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Chapter 6
Faithful Delineations

Figure 6.1. First Aborigines at Yarrabah Mission, in front of shelter, some with spears, 1892, Alfred Atkinson, with inscription by an unknown hand. Cairns Historical Society.

Figure 6.2, above left: First Aborigines at Menmuny Museum, Yarrabah.
Figure 6.3, above right: First Aborigines in a 1970s Cairns tourist brochure. Cairns Historical Society.
Introduction

Had Cairns Post editor-proprietor Frederick Wimble suffered the expense of a photographer to illustrate his several-paged publication of the 1890s, he could have done worse than to employ local lensman Alfred Atkinson. The intensity of frontier conflict between Aborigines and colonists of the Cairns district reached a crescendo in the early 1890s and a new phase of relations was unfolding. It was during this critical period that Atkinson captured a defining image. Known as *First Aborigines at Yarrabah Mission, in front of shelter, some with spears, 1892*, the photograph is currently displayed in the Menmuny Museum in what is now the township of Yarrabah on Cape Grafton, south-east of Cairns. The photograph was once hung in Yarrabah’s St Albans church, adjacent to an altar containing fragments of ‘holy rock’ upon which the first Christian service was held in the area.\(^1\) It was said that in the days before the mission, just near the church’s consecrated ground, a wandering European naturalist was savagely killed by Gungganydji.\(^2\) Reverend Ernest Gribble, son of the mission’s founder Reverend J.B. Gribble, could show Yarrabah’s visitors the approximate scene of the crime.

Among Torres Strait Islanders, the introduction of Christianity achieved an historical momentousness, immortalised in the Coming of the Light festival celebrated yearly. The non-hierarchical social organisation of Gungganydji conspired against sudden, community-wide conversion, but a celebratory narrative for Yarrabah’s development harking back to the old days was no less important to the mission’s sponsors. An image of success was important to the mission’s future prospects and relics, such as those mentioned, were summoned to the folkloric cause. The *First Aborigines* photograph is one of these.

From mission artefact, and cultural sensitivities about images of deceased Aborigines notwithstanding, *First Aborigines* found another career, that of historian’s tool. It has been frequently reprinted to the point of becoming a stock illustration with which to ornament local history accounts, commemorative editions and academic theses with each usage adding a fine layer to the myth. I estimate that it is the single most reproduced image of Aboriginal people from early Cairns. Particularly popular is the version on which a looping hand has identified its subjects in their mix of Christian and Gungganydji names: George Christian, Billy Woopah, Cubby,\(^3\) Albert Maywe and his sister Ballawoorba,\(^4\) and Menmuny,\(^5\) or King John Barlow\(^6\) as

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3. Cubby is sometimes referred to as Tubby.
4. Also known as Balla or Bella.
5. Menmuny, also known as: Menonomonee, Menomonie, Mannmuny, Minminiy, Menmeny and Menmurray.
he became known. Local legend holds that the people we glimpse in *First Aborigines* had been baptised sometime earlier on the shores of the Cairns Inlet, although this was probably not the case.\(^7\)

In reproductions, the photograph’s title or a close paraphrasing of it is always used, perhaps leading the viewer to incorrectly assume that *First Aborigines* represents *First Contact*. The figure of Menmuny is compositionally central to the image. The enigmatic Gungganydji warrior took the extraordinary step of aligning himself with Ernest Gribble. Menmuny’s influence and web of relations proved pivotal to Yarrabah’s foundation and Gribble used the story of King John of Yarrabah as a proof of the mission’s success. While it is true that all of the Gungganydji of *First Aborigines* did become associated with the mission to different degrees, the photograph could otherwise have been entitled *The First Gungganydji to co-operate with a photographer associated with the mission being constructed on their land*. This chapter reconsiders *First Aborigines* as a site of memory. It examines the events that surrounded its creation, cultural change, colonial expansion and the rivalries of historical construction.

**Theatrical coups**

In capturing images of Aboriginal people, professional photographers in Cairns responded to commercial imperatives with a blend of curiosity, artistic license, neo-Darwinistic assumption and some formulaic cliché. The technical limitations of fiddly, cumbersome cameras militated against spontaneity, as did the expense of plate glass negatives, customers’ requirements and the aesthetic traditions of the medium. Compositional elements were carefully arranged. Racial belief was codified in a visual language that took inspiration from the natural sciences and popular ethnography. The historical value of these photographs notwithstanding, it is an open

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7 There are inconsistencies among the sources and perhaps some wishful thinking. A Yarrabah commemorative booklet claimed, “The first man baptised it is believed was the famous 'King John,' John Menymeny Barlow who was baptised ‘on the shores of the Cairns Inlet 1891,’ by Fr. John Brown Gribble.” *75th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Community of Yarrabah by the Church of England*, 1967, p.10. Judith Thomson concurred. *Reaching Back: Queensland Aboriginal people recall early days at Yarrabah Mission*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra 1989, p.xiii. Plausibly, Paul Smith placed Menmuny’s baptism in early 1894, the year he was renamed John Barlow. Smith, Like a Watered Garden, p.136. The *Cairns Post* maintained that J.B. Gribble died without ever meeting any Gungganydji, leastways not on their own country. Apparently independently of each other, Melbourne-based Presbyterian clergyman and controversialist Professor John Rentoul and Anglican J.B. Gribble interacted with Cairns-based Aborigines at Gordon Creek (near present day Woree) during August, 1891. The Post believed that baptisms had been conducted by Rentoul: “ladling out…wares in the spiritual line” as it put it. *CP*, 3 October 1891, p.2. While unlikely, it is possible that Menmuny was among those baptised on that day, and therefore, baptised twice.
question as to what can be learned about Aboriginality from them. Bicultural Aborigines working for whites were enlisted by photographers and encouraged to remove their European habiliments and to wield spears and boomerangs, revealing their savagery. These images served to not only confirm expectations, to thrill the viewer and flatter colonial fortitude, but by reducing the feared enemy to a caricature, may have helped neutralise prevalent European anxieties about uncontained ‘wild blacks.’

A steady trade existed in post-cards of Australian colonial exotica. These images were produced by Europeans for European consumption and did not make authenticity a priority. The framework was generally demeaning but may not necessarily have been experienced as such by the Aboriginal subjects. As well, there existed opportunities for Aboriginal participants to conceal culture, knowingly misrepresent themselves or display their attainments. Photographers in Cairns were adepts at interpreting and recasting the ‘state of play’ between Europeans and Aborigines. Cultural change among Aboriginal people was categorised through a convenient system of archetypal groupings: ‘wildness,’ ‘tameness’ and ‘degradation.’ The visual motifs of

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post-cards most commonly depict the former two. One could send a greeting to far-off friends and family on the back of a picture of Aborigines lined up in Victorian domestic costume, shaking spears at the viewer, or standing in the studio with dried foliage, stuffed animals and other bush ephemera. Otherwise photographers pictured Aborigines headed for racial extinction; scratching themselves in squalid fringe camps, wearing rags and chomping unhappily on tobacco pipes. Images of degradation appear to answer a great psychological need to transfer to Aborigines responsibility for their own apparent retrogression. Photographs also served public relations functions, and from the outset, Yarrabah Mission was in need of good publicity.

Figure 6.6, Figure 6.7. ‘Wild’ and ‘civilised blacks’ postcards: a horse spearing staged by Atkinson (above) and a composite of Aborigines working for Europeans by Robert Alston (below). Cairns Historical Society.
The walls of the Handley and Atkinson photographic studios in Abbott Street displayed Aboriginal artefacts, moths and butterflies pinned out within glass cases, shells, corals and examples of the photographers’ work. Prior to Atkinson joining the business, James Handley advertised that he was unavailable on Mondays. On these days he took his camera en plein air, scouring the district for suitable photographic subjects. Most of Handley and Atkinson’s compositions are illustrative of progress: railways, buildings, the growth of Cairns and its various industries, some landscape studies and portraits are still around, and as we know, Handley and Atkinson also took photographs of Aborigines. Not included within the conventions of portraiture or nude study, Aboriginal photography existed as its own discipline, with its own requisite visual system.

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Figure 6.8, Figure 6.9. Aboriginal bush life as seen by Alfred Atkinson. Cairns Historical Society.

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9 At the 1891 Cairns Show Handley and Atkinson swept the pool: Photographs; 12 portraits from life (professionals). Order of merit. 1st prize; Photographs; landscape and architectural (professionals). Order of merit. 1st prize; Photographs; Enlargements, portraits (four). Order of merit. 1st prize; Photographs; enlargements, landscape (one), Order of merit. 1st prize; Photograph (12); scenery and studies from life (professionals). Order of merit. 1st prize. They were however the only entrants in each division. CA Supplement, 15 September 1891. They also received some free promotion from the other Cairns newspaper: “Messrs Handley and Atkinson have shown us an excellent panoramic view of Cairns taken from the top of the Cairns Hotel. This should be in great demand by those wishing to possess a copy of Cairns to date. This firm have [sic] also about completed a series of views of the Freshwater rush showing the various workings.” CA, 31 July 1891, p.2.
In one scene staged by Atkinson, taut-buttocked Aboriginal men hold spears in threateningly close vicinity to the wrinkled hide of a gloomy-looking old horse, giving illustration to the stock-slaughtering depredation bemoaned in ‘the settler’s lament.’ More convincing is an Atkinson image of three Aborigines demonstrating astonishing unaided tree climbing ability, many vertiginous metres up the smooth trunks of rainforest giants. Names of the Aboriginal people featured were rarely recorded. In language that recalls Rousseau’s ‘noble savage’ ideal and ‘man in a state of nature,’ Atkinson’s daughter Beatrice Wiles described this mode of viewing as capturing Aboriginal people “in their natural state.” Wiles juxtaposed this perspective with the later nineteenth century representation of Aboriginality – that of the ‘ignoble savage.’ Her father had recalled that around Cairns in the 1890s there were Aborigines “in the bush with their spears…who definitely were in their wild state - and close to town,” although she “heard nothing of any skirmishes with the blacks.” When asked how it was that her father was able to convince Aboriginal people to participate in his photographs she speculated, “in the bush and in the studio…I would say that the aborigines who posed for the photographs were not wild.” Wiles assumed they demanded some token payment for their troubles, or as she put it, they were “not at all beyond accepting some tobacco or coin to pose.”

Figure 6.10. Although the (unknown) photographer may have been marvelling at ‘Stone Age’ technology, this postcard image is less burdened than others with kitsch, judgemental overlay. Irrespective of photographic intentions, occasionally the dignity, subtlety and genius of traditional rainforest life can be discerned from contemporary images.

10 This was a favourite expression of the Cairns Post.
On one level, the relationship between the Gungganydji of *First Aborigines* and Atkinson was that of colonised people and the camera as an instrument of symbolic control, a relationship that has been examined by scholars. Jane Lydon considered photography “part of the West’s objectifying mode of perception, to know and control indigenous peoples.”\(^\text{12}\) In its missionary context, historians have seen the photographing of Aboriginal people as part of the disciplinary apparatus identified by Michel Foucault, a mechanism of “surveillance, identification, classification, labelling, analysis and correction.”\(^\text{13}\) Roslyn Poignant argued that “the West’s appropriation of colonial spaces in the course of the imperial enterprise was paralleled by the

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construction and presentation of savage otherness.”\textsuperscript{14} Certainly, late nineteenth and early twentieth century postcards of Cairns’ Aborigines can be read as colonial souvenirs which create ‘Aboriginalities,’ but as Lydon argued, in practice the photographing of Aboriginal people produced “mutual, sympathetic or contested forms.”\textsuperscript{15}

On an initial viewing of First Aborigines, those familiar with nineteenth century Western modes of perception might see savagery through Atkinson’s lens. Others may ponder the Christian overlay of the scenario represented and imagine symbols of Christian iconography: Gungganydji saints, sinners, wise men, apostles, martyrs and innocents, even perhaps the nativity? But Atkinson was not a philosophical photographer. His constructions of Aboriginality were conventional. By comparison with many surviving postcards which supposedly depict Aboriginal life around Cairns, First Aborigines seems to crackle with life. It is as if the orchestration was met directly by Gungganydji engagement and it is this factor, as well as the intrigue of the photograph’s title, which gives the image its dramatic tension.

The Cairns Post recognised and was concerned about the persuasive potential of photographs of Aboriginal people. Missionaries, it alleged:

\begin{quote}
go south with some cheaply acquired photographs of tame niggers and some doubtfully obtained native weapons, and they give a magic lantern entertainment…and the dear old ladies say ‘Oh what terrible risks the dear missionaries run [on account of] the poor dear blacks.’\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

When in late 1891, J.B. Gribble and Professor Rentoul were evangelising among Aborigines close to Cairns, the irreligious Post pretended to be scandalised by the fact that baptisms had been conducted, that is: “A minister of the gospel of Christ considered it fitting to burlesque the most cherished and venerated tradition of the church.” It bewailed the “air of tragedy over the whole affair.” Particularly was the Post concerned about the implications of visual artefacts, “the historical photographs” which were “secured…that bright Sabbath afternoon.”\textsuperscript{17} It pored over one of these historical photographs:

\begin{quote}
Whatever is said of the theatrical coup which readied up the wretched half-civilized town outcasts into picturesque savages for the occasion, that deprived them of their vermin-
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Lydon, \textit{Eye Contact}, p.10.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{CP}, 30 September 1891, p.3.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid}.
haunted breeches and nondescript shirts for the nonce? Is it outrageous to infer that the
’readied up’ picture, so pretty and so unnatural with its spears and boomerangs and nulla
nullas was required not necessarily for publication but as a guarantee of good faith, for
exhibition to the dear old ladies of the south?\(^{18}\)

**In terra incognita**

Before they were photographic models, the Gungganydji occupied their peninsula, not in
splendid isolation exactly, but relatively free from outside interference. In September 1881, this
state of independence was coming to an end. A detachment of Native Police under the direction
of Sub-Inspector Carr ploughed across Trinity Bay in the pilot boat and into Gungganydji
country, to reconnoitre with them. The Sub-Inspector “ordered the boys out in search of
blacks,” and “issuing strong injunctions against using firearms,” ordered that “what niggers
might be met with should be arrested and brought to camp.”\(^{19}\) The “boys’ instinct knew where
to find their fellow countrymen” thought the *Queenslander*, and soon enough, the troopers:

returned with four [elderly] men, two women and three children, trembling for their lives,
which feeling was certainly not improved when they saw Sub-Inspector Carr. No doubt they
considered immediate death was their doom.\(^{20}\)

The men, women and children who had been placed under arrest “were scarcely prepared for an
immediate reprieve in the shape of a good ‘feed’ followed by presents of blankets and
tomahawks,” reported the *Queenslander*. “Signs were made to them of future protection.” This
confusing and frightening diplomacy was described as having been “eminently successful.”\(^{21}\) In
January 1882, four months later, the Gungganydji sent an envoy of their own into Cairns. “Not
satisfied with the visits paid *them* by the government and clergy,” complained a correspondent,
“the blacks…have visited *us*. Some canoes came over from False Cape…half a dozen niggers
landed and were duly received, feasted clothed and sent away.”\(^{22}\) Calling for a second time, the
Gungganydji found that niceties were now exhausted. “They were set to work clearing the
beach road of weeds, an exercise they apparently cared little for.”\(^{23}\) In spite of the fact that

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
\(^{19}\) *Queenslander*, 10 September 1881, p.326.
\(^{20}\) Ibid.
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
\(^{22}\) *Queenslander*, 7 January 1882, p.7. Italics in original.
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
indigenous and non-indigenous people continued to represent—among other things—death and danger to each other, their objectives being commonly, fundamentally at odds, and in spite of the fact that it was consistently shown that peaceable accommodations between the two groups were possible, (and one would have thought, desirable), diplomacy of any kind was little used by the occupying power in the district, and tokenistic. In 1881, Christie Palmerston had wondered at the ferocity of Aboriginal antipathy towards colonial incursions alongside their mistrust of whites:

It was impossible for me to hold converse with the natives, as they resented anything like a friendly approach, and if they listened to a few words would reply by inviting the party into ambush…Neither would the male aboriginals drop their spears by any inducement of mine.

Being particularly anxious to prospect their country well, I explored it…with the most pacific intentions towards the natives, and in return have been hunted by day and night.24

Palmerston concluded with the familiar frontier logic, that the ‘natures’ of Aboriginal people, rather than their legitimate grievances, were the sticking point. “To establish friendly intercourse will be the work of years, and, from the character of these natives, I judge will never be thoroughly accomplished.”25

Ten years later, with friendly intercourse still a work in progress, the Cairns Post dedicated a column to the romance and heroism of the colonial enterprise. “Many a pioneer leaves his bones on the rough road he has hewn” it began. These “heroes of civilization…what dangers they have faced—hunger, thirst, cold, fever and death at the hands of treacherous niggers…in terra incognita.”26 During the 1870s and 1880s, the situation in Bama country surrounding Cairns could be fairly described, as it was in the Queenslander, as a slow moving “war of extermination,”27 on in which the bones of many—pioneers and others—were left behind.28 In north Queensland, Aboriginal numbers were relatively great and European numbers relatively few in comparison to southern Australia and the inland. With rainforest providing good cover and mountainous terrain being difficult to traverse on horseback, Aboriginal people of the coastal north held out longer than was possible elsewhere, but the balance of power shifted ever

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25 Ibid.
26 CP, 30 November 1892, p.3.
27 Queenslander, 8 October 1881, p.645.
28 It is estimated that 38 non-indigenous people associated with the colonisation of the Cairns district were killed in the period 1873-1892. Aboriginal deaths are more difficult to estimate but there were perhaps eight ‘dispersals’ during the same period. The War for the Land: a short history of Aboriginal-European relations in Cairns, Cairns Historical Society.
further in the colonist’s favour. Poisoned food was left in the rainforest. Sporadic shootings and spearings continued into the 1890s. Deadly attacks provided a rich resource of exciting news copy but the specifics of possible Aboriginal fatalities were handled with a deliberate vagueness, offsetting legal ramifications. For example: “The aboriginal nuisance along the Barron Valley on the range is approaching a critical stage” the Cairns Post reported:

The blacks until recently had a comparatively high time of it and now that they are again being thrown chiefly upon their own resources, all the cunning and treachery of which their savage natures are capable are set to work to obtain by fraud or force the white man’s luxuries [and] to prey upon the defenceless selector and depopulate the district.

A Native Mounted Police assault which followed, gave the Post cause to make the (premature) calculation: “There will be no more outrages committed by the blacks of the Barron River…and the selectors may now sleep in peace. The dignity of the law has been upheld, and justice has descended on the head of the dusky wrong doer.” As early Cairns resident J.W. Collinson explained, “aboriginals on this part of the coast…learnt to respect the white man’s firearms.”

Subjugation of Aboriginal people achieved at the point of a Snider rifle was then maintained through other forms of intimidation, such as an attack upon an Aboriginal camp described by the Post as “an agreeable diversion.” Certain “individuals rejoicing in the dignity of white manhood set fire to several of the gunyahs; the conflagration being with difficulty extinguished by the frightened myalls.” The Post enjoyed thumbing its nose at humanitarians. In 1892 W. Garrett enquired of the Post, “my residence was plundered by the thieving treacherous aboriginals of this district…Can you tell me what liability would attach if we were to shoot one or two of the thieves?” With the pugnacious swagger that reminds us to treat such stories with caution the Post replied:

In the event of any of the aboriginals getting killed in defending [Garret’s] life or property, there is not a jury in the Cairns district, I may say in North Queensland that could be found

29 Ibid.
30 CP, 14 September 1892, p.3.
31 CP, 1 October 1892, p.2.
32 J.W. Collinson, Early Days of Cairns, W.R. Smith and Peterson, Brisbane, 1939, p.60. Collinson elaborated: “Blacks thieved camps when the men were absent, and in retaliation were shot on sight. Their fishing and hunting grounds were filched from them, and they were gradually driven back into the scrubs. They watched every opportunity to rob the camps, way-lay pack teams, drive off cattle and horses and raid maize or sweet potato patches.” Collinson, Early Days of Cairns, pp.61-62.
33 CP, 20 January 1892, p.2. Deriving from the idea of a potentially hostile stranger from another Aboriginal group, the word myall was in common usage in early Cairns to denote Aboriginal people relatively inexperienced in European ways, or ‘wild blacks.’
34 CP, 10 September 1892, p.3.
With the destruction, devastation and upheavals in Aboriginal life brought about by the colonial onslaught, there also transpired closer, daily interactions and collaborations between indigenous and non-indigenous residents. Working for Europeans on or near traditional lands around Cairns made it possible for displaced Aborigines to maintain some links and uphold some ceremonial life. By 1892, many were maintaining Aboriginal heritage and adapting European ways as they lived across the frontier, either voluntarily or in some cases as abductees. To Aboriginal people, this involved a mental absorption of Europeans into an Aboriginal order. To Europeans, it was Aborigines being ‘let in.’ However, the profound disruptions to traditional life and the disappearance of Aboriginal space came with severe and demoralizing consequences.

The *Cairns Post* once chuckled that “the only chance of safety for the nigger is to place the greatest possible number of miles between himself and civilisation,” but curiosity, necessity and opportunity had drawn Aboriginal people into Cairns. The attractions of food and tobacco escalated rapidly towards dependency for many as hunting ground was steadily lost and food ran chronically short. Life was meagre for the displaced and demonised people living on the fringes of Cairns, trying to prevail in the haphazard overlap of two worlds. Lawless brutality, sexual and occupational exploitation were rife. At this time, the *Cairns Post* was absolutely unsympathetic to their plight, demanding on behalf of white settlers, ready access to Aboriginal labour, while refusing to have its gaze affronted by spectacle of Aboriginal habitations and the starvation, desperation and chronic illness within them. “Cairns is infested…[by] stunted, degraded, deformed blacks and their gins” it complained, “vermin and disease stricken wretches” who “infest the town and its outskirts.” The *Post* took exception to the “annoyance of hungry blackfellows stalking around demanding food” and summoned the law: “Trooper Higgins…one of the most successful constables in the Force in dealing with the blacks has been instructed to patrol the district…to protect the residents.” A visitor to Cairns was disgusted by the visibility of Aboriginal people and left the town, having seen “quite enough of them.”

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35 *CP*, 14 September 1892, p.3.
36 *CP*, 20 January 1892, p.2.
37 *CP*, 27 August 1892, p.2.
38 *CP*, 20 February 1892, p.2.
39 *CP*, 24 September 1892, p.2.
Figure 6.12, above. 1890s Aboriginal village near Cairns, with highly combustible gunyahs. Cairns Historical Society image.

Figure 6.13, above. Aboriginal camp in Lake Street, Cairns, 1890s. Both photographs on this page were taken at about the same time, and while an outlying camp was likely to be more ‘traditional’ than a town camp, it is also possible that elements within the photographs have been introduced or removed to create, alternately ‘pure’ and ‘more civilised’ pictures of Aboriginal life. Colonists required Aboriginal people to wear clothing and incorporate other ‘elevating’ aspects of Western culture (the Lake Street camp people are literally upstanding for the photographer), but encumbered by a fervent belief in racial hierarchy, Europeans viewed the results with horror. Aboriginal acculturation to white ways seemed to make a mockery of ennobled white culture, while being considered somehow degrading to Aboriginality – as understood by whites. “Wherever we find a degraded aboriginal” wrote Ernest Gribble, “he has become so through contact with our boasted civilisation.” 41 Gribble attempted to resolve this dilemma by pursuing a segregationist ideal, combined, paradoxically, with the intensive culture contact of missionary re-education. Cairns Historical Society image.

Other townsfolk were offended by the re-colonisation of the colony:

Mr. Editor, who has the power of controlling the movements of the blacks in Cairns? Apparently they, the blacks, have the liberty to camp wherever they please and at present there is a native village in the upper part of Lake street…It was time such a danger was put on one side with a strong hand. Cairns seems to be going backwards instead of forwards.42

He was told in reply, “it is the duty of the inspector of nuisances to report the squatting of blacks in the precincts of the town…if the white neighbours would only kick up a bit of a row…the police would clear the camp out.”43 Despite being periodically driven off, a fringe camp developed in West Cairns in the early 1880s. By 1886 it had swollen to about 100 people,44 its number including for a time the young Menmuny.45 From the Cairns camp, Menmuny had the chance to observe and interact with Europeans. Before the advent of Yarrabah, Menmuny had gained enough English to slot into the role of Gribble’s translator.

Natural laws

Pre-contact bush life was demanding by contemporary Australian standards, but structured and healthy. Now unprecedented levels of chaos, squalor, malnutrition and contagion were taking their toll, exacerbated by psychological duress, fights, alcohol, tobacco and opium abuse. More than other contact situations, fringe camps encouraged Europeans to believe in laws of progress and degeneracy. In 1895, Arthur Bicknell recorded some impressions of Cairns. According to Bicknell, “Year after year slips by, and the Australian black makes little progress…he is content to subsist, and cares nothing about civilisation and the progress of the outside world.”46 Enlightenment ideas of progress and Spencer’s ‘survival of the fittest’ filtered through popular discourse of the Trinity Bay district, with an expectation that Aborigines were a dying race. The Post reported that in two town camps, “one the habitation of the Cairns blacks, the other the lodge of the Mulgrave blacks. Death…stalked into the both camps; in one day four sable gentlemen were carried off.”47 It seemed quite conceivable that Aboriginal people were headed

42 CP, 5 October 1892, p.2.
43 Ibid.
46 Bicknell, Travel and Adventure in North Queensland, p.43.
47 CP, 20 February 1892, p.2. The ‘Mulgrave blacks’ were the consanguineous Gungganydji and Yidinydji, and the ‘Cairns blacks’ were the Djabuganydji (Djabugay).
inevitably towards racial extinction. This was not simply, as might be thought, a veil thrown over the destruction of Aboriginal society as a result of colonisation, but held to be the process of a natural law in which the inferior species/race must decline against its superior.\footnote{Russell McGregor \textit{Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939}, Melbourne University Press, 1997.}

The \textit{Cairns Argus} considered that a dying Aboriginal race was entitled to some special consideration in the form of a reserve. “At least while there is a remnant, let those have free space to die in whose country we live in,” it argued. Europeans could no doubt cede “a little scrap of territory for the people whom we have dispossessed of the whole.”\footnote{CA, 10 May, 1892, p.2.} Unlike the cold-blooded, white-advancement-at-all-costs \textit{Cairns Post} of the 1880s and early 1890s, the \textit{Cairns Argus} applied scientific orthodoxy to formulate an ethical response to the situation of local Aboriginal people, arguing “We plead for fair play.”

Every sentiment of justice, every sentiment of chivalry urges consideration for the weakness of those who, were they as strong as us we, would have a better title to Australia than our own…The transaction is defensible no doubt by… theories of the survival of the fittest and the divine right of the English ascendancy, [but] we owe the blacks more than contemptuous annual alms of blankets can repay. In New Zealand…the Government buys its land. Here it steals it.\footnote{Ibid.}

The \textit{Argus} did not think that a mission could succeed in civilising Aboriginal people on such a reserve, but thought that in the name of justice it was it was worth a try:

\begin{quote}
[Missionaries] believe, in spite of science, that a low type can be raised to a high one without passing through the countless graduations by which nature effects the elevation…that what’s bred in the bones cannot come out in the flesh. We know they are wrong; but we do not know that they do wrong.\footnote{Ibid.}
\end{quote}

Having got wind of J.B. Gribble’s proposed mission, the \textit{Queenslander} offered support for its objectives:

\begin{quote}
aiming as it does at the social and, intellectual and moral elevation of the long-neglected natives of the far North, it ought to command the earnest practical sympathies of the entire community, for certainly no harm can come of it, while the chances are that as in the other
\end{quote}
colonies, where the experiment has been tried with considerable success, lasting benefits will accrue to the blacks.\textsuperscript{52}

The \textit{Herberton Advertiser} thought only a mooncalf could be convinced of this:

the blacks, whose detestable condition; both moral and physical had aroused the sympathies of those foolish enough to imagine these interesting individuals are suffering extreme hardships and have a small chance of salvation. It is a pity that Mr. Gribble and his associates cannot find better employment than endeavouring to save a number of people who cannot understand them and would laugh at them if they did.\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{Knowing the blacks}

The Gribbles, the \textit{Argus} and the \textit{Post} found rare concord in predicting Aboriginal extinction. The \textit{Post} emphatically ruled out Christianising Aborigines as a solution to their ills, regarding this as both undesirable – exposure to Christian teaching could make Aboriginal employees difficult and unmanageable – and impossible. According to the \textit{Post}, civilising simple, unpredictable and animalistic creatures of impulse was a hopeless undertaking. The “instincts and traditions of centuries cannot be wiped out,” it declared. “It would be easier to convert alligators or dingoes than the myalls.”\textsuperscript{54} The \textit{Post} launched a vicious attack on the reputation of J.B. Gribble, threatening to expose his allegedly sordid past,\textsuperscript{55} and tried valiantly to build up an extensive list of rebuttals to the mission, contending that “hundreds of arguments could be advanced against…the stupendous folly of the proposed outrage on common sense,” but all of which rested upon the conviction that missionaries, humanitarians, southerners and others did not know the north Queensland blacks.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Queenslander}, 17 October 1891, p.751.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Herberton Advertiser}, (hereafter \textit{HA}), 24 June 1892.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{CP}, 16 March 1892, p.2.
\textsuperscript{55} “It may have been as well for the REV. GRIBBLE if he had allowed sleeping dogs to sleep because it now behoves us to publish his history in Western Australia.”\textit{Cairns Post}, 11 June 1892. Upper case in the original. This threat was in extremely poor taste. Gribble had undertaken mission work at Gascoyne River, in the north of Western Australia and in drawing attention to ill-usage, perhaps even atrocities being committed against Aboriginal people; Gribble drew the ire of settlers. After two attempts were made on his life, Gribble fled, smuggled out of WA at night under heavy police escort. Geoff Higgins, \textit{James Noble of Yarrabah}, Mission Publications of Australia, Lawson NSW, 1981, p.4; also Lynne Hume, ‘Them Days: Life on an Aboriginal Reserve 1892-1960,’ \textit{Aboriginal History}, vol. 15, no. 1, 1995, p.4.
‘Knowing the Barron blacks’ through photographs and illustrations: Alfred Atkinson photographs and their hand drawn equivalents, published in the Queenslander. While in popular discourse, thoughtful discussions about the fate of Aboriginal people tended to be subsumed by the political objectives of white settlers, scholarly interest in Aboriginal culture continued to be stimulated and sympathetic views expressed. For example, an ‘Aboriginal studies’ author named Dawson told the Queenslander that “the more intelligent natives are better informed on some subjects than the ordinary run of what we call the middle classes.” Dawson doubted “considerably whether those same middle class white people [knew] as much of their own laws, or as much about natural history, or the nomenclature of the heavenly bodies, as the aborigines do.” Queenslander, 23 April 1881, p.522.

According to the Cairns Post, to “old pioneers the blacks are an open book.” Missionaries, on the other hand, were no more than “peripatetic pilgrims” who “visit a district for a few hours and in the shortest time on record pretend to acquire an accurate knowledge of the aborigines.” Evangelisers Gribble and Rentoul had despaired of the north, Rentoul arguing

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56 CP, 30 September 1891, p.3.
57 CP, 16 March 1892, p.2.
58 CP, 9 September 1891 p.3.
that in “no part of Queensland have the aborigines been more wantonly and cruelly wronged.”

The Post fulminated: “North Queensland is misrepresented on all sides, from the quidnuncs of Exeter Hall to the itinerant preacher who scrapes together an audience of old women of both sexes telling fairy tales regarding the poor dear blacks.”

It condemned the “ignorant and goody-goody people of the South” with their “lovely fictions in connection with the cruelty shown by the whites to the blacks,” and exclaimed, “how old pioneers and old experienced police inspectors must grin when they come across the twaddle written by these frigate birds.”

While across the Cairns Inlet, the Bellenden-Ker, later Yarrabah Mission, stumbled and faltered into being, the Post exploded with rage:

The fact of “baptising” out of a billy can a few degraded specimens of the tame town blacks, readied up for the occasion hardly suffices to prove any intimate acquaintance with [Gribble’s] dear black brothers...a few photographs of the niggers and a few weapons (taken from the niggers) form this man’s stock in trade, and with these the Brisbane officials have apparently been satisfied.

An overwhelming sense of racial and cultural superiority meant that only a tiny minority of Europeans ever approached Aboriginal people on Aboriginal terms, or through Aboriginal languages. Most assumed, as did the Cairns Post, that Aboriginal people had belonged to the region for no more than several hundred years. And while few European Cairnsites could demonstrate any detailed comprehension of the culture of the Gungganydji, Yidinydji, Yirrganydji, Dyabugganydji, Muluridji, Kuku-Yalanji and Mbarabram living within two days’ ride from Cairns, anecdotal evidence and apocryphal accounts were presented in the pages of local newspapers with the confident air of conclusiveness. Europeans were alert to the

59 CP, 3 October 1891, p.2.
60 CP, 4 June 1892, p.2.
61 CP, 11 June 1892, p.2.
62 CP, 3 October 1891, p.2.
63 J.B. Gribble called the mission Bellenden-Ker in reference to the mountain range which, to gales of laughter from the Cairns Post, proved to be nowhere near Cape Grafton. Ernest Gribble reported that the Gungganydji name for the area was 'Eyerraba,' meaning a place of meeting, so putting his own stamp on it, renamed it Yarrabah. Ernest Gribble A Despised Race: The Vanishing Aboriginals of Australia, Australian Board of Missions, Sydney, 1933, pp.34-37. ‘The name Yarraburrah describes the flight of Yarraburrah or Guyala the fish-hawk as he hunts for fish on slanting wings over Mission Bay. Yarraburrah the fish-hawk was a Bulleru (totemic ancestor) and his home is near a spring of water near to where the old dormitory was once situated. On the beach, three large rocks preserve the memory of Kudya: Bi (Bulleru) – his wife and lawyer cane dilly bag.’ Menmuny Museum.
64 CP, 16 March 1892, p.2.
65 Also known as Kongkanji or Goonjanji.
66 Also known as Yetinji or Majanji.
67 Also known as Yerkanji.
68 Now refer to themselves as Djabugay.
fact that harmonious relations did not exist between Aboriginal groups, a situation intensified by European land occupancy effectively coralling antagonists and inflaming violent conflict. “Persons who know…the habits and character of the blacks around Cairns,” observed the Post, “are well aware that the various tribes do not mix together, and that one or two little wars are continually going on in a quiet and deadly sort of way.” From such observations, Europeans believed that they ‘knew the blacks.’ There was no suggestion that Aboriginal epistemology might be intricate and not readily accessible, appreciable and determinable to Europeans. Using a system of English nomenclature, the Cairns Post referred to Aboriginal groups from surrounding areas as the Mulgrave River blacks, the Barron River blacks, the Port Douglas blacks, the Herberton blacks and so on. A guffawing Post reprinted an article from the Queenslander in which these groups were called the “the Yarra-burra, Bandoo, Mamoo, Najung, Jiroo” and “Yeddai Yilgunyee.” This reminded the Post of its own expertise as a student of Aboriginality and southern obliviousness.

Years later, Ernest Gribble would reflect upon the fact that while they had “not benefited as a race,” Aboriginal people had “played a very important part in the development of the country we have taken from them...as shepherds, shearers, horse-breakers, stockmen, letter carriers, police trackers and domestics.” As well as depriving colonists of resources that may be required in the future, the mission threatened the supply of Aboriginal labour. The Post championed the cause of “the unfortunate whites of Cairns,” asking how it could be that “a few poor and struggling men utilize a little cheap aboriginal labour” only to have it “stopped in favour of missionary enterprise?” J.B. Gribble was badgered into assurances that he would not under any circumstances, “endeavour to influence any blacks working for settlers to come to the mission.” Rentoul had described Aboriginal workers near Cairns, “along the [train] line chopping wood and carrying water for the navvies and storekeepers and all this for a little ‘ki ki’ (food).” Noting this common mode of employment for Aboriginal people, or mocking Gribble in biblical parlance, or citing Joshua’s curse on the Gibeonites – a biblical reference used in defence of slavery – one member of the Cairns Divisional Board argued that “the blacks were much better employed as hewers of wood and drawers of water for scrub pioneers than in singing hymns for the missionaries.” The consensus view among Europeans was that

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70 CP, 15 June 1892, p.2.
71 CP, 28 October 1891, p.2.
72 Ernest Gribble, The Problem of the Australia Aboriginal, p.66.
73 The “land, timber & c. that [Gribble] is locking up.” CP, 16 March 1892, p.2.
74 CP, 16 March 1892, p.2.
75 CA, 10 June 1892, p.3.
76 Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS MS 1515/2.
77 CA, 11 March 1892, p.2. “Now therefore you are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being slaves, and hewers of wood and drawers of water.” Joshua 9:23, Holy Bible, American King James
Aboriginal people should be socialised only as an underclass serving the interests of whites and “not enter into slavish competition with the white man.” Rentoul felt it was hazardous to allow egalitarianism to creep into relations between blacks and whites, noting the death of a white Cairns man named Hobson who had been killed by his Aboriginal employees. “Terrible murder,” wrote the Professor. It “would seem that Mr. H. was extremely kind to his blacks. But with kindness there must be a constant and uniform firmness in one’s treatment of the myalls; and incidental yielding may be taken for weakness. Then the danger comes.”

Yarrabah

In mid 1892, the missionary party dragged its cutter up the beach at Mira: wungula, (Mission Bay). The Gungganydji can hardly have been filled with optimism. Strange boats disgorging Europeans were not likely to be harbingers of good fortune. Hazel Barlow, grand-daughter of Menmuny explained, “When Father Gribble came here he was looking…to see if any coloured people would come out [and] one evening he heard [them] all talking amongst themselves like they wanted to fight because there was a white man here on their land.” The cosmology of Gungganydji country and its beaches, bushland, swamps and wildlife was perilously poised, but intact. In Halse’s estimation, there were 200-300 Gungganydji living in scattered extended families of 40-50 when missionaries arrived in the area. Gungganydji land was accessible only from the sea or through the dense rainforest across a small mountain range which completed the area’s enclosure, and made an ideally isolated location for remnant preservation. Some interlopers may also have been dissuaded by the Gungganydji reputation for cannibalistic ferociousness, which made thrilling telling. Constructions of Aboriginal savagery were eagerly woven into local folklore, sustaining missionary and colonial objectives as well as bolstering the self-image of colonists. Squaring up to the challenge of missionising Cairns’


Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

Later, Rentoul grew doubtful about Hobson’s kindness, stating that Hobson was “kind to the blacks,” but only “as compared to others,” and “at the same time erratic.” Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS MS 1515/2.


Halse, A Terribly Wild Man, p.25.

A reputation for unusual ferociousness was bestowed upon all of the Aboriginal groups around Cairns at various times, depending upon the state of relations between indigenes and settlers.
Aborigines, J.B. Gribble had told the *Queenslander* in 1891, that “one of their most desirable pastimes [is] the capture and eating of hostile tribes.” The *Queenslander* soberly considered the matter: “This is the kind of material to be operated upon by the missionaries.” Ernest and J.B. Gribble had convinced themselves (and others) that the Aborigines of Cape Grafton were cannibals, but did the Gungganydji have any appetite for Christianity?

Figure 6.18. A scene resembling perhaps the birth of Yarrabah mission. Its occupants having wandered off, a small wooden cutter has been dragged some way ashore at Leper Bay, Gungganydji country, 1890. Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library, UQFL 243 SR 23.

Missionaries keen for converts tended to bypass Aboriginal Australia for the more fertile fields of the Pacific and elsewhere. “In those days everyone looked askance at missionizing the blacks,” Ernest Gribble recalled. The “most kind hearted old ladies who would willingly subscribe…for the heathens in the Cannibal Islands would do but little to assist the conversion of the Queensland blackfellow.” J.B. Gribble became increasingly ill and was forced to leave.

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83 *Queenslander*, 17 October 1891, p.751. The practice of cannibalism was probably not part of Gungganydji culture, or if so, was of a ceremonial nature and easily confused with certain mortuary practices.
85 AN, 14 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101. The Australian Board of Missions did eventually agree to direct some small finance towards the mission. The bishop of north Queensland warned Gribble against commenting publicly on European ill-treatment of Aborigines and Pompo Katchewan, Gribble’s
On his deathbed he wrung from his unhappy son Ernest an undertaking to continue the mission’s work. Ernest Gribble assumed the role with no knowledge of Gungganydji language or culture, nor any intention to gain any. The transition would be entirely unilateral. Gribble was according to Halse, groomed for this work by “nearly a quarter of a century on a staple diet of imperial ideology and liberal rations of the ‘White Man’s Burden’…fortified by copious doses of missionary example,” but he was untrained as a cleric, as an educator, administrator or agricultural producer, and he brought no specific competencies to the work the missionaries had assigned to themselves. If Gribble the younger were able to succeed in preserving a remnant of Aboriginal Christians, it would be quite an achievement - a reputation-making triumph, and Ernest Gribble was ever mindful of his legacy.

As with the Gospels, there are differing accounts of the following events. Mission staff cleared land and erected the first buildings apparently alone at Cape Grafton. The Post was happy to report “the blacks of the district decline any connection with…Gribble.” The missionary pondered his situation. “It was a peculiar position in which I now found myself – in charge of a Mission but with no natives. There seemed to be [none] in our vicinity…I sighted a solitary native fishing, but as I approached him he fled into the scrub.” In the scrub, the need to respond was growing urgent. Amid apprehension, cautious curiosity and outright hostility, which it is said Menmuny worked to calm, the Gungganydji considered their options. They resolved to act. An advance was made, with a warning. Gribble recalled:

I was on the ridge of the new school-church…when I suddenly heard a shout from the beach. It came from three old blacks. A few presents in the form of tobacco and food soon convinced them of our friendly intentions…they gave us to understand that they were not the only blacks in the vicinity…I offered to accompany them to their camp but they were not anxious for my company.

Later, Gribble offered another version of events in which the visitors “gave us to understand that they were the only blacks in these parts, in fact the last of the tribe.” Either the three old men spoke English or they were highly articulate hand-signal communicators, discouraging further missionary encroachments with the well-worn dying race trope ‘the last of the tribe.’ In

Aboriginal assistant, was barred from the rectory as “parishioners were not in favour of aborigines being about the church.” Halse, A Terribly Wild Man, p.18.

86 CP, 27 August 1892, p.2.
87 Ernest Gribble, Forty Years With the Aborigines, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1930, p.60.
88 Halse, A Terribly Wild Man, p.27.
89 Gribble, Forty Years With the Aborigines, pp.61-62.
90 The contributor of this article did not identify himself, but it is written from a perspective that can only have been Gribble’s. AN cited in CP, 4 July 1907, p.4.
this draft of Yarrabah history, the first Aborigines at Yarrabah Mission were “three old
blacks.” Among the party that became known as the First Aborigines at Yarrabah Mission,
only one was an old man - Gribble’s nemesis Billy Woopah. The three ‘last of the tribe’
Aborigines were said to have made several visits prior to Menmuny’s official opening of
negotiations and one might reasonably expect Gribble to remember an early meeting with
Woopah. They attracted Gribble’s censure for their failure to share like good Christians. The
“old fellows who had been visiting us had gone and camped by themselves in order to keep the
food etc given by us for themselves,” Gribble wrote, but given Gungganydji traditions of
sharing resources, it smacks of interpretive invention on Gribble’s part, consistent with his
dislike of Woopah. Arguably, Woopah was an unsuitable First Aborigine. More time passed.
Tobacco and a “good feed,” Gribble wrote, “that was the best way to a native’s heart.” And
shortly, Yarrabah received its first ‘rice Christians.’ 12 December 1892 is the recognised
date upon which the First Aborigines, including Menmuny, approached Yarrabah Mission.
More arrived the following day. When in his memoirs, Gribble revisited this inaugural
‘breaking of bread,’ there were prayers while “the blacks looked on in wonderment” and
Gribble’s gleeful departure from Gungganydji protocol by which he served the women first. It
is possible that wounds were also treated and clothes distributed on that day.

Either before or after the first rice banquet, a permanent Gungganydji camp was established on
the beach at a safe two kilometres from the mission, the camp to which Atkinson was
admitted. Gribble later decided that “through it [rice] and the doctoring of their wounds we
won their confidence.” Gribble fed all visitors (one meal per day, followed directly by
lessons), and promised regular meals to anyone who settled. Some may have suspected
Gribble’s overtures to have been a trap, although in a culture where food was not used as a
disciplining device, few could have foreseen it as lure to an increasingly debilitating
entanglement that would lead to institutionalisation. Apparently Gribble was unaware that he

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91 Gribble, Forty Years With the Aborigines, pp.61-62.
92 AN, cited in CP, 4 July 1907, p.4.
93 Gribble, Forty Years With the Aborigines, p.60.
94 AN, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.
95 AN, November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.
96 “We gathered them together and at once knelt down and asked God’s blessing…We gave them a meal
of boiled rice which we cooked in a kerosene tin. The feast was most amusing. I made the blacks sit in a
circle and gave into the hands of each a supply of food. I began with the old women, but as I proceeded,
one old fellow came and expostulated with me and gave me to understand that the men ought to be served
first. I went my own way, much to his disgust.” Gribble, Forty Years With the Aborigines, p.61.
97 In an alternative telling of this story, Gribble remembered treating wounds and distributing clothing –
the trying on of which greatly entertained him. AN, November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.
98 Another time Gribble remembered that before the mission received visitors: “We…discovered that
there was a very large camp at the south of us.” AN cited in CP, 4 July 1907, p.4.
99 AN, November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.
100 Gribble, Forty Years With the Aborigines, p.63.
was being absorbed into the Gungganydji system of reciprocity and displaying only the generosity expected of him.\textsuperscript{102} Perhaps it had become clear that the missionaries intended to continue their occupancy and the Gungganydji moved to assimilate the newcomers and share their food. The Gungganydji would always be pleased to ‘bandicoot’ mission crops, the responsibility for which was directed at strangers from beyond the mission. “If we made inquiries we were told that the wild blacks had been about and we would even be shown the tracks of ‘wild blacks.’”\textsuperscript{103} Gribble credited himself with the changed circumstances. His specific intention was to eradicate traditional Aboriginal culture, which Gribble regarded as pagan, uncivilised and inferior, and replace it with an approximation of a Eurocentric brand of Christianity, under his absolute authority. To Gribble, Christianity was indistinguishable from European culture - economy, work patterns, attire and home life, language, games and so on, and these he set out to instil.

Menmuny took his giant leap into the political unknown and settled himself at the mission. At some point, his family was pared-down and Christianised (one wife instead of three), “and from that time to the present they have been resident here,”\textsuperscript{104} wrote Gribble. In Menmuny, Gribble had found a translator and ally. The crucial link to Gungganydji was made.\textsuperscript{105} As for taking up at Yarrabah Mission, Menmuny is reported to have said, “New way now. Help missionary.”\textsuperscript{106}

The first Aborigines at Yarrabah Mission, in front of shelter, some with spears, 1892

The interlocutor credited with having brought Gungganydji to Yarrabah is the compelling and illusive Menmuny. Was his ‘new way’ a desperate retreat? A calculated pretence? A practical solution? A betrayal? A shrewd alliance? An ambitious quest to square with the coloniser? An opportunity too good to refuse? None of these? In the iconic First Aborigines photograph, Menmuny stands almost free of European clothing, glowering defiantly at the camera – or is he

\begin{footnotes}
\item[102] Halse, \textit{A Terribly Wild Man}, p.27.
\item[103] AN, November? 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.
\item[104] AN, November? 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.
\item[105] The second group of residents included Menmuny’s brother Dick Yimbungi, his father-in-law Billy Church, his wife Goondoon and her three sons, Halse, \textit{A Terribly Wild Man}, p.28.
\item[106] Halse, \textit{A Terribly Wild Man}, p.28. In the words of his grand-daughter: “Minminiy, John by Christianity, well then John was able to get through to his people, you see, to bring them in…That’s why they took their time because they were watching. Watching to see what was going to happen. They made sure of that and when they saw their leader had already settled down, I think that was time they thought they’d have to follow their leader and settle down too…Maybe otherwise they could have gone away on their own and just carry out in the natural. And then when they knew it was time to move home to the mission they moved home then into the mission.” Lorna Schreiber, cited in Thomson, \textit{Reaching Back}, p.15.
\end{footnotes}
squinting into the sun? Out of the darkness of the gunyah and into the light? Menmuny’s very stance seems to speak an interior monologue. He rests his weight St Sebastian-like on one hip, but unlike St Sebastian, Menmuny is armed and unbound and appears untroubled as he faces not plague-infected arrows, but the future and its unknown dangers. Could Gribble refashion Menmuny into his own Holy Helper? An athleta Christi?

Figure 6.19.
Cairns Historical Society.

To Menmuny the eye returns and it is from Menmuny that the overarching emotional themes of First Aborigines are derived, but the mood of First Aborigines is complex. Billy Woopah and Cubby looks discontented. George Christian and Menmuny are armed, but they are not off to hunt or to battle. George wears an affable grin. By including their weaponry and gunyahs - not mission buildings - Atkinson invites us to view the First Aborigines as rude savages about to leave this life behind for one of Christian virtue. But this is an image of crossed and intersecting purposes as much as transitions. The Gungganydji we see have already absorbed knowledge and experience of wider cultures. They wear improvised loincloths, show no fear of the camera, their Christian names are recorded and a billy can is in their camp (which disappears from other shots taken that same day). Otherwise these strong, healthy looking people, bearing deep
cicatrices diacritical of initiation, give little indication of a significant departure from Gungganydji ways.

There is a predictive aspect to First Aborigines, implying ‘there will be more.’ The cultural transformation is implicit and retrospectively anticipated. It is unlikely that Gribble communicated to the Gungganydji that his vision for their preservation involved their capture and the stripping away of all outward manifestations of Aboriginality. Posed naturalistically and picturesquely before some gunyahs and in a style that combines Atkinson’s bush and studio photography, there is an interesting, if incidental, congruence between Gribble’s plan and Atkinson’s photographic arrangement. The photograph centralises Menmuny. The future ‘monarch’ of Yarrabah anchors First Aborigines - a powerful, muscular core standing squarely to the viewer. He is ‘attended’ by the very properly named George Christian. The two have a loose hold on the equipment of bushlife: spears, a boomerang and a nulla nulla.

More so than rosary beads or crucifixes, the humble ‘billy’ was to the Cairns Post the perfect ideogram of Aboriginal conversion. Some irony attaches then to the co-incidence of chichal-barra (clever man) Woopah, Gribble’s greatest spiritual rival – a dabbler in diablerie according to the missionary – receiving the same name as the purported baptismal item. Gribble mocked Billy Woopah’s supernatural abilities and subjected him to ongoing brutality. In First Aborigines he is reduced to a squat with Cubby. Writing in 1906, Gribble meditated upon another photograph featuring Woopah, to denounce the reputation of his now-deceased rival:

> Upon my table as I write there stands a picture of a group of the members of the Mission some thirty in number. The children of the group are now married men and women of the Mission and have spent most of their lives here never left since their arrival in 1892. Conspicuous among them stands a man named ‘Woopah,’…he died three years ago.

Gribble did not mourn Woopah’s passing – far from it. According to Gribble, Woopah was a murderer, a wife beater and a “thorough scoundrel,” whose opposition to white intrusion generally and Yarrabah’s aims in particular, caused “much trouble to the mission in the early days.” But to Gribble’s chagrin, “all were afraid of him and always treated him with a marked

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107 The old women of the camp and in particular Menmuny’s mother also proved a determined challenge to Gribble’s authority. Menmuny’s mother “had a great objection to the mission, holding that we would make the young folk ‘too much like white fella.’ This poor old soul was frequently seeing visions and dreaming dreams, and frequently conversed with the dead, from whom she from time to time received new songs for the use of the tribe. [Menmuny] held her in dread, having great belief in her powers…her death was a blessing for the Mission.” Ernest Gribble cited in Halse, A Terribly Wild Man, p.30.

108 Gribble, AN, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.
deference and respect,"¹⁰⁹ that is, until he was publicly humiliated by Gribble and left the mission for a time. Missionaries claimed powers similar to Aboriginal clever men and Menmuny had seen the power of Gribble’s medicine. In the First Aborigines photograph, Menmuny’s infant daughter Ballawoorba, cradled by her brother Albert Maywe¹¹⁰ was saved by Gribble’s medicine when a traditional remedy had failed – and for which Menmuny became indebted to Gribble.¹¹¹

Figure 6.20. The image above, taken in the early 1890s by an unknown photographer seems to be the photograph to which Gribble referred. Menmuny scowls from the far left, while his three wives, Maggie 1, Maggie 2 and Nora sit next to him. Gribble and Mr Reeves at rear, stand in charge. The man third from the viewer’s right appears to be the emasculated Billy Woopah. Cairns Historical Society.

As well as undermining traditional authority, Gribble intended to disrupt Gungganydji kinship rules which he found abhorrent. There are no women in First Aborigines. Is Atkinson telling us that men are the makers of history? This was after all the reason for his visit. But there are children present. Aboriginal children accompanied adults almost everywhere, to observe and to

¹⁰⁹ Gribble, AN, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.  
¹¹⁰ Albert Maywe was the future King Albert of Yarrabah.  
¹¹¹ Halse, A Terribly Wild Man, p.147.
learn through participation. The future of the mission was children. Gribble accurately predicted that he would struggle to convert elders and so he directed his efforts towards the children.  

Mission accomplished

Looking back, Gribble wrote, “On Dec. 12th 1892, all the blacks came into the settlement.” In actual fact, until about 1910 there were two distinct strands of community life on the Yarrabah peninsula, those of the mission and its outstations, and the traditionally-oriented beach camp, the setting for *First Aborigines* and from which most of Yarrabah’s initial population had come. The older Gungganydji in particular continued to avoid the mission altogether while others participated in mission life as they saw fit. While Gribble made it increasingly difficult for

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112 Prior to Yarrabah, Aborigines around Cairns already believed that missionaries stole children. When embarking upon the first land clearing, J.B. Gribble had identified the common method by which to bring about deculturation, proposing “to gather about a dozen young boys to begin with and to teach and train them carefully working from the children to the elders and endeavouring by degrees to influence them for good.” *CP*, 10 September 1892, p.3.

113 *MP*, 4 July 1907, p.4.

114 Despite escalating pressures, the Gungganydji did not abandon traditional life in their own country. They were attracted to Gribble’s food, tobacco, the trappings of European clothing, accommodation, medical care, to gain a type of prestige, to escape tribal obligations or circumvent tribal restrictions such
them to do so, the camp served as a crucial repository of Gungganydji tradition, making it possible for mission dwellers to continue to participate in ceremony. Its population fluctuated over the years, growing to several hundred at times with Aboriginal movements through the area. The early hostility to the mission dissipated and things began to follow a routine. In a letter from 1893 Gribble counted twenty children attending the school and 50 or 60 people occupying the beach camp, adding:

Johnny also attends the school, he is a fine fellow... [He] looks after the children, taking them to camp after evening prayers and bringing them back again just after daylight in the morning... The children will never leave us now. The mothers and fathers are quite content to go away and leave them in Johnny’s care.

By 1910, an estimated 60 of the 300 people at Yarrabah were Gungganydji and the Rector Alfred Burton was surprised to find that the beach camp had become a retirement home for a dying race. He reported “a small camp in the bush not far from headquarters where seven poor old women were comfortably camped in two huts erected by the erstwhile king of Yarrabah, an old fellow who appeared content to reign over this ancient remnant, and to do it with dignity and fatherly care.” A “quaint notice...was pinned up in the church,” the visitor wrote: “King John, native head of the tribe and acknowledged head of the mission - as long as his conduct was good.”

While their relationship was unequal, it was patent that Menmuny and Gribble enjoyed each other’s company. “Many were the journeys we made together by boat and many were the exciting experiences we had together,” Gribble would later recall. In practice, Gribble relied more heavily and seems to have formed a closer bond with fellow missionary Willie Ambryn, a Pacific Islander, but gave emphasis to the role played by Menmuny. “John has been a very faithful adherent of the Mission and in those days of hardship and trial he gave...”

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as those concerned with marriage, and to receive the rudiments of a European education. The Gungganydji may have mistakenly believed that these attributes would enable them to engage with Europeans in the wider world on equal terms. Neville Green’s estimation of another of Gribble’s missions in Western Australia is equally applicable to Yarrabah: “Neither acculturation...nor assimilation...was attained or attempted...Gribble was not preparing people for a world beyond the mission...If anything, the reverse was the common policy which, by its very nature, fostered inmate dependence on the mission.” Neville Green, ‘The Mission as a Total Institution,’ Lectures on North Queensland History No.5, James Cook University, 1996, p. 200-201.

115 Smith, Like a Watered Garden, pp.130-131.
116 Letter from Gribble junior to Gribble senior, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.
118 Gribble Collected Papers, newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.
119 Gribble Collected Papers, newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.
120 Menmuny ferried Gribble into Cairns regularly, but more often the boat was used as a fishing vessel crewed by Menmuny, George, Pompo and Willie Ambryn.
121 In his notes, Gribble customarily referred to Ambryn as: “Willie Ambryn (S.S.I.)”
much help.” Receiving a Christian name from Gribble created a kinship link and a corresponding link was created when Gribble was dubbed Dadda Gribble. A leader, Menmuny was perceptive enough to recognise an opportunity and courageous enough to act on his people’s behalf, to augment, not surrender traditional life on Gungganydji land. His ability to adapt within Gribble’s theocratic regime was remarkable. While Menmuny may not have been part of the Gungganydji leadership group prior to the establishment of Yarrabah mission, under Gribble’s patronage he became captain of the Yarrabah boat and was anointed ‘King John of Yarrabah.’ In return, Menmuny gave up two of his wives and helped Gribble track down promised wives that were taken from the mission.

Figure 6.22. JOL image no.31350.

Gribble’s interior monologue: inside St Alban’s church. Gribble made the case that protection from rapacious settlers was the necessary first step to preserving a doomed remnant and exclusion from white settlement the second. The motto of Yarrabah’s newspaper, The Aboriginal News was “Lift up thy prayer for the remnant that is left.” The phrase was also painted across the sanctuary of St Alban’s church for the contemplation of the Aboriginal congregation assembled before it daily. “Lift up thy prayer for the remnant that is left” was said to have been coined by J.B. Gribble at the first Christian service conducted at Yarrabah and reused at his funeral not long after.

122 Gribble, AN, November 1906, QSA, SRS 5356/1/101
123 Smith, Like a Watered Garden, p.135.
124 QSA SRS 5356/1/101.
125 TT, Gribble Collected Papers, newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

The stated aims of Yarrabah Mission were: “1. The evangelisation and elevation of the Aboriginals by the preaching of the Gospel and teaching them habits of industry. 2. It is believed that this can be done by:-
In 1905, the “Rev E.R. Gribble gave a short history of the Mission” to the *Morning Post*, explaining that “the Government’s every experiment” had proven “a failure, while Yarrabah was a success.” For the financial well-being of Yarrabah (and perhaps for his own sake), it was vital to create pictures of mission success. Gribble expended no little energy promoting a successful image in interviews, Yarrabah’s own *Aboriginal News* and in subscription-raising lecture tours far away, illustrated with photographic proofs. “The photographs that I took when I visited you,” wrote the Rev. R.T. Gardner to the people of Yarrabah, “have been made into lantern slides and so I have been able to show many people…who like me thank God you are all trying so hard to learn your lessons and to do your work and to serve God as well as love your neighbour.” Others were impressed with Gribble’s work. The missionary collected their words in a scrapbook. The “very fact” wrote one, of Gribble using “his influence in civilising cannibals proves him to be unselfish for his own welfare and sincere.” In a clipping from 1899, F.G. Foxton called Yarrabah “the most successful of all the missions visited by him on his northern tour.” In another, the *Trinity Times* said that “far less meritorious work has been trumpeted abroad and the world called to see it.” In yet another, the *Morning Post* declared that “Rev E.R. Gribble has raised to himself in Yarrabah a monument of fame which will remain for all time.” It continued:

[The] whole of the North knows that it is to his self-sacrifice and almost superhuman labour that Yarrabah is the model Aboriginal station in Australia today…Mr. Gribble has starved himself in order that he might carry out his great scheme of the regeneration of the aborigines… his sterling work is admired by all men and women in North Queensland the primal and final cause of the success of the mission.

In 1907 a contributor to the *Morning Post* wrote:

[To] look at Yarrabah today with its green lawns, flower gardens, fruit trees, plantations and its happy well-ordered community no-one would realise the scenes that took place in the early days of the Mission…We who have been here from the beginning have seen

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(a) Gathering them into communities surrounding them with Christian influence and protecting them from evils too often associated with European service, (b) By getting them to take an interest in themselves as a people, and cultivating self-respect.” *AN*, April-May-June 1907, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.

126 Although the *Morning Post* which commenced publication in 1895 later claimed the moniker *Cairns Post*, it was a very different newspaper to the original *Cairns Post* which had ceased production in 1893. *MP*, 13 September 1903, p.2.

127 *AN*, November 1906, QSA, SRS 5356/1/101.

128 Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

129 *CDT*, 13 October 1899, p.2.

130 Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.

131 *MP*, 18 January 1907, p.2.
many wonderful changes.

This image was contrasted with a picture of pre-mission savagery:

[The] beach where the Mission jetty now stands [was once] strewn with broken shields and spears…the Mission store [was the scene of ] aboriginal burial rites…The Cape Grafton tribe were inveterate cannibals…three old Aboriginal men were killed at what is now known as Leper Bay…cut up on the beach…cooked and eaten.133

And the culprit? “The man who organised the whole business is the present King of Yarrabah…our kindly intelligent King John.”134 Menmuny was crucial to the power structure of Yarrabah, but he was of no less importance as a symbol. As the leading example of Aboriginal Christian redemption, “the famous ‘King John’” was central to the myth.135 Many were taken with the redemption of the inveterate cannibal Menmuny. “Ten years ago the King of Yarrabah was a wild savage with three wives.” wrote J. Cumming. “He is now a Christian with one wife and lives a constant life.”136 Gribble enthusiastically spun blood-curdling tales of ‘cannibal feasts,’ and placed a human thigh bone, which he had retrieved from a burial tree, in the Mission museum, as “witness to the indisputable fact that the people of these parts were once cannibals.”137

The Bishop of Carpentaria proclaimed Yarrabah to be “one of the most remarkable instances of successful mission work in modern times.”

Before Mr. Gribble began his work the blacks were living as savages; now they were leading sober, respectable lives in houses erected by themselves, and kept scrupulously clean. They worked year in year out to support themselves and families.

Raising the possibility that savagedom was not ‘bred in the bones’ after all, the Bishop added, “there appears to be no tendency to break back into savagedom.”138

133 MP, 24 April 1907, p.4.
134 Ibid.
136 J. Cumming, The Story of my Trip to Queensland, A.N. Wallace, Sturrock st., 1903, p.73
137 Gribble, AN, 21 November 1906, QSA, SRS 5356/1/101.
138 MP, 26 October 1900, p.3.
Figure 6.23. King John: appearing older, wiser and peacefully composed as he fishes the 'old way' in his homeland, dressed in a pair of mission strides. A veteran, Menmuny could look back upon the cataclysmic clash of traditional and historical pasts that in one generation drove the Bama to the brink. From his unique position however, Menmuny looked forward. Displaying Gungganydji leadership founded on knowledge and reciprocal relationships between people and country, Menmuny squarely faced the challenges of his time.

Cairns Historical Society.

Conclusion

In researching the early development of Yarrabah Mission, one is first faced with what appears to be a baffling quagmire of contradictions among the sources, adding to the intrigue of the *First Aborigines* photograph. A cacophony of opinions surrounding the image, from the contemporary press, settlers, scientific theorists, politicians, humanists and religious groups, and from those who have later picked up their stories. Ernest Gribble’s contribution to the historical record is especially problematic as his versions of events have been privileged and his position at the centre of the enterprise meant that for a long time his recollections went largely unquestioned. While Yarrabah was called a success, commentaries generated within the mission or by its sympathisers venerated Gribble. Some oral accounts are similarly generous to Gribble,
while others provide scathing recollections of the mission’s operation, if not Gribble himself. Yet Gribble was an unreliable witness with a tendency to exaggerate or misrepresent events.139

First Aborigines at Yarrabah Mission, in front of shelters, some with spears, 1892 sustains many meanings, the most obvious being the rapid, profound and frequently painful cultural change that was coming about within the Aboriginal communities of Cairns. First Aborigines was captured during a key period of negotiation between and within Gungganydji people, mission enterprise, the colonial project, and what might now be called popular culture and public relations within the Cairns district. The subjects of First Aborigines were to experience an acceleration of this change at Yarrabah Mission which, with the exception of the children, seems to have been to some extent self-directed. Curiously enough, the beach camp in which they stand came to represent Gungganydji cultural continuity rather than change. The standard usage of First Aborigines has, inadvertently or otherwise, blurred artefact and artifice. To the mission, the symbolic importance of the photograph was its use as a piece of evidence for Christian transformational uplift - a ‘before picture,’ the ‘kind of material operated upon.’ With remnant preservation, this formed the mainstay of the mission’s raison d’être. An image such as First Aborigines indicated Gribble’s effective communication with cannibal savages, contrary to popular opinion, Gribble did indeed ‘know the blacks.’ The first usage proves Gribble’s success as a communicator, the second as an administrator. Once Yarrabah Mission had put down roots in the country, with local recruits, the image could be used to reminisce about the journey travelled.

139 For instance, in Gribble’s usual telling, the beach camp materialises after the rice banquet, implying that the missionary had certain powers of persuasion with regard to the Gungganydji. However, he did once allow that the missionaries had been oblivious to the presence of the beach camp until they were introduced to it, before the rice banquet. The latter version suggests Gungganydji initiative, not Gribble’s entreaties to have been responsible for the establishment of the beach camp. MP, 4 July 1907, p.4.
Chapter 7
Blurred visions

Figure 7.1. A Gribble scribble? And of what significance?
E.R. Gribble Journals, 9 July 1904, AIATSIS, MS1515/1.

Introduction

The *Morning Post* saw itself and those with whom it shared the Cairns district as inhabitants of an “infinite Universe whose implacable laws are around us like a chain.”¹ The domination of women by men and weaker races by those which were stronger were included among the links of the *Post’s* metaphorical chain, against which strained reformers, remnant preservers, Aboriginal protectors and others. By the 1890s, Aboriginal people living near Cairns were seeking new ways to survive amid the destruction of traditional life. In 1897, Queensland

¹ *MP*, 19 August 1897, p.2.
legislated its response to the ‘Aboriginal problem’ and moved into the era of Aboriginal Protection. Leaving little room for the pursuit of Aboriginal objectives, controls on Aboriginal people were tightened. The work begun at Yarrabah entered a new phase as the ‘schemes for the blacks’ coterie stepped up its campaign against settlers claiming rights to Aboriginal labour and a free hand in its usage. This was to no small degree a European battle over the sexuality of Aboriginal women (as it was understood), between those who wished to control and contain it to protect ‘helpless’ Aboriginal women from themselves, to engineer an Aboriginal revival and to quarantine the supposed racial purity of the Australian nation, pitted against those who sought the domestic and sexual servitude of Aboriginal women. Photographers from this period continued their efforts to define and respond to Aboriginality through ethnographic documentation of traditional Aboriginal life and with a slippage, or so it was thought, towards lewdness when photographing Aboriginal women.

On the sexual frontier: free agents, concubines, kombos, and half-castes

In the early 1900s, newspaper editors in north Queensland were given to reminiscence about the frontier years, now past, brimming with admiration for the dynamic and uncompromising white man. Hinting at masculine sexual power as a driver of progress, the editor of the Record maintained:

> The distinctive attribute of a new country peopled by the Anglo-Saxon race is virility. For successful colonisation, and the onward march, manhood in its most vigorous condition is absolutely necessary. There has to be a combination of energy, brains and courage – energy to subdue, brains to direct and courage to conquer.²

Being the most exposed to the hardening race logic and the tyrannical tendencies of some, the misuse of colonial power could be devastating to Aboriginal women. As Broome has stated, “Quite a number of Europeans on the frontier, especially in the violent initial phase, simply took Aboriginal women in relations not of agreement or care, but of force, violence and rape.”³ In the struggle for their own survival and that of their kin, finding a way to control European behaviour represented the greatest challenge faced by Aboriginal women. While the gender balance tipped heavily in disproportion towards men, opportunity for Aboriginal women lay in

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² PDMR, 4 September 1901, p.2.
the great demand for female sexual partners and domestic workers. In recognition of this, “Aboriginal women offered themselves to the Europeans or were offered by their husbands.”

This was not however:

a relationship of prostitution in the eyes of the Aborigines, despite the fact that this was how the Europeans saw it. The Aborigines believed that they were establishing kinship and reciprocal ties in a traditional way...creating friendliness, obligations and thus repayments between kin, or establishing good relations between groups in potential conflict.

Where Aboriginal women became more regular companions for white men, Frances has argued: “It was also, no doubt, sometimes a matter of personal preference on the part of Aboriginal women, who welcomed the novelty the white men provided and perhaps also wished to cast in their lot with the ascendant power in the region.” But the sexual behaviour of Aboriginal women could expose them to further dangers, often became a source of interracial conflict and was poorly understood by white society. As Cairnsites’ attitudes to prostitution show, a dividing line was drawn between women who were respectable and women who were not. By Victorian moral standards, the marital prospects of respectable women (but not men) depended upon them refraining from pre-marital sex. Within marriage, curtailing sexual activity was used to control fertility. Men (but not women) were regarded as having base natures and strong sexual urges for which some leniency was granted to pursue women who were not respectable. The lissom nakedness of Aboriginal ‘Eves’ tantalised the imaginations of colonial men, from whose perspective female ‘immodesty’ signalled sexual availability. For their lack of sexual conservatism, Europeans tended to view all Aboriginal women as the embodiment of moral failure, as fallen. First cast as ‘wild nymphets,’ Aboriginal women became ‘brazen harlots’ in the minds of contemptuous colonists. Compelled into transacting sex to survive, Aboriginal women were stuck with an image of universal whoredom to which Europeans responded with moral disgust, paternalistic humanitarian fears for their well-being and concerns for the future of the Australian nation.

Aboriginal women frequently took up with, or were claimed by white men, but serious dangers could come with these arrangements. In 1892 “a Good Samaritan” found an abandoned Aboriginal woman, lying in agony with her leg shattered. The injured woman related: “Me belong Yorky. He got eight fellow jins and want to kill me because I sick.” ‘Yorky’ was the
popular Cairns identity George ‘Yorkey’ Lawson, a white fisherman who operated around the northern beaches of Trinity Bay (near present day Yorkys Knob), and who was said to be the father of George Christian. Men who engaged in relationships with Aboriginal women, or ‘kombos’ as they were known, defied the law and drew the ire of the white community. Whether prompted by theories of race or realities of colonial power, consent was considered to be uncertain. In 1900 Gribble wrote to Dr Walter Roth, the Northern Aboriginal Protector, complaining about the presence of timber gatherers on the Yarrabah peninsula, or more specifically, the transactions of sex, food and tobacco Gribble suspected to be taking place between the timber gatherers and Gungganydji women off the mission. Such ‘immorality’ was to Gribble, “deplorable to our community.” A non-Aboriginal man living with an Aboriginal woman was considered to be ‘harbouring’ and risked legal penalties. Near Ingham in 1900, two European men were charged with cohabiting with Aboriginal women in relationships which reformed despite police breaking them up. To the Morning Post, their deviation was cultural rather than legal. It issued a warning to readers engaged in such domestic arrangements with a column entitled: “To Those Whom it May Concern: A Tip to the Depraved.” The Post’s definition of depravity was the white man “whose inclinations are towards those of the female Queensland aboriginal.”

A particular difficulty arose from the fact that unlike Japanese prostitutes, Aboriginal women brought mixed-descent babies into the world. Early contact between Aboriginal people and Europeans was marked by ethnocentrism. By the end of the nineteenth century a sense of European racial superiority had taken over, flourishing in a ferment of inter-cultural misunderstanding, sustained by a growing body of race theory, not helped by a deficit of sympathy and a surfeit of contemporary myth-making in which the pioneer was pitted against the savage, and all of which rationalised Aboriginal dispossession and decline as the workings of a higher law. In a society increasingly beholden to racial ideology, convinced that in whiteness lay greatness and that in ‘admixture’ lay relegation down the racial hierarchy, the main danger posed by mixed-race relationships was miscegenation. In the White Australian consciousness of Parry-Oakeden, the children of mixed race parents, or the “offspring resulting

an old fellow who had no less than six wives. The old fellow had in a rage broken this poor creature’s leg… I found her with her leg broken again at the same place her husband had given her a kick which had again fractured the newly knit bone.” AN, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101. It was not a white woman but Gribble himself who played the Good Samaritan in the missionary’s version of the story. Gribble seemed to assume, furthermore, that an Aboriginal man had committed the assaults.

8 CP, 10 January 1910, p.2.
9 Letter from Gribble to Roth, 14 July 1900, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.
10 MP, 10 March 1900, p.3.
11 Ibid.
12 Broome, Aboriginal Australians, pp.92-97.
from such intercourse are, I think, by no means a desirable addition to the population.” Those who sought to regulate such aberrations including Gribble, Roth and Meston, were unable to accept that mixed relationships were formed on any basis other than the amoral opportunism of all parties. Meston argued:

This marriage of white men and aboriginal women requires emphatic discouragement. Such marriages are degrading and mean and also increase the half-castes, a result to be earnestly avoided. White women of decent character are not scarce in Queensland and the white man who cannot induce a white woman to marry him is not fitted to be the father of half-caste or any other children.

The *North Queensland Herald* lamented the “evil of miscegenation,” claiming that “Nature punishes rebellion against her sexual laws” and that “nothing but harm can result to both races from an intercourse which is in popular opinion both discreditable and degrading.” Despite this, children of mixed-descent were everywhere around Trinity Bay, according to Roth, because “the general morality of the settlers etc. in these far districts is at so low an ebb.” Members of the white community attached deep shame to the birth of children from relationships that did not conform to European conventions of matrimony, including conventions of racial pairing. For Aboriginal people, race seems to have had lesser importance than the challenge of totemic incorporation for the children of mixed descent, but to most Europeans, babies born to Aboriginal mothers and non-Aboriginal fathers were not simply descended, as we all are, from two parents, but fundamentally, biologically mismatched between a higher and lower race and dysgenically half-caste. In other colonies, fear of miscegenation had led to policies designed to soak up half-castes in the broader Australian population while the doomed full-blood Aboriginal remnant died out on the missions and reserves.

**The Act – and other acts**

The Aboriginals’ Protection Act and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (1897 and 1901), better known as ‘the Act,’ signalled a new era of race relations: the era of Aboriginal Protection.

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13 W. Parry-Oakeden, 4 September 1901, QSA 15038/1/27.
14 A. Meston letter to the Under Secretary, Home Office, 12 September 1902, QSA PRV 10729/1/41.
15 *NQH*, 31 May 1910.
16 *MP*, 10 February 1903, p.3.
The title of the Act suggested a race being hastened into decline not by European colonisation, but by ‘oriental vices,’ and while the Act clearly sought to satisfy a number of Anglo-Australian concerns, it was certainly prompted by an endemic situation of Aboriginal destitution, substance abuse, sexual and economic exploitation. Its consequences included the intensification of governmental controls which systematically contracted the citizenship rights and freedoms of Aboriginal people. The *Brisbane Courier* recognised the infantilism and criminalisation of Aboriginality inherent in the policy response to the ‘Aboriginal problem,’ and thought that its effect was to treat even adult Aboriginal people as “little better than children…But then we do not treat children as criminals.” With prescience, the *Courier* hoped that Aboriginal people would “not find in protection something to stir up feelings of more intense bitterness against those who seek to help them.”

Figure 7.2. Supreme confidence and quiet confidence? Southern Aboriginal Protector Archibald Meston, left and Northern Aboriginal Protector Dr Walter Roth right, pose for a studio portrait. JOL 187178, from the *Queenslander*, 19 October 1901.

The Act was suffused with racial anxieties and scientific theories of race. Aboriginal Protectors monitored the marriages and employment of Aboriginal people, the second to the great irritation of employers and the press of the north, and the state-sanctioned removal of children. A memo

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17 *BC*, 16 November 1897.
from the Chief Protectors Office in Brisbane explained: “Queensland has passed special legislation for the care, protection and amelioration of the native race.”

Except where already in service under proper agreement, all full-blooded and half-caste children, especially the girls are gradually being drafted into the mission stations…every child of an aboriginal woman being a neglected child under the Reformatories Act.

Figure 7.3. Postcard, 1890s: Bama mothers and their infants. Europeans were intensely anxious about Aboriginal children with any degree of white descent being raised with their Aboriginal families, preferring that they be socialised as a low class of orphaned Europeans.

Most observers believed that history would forgive the removal of Aboriginal children: “Humanity may well excuse the detention of the child in the interests of its upbringing and [separation] from the opportunities of vice,” suggested a correspondent to the Morning Post.

The editor of the Post reflected with satisfaction upon a comparable situation in New South Wales and efforts there to gather up the “large number of half-castes and other children, some of whom are almost white at the various stations and camps…to train the girls in domestic duties [and] proper spheres of usefulness.” As useful labour, Aboriginal children had often

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18 Memo from the office of the Chief Protector of Aboriginals, 17 May 1904, QSA RSI 14962/1/1.
19 Ibid.
20 John Hill, letter to the MP, 18 July 1905, p.3.
21 MP, 26 August 1908, p.5.
been stolen by native police and colonists and transacted among the settlers of Trinity Bay, to be reared as household help. Common consent was given to the view that Aboriginal children were legitimately a resource to be used by Europeans as they saw fit. These forced orphans were raised it was said “as a part of the family.” In his role as Protector, Roth instigated the removal of children from Aboriginal mothers, but was concerned by the prevalence of Aboriginal child labour in the north. He viewed “with some anxiety the increased tendency to take the young women away from their natural associations…and make them the domestic servants of the white people.”

Roth was particularly concerned with the exposure of these girls to sexual abuse, writing “it is my conviction that the little half-caste female is especially sought for destruction.”

The stories of Aboriginal people from this period are scarred with the pitilessness engendered by Europeans’ sense of racial superiority. In 1902, Roth received a letter from a former domestic servant of Anglo-Australians, begging for the return of her child. Alberta Mossman had been taken from her own people and raised by the North family as their servant. When she became pregnant to Mr. North, she was exiled to a mission. In a moving four page letter, she told her story to Roth: “I was never a bad girl [but] I disgraced myself having a child to Mr. W.R. North Esq. Then after the trouble he got me in he left me to do as best I could.” An unnamed man proposed to marry Alberta, but the marriage was refused by Southern Protector Meston. Instead, Alberta and her infant son George were sent to Fraser Island. Here she met, and with Gribble’s permission married, Nobel Mossman, “a good man.” Domestic stability was not to be found at Fraser Island however. Alberta quarrelled with an official, “said things [she] oughtn’t to have said,” and found herself and her family again cast adrift. They obtained employment “for tucker only” in Rockhampton, before Gribble ordered George to be brought to Yarrabah.

Gribble met Alberta, Nobel and George in Cairns and rode the oil launch with them across Trinity Bay to the mission. As they approached Yarrabah, Gribble launched a stinging rebuke upon Alberta, “saying that I disgrace the [Fraser Island] mission…he also gave orders to the boys to pull me about, and little boy too [and] gave one of his servants orders to search my bag,” whereupon Gribble “got all my letters and read them.” For reasons not given, George remained at Yarrabah, but Alberta and Nobel did not. Alberta implored Roth that they not have to return: “We don’t wish to go back to the mission any more...please don’t let us go back” and begged for the release of her child. “I want George to be brought over to me from Yarrabah”

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22 *Queenslander*, 29 July 1905.
23 *MP*, 10 February 1903, p.3.
24 Letter to Roth from Alberta Mossman, QSA SRS 4356/1/54.
Alberta implored, “please…bring my child over to me now Sir…I am not strong and…fret a lot over the child.”

I was unable to locate a response from Roth, but his general position was, as he told the Morning Post, that:

we are working on correct lines in dealing with the transfer of half-caste and full-blooded children…If left to themselves, the majority of the girl half-castes eventually become prostitutes and the boys cattle and horse thieves.26

Pombo

Figure 7.4. Pompo Katchewan seated on the grass with the Swallow family and Hambledon domestic staff 1889.
Photograph: James Handley, JOL image no. 171012.

The trajectory of Pompo Katchewan through colonial society illustrates the curtailed freedoms of Aboriginal people, children in particular. The Yarrabah stalwart, assistant to Gribble and

25 ibid.
26 MP, 10 February 1903, p.3.
bugler of repute, Pompo was in today’s terminology a stolen child. In the late 1870s, and with his usual cavalier attitude to dealings with Aboriginal people, Christie Palmerston had snatched an infant in the rainforest north of Cairns, as cassowary chicks were snatched for pets. Palmerston renamed the child ‘Pompo’ and presented him as a gift to the Swallow family at Hambledon. If the Swallows felt any misgivings about this, they did not find their way into the historical record. With the demise of Hambledon in the 1890s, Pompo was relocated to Yarrabah to work closely with Gribble, where he married a young woman named Jinny. Pompo may have come to regret his association with the Gribble family. According to Halse, after a fleeting and quite possibly coercive encounter with Gribble’s younger brother Bert, Jinny Katchewan became pregnant and later gave birth to a mixed-descent child. Bert Gribble was exiled from Yarrabah. Pompo’s reaction is not known.

**Jeannie**

The pillar-to-post story of Jeannie Forbes, formerly Jeannie Brown, later Janie Clarke, is also indicative of the cruelty and callous disregard practised against many children of Aboriginal or part-Aboriginal descent, the gulf between moral rhetoric and sexual practice, but also the concerns of some at the injustice of this. Born to an Aboriginal mother and European father near Mareeba about 1887, the child Jeannie was abducted from her kin and shunted into the domestic service of the Patience family in Townsville who in time grew weary of her, or as Thomas Givens told the Queensland Parliament, “a little half cast girl was got by a man named Vallely, who gave her to a lady [who later] professed to find her incorrigible.” Jeannie had not wanted to leave her adopted home, so “a pious fraud was perpetrated.” Jeannie was told she was being sent to join her mother in Sydney, but was instead sent to Cairns and given to the Forbes family, with the advice that they might send Jeannie to Yarrabah “if they wanted to get rid of her.”

Over the course of the next three years however, Jeannie “blossomed satisfactorily and turned out a useful child…very much attached to Mrs’ Forbes and family.” Scarcely more than a child herself, Jeannie was said to have “developed into a devoted servant of the children and a handy little household help.” The “new proprietors or custodians had become fond of the child,” at

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28 *MP*, 1 January 1901, p.3.
29 *MP*, 25 September 1900, p.3.
which point, Mrs. Patience decided she wanted Jeannie back, but was refused. Roth learned of the dispute and made a personal visit to the Forbes family in Cairns where he ordered Jeannie’s arrest as a neglected child, “by virtue of the simple fact that she was the half-caste offspring of an Aboriginal mother.” Mr. Forbes steadfastly refused to relinquish Jeannie and “absolutely forbade [the police] from kid-napping or body snatching the youngster.” A telegram from the Customs Office changed Forbes’ mind.31

Jeannie protested emphatically, but finally left amid the sobs and wrath of the entire Forbes household…and said clearly that she did not want to go to the Aboriginal Mission Station, neither did she want to go to Mrs’ Patience, but wanted to stop with Mrs. Forbes.32

Queensland Parliament was told that Mrs. Forbes had proposed “to rear the child as her own daughter” and that if Jeannie was to be returned to the Patience family, “she would probably become a slave.” The Home Secretary impatiently “regretted that the time of the Committee should be taken up with matters of this sort [and that if] anybody was entitled to the ownership of the aboriginal Children it was the Crown.” Jeannie was sent to Yarrabah.33

The Morning Post thought Roth’s handling of Jeannie’s case “far from creditable” but its empathy was incomplete. It argued that the Protector ought to have exercised:

wiser discretion in the matter of half, three-quarter or full-blooded ‘myalls.’ [Jeannie] was a hundred times better off with Mrs. Forbes than herding with the half-civilised niggers at the mission station.34

After a challenge from the Cairns Argus, the Post launched a salvo at its competitor: “We admit that the Argus has a big claim on the nursery department at Yarrabah,” then proceeded to slightly modify its position regarding Jeannie from one of respect owing to ‘whiteness,’ even in degrees, to the question of personal liberty, a right which the serially uprooted Jeannie can barely have imagined herself to have possessed. “The old rum-deluded Argus,” chided the Post:

states that our remarks were positively awful, libellous and all sorts of things…Our

31 MP, 1 January 1901, p.3.
32 MP, 25 September 1900, p.3.
33 MP, 1 January 1901, p.3.
34 MP, 25 September 1900, p.3.
contention was that the girl’s liberty was violated and that she should not have been removed even to Windsor Castle unless with her freely given consent.35

At Yarrabah, Jeannie was taken into the Gribble household, as housekeeper and nanny to Ernest and Amelia and their three boys, just as Gribble’s marriage was crumbling. Gribble became smitten with Jeannie and rumours about a relationship between the two began to spread. The Cairns press got wind of improper dealings between the missionary and his domestic servant, sparking insinuations that Gribble “made immoral use of mission women.”36 Queensland Parliament was told that “although white people were excluded from the mission station, half-caste children were still born there,” and that while Gribble “could not be blamed for all that went on there,” the subject “was one which wanted a good deal of explanation.”37 In 1902 Gribble wrote in his journal: “Took Jeannie Brown” into Cairns. “Find that one of the local papers has again attacked us but statements are false of course.”38 Amelia left Ernest, taking their boys and Jeannie away to Sydney, then Brisbane.39

“Dear Old Dadda,” Jeannie had written from Sydney:

I am writing in the place of poor Mamma. The place seems so lonely, [but] we have to put up with these things [and] you must not trouble about us. We will be alright and we must put our trust in God. We are waiting for a letter from home it has been two weeks since we have had one from you Dear Daddy…I remain your true little girl Jeannie.40

In 1906, Jeannie was sent back to Yarrabah whereupon she re-entered Gribble’s domestic sphere. Guilt-stricken and distraught, Gribble attempted to cauterise the resurgent relationship. In 1907 he married Jeannie to Roth’s former Aboriginal domestic servant and cabin boy Willie Clarke. Willie otherwise continued his preferred relationship with Yarrabah Senior Girl of 1908 Ada Pickles, and according to Halse, the marriage made no appreciable difference to the relationship between Ernest and Jeannie either. In September 1908, Jeannie gave birth to Gribble’s (unacknowledged), blue-eyed, half-caste daughter Nola.41

35 MP, 13 November 1900, p.2.
36 Halse, A Terribly Wild Man, p.85.
37 Thomas Givens, MP, 1 January 1901, p.3.
38 Gribble’s journal, 5 November 1902, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/2.
40 Letter from Jeannie Brown, AN, May 1906, QSA, SRS5356/1/101.
41 Halse, A Terribly Wild Man, p.86.
Full-bloods, half-castes, quadroons, octoroos and Gribble

Among the scientific facts accepted by Europeans of the Cairns district were a hierarchy of races and fixed biological difference, evident through skin colour and comportment. As a consequence, one’s racial delineation steered one’s destiny. A nearly-white child had the potential to be partially reclaimed by white society; a nearly-black child could not. Anglo-Australians of Trinity Bay were acutely conscious of subtle degrees of ‘non-whiteness’ from which social standing was determined, but it was an imprecise science, reliant on the perceptions of the beholder. Everyone was an expert. The Cairns Police Magistrate P.G. Grant lacked confidence in Gribble’s ability to accurately perceive degrees of race. After visiting Yarrabah, Grant fumed that it was “a painful sight to see almost white children [at the mission] brought up on the same level as blacks.”42 Gribble on the other hand, was not convinced that the Cairns police had any greater expertise in making such determinations. On one occasion Gribble wrote to Roth:

Cairns police have handed over to me a little boy of about four…Such a child should without a doubt be sent to a orphanage and brought up as a white child [I describe] him as octoroon…and write asking that for his own sake he be sent to an orphanage.43

Allotting a place for these mixed-descent children was not easy. They were, according to the North Queensland Herald, “unpleasant problems raised by human nature…the products of promiscuous intercourse between blacks and white.” But these people were not simply unpleasant problems for white society; they were tragic, comic and hideous. In their presence, only the “earnest and steady-minded…neither laugh nor cry” claimed the Herald.44 Grant too gravely mourned for the mixed descent child who:

opens its eyes in a world wherein there is no haven of refuge save that which love and sacrifice has provided for them, in institutions like Yarrabah…The mission provides shelter and teaching for all those unfortunates, whatever their colour, half caste or quadroon.45

42 Letter from Cairns’ Police Magistrate P.G. Grant to the Under Secretary, Brisbane, 12 March 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.
43 Letter from Gribble to Roth, 30 May 1901, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.
44 *NQH*, 31 May 1910.
45 Lancelot E. Ferris, letter to the Under Secretary, Home Office, Brisbane, 17 August 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.
There is no doubting the strength of Anglo-Australians’ belief that half-caste children represented genetic debasement of the worst possible kind. Freakish and spurned, those of mixed-descent needed to be isolated from the mainstream, both for their own good and for that of the community, so that Cairnsites need not gaze upon the grim spectacle of their very existence. Choking back tears, the hardened Police Magistrate wished to draw a “veil [to] shut out the horrors of a living death to these poor people.”

Figure 7.5. Living death? Boys at Yarrabah about 1910. They are wearing sulus, which are discussed later. Cairns Historical Society.

In the 1900s, Yarrabah was portrayed as providing charitable asylum for the racially outcast. A visitor to Yarrabah composed a reflective newspaper piece, which Gribble pasted into his journal and which commenced with Gribble’s own slogan. “Lift up thy prayer for the remnant that is left” it began, before adding some familiar hand-wringing about Aboriginal dispossession to the newer legend of the half-caste:

When one remember that Yarrabah is sheltering the remnants of the once free tribes now

46 Ibid.
scattered by advancing civilisation, their homes broken up and their hunting ground destroyed; that it is the last refuge of the wretched aboriginal women who have been made the victims of the newcomer’s vices and then abandoned; that it is the only place that half-castes can call home and that but for it they would be buffeted about from pillar to post no man’s concern; when one remembers these things the full pathos of the inscription comes home.47

Although disinclined to discuss his racial understandings or marital policy at length and unwilling to be perceived as wielding undue influence, Gribble was nevertheless encouraging and refusing certain types of marriages at Yarrabah based on percentages of Aboriginal ‘blood.’ Consistent with general policy in Queensland, Gribble did not believe in ‘breeding out the colour,’ rather he sought to ‘breed it in.’ The *North Queensland Herald* crassly explained that Gribble’s approach was “to regard [half-castes] as aboriginals and to encourage them to mate with each other or with pure-bred blacks.”48 After a visit to Yarrabah in 1906, the *Trinity Times* offered a similarly distasteful insight into Gribble’s racial thinking, published under the heading ‘A Study in Sociology and the Regeneration of a People.’ “Consideration of the problem of our aboriginal population,” began the author:

would not be complete without some mention of the matter of half-castes and quadroons. A very large proportion of the children at Yarrabah are of mixed blood. The mission has always freely taken half-bloods in and offered asylum to aboriginal domestic servants about to become mothers (on the condition of course that the mothers shall remain). [Gribble] does not believe in going away from the aboriginal strain but opines, rather, that the black blood should not be there worked out. With that end in view he would encourage the marriage of a quadroon or a mulatto with a full black rather than the opposite.49

Grant disagreed, stating that this “marrying of almost white girls to blackfellows should I think be discouraged,”50 whereas the *North Queensland Herald* alluded to the ‘natural’ repellence that ought to be felt across racial divisions and the dishonour of its transgression. Encouraging those with any visible proportion of Aboriginal blood “to mate with each other” was, it believed, necessary to protect them from “sexual appeal which can never be openly and honourably

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47 Undated *TT* clipping, Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.
48 *NQH*, 28 May 1910.
50 Letter from Cairns’ Police Magistrate P.G. Grant to the Under Secretary, Brisbane, 12 March 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.
gratified by intercourse with the superior race.\textsuperscript{51} Taking a pseudo-Darwinian turn, the \textit{Trinity Times} expressed belief in a natural attraction existing between people of similar complexion and therefore racial descent: “natural selection one would think would tend to bring about marriages between the lighter-coloured people.” This argument also disguised Gribble’s hand in the process. But having left the reader with the distinct impression that Gribble was running an Aboriginal stud farm at Yarrabah, the author of the \textit{Trinity Times} made sure to add that in the selection of partners, Gribble “allows of course freedom of choice.”\textsuperscript{52}

![Figure 7.6. The wedding of Menmuny’s son, Albert Maywe, with the similarly-hued Lottie Wallace, 1908. Cairns Historical Society.](image)

While Gribble may have enjoyed the approval of sections of the scientific community, his interference was culturally inappropriate by Aboriginal law. It cut across human beings’ most basic rights and fed Cairns’ rumour mill, but there was little danger of a groundswell of opposition from the larger settlement of Trinity Bay. When the ‘Study in Sociology’ article was published, the \textit{Trinity Times} claimed that Yarrabah had not been visited by any member of the

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{NQH}, 28 May 1910.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{AN}, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.
Cairns press in fourteen years.\textsuperscript{53} It was through Yarrabah’s self-representation and not direct observation that most Cairnsites knew anything at all about Yarrabah. In his efforts to raise money for the mission, Gribble desperately sought publicity through public lectures, photographic exhibitions\textsuperscript{54} and performances of the Yarrabah band, but as a rule, Cairnsites displayed little interest in goings-on at the mission. Gribble may have regretted the lack of support from the Cairns community, but the absence of scrutiny gave him free reign.

“Have been accused of forcing [a Yarrabah] girl into marriage,” Gribble wrote wearily in his journal, adding that “needless to say there is no truth in such a libellous statement.”\textsuperscript{55} By attempting to control Aboriginal sexuality, Gribble faced accusations that marriages at Yarrabah were biologically inappropriate or coerced. These were questions taken up by Lancelot E. Ferris of the Brisbane Home Office. While rejecting the suggestion raised by some commentators that marriages “between half-caste and full blooded aboriginals were a failure,” Ferris accepted the opinion of the Cairns Police Magistrate that at Yarrabah, matrimonial “alliances are quite uninfluenced.” Ferris stressed “the idea that they [Aborigines] are a free people must be maintained.”\textsuperscript{56}

### The ballad of Annie and Johnnie

Into the twentieth century, Aboriginal people had less direct experience of freedom and were absorbing the language and ideology of the mission. In 1901 Roth’s office received a letter written by Gribble, protesting the removal \textit{from} Yarrabah of Annie because “Annie earnestly desired to remain” at the mission and that it would be “in the girl’s best interest to remain here.”\textsuperscript{57} Signatories included King John Menmuny, Pompo Katchewan, William Reeves, Amelia Gribble, Jeannie Brown, Ada, Minnie Mays, Albert Maywe, George Christian, Willie Ambryn and Gribble. In 1906 Yarrabah’s \textit{Aboriginal News} fended off claims printed in a Geraldton paper that at the mission “half-caste girls are forced into marriage with full-blood aboriginals of doubtful character.”\textsuperscript{58} The \textit{Aboriginal News} cited the case of ‘Annie the half-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} \textit{TT} clipping, Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Gribble in Brisbane 1900 gave the Anglican Board of Missions “the benefit of his lengthy experience.” MP, 24 February 1900, p.2. “Lantern slides showing the daily life at Yarrabah were exhibited.” MP, 3 March 1900, p.3.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Gribble’s journal, 16 November 1901, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/2.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Lancelot E. Ferris, letter to the Under Secretary, Home Office, Brisbane, 17 August 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Gribble letter to Roth, QSA RSI 15038.
\item \textsuperscript{58} AN, 14 November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.
\end{itemize}
caste.’ Annie made three attempts to escape from Yarrabah only to be recaptured and returned to the mission. Having made his way by steamer to Yarrabah, Johnny “an aboriginal full-blood” arrived at Yarrabah to argue for Annie’s release but elected to remain with her for a time on the mission.⁵⁹ As reported in the Aboriginal News:

Annie the half-caste and this boy claimed to belong to the same country and wished to marry. This they were allowed to do. Some time after the marriage the girl persuaded the husband to abscond…as we fully expected the girl took to evil living though still living with her husband who is hardly what we would term a reformed character.⁶⁰

Later, the Aboriginal News printed a letter from Yarrabah’s Minnie Burke, which had been sent to the editor of the Geraldton Sentinel, rejecting allegations of forced marriages at Yarrabah and enlightening readers about racial politics as discussed at the mission:

Sir, I am a half caste aboriginal and I married a fullblooded aboriginal and so far we have lived together two years and a half and we have never thought of the different colour and I have a little child since I have been married and one little quadroon girl before I came to the Mission. That is al a white man is good for making a fool of a half caste girl and then the white man turns round an kicks up a row with her for marrying a black man. I would like to know what white man would wait nine months for either a black or a half caste girl. I have known a black man to follow his lady love all the way from Hughenden to the Mission after being separated all that time.

Mr Gribble does not give the girls to any of the boys but the girls pick which ever boy they like. We would like to know who the girls are going to marry if they do not marry the boys. It is much better to be married and living on the Mission than to be about white people’s towns and living with any man we can first come across unmarried. Johnny and Annie always were in trouble on this place. They picked each other and bothered Mr Gribble to get married; and when Annie was single she was always running away into Cairns after bad life, and now she is married by God’s own law. She has gone and done a worst thing than ever besides telling a lie by saying she was forced to be married. Please do not call those two Mr Gribble’s boy and girl. This is the truth.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Letter from Cairns’ Police Magistrate P.G. Grant to the Under Secretary, Brisbane, 12 March 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.
⁵⁹ AN, 14 November 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.
⁶⁰ Ibid.
Domestic girls, moral laxity and unmanly insinuations

In north Queensland, the pregnancy of a domestic girl often resulted in her being exiled to Yarrabah. Authorities commonly accepted that the ‘natural’ sexuality of Aboriginal women was disorderly and primitive, and that they were incapable of its management. Bearing in mind Jeannie’s predicament, Gribble maintained opposition to Aboriginal ‘girls’ employment in the domestic service of Europeans on the grounds that in such a situation, moral compromise was virtually inevitable. The North Queensland Herald agreed that such employment “must end in their physical ruin.”\footnote{NQH, 31 May 1910.} Gribble and the Bishop of North Queensland were of the view that Aboriginal servants were “more open than white girls to the attack of unprincipled men”\footnote{Bishop of North Queensland, letter to the Under Secretary 6 August 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.} but the Trinity Times blamed the purported sexual nature of Aboriginal women for their inconvenient impregnation. Adding another layer of blame, the Trinity Times thought that an Anglo-Australian family might see a servant’s pregnancy as displaying a lack of gratitude, but
thought it “unreasonable on the part of the family to exclaim ‘How ungrateful after all we have done for her’…it is not ungrateful only natural.”64 A contributor to the Trinity Times, possessed of an even more energetic imagination, wrote of helpless white employers in being lured into carnal disgrace by irresistible native passions. The domestic “black girl is not unsexed,” the writer confidently pronounced:

[She] has the same strong passions as the free denizens of the forest but without the opportunity of gratifying them so when the inevitable happens [it is] only natural. That is almost the invariable history of aboriginal females in domestic service.65

Similarly, the North Queensland Herald identified the “animal passions” of Aboriginal domestic servants as the problem. “Usually they are the tempters not the tempted,” it concluded.66 Discussions of the plight of the pregnant servant reused much of the operatic pathos reserved otherwise for half-castes. Thus disgraced, she could “never hope to marry,” said the Trinity Times. The “family she is living with would never countenance a man of her own race about, and no white man would marry her.” According to that Cairns newspaper the only acceptable solution was to ship these women to the mission, “to marry the girls to their own people…that is by far the best for them.”67 The institutions of matrimony and Yarrabah represented the only acceptable means of containing hot native passion and its shameful reproductive consequences.

In his report to the Home Office, the Cairns Police Magistrate countered with the popular gripe that the corollary of this policy was Anglo-Australians being robbed of valuable labour, in this case ‘white enough’ domestic labour. Grant perceived that among the mixed-descent residents of Yarrabah there were “girls who could earn their living anywhere if they were allowed…I think it is a pity that they should be immured for life at this Mission Station.” According to Grant, half-castes were the “poor unfortunate victim[s] of lust,” but as he shook his head, dismayed at “white man’s passions,” Grant indulged his own sensual nature, being “greatly struck by the number of good-looking, well grown girls.” As with the ‘natural appeal’ within racial groups already mentioned, female attractiveness was to the Police Magistrate, a question of hue. Running an expert eye over the well-grown girls, whom Gribble had deemed half-

64 AN, November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.
65 Ibid.
66 NQH, 31 May 1910.
67 AN, 21 November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.
castes, Grant thought “a number of them” – the best-looking ones? – “appear to be quadroons… and when I think of the demand that exists for that class of servant.”

Upon receipt of Grant’s report, Lancelot Ferris exploded at “the suggestive remark” it contained, warning that “missionaries should be married.” Grant had wondered vaguely that missionaries might struggle to resist temptation. The basis for Grant’s remark was not disclosed. One newspaper described it as “saying either too much or too little” on the matter. Ferris leapt to the missionaries’ defence, mortified by Grant’s “unmanly insinuation of moral laxity on the part of [the] devoted men and women” of Yarrabah, and haughtily clarified once and for all that “the source from which the Mission derives its half caste members is Cairns and the surrounding district.”

**Roth’s ethnographic photography: worse than anything in Port Said**

Between 1904 and 1905, a new insinuation of moral laxity was added to the image of the Aboriginal woman in the puzzle of indigenous and non-indigenous relations in north Queensland. The spiteful circulation of some photographs taken by Roth triggered a populist scandal and moral panic entangling the Chief Protector and destabilising his authority. As the scandal unfolded in Queensland, northerners seized the opportunity to vent their displeasure with Aboriginal Protection, and to express mistrust of scientists and ‘foreigners’ (Roth was Hungarian-born), but of particular interest here, the scandal also prompted north Queenslanders to clarify the distinctions they drew between socially acceptable and socially unacceptable photographic images of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people could be represented unclothed without conveying romantic beauty or lascivious intent but despite their stated horror for the ‘brutal body,’ Anglo-Australians enthusiastically captured ethnographic photographs not entirely dissimilar to Victorian pornography. Ancient Greeks and Romans had revelled in the unclothed human form and as their cultural imitators, Victorian sophisticates admired controlled artistic nudes. The introduction of the camera however challenged their sense of naked decency, revealing as it did nudity very different to the muscular hero in alabaster, or the voluptuous Venus rendered sans nipples or genitals. The camera revealed a confronting, vivid nakedness of

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68 Letter from Cairns’ Police Magistrate P.G. Grant to the Under Secretary, Brisbane, 12 March 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.
69 Lancelot E. Ferris, letter to the Under Secretary, Home Office, Brisbane, 17 August 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.
70 Unmarked newspaper clipping regarding Grant’s report, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.
71 Lancelot E. Ferris, letter to the Under Secretary, Home Office, Brisbane, 17 August 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.
sagging breasts, pubic hair and life-like genitals. To European consciousness, such images could only be sexualised when the subject was white, female and devoid of overt classical references. However, despite their cultural constraints, Anglo-Australians of Trinity Bay were unable to be ‘naturally’ and completely repelled by the brutal body. Their enthusiasm for photographs of unclad Aboriginal people, photographic scandals such as that which would envelop Roth and of course the prevalence of mixed-descent children all point a racist repugnance that was far from absolute.

Two undated photographs (above) from the Trinity Bay district point to the photographer’s difficulties in establishing incontrovertible meanings in relation to indigenous people, with foggy notions of public and private. The imposition of a metaphorical fig leaf to the biblical ‘naked shame’ of Aboriginal people in their ‘garden of Eden’ is suggestive of what Margaret Maynard has called the “fears and anxieties that whites had about their own sexuality and that of the subject race.”\(^{72}\) Both photographs further remind us of what Elizabeth Edwards has termed “the materiality of ethnographic photographs as socially salient objects.”\(^{73}\) The

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photographs appear to have been taken on the same day. Despite their similar provenance, they were retrieved from separate photographic collections; their separate trajectories as artefacts being perhaps the result of the different information they contain – one meets a basic Anglo-Australian level of nineteenth century decency (right), the other (left) does not. Why did the photographer require or choose to photograph two distinct poses? The ‘modest’ photograph at right was a saleable, postcard image. The ‘immodest’ photograph is of a more ambiguous commercial value. The photographs were taken by Roth.

Roth was a doctor of medicine, anthropologist and ethnographer who produced an impressive body of work, including the monograph *Ethnological Studies among North-West Central Queensland Aborigines* (1897), which established his international reputation. *Ethnological Studies* contained a hand-drawn illustration of a “peculiar method of copulation” used by Aboriginal people, which Roth included as part of a series of “natural postures which every anthropologist make inquiries about, with a view to ascertaining connections (if any) between the highest and lowest types of man.” Some of Roth’s anthropological peers expressed doubts about the “peculiar method of copulation” and demanded further evidence of its existence among Aboriginal people in north Queensland. Despite what Roth called “the natural modesty of the untutored savages,” which he “invariably admired and respected,” in 1900 or 1901 Roth found a married couple south of Cairns who agreed to demonstrate for his camera, although Roth stated that “they could hardly refrain from laughing” at his request, and “were a bit afraid of the camera at first.”

For most of Roth’s tenure as Aboriginal Protector, it was another act entirely that concerned north Queenslanders most – the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act. Roth occupied the roles of Northern Protector 1898-1904 (Cooktown), then Chief Protector 1904-1906 (Brisbane), working to meliorate the exploitation of Aborigines in employment and marriage, while documenting Aboriginal cultures, often with a camera. At the turn of the century, many or most Anglo-Australian employers saw the regulation of Aboriginal employment as onerous and openly flouted its requirements. Employers enjoyed minimal reference to the law, if not impunity from it, and had been accustomed to treating ‘their’ Aborigines as they felt appropriate, arguing that Aboriginal ‘inefficiency’ justified peppercorn wages, or that “the amount of wages should be left optional with the employers to be paid in accordance with the merit of the employee.”

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74 In my copy of the image at right, bark ‘fig leaves’ appear to be worn, but I thank Jane Lydon for pointing out to me that these may in fact be scratched out details.

75 Walter Roth letter to Bishop White, 19 June 1904, QSA, SRS 4356/1/155.

76 Petition from Gregory Downs, to James Forsyth MLA, 28 August 1903, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.
New sensitivities however, were becoming apparent in the language of the Cairns’ press in its discussion of race relations. In their public pronouncements, white northerners were more willing than ever to express their sympathy for the plight of Aboriginal people. Initially, the *Port Douglas and Mossman Record* spoke in favour of the Act. We were “worse than savages” it maintained, “if, as a superior race, we did anything less than cherish the remnants of the inferior race which we have so unceremoniously supplanted.”

Never again should a young gin be discoverable as a ‘hand’ on a pearling boat. For malevolent intrusion upon blacks camps white ruffians should suffer unmitigated penalty. Food and clothing should be given without any sign of meanness to the disinherited people. The Chinese opium vendors should be severely punished and completely ostracised.77

Less pleased by Aboriginal Protection, but inclined nevertheless to couch in humanitarian terms its objections to the governmental response to the ‘Aboriginal problem,’ the *Morning Post* argued: “since Dr Roth’s appointment the natives of Queensland have been far worse off in every respect than in the days when no such ‘protection’ existed.” The *Post* was unhappy to report the regulation that:

- no female aboriginal or half-caste over fourteen years of age shall be employed at a wage less than 2/6 per week…at which wage good white servants may be obtained anywhere.
- As no aboriginal woman can compare with white women as to efficiency…the new regulations simply mean that no aboriginal women will be employed…those aboriginal women who are now decently clothed, housed and fed will be forced to go to the camps there to starve or engage in a life of prostitution.79

On another occasion the *Post* frowned upon the misappropriation of wages, arguing: “Today it is very difficult to get an Aboriginal girl or woman to ‘sign on,’ they know that if they do their wages have to be paid to the protector to be ‘put away for a rainy day’ and that is the last the unfortunates see of the money.”80

There were long-standing residents who clearly felt that Europeans were indebted to Aborigines in the wake of colonisation, but other, harder attitudes from the frontier period, still littered

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77 PDMR, 28 August 1901, p.2.
78 MP, 17 July 1905, p.2.
79 MP, 4 March 1904, p.2.
80 MP, 13 December 1905, p.3.
private correspondence. For instance, Roth’s office was informed that on a property claiming 150 km of river frontage, local Aboriginal people were seeking access to the watercourse to hunt. The property’s manager Mr. Robertson told Sergeant Whelan that he “would not allow no blacks on the run,” and that “the trackers should shoot them – that was what they were kept for.” Roth’s unloved administration was bombarded with similar letters objecting to its interference with the status quo. Usually, objections to Aboriginal Protection carried the implication that the racial and economic hierarchy was being flattened by the new regulations, making “blacks too independent and more difficult to deal with as servants.” Petitioners presented Roth with the common complaint that, in their opinion: “under the Aboriginal Act our blacks are becoming insubordinate and useless.” Leonard M. Cutter wrote “in despair about the aborigines.”

I had thought that I could exercise some sort of control over them… but officialdom has beaten me…it quite nullifies any attempt by an individual… to do anything in the way of elevating or controlling them.

E. Jackson of Atherton objected to a contract being drawn up for his employee named Echo:

We have had our boy 26 years. He has never known what it is to live with the blacks, for he was but a little fellow when he was given to us by Inspector Whelan… He certainly does not like to be signed on… he said he thought this was a free country.

The personal dignity and self-respect of Aboriginal people notwithstanding, the expectation remained among Anglo-Australians that Aborigines must occupy the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. That they must remain in their subordinate place was reinforced by the white community at every juncture, even through the language of dress. Gribble delivered a lecture on “foolish pride” which he called the “besetting sin of mission boys and girls,” and a ‘sin’ Anglo-Australians found “cockie [and] objectionable.” According to Gribble, Aboriginal people ought

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81 Letter from Whelan to Roth, QSA RSI 14962/1/1.
82 Telegram from W.M. Lee Bryce to Roth, 1902, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.
83 Petition from Gregory Downs, to James Forsyth MLA, 28 August 1903, QSA SRS 4356/1/155. In response, Roth worked through the list of petitioners names, telling Forsyth that one was “the reputed father of a h.c. child; another is a reputed ‘kombo’ said to be living with his aboriginal female stock woman; another a ‘kombo’ who lately enquired re. necessary permission etc. to marry his black paramour; another was (and probably still is) employing blacks who were sent to him in chains by a friend from a distant district.” Letter from Roth to Forsyth, the Under Secretary of Lands, 22 December 1903, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.
84 Letter to Roth from Leonard M. Cutter, 4 April 1900, QSA RSI 14962/1/1.
85 ibid.
86 Letter from E. Jackson of Atherton to J. Tolmie, Minister for Agriculture 18 April 1912, QSA PRV 10729/1/31.
to be proud only of their “truthfulness [and] obedience” – to Europeans – but instead, they were sometimes “proud of what they could do, or what they knew, or what they wore.” At Yarrabah men wore sulus, through which Gribble imposed a bizarre, oriental vision of racial otherness. An observer at Yarrabah saw:

picturesque forms of natives dressed in red or white sulus of India and the East, for it is part of Gribble’s methods not to get his people to imitate whites even in dress, ‘You cannot be white folk, but you can be good blackfellows,’ he tells them.

Sulus were even worn on excursions across Trinity Bay, which in the minds of many, was going too far. Gribble was accused of public indecency when Yarrabah residents visited Herberton in a “semi-nude condition.” The Cooktown Independent thought that only “ultra sensitive prudes are shocked by the scanty wardrobe furnished by the Police and the charitable,” but the Morning Post took a less moralistic line. When the Post witnessed Yarrabah men and boys adorned in “about 3d worth of turkey red,” it argued that “the blacks are…in all common decency entitled to at least a pair of pants…Heaven knows pants are cheap enough.” While in the scrub Aborigines could dress or not dress as they pleased, but on the boulevards of European settlements, clothing was mandatory. The mayor of Cooktown once told a council meeting that “the manner in which the Blacks were allowed to parade the streets and parade round the suburbs was a disgrace to the town and the people…in the state they were often in.” However, by absent-mindedly including that he did “not think anything of the gins” doing so, the mayor elicited “roars of laughter” which caused him to become “unusually rosey [sic.]”

Accusations of Gribble’s indecency went no further. For his trafficking of Aboriginal artefacts, Roth had been accused of “prostituting his office” but for this offence, he was spared a public excoriation. Allegations of indecency directed at Roth however, threatened to topple the Protector. From displeasure with administrative mores subverting the normative expectations of Anglo-Australians, by 1905 residents of the north fast developed an animus for Roth the man. Public meetings began clamouring for Roth’s dismissal, a matter in which the “whole press and public of north Queensland” was said to be “unanimous.” Roth’s only supporters were

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87 AN, May 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.  
88 See Figure 7.5.  
89 TT, cited in AN, 14 November 1906.  
90 MP, 21 December 1905, p.2.  
91 CI, 26 January 1889, p.2.  
92 MP, 27 November 1905, p.2.  
93 CI, 2 February 1889, p.2.  
94 Ibid.  
95 W. Dallaghy, letter to the Home Secretary’s Department, 15 July 1901, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.
characterised as the ancient enemies of patriotic north Queenslanders: “clerics [and] goody-goodies down south.” The New Endeavour Beacon, called the Protector “worse than useless [and] an incubus upon us,” claiming that a “strong feeling of abhorrence and detestation…circles round the very name of Roth.”

In 1905 the Minister for Lands in Brisbane received a letter from An Old Resident in North Queensland, who appears to have been a paternalistic humanitarian, something of a sexual conservative and a Christian. The Old Resident insisted that the “Protector of Aboriginals should be loved and trusted by that unfortunate and helpless race” – meaning Aborigines – and from him they “should receive only kindness.” The Old Resident assured the minister that Aboriginal people shared Europeans’ aversion to Roth, for his “inhumanity and indifference” and in particular, Roth’s lack of “modest politeness” towards Aboriginal women. For this reason, the Old Resident thought, “Church people would give Roth a wide berth if they knew his true character.”

The deficit of ‘modest politeness’ to which the Old Resident referred was Roth’s “notorious” activities with a camera, constituting “grossly indecent actions with…women.” The Old Resident claimed to have viewed photographs taken by Roth which were “worse than anything I saw in Port Said,” for which “the author…ought to be in St. Helena instead of the public Service of Queensland.” Two incidents of Roth’s ethnological indecency were cited, with a third general charge being laid by the Old Resident. A “trooper named George told me that Roth behaved in a disgraceful manner examining some gins seated on a log…the gins afterwards expressed intense disgust,” he wrote. Beyond the incongruousness of native troopers claiming the moral high ground, the ambiguity of this statement makes the alleged examination very difficult to comment upon. The Old Resident explained the dilemma of explication as that of “sailing as near as possible in the law of libel in discussing Roth’s transaction.” More detail was furnished, however, in the second example in which the Old Resident was far from convinced that Roth had honourable scientific intentions. Roth was travelling on horseback with Aboriginal police when:

[Apparently] any prurient-minded blackguard can be guilty of any act of indecency to

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96 New Endeavour Beacon, (hereafter NEB), 14 July 1905, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.
97 Letter from An Old Resident in North Queensland to the Minister for Lands, Brisbane, 20 July 1905, QSA RSI 14962/1/1.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
aboriginal women if he calls himself an ethnologist.100

Figure 7.10, Figure 7.11. The photographs above are from a suite of images which appear to have been captured on one of the big sandy rivers south of Cairns. Included among the idyllic Bama village tableaux and scenes of traditional life, displayed by a cooperative clan group, is an image of two young women, singled out for a closer photographic study. The two ‘wild gins’ gaze warily at the camera, most likely operated by Meston’s photographer White on the Bellenden Ker expedition of 1904, or by Roth at about the same time.

Both photographs: Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library, Hume Collection.

100 Ibid.
From hard-learned experience, Aboriginal people halted in the scrub by armed native troopers had every reason to be fearful, their fear not alleviated by the presence of an Aboriginal Protector whose identity and works may well have been a mystery to them. Combined with the arcane processes of photography the experience would be, at the very least, intimidating and confusing to the two young Aboriginal women, but we cannot be certain from this that Roth’s photographic motivation was lascivious.

Around Cairns in the early 1900s, photography was used as an effective means of public promotion, or as a visual art, aping the traditions of European romantic painting. At the Cairns Show in 1908, Best Photographs by an Amateur were entered under the following categories: Landscapes, Views of the Cairns District, Views, and Portraits. At the show, “photographs occupying prominent positions” advertised the efforts of Yarrabah missionaries with images of Aboriginal acculturation to European ways, in postures of patriotism, work and rank: “photographs of the church, the land, the oil launch and the leading people of Yarrabah saluting the flag and ploughing” – presumably not at the same time.  

However, the photographic legacy of this period created by Alfred Atkinson and others includes a great number of photographs depicting naked and semi-naked Aboriginal people, apparently created for the private pleasure of middle-class Anglo-Australians, captured in the private Aboriginal space of the rainforest, which could not be displayed before the Cairns public. As far as can be ascertained, no one ever accused Atkinson of being a prurient-minded blackguard who belonged in gaol, or blamed him for “violating the sense of shame and modesty of the women, and outraging the feelings of the men.” Whether or not viewers of Atkinson’s work were titillated by his images, the photographer was not targeted for public outrage and accused of entertaining thoughts “beyond the worst imagination in Post Said,” but then Atkinson’s images were ambiguous in their sexual content or subtext, Roth’s were not, and Atkinson was not an Aboriginal Protector.

In 1905, Queensland parliament received a petition against Roth, calling him “guilty of taking grossly indecent photographs, and conniving at immorality…etc.” The chivalrous pretensions of white men in the north were grievously affronted by Roth’s actions, and many bore testimony of the Protector’s misdealing with Aboriginal women. Others claimed to have viewed Roth’s photographic portfolio and were able to make informed comparisons with the

101 MP, 22 July 1908, p.3.
102 J. Hamilton letter to Minister for Lands, 14 June 1904, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.
103 Ibid.
104 MP, 2 December 1905, p.3.
pornography available in Port Said – the benchmark for visual indecency. No fan of Roth’s Aboriginal Protection, the *New Endeavour Beacon* lingered on Roth’s greatest crime:

The bawdy photographs…taken ‘in the interests of science [which would] disgrace a common Port Said exhibition – and Port Said photos are…the dirtiest filth on earth. There is not much Aboriginal Protection in depicting filthy and degrading as well as unnatural scenes.105

The two photographs – a front and a side view – had been removed from Roth’s office and were being circulated by John Hamilton M.L.A. Under the cloak of anonymity, one witness described the images as “the most disgusting thing I ever saw.” Another said: “What manner of man took these? He ought to be in gaol.” Still another said: “Those pictures haunt me. They are terrible! Terrible!”106 As we have seen, photographs of unclad Aboriginal people were widely available to Europeans, and discretely handled, did not fly in the face of respectability. Roth’s images however, displayed two Aboriginal people engaged in sexual activity, flouting taboos of sexual depiction and the sexualisation of Aboriginal people. Roth retorted that his photographs were taken “in the interests of ethnological science” and that the Prince of Wales had been “pleased to accept a copy” of his work.107 Hamilton then summoned three “impartial ethnologists”108 to agree with him that:

no ethnological society, and no respectable ethnologist in the world deals in pictorial filth, a mere glance at which would be a cause of shame and disgust, to any respectable man, leaving all types of womanhood out of the question.109

Bishop Gilbert White of Carpentaria, from whom a vigorous response might have been expected, had the photographs waved accusingly under his nose by Hamilton, “in the interests of religion and morality.” The Bishop may have been naïve, but he could not be certain that they represented any sexual act with which he was familiar. He reasoned mildly and with a lot of sense, “I did not think it my business to sit in judgement on such matters so long as they were confined absolutely to strictly scientific and medical work.”110

105 *NEB*, 14 July 1905, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.
106 Quoted in J. Hamilton letter to Minister for Lands, 14 June 1904, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.
110 Bishop Gilbert White of Carpentaria letter to Roth, 3 June 1904, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.
In responding to the accusations, Roth’s choice of words, that is, his “interest in the flesh and blood of the native,” gifted the Morning Post with a sensational headline, but with its traditional pragmatism to the fore, the Post’s response to Roth’s purported indecency fell short on outrage.\textsuperscript{111} The Morning Post saved its strongest language for Roth’s failings as an Aboriginal Protector, calling him an “iniquitous…useless and mischievous official,” responsible for “the smothering of the bêche-de-mer industry and the starvation and misery of the majority of the aboriginals,” while admitting that “Dr. Roth took a keen interest in Aboriginal ethnology,” that is to say, “inventing aboriginal legends [and] taking indecent photos.”\textsuperscript{112} If “the government must go in for the luxury of an aboriginal historian,” it “should confine Dr. Roth to making photographs of more or less indecent pictures, and of chronicling the ways and habits of a disappearing race.”\textsuperscript{113}

By 1906 Roth had resigned citing ill-health, and departed Australia for South America.\textsuperscript{114} Unbowed, unapologetic and flatly rejecting the “scurrilous and slanderous abuse”\textsuperscript{115} directed towards him, Roth declared himself “not ashamed”\textsuperscript{116} of having taken the photographs and “guilty of no conduct unworthy of a man of honour.”\textsuperscript{117} The scandal in which he had been embroiled was in part a proprietary battle over indigenous bodies, played out through discourses of gender and morality. Through Aboriginal Protection and the lens of a camera, Roth claimed rights of “identifying and categorising the individual within the corpus of the state,”\textsuperscript{118} but knew that colonists presented a rival claim:

\begin{quote}
I was well aware that the general opposition to my administration and to myself
Personally was mainly due to my interference with what has for many years past been
considered a vested interest in the flesh and blood of the native.\textsuperscript{119}
\end{quote}

The anger directed towards Roth however, speaks not only of Anglo-Australians’ resentment of Aboriginal Protection undermining their rights to Aboriginal labour, but highlights their understanding of the workings of their own society, in which some unscrupulous white men took sexual advantage of black women.

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{111} MP, 2 December 1905, p.3.
\textsuperscript{112} MP, 24 August 1905, p.3.
\textsuperscript{113} MP, 4 March 1904, p.2.
\textsuperscript{115} MP, 2 December 1905, p.3.
\textsuperscript{116} Walter Roth letter to the Under Secretary, Home Department, 27 February 1903, QSA 4356/1/155.
\textsuperscript{117} Walter Roth letter to Bishop White, 19 June 1904, QSA SRS 4356/1/155.
\textsuperscript{119} MP, 2 December 1905, p.3.
\end{footnotes}
Conclusion

Aboriginal people persistently blurred the expectations of the white community and those who attempted to classify and command them. Less than three decades had passed from the first colonial incursions at Trinity Bay to the birth of a race-obsessed and sexually uncomfortable Australian nation and the Queensland government was behaving as if a mess made on the frontier needed to be cleaned up. Its policy initiatives however pleased few, being extreme and at odds with the wishes of indigenous and non-indigenous people alike. Socialised to believe that their own advancement was a right, Europeans had shown little concern for the destruction of Aboriginal families and had no qualms about pressing Aboriginal people into their service. Being ‘blacker canvasses,’ children were particularly sought. Although commonplace, sexual interaction between white men and black women was shocking to white society and babies born of such unions horrifying. People of mixed descent blurred the visual and caste distinctions which were considered crucial to social order. With steadfastly-held beliefs in racial absolutes, Europeans found ‘half-castes’ a morally repugnant threat to their colonial legitimacy. Such was the power of racial thought at the time that removing mixed descent children from their families and either dragooning them into white service or marrying them off at the mission was considered to be a pragmatic solution and in pursuit of a humanitarian and national good. As well as concerns for settlers’ rights to unfettered access to Aboriginal labour, the scandal which engulfed Roth speaks of the complex network of taboos surrounding interracial interactions, fears about sexuality and its implications for lineage and well-founded concerns for the wellbeing of Aboriginal women.
Chapter 8
The Keynote is Love

Figure 8.1. St Albans church 1904. Central to the transformative hopes of missionaries at Yarrabah was the humble St Albans church, an institution which required rebuilding on more than one occasion (the version above was destroyed by cyclone in 1906), housed the First Aborigines photograph, and was the venue for many hours of prayerful reflection by the Yarrabah Senior Girls of 1908. 
Coles Album p.9, Menmuny Museum.

Introduction

Around Trinity Bay, Aboriginal people were entangled in webs of others’ expectations. This chapter takes the example of a cohort of young women, known as the Yarrabah Senior Girls of 1908, to look more closely at the relationship between racial expectations and lived experiences. Around Trinity Bay, ordinary Anglo-Australians constructed images of Aboriginal women exemplified by the derogatory stereotype of the bawdy, dishevelled, wastrel ‘gin,’ brutally oppressed by Aboriginal menfolk. This image emphasised the innate wretchedness of Aboriginal people and ennobled
Europeans’ experiences as occupiers of Aboriginal land, employers of Aboriginal labour and as saviours and civilisers, while playing down settlers’ prevalent sexual objectification of Aboriginal women. Around 1900, representations of Aboriginal society informed debates about the management of the indigenous population. White fears of Aboriginal society informed debates about the management of the indigenous population. White fears of racial mixing found expression in the supposed problem of the ‘half-caste,’ which focused its attention specifically on the behaviour of Aboriginal women. Among its other roles, Yarrabah mission functioned as a kind of racial laboratory, shaping the behaviour of Aboriginal people towards white Australian reproductive ideals. Perhaps influenced by the ‘child race’ theory of Aboriginality, the Yarrabah Matron infantilised her charges, but unlike Gribble, emphasised the shared humanity of all people. This contradiction between paternalism and humanism is apparent in photography from the time, which otherwise continued to contrast ‘wild’ Aboriginality with the improvements of civilisation.

Nun shall ye know

Figure 8.2. Caption reads: Senior girls at Yarrabah Mission in 1908, photographer unknown. L-R: Laura, Lucy Long, Phoebe, Miss Cheffins, Lucy Gumgaro (Gomeraa?), Caroline, Mary Pentacost and Minnie Winton (seated centre) and Polly with baby. Others may include Rosie Norhedge, Rosie (?) Naleen, Mary (May?) Bignell and Mary Dayand.1 Cairns Historical Society.

1 Thomson, Reaching Back, p.30.
A photograph from 1908 (above) shows the Yarrabah Senior Girls and their supervisor Miss Cheffins being just as perfect ladies. According to Gribble, Aboriginal school girls ought to aspire to being “just as perfect ladies” despite being encumbered with the twin disadvantages in turn-of-the-century Australia of being female and “black as saucepans.” Goings-on at Yarrabah took place beyond the view of the Cairns community. Adding ideological weight to an apparently simple document of schooling, photographs such as the Senior Girls at Yarrabah 1908 image helped to popularise certain ideas about Aboriginal people, their capacities, potentials even their relationship to the Australian nation. The Senior Girls image is in a sense an index of Aboriginal women’s progress as a reformed gender and class order within a settler society. Cleanliness and order have been imposed. The dress and demeanour of the Senior Girls ‘prove’ their capacity for, and acceptance of, Christian conversion. All of these were considered measurable by visual inspection.

The Senior Girls photograph is monotone, grainy and frozen, but it not difficult to imagine the day: the heavy air, the vivid tropical greens of the foliage, the din of insects, rustling dresses and school girl chatter accompanying the photographer’s task; his polite requests communicated through the Matron directing the girls. Miss Cheffins appears to have performed the wide-ranging responsibilities of Yarrabah Matron during 1908 and was the keeper of the related, succinct-but-informative Matron’s Log. By Victorian conventions of reading character in the face, the connection between Cheffins’ inner being and her visage in this image is misleading. Thick-lipped features and crabby eyes may go with moral rectitude but seem mismatched to the patient and kindly tone of the Matron’s Log. In the photograph, Cheffins presents to us as a squarish woman in morailstically high-collared, pinch-waisted Victorian dress, scarcely the height of looser Edwardian fashions, signifying ‘standards’ rather than being climatically appropriate to the tropics. A primary objective of the Yarrabah mission was to contain the sexuality of Aboriginal women within marriage and to prevent sexual relations between them and non-Aboriginal men. The Senior Girls are thus prophylactically armoured in sack-like, figure-disguising and nunnish ‘habits,’ probably sewn by their own hands. Their jewellery is limited to large suspended crucifixes and rosary beads, creating a very ecclesiastical impression of almost suffocating modesty overall, and surely enough to put to flight any man of lecherous intent. The photograph effectively captures the strict, gendered religiosity of the setting, but is expressed with friendly informality. The message is one of morality not brutality.

Subtle calibrations of the Yarrabah experience are transmitted through the photograph. The girls are lined up according to the conventions of the group shot wherein the tallest form a line at the rear, then the smaller form a line before them. A mascot was often added to such images, like a decoration on a

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2 I am confident, but not certain that Cheffins was the Matron during 1908. The role of Matron appears to have been a general one, encompassing hospital, kitchen, dormitory and educative functions.
3 AN, May 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.
cake, and this photograph is no exception for its inclusion of a dog, which managed to stay still long enough to not blur the image. The authority figure Cheffins has been placed at the composition’s centre and the photographer has taken care to arrange the girls according to the lightness or darkness of their dresses. The seated girls all hold their hands modestly in their laps, a familiar, polite pose for them. The girls appear more accustomed to being photographic participants than were Yarrabah’s ‘First Aborigines’ fourteen years earlier, and strike poses that reflect their mission training, the photographer’s expectations and their personal inclinations. Hymn singing occupied many hours of the Yarrabah week and Caroline clasps her hands in a chorister’s ‘monkey grip.’ Some excited smirking is apparent among others. Minnie Winton sports a gorgeous grin. As with the First Aborigines photograph, a small child has been included, sitting in Polly’s lap, but in this instance the visual device would appear to relate to the mission’s role in taking in disgraced, pregnant domestic servants. In the years since Atkinson first ventured into Gungganydji country, much seems to have changed.

In addition to the handful of photographs which have survived, the Yarrabah Matron’s Log of 1908 contributes snippets of information to our understanding of the life an Aboriginal girl might expect to lead within the ‘protecting shelter’ of Yarrabah. The Log was subtitled A daily record of work done, misdemeanours etc., wants and acquirements and tells us that in January 1908, there were 126 scholars on the school’s roll and approximately thirty Senior Girls, aged about fifteen, not all of whom appear in the Senior Girls class photograph. Even by the gruelling standards of the day, the Senior Girls’ working days were lengthy and strenuous, and while they received only smatterings of formal education, no more than a few hours ever passed without prayer. Children respond to security and structure and day after day the matron recorded the girls’ work as having been well done and their conduct good – remarkable considering the hugely disrupted backgrounds and traumas most had experienced. An official record, the Matron’s Log promotes an image of Christian hard work, discipline, simplicity and happiness, which is consistent with Aboriginal oral history of Gribble-time. Cheffins’ entries are filled with affection for her charges and hopes for their ‘betterment.’ Her tenor is authoritarian but relentlessly positive. When reprimanding the girls, softness suggests disappointment rather than anger, tending to mild resignation in later entries.

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4 Fundraising for the mission took a much higher priority than the girls’ education: “There was no school [today]…May Pitt came in the evening to teach the girls some new dances for the forthcoming concert in Cairns.” Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 9 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

5 Mollie Coleman Green meat and oily butter: memories of Yarrabah, published by Ros Kidd, Brisbane, 1999; and Thomson Reaching Back.
Yarrabah Matron’s Log: Work done

Figure 8.3. The girls’ dormitory 1907. Only certain types of photographs were ever made at Yarrabah. One can find many images of residents which emphasise domestic order, re-education and discipline, but there are none which might be interpreted as taking a critical view of the institution, showing for instance conditions within the dormitories or the humble repast of meal times.

Cairns Historical Society.

The behaviour of the Senior Girls as interpreted and directed by Cheffins gives us the opportunity to consider the moral program of Yarrabah in action, and the girls’ response to it. Cheffins’ notes were often brief statements to the effect that all was well with the girls, that they were happy, behaving well and working hard: “Work: good cooking baking washing; Conduct: good: girls all very good,”\(^6\) and “work well done, same as usual….Conduct good”\(^7\) being typical examples. They may have been hungry; the weather may have been hot and rainy, but even in their full-length mission garb, the Senior Girls always worked hard. Cheffins was effusive in her praise for their efforts: “work splendidly done and promptly and well” was a common sentiment.\(^8\) The work performed by Yarrabah girls was purported to be educative, vocational training but was in effect unpaid labour, serving to reduce the running costs of the mission. The girls worked as handmaidens to all of the residents. They cooked, cleaned, made and washed clothes, polishing the boys’ belt buckles and the band’s musical instruments,\(^9\) as well as labouring on the mission plantation and maintaining their own vegetable

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\(^6\) Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 15 January 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\(^7\) Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 17 January 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\(^8\) Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 24 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\(^9\) Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 29 April-2 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
gardens. Gribble’s stand-in Selwyn Chase once told a disbelieving *Morning Post* that at Yarrabah “work is not laborious, nor the hours long.” In comparison to what, one might ask?

In April 1908 Cheffins documented a list of extra tasks accomplished by the girls:

In addition to ordinary work today the outside of the kitchen was white-washed, & the roofs and & walls swept of the two rooms used as bedrooms. Some weeding was also done by the 5 dormitory girls, also plantation work. All the senior girls who could went grass gathering in the afternoon [for mat-making], school windows cleaned. Bible class held this evening.

On the previous day:

[The] kitchen was whitewashed inside and thoroughly cleaned…the verandah walls & roof were well swept & washed down and books dusted the church walls were swept both inside and out, the school thoroughly cleaned only the girls forgot to clean the windows.

Work as a moral imperative infused Cheffins’ monitoring of individual efforts:

Plantation in the afternoon; the girls picked 2 baskets and 1 kerosene tin of cotton. Lottie was cook & neglected her work in the afternoon to make a baby’s dress. There was time for both but her duties should have come first, then she would not have to scrub down her tables when the bell was ringing for church.

When Lottie was seen as working unsatisfactorily she was accused of wasting time, and being moody and pert. Lucy Gomerra was said to be “doing her work very well indeed, showing that she can do things properly when she sets her mind to it.” Leisure and relaxation were not altogether unknown to the Senior Girls. From time to time they enjoyed ‘free evenings’ in the School Hall, sometimes there were excursions into Cairns to go to St John’s church, pay respects at the cemetery or

10 *MP*, July 15 1905, p.3.
11 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 10 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
12 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 9 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
13 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 23 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
14 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 31 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
15 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 6 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
16 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 24 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
17 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 28 January 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
visit the Chinese temple.\textsuperscript{18} There were intermittent ‘free afternoons’ to ride around Yarrabah on the creaky old pony,\textsuperscript{19} to go on picnics to the outlying settlements off the mission,\textsuperscript{20} to play tennis and football, once with such enthusiasm that Cheffins noted: “they managed to burst the windbag in the boys’ football, but it was pure accident.”\textsuperscript{21} On one of these idyllic afternoons, Gribble gave the girls a tin of lollies and some coconuts - a real treat for them.\textsuperscript{22}

Wants

Usually however, the girls could only dream of tins of lollies. The \textit{Trinity Times} ventured that at Yarrabah “the girls…are provided with plenty of interest in life [within] the protecting shelter of the Mission,” that they “are comfortable, well-fed,” and in short, a “black girl has a far better life at Yarrabah than she could possibly get in the bosom of the best white family that ever existed.”\textsuperscript{23} There was less chance of an unmarried girl becoming pregnant at Yarrabah than in outside domestic service and perhaps there was an expectation that Aboriginal girls ought to be grateful for anything they got, but life at Yarrabah was hard. As to the girls being well-fed, this was pure sophistry on the part of the \textit{Trinity Times}. Yarrabah never achieved a consistent, nutritious food supply and the grim partnership of hunger and toil was well-known to the Senior Girls. A shoestring budget and agricultural ineptitude meant that at mealtime residents might expect to see the odd sweet potato but were usually served damper or runny gruel made from wheat, corn or rice, with perhaps some skerricks of dugong, turtle, fish or wallaby thrown in at Christmas.\textsuperscript{24} Although it is hard to imagine anyone preferring either, Cheffins maintained that the “girls do not like the wheat meal as much as they do the corn meal,”\textsuperscript{25} and later assured the reader that in lieu of starvation, the girls were indeed, “very glad to have corn-meal.”\textsuperscript{26} The food alone caused many to flee the mission and poor publicity from this prompted the above defence from the \textit{Trinity Times}.\textsuperscript{27} Making interesting usage of the idea of shared humanity, in 1905, the \textit{Morning Post} called it:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{18} “Dadda took all the senior girls to visit Maggie Short’s grave in the Cairns cemetery…We went into the Chinese temple and also had a rest in St John’s church.” Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 3 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9. Gribble’s interpretation of Chinese religious belief would make fascinating hearing.

\textsuperscript{19} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 15 January 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

\textsuperscript{20} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 12 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

\textsuperscript{21} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 8 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

\textsuperscript{22} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 15 January 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{AN}, 21 November 1906, QSA, SRS5356/1/101.

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{MP}, 20 July 1905, p.2.

\textsuperscript{25} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 1 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

\textsuperscript{26} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 2 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

In 1905, a small controversy erupted when a group of Yarrabah escapees informed police in Cairns that at the mission “the only food allowed them was maize-meal either in the form of skilley or baked into a damper; that neither fish nor flesh of any kind was allowed them; and that there was no fruit or vegetables…it was an

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a standing disgrace to our common humanity that men and women, no matter what their colour...should...under pains and penalties be forced to work for a ration such as no other human beings on the face of the earth are expected to exist upon.\(^{28}\)

Even as Cheffins was declaring the girls “well and happy...all very good,”\(^{29}\) they were sick, fainting from hunger and sequestering food during their kitchen duties. Cheffins was unable to conceal the girls’ unhappiness at surviving on insubstantial, unvaried and unpalatable fare, or the food pilfering and resentment that occurred. When they had the opportunity to do so, the girls risked retribution by helping themselves to unauthorised morsels such as crusts of bread in the kitchen.\(^{30}\) When one of the hungry girls (Lottie) passed out, the Matron saw this as a moral lapse and chided the future Princess Albert of Yarrabah.\(^{31}\) Cheffins caught Jessie Keppel hoarding flour,\(^{32}\) and when Ada Pickles and some other girls were discovered making an unauthorised foray into the food store, Cheffins challenged

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\(^{28}\) MP, 14 July 1905, p.2.
\(^{29}\) Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 15 January 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\(^{30}\) Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 4 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\(^{31}\) Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 6 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\(^{32}\) Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 29 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
them and was smartly told to “shut up.” The girls’ punishment is not recorded, but Gribble reserved the right to cancel weddings over such misdemeanours:

Some of the girls [kept] back a damper which had been baked out of the day’s dough… and must have been eaten by some of the girls. In consequence of this serious lapse in behaviour the weddings to have been celebrated next week are to be postponed.34

Figure 8.5. Yarrabah kitchen and dormitory, 1899. In this image of Yarrabah, the photographer has employed a graceful swirl and other classical elements of European romanticism in the composition, incorporating a plunging, tree-clad horizon line falling from right to left and ending with the great splash of two heroic eucalypts, which restore the gaze to the central, steady symbols of civilisation and balance. From this distance, the buildings (Man) are of a mortal scale relative to God/Nature.
JOL image no. APA-050-0001-0012.

Unsurprisingly, with human health poorly understood and malnutrition the order of the day, death stalked the residents of Yarrabah. The communities of the greater Trinity Bay district were well-used to the abrupt and early departures of loved ones and strove to be stout-hearted about it. Gribble believed that Aborigines were a race dying out and perhaps this explains the mundane acceptance of residents’ deaths in mission records. In February 1908, Cheffins described in the most prosaic terms

33 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 12 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
34 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 22 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
the death and burial of a resident, who must have been well known to the girls: “All girls attended the funeral service…some who could be spared went to the cemetery.”

**Acquirements**

Commencing with a Shakespearian quotation, the *Australian Journal* once explained to its readers, “Ignorance is the curse of God, Knowledge is the wing wherewith we fly up to Heaven.” Therefore “vulgar superstition, especially where it is in contradiction to Divine teaching…is one of the worst evils attendant. The rude and barbarous tribes of the earth prove this most truly as the uncivilised life they lead is but a convertible term for their ignorance.” It seemed that the only means for indigenous people to lift God’s curse was to seek redemption by accepting Christianity and getting a “proper education,” that is a European education, through which, according to the *Australian Journal*, “much has been done to civilise the world.”

Re-socialisation was to be achieved through no less than the transformation of the soul. At Yarrabah, religion and education were virtually indistinguishable, being part and parcel of the same progressive influence. In 1908 readers of the *Morning Post* were assured that missionary work was not fruitless, that Aboriginal people were capable of receiving religion and that its civilising power was demonstrable in a check-list of their progress:

three hundred Aboriginals…dwelling peacefully together, practising industry, living for each others’ good, behaving remarkably as intelligent, warm-hearted Christians. They are a striking refutation of the incapacity of the Aboriginal for education and religion, and they supply another illustration of the truth that religion is the most effective agent in the uplifting of man.

The *Trinity Times* concurred that Aboriginal people had a capacity for Christianity and had therefore some limited prospect of uplift:

Mr Gribble…against the common conception that the Queensland blacks are too degraded and low on the scale of human evolution to do anything with [has] clearly demonstrated that they are [as] capable of receiving a fair amount of education and enlightenment indeed and by the aid of a suitable environment can be lifted to as high a scale morally as many white people.

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35 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 20 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
36 *Australian Journal*, 1 July 1875, p.607.
Roth’s pessimistic view of white people’s morality notwithstanding, this backhanded compliment was the most Aboriginal people might expect from European Australians, whose efforts at Christian humanism were consistently thwarted by their paternalistic sense of racial superiority. Even when observers noted the residents’ scholarly aptitude in the foreign culture, patronising attitudes betrayed scepticism that blacks could ever match the intellectual achievements of whites. The Yarrabah School, wrote a correspondent:

was a revelation as regards the adaptability of the aboriginal…The children, on average quicker of perception than white children take so kindly to learning that their recent copy books would do credit to a state school.39

The purpose of this education was not to level the racial hierarchy, but to Europeanise Aboriginal people, to erase indigenous culture and replace it with the language, habits and disciplines of the colonisers, to make Aboriginal people more acceptable inferiors to Europeans. The Queensland government did not see fit to provide a schoolhouse and teacher’s salary for children at Yarrabah, as it did for white children elsewhere.40 Instead, volunteers and untrained teachers provided a mishmash of instruction in which Anglican mnemonics towered over all other pedagogical priorities. “Gribble…feels the keynote of [the teacher’s] work is Love,” it was said, as though this was educationally sufficient.41

During 1908 an Aboriginal man made the wry observation to Police Magistrate Grant that “the only Supreme Being he knew anything about was the lock-up.”42 The Senior Girls of 1908 were given ample opportunity however, to become better acquainted with a Christian Supreme Being through prayers, singing, Bible classes and Anglican services conducted sometimes thrice daily. For them, Christianity was reduced to a set of rituals and memory exercises, tailored to a people whose capacities were praised, but whose advancement was deliberately curtailed. ‘Bush agnosticism’ seems to have been the predominant faith of north Queensland’s Europeans, but newspaper editors were still willing to argue in support of Christianising Aborigines. The Trinity Times admired St Albans church, which it saw as the source of Gribble’s vaunted success in civilising members of an ‘immature race’:

From that little temple all the laws that guide Yarrabah have been promulgated [and] all the teaching that has reformed the lives of the dusky inhabitants...People often credit me

38 AN, 14 November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.
39 Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.
40 Report of visit to Yarrabah made by A. Burton, 1910, QSA SRS 4356/1/34.
41 AN, 14 November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.
42 MP, 22 September 1908, p.5.
with being indifferent to churches and with disbelieving in their efficacy. Perhaps I do for adults, [but not for] the younger brothers of our humanity.\textsuperscript{43}

To Miss Cheffins, work and prayer were the central features of a civilised, virtuous Christian life. By these measures, Cheffins usually judged the Senior Girls “good on the whole.”\textsuperscript{44} On a typical day Cheffins wrote in the Matron’s Log that:

the girls worked well all day. Sixty-nine rows were done at the plantation…attended morning service, midday instruction and some of them evening service [and] a few of us gathered late for a special prayer.\textsuperscript{45}

When the torrential rain of the wet season set in, the girls worked and prayed in their quarters: “It rained heavily until nearly noon,” Cheffins wrote in February 1908, so “instead of going to the service we had prayers in the cottage. A good deal of sewing was done and the girls were set to washing when the rain abated. We closed the day with hymns and prayers.”\textsuperscript{46} To Cheffins’ chagrin, happy compliance with the demanding religious programme was not always guaranteed: “It has been found necessary,” lamented the Matron, “to make a rule that no senior girl shall leave the church during service, owing to quite an epidemic among the girls for doing so.”\textsuperscript{47} Later Cheffins added that “Jessie Keppel was naughty about going to the evening service,”\textsuperscript{48} and was vexed by the fact that some “of the older girls are not very reverent in church.”\textsuperscript{49} In March, Cheffins was shocked by one of the girl’s strong disinclination to go to church: “Lucy Gomarra lost her temper today because I insisted upon her attending the midday service, & she said she ‘would hit’ me.”\textsuperscript{50}

Sometimes Cheffins was encouraged by and encouraging of the apparent Christian development of the girls. “As we left the church,” she wrote one night:

Eva Byrung said very earnestly that they ‘are going to be good,’ & Annie and Jessie Mason gave their promise…so there is room for hope with regard to them; I told them they can only be good in one way, that is asking Jesus to help them.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{43} AN, 14 November 1906, QSA SRS5356/1/101.
\textsuperscript{44} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 21 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\textsuperscript{45} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 10 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\textsuperscript{46} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 20 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\textsuperscript{47} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 23 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\textsuperscript{48} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 2 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\textsuperscript{49} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 11 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\textsuperscript{50} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 31 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
\textsuperscript{51} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 6 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
The first Aboriginal people residing at Yarrabah during the 1890s seem to have regarded Anglicanism as an irrelevancy, or a set or rituals to be practiced strategically. The Senior Girls of 1908 give the appearance of being more devout than their predecessors, but wore their religion lightly, even as they bore witness to the sacred expressions of their Aboriginal ancestors being reduced to an evening’s light entertainment at Yarrabah, in parodies of song and dance. Gribble’s cross-cultural tolerance extended to permitting residents to perform corroboree-style entertainments of indeterminate cultural significance to be performed for visitors to Yarrabah. These shows were extremely popular among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. “A great corroboree was held in the school last night after the meeting,” Cheffins wrote enthusiastically after one such event, which she was pleased to report “received the congratulations of the [visitors].” In the private Aboriginal space of the bush, ceremonies – generalised by Gribble as ‘corroborees’ – continued to be conducted among the ‘camp blacks’ of the Yarrabah peninsula. It is reasonable to assume a significant variation in content between the ceremonies of Gungganydji people among themselves and shows put on for white visitors to Yarrabah, but it is also worth considering that more may have been taking place, overlooked by missionaries.

Misdemeanours etc.

Cheffins devoted a good many pages of the Matron’s Log to assessing the virtue of the Senior Girls, praying for their souls and imploring them to strive towards Christian salvation. The Matron placed great stock in maxims: “May Thyme, I believe, is learning to think before she acts,” but was sometimes disappointed: “May Thyme is behaving badly again.” Cheffins measured the goodness of the girls in their obedience: “Late last night Caroline was punished for disobedience and naughtiness,” and chided the girls in its absence: girls “talked too much during the latter part of the public meeting.” Cheffins’ displeasure peaked at very low levels: “There was some trouble in the early morning owing to some leaves having been removed from the work book,” and she accentuated the positive: “Conduct was good on the whole. Only one of the older girls is really unsatisfactory, Ada Lyall.” Or on another occasion: “The conduct of the girls today has been

52 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 29 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
53 Ibid.
54 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 8 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
55 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 22 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
56 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 13 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
57 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 11 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
58 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 12 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
59 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 8 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
satisfactory with 3 exceptions, but I trust the trouble will soon pass over; the sad part of it is that there would be none but for one girl, or so it seems.\textsuperscript{60}

Figure 8.6. Rank, discipline, order, examination: hand-tinted post card of the Yarrabah band, undated. When this musical ensemble began giving performances in Cairns in the early 1900s, it filled halls and received rave reviews in the \textit{Morning Post} as an object of absolute wonder for its proof of a racial characteristic – higher order musicality – with which Aboriginal people had not been credited by Europeans.\textsuperscript{61} Yarrabah concerts were said to “furnish an object lesson to those in doubt as to whether the aboriginals are capable of attaining a higher civilisation.”\textsuperscript{62} As such, the band was an effective generator of publicity and much needed money for the mission, as well as forming a part of Gribble’s disciplinary regime. Apart from its repertoire, the band was notable for quasi-military drill, a rifle-wielding guard and Orientalising, mock-Fijian/Ghurkha-style dress. In this image, the band’s musical director William Reeves stands off in seeming irrelevancy to the viewer’s right; the titular head, the ‘drum major’ (Menmuny?) in pith helmet, stands impotent and barefoot to the left; while Gribble imposes his authority, surveying the troops from the side, having equipped himself with a riding crop which he appears ready to use, and outfitted himself in a similar style to a British Boer War officer. www.oceaniaethnographica.com

Cheffins’ outlook remained determinedly optimistic and her tone resolutely kind. The same could not be said for the mission’s other journal-keeper, the put-upon Gribble, who scratched out terse, hard-bitten phraseology in the wee small hours, gnawed by the insubordination he saw all around. It was common for girls, absconders in particular, to be locked in their dormitory as punishment. “Sarah and

\textsuperscript{60} Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 2 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.

\textsuperscript{61} “For those who have been accustomed to regard the Australian aboriginal as a wretched specimen of humanity so far as intellect and laxity of purpose is concerned, no greater surprise could have experienced than to have encountered the Yarrabah Brass Band…the performances may be regarded as little short of marvellous.” \textit{MP}, 5 January 1904, p.3.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{MP}, 18 September 1905, p.2.
Anne ran away when church service going,” wrote Gribble: “Locked them up.” Cheffins, on the other hand, gave different emphasis to the same punishment: “Jessie Mason has gone back to the dormitory and will be a good girl I hope.”

The Matron much preferred shows of remorse to the imposition of punitive measures. She was impressed by obedience, male authority and honest confession; even if the latter was not always standard practice at Yarrabah and the second sometimes misused. Cheffins’ preferred to leave judgement to the higher authorities in the patriarchy – Gribble and Jesus: “Dadda’ had a very serious talk with the girls in church tonight…May Bignell and May Thyme are very both very penitent for all

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63 Gribble’s journal, 11 June 1905, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.
64 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 21 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
past disobedience and wrong-doing…May the Saviour help them.”

Two days later the Matron was still expressing hope that the unspecified unpleasantness would be shortly resolved by the intervention of the patriarch: “Last night ‘Dadda’ had a long talk with some of the girls and the result seems to be a better understanding all round; I feel we can rest assured that all serious trouble is over with the senior girls.”

It might be remembered that as this official version was being drafted, Ada Pickles was conducting a relationship with, and possibly pregnant to, Willie Clarke, who was married to Janie, with whom Gribble was pursuing a relationship and who, in September of 1908 bore him a child.

When Ada Pickles publically accused Janie of carrying Gribble’s baby, Gribble banished the appellant to Fitzroy Island.

To place this in the context of Cheffins’ moral framework: “A cup was broken during tea time. Ada Pickles, without pressure admitted she did it in a temper, but the open honesty of the confession made a few earnest words from ‘Dada’ all that seemed to me was needed.”

The sin of breaking a cup would seem by comparison, a minor one, but the Matron’s Log was certainly not the place to weigh the soul of the mission’s head.

There are hints that Cheffins knew that the Gribble marriage was in terminal decline. Cheffins noted that Amelia Gribble (who loathed missionary life), was in the habit of confining herself to her quarters and “not being well.” Once Amelia Gribble had left, Cheffins cautiously observed “girls now baking regularly for Dada in the mission house.” There were many girls at Yarrabah whose worldliness undoubtedly exceeded the cosseted reality of the prim Miss Cheffins, yet whatever she knew, or secretly feared, Cheffins made no mention of any of this, clasped her rosary beads and spoke to the purported Senior Girls as children: “May Thyme’s behaviour today has been ridiculously foolish and babyish,” or: “Caroline is a good girl now.”

Most Senior Girls would be married before the age of twenty, pending Gribble’s authorisation. At the mission they were drilled in a dogmatic brand of morality which emphasised female sexual purity but patently did not accord with the moral order of the Trinity Bay district or the complexities of their lives. Many knew the harsh realities of having been stolen children, abused domestics and abandoned teenage mothers, or had perhaps been dragged from a fringe world of racially unacceptable relationships, alcohol, opium ash, violence and prostitution. It is probable that many bore the scars of serious psychological harm. There are tell-tale signs of the stressfulness of the girls’ lives at Yarrabah,

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65 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 1 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
66 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 3 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
68 Halse, A Terribly Wild Man, p.88.
69 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 11 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
70 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 20 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
71 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 14 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
72 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 13 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
73 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 8 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
persistent bed-wetting for instance, for which girls were punished. One girl “still has a wet blanket” wrote Cheffins. She “hides it if she can; & tells lies about it if found out.” To Cheffins, bed-wetting represented a form of moral failure.

Topsy, Kitty and Goon Goo

The behaviour of Topsy troubled Cheffins: “Topsy is not herself. There was a little misunderstanding last night and that may account for it, but Topsy is a little disappointing.” The Matron may have been disappointed by Topsy, but this paled in comparison to the ‘disappointment’ caused to girls such as Topsy by the dominant culture. In 1901 in a single police action, two Aboriginal girls, Topsy and an older girl named Kitty, were removed to Yarrabah from their residences on the Atherton Tablelands. The reasons given for Topsy’s removal are not clear but mixed-descent would be the simple and usual trigger for such an action. Roth had believed Topsy’s removal illegal, but in 1908 she was still at Yarrabah, a Senior Girl. Kitty on the other hand was removed because local Europeans objected to her relationship with a Chinese man named Goon Goo. Goon Goo was charged with harbouring and fined £3 plus costs. On learning of this, Roth demanded Kitty’s “immediate release from Yarrabah” and vented his fury at the “high-handed action” of the local Protector Shepherd, who had acted beyond his authority. In the meantime, Kitty took matters into her own hands. She took flight from the mission and brought three others with her. They were shortly recaptured by police but Kitty defiantly told them that she would not be detained at Yarrabah.

Roth received a letter from Goon Goo requesting permission to marry Kitty, adding that he was willing to cover any costs involved with her return to Herberton. Shepherd had informed Goon Goo that while “not unlawful,” the marriage was “undesirable,” and therefore refused. The Commissioner of Police Parry-Oakeden was drawn into the matter, explaining to Roth:

I have always regarded it as inexpedient to permit co-habitation between Chinamen and aboriginal women and have sought to discourage or prevent it as much as possible; and I was under the impression that the other ‘Protectors’ held similar views.

74 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 25 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
75 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 6 April 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
76 Roth letter, QSA 15038/1/27.
77 Ibid.
78 Goon Goo letter to Roth 13 August 1901, QSA RSI 15038/1/27.
79 Letter to Roth from Goon Goo’s solicitor, QSA RSI 15038/1/27.
80 W. Parry-Oakeden, 4 September 1901, QSA 15038/1/27.
Yet “Beyond being a chinaman,” Roth could “find nothing against Goon Goo’s character.” In October 1901, Goon Goo and Kitty married.

**Minnie Mays**

The disconnection between Cheffins’ constructions of the Senior Girls and their personal experiences, known and presumed, is remarkable. One evening in February 1908, Cheffins wrote in the Matron’s Log: “Am sorry to have to report Minnie Mays for disobedience and surliness,” later adding: “Minnie Mays is again manifesting a resentful spirit.” This was not to be the end of Cheffins’ sorrow regarding Minnie Mays and her spirit. In March she wrote:

> Am sorry to have to report that Caroline’s disobedience was chiefly the result of Minnie Mays influence. Minnie has shown a very bad spirit today but I hope…earnest words will have effect.

Evidently earnest words had no such effect. Minnie Mays did as many others had done and ran away from the mission. “Minnie Mays did not return to the cottage during the night,” wrote Cheffins. She “was brought back during the day.” The Matron steadfastly maintained her hopefulness: “The cloud hanging over the house for the last few days has, I trust, passed. There was a good spirit throughout the day today. I was made very happy in the early morning to see Minnie Mays taking Caroline lovingly under her care.” Cheffins’ optimism was extending but foundered a month later when she noted: “After evening service, ‘Dadda’ sent 5 of the elder dormitory girls here for special discipline as their conduct is unsatisfactory, but we hope they will improve; they are Jessie Watson, Minnie Winton, Annie Callaghan, Eva [Byrung], Minnie Mays.” More is known of Minnie Mays through some surviving correspondence from the previous year. In 1907, a letter written by a man named Fred Mays had reached Mr. Howard at the Aboriginal Protector’s Office. It read:

> I beg to tell you that I have an adopted daughter Minnie Mays…whom Dr. Roth had taken away from her home six years ago last August…Since Minnie went away I have news

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81 Roth letter, undated, QSA 15038/1/27.
82 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 24 February 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
83 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 31 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
84 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 12 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
85 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 13 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Yarrabah Matron’s Log, 14 March 1908, AIATSIS MS1515/9.
from her constantly that the Missionary wants her to marry, also she sends her word that she wants to come back to her home. I wish to ask you wether Minnie may be allowed to come & also be sent to me. Her mother took it very much to heart after Minnie been taken away and died soon after. Will you be good enough to let me know whether you will have Minnie sent home.\textsuperscript{89}

Howard contacted Gribble, seeking further information about Minnie Mays and to establish the facts of the matter. Gribble gave Howard his interpretation of Minnie Mays’ situation, crediting her with being a year or two older than was likely and highlighting the racial blending and therefore moral ambiguity of her origins. “Fred Mays,” wrote Gribble, “is an aged South Sea Islander who lived with her mother (an abor.) for a short time. Minnie’s own father is European…Minnie is a bright, active and happy girl [who is] happy and contented…about seventeen years of age.”\textsuperscript{90} Again, Gribble was forced to fend off the familiar, rumours of forced marriages being conducted at Yarrabah. “There is no such thing as any girl being forced to marry against her wishes or intentions,” Gribble wrote. Minnie has:

repeatedly written to Fred Mays when he has written having heard all sorts of rumours through others, telling lies…I have shown [to Minnie] Fred Mays’ letter and told her to reply.\textsuperscript{91}

And indeed, a letter to Howard from Minnie Mays was forthcoming. “I do not want to go back from yarrabah,” it began:

I was here six years now and I am not going to go back. I am going to stick to yarrabah as long as I live because it is the black peoples home, and the missionaries are giving up their lifes for the people…Mr Gribble shewed me the letter and I read it, what it said in that letter it is not true, I did not send word back saying that I wanted to go back, and the missionaries did not even try to make me marry any of the boys at yarrabah I could please myself…There are some one that are trying to make trouble in the mission they are not going to get me back from yarrabah.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{89} Fred Mays, letter to Howard, Protector of Aboriginals, 29 December 1906, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.
\textsuperscript{90} Gribble letter to Howard, Protector of Aboriginals, 4 February 1907, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Minnie Mays letter to Howard, Protector of Aboriginals, QSA SRS 5356/1/101.
Realities, representations and runaways

Figure 8.8. A postcard from the early 1900s shows a visit of Lord Hopetoun to Yarrabah, with white people in black and black people in white. The silhouetted figures of authority loom on the horizon as the discipline of the official welcoming group wavers somewhat; arms are crossed, heads are bowed and regimentation is only vaguely acknowledged.
JOL image no. API-039-0001-0004.

Beyond the Act, Gribble rarely referred to Queensland law; even less Gungganydji law, operating instead as the supreme authority, the self-appointed judge and gaoler of the Yarrabah peninsula. Individual acts of resistance brought forth imprisonment and beatings. Residents were “punished for defiance of authority”93 and punished if thought to be considering departure.94 While some still preferred Yarrabah to the uncertainties of the outside world, others took their chances and escaped. “Launch returned 10 o’clock having on board 8 absconders (of 14 who had taken their leave) & 2 children under warrant in charge of a police constable,”95 Gribble recorded in June 1905, adding later, “Sarah and Anne ran away when church service going…Nellie & Amelia packed up and ready to leave. Locked them up in dorm.”96 Sarah, Anne, Nellie and Amelia were persistent absconders. In 1905 Sarah made several attempts to escape with other girls. On the first attempt and unable to find the road out, Sarah and Annie returned to Yarrabah. “Sarah asked Annie to go with her so locked her

93 Gribble letter to Roth, 12 July 1900, QSA 5356/1/101.
94 Gribble’s journal, 1905, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/1.
95 Gribble’s journal, 5 June 1905, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.
96 Gribble’s journal, 11 June 1905, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.
up.” Later that day, Gribble added that Sarah had “ill-treated Annie so locked her up again.”97 Two days later Doris became Sarah’s travelling companion: “Doris Smith and Sarah packed up clothing to go away at dusk, locked them both up.”98

For many young Aboriginal women, the freedom and familiarity afforded by even the most rugged camp life had greater appeal than the harsh restrictions and indoctrination experienced in Yarrabah. “Five girls ran away this afternoon,” Gribble noted. “These girls have been sent to us by the police and Dr. Roth having been living with Chinamen & Malays…Sent Phillip & Andrew & Denis in dinghy after the runaways.”99 In 1902, Gribble had written to Roth requesting Amelia be removed to the Fraser Island mission:

I have again had difficulty with the girl Amelia who has again gone off to the Chinese settlements on the Mulgrave. This is the fourth time she has done this, and taken two others with her…Amelia is an incorrigible…The old craving is in her and what with opium and drink, her future is awful to contemplate.100

Gribble added later: “Amelia and her companion Rebecca otherwise Lucy are over here [Yarrabah]. They were found by the lads just over the range in a S.S.I. camp.”101 Nevertheless, Amelia was determined to part company with the mission, to take others with her and to assert their legal rights if necessary. In 1905 Roth received another letter explaining:

Nellie Smith, Amelia, Sarah and Nellie Port Douglas were brought here by one of the mission boys who said he found them camped on the beach in the mangrove on the other side of the inlet. They had refused to return to Yarrabah and said they wanted to see the police…The gins…were asked if they would return to Yarrabah and they said no they would rather go to gaol than go back. They said the food was hard and they got no change and they did not like the treatment they got and did not want to return.102

Gribble wrote to Roth requesting:

the assistance of the Government in promptly returning those who abscond…The police tell me that they have no power to detain those who abscond from Yarrabah & that they

97 Gribble’s journal, 13 June 1905, Gribble Collected Papers, AIATSIS, MS 1515/9.
100 Roth quoting Gribble letter, 30 September 1902, QSA SRS 4356/1/54.
101 Ibid.
have received meat & other rations while in their care. Can it be wondered at why they chose to leave the reserve?^103

**The child race at home**

Figure 8.9. In the image above, nuclear families and domestic order are passed off as the reality of an outlying settlement of Yarrabah. Cairns Historical Society.

Those who did not choose to leave the reserve, or were unable to do so, had their lives represented as if they were characters in children’s story book. A clipping from Gribble’s scrapbook records the impressions of a visitor who toured the premises with the Matron, apparently stepping through the looking glass in the process. It has been included here as a final statement in the contemporary representation of Aboriginal women at Yarrabah:

^103 Gribble letter to Roth, 12 July 1900, QSA 5356/1/101.
After breakfast…the wives trooped up to the store with their ration bags. More girls most of them, many very pretty…endowed with the large expressive eyes and sound white teeth of their care. Some had tiny piccaninnies in their arms or clinging to their skirts. All were clean and neatly enough dressed…Later on we saw those childish matrons on their own hearthstones, during the visit of inspection which takes place every day. Each married pair have their own particular nest – snug little one roomed cottages with fireplaces for cooking, blanketed beds, small dining tables on which the day’s allowance of damper and fruit are laid and clean swept earthen floors. In many of the tiny homes there were pathetic little attempt at adornment…but the absence of even the shadow of luxury made one draw distinctions between black and white races decidedly to the discredit of the latter. For in those simple surroundings there was an air of almost idyllic contentment.

As the lady inspecting passed from one to another of the small dwellings the young wives met her with artless tales and displayed various small accessories with pride. Then when the matron praised the little devices, laughing and dimpling like the children they were, they would hide their head on her shoulder and doubtless blush with pleasure under their swarthy skins. One or two loiterers caught gossiping in the very act, ran like naughty children when they saw the matron coming.104

The account perfectly captures the feminised and infantilised constructions of Aboriginality projected by missionaries as they sought to reform Aboriginal people, as well as the constant surveillance to which mission inmates were subject – even in the allegedly private sphere of the home, and the yawning chasm that opened up between representation and reality at Yarrabah. The image of Yarrabah and its works as promoted by the missionaries could scarcely have been at greater variance to the work re-education camp from which inmates ran. “I left Yarrabah with regret,” the visitor concluded. “I seemed to be leaving behind a peaceful haven where no whisper of outside turmoil could come; no war news or plague scares to ruffle one’s serenity and I envied Mr. Gribble his lot.”105

Conclusion: chastity, discipline, acculturation and labour

In 1908, removal to Yarrabah had become the conventional response for dealing with elements deemed racially and morally problematic to the white community. Although many would elect to

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104 Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.
105 Gribble Collected Papers, scrapbook newspaper clipping, AIATSIS, MS 1515/17/179.
remain there, few who had come to Yarrabah during the Protection era had done so of their own volition. The sexuality of Aboriginal people generated great undercurrents of racial anxiety among Anglo-Australians for its fraying of the racial distinctions so necessary to the colonial project and its hierarchy. The psycho-sexual drama of discipline and punishment unfolding on behalf of the chastity of Senior Girls at Yarrabah speaks of this fear. Gender reform had become a central object of the mission’s ideology with special scrutiny towards young women over whom singular control was exercised. The paradisiacal image promulgated by the mission bore little resemblance to the thudding reality to which residents awoke each day. As well as being stolen, half-starved, subject to physical assaults and imprisonment, there were fights and numerous attempted escapes. Yarrabah girls were locked in their dormitory by night until they married, or died. Daily life was dominated by strict routine and long hours of hard work. ‘Language’ and traditional Aboriginal cultural practices were forbidden, while untrained teachers gave the Yarrabah young women some crude exposure to Western literacy and numeracy on top of relentless Christian observance and endless domestic duties. This was considered an adequate education for an Aboriginal girl. There was no expectation among staff that there could be, or ought to be, any future for Aboriginal women other than in servitude to Europeans and men, preferably in the controlled setting of the mission.

The voices of the Senior Girls themselves are faint in the historical record, but a few isolated letters and documents help to give a sense of their subjective impressions. About to be shunted into adult responsibilities, the Senior Girls of 1908 were only in their mid-teens. They were not simple blessed angels of shining Christian love graduating from a sort of Aboriginal convent finishing school, but complex human beings with infants, stories, broken connections, hopes, purposes, reflections and experiences, most of which were alien to the Yarrabah Matron. Cheffins appears to have had almost no understanding of Aboriginal culture or saw it as a shallow thing and it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which she related to the Senior Girls as Aboriginal girls, rather than young women placed in her care. She seemed to regard them as children undergoing training and being brought to order. Cheffins left the specifics of race theory to the theorists and worried more for the well-being of her girls, upon whom so much was inscribed.