

‘This bitter reproach’: destruction, guilt and the colonial future

In 1841, LE Threlkeld wrote to Colonial Secretary E Deas Thomson to report on the imminent closure of his Lake Macquarie mission. The mission had been marked by controversy virtually from the beginning, due to Threlkeld’s angry public statements about colonial violence and his disputes with powerful local figures – firstly, with missionary advocate Samuel Marsden (which contributed to the London Missionary Society’s decision to remove their funding in 1828) and later with outspoken politician John Dunmore Lang (which furthered the removal of government funding).¹ Throughout these tumultuous years, Threlkeld had contributed to the production of ideas about Indigenous Australia. He had set himself up as an expert on Awabakal language and society, promoted the need for missionary work, and objected passionately to what he believed was a culture of frontier violence. However, he also came to see the final disappearance of Indigenous societies as probable and perhaps unavoidable. Threlkeld’s final report encapsulated some of these complexities. He reported with pride that King William IV had accepted a copy of his linguistic work for the Royal Library, but made clear that this was more about memorialising a dying race than supporting a living one. Threlkeld asserted that his mission was closing because so few Awabakal people remained, and expressed hope that this tragedy would not dissuade the government from supporting future philanthropy. Indigenous opinions on the mission’s closure were not discussed, and his morose conclusion suggested a certain temptation to hold them responsible for his disappointments and their own mortality:

It is a melancholy fact that, although much has been done in the way of translation, there are now scarcely any Aborigines left to learn to read, and the few who remain appear determined to go in the broad road to destruction.²

In fact, Threlkeld’s mission was one of the first to close; others, in southern and western Australia, had barely begun. His comments, however, drew attention to – and perhaps exacerbated – the pessimism that surrounded many Australian philanthropic efforts, even at their inception. By 1855, all of the first missions and protectorate stations had shut (most had dwindled long before). Meanwhile, Aboriginal people across all the colonies were suffering from loss of land and resources, erosion of cultural life, and depopulation through illness, poverty, low

¹ Johnston 2006: 59, 73–77.

² LE Threlkeld to E Deas Thomson, ‘The final report of the mission to the Aborigines, Lake Macquarie, New South Wales, 1841’, PMS1847, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

birth rates and violence. Philanthropists reported this destruction frequently but felt largely powerless to prevent it. This chapter traces the humanitarian collapse, while also attempting to go beyond the common assessment of these missions and protectorates as simple failures. In a setting where Evangelical philanthropists consistently stressed that nothing but their own Christian efforts could save Indigenous people, the closure of their projects had important implications for future policy-making. Intertwined with these changes was a growth in popular settler portrayals of Indigenous people as naturally doomed, a topic which brings to the fore the ambiguous place of philanthropists within empire, as they alternately opposed such racist attitudes and became implicated in them.

‘An eternal memento’: Indigenous deaths and philanthropic collapse

The spectre of Indigenous death and disappearance had been present in philanthropic discourse from at least the 1820s, with Christian intervention portrayed as the only solution. The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society’s *Missionary Notices* (1825), for example, reported ‘exterminating conflict’ occurring in Bathurst, and called for a mission to be established nearby. Accompanying this was a quotation from the *Sydney Gazette*:

it is horrible to think, that, at a moment when all the civilized world is united for the abolition of the (abominable) slave trade, that even one man could be found cruel enough to think it necessary to exterminate the whole race of these poor misrepresented people.³

Similarly, the Church Missionary Society’s *Missionary Register* (1831) anticipated that the government would support the proposed Wellington Valley mission in order to avoid the devastation that had occurred in other British colonies.⁴ In 1838, when the Colonial Church Society promoted the need for stronger religious life in the colonies, one reason cited was the need to prevent Indigenous destruction. Otherwise, the ‘New Hollanders’, along with native peoples of Africa and America, would remain degraded and ‘vitiating’, ‘melting away from existence’.⁵

While the claim that only missionaries could save Indigenous people was understandable and in some respects valid, it conveyed some mixed messages. This was especially so when Indigenous people were described as so degraded

3 Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS), *Missionary Notices*, no 116, August 1825: 499.

4 Church Missionary Society (CMS), *Missionary Register*, January 1831: 118–119.

5 Colonial Church Society (CCS), *The Second Report of the Australian Church Missionary Society, now formed into the Colonial Church Society*, 1838: 19.

that missionary success seemed near-impossible. For instance, the WMMS's *Papers Relative to the Wesleyan Missions* (1822) gave derogatory descriptions of Indigenous Australians and asserted that 'left to themselves' they would soon become 'extinct'.

Shall these tribes go on diminishing in numbers until they become extinct for want of food, which we can teach them to raise? and shall this bitter reproach be written in our history, that we suffered them thus to perish from the face of the earth, without an effort to save either their bodies or their souls? God forbid!⁶

This, however, raised the implicit question of what would happen to Indigenous people should their missionaries fail.

This question assumed immediate relevance by the 1830s, as philanthropists reported high Aboriginal mortality and depopulation. Threlkeld had urged the London Missionary Society as early as 1828 that greater action was needed to prevent 'their speedy extinction'.⁷ By the mid-1830s, as his work became controversial and unpopular, his Lake Macquarie reports had assumed a grim tone. In 1836–37, Threlkeld warned that Awabakal numbers were shrinking; he cited the low birth rate and venereal disease, asserting 'the decrease of the Black population is not local and temporary, but general and annual'.⁸ In 1839, two years before the mission was finally defunded, he told Colonial Secretary Thomson that deaths were outnumbering births in his region; 'in the elapse of a very few years, humanly speaking, the race will become extinct in these parts'.⁹

This concern had become apparent in British philanthropic advocacy by the late 1830s, and it permeated the work of the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements). The Church Missionary Society's *Missionary Register* set the tone in 1836, praising TF Buxton's efforts to push for enquiries into native conditions throughout the empire, and commenting 'It is not very creditable to the general policy of our Colonial Settlements, that wherever we establish Colonies, there the Aboriginal Population begins rapidly to disappear.'¹⁰ This was a major theme in the Committee's 1837 report. An overview stated that the original peoples of Newfoundland and the Caribbean had been exterminated, that Native Americans had suffered from cruelty and depopulation but were

6 WMMS, *Papers Relative to the Wesleyan Missions and to the State of the Heathen Countries*, no IX, September 1822.

7 LE Threlkeld, 'London Missionary Society. Mission to the Aborigines, New South Wales. Circular', 8 October 1828, London Missionary Society, Records [hereafter *LMS*], AJCP M73, State Library of Victoria (SLV).

8 LE Threlkeld, Annual Reports, 1836 and 1837, in Gunson (ed) 1974 vol 1: 133–135.

9 LE Threlkeld to E Deas Thomson, Annual Report of the Mission to the Aborigines, Lake Macquarie, 1839, in L.E. Threlkeld, Papers 1815–1862, ML ref A382, CY reel 820, State Library of NSW.

10 CMS, *Missionary Register*, January 1836: 5.

helped by missionaries, that native peoples in British Guinea were disappearing through government neglect, and that 'Hottentots' and 'Bushmen' in the Cape Colony had died in great numbers through dispossession and genocidal violence.¹¹

Within this context, the Australian sections were distinguished not so much by their threats of Aboriginal 'extermination', as by the relatively minor attention and future planning they received. Certainly, Indigenous Australians were described as neglected and abused, diminishing in numbers and needing humanitarian intervention. Rev Walter Lawry stated 'White men, on the spot, generally think that the black will become extinct within the colony. I think so too, and this will be very much through the vices of the Europeans.'¹² However, some of the Australian testimonies contained mixed messages. Archdeacon Broughton, for instance, described Aboriginal decline thus:

wherever the Europeans meet with them, they appear to wear out, and gradually to decay ... within a very limited period, those who are very much in contact with Europeans will be utterly extinct; I will not say exterminated, but they will be extinct.¹³

He blamed this largely on alcoholism and loss of resources (downplaying colonial violence) but added in the more mystical tone which would come to characterise the 'doomed race' discourse: 'there is something in our manner and state of society which they appear to decay before'.¹⁴

The report's section on Van Diemen's Land showed some particularly equivocal views on destruction and responsibility. The exile of Indigenous people to Flinders Island was described as tragic but unavoidable, on the grounds that settlers, angered by Aboriginal attacks, would exterminate them otherwise. A comment from Governor Arthur was included, lamenting the need to drive away 'a simple, but warlike, and, as it now appears, noble-minded race'. While their banishment was portrayed as necessary, their imminent doom was still taken largely for granted. (The unofficial survival of Indigenous people in the sealing islands of Bass Strait was ignored.) Also featured was a remark from former Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sir George Murray, that 'the adoption of any line of conduct, having for its avowed or secret object that extinction of the native race, could not fail to leave an indelible stain upon the British

11 *British Parliamentary Papers (BPP): Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements) with minutes of evidence, appendix and index*, Anthropology: Aborigines, vol 2, 1837: 6–10, 25–29.

12 *BPP: Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements)*, Anthropology: Aborigines vol 1, 1836: 498. Also, *BPP: Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements)*, vol 2: 10–11.

13 Archdeacon Broughton, evidence, 3 August 1835, *BPP: Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements)*, vol 1: 17.

14 Archdeacon Broughton, evidence, 3 August 1835, *BPP: Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements)*, vol 1: 17.

Government.¹⁵ Thus, the colonial government was both blamed and excused, the possibility of Indigenous survival was neglected, and Van Diemen's Land was held up as a warning to other colonies. No doubt the authors hoped this would prompt more humane policies on the mainland, but the use of Tasmanian examples may have also fed inadvertently into a darker discourse. As Lyndall Ryan has argued, portrayals of Tasmania as an aberrant, exceptionally brutal district have served historically to obscure the oppression which occurred in other colonies, less notoriously but on a wider scale.¹⁶

By this stage in New South Wales, reports from Wellington Valley combined predictions of Indigenous tragedy with mixed assertions that missionaries were both crucial to Indigenous survival and unequal to the task. From the start, the Church Missionary Society had framed their official commentary on Wellington Valley with gloomy warnings, highlighting a quotation from missionary JCS Handt that the people around Sydney were 'fast wasting away, wherever the Whites get a footing'.¹⁷ By 1835, CMS lay secretary Dandeson Coates was admitting to Lord Glenelg, Secretary of State for the Colonies, that initial failures and frustrations were evident at Wellington Valley, but maintained that mission work was always problematic at first and would improve.¹⁸ However, by the late 1830s, with few signs of Christian triumph and a severe drought damaging the station, support from the CMS declined. This was not helped by the loathing between missionaries William Watson and James Günther. As William Cowper, secretary of the CMS's Sydney corresponding committee, complained 'one needs a better temper and the other needs more energy'. The abrasive Watson was urged in vain to 'cultivate a meek and quiet spirit, which in the sight of God, is of great price'.¹⁹ He was eventually dismissed in 1840 and left, furiously, to start a private mission at Apsley nearby. The missionaries were also feuding with neighbouring magistrate Henry Fysche Gisbourne, who told the New South Wales Executive Council that they were inefficient and deceptive.²⁰

Throughout these struggles, the missionaries continued to warn of Indigenous destruction. Handt claimed in 1835 that more Wiradjuri people were dying than were being born, a statement repeated by Günther in 1838. When Watson and Günther complained to the colonial secretary, E Deas Thomson, about the

15 BPP: *Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements)*, vol 2: 13–14, 121–122.

16 Ryan 1981: 5, 259–260.

17 CMS, *Church Missionary Paper: for the use of weekly and monthly contributions*, no LXXV, Michaelmas–Day 1834; CMS, *Missionary Register*, January 1831: 118–19; CMS, *Missionary Register*, April 1832: 238.

18 Dandeson Coates to Lord Glenelg, 17 December 1835, BPP: *Papers Relating to Australia, 1844*, vol 8, 1969: 59–60.

19 William Cowper to Dandeson Coates, 26 December 1838, Church Missionary Society, Records [hereafter CMS], reel 40, AJCP M212, SLV; CMS Corresponding Committee, New Holland, 28 November 1838, CMS, reel 40, AJCP M212, SLV.

20 Henry Fysche Gisbourne to the Executive Council, 17 April 1839, BPP: *Papers Relating to Australia, 1844*, vol 8: 40–42; Rev Richard Taylor to Rev William Cowper enclosed in William Cowper to William McPherson, 26 April 1839, BPP: *Papers Relating to Australia, 1844*, vol 8: 45.

need for their station to be better supported and isolated from Europeans, they warned that the Wiradjuri might be destroyed by the bad colonial influences which had already wrecked other communities.²¹ Again, the centrality of mission work to any viable Indigenous future was stressed; as the CMS's *Missionary Register* stated in 1839, 'nothing but Missionary Effort can save these wretchedly-corrupted Natives from becoming extinct.'²² However, at the same time as mission life was portrayed as the only hope for Indigenous people, the flimsiness of such hopes was becoming clear. In 1839, the CMS Corresponding Committee admitted they had few hopes for the mission's success; a key reason for continuing their support (for the moment) was that they feared the government would not support any future missionaries if this project collapsed.²³ State support was certainly declining; in 1840, Governor Gipps commented to Lord John Russell, Secretary of State for the Colonies, that the mission seemed ineffective and possibly hopeless.²⁴ The government refused to increase their support, and the CMS decided in 1842 to close the station.

Meanwhile, the German stations at Moreton Bay were reporting even less success. Christopher Eipper and JCS Handt (at his new posting) asserted in 1841 that Indigenous numbers were decreasing, due largely to introduced diseases and the low birth rate, and that the people showed little interest in Christianity.²⁵ The following year, their colleague Karl WE Schmidt complained that the government was withdrawing its support,

since everybody, believers and unbelievers alike, despairs of the conversion of the Australian aborigines and regards our work amongst the children of the bush (which are viewed not as people but as a race between people and monkeys, orangoutangs) as hopeless.²⁶

This situation worsened when Governor Gipps demanded that they shift location in 1842, some 80 miles inland, in response to the expansion of the nearby Moreton Bay settlement. Government funding was removed in 1844. The missionaries continued working with funds raised in Berlin, their new station at Zion Hill closed down in 1849.

21 JCS Handt, 1835 Report, in Carey and Roberts (eds) 2002, *The Wellington Valley Project: Letters and Journals Relating to the Church Missionary Society Mission to Wellington Valley, NSW, 1830–42, A Critical Electronic Edition* [hereafter WVP]: <<http://www.newcastle.edu.au>>; James Günther, journal, 8 February 1838, WVP; William Watson and James Günther to Colonial Secretary E Deas Thomson, 12 March 1838, CMS, reel 40, AJCP M212, SLV.

22 CMS, *Missionary Register*, August 1839: 387.

23 CMS Corresponding Committee, New Holland, 23 August 1839, CMS, reel 40, AJCP M212, SLV.

24 Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 7 May 1840, BPP: *Papers Relating to Australia, 1844*, vol 8: 33.

25 Evans 1992: 22–24.

26 Karl WE Schmidt, *Report on an Expedition to the Bunya Mountains in search of a suitable site for a mission station*, Accession 3522, Box 7072, State Library of Queensland (SLQ): 15.

Southern projects attracted little more optimism. In 1839, Joseph Orton had warned the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society that Indigenous people were dying because of dispossession and corrupt European influences and would eventually become 'extinct', 'leaving only an eternal memento of a blot upon the justice – equality & benevolence of our Christian Government.'²⁷ Such advocacy led to the funding of Buntingdale mission, but discussions of missionary work continued to overlap with pessimistic predictions. In 1840, his work barely commenced, Buntingdale missionary Francis Tuckfield warned the WMMS that he feared dispossession, poverty and frontier violence would lead to 'the final and utter extinction, of at least, some of the Aboriginal tribes'.²⁸ Three years later, he warned that the Colac people (apparently Gulidjan and Dhaugurdwurrung) were being victimised by neighbouring groups and might be dead soon. His colleague, Benjamin Hurst, agreed, stating that the local population had decreased by 15 per cent between 1840–41, citing venereal disease and the low birth rate. In 1842 Hurst reiterated his complaints about disease, violence and government inefficiency, asserting flatly that 'most of the natives are dead and others are dying'.²⁹ Missionary society reports and publications expressed occasional hopes for Buntingdale during the mid-1840s, when some Indigenous people took up labouring jobs and sedentary housing, and when neighbouring settlers became more supportive. However, by the end of the decade, these publications were declaring the mission a failure. In contrast to their local employees, the missionary societies placed greater blame on Indigenous people, citing their alleged apathy, violence and nomadic life.³⁰

The Port Phillip protectors also voiced fears of Indigenous doom and their own weakness. By 1840, protector ES Parker was already predicting that dispossession and frontier violence would expose Indigenous people to 'rapid and certain destruction'. During 1841–42, he reported a death rate in Mt Macedon, the Western District, Campaspe and the Pyrenees that significantly outstripped births, adding that he believed the country west of the Pyrenees to South Australia had seen worse losses, at a rate of perhaps 20 per cent over the previous

27 Joseph Orton to General Secretaries, 13 May 1839, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, Archive: Australasia 1812–1889 [hereafter *WMMS*], reel 1, Mp2107 (Record ID: 133095), NLA.

28 Francis Tuckfield to General Secretaries, 30 September 1840, *WMMS*, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA.

29 Benjamin Hurst to CJ La Trobe, 22 December 1841, Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV) VA512 *Chief Protector of Aborigines*, VPRS10 unit 3, 1841/2027 (reel 1); Benjamin Hurst to General Secretaries, 21 January 1842, *WMMS*, reel 2, NLA; Benjamin Hurst to J McKenny, 8 March 1842, *WMMS*, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA; Benjamin Hurst to General Secretaries, 23 June 1842, *WMMS*, reel 2; Francis Tuckfield, Report on the Wesleyan Missionary Society's Mission to the Aborigines of the Sub District of Geelong, Port Phillip, August 1843, *WMMS*, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA.

30 CMS, *Missionary Register*, May 1843: 238; CMS, *Missionary Register*, April 1844: 227; CMS, *Missionary Register*, May 1845: 210; CMS, *Missionary Register*, May 1849: 218–19; Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Australian District, 31 July 1845 and 30 July 1846, Methodist Missionary Society, Records [hereafter *MMS*], reel 5, AJCP M122, SLV; *WMMS, Papers Relative to the Wesleyan Missions, and to the State of Heathen Countries*, no CXI, March 1848; *WMMS 1848, Report of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society for year ending April 1848*: 34–39.

two years.³¹ Chief protector GA Robinson, reporting to the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines in 1845, estimated that the Indigenous numbers in occupied districts had decreased over the past six years by about a fifth.³² Meanwhile, between 1839–48, protector William Thomas produced alarming census reports from the Yarra and his Narre Narre Warren station, reporting significantly higher deaths than births. In 1848, he remarked morosely that if he survived his allotted three score years and ten, ‘this Protector may outlive the whole of his charge.’³³



Fig 4. By the 1840s, philanthropists’ reports were becoming pessimistic. As this choice of illustration in a missionary journal shows, Indigenous Australians were increasingly portrayed as hopeless and doomed.

‘Burial of one of the natives of Australia’, Wesleyan Missionary Society, *Papers Relative to the Wesleyan Missions, and to the State of Heathen Countries*, no CXI, March 1848, London. National Library of Australia, Petherick NK5726.

31 Edward Stone Parker to GA Robinson, 1 April 1840, in Cannon (ed) 1983, *Historical Records of Victoria (HRV): Aborigines and Protectors, 1838–1839*, vol 2B: 695–696; Edward Stone Parker to GA Robinson, Returns of Deaths and Births, 1 January – 30 June 1841, 1 March – 31 August 1841, PROV VPRS4410 unit 2 (reel 2); ES Parker, Quarterly Journals, 1 March – 31 May 1841, 1 June – 31 August 1842, PROV VPRS4410 unit 2 (reel 2).
32 GA Robinson, Evidence to the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, 1845, in Frauenfelder (ed) 1997: 51.

33 William Thomas to GA Robinson, 31 August 1848, PROV VPRS4410 unit 4, 1848/109 (reel 2). Also, William Thomas to GA Robinson, 20 November 1839, William Thomas, Papers, 1834–1868 [hereafter WTP], ML MSS 214, reel 7, State Library of NSW; William Thomas to GA Robinson, 6 January 1840, WTP, ML MSS 214, reel 4; William Thomas to GA Robinson, 29 February 1840, PROV VPRS4410 unit 3, 1840/66 (reel 2); William Thomas to GA Robinson, Journal of the Proceedings during the months of June, July & August 1841, PROV VPRS4410, unit 3, 1841/70 (reel 2); William Thomas to GA Robinson, 24 May 1842, PROV VPRS4410 unit 3, 1842/71 (reel 2); William Thomas to GA Robinson, Journal of Proceedings, 1 December 1842 – 1 March 1843, PROV VPRS4410 unit 2, 1843/87 (reel 2); William Thomas to GA Robinson, 1 June 1846, PROV VPRS4410 unit 4, 1846/87 (reel 2); William Thomas to GA Robinson, 31 May 1848, PROV VPRS4410 unit 4, 1848/106 (reel 2); William Thomas to GA Robinson, 1 December 1847, PROV VPRS4410 unit 4, 1847/102 (reel 2).

Such comments were not welcomed by settlers or local officials, whose evaluations of the protectorate were damning. As early as 1840, Colonial Secretary Thomson wrote brusquely that the protectors were demanding and inefficient; 'From the beginning he [the governor] observed in them all, a disposition to complain a great deal and in their chief to write a great deal.'³⁴ During 1841, superintendent CJ La Trobe complained that the protectors were inefficient and their duties problematic; Governor Gipps was also disparaging about their personal failings.³⁵ Certainly, the combination of scandals and administrative problems that marked the protectorate could not have enhanced its standing – protector CW Sievwright's furious disputes with neighbouring settlers over accusations of frontier violence, and his eventual dismissal on grounds of sexual immorality, comprised the most notorious example. However, the protectorate's slow collapse was not anomalous within wider Indigenous governance. Funding was reduced in 1843, the 1845 Select Committee reached negative conclusions, and in 1847 Governor Fitzroy commented to Earl Grey that the system had achieved almost nothing.³⁶ It was abandoned in 1849, and as Jane Lydon has observed 'The failure of the protectorate came to be seen in terms of the innate wretchedness of Aboriginal people, justifying colonialism and underwriting humanitarian management of the survivors.'³⁷

Any assessment of the 1840s as a period of philanthropic decline should be tempered by acknowledgement of the greater official support for comparable projects in Western Australia and South Australia. As noted, missionary society publications voiced optimism about John Smithies' Swan River Methodist mission, and Western Australia was singled out as a hopeful site for Indigenous policy by Lord Stanley in 1843, and South Australia by Earl Grey to 1848.³⁸ However, such hopes were tied, to some extent, to these institutions' greater willingness to make Indigenous pupils useful to colonists as servants. Furthermore, they still did not last. In 1849, Western Australian protector Charles Symmons was retitled pointedly Guardian of Natives and Protector of Settlers. This protectorate, which had long been more of a policing operation than a philanthropic one, was phased out as Symmons assumed other government roles. George King's Fremantle school closed in 1851, with the children transferred to Smithies' institution, but this did not endure either. It declined in the early 1850s, due to disease and Indigenous resentment at being

34 E Deas Thomson to CJ La Trobe, 24 April 1840, enclosed in James Dredge to Jabez Bunting, 31 July 1840, WMMS, reel 1, Mp2107, NLA.

35 Christie 1979: 102–104.

36 Sir Charles Fitz Roy to Earl Grey, 17 May 1847, *Historical Records of Australia (HRA)*, 1925, series 1, vol xxv, April 1846 – September 1847: 558.

37 Lydon 2005: 215.

38 Lord Stanley to Gov Grey, 10 July 1843, *BPP: Papers Relating to Australia, 1844*, vol 8: 341; Report of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society for year ending April 1848: 34–39 (in *Reports of the Wesleyan-Methodist Missionary Society, 1840–51*).

pressed to move to a new station in the York district, and it closed in 1855.³⁹ Meanwhile, South Australian missions were also in decline. The *Colonial Church Chronicle, and Missionary Journal* (1849–50) blamed Indigenous people for this, for refusing to merge their communities into one area, adding that the failure of such projects gave ammunition to opponents of philanthropy.⁴⁰ The transfer of young people to the new Poonindie station from 1850, however, signalled a future cycle of South Australian mission life.

There was undoubtedly a connection between the decline in philanthropic efforts and the alarming drop in the Indigenous population. Dispossessed people could not have benefited from losing the (limited) land and resources philanthropists had secured for them, and, in turn, it became hard to justify mission funding when the target population was vanishing. However, the correlation between evangelising and Indigenous survival was also a conceptual one, created partly by philanthropists themselves. Observing how single-minded religious conviction both drove and hindered the career of New Zealand missionary Thomas Kendall, Judith Binney has observed of missionaries ‘A profound sense of their infallibility was to guide their actions. As instruments of Divine Will they could not fail.’⁴¹ The frequent assertion that missionary work alone could save Indigenous people, combined with the apprehension that had surrounded these projects from the start, meant that their ultimate closure brought into question the value of philanthropy and the future of Aboriginal policy. The implication that white advocates’ failures proved the hopelessness of Indigenous people themselves has, I would suggest, left a long and troubling legacy.

‘While we hesitate they die’: the threat and allure of destruction

Henry Reynolds and Elizabeth Elbourne have argued that many philanthropists saw Indigenous suffering as a national sin, for which Britain and the colonies would be held accountable.⁴² When faced with their own collapse, some local missionaries and protectors endorsed this view strongly. They tended to portray governments as inert and neglectful rather than deliberately malicious, while blaming colonists as much for their callousness, greed and sinful habits as for their outright acts of violence. Here, the angriest accusations were voiced by James Dredge. Upon resigning from the Port Phillip protectorate in 1840, he reflected furiously on Indigenous suffering, writing to Methodist leader Jabez Bunting ‘while we hesitate they die. Their condition is indescribably awful and perilous. As colonization extends their misery is enhanced, and their existence

39 Hasluck 1970: 79–80; McNair and Rumley 1981: 60, 134–143.

40 CMS, *The Colonial Church Chronicle, and Missionary Journal*, vol III, July 1849 – July 1850: 278.

41 Binney 1968: 13.

42 Elbourne 2003; Reynolds 1998: 41–45.

endangered.' He warned of the possibility of 'exterminating conflict', like that which had 'well nigh blotted out' Indigenous Tasmanians. Reflecting on his failure in 1841, Dredge repeated that only 'a few years will be required to blot them from the living'.⁴³ In such accounts, official negligence was not excused or portrayed as benign misunderstanding, but rather implicated deeply in the destruction of a people. Similar concerns were voiced by missionary advocates in Britain. The Colonial Church Society, for example, worried about the sinful behaviour of colonists, given their imperial responsibilities; 'God has given us all this dominion, all this wealth, all this population'.⁴⁴ Similarly, the *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (1850) warned its readers of the fall of past empires because of their selfish glory or religious decline, thus demonstrating 'that God ever bestows great empires for the *truest and highest* good of the governed; and that whenever that good is not stedfastly [sic] pursued, such a kingdom carries with it the sure seed and element of decay.'⁴⁵

However, it was the oppression and destruction of Indigenous people *in a state of heathenism* that distressed philanthropists; colonial suffering and the absence of Christianity could not easily be disentangled. The London Missionary Society, for instance, warned its supporters during the 1830s that millions of Indians ('British subjects') had not yet received the Gospel; '*God will not hold us guiltless of their blood*'.⁴⁶ Similarly, the Colonial Church Society remarked in 1839 on the need to promote missions – 'Only as our Government and nation thus maintain the true faith of Christ throughout the land, they approve themselves in the sight of the Supreme Governor of the world, and obtain his favour.'⁴⁷ Such comments were both authoritative and anxious. As indicated in the previous chapter, Evangelical advocates constructed themselves as observers and moral judges of empire and native peoples, whilst also seeing this role as critical to their own (and their country's) salvation.

A mingling of ideas about death, heathenism and colonial guilt was apparent in some accounts from Wellington Valley. Watson, for example, remembered sharing tea and a conversation about God with a group of people in 1832, and realising how puny his efforts were, given the scale of the challenge. He observed:

43 James Dredge to Jabez Bunting, 31 July 1840, WMMS, reel 2; James Dredge to Jabez Bunting, 10 May 1841, WMMS, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA.

44 CCS, *Report of the Australian Church Missionary Society, now formed into the Colonial Church Society*, 1839: 20.

45 CMS, *The Church Missionary Intelligencer, A Monthly Journal of Missionary Information*, vol 1, no 3, July 1849: 51–52.

46 *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, vol XII, London, Westley and Davis, August 1834: 317. Also, London Missionary Society (LMS), *Missionary Magazine and Chronicle*, vol 1, London, LMS Directors, June 1836 – December 1837: 280.

47 CCS, *Report of the Australian Church Missionary Society, now formed into the Colonial Church Society*, 1839: 17–18.

One of them, a very old man with no hair on his head, ripe for death, on the verge of eternity, altogether ignorant of every moral and religious truth ... For one of the human race to be in this condition is lamentable beyond description, but it is not the case with one alone, it is the state of families, tribes, yea doubtless of all the Black Natives of this colony.⁴⁸

Again, in 1837, his colleague Günther recalled visiting a woman called Sally, who was seriously ill. He concluded 'It is a melancholy sight, to see these poor creatures dying apparently without God, without hope, ignorant of the Saviour of Sinners.'⁴⁹ Such remarks drew attention to philanthropists' deep unease at the outcomes of colonialism, but also their reliance on imperial expansion to further their aims. The relationship between enlightenment and governance was made more explicit by James Dredge, who lobbied Jabez Bunting on the need for Indigenous projects to be better supported and placed under missionary control. He drew attention to both the physical and spiritual damage caused by mishandled colonialism.

I know not how to repress the struggling fire in my bones – while a witness of the awful tragedy in course of performance around me and which, while the natives are the immediate sufferers cannot fail, sooner or later, to entail the righteous retribution of insulted heaven upon the European innovators and oppressors.⁵⁰

While such views had a certain political resonance during the 1830s, they did not remain popular for long, especially in the Australian colonies. Rather, philanthropists found themselves in an environment where Indigenous deprivation and death were increasingly portrayed in terms of 'progress' – natural, inevitable and ultimately positive. Russell McGregor, who has dubbed this the 'doomed race theory', traces its development throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but its origins were older still.⁵¹ The influential 18th century idea that all living creatures were arranged in a hierarchical sequence called the Great Chain of Being lent itself easily to the ranking of human societies from superior to inferior, with the lowest races placed one link above apes (a belief that endured into 19th century evolutionary science). This sat fairly comfortably beside Enlightenment theories describing human societies developing through progressive stages, with savages portrayed as retarded or childlike. Peter Bowler argues that ideas of human development as hierarchical and purposeful became significant in the 19th century because they helped to rationalise imperial expansion and to console Europeans, themselves unsettled

48 William Watson, journal, 27 November 1832, *WVP*.

49 Günther, journal, 17 September 1837, *WVP*.

50 James Dredge to Jabez Bunting, 10 May 1841, *MMS*, reel 55, *AJCP* M172, SLV.

51 McGregor 1997.

by rapid industrialisation and social change.⁵² Moreover, the naturalising of extermination can be associated with a form of settler-colonialism which sought to supplant Indigenous people with an overwhelmingly large white population, relying on the absence of Indigenous people from the physical, political and cultural landscape.

Such beliefs had entered public debate in the colonies by the time the first philanthropists arrived. One correspondent to the *Sydney Herald* wrote in 1836 'it is in the order of nature that, as civilization advances, savage nations *must* be exterminated'.⁵³ The *Australian* published a similar claim in 1838:

The approaches of the Europeans among the savages ... has ever been the signal for their rapid and final disappearance. In North America, in South America, in Africa and in Australia, the black has always retreated before the footsteps of the white man.⁵⁴

Again, in 1846, the *Geelong Advertiser* declared:

the perpetuation of the race of Aborigines is not *to be desired* ... they are an inferior race of human beings ... the probable extinction of the race from natural causes is proof of this ... it is no more desirable that any inferior race should be perpetuated, than that the transmission of a hereditary disease, such as scrofula or insanity, should be encouraged.⁵⁵

In her analysis of the northern frontier in the late 19th century, Deborah Bird Rose asserts that Indigenous depopulation (which she sees as occurring largely through neglect and unofficial cruelty) was rationalised by a colonial belief in 'the agency of history', leading to a form of dispossession that was haphazard and complacently vicious; 'If the tide of history doomed Aboriginal people, complicit whitefellows hastened that history along.'⁵⁶ This understanding of history as an impersonal force of progress via destruction had its origins in earlier decades, and it is important to consider philanthropists' role in challenging, negotiating or reinforcing it.

Philanthropists usually opposed attempts to naturalise Indigenous death. They insisted that it was a barbaric affront to Christianity to suggest that a race of human beings were destined for annihilation. Quaker missionary travel writer James Backhouse commented in his 1834 work on Australia that he was disturbed by the common view that indigenous destruction in Australia and

52 Bowler, 1984: 90–92; Bowler 1989: 1–13. See also, Lovejoy 1960[1936]: 184, 190, 197, 235; McGregor 1997: ix, 1–9; Meek 1976: 2, 12–13, 16–17, 22.

53 *Sydney Herald*, 26 December 1836.

54 *Australian*, 27 December 1838.

55 *Geelong Advertiser*, 2 May 1846.

56 Rose 2001: 153.

North America was unavoidable.⁵⁷ Port Phillip chief protector GA Robinson was similarly perturbed. In 1846 he gave an indignant account of remarks by colonists, which hinted at simultaneous guilt and displacement of responsibility: 'Well Mr Robinson I admit their situation is a hard one and I should be sorry to see them injured but then sir really I do think under all circumstances the sooner they are got rid of the better.'⁵⁸ He repeated in his 1848 report that many colonists saw Indigenous people as doomed. Robinson commented 'such unhappily has been the case but such is not a natural consequence ... if the White man could but do to the coloured as he would be done unto all would be well.'⁵⁹ Similarly, former protector ES Parker claimed in 1854 that Aboriginal extinction, while possible, was not 'the inscrutable decree – of Divine Providence'; such theories, he said, were impious.⁶⁰ The Aborigines Protection Society made a lengthier protest against Social Darwinist ideas in the late 1840s:

Such a theory is a libel upon the mercy, the beneficence, and the wisdom of God. It is a crying impiety to urge it; it is a slander upon Christianity to perpetuate it; it is the foulest iniquity to advocate it.⁶¹

Nonetheless, philanthropists did not only oppose the 'doomed race theory'; their relationships to this belief were more complex. For one thing, it was rare for them to confront head-on the question of whether Indigenous destruction might be linked inherently to settler colonialism itself – what Ann Curthoys has called 'the murderous desires that underlie colonisation, the taking of someone else's land'.⁶² For proponents of humane colonialism, this dilemma could not be acknowledged easily. As Elbourne has observed, the focus on sin and virtue by the Select Committee, for instance, could serve to obscure the wider structural issues of dispossession.⁶³ When philanthropists did address these broader questions of guilt, they did so equivocally. The Aborigines Protection Society's 1840 report, for instance, contained an angry article about the destruction caused by Australian dispossession and the weakness of official protection; 'Justice is hard to administer, where famine is decreed to one party, and the fruits of spoliation to the other'.⁶⁴ This did not detract much, though, from the APS's generally pro-imperial view. Indeed, their *Papers and Proceedings* for the following year briefly described most of the Indigenous Tasmanians as

57 James Backhouse 1843, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*: 532.

58 GA Robinson 2001, '1846 Annual Report', in *The Papers of George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector, Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate*, Clark (ed) vol 4: 116.

59 Robinson 2001, '1848 Annual Report', in *The Papers of George Augustus Robinson*, Clark (ed) vol 4: 152.

60 ES Parker 1967, 'The Aborigines of Australia', 10 May 1854, in *Frontier Life in the Loddon Protectorate: Episodes from Early Days, 1837–1842*: 30.

61 Aborigines Protection Society (APS), Annual Report, 3 May 1848: 42–44, in *APS Transactions, c1839–1909*, MIC/o6550, reel 3 (Records the property of Anti-Slavery International). Also, APS, *The Colonial Intelligencer, or Aborigines' Friend*, vol II, 1849–50, APS, Transactions, reel 3: 67–69.

62 Curthoys, Veracini and Docker 2002: 5.

63 Elbourne 2003.

64 APS, 3rd Annual Report, 23 June 1840, APS, Transactions, reel 1: 31–33.

'swept from the earth', but did so amidst broad praise for the benefits of empire. Colonial violence, in this context, came across as horrifying but anomalous.⁶⁵ Similarly, chief protector GA Robinson touched on a more radical understanding of imperialism when he mused in his journal in 1847:

We carry what we call our civilisation into savage lands, but we carry our vices and our diseases along with it and I am not sure that savages are not better without us ... They are free, they are strong, they are healthy ... the utmost we do for them is to instil wants into them which when they cannot supply, they become miserable.⁶⁶

Such uncomfortable thoughts, however, did not discourage Robinson from pursuing a profitable career in colonial government.

Moreover, philanthropists' warnings about Indigenous destruction and missionary hardship could be appropriated by some hostile commentators to argue that Aboriginal philanthropy was useless. In an 1840 report to James Stephen (permanent under-secretary of the Colonial Office), the Colonial Land and Emigration Office commented that there was no point in increasing funding to Wellington Valley, as the missionaries had not shown enough success to warrant greater resources or control over land. (Wiradjuri rights to land were ignored.) Here, the findings of the 1835 Select Committee, which had used evidence from Wellington Valley to support Evangelical claims, were cited to prove that Australian missions were futile. The office drew attention to philanthropic disappointments mentioned by the Committee – notably, the depopulation occurring on the supposedly humane Flinders Island, and the failures of protectorates amongst the allegedly more advanced First Nations people in Canada – in order to prove that Wellington Valley would probably fail. If Evangelical warnings of Indigenous disaster and death were meant to inspire missionary work, some less sympathetic observers could merge these claims with disturbing ease into a discourse of Aboriginal doom.⁶⁷

Philanthropists may not have been responsible for how their writings were reinterpreted, but even their own publications conveyed some mixed messages. In 1848, *Papers Relative to the Wesleyan Missions* published an article calling for further missionary work. While asserting that all people were blessed in Christ, the author wrote:

no race of men have been considered more hopelessly ignorant of religion than the aboriginal inhabitants of New South Wales. The difficulties in

65 APS, *Extracts from the Papers and Proceedings of the Aborigines' Protection Society*, vol II, no III: 89–91.

66 GA Robinson 2000, *Journals: Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate*, Clark (ed) vol 5: 169.

67 T Frederick Elliot, Robert Torrens and Edward C Villiers to James Stephen, 17 July 1840, in Church Missionary Society, Papers 1840, MS4153, NLA: 3–13, 17–22, 35–36, 40–45.

the way of instructing them have appeared almost insuperable; and the Church of God is called to special prayer, and special exertion, in their behalf.⁶⁸

These apprehensive remarks were accompanied, somewhat ominously, by illustrated descriptions of Aboriginal funeral rites. A similar mixture of hope and gloom was voiced by the CMS's *Missionary Register* in 1850, which noted the loss of residents at Buntingdale but also the possibility of Christian marriages at John Smithies' Swan River mission. A quotation from the WMMS committee was included, stating that Indigenous Australians were the most ignorant and hopeless of all the colonised peoples of the world – 'Yet even these are not without the pale of Divine Compassion, nor beyond the reach and influence of patient evangelical labour.'⁶⁹ Such messages were no doubt meant to remind the reader of God's extraordinary power and the heroic labours of missionaries. However, the stress on Aboriginal degradation, in a context of reduced support for Australian projects, meant that such accounts might also be read as preludes to surrender.

In this context, even philanthropists' claims that God alone could save the heathen (conventional enough, on one level) may have started to take on a double meaning. They helped to renew confidence in a painful, frustrating situation, but they may have also contributed to a certain refusal of responsibility. Thus, at Wellington Valley in 1834, the none-too-optimistic JCS Handt assured himself 'God is well able to enliven and to raise these dry bones, though there may at present be no appearance of it. He works in a mysterious way, and performs his wonders so, as to secure the glory to himself.'⁷⁰ His colleague James Günther, describing Wiradjuri people as sinful and apathetic, wrote 'the more I see of the Aborigines of this country the more I feel convinced of the need of the Almighty's powerful display of his saving mercy as the only means to effect what human efforts must despair of.'⁷¹ Such notions were reiterated by protector Thomas in 1843. Depressed at Kulin peoples' insistence on visiting Melbourne, which he considered a sinful locale, he remarked that this dampened his zeal; 'I am led to conclude under present circumstances that physical means will ever prove abortive, and that nothing short of supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit will change their condition'.⁷² Such comments reaffirmed missionary faith, whilst also coming close to acknowledging (and perhaps exaggerating) their helplessness. This was certainly implied in 1844, when William Cowper, of

68 WMMS, *Papers Relative to the Wesleyan Missions, and to the State of Heathen Countries*, no CXI, March 1848.

69 CMS, *Missionary Register*, May 1850: 218.

70 Handt, journal, 8 March 1834, WVP.

71 Günther, journal, 31 December 1837, WVP.

72 William Thomas to GA Robinson, Journal of Proceedings, 1 December 1842 to 1 March 1843, PROV VPRS4410 unit 3 (reel 2).

the CMS corresponding committee, wrote to society secretary Dandeson Coates, reflecting morosely on the failure of every mission and protectorate in eastern Australia. He concluded 'Yet I would indulge the hope, that hereafter some of the Aborigines of this part of the earth, will be made partakers "of the Salvation, which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory"'.⁷³ Here, the Indigenous future was reduced from a prospect to be worked towards, to a faint hope to be indulged.

Indigenous people's own views on the depopulation and destruction of their people were scarcely mentioned. While British publications ignored Indigenous opinions on a range of subjects, this particular omission from local records is a startling one, given that missionaries and protectors did highlight Aboriginal statements on other topics. Only a handful of remarks from Port Phillip stand out. In 1843, protector Thomas talked to Woiwurrung leader Billibellary about his fear that infanticide was occurring, and urged him to take action to prevent it. Billibellary's response was grim: 'Black Lubras say now no good children, Black fellow say no country now for them ... no more come up Pickaniny.' The following year, Thomas told Robinson that the birth rate was low. He suspected that people did not see the point in raising children, telling him 'No good Pickaninnys now no country'.⁷⁴ Parker repeated this claim in 1846: 'The blacks say they have now no country and are therefore unwilling to keep their children'.⁷⁵ Such comments hint at a deep and chilling despair, but how pervasive it was can be hard to say now, given the paucity of the sources. Philanthropists' apparent lack of interest in Indigenous opinions indicates how Aboriginal people were rendered passive within a discourse of racial doom. It also suggests, perhaps, that without a strong enthusiasm for mission life, Indigenous people's views on their future were not considered to be of much value.

Certainly, some philanthropists' papers reflected a transition from outrage at Indigenous destruction to a final naturalising of it. Ironically, LE Threlkeld, the most vocal opponent of racial science and one of the most outspoken protesters against frontier violence, also became the most inclined to cite mysterious reasons for Indigenous demise. As Anna Johnston has commented, these two sides of his personality are enigmatic and hard to reconcile.⁷⁶ When Threlkeld reported to the LMS in 1826, he wrote of his distress not only at colonists' cruelty but also at their belief that Indigenous people were hopeless.⁷⁷ By 1837, however, he had changed his tune. He wrote in his annual report:

73 William Cowper to Dandeson Coates, 27 February 1844, *CMS*, reel 40, AJCP M212, SLV.

74 Thomas, journal, 7 October 1843, *WTP*, ML MSS 214, reel 3, State library of NSW; William Thomas to GA Robinson, 1 December 1843, PROV VPRS4410 unit 3, 1843/78 (reel 2); William Thomas to GA Robinson, 31 November 1844, PROV VPRS4410 unit 3, 1844/82 (reel 2).

75 ES Parker, 1846, *The Aborigines of Australia*: 14.

76 Johnston 2003: 183.

77 LE Threlkeld, Second Half Yearly Report of the Aboriginal Mission Supported by the London Missionary Society, 21 June 1826, *LMS*, AJCP M73, SLV.

He who 'Increaseth the nation', or 'Destroys that there should be no inhabitant', has visited the land, and the Meazles, the hooping cough and the influenza have streched [sic] the Black victims in hundreds on the Earth ... Many suffered from the ire of human vengeance ... but the most died by the act of God.⁷⁸

His final report, in 1841, concluded despondently 'The thousands of Aborigines ... decreased to hundreds; the hundreds have lessened to tens, and the tens will dwindle into units, before a very few years shall have passed away.' This, he attributed largely to 'the wrath of God'.⁷⁹ In his 1850 publication, *A Key to the Structure of the Aboriginal Language*, Threlkeld reminisced about Awabakal life in the old days. The romantic language and imagery he employed would, over the following century, become a key part of the doomed race discourse.

[T]he once numerous actors, who used to cause the woods to echo with their din, now lie mingled with the dust, save some few solitary beings who here and there still stalk abroad, soon, like their ancestors, to become 'a tale that is told'.⁸⁰

A similar, if less dramatic, transition was also apparent in James Günther's writing. In 1841 he described to William Cowper his regret at Wellington Valley's imminent closure; it was distressing to think that 'these poor Aborigines should be given up, not so much because they have proved unworthy of Christian charity, but because our mission has almost proved unworthy of its name & design'.⁸¹ However, by 1846, having left the district in resentment and despair, Günther had hardened his views. He had been especially chagrined to discover a clandestine affair between mission agriculturalist William Porter and a woman called Noamilly, whom the Günthers had considered a promising pupil. The resentment some Wiradjuri people voiced at Günther's dismissal of Porter, and the refusal of most of them to accompany him to his new home in Mudgee, left him embittered. He told the Legislative Council's committee investigating Aboriginal conditions that 'very little or nothing can be done for these Aborigines, who seem to care less for any kind of improvement, and are more devoid of reflection, than any other known races.' Here, the assertion of God's mysterious power merged with a refusal of personal responsibility. 'Unless it should please God, to change their disposition, in some marvellous manner, or to raise some extraordinary man to labor, as missionary, among them ... their Case Seems to be hopeless.'⁸²

78 LE Threlkeld, Annual Report 1837, in Gunson (ed) 1974 vol 1: 137.

79 LE Threlkeld, Annual Report 1841, in Gunson (ed) 1974 vol 1: 169.

80 LE Threlkeld, 1850, *A Key to the Structure of the Aboriginal Language*, in LE Threlkeld, 1892, *An Australian Language as Spoken by the Awabakal, the People of Awaba or Lake Macquarie*, Fraser (ed): 89.

81 James Günther to William Cowper, 12 June 1841, CMS, reel 40, AJCP M212, SLV.

82 James Günther, Reply to a Circular Letter Addressed to the Clergy of all Denominations, 1846, in Bridges 1978: 733; James Günther to Richard Taylor, 12 November 1842, N.S.W. Archival Estrays: N.S.W. Royal

Threlkeld's and Günther's views were not universal amongst their colleagues, but they do point to some broader concerns. Belief in the regenerative power of Christianity and the philanthropic role of state and church had, of course, driven Evangelical advocacy in the first place, but it also limited this process. Local disappointments, combined with philanthropists' basic support for imperialism and their tying of Indigenous survival to charitable gratitude, could occasionally steer them perilously close to a sense that Indigenous destruction might be unavoidable after all.

Despair, resistance, continuity? Possibilities for understanding this period

It is unsurprising that historians have often described the first missionaries and protectors as failures, emphasising their inability to make converts, protect people from violence and deprivation, alter Indigenous customs, succeed in farming, or work effectively with one another. Emphasis has been placed, variously, on philanthropists' personal shortcomings (as in Vivienne Rae-Ellis's biography of GA Robinson), their helplessness against mass dispossession (as in works by Peter Corris and Michael Cannon), and their cultural conflicts with Indigenous people (as in Michael Christie's emphasis on Aboriginal Victorians' refusal to comply with protectorate agendas, and Peter Read's portrayal of Wellington Valley within a narrative of Wiradjuri resistance).⁸³ Of course, all of these interpretations can be borne out, to varying degrees. Nonetheless, I would emphasise that philanthropic declarations of failure and despair were by no means neutral or straightforward. Here, some additional challenges to the failure thesis have been posed. Hilary Carey, for example, has suggested that missionary understandings of failure may have had more to do with personal and spiritual disappointments than with the (expected) challenges of station life.⁸⁴ Moreover, as Richard Broome has pointed out, too much of a failure focus can detract from accounts of Indigenous continuity and endurance.⁸⁵

While Indigenous views on the future were rarely sought, philanthropists' records do yield some sense of the (limited) directions left available to Aboriginal people. Despite the grief and depression hinted at by Thomas, some anecdotes challenge the dominant sense of Indigenous helplessness and philanthropic disappointment. For one thing, Indigenous people were unlikely to understand

Commission into Crime in the Braidewood District [Journal 1836–1865 of Rev. James Günther], ML MSS 508, item 10, CY reel 872. (Accessed copy at AIATSIS library, ref MF294); James Günther to the Lord Bishop of Australia, 17 November 1843, *NSW Archival Estrays*, ML MSS 508, item 10, CY reel 872.

83 Arkley 2000; Cannon 1990; Christie 1979; Corris 1968; Rae-Ellis 1988; Read 1988.

84 Carey 2000: 45–61.

85 For a discussion of the protectorate that highlights Aboriginal agency and continuity rather than philanthropic failings, see Broome 2005: 35–53.

the situation strictly in terms of Evangelical 'failure', given that they never fully endorsed philanthropists' aims in the first place. In some cases, a sense of disloyalty may have been more relevant. For instance, when the Günthers left Wellington Valley, Noamilly shouted furiously after them that they had ruined the station by allowing all the land and cattle to be given away. She may have disliked Günther because of his sacking of William Porter, but her response also suggests Günther's betrayal of his obligations to Wiradjuri people and country.⁸⁶

Other Indigenous people retained friendlier relationships with their former missionaries, and indeed may have experienced the post-mission period more in terms of continuity than rupture. Some Wiradjuri people opted to continue a mission life on Watson's station, where he carried on with religious instruction and baptisms. Günther also kept receiving some visits by younger Wiradjuri people; Cochrane, his wife Maria and their child even lived with the Günthers for a while.⁸⁷ Similarly, Francis Tuckfield of the Buntingdale mission remained in his district as a private grazier until 1850, retaining contact with Indigenous people.⁸⁸ Even the pessimistic Threlkeld continued with some Aboriginal preaching whilst running his Newcastle coal mine and working as a minister of the Bethel Union; the few surviving Awabakal people were living in their country nearby, working as fishermen, washerwomen, servants and sailors.⁸⁹ Such accounts can point, also, to the primacy of ties to country; a philanthropist's presence need not be the key factor determining people's residence in a district. In the 1840s, for instance, there were ongoing reports of Indigenous people living at Dredge's and Sievwright's abandoned protectorate stations.⁹⁰

Furthermore, Indigenous responses to the decline of the Port Phillip protectorate demonstrated the need for political contacts, as well as personal ones. When James Dredge left the Goulburn River in 1840, Daungwurrung people seemed distressed, and later visited his house in Melbourne four times, complaining to Dredge about his successor, William Le Souef, and urging him to return to their country, promising to build him a house and work on his farm. While Dredge's

86 James Günther to Richard Taylor, 12 November 1842, *NSW Archival Estrays*; James Günther to the Lord Bishop of Australia, 17 November 1843, *NSW Archival Estrays*, ML MSS 508, item 10, CY reel 872.

87 Bridges 1978: 733; James Günther, 13 August 1842, *NSW Archival Estrays*; James Günther to the Lord Bishop of Australia, 17 November 1843, *NSW Archival Estrays*, ML MSS 508, item 10, CY reel 872.

88 Greenwood 1956: 16–19.

89 Niel Gunson, 'Introduction', in Gunson (ed) 1974 vol 1: 28–29; Henwood 1978: 42; LE Threlkeld, 'Memoranda', in Gunson (ed) 1974 vol 1: 166–167.

90 Cannon 1990: 130–131; James Horsburgh to GA Robinson, Return of the numbers of Aborigines daily present at the Goulbourn Aboriginal Station, April 1846 – December 1848, PROV VPRS12 unit 7, 1848/30 (reel 3); ES Parker to GA Robinson, Return of the number of Aborigines daily present, Goulbourn River, April – December 1845, PROV VPRS12 unit 6, 1845/25 (reel 3).

own political role had collapsed (he lamented 'Poor fellows, I can do nothing for them'), the political efforts of the people he had been sent to protect were growing.⁹¹

Circumstances at ES Parker's protectorate station were particularly interesting. Parker's final report in 1850 struck an intriguingly optimistic note, stating that he had never been more hopeful of Indigenous people's working and religious improvement: 'Success seems to have dawned, and I most earnestly pray ... nothing will occur to blight or destroy the work so begun on this establishment.'⁹² While he may have been hoping for future financial support, Parker's relationships with Djadjawurung and Djabwurung people did outlast the protectorate's closure. He retained the land, and set himself up as a pastoralist with an Aboriginal school, which continued to operate at Franklinford till the Board closed it in 1864. He also boasted that several young men whom he had known for years were running successful farms and living as Christians; Parker's son claimed some of these people were still farming around Mt Franklin in the 1870s. Many of them died young, however, or were forced off their land by colonists; some moved eventually to the new Coranderrk station.⁹³

Perhaps the most politically charged philanthropic link maintained by Indigenous people in Victoria was with William Thomas, in his new capacity as Guardian of the Aborigines. Their dealings with Thomas were not always happy; his papers in the early 1850s depict the small numbers of people left around Melbourne as impoverished, depressed and alcoholic, and he began to advocate forcible removal of their children. However, Thomas's role was by no means negligible to Aboriginal people. They discussed with him Earl Grey's plans to set aside reserves for them in 1849, and various Kulin and Gunnai delegations lobbied him for assistance to secure farming land in their country. Thomas was surprised and pleased by their new enthusiasm for agriculture, but the ultimate results made clear where colonial power really lay; the land he had helped them reserve was seized by neighbouring settlers.⁹⁴

91 James Dredge, 11 June 1840, 10 October 1840, 18 March 1841, 27 November 1841, 4 December 1841, James Dredge, Diaries, Notebook and Letterbooks, ?1817–1845 [hereafter *JDD*], MS11625, MSM534, SLV; James Dredge to J Harding, 31 October 1840, *JDD*, MS11625, MSM534, SLV.

92 ES Parker to GA Robinson, 7 January 1850, PROV VPRS4410 unit 2, 1850/65 (reel 2).

93 Christie 1979: 149; Lewis 1987: 19; Morrison 2002a: 84; Rhodes 1995: 13; Morrison 2002b: 235–242; O'Connor 1991: 12; Parker, 'The Aborigines of Australia': 23; ES Parker to Colonial Secretary, 1 March 1853 in William Thomas 1854, *Aborigines: A Return to Address Mr Parker – 21 October 1853*: 29.

94 Attwood 2003: 7; Barwick 1998: 34; Christie 1979: 138; Peter Dean Gardner 1979, *W. Thomas and the Aborigines of Gippsland*, PMS3118, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS): 7; William Thomas to CJ La Trobe, 9 September 1850, PROV VPRS2893 unit 1, 1850/57 (reel 3); William Thomas to CJ La Trobe, 2 December 1850, VPRS2893 unit 1 (reel 3); Thomas 1854, *Aborigines: A Return to Address*: 17, 29; William Thomas to the Commissioner of Lands and Survey, 4 March 1859, in Attwood and Markus 1999: 41–42; William Thomas to Sir Redmond Barry, 21 October 1861, in William Thomas Papers – Correspondence, 1861, PMS681, AIATSIS: 125–126.

To summarise philanthropic work as a simple failure can be problematic. It can imply too great a sense of collapse and ruin – the above accounts of Indigenous endurance challenge this somewhat – but it can also minimise the impact of these projects. This point is highlighted by Deborah Bird Rose in her study of the Daly River Jesuit mission. Rose points to the rich and violent complexity of these supposedly fruitless mission projects, and observes that it can be dangerous to accept a sense of missionary helplessness at face value.

To sum this [missionary work] up as a failure to have an impact, or to assume that the impacts had only been superficial, is to set up the parameters of the frontier: presence described as absence. Denial of impact was also a denial of accountability and responsibility. The missionaries and everyone else could rest assured that their departure had no consequences because their presence had had no effects.⁹⁵

It is not my intention to downplay the sense of loss and tragedy conveyed in philanthropic records. Indigenous suffering pervades these sources, and although it fed into various forms of Evangelical rhetoric, it also has a painful immediacy: philanthropists were witnesses to physical and social destruction, which they deplored but could not prevent and, in some ways, ended up reinforcing. Questions of responsibility here are both urgent and problematic. If philanthropists voiced the loudest protests over dispossession, they also demonstrated some of the complexities of this response. Their papers suggest how models of Evangelical Protestantism, imperialism and charity were both necessary and limiting to the expression of compassion, grief and guilt.

95 Rose 1998: 27.