

8. Chief Protector of Aborigines

Henry Prinsep took up the role of Western Australia's first Chief Protector of Aborigines anticipating a change from the unrelenting grind of the Mines Department, but soon realised the job would place him in the midst of fraught political battles over the colony's indigenous populations. His first parliamentary master, Premier John Forrest, had an active interest in the portfolio and wanted the job done as he determined. A self-proclaimed expert on Aboriginal matters, Forrest believed that governments should intervene only in the most extreme cases of mistreatment or poverty. It was his conviction that Aboriginal people were, in any case, disappearing and would have little future in the development of the State. He wanted his new Aborigines Department to stay small and cost little. It was the responsibility of pastoralists and farmers to look after their Aboriginal workforces, and Aboriginal people should be compelled either to work or sustain themselves in their traditional way. Prinsep's job was to remain in his Perth office and efficiently manage a meagre budget and staff, devoting his efforts to providing rations to a population of dispossessed Aboriginal people that was expanding rapidly as colonisation spread throughout Western Australia.

Prinsep's qualifications for the position of Chief Protector of Aborigines were not immediately evident, even to members of his family. Like many colonists in the country areas of Western Australia, Prinsep had encountered Aboriginal people intermittently as pastoral workers, and had been involved in the humane activities of dispensing rations, clothing and blankets, principally as a member of the church. To Julius Brockman, son of Josephine's sister, Capel, who spent his adult life running pastoral stations in the Gascoyne and Pilbara, Prinsep was too closely aligned to Forrest and 'too busy playing charades at Government House' to give his full attention to the job.¹ From her home in Paris, Caroline Bussell told her sister Josephine Prinsep that a better candidate would have been her childhood friend, Harold Hale, who, in 1896, had unsuccessfully tried to establish a Church of England mission at Forrest River in the East Kimberley.² To Caroline, it was Hale's background in one of the old Western Australian families that made him suitable:

I suppose Harold was too proud to ask for work under the Government. If he had I should think he might have got something. Considering that his Grandfather [John Molloy] was one of the first settlers and magistrates, that his Grandmother [Georgiana Molloy] died from the privations she

1 Brockman, Joan (ed.) 1987, *He Rode Alone: Being the adventures of pioneer Julius Brockman from his diaries*, Artlook Books, Perth, p.295.

2 *The West Australian*, 6 July 1898.

underwent as wife of a pioneer, and then his father [Mathew Blagden Hale] did so much in helping procure education for the young people apart from his generosity to the Church. Many who are now members of the WA Government owe their education to the Bishop's School.³

But Prinsep possessed many of the attributes John Forrest was looking for. His achievement in efficiently setting up the Mines Department over the previous four years suggested he could do the same for another domain of colonial government activity. Forrest wanted a person who would not unsettle the colonial social body, as John Gribble had done in the 1880s, and would present a humane and efficient face to the policies of the government. Prinsep was well known and well connected in the colony, Britain and the imperial world, an attribute that would be handy in placating continuing criticism of the colony's treatment of Aboriginal people. Telling Prinsep he must quickly 'get a firm grip on the question and attend to it', Forrest had every reason to believe that his new Chief Protector would faithfully represent the benevolent paternalism of old settlers such as himself.⁴

As Prinsep's Minister, John Forrest held firm views on the future of Aboriginal people, derived from a life-time's contact, from his childhood in proximity to Noongar families around Bunbury, to extensive contact with Aboriginal societies during his explorations around Western Australia, and his associations with Aboriginal guides, such as Tommy Windich, Tommy Pierre, Tommy Dower, and Billy Noongale Kickett, who helped mediate his encounters with Aboriginal peoples he encountered in the bush. Biographer F.K. Crowley saw in Forrest a man of 'humane outlook', who viewed Aboriginal people as 'very intelligent', their language 'euphonious and ... easily acquired', and as 'tractable and willing to work'. At the same time, they lived 'a savage and precarious life', and made 'no provision for the morrow, using no means to cultivate the land, no permanent habitations, a mere animal living in savagedom'.⁵ Forrest told Legislative Councilors in 1883 that 'we owed these natives something more than repression ... Anyone would imagine ... that the natives were our enemies instead of our best friends. Colonisation would go on with very slow strides if we had no natives to assist us.'⁶ Aboriginal people should be preserved 'from

3 Caroline Bussell to Josephine Prinsep, 3 June 1898, SLWA Acc. 3593A/25. Caroline was referring to the son of her friend, Sabina Molloy, who had married Bishop Mathew Hale, the founder of Bishop Hale's School, the first private school for the sons of gentlemen in the colony. Forrest attended Hale's School along with many of the Brockmans and Bussells. The grandparents of Harold Hale referred to by Caroline were Georgiana Molloy and her husband, Captain John Molloy, who had settled in the Augusta area and then the Vasse during the 1830s. Caroline is referring to Harold Hale's involvement in an ill-fated attempt by the Church of England to establish a mission at the Forrest River in the East Kimberley.

4 SROWA Series 3005, Cons. 255 AD File 1426/98.

5 Crowley, F.K. 2000, *Big John Forrest 1847–1918: A founding father of the Commonwealth of Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, pp.34–6, 109.

6 *Ibid.*, pp.49–50.

extinction', yet he believed in the inevitability of their withering in the face of a more robust culture. Governments should 'do just enough to smooth their passing and to ensure that they should serve the higher civilisation before they went'.⁷ As Premier, Forrest was much more concerned with the pastoral and industrial development of the colony than with the interests of Aboriginal people as traditional landholders.

Forrest acted immediately to cut the spending of the dismantled Aborigines Protection Board. Section 70 of the *Western Australia Constitution Act 1890* had specified the financial arrangements under which the Board, constituted by the *Aborigines Protection Act 1886*, was to function. An annual sum of 5,000 pounds or 1 per cent of gross revenue from the colony's consolidated revenue was to provide Aboriginal people 'with food and clothing when they would otherwise be destitute, in promoting the education of Aboriginal children (including half-castes), and in assisting generally to promote the preservation and well-being of the Aborigines'.⁸ As the colony's revenues increased after 1890, so did the annual revenue of the Aborigines Protection Board, which reached 23,563 pounds in 1897/98.⁹ Although he had been an early member of the Board, Premier Forrest criticised it whenever the opportunity arose and effectively froze it out of a role in the colonial government. The Secretary of State for Colonies finally relented to Forrest's pressure and, in 1897, legislation was passed to wind up the Board and establish the position of Chief Protector as head of a new Aborigines Department, responsible to the executive.¹⁰

Prinsep found himself heading a department with no money and no powers. Along with a single staff member and a part-time accountant, he was expected to remain in Perth, with few resources to travel to other areas to supervise compliance of the *Aborigines Act 1897*. The regional presence was, instead, to be through a network of unpaid local protectors, mostly police officers, pastoral managers, resident magistrates, missionaries and medical officers. Local protectors were given no extra resources to undertake their functions under the 1897 laws, and their capacity to undertake the role was additionally compromised by their other responsibilities, which, in the case of police, primarily involved the protection of European populations. The Chief Protector had no authority to direct local protectors and was forced to rely on good will. As Prinsep put it in 1905: 'It is very difficult for me to pat with one hand and slap with the other. If I were threatened by the refusal of the police and the squatters to help me

7 Goddard, Elizabeth and Tom Stannage 1984, 'John Forrest and the Aborigines', in Bob Reece, Bob and Tom Stannage (eds), *Studies in Western Australian History*, Issue 8: European-Aboriginal Relations in Western Australian History, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, Nedlands, p.56.

8 Western Australia, *Constitution Act 1889*, Section 70.

9 Biskup, Peter 1973, *Not Slaves, Not Citizens: The Aboriginal problem in Western Australia, 1898-1954*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, p.46.

10 Western Australia, *Aborigines Act 1897*.

carry out my duties, I should be in a sorry plight.'¹¹ The periodic employment of Travelling Inspector G.S. Olivey, whose job was to visit stations and farms employing Aboriginal people and provide reports on their numbers, conditions and treatment, gave the department a very limited profile in the regions. It remained dependent on the good will and integrity of a network which, by virtue of distance and a non-existent level of supervision, retained considerable discretion over Aboriginal people at the local level.

Such was Forrest's approach to Aboriginal governance, a weak act and a level of funding designed to limit the department's capabilities to a function largely restricted to a niggardly obsession with relief and ration payments. This was the home grown solution to the problem, defined by the way in which local politicians and interest groups viewed Aboriginal populations as a doomed race, fated to die out in the face of modernisation and dispossession. The duty of the government was one of benign benevolence, which aimed to make the passing less painful, relieve the misery of the old and indigent, and either put the able-bodied to work, or leave them to fend for themselves, until the colonisers required their land and labour. By the time Prinsep took up his job in 1898, Western Australia was one of the few Australian colonies without intrusive legislation designed to micro-manage Aboriginal populations. Prinsep drew the attention of Western Australian legislators to laws and systems in other Australian colonies, which had established Aborigines Protection Boards with extensive powers to remove and institutionalise Aboriginal children.¹² Queensland and the Northern Territory seemed to provide precedents relevant to the colony. Like Western Australia, they were colonies with vast northern and desert areas, large Aboriginal populations, and sparse colonial settlement. The Queensland *Aborigines Protection and Restriction on the Sale of Opium Amending Act 1897* subsequently provided a precedent for laws in Western Australia, South Australia, and the Northern Territory.

Prinsep repeatedly alerted Forrest to the weaknesses of the *Aborigines Protection Act*, pointing to a budget plainly inadequate to deal with rising levels of poverty and dispossession among Aboriginal populations throughout Western Australia. He warned that pastoral landowners were increasingly seeking to defray the costs of rations on to the government, and that there were demands also from the missions for resources to establish institutions for the care and education of Aboriginal children throughout the colony. As the government had learned from the Gribble affair, the churches were not averse to making public their allegations of government inefficiencies or lack of action. Prinsep brought new

11 *The West Australian*, 2 February 1905.

12 Prinsep to Forrest, 10 December 1900, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 180/1900; Haebich, Anna 2000, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous families, 1800–2000*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, p.144.

problems to the government's attention, including the increasing population of mixed-race children, whose unregulated presence implied a threat to the harmonious future of the colony. The occurrence of venereal disease in country regions, ports and mining centres, posed a threat not only to the future of the Aboriginal population and their children, but to working men of European origin. Criticism of the colony's alleged toleration of violence and forced labour, coming from outsiders in Britain and the eastern colonies, would not go away, prompting Prinsep's clerk, Edward Pechell, to ask in 1907: 'when is it going to end—why cannot they leave us alone, as we do the natives in other states?'¹³

During its first year, the Aborigines Department's budget of 5,000 pounds represented a 75 per cent reduction from the final year budget of the disbanded Aborigines Protection Board. Fixed items in the budget included Prinsep's salary of 550 pounds, the costs of an accountant and a clerk, and annual allocations to the Swan Natives and Half Castes Mission of 750 pounds, and Bishop Salvado's New Norcia Mission of 450 pounds. The small amount left over for relief guaranteed that much of Prinsep's attention would be given to cutting expenditure and scrutinising claims from station owners and protectors. Prinsep often sought Forrest's approval for expenditure, even for small items, such as 1 pounds 10 shillings for a child's funeral in the Eastern Goldfields town of Norseman. The request was grudgingly approved by the Premier, 'for the sanitary benefit of the town than for the Aborigines and I think the sanitary board should pay'.¹⁴

Forrest was reluctant to approve extra funds, yet directed the Department 'not to be harsh or to be niggardly—each case must be dealt with on its merits'.¹⁵ 'The natives', he wrote, 'must be fed and given water.' Prinsep informed him that the problem lay in the decline of paternalistic obligations amongst the colonial social body, along with a widespread failure to look after the 'old and indigent' and those unable to work for their living. In his mind, there was a distinction between the old colonists who understood their responsibilities, and 'a new order who do not recognise the claims on them of the Aborigines'.¹⁶ In letters to pastoral managers in the north, Prinsep emphasised that Aboriginal people should be required to 'fend for themselves' wherever possible, particularly when 'there is much game and many able young men in the tribes to get it and so feed their old relatives'. He warned against 'pampering' Aboriginal people 'with too rapidly afforded relief, which in some parts of the colony has been said to have pauperised them needlessly'.¹⁷

13 E. Pechell to H.C. Prinsep, 23 December 1907, SLWA Acc. 3593A/34.

14 Forrest to H.C. Prinsep, SROWA Series 3005 255 AD File 1898/78.

15 Forrest to H.C. Prinsep, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD 1898/375.

16 H.C. Prinsep to Forrest, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 1898/387.

17 H.C. Prinsep to Arthur Clifton, manager of Yeeda Station, West Kimberley, 25 May 1900, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 1900/6.

Prinsep predicted a crisis in the Aboriginal labour market, 'which sooner or later will require attention'.¹⁸ Increasing numbers of farmers in the southern districts preferred to employ white rather than Aboriginal labour, and were refusing to provide food and relief for Aboriginal people camped on their properties. This meant that even able-bodied Aboriginal people had difficulty obtaining work which, combined with the 'extinction of their natural food', and 'their being brought up on stations and so hav[ing] lost the art of catching their food', added to the burden on the rations budget. By July 1898, Prinsep informed Forrest that expenditure on relief would have to be restricted to 180 pounds per month if it was to last the financial year.¹⁹ Forrest refused to believe that 'there were so many absolutely indigent natives about', and feared that station owners were defraying their labour costs to the government, but grudgingly acceded to Prinsep's request for additional funds in February 1899, directing Treasury to make an extraordinary payment of 3,000 pounds. A system of subsidiary payments, to top up the meager parliamentary vote, continued for the next three years until, in 1901, an annual budget of 10,000 pounds was allocated. But these additional funds were provided reluctantly and failed to disguise the prevailing government conviction that money spent on Aboriginal people was money wasted.

'Complete separation from their savage life'

The situation confronting Aboriginal, and particularly 'half-caste' children, soon came to preoccupy Prinsep in his role as Chief Protector. In his 1901 Annual Report, he reported on the 'number and condition of the half-castes', removing details that 'allude personally to men as fathers of half-castes and other passages which it will be advisable not to publish'.²⁰ 'Where there are no evil influences', he advised, 'these half-castes can be made into useful workmen and women', yet most of them lived in communities 'whose influence is towards laziness and vice; and I think it is our duty not to allow these children, whose blood is half British, to grow up as vagrants and outcasts, as their mothers now are'.²¹ The vagrancy provisions of the criminal laws allowed him to ask police to detain Aboriginal people but, in some areas, this would mean the arrest of whole communities, since the 'natural custom of their race is one of vagrancy'.²² The power to compulsorily remove half-caste children would allow the government to enforce 'complete separation from their old savage life, which is a desirable end in the case of all half-castes'. Furthermore, the government should make

18 SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 1898/941.

19 Ibid.

20 SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 1901/351.

21 Government of Western Australia 1900/1, *Annual Report of the Aborigines Department*, Perth, p.4.

22 Ibid., p. 4.

these children wards until the age of 18 to reduce the probability that, on their return home, 'they may revert to a more evil, because educated, barbarism than before'. Legal guardianship of all half-caste children would see most of them 'placed under proper care, and brought up in useful knowledge'.²³

What this proper care might entail was another question confronting Prinsep. The small number of mission institutions funded by the department in 1901 varied considerably in their methods and target populations. The major recipient of government aid was the Church of England Swan Native and Half-Caste Mission near Perth, which accommodated 14 boys and 33 girls, and received per capita payments for most of the children. Girls were taught laundry work, bread-making, cooking, sewing, gardening and 'other household occupations ... with good results', but the supervisor, David Garland, expressed his 'grave concern' for their future, believing that discharge would be 'attended with the most serious dangers.' He and Prinsep agreed that, on their release, they should be placed with settler families to work as domestic servants. The boys would be transferred to the orphanage 'for white boys, where they receive the same school and practical instruction on handicrafts, gardening, and farming as the white boys', and progress to employment as labourers on farms.²⁴ The Pallotine Beagle Bay Mission in the Kimberley dealt both with children and their families. Twenty children were given two hours schooling a day, the remainder of their time occupied 'making bricks, others repairing fences, others doing stock work amongst the cattle etc.; and if they are inclined to be idle, the threat of not being allowed to attend school has an instant effect'. The mission aimed to 'civilise' about 70 adults, 'all well-dressed, clean and respectable', singing 'hymns in their own lingo ... and made the responses very audibly and, apparently, correctly'.²⁵ Prinsep approved the methods of the Bishop Salvado's Benedictine New Norcia Mission, 100 kilometres north-east of Perth, whose creed he thought 'eminently practical'.

The experience of the good Bishop Salvado ... is that we must not forget they are savages, and we must first try to enable them to make their own work worth their food and clothing, and, if they gain this knowledge, reading and writing may then be taught; but, as they can never hope to have the same status as a white man, it is useless to teach them those things which a labourer does not require.²⁶

Ellensbrook Farm School, about 60 kilometres from Busselton in the south-west of the colony, provided the kind of environment Prinsep particularly favoured. Under the management of Josephine's cousin, Edith Bussell, 'a lady well-known

23 SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 1902/12202.

24 Government of Western Australia 1900/1, *Annual Report of the Aborigines Department*, Perth, p.9.

25 Ibid., p. 47.

26 1898/99 Annual Report, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255, AD File 1899/782.

for her knowledge of the natives', Ellensbrook was 'a farm home for such young natives and half-castes as cannot for some reason be lodged in other recognised institutions':

They are taught reading and writing—indoor work for girls, sums, and milking, vegetable gardening and all the small farm industries so as to become useful farm hands, both male and female, in a practical manner and such as is in vogue in our country districts. The children are encouraged to bathe frequently. They spend every Sunday on the sea beach and have plenty of milk and vegetables and meat food.²⁷

Through Prinsep's influence, Ellensbrook received per capita payments of between six and nine pence a day, and government grants for extensions to the buildings, clothing and school equipment. Edith Bussell strongly believed that she 'ought to have some hold' on the children until they reached the age of 16, and resisted efforts by local settlers to recruit them as farm labourers. Many are the letters from Bussell to Prinsep in which he is urged to act promptly on behalf of the facility. 'I really must scold you', she wrote in 1903, 'for not taking a bit of notice at my requests. You have never sent my poor girls any wearing apparel for a great many months.'²⁸ Other letters thank him for sending shoes, clothes and building materials, to erect 'another room for my black people' after Bussell complained that 'at present the boy Tommy is sleeping in my kitchen which is so disagreeable'.²⁹ Many children were sent to Edith Bussell, some by mistake, such as the time in 1901 when 'the wrong child was sent to me':

I was so sorry to part with her. I sent her back by coach last Thursday 16th. I hope she will be all right, poor wee mite, it seemed so dreadful to bundle her off again after travelling so far. She is such a nice pretty little girl but could not speak a word of English. It was so funny to hear her prattling away in her own language and none of us able to understand a word.³⁰

A series of letters to Prinsep from Mr. Pius, whose son, Willie, was sent to Ellensbrook in 1903, led to the boy's return home, although with some opposition from Bussell. Pius told Prinsep repeatedly that his son had been wrongfully removed and that he and his wife were suffering:

I have as much love for my dear wife and churldines as you have for yours and I can not afford to luse them so if you have any feeling atole pleas send the boy back as quick as you can it did not take long for him

27 H.C. Prinsep to Daisy Bates, 'Daisy Bates Papers', Folio 97/473–5, SLWA Acc. 6193/A.

28 Edith Bussell to H.C. Prinsep, 30 October 1903, SLWA Acc. 3594A/45/38.

29 Edith Bussell to H.C. Prinsep 15 February 1901, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 1901/106.

30 Edith Bussell to Josephine Prinsep, 18 August 1900, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 1900/61.

to go but it takes a long time for him to come back and I do not think that fare you may thing because I am black I can't look after him but I am as kind to him than I am to my own I have more love for him than I have for my own.³¹

Bussell blamed the boy's mother for the mistake:

Little Willie is going on well and is a very jolly little fellow, a favourite all round. I suppose you have had letters from his mother as I have asking for him to be sent back to her. She must be a very silly woman. If she felt like that about him, she should not have parted with him at all.³²

Some of the Ellensbrook children feature in Prinsep's diaries, letters and photographs over many years. Jennie Councillor first came into Prinsep's sphere in May 1900, when he took 'the little half caste girl who was so badly burnt at Champion Bay' to Ellensbrook.³³ The next year, departmental files record Prinsep sending her shoes and writing to Bussell that he had been in contact with the police in her home town of Northampton giving them news of the girl and asking them to let her mother know she was well. 'The girl is very nearly well of her wounds', he wrote, 'and quite happy. The only thing she wants is to see her mother and I have promised to offer Mrs Councillor a railway passage to the South, so that she may stay a few days with her daughter and see her.'³⁴ At Bussell's urging, Jennie wrote to Prinsep telling him how much she was learning at Ellensbrook:

My dear Sir, Miss Edie wants me to write you a few lines to show you how I can write. I cannot write a very long letter but I think it will be enough for you to examine my writeing [sic]. My writeing is not very good this time but I will do better next time. I have a pet kangaroo and a dear little kitten. I am well and very happy and I hope you will come down at Christmas time. I am yours respectfully Jane Councillor.³⁵

As Jennie grew up, Bussell realised she would soon leave Ellensbrook and marry a local boy. 'Jennie has a lover', she informed Prinsep, 'young Sam Isaacs, he is very fond of her ... but she does not quite fancy him, says he is too dark, which is quite true, he is a nice little fellow but not half good enough for Jennie'.³⁶ Jennie later married Isaacs, and Prinsep travelled to Ellensbrook for the wedding and presented the couple with a set of knives and forks as a wedding present. She

31 Mr. Pius to H.C. Prinsep, 26 September 1903, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File, 1903/12.

32 Edith Bussell to H.C. Prinsep, 5 September 1903, SLWA Acc. 3594A/13.

33 Jennie's name is rendered in various forms in the letters. Prinsep and Bussell called her Jennie, while she signed her name as Jane.

34 SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File, 106/01.

35 J.J. Councillor to H.C. Prinsep, 31 October 1902, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File, 1902/117.

36 Ibid.

and Isaacs formed one of the Aboriginal families that Prinsep believed he and Bussell had saved from their Aboriginality. Although her marriage to another Aboriginal person was not what they had planned, she moved to the Isaacs' property 'Ferndale' near the Bussell's Walcliffe farm and continued to live and work for the family for many years.

'Mary', however, who lived at Ellensbrook for a number of years with her two young boys, was one whose supposedly innate Aboriginal deficiencies prevented her from benefiting from the paternalism of the Bussells and Prinseps. From Roebourne in the central Pilbara, she came to Ellensbrook after being abandoned in Bunbury, but Bussell turned against her and had her removed. 'This horrible woman Mary', she wrote to Prinsep, 'has again been up to her tricks and I think that she will be laid up in July.'

The partner of her disgusting behaviour is that useless infamous fellow Eli Lowe. Oh I do wish you could punish him for it, could it not be done? I think he ought to get a divorce from Sarah and be compelled to marry Mary. I am very glad you do not think I have been careless for indeed I have not ... I must ask you to write to someone at Busselton to arrange about some place for Mary to go. You don't say what we are to do with her afterwards. I am afraid it would be a very bad example for the other girls to have her back here, however you must decide about this.³⁷

Another Ellensbrook child was Tommy Ah Hong (or Ah Hay), who lived there for about two years between 1900 and 1902. His status was different from the other residents in that his father was 'a Chinaman', resident at Williambury station near Carnarvon, a property leased by Mervyn Bunbury, another member of one of the 'old settler' families from the south-west who was closely associated with the Bussells. Tommy's father asked Prinsep to take the boy away from the property for his education and paid for him to go to Ellensbrook. This earned him Prinsep's praise as one of the 'few fathers of half-caste children doing their duty, and contributing to the support of these unfortunates; most notably among these is a Chinaman'.³⁸ After two years at Ellensbrook, Tommy returned to Williambury at the request of his father, where he started work for Bunbury as a cart boy and stable hand.

The 1897 legislation provided the Chief Protector limited powers to regulate Aboriginal labour, allowing him only to recommend cancellation of a permit whose holder was deemed 'unfit' to employ Aboriginal people.³⁹ To Prinsep, employment contracts should tie Aboriginal families to a white boss and 'missus', whose obligations extended to providing rations for old and sick members of

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ 'Government of Western Australia 1900/1, *Annual Report of the Aborigines Department*, Perth, p.4.

³⁹ *The Aborigines Act 1897*, Section 11.

the family, providing a rudimentary education and training for children, and acting generally to protect the families from the ravages of colonisation. These obligations were implicitly understood by old settlers such as Prinsep's extended family, but not by the 'new order who do not recognise the claims on them of the Aborigines' and thus threatened the paternalistic relationships he favoured.⁴⁰ The family of Donald and Charlotte McLeod, another cousin of Josephine's, on their Minilya pastoral property 100 kilometres north of Carnarvon, provided a perfect illustration of the pastoral relationships Prinsep envisaged, as he told the Parliament in two Annual Reports. Like Prinsep, McLeod had married into the Bussell family and was a devout Anglican and humanitarian. Born in Victoria in 1848, he had managed a pastoral station in the Pilbara before returning to farm in Victoria, where he held the seat of Portland in the Legislative Assembly for six years and became an active member of the Society for the Protection of Aborigines.⁴¹ The McLeods were 'very experienced and wise trainers of the native race', Prinsep wrote in his 1901/02 Annual Report, and encouraged 'a large number of natives to congregate at Minilya'.

And no wonder, for they have found out that under the new management they receive kindness and justice, with liberality. The children are clothed, and all the natives are compelled to wash themselves and their clothes, and to keep their hair short, and to appear weekly in a clean condition. Their appreciation of this—quite a new sensation I should fancy—appears quite evident. The children are taught every day not only their letters and sums, but in everything which tends to civilise and Christianise them, and the parents seem very grateful for the kindness shown to their children. Mr. McLeod does not let his efforts be any burden to the Department, but I think it is only due to him to supply him with a certain amount of drapery stuffs to assist him in clothing neatly such a large number.⁴²

McLeod wrote frequently to Prinsep, sometimes to thank him for sending blankets for the 'old women ... to protect their poor old frames these cold nights', but often to scold the government and criticise the church for their failure to protect Aboriginal people from evil influences, provide relief and education for the children.

I take a great interest in the Native question and I think neither Church nor State is doing what is due to them in this direction ... It is high time and past that something was done to endeavour to rescue the perishing

40 H.C. Prinsep to Forrest, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 1898/387.

41 Lomas, L. 1986, 'McLeod, Donald Norman (1848–1914)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 10, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, pp. 333–4.

42 Government of Western Australia 1901/2, *Annual Report of the Aborigines Department*, Perth, p.8.

... My big family of natives all doing well. Lottie takes two of her little half caste girls with her. They could serve as an object lesson of what can be done with even two years' training.⁴³

'Like tribes of Arabs'

Prinsep was reluctant to openly criticise pastoralists who were not fulfilling their obligations under the Act, mindful of the powerful representation of landowners in both houses of parliament. In his 1901/02 report, he described the situation found by Olivey and 'Magistrates, Police Officers and others in various districts' as 'satisfactory'. In the Kimberley, 'the natives are generally left to their original lives or are being utilised and kindly treated by the pastoralists'. The main problem was cattle-killing, with the police seeking to 'make examples' of the few they were 'able to apprehend'. The system of pastoral paternalism generally worked, according to Prinsep, in contrast to the mining districts, particularly the gold mining towns of Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie.

Here we have several hundreds of natives in a totally pauperised state with scarcely any actual food or water, and very little opportunity of employment. They wander about like tribes of Arabs pitching their camps for a short time at one goldfields centre, and then on to another begging from whites and reported to be earning a good deal by prostitution.⁴⁴

Without a pastoral industry in the region, the Aboriginal people of the goldfields 'have very little idea of work' and, with no access to their traditional food and water sources, have 'nothing but grasses and insects'. They live in a state of 'complete beggary', 'considered as a nuisance, and feel themselves to be such'. Prinsep recommended that 'they be collected in reserves, the support of them would come to a good round sum—more than I can set apart out of my present votes.'⁴⁵ Forrest agreed that a system of reserves should be established in the goldfields, but refused to provide additional funds. He favoured a 'central station', where Aboriginal people 'could be free from want and demoralising influences and a good way from a town, with land fit for cultivation, where farming, fruit and vegetables ... could be carried on ... where they could marry and settle down ... To this place young men and women would gladly come.'⁴⁶ Prinsep considered various options for a reserve in the region, including islands off the south coast in the vicinity of the small town of Esperance, or the use of

43 Donald McLeod to H.C. Prinsep, 16 November 1903, SLWA Acc. 3594A/7.

44 Annual Report 1902/03, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255, AD File 1903/148.

45 Government of Western Australia 1901/2, *Annual Report of the Aborigines Department*, Perth, p. 8.

46 Forrest to H.C. Prinsep, 19 November 1900, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 1900/830.

Rottneest Island as 'the only one in this part of the State where I thought natives could live permanently but this, of course, would not do, so long as the prison existed there'.⁴⁷

Prinsep proposed extensive powers to control the movements of unemployed Aboriginal people, to create Aboriginal reserves and white reserves, declare prohibited areas and prohibit cohabitation of white or Asian men with Aboriginal women. These were designed to limit contact between the races and, as historian Raymond Evans has observed in the context of similar policies in Queensland, were widely supported by the colonial social body. To humanitarians, they represented an opportunity to free Aboriginal people from the pernicious influence of colonisation and thereby preserve the remnants of a ravaged population. Others viewed segregation as a way of removing Aboriginal people to a distant and largely inaccessible stage.⁴⁸ Pastoralists could readily see benefits in the potential of reserves as a labour pool which could in the process provide limited training and initial assimilation to western ways. The objective was not only to protect Aboriginal populations from pernicious contact with whites and Asians, but also from each other. As Prinsep identified in his annual reports, it was the immorality of Aboriginal people that brought about the problems of the 'half-caste' population, prostitution and venereal disease. In the coastal towns of the Kimberley, 'strong and able men' were known to live on 'the immorality of their women', but Prinsep assured the Parliament that most resident magistrates were assiduous in their efforts to deal with the perpetrators of such immorality. The Wyndham magistrate, for example, was 'determined to put a stop to this sort of thing':

I want Wyndham to be a clean town, and I wish the people in it to be respectable and healthy-living residents. You may depend that any deserving case will have my prompt attention. Old and decrepit natives will be looked after and attended to in the usual way, but young demons who live on the prostitution of their unfortunate women shall receive no quarter at my hands, and I have instructed the police to take immediate steps to rid the town of such pests.⁴⁹

In Prinsep's view, this was 'the right way to talk'. He nevertheless felt obliged to address immorality, even though the 'subject is a nauseous one, but the worst phase of it is the readiness with which the natives take to an immoral life, the men ... finding so many temporary advantages accruing from the degradation of their women'.⁵⁰ In the Kimberley pearling ports of Broome, Lagrange and

47 Government of Western Australia 1900/1, *Annual Report of the Aborigines Department*, Perth, p. 6.

48 Evans, Raymond, Kay Saunders and Kathryn Cronin 1975, *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland: A history of exclusion, exploitation and extermination*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, p. 118–9.

49 Government of Western Australia 1901/2, *Annual Report of the Aborigines Department*, Perth, p.6.

50 Ibid., pp.6, 8.

Wallal, Prinsep was keen to prohibit contact between 'Asiatics' and Aboriginal women, which was believed to bring 'a great deal of sexual disease', but more seriously risked populating the north with a 'mongrel race, very inimical to their future quietude'.⁵¹

Prinsep periodically initiated inquiries into mistreatment or immoral behaviour by pastoralists, but was unable under his powers to lay charges or gather evidence and, in any case, was generally sympathetic to the situation of the pastoralist. In 1898, he informed the Premier about an allegation of the 'unlawful detention' by pastoralist and local Justice of the Peace Walter Nairn, manager of Byro station in the Murchison district, of two women, 'Caroline' and 'half-caste Polly':

There seems no evidence that the Messrs Nairns are cruel, or even harsh with the natives in their employ—but there is evidence of a very low morality, which I presume we cannot interfere with, until the native woman complains ... The white ladies on the station seems to be living in the most blissful ignorance of what is going on "down in the gully and just outside the garden wall."⁵²

Prinsep was equally concerned with the protection of young men from 'highly reputable families' who, 'in their youthful ardour', became 'so enamoured of some black girl as to wish to marry her, and thus blast their future lives'. 'Everything should be done', wrote Prinsep to the Colonial Secretary, 'to protect them from their own folly.'⁵³ In Prinsep's view, efforts to regulate interracial relationships in country regions would remain ineffectual without legislation giving the Chief Protector the power to intervene directly. The powerlessness of the department was exacerbated by the status of many of the pastoralists as members of the political and social elite in Perth, which virtually guaranteed their immunity from prosecution or even censure over ill-treatment of Aboriginal people. Much as Gribble had encountered a wall of silence about the true state of relationships between pastoralists and Aboriginal populations ten years before, so did the Aborigines Department stand little chance of prosecuting cases of mistreatment or regulating sexual liaisons, even if Prinsep and his staff had been inclined to vigorously pursue alleged offenders.

51 Ibid., p.8.

52 H.C. Prinsep to Forrest, 21 December 1898, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 1898/373.

53 H.C. Prinsep to Colonial Secretary, 16 November 1906, SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 1906/533.

A 'firm course of action'

Prinsep believed that Aboriginal people were vulnerable to the corrupting influences of lower class whites and Asians, and that the only means of slowing the process of moral and physical decline was to isolate black from white.⁵⁴ In 1899, he wrote to Forrest telling him that venereal disease was rife in the Aboriginal population and that, unless the government took a 'firm course of action', Aboriginal people would completely disappear from the north; he did not want to be held responsible.⁵⁵

The growing prevalence of venereal disease amongst the Aborigines in some places compels me to suggest that our curative efforts should be assisted by legislation with the object of preventing them, in their own interest, from loitering in towns and other places where the evil exists—affecting both the black and white population.⁵⁶

Historian Mary Anne Jebb suggests that 'venereal disease and prostitution were tied together as a gauge of both the moral and physical degeneration of Aboriginal people'.⁵⁷ By enabling Aboriginal men to 'live well' off the earnings of women from prostitution, the pastoral labour force was destabilised and the 'social distance' between the white and Aboriginal populations reduced.⁵⁸ The reports of G.S. Olivey, along with constant complaints from pastoralists, fuelled the view that Aboriginal peoples were increasingly abandoning an 'honest living' and congregating in towns and mining camps where they lived 'off the prostitution of their women'.⁵⁹ This was a particular concern to pastoralists, who were worried that their Aboriginal workforces would 'drift away' to become victims of venereal disease and prostitution. Prinsep's proposals to control Aboriginal movement and prohibit sexual contact were thus designed to preserve a permanent pastoral workforce, and to limit the numbers of people leaving the stations and moving to the towns and camps, where they 'insultingly refuse employment and dress well, drink much, and are a general nuisance irrespective of the diseases which are disseminated in their immoralities to both black and white'.⁶⁰

54 SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255, AD File 782/1899/782; Government of Western Australia 1901/2, *Annual Report of the Aborigines Department*, Perth, pp. 3–5; Government of Western Australia 1903/04, *Annual Report of the Aborigines Department*, Perth, p.5.

55 Prinsep to Forrest, 17 October 1899, private collection.

56 Ibid.

57 Jebb, Mary Anne 1987, 'Isolating the Problem: Venereal disease and Aborigines in Western Australia', Honours Thesis, Murdoch University, p.16.

58 Ibid., p. 34.

59 Letters to Prinsep from Arthur Weston, Murchison; F.T. Smith, Upper Gascoyne; E.J. Brockman, Gascoyne; Ball Bros, De Grey; and J. Isdell, Nullagine in SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 1900/51.

60 SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 1905/97.

Prinsep's proposals were designed to curb sexual contact between Aboriginal women and white or Asian men, but they also acted to limit 'Aboriginal women's survival opportunities outside the parameters of state ration depots or the pastoral industry'. Consequently, Aboriginal women who continued to participate in casual sexual liaisons with non-Aboriginal men reinforced their position as prostitutes, entrenching their immoral status and providing a rationale for increased state control.⁶¹ The 1905 laws served to institutionalise the immoral status of Aboriginal women by providing the Chief Protector with powers to detain and remove half-castes or other problem populations including venereal disease and leprosy sufferers.⁶²

Prinsep's response to the problem of venereal disease in the north was to establish Lock Hospitals on Dorre and Bernier islands off the coast near Carnarvon, one for men, the other for women. The proposal, which relied principally on the legislative powers of the *Aborigines Act*, was the result of a co-operative effort by the Aborigines Department, an initially reluctant Health Department, and the police. The rising status of the medical and health professions in the early 1900s, partly through the perceived success of public health in the control of disease, contributed to perceptions that an important role of the state was to prevent disease, and that a state of health was 'the root of the nation's happiness'.⁶³ Perceptions of a large, venereally diseased population of Aboriginal people in the north and the threat of contagion demanded a response from the government to a population that could be treated through medical science, and at the same time segregated under the *Aborigines Act*.

Part of the role of Travelling Inspector G.S. Olivey was to dispense medical care to diseased Aboriginal people, by distributing potassium iodide, zinc-based ointments, carbolic acid, washes of epsom salts and sandalwood oil.⁶⁴ Yet reports of 'loathsome' venereal disease in the northern Aboriginal population and fears of an epidemic decimating the Aboriginal workforce increased in the period between 1900 and 1904, and medical treatment became a higher priority for the Aborigines Department. In 1906, suggestions that Aboriginal venereal disease was a treatable problem came to occupy the minds of Prinsep and the Health Department, signifying a shift in emphasis from limiting sexual contact between races to control and treatment. In a Lock Hospital, Aboriginal people could be 'treated under lock and key and not permitted to leave until cured', thereby dealing with two connected problems, enforced medical treatment and the fears in the white population about contagion. Prinsep's plan was to place the two islands under the dual control of the Aborigines and Health Departments, his

61 Jebb 1987, 'Isolating the Problem', p.39.

62 Ibid., p. 41.

63 Department of Health, *Annual Report*, 1914, quoted by Jebb 1987, 'Isolating the Problem', p.43.

64 Jebb 1987, 'Isolating the Problem', p.50.

department providing funding and the powers to collect and detain Aboriginal people, and the Health Department the medical expertise. In October 1907 the islands were temporarily reserved for use as Lock Hospitals and 2,000 pounds was added to the Aborigines Department vote.⁶⁵

By the time the Lock Hospitals were established, Prinsep was on leave in Europe, prior to his retirement. Edward Pechell wrote in December 1907 with the news the government had finally decided to reserve Dorre and Bernier Islands as hospitals for 'sick natives', and had made a special allocation of 4,000 pounds.⁶⁶ Pechell foresaw 'a lot of trouble in connection with it, collecting the natives will be no easy matter'. Police officers throughout the north subsequently assumed an active role in collecting diseased Aboriginal people and arranging for their transport to the islands. The anomalous function of police thus continued, their dual role as protectors and law enforcers blurring the distinction between punishment, protection, arrest and coercion. The proclamation of the islands as reserves under the Act allowed the Minister to issue warrants for the removal and detention of any Aboriginal person suspected of carrying a venereal disease, which in practice allowed the police collectors considerable discretion. Some examined Aboriginal people themselves, while others relied on the advice or station managers and local residents.⁶⁷ E.L. Grant Watson, who visited the islands with Radcliffe-Brown and Daisy Bates in 1910, criticised collections as 'neither humane nor scientific': 'A man, unqualified except by ruthlessness and daring and helped by one or two kindred spirits, toured the countryside, raided native camps and by brute force "examined" the natives ... diseased were seized upon ... chained by the neck ... marched through the bush in search of further syphilitics ... eventually to the coast.'⁶⁸ Collections were pursued vigorously until 1911, when, with the election of a Labor government, enthusiasm began to wane. During the ten years of the hospital's operation, over 600 people were incarcerated, including 428 women and 209 men. 170 people died on the islands.⁶⁹ Daisy Bates described the Lock Hospitals as a 'ghastly experiment', with 'no ray of brightness, no gleam of hope'.⁷⁰

Deaths were frequent—appallingly frequent, sometimes three in a day—for most of the natives were obviously in the last stages of venereal disease and tuberculosis. Nothing could save them, and they had been transported, some of them thousands of miles, to strange and unnatural surroundings and solitude. They were afraid of the hospital,

65 Ibid., p.64.

66 Pechell to H.C. Prinsep, 23 December 1907, SLWA Acc. 3593A/34.

67 *The Aborigines Act 1905*, Section 12; Jebb 1987, 'Isolating the Problem', p.78.

68 Grant Watson, E.L. 1968, *Journey Under Southern Stars*, Abelard-Schuman, London and New York.

69 Jebb 1987, 'Isolating the Problem', p.101.

70 Bates, Daisy 1938 (1966), *The Passing of the Aborigines: A lifetime spent among the natives of Australia*, Second Edition, Heinemann, Melbourne, pp.101–4.

its ceaseless probings and dressings and injections were a daily torture. They were afraid of each other, living and dead. They were afraid of the ever-moaning sea.⁷¹

The closure of the island hospitals in 1918 signified a loss of interest by health authorities, attention shifting to control of other tropical diseases, particularly leprosy. The labour force needs of pastoralists were also changing, and venereal disease was no longer seen to be a problem. The period of labour instability had passed, while southern and goldfields half-caste populations came to occupy the energies of Prinsep's successors, Gale and particularly A.O. Neville.⁷² Nevertheless, the precedent of government intervention to limit contagions on the basis of race had been set and was, from 1936, to be applied to the collection and compulsory detention in the control of leprosy in the north. Because the provisions of the 1905 laws allowed for the compulsory detention of Aboriginal people, the problem of venereal disease could be defined on racial grounds as an Aboriginal problem. There was no need for new and contentious contagious diseases legislation to forcibly collect and treat Aboriginal people, as the *Aborigines Act* provided all the powers necessary to sanction their arrest and removal to a reserve.

71 Ibid., pp.98–9.

72 Jebb 1987, 'Isolating the Problem', p.154.



'Neck-chaining has not a pleasant sound, and perhaps that is the worst part of it.' Prinsep's final few months as Chief Protector were spent trying to defend Western Australia's practices in the transnational sphere, including attending a meeting with the Secretary of State for Colonies Lord Elgin in 1908 to explain the government's continued toleration of the practice. This image shows unnamed Aboriginal men probably in the Kimberley, date unknown.

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 BA 1423/149.



An unnamed Aboriginal man in the vicinity of Willambury Station, 300 kilometres from Carnarvon in the Gascoyne region of Western Australia, a property owned by Prinsep's kinsman Mervyn Bunbury and his wife Millie (née Priess).

Source: Lovegrove Images, SLWA 28614P.



As Chief Protector, Prinsep was appalled at what he believed was the depraved condition of Aboriginal children in the vicinity of regional towns such as Carnarvon. This group of children was photographed by Thomas Lovegrove on a visit to the region in 1908 in the river bed of the Gascoyne near Carnarvon.

Source: Lovegrove Images, SLWA 28614P.



Tommy Dower on his death bed in 1895. Dower had accompanied Alexander Forrest on one of his explorations and took the role as a spokesman for Perth Noongars from the 1870s to 1890s. Ngilgie and Joobaitch, with dogs, sit at the front, while the man standing behind Joobaitch may be Timbal, who was employed by Prinsep on his stations as a young man. The identities of the others are not known.

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 BA 1423/154.



'Corunna Downs natives', 1905. The Pilbara station was owned by members of the Brockman family, who also ran stations elsewhere in the Pilbara, the Kimberley and the Gascoyne. Aboriginal children from these stations, some of them fathered by white men, were sometimes sent south to work as domestics or farm labourers for Brockman families living in Perth or on farms in the south-west. Nathaniel (Nutty) Leyland was one of these children, born in the Pilbara and taken south to be brought up and work on Edward and Capel (née Bussell) Brockman's farm, The Warren.

Source: Courtesy Ailsa Smith, Claremont WA.



The meagre resources of the Aborigines Department were stretched as Prinsep sought to meet the demands for rations from the ever-increasing numbers of dispossessed Aboriginal people around the state, as their traditional lands were steadily appropriated by white pastoralists. Ration stations, such as the LaGrange bay station shown in this picture, were established throughout the State. This picture shows a group of people, probably Karajarri traditional owners, camped in the vicinity of rations.

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 BA 1423/148.



Prinsep's efforts to segregate Aboriginal populations on reserves received little support from Government, although he was able to establish the Welshpool (Maamba) reserve to confine Perth people. Few of the people can be identified. Joobaitch stands in the centre, his head adorned with a new boater hat. Daisy Bates, at that time employed by the government to record Aboriginal languages, is in the background on the far right.

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 BA 1423/150.



Ngilgie and her animals at the Welshpool Reserve, date unknown. Daisy Bates called her 'the rich widow of the Welshpool Reserve', and 'the proud possessor of seven goats, 12 fowls and 32 dogs, incredible mongrels all'.

Source: The Western Mail, 1 June 1907.



The 'half-castes' of Ellensbrook in 1902, from left to right: Ivy, Miss Griffiths, Tommy, Emil-Penny, Mary, Frank, Dora and Jennie (Jean Jane) Councillor. Rather than calling them 'inmates' as he did other institutional residents, Prinsep called the Ellensbrook residents his 'protégées'. They wrote letters to him, and he regularly visited and sent them presents of clothing and shoes.

Source: Courtesy of Ailsa Smith, Claremont, WA.



Edith Bussell, 'a lady well-known for her knowledge of the natives', and a cousin of Prinsep's wife, Josephine, ran Ellensbrook Farm Home from 1898 to 1916.

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



Tommy Ah Hong, whose father had asked Prinsep to take him to Ellensbrook from Williambury station in the Gascoyne, and met the costs for his keep. This brought Prinsep's praise as 'one of the few fathers of half-caste children doing their duty', particularly notable because he was a 'chinaman'.

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 BA 1423/134.



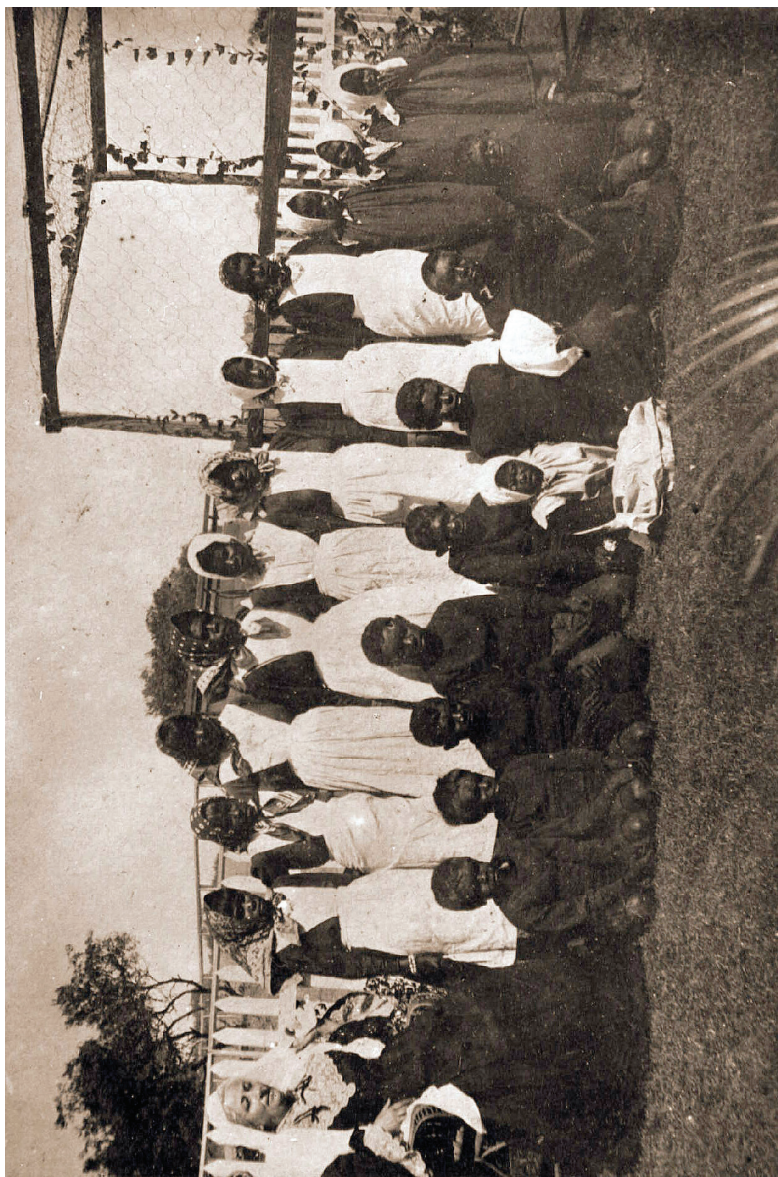
Williambury station in the Gascoyne, showing a boy believed to be Tommy Ah Hong after he had left Ellensbrook. The image was taken by Millie Bunbury (née Priess), a family friend of the Prinseps who spent most of her time living in Busselton in between visits to her husband Mervyn Bunbury at Williambury.

Source: Courtesy of anonymously held private collection.



Ellensbrook, today a National Trust property, with interpretive panels and walk trails. Located 30 kilometres from Margaret River, the place is a well-visited spot.

Source: Author's private collection.



'My big family of natives all doing well'. Prinsep informed the government that the Aboriginal people on Donald and Charlotte McLeod's station were 'compelled to wash themselves and their clothes, and to keep their hair short, and to appear weekly in a clean condition'.

Source: Courtesy of Ailsa Smith, Claremont, WA.



The Isaacs children off to school, at the Ferndale property Sam Isaacs was given in recognition of his heroism in rescuing the passengers of the stricken Georgette in 1876. Ferndale was located near Alfred Bussell's homestead, Wallcliffe, at the mouth of the Margaret River.

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



Native Camp, Strelley Street, Busselton, in 1901, near Henry Prinsep's home, Little Holland House, on the Vasse River.

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

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