

5 'Removing Aborigines from Europeans': the historical context of Kamberri survival strategies, 1855–1927

Since the departure of George Augustus Robinson's Protectors in the 1840s, the care and protection of Aboriginal peoples in New South Wales was mostly left to the missionaries, with some Government support. In 1874, Daniel Matthews established Maloga Aboriginal Mission on the Murray River near Echuca and Moama (see Map 13). Individuals and families from the Lake George, Monaro and Tumut districts were among the Mission's earliest residents.¹

In 1879, Reverend John Gribble established a second Aboriginal Mission, Warangesda, on the lower Murrumbidgee River at Darlington Point (see Map 13). A number of families and individuals originating from Yass, Canberra and Tumut were among the first residents there.² They had travelled down the Murrumbidgee in earlier days to flee from invading Europeans and had congregated with other groups along the river. Other members of their families joined them over a period of time.³

In December 1881 Sir Henry Parkes, then the Premier of New South Wales, appointed a Protector of Aborigines of New South Wales. This was George Thornton, MLA, who, as a member of the Society for the Protection of Aborigines, had been involved in the administration of Warangesda. Thornton believed that reserves should be set apart for use by 'Aborigines'⁴ to build homes and cultivate their own food. Yet he confessed he could not conceal his knowledge of the painful fact that 'the black aborigines are fast disappearing — destined to soon become extinct. Drunkenness is a source of this great calamity.' Thornton was particularly concerned about the 'large number of half-castes'⁵ and thought it was necessary to consider how 'this class'

1. Ascertained from names listed in the Report on the Aboriginal Mission at Maloga, Murray River, included with the Report of the Protector of Aborigines, 1882, *Votes and Proceedings of the NSW Legislative Assembly (VPNSWLA)* 1883, vol III.

2. Jackson-Nakano, Ann, 1994b.

3. *Ibid.*

4. I am placing this word in inverted commas because some Aboriginal people dislike this term.

5. This is an offensive term and I use it throughout the text only in its historical context.

would be regarded in any future arrangements. Thornton believed government assistance should go to 'true aborigines' only:

While I wish to see the half-castes civilized, educated and cared for, yet they should not be permitted to grow into a pauper or quasi gypsy class, but taught to be able and compelled to work for their own living and thereby ultimately merge into the general population.⁶

Thornton reported there were 4994 'pure bred'⁷ Aboriginal adults, 1546 'pure bred' children under 14, 1108 'adult half-castes' and 1271 'half caste' children under 14 in the colony of New South Wales: a total of 8919. Aid was given to Aboriginal families at Pudman Creek, Rye Park and Yass to the northwest of Lake George but, at that time, none of the Aboriginal people in the Queanbeyan district was receiving rations. Thornton strongly urged that aid to Aboriginal people be given in their own districts to prevent them from coming into the metropolis.

Having absorbed Thornton's statistics and recommendations, as well as other reports, the Colonial Secretary decided that 'more must be done for Aborigines before there can be any national feeling of satisfaction that the colony has done its duty by the remnant of the aboriginal race'.⁸ Most 'blacks', he wrote, should be placed in 'suitable' employment. The youths should be trained and the children, 'particularly half-castes', should be educated. Meanwhile, the aged, sick and infirm 'Aborigines' 'should find a resting place with some degree of comfort and attention'.⁹ He was content to consider the granting of suitable land for self-supporting 'Aborigines' provided the land was vested with benevolent institutions. His desire was for aid to be given in such a way that it 'discouraged idleness'. The major solution was, in 1883, the creation of a new administrative entity: the Board for the Protection of Aborigines.

One of the first decisions of the newly-formed Board was that 'Aborigines' would be in far better condition living in small communities, isolated and removed from Europeans, than when congregating in large camps near the townships and public houses. In their annual report for 1886, members emphasised the need to alleviate 'any real distress' among 'Aborigines'. However, they decided the 'indiscriminate granting of assistance in the shape of clothing, food and tobacco is not warranted nor advisable' as 'able-bodied Aborigines' were capable of working.¹⁰

No doubt the members of the Board were convinced they were being charitable. One of their chief objectives was to establish 'asylums' or 'homes' where children, 'both full blood and half caste', could attend school, where the sick and aged would find a haven and where young Aboriginal women would be 'secluded' from the 'intrusion' of 'depraved Europeans'. As such, their air was one of benign victors, treating Aboriginal people as civilised invaders would treat their war-scarred

6. Thornton, George, Report of Protector of Aborigines, dated 14 August 1882, for period up to December 1881, VPNSWLA 1882, vol IV.

7. This is an offensive term and I use it throughout the text only in its historical context.

8. Minutes of the Colonial Secretary, 26 February 1883, VPNSWLA 1883, vol III.

9. Report of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, 31 May 1890, VPNSWLA 1891, vol VII.

10. Report of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, printed 30 June 1887, VPNSWLA 1887, vol II.

wounded and defeated enemies. Clearly, they did not consider it to be their task to debate the legal rights and/or wrongs of the European invasion of 1788 and its consequences for Aboriginal Australians.¹¹

Between 1888 and 1900, the Board created Brungle Aboriginal Station in the Tumut district through three separate land grants.¹² By that time, the Walgalu-speaking Tumut Aboriginal communities included some Kamberri families who had joined them over the years, as well as a number of Wiradjuri-speaking groups and individuals who had crossed the Murrumbidgee in earlier days and eventually married into Aboriginal families at Yass and Tumut.

Changes in social relations and relocation

From the 1880s, Aboriginal people in the districts surrounding the modern Australian Capital Territory, from the south coast of New South Wales and across the Australian Alps at least as far as the junction of the Murray and Murrumbidgee rivers, forged new and friendly social relations in order to survive. Many of them intermarried with other groups and their descendants now identify with areas far away from their ancestral homelands.¹³

As we have seen, the European invasions had forced changes upon these Aboriginal people and they had to respond, and adapt, to those changes to survive. A few Aboriginal individuals and families opted to pass into white society if they could for various historical reasons, and told their children and grandchildren nothing about their Aboriginal ancestry. As the descendants of convicts will attest, 19th and 20th century Australian society did not look kindly on those who were, or had been, or were descendants of, 'Aborigines', convicts or their descendants. It is only relatively recently, from the 1970s onwards, that descendants rediscovering their Aboriginal or convict ancestors have been doing so publicly and with pride. Unlike the convicts, however, who were, after all, part of European society, most contemporary Aboriginal people in southeast Australia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were not concerned with hiding their identity but with keeping it alive, regardless of the degree to which they had a mixed heritage. One generation in an Aboriginal family might have been reluctant to teach their children their culture, social organisation and language for fear of retribution by their European 'masters', but this does not necessarily mean that they or their children lost their Aboriginality. Despite the efforts of the New South Wales Government to stamp it out, Aboriginality was like a flaming inner torch that each generation of Aboriginal people handed down to the next until such time that a generation would emerge, as it did in the 1970s, who could finally fight back.

11. For a critique of the legal and political arguments used to justify the European settlement of Australia, please read Reynolds, Henry, 1992.

12. For more detailed information on the establishment of Brungle Reserve (also known as the Brungle Aboriginal Station), see Read, PJ, 1983.

13. Jackson-Nakano, Ann, 1994b.

Yet to each generation, Aboriginality meant something different. The essence of Aboriginality has more to do with identity, with links to family and community, than with a place or particular cultural traditions. As long as Aboriginal groups throughout New South Wales were supportive of each other in one way or another, Aboriginal individuals and families from far-flung areas could forge new social relations and their identity could be 'reborn'. These generations of the second half of the 19th century left the land rights protests for their descendants; towards the end of the 19th century, the most important task for New South Wales Aboriginal families was to stay alive.

When Brungle Station was established, it became part of a circuit travelled regularly by Aboriginal families from all the regions local to this reserve and to Warangesda Mission at Darlington Point, as well as by some individuals and families from the Yass camps. Some Kamberri families also travelled that circuit. The causes of the great wars of the past, fought between hostile Aboriginal neighbouring groups, were, temporarily at least, set aside. In the 1890s, the constant movement of Indigenous peoples between Yass and Brungle caused so many problems for the authorities that the Aboriginal Protection Board decided that only those who could name Brungle as their original district would be allowed to return to the station.¹⁴ Six months later, the police at Yass, Cowra, Young and Orange were urged not to issue free rail passes to 'Aborigines' unless they possessed ration books issued in those areas. When a party of Aboriginal people arrived from Yass a week later and asked to go on the ration list, they were told to remain permanently in one town or the other.¹⁵

Yet by 1900, so many of these families had intermarried that it was difficult for both adults and children to narrow down their areas of specific geographical residence to a particular pre-1788 Aboriginal community or country. In pre-European times they could claim individual rights to any areas with which they had a recognised association.¹⁶ On the other hand, could the same be said of their relatives?

From the 1880s, relatives of Wallabalooa individuals who had children to Brungle people evidently considered this to be an entrance ticket to Brungle for all of them. Similarly, the Wiradjuri relatives of individuals who had intermarried with Ngoonawal-speaking Wallabalooa families were spilling into Yass in large numbers from that time.¹⁷ Under normal circumstances such incursions might have been the subject of negotiation and even war between the relevant Aboriginal communities, but by this time the pre-1880s traditional conflict resolution customs were inappropriate because community Elders were no longer empowered to make such decisions. New styles of conflict resolution negotiations between Aboriginal communities would have to be developed by future generations. From the 1880s

14. Read, P, 1983.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Howitt, AW, 1904.

17. The history of the Wallabalooa will be included in more detail in volume II of the Weereewaa History Series.

onwards, all the traditionally negotiated territorial 'boundaries' were mostly being trampled down by Aboriginal 'refugees'.

Why were they on the move? One reason was the increase in population of newly-arrived European free migrants. Some with means took up land when small selections were released through the 1861 Robertson Land Acts. Those migrants without immediate means obtained employment on some of the larger stations, thus displacing Aboriginal employees.

In the earliest days of European settlement southwest of Lake George, station owners who had settled in this isolated area needed to forge good relationships with local Aboriginal communities to survive. As we saw in Part I, members of the Kamberri who did not flee the Europeans at that time were able to camp out on these properties if they proved themselves to be 'friendly' and 'trustworthy', for example by keeping at bay 'wild blacks'. The station owners gained some protection and labour from this relationship and the Kamberri obtained food and the opportunity to stay on their own land. This changed when the new waves of European immigrants arrived in the 1860s. There were many among this generation of migrants who despised Aboriginal people and were afraid when they saw them gathered in large groups. They treated them as pests and constantly put pressure on local authorities to do something about 'the Aboriginal problem'.¹⁸

The small reserves

Coinciding with the establishment of missions and reserves, the NSW Government also began setting aside areas of land for 'well-behaved' Aboriginal individuals and their extended families from the 1880s so they could establish farming communities and therefore become self-sufficient. This policy reflected a similar one introduced by Governor Macquarie more than half a century earlier, which had failed. This policy worked for some Aboriginal families in the Gunning and Boorowa districts — such as the communities established by predominantly Pajong descendants at Blakney Creek near Gunning and by predominantly Wallabalooa descendants at Pudman Creek between Boorowa and Yass¹⁹ — but not for others, such as the ones granted for Kamberri families near Cuppacumbalong, then in the Queanbeyan district, and at Boambolo, south of the Yass River near Murrumbateman (see subsequent chapters in Part II).

The two groups at Pudman and Blakney Creeks developed a very distinct identity in the 20th century and distanced themselves from their relatives residing at the larger Yass camps. The reason for this estrangement may have been the threat by the Board to become the official guardians of all Aboriginal and 'half caste' children and move them to mission stations, away from the control of their parents.²⁰ The Board particularly targeted 'those hot beds of immorality — camp life near the large towns'.

18. Contemporary editions of the local Yass and Queanbeyan newspapers are full of such stories.

19. A more detailed history of these communities will be featured in volume II of the Weereewaa History Series.

It is not surprising, therefore, that, under the circumstances, members of the Wallaballoo and Pajong farming communities at Pudman and Blakney Creeks in the Boorowa and Gunning districts were anxious to prove to the authorities they were more responsible and settled than their relatives at the camps in Yass. They wanted to protect their children.

The large Aboriginal stations and camps

It has to be acknowledged that the camps, missions and reserves for 'Aborigines' established by the Aboriginal Protection Board did assist in helping contemporary Aboriginal families in New South Wales to survive, both physically and socially. Without the further distribution by the Board of government-funded rations, clothing, land grants and farming implements, it is possible that many more Aboriginal people would have died long before their time. These institutions also helped them to stay together and, thus, survive as (albeit re-formed) distinct Aboriginal communities.

On the other hand, judging by the various Protection Board reports, there was little doubt that Europeans intended to destroy forever Aboriginal culture and identity. The 1893 report, for example, included a complaint that Aboriginal ceremonies were still going on all over New South Wales.²¹ Throughout the 1880s to the 1920s, the Board collected birth, marriage and death statistics that separated the 'full blood' and 'half castes' and scrutinised them eagerly for signs that the latter were outnumbering the former. It noted with great satisfaction that 'half-castes' outnumbered 'full-bloods' for the first time in 1897, when the former were reduced to 3433 and the latter increased to 3663 in New South Wales.²² This long awaited event thus gave the Board an excuse to take a stronger line on the 'misuse' of its stations by 'able-bodied persons who were more European than Aboriginal', and to consider removing some of the younger Aboriginal people from their families.

In 1898, the Board reported:

It has been brought to the notice of the Board that a number of able-bodied persons, many of whom should be classed as Europeans rather than Aborigines, were in residence at Aboriginal stations. The Board has issued a circular to all Local Boards and Managers of such stations, impressing on them the desirability of furthering by every means in their power the aim of the Board, that all youths and girls should, after receiving instruction, and when of an age fit to work for a livelihood, be placed in suitable service or induced to accept it.²³

The manager at Warangesda, near Darlington Point, responded that he had sent several 'half caste' girls to service and that they were giving satisfaction. The manager at Brungle also stated that a number of young men and women had been induced to leave the station and accept employment in different parts of the country.

20. Report of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines for 1888, *VPNSWLA* 1889. Elma Pearsall, nee Russell, whose family lived at Pudman, confirmed this in an interview with me in 1997 (Jackson-Nakano, Ann 1997b).

21. Report of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, 1893, *VPNSWLA* 1894, vol III.

22. Report of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, 1897, *VPNSWLA* 1898, vol III.

23. Report of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, 1898, *VPNSWLA*.

The Aborigines Protection Board was faced with two inter-related options that reflected a dilemma from the time of the First Fleet: whether to isolate the 'full-blood Aborigines' and await the demise of the 'remnants'; or to remove their offspring from the influence of their Elders. The latter policy was designed to ensure that Aboriginal culture would be eliminated and that Aboriginal people of mixed heritage could be integrated or assimilated into 'white' Australian society through education and religious instruction.

The *Aborigines Protection Act (NSW) 1909*, and its amendments bestowed upon the Aborigines Protection Board the power it desired to rid Aboriginal 'stations' like Brungle of people they thought should be classed as Europeans. Following the introduction of the *Aborigines Protection (Amendment) Act 1918*, the Board sent a circular to all Aboriginal Reserve Managers warning them that no 'quadroon', 'octoroon' or fairer 'half-caste' child was to be allowed into any reserve.²⁴ Aboriginal people termed by the Board as 'quadroons' (children of a 'half-caste' and a European, or two 'half-castes') and 'octoroons' (children of a 'quadroon' and a European, or two 'quadroons', and so on) were not permitted to live on the reserves. Some parents left the reserves in order to keep their 'quadroon' children.²⁵

In Yass and Tumut towns, however, residents were becoming increasingly hostile to Aboriginal people who had been ejected from the Aboriginal stations in the local region and were establishing camps on the fringes of their towns. Residents of European descent objected to 'Aboriginal beggars' or 'Aboriginal drunks' congregating in large groups in their towns.²⁶ The implementation of earlier New South Wales Government policies had ensured that the gathering of large Aboriginal groups of old would be stamped out. Once they were ejected from the reserves, however, Aboriginal people in New South Wales, regardless of their 'degree of Aboriginality', began to regroup in large numbers on the fringes of towns such as Yass and Tumut. These included, in both districts, some Kamberri individuals and families who had been rendered unemployed in the early 20th century following resumption of the lands of some of their former employers by the fledgling Commonwealth Government.

Subsequent chapters in Part II relate the history of Kamberri families from the early 1860s, following the passing of leaders such as Onyong and Noolup in the 1850s, to 1927, when their lands were resumed by the Commonwealth.

24. Read, PJ, 1983.

25. *Ibid.* These terms are highly offensive, of course, and I use them only in their historical context, as did Peter Read in his thesis.

26. *Ibid.* Articles or Letters to the Editor in the contemporary local newspapers in Yass, Tumut and Gundagai, as well as complaint letters to the Board, reflect the hostility of Europeans towards Aboriginal people in these districts during this time.