

## Chapter 11

# Sixteen-pound hammers, fettlers, shanties and railway tents: Demographic movement of Aboriginal people from rural to urban areas of central eastern New South Wales in the assimilation era, 1940–69

Greg Blyton

University of Newcastle

**Abstract:** *This chapter provides a brief history of Aboriginal urbanisation, with a particular focus on the trials and tribulations of Aboriginal people who relocated from the North Coast and New England districts of eastern New South Wales to Platt's Estate in Newcastle and Teralba at Lake Macquarie in the Hunter region. Drawn from colonial archival records, contemporary literature, film documentaries and Aboriginal oral tradition, this work specifically focuses on the lives of Aboriginal people against a backdrop of the assimilation policies of the paternalistic New South Wales Aboriginal Welfare Board from 1940 to 1969. How did these policies impact on Aboriginal people at Platt's Estate and Teralba? Finally and most importantly, this paper recognises an invaluable contribution to the Australian economy by Aboriginal people; the Aboriginal men who provided muscle and sweat as fettlers in the railways and as labourers in heavy secondary industries, and the Aboriginal women who cooked the meals and nurtured the children.*

### **A brief history of nineteenth-century Aboriginal urbanisation and the protection era, 1883–1969**

Aboriginal populations, apart from large congregations at various ceremonial exchanges, lived in low-density demographic settlements prior to European colonisation. Since British colonisation in 1788 there has been a trend for Aboriginal

people to move to colonial urban centres. What motivated this trend? From archival and contemporary sources it is evident that employment and frontier conflict were significant factors in the nineteenth century. Australian historian Professor Henry Reynolds states that Aboriginal people were drawn to urban areas out of curiosity and a desire for European foods such as flour, sugar, meat and rice. Reynolds (1990:131) also states Aboriginal people moved to urban areas to escape colonial violence:

The attraction of the towns was real enough; but it was only half the story. Many family groups were driven in the countryside by the violence of the frontier, the difficulty of finding enough to eat in their own country, or because they were literally forced off their land by squatters and police.

Reynolds' claim is supported by missionary Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld, who observed the demographic migration of Aboriginal people away from Lake Macquarie in the first half of the nineteenth century. Here, according to Threlkeld, colonial frontier conflict erupted against Aboriginal people in the 1820s. He informed his superiors, the London Missionary Society, in a letter on 4 September 1826, 'Alas! The blood of the Blacks begins to flow. We are in a state of warfare up the country here' (in Gunson 1974:vol. 2, 213). A few years later Threlkeld lamented a failed mission at Lake Macquarie when he wrote to Colonial Secretary E Deas Thompson on 31 December 1840 (in Gunson 1974:vol. 1, 166):

The blacks have nearly forsaken this Lake, having found at Newcastle employment suitable to their habits; some being engaged in fishing, some as water carriers, messengers, servants, and some on board the numerous vessels, according as their services are required.

Although Threlkeld did not mention that urban migration to Newcastle was directly caused by violence, it was a most likely scenario. Colonial explorer Sir Thomas Mitchell (1965[1839]:9–10), who visited Lake Macquarie in the early 1830s, noted that a war had been waged by colonists against Aboriginal people in the district, resulting in forcible dispossession of land and resources:

Not a trace of man, or of his existence, was visible on any side, except a distant solitary column of smoke, that arose from a thicket between the hill on which I stood and the coast, and marked the asylum of a remnant of the aborigines. These unfortunate creatures could no longer enjoy their solitary freedom; for the dominion of the white man surrounded them. His sheep and cattle filled the green pastures where the kangaroo (the principal food of the natives) was accustomed to range, until the stranger came from distant lands and claimed the soil. Thus these

## Demographic movement of Aboriginal people from rural to urban areas

first inhabitants, hemmed in by the power of the white population, and deprived of the liberty which they formerly enjoyed of wandering at will through their native wilds, were compelled to seek a precarious shelter.

Following a century of frontier conflict, colonial governance over the lives of Aboriginal people took a new direction in the latter part of the nineteenth century. On 2 June 1883 the Aborigines Protection Board was formed, comprising six members who were responsible to the Governor for Aboriginal welfare in New South Wales. The *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* (NSW) and subsequent amendments in 1915 gave government authorities legislative power to remove any children of Aboriginal descent from their parents (State Records n.d.). Dr F Gale (in Jupp 1988:242) writes, 'By and large, Aboriginal people in southern and eastern Australia during the nineteenth century were gathered onto confined missions surrounded by encroaching frontiers of settlement.' In total, the major impacts of this legislation were the confinement of thousands of Aboriginal people onto government reservations and the creation of a Stolen Generation. In the latter part of the 1930s, Commonwealth and New South Wales governments sought to dismantle segregation policies and decentralise missions by merging Aboriginal people into mainstream Australian society. This new direction saw the draconian Aborigines Protection Board replaced by the Aborigines Welfare Board (AWB). According to the New South Wales State Archives Office (State Records n.d.):

The Board was reconstituted again under the *Aborigines Protection (Amendment) Act of 1940*, and its name changed to the Aborigines Welfare Board. The duties of the new Board were to: apportion, distribute and apply moneys for the relief or benefit of Aboriginal people; or to assist them in obtaining employment; maintain them whilst employed or otherwise to assist them to become assimilated into the general life of the community.

According to Gale (in Jupp 1988:240), the war years from 1939 to 1945 were 'the watershed between the total isolation of Aboriginal people on restricted, segregated missions and settlements, and their movement into towns and cities to join the growing multicultural Australian society'. Following the Second World War, full employment became a major policy goal of the Australian federal government, from Chifley's Labor Party to Menzies' coalition government. The AWB policy of encouraging Aboriginal people into full-time employment therefore conformed to a direction in federal government policy about employment in general (O'Keefe 1986:150–61). Gale (in Jupp 1988:240) proposes that positive and negative demographic forces influenced Aboriginal urbanisation following the cessation of the war:

## Exploring urban identities and histories

In this, as in almost all migrations, both push and pull forces were operating. Not only was life becoming increasingly restrictive and intolerable for many Aborigines on reserves, but also urban areas were opening up and opportunities became available in towns and cities on a scale never known on the reserves.

Australian historian Richard Broome (2002:178) noted that, following the war, 'many Aboriginal people moved to the capital cities. This move was stimulated by employment opportunities and greater freedoms that emerged after the war.' Broome's view is supported by social analyst Professor C Rowley (1973:363), who stated that Aboriginal people in general had been 'pushed from the country areas by economic factors, and by local discrimination'.

The merger of Aboriginal people into mainstream society was an uneasy process and the AWB recognised that racial discrimination was a major obstacle to achieving its goal of successful integration. The AWB believed that overcoming this barrier was the responsibility not only of the 'white' population, but also of Aboriginal people. In January 1952 the AWB highlighted racial divisions in its inaugural issue of a monthly magazine, *Dawn*<sup>1</sup>:

Good progress has been made in overcoming the antipathy and colour prejudice which exists among a section of the white community in relation to the aboriginal people. It must be realised, however, that success in this direction, and the complete acceptance of the aborigine by the white people can only be achieved with the co-operation of the aborigine himself. He must prove his independence, and his willingness to work and live in clean hygienic conditions. (*Dawn*, January 1952:4, 5)

There was an expectation, if not onus, on Aboriginal people to 'prove' their worthiness to live among a larger post-colonial society. During this period many Aboriginal people in central-eastern New South Wales were living in relative poverty, either on missions or as fringe-dwellers on the outskirts of urban centres. The AWB was highly critical of Aboriginal housing standards. Photographs were placed in *Dawn* showing Aboriginal people living in shanties and makeshift lean-tos. In condescending terms the AWB made its ideals for Aboriginal people known (*Dawn*, January 1952:14):

The provision of so many clean, modern homes on Aboriginal Stations throughout the State, opens up a new world for the Aboriginal woman of to-day. She can now enjoy the same amenities, the same comforts, and the same pleasures as her white sister. From the dirt floor of a bark gunyah to the polished linoleum of a modern hygienic cottage, is a big step for many aboriginal women to take, a frightening step, perhaps, but, with the patient and ever ready help of Station Managers and Matrons, she will find it is not a difficult one after all. She will realise, that as

## Demographic movement of Aboriginal people from rural to urban areas

the schools are educating her children to the cleaner and better ways of life, and teaching them various arts and crafts, she must play her part by providing that home environment that is so necessary to the welfare of those children.

Aboriginal women were expected to provide a 'clean, hygienic' home, cook meals for a husband in full employment and raise healthy children.

The post-war period provided job opportunities for Aboriginal people in a variety of positions, although unskilled, labour-intensive work appears to have been the main form of employment. The AWB reported in *Dawn* in June 1955 that the railways were a major employer of young Aboriginal men: 'The employment situation in Condobolin at present is very good. Many of the young men have taken permanent jobs with the railway and are making good money' (*Dawn*, June 1955:6). *Dawn* reported in 1957 that 'Employment is found with the Railways Department, Public Works, Saw Mills, Factories, as well as pastoral work and a few in the mechanical, teaching, nursing and secretarial professions; also several take up fishing and timber cutting on their own' (*Dawn*, January 1957:22). Aboriginal Welfare Officer A Norton, who monitored Aboriginal populations in the Bowraville district on the north coast of New South Wales, proudly boasted during an Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio announcement in January 1957:

The Commonwealth Employment Officers do a wonderful job in placing aborigines, and it is felt that with co-operation from both Government and non-official agencies, much will be done to place the Australian Aborigine in permanent employment which will, without a shadow of doubt, be a great step achieved towards our policy of Assimilation. (*Dawn*, January 1957:22)

The AWB saw permanent employment in the railways, public works, timber mills and factories as a preferable option to seasonal and casual work. The philosophy behind this policy is best explained by Norton: 'It is not easy to wean the Aborigines from casual work, catering as it does for the tendency in many to lead a nomadic life, and offering opportunity for high wages and free spending for all members of the family' (*Dawn*, January 1957:22). The following year, the AWB stated in *Dawn* (January 1958:4):

While increasing numbers of aborigines are finding more permanent types of employment, there are still many who follow seasonal occupations and lead a somewhat migratory existence. This is inimical to a stable economic position and has an adverse effect on the home life and education of the children. Officers of the Board make it their constant endeavour to settle workers in permanent occupations. Many have obtained positions with the Railway Department, Main Roads Board, Local Government bodies, and other work of a stable nature.

Government agencies worked collectively to absorb Aboriginal people into the workforce and to obtain full-time employment of a labour-intensive nature. In some ways the AWB held archaic views similar to Governor Lachlan Macquarie, who ruled the New South Wales colony from 1810 to 1821. Reynolds (1990:88) writes, ‘Macquarie expected the Aborigines to become “progressively Useful to the Country” when employed as “Labourers in Agricultural Employ or among the lower Class of Mechanics”’. Well over a century later, expectations did not seem to have greatly changed, with the AWB reinforcing the notion that Aboriginal people prefer the bottom end of a labour hierarchy. This is the sentiment expressed in *Dawn*, where it is stated, ‘Generally speaking they are not interested in academic pursuits, nor as yet have they expressed the desire to become highly skilled artisans’ (*Dawn*, January 1957:16).

Significant economic growth in the secondary industries in Newcastle stimulated during the Second World War saw a high demand for low-skilled labour. This high labour demand continued into the post-war period, with growth in the secondary industries and the government initiation of massive public works, including the Snowy Mountains Scheme. A labour shortage was compounded by more than 30 000 casualties as a legacy of war, which left New South Wales with a modest labour force. Men were also needed to renovate a rail system that had been badly neglected during the Great Depression and the Second World War and left in a state of disrepair (O’Keefe 1986:214). The following section shows that the lofty ideals of the AWB fell short in attaining equality, especially in housing, for Aboriginal people at Platt’s Estate in Newcastle and at Teralba in Lake Macquarie.

## **Platt’s Estate, Stolen Generation and tent children**

Platt’s Estate was one of a number of shanty settlements seen in the Newcastle district during the Great Depression of the early 1930s (Figure 1). Late historian Shelia Gray (1989:21) stated that, following the Great Depression, ‘victims’ of unemployment left Platt’s Estate ‘when work became available’. She noted that ‘vacated humpies were taken over by other disadvantaged people; in Platt’s Estate for instance by fringe-dweller aboriginals’ (Gray 1989:21). The *Newcastle Morning Herald (NMH)* supports Gray’s claim, reporting on 6 September 1943 that six Aboriginal families were living at Platt’s Estate. According to the report, all the Aboriginal men were employed in secondary industries and the families had been issued permissive occupancies to reside at the estate (*NMH*, 6 September 1943:1).

In 1943 Platt’s Estate housed about 200 people in shacks and shanties, with between 20 to 40 Aboriginal people. Life in Platt’s Estate in the 1940s differed in a number of ways to mainstream society. The homes were low quality compared to mainstream housing, there was no electricity and the road into Platt’s Estate was composed of embedded rocks, which severely tested the soundest of carts (Turner and Blyton 1995:64). At Platt’s Estate Aboriginal families lived in humpies or shanties



**Figure 1:** A Platt's Estate residence, May 1960 (photograph courtesy of Ronald John Morisson)

constructed of bits and pieces of salvaged roofing iron and timber. Here they became the subject of dispute and racial vilification. For example, Mr R Evans of the Waratah Electoral Council of the Australian Labor Party stated on 4 October 1943 that the 'council simply did not want to encourage the settlement of blacks in the district' (*NMH*, 4 October 1943:1). Aboriginal residents protested against this discrimination. Vera Deacon (2000:4) wrote in May 2007:

On 22 September, *The Newcastle Herald* reports: 'Half caste aboriginal women left a prayer meeting at Platt's Estate City Mission to plead with the Health Committee not to send them away. The majority had lived there two to three years. The woman showed the alderman through their iron and bag shacks, crudely built, but spotlessly clean, each with a vegetable plot. One woman said: 'Why can't you leave us in peace? We should not be penalised because we are coloured.'

Alderman Higgins objected to the suggestion by Evans and the Chief Health Inspector (Mr Meddows) 'to have Aboriginal families on Platt's Estate removed' (*Newcastle Morning Herald*, 4 October 1943:1). He protested at a council meeting over the dispute 'that Aborigines should be treated as humans and not pariahs' (*Newcastle Morning Herald*, 4 October 1943:1). In contrast to the Aboriginal families, non-Aboriginal families also living at Platt's Estate were not subject to such arduous inquiry (*Newcastle Morning Herald*, 6 September 1943:1). Deacon (2000:4) writes:

## Exploring urban identities and histories

The walls of another shack were lined with newspapers, over which were printed Scriptural texts. An Aboriginal woman said: 'God sees no difference in us. Why should you?' A male Aboriginal interjected: 'It is a pity the bible is not read more in the world today'. Sister Durban, in charge of the City Mission described 'the behaviour as excellent'. One referred to the squalid condition of some white-occupied places. Another woman declared her intention to 'fight for my home. I'll never leave here.'

It is interesting that the AWB did not seem to have been involved in this dispute, which was eventually resolved and the Aboriginal families permitted to remain at the estate. The *Newcastle Morning Herald* (6 December 1943:1) reported in reference to these Aboriginal men at Platt's Estate:

The men, in most cases, are employed in essential industry. It is only natural that they should wish to reside in close proximity to their work. It would appear, furthermore, that Greater Newcastle Council had made an exhaustive investigation into the conditions on the estate, and the investigation disclosed that the men and their families were invariably of good character and that their homes were maintained well up to standard requirements.

Another Aboriginal family relocated from Purfleet Mission (near Taree) in the late 1940s, and the father gained employment in the secondary industries and the children attended the local school, Waratah West. An Aboriginal man who was a child at Platt's Estate recalled in 1994:

Dad worked at Stuart and Lloyds for years...it was the only place you could get work...In Newcastle there was no colour bar...the black man and the white man were equal...I went to school there and never found any trouble with the colour of my skin with my white mates...The only time I heard the word black was in jokes...My parents taught us to treat people as we found them and [that] we were as good as any Tom, Dick or Harry. I was lucky because I got an education and when I met people who had stayed at the mission years later they couldn't read or write. (Turner and Blyton 1995:60, 61)

Aboriginal people also abandoned Karuah Mission (60 kilometres north of Newcastle) to seek a better life and moved to Platt's Estate. One Aboriginal man left Karuah Mission in 1950 because he was tired of rations and the paternalism of mission life and found employment at Newcastle as a labourer at BHP. A former non-Aboriginal resident of Platt's Estate recalled in 1994:



He'd had enough of the mission and got tired of the handouts of brown sugar, flour and government suits. He decided to take a chance and come to Newcastle and it turned out a good move because he was able to gain employment in the heavy industries. (Turner and Blyton 1995:60, 61)

Both the Aboriginal men quoted above left missions because they wanted freedom of choice and equal rights rather than the strict regimes of mission life. However, there were some gains. The adult men gained employment in the secondary industries, such as Stewart and Lloyds, until the families were evicted and the land cleared for suburban development in the 1960s. Years later when this man visited Purfleet, he noticed Aboriginal people who had stayed at the mission were illiterate. So it can be seen that urbanisation may have led to some improvements for Aboriginal people in relation to education (Turner and Blyton 1995:60, 61).

Throughout the twentieth century many Aboriginal children were taken from their natural parents and either sent to institutions or adopted out to foster homes. As a result, many Aboriginal people lost contact with their kin and identity. Aboriginal urbanisation did not bring immunity from the threat of having children taken by the AWB officers. One former resident of Platt's Estate recalls being taken from his father by the AWB: 'The welfare caught up with us of course here...they were up on top of the hill with the spy glasses...as soon as Dad went they came straight down and grabbed me, Martin, Dessie and Laurie with the police.' These boys were sent to the notorious Kinchela Boys Home near Kempsey on the north coast of New South Wales. They never saw their father again (*Muloobinda Place of Sea Ferns* 2007). This was the policy line of the AWB, which stated in *Dawn* (February 1962:17):

It is recognised that the best substitute for a child's own home is a foster home with understanding and sympathetic foster parents. If accommodation of this type cannot be secured the only alternative is a Home under the control of the Board. Two such Homes operate, one at Cootamundra for girls, the other at Kinchela for boys.

A 1954 inspection of Platt's Estate by Newcastle City Council revealed there were 62 dwellings made of tents, bagging and iron, with a population of 125 adults and 109 children, including eight Aboriginal families (Turner and Blyton 1995:64). By the end of the decade the process of evictions reignited and both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people were relocated to Housing Commission homes. In 1960 the estate ceased to exist (*Platt's Estate Pambalong Country* 2008).

The history of Aboriginal people who worked on the railways differs to that of people at Platt's Estate who were sedentary and fixed in employment within the secondary industries. The nature of railway work required social mobility and Aboriginal families were frequently required to relocate. A natural catastrophe in

the Hunter Valley in 1955 was the catalyst of Aboriginal urbanisation at Teralba in Lake Macquarie when the banks of the Hunter River collapsed to floodwaters that caused extensive damage. Hundreds of kilometres of railway track were destroyed in the Hunter Valley, particularly in the Maitland and Singleton districts. This catastrophe created an urgent demand for labour and attracted many Aboriginal people from the New England region.

One Aboriginal man who was 17 years old put his age up to 18 to qualify for employment as a fettler. Word spread and he was soon joined by his older brothers as employees of the New South Wales railways. The Aboriginal men lived in tents leased from the Department of Railways about half a kilometre from Maitland Railway Station. In some places, their families joined them. According to this same man, the nature of the work was very hard, swinging 16-pound hammers, levelling ground with shovels, and lifting iron and steel rail girders to lay track. In his group there were five fettlers and a ganger (supervisor). The men normally worked an eight-hour day, but were often called on to do overtime and it was common to work ten to 12 consecutive days (Blyton et al. 2004:71, 73).

Another Aboriginal man who worked in the New England region as a seasonal pastoral worker moved to the Hunter Valley to gain employment in the railways. Although he experienced racism in being refused a lemon squash in an Armidale hotel and was made to sit in a roped section at the front of the picture theatre in Tamworth, the opportunity to obtain full employment was a primary motivation for relocating. To him, the railways presented an opportunity for both permanent employment and equal wages. He was employed as a fettler and worked with other Aboriginal men in gangs repairing railway track damaged by the flood. This was in stark contrast to employment in the pastoral industry, where work was seasonal and 'black rates' or lower wages were paid to Aboriginal men. He recalls:

We camped near Scone, I was 17 I suppose and Old Blue Stewart was the ganger. There was still a stigma about Aboriginal people and we were fighting for just basic individual rights. In the railways you were treated equal as long as you were prepared to sweat it out with the others. (Blyton et al. 2004:71, 72)

Although little research has been conducted in this area, it would seem Scone, Aberdeen and Muswellbrook in the upper Hunter Valley were once the locations of numerous Aboriginal tent communities sited along railway tracks.

It is interesting to note that the railways, albeit due to the influence of trade unions, recognised equal rights and wages for Aboriginal people many years before such rights were recognised in the 1967 referendum. While work on the railway may have been of a permanent nature, the residential addresses of fettlers frequently changed depending on where sections of track needed renovation. Aboriginal people

often found themselves packing up their tents, uprooting their families and relocating to new areas along the railway track. This happened to several Aboriginal families who eventually settled at a place known as Billy Goat Hill in Teralba near Lake Macquarie. During the 1950s and early 1960s at least five Aboriginal families lived on Billy Goat Hill alongside several migrant families who also worked as fettlers and lived in tents.

In William Street, Teralba, Aboriginal people lived in railway tents with their families. Here Aboriginal women raised their young children in the early 1960s. Some of the Aboriginal families eventually leased small blocks of land from the railways and were given permission to erect small two-bedroom weatherboard homes. A long-term resident of the Lake Macquarie area recalls a conversation with his grandfather regarding Aboriginal men working on the railways in Teralba:

I can remember my grandfather saying in the late 1950s, that Aboriginal people living along the railway line at Teralba were just people like us, under the thumb. They lived in tents because it was cheap...my grandfather used to stop by this particular family. The Aboriginal men worked as fettlers which was very arduous work on a difficult section of track between Teralba and Fassifern. Their accommodation consisted of Railway tents and in an area known locally as 'Billy Goat Hill'. (Turner and Blyton 1995:62)

The influx of Aboriginal people to urban areas in Newcastle and Lake Macquarie did not go unnoticed. Yet again Aboriginal people became a subject of controversy and debate among councillors and in October 1954 Alderman Jones of the Newcastle City Council was highly critical of the Railways Commissioner for allowing fettlers to continue living in what he described as 'squalid tent homes alongside railway track'. He was speaking during a debate on a reply to the representations the Health Committee had made to have the tent villages near Platt's Estate cleaned up (Turner and Blyton 1995:62).

Jones insisted that the railways were responsible for providing adequate housing for employees. His report does not specifically refer to Aboriginal people, but it is clear that a significant number of Aboriginal families were a part of these tent communities. Aboriginal people were among a number of disadvantaged minority groups who lived in tent communities. Aboriginal people found themselves working and living alongside migrant groups, including Greek, Italian and Polish people, along the railway tracks in tents or shanty communities (Turner and Blyton 1995:62).

An Aboriginal woman who resided at William Street, Teralba, raised her young daughter in a railway tent. The woman herself was raised in Kempsey on the north coast and had been removed from her parents by the AWB to serve as a domestic servant in Sydney when she was 12 years old. She recalls going to Green Hill Public School in Kempsey in the late 1940s and unsuccessful attempts by the AWB to

integrate the school by admitting Aboriginal children. When this happened all the 'white parents' removed their children from the school and sent them to West Kempsey primary school (Greenhill Public School Centenary 1990:26–32). She also remembers Kempsey as 'a terribly racist place', where if you 'tried on a dress you had to buy it'; while she encountered racism in Lake Macquarie, it was not as bad as Kempsey and Armidale (Turner and Blyton 1995:62–4).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate responses of urban 'white people' to the movement of Aboriginal people to towns and cities in the Hunter region. Preliminary findings indicate Aboriginal people experienced a variety of responses in Newcastle and Lake Macquarie. Racist jokes were common, but colour bars seem less overt compared to some rural sectors. Unlike rural areas, there was no segregation in picture theatres or restrictions to municipal swimming pools. Unfortunately, this does not mean there was no racism or social discrimination. One Aboriginal woman has bitter memories of integrated school life in the Hunter Valley:

I couldn't wait to leave school, I hated it, I had to put up with racial abuse because I was Aboriginal. You'd be spat on, there was people known to have head lice, you'd see them crawling on the desk, they just stunk, and I'd always get the blame, never had a louse in my head. It was awful hard until I started fighting back. (Blyton et al. 2004:78)

In 1958 a large percentage of the Aboriginal population in New South Wales remained on missions under the auspices of the AWB, which identified that '4,758 reside on Stations and Reserves under the control of the Board. Of the remaining 8,840, some live in sub-standard conditions on the outskirts of country towns' (*Dawn*, January 1958:4).

Fear of racial conflict and discrimination shaped the decisions of some Aboriginal families in their choice of relocation. An Aboriginal woman recalls that her father had a choice to move to either Muswellbrook or Armidale for employment in 1949 and chose the former. She recalls her school days and how teachers had low expectations of Aboriginal students. She remembers walking to school along a creek and living in a tent leased from the railways department, where her father worked for 30 years:

Dad worked for the railways and had an offer for a job at Muswellbrook or Armidale but chose Muswellbrook because he thought us kids would have a better chance there because there was less racist problems. We were living in a tent. It's a caravan park now, but it was all Sydney Street once. It was an island then, Muscle Creek came round one way and the Hunter River the other way. We moved there in 1949 when I was one or two years old. There was no electricity even though across the other side of the road it was lit up. The railways used to give them a frame and

## Demographic movement of Aboriginal people from rural to urban areas

the canvas went over the top and you had your sleepers as the floor. (Blyton et al. 2004:77)

It is acknowledged that the AWB had limited resources to assist Aboriginal people reach a state of social and economic equality in New South Wales. The Board admitted as much in a statement in March 1960:

The present board's policy aims at the economic assimilation of the aborigines into the general community, with emphasis on housing, health and education. Operating with limited funds, the board has made a great deal of progress in the implementation of its policy. (*Dawn*, March 1960:19)

The AWB promoted its success with little supporting evidence, while racial prejudice and inequality continued, particularly in rural communities. It is difficult to determine if Aboriginal people at Platt's Estate and Billy Goat Hill experienced less racism than their rural counterparts. Oral tradition from people who moved to these areas indicates it was better than rural districts. Aboriginal people were segregated in rural hospitals, with special wings serving as maternity wards for Aboriginal women. Aboriginal people were forced to wait until all the 'white people' had been attended to before being served in shops. A constant shadow of fear that their children could be taken by the AWB haunted many Aboriginal families during these times (*Muloobinda Place of Sea Ferns* 2007).

It was not until the 1960s, with the work of civil rights leaders such as Charlie Perkins, that continuing discrimination against Aboriginal people began to be highlighted. In February 1965 a group of Sydney University students went on a now-famous bus excursion (the Freedom Rides) throughout rural New South Wales, exposing social discrimination against Aboriginal people who were banned from swimming pools, segregated by rope at the front of picture theatres, and denied access to Returned Services League clubs and hotels (Read 1990:107,112).

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief history of Aboriginal urbanisation and looked at the lives of Aboriginal families who migrated from rural sectors of New South Wales to Newcastle and Lake Macquarie in the Hunter region during the assimilation era (1940–69). It is estimated based on newspaper reports and oral tradition that about 20 Aboriginal families relocated from rural areas to Newcastle and Lake Macquarie seeking employment opportunities and escape from racial discrimination. There were positive and negative forces of demographic change. The 1965 Freedom Rides and oral testimony of Aboriginal people are evidence that racism remained active throughout the assimilation period in New South Wales.

Sadly, the AWB lacked the capacity to effectively combat racism or bridge housing inequity for Aboriginal people in Newcastle and Lake Macquarie. The ideal of the AWB that Aboriginal women should live on floors of 'polished linoleum' did not materialise at Platt's Estate or Billy Goat Hill. Instead, Aboriginal women gallantly raised children in shanty settlements or railway tents, while Aboriginal men worked as labourers and fettlers in secondary industries and on the railways. There was significant racial conflict in many sectors of rural New South Wales and to escape this racism many Aboriginal families moved to Newcastle and Lake Macquarie. Despite such moves, Aboriginal families at Platt's Estate were under close scrutiny from authorities and the subject of debate concerning evictions. Aboriginal people were attracted to urban areas because they offered full-time employment and better opportunities for their children at school. Finally, it should be acknowledged that Aboriginal men provided valuable service to the economy by working in low-skilled, labour-intensive jobs in the railways and secondary industries. These were brave people in a social landscape where the rivers of racism ran deep in many sectors of New South Wales.

## References

- Blyton, Greg, Deidre Heitmeyer and John Maynard 2004 *Wannin Thanbarran: A history of Aboriginal and European contact in Muswellbrook and the Upper Hunter Valley*, Muswellbrook City Council, Muswellbrook, NSW.
- Broome, Richard 2002 *Aboriginal Australians: Black responses to white dominance, 1788–2001*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Deacon, Vera 2000 'Aborigines at Platt's Estate': 'Attempt to move Aborigines', *Newcastle Aboriginal Support Group Newsletter* 122(April):4–5.
- Gray, Sheila 1989 *Newcastle in the Great Depression*, Newcastle City Council, NSW (Newcastle History Monograph no. 11).
- Greenhill Public School Centenary 1890–1990*, Argus Print, Kempsey, NSW.
- Gunson, Niel 1974 *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L. E. Threlkeld, missionary to the Aborigines, 1824–1859*, vols 1 and 2, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.
- Jupp, James 1988 *The Australian People: An encyclopaedia of the nation, its people and their origins*, Angus & Robertson Pty Ltd, Australia.
- Mitchell, Thomas Livingstone 1965[1839] *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia: with descriptions of the recently explored region of Australia Felix, and of the present colony of New South Wales*, two volumes (facsimile edn), Public Library of South Australia.
- Muloobinda Place of Sea Ferns* 2007 Black Chilli Productions, Newcastle City Council, NSW (video-recording).
- O'Keefe, Daniel 1986 *The Concise Australian Reference Book*, Golden Press, Drummoyne, NSW.

## Demographic movement of Aboriginal people from rural to urban areas

- Platt's Estate Pambalong Country* 2008 Black Chilli Productions, Newcastle City Council, NSW (video-recording).
- Read, Peter 1990 *Charles Perkins: A biography*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Victoria.
- Reynolds, Henry 1990 *With the White People: The crucial role of Aborigines in the exploration and development of Australia*, Penguin Books, Australia.
- Rowley, CD 1973 *Outcasts in White Australia*, Penguin Books, Australia.
- State Records n.d. *Archives in Brief 42—Aborigines Welfare Board, 1883–1969*, NSW Government, <[www.records.nsw.gov.au/state-archives/guides-and-finding-aids/archives-in-brief/archives-in-brief-42](http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/state-archives/guides-and-finding-aids/archives-in-brief/archives-in-brief-42)> accessed 23 May 2011.
- Turner, John and Greg Blyton 1995 *The Aborigines of Lake Macquarie: A brief history*, Lake Macquarie City Council, Boolaroo, NSW.

### Note

1. *Dawn* and *New Dawn: A Magazine for the Aboriginal People of NSW* were published from 1952 to 1975. The magazines are available on DVD via the 'Dawn and New Dawn magazines' page of the AIATSIS website ([www.aiatsis.gov.au/fhu/dawn.html](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/fhu/dawn.html)).