COLOURING WITHIN THE LINES: SETTLER COLONIALISM AND THE CUMMERAGUNJA ABORIGINAL STATION, 1888-1960s

Submitted by

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SUMMARY OF THESIS

This thesis presents the New South Wales Aboriginal station, Cummeragunja, as a complex site of exchange within a context of settler colonialism in south-east Australia, from its official commencement in 1888 through to the 1960s, by which time the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board had ceased to manage it and the Cummeragunja residents regained land previously leased to neighbouring farmers. Using a variety of sources, including oral testimonies, this thesis reveals the competing interests of residents, settler governments, scientific and religious organisations and members of nearby settler communities in the Cummeragunja station. While many in these non-Aboriginal groups sought fairness in their interactions with the Indigenous people of Cummeragunja, much of their behaviour reinforced Cummeragunja’s marginalisation.

Importantly, this thesis also shows the unwavering attachment of this community’s members to their right to fair and equal treatment as they dealt with the members of these non-Aboriginal groups – managers, officials, settlers, scientists, missionaries and employers – in the daily rounds of school and religious observance, in waged and unwaged work, and in leisure pursuits. In doing so, the thesis enhances contemporary understanding of the Cummeragunja community’s determined claim to the station’s site and its defence of its rights over this seventy-five period, this latter defence most famously reflected in the 1939 walk-off across the Murray River into Victoria. It reveals Aboriginal people sustaining their sense of worth and dignity amidst settler discrimination, as they sought the wider opportunities that settler society promised, while maintaining their commitment to their families, their community, their culture and their land: their heritage.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

(i) The thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD;

(ii) Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and

(iii) The thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signature:                     Date:
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INTRODUCTION

DRAWING THE BOUNDARIES

I want you to imagine a picture being drawn by a small girl’s hand. A crayon clutched in her grip, she is sketching and carefully colouring a sailing ship, complete with white sails, a bright red flag pole and a striking blue, white and red flag.¹ She also draws some flowers and a house boat, a common sight on the nearby Murray River. You can see the results on the previous page. Now I want you to imagine a whole classroom of children drawing. Occasionally a child sketches something different, an emu, for instance. But for the most part the children keep to a formula: a house, a boat and some flowers. At first glance, the content of these pictures may seem commonplace. Delve deeper, however, and you will discover that this is no ordinary primary school and the production of these pictures, no everyday activity. These children are Aboriginal, students of the Aboriginal school located on the New South Wales Government station of Cummeragunja, almost 800 kilometres south-west of the NSW capital, Sydney, but only 30 kilometres north-east of the Victorian township of Echuca. A white employee of the state, A.J. McQuiggin, oversees their lives on a day-to-day-basis.² The children are drawing on that mid-1938 day at the request of Norman Tindale, an anthropologist studying the assimilation of mixed-descent Aboriginal people in south-east Australia. The adults on the Cummeragunja Station have spent days answering questions and having their photos taken: now the children are the ones in focus. Mostly these children are drawing colonial mainstays, showing as they do so varying levels of enthusiasm.³

¹ Crayon drawing, Cummeragunja, 2 June 1938, AA346/18/10/17, Children’s Crayon Drawings Relating to the Harvard and Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition to South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland, Cape Barren Island, Tasmania and Western Australia, 1938-1939, Board for Anthropological Research, South Australian Museum Archives, Adelaide, SA.
² NSW stations can be distinguished from reserves at this time, by this day-to-day management on the part of the state’s Aborigines’ Protection Board. Cummeragunja later became a reserve, when the last manager departed in 1953. I have chosen to use the term “station” wherever possible throughout the thesis, but both my primary and secondary sources will often use “reserve” or “mission”. For more discussion on the differences between NSW reserves, stations and missions see Valerie Djenidi, “State and Church Involvement in Aboriginal Reserves, Missions and Stations in NSW, 1900-1975 and a Translation into French of Custodians of the Soil”, PhD thesis, Wolluka School of Aboriginal Studies, University of Newcastle, 2008, p. 6.
³ I have chosen to refer to the residents of Cummeragunja as Cummeragunja people or Aboriginal people. I have deliberately not used the tribal names wherever possible of Yorta Yorta and Bangerang as there is a split within the community over this and, as an outsider, this is not a debate in which I feel qualified to participate.
This image of children drawing and the results now stored in the South Australian Museum Archives presents me with something of a quandary. Why did these children choose to draw these particular pictures? Were they encouraged, pressured, or did they do so of their own volition? Did the fact that they were Aboriginal change the meaning of their art, as they sketched out this ubiquitous colonial imagery and coloured the space inside? And how can we understand the role of Norman Tindale, who encouraged their creation? This incident, moreover, hints at broader questions relating to settler colonialism on the Cummeragunja station at this time. To what extent had this community appropriated the practices and infrastructure of settler colonial society? And how had this occurred? Were they encouraged or pressured, or did they do so of their own choice? Had this very appropriation changed the meaning of these aspects of white culture?4 And what are the outside influences that played out in this uptake?

This incident provides an intriguing entry into the processes of settler colonialism on Cummeragunja at this time and the questions that these raise. This makes it a fitting beginning to this study, a social history of Cummeragunja from the station’s creation in 1888 until the 1960s, when the NSW Government had ceased to manage it and members of the community had regained a level of control over the land. Over 500 kilometres closer to the Victorian capital, Melbourne, than to Sydney, Cummeragunja lies on the NSW side of the banks of the Murray River, across which is the small Victorian town of Barmah. During its life as a Government-managed station, it was home to anywhere from 100 through to over 300 Aboriginal people, who worked, played and carved out lives in the region, their activities on the station overseen by Government-appointed non-Aboriginal managers. Today a small village remains on this site, now a Local Aboriginal Land Council reserve, managed by a community collective.

This study explores Cummeragunja as a complex site of exchange within a context of settler colonialism in south-east Australia. Using a variety of sources, including oral history traditions shared by Cummeragunja’s Aboriginal elders, this social history reveals the competing interests of settler governments, scientific and religious organisations and nearby settler communities that were played out on Cummeragunja. It explores the interactions of Cummeragunja people with these groups, as they engaged in schooling, in religious pursuits, in paid and unpaid work and in entertainment. My focus is on the formal and informal ways settlers, at various times, sought to improve the lives of Cummeragunja residents, but continued to marginalise and discriminate against the members of this community. It traces the responses of Cummeragunja people to this, as

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3 I am influenced in this approach by the editors of a recent US publication on missions, *Competing Kingdoms*, who wrote that the study of cultural imperialism should not be “a unidirectional exercise of power”. Rather, mission sites should be considered “sites of encounter and exchange where individuals met, interacted and triggered change”. Barbara Reeves-Ellington, Kathryn Kish Sklar and Connie A. Shemo, “Introduction”, in Barbara Reeves-Ellington, Kathryn Kish Sklar and Connie A. Shemo (eds), *Competing Kingdoms: Women, Mission, Nation, and the American Protestant Empire, 1812-1960*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, p. 6.

6 A number of prominent historians outside Aboriginal history have also explored this idea of examining everyday life to show how a subjected group can resist domination through resistance that is not immediately overt. In the United States, Lawrence W. Levine famously looked at this in regards to slave culture in the 1970s. Singling out the importance of studying slave songs, he encouraged us, the historians, to “broaden our definition of protest and resistance, to make it less restrictive and more realistic”, pointing out that for most slaves “the normal outlets for protest remained closed”. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 239. More recently in Australia, meanwhile, Joy Damousi has investigated this small-scale resistance in regards to convict women, writing that some previous historians of convict history have overlooked subversive activities of convicts, understanding “protest to mean organised, premeditated resistance driven by a political consciousness”. Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 65.
they sought to better their lives and those of their children and to hold on to their land, their culture and their community.

I undertook this examination using a wide array of primary source material, not least important of which was a series of oral history interviews. These interviews provide both an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspective on Cummeragunja’s history, speaking of individual and collective experiences but also the processes of memory which in 2010 continue to evolve. Underpinning this thesis is also an examination of a sizeable body of written records, which range from the Minute Books of the Aborigines Protection Board (APB) and the correspondence of the Department of Education (previously the Department of Public Instruction), through to the missionary magazine, Our Aim, and to numerous written testimonies relating to Cummeragunja. Before I consider my primary source material further, I want to share my own introduction to Cummeragunja and to clarify the approach I have taken in this thesis. From there I consider the previous studies of Aboriginal reserves, stations and missions and, more specifically, of Cummeragunja which have informed and influenced my research. Finally, I return to my primary source records, considering these in turn and concluding with an overview of the structure of this thesis.

The Project
As will soon become obvious, I am present throughout this work. I recognise that this is not standard practice and that not everyone may agree with this approach. In considering this, I draw from the eminent historian Greg Dening, who argued that revealing oneself was a requirement of writing history, showing “not just our biases, but those things that affect us in our reading and writing”.7 The fact that I use oral histories within this thesis convinced me further to move away from the style of the omniscient narrator, as it appeared to me that a white person writing the history of an Aboriginal station needed to be open about her own influences and choices within her work.8 From the beginning, I was aware of the highly sensitive role I was playing. Here I was, a middle-class white woman, whose great grandparents played their own part in the colonising process after they arrived from United Kingdom and set up farming ventures during the mid-nineteenth century.9 I was inspired in my approach by the publication, Uncommon Ground:

9 Rosamund Dalziell also wrote on this sense of responsibility in her Shameful Autobiographies: Shame in
White Women in Aboriginal History, and its preface in which each editor revealed something of her own background. Explaining this choice, the editors wrote that they were each aware of the role of white women in settler colonialism and that, like the women they were writing on, they too were working to improve the “rights and status of Aboriginal people”.

While they did not apologise for this, they felt it necessary to be open about the influences shaping their work. Raymond Evans in his book, Fighting Words: Writing about Race, takes a similar approach. He believes that recognising one’s own position in respect to history is important, observing: “my Welshness and my Australianness have a history; and so does my whiteness and maleness”.

I first heard about Cummeragunja during my cadetship year at the nearby Shepparton News, when I began working on the paper’s weekly history page. Seeking to incorporate an Aboriginal component that was previously absent, I contacted the local Bangerang Cultural Centre and through my relationship with the Centre, I discovered Cummeragunja. I had grown up on a dairy farm in Rochester, some 100 kilometres away, but had never come across Cummeragunja. Even learning how to spell the station’s name was initially a challenge. The more I found out about this Aboriginal station, the more I wanted to know. When a few years later the chance arose to study Cummeragunja, as part of a broader Australian Research Council-funded project looking at missions and reserves, I welcomed the opportunity.

The issue of being an outsider to the community has informed and guided my work. I chose to use oral histories – as I discuss further in Chapter One – partly because of my interest in this method, but also because I knew Aboriginal input into my research was essential. I also visited the station many times and in the first two years of my research put out newsletters detailing what I was interested in and the people I had contacted or visited. I was confident throughout my research that this was history


Evans, Fighting Words, p.10.

I was not alone in this dilemma: Cummeragunja is spelt many other ways, including Comeroogunga, Cummeragunga and Cumeragunga. I have chosen to use Cummeragunja as this is the way the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Land Council is spelt. Where written quotes use different spelling, however, I have left the original.

Michael Jacklin has discussed a similar issue in relation to his PhD thesis, for which he interviewed 29 Aboriginal narrators. He wrote that consultation with Aboriginal people was useful as it “provided an
marked by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal interactions within a settler colonial framework. The thoughts of Raymond Evans have helped me to understand the issue of writing the history of a culture of which I am not a part. Any historian working on contact history, according to Evans, will need to deal with at least one culture with which they do not identify. “Both Aboriginal and European researchers”, wrote Evans, “logically face this same problem when studying Aboriginal-European relations”.15 Evans well understood the sensitivity over white people writing Aboriginal history, particularly “[c]onsidering the high tides of cultural imperialism which have continually assailed Aboriginal societies”.16 But, ultimately, he felt that while Aboriginal writers of history and biographies should be prioritised, this did not mean that we should establish “an Aboriginal intellectual monopoly over discourse in place of the former European one”.17

It is not my intention to take the place of an Aboriginal historian here; I have studied Cummeragunja through the lens of cross-cultural exchange. But there is so much more to tell. As Heather Goodall wrote in the introduction to her own PhD thesis, “[t]his is one history and one history only”.18 Some community members have chosen to tell me – or white society generally – some of the stories of Cummeragunja, both directly in the form of my oral history interviews, but also indirectly through biography and autobiography. Through this act – agreeing to an interview or writing for a broad audience – I feel these community members have given me permission to use these accounts.19 I draw most significantly from my own oral history interviews, however, feeling that the permissions involved in these are the clearest, and that I have the best understanding of these, having had a role in their creation and knowing the person who shared them firsthand. But I also realise that these narrators have omitted much from their accounts and that still others who have not spoken have a great deal to tell. I have also deliberately omitted parts of the accounts, largely relating to culture and family feuds, which I felt that I was not in a position to discuss. Aboriginal historians will best


15 Evans, Fighting Words, p. 229.
16 Evans, Fighting Words, p. 229.
17 Evans, Fighting Words, p. 230.
19 Maria Nugent, for instance, identifies “the wider community” as one of the two audiences Aboriginal family historians are thinking of when they publish their histories. Maria Nugent, “Aboriginal Family History: Some Reflections”, Australian Cultural History, vol. 23, 2003, p. 149.
tell these stories. Evans has also written of this, noting that: “it is Aboriginal historians who are best positioned to communicate all the nuances of Aboriginal cultural practice and to appreciate such matters as indigenous choice, pride and solidarity in situations of extreme duress”.  

**Historians**

My methodology for this thesis places Cummeragunja within a settler colonial context with its accompanying power relations, at a particular place and time. Studies of Aboriginal history and Aboriginal communities, mission stations and reserves, of boundaries, of space, and of whiteness are therefore critical. My work, moreover, builds on earlier studies of Cummeragunja and its mission predecessor, Maloga and of Aboriginal history more generally. In the section below, I provide some background on some of the most influential of these.

Previous histories of Aboriginal people, particularly those produced in the last twenty years, have provided a foundation for this thesis. The field has undergone significant change since W. E. H. Stanner called for an end to the “great Australian silence” on Aboriginal people in his Boyer lecture of 1968. Since Stanner’s lecture, many historians have turned their focus to Aboriginal history. Key within this has been Henry Reynolds’s work on frontier violence, which revealed the extent of the atrocities perpetrated by settlers on Aboriginal people. Richard Broome’s *Aboriginal Australians*, first published in 1982, is now on its fourth edition. Ann McGrath, meanwhile, has received recognition for revealing the extent of abuse of Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory, while Bain Attwood, Raymond Evans, Lyndall Ryan and others have made substantial contributions.

Writing as I do in 2010, I am not simply interested in writing Aboriginal people

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20 Evans, *Fighting Words*, p. 231.


back into white history. Rather, I am concerned with highlighting the political implications of day-to-day exchanges between community members and white community representatives, neighbours, employers and missionaries. In this, I am influenced by Deborah Bird Rose and Richard Davis, who in their study of Australia’s frontier encounters attempted to highlight within these, “exchange, perpetuation, transformation [and] reclamation”. Highlighting these elements, wrote Rose and Davis, revealed the limits to colonisation and allowed them to move beyond the common tropes of frontier narratives, which speak primarily of “resistance, capture, seizure and violence”. I am also aware of the dangers of overemphasising resistance and ignoring the power relations between settlers and Aboriginal people, which were, as these historians point out, “radically asymmetrical”. Cummeragunja descendant and academic Wayne Atkinson, for instance, has written that despite the “evidence of co-existence” between the Cummeragunja people and the outside white community “the relationship was really a one-way process”. Yet, while these power relations existed, these interactions are still worth considering further.

These power relations are an important focus for many historians studying colonial relations. Michel Foucault, for instance, argued that, historically, power was “rooted in the system of social networks”, not just institutions. Barry Morris in his study of the Dhan-Gadi Aboriginal people draws on Foucault’s notion of power to look at the ways changing state power structures shaped Dhan-Gadi responses, but also this community’s resistance, which “subverted and modified” these powers. Other histories of Aboriginal communities in Australia have also highlighted the, at times, surprising

23 The idea that Cummeragunja was not isolated but, rather, linked in many different ways to the broader community formed the basis of a chapter that I co-wrote with Patricia Grimshaw. See Fiona Davis and Patricia Grimshaw, “We’re All Part of the Passing Parade”: The Movement of People and Ideas to and from the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Reserve, 1888-1962”, Outside Country, edited by Alan Mayne, Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2010 (forthcoming).
24 Rose and Davis, “Preface”, p. 9.
26 Rose and Davis, “Preface”, p. 9.
27 Wayne Atkinson, “Not One Iota: The Yorta Yorta Struggle for Land Justice”, PhD thesis, School of Law and Legal Studies, La Trobe University, Bundoora, 2000, p. 66.
degree of Aboriginal autonomy. In Diane Barwick’s history of Coranderrk, she maintains that: “the 20 or so families who made Coranderrk their home were not ignorant pawns … enlist[ing], even manipulat[ing] Europeans for their own purposes”.30 Keith Cole, meanwhile, highlighted the attachment of Aboriginal people to missions in his history of the western Victorian mission, Lake Condah, despite the hardships they endured there. According to Cole, their link to this site was “of the utmost importance to their identity, and their historical and cultural relationships with the past”.31 Karen Hughes, meanwhile, has recently completed a PhD thesis at Flinders University on the Point McLeay Mission in South Australia, which took into account the interactions of this community with its white neighbours.32 Her insights into this shaped my understanding of Cummeragunja’s cross-cultural exchange.33

Mission founders, such as Daniel Matthews, who started the Maloga mission that preceded Cummeragunja, have attracted the attention of historians for their role in introducing white civilisation to Aboriginal people. “At the interface between cultures and religion”, as Patricia Grimshaw and Andrew May have remarked, “missionaries from the Christian west spearheaded the proliferation of the practices of modernity: capitalist economic systems, social institutions, ideas of gender, class and progress”.34 Missionaries brought to Aboriginal people western ideas about life and culture, believing that their own society’s practices were inherently superior to those of Aboriginal people.35 But it is

35 Many historians have made this point, including John Harris, One Blood: Two Hundred Years of Aboriginal Encounters with Christianity, Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1990, p. 539; Partha Chatterjee, “Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonized Women: the Context in India”, American Ethnologist, vol. 26, p. 623; and Myra
too easy to judge missionaries now with the benefit of hindsight, without considering the other roles they played. Brian Stanley, for instance, acknowledged the damage to Aboriginal culture that missionaries caused, but points also to them as among the few colonists who did not see Aboriginal people as “destined to perpetual inferiority”. And, for his part, Noel Loos has acknowledged the faults of Australia’s missionaries, but has indicated that they were less harmful “than any other group of colonists coming into contact with Aboriginal people”. Until governments began creating reserves, wrote Loos, no one else was attempting to help Aboriginal people – flawed or otherwise.

Historians have also highlighted the empowering potential of Christianity for Aboriginal people, particularly in colonial Australia. Andrew Markus and Bain Attwood, for instance, have written that on Maloga, Christian teachings served as a “powerful antidote to racism”. Not only did Christians recognise Aboriginal people as human, wrote Markus and Attwood, but they offered Christianity as a power higher than the often discriminatory policies of the state and federal governments, offering “salvation for the downtrodden”. In the African context, Elizabeth Elbourne has similarly written about the ways power shifted between missionaries and indigenous people, observing that “if one digs beneath the surface of the archival record, its anxieties, tensions and dense social relationships reveal much about wider relationships of power on many levels”.

Missionaries were neither all-powerful nor were they all the same. Rather, missionaries in different locations had vastly different experiences. As Felicity Jensz explains in her work on German Moravian missionaries in Australia, an understanding of the specific context of each mission is “essential to understanding significant interactions
upon multiple sites of cultural exchange”. Claire McLisky, in her consideration of the missionary Daniel Matthews and his wife Janet, similarly calls for historians to take their understandings of colonists beyond the good/bad dichotomy. She wrote that: “we need to see all colonisers – whether secular or religious – in their capitalist, post-enlightenment individualist contexts, as well as being informed by their more personal, spiritual concerns”.

Lynette Russell has highlighted the dangers of binaries in Australian history, which unhelpfully pit the “colonized indigenous” against the “colonizing diasporic white newcomer or settler”, when in reality these categories often “overlap, coincide, and at times conflict”.

This call for specificity of understanding is a focus throughout this thesis, conscious also that as historians, “our categories of analysis may well create the object we study”, as Russell has cautioned. A number of historians have recently shown the need for studies that reveal the various workings of settler colonialism at a localised level. Maria Nugent in a study of Australian colonial memorials found that local histories of these “provide windows into the shifting uses of, and esteem given to, Aboriginal testimony in colonial forms of history”. Rose and Davis, moreover, in their preface to Dislocating the Frontier, write that the chapters of this volume “allow the intricacies of real life to take precedence over the singularities that have come to dominate [Australia’s] history wars”. This approach, they write, enables the subtleties of historical experiences of the frontier to be “examine[d] and celebrate[d]”, in an area of history they felt was “in danger of being turned into a shadow zone of caricature and stereotype”.

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42 Felicity Jensz, “Colonial Agents: German Moravian Missionaries in the English-Speaking World”, in Patricia Grimshaw and Andrew May (eds), Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Exchange, p. 149. For more on missionaries and Indigenous people see also the work of Helen Bethea Gardner, Angela Walhalla, Peggy Brock, Myra Rutherford and Norman Etherington also in this volume. I discuss their work further in chapters two and five.


47 Rose and Davis, “Preface”, p. iv.

48 Rose and Davis, “Preface”, p. iv.
historian Paula Byrne agrees that specific studies are important, noting that “[y]ou track power differently in each place I’ve been”. 49

While Australia was strictly speaking a British colony only for the first decade or so of Cummeragunja’s existence, the framework of settler colonialism is still important to any understanding of Cummeragunja’s history and its power relations at least until the 1950s. Australia may have technically been a postcolonial nation, but it has certainly had not “transcended”, as Nicholas Thomas so aptly observes, “the cultural forms and procedures associated with colonial dominance.” 50 In the co-written, Equal Subjects, Unequal Rights: Indigenous Peoples in British Settler Colonies, for instance, the authors argued that studies of settler colonialism were essential because of its particular nature, wherein “economic interests were vested primarily in securing permanent control of the land”. 51

Settler colonialism then is not just about origins, as Patrick Wolfe reminded us, but rather “society’s primary structural characteristic”. 52 This is not to say that settler colonialism was an overarching, immutable power that dictated peoples’ experiences; rather, to quote Thomas once again, “it was more “a series of projects that incorporate representations, narratives and practical efforts”. 53 Amanda Barry has made a similar point, writing that: “the Empire was never monolithic”, but instead “a tenuous collection of small colonies, each of them grasping an idea of ‘Empire’ but also responsible pragmatically to the local specificities of their region, its terrain, economies and people”. 54 Aboriginal agency needs to be considered within studies of settler colonialism, as Grimshaw recently observed, as those “Indigenous peoples who survived the initial onslaught of colonial occupation negotiated ways of living with settlers, albeit on unequal terms”. 55

53 Thomas, Colonialism’s Culture, p. 171.
To explore these subtleties more effectively, I have chosen to use oral history as a key component of this thesis. As I discuss more fully in Chapter One, oral history allowed me to include Aboriginal voices in my study, where written Aboriginal records are rare. But it also opened up a whole range of possibilities that written records could never provide. The way in which the people I interviewed remembered events or experiences, for instance, provided essential information, but they also hinted at the ways personal and collective memory had formed in the intervening years. As the Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli has observed, more than just about an event, oral history is also “about the place and meaning of the event within the lives of the tellers”.

A number of Australian historians have used oral history in recent years to write about Aboriginal people. The involvement of the historian in this process has ranged from minimal – such as Jeremy Beckett’s assistance to Aboriginal man, Myles Lalor, in writing his autobiography – through to more significant interventions, such as Gillian Cowlishaw’s work with the Rembarrnga people. In the resulting publication, Cowlishaw draws both on her experiences with Rembarrnga people and on official records, carefully pointing out that she is not comparing these to test the “facts”, but rather to show “there were other lives being lived out in the domain the colonisers always thought of as theirs”. While I would not say I was using my oral accounts to “test” written history, I do feel that their inclusion does more than just show that other lives were being lived. These stories also complicate and fill out our understandings of Cummeragunja experiences, from both black and white perspectives.

I consider my project a community history, but admit that this is a problematic term. Tim Rowse explored the difficulties of the word “community” in his article “Enlisting the Warlpiri”. In this, he warns that researchers should not assume the unity of the Warlpiri people that make up the Yuendumu “community”, but instead recognise that “Yuendumu is a congeries of rival interest, defined by lineage, age and sex”. Crucially, however, Rowse finds that the Yuendumu do come together in the collective interest, when required. For want of a better word then – and reluctant to use the term

coined by Kenneth Burridge, “Unspecific Larger Groups” – I believe that the advantages of referring to community in this history outweigh its drawbacks.\(^5^9\)

The permeability and complications, moreover, of the boundaries of these communities are characteristic of the many boundaries that I explore within this thesis. Ann McGrath wrote of the mutability of boundaries in her examination of representations of Aboriginal people wearing white bridal gowns, describing these as “boundary-crossing”, and concluding that the “fluidity of ostensible boundaries of the categories of sex, race, and color change with sunlight, landscape and time”.\(^6^0\) That does not mean that boundaries are meaningless or that they do not exist. Rather, they shift depending on political and social circumstances and, as Ingereth Macfarlane remarks, they are most visible when they are crossed.\(^6^1\) Greg Dening also built on this idea throughout his work, describing the shared borders of these categories as “beaches”. “These spaces where we are neither one thing nor another are spaces of defining rather than definition”, wrote Dening. “The ordinary moments of living are interrupted for a time by abnormal moments when the focus is on identity and the meaning of things”.\(^6^2\) Richard Davis agrees, observing: “it is the real and imaginative spaces where edges and borders between ideas are traversed, where identities can lose their certainty and be reassembled, and where power fluctuates between people and the world”.\(^6^3\) Lynette Russell shared this focus on the boundaries created by cross-cultural encounters in her book, *Colonial Frontiers: Indigenous-European Encounters in Settler Societies*. She wrote that these encounters necessarily created boundaries and frontiers that were “both physical and intellectual, which are never neutrally positioned, but are assertive, contested and dialogic.”\(^6^4\) Despite their mutability, the boundaries in this study shape, but do not

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determine, experiences on Cummeragunja at a whole range of levels. For Cummeragunja, these boundaries marked how Aboriginal and white people should behave, as dictated by the state, the APB, the manager and society generally. These boundaries were often physical, marking the edges of the station, the border between NSW and Victoria, and the spaces open to Aboriginal people.

Understanding these spaces was critical on Cummeragunja, where different rules applied to different areas in public, but also private, arenas. As I discuss in Chapter Five, the space in which interracial exchanges took place often shaped their nature. In the shearing shed, for instance, black and white people worked side by side, but out in the social sphere, such as at the local football field, it was a very different story. I am influenced here by the work of Stephen Muecke, who argued that: “things and people are mutually transformative”: “the place changes according to who comes to occupy it and what they do there”, while “the people change as a consequence of the place”. A number of historians have explored the idea that spaces are imbued with racial meaning, including Penelope Edmonds. She wrote that settler colonies were “formed through the rapid reorganisation, regulation and governance of bodies and spaces”. Liz Reed, meanwhile, has highlighted the humble verandah as a significant site for racial tensions, in the case of the white Victorian woman, Anne Bon, her Aboriginal guests and her white neighbours. In allowing Aboriginal men to inhabit this space, which was neither clearly inside nor outside her home, Bon worried some local white men, their anxiety

65 For more on conceptions of geographical boundaries see Joanne Nagel, Race, Ethnicity and Sexuality, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
66 For more on the New South Wales/Victoria border see Bruce Pennay, From Colonial to State Border: A Federation History of the Social Construction of the Border between New South Wales and Victoria as a Frontier Barrier and Contact Zone, Albury: Johnstone Centre, Charles Sturt University, 2001; and Atkinson, “Not One Iota”, p. 60.
reflecting their “concerns about her behaviour and its possibilities for erasing the cultural and racial(ised) ‘spaces’ at whose borders she located herself”.  

Much of this study of racialised spaces emerges out of a broader consideration of the hidden power of whiteness and white privilege, a growing field of interest for historians over the last decade. For many years and in many locations across the British Empire, as Grimshaw and May have written, “pale skin appeared the marker of a normative authority, of unreflective convictions of righteousness”.  

Studying whiteness enables the historian to undermine its sway, and to “dislodge” its power and subsequent inequities, as Richard Dyer has written. Uncovering whiteness in history requires a shift in the way we perceive history, a point Toni Morrison makes articulately in her influential publication, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination*. It was as if, Morrison observed, she had been viewing a fishbowl but seeing only its interior: “the glide and flick of the golden scale, the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills; the castles at the bottom”. Abruptly, her perspective changed: “I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world”. Morrison’s reflections are an important reminder that, even when the importance of race and colour is downplayed, as it often was in my interviews and the documents I dealt with, these factors are not only ever present, but were, in fact, a framework from which these accounts emerged. I am also conscious, though, that whiteness worked differently in different locations, as Alastair Bonnett and Homi Bhabha have both counselled, and should not be reduced to an overly simplistic category.

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69 Liz Reed, “‘Mrs Bon’s Verandah Full of Aboriginals’: Race, Class, Gender and Friendship”, *History Australia*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2005, p. 39. For more on racialised spaces see Richard Davis’s chapter “Eight Seconds: Style, Performance and Crisis in Aboriginal Rodeo”, in *Dislocating the Frontier*. In this, Davis highlights Kimberley rodeos as a social space that is created and which station managers, stockhands and their families share. See also Hughes, “The Past is the Present”. In this, Hughes wrote that “[k]itchen tables and domestic spaces – places of socialization – have been significant sites of exchange within and across cultures”. See also Tracy Spencer, “‘Woman Lives as a Lubra in Native Camp’: Representations of ‘Shared Space’”, *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 82, 2004, pp. 61-74.

70 Grimshaw and May, “Reappraisals of Mission History”, p. 2.


More locally, whiteness studies have also illuminated the ways scientific racism affected Aboriginal lives. In *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, for instance, Warwick Anderson considered the history of medical and scientific conceptions of race in Australia, with a particular focus on shifting ideas of whiteness, arguing that doctors and scientists marked whiteness and in the process provided the nation with a “type of body and mentality to which it may aspire”.\(^75\) In considering this, I am also conscious of Ian Keen’s argument in regards to white research into Aboriginal people, in which he acknowledges the power of this research and its impact on Aboriginal people, but points out that Aboriginal people also interacted with and shaped this research themselves.\(^76\) Moreover, governmental policy that turned towards assimilation during the twentieth century belied the studies that attempted to show whiteness as superior. “Aborigines’ physical substance cannot really have been seen as deficient”, as Patrick Wolfe has written, “otherwise the last thing white authorities would have set out to do would have been to incorporate it into the white gene pool”.\(^77\) However, we should not automatically overlook the study of racial categories in favour of whiteness studies, as Georgia Shiells rightly pointed out.\(^78\) Studying race, for instance, makes it easier to understand racial domination, the function of whiteness and for combating the idea of true racial types.\(^79\) This is particularly relevant to my study of Cummeragunja, as colonisation led to the growth of racial ideas, which effectively saw science back up political agendas.\(^80\)

A number of historians have written accounts of Cummeragunja’s history.\(^81\) Perhaps the most notable of these is Cummeragunja descendant Wayne Atkinson’s unpublished manuscript, “A Picture from the Other Side”.\(^82\) Atkinson takes a similar

\(^75\) Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, p. 245.
\(^82\) Wayne Atkinson, “A Picture from the Other Side: Cummeragunga and Its Historical Connections with Coranderrk from Written and Oral Sources”, February 1981, MS 1598, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Library, Canberra. In addition to this manuscript, Atkinson also produced a an unpublished report into his research progress. See Wayne Atkinson, *Historical Research into*
approach to my own in looking at Cummeragunja’s past, but with a greater focus on Aboriginal history prior to white arrival, on Aboriginal cultural practices and the station’s connections with Coranderrk. Given his origins as a Cummeragunja descendant and as an Aboriginal man, Atkinson’s history is one that I could never write. Other historians have studied Cummeragunja with a primary focus on large-scale political events. Diane Barwick, for instance, looked at Cummeragunja residents that had moved to Melbourne in her PhD thesis, “A Little More than Kin: Regional Affiliation and Group Identity Among Aboriginal Migrants in Melbourne”. While her published work focussed primarily on Coranderrk, she wrote a number of articles that revealed much about the politics and the emotions involved in life on the Cummeragunja, particularly apparent in her work on the Cummeragunja woman, Ellen Atkinson.83

Heather Goodall, meanwhile, has studied in depth Cummeragunja’s political history, particularly in regards to land, in her PhD research and later her book, Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972, in which she charts the role of land in Aboriginal politics in NSW. In this, Goodall examines various attempts by the station’s population to claim land rights through to the 1970s and provides a broad overview of the many restrictions on Cummeragunja people during these years, and their responses to these regulations. Goodall is one of a number of historians to study the role of ex-Cummeragunja resident William Cooper and his activism in the 1930s. She argued that Cooper’s early work, demanding land and rights, used the language of Christianity, but that his aim was not a Christian concept: “he was insisting on recognition of Aboriginal rights of prior ownership”.84 Markus and Attwood, meanwhile, chart Cooper’s work, and the role of faith and Daniel Matthews’s teachings, writing that: “Matthews’ evangelical work provided Cooper and other Yorta Yorta with powerful ways of

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84 Goodall, Invasion to Embassy, p. 78.
understanding and protesting against their plight, and so helped equip them to fight for equality”.

A study of Daniel and Janet Matthews and their work at Maloga is the most recent addition to this body of work on Cummeragunja and its foundations. In Claire McLisky’s recently submitted PhD thesis “Settlers on a Mission: Faith, Power and Subjectivity in the Lives of Daniel and Janet Matthews”, she explores the motivations and attitudes of both Daniel and Janet as they sought to carry out their evangelical work as Christian settlers. The ideas of settler colonialism are central to McLisky’s work and she finds that the excesses of these forces were essential to Janet and Daniel, as without them, they “would have had nothing to define themselves against”. She concludes that: “in its desire to possess and to transform, the evangelical project – despite its appeals to humility – is in itself a colonizing one”.

Sources
Building on these earlier studies of Maloga and Cummeragunja, my research into this station has taken a broader social scope, with a focus on Cummeragunja as a complex site of exchange within a framework of settler colonialism in south-east Australia. Towards this, I have blended white records, in the form of governmental records and debates, premiers’ letters and newspaper reports with both white and black oral histories and reminiscences. Influencing me in this approach is the work of Kristyn Harman, who in her biography of an Aboriginal man, Duall, drew on the colonial archive. Harman wrote: “[e]ngaging with some of the by-ways of the records about Duall’s life elucidated not only aspects of individual experiences but also revealed some interesting dynamics driving broader colonial society”. Towards this, I draw on a range of official and non-


87 McLisky, “Settlers on a Mission”, p. 276. For other local histories of Aboriginal people on Maloga and Cummeragunja see Beverley and Don Elphick (eds), Riverina Aboriginals, 1874-1945, Canberra: D.J. & B.P. Elphick, 1997. This study includes a brief history of Maloga and Cummeragunja – as well as other NSW reserves – and lists of births, deaths and marriages. The second half provides reference sources for various residents of these reserves.

official records, which span the station’s entire history to provide particular insights into these dynamics.

It is fitting to begin this discussion of my primary sources with my oral histories, which form the basis of my first chapter and inform the thesis as a whole more generally. Over many visits to the reserve, and the area surrounding it, I conducted my oral history interviews with community members and some of their white neighbours. I carried out a number of official interviews, but my understanding of the various community interpretations came not only from these, but also from the numerous conversations and observations that occurred away from the tape recorder. These occurred at the Yorta Yorta Spiritual Gathering, the Landcare rubbish removal day or over lunch in the caravan in which I camped when I stayed. They also occurred when I dropped into the reserve, and chatted to Denise Morgan-Bulled at the health centre or Kevin Atkinson at the Land Council office. Often, frustratingly because they were off the record, but the for the most part invaluably, these “unofficial” conversations provided key insights that my official interviews overlooked, whether because the people I interviewed did not think of them at the time or they were not comfortable saying them on record.

As well as drawing on oral histories, I am influenced by published personal accounts of Cummeragunja’s history. These have provided important background for this thesis, although I have chosen to draw the bulk of the memories from the oral history interviews that I conducted personally. I felt justified in this approach, as this ensured I did not mine the material for handy quotes; rather I attempted to understand the narrator within the more complex context, which I had a role in creating. When


90 In considering both published and unpublished testimonies I have also been influenced by the work of Jane C. Richardson and Barry S. Godfrey in Towards Ethical Practice in the Use of Archived Transcripted Interviews”, International Journal of Social Research Methodology, vol. 6, no. 4, 2003, pp. 347-55; and Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith, Reading Autobiography, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

considering these life stories I was conscious of the collaboration that went into them. The Australian historian Jennifer Jones has written on this process in detail in relation to one ex-Cummeragunja resident, Margaret Tucker. Tucker had recently become more committed to religion in the years leading up to her memoirs, and, according to Jones, this fact shaped her book, as did the collaboration of her white friend and editor, Jean Hughes. Despite their complications, these mediated accounts are still valuable. Basil Sansom, for instance, has written that in Aboriginal biographies, such white interference helps to make sense of Indigenous narratives for a broader audience. These meanings, moreover, have the potential to change national history narratives.

Published personal accounts of Cummeragunja’s history emerged from the 1930s onwards, first with Therese Clements’s, *From Old Maloga: the Memoirs of an Aboriginal Woman* and twenty years later with Ronald Morgan’s, *Reminiscences of the Aborigines Station at Cummeragunja and its Aboriginal People*. In her book, Clements – the mother of Margaret Tucker – takes a very personal approach to the history of Maloga and Cummeragunja, recounting her initial unease about moving to Maloga and then the success of her life there. Clements’s tale is not just one of triumph; she recalls the APB taking her children from her, describing this as the most terrible day of her life. Morgan’s *Reminiscences* is also a personal narrative, but has a greater focus on the general history of Cummeragunja. Morgan recalled life on Cummeragunja, describing the station as a strict and, in some ways, unhappy place, but pointing out that Aboriginal people still found outlets for entertainment. Morgan also turns to the achievements of Aboriginal people more generally, writing that any Aboriginal person who “inherits some of the good qualities of his ancestors has much to be proud and thankful for”.


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In the 1970s, Tucker, who spent parts of her childhood on Cummeragunja, published her autobiography, which I discussed earlier. Tucker’s account of her life is a story of achievement against a backdrop of racism and poverty. She recalled the struggles her parents and grandparents had faced and overcome before her, before charting her own life, from her childhood moving between Moonah Cullah mission and Cummeragunja and her removal to the Cootamundra Girl’s Home to, later, her political activities in Melbourne. Tucker’s narrative was underpinned by her Christian faith, as Jones noted earlier, and she concluded with an observation that everyone had the Holy Spirit, but this would be revealed only when we “skim all the scum off, get rid of these feelings of bitterness and hate, the feeling of lost hope”.

Other Cummeragunja residents who have published their experiences of station life include Merle Jackomos and Geraldine Briggs. In her chapter in Australians 1938, Jackomos recalled the difficulties she had faced, but also the happy memories that she held in spite of this, writing that, ultimately, Cummeragunja was her home and her “roots are in that land”. Hilton Walsh is the most recent Cummeragunja community member to publish recollections of the station. His introduction to the station is memorable in its brief but cutting summation of his experiences there: “I originated from Cummeragunja, born there, lived there and schooled there, where we were half clothed, half fed and half educated”. Like others before him, Walsh’s memories of the station combined this resentment of white authorities with recognition of the enduring strength of this community.

Collections of personal narratives recalling Cummeragunja include Bain Attwood’s book, A Life Together, a Life Apart, co-authored by the adult children of a Cummeragunja school teacher also provided important material for this thesis. Bain Attwood put the book together from a series of interviews with the children of Charles Burrage: Winifred Burrage, Alan Burrage and Elsie Stokie (nee Burrage). Together the siblings recall their childhood history at Cummeragunja, and at two other NSW stations,

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97 Tucker, If Everybody Cared, p. 199.
100 Walsh, Double ID, p. 32.
Sevington and Moonah Cullah.\textsuperscript{101} Another compilation of edited oral history transcripts, *The Barmah Forest in our Blood*, has also provided valuable background.\textsuperscript{102} As the name suggests, the book is in many ways a tribute to the forest and its role in the lives of the white community who had worked and played inside it. Their memories, many of which deal with the early twentieth century, helped build a better understanding of the lives of Cummeragunja’s white neighbours and their dealings with, and attitudes towards, Aboriginal people.

Of value to the early part of this study are the yearly reports and miscellaneous documents of the missionary Daniel Matthews. These are stored in a variety of places in the Mitchell Library, including within the records of Nancy Cato who wrote *Mister Maloga*.\textsuperscript{103} The records of the Aborigines Protection Association, also stored in the Mitchell, are similarly revealing in what they say about Cummeragunja’s inception and early years.\textsuperscript{104} Matthews’s promptings encouraged the formation of this Association, which was to fund and increasingly direct, how Maloga, and then later Cummeragunja in its early years, were run.

The records of the NSW Education Department and its predecessor the Department of Public Instruction are of significant interest to my research question.\textsuperscript{105} I accessed these in the Western Sydney Records Centre, a branch of the NSW State Archives, and they form the basis of my study of the Indian school teacher Thomas James and his relationship with these white authorities in Cummeragunja’s first thirty


\textsuperscript{102} Nerelie Teese and Leigh Wright (eds), *The Barmah Forest in our Blood*, Echuca: Nerelie Teese and Leigh Wright, 2008.


\textsuperscript{105} See for instance the Department of Public Instruction, Cummeragunja (Aboriginal) School Administrative File 1889-1910, 5/15619.2, NSW School Records, Western Sydney Records Centre, NSW State Archives, Kingston (hereafter WSRC); Department of Education/Public Instruction, Cummeragunja (Aboriginal) School Administrative File, 1911-1939, Bundles A, 5/15619A, NSW School Records, WSRC; Department of Education/Public Instruction, Cummeragunja (Aboriginal) School Administrative File, 1911-1939, Bundles B, 5/15619B, NSW School Records, WSRC; Department of Education, Cummeragunja (Aboriginal) School Administrative File, 1940-1979, 14/7444, NSW School Records, WSRC.
years. I drew from them again in my study of the station in the 1940s, when the white school teacher Thomas Austin attempted to close down a nearby hotel.

Underpinning my research into Cummeragunja in the 1920s and 1930s is a close reading of the Echuca newspaper, the Riverine Herald. This paper wrote for a broad white audience, as did all newspapers at this time. The Riverine Herald’s reports often overlooked Aboriginal people, stationed as they were, for the most part, some thirty kilometres from this newspaper’s offices. But their reporting of Aboriginal issues and people bring significant insights to this thesis. I also draw from the Shepparton News, Melbourne’s Argus and the Sydney Morning Herald.

With a similar focus on the interwar period on Cummeragunja, the records and, in particular, the monthly magazines of the Aborigines Inland Mission (AIM) are crucial to this thesis. The AIM founder Retta Dixon (later Long) visited Cummeragunja in 1907; in the same year the AIM launched its magazine Our Aim, now stored in Sydney’s Mitchell Library. Our Aim provides the basis of an examination of the AIM missionaries based at Barmah from the 1920s and the complexity of their relationships with the Cummeragunja people during this time.

Records left by Norman Tindale and Joseph Birdsell, anthropologists who visited Cummeragunja in 1938, reveal much about the station at this juncture. They illustrate prevailing ideas about Aboriginal people and their prospects for assimilation just before the outbreak of World War Two and the creation of the Aborigines Welfare Board. These records include journals, photographs, data cards, family trees and children’s drawings, such as the one that opened this thesis, and are held in Adelaide’s South Australian Museum Archives.

The files of the NSW APB (later the Aborigines Welfare Board), while not always coherent as I had hoped, underpin this thesis. They are particularly valuable when considering significant times of change on the station, including the increasing controls in the early years of the twentieth century, the walk-off from Cummeragunja and the first

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107 The Argus, Melbourne, 1888-1939; and Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney, 1889-1939.
109 Most significantly Norman Barnett Tindale, Harvard and Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition, Australia. Journal and Notes by Norman B. Tindale, volume 1, 1938-1939, AA38/1/15/1, Dr Norman Barnett Tindale, South Australian Museum Archives, Adelaide, SA (hereafter SAM); and Joseph Bernard Birdsell, Australian Daily Field Journal, 1938-1939, AA689/1/1/1, Dr Joseph Bernard Birdsell, SAM.
few years of the Aborigines Welfare Board. These records include the Board’s annual reports, its regular meeting notes and its correspondence. These are stored online, in the Mitchell Library and in the Western Sydney Records Centre.\footnote{Aborigines Protection Board (later the Aborigines Welfare Board), Minute Books, 1890-1964, Reels 2788-94, Series 2, WSRC.}

An inquiry into the Board’s operations held in 1937 forms a key part of a later chapter of my thesis. This Select Committee investigation – stored in the Western Sydney Records Centre – took evidence from a number of significant figures in the station’s history, in particular two recent managers and a nurse. Their accounts covered issues of the management of Cummeragunja in the 1930s, ranging from the mundane through to the shocking. The questions in the inquiry, moreover, revealed much about ideas of white authority and Aboriginality at this critical juncture.\footnote{Select Committee on Administration of Aborigines Protection Board: Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence and Exhibits, Legislative Assembly: Sydney, 1938.}

Still in western Sydney, the Premier’s correspondence from the late 1930s through into the 1940s reflected the increasing governmental and public concern for Aboriginal issues, providing valuable information for my study of the walk-off from Cummeragunja and the station’s subsequent management.\footnote{Premier Special Bundles: Treatment of Aborigines in NSW, 1936-63, Premiers Letters Received, Reels 1862-3, WSRC.} These letters were from Aboriginal people, both on and off Cummeragunja, but also from an array of white supporters who sought redress for the Cummeragunja people’s plight.

\textbf{Structure}

The eight chapters of this thesis move from the development of an Aboriginal administrative body in NSW – the Aborigines Protection Board – and Cummeragunja’s subsequent creation, through to Cummeragunja residents’ efforts to make a life for themselves, Government attempts to close down the station and, finally, to the assertion of a level of Aboriginal control over the site in the 1960s. I begin this thesis by providing the foundations of both my methodology and of Cummeragunja. My first chapter considers one of my narrator’s calls for context in history. With this in mind, I explore further my choice of oral history, its uses within my thesis, its possibilities and its limitations. I look specifically at my transcripts and my interpretation, before introducing the people that I interviewed for this thesis.

From these methodological foundations, I turn to the foundations of Cummeragunja and the move from the Maloga Mission four miles away. I open with a
letter written by a Cummeragunja resident shortly after the station’s establishment complaining about the new station manager’s attitude to Aboriginal people and the change from a religious volunteer to a more secular employee of the state. I use this to frame my consideration of the final years of Maloga and the changing of power from the Maloga founder Daniel Matthews, to the Aborigines Protection Association and, ultimately, to the NSW Government’s newly formed APB.

From here, I move to the second broad section of this thesis: that of making a life on Cummeragunja. The next chapter, Chapter Three, takes me to the first 30 years of the Cummeragunja station, with a focus on Aboriginal education and its main proponent on the station at this time, Thomas James. This chapter opens with a particular sermon given by James, a school teacher and religious adviser of Indian descent who used his address to urge the Cummeragunja congregation not to turn to methods of rebellion or to rely on white people to redress their needs, but rather to rely on their Christian faith to get them through. Drawing from this and the subsequent controversy, I explore James’s relationship with white authorities to highlight governmental attitudes towards Aboriginal education during this time, and the boundaries to their support for this.

From education, in Chapter Four I turn to religion on Cummeragunja, with a focus on a series of visiting missionaries from the Aborigines Inland Mission (AIM), between 1907 and 1939. I use one example of an AIM missionary’s concession to Aboriginal preferences – the construction of a fake fire around which to recite scriptures – to enter my exploration of the transmission and acceptance of religion on the station and of the role of Cummeragunja people in this. I draw particularly from the AIM magazine, Our Aim and from my oral history narrators’ recollections.

I move in Chapter Five to the question of acceptance outside the boundaries of Cummeragunja, through an examination of white settler attitudes during these years. I open this chapter, the fifth of this thesis, with an incident that saw Aboriginal men enter the bedroom of Thomas James’s replacement, the white school teacher Charles Burrage, whom, alongside his son, these men had just saved from drowning. The shock that Burrage’s daughter felt when she saw the Aboriginal men in her parents’ room bookends my exploration of the complex boundaries set by white settlers in the region, no matter how sympathetic or enlightened they felt they were. To do this, I draw from my oral history interviews to highlight the personal boundaries and from the Riverine Herald to
show the corresponding public boundaries, both of which limited the acceptance of Aboriginal people whom they purported to encourage.

In the final three chapters of this thesis I turn to the new way of thinking about Aboriginal people that was gaining popularity, first signalled at a 1937 national conference of state and federal authorities that resolved to work towards assimilating the nation’s Aboriginal population of mixed descent. In considering this, I turn in Chapter Six to a formal examination of assimilation on Cummeragunja, which occurred when the Harvard Adelaide Universities expedition arrived on the station in late May 1938 for a two-week visit. During this, the Australian anthropologist, Tindale and his American counterpart, Joseph Birdsell set out to photograph, interview, test and observe the Cummeragunja community, the evidence that they collected contributing to their overarching research question, essentially whether Aboriginal people could be assimilated into white society. Here then I draw from the records left from this visit and from my Aboriginal narrators’ recollections of these men to explore both the ways white society sought to gauge assimilation, whilst impeding its progress and the responses of Aboriginal people to this.

The final two chapters of my thesis turn to Aboriginal attempts to take back control that became particularly visible after Birdsell and Tindale departed. Chapter Seven explores the developments of 1938 when a Government select committee investigated the state’s reserve and station system and of the following year when a walk-off from the station occurred. This investigation is framed by a press conference of sorts held by the Cummeragunja manager Arthur McQuiggin, after this event, that presented the many stakeholders who had an interest in the station and its residents at this time. This prompts me to investigate, through the proceedings of the select committee inquiry, the Premier’s letters, press reports and my oral history accounts, who was involved and how these developments played out.

In my final chapter, I focus on the developments of the 1940s, 1950s and into the 1960s, including the attempts to close the Barmah hotel, frequented by Aboriginal people, and the departure of the final manager. I draw on my oral history interviews to look at the ways these issues of closure and departure, in particular, can be understood. I end with a consideration of just three of the new beginnings that occurred with the end of the NSW Government’s management of the station and the start of its life as a Government reserve. Finally, I conclude this thesis with some thoughts on cultural
exchange on Cummeragunja and return to the image of the children’s drawing with which I opened my thesis to review what I have discovered.

Through this exploration, this thesis presents Cummeragunja as a complex site of exchange with a settler colonial context in south-east Australia, between 1888 and the 1960s. I trace this station’s history, from its foundation, to its residents attempts to make a life for themselves and, finally, to the changes that occurred from the 1930s as Aboriginal people began in earnest to demand a better deal for themselves. I do this by drawing from written records, including government records and correspondence as well as newspaper coverage, and through a series of oral history interviews with Cummeragunja residents and their white neighbours. By focussing on the interactions between Cummeragunja residents and the many stakeholders associated with the station during this time-the missionaries, the white neighbours, the government representatives and the managers- I explore the boundaries these stakeholders set for Cummeragunja residents and, ultimately, to build on contemporary understanding of this community’s defence of its rights.
Figure 3: Cummeragunja from a distance. (AWI.BW-N1612.10.10) Photograph courtesy of Aborigines Welfare Board collection, Audiovisual Archive, AIATSIS
CHAPTER ONE

“A REAL DINKY-DI THING”: THE CHALLENGES OF AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

When I met up with Cummeragunja descendant John Atkinson one evening in April 2008, he set down a challenge that I was to revisit many times as my thesis progressed. We had arranged to meet at the Bangerang Cultural Centre but, by the time we arrived, it was closing. During our interview that night, sitting on a park bench underneath the Centre’s verandah, John explained to me how he thought a history of Cummeragunja should be understood. He explained:

I’d like to see someone that is clever enough to put all those faces and anything else that you can think about in this, where the attitudes made a difference too … Only then does history have a real dinky-di thing … history, it can’t be written unless you put in all the contexts that go with it.¹

He told me about Iris Swan, a white woman I had interviewed that day and how she had influenced both his life and mine in some way, however small. “She [Iris] was a part of your journey and whether she likes it or not she’s been a part of my journey”. John said Iris’s brother Max had spent significant time with Aboriginal people from Cummeragunja and Barmah, and was “a beautiful man” who, like Iris, had grown up with Aboriginal people: “[s]ome of them lived along the creek near them because they were always friendly people, so Max would have played with their kids and so on”.

As I drove away later that night, I thought about John’s message for me. In some ways, it confirmed the direction I had already taken; John was showing he supported the inclusion of non-Aboriginal people. But he was setting down a difficult challenge. How should I include all those faces, all those events and all of their contexts into my thesis? The conversation, while complicating my project, at the very least highlighted one of the benefits of histories based on oral testimonies. Written records do not give us advice; they do not clarify the task ahead of us.

In this chapter, I consider my oral history methodology and provide some background of the people who agreed to be interviewed for this thesis. First, I provide a brief overview of the development of oral history. I then turn to my approach and the

¹ John Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Shepparton.
negotiation of relationships that come with an oral history project. From here, I move to the complex issue of interpretation and introduce my oral history narrators. Finally, I return to John’s plea for context.

**Methodology**

The oral histories I have included in this thesis are very different from those that emerged when Allan Nevins, a former journalist, created the first modern oral history archives in 1948 at Columbia University. To understand my use of oral history, however, I first want to look at the ways the field has evolved since that time. This mid-twentieth-century development in oral history came about because of the growth in recording technology, as historians moved from long-hand notes to document interviews, to wire recorders. As recording processes continued to become more accessible, increasing numbers of archives appeared across the United States and beyond. The initial focus of oral histories in the United States was on major figures, for the most part, white, middle- or upper-class and men. Nevins’s interviews, for instance, were conducted with “the major players in government, business and society”. In Europe, however, oral history focussed on the lives of the working class from early on. With the beginning of the US civil rights movement, American oral historians also turned to members of the lower classes to make up for the lack of formal documentation, at this time a domain of the elites. During this period, the work of Studs Terkel emerged. A radio broadcaster from Chicago, Terkel published a number of oral history interviews of “every day” Americans, from 1970 right up until his death in late 2008. His books were outside academia, but enormously popular with the public.

Methodological and theory debates around oral history emerged in the late 1960s. From the mid- to late 1970s oral historians moved from more practical, hands-on considerations to “the theory behind the interview” and an awareness that as the field

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5 Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 23.
8 Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 23.
grew, basic standards needed to be set. These debates added “depth and sophistication” to oral history, according to Donald Ritchie, emerging with discussion around the ethics and possibilities of this field. For some, these possibilities were also cause for alarm, as Paul Thompson discussed in *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Writing of the many benefits of oral history, including its ability to “change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry”, Thomson noted that this ability frightened many historians. Thomson maintained, however, that oral history could be carried out as rigorously as traditional history, and that it was not just a forum for those outside the mainstream. In fact, Thompson remarked, even by the late 1980s, “American experience shows clearly enough that the oral history method can be regularly used in a socially and politically conservative manner”.

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, oral history holds particular potential for understanding the history of Aboriginal communities, including Cummeragunja. Wayne Atkinson, who drew from around 50 oral histories to write his manuscript, “A Picture from the Other Side”, has written that oral history “is a PEOPLE’S HISTORY”. “It is the history of a people who have been able to withstand the oppressive laws, restrictions and conditions of station life and survive – still retaining their identity, pride, sense of humour and wisdom.” Even before missionaries, religious groups and governments established stations and missions, “oral tradition, was part of [Aboriginal] culture, and their history was passed on that way”. Atkinson urged researchers to speak to Aboriginal people, as it is they who: “are the sources from which Aboriginal history should be coming”. Speaking with Aboriginal people can provide answers that are not included in written documents, and, furthermore, “they enjoy it and feel good about sharing their experiences, knowledge and wisdom with those who are interested in learning”. Kate Darian-Smith, similarly, wrote of the community strength revealed in interviews with Aboriginal people – including some from Cummeragunja – about memories of play. These memories, she wrote, “not only reflect on experiences of

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13 Wayne Atkinson, “A Picture from the Other Side: Cummeragunja and Its Historical connections with Coranderrk from written and oral sources”, Melbourne, February 1981, MS 1598, AIATSIS Library, Canberra, p. v.
14 Atkinson, “A Picture from the Other Side”, p. vi.
15 Atkinson, “A Picture from the Other Side”, p. vi.
16 Atkinson, “A Picture from the Other Side”, p. iv.
hardship and racism, but also attest to the strength of community bonds, the ties with culture and the centrality of family life”.

While some historians may consider oral history a less reliable source than written documentation, I argue that it has a value of its own. As Alessandro Portelli so rightly pointed out: “[o]ral sources are credible but with a different credibility”, its significance lying “not in its adherence to fact but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism and desire emerge”. He argued that oral sources could never be “false”, and that once facts are verified, “wrong” statements are still psychologically ‘true’ and that this truth may be equally as important to factually reliable accounts. His suggestions proved helpful when I considered my own interviews, particularly in regards to the 1939 walk-off, which the people I interviewed remembered for what it meant and not necessarily exactly as it happened, as I discuss in Chapter Seven. In considering the walk-off, I turned to the work of Minoru Hokari and Deborah Bird Rose, who have both used oral histories to look at the Wave Hill walk-off, almost thirty years later. Both Hokari and Rose found that Gurindji people used terms that would garner them support from white unionists, when, in actual fact, their own reasons for the walk-off were somewhat different. Their real motivations, however, would not emerge until many years after the event.

There is, of course, a danger in over stressing the value of “errors” in oral histories. This became particularly apparent with the growth in Aboriginal accounts of being part of the stolen generation that came with the publication of the Bringing Them Home report (Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families). Reactions to these accounts have, at times, been damaging, as Heather Goodall has observed, with some conservative politicians regarding these testimonies as “trumped up exaggeration”. Similarly, in the Yorta Yorta Native Title cases, judges dismissed oral histories in favour of white records, which they

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privileged in spite of their flaws.\textsuperscript{23} Inconsistencies with the dominant historical narrative, therefore, should not necessarily be seen as true only for the narrator: such an assumption can not only be hurtful, but can also lead the historian to overlook the hidden truths that oral history can uncover.

Part of the attraction of oral histories, moreover, is the fact they are always changing, always contingent on the time and place in which a narrator tells them. The oral histories that I collected are different from those recorded by Wayne Atkinson in the late 1970s and early 1980s, not only because thirty years had passed in the meantime, but also because Atkinson was interviewing his subjects as a member of their community. Heather Goodall celebrated this transient nature of oral histories in an article about reconciliation.\textsuperscript{24} Calling for “recognition that histories are not sets of empirically testable facts”, Goodall wrote that they are instead “always unfinished and always contingent on the teller, their purpose, the context and the audience to whom they speak”.\textsuperscript{25} Paula Hamilton, likewise, wrote about the implications of the present time to the telling of an oral history. “To struggle with the past is”, she remarked, “also to pose questions of the present – what the past means in the present”.\textsuperscript{26} She highlighted the changes that occur between the time an event and when a narrator retells it. A memory, she wrote, “includes experiences of both history and memory: the way memory has already become part of personal history, the ways misunderstandings, rumours, and silence were part of what happened then and part of the memory as it is told now”.

\textbf{Approach}

My study is not exhaustive. Even if I wanted to, I could not include every voice and factor that affected Cummeragunja in the first 50 years of the twentieth century. Instead, my thesis is really a tour, if you like, of the station, taken from particular angles at particular times, each of which highlights a particular set of relationships and themes, and each of these is remembered and considered at a particular point in time. I am aware of the potential criticisms of this approach. Some people may argue that in a thesis of close to 100,000 words, I should have taken a quantitative approach and surveyed a wider

\textsuperscript{23} Wayne Atkinson, “Not One Iota: the Yorta Yorta Struggle for Land Justice”, PhD Thesis, School of Law and Legal Studies, La Trobe University, Bundoora, 2000, p. 218.


\textsuperscript{27} Hamilton, “The Oral Historian as Memorist”, p. 1.
group of narrators. Then, for instance, I may have been able to say categorically that 92.5 per cent of respondents thought the walk-off occurred as a direct result of the manager’s bullying. But then comes the issue of whether certain voices would, or should, be privileged. Should those who lived on Cummeragunja the longest have the most say? What about the descendants who were born and lived far away but were told significant stories by their parents and grandparents? In an article published in 1998, Alistair Thomson reviewed the development of oral history in academia and noted that the more scientific and structured approach to oral history was recommended in the early days in an attempt “to legitimise oral history”.28 “In practice”, wrote Thomson, “oral historians usually found it impossible to follow a single set of techniques or rules for interviewing”.29

Apart from the obvious logistical nightmare of such a task, the ultimate obstacle for me is that quantity would come at the expense of individual voices and personalities. Only by looking at individuals carefully, by taking into account their own very particular experiences, can we really begin to understand the implications of their opinions, the subtleties that shaped their relationships and, ultimately, the power structures that underwrote these years. Through its ability to provide a voice to people from all different backgrounds, oral history holds many possibilities for social history, as Alistair Thomson has written.30 But it is only through an in-depth interview that the historian can, in the words of Valerie Yow, find out “how the subject sees and interprets her experience”.31 Interpreting and drawing on in-depth interviews take space: a significantly larger number of narrators would have required significantly more words than I was permitted.

As I explained in my introduction to this thesis, my initial entry to the Cummeragunja community came when I was working at the Shepparton News. Through these contacts, I was able to find Aboriginal people of appropriate ages to interview. Gradually, I built up a small network of people whom I could call upon for advice. I found Aboriginal people to interview largely through recommendations from these community members and, for the most part, people were happy to be involved. Certainly, there was a level of initial wariness, understandably given the history of research and Aboriginal people. This largely dissipated as my project progressed.

29 Thomson, “Fifty Years On”, p. 582.
30 Thompson, The Voice of the Past, p. 21
From the beginning, I also wanted to interview white people who lived near Cummeragunja during the first half the twentieth century. I drew support in this decision from Linda Shopes and her work on oral history projects and communities. “We tend to interview insiders and people with a long-term relationship with a community”, Shopes has observed. “But what about outsiders and newcomers? What about people external to the community whose actions impinge on it?”“Including a range of narrators”, wrote Shopes, “simultaneously deepens the inquiry and extends it outward, helping us understand both the internal complexity of the community under study and its relationship to a broader historical process”.

While at the newspaper in Shepparton, I had written a number of stories on the Barmah Forest, about such issues as cattle grazing and river degradation, and had encountered a group of white farmers called the Barmah Forest Cattleman’s Association. Typically these farmers had lived in the region all of their lives and thus many were of the right age to remember Cummeragunja. I found the white people I interviewed through this association.

I want to note here my gratitude to my white narrators for their willingness to share with me, in good faith, their recollections. It is not at all my intention to respond to their generosity with a subsequent analysis that denigrates them for their views on race. At the same time, my analysis, by its very nature, will undermine, to some extent, their testimony, leading me at times to draw conclusions with which they might not agree. My research, after all, is hardly rigorous if it merely provides a mouthpiece for the people I interview. It is also important to recognise that the nature of this exercise is made all the more sensitive by the relationships I have formed with my narrators and by the fact they are living and breathing entities, not simply texts to be underlined and annotated.

I embarked on my analysis as sensitively as possible, with an underlying understanding that, as well as my search for answers, I needed to balance the concerns of these narrators with those of the Aboriginal people of whom they speak.

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34 I use the term “my narrators” a number of times during the thesis. This is not to imply a level of control over, or ownership of, the people that I interviewed, but rather to identify them as people that I have interviewed in a less convoluted manner.

Relationships and negotiating authority

All of the research I have conducted for this thesis has been interactive. While the content of the documents, whether they are governmental records or newspaper articles, may seem static, in fact, any understanding of them is fluid, shaped by the political climate in which they are read and the biases of the person who is reading them. For instance, my own education and experiences have influenced what I have learned but, at the same time, what I have learned has clearly helped to shape my knowledge and my evaluation of issues as my research has progressed. When it comes to my oral histories, this is naturally even more pronounced. Embarking on a project that incorporates oral history necessarily means forming a relationship with one’s narrators. “We are dealing, in short, with living sources”, observed Paul Thompson, “who, just because they are alive have, unlike inscribed stones or sheaves of paper, the ability to work with us in a two-way process”.

The role of relationships within oral history was a focus for Michael Frisch in *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. “What has interested me from the start”, wrote Frisch, “is the way these approaches raise important issues of culture, communication and politics”. This extended to “the very processes of engagement”, because of the changed relationships “between historian and ‘source’, between scholarship and public discourse, and between dominant cultural forms, assumptions, and institutions”. Frisch called for more nuanced understandings of oral history narratives, writing that this was “not so much because they require concreteness as such as because they require precise location in cultural space and historical time”.

Portelli takes this further, characterising the entire oral history endeavour as a series of social and historical relationships. “The historian must work on both the factual and the narrative planes, the referent and the signifier, the past and the present, and, most of all, on the space between all of them.” He also highlighted the need to follow up after the interviews, writing that: “the important thing about the dialogic nature of oral history work is that it does not end with the interview, or even with the publication”.

36 Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 149.
38 Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, p. xvi.
The permeability of oral history was important to Peter Read, when he compiled an oral history with Erambie Aboriginal reserve residents, *Down There with Me at the Cowra Mission*. He wrote that while some people have likened the collection of oral histories to “finding a box of old diaries in the ground”, the process was actually far more complex, as the interviewer also influences that box’s contents. Rather, the historian must find ways of being useful to the individuals and the communities involved. As Portelli has highlighted, my relationships with my narrators came with particular responsibilities. Furthermore, while I recognised the production of oral history was a shared process with shared authority, I also realised that the final authority was in my hands. I have not taken this responsibility lightly.

Before I began my interviews, I applied for, and received, approval from the University of Melbourne ethics committee. This meant having a clear idea of what I was looking for from my interviews and deciding on the most sensible way of approaching these interviews without causing unnecessary discomfort. My narrators were each supplied with a statement of my research and each signed an agreement allowing me to use their interviews for my academic work. However, I did not feel that simply satisfying the University’s ethical guidelines went even close to ensuring that our relationship really was as ethical as possible. From the beginning, I was convinced that my relationship with my narrators or with the community, generally, had to be more than just travelling from Melbourne every now and again to capture an interview before retreating, with no further follow up. As I outlined earlier, at the outset I established a number of informal contacts across the community whom I could call on for advice throughout my project. Through this and through a series of newsletters, I hoped I could ensure that a broad spectrum of people not only knew that my research existed, but also its direction. For the most part, I found this a useful, if at times challenging, initiative. I also tried to visit the reserve as often as possible and through this managed to consolidate links with a number of people within the community and to build trust in me as a researcher. As Frisch has questioned: “Who, really, is the author of an oral history, whether this be a single interview or an edited book-length narrative?”

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editing the results”, he continued, “or the ‘subject’, whose words are the heart of the consequent texts?”

“Editing oral history”, as Rebecca Jones in her article “Blended Voices” has so rightly observed, “is also about the production of meaning and about the responsibilities and social relationships inherent to qualitative research”.

Although I have tried to give my narrators as much agency as possible, ultimately I am the author of this thesis. I analysed and interpreted the interviews in order to flesh out particular issues and questions. It was an approach also taken by Diane Bell in her work with the Ngarrindjeri people that resulted in Ngarrindjeri Wurrwarrin: A World that Is, Was, and Will Be. She wrote that despite her efforts to include Aboriginal input – including comments on the final manuscript – she had the final say. Moreover, while my thesis involved oral histories, I also drew heavily from other sources. I have made full use of the more traditional archival materials, governmental and scientific records, newspapers and magazines, and have used these to inform my analysis of the oral history accounts that I have collected and vice versa.

A key part of my responsibility to my narrators was a faithful transcription of their interview. Much debate exists over how best to transcribe oral history interviews: how to perfectly capture a narrator’s voice and whether to remain faithful to their exact words. Portelli has dismissed these attempts, writing, “[t]he most literal translation is hardly ever the best, and a truly faithful translation always implies a certain amount of invention”. Read had also discussed the difficulties involved in transcription. He pointed out that oral language was different from written language and noted that interjections, such as discussions of cups of tea, had to be removed. In his project, furthermore, he had to sectionalise the information to give the book a structure. Given the number of topics that could arise in just a one-hour interview, this was no easy task. Read highlighted the shortcomings of the transcript in conveying the emotions and

43 Frisch, A Shared Authority, p. xx.
messages that his narrators shared, through “the tone of their voice, its volume and speed, their gestures and facial expressions”. 47

With this in mind, I have aimed to be faithful in my transcripts to what my narrators said, but at times made small adjustments to better reflect their true meaning. I attempted to capture the interviews accurately by inserting observations such as “laughs” in square brackets. After many, many hours spent agonising over these decisions, I sent each of my narrators a copy of their interview transcripts, inviting them to return the copies with corrections, deletions or additions. Only one took me up on this offer. Correcting the copy of this draft, I was disappointed to find that some of the changes formalised the language of my narrator and removed some of the small offhand remarks within the transcript that I had found revealing. During the process of reformatting the transcript to suit my narrators, I was reminded of Bain Attwood’s work with the Burrage siblings, recalled in A Life Together, A Life Apart: A History of Relations Between Europeans and Aborigines. This is based on the siblings’ memories of living on Aboriginal reserves and stations in NSW with their mother and their father, the school teacher Charles Burrage. Disappointed by their decision to exclude certain personal material from the book, Attwood recognised that he “had no choice other than to accede to this matter”. 48 “The historian does have a moral responsibility to his or her informants”, wrote Attwood, “and it is dependent through the process of research”. 49 The Burrages invited Attwood into their homes, gave him tea and cake, lunch and even dinner and entrusted him with their stories. “In short, like other oral historians, I believed I was given a gift and felt this should be reciprocated”, Attwood observed. 50 Like Attwood, I recognised the gift my narrators gave me with their narratives and respected their wishes when it came to their transcripts.

**Interpretation**

Interpretation is what makes oral history “History”: without interpretation, oral accounts remain just that. Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan in the Oral History Manual, for instance, asserted that oral history is sometimes confused with “asking Grandma to talk about the olden days” and popping on a recording device. 51 This, they reminded us is

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47 Read, “Preface”, p. xvi.
50 Attwood et al, A Life Together, p. 200.
not oral history. Oral history accounts need to be probed more deeply for what they do not say as much as what they do; for what they really mean which is not usually straightforwardly apparent. It is in this area – interpretation – that the historian wields her authority and must do so with sensitivity.\textsuperscript{52} In actual fact, the historian begins her interpretation at the very beginning of the project, as Alessandro Portelli has so rightly observed; “The interpretation begins with the selection of sources”, he wrote, “continues in the researcher’s active role in the interviews and culminates in the open comments of the authorial voice and the meanings implicit in editing and montage”.\textsuperscript{53} It is this interpretation that led Portelli to explain that while he had embarked on a process of sharing authority, he was the one ultimately responsible for his research – in this case a study of a Nazi massacre in Rome. “The explicit and implicit interpretative dimension of this book is, of course, my responsibility, which is why it appears under my name”, he wrote.\textsuperscript{54}

When considering my oral history interviews with Aboriginal people, I have drawn from the work of other historians who have written on the importance of family within Indigenous life narratives. Maria Nugent wrote of the way that Aboriginal narrators often link individual experiences to local or national events. “These texts, producing flashes of recognition in their Aboriginal audience, contributed in turn to a growing sense of Aboriginal collective identity based on shared experiences”.\textsuperscript{55} Bain Attwood, meanwhile, has observed the trend within Aboriginal accounts of talking about stolen generation narratives, driven by a number of factors, including the \textit{Bringing Them Home} report. With such a focus on these sorts of stories, they have formed a “narrative accrual”, Attwood wrote, and “the narrative has lost sight of the myriad ways in which Aboriginal communities have been undermined by ongoing dispossession and destruction”.\textsuperscript{56} Nugent has suggested that while Attwood’s theory of “narrative accrual” may be too schematic, it is useful to keep in mind. “Attwood … clearly reminds us”,

\textsuperscript{53} Portelli, \textit{The Order has been Carried Out}, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{54} Portelli, \textit{The Order has been Carried Out}, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{55} Maria Nugent, “Aboriginal Family History: Some Reflections”, \textit{Australian Cultural History}, no. 23, 2003, p. 144.
wrote Nugent, “that the tenacity with which Aboriginal people have remembered their pasts in familial ways has been an essential resource for exposing the structures of forgetting upon which all national, and indeed local, history is based”. 57

A number of historians have commented on this Aboriginal focus on families, communities and landscape, rather than individuals and dates. Discussing the issues encountered when conducting oral history interviews with the Rembarrnga community, Gillian Cowlishaw observed: “Black voices challenge the technical, moral and epistemological foundations on which conventional histories are based”. “The techniques of documenting, dating and naming individual actors as the first step in any narrative of the past”, she wrote, “are absent from Rembarrnga accounts”. Cowlishaw claimed that the narratives were more about “placing people in their social and geographical landscape.” 58 The Rembarrnga people also had a different approach to story telling when compared to the West. “They are tolerant of multiple stories concerning experience”, she wrote, “and do not necessarily seek the definitive, authoritative account of events such as those contained in written records which are the official memories of English-speaking Australia”. 59

Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan also suggest in their introduction to the edited collection Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand that Aboriginal people often talk of their history in a non-Western manner. “The notion of a singular, bounded individual”, they wrote, “has rarely squared with Aboriginal conceptions of self”. 60 Attwood and Magowan noted that Aboriginal narrators tended to use the term “we” rather than “I” when sharing their life stories, and emphasised personal relationships. 61 Often, Indigenous accounts sequenced events in unusual ways, they said, “while chronologies are either absent or follow a different logic”. 62 Stephen Muecke, likewise, points to the fact that apparent “contradictions” in Aboriginal narratives, are not always as they appear, urging an “openness to different kinds of ‘logic’”. 63 I take this advice into account in my work, but am also aware that the

57 Nugent, “Aboriginal Family History”, p. 149.
58 Cowlishaw, Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas, p. 9.
59 Cowlishaw, Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas, p. 10.
60 Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan, “Introduction”, in Attwood and Magowan (eds), Telling Stories, p. xiv.
61 Attwood and Magowan, “Introduction”, p. xiv. For more on this idea of Aboriginal narratives using “we” rather than “I” see another chapter in this volume, Basil Sansom, “In the Absence of Vita as Genre: The Making of the Roy Kelly Story”, in Attwood and Magowan (eds), Telling Stories, pp. 80-98.
community I am studying, whilst it does have a different culture, has lived alongside white communities for many years now and that English is the first language of all of my narrators.

While aware of the sensitivities involved in interpreting Aboriginal testimonies as a white, middle-class woman, I have been encouraged by Jeremy Beckett’s warning against exaggerating the issues that this involves. “Some of this anxiety”, according to Beckett, “stems from a preoccupation with the difference between indigenous and non-indigenous to the point of disregarding the common ground that makes communication possible”.64 Beckett admitted that in his oral history of Myles Lalor, many of Lalor’s experiences were foreign to him and that this division was implied rather than stated. He observed that race and class in Lalor’s stories were “implied in the stories he tells of a life as an Aboriginal man who has been a stockman and truck driver and much beside”. Beckett was well aware that: “[a]s a middle-class white academic I have never experienced such things”.65 Ultimately, however, Beckett found that they had a bond in mutual relationships: “the conjunction between us resides finally in the fact that I have known some of the people he is talking about”.66 He also cautioned against underestimating the agency of the Aboriginal people involved. Beckett discussed the issue of mediating Aboriginal life stories, and described some criticisms as overly harsh. He wrote that when Lalor did not want to answer a question, he was not shy in refusing. Similarly, when Beckett asked questions that sent Lalor off on a tangent, Lalor would stop himself and return to what he was originally intending to say.67

Historian Heather Goodall has also discussed the issue of non-Indigenous people conducting interviews with Indigenous people, particularly in regards to analysis. In an chapter entitled, “Aboriginal History and the Politics of Information Control”, Goodall discussed those who felt that non-Aboriginal people “analysing or asking any questions at all of what Aboriginal people are saying [was] somehow anti-Aboriginal and an attack on Aboriginal credibility”.68 Goodall disagreed, observing: “[t]his view assumes that Aboriginal people always speak in literal, superficial and empirically-verifiable fact”.69 She

69 Goodall, “Aboriginal History and the Politics of Information Control”, p. 80.
described this as “patronising”, depicting Aboriginal people “as simple or childlike and

den[y]ing] them recognition as adults, living complex lives in the middle of extensive

social networks and political alliances”. Goodall went on to argue that analysis was in
fact the very thing that Aboriginal oral history needed. “Rather than shattering, because
they are too fragile to withstand a closer look”, she wrote, Aboriginal accounts are
actually “sustained by detailed analysis”. “Aboriginal oral history emerges strengthened
by allowing more subtle insights into a rich, complex history of Aboriginal experience.”

Portelli, meanwhile, has written that a certain level of difference between interviewer and
narrator is important. “It would be a mistake”, he wrote, “to assume that only similarity
allows narrators to express themselves, that only similarity establishes the ‘trust’ on which
dialogue is founded”. According to Portelli, “[c]ommon ground makes communication
possible, but difference makes it meaningful”. And common ground, he argued, is not
necessarily “a shared identity but must rather depend on a shared will to listen to and
accept each other critically.” Portelli went on to say that, actually: “an exchange of
knowledge has a meaning only if this knowledge is not previously shared”.

Drawing from Portelli, I would say my narrators and I had at least a degree of
common ground, and also that I was a willing audience. This was another point John
Atkinson made in our interview outside the Bangerang Cultural Centre, when he was
ruminating on the implications of wealth. Addressing me directly, he remarked:

You know, if you were very wealthy … you probably wouldn’t
be writing about our normal people would you? And I mightn’t
even think … I’d be “oh I don’t want to talk about that”, you
know. The fact that my family had visited the Barmah forest for picnics during my childhood
represented a vital shared link, or shared appreciation, if you like, of the unique
environment found in the area. However, the fact that I grew up about 45 kilometres
away in the town of Rochester and worked for a year about 50 kilometres away at the
Shepparton News went against me: both the paper and the town are unpopular with a
number of Aboriginal people from Cummeragunja. In spite of this, my knowledge of the
area and my country background ultimately helped to build trust within the community
through shared knowledge of not just places but also ways of communicating and

70 Goodall, “Aboriginal History and the Politics of Information Control”, p. 80.
71 Goodall, “Aboriginal History and the Politics of Information Control”, p. 81.
72 Portelli, “A Dialogical Relationship”.
73 Portelli, “A Dialogical Relationship”.
74 John Atkinson interview.
understanding issues, which would otherwise have been difficult, if not impossible.

**Narrators**

In the section that follows I introduce my narrators, and provide some context for understanding the accounts that appear throughout this thesis. In doing this, I am influenced by Jeremy Beckett, who, when considering the criticisms and difficulties associated with his interviews with Myles Lalor, observed that: “either way, an awareness of the conditions under which an utterance … is produced is essential to an understanding of what is being said”.75 Here then are the conditions of my interviews.

Kevin Atkinson was my first narrator, and the narrator with whom I had the most contact.76 Kevin was in his seventies, and a director of the Cummeragunja Local Aboriginal Land Council, living and working on the reserve that he had grown up on, alongside his 10 brothers and sisters. Each of our conversations and interviews had a similar structure. Before we could discuss anything historical, Kevin would typically ask me a series of questions: where I had been since we last spoke and what I had been doing; where I was staying; and what I was planning to do. And, always, with whom I had been speaking. This was not an interrogation, as it may seem here, but rather the openings of a dialogue. For Kevin to share with me his memories and his history he needed to build a level of trust in me, and this meant knowing some of my history. Most of my dialogue with Kevin took place in the Land Council office, which, while it may not have provided an uninterrupted recording space, had its benefits. It seemed to me a relatively conciliatory space, where Kevin had spent most of his time for a good many years and in which conversation seemed to flow.

When I first interviewed Kevin’s brother John Atkinson, who had also grown up on Cummeragunja but who now lived at Tatura, I knew from an earlier conversation that he would have much to say about Cummeragunja and about Aboriginal history generally. I was not wrong. Reviewing the transcripts of our 90-minute interview, I realised I had spoken no more than twenty times during that interview, many of these occurring in response to John. Once was when I thanked him for his time at the very end. In fact, so

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76 Kevin Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 15 February 2008, Cummeragunja; Kevin Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 10 April 2008, Cummeragunja; and Kevin and John Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 10 October 2008, Cummeragunja.
in control of the interview was John that he even concluded it, with a summing up of his life and the words: “it’s good to talk to you today, and good luck”. 77

When later I read Alessandro Portelli’s account of an interview he had conducted with an organiser in the civil rights movement, the Reverend Hugh Cowans of Kentucky, I immediately thought of John Atkinson. Cowans had asked Portelli if he was in the United Mine Workers and then talked for 45 minutes without pausing. 78 Portelli reflected that this monologue occurred for a number of reasons, including Cowans’s blindness, a lack of interrupting questions, and his “experience speaking as a preacher and organizer”. 79 John was not blind, but he was an experienced and popular speaker, and often made explicit links to stories he had told other people, such as school groups. It is important to remember that oral histories are by their very nature performative and, as Portelli reminded us, should “not to be thought of in terms of nouns and objects but in terms of verb and processes; not the memory and tale but the remembering and the retelling”. 80 This performance depends on the audience and the time at which it takes place, “[i]ts meanings”, as Samuel Schrager has remarked, “never … settled”. 81

I first met Colin Walker when I joined Wayne Atkinson and a group of University of Melbourne students at the Yembena Training Centre in Barmah for the Federal Government’s apology to the stolen generations. It had been clear from Colin’s address on that day that he was an influential and well-respected elder in the community, serving as a judge on Shepparton’s Koori court and playing a major role in the return of Aboriginal remains from collections, both in Australia and overseas, to the region. When I arrived the next day to interview him at his home near Cummeragunja, his wife was just heading out for the evening. I was welcomed inside and, over a cup of tea, we began our conversation. 82

What I remember from that interview is less about the content, although that was certainly valuable, and more about Colin himself. I recall clearly, for example, the twinkle in his eye when he told me about being “smoked” as a punishment by his grandfather because he was always getting into mischief. Perhaps this understanding of childhood

77 John Atkinson interview.
79 Portelli, “History-Telling and Time”, p. 53
80 Portelli, The Order has been Carried Out, p. 14.
82 Colin Walker interview with Fiona Davis, 14 February 2008, Barmah.
delinquency had informed his success as an elder on the Koori Court, I later surmised. Afterwards with the tape off, Colin showed me around the photos that blanketed the walls of his open plan kitchen, dining and lounge area. The photos came from a long stretch of time – the most recent and perhaps the most precious were of Colin’s great grandchildren, twins, born prematurely, who had won a fight to stay alive. Colin was also able to show me a picture of his late brother, the famed boxer, Barney Walker, and one of his trophies.  

It was impossible to leave that night without an impression of the importance and resilience of family but also, the pain of the past.

Unlike my other Aboriginal narrators, Alf Turner had never lived on Cummeragunja. Rather, this grandson of the famous activist, William Cooper, had spent many years at Barmah, as well as other stints at Footscray living with Cooper. He later moved to Mooroopna, where he lives now and where we conducted our interview in April 2008. His perspective, on the reserve and on life in the first half of the twentieth century was quite different from that of my other narrators. Alf’s story is one of movement. Born in North Melbourne, he and his mother had returned, following his parents’ separation, to Alf’s grandparents at Barmah before he was twelve months old. His parents placed his two sisters in a convent, due to financial strain. Later Alf’s mother remarried and her new husband, a fisherman, took the family with him to fish frequently. It is a time Alf remembers with fondness. “I spent most of my boyhood days on the river – up and down the river – you know”, recalled Alf:

there was only me and mum and my stepfather and they had a little girl. So there were only four of us. And if the fish didn’t bite in one spot, you’d take the tent down and go to another spot. That’s all you did year in, year out.

For Cummeragunja resident, Lorna Walker, her family and duties to them were central. Between nursing a sick son in Melbourne and caring for her disabled adult granddaughter, she appeared to be one of the busiest 80-year-olds I had met. It saddened Lorna that so many of her younger relatives chose to live away from Cummeragunja, the place that had been her childhood home and which she had returned to some years


84 Alf Turner interview.

85 Alf Turner interview.

86 Not a close relative of Colin.
earlier. She told me that this was not a new phenomenon, but one that she had seen played out years earlier when Pastor Doug Nicholls had left the station. “When he left all the elders passed away and it was just the young ones”, she explained, going on to make an analogy between the struggle to keep the reserve going and the struggle to keep her garden alive:

It’s still the same. But when Mum and my grandmother and that, and grandparents was here, they had beautiful gardens, they took interest. That was what I thought I would have – a lovely garden – but there’s no water here. I’m trying to grow a few trees there. I’ve got a lemon tree and an apricot tree and a grape vine, but I’m strugglin’ to keep it alive – no rain and no water.  

She took comfort from the fact the older people who had died were not far from her, buried in the cemetery on the reserve. She told me that she, too, will join them some day. “And that’s what I say to myself, I’ll never leave, because I’ve got them all up there, holdin’ me here”, she observed, laughing. “I say to my sister and my grandchildren over there, and my daughter … I say I’ll never leave."

The theme of community is also strong throughout the testimony of the Cummeragunja descendant, Melva Johnson. When I asked her what she remembers about Cummeragunja, she responded: “I just say it was a sense of belonging, of belonging to a mob of people”. Melva, who now lives in Moama, spent much of her childhood with her mother’s parents and modelled herself on her maternal grandmother, Nanny. Growing up with her Nanny and her grandfather, Melva remembered moving around frequently. At the time she did not know why, but in the years since she had become sure she now knew the answer: “it was to keep us from being taken”. Melva’s real disillusionment with the station system came after she returned to work for the manager following the death of her grandmother. “You started thinking things then and realising and getting a few rations and things like that … no one ever told me about it – I just learnt it through life”.

I interviewed Iris Swan along with her husband Jack in their Picola home. This joint interview went against some oral history guidelines. For instance, Sommer and Quinlan, in their *Oral History Manual*, used this as an example of exactly what an oral

87 Lorna Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 23 March 2009, Cummeragunja.  
88 Lorna Walker interview.  
89 Melva Johnson, interview with Fiona Davis, Moama, 21 September 2009.  
90 Melva Johnson interview.  
91 Melva Johnson interview.  
92 Iris and Jack Swan, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Picola.
historian would not do. They observed that, for oral history purposes, a husband and wife were best interviewed separately, as the researcher would be “seeking to identify the unique perspective of each spouse”.93 However, I was prepared, where appropriate, to disregard certain advice given by oral history books. In the words of Donald A. Ritchie, “there is no uniform way of doing oral history”.94 Ultimately, the decision to interview the two together was not even mine; while I arranged to interview Iris, Jack sat alongside encouraging his wife and eventually taking on a formal role in the interview. A descendant of Joseph Rice, Murray River Fishing Company founder and a major employer of Aboriginal people, Iris had a strong bond to the area. She came from a family of timber cutters, an industry her son was still involved in at a time when authorities were turning the Barmah Forest into a National Park.95 Jack was also closely tied to the forest and timber cutting, recalling that when he had cancer in the 1980s, he asked his oldest son to take a photo of his father’s work ring barking trees. They are still evident today, reflecting his skill as an axeman.96

Another white woman from the area, Marjory Pearce, was in her nineties, living in a home for the aged in Nathalia when I spoke to her, and she welcomed the chance to talk about her memories of Aboriginal people in the area. I first met her in February 2008 and followed this up with our interview two months later. Like Iris, Marjory’s father employed Aboriginal people, particularly as shearsers. “They used to be around the different sheds”, she explained. “There’d be a group of them”.97 After her marriage, Marjory and her husband also employed Aboriginal people.

Marjory’s narrative is similar to Iris’s, although she appears to have less invested in her own personal history. She had not followed the Yorta Yorta Native Title Cases, but is aware of the sensitive nature of her family’s employment of Aboriginal labour, and, as Iris had been, keen to point out that – for the most part – Aboriginal people and white people were just the same. Her narrative, however, belied this at particular points, such as when she noted that an Aboriginal woman helping her out with her baby was too shy to hold it in public, for fear of the gossip.

Joyce McKenzie lived alongside Marjory in the Nathalia home for the aged and

93 Sommer and Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual*, p. 3.
94 Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 16
96 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
97 Marjory Pearce, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Nathalia.
was also in her nineties when I spoke to her. Her willingness to share her stories of Aboriginal people came in part, I suspected, from a desire to have visitors. Joyce was clearly aware of the stories regarding the injustices experienced by Aboriginal people and these informed her narrative. “They were a very neglected race”, she explained to me. “They were very ill treated by the whites. I can remember my mother saying that”.”

Unlike Marjory, who spoke in terms of particulars, Joyce’s stories were less specific and tended towards generalisations. Her comments are still valuable as they tell us much about how the collective memory can influence individual narratives.

**Conclusion**
Each of my oral history narrators shed new light on my research questions, bringing their own perspective, shaped by their own experiences. While I approached each person with similar questions, my narrators all led me in quite different directions. In the same way that my questions and research direction developed, so too has my understanding of the importance of oral history. Their contributions to my thesis have been invaluable.

What have I come to make of John Atkinson’s plea for context? At the time, my thoughts went immediately to a political context and what was happening, more broadly, in regards to race. However, my exploration into both the field of oral history and my own oral history interviews revealed a need for a context of a more particular kind. From listening to talking, from transcribing to interpreting and, finally, to writing, the construction of an oral history is a multi layered activity, each layer bring with it its own set of contexts. Accordingly, instead of picking over oral history narratives for good quotes or clever conclusions, we should try to reconcile each of these with the multiple contexts that they encompass, in an overall pursuit of John Atkinson’s “dinky-di thing”.

With these considerations in mind, I now turn from these oral history foundations to the foundations of the Cummeragunja station. Placing this station’s creation in its context, I explore the development that saw residents of the Maloga mission move to Cummeragunja, and oversight over this community shift from the missionary Daniel Matthews to the Aborigines Protection Association and finally to the NSW Aborigines Protection Board.

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98 Margaret “Joyce” McKenzie, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Nathalia.
Figure 4: A home on Cummeragunja (AWB.1.BW-N1619.09). Photograph courtesy of Aborigines Welfare Board collection, Audiovisual Archive, AIATSIS
In February 1889, Daniel Matthews added a clipping of a letter to the editor in the Riverine Herald to his newspaper file dealing with Aboriginal issues. It would not be surprising if Matthews felt some satisfaction as he did so, as the letter supported the approach he had taken on his mission, Maloga, before the community shifted to the Government station, Cummeragunja. The letter’s author, station resident Hugh Anderson, was highly critical of the new station manager, George Bellenger, and his attitude towards Aboriginal people. Bellenger had called the Cummeragunja people “ungrateful” for what the Government was doing for them. “I say that the blacks are a very thankful lot of people”, argued Anderson, “but let that be as it is we have nothing to be thankful for at present”. What seemed to bother Anderson most was the changeover from a religious overseer to a Government-employed one. “[A]nything that he does on the station he gets paid for”, wrote Anderson: “If he did not receive a salary he would not stop with the blacks long”.1 Bellenger’s so-called “love for the blacks” was a misnomer, he observed, before drawing from the Bible to highlight the difficulty of the situation facing Aboriginal people.2 “We are told in the scriptures to bear one another’s burdens, and so to fulfil the law of Christ; we have to bear our own burdens”.3

This letter from Anderson, now amongst Matthews’s papers in Sydney’s Mitchell Library, leads me to the focus of this chapter, that of exploring the interactions that marked the change from a missionary-run enterprise to a Government-run station. Drawing also on the records of the Aborigines Protection Association and the NSW Aborigines Protection Board (APB), in this chapter I tease out the tensions between the various factions that sought to influence governance of Maloga and later Cummeragunja and the community’s own involvement in this.

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2 Anderson, letter to the editor, 13 February 1889.
3 Anderson, letter to the editor, 13 February 1889.
First, I look briefly at what the Australian colonial governments had done for Aboriginal people before the 1880s. From here, I examine the growing administrative concern over Aboriginal issues and the tensions that underwrote white understandings of how they should “manage” Aboriginal people. I chart the changing control from Matthews to the Association, and finally, the NSW Aborigines Protection Board. I then draw from my own oral history interviews to explore the importance of faith and authority in recent recollections of Cummeragunja’s founding.

**Colonial New South Wales before 1888**

Colonial governments in New South Wales and its Port Philip Protectorate sought to wield bureaucratic control over Aboriginal people from the early days of British colonisation in the 1830s. However, in terms of making real improvements in the lives of Aboriginal people, their attempts, and those of the missionaries who arrived to assist them, were largely unsuccessful, perhaps due to the inherently violent nature of the settler colonial project, as Tracey Banivanua Mar has argued. Early in the colony’s history, Governor Lachlan Macquarie granted land to Aboriginal people at George’s Head, Port Jackson and established a “native institution” at Parramatta to Christianise and educate Aboriginal children, but this closed by 1823. Two years earlier, the first missionary to Australia’s Aboriginal people arrived, sent by the Wesleyan Missionary Society, which, together with the Church Missionary Society, had begun to send missionaries throughout the Empire during these years. These efforts were brief: attracted to the large populations of Asia, Africa and the Middle East, missionaries felt that Australia with its comparatively small indigenous population could be taken care of by the growing settler congregations. In the mid-1820s, Governor Brisbane granted 4000 hectares close to Lake Macquarie to the London Missionary Society, and appointed

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4 Lynette Russell makes this observation in regards to Victorian Aboriginal people in Lynette Russell, “Repressed, Resourceful and Respected”, in Lynette Russell and John Arnold (eds), *Indigenous Victorians: Repressed, Resourceful and Respected*, a special issue of the *La Trobe Journal*, no. 85, May 2010, p. 3.


6 Valerie Djenidi, “State and Church Involvement in Aboriginal Reserves, Missions and Stations in NSW, 1900-1975 and a Translation into French of Custodians of the Soil”, PhD thesis, Wollotuka School of Aboriginal Studies, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, 2008, p. 44.


the Reverend Lancelot Edward Threlkeld to oversee it but this failed, as did Threlkeld’s subsequent attempt to run a mission on the other side of the lake.\(^9\)

In 1838, the British Government bypassed the NSW Legislative Council to establish an Aboriginal Protectorate in the Port Phillip district (later the colony of Victoria), in line with findings of a Select Committee inquiry the previous year. It appointed five Protectors but, inexperienced and working with very small budgets, they were largely unsuccessful and the system ended in 1849.\(^10\) With the end of the Protectorate, the NSW Government began setting aside reserves for Aboriginal people, a process that the Land Act of 1842 made possible and which Aboriginal people encouraged. By 1859, the Government had set aside 35 Aboriginal reserves, adding another 32 between 1861 and 1864.\(^11\)

Established as a separate colony in 1851, Victoria also set aside land during these years, including a 1820 hectare site on the Acheron River for the Kulin tribes of the Goulburn and Yarra to live and grow crops on.\(^12\) The colony failed to provide adequate support, however, and the Kulin were forced to move to the nearby Mohican station and later to Healesville where the missionary John Green was establishing the mission, Coranderrk. The Victorian Government’s newly-established Central Board for Aborigines set the 930 hectare area surrounding this site aside as an Aboriginal reserve in 1860, more than doubling this in 1866.\(^13\) The Board also established reserves at Framlingham, Lake Condah, and Ebenezer in the west of the state, and Ramahyuck and Lake Tyers in the east.\(^14\) In 1869, the Government renamed the Board the “Central

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12 Broome, Aboriginal Australians, p. 74


14 For more on these missions see Aldo Massola, Aboriginal Mission Stations in Victoria: Yelta, Ebenezer,
Board for the Protection of the Aborigines’ and gave it statutory authority, including the power to force Aboriginal people to move onto reserves, through the Aborigines Protection Act. Eight years later, however, half of the state’s Aboriginal population still lived off reserves.\textsuperscript{15}

The Victorian Government issued supplies and rations to Aboriginal people through the reserves but also through local guardians at depots around the state.\textsuperscript{16} In the north of the state on the border with NSW, near the future site of Cummeragunja, there were five such Protectors stationed at Echuca, Gunbower, Wyuna, Ulupna and Toolamba. In 1859, the Echuca guardian and local police magistrate, Charles Strutt, reported that the Aboriginal people in his district were concentrated near local rivers and on stations, but were suffering from a shortage of traditional food sources.\textsuperscript{17} Seven years later, the Gunbower guardian, George Houston reported that Aboriginal people in his region worked on local stations, and supported themselves during summer and autumn, hunting and fishing.\textsuperscript{18} In South Australia, meanwhile, the Aborigines’ Friends’ Association through George Taplin set up the Raukkan mission, later known as Point McLeay, in 1859 south of Adelaide, near Lake Alexandrina, for the Ngarrindjeri people. Despite serious financial struggles, the Ngarrindjeri managed to start a wool-washing plant on the shores of the lake and derive a steady income.\textsuperscript{19}

Back in NSW, individual missionary efforts continued to occur, including that of


\textsuperscript{16} Wayne Atkinson, “A Picture from the Other Side: Cummeragunga and Its Historical Connections with Coranderrk from Written and Oral Sources”, February 1981, MS 1598, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (hereafter AIATSIS) Library, Canberra, p. 37.

\textsuperscript{17} Atkinson, “A Picture from the Other Side”, p. 37.


a missionary couple, Daniel and Janet Matthews, born respectively in Cornwall and Scotland. Having visited Green at Coranderrk in 1866, Daniel began setting up a similar venture on their property, jointly owned with his brother, in 1874. The site, which Daniel had set aside some years earlier, was on a sandy promontory next to the Murray River, a traditional gathering place for local Aboriginal people. The name, Maloga, came from the Aboriginal name for the site. Like their white contemporaries, the Matthews saw ideas of white civilisation as a vital part of conversion to Christianity. Slowly houses – an important part of civilising Aboriginal people – were built and Aboriginal people encouraged to settle in family units. The Matthews encouraged the regulation of marriage, an important aspect of missionary work that many historians, including Angela Walhalla, have highlighted. As Victorian legislation controlling Aboriginal people became more intrusive, many Coranderrk residents moved across to Maloga.

Daniel and Janet Matthews’s spiritual rather than financial focus, however, had some consequences, since a mission required money to run, and the Matthews had very little. Neither they nor their fellow missionary, the Reverend John Gribble of the NSW Warangesda Mission, could afford to carry out their work without outside assistance. A group of Sydney men heard their appeals for financial help and formed the Aborigines Protection Association in 1879, aiming to promote “the social, moral, religious and intellectual welfare” of the colony’s Aboriginal population, including those of mixed


21 John Harris, One Blood: Two Hundred Years of Aboriginal Encounters with Christianity, Sutherland, NSW: Albatross Books, 1990, p. 221.


25 For more on Warangesda see Beverley (Gulumbali) and Don Elphick, The Camp of Mercy: an Historical and Biographical Record of the Warangesda Aboriginal Mission/Station, Darlington Point NSW, Canberra: Gulambali Aboriginal Research, 2004. For more on Gribble see his publication, A Despised Race: the Vanishing Aborigines of Australia, Sydney: Australian Board of Missions, 1933; and Loos, White Christ, Black Cross, p. 9; “Gribble, John Brown (1847-1893)’, Australian Dictionary of Biography Online, Australian National University, accessed on 5 May 2010 at www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A040338b.htm.
descent. The Association found support in high places, with the NSW Governor, Augustus Loftus, agreeing to become patron of the Association. The Association always intended their task to be a temporary measure, its members feeling that until the Government took responsibility “the Christian community in this colony would be responsible for a grave neglect of duty” if they failed to help.

At least one resident remembered the Association’s assistance warmly. Therese Clements wrote in her autobiography that the Association secretary, George Ardill asked the “dark men” of Maloga what they would like. According to Clements, the men replied, “[w]e want board houses like yours. We want glass windows and brick chimneys and iron roofs. We want to live like you do”. Clements recalled the surprise and joy that occurred when the Association granted these wishes. “They were all given timber to build”, she recalled. “The men were shown how to make furniture, and the women made window-blinds and odds and ends”. According to the historian, Noel Loos, memories like these were not unusual but not everyone was so enthusiastic.

Perhaps buoyed by this new feeling of hope, in 1881 a group of 42 Maloga men petitioned the Government for “a sufficient area of land … to cultivate and raise stock”. It was a demand that they would continue to make for many years. Colin Walker explained during our interview that the men were particularly concerned about the forest on the NSW side of the river, and the impact of settlement on hunting and gathering of foods, both to eat and for medicine. “[T]hey could see things were going to start to deteriorate then”, he observed. The degree to which Matthews encouraged the petition is a point of controversy. Heather Goodall, for instance, acknowledges Matthews’s influence but wrote that the “continuity of Cummeragunja demands with Coranderrk aspirations and phrasing suggests that the strongest influence was from within the Goulburn Valley Aboriginal community itself”. In Rod Hagen’s article about the Yorta Yorta native title experience, however, he is confident that Matthews, in fact,

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27 APA, Report, 1880/1, p. 2.
28 As quoted in Therese Clements, From Old Maloga: the Memoirs of an Aboriginal Woman, Prahran: Fraser & Morphet, 1930s, p. 3.
29 Clements, From Old Maloga, p. 3.
30 Loos, White Christ, Black Cross, p. 9.
32 Colin Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 14 February 2008, Barmah.
33 Goodall, “Land in our own Country”, p. 172. She also makes a similar point in Goodall, Invasion to Embassy, p. 77.
wrote the petition during a visit to Sydney, “without any recourse to the words or thoughts of those community members whose names were actually attached to it”.\textsuperscript{34}

The Association was highly critical of the NSW Government’s perceived inaction in regards to Aboriginal people and put considerable effort into attempting to make it take notice.\textsuperscript{35} Introducing the Association’s 1881 report, the secretary, Palmer, wrote that despite “praiseworthy efforts” in other colonies to improve conditions facing Aboriginal people, NSW had done nothing, apart from “feeble individual efforts”, and that it needed to act “speedily”.\textsuperscript{36} He praised the work of Matthews and Gribble, but despite this support, doubted, given the difficulties experienced by earlier missionary groups, that anyone could convert Aboriginal communities to Christianity.\textsuperscript{37} It was a stance the Association would reassess in the years that followed. Regardless of the Association’s role in evangelisation, Palmers said that while the Government would ultimately take responsibility for Aboriginal people, the Association, assisted by the “Christian public”, needed to encourage this.\textsuperscript{38}

Just a few months later, the Association received some of the governmental assistance it had sought when one of its members, George Thornton, became the colony’s first Protector of the Aborigines. The Government asked Thornton, previously the Mayor of Sydney and a founding councillor of the Association, to investigate the state of Aboriginal people in NSW at this time and to make recommendations.\textsuperscript{39} First on Thornton’s agenda was the creation of a census of the Aboriginal population, with the help of the Inspector-General of Police, Edmund Fosberry. Historically, this is an important step in the settler colonial project, as the census, combined with the map and the museum create, as Benedict Anderson has observed, a “classificatory grid”, for

\textsuperscript{35} Goodall, Invasion to Embassy, p. 88.
\textsuperscript{36} APA, Report, 1880/1, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{38} APA, Report, 1880/1, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{39} Goodall, Invasion to Embassy, p. 89; Martha Rutledge, “Thornton, George (1819-1901)”, in Australian Dictionary of Biography Online, Australian National University, accessed on 5 May 2010 at http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A060293b.htm.
defining the nation and who belonged within it.\textsuperscript{40}

Fosberry also ordered the colony’s police to prevent Aboriginal people accessing alcohol. Controlling this supply was crucial, according to Thornton, who blamed it for “nearly all the evils and misery to which the poor creatures are subject”.\textsuperscript{41} Thornton also distributed almost £600 of NSW Government funds for Aboriginal amelioration, with good results, but not without stern warnings to the recipients that they could not rely on this support on a regular basis.\textsuperscript{42} This warning fit with the general “ethic of self-improvement”, that Broome has remarked prevailed at this time, as did Thornton’s subsequent recommendation that land be provided for Aboriginal people and his assurance that “this would prove a powerful means of domesticating, civilizing, and making them comfortable”.\textsuperscript{43}

Thornton saw no role for Christianity in the future of Aboriginal people, believing that religion could only rarely overcome the fact that Aboriginal people were “naturally superstitious”. Aboriginal people should instead learn numeracy and literacy skills and practical trades and through this, the men “could be made useful and sometimes clever mechanics” and the women, “useful and valuable domestic servants”.\textsuperscript{44} Just a few months later, in December 1882, Thornton published his first complete report, highlighting the fiscal need for limiting this charity to Aboriginal people. With 8919 Aboriginal people counted in the census, Thornton calculated it would cost the Government about £20 per head in support for each of these, should it choose to support them all.\textsuperscript{45} Thornton pointed out that although he had provided some help to Maloga and Warangesda, these privately run enterprises were outside his jurisdiction.

Also that December, the NSW Legislative Council published its own, ultimately critical, inquiry into Maloga and Warangesda, carried out by Philip Gidley King, a good friend of Parkes who had served on the Council for three years, and Edmund Fosberry, who had helped Thornton with the Aboriginal census. King and Fosberry found that while Maloga was set in an excellent position and that while both mission managers –

\textsuperscript{44} Thornton, \textit{Report of Protector}, 14 August 1882, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{45} George Thornton, \textit{Aborigines (Report of Protector to 31 December 1882)}, Sydney: NSW Legislative Council, 1883, p. 2.
Matthews and Gribble – had made good attempts, ultimately their aims lacked clarity. The missionary impulse of both these men was a mystery to both King and Fosberry, who wrote that when they had “endeavoured to elicit” from both men “the ulterior benefits” they hoped to achieve their answers were inadequate. “[B]eyond the prospective result of their present moral training and education”, they noted “neither of these gentlemen were able to explain his views satisfactorily to us as to any future advantages to be derived by the children by retaining them in an aboriginal asylum”.46 They found that while Gribble and Matthews had devoted themselves to their work, “apparently to the impoverishment of their families”, Aboriginal stations should now come under Government control, with qualified people employed to “ensure the goodwill and co-operation of the neighbouring population and the confidence of the public”.47

Previously the Association had stepped in to help and ultimately control Matthews and Gribble. Now the Government needed to do the same, the men concluded, noting that the Association was now facing a financial crisis, and that Maloga and Warangesda residents needed clothing and food immediately. Organisations such as the Association could still be of assistance in areas, “beyond the province of the Government”.48 Despite the early scepticism of the Association as to the possibility of converting Aboriginal people to Christianity, Fosberry and King saw the Association’s future primary role as religious.

In February 1882, the NSW Colonial Secretary, Alexander Stuart, published his findings regarding Aboriginal protection, which indicated that a single Protector was inadequate for the work. Having read both reports from the Protector and the inquiry into the Maloga and Warangesda mission, he wrote, it seemed a new system for taking care of Aboriginal people was needed, namely, the creation of an Aborigines Protection Board.49 The Government, moreover, should take advantage of the benevolent activities of the public, as “some portion of the work to be done lies beyond the province of the State”.50 In June 1883, the NSW Government created the Aborigines Protection Board, appointing the authors of the Maloga and Warangesda inquiry, Edmund Fosberry and

46 Philip Gidley King and Edmund Fosberry, *Aboriginal Mission Stations at Warangesda and Maloga (Report and Correspondence Respecting Inquiring into Working Of)*, Sydney: NSW Legislative Council, 1883, p. 3.
47 King and Fosberry, *Aboriginal Mission Stations*, p. 3.
50 Stuart, *Minute of Colonial Secretary*, p. 2.
King; members of the Legislative Council, Richard Hill and Alexander Gordon; and the barrister, W. J. Foster. Hugh Robinson, the Inspector of Charities, joined them.\textsuperscript{51} Thornton was initially chairman but resigned shortly after. Despite this, the Association and Matthews maintained administrative control over Cummeragunja.

A significant focus for the APB in its first report in 1883 was its desire for greater power over Maloga and Warangesda and over Aboriginal people generally through “legislative action”.\textsuperscript{52} The Board, in fact, sought “the custody and control” of all Aboriginal people, who according to the Board were “inexperienced” and inclined to become “victims of debauchery and immorality”.\textsuperscript{53} Looking at Maloga and Warangesda, the Board advocated a change to Government control, noting: “[w]e fear private benevolence cannot altogether be relied upon for providing the requisite funds”.\textsuperscript{54} The Board was not opposed to private support as a supplement, urging that this “be warmly encouraged”.\textsuperscript{55} Already the Government had set aside reserves for Aboriginal use, with a combined acreage of 3500 acres.\textsuperscript{56} The Lands Department had produced “plans and particulars” for each of these. When the Board investigated, however, it found that eight were not being used “for the purpose for which they were intended”.\textsuperscript{57} The Board had also requested a number of other sites for Aboriginal reserves, where homes and schools would be superintended by “proper persons of good character” and of appropriate adaptability, chosen by the Board.

In 1885, Daniel Matthews unsuccessfully applied to the Victorian Government to be a Local Guardian in the colony. As Victorian BPA representative Captain Page explained, the Board “thought it would not answer to have a NSW man and one in charge of a NSW Station – it would mix things up a good deal”.\textsuperscript{58} But Matthews’s time in charge of his NSW mission was about to expire. The NSW APB’s report for 1885 noted that it had not yet made “[p]ermanent arrangements” for management at Warangesda and Maloga.\textsuperscript{59} Admitting it would be expensive, the Board was “desirous of seeing a more definite and responsible system of management of these Stations”.\textsuperscript{60} For Maloga,

\textsuperscript{51} NSW Legislative Assembly, \emph{Parliamentary Debates}, 17 April 1883, p. 2816
\textsuperscript{52} Hill et al, \emph{Report 1883-4}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{53} Hill et al, \emph{Report 1883-4}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{54} Hill et al, \emph{Report 1883-4}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{55} Hill et al, \emph{Report 1883-4}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{56} Hill et al, \emph{Report 1883-4}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{57} Hill et al, \emph{Report 1883-4}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{59} Hill et al, \emph{Report 1883-4}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{60} Hill et al, \emph{Report 1883-4}, p. 3.
the Board wanted to see the Government purchase land from the Matthews. At about 781 acres, the site was “peculiarly well suited for a Station, and suitable for cultivation”.61 Without this, the Board felt that the nearby 1800-acre Government reserve, gazetted in 1883, “would be comparatively useless”.62 Unfortunately, however, the Matthews valued the selections at “between three or four thousand pounds”, while the “huts and other buildings on the Station require to be replaced, as they are dilapidated and uninhabitable”.63

The Association’s report for that same year also reflected the Matthews’s family loss of control, noting that it had issued a series of rules to both Maloga and Warangesda, covering the duties of those in control, even covering the way the mission managers should keep their accounts. The Association’s secretary, Andrew Menzies, introduced these regulations, pointing out that “for the good government” of both these missions, it needed to appoint “proper officers” to take charge. While Matthews was still superintendent and his wife served as matron, they now had paid assistants. The Association had employed a man, Mr Waters as overseer, and a woman, Miss Affleck as an assistant matron. The missionaries’ work on Maloga was proving difficult and Matthews’s authority was slipping. On 10 April 1885, he had cause to write: [n]ever since we commenced the work have I felt more perplexity than now”.64 By June, Matthews’s workers were already struggling and Matthews was feeling the weight of his work, writing that it was “often almost more than I can bear”.65

While Daniel and Janet Matthews for the most part laboured in hope on Maloga, the APB had limited expectations. In its 1886 report, the Board observed that while there were “many encouraging instances of industry and thrift”, it was not confident there would be “any general and permanent alteration in the condition and habits of the Aborigines”.66 Without going into particular detail about the changes going on at Maloga, the Board reported that the Association intended to change management at Maloga and Warangesda.67 Both this report and the next, issued in May 1887, made it clear that the

62 Fosberry et al, Report, 1885, p. 3.
63 Fosberry et al, Report, 1885, p. 4.
64 Daniel Matthews, Eleventh Report of the Maloga Aboriginal Mission Station, Echuca: Mackay and Foyster, 1886, 10 April 1885, p. 6.
65 Matthews, Eleventh Report, 3 June 1885p. 11.
67 Fosberry et al, Report, 1885-6, p. 2.
Board was not yet challenging the Association for control of these missions, writing in the latter that: “we express our wish to co-operate with that Society”.

That same month, Matthews wrote to the Association’s secretary, George Ardill, suggesting they lease the 20 acres on which Maloga currently stood, in order to “avoid the labor, expense, and waste of removing the cottages and other buildings”. The Association leaders were not interested in Matthews’s offer, however, and their relationship with the missionary was quickly souring. In July 1887, Ardill, and the ex-secretary, Andrew Menzies, arrived at Cumberagunja to identify a site to which they could remove the cottages from Maloga. Ardill and Menzies had hardly left, when Matthews received in the mail a stack of unpaid accounts from the Association, which refused to pay them. They had been “incurred contrary to [its] instructions” and Matthews would now need to take care of them himself. Less than a week later, Matthews received an official demotion from the Association, his duties now limited to that of religious instructor, the more general mission management role going to Matthews’s assistant George Bellenger. Bellenger assured Matthews, however, that he would always treat him with “deference” and after careful consideration, Matthews chose to see the news as a release from “the incessant toil and anxiety in connection with the temporal wants of one hundred and fifty Aborigines”.

The Maloga residents, meanwhile, were taking action to relieve their own “temporal wants”, submitting another petition for land to the Premier later that month. In this, Maloga petitioners, including Robert Cooper, Samson Barber, Aaron Atkinson and Hugh Anderson, whose letter opened this chapter, reminded the Government of their desire for land. They said that the Aborigines Protection Association supported them in their request, for “sections of land not less than 100 acres per family”, to be paid for by a small rent or fee, “deemed reasonable for them under the circumstances, always bearing in mind that the Aborigines were the former occupiers of the land”. Writing of this petition, Claire McLisky has noted that it is unlikely that Matthews would have

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69 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 2 May 1887, p. 7.
70 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 4 July 1887, p. 10.
71 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 17 August 1887, p. 12.
72 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 22 August 1887, p. 12.
74 Robert Cooper, Samson Barber, Aaron Atkinson, Hughy Anderson et al, “Maloga Petition, 20 July 1887”, in Attwood and Markus (eds), The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights, p. 52; for more on this see Goodall, “Land in our own Country”, p. 189.
approved of its content, which thanked the Government and the Association for their work, but “did not once mention the missionaries who had facilitated this effort”.  

The Government and the Association continued their plans to move the Maloga people from their existing site, an endeavour marked by disorganisation and an ignorance of the landscape. The Land Department’s reluctance to give them the prime riverside frontage which they coveted did not help the situation. A site that was set aside soon flooded and the search continued. Noting this, Matthews observed that he had advised against the site in September, knowing it had “flooded several times during the last 20 years”. Matthews was hardly revelling in this small victory, his authority on the mission continuing to slip. Bellenger had married and was away on his honeymoon and in his absence, a number of men had “for the first time” questioned Matthews’s position as superintendent. In October 1887, Matthews was informed that Bellenger now had full control of the mission’s secular management. “The men and residents will be answerable to him alone”, wrote Ardill. A few days later, Matthews reported that Bellenger had again pledged his deference to him and they were getting “along very well under the new regime”.  

Maloga residents were fast growing tired of the doubt over their futures. In November 1887, William Cooper wrote directly to MLA John Moore Chanter restating his request for land. “I am anxious to get a home and make some provisions for my wife and daughter”, wrote Cooper. The following January, Matthews noted that this frustration had “manifested [in] a recklessness which was never before seen”. “Instead of carting firewood”, he wrote, “some of them pulled down their garden fences and burned them”. An Association member arrived from Sydney to sort the situation out, but had little success. The relationship between Bellenger and Matthews was also suffering, Matthews describing this time as “the hour of Satan”. Visiting the mission

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76 Heather Goodall puts this delay down to obstructions from Matthews, but this is not my reading. Goodall, “Land in our own Country”, p. 189.
78 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 26 September 1887, p. 15.
79 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 26 September 1887, p. 15.
80 As quoted in Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 1 October 1887, p. 15.
81 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 10 October 1887, p. 16.
82 William Cooper, “William Cooper to John Moore Chanter, MLA, 11 November 1887”, in Attwood and Markus (eds), The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights, p. 53.
84 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 15 January 1888, p. 19
that month, the Department of Public Instructions District Inspector found management in confusion. “The Mission has not yet been removed”, he wrote, “and neither the manager nor anyone else there seems to know either when or where it is to be removed or whether it is to be removed at all”. He advised the Department to hold any decision about moving the school until the Association’s plans became clear. The chief inspector of the Department supported his request that the Association immediately inform them what was going on.

On 6 February 1888, Bellenger and some of the men now camped at the new station began dismantling the houses on Maloga. “As there were 17 of them”, wrote Matthews, “all disaffected, and some bitter in spirit against me they worked most willingly”. The Matthews were devastated. “Houses, that had taken months in construction, and years in anticipation, were levelled to the ground with destructive rapidity”, Matthews observed. “Fences that stood around the garden lots, and had been our pride, as being the achievement of much patient labour, were soon uprooted”. Although Matthews felt that he could have used legal avenues to prevent this destruction, he was confident “our Heavenly Father would not permit His work to be injured”. By mid-February Matthews saw that his authority “was set at nought” with the Maloga people. Although the new site for the station had flooded, and yet another had to be selected, the move was continuing. Already feeling the strain, Matthews was devastated to discover that he had not, in fact, been superintendent for some years; the Association had Bellenger as superintendent, when Matthews received his demotion some years earlier.

The following month, March 1888, the Association informed the Department of Public Instruction that the removal was again on hold while the Department of Lands decided whether to grant 100 acres of “high lands untouched by floods upon which to erect the building”. Ardill assured the Department that he would keep them informed: “Immediately that a definite settlement is made, I will again communicate with you”.

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85 J. Hay, note on back of letter sent from Edmund Fosberry (APB Chairman) to Under Secretary, Department of Public Instruction, 6 February 1888, Cummeragunja School File, 1889-1910.
86 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 6 February 1888, p. 21.
87 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 6 February 1888, p. 21.
88 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 6 February 1888, p. 21.
89 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 15 February 1888, p. 21.
90 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 15 February 1888, p. 21.
91 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 15 February 1888, p. 22.
92 George Ardill, letter to Under Secretary, Department of Public Instruction, 10 March 1888, Cummeragunja School File, 1889-1910.
93 Ardill, letter to Under Secretary, Department of Public Instruction, 10 March 1888.
Matthews, meanwhile, took the train to Sydney to offer his services as a voluntary superintendent. The Board did not give him a chance to present his proposal instead informing him that it had decided to accept his resignation. Matthews returned home, undaunted, still full of religious fervour and planning to continue “the work of Missions to the Aborigines, as the Lord shall direct us”. 94

Moving from Maloga
Moves to shift the Maloga community continued. On 30 March 1888 – Good Friday – Bellenger and some of the men moved a number of houses over to a new site that the Association had chosen. This site, like those before it, was too far from the river, but the Lands Department had just denied a more suitable spot that the Association had requested. Now seemingly resigned to the move, Matthews noted in his diary, “we, and other dear friends are united in prayer to Almighty God, that the decision of the Government will be reversed”. 95 With the exception of Maloga, it seemed the only suitable site in the district. 96 By the end of April, most residents had left Maloga. 97

The Matthews spent the next few months travelling in Queensland promoting work among the Aboriginal people. In a postscript to his report for 1888, Matthews made an effort to show that he held no grudge against the Association, noting that: “anything in this Report that may appear like censure will not be interpreted by our readers in that way”. 98 That October there were around 130 men, women and children on the new station and only 16 at Maloga. In December, morale on the mission fell further when during its annual visit to Brighton, a concert was broken up by a man who rushed at the performers with a stick. So frightened were two of the girls, that they required medical assistance, one remaining insensible a couple of days later, according to the Melbourne newspaper, the Argus. 99 Interestingly, shortly before the performance was disrupted, Thomas James, who was now teaching over at Cummeragunja, had given a brief report on the good progress at Maloga. So, while, Daniel Matthews may have lost control of the community, he still maintained links, visiting regularly, holding religious

95 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 30 March 1888, p. 23.
96 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, 30 March 1888, p. 23.
services and promoting, in his words, “unity and success”. Daniel and Janet planned, he wrote, to visit Europe the following year, a trip they had contemplated for some years, but only now could afford the time to carry out. Daniel and Janet Matthews, however, appeared certain they would return to use Maloga as their base for their spiritual work among the Aboriginal people.

For its part, the Association felt that Cummeragunja was making “good progress”. The Lands Department had finally approved the gazetting of the coveted site — although a level of uncertainty still surrounded its tenure — and cultivation of the land had been successful, bringing in 117 bags of wheat and 20 tonnes of hay to a value of £200. Religious work on the station was less successful, but the Association believed there was still cause for hopefulness — a change from its initial scepticism surrounding Aboriginal conversion. “Many of those on the mission profess faith in Christ, and some manifest by their lives that they are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ”. The Association wrote of its disappointment that Australians were loath to support local missionary efforts, noting that while such work overseas “receives so much attention, the heathen at our own doors are perishing for lack of the knowledge of Christ”.

In 1889 typhoid fever arrived on the station and tensions with management ran high. The disease broke out in February and the NSW Government’s medical officer for the Moama District, Dr Edkins, recommended that the school close. Two Aboriginal people from Cummeragunja went to Echuca to convalesce. In fact, Edkins had submitted a report to the Government just days before the outbreak, alerting it to the unsatisfactory nature of the station. Conditions were insanitary and the quality of food supplied to residents inadequate, Edkins recounted. The Government had forwarded the report to the APB for comment. By mid-February, 19 Cummeragunja people had signed a petition and sent it to the APB’s Edmund Fosberry, complaining about the difficulty of procuring rations, even while sick. They requested that the APB ask Edkins and a few other men, whom they recommended, should visit the station on a monthly basis and report back to the Board. Finally, they felt that ration distribution should not be left to the manager, Bellenger, with whom they could not “work in harmony”.

100 Matthews, Thirteenth Report, Additional Remarks, October 1888, p. 27.
103 “Legislative Assembly”, Sydney Morning Herald (hereafter SMH), 9 August 1889, p. 4.
104 “Legislative Assembly”, p. 4.
105 “Legislative Assembly”, p. 4.
While there is no mention of a response to this petition, the Legislative Assembly discussion on the issue noted that the APB had appointed a medical attendant, Dr Sergeant, to the station, based on a recommendation from the Association’s Rev. A.J. Clarke. They were also pleased to report that Sergeant came at a relatively cheap rate: a mere £50, which was a third of the other quotes they had received. By mid-April, the danger had passed and Edkins advised the school to reopen.

Twelve months later, the Association announced it had begun negotiations with the Board over drafting a bill to transfer the care of all Aboriginal children to the APB. “The necessity for this has been seen by the difficulties the council have to contend with in retaining the children of the missions”, the meeting report published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted, “as friends will induce them to leave for camp-life again”. This same report noted that Hugh Anderson was doing good religious work among the south coast Aboriginal people. The Association, meanwhile, placed an order for a draught horse, a reaping machine and a plough for Cummeragunja where, it noted, Aboriginal residents were busy making bricks for chimneys. The need for pumping machinery was also considered.

As the orders for farming equipment indicated, farming was going ahead on Cummeragunja. In his 1890 report, the manager, Bellenger, was “thankful to God for the success that has attended us”. Although budget issues had limited the amount of construction on the station, cropping continued to go well, with 104 bags of wheat and 25 tonnes of hay. Bellenger expected they would complete the planting for the orchard within twelve months. Cummeragunja people seemed already attached to their new home, Bellenger reported. The Association’s report for that year, meanwhile, thanked the APB for its assistance in securing funding. Previously this had come directly from the Government at a rate of £2 for every £1 raised from the public. The Association was thankful this was no longer the case – private subscriptions had fallen considerably and carrying out its work would have been difficult. It still needed private donations, however; the Government would not allow the Association to use colonial funds for

106 “Legislative Assembly”, p. 4.
107 “Legislative Assembly”, p. 4.
108 “Aborigines’ Protection Association”, *SMH*, 5 April 1890, p. 6.
109 “Aborigines’ Protection Association”, *SMH*, 5 April 1890, p. 6.
Visiting the station in July 1891, Association representative John G. Treseder was impressed. He said the change from twelve months ago was striking. “The cottages generally speaking, are fairly clean, and the closets are much better kept”, he subsequently reported. “The streets have been partly drained, and the Manager is preparing for the planting of shade trees”. The women inside the cottages were busy with housework, to the approval of Treseder. Mentioning Bellenger only in passing, Treseder instead focussed on the good work of his assistants, Mr and Mrs Pridham, in charge of stores and book keeping, and sewing, respectively. Treseder called for more improvements to the station, although, interestingly not primarily for the Aboriginal residents, but rather “so that visitors may be invited to inspect the place”. To this end, verandahs must be built, and creepers, that he would supply, grown upon them. Both these verandahs and the houses to which they were attached were to be painted, and gardens planted. Treseder’s preoccupation with plants was a particularly passionate one.

The founder of a prominent nursery in Sydney, Treseder had published widely on the topic and had even been called in by the Premier, Henry Parkes, to overhaul that city’s gardens ten years earlier. “The cottages should be lined with boards, and a few pictures provided for the houses and school”, continued Treseder. Finally, Treseder called on the Government to grant 15 hectare blocks of land to the Cummeragunja people, who had “a great wish” for these. “[T]here is a tract of about two thousand acres available close to the Station, and which should, I think be set apart for this purpose”, wrote Treseder. “Under such circumstances, the people would I believe feel more at home”.

In November 1891, the Sydney Telegraph reported that the Association “was absolutely without funds” and that the APB was considering taking over the stations, Cummeragunja, Warangesda and Brewarrina, the last established by the Association in 1886, and all three of which the Association continued to manage. That same month Gribble wrote in the Australian Christian World that the Association’s failure had stemmed

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111 NSW APA, The Rightful Owners, p. 4.
113 Treseder, Report by John G. Treseder, p. 2.
114 Treseder, Report by John G. Treseder, p. 2.
116 Treseder, Visit to the Aborigines Mission Station, p. 3.
from a number of factors, not least its tendency to sideline religion. “God must be fully
recognised in Missionary enterprise”, wrote Gribble, “or things will grow wrong”.117 The
Association’s report for that year acknowledged its debt to the NSW Government and
the APB, writing that without their “liberal help … the work could not have been
maintained”.118

No doubt to the relief of those who had petitioned against him, Bellenger
resigned on 31 December 1891 and was replaced by Bruce Ferguson, a farmer and
“devoted Christian worker”, according to the Association. The following year, members
of the Legislative Assembly discussed Cummeragunja as an example of a site where work
was going well among Aboriginal people. While depicting Brewarrina as a “a breeding
ground for black prostitution”, its profits siphoned off by “the man who is there to teach
religion”, Member for West Macquarie, William Crick, shared the testimony of a friend
who had recently visited Cummeragunja and whose account provided “a pleasant
contrast” to Brewarrina.119 According to this unnamed male friend, there were 220
Aboriginal people, showing “every indication of multiplication”, having settled in well,
the men working and the women and children receiving food. About 50 children
attended school, to good results. Ferguson was “the right man in the right place”,
according to this observer, “who, while exercising proper control over the blacks, is not
in any way tyrannical”.120

The parliamentarian Chanter also spoke in favour of the station. Cummeragunja
was in his electorate, Chanter explained, and he had “many opportunities of conversing
with the residents of that place”.121 “Very good and valuable work is being done there”,
he had concluded. One man had now crossed over to Victoria and, through a contract
with that Government, acquired a selection of his own. “[H]e is a married man and his
children are going to school; he ploughs and does all his work as well as any white
man”.122 Many Cummeragunja men sought to follow his lead, but their applications had
not been successful, observed Chanter, before he set about repeating their demands for

117 Reverend John Gribble quoted in Janet Matthews, “Maloga Mission to the Aborigines of Australia:
3, Box 1, MLMSS 2621, Nancy Norman papers.

118 NSW Aborigines Protection Association, Our Black Brethren: Their Past, Present and Future: Being the Annual
Report of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Association for 1891, Including Accounts of Cumeroogunga (Late

119 NSW Legislative Assembly, Parliamentary Debates, 18 February 1892, p. 5454.

120 NSW Legislative Assembly, Parliamentary Debates, 18 February 1892, p. 5454.

121 NSW Legislative Assembly, Parliamentary Debates, 18 February 1892, p. 5455.

122 NSW Legislative Assembly, Parliamentary Debates, 18 February 1892, p. 5454.
The Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines had its own hopes for the manager Bruce Ferguson. In September 1892, Frederick Hagenauer, secretary of the BPA, wrote to the NSW APB secretary Ardill asking that he ensure that Ferguson respect that Board’s wishes and not accept Coranderrk residents, unlike Bellenger who had “constantly received” them, against the Victorian Board’s wishes. He added that such behaviour “greatly hindered” the state’s attempts to merge its Aboriginal people into the general populace.\textsuperscript{124} Ardill must have replied, pledging support but pointing to Maloga as a place where Coranderrk people could go to, and over which the APB had no control, for Hagenauer replied in a more relaxed fashion. “Re: the damage that may arise through these people settling at Mr. D. Matthews at Maloga. I don’t think we need fear much for they will not remain long, especially if there is no provision made for them”. He had received news that Daniel Matthews’s brothers did not approve of Maloga or any other mission starting up nearby the newly established Cummeragunja site.\textsuperscript{125} Hagenauer had good reason to feel positive. Maloga never returned to its former importance and eventually the Matthews turned their mission efforts to South Australia.\textsuperscript{126}

The APB, meanwhile, continued to assume greater control over Cummeragunja and in 1894 the relationship between it and the Association reached a crisis. A number of people had notified the Board of apparent mismanagement at Cummeragunja, Warangesda and Brewarrina, which the Board noted were still under the Association’s control. These informants claimed that these stations had almost completely failed to attain any “amelioration for the condition of the aboriginal inmates of these places”.\textsuperscript{127} Two Board representatives, the chairman, Fosberry, and W. H. Suttor, went to investigate and confirmed these accusations. In response, the Board appointed a local board to advise each station, issued a code of regulations that it hoped would improve the situation facing Aboriginal people residents and, ultimately, chose to take over

\textsuperscript{123} NSW Legislative Assembly, \textit{Parliamentary Debates}, 18 February 1892, p. 5455-6.
\textsuperscript{124} Frederick Hagenauer, letter to G.E. Ardill, 21 September 1892, Folder 3, Box 1, MLMSS 2621, Nancy Norman Papers.
\textsuperscript{125} Frederick Hagenauer, letter to G. E. Ardill, 16 October 1892, Folder 3, Box 1, MLMSS 2621, Nancy Norman Papers.
\textsuperscript{126} For more on the Matthews Manuka Mission see Cato, \textit{Mister Maloga}. One success of the Matthews’s visit to England was meeting Jennie and George Smith, who followed them back to Australia, worked at Maloga, Cummeragunja, Warangesda and Singleton. For more on this see Christine Brett Vickers, “The Mother of the Home”: Jennie Parsons Smith, \textit{Uncommon Ground: White Women in Aboriginal History}, edited by Anna Cole, Victoria Haskins and Fiona Paisley, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005, pp. 28-56.
\textsuperscript{127} NSW Aborigines Protection Board, \textit{Protection of the Aborigines (Report of the Board) 1894}, Sydney: NSW Legislative Assembly, 1894, p. 3.
complete control of Cummeragunja’s management, although the Association, like Matthews, continued to take an interest in and publish yearly reports about the work.  

The Association gave no hint to its readers that management at Cummeragunja was struggling in its report for that year. In this, Ferguson noted that eight Aboriginal men had been granted farm blocks and had made progress, but due to low wheat prices should perhaps trial olives. In fact, those men would continue to struggle over the coming years, not just because of low wheat prices, but the size of the blocks. At 10 hectares, these were significantly less than the 65 hectares areas that the residents had requested, the 15 hectares recommended by Treseder and the 350 hectares which Heather Goodall has argued was required to provide a comfortable standard of living to a family in that region. Nevertheless, the medical missionary for the station, Dr T. Orde Smith, reported that year that there was a “steady cultivation among the natives of habits of cleanliness”, and much improved health, “undoubtedly” as a result of “the wholesome food, the greater abundance of milk, vegetables, and the successful laying-on of water by Mr. Ferguson”. Orde Smith, in what seems to be a direct rebuff of Daniel Matthews’s methods, was also pleased to reported that “[e]very effort has been made to keep the recreations at home, and not to send our young people travelling about to amuse the white population, the effect of which is obviously degrading in its tendency, leading them into bad company, drink and vicious habits of all sorts”. Shortly after Ferguson wrote his report, he resigned and his assistant, Mr E.W. Pridham, was appointed to replace him.

### Remembering Matthews and the move to Cummeragunja

The memories of Maloga and the change to Cummeragunja provide insights into the period, which written records cannot tell us. For one, the lasting legacy of Daniel Matthews as a kind of saviour is a common theme in my oral history interviews. When I spoke to Lorna Walker about Matthews and his role within the community she told me that the older people had “loved him”, remembering her grandmother telling her “about

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128 NSW APB, Annual Report, 1894, p. 3.
130 Goodall, “Land in our own Country”, p. 189.
133 APA, The Australian Aboriginal, p. 8.
the Matthews and that”.\textsuperscript{134} Lorna has now forgotten most of these stories, but recalls the overwhelming message they contained: “that he was a good man”.\textsuperscript{135} One story she does remember involved Matthews going all the way up to Sydney, “because all our Koori people was dying of TB [tuberculosis]”:

And he used to go right up to Sydney, he and his wife, gathering all the sick people from around up there in New South and bringing them down here to Maloga. … they come down here and they married in.\textsuperscript{136}

Alf Turner also spoke with great respect for the man he believed had saved local Aboriginal people from death. “I think he did a great job”, Alf told me, “because he took the people in when they were in a bad way”.\textsuperscript{137} He said the Matthews took his great grandparents and some of their relatives who had been living on the nearby Moira station. “I do believe myself that if that man hadn’t taken them in”, said Alf, “that the people would have died out”.\textsuperscript{138} He continued with greater confidence: “I’m sure they would have”.\textsuperscript{139}

Community members have not forgotten Matthews’s damaging impact on Aboriginal culture. Kevin Atkinson told me that white farmers and, in particular, timber cutters, influenced Aboriginal people and they “got into smoking and drinking, you know, and they became addicted to it very easily and quickly”.\textsuperscript{140} When Matthews arrived, he tried to help them but this was not without its drawbacks. “His way of life was our spiritual feelings and beings were wrong”, observed Kevin.\textsuperscript{141} The Matthews “imposed their religious beliefs onto Aboriginal people … so that was part of the culture gone”.\textsuperscript{142}

Colin Walker had a more negative view of the role of the mission, noting that while the Matthews “might have thought they were doing a good job”, they were wrong. He said that community elders now “say they did more damage to Aboriginal people”.\textsuperscript{143} Walker described himself as “spiritual” rather than religious, explaining that “our spiritual ways were about thousands of years before the missionaries come here”.\textsuperscript{144} His grandparents

\textsuperscript{134} Lorna Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 24 March 2009, Cummeragunja.
\textsuperscript{135} Lorna Walker interview.
\textsuperscript{136} Lorna Walker interview.
\textsuperscript{137} Alf Turner, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008 Mooroopna.
\textsuperscript{138} Alf Turner interview.
\textsuperscript{139} Alf Turner interview.
\textsuperscript{140} Kevin Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 15 February 2008, Cummeragunja.
\textsuperscript{141} Kevin Atkinson interview, 15 February 2008.
\textsuperscript{142} Kevin Atkinson interview, 15 February 2008.
\textsuperscript{143} Colin Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 14 February 2008, Barmah.
\textsuperscript{144} Colin Walker interview.
were “spiritual people” and handed down these beliefs to him.\textsuperscript{145} My other narrators were Christians, a fact that perhaps softened their criticisms of the introduction of Christianity into their communities. Walker strongly believed in Aboriginal spirituality and did not see himself as Christian, hence had little reason on that basis to hold back his criticisms of Matthews.

Most people I interviewed remembered talk of the departure of the Matthews family vaguely. Melva Johnson did not hear about Maloga from her family, only discovering this part of her history and the fact her grandmother was 18 months old when the move occurred “later on, when the history books come out”.\textsuperscript{146} She puts this down to the sheer pace of station life: “we were too busy trying to survive”.\textsuperscript{147} Alf Turner, meanwhile, said he had been told why the Matthews left, but he could not remember. He thought this was probably because the Government wanted Aboriginal people to move closer to a town. “There was nothing down where Maloga was”, said Alf, “nothing at all”, but over at the Cummeragunja site there was the small township of Barmah.\textsuperscript{148} Kevin, meanwhile, suggested that religious disharmony led Aboriginal people to leave Maloga. He said Aboriginal spirituality was strong at the time, “and that was where they finally ran into trouble with Matthews”:

> Because you see Matthews tried to convert ‘em back over to his religion and it didn’t go too well. And that’s where it caused a bit of problems then, with holding them there and teaching them.\textsuperscript{149}

A number of my narrators remembered the religion that the Matthews brought to the future Cummeragunja people as one of the few things that they could rely on. John Atkinson, for instance, remembered telling a friend who had asked him if he knew any Gospel music that he had been “brought up on Gospel, because on the missions that was the one thing you had, the church”.\textsuperscript{150} Alf Turner, meanwhile, said religion was a big part of his early life because “[t]here was nothing else”.\textsuperscript{151}

\textbf{Conclusion}

What can I make of Anderson’s complaint that opened this chapter? The fact that Bellenger left within ten months could mean that authorities eventually agreed with

\textsuperscript{145} Colin Walker interview.
\textsuperscript{146} Melva Johnson, interview with Fiona Davis, 21 September 2009, Moama.
\textsuperscript{147} Melva Johnson interview.
\textsuperscript{148} Alf Turner interview.
\textsuperscript{149} Kevin Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 10 April 2008, Cummeragunja.
\textsuperscript{150} John Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Shepparton.
\textsuperscript{151} Alf Turner interview.
Anderson or, perhaps, just that Bellenger tired of the struggle. The Association’s replacement of him by another employee of the State was hardly a victory for Anderson, despite this newcomer’s reputation as a good Christian worker – a title Bellenger had also attracted. The Government was intent on separating religion from Aboriginal governance, a key factor in the demise in influence of both Daniel Matthews and later the Association. Like it or not, the state was increasing its intervention into the management of Cummeragunja and control over Aboriginal people and be it state charity or some slight compensation, Aboriginal people were supposed to be grateful for whatever assistance they received.

Bellenger’s letter reveals that while white men fought over how NSW authorities should treat Aboriginal people, the Cummeragunja community had its own views on this. Groups such as the APB and the Association could argue over the Aboriginal “problem”, but Aboriginal people were not silent parties within this. Familiar with the structures and tools of white society, they could – like Bellenger and Cooper – vocalise their discontents, through white channels of communication such as the newspaper, but also by calling on the messages of the Bible to make their point and through communication with the Department of Public Instruction. Memories of Maloga recall the tensions that resulted from Matthews’s evangelising, but many also remember the strength he gave to the community, although not as much strength as the school teacher he had hired, Thomas James, was about to provide.

In the chapter which follows I trace James’s attempts to uphold a good level of Aboriginal education on the station, and the personal attacks he received as a result, as I move now from a focus on foundations to the attempts of Cummeragunja residents to make a life for themselves, despite the difficulties they faced doing so.
Figure 5: Cummeragunja School (AWB.1.BW-N1619.17). Photograph courtesy of Aborigines Welfare Board collection, Audiovisual Archive, AIATSIS
CHAPTER THREE

“TAKE MY YOKE ... AND LEARN FROM ME”: THOMAS JAMES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

On the first Sunday of February 1909, the school teacher Thomas James gave a church service on Cummeragunja. This arrangement was not in itself unusual: the year before, the manager, George Harris, had requested that he do so on a regular basis. This time, however, his service caused an upset that was to permanently sour relations between the pair. Harris wrote quickly to the Aborigines Protection Board to report that James had encouraged the residents to rebel. In a subsequent letter, James denied the allegations:

After referring to the unrest prevailing everywhere – Russia, India, Africa, Broken Hill and here too and the wrong methods adopted by the people for its cure, viz dynamite, dagger, brick, club (rebellion) I pointed to the Lord Jesus quoting his words, “come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden. I will give thee rest. Take my yoke (submission) and learn of me”.¹

James’s claim that he preached submission not rebellion was disputed repeatedly throughout his long career and is a fitting opening for this chapter, which will explore the interactions between James, his Aboriginal neighbours, the station’s managers and the Department of Primary Instruction between the 1880s until his departure from the station in 1922. I argue that James’s position as an intelligent, non-white educator was considered a threat by many in authority, who continually attempted to discredit him. I begin by considering the early relationship between James and the white authorities, his difficult position and the reasons they needed him. I then move to the falling out which occurred between James and the manager from 1908, the increasing tensions after 1919 and finally, I turn to my oral history memories of James.

A hard man to replace

Before turning to James, I first want to look briefly at the importance of education in helping Aboriginal people “get ahead”, a point that a number of historians have made. Outside Australia, Andrew Porter has emphasised that missionaries naturally taught their indigenous subjects to read, as they needed this to understand the Bible, and that, despite its paternalistic shortcomings, the empowering potential of literacy was largely

welcomed by indigenous communities. Australian historians, meanwhile, have pointed to the importance of educating Aboriginal people to the colonising project. As Noel Loos has observed, “white administrators or missionaries attempted to govern every aspect of Aboriginal lives”, including their education.  

Amanda Barry recently completed a PhD thesis on the subject of Aboriginal people in Australia and education. In an article published in 2008, she noted that education was a double-edged sword. Aboriginal education, wrote Barry, was destructive of traditional culture, “breaking down traditional family structures, erasing language and cultural practice”. But for many faced with the daily task of coping with settler colonial society, it was clear that being “sufficiently educated to participate in the emerging colonial economy, culture and life would be useful, and in some cases, essential to their economic survival”. Inara Walden, in her study of NSW’s Aboriginal domestic servants, highlighted the impact of not receiving an education, writing that domestic service “robbed young Aboriginal women of the opportunity to gain an education or skills that might have given them a relatively independent future”. Instead, girls who completed their domestic service apprenticeships had little choice but to continue in this field.

This lack of education had social as well as economic implications for Aboriginal people. “As long as you were good enough to read and write a letter you were good enough to leave school, so I left at the age of 14”, recalled Hilton Walsh, who grew up on Cummeragunja. Not until Walsh moved to Shepparton did he see the limitations of this education, later blaming this for the tensions which arose between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. “I realised that lack of education causes lack of...

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4 See Amanda Barry, “Broken Promises: Aboriginal Education in South-Eastern Australia, 1837-1937”, PhD, School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne, Parkville, 2008.
7 Inara Walden, “That was Slavery Days: Aboriginal Domestic Servants in New South Wales in the Twentieth Century”, *Labour History*, vol. 69, November 1995, p. 204.
conversation which causes lack of communication”, he wrote. Historians have cited the education that James provided the Cummeragunja people as valuable for their later political activities. For others, however, this education did not always translate into success. Ex-Cummeragunja resident Geraldine Briggs later recalled that James taught her mother, Margaret Tucker, and that he told Briggs he thought of Tucker as one of his top six students. “I said, ‘Yes, but it didn’t get Mum anywhere’”, Briggs later recalled. James had responded: “[n]o, she was always a slave for the white man”.

Thomas James, formerly Shadrach James Peersahib, had arrived at Maloga in 1881, after meeting Daniel Matthews at the Melbourne beachside suburb of Brighton. A medical student, James had emigrated from Mauritius five years earlier after the death of his mother. His father, an Indian interpreter, remained in Mauritius. When he met Matthews, James was twenty-two and had only just recovered from an attack of typhoid fever, which had ruined his plans for a career in medicine. Armed with a private school education, James agreed to join the Daniel Matthews and his wife Janet at Maloga and work as a volunteer teacher at the mission school. After two years as an unpaid teacher, he was promoted to a salaried head teacher position. In 1885 he married Ada Cooper, the daughter of a prominent family, thus cementing his relationship with this community. When the Maloga population shifted to Cummeragunja, James found himself temporarily stranded. Because of the disorganised nature of the move it took over two months for the Department of Public Instruction to approve his transferral, despite James’s repeated requests for direction from the department, and requests on his behalf by the parliamentarian, John Moore Chanter.

Three years later, in 1892, it became particularly clear that even if the Department of Public Instruction had toyed with the idea of not moving James to Cummeragunja, they would have had a hard job finding a suitable replacement. That year, James returned

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9 Walsh as quoted in Nathalia Secondary College, *Times Have Changed*, p. 27.
14 Thomas James, letter to John Duncan St Clair Maclardy (Assistant Inspector), 2 April 1888; James, letter to Inspector of Schools, 2 April 1888; John Moore Chanter, letter to Inspector of Education, 24 April 1888; Chanter, letter to Inspector of Education, 24 April 1888; St Clair Maclardy, telegram to the Chief Inspector, 9 May 1889, Cummeragunja School File, 1889-1910.
home to Mauritius to visit his ailing father whom he had not seen for 15 years. Applying for a leave of absence, he recommended Thomas Baker from Kew to take his place during the four months he would be away, and Baker, himself, wrote to offer his services. The department rejected Baker’s offer and by New Year’s Day of the following year, the teacher chosen, J.M. Caran, could be found writing to urge his speedy removal. It seems that the department had offered the temporary position without making it clear this was an Aboriginal school. Now Caran wanted to leave at once. Inspector Pearson, forwarding Caran’s concerns, gave his support to the request, noting: “[i]t is decidedly a most undesirable place for a white man especially on account of the objectionable associations with the blacks”. The Chief Inspector, John C. Maynard did not agree: no other suitable candidate existed, and Caran was already aware that the situation was temporary.

Later that month, Caran was again complaining, this time of an illness contracted during the overnight coach ride to the station. “I regret to have to inform you of my serious illness”, he informed Maynard, noting rather alarmingly that an initial cold had worsened and he was now haemorrhaging from the lung. “I wish to be relieved as soon as possible, the performance of the work in school being too painful”, he wrote. The department did not replace him, nor did it reconsider his request for removal when he requested a leave of absence for the entirety of March due to illness. Meanwhile, James was having his own problems in Mauritius. Shortly before Caran requested his further relief from teaching, James received confirmation of his own leave – unfortunately not for the period James had requested. Rather, the leave was to be from 18 January, when, in fact, James had left Australia by steamer on 30 December. Intensifying James’s anxiety was the fact Mauritius was quarantined as a result of a small pox outbreak on the island. He did return to Australia, finally, and with his homecoming, the APB allowed Caran to leave, no doubt to Caran’s great relief.

15 James, letter to John C. Maynard (Chief Inspector), 20 November 1891, Cummeragunja School File, 1889-1910.
16 J.M. Caran, letter to Department of Public Instruction (DPI), 25 January 1892, Cummeragunja School File, 1889-1910.
21 Caran, letter to Maynard, 29 February 1892.
22 Thomas James, letter to Maynard, 23 February 1892, Cummeragunja School File, 1889-1910.
While obviously supportive of the Cummeragunja community, James did not always show the sympathy towards Aboriginal people one would have expected, particularly given his wife and children were of Aboriginal descent. In one particular example from October 1896, James complained that an APB inspector had tested some of his students when he had not been expecting this examination. He wanted the APB to know the true difficulties he faced. He said two of these students were “pure aboriginals in a delicate state of health and being exceptionally dull in Arithmetic”. He continued: “it is doubtful whether they will ever gain the required number of marks in that subject”. Of the other two, one was very bright but had failed due to “carelessness”. James said that of the four he had prepared, three had passed. The previous year four out of the five prepared for the exam were successful. What the Board had to understand, wrote James, was that 90 per cent of Cummeragunja students were Aboriginal, and that as a result his work was “beset with peculiar difficulties, the most disheartening being the Aboriginal’s volatile memory, the want of application and their indisposition to think, for which I trust allowances will be made”. He went on to explain, that having had experience teaching both black and white children, it had become clear that “the aboriginals are not equal to the former in intellect and therefore the latter require quite a half year more to complete the standard in each class”.

James was working under difficult conditions. In 1899, APB member and parliamentarian, Chanter, visited the school and was shocked by what he found, immediately writing to the Board. The school, he wrote, was in operation when he arrived and about 60 “full bloods, half-castes and whites, the latter the children of neighbouring selectors” were present. While the turn-out was good, the school building was not so: Chanter described it as “altogether inadequate for the healthful requirements of so many children and in a warm climate”. The school was “a poor ramshackle building”, according to Chanter, “very low in the ceiling, and altogether unsuitable”. Chanter suggested James’s residence was “the worst provided for any teacher in the

23 James, letter to DPI, 26 October 1896, Cummeragunja School File, 1889-1910.
24 James, letter to DPI, 26 October 1896.
25 James, letter to DPI, 26 October 1896.
26 James, letter to DPI, 26 October 1896.
27 James, letter to DPI, 26 October 1896.
29 Chanter, letter to APB, 18 January 1889.
30 Chanter, letter to APB, 18 January 1889.
“Colony”. “It is a patchwork building altogether out of repair, and comprises altogether five very small rooms, the largest I should say no more than 10 x 10 feet”. James was using one room as a sitting room, another as a dining room, while the remaining three provided sleeping quarters for James, James’s wife, their five children and their servants. Of these, two rooms were “skillion rooms”, in which “one’s head almost touches the iron roof”. Chanter wrote: “although unsuitable in the colder portions of the year, in the summer months it is a marvel to me that the teacher and his family have not been stricken down with a serious illness”. It would be another decade before the Board replaced the building.

The difficulties of finding a qualified teacher prepared to work on Cummeragunja arose again in November 1905, when Miriam Morris, Thomas James’s daughter, wrote requesting a salary increase. She had been working as a temporary assistant at the school for one year and nine months, she informed the Public Service Board. A note added to her letter by the Board agreed to the increase, pointing to the difficulty in “obtaining a suitable assistant in this school”. Morris, it said, had recently married and was “an intelligent woman”, who “does fair work in the school”. Her salary was increased from £24 to £30 per annum. Another typed noted below this pointed out that in “ordinary circumstances” Morris would be paid at least £72 per annum. I assume “ordinary circumstances” would be if she were white and not the daughter of “a native of Mauritius and a colored man”, as the first note writer had taken pains to point out. Indeed Ida Falconer, James’s assistant teacher in 1903, had been given a pay rise two and a half years earlier, taking her pay from £72 to £90 per annum.

James’s colour was again an issue three years later, when local white men banded together to demand a white school for their children. These men included the manager George Harris and the farm overseer William Wilkinson. “Mr T. S. James, the head teacher is an Indian born at Mauritius”, they explained to a Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly, Henry Peters: “He passed an examination of 3c grade and now holds a 3a classification for long service and is married to one of the Cummeragunja

31 Chanter, letter to APB, 18 January 1889.
34 Anonymous note on Miriam Morris, letter to PSB, 13 November 1905.
people”. They had applied for a white school three times over the past decade, and still the Government had not done anything. “Two families that have left the district might have remained if the white school had been carried on”, the men wrote. They explained that some children currently walked three miles, half of which was through sand, to attend the Cummeragunja school. For the time being, the men suggested, a white assistant should be appointed to help James, as his current assistants were family members and unqualified. While the men’s requests for a white teacher on Cummeragunja were unsuccessful, the Victorian Government built a school at Barmah a short time later.

I want to turn here to the memories of Thomas James as a teacher of white children. For many in the community, it is now a source of pride that white parents considered him “worthy” of also teaching their children. For Kevin Atkinson, the white community’s support highlighted James’s teaching abilities. He remarked: “[t]here were a few non-Aboriginal people came to school here too, some of the farmers from around the place, so he must have been pretty well educated as a teacher”. Alf Turner recalled: “in the early days there were a lot of white kids taught at Cummera”.

Like Kevin and Alf, Iris Swan told me that James had also taught white children. Unlike Kevin and Alf, Iris related this story to her personally, recalling that she believed that James taught some of her uncles. “See before the Barmah school, the white kids actually went to Cummeragunja school, or Maloga”. According to Iris, this extended even after the Barmah school was built: “[e]ven in later years the ones that lived in NSW, my sister-in-law, her dad went to the Cummera school”. Interestingly, Iris was taught to read by a non-white student at the Barmah school in the 1930s: Alf Turner. James’s skills as a teacher are both highlighted and, in some ways, undermined by many of my narrators’ claims that the outside white community considered him good enough to teach white children – mostly only until the Victorian Government built the Barmah school. Their observations are an indication of the segregation that occurred in the area and a general understanding that Aboriginal education was inferior to that of white children.

36 George Harris, McLeish and others, letter to MLA Henry Peters, 10 February 1908, Cummeragunja School File, 1889-1910.
37 Kevin Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, Cummeragunja, 10 April 2008.
38 Alf Turner, interview with Fiona Davis, Mooroopna, 11 April 2008.
39 Iris and Jack Swan, interview with Fiona Davis, Picola, 11 April 2008.
40 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
Taking back farm blocks and an “open breach of friendship”

Back at Cummeragunja in 1908, Aboriginal people had experienced a difficult few years. The NSW Government had severely curtailed the APB budget in 1902, but in 1903 provided cause for hope when it set about making Cummeragunja a profitable communal farming enterprise, by purchasing equipment and hiring a farm manager three years later. However, when it ran particularly short of funds in 1907, the APB reclaimed the individual farm blocks that the Cummeragunja community had fought so hard for and added these to the communal farm. The Cummeragunja community protested loudly, but to no avail.\(^{41}\)

The petition for a white teacher at Cummeragunja and the removal of the farm blocks had already placed stress on the relationships between James and Harris before the incident involving James’s church service that opened this chapter. However, the quarrel that resulted from that service on 7 February 1909 was the first “open breach of friendship”, according to James.\(^ {42}\) Shortly after this, Harris put pen to paper and submitted a range of complaints to the Department of Public Instruction. According to Harris, James had instigated trouble, by pointing to the farm blocks issue and the community’s disappointment in its managers during his church service, telling the congregation: “[y]ou people have had a good many friends but they have not done you much good”.\(^ {43}\) James responded, objecting to this interpretation of his service. He maintained that he had not mentioned the blocks and that he had only used the examples of past managers, because his psychology studies and teaching experience in this Aboriginal community had convinced him that they understood best when given “concrete examples”.\(^ {44}\) His intention in doing this, he wrote, was not to put down those particular men, but rather “to show the inability of human beings to provide entire redress in times of trouble and to show that God is the final refuge”.\(^ {45}\)

Memories of the injustices that led to the removal of the farm blocks have stayed with the Cummeragunja people, a fact that highlights just how sensitive this issue would have been then. Alf Turner, for instance, identified the farm blocks as the reason why his grandfather, the activist William Cooper, decided he would leave the station. In our

\(^{42}\) Thomas James, letter to J.W. Bradley (Acting Chief Inspector), 1 March 1909, Cummeragunja School File, 1889-1910.
\(^{43}\) James, letter to Bradley, 1 March 1909, Cummeragunja School File, 1889-1910.
\(^{44}\) James, letter to Bradley, 1 March 1909.
\(^{45}\) James, letter to Bradley, 1 March 1909.
interview Alf explained:

they had a bit of trouble with the authorities when they petitioned for blocks of land to grow vegetables there and when it came time to harvest what they grew, the Government decided they’d take the blocks back off them. My grandfather left at that point and never ever went back.\(^{46}\)

Kevin Atkinson remembered hearing the blocks were successful, but “the Government took it, took it all back off them again”.\(^{47}\) He had concluded they must have had a verbal agreement, and the Government had “conned them into believing it was their property”.\(^{48}\)

Returning to James’s letter of 1909, it seems Harris’s accusation that he continually put the “Black and White question” before the community had upset him badly. This was the most serious of Harris’s claims, wrote James:

On the contrary for the last 28 years I have laboured amongst and associated with both the coloured and white races on both sides of the Murray, and I can undoubtedly claim that while I have at all times had the confidences of the Aborigines I have also earned the respect of the whites.\(^{49}\)

James said that he could guarantee that about 75 per cent of the “leading people” in the district would sign a petition stating that his “influence, so far from tending to embitter the feeling between Black and White on the contrary has always had the effect of drawing the two races together”.\(^{50}\) These people were “farmers, graziers, clergymen, police officers, teachers, Justices of the Peace” and resided in Victoria and NSW.\(^{51}\)

Harris also singled out Miriam Morris, as a disruptive influence. According to his testimony, she told the children a story “about some of the dreadful cruelties inflicted on the natives in Western Australia” and concluded by warning her audience “that is what will happen to you if Mr Blackwood gets into Parliament”.\(^{52}\) When Mrs Harris, the manager’s wife, approached Thomas James about this, he reportedly responded “oh well,
you shouldn’t take any notice of the talk of a foolish woman”.

James pointed out he had said “foolish girl” not “foolish woman”, as his daughter was only 17 years old at the time.

Harris’s final assertion was that he had felt he should make the Board aware of the situation because James’s influence tended “to make the people dissatisfied, resentful and bitter towards the Board, the Manager as its Officer and the white people”. James responded: “I have at all times endeavoured to instil into the minds of the people respect for law and authority and have frequently woven into my addresses … to obey and suffer, rather than to rebel”.

Moreover, wrote James, the Matthews family of Maloga often attended his services and once a fortnight he gave a service to white fishermen at Moria Lakes, “trudging 10 miles to do so and dividing my Day of Rest between the Whites and Blacks with a sincere desire to do good”.

James questioned: “[w]ould a work of this kind, sir, have the effect of deepening the line of demarcation between the two races?”

Before concluding, James noted that while Harris’s letter of complaint was posted on 10 February, on 14 February Mrs Harris sent her servant to see if James would like to take the service that evening, behaviour he described as “inconsistent”. He also pointed out that Harris, as manager, could have prevented him from conducting services at any time, and that, in fact, he had begun asking James twelve months ago to give them in order to relieve himself of the duty. Accompanying James’s letter was a signed petition from those who attended the disputed service – apart from his own family members and those of Mr Harris and farm overseer William Wilkinson – confirming he had not spoken of farm blocks.

Harris, meanwhile, was experiencing some personal stress, following a visit from Mr Harrington, a missionary of the Aborigines Inland Mission that ended badly. A romance sprang up between Harrington and Harris’s daughter Hazel, during Harrington’s stay and a subsequent proposal was rejected. Writing to the Mission founder, Retta Long, Harris expressed his embarrassment over the incident. “I hold...
myself to blame greatly for the cause”, wrote Harris. It seems that Harris and his wife were so busy with work on the station, that they had left Hazel to entertain Harrington. “I did not realize as Hazel is so young”, he wrote, “that any feeling other than friendship might spring up between them”.

Although Harris’s family situation was not of interest to authorities, the Board and others regularly monitored the “moral character” of James’s children. In February 1910, someone alleged that James’s son Shadrach was having a liaison with another Aboriginal teaching assistant. The Board became involved and Shadrach James was encouraged to marry, a request he appeared more than willing to favour. This was not before a large controversy had erupted, and the parents of the Cummeragunja school children had sent in a petition vouching for the character of both James and his soon-to-be wife, Maggie Campbell. “We most humbly beg that you consider their case and give them another chance as we will be very sorry to lose them”, the petition concluded.

James, meanwhile, continued to struggle to make peace with Harris, who, he explained to the Board, had made his life difficult for the past three years. Early on, James had approached Harris for a “quiet conference” on the reason for this treatment, but Harris had rebuffed him. “He charged me with having treacherously influenced the Aborigines here to petition the Board for his removal and for my appointment as Manager”, wrote James, who denied the charge. Another resident had reported hearing Harris planning to replace James: telling James afterwards that Harris had said: “I will shift Mr James before long. A coloured man is no good here. We shall have a white man here”.

Harris’s opinion of James was not reflected in the celebrations that surrounded the opening of the stations’ new school building in June 1910, the same month the new Aborigines Protection Act came into effect, strengthening the APB’s control over Aboriginal people, in particular its powers to apprentice Aboriginal children and expel

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61 George Harris, letter to Retta Long, 29 June 1909, Folio 30, Box 1, MLMSS 7244, Australian Indigenous Ministries – Further Records, 1904-30 (Formerly the Aborigines Inland Mission), Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney, NSW (hereafter AIM Correspondence).
62 Harris, letter to Long, 29 June 1909.
63 Shadrach James, letter to Inspector for Schools, 23 February 1910, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939a.
66 James, letter to APB, 26 February 1910.
adults from stations and reserves. A subsequent article about the opening in the *Riverine Herald* indicated the day was as much about the fine new facilities as it was a cause for reflection on James’s good work over the years. The celebrations were held to coincide with Empire Day. “The building consists of a lofty hall”, enthused the unnamed contributor, “subdivided by a sliding glass partition into a larger and smaller class room.” Each room had generous windows and was well ventilated. The school, this writer hoped, would have an uplifting effect on the station’s residents, noting that despite its “somewhat incongruous” appearance among the station’s “dingy and dilapidated dwellings” and other buildings, such an inspiring structure “must be of immediate advantage educationally”, and may spur many to white-wash their homes. At the day’s speeches, various parents paid tribute to James, one white father, Mr Maloney, remarking that his two sons now worked within the Department of Public Instruction as a result of James’s careful tuition. The author of this article observed that any teacher would be pleased with such praise, but for James, this “must necessarily be more than usually acceptable”. But James’s position was likely the most “exacting” of any teacher working for the department at that time, wrote this author, “and his difficult path is not made any smoother by the captious [censorious] critics and even active opposition, to which he is often subjected by those deriving authority from the A.P.B. in Sydney”. A local settler, Cyril Pearce, who knew James at this time has agreed that James, who “was really boss at Cummera … was very often pulled in the opposite direction to the white Manager.” Back at the celebrations, the farm overseer, Wilkinson, and his wife were acting manager and matron on the day and hosted the event.

Harris was soon back in charge; 11 days later he and James were again at loggerheads, over the new Act and the increased powers the manager now thought that he had. “Will you kindly inform me”, wrote James to Inspector J. Lynch, “if Mr Harris, the Manager of this station has the power to stop the neighbouring farmers’ children

69 “Cummeragunja, Empire Day and Opening of the New Public School”, p. 2.
70 James’s ability was also reflected in a publication, somewhat patronisingly, two years later, Edwin James Brady’s, *River Rovers*. In this Brady described James as “a most affable Eurasian of the Parsee caste”, who was providing this “tawny generation” with “all the current benefits” of primary education. See Brady, *River Rovers*, Melbourne: Geo. Robertson and Co. 1912, in G.M. Hibbins, *Barmah Chronicles*, Richmond: Lynedoch Publications, 1991.
71 “Cummeragunja, Empire Day and Opening of the New Public School”, p. 2.
72 “Cummeragunja, Empire Day and Opening of the New Public School”, p. 2.
73 Cyril Pearce, *Those were the Days: The Picola Football League*, n.d., p. 7.
(white) or the coloured children from across the Murray attending this school?" 

Two weeks later, James wrote again: “[t]he white farmers in the neighbourhood (N.S.W.) Messrs Rice, McBurnie and McDougal [are] reluctant to send their children across the river to the Victorian school”. He explained that crossing the Murray River was both difficult and dangerous for children of this age. James wanted to know whether the school building and grounds were “vested in the Minister of Public Instruction as there is some doubt about it”, and whether the track leading to the school was technically “a surveyed or public road”.

A month later James confirmed that seven white children and four “coloured” children still planned to attend the Cummeragunja school, if Harris would allow them. It seems five years earlier, Harris and the farm manager Wilkinson, together with another two men, had requested a school for white children but the School Inspector decided against it as of these parents planned to leave the district anyway. A rumour emerged that the parents in question planned to fight the decision, as they felt that the Cummeragunja school was unfit for white children, as the large number of Aboriginal children made the “moral atmosphere” inappropriate. James had feared their campaign was successful when, a short time later, he received two letters from the department addressed to the “Public School for the Aborigines”. Then came Harris’s interpretation of the new Aborigines Protection Act of 1909, which he felt gave him full power over the station, and the ability to expel residents and ban white visitors to the station at will. By the time Lynch wrote to the Department of Public Instruction a month later, Harris had changed his mind and was allowing white children attend the station’s school. Two months later, Harris moved to Runnymede House, and Bruce Ferguson returned once more to manage Cummeragunja.

Despite Ferguson’s return, the troubles on Cummeragunja continued. In its annual report for 1911, the APB recorded 39 offences against the Act on Cummeragunja,

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74 Thomas James, letter to J. Lynch (Inspector of Schools), 25 June 1910, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939a.
75 Thomas James, letter to DPI, 8 July 1910, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939a.
76 James, letter to DPI, 8 July 1910, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939a.
77 James, letter to DPI, 8 July 1910.
78 James, letter to Lynch, 25 July 1910.
80 James, letter to Lynch, 25 July 1910.
82 APB (later the Aborigines Welfare Board), Minute Books, 20 October 1910, Reel 2790, Series 2, WSRC.
far more than on any of its other stations.\textsuperscript{83} The Inspector’s report on the newly built Cummeragunja school included no hint of these troubles. Instead, it read: “[g]reat interest is taken by the teacher and children in the vegetable and flower gardens … The parents are proud of their school; they ought to be. The Manager takes a great interest in the advancement of the school”.\textsuperscript{84} It is telling that the manager, not James, received the accolades for the successful school, in striking contrast to the \textit{Riverine Herald} report. Meanwhile, that year’s general report on Cummeragunja found that the manager had expelled many “undesirables”, most of whom possessed “a preponderance of white blood” and were “well able to provide for themselves and their families”.\textsuperscript{85} Inside the school, the inspectors found, “conduct was very satisfactory”, and “steady all-round progress” apparent.\textsuperscript{86}

Despite the positive reports, Inspector J. W. Chalmers of the State Children’s Relief Department visited the school in late 1911 and was highly critical.\textsuperscript{87} Chalmers reported that Shadrach James had behaved immorally, that Thomas James’s wife and daughter had been involved in a fight and that his children did not respect him.\textsuperscript{88} In fact, according to Chalmers, James was “heavily handicapped in every way”, being “related by marriage to half the settlement, his domestic relations are strained, and he has allowed both the parents and children to get the upper hand”.\textsuperscript{89} Chalmers recommend that the Board replace him. With this, he claimed the education and discipline of the children would be enhanced and the “moral tone of the settlement would also improve, for it is in the School that a child’s mind is trained”.\textsuperscript{90} Two months later, the local committee of the APB wrote to the Board supporting Chalmers’s criticisms of Shadrach James.\textsuperscript{91}

Shadrach James’s decision to join the Barmah Football Club, and play in opposition to the Cummeragunja team appeared to be at the heart of the matter when Inspector of Schools, George Dart, drove down from Sydney to investigate. Dart, however, did support Chalmers’ allegations against Shadrach: just being in a particular girl’s company was “sufficient to condemn him in point of view of character”, as “[n]o

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{83} NSW Legislative Assembly, \textit{Aborigines (Report of Board for the Protection of, for Year 1911.)}, Sydney: Government Printer, 1912, p. 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{84} NSW LA, \textit{Report of Board, 1911}, p. 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{85} NSW LA, \textit{Report of Board, 1911}, p. 9.
  \item \textsuperscript{86} NSW LA, \textit{Report of Board, 1911}, p. 9.
  \item \textsuperscript{87} J.W. Chalmers, Report to State Children’s Relief Department, 15 December 1911, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939a.
  \item \textsuperscript{88} Chalmers, Report to State Children’s Relief Department, 15 December 1911.
  \item \textsuperscript{89} Chalmers, Report to State Children’s Relief Department, 15 December 1911.
  \item \textsuperscript{90} Chalmers, Report to State Children’s Relief Department, 15 December 1911.
  \item \textsuperscript{91} A. Smith, letter to APB, 3 February 1912, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939a.
\end{itemize}
upright man would be seen in her company”

Dart dismissed the other complaints about James’s family, finding, ultimately, that Thomas James was “doing his best under trying conditions”. By this stage another one of James’s daughters, Rebekah, had replaced Miriam and although Dart mentioned no allegations against her, both she and her brother Shadrach were to be replaced by “a white male assistant”. Dart was conscious, however, that the Board would face “some difficulty … in getting a suitable man for this unenviable position”.

By 16 June, Rebekah James had resigned. In her letter of resignation, she revealed the reason for her persecution: she, too, had kept bad company. She explained that while she had “lived a irreproachable life”, her decision to walk barefoot back from swimming in the Murray River, combined with “barracking at a local football game” had sealed her fate. It seems Rebekah had hidden behind a girl of ill repute to avoid the farm manager, Wilkinson, spotting her without shoes. As a result, she was reported for “walking arm in arm with a girl of undesirable character”.

The Aboriginal man who had supported Wilkinson’s claim that Rebekah was arm-in-arm with this girl of ill repute, later admitted he had lied. Rebekah concluded her resignation letter by noting: “I hold the respect of all the white residents in the neighbourhood as well as the Aboriginals on the Station”, and enclosed a note from a local state school teacher supporting her statement. A day later Shadrach also resigned, maintaining his innocence and asking for help to find another position. He also planned to fight the accusations against him in court, explaining: “I simply desire to expose the conspiracy and nothing more”. It is not likely he had any success in doing so.

Greater freedom was not on the cards for the Cummeragunja community, however. Three years later, the NSW Government passed the Aborigines Amending Act of 1915, extending the power of the 1909 Act. Now the Government could remove Aboriginal children, even if it did not consider them neglected, as long as it believed the removal was in the interests of the child’s “moral or physical welfare”.

Three years later another amendment gave further control to the APB: the term “Aborigines” was to henceforth apply to anyone “apparently having an admixture of Aboriginal blood in his

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93 Public Instruction Department, letter to APB, 11 April 1912, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939a.
94 Public Instruction Department, letter to APB, 11 April 1912, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939a.
95 Rebekah James, letter to APB, 16 June 1912, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939a.
96 James, letter to APB, 16 June 1912.
97 James, letter to APB, 16 June 1912.
98 James, letter to APB, 17 June 1912.
99 Aborigines Amending Act, 1915 (NSW), no. 2.
or her veins”, whether they were supported by the APB or not. It was also now illegal to supply liquor to people deemed Aboriginal.

1919 influenza and tensions

By 1919, conditions on Cummeragunja were reaching a crisis point. On New Year’s Day, a brawl broke out during celebrations at Barmah. The Riverine Herald reported that some Aboriginal men had attacked a constable and when he tried to fire his revolver at them it misfired; an all-in brawl broke out and 15 Aboriginal men were later charged. The ruckus caused by the brawl had hardly calmed down, when an outbreak of deadly influenza, or “Spanish Flu” as it became known, occurred and authorities closed the border between Victoria and NSW. The ban came down so suddenly not even the Mayor of Moama, who had visited Melbourne that day, was allowed back across. New rules required everyone in NSW within a 10-mile radius of the Victorian border to wear a mask, or risk a £10 penalty. Not only did the Cummeragunja people have to comply with these arduous conditions, which, given the location of the station, would have meant wearing a mask at all times, but they were also forcibly inoculated by the local police sergeant, Constantine. On top of this, authorities appointed special rangers to patrol the riverbank at Barmah, and police impounded boats on both sides of the river. The Riverine Herald, in an effort perhaps to show the station had not been unduly targeted, warned: ‘[i]f there is any surreptitious crossing of the river at other parts the police will act similarly in this regard.’ Although the Riverine Herald does not record the number of deaths on Cummeragunja, it is likely this flu was the same one that Colin Walker recalled hearing about, which killed many children: “we heard stories that they could see the fathers and uncles coming up in the nights digging graves to bury the little ones, you know”.

In early March, 1919, the Riverine Herald reported that the Barmah punt, which crossed between Cummeragunja and Barmah, was still being guarded, and all quarantine regulations were “still being strictly enforced, and all traffic is still being held up.” The article leaves the impact of these restrictions on the lives of the Cummeragunja people

100 Aborigines Protection (Amendment) Act, 1918 (NSW) no. 7.
103 “Pneumonic Influenza”, Riverine Herald, 5 February 1919, p. 2.
104 “Pneumonic Influenza”, p. 2.
105 “Pneumonic Influenza”, p. 2.
open to conjecture, but it could not have been easy. Many adults worked in Victoria and would have been stranded either at, or away from, their place of employment. In either case, the ban would have severely impinged on their ability to support their families. By March, it was again possible to cross the NSW-Victorian border, but only for those issued with a passport, and the restrictions this were unclear. A short time later, authorities reopened the border, but for many it had been at least a month without income.

On 7 April 1919, Thomas James sent an urgent letter to the Inspector reporting the “Police having arrested and carried off three girls from [Cummeragunja], the people, panic stricken, have fled with the children and are camped on the Victorian side of the river”.  

Attendance at the Cummeragunja school had dropped from fifty students to eight, and was likely to fall further. Wrote James: “the people strongly resent the summary measure the Board has adopted, through the Police, for moving the girls eligible for service to the Training Home at Cootamundra”. Three days later, the situation had worsened and James telegraphed the Department of Education in alarm: “[n]o attendance today police seized some girls parents with children fled across river situation serious”. Later that month, James sent another note, advising that if the Board was to reassure parents, they would return with their children.

The Riverine Herald, reported the development the following month, albeit in a rather convoluted form. It noted “[y]esterday’s ‘Age’ is responsible for the following”:

Three aboriginal girls were seized last month on the score of being neglected, and were sent to Cootamundra. Fearing further in-roads about sixteen aboriginal families fled to Victoria, and sought the protection of the authorities of this State.

According to the piece, these families had “fled in terror” and had set up camp on the Victorian side of the river, where they were “being left to work out their own salvation”. It is likely that the influenza epidemic and, possibly, the arrests from the riot led to these removals. Not only would it have been significantly more difficult to

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109 Thomas James, letter to Department of Education Inspector, 7 April 1919.

110 Thomas James, Telegram to Dawson, Education Department, 10 April 1919, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939b.

111 Thomas James, letter to Department of Education Inspector, 26 April 1919, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939b.

112 “Cummeragunja Station”, Riverine Herald, 27 May 1919, p. 2

113 “Cummeragunja Station”, p. 2.
provide for the children with the reduced incomes for families, but also Government surveillance of the Cummeragunja people had also increased. This fear of the Government taking Cummeragunja children carried on through the decades following. Colin Walker who grew up in the 1940s remembered: “we were always told to follow the river when we were running home, you know”. He said the checks used to justify taking children away were intrusive and unfair, exclaiming that:

if they looked in your cupboard and they didn’t see anything there they thought we were neglected, but we weren’t. Our clothes were clean and washed and hung out and our bedding was clean and, as I said, our food was cooked every day, straight out of the river.

Returning to August 1919, the campaign to remove James was about to begin in earnest. At the end of that month, the APB wrote to the Under Secretary of the Department of Education to say that the Board had discussed James’s position on Cummeragunja, and “recognised that a good deal of the strife and friction which occurs at the station is due to his influence”. The APB recommended James be transferred to Singleton Aboriginal School or, failing that, be retired, “as in the opinion of the Board harmony is not likely to exist at Cumeroogunga Station whilst he is resident there”. The Department of Education supported the APB’s opinion when they wrote to the Public Service Board, recommending he stay no more than another twelve months on the station. The Public Service Board gave its approval.

Thomas James’s troubles continued two months later when his son Shadrach was taken to court for trespassing on the station. When Shadrach made his defence, he drew from his father’s suggestion nine years earlier that the school was not really under the APB jurisdiction at all. Pleading not guilty, Shadrach argued that he had been found at the school and that since the Public Instruction Department controlled it, “it was a place to which people other than aborigines, could lawfully go”. When Shadrach requested they investigate further, the prosecution dropped the charges.

114 Colin Walker interview.
115 Colin Walker interview.
116 APB, letter to Under Secretary, Department of Education, 28 August 1919, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939b.
117 APB, letter to Under Secretary, Department of Education, 28 August 1919.
118 Department of Education, letter to PSB, 15 September 1919, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939b.
119 “Moama Court”, Riverine Herald, 19 October 1919, p. 2.
120 “Moama Court”, p. 2. For more on using criminal records to better understand colonial experiences see Catharine Coleborne, “Crime, the Legal Archive and Postcolonial Archives”, in Barry Godfrey and Graeme Dunstall (eds), Crime and Empire 1840-1940: Criminal Justice in Local and Global Context, Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2005, pp. 92-105.
Twelve months passed and Thomas James remained on Cummeragunja. In December 1920, he lost patience with the lack of clarity on his future and wrote anxiously to the Education Department. Carefully crossing out the official Department template’s “It is my honour …” typed introduction, James expressed his displeasure over the Department’s failure to confirm his position, to which he was still committed. On 19 January 1921, the Department of Education found that James was “physically and mentally capable of satisfactorily performing the duties” and that he should be retained for another year, but no longer. Seven months later, the APB was again calling for James’s removal, remarking: “it is not in the best interests of the aborigines for Mr James’s services to be retained at Cumeroogunga” and that a transfer was urgent.

In August 1921, the Department of Education once again wrote to the APB about James. Now James was approaching his 62nd birthday and it needed to decide whether he stayed for another year at the Cummeragunja school. “The Inspector of Schools recommends his retention”, it said. In September, the APB wrote once more repeating its request that James be retired. That same day, it posted another letter, claiming that James was “unsuitable” for white schools. In October, the APB wrote to the Public Service Board asking that James be retained on the station until the end of the year but no longer. James was to be granted two months and 15 days long service leave on 1 January 1922, and at the end of this on 15 March, he would retire.

James did finally retire in 1922 after an extraordinary career teaching one community for just over 40 years. As he was no longer permitted on the station, James moved to Barmah. Later he went to North Fitzroy where he used his medical experience to work as a herbalist. He saw many of his former students, including William Cooper and Doug Nicholls, become active in Aboriginal politics before he finally died in Shepparton in 1946.

**Remembering Thomas James**

My oral history interviews reinforce yet complicate the impression of James given by the archives. I want to turn to a number of key themes from these interviews, and consider

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121 Thomas James, letter to PSB, December 1920, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939b.
122 Department of Education, memo, 19 January 1921, NSW State Archives, Kingswood, NSW.
123 APB, letter to Department of Education, 23 August 1921, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939b.
125 APB, letter to Department of Education, 9 September 1921, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939b.
126 APB, letter to Department of Education, 9 September 1921.
127 APB, letter PSB, 20 October 1921, Cummeragunja School File, 1910-1939b.
128 Nelson, “James, Thomas Shadrach (1859 – 1946)”. 
what they reveal about James. As the archives imply, Thomas James, long time
Cummeragunja teacher and a thorn in the side of white authorities, is remembered as
being incredibly committed to his role as teacher. Kevin Atkinson recalled his parents
talking about James’s commitment to education, explaining:

if somebody didn’t attend school, he’d get somebody there to
look after the school, and while he was away he’d go home and
see why somebody wasn’t at school that day. So he used to, you
know, he used to make sure everybody attended school, and had
a good reason why they didn’t, if they didn’t.129

Alf Turner estimated that James “must have taught hundreds of kids”, during his time at
Cummeragunja.130

My narrator’s recalled little about James’s preaching but plenty about the incredible
respect that this community held for Thomas James. Melva Johnson recalled that James
“was like a god” to her grandmother, Nanny.

I think he was a real leader. [pause] But, he had people that
supported him and I think that was the biggest thing. They all
supported one another, whatever was going on.131

Alf Turner remembered James with real fondness, observing, “Grandpa James we used
to call him. He was a great old man”.132 Kevin, too, noted that his parents and the
community generally “all spoke very highly of him”. “He was another man that got on
well with the community”, Kevin observed.133 Lorna Walker remembered him teaching
her relatives and said that “[w]hen he died everything went down”.134

My interviews reveal that James also had a crucial role as a medical adviser on
the station, a role on which the archives are almost silent. Kevin recalled that James
treated various illnesses on the station, and that, while he had “no real qualifications”,
he played the role well.135 Alf Turner, meanwhile, remembered James, his great uncle, “a
thin old gentleman and a very religious man”, mixing powders for the sick. “He was
both teacher and doctor for the people at Cummera because he studied medicine”,
recalled Alf, “[h]e was the man that saved a lot of lives”.136 Melva Johnson explained
that James was both chemist and doctor on the station, and that he played a crucial role

129 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
130 Alf Turner interview.
131 Melva Johnson interview.
132 Alf Turner interview.
133 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
134 Melva Johnson interview.
135 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
136 Alf Turner interview.
in nursing Melva’s mother back to good health when she was a child. “Mum was in bed for ten months, Nanny told me, with rheumatic heart”, recalled Melva, “and he brought her out of it”.

Lorna Walker remembered being about nine or ten and having a nightmare about swimming with leeches in the Murray River. To calm her down, Lorna’s mother took her in the middle of the night over to the James’s residence for help.

Not surprisingly, James is also remembered as a figure of authority on the station. Kevin Atkinson wonders whether James was “in partnership with Matthews” over at Maloga, and that when they moved across, he held a position of authority on Cummeragunja. “I don’t know if he was the manager up here or both the manager and the school teacher for a start”, he pondered, “when they first come here”. Melva Johnson, meanwhile, described him as a “role model”, who was remembered with respect.

**Conclusion**

Let us return now to that Sunday in early February when Thomas James gave his controversial service in the small church on Cummeragunja. Was it rebellion he was preaching? It seems unlikely. A man who stays for more than 40 years in one location is hardly a rebel. But what to make of this man, who was not Aboriginal but who was still not white? Who was educated, but not educated enough. Whose very presence appeared a constant annoyance to many white authorities. Who gave his students an education that many later used to stand up for their rights. It seems from the outset James’s career was beset by extreme difficulty. He was not white so his working conditions were such that white men would not be expected to accept, as were his wages. And what of his early claim that Aboriginal children were slower than whites? After all, he had married an Aboriginal woman and had Aboriginal children of his own. Perhaps this was a way of gaining sympathy from white authorities, who would understand this kind of language. Or perhaps it reflected the preferences rather than the ability of many Aboriginal children, who preferred to be outdoors, learning from their elders, than cramped within four walls. Certainly, it is difficult to fault his overall commitment to the community. Memories are a testament to the good work of this man, who served one community for

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137 Melva Johnson interview.
139 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
140 Melva Johnson, interview with Fiona Davis, 21 September 2009, Moama.
almost half a century, and would later support many when they made their way to Melbourne to carve out new lives for themselves.

It seems Thomas James trod a fine line. Difficult to categorise at a time when racialised categories were pervasive, he was destined to face a challenging life. The prevailing political circumstances heightened these difficulties, increasing controls governing every aspect of Aboriginal lives. Here was a man who preached submission to his flock but who also understood their fears; who taught this community – many of whom were his relations – to read and write and to understand what was going on around them, at a time when they were supposed to learn domestic work and farming, but little more. Perhaps he did no more than this – certainly he is still remembered for these gifts today. And perhaps on that late summer Sunday this was too much for one white man, George Harris, who was already painfully aware his own sway could never be like that of James, glimpsed the power of James’s messages.

This power within the community remains a theme in the following chapter, when I turn to the efforts of Aborigines Inland Mission representatives to shape religion on the station, but who were faced with the community’s own preferences for religious observance, as its members sought to make the best for themselves they could.
Figure 6: Cummeragunja home with garden (AWB.1.BW-N1619.05). Photograph courtesy of Aborigines Welfare Board collection, Audiovisual Archive, AIATSIS
CHAPTER FOUR

“A PERFECT PICTURE OF REAL LIFE IN THE BUSH”:
MISSIONARIES OF THE ABORIGINES INLAND MISSION AND
THE QUESTION OF RELIGIOUS CONTROL

One late Spring evening in 1937, the missionary, Miss W. Cash, set about constructing a fake fire out of coloured paper, some wood and a lantern on Cummeragunja. The fire adequately prepared, Cash, who had arrived only recently to assist in the Christianisation of the Cummeragunja community, took a seat beside this unlikely creation, and, joined by twelve Aboriginal people, began a highly unusual Bible meeting. The Aboriginal impressions of this are now lost, but Cash’s subsequent report certainly paints it as a success. She reported enthusiastically in the following month’s edition of the Aborigines Inland Mission (AIM) magazine, Our Aim, that “[t]he glow”, from this fake fire, “made a perfect picture of real life in the bush, with everybody sitting around the fire enjoying themselves – and so we did”. “There was no reading”, wrote Cash, “so everything was done by memory. Hymns were sung and scripture quoted”.¹

This striking instance of cultural negotiation between a missionary and her Aboriginal congregation is a fitting entry point for this chapter, which seeks to highlight the complex process of cultural exchange that underwrote the transmission of religion and the work of AIM missionaries on Cummeragunja in the early decades of the twentieth century. Through a consideration of Our Aim and my oral history interviews, I explore the ways the AIM relied on the good will and, at times, the assistance of Aboriginal people and, more broadly, the question of control over religious observance during these years. In doing so, I hope to shed light on why one AIM missionary considered a fake fire an appropriate setting for a Bible meeting in 1937, and, more generally, the ways members of a settler colonial society promoted religion to Aboriginal people during these years.

I begin by providing a brief overview of the questions surrounding Aboriginal conversions, before turning to Cummeragunja and the arrival of the AIM. From here I turn to one particular missionary, Miss M.E. McAulay who arrived in the 1920s and chart her time on the reserve through to her later departure and the question of religious

¹ W. Cash, “Cummeragunja”, Our Aim, 15 May 1937
control as it shifted towards the Church of Christ. I end with the Christian Endeavour movement as it played out on the station, return to the fake fire and make my concluding comments.

**Aboriginal Christianity and the AIM arrival**

Missionaries have long had cause to wonder at the validity of the conversions that their converts claim have occurred. Particularly in the context of colonialism, indigenous communities had plenty of reasons to convert to Christianity, seeking the protection, education and health-care that missions often provided. The traditional indicators of conversion – baptism, marriage, church attendance – could be politically and socially useful to indigenous people, as they sought to carve out lives for themselves in a new political environment. Did this self-interest preclude a “true” conversion? If the outward signs were potentially misleading, missionaries faced a difficult job ascertaining whether the conversion was, indeed, true, whatever they understood that “true” to mean. According to Peggy Brock, religious change was not “entrenched within a community”, until it took on real meaning for that community’s members, becoming a real part of their “the social and cultural life”.

In Australia, Aboriginal communities defied missionary attempts to define what was and what was not true Christianity. Many groups, in the words of Brock, “refined Christianity in response to economic and social pressures and their own cultural imperatives”, a process that became particularly apparent after the mission era. Bill Edwards, meanwhile, has accused writers of previous studies of “play[ing] down the response of Aboriginal people in Australia to Christianity”. In his research, Edwards finds that Pitjantjatjara Christians in central Australia did not see their conversion to Christianity as affecting their fulfillment of traditional obligations. Likewise, Fiona

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4 Brock, “Introduction”, p. 11.

5 Brock, “Introduction”, p. 11.


Magowan has written that Yolngu Christianity brought “ancestral law and Christianity together as extensions of bodily feeling and expression in landscape and seascape”.\(^8\) Many Aboriginal people converted to Christianity without abandoning traditional spirituality. “They were not empty wine skins waiting to be filled”, in the words of Noel Loos, “but wine skins holding good old wine”.\(^9\) These combined to form a new style of Christianity. Loos observes that later generations of Aboriginal Christians began to see traditional Aboriginal spirituality as “a forerunner to Christianity”, a system of belief that was “completed” by this addition, rather than destroyed.\(^10\)

Those perhaps most responsible for this creation of an Aboriginal Christianity were Aboriginal evangelists, who until recently have received little scholarly attention. Certainly Anne O’Brien think so. In *God’s Willing Workers: Women and Religion in Australia* she wrote that “Aboriginal Christians were the most effective evangelists of their people”.\(^11\) Particularly as the major churches withdrew from providing education, health and other primary services to Aboriginal people, Aboriginal evangelists and pastors exercised increasingly control over Aboriginal Christianity.\(^12\) Even before this, Aboriginal people played a crucial role in achieving conversions. Brock puts this lack of historical regard down to the fact that Aboriginal Christians often engaged in spreading the Word through informal arrangements, with few Aboriginal first hand accounts and “acknowledgement in mission-generated records”.\(^13\) Studying Aboriginal evangelists, however, offers valuable possibilities and the texts they produce, according to Brock,

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\(^12\) Terence Ranger, “Christianity and the First Peoples: Some Second Thoughts”, in Brock (ed.) *Indigenous Peoples and Religious Change*, p. 29. In the African context, Elizabeth Elbourne has argued that missionaries were dependent on African intermediaries to convey their message, and that these achieved more conversions in Africa than European missionaries. Elizabeth Elbourne, “Mother’s Milk: Gender, Power and Anxiety on a South African Mission Station, 1839-40”, in Grimshaw and May (eds), *Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Exchange*, p. 22.

“unveil the complexities of religious change as a process which occurred within indigenous societies, rather than an imposition from outside”.14

Aboriginal evangelists, or “native helpers” as Our Aim dubbed them, were key to the work of the AIM on Cummeragunja. What better way to appeal to the sentiments of Aboriginal people than through the engagement of one of their own? And, from my own perspective, what better evidence that religion on Cummeragunja was a process of cultural exchange? Far from being a one-way transmission of a white Christian tradition, Aboriginal people mediated this message before passing it onto others in their community. There were benefits from both perspectives: it appears to have given the AIM a right to an Aboriginal representative based on Cummeragunja where a white missionary would not have been permitted to stay, and it gave Aboriginal people a level of empowerment. To quote Diane Barwick, the AIM’s appointment of Aboriginal evangelists “bolstered morale”, particularly at a time when the Aborigines Protection Board’s activities were making life on the station difficult.15 Despite all this, the relationship still had its problems. The message that these Aboriginal representatives were communicating was at the expense of existing Aboriginal culture and spiritual beliefs. Further, Kevin Atkinson, born on the station in the 1930s, questioned the real possibilities of progress within the AIM ranks during this period. “I don’t know whether people rose up and became leaders in religion and went on any further”, he remarked to me, “other than to take part in it as singers and attendees and that type of thing”.16 This is something I explore in this chapter.

Retta Long must have known from the start that Aboriginal evangelism, and, at the very lease, active Aboriginal co-operation were going to be important to her mission when she first established the AIM in 1905.17 Certainly, she began training Aboriginal evangelists from as early as 1906.18 Long had created the AIM after leaving the NSW Aborigines’ Mission, for whom she had previously laboured, seeking to create a faith mission flexible in its approach, enabling its missionaries to, as she later explained, “adopt the method of church government on their mission station that they believed was

16 Kevin Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 15 February 2008, Cummeragunja.
17 For more on Retta Long and the work of the AIM see O’Brien, God’s Willing Workers, pp. 142-155.
18 See for instance “Mr and Mrs Alick Russell, Native Helpers”, Our Aim, 1 December 1913, p. 3.
most biblical”. This flexibility was to be important to the AIM in its work on Cummeragunja, enabling its missionaries to choose the method best suited to this community. The AIM was to hold a precarious position on Cummeragunja, where they could visit with the Manager’s approval, but not live. They offered little in the way of practical items or skills, bringing with them no goods, no medicines, no education and no employment, adhering as they did to “Romantic rather than Enlightenment” missionary principles, which meant that “depth of faith” not training or education achievement, “was the crucial requirement for an effective missionary”. This approach meant that the goodwill and support of the Cummeragunja community was even more important than in other missionary endeavours.

Long’s first Our Aim article on Cummeragunja appeared in 1907, the first year of the magazine’s publication. Her account clearly showed that while the direct influence of the Maloga missionaries Daniel and Janet Matthews may have ended, the Manager, George Harris, his wife and the school teacher Thomas James were dutifully carrying out the work of the Lord. Wrote Long: “[t]hese friends are labouring faithfully for the Master, and the above-mentioned incident will strengthen their hands”. The focus of this article was the deathbed conversion of an Aboriginal man, whom she called “Old Cobby”. “With joy those who were praying for him, and watching for his soul, saw the effects of the entrance of the Gospel light into his soul”, wrote Long, “and witnessed his departure from this world with a confident ‘Jesus is opening the beautiful gates to let me in’”. Long’s observations were typical of Our Aim reportage, which sought to encourage AIM missionaries and, importantly, to secure outside support for missionary

work. The magazine commonly reported conversions as occurring on deathbeds and the missionaries often marked them with a rather unlikely quote, such as “old Cobby’s” above. I assume in these cases Long allowed herself a fair degree of creative flair in her transcription, as she sought to praise not only those responsible for these conversions and the missionaries who toiled alongside them, but also the supporters of their endeavours. In fact, the magazine itself named one of its key roles as “carry(ing) news of the work into the homes of sympathisers”.

This was, after all, a faith mission and while, in theory, it relied on God to survive and did not solicit financial aid, in reality it relied on public support to keep it going. Conversion narratives were ideal for encouraging this vital backing. The AIM was not unique in this: in her study of missionary anthropologists, Helen Bethea Gardner has observed that it was typical for “a steady diet of conversion narratives” to be sent home to encourage missionary sponsors. David Arnold and Robert A. Bickers, likewise, warn that using missionary sources “uncritically” could be “profoundly misleading”. The authors of these rosy accounts were not simple minded but rather deliberately shaped these accounts for this purpose. As Gardner points out: “all residents of the mission field were aware that the situation on the ground was thick with ambiguities and complexities”. Elizabeth Elbourne agrees, noting that a study of the archival record that reveals the real “anxieties, tensions and dense social relationships” that underwrote missionary work.

Moreover, while missionaries may have exaggerated the enthusiasm with which Aboriginal people converted, a significant number of Aboriginal people did become committed Christians, as Thor Wagstrom has pointed out.

Despite Long’s enthusiasm, Our AIM turned away from Cummeragunja for another six years, until August 1913 when it reported that Alick Russell, an early Aboriginal evangelist from Karuah, NSW, had taken up residency. Russell was living with James and the Manager had given him permission to hold services and prayer meetings in Cummeragunja’s church. “Our brother” Russell was doing good work, holding meetings and witnessing “the Lord working in the lives of the people, many of

26 Helen Bethea Gardner, “Practising Christianity, Writing Anthropology: Missionary Anthropologists and their Informants”, in Grimshaw and May, Missionaries, Indigenous People and Cultural Exchange, p. 120.
28 Gardner, “Practising Christianity, Writing Anthropology”, p. 120.
29 Elbourne, “Mother’s Milk”, p. 22.
whom have been awakened to see their need of a Saviour, while backsliders have been restored and faithful ones refreshed”. 31 Two months later, an unnamed source from Cummeragunja sent another letter to Our Aim heralding “Brother” Russell’s success in converting an old but influential resident, Aaron Atkinson, “the most popular man on the place”, who had been “struck down by paralysis”. 32 Although Matthews had converted him, his faith had “lapsed” until shortly before his death, when Russell spoke to him “in his conscious moments at the hospital”. While there are no speeches of startling Christian clarity provided, such as in the case of “Old Cobby”, the letter writer assured readers: “we have every reason to think he was comfortable in his mind before the end came”. 33 Further into the magazine is Russell’s own account of the conversion, which he undertook after a 14-mile bicycle ride into Echuca where Atkinson must have been in hospital and read aloud to him from a Bible. “I asked him was he trusting Jesus”, wrote Russell. “He could only mumble his answers, but the meaning was ‘Yes’, as he clasped his hands in mine for just two minutes”. 34 More exciting, perhaps, than this conversion was the revival that occurred during Atkinson’s funeral, with no fewer than 20 souls offering themselves to God. “We cannot help praising God when such blessing comes and He uses such weak instruments”, celebrated Russell. 35

Cummeragunja funerals, while obviously conforming to a certain degree of Christian tradition, would not have been the same as those to which the missionaries themselves were accustomed. When I interviewed Alf Turner, he recalled that Aboriginal funerals in the area were far more demonstrative than those in the white community. “They’re not so bad now, but when I was a kid they used to be very sad funerals”, he told me. 36 “Like all the people would be crying and you weren’t allowed to play if anyone had died, or make a noise”. 37 Kevin Atkinson, meanwhile, recalled that when a resident died, “people used to sit up around them … the families would have the body in their front room, or the dining room, on their land”. 38 He said on the day of the funeral, the coffin would be loaded into a truck and taken to the cemetery. The mourners would show their grief clearly, he recalled. “Different to the white funerals and that sort of thing, people are not ashamed to cry, you know or grieve openly. And that still goes on

31 “Cummeragunja”, Our Aim, 16 August 1913, pp. 6-7.
32 “A Revival at Cummeragunja”, Our Aim, 1 October 1913, p. 3.
33 “A Revival at Cummeragunja”, Our Aim, 1 October 1913, p. 3.
34 “Cummeragunja”, Our Aim, 1 October 1913, p. 4.
35 “Cummeragunja”, Our Aim, 1 October 1913, p. 4.
36 Alf Turner, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Mooroopna.
37 Alf Turner interview.
38 Kevin Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 10 April 2008, Cummeragunja.
today”. He said this enabled the families and friends to deal with their grief. “You have that grieving and then you have closure when that body goes in the ground and you come away and the healing starts then after that”. 39 Melva Johnson remembered funerals as “a good time” where people congregated in houses, with some of her “happiest times” when she was a child, walking up to the cemetery on a Sunday. “It was just lovely to be able to go and pay our respects”. 40 Cummeragunja funerals may seem at first glance to be the performance of a white Christian tradition, but this was also a tradition that the community had taken and made its own. The AIM were using this intimate moment, when residents would clearly have been emotional and, perhaps, thinking of their own mortality, to carry out their religious work.

That same month, Russell married Aaron Atkinson’s daughter, herself a supporter of missionary endeavours, who had enlisted to become a “native worker” even before her marriage. 41 December’s edition of Our Aim featured a large photograph of the happy pair dressed in their wedding clothes: she in a long white dress and he in a formal dark suit. In a magazine that rarely published actual photographs, this was a rare sight, and one carefully orchestrated to demonstrate the level of assimilation that Aboriginal people could achieve. 42 But we should not overlook the power that this image also invested in the newlyweds. As Jane Lydon observed in her analysis of Aboriginal wedding photos, women used this “deployment of white gender to improve their lot within white society”. 43

This notion of “getting on” in white society was a common theme in my oral history interviews. Melva Johnson, for instance, recalled that she took part in concerts because she was “made to” by the older people in the community. She said they even pressured her to take part in a debutante ball when she turned 14. “[O]ur old people, they had a vision”, explained Melva. 44 “They made us – because they knew we would have to sooner or later – move or make it better for ourselves”. 45 She returned to this point later in the interview, remarking “we had to live in the white man’s world and that

39 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
40 Melva Johnson, interview with Fiona Davis, 21 September 2009, Cummeragunja.
41 “A Wedding”, Our Aim, 1 October 1913, p. 3.
44 Melva Johnson interview.
45 Melva Johnson interview.
was it from then on”, and again, when she recalled her father speaking his traditional language to researcher Luise Hercus. Melva Johnson interview. Footage of Luise Hercus recording local Aboriginal languages can be found in the AIATSIS library, see Luise Hercus, Language Recording in South-East Australia, Audiovisual Archives, film/video, DAC00025_1-3. For more on the traditional language of Cummeragunja residents see Heather Bowe, (ed.), Yorta Yorta Language Heritage, Clayton: Depart of Linguistics, Monash University, 1998. Hercus also recorded the language of the nearby Wamba Wamba people, see Luise Hercus, Wembawemba Dictionary, Canberra: L.A. Hercus, 1992.

46 Melva Johnson interview. “Mr and Mrs Alick Russell, Native Helpers”, Our Aim, 1 December 1913, p. 3.

47 “Mr and Mrs Alick Russell, Native Helpers”, p. 3.

48 “Mr and Mrs Alick Russell, Native Helpers”, p. 3.


50 “Mr and Mrs. Alick Russell, Native Helpers”, p. 3.

51 The magazine used the opportunity of the Russell wedding to discuss an issue of particular concern to AIM missionaries: the nature of Alick’s own conversion, remarking that this occurred in August 1905 when he was precisely 15 years and 11 months old. The person responsible for this conversion was not one of the many white women employed by the AIM, but rather his own brother, who, while unnamed in this article, was “the hero of the leaflet, entitled ‘A Corn of Wheat’”. When Alick was sixteen he offered himself as a “Native Helper”, and after six months’ training under the missionary at Karuah, Charles Harrington, he shifted to Walcha for ten months of “practical training”. In the years since, it appeared Alick had had an itinerant lifestyle, spending time at Yass, Brungle and Moonah Cullah as well as Cummeragunja. While at times the AIM was frustrated by the frequent movement of its Aboriginal evangelists, as Anne O’Brien has observed, on this occasion it was not. Instead, the magazine wrote approvingly, “[o]ur young brother has been much used amongst his own people, and has led many of them into touch with the Lord Jesus”.

52 It initially seemed that Alick had cemented his relationship with the Cummeragunja community through his marriage to a daughter of a prominent community member, in the same way as Thomas James, initially an outsider, had confirmed his own acceptance through his marriage to Cummeragunja woman, Ada Cooper decades earlier. Appearances were deceiving: Alick disappears from the pages of Our Aim with barely a mention. In August 1914, the magazine notes that the Russells returned to Karuah for Christmas as the AIM had granted Alick six months’ leave from
Six months leave starting at Christmas would have seen the Russell’s return to Cummeragunja in late June, or even July at the latest; clearly, the AIM had less control over its Aboriginal representatives than it would have liked. Later in the article, the writer celebrated Alick Russell’s good work while at Cummeragunja, recounting the mass conversions that occurred when Atkinson died, and the work that he carried out on a daily basis that regularly saw “fresh wonder of His grace”.

It is likely this was a pointed reminder to Alick of the work that awaited him back on the reserve. If this was the strategy, it was unsuccessful. In April 1914 under the heading “Items of Interest”, it is noted that, finally, the Russells “are about to return to Cummeragunja”. “They have had a long rest at Karuah”, the magazine remarked, “and we trust that another useful term of service is before our young brother”. The Russells had other ideas; Our Aim is silent on their whereabouts until part way through 1917, when it reported they remained at Karuah.

Cummeragunja dropped away from the focus of Our Aim in subsequent years, although the work of the AIM continued. In the same year, Our Aim reported on the Russell’s relocation to Singleton, it outlined the multiple debts that white Australians owed to Aboriginal people. These included such debts as “that which we owe all mankind” and “that which the strong owe to the weak”. This particular debt is indicative of prevailing ideas of race at this time. “We are part of the strongest of all races, the noble British race whose boast it is to protect the weak and to succour the needy”, exclaimed the author. Another debt was one of land. They are a dispossessed people, and we are the dispossessors”, the author mused. But it was not too late; readers could still work towards discharging this debt, both “to the heathen at home as well as the pagan abroad”. As I observed earlier, the AIM may have been relying on the grace of God, but they were certainly doing their best to aid this process. It is possible this passage offers some insight into why the AIM did not work well with the Aborigines Protection Board, as Christine Brett Vickers’s research shows. Perhaps their recognition

52 “Our Native Helper”, Our Aim, 1 August 1914, p. 3
53 “Our Native Helper”, Our Aim, p. 3
54 “Items of Interest”, Our Aim, 1 April 1915, p. 8.
55 “Farewell to Miss Stewart” (Missionary at Karuah), Our Aim, 1 October 1917, p. 8.
56 “Mission Work in Australia: in What Way are we Debtors to the Aborigines?” Our Aim, 1 September 1917, p. 8.
of a debt owed to Aboriginal people on such a scale, was a little unsettling to those seeking to ameliorate their conditions on a relatively low budget.

Cummeragunja remained absent from the pages of Our Aim for some time in the early 1920s, but behind the scenes, religious life on the station was continuing, with another Aboriginal person preparing himself to take on the work of missionary. In July 1921, Edwin Atkinson (known as Eddy) accompanied his uncle, Thomas James, to the Barham Native Convention, a religious gathering held over 100 kilometres from Cummeragunja. After James’s retirement the following year, Eddy became increasingly active in church life on the station, but if he had any association with the AIM at this stage, Our Aim made no mention of it. In fact, the magazine was generally quiet on Cummeragunja until 1924, when an AIM missionary, Miss M.E. McAulay, arrived to carry out her role in furthering the work of the Lord.

Miss M.E. McAulay

It was a winter morning when McAulay first visited and was struck by the level of civilisation that she encountered. “The beautifully kept gardens, of cosmos, chrysanthemums, dahlias, African marigolds, and many other beautiful flowers in full bloom”, she enthused in a subsequent article, “made a wonderful combination of colour against the red, newly painted cottages”. She was most impressed with the latter, which she referred to as those “neat little cottages with their pretty gardens”, which, in some cases, were “equal to many a suburban home”. McAulay was less impressed with the 20 bag camps she found at Barmah, although when invited into one she “found everything so scrupulously clean and a nice supper set on the table”. While converting Aboriginal people to Christianity was evidently the overarching concern of the AIM, McAulay’s comments reveal the close links of this activity with the broader settler colonial goal of imparting western civilisation. In fact, Our Aim’s preoccupation with ideas of western civilisation clearly demonstrated that the AIM saw assimilation and religion as connected. Its “Object” published on the title page of the magazine in the 1920s clearly stated that its aim was to send missionaries “throughout

61 “The Harvest Field – Barham”, Our Aim, 18 July 1921, p. 4. I have chosen to refer to Edwin Atkinson as “Eddy”, using his first name due to the high number of Atkinsons who appear in my research, and the shortening because this is how my narrators refer to him.
Australia to preach the gospel and teach them how to live Christian lives”. Neat homes and well-kept gardens were a large part of these Christian lives. Michael Harkin, in his study of missionaries in British Columbia, observed that homes had a particular meaning in this context. “The house is an entity both material and immaterial”, he wrote, “providing shelter from the elements as well as a model of normative social organization”.

The white missionaries were not alone in their preoccupation with maintaining a well-presented home: Aboriginal people, themselves, were conscious of the need to live up to these white norms. Colin Walker, who spent his childhood on the station in the 1930s, clearly linked western civilisation and religion when he observed to me:

The old people always said cleanliness is next to godliness … Oh clean – you could eat off the floor. We only had dirt floors … They used to scrub ‘em, get down on their knees and scrub ‘em.

He said although this was not always an easy task, given they had to do washing with just normal soap cut up, it was an important one; having “washed and clean” clothing affected how they felt about themselves. These comments also demonstrate the level of commitment Aboriginal people showed towards some of these aims. Melva Johnson, likewise, described Cummeragunja’s gardens as “lovely”, telling me “[t]hey really took a pride in their homes, I tell you”. Iris Swan agreed, saying that “[e]ven the ones that lived in the fairly humble places on the creek always kept it tidy around their homes. They usually had a geranium growing”.

Back on Cummeragunja, McAulay was pleased to see religion had not dropped away completely from the station, remarking that a service at the station’s church was held by “one of the dark men, who has faithfully held the fort, and is continuing to do so, till a missionary can come”. Aboriginal men were not the only ones working hard; McAulay noted that after she left, “a dark woman is continuing the S. School until a missionary comes, and several of the women are keeping up weekly prayer meetings.”

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70 Iris and Jack Swan, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Picola.
72 McAulay, “Cummeragunja and Barmah”, p. 13.
Here it seems that while McAulay may have appreciated the efforts of Aboriginal people in directing their own Christianity, she considered it inferior, nonetheless, to an official missionary, such as herself.

In this, McAulay’s first article in Our Aim, she was conscious of depicting the Cummeragunja community as similarly appreciative of her presence. “The people were around me like bees”, she remarked, “each one eager to tell me how glad they were that a missionary had come”.73 During a service at Cummeragunja that night of her first visit, McAulay reported that many Cummeragunja people cried as they told her of their unworthiness and “how they implored the Lord with tears, to send a missionary”.74 In November 1924, Our Aim observed that within a few weeks of McAulay’s departure from the area, “the people sent an urgent petition asking that she be allowed to return as their resident missionary”.75 Possibly the AIM exaggerated this support and fabricated, or at least engineered, the petition, but either way, it shows clearly the importance of Aboriginal endorsement of this organisation’s work.

In considering McAulay’s claims to popularity, I turn here to my oral history interviews. Within these, the AIM is recognised but Eddy receives the bulk of the accolades. When I asked Turner, for example, about Eddy he replied: “Oh, he was a lovely man. Uncle Eddy we called him. A great old man”.76 Turner said that occasionally white people from churches in Melbourne and from surrounding towns would come to Eddy’s services and join in. “He was loved by everybody, Uncle Eddy”, said Turner. “He was a real Christian man”.77 Colin Walker was also full of praise for Eddy, describing him as “a great old man, an Aboriginal man”. “He never preached to you but he’d come up and talk to you like anyone else”, recalled Colin. “We still think of him and still respect his name”.78 John Atkinson, meanwhile, remembered Eddy’s wife Ellen for her “magnificent” organ playing skills.79

My narrators’ memories of the AIM missionaries were quite different from those they held of Eddy. John recalled that the community, always had missionaries from the AIM based at Barmah; they were “good” people and the community “always enjoyed” them. But, in an observation that revealed the power structures underpinning the

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75 “New South Wales”, Our Aim, 24 November 1924, p. 5.
76 Alf Turner interview.
77 Alf Turner interview.
78 Colin Walker interview.
community’s relationship with the AIM, he also remarked: “They were usually extremely poor people. Sometimes the Aboriginals would have to give them handouts to keep them alive”. He laughed, and then added: “You often wondered what made ‘em tick”.

John’s brother Kevin remembered putting money in a collection tin at Sunday School and services. Alf knew the AIM missionaries quite intimately as he spent time at their Barmah house, directly across the road from his own. “[W]e used to go to their place all the time. And you’d have little chats, you know, they’d call the kids in and have a bit of a talk on Christianity and whatever”. He recalled two unmarried women in particular, a Miss Williams, who was in her thirties and Miss C. Presnell, in her seventies. He was pleased to run into one of those missionaries, Williams, some years later when he was in Dubbo. “They were very good people”. Lorna Walker, meanwhile, remembered Miss Presnell writing to one of her friends on Cummeragunja for many years afterwards.

Colin was markedly less enthusiastic in his recollections of the AIM than in his memories of Eddy. “They had a missionaries’ quarter, a little house just over the river”, he recalled, noting this was just opposite Cummeragunja. “[T]hey’d cross over in a boat”. Colin’s subsequent comments indicated that his own needs often mediated his relationship with the AIM. He told me he occasionally attended the AIM’s Sunday School classes held at Barmah, “especially if there were sandwiches there”. He said the AIM placed pressure on residents to attend that was not necessarily welcome. “[W]e were frightened I think too. You know, they’d come around to your house and say ‘we’re having Sunday school and we want you there’”.

Memories of the AIM were, in fact, overshadowed not just by Eddy, but also by William B. Payne, a Church of Christ minister from Echuca, who with his wife ran church services on the station, in conjunction with Eddy. Alf Turner remembered Payne, a train driver, coming out to organise the station’s Christmas tree each year, which would have presents for each of the children on the station and also those over at Barmah, including Alf. Payne, whom Alf estimated was about 40 years of age when he knew him, would sometimes bring his wife and their young boys with him. Melva Johnson said

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80 John Atkinson interview.
81 Alf Turner interview.
82 Alf Turner interview.
83 Lorna Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 24 March 2009, Cummeragunja.
84 Colin Walker interview.
85 Colin Walker interview.
86 Colin Walker interview.
87 Colin Walker interview.
88 Alf Turner interview.
that her family was not inclined towards religion, nor were her grandparents, “[b]ut we respected Uncle Eddy. We respected Mr and Mrs Payne”.  

McAulay, nevertheless, seemed certain of her popularity and it is likely she would have felt she was privileging the Cummeragunja people when she arrived a few months later to take up permanent residence. In a gesture that hints at a lack of practical consideration for the community, she gave them only one day’s notice of her impending arrival. Fortunately for her, the community still managed to provide her with a neatly furnished house, with “green bushes put in the fireplace and on the table, to give it a homely appearance”.  

This was a particularly impressive feat by the community, given the generally acknowledged shortage of housing at this time. A month later, she reported that the community had also provided a temporary church. “An Indian man, who lives here has erected a building and placed his organ in it”, she wrote, “and has allowed us the use of the building and organ for our services as long as a missionary is here”.  

The AIM later revealed the Indian man in question was Meera Navy Bux. According to Barwick, Bux was a relative of Eddy and had “provided an organ and the use of his shop premises for church services conducted by Atkinson”. I would assume, then, that the community had passed on this privilege to McAulay, rather than created it especially for her, as her comments seemed to suggest. A couple of months later, McAulay was again absent from Barmah, but returned home to find the mission house “was nice and clean and had been painted on the outside to give it a fresh appearance”. Her congregation had also made a new boat to enable her access to Cummeragunja without having to wait for the punt, the only other way until the 1960s to cross the Murray River separating the station from Barmah.  

McAulay remains a mysterious figure in the reports of the AIM. From her comments, it is impossible to judge her age or even personal inclinations or motivations, apart from her general interest in promoting Christianity and white civilisation. I draw here, then, from broader studies of women missionaries and a more general reading of Our Aim and the AIM files. Missionary work presented unmarried women with the

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89 Melva Johnson interview.
possibility of a career and, in the words of Ruth Compton Brouwer looking at the Canadian mission field, “an escape from the stigma that spinsterhood often carried in their own communities”. As Rosemary Seton has argued in the British context, “opportunities for unmarried, middle-class women seeking respectable employment” were limited. McAulay who lived alone at Barmah was either unmarried or a widow: here was an opportunity for her to make a meaningful contribution at a time when society grudgingly supported women having a professional position.

It is unlikely McAulay had more than a basic education for, as I noted earlier, the AIM chose its representatives based on a candidate’s calling rather than their skills. This becomes particularly clear in the AIM files held in Sydney’s Mitchell Library. Evidence of employment interviews reveal that the main reason people gave for getting involved in missionary work was because God had “called” them. A typical report of an employment interview with a Miss Sutton, herself years later a missionary who visited Cummeragunja, appears in the Melbourne Auxiliary Council’s minutes in 1927. The Council asked Sutton to explain “her experience of the call to the work”, and then asked her “several doctrinal questions”. This fits with Rosemary Seton’s study of the London Missionary Society’s interview records that, she said, first called on their interviewees to establish their “fundamental spiritual qualifications”. Following this, the Melbourne committee moved that the AIM welcome her “as a gracious and conscientious Christian who is manifestly called of God to this work”. Despite these kind words, there was a less flattering rider to these comments: “she appears in a measure to lack brilliance in mentality and alertness at first sight”, but it appeared “that she has the qualities of a plodder, and one whose work will tell in fruitfulness and effectiveness”. The AIM was not looking for a brilliant over-

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97 Melbourne AIM Auxiliary, Executive Committee Meeting, 22 April 1927.
98 Rosemary Seton, “‘Open Doors for Female Labourers’”, p. 57.
99 Melbourne AIM Auxiliary, Executive Committee Meeting, 22 April 1927.
achiever, but rather an individual with a deep Christian belief who would devote themselves faithfully to the job of saving souls.

A more general reading of *Our Aim* around the time of McAulay’s arrival on Cummeragunja similarly hints at ideas she could well have had about Aboriginal people. A regular section called “Aboriginaldom” in August 1924 wrote that the “ethnological work amongst the Aborigines of recent times has revolutionised our knowledge of primitive human relationships”, while another snippet included on that page observed a contemporary writer had “had personal experience of a fully developed religious capacity in the Aborigines”.100 It is important to remember that the AIM pitched its magazine at potential sponsors of its missionary work. Underlying this information, therefore, there seems a desire to paint Aboriginal people as a good investment. Despite what others might have been saying, the AIM was confident Aboriginal people could adapt to white Christianity and civilisation.

McAulay’s reports on Aboriginal participation within Christian work on the station certainly show she did believe they could convert to Christianity. At Christmas, she wrote that one of her flock, who had conducted services when a white AIM missionary was not present, had given a short message.101 McAulay’s presence, however, makes his role seem largely redundant in this article. It is likely this man was Eddy Atkinson, whom the AIM had appointed as a “Native Helper” in early 1925. Reporting the appointment in May 1925, the *Our Aim* writer observed: “Our brother has endeavoured to uphold the standard of the Cross for the last twelve years”.102

Frequent absences and ill health, the plague of many missionaries, marked McAulay’s tenure on the station, providing Aboriginal people with many opportunities to take their own religious services.103 In her April 1925 update in *Our Aim*, for instance, McAulay, recently returned from a month’s holiday, reported she had been too sick to attend a prayer meeting and had permitted “the people” to go to church to sing hymns:

> To my surprise and joy, I could hear, as I lay in bed, someone praying and speaking, and found afterwards that one who has been recently restored came to the meeting, and when he was

100 “Aboriginaldom”, *Our Aim*, 23 August 1924, p. 4.
102 “Another Native Helper”, *Our Aim*, 20 May 1925, p. 12.
told the missionary was ill, he led the meeting and gave a message.\textsuperscript{104}

Since that time, whenever she conducted meetings at Cummeragunja, one or two men always held concurrent meetings at Barmah. According to Peggy Brock, this was quite common in Aboriginal communities throughout Australia, where most "teaching and preaching took place away from the supervision of the outsider missionaries".\textsuperscript{105}

Two influential white women came to see McAulay’s good work the following year. The first was Janet Matthews, who continued to take an interest in the station, and visited with her daughter in June 1925, twenty-three years after her husband’s death.\textsuperscript{106} Her visit reflected the lasting legacy of the work of the Matthews on Maloga. Shortly after Matthews’s visit, Retta Long, also found her way to Cummeragunja. Long was impressed by the level of civilisation on the station, as McAulay had been when she first arrived. During her visit, she met Alec Briggs, his wife “and their nice family and comfortable house and beautiful garden with its scent of violets floating out over the village”.\textsuperscript{107} Among her long list of visits to Cummeragunja people, was one to “Granny Briggs, now nearing the Glory land after nearly 107 years pilgrimage, the last living Tasmanian aboriginal, sleeping most of the time, but until recently with all faculties alert, walking in the fear of the Lord”.\textsuperscript{108} Our Aim frequently discussed this idea of Aboriginal people as a dying race.\textsuperscript{109} For instance, the magazine published an article earlier that year titled “A Declining Race that presented a series of figures, it claimed could be used to “easily calculate the extinction of the race in its purity”.\textsuperscript{110} The AIM used this opportunity to appeal to its white supporters, addressing its concluding sentence to them: “[w]hat shall we then say to these things?”\textsuperscript{111}

Even the Melbourne newspaper, the Argus, revealed an interest in McAulay’s work on Cummeragunja, when it reported on the annual meeting of the Melbourne Auxiliary of the AIM in July 1925. McAulay attended this meeting, accompanied by Thomas James, whom the paper described as “a native missionary”. Both addressed

\begin{footnotes}
\item[105] Brock, “Setting the Record Straight”, p. 125.
\item[109] This was a common perception at the time. See for instance Daisy Bates, The Passing of the Aborigines, London, 1938.
\item[111] “Aboriginaldom”, p. 4.
\end{footnotes}
meeting attendees, James “pleading for more workers”. Another Cummeragunja man, described as “a mission aborigine”, “spoke of the fine work which Miss McAulay was doing, and also emphasised the need for more help”.

With religious work appearing to progress steadily on Cummeragunja, the departure of McAulay from the station not long after this seems abrupt. Perhaps she felt the leading role of the missionary was, after all, unnecessary, and that the community could cope only too well without her. Regardless, two years later McAulay could be found in Palm Island, Queensland, continuing her mission work, while Eddy Atkinson and William Payne had taken on her role at Cummeragunja. Religious work on the station appeared to carry along unremarkably until a “wonderful incident” in 1928.

_Eddy Atkinson and William Payne take charge_

That winter, Eddy wrote a lengthy letter to Long, which she published in a subsequent edition of _Our Aim_. A conversion had occurred, startling the previously “slack and flat” religious work Atkinson had been undertaking, on an ordinary Saturday afternoon when Eddy happened to be in Barmah. Here again, we see the instrumental role of Aboriginal people in the conversion of their community. “It seems to me it was God’s doing”, wrote Eddy, “for I met one of our men, Robert Peters, at the hotel; he was very drunk and when he saw me he came to me and asked if he could come home with me”. The pair had only just reached the river, when Peters asked Atkinson to pray for him.

I prayed as I never prayed before, asking God to bless him and save him from the cursed sin, and to save him from hell. Then Robert Peters prayed himself and asked God to save him, and dear Mrs. Long when we finished and both stood up together, I could see that the power of God had come in to his very soul, for he was as sober as I was.

This was no casual commitment on the part of Peters, according to Atkinson, who concluded: “I am pleased to say that Mr. Peters has proved himself a saved sinner, saved by the precious blood of Christ. Over a month now and he is still trusting”. Years later we read that Peters also became an Aboriginal evangelist for the AIM, and according to

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Anne O’Brien became an accomplished Pastor at Darlington Point. He appears also to have been the muse for a rather oddly, not to mention lengthily, named AIM publication in 1944, *Bobbie Peters: A Chosen Vessel: A Story of a Deformed Half-Caste Aboriginal Native Worker, Who Was Made Meet for the Master’s Use.*

Almost exactly two years later in 1930, Eddy was again reporting success on Cummeragunja. Perhaps missionary work was easier in winter when employment opportunities were limited. Shearing opportunities would have been few if not non-existent at this time of year and fruit picking work would not have been available for another few months. Either way, Eddy reported “glorious blessings”, in the form of two conversions and packed church services. “The little church is crowded”, he wrote, “on Sunday and Wednesday evenings”. He then highlighted his pride in his own services, as compared to those of the missionaries: “[i]sn’t it glorious to know my people do not need much theology?”

We are quite satisfied with plain gospel truths – Preach Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ ascended, Christ coming again. I go on sowing the good seed with full assurance of faith that God will not let His word return unto Him void.

Eddy’s description of his services fit with those described by Alf in his interview. He told me: “they only spoke of what the Bible was written about and I think that’s all they knew… What they read in the Bible, they taught to the people. And in my book that wasn’t bad”.

In March the following year, Eddy was celebrating what he believed was the beginnings of a revival on Cummeragunja. “Last Sunday at the evening service 4 young girls gave their hearts to Jesus, on Monday night at the prayer meeting two more young souls took their stand, and then during the week a lad came and yielded”.

Only four months later, Eddy’s health appeared to be failing him. An article in *Our Aim,* attributed to Eddy, although not at all in his usual tone and using the third person, reported: “Mr Atkinson, our native pastor has not been very well indeed and we are hoping he and Mrs

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124 Alf Turner interview.
Atkinson will soon be able to have a change”.

The report also noted that Miss Sutton, the “plodder” discussed earlier, and Miss McLean had “been spending a few weeks at Cummeragunja”. The pair had intended their visit to be short, but bad weather and then floods had stranded them for a time. In March the following year, Long visited Cummeragunja and while the Atkinsons hosted her ably, she remained concerned for Atkinson’s health. He had been ill with pneumonia and then when only just recovered from this, had to have an abscess, which subsequently developed on his neck, lanced. “His bad health, together with his long years of service at Cummeragunja”, wrote Long, “has led us to think more seriously than we did last year that he must have a change, and we propose he go to another station for a while”. She found no issue with his religious work, however, noting that “altogether 70 in the last few weeks have got right with God”.

Like Russell, Eddy was unwilling to let the AIM move him about at will, and this is the last we hear of him within the pages of Our Aim. Payne wrote the next update from Cummeragunja, when in September 1932 he submitted a sizeable list of people who have recently died on the station. The following June he wrote again to say that religious work is going well, but that “[t]he grim reaper has once more visited Cummeragunja”. Payne informed readers that the Victorian Churches of Christ were now providing financial assistance for his work, enabling him “to assist more satisfactorily the sick ones in the Echuca Hospital”. It seems that in Cummeragunja’s real time of need, the AIM’s preference for allowing God to provide proved inadequate.

The details of the breakdown in Eddy’s relationship with the AIM remain somewhat of a mystery, but appear to speak of a level of Aboriginal independence. From other sources, I know that both Atkinson and Payne carried on their work on Cummeragunja, assisted by the Church of Christ, in which Atkinson became an ordained Pastor as did another Cummeragunja resident, Doug Nicholls, some years later. A couple of years later, the AIM installed two white missionaries again at Barmah, and

Atkinson and Payne were accused of stealing Aboriginal people for their own congregations. It is possible the high level of power and respect that Atkinson had earned within the community was too much for the AIM. Certainly, Barwick who interviewed Eddy’s wife, Ellen, has argued that while the “AIM blamed sectarian sentiment … this interpretation ignores Aboriginal opinions about independence, paternalism and merits of rival patrons”.

While absent from the pages of Our Aim, the Church of Christ did have an active presence on Cummeragunja during these years. In 1934, it held its centenary celebrations in the Melbourne Town Hall, at which ex-Cummeragunja resident Doug Nicholls, whom my narrator, Kevin Atkinson describes as an accomplished negotiator, addressed the crowd and pledged his faith. “I came from Cummeragunja, only 180 miles from here”, Nicholls said, “where there are 300 or 400 of my people, lovable and God-fearing and willing to know more of Christ”. It was from among these residents that the impetus for re-opening the station’s church emerged, according to Nicholls, who said “native workers” who had “laboured for many years faithfully” had done this. The following year, Payne spoke at the Church of Christ in Bendigo about the plight of the Aboriginal people at Cummeragunja and beyond, observing that: “within a few hours’ journey of many Christian churches there were hundreds of aborigines with nobody caring for them”. In his own work, he had received little help from the Church of Christ, and while “thousands of pounds [were] being raised for missions in foreign countries the aborigines in Australia were regarded as outcasts”. Payne planned to raise enough money to take Eddy Atkinson, described as a preacher for over 20 years, to surrounding congregations, and, who, with the station’s choir, would be able to show people “the capabilities of the aborigines”.

Three months later, Payne again lobbied the Church of Christ, this time to provide medical care to Cummeragunja. Perhaps Payne’s lobbying was effective, or maybe changes were already underway, but either way, less than six months later, the Church of Christ provided staff for the newly built treatment room on Cummeragunja. The Argus reported in late June that a Sister Bryant had been contacted by the Victorian

135 “Churches of Christ”, p. 10.
137 “Aborigines Neglected”, p. 3.
138 “Aborigines Neglected”, p. 3.
Churches of Christ, and was to leave the following Monday for the station, where she would stay as a guest of the Manager of the station, J. G. Danvers and his wife, until the hospital was completed. The following month, Church of Christ representatives were among those from Sydney, Bendigo, Albury and Melbourne who arrived to inspect the new facilities. Church of Christ Social Service Department secretary W.H. Clay informed reporters that while often missionaries looked to cities or overseas to carry out their work, his department had felt they should help. “It was the beginning of a work which would benefit the whole of the aboriginal population of Australia”, Clay noted.

My narrators remembered the Cummeragunja treatment room, although it is the Aboriginal health care providers that are more clearly recalled and it is to those I now want to turn. Colin Walker told me that he still sees the treatment room, now relocated near Mathoura, and marvels. “Every time I’m driving up the Cobb Highway I look over at it. And I’d say well that was a great thing in them days. You know, some of my cousins were born in there, I believe, in the hospital.” Lorna Walker remembered a sister who manned the treatment-room and helped Lorna’s mother Nora Charles, not the other way round. Charles was “a top nurse”, according to Lorna, who remarked: “everybody loved her and respected her”. “She should have had a medal for what she did”. Lorna said Nora, taught by her mother, Florence Nicholls, found support in local doctors and nurses, who would “come out and help” and who “got attached to the Koori people here too, the Cummera people”. Aboriginal mothers on Cummeragunja and at Barmah refused to go into hospitals in Echuca to give birth, so Nora would have to help. John Atkinson also spoke of his admiration for Nora Charles, describing her as “a grand lady”, who saw residents at all stages of their lives. “[S]he might be the one that seen you come into the world but she might also be the one that seen you leaving the world”, John observed. “Cause when you died she was the one that laid you out, you know”.

142 “Treatment-Room for Aborigines”, p. 5.
143 Colin Walker interview.
144 Lorna Walker interview.
145 Lorna Walker interview.
146 Lorna Walker interview.
147 Lorna Walker interview.
148 John Atkinson interview.
149 John Atkinson interview.
150 John Atkinson interview.
151 John Atkinson interview.
Another prominent Aboriginal health carer on the station was Florence Walker, whom Colin, her grandson, recalls delivered him “in an old tin hut and a dirt floor”.152 “[S]he delivered a lot of them there on Cummera”, remarked Colin. “She was well-respected for the work she did there”.153 Like Nora, Florence, who lived to 105, had learnt her skills from her mother, Annie Hamilton, who according to Colin, was the first Aboriginal woman to be awarded a midwifery certificate from a formal education institution.154 “She used to travel the steamboats and when families would pass on she’d take the children to the relatives, to the aunts and aunties, to the extended family”, he recalled.155 Florence’s skills extended beyond midwifery skills: Walker recalled becoming very ill from Bright’s disease (nephritis), and although his grandmother took him to hospital, she did most of the nursing. “We had our own home remedies”, he explained.156 One of those remedies was wattle gum, which Colin, when he was not ill, would collect with his grandfather.

The treatment room, while an exciting development was really an addition to existing Aboriginal-led healthcare on the station. And, unfortunately, it did little to dint mortality rates on the station in the late 1930s. The AIM missionaries returned to Cummeragunja in 1935 and by August 1936 they reported there had “been quite a run of sickness on the Reserve and several deaths – young as well as aged being called”.157

The Christian Endeavour movement

Whether it was because of the religious split or the run of ill health on the station it is unclear, but by 1937 it seems the AIM was struggling to attract supporters. The revival of the Christian Endeavour movement that year seemed well timed to boost numbers, with its more light-hearted approach, including the fake fire Bible meeting we saw at the beginning of this chapter. Certainly, that was the hope of Francis and Harriet Clark when they formed the first Christian Endeavour society in Portland, United States, half a century earlier. The couple sought to involve young people in the Church and trigger a religious revival and, either due to its great success or perhaps more so, its proximity to a port, the movement spread rapidly.158 Two years later, the Endeavour movement arrived in Australia and was taken up by the New South Wales Aborigines Mission, the

152 Colin Walker interview.
153 Colin Walker interview.
154 Colin Walker interview.
155 Colin Walker interview.
156 Colin Walker interview.
158 Longworth, “Was It Worthwhile?”, pp. 96-7.
organisation that Long had left to form the AIM.\textsuperscript{159}

Visiting the station in March 1937, just as the Christian Endeavour movement was really taking off, Long witnessed the successful sewing efforts of the Cummeragunja women, who, already experienced in making their own frocks, were working on garments to send to Aboriginal people at Tennant Creek. She saw here a sign of successful civilisation, remarking that the residents held the sewing meeting in the home of Mrs Walker senior, who “was a true hostess”.\textsuperscript{160} “Everything was bright and shining in readiness for us”, wrote Long: “and it was very pleasant on her big, cool verandah”.\textsuperscript{161} Long clearly approved of the spirit of generosity this activity entailed: “the women here will be helped and blessed, as they work to help those who are so differently placed from themselves”.\textsuperscript{162} Long noted also that a choir was being started on the station.

Singing was a key way in which religious representatives had appealed to Cummeragunja, right from the time the Matthews had established Maloga. During his old age, William Cooper observed in a letter to Daniel Matthews’s daughter, Alma, that this singing during the Maloga days had “appealed to a people who were naturally musical”.\textsuperscript{163} My oral history interviews support this observation. When I spoke to Colin Walker, he remarked, “we used to have sing songs, like we’d sing at Sunday School, we’d sing at church”.\textsuperscript{164} He said some of the elders were talented singers, whose repertoire included many hymns: “they loved singing”.\textsuperscript{165} Kevin Atkinson agreed that singing hymns took up a considerable amount of time during his childhood on Cummeragunja. “They’d spend at least half an hour singing hymns”, said Kevin, “people would select a hymn from the floor or from the seats, you’d sing them for at least half an hour, and everyone took part in it and enjoyed themselves”.\textsuperscript{166} The choir was well known, Alf Turner recalling that it travelled around the region quite frequently. A member of the choir when she was 12, Lorna Walker said Payne used to drive them around, raising money to expand their current church on the station. “We used to go down around Maryborough and Horsham, and all around there. All around we used to go”, she told

\textsuperscript{159} Longworth, “Was It Worthwhile？”, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{161} Retta Long, “Cummeragunja”, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{162} Retta Long, “Cummeragunja”, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{163} As quoted in Nancy Cato, Mister Maloga, 2nd edition, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993, p. 347.
\textsuperscript{164} Colin Walker interview.
\textsuperscript{165} Colin Walker interview.
\textsuperscript{166} Kevin Atkinson interview, 15 February 2008.
me. She said the church extensions never eventuated, due to developments on the station that I discuss in Chapter Eight. Melva Johnson recalled the concerts, but also the Walker band from Cummeragunja, telling me: “gee whiz, … could they sing and play the music”. 

While attempting to garner Aboriginal support for Christianity, it seems that the AIM’s Christian Endeavour activities had emerged as a further compromise to Aboriginal culture. The following May when *Our Aim* reported the campfire meeting, it also noted that about 80 Aboriginal people had gathered at a recent service to sing for, and listen to, the father and sister of one of the missionaries, Joan Proctor. “My word, they did show them how they could sing”, exclaimed Miss Cash. Three residents, meanwhile, were attending Sunday School teachers’ training classes, which had just begun on the station.

In the following edition of *Our Aim*, Proctor reported on a picnic she had held at which “everyone enjoyed both the social side of it and the fellowship”. A Bible cricket match had also attracted great interest. “The answers to the questions”, wrote Proctor, “showed that the Endeavourers had studied the chapter chosen for the match (Matt. 13) very well”. Her report of this cricket match was very different from the account of a new football team in Moree the following year, where the missionary bemoaned the sport as an “adversar[y]” of the Lord because it “takes away children from Sunday school, and adults from night services”.

**Conclusion**

What does this allow us to say about the experiences of the AIM missionaries on Cummeragunja? Firstly, it seems the AIM tied its religious purpose closely to the objective of promoting white civilisation, as shown by the focus on clean homes and pretty gardens. But the community already had an investment in these concepts, the preservation of which was both a source of pride and a way of getting along. Secondly, while these women tried to reassure readers of *Our Aim*, and quite possibly themselves, that their role was incredibly important, in reality the residents often undermined their efforts. Ultimately, the missionaries were dependent on Aboriginal people on the station to provide for them in a variety of ways. McAulay, for example, relied upon Aboriginal

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167 Lorna Walker interview.  
168 Melva Johnson interview.  
hospitality to provide her with shelter and transport. During their absence or illness, missionaries relied on Aboriginal men to hold services and continue religious work. This assistance had a double edge, however, as it required a level of recognition that the role of the missionary was not as essential as missionaries might like to believe.

This chapter reveals that the experience of Aboriginal people dealing with the AIM was often one of empowerment. While Christianity may have been pressed upon Aboriginal people, some made it their own and the community generally could exert a level of power over AIM missionaries due to the missionaries’ dependence upon them. Further, Aboriginal people could achieve a level of recognition as well as control over their own religious lives by becoming Aboriginal evangelists. Certainly, this was under the auspices of the AIM but as the examples of both Alick Russell and Eddy Atkinson show, these Aboriginal representatives ultimately controlled their own movements. The longevity of Atkinson’s good reputation is further testament to the power he both achieved and wielded within his community.

And, finally, what does this allow us to say about the fake fire Bible meeting that opened this chapter? It seems that this campfire format, obviously chosen by Miss Cash to make the most of fond Aboriginal memories of the bush, was a compromise of sorts, between the Aboriginal lifestyle and her missionary aims. Why not have a real fire though, particularly given the station bordered the Barmah state forest and there would have been no shortage of firewood? I believe that this distinction was, in fact, deliberate and that the substitution actually had a very pointed meaning that would not have been lost on the evening’s participants. Here was a reminder that memories of traditional bush life, fond as they may be, were in the past: life now for Aboriginal people was one of progression, away from their “primitive” roots and into white civilisation. The AIM missionaries were not the only people urging Aboriginal people to take their part in white civilisation.

In the chapter that follows, I turn to Cummeragunja’s white neighbours, as they promote a similar progression for Cummeragunja people. Examining my oral history narratives and interwar coverage in the Riverine Herald, I explore local white settlers’ general support for Aboriginal people, but also the boundaries they set in their interactions with the Cummeragunja community.
Figure 7: Haystack on Cummeragunja (AWB.1.BW-N1619.15). Photograph courtesy of Aborigines Welfare Board collection, Audiovisual Archive, AIATSIS
It was an unremarkable afternoon on Cummeragunja in the mid-1920s. Charles Burrage, the white Cummeragunja school teacher and his son, Alan, were out fishing on the Murray River, as they often were when the weather was right and the last school bell had rung. Back at the house, Burrage’s wife was outside watering the garden with the couple’s other two children, Elsie and Winifred. The rest of the Cummeragunja community was busy in its own way: working, playing and socialising. The day’s peaceful beginning, however, ended abruptly when someone spotted an empty boat down on the river, which bordered the station. It was the Burrage boat. Charles and Alan had fallen in and were struggling to keep above water. Herbie Walker, an older man from the station, rushed past the onlookers, jumping in the water and dragging the pair to safety. A group of Aboriginal men carried Charles and Alan up to their rooms. Elsie, who was only small at the time, remembered vividly many years later the men in her father’s bedroom taking off his clothes. “I thought, ‘Mum never lets them in the bedroom’; you know, it was sort of strange”.

Elsie’s comments, recollected and published 70 years later, about the domestic spaces that her family considered appropriate for Aboriginal people lead me to consider in this chapter the boundaries of acceptance set by white settlers for Cummeragunja people in the interwar period. My analysis centres on the testimonies of my oral history narrators and a close reading of the local Echuca paper, the Riverine Herald, which made periodical and awkward acknowledgements of the Cummeragunja community’s presence. Although my investigation focuses on the interwar period, I understand that my narrators may well have drawn from their experience outside this time.

I begin the chapter with a focus on my oral history interviews, seeking to explore the implications of my narrators’ understandings of space, race and whiteness upon the narratives they shared with me. I am interested, here in exploring the boundaries that white settlers drew for their Aboriginal neighbours. The second half of this chapter turns

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to the *Riverine Herald* and the articles it published on Aboriginal people in the interwar period, both for the examples it provided of the nature of public interactions between black and white, and for a further exploration of these settlers’ boundaries. Finally, I return to the initial site of my discussion, the Burrage bedroom, and my conclusions.

**Remembering cross-cultural encounters**

Primary sites of interracial interaction during this time were the homes and farms on which Aboriginal people laboured for white settlers. Cummeragunja, like other Aboriginal stations and missions offered a ready supply of labour to Europeans in the region.\(^2\) As a result, Aboriginal men played a crucial role in setting up and maintaining local farms, where sheep and wheat production were widespread. From the 1880s to the 1920s, there was a particularly high demand for these services as settlers subdivided the large pastoral stations in the Riverina, clearing and establishing many more small farms.\(^3\) Aboriginal men earned wages as “drovers, fencers, shearers and harvesters”, for these local landholders.\(^4\) In the months that they were not required, they supported themselves and their families by hunting, fishing and cutting timber to earn extra cash.\(^5\)

Aboriginal women from Cummeragunja, meanwhile, worked within white homes as domestic servants. Jackie Huggins, who has written extensively on the Aboriginal women who worked in Queensland homes, described the conditions in which they worked as akin to slavery. “[T]he types of treatment”, she wrote, “ranged from cruel and barbaric to generally kinder, but never egalitarian”.\(^6\) Despite this, Huggins revealed that not all stories of domestic service were ones of total domination, as underpinning many were the “resilience and determination” of the Aboriginal women involved.\(^7\) Many of these women were, in fact, thankful for the experience that this work provided: “Some say that it gave them good training for their future lives with their husband and

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\(^4\) Barwick, “Aunty Ellen”, p. 182.


\(^7\) Huggins, “White Aprons”, p. 195.
While the situation in NSW was quite different from that in Queensland, Aboriginal women were sent in large numbers to work in white homes, doing laundry, cooking meals, cleaning homes and caring for children. In some cases, the women worked by choice; others responded to orders from the NSW Aborigines Protection Board (APB). Inara Walden has studied the NSW context and found that hundreds of Aboriginal girls “were indentured into servitude”, because of the APB’s policies. Apprentice as domestic servants, these girls found themselves “legally bound to their employers” for up to four years. Aboriginal girls on Cummeragunja were a part of this scheme, and even those who were older and had families found it necessary to take this kind of work to support themselves. Certainly, this was the case for one of my narrators, Lorna Walker; her parents and others in the community sent their children away from the station to work so that white authorities did not place them in the Cootamundra Girls’ Home or the boys’ home at Singleton. “So we did what they told us and went, though it was heart breakin’ to leave our parents”. Once in domestic service, though, Lorna said she, and other girls she knew, were not “treated [as] bad as what some of them say they was in the home”, or as poorly as when women were taken to work in settlers’ homes in the very early years. The Cootamundra Girls’ Home was particularly unpopular with the Cummeragunja community, particularly after one girl died while at the Home and her parents were not informed. Maude Smith who grew up on the station recalled going to the Echuca station with her mother and grandmother to meet her aunt who was returning from the Home. Instead, they received just her suitcase: “[s]he had died in Sydney and they never let her parents know”.

Lorna’s mother, Nora Charles, also did washing and ironing for a sick lady who lived in the area. “[S]he used to drive a horse and sulky always up to where she worked. When I was about 12, I used to go up and I’d help her”. Nora was also responsible for teaching Cummeragunja woman, Melva Johnson, the ropes. Melva told me that, “Aunty Nora Charles taught me to pour tea out, you know, you had to put the milk before … I

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10 Walden, “That was Slavery Days”, p. 197.
11 Lorna Walker interview.
12 Lorna Walker interview.
14 Lorna Walker interview.
didn’t know, I just poured the tea. And Aunty Nora showed me how to do it properly. She was a real old darling”. These experiences of domestic service also shaped the lives of the white women, who should not be seen as simply the dominant figures. Rather, white women in this colonial context, were as Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherford have written, “both powerful and powerless … [t]heir power rested in their whiteness, but they were constrained by patriarchy”.

Marjory Pearce, now aged in her 90s, knew Aboriginal domestic servants both within her parental home and in the home she shared with her husband and their children. When I spoke to her in 2008, she shaped her story around her concern for demonstrating that neither she nor her family were racist, despite the obvious power and class differences. Marjory rarely referred to the racism that Aboriginal people experienced explicitly, preferring to convey to me that, at least under her watch, Aboriginal people were treated just the same. Twice she used this phrase almost word-for-word. The first was in relation to her employment of Anna, a Cummeragunja woman, who helped when Marjory’s children were small. “She used to have her meals with us”, said Marjory, “just the same as anyone else”. The second occurred outside the home in a public space, in which Marjory’s comments placed her relationship with one Cummeragunja girl. “I remember walking down the street with Prudence”, said Marjory, “I treated her just like anyone else”. She continued: “Her mother lived on the other street. She used to get the mail and you’d see her then. I didn’t know her closely”.

The simplicity with which Marjory depicted her relationship with Aboriginal people, as one of equality, was regularly undermined in her testimony by not only the obvious power difference but also the clear boundaries of these relationships. For one, Anna was not quite the “same”. She was, ultimately, a servant in her employer’s home and the power relations would have been quite different had she been a guest. Secondly, Prudence’s mother was an elusive figure in Marjory’s testimony, encountered in a public space, the post office, and not in Prudence’s home, which Marjory had clearly never

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15 Melva Johnson interview.
18 Marjory Pearce interview with Fiona Davis, Nathalia, 11 April 2008; Anna is not her real name.
19 Marjory Pearce interview.
20 Marjory Pearce interview; Prudence is not her real name.
21 Marjory Pearce interview.
visited. It seems these roadside spaces were popular sites of interracial interactions. Cummeragunja resident Kevin Atkinson recalled of a prominent family for whom he used to work that: “you’d always have a talk to them if you met them on the road or on their property”.  

Marjory’s testimony, in fact, regularly highlighted the fact that the community did treat Aboriginal people differently. That she felt the need to explain the good treatment of Aboriginal people within her home revealed a shared assumption that this was not the case in all homes. At one point, she referred directly to this racism through a discussion of terminology, telling me that: “A lot of them called them ‘niggers’, but my mother would never allow that”. She said usually her family referred to Aboriginal people as “dark folk”, and occasionally, “blacks”, terms that now jar uncomfortably but that were clearly considered acceptable, even preferable, in Marjory’s youth. Once again, the obvious need to define Aboriginal people as a collective that was different from the white community, further undermined Marjory’s claim that they were “just the same”.

But it is worth considering further Marjory’s insistence that Aboriginal people were treated “just the same”. As Lynette Russell has observed, in studying racial boundaries we should not “draw a line that excludes mutuality of experience”. Certainly, one of my Aboriginal narrators, Colin Walker, explained to me that the boundaries between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people were often blurred in the early years, remarking: “when things were tough there were non-Indigenous and Indigenous people camped along the river banks”. He said this occurred even after they moved to the river flats at Mooroopna. The large families bonded women, sharing as they did the challenge of rearing children with very few resources. Another white narrator, Iris Swan agreed that the poor conditions were shared by black and white, recalling that in her childhood, kitchens had dirt floors and the children often slept in sleep-outs, which were covered in verandahs. She also said that, before her birth, settlers lived in “makeshift homes”, and even tents out in the forest, in similar conditions to Aboriginal people. Lorna Walker supported this in her interview, telling me that she thought white people “were in the same boat back in them days”. “Cause I can remember in the 30s they lived the same

22 Kevin Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 10 April 2008, Cummeragunja.
23 Marjory Pearce interview.
26 Iris and Jack Swan, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Picola.
27 Lorna Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 24 March 2009, Cummeragunja.
way as us – they had no money they had no electricity – they lived the same as us”.28 While I would argue that there were differences, at times standards of living were clearly comparable between black and poorer white rural families in these early years.

Marjory uses a particular area of her childhood home to demonstrate that her parents’ relationship with their servant Rebecca was one of equality, centering her discussion of Rebecca on the guest bedroom, where she slept during her time there. While clearly less sacred than the Burrage parental bedroom and with far fewer sexual connotations, the guest bedroom, as opposed to simply a “spare” room, is also loaded with a broader meaning than simply a room with four walls. By sharing a space where friends and relatives stayed, it is implied that Rebecca’s position within the home was elevated above that of a mere (black) servant. Where, for some, a racial boundary would have been drawn and other accommodation arranged, Marjory’s family drew a more intimate boundary around where Aboriginal people could be accepted. It was still a boundary, however: the guest bedroom was still, necessarily, a liminal space, the very name implying a certain distance between those that inhabited it and the rest of the family. Similarly, while we do not have access to Rebecca’s own voice within this narrative, it is likely the guest bedroom, a sign of white privilege and wealth, would have underscored her social distance from Marjory’s family. Back on Cummeragunja where Rebecca lived with her large family, in what would have been a two to three-roomed home, it is unlikely that visitors would have had the luxury of their own bed, let alone their own room.

Gender was central to Marjory’s descriptions of domestic service, which emerges as a feminine space that women not only inhabited, but also ruled. A striking example of this was Marjory’s account of Rebecca’s arrival at her parents’ home. This was a process negotiated solely by women: Rebecca’s sister was helping out a (female) friend of Marjory’s mother and so Marjory’s mother, who had six children in seven years, followed her lead. Rebecca’s mother, who had several children herself, then joined this narrative: “[s]he drove [Rebecca] over the nine miles from Barmah”.29 While Rebecca’s mother was not the only person responsible for driving Rebecca back and forth – Marjory had another story that involved her mother driving Rebecca home – there are significant power differences in this account. It makes sense that Marjory’s mother, charged with the care such a large brood in so short a space of time, required outside assistance. But what of

28 Lorna Walker interview.
29 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
Rebecca’s mother, herself responsible for “several children”? It is unlikely Rebecca’s mother had access to this kind of help when her children were young. She would also have lived in a much smaller and more basic home than that of Marjory’s mother.

Like Marjory, Iris – now aged in her seventies – placed her Iris’s accounts of domestic service identify this field as a female domain and feature shared meals within the kitchen or dining room as a particular place of bonding. She explained that she remembered far more of the women who worked in her home than of the Aboriginal men who laboured on the property beyond the front gate. Iris places memories of her mother’s domestic servant in a particular space of the home – the laundry, which was, of course, a place of toil. Dorothy Williams who worked for Marjory also worked for Iris’s mother when Iris was a child. “I used to stand at the wash trough and she was a most patient lady”, recalled Iris. “She’d sing to me … She was a very, very Christian lady”. Cummeragunja had a solid Christian foundation and it is not surprising that Anna also followed this faith. It is likely that Iris’s assertion was more than just a passing description of Anna’s personal religious practices, but rather a claim as to her level of adaptation to white civilisation and, necessarily, a level of disjuncture from her Aboriginal heritage. This is a well-documented colonial concern of settlers seeking to transform Aboriginal people into “compliant subjects.” The same can be said for Iris’s subsequent observation that she was never allowed to refer to Anna by her first name, but rather as Mrs Williams. She provided this story, at least on one level, to demonstrate the respect that her parents taught her to show to Anna. Anna also played a role in preserving this boundary. “When Mrs [Williams] told me about her husband”, explained Iris, “she would always refer to him as Mr [Williams]”. This was not unusual: Marjory Pearce remembered Colin Walker always called her Mrs Pearce, when passing through the house after knocking off shearing, and when coming in for a meal. Implicit in Iris’s recollections of Anna, however, was that Anna’s acceptance within the family home was contingent on her level of assimilation.

When I interviewed Iris, her husband Jack was by her side. His role was initially to support Iris, but, as the interview played out, it became clear that both Jack and Iris considered Jack more qualified to speak on certain subjects. These were the topics that

30 Marjory Peace interview.
31 Dorothy Williams is not her real name.
32 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
34 Iris and Jack Swan interview. It is possible this was a defensive manoeuvre: Aboriginal people were typically required to address members of the family, even the children, by titles. See Jackie Huggins, “White Aprons”, p. 195.
dealt with Aboriginal men in sport and farm labour. For instance, when I asked Iris to describe Gavin Miller to me, Jack quickly jumped in. “He was short, he was shorter than me”, explained Jack. “He was smaller than me”. Jack told me he and Gavin worked together cutting timber. “He was terrific. A good worker and everything”. This is not to say that Iris did not have stories of Aboriginal men: her father employed many Aboriginal people both on his farm and in his charcoal burning plant during World War Two. But Jack’s accounts were more personal. His descriptions of the appearance of Aboriginal people appeared to come more easily, and his stories were far less general – instead, grounded in the personal experiences he shared with them. Like Iris, he was conscious of presenting an image of racial harmony and equality in the stories he chose to share. Most of these are brimming with praise for the person of whom he is speaking, and involved a shared activity: walking, working or travelling together. He also brought up anecdotes of impressive sporting feats by the Aboriginal men on Cummeragunja. One man, noted for his running ability, was jolted all the way to Warrnambool in south-western Victoria on the back of a local white man’s motorbike to compete in a race the following day. Despite the discomfort the trip would have caused, this man ran and won his race, according to Jack. The physical ability of Aboriginal people was also noted by Iris who told me that her “grandparents lost their only son in 1910”, when he drowned in the Murray River and that “one of the Atkinsons and one of the Coopers were the Aboriginals that retrieved his body”.

When Cummeragunja resident Kevin Atkinson spoke to me in 2008, he recalled a level of equality in certain workplaces, particularly in the shearing sheds in which he and his brother, John, and their father before them, worked. “I always say the shearer, the Aboriginal shearer, was on equal terms with anyone”, he explained. “Because most of the contractors knew that the Aboriginal person was as good as the next person”. John agreed, describing the shearing shed as “the most amazing workplace ever”, where “right from the beginning of time there was never discrimination”. He said it did not matter who you were, particularly if you became the gun shearer, the quickest in the shed, as many Aboriginal people did. Kevin recalled his father’s impressive shearing ability, despite his short stature. He observed that Dan: “wasn’t only a short man, he wasn’t very big

35 Gavin Miller is not his real name.
36 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
37 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
38 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
physically. It didn’t hold him back: he was still a pretty good shearer”. Jack, meanwhile, was able to quote Dan’s shearing statistics to me, at least 70 years after he would have achieved them. This was, in my mind, a testament to the currency of Dan’s reputation in the white community at the time. Gillian Cowlishaw has remarked that the competitiveness in the shearing shed tally board not only created status for the workers but also served the interests of employers “to have shearers competing to do more work in shorter periods of time”. I am also reminded here of Richard Davis’s study of rodeos in the Kimberley region, where Aboriginal and white people interacted “on the basis of their shared cattle-based activities”. At these events, Davis wrote that race “rarely informs the overt structure or content of these interactions”. Instead, he observed, “status is determined through the prestige achieved in contesting rodeo events”, as well as the success of the cattle stations on which they worked.

Outside the shearing shed, the interactions of Aboriginal men and the broader community could be quite different. While Aboriginal people may have been more broadly recognised for their sporting abilities, the surrounding white community did not necessarily respect them for these. “Sport was different”, observed Kevin: “It was a pretty hard time to play”: “Some of the players that you used to shear with … would be calling you all sorts of insulting names when you were playing football”. He said when Barmah came to play Cummeragunja, “they’d be fightin’ all the way back across the river”. Other interviews supported Kevin’s claims. Joyce McKenzie, for instance, noted that football games were almost the only place she saw Aboriginal people, while Iris Swan remembered one particularly large fight at a football match between Barmah and Cummeragunja “that’s lived on in history”. “I think the umpire ended up underneath a car!” She, for one, felt it was not indicative of a distance between the two communities, but rather their closeness. “I think that Barmah and Cummera got over it quicker than anyone else did”, she told me laughing.

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41 Kevin Atkinson interview, 15 February 2008.
42 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
46 Kevin and John Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 10 October 2008, Cummeragunja.
47 Kevin and John Atkinson interview.
48 Joyce McKenzie, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Nathalia; Iris and Jack Swan interview.
49 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
family, you have a fight and you get over it”.\textsuperscript{50} Colin Walker, meanwhile, remembered that white players abused Aboriginal people but “[i]t was just to torment you to get you off guard”.\textsuperscript{51} As he grew older, he got better at dealing with it: “[y]ou’d just say ‘well I’m proud of being black’”. For his part, Alf Turner suggested that perhaps the tensions between Barmah and Cummeragunja, white and black, stemmed from the fights the two teams used to have.\textsuperscript{52}

Iris draws upon this bond between Aboriginal and white women to demonstrate the lack of racism in the region, when she explains that the fact that white women, such as her great grandmother who was the first white woman in the area and had to be friends with Aboriginal women, as a necessity. “And even my gran … they must have depended on the Aboriginal ladies to be their friends … [To] help them when they were pregnant and everything.\textsuperscript{53} Jack agreed, drawing on outside spaces to denote the relationships between white men and Aboriginal people. “Out in the forest, you know, the Aboriginals and the whites … they were all here and there … there might be an Aboriginal there. They’d be sitting near a white bloke that didn’t make a difference”.\textsuperscript{54} Iris said her grandmother had an Aboriginal friend, but that she had never been told the details. “[S]he had her photo in her possessions and I know she was important … I should have asked, but I never did”.\textsuperscript{55}

Iris argued that claims that related to injustices to Aboriginal people that emerged in the Yorta Yorta Native Title court cases from the 1990s were unfounded, telling me:

A lot of the older relatives have gone away from here, and when the Native Title was on, and I told them about things that were said, they’d say ‘but that didn’t happen around here’. I think it was a different situation.\textsuperscript{56}

Iris’s remarks are worthy of further consideration. Firstly, they provide an important reminder that both women’s narratives are mediated by the years, events and developments that have passed since the particular period I asked them to focus on. We cannot ask our narrators to transport themselves back to the time in question, but nor should we necessarily want them to.

Iris’s comments located her narrative both historically and politically in two quite

\textsuperscript{50} Iris and Jack Swan interview.
\textsuperscript{51} Colin Walker interview.
\textsuperscript{52} Alf Turner, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Mooroopna.
\textsuperscript{53} Iris and Jack Swan interview.
\textsuperscript{54} Iris and Jack Swan interview.
\textsuperscript{55} Iris and Jack Swan interview.
\textsuperscript{56} Iris and Jack Swan interview.
specific ways. Firstly, they referred to a subsequent development, the Yorta Yorta Native Title cases of the 1990s and into the 2000s, carried out, at least in part, by the descendants of Cummeragunja people, of which Iris was clearly not supportive. They also placed her understanding within a broader narrative of injustices to Aboriginal people that has emerged in more recent years: stories of neck chains, of massacres, of rapes and of carefully maintained segregation. These, too, are important stories and ones that warrant further investigation. But in the region surrounding Cummeragunja, the treatment of Aboriginal people was different, as Iris stated. Aboriginal people were not generally kept in neck chains or whipped or kept as sex slaves, as in the more dramatic accounts which have emerged in the north and the west of the country. For the Aboriginal people living on and around Cummeragunja in the first half of the twentieth century, these injustices and the demarcation of race were, for the most part, subtle and quotidian. However, this treatment, and the thinking that underpinned it, had significant implications for Cummeragunja peoples’ lives and the lives of their descendants. The focus should not be on who was crueller or worse off but, rather, how people understood race in their every day lives and the impacts this had.57

The Barmah school was initially a site of anxious interracial interactions for Alf, who grew up at Barmah but who attended the Cummeragunja school for the first six months of his schooling, until his mother and a few other Aboriginal women decided it was time their children were educated locally. Their attempts to enter the Barmah school were initially unsuccessful, until a particular day that Alf remembered well. “[T]hey took us up and knocked on the door and the headmaster came out and he said, ‘what do you want?’”, Alf recalled. Alf’s mother demanded that the boys be enrolled in his class, but the teacher refused, and “slammed the door in our face”. What the teacher did not realise was that the Inspector of Schools was in town that day, having lunch at the Barmah hotel. “[S]o we took off towards the hotel and met him on the way back actually and told him what had happened”, said Alf. “And he said ‘leave it with me’, so he took us by the hand, he marched us straight in through the door, sat us down at a desk and said ‘these

57 My thoughts here are influenced by Bain Attwood’s article, “Learning about the Truth?: the Stolen Generations Narrative”, in Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan (eds), Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2001. In this, Attwood argued that the stolen generations narrative had dominated popular understandings of Aboriginal people’s experiences to the point that narratives that did not fit this particular story were often ignored within popular memory. As indicated within my chapter, I believe that the extreme examples often overshadow the day-to-day, less dramatic incidents, but that both deserve recognition in order for a fuller picture of Aboriginal-white relations to emerge. See also Kay Schaffer, “Stolen Generations Narratives in Local and Global Contexts, Antipodes, 2002, pp. 5-10.
boys are staying here’. Alf doubted the teacher was impressed. Perhaps not surprisingly given his introduction to the class, Alf at times found his interactions with other students difficult. He recalled a school dance class at which none of the girls would dance with him. “And the headmaster gave me a broom to dance with”. There were figures of white friendship, however: a local forestry commission boss brought his own daughter over for Alf to dance with and a subsequent teacher, Vern Edgoose, was far more accommodating to his Aboriginal students.

Iris Swan remembered Edgoose fondly and recalled the increasing numbers of Aboriginal students at Barmah from the 1940s. According to Iris, the school treated these students as equals, although a small English boy fared less well, never “seem[ing] to fit in”. However, Alf said there seemed to be two rules for interactions, one for within the schoolyard and another for outside its boundaries. “[O]nce you saw the kids down at the store, they wouldn’t speak”, he remembered. He said later when those children had grown up, married and had the power to think for themselves, they became friends with him. “I think that was brought on by the parents”, observed Alf. “They didn’t want their kids playing with Aboriginal kids and that sort of thing. But they’re alright now”.

Public sites of interaction were often racist in Alf’s experiences. “I can remember the time – I’ll just tell you how it was”, Alf began, “when the men went to the hotel [pause] all the Aboriginals drank on the one side and the non-Aboriginals on the other. It was the same when you went to the pictures, whites one side, blacks on the other”. Iris Swan confirmed that at the local cinema her Aboriginal friend had to sit in a different side of the hall while the movie played. Alf recalled that the local store was also racist in its serving policies, remembering: “you’d have to wait until the white people were served before they’d serve you. And nobody would speak to you”. Alf said this racism did not cause him any anxiety “because I lived it. I knew what the people were like, it was no surprise to me”.

John Atkinson recognised the racism experienced by Alf, but said he personally

58 Alf Turner interview.
59 Alf Turner interview.
60 Alf Turner interview.
61 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
62 Alf Turner interview.
63 Alf Turner interview.
64 Alf Turner interview.
65 Alf Turner interview.
66 Alf Turner interview.
had “never been discriminated against, ever”. It seems John largely escaped racism by avoiding certain spaces, such as the Barmah hotel. “[T]here was a side where the whites drank and there was a side where the blacks drank, and neither people would move into the other one because that’s where they belonged. … I didn’t like that when I was growing up as a little boy”. He said often Aboriginal people would be thrown out, and banned for a time by the publican:

And I thought – I remember this at an early stage – I thought “now nobody will ever throw me out of the pub because I’ll never ever go in there”. So I never went into a pub. I don’t know how old I was till I even had a glass of beer. And looking back that was good too, because it meant that I controlled my destiny.

John’s early interests similarly shielded him from racism: his cycling, his shearing and his career as a musician. “Because you know if you’re a big singer or a good musician no one thinks of calling you black or any other thing, you know, they like your playing”, he explained. Certainly, this was supported by Iris’s account of Aaron Briggs, a Cummeragunja man who used to be invited to musical evenings with her grandparents.

Cross-cultural friendships and sexual unions
Kevin Atkinson recalled having a non-Aboriginal friend from Barmah, Stuart Brown when he was growing up, with whom he went fishing and hunting. One day he and Stuart cornered some rabbits in a large old log barge. “We smoked ‘em out, and next thing there’s a big furl of smoke and we burnt the barge up”. Comments from John, however, complicated this picture of Stuart, and his brother David who also played with Aboriginal children. John remembered that Stuart’s father identified himself as an African American, and “was blacker than us”. “See, anything but a blackfella”, remarked John:

But when he died, Stuart reckoned that they were Aboriginal. [laughs] And David used to say to me, he used to always say “our mum and dad won’t allow us to take any of you people to our house”, cause it used to get on their goat that we used to

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67 John Atkinson interview.
68 John Atkinson interview.
69 John Atkinson interview.
70 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
71 Stuart Brown is not his real name.
72 Kevin and John Atkinson interview.
73 Kevin and John Atkinson interview.
74 David Brown is not his real name.
75 Kevin and John Atkinson interview.
allow them to come across to our place, ay? [addresses Kevin]
And they’d swim across the Murray to play with us.”

John said “it was pretty rare” for Cummeragunja people to be friends with the people at Barmah. “It’s a funny thing, people live together but they mightn’t necessarily get on together and they mightn’t necessarily be friends”.

Lorna Walker’s friendship with non-Aboriginal people came about largely through her children. She said although she did not feel she was treated badly when young, her only white friends were in her workplaces. By the time her children went to school, it was a different story. “They’d just mingle with [white people], you know. They’re like family to them. That’s why I don’t say nothing bad about them”. The other reason for not criticising white behaviour stemmed for her great respect for her uncle, the Pastor who was later knighted, Doug Nicholls. “This old man used to say to me”, she said, gesturing at Nicholls’s photo, “he used to say ‘don’t ever turn your back on white people, you make up to them’, he said, ‘because they’re the ones that have brought me to where I am today’”. She said her mother worked on a similar principle to Doug. “[S]ome of them were against white people you know. Mum wasn’t like that, she went to church and she gained their confidence and they began to like her and she liked them, same with Uncle Doug”.

Even interactions with Aboriginal people from outside the station could at times be fraught. Alf Turner will never forget an outdoor encounter with a group of Aboriginal people from another area. “I think it was a group that came to Cummera from another part, and they put [the performance] on”. He said visitors were often arriving from elsewhere, some staying for a few weeks, others “for the rest of their lives”. These visitors just stayed a while, much to Alf’s relief. “I was very small but I’ll remember that corroboree until the day I die. It was frightening for a little boy”, he recalled. “[S]eeing men painted up and everything and jumping around and singing out was frightening for me, I know that”.

Interracial interactions occurred not just between Aboriginal and white people, or people claiming to be African American: there were also Indian families that visited and

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76 Kevin and John Atkinson interview.
77 Kevin and John Atkinson interview.
78 Lorna Walker interview.
79 Lorna Walker interview.
80 Lorna Walker interview.
81 Alf Turner interview.
82 Alf Turner interview.
83 Alf Turner interview.
lived alongside the Cummeragunja community. While Thomas James is the most famous Cummeragunja resident to have Indian ancestry, there were at least two other Indian men, Meera Navy Bux and Alf Sherkhan, who lived at Barmah. Lorna Walker said there were no divisions between these men and the rest of the community, noting that they all intermarried. Her aunt was Gladys Nicholls, the daughter of Bux. Alf remembered that Indian and Aboriginal people in the region were treated “all the same”, and that the children of these alliances would have been indistinguishable to many people, from those of straight Aboriginal descent. Like Lorna, he had Aboriginal relatives: “they were just me friends, kids I played with and were related to”. Alf Turner said the Bux family lived near him in Barmah and that Meera wore a turban.

Both Alf and Kevin recalled Indian people frequently visiting the area as hawkers, selling clothes and trinkets. Kevin said they were “pretty friendly people”, who “knew the value of a dollar” and did not let a friendship get in its way. Alf, meanwhile, recalled Indian hawkers with “wagonettes and … horse drawn vehicles … selling pots and pans and women’s clothes”. This link with the women led both Bux and Sherkhan to remain at Barmah, according to Kevin. He said Sherkhan also arrived this way, met a Cummeragunja woman and “stopped here till he died”. It seems the community accepted James, Bux and Sherkhan into their midst, although this was contingent on their showing respect. “Because, back in them days, you either had to respect people here or you were put in your place”, recalled Kevin, “because people solved their problems with their fists back in them days”. Once that was out of the way, “everybody sat around and that was the end of it”.

Marriages and sexual unions also occurred between Cummeragunja people and their white neighbours, but are not openly discussed. The son of an Aboriginal servant of Iris’s family, a successful employee of Vic Railways, married a white woman from

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84 Lorna Walker interview.
85 Alf Turner interview.
86 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
87 Alf Turner interview.
88 Alf Turner interview.
89 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
90 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
Barmah, but according to Iris there was no controversy around this. She noted: “he was just one of us really”.\textsuperscript{92} Marjory Pearce recalled that her husband’s uncle, a returned serviceman, married a woman from Cummeragunja, with whom he had a daughter. Alf Turner also recalled this union, noting there was a controversy at the time from the white side. “I’ve heard some stories since about how [his family] didn’t want him to marry her”, he observed.\textsuperscript{93} He said interracial marriages were rare: “of all the people, that lived there both black and white, I think they were the only two that married”.\textsuperscript{94} While “there were a few sweet on one another”, families “more or less put a stop to it, or didn’t encourage it”. This changed later on, although some in white community “didn’t like it” and still do not.\textsuperscript{95} Iris Swan, however, thought it was likely she had Aboriginal relatives and was not at all alarmed by the prospect. “I remember one day we were out for the Native Title and this lady was giving her evidence, and I thought to myself ‘if they did a DNA test we’d probably come up’. But she didn’t know it”.\textsuperscript{96} She said her niece was into genealogy and had discovered a Tasmanian Aboriginal connection that “she’s quite proud of”.\textsuperscript{97}

This white ancestry had different implications for my narrators. Lorna Walker did not see her identity as being at all shaped by white people, telling me that: “[i]’m a full-blood. My grandfather and my mother and Uncle Doug [Nicholls] were all full bloods”.\textsuperscript{98} For Alf Turner, his white ancestry is a point of anger, particularly with regard to the white men who had children to his great grandmother Kitty and abandoned her to her fate. Four of these children were given the surname Atkinson and the other four Wilberforce, a name that was later changed to Cooper. According to Alf, the Wilberforce surname came from William Wilberforce’s grandson, who came to the area to buy land:

I think the original Mr Wilberforce – William Wilberforce – put a stop to slavery. It was his grandson that came out … And the great grandmother had four kids. William, Robert and Jack and Ada. And he flew back home and married his sweetheart.\textsuperscript{99}

When I asked Alf how he had found this out, he referred to it as general knowledge: “he came here to buy land like I said, and that’s been known for ages”. He said a German writer had spoken to him about investigating this further, but had fallen

\textsuperscript{92} Iris and Jack Swan interview.  
\textsuperscript{93} Alf Turner interview.  
\textsuperscript{94} Alf Turner interview.  
\textsuperscript{95} Alf Turner interview.  
\textsuperscript{96} Iris and Jack Swan interview.  
\textsuperscript{97} Iris and Jack Swan interview.  
\textsuperscript{98} Lorna Walker interview.  
\textsuperscript{99} Alf Turner interview.
out of contact. I asked Alf how he felt about the possibility of being related to the English Wilberforces and he elaborated on his reactions. He was careful to point out that money was not an issue, noting “I’m not interested in their money if they’ve got any”. Rather, Alf said: “I’d just like to tell the story about he left them in the lurch and how they could have died”. Alf explained that the issue was brought up during the Yorta Yorta Native Title cases of the 1990s, but that the judge stifled the debate, saying “we won’t go into that because we don’t know where it will finish”. “So twice it came up and twice he put a stop to it”, recalled Alf. “So they knew all about it. I asked our solicitors and they wouldn’t tell me anything”.

It is important to think about why this understanding of history is so important to Alf. It could have such resonance because here is a person to single out for blame in relation to not only difficulties for Alf’s family but also many such tragedies that followed white settlement. Moreover, this is not just any person: this is the grandson of the man recognised as having ended slavery in the United Kingdom. Perhaps, then, this narrative could also be read as disillusionment with white assistance in black issues. It could also be a plea to get the injustices of the colonial process put out into the mainstream: the Wilberforce name, after all, is a recognisable one and a story such as this would be sure to attract attention.

**Reading of Aboriginal progress**

To further understand the boundaries of acceptance for Aboriginal people at this time and the nature of racialised exchanges, I will now step back from these more intimate sites and focus on the public interactions and broader understandings of Aboriginal people as reported in the local paper, the Riverine Herald. I draw here from a selection of articles published in the paper, primarily in the 1920s and 1930s. They reveal much about the relationship between members of the white community and the Cummeragunja people. Moreover, these views will, in turn, have shaped in some degree my narrators’ opinions about Aboriginal people and, crucially, the actual experiences of the Cummeragunja community.

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100 Alf Turner interview.
101 Alf Turner interview.
102 Alf Turner interview.
103 Alf Turner interview.
Before I enter this discussion, I want to turn briefly to the role of the media in shaping understandings of community. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* pointed to the crucial role of print media in the development of nationalism, writing that this “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways”\(^{105}\). Locally, Richard Broome has written of the way Victorian newspapers were one of the main sources of information about Aboriginal people for non-Aboriginal citizens in the twentieth century, particularly given most had never met an Aboriginal person.\(^{106}\) In Broome’s own study of the *Argus*, he found that most Victorian newspaper coverage is sourced from outside the state and that before the growth of Aboriginal organisations, prior to the outbreak of World War Two coverage of Aboriginal issues is minimal. There are, however, moments where Aboriginal voices do appear, in particular, in local media. Broome cautioned the reader that these articles are “inevitably more valuable for white perceptions than black”, but said they still had value.\(^{107}\) \(“\text{They can help us chart”, he wrote, “the changing definition of Kooris by white Victorians”}\).\(^{108}\) Certainly, this was Melva Johnson’s reading of a collection of *Shepparton News* articles about Aboriginal people in the twentieth century, which she pointed to in our interview. “We were just called the blacks from the riverbank”, she observed of this coverage.\(^{109}\) I kept this cautionary advice in mind in my reading of the *Riverine Herald*.

The focus in the *Riverine Herald* reporting on Cummeragunja during these years is the progression of the station and its inhabitants into white civilisation. A classic example of this was a procession held on the station one late spring afternoon in 1923. Before I discuss the coverage of this, I want to turn briefly to my narrators’ memories. Kevin Atkinson recalled they had a certain appeal because they were “something a bit different”.\(^{110}\) He said some people with cars, and horses and carts “used to put bunting around them and streamers and things around them, and dress up themselves”.\(^{111}\) Others with boats would decorate them and float along the river. Colin Walker remembered parades around the station’s football oval and showed me a photograph of his mother.

\(^{107}\) Broome, “Constructing Kooris”, p. 43.
\(^{108}\) Broome, “Constructing Kooris”, p. 43.
\(^{109}\) Melva Johnson interview.
\(^{110}\) Kevin Atkinson interview, 15 February 2008.
\(^{111}\) Kevin Atkinson interview, 15 February 2008.
who died when he was small, dressed up for the event. “[S]he dressed up like that as an Indian woman, and she rode this little black pony, and my father used to tell me, he reckoned she looked so nice on her”\(^{112}\) Alf Turner remembered the processions as an annual event, which “they used to come from everywhere to see”.\(^{113}\)

Organisers of the 1923 event had clearly geared it to highlight the civilised status of Aboriginal people on Cummeragunja whilst raising money for an inarguably civilised cause: a piano for the station’s newly built hall. One article published a few days before gushed that there would “be great doings at the Cummeragunja aboriginal station” the following Wednesday.\(^{114}\) Visitors would be treated to a flower show, for which all entries would be “grown by the aborigines” and would have the opportunity to watch the “interesting spectacle” of boomerang throwing.\(^{115}\) Those wishing to make an extra contribution could send donations. Another article published on the big day wrote that the event was promising to draw a large crowd. Readers were reminded that the flower show would not only “be of a very high standard”,\(^{116}\) but it would “indicat[e] the ability of a nomadic race to apply itself to domestic husbandry”.\(^{117}\) The sporting events also highlighted this ability, with the journalist assuring readers, they would see: “[t]he aboriginal is a good, keen sportsman in spite of his color”.\(^{118}\) Further, this article upgraded the boomerang throwing from an “interesting spectacle” to an exhibition of the art that would “probably be as fine as any that could be witnessed on this continent”.\(^{119}\)

Writing later, a journalist from the Riverine Herald described the display, noting that many “motor cars, gigs, buggies and vehicles of all kinds were concentrating on the mission site” to watch the procession.\(^{120}\) “Aboriginal chiefs, garbed and acting as became their part”, led the processions, the journalist noted, while “the piccaninnies followed, amazing in their number, and full of joy at taking a part on so important an occasion”.\(^{121}\) After them was “a canoe on wheels” and “a Ford car”.\(^{122}\) Following were some “local girls, calling themselves 'Jap' girls”, and, finally, “a band of rough riders bringing up the

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\(^{112}\) Colin Walker interview.
\(^{113}\) Alf Turner interview.
\(^{114}\) “Cummeragunja Ghymkhana [sic]”, Riverine Herald, 16 November 1923, p. 2.
\(^{115}\) “Cummeragunja Ghymkhana”, p. 2.
\(^{117}\) “Today's Ghymkhana”, p. 2.
\(^{118}\) “Today's Ghymkhana”, p. 2.
\(^{120}\) “Cummeragunja: Ghymkhana and Flower Show”, Riverine Herald, 22 November 1923, p. 2.
\(^{121}\) “Cummeragunja”, p. 2.
\(^{122}\) “Cummeragunja”, p. 2.
rear, the men sitting on their horses like centaurs”. The journalist reflected: “[a]lthough the horse is an importation, the Australian aborigines have taken to its management as if it were part of Australia’s fauna”. The progression of Aboriginal people into white civilisation was a clear focus of the day. We can read the Aboriginal chiefs as representing Aboriginal society as it was, and the Ford and the horse riders, as proof not only of Aboriginal progress but also of Aboriginal people’s adaptability to white society. The car, however, reveals the economic challenges faced by the Cummeragunja community; it was not the functioning motor vehicle that we are led to imagine by this writer, but rather a cardboard cut-out carried by an Aboriginal boy, with the words “I can’t afford a Ford” scrawled along the side. It is unlikely this potentially uncomfortable reminder was an editorial oversight: the school teacher’s daughter later recalled it was “the joke of the day”.

The subsequent flower show emerged as a particular highlight and the entries, clearly a convincing display of Aboriginal “domestic husbandry” skills, as promised by the Riverine Herald. The paper’s report on the occasion enthused that: “[t]he collection of many beautiful flowers and fine vegetables which were on view was such that the newly formed Echuca Horticultural Society might well be proud of”. Florence Walker won with her roses, while judges also awarded prizes for snapdragons, geraniums both in and out of pots, larkspur, pansies and sweetpeas. The exhibition of these flowers, presumably cut and arranged in the way recommended by the women’s groups of the region, was a particularly convincing sign of the uptake of western civilisation by the community.

Perhaps even more persuasive, though, was the judging of actual gardens, which judges marked, no doubt, on a range of western inclusions not limited to those of the natural variety; fences, garden edgings, garden features would also have counted towards the final result, which saw Mrs J. Charles and Mrs A. Briggs awarded equal firsts. This process of overwriting the landscape was an important part of colonising the land generally. Historian Katie Holmes has discussed this, writing that the creation of gardens played an important role for British settlers as they “established themselves in this foreign

123 “Cummeragunja”, p. 2.
124 “Cummeragunja”, p. 2.
She wrote that “[t]hrough planting, tending and harvesting, settlers transformed alien spaces into images of their own making”. Further, gardens are essentially cultivation and as Holmes remarked, western cultures considered soil cultivation “a mark of civilisation”. Aboriginal gardens carried a special meaning – not only was this a British inscription on the Australian landscape, but the existence of Aboriginal gardeners signified a colonial victory over the people as well as the land. Compounding this was the fact that they were planting European species: the geraniums, larkspur, roses and snapdragons mentioned in the Riverine Herald article were hardly native to the surrounding Barmah forest.

In line with the broader community’s concern for the adaptation of “civilisation” on Cummeragunja, was a corresponding desire to see that the Government was aiding this process. Towards this end, the APB Inspector, Robert Donaldson, attended the procession and returned a year later to inspect the improvements taking place on the station. The group accompanying Donaldson included the retiring honorary secretary of the local APB and Moama police sergeant, W. Goodwin and the local APB chairman Alfred Bartlett. After inspecting building repairs on the station, they retired for “a social cup of tea” with the manager Sydney Gibson and his wife. In the Riverine Herald article written about the visit, it was observed: “[t]he whole station is in the course of renovation and the work is now nearing completion, the waterworks have been reorganised, and a new pump engine and water tower installed”.

The Government’s responsibility for the well-being of the Cummeragunja population was again a focus in 1925. A visitor at this time, identified only as “ATM”, assured the Riverine Herald readership that “no matter what opinions one may have regarding the present recipients of the government’s bounty, the State is doing its duty to the descendants of people who have been dispossessed of their land”.

131 Jamie S. Scott discusses the close links between colonisation and cultivation in, “Cultivating Christians in Colonial Canadian Missions”, in Alvyn Austin and Jamie S. Scott (eds), Canadian Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples: Representing Religion at Home and Abroad, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005, pp. 21-45.
132 “Cummeragunja Station”, Riverine Herald, 26 June 1924, p. 2.
133 “Cummeragunja Station”, p. 2.
134 “Cummeragunja Station”, p. 2.
aptly their second “inspection”, they were impressed with what they saw. While Winifred Burrage may have felt “public spirit” was on the decline at this time, ATM had nothing but praise for the outward appearance of the station. In fact, ATM did not seem troubled with the personal well-being of the station’s inhabitants at all. For the purposes of this article, the Aboriginal residents could all have been absent during ATM’s visit, as they appeared of no interest. Rather, the trappings of white civilisation were his or her primary interest: “It was noticeable that the road and footpath formations were all in good order; each house neatly fenced off and almost every one with a verandah in front”.136 This picture of neatly fenced houses with verandahs facing out to well-formed footpaths and roads was a typical image of “white” Australian towns in this era. This is not to say that their existence was unproblematic; the verandah was actually an integral site for black and white interaction at this time; providing a space for Aboriginal workers to receive their instructions and for white people to stand when visiting Aboriginal homes. It was, as historian Liz Reed has written, “a liminal space also – a place of confinement and avoidance”.137

Given the writer’s adherence to white cultural values, it makes sense that the cleanliness of the structures on Cummeragunja was also a focal point. This was certainly the case when ATM reported on the church, whose sparkling interior redeemed its outwardly unpromising appearance.138 At the lower end of the cultural spectrum, the writer also praised the milking sheds, describing them as “a model of cleanliness”.139 It is in the author’s discussion of the station’s dairy that we see one of the few, albeit unflattering, acknowledgements of Aboriginal people. Commenting on the milking and the general work that was necessary for the station to function successfully, the author observed: “it is a common fact that the Australian aborigine is not over fond of it”.140 The remark is so general it remains unclear whether the author actually witnessed this laziness, repeated the opinion of the manager or simply echoed a contemporary trope about Aboriginal people. Judging from the rest of the article, I suspect that it is the latter. In fact, a closer examination of the article reveals an underlying paternalism towards Aboriginal people: an assumption that if the settler governments built the structures of

white civilisation upon the land then Aboriginal people should not only be satisfied, they should be thankful.

**Remembering a dying race and a growing white interest**

The *Riverine Herald* did allocate some space to traditional Aboriginal activities, although the scope of this was limited. In 1923, for instance, the paper reported proudly on one Cummeragunja man’s exhibition of boomerang throwing. The paper informed readers that Sydney Williams had given “an excellent exhibition of boomerang throwing in the Supreme Court Square before an admiring audience.” 141 Within this article Williams was not the only local to receive praise; the owner of the boomerang, Baden Powell of Barmah, had procured it from the Coranderrk reserve and was himself “an expert” in the art of boomerang throwing. According to the *Riverine Herald*, Powell had “won several trophies, including a shield at the Barmah sports on one occasion”. 142 Deliberately or otherwise, this reference to Powell, presumably a white man, undermines to a certain extent the achievement of Williams, who receives no such accolades. This incident hints at a level of cultural exchange, where the white community appropriated Aboriginal artefacts, albeit in a westernised-form complete with organised competitions and trophies. Certainly, Powell was not the only one collecting artefacts. Iris Swan told me of at least one other woman, a Seventh Day Adventist at Barmah, who had an extensive collection of Aboriginal artefacts and weaponry. 143 This collection of Indigenous objects played an important role in colonising Australia. As Tony Birch has observed, collecting Aboriginal art “can serve as evidence of the superiority of the imperialist culture, while allowing its owners the gratification of appreciating the ‘beauty’ in objects from a past time”. 144 Mastering the art, therefore, of an Aboriginal weapon must have had enormous symbolic value.

The *Riverine Herald* also revealed a curiosity and some degree of respect for older Aboriginal people, and, in particular, Louisa Briggs who died in 1925. 145 According to the article published on this occasion, Briggs, who died at Cummeragunja, had been a

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142 “Boomerang Throwing”, p. 2.
143 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
Briggs sailed from Tasmania to Victoria as a girl, married and headed for the goldfields, the paper reported. She lived at Warrnambool, then on the Maloga mission, and finally on the Cummeragunja station itself. The paper paid particular attention to Briggs’s adoption of western culture, describing her as “a prolific reader of best literature”, who also had a soft spot for comics. The paper clearly considered her a good Christian woman, who while “a very heavy smoker”, did not drink alcohol. The paper remarked: “[h]er passing was as tranquil as her life”. Aboriginal Pastor Eddy Atkinson provided a service at her funeral that featured “full religious orders” and school children laid a wreath of violets on her grave, highlighting her standing in the community. The article reflected the prevailing belief that Aboriginal people were dying out, reporting that with her death “another ‘milestone’ [had] been passed in the anthropological history of the Australian aboriginal”. According to the Herald, Briggs “was absolutely the last of the Tasmanian aboriginals, directly related to King John and Queen Truganini”.

This idea of Aboriginal people as part of a dying race was popular in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, although it faded as growing numbers of Aboriginal people of mixed descent became apparent during the 1920s and 1930s. The Riverine Herald, nevertheless, writing in the interwar period, frequently reinforced this dying race concept through the re-publishing of settler’ memories from the nineteenth century. The romantic ideas that these encapsulated would have had a formative influence on my white narrators, who each had a vested interest in the idea of a peaceful white settlement of the region. For example, an account republished from Edward Curr’s Recollections of Early Squatting Days recalled this idea in striking lyrical fashion. “Forest and swamp know thee no more”, wrote Curr. “Let the cry of the Jarring (cockatoo) flying to the Murray to drink at sundown, and the loud laugh of the wigilopka (laughing jackass) … be the memento”, he observed, “the dirge of a people which have passed away. This is a far more palatable interpretation of the settling of the region and its subsequent

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146 “The Last of the Tasmanian Aboriginals”, Riverine Herald, 11 September 1925, p. 2.
147 “The Last of the Tasmanian Aboriginals”, p. 2.
148 “The Last of the Tasmanian Aboriginals”, p. 2.
149 “The Last of the Tasmanian Aboriginals”, p. 2.
150 “The Last of the Tasmanian Aboriginals”, p. 2
151 “The Last of the Tasmanian Aboriginals”, p. 2.
destruction of Aboriginal communities for many white people. It also plays a role in stressing a sense of white belonging in Australia. As Stephen Muecke has observed, “[l]andscape aesthetics work towards the intensification of relationships between the subject and object, creating a sense of belonging or homeliness approaching the aboriginal sense of ‘spiritual attachment’.”

While accounts such as Curr's perpetuated the “dying race” theory, they also drew attention to Aboriginal people as the region’s first inhabitants. The semi-regular uncovering of Aboriginal skeletons in the area reinforced this knowledge, as was the case when one such discovery occurred at nearby Gumbower in November 1919. A correspondent for the paper remarked that: “These relics point to a time when the black race were the only human inhabitants of these northern regions”. In considering this, I draw from the work on Tony Birch who has written that Australian settlers, “both lamented and celebrated” the passing of Aboriginal culture.

Much has been written on the way in which white Australians conveniently “forgot” their black past. Historian Ann Curthoys, for example, remarked that during the 1900s “Aboriginal existence almost disappeared from the national historical archive”. According to Curthoys, Australian historians and the public assumed that “Australian history began with the European early visitors and then the establishment of a British settlement at Sydney cove”, although she admits that in some spheres, such as art and film, Aboriginal people remained visible. While I agree that the history studied at schools discounted Aboriginal history, the Aboriginal presence scarcely disappeared in the way Curthoys suggests. Rather, as Birch has indicated, recognition of an Aboriginal presence continued in settler colonial societies. Newspapers, such as the Riverine Herald, revealed that they functioned as popular forums for local history that not only showed an awareness of Aboriginal people in their areas, but also actually focussed on their pre-white history as a particular point of interest.

The Riverine Herald reflected a growing concern for the welfare of Aboriginal people in northern Australia during the 1930s. Historian Henry Reynolds has discussed

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156 Birch, “‘A Land So Inviting’”, p. 179.

the growing public interest in Aboriginal issues during this period, which was sparked by two major incidents in the late 1920s: the Forrest River massacre, where missionaries estimated a police party slaughtered up to 30 Aboriginal people, and the Coniston massacre, which saw close to 100 Aboriginal people killed.\textsuperscript{158} Both incidents attracted widespread condemnation, both locally and abroad. In line with this concern, the \textit{Riverine Herald} published a number of articles throughout the 1930s pointing to issues relating to Aboriginal welfare, incidents which usually occurred far away in Queensland or the Northern Territory. For example, an article included under the heading “Items of Interest”, wrote that Francis Birtles’s recent allegations concerning the maltreatment of Aboriginal people in the north were too vague for Home Affairs to act upon. Further, it said officials had indicated: “that the interests of the aborigines are so carefully guarded by the existing organization that such events as those mentioned by Birtles could not pass undetected”.\textsuperscript{159} The article reported that these were not the only allegations made about the maltreatment of Aboriginal people, but that there was never enough information provided. The issue did not disappear as the Federal Government was probably hoping it would: a fortnight later another article appeared, entitled “Alleged Native Slavery”. It reported that the secretary of the Collins Street Baptist Church, W. Gordon Sprigg had urged the Federal Government to conduct a full inquiry into recent claims made by the NSW Industrial Court president’s son that Aboriginal people were being forced into slavery in north-west Australia.\textsuperscript{160} I would argue that this concern for the north, while valid, supported claims such as Iris’s that the worst incidents happened up north and that in the local area it was “a different situation” and, therefore, distanced from any ill treatment.

Despite the obvious challenges, the paper continued to publish articles that indicated Aboriginal people could become like the white community. In 1932, it published an article entitled “Aborigines’ Law Like Christians” that was based on an interview with Joe Anderson, an Aboriginal man from Sydney. Anderson condemned the impact of white arrival on Indigenous society but also indicated the many similarities


\textsuperscript{159} “Items of Interest”, \textit{Riverine Herald}, 2 January 1932, p. 3. See also:

\textsuperscript{160} “Alleged Native Slavery: Inquiry Urged”, \textit{Riverine Herald}, 16 January 1932, p. 2. For more on Sprigg see Donald MacLean, \textit{Sketch of Public Service of Mr. W. Gordon Sprigg of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia}, Melbourne: Ruskin Press, 1940.
between the white and black cultures.\textsuperscript{161} Anderson told the reporter that: “Before Captain Cook landed … they were not cannibals but were brought up to be industrious”.\textsuperscript{162} He outlined the various rules followed by Aboriginal people before white settlement and claimed most vices arrived with the Europeans. Anderson blamed the convicts for the majority of Indigenous Australia’s problems, writing that: “[i]f free settlers instead of convicts had first come to the colony, the blacks would not be a dying race, many of them would be in good positions today”.\textsuperscript{163}

The testimonies of missionaries visiting the region also encouraged the white community’s interest in Aboriginal activities. While these ideas now appear crude, they would have been influential at the time my narrators were growing up. One was the Reverend James Watson, a Methodist missionary from the Northern Territory who addressed a gathering on Aboriginal “tribes”. Leading up to the event, the paper enthused that “those who want to know something of the history of the aborigines of Australia” should attend Watson’s presentation, which would prove information about “these strange people”.\textsuperscript{164} Watson, the journalist wrote, was the general secretary of the Methodist Church in Victoria and Tasmania, and had conducted pioneering work in New Guinea, “where by a Providential deliverance he escaped being killed and eaten at a cannibal feast”.\textsuperscript{165}

Clearly steeped in the prevailing ideas of racial science, Watson placed Aboriginal low on the racial hierarchy in another article in the Riverine Herald published two days later. He observed that the “Myall black in his native state” lived “in a perfectly natural condition, naked and unashamed” and that this “healthful condition” would continue so long as settlers prevented him from having “contact with the higher races”.\textsuperscript{166} In words similar to those used by ATM to describe the laziness of Aboriginal people on Cummeragunja, Watson told his readers that Aboriginal men were “indolent” in their “natural state”, because the land and rivers provided easily for them.\textsuperscript{167} When Watson made the address these articles promoted, his focus was on the process of civilising Aboriginal people. He identified three main focuses for his mission – “industrial,
educational, and spiritual”. Watson drew on the teachings of the anthropologist Herbert Basedow to explain his attitudes to Aboriginal education, observing that Aboriginal people, however primitive, were just as capable of learning about science as white people. But Watson revealed the limits to his confidence in Aboriginal education when he observed that the Aboriginal person was a “laughing, loving child of nature”, who would struggle to keep up with an advanced level of education. There were exceptions, however, such as the “girl whose poetry [was] read widely”, and another man, a war hero and illustrator, who could “recite Shakespeare with great ability”. Watson’s favourite was David Unaipon, whom he depicted as the golden child of the mission system. Unaipon grew up on the Point McLeay Mission in South Australia and was by this time “a philosopher, inventor and musician” who even “studie[d] evolution”.

Three years later, the Echuca people got to see Unaipon’s gifts firsthand when he visited the region to give a lecture about Aboriginal people. Described as an Aboriginal missionary, Unaipon was quick to point out the adaptability of Aboriginal people to Christianity, who, unlike the “Mohommedians” [presumably Muslims], “did not worship idols”, and so “had no other creed which had to be displaced”. Unaipon presented himself as evidence Aboriginal people could be educated, and called on his audience to support missions to Aboriginal people that did more than just feed and clothe them. He stressed to his audience: “It would be better by far to given them opportunities and make them stand or fall by their own efforts”. He concluded with a description of his research into “perpetual motion and the laws of exchange in the material world”.

Conclusion

Riverine Herald readers enjoyed seeing the Cummeragunja people progress into white civilisation and displayed a paternalistic interest in clean houses, neat gardens and a general departure from traditional Aboriginal activities, apart from those of particular interest to the white community, such as boomerang throwing. It is in relation to events

174 “Australian Aborigines”, p. 2.
175 “Australian Aborigines”, p. 2.
176 “Australian Aborigines”, p. 2.
which celebrate this kind of activity, that the community interacted with its Aboriginal neighbours in the public sphere. The Riverine Herald readership, meanwhile, appeared to have a general, if limited, understanding of its Aboriginal history, which the paper depicted as coming to a peaceful end. Aboriginal people were largely absent from any active participation within the community outside Cummeragunja. When we see them outside the station’s boundaries, they either appear to be a troubling element or a source of entertainment.

This reading of the Riverine Herald has a number of implications for understanding my oral history interviews. First, the settler community’s benevolence towards Aboriginal issues was in line with the testimonies of my white narrators, who each attempted to demonstrate their regard for Aboriginal people. Unlike the Riverine Herald reports, which are explicit in their ideas about Aboriginal people and their place within a racial hierarchy, my white oral history narrators often attempted to deny race or racial difference really existed but, ultimately, they undermined themselves in the process in a whole range of ways. Instead, through both these oral accounts and the Riverine Herald a picture of white privilege emerges in which Aboriginal people are primarily located on the boundaries, both socially and economically.

The spaces featured in the Riverine Herald, are by their very nature public, primarily focussing on communal events in communal locations: whether outside or in community halls. Aboriginal people are for the most part found on the station, and, when seen by the paper are outside in shared areas within the station’s boundaries, parading quite explicitly for the white spectators congregated to watch them. When found off the station, they appear to be performing, once again, for a white audience in a public arena. These accounts are narrated by what appears to be an authoritative male voice, although they are not explicitly gendered.

In my oral histories, the spaces within white homes that Aboriginal people remembered are far more specific and personal. These are clearly gendered and are located in particular areas; the laundry, the kitchen, the guest bedroom or even the shearing shed. In my interviews with white women, the home emerges as a feminine space and, in this way, appears to include Aboriginal women. These relationships were underwritten, however, by a power structure that problematised the bonds that this space otherwise enabled. In a similar way, my narrators depict the shearing shed as a masculine space, within which bonds are forged and quickly forgotten once the men move outside
the shed into the view of broader white society. Within the space of the shearing shed, the Aboriginal shearer was, ultimately, working underneath the farmer whose sheep he was shearing. The white community would not have considered his place here then a particular threat. Also, within this space, and within any of the workplaces Aboriginal people found themselves in at this time, bonds would have formed along gender lines, muting the distinction of race to a certain extent. Outside on the football field, white men were performing before not only their friends but also their girlfriends against the might of the Aboriginal teams. It is not so surprising that these situations often led to clashes.

From my oral history interviews and my reading of the Riverine Herald it is clear that white society surrounding Cummeragunja set boundaries for where Aboriginal people belonged on both personal and public levels, the location of these depending on their individual circumstances and the broader social climate. In the case of the Burragge family, it seems this personal boundary was set at the door to the master bedroom, perhaps the most intimate site within the home. When Charles Burragge and his son almost drowned, the racial status quo was over turned. Aboriginal people were now the saviours of this white man and his boy, in a world where white people were, generally, the parties privileged and in power. It was this brief change in status, combined with the exceptional circumstance of the near death experiences of the Burragge menfolk that led to a temporary change in the boundary of where Aboriginal people could go. Secondly, this incident was not simply an incursion on coded space: it was also an incursion on a gender code. Aboriginal men rarely entered white homes in the area, and although Aboriginal women entered through their role as domestic servants, they were not, at least in this home, allowed in the same bedroom. And here, in this most private of spaces, were Aboriginal men. It is no wonder four-year-old Elsie was struck.

This chapter marks the end of my focus on the boundaries of acceptance that Cummeragunja people faced when attempting to make lives for themselves in the first fifty years of the station’s existence. I now turn to the new climate of opinion that was forming, hinted at in the pages of the Riverine Herald, regarding the assimilation of Aboriginal people into white society. In the next chapter, I explore an early indicator of this on Cummeragunja: the arrival of two anthropologists in 1938 to assess this community’s ability to assimilate into white society.
Figure 8: Harvard-Adelaide expedition camp, Cummeragunja, 1938 (AA38/1/15/1). Image courtesy of the South Australian Museum Archives
On a sunny afternoon in late May 1938, two anthropologists, Joseph Birdsell and Norman Tindale, and their wives, Bee Birdsell and Dorothy Tindale, arrived for a short stay at Cummeragunja. Through what seemed good luck rather than good management, the group drove through the station’s gates just after the Aborigines Protection Board (APB) Chief Inspector Ernest Smithers, who had come from Sydney for what was a big day for the station’s inhabitants: the commemoration of Empire Day.¹ The participation of Cummeragunja residents, though ironic, appeared at least superficially voluntary. Given indications of some contemporary Aboriginal faith in the residual good will of the British Crown, the Cummeragunja people perhaps nurtured some hope that the royal head of the empire would one day prevail over the Australian settler governments and offer them rights as Australia’s Aboriginal people.² Either way, on this day and, apparently, on every 24 May since the late 1880s, residents, young and old, had donned costumes, decorated vehicles and bikes, and paraded through the streets in cheerful spirits. A returned Anzac soldier in full uniform led a colourful parade that included “[d]ecorated motor floats with streamers and gaily dressed children, black minstrels playing in a gum leaf band and decorated bicycles”.³ Tindale and Birdsell quickly set up their video camera to capture the event.

Here we see Cummeragunja residents celebrating their inclusion within the British Empire, while on the margins of these festivities are Birdsell and Tindale, anthropologists there to study the “otherness” of Aboriginal people. This scene is an appropriate opening to this chapter, which seeks to explore the ways white society sought to gauge assimilation, whilst impeding its progress, and the responses of

Aboriginal people, with a particular focus on the power of whiteness, hinted at on this day and deeply embedded in Tindale and Birdsell’s research trip to the station.4

The Chapter begins by looking at the records left from the expedition, now kept in the South Australian Museum Archives, for what they tell us about attitudes to assimilation and the working of whiteness and race during these years. I turn next to the response from Cummeragunja people. How did the community react to the expedition’s visit? What authority, if any, were they able to hold over this research? The final section of this paper looks at the legacy of this visit and the question of who now has authority when considering the expedition.

_A research agenda_

The attempts of white “experts” to speak for indigenous people have attracted increasing critique in recent years. Within this is the fraught issue of white research into indigenous peoples. As Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai-Smith has observed, “The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary”.5 Anthropology is a significant offender and has, according to Tuhiwai-Smith, been “implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism”.6 Michael Dodson, meanwhile, has argued that the study of race played an essential role in colonisation. “Since their first intrusive gaze”, he wrote, “colonising cultures have had a preoccupation with observing, analysing, studying, classifying and labelling Aborigines and Aboriginality”.7 “Under that gaze”, Dodson asserts, “Aboriginality changed from being a daily practice to being ‘a problem to be solved’”.8 Lynette Russell has similarly written of this link between anthropology and colonial governance in Victoria, observing that: “the disciplines of ethnology and anthropology … develop[ed] alongside the ‘need’

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6 Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies, p. 1.
8 Dodson, “The End in the Beginning”, p. 7.
to govern and understand Indigenous Victorians”. Certainly, scientific investigations throughout the nineteenth century and at least into the first half of the twentieth often sought to reinforce notions of Aboriginal inferiority, and necessarily, European superiority. Accordingly, many academics have described this desire of colonisers to know Indigenous people as fundamental to colonial power, as Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper have argued. “A large colonial bureaucracy occupied itself”, they wrote, “especially from the 1860s, with classifying people and their attributes”. According to Stoler and Cooper, colonial regimes then used this knowledge to “define the constituents of a certain kind of society” and in turn employ this knowledge to demonstrate that their “cultural knowledge qualified them to govern”. Deborah Bird Rose has made a similar point looking at the Australian context specifically. Assessing Aboriginal people, whom she notes appeared to have “invisible skin”, for their measurement of Aboriginal blood, pleased a white bureaucracy searching for documents. Authorities, moreover, treated this blood as if it had “its own agency that the person [could] barely or rarely resist”.

However, anthropology also unsettled some of the prevailing ideas held by colonists while at the same time prompting discussions and highlighting facts that made authorities uncomfortable. Jeremy Beckett, for instance, has written that anthropological fieldwork “subverts the researcher’s preconceptions and, in greater or lesser degree, remakes the project in its own image”. Its subjects, he wrote, were “not inert, and have a way of setting their own terms”. Gillian Cowlishaw, meanwhile, argued for the continued study of race in history, observing that social scientists now avoided race in favour of culture, but that this in many ways served to reinforce its power, through a failure to tackle it properly. “I want to replace the pretense that ‘skin colour does not

11 Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda”, in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds), Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 11.
12 Stoler and Cooper, Between Metropole and Colony, p. 14.
14 Rose, “Aboriginal Life and Death”, p. 147.
manner”, wrote Cowlishaw, “with the recognition that of course it does, and to examine the ways it matters”.17

The idea of a joint Harvard-Adelaide expedition to study the nation’s Aboriginal people of mixed descent lay in the collegial contact of Adelaide University’s Norman Tindale and E.A. Hooton, an anthropology professor from Harvard University, and his anthropology graduate student, Joseph Birdsell. The trio planned that Tindale, who had met with Hooton and Birdsell during a visit the United States in 1936, would study the genealogies, while Birdsell would conduct measuring.18 Their approach reflected the scientists’ belief that not only did race exist, but that it incorporated both the physical and the social, with “mental traits, such as an Aboriginal way of thinking or the nomad instinct, [considered] inherited or race specific”.19 To quote Ian Keen, this approach attributes social adjustment difficulties “to the type of cross, not to historical, social and cultural factors”.20

The plans for the expedition were timely in national terms. The 1930s had seen authorities express growing concern over the increasing numbers of Aboriginal people of mixed descent. In 1937, a meeting of Commonwealth officials, and representatives of state authorities decided that the “destiny” of this portion of the population lay “in their ultimate absorption” into the rest of the population and that “all efforts [were to] be directed to that end”.21 With such interest in the topic, Tindale and Birdsell appeared assured of the governmental support essential to their fourteen-month journey, which was to take them across south-east Australia, as well as parts of Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania. The assistance they needed was not merely financial – although

19 D’Arcy, “The Same but Different”, p. 74.
funding was also welcome – but also they relied on governmental representatives to gain access to their subjects: stations, for the most part, were not public spaces and they could not be entered without some kind of approval. “It is agreed”, wrote Hooton, accordingly, before the project began, “that there should be stressed the capacity of the hybrids for adapting themselves to European civilisation, since this group of the population constitutes a government problem”.22

Despite Hooton’s concern for governmental support, it certainly seems that the project genuinely excited him. Not only did he assure Harvard president James B. Conant of the skills and work ethic of the Adelaide anthropologists, but he was also instrumental in securing financial support from the Carnegie Institute towards the project.23 On the Australian end, the group appointed Adelaide pathology professor John Burton Cleland as the Australian research sponsor. Cleland shared Hooton’s support for assimilation, observing at the 1937 conference that miscegenation would produce “increased vitality”24. Unlike Birdsell and Tindale’s clear respect for Hooton, however, both men found Cleland “stiff and officious”.25 They resented his suggestion that they restrict their research to South Australia and his general opinion that their project was overly ambitious.26 The two men largely ignored Cleland and continued with their plans to traverse much of eastern Australia, Tasmania and parts of Western Australia.27 When they left Adelaide to begin their expedition they were pleased Cleland had by this time headed for Europe.28

When Birdsell, Tindale and their wives reached Cummeragunj in late May 1938, the necessary assistance appeared forthcoming. Smithers and the station’s manager, A.J. McQuiggin, greeted the group, as Birdsell noted in his diary. “Protector Smithers of Sydney gave us a hearty welcome + NSW co-operation seems fully assured”.29 While McQuiggin’s reach may not have been as impressive as that of Smithers, who could coordinate access all over the state, he was able to offer some young men to assist them. “Set up camps very nicely near the station hall and found the manager most helpful; a

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team of boys bringing us wood + water + setting up our tents for us”, wrote Tindale that evening.

Before concerning themselves with setting up camp, the new arrivals set up their video cameras to capture the parade that introduced this chapter. This film, held in the South Australian Museum, is testament to Tindale’s account. Silently, the viewer watches as young Aboriginal boys pass by dressed as Chinese people, while others follow in flowing white garments. Behind them are vehicles decorated in the theme of Rule Britannia and bikes almost hidden under streamers. Following the procession, the 300 people who had turned out for the event crowded onto the station’s football ground for speeches. Tindale wrote that: “as visitors Birdsell and I were compelled to contribute”. Compelled or not, Tindale welcomed the opportunity to introduce the expedition and “tell what we hoped to do”.

Later that night the community held an Empire Day concert and dance, an event for which they had been preparing for months. Tindale clearly felt he was a qualified judge of the community’s performance, noting somewhat patronisingly in his diary that, “[t]he songs and items were well sung and acted and some of the people showed talent which would not be amiss in any white community”. He and Birdsell both took to the dance floor as the evening wore on, but the real highlight for them was in the research they were able to conduct surreptitiously. Birdsell took particular note of the physical appearance of those around them. His daily journal entry noted that after attending the concert, he had been “tempted” to stay on for the subsequent dance. “In crowd noticed lack of full bloods”, he wrote, “but only slight traces of blond hair”. Birdsell’s use of the word “tempted” here appears to more related to his work than any social enjoyment.

The pair was also interested in the Tasmanian Aboriginal descendants present that evening. Two photographs of mixed-descent Tasmanian brothers George and Harry Briggs had sparked Tindale’s interest before the trip. Now at the dance Birdsell was keen to find out more. “During the evening we saw several people of strange complexion, dark skin and curious eyes”, he later noted in his diary; “brief enquiry showed that we

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34 Tindale, Journal, p. 91.
had located a considerable number of people with slight to moderate admixture of Tasmanian aboriginal blood”.

Both Birdsell and Tindale had a strong curiosity in the difference between Tasmanian and mainland Aboriginal people, itself a source of much debate during this period.

Also that evening Tindale took the opportunity to consult Smithers about the number of white men present who were either engaged or married to the station’s women. Smithers, described by historian Naomi Parry as “a professional civil servant” who “considered himself knowledgeable on Aboriginal conditions, customs and psychology”, was apparently all too happy to help. “These unions”, he explained to Tindale, “do not tend to last”. He remarked that despite this, Aboriginal people sought them out. Smithers would no doubt have been irritated to know that his claim was later contradicted, apparently unknowingly, by one of the Cummeragunja men, who told Tindale that while Smithers supported interracial unions, the type of white people interested in marrying Aboriginal people were “only … the lowest, the scum of the earth”. Despite the spuriousness of his expertise, Smithers continued to provide assistance to Tindale. The following morning the pair met to discuss the expedition’s route through NSW. In between working on genealogies, Tindale made another call on Smithers and his hosts, McQuiggin and his wife, that evening.

Despite this call and, one would assume, other social engagements with McQuiggin, the most influential day-to-day authority on the station, neither Birdsell nor Tindale made note of any of his opinions about Cummeragunja people. Perhaps he refused to participate, although he clearly agreed to allow the men on to the station, or maybe the opinions of this man, described by residents later as violent and controlling, held little interest for Tindale and Birdsell. Even when they recorded that the community spoke out against conditions on the station, neither man mentions McQuiggin specifically. The community’s silence was more understandable: those who acted against him risked retribution, as events the following year would demonstrate.

On the second day of their visit, Tindale and Birdsell were still on a high, Tindale noting in his diary that the discovery of so many Tasmanian descendants was quite a

37 Quoted in McGregor, Imagined Destinies, p. 36.
40 Cummeragunja Sociological Data Cards, AA 346/4/20, Harvard and Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition Sociological, Anthropological and ACER Data Cards, BAR, SAM.
thrill. “Birdsell is quite excited about it and I confess I am also”, he wrote.⁴¹ On that first day after taking genealogies, Birdsell wrote in his journal that he was initially focussing on the Tasmanian descendants and their unusual physiologies. His most notable discovery, however, was actually a deformity rather than an inherited feature. Birdsell noted that he had observed Aboriginal people, who were short, with wavy or fuzzy hair; one person with the latter, he hoped was one of “‘my Papuan’ type”. This person turned out to have a hair lip and cleft palate; his nose, a key part of fitting this Papuan ideal, was deformed.⁴² Birdsell’s use of “my ‘Papuan’ type” here, highlights the proprietorial nature of this anthropological knowledge, the employment of the word “my” making the “Papuan” sound more like a collector’s piece than a human. Birdsell draws on Tindale’s own theory next, observing that he believed the eyes of Tasmanian Indigenous people differed subtly from those on the mainland.⁴³ When Tindale made his daily entry, he gave no indication of the subtlety of this distinction, nonetheless, writing that “[e]ven when present as to the 1/16th part it seems to stand out clearly from the Australian aboriginal cross”.⁴⁴ Although Tindale was not adverse to the use of genetic formulas, as shown above, Birdsell showed the greatest commitment to these. He was, after all, in charge of measuring and his role on this trip was scientific, not social. It was common, therefore for him to make observations such as the following:

3/4 caste … seem close to present “F-1” type – but darker – perhaps broader noses – but same firm chin etc – little of recessive Australian traits seem to appear here.⁴⁵

F-1 referred to “first cross” Aboriginal people. Almost everyone living at Cummeragunja at this time had at least one white parent or grandparent. Tindale’s use of these formulas is clearest in his family trees, which score every family member on their racial status, with bracketed information, such as ¼ x ½ or ¾ x F2. This use of symbols can obscure or mute the human side of these genealogies, but does not succeed in overwriting it entirely. The most striking examples occur when Tindale scribbles a little extra information next to a name. For instance, he annotates one woman’s record with the following: “Living in Melbourne. Husband did not know she was of native origin when he married her. When

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⁴¹ Tindale, Journal, p. 94.
⁴⁴ Tindale, Journal, p. 94.
⁴⁵ Birdsell, Journal, p. 11.
he found out he took his 3 girls and left her”. Beneath her name are three unnamed female symbols. It is likely Tindale would have made an effort to collect stories such as this as an example of assimilation, however unsuccessful.

Back on Cummeragunja, the anthropologists began to interview residents to find out their “Vital Statistics”. These allowed considerable room for an incredibly high degree of invasive research, but fortunately, due either to the restraint of the researchers or the refusal of Cummeragunja people to submit to this, they were not fully completed. The section on the “Sociological Data Cards” regarding cranial measurements, for example, was blank in every case; likewise, the menstrual data fields on the “Vital Statistics” cards. Only women were required to complete these cards, which covered their date of birth, the number of children they had and their age at the time of each of their children’s births. The cards, like the genealogies, hint at far more than they tell. Sometimes they contradict the genealogies, such as the case of the Aboriginal woman of mixed descent who passed herself off as white and lost her children. According to her Sociological Data Card, the family of her husband took her children, an event that sheet C9B does not record.

The cards reveal the fragile nature of “whiteness” during this period. There are three mentions of “white” which are immediately destabilised by the researchers’ other remarks, such as the case of two sisters who were categorised in the class F2 x white. Their cards record, “white here is not normal white but some unusual white type not specified however”. Similarly one woman was married to a man described as “‘white’ of some foreign strain; not particularized”. The degree and type of whiteness involved would have been of particular interest to Tindale and Birdsell. Not only was it scientifically relevant, but it also indicated the level of acceptance Aboriginal people had achieved within their communities and, therefore, their progress in assimilation.

48 Cummeragunja Sociological Data Cards; for more on this idea of different types of whiteness see Georgia Shills, “Beyond Black and White Caricatures: Depictions of British and Non-British ‘Whites’ in the Brisbane Worker, 1924-1926”, in Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey and Katherine Ellinghaus (eds), Historicising Whiteness: Transnational Perspectives on the Construction of an Identity, Melbourne: RMIT Publishing in association with the School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne, 2007, pp. 392-99.
**Local white experts**

One local white man whose opinions Tindale closely noted was the teacher, Thomas Austin. Before I look at Austin’s contribution to this visit in more detail, I turn briefly here to my oral history accounts of Thomas Austin, who is remembered more for his general amiability than his educational prowess. Lorna Walker was the most effusive of my narrators about Austin and his wife, who nursed her dying sister, sixteen-year-old Lillian. Their daughter Zea would also sit with Lillian, whom Lorna said had a rheumatic heart, a condition that was untreatable at the time: “mum brought her home and Mr Austin and Mrs Austin looked after her here, helped mum with her”.49 She said they were “lovely people”, who “were like family”.50 “They were lovely to the Koori people”, she told me, telling me that just recently Zea, who was now elderly, had returned to see the station where she had grown up. “[O]h she was so happy to see me, she cried and she cuddled me”.51 She described Mrs Austin as a small woman with dark brown hair, who taught the girls to knit and do needlework.52

Melva Johnson also remembered Mrs Austin teaching knitting, as well as weaving baskets and how to clean. “Those are the things they learnt us, the skills that we sort of carried with us”, she told me.53 “Cause not many of us went on to anything else but being domestics”.54 Thinking of the curriculum generally, she remarked that “they didn’t learn you so much about reading and writing”, telling me that she had largely taught herself to read. Despite this, she described Mr Austin as a “lovely old man”, who would “walk around swinging his cane”.55 She said he was a “[t]all thin old fella”, whose “head used to shake a lot, or used to turn around a lot”. She laughed, before continuing: “[y]eah, a real tall, thin old strict … fella”.56 Despite being “lovely” people, she said both the Austins maintained a level of distance from the Aboriginal community. “[T]hey had that attitude you know … They never let you get really close”.57

When I interviewed John and Kevin together they agreed their education had been basic. “I tell you what I liked about Mr Austin”, said John. “He had very high

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49 Lorna Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 24 March 2009, Cummeragunja.
50 Lorna Walker interview.
51 Lorna Walker interview.
52 Lorna Walker interview.
53 Melva Johnson, interview with Fiona Davis, 21 September 2009, Moama.
54 Melva Johnson interview.
55 Melva Johnson interview.
56 Melva Johnson interview.
57 Melva Johnson interview.
Reminding me to put everything in its context, he continued: “He didn’t teach us very much because on the mission, they didn’t teach you much”. “Just learned us to read and write”, added Kevin. “Yeah, that’s all”, observed John. “But every day of my life I seen him, he always had a suit on – a suit and a tie”. Thomas Austin’s appearance was also a focus in an earlier interview with Kevin. “I suppose he wasn’t what you’d call a knock-about bloke”, he explained. “He was always well-dressed and that sort of person”. There was one glitch to Austin’s otherwise careful presentation. “I can remember he had a watch and it only had one hand on it, and it was the minute hand”, recalled Kevin. “And he was able to pick the time pretty well where the hand was, and so on”. I asked Kevin why he thought this was. “Well it probably fell off and I don’t know whether he couldn’t afford to get it fixed up, but it was always like that when I knew him”.

The education, meanwhile, that Austin and other teachers of his era supplied to Aboriginal children was remembered as limited. Alf Turner, admitting he “wasn’t a very good pupil”, spoke of his frustration at having to learn about Captain Cook. “I didn’t think it was right and I still don’t think it’s right … Aboriginal history of Australia should have been taught in the schools from the beginning”. “If you’re going to teach the history of Australia get it right, and get it from both sides, not just one side”. Kevin Atkinson, meanwhile, also remembered learning about Captain Cook discovering Australia, and then having other people explain to him “that how could he discover Australia, when there was already people here?” He said, “it wasn’t hard to work out”, surmising that Austin, and other teachers at the time, “put no importance on the real history of Australia did they? That’s what it amounts to”. Captain Cook was also on the agenda, when Colin Walker remembered his early schooling. “There wasn’t much taught to us about our own culture”, he observed.

Austin’s personality and work ethic aside, he had taught at the school for close to a decade when Birdsell and Tindale arrived, and clearly considered himself an expert not just about Cummeragunja people, but Aboriginal people generally. The problem, he told Tindale, was that Aboriginal people developed physically earlier than white children and

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58 Kevin and John Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 10 October 2009, Cummeragunja.
59 Kevin and John Atkinson interview.
60 Kevin Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 10 April 2008, Cummeragunja.
61 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
62 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
63 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
64 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
65 Colin Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 14 February 2008, Barmah.
this impeded their intellectual growth. He cited two examples to support his case: one was a boy who was sexually active and slow in school; the other, a 12-year-old girl who performed well in her studies and had not yet reached puberty. Austin explained to Tindale that while the station rations did not fulfil dietary requirements, they in fact benefited the children’s performance in school as their malnutrition slowed their development. Wrote Tindale after their meeting: “Undersized native children, partly starved even do better … for they are late in arriving at maturity and so advance further on the path to educative efficiency”.66 Disturbingly, the advice Austin doled out to Tindale was not just the confused musing of a local school teacher, with no reach outside the Cummeragunja school, although this would have been problematic enough. Austin’s expertise had formed the basis of a recent paper written by Sydney anthropology professor, Adolphus Peter Elkin on that very topic.67 Austin’s assistance was particularly important to Tindale in his plans to test the intelligence of children at the school. With Austin’s help, Tindale was able to find out more about the “home environment” and “previous schooling” of the children, and, using the genealogies already collected “to place them in their genetic classes”.68

After another day of these more generic tests, Tindale introduced the children to his drawing tests, which introduced this thesis. While the intentions of the maths and spelling tests are reasonably easy to interpret, these “free drawing” tests are far more obscure. Tindale issued each child with four crayons – red, black, white and yellow – at which point most demanded they also be given green.69 Fortunately for Tindale, Austin was able to assist in this matter. Although Tindale does not mention it, he must have also supplied blue as a number of the pictures include blue skies and partially blue flags, many of which bear a striking resemblance to the Union Jack. The results are now stored at the Adelaide Museum and are both informative and problematic.70

Tindale’s conclusions on the drawing tests relate more to the gender differences between the pictures. “The results were of much interest”, he later noted, “because of the fact that while boys are taught drawing as part of the schooling, girls once they leave

70 See for instance Crayon drawing, Cummeragunja, June 2nd 1938, AA346/18/10/17, Children’s crayon drawings relating to the Harvard and Adelaide Universities Anthropological expedition to South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland, Cape Barren Island, Tasmania and Western Australia, 1938-1939, BAR, SAM.
the kindergarten are not given any opportunity to make drawings in school”.\(^7^1\) Frustratingly, he does not elaborate on his findings in this regard. From my own observations, I would not say there was a marked difference in the skills of the boys versus the girls. Tindale’s other remark on the drawing tests relates to the diligence of those involved. He wrote that the children were given half an hour to complete their pictures, and that most “worked till the last moment and a dozen continued working for from 10 to 25 minutes longer to finish designs they had commenced”.\(^7^2\) Tindale’s use of the phrase “free drawing” seems to indicate that the children were able to choose what they drew. If so, why did so many include a western-styled boat, a house and one or more flowers of introduced species? Perhaps this is what children at the time liked to draw: certainly today, houses and flowers feature prominently in children’s artwork. This is a question to which I will return at the end of this thesis.

Austin also furnished Tindale with a list of the most intelligent people on the station. Austin’s comments regarding the women he had selected, including Mrs Walsh the “most thrifty and honest”,\(^7^3\) reveal the subjective nature of the idea of “intelligence”, as Austin understood it. Next to the list of five female names, was the observation: “[t]hese women show high degree of commonsense and culture; they are widely read + leaders of the native community”.\(^7^4\) I assume culture here refers to white culture rather than Aboriginal culture. The only comments reserved for the seven men named by Austin was the occasional racial classification – “last full blood” and “F1 half-caste”.\(^7^5\)

The local doctor, Dr Graham, is the next figure to move from historical obscurity into the limelight during the visit. He highlighted the picture of malnourishment and ill health that was emerging in an interview with Birdsell, in which Graham complained about the inadequate food on the station. Rations were limited to flour, sugar, tea and only occasional fruit and vegetables, which had led to numerous stomach problems. He suggested to Birdsell “the government may tacitly wish these hybrids to die out—at least they [are] doing a good job to help them”.\(^7^6\) However, his discussion of disease on Cummeragunja soon revealed he was not entirely a sympathetic character. He told Birdsell that one girl infected five men with gonorrhea, and called for the power to segregate people in such cases. I assume the segregation was to be directed

\(^7^1\) Tindale, Journal, p. 109  
\(^7^2\) Tindale, Journal, p. 111.  
\(^7^3\) Tindale, Journal, p. 113.  
\(^7^4\) Tindale, Journal, p. 113.  
\(^7^5\) Tindale, Journal, p. 111  
\(^7^6\) Birdsell, Journal, p. 9.
at the girl and not the men involved. Birdsell does not remark upon the welfare of the girl involved or the circumstances surrounding her sexual behaviour, if accurately reported. Dr Graham also, according to Birdsell “wanted the authority to send venereal disease and tuberculosis patients to Sydney for segregation”, a popular strategy for dealing with such cases over the years. Graham said trachoma was a serious issue on the station, with one specialist in eye disorders claiming he had found 120 cases of trachoma on Cummeragunja. Graham, however, said there were only about 20 “honest cases”.

The community speaks
On the one hand, the expedition to Cummeragunja was an exercise in white authority. Here were two white men, who not only had the audacity to measure and calculate the racial status of the Cummeragunja community, but who did so with the permission, and, in most cases, the testimony of the white authorities related to the station. On the other hand, there is another story that, while not denying this dominant power, does destabilise it. Many in the community were aware of the growing concern about Aboriginal rights and were unlikely to allow these two men to measure their bodies and write down their family relationships unquestioningly. Accordingly, just four days into his visit, Birdsell noted in his diary that one informant “indicates station conversation subversive and situation seems to be indicated developing which calls for ‘Town Meeting’—to explain purpose of study”. Meanwhile, two children whose parents had talked “non cooperation” did not apply themselves in their school tests. Neither Tindale nor Birdsell followed these objections up: the town meeting failed to eventuate and the children were required to participate, regardless of their parents’ objections. Ultimately, these white men had the benefit of their white authority, and did not feel they needed to take seriously the objections of Aboriginal people.

The community’s opinions were most clearly expressed when the researchers interviewed them about their health and level of assimilation. In these, we hear the views, in many cases taken down verbatim, of certain Aboriginal people who lived much of their lives in relative obscurity, but who in these interviews had the rare experience of having a white authority ask them what they thought. Rather than merely discussing the influenza that plagued them from time to time or their love of the Bible, many of these

men seized this opportunity to explain to Tindale the many wrongs which the NSW Government and local white settlers had perpetrated on Cummeragunja people.

Charles McBride senior was unhappy about his lot on the station. He told the anthropologists:

we work shearing and pay unemployment tax. On the station we have to work for the dole instead of receiving it ... white men are taxed and don’t have to work for dole when unemployed.\textsuperscript{81}

McBride expressed his discontent with the leasing of the station, and said that it meant while “[m]en used to get paid for farming [they] now received nothing except dole”. He said previously the Government had paid men to cut thistles, but now expected them to do this work for rations. That said, he described the place as “better” because he could leave “without permission”, there was a “freer attitude” and he felt “appreciated”.\textsuperscript{82}

The leasing of Cummeragunja was also a problem for Frank Davidson, who also complained that the white farmer who now had control of much of the land did not allow Aboriginal people on it and did not employ Aboriginal labour.\textsuperscript{83} This farmer was not the only one who failed to hire Aboriginal people, according to Davidson, who observed, “[p]romises given of work in forests have been token”.\textsuperscript{84} While McBride may have thought the Cummeragunja management had a “freer attitude”, Davidson had little positive to say about it. He told the anthropologists that he “[l]ike[d] this place for [his] children’s sake for their colour may be slung off at them in a school outside”, but that he would never live there otherwise.\textsuperscript{85} George Sparks expressed concern over the Government’s policy of assimilation, telling his interviewer that “[n]atives feel that [the] Sydney board want them to marry out” with whites, but that “[n]atives want to marry in”.\textsuperscript{86} Sparks was also worried about the growing number of Aboriginal people living together without being married, observing that successive managers had become more lax in allowing this.

Like the other men, Gary Marsden was quick to point out to the anthropologists that the Cummeragunja people had had their land taken from them.\textsuperscript{87} He said that:

\textsuperscript{81} Charles McBride is not his real name. Cummeragunja Sociological Data Cards.
\textsuperscript{82} Cummeragunja Sociological Data Cards.
\textsuperscript{83} Frank Davidson is not his real name.
\textsuperscript{84} Cummeragunja Sociological Data.
\textsuperscript{85} Cummeragunja Sociological Data.
\textsuperscript{86} George Sparks is not his real name. Cummeragunja Sociological Data.
\textsuperscript{87} Gary Marsden is not his real name.
the idea in the first place was to grow farm blocks; we’ve lost them now. They took them after we had cleared the land; deep resentment among people at this action. They promised us more land if we efficiently worked what they gave us at first; experience lasted 11-12 years. I had 50 acres, got good wheat off it.\footnote{Cummeragunja Sociological Data.}

Ultimately, he said there were too many “bad blocks” that were too small to make a living: “They took land away from us”.\footnote{Cummeragunja Sociological Data.} Marsden spoke of the importance of individual farm blocks for the young Cummeragunja men, who now had to work away in Victoria. He had taught his sons to do farm work and to “keep off mission”.\footnote{Cummeragunja Sociological Data.} Despite his problems, Marsden highlighted his attachment to the station, observing that his mother helped to form the first Maloga mission and he was the first schoolboy on Cummeragunja.

Barry Jones also complained that the Government had leased out the bulk of the station and his own daughter was “turned off when fishing and camping there”.\footnote{Barry Jones is not his real name. Cummeragunja Sociological Data.} He was not happy that the lessee employed white men on the station to cut timber, and not the station’s Aboriginal residents. He talked about his affection for the river and what it could provide, and observed that those that now hunted game and fish could “be fired for doing it”.\footnote{Cummeragunja Sociological Data.} Jones was a shearer and had once enjoyed reading novels about the Wild West. By this time, he read primarily religious sermons and the \textit{Christian Herald}. His marks for assimilation were high – particularly in regards to gardening.\footnote{Cummeragunja Sociological Data.}

Jones and a Cummeragunja woman, Jenny Allen, provided information to Tindale for his family trees of the community.\footnote{Jenny Allen is not her real name. Cummeragunja Station (New South Wales) [25 May- 5 June, 1938], AA 346/5/3, Harvard and Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition 1938-9, Volume 1, New South Wales, Harvard and Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition Genealogies, 1938-39, BAR, SAM.} It is likely Austin recommended Allen, 66, and Jones, 61, to Tindale; certainly, both feature on his intelligent list. Exactly why the pair agreed to be involved is difficult to say. Perhaps they thought the work of Tindale was valuable: it is now one of the most useful resources left regarding the station. Perhaps they had no choice or Tindale offered them something in return or that they hoped to use the inquiry for the community’s advantage. Overall, I have little information in regards to the pair and what I do have comes mainly from Tindale himself.
One of the most notable places that Allen and Jones feature in Tindale’s research is in the photographs he took of the Cummeragunja community. These photos record about 90 people, each with a front and side shot reminiscent of “mugshots” taken of people after they are arrested. According to Jane Lydon, photographic projects like this were typical in scientific research at the time. She wrote, “[f]or those interested in racial diversity, photographic types allowed the possibility of systematic comparison”. Likewise, Heather Goodall has likened the use of photography by scientists to naturalist drawings, observing that both aimed to “stabilise and categorise” Aboriginal people. Despite this, Lydon believes historians should not pass off Indigenous photographs “purely as a tool of the colonial project”. Rather, she argued, “[t]he exploitation subject-object relationship characteristic of colonialism is … vulnerable to attack from within the image itself”.

It is difficult to read the gaze of Allen, who is number 47 in Tindale’s photographs and whose name is misspelt. She wears a scarf around her neck and is wearing a light coloured v-neck dress. Her hair is slightly untidy and her dress appears far from clean. Jones, meanwhile, comes in as number 38. He is wearing a striped jumper complete with collar and zip and is not smiling but stares directly at the camera. These photos are tantalising: they give us “real” glimpses of “real” people. It is difficult to say, however, what they actually tell us. Writing about an Aboriginal man’s portrait, Lydon remarks that his “personality seems tangible and vivid”. She admits, however, that reading this photo is open to interpretation, and that facial expressions can “conceal… as much as [they] convey”. Similarly, John Morton has discussed this problem, writing that although they are often considered “true absolutely”, the way photos are understood changes over time. He wrote: “what changes is the way any particular photograph is perceived, the way in which it is contextualized and enlisted to tell stories, and the way in

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95 Norman B. Tindale, Portraits of Aboriginal Peoples of New South Wales, 1938-1939, MLMSS 6486, ML.
96 Heather Goodall in her study of Tindale’s photos taken at the Brewarrina reserve claims he did not take side on shots, which she says were used previously be anthropologists with ‘the intention of recording skull proportions and face shape.’ Heather Goodall, “‘Karroo Mates’—Communities Reclaim their Images”, Aboriginal History, vol. 30, 2006, p. 53.
99 Lydon, Eye Contact, p. 77.
100 Lydon, Eye Contact, p. 242.
101 Lydon, Eye Contact, p. 118.
102 Lydon, Eye Contact, p. 243.
which people find themselves, their identities, in those stories".103 Looking at these photos of Cummeragunja residents, therefore, I recognise the limits to the information they can provide. Nevertheless, I can still draw certain conclusions. For example, what people are wearing gives us an idea of their financial status and at times their personality. I like to think the state of their hair also tells us something, although admittedly not firm facts. Is Allen’s slightly dishevelled hair an act of defiance, a desire for a true representation or simply a sign she is overworked?

Regardless of the meaning of Allen’s slightly unkempt appearance, it is in direct contrast to Tindale’s role in this representation. His side of this interaction was supposed to be ordered; the pictures taken from the same angle both front and side view, the little identifier card held out to one side; the name, the date and the age all recorded. His subjects, meanwhile, were supposed to be disordered, displayed “truthfully”, unchanged by Tindale’s presence. It is unfair, though, to assume Tindale actually thought he achieved this neat invisibility. Later when discussing the social side of his research, he acknowledged the information he had collected was not necessarily the exact truth, as “[t]he interpretation could easily be coloured by the personal prejudices of the various informants, and even by the unconscious bias of the observer”.104 Nevertheless, it does appear Tindale was endeavouring to act as the mythological “chameleon fieldworker”, discussed by Clifford Geertz in his investigation of another prominent anthropologist from this period, Bronislaw Malinowski.105 While it may have been their aim, Tindale and Birdsell’s presence on Cummeragunja was anything but “chameleon-like”. Not only did they arrive at one of the biggest events of the year, but also they did not try to temper their invasiveness, measuring, testing, and photographing as many locals as they could find.


The legacy

Eight months after Tindale, Birdsell and their wives departed from Cummeragunja, tensions came to head on the station and the Cummeragunja walk-off – the subject of the next chapter – occurred. Three years after his visit, Tindale drew on some of the problems found at Cummeragunja to support his findings that while Aboriginal people of mixed descent could assimilate successfully, the reserve and station system was not the answer. His conclusions appeared to address the concerns of the Aboriginal men who had complained in their health interviews, although they overlooked the very real attachment to, and feeling of entitlement to, land that had underpinned these complaints. Calling for qualified teachers and for vocational training, Tindale gave the example of the farming training given to Aboriginal people on Cummeragunja at the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. “Although the training itself was ultimately abandoned”, wrote Tindale, “the good results are evident in that some of the older men still find ready employment and good remuneration in the adjoining districts in NSW and Victoria”.106 Tindale appeared to link a subsequent lack of training to the growing dissatisfaction on the station: “[I]t will be remembered that there is increasing unrest and maladjustment at this place, which in former times was one of the most successful experiments in Australia”.107

The unrest at Cummeragunja is a frequent theme in Tindale’s report. Discussing the role of missions, stations and reserves, he wrote that although they had a role following early contact with Europeans, they mainly provided a site now for full bloods to die out and for mixed groups to grow. He cited Cummeragunja and Cape Barren Island as examples, writing: “In such communities there may be even a passive revolt against control and movements away from the area in which the people are retained”.108 Tindale here highlights an important contradiction in the role of missions and reserves in settler colonies: at the same time as they provided sites where Aboriginal people could be both contained and studied, they were also supposed to be a training ground for assimilation, after which properly trained Indigenous people could join the broader white community. Further, while these sites attempted to break down traditional community links, Aboriginal people responded by rebuilding and strengthening their communities.

106 Tindale, “Results”, p. 148.
107 Tindale, “Results”, p. 148.
When Birdsell reflected on his experiences of the expedition 50 years later, his own revolt against his mentor Hooton took centre stage. Birdsell embarked on the trip steeped in Hooton’s ideas of racial typologies: his observations on his “Papuan” type at the Empire Day concert were clear evidence of this. But confronted with actual Aboriginal people and the fact they did not necessarily fit these categories, Birdsell experienced a crisis in faith. He observed, “[a]fter the first few months of field work with real populations, that set of assumptions was necessarily discarded”.109 Expanding on Hooton’s failing, Birdsell remarked “[i]t is remarkable that a scientist of Hooton’s evident brilliance and breadth of interest failed to probe the relevant developing fields of biology”.110 He continued, noting that the idea that figures could be used to explain relationships, “totally ignores the reality that in human populations proportions to do not come in an infinite variety but in a limited one”, referring to the ultimate similarity between people of different ethnicities.111 Warwick Anderson has discussed Birdsell’s racial rethink in his book, Cultivating Whiteness. He believes that Birdsell’s disillusionment came later, claiming that Birdsell’s service in World War Two delayed his expedition report and that, when he returned, his faith in racial typologies had diminished. Either way, by the time Birdsell did come to write up his findings he found that his data did not fit his new focus on population characteristics, which traced “geographical distributions of variations among populations”, rather than simply “aggregating physical characters into abstract types”.112

It is likely that the findings of the expedition did have an impact on the community, spurring on changes to the APB and, as a result, to Cummeragunja’s management, that I turn to in Chapter Eight. Most notably, the expedition produced an impressive archive of photographs and accounts which are now of value to the station’s descendants. Diane Bell has written of the importance of these records today, noting that Tindale’s “level of detail is unrivalled, his notes … grounded in the specificities of time, place and person”.113 Of particular interest to my research are the photographs, which, while they rated little mention in either of the two scientist’s diaries, are now important artifacts for many within the Cummeragunja community. Residents keep copies, both

communally and individually, on the reserve, and access and discuss the genealogies, even if they are often critical of these.

One of the oldest people still living on Cummeragunja remembered the expedition positively when interviewed in 2009. Lorna Charles, later Walker, was thirteen years old when Tindale and Birdsell arrived at Cummeragunja. Her picture is there with the others: well dressed in what appears to be a homemade tunic, if judged by the uneven spacing of its buttons, Lorna seems to be frowning at the camera. Trying to judge her attitude to the photographer from her expression and body language, I am tempted to conclude that she resented the intrusion in her life. Yet when I interviewed Lorna over 70 years later, my interpretation did not fit with her memories of a tall, friendly man who measured her feet “to see how much they’d grown”. In Lorna’s memory, Tindale was a welcome guest on the station, although she finds it difficult to explain his bizarre attempts to measure her and her siblings, laughing at the ridiculousness of his endeavours. Lorna now treasures the photographs left from the visit, although she has less respect for the genealogies, as she says some in the community question their accuracy. Nevertheless, Lorna did not recall any opposition at the time to Tindale. She said that she, personally, was happy for him to visit: “it didn’t worry me. I mean, he was a nice man too and he always looked after the Koorie people as well”. Heather Goodall has discussed this importance of photographs to Aboriginal communities, including those Tindale and Birdsell left after their visit to the Brewarrina reserve. She wrote that these images appeared different when seen “in frames on family walls or carefully placed in albums”, than when seen in the archive booklet:

Certainly the families’ own sense of having brought these images back to be among relations has coloured the way they are seen and read, to override the tension between the survey team and their subjects with the closeness of past and present family ties.

Similarly, Gaynor Macdonald has written of the importance of photographs, regardless of the type, to Aboriginal people in confirming genealogies, remarking: “photos of kin link one to ancestors and to one’s children’s children when myth and history cannot”.

Speaking to other Cummeragunja people, it becomes clear that Lorna’s memories

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114 Lorna Walker interview.
115 Lorna Walker interview.
are more positive than those of others. One woman claimed the researchers measured the heads of the Cummera people – although the parts of the research cards dedicated to head measurements are blank. Perhaps this memory is more to do with the invasiveness of the visit than cold, hard fact. Other people told me that management forced residents to comply or lose their rations. Many resent Tindale’s genealogies, later used to undermine Aboriginal testimony in the unsuccessful Yorta Yorta Native Title case in the 1990s.\footnote{For more on Tindale’s research and the Yorta Yorta Native Title Case see Rod Hagen, “Ethnographic Information and Anthropological Interpretations in a Native Title Claim: the Yorta Yorta Experience”,\textit{ Aboriginal History}, vol. 25, pp. 216-27.} Descendants of the Yorta Yorta/Bangerang people brought this claim forward and, ultimately, failed because of white records. In the words of Justice Olney in his 1998 Federal Court judgement, these records proved that: “[t]he tide of history has indeed washed away any real acknowledgement of their traditional customs”.\footnote{See Justice Olney, “Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v The State of Victoria & Ors”, Federal Court of Australia (hereafter FCA) 1606, (18 December 1998), accessed on 23 September 2007 at \url{http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AILR/1999/10.html}. See also “Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community and Others v Victoria and Others [1996] FCA 1540, (7 June 1996), accessed on 23 September 2007 at \url{http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/FCA/1996/1540.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=Yorta}; “Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v Victoria & Ors”, [1997] FCA 1181, (29 October 1997), accessed on 23 September 2007 at \url{http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/FCA/1997/1181.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=Yorta}; and “Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v State of Victoria (Including Corrigendum dated 21 March 2001)”, [2001] FCA 45, (8 February 2001), accessed on 23 September at \url{http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/FCA/2001/45.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=Yorta}. Subsequent judges supported Olney’s findings when the Yorta Yorta appealed the decision before a full bench in the Federal Court, and again in 2002 in the High Court. While the nineteenth-century reminiscences of Edward Curr, a pastoralist and, later, an ethnographer, are widely acknowledged as key to this, important, too, were the records that emerged from Tindale’s and Birdsell’s visit, in particular those relating to tribal boundaries and genealogies.\footnote{Hagen, “Ethnographic Information”, p. 225.} Writing later, anthropologist Rod Hagen, who was involved with the case, remarked on the justified anger of Aboriginal groups, whose oral traditions were being “judged against the writings of the initial colonisers themselves”, and also, “later ‘academic’ interpretations of territorial interests, best epitomised perhaps by the work of Norman Tindale”.\footnote{Hagen, “Ethnographic Information”, p. 216.}

\textbf{Conclusion}

The power of whiteness embedded in the Harvard-Adelaide expedition’s visit to Cummeragunja is not as straightforward as it may first appear. This research and the thinking that underpinned it had an undeniable impact on the lives of Aboriginal people,
both then and now, at local, state and federal levels. The Cummeragunja people came under the scrutiny and in some cases, rule, of a string of white figures of authority, including those who oversaw the station, such as the manager, the teacher, the doctor and the chief inspector, as well as those in scientific circles, such as Tindale, Birdsell and Hooton. Tindale’s and Birdsell’s diaries reveal that these “experts” on Aboriginal people used their skills to legitimise varying levels of authority over Aboriginal Australians at this time. Later, white authorities used these records to override Aboriginal land claims. Yet, the expedition did not simply reinforce white authority. Not only were the researchers ultimately critical of contemporary Government policy but the Cummeragunja people did have a level of agency in this process, at times objecting, and at others trying, as best they could, to direct the research to their own advantage. Moreover, the community today values parts of these records.

Studies, like this one, that critically revisit research into Aboriginal people, have the power to destabilise white authority. As Gillian Cowlishaw in her book, Black, White or Brindle: Race in Rural Australia, has written, “by delegitimising the tainted and outworn body of racial knowledge which has been inherited from the past, it might be possible to recognise that local Aborigines, with their particular historical experiences, are the final authorities on their own worlds”.

From the calls for a town meeting to the resurrection of the expedition’s photos, an alternate reading of the Harvard-Adelaide records reveals Aboriginal people in a very different light. Here they were defying the profoundly inequitable power relations confronting them and continuing to demonstrate at least some level of authority over their lives and their past, an authority that they were about to wield most convincingly, as I discuss in Chapter Seven.

Figure 9: Looking across the Murray River from Barmah to Cummeragunja, 2008
CHAPTER SEVEN

“THEY HAVE BEEN A LAW UNTO THEMSELVES”: RESISTING CONTROL

On a late summer day in 1939, a small group stood gathered on the Cummeragunja manager’s doorstep. The manager, Arthur James McQuiggin, was reading aloud his statement to a press representative regarding the exodus—or “walk-off” as it later became known—of residents from Cummeragunja that had taken place three weeks earlier. The rest of this small delegation stood watching and listening, having braved dirt tracks and the flooded Murray River to visit the station. The group included the ex-Cummeragunja resident Shadrach James; Anton Vroland, a Melbourne school teacher and white supporter of Aboriginal people; and Helen Baillie, a fellow white supporter, and the only member of this small delegation who had been earlier allowed inside the manager’s residence to discuss the situation.¹ The departure of over 100 residents had occurred as a result of false rumours spread by outsiders, McQuiggin informed the group, and it would soon end. What people had to understand, he explained, was that Aboriginal people seemed normal at first, but were actually not so. McQuiggin claimed that as manager he had tried to humour Cummeragunja residents, but this was difficult as they had not yet adapted to the white man’s system. “They have been a law unto themselves, and have not been checked as they should have been in past years”, McQuiggin exclaimed.²

The role of Cummeragunja’s various stakeholders are shown clearly in this small scene: the Cummeragunja people, past and present; white representatives of the Aborigines Protection Board (APB) and Aboriginal rights groups and, finally, the media. Not shown, but appearing at the speeches back at Barmah after this meeting are the Aboriginal members of these rights groups. It is these stakeholders and their interactions that form the basis of this chapter, in which I explore conditions on the station in the late 1930s and the Cummeragunja walk-off. I do this through analysis of coverage in the Shepparton News, and of NSW government records, my oral history accounts and

² “Exodus from Cummeragunja”, p. 7.
published narratives relating to the walk-off in order to explore the on-going legacy of the walk-off.³

The historian Heather Goodall and Wayne Atkinson have both researched the walk-off in terms of politics and land rights.⁴ My interest here is more social, as I explore the interactions between the Cummeragunja people and the various stakeholders of this station, and on its enduring legacy. I begin by looking at the development of Aboriginal activism and a growth in white supporters during the interwar period, before turning to the conditions on Cummeragunja in the twelve months leading up to the walk-off, as shown through an inquiry into the NSW reserve system. From here, I turn to the walk-off itself and its aftermath. Finally, I examine its legacy.

**Interwar developments**

Aboriginal activism has attracted increasing historical interest in recent years, with a particular growth in studies of interwar political activity. Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus heralded this growth in their edited collection, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights*, writing that it was finally being recognised that Aboriginal activism had a long history that extended far earlier than the 1960s, a fact that Aboriginal communities have long been aware of, primarily through oral traditions.⁵ Both Attwood and Markus have played important roles in recovering these histories, as have Goodall, Anna Haebich, Paul Newbury and John Maynard in particular.⁶

The interwar period was a time of significant growth in Aboriginal activism, as Maynard’s work has shown.⁷ The first Aboriginal lobby group, the Aborigines

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Progressive Association was formed in the mid-1920s and led by Fred Maynard. As just a few years later, ex-Cummeragunja resident, William Cooper, moved from Barmah to Melbourne and set up the Australian Aborigines League, petitioning King George V for better conditions for Aboriginal people. As his attempts to contact the King indicated, Cooper’s political activism operated, partially at least, within the established structures of white society. In fact, his general demands for rights built on the education he had received from the missionary Daniel Matthews, who had established the Maloga mission, which preceded Cummeragunja. A devout Christian, Cooper described Aboriginal people’s demands for land as a “God-given right” and once wrote, “God’s mercy endureth forever. Do right. Lord will give thee victory over thine enemies.” Cooper clearly valued the work of the Matthews, writing to the Matthews’s daughter Alma in 1941, that had her parents still been working, “we would have had Aboriginal doctors, lawyers, mechanical engineers and other professional people, and would also have had educated natives capable of representing our people in Parliament”. Later when he began his political work, a number of white people, including Arthur P. Burdeu and Helen Baillie, whom we met at the beginning of this paper, supported Cooper’s work. From the outset the growth of Aboriginal activism was the product of a cross-cultural collaboration.

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In 1936 the NSW Government passed an amendment to the Aborigines Protection Act, which gave the APB the capacity to order compulsory medical checks, as well as the power to remove and isolate Aboriginal people, or anyone “apparently having an admixture of Aboriginal blood”.14 Fortunately, as we glimpsed in Chapter Five and saw more clearly in Chapter Six, alongside this increased regime of control was the growth of a new way of thinking about Aboriginal people, encouraged by increasing numbers of Aboriginal lobby groups and support from the media, both domestically and internationally.15 The fight against these white regulations placed on Aboriginal people could not be successful without this support from the white community.

As noted in Chapter Six, in April 1937 Commonwealth and State authorities held a conference on how best to deal with their Aboriginal populations and resolved that, “the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin … lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth”.16 The APB secretary A. Charles Pettitt criticised the “mealy-mouthed hypocrisy” that surrounded the assimilation of Aboriginal people, noting that “[e]ven some church people who should support us”, want it done elsewhere, “when it comes to the practical application of the principle”.17 However, when Pettitt was interviewed many years later, he denied he had made such claims, saying he had seen no such evidence and pointing to the APB’s support for the local committees, which existed in the early years.18

**An inquiry**

In November 1937, seven months after the conference on Aboriginal welfare, the NSW Government began a Select Committee inquiry into the administration of the APB.19 The inquiry’s proceedings revealed that the depression of the 1930s had placed extra pressure on NSW stations, stretching the resources of the APB as the higher unemployment levels increased the number of Aboriginal people seeking to live on stations, including Cummeragunja.20 This placed pressure on housing and rations, and led to illness such as

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15 Broome, Aboriginal Australians, p. 167.
17 “Aboriginal Welfare”, p. 16.
18 A.C. Pettitt, Interview with Jim Fletcher, Re: Aboriginal Education, PMS 5380, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Library (hereafter AIATSIS Library), Canberra, p. 27.
19 Select Committee on Administration of Aborigines Protection Board: Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence and Exhibits, Legislative Assembly: Sydney, 1938.
20 This is supported by Broome, Aboriginal Australians, p. 167. For more on the Depression of the 1930s in Australia see Matthew Williams, Australia in the 1930s, Sydney: Trocadero Publishing, 1985.
the eye disease trachoma. No Aboriginal station residents were called on to contribute to the inquiry and only one Aboriginal person was involved: the activist William Ferguson. It is likely this reflected the claim of ex-Cummeragunja farm manager, Gordon Nelson Milne, who told the inquiry: “I have spoken to aboriginals on various matters on which they are dissatisfied, and they would say ‘What is the use of reporting the matter to the Board? The letter will come back to you, no one takes the word of an aboriginal’.”

The inquiry revealed that John Gordon Danvers had taken over management in 1934, when morale on the station was particularly low. The father of Cummeragunja school teacher, Thomas Austin, had been manager and, according to Danvers, had not acted in this community’s best interests. Danvers reported that the station’s quite extensive infrastructure was neglected and Austin senior had withheld rations from a number of residents for no apparent reason, forcing many to live on their children’s endowment payments, when seasonal work was unavailable. “The shearing was finished and the fruit picking was finished”, explained Danvers, “and for about three months at about that time of the year there is nothing doing until work starts again”.

The Cummeragunja community’s high personal standards had impressed Danvers on his arrival, and he noted in the inquiry that this population was “far more sophisticated” than the residents of other stations. He said that not only had some visited Melbourne, but others were “great athletes”. “One or two of them have won the Stawell gift [national running race], which is £400 or £500”, observed Danvers, “others are footballers of note, like [Doug] Nicholls, who plays with one of the principal teams in Melbourne”. He spoke glowingly of the education many residents had received under the previous school teacher, Thomas James, remarking that: “I do not think anybody could want a finer school-master”. In fact, Danvers claimed, if “more men like him could be obtained and put on the stations there would never be any complaints about the education the natives receive”.

By the time of the Select Committee inquiry in November 1937, Danvers and the station’s farm manager, Gordon Nelson Milne, had left their positions at Cummeragunja, after trouble with the APB. The APB had transferred Danvers earlier in the year to

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21 Select Committee, p. 88.
22 Select Committee, p. 77.
23 Select Committee, p. 77.
24 Select Committee, p. 74.
25 Select Committee, p. 74.
26 Select Committee, p. 74.
27 Select Committee, p. 74.
Brewarrina, and put Arthur John McQuiggin in his place. The Board’s reasons for doing this are not entirely clear. McQuiggin certainly needed to be removed from his position as Superintendent at the Kinchela Boys’ Home, where he was repeatedly warned about his “insobriety, illtreatment of the inmates and indebtedness to local tradespeople”.28 Milne left a month after Danvers, due to an incident that had occurred while Danvers was in charge. During a stay in Sydney, Danvers had written to Milne about a fire that had wiped out a station hut and killed a small girl, instructing him to place a claim with the APB for £80, some £75 more than what it was worth. The extra money would go towards Milne’s own extensions. Milne was horrified, telling the inquiry that it was “an awful thing” to make money out of an incident that had destroyed a man’s home and his only remaining child, particularly since his wife and another child had already died.29 Danvers’ letter named Smithers as the author of the insurance ruse, and Milne was confident that the APB Chief Inspector Ernest Smithers had exerted considerable pressure on Danvers to make such an indelicate proposal. Unfortunately for Milne, when he complained, the APB sent Smithers to investigate.30 Smithers arrived on Cummeragunja “as judge, jury and accused”, in the words of Milne and, not surprisingly, found no issue to answer.31 When McQuiggin arrived in June 1937, he suggested Milne give him the letter “so that he could burn it”.32 If Milne complied, McQuiggin would wire Smithers and get him to alter his report. Milne stuck to his principles.

Milne had not been afraid to lobby the APB in the interests of fair and equal treatment of Cummeragunja’s population during his time on the station. A particular issue that concerned him, was the leasing of Cummeragunja land to a neighbouring white farmer, an issue pointed to in Norman Tindale’s work with the community six months after this Select Committee inquiry. This farmer was cutting timber on the station’s site, and, according to Milne, keeping more for than he should. His incursion on to the Cummeragunja station was also highlighted in my oral history interviews, when John and Kevin Atkinson took a walk around Cummeragunja with me. John told me this farmer had land in the “middle of our mission”, and on this, a mill that processed Murray pine

28 Aborigines Protection Board (later the Aborigines Welfare Board), Minute Books, 4 December 1935, Reel 2792, Series 2, Western Sydney Records Centre, NSW State Archives, Kingston, NSW (hereafter WSRC). See also APB Minute Books, 4 November 1936; APB, Minute Books, 4 November 1936; and Select Committee, p. 93; APB, Minute Books, 7 April, 1937. The metro media also notes this appointment: “News of Country People”, The Argus, 29 July 1937, p. 12.
29 Select Committee, p. 89.
30 Select Committee, p. 89.
31 Select Committee, p. 87.
32 Select Committee, p. 89.
timber for local houses. The farmer also installed a channel to pump water from the river, and did not hold back from disciplining the station’s children if they invaded his lease. “[H]e had the authority to give you a flogging if he caught you swimmin’ in his channel”, recalled John. The farmer has become a somewhat ineffectual and comic figure in John’s recollections, most notably in John’s memory of coming home to the station one night to find this man bogged in the sand beside the station track, “[d]runk as a monkey and abusive to anyone that come along”.  

Back in mid-1937, the Board sent Smithers to inquire into the farmer’s use of timber from the station, but his total disregard for Aboriginal testimony hampered his investigation. By July 1937, the APB had dismissed Milne and did not hire a replacement.

It is not surprising given Milne’s troubles with the APB that at this Select Committee inquiry he was disillusioned with the current reserve and station system. Milne questioned the likelihood of Aboriginal people getting justice under the current system and advocated that the APB curb managers’ powers. “The managers have the power to cut off their rations if they want to, and the aboriginal has no redress at all”, he said. Milne’s suggestion had little effect on the Select Committee panel, the members of which subsequently asked Danvers: “[w]ill you tell us just what the stations do with these people? Are they allowed to roam about at their own sweet will?” Danvers agreed that he had no control, describing the station as a “refuge … for them to come and stay at, and keep off the streets”.

One person who was still employed at Cummeragunja and who addressed the inquiry was Ivy Pratt, a nurse at the recently-established treatment room on the station. Pratt had recently arrived at Cummeragunja from Brewarrina, where she had contracted trachoma that permanently damaged her left eye, and to her dismay found conditions at Cummeragunja even worse. She was also disappointed at the residents’ preference for being treated by one of their own people, revealing a lack of respect for the channels of authority and knowledge that still existed within the Cummeragunja community. “They take the advice of the old woman or the old man”, explained Pratt bitterly.

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33 John and Kevin Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 10 October 2008, Cummeragunja.
34 Select Committee, p. 91.
35 Select Committee, p. 89.
36 Select Committee, p. 78.
37 Select Committee, p. 78.
38 Select Committee, p. 2.
39 Select Committee, p. 3.
say, ‘My uncle had that complaint and knows all about it.’ Mrs so-and-so across the road pretends to fix him up as she fixed the others up’.” 40

Pratt was similarly unsympathetic about a lack of hygiene on the station, a broken water pump was not the issue, but, rather, it “was the fault of the people, mainly, they have to be driven to personal cleanliness”. 41 Danvers argued that often there were no “proper bathing facilities” on the stations and that Aboriginal people had no aversion to keeping clean, if functional facilities were available. 42 The Select Committee inquiry revealed that poor bathing facilities were not the only sanitation problem on Cummeragunja. Almost two years earlier, the Department of Public Health representative, Dr Emmanuel Sydney Morris, and the APB secretary, Pettitt and member, James Mitchell actually visited the station and witnessed this for themselves. 43 Dr Morris had even ordered photographs of the toilets, but the Board still did not act. A wry Legislative Assembly Member, Edward Horsington, mused: “[h]e must have taken them to put on his wall or something. He did not do anything else with them”. 44 However, Pratt was adamant that the worst of the health issues did not arise from the Government’s neglect of the station. She argued that Aboriginal people had always had trachoma, and it was they who were now “giving it to the whites”. 45 Mixed race marriages were also to blame, according to Pratt. She felt the children of these unions, many of whom lived on the Murray River’s banks at Moama, were “more affected with disease than those on the station”, attributing this to racial mixing and not the fact they received no governmental assistance and lived in extremely difficult conditions. 46

**Lobbying and a polio outbreak**

As this Select Committee inquiry drew to a close that January, the dreaded disease poliomyelitis (Infantile Paralysis) broke out on the station, and the NSW and Victorian governments quarantined residents. Two doctors and seven police officers implemented the quarantine and two officers took up temporary residence on the station to ensure that no one escaped. 47 While authorities may have mourned their lack of control in the Select Committee inquiry, it seems that, where necessary, the community could be

40 Select Committee, p. 4.
41 Select Committee, p. 5.
42 Select Committee, p. 86.
44 Select Committee, p. 79.
45 Select Committee, p. 2.
46 Select Committee, p. 2.
successfully restricted, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the Cummeragunja people. The Argus reported that the station became a “scene of panic” when news of the epidemic broke out.48 “The publicity that has been given to this disease affected the half-caste population to the verge of terror”, noted the paper, “and only the discipline of station authorities, assisted by two doctors and seven members of the New South Wales and Victorian police forces, prevented some of the frightened adults and children from leaving their homes”.49

For the media, the polio outbreak appeared to be an opportunity to show the good work settler society was doing for its Aboriginal population. The Argus explained to its readers that the station was “administered by the Aborigines Protection Board”, and that on it “the blacks and half-castes live in their own homes contentedly”.50 “They have similar educational, religious and social facilities as residents of an ordinary country town”, it declared.51 The Riverine Herald focussed its attention on the polio victim, a six-year-old girl called Beryl Briggs. The station’s medical officer, Dr W.A. Graham had rushed Briggs “to the Echuca infectious diseases ward, where the recently purchased respirator was later put into commission”.52 The use of the new respirator to keep Beryl alive was so exciting that the Riverine Herald published a rare news photo of the event. A corresponding article noted: “[t]hat Beryl is happy in her temporary home is evident from the photograph, and all that medical science can do to facilitate her recovery is being done”.53

A week or so later, Beryl finished her three-week isolation period and her parents were finally allowed to visit her. Days later she was dead.54 Her parents were not the only ones to feel her death keenly, the Riverine Herald reported:

The death of the unfortunate aboriginal girl brought to a close an intensely human drama that had been watched closely by every resident in the district, and throughout Victoria and Australia. The matron and sister of the hospital felt yesterday that they had suffered a personal loss as during her residence in the respirator she had endeared herself, and captivated the hearts of her attendants.55

49 “Terror among Aborigines”, p. 2.
50 “Terror among Aborigines”, p. 2.
51 “Terror among Aborigines”, p. 2.
52 “Infantile Paralysis”, Riverine Herald, 18 January 1938, p. 3.
53 “Respirator at Echuca District Hospital”, Riverine Herald, 31 January 1938, p. 3.
54 “Paralysis Patient Dies”, Riverine Herald, 10 February 1938, p. 3.
55 “Paralysis Patient Dies”, p. 3.
The paper explained that the local community had done all that it could. When Beryl had expressed concern that her picture in the paper looked like a boy, a mirror was fitted to the cabinet so she could see herself, the assumption being she would find a more feminine image therein. Further, the nurses had built a “glass holder through which she could read comics that were sent by various children in the town, and from the station”. 56 Beryl had spent her isolation reading, listening to the radio and devouring the “icecream, fruit and sweets that were given to her by the hospital staff and residents, many of whom had never seen the patient, but whose sympathy had been aroused by her misfortune”. 57 The State Electricity Commission, meanwhile, had ensured that power to the hospital was continuous while Beryl was in the respirator. Two months later, the NSW and Victorian Governments fully lifted the restrictions surrounding the paralysis outbreak. 58

While Cummeragunja and its white neighbours were gripped by this polio outbreak, Aboriginal dissatisfaction with white governance was becoming publicly more apparent. In Sydney that January, while Beryl lay in the Echuca Hospital’s respirator, the Aborigines Progressive Association members, William Ferguson and John Patten, in collaboration with Melbourne activists, were busy organising a Day of Mourning to mark Australia’s 150-year celebrations. First, they released a pamphlet entitled “Aborigines Claim Citizenship Rights”, and then on Australia Day, 26 January, they held the meeting at Australian Hall, not far from where a Government-sponsored re-enactment of Governor Phillips’s landing was taking place. 59 A few days later, a deputation from the Association arrived to speak to the NSW Premier, Bertram Stevens, about the conditions on Cummeragunja. MLA George Charles Gollan met the group and reported their demands back to the Premier. Patten, president of the Association, explained to Gollan that the Government should disband the APB and, in the interim, reconstitute it to include three people of Aboriginal descent. Patten highlighted problems in rations, housing and general living conditions and argued that the Government should extend Aboriginal education across the state to high school and university level. The delegation also recommended improved medical treatment, direct cash payments and rights to land, asking also that a comprehensive review and removal of current expulsion orders be completed.

56 “Paralysis Patient Dies”, p. 3.
57 “Paralysis Patient Dies”, p. 3.
59 Broome, Aboriginal Australians, p. 171.
When Gollan passed the Aborigines Progressive Association’s recommendations on to Premier Stevens, he concluded that the time had come for a review of “the whole problem of the control” of the state’s Aboriginal population, but not until the outcome of the Select Committee inquiry was known. In the meantime, however, the Premier should review ration levels as they seemed deeply inadequate. The Premier turned for guidance to the state’s Colonial Secretary, Frank A. Chaffey, but his response was unsympathetic. He maintained that not only was the housing situation under control, but that the sanitation was perfectly adequate. “It has been inspected by various Health Inspectors and approved by them”, Chaffey wrote. When the Premier turned to the APB it acknowledged sanitation and housing were problematic, but said this was due to a shortage of funds. Education and rations were already improving, so needed no further aid in this regard, while some expulsions may warrant reviewing, for the most part they were fair.

Letters to the Premier regarding the treatment of Aboriginal people arrived en masse. In March, the Feminist Club of NSW sternly informed the Premier that at a recent meeting the group had “carried a comprehensive resolution expressing indignation and disappointment at the sudden termination of the inquiry”. Then in May, former Cummeragunja resident turned Aboriginal activist, William Cooper addressed four separate letters to Stevens. Cooper, now secretary of the Aborigines Advancement League and living in Melbourne, explained that he had just returned from visiting Cummeragunja and that he had separated each issue so that the Government could deal with them speedily. One letter called for the removal of racist legislation, impeding the progress of Aboriginal people. “We can’t avoid the disability of color and the prejudice of White people when we come into competition with them”, wrote Cooper, “but equality in law would be something”. Cooper’s other letters called for irrigation on the station and a complete sanitation overhaul. “[T]he present W.C.’s are so foul-smelling, with kero tins for pans and overflowing, that people only go to them from sheer necessity”, noted Cooper. Cooper also highlighted the problem of housing, explaining that building had ceased and, as a result, “the people living in the slums along the River

60 C. G. Gollan, Minute to Bertram Stevens (NSW Premier), 15 February 1938, Special Bundles.
61 Gollan, letter to Stevens, Special Bundles.
62 Frank A. Chaffey, letter to NSW Premier Bertram Stevens, 9 February 1938, Special Bundles.
63 APB, letter to NSW Premier Bertram Stevens, 3 March 1938, Special Bundles.
64 Feminist Club of NSW, letter to Bertram Stevens, 10 March 1938, Special Bundles.
65 William Cooper, letter to Bertram Stevens, regarding removal of legislation, 23 May 1938, Special Bundles.
66 William Cooper, letter to Bertram Stevens, regarding sanitation, 23 May 1938, Special Bundles.
must continue in these awful conditions for another winter”. Cooper urged the Premier to ensure that good quality housing was constructed, and noted that: “[w]hile the policy of pulling down slums in the cities occupied by white people is being carried out they should not be erected for aborigines”.

Cooper’s grandson, Alf Turner, who I interviewed for this thesis, recalled that while Cooper’s working conditions were not ideal, with four grandchildren including Alf, living with him and his wife, his prolific letter writing and activism achieved much for Aboriginal rights and more. “[H]e not only fought for Aboriginal people”, Alf told me.

Cooper had also written to the German Government to express concern about its treatment of the Jews, and to the American Government, complaining of their treatment of African Americans. Alf commented that only in recent years had Cooper received recognition for what he did during these years. “I’ve been to numerous functions and dedications of different thing to him, you know, for the work he did in the early years”.

Back in Sydney in May 1938, irrigation was the main issue when, just two days after Cooper’s letters, the Aborigines’ Uplift Society honorary secretary, A.P. Burdeu, also wrote to Stevens. A friend of Burdeu – perhaps Cooper himself – had recently visited the station and found that the stock were “practically dying”, while an irrigation channel carried water through the station for the benefit of a white settler. Burdeu proposed a scheme to put the entire station under irrigation for a mixed farming enterprise. An appeal through the Victorian press would fund the scheme, providing the Government approved. “It is felt that those on the land could, and probably would, help by donations of stock”, Burdeu observed. If this was successful, Burdeu planned to launch a similar appeal through the Sydney papers and appoint a local committee to oversee the roll-out of the scheme. It was not to be.

The following September, 1938, the Public Service Board reported to Premier Stevens on its own investigation into the administration of the APB. This time, the Government kept the inquiry and its findings closed, but once again, they were damning. “The system of education of children leaves much to be desired”, the report informed the Government, and there was an “absence of reasonable standard of comfort”.

67 William Cooper, letter to Bertram Stevens regarding housing, 23 May 1938, Special Bundles.
68 Cooper, letter to Stevens regarding housing, 23 May 1938.
69 Alf Turner, interview with Fiona Davis, Mooroopna, 11 April 2008.
70 Alf Turner interview.
71 A. P. Burdeu, list to Bertram Stevens, 26 May 1938, Special Bundles.
72 APB, Statement to Cabinet, 30 September 1938, Special Bundles.
Medical and dental attention was insufficient and there was a shortage of staff. The APB recommended “an immediate review of the qualifications and fitness of the existing staff”\(^{73}\) In line with popular thinking at the time, it also advocated the Government adopt a policy of gradually assimilating its Aboriginal population “into the economic and social life of the general community”.\(^{74}\) The Government did not release these findings until 1940 and, in the meantime, the frustration of the Aborigines Progressive Association and other Aboriginal groups was reaching a crisis point. William Ferguson, John Patten and Pearl Gibbs toured NSW throughout the year, speaking to the Aboriginal residents and gauging conditions on the stations and reserves.\(^{75}\)

On Cummeragunja, meanwhile, McQuiggin’s stint as manager had hardly been a success. On 28 November, William Cooper forwarded a petition to the Board calling for the removal of McQuiggin and his wife. In the letter accompanying the petition, Cooper wrote that the residents wanted an inquiry into their treatment, and that the Inspector Ernest Smithers ought not to lead this. First on the list of complaints was the claim that McQuiggin and his wife called “all the married women only by their Christian names”: “The married men object to this and the women support their protest. The women say that they are required to always call Mrs. McQuiggin Matron”.\(^{76}\) The residents also objected to the fact that the manager never allowed them to ride in the cab of the station’s truck, regardless of their condition or the weather. Sanitation was inadequate, the meat rotten and clothing no longer supplied. The roads were unsatisfactory and the houses overcrowded. Mrs McQuiggin’s attitude to the station’s women was an issue. Describing this as “most offensive”, Cooper wrote: “[s]he goes to the homes when she likes and says what she likes. If things don’t suit her she bounces the women. If they pick her up for the way she speaks the rations are stopped”.\(^{77}\) No reply was received, but the petition was later posted up at the station, with McQuiggin “inviting those who wished to remove their names to do so”, Cooper later informed Premier Stevens.\(^{78}\)

On 1 December 1938, a member of the Premier’s staff took a clipping of an article regarding death rates on Cummeragunja. In this, Jack Patten claimed that in the past 22 months on Cummeragunja, no fewer than six adults, four children and 15 babies had died out of a population of about 250. Speaking as President of the Aborigines

\(^{73}\) APB, Statement to Cabinet, 30 September 1938, Special Bundles.
\(^{74}\) APB, Statement to Cabinet, 30 September 1938, Special Bundles.
\(^{75}\) Broom, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 172.
\(^{76}\) William Cooper, letter to APB Chairman, 28 November 1938, Special Bundles.
\(^{77}\) Cooper, letter to APB Chairman, 28 November 1938, Special Bundles.
\(^{78}\) William Cooper, letter to Bertram Stevens, regarding sanitation, 20 February 1939, Special Bundles.
Progressive Association, Patten exclaimed: “Mental and physical cruelty is inflicted by white men in charge of reserves”. Patten pointed to the fact that the Cummeragunja people were living on only 14 acres while the Government leased the remaining 2000 acres to a neighbouring white farmer. Six days later, the APB met and discussed a forthcoming radio interview with Patten that was due to air, and resolved to request in advance any script Patten planned to give. The APB’s anxiety over its inability to fully control Aboriginal people was clear.

The walk-off

Two months later, Patten arrived on Cummeragunja. On 2 February 1939, he addressed the community in the station’s hall. The next day over 100 Cummeragunja people crossed the Murray River and joined an Aboriginal community already camped on the Victorian riverbank at Barmah. Alf Turner recalled witnessing the walk-off when he lived at Barmah: “people put their belongings across on the boat, and if they had a horse and cart they’d bring ‘em around over the punt’.

Premier Stevens received the following telegram:

ABORIGINAL MEN WOMEN LEAVING RESERVE
CUMMERAGUNJA CAUSE INTIMIDATION,
STARVATION, VICTIMISATION DEMAND INQUIRY
IMMEDIATELY … PATTEN

Police arrested John Patten and his brother George, who lived on the station, for inciting the event, releasing them to reappear in the Moama Court the following month. Later, a court issued Patten with a suspended sentence and dropped George’s charges.

On 20 February, the Premier, Bertram Stevens, received the first of many motions supporting the Cummeragunja people and calling for an inquiry when William Cooper wrote to explain that the Australian Aborigines League had moved to request such an inquiry, at which Aboriginal people would “be allowed to give evidence”. Cooper also called for an inquiry into the dismissal of Danvers whom the Board had shifted from Kinchela to Menindee, and sacked, ostensibly because his wife was not a trained nurse and there was no suitable position available for the couple. Other groups that submitted petitions for action in regards to Cummeragunja included the Australian Railways Union,

79 “Aboriginal Charles Cruelty”, 1 December 1938, Special Bundles.
80 APB, Minute Books, 7 December 1938.
81 Alf Turner interview.
82 William Cooper, letter to Premier Stevens, 20 February 1939, Special Bundles.
with which Burdeu was involved; the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of Victoria; the Victorian Aboriginal Group; the Aborigines Uplift Society and the Aborigines’ Assistance Committee. The Australian League for Peace and Democracy, for its part, presented a petition for a Royal Commission signed by 800 people. Meanwhile, Stevens had decided against including Aboriginal representatives in the future reconstitution of the APB.

Alongside the motions from Cooper was a letter he had asked the Church of Christ to forward to the Premier on his behalf. Once again, Cooper knew that using his white friends as messengers would likely garner him a more sympathetic reception. Cooper explained that the walk-off occurred because of the persecution that followed McQuiggin’s posting of the petition on his house. Cooper requested that the Government hold an inquiry not led by the APB. Aboriginal people were not, he noted, agitators, but rather felt they had “a right to British Fair Play”. He explained that the current “exodus” appeared to be the only way that Cummeragunja residents could attract attention to their cause. “This is no ordinary strike”, wrote Cooper. “It is merely drawing attention to conditions which neither government, Parliament nor Public would suffer, if they but knew them”. Those now camped at Barmah were terrified of the manager, whose rifle and vile language worsened their fears. “We have been decimated with the rifle among other things and fear the result of one being carried now”, Cooper exclaimed.

Three days later, William Gale of the Church of Christ again turned to his typewriter. He explained that he had been approached by the Aboriginal pastor Eddy Atkinson “for guidance”, and that he had wired to say the community should return. This they had now done and he felt he could now approach the Premier “to see that their grievances are heard”. A day later, Gale had the awkward duty of again writing to the Premier, this time to clarify that while the Cummeragunja people had been “on the point of returning” they had not actually done so. He included a personal letter from a Church of Christ minister in Echuca to explain further, and urged the Premier to hold an independent inquiry. If this were possible, Gale wrote, he was confident he could

83 Premier’s Department, Memo on the Position of Aboriginal People and Control of Cummeragunja, 12 October 1939, Special Bundles.
84 W. C. Hall, letter to Premier Bertram Stevens, 3 March 1939, Special Bundles.
85 William Cooper, letter to Premier Bertram Stevens, 20 February 1939, Special Bundles.
86 Cooper, letter to Stevens, 20 February 1939.
87 Cooper, letter to Stevens, 20 February 1939.
88 Cooper, letter to Stevens, 20 February 1939.
89 W. Gale, letter to Bertram Stevens, 6 March 1939, Special Bundles.
“persuade these people to go back at once”.

In the enclosed letter, the Echuca minister, H. Hargreaves, explained that he had, in fact, convinced the strikers to return to reclaim their homes, but that before they did so a radio broadcast from Sydney had reported the community “had been misled by an agitator”. So incensed were they by this claim that they immediately dropped all plans to return and even when they received Gale’s telegram urging them to do so, they did not. “Saturday’s broadcast stirred up in them a spirit of rebellion”, wrote Hargreaves.

Eddy Atkinson, meanwhile, was having a difficult time. “He feels that if he forsakes his people in their sorrows he will lose their confidence”, noted Hargreaves, “so he has left his home, and is camping and suffering with them”. The previous week Eddy and his family had eaten only “bread and dripping” but since then had received some assistance from the Church of Christ. Hargreaves clearly supported the strikers, noting that “[f]rom every side one heard evidence of the callous and unsympathetic manner of the Manager, in his treatment of the people”. He warned Gale that they had a Christian duty to assist the Cummeragunja people: “[i]f we can show our sympathetic concern for these people I feel sure we will not lose our reward in this life or the next”.

The Aborigines Inland Mission representatives at Barmah were less supportive. Miss C. Presnell and Miss Peterson reported in the following edition of Our Aim, that “much prayer [had] ascended to the Lord” for the return of the Cummeragunja people. They continued: “we trust that, ere long, they will be back in their comfortable homes”, noting that John Heland, an Aboriginal evangelist for the AIM, now on Cummeragunja, and his wife had not left.

While the local Echuca paper, the Riverine Herald, remained silent on the issue, the Shepparton News picked up the story and run with it, albeit three weeks later. The subheadlines of the article, which opened this chapter, ran: “‘Persecuted by Manager’, Says Natives; ‘Misled by Agitator’, Says Manager”. McQuiggin was sticking by his story. This lengthy article in the Shepparton News found the complaint of the Cummeragunja people was something more than an issue with the manager. “Apart altogether from the

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90 W. Gale, letter to Bertram Stevens, 7 March 1939, Special Bundles.
91 H. Hargreaves, letter to W. Gale, 5 March 1939, Special Bundles.
92 Hargreaves, letter to Gale, 5 March 1939.
93 Hargreaves, letter to Gale, 5 March 1939.
94 Hargreaves, letter to Gale, 5 March 1939.
95 Hargreaves, letter to Gale, 5 March 1939.
administration at Cummeragunja”, the author observed, “the aborigines are weary of a system which makes them feel a subject race and want the government to assist them to become full Australian citizens”. They also wanted the return of their leased land and believe that with reliable irrigation they could make successful farms, the journalist noted. The article acknowledged that while the manager may have blamed Patten for inciting the walk-off, the Aboriginal people involved disputed this, instead explaining that their primary reason was the persecution they experienced after sending in a petition for McQuiggin’s dismissal a few months earlier.

This same article reported that Vroland, Baillie, James and the journalist returned to Barmah after speaking to McQuiggin, where a small meeting had assembled. A number of speakers took to the platform to voice their grievances. Thomas blamed the Government and, in particular, the APB for the problems now facing Aboriginal people, while Eddy Atkinson explained that although he had not initially left he was ultimately forced as he saw himself as responsible for the community’s food and supported the strikers complaints. Finally, Doug Nicholls explained Australia’s Aboriginal population wanted to become “full citizens with status equal to the whites”. Those present resolved to ask that MLA, Mark Davidson, conduct an inquiry.

The walk-off attracted metro media interest. The Argus ran its first story on the walk-off on the same day as the Shepparton News, and clearly had been given the same tour of the camp. Sydney’s Daily News, meanwhile, “implied that Patten was working for the Nazi Party and had caused the strike to assist German claims for a return of the mandated territory of New Guinea”. It quoted Ferguson, the only Aboriginal representative on the Select Committee inquiry in 1937, as supporting this statement and in the months that followed, refused to support the walk-off. On 4 March, the Argus reported that during a NSW Legislative Assembly discussion the previous day, Gollan had blamed the walk-off on an outside agitator. “He added that every consideration had been shown to the aborigines and if they returned to the station they would be treated in the same generous manner as the aborigines at other stations”, the article observed.

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98 “Exodus from Cummeragunja”, p. 7.
99 “Exodus from Cummeragunja”, p. 7.
100 “Exodus from Cummeragunja”, p. 7.
101 “Exodus from Cummeragunja”, p. 7.
104 Goodall, Invasion to Embassy, p. 301
105 “Aboriginal Unrest: Natives Leave Station”, The Argus, 4 March 1939, p. 3.
Patten appeared in court on 10 March and pleaded not guilty to “having enticed and persuaded aborigines to leave” Cummeragunja, and was released on a good behaviour bond. During the court hearing, first-constable Arthur McAvoy claimed that when he warned Patten, before the walk-off, that the manager had made a complain that Patten was persuading residents to leave, Patten had responded that they were “being victimised and starved”. When McAvoy arrested Patten, he had allegedly shouted out the departing car: “[g]o to it, boys! Now is your chance to leave the reserve. I will get all the publicity I want now”. Patten, however, shared a letter from the APB authorising him to hold meetings on the station and maintained that the residents left not because of his incitement but because of the manager, Arthur James McQuiggin, who “drove round with a rifle on his lorry and looked at them in a hostile manner”. Delivering his verdict, the Magistrate Hawkins supported the police evidence, and blamed Patten for the departure, but credited him with “honestly trying to do his best for his own people although he had adopted a hopelessly wrong method”.

A similar article published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* the same day, included evidence from Nora Charles, a respected resident who had walked off. She reported that Patten had explained to the Cummeragunja people about the conditions in reserves and stations in other states and she had assumed his comments also applied to Cummeragunja. “The harsh conditions caused her to leave the reserve, and she would not return unless better conditions were granted”, the *Herald* reported. Claims that Patten frightened residents with the suggestion that the station would become a compound emerged in this article, in an interview with the white nurse working on Cummeragunja, Vine Pickery. Pickery said that Patten had read out an extract of the Select Committee inquiry, and had said that the legislation currently being drafted “would place all aborigines in a compound”, when he addressed the station’s residents.

The next month, the *Shepparton News* reported that about 180 people were still camped at Barmah, and intended to stay there “until they are granted an inquiry into the administration and the Manager”. The group was unanimous, the journalist reported.

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107 “N.S.W. Mission Station”, p. 2.
108 “N.S.W. Mission Station”, p. 2.
109 “N.S.W. Mission Station”, p. 2.
110 “N.S.W. Mission Station”, p. 2.
111 “Patten convicted”, p. 12.
in their claim: “that they had decided to leave the reserve before Patten’s visit”.

The prospect of an inquiry was looking positive, with the Australian Labor Party, now the Opposition in the NSW Legislative Assembly following April’s election, taking up the issue. However, the article cautioned, this cross-cultural support was not always successful. “Aborigines have, in the past, often found the white man to be a false friend”, it observed, “and as a result it is now a difficult matter to extract from them [the residents] the actual facts of happenings that have aroused their resentment.”

The day before the Shepparton News published this article, the APB held a meeting at which it discussed the findings of an inspection of Cummeragunja, where a number of residents remained and others had recently returned. So disturbed was the APB by the ongoing protest and, perhaps more importantly, the negative press, it discussed the idea of combining Cummeragunja with another station, Moonah Cullah, and moving them to another site entirely, away from the river. In the meantime, the APB had brought its improvements on Cummeragunja to a standstill “pending some definite decision in this matter”. The activities of Victorian charities, busy gathering resources to help the strikers, clearly irritated the Board, which resolved to draft a letter “to the Victorian government, stating that there is no necessity for appeals to be made to the Public for assistance for the aborigines at this station”. In the same month, Presnell requested in Our Aim that readers pray for the rest of the Cummeragunja people to return. Sounding increasingly concerned, Presnell still seemed certain of a positive outcome: “[t]he enemy is putting up a big fight, but ‘Praise God,’ he is a conquered foe”.

At the APB’s next meeting, it decided to endorse McQuiggin’s “efforts to restore harmony” through the formation of an advisory committee, which would in future issue progress reports to the Board. The Board concluded an inquiry was unnecessary, but that it would continue to monitor the situation and update the Australian Natives Association. William Cooper, meanwhile, wrote to the Premier warning him that he had heard conditions on Cummeragunja were worsening, as was McQuiggin’s behaviour. “[T]he Manager is intensifying the persecution we have had to bear in the past”, wrote

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116 APB, Minute Books, 5 April 1939.
117 APB, Minute Books, 5 April 1939
118 APB, Minute Books, 5 April 1939
119 C. Presnell, “Cummeragunja”, Our Aim, 18 April 1939.
120 APB, Minute Books, 21 April 1939
Cooper, noting that this was “now almost intolerable”.121 “If public opinion only knew
the nature and extent of the persecution, victimisation, stoppage of rations, there would
be a great outcry”, he expounded. “If you knew yourself, it would stop at once”.122

On 29 April 1939, the *Argus* reported that Burdeu had confirmed that “about 22
families”, who had recently returned to Cummeragunja, had again crossed into Victoria.
Burdeu explained that the Australian Aborigines League had persuaded them to return,
“pending the receipt of an answer to a request to the NSW government for a public
inquiry into their charges”.123 Those who returned were not receiving rations as
punishment by the manager and the League had telegrammed NSW chief secretary
Michael Bruxner and Legislative Assembly member Mark Davidson encouraging them to
address this. Two weeks later, Members of Parliament highlighted the issue during a
parliamentary debate. Davidson asked the Colonial Secretary, Gollan, for more
information about the situation at Cummeragunja and whether he planned to
“immediately appoint an independent tribunal to make an independent inspection of the
station with a view to bettering the conditions of the natives?”124 Gollan responded that
most Cummeragunja residents were on the station and that “but for outside interference
the lot of the aborigines would be much happier”.125

A few weeks later, in May 1939, the *Shepparton News* reported that while most
people who had left the station subsequently returned, 70 of these had soon after re-
crossed the river to Barmah. The journalist’s main contact this time around was Burdeu,
now the president of the Australian Aboriginal League. Burdeu asserted that this time the
group would not return until the Government remedied the conditions or held an
independent inquiry. The League had made more appeals to the NSW Government and
Burdeu “was hopeful that a settlement would be reached”.126 In the meantime, the
protesters were facing difficult conditions, but money and food from supporters in
Melbourne was keeping them going.127

It was this support that the APB secretary, Pettitt, took issue with when he finally
sent the Board’s letter of clarification to the Australian Natives Association, requesting
that these Victorian organisations cease their efforts, as “such appeals are quite

121 William Cooper, letter to Premier Bertram Stevens. 28 April 1939, Special Bundles.
122 Cooper, letter to Stevens, 28 April 1939.
123 “Crossing the border”, *The Argus*, 29 April 1939, p. 2.
124 NSW Hansard extract, 2 May 1939, Special Bundles.
125 NSW Hansard extract, 2 May 1939.
unwarranted”. Pettitt also told the Association about the manager’s new advisory committee. Accordingly, on 12 July a meeting of the APB “Read with satisfaction” a report by McQuiggin of the advisory committee’s progress, although it did not note any plans to act because of this. McQuiggin also informed the Board that conditions on the station were “almost back to normal”. July’s edition of Our Aim, however, indicated that the station had by no means returned to normal. “We are still asking for and expecting the Lord to work mightily in our midst”, wrote Peterson, noting: “Satan is, in very many ways, doing his utmost to hinder blessing”. She did feel encouraged on one front, though, observing that: “[w]e had the joy of seeing one wanderer returning last week, and trust this may be the forerunner of others”.

Despite the AIM’s prayers, the protesters’ presence at Barmah persisted. By the end of July, the Shepparton News was reporting that the Victorian Government planned to place five of the Aboriginal families now camped at Barmah on sustenance, financial support offered to all Victorians, including Aboriginal people, while it investigated their positions. The Victorian Minister for Sustenance, Edwin Mackrell, the paper reported, had informed a deputation that: “his department had no intention of discriminating between people because of their color”. This deputation included representatives from the Australian Aborigines’ League, the Aborigines’ Assistance Committee and the Aboriginal Uplift Society. George Patten informed Mackrell that their race was exactly what had prevented those who shifted from receiving Government assistance earlier, while Mackrell responded with a query as to whether it was the fact that “they were aborigines or aborigines from another state?” Burdeu, who was also present, reported that the group wanted to stay in Victoria, but that if the Victorian Government withheld sustenance, it would drive them back to NSW. He said the deputation asked that Aboriginal people arriving in the state be “placed on the same footing as white people coming from New South Wales, who, after three months’ residence, were eligible for sustenance”. At the very least, they asked Victoria not to force Aboriginal people to return to Cummeragunja. Patten pointed to the importance of receiving an education that went past the third grade, which was the highest level taught on Cummeragunja, while Baillie, representing the Aborigines’ Uplift Society, informed Mackrell that “one of

128 A.C. Pettitt, letter to Australian Natives Association, 4 July 1939, Special Bundles.
129 Pettitt, letter to Australian Natives Association, 4 July 1939.
130 APB, Minute Books, 12 July 1939.
133 “Help for Blacks”, p. 8.
the great disabilities the aborigines suffered was the insufficiency of education”.134 Mackrell’s subsequent responses to these points were unrecorded.

Two days earlier, the Argus had reported that there were forty-four Aboriginal people still camped at Barmah and another twenty-five further south-east near Moorooroo, “suffering privation through the lack of blankets and adequate clothing”.135 An interview with George Patten revealed that for many, bags provided their only shelter from the elements, but those still camping were committed to their cause. “Most of the aborigines remaining away from the station are older people, who can see no future under present conditions”, Patten explained.136 This was a claim supported by Alf Turner in our interview. “Some of them had children or grandchildren”, he told me, “and it was no place to bring any children up because there was no work”.137 McQuiggin disputed these figures, claiming that just “20 malcontents” refused to return, and that 220 residents were “now living at the station … contented with their conditions”.138 The League, meanwhile, was busy organising a public campaign to raise awareness of Aboriginal living conditions, and a petition seeking a Royal Commission, both to be launched in the next few days.

In August, Burdeu wrote to the new NSW Premier Alexander Mair to acquaint him with the Cummeragunja issue and caution him on the dangers of ignoring the situation.139 “I have long felt that a subject people who have been badly treated would be a good field for subversive influence and sought in my influence to obviate that tendency”, wrote Burdeu.140 He warned that while public opinion in Melbourne was currently more inflamed over the Cummeragunja situation than that in Sydney, this could soon turn around. On the same day Burdeu wrote his letter, Amy Brown of the Victorian Aboriginal League also wrote to Mair to confirm he had received a petition and ask why the Government had leased out so much land.141

The following month World War Two broke out, and coverage of Aboriginal issues in the Shepparton News and in the Premier’s letters was swiftly squeezed out. By October, the Victorian Government withdrew its sustenance payments due to pressure

136 “Privations Suffered”, p. 15.
137 Alf Turner interview.
138 “Privations Suffered”, p. 15.
139 A.P.A. Burdeu, letter to Alexander Mair (NSW Premier), 7 August 1939, Special Bundles.
140 Burdeu, letter to Mair, 7 August 1939.
141 Amy N. Brown, letter to Alexander Mair, 7 August 1939, Special Bundles.
from the NSW Government. Without this support, many people moved to Moama or Mooroopna, while others went further afield to Melbourne. In *Invasion to Embassy*, Heather Goodall wrote that with this, the “strike was finally broken”142 I would argue that this movement was not really the end of a strike, but rather a continuation of a move away from the station, which had been happening for many years and which had accelerated eight months earlier.

Aboriginal issues returned briefly to the *Shepparton News* in January 1940, when an editorial supporting the Aboriginal struggle for full citizenship rights appeared. “The ousting of the aboriginal from their possessions”, the author wrote, “is not a creditable record in the history of Australia”.143 The paper quoted “One Aboriginal supporter” observing that “[t]he treatment that we white Australians had meted out during the last 150 years to our fellow black Australians has been abominable”.144 “We have gaoled, flogged, given them poisoned damper and debauched and demoralized them in every way”, the supporter wrote, “and still our governments have not yet learned how to treat these defenceless people in a civilized manner”.145

In the meantime, the relationship between McQuiggin and the Board had deteriorated. McQuiggin had failed to pay a bill and subsequently failed to respond to a letter from the Board asking him why. The APB resolved to warn McQuiggin that it would not tolerate his carelessness in future.146 By the end of the year, McQuiggin was in even more trouble, receiving from the Board “a carefully prepared schedule of matters which have been the subject of laxity”, with a stern warning that if there were any more “grounds for complaint” his services would be terminated.147 The following February McQuiggin was dismissed, a direct result of the walk-off and what Heather Goodall has described as his “political ineptitude”.148 The APB appointed the school teacher, Thomas Austin, as interim manager.

The structure of the Board, meanwhile, was about to change. In 1940, the Government released the Public Service Board inquiry findings. The subsequent uproar in the press, spurred on by the Aborigines Advancement League, prompted the change

142 Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 303.
144 “Citizenship Rights”, p. 11.
145 “Citizenship Rights”, p. 11.
146 APB, Minute Books, 9 August 1939.
147 APB, Minute Books, 20 December 1939.
148 Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 304.
for which Aboriginal groups had lobbied for many years; the APB was replaced by the Aboriginal Welfare Board, as a result of the NSW Aborigines Welfare Act which was passed in 1940.149

The legacy
On 4 February 2009, a group of Aboriginal people walked off Cummeragunja, just as more than a hundred Cummeragunja people had 70 years earlier. The walk began on the station and finished at the Flats at Moorooopna, more than 80 kilometres away. While the 1939 walk-off took much longer than the 16 hours taken to re-enact the event, the walk symbolically represented the journey that many Aboriginal people made away from station life into Moorooopna and the world beyond. The event reflected the very real importance the walk-off now holds in the collective memory for many, its influence extending far further than the Goulburn Valley. Reporting on the commemorative walk, the Australian Broadcasting Commission explained that the “walk-off inspired Indigenous people across Australia and has been seen as the spark that ignited an Indigenous movement which has since fought for basic rights for Indigenous Australians, such as the right to vote”.150 The walk-off has featured in two documentaries, Lousy Little Sixpence, and in episode six of the documentary series, First Australians.151 It also provided inspiration for third episode of the four part series co-written by Sonia Borg and Cummeragunja descendant Hyllus Maris, Women of the Sun.152 In 2010, an opera on the walk-off, entitled Pecan Summer, reinforced its place within the public imagination. This opera, Australia’s first Indigenous opera, was written by Indigenous soprano and relative of the Cummeragunja community, Deborah Cheetham and performed by Cheetham and a cast of Indigenous performers.153 Promotions for its performance at Melbourne’s Federation Square were in full swing as I completed the final drafting of this thesis.154 In the section that follows, I examine the ways individuals

and groups have remembered the walk-off in the intervening years. First, I look at the terminology used, before turning to issues of leadership, the decision to leave Barmah and, finally, the significance of the walk-off in the community’s autobiographies and oral history interviews.

Today people commonly refer to the events of 4 February 1939 as the Cummeragunja walk-off but, in fact, this terminology is a relatively recent development. Newspapers and correspondence from the time often refer to it as an “exodus” or “strike”. More often, the media gave it no simple label. As we have seen, the walk-off was part of a much broader discord and the decision to leave was a reflection of this. For instance, Therese Clements’s account, From Old Maloga: The Memoirs of an Aboriginal Woman, that emerged in the 1930s did not use the words “walk-off”, but rather described the event in general terms. More often, those at the time referred to it as the Cummeragunja situation. It is not normally now described as an “exodus”, which resonates with dramatic, biblical descriptions. Such terminology lingered in the autobiography of Clements’s daughter, Margaret Tucker, who described the walk-off in this way:

The descendants of the Ulupna, my mother’s tribe, the Yorta Yorta, Wirrardjeri and other tribes – mothers, fathers, babies, children and elderly people – all tracked across the same land that had belonged to us in our tribal days.

For the most part, memory supports the written sources from the time concerning the reasons for the Cummeragunja walk-off. Recollections always note McQuiggin’s treatment as a factor, but often back this up with evidence of the community’s general lack of rights. For instance, Ronald Morgan, who wrote Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cummeragunja in the early 1950s, did not use McQuiggin’s name but said that as the 1930s progressed the rules governing Aboriginal people were more strictly enforced. This community, meanwhile, had been given “a taste of civilisation” and had begun to realise that the “democracy” experienced by the broader population had its limits where they were. “Were they enjoying [democracy] on the Station”, wrote Morgan: “with all its rules and regulations, perhaps under a Manager who could not

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control his temper or one who would become vindictive at the least provocation”?

For Morgan, it was a natural progression from this discontent to the walk-off 1939. In his narrative, there was no dissention amongst the Aboriginal people on Cummeragunja. Rather, they “rose in a body and shifted into Victoria”.

Clements’s daughter Margaret Tucker also described the days leading up to the walk-off as “desperate” and highlighted the problems with the manager. “A new generation of white managers were now in change of the Aboriginal Settlements”, she wrote. She described these managers as fitting into two main types; the understanding ones, and the others who were “arrogant and created favourites, or encouraged tale-carriers”.

When Tucker visited her sick sister May, she heard all about the manager, presumably McQuiggin, who “often spoke about the Aboriginal men as ‘black b…s’”.

Tucker’s sister, Geraldine Briggs, described the walk-off in practical terms. Her daughter had heart problems so she and her husband decided they would move to Ardmona to be near the hospital. But leaving Cummeragunja was more than this for Briggs, who also describes the need to reclaim her community’s dignity, remarking that: “[w]e were tired of being bossed about and told what to do like a group of children”.

They left and moved to Mooroopna, along with many others.

My interviews placed a slightly different perspective on this memory of the walk-off. Colin Walker saw the walk-off as a continuation of a struggle that Aboriginal people have been fighting for all along. “It was more or less what our elders fought for, and what we’re fighting for today; our rights, justice and better living conditions”.

Alongside the general lack of rights, Walker said Aboriginal people had poor living conditions. “They were big families and they were jammed into these little houses, a couple of two bedroom houses and carrying their water”. He said that over the river in Victoria, the Cummeragunja people had better access to seasonal work. Colin recalled his grandfather Herb working with Patten of an evening on Aboriginal rights’ projects, sometimes writing letters all night. “[W]e’d get up and they would be just finishing

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158 Morgan, Reminiscences, p. 15.
159 Tucker, If Everybody Cared, p. 168.
160 Tucker, If Everybody Cared, p. 168.
162 Colin Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 14 February 2008, Barmah.
talking to one another and writing letters”, Colin recalled. “They were knowledgeable old people because what they were fighting for and were saying in them days for me is sort of coming true now”, he observed.

A number of my narrators were not on the station when the walk-off occurred, but the event still resonates as a key marker of, at the very least, a movement towards freedom. Lorna Walker, for instance, told me that she and her husband had moved over to Shepparton “when they started the walk-off”. “The people they just went because they weren’t earning their own money”. Similarly, Turner was living at Barmah at the time of the walk-off, but saw enough to know that the ill treatment from the manager was pivotal. “They didn’t like it and they put up with it long enough. And they decided to do something about it”.

The leader of the walk-off is now generally recognised as John Patten. In the 1950s, however, Ronald Morgan clearly resented this claim, writing that while Patten was “cited as their leader”, in fact, “they had no leader or anybody else to state their grievances”. As a result, Morgan argued, the rest of Australia ignored the Cummeragunja people’s complaints. By the 1970s, nevertheless, Margaret Tucker placed Patten clearly as the primary driver behind the event. She wrote that Patten came, “after being sent for by the majority of the Aborigines”, and that the manager told him to leave. “The Aborigines decided that if Jack wasn’t allowed to stay at Cummeragunja, they wouldn’t stay there either”, wrote Tucker. Twenty years later, Hilton Walsh, similarly, attributed the walk-off to Patten. When I interviewed him in 2008, Kevin Atkinson did not talk about Patten directly but agreed that the impetus for the walk-off did not come from within the community. He explained to me that “most of the people here resigned themselves to what was happening here and what was going on … even

163 Colin Walker interview.
164 Colin Walker interview. Although not a focus here, Aboriginal women also have a long history of letter writing. See Patricia Grimshaw, Elizabeth Nelson and Sandra Smith (eds) Letters from Aboriginal Women in Victoria, 1867-1926, Parkville: University of Melbourne, 2002. Grimshaw recently spoke on the way in which Indigenous women were persistent in demanding their entitlements from colonial governments. Patricia Grimshaw, “Rethinking Approaches to Women in Missions: The Case of Colonial Australia”, Keynote address at the Australian Historical Association Biennial Conference, 5-9 June 2010, Perth, University of Western Australia. See also earlier in the year: Patricia Grimshaw, “Welfare or Entitlement? Activism of Indigenous Christian Women on Missions in Victoria 1880s-1930s”, Australasian Welfare History Conference, 18-19 February 2010, University of New South Wales, Sydney.
165 Lorna Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 23 March 2009, Cummeragunja.
166 Alf Turner interview.
167 Morgan, Reminiscences, p. 15.
168 Morgan, Reminiscences, p. 15.
169 Tucker, If Everybody Cared, p. 168.
though a lot of people didn’t like [what] was happening to them”. He continued:

There was nobody wanting to standing up and rise up and do anything about it. So there was some people from outside came, and that was how they caused that walk-off, from outside influence.171

While not leaders of the initial departure from Cummeragunja, some people remember Eddy and Ellen Atkinson as key supporters in the walk-off. Although John Atkinson was not involved in the walk-off, he saw the involvement of Eddy in this as a sign of his commitment to the Cummeragunja community. Melva Johnson, meanwhile, remembered that Eddy “moved to Shepp[arton] when we went over there too”. Thomas James’s son Shadrach was also remembered as an influential member of the community, particularly in regards to political activities. Lorna described Shadrach as “just like his father”. Kevin recalled that when Shadrach moved over to Mooroopna, he “was one of the blokes that used to try and organize things for Aboriginal people, be a spokesperson for ‘em”.172

Apart from Jack Patten, most people seem to have forgotten the role played by people outside the station. Writing in the 1970s, Tucker did remember, but this was hardly surprising – she was one of those in Melbourne helping to raise funds. “Those of us living in Melbourne walked our shoe leather thin, cadging food for the protestors”, she recalled.173 Tucker admits that she flirted with a taxi driver in the city in an attempt to ferry food up to the protestors. She was successful: “by the time the taxi driver reached Mooroopna, he was on our side and keen to help all he could”.174 She said support came from many different directions. “I am sure those who did not leave Cummeragunja as well as local farmers must have helped with milk for those families”, she remarked, noting that the police also turned a useful blind eye during the difficult months that followed.175 She wrote that in the three months before the Victorian Government granted sustenance payments, “there was a bit of sheep stealing and petty thieving”, which locals called the Echuca police out to investigate, but that they purposely failed to find the culprits. “The evidence was right there under their noses, but perhaps they were too kind-hearted to make a charge”, mused Tucker.176

173 Tucker, If Everybody Cared, p. 169.
174 Tucker, If Everybody Cared, p. 169.
175 Tucker, If Everybody Cared, p. 169.
176 Tucker, If Everybody Cared, p. 169
While historians may attribute the decision to move on from Barmah to the withdrawal of Victorian Government sustenance payments, those who shared memories of the walk-off did not mention this. Rather, they spoke of moving away for employment and seeking new opportunities. For instance, Clements said that for a time she and the others “camped near Barmah, but when there was work offering we shifted to the Shepparton-Mooroopna district”. 177

People who have published recollections of the aftermath of the walk-off generally agree that the circumstances facing those involved were dire. Margaret Tucker wrote that most relocated to Mooroopna, rather than return to the station, but that life was difficult. She recalled the hardships experienced by her sister Geraldine and brother-in-law Selwyn Briggs as they struggled to build a shelter from rubbish near the Goulburn River in Mooroopna for themselves and their four children. “I can remember Selwyn with his face tied up, suffering from a swollen gland and neuritis, struggling to make a makeshift shelter, my sister helping too”, observed Tucker. “She was just skin and bone”. As Selwyn and Geraldine struggled, they did so alongside many others, who “were all determined to make a go of things”. 178

In an interview, Alf Turner explained to me that after a year at Barmah, the strikers “decided they’d go”, heading to Mooroopna or Echuca to get work. Without any work at Cummeragunja there was little incentive to return. 179 He said a few would have returned to the station, but the majority went on to carve out their lives elsewhere. Similarly, when I interviewed Melva Johnson, she stressed that those who left went in all different directions: “they didn’t all just go to Mooroopna. Some came into Echuca. And down the west, there was a group of people that … bought houses down there.” 180

In the years following the walk-off, some people questioned whether it had been worth it. Clements, for instance, said she “sometimes wonder[ed] whether we did the right thing coming off Cummeragunja”. “We had to come off to live like human beings”, wrote Clements, “but it has been terribly hard for some – especially the children of people who are not able to cope with difficulties”. 181 Later, Tucker wondered whether “with real care and fight” the community “could have helped that Manager and his wife

177 Clements, From Old Maloga, p. 8.
178 Tucker, If Everybody Cared, p. 170.
179 Alf Turner interview.
180 Melva Johnson, interview with Fiona Davis, 21 September 2009, Moama.
181 Clements, From Old Maloga, p. 8.
to understand us”." Hilton Walsh, however, was certain that, despite the very real
difficulties, the walk-off was worth it: “[i]t soon proved what a fantastic thing Jackie
Paton [John Patten] had done. It was as though he opened the bloody gates and let us
out and we had the outside world to look at”."  

For some, the walk-off holds very little significance. My white narrator Iris Swan
did not remember hearing about the walk-off at the time, but did hear later through the
media. She recalled speaking about it to her mother, who told her it had occurred
“because they wanted to control their own lives”.  

Iris’s husband Jack Swan recalled an Aboriginal farm worker talking about it, but could
not remember what he had said. What had stayed with Jack, related more to the region’s
cattle operations and the fact that the cattle had to be mustered early due to the
flooding.  

Kevin Atkinson, whose family did not take part in the walk-off, told me he was
unsure of Patten’s vision: “this is the best that I can come up with: that they were just
able to make a statement of what was happening here”. He continued: “Because there
was nothing followed up with after going off, you know. The Government didn’t take
any notice of what happened or change anything”. When I asked if Kevin agreed with
the outcome, he said he was unsure:

I suppose some of those things needed to be said. I don’t know
today whether you’d do that sort of thing, because if you go
from here to there, you have to make sure when you go where
you can support yourself and survive there. And that’s what
happened to people: they went from here, where they was able
to survive and had somewhere to live, to across the border
where they had nothing.”  

Conclusion
The walk-off has left a very real legacy for the Cummeragunja community and beyond.
Memories over time have quite naturally shaped the narrative of the walk-off into a more
straightforward tale of Aboriginal agency, for the most part overlooking the role of white

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182 Tucker, If Everybody Cared, p. 168.
183 Walsh, Double ID, p. 43
184 Iris and Jack Swan, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Picola.
185 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
186 Iris and Jack Swan interview.
188 Kevin Atkinson interview, 15 February 2008.
189 Kevin Atkinson interview, 15 February 2008.
supporters. Patten’s role, however, has become enshrined. As the political imperative to deny Patten’s role subsided and authorities no longer sought to place him as an agitator who fabricated this dissatisfaction, his place in this story became firm. As a relative, it now seems perfectly acceptable that Patten visited and encouraged his family members and friends to depart. For those not involved in the walk-off, this collective memory can be alienating. But for those whose families did play a part, here is a legend they can be proud of: a story of a brave group of people fighting for the rights at a time when they had few and paying a heavy price for it.

Moving away from memory and returning to McQuiggin’s verandah back in 1939, we can see that this scene points to an anxiety about the perceived freedom of Aboriginal people that characterised this period. It also represents the complicated cross-cultural nature of the fight for Aboriginal rights during these years. While Aboriginal people seemed at the mercy of white governments, they were fighting these controls with the help of supporters outside the station, both black and white. These sympathisers played an important role in communicating Aboriginal requests to a broader white audience, by speaking on behalf of the community but also by publishing Aboriginal testimony at a time when governments refused to listen. White anxiety increased during this period as it became clear that control was slipping and knowledge of the less savoury details of station conditions could no longer be withheld. The walk-off from Cummeragunja was yet another sign that Aboriginal people could and would exercise agency over where they lived and what they said, despite the very real difficulties they faced doing this.

The Cummeragunja community’s growing assertion of its rights is again a focus in my next chapter, which turns to the 1940s and 50s. In this chapter, my eighth and final one, I chart the conflicting policies of the NSW Government as its representatives sought to both control and yet assimilate the Aboriginal people of this state. I do so through an exploration of attempts to close the Barmah hotel and subsequent moves to shut down the station, moves which resulted in its transformation into an unmanaged reserve, and, finally, through an overview of the new beginnings that followed.
Figure 10: Waters tanks on Cummeragunja (AWB.1.BW-N1619.08). Photograph courtesy of Aborigines Welfare Board collection, Audiovisual Archive, AIATSIS
CHAPTER EIGHT

“NO MORE ‘AKTA-VITE’ FOR US”: DRINKING, DEPARTURES AND NEW BEGINNINGS, 1940-1960s

In 1955, the Aborigines Welfare Board’s magazine, *Dawn*, published an account of the closure of Cummeragunja as a managed station two years earlier. In the article, a Board representative observed that the station’s “population has been, in past years, sadly depleted by an exodus of the people to Victoria”. The prospect of work picking and canning fruit lured the young people away from the station, but this site’s foundations had not been forgotten – the author noted that a photograph of Daniel Matthews of Maloga and “five of his aboriginal evangelists” still hung on the Board’s wall. The purpose of the article was to discuss the removal of three of the station’s cottages to Moama, built in the late 1930s, just “before the young people decided that there was more attraction in Victorian in the fruit area”. Now with only six families still living on the station, the Board had decided to shift the cottages on to blocks in Moama, “renovate them and charge a small nominal rent for them”, the ownership of these homes remaining with the state. So successful was this, the author claimed, that one Aboriginal woman had written to the Board, expressing her gratitude for the initiative. She wrote: “[w]e, the ex-residents of Cumeroogunga Station, now residing in the renovated cottages at Moama, wish to thank the Board for giving us the opportunity to live in nice homes in a good town amongst nice people”. The local community had already accepted them as equals, she observed.

This article’s somewhat rosy and, at times, strikingly paternalistic description of the closure of Cummeragunja as a managed station is an appropriate place to begin this chapter, in which I explore the developments of the 1940s and 1950s that led to the closure of the station and the departure of much of its population. What role did Cummeragunja’s stakeholders play in this station’s demise? Had the prospect of work simply lured the younger members of the community away, as the *Dawn* claimed? How typical was it that Aboriginal people were living happily in their new towns? And had

other Aboriginal people been accepted on equal footing, as the writer of this letter indicated?

To understand these developments, I begin this final chapter by looking at what happened in the years after the walk-off. I then draw on the records of the Aborigines Welfare Board (AWB) and the NSW Department of Education to highlight a particular debate over the Barmah hotel that raged during these years. This debate reflected a conflict in Board policy at the time, as it sought to police Aboriginal behaviour, but at the same time move Aboriginal families into white communities outside its control. From here I turn to the oral history narratives shared with me regarding the station’s closure and, finally, to stories of departure and new beginnings. I end by returning to this article from the *Dawn* to offer my concluding comments.

**Post war years and attempts to close the Barmah hotel**

In the early 1940s, much had changed since the walk-off of 1939. The AWB replaced the APB with the passing of the Aborigines Welfare Act in 1940. This Act placed assimilation at the centre of its platform.6 Meanwhile, Australia had officially joined the war effort in September 1939 and fought for the next six years. Many men from Cummeragunja attempted to enlist and some succeeded.7 Among them was Lorna Walker’s father, William Charles, who sailed overseas but did not reach the action. “He [pause] got meningitis and came straight back”, she explained.8 Upon his return, his family were quarantined and Lorna said that “an old matron” on Cummeragunja helped to nurse him back to health. “[S]he had to stay in a room with dad all the time, without mixing with the other patients”, Lorna recalled.9 She said Matron Baker had a good relationship with the station’s residents, in particular the children. “The Koori people got attached to her too, old Mrs Matron Baker”.10

The war meant increased work opportunities for the Cummeragunja people. Melva Johnson remembered her mother moving to Melbourne, alongside a number of other women living on the Flats at Mooroopna, to work in a munitions factory. “I think we did our bit towards the war”, she remarked.11 Aboriginal men worked in the region’s charcoal burning operations, which provided a cheap source of fuel during the war. Alf

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7 Iris and Jack Swan, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Picola.
8 Lorna Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 24 March 2009, Cummeragunja.
9 Lorna Walker interview.
10 Lorna Walker interview.
11 Melva Johnson, interview with Fiona Davis, 21 September 2009, Moama.
Turner spent three years in the forest burning charcoal. “It was dirty work, but I enjoyed it”, he remembered over sixty years later, recalling cutting wood and burning it in sealed steel drums.\textsuperscript{12} Alf told me that the war years were a time of plentiful employment for Aboriginal people. “There was work everywhere because they couldn’t get workers. Most of the men were overseas in the army and you could pick up a job anywhere”.\textsuperscript{13}

While many Cummeragunja people took up jobs in the community, others used their musical abilities and toured the area raising money for the war.\textsuperscript{14} Cummeragunja resident, Hilton Walsh, noted in his memoirs on the skill associated with the Cummeragunja singers, describing it as “one of the greatest choirs that you could ever imagine”.\textsuperscript{15} The choir held regular concerts to raise money for war relief. Melva Johnson recalled taking part in these and other concerts, remembering vividly she herself and her friend Brenda Nelson, dressed as “two little urchins”, singing “Mr Baggy Britches”.\textsuperscript{16}

Alongside these developments was a rising anxiety over the access of Aboriginal people to the Barmah hotel, which had enjoyed a steady Aboriginal patronage since its construction early in the twentieth century. Cummeragunja resident, Ronald Morgan, recalled in his memoirs that visits to the pub increased after the war, and that drinking “as the years passed, became slowly but surely worse”.\textsuperscript{17} In an interview with Kevin Atkinson, however, he denied that alcoholism was much of a problem for Cummeragunja people, as they simply could not afford to drink very much and provide for their families. He indicated, though, that managers often used alcohol as an excuse to expel men from the station, a fact that caused many to move off Cummeragunja permanently.\textsuperscript{18}

An early push to close the hotel happened just two months after the war began, when the school teacher Thomas Austin wrote to the NSW Education Department asking for their support in this effort. Victorian laws, wrote Austin, prevented only “full blood” Aboriginal people from buying alcohol. “There is one Full Blood here!!”\textsuperscript{19} The

\textsuperscript{12} Alf Turner, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Mooroopna.
\textsuperscript{13} Alf Turner interview.
\textsuperscript{14} Hilton Walsh as quoted in Nathalia Secondary College, \textit{Times Have Changed: Nathalia and Barmah}, 2nd ed, Nathalia: Nathalia Secondary College, 1991, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{16} Melva Johnson interview.
\textsuperscript{18} Kevin Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 10 April 2008, Cummeragunja.
\textsuperscript{19} Thomas Henry Austin, letter to J. Pollock (Inspector), 3 November 1939, 14/7444, Cummeragunja (Aboriginal) School Administrative File, 1940-1979, Western Sydney Records Centre, NSW State Archives,
licensee, moreover, was “entirely dependent upon the hotel for his livelihood”. In fact, according to Hilton Walsh’s recollections, the hotel was purposely built “well into Victoria”. The first owner, aware that it must be “two chain from the high water mark”, had “stepped it out … add[ing] other chain to that to make doubly sure and built the hotel”. By late 1939 the problem of alcohol was worse than at any time in the past decade, according to Austin, and bar staff were even serving Aboriginal people on Sundays. “With the present continued agitation amongst these people drunken aborigines are a serious menace to the safety of the staff”, wrote Austin, noting that the “seriousness of the present position cannot be too fully emphasised”. He said that settler and Aboriginal women and children visiting the Barmah store and post office were frightened of the drunken Aboriginal people. “From an educational standpoint drunkenness is a serious menace to the welfare of the children”, Austin observed, while the “language used by the people is filthy in the extreme”. The general “morality” of the community had fallen, and “bad language” was common amongst even the youngest children. Therefore, in closing the hotel the Victorian authorities would find support from Aboriginal women and children, and most Barmah residents. When questioned further by Pollock, Austin added that police at Nathalia and Moama had both made similar reports, as had the Cummeragunja manager, McQuiggin, upon whose request Austin had sent his own letter.

The NSW Department of Education subsequently used Austin’s letter in an internal report. Noting that on two other occasions the Department had unsuccessfully stepped in to prevent the issuing of a liquor licence, it observed that this case was quite different. On the downside, it seemed that this time the Department was attempting to influence the laws of another state. By working with the Chief Secretary there was more chance the Department could get the Barmah hotel delicensed. The Department forwarded Austin’s report to the Police Commissioner, in line with his suggestion, but the records hold no subsequent response.

Back on Cummeragunja in 1942, the “Menace of Barmah Hotel” had again arisen at a meeting of the AWB, the Board resolving to instruct the Moama Police to act to

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Kingswood (hereafter Cummeragunja School File, 1940-1979).

20 Austin, letter to Pollock, 3 November 1939.
21 Walsh, *Double ID*, p. 38.
22 Austin, letter to Pollock, 3 November 1939.
23 Austin, note to Pollock, 27 November 1939, added to letter to Pollock, 3 November 1939.
“obviate” the complaints made about the hotel. In the meantime, Aboriginal people, “less than half-caste”, would be warned that if they crossed the Aborigines Protection Act regulations and indulged in drunken or riotous behaviour, they would be removed from the Station, and brought “within the scope of the penalties under the Laws governing the general white community”.

When approached the following January, Albert Arthur Dunstan, the Premier of Victoria, assured NSW authorities that the hotel licensee had promised to limit both the alcohol served to Aboriginal people and also the troubles that had been occurring as a result of its overuse, having been warned that if there were more complaints “action would be taken”. At the end of 1942 when the license was to be renewed, the AWB’s local officer strongly opposed it. The Licensing Court subsequently warned the licensee that he would endanger his license if he continued to supply Aboriginal customers with too much alcohol. The next year, however, the Board’s officer again made regular reports that not only was the hotel still serving Aboriginal people too freely, but that it, in fact, only opened every second Friday to correspond with the day most Aboriginal people were paid. On this day, a later letter noted, Aboriginal people “could be found either partly or fully under the influence of liquor”. By the end of that year, the NSW Premier’s Department was again lobbying the Victorians to close the hotel. This time the Premier agreed to bring the issue up with the Licensing Court for consideration when the license was next renewed. Six months later, the owner of the pub, Mr M. Maloney, informed the AWB that because of all of the troubles with the current tenant Mr H.A. Day, he had terminated the lease and planned to transfer it to a family member, whom he would supervise personally.

Maloney’s solution seemed a success, at least in the short term. But three years later, he sold the hotel and – if we are to believe the records – chaos resulted. The NSW Chief Secretary’s Department informed the NSW Premier’s Department in August 1947 that: “recently two drink-crazed aborigines were firing pea-rifles indiscriminately and that about 26th July, 1947 there was a brawl in Barmah between the white people and the

26 AWB, Minute Books, 19 May 1942.
29 Under Secretary, letter to the Department of Education, 25 August 1947.
aborigines”.

It requested that Victorian authorities be asked to investigate and act on the issue. The following month, the NSW Premier’s Department responded that it had made many representations to Victoria since 1939 and that five main points had emerged from this. These included the fact that “a great number of travellers and the general public would be inconvenienced if the hotel were delicensed”, and that, ultimately, the Victorian authorities could really do nothing other than increase police supervision over the licence. Victoria’s suggestion then had been for the AWB to “prevent their aborigines from visiting Barmah”.

Two weeks later, the NSW Chief Secretary’s Department responded. The AWB could not legally prevent the Cummeragunja people from visiting Barmah as there was no provision under the NSW Aborigines Act that would allow this. Moreover, wrote the Chief Secretary’s Department: “a number of the former Cumeroogunga Aborigines have left the Station because of their dislike of control, and these people have established unsatisfactory camps immediately across the River on the Victorian side”. Compounding the problem was the fact that there was no Victorian Police Station at Barmah, the nearest being at Picola 10 miles away. Closing the hotel would not put out visitors to the region, the letter noted, as it does not have “proper provision” for traveller accommodation. The NSW Superintendent of Aborigines Welfare had recently visited and found that the previous licensee had obtained 90 per cent of his profits from the local Aboriginal population, at a “net profit of over £30 per week”.

And so the dialogue continued. It took another three months for the NSW Premier’s Department to pass on this information to the Victorian Government. On top of the information we have already seen, the letter noted that each Aboriginal man who worked paid £5 a week to the licensee. It requested the Victorian Government investigate the Barmah hotel situation with a view to improving the situation at Cummeragunja.

In mid-January 1948, the manager of Cummeragunja, Gordon Milne, sacked by the APB in the 1930s and rehired by the AWB in the 1940s, wrote to complain that the

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30 Under Secretary, letter to the Department of Education, 25 August 1947.
31 Under Secretary of Premier’s Department, letter to Chief Secretary’s Department, 5 September 1947, Cummeragunja School File, 1940-1979.
32 Under Secretary, letter to Chief Secretary’s Department, 5 September 1947.
33 Chief Secretary’s Department, letter to Premier’s Department, 20 September 1947, Cummeragunja School File, 1940-1979.
34 Chief Secretary’s Department, letter to Premier’s Department, 20 September 1947.
35 NSW Premier’s Department, letter to Victorian Premier, 1 December 1947, Cummeragunja School File, 1940-1979.
hotel was the cause of serious social problems on Cummeragunja. It seemed the Victorian Police stationed at nearby Nathalia had ceased their weekly patrol and that “as a consequence drunkenness by the aborigines is an every day occurrence”.36 “Gambling is conducted quite openly in front of the Hotel”, he complained, noting that the previous Sunday as he returned from a church service at Barmah he had “noticed the bar door of the hotel wide open and the hotel-keeper was standing outside keeping watch”.37

Aboriginal people had confirmed this availability of alcohol on the Sabbath, wrote Milne, and the consequences of this liquor had been devastating. He said an old age pensioner who no longer lived on the station had sold his sulky two weeks earlier and bought wine at the hotel. Said Milne: “at midday he was blind drunk”. 38 Another man had drawn £6 in wages and within days had spent it all, his wife receiving nothing. The position of the hotel made it difficult to police the Liquor Act, leaving authorities with two main options. “I would suggest that the Victorian Police Department be approached with a view to having a Police Officer stationed at Barmah or that hotel be delicensed”. 39 At the end of February 1948, the NSW Premier requested an investigation into the Barmah hotel dilemma. 40 The same issues continued to arise: short of changing the law to further restrict Aboriginal people at a time when they were supposedly working towards assimilation, there seemed no solution. The AWB, however, now had another goal in mind for Aboriginal people, which did not involve increasing its control over the Cummeragunja station, but rather quite the opposite.

Attempts to close Cummeragunja
Before examining the AWB records regarding their aspirations to close Cummeragunja down, I want to turn to the narrators’ memories of this. The first whom I will turn to is Kevin Atkinson. Kevin explained to me that during the 1940s “there were moves afoot to really close the place up”. He said AWB representatives visited and asked residents of Cummeragunja what they planned to do when the station closed down. 41 But Kevin said that leaving was never an option for him and his family: “we always felt that this was our

37 Milne, memo to Department of Education. 17 January 1948.
38 Milne, memo to Department of Education. 17 January 1948.
39 Milne, memo to Department of Education. 17 January 1948.
41 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
home and it didn’t matter whether the Manager or the government was involved”. 42 While a handful of families moved to Moama, most people stayed. Kevin remembered officials asking him to leave: “at that time I didn’t know what life was outside these fences here”. 43 Although Kevin used to work outside the station, he could not imagine staying out permanently: “I couldn’t see how I’d survive out there then”. 44 He was not alone: “I think a lot of the people felt the same way because we were so dependent on this place and we couldn’t see a future anywhere else”. 45 Faced with this resistance, Cummeragunja survived: “it got around to the point where Cummera was never going to be closed up”. 46

Kevin said his father, Dan, had always felt that the station’s distance from Sydney was part of its downfall as a managed station. “[I]t was very difficult for them to run the place from up there, you know”, he remarked. “I suppose it would have probably taken them a week to get down here if they’d needed to come here and so on”. 47 He said the station started to deteriorate “just after the war [when] a lot of the people went away and never came back”. 48 Ultimately, Kevin put the departures down to a desire to escape the controls of the station. “Some people just wanted to live the life they wanted to, not to be told what they had to do”, he explained. He said controls regulating movement on and off the station were particularly unwelcome. “For the likes of Dad going away, he had to tell the manager he was going away and how long he’d be going away for”. 49 Later, when Dan returned, he would also have to get permission. Usually people going away for work would gain the necessary permissions, but Kevin said trouble could arise if they forgot or chose not to follow the proper procedures. He said the permanent campsites outside the station’s boundaries, in which his grandparents, among others, lived, showed that many had already rejected this control. “They just lived where they could be free”, he explained. 50

Kevin’s brother John Atkinson, meanwhile, said that with the 1940s, the station’s management had lost its force. “[T]he manager didn’t seem to have any influence – any

42 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
43 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
44 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
45 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
46 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
47 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
48 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
49 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
50 Kevin Atkinson interview, 10 April 2008.
real influence – then for things”, John observed.\(^{51}\) He admitted that “when you worked for him, he was still your boss”, but said respect outside this was lacking. He pointed to the huge growth in charcoal burning that occurred with the onset of the war and the number of families moving across to Shepparton in Victoria for the fruit picking and canny.\(^{52}\) “[T]he fruit industry was big, it was big, it was very big?”, he told me:

And you know an entire family could come and work in the fruit industry. They not only picked it and canned it, they packed it and they dried it and there was about three fruit canneries in Shepparton, or in the area, and about three or four tomato sauce factories.\(^{53}\)

When I interviewed Melva Johnson, she was adamant that just because many people left, “it wasn’t like moving off Cummera because everyone was over there sort of thing, we was all together”. “I reckon that’s what gave us more self-esteem, that group of people”, she remarked.\(^{54}\) Colin Walker agreed that while many people moved away, “we all knew where we had come from”.\(^{55}\) He said in Shepparton and Mooroopna where many of the younger men and women moved for fruit picking and cannery work, ex-Cummeragunja residents would meet up on Friday nights in Shepparton, “have a drink together and we’d make sure that our girls were in the taxis ready to go back to their quarters”. “We sort of respected one another”, he told me.\(^{56}\) He said they also had many white friends, with whom they would stay with for weekends. These years were happy ones, according to Colin. “They were great days and we were happy because we were all employed and, then, when the fruit season was over we’d all come back and we’d go rouseabouting in the shearing sheds until we all learnt to shear”.\(^{57}\) He said over time they got married, and “had their own married lives”, but their bonds continued. “[W]hen we run into one another now, our age group, we always have a good old chat”.\(^{58}\)

Both Lorna Walker and Melva recalled leaving the station due to the encouragement of older male relatives. Lorna told me very quietly that in the end she was “glad to get out of here”. “Uncle Doug, he came when I was 18, he came and picked me up and took me to Melbourne”.\(^{59}\) Melva, meanwhile, said that her cousins had moved to

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\(^{51}\) John Atkinson, interview with Fiona Davis, 11 April 2008, Shepparton.

\(^{52}\) John Atkinson interview.

\(^{53}\) John Atkinson interview.

\(^{54}\) Melva Johnson interview.

\(^{55}\) Colin Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 14 February 2008, Barmah.

\(^{56}\) Colin Walker interview.

\(^{57}\) Colin Walker interview.

\(^{58}\) Colin Walker interview.

\(^{59}\) Lorna Walker, interview with Fiona Davis, 24 March 2009, Cummeragunja.
Sydney, others had encouraged her to move to Melbourne when she was 15. She said her Great Uncle Mick was behind this. “[H]e was always determined – he was the one that, he must have went to Liz and Merle and said ‘get this Melva out of Cummera’, he was like that. He got his girls out to go to Melbourne and work”.  

She said the move, while “frightening” was final. “I never went back to Cummera after that, not to live”. Melva soon joined Nicholls’s church, however, and Melbourne became a friendlier place: “that’s when you met everyone in Melbourne, you met everyone from Gippsland and all round really, but they, yeah, they looked after you”.  

She said Doug and his wife Gladys would always put people up if they had nowhere to stay. “He was a wonderful old mentor, him and Aunty Gladys”.  

According to the official records of Cummeragunja’s last days as a managed station, shortly after the date that the NSW Premier requested an investigation into the Barmah hotel, the AWB resolved to close the station. Almost 10 years earlier, following the walk-off, the APB had mooted the idea of combining Cummeragunja with nearby Moonah Cullah, a NSW station established by the APB in 1910, and shifting the two communities to another site altogether. Now in March 1948, they planned to gradually do just this, moving the two stations to a new site near Deniliquin. This process was so gradual, the issue did not appear again in the minutes until the following December, when the Board again discussed moving Cummeragunja to another site. The Board presented a motion to support this transferral, knocking back a proposal from a J. K. Matthews, who sought to “develop the Station”. Although William Ferguson, now a Board member, disagreed, the AWB passed the motion.  

The policy of the Board was changing, however. While it was intent on moving Aboriginal people away from town camps and on to stations, this was not its end goal. Rather, Aboriginal people were then to be relocated from stations into regional towns. There would be no new station; the residents of Cummeragunja were to be instead moved into the wider community. Accordingly, one year later in October 1949, the AWB “re-affirmed” its assimilation policy, in the process supporting the movement of Aboriginal people away from Aboriginal stations and into country towns. Towards this, it directed £30,000 towards building homes in these towns for the incoming Aboriginal

60 Melva Johnson interview.  
61 Melva Johnson interview.  
62 Melva Johnson interview.  
63 AWB, Minute Books, 14 December 1948.  
64 Heather Goodall, Invasion to Embassy, 2nd ed., p. 332.
residents. In line with this, the following January of 1950 the Board supported the Superintendent’s report that it transfer “suitable families” from Cummeragunja to homes in Moama and Mathoura. The AWB would send those remaining families to the new station it planned to build at Deniliquin. The local councillors’ co-operation was essential to this scheme, and at this stage, the Board could not depend upon it. A number of Shire Councillors, therefore, would be targeted with information regarding the “aims and objects” of the scheme, “with special reference to settling three or four good families in Mathoura”.

Convincing these Councillors would be no easy task; nine days after this decision Clive Turnbull, a journalist for the *Argus* in Melbourne, published a column based on the meeting notes of the Murray Shire Council on this very issue, notes that he was sent by the Victorian president of the Australian Aborigines League, Bill Onus. These notes showed clearly the Councillors dissatisfaction with the idea that white people would have to live alongside Aboriginal people. Complained one Councillor: “the men would only hang around the hotels and the girls would not be much better”. Another suggested that “decent people would not tolerate” the way in which Aboriginal people would bring the standard of living down, while yet another claimed that if cities such as Sydney and Melbourne would not take Aboriginal people, he could not “see why we should be inflicted with them”. Onus had written a letter of protest to these sentiments, while Turner chose instead to let his readers “supply their own comment”. The opinions of these Councillors were not out of keeping with the thoughts of many in the white community at this time. Heather Goodall, for instance, has revealed the way in which the Board struggled to find residential blocks of land to rehouse Aboriginal people, writing that white communities used the control of these as a “weapon”. “Suddenly no land could be found for acquisition by the Board”, wrote Goodall, “or vendors of potentially suitable land would inexplicably take their blocks off the market”.

In April 1951, the Board responded negatively to a suggestion that it establish a co-operative farming scheme for the state’s Aboriginal population. This idea would

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65 AWB, Minute Books, 18 October 1949.
68 “Not So New Australians” p. 2.
69 “Not So New Australians”, p. 2. Clive Turnbull was not an unsympathetic character, having two years earlier published his *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, Melbourne, 1948.
70 Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 2nd ed, p. 332.
require white supervisors, at least in the beginning, and, for this reason, the Board could not comply:

This involves departmental control to which the aborigines are opposed. The Board will, however, continue to give sympathetic and practical consideration to individual cases where there is reasonable evidence that the applicant would be successful in an agricultural undertaking.\footnote{AWB, Minute Books, 17 April 1951.}

It rejected another suggestion that it establish a co-operative scheme of home building for Aboriginal people as impractical.\footnote{AWB, Minute Books, 21 August 1951.}

In January 1952, as a further cost-cutting measure, the Board decided it would shift four of the “best” homes from Cummeragunja into Moama. Ten months later, it changed its mind, as sufficient funds even for this were not available.\footnote{AWB, Minute Books, 18 November 1952.} In the meantime, a budget sheet for the AWB’s financial year 1952-53 revealed that the closing of Cummeragunja as a managed station had a significant fiscal appeal. The budget statement noted that the money from the NSW Government for water supplies on the stations was about two-thirds that which the Board had requested, with only £1600 rather than £2710 forthcoming. The Board realised that it could only address urgent issues, and that it could save money by shutting down Cummeragunja. “Should the Board decide to close Cumeroogunga as a Station, and allow the few aborigines to remain in the existing cottages without supervision”, wrote the superintendent, “we could effect further savings using existing tanks at Manager’s residence (5) Teacher’s old residence (3) and give them a tank supply”.\footnote{AWB, Minute Books, “Consolidated revenue fund 1953/53”, 21 October 1952.} Other pipe lines, the engine pump and two tank stands could then be moved over to Darlington Point. This plan would not only aid water supplies, but would also save on building materials.

Shortly after, in January 1953, the Board secretary J.R. Mullins issued a circular clarifying its policy of assimilation for Aboriginal people, noting that “[e]nquiries are often made which show that a good deal of misunderstanding exists regarding the objects aimed at under what is known as the policy of assimilation”.\footnote{AWB, Minute Books, “Circular No. 597”, 24 January 1953.} Mullins explained that the Board’s understanding of assimilation did not extend to “resemblance or conformity in a racial or colour sense”.\footnote{AWB, Minute Books, “Circular No. 597”.} Rather, “the habits, attitudes and standards of living” were most important, as when these changed, the broader community would
accept Aboriginal people as equals. It seemed that, according to Mullins, most Aboriginal people had “not yet gained an adequate appreciation of the benefits to be derived from better housing, hygiene, health and education or a recognition of the obligations they owe to their families and to the community”.  

Aboriginal people had earned good wages, but had misspent this money, and although their colour and their history disadvantaged them, the primary cause of their “inferior position in the community [was] social”. “It is not surprising in these circumstances that aborigines are disposed to seek such relaxation as may be available to them”, wrote Mullins, “and it is inevitable as a result that there should be a deterioration in moral standards, excessive drinking and a disposition towards any kind of activity that will afford relief from a dead end existence.” Government financial assistance was not the answer. Rather, the solution lay in social acceptance within the community and good personal budgetary practices.

In May 1953, the Board managed to purchase blocks of land in Moama on which to transfer at least a couple of the homes. Later that year Cummeragunja was closed as a managed station and most of its land leased out to white farmers. The remaining land was turned into a reserve, on which Aboriginal people could live, without day-to-day surveillance, but also without much of Cummeragunja’s original infrastructure. Importantly, a small population chose to continue to live on the reserve, ensuring this community’s hold on the land for future generations.

**New beginnings**

The *Dawn’s* account of the demise of Cummeragunja as a managed station is AWB spin and a clear oversimplification of what was, in fact, a long and complicated struggle, in which many parties played a part. But what of its account of the success of the station’s residents’ assimilation following the station’s change to a managed reserve? Certainly, this is likely also to be an exaggeration, but to what extent? In the section which follows I turn to just some of the challenges faced by three narrators after Cummeragunja closed.

John Atkinson’s recollections of the establishment of the Rumbalara housing initiative, in some ways supports the *Dawn’s* impression that Cummeragunja people were being treated well in the broader community, although he does not depict this as an easy transition. He charts the beginning of a change in attitude from 1954, the year after

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77 AWB, Minute Books, “Circular No. 597”.
78 AWB, Minute Books, “Circular No. 597”.
79 AWB, Minute Books, “Circular No. 597”.
80 AWB, Minute Books, 19 May 1953.
Cummeragunja’s final manager left, when Queen Elizabeth arrived in Mooroopna as part of a tour of Australia. The visit gave the local white community an unlikely impetus to “deal with” its Aboriginal population. But John explained to me that it was more than just the Queen’s visit that prompted the changes. “The attitudes were starting to change”, he said, “and, whether the Queen was coming or not, I suspect it wouldn’t have been long before other people would have begun to say the same thing, you know, ‘we can’t leave those people living at the tip’”. In 1955, the Victorian Government appointed Charles McLean to undertake an inquiry into the condition of Aborigines in Victoria. The report that emerged two years later was damning, describing conditions as “squalid” and children as “malnourished”. It said housing and education needed particular attention. Taking advice from the report, the Victorian Government passed the Aborigines Act of 1957 creating its own Aborigines Welfare Board that had two Aboriginal members, Cummeragunja’s Pastor Doug Nicholls and the singer Harold Blair. The following year, the Victorian Government funded a transitional housing development for Aboriginal people, Rumbalara, at Mooroopna.

It is through Rumbalara that John Atkinson sees some of his significant work for his community. John Atkinson recalled its opening in 1958 with ten new houses:

> the Government was right behind it, and so they had members from the Housing Commission who actually built the houses and a member from the Forest Commission who actually donated the seven acres to the community … So Rumbalara was born, and it was, in my opinion, Rumbalara was the most successful Aboriginal project by a government in our history. While its form changed, Rumbalara remained an important site for Aboriginal people in the region, housing an Aboriginal health centre and the well-known Rumbalara Football and Netball Clubs.

In Echuca and Moama, meanwhile, the residents that Melva Johnson remembers were quite different from those depicted in Dawn. “You’ve got no idea what it was like living in Echuca in the early days”, Melva told me. “We were getting treated like dirt”.

81 John Atkinson interview.
83 Broome, Aboriginal Victorians, p. 316.
85 Melva Johnson interview.
She said even those who thought they were helping were often misguided. “We used to have a social worker that used to come around, her name was Kitty Martin, the old bitch”. Melva explained that Martin would visit Aboriginal families at Christmas, arriving in her small car dressed as Santa with toys to give out to the children. “[I]t was embarrassing”, Melva told me, explaining that living in homes, surrounding by white people, Aboriginal families were conscious of what their white neighbours would think. “[T]hey’d just think ‘oh those poor old things can’t buy presents’, it was just degrading”. Melva and another few women decided it was time to put an end to Martin’s visits, by making a visit to her themselves. Melva recalled that the group went over to Martin’s house in order to ask her to stop bringing them presents, as they intended to raise their own money for Christmas. Unfortunately, two of the women “took off” as they got to the door, “frightened of the welfare” Melva explained. “So me and Val was left standing there, looking up at her saying ‘no, no’, because I was only small at that time, ‘we’re going to raise our own money.’” Despite the nerve wracking nature of the exercise, Melva said the rewards made it all worthwhile, “No more Atka-vite for us”, she said, referring to the chocolate milk powder used to make drinks that was popular at the time, which Martin had included in her gifts. Martin did not return and Melva’s children were delighted: “[t]he kids reckoned it was the best thing that ever happened”. From there, Melva and others began to raise money through raffles for different causes, before in 1974 forming the Echuca Aboriginal Co-operative, which is still running in 2010.

Not everyone sought the challenges of life outside Cummeragunja. In 1959, the reserve was largely leased out and the buildings that remained, in a state of disrepair, but members of the community were getting ready to make big improvements. Spurred by a desire to rebuild this community base into a profitable farming venture and housing estate, a Cummeragunja delegation travelled to Canberra to speak to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs about revoking the leases and claiming the full 727 hectares originally gazetted. For Kevin Atkinson, active in Aboriginal issues since the very first National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee celebration five years before, the meeting with the Minister was a moment he would always remember. Atkinson recalled

86 Melva Johnson interview.
87 Melva Johnson interview.
88 Melva Johnson interview.
89 Melva Johnson interview.
90 Melva Johnson interview.
the Minister’s initial greeting received of his group, which included Pastor Doug Nicholls, Colin Walker and an Aboriginal Advancement League representative, Ray Adams, was far from friendly:

He never got up, when we came in, to welcome us in and sit down. He just said “what can I do for you fellas?” So we edged our way in, and were talking to him there and Sir Doug happened to see some photos around the wall there of some of their rugby players and so on. And he might have started it off by saying, “Geez, your game up here’s a lot rougher than our game down home”, and next thing they were laughin’, and talkin’. And next thing he pressed a button and told his secretary to bring us in a cup of tea and biscuits, so we all sat down and had a cuppa.

In 1964, after further delegations and lobbying, the NSW Government cancelled the leases and gave the Cummeragunga people permission to farm. The lessee of much of the land at this time, demanded compensation for the improvements he had made to the blocks during his long tenancy. The AWB told him to remove any infrastructure he had built, but made it clear no financial reimbursement would be forthcoming. The following year a proprietary company, Cummeragunga Pty Ltd, was registered, to which all thirty-five adult residents became shareholders. The agreement the community reached with the AWB was in no way ideal: the conditions of the lease meant that not only could tenancy be terminated with one month’s notice, with no reason required, but that any fixed assets the Cummeragunga people installed would belong to the AWB. Further, the AWB provided no financial assistance in the venture, yet required the Cummeragunga people repair all boundary fences within a year and take out an insurance policy for £30,000 to protect this new business from liability claims. Nevertheless, with state and national Indigenous rights movements escalating, Cummeragunga was poised on the edge of another period of hope.

**Conclusion**

Returning to the *Dawn* magazine, it seems it did exaggerate, not just the simplicity of the closure of the managed station, but also the ease with which the transition to life outside the station occurred. As Melva Johnson’s testimony indicated, Aboriginal people were not always welcomed into the their new communities and instead had to battle to carve out their rights and to rebuild their social networks in these new environments.

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92 Cato, *Mister Maloga*, p. 353; Ray Adams, letter to B. G. Dexter, 12 May 1968, A2354.65, Cummeragunga - New South Wales File, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, ACT.

93 AWB, Minute Books, 15 December 1964.
What can I conclude about the attempts to close down the Barmah hotel? It seems that management of the station was being pushed to encourage assimilation but at the same time, to a certain extent, isolate and protect station residents. When Austin and Milne sat down to write their letters regarding the Barmah hotel, they would have realised that the policy of assimilation promoted by the Board threatened the existence of this community with which they worked. The walk-off had highlighted the freedom that Aboriginal people could claim, however difficult that process might be. It had also made clearer the disparity in living conditions between those on Cummeragunja and those in the broader white community. Never really subdued by their white managers before, the Cummeragunja people were even less likely to be so now. Alcohol may well have been a social problem at this time, but I would argue that the issue of the Barmah hotel that raged during these years was more about the dying days of the managed station system than anything else. In these records, we can see that while white authorities called for control, the impossibility of achieving this in the post-war years was becoming increasingly clear.

Finally, what can I say of the oral history interviews in which I participated that speak of strength within the community during these years, of departures and new beginnings? From John Atkinson’s memories of the start of Rumbalara to Melva Johnson’s recollections of adjusting to life in Echuca and Moama, and, finally, to Kevin Atkinson’s role in taking back control of Cummeragunja, we see just some of the stories of the challenges and triumphs that followed the station’s closure and its new life as a reserve. These narratives speak of an enduring pride and of community strength, in spite of the many challenges that Aboriginal people had faced and would continue to face.
Figure 11: Cummeragunja from a distance, 2008
CONCLUSION

BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES

Cummeragunja was, indeed, a complex site of settler colonial exchange. Residents, governments, scientific and religious organisations and members of nearby communities all had a stake in the station from its official commencement in 1888 through to the 1960s, when it returned, once more, to a level of Aboriginal control. Through archival research and through oral testimonies, however, the thesis revealed that the competing white interests in Cummeragunja were not often to the advantage of Aboriginal people. While many non-Aboriginal people sought fairness in their interactions with the station’s residents, much of their behaviour, in fact, reinforced Cummeragunja’s marginalisation. But despite their experience of settler discrimination, Aboriginal people on Cummeragunja maintained their right to fair treatment, as they dealt with non-Aboriginal people on a day-to-day basis through school and religious observance, in employment, and in entertainment. While Cummeragunja’s people sought the wider opportunities that settler society promised, they maintained their claim to their land, their rights and their community.

I opened the thesis with two chapters that established the necessary background for understanding the approach and historical context of my study. I began with an exploration of the oral history interviews, which I conducted and which underpin the thesis. A consideration of both the field of oral history and the interviews revealed the multi-layered nature of oral history, each layer bringing its own set of issues. Instead of picking over oral history narratives for good quotes or clever conclusions, we should try to reconcile the narrators’ words within the multiple contexts of each layer, or contexts. Each narrator, for instance, brought new perspectives to my research questions; their personalities, their experience of the time and their experiences since, all had to be given consideration for their potential to impact upon the interviews.

A consideration of Cummeragunja’s foundations subsequently situated the thesis within a broader understanding of the processes of settler colonialism and introduced the community as it prepared to take on the challenges of its new life on the station. An investigation of written records revealed the general disorganisation that underscored the official movement from religious teachings on Maloga to secular governance on
Cummeragunja as, for the first time, NSW attempted to implement a comprehensive policy in regards to Aboriginal people. The newly formed Aborigines Protection Board (APB) spoke in terms of self-reliance for Aboriginal people while at the same time seeking greater controls over them. And as the APB and the Aborigines Protection Association thrashed out how they thought the Aboriginal “problem” could be best dealt with, the future Cummeragunja community was making moves of its own. Familiar with the structures and tools of white society, they vocalised their discontents through white communication channels, including petitions and newspaper interviews, drawing from the Bible to make their point. Recollections written and recorded in the past fifty or so years about Maloga and Daniel Matthews, point to the tensions that arose from Matthews’s teaching, its paternalism and its harm to Aboriginal culture. But they also recall the strength that he provided to the community.

The next three chapters explored the community’s first forty years on the station through three different aspects of station life: education, religion and its relationship with the white community. I began with an investigation into the school teacher Thomas James’s correspondence with the Department of Public Instruction, from Cummeragunja’s establishment in 1888 through to James’s retirement in 1922. This revealed the real difficulties that James faced. As a non-white educator teaching an Aboriginal community to read and write, James appealed to the Department’s budget but not to its expectations for Aboriginal people, who were supposed to take their place within the lowest rungs of NSW’s workforce. The Cummeragunja community, meanwhile, continued to strive for education, which offered hope for its children. Memories of James, moreover, point to the legacy he left behind.

Turning from education to missionaries from the Aborigines Inland Mission who were stationed at Barmah periodically during the interwar period, it was clear that the missionaries’ religious purpose was tied closely to the objective of promoting white civilisation. But the adaptation to white civilisation was already a point of pride to many in the Cummeragunja community. The desire of the community’s members to control their own religious lives took away from the gratification these missionaries felt in bringing the Word of God to Cummeragunja’s people. However problematic, the communication of religion on Cummeragunja was not simply about white dominance but at different moments, about rejection, adaptation and, importantly, Aboriginal leadership, shown clearly by the respect with which the Aboriginal Pastor, Eddy Atkinson, is still remembered.
Moving then to Cummeragunja’s white neighbours, I found that they also encouraged the Aboriginal uptake of white civilisation but set clear limits. Ultimately, white society set boundaries, albeit permeable ones, for Aboriginal people that were contingent on personal circumstances, location, and on the social milieu of the times. As my study of the Burrage bedroom revealed, Aboriginal people could break through these boundaries, but usually only under exceptional circumstances, such as in that particular case, a near death experience.

The final three chapters signposted a new national policy driven from Canberra, and explored its impact on Cummeragunja. A change was shown clearly at a 1937 national conference of state and federal government authorities, who proposed to work towards Aboriginal people’s assimilation into white society. The changing political environment was reflected during the visit that two anthropologists made to Cummeragunja the following year, which sought to answer a question close to the hearts of south-east Australian governments at the time: could Aboriginal people assimilate and, if so, how? Records and memories of the visit showed a preoccupation with this dilemma, but also revealed the barriers to assimilation occurring. Moreover, while the impact of this type of research on Aboriginal people was undeniable, the expedition did not simply reinforce white authority. Not only did the researchers criticise contemporary governmental policy, but the Cummeragunja people also had a level of agency in this process, at times objecting to the research and at others trying to direct it to their own advantage. In 2010, members of the community value the photographic records left from the visit.

The changing political environment also led to a growth in Aboriginal activism. On Cummeragunja, residents began to lose patience with the poor conditions on the station, and began to overtly fight unfair white governance, shown by the famous walk-off from the station in February 1939. At this critical juncture, white authorities were anxious about the perceived freedom of Aboriginal people, particularly with the growth in Aboriginal lobby groups. Cummeragunja people were not simply at the mercy of white governments. Despite the clear difficulties they faced in doing so, Cummeragunja people fought white controls using their own skills and networks of white and black supporters. Memories have, over time, downplayed the role of these supporters, as the walk-off has become a marker of a shift to greater freedom for Cummeragunja people, and has taken its place within a national narrative of Aboriginal activism.
This more active expression of Aboriginal independence coincided with a NSW Government move to pursue more actively an official policy of assimilation for Aboriginal people, marked by the restructuring of the APB to create the Aborigines Welfare Board and new amendments to the *Aborigines Protection Act* in 1940 and 1943. The move did not mean a complete and immediate break from the past, and issues reflecting the paternalism of white authorities towards Aboriginal people continued to arise, as my study of the decade-long battle to close the Barmah hotel showed. This study also revealed the anxiety of white authorities, as they watched the control they had previously exerted over Aboriginal people slip. As Cummeragunja’s existence as a managed station came to a close and its new life began as an unmanaged Government reserve, the Cummeragunja community took on the challenges that came with this, whether it was building lives outside the reserve’s confines or fighting to have their land returned to Aboriginal control. I left the community in the mid 1960s, just as it successfully reclaimed the station’s site, which had been leased out, for the most part, for communal farming purposes.

Let us return now to the scene that opened this thesis, the children drawing and colouring the images of white culture – the boat, the house, the flowers – and some of the questions I posed at the outset. I asked to what extent the Cummeragunja community had appropriated the practices and infrastructure of settler colonial society and how this had occurred: were they encouraged or pressured, or had they done so freely? Had this appropriation changed the meaning of these aspects of white culture? The scene of children drawing is indicative of the process of negotiation and appropriation that Cummeragunja people undertook from the time the station began. Never mere victims, these children’s pictures were part of a whole trajectory of Aboriginal activity on Cummeragunja that sought to make the best of what they had in white society, within a context of settler colonialism in south-east Australia. The competing interests of white society – neighbours, experts and governments – all played out on Cummeragunja. Like the boundaries in these pictures, these white representatives set limits on Aboriginal behaviour and movement, through direct legislation and through the provision of opportunities and acceptance. But Aboriginal people had agency within and, at times, beyond these lines. They negotiated their own relationships with white people, who were, at various times, their employers, their governmental representatives, their competitors and friends. Their very appropriation of aspects of white culture
remade these into new tools for Aboriginal society, tools with which to build lives and futures in a changed environment.

It is clear that through school and religious activities, through work and entertainment, Cummeragunja people engaged with the broader community on a daily basis, using aspects of white culture as they did so. Certainly, there was pressure to adopt the practices of white society but this was not a story of total domination. Settler governments, scientific and religious organisations, and white neighbours, implicitly and explicitly, reinforced the marginalisation and discrimination against Cummeragunja people: they did so, for the most part, not through an outright desire to harm Aboriginal people, but rather through actions and beliefs underpinned by settler colonialism. Cummeragunja residents responded to these exchanges by demanding, at times more obviously than at other times, their rights to fair and equal treatment in their daily lives.

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When you now drive to Cummeragunja, the road is sealed and the punt lies decommissioned on the edge of the Murray River, long ago replaced by a bridge. You can still see it if you visit, rusting behind wire fencing. There is also a community still living at Cummeragunja, down the long driveway just next to the bridge. You can see a cluster of houses from the road if you know what you are looking for. In this small village live many of the descendants of community members who featured in the thesis. Old and young live side-by-side, for the most part, in modest brick homes. In the centre of the village is the Viney Morgan Health Centre and the Cummeragunja Local Aboriginal Land Council office. Kevin Atkinson, who I interviewed for the thesis, mans the office, but he hopes soon to retire. Next door to this, is the school, its white picket fence and large old bell a reminder of a very different Cummeragunja to the one that exists in 2010. It is fitting that the community is now turning the school building into a museum.

That this small village exists is testament to the resilience of the community, which showed remarkable strength, courage, flexibility and optimism in the first seventy-five years it formally occupied this modest-sized piece of land, their struggles revealing both a real and a symbolic attachment to the site. In the half century that followed the handback of Cummeragunja leases to Aboriginal management, the community faced fresh obstacles to social justice, thrown up by unsympathetic courts and governments.
among others. Met by resistance, the people’s resolution to become the chief stakeholder in the site only increased. This thesis is a story to be continued.
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