns. Native after native was shot, and the survivors, knowing that orders had been given not to shoot the women, crouched on their knees, covered their bodies with their bokas, and cried, 'Me yokah' (woman). The white men had no mercy. The black men were killed by dozens, and their corpses lined the route of march of the avengers. Then the latter went back satisfied.<sup>26</sup>

Bussell letters to family and friends in England portray their venture as a noble battle against intractable odds in a new country, a place where not only the country itself, but its occupants conspired to frustrate the family enterprise. John is the patriarch and philosopher, the 'mainspring of the whole machinery', who deals with the colonial government and restrains the impetuosity of his brothers, Charles, Vernon, Alfred and Lenox, who labour unceasingly to establish the farms, build the houses and protect the family. The sisters, Bessie, Fannie and Mary, deprived of the comforts of civilised life, become 'practical and active', face their challenges with stoicism and determination in the domestic sphere in an attempt to bring their 'savage brothers into some kind of order'.<sup>27</sup> Almost absent are the perspectives of the Wardandi people trying to maintain their way of life, although Shann mentions that the family farm, Cattle Chosen, lay on a prime hunting ground and that 'like all humans', the Wardandi were 'tenacious of the land that gave them birth and being'.<sup>28</sup> The colonisers shut them out of their traditional lands and hunted out the kangaroos 'with their dogs and guns, making the game scarcer every year, and then objected with

25 Ibid., p.119.

26 Kimberly 1897, *History of Western Australia*, p.116.

27 Shann 1926, *Cattle Chosen*, p.47.

28 Ibid., p.92.

violence when the blacks speared in the open forest their horses and cattle'.<sup>29</sup> 'No doubt the blacks had been wronged', Shann concludes, but 'how else could colonisation proceed?'<sup>30</sup>

The absence of Aboriginal voices in the Bussell colonising venture is also characteristic of the records of the Swan River Colony. Some colonisers understood what lay behind the resistance and were surprised at the 'moderation and even kindness' shown in the face of the loss of the best Wajuk lands and access to game, fish and bush foods.<sup>31</sup> Others understood that violence was often a response to 'improper treatment ... rather than from a natural disposition to ferocity on their part'.<sup>32</sup> Using the pseudonym Philaleth, Attorney General and landowner George Fletcher Moore reminded colonists that they were facing the consequences of a venture that had barely considered the 'rights of the owners of the soil, of the probable consequences of that violation, or our justification for such an act'.<sup>33</sup> In his memoirs, Moore paraphrased a conversation with Yagan, a man he admired for his bearing and manliness, but mistrusted as 'the very spirit of Evil, as he is often considered in that light'.<sup>34</sup> Although he understood little of the language, Moore knew that Yagan was furious that the colonisers were taking their assets and refusing to share their food, asking him why, when 'we walk in our own country, we are fired on by white man?'<sup>35</sup> Yagan suspected that his father, Midgegooroo, had been killed by the colonial government, but Moore, outnumbered and plainly sympathetic to his arguments, denied this was so. Yagan terminated their heated argument by walking away, on his face a look of 'ineffable disdain' only to return to part 'the best of friends'.<sup>36</sup> Soon after Yagan's death, the 'Perth Gazette' reported that two of the remaining senior Wajuk men, Munday and Migo, met Lieutenant Governor Irwin in Perth, and spoke 'with a degree of fluency we could scarcely have anticipated', with the aid of an interpreter, 20-year-old colonist Francis Armstrong. They wanted to know 'whether the white people would shoot any more of their black people', and gave the names of the Aboriginal people in the Perth area who had been shot and those who had shot them. They recognised that their people might be shot for stealing white men's property. Although they were adamant that this was a 'punishment too severe for the offence', they promised that the 'quippling' would cease. They also undertook to stop spearing white men, but explained to Irwin that this had only been done to

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29 Ibid., p.120.

30 Ibid., p.111.

31 Berryman, Ian (ed.) 2002, *Swan River Letters*, Swan River Press, Glengarry WA, p.206.

32 *Colonial Times*, 29 June 1831.

33 *Perth Gazette*, 27 July 1833.

34 Moore, George Fletcher 2006, *The Millendon Memoirs: George Fletcher Moore's Journal and Letters, 1830–1841*, edited by J.M.R. Cameron, Hesperian Press, Victoria Park WA, p.235.

35 Moore, George Fletcher 1884, *Diary of Ten Years Eventful Life of an Early Settler in Western Australia: And also a descriptive vocabulary of the language of the Aborigines*, M. Walbrook, London, pp.159–60.

36 Moore 2006, *The Millendon Memoirs*, p.236.

avenge killings of their people or to punish those 'who had behaved ill towards them'.<sup>37</sup> Munday and Migo told Irwin that their people were starving because of the disruption of their traditional economy and the loss of their sources of food. Because the white man had taken their country, they explained, he was obliged to give them a fair share of its food. Soon after, the Governor established a ration station, under Armstrong's control, just outside the town at Mt Eliza, a move that earned the ire of some Perth colonists who wanted to see Aboriginal people excluded from the town boundaries altogether.<sup>38</sup>

The massacres at Pinjarra in 1834 and Busselton in 1841 largely succeeded in intimidating the Noongar populations, making them wary of taking on the power of the colonisers. When John Wollaston arrived to establish his Picton parish near Bunbury in 1841, at first he thought the local Wardandi people 'a singular and intelligent race—well-disposed towards the whites, who in general treat them with kindness: but indolent and sly, remarkably indifferent to foreign things and customs which in general excite wonder or curiosity in savages'.<sup>39</sup> Five months later, he recorded a series of 'distressing incidents' around Bunbury, Australind and the Vasse, but hoped that 'no serious result [would] follow' these 'accidents'. 'All this slaughtering of blacks by the whites', he wrote on 15 March 1842, was 'distressing and lamentable. And it is difficult to convince these savages that the death of any of their people is caused by accident. At present all seems to blow over with them and they are perfectly quiet.'<sup>40</sup> By May 1842, his opinion was 'much altered about them'. He no longer thought he should 'encourage them about the premises, unless they are employed. They are of too rude a nature to bear it.'<sup>41</sup> Instead, he proposed a plan to remove Aboriginal children from 'the baneful influences of heathen customs', and '(the greatest obstacle) the evil example of the white people of the common sort', and instead have them educated at the cost of settler families, who would then be able to employ them as domestic servants.<sup>42</sup>

Such were the limited options available to Aboriginal people in the minds of many of the colonists. Thereafter, relationships between the steadily growing settler population of the south-west and the largely subjugated and dispossessed traditional landowners came to be based on the harsh benevolence of what historian Mary Anne Jebb, writing on Aboriginal people and the pastoral industry in the Kimberley during the early-Twentieth Century, called 'pastoral paternalism'. Noongar families who had survived the initial onslaught of colonisation and

37 *Perth Gazette*, 7 September 1833.

38 Stannage 1979, *The People of Perth*, p.43.

39 Wollaston, Rev. John Ramsden, n.d., *Wollaston's Picton Journal (1841–1844), being Volume I of the Journals and Diaries (1841–1856)*, Paterson Brokensha Pty. Ltd., Perth, p.9.

40 *Ibid.*, pp.59–60.

41 *Ibid.*, p.82.

42 *Ibid.*, pp.82–3.

remained in their country were forced to learn 'the rules of occupation' and find 'a place that assured their survival'.<sup>43</sup> While the loss of land at the hands of the British devastated traditional society and severely disrupted traditional economies, Noongar families sought to manage and ameliorate the threat to their way of life as best they could. Within an ever-increasing domination of their world by the colonisers, it was still possible to move around their traditional country and escape, if only for a short time, the growing constraints on their freedoms of movement.<sup>44</sup> Henry Prinsep's rendition of encounters with his Noongar workforce hint at a parallel life, largely unrecognised by the writer, and at the strategies for survival adopted by Noongars in the face of colonial domination. Often this meant making oneself invisible to the gaze of an alien and intrusive colonial presence, as many people continued to live in the bush away from white people, while some took up jobs with white colonisers, continuing to live as they could within a new regime, doing their best to maintain their own freedoms and family lives. Resistance took many forms. As Noongar authors Kim Scott and Hazel Brown put it, it 'was trying to avoid conquest ... adapting different strategies to maintain certain values as others fell away. Resistance was merely surviving, and in such circumstances there must have been a lot of slippage, a lot of compromise and shifting ground.'<sup>45</sup>

## 'This strange young Englishman'

By the time Henry Prinsep arrived in Fremantle in May 1866, relieved to once again 'get among people all speaking English', the traumatic events of the first few years of the colony seemed well in the past.<sup>46</sup> After presenting his letters of introduction to Governor John Hampton, Bishop Hale, Colonial Secretary Frederick Barlee, and other notable citizens of the colony, Prinsep had every reason to expect that his colonial adventure would get off to a smooth start. Barlee offered him a room in his riverside home and made sure he got to meet all the right people. Prinsep encountered Aboriginal people for the first time on the day he arrived in Perth. As his daughter Carlotta recalled, 'old "Billy Barlee"', a very black old native with white beard and hair, poked his head in at the bedroom window and said "hullo" to him with a very broad smile on his funny old face. The old fellow was so inquisitive to see this strange young

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43 Jebb, Mary Anne 2002, *Blood, Sweat and Welfare: A history of white bosses and Aboriginal pastoral workers*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, p.121.

44 Haebich, Anna 1988, *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and government in the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900–1940*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, pp.1–6, records the findings of travelling inspector G.S. Olivey in 1902 that many south-western Noongars continued to lead a 'vigorous life of hunting in the bush' throughout the late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth centuries, interspersed with periods of employment on farms and stations.

45 Scott, Kim and Hazel Brown 2005, *Kayang and Me*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, p.85.

46 Prinsep, Henry C., 'Diaries 1866–1922', SLWA Acc. 499A, 23 May 1866.



Englishman!’<sup>47</sup> On his first Sunday in the colony, Prinsep attended a Church of England service in a bush school house, observing that ‘half the little room was filled with convicts’: ‘For the first time I heard the penal prayer, which asks for the punishment of all sinful men and wicked doers and that the sword entrusted to the care of the governor may be wielded with justice & c. I did not like the idea somehow.’<sup>48</sup>

One week later, Prinsep departed on horseback on the three-day, 140 kilometre journey south to take up management of the three family estates: Belvidere on the Leschenault Inlet, and Prinsep Park and Paradise stations near Dardanup. On his first night out, he was awoken by the alien sounds of ‘a native corrobarray ... a strange and curious sight to hear the cries and uncouth singing of the blacks round their fires, keeping time by slapping a lump of wood with their hands’.<sup>49</sup> After a tiring journey through ‘wild country, all the same’, he was comforted to arrive finally at the Paradise homestead, located in country which reminded him ‘more than anything I had lately seen of England’.<sup>50</sup> The next morning, he met some of his station workers, including ‘five English, one Hindu and two native Australians, Coolbool (George) and an object called Nooky’, as well as Timbal, Kitty, a young women employed in the house, and Tommy Cattle, who later became the main informant for colonist Jesse Hammond’s book on Aboriginal people, *Winjan’s People*.<sup>51</sup> Their responses to the new boss confused Prinsep, who thought them ‘funny fellows’ after showing little of the deference he expected of his employees. They would ‘always burst their boilers as it were with two big shouts of laughter for the first 3 days or so that I knew them’, this being ‘their way’, he decided, ‘of showing bashfulness to a stranger’.<sup>52</sup>

Despite this hesitant beginning, George Coolbul and Charlie Neeribun (‘Nooky’) became not only important workers in Prinsep’s initial management of the station, but a source of company, entertainment and sustenance. Through them, he met Aboriginal people who were independent of the colonial economy, living nearby in the hills to the east of the properties, who he could sometimes hear ‘howling and screaming a mile and a half away through bush’.<sup>53</sup> The homestead was visited by families coming to hold ceremonies nearby, and Prinsep took a keen interest in their music and dancing, learning from Coolbul how to throw a ‘kyle or boomerang’.<sup>54</sup> The hunting skills of Coolbul and Neeribun provided the

47 Brockman, Carlotta, ‘Reminiscences of Carlotta Louisa Brockman, née Prinsep, 1882–1956’, State Library of Western Australia (SLWA) Acc. 931A.

48 Prinsep, ‘Diaries’, 27 May 1866.

49 Ibid., 30 May 1866.

50 Ibid., 31 May–2 June 1866.

51 Hammond, J.E. 1933, *Winjan’s People: The story of the South West Australian Aborigines*, Imperial Printing Company Limited, Perth.

52 Prinsep, ‘Diaries’, 3 June 1866.

53 Ibid., 22 September 1866.

54 Ibid., 8 June 1866.

station with a supply of fresh meat, as they regularly returned to the homestead carrying wild game, such as swan or kangaroo. He attempted to learn the Noongar language, and wrote up a 'short list of aboriginal words' for clothing, livestock, water and food, language useful for managing an Aboriginal workforce.<sup>55</sup> Soon after his arrival, he ordered them to stop wearing their 'dirty kangaroo skins' and bought them new shirts, boots and trousers.<sup>56</sup> The transformation from savagery to worker for the white man appeared complete when a cricket match was organised between a team of Noongars and local colonists, who won easily.<sup>57</sup>

Coolbul, Neeribun and the other Noongar workers were excellent horsemen and stockmen, and Prinsep's carefully prepared budgets made allowance for their work, but at a rate much lower than for his European labourers. In 1870, Prinsep allocated 60 pounds for each European stockman, 36 for a 'native st. man', and 25 for a 'native helper'.<sup>58</sup> Labour became a chronic problem for Prinsep, and he had difficulty retaining his European workers, whose poor attitudes and 'surliness' towards their boss, along with their capacity to trade their labour for higher wages, meant that the stations experienced a high turnover of staff. Coolbul and Neeribun often caused him problems, being absent without his permission for long periods and frequently in trouble for drunkenness and fighting. Prinsep tried to assert his authority over his Noongar workforce by using his fists, tying them up and, on occasion, using a stock whip. The task of controlling workers who accorded him limited respect as a boss justified the sudden and unexpected resort to aggression and violence. This was a pattern of behaviour that recurs throughout narratives of British colonisation, in which are found conceptions of indigenous people being like children, who require short, sharp punishments to keep them under control, contradicting humanitarian principles of non-violence and equality before the law.<sup>59</sup> Men such as John Bussell and Henry Prinsep, who professed to abhor violence, were able to rationalise its use to control unruly workers and servants. They record what seems to be unnecessary aggression against Aboriginal people with almost a sense of relish and mirth, certainly without recognisable expressions of guilt or remorse. A man like Prinsep might appear, as his sister-in-law, Capel Brockman, remarked, a 'clever well educated, gentlemanlike young man', and 'not so strong and robust looking as our colonial youths', but he too was prepared to use force on his Noongar workers in order to assert his command.<sup>60</sup> This sort of violence coming from a man who

55 Prinsep, Henry C., 'List of Aboriginal Native Words', SLWA Acc. 3592A/73.

56 'Diaries', 15 June 1866.

57 Ibid., 26 June 1869.

58 Ibid., 28 October 1869.

59 One is reminded of John Borthwick Gilchrist's advice to East India Company recruits in 1809, on how they should maintain control of a domestic Indian workforce by the language of command and use of threats such as, 'I shall turn you off, as a good-for-nothing fellow; take care! Or the House of Corrections will be your lot.' Cohn, Bernard S. 1996, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., p.40.

60 Milward, John, 'Pioneers of the Warren', unpublished manuscript, personal collection, p.26.

otherwise seems gentle and mild in temperament might have seemed shocking to his friends and family, back in the metropole, but Uncle Thoby and other old Indians would probably have understood, for no-one knew better how to control an unruly workforce than the 'man on the spot'.<sup>61</sup> Absences from duty, the use of alcohol, or a failure to obey the orders of the boss might be punishable by violence, or threats to call the police and have the offender jailed. One day, Prinsep recorded that 'Neeribun appeared at sundown inebriated and got more troublesome, until I had to eject him forcibly'.<sup>62</sup> Another time, 'Neeribun gave immense trouble half killing his wife & c. I pummelled him, whipped him and at last had to tie him up, when he set a wail which he kept up for a long time most dolefully'.<sup>63</sup> On another occasion:

Coolbool was troublesome in the evening and I was hiding for him and chasing him with a stockwhip all about the fields. He called out for his spears but the other blackfellows knew too well not to give them to him. It was fine fun in the moonlight but he was too wary and swift tho' I very nearly had him once or twice.<sup>64</sup>

Prinsep's diaries hint at the complexity of relationships on the stations, but are framed by a focus on Coolbul and Neeribun as workers, and on their kin as exotic and mystifying but potentially troublesome presences in the landscape. There is little obvious curiosity in Prinsep's account about the Noongar people around him. The words or views of Coolbul and his kin are rarely recorded. They are simply 'funny fellows', valuable but erratic and troublesome workers. Prinsep was familiar with some of the Noongar kin networks, and identifies many individuals in his diary, but for him, their presence was incidental; they were simply 'there', a people without a history and devoid of family and cultural context, in Mary Louise Pratt's words, a 'speechless, denuded, biologised body'.<sup>65</sup>

After Prinsep's initial excitement about farming life, its complexities, difficulties and isolation started to weigh him down. Gradually he became burdened by debt, lack of income and the difficulties of doing business in the colony. 'I wish I had an adviser here', he wrote in October 1866, 'but I am lonely both in mind and body and have to think a good deal about what is the good ... I am looking for some great piece of luck to turn up under my very nose and keep my eyes

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61 The superior knowledge of the colonial man on the spot over the metropolitan population constitutes something of a trope in colonial literature, as noted in Chapter Three. Thoby Prinsep remarked on it in his *The India Question in 1853*, as did J.S. Mill, the East India Company Board of Directors, and John Gilchrist in his *Vade Mecum*. Prinsep, Henry T. 1853, *The India Question in 1853*, W.H. Allen & Co., London; Gilchrist, John 1825, *The General East India Guide and Vade Mecum: For the public functionary, government officer, private agent, trader or foreign sojourner, in British India, and the adjacent parts of Asia immediately connected with the honourable East India Company*, Kingsbury, Parbury & Allen, London.

62 Prinsep, 'Diaries', 30 May 1869.

63 Ibid., 22 August 1869.

64 Ibid., 21 July 1869.

65 Pratt, Mary Louise 1992, *Imperial Eyes: Travel writing and transculturation*, Routledge, New York, p.53.

wide open on each side of that nose, for other advantages besides luck'.<sup>66</sup> The 'great piece of luck' arrived in his association with the Bussell family, who were delighted when he married Josephine. His mother-in-law, Charlotte, was charmed by his 'energy and activity', as well as his 'command of means to carry out all his undertakings, with an agent in Calcutta to consign them to'.<sup>67</sup> By the time Prinsep entered the scene, the Bussells were well on the way to elevating themselves to the status of colonial gentry, acutely conscious of their role as pioneering legends and colonial history-makers. 'Josephine told me such lots about various antique Vasse heroes and heroines', wrote Henry, 'that we have determined on the formation of a book of gossip in manuscript to immortalise the doings in older days, which book will be of great value 50 years hence and may be the Doomesday Bk of W. Australia as regards the pedigree of future WA families.'<sup>68</sup> This was a history which sanitised the relationship between the Noongars and colonists. Noongars no longer constituted a threat to the colonising enterprise and instead became the onlookers, 'funny fellows', sometimes useful, but more often a 'nuisance', their periodic appearances in the family records portrayed with cynical amusement and a sense that they were destined to disappear from the landscape. Writing her memoirs in the 1950s, Prinsep's oldest daughter, Carlotta, characterised the early days of colonisation as a time of 'very little trouble ... except when my grandfather [John Bussell] was away for a time, when there was some trouble from the blacks learning how good the white mans' food was, would often steal it'.

It must have been a great temptation to them after the life they had been accustomed to, a sort of 'hand to mouth' existence. There was trouble at Wonnerup when Mr. Layman was killed, but that was his own fault, because he pulled a blackfellow's beard, a terrible insult.<sup>69</sup>

Carlotta Prinsep's account conceals the reality of colonial relationships in a contact zone such as the south-west of Western Australia. A closer reading of historical narratives such as Prinsep's diary suggests that these relationships were infinitely more complex than their authors portray. Behind the imagery of Noongars as a people doomed to disappear in the face of a rampant colonising force, there are glimpses of a people seeking to maintain culture and family, and to develop ways of minimising the intrusion of an unwanted colonising presence into their way of life.

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66 Prinsep, 'Diaries', 22 October 1866.

67 Charlotte Bussell to her sister-in-law, Fanny Bussell, March 1868, in Heppingstone, Ian D. and H. Margaret Wilson 1973, 'Mrs. John: the Letters of Charlotte Bussell of Cattle Chosen', in *Early Days*, Part 1, Volume 3, Part 4, pp.7–28; Part 2, Volume 7, Part 5, p.59.

68 Prinsep, 'Diaries', 24 January 1869.

69 Brockman, 'Reminiscences'.

## George Coolbul and Henry Prinsep

That George Coolbul's name survives the historical records of the south-west is largely due to the records kept by Henry Prinsep. His name appears nowhere else, not in a dictionary of Aboriginal people of the south-west between 1829 and 1840, nor in genealogies recorded by Daisy Bates at the turn of the Twentieth Century.<sup>70</sup> He remains a misty figure, the reality of his life as a worker for the white man and how he was able to maintain his connections and responsibilities as a Noongar man being marginal to the matters occupying the attention of Prinsep the diarist. A closer reading of the interactions between Coolbul and Prinsep, together with an appreciation of the cultural and historical context in which they were functioning, suggests a relationship full of complexity, with Coolbul a liminal figure, fully engaged with his people's efforts to deal with the colonial onslaught. He did his best to work for Prinsep, but was unable to fully meet the demands of his employer and would be absent for days at a time, attending to family and cultural obligations. Prinsep tried to control his movements, threatening to have him imprisoned, using his fists and the stock whip to break up fights at the camp. After six years of a relationship full of complexities and misunderstandings, Prinsep reported Coolbul's death in a fight in 1872:

I found poor George very bad, the spear had gone right through him to the left of the navel. The women were lamenting and nursing him ... I sent Bejine with a letter to P. Clifton asking him to send Lovegrove and a policeman. When I returned I found Mr. Charlie [Neeribun] had decamped. I was glad of this because he had served us for many years formerly and I should not like to have been instrumental to his conviction which would only have been founded on native assertions. Poor George I think will not recover tho' James Maguire says he has known similar cases before with sorcery. [Doctor] Lovegrove and [P.C.] Slack came out at about 1.30 and we went to examine George, who was in great pain. Decided to send him into Bunbury. Lovegrove bandaged and washed him and gave him some Dovers powders to ease his pain and then we returned to dinner ... Mack went up to put George in the cart ... and returned saying George was dead. Lovegrove and I rode down to see the body and met a large number of about 20 natives armed with spears and painted going in search of Charlie. I told them not to spear him but to bring him bound to Bunbury or tell the police. We found

70 Hallam, Sylvia and Lois Tilbrook 1987, *Aborigines of the South West Region, 1829–1840*, Volume 8: Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians, 1829–1888, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands; Bates, Daisy, 'Papers of Daisy Bates, Detailed List', National Library of Australia, MS 365, Acc. 6193/A, Folios 97/473–465, 88/322.

poor Kitty, George's pretty wife in a great agony of grief and about four other women singing their dirges over his body. We told them not to bury him until Mr Pearce Clifton has seen him tomorrow morning.<sup>71</sup>

Prinsep, a Justice of the Peace, attended an inquest the next day and was keen to protect his other Noongar worker, Charlie Neeribun, his value as a worker outweighing the gravity of what appeared to the inquest as simply a 'tribal fight' over Coolbul's wife, Kitty, the passion of the protagonists fueled by alcohol and jealousy. The evidence of witnesses was that Neeribun speared Coolbul, but this was dismissed as only 'founded on native assertions'. The inquest exonerated Neeribun, finding that Coolbul 'met with death from spear wound inflicted by person or persons unknown'. There was no material evidence to show Charlie had done it, Prinsep recorded, 'tho' we all thought so'.<sup>72</sup> Two days later, a violent storm brought down a tree at the back of Prinsep Park homestead, and it landed 'where George and Kitty generally lay'. Later, Prinsep came across 'a lot of natives, strange tribe, on the road in the moonlight and expected to hear something about Charlie'. Finally, in April:

We were disturbed by Burman and Gippy, two native relatives of Coolbul, who was killed. They were in great agitation from mingled grief and wine, and swore Charlie's death which I strenuously warned them against. Burman ... mentioned having noticed some words flying along the telegraph wire about George's death, to Fremantle where he was, and when he went to the office, sure, the words were written down exactly the same.<sup>73</sup>

Prinsep does not mention that Coolbul was a keen artist, nor that he had supplied him with pastels and paper to encourage his interest. A sample of Coolbul's drawings was selectively assembled into an album by Prinsep after Coolbul's death, one of few extant examples of art by a Nineteenth-Century Western Australian Noongar. In a short foreword to the album, Prinsep records that he had employed Coolbul, who came from the Vasse, on his cattle station, provided him crayons and paper, and that the drawings were a selection from the 'very many' from their six years contact on the stations. From the limited range, there are only hints of what Coolbul was seeking to express in his art and what might have motivated him to put the images on paper. There are none of the notations or explanatory words that accompany works of other Aboriginal artists of the Nineteenth and early-Twentieth centuries, or of the native American 'ledger-book' artists.<sup>74</sup> Coolbul's drawings depict activities on

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71 Prinsep, 'Diaries', 7 March 1872.

72 Ibid., 8 March 1872.

73 Ibid., 7 March 1872.

74 Callaway, Anita 2002, 'Balancing the Books: Indigenous autobiography and ledger-book art', in Rosamund Dalziell (ed.), *Selves Crossing Cultures: Autobiography and globalisation*, Australian Scholarly Publishing,



a pastoral property with which the artist was familiar and which attracted his interest. They show white people and the animals and activities that caught Coolbul's imagination and with which he was involved, such as horse work, hunting and racing, and kangaroo hunting. One shows four horses and a white rider around a fenced yard, in which trees and possibly a waterhole are enclosed. The man is dressed for riding in spurs, red riding jacket, helmet and riding breeches, and carries a long stick. The horses are in silhouette, showing Coolbul's keen observation of the shape and movement of the animals. Another is a representation of horse and human at full gallop, the white rider in racing apparel, carrying a whip, the horse with a plaited mane and tail flowing. A pencil drawing shows a woman, probably Josephine, on horseback. The horse is majestic, its head upright, held firmly by the bridle. The woman is in full riding apparel, sitting side-saddle in full control of the animal. Another blue pastel drawing is a study of a horse's motion, showing Coolbul's ability to freeze the movement of the animal, while another scene, of a kangaroo pursued by dogs, shows the final moments of a hunt, the kangaroo on the point of being run down by two dogs, teeth bared and ears back, at full stretch.

Coolbul's drawings provide a glimpse into the way he expressed a British presence that, in 1866, was still new and strange, but becoming increasingly intrusive into Noongar lives. The new regime sought to control Noongar freedoms but far from being a population in the throes of 'disease and despondency', Prinsep's diary suggests that, in the late 1860s and early 1870s, Noongar families continued as best they could to maintain traditional law, culture and way of life. Ceremonies and traditional practices continued, people still 'painted up', moved around their country, and made and used spears and boomerangs. Families and travelers visited and camped with their relatives working for white men, many of them unknown to white bosses such as Prinsep. To Prinsep, Aboriginal people were primitive, of temporary but probably marginal value in the new white economy, their culture of occasional interest but little value to one whose relationship with them was based on his own values and religion and the assumed superiority of his own Britishness. The perceptions of those such as Coolbul, confronted with the challenge of survival in the face of rapid change at the hands of white men, whose ruthlessness and lack of respect for him and his people was all too evident, can only be imagined. Coolbul worked for the white man, but there is evidence that he sought to negotiate the substance of the relationship. The jobs he was assigned, mustering cattle and breaking in horses, he did well, but he, Neeribun and other Aboriginal workers had broader responsibilities to family and kin, which they were trying to combine with their new and imperfectly

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Melbourne; Sayers, Andrew 1994, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press Australia, Melbourne; Coyne, Cynthia, 2005, 'Bye and Bye When all the Natives Have Gone', in Anna Cole, Victoria Haskins and Fiona Paisley, *Uncommon Ground: White women in Aboriginal history*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, pp.199–213.

understood role as workers for the white man. The fact that Neeribun and Noongar people were working for the white man, and presumably were seen by their bush compatriots as able to intercede and negotiate with station owners on their behalf, also suggests that they played a role as cultural mediator between their people and the newcomers. Coolbul and the other Noongar workers took on the difficult role of negotiating interactions between the white boss, who now occupied their lands, and their own families and kin. Noongar men such as Bejine and Burman, who also feature in Prinsep's diaries, were not employed directly by the station, but came and went as they pleased, moving between the colonised world and that of their families, who continued to live in the bush.

## Fanny Balbuk and Ngilgie

Although some of the British paid lip-service to the impoverishing consequences of the loss of lands and hunting grounds for Noongar families, there was little sympathy and only a partial sense of obligation to provide material compensation. The prevailing response was simply to allow the older people to die, at times with a sense of mild regret, and to view them as artifacts of a dying culture, the last of their people. Demonstrations of Aboriginal resentment were viewed with amusement or disdain, as amateur ethnographer Daisy Bates's description of Perth Noongar woman, Fanny Balbuk, in the early 1900s reveals:

To the end of her life she raged and stormed at the usurping of her beloved home ground. One of her favourite annoyances was to stand at the gates of Government House, reviling all who dwelt within because the stone gates guarded by a sentry enclosed her grandmother's burial ground ... Balbuk had been born on Huirison [sic.] Island at the Causeway, and from there a straight track had led to the place where once she had gathered *jilgies* and vegetable food with the women, in the swamp where Perth railway station now stands. Through fences and over them, Balbuk took the straight track to the end. When a house was built in the way, she broke its fence-palings with her digging stick and charged up the steps through the rooms. Time and again she was arrested, but her former childhood playmates, now in high positions, would pay the fine for her, and Balbuk would be free to get drunk again, and shout scandal and maledictions from the street corners.<sup>75</sup>

While Aboriginal adults were dying from the impact of colonisation, their children were viewed by the colonisers as worthy recipients of beneficence. The records of the Prinsep, Bussell and Brockman families tell of orphans they

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75 Daisy Bates, 'Fanny Balbuk-Yoorel, The Last Swan River (Female) Native', in *The Western Mail*, 1 June 1907.

believed they had rescued, to be brought up as one of the family. Historian Anna Haebich has observed that being 'part of the family' generally meant 'cheap clothes, little food and no pay': 'They could train, mould and discipline the children as they wished', she observes, 'and, if there were any problems, they simply blamed the children's racial inheritance.'<sup>76</sup> After a childhood in the family home, these children grew up to become retainers or 'man Fridays', living nearby the family, on permanent duty as general farm and domestic labourers.<sup>77</sup>

Most of what we know of Ngilgie comes from Daisy Bates, who knew her as an old woman living at the Welshpool reservation near Perth, where a 'kindly understanding government had given her a plot of ground'.<sup>78</sup> Born in about 1845 on the Bussell property at Ellensbrook near Margaret River, Bates's almost folkloric account tells of her birth, 'just at the moment her mother was caught red-handed robbing a potato-patch, and her unexpected arrival made the potato-patch her ground thereafter, and she became an amusing protégée of the white people who owned it'.<sup>79</sup> Ngilgie 'became the pet of the family' and 'received the same education as the other children until she was 12, when she returned or was taken back by the tribe', as Bates put it, resuming 'the native life con amour'.<sup>80</sup> In 1866, Ngilgie married George Blechynden, a man described by Bates as a 'half-breed', and went to work for Charlotte Bussell at Cattle Chosen, where George also found employment as a shearer. Charlotte was ambivalent about Ngilgie as a domestic employee and was concerned about her adherence to 'native ways', even though she had been given 'every advantage and kindness' during her childhood at Ellensbrook.<sup>81</sup> After leaving Cattle Chosen, Bates records that she moved around the south-west between her traditional Wardandi country and Perth, 'her path ... marked with altercations and affrays, either with natives or with the white servants of successive mistresses', working as a domestic labourer, shepherd or 'relapsing into native camp life'.<sup>82</sup>

Daisy Bates met Ngilgie during the 'early 1900s' when she was 60 years old and living on the Aboriginal reserve established by Prinsep at Welshpool near Perth in 1901.<sup>83</sup> In three articles, Bates praised Ngilgie's ability to inhabit her own culture and that of the colonisers:

She was always liked and trusted by the whites, for her early associations having been amongst gentlefolk she had unconsciously absorbed their

<sup>76</sup> Haebich 2000, *Broken Circles*, pp.78–9.

<sup>77</sup> Milward, 'Pioneers of the Warren', p.134.

<sup>78</sup> Bates, Daisy 1923, 'The Adventures of Ngilgian', in *Australia*, November. Ngilgie was also known as Ngilgi, Nilgee, and Ngilgian.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Heppingstone and Wilson 1973, 'Mrs. John', p.40; Bates 1923, 'The Adventures of Ngilgian'.

<sup>81</sup> Charlotte Bussell to Josephine Bussell, 20 October 1866, MN 771 Acc. 1972A/51.

<sup>82</sup> *The West Australian*, 8 February 1908, article by Daisy Bates, 'An Aboriginal's Adventures: Nilgee'.

<sup>83</sup> *The West Australian*, 23 March 1935, article by Daisy Bates, 'Ngilgi: An Aboriginal Woman's Life Story'.

ways and manners and fine principles, but the wild in her blood was ever upper-most and none of the joys of 'jang-ga' life could equal the delight in taking a dancing part in the 'ke'ning' (corroborees) of her own folk and listening to the myths and traditions of 'Demma Goomber' (great grandparents) times.<sup>84</sup>

Bates was dependent on Ngilgie for her cultural knowledge of the people of the Margaret River area, and utilised her Bibbulman linguistic skills to prepare a 1,400-word vocabulary, which was eventually published by Isobel White in 1985 as part of *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*.<sup>85</sup> She is described by Bates as 'the rich widow' of the Welshpool reserve, and 'the proud possessor of seven goats, 12 fowls and 32 dogs, incredible mongrels all'.<sup>86</sup> She lived out her life on the reserve, working as a domestic labourer for nearby white families, looking after her animals, and hiding from the police who wanted to destroy them. Eventually the police succeeded, and, according to Bates, 'mercifully destroyed all save the single whole specimen', whereupon 'she shook the dust of the reserve from her shapely feet and retired to the outskirts of Guildford, where she busied herself cleaning and washing for the white man'.<sup>87</sup>

## Almost one of the family

In 1953, Henry's daughter Carlotta Brockman recalled the Aboriginal people she had known as a child at Belvidere and the family properties in the south-west. Her handwritten childhood memories touch on older traditional bush people such as Burman, whom she admired for his nobility and grandeur, 'a man 'so black with bundle of long spears, his "cooter bage" made of possum skin and his large cloak ... made of Kangaroo skins neatly sewn together with a bone needle and kangaroo tail sinews'.<sup>88</sup> She remembered the Aboriginal people of her youth as 'very primitive ... wandering from one hunting ground to another, making no permanent houses and wearing no clothes but their kangaroo skin Bokas ... gentle and friendly in the district, for the white settlers had treated them kindly'.<sup>89</sup> Others lived in 'a collection of bark huts' near the homesteads, and were often noisy, drunk and unruly:

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84 Bates 1923, 'The Adventures of Ngilgian'.

85 Bates, Daisy 1985, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*, edited by Isobel White, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

86 Bates 1923, 'The Adventures of Ngilgian'.

87 Bates, Daisy 1938 (1966), *The Passing of the Aborigines: A lifetime spent among the natives of Australia*, Second Edition, Heinemann, Melbourne, pp.71–2.

88 Brockman, 'Reminiscences'.

89 Ibid.

Sometimes there would be a lot of shouting and screaming that used to frighten the children. I remember one day running into the kitchen where my grandmother was busy cooking ... and close to her was a half naked black woman who was sobbing and most unhappy and to my horror I saw a great spear wound in her leg, all bleeding and sore. I think the men had been fighting about her and that was what all the shouting had been about.<sup>90</sup>

These 'camp natives' could be called on to labour on the farms and around the homestead, but were unreliable and often a nuisance. Carlotta writes of one old Noongar man who 'kept bothering' a Bussell neighbour, who threw a pot of boiling potatoes over him: 'That settled him!'<sup>91</sup> Other Noongars lived in close proximity to the family but had strictly defined relationships with family members. One was Carlo Sears, 'rescued' by Charlotte Bussell, who had been 'distressed to see the pretty little half caste being brought up in the natives' camp, so asked the old black woman to let her have him, which she seems to have been quite willing to do. My grandmother always said she bought Carlo for a stick of tobacco.' Also at Cattle Chosen were Joolbert, his 'half-African' father Tim Harris, and mother Caroline, who was 'not much of a favourite with the family, nor was Joolbert either'. Janey, 'half-African' and 'very fat and black with frizzy hair', worked in the house, and 'was very fond of creeping into the drawing room and picking out tunes on the piano, while we were at meals in the dining room below'.<sup>92</sup>

On another family property near Pemberton on the Warren River, Edward Brockman and his wife, Josephine Prinsep's older sister, Capel (née Bussell), also lived in close proximity to the region's Noongar traditional owners.<sup>93</sup> After taking up the land in 1861, the Brockmans had seven children, four sons and three daughters, who spent their childhood at the station. Capel characterised the Noongar population of the bush environment as 'plentiful and friendly', trading kangaroo skins for flour and tobacco and working 'around the garden, digging potatoes, grubbing palms and gathering palm wool for their rations'.<sup>94</sup> Family biographer, John Milward, writes that the Brockmans had a 'good relationship with the natives, and treated them a great deal better than some of the other settlers'. They occasionally worked for the family but were 'itinerant in the main, whenever the spirit moved them they worked at odd jobs at the Warren for a few days and then moved on again ... The local Royalty, in King Bunglish and Queen Jenny honoured the Warren family with a visit on occasions, but

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Milward, 'Pioneers of the Warren'.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

Capel does not mention as to whether they were received with due formality.<sup>95</sup> Most of those who worked for the family stayed at the camp on the other side of the nearby Warren River, away from the main homestead, and were known by the names given to them by the settlers: Polly, Charlie, Noble, Gharley, Mingo, and old Mary. Others lived with the family, slept and ate meals at the homestead away from the camp. They included children, who were taught to read and write, with the aim of turning them into good, reliable workers. They were also companions to the Brockman children and worked with the sons, who became fluent speakers of the Noongar language and learned about the bush, hunting, and the collection of bush foods. One such person was Nathaniel Leyland, universally known to the family as Nutty. Milward remembered him as 'one of the mainstays of the Warren workforce', 'a fine looking man in his youth,' who was 'more copper coloured than black'. Leyland was not a Noongar and, like many of these so-called orphans, was said to have been 'given' to the Brockmans when he was a child. He was believed to have been born in the Pilbara region on one of the Brockman stations, son of a white man and an Aboriginal woman who allegedly did not want him. Milward says that Nutty came to the Brockman family after 'he attached himself as a young boy to Harold Brockman'. 'Having no further use for Nutty when he reached Perth, and realising that Nutty would have a good home and be useful to his kinsman at the Warren, he passed him on to Edward and Capel, who brought him up almost as one of the family.' Leyland grew up with the Brockman children at The Warren and, 'like a lot of aboriginals', was a 'born horseman' with an 'inherent bushcraft'.<sup>96</sup> In 1894, he left The Warren and moved to Busselton, where he continued to work for the Brockmans and Bussells and lived in quarters near the family homesteads, Sandilands and Beachgrove. Here he spent his retirement doing odd jobs and driving 'the family to church every Sunday in the Phaeton'.<sup>97</sup>

According to Milward, many colonial families in the region had similar relationships with Aboriginal people, who had been 'adopted' as children and grew up as companions for the settler children. Some were given a rudimentary education but, as they grew older, became part of the station workforce or general labourers around the homestead. The Prinseps themselves considered taking on a child, to be brought up by Josephine and trained to provide domestic labour for the family. 'Little Chloe, Fanny the native's whitey brown child is now at Sandilands under F's [Josephine's aunt Fanny] charge, proposed for Josephine's adoption', wrote Henry Prinsep in 1872, 'a good clever little child, about 6.'<sup>98</sup> Sammy Isaacs lived at Alfred Bussell's coastal homestead, Walcliffe, at

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95 Ibid.

96 Ibid., p.53.

97 Ibid., p.51.

98 Prinsep, 'Diaries', 14 September 1872.



the mouth of the Margaret River; Carlo Sears lived at Cattle Chosen; while Isabel Brockman at Beachgrove had her 'man Friday', Jimmy Isaacs, 'on appearance part Aboriginal and part Negro':

Employed as a handyman, gardener, cowmilker or whatever, Jimmy was unrivalled as to unreliability. Jimmy lived with his De Facto, Eliza Nettup, in an iron and hessian humpy ... within easy calling distance of Beachgrove. Jimmy's hearing defects caused Isabel no little perturbation when the house cows were bellowing at the yard gate waiting to be milked. The older members of the Brockman family can well remember 'Aunty Bel' standing on the back verandah at Beachgrove, vigorously ringing an old cow bell and screaming 'Jimmee' at the top of her voice, in the vain hope of attracting his attention.<sup>99</sup>

Milward rationalises the paternalism of these relationships, and says that the kind of long-term contacts between these Noongar families and their colonial patrons was 'very hard for the younger generation to understand'. They were not 'servile slaves' he asserts, but each was respected 'as a man, stockman and equal' and, in turn, gave respect 'without any sense of inferiority'.<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, they were still treated as naughty and unreliable children, and were firmly under the authority of their patrons. Their patronage did little to protect men such as Leyland from the steady encroachment of colonial and later State laws designed to regulate Aboriginal labour and curtail freedom of movement over the course of the 1890s and 1900s. Nutty reportedly became unreliable and 'developed a taste for wine', brought on by the 'loss of his children':

It is believed that he never really recovered ... and that loss led to his loss of self respect and his periodic lapses onto the bottle. While those outbreaks caused much shaking of heads and muttering to one another by members of the family, they were regarded by them as those of a very naughty child and were soon forgiven.<sup>101</sup>

Over the 1890s and 1900s, when Henry Prinsep was Chief Protector of Aborigines, Leyland and many like him lost custody of their children, who were removed from their families to mission schools and government reserves. Prinsep's membership of the Bussell and Brockman families counted for little, and may even have facilitated the rapid removal of his children from Leyland's care. Prinsep seemed loathe to use his status or contacts to help in any way, and refused to intervene when Leyland was locked up for drunkenness. 'Although the likeable and cheerful Uncle Harry had been Protector of Aborigines', Milward reports, 'and would have wielded some influence, it is doubtful whether he

<sup>99</sup> Milward, 'Pioneers of the Warren', pp.134–5.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., pp.53–4.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p.54.

used that influence in Nutty's case, as it is believed that Harry frowned on the relationship that Nutty had with the Warren people.<sup>102</sup> Many years later, in 1987, a grandson of Henry Prinsep, Frank Brockman, expressed his sorrow at the disappearance of Leyland's children and said he had 'always wondered' where they went. He remembered playing with them when he was a child, but one day they had vanished, never to be seen by him again.<sup>103</sup> Leyland's children had suffered the same fate of mission or government removal from their homes as many Aboriginal people in the south-west. In 1988, Isobel Bropho, a daughter of Leyland, wrote that she and her six siblings had been removed from her father and taken from Busselton to Perth to be placed in a mission home:

Before we was taken to the orphanage, we used to live in a tent behind an old homestead ... we camped there and that's where my father Nathaniel ... used to ride off to work every day. ... That lasted until we was taken by the missionary, Annie Lock. One day she picked us up from Busselton. She took us away from there and put us in a home she was starting near Perth. She said she'd come to pick the children up and take them away to this home, where they can have some schooling. And that was that.<sup>104</sup>

Isobel Bropho's account provides a counterpoint to Milward's depiction of equality and mutual respect, and Frank Brockman's nostalgia for his childhood playmates. Leyland did not simply 'lose' his children, they were removed from him, his status as a trusted retainer to the Brockman family providing no immunity from the inexorable application of official benevolence. As Isobel Bropho's son, Robert, later described, their removal did nothing to improve their lives, as they all became fringe dwellers on the outskirts of Perth in their later years. He wrote that his mother, father and aunties lived 'in tin camps at Caversham which was buried away in the scrub of the banksia trees, the sheoak, the redgum and the jarrah and the stinkweed', and shifted from place to place in an attempt to make themselves invisible and escape the grasp of the protectors.<sup>105</sup>

Arthur Joolbert Harris, the son of a white man, lived at Cattle Chosen for many years with his mother, Caroline Mullane, the woman remembered by Carlotta Prinsep as 'not much of a favourite', and her 'half-African' husband, Timothy Harris. Historian Lois Tilbrook records that Harris was the son of a European sealer and whaler, and an unnamed Aboriginal woman, while Caroline Mullane's father was also a whaler of West African or American origin who, 'as they

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102 Ibid., p.134.

103 This was from a conversation between the author, Frank Brockman, and Brockman's grand-daughter, Mary Anne Jebb in 1987, shortly before Brockman's death.

104 Carter, Jan 1981, *Nothing to Spare: Recollections of Australian pioneering women*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Victoria, pp.20-1.

105 Bropho, Robert 1986, *Fringedweller*, Alternative Publishing Co-operative, Chippendale, NSW, p.21.

beached to obtain fresh water and to treat their catch ... had the opportunity to form relationships with the Aborigines in the area, which they could renew the next season when they were in the area'.<sup>106</sup> Caroline was 'very attractive and was known locally as Caroline of the Vasse'. She had at least 12 children with a number of husbands, including Harris. Joolbert married Janie McCarthy, who also worked in the house at Cattle Chosen, and 'took a deep interest in the welfare of his half-sisters and brothers', including Leyland's children by his half-sister, Clara Harris. Isobel Bropho believed that it was Joolbert who reported them to the Aborigines Department, and that this resulted in their removal to Perth.<sup>107</sup> Joolbert himself suffered the same fate later in his life, after he had outlived his usefulness as a farm worker. He was also removed from Busselton to the Welshpool reserve near Perth in 1901, a place established by one of Prinsep's initiatives as Chief Protector, to provide 'a comfortable and safe home for many of the old natives who have faithfully worked for white settlers, and are cast off when of no further use'.<sup>108</sup> Again, his connections with the Bussell family were of no value, for, in 1905, Prinsep recorded that 'Joolbert had been annoying Ngilgie at Welshpool, so I wrote to the Victoria Park police to turn him off the reserve and if need be to arrest him as a vagrant'.<sup>109</sup> Joolbert later moved to Yokine, a northern suburb of Perth, where he occupied a block of land and a house, supplied leeches to hospitals and bred dogs.<sup>110</sup>

The extent to which these Aboriginal families were able to retain their freedom from mission and government control depended on their continuing value as workers, as well as their perceived capacity to stay away from alcohol and care for their children in a manner conforming to the standards of white families. The family of Sam Isaacs, 'an Aboriginal or an American' who worked for Alfred Bussell at Walcliffe Farm, appears to have escaped the experience of Leyland. Isaacs is believed to have been born about 1850, and arrived at Ellensbrook as 'a curly-haired little boy saying he had lost his pigs. He was taken in and so liked the Bussells that he stayed on.'<sup>111</sup> He grew into a 'big, strongly built man and an excellent worker', and is best known for his role with Alfred's daughter, Grace Bussell, in rescuing passengers from the 'Georgette', which ran aground near the homestead in 1876. He married Lucy Lowe, daughter of an American Lieutenant Major, who had arrived in the colony in 1886. Sam and Lucy had six sons, at least two of whom grew up to work for the Bussell or Brockman families in the area. One of these sons, also Sam, was born in 1879, and lived in the vicinity of Walcliffe as he was growing up. In 1906, he married Jennie Councillor, a

106 Tilbrook, Lois 1983, *Nyungar Tradition: Glimpses of Aborigines in South-Western Australia 1829–1914*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, p.205.

107 Ibid., p. 207.

108 Aborigines Department, 'Report for Financial Year ending 30 June 1902,' p.9.

109 Prinsep, 'Diaries', 5 April 1905.

110 Tilbrook 1983, *Nyungar Tradition*, p.207; Haebich 1988, *For Their Own Good*, p.6.

111 Heppingstone and Wilson 1973, 'Mrs. John', p.37.

'half-caste waif', who had been brought to Ellensbrook from Northampton at the behest of Prinsep as Chief Protector in 1900, and who became another of the family favourites.<sup>112</sup> Later, Isaacs became one of the first Aboriginal people to achieve citizenship under the exemption provision of the *Aborigines Act*, which meant that legally he was 'deemed to be no longer a native or aboriginal'.<sup>113</sup> Sam and Jennie had four children, one of whom, another Sam, later settled in the northern Goldfields at Gwalia, where it is believed he worked as a miner. Jimmy Isaacs, Sam's fourth son, lived most of his adult life with his wife Eliza Nettup (née Hill) in Busselton where he lived and worked at Beachgrove as Isabel Brockman's 'man Friday'.

It was relationships such as these that later exerted an influence on the way Henry Prinsep approached his role as Chief Protector in 1898. Although his domain of responsibility as Chief Protector covered the entire colony, his experience as a primary producer within an extensive family of south-west landholders meant that the issues and priorities of the south-west assumed a prominent place in his formulation of government policy. To Prinsep, the settler bore a level of responsibility to provide relief for the destitute, the role of government being to supplement their efforts, and to dispense relief to those who, for one reason or another, were outside the ambit of the colonial economy. Those able to work were required to do so, but when their labour was not required the official preference was that they resort to traditional ways of providing for their families, by hunting and fishing, or moving elsewhere to obtain work. The children of these Noongar families, particularly those with a British parent, were believed to have the ability to learn British ways and adapt to a future as rural or domestic labourers. Removal and separation from the barbaric environments of their Aboriginal families was seen as essential, as it was believed that, if there were left to grow up as 'savages', Aboriginal people would take on the worst characteristics of both races and become a threat to colonial society. Benevolent patronage of the kind extended by his family members, Prinsep believed, established a precedent that both the government and colonists in other districts should be required to emulate. He was convinced that the decline of this sense of benevolent responsibility represented a particular threat to the well-being of the colony's Aboriginal population. This was brought about chiefly by an increasing proportion of colonists who did not appreciate the 'old ways', as he put it, and a government unwilling to act decisively.<sup>114</sup> As he stated in his first report to Premier Sir John Forrest, 'the settlers who held the country when the last mentioned were able to work have now left and the new generation cannot have the same regard for them as their

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112 Prinsep, 'Diaries', 9 May, 1900.

113 Collard, Len 1994, *A Nyungar Interpretation of Ellensbrook and Wonnerup Homesteads*, National Trust of Australia, Western Australia, p.82.

114 H.C. Prinsep, report to Forrest, 30 June 1898, AD File 571/98, 'First report for financial year ending 30 June 1898, and three months following'.

old masters would no doubt have preserved'. Amongst the 'old settlers' in the south-west, 'everywhere I found great sympathy with the remnants of the black race ... the greater part of the charity that was due to them was afforded by the settlers themselves'.<sup>115</sup> Prinsep's life in Perth, away from the anxieties of direct management of a Noongar workforce, did little to alter his sympathies for the paternalistic benevolence of these old settlers. Instead, their beneficence seemed all the more important, as political and economic developments started to change the face of colonial society, bringing new settlers who did not seem to hold the same ideas about looking after the remnants remaining on their properties.



**'Pastoral paternalism'.** This group of dispossessed Noongar people, many of them likely to be Wardandi, whose traditional country encompassed Bunbury and Busselton, was photographed by Prinsep in 1880 at Berry Hill, adjacent to the Government Resident's home near Bunbury. The photograph is unusual in that many of the group are identified by name in Prinsep's handwriting, along with the white man.

Source: Courtesy of Ailsa Smith, Claremont, Western Australia.

115 Ibid.





**Zillah, a Wardandi woman who died at Karridale in about 1900 and spent her life in her traditional country at the Brockman farm The Warren, near Pemberton, and the Bussell homestead Cattle Chosen near Busselton.**

Source: Courtesy of the Butter Factory Museum, Busselton WA.





**Zillah and a man known as King Billy, believed to be at The Warren, probably during the 1880s.**

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 BA 1423/165.



**King Billy, photographed by Prinsep, probably in the early 1900s, possibly at Cattle Chosen.**

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 BA 1423/166.



**Prinsep and Josephine believed in their Christian duty to dispense patronage to Noongar families in the vicinity of their farms. Here Prinsep talks to a Noongar woman and her children, circa 1870.**

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 BA 1423/196.





**Onlookers in the colonial project, two unnamed Noongar men kneel in the foreground on either side of their boss, at this homestead near Busselton.**

Source: Courtesy of the Butter Factory Museum, Busselton WA.



**Posed and under control, a photograph by Prinsep of an unnamed Noongar man in traditional dress, circa 1880.**

Source: Scenes of Travel and Adventure in Western Australia, National Library of Australia, Bib ID 3547143.



**Two studies of Europeans, probably Prinsep and Josephine on horseback, by George Coolbul, 1866–1871. Coolbul worked for Prinsep on his stations at Belvidere, Prinsep Park and Paradise before being killed in a fight in 1871. Prinsep encouraged Coolbul to exercise his artistic interests and gave him pencils, pastels and paper. He later bound these in a volume he called 'Western Australian Native Art'.**

Source: Native Art of Western Australia, George Coolbul, Art Gallery of Western Australia.





**George Coolbul, kangaroo being run down by hunting dogs.**

Source: Native Art of Western Australia, George Coolbul, Art Gallery of Western Australia.



**George Coolbul, horse.**

Source: Native Art of Western Australia, George Coolbul, Art Gallery of Western Australia.



**George Coolbul, who worked for Prinsep on his stations between 1866 and his death in 1872, was provided with pastels and paper by Prinsep. This drawing depicts a European man and horses around a yard, and was probably drawn with the paper on the ground, rotated as the artist added the features.**

Source: Native Art of Western Australia, George Coolbul, Art Gallery of Western Australia.

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