

10. A 'southern home'

Prinsep's trip to Britain in 1908 was the first time he had been home since his departure as a 21-year-old in 1866, the first time he had seen his sisters, Annie, Louisa and May, and his brother, Jim, all together since they were young people.¹ His diaries over a 12-month stay record his joy at being once again amongst family members and old friends. Re-united with his cousin, Sir Henry Thoby Prinsep, recently retired after a career in the Indian colonial judiciary of 27 years, he was given a 'very cordial reception', and spent hours reminiscing about their shared childhoods in the homes of Thoby and Sara at Little Holland House and the Isle of Wight.² He again met Annie Thackeray Ritchie; Edward Thackeray; Bessie Hocking, the wife of his late friend, Sir Harry Hocking, who had died some years before in Jamaica; Hallam and Audrey Tennyson, who he had not seen since Hallam was Governor of South Australia during the last decade of the Nineteenth Century; and Mary Watts, wife of his old art teacher, George Frederick, who had died only three years before. He re-visited old haunts, sketched and painted his way around England, Scotland and the tourist spots on the continent—Cordova, Pompeii, Pisa, Capri, Florence, Rome, Venice, Switzerland and Paris—before returning to Britain.³ He revelled in the atmosphere of the countryside with its 'lovely trees and hedges' and visited art galleries and stately homes throughout the south, admiring the pictures and statues in places such as Basildon House, 'Constables, Lock, 3 Turners, a Rembrandt, 3 Van Dykes & c'.⁴

When the time came to return to Western Australia, Prinsep did so without regret, keen to be reunited with his daughters and an expanding family of grandchildren, and looking forward to a life of retirement, free from the demands of public service. Early-Twentieth-Century Britain had changed much from the place of his youth, and he now preferred the relative peace of a small Australian colony to the pace and crowds of London, the warmth of Western Australia's climate to the cold and damp of Britain. The London of his youth was no more, and Prinsep had come to feel like an artifact from another age. He reminisced with his brother, Jim, about these times long past, the green fields of a now suburban Kensington, 'the turnpike gate at the end of the Kensington boundary somewhere near the De Vere Hotel, I think now. I remember a little box in the middle of the road where the gateman sheltered to collect the tolls. But all this is long past history and few people believe me when I say I remember the tollgate.'⁵

1 Both of Prinsep's brothers had visited Perth, Jim in 1882 for nearly a year, and older brother, Charlie, who died in Melbourne in 1898, for a few days in 1887. Prinsep had visited Louisa Bowden-Smith in Colombo in 1897.

2 Prinsep, Henry C., 'Diaries 1866–1922', SLWA MN 773 Acc 499A, 1907–8.

3 Ibid., 4 February–7 April 1908.

4 Ibid., 18 May 1908.

5 H.C. Prinsep to Jim Prinsep, April 2 1916, private collection.

Soon after their return to Western Australia, the Prinseps left Perth for the rural quiet of Busselton, where they planned to build a house on land Henry had purchased on the banks of the Vasse River. Employing their friend and prominent colonial architect, George Temple Poole, to prepare drawings, Henry and Josephine spent as much time as possible away from the city. Poole wrote to Prinsep after a few days in Busselton, bemoaning his return to the 'muddy waters of this trivial place' after the companionship of his short stay in 'nature's great liberty'. He warned that the plans Prinsep wanted would result in a house far too large and expensive for the needs of Henry, Josephine and unmarried daughter Emily: 'You will have the jeer of me that I, an architect, inherently lavish, should preach to you for a reduced scheme of undertaking.'⁶ In 1911, the house, named after Thoby and Sara Prinsep's Little Holland House from Henry's youth in England, was finished, and the family moved in. Henry was to spend his remaining 14 years in pleasant retirement here, near his married daughters, Carlotta Brockman and Virginia Reynolds, their grandchildren and large extended family, living in the rural bliss he had yearned for, and thanking his God who 'in such mysterious ways ... in His mercy brings to pass, for us such happy days'.⁷

Older family members speak of Prinsep in retirement as a sociable man devoted to his wife and family, dedicated to photography and art, poetry and reading, whose public life he now restricted to a term as President of the Busselton Roads Boards, and elder and lay preacher of the town's St Mary's Anglican Church.⁸ They remember Prinsep and Josephine as a quiet and refined couple, 'very English', known for eccentricities, such as reserving a high-chair at the breakfast table for their cat, and Prinsep's famed lack of punctuality. He built his own darkroom, indulged his passion for painting and photography, and entertained old friends from Perth, such as artist Herbert Gibbs and scientific visitors from Britain sent to see him by Museum Director Bernard Woodward, who collected '214 beasties including some very remarkable beetles'.⁹ He continued his poetry, acrostics and honorific verses about old friends, such as John Forrest, playful rhymes for his grandchildren, nephews and nieces and memorials of his youth and childhood.¹⁰ Letters continued to arrive from Britain and throughout the imperial world. Many concerned the death or illness of his increasingly elderly siblings, kin and friends, and the affairs of his many nieces and nephews, some of whom had followed their forebears into colonial careers.¹¹ He and Josephine

6 George Temple Poole to Prinsep, 4 May 1911.

7 'Return to the country', in Prinsep, Henry C. 1908, *Random Rhymes*, T.F. Christie, Perth.

8 These memoirs are from a conversation with Prinsep's last surviving granddaughter, the late Mrs. Edie Giles of Busselton, who remembers him from her childhood 'as a misty figure'. One grandson, Alfred Reynolds, survives at the time of writing, but was too young to remember Prinsep.

9 Bernard Woodward to H.C. Prinsep, 25 October 1912, SLWA Acc.3594A/23.

10 Prinsep 1908, *Random Rhymes*, foreword.

11 Amelia Wilkens to H.C. Prinsep, 11 July 1912, SLWA Acc.3594A/3.

farewelled younger family members bound for South Africa and Europe on military service, rejoiced in the exploits of Britain's military heroes, and shared with family correspondents their despair at food shortages at home and the death and injury of family members and friends on military service.¹² Periodically news from home, such as the marriage of Prinsep's recently-widowed youngest sister, May, to former Australian Governor-General, Hallam Tennyson, delighted Prinsep and Josephine. As Jim Prinsep confided in July 1918:

At present it's a profound secret, but I expect that by the time you get this it will have been publicly announced, and I hope the marriage will have taken place, as there is nothing I can see to make them wait. But if not, you must treat it as absolutely confidential as one can never be sure in these times how a chance remark in Busselton may not be cabled to England. Please therefore keep it entirely private until it is publicly announced. It is possible that Hallam's former position in Australia may render his marriage sufficiently interesting to be deemed worth calling to the papers and if so you may hear of it before you get this ... You'll be able to swagger a bit by referring casually to 'my brother-in-law, who was formerly Governor-General.'¹³

Prinsep's retirement gave him time to reflect upon his place in the history of Western Australia, and on its development over the half-century since his arrival as a young man in a colony then less than 40 years old. He spent time sorting out his collection of artifacts and ephemera from India, Ceylon and Australia, and donated many to the new State Museum, including a 'tile from a Temple roof', a 'sacred lamp', 'Indian art' and a 'Buddhist Bible in brass covers', a 'skull (homo), a trap door spider's nest ... a portion of native canoe (from what location?), a native ornament, and a small box containing mineral specimens'.¹⁴ He imposed rudimentary order on the piles of letters and photographs from Australia, Britain and empire that had accumulated over his 40 years in the colony, sorting the correspondence into loose categories, and arranging black and white prints, cartes de visite and cabinet cards into albums. As he grew older, he became more conscious of his status as an old colonist, one of a declining number of Western Australians who could recall the colony in its early days. On occasions, he was invited to meetings to speak about the old times. He contributed memoirs to local magazines and wrote letters to his brother and sisters recalling their youth in places such as Kensington and Freshwater on the Isle of Wight.¹⁵

12 Annie Prinsep to H.C. Prinsep, March 29 1916, SLWA Acc.3592A/16A; Hallam Tennyson to H.C. Prinsep, 24 February 1918, SLWA Acc.3592A/67B; Jim Prinsep to H.C. Prinsep, 14 June 1918, SLWA Acc.3592A/67B.

13 Jim Prinsep to H.C. Prinsep, 26th July 1918, SLWA Acc.3859A/67B.

14 Western Australian Museum, 'Donation Catalogue', 1902–1914; Bernard Woodward to H.C. Prinsep, 4 March 1910, SLWA Acc.3594A/71.

15 Bernard Woodward to H.C. Prinsep, 11 January 1904, SLWA Acc.3594A/46/3; Prinsep, H.C., 'Memoirs of an Old Colonist', in *The Magistrate: Official Organ of the Justices Association of Western Australia* (Perth), June 27 1918; H.C. Prinsep to Jim Prinsep, April 2 1916, private collection.

Western Australia had become his 'southern home', the place beneath 'southern skies to spend my life in strange, untrodden ways', as he told his Scottish cousin, Katie Grant-Peterkin.¹⁶ This distant land had become familiar, and he was proud to be one of 'Old Britain's offspring strewn o'er all the world, standing firm in its dear mother's attitude', member of the singular race that 'strives for Truth and equal rights for all, and freedom from the tyrant's iron chains'.¹⁷

'A Christian gentleman of the old school'

Considering his diverse interests, we can imagine that Prinsep would be dismayed that today he is widely remembered in Western Australia for his role in the controversial and discredited *Aborigines Act*. Convinced that time would prove the many critics of his role as Chief Protector wrong, he believed future generations would bestow 'high ecomiums' on him and a government which had acted correctly to forestall the complete disappearance of a dying race. 'In future days', he told Premier John Forrest, the people of Western Australia will be grateful for 'laws which will do so much to preserve the health and morality of the coming race and prevent the ancient and interesting aboriginal race from sinking into a degraded grave and infamous memory. Necessity requires no precedents.'¹⁸

Prinsep viewed himself as 'the best friend of the native', the one 'the natives themselves' turned to for help, but he was sensitive to his many critics and despaired that he would ever be able to satisfy anyone with his performance. Many believed he had done little to protect Aboriginal peoples throughout the State from cruelty and exploitation, others that he had done too much, and had sided with Aboriginal people against the interests of the pastoral and mining industries. *The West Australian* called for Prinsep's resignation on the grounds of incompetence in the immediate aftermath of the Roth Royal Commission. He also drew ridicule as a 'round man in a square hole', or as the 'dearest old lady in the world', as Daisy Bates described him after he had refused her request to remove Aboriginal skeletal remains for her research.¹⁹ He was lampooned for his Englishness, his mild temperament and innocuous attempts to prosecute pastoralists for their illegal treatment of Aboriginal people. *The West Australian*, a critic of Prinsep as Chief Protector, even published verse mocking his Englishness and mild manner:

16 These phrases are from two of Prinsep's poems, 'To Mrs Willoughby Wilkinson' and 'To Cousin Katie Grant-Peterkin' in Prinsep 1908, *Random Rhymes*.

17 H.C. Prinsep, 'Our Britain', SLWA Acc.3594A/4.

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

19 Haebich, Anna 1988, *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and government in the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900-1940*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, p.61.

I'm Prinsep, Protector of the Blacks,
 Of good English blood I have stacks,
 And my anger (?) goes forth,
 To those men of the north,
 Whose morals and methods are lax.²⁰

By the last years of his career, Prinsep indeed appeared an anachronism in an increasingly professionalised state civil service, the last of a generation of gentleman civil servants from an earlier era in the colony's history. Men such as Prinsep brought to the civil service a 'good education in England' and 'dignity in official and social relations'; he was 'a man of culture and of general knowledge', but in early-Twentieth-Century Western Australia, this no longer seemed enough.²¹ According to the Perth newspaper *The Morning Herald*, Prinsep was 'humane, honourable, and just-minded', but lacked the energy and expertise of a man like Walter Roth.

Mr. Prinsep has served the State well in other capacities, and no one will doubt for a moment his keen sympathy with the lot of his helpless charges. But the chief protector of aborigines must be a young man, who can go about amongst the blacks and their employers, and get his information first hand. That he should be a scientist like Dr. Roth is also desirable.²²

Despite his expectation that future generations would endorse his actions as Chief Protector, history has instead judged Prinsep harshly, particularly the *Aborigines Act* and the government bureaucracy he pioneered. Rather than fulfilling Prinsep's anticipation that they would be the salvation of Aboriginal people, in 2008 the laws were judged a humanitarian tragedy that, over 100 years after their enactment, required the Commonwealth's formal apology and a promise that governments of Australia would never again act in such a blatant way against the interests of Aboriginal people. People such as Prinsep would no doubt have found it impossible to imagine that his brand of colonial humanitarianism would be so explicitly rejected. Far from being a savior, he would instead be held as one responsible for a system that acted against the interests of the State's Aboriginal people for the next 70 years. The system he and people like him had introduced was adjudged a massive failure that had brought great suffering on Aboriginal people as a subject race throughout

20 Undated cutting, 'The West Australian' in the Prinsep papers, SLWA MN 773 Acc. 3592A/72A.

21 Prinsep, Henry C., 'Application for Appointment as Government Resident, Kimberley', State Records Office of Western Australia, Colonial Secretary's Office, 1885 1668, AN527.

22 *Perth Morning Herald*, 1 February 1905.

Western Australia and the Commonwealth of Australia. This system was based on serious and misleading illusions about the nature and complexity of Aboriginal societies, and largely denied the human rights and freedoms of a subject people, together with their cultural and historical identities, their capacity and desire to exercise agency and control over their own personal and family lives.

Prinsep's *Aborigines Act* was thoroughly consistent with his understanding of Britain's imperial role and the growth of an extensive colonial system founded on the appropriation of new lands and the dispossession of indigenous peoples. The unquestioned right of British colonisation to exercise its power over subject peoples could readily be justified by loosely held humanitarian ideals of advancement and modernisation, which assumed that the benefits of British civilisation and religion were sufficient compensation for the loss of indigenous lands and cultures. As a coloniser and 'imperial man', Prinsep was very much complicit in this dispossession. Aboriginal cultures would be forever changed under the impact of colonisation, but the role of humane people such as himself was to protect Aboriginal people from its worst excesses. Aboriginal populations throughout Australia became subject peoples identified by race, whose destinies in every aspect of their lives was now the business of government, the province of an increasingly powerful and intrusive bureaucracy which became ever more efficient in its role of managing and regulating Aboriginal life. John Forrest's warning in 1900 that the laws would make 'prisoners of these poor people in their own country' proved to be devastatingly accurate, while the humanitarian justifications advanced by Prinsep eventually came to be seen as misguided and ultimately destructive.²³

Were he alive today, Prinsep would no doubt be surprised by the continued presence of a vibrant Aboriginal society, even more so by its increasing presence in Australian public life. In his last years, Prinsep believed that the coda of Aboriginal society in colonised Australia was already being played out. He died quietly at home, in Little Holland House, at the age of 78, surrounded by his loving Josephine, daughters Carlotta, Emily and Virginia, and many of his grandchildren. The Western Australian press recorded the passing of an 'old colonist', eulogising 'one of the State's oldest and best known residents' who was 'always polite, always courteous, always kind and wishing to be helpful', and 'a Christian gentleman of the old school.'²⁴ By contrast, George Coolbul, Charlie Neeribun, Ngilgie, Fanny Balbuk, Nathaniel Leyland and the countless other Aboriginal people he had known over his years in Western Australia died unlamented and largely unremembered. At the time of Prinsep's death, their traditional country was covered by farms, and their Noongar descendants were shut out of their traditional lives and the colonial economy. They had been

²³ SROWA Series 3005 Cons 255 AD File 830/1900.

²⁴ *The West Australian*, July 21 1922; *West Australian Church News*, 1 August 1922.

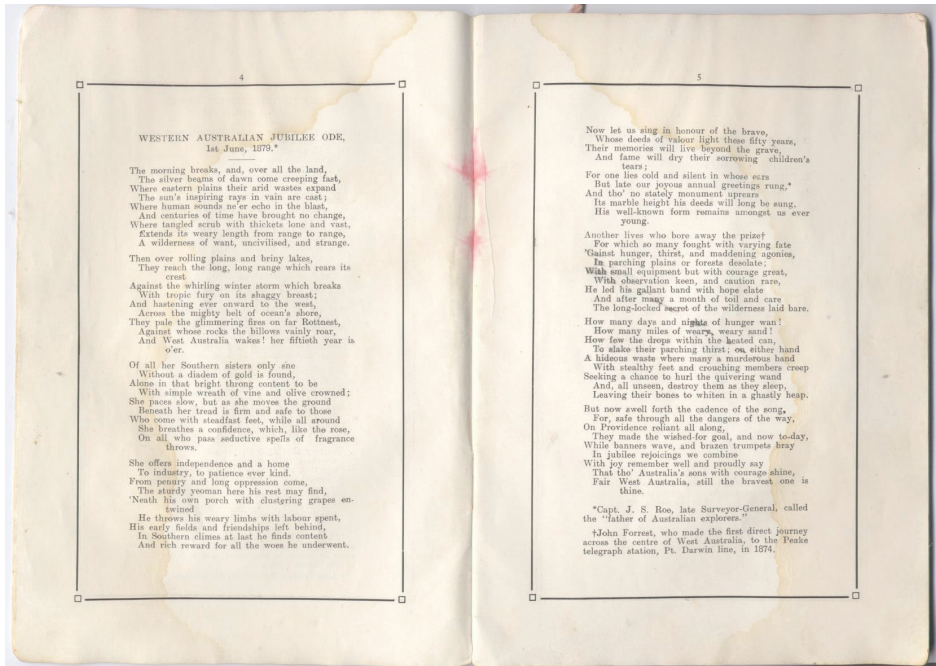
relegated to the status of pauper and excluded from participation in the Western Australian community partly because of the legislation that Prinsep worked so hard to promulgate. Prinsep, as his descendants recorded, died happy, content with his life's work and his contribution to the development of a prosperous southern colonial home, secure in the knowledge that he had done his duty in the way his God would have approved. Like his forebears in India whose example he so much revered, Prinsep never questioned the rightness of a venture that was divinely ordained and that had as its basis the appropriation of indigenous lands. Prinsep and his forebears might occasionally bemoan the violent expulsion and repression of indigenous resistance, but they were never at any stage prepared to seriously question the primary logic of a settler colonialism founded on dispossession. Instead, they argued that it was the innate deficiencies of Aboriginal or Indian populations which rendered them incapable of benefiting from the offerings of British civilisation. A man such as Prinsep could simply turn away from any concerns he might have about the future of Aboriginal Western Australia, put the cares of official office aside, and enjoy the fruits of his retirement, comfortable in the knowledge that his descendants would benefit from the adventure he had started so many years before. He could trivialise the situation of his Aboriginal charges as a 'laughing, careless race, full of humour, mirth and song. Indolent in the extreme, they appear to be believers in the maxim "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," and to take no care for the morrow.'²⁵ In the early-Twenty-First Century, Australia is still in the process of emerging from its colonial past, as the sense of connectedness to Britain and an imperial past decreases with the emergence of new generations and non-British ethnicities into positions of political power and influence. For the nation's Aboriginal people, we can be optimistic that our own post-colonial moment will provide the opportunity to consolidate the moves towards the decolonisation of the past few years, and achieve a time when they will return to a position where they are respected as a people, valued for their contribution to modern Australian society.

25 Government of Western Australia 1901, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Western Australia*, P.W.H. Thiel & Co., Perth, p.178.



Little Holland House, Busselton, 'for us a place to pass such happy days' in retirement. Prinsep, Josephine and Emily moved to Busselton a year after his retirement. Naming it after the Kensington home of Thoby and Sara Prinsep where he had spent his youth, he lived out his remaining years in contented rural bliss. Josephine and Emily are on the front porch.

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 BA 1423/344.



In his retirement, Prinsep gathered verses and acrostics he had penned over the years and published them in 1915 in a booklet, *Random Rhymes*, 'for friends who have pressed me so hard for copies'. Many of the rhymes honour and remember old friends, such as John Forrest, and others, such as his 'Western Australia Jubilee Ode, 1879', sing the praises of his 'southern home', Western Australia.

Source: Author's private collection.



Surrounded by family, Henry Prinsep and Josephine in Busselton in old age, photographed by Millie Bunbury (née Priess).

Source: Courtesy Ailsa Smith, Claremont WA.



In retirement, Prinsep pursued his love of art and photography. This oil painting, 'Karri Trees, Manjimup in 1910', is one of his few paintings to explore newer and bolder styles.

Source: The Wordsworth Collection, National Gallery of Australia.

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